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Laura Hoppe

University of Minnesota, Morris, hoppe224@morris.umn.edu

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Laura Hoppe

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An Anthropological Exploration of Latino Immigrant Identity in Contemporary
Migration Literature

In 2009, political scientist, author, and academic Samuel Huntington, famously wrote *The Hispanic Challenge*, an article that both shocked and resonated with many. In the text, Huntington argues that the United States may experience a “Hispanization” due to the growing number of Hispanic immigrants in the country (Huntington). He claims that the “persistence of Mexican immigration...reduces the incentives for cultural assimilation,” and as their numbers increase, Mexican immigrants will identify more with their Mexican heritage and become less likely to “accommodate the dominant group and adopt its culture” (Huntington). He warns that this wave of immigration could divide the U.S. in half: a country of two languages and of two cultures.

Immigration remains one of the hottest topics of discourse in the U.S. today. Immigrants contributed to the construction of the country and continue to contribute in all facets of life here, but words like “assimilation” pressure immigrants to leave behind aspects of their culture and ways of life, and instead adopt an “American identity.” While assimilation attempts to create a melting pot nation in which all cultures blend together, the United States represents much more than a diluted mix of languages, religions, and traditions to create “the American.” Many immigrants cannot simply forget all aspects of their identity from their

country of origin and assimilate into a constructed American identity. In fact, many scholars note that the very idea of assimilation is too simplistic to analyze in a complex nation like the United States where “there is no undifferentiated monolithic ‘American’ culture” (Foner 966). This black-and-white view of immigration misrepresents the realities of an immigrant’s construction of their identity. While Huntington assumes the appropriate model of immigration consists of assimilation and of the melting pot representation, immigrants today demonstrate how the merging of two countries, cultures, and languages, can contribute to a more flexible identity.

Identities are increasingly nuanced, meaning that as people from different countries and cultures come together and interact in this globalized world, their identity transforms and crosses political and cultural borders. The either-or situation of assimilating, as Huntington describes, *or* fully retaining a particular culture in an individual’s identity does not accurately depict the fluid, *hybrid* identity immigrants construct for themselves today—an identity that foments cultural in-betweenness and fusions (Pourjafari 686). Immigrants can take on aspects from multiple cultures, mixing these components together to create their identity.

Themes of identity in immigrants have come to surface in not only the political world, but also in contemporary literature. Authors from around the world have tasked themselves with exploring immigrant and migrant identities, demonstrating its ever-changing nature. Gloria Anzaldúa, author of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, for example, contributed greatly to the idea of a hybrid identity in *mestizos*, or people of mixed race, in the 1980s. She first explored

hybridity in *chicanas*, or Mexican American women, who lived in the “borderlands.” While a borderland could literally consist of a region close to a territorial line, Anzaldúa articulates the essence of hybridity by exploring how Mexican Americans have embraced an identity that can take on a mix of cultures, heritages, races, and languages.

Some authors, like Anzaldúa, may focus on the story of an *immigrant*, which Cambridge dictionary defines as a person who has come into another country to live there (“Immigrant”). Typically, immigrants travel to another country for permanent residence (*Dictionary.com*). Other writers might focus on the story of *migrants*, or people who travel or move to a different country, often in the context of finding work (“Migrant”). While migrants may stay in a country temporarily or for a shorter period of time than immigrants, many migrants still experience an identity change.

For the purpose of analyzing identity in a more long-term context, the exploration of Latino identity in the novels selected tends to focus on immigrants. By analyzing the representation of Latino immigrant identity in a selection of contemporary literature of migration, we can come to better understand what it means to be a *transmigrant*—a migrant whose identity is not confined to one nation-state—and how that concept better sheds light on the flexibility of an immigrant’s identity in the 21st century.

Postcolonial Theory and Migration Literature

Literature has the ability to illuminate ideas and issues pertinent to society. As immigration stands at the forefront of contemporary issues in an increasingly connected world, more writers have tried to explore how immigrants react to their

new environment and how their perspectives and identity evolve over time. Much of the literature of migration falls under the framework of postcolonial literature.

According to Leela Gandhi, one of the leading postcolonial investigators, postcolonial theory aims to recognize and remember a past that has a long history of colonialism (4). By viewing the migration of people through a postcolonial framework, we can better understand the relationships between countries and how these relationships have played out in terms of modern-day immigration.

