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“I BELONG BUT DO NOT BELONG”

THE CONCEPT OF NEPANTLA AND NARRATIVES OF
IN-BETWEENNESS IN CHICANA/O AND FINNISH
ROMANI *BILDUNGSROMANE*

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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to better understand how in-betweenness is created and represented in narratives. I argue that the concept of nepantla, which roughly translates as ‘torn between ways’ from Nahuatl, the Aztec language, allows scholars to analyze non-hierarchical, neutral in-betweenness in texts and, as a result, also in the ‘real’ world. I consider four works—three novels by Mexican American authors and one trilogy of novels by a Finnish Romani author—to approach characters who remain uncommitted, or do not fit, into our shared frames of reference. The dissertation aims to allow scholars familiar with the work of Gloria Anzaldúa to see nepantla, through the prism of comparative literature, in a new light. Further, Romani studies, and cultural studies and literatures in Europe more broadly, will benefit from the possibility of building on many decades of thought concerning ethnicity, race, culture, and more from the field of Chicana/o studies in the United States.

Currently, the most common concept for discussions on in-betweenness is probably hybridity. Hybridity, however, and other concepts like it (the Third Space, *mestizaje*, *métissage*, etc.), imply two or more self-contained categories that are then amalgamated, usually with an implied hierarchy. Nepantla, in contrast, allows scholars to ask: what aspects of normative categories are accepted, which are rejected, and why? If a character chooses from various influences in a piecemeal fashion that is continually evolving, the categories that make up the ‘hybrid’ are no longer very meaningful and cannot be hierarchically positioned.

Though nepantla is an abstract, contradictory, and difficult concept to wield, its application to a reading of literature allows nepantla-like processes of in-betweenness to be analyzed through the specificity of individual characters, communities, and historical contexts. This makes the concept more accessible. The novels I’ve collected are all ‘ethnic’ *Bildungsromane* in which the protagonists grapple with being between their minority communities and the status quo. They all end with the protagonists in an ambiguous state of in-betweenness and ongoing *becoming* that coincides with the concept of nepantla. They are Oscar ‘Zeta’ Acosta’s (1972) *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, Sandra Cisneros’s (1984) *The House on Mango Street*, Kiba Lumberg’s (2011) Finnish Romani *Memesa* trilogy, and John Rechy’s (1963) *City of Night*. The texts have been chosen because they represent different forms of in-betweenness and thereby illustrate nepantla’s many variations.

Based on the insight that nepantla represents both a positive in-between space where transformation can occur and the *Coatlicue* state, which is a time-place of chaos, suffering, and a loss of control, I argue that nepantla is best understood as a continuum of possible positionalities that change in the

passage of time. Acosta's novel represents an explicitly empowering form of nepantla, which is one end of the heuristically plotted continuum. Rechy's novel is at the opposite end because it represents nepantla as chaotic, debilitating, and harmful. I compare Cisneros's novel to Lumberg's trilogy, which represent similar life trajectories for their heroines yet with very different results. While Cisneros's protagonist dares to dream of a house of her own, Lumberg's protagonist is regularly, in the course of her racialized existence, shut out from the category of 'human,' which results in different positions on the nepantla continuum for each protagonist.

An important contribution of the dissertation is the application of nepantla to Finnish Romani literature. While in the field of Chicana/o studies nepantla has mostly been used to better understand subjective processes of change based on agency, the analysis of the sociocultural and historical realities faced by Roma in Finland shifts our understanding away from agency and towards society. Besides a few minor exceptions, Finnish Romani literature has not yet been studied. In the dissertation, the Finnish-language excerpts have been translated, allowing for a more global and transdisciplinary dialogue.

Narrative theory provides a number of tools that help us to discern how in-betweenness and nepantla-like processes are represented and created in texts, the most central of which is the narrative gap. Because semantic signifiers are categories and nepantla is in-between categories, and hence often language itself, texts will often rely on representing a nepantla-like phenomenon by placing it where a conspicuous absence exists. Furthermore, readers can access that which is beyond language through negativity, irony, association, interpretation, imagination, and metaphorical language, which are all ways of communicating beyond verbalized meaning. Nepantla guides this process by making us on the lookout for representations of experiences, emotions, time-places, and meaning that don't fit into normative frames of reference. The main implication of this research is that the concept of nepantla allows scholars to better acknowledge, analyze, and understand in-betweenness in both texts and the 'real' world, thereby beginning to do justice to the experiences and subjectivities of some characters and individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

1 INTRODUCTION

The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo (1972), a satirical account of mid-20th century U.S. society by Oscar ‘Zeta’ Acosta, offers a scathing illustration of the problems involved in viewing the world through simplistic categories. The character narrator (Phelan 2005) Oscar describes his own coming-of-age process as he moves from one normative sociocultural category to the next, each embodied with a fervent earnestness that turns to comic hyperbole. He is a devout Catholic Mexican American boy, a patriotic U.S.-American youth during World War II, a zealous Baptist missionary, a peach-picker immigrant’s son, a macho male, a lawyer, a nationalist leader of his people in the vein of Mao, Moses, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and much more. He is alternatively an Aztec, a Samoan, a Cro-Magnon Man, a Blackfoot, and Little Black Sambo. Moreover, each of the characters he encounters is boiled down to his or her ethnicity. According to Oscar, racial stratification is of “ultimate importance” and means everyone knows “exactly who one is” (Acosta 1972, 85–86) in the schema operating in the USA at that time. Racial, religious, and class categories mean the world is a simple place to maneuver.

Except, of course, that Oscar’s categories lead to depression, suicide attempts, and a body that rebels in the form of constipation, impotence, ulcers, and nervous angst. As a result, Oscar constantly changes his race, religion, role, and other markers of identity, hence undercutting, through an exuberant performance in search for his “fucked-up identity” (Acosta 1972, 190), the ostensible stability upon which the narrative and U.S. society are founded.

At the end of the novel, Oscar declares: “My single mistake has been to seek an identity with any one person or nation or with any part of history. [...] [W]hat is clear to me after this sojourn is that I am neither a Mexican nor an American. I am neither a Catholic nor a Protestant. I am a Chicano by ancestry and a Brown Buffalo by choice” (Acosta 1972, 199). For Oscar, this utterance is the culmination of the process of *nepantla*, which roughly means ‘torn between ways’ in Nahuatl, the Aztec language, and is the central theoretical lens by which the novels in this dissertation are read. *Nepantla* is the ‘space’ in-between normative categories, such as Oscar’s “Catholic” and “Protestant,” seemingly the only two religious options in the USA at the time. Oscar realizes he is neither one nor the other. It is a space where you don’t belong to any of the available cultures, e.g., to “Mexican” or “American,” but take aspects that are good from both—and potentially many others—and reject what is harmful.

Nepantla can be a choice and constructed from a multitude of influences while not pledging allegiance to, or being constrained by the demarcations of, any *one* of them. Oscar’s declaration that he is a “Brown Buffalo by choice” establishes a positionality of his own invention constructed from numerous aspects of the multitude of identity categories he has ‘tried on’ and discarded throughout the narrative. A stable or fixed vantage point is replaced by the

ability to see from multiple contradictory viewpoints at once. Moreover, nepantla changes as the process of identity moves ever-forward with time and the accumulation of experiences and influences. It may lead to failure altogether—as readers surmise it will for the blinkered and impulsive Oscar. But for all his foolishness, Oscar has pierced the mysteries of identity and landed at the heart of nepantla: some characters are best understood as inhabiting a space in-between the shared frames of reference by which the world and literature are usually talked about.

Based on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) and others, I've applied the concept of nepantla to literature. While scholars usually subordinate nepantla to Anzaldúa's theories on borders/borderlands and, specifically, mestizaje (Keating 2015, xxxvi), I will argue in this dissertation that they have it the wrong way around. In the words of AnaLouise Keating (2015), "nepantla's implications are immense" (xxxvi) and, as I will show, the concept can be used for a richer reading of narratives by accessing veins of more complex knowledge. Moreover, I extend the concept of nepantla from questions of identity to analyze elements of time, place, quotidian experiences (such as language or those of an immigrant), epiphanies and realizations, satire (including irony and humor), multiple-voiced character narrators, death and rebirth, schooling, sexuality, trauma, and the unnatural based on an analysis of how these devices are used in literature to create in-betweenness. The analysis will hence be of benefit for the field of narrative theory and literary studies more broadly. I ask how in-betweenness, as understood through the theoretical lens of nepantla, is created and represented in stories. This is the first objective of this dissertation.

To apply nepantla to literature, I've developed a methodological framework by which to analyze a continuum of nepantla, which is the second objective of this dissertation and a contribution to the field of Chicana/o studies. Instead of a singular nepantla, I speak of a variety of different nepantla-like phenomena that, in addition to their theoretical underpinning in the work of Anzaldúa and in Aztec metaphysics (Maffie 2014), are illustrated in the four works that make up my corpus. Literature is an important and meaningful scholarly endeavor precisely because theoretical implications can be illustrated in reference to specific characters, experiences, and contexts. Moreover, readers generally and scholars specifically can begin to access the emotional implications of in-betweenness, which is an important aspect of the various kinds of nepantla I have identified. By better understanding how in-betweenness works and feels in stories, we are better equipped to recognize and approach real-life situations in which the status quo stratification systems are simply not working for any given individual.

Access to specific instances of in-betweenness will also benefit the field of postcolonial studies, which, in reference to concepts such as hybridity, mestizaje, the Third Space, etc., has too heavily relied on mechanisms of systemic interaction between colonizer and colonized instead of individuals in view of specific contexts. My analysis will show that for some individuals or

characters—such as those found in my corpus—thinking in terms of amalgamated systemic categories, which can lead to an implied hierarchy, does not do justice to their lived experiences. Nepantla could be used to allow for instances of non-hierarchical multiplicity within postcolonial studies.

I extend the concept of nepantla by applying it to a narrative by and about Finnish Roma by considering the historical and sociocultural contexts. This move allows scholars in the field of Chicana/o studies to see whether, or to what extent and how, a concept developed in the U.S. context can be utilized across geographies. It also enriches the theoretical possibilities in the field of Romani studies in Finland, where questions of multiplicity, in-betweenness, and subjectivity are only now being asked (Roman 2018; Stenroos 2012a, 2012b). Moreover, the study of literature in Finland will benefit from a more globally interactive theoretical approach when it comes to questions of race, belonging, and not belonging. The discussion of Kiba Lumberg's (2011) *Memesa* trilogy will raise many questions that could lead to meaningful discussions in Finnish society, such as who is included as a Finn and who is excluded. How do stereotypical ideas concerning Roma in Finland continue to flourish? How is Finnish society systemically racist?

The topic of in-betweenness in narratives is important because too often we interpret texts—as well as the world around us—through categories that are too coarse to meaningfully represent some characters or individuals' realities. Scholars who have attempted to discuss in-betweenness have often fallen back on the binaries, assumptions, and hierarchies that they're trying to undo. Processes and change are not always accounted for. Most importantly, I think, there is an over-reliance on fitting individual characters and experiences into pre-existing schemata of set categories—as if everything that exists has its place or can even be named. A character is expected to fit into *some* ethnic or racial category, for example, and sometimes will be made to, even if it's an amalgamation such as in hybridity. The concept of nepantla allows us to take ambiguity, mutability, process, and non-hierarchical thinking seriously as we apply it to texts in which characters might not fit normative frames of reference or accept that socially informed hierarchies reflect their own lived experiences and understandings.

The most central literary device for interpreting nepantla—both the process and the telos—is the narrative gap. A narrative gap is a place in a text where information or meaning has been omitted. Readers will fill in the missing information through interpretation based on, and guided by, the text but also by relying on pre-existing knowledge. Because semantic signifiers are categories and nepantla is in between categories, and hence often language itself, texts will frequently rely on representing nepantla by placing it where a conspicuous absence exists. This can be a form of negativity, which saying what something is *not* without saying what it *is*. Irony can be used—saying one thing but meaning another. Furthermore, readers can access that which is beyond language through association, interpretation, imagination, and

metaphorical language, which are all ways of communicating beyond verbalized meaning.

These tools and others will be used to better understand how literature represents and creates in-betweenness. The analysis chapters will explore four texts to show that, for some characters, in-betweenness is a defining trait of how they understand themselves and experience the storyworld (Herman 2002, 14).

1.1 OVERVIEW OF THE STRUCTURE

In part 1 of this dissertation, I discuss in-betweenness as an embraced positionality. I call this a nepantla of ‘belonging’ because characters accept their in-betweenness as a legitimate and empowering way to view the world. In a sense, they ‘belong’ to in-betweenness as they overlap with various categories positively. They are able to use aspects of their many influences—cultures, genders, religions, and so on—and reject others. Through agency, they creatively adapt and balance outer reality and their inner subjectivity. In part 2, I analyze the nepantla of ‘not belonging.’ In these works, the characters experience nepantla not as partial belonging to multiple categories, but rather as a distance—or not belonging—to multiple categories. Some characters and individuals can want to belong to society’s categories but, for reasons such as racism, violence, and trauma, are unable. In practice, all the protagonists in this corpus experience both of these forms of nepantla as well as others. The classification speaks to the overall experiences of the protagonists and is meant to begin to expose the existence of many forms of nepantla, which will be outlined in chapter 2.

After the analysis of Acosta’s abovementioned *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) in chapter 3, in which I argue that the novel represents the most explicitly positive form of nepantla in the corpus, I turn to Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (2009) in chapter 4. I seek to better understand how the character narrator Esperanza can simultaneously be faithful to her individual need to be an artist, and hence not constrained by men, family, or the community, while remaining loyal to her obligation to the women of Mango Street, who live under the detrimental realities of the patriarchy. Though also positively framed as an eventual realization of nepantla as Esperanza shapes her reality by utilizing aspects of her many available categories, this novel differs from Acosta’s because nepantla is not framed as a verbalized position. Rather, Esperanza gradually comes to a nepantla realization by internalizing the stories of the women on Mango Street. Moreover, in this chapter I analyze quotidian nepantla, which is the everyday reality of in-betweenness as represented through bilingualism and the immigrant experience.

In chapter 5, I analyze Kiba Lumberg’s *Memesa* trilogy (2011), an example of nepantla as not belonging, the first novel in part 2. The character narrator

Memesa, who begins the story as a girl in her Romani family in Finland, decides that, due to her role as a woman in the patriarchy, she must leave the community. Her intention is to join the majority-Finnish culture, but she is rejected due to racism and socio-cultural constraints based on a stereotypical view of Roma in Finland. In-betweenness is not an accepted or liberatory position for Memesa, but rather the result of outside forces that push her into it. Agency can only take her so far. This complicates but also enriches our understanding of nepantla because it takes into consideration that, sometimes (or even often), not belonging to categories can be an isolating, confusing, and lonely experience.

John Rechy's novel *City of Night* and analyzed through the idea of *Coatlicue* nepantla in chapter 6. In *Coatlicue*, one is torn apart between one's conflicting stories. I argue that, taken far enough, in-betweenness leads to chaos as one's connections to a shared reality, which is based on the assumptions of sameness extrapolated into categories, are severed. Rechy's unnamed narrator consciously cultivates his apartness as he dives deeper into his experiences as a hustler (i.e., a male prostitute) on the nocturnal streets of urban USA. The narrator's inability to integrate the conflicting aspects of his self drives him deeper into chaos, which is a terribly lonely and isolating experience. It is also one possibility on the continuum of nepantla, as stories of utter failure, chaos, and torture are one potential outcome of in-betweenness.

I argue that all these texts can be classified as modified *Bildungsromane* of in-betweenness. The life arc or *becoming* represented in these texts leads from childhood conformity and innocence through an education amongst society's many conflicting categories to a telos of in-betweenness, ambiguity, and ongoing change. In the words of Esperanza, Cisneros's (2009) character narrator in *The House on Mango Street*, the protagonists arrive at a space to which they "belong but do not belong" (109–10). The genre of *Bildungsroman* is hence expanded to account for the experiences of in-betweenness that most closely define some protagonists in literature. This dissertation is an attempt to begin to better understand those experiences that don't fall easily into our shared understandings of belonging. And belonging, I believe, is at the heart of what it is to be human.

INTRODUCTION

2 ON THEORY AND GENRE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The theoretical framework laid out in this chapter will be illustrated through the collected novels in which the character narrators come to realize, in varying degrees and ways, that in-betweenness is perhaps the best way of defining their reality and experiences vis-à-vis society and culture. I take the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) as my starting point to show that there is no *one* nepantla, but rather various ways of experiencing in-betweenness. Anzaldúa's conceptualization of nepantla will be compared to how the concept is understood in Aztec metaphysics (Maffie 2014). I also consider why mestizaje, hybridity, and similar concepts are not viable alternatives for understanding the kind of in-betweenness presented in my corpus. This will make clear that the concept of nepantla allows scholars to think about in-betweenness and its representation and creation in ways that correspond more closely with the experiences of characters—as well as their real-life equivalents—as described in the texts themselves. As such, the characters in these texts are understood in the mimetic tradition (Anderson, Felski, and Moi 2019; Phelan 2007; Polvinen and Sklar 2019).

The theories I discuss below can be abstract and rely heavily on metaphorical language—and even Anzaldúa (2000, 132–33) conceded that she was unable to communicate precisely what she wanted. For this reason, I have found it useful—for myself, and hopefully also for you—to break the theory down into its constituent parts, such as: 1) positive-negative; 2) temporary-permanent; 3) epiphanous-quotidian. Thinking in terms of binaries goes against the very spirit of nepantla but, nevertheless, for heuristic reasons, binaries will allow us to begin plotting what nepantla means and how we can use it.

2.1.1 NEPANTLA

In the 16th century, the Dominican friar Diego Durán, a speaker of Nahuatl, chastised a Nahua man for his behavior, which fell outside of Christian norms. The man responded, “Father, don't be shocked, for we are still *nepantla*” (Durán 1967, I, 237, qtd. in Burkhart 2017, 5), which the friar understood to mean “in the middle,” but he wanted a further explanation. Since the indigenous peoples are not yet rooted in Christianity, the man says, they are “governed by neither one religion nor the other [...]. They believe in [the Christian] God and also follow their ancient heathen rites and customs” (Durán 1967, I, 237, qtd. in Palencia-Roth 2016, 1). This statement led anthropologist Miguel León-Portilla (1974, 24, qtd. in Burkhart 2017, 5) to

formulate a theory of cultural *nepantlism*, which he defines as “to remain in the middle, the ancient ways confused (*ofuscado*) and the new ways unassimilated.”

Nepantla was later taken up by Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, who approaches nepantla through figurative language to better understand subjective processes of change. For example, Anzaldúa (2015) writes that nepantla is being at home on the bridge that represents constant transition, “the most unsafe of all spaces” (156). As a space, “se refiere a un lugar no-lugar” [it refers to a place no-place], writes Anzaldúa, and is a “connective tissue, nepantla, the bridge between the compartments” (28) and “the bridge between the material and the immaterial; the point of contact y el lugar [and the place] between ordinary and spirit realities” (28–9). It is the “place/space” where “realities interact and imaginative shifts happen” (35). Anzaldúa thus writes of nepantla as a metaphorical ‘space’ in which movement occurs beyond linear polarities. It can be robustly abstract (“un lugar no-lugar” [a place no-place]), mystical (“between the material and the immaterial”), and spiritual (“between ordinary and spirit realities”). It can also be understood bodily (“connective tissue”) and pragmatically (“a bridge”). In other words, nepantla can be understood metaphorically through any number of images and ideas. In an interview, Anzaldúa (2000) spoke about how she struggled with describing identity, saying it is “sort of like a river. It’s one and it’s flowing and it’s a process” but also acknowledged that, by giving different parts of the river names, “we’re doing that entity a disservice” by fragmenting it. These metaphors, Anzaldúa recognizes, do not quite capture what she is after (132–33). This undecidability—or rather the slipperiness in the grasp of language—is a primary challenge for the scholar applying nepantla to characters. However, nepantla does have some more tangible ideas we may apply to texts.

For Anzaldúa (2015), nepantla is also a state of mind in which you question your inherited ideas and beliefs, which allows new perspectives to emerge as worldviews shift from one “symbol system to another” (127). It is hence a zone of possibility where your ‘self’ meets the world and, in interaction with it, can change (122). Nepantla is thus “that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity” (56). Identity is “a process-in-the-making” (Anzaldúa 2000, 238) and hence not a stable end point but, rather, fluctuates and extends out in relation to the community. For instance, your ethnicity is to be understood non-hierarchically as one mutable aspect of your identity that bleeds into everything else, including your interaction with your community. If you change your own story, which is to say the stories of the self that you have inherited, including the story of your ethnicity, you also change the “collective fabric” (Anzaldúa 2015, 139) of the community. Nepantla can be envisioned as the space in-between your self and the community (or outer reality) but, rather than two independent entities, they overlap, blend together, and fluctuate as they interact.

Nepantla is also a strategy for making sense of the clash between subjective and objective (or ‘outside’) realities. By finding common ground in nepantla, which is based on the aspects of yourself that correspond to aspects of others, you can form alliances beyond your inherited tribalisms. Anzaldúa (2015) describes the process of interacting with different belief systems, which stretches your consciousness, as “tussling con remolinos [with vortexes]” (141). It can happen when “you give up investment in your point of view and recognize the real situation free of projections—not filtered through your habitual defensive preoccupations. [...] When you’re in the place between worldviews (nepantla) you’re able to slip between realities to a neutral perception” (150). Nepantla can be a strategy for seeing the world more neutrally and holistically based on shared aspects rather than an overdetermined tribalism and, as such, it can be an exercise in actively going beyond inherited categories. Anzaldúa writes:

Being Chicana (indigenous, Mexican, Basque, Spanish, Berber Arab, Gypsy) is no longer enough; being female, woman of color, patlache (queer) no longer suffices. Your resistance to identity boxes leads you to a different tribe, a different story (of mestizaje), enabling you to rethink yourself in more globalspiritual terms instead of conventional categories of color, class, career. It calls you to retribalize your identity to a more inclusive one, redefining what it means to be una mexicana de este lado [a Mexican woman on this side [of the border], an American in the U.S., a citizen of the world, classifications reflecting an emerging planetary culture. In this narrative, national boundaries dividing us from the “others” (nos/otras) are porous, and the cracks between worlds serve as gateways.

Nepantla can therefore be a strategy for meeting at points of contact (sameness) despite differences. It is bigger, broader, and more fluid than the ethnic, gender, and sexual categories in the quote can encompass. The lines dividing people—constructed categories such as “national boundaries”—are not necessarily deterministic but can be traversed through “cracks.” This way of thinking allows you to expose and try to change oppressive cultural beliefs, such as “all women are traicioneras (betrayers), queers are abnormal, whites are superior, and sparing the rod spoils the child” (141). By thinking of categories differently, a nepantla strategy leads to a different interaction with the world’s normative assumptions and stories.

As commented upon by AnaLouise Keating, nepantla represents an expansion of both Anzaldúa’s (1999) well-known conceptualization of the borderlands and the *Coatlicue* state. The former is a positive liminal space where transformation can occur, and the latter is a time-place of “chaos, anxiety, pain, and loss of control” (Keating 2015, xxxiv). Nepantla can be liberatory and a choice or imposed and result in not belonging, as well as innumerable combinations and contradictions within these heuristically

plotted poles. Moreover, as in *City of Night*, nepantla can veer off into chaos and isolation, which I term *Coatlícué nepantla*. Understanding nepantla as a continuum allows us to avoid romanticizing in-betweenness and acknowledge that, sometimes, it is a lonely space of being outside shared groups, systems of belief, shared meaning, and even geography (Keating 2015, xxxv) in a form of not belonging. Different combinations of shades on the continuum can, however, be more prescient representations of how some characters experience the storyworld (and individuals experience the real world) by going beyond what Keating calls the “cultural trance and binary thinking that locks us into the status quo” (xxxvi).

In all these cases, nepantla can be understood as an actant, meaning it serves a structural function driving the subject forward (Hawkes 1977, 89). As Keating (2015) puts it, “[i]t’s as if nepantla shoves us partially outside of our previously comfortable frameworks; pushes us into a frictional, contradictory clash of world views; challenges us to make some sort of meaning from chaos; and thus forces us to change” (xxxv). Thinking of nepantla as an actant blurs the line between conscious individual agency and nepantla as a force outside our (conscious) control.

In practice, as illustrated in the novels in this dissertation, nepantla often takes the shape of a character scanning his or her many categories, for example gendered traditions, and choosing what aspects are good and to be kept and what aspects are harmful and should be jettisoned. Doing so changes the balance of the gendered traditions themselves. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza’s refusal to get married is almost unheard of in her context; however, by refusing, a non-married woman becomes an active precedent within the Mango Street community. Moreover, writing and publishing a novel about it, as Esperanza does, melts away the separation between self and community further.

Re-writing inherited stories is also a process by which you can creatively make new sense out of your many influences. Esperanza, in *The House on Mango Street*, fashions her story in-between many influences—and from them—as she attempts to make sense of her desires, places, and roles in life, which is the process that the novel depicts. In reference to process and storytelling, Anzaldúa (2015) writes:

It’s not race, gender, class, sexuality, or any single aspect of the self that determines identity but the interaction of all these aspects plus as yet unnamed features. We discover, uncover, create our identities as we interrelate with others and our alrededores/surroundings. Identity grows out of our interactions, and we strategically reinvent ourselves to accommodate our exchanges. Identity is an ongoing story, one that changes with each telling, one we revise at each way station, each stop, in our viaje de la vida (life’s journey). [...] We must challenge the present concepts, creating frameworks that span the fissures among us and link us in a series of interconnected webs (telarañas). (75)

Anzaldúa's emphasis on creating identity as a continuing process, the "ongoing story" that changes as we retell it, undermines the stability of the normative frames of reference by which identity is often talked about. With the term 'process,' I am referring to mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's (1978) observation that "*How* an actual entity *becomes* constitutes *what* that actual entity *is*.... Its 'being' is constituted by its 'becoming'" (emphasis in original). Whitehead calls this the "principle of process" (23), which is closely related to Aztec metaphysics. The 'strategic reinvention' quoted above references empowered agency in choosing one's identity anew as needs, desires, and understandings change. This subjective process is relational and outward facing to others as the "fissures among us" are spanned to link individuals, in their plastic malleability, together into a community that meets in the middle rather than being isolated in impermeable categories of "race, gender, class, sexuality" and others.

In *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion*, James Maffie (2014) presents nepantla as understood in Aztec metaphysics. Perhaps most notably, Maffie shows how nepantla can be understood as the quotidian reality of flux that defines the cosmos. This is useful for expanding the concept of nepantla from subjective processes of change—usually for the narrator whose 'mind' we can access—to also take in the literary devices by which everyday kinds of in-betweenness are represented in texts.

Maffie (2014) shows that in Aztec metaphysics, nepantla is the basic way by which the cosmos operates. As with Anzaldúa, the concept still means 'in-betweenness' but with a different stress: flux, change, movement, and in-betweenness are the ordinary state of things. Stability and essential being are impossible while in-betweenness is the norm. "Reality is characterized by *becoming* – not by *being* or 'is-ness,'" writes Maffie (2014, 12, emphasis in original). He shows that nepantla means 'in-betweenness' as the "permanent condition of the cosmos," which is:

a grand weaving in progress. Nepantla is therefore ordinary—not extraordinary. The ordinary is not interrupted by nepantla; nepantla is the ordinary. Becoming and transition are the norm—not being and stasis. Ontological ambiguity is the norm—not ontological unambiguity. (363, emphasis in original)

If in-betweenness, flux, process, and ambiguity define how the very cosmos is to be understood, it follows that stability and, for example, categories are an illusion.

Anzaldúa also defines "the universe" as being always in movement, which she compares with identity. "Nothing is fixed. The pulse of existence, the heart of the universe is fluid. Identity, like a river, is always changing, always in transition, always in nepantla. [...] You begin to define yourself in terms of who you are becoming, not who you have been" (135; see also Scott and Tuana 2017

for whom nepantla is the “continual happening of the in-between” [3]). The perspective that Anzaldúa defines here is important: rather than looking back at how you have been, which, with the myopic vision of the historical perspective, is bound to gloss over ambiguity to fix being into a cohesive totality, the future-looking perspective allows for the openness of *becoming* as the ongoing process is stressed. Change is difficult to categorize because it is prone to slip out from under semantic signifiers. Relatedly in terms of literature, the representation of a ‘self’ in a narrative tends to be more coherent and stable than the actual experience of living. Novels of in-betweenness, however, can be understood as resisting this tendency with an emphasis on continual *becoming*, which is reflected in the ambiguous denouement of all the texts collected here.

The conceptualization offered by Anzaldúa also includes nepantla as a temporary state, a stage on the path to *conocimiento*. This is the crisis point in which a “kind of double or multiple ‘seeing’” results in “dialectical encounters” (Anzaldúa 2015, 125). According to Anzaldúa, nepantla is “this liminal, transitional space, suspended between shifts, [in which] you’re two people, split between before and after” (122) and hence a space of change marked by temporality. Temporal nepantla can be the questioning of the basic assumption about your family ideology, place in society, religious teachings, and more yet, once the temporary clash has subsided, you either return to understanding the world through familiar categories or build new ones.

This formulation holds some similarities to the concept of liminality, as defined by Victor Turner (1979, 237), who delineates it as an exceptional state of in-betweenness and hence tied to temporality, while the norm remains structure, order, and being (Maffie 2014, 363). The act of giving birth is a well-known example. A woman becomes a mother and thereby exchanges one stable category for another by way of the exceptional and liminal state of giving birth.

Nepantla can both be the temporal shift or clash and its posterior position as one learns to see, in a more permanent way, that in-betweenness defines the universe. In this way, the concept of nepantla is an illustration of the contradictory ‘multiple seeing’ from various vantage points that Anzaldúa argues for: the concept itself is defined by two contradictory temporalities. Not taking this contradiction into consideration has led some translators of nepantla to associate it with the Western concept of liminality (Burkhart, 1989; Carrasco and Sessions, 2007; Elzey, 1976; León-Portilla, 1974). The outcome of all this for our study of literature is, again, that there is no *one* form of nepantla, but variations that may be discovered and interpreted in texts.

2.1.2 CRISIS, CHAOS, COATLICUE, AND NOT BELONGING

Scholarship on nepantla tends to emphasize the potentiality of positive change when in-betweenness is embraced as a strategy (e.g., Koegeler-Abdi 2013;

Lizárraga and Gutiérrez 2018; Martínez 2017), though by no means exclusively (e.g., Alcoff 2012; Locke 2020). However, the negative aspects of nepantla—not belonging, crisis, chaos, and the *Coatlicue* stage of being unmoored from shared frames of reference—are equally as important when analyzing stories in which in-betweenness is a predominant theme. *Coatlicue* is defined as the “[p]eriods of being lost in chaos [that] occur when you’re between ‘stories’” before you potentially “shift from one set of perceptions and beliefs to another” (Anzaldúa 2015, 132). It is where you “break down, descend into the third space, the Coatlicue depths of despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness” (123). *Coatlicue* hence marks the most negative pole on the nepantla continuum.

Each of the texts analyzed here represents and creates spaces of not belonging as a form of in-betweenness. Just as in Anzaldúa’s theorization, a crisis instigates the state of not belonging in these novels. For Acosta’s protagonist Oscar, it is the falseness of his role as a lawyer, and, for Cisneros’s protagonist, Esperanza, it is the realization, illustrated through a series of vignettes that portray rape, sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and more, that her inherited role as a woman goes against her subjective view of her future. These novels nevertheless end with an embrace of in-betweenness as an integrated, albeit contradictory, whole, which I call a nepantla of belonging, and Anzaldúa would call becoming a *nepantlera* or reaching *conocimiento*. As an ultimate goal of sorts, *conocimiento*, as Anzaldúa defines it, is a higher-level state of mind, a deep reflexive critical consciousness based on constant change that builds towards liberatory transformation as one is thrust out of one’s inherited categories of family, society, religion, etc. *Conocimiento* is having a “perspective from the cracks” as one lives among and within multiple worlds (Anzaldúa 2015, 84). The protagonists’ processes by which they come to understand and accept nepantla is also marked by crises and not belonging, however, which is a temporally marked stage on the path to *conocimiento*.

Anzaldúa emphasizes the indeterminacy of the path to *conocimiento*, which is embracing a more permanent view of in-betweenness and contradiction, and the many failures along the way as you are thrust back into the chaos of the temporary *Coatlicue* stage. Once a new identity has been constructed out of the pieces of your many rejected categories—taking what is good and leaving behind what is harmful—that identity may fail to work in society or be rejected by others. As Anzaldúa (2015) writes:

Torn between ways, we seek to find some sort of harmony amid the remolinos [vortexes] of multiple and conflictive worldviews; we must learn to integrate all these perspectives. Transitions are a form of crisis, an emotionally significant event or a radical change in status. During crisis the existential isolation all people experience is exacerbated. Unruly emotions and conflicts break out. In nepantla we hang out between shifts, trying to make rational sense of this crisis, seeking solace, support, appeasement, or some kind of intimate connection. En este lugar [in this place] we fall into chaos, fear of the unknown, and are

forced to take up the task of self-redefinition. In nepantla we undergo the anguish of changing our perspectives and crossing a series of cruz calles [crossroads], junctures, and thresholds, some leading to a different way of relating to people and surroundings and others to the creation of a new world. (17)

This quote underlines the notion that nepantla can be the crisis of in-betweenness itself. We can *try*, as Anzaldúa puts it, to “make rational sense of [the] crisis” but we may fail, which can plunge us into chaos. Changing perspectives causes anguish that may be a force too strong to overcome, as it is for the narrator of *City of Night*. It is important to note that, though nepantla is here represented as a processual continuum, not all aspects of that continuum or process will be true for any given character. We are not guaranteed to see the process through to *conocimiento* but may end—or the story may end—at the point of failure, chaos, and isolation. The telos of failure can become accessible through literature as a character’s inability to integrate the many aspects of the self leads to dissonance and conflict. This means the character may remain in *Coatlícue* nepantla. Failure is an important telos that should be given equal place on the continuum of nepantla because, for some characters, it best represents their subjective realities.

In summary, there are a few generalizable criteria that can guide us in understanding nepantla. For clarity, this can be understood as a continuum of possibilities. The most basic distinction is that nepantla can either be beneficial or harmful to the individual experiencing it and can be either embraced or be the result of outside forces imposing it upon one against their will. In terms of time, nepantla can be either a temporary stage for a character in the narrative or a more permanent way of looking at the world. When a crisis occurs, the character might find that the categories she has lived by—family ideology, culture, religion, etc.—no longer make sense. This disillusionment with categories may unhinge her from secure frames but then passes as she either reestablishes herself in old categories or creates new ones. Nepantla can also be a way of looking at the world, a telos or goal that, once learned and embraced, can allow her to see ‘through’ the constructed-ness of categories. This ability or vision becomes some characters’ defining trait and, in terms of time, can stretch out past the end of the narrative.

There are also two basic ways nepantla is represented in narratives: that of the realization (or epiphany) and that of a more quotidian in-betweenness. A character may realize that normative categories have not been working and he creates a nepantla-like alternative. The realization can generally be identified with some event, conversation, or speech act that triggers the change and is hence a temporal event or turning point. The latter, quotidian version is identifiable in texts where in-betweenness is part of everyday life and has no demarcated beginning or end.

The concept of nepantla is abstract, multiple, contradictory, prone to changing meanings, and, as a result, can be difficult to wield. That is a potential

down-side to the concept. However, the processes and spaces we are talking about are abstract and difficult—and perhaps beyond language altogether. Other concepts are simpler and easier to wield but, as I will show next, impede meaning for this very reason.

2.1.3 WHY NEPANTLA AND NOT MESTIZAJE, HYBRIDITY, ETC.?

Conceptual language is meant to help us better understand the world in which we live. New concepts should be introduced because they do something that other concepts cannot. Here, I shortly outline what nepantla does that concepts such as mestizaje, hybridity, and others do not do.

Illustrative of nepantla's conceptual power is the theoretical shift that becomes apparent when Anzaldúa's influential book *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999) is compared to her posthumously published *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* (2015). The latter provides a critique of Anzaldúa's own position concerning mestizaje/the mestiza/borders/borderlands (henceforth 'mestizaje'), which is found in the former. Originally, mestizaje denoted the process of miscegenation and mixture of different racial backgrounds but has been extended to take in sociocultural elements and is often viewed favorably in the field of Chicana/o studies (e.g., Pérez-Torres 2005). Mestizaje also conceptualizes the relations between the many 'parts' within a mestiza, which Anzaldúa terms as 'bridges' that span those differences.

As argued by Cristina Beltrán (2004), Anzaldúa's move from the homeland of Aztlán, as found in the Chicano Movement's nationalistic rhetoric (see next chapter), to the borderlands necessitated that she maintain a "hierarchy of hybridity" (600). Anzaldúa created a hierarchical dichotomy that elevated the importance of indigenous heritage as opposed to Anglo Americans/Westerners. Likewise, within mestiza identity the indigenous aspect was privileged at the expense of the Spanish and, as Mariana Ortega (2016) points out, Anzaldúa romanticizes the indigenous past, which may work to silence indigenous people's contemporary concerns (29–35). Beltrán (2004) writes that "Anzaldúa's theory [of mestizaje] celebrates ambiguity and the tearing down of dichotomies, yet she continually constructs a dominant narrative of subjectivity in which some subjects represent multiplicity and insight while others signify unenlightened singularity" (604). Beltrán continues, "Chicano hybridity is created in opposition to the unquestioned existence of autonomous self-contained subjects" (605), who are Anglo Americans/Westerners. The concept of mestizaje thereby utilizes essentialized ideas of the subject "in order to posit a fluid subject that works against it" (606). Anzaldúa recognized this as a problem and, as a result, shifted to the theorization of nepantla in the later years of her life.

With nepantla, Anzaldúa (2015) attempts to formulate a method by which to better understand a subjective position that may exist beyond such

categories and hierarchies. Instead of bridges spanning differences, it is the water beneath the bridge that is in movement and in-between, while the bridge becomes ‘home’ rather than leading between two points, hence disaffiliating—in a deterministic sense—the *nepantlera* from the categories that are identifying options. Nepantla is a space in which transformation can occur fluidly, which works to undermine hierarchies (148). Anzaldúa introduces nepantla, in part, to demythologize race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. while not negating the existence, influence, and import of these categories (Keating 2015, xxxvi). Anzaldúa’s shift to nepantla was based on the need for a theorization of inclusionary processes that “radically broke with binary thinking and identification by exclusion” (Koegeler-Abdi 2013, 71). While a mestiza locates herself as a synthesis of positions, a nepantlera positions herself in a neutral, non-hierarchical space that is in-between shared frames of reference.

Echoing Anzaldúa’s reasons for shifting from mestizaje to nepantla, I have chosen not to rely on concepts such as hybridity, *métissage*, which also signifies mixing but has a broader cultural signification in French than hybridity does in English (Yee 2003, 411; see also Casanova 2004), the Third Space, and others from the field of postcolonial studies. Nepantla provides scholarship with the tool to better understand in-betweenness beyond discourses of difference while hybridity (and other, similar terms; henceforth simply ‘hybridity’) commonly refer to new transcultural forms resulting from the contact produced by colonization based on difference. My argument is illustrated through two problems with hybridity.

The first problem with hybridity is that it often implies an implicit power hierarchy within the given parts in any given socio-cultural context (see Sharrad 2007, 100; Mambrol 2016), which is in line with the critique of mestizaje above. Often, such a power hierarchy does exist within the socio-cultural context. The contextuality of the hybrid should be made explicit, however, and the analytical categories of socio-cultural, historical, economic, and political relations should be separated from subjective understandings. For instance, regardless of what one may say or theorize, a mestiza/o in Mexico, which is to say a person of both indigenous and Spanish ancestry, will feel or be made to feel that, out of the two ‘parts’ that make up his or her cultural and ethnic heritage, the Spanish ‘part’ is more valuable or ‘above’ the indigenous in the implicit hierarchical formation within the hybrid. Historically, economically, in terms of society, and so on, it is easy to understand how such a power hierarchy takes shape. However, at the subjective level, which is to say how any given individual experiences the ‘parts’ within his or her own hybridized self, this hierarchy is less obvious or clear-cut. Epistemologically, the hierarchy is not a priori the case for any given individual, though it is borne out in the stubborn resilience of cultural binaries in society generally. In other words, the hierarchy may be projected *onto* a subject independently of what he or she experiences or feels.

In nepantla, the categories that make up the hybrid are rejected and only aspects of various categories, acting as influences, are integrated in a piecemeal fashion into the subjective space. Since discernable categories are no longer operational, it becomes more difficult to systemize a hierarchical ordering of aspects in one's identity. While I imagine legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1995) intersectionality, for example, as a set of identity markers piled one atop another as they're moved strategically on a board, which is in line with the legal understanding of identity, nepantla is more like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987) rhizome or assemblage in which the messy network's symbiosis with the 'outside' blurs the lines between, and within, self and others.

According to Homi Bhabha (1994), cultural representations and systems are produced in what he calls the "Third Space of enunciation" (37), which is an ambivalent space of contact that undermines the idea of the 'purity' or hierarchical positioning of cultures that are hybrid outcomes of the process of contact. Bhabha's formulation does not take context and specificity, especially at the subjective level, into consideration, however, which makes the concept of the Third Space insufficient for the sometimes contradictory and non-hierarchical positionings outside of discourses of difference that I have identified in my corpus. This is the second problem with hybridity (see also Sharrad 2007, 100; Mambrol 2016; for broader critiques of hybridity, see Ahmad 1992; Mishra 1996; Smyth 2000; cf. Kraidy 2005).

Hybridity is useful for abstract theorization of systemic social and postcolonial mechanisms. For narratives, which often portray social forces through the experiences and thoughts of individual characters, there is the danger that hybridity at the subjective level is dealt with in terms of hybridity at the social, cultural, or political level. Social relations and mechanisms do not necessarily apply to individual experiences, which are specific. In the words of Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2013), "the concept of hybridity emphasizes a typically twentieth-century concern with relations within a field rather than with an analysis of discrete objects, seeing meaning as the produce of such relations rather than as intrinsic to specific events or objects" (138). Literature allows scholars to better understand how subjective and contextualized experiences play out and may show, as the novels in this dissertation do, that there is an active move away from hierarchy in some cases.

2.2 GENRE: BILDUNGSROMAN

The corpus collected here can be classified as modified *Bildungsromane* of in-betweenness. The classification differs significantly from the classical novel of (male) formation into society, exemplified by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (2016) *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* from 1795. In this dissertation, the genre *Bildungsroman* is used liberally to demarcate novels in which a

protagonist, through a process of *becoming*, reaches a telos of in-betweenness. This means that one point of such a novel—as well as the destination of the protagonist—can be understood as representing in-betweenness. However, rather than being defined by telos alone, it is also the process, as represented in the narrative, that constitutes *becoming* and the protagonists' experiences of nepantla.

According to Sarah Graham (2019), the genre of *Bildungsroman* is about a “protagonist striving to reconcile individual aspirations with the demands of social conformity” (1) and hence can be defined as a narrative of individual *becoming* in relation to the given social context. The novels included in this genre tell of individual characters' progress from youth and naiveté into more mature positions. The German concept of *Bildung* helps us to appreciate what binds these types of novels together. *Bildung* typically signifies “formation,” “development,” “education,” or “growth” (Graham 2019, 2). However, it also encapsulates the root word *Bild*, which means “image,” “figure,” “trope,” and “painting” (Redfield 2006) and hence can be associated with the aesthetic representation of *becoming*. Joseph Slaughter (2006) has observed the dual meaning of the term: “image and image making, culture and cultivation, form and formation” (1409) as well as telos and process.

The meaning of the term *Bildung* is hence unstable. It can point to both the representational product, such as a novel of formation, and the process that makes up that story. The protagonists included in this dissertation do not cease their processes of ongoing change but rather take up *Bildung* as a positionality, which correlates with the concept of nepantla. They continue to be on the way from one understanding of their identity or place in society to other understandings, and this condition is presented as both an ongoing process and a telos in and of itself (cf. Bolaki 2011, 19).

Franco Moretti (1987) defines the hero of a *Bildungsroman* as having “wide cultural formation, professional mobility, full social freedom” (ix), while those who lacked these were “without the right to dream” (x). The possible protagonist of a *Bildungsroman* has traditionally been narrowly defined by social, cultural, political, historical, racial, and, perhaps most importantly, gender considerations. Scholars have pointed out that texts by women and minority voices do not fit into the traditional definition of *Bildungsroman* (see, e.g., Abel, Hirsch, and Langland, 1983). The term ‘modified *Bildungsroman*’ (Karafilis 1998; McCracken 1989) includes novels of formation or coming-of-age novels that tell the story of a protagonist who develops in relation to society or community but in which the classical conventions of the genre can be subverted. The modified *Bildungsroman* allows for a wider array of voices to be included in depicting the processes by which individuals come of age and, as such, is used to define the novels in this corpus.

A subgenre of the *Bildungsroman* is the ‘ethnic *Bildungsroman*,’ which is marked by its author and/or protagonist belonging to a minority ethnicity vis-à-vis the status quo, and it is a central exhibit of the ‘modified *Bildungsroman*.’

The *Bildungsroman* is a fitting genre for exploration of questions of identity because the individual protagonist's journey can dramatize the tension between subjective understandings of self and outside social forces. The struggle can be to make peace with the contradictions between individualism and the (various) collective(s). Stella Bolaki (2011), in her book *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*, shows that it is practically taken for granted that an ethnic writer will 'communalize' the individualist *Bildungsroman* for the benefit of communal solidarity and unity (29). According to Bolaki, the protagonist's development is expected to reach a stable representation of understanding between competing cultural codes, as represented through the experiences of the protagonist. This, however, is not the case in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, for example (see Bolaki 2011, 86–132), nor any of the other works included here. Instead of the narrative tension being eased by Esperanza representing the community, she rejects what is harmful in her community while also not buying into the Anglo-American alternative. This subversion is key to Esperanza's ultimate nepantla-like positionality.

According to Bolaki (2011), a compelling tension is created in the *Bildungsroman* due to its promise and simultaneous inability to represent the fullness of human development. As long as the protagonist is alive or the text is revisited, development is never conclusive and is always open to new interpretations and changes. Bolaki calls this the genre's "aesthetic architecture," and its buttressing is held together by the tension of ongoing *Bildung*. Authors with different needs and realities than those writing during the German Enlightenment can dismantle and subvert the genre's architecture, which gives "room for alternative formulations of development" that, in line with nepantla, can coexist though they are contradictory. Contradictions and clashes of interpretation can become productive when viewed through the idea of 'multiple seeing,' which is seeing simultaneously from incompatible vantage points and is a hallmark of nepantla.

In terms of the novels in this dissertation, the classical (i.e., German Enlightenment) *Bildungsroman* convention of resolution is, in all cases, subverted into a denouement of unstable and ongoing in-betweenness. Put another way, the narrators *do* achieve resolution, but that resolution takes the shape of acknowledging a state of ambiguity, flux, and openness. I call it a resolution because it is not temporary liminality (see Turner 1979, 236–7; 1986, 41).

'Ethnic' authors and characters are sometimes in positions to become more aware of the in-betweenness they inhabit due to the hegemonic discourses of the majority culture, which explains the motivation for studying 'ethnic' *Bildungsromane* in this dissertation. Ethnicity is only one aspect of how in-betweenness is represented, however, and for this reason I refer to the corpus simply as *Bildungsromane*, which, however, should be taken to mean the 'modified' rather than 'classical' variety.

2.3 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In various ways, scholars have used nepantla in attempting to conceptualize the space that exists between dominant categories where inner subjectivity and outer reality meet. Anzaldúa's work is the foundation upon which much of this scholarship is built. For example, Anzaldúa's nepantla is widely used in the field of pedagogy: it has aided teachers in sanctioning topics at the borders of what is considered educational (e.g., Lizárraga and Gutiérrez 2018) and has been used as a strategy for teacher and student interaction based on multiple realities for building new knowledge (e.g., Gutiérrez 2012). Activists have used nepantla to better understand those whose acts or ideas they oppose, communicate despite differences, and attempt to dismantle hierarchies in everyday life (e.g., Martínez 2017; Koegeler-Abdi 2013). The nepantla continuum collects the concept's many definitions, partially illustrated here, to allow multiple understandings of nepantla to overlap and coexist.

Apart from some superficial mentions (e.g., Pizarz-Ramírez 2007; Delgadillo 2011; Palencia-Roth 2016), there has not yet, to my knowledge, been an account for how the concept of nepantla might be used to better understand how in-betweenness is represented and created in narratives, which is what I set out to do in this dissertation. The application of nepantla to literature can feed into many other fields by showing how in-betweenness is experienced, represented, and created in relation to specific characters in complex yet specific contexts. Unlike this theoretical chapter, the following four analytic chapters will elaborate on how nepantla can be applied to literature specifically. Let us thus begin with Oscar 'Zeta' Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, which will give us an entertaining, if sometimes vulgar and even offensive, look at the unworkability of categories as well as a nepantla alternative.