One of the key themes in postcolonial literature is the idea of the “Other” (Gandhi 16). Postcolonial theory dictates that identity exists as a way to differentiate oneself in relation to the “Other” (Ozkazanc-Pan 13). In this sense, representing the concept of the “Other” in a novel about immigration could consist of juxtaposing the immigrant or a immigrant group as the “Other” in a community of non-immigrants, or representing the non-immigrants as the “Other” in the eyes of the immigrant. Of course, this idea can become much more complex as various groups and different generations of immigrants interact with each other. In any case, establishing an “Other” creates a space in which the characters can contrast their way of life with that of another group of people, contributing to the construction of their own identity. Transitioning this idea into the context of the migration of people allows us to examine the relationships between immigrant groups and non-immigrant groups, and study how the interactions between these diverse groups have the power to influence or change perspectives and identities.

While the migration of humans has occurred for many years, migration literature specifically about Latinos is relatively contemporary. Nonetheless, some

investigators have already tried to define the essence of migration literature. According to Pourjafari and Vahidpour, migration literature does not necessarily have to include themes about culture or traditions of the destination country (680). Migration literature is diverse in both themes and structure (680). In general, the themes at the heart of migration literature are based on the migrant or immigrant group, their identity, their way of overcoming difficulties, their insecurities, and communication problems (680). Migration literature investigates the result of people from different cultures and backgrounds coexisting in the same space, and how that can affect perspectives and identities (680). While it can also include commentary or an analysis of the culture of the non-migrant group, the focus remains on the social, cultural, economic or political narrative of the migrants (681). While all of these themes remain pertinent to migration literature, some authors will explore a particular theme more in-depth than others. This variety in perspectives demonstrates the uniqueness of the migrant experience.

Immigrant Identity in Two Contemporary Novels

The theme of identity plays a central role in migration literature. Postcolonial authors examine the ways in which identities constantly deteriorate and reconstruct themselves. This does not mean, however, that certain aspects of a person's identity may disappear forever or that other, newer contributions to someone's identity override previous identities. As much as we may find ourselves trying to define an identity as a stagnant part of our being, postcolonial theory reiterates the idea that identities constantly change and evolve. Migration literature also emphasizes the importance of understanding the fluidity and flexibility of an immigrant's identity

(Pourjafari 687). Two contemporary novels about migration, *El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos* and *Crónicas de un Nómada: Memorias de un inmigrante* demonstrate the hybrid nature of an immigrant's identity.

El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos, written by Cristina Henríquez and published in 2014, tells the story of a family from Mexico who moves to Delaware in hopes of enrolling their daughter in a school that can help her after she suffers a brain injury. Arturo and Alma Rivera, along with their daughter, Maribel, move into an apartment complex inhabited by a plethora of other families that immigrated to the United States from all over Latin America. The narrative, told in the first person by multiple characters, details the struggles, successes and perspective changes the various immigrants' experiences.

Henríquez, whose father immigrated to the United States from Panama in 1971, intertwines experiences and observations from her own life into the stories of her characters, while at the same time demonstrating the diverse nature of immigrant experiences (Reyes). With her novel, Henríquez aims to tell the story not of immigration, but instead of the immigrants. Translated as "The Book of Unknown Americans," the author writes about "the human faces, the human stories, the human *lives* behind what for many people has become only an issue" (Olivas). The narrative closely follows the personal stories of the characters and details the intricate nuances in their identities as immigrants of the 21st century.

The second novel used to demonstrate explorations of Latino immigrant identity, *Crónicas de un nómada: Memorias de un inmigrante*, was written by A. A. Álvarez and published in 2009. The novel follows a Venezuelan teenager, Carlos,

who decides to travel to the United States to live with his brother in Denver, Colorado. After a series of realizations about the realities of his life as an immigrant in the United States, he decides to later move to Greece to be with his fiancée, a woman also born in Venezuela who has Greek heritage. By the end of the novel, Carlos once again immigrates, this time to Australia. Carlos's experience in each country demonstrates the character's ability to reconstruct his perspectives and, as a result, constantly create a new identity. The storyline, narrated in the first person, presents the readers with an in-depth view into the thoughts of an immigrant during the various stages of his life. By the end of the novel, and after visiting his hometown in Venezuela after living abroad for many years, Carlos finally realizes the flexibility of his identity and how much his experiences have changed him.

Merging Anthropology and Literary Analysis: The Transmigrant

Álvarez, an immigrant also born in Caracas, Venezuela, notes that by fusing together his personal experiences with the story of many other young immigrants he has come to know in his life, he hopes to erase the territorial lines that outline nations and divide us as people (327). Álvarez's novel not only expands upon the idea of hybrid identity in immigrants, but he also touches on an important idea in the field of anthropology. The author argues that immigrants today have the capability to transcend territories and recreate their identity outside of a country's borders. In anthropology, a person whose identity is not confined to one nation-state is considered a *transmigrant*. While Álvarez briefly alludes to this idea at the end of his novel, both he and Henríquez demonstrate the concept of transmigrants through the characters in their books.

Because the idea of a transmigrant appeared only within the last few decades, it is imperative to understand the evolution in concepts regarding immigrants and identity. In the past, some scholars viewed American immigration through the *Ellis Island paradigm* or the *immigrant assimilation model*, according to Paul Spickard, author of *Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity* (6). Immigration in the United States historically consisted of a series of one-way migrations of Europeans in the “Old Country” to the “New Country” (6). According to these models, these immigrants needed to undergo culture change and conform to an “American identity” (7). Immigrants spoke a foreign language and needed to learn English to engage in public life (7). They wore different clothes, ate different foods, and celebrated different traditions.

In order to embody a successful immigrant, the assimilation model argues that immigrants must integrate and become a part of the American *melting pot*—a “proportional blend of all the peoples who make up America” (Spickard 11). As the years passed, scholars have discovered that this model does not accurately represent the immigrant experience. Spickard notes that, “Assimilation as the rapid transformation of immigrants into residents ‘as American as everyone else’ has never happened” (139). In other words, *true* “assimilation”—meaning that all immigrants fully incorporate themselves into the U.S. way of life and absorb the defined characteristics of the typical American—never really characterized the immigrant experience in the United States.

Although immigration itself and the process of an immigrant’s identity change cannot truly be defined since these concepts are flexible, unique, and

constantly changing, the idea of the immigrant assimilation model remains problematic in two ways. First, believing in and trying to encapsulate one, true American identity elicits myriad different definitions, even among non-immigrants who claim to embody this very identity. Second, the idea of assimilation assumes a simple, unitary idea: people either assimilate or they do not assimilate (Dvorak 85). For example, learning English as an immigrant in the United States illustrates the problem in identifying assimilation as a uniform idea. The question of assimilation comes into play when looking at the progress an immigrant makes in learning the target language. To some, assimilating through language might mean speaking a clear, well-paced English with little trace of an accent of someone who emigrated from a different country. To others, assimilating through language could mean knowing just enough words in English in order to carry on a conversation. In summary, the immigrant assimilation model does not account for the nuances in the evolution of the life of an immigrant. For these reasons, the model remains misrepresentative of the flexible nature of each immigrant's experience.

In the 1980s, cultural psychologists began to recognize that acquiring some of the traditions, values, and beliefs of the destination country does equate to immigrants abandoning previous traditions, values, and beliefs from the country of origin (Schwartz et. al). They realized that while an immigrant can come to identify with some aspects of the destination country's culture and way of life, it does not mean that these newfound connections supersede every part of one's previous identity. In fact, some immigrants experience a tension in finding a balance between preserving cultural aspects of their country of origin and adopting parts of the

culture of the destination country (Barkan 83). This is particularly the case for first- and second-generation immigrants who must “straddle” two worlds at once (Pew Hispanic Center). This idea of a combination of cultures contributing to a person’s identity took off during this period of time, leading scholars to further investigate the ways immigrants have constructed their identity.

Researchers of the 1990s expanded upon this idea that an immigrant’s identity evolves in a much more complex way than previously assumed. Ian Chambers, author of *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*, writes: “Migrancy...involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation” (5). Identity constitutes a construction and an invention (25). The creation of an individual’s identity never ends. As Chambers states, “...there is no fixed identity or final destination” (25). This idea deconstructs the previous concept that immigrants either assimilated and *became* Americans or did not assimilate and only identified with their country of origin. Immigrants acquire different aspects from a culture or a way of life and apply that to the composition of their own identity. They transcend both physical borders and cultural borders, fusing their previous and newfound experiences, thoughts, and opinions into their current identity.

Building on the idea of a fluid identity and recognizing the transnational connections occurring between countries during the 1990s, three anthropologists, Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, began to write much of the academic work published about the idea of the *transmigrant*. Glick Schiller,

Basch and Szanton Blanc characterize the transmigrant as a migrant who “[becomes] firmly rooted in their new country but [maintains] multiple linkages to their homeland” (48). While previous generations in the United States viewed immigrants as having to “uproot” and incorporate themselves into a whole new country and culture, the idea of the transmigrant better characterizes the flexible, interconnected nature of an immigrant’s life today. The transmigrant fashions multiple identities together and lives in a state of constant interconnections across territorial lines (48). Immigrants more than ever have the ability to maintain links to their country of origin while at the same time physically living within the boundaries of another country (48). This idea of the transmigrant has made its way into more modern-day discussions about the inter-connected lives many immigrants today live.