PART 1. IN-BETWEENNESS AS BELONGING

3 PERFORMING NEPANTLA IN OSCAR 'ZETA' ACOSTA'S THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BROWN BUFFALO

And crazily excited I wonder suddenly if that spotlight swirling nightly is not trying somehow to embrace it all—to embrace that fusion of savage contradictions within this legend called America.

John Rechy, *City of Night*

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Oscar ‘Zeta’ Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) presents a largely unlikable yet at times vulnerable narrator who performs a sequence of acts—such as hallucinating at a fancy restaurant and subsequently ‘blacking out’ and continuing to perform, unable to remember it later (61–4)—that may cause readers to squirm. The novel is calibrated to shock and works to destabilize, invert, or simply mock the ideologies that make U.S.-American society appear as cohesive in the middle part of the 20th century, including the stability of ethnic categories.

The novel opens on July 1, 1967, when the character narrator Oscar¹ states that he is 33 years old, the age of Christ crucified.² In the opening pages, he describes himself as fat and states that he has ulcers, vomits blood, and is depressed. He realizes his position as a lawyer does not fulfill him and abruptly throws his bar diploma into the trash and departs on a road trip in search of his past (Acosta 1972, 71). The novel morphs into a road narrative in which Oscar, through a series of flashbacks, narrates episodes in which meaningful events occurred during his life. The central motivating factor for the novel’s action is Oscar’s identity crisis and subsequent “search [for] his fucked-up identity” (190), which literary scholar Greg Wright (2010) calls “the book’s ironically and comically over-determined goal” (627).

From the novels included in this dissertation, Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* represents the most liberatory, embraced, and positive point on the nepantla continuum. One could even say that Oscar manages, in the last pages of the novel, to potentially approach becoming a *nepantlera*, which, as theorized by Anzaldúa, is a kind of overriding goal of sorts in the theory of nepantla. A *nepantlera* views the world from the in-between with an ability to disengage from deterministic categories while finding overlapping similarities with others to create holistic alliances. The *nepantlera* uses “these liminal perspectives [...] to question ‘consensual reality’ (our status quo stories) and develop alternative perspectives—ideas, theories, actions, and beliefs that partially reflect but partially exceed existing worldviews” (Keating 2015, xxxv–xxxvi).

¹ I refer to the character narrator as Oscar and the historical author as Acosta.

² As Frederick Luis Aldama (2000, 203) has noted, Oscar’s age is an invention to fit with the messianic persona and contradicted elsewhere in the novel.

On the face of it, Acosta and Anzaldúa appear very different: the latter a careful theorist and the former an irreverent satirist. In terms of goals, however, Acosta and Anzaldúa both set out to deconstruct identity categories and binaries within the subject and in relation to society and culture, which they then reconstruct as an identity of in-betweenness. For example, late in the novel Oscar says: “I’ve checked it all out and have failed to find the answer to my search [for identity]. One sonofabitch tells me I’m not a Mexican and the other one says I’m not an American. I got no roots anywhere” (Acosta 1972, 196). Both Acosta and Anzaldúa ultimately locate resistance as coming “from the cracks” between unworkable, normative categories (Anzaldúa 2015, 84). In this chapter, I argue that Oscar’s journey through multiple identity categories ends—in the last pages of the novel—in an epiphany of nepantla-like in-betweenness. Oscar may be neither Mexican nor U.S.-American, but he creates an in-between identity of his own: the Brown Buffalo.

My central aim in this chapter is to better understand how certain literary devices and modes produce forms of in-betweenness that are not informed by any one category but are rather framed as a creative choice from the fluctuating multiplicity of possibilities. The literary devices I have uncovered that create in-betweenness include the mode of satire (most notably the use of irony) and the resulting narrative gap between verbal utterance and implied meaning, the relentless use of stereotypes, and the destabilizing performance of multiple ethnic categories that results in the multiple vision of nepantla. The question of genre—or, more specifically, the subversion of multiple genres in the mode of satire and the destabilization of readerly expectations—is also important. In the remainder of this introduction, I outline these literary devices and indicate why they are important and how they inform the goals of this chapter.

3.2 THE MODE OF SATIRE

In Acosta’s novel, satire is the method by which in-betweenness is most powerfully represented. This happens through three interrelated moves. First, Acosta uses satire to expose and mock society’s reliance on simplistic categories, which take the shape of stereotypes. This allows Oscar’s performances of stereotypical ethnicities, races, classes, and religions to be understood as an exposé of categories’ instability and unworkability. This, in turn, opens the door for Oscar to invent his own identity out of the parts of the many identities that haven’t worked for him.

Satire is a mode and literary device that uses various means, including irony and humor, to critique and to call for change. According to literary scholar Linda Hutcheon (1994), in her book *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, satiric irony has discernable values that the satirist is intending to correct. Satire uses irony as a means of ridiculing, and thereby setting a corrective path for, the “the vices and follies of humankind” by relying

on a wide tonal range within the corrective function, from the “playfully teasing to the scornful and disdainful” (50). Acosta’s novel relies on humor and gags that are sometimes playful and fun but often scornful and even aggressive.

Often achieved through irony, satire can be a rhetorical mode for saying one thing and meaning another. A verbal utterance’s meaning is destabilized and must be interpreted by the receiver. As noted in the introductory chapter, in-betweenness is sometimes locatable in a narrative gap, which is what the text has left unsaid and is filled in by readers in interaction with the text. Due to the satirical mode and the ambivalence that the mode entails, readers have considerable leeway in how the narrative’s central, satirical gap will be filled. Acosta, like other satirists, encourages what Ruben Quintero (2007) calls “our need for the stability of truth by unmasking imposture, exposing fraudulence, shattering deceptive illusion, and shaking us from our complacency and indifference” (4). In my reading, Acosta’s satire mocks and unmasks the stability of categories in the context of mid-20th century United States by ironically exaggerating the importance of his and others’ normative identity positionalities, which are shown to be overly simplistic and hence untenable. Reading Acosta’s categories as overdetermined and hence satirical makes it possible to locate representations of in-betweenness, which is one of this dissertation’s goals. The novel’s stereotypes, as employed by Oscar, indicate that a truer version of society and characters would locate their traits in-between the coarse categories the narrative peddles. Apart from Oscar’s late nepantla epiphany, this is not verbally stated. It is located in irony’s unsaid gap and will be inferred by readers.

3.2.1 HURTFUL LANGUAGE’S EDGE

Many scholars have found elements of Acosta’s novel distasteful and even problematic (e.g., Bruce-Novoa 1989, 72–74; Hames-García 2000, 473; Lee 2000, 165; Carrasquillo 2010; Bishop 2014, 211; Schryer 2014, 461). As will become clear, I agree that the novel represents racism, misogyny, and homophobia through the heavy-handed application of stereotypes. The character narrator Oscar is unreliable in what James Phelan (2005, 51) calls the axis of ethics and evaluation due to his racist misrepresentation of individuals, among other reasons. However, Oscar is also presenting what he understands to be the hegemonic vision of U.S. society. This prism of ignorance also places his unreliability on the axis of knowledge and perception (Phelan 2005, 51). In both cases, unreliability requires that readers infer “an understanding of the narration different from that offered by the narrator” and hence acts as a “double communication” (49–50). On the one hand, Oscar the character’s communication to readers is ignorant and ethically problematic. On the other hand, Oscar the narrator is communicating something quite different that can be inferred by readers behind his back (33, 50).

Acosta's text is located on what Hutcheon (1994) calls "irony's edge," which is the fine line between emancipatory political agenda and harmful and reactionary entrenchment of stereotypes through irony missing its target. The text, like irony itself, is hence "edged," which is the doubled ability to "ingratiate and to intimidate, to underline and to undermine" while potentially driving people apart and/or together (53). Irony is risky because it is not guaranteed that the interpreter will understand the irony in the same way as it was intended (11). Even if taken as irony, the literal, hurtful speech act still carries meaning, which is another "double communication" (Phelan 2005, 50) and an example of multiple seeing. An utterance can hence illustrate and simultaneously critique, and both meanings remain active. For this reason—and due to the aggression of his representations—Acosta's method, which I will below describe as Gonzo, may not be appropriate for some readers.

The satirical mode is premised upon readers feeling uncomfortable, but the level of discomfort is based on individual readers' positionality and interpretation of the text. This is illustrated by Oscar and Karl King (a white man based on Hunter S. Thompson) playfully exchanging derogatory remarks. The worst Oscar can say about King is that he is a "tall, baldheaded hillbilly from Tennessee" (Acosta 1972, 137). In the words of Greg Wright (2010), "many of the derogatory names for minorities greatly outweigh even the most savage names for whites, in terms of hateful cultural baggage" (641). This insight is important because it highlights that hate-filled speech and ideology do not affect everyone in the same way. Some suffer more than others. I am sensitive to the fact that, while I believe Acosta's goal is to undermine the power of stereotypes by exposing them as ignorant, this satirical method may not work for all readers, especially if a reader has suffered from such hate-speech him- or herself, which will result in a different gap-filling process. Self-preservation, as pointed out by Anzaldúa (2015, 148) with respect to the *nepantlera* response to racism, may dictate that one avoids the novel altogether. On the other hand, for readers who haven't been traumatized by racist language, the novel may serve as an illustration of the ignorance that underpins stereotypical worldviews and racism, which may make readers more aware of such thinking in their own lives. There is the risk, however, that some readers will take the novel literally, stripped of its irony, in which case it is a cultural artifact of hurtfulness, ignorance, self-absorption, hostility, and strict demarcation into categories that are the basis for racism.

3.2.2 PICKING AND BORROWING FROM GENRES

The mode of satire is closely related to the topic of genre. Within scholarship on the novel, there have been various conclusions on the matter of genre. On the one hand, some scholars, including Acosta's biographer, Ilan Stavans (2003), have assumed a more or less straightforward correlation between *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and historical events. On the dust sleeve

of my edition, Acosta is quoted as saying, “The fucking book is true” (see, e.g., Fetta 2016). Critical work (Walker 2009, 147; Hames-García 2004, 267; Mendoza 2002, 80), however, has shown that the book should be treated as a destabilized autobiography that satirizes the autobiography as a genre dominated by Western authors that, according to Frederick Luis Aldama (2000), “spreads thick veneers over its manipulation of detail to naturalize as ‘fact’ the centrality of its protagonist’s experience and subjectivity” (215). The titular ‘autobiography’ hence points to the centrality of Oscar’s subjective experience in relation to broader society. Writing an autobiography is a form of agency-taking and inserting one’s own narrative into the broader social story, an opportunity that has often been denied ‘brown buffalos.’ Oscar enthusiastically puts himself center stage.

Aldama (2000) calls the text a “parody” with a “road-narrative structure” that is “deform[ed]” (212); elsewhere, he calls it a “picaresque road narrative” (2005, 54). Juan Bruce-Novoa (1989, 73) calls it a satiric parody of the American Dream *Bildungsroman*. I follow Michael Hames-García (2000) in analyzing the novel in terms of the Gonzo style and grotesque satire. Satire, rather than a genre, should be understood as a mode of writing or, in the words of Charles Knight (2004), a “frame of mind” that exploits other genres to its own end (4). By subverting readers’ expectations through an engagement with multiple genres, Acosta further destabilizes meaning.

Like the rest of the corpus, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* goes from the character narrator’s naiveté to a form of resolution that is open-ended and in-between, which marks it as a modified *Bildungsroman* of in-betweenness, a topic that will be covered in more detail in chapters 4 and 6 due to the centrality of satire here. In the classical *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist, to various degrees, comes to terms with his or her position in relation to broader society. Put another way, the protagonist’s category or identity is established.

Oscar ‘tries on’ many different categories in the novel—ethnic, religious, and others—only to conclude that no *one* of them captures his subjective identity, which is in line with nepantla. He chooses to create his own identity, which is the Brown Buffalo. This form of *becoming* marks the novel as a *Bildungsroman*. As with the other novels in this dissertation, I argue that the unstable, open-ended, ambiguous, and fluctuating conclusion to the novel, which here is explicitly commented upon by the narrator, is the fitting resolution for a narrative of discovering in-betweenness.

Rather than behaving like the marginalized citizen that he supposedly is, Oscar’s narrative is marked by carnivalesque mayhem informed by an irreverence of hierarchy and normative social codes. Acosta rewrites the traditional *Bildungsroman* from a position of irreverent *becoming* that is linked to the carnivalesque as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). As M. Keith Booker (1996) points out in reference to Bakhtin, *becoming* requires that “final conclusions and interpretations be perpetually deferred in favor of an ongoing potentiality” (105). In a similar way, Acosta’s identity shows no signs

of being a closed unit of meaning, even after his revelation of in-betweenness; rather, the processes of change and performativity continue after the conclusion of the text in “ongoing potentiality.”

Hames-García (2000, 467) links Acosta’s satire to Bakhtin’s idea (1984, 12) of universal carnival laughter directed at “all and everyone.” This form of carnival laughter is a rejuvenating phenomenon that destroys in order to allow new birth; abundance and renewal are brought about by references to grotesque characterizations of the body, defecation, and reproduction. Oscar’s descriptions of his body’s many functions and malfunctions—sex as framed through his own impotence and the smallness of his penis, as well as masturbation, constipation, vomit, and so on—are not only a manner by which he calls attention to his physical presence, there whether you like it or not, but also a way to destabilize readers’ preconceptions of what an ‘ethnic’ *Bildungsroman* consists of. By putting himself forward in all his uncensored rawness, Oscar insists on being seen and hence takes up space in the cultural field on his own terms. In this way, Acosta destroys the conception of what Chicana/o art is in order to allow new birth from fertile ground—after this text, one feels, *anything* is possible in the Chicana/o cultural field. The constraints felt by some ‘ethnic’ writers to represent their community (see Bolaki 2011, 29) are rejected, which is perhaps responsible for the poor reception the novel had (and still has) in the Chicana/o community (González 2017).

Next, I will establish how stereotypes are utilized in the novel. This is necessary groundwork before we can return, in the section entitled ‘Religion as Process and Nepantla Epiphany as Telos,’ to the central aim of this dissertation: to analyze how a continuum of different forms of nepantla are represented in literature.

3.3 IRONY, SATIRE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF STEREOTYPICAL ETHNIC CARICATURES

The narrative’s satirical premise implies that much of what Oscar narrates can be understood as an ironic performance, both in terms of himself and how he describes the world around him. Open the novel to nearly any page and a character will be identified in terms of his or her ethnicity—often derogatorily. There are “greasers”, “spics”, “Japs”, “kikes”, “wops”, “gypsies,” Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Armenians, and so on. The superficiality of these overdetermined and stereotypical ethnic handles points to a contradiction. On the one hand, characters are shown to essentially ‘be’ their ethnicity or race, which is the category that indicates “exactly” (Acosta 1972, 86) who they are. On the other hand, ethnicity is undermined by Oscar performing multiple ethnicities, which breaks the link between Oscar’s self and his outward performance of it. I first consider stereotypical ethnicities, which are closely linked to satire and irony, and, in the subsequent section, discuss their subversion through performativity by the character narrator Oscar.

3.3.1 THE IRONY OF OSCAR'S STEREOTYPES

In San Francisco, where the novel opens, the neighborhoods are clearly demarcated by ethnicity described in terms of stereotype: “Here the yellow horde is cut off. [...] From slant-eyed, yellow people to black-eyed olive-oils all spliced by a single stop light at Grant & Broadway.” Though communicated in an offensive manner, the reality of neighborhoods being clearly demarcated by ethnic population in the United States—which, contrary to the ‘melting pot’ myth, indicates the importance of ethnicity in practice rather than in idealized terms—is in this way shown. Ethnicities are caricatured in the novel, such as, for example, “the old Italian men [who] smoke stubby Toscanas and spit brown on the lawn, flaying their arms as they talk in operatic gestures” and mothers who have another “bambino” (Acosta 1972, 59) on the way. The brand of cigar (Italian), the color of their spit (brown, referring also to Italians’ darker complexion), the “operatic gestures” (passion in conversation), and another “bambino” on the way (Catholic dogma dictates eschewing contraception) are all Italian stereotypes.

The ethnic profiling in the novel is stereotypical, coarse, and exaggerated to the point where it no longer stands out only as a shocking flaw in thinking but becomes a literary device. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Oscar’s psychiatrist, Dr. Serbin, who is introduced early in the novel. His caricature is so typically contemptible—based on the twisted end of the U.S.-American social imaginary—and repeated so often in a short span of text that it begins to signal a deeper, unsaid intent in the novel’s design. By ‘social imaginary’ I am referring to Charles Taylor’s (2002) definition of “the way we imagine our society” (92; see also 106–7) as a generalizable collective.³

Individual instances of racist stereotyping take on new meaning when the novel’s overall design is considered. Nevertheless, early in the novel readers will not yet be aware of the extent to which Oscar will categorize characters (including himself) as ethnic types. At the novel’s opening, for example, Oscar wonders what causes his constipation—perhaps the “beancake with the black bean sauce [he] got from Wing Lee’s last night.” Oscar’s “Jewish shrink [Dr. Serbin] butts in” as a voice in his head: “Don’t tell me you believe that stuff about Chinese putting the leftovers back in?” he asks. Quickly two caricatures are produced, the “Jewish shrink,” who pedals “jewish fairy tales” (i.e., psychoanalysis), and Wing Lee, the “Chinese man with the long, pointed beard” (Acosta 1972, 13). Dr. Serbin’s Jewishness is referred to four times in a single page (14) and linked to his occupation as “shrink” three times; he is a “[f]ucking tall intellectual bastard,” an “Ivy League black-haired bastard,” and a “skinny fag without culture” (14) who is “hung up on ancient history. Moses and Freud really got to him” (19). In the context of the United States, Jewish

³ For an overview of approaches to ‘social imaginary,’ including from Cornelius Castoriadis, Jacques Lacan, and Benedict Anderson, as well as Charles Taylor, see Strauss 2006.

people are stereotyped as advocates of psychoanalysis (Woody Allen also riffs off this stereotype; Freud was Jewish), more highly educated, darker featured, and preoccupied with events that occurred at the historical time of the Torah. Occurring early in the novel and, on a first reading, without the rest of the novel as a reference, this degree of stereotypical imagery will, by design, be shocking to many readers.

Dr. Serbin is not an individual or a character. He has no defining traits or nuances that would make him appear as ‘real.’ He is a caricature of a Jewish person in the social imaginary of the United States. It is not insignificant that Dr. Serbin, at this point, is a voice in Oscar’s head—entirely constructed in his imagination—which tells us more about Oscar than about his psychologist. Hutcheon (1994) argues that ironic meaning is, in practice, something that “happens” as a process in a social/communicative context rather than something that simply exists. Irony should be understood as relational between the ironist (with an intention of irony) and the interpreter of the irony (who interprets the utterance as ironic or not). The social context from which Oscar’s ironic “happening” is being iterated is a society in which ethnicity is very significant in terms of who you are and what position you hold in the social system, which is especially the case for non-whites. The interpreter benefits from keeping this in mind.

According to Hutcheon (1994), it is through the interpretation of “the unsaid, the unheard, the unseen” (9) that irony comes into being. The move is usually triggered and directed by “conflictual textual or contextual evidence” (11), which entails semantic and evaluative inferences (12). In reference to Oscar’s description of Dr. Serbin, the “conflictual textual” evidence is the overdetermined degree to which racist stereotypes are employed, which can be interpreted as signaling an unsaid ironic meaning, its latent double. The novel’s contextual evidence, in reference to Hutcheon above, includes Acosta’s activist role in the Chicano Movement (for the historical background on Acosta’s writing, see Alba Cutler 2016, 154–56), which mobilized for better treatment of Mexican Americans in the United States. The historical context of anti-racism in the 1960s and early 1970s, centered on the Civil Rights Movement, along with the literary conventions of Gonzo and satire, signal that the novel’s racist stereotypes are being employed ironically. In the words of Quintero (2007), “confusions between literal fact and the truth of art remind us that satirists must ultimately rely on audiences to share a common ground of reason and, as far as literary satire is concerned, of belief” (5). To be interpreted as such, satire and irony demand that interpreters share a certain degree of common belief with the ironist, which, in the context of Acosta’s novel, would be the zeitgeist of anti-racism centered on the Civil Rights Movement.

If Oscar’s utterances are taken as ironic, the question of what the irony signifies must be established. Understood as ironic, the racist utterances will be interpreted as signifying an interaction between the said and the unsaid, which creates meaning that is different and more than what is stated. In

Hutcheon's terms, irony can "complexify" by removing the semantic relation between clear signifiers and signifieds and cannot "disambiguate." Ironic meaning must be contextualized in terms of its use and reception (Hutcheon 1994, 12–13), which, as stated earlier, means the description of Dr. Serbin should be understood through an analysis of the novel as a whole, which will be the work of this chapter.

For now—and to establish how irony works in the novel and what the satire is attacking—it is possible to read the Dr. Serbin episode as having Jews in the position of the text's satirical object, while the satirical subject, that which is being attacked, is U.S.-American racial hierarchies, essentialisms, and simplistic categories of social thinking. A satire generally attacks someone or something specifically, but the "real subject" of the satire may not be the object attacked (Knight 2004, 4). Oscar's attack is ignorant and offensive, but that very ignorance and closed-mindedness, based on the strictly policed ethnic boundaries in the United States, can be understood as the satire's "real subject." In other words, it is not the Jewish people who are here being satirized but rather how U.S.-Americans *think* about Jewish people in their preconceived categories. This is in line with one of the main arguments in this dissertation, namely that, for many, normative frames of reference do not align with their subjective experiences. The way we often think of others—through simplistic categorization—is here being shown to be wanting and potentially harmful.

3.3.2 GONZO SATIRE AND (MORE) ETHNIC STEREOTYPES

Satire is often upsetting even if its deeper intentions are noble. A satire can be defined as communication that uses "humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues" (*Oxford Dictionary of English*). It often manifests its judgment on transgressions or stupidity in a blend of attack and entertainment and in a manner that is designed to cause controversy (Greenberg 2018, 7). Acosta's novel appears to be designed with controversy specifically in mind. In reference to *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, Héctor Calderón (1982) writes that "[t]he satirist uses the free-play of his intellectual wit and fancy to persuade the reader that if anything can go wrong with society, it already has. If successful, the satirist will produce in the reader not only amusement, but also contempt, disgust, and bitterness" (7). Acosta establishes early on that "contempt, disgust, and bitterness" are the narrative's emotive mode.

Hunter S. Thompson (1979), the widely accepted originator of Gonzo⁴ and a friend/colleague of Acosta's, makes the point that mixing journalism (or the

⁴ The term 'Gonzo' comes from Hunter S. Thompson's (1971) character Dr. Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, who was modeled on

accounting of events as ‘real’ as in an autobiography) with fiction is a method of reporting that is “based on William Faulkner’s idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism [...]” (106, emphasis in original). Gonzo ‘truth’ can be termed negatively: rather than showing what is true, it strips away layers of falsity and holds them up to illustrate what isn’t true. Acosta’s handling of ethnicities of all sorts, as well as gender, homosexuality, and religion, is superficial, flippant, irreverent, and essentialist yet, at the same time, a reflection of what might pass as typical discourse in some contexts. Though it is tempting to place this discourse in the past, the recent political climate in the USA, coming to an apex in 2016–2020, shows that these problems are still with us. By exaggerating and mocking the layers of society’s accepted ‘truths,’ Acosta’s novel ridicules an entire register of discourse.

Oscar’s character narrator amalgamation (the character and narrator are distinct though also the same; more on that below) is defined by a form of Gonzo exaggeration and subjectivity. The narrative is told in a “frenzied style of [attack] from a constantly shifting, counter-cultural vantage point” (Wright 2010, 623). In the Gonzo style, the author-as-participant and protagonist (or character narrator) is so fully immersed in the story that his or her personality becomes “exaggerated to such a degree that its subjectivity is defined through its physical and psychological excesses” (Hames-García 2000, 467), which neatly characterizes *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*. John Hartsock (2010) defines the Gonzo mode of writing as “in fact part of something larger: a resistance to cant, to bureaucratism, to the comfort of the structured (read: ‘restrictive’) social code, accumulating the irrational and the absurd in its creaking joints until they burst out in what Mikhail Bakhtin characterized as the carnival of the grotesque” (7). The character Oscar exposes U.S.-American social codes to be absurd and irrational by allowing them to “burst out” in grotesque exaggeration. Gonzo’s ‘narrator-as-participant’ mode means that the satirical critique aimed outward towards society—the “real subject” (Knight 2004, 4)—is attacked via the narrator himself, who is wholly enmeshed in the society being critiqued, a tradition going back at least to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759). Calderón (1982) calls this Acosta’s “satire directed inwards” (7), which refers to Oscar’s self-abuse, self-deprecation, and Acosta’s attack on social conventions via the first-person narrator’s use of racist stereotypes when describing himself.

Dr. Serbin’s voice—inside Oscar’s head, so, again, perhaps best understood as an extension of Oscar—also peddles stereotypes and caricatures. He says of Oscar, “After all, you’re just a little brown Mexican boy” (Acosta 1972, 25). He later adds, “You just can’t be comfortable with the bigness” (28). Dr. Serbin’s comment about Oscar’s Mexican ethnicity is linked to the accusation that is he unable to handle success, for Dr. Serbin’s diagnosis is that Oscar’s Mexican heritage in the U.S.-American context makes him “just a little [...] boy” and

the real-life Acosta (Hames-García 2000, 467). Acosta (1996, 109, qtd. in Calderón 2004, 88–89) claimed to be co-creator of the Gonzo style.

hence unable to perform as a lawyer. Dr. Serbin's voice denies Oscar individuality and analyzes him in terms of his ethnicity. Of a problem Oscar has, Dr. Serbin says that it's very common. Oscar thinks, "All my symptoms have been common to every man for years now. He refuses to permit me the satisfaction of uniqueness" (36). Instead of being an individual, Oscar is just like everyone else (or all 'Mexicans'), one of a mass, just as Dr. Serbin is not an individual but simply a 'Jew.' Oscar reports of Dr. Serbin: "In ten years of therapy the only thing the fucker has wanted to gossip about has been my mother and my ancestry" (19). Oscar's Mexican-ness is his defining feature, his essential identity, along with his mother in a reference to Freud and perhaps the cult of the mother in Mexico (Paz 1985, 80–88). The central motivation for Oscar's pilgrimage, the source of the "ants in [his] stomach" (Acosta 1972, 31), is the dissonance created by his inherited ethnicity on the one hand and his subjective agency on the other. The conflict that arises from stereotypes on the one hand and individual experience on the other drives the narrative forward and can be termed an actant.

This problematic is illustrated by Sal, a bartender, who says, "How many guys like you do you know that are lawyers?" Oscar replies, "What do you mean, 'like me'?" Sal says, "Ah, don't play cute. You know what I mean" (Acosta 1972, 30). In the social, political, and economic context of the United States in the 1950s and 60s, 'Mexicans' held the 'position' of migrant worker in the social imaginary; a 'Mexican' becoming a lawyer was an anomaly. This is echoed by Oscar later when he is offered mescaline: "I can't answer [...]. I'm an innocent, brown-eyed child of the sun. Just a peach-picker's boy from the West Side. Riverbank. My father's a janitor with only a third-grade education and my mother makes tortillas at 5:00 A.M. before she goes to the cannery" (54). His indigenous ancestry ("innocent, brown-eyed child of the sun") is exoticized and caricatured while his parents' socio-economic positioning in the United States ("peach-picker," "janitor with only a third-grade education," and "cannery" worker) operates as a mechanism, via the social imaginary, to place him in a constricted positioning that lacks agency. This process is based on thinking in terms of simplistic categories in which each ethnicity symbolically holds a certain place in the hierarchical schema of U.S.-American society. Oscar 'is' his category—a poor Mexican.

This is in line with how Oscar describes Riverbank, California, the city of his youth. Oscar states: "Riverbank is divided into three parts, and in my corner of the world there were only three kinds of people: Mexican, Okies and Americans. Catholics, Holy Rollers and Protestants. Peach pickers, cannery workers and clerks" (Acosta 1972, 78). Here ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic statuses are coalesced together for each of the three definitive categories that make up the social imaginary in Riverbank at the time. Religion is not about divinity but just another identity category, like ethnicity (Michaels 2006, 174).

These three categories ("Mexican, Okies and Americans") are, of course, more nuanced if looked at more closely. On the weekends, for example, Oscar

and his brother Bob have to fight the other boys in their neighborhood: Oscar and Bob aren't "*real* Mexicans" (emphasis in original) because the family, originally from El Paso, Texas, is considered "easterners." They wore distinctive clothing and spoke Spanish when they arrived in California. "I was an outsider then as much as I am now" (Acosta 1972, 77), states Oscar.

However, the real fight begins before school on Monday when the boys enter 'Okie Town':

We had to fight the Okies because we were Mexicans! It didn't matter to them that my brother and I were outcasts on our own turf. They'd have laughed if we'd told them that we were easterners. To them we were greasers, spics and niggers. If you lived on the West Side, across from the tracks, and had brown skin, you were a Mexican.

In relation to other ethnic communities in Riverbank, all 'Mexicans' held the same essentialized position in the social imaginary—you 'were' your ethnicity. This form of logic overrides contradictions, such as how Oscar states that "you never fought *one of your own kind* in front of others" (Acosta 1972, 78, emphasis added). Those who were 'Other' a few sentences prior become his 'own kind' when the railway tracks are crossed. The neighborhood boys are simultaneously different, to the point of sparking violence, and the same, a seemingly contradictory idea that nevertheless makes sense based on the context.

Oscar's thinking and talking in terms of stereotypes is highly problematic (though for many U.S.-Americans it will 'feel' intuitively familiar). That 'Mexicans' can be "greasers, spics and niggers" (Acosta 1972, 78) to the "Okies" is—needless to say—offensive. My argument is that the ridiculousness and offensiveness of these patterns of thought is Acosta's point. If a child is raised in an environment in which ethnicity, along with religion and socio-economic standing, in practice is the essential defining trait by which society is stratified, readers should perhaps not be so surprised that Oscar narrates the novel in reference to characters' ethnicity as their defining characteristic. The practice is an extension of the environment in which Oscar grew up and an illustration of it. Literary scholar María Herrera-Sobek (2000) shows that, in specific instances such as those illustrated here, Oscar's masculinity and ethnicity are in this way "mapped out" psychologically (83). According to Oscar, defining a person—categorically and essentially—based on his or her ethnicity was common practice in Riverbank, California, in the 1950s and 60s, and he conforms to the conventions of his social upbringing.

Moreover, defining individuals or a people based on essentialized ethnicity was a practice that continued up through the Chicano Movement, which was Acosta's historical context at the time of writing. Related to the Civil Rights Movement, the Chicano Movement was made up of people who fought for the rights and recognition of Mexican Americans in the 1960s and early 70s in the United States. Broadly speaking, within the Chicano Movement a

heterogeneous group of activists and individuals actively created a hyper-masculinized, heterosexual, and homogenous Chicano/a identity to act in opposition to the Anglo, “gringo”, or “foreign Europeans” (Gonzales and Urista 1969, 5). *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* is the 1969 declaration of the National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in which the stated goal was to bring all Chicana/os together “with one heart and one mind” employing a form of nationalism that “transcends all religious, political, class and economic factors and boundaries.” These Chicana/o student leaders utilized the concept of “La Raza,” or ‘the Race.’ For example, *El Plan* states that “sangre” (blood) is “our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny” (González and Urista 1969, 5), blending biology with politics. Acosta, who participated in the Chicano Movement, can be seen as satirizing the overwhelming importance that simplistically constructed ethnic categories, taken as “authentic” representations (Hames-García 2000, 466), had not only in broader U.S. society but also in the Chicano Movement.

Returning to the novel, Oscar indicates that his stereotypes also come from broader U.S.-American popular culture. In an imagined conversation with Humphrey Bogart in the shower, Oscar states, “[...] the sneaky Japs in khaki uniforms and beanie caps see that I’ll die before I talk” (Acosta 1972, 15), which places Oscar within a popular World War II film in which Japanese soldiers are represented in a widely accepted albeit stereotypical and derogatory manner. In addition to Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson are described as Oscar’s “three favorite men” (12). These masculine movie stars also illustrate the contradictory position of a boy in the USA: popular culture pushes him into a form of masculinity (as sometimes parents do, too, as shown below) that may not fit the boy in question.

Oscar asks the three actors collectively: “Constipation? How in the fuck can I be constipated when I have so much to offer?” (Acosta 1972, 12). His body is rebelling against his forced conformity to preordained categories—be they masculine, ‘white,’ or other normative categories. Elsewhere Oscar states, for example, “[...] if I got my right hand chopped off by the Japs” (75), which indicates the confrontational, ‘us versus them’ mentality that often accompanies Oscar’s caricatures. Historically, such stereotypes have been actively cultivated in times of war, such as the World War II depiction of Japanese soldiers indicates, or for other violent purposes, including in relation to Native Americans and others.⁵ For example, the Boy Scouts is an organization, according to Oscar, “to prepare honest young men such as myself for the fine art of tracking down Indians in the woods” (85), another allusion to popular culture (e.g., Davy Crocket). Oscar illustrates that if stereotypes and essentialized thinking are a widely utilized basis for popular culture, the social

⁵ As Sarah Bishop (2014) has shown, Mexican Americans were construed through negative stereotypes (typically a ‘bandito’) in popular culture, from silent ‘greaser’ films in the early 1900s to advertising in the 1960s and beyond.

imaginary generally, and the experienced realities on the ground in U.S. society, then one should not be surprised to find them—admittedly in an extreme form—in a piece of literature.

3.3.3 THE IMPLICATIONS OF READING THE NOVEL AS A SATIRE

Choosing to read Acosta's novel as a satire has certain implications. One must interpret the text and judge it by the criteria of that mode. The novel's 'deeper meaning' is ambiguously located in the narrative gap created by the distance between what is said and a "complexified" (Hutcheon 1994, 12–13) alternative. As a result, the novel can be understood as utilizing ambiguity as a constructive force (Sternberg 1989, 227) in which any number of possible explanations are available. However, and following Hutcheon (1994, 12–13) again, if the text is taken as satire based on irony, the resulting meaning cannot be less ambiguous than the straightforward original.

Marci Carrasquillo (2010) chooses not to read Acosta's novel as a satire, which, stripped of its complexified ironic meaning, drastically changes what the novel means. She critiques the novel's reliance on the road trip trope as a "gendered American literary tradition." Carrasquillo continues: "Acosta succumbs to the excesses of patriarchy, for he is limited by stereotypical formulations for 'real' masculinity that have been integral to the American road trip plot and to the frontier narrative," which is a reason for the "project's failure" (80; for a critique of this position, see González 2017, 38).

In the novel, Oscar comments on masculinity in this way, for example: "The truth of it was they [his parents] both conspired to make men out of two innocent Mexican boys. It seemed that the sole purpose of childhood was to train boys how to be men. Not men of the future, but *now*" (Acosta 1972, 75, emphasis in original). Oscar illustrates how boys are turned into men when he and his brother are challenged to eat spoons of red-hot chilies, to take just one example. When the "sole purpose" of turning boys into masculine men succeeds (as it does with Oscar), an underlying issue in terms of problematic masculinity is shown to be how boys are raised—their socialization. Oscar embraces his positionality as a macho man, but he is consistently portrayed as ignorant and his behavior, instead of being glorified, is shown to be limiting and harmful to himself and others. Contrary to Carrasquillo, I believe adult-Oscar's excesses, ill-health, mental and spiritual anguish, suicide attempts, and obliviousness act to discredit Oscar's misogyny and other attitudes and behaviors. While this does not excuse Oscar's behavior, it helps to explain how it should be interpreted, which is that the norms of Oscar's socialized upbringing shape him heavily.

Oscar the narrator continuously shows, through flashbacks to his youth, how growing up in a specific environment correlates to the satirical exaggeration of learned attitudes and qualities in the grown man. The subversion of "macho" characteristics (see Paz 1985, 80–88) also points to

satire: it is a strange kind of hyper-masculine and hyper-sexualized narrator who continuously refers to his own impotence and the smallness of his penis. Though I do not agree with Carrasquillo,⁶ her text is of interest as an example of what reading Acosta's novel unironically entails, for there is certainly much to critique. Her analysis also raises questions about how to understand Oscar's misogyny and homophobia in a reading that accepts it as satire.

I respectfully disagree with Michael Hames-García (2000), among others,⁷ who criticize Acosta's "portrayal of women and of gay men" (473) while arguing that Acosta is critiquing the essentialisms and positions found in the Chicano Movement through satire, including how women and gay men were perceived and treated. Hames-García writes that "Acosta seems to have failed to find ways to connect oppressions and identities without assuming false or superficial commonalities or re-inscribing pre-existing inequalities" (478). According to Hames-García, Acosta's topic is the oppression resulting from identity positionalities, such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and so on, but the problematic is dealt with by reinscribing the oppression that he is criticizing. Hames-García says that Acosta's text keeps the inequalities intact through his handling of stereotypes, among other ways.

However, there is a contradiction in this formulation, for Hames-García (2000) also writes:

The pomposity and self-centeredness of Acosta's protagonists are components of the satire directed at the idea of the Chicano warrior-hero. Acosta inflates the egos of Oscar and Brown [the narrator of Acosta's second novel] at least as much as he exaggerates their bodily characteristics. What becomes clear to the reader is the extent to which

⁶ Carrasquillo's (2010) belief that "male movement is always sexualized" (84), and other similar formulations, are problematic. This statement is written to indicate that movement for all men is always sexualized. It is possible, however, that Carrasquillo means that movement for men in the novel is always sexualized, which, however, is also not supported by the text.

⁷ A number of scholars both define Acosta's novel as a satire and are critical of Acosta's form of representation. Alexi Nowak (2017) criticizes the novel as 'ugly' due to "the book's consistent recourse to misogyny, stereotypes, and ethnic and homophobic slurs" (191). Juan Bruce-Novoa (1989) writes that the "text remains offensively homophobic" (74). Louis Gerard Mendoza (2001) criticizes Acosta for his lack of "critical analysis on gender" (232) and Aldama (2000) concurs, saying the use of gender is "suspect" (216). I completely agree that the novel is ugly and full of all kinds of extremely problematic representations. However, as hopefully is made clear here, this line of analysis is misleading if the text is simultaneously taken as a satire attacking such behavior and traits.

such self-important male figures are dependent on the subordination of women and gay men. (473–74; see also Hames-García 2004, 70)

If Acosta is satirizing the “self-important male figure” as a “warrior-hero,” as Hames-García indicates, Acosta cannot simultaneously critique Oscar and have him treat women and homosexuals respectfully. One satirical method is to reinscribe the “pre-existing inequalities” that are “false” and “superficial” (478) and expose and mock them for their superficial falsity. Oscar’s characterization and the tone of the text, which is riddled with exaggerations, falsehoods, errant thinking, and arrogant yet ignorant stances, indicate, in my reading, that Oscar’s hurtful words are to be taken, as Hames-García says, as a satire of men like Oscar in the Chicano Movement. My argument is that if Oscar’s utterances are satire, they must be interpreted as more than their signifiers superficially suggest; if the utterances are taken unambiguously, they cannot be understood as satire. By exposing (rather than endorsing) misogyny and much more, Acosta’s text may be analyzed to better understand how such insidious ideas, ideologies, and social mechanisms operate. In the words of Calderón (1982), it is a satire in which “anything goes, including decorum” (9).

As we have seen, satire is premised upon exposing “people’s stupidity or vices” (*ODE*) in a manner designed to cause controversy (Greenberg 2018, 7) and hence draw attention to deeper problems beyond the surface of the verbal utterances. Exposing ignorance will, inevitably, also mean depicting ignorance. As Aldama (2000) states, Acosta’s novel “reveals that the ‘real’ is an artificial, neocolonial hegemonic construct that maintains [...] hierarchies of difference” (216). This hegemonic social ‘reality’ and its critique are both embedded—doubly—in the character narrator’s voice, which can be termed an in-between style⁸ and will be dealt with next.

3.3.4 SATIRICAL IN-BETWEENNESS AND THE CHARACTER NARRATOR

I have shown that Oscar’s stereotypical ethnic caricatures point to an underlying satirical meaning that exposes them as being based on ignorance and that the text begins to explain some of the reasons they exist. These include social environment and upbringing, popular culture, and even social movements like the Chicano Movement. However, the verbal utterances

⁸ I’ve borrowed the term “in-between style” from Aldama (2000), though he uses it differently. According to Aldama, the “boundaries that separate high and low culture do not exist for Acosta; this boundarylessness helps clear the way for the subaltern voice” (213), which he calls an “in-between style” (217).

themselves are undeniably stereotypical, derogatory, and harmful. What is the relationship between these two conflicting planes of communication?

One way to approach this is to ask who, at any given point in the narrative, is communicating. What is the motivation for the utterance? In reference to the discussion on narrative communication (authors, implied authors, [character] narrators, narratees, and flesh-and-blood readers) in narrative theory (see, e.g., Booth 1983; Phelan 2005), I have distinguished a difference in narrative voices for Acosta the historical author, Oscar the narrator, and Oscar the character (the latter two are the same character but operate with distinct voices).⁹ This, I believe, begins to explain the difference between the harmful speech on the one hand and its satirical critique on the other.

First comes Acosta, the historical author, who took part in events that made up the Chicano Movement, including working as an attorney to defend the East L.A. Thirteen and the Biltmore Six, Chicano activists, in 1968 (Nowak 2017, 172–75).¹⁰ His experiences, views, and historical context are discernable in the unsaid gap created by satire: one can project implied meanings based on an educated understanding of what such a person might have believed. He is the designer of the satire who points its critique towards subjects. In James Phelan's (2005) terms (following Booth 1983), Acosta can be understood as the implied author, which means the source for the "assumptions, beliefs, norms, meanings, and purposes of the text" (39), and can be reconstructed by readers. The idea of the implied author presents some theoretical problems that are not an issue here, so I forego its analysis in favor of concentrating on the character narrator Oscar.

Oscar the narrator is the voice that carries out the satire in the text. He is in on the satire's secret, which is to say he knows who or what is being targeted and why. In line with this, he exaggerates actions that seem unrealistic in their ignorance in a gleeful, almost snickering tone. Oscar the narrator observes tragedies from some distance, which allows him to laugh at them, while they occur to Oscar the character within the storyworld.

The third tier of narrative communication is Oscar the character, who is ostensibly the same as Oscar the narrator but with important differences in terms of narrative voice. Oscar the character is earnestly seeking out his identity, the overarching motivation of the narrative. For Oscar the narrator, meanwhile, the search is comical, ironic, and overdetermined (Wright 2010,

⁹ Aldama (2000) also differentiates between Acosta-as-character and Acosta-as-narrator/writer but in a temporal sense: "The story is told from a temporal position closest to Acosta-as-writer of text, further from Acosta-as-character experiencing the events within the storyworlds of July 1967" (203).

¹⁰ See Acosta's (1989) second novel, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* for a fictional account of these and other events set around the Chicano Movement.

627), which points to it being satire. Oscar the character is the butt of the joke and doesn't realize it. He is a bungling fool whose primary merit is his naiveté, which somehow leads him—through all the wrong ways—deeper into the complexities and mysteries of representation. For Oscar the character, the performances aren't symbolic but tangible; he is actually intoxicated on LSD and Budweiser beer as he drives his car off of a cliff (Acosta 1972, 159). He is ignorant in the way a young child is still unaware that actions have consequences, and that social implications and shared meanings extend outward from the literal. By the power of his tenacity and powerful body, however, he can achieve consequential things (becoming a lawyer and consuming massive amounts of drugs, for example). Oscar the character is oblivious to the satirical intent and is, for the most part, simply acting out his appetite, be it for food, alcohol, drugs, meaning, or fame.

The distinction in narrative voices is like a hologram: if you tilt your head one way a certain image will appear and, looking from another angle, another image forms, though they are the same picture of the character narrator Oscar. The communicating position one 'sees' depends on the angle the text is taken at. The novel is hence doubly coded and meaning fluctuates in-between these two possible interpretations. In Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser's (1989) view, "practically all" utterances contain a tacit dimension, the "latent double" of the text (xii). Satire and, especially, the use of irony compound the importance of a text's "latent double." Sometimes, however, one can distinguish the clear voice of the narrator or character at the exclusion of the other. The clearest examples of this are when the satire is laid on thickest and Oscar the narrator exaggerates his character self's ignorance most excruciatingly. Oscar's ultimate realization that he is neither U.S.-American nor Mexican, but a constructed, in-between identity—the Brown Buffalo—is communicated by Oscar the character in a (short) moment of sincere profundity. The character voice is also discernable in other moments of sincere expression with no satirical intent.

The twin voices also highlight the role of agency in the novel. Oscar the character shows that much of his reality and identity—what kind of person he is and how he behaves—is the result of his social environment. By and large he is innocent when this context is taken into account. According to Oscar the character, *any* reasonable lawyer working in the context of the Legal Aid Society would rely on his or her secretary to do the work and, when she dies, flee in a panic; modern society just does that to people. However, the narrator speaks with agency and hence criticizes his own character self, exposing his flaws.

The question of who is taken to be speaking—and with what motivation—is important in the novel and, in what follows, I will comment on the differences in narrative voice between Oscar the narrator and Oscar the character.

3.4 A PERFORMATIVE DECONSTRUCTION OF CATEGORIES

Oscar describes himself alternatively as a Brown Buffalo, a Cro-Magnon Man, a Blackfoot, a Samoan, Little Black Sambo, a “nigger” (Acosta 1972, 94), “Jigaboo” (85), Jesus Christ, a “wild Indian” (42), a “spic” (47), “ancient” (63), a “peasant” (64), the “son of Lorca” (66), and an Aztec.¹¹ He is not all of these at the same time exactly, but rather performs one ethnicity or persona after the other, usually in reference to his particular context. According to Hames-García (2000, 463), Acosta has moved beyond race by intentionally adopting aesthetically and culturally constructed identities as a carnivalesque masquerade. In my reading, Oscar is performing (Butler 1990) these identities to simultaneously deconstruct the idea of a fixed identity and ‘trying on’ aspects of his own, multiple, in-between identity in an exaggerated manner. Oscar is all of these and more, yet not *one* of them.

3.4.1 BECOMING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN SCAPEGOAT

Oscar illustrates what critical race and cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter (2003) calls the hierarchy of racialized bodies based on their deviation from normative white bodies. Hierarchy can be manifest in the exclusion of racialized bodies from the category of ‘human’ in discourses, socio-political relations, economics, and everyday practices. Oscar experiences the hierarchy of racialized bodies starting in his youth. For example,

Vernon, like all my Okie buddies, called me Jigaboo. I didn’t actually look like Little Black Sambo, but like I’ve said, in Riverbank there were only three races of people, and the closest anyone came to being black was during the summer when brown buffalos ran practically naked in the sweltering heat of the San Joaquin Valley. The name was not meant as an insult. It was simply a means of classification. Everyone in the Valley considers skin color to be of ultimate importance. (Acosta 1972, 85–86)

This quote illustrates the coarse categorization process and hierarchy that was in effect in Riverbank at the time. Oscar the character is earnestly explaining how identities worked in his childhood environment, which had everything to do with physical bodies. In that particular context, Oscar explains, the classification of “Jigaboo,” an offensive term for an African American (*ODE*), made some sense because, out of the options available, Oscar looked the most like an African American. Skin color, as Oscar states, was of “ultimate

¹¹ Herrera-Sobek (2009, 84) links all of Oscar’s racial persona to the stereotypical conceptualization of masculinity.

importance” and was used to determine “*exactly* who one is” (emphasis added). This is tragicomic—and one can discern the voice of Oscar the narrator here—because it is at once patently false and hence funny, while also evoking a sad sort of sympathy because, for Vernon, Oscar, and other children growing up in this environment, this classification system makes sense.

Even more upsetting is Oscar’s illustration that someone had to be the African American scapegoat in society, and Oscar repeatedly states that with the absence of African Americans in Riverbank, it was he and others like him who fulfilled that position. Oscar states, “Is it any wonder then that Vernon called me Jigaboo? Maybe if black people, righteous Negroes, had lived in Riverbank they would have been the niggers. But as things turned out, I grew up a fat, dark Mexican—a Brown Buffalo—and my enemies called me a nigger until that day I beat up Junior Ellis” (Acosta 1972, 86). This is an illustration of the ‘Othering’ process by which one group—‘Okies,’ in this case—defines itself through difference to another group.

The violent outcomes that this Othering process can take are illustrated when Oscar attends an annual birthday party on Halloween. “I actually went as a nigger” (Acosta 1972, 87), he states, which means he dressed up in blackface for the party, which points to the satirical, performative underpinning of the episode. Oscar walks a girl home along a dark street, and they are ambushed by “Okie” boys, one of whom screams, “I got me a fuckin nigger.” They “beat the shit” out of Oscar and pull his pants and underwear off, shining a flashlight on his crotch in front of the girl, who is paralyzed with fear. “This pussy Jigaboo ain’t even got hair on his prick” (88), one of them says. Apart from the horror for Oscar and the girl, this episode calls to mind lynching scenes and sexualized violence against African Americans in the United States. The absence of African Americans in Riverbank meant Oscar becomes the “nigger” and illustrates the terrifying realities of ethnic categories and their subsequent violence more broadly in the United States. Elsewhere Oscar is told, “I said you was a fucking, pussy-ass nigger....” and “you fucking black nigger!” (93).

Paula M.L. Moya and Hazel Markus (2010) have shown that ‘race’ should not be understood as a feature of identity, but rather as a structure of *doing* that is an elaborate nexus of personal and social actions (4). Oscar *does* the position of African American race in terms of embodied performance and, in turn, has race *done* back to him. His ability to switch between races is based on his ability to act within socially codified structures. Perhaps the most common example is the speech act: Oscar claims a certain identity by proclaiming outwardly that he is in possession of it.

Nevertheless, Oscar assures readers that “[t]he tone of one’s pigmentation is the fastest and surest way of determining exactly who one is” (Acosta 1972, 85–86). Later, Oscar “whipped Junior Ellis good [...] And no Okie sonofabitch ever called me a nigger to my face ever again” (Acosta 1972, 94), which was not an option open to some African Americans. Oscar’s performance succeeded on a certain level—he embodied a reality that some African Americans

experience—but it failed both to capture the complexity of his full identity and the actuality of racism as faced by some African Americans. Aldama (2000) links this episode to Oscar’s impotence, for Oscar “internalizes and makes real those narratives that a perverse and racist white masculinity perpetuate” (207). According to Aldama, Oscar internalizes the racist phrase “This pussy Jigaboo ain’t even got hair on his prick,” which results in his impotence. This means that racist language may affect Oscar in ways that he is unaware of in terms of his own racist language. Racism is an extreme form of thinking in terms of simplistic categories combined with antagonism and discrimination, and Oscar here momentarily embodies this simplistic category in terms of racism through a performance.

Oscar illustrates racism in part through his performative experiences, which links to the ideas of Judith Butler (1999). Butler shows that gender, as one aspect of identity, is constructed through a sequence of repeated performances that are necessitated by gender ideology’s regulatory practices, which are mostly compulsory within the social context. As Susan Stanford Friedman (1998) points out, parodic performances, such as drag, can intentionally “undermine notions of fixed or stable gender identities upon which the feminist discourse of sex/gender difference was often founded” (77). Gender isn’t about an essentialist being found within everyone, but rather a set of performative practices that are learned through socialization and which can be subverted. Likewise, Oscar’s performances of various personae, like the parodic performances mentioned by Stanford Friedman, expose the falsity of the notion that such identities are fixed.

The parallels found in Anzaldúa and Butler, which are important for opening up Oscar’s take on ethnicity, can be illustrated by the difference in emphasis between mestiza consciousness and nepantla, as argued by Martina Koegeler-Abdi (2013). In mestiza consciousness, closely related to mestizaje from Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999; see chapter 2), the subject deconstructs the internalized elements that make up the self through agency and reconstructs a new consciousness from the parts. In a nepantla process, however, Anzaldúa emphasizes the instability and precariousness of identity after this process of de- and reconstruction. Koegeler-Abdi (2013) links this to Butler’s concept of gender performativity because it “requires an aspiring nepantlera to perform inner changes outwardly, and the likely public rejection forces a nepantlera back into the in-between, to rework her strategies and inner works before trying to change external realities again.” The interplay of one’s internal processes with external influences acts to continuously destabilize one’s positionality. Failure and negotiation of one’s repeated identity performances, which are always changing and in movement as they are renegotiated, are also key elements of Butler’s take on subjectivization, which is another overlap between Butler and Anzaldúa’s ideas (Koegeler-Abdi 2013, 81). In the positive form of nepantla, Anzaldúa stresses the subject’s agency in choosing which aspects of identity will be performed. Actively turning multiplicity into a new subjectivity, nepantla can be conscious

performativity. Oscar the character embodies his performances, while Oscar the narrator at times comments on their constructed-ness (e.g., Acosta 1972, 68).

Throughout the novel, Oscar reimagines what constitutes his identity and performs it in relation to society. According to Anzaldúa (1999), one can “modify and shape primordial energy” into becoming a “turkey, coyote, tree, or human” (74), and Oscar momentarily embodies sexualized violence as experienced by some African Americans, for example. Oscar ‘is’ the unstable manifestations of his transforming self. This links with Butler’s idea of performativity and Anzaldúa’s theorization of *nepantla*: Oscar’s ethnic performances are perhaps exaggerated, but they can be taken to represent the “continual generating and regenerating of the cosmos” (Maffie 2014, 38) in its constant fluctuation and lack of any stable form. Oscar illustrates the continued mutability of our outward performances of identity. At one point, Oscar becomes a gorilla while on LSD: “No, I didn’t *look* like one, I *was* one” (Acosta 1972, 164, emphasis in original). In this sense, Oscar actually ‘becomes’ the many personae that he performs, even if momentarily as in the case of the lynching scene above or from the effects of LSD.

3.4.2 OSCAR AS NOT MEXICAN

As illustrated above, within the simplistic racial or ethnic categorization schema operating in the United States, Oscar is, at the end of the day, a ‘Mexican.’ In his youth, this is coded in large part through his body: he looks like a Mexican based on the color of his skin and hair, facial features, and so on (see Rodriguez 1994). Later, however, when Oscar is a lawyer (and elsewhere in contexts that are not considered typical for his ethnicity), he states:

All my life strangers have been interested in my ancestry. There is something about my bearing that cries out for history. I’ve been mistaken for American Indian, Spanish, Filipino, Hawaiian, Samoan and Arabian. No one has ever asked me if I’m a spic or a greaser [i.e., ‘Mexican’]. (Acosta 1972, 68)

During his youth, no one asked Oscar if he was a Mexican because they didn’t have to: they knew based on the context of Riverbank. But since the adult Oscar is obviously no longer in the position of a “peach-picker’s boy” or a “janitor” (54)—and hence easily identifiable as a ‘Mexican’ in the social imaginary—people no longer identify him as ‘Mexican.’

Oscar’s identity category of ‘Mexican’ is hence destabilized in various ways, though he flaunts his body as a representation of Otherness, both in terms of color (‘brown’) and its superhuman (god-like) ability to ingest drugs and alcohol. When Oscar takes a trip to El Paso, Texas, it is with the aim of

“[finding] out just who in the hell [he] really was,” which is “the object of [his] quest” (Acosta 1972, 184). The family had lived in El Paso when Oscar was young, and this geographic location represents Oscar’s roots. It is also notable for its in-betweenness at the borderlands: the area (El Paso/Juárez) is geographically one city that is both U.S.-American and Mexican and cut in half by an international border. This episode spurs Oscar’s realization of who he really is, albeit negatively: neither Mexican nor U.S.-American.

Arriving in Juárez, “[a]ll the faces are brown, tinged with brown, lightly brown, the feeling of brown” (Acosta 1972, 185). In this way, Oscar fits in. Oscar’s U.S.-American-ness, however, has already become apparent on the tram-ride across the border: a boy enters and sings a song from Oscar’s childhood and collects donations from the passengers. Oscar thinks,

What is a memory worth? How much is a nickel? Does he pay taxes? What is it, a peso is eight cents, or twelve and a half? But do I use American labor standards or will the tourist in me come out as arrogance? Am I just one of those gringos who *spoil* these poor savages with hopes of a better tomorrow? (188, emphasis in original)

Oscar’s de facto way of understanding society is U.S.-American, as illustrated by his reference to U.S. labor standards, which he is knowledgeable about. He is afraid of coming across as “just one of those gringos,” indicating that he is conscious of being in the role of a ‘gringo,’ which the narrator satirizes by linking the italicized “*spoil*” with “poor savages” when speaking of a nickel. Oscar’s awareness that he doesn’t speak Spanish despite looking like a Mexican is painful and causes him fear in this foreign context: “Impersonating a *mexicano*? Is there such a charge?” (187).

In the Mexican context, Oscar’s central identity categories flip. Now he is U.S.-American though he continues to have the physiognomy of a Mexican. Oscar also states that the contradiction between his Mexican body and U.S.-American socialization is a basis for assuming various personae: “I hate for people to assume I’m an authority on Mexicans. Just because I’m a brown buffalo doesn’t mean I’m the son of Moctezuma, does it?” (Acosta 1972, 101). Moctezuma was the leader of the Aztecs when Cortés arrived, which makes him a symbol of indigenous (Aztec) and Mexican heritage. However, as a Mexican American—and sometimes Oscar conflates ‘brown buffalo’ with the term Chicana/o—Oscar resents not being taken as a U.S.-American who happens to be of Mexican descent. Mexican ancestry does not necessitate that he is an expert on Mexican culture, because, like those posing the questions to him about Mexico, he grew up in the United States.

Despite Oscar’s earlier wariness of Mexico, he now finds women with Mexican features appealing, albeit in their capacity as caricatures of fertility goddesses: “Millions of brown women with black hair, Graceful asses for strong children; full breasts for sucking life; eyes of black almonds encased in furry nests.” Prior to this episode, Oscar had found women with Mexican

features unattractive. He states that on all his travels through life up to that point he had never “found a *woman*” (Acosta 1972, 188, emphasis in original). As with the ethnicity to which it is linked, Oscar here essentializes women based on their reproductive mothering role, which, in addition to the cult of the mother in Mexico (Paz 1985, 80–88), may be linked to the fetishizing of exoticism in the West.

Suddenly, however, the category of a ‘brown’ Mexico begins to unravel. First, it is Jefferson Airplane’s song ‘White Rabbit,’ which Oscar hears being played from a bar. Oscar protests at what he considers to be ‘white’ music robbing him of an authentic, exotically ethnic situation: “I’ve come to MEXICO.” Then it is a topless bar that could just as well be in San Francisco, Alpine, or Panama City staffed by “tall blondes [...] short redheads [...] long-haired brunettes.” Oscar the narrator takes care to list a variety of hair colors and thereby undermines Oscar the character’s vision of an ‘authentic’ Mexico. A prostitute “with red hair and peach skin” approaches Oscar in Spanish. “What kind of jackshit is this?” Oscar the character wonders, unable to fathom a situation in which a U.S.-American-looking woman speaks Spanish. “They get American girls to fake Spanish so well they speak it better than I do.” Again, this is Oscar the narrator poking fun at his character self, whose obliviousness is exaggerated for comic effect. The red-headed woman doesn’t speak English and another woman is asked to interpret: “*Oye, que dice este indio?*” (Hey, what is this Indian [Oscar] saying?) The redhead adds, “*Y este, no me digas que no es Mexicano?*” (And what, don’t tell me he isn’t Mexican?) (Acosta 1972, 189, translations mine). The ethnic roles have thus been reversed: the dark-skinned Mexican-looking U.S.-American can’t respond in Spanish to the redheaded, fair-skinned Mexican prostitute (see Rodriguez 1994).

Oscar’s identity crisis—being neither U.S.-American nor Mexican nor any of the other categories he has performed—is thus reaching its apex. A further illustration of this occurs when Oscar is sent to jail for an exchange with the proprietor of his hotel. Oscar is offered the chance to bribe his way out of jail but, since he is a U.S.-American lawyer, he finds such an action below his dignity. This level of naiveté marks Oscar as out of touch with Mexican realities. Hence, Oscar is thrown into a miserable jail with no ceiling in the cold night and later, after an altercation, into a dark “dungeon” full of “the ugliest pirates [he] had ever seen” with “whiskers bristling with lice” and “without hands, without arms.” The level of poverty and abasement, which is compared to “the black hole of Calcutta” (Acosta 1972, 192), again highlights Oscar’s U.S.-Americanness. In Oakland he came across poverty at the Legal Aid Society, but nothing like this.

The ultimate humiliation occurs when Oscar sees the magistrate: “Jesus H. Christ, I was being courtmartialed by a woman! In Spanish, at that!” (Acosta 1972, 192). Among other things, Oscar is accused of using “*palabras malas*” and he responds, “Is there no constitution here? [...] I’m charged with using *bad words*? What happened to due process? Where’s the Goddamned First Amendment around here?” (emphasis in original). Again, Oscar’s worldview

is U.S.-American right down to relying on the Constitution in a moment of crisis. Though the satire has attacked U.S.-American processes of thinking about race, now Mexico's exotic sheen of lost innocence and fertility goddesses is being undermined. This is made clear by the "fat soldier" (193) who terminates Oscar's lawyerly defense tactics with a rifle in the ribs. Earlier, the jail guards strip-searched Oscar three times and, when he protested, one of them "grabbed [his] balls and squeezed" (191) and laughed. Oscar finally admits, "I am guilty of all those nasty things, vile language, gringo arrogance and *americano* impatience with lazy *mexicanos*" (193). In short, he admits guilt for being a stereotypical 'ugly American' tourist on a bender in a Mexican border town. This is yet another persona that Oscar performs on his quest for identity.

Oscar is fined and, as he is leaving, the magistrate says, "Why don't you go home and learn to speak your father's language?" (Acosta 1972, 194). Earlier, Oscar explained that his father insisted that the children speak only English at home (186) and that his grammar school principal threatened to expel him if he spoke Spanish at school: "This is an *American* school" (187, emphasis in original), the principal tells him. Oscar's inability to speak Spanish does not have to do with his own decision but was thrust upon him by family and society; it is not his fault. This illustrates how in-betweenness can be inherited and, while Oscar's ultimate *nepantla* comes in the form of a temporal epiphany, much of the novel is marked by a more permanent form of quotidian in-betweenness that is divorced from his own agency. From his father, Oscar received both his "*indio* from the mountains of Durango" (184) genes—and hence his outer physiognomy—and, by way of his father's U.S.-American patriotism gained from serving in World War II, his inability to speak Spanish.

To make Oscar's reversal of identities complete, he has to return across the border to the United States without identification. The U.S.-Mexico border in the 1960s was not what it is today, and the border guard is friendly but suspicious. It is clear from Oscar's speech that he is a U.S.-American, such as in the phrase "I lost my wallet ... I'm a citizen, man." The word "man" indicates that Oscar did not learn English at a language school. "Well ... can you prove it?" asks the guard. Oscar's identity crisis is now complete: "Jesus Christ, I think, what *do* I have to prove who I am?" (emphasis in original) he thinks. Due to Oscar's U.S.-American bearing and language usage, he is allowed to enter the country, but the guard says, "Okay, buddy. Next time I suggest you have some I.D. on you. You don't *look* like an American, you know?" (Acosta 1972, 195). Being neither U.S.-American nor Mexican, nor any of the other personae that he has momentarily 'tried on,' sets the stage for Oscar's *nepantla*-like epiphany of in-betweenness.

3.5 RELIGION AS PROCESS AND NEPANTLA EPIPHANY AS TELOS

Oscar the character has a knack for taking what is available in whichever context he finds himself and, through change and a piecemeal process of adaptation, performing a new persona. He moves from one position to another and, through failure, learns that, in order to meet his end—which is to solve his identity crisis—he must create something new and apart from the identity categories that serve as society’s shared frames of reference. In this section, Oscar’s process will be illustrated through his relationship to religion while the novel’s telos will be found in an epiphany of nepantla.

3.5.1 RELIGION AS SHIFTING IDENTITIES

The nepantla process of creating new identities out of what is useful and discarding what is harmful, presenting the new identity in society and failing, and repeating such attempts is clearly evidenced by Oscar’s relationship to religion. In this subsection, I will illustrate the process that leads Oscar to nepantla through the example of religion. This underpins the argument that *Bildungsromane*, like nepantla, can be defined by both process and telos.

For Oscar, religion is not equated with spiritual experience, but is rather a means to an end: it is a performance of a particular identity that, he feels, might hold the answer to his crisis: “all my life I sought to find out who I am. Why do you think I became a Baptist?” (Acosta 1972, 198), he states. Oscar relates the arc of his life, which is framed as a religious pilgrimage from crisis to redemption (Calderón 2004, 98–99), from the Catholicism of his youth through membership in the First Southern Baptist Church to a form of indigenous spirituality. In the nepantla-like epiphany at the end of the novel he states, however, “I am neither a Catholic nor a Protestant” (Acosta 1972, 199), and his relationship to Aztec religion is shown to be superficial and satirical.

As a youth, Oscar is a Catholic like all the others in his neighborhood in Riverbank. However, as Oscar matures, he transforms himself into a “Holy Roller” (Acosta 1972, 78), which takes some time to accomplish. This is illustrated by the humorous episode where Alice, his thirteen-year-old, ‘Okie’ (i.e., ‘white’ and Baptist) girlfriend asks him if he believes in Jesus. “Sure. I told you I was Catholic,” Oscar says. “Daddy says some Catholics don’t believe in Jesus,” Alice says. “You can tell him this one does. He’s my favorite saint,” Oscar assures her (115).

The humor stems from the fact that, though a Catholic, Oscar doesn’t even understand basic Christian dogma, Catholic or otherwise, which begs the question: what is religion actually about? If religion is about a set of shared beliefs in terms of the divine, then Oscar is lacking. But—and this seems to be closer to the truth—if religion is about culture and an inherited social position

in the hierarchy of broader U.S. society, then Oscar's religious position is clear without reference to dogma: he is Other.

From the perspective of Protestant, 'white' America, Oscar's Catholicism is one of his defining characteristics. For example, upon hearing Oscar's Hispanicized name, Alice's mother forces Alice to write him a letter saying that they can never again meet (hence the need for the letter). Oscar's response is simple: "There's no problem in a name change." Alice's mother links Oscar's Hispanicized name to the position of Other from her 'Okie' vantage point, which in practice associates the name with ethnicity, which in turn corresponds to religion, social class, and more. Hence, she does not need to meet or see Oscar to pass judgment on him. Further illustrating the power of tribal identities, Oscar's mother has a different opinion when Oscar tells her he's thinking of changing his name for love: "You'll go to hell if you change your family name" (Acosta 1972, 117), she says.

Here Oscar the narrator is doubling down on the character Oscar's naiveté in order to bring about satirical meaning through humor. Oscar the character comes across as too ignorant (i.e., cut off from shared forms of meaning) to survive in a relationship with Alice, yet he tenaciously continues the chase. Though unrealistic—Oscar is painfully and contradictorily aware of the consequences of crossing the tracks into 'Okie town,' for example—this episode uses Oscar the character as an object of satire to ridicule the symbols by which racism operates, such as Hispanicized names. A deeper wisdom resides in Oscar's ignorance: does a name really categorize one into fields of implicit meaning? In practice, for Oscar, it does.

Meanwhile, Alice's stepfather, a Baptist deacon, had "tried to rape her when she was twelve. And he hated Mexicans more than life itself" (Acosta 1972, 117). The rape, by its proximity to the description of racial hatred, is linked to it. As with the sexualized 'lynching' scene when Oscar became the African American scapegoat (88), Oscar associates racism with sexual violence, thus driving home the visceral poignancy that such ideas have. The stepfather is a caricature of the hypocritically religious, hateful, male tyrant and, by being a deacon of the specifically Baptist church, undermines Oscar's eventual conversion to that denomination.

None of this seems to bother Oscar, however, for it is the blonde, pig-tailed girl that he desires, and the details (religion affiliation, what parents or society might say,¹² racial hatred, attempted rape) do not concern him. He sums up

¹² Aldama (2000, 11) points out that the police become involved in separating Alice and Oscar based on the law against miscegenation. Although interracial marriage and sexual relations weren't legalized across the United States until the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case in 1967, the California Supreme Court decided that the state's ban on interracial marriage violated the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in *Perez v. Sharp* in 1948. Nevertheless, a Gallup poll (Newport 2013) showed that 94%

his rationale with, “But what the hell, *she loved me!*” (Acosta 1972, 117, emphasis in original). Besides sexual desire, Oscar is motivated by a wish to assimilate with Anglo society on the one hand and a feeling of being constricted within the Mexican American community on the other (Walker 2009, 147). He finds ‘Mexican’ girls “quite simply, a drag”; they “always held back, eating their lunch under the shed for bicycles instead of on the lawn with ‘the rest of the people’” (Acosta 1972, 113). One of Oscar’s defining traits is that he wants to be where the action is, and the ‘Mexican’ girls continue to live by the rules of a segregated Riverbank. Oscar, meanwhile, is “elected Jr. Class President,” becomes the solo clarinetist in the high school band, and “played the lead role in *Captain From Castille*” (112). Oscar’s activity is coded as Anglo, not ‘Mexican,’ a process Herrera-Sobek (2009) calls becoming “*agringado*” [gringo-like] (84). He avoids the Mexican Americans of his youth in part because “they constantly talked about the gringos and the Okies and the Americans and all kinds of things that I could not accept as true since for me all was going king ass” (Acosta 1972, 112), which is to say exceptionally well. Oscar’s needs and realities no longer coincide with the social positioning of the Mexican American community and the Catholic religion, which is an integrated symbol of that positioning.

Oscar’s conversion to the Baptist church is, as indicated above, framed as an attempt to “find out who [he] is” (Acosta 1972, 198), and religious conversion should, Oscar hopes, lead to assimilation. He becomes “a fanatic of the worst kind” (131) in his attempt to belong to this insular community and identity. The identity is demarcated through actions. Never one to do things half-heartedly, he acts as a missionary in Panama and “worked with the Southern Baptist Convention and Jesus Christ to save the black souls of niggers, spics and Indians” (100) by feeding them what he later decides is a “crock of shit” (133). While Catholicism simply *was*, evangelical Protestantism must be acted out with tangible results. Just as *La Virgen de Guadalupe*¹³ reigns south of the border, it is the Holy Spirit that may appear most stimulating and approachable in some evangelical denominations, e.g., Baptists, in the United States (Acosta 1972, 131; León 2004, 208). In order to enter into the U.S.-American mainstream, Oscar has to symbolically abandon the dark-skinned goddess Guadalupe and, by extension, the more ambivalent female aspect of spirituality, and accept the Holy Spirit and a more masculine, works-oriented Protestant religion.

of white Americans disapproved of interracial marriage in 1958, which would be around the time Oscar’s experience took place.

¹³ The dark-skinned *Virgen de Guadalupe* appeared to an Aztec peasant named Juan Diego speaking Nahuatl, his native language, in 1531. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* has since developed into the Mother of Mexico and has become the primary symbol of religious identity for Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike (León 2004, 61–4).

The racial slurs used to describe the people whom Oscar tried to 'save' while he was a missionary indicate, however, that Oscar has more in common with them than with his white, Baptist colleagues, who do not accept him socially. As shown, Oscar repeatedly refers to himself as an '*indio*,' '*spic*,' and '*nigger*' as well. The Baptist church does not fulfill its assigned purpose or serve Oscar's concrete needs, and hence he later de-converts (Acosta 1972, 133). The ease with which Oscar converts and de-converts from the Baptist church is indicative of his relationship to identity categories more broadly. For Oscar, religion, as with his ethnic performances, is about tangible results; it is a tactic for reaching some desired end. If the tactic fails, he quickly abandons it for a new attempt.

At the end of the novel, Oscar begins his transition into a self-described "man who is chosen to speak for his people," and so his religion changes again. In an imagined speech to the Chicana/o masses, he states, "They [i.e., 'gringos' and the Spanish] stole our land and made us half-slaves. They destroyed our gods and made us bow down to a dead man who's been strung up for 2000 years...." In a political maneuver, Oscar positions himself as a Chicano leader against the religion of the U.S.-American, Spanish, Mexican, and Mexican American status quo. Chicana/os are different, he is saying, because they are not Anglos or even Catholic (in reference to Spain as a conquering power), but rather have indigenous 'blood' and hence spirituality. Even in this imagined rallying speech, which he is thinking to himself as he plans his move to California to join what would later be called the Chicano Movement, Oscar's gambit is miscalculated, as he himself realizes: "what's this, you don't want me to attack our religion? Well, all right..." (Acosta 1972, 198). He doesn't yet know much about Chicana/os, as he is here admitting, and quickly repositions himself by referring to "our religion," which keeps the cohesive group definition intact. In other words, Oscar offhandedly reverses an extremely important political position—to reject or include Christianity in the platform—which exposes it as opportunism.

Oscar's speech, the rejection of Christianity, the imagined public outcry against that proposition, and his quick reversal illustrate that, for Oscar, it is not religion itself that matters but rather the opportunistic ends to which religion may be employed. In this case, Oscar's goal is to lead masses of Chicana/os in a political awakening, which would rely upon the Chicana/o community remaining cohesively intact. This can be understood as a satirical commentary on the superficially homogenous Chicano Movement.

As in the quote above, Oscar elsewhere begins to refer to the "gods" leading his process of transformation. His realization that he can lead the Chicana/os, he says, was preordained by the "gods." "The bomb explodes in my head. Flashes of lightning. Stars in my eyes. I see it all before me. That is exactly what the gods have in store for me" (Acosta 1972, 196). The novel's pilgrimage, Oscar realizes, has an overarching meaning in terms of spiritual preparation guided by the "gods": "Perhaps that is why the gods have sent me into Riverbank, Panama, San Francisco, Alpine and Juarez" (198).

The “gods” Oscar is referring to are Aztec, which is Oscar’s way of deconstructing the Protestant/Catholic binary in the United States. Moreover, Oscar’s framing of his experiences through a form of superficial indigenous spirituality is an example of the Aztec palimpsest (Alarcón 1997; see chapter 4), which is the residue of Aztec symbols residing in the contemporary moment. In relation to our purposes here, these Aztec symbols are still partially visible after the superimposition of new religious and cultural expression onto them over time. Oscar calls on “the dead ghosts of [his] Aztec ancestors” (Acosta 1972, 158) up in the mountains to anchor himself in an older tradition with powerful symbols despite his spirituality having little to do with historical Aztec or other indigenous spiritualities (see Alarcón 1997, 3–35). As Madeline Walker (2009) has noted, Oscar’s “satirical employment of Aztec religion” points to it being a “cultural habit rather than belief” (160), which she links to Hames-García’s (2000) argument that Oscar’s satire undermines the idea of an “authentic” ethnicity (470). Oscar’s performances of ethnic personae, but also religious/spiritual/cultural identities, undercut the stability of their perceived “authentic” positionalities. The stand-in references to the Aztecs are, as Madeline points out, a type of jargon associated with the Chicano Movement.

One form of ‘spirituality’ that Oscar does enthusiastically take part in are drugs, which lead to transfigurations that, at times, appear to make him god-like. Becoming god-like is a trope in the Aztec religion. Aztec religious leaders transformed humans into gods and then ritualistically sacrificed the ‘god’ and ate him or her in order to become god-like themselves (Carrasco 1995, 434; Paz 1985, 56). In both the Aztec ritual and Oscar’s drug consumption, it is the indigestion of substances that leads to transformation. Budweiser beer is a constant fixture as Oscar drives up and down the United States, but so are peyote, mescaline, cocaine, LSD, Valium, Stelazine, and marijuana. Through the ingestion of these substances Acosta transcends the material world in a form of ‘spirituality.’¹⁴

Oscar’s pilgrimage is framed as a crisis fueled by substances—from bad trips to inebriated car crashes to shameful public fiascos while intoxicated. Drugs help push Oscar to the brink of existential crisis, which, in turn, forces him to re-imagine his positionality and hence ‘solve’ his identity crisis. It is from a sense of despair that Oscar creatively negotiates the identity position of the Brown Buffalo for himself by taking what is available and re-inventing it into something new. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa (1999) writes:

¹⁴ The intersection of drugs and spirituality was part of the zeitgeist in the period Acosta’s novel was written and published (1972). Acosta may have been aware of Carlos Castaneda’s (1968) popular *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, in which peyote, a psychedelic, plays an important role.

What I want is an accounting with all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (44)

Anzaldúa's three cultures—"white, Mexican, Indian"—coincide with the three basic identity categories Oscar has contended with in the novel, which are linked to Catholicism, Protestantism, and an indigenous form of spirituality. Anzaldúa's conclusion that "if going home is denied [her]," she will "stand to claim [her] space" echoes the defiant tone in Oscar's epiphany and overtly constructed Brown Buffalo positionality. The creative act is emphasized in Anzaldúa's quote, the conscious will to enter in-between the existing identification categories to create a new identity based on the borderlands experience. The active verbs to "chisel," "fashion," "claim," and "make" point to creation. It, too, is borne out of despair ("bleeding," "entrails," denied "going home").

That Anzaldúa (1999) might "fashion [her] own gods out of [her] entrails" (44) is instructive: spirituality primarily springs from, and is in service to, Anzaldúa's needs. The audacity of creating gods is another aspect that joins Anzaldúa and Acosta together. For both of them, creation—be it gods or one's own identity in-between shared frames of reference—is where resistance to the effects of racist and otherwise harmful categories takes place. Oscar abandoned the Baptist church because its members did not accept him socially and, on the symbolic as well as literal plane, he goes to the mountains to create his own identity (and takes loads of drugs along the way).

3.5.2 NEPANTLA EPIPHANY AS TELOS

At the end of the novel, Oscar states the lines already quoted in chapter 1: "My single mistake has been to seek an identity with any one person or nation or with any part of history. [...] [W]hat is clear to me after this sojourn is that I am neither a Mexican nor an American. I am neither a Catholic nor a Protestant. I am a Chicano by ancestry and a Brown Buffalo by choice" (Acosta 1972, 199). Oscar's transformation is positive, profound, and abrupt, or, in other words, an epiphany (McDonald 2008, 90), much like Stephen Daedalus's in James Joyce's (1963, 211) early work *Stephen Hero* and in other modernist fiction (Beja 1971). This epiphany is *how* Oscar comes to view his in-betweenness (Maffie 2014), which is the result of a learning process, framed as a pilgrimage, that is the subject of this *Bildungsroman*.

As the quote illustrates, part of Oscar's identity is not chosen: as a Chicano, Oscar has inherited some aspects of his identity, especially in relation to society. However, the construction of his Brown Buffalo identity is framed as

a choice that transcends “any *one* person or nation” (emphasis added) or period of history. Here, Oscar has grasped a central tenet in the concept of *nepantla*: it is multiple vision, as opposed to vision via any *one* identity category, which allows for a holistic understanding of the fluctuation and multiplicity of existing in-between shared frames of reference for the subject. Oscar has been Catholic and Protestant and Mexican and U.S.-American and, in part, still ‘is’ through the influence of lived experience. He can see from various vantage points at once, which is multiple vision. He is “never entirely inside, always somewhat outside, every group or belief system” and does not “belong to any single location,” which is how Keating (2015, xxxv) describes a *nepantlera*. He chooses to be a Brown Buffalo, which is an identity position of his own invention created out of the multiplicity of his influences and can be understood as a form of in-betweenness.

In the words of Aldama (2000), Oscar, in the quote above, “views different times and spaces (pre-colonial, colonial, postcolonial, and post-postcolonial) in ultra-sharp focus and along one stretched-out, simultaneous forward- and backward-thrusting hybridized time/space zone” (205). Aldama indicates that Oscar’s vision surpasses closed units of meaning—be they historical periods or perspectives (e.g., the colonizer or the colonized)—and, as a result, traverses a continuum of possibilities. The vision described by Aldama is anything but stable: it is “forward- and backward thrusting” and hence in flux through space and in time. At this moment in the narration, Oscar invents a new way of envisioning his identity that goes beyond categories in what Aldama calls *magicorealism*,¹⁵ which is “intended not just to open readers’ eyes to the multiply-layered reality their subjects inhabit, but also to question the terms used to categorize experiences of reality” (199). This is in line with the multiple vision of *nepantla* and the possible disjunction between experience and categories, which further illustrates the parallels between Acosta and Anzaldúa. Rather than amalgamating his positionalities into a hyphenated hybrid,¹⁶ Oscar invents a new position that is outside the schema underpinning the social imaginary in the United States.

In Acosta’s novel, the “forward- and backward-thrusting” (Aldama 2000, 205) motion is illustrated in Oscar’s process of ‘trying on’ many different

¹⁵ According to Aldama (2000), in a lively turn of phrase that is further substantiated in his paper, “*Magicorealism* is in contrast to ‘magical realism,’ a term that has been swallowed by the consuming, homogenizing beast of capitalism and spit back out as a sign empty of meaning. Magicorealism identifies a new contemporary pan-subaltern textual mode that does away with any linguistic lean toward binary oppositionality” (199).

¹⁶ ‘Hybrid hyphenations’ are the terms used to designate positions of combined identity categories, such as Mexican-American, though hyphenations of this kind have fallen out of practice in the English language. See Bhabha 1994, 219.

identities throughout the novel in what can be termed a more permanent process of in-betweenness. For Oscar, the ongoing performance of different persona is quotidian, as will be further illustrated in the next subsection. However, it is only at the end of the novel that he sees, through multiple vision, *how* he is located in the in-between. The epiphany is a temporally marked endpoint to his struggle to define his identity and hence a telos. From the novels in this dissertation, Oscar's realization that he is "neither a Mexican nor an American" but rather a "Brown Buffalo by choice" (Acosta 1972, 199) is the clearest example of temporally marked, positive nepantla.

3.5.3 INEVITABLE FAILURE AND NEPANTLA IN THE GAP

For Anzaldúa, failure is an integral part of the nepantla process. A subject must perform his or her new identity out in the world and that identity is often rejected. The subject must then re-enter a temporary nepantla to formulate a new identity, which is an ongoing process that Koegeler-Abdi (2013, 81) links to Butler's *performativity*. Here I will shortly illustrate that, despite Oscar's temporally marked epiphany of positive nepantla, his process of in-betweenness continues past the end of the narrative itself. Fluctuation and change are the norms of the cosmos and in-betweenness is quotidian. Despite Oscar choosing his Brown Buffalo identity, one can discern the seeds of his future failure.

At the end of the novel, Oscar presents himself as having the potential to be a great leader of the Chicana/o people in the tradition of Moses, Mao, and Martin Luther King Jr. All three figures are larger-than-life 'religious' leaders of a people:

I have no desire to be a politician. I don't want to lead anyone. I have no practical ego. I am not ambitious. I merely want to do what is right. Once in every century there comes a man who is chosen to speak for his people. Moses, Mao and Martin are examples. Who's to say that I am not such a man? [...] Who will deny that I am unique? (Acosta 1972, 198)

This position is marked as ironic and satirical in a number of ways. First, Oscar states that he has no desire to lead anyone yet insinuates that he may be a once-in-a-century leader, a unique man "chosen" to "speak for his people." Ironically, the agent doing the 'choosing' here is Oscar himself as he plans to impose his leadership on Chicana/os. Moreover, it is Oscar's uniqueness that may qualify him for greatness, which echoes his complaint about his psychiatrist Dr. Serbin from the beginning of the novel: "He refuses to permit me the satisfaction of uniqueness" (36). Oscar bases his greatness on his singular distinction from others, which is the basis for his epiphany: "My single mistake has been to seek an identity with any one person or nation or with any part of history" (199). He cannot, he is saying, fit into any category.

Meanwhile, these lofty plans are humorous since Oscar had neither known nor cared about Chicana/o politics some 20 pages prior when King mentioned the protests organized by Rodolfo ‘Corky’ Gonzales. Oscar responds to King by asking, “What are the Mexicans protesting?” while “not really [being] concerned with the answer” (Acosta 1972, 179). The Chicana/o community is, he thinks at this later point, an available context by which he can appease his appetite for fame and find a sense of meaning, which he links to his desire to write: the Chicano Movement will also make good copy (196).

Only after the novel ends does Oscar go to Los Angeles to meet his first politicized Chicana/o or learn more than rumors about them (he hears some vague information from his brother on the phone [196]). Oscar the narrator is communicating from a later temporal point about future events involving the Chicano Movement, which would be covered in Acosta’s second novel, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1989 [1973]). Oscar’s messianic projection into the future grows from the offhand comments from his brother over the phone.

To further undermine Oscar’s position as stable and serious, he states that he writes letters to Robert F. Kennedy, Edward Roybal (“[t]he only elected official of buffalo ancestry in California”), and President Johnson, to whom he suggests that he “can deliver the Chicano vote in East L.A. where some one million brown buffalos reside.” He asks each of them for “immediate cash. *Seed money*. If they’re interested, they’ll pay. If not ... God’s mercy on their souls” (Acosta 1972, 197, emphasis in original). Writing the President of the United States for money when broke is not only humorous, but it also illustrates Oscar’s pomposity, arrogance, and ignorance, which in turn indicate that the narrator Oscar is winking hard as he delivers the satire. “When I have the one million Brown Buffalos on my side I will present the demands for a new nation to both the U.S. Government and the United Nations” (198). As with the references to Moses, Mao, and Martin, Oscar the character clearly has a delusional understanding of how politics and leadership work and his future is shadowed with inevitable failure.

In the same debate with the imaginary crowd Oscar adapts the name Brown Buffalo as the title for the movement he’ll lead in the future:

No, it’s not an Indian name, for Christ sake...don’t you get it? The buffalo, see? Yes, the animal that everyone slaughtered. Sure, both the cowboys and the Indians are out to get him...and, because we do have roots in our Mexican past, our Aztec ancestry, that’s where we get the *brown* from.... (Acosta 1972, 198, emphasis in original)

‘Brown Buffalo’ here is also a position of in-betweenness (“Sure, both the cowboys and the Indians are out to get him...”), but it is unclear what distinguishes it from the term ‘Chicana/o.’ However, in the epiphany at the end of the novel, the terms ‘Chicana/o’ and the Brown Buffalo are contrasted: “I am a Chicano by ancestry and a Brown Buffalo by choice.” In the epiphany

he also states that he is unlike “any one person or nation” (199), which further distances him from the term ‘Chicana/o,’ which, at the time, pointed to a nationalistic project. One possibility, however, is that the Brown Buffalo is here a synonym for Chicana/os in the Chicano Movement with one crucial distinction: Oscar will be their leader, the “Chicano warrior-hero” (Hames-García 2000, 473). Rather than Oscar joining the Chicana/os, the Chicana/os can join *him*. More to the point, Oscar is adapting the term ‘Brown Buffalo’ to his audience, just as he adapted religion to keep a coherent group identity intact.

To bring our analysis full circle, it is notable that, in terms of literary devices, the most explicitly verbalized nepantla positioning in this corpus in fact rests on a narrative gap. Through negativity, we’re told what the Brown Buffalo is *not*, which does begin to draw an outline around an alternative form of identity that is explicitly not tied to society’s normative categories. It is shown to not mean ‘Chicana/o’ exactly. So, what is a ‘Brown Buffalo’?

It is impossible to conclusively define the term ‘Brown Buffalo,’ and the ambiguity of the term invites interpretation. Because clear meaning is obscured, the term acts as a narrative gap. I understand Acosta to mean something along the lines of “the Brown Buffalo equals Oscar himself in all his contradictory messiness contra limiting categories.” Oscar has shown that Brown Buffalo points to the specificity of instances, influences, and context as they play out through time in a process that is highly adaptable. It’s a metaphor that stands in for something singular, complex, and changing. As nepantla, it can be beyond language itself. This is a particularly fine example of the insight that runs through these chapters: since nepantla can be difficult (or impossible) to talk about, it is often located in a narrative gap in texts yet nevertheless manages to be communicated.

In the pomposity of Oscar’s political ambitions, we can discern a kernel of wisdom: it is his newly established identity of multiplicity and in-betweenness that will allow him to infiltrate the system “undercover for the good guys,” hence illustrating the performativity of identity positionalities. “Hell, they’d never expose me. I am too tricky. I can make any kind of face you ask. After all, I’ve been a football man, a drunk, a preacher, a mathematician, a musician, a lawyer...and a brown buffalo” (Acosta 1972, 197), he says. Oscar illustrates that identities can be chosen, and it is his overtly chosen positionality in-between normative frames of reference that makes *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* an artifact of nepantla-like in-betweenness.

3.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through the satirical mode, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* calls into question the stability of normative frames of reference. The gap between Oscar’s ironic utterances and readers’ interpretations of those utterances is a form of ambivalent in-betweenness. Taken as satire, the narrative illustrates

the mechanisms by which degrading stereotypes operated within the shared social imaginary of the United States in the mid-20th century.

Acosta's novel can be understood through three interlocking tiers. First, he mocks the usage of ethnic and other categories in determining individuals' realities through the overdetermined use of stereotypes; then, by having Oscar perform multiple ethnic and other personae, he undermines the categories' workability, stability, and usage. Lastly, he presents an alternative: a nepantla-like 'space' in which Oscar invents his own subjectivity from the multitude of influences while not pledging allegiance to any one of them.

Both in terms of the characters he describes and descriptions of himself through a variety of different performances, Oscar illustrates the paucity entailed in thinking through simplistic categories. Oscar embodies the realities of these positionalities momentarily—be it as society's Black scapegoat or as a 'poor Mexican.' By exposing stereotypes as unworkable, Oscar forces readers to imagine beyond such thought patterns and rethink how categories are used in the United States. In-betweenness is created through the shifting, performative aspects of Oscar's characterization as he embodies many exaggerated, stereotypical positionalities—from the ethnic to the religious.

As a theoretical framework, the concept of nepantla is fruitful for better understanding Oscar's conclusion that he doesn't belong to any *one* category but can be influenced by multiple categories in his ongoing, fluctuating identity positionalities. Oscar's failure to assimilate in the U.S. context and his U.S.-Americanness in the Mexican context bring about an epiphany of in-betweenness, which is the novel's telos. Nepantla is not only a destination, however, for it is also a process, and Oscar's changes and failures, which have made up the narrative itself, will continue after the story concludes. What is important, and what Oscar so doggedly illustrates, is that for some individuals, the ambiguous, changing, processual space in-between categories is the closest and truest delineation of identity available in a society that relies on simplified categories.

In the next chapter, I will analyze nepantla in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (2009), which is also premised upon a partial belonging to multiple categories without pledging allegiance to any one. The novel also illustrates a positive, empowering nepantla but, in this case, a nepantla position is not verbally stated. It can, however, be discerned in a narrative gap. I also expand the use of nepantla by analyzing textual manifestations of quotidian in-betweenness.

4 WRITING NEPANTLA IN SANDRA CISNEROS'S THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET

Life is a house, with windows and doors, built of grief and suffering that every person carries from birth. For some, the windows and doors are open and, for others, closed. The winds of life's suffering sometimes blow over everyone, and there are no windows and doors that can shut so as to keep the suffering and grief out.¹⁷

Kiba Lumberg, *Memesa* trilogy

¹⁷ *Elämä on surust ja kärsimyksestä rakennettu talo, jos on ikkunoit ja ovii, ja jota jokaine ihmene kantaa syntymästä asti. Osal ikkunat ja ovet ovat kiinni ja osal auki. Elämän kärsimyksen tuulet pyyhältävät aika ajoj jokaise ihmise yli, eikä nii suljettuna ovii ja ikkunoit oo, mistä ei kärsimys ja suru sisää astu* (Lumberg 2011, 234, my translation).

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (2009 [1984]) is narrated by Esperanza, who begins the novel as a child and ends on the cusp of adulthood. This transitory period of life sets the stage for a number of ways by which in-betweenness is created and represented, which will be analyzed through the concept of nepantla to better understand how fluctuating youth can develop into an accepted positionality of in-betweenness. Specifically, Esperanza's progression is from the family home out into the community and, finally, into the broader world to become a writer. Rather than leaving the community behind to follow her artistic ambitions as she had planned and hoped, she realizes that, though problematic, the Mango Street community will always be part of her. Initiated by an encounter with three old sisters, Esperanza transitions from individualistic desires to an understanding that, through writing, she can challenge the ills of the community with an empowered call for change. I argue that Esperanza rejects those aspects of her community that harm her—most notably the role of women, which is the novel's central theme—and returns for the women who cannot leave by writing their stories, which take the form of the novel *The House on Mango Street*.

In line with the goals of this dissertation, reading *The House on Mango Street* through the concept of nepantla allows us to perceive subjects, the tacit norms of cultural spheres, languages, immigrant experiences, time-place, and more in their capacity to represent in-betweenness. The novel illustrates Esperanza's journey to a positionality of "multiple seeing" (Anzaldúa 2015), which allows her to holistically integrate the contradictory aspects of her self. Esperanza learns to perceive her life "from two different angles," which creates "a split in awareness" that leads to her ability to balance "contemporary society's worldview with the nonordinary worldview, and to move between them to a space that simultaneously exists and does not exist" (Anzaldúa 2015, 28). Esperanza partially accepts both normatively coded U.S.-American (e.g., individualistic, independent, mobile, free, transcendent, English-speaking, geographically located in relation to the broader nation) and Chicana (e.g., community-orientated, Spanish-speaking, geographically localized, the importance of heritage) (see Bolaki 2011, 21) cultures without pledging allegiance to either of them. To do so, she must re-write aspects of her inherited stories.

The novel's critique of women's roles, which are shown to be debilitating in their static confinement within the walls of houses due to men, the forces of tradition, and material impediments, contradicts the duality of the 'ethnic' collectivity on the one hand and individualist U.S.-American culture on the other that informs some scholarship (Karafilis 1998; Martin 2008). Rather, Cisneros shows that a critique of some aspects of the Mexican American community does not necessarily lead to a wholesale abandonment of the culture. On the other hand, remaining engaged with the community need not lead to a rejection of individual desires for emancipation, creativity, and an

engagement with the multiplicity of other aspects of one's subjectivity, such as, for example, broader U.S.-American society. Following literary scholar Stella Bolaki (2011), in her book *Unsettling the Bildungsroman: Reading Contemporary Ethnic American Women's Fiction*, my analysis shows how Cisneros challenges the tension that traditionally informs so-called 'ethnic' literature, which is that 'ethnic' writers should speak on behalf of their community. Rather, Cisneros "exposes the injustice" of having to choose between the sacrifice of personal freedom or the curtailment of certain allegiances in order to be of service to one's community. According to Bolaki, "[c]hallenging the fact that the diverse loyalties of ethnic subjects are mutually exclusive is a political act that serves to multiply the sites of identification and allows people who grow up in the interstices of varying territories to claim a more inclusive and potentially empowering subject position" (131; see also Grobman 2000; Quintana 1996; Sanborn 2001; Yarbrow-Bejarano 1996). As Bolaki indicates, going against the normative assumption that one must choose sides is political and, I would add, a nepantla strategy. Esperanza's in-betweenness can be understood as an act and choice by which she changes the fabric of her community by transforming her own story's trajectory, which is closely related to her role as a writer and the novel *The House on Mango Street* itself.

As with Kiba Lumberg's *Memesa* trilogy and John Rechy's *City of Night*, Esperanza's ultimate in-between positionality is locatable in a narrative gap. It is implied by the text and formal considerations and must be interpreted and filled in by readers. Since a nepantla position is not verbally acknowledged, yet it is still shown to be positive, I position Cisneros's novel further down the nepantla continuum from Acosta's explicitly positive acceptance of in-betweenness. The fact that a nepantla positionality is not explicitly being stated does not mean that it does not exist, however. It can be found in a gap surrounded by textual evidence.

According to literary scholars Marco Caracciolo and Cécile Guédon (2017), "[g]aps—in the sense of both omitted information and syntactic or typographical discontinuities—can [...] be utilized as psychological ciphers affording insight into the cognitive make-up of a certain character" (50). Esperanza's development after the novel ends and before it begins again is the central narrative gap in the novel, which is signaled by the novel's first sentences being repeated at the end. The gap allows readers to infer the character Esperanza's psychology in the text through a projection of post-narrative events back onto the text. By paying close attention to grammatical structures, I show that Esperanza as character narrator (Phelan 2005) is doubly voiced, which holds the key to interpreting what has occurred during the circular narrative's missing arc. Though the character Esperanza is experiencing the storyworld as the events occur, Esperanza the narrator, or what I call the post-storyworld narrator, speaks from a later temporal point to communicate to readers what Esperanza learns after the novel ends and before it begins again on its circular trajectory. I argue that Esperanza is coming back

for the women on Mango Street whose stories populate the novel that one has just read and, by circling back, will read again with a new meaning.