While both authors Henríquez and Álvarez may not have intentionally explored the concept of the transmigrant in their novels, they demonstrate this idea by weaving in narratives that portray the fluid nature of an immigrant’s identity. The novels shed light on many aspects of the transmigrant Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc have investigated. Two of the most explored themes in the novels, language and relationships, exemplify both the ideas of a hybrid immigrant identity and of a 21st century transmigrant. Investigating these two themes in each novel demonstrates a connection between the fields of postcolonial literary analysis and of contemporary anthropology.

Language as a demonstration of hybridity and the transmigrant

Language constitutes one of the most widely discussed topics surrounding immigration in the United States today. According to data recorded in 2011 by the U.S. Census Bureau, around 231,000,000 people over the age of five spoke only English at home while roughly 60,500,000 people spoke a language other than English at home (Ryan 3). As a country made up of primarily English-speakers and home to millions of people who speak a language other than English, the country has seen a push toward both English-only policies, following in the footsteps of the assimilation model, and bilingual education, a means of connecting two linguistic groups. Language remains a highly debated topic in the discourse about immigration because it holds a strong connection to our identity. Language consists of more than words in literature or the sentences we hear and speak. It represents a cultural construction that we have built for ourselves (Chambers 22). Our language is something we have inherited and created. It embodies the history of our families, culture, and traditions, and it represents part of our current identity (24). Languages are constantly open to “questioning, rewiring and re-routing” as time passes (24). In turn, language helps us identify who we are in the present moment, and changes simultaneously as our identity evolves.

English in the United States exemplifies the flexibility of our identities and how we use language to differentiate between others and ourselves. Even within this one language, we have come to identify certain words, phrases, and accents with our identity and the identity of the “Other.” We can identify someone from Minnesota by the way they might draw out the “o” sound in words, for example. We recognize that a person might have grown up in the South if they use the word

“ya’ll.” However, even in these examples we must recognize that languages, too, are fluid and constantly susceptible to change. Not all identified Minnesotans draw out the “o” sound, and not all Southerners use the word “ya’ll.” Some people pronounce these sounds and words differently, and others may stop or start using such words at any point throughout their lifetime. A person born and raised in Minnesota might eventually start using the word “ya’ll” and identify with that language after moving to the South, for example. Language, therefore, not only constitutes a means of communication; it is a way to represent and identify with a culture, contributing to the construction of our identity.

In *El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos* and *Crónicas de un Nómada*, the authors explore the evolution in the immigrants’ languages and how the characters come to identify with particular languages over time. While each immigrant’s experience with language remains unique, some characters embody a hybrid identity by utilizing and identifying with both the language of the country of origin and the language of the destination country.

Finally, we can better understand the idea of the transmigrant by analyzing it in terms of its representation through language. The transmigrant has the ability to become “rooted” in the country of origin by learning and utilizing the language of the new community while at the same time maintain links to the language of the country of origin. Many of the characters, for example, learn the target language in the destination country—in this case, English in the United States or Greek in Greece—and continue to use the language of their origin nation-state. The newer language transforms into a part of the immigrants’ identity and experience.

Meanwhile, the characters do not lose their first language; some might reconstruct it as people do with any language, but they maintain the language across territorial lines.

Language in *El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos*

In *El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos*, Mayor Toro exemplifies the idea of a hybrid identity and a transmigrant. Mayor, the teenage son of Rafa and Cecilia Toro, grew up in Panama but moved to the United States during what his mother describes as a period of disintegration (57). The family moved in order to find better opportunities for their children and escape the difficult challenges life in Panama presented to them. At this point, Mayor has spent many years of his life in Delaware, and along with his parents and brother, has acquired citizenship in the United States. He attends public school and speaks both Spanish and English. One scene in the novel in particular demonstrates Mayor's ability to identify with and utilize both his Spanish and English languages.

In the middle of the novel, Mayor's father decides he needs to buy a car. Rafa invites Mayor to accompany him at the car dealership because he "doesn't know the language of cars" (161). The father mentions that in Panama, he knew the languages of everything. He could speak the language of breakfast, of business, and of politics (161). He believes, however, that even though he speaks English everyday in Delaware, he does not dominate the language well enough to speak the language of cars. For that reason, he brings along Mayor, who also notes to himself that as a young boy, he knows nothing about how cars work or if he can properly interpret for his father. However, Rafa tells Mayor that he knows English just as well as Rafa

knows Spanish. Mayor then interprets between the English-speaking salesperson at the car dealership and his father.

In this scene, Mayor identifies with both his Panamanian Spanish and with the English he has learned in Delaware. While he expresses his doubt in knowing everything about cars, he easily transitions between English and Spanish in his everyday life. He speaks English in school and with many of his friends, and he speaks Spanish at home with his parents and other friends who also emigrated from Latin America. He uses his Spanish as an identifier of his family, their history, and their origins. At the same time, his English language identifies him with his life in Delaware.

Mayor's identification with both languages contributes to his hybrid, flexible identity. He also transcends borders, combining a part of his identity from Panama with a part of his identity as a resident in Delaware. He does not "assimilate" in the sense that he loses his Spanish and only speaks English. As the Pew Hispanic Center notes, "For the children of immigrants and later generations, embracing English does not necessarily mean abandoning Spanish" (7). Of Latino immigrants in the U.S., for example, about 80 percent of second-generation immigrants and roughly 40 percent of third generation immigrants report proficiency in the Spanish language (7). While an individual's language changes over time and throughout generations of families, a hybrid linguistic identity can exist at various levels of proficiency in different languages. Mayor experiences a construction of a whole new identity that fuses together what he has learned and experienced in both Panama and the United States, contributing to his own hybrid identity.

This type of situation increasingly occurs for different generations of children of immigrants who spend many years of their lives in various languages, sometimes using one language with certain people like their parents, family or friends, and using another language with other groups of people. Even this idea, however, remains flexible. The boundaries between English and Spanish, for example, can blend and reconstruct one another. As the Pew Hispanic Center reported in a 2009 survey, about 70 percent of respondents in a nationally representative sample of about 3,000 Hispanics note that, “when speaking with family members and friends, they often or sometimes use a hybrid known as ‘Spanglish’ that mixes words from both languages,” a linguistic process called *code-switching* (7). Even though the characters in Henríquez’s novel use either Spanish *or* English when they speak to one another, using both languages or a mix of two languages demonstrates the hybridity of a linguistic identity and how an immigrant can identify with both the language of the country origin and of the destination country.

Language in *Crónicas de un nómada: Memorias de un inmigrante*

In *Crónicas de un nómada: Memorias de un inmigrante*, the main character, Carlos, experiences not one but two migrations, navigating between three different languages: Spanish, English, and Greek. In Venezuela, Carlos grew up learning English in school. When he moves to the United States, he quickly immerses himself in his new high school, rapidly acquiring the ability to express himself in both English and Spanish. Carlos finds a place in which he can communicate well with English-speakers in the United States while at the same time maintain ties to his

Spanish language, using it primarily to communicate with his brother in Denver and with his family back in Venezuela.

The dilemma for Carlos arises when he immigrates to Greece. While Carlos quickly identified with the English language, and frequently switched between English and Spanish while living in the United States, his experience in Greece proves much more challenging, primarily in terms of linguistics. Carlos never studied Greek before. His first exposure to the language occurs when he moves to the country to live with his fiancée, a Venezuelan-born woman with Greek heritage.

Carlos struggles to learn Greek, commenting that it seems so different and foreign to him compared to his experiences with the Spanish and English languages he had already identified with. Carlos feels unproductive, illiterate, and isolated because he cannot communicate with anyone (274). The character does not immediately identify with the Greek language like he did with English in the United States.

Carlos' situation in the novel demonstrates the flexibility of the immigrant experience. At this point, Carlos still uses his Spanish to communicate with his fiancée and his English to communicate with the few people who also know the language, but Greek proves a different challenge. While some immigrants can identify with a certain language very quickly, others might find it more difficult. Therefore, attempting to define "the immigrant experience" will never lead to one, true answer. All immigrant experiences are different and unique to the individual. Immigrants learn languages at different paces and generations of people learn

languages at different rates. The process depends on the person, demonstrating the flexible nature in language acquisition.

Even outside both his Spanish-speaking and English-speaking nation-states, as a transmigrant, Carlos has the ability to maintain both languages as a part of his identity even when he lives in Greece, a country that does not primarily speak either language. According to Bibler Coutin, this dual- or multiple-identity is “common among recent immigrants, who, regardless of their geographic mobility, orient their lives around multiple local and national realities” (512). Immigrants do not make a “clean break” from the identities they created for themselves in the past (518). For Carlos, moving to Greece does not mean leaving behind his Spanish or English language. The character instead maintains his linguistic ties to multiple societies. Connections to various nation-states at the same time characterize one of the principle ideas of the transmigrant (520). He identifies his Spanish with the Spanish he grew up with in Venezuela, and he identifies his English with what he learned and used in the United States.