The chapter that follows is organized into analyses of two basic types of nepantla. First, I analyze a revelatory kind of in-betweenness that is empowering, marked by agency, and is informed by temporality (with a clear before and after). The term 'revelatory' differs from my use of the term 'epiphany' in chapter 3 because, for Esperanza, her acknowledgement of a nepantla-like positionality of in-betweenness is gradual; it is a revelation that is slowly revealed through her education, which is based on the observation of women in her community and the listening to and re-telling of their stories. In Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, by contrast, Oscar's transformation is positive, profound, and abrupt, or an epiphany (McDonald 2008, 90). I will then analyze how a more quotidian form of in-betweenness is represented and created in Cisneros's novel, which includes in-betweenness as manifested in language and immigrant experiences. Finally, I look at how houses are linked to the experiences of women on Mango Street, which supports my argument that a reading in the mode of in-betweenness honors Esperanza's call for change in light of the misfortunes faced by women in the Mexican American community while allowing her the freedom, independence, and isolation she so desires. First, however, I consider *The House on Mango Street* as a *Bildungsroman*, which informs both Esperanza's youthful life stage and the analysis of the novel's circularity that follows.

4.1.1 THE *BILDUNGSROMAN* AND YOUTH

Stella Bolaki (2011) argues persuasively that the classical genre of *Bildungsroman*, as "the prototypical genre of individual development in society" (Felksi 1989, 135, qtd. in Bolaki 2011, 11), has been adapted in the subgenre of ethnic U.S.-American *Bildungsromane* by women to specific ends. The protagonists Bolaki analyzes dramatize "constant 'border crossings' and negotiation of belonging in distinct territories" (Bolaki 2011, 94, in reference to Anzaldúa 1999, 99). In this way, such texts problematize the narratives of both individualism and community (117). Traditional notions of *Bildung*, taken here as the aesthetic representation of *becoming* (see chapter 2), are redefined by "turning attention away from organic integration in order to express the acute conflicts and complexity that characterises life 'on the border'" (Bolaki 2005, 1). These elements add to the unsettled nature of the texts' closure, which remains in mid-process, as it were, not only in Cisneros's novel, but in the subgenre of ethnic U.S.-American *Bildungsromane* by women more generally (Bolaki 2011, 12).

The genre of *Bildungsroman* raises expectations of transformation based, in part, on the youthful life stages of its protagonists and is premised on a "fluid spatial becoming rather than [a] fixity of being," which aligns precisely with the "malleability of childhood and adolescence as an unfixed site of dynamic

potential” (McCulloch 2019, 178). Esperanza’s unfixed, dynamic potential is based on her courage to break out of her inherited role as a female and her ability to learn by observing other women and listening to their stories. The novel illustrates the malleable state of youth in the process of development towards adulthood.

According to Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (1983), editors of the influential *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, the female *Bildungsroman* has gradually been able to ‘write beyond’ a series of limiting endings. An illustration of this is how Esperanza’s child-like perspective gradually transforms to taking in the perspectives of other women in the community to give voice to their experiences. Hence the prototypical genre of individual development¹⁸ turns its gaze outward to the women in the community, which, in turn, affects and shapes Esperanza’s personal development.

The “modified *Bildungsroman*” (Karafilis 1998; McCracken 1989) subverts the classical genre to allow for different kinds of becoming, settings, developments, and futures for a multiplicity of possible protagonists. Maria Karafilis (1998) writes that

it is precisely Cisneros’s emphasis on development in terms of ‘space’ instead of development in terms of chronological, linear time that marks her most radical revision of the classical *Bildungsroman* and makes the modified genre so fitting to narrate the development of ethnic or post-colonial subjectivities—people who are often displaced, occupying a site between cultures, and who must strive to find a cultural space in which they can develop. (71)

Esperanza’s development is from her family home, which is dilapidated and crowded, to a declaration of independence in acquiring a house of her own that will allow for personal freedom and creativity, which goes against the norms of Mango Street, the Mexican American community in which she grows up—all spatial metaphors.

According to Karafilis (1998), linear time is substituted for the transformational potential of space. Bolaki (2011) argues that each vignette can be read as a stand-alone short story, which can “turn the text into a matrix of constant crossings” (103–104) as it is pieced together by readers. In my reading, it is Esperanza’s shift in subject matter that most clearly indicates her coming-of-age process, and this follows a linear path. The vignettes first present images and situations that would be interesting to tell from the point of view of a child narrator: hair, which is intimate and different for each

¹⁸ I do not wish to imply that all canonized *Bildungsromane* exclusively stress individual development without turning their gaze outward. Charles Dickens’s (2000) *David Copperfield* is an example of an earlier *Bildungsroman* by a male author that also incorporates the community.

member of Esperanza's family in "Hairs"; Esperanza's similarity to her sister Nenny in "Laughter"; names for different types of snow, clouds, and people in "And Some More"; and superficially innocent racial tension through the interaction with Cathy, who is a white, haughty neighbor girl moving away next Tuesday due to demographic changes in the neighborhood in "Cathy Queen of Cats." As the narration progresses, however, the topics become more adult-like: sex and sexual harassment, rape, the role of women in marriage, domestic violence, and so on, and are not limited to any one vignette. The vignettes are short, and the book is slim, which also heightens the density of time while highlighting the elliptical nature of the textual gaps between vignettes.

Many scholars discuss Cisneros's choice of formal elements and style, from the hybrid genre crossing of poetry and prose (Martin 2008; Cutler 2015, 130–52) to her choice of writing a text that could be opened "at any random point without having any knowledge of what came before or after" (Cisneros 1987, 78; see Doyle 1994, 12; Wissman 2007, 17). The formal elements of the short-story cycle allow for an experience of indeterminacy and fragmentation that stands in contrast to the totalizing impression of, for example, the realist novel (Davis 2001, 215) or the classical *Bildungsroman*. Esperanza's progression must be pieced together from many different vantage points, topics, and inferences. This works to destabilize the text and makes it harder to conclusively declare any one reading as correct, impossible as that may be even with the simplest and most coherent of texts. However, I will argue that, formally, the novel's linear development of subject matter and overall circularity are the most important aspects for interpretation. I will also show that in-betweenness is a textually supported means by which to make sense of the text's gaps that should be considered by literary scholars when analyzing *The House on Mango Street*. The central gap in Cisneros's novel is related simultaneously to belonging and not belonging, which is my basis for positioning it at the junction between parts 1 and 2 of this dissertation. Esperanza's 'belonging' to in-betweenness in a positive way wins out, which will later be compared to Memesa's melancholic and detrimental 'not belonging' and in-betweenness in chapter 5.

4.2 BELONGING, NOT BELONGING, AND RETURNING THROUGH WRITING

Esperanza's education into in-betweenness evolves gradually through the novel, especially the second half. During this build-up, Esperanza develops an aspiration to become a writer, and the observational perspective that writing demands motivates her shift from child-like themes to recording women's stories of suffering under the patriarchy. Esperanza's eventual transformation to a realization of nepantla, which occurs after the novel ends, is put into motion when she encounters three old sisters, which I link to the novel's

circularity. In this section, I lay out my argument that Cisneros's novel is, in fact, Esperanza's manner of returning for the women on Mango Street who cannot leave as easily as she can by telling the women's stories, which acts as a politicized call for change in the Mexican American community.

4.2.1 THE SUPERNATURAL GAP

At the viewing of the body of her friends' baby sister, who has died, Esperanza meets three old sisters, who are presented as mystical in the vein of Mexican *curanderas*.¹⁹ Occurring at the end of the novel, this episode is the only instance of what could be termed the supernatural, which goes beyond the mode of childish fancy and poetic realism up to this point. "They must've known, the sisters. They had the power and could sense what was what," Esperanza says of the sisters. What it is that the sisters "must've known" and what their "power" is remains unspecified. The sisters call Esperanza over, give her some gum, and talk with her. "Tomorrow it will rain," one of them says. "How do you know?" Esperanza asks. "We know, we know," they answer simply. They look at Esperanza's hands, which could be palm-reading, and say, "She's special" and, "Yes, she'll go very far" (Cisneros 2009, 104). The sisters' knowledge is presented as collective ("We know"), which may indicate that they have access to each other's thoughts but, in any case, indicates collectivity over individualism. Their 'knowing' is linked not only to nature (rain) but to Esperanza's future: she will go far. 'Going' implies away from Mango Street, which has been one of Esperanza's wishes since the very beginning of the novel, or it could, metaphorically, mean in terms of success. The sisters have just met Esperanza, however, and cannot "know." This creates a gap that heightens the reader's attention due to the incongruity by which it stands out against the realist norms.

Besides coming at the end of a coming-of-age story, which signals that some form of denouement might occur, the exchange also elevates readerly expectations through the setting and descriptive words used. Esperanza "had never seen the dead before, not for real, not in somebody's living room for people to kiss and bless them" (Cisneros 2009, 104). Death is a momentous occasion, more so in the case of a baby closer in age to Esperanza than her aunt, who died earlier in the narrative and whose body she did not see. Moreover, the sisters arrived "with the wind that blows in August, thin as a spider web and barely noticed. Three who did not seem to be related to anything but the moon" (103). The sisters are "barely noticed" except by Esperanza, who pays close attention, which illustrates that her gaze has shifted from her immediate and childish preoccupations to observing others closely—

¹⁹ *Curanderas* are women who practice traditional medicine and healing, often with the aid of herbs and other treatments with a spiritual aspect.

perhaps with writing their stories in mind. The sisters' language is kind and bantering, but they also entice Esperanza through their way of being, which seems not to be related to the earth but rather the moon.

By pointing out that the sisters were "[t]hree who did not seem to be related to anything but the moon," (Cisneros 2009, 103), Esperanza is linking them to some system of thought that would be non-standard for a U.S.-American girl. The text does not link the moon to the Aztecs or other indigenous cultures, but it is possible that this poetic use of metaphor signals how Esperanza's exchange with the three sisters should be interpreted. In the Aztec system, the moon is the goddess Coatlicue's daughter Coyolxauqui's severed head, thrown there by her brother Huitzilopochtli, in a founding myth of Aztec military rule (Karafilis 1998, 69; Pizarz-Ramírez 2007, 169; see also Anzaldúa 2015, 124). The moon is not only feminine (also in Spanish, *la luna*), but the result (sign) of male domination over women and Aztec power over other peoples. It is possible that Esperanza is alluding to the sisters and the moon as symbols of femininity, which is to be understood in opposition to the masculine-dominated earth. As a sign of femininity, the linkage of the moon to the three sisters could be understood as Esperanza re-writing the Aztec myth, or any other earthly, male-dominated narrative that underpins the patriarchy, as a new symbol of gender emancipation.

The sisters ask Esperanza to make a wish. "Anything?" Esperanza asks. "Well, why not?" (Cisneros 2009, 104) one of them answers. Esperanza closes her eyes and makes a wish. "Well, that's all there is to it. It'll come true," a sister says. One of them calls Esperanza aside: "She held onto my face with her blue-veined hands and looked and looked at me. A long silence. When you leave you must remember always to come back," she finally says, and adds: "When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are." Esperanza "didn't know what to say. It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish." The sister emphasizes her point again while becoming more specific: "You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember?" (105). Regardless of what is really happening here, and anything from supernatural mind-reading to skillful observation and conjecture is possible, Esperanza *feels* like the three sisters have accessed her inner secrets. Since the first pages of the novel, she has wished to leave Mango Street, a desire that has now been confirmed and validated by the sisters with their assurance that "that's all there is to it. It'll come true" (see also Sanborn 2001, 1344). In turn, this invites Esperanza to more confidently turn her desires into outer action, and, in this sense, the sisters make the wish come true. The sisters indeed "know." It is unclear where Esperanza will go and what it means to come back but, through interpretation, readers can fill in these gaps based on the novel's last and first vignettes.

4.2.2 WRITING AS RETURN

The novel finishes—in the sense that one has reached the end of the physical book—with the first sentences of the novel being repeated in the last pages. This circular framework can lead to an interpretation of revelatory in-betweenness and *nepantla* multiple seeing, which is a holistic vision from various vantage points at once. According to Rita Felski (1986), the understanding of time as circular is a reoccurring motif in the novel of awakening and allows an escape from history (142). The end of *The House on Mango Street* gives evidence that Esperanza is undergoing a transformative revelation, which is one result of her process of *becoming*.

To understand the significance of the novel's first sentences being repeated on the last pages, it is important to keep in mind the novel's central theme, which is how women suffer under the patriarchy. Women in the novel cannot simply leave their domestic situation: they are constrained by the walls of homes, the power of men or a specific man, the culture's tradition, and material impediments. These are almost certainly the women the old sister is referring to when she says that Esperanza must return for "the ones who cannot leave as easily as you." Esperanza has also come to know the power of storytelling embodied in writing, which is a motif linked to creative power that is only possible outside the constraints of the domestic situation most women on Mango Street live under. Writing and creating are strongly linked to freedom, which in turn is linked to leaving Mango Street. I will elaborate on these topics as the chapter progresses.

When the novel 'ends,' it has also returned, in the voice of Esperanza the narrator, to the beginning of the story that Esperanza the character is about to tell (see also Karafilis 1998, 71; Bolaki 2011, 121). This dual voice is the basis of my interpretation that the novel's circularity points to the novel's politicized return for the women on Mango Street in the form of telling their stories, as is most evident in the final vignette, which is entitled "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes." "I like to tell stories," it begins, and the first three paragraphs are about Esperanza's storytelling. Based on its centrality to the end of the novel, we can infer that storytelling will have something to do with filling in the gap of the circular narrative, or what occurs after the novel ends and before it begins again. In the third paragraph, Esperanza states, "I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong" (Cisneros 2009, 109). Esperanza the narrator is going to (future tense) tell a story about Esperanza the character, which is incongruent because the phrase occurs at the end of the novel. The phrase "a girl who didn't want to belong" is again in the past tense and implies that the girl may now want to belong, and this transformation may be the subject of the story that Esperanza is going to tell.

Esperanza then repeats the first two sentences of the novel. For the sake of clarity, I here quote the two sections of the novel that are repeated, with some continuation, and invite readers to refer to them as the analysis progresses.

First is the version from the opening page and the second quote is its variation from the last pages of the novel.

Version 1	Version 2
<p>We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot. Each time it seemed there'd be one more of us. By the time we got to Mango Street we were six—Mama, Papa, Carlos, Kiki, my sister Nenny and me.</p> <p>The house on Mango Street is ours, and we don't have to pay rent to anybody, or share the yard with the people downstairs, or be careful not to make too much noise, and there isn't a landlord banging on the ceiling with a broom. But even so, it's not the house we'd thought we'd get.</p> <p>We had to leave the flat on Loomis quick. The water pipes broke and the landlord wouldn't fix them because the house was too old. We had to leave fast. We were using the washroom next door and carrying water over in empty milk gallons. [...]</p> <p>(Cisneros 2009, 3)</p>	<p>We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to.</p> <p>I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free.</p> <p>One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away.</p> <p>Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?</p> <p>They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out.</p> <p>(Cisneros 2009, 109–10)</p>

In version 2, Esperanza repeats the first two sentences of the novel, indicating that the novel has, in a sense, begun again, which is also referred to in the line “I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong” (Cisneros 2009, 109). The ending of the story overlaps with the beginning to guide readers to read it again, yet differently. This layering technique also shows that the voice of a later Esperanza narrator is present in the character narrator voice of the novel as it starts out. Her message—that of a woman's position in the Mexican American community—may be discerned as it is woven into the text.

Esperanza deviates from version 1 in the middle of the third sentence in version 2: “[...] but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the

house I belong but do not belong to” (Cisneros 2009, 109–10). What Esperanza ‘remembers most’ from that period of life is the house on Mango Street, which indicates that her time of narrating is at a later temporal point, for one does not ‘remember’ one’s present. In version 1, Esperanza narrates, after listing the family’s houses that led up to the house on Mango Street: “[...] and before that I can’t remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot” (3). Version 1 establishes Esperanza’s memories up until the present tense in the house on Mango Street at the beginning of the novel, and she remembers her past moves before Mango Street. Her statement “[...] and before that I can’t remember” signifies the furthest temporal point back in time from her present perspective, which she is unable to remember because she was too small. In version 1, Esperanza goes into some detail (“water pipes broke;” “carrying water over in empty milk gallons”) about the time prior to Mango Street, which is relatively recent when viewed from her present tense at the beginning of the story. At this point, version 2 has switched to the present tense of the later temporal period in which, for example, she has already learned the importance of writing (“I put it down on paper”) and freedom (“She sets me free”).

Most importantly for our study of in-betweenness is the revelation indicated by the phrase in version 2, “the house I *belong* but do *not belong to*” (Cisneros 2009, 110, emphasis added). Esperanza now understands that it is possible to *belong* and *not belong* at the same time—to be in-between and view one’s reality from various, contradictory vantage points at once, which is multiple seeing. This realization does not happen in the novel itself, which is indicated by Esperanza’s negative emotional register concerning Mango Street at the end of the novel: “[...] then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes” and “One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away” (110). These are not ambivalent emotions or intentions and are squarely located in the present tense at the end of the novel. Esperanza’s post-storyworld revelation is communicated through her definitive tone next when she says, “I have gone away to come back” (110), which not only echoes the old sister’s phrase five pages prior (“come back for those who cannot leave as easily as you”) but also contrasts to Esperanza’s lack of understanding when she spoke with the sisters: “I didn’t understand everything they had told me” (105). The latter phrase is again in the past tense and implies that she may now understand. This considerable shift in emphasis, from Esperanza’s “selfish wish” (105) to accepting her responsibility for those whom she has left behind, occurs, in my reading, after the novel has ended but is perceptible in the text itself through the grammatical handling of future and past tenses, the mixing of Esperanza’s character narrator voice with her post-storyworld voice (e.g., ‘remembering’ Mango Street), and her shift in tone and declared intent.

Based on the incongruity of these two narrative perspectives—the predominant perspective of Esperanza as a youth narrating within the storyworld and the less common perspective of a possibly adult Esperanza narrating away from Mango Street later—it is possible the novel itself is

Esperanza coming back for the women whom she should not leave behind. Geoffrey Sanborn (2001, 1335) also argues that Cisneros's novel is Esperanza's way of returning for the women on Mango Street.

As Shoshana Felman (2006) has shown in the case of *The Turning of the Screw*, a narrative's framework, which is both posterior and exterior to the body of the text itself, places the text as a story or speech event (see also Sanborn 2001, 1335). The circular framework in *The House on Mango Street* emphasizes that the novel is a story apart from the reality of the exterior time-place from where it is being told. The many references to writing, storytelling, and the definitive statement "I have gone away to come back" (Cisneros 2009, 110) are textual evidence that Esperanza will fulfil her agreement with the three sisters in the novel, which, due to the circular framework, begins again. I will give further evidence for this reading as the chapter continues.

4.2.3 TIME AS CIRCULAR

The narrative's circularity can also be viewed through the idea of circular time as understood by the Aztecs and indigenous peoples in the Americas more broadly.²⁰ Susan Gillespie (1989) shows that historical events of the past can be thought to correspond to events in the present as time moves on in its cyclical, repetitive orbit. For the Aztecs, the historical record could hence be mined to find a precedent to correspond, in adapted form, to current events. "Consequently, the past cannot be considered immutable or irreversible. Instead, it has to be amenable to change as required by later events—it is the past that is altered to conform to, and to be continuous with, the present" (Gillespie 1989, xxiii-xxiv). Storytelling is one way that past meaning can be changed. Storytelling can return, as through a circle, to the historical event to make it continuous with present needs. For Esperanza, returning to the stories of the women on Mango Street is a way of re-framing their significance. Rather than being forgotten in their silent suffering, the women's stories take on representative meaning and become a call for change in the Mexican American community.

Daniel Cooper Alarcón (1997) links circular time to the idea of the palimpsest. Past narratives are symbolically harnessed to prop up altered meanings and new political realities. In a similar way, Esperanza casts new meaning onto the narrative at the end of *The House on Mango Street* and, as readers return to the beginning, the novel transforms from a story of not belonging to a story of Esperanza's education into belonging while also leaving room for her specific intentions. The stories she hears and records and the

²⁰ I am not here arguing that, as a Mexican American, it is obligatory to read Cisneros through Aztec ideas. It is, however, an interesting lens for alternative ways of thinking and fits in with the Chicana/o studies field more broadly, which is where I situate this dissertation.

characters and events she observes become the manifestation of her nepantla education and eventual revelation. Esperanza will always be Mango Street because the stories, as a writer, are who she is (Olivares 1996, 242–43). Hence the novel is a manifestation of Esperanza always being Mango Street, as one of the sisters predicted.

Esperanza's belonging to Mango Street is also visible in the novel's dedication, which is "A las Mujeres/To the Women." It uses the definitive article in both languages, which signifies that a group of particular women are in mind rather than women in general. Given the novel's circularity, the dedication links to the end of the novel when the sister refers to a circle and coming back "for the others." She adds, "You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are" (105). In my reading, Cisneros's dedication and the old sister are both referring to the women who begin to appear in the stories that follow. Esperanza validates the women's struggle by telling their stories and holding them up as examples of what, as a young Latina woman, one should avoid, if possible, though they are endowed with their own beauty and particularity all the same. Like the novel's dedication, the women are both U.S.-American (English-speaking) and Latina (Spanish-speaking) or, in other words, in-between these two categories, which corresponds to Esperanza's struggle and eventual positionality of in-betweenness, which can be represented by the different understandings of the world that bilingualism affords.

In summary, there is strong evidence that the episode with the three sisters can be read as a turning point that leads to Esperanza's revelation that she both belongs and does not belong. Esperanza goes on to realize that she can be both a future-, outward-facing woman embracing the role of a storyteller in broader society while retaining aspects of her past culture, family connections, neighborhood identity, etc. She can criticize aspects of her past while creating something new out of that fertile in-between space. In the words of Anzaldúa (2015) in reference to nepantla: "you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures" (127) while also retaining what is good in them. Nepantla is a subjective space in which the complexity of influences that are beyond the categories available to Esperanza come together as a holistic vision. As Bolaki (2011) states, "[t]he kind of development outlined in *The House on Mango Street* is not from ethnicity to Americanisation, but does not blindly submit to communal precepts either. Cisneros maintains a healthy distance from both closures" (131). The result is a new positionality that is in-between normative categories or an either/or formulation.

In this reading, nepantla is communicated through the implications of filling in gaps that, in Meir Sternberg's (1987) words, are "crying for resolution" (252) due to a lack of given information and clear meaning. As illustrated, such gap-filling processes are based on a close reading of the textual evidence. My reading attempts to resolve one of main contradictions in the novel, which has also been a topic of previous scholarship (Hartley-

Kroeger 2011, 287; Martin 2008, 65; Sanborn 2001, 1335; Wissman 2007, 31): how can Esperanza, who is so adamant in her desire for independence and isolation, be reconciled with the fulfillment of her promise to come back for the others? Writing is a means to both engage with the realities of others while being premised on the freedom and isolation needed to create.

4.2.4 WRITING A NEW SELF

Esperanza's journey away from Mango Street and into adulthood can be understood to be influenced by multiple categories while she sidesteps pledging allegiance to any of them. She both belongs and does not belong. The exception, in the reading outlined in the section above, may be that of writer. But then again, a writer is defined by metamorphosis, of inhabiting multiple positions in an unstable performance. In this sense, an allegiance to telling stories is itself a position of transmutability. As shown above, there is evidence that Esperanza's trajectory after the novel ends is to a revelation of in-betweenness and a vocation as a writer.

I elaborate on the reading above by more closely inspecting the related topics of writing and gender. In the novel, Esperanza's desires are symbolized by a house of her own. In the second-to-last vignette, "A House of My Own," which I quote in its entirety here, Esperanza says:

Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after.

Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem.²¹ (Cisneros 2009, 108)

There are two, interwoven subjects central to this vignette. First, Esperanza does not want to be constrained by a man, which is clearly stated: "Not a man's house." In the broader narrative, the point is driven home through the problematic positions of all married women in the novel; through the mechanisms of the patriarchy, they are too afraid, doubtful, or busy to utilize their agency beyond the traditional mandates of the home. Married women do not have the liberty of creating themselves on their own terms, which is stated by Esperanza's mother in a reverie on her past: "I could've been somebody, you know?" Esperanza says her mother "can speak two languages. She can sing opera. She knows how to fix a T.V. But she doesn't know which subway train

²¹ The text seems to mirror Virginia Woolf's (2001) novella *A Room of One's Own*, though Cisneros (2009, xv), in the introduction, writes that she had not yet read Woolf's text when *The House on Mango Street* was written.

to take downtown” (90). The domestic space, linked to marriage and shown negatively in contrast to the subway train and downtown, has limited Esperanza’s mother’s possibilities though she is talented and intelligent.

The second aspect of the above-quoted vignette is that of writing. In Esperanza’s desired house, there are “my books and my stories,” which I take to be books to read and the stories she has written, which are linked to the final image of the house being “clean as paper before the poem” (Cisneros 2009, 108), referring to the possibilities that are available to the person who creates something (a poem) out of nothing (a clean piece of paper). As part of a large family, as well as through her observations of her mother and others, Esperanza is aware of a need for space in order to create, and hence it is central to her daydream. In the words of Geoffrey Sanborn (2001), writing is “a technology of privacy” (1338). The future house is hence also a spatial metaphor for the freedom to create. If a man is involved, even if he is a loving father, Esperanza’s ambitions would become secondary.

Cisneros (2009) writes about the dynamic with her father at length in her introduction to the 25th anniversary edition of the novel. For example (note that she writes of herself in the third person):

The daughter claimed she’d been taught that a writer needs quiet, privacy, and long stretches of solitude to think. The father decided too much college and too many gringo friends had ruined her. In a way he was right. In a way she was right. When she thinks to herself in her father’s language, she knows sons and daughters don’t leave their parents’ house until they marry. When she thinks in English, she knows she should’ve been on her own since eighteen. (xiii)

Cisneros’s description shows that the father and daughter’s contradictory ideas can both be “right” depending on the cultural associations and expectations that are associated with the use of one language or the other. With hindsight, it is Cisneros’s ability to entertain both ideas that represents *nepantla*, a form of multiple seeing, but *nepantla* is also captured in her young self’s ability to think in Spanish and demand English-language rights. She creates a position in-between these polarities while recognizing both are correct though they are contradictory. Cisneros’s positionality, between tradition and independence, is symbolized by the house, as it is in her novel.

Writing and literature come up elsewhere in the novel. For example, Esperanza reads stories to her aunt, who is dying. Esperanza also reads one of her own poems and her aunt says, “That’s very good. [...] You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn’t know what she meant” (Cisneros 2009, 61). Freedom and creation are relational here as elsewhere in the novel: to create, you must be free; in order to be free, you must create. For both, you need a space of your own. Also, Esperanza says that she didn’t know what her aunt meant “at that time,” which implies that she now knows. In line with the

analysis above, this is an important marker of time in the narrative, which shows that Esperanza, as narrator of the text, is living in a time after the described events.

Esperanza's writing is linked to her community in more than subject matter. It is also a political maneuver that changes the community. Anzaldúa (2015) writes that

By writing about the always-in-progress, transformational processes and the constant, on-going reconstruction of the way you view your world, you name and ritualize the moments/processes of transition, inserting them into the collective fabric, bringing into play personal history and fashioning a story greater than yourself. (139)

Anzaldúa suggests that if a storyteller can change her story, she will change not only herself but the whole community. *The House on Mango Street* can be understood as Esperanza inserting her moments/processes of transition "into the collective fabric" (Anzaldúa 2015, 139) and "com[ing] back for the others" (Cisneros 2009, 105). Esperanza has re-written her story in the sense Anzaldúa indicates and created someone new, which in turn becomes part of the fabric of the community. An illustration of this process in action can be found in schools across the United States, where *The House on Mango Street* is widely taught. For some students, this may be their first glimpse into Mexican American culture and, for Mexican American students, especially girls, the novel presents an alternative to the patriarchy in a context that may be familiar. Communal consciousness is the fabric that storytelling shapes.

In Anzaldúa's thought, storytelling and writing are central to the process of nepantla. These are not metaphors. If a person is able to re-write her own inherited story, she is able to question the validity of her inherited categories, which may lead to nepantla. "[Y]ou are aware of the changeability of racial, gender, sexual, and other categories rendering the conventional labels obsolete" (Anzaldúa 2015, 119), which means that the stability of categories is shown to be an illusion and one's positionality can be negotiated (see also Spolsky 1993). Esperanza writes so that the "ghost does not ache so much" and so that "Mango says goodbye sometimes" (Cisneros 2009, 110), which is her own liberatory development away from the "often destructive" stories that she has internalized from culture and society (Anzaldúa 2015, 139). Esperanza "recognize[s] their faulty pronouncements, scrutinize[s] the fruit they've borne, and then ritually disengage[s] from them" (139) in the process of writing and saying goodbye to Mango Street. She is hence able to "re-member" (136) her experiences from the past in a new arrangement, which is a way of creating a space of both belonging and not belonging, of validating the importance of community, the women's stories, her personal artistic development, and gendered emancipation while allowing parts of herself to die so that someone else might be born (138).

4.3 QUOTIDIAN IN-BETWEENNESS

In this section, I will explore some of the more quotidian forms of in-betweenness found in *The House on Mango Street*, which stand in contrast to the revelatory in-betweenness described in the previous section. These are bilingual in-betweenness as captured in the Spanish word *esperanza*, along with its English translation, and immigrant experiences as related to time-place (see also Gutiérrez 2012, 34). Though it may be common sense that we are all, always, in-between one moment and another, or one place and some other place as we move through life, this analysis hopes to capture the ways in which narratives capture and represent the flux and flow of everyday in-betweenness as experienced by some characters.

4.3.1 LINGUISTIC IN-BETWEENNESS: *ESPERANZA*

Esperanza discusses the shifting, contradictory meanings of her name at the beginning of the novel. The word *esperanza* translates as ‘hope’ in English, but in Spanish it means “sadness, it means waiting;” her name is like her father’s records on Sunday mornings, “songs like sobbing” (Cisneros 2009, 10).²² The name inhabits the space in-between two languages, cultures, and meanings. It longs for what is missing, a distinctly melancholic emotion while, at the same time, it hopes for what is yet to come, which is positive. The meaning depends on the language context but, in either language, its “latent double” (Budick and Iser 1989, xii) is also present for the bilingual speaker. In both languages, *esperanza* signifies distance and/or a time gap between what is longed for/hoped for and she who does the longing/hoping, a kind of separation. Esperanza’s name is also a potential process of movement towards something. In this way, bilingualism affords Esperanza multiple seeing, or the ability to see two contradictory positions at the same time. *Esperanza* is also a name that stands for a particular character narrator, which can point to Esperanza’s experiences and ultimate identity positioning in-between the English- and Spanish-language cultural spheres and their tacit norms.

Esperanza was named after her great-grandmother, who “was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse—which is supposed to be bad luck if you’re born female—but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don’t like their women strong” (Cisneros 2009, 10). Esperanza and her great-grandmother have been told the story that they were born in a bad year for women, but Esperanza is able to deconstruct the story through her understanding that Chinese and Mexicans “don’t like their

²² The verb form of *esperanza*, a noun, is *esperar* (to wait; to wait for; to expect; to hope), which, when meaning ‘to hope’ pairs with the beautifully indeterminate subjunctive case in Spanish (*espero que te vaya bonito*, to quote a lyric by Don José Alfredo Jiménez).

women strong.”²³ Men propagate ideas against strong women in the form of stories to consolidate their power, an underlying mechanism of patriarchy. Esperanza's great-grandmother was “a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier” (10–11). Esperanza has inherited more than her great-grandmother's name: she has also inherited the will not to be “tame” (88). Further, the great-grandmother, like Esperanza later, decided not to marry but the great-grandfather captured her like a wild horse and domesticated her in a process of commodification, carrying her body off like a fancy chandelier. The movement inherent to Esperanza's great-grandmother's name and her characteristics as a young, lively woman were constrained when she was captured in marriage.

However: “the story goes she [the great-grandmother] never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow.” This is the first instance of many in the novel in which women are seen looking out of windows. Windows are a space in-between the domestic interior and the public exterior; they are thresholds. Esperanza's great-grandmother's gaze is here represented as a kind of revenge, a non-compliance strike. Esperanza states, “I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window,” indicating that she will not repeat the fate of her great-grandmother and allow a “sack [to be thrown] over her head” (Cisneros 2009, 11). Esperanza is taking what is good from her namesake's story, her horse-like wildness, and rejecting what is not, marriage, in a process of re-writing the great-grandmother's story, like a palimpsest, in which the older narrative is still visible but has been adapted to Esperanza's current needs. Questioning and rejecting harmful traditions while taking what is good from one's inheritance is also, as we have seen, central to the concept of nepantla. Esperanza's name implies that stasis and movement are both potentialities within her and that she may be able to choose which future trajectory she will follow.

The many instances of young women “sit[ting] their sadness on an elbow” (Cisneros 2009, 11) while gazing out of windows, including Esperanza's great-grandmother above, creates an uncomfortable dissonance in the narrative. The stasis of waiting is the hoping and longing of *esperanza* without resolution, or in-betweenness without movement towards the object of desire. Waiting is a time-place of in-betweenness, neither here nor there, and, if the goal never arrives, it is static. Paula Moya (2016) writes that women waiting is “joined to a culturally specific and patriarchal lack of female agency against which Cisneros is reacting” (136). Just as the norm for the cosmos can be understood as transition (Maffie 2014, 363), the norm for people, especially

²³ Jacqueline Doyle (1994, 30) and John Alba Cutler (2015, 144) link Cisneros's works to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1977), which may explain the inclusion of Chinese culture here.

young people, is movement. The reoccurring reference to young women in stasis causes a feeling of wasted potential that indicates that all is not well on Mango Street, which is a motif in the novel that points to the central theme of women's realities.

Esperanza's great-grandmother illustrates not only the negative results of marriage for girls and women in her culture, but also how the inherited story is re-written by Esperanza to give herself clarity by creating new meaning. The story's negative example must be transformed into something positive. As such, this story and others are Esperanza's legacy that she utilizes to grow confidently into an un-tamed woman against the odds. The word *esperanza* captures the double meaning of longing and hope, the multiple seeing from the contradictory positionings of the story of her domesticated great-grandmother, the potential for either movement or stasis, and the bilingual and bicultural environment in which Esperanza grows up, which are examples of quotidian nepantla.

4.3.2 IN-BETWEENNESS IN TIME-PLACE: IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCES

Language has other significations in the novel as well. Speaking English fluently in the context of the novel's urban U.S. setting affords a character a higher social position and opportunities. The opposite is also true and bad English means less opportunity. Speaking only Spanish in this context indicates that a person is possibly of more recent arrival in the United States. Language is a tangible arena from which to determine certain kinds of in-betweenness for characters, especially in terms of migration status.

The vignette "No Speak English" illustrates the social and linguistic in-betweenness that exists for many immigrants the world over. *Mamacita*, who is so large that Esperanza's friend thinks she should be called *Mamasota*,²⁴ arrives from a foreign country one day with a baby boy. Her husband has worked two jobs to afford to bring them. *Mamacita* and the boy go up to the apartment and do not come down again for some time. The neighborhood speculates as to why: "because she's too fat" someone suggests, and the stairs are difficult to climb. Perhaps it is because she does not speak English, another suggests. For whatever reason, *Mamacita* "sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull" (Cisneros 2009, 77).

Mamacita "sits all day" by the window observing the world but does not feel part of it. This disengagement and distance through the threshold of the window and a lack of movement communicate a kind of hopelessness. Esperanza decides that *Mamacita*'s detachment must be based on "Home.

²⁴ *-ita* is the diminutive form while *-ota* is the augmentative form in Spanish. Hence a *mamacita* is a small mother and a *mamasota* is a large mother.

Home. Home is a house in a photograph, a pink house, pink as hollyhocks with lots of startled light” (Cisneros 2009, 77). A man comes to paint *Mamacita*'s walls the pink color of her home in the other country, but it doesn't help. The husband, for his part, sometimes becomes frustrated and is heard screaming from down the street: “*¡Ay, caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ!*” And then, “to break her heart forever, the baby boy, who has begun to talk, starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on T.V.” *Mamacita* says to him, “No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears. No, no, no, as if she can't believe her ears” (78, emphasis in original).

The episode is presented as tragicomic. From the point of view of those who had immigrated earlier, whose ancestors immigrated, or whose ancestors became U.S.-Americans when the border migrated in 1848 after the Mexican–American War, *Mamacita*'s dogged refusal to learn English can seem charming or comical but ultimately futile. To get ahead or to simply better enjoy the reality of the place in which she is, English will be necessary. If she refuses, her child(ren) will not refuse, as illustrated by the little boy singing the Pepsi commercial, which links English to the mechanisms of capital. English will win out in the end. On the other hand, the neighbors (and readers) see *Mamacita* suspended in a precarious space of in-betweenness: physically in one context while emotionally in another. *Mamacita*'s time-place can thus be framed as in the past (emotionally) while being physically present in the place of migration in the form of in-betweenness. Note also that Esperanza's narration focalizes on *Mamacita* and describes the situation with information that she, as a character, does not have access to. This is an illustration of good storytelling, which takes in or invents the realities of others while diminishing the centrality of the character aspect of the narrator.

To cope with the disjunction between present circumstances and emotional longing, some immigrants may also dream of the future in either the form of return to the old country or as achievement and success in the new place. In another example of this kind of immigrant in-betweenness, Esperanza's father has lived in the United States for many years, but Mexico still defines him in many ways, as in the abovementioned reference in which Esperanza's name is like the “Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing” (Cisneros 2009, 10). The music is probably *ranchera*, defined by melodramatic lyrics and a highly emotive, wailing register of vocals backed by a mariachi band, but the “sobbing” nevertheless points to what Esperanza's father has had to endure as an immigrant: the loss of his culture, place, home, familiarity, belonging, family, and friends. Indeed, an entire emotional register, which is symbolized by *ranchera*, has been partially lost by Esperanza's father in the USA. In Mexico, a male “sobbing” in this way, which is to say for reasons of longing for the past or the future (*esperanza*) in romantic terms, is deemed natural (at least in song). In the context of the status quo in the United States, male “sobbing” stands out as

incongruous. The music takes Esperanza's father back home as it were, which highlights the fact that he is in a foreign place.

Esperanza's father tends the gardens of expensive houses up on a hill (Cisneros 2009, 86) and has "thick hands and thick shoes [and] wakes up tired in the dark [...] combs his hair with water, drinks his coffee, and is gone before we wake" (57). His hands are thick from work and his shoes are thick to withstand physical labor. He is "gone before we wake," which indicates the sacrifices he makes to earn a living despite the rewards not being great, which is indicated through a description of their house: "[b]ricks are crumbling in places, and the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in" (4). Most directly, the immigrant's position is made clear by the fact that Esperanza's father is geographically far from his own father when the latter dies, so that he "crumbles like a coat and cries, my brave Papa cries. I have never seen my Papa cry and don't know what to do" (56). The episode's sadness is based on the geographical distance between Papa and his own father, which is related to the immigrant experience (see Herrera 2016).

As described in the novel, the immigrant experience personifies in-betweenness in terms of time-place and emotional longing for the past and hoping for the future. These are not stable positionings, however. Esperanza's father is more U.S.-American now than he was: "My father says when he came to this country he ate hamandeggs for three months. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Hamandeggs. That was the only word he knew. He doesn't eat hamandeggs anymore" (Cisneros 2009, 77). He has learned English and, through hard work, has made a place for himself, including the house that the family has bought ("The house on Mango Street is ours, and we don't have to pay rent to anybody [...] [3]). This indicates that in-betweenness operates on a gradient and changes through time.

The house Esperanza's father dreams of buying, which is a time-place located in the future and the hopeful aspect of *esperanza*, is indicative of how he is now more at home in the United States: "Our house would be white with trees around it, a great big yard and grass growing without a fence. This was the house Papa talked about when he held a lottery ticket [...]" (Cisneros 2009, 4). His dreams have expanded, and he is comfortable enough in the new place to talk about such a dream, albeit relying on the lottery to produce it. The house sounds like the idealized suburban U.S.-American houses whose gardens the father tends to. In this way, his dream is to become an established and successful U.S.-American.

In these examples, we have seen how Esperanza's father has been emotionally located in the past and Mexico through music and the death of his father, or in the future through his dream of buying a nice house. The same push and pull of time-place applies to Esperanza, who says, "I knew then that I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The house on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go" (Cisneros 2009, 5). The present time for Esperanza and her mother and father is a temporary state on the way

to potentially better things. This holds true for many people and is not limited to the experiences of immigrants and their offspring. However, in terms of narrative, especially in so-called 'ethnic' literature, the relationship between various places and times can be fruitfully analyzed in terms of quotidian in-betweenness.

Quotidian in-betweenness is prevalent in *The House on Mango Street*; it is ongoing and inherent to the nature of time, memories, and hopes, and it is present for anyone who has changed geographical locations or leaves one home to build another. As Anzaldúa (2015) writes, "We discover, uncover, create our identities as we interrelate with others and our alrededores/surroundings" (75). Our interactions with our surroundings over time and our sense of belonging (or not belonging) create a relationship between places where we are, where we were, and where we hope to one day be. The bilingual understanding of the word *esperanza* captures this sentiment and hence can be understood as a signifier of quotidian in-betweenness.

4.4 HOUSES AND STASIS

To illustrate the importance of a nepantla reading of *The House on Mango Street*, I will now show how imposed categories can overshadow the politicized heart of the narrative. Esperanza's in-between positioning allows for a critique of the Mexican American community while also accepting what is good in it. Specifically, Esperanza illustrates the ills of being a woman on Mango Street through descriptions of the women she knows there. She re-tells their stories in a context that transforms them into calls for change. One of the central ways this is done is through the spatial metaphor of the house, which is linked to the temporal-spatial state of stasis. I argue that just as a 'house of one's own' is a precondition for freedom and creativity, the domestic situation of most women on Mango Street limits their horizons. The houses in question are coded as ethnic, which is Cisneros's way of criticizing the culture in which she grew up.

4.4.1 HOUSES AS ETHNIC SPACES

The novel's title indicates the importance of space for Esperanza's development: first it is the house, which represents her nuclear family, followed by Mango Street, which represents the community but also leads away from that community to the outside world. The correlation of the two in the title indicates their interrelatedness: the street and the people on the street are a continuation of Esperanza's family, which together form the community that shapes her worldview and development. The house and Mango Street also represent the inherited cultural constraints Esperanza wishes to escape. I

argue that instead of idealizing the Mexican American idea of community as symbolized by the house, Cisneros's novel should be read in terms of the effect houses have on the community. This, in turn, destabilizes idealized ideas of the Mexican American community, which, I will show, Esperanza rejects in part while harnessing what is good in it.

I agree with Maria Karafilis's (1998) conclusion that for Esperanza, and Chicanas more broadly, a house may symbolize a "space" that is not in the "dominant American culture nor some type of an 'authentic' traditional Mexican culture but rather a cross-cultural location of one's own creation," which Karafilis terms *métissage*. As a Chicana, Karafilis writes, Esperanza "truly represents two different cultures coming together in an egalitarian way to form a third—no hyphenation, no subordination is involved" (71).

However, Karafilis's (1998) argumentation relies on a dichotomy that essentializes both Mexican American and "dominant American" cultures and, as a result, does not sufficiently recognize the strong critique of Mexican American culture that is, in my reading, central to the narrative. Karafilis states that Esperanza's oneiric houses subvert the traditional bourgeois home of "individualism, isolationism, a space for exclusion, and the consolidation of the patriarchal, nuclear family [by] turning it into something completely different" (69–70). Karafilis has in mind a house that is "markedly not exclusive, allows for free access, and has room in its yard for all, which calls on the collectivity of traditional Mexican households" and argues that *The House on Mango Street* makes a case against U.S.-American materialism and bourgeois individualism.

There are aspects to what Cisneros (1993) has said that support this view. She writes that Gaston Bachelard's (1964) *The Poetics of Space* was instrumental in her development of *The House on Mango Street* due to the book's assumption and linkage of privileged upper-middle-class homes as a 'house of memory' in psychology, which Cisneros (1993) compares to her realities growing up in dilapidated third-floor flats (xiii–xiv). In reference to Bachelard's book, Karen W. Martin (2008) argues that Cisneros's novel offers a transgressive space whose creative possibilities, peacefulness, and sense of security derive not from the isolation offered by wealth and privilege, but from the joy of collective existence and shared experiences as opposed to the traditional, single-family dwelling. "Within this cocoon of energy and movement, created by female ownership and agency, [Bachelard's] house of memory is reconstructed as an unbounded zone of inclusiveness and collaboration rather than silence and isolation" (66).

I respectfully disagree with Karafilis and Martin to illustrate a mode of interpretation that, in my view, Anzaldúa tries to go beyond with the concept of *nepantla*. In my reading, Karafilis and Martin impose ideals of Mexican-ness onto houses on Mango Street that are not supported by the text, namely by attributing a "collectivity" and "inclusiveness" to the house(s) Esperanza desires. Esperanza does say, as Karafilis points out, that she'll open her future house's attic to passing bums because, "I won't forget who I am or where I

came from [...] I know how it is to be without a house.” She adds, “[s]ome days after dinner, guests and I will sit in front of a fire. Floorboards will squeak upstairs. The attic grumble. Rats? they’ll ask. Bums, I’ll say, and I’ll be happy” (Cisneros 2009, 87).

Enjoying a meal and fire with friends in a luxurious house while a bum is hidden away in the attic does not, in my mind, point to the “collectivity” that Karafilis refers to, and it is neither “markedly not exclusive” nor does it “[allow] for free access” (69–70) but rather frames a joke with the bum as the butt. Martin (2008) also references this episode and argues that, while it seems to steer readers towards privileging an upper-class, mainstream existence, Esperanza substitutes this idea with “a new type of idealized home, a heterotopic space that combines the senses of possibility, creativity, and corporeal mobility offered by the stereotypical home of the American dream with a refusal to render invisible those who fall outside the parameters of wealth and social status.” This can be understood as Esperanza’s “own multi-level private home, complete with an attic, dinner guests, and a cozy fireplace, but rooted in a non-hierarchical juxtaposition of the previously irreconcilable sectors of homeowner and homeless, center and margin” (66).

Even leaving Esperanza’s juvenile and rather mean-spirited joking aside—‘bum’ is not a respectful term she would use to the person’s face but could if gossiping with friends—the physical distance between Esperanza and her friends and the bum in the attic is precisely hierarchical, albeit inverted with the attic above as the less desirous location, and reconfirms the “sectors of homeowner and homeless” explicitly. Martin’s claim that Esperanza refuses “to render invisible those who fall outside the parameters of wealth and social status” is clearly not the case: the bum’s footsteps are heard but he or she is never seen. Esperanza can feel good about helping the poor without inconveniencing herself or her friends as they enjoy an ideal setting. While a more generous interpretation than the one I have presented here is certainly possible, I am arguing that Esperanza should not be idealized as a paragon of traditionally Mexican American inclusiveness. It would be wiser to take her as the complex, contradictory, sometimes selfish and juvenile youth that she is. The distinction between collectivity and individualism need not be absolute, just as collectivity is not inherently better than, or morally superior to, individualism. It depends on context and subjectivity.

In the vignette “A House of My Own” quoted in a previous section, Esperanza uses eight first-person possessives in a space of 72 words when talking about her future house at the end of the novel (Cisneros 2009, 108), which indicates individualism rather than collectivity. Also, the house Esperanza desires in the daydream with the bum, the kind where her father tends gardens, is in affluent suburban United States (termed “non-urban” by Martin [2008, 66]). Inhabitants of such houses are “[p]eople who live on hills [and] sleep so close to the stars they forget those of us who live too much on earth. They don’t look down at all except to be content to live on hills. They have nothing to do with last week’s garbage or fear of rats” (86–87).

Esperanza's ultimate decision to come back to Mango Street for those who cannot leave can be understood as standing in contrast to the "people who live on hills" and who are unaware of reality "on earth" (see Sanborn 1334). Instead of being a representation of collectivity, Esperanza's desire for a suburban house is individualistic and opposed to her later development into in-betweenness at the end of the novel, where she can both desire a space of her own—the house she desires at the end of the novel is humbler than in the "bums" episode but explicitly referred to as solitary and not a collective—while also being connected to the community "on earth" (cf. Bolaki 2011, 108) due to the space it allows for her writing. My argument is that because writing is of utmost importance for Esperanza and writing dictates that she needs isolation and individualism to create, imposing a "collectivity" onto her oneiric house does not, in fact, take into consideration Esperanza's realities and wishes. Esperanza may open her attic to passing bums, but she never disavows her right to the independence, isolation, and peace that she needs to create. Rather, she can be positioned both as an individual and, at the same time, interact with and attempt to shape the community through an activity that is premised upon that individualism, which is writing. In this way, the dichotomy between ethnic "collectivity" and bourgeois mainstream U.S.-American individualism is sidestepped into *nepantla*, which allows Esperanza to reject what is harmful from her inherited categories and embrace what is valuable.