A few years into his time as an immigrant in Greece, Carlos eventually learns Greek and finally gains the ability to communicate with others. Learning the language of the new destination country not only expands upon his linguistic identity, but it also opens doors for him. When Carlos did not understand or speak Greek, he felt helpless and alone. He could not find work and he could not communicate with others in order to make friendships. By learning the language and taking on a new linguistic identity, he further immerses himself in the local life. During that process, Carlos becomes part of the community. He makes friends,

foments stronger relationships with his Greek in-laws and, ultimately, transforms his identity once again to include not only aspects from Venezuelan and U.S.-American culture, but also those of Greek life. Community and friendships constitute another key theme in both novels, again demonstrating both the ideas of a hybrid identity and of the transmigrant.

Relationships and community as demonstrations of hybridity and the transmigrant

Personal relationships and our communities contribute greatly to the creation of our identity. Transmigrants have the ability to maintain connections in their country of origin while at the same time creating new relationships in their destination country. While immigrants physically cross borders, they also remain figuratively present in multiple societies at the same time, transcending territorial lines. Furthermore, keeping in touch with those in the country of origin proves increasingly more common and feasible. Modern-day transportation allows immigrants to move between locations more easily. Technology has also permitted international travelers to send and receive instant messages, share photos, and communicate via webcams and phone calls, allowing continuous participation in relationships and in family matters, all from a distance (Foner 963-64). With these modern innovations, migrants can easily stay connected to people in their country of origin while physically living in a different country.

In the destination country, transmigrants also have the ability to create new connections and engage in community events or organizations, fostering yet another community tie. According to William V. Flores, author of “New Citizens, New

Rights: Undocumented Immigrants and Latino Cultural Citizenship,” Latinos often organize on a neighborhood or citywide basis, “[securing] space for cultural identity constructions, group survival, and community organizations” (89). Of course, many immigrants also create ties and friendships with people in other communities. All of these contacts, both within the country of origin and in the destination country, create simultaneous engagement (964). Engagement in these various communities characterizes the constant nature in which “current-day immigrants construct and reconstitute their simultaneous embeddedness in more than one society” (Schiller, Basch, Szanton Blanc 48). In both Henríquez’s novel and Álvarez’s novel, the main characters find themselves frequently engaging with people of various communities, transcending social and territorial borders, as a transmigrant does.

Relationships and community in *El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos*

In *El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos*, the theme of community and relationships remains at the heart of the narrative. Because the story follows the relationship between Maribel Rivera and Mayor Toro, it also examines the relationships between the two families and the other families in the surrounding community. Both the children and the parents in each family start to form relationships with each other and with other people in the school and apartment complex.

In telling his story, Mayor narrates that upon moving to the United States, his family became divided between the desire to look back and the desire to live fully in the new life they had constructed in Delaware (79). He notes that at some point his family thought about moving back. They believed that with enough time, Panama

would reconstruct itself. But, he states, “while we waited for that day, we began to make friends” (79).¹ Mayor reflects on his journey to the United States and how his family coped with leaving a country during a difficult period. He recognizes that in order to make a life for themselves in their destination country, they need to make friends and engage themselves in the community in which they reside. He later says, “...we just want to be a part of this...Delaware is our home too” (145). Not only does Mayor come to identify with a new group of friends at his school, but he also calls Delaware his home, identifying himself with the country in which he lives.

Mayor’s mother, Celia, also comes to identify Delaware as her home. At the same time, she exemplifies how people who migrate keep in touch with people across territorial lines. Celia frequently calls her family in Panama and maintains tight bonds with them. Although she misses her country of origin and her family, Delaware begins to resonate as her home, eventually leading her to apply for U.S. citizenship and form close relationships with the other people in the apartment complex. Many U.S. immigrants express or promote dual identities which, especially after naturalization, “add U.S. citizenship to the migrants’ preexisting...nationality” (Coutin 519). This dual-identity surfaces as Celia and her family begin to view the United States as a home. However, rather than that identity overriding their Panamanian identity, the transmigrants take on a hybrid identity that combines both perspectives.

Relationships with the families in the apartment building demonstrate the importance of friendship and community in a person’s identity. For example, when

¹ This and all subsequent quotes from *El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos* and *Crónicas de un nómada: Memorias de un inmigrante* are translated by Laura Hoppe.

the heating in the building stops working during Christmas, all the families in the complex gather together in Celia's apartment and sing songs, drink hot coffee, dance, and shout out the names of the countries they represent: Mexico, Panama, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Paraguay (141). While all of the people in the apartment complex maintain their country of origins as a key part of their identity, they can also all identify with the community they have created in their residential block.