Relatedly, Ramón Saldivar's (1990) dialectics of difference is premised on the nature of Chicana/o literary production as the experience of Mexican Americans as an "ethnic minority in a conquered homeland" exhibiting a "decisive sense of opposition to Anglo-American forms and institutions" (13). Olga Herrera (2016) suggests that Chicana/o literature can rather be seen to represent a dialectics of engagement in various ongoing processes (105). Cisneros's text maps out movement, Herrera writes, between places that both belong and do not belong to the characters rather than taking up the Chicana/o claim to a dispossessed land by which they are positioned oppositionally against Anglo America (106).

Returning to the stance represented here by Karafilis and Martin, I argue that Esperanza's desires should be taken as her subjective agency in choosing to either engage or disengage with any number of sociocultural realms and tacitly coded norms. Both Karafilis and Martin suggest that the individualist bourgeois home is something to be avoided and defend Esperanza against such a reading. Rather, I argue, we must attempt to better understand Esperanza's desires and trajectory beyond the normative categories of the "ethnic collectivity" on the one hand and "bourgeois individualism" on the other.

The most lamentable result of contrasting the "ethnic" house with its "dominant American" counterpart is that it confuses Esperanza's critique of how women are treated in her Mexican American community. The "consolidation of the patriarchal, nuclear family" (Karafilis 1998, 70) does not occur in a "traditional bourgeois home" (69) in the novel, as Karafilis suggests, but rather in the "ethnic spaces" on Mango Street. Esperanza is highly critical

of her culture's 'ethnic space,' i.e., Mango Street, which is her motivation for leaving the community. The "ethnic spaces" that Karafilis refers to are, in fact, the houses in which the patriarchy is played out. My intention here is not to pick on Karafilis and Martin but to rather illustrate the dangers of imposing preconceived categories, such as what 'ethnic' spaces may or should be, onto texts that actively problematize clear distinctions between normative frames of reference.

4.5 WOMEN AND HOUSES

The novel represents three kinds of houses: that of Esperanza's current, run-down house on Mango Street; the house(s) of her imagined future; and houses as places where married women spend their days. The last of these is the prevailing mode of houses in *The House on Mango Street* and it is pessimistic. The house, which represents everything that is holding Esperanza back, based on her own telling, is what she must leave behind. It is the space, both symbolic and real, that triggers her transformation, the place where her realities and those of the women around her force a reckoning with her inherited place in the world (Anzaldúa 2015, 127). In this way, the house is the story's actant, which can be understood as a nepantla push and pull between multiple contradictory positions.

Esperanza's own familial home is loving, though her mother and great-grandmother had to shelve their dreams in order to perform the roles of wife and mother. For women in the Mexican American community in general, based on observation and inherited stories, it is the house that symbolizes patriarchy on Mango Street, which is in line with Alvina Quintana's (1996) observation that "[t]he freedom and independence associated with male coming-of age narratives has typically been replaced in the female versions by loss of freedom and acceptance of subordination; the narratives have tended to portray imprisoned, trapped, or isolated women" (56). In the novel, the house is a prison.

As opposed to the street, which stretches out past the horizon, the house is a confined space. It is spatially limited, and the man (father/husband) is the head. Some fathers/husbands are kind and good, like Esperanza's father: they work and mostly keep quiet. However, they still demand, via the traditions of the community, that the housework is done, meals are prepared and served, and that many children are birthed, which, in practical terms, limits the woman/wife's possibilities regardless of how good-hearted the man may be. On the other hand, the father/husband might be cruel and intent on violence and bursts of jealousy, as we will see. Either way, marriage for women is a no-win situation as viewed by Esperanza.

One of Esperanza's central messages is her questioning of the institution of marriage and the role of women in the Mexican American culture in which she grew up. The alternative to that tradition is also found in the text, such as when

she says, “I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain. [...] I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (Cisneros 2009, 88–89). A female’s lack of (male) empowerment and entitlement, the necessity of being tamed and sacrificing one’s life (the neck on the threshold) to marriage (ball and chain) are what she questions from her family and traditions. By behaving like a man in her “own quiet war,” she re-writes the role of a woman in order “to intervene in the cultures’ existing dehumanizing stories” (Anzaldúa 2015, 139). Esperanza manages to illustrate a moving critique of patriarchy as well as an empowering alternative to it by contrasting her own becoming to that of the many women trapped in houses on Mango Street. This makes her powerful.

One example of how marriage is connected to houses comes from the character *Mamacita* above, who was brought to the United States by her husband and, due to the institution of marriage and the husband’s primary position as decision-maker, is forced to stay despite homesickness and a strong urge to return home. Hers is a self-imposed imprisonment inside the house, though the exile in a foreign land is not. She sits at the window looking out without venturing into the world as she could, though with limited possibilities even outdoors. The threshold implies the possibility of change that does not, however, occur.

Unlike *Mamacita*, two women in the novel are forced to stay in-doors due to their beauty, which, their men are afraid, might lead to trouble. The focalization in these episodes switches to the women; readers are made aware of feelings, thoughts, and actions that Esperanza would not have access to. This illustrates Esperanza’s developing skills as a storyteller as the narrative progresses and underlines the linear development of the text. Rafaela’s husband works during the day and on Tuesdays comes home late because he plays dominoes. Rafaela, “who is still young but getting old from leaning *out the window* so much, gets locked indoors” (emphasis added) because her husband is afraid that she might run away due to her beauty. Rafaela is represented as waiting at the window, the threshold, which is emphasized again: “Rafaela leans *out the window* and leans on her elbow and dreams her hair is like Rapunzel’s. On the corner there is music from the bar, and Rafaela wishes she could go there and dance before she gets old” (Cisneros 2009, 79, emphasis added). She throws down a dollar bill and asks the kids to go to the corner shop and buy her “coconut or sometimes papaya juice,” which she pulls up with a clothesline. She “wishes there were sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room, but sweet sweet like the island, like the dance hall down the street where women much older than her throw green eyes easily like dice and open homes with keys” (80).

Time passes and Rafaela is getting old waiting for something “sweeter,” which has a sexual connotation, though it may also be the intoxicating sweetness of romance in general, which is linked to the “women [...] throwing

green eyes easily like dice [...].” Her youth and beauty are being wasted inside, locked away as she is “getting old from leaning out the window so much” and she wishes she could go to the bar “before she gets old” to socialize instead of being alone in the “bitter” and “empty room.” Ironically, once she is like the “women much older than her” she will no longer be young and (as) beautiful but will be trusted to “open homes with keys” (Cisneros 2009, 80). Youth dissipating, old age having not yet arrived, Rafaela waits, watches, and daydreams herself away from her physical reality. These traits are textual markers that create a sense of in-betweenness in the text.

Next, we meet Sally, whose father says that “to be this beautiful is trouble” (Cisneros 2009, 81). He beats her when he catches her talking to boys and she’s regularly coming to school full of bruises, saying she tripped. Later he beats her badly with a belt and buckle and possibly rapes her (93). She gets married in another state “where it’s legal to get married before eighth grade” (101) but her husband “won’t let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn’t let her look *out the window*” (101–2, emphasis added). Instead of looking out the window, she “looks at all the things they own [...] She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as a wedding cake.” She sits inside because “she is afraid to go outside without his permission” (102), which illustrates the husband’s insidious grip on her life. She is a commodified woman gazing at commodified goods.

Again, there is the threshold of the window, but in this case, Sally is not even allowed to look out it, which is linked to her being trapped, either by lock or fear, in the house due to her marriage. Sally might say she “likes being married because now she gets to buy her own things when her husband gives her money” (Cisneros 2009, 101) but it rings false. Also, the word ‘when’ in “when her husband gives her money” indicates she is at the mercy of his whims and is materially dependent on him. She has exchanged a violent father for a violent husband and the future appears bleak. Sally has every material thing she might wish for, including “linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake” (102). The things she has, however, are not the point—they are even referred to somewhat ironically, as linoleum is hardly the pinnacle of materials. Sally’s life and agency have been dominated by two men in her life, one after the other, with tragic results.

Minerva “is only a little bit older than me [Esperanza] but already she has two kids and a husband who left.” She is always “sad like a house on fire” (Cisneros 2009, 84) due to her many troubles, “but the big one is her husband who left and keeps leaving.” While Minerva doesn’t sit at the window looking out, she does kick her husband out of the house by throwing his clothes, records, and shoes “out the window,” but “that night he comes back and sends a big rock through the window. Then he is sorry and she opens the door again. Same story.” Esperanza goes on in a tone that is hopeless at the lack of agency: “Next week she comes over black and blue and asks what can she do? Minerva. I don’t know which way she’ll go. There is nothing *I* can do” (85, emphasis in original)

There is nothing Esperanza can do except take Minerva's story and bring it back to the community in order that she and others might learn from it (*pace* Hartley-Kroeger 2011, 287). She can include the stories in the fabric of the community, hence changing their meaning from tragedy to a politicized call for change. According to Anzaldúa, "*A woman who writes has power. A woman who writes is feared*. In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts" (1983, 164, emphasis in original). In presenting these women's stories, Esperanza exposes them, which, in the capacity of one who writes, gives her power as these injustices and tragedies are made public. It is up to Esperanza to do this; without her transmission of these stories, they would have faded into murky history, the women all but forgotten.

These examples show that marriage and houses are linked in the novel. The underlying premise, which is a question of agency or the lack thereof, is summed up by yet another example, that of Ruthie: "There were many things Ruthie could have been if she wanted [...] She had lots of job offers when she was young, but she never took them. She got married instead and moved away to a pretty house outside the city" (Cisneros 2009, 68–69). As might be expected, the husband is nowhere to be seen and Ruthie sleeps on a couch in her mother's living room idling her days away waiting. These examples show that the role of women in the community is at the heart of how houses are represented in the novel and, as mentioned, that houses are informed by women waiting indoors for something indistinct, thereby giving the impression of wasted potential as the dynamism of youth is reversed into stasis. The examples also show that if houses are essentialized as "ethnic spaces" that stand in contrast to traditional bourgeois homes of "individualism, isolationism, a space for exclusion, and the consolidation of the patriarchal, nuclear family" (Karafilis 1998, 69–70), then Esperanza's critique of gender relations in the Mexican American community is overlooked.

The bulk of these stories are taken from pages 67 to 85, with Sally revisited a few vignettes later. The subject matter is dark, and one must keep in mind that Esperanza is narrating these events. It is the same narrator who told about "the smell when [her mother] makes room [...] on her side of the bed still warm with her skin" (Cisneros 2009, 6–7) at the beginning of the novel. The topics go from child-like to more adult-like in the recognition of sadness, hopelessness, domestic violence, male domination, fear, and being trapped or locked in the house based on male decisions, emotions, and whims. These episodes illustrate that in order for Esperanza to meaningfully belong to Mango Street, she must also not belong.

4.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The concept of nepantla has been used to analyze two kinds of in-betweenness in *The House on Mango Street*: that of the revelatory variety that results in multiple seeing and the more quotidian in-betweenness that was illustrated through the bilingual understanding of the word *esperanza* as spatialized and temporal longing and hoping. Esperanza's revelation of a nepantla future was spurred by the three old sisters' validation of her dream to leave Mango Street and the harmful traditions that it represents, namely marriage, and to go out into the world to create a distance from the patriarchy. Esperanza cannot, however, ever completely leave Mango Street, for it is part of her. As a writer, Mango Street's stories populate her imagination.

Esperanza's eventual return takes place in the form of the novel *The House on Mango Street*. The stories she re-writes and "re-members" (Anzaldúa 2015, 136) create the possibility for her to become someone else, to transform. This transformation is a process of questioning the frames of reference inherited from family and culture. Rather than arriving in a new, easily definable identity category, Esperanza exists in the in-between. This subjective space is at the heart of nepantla as theorized by Anzaldúa.

Esperanza's *becoming* is premised on her disavowal of marriage. She is the rare female character in the novel whose horizon is symbolically beyond Mango Street and whose time moves out of the traditional daily rhythms of women in the community. This difference in time-place creates a contradiction: the same places can have different elements of time for various characters. Esperanza manages to choose *becoming* instead of stasis by re-writing the stories she has inherited. Rather than sacrificing herself for the community or abandoning the women there through her individualistic role as an artist, she positions herself in-between these polarities. She creates and is free but nevertheless materializes the community's women in stories, which is a political act against the mechanisms of the patriarchy.

The many contradictory positionings—freedom and obligation, leaving yet returning, individualism and community, linear and circular time, the house as prison and as liberation—produce an ongoing negotiation that is beyond any fixed conclusion or category. In this way, Cisneros's novel blurs the normative frames of reference that may underpin the assumptions by which 'ethnic' or minority literature is sometimes read. This in-between space also problematizes understandings of what an adolescent Mexican American is and ought to be like. Nepantla allows us to recognize and validate such positions.

As with Oscar in Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, the denouement to Esperanza's coming-of-age story is that of an accepted and emancipatory in-betweenness. She takes parts of her multiple categories to fashion a new self. In part, she belongs to many categories: female, male, writer, Chicana, U.S.-American, English-speaker, Spanish-speaker, resident of Mango Street, resident of the broader world, and more. This is possible

because she decides it's possible, and she fights against her inherited traditions to make it real.

In part 2 of this dissertation, I move on to another kind of nepantla: that of *not belonging*. Sometimes, we are forced into the in-between by outside forces beyond our control. Nepantla can also be based on loss and chaos, as we are unmoored from the stability that categories afford. Despite our innate need to belong (Baumeister 2012; Baumeister and Leary 1995), the social, cultural, political, and economic realities of the societies in which we live may deny us that belonging. This is the case with the character narrator Memesa in Kiba Lumberg's *Memesa* trilogy (2011). John Rechy's novel *City of Night* (1984a), in the concluding analysis chapter, will show an extreme form of not belonging that turns to chaos.

PART 2. IN-BETWEENNESS AS NOT BELONGING

5 PRESSED INTO NEPANTLA IN KIBA LUMBERG'S *MEMESA* TRILOGY

Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives.

Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The novels in part 1 represented in-betweenness as a liberatory space of self-determination bolstered by a feeling of belonging—both to in-betweenness itself and, through picking and choosing, to parts of multiple categories. Part 2 looks at two texts in which in-betweenness is presented through *not belonging* or being cut off from shared frames of reference. This general insight allows us to broaden our understanding of the ways in which nepantla is represented and created in narratives. It does not, however, represent a hard and fast category. Indeed, Kiba Lumberg's *Memesa* trilogy (2011) represents both in-betweenness as not belonging and Memesa's eventual coming to terms with aspects of her heritage, which is a moderate—and distinctly melancholy—version of Esperanza's revelation of in-betweenness in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (2009).²⁵

The aim of this chapter is twofold: first, through the study of Lumberg's *Memesa* trilogy (2011), to better understand Romani culture in Finland, the relationship between Roma and majority-culture Finns, and how some Roma exist in-between cultures. The second aim is to determine the variety of ways in which in-betweenness is represented and created in the trilogy through the concept of nepantla, which is taken from the U.S. Chicana/o context in which it was developed and applied to a narrative about Finnish Romani characters and the community. The structure of the chapter is organized so that first I will analyze representations of Roma in Finland, especially through the construction and deconstruction of stereotypes, and only towards the end of the chapter will I move on to the central theme of this dissertation, which is in-betweenness as understood through the concept of nepantla. This allows us to come to grips with the context in which the novel was meant to be read, which is by Finnish-language readers in Finland. This will make a more specific investigation into in-betweenness possible.

Romani literature in Finland is understudied. As far as I know, the complete scholarship on the topic is made up of the following: two chapters by Satu Gröndahl (2005; 2010), a chapter by Gröndahl and Eila Rantonen (2013), a chapter by Päivi Lappalainen (2012), a paper by Viola Parente-Čapková (2015) in Czech, a chapter on Kiba Lumberg's comics (Parente-Čapková, Kauranen, and Vuorinne 2020), and Tuula Kopsa-Schön's overview of Finnish Romani literature from 2002. A thorough analysis of the Romani narrative field has yet to be accomplished, and this chapter is meant to help alleviate this oversight.

More work needs to be done on Finnish Romani literature, but the scope of this chapter is necessarily limited. I occasionally reference Veijo Baltzar's

²⁵ Many thanks to Risto Blomster, Ph.D., The Finnish Literature Society, who kindly read this chapter before I submitted the dissertation. I take full responsibility for the views expressed and oversights that have been included.

(2014a) novel *Polttava tie* from 1968, which has some similarities to the *Memesa* trilogy, to hint at the possibilities of a more comprehensive analysis of the Finnish Romani narrative field. Although the number of novels is few, the Romani narrative field is broad. There are, for example, collections of poetry and short stories, plays, screenplays, documentaries, children's books, memoirs, non-fiction and journalism/editorials, oral narratives collected on audio in archives, music/lyrics, and lively debates on social media.²⁶

The *Memesa* trilogy is a coming-of-age story, but also a *Künstlerroman*, as it is the story of Memesa becoming an artist. The genre of *Bildungsroman* is handled in more detail in chapters 2, 4, and 6, however, and so, in this chapter, I concentrate on the development and problematization of stereotypes concerning Roma across the trilogy. I show that Lumberg addresses the *Memesa* trilogy to a specific readership (the authorial audience), which is majority-culture Finnish. The authorial audience are the ideal readers to whom the author is addressing the text. They are in a position to receive the narrative as its design is intended (Booth 1983; Phelan 2005). Lumberg utilizes stereotypes with a keen feeling for the historical relationship between Roma and majority-culture Finns and the ensuing, entrenched ideas of what Roma are like, which is evidence that majority-culture Finns are the authorial audience.

The first section deals with Romani stereotypes as represented in the text. A Romani reader might already be irrevocably insulted by the trilogy's opening paragraphs. However, the blatant stereotypes in the first paragraphs fit comfortably in the majority-culture Finnish social imaginary concerning Roma, and majority-culture readers may continue reading without giving the stereotypes much thought. The Sammakko edition's paratext also marks majority-culture Finns as the authorial audience, for example, by stating that it is the "first portrayal of Finnish Romani culture from the perspective of a Finnish Romani woman; an exciting and touching coming-of-age story from the shackles of the community to freedom. [...] [*Memesa*] stands up against the prejudices of her tribe and society" (Lumberg 2011).²⁷ The phrase "shackles of the community," for example, can be taken to indicate that an exposé of Romani culture is in store for non-Romani readers. However, the story is much more complex than it may first appear, which is in part due to the multiple layers of communication embedded in the narrative.

As outlined by James Phelan (2007), in fictional narrative there exists the doubled voice of the narrator who "tells her story to her narratee for her

²⁶ For a detailed list, see Appendix.

²⁷ "Memesa-trilogia on ensimmäinen suomalaisen romaninaisen näkökulmasta kerrottu romanikulttuurin kuvaus; jännittävä ja koskettava kasvutarina yhteisön kahleista vapauteen. [...] [*Memesa*] asettuu heimoaan ja yhteiskunnan ennakkoluuloja vastaan." All translations are by me. I have opted for the most literal translation instead of the most eloquent.

purposes,” while “the author communicates to her audience for her own purposes both that story and the narrator’s telling of it” (3–4; see also chapter 3). Likewise, in the *Memesa* trilogy, Memesa narrates her story beginning with Romani stereotypes, which is the subject of the first section of this chapter, based on her own negative experiences. The author Lumberg has designed the text to first show the naturalness of Romani stereotypes in the Finnish context and then goes on to problematize and, to a certain extent, deconstruct them, which is the subject of the second section.

The most important way Lumberg problematizes stereotypes concerning Roma is through Memesa the narrator, who rejects one normative category after another and, as a result, enters a space of in-betweenness. What may seem self-evident to the authorial audience at the beginning of the trilogy will appear quite differently upon completion, which may force readers to question their own assumptions and beliefs concerning Roma in Finland. I use the concept of nepantla to help determine how in-betweenness operates and can be represented and to better understand the processual nature of characters who find themselves outside of normative frames of reference.

The third section of this chapter concentrates on the character narrator (Phelan 2005) Memesa’s in-betweenness, which is read through nepantla as not belonging. By analyzing the story of a Romani girl who, in the words of Michael Stewart (1997) describing the act of leaving an insular Romani community, “breaks out” (73–94) and finds herself rejected by majority-Finnish culture, yet not part of Romani culture either, it is possible to discern issues of in-betweenness. Nepantla is analyzed in terms of the space between the symbolic death of one identity and the birth of another, the use of magic realist elements, time, language, relationships, schooling, sexuality, and more.

The form that nepantla takes in the *Memesa* trilogy differs from how the concept was formulated in part 1 of this dissertation. Nepantla can indicate both a positive in-betweenness where transformation can happen and a “space / times of chaos, anxiety, pain, and loss of control” (Keating 2015, xxxiv). In the former, nepantla is framed as coming into the consciousness of one’s own in-betweenness based on a choice, an embracement of in-betweenness as belonging. In Anzaldúa’s chapter ‘now let us shift...conocimiento...inner work, public acts’ (2015), however, nepantla is first introduced as a space of loss, confusion, and in-betweenness as *not belonging*—of having broken from secure and accepted frames of reference. These are both parts of a process.

Nepantla is a one of seven stages to *conocimiento*, or self-awareness, which will here be used as a heuristic tool. Instead of in-betweenness being embraced, as it was in Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (2009), in-betweenness is defined negatively—as what it is not, as well as loss, confusion, and through not belonging. Through the experience of being the Other, one can be forced into the in-between by not belonging to society’s shared frames of reference. This form of negativity can be understood as a narrative gap: we are told what the narrator isn’t but perhaps not conclusively what she is. The two texts in part 2

of the dissertation, including, in addition to Lumberg's trilogy, John Rechy's *City of Night*, have narrators who are defined, in large part, by not belonging.

This insight complicates our understanding of nepantla. Nepantla is premised upon ongoing change and the novels in part 2 also end with the character narrators' *Bildung* in mid-movement. However, there is a pessimistic difference here. Movement can be towards something, a linear, outward *becoming*, or it can be circular and repetitive. In-betweenness can be defined as partially belonging to a multiplicity of categories, while never pledging allegiance to any *one* of them, or it can also be defined as not belonging to various categories. Lumberg's text is like Cisneros's novel in the sense that Memesa reconciles, to a degree and after many failures, with her Romani heritage by symbolically killing the aspects of that culture that she rejects, though her relationship to majority-Finnish culture remains estranged. Compared to the novels in part 1, the *Memesa* trilogy is marked by an imposed form of in-betweenness, however, rather than being Memesa's choice.

Furthermore, I am interested in seeing how nepantla translates across cultures. In the chapter, and especially the conclusion, I compare the *Memesa* trilogy with Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* to determine what similarities and differences exist in terms of representing and creating in-betweenness across cultures and geographies. Both texts are told from the point of view of adolescent girls who leave their collective to search for a healthier and more fulfilling subjectivity.

5.1.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The nepantla of not belonging is especially pertinent in the case of the *Memesa* trilogy, but perhaps also for scholarship on the Finnish Romani community more broadly. Within the field of anthropology, there has recently been a call for Finnish Roma to be studied as a heterogenous community, especially in cases where Roma feel 'in-between' cultures (Roman 2018; Stenroos 2012a, 2012b). Viewed from the field of Chicana/o studies, which went through the process of opening scholarship to the heterogeneity of the community in the 1970s (see Noriega *et al.* 2010), one might wonder at the tardiness of such a scholarly project. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, many Roma themselves, and especially those in positions of power within the community, have wished to maintain the traditional status quo through a collective identity (Kopsa-Schön 2002, 172). As a greatly outnumbered minority (there are 10,000–12,000 Finnish Roma [Terveyden ja hyvinvoinin laitos 2021]), there has been resistance to Romani culture assimilating to the norms of the Finnish majority, which have been stigmatized within the Romani community (Kopsa-Schön 1996, 68–9). One cannot be a Roma if one does not behave according to the established norms (Gröndahl 2011, 116; see also Kopsa-Schön 1996, 253, 2002, 172; Viljanen 2012). For

example, in both Lumberg (2011) and Baltzar's (2014a) texts, characters comment pejoratively to others for having fair skin and hair, which is not within the norms of Romani physiognomy, and the norms of dress, which are distinct from majority-Finnish culture, are commented upon regularly.²⁸ Acting/appearing like majority-culture Finns is said to be acting "*kaaje*-like," an utterance that is used to police the boundaries of the in-group identity and customs (compare this to María Herrera-Sobek's [2009, 84] "*agringado*" [gringo-like] in chapter 3). *Kaaje* is a Romani-language term for majority-culture Finns/non-Roma, like the more widely known Romani term *gadjo*, while *kaale* signifies a Romani individual.²⁹ These are used, in the trilogy as elsewhere, to demarcate the dividing line between in- and out-group.

To empower the Romani position at the margins of society, a process of "strategic essentialism" has taken place (Gröndahl 2010, 119). According to Gayatri Spivak (1987, 205), a "strategic essentialism" is a way of politicizing attributes with the aim of strengthening the position and boundaries of a group to create an emancipatory identity in place of a negative one. For example, feminists might overlook internal differences within a heterogeneous group of women to fight for women's rights temporarily and strategically. The result for Finnish Roma has been a homogenizing view in Finland by both Roma themselves and majority-culture Finns, a position that has fluctuated yet remained intact over the 500 years Roma have lived in Finland (Pulma 2012). Kiba Lumberg's *Memesa* trilogy, however, is a more recent example of the artistic representation of heterogeneity within Romani culture that enables scholars and society alike to better see, define, and understand the multiplicity within the Romani community. In the words of Gröndahl (2010),

In this respect, it is precisely the production of Lumberg, Baltzar, and [Katarina] Taikon that questions the traditional stereotypes of the Roma that produce otherness and locate Romani culture in the past. The Roma described in the works of these authors consist of differences that are themselves variable. The various manifestations of Romani identity have been described in their texts as mutually permissive and equal experiences rather than as hierarchical, dichotomous, and

²⁸ See Airi Markkanen (2003b) and Anna Maria Viljanen (2012) for more on the norms of clothing in Romani culture. Clothes are meant to cover the skin and hide bodily shapes. A girl who has reached puberty decides whether to take on "dresses" (*hameet*) and dress according to Romani traditions. It is not seen as appropriate to appear dressed non-normatively in front of older Roma.

²⁹ I have translated the Finnish-language term *mustalainen* (literally 'black one') to 'gypsy.' *Mustalainen* has historically been used to refer to Roma but has largely been replaced by the term *romani* in written texts and, increasingly, in spoken language.

separate entities (cf. Rosenberg 2002, 164). Thus, these writers often deal with the intersections of collective and individual Romani identity. (127–8, my translation)

Gröndahl points out that Lumberg and Baltzar in Finland, and Taikon in Sweden, create characters who come alive on the page because they are complex, variable, and do not submit to the stereotypical images of Roma, which are often based on a homogenous and mythical past. Historical vision can be myopic and becomes even more problematic when used as the basis for defining the present. For example, YLE's³⁰ section for Finnish Roma in its *Elävä arkisto* [Living Archive] (YLE, n.d.), a website where information, photographs, and television and radio programs have been collected, relies heavily on the image of the Romani man as horse-trader, the Romani woman as wearing a distinct dress, and music being a 'natural' occupation and pastime of Roma in general. These tropes come into the historical analysis of Roma in Finland but cannot be the premise upon which contemporary understanding of Romani culture is based, nor should it be used as a blanket interpretation of all Roma in the past.

Historically, Roma often took up mobile trades, which means they were usually poorer, though not exclusively so (Tervonen 2012, 104–7). Also, both Romani and majority-Finnish cultures were more homogenous in the past due to economic and educational limitations, which often translated into a narrow niche of everyday survival for most people. Both cultures are patriarchies. Generally, the Romani patriarchy has been more hierarchical with clearly encoded 'natural' differences between men and women—e.g., women's bodies were considered 'dirty'—which could lead to misogyny (Kopsa-Schön 1996, 68–9; Roman 2018, 243; Stenroos 2018, 11–12; Steward 1997, 224). This is a central theme in Lumberg's trilogy.

The historical record, as outlined in the contributions to Panu Pulma's (2012) edited book *Suomen Romanien Historia* [Finnish Romani History], also illustrates the heterogeneity of the Romani people throughout Finnish history. This included racially mixed unions (and the resulting children), individuals who joined the Roma who were not of Romani racial background themselves, Roma who settled into localities and practiced trades and eventually were no longer counted as 'Roma' in future censuses (Tervonen 2012, 91), wealthy merchant class Roma (Palm 2012, 62–73), and other elements that went against the grain of stereotypical and easily categorizable Roma. Despite this, historical documents often refer to the Roma's 'natural' inclination to wander. Settling down to work in the standard economy was felt, by some in the majority culture who made political decisions, to go against the Romani 'blood.' As a result, the historical tendency was forced assimilation through often draconian laws and dehumanizing practices (Tervonen 2012,

³⁰ YLE is the Finnish state-owned and operated media conglomerate.

92). These same sentiments—the drive of one's 'blood' influencing one's natural inclinations—were also included in *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* in the United States in 1969, as mentioned in chapter 3.

According to literature by Roma describing historical reality, including Lumberg and Baltzar's texts, Roma have been marked as Other based on the idea of race, which then informed the stereotypical categorization of Roma as a whole. Race has also been shown to be the determining factor in the Othering of Roma across Europe both historically and in contemporary times (Lee 2000; for how racial difference is articulated and constructed in Finland, see Rastas 2005). While, to some, it may sound self-evident that race plays into Romani Othering, Reza Zia-Ebrahimi (2020) illustrates, for example, the denial of race when Islamophobia is discussed in France. Farid Hafez (2018), in reference to anti-Muslim racism, writes:

In the Anglosphere, Islamophobia has become widely accepted as a term to name the racism focused on the figure of the 'Muslim,' and its historical development and genealogy has been traced in great detail (Allen 2010); however, in other parts of the world (especially in Europe), the terminology itself is still questioned a great deal, not only by Islamophobes but also within academic spheres. (211)

Hafez's insight into the paradigmatic differences in how the concept of 'race' is understood in various cultural spheres stands as a warning that we must not assume like-mindedness when comparing U.S.-American and European texts and ideological realities. Since 2009, for example, Sweden has banished the concept of 'race' from its antidiscrimination law, which, according to Michael McEachrane (2018), results in the state not recognizing race as a social problem in the country. As a result of these kinds of phenomena, some scholars argue that in the European context there is a widespread denial that race and colonialism are politically relevant (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Gilroy 2005; Goldberg 2009; Shilliam 2017).

Meanwhile, and contrary to all this, Ivan Hannaford (1996, cf. Bethencourt 2014) argues that there is little evidence that a conscious idea of race existed before the Reformation. Rather, it was developed by thinkers in a specifically European context in dialogue with colonialism (187–233). In other words, Hannaford argues that race does not only apply to Europe but that the concept of race as it has come to be understood has its origins in Europe. While Finland does officially recognize race, its usage has limits, for example when collecting data, and sometimes it is used in questionable or illegal ways, such as police profiling of Roma (The Stopped Ethnic Profiling Project, n.d.). The general European understanding of race sheds light on the premise of race in the *Memesa* trilogy: there is a gulf between the institutional intent of anti-racism in schools, for example, and the realities of how race plays out for Romani students.

Race is important for the *Memesa* trilogy as for the study of Roma in Finland. I concentrate on how race is manifested as physiognomic difference and extended to symbols of culture, social standing, economics, and so on in the *Memesa* trilogy, especially through Memesa's feeling that some majority-culture Finns do not see her as human. I believe much more work on this topic remains to be done (for an analysis of representations of Roma in Finnish literature by non-Roma, see, however, Parente-Čapcová 2011). According to Catrin Lundström and Benjamin R. Teitelbaum (2017), editors of a special edition of *Scandinavian Studies on Nordic Whiteness*, "[...] non-white residents of the Nordic countries experience themselves as perpetual outsiders—as eternal “immigrants”—regardless of their place of birth or degree of integration” (151). Race has been, and continues to be, a powerful marker in Finnish society in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them.’

5.1.2 ACCESSING ROMANI INDIVIDUALS THROUGH LITERATURE

Though the character Memesa is fictional, some of her experiences align with the life of the historical author Kiba Lumberg, which is informative (though an in-depth comparison of fictional and historical elements is beyond the scope of this dissertation). Kiba Lumberg, full name Kirsti Leila Annikki Lumberg, was born to Finnish Romani (Kaale) parents in Lappeenranta, Finland, in 1956. She is a visual artist who has also published novels (2011; 2018), comic books (2010a; 2010b), a children's book (Majander and Lumberg 2012), a screenplay (1997), and videos (1990; 1999; 2004). She is an important, if often overlooked, part of the Finnish cultural milieu.

In an interview on YLE's program 'Punainen Lanka' [Red Thread] (2004), Lumberg explained that her childhood in the 1960s was “poor but spiritually rich.”³¹ Lumberg also confirms that she, like the character Memesa, ran away from her family at age 13 (on her birthday) with the help of a benevolent teacher, who, as with Memesa, shaped her life. There are other parallels. Lumberg states:

Freedom is so terribly important. And Memesa experiences that freedom in such a way that she must get out of the life situation in which she's been. [...] I've also wanted to leave certain circumstances that seemed to stunt my growth, my physical integrity, and so on, so that, I think that safety... it's an absolute precondition for every child to have a safe environment.³² (Punainen Lanka 2004)

³¹ ”...köyhänä mutta henkisesti rikkaana...”

³² ”Vapaus on niin hirveen tärkeä. Ja Memesa kokee sen vapauden sellasena, että hänen on päästävä niin kuin pois siitä elämäntilanteesta missä hän on ollu. Ja kyllä siinä on tiettyjä yhtymäkohtia

Lumberg here explains that the essential prerequisite for any child is feeling safe in her environment and, if this condition is not met, then something bold must be done, like turning against one's home environment and towards institutional authority. Freedom, she says, is the state of having one's basic emotional and physical needs met, which here means that one's body and inner life are intact.

Prodded by the interviewer, Maarit Tastula,³³ Lumberg describes the violence she encountered as a child growing up, saying violence "was basically seen constantly. So, you went anywhere and there were always forms of violence."³⁴ Pushed for examples, though visibly trying to avoid saying too much, Lumberg expands on the prevalence of violence everywhere she went, such as on weekends, when

even in white families, fists might be swinging, and there, too, the man of the house might also get into a fit of rage and throw the woman and children out, and suddenly you realize that it is [everywhere]. It's just so awful that, 'it's pretty wild over here, and, well, it's pretty wild over there, too,' and it just feels like, why's it like this?³⁵ (Punainen Lanka 2004)

Lumberg deflects the interviewer's line of questioning by reminding her, and the audience, that it was not just Roma who resorted to violence, but it was prevalent across society, most notably instigated and practiced by men.

Another parallel between Memesa and Lumberg is their experience of school. At the time of the 'Punainen Lanka' (2004) interview, only the first

kirjoittajaan, elikä minuun. Mä olen myös halunut lähteä pois tietyistä olosuhteista, jotka tuntuu vangistavan minun kasvamista, fyysistä koskemattomuutta ja semmoista, niin kun, turvallisuutta mikä minun mielestä, niin kun, jokaiselle lapselle on ehdoton edellytys, että sillä olisi turvallinen ympäristö."

³³ Interestingly, given that the interview took place as recently as 2004, Tastula uses the term *mustalainen* (gypsy) often, sometimes interspersing it with *romani* (Romani).

³⁴ "Kyllä sitä periaatteessa näki niinku jatkuvasti. Siis, meni minne tahansa ja aina ilmeni väkivallan muotoja."

³⁵ "...kyllä valkolaisperheissäkin, siellä saatto nyrkit heiluu ja sielläki, se, miespuolinen siellä saatto saada kans raivareita ja heittää naista ja lasta ulos. Yhtäkkiä huomaa, että sitä on [kaikkiällä]. Se oli niinku kauheeta, että aika hurjaa siellä, no, on tuollaki kyllä, et tuntu jotenkin, että miksi näin?"

novel, *Musta Perhonen* [Black Butterfly] (2004), had been published, which deals with Memesa's life up to the age of 13. It is natural that Lumberg would discuss topics surrounding childhood in her interview following the publication of that book. However, I also argue that Lumberg's technique of framing Romani issues through children is a tactical gesture to circumvent the prejudices of her authorial audience—majority-culture Finns. Children are, of course, venerated around the world, but Finnish society has an especially egalitarian and idealistic vision when it comes to children's right to be educated in a safe environment, which links to Lumberg's statements about physical and emotional integrity above (see special edition of *Early Child Development and Care* for an overview of Finnish educational attitudes and practices, e.g., Määttä and Uusiautti 2012). Speaking to a broad Finnish audience on national television, Lumberg appeals directly to her audience by using the second person perspective in describing the effects of racism on children. She says, of her own experiences:

You're all alone, and you lean against the school wall, and, with the toe of your shoe, you draw patterns on the sand. No one talks to you at all and the fact that you are, like, you don't even exist, your fate is that you are that gypsy. Others have friends, they talk, they smile at each other [saying] "you exist." But you're just the weird one.... You weren't a human. There was no human dignity. And it's, of course, the most awful thing is, that this kind of mindset, imagine, they're passing on to young children.³⁶ (Punainen Lanka 2004)

This quote encapsulates Memesa's experiences of childhood in school and, later, once she's left home, out in broader majority-culture Finnish society (see Uusitalo-Malmivaara 2012 for inclusion of school children in Finland). The dehumanizing effects of racism as experienced by Memesa in the trilogy, and Lumberg in real life, speak to the complex systems of institutional racism in Finland and help to explain how and why Roma were and continue to be a marginalized community. It is these undercurrents that, over the course of the trilogy, begin to complicate and undermine the stereotypes by which Roma are presented to the authorial audience at the beginning of the trilogy. Other parallels between Memesa and Lumberg exist, and I will comment upon a few of them as the chapter progresses, especially as historical events support the plausibility of experiences in the *Memesa* trilogy, which is taken as a fictional

³⁶ "Sä ootkin ihan yksin, ja sä nojaat niinku semmoiseen koulun seinää ja kengänkäreillä piirtelet hiekkaan niinku kuvioita. Kukaan ei puhu sulle mitään ja se että sinua ei niinku tavallan niinku ole olemassakaan, sun onni on, että sä oot se mustalainen. Toisilla on ystäviä, ne puhuu, ne hymyilee toisilleen "sä oot olemassa". Mutta sä oot vaan se omituinen. ... Ei ollut ihminen. Ei ollut ihmisarvoa. Ja se on tietysti kaikkein hirveintä, että tämmöinen ajattelutapa, kuvitelkaa, ne antaa pienille lapsille."

representation of one Romani girl/woman's experiences coming to terms with her place in Finnish society.

The *Memesa* trilogy (2011) is made up of three novels: *Musta Perhonen* [Black Butterfly] (2004), *Repaleiset Siivet* [Tattered Wings] (2006), and *Samettiyö* [Velvet Night] (2008). Memesa narrates her story from childhood to adulthood. The analysis that follows is premised upon a reading of the trilogy as a whole. The arc of development means that Memesa, at any given point in the narrative, is one version of her character as she continues to develop. Process is highlighted as Memesa goes through Gloria Anzaldúa's seven stages of *conocimiento*, fails, backtracks, and learns. As such, reading any section in isolation can misconstrue the overall meaning of the text. Stereotypes, racism, and misogyny exist in Finland, and, in the coming pages, readers will be confronted with them.

5.2 CURSED: STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISMS

The first book in the *Memesa* trilogy,³⁷ *Musta Perhonen*, covers Memesa's life from the age of five to thirteen, at which point she runs away from home. The novel is important for the analysis of how Lumberg utilizes structural elements to create in-betweenness. First, Lumberg paints a bleak picture of the Romani community in line with stereotypes about Roma in the Finnish social imaginary, which I analyze at length in this section. These are the essentialisms through which Roma are often viewed in Finland. *Nepantla*, we will remember, is premised upon the rejection of one's inherited stories that are harmful. In the analysis of in-betweenness later, I argue that Lumberg, through her depiction of Romani essentialisms, is showing how and why Memesa must leave her culture behind. Running away allows Memesa to confront alternative realities—notably majority-Finnish culture—to create and test out her new self, which is in line with the concept of *nepantla*.

5.2.1 ROMANI STEREOTYPES AS REPRESENTED IN THE TRILOGY

The first paragraphs of the *Memesa* trilogy establish Roma in terms of a negative "strategic essentialism" (Spivak 1987). Though strategic essentialisms are typically positive attributes, Lumberg's description is almost all negative and fits neatly into the category of Other that Roma have

³⁷ It is imperative to stress that the 'Romani customs' described here are based on Lumberg's fictional text, unless otherwise indicated by a citation. I've tried to take care to remind readers of this, and I hope I've succeeded. Relatedly, the paratext on older editions of the *Memesa* novels indicate that "the persons and events in the book are a product of the imagination."

historically held in Finland. These negative attributes contribute to a call for change in how Roma are viewed in Finland, namely to seeing them as historically situated individuals faced with social, political, cultural, and economic ostracism. At first, however, the stereotypes represent how Memesa experiences the Romani community as a child, which is to say very negatively.

The trilogy opens with the line, “I, blessed and cursed, was born a gypsy girl” (Lumberg 2011, 11).³⁸ Memesa is referring not only to her race, ethnicity, and socio-economic position, but also to her gender. Her race is problematic in the context of Finland—stigmatized, ostracized, and often hated—and her gender, especially within Romani culture, is also problematic, as portrayed by Lumberg. Gender and socioeconomics are often linked in the trilogy, as women pay the heaviest price for the Romani community’s marginalization along with its adherence to a strict, traditional code of behavior.

Children relieve themselves in the yard, women carry water from a faraway well, and laundry day is heavy as the families are large. In the evenings, the women are exhausted. Fights are common when the men start to drink; many are killed by knife blows. The Roma live off of selling alcohol illegally and selling handicrafts. Children are mostly left to their own devices due to the overwhelming amount of responsibility the mothers carry. This, in turn, brings about an atmosphere of loneliness and fear in the children, as described by Memesa for her own part. Shooed away from her mother’s feet, she goes outside “timid and alert, afraid of the other gypsy children,”³⁹ for they “fight and beat me as a group, but I don’t hit back; I hate hitting.”⁴⁰ Memesa states: “I don’t want to shriek, to be involved in the pushing games. I spend a lot of time alone.”⁴¹ This difference extends to Memesa’s family, for the “gypsies scream at one another for whatever reasons, screeching. My mother Roosa doesn’t yell much, but sometimes ends up in a skirmish with two screechers” (Lumberg 2011, 11).⁴²

These quotes, all from the opening of the trilogy, sets out the timeframe for the text, the main themes, the implied author/narrator/authorial audience

³⁸ *”Minä kirottu ja siunattu olen syntynyt mustalaistytöksi.”*

³⁹ *”Menen ulos arkana ja valppaana, pelkään muita mustalaislapsia.”*

⁴⁰ *”Ne tappelevat ja hakkaavat minua joukolla, mutta minä en lyö takaisin, inhoan lyömistä.”*

⁴¹ *”En halua mölistä äänekkäästi, olla mukana tönimisleikeissä. Kuljen paljon yksinäni.”*

⁴² *”Mustalaiset huutavat toisilleen milloin mistäkin, räähkyvät. Äitini Roosa ei pahemmin räähky, mutta joutuu välillä kahakkaan räähkyjien kanssa.”*

relationship, and an important element of the characterization. The novel starts around the time of Memesa's first memories, which are of the house in which the family lives, and her emotions, characterized by fear, which mark the time. The opening indicates that Memesa's experience is central to this narrative and that she is different from the Romani collective, which combine to make up a major theme of the trilogy. The prologue indicates that the story is being told from the vantage point of adulthood upon the death of Memesa's mother; details such as the heavy laundry loads resulting from large families and the faraway well from which the women carry water are realizations that would come later and are applied to this earlier period. In other words, the focalizer is Memesa as a five-year-old but the narrator is Memesa as an adult, which is similar to the layered narration technique in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. This temporal gap is an element of in-betweenness throughout the trilogy, albeit a typical one in literature. It is highlighted through the prologue, however, and indicates that the implied author's establishment of the many stereotypes concerning Roma in the opening paragraphs is systematic rather than the innocent observations of a child. This insight also relates to the authorial audience, as will be shown.

Reviewing the opening paragraphs again, the following are set as tropes that coincide with the position of Roma in popular Finnish consciousness: Roma as poor, unemployed, dabbling at the illegal fringes, dirty (children), loud, overly emotional, violent (especially by knife), and engaged in (extreme) gender differentiation. These elements tap into what Susan Stanford Friedman (1993) calls "vertical reading." Stanford Friedman, in dialogue with Julia Kristeva (1980) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), plots narrative as the "movement within the coordinates of time and space" (Stanford Friedman 1993, 12) by invoking a graph. The horizontal axis represents the text as a transaction between writer and reader, which is where the plot "happens" (15). The writer, the reader, and the text each exist in their own time-place on this axis (15). Meanwhile, the vertical axis moves from the text "down to the exterior texts, or contexts, of the text in question" (13). The vertical axis emphasizes the text's relationship to other sources and influences, which are the dynamic multitude of meanings embedded in the text itself (16). For our purposes, the most important aspect of Stanford Friedman's demonstration is that the text takes part in a dialogue that is narrated by the reader from the "layered surfaces beneath and within the horizontal narrative" (16). The dialogue between text and reader takes place in a time-place that is distinct from the horizontal axis upon which the characters move (17). New and dynamic meaning—with a multitude of possibilities—appears in the process and time-place of reading. The characters or narrator in the storyworld can be (and often are) unaware of the dynamic levels of communication that are occurring between the text (and author) and the reader in another time-place.

In this dissertation, I have been referring to readers' interaction with, and interpretation of, narrative gaps. By filling in narrative gaps, or by reading 'vertically,' the authorial audience may become aware of what the stereotypical

Romani characteristics mean in the ideological landscape of Finnish society, even though the information is not verbally stated. The Romani stereotypes take on a referential aspect as they communicate ‘down’ the vertical axis of the text into the contextual, socially informed, position of Roma in Finland. For example, it is a common conception in Finland that Roma carry knives and use them violently, and so Romani knives have taken on the form of a cultural trope in Finland, which Memesa also taps into in her art piece ‘Musta Perhonen’ in which a Romani dress is pierced through with knives.⁴³ The stereotypical attributes Lumberg employs can thus be read as “textual gaps, silences, knots, and aporias [that] can be read vertically to gain some sort of access to the textual unconscious” (Stanford Friedman 1993, 223). The textual unconscious, in the opening of the trilogy, can be understood as the psychological burden of belonging to a people who are collectively understood by society as holding these stereotypical traits. This communication does not occur at the level of the characters or narrator but is rather found in dialogue with the socio-cultural and historical context of Finland. The meaning is filled in by readers who are aware of that context.

If the flesh-and-blood reader were expecting a sympathetic text about Roma by a Romani author, the opening paragraphs will have disillusioned him or her from the outset. However, in the vertical axis of the text, cultural narratives of racism against Roma based on stereotypes, socio-economic marginalization, gendered violence, and more come together as interdependent discourses in the description of Romani life. Memesa’s assertion that she is “blessed and cursed [to be born] born a gypsy girl” brings the multiplicity of her ethnicity into view: by referring to the negative aspects of Romani culture (“cursed”), which are established cultural narratives in Finland, she also plants the seed for their deconstruction, which will become clearer as the narrative progresses—the “blessed” aspects of being a Roma in spite of the persistence of these stereotypes.

Another way Lumberg deconstructs Romani stereotypes is to illustrate that they are not traits exceptionally held by Roma. Majority-culture Finns, for the most part, were also poor in the 1960s when this episode takes place; men across cultural borders beat their women and domestic violence generally rose in Finland after the traumas of World War II (Laurén and Malinen 2021). Despite this, in the vertical axis of the novel’s opening paragraphs, we can also read the text’s inverse, the mirror image of the Romani archetypal trope, which communicates majority-culture Finnish traits: hard-working, honest, clean, quiet, and stoically struggling through hardships. These archetypal ‘Finnish’ attributes are visible in their doubled Other, the Roma. The novel’s opening begs a series of questions: 1) Why would an implied Romani author depict

⁴³ Specifically, Roma are thought to carry the *puukko* variety of knife, which men generally carried on their belts in the past as a kind of general tool.

Romani characters in essentialized and stereotypical ways? 2) To whom is she communicating this? 3) What motivates this process?

I argue that Lumberg is utilizing strategic essentialisms to evoke the very stereotypes that the text will go on to undermine. As pointed out by Stanford Friedman (1998) about a text, its “[...] mimicry requires the (re)activation of the cultural narratives it would expose” (30–31). The trilogy as a whole shows that ‘Roma,’ ‘Finnish,’ ‘woman,’ ‘man,’ ‘heterosexual,’ ‘lesbian,’ and other categories are symbolically violent to Memesa’s subjective sense of self, which, to a large extent, exists in-between these categories and others. This also reflects the need not to reify Finnish Roma into one, cohesive group, but to understand Romani culture in terms of its heterogeneity (Sternroos 2018, 9) and Memesa as a dynamic example.

As character narrator, it is Memesa’s coming-of-age process that illustrates the complex interactions between conflicting stereotypical images and her experiences. This is indicated from the first word of the trilogy, which is *minä* or ‘I,’ in reference to Memesa as narrator (“I, blessed and cursed, was born a gypsy girl” [2011, 11]). Starting the texts with the first-person pronoun and distinguishing it from the collective through the third-person exclusive differentiates the description of the Roma generally from Memesa specifically. Though only five years old at the beginning of the trilogy, Memesa stands out: rather than violence, she chooses vigilance, hates hitting, feels fear that is linked to the Romani children as well as adults, and spends most of her time alone.

I will next explore how two of the abovementioned essentialized qualities for Roma—violence and gender relations—are developed in the trilogy. This will allow for a better understanding of how in-betweenness can be represented through the subversion of stereotypes.

5.2.2 VIOLENCE AND GENDER RELATIONS AS REPRESENTED IN THE TRILOGY

Violence and potential violence, which can quickly escalate to death, are an ever-present shadow across the narrative.⁴⁴ Blood feuds or vendettas, which become more central in the third book, *Samettiyö*, are brought up early in *Musta Perhonen*: “Death for death as there is no atonement” (Lumberg 2011,

⁴⁴ As noted, many of the descriptions concerning Roma here are fictional and are being analyzed as literature. Also, it is important to note that many of the fictionalized events are set in the 1950s and 60s. Since then, in the ‘real world,’ more and more attention has been paid to domestic and intimate partner violence against the Roma (and other minorities) both in Finland and internationally. See, e.g., Bimbi 2013; Milenković 2018; Törmä, Tuokkola, and Hurtig 2013; Yli-Räisänen 2019.

13; Grönfors 1977).⁴⁵ Extended families can join into the blood feud, which means revenge expands to a war between families. One of the families must move away to another town, city, or country, and the vendetta carries down through the generations. Large families have been known to traverse the country from north to south out of not only a fear of revenge, but also as a form of respect for the harmed family (Berlin 2015, 151).

Later, as an adult, Memesa applies to a course on traditional Romani handicrafts. Two male Romani interviewers look at her as though she were a “Martian,”⁴⁶ and one of them says, “We only take gypsies.”⁴⁷ “That’s why I came” (Lumberg 2011, 456),⁴⁸ Memesa replies. It turns out that the man had heard Memesa speak to an interviewer, which aired on TV, and he is upset about her views on Roma. She is also warned that Roma may attack her due to her outspokenness.

The TV interviewer had asked, “What do you think about gypsy-ness?” (Lumberg 2011, 453),⁴⁹ and Memesa answered, “I don’t believe it to be an intrinsic value. I think it’d be important for gypsies to study and develop themselves. And so that young people could also get jobs” (Lumberg 2011, 453–4).⁵⁰ The interviewer asks about blood feuds, and she says they exist, all Roma know that, but you shouldn’t talk about it. She says she thinks it’s ridiculous that it continues: “Some are in coffins and others in chains.”⁵¹ Her opinions about education are cut when the interview appears on TV, however,

⁴⁵ *”Kuolema kuolemasta, eikä sovitusta tunneta.”* This echoes the ‘lex talionis’ from Hammurabi’s Code from Ancient Babylonia and the saying ‘an eye for an eye,’ which is also included in the Bible. Though Lumberg frames this phenomenon in terms of ‘blood feuds’ (as does Grönfors 1977), more recent scholarship in the field of Romani studies in Finland tends to replace the term with the idea of ‘avoidance’ (*välttämistä*). There is much more to the phenomenon than the term ‘blood feud’ implies, including, for example, where one is allowed to live. Both ‘blood feud’ and ‘avoidance’ are related to the symbolic boundary of purity/impurity, the avoidance of impurity, and the concept of respect. See, e.g., Berlin 2015.

⁴⁶ *”...kuin marsilaista...”*

⁴⁷ *”Tänne otetaan vaan mustalaisia.”*

⁴⁸ *”Siksi mie tänne tulinkii...”*

⁴⁹ *”Mitäs olet mieltä mustalaisuudesta?”*

⁵⁰ *”En pidä sitä itseisarvona. Musta ois tärkeätä, et mustalaiset opiskelis ja kehittäis itseään. Ja et nuoret kii sais työpaikkoja.”*

⁵¹ *”...toiset on laudois ja toiset raudois.”*

which has been edited to make her look like a “bomb thrower” (Lumberg 2011, 454).⁵² Memesa states that ‘Roma’ is not an intrinsic value—not an essentialism—and historical, social, and economic contexts have shaped Romani realities, in addition to harmful traditions such as blood feuds. Memesa’s critique works to complexify the realities of Roma in Finland by showing that structural racism has harmed Romani individuals and these issues should be addressed, not just cultural ones. Group identities are too easily essentialized into simplistic, stereotypical images, Memesa asserts. Memesa’s argument is misconstrued, however, and she is suddenly in the middle of Romani power struggles and cultural disputes and becomes a scapegoat as a traitor to her tribe. Her parents receive death threats on the phone, causing her mother to suffer a heart attack.

In the trilogy, blood feuds are part of the ever-present potential for violence, which includes husbands beating wives, boyfriends beating girlfriends, a brother nearly killing his little sister for crying, rape, an escape from rape that involves the gouging out of the man’s eyeballs, and more. Violence is not taboo, but a normalized manner by which hierarchy is preserved in the text: strong over weak, men over women, parents over children. Marko Stenroos (2018) has shown that in Romani culture generally, power should not be understood as a ‘chain of command’ as in Euro-American societies but rather as based on hierarchies linked to an adherence to customs and loyalty to family (11–12).

At the opening of the first novel, violence is introduced through Memesa’s mother, Roosa. The focalizer is five-year-old Memesa, who has just described herself as hating violence. The neighbor Pitkä-Ilma’s [Tall Ilma’s] sister and mother often visit Stink Tower (*hajutorni*), the large wooden building where many Romani families live. Another neighbor, Punapää-Saaga [Redheaded Saaga], stokes animosity against Roosa amongst the two sisters and mother, who suddenly appear at Roosa’s door as young Memesa watches from a corner. The younger women have pieces of metal, and the mother holds a sickle. Punapää-Saaga’s golden hooped earrings have disappeared from the communal sauna, and they are accusing Roosa of stealing them.

Roosa grabs an axe from the corner and yells, “Come a meter closer and the axe will fall!”⁵³ One sister and the mother back up, but the second sister, Tekla, holds her ground. Roosa continues: “Out of my doorway or I’ll split your head!”⁵⁴ Tekla backs off and Roosa rushes out to settle the situation with Punapää-Saaga. From behind a door, Saaga whines, “Roosa dear, don’t come

⁵² “...pommihettäjäksi.”

⁵³ “Jos tuutte metriikää lähemmäs nii tullee kirvesnakkii!”

⁵⁴ “Pois miun ovenlävestä tai sie saat jakauksen päähäs!”

here!”⁵⁵ Splinters flying, Roosa smashes through the door with the axe and comes upon Punapää-Saaga’s husband, Väiski. “Where’s your woman? That windbag has been spreading lies. I’m going to cut out her tongue!”⁵⁶ Roosa finds Punapää-Saaga in the kitchen and grabs her by the hair, dragging her around the floor so that hair comes out in tufts. Memesa informs us coolly that “Mother took her honor back” (Lumberg 2011, 12).⁵⁷ We are told that the next day Memesa watches all of those involved in the fight sitting together in the kitchen together drinking coffee and laughing.

The elements of Romani violence, as portrayed in the novels, are set out here. First, the violence is based on an (unfounded) accusation and goading. As portrayed in the text, one cannot simply ‘mind one’s own business’: violence perpetually infringes upon any form of personal or private space. Second, the violence is serious: pieces of metal, sickles, an axe, the cutting out of a tongue, doors turned to splinters. Stealing golden earrings (or the suspicion of having done so) is an offense potentially punishable by death. Third, violence is closely equated with honor. If you are threatened, you must respond in kind or lose face. If you show yourself to be weak the harassment and violence will perpetuate itself. Fourth, Roosa can drag Punapää-Saaga by the hair while her husband, Väiski, watches, and he does nothing: he knows his wife deserves this retribution, and Roosa is allowed to attack her. Fifth and lastly, once the situation is resolved, which means that Roosa has passed the test on her honor and shown that she is willing to respond in kind, everyone laughs about it. The only real victim here is the child who is fearful and traumatized while watching from the corner. The child is acculturated into violence, and so the violence is perpetuated (not in Memesa’s case, however, who is portrayed as being different). Though normalized in the context due to its prevalence, it is violent moments like this that cause young Memesa fear and trauma and motivate her from a young age to run away.

An important aspect of violence in the novels is that it cuts across age-groups, genders, and family relations. Indeed, the family exists in part to protect its members from outside violence but inflicts much of it while policing the boundaries that make up the familial hierarchical structure. Examples are many, but perhaps the most shocking comes from *Musta Perhonen* and is referred to again at the end of the trilogy in *Samettiyö*. Memesa’s older brother Ranssi, a popular singer when things are going well, is hot-tempered and unpredictable. He demands servitude from the women, including his younger sisters. Ranssi is late for a performance and cannot find his cufflinks and his

⁵⁵ ”Älä rakas Roosa tuu tänne!”

⁵⁶ ”Missä se siun akkas on? Se kielilärppä puhuu perättämmii, mie katkasen sen kielen.”

⁵⁷ ”Äiti otti kunniansa takaisin.”

shirt is not ironed; he grabs and slaps Memesa, but she escapes to the roof. In a rage, he comes across his littlest sister running across the yard and shakes her out of irritation. Startled, she begins to cry, and Ranssi screams, “And don’t scream; shut up!”⁵⁸ and punches her so hard that blood comes out of her mouth and nose, and she lands motionless on the ground. Ranssi is described as unhinged and narcissistic; however, there is nothing that those around him can do but hide for he is an adult male and hence at the top of the physically enforced familial hierarchy. The only potential challenger is Ranssi’s father, who does say that if his daughter is dead, he will kill Ranssi “if it is the last thing I do” (Lumberg 2011, 112).⁵⁹ Ranssi himself left home early after violent beatings from his father and has scars on his knees from an axe that may indicate a source of his own violence. This episode works, in its shocking portrayal of violence upon the innocent body of a young girl, to allow the authorial audience to feel the fear and helplessness of women in the Romani familial context.

An episode is then portrayed that takes place later in narrative time, in which Ranssi’s girlfriend is caught trying to leave him and he beats her, including in the face, with a horsewhip made of car radio antennas fastened together, saying, “In our family women haven’t left before and they won’t now, either. And if they do it’s as a corpse! Now you’ll suffer, woman!” (Lumberg 2011, 120).⁶⁰ These two episodes illustrate that women bear the brunt of violence in the trilogy, that much of it takes place within the family unit, and that the violence is life-threateningly serious. Existential fear pervades the lives of women in the novels daily, for anything—Ranssi’s missing cufflinks or Punapää-Saaga’s missing earrings—can bring down sudden violence. As an old man at the end of the trilogy, Ranssi’s past haunts him like a ghost as he stands at Memesa’s art exhibition looking at a piece of art that depicts a man kicking the head of a girl with her eyes closed and blood coming out of her mouth and nose (Lumberg 2011, 352). Memesa’s art symbolizes that violence may be normalized, but it is not forgotten; it lives on in the emotional landscapes of those who continue to suffer from it in the form of scars and emotional trauma.

5.2.3 ROMANI CUSTOMS AS REPRESENTED IN THE TRILOGY

Violence is used to police the community in the trilogy, along with a variety of other methods. Without providing a detailed outline or guide to Romani

⁵⁸ *”Etkä huua siinä, pää kiini!”*

⁵⁹ *”..jos sie tapoit miun lapsein, nii mie oon tappava siut vaik se ois miun viimone tekoni!”*

⁶⁰ *”Mein suvus ei oo ennenkää naiset lähteneet kävelee, eikä lähe nytkää. Ja jos lähtee nii ruumiina! Nyt sie naine kärsit!”*

cultural codes, Memesa alludes to and interweaves aspects of “*romaniya law*” (Berlin 2015, 155) into her story. One aspect Memesa goes into detail on, however, is how women are viewed, which she finds especially galling from an early age. For example, in *Samettiyö* Memesa discovers that she is paid less than men for the same job. She quits on the spot because of her visceral understanding, which is also backed up by logical conclusions later, that her worth is equal to that of men (Lumberg 2011, 425–8).

By Romani custom, as portrayed in the trilogy, women’s bodies are considered ‘filthy’ and all reference to sex is forbidden for this reason. Since marriage means sex with the ‘filthy’ body of a woman, marriages must be conducted under veil of secrecy as well. Women, naturally, live bodily, which makes the “ideal of a nonbodily existence” (Stewart 1997, 224) in Romani culture a contradiction that, for Memesa, causes angst, fear, and cognitive dissonance.

When I still lived at home, I was constantly being told that women are filthy and a little girl’s already a whore and dirty. Then why are men with women? To have sex with them, and for women to bear children. They often talked of women’s treacherousness at home. [...] A girl must cover herself and be shy, but at the same time allow a gypsy boy or man to take her purity even by force.⁶¹ (Lumberg 2011, 165)

By custom, Memesa states, narratives of women’s “treacherousness” and filth are engrained in the community, especially in terms of sex. Women’s nature is a ‘fact’ established through stories received from a young age. Based on ethnographic work, Raluca Bianca Roman (2018) concludes that “Finnish Roma women appeared to sustain a way of life in which sexuality had to be denied in all aspects of life” (243).

Memesa sees through the inconsistencies of women’s role in the Romani community not only in terms of her own reality, as will be made clear, but in how male-female relations play out more generally. As the subsection above illustrated, if any one gender is responsible for being ‘treacherous’ to the well-being of the community it is men—through deadly violence and fear. ‘By force’ in the quote above refers, of course, to rape, which in turn refers to the Romani custom of ‘stealing the bride.’ In Veijo Baltzar’s (2014a) *Polttava Tie*, this custom is described from a male perspective; in that account, the practice reverberates with potential violence but ends happily and even comically (36–48). Anna Maria Viljanen (2012, 407–14) gives a historical account of the

⁶¹ ”*Kun vielä asuin kotona, sain koko ajan kuulla, että nainen on saastainen ja tyttö jo piienenä huora ja likainen. Miksi miehet sitten kuitenkin ovat naisten kanssa? Naivat heitä, ja naiset synnyttävät lapsia. Naisen petollisuudesta puhuttiin kotona usein. [...] Tytön pitää peittää itsensä ja olla ujo, mutta suoda mustalaispojan tai -miehen ottaa koskemattomuus vaikka väkisin.*”

custom that aligns with general outlines of the fictional descriptions mentioned here.

In *Musta Perhonen*, 'stealing the bride' reflects a much more sinister reality than in Baltzar's novel. Memesa's older sister Signe is a beautiful, intelligent, and studious thirteen-year-old. Viki, her father, is oblivious to her approaching adulthood and sexualization. One day riding home with a load of hay, Viki and Memesa come across Viki's relative, Mari, and her husband. Mari warns Viki that Kalle, a man in the region, has been keen on dancing with Signe and is eyeing her as a potential wife. Viki, shocked not only that anyone would consider his child-daughter as a wife but also that he appears to be the last one to know, comes home angry and intent on action (Lumberg 2011, 40–2). His chagrin is also intensified by Kalle's family, which gives context to the power relations and hierarchies within the Romani community, as portrayed in the trilogy, and how forced marriages invalidate agency in women's choice of husband or family to which they will then 'belong.' Viki, a good, kind man, personally dislikes and disrespects Kalle's family, which he holds to be corrupt, cruel, and immoral. Kalle's family is literate and Viki, who is illiterate himself, resents how they look down on other, less educated Roma.

Viki relates a story of how Kalle's father, Viktori, convinced a family to sell their small house in the countryside and helped them move to the city, but then kept the money himself since they were illiterate and easily cheated. Residential moves orchestrated by community leaders or more powerful men are related to the custom of the 'moving permit' by which families are given permission to move into a particular territory in Romani culture (Sternroos 2018, 17–8). When there was no work for the poorer family's father, a horseshoe smith, in the town, he died of grief soon after (Lumberg 2011, 35–6). Preying on the weak in this manner, which has made Kalle's family dominant in the region and the richest of the Roma, goes against the moral fabric from which Memesa's family cuts their cloth. The story has a long arc in the trilogy. The cheated family's children carry out a long campaign of revenge on Kalle's family, which gains closure when Kalle is shot dead at nearly the last chronological point of the trilogy. Thus, denouement is brought to the subject of blood feuds that began at the opening of *Musta Perhonen*, the first novel.

In part, however, Viki's distrust of Kalle's family is also explained by Kalle having mixed blood: "Those mix-bloods sure know how to cause trouble," (2011, 35)⁶² he says, which is ironic because he is also of mixed blood (his mother Emilia was a Jew from St. Petersburg) as are his wife and children. Raluca Bianca Roman (2018) explains how being a true Rom⁶³ is based on three pillars: one's blood, a desire to belong to the community, and, most importantly, a performance of an "acceptable form of Kaale [Finnish Romani]

⁶² "...kylhä ne sekaveriset metkut ossaa."

⁶³ This is the singular of 'Roma,' and in the Romani language means 'man.'

morality” (248). In Viki’s eyes, Kalle comes up short in the first and third of these pillars.

Viki sends Signe to live with Roosa’s sister in Porvoo, where Signe begins to attend school. On the playground one day, a car pulls up and a man comes out to talk with Signe, who is skipping rope with her friends. The setting (school playground) and activity (skipping rope) indicate that Signe is still a child. However, the man grabs Signe and throws her into the car, and it drives off, such like Esperanza’s great-grandmother had a sack thrown over her head and was carried off like a “fancy chandelier” (Cisneros 2009, 10–11) in *The House on Mango Street*. The teacher says, “Those are those gypsy antics again [...] we can’t get involved” (Lumberg 2011, 49).⁶⁴ In the trilogy, Roma are shown to be considered by society at large to exist outside Finnish customs, norms, and laws. Further, Signe’s body has been objectified completely. It is plucked out of a school yard and set out on a future of violence and servitude. The body will begin to bear the marks of that violence in the form of scars.

In the ‘Punainen Lanka’ (2004) interview, Lumberg explains that despite the tenacity of traditional gender relations and customs in the Romani community, any good-hearted man will nevertheless wish for something different for his own daughters. Such seems to be the case with Viki’s attitude towards Signe: Viki does not want his own daughter to live in an environment of immorality and servitude, even if he upholds some of these norms in relation to his own wife. However, Kalle’s family is more powerful, and with power comes agency. Decisions can be made on behalf of those who are weaker. Notably, nobody asks Signe her opinion. Rather, her father works on her behalf but, since he is weak in relation to Kalle’s family, his agency is also subsumed by the stronger family, for the hierarchy has many rungs.

Signe is missing for some months, which, according to Baltzar’s (2014a) description of ‘stealing the bride’ in *Polttava Tie*, is customary so that “the first fit of anger subsides” (40).⁶⁵ Viki goes around asking everyone about Signe’s whereabouts, but people either don’t know or play dumb. Eventually, once the situation has been mentally reconciled on the part of Signe’s family, Kalle and Signe appear at their door. Kalle, now Signe’s husband, informs Viki that they are moving in. Viki says the newlyweds should go live with Kalle’s family, which is much wealthier, but they cannot, Kalle says, as they’ve been cut off. Signe takes off her woolen shawl and is unrecognizable. Her hair has thinned, there are dark circles under her eyes “like bicycle tires,”⁶⁶ her face is as white

⁶⁴ ”Nuo on taas niitä mustalaisten touhuja [...]. Ei me niihin voida puuttua.”

⁶⁵ ”...sitten kun ensimmäinen suuttumiskohtaus on ohi.”

⁶⁶ ”... mustat renkaat kuin polkupyörän kumit.”

as a “gnawed bone,”⁶⁷ and she has scars at the corner of her mouth and above one eye (Lumberg 2011, 52). She is dressed in traditional Finnish Romani women’s clothing.

After some tense moments, Viki finally says, “[b]ring coffee to the table!” (Lumberg 2011, 53),⁶⁸ which everyone understands to be the acceptance of the marriage that it is: the newlyweds move in. While violence is potentially harmful to everyone, violence is squarely inscribed on the physical body—and in turn the psyche—of women in the novels. Memesa’s conclusion from all this is that violence forces women to pass the traditions on to the next generation, which only benefits men, who, as a result, can lead leisurely lives.

Signe’s development in the novels reflects the dynamic of women upholding the traditions they suffer from (see Tervonen 2010, 166). Signe goes from a young, studious girl to harsh-tempered enforcer of Romani customs, which is commented upon by Memesa in *Repaleiset Siivet*.

I don’t understand for what damn reason this kind of tribe has to be kept going by force, to imprison girls to be stepped on. It’s women’s and girls’ obligation to prop up the gypsy life and rules by which the men ensure themselves comfy conditions. Adult women make sure that their daughters are raised traditionally. If that fails, the mother ends up in the firing line and beaten because her daughter is stubborn. The rod must be bent early so the girl won’t become a wild animal.⁶⁹ (Lumberg 2011, 218)

The irony, in Memesa’s account, is that women “prop up the gypsy life and the rules” and pass on and enforce the very traditions from which they suffer (see, however, Roman 2018 for a discussion of female resistance). They may do so

⁶⁷ *”Naama on valkoinen kuin kaluttu luu...”*

⁶⁸ *”Tuoha kahvia pöytää!”*

⁶⁹ *”En käsitä, mikä helvetin tarve on pitää koossa tällaista heimoyhteisöä väkipakolla, vangita tytöt poljettaviksi. Naisen ja tytön velvollisuus on pönkittää kaalein elämää ja niitä säätöjä, joilla miehet varmistavat itselleen lokoiset oltavat. Aikuiset naiset pitävät huolta, että kasvattavat tyttärensä perinteisesti. Jos se ei onnistu, äiti joutuu tulilinjalle ja saa selkäänsä sen takia, että tyttö on kovapäinen. Vitsa on väännettävä jo varhain, ettei työstä tule jalopeuranaista.”* The world *jalopeura* is not commonly used, but a source indicates that when Mikael Agricola was originally translating the Bible into Finnish, he had to come up with a word for ‘lion’ that Finns in the far north, who’d never seen or perhaps heard of lions, would understand. He chose *jalopeura*, which also can be used as a synonym for a moose, to indicate a dangerous wild animal (Ruppel, n.d.).

because “force” or violence motivates them: the mother will pay the price for a stubborn daughter who does not conform. In addition to questions of honor, this means severe beatings. From a young age, the idea is to ‘break’ girls’ personalities through fear. As Lumberg stated in the ‘Punainen Lanka’ (2004) interview, “[w]hen a person’s self-belief is taken away, then she’ll lie there on the floor. She’ll do exactly what you ask,”⁷⁰ which is done through “[v]iolence. You take her character away. When a girl is made into a woman, you take her character away.”⁷¹ Memesa states, “[y]ou have to beat the arrogance and insolence out of [women] already at a young age” (Lumberg 2011, 165).⁷² These quotes indicate that any form of agency, self-direction, or independence must be stripped away to ensure that traditions continue and are passed on; men, meanwhile, are the beneficiaries. When Memesa runs away to the orphanage later and the family goes to fetch her, it is Signe—who has recently been beaten, kidnapped, and forcibly married at a very young age—who is most vocal and aggressive in pointing out Memesa’s treacherousness to her people.

Signe’s experience, the signs of which are visible on her body, are what motivates Memesa’s desire to run away (Lumberg 2011, 225). If it happened to Signe at the age of thirteen, Memesa calculates, it is only a matter of years before it will happen to her, too. After Signe’s kidnapping, Memesa’s mother starts to worry about Memesa, as well.

My dear daughter, be on your guard when you get older. Make your own life and be free. A young girl is never safe from older men. All they want is an innocent for themselves, and there you are. Where can you go once the house starts to fill with kids. You’re a prisoner.⁷³ (50–1)

Memesa’s mother is under duress in view of her elder daughter having been kidnapped, but this clearly also links to her own past and present realities. Roosa remembers herself as a girl when watching Memesa and knows that Memesa’s future in the Romani community is as a “prisoner” because she is

⁷⁰ *”...kun otetaan ihmiseltä itsetunto pois, sen jälkeen se matelelee tossa lattialla. Se voi tehdä ihan mitä sä pyydät.”*

⁷¹ *”Väkivalta. Otetaan luonne pois. Tytöstä tehdään nainen, niin siltä otetaan luonne pois.”*

⁷² *”Naisesta täytyy jo varhain hakata pois pöyhkeys ja röyhkeys.”*

⁷³ *”Sie rakas tyttösein oot varuillas ku tuut isommaks. Hanki ittelles oma elämä ja oo vapaa. Nuor tyttö ei oo koskaan turvassa vanhemmilt miehilt. Ne halluu aina viattoman itelleen ja siinäpä sitä on. Mihis siit lähtee jos lapsii rupiaa tulemaa tupa täytee. Vankiha siin on.”*

female. This kind of stark warning from an older woman is similar to those in *The House on Mango Street*, even down to the image of the house as a prison. Later, when Signe returns after the birth of her second child, missing a few front teeth, with black eyes, looking like an old hag (*vanha eukko*) (125), Memesa thinks: "If I stay here, my fate is to get married to some gypsy man that rapes me, punches my teeth into my throat, and breaks me down. My whole life wasted while making kids" (126).⁷⁴ Also, beyond the direct physical toll in terms of beatings and giving birth to children, Signe becomes her husband's servant, which irritates Memesa greatly; wives, for example, even butter their husbands' bread for them, which are handed over one by one.

Here we have seen how two of the essentialisms used to characterize Roma at the opening of *Musta Perhonen* have been further established in the narrative; indeed, there is little in the narrative to counter the suggestion that Roma are violent and adhere to extreme gender inequality, other than Memesa herself. Following the generic formulation of the *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel, the dire circumstances from which the heroine may develop have hence been established. Furthermore, the essentialisms that Roma carry in their coded position as Other in Finland have been made visible. Lumberg shows that this is how Roma are seen in Finland. Complicating the position is the fact that, based on the narrative, those stereotypical assumptions seem to be correct: Roma *are* in fact violent, gender discriminating, poor, unable to hold down legitimate jobs, and all the rest of it.

However, this is a kind of ethical trap set by Lumberg that will be sprung on the authorial audience later. The reader's initial response to these descriptions may become problematic later, when he/she learns more about the socio-economic context of Roma in Finland. Memesa also begins to see positive attributes in Roma and meets individual characters who do not conform to these traits.

5.3 BLESSED: DECONSTRUCTING STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISMS

As we have seen, the *Memesa* trilogy presents violence and gender relations as well as other elements in ways that coincide with the stereotypical essentialist categories that exist for Roma in the Finnish public consciousness. Stories, however, can convey contextualization, individual experiences, and multiplicity, which begin to problematize the basis upon which the stereotypes have been constructed.

⁷⁴ "Ajattelen, että jos tähän jään, minunkin kohtaloni on joutua jonkun mustalaismiehen matkaan, joka raiskaa, lyö hampaat kurkkuun ja näännyttää. Lapsia tehdessä menee koko elämä hukkaan."

As the novels proceed, it becomes clear that not all Roma are defined by these negative traits. Further, it is possible to choose not to take part in shared cultural traits that one finds harmful. This is the basis of *nepantla* as theorized by Anzaldúa. One's inherited stories can be rewritten, and the harmful aspects can be rejected.

Memesa's process into *nepantla* is looked at in detail in the section that follows. Here, I continue providing evidence that, overall, the *Memesa* trilogy presents negative strategic essentialisms that coincide with the way Roma are stereotypically seen in Finland only to deconstruct them. This overall structure also reflects how *nepantla* can be represented in narratives. It extends *nepantla* from the storyworld into a rhetorical act aimed at readers by forcing them to question the categories by which Roma are often perceived.

5.3.1 AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT KIND OF ROMA

In *Samettiyö*, the second novel, Memesa moves into her relative Zaida's apartment in Helsinki, where she acts as a live-in nanny for the two children while she awaits a training position at a hospital to begin. Zaida is a 'liberated woman' in the sense that she proudly lives without a husband, does what she wants, and extracts money from men as a kind of flirtatious escort. It is possible that she is actually a prostitute, but she frames her actions as milking the male gender, whom she considers a "simpler creature" (Lumberg 2011, 369),⁷⁵ for money. Officially she is a singer, though the reader only learns of this secondhand, such as when she leaves home to go on tour for several weeks. Performance fits in with her liberated, bohemian persona, and she comes home with money and gifts she's collected from her travels. Overall, she is perhaps the trilogy's most likeable character: she is not hung up on problems but creates her own reality, speaks her mind defiantly, and has a lot of fun in the process.

It is Christmas Eve, which in Finland is the high point in the year's festive calendar. Zaida and Memesa have prepared traditional Christmas foods, including *uunilohko* from Karelia, the recipe for which is given in detail, a traditional Christmas ham, and lutefisk. A white tablecloth reflects the many candles, it is clean and beautiful, and the children are washed and well dressed. Zaida remembers that they must have wine and goes to rummage for a bottle in her collection brought home from foreign trips. The children are given a tablespoon amount of wine mixed with water, adding to the festive quality of the occasion. The setting is idyllic: beautiful and peaceful (tablecloths and candles); festive (wine); and in touch with traditions (*uunilohko*, ham, and lutefisk). Then the doorbell rings. Zaida wonders who could possibly be ringing at this hour, the 'holiest'⁷⁶ in the Finnish calendar. It is the neighbor

⁷⁵ "...yksinkertaisempi otus..."

woman, Sirpa, her eye black and clothes torn, with her children, who are majority-culture Finns. Echoing Memesa's arrival at her door, Zaida says, "Now you're here. There's space for everyone" (Lumberg 2011, 371)⁷⁷ and has Memesa set more places at the table. Welcoming those in need into her home—which blurs the separation of private/public—indicates Zaida's generosity and goodness. This is especially poignant in the Finnish context where interfering in others' business is looked down upon, which is commented on by Memesa later, who wonders out loud why other neighbors, their doors ajar, do not interfere in the ensuing violence. The structure also echoes countless Christian stories, from the original Christmas story where Mary and Joseph were without shelter to Mary Magdalen caring for Christ's body and the Good Samaritan, hence epitomizing Christian ethics especially in terms of the 'sinner' and racially coded 'Other,' Zaida, being held up as more ethical than the high-minded majority-culture Finns.

The neighbor's husband, a policeman and majority-culture Finn, is drunk. He regularly beats his wife, Sirpa, and, since he is a police officer, there is no one to report him to. The man's occupation links back to hierarchies, especially in the context of Christmas: God, church, state, and men, with women and children at the bottom and Roma below that. Sirpa and the children settle to eat with the other women and children, and the scene continues as an ideal of female solidarity, plenty, and festive tranquility that flourishes outside normative hierarchies. The credit belongs to Zaida, who has consoled Sirpa, disinfected her wounds, taken a glass of vodka with her and Memesa, and it's back to the table to celebrate Christmas joyfully.

The family stays for the night, but the husband/father arrives pounding on the door and screaming in the morning. Sirpa dresses the children, not wanting to involve Memesa and Zaida and her children in the mess, but Zaida screams through the door, "Stop that racket or I'll call the police!"⁷⁸ The man answers, "Shut up, fucking gypsy whore. The police won't come because I'm a cop myself. Open the door, fucking whore!"⁷⁹ The man's insults are double-edged, bringing together race with gender, which in turn frames sexual liberty as immoral specifically for women. Sirpa also reflects the coded differences between majority-culture Finns and Roma: the former are portrayed as more individualistic and solitary, while the latter are regularly involved in others'

⁷⁶ Christmas Eve begins at noon in Finland when 'Christmas Peace' is declared from Turku. This is an old statute that makes breaking the peace during Christmas more punishable than at other times of the year.

⁷⁷ *"Nyt oot täällä. Kyl tänne mahtuu."*

⁷⁸ *"Lopeta toi rymistely tai soitan poliisit!"*

⁷⁹ *"Turpa kii saatanan mustalaisnatku. Ei poliisit tule, koska olen itse poliisi. Ovi auki saatanan hutsu!"*

business. Due to the pounding and screaming, the children start to cry, but Sirpa opens the door and the man barges in wearing his police uniform. “Fucking gypsy, don’t interfere with our business or your children will become orphans,”⁸⁰ he says to Zaida and orders his children home and drags his wife there by the hair. Again, this reflects the understanding that—even in cases of violence—one is expected to avoid interfering in another’s business in the majority culture. Illustrating Zaida’s feisty spirit, she yells after him, “Some night on a dark street, someone’s going to snuff you out, father-fucker wife-beater!” (Lumberg 2011, 373).⁸¹ By way of warning, Zaida tells Memesa: “There you have it. [...] Where one could end up” (374).⁸²

The context and the pitch to which the violence escalates or could potentially escalate gives one pause. The discrepancy is made starker by the idyllic, female Christmas setting in Zaida’s apartment and the gendered violence that disrupts it. In terms of space, Zaida’s apartment is marked as feminine and men would only cause disruption, which then becomes the case with the police-officer husband. The husband is only able to interfere on the feminine space’s fringes, however, and plucks his wife and children out of the safe environment and back into the realm of masculine domination. As with Signe above and elsewhere in the texts, this process plays out on the body of the woman: the body is pulled by the hair back into the male space. Zaida refuses to take part in the gendered roles of dominator and dominated. Her procurement of money from men is not framed as shameful by her nor by Memesa, who recounts it, but rather as a resourceful way of claiming independence. Importantly, Christmas is spent by the nuclear family with two women, i.e. Zaida and Memesa, as heads: it is plentiful, peaceful, beautiful, and in touch with tradition. It is possible, Memesa sees, to live freely and well without a man present, as tradition and society would dictate. The upshot of this is that gendered violence marks the majority culture in Finland as well and is not a characteristic reserved for Roma alone. This brings us back to the topic of in-betweenness, which begins to appear in the text in direct relation to Memesa’s ongoing and broadening experiences—her learning process—by which stereotypes, both Romani and majority-culture Finnish, are complicated.

Both Romani and majority-Finnish cultures have positive and negative attributes and characters who embody them. Moreover, there are characters such as Memesa and Zaida who, deliberately or not, live in-between cultures.

⁸⁰ *”Sinä saatanan mustalaine et puutu meidän asioihin, tai lapsesi jäävät orvoiksi.”*

⁸¹ *”Sinä kun pimeällä tiellä kuljet, joku sinut vielä nitistää isäsmussija naisesi hakkaaja!”*

⁸² *”Tuossa näet [...] mihinkä sitä voi joutua.”*

This is a process by which in-betweenness is created in the narrative, which is filtered through the experiences and perspective of Memesa, the narrator. Nepantla can be understood as ‘multiple seeing,’ which implies being able to see from multiple contradictory vantage points, as we saw in Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*. Memesa begins to see Romani culture from the majority-Finnish perspective and vice versa. Another option, as occurs in the *Memesa* trilogy, is a negative formulation: one is *not* part of multiple categories, though these can still be positive influences. Zaida, for example, represents the positive aspects of Romani culture for Memesa, yet Memesa is defined, at this point, as not belonging to Romani culture. Rather than proximity, it is the distance to these categories that can define one’s positionality. Memesa’s growing awareness of nepantla—or not belonging to various categories—is manifested as a new coping mechanism as she develops “a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity” (Anzaldúa 1999, 10) over time.

5.3.2 BEING HUMAN, ETHICS, AND THE AUTHORIAL AUDIENCE

Memesa’s sense of aloneness—of not belonging to the Romani culture that she has rejected and not being accepted by the majority-Finnish culture that she tries to enter—builds as the trilogy progresses. As such, the trilogy can be viewed as a manipulation of the authorial audience through the chronology of the linear reading process. Earlier, we established why Memesa would want to leave the Romani community. Slowly and subtly, the narrative then positions readers as emotionally engaged in Memesa’s reality and morally against the cold, lifeless, monolithic majority-culture Finns, as represented in the trilogy, who seem to be incapable of seeing her as a human individual. For the most part, they only see her as her ‘race.’ This brings us to the question of ethics, the authorial audience, and Memesa’s humanity.

Memesa moves to Lappeenranta and begins frequenting a youth center. It is the late 1960s and norms are being rejected via drugs, guitars, and long hair. The norm of Romani Otherness, however, proves too large to bridge. For example, the group from the youth center are headed to an apartment for a party. Bablo, the leader of the group, says that the apartment’s owner doesn’t want Memesa to come. Memesa stops in her tracks and asks, “Because I’m a gypsy?”⁸³ Bablo responds, “How the fuck should I know?”⁸⁴ Memesa screams at the top of her lungs, “I haven’t done anything bad to any of you! Each of us eats and shits, lives and dies. All of us are human!” (Lumberg 2011, 195).⁸⁵

⁸³ *”Siksikö kun oon mustalaine?”*

⁸⁴ *”Mist vitust mie sen tiijän...”*

Shared humanity is a recurring topic for Memesa. Though Memesa has done her best to fit into the group dynamics, she is segregated based on race. Her racialized body stands in contrast to the normative white bodies of the majority-culture Finns in the racial hierarchy, which leads to others perceiving her as less than human. Bablo freezes due to Memesa's shouting, as do the others, but then Bablo indicates that everyone but Memesa should continue to the party. Memesa stays behind alone. It is moments like these that indicate that however much Memesa spends time with others and shares in their activities, she is still a person apart, marked by her race as Other and dispensable when the circumstances call for it. Memesa states: "I don't emphasize my background because I feel myself to be above all human and I don't have to ask anyone for permission for my human dignity."⁸⁶ She is, however, dehumanized as a regular course of her social existence. For example, "One time a woman on the street was watching me so intently she walked right into a passer-by" (Lumberg 2011, 413).⁸⁷ Despite what others think and feel, Memesa states that it is her humanity that makes her equal to others. For Memesa, her race and gender should be inconsequential, yet she is keenly aware that others don't share her understanding.

The culmination of these experiences results in the realization that "a gypsy is not a Finn even if she lives in Finland, but rather of 'the others' who aren't considered human" (Lumberg 2011, 414),⁸⁸ which echoes Sylvia Wynter's (2003) ideas about racial hierarchy and the perceived non-humanness of racialized bodies. Memesa's experience of in-betweenness based on racism is quotidian nepantla, but here, her realization that she is not a Finn despite having disassociated from the Romani community can be understood as a temporally coded instance of nepantla. As with Esperanza's education through women's stories, Memesa learns about her Otherness from hard experience, which culminates in a realization of how others see her. Memesa's realization should also be understood in view of the opening paragraphs of *Musta Perhonen*, in which Memesa outlines the worst stereotypes of Roma in Finland. Reading the opening paragraphs, the authorial audience may have found nothing out of the ordinary when Roma are described as violently knife-wielding misogynistic brutes. However, at this later stage of the narrative, the

⁸⁵ *"Mie en oo tehny teil mittää pahhaa! Jokaine meist syö ja paskantaa, elää ja kuolee. Kaik myö ollaa ihmisii!"*

⁸⁶ *"En juuri korosta taustaani, koska koen olevani ennen kaikkea ihminen, enkä pyydä keneltäkään lupaa ihmisarvooni."*

⁸⁷ *"Kerran eräs nainen katsoo minua kadulla niin, että kävelee suoraan päin vastaantulijaa."*

⁸⁸ *"Alan ymmärtää, ettei mustalainen ole suomalainen, vaikka asuisi Suomessa, vaan 'niitä toisia', joita ei pidetä ihmisinä."*

authorial audience's view of Roma will have changed considerably based on Memesa's continual mistreatment at the hands of majority-culture Finns. Memesa's very lack of human connection in society elicits sympathy in readers. Importantly, readers have access to Memesa's noble and laudable thoughts due to her role as narrator. A character such as Bablo, a majority-culture Finn, is contemptible. The outcome is that the authorial audience will have emotionally connected with the Memesa and other Roma's circumstances. A flip has occurred: the authorial audience is rooting for Memesa against the society to which they presumably belong. In essence, they are rooting against themselves, which opens any number of ethical considerations.

Following James Phelan's (2005, 23) four ethical positions within a narrative, we can better understand how this ethical flip has occurred. Phelan's first ethical position is of the characters in the storyworld, whose interactions with each other can be assessed ethically. Quite often, as with Bablo above, these ethical positions are quite clear-cut even if, as with the Romani characters, extenuating circumstances are used to explain them. The second ethical position is of the narrator and the telling of the story in relation to whom is being told. Memesa narrates her story to an implied narratee, who could be herself as she reflects on her life. Memesa's narrator role blends with her character role, so that the telling is focalized by Memesa as she was at any given historical point, not as she would later become. Ethically, young Memesa is at times found wanting in relation to the ethical standpoint of Memesa as an older narrator. The third ethical position is that of the implied author in relation to the authorial audience, which is what I concentrate on here, along with the fourth position, which is that of and the flesh-and-blood reader "in relation to the set of values, beliefs, and locations operating in" the positions described above (Phelan 2005, 23). These four ethical positions can blend and overlap. For example, Memesa the narrator can describe Romani culture and characters in an essentializing manner at the beginning of the trilogy while the implied author can use it as a method of strategic essentializing that is part of the overall structure of the narrative. Lumberg the implied author can bide her time in complicating the characterization of Roma through the development of contextual evidence.

Through experiences like being disinvited to a party due to her race—where Memesa is thrust into the position of Other in Finland—Lumberg asks the authorial audience to ethically side with Memesa against Finnish society, which is depicted as ethically flawed. However, Memesa the narrator has also shown Romani culture to be ethically corrupt, especially through the violation of women's bodies. We can compare Memesa, who is a scrappy survivor in the face of adversity, and Bablo, who is portrayed as fickle, selfish, unemployed, lazy, violent, and gender discriminating. Bablo asks Memesa, "Hey, why aren't

you in the park with the other gypsies selling booze with that dress on?”⁸⁹ Memesa answers, “I could ask you, Bablo, why you aren’t at work, and why you’re running around with a much younger girl whose father you could be” (Lumberg 2011, 199).⁹⁰ Bablo places Memesa within the stereotypical confines of her race, but Memesa cleverly turns the question around and, by so doing, points out that Bablo lives more like a stereotypical Roma than she does. Bablo also beats his girlfriend, Gaala, “really going at the girl, beating her with his fists.”⁹¹ Memesa tries to go to Gaala’s aid but is threatened by Bablo, who says, “Fucking gyp, this doesn’t fucking concern you, I’ll beat my woman as much as I want,”⁹² echoing Rassi’s words to his girlfriend in a previous section of this chapter. Bablo threatens Memesa, but Memesa tells him that if he touches her the Roma will “pull out your innards, you won’t escape” (Lumberg 2011, 227).⁹³ Gaala also asks Memesa to leave. This illustrates that the narrative begins to invert ethnic stereotypes by presenting majority-culture Finns who are framed as stereotypically Roma and builds Memesa’s positive characteristics, which are usually, in the Finnish context, associated with majority-culture Finns. The ethical position of the authorial audience is being highlighted by asking, as it were: to whom are you feeling sympathetic?

Episodes such as these act to crystalize Memesa’s realization that, while she cannot belong to the Romani community, the majority-culture Finnish community has the same as well as other problems. In-betweenness is hence created negatively by Memesa not belonging to these two cultures (i.e., Romani and majority-Finnish). Phelan’s (2007) fourth ethical category, that of the flesh-and-blood reader, is determined by the reader’s reaction to majority-culture Finnish men who behave like stereotypical Roma, and Roma who believe in the shared humanity of all, fight for the weak, and long for belonging and love. This, of course, depends on the individual reader. However, anecdotally it might be illuminating that, when I was presenting Bablo’s example at a seminar in Finland, I was told that Finnish men “aren’t really like that.” The speaker went on to describe an episode occurring decades prior in which a Romani individual threatened violence. This real-life example highlights the persistence of stereotypes, Otherness, and the binary of ‘us’ and

⁸⁹ *”Hei miks sie et oo tuol Kirkkopuistos toisten mannejen kans myymäs viinaa se mekko pääl?”*

⁹⁰ *”Mie voisin siult Bablo kyssyy, miks et oo töis, ja miks pyörit itteäs paljo nuoremman tytön kans, jonka isä voisit olla.”*

⁹¹ *”Bablo alkaa oikein urakalla hakata tyttöä nyrkein.”*

⁹² *”Jumalauta manne, tää ei kuulu siulle saatana, mie hakkaan omaa naistani niin paljo ku huvittaa.”*

⁹³ *”...siult vejettä sisuskalutkii ulos, etkä pääse karkuu.”*

'them' in Finland. However, by presenting Memesa as, above all, a good, generous, and open character, Lumberg's text gives a powerful example that works against these stereotypes.

5.4 NEPANTLA: DEATH AND REBIRTH

In this section, I will outline the process by which Memesa's Romani identity dies, which allows for the rebirth of an in-between identity that is grounded in her occupation as artist. The analysis follows Anzaldúa's path to *conocimiento*, which is a process of transformation. I argue that Memesa's ultimate positionality is that of not belonging, which is the form of nepantla found as one stage on the path to *conocimiento*.

5.4.1 CONOCIMIENTO

The fictional Memesa and the historical author Lumberg (Immonen 2016; Yliherne 2019) both received death threats due to their views of Romani culture. The death threats may be understood as one manifestation of Memesa and Lumberg's ostracism from their community. Moreover, the institutional racism experienced by Romani children at school as recounted by Lumberg, for example, and Memesa's claim that Finns do not see her as human, can be equated with their rejection by Finnish society (Lumberg 2011, 414). Shunned by both cultural groups, where does Memesa find herself? The text indicates that her ultimate positionality is in-between these two monolithic categories, which is negatively framed as not belonging. She must create her own position out of their pieces. If we accept that the experience of the self takes shape in the dialectical exchange between subjectivity and objectivity (Vallone 2014), the trilogy can be understood as Memesa's process of coming to grips with her subjectivity while facing harmful experiences and rejection from the objective world in which she lives.

The *Memesa* trilogy hence illustrates another aspect of the concept of nepantla—that of in-betweenness as not belonging. Nepantla is not a stable destination but rather an ongoing process of development into in-betweenness, which, I argue, is at the heart of the trilogy. To highlight nepantla as not belonging, I turn to Gloria Anzaldúa's (2015) seven stages to *conocimiento*, or deepened self-awareness (literally Spanish for 'knowledge'), as laid out in "now let us shift...conocimiento...inner work, public acts." *Conocimiento* remains an understudied concept in Anzaldúa's theoretical oeuvre (Fernández and Magaña Gamero 2018; Reza-López, Huerta Charles, and Reyes, 2014). While I do not intend to provide an in-depth analysis of *conocimiento* here, the concept is especially useful as a general heuristic tool for highlighting Memesa's process of coming to terms with her rejection of Romani culture and her rejection by majority-Finnish culture. Also, one of the

stages of *conocimiento* is the ‘not belonging’ variety of nepantla, which differs from Anzaldúa’s theorization of nepantla elsewhere.

The path to *conocimiento* includes seven stages. They do not necessarily go in order, can overlap and backtrack, and should be taken as a general guideline. The stages are: 1) crisis; 2) in-betweenness (nepantla); 3) *Coatlicue*: living in-between stories, which equals chaos; 4) paralysis; 5) re-creating a sense of self; 6) a new narrative of reality; and 7) testing the new reality in the world, failure, and a new self. This process may lead to *conocimiento*, which is a higher-level state of mind, a deep reflexive critical consciousness based on constant change that builds towards liberatory transformation. AnaLouise Keating (2015) calls it a “relational onto-epistemology” that is an “intensely personal, fully embodied process that gathers information from context” in a profoundly relational way, enabling one to “make connections among apparently disparate events, people, experiences, and realities” that lead to action (xxvii). Transformation allows one to question “conventional knowledge’s current categories, classifications, and contents” as knowledge is sought beyond the “subject-object” divide (Anzaldúa 2015, 119). In short, *conocimiento* is the ability to view one’s self and the world in a new way, beyond the Western philosophical tradition based on binary opposition in a process of nonlinear healing (Keating 2015, xxivv).

The most important parallel between Anzaldúa’s model and Memesa’s journey into in-betweenness is the manner by which Memesa’s crisis, which includes running away at the age of thirteen, metamorphoses into a symbolic death of one self and the birth of another. The trilogy’s second novel, *Repeleiset Siivet*, tells the story of Memesa’s symbolic death and rebirth. Anzaldúa (2015) writes that the seven stages of *conocimiento* together “comprise a meditation on the rites of passage, the transitions of life from birth to death, and all the daily births and deaths in between. Bits of your self die and are reborn in each step” (124). As was shown through an analysis of writing in *The House on Mango Street*, this process can also be understood as the re-writing of one’s inherited stories in a process of creating new narratives of the self.