The strength of the community they identify with comes to surface again at the end of the novel when Alma's husband dies. As Alma and Maribel prepare to head back to Mexico, Alma expresses to Celia her wish to bring Arturo's body back to Pátzcuaro so they can bury it at the local cemetery. Low on money, Alma realizes she will not be able to pay to fly his body back. Because of Alma's connections to the people in her apartment building, they all pitch in money help her pay for the flight. Celia delivers the money to Alma, telling her, "We all did it together...before I realized it, people were contacting me to find out how to collaborate. People that I didn't even know you knew. The whole world loved him, Alma" (280). This collaboration and generous act demonstrates the tight-knit community the tenants created through their apartment building.

At the end of the novel, Arturo also narrates and reflects on his family's experience in the United States: "We were very happy here in many aspects. We met some good people. We didn't spend much time here, but the people we met in the building in which we lived have converted into a kind of family for us" (280). Even though Arturo's journey in the United States was short-lived, he notes that his

apartment building transformed into a sort of family for him. While he remained in contact with his family in Mexico, he also came to identify with his new community. The deep connections Arturo had with his neighbors contributed to his own identity. He labeled his apartment complex as “home” even when he knew he would only live in the building temporarily.

These scenes of community and friendship demonstrate the idea that immigrants can create and maintain connections with people both in the country of origin and in the current location. Celia sustains links to her country of origin by keeping in frequent contact with family and friends. At the same time, she makes new friends in the United States and becomes a part of a close community within her apartment building. She identifies with the new community by calling it home, and with her new friends by calling them her family.

Making friends and joining a new community does not mean that an immigrant must leave behind and cut off ties with friends, family and the community in the country of origin. As demonstrated through Henríquez’s novel, transmigrants have the ability to interconnect their relationships in both countries. They constantly live in a world of multiple realities, linking together social relations from both the country of origin and the destination country (Schiller, Basch, Szanton Blanc 48). Multiple characters in *El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos* embody the idea that an immigrant can come to call various places “home” and various people “family,” recognizing these relationships as a part of a newly created identity.

Relationships and community in *Crónicas de un nómada: Memorias de un inmigrante*

In *Crónicas de un nómada*, Carlos also maintains relationships in his country of origin and forms new friendships with people he meets in his two destination countries, the United States and Greece. Carlos's experience in staying in touch with people in his country of origin differs from those of the characters in *El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos* at the beginning. Eventually, Carlos comes to realize the importance of maintaining relationships across borders, especially for his mental health. He also makes many connections with people in both countries, and sustains those relationships even after immigrating again. Carlos's journey resembles that of a transmigrant who proves capable of balancing relationships he holds with people across multiple borders.

Because Carlos emigrates during a very economically- and politically-trying time for Venezuela, he does not want to leave the country and be known as a *vende patria*—a traitor or an anti-patriot. In his first few months in the United States, he purposely cuts off many ties with his friends back in Venezuela. He knows English well enough that he can quickly make new friends, yet the person from his country of origin he talks to the most is his brother, with whom he lives in Denver. Although he breaks some ties to people back in his country of origin, he makes many new friends at school. Carlos notes, "...because almost all of my friendships were with English-speakers, I hadn't even finished the first semester and I was already speaking English comfortably" (198). Not only do his new friendships in the United States help Carlos identify with the people, but they also help him create greater ties to the English language.

When Carlos migrates to Greece, he finally realizes the importance of social connections with his friends and family back in Venezuela, especially for his own mental wellbeing. According to Rose Perez, author of “Latino Mental Health,” migrants may experience many psychological stressors such as: a feeling of the loss of a homeland, family separation, and difficulties adjusting both culturally and linguistically (38). Carlos’s first months in Greece prove especially difficult because he cannot understand nor easily learn the Greek language. He feels more isolated and vulnerable than he did in the United States, where he could at least use his English skills to feel a sense of empowerment in his school and place of work. Although Venezuela and the United States contribute to Carlos’ identity, he experiences difficulties in adjusting because he feels less “at home” in Greece.

After recognizing his feelings of loneliness, Carlos reconnects with some of his friends and family back in Venezuela. Carlos says, “...my friends on the American continent were many hours behind me, so staying up late was the only way to maintain the little social life I had left” (276). He realizes that his limited language ability in Greece inhibits his means of having a social life in the country, so maintaining these ties to his connections in Venezuela reaffirms that he still identifies with the community in his country of origin. Carlos notes that his hobbies and friendships helped him maintain his sanity during this difficult transitional period (279). Sustaining these relationships helps him feel that he can once again identify with a group of people while he experiences trouble in identifying with the people in his current community.