Conocimiento is another way of saying that one becomes aware of being in-between as parts of you die, new characteristics are born, and change rolls ever forward. The following utilizes Anzaldúa’s theorization to illustrate the processual nature of transformations of the kind dealt with in this dissertation, which can be termed *Bildung* but with the result being an indication of in-betweenness.

Anzaldúa’s (2015) first stage (stage 1) is a crisis that initiates the process towards *conocimiento*, followed by a state of temporal nepantla in-betweenness (stage 2), where “you are exposed, open to other perspectives, more readily able to access knowledge derived from inner feelings, imaginal states, and outer events, and to ‘see through’ them with a mindful, holistic awareness” (122). The third stage (stage 3) is *Coatlicue*, which is living in-between stories and can equal chaos. For Memesa, the crisis is an attempted

rape, her being the object of a blood vendetta that follows from her violent defiance of the attempted rape, and the prospect of being married in the Romani community. Leaving the Romani community and her family is described as a prolonged, painful death. As such, Memesa's experience of running away traverses the first three stages of Anzaldúa's path to *conocimiento*—crisis; loss, confusion, and not belonging; and chaos—as her old self is deconstructed.

5.4.2 A LONG, PAINFUL DEATH: DECONSTRUCTING THE SELF

Repaleiset Siivet, the trilogy's second novel, opens on the train towards Helsinki when Memesa is thirteen years old. Memesa has just escaped an attempted rape, occurring at the end of *Musta Perhonen*, by blinding her older male attacker with her thumbs, which, in the Romani community as described in the trilogy, is a crime punishable by death at the hands of any of the man's relatives. The rape, if successful, would have in effect made Memesa the assailant's wife by Romani custom, according to Memesa's telling.

Hence, she has suffered not only the attempted rape/marriage-by-force, but has inflicted blindness and left her family, culture and community, and city behind. She is skirting literal death to dive into a figurative death. This corresponds to Anzaldúa's (2015) first stage on the path to *conocimiento*, which is a crisis that initiates the process and a transition from life to death, along with all the daily deaths of the self in-between (124). Such is the level of stress, mourning, relief, and fear in such a situation that the appearance of Memesa's grandmother, who has long been dead, in such a context is delivered matter-of-factly. Following Brian Richardson (2012), "unnatural techniques" can be used to depict traumas "that seem to defy the normal methods of ordinary narratives [...]" (178). The 'unnatural' appearance of Memesa's dead grandmother occurs during Memesa's most distressing point in the trilogy and can give us insight into Memesa's state of mind as she transitions away from her Romani heritage.

Memesa's grandmother is named Emilia; she is Memesa's father, Viki's, mother, a Jew from St. Petersburg, whom Viki describes in adoring terms that highlight her abilities as a Romani woman: "Emilia was a hard businesswoman; in whichever municipality we went to she sold bolts of fabric and lace" (Lumberg 2011, 14).⁹⁴ She read rural women and girls' hands, winking at Viki and always foreseeing the same thing: to the girls she said, you'll meet the man of your life, he's already on his way. To the housewives she said: lots of riches and healthy kids. Emilia knew how to turn fantasy and illusion into profit. She even knew how to read and write, which was a rarity at the time. Emilia is portrayed as the quintessential Romani woman who

⁹⁴ "Emilia ol kova kauppanaine, mäntii mihi pitäjää tahansa nii kangaspakat ja pitsit män kaupaks."

nevertheless is also an educated Jew from Russia, muddying the waters of racial purity and belonging, which will be important below.

After Emilia appears to Memesa on the train, she acts as spiritual guide to her granddaughter's development. She talks to Memesa, urging her to take a certain course of action and giving her courage to go on. Emilia is both dead and alive—a form of in-betweenness—whom Memesa encounters at the borderlands where death and birth meet. The birthing itself is in-between two stable identities (see Turner 1967), just as a mother's solitary 'self' dies with the birth of a child and a new 'self' as mother is born. One identity dies so that the other can be born.

Emilia's apparition disrupts the consistency of the trilogy's realism, but this generic consideration mirrors Memesa's isolation and disjointedness in what can be termed a magic realist manner. The depiction of Emilia being both 'alive' and real yet dead and impossible mixes traditionally incompatible codes, which co-exist in the narrative (Hegerfeldt 2005, 50). Mixing the supernatural with realism can be seen as a strategy for attempting to make sense of an 'impossible' reality (7). Despite being dead, Emilia fits unobtrusively in the realist context (Danow 2004, 87) and does not appear in dreams or via hallucinatory visions (see Hegerfeldt 2005, 51), apart from the first visit. Emilia only appears as long as Memesa needs her, which is during the difficult transitional period out of Romani culture, Memesa's attempt to join majority-culture Finnish society, and the beginning of her reconciliation with her Romani heritage. As an apparition, Emilia is both in- and outside Romani and Finnish cultures, and her gravitas and implied experiences as a woman and foreigner allow her to guide Memesa in her struggle. It must also be emphasized that Memesa is in her early teenage years—the liminal period of life *par excellence*—and living alone out in a strange, new world. Memesa is culture-less in one sense yet straddling both the Romani and majority-Finnish cultures in the in-between.

After the initial crisis of leaving the Romani community (stage 1), Memesa enters a temporal *nepantla*, with a clear before and after, and chronological time breaks down (stage 2). As long as the dead can join the living, the past envelops the present. This occurs to Memesa as she suffers the aftereffects of her violent escape and Emilia continues to appear. According to Richardson (2012), “[t]rauma produces a skewering of normal perceptions of temporality as powerful past events come unmoored in time and haunt the present experience of the disoriented sufferer” (178). Memesa, being so close to death herself, both literally and symbolically, has access to the dead, making the blurring of states—the living and the dead—both figurative and real.

The *nepantla* of stage 2 is informed by loss, confusion, and not belonging. As part of a process, it passes to make way for changes on the (potential) way to *conocimiento*. However, I argue that the self-awareness gained from the path to *conocimiento* may point to in-betweenness as not belonging, a 'space' in which *nepantla* is not empowering but has been imposed. Agency may have been exercised but outside forces, such as racism and institutional forces, may

be too strong to overcome. This structural underpinning is important to consider when discussing nepantla as a potentially empowering space marked by agency. In the words of Marx (2010), “[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (103). Memesa’s agency, in this way, is limited by the imposing circumstances of history manifested as contemporary society and, for example, the institutional racism she faces in school and workplaces. In Anzaldúa’s model, this form of nepantla is the in-betweenness that results from an exterior crisis that can be outside of one’s control.

Memesa also enters Anzaldúa’s third stage, which is living in-between stories, or selves, with the resulting overwhelming chaos. This causes her to descend into *Coatlicue*, a state of despair and hopelessness, that was first introduced by Anzaldúa (1999) in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Memesa’s grandmother Emilia urges her to continue struggling despite the seemingly insurmountable realities.

Emilia appears to Memesa in a prison cell, for example, where the police have let Memesa stay the night until the social services office opens the next day. Memesa has begun to waver in her escape from the Romani community and Emilia encourages her in her escape. Memesa asks, “Who are you really?”⁹⁵ and Emilia answers, “I am your relative, your father’s mother, and I always come when you need me. This is the duty given to me, which I must fulfill. One thing I’ll say: you have to live your own destiny [...]” (Lumberg 2011, 143).⁹⁶ Here, Emilia frames Memesa’s present and future in terms of empowerment and subjectivism. It is Memesa’s “destiny” that is at stake, not that of the Romani community or her family. In the novel, Emilia often repeats that Memesa is on her own and that she cannot rely on anyone else. This goes against the grain of traditional Romani culture, as presented in the trilogy, in which the emphasis on community trumps individual needs. As the trilogy progresses, this message implies that Memesa cannot rely on the acceptance of, or belonging to, any group based on shared meaning. In this way, Memesa’s identity is created negatively in relation to the normative categories around her. This is nepantla as a form on not belonging.

As Anzaldúa puts it, “When overwhelmed by the chaos caused by living between stories, you break down, descend into the third space, the Coatlicue depths of despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness” (2015, 123). *Coatlicue* is the dark underbelly of terror that exists in all life, the shadow to the sun. For Anzaldúa, it was depression; for Memesa, anger transforms into despair and

⁹⁵ ”Mutta kuka työ oikeestaan ootte?”

⁹⁶ ”Mie oon siun sukulaine, isäs äiti, ja mi etuun siun luokses aina kun on tarvis. Tää on miul annettu tehtävä joka miun on täytettävä. Ja sen mie sanon, et siun on elettävä omanlaises kohtalo...”

sometimes back again. As a five-year-old in the narrative, Memesa states, “I hate hitting” (Lumberg 2011, 11)⁹⁷ but becomes, through contact with injustice, an angry young woman. White people can “fry like pigs” (185),⁹⁸ she states, in relation to the injustices experienced at school.

The teachers and white students have a shared sense of belonging and, even if that cotton-head pushed me and yapped her mouth at me continually, she’s still one of them. Fuck the whole denomination. If I really had some dynamite, I’d blow the whole shit up into the air. That’d be the end of the whole pigsty⁹⁹ along with all the pink pig-people.¹⁰⁰ (185)

Memesa’s anger is expressed racially, with the “cotton-head” and “pink pig-people” as the recipients of her rage expressed through images of extreme violence. This goes some way to illustrate the level of racially informed abuse Memesa had been subjected to, which is the source of her anger. Memesa’s ethics have collapsed as she dehumanizes others despite her own, deep convictions. Lumberg uses this episode to illustrate the results of long-term dehumanization: it spreads into a reciprocal circle of hatred and chaos.

The racially informed abuse Memesa is reacting to is part of her process of disillusionment. As a child, Memesa saw through the lens of Romani culture. The result of her immersion into the racism and injustice of the majority-Finnish culture is anger. Anzaldúa (2015) writes, “Living between cultures results in ‘seeing’ double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the perspective of another. Seeing from two or more perspectives simultaneously renders those cultures transparent” (127). Memesa’s disillusionment with majority-culture Finnish society forces her into the in-between. Caught in the middle, she begins to see both cultures with a clarity that develops and becomes more refined throughout the rest of the trilogy. This opens the possibility of a rebirth.

⁹⁷ ”...inhoan lyömistä.”

⁹⁸ ”... saisivat paistua kuin porsaat.”

⁹⁹ The school used to be a pig farm, so it was literally a pigsty.

¹⁰⁰ ”Opettajien ja valkolaisoppilaiden välillä on yhteenkuuluvuus, ja vaikka se rasselipää töni minua ja soitti turpaansa jatkuvasti, hän on kuitenkin yksi heistä. Perseestä koko lahkokunta. Jos saisinkin dynamiittia, räjäyttäisin koko saatanan paskan taivaan tuuliin. Siinä menisi koko sikala vaaleanpunaisine sikaihmisineen.”

5.4.3 BIRTH: THE CREATION OF A NEW SELF

In Anzaldúa's (2015) seven stages to *conocimiento*, paralysis (stage 4) follows the chaos of *Coatlicue*. This is followed by a sifting and sorting through the pieces of one's self, traditions, pieces of identities, myths, stories, and cultures to re-create a sense of self (stage 5). Out of this you patch together "a new narrative articulating your personal reality. [...] And putting all the pieces together, you re-envision the map of the known world, creating a new description of reality and scripting a new story" (123) (stage 6). Out in the world, you test your new narrative of self and, discovering that it is rejected by others or doesn't hold together, you perhaps plunge back into *Coatlicue*. Finally, however, a new self-awareness is born (stage 7), one in which "you shift realities" (123), which is manifested as a "compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference within the self and between others" (123). Anzaldúa's emphasis on strategy indicates that *conocimiento* is an ongoing process rather than an endpoint.

To reach *conocimiento*, a new identity must be constructed. This begins with paralysis (stage 4), which allows one to take stock of one's self and one's surroundings. Identifying what is harmful is a step towards change. This occurs to Memesa as a child in schools otherwise occupied by majority-culture Finns. A reoccurring theme in the *Memesa* trilogy, as in Baltzar's (2014a) *Polttava Tie*, is the isolation Romani children feel at school: they are ostracized by the majority culture's children and sometimes teachers as well, which makes learning difficult if not impossible. The underlying emotional landscape is that of loneliness, silence, difference, and torment. Romani children in these texts are the Other and cut off from the communal games, communication, and shared sense of belonging that comes naturally to other students. Overt teasing, name-calling, and violence are also present. In these texts, the violence sometimes stems from long-term emotional/verbal abuse from another student (or students or teacher) and boils over into violence instigated by the Romani child. The Romani child is then held up as the guilty party and punished without contextualization. If anything goes wrong, it is the Romani child who is blamed for it, the texts suggest, which leads to a simmering feeling of injustice. Lumberg's handling of this theme goes a long way in giving context to how Roma are in practice marginalized as the Other. Memesa states at one point that "many gypsies have been persecuted at school and work. Some gypsies have quit school or left a job because they couldn't stand to fight any longer and swallow the humiliations. Many are bitter because of these experiences" (Lumberg 2011, 457;¹⁰¹ see also Friman-Korpela 2012, 223; Grönfors 2004; Viljanen 1994; Markkanen 2003a, 15). Through her

¹⁰¹ "...moni kaaleista on kokenut, että heitä on sorrettu kouluissa ja työpaikoilla. Jotkut kaaleet ovat jättäneet koulunkäynnin kesken tai lähteneet lätkimään töistä, koksa eivät jaksaneet taistella ja niellä nöyryytyksiä. Monet ovat katkeroituneet näistä kekemuksista."

experiences at school, Memesa becomes aware of her position as Other in Finland. The systemic racism and abuse from other students and teachers freeze Memesa into a state of lonesome paralysis, Anzaldúa's fourth stage, though sometimes her emotions boil over into anger.

In my reading, Lumberg's message is that while there are many important problems in Romani culture—violence and gender relations among them—the fact that Romani children are treated as inhuman helps to explain why the Romani community continues to be marginalized. It also shapes a pragmatic suggestion as to what might be done concerning Roma in Finland, which comes to the heart of the ethical dimension of the narrative concerning the authorial audience. The future may be different if majority-culture Finns could treat Romani children as children—stripped of preconditioning stereotypes—and educate them in an atmosphere of respect and affirmation. In *Samettiyö*, the third novel, Memesa shows the subtle signs of dehumanization from the vantage point of adulthood: “From small clues I can already read how a white person feels about me. Those who see me as a human react naturally, but they are rare (Lumberg 2011, 414).¹⁰² This quote speaks to the subtlety of how racism can be conveyed, its results (dehumanization), and works to highlight the extremity of Memesa (and Lumberg's) experiences of Othering at school while young. Memesa states clearly that most majority-culture Finns do not view her as human, which is an extreme case of rejection and not belonging. This realization paralyzes Memesa's trajectory into majority-Finnish culture and suspends her in the in-between (stage 4).

The fifth stage on the path to *conocimiento* is re-creating a sense of self by shifting through parts of various identities, stories, and cultures and re-creating a sense of self. In the sixth stage, you begin to create a new description of reality by shaping a new story. Both stages are combined as Memesa explores aspects of majority-Finnish culture that may act as a new self and story. She enrolls in further education in Joutseno after receiving help from a teacher who guides her education, which allows her to receive a position as a trainee caretaker in a hospital in Helsinki. This leads to other jobs and a more secure financial position. Financial independence leads to self-determination. Unlike some Romani children in the narrative who quit school at a young age, either because of abuse at school or for reasons stemming from home, such as forced marriage, Memesa continues long enough to allow for a future in education and a belief it may aid her in achieving her goals.

In *Repaleiset Siivet*, Memesa attempts to join various groups outside of school. The groups are socially cohesive units built on trusting relationships—friendship—and include youths at the orphanage, a youth center in Lappeenranta that she begins to frequent, a youth detention center (i.e.,

¹⁰² ”Jo pienistä vivahteista pystyn lukemaan valkolaisten suhtautumisen minuun. Ne, jotka näkevät minut ihmisenä, kohtaavat minut luontevasti, mutta heitä on harvassa.”

prison) that she is confined in, and the abovementioned educational institution that she attends and where she boards. Memesa attempts to join these groups to re-create her sense of self (stage 5). Though there is naturally some interaction with others, Memesa remains alone and isolated in each of these places despite her brave attempts at fitting in. Memesa starts 7th grade after entering the orphanage where she receives new clothes, but she is still alone. "I used to think it was because I always wore others' old clothes. Now I know that it's because I'm a gypsy" (2011, 183).¹⁰³ Testing her new reality out in the real world (stage 7), Memesa is confronted with the racist reality that she is Other and does not belong. This failure flings her back into the in-between (nepantla, stage 2), where she must reconfigure yet another sense of self.

Memesa's continued isolation despite her attempts to re-create and present her new 'self' is perhaps best illustrated through her budding sexuality in *Repaleiset Siivet*, when she begins to feel desire for another student, Petra, who is beautiful, popular with others, and from a good, middle-class family in Helsinki. In-betweenness is created in moments of potential acceptance by people of the majority culture in the narrative. Potential belonging underlines Memesa's apartness because her expectations rise only to be disappointed. Memesa's relationship to Petra, among other majority-culture females whom she desires later, acts to illustrate a form of in-betweenness as not belonging.

The way same-sex desire is developed in the trilogy is important for understanding Memesa's in-betweenness more broadly. Given the period (around the turn of the 1960s and 70s) and Memesa's family background (strict patriarchy and traditional), same-sex desire is an intuitive and subjective position she arrives at despite her upbringing. This is not to say same-sex desire did not exist in the Romani community: there was, Memesa later concludes, an example of it from her own childhood (that ended in suicide, however). Despite this, Memesa arrives at her sexuality easily, and the text does not dwell on feelings of guilt or the 'wrongness' of desiring another woman, which marks her as a character with a clear understanding of her own being.

Though Petra accepts Memesa's romantic advances, and they cuddle, undress, feel, and kiss on Memesa's small bed at the educational institution in Joutseno (Lumberg 2011, 286–7), an emotional distance pervades the relationship, as told by Memesa, and it ends suddenly. For Petra, it is framed as a youthful fling, while Memesa is deeply engaged emotionally.

¹⁰³ "Aikaisemmin luulin, että se johtuu siitä, että minulla oli aina toisten vanhoja vaatteita. Nyt tiedän jo, että syynä on se, että olen mustalainen."

When Petra breaks up with Memesa, Emilia whispers into Memesa's ear: "Let it be. There're more fish in the sea. That tenderfoot isn't worthy of you" (Lumberg 2011, 337).¹⁰⁴ Emilia goes on once Memesa is alone:

That girl's a stubborn cow who won't ever be able to decide if she's a bird or a fish. [...] Look, Memesa, the person [her life partner] has to have character and temperament, a bit like *kaale* [Romani] women. You understand? That person must have an abundant heart and genuine love towards you. [...] Believe me. I know a thing or two about life.¹⁰⁵ (338)

Emilia is not saying that Memesa's life partner must be racially or ethnically Roma, but that she should have some of the positive characteristics that Roma have compared to majority-culture Finns. For example, Memesa refers to Petra's roommate, who attempts to get in the way of Memesa and Petra's budding friendship, as "white ghost," "ghost," "bone-ass" (*luuperse*), a "colorless pile of bones" (301),¹⁰⁶ and a "dead-looking chalk-ship captain" (310).¹⁰⁷ These attributes conflate the roommate's whiteness with lifelessness, which stands in contrast to the Romani qualities of being, typically, of darker complexion and full of life. Petra is also unreliable and, since readers learn very little about her, uninteresting and unapproachable in her flatness. Emilia repeats her admonishment: "Remember that your life's path is the road upon which you set forth with courage" (338).¹⁰⁸ This emphasis on Memesa's decision-making frames her as a character with agency and, if she will exist in the in-between, it can be based on an empowering choice rather than negativity and not belonging. Though my main argument is that Memesa's in-betweenness is, indeed, framed in the text as not belonging, it is also only a partial life story and Emilia's words may continue to guide Memesa as her life trajectory moves past the pages of the trilogy.

¹⁰⁴ "Anna olla. Kyl meres on kalaa. Ei tuollane arkajalka ole siun arvoses."

¹⁰⁵ "Tuo tyttö on tavllinen jullikka, joka ei koskaan pysty päättämään, onko lintu vai kala. [...] Katoha Memesa, siin ihmises pittää olla luonnetta ja temperamentti, vähä niinku kaalein naisis. Ymmärrätsie? Siin ihmises pittää olla sydämen suuruutta ja aitoa rakkautta siuta kohtaan. [...] Usko miuta. Mie tiijän rakas laps elämästä yhtä ja toista."

¹⁰⁶ "Väritön luukasa..."

¹⁰⁷ "Tuollane kuolleen näköne kalkkilaivan kapteeni..."

¹⁰⁸ "Muista, että siun elämänpolkus on se tie, jonka sie astelet rohkein mielin."

In terms of in-betweenness and our study of nepantla, it is noteworthy that Memesa frames her sexuality as a desire for specific individuals, not as lesbianism, a categorization she does not use. The desire happens to be same-sex because the object of her desire happens to be the same sex as she. It is not formulated as a big deal. Throughout the trilogy, Memesa desires women of the majority-Finnish culture and, in all cases but one, she is spurned (in the outlier she does the spurning). This informs the overall theme of not belonging and apartness. Sexuality for Memesa can be understood as the distance to her objects of desire. It is the unfulfillment of desire that becomes the prominent trait of Memesa's sexuality. This is a gap between two individuals, but it is also a negative space that takes on substantive quality in Memesa's identity; it is part of who she is and only deepens as the trilogy progresses. Rather than being part of a coupling, a group, or a community, it is the distance to such normative categorizations that define her. This is a powerful literary device for creating the mode of in-betweenness in the trilogy. It is also another example of Anzaldúa's (2015, 123) seventh stage on the path to *conocimiento*, which includes taking one's new identity out into the world and testing it, which more than likely fails.

Through these and other crises, Memesa is beginning to piece together a new identity. She does so out of the pieces of cultures and stories that she experiences in her ongoing process. When Memesa is caught by her family at the orphanage, for example, and is brought (her body literally carried) back to the family home, a conversation takes place in which Memesa begins to "sift, sort, and symbolize [her] experiences and [tries] to arrange them into a pattern and story that speak to [her] reality" (Anzaldúa 2015, 123). The family pleads, arguing that Memesa's proper place is not among 'whites' but with her family and the Roma. Memesa, however, has begun to create her identity in opposition to the negative Romani traits she identifies in her family members. Memesa's elder sister, Signe, who has been transformed from a sweet, studious girl into an enforcer of Romani customs, is the most vocal and aggressive. Memesa says to Signe, "Just look at your own life! You get beaten till your face is the color of a rainbow! Is that the life I should lead?" (Lumberg 2011, 225).¹⁰⁹ Memesa wonders why she should remain in the Romani culture if, in practice, for her as a woman it means inevitable beatings and 'slavery' in the home.

Though Viki, Memesa's father, is melancholy and soft-spoken, he upholds the traditions of Romani culture. He says, "You can't leave the gypsy life. You belong to our family" (Lumberg 2011, 213).¹¹⁰ Viki is bypassing Memesa's logic and calling upon a higher meaning: that of how things have always been. A conversation on the nature of ethnic and racial belonging ensues. Memesa tells Viki that it's no use trying to shape her into a Romani girl—it won't work. "But

¹⁰⁹ *"Kato sie vaa omaa elämääs, ku turpaas saat nii et naamas on sateenkaaren väreissä! Sitäkö elämää miun pitäis elää?"*

¹¹⁰ *"Ei mustalaisten elämästä voi lähtee. Sie kuulut meijä sakkii."*

you are a gypsy girl!” (214)¹¹¹ answers Viki. “Am I? What is a gypsy? Does anyone actually know? You too, Viki, are mixed race,”¹¹² says Memesa. At this point in the trilogy, Memesa equates race to behavior: the amount of Romani ‘blood’ one has dictates the degree to which he/she will behave like a Roma.

Viki points to Memesa’s short hair and trousers, saying that other Roma might attack her for these symbols of nonconformity. Memesa tells him, “You know yourself, Viki, that you can’t please everyone” (Lumberg 2011, 215).¹¹³ While humorous, this statement also works to win Viki’s sympathy since he, too, has not lived up to Romani standards on certain issues. Roosa joins in, saying that she is also considered to be *kaaje*, i.e., non-Romani, because she doesn’t agree with others or does things her own way. Memesa points out that Roosa cannot be like the other Roma since she is, by ancestry, also partly majority-culture Finn. “Yes, and I’m not actually like these *kaale* [Romani],”¹¹⁴ Roosa says, indicating that she has her own, higher standards. “And you’ve taken after me. You’re just like me,”¹¹⁵ she adds. While officially disapproving of Memesa’s actions, Roosa is also proud of her daughter’s defiance. Viki takes some offence to this, saying, “Memesa’s taken after my family, too. [...] She’s got the same briskness as my mother, Emilia. And she looks like our family” (215).¹¹⁶ Both parents are, deep down, proud of their daughter.

What this and other sections make clear, however, is that the family and other Roma are mixed-race in any case. Roosa has majority-culture Finnish ancestry, Viktor is part-Jewish, and Memesa is all of these. More to the point: what is race? “What is a gypsy? Does anyone actually know?” (Lumberg 2011, 214),¹¹⁷ Memesa asks. No one is ‘pure,’ and no one seems to live up to Romani standards, which differ depending on who is doing the evaluating. Roosa’s standards differ from those of her neighbors. At this point in the narrative, Memesa begins to question the link between race and inherited customs. Later

¹¹¹ *”Mut siehä oot mustalaistyttö!”*

¹¹² *”Olenko? Mikä on mustalaine? Tietääköhän sitä kukkaa? Sieki Viki oot sekarotune...”*

¹¹³ *”Sie tiijät Viki itekkii, et kaikille ei voi olla mieliks...”*

¹¹⁴ *”Nii, ehä mie ookkaa ko nää kaaleet...”*

¹¹⁵ *”Ja miuhuha sie tyttö oot tullu. Siehä oot iha saman olonenki ko mie.”*

¹¹⁶ *”Kyl Memesa on tullu miunkii sukkuu [...]. On sammaa rivakkuutta ku äitissäin Emilijas. Ja hää on meijä suvun näköne.”*

¹¹⁷ *”Mikä on mustalaine? Tietääköhän sitä kukkaa?”*

she will agree that, to a certain degree, she will always be Roma, for that is part of her lived experience. This process involves learning to see one's race in a new light: "You begin to see race as an experience of reality from a particular perspective and a specific time and place (history), not as a fixed feature of personality or identity," as Anzaldúa (2015, 127) puts it. However, there is a difference between Memesa's own understanding of race, early on, as conditionally deterministic and society's understanding of race as absolutely deterministic, which is projected onto her throughout the trilogy. This clash between subjective and outside standpoints results in Memesa's enforced position in the in-between.

5.4.4 IN-BETWEENNESS AS DENOUEMENT AND REBIRTH

One aspect that joins the novels in this dissertation together is a denouement marked by in-betweenness. While ambiguous endings are common in literature, in these novels in-betweenness is the point, not a byproduct of some other thematic. As already illustrated in chapters 3 and 4, the endings of these novels, in different ways, embody Anzaldúa's concept of nepantla. I argue that the ending of the *Memesa* trilogy can be understood as a positionality in the second stage on the path to *conocimiento*, i.e., as not belonging, loss, and distance from normative categories. Nepantla can be an awareness and even acceptance of multiplicity within one's own self without the possibility of pledging allegiance to any one category or defining trait or tradition, as opposed to no longer having the *need* to claim membership.

The trilogy ends with the note of loneliness and apartness continuing to ring as the dominant register. Peace, to a certain extent, may be made with both Romani and majority-Finnish cultures, but it is a pyrrhic victory for both sides, especially for Memesa as an individual and primary challenger to the status quos, which have not bent. As such, I do not argue that Memesa reaches a state of *conocimiento* as it was defined above: a higher-level state of mind, a deep reflexive critical consciousness based on constant change that builds towards liberatory transformation. Memesa's liberation is private but, without others with whom she may connect, any kind of celebration is quietly dropped from the proceedings. The melancholy and loneliness illustrate one possible outcome of living in-between cultures and other normative categories: that of not belonging.

In the last section of the third novel, *Samettiyö*, Memesa does develop a self-awareness of her relationship to the world through her work as an artist, which supports my argument that the trilogy's denouement is one of nepantla in-betweenness. To enter this nepantla space, Memesa must reject those elements of Romani culture that hurt her and accept those aspects that sustain her. This is symbolically done, finally, through her artwork exhibited at the Venice Biennale, as will be illustrated in a moment. Memesa's occupation as artist makes this process possible.

Samettiö begins, like its predecessor, on a train. The reflection in the window is of an adult Memesa, however, who is on her way to her old hometown of Lappeenranta to install her art in a gallery located in an old fortress prison. The tour guide in the fortress states that the women prisoners had their hair shorn and those who tried to escape had two options: either jump from the top of the tower or be stabbed by bayonet. Memesa's head is buzzed, and her hair has been used in one of her art pieces. The tour guide says, “[m]any artists subconsciously realize this place’s history, as you have. You cut your hair as they used to shave the heads of female prisoners” (Lumberg 2011, 348).¹¹⁸ More than an occupation, Memesa's vocation as artist is an identity. Towards the end of the book, immersed in the pursuit of art, Memesa states that she belongs to the “spiritual family” (495)¹¹⁹ of artists. When she enters her atelier, she feels as if “this room takes me in. I think, this is my white temple” (491).¹²⁰ She is an artist and belongs to art. To be an artist, Memesa must plunge the depths of her experiences—Romani, majority-culture Finnish, and others—to create a new identity, a rebirth, as she rejects what harms her and embraces that which nourishes her.

Memesa travels to Yugoslavia with her Romani handicrafts class to visit Šuto Orizari, a Romani town in Macedonia. The group of Finnish Roma are transformed into Finns in the foreign Romani setting and stand out specifically for their Finnishness. In chapter 3, we will remember, Oscar was also transformed into a U.S.-American when he set foot on Mexican soil. The Finns in the *Memesa* trilogy, for example, are shocked when they watch an all-Roma play in which men are actually whipped—the ‘theater of the real’—while the locals take it nonchalantly. They speak Finnish, drink alcohol like Finns on vacation in a foreign land (which is to say a lot, including the teachers), are dressed differently, and are generally squeamish with the poverty and strange setting. Their foreignness trumps a sense of shared Romani belonging. Later, through an interpreter, the students are nevertheless asked, “Speak your gypsy language” (Lumberg 2011, 471–2)¹²¹ in an attempt to find some common ground. Memesa narrates: “I sit by the sideboard further from the others and wonder why the course mates don’t now speak their language since in Finland they’re always going on about gypsy culture.”¹²² Memesa watches the

¹¹⁸ *”Monille taiteilijoille välittyy alitajuisesti tämän paikan historia, niin kuin sinullekin. Leikkasit hiuksesi pois, niin kuin muinoin leikattiin kaljuiksi naisvankien päät.”*

¹¹⁹ *”...sieluni perheeseen.”*

¹²⁰ *”...tunnen että se ottaa minut vastaan. Ajattelen, että tämä on minun valkoinen temppelini.”*

¹²¹ *”Puhukaa nyt sitä mustalaiskieltä.”*

playwright's wife, who in turn is watching Memesa and probably wondering why she's so different looking from the others, wearing trousers and a jacket and with short hair instead of the massive dress and long hair. Memesa speaks in the Romani language to the woman, and the local Roma become excited. Instruments are brought in, and they begin to sing and drink. The hosts ask the Finns to sing something and the other students yell, "Memesa will sing!" (472).¹²³

Memesa turns an awkward setting into a triumph, full of music and shared joy through her skills and abilities *as a Roma*. She is the only one who speaks the Romani language, it turns out, and can sing a Macedonian Romani song from memory while the others watch and listen. She doesn't look like a Roma in her manner of dress and with the shortness of her hair, but she *is* a Roma. Two other students, who dress and behave like traditional Romani women and aggressively police the norms and expectations of that culture, turn out to be lacking in these important elements of cultural heritage.¹²⁴

At the Romani pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Memesa exhibits her work called 'Musta Perhonen,' which consists of a heavy Romani dress pierced with knives (Lumberg 2011, 509). The Romani dress, which billows out from above the hips and is heavy and impractical, has been a particular bone of contention for Memesa throughout the trilogy as a symbol of gendered domination. She says:

[...] I realized why I'm like a red cloth to gypsies. I don't consent to submit to the tribe's rules, and that's where the anger springs from. I don't want to trample on myself and become a victim. I want to find my own star and go towards it. That's enough for me but too much for others. Especially for many women. Gypsy women submit themselves and accept the subservient position. That's how it should be. They dress

¹²² "Istun senkin vieressä kauempana muista ja ajattelen, että mikseivät kurssilaiset nyt puhu omaa kieltänsä, kun Suomessa aina toittottavat mustalaiskulttuuria."

¹²³ "Memesa laulaa!"

¹²⁴ I do not have space to get into the role of orphanages for Romani children from the 1950s through the 70s, which were a mechanism by which the state attempted to assimilate Romani children into majority-Finnish society and break their connection with Romani culture (see Grönfors 1981, 40–44; Grönfors 2012, 241–249; Pulma 2006, 160–179; for a Master's thesis on abuses in children's out-of-home care in Finland, including Roma, see Mäkelä 2015). In the *Memesa* trilogy, the women described here turn out to be jealous of Memesa, who grew up in a Romani family and hence learned the language, etc., because they grew up in orphanages and missed out on such experiences.

in prisoner's clothing and are content with their destiny. I remind them of freedom. (483)¹²⁵

The Romani dress symbolizes 'prison' while, for Memesa, her short hair, trousers, and her outspokenness symbolize freedom. Freedom is related to the subjectivity that Emilia preached, Memesa's mother talked about, and which Memesa has long understood on a visceral level.

Freedom is also one of the reasons Lumberg would be motivated to have Memesa narrate these events: to illustrate alternatives within the Romani community. The possibility of Memesa transforming her inherited role as a Romani woman into something else is related to the concept of *nepantla*, which is where various perspectives clash and one is forced to question the inherited foundations upon which one's reality is premised (Anzaldúa, 2015, 125). Memesa is discarding the matrimonial line of Romani traditions symbolized by the large, heavy dress. By partaking in the Romani pavilion as a Romani artist and making Romani symbols central to her installation, Memesa shows that she has not rejected her Romani past outright. There are many aspects of Romani culture that she accepts and enjoys, among them the vividness of the people, but her installation kills, with so many knives, the side to Romani culture that she cannot and will not accept. This is the end of the protracted death scene of those aspects of Memesa's Romani identity that she then publicly rejects. This is also the rebirth of the self in *nepantla*, which, for Memesa, is largely defined as not belonging to majority-Finnish culture as well as other categories. As we've seen, however, this demarcation is not absolute, and she manages to redefine her relationship with her Romani heritage.

5.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

After centuries of institutional racism, neglect, and abuse, non-Romani Finns may feel ill-equipped, not to mention unentitled, to question the collective Romani identity. There is no doubt that Roma have been, and continue to be, mistreated in Finland (see, e.g., Granqvist 2020). The historical record is deeply troubling. Roma are entitled to define their own identities, desires, and solutions, and the best scenario would be research conducted by Roma themselves into this complex and thorny issue. However, I also believe Romani

¹²⁵ *"Sen illan jälkeen tajuan, miksi olen mustalaisille kuin punainen vaate. En suostu alistumaan lauman sääntöihin, ja siitä suuttumus sikiää. En halua talloa itseäni ja jäädä uhriksi. Haluan löytää oman tähteni ja mennä sitä kohti. Se riittää minulle, mutta on liikaa muille. Etenkin monille naisille. Mustalaisnaiset alistuvat osaansa ja hyväksyvät alistetun asemansa. Niin kuuluu olla. He pukevat yllensä vangin puvun ja tyytyvät kohtaloonsa. Minä muistutan heitä vapaudesta."*

history and contemporary realities in Finland to be a national and even international issue that deserves broad attention because, by studying it, we might not only better understand Roma in Finland, but minorities the world over. Understanding can lead to changes not only in behavior between individuals and groups, but in the institutional structures by which racism continues to play out today. I believe this is a collective responsibility and not 'only' for Roma or other minorities to sort out for themselves. A powerful tool for better understanding Romani culture and history is the study of literature by and about Roma.

An analysis of the *Memesa* trilogy leads to some tricky questions. One could argue that Memesa, despite deciding not to associate with Romani culture, is still a Roma due to her inherited race and ethnicity and through her lived experiences, which have both positive and negative connotations. She is also in part majority-culture Finnish because she is a citizen of that nation state, speaks Finnish, was born and grew up in Finland and works there, has ancestors who have lived in the country over generations, and so on.

However, she is also *not* Finnish because she is Roma, or not 'really' Finnish, as she is reminded often in her socio-cultural context. She also does not belong to the Romani community because she rejects aspects of that culture and its traditions and has been ostracized, which here has been symbolized by the death threats she receives. The result of all this, and much more besides, including sexuality, gender, language, etc., is a complex position in-between the normative categories by which society is understood.

Complicating the topic is the fact that Memesa wants to belong to Finnish society. She wants to be accepted by people walking down the street, but it is rare, she says, for a majority-culture Finnish person to see her as human (Lumberg 2011, 414). Memesa's in-betweenness is hence forced onto her from the outside rather than being framed as a choice. It is one result of the accumulation of history as it shapes society and culture (Marx 2010, 103).

Memesa has the revolutionary's fervor and the steady stoicism of a long-suffering martyr. She does not waver on the path that she sees as ethical—that all humans should share the dignity of their humanness. But society does not conform to her vision of dignity. As Marx notes, "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living" (103). Hundreds of years of racism, apartness, and stereotypes in Finland concerning Roma are the "nightmare on the brains" of society and culture. This pessimistic outlook is upheld in the *Memesa* trilogy, but there is one important development that is outside the frame of the trilogy: the *Memesa* trilogy itself. Reading, studying, discussing, and sharing about individual experiences that go beyond and against the stereotypes by which Roma are understood in Finland is one way of transforming the "tradition of all dead generations" into something new. I believe it is imperative to seek out, encourage, and, most importantly, listen to the stories that Romani individuals tell in all their complex specificity, which may begin to undo the straight-jacketed stereotypical roles by which Romani are still understood in Finland today. This

may allow for a turn in Romani studies in Finland that takes in the multiplicity, heterogeneity, and in-betweenness that exists in the Romani community.

This chapter has shown how Lumberg takes stereotypes about Roma in Finland head-on from the first paragraphs of the trilogy. Her authorial audience, majority-culture Finns, will recognize these tropes—if they recognize them at all—as well-worn and typical characteristics of Romani people generally. As the trilogy progresses, these stereotypes can be understood as strategic essentialisms by which Lumberg lays an ethical trap for her majority-culture readers. The degree to which flesh-and-blood readers will have failed to question, or even notice, these tropes—which is to say to think critically about them in the context of broader Finnish society and history—will have a direct influence upon how readers feel about their own stereotypical thinking once they begin to side with Memesa against majority-culture Finnish society.

The need to belong is a powerful instinct and need for humans (Baumeister 2012; Baumeister and Leary 1995). Most of us will, to a certain degree at least, sympathize with the image of a child who has been cast out by her playfellows, is not spoken to except in ridicule, who is alone and unable to join others' games, talk, and laughter. The vulnerability of a child being cast out from belonging is a powerful image. The fact that the child is Romani may bypass stereotypes and prejudices to allow us to emotively connect with the predicament of not belonging.

As Memesa grows into an adult, this same emotional register follows her throughout her experiences in Finnish society. She is not awarded the dignity, she feels, of belonging to the most basic category most of us take for granted: that of being human. These stories speak to our emotional understanding of one specific character, which may allow us to understand issues surrounding Roma in Finland (and elsewhere and other minorities) in a new light. They are not a mass of people or a collection of statistics or newspaper print, but made up of individuals, and some of them are like Memesa, whom we've come to know. We may even be driven to fight for her. Therefore, telling and listening to stories is important and evidence that the study of literature is not a remnant of a pre-tech society but imperative for helping us to make sense of how others feel and what consequences our (in-)actions may have, including the (in-)actions of our institutions.

This chapter contributes to the overall goals of this dissertation by showing that in-betweenness is a crucial and even defining part of some texts. Overlooking Memesa's process as she leaves the Romani community, is rejected by majority-Finnish culture, and is eventually forced into a positionality of in-betweenness through not belonging would be to disregard what, for Memesa and many like her in real life, is a primary pillar of her experience and identity.

The concept of *nepantla*, which has been taken from its U.S.-American theoretical context and applied to a text from Finland, has allowed a study of Memesa's process into in-betweenness but also, and perhaps most

importantly, of how in-betweenness can be an imposed force rather than being an empowering space marked by agency. Some characters, such as Oscar in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street*, come to the realization that they, in part, belong to a multiplicity of categories though not to any *one* category. This chapter has shown that in-betweenness can also be an experience of enforced not-belonging. These are variations in the experiences of individuals in specific contexts as they negotiate their way through societies that are defined by clearly demarcated categories.

At the conceptual level, then, my conclusion is that the concept of nepantla can be applied across geographies and cultures by always taking the specificity of individual experiences into consideration and by paying attention to the heavy hand of history in the specific context. Memesa and Esperanza's experiences cannot be conflated for many reasons that stem from the specificity of their experiences and societies, but their acts of facing up to the traditional role of women within their own minority group is strikingly similar. As women, they are both expected to uphold the traditions of their community—even in writing about it (Bolaki 2011, 131). Both defy this expectation by writing scathing critiques of the role of women in their respective communities. I see this courage as a sign of deep loyalty. Memesa (and Lumberg) put their safety and even lives on the line to challenge the aspects of their community, namely gender relations and violence, that are harmful to members of that community. Esperanza gives voice to the many women on Mango Street who had been silenced within the walls of houses, all but invisible if their stories had not been written down.

This chapter has illustrated that historical and sociocultural differences amount to different and specific experiences of in-betweenness for Memesa and Esperanza, however. While both Esperanza and Memesa left their communities due to their roles and perceived future as women in the traditional patriarchy, Esperanza was free to confidently dream of a house of her own outside of the Mango Street community. Even in the voice of a post-storyworld narrator, Esperanza does not frame Anglo-American culture as an impediment, though we can safely assume that her life as a woman of color wouldn't be easy.

Memesa's trajectory, in many ways, is similar to Esperanza's except for the all-important context, which took on the form of the deeply rooted racism she experienced in Finland in the 1960s through to the 80s, as portrayed in the trilogy. To take one example, Esperanza's experiences at school, though marked by shame due to poverty (Cisneros 2009, 45), are nondescript. However, as part of a tiny minority with 500 years of racist historical baggage in a predominantly homogenous culture, many experiences for Finnish Roma are hard to compare with those of a Mexican American girl growing up in a Latino neighborhood in Chicago. Memesa's experiences at school are defined by isolation, humiliation, taunting, and violence, which severely limit the scope of her future dreams. Nevertheless, she holds out faith that shared

humanity will eclipse ideas of race and, through a painful educational process out in society, is proven wrong at the social level.

In terms of literary devices and the application of the concept of nepantla, these sociocultural and historical differences can be accounted for by taking nepantla as a continuum that can signify different experiences and positionalities. Both Cisneros and Lumberg's texts present the experiences of young protagonists who come to understand, to different degrees, that they are in-between their competing categories and are urged on by 'supernatural' old women who guide their escape. Both texts use spatial metaphors to communicate that their roles as women are limiting. Esperanza and Memesa both become artists to better fashion and shape their own realities. Both texts depict the process by which these young women come to understand their own subjectivity, which is shown to not correlate with the normative frames of reference at their disposal. But they illustrate very different outcomes: for Esperanza it is one of hope and belonging while, for Memesa, it is of not belonging and distance. Most importantly, however, both Esperanza and Memesa write their stories to "re-member" (Anzaldúa 2015, 136) their pasts as empowered calls for change in their communities.

This chapter has hence taken our understanding of the concept of nepantla forward by showing that resistance is also possible from a position of not belonging, or from the lonely space of loss in which one is defined, in large part, by one's distance to normative categories rather than partial acceptance of them. Memesa, like Esperanza, is grounded through her identity as an artist, and she also creates her own space of in-betweenness by narrating the *Memesa* trilogy. Her story indicates that, though it is not recognized in the storyworld, she has succeeded in making her own space in-between by writing about it and hence bringing it concretely into existence. In this way, in-betweenness can be a telos, a 'space,' and a defining aspect of one's position and identity.

In the next chapter, I analyze John Rechy's novel *City of Night*, which is at the far side of the nepantla continuum because the character narrator goes to extreme lengths to avoid accepting belonging. He is rather defined by an avoidance of identifying markers, most notably in the case of his sexuality, which is highlighted by his role as male hustler but remains ambiguous through his refusal to identify with homo-, bi-, or some other form of sexuality. He remains stubbornly and adamantly in-between normative categories and can most fruitfully be defined negatively—through what he is not. In this sense, the novel is a radical example of a *Bildungsroman* of not belonging and ambiguity.

6 THE CHAOS OF NEPANTLA IN JOHN RECHY'S *CITY OF NIGHT*

Oh, of course, you can't give them any false hope. After all, you're just a little brown Mexican boy.

Oscar 'Zeta' Acosta, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first two novels analyzed in this dissertation, nepantla was represented as an embraced positionality of partial belonging to various categories. In the previous chapter, we saw that nepantla can also be the result of not belonging. These are not hard and fast demarcations but overlap for each of the character narrators presented so far. The insight that nepantla can be both positively and negatively formulated respects the complex realities of characters' interactions with society, encapsulated by the racism Memesa faced in the previous chapter. While Memesa wanted to belong and could not, John Rechy's novel *City of Night* (1984a [1963]) presents yet another kind of in-betweenness in which the character narrator actively rejects belonging to communal identities, be they ethnic, sexual, or in relation to other individuals. As a result, the narrator is a multiple outsider as he actively cultivates his apartness. A radical form of in-betweenness based on not belonging, which is a form of negativity as readers are told what the narrator *is not* rather than what he is, ensues. Rechy's novel is presented last in this dissertation because it represents an endpoint on the nepantla continuum: in-betweenness as chaos and what I term *Coatlicue* nepantla. While the other protagonists in this corpus both belong and do not belong in various and messy degrees, *City of Night*, I argue, presents a nihilistic form of in-betweenness as extreme not-belonging based on ambiguity, a rejection of shared frames of reference, and unreliability.

I claim that the narrator, despite working as a hustler (i.e., a male prostitute) and engaging in sexual acts with a plethora of men, remains in a state of in-betweenness in terms of his sexuality. The text very carefully does not accept any one sexual category, but, instead, uses ambivalence as a creative force (Sternberg 1989, 227) to represent and create in-betweenness. According to the rules of the street, 'going' with a man for money does not make one a homosexual; it can be seen as a job or a method of survival. If Acosta's narrator Oscar overstates his case in chapter 3, which is a form of unreliability (Phelan 2005, 51), Rechy's narrator is unreliable because he does not disclose enough, which James Phelan (2005) would call "underreporting" (52). A close textual analysis is necessary to reach a position supported by the text.

City of Night tells the narrator's story of leaving his home and mother in El Paso, Texas, and setting out in search of something "indefinable" (Rechy 1984a, 31), which is related to a conscious effort to lose his innocence. Neither the narrator nor readers can quite say why the sexualized streets of New York City, Los Angeles, New Orleans, and San Francisco have the urgent draw that they do, but the narrator must experience them. The narrator's occupation as hustler transforms over time into an unquenchable need to be desired in the form of amassing as many sexual contacts as possible. However, what motivates this form of sexuality remains just out of grasp.

6.1.1 THE GAP CONTAINS A SPECTRUM OF SEXUALITY

City of Night was published in 1963, a period when social movements based on identity, such as the Chicano Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Gay Rights Movement, were in the process of being defined via differentiation (Miller 2019, 255). In these movements, broadly speaking, difference was redefined from being a liability to becoming a source of pride; difference, from this perspective, was beautiful. Rather than being defined in relation to one of these or other subgroups, however, the narrator remains an outsider.

The novel tells of the complex realities and experiences of a character at the borderlands of sexuality, lawfulness, society, body as private/public, and ethnicity. As Frederick Luis Aldama (2005) has noted, John Rechy “powerfully imagines an otherwise essentialized and/or neglected queer Chicano/a identity and experience” (48). *Pace* Aldama, I claim that Rechy’s ‘power’ is linked to his ability to imagine beyond the categories of queer, Chicana/o, and other normative frames of reference. Rechy’s most powerful statement on ethnicity in the context of the hyper-racially aware context of the United States in the mid-20th century, for instance, is to say very little on the subject, which can be contrasted to the racialized social stratification schema described by Oscar in chapter 3 and Memesa’s experiences of dehumanization based on her race in chapter 5. The narrator’s rejection of ethnicity as a shared identity positioning, along with sexuality and other categories, thus creates a multiple outsider position (see Giles 1974, 376). This leads us to the following questions: how does the narrator’s outsider position, combined with his lack of disclosure, represent in-betweenness and what is its motivation?