Later on, Carlos finally learns Greek, which creates more opportunities for him to build new friendships in his community. Carlos reflects on this moment in his life: "It's impressive to me to see how one thing is related to the other. The simple fact of having made friends opened the doors to new job opportunities..." (279). He makes new friendships, finds work, and comes to appreciate the style of life he created for himself. Through this experience, Carlos obtains multiple identities, and finally connects with the people and communities across various international borders. Carlos engages in the local community while at the same time remaining engaged in his previous places of residence. Transmigrants, like Carlos, have the ability to constantly stay connected to the country of origin and the destination country. Although Carlos's level of involvement with each community may differ, by the end of the novel he finds a balance between physically living in one space and "being present" for his friends and family across territorial lines.

Lastly, Carlos's experiences demonstrate the flexibility and constant evolution of an immigrant's identity. After many years abroad, he finally visits Venezuela to see his family. While in the country, he experiences a shock. Not only does he witness the differences in the economic and political situations and how they have created a divisive nation, but he also receives backlash from his own family about his life as an immigrant. Carlos's uncle, for example, insinuates that Carlos is a *vende patria* for having left Venezuela during a difficult period. Carlos reflects, "...that was something that bothered him a lot and he criticized me for having let the *yanquis* brainwash me and turn me against my own people" (308). Carlos feels taken aback and insulted by the comments his uncle makes against the

United States. Even though he never acquired citizenship in the U.S. and only lived there temporarily, Carlos still feels a strong connection to the country and its people.

This precise moment demonstrates the fluidity of Carlos's identity and the drastic changes it undergoes over time. He feels a sense of disconnect not only with his family, but also with his country of origin. Carlos ends up leaving Venezuela a couple weeks early to return to Greece, stating that he can no longer take the stress. He leaves Venezuela and refers to his destination country as "my beautiful, beloved Greece" (312). While Carlos still connects with the people in Venezuela, and identifies with the United States and Greece on various levels, he realizes that he does not truly *belong* to one place in particular. By the end of the novel, Carlos states: "I am an international citizen and I belong to the generation of immigrants" (323). Creating an identity of a "citizen of the world" places him in a life that transcends social, cultural, and political borders. He remains interconnected yet flexible, grounded yet free. Carlos maintains the ties he has to various nation-states, yet recognizes that not one country or one experience dominates his identity. The character creates his own identity—a hybrid, and flexible one that follows him across borders.

Conclusion

Two contemporary novels about migration, *El Libro de los Americanos Desconocidos* by Cristina Henríquez and *Crónicas de un nómada: Memorias de un inmigrante* by A.A. Álvarez, characterize both the postcolonial theory concept of a *hybrid* or *dual-identity* and the anthropological idea of *transmigrant*. By examining

the novels' portrayals of language and relationships, we can come to better understand the connection between these two concepts. While immigrants increasingly stay in contact and maintain ties to people and communities in the country of origin, many often foment ties and come to identify with aspects of the destination country. An immigrant's identity remains flexible and fluid, constantly undergoing change and recreating itself. While some parts of one's identity may be destroyed while others are created, immigrating to a country does not consist of ridding oneself of a previous identity. Instead, transmigrants reconstruct their identities and maintain multiple links across borders.

Even in the United States today—a country in which immigration remains key to our historical narrative—we still struggle in finding a balance between rhetoric of assimilation or the promotion of a true “American” identity, and cultural retention. Many writers around the world have explored these themes and how an immigrant's identity has the capability to evolve over time. Through this exploration, literature of migration has blossomed into a means of portraying the diversity in an immigrant's experience. Henríquez's novel demonstrates more than just the story of a Panamanian-American family and a Mexican family finding a place of community in Delaware, and Álvarez's story consists of more than just a Venezuelan teenager who finds himself on a journey of ups, downs, and encounters with people from around the world. Literature of migration reflects upon the experience of the *individual*. Immigrant experiences remain unique to each person, and a rigid idea of “the immigrant story” misrepresents the flexible nature of the human experience. While Huntington is correct in stating that the number of

Hispanic immigrants in the U.S. continues to expand, the country consists of much more than a place of two cultures and two languages. The diversity in the United States allows us to interact with people from all backgrounds and cultures, meaning that even without *physically* crossing territorial lines, we can all transcend borders and become a part of an increasingly inter-connected world.

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