The narrator’s relation to the homosexual subculture is especially important. Generally, *City of Night* is considered a “gay classic” (Nichols 2016, 409) but the novel has been taken both as a coming out narrative (Zamora 1979) and an “anti-coming out” narrative (Arnold 2011, 121). Kevin Arnold argues that Rechy’s second novel *Numbers* (1984b [1967]) specifically, and his early novels generally, including Rechy’s first novel *City of Night*, never reach a “tangible or concrete articulation of sexuality” (119) and instead illustrate the impossibility of identification for the narrator. For Arnold, the impossibility stems from the narrators’ inability to “[reconcile] masculinity with homosexuality” (121) because the novels’ chosen construction of masculinity (macho, hyper-masculine) is incompatible with their homosexuality in the discursive, representational space of the texts (127). The narrators’ desirability is based on their “straight” persona, which, as a representational position, excludes the possibility for an “open” articulation of homosexual desire.

Arnold’s (2011) analysis is an excellent contribution to better understanding Rechy’s technique of articulating “the impossibility of identification” (121). However, in the spirit of nepantla, I wish to go beyond the irreconcilability of masculine and homosexual norms to explore the narrator’s articulation of his subjective position through multiple unstable

sides to his self that, while contradictory, co-exist in *City of Night*. Understood through nepantla, such a reading goes beyond oppositional dualities to articulate a mutable, non-hierarchical in-betweenness, which differs from Arnold's argument that "it is *representationally* impossible for a subject to occupy both masculinity and homosexuality in the discursive space of Rechy's novels" and, as a result, characters are "either masculine or they are not" (127, emphasis in original). I claim that *City of Night*'s narrator is, in Arnold's terms, both masculine and not masculine at the same time, which are represented by the 'mask' he wears while hustling and his inner self that is mostly kept secret, and he hence occupies a space of in-betweenness as he is torn between these two heuristically plotted points.

The subject of sexuality is steeped in ambiguity in the novel. The narrator provides a clear pattern of silences concerning the topic, which operate as a narrative gap where a proclamation could be or would be in a traditional coming-out narrative or *Bildungsroman*. The analysis of the narrative gap concerning the narrator's sexuality is the central method for opening up questions of in-betweenness in the narrative.

An established definition of a narratological gap in narrative theory is that it is a place within a text where vitally important information is withheld (Iser 1974, 33) through, for example, omission or negativity (saying what something is not, rather than what it is). Paradoxically, such an omission elicits "an intensification of the reader's emotional engagement with the text" and is one literary tactic for rendering "non-verbal experiences" (Caracciolo and Guédon 2017, 45). In line with this, I argue that sexuality for the narrator may be beyond shared frames of reference and even signifiers altogether, or his ability to verbalize it. It is possible that the narrator's sexuality can only be depicted in silences, and, in his own inconclusive way, he is outlining it as clearly as he can.

The narrator's portrayal of his journey "through nightcities and nightlives—looking for I dont [sic]¹²⁶ know what—*perhaps* some substitute for salvation" (Rechy 1984a, 19, emphasis added) is indicative of the level of interpretation readers are given: it is negatively framed because we know what it's a substitute for, but not what it is, and it is in the conditional tense. This is the gap at the center of my analysis: what, in terms of sexuality, is the narrator looking for? The textual evidence indicates that it is not satisfyingly definable through the normative categories at our disposal. Instead, it is defined ambiguously as existing on a spectrum of sexuality and communicated through textual clues that point to a narrative silence.

The narrator's silence should be taken as indicative of the rich possibility within the narrative's discourse. In the words of Foucault (1978), "[t]here is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say;

¹²⁶ Punctuation and spelling are erratic in the novel as seen here and in the quotes that follow. I will not be commenting 'sic' after each instance as it would become burdensome for readers.

we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things. [...] There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.” Foucault claims that silences, rather than being a strict boundary of discourse, are “an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies” (27). In other words, discourse is also made up of the rich possibilities of what has been left unsaid.

The text is hence read through a ‘spectrum of sexuality,’ which is the understanding of sexuality as an array of many possible, constructed identities, thereby causing readers to question the “‘natural’ authority of difference” (Stanford Friedman 1998, 78) that underwrites the hegemonic, historical understanding of sexuality that was prevalent in the mid-20th century Western social imaginary. The analysis is positioned at a crossroads that, I argue, reflects the positionality of the narrator, who remains at the intersection of sexual identification without ever committing to any forward journey.

For these reasons, I have chosen to rely on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2008) book *The Epistemology of the Closet*. In the book, Sedgwick looks both back at the inherited understandings of sexuality that dominated Western culture throughout most of the 20th century and forward to an understanding of sexuality that resembles what, in my reading, is represented in *City of Night*. Namely, sexuality is not a static category or binary, but fluid and sometimes difficult to define or talk about. The spectrum of sexuality is premised on ambiguity and nuance rather than a “tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization [that] have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought” (Sedgwick 2008, 22) such as sexuality based on the gender of one’s object of desire, as well as class, ethnicity, etc.

Some scholars (e.g., Arnold 2011; Nichols 2016; Oritz 1993) link the narrator’s sexuality to that of the historical author John Rechy, who identifies as gay. Doing so inscribes sexuality a priori onto the narrator without reference to the text itself. Following Sedgwick (2008, 3–4), the narrator must use a speech act to proclaim his own coming out. In the words of Sedgwick again, “[t]o alienate conclusively, *definitionally*, from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire is a terribly consequential seizure” (26, emphasis in original) and one that this analysis attempts not to perform.

My analysis is based on a close reading of the text with an active attempt to avoid a priori projection of normative frames of reference onto it as much as possible (understanding, of course, that doing so completely is impossible). Rather, I believe that

[t]he safer proceeding would seem to be to give as much credence as one finds it conceivable to give to self-reports of sexual difference—weighting one’s credence, when it is necessary to weight it at all, in favor of the less normative and therefore riskier, costlier self-reports. To

follow this proceeding is to enclose protectively large areas of, not mere agnosticism, but more active potential pluralism on the heavily contested maps of sexual definition. (Sedgwick 2008, 27)

Sedgwick here argues for the riskier path of relying on subjective accounts of identifications concerning sexuality rather than inscribing normative frames of reference, which allows for the kind of in-between readings that this dissertation attempts to produce. More variations concerning sexual positionings are hence legitimized. This stance is echoed in the novel as the narrator actively substitutes a static identity for freedom that leads to chaos. By doing so, he not only deconstructs the dichotomies of opposites that often underwrite understandings of sexuality in the Western social imaginary, but also enters a space of in-betweenness. The narrative builds an extended space of ambiguity, which, seen through the lens of nepantla, opens the possibility that the narrator's sexuality is not definable by any one sexual category but is rather an ongoing, fluctuating space with many, mutable influences. Most powerfully, sexuality is defined as not belonging, loss, and chaos, which coincides with Anzaldúa's (2015) theorization of nepantla as stage 2 on the path to *conocimiento*, as outlined in chapter 5, and as being torn between stories, or *Coatlicue*, which is stage 3. The narrator's journey from his childhood home through the "nightcities" of the USA leads him to a form of knowledge that is represented as chaos, an extreme form of not belonging, which is the basis of my argument that the novel can be termed a modified *Bildungsroman* of in-betweenness.

6.1.2 THE TELOS AND PROCESS OF THE *BILDUNGSROMAN*

One element that motivates the narrator's journey is the pull of the center in relation to the periphery. The scope of the narrator's journey is from rural innocence through the urban underground to eventual chaos and jaded knowledge. Having arrived at knowledge, he longs "for innocence more than for anything else, and [he] would have thrown away all the frantic knowing for a return to a state of Grace—which is only the state of, *idiot-like*, Not Knowing" (Rechy 1984a, 379, emphasis in original). The fact that the narrator does not specify what he now knows and wishes he didn't is an illustration of the novel's indeterminacy. This development, moreover, is central to my motivation for classifying the novel as a modified *Bildungsroman*, though many scholars would disagree with me.

Of the novels included in this dissertation, Rechy's fits least well into the genre category of *Bildungsroman*. Scholars have suggested that it is the opposite of a *Bildungsroman* as the episodic nature of the text leads nowhere specifically. Aldama (2005), in describing Rechy's second novel, *Numbers*, could just as well be discussing *City of Night* when he writes "the reader is not to expect the character arcs and grand moments of awareness of the

Bildungsroman, but rather the episodic story of a character who changes little and whose journey reveals the underbelly of society” (54). As Arnold (2011) notes, Rechy’s *Numbers* and *City of Night* share the same plot trajectory of a young masculine man moving from a rural setting to big cities to join the underground hustling scene, which Arnold calls a “‘myth’ of gay male culture” that stands for both the perceived trajectory of the coming-out narrative and the “eroticized fantasy of having sex with a ‘straight’ man” (117), which is the role the hustler plays for his clients, or ‘scores.’ Despite the movement from what Arnold calls “repression” to “liberation,” these novels are not *Bildungsromane*, Arnold argues, because the protagonists never “seem to learn anything” (117).

Marcelle Maese-Cohen (2014, 105) critiques James R. Giles (1974), one of Rechy’s earliest literary critics, in his reading of the novel as a *Bildungsroman*¹²⁷ because his analysis “aligns travel and consciousness in a teleological manner that privileges the end point rather than the process and replicates the logic of the American dream in place of the migrant nightmare.” She contrasts the teleological framework of the *Bildungsroman*, with its implied destination of social cohesion as the overriding goal and point of the narrative, with María Lugones’s (2003) concepts of “pilgrimage” and “world”-traveling, which are praxes that replace the forced movement of peoples in colonialism by “shifting the directionality and intentionality of travel” (Lugones 2003, 18, qtd. in Maese-Cohen 2014, 88). The *Bildungsroman*, it is implied, is a genre befitting the specific purpose of getting the protagonist to his or her destination (teleology), which, for American literature, is the logic of the American dream in Maese-Cohen’s reading, which she contrasts dichotomously with the “migrant nightmare” as a process. Elsewhere, Maese-Cohen (2013) reads *City of Night* as a “pilgrimage,” which is an anti-*Bildungsroman* form, she argues, because in it, “colonial expansion is circumvented by the imperative to return home both in terms of geopolitical location and self-reflection” (12). “Home,” for the narrator, is El Paso on the U.S.-Mexico “frontera,” which Maese-Cohen contrasts with the Western frontier and U.S. imperialism (12). I will argue that the narrator leaves home on a quest and returns having fulfilled it, which marks it as a *Bildungsroman*. I will also show that building dichotomies such as those utilized by Maese-Cohen (2013, 2014) and Arnold (2011)—“American dream” vs. “migrant nightmare”, “colonial expansion” vs. “home,” the “frontera” vs. “Western frontier” and U.S. imperialism, “homosexual” vs. “masculine”—does a disservice to the narrator’s complex realities. These are similar to the move some scholars (Karafilis 1998; Martin 2008) have made for Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street*, as I showed in chapter 4. For now, it is important to note that many scholars are of the opinion that *City of Night* is not a *Bildungsroman*.

¹²⁷ Giles does not use the term *Bildungsroman* himself, but I take Maese-Cohen to mean that his reading implies the scope typical of that genre.

Yet other scholars have found aspects of the *Bildungsroman* in *City of Night*. For example, Karen Christian (1992, 98) and Carlos Zamora (1979, 53) emphasize the narrator's progression towards maturation, even if it remains halting and problematic, in what can be understood as fitting within the generic characteristics of the *Bildungsroman*. While I do not believe the narrator matures, exactly, I do argue that the narrator develops from childhood innocence to a state of radical in-betweenness, which takes on the form of chaos.

The indeterminacy of chaos is in line with Arnold's (2011) analysis. He writes that the narrators of Rechy's early novels "articulate the impossibility of [the coming out] narrative" as they "circle around endlessly" and "never finally [satisfy] us with any truth of the subject" (117) and are hence not *Bildungsromane*. Though I agree with Arnold in terms of his stance on indeterminacy, I disagree with his conclusion. For the narrator, the impossibility of articulating his coming out and his avoidance of ever satisfying us with any final "truth" on his sexuality is, in my reading, the teleological destination of radical in-betweenness that marks the novel as a *Bildungsroman*. The assumption that sexuality should always be stated in clear and unambiguous terms—which is to say by using the traditional categories that Western culture has bequeathed us—is problematic. Clearly, this is not a classical *Bildungsroman*. As with the other novels in the corpus, its denouement is framed through a disavowal of what would traditionally be one's 'category' in society, which is the telos of the variety of modified *Bildungsromane* collected in this dissertation.

If the *Bildungsroman* genre is teleological rather than processual, though I argue in this dissertation that it can be both, the narrator of *City of Night* reaches his stated goal of knowledge as opposed to innocence. As the quote included at the beginning of this subsection indicates ("[he] would have thrown away all the frantic knowing for a return to a state of Grace" [Rechy 1984a, 379]), he comes to regret it, but he has nevertheless succeeded in stripping away belonging of many kinds, including, most importantly, in terms of his sexuality, which is the abstract form of nihilistic and jaded knowledge he had been seeking.

6.2 THE MULTIPLE OUTSIDER POSITION

The following analysis examines the narrator's ethnicity, which is not claimed as a communal identifying category but nevertheless informs the narrator's in-between positionality. While the narrator's motivation is, in part, to move from the margins to the center, he remains emotionally and relationally uncommitted and at a distance from others. The narrator illustrates and underlines how he does not belong, which is one manner by which in-betweenness can be represented in narratives. Apartness, I claim, is one

defining characteristic for the narrator, which can fruitfully be understood through the ideas of *nepantla* and not belonging.

6.2.1 ETHNICITY AND NOT BELONGING

The historical author John Rechy has spoken out against being labelled by preconceived categories as a writer, claiming that “[a]ll categorization that limits the artist is negative” (Castillo 1995, 118). Specifically, he resents being labeled a “gay writer” (113), which, Rechy states, stands in the way of being appreciated for his “literary quality” (122). Ben Nichols (2016) suggests that the term “gayness” stands in for all forms of limitation and reduction for Rechy, which act in “keeping things confined, restricted, the same” (410). The novel illustrates that, in terms of “gayness” or any other category, the text goes beyond the restriction of confined same-ness in its depiction of the narrator’s experience.

Unlike other Chicana/o authors publishing at the time, John Rechy also disassociates with the category of Chicano author/narrator and ethnic subject matter. A longstanding discussion in Chicana/o studies focuses on the definition of a Chicana/o writer, which Rechy himself has declined to be identified as. If it is defined as a “Chicano who writes,” as Rechy believes it should be, “obviously I am that” (García 2003, 45), he says. However, since Rechy’s early novels do not foreground ethnicity and deal with men who have sex with men (MSM) (Glick *et al.* 2012) in risqué fashion, his works were long held to be outside the Chicana/o literary canon. José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho* (1970 [1959]), for example, also deals with attitudes towards homosexuality¹²⁸ but foregrounds ethnicity and has hence been considered ‘Chicana/o’ by readers and critics alike (Bruce-Novoa 1986, 70).

Aldama (2005, 47–53), in his book *Brown on Brown: Chicano/a Representations of Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnicity*, discusses the genealogy of Rechy’s eventual acceptance into the Chicana/o literary fold, which Aldama corresponds with the publication of a special edition of the journal *Minority Voices* in 1979 and the subsequent engagement with queerness via Chicana/o literature, as championed by Juan Bruce-Novoa in his 1986 article ‘Homosexuality and the Chicano Novel.’ In the book, Aldama highlights Rechy’s construction of “ethnosexualized” characters, who are doubly marginalized by their ethnicity and sexuality and are often from border areas,

¹²⁸ Homosexuality was not a taboo subject in Chicana/o literature per se, though there has been a strong cultural hostility towards homosexuality (see Rodriguez 1994). Juan Bruce-Novoa (1986, 70) has shown that in the decade in which the Chicano Movement began (1959-1970), five of the seven Chicano/a novels published utilize homosexuality or attitudes towards homosexuality as an important theme (three of them by Rechy).

such as El Paso, Texas, for example. However, Aldama also suggests that perhaps

it is not a question of framing Rechy's narrative fictions as within an either/or [queer and Chicana/o] paradigm. Perhaps, Rechy as literary saboteur can complexly re-imagine what it means to be Chicano/a precisely by employing avant-garde technique to bend genre and reconfigure world literary canons.

Aldama is suggesting that Rechy, by bending the techniques of literature by using elements borrowed from world literature, including the episodic picaresque mode and Joyce's stream-of-consciousness, "radically reframes traditional depictions of ethnosexualized characters" (48). He does so by going beyond the categories of both ethnic or sexualized, or, I would add, even our conceptions of what sexual and ethnic positionings can be. The "ethnosexualized" positionality of Rechy's narrator is defined by not belonging to an ethnic group, a sexual category, normative ideas of what U.S.-American society consists of, and even geographical locations as he moves from city to city and back again in short periods of time.

Rechy refers to himself as a "literary saboteur" (Castillo 1995, 122), by which he means both in terms of his subject matter and his literary style that, for example, includes the fragmented unreliability and inaccessibility of his narrator in *City of Night*, a novel that is otherwise candid and coldly straightforward in its observations of the U.S.-American demimonde. Rechy's technique is to sabotage readers' ability to neatly categorize his narrator, just as the historical author Rechy resents being labelled as a "gay writer" due to its limiting effect on how his writing is understood (Castillo 1995, 113, 122). Rather, the narrator's 'category' remains in-between based on ambiguity: normative categories influence the narrator, naturally, but he goes out of his way to not pledge allegiance to them. The narrator's ethnicity is a good example.

In the novel, ethnicity is only alluded to a handful of times, such as when, for example, the narrator describes his mother as a "beautiful Mexican woman" (Rechy 1984a, 14) who has been left behind, which makes him feel guilty. When the narrator leaves El Paso, she is "standing that morning by the kitchen door crying, as she always would be in my mind" (19). The narrator's emotional relation to his mother is more important than her Mexican-ness, but in relation to both, he is shown to be an outsider. The narrator's father's ethnicity is also mentioned—he is a "man who alternatively claimed French, English, Scottish descent—depending on his imaginative moods" (14)—but is not emphasized. Much more important is the father's violence, which "erupted unpredictably over anything" when he would "smash bottles, menacing us with the sharpfanged edges," his moments of tenderness "even more brutal because they didnt last" (15), and sexual abuse. Again, not being accepted by

his father, except for short moments, indicates that it is the lack of belonging that preoccupies the narrator.

Nevertheless, readers may infer the influence of ethnicity based on the narrator's characterization as an outsider. Being of Mexican heritage in the context of the United States implies a specific kind of outsider positioning vis-à-vis the status quo. Rechy told Giles (1974), for example, "*You can't know, Jim, the crap of being a Chicano in all the ugly little Texas towns where all they know, or have ever known, is hate!*" (376, emphasis in original). As was shown in Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* in chapter 3, being coded as 'racialized' in mid-20th century United States amounted to living in adverse conditions. Being marginalized implies certain survival tactics that shape a subject's worldview. Sedgwick writes in terms of human animal survival in a hostile environment:

[...] probably everybody who survives at all has reasonably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy for mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations of their human social landscape. It is probably people with the experience of oppression or subordination who have the most *need* to know it [...]. (Emphasis in original)

The narrator's doubly marginalized positioning in the United States as a Mexican American male hustler may inform his ability and necessity in "making and unmaking and *remaking*" nonce categories, which are categories that fit specific occasions rather than being more broadly applicable, while tactically maneuvering through a dangerous world (Sedgwick 2008, 23, emphasis in original). It is possible that the narrator, who has experienced the realities of his racialized normative category and seen how it falls short of his subjective experiences, thus rejects normative categories concerning his sexuality as well. He may know that his experiences are much more complex than the 'homosexual,' 'bisexual,' or 'heterosexual' labels can capture, just as his experiences overflow from the demarcated implications of the term 'Chicano.' In any case, the narrator's refusal to associate with both ethnic and sexualized communal identities creates a negative space of in-betweenness that is influenced by these categories even as he disassociates from them.

6.2.2 APARTNESS

Just as the narrator does not associate with belonging to the Chicana/o ethnic category, he also keeps his distance from other individuals, which is ironic due to his role as a hustler. Though physically intimate, these relations are defined by emotional distance, which aligns with the narrator's descriptions of his childhood.

In the novel's first episode when the narrator is a child, his dog, Winnie, is dying in the dark outside during a windstorm. At first, the boy stays with the

dog, moving it next to a building in a less windy place and leaving food and a bowl of water, which turns to mud in the dusty wind. He then watches from the calm of indoors, separated by a window, which is a leitmotif in the novel: observing yet apart. As in Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, windows are thresholds, in-between spaces that indicate transition from one state or place to another. They also separate. "I watched other lives, only through a window" (18), he says of this time. In the morning the windstorm has passed, and the dog is dead. The tone is of a child's powerlessness in observing the cruelties of the world that occur beyond his sphere of influence.

Both Maese-Cohen (2014, 91) and Giles (1974, 371) read the episode in which the dog Winnie dies as the catalyst for the narrator's disavowal of religion due to his mother's statement, in line with Catholic dogma, that dogs do not go to heaven (Rechy 1984a, 11). The narrator's rejection of faith can thus be understood as framing the narrative journey, they argue. Giles (1974), who, like me, also frames the narrator's journey as a quest (375), writes that the narrator, upon leaving El Paso, believes he has "denied virtually everything," including both Catholicism and any form of personal salvation, but also self-pity and compassion for others (370).

The image of disconnection and separateness, either physical or, more often, emotional and relational, is central to the narrator's presentation of himself and woven into the narrative. He says that bodily contact, in his capacity as a hustler, "ironically" (Rechy 1984a, 81) increases his loneliness. The narrator feels "the incompleteness intrinsic in sharing in another's life" (82) and craves "for a powerful symbolic window away from the world" (83). He remains not quite there, which is to say in-between the present place and somewhere else. The impossibility of experiencing another's reality, which in Wolfgang Iser's (1978, 165) formulation is the inherent gap between all humans that leads to interpretation, is emphasized, and even exaggerated by the narrator. Rather than bringing readers into the narrator's confidence by glossing over the gap that separates the two, Rechy's technique is to emphasize the unknowability of another's subjective experiences.

Like Cisneros's (2009) *The House on Mango Street*, Rechy's novel has a cyclical framework. The novel opens and closes in the same geographical location, El Paso, but the narrator emphasizes the inevitability of leaving the city again in the future (i.e., after the novel ends; Rechy 1984a, 378). In its many departures and restlessness, the narrative is a "circle which winds around, without beginning, without end" (379). The narrator's return to El Paso takes place after the quest has been completed: he has traded innocence for jaded knowledge. The narrator has thus "confronted that which he set out to challenge" (Giles 1974, 375).

Moreover, I believe that since the novel's central topic is the breaking down of categories through their denial, the non-hierarchical multiplicity of nepantla is a pertinent methodological frame for analysis. The narrator's denial of categories, which starts from a young age when he renounces his

mother's faith, is also the basis of his apartness. As we will see next, the distance to others extends to inform the ambiguity surrounding his sexuality.

6.2.3 THE AMBIGUITY OF SEX

City of Night became a best-seller based on its presentation of sensationalized, taboo-crossing subject matter, including homosexuality, promiscuity, and the commodification of bodies, that attracted readers' fascination. *City of Night's* publisher, Grove Press, had published Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* in the United States in 1961, and Miller's novel became "one of the most censored books in history" as it notched up nearly 100 court cases. In *Grove Press v. Gerstein* in 1964, the Supreme Court struck down a Florida county ban of the book that had been based on obscenity charges (Flemming 2009). As a result of the publicity from the *Tropic of Cancer* ordeal, most readers would be aware of what a Grove Press novel would entail—sex. The dust jacket to the first edition of *City of Night* also promises that the novel will be a "bold . . . account of the urban underworld of male prostitution" and "an unforgettable look at life on the edge" (qtd. in Arnold 2011, 115). Rechy delivers on the sexual milieu of male hustling—how it works, hustlers' and clients' attitudes, etc.—but the narrator remains at a distance from readers in terms of his motives.

Ironically, the act of narrating, in one important way, separates the narrator from his audience: he does not disclose information regarding the motivation for his sexual acts. On the other hand, the narrator does explicitly state that he does not know what he is searching for. This lack of knowing acts as a question posed over the narrative. Readers may attempt to piece together evidence to answer the question. The textual evidence rules out the possibility of readers filling in the narrator's sexualized gap with the term homosexuality, which is rejected by the narrator himself. Rather, the narrator's sexuality must be accepted in terms of its ambiguity, which is highlighted.

When first solicited by a sailor inside the Sloane House YMCA, for example, the narrator simply states: "A strange new excitement wells inside me" (Rechy 1984a, 22). The nature of the excitement is not explained: does it have to do sex, the illicit, being the object of desire, money, or a combination of these and/or other elements? The narrator's inner struggle is alluded to dramatically but remains vague. The narrator describes the change taking place within him as

a frantic lonesomeness that sometimes took me, paradoxically, to the height of elation, then flung me into depression. The figure of my Mother standing by the kitchen door crying, watching me leave, hovered ghostlike over me, but in the absence of that overwhelming tearing love—away from it if only physically—I felt a violent craving for something indefinable. (31)

Loneliness is mentioned in the novel often, and, periodically, it is linked back to the narrator's mother in El Paso, which often comes at the heels of sexual contact as a form of guilt. The loneliness is based on extreme individuality and apartness from communal or relational belonging. The mother stands at the door, which may represent the space between domestic childhood innocence and the loss of that innocence out in the cities of night. Apartness is constructed through the active verb "violent craving," which is real and virile, but not linked to an identifiable object as it remains directed at "something indefinable," hence undermining the linkage between the subjective emotion and a shared reality. The emotion circles within the subject rather than being tied to an object, a kind of impotence of meaning. A nihilism of this sort underpins the narrator's emotional landscape. The novel hence takes the form of attempting to define the narrator's craving and fails to carry it through. As Arnold (2011) notes in reference to a character in *Numbers* (1984b), his "subject position is ultimately unclear; what is represented in the scene is obscured by its representation as much as it is revealed by it. In this way, meaning is not so much in the scene as it is *of* the scene, as a representation of this ambiguity itself" (120). Through the representation of ambiguity, *City of Night's* narrator shows his first hustling gig to be beyond the categories by which it might normatively be described.

Much of hustling amounts to waiting in a designated area until one is approached by a man; it is a passive rather than active engagement with the world. This passivity informs the narrator's disengaged observation of characters on the streets and squares and in the bathrooms and cinemas across the United States, which adds to the theme of the outsider looking in. After the initial excitement that hustling affords, it soon turns into a repetitive action that must be continually reproduced to fulfill its momentary function of quelling the narrator's loneliness and apprehension by being desired. Though the narrator states that he wants to be desired, which could be an explanation for his sexuality, being the object of desire is not enough and stands as a byproduct for something that remains unstated. It becomes a question of numbers rather than of desire, or of money, which is also a byproduct of the process. "From face to face, from room to room, from bed to bed, the shape of the world I had chosen emerged [...]" says the narrator. The days are "endlessly resurrected" and "indifferent," which turns to "untrammelled anarchy" and a "symbolic night, as the number of people I went with multiplied daily" (Rechy 1984a, 120). This repetition and circular dead-ended-ness gives the narrative its lifeless, melancholy tone. No matter how many partners the narrator has—how much he is desired—it is never enough, which is a state that continues to the end of the novel and is never resolved. The narrator's eventual chaos is related to his role as hustler being a mask, which complicates readers' understanding of how his sexuality should be perceived.

6.3 SEXUALITY BEYOND CATEGORIZATION

Near the end of the novel, the narrator finally reveals that his role as hustler is, to a certain extent, a mask, and that he harbors complex thoughts, beliefs, and emotions below the surface. This episode is crucial for better understanding the narrator's sexuality in the novel, but ambiguity remains. In reference to Aztec metaphysics, I will show that both the mask and the narrator's private self reflect reality as he experiences it in the storyworld, which undermines the oppositional duality that the formulation of 'mask' and 'private self' implies. For heuristic reasons, I present the narrator's mask and private self as a duality, which, through the analysis, will be resolved as parts of the narrator's whole. In other words, such a duality does not exist but acts here as a representational method by which to approach the narrator's conflicting sense of in-betweenness. I also analyze an episode in which the narrator comes closest to accepting a normative sexualized positioning through the idea of reciprocal romantic love, which, through its rejection, underlines the impossibility of categorization. The negative, ambiguous space that is created through the narrator's ongoing silence concerning his sexuality will be analyzed through the trauma that he suffered as a child that, while not explaining his sexuality, may offer a better understanding of its motivation and his subsequent silence.

6.3.1 MASKS AND PRIVATE SELVES

Masks come up often in *City of Night*. When the narrator describes characters as wearing masks, he means that there is something false about their presentation of themselves. In New Orleans, the narrator meets a "gypsy" woman, who tells him that "People wear masks three hundred and sixty-four days a year. Mardi Gras, they wear their own faces! What you think is masks is really— ...*Themselves!*" (Rechy 1984a, 291). Masks are hence contrasted with peoples' "own faces," which, according to the woman, are only revealed at Mardi Gras. This is a pessimistic evaluation, because Mardi Gras is shown to be a steady descent into chaos for the narrator and others around him.

It is in the context of Mardi Gras that the narrator's mask finally falls after being pushed past his limits by chemicals and wakefulness.

And lucid suddenly as if I had stepped beyond the world, I watch the spectacle, and remember myself years ago before I left that window through which I had merely watched the world, uninvolved.

Masks!

Masks, masks...

And I think: Beyond all this—beyond that window and this churning world, out of all, all this, something to be found: some undiscoverable country within the heart itself.... (Rechy 1984a, 339–40)

This quote refers to the narrator's innocence and marginality in rural El Paso, where he "watched the world, uninvolved." Arriving in New York City, he transformed himself into the macho hustler, which allows him to be the object of others' desire, so at the center of attention. "Some undiscoverable country within the heart itself" refers to romantic love, but it remains "undiscoverable" and is later rejected. In my interpretation, the narrator is here referring to his desire to transcend his childhood state of apartness, as when he watched his dog Winnie die in the windstorm, and his inauthentic mask of macho hustler to reach some "undiscoverable" and "indefinable" (31) state of authenticity, which, the narrator implies, has to do with his sexuality.

Though now out of fashion, ideas concerning authenticity were more prevalent in the 1950s and early 1960s when *City of Night* was written. In Existentialist philosophy, 'authenticity' can be understood as the desire to transcend one's social and ethical constraints to achieve individuality as one truly is (Golomb 1995, 3). Authenticity is fully subjective and beyond objective criteria. Rather than a particular outcome, it is the origin and intensity of one's drive to transcendence—the "incessant movement of becoming, self-transcendence and self-creation" (9)—that point to authenticity. Authenticity is most often described negatively, however, through examples of individuals living inauthentically or in bad faith, which includes giving in to the external pressures from societal norms instead of acting on one's own inner needs and desires. Examples can be found in characters from fictional narratives by Albert Camus, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre (7), whom Rechy cites as an influence (Giles 1974, 373). The narrator's immediate social context and pressures are within the hustling scene, which requires one to play the part of the hyper-masculine macho in exchange for money or being the object of desire. His streetwise persona may then be an inauthentic portrayal that outlines the space where authenticity would be. It may be the case that the narrator's inauthenticity is a result of his inability to integrate the many parts of his character, which are here symbolized by his street-persona mask and his private self.

Such an integrated state can be understood through the concept of nepantla as representing in-betweenness or, more precisely, as a holistic vision from various vantage points at once that does not elevate any one category or perspective. As such, multiple seeing does not imply an either/or situation or duality. The narrator's shifting vantage point, from either stressing the importance of his mother and El Paso and thereby his innocence and private self, or the experienced hustler perspective, which represents the loss of innocence, is consistently presented as an either/or situation (innocence or knowledge). Authenticity would suggest acknowledging both elements of the contradictory dualism, as well as others, as parts of an integrated self.

In Anzaldúa's formulation, the narrator's inability to integrate the parts of himself into a whole and the resulting despair, flux, and chaos can be termed as the *Coatlícue* stage on the (potential) path to *conocimiento*. As Anzaldúa

(2015) puts it, “When overwhelmed by the chaos caused by living between stories,” which are competing versions of the story of the self, “you break down, descend into the third space, the Coatlicue depths of despair, self-loathing, and hopelessness,” (123). The narrator refers to his own torment throughout the novel and it comes to a head at Mardi Gras. Importantly, the anguish does not resolve; rather, it is presented as circular and reoccurring, which is possibly a result of the narrator’s inability or unwillingness to face its root cause.

Nepantla and *Coatlicue* are neighboring stages on the path to *conocimiento* (stages 2 and 3) and closely related. In my formulation of the novel as inhabiting the negative edge of the nepantla continuum, however, it is important to stress that nepantla needn’t always resolve into a ‘successful’ acknowledgement of in-betweenness. This is to say that in-betweenness may be in fact occurring, but the character may not be aware of it. He or she may continue to be torn between competing stories in *Coatlicue*. Anzaldúa (2015) writes,

En este lugar entre medio [In this in-between place], nepantla, two or more forces clash and are held teetering on the verge of chaos [...]. These tensions between extremes create cracks or tears in the membrane surrounding, protecting, and containing the different cultures and their perspectives. Nepantla is the place where at once we are detached (separated) and attached (connected) to each of our several cultures. Here the watcher on the bridge (nepantla) can “see through” the larger symbolic process that’s trying to become conscious through a particular life situation or event. Nepantla is the midway point between the conscious and the unconscious, the place where transformations are enacted. Nepantla is a place where we can accept contradiction and paradox. (56).

The first half of the quote captures the “clash” and “chaos” of living in the “tension” between competing stories. In this process, the validity of our “different cultures” is undermined as their singular vision begins to crack and tear, yet we’re still partially attached and detached. In the second half of the quote, Anzaldúa formulates a more positive version of nepantla: we will “‘see through’ the larger symbolic process,” which leads to enacted transformations. My argument is that this second part of the formulation needn’t necessarily be the case, as it isn’t for Rechy’s narrator. He can be in nepantla without ever achieving the shift in vision that ideally occurs. Literature is important for better understanding the theoretical implications of nepantla for this reason: the cases of specific characters (or individuals) may differ from what typically or ideally might happen. Moreover, as in Rechy’s novel, nepantla can veer off into *Coatlicue* nepantla

The narrator acknowledges the duality of living in-between stories at the end of the novel, the “opposites” he’s holding up within himself (Anzaldúa

2015, 127), which supports my argument that the narrator actively rejects belonging in his quest for a jaded knowledge of nihilistic individualism and disconnection from the illusion of shared meaning. Applying Anzaldúa's understanding of this state, he is "lost in chaos" while being "between 'stories'" (132). Despite her non-linear and mutable theoretical framework that is explicitly opposed to Western binaries, Anzaldúa inscribes a story of progress and a telos of success in the concept of nepantla, something the narrator of *City of Night* does not accomplish. Anzaldúa does, however, also emphasize failure on the path to *conocimiento* as one's new identity is tested out in the world, rejected, or somehow falls short, and one is plunged back into *Coatlicue*. The study of literature shows that we must expand our understanding of nepantla to account for a telos of 'failure.'

Soon after the moment of lucidity quoted at the beginning of this subsection, the narrator is picked up by two scores in an episode that illustrates his abject failure to integrate his various 'selves.' Breaking the norms of the unspoken hustler/score contract, which dictates unfeeling, unemotional, macho masculinity from the hustler in exchange for money, the narrator blurts out:

I want to tell you something before we leave. Im not at all the way you think I am. Im not like you want me to be, the way I tried to look and act for you: not unconcerned, nor easygoing—not tough: no, not at all. [...] No, Im not the way I pretended to be for you—and for others. Like you, like everyone else, Im Scared, cold, cold terrified. (Rechy 1984a, 341)

The scores, unsurprisingly, abandon him. The narrator has admitted to not being an unfeeling, unemotional macho and this, on the face of it, is unsurprising (who is?). But the narrator's mask that he has worn for the previous 364 days of the year has momentarily fallen, and, in this sense, it is a momentous occasion, foreseen by the "gypsy" woman. By saying "Im not the way I pretended to be for you—and for others," he is indicating that his street persona is a mask and beneath that performance he is something close to its opposite: "Scared, cold, cold terrified." The narrator states that, at a later temporal point—perhaps at the time of writing the novel itself—he will attempt to "find a clue [in the events described] for my own subsequent actions, my compulsive attempt to drop my mask, to try, at least, to face myself at last" (340). By facing himself, the narrator would confront his contradictory positions, which is something that he is unable to accomplish in the novel, and hence he remains in a state of inauthenticity and *Coatlicue* nepantla.

Furthermore, the "gypsy" woman the narrator meets at Mardi Gras tells him, "[i]nnocence may be all right for those that got it. Us that lost it aint never gonna get it back" (Rechy 1984a, 291), which underlines the duality that informs the narrator's worldview: once innocence has been lost, it can never be regained, an either/or situation. Despite this, the narrative implies that there are aspects of the narrator's identity, thoughts, beliefs, and emotions that

readers do not have access to; they remain ambiguously located in a narrative gap. As the narrator points out, “we only see what ‘appears’” in reference to his mask as a hustler. “How many of all the people I had known had ever begun to know me?” (360). The answer appears to be that not many know his inner secrets, which, until the episode quoted above, have been kept, for the most part, from other characters and readers alike.

But clues exist, such as a conversation with a flamboyant transvestite named Miss Destiny, who decries living with the demimonde. She says, “And! I! dont! know! what! Iamdoing! here! amongst all this: *tuh-rash!* I! Went!! To College!!! And Read Shakespeare!!!!” (Rechy 1984a, 114). The narrator quietly admits to having read Shakespeare as well, which startles Miss Destiny. It’s a side of the narrator that he does not show to others in the cities of night, except on very rare occasions. The hustler persona is all brawn and no brains and Shakespeare, naturally, symbolizes culture, intellect, complex emotions, and an active engagement with learning about culture beyond the streets. The narrator also describes himself, elsewhere, as “Sad for the whole rotten spectacle of the world wearing cold, cold masks,” which is linked to the phrase “The ice age of the heart” (341). Masks in this way are shown to distance the holistic complexity of the integrated individual from others through a simplified presentation of only one socially construed version of the self. Moreover, the narrator’s turmoil is shown to be informed by the brutal self-rejection of aspects of his multiple self. He represses memories of his mother and lost innocence in El Paso while hustling and, when the mask of hustler falls, bitterly condemns his hustling self as false.

This perceived duality raises the question of how to interpret the narrator’s contradictory selves. The mask the narrator wears on the streets is shown to be a real identity: it is manifested in his behavior, verbal utterances, occupation, and so on. However, his “cold terror” is also real, although it is not manifested outwardly except on this rare occasion. Aztec metaphysics, which is based on the constant change of everything in the cosmos, can help us to better understand the relationship between perceived likenesses that may be grouped into normative categories and the underlying multiplicity. To explain this relationship, we can look at how Aztec metaphysics bases its understanding of reality on the transformational power of masks, which in turn is related to the concept of *teotl*.

Maffie (2014) shows that for the Aztecs, *teotl* is what the cosmos is made of. It is “dynamic, vivifying, eternally self-generating and self-regenerating sacred power, force, or energy” (12). Aztec metaphysics is based on an ontological monism that denies the separation (i.e., duality) of mind/body, spiritual/material, etc. In Aztec metaphysics, there exists only one thing: *teotl*. Humans see *teotl* de re (perception of the thing itself) as opposed to perceiving it de dicto (perception of the thing under description). In other words, humans see *teotl* since it is the only thing there is to see (de re) but do not recognize it as *teotl*; rather, we see a multiplicity of manifestations of *teotl* de dicto, which is *how* we see it as opposed to *what* we are seeing.

The manifestation of reality, then, is not fundamentally linked to a variety of set essences, but rather to a vast multiplicity of different forms that *teotl* can take in the eye of the perceiver, which undermines the stability in the linkage between perception and being. This, in turn, allows for perception to be taken as one instance in a vast variety of possible perceptions, all of which, in reality, are manifestations of *teotl*. Multiplicity is hence not premised upon a variety of stable categories but on a variety of unstable manifestations.

This is important for the analysis of *City of Night* for two reasons. First, it helps us to understand the relationship between the narrator's outer manifestation, including his behavior, verbal utterances, and so on, and his private realities hidden from view, such as trauma, non-verbalized urges, desires, needs, and more. Both the outer and inner versions of the narrator can be understood as unstable manifestations of himself. Second, an analysis through the Aztec understanding of masks allows us to outline a fluctuating in-between space in which the narrator is simultaneously his outer manifestation, which is linked to consciousness and agency, and his private self.

Following Maffie (2014, 4; see also Anzaldúa 2015, 135), understanding the 'mask' as outer manifestation and the hidden meaning under the mask as two distinct identities is misleading. The shaman becomes his *nahual* (also *nagual*, i.e., personal guardian spirit); he will not give the illusion of being a jaguar but actually become a jaguar. Likewise, the narrator becomes his mask, or what Arnold (2011, 118) calls a "representational position" and Judith Butler (1990) would call a performance. This is not to say that deeper, hidden urges don't exist or that the characters are only their masks, but by deciding to wear a particular mask the character also becomes that mask. This insight is crucial for understanding the narrator's contradictory positionings holistically without elevating one aspect over others.

Performativity (Butler 1990), understood through the process of *nahual*, by which the mask-wearer becomes the mask, is not something separable from the performer but an integral part of the complex nexus of parts that influence and hence make up the individual, which is in line with the shifting subjective multiplicity of nepantla. In Butler's terms, the narrator's "I" should not be understood as predating its signification. "Language is not an *exterior medium or instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self" (Butler 2007, 196, emphasis in original). The self is the result of signification or performance, not a subject that predates the presented object. The performativity or mask is one part of the complexity of identity for the character as it changes through time and is not separable into a subject and object that could then be deemed more or less true.

Butler (1990) also illustrates the impossibility of encompassing a situated subject by pointing out that lists involving identity categories in identity theories (ethnicity, sexuality, class, etc.) often end in an "embarrassed 'etc.'" This string of adjectives fails to capture the complexity of a subject. The failure is a sign of the "illimitable process of signification itself" and the "excess that

necessarily accompanies any effort to posit identity once and for all” (143). Applied to the narrator of *City of Night*, this means that attempts to situate his identity “once and for all” through the “process of signification” will end in failure. Rather, he fluctuates between various contradictory positions. The instability of such in-betweenness results, in its most extreme form, in chaos, which is a result of the narrator having actively severed his links to shared meanings.

Chicano literary scholar Juan Bruce-Novoa (1986) illustrates that, through his denial of static identifying categories, *City of Night*'s narrator is negating the rhetoric of opposites, and by doing so, “raises the problem to a more essential level, that of the conflict between any form, which imposes itself as static order, and freedom.” This is represented by the “fluid chaos” or at least a “disorderly lack of conformity” (72) that marks the novel. By refuting stable categories or static being through an embracement of chaos in the Mardi Gras episode, the narrator shows that identification is not a problem to be explained away, solved, or categorized, but rather a problematic that can be pondered and negotiated (Arnold 2011, 126, following Foucault 1978). Outer representations and masks are an important part of sexuality in the novel, not discourses to be understood as better or worse representations of essentialized sexualities that might be hidden underneath. By understanding a character's mask as one part of the complexity of his or her identity, with an emphasis on that identity's mutability, we honor the irresolvability of identity itself by including the private self, the mask, the gap between them, and more in an ongoing development. We also take the narrator's self-described experiences, emotions, and positionality seriously.

A reading in reference to Aztec metaphysics helps us to become more attuned to the influence of multiple aspects of a character's experiences, emotions, identities, and more without feeling the need to definitively locate characterization solely in reference to any given category. A key insight is that ambiguity in the novel is not a problematic with an impossible solution, but rather that ambiguity is the solution that may best represent the in-betweenness that the narrator experiences.

To bring my argument concerning the narrator's sexuality full circle, I now turn to the episode in which the narrator comes closest to accepting a recognizable sexualized position through the idea of romantic love.

6.3.2 A CAREFUL REJECTION OF ROMANTIC LOVE

In the novel, romantic love is positioned as the category that, if it were accepted, would settle the issue of the narrator's sexuality and release the tension of ambiguity. It is debated in a long, roundabout dialogue between the narrator and the character Jeremy, who happened to overhear the narrator's confession of not being a macho to the scores in an episode discussed earlier. Jeremy later takes the narrator to his hotel room, a sex act is performed, and

the narrator falls asleep. Awaking, the narrator remembers that he and Jeremy had not mentioned money, which means that Jeremy is not a 'score' but a reciprocal arrangement, albeit influenced by the narrator's "state of pilled and liquored panic" (Rechy 1984a, 343) in which he had "played the unreciprocal [sex] role more obsessively than ever before" (344). In the morning, Jeremy places money on the dresser in any case, though it remains untouched throughout the dialogue. 'Going' with a man for money does not make one a homosexual according to the rules of the street but going with a man for free does. Ambiguity is hence created because the narrator assumes that he had gone with Jeremy for free, though later he is nevertheless paid. In another reversal, the narrator does not take the money. He was also possibly too inebriated to realize what he was doing (the old excuse that goes back at least to Lot and his daughters [Genesis 19]).

The narrator feels he must escape but is invited to stay for a cigarette. Watching Jeremy, the narrator notes that "[h]e is intensely, moodily handsome...Looking at him, I wonder why such a man would pay another male when he could obviously make it easily and mutually in any of the bars" (Rechy 1984a, 345). The narrator's observation that Jeremy is handsome, especially in the context of it making reciprocal sex more available, is not evidence of sexual preference per se. But it does open a gap that asks to be interpreted: did Jeremy's handsomeness and the narrator's comment about it have something to do with their sexual liaison? It sets up the scene as though the narrator were on trial: does he or does he not accept that he, too, may not be immune from romantic love and mutual desire? Jeremy wishes to pull the narrator's mask off for good, which would entail that the narrator admits to the possibility for romantic love and that his hustler role is a mask behind which he hides. Readers might identify with Jeremy to the extent that they desire some clarity regarding the narrator's motives, which are frustratingly elusive.

In the dialogue that follows, Jeremy carefully pries into the narrator's motivations, fears, and desires. "You want, very much, to be loved—but you don't want to love back, even if you have to force yourself not to" (Rechy 1984a, 346), Jeremy says. This sounds like a reasonable interpretation given the evidence. However, the narrator bristles, though he remains in the room. "You've never loved anyone?" Jeremy asks, and the narrator answers, "[n]ot in the way you mean," which means in terms of reciprocal, romantic love. The narrator thinks of possible forms of love for other characters in the novel, including Barbara, a woman, as "the least dangerous thought," and four men's images cross his mind. "No," he finally answers, "I've never loved any *one*" (347, emphasis in original). This echoes the narrator Oscar's ultimate, nepantla-like epiphany in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*: "My single mistake has been to seek an identity with any *one* person or nation or with any part of history" (Acosta 1972, 199, emphasis added). The separation of "any" from the emphasized "one" indicates that he has never loved any one individual at a time, which reflects the decision the narrator made earlier in the novel that "it would not be in one apartment, with one person, that I would

explore the world which had brought me to this city. The streets ... the movie theaters ... the parks ... the many, many different rooms: That was the world I would live in” (Rechy 1984a, 35). The narrator is not answering Jeremy’s question, however, which was whether he’s ever loved “anyone.”

By evading the question with an ambiguous answer, the narrator is opening a spectrum of sexuality. Jeremy’s question sits squarely within hegemonic discourses on sexuality as a homo-/heterosexual binary with desire expressed toward one object at a time. Jeremy’s question implies that the narrator’s sexuality should be expressed through traditional Western ideas of romantic love. Given the spectrum of sexuality that the narrator encounters and, to an extent, takes part in—from urolagnia, sadomasochism, costumes, being ‘seen’ walking with another, unemotional corporeal engagement with multiple partners, and more, which have little to do with the Western tradition of romantic love—it is possible to assume the narrator’s sexuality is beyond normative frames of reference. The dominant socializing category of ‘sexuality’ aligns with the simplification implied by Jeremy’s question, which Sedgwick (2008) discusses as follows:

It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of ‘sexual orientation.’ (8, emphasis in original)

The differences listed above (Sedgwick expands this list more precisely, see 25–26) can differentiate people who are otherwise of the same gender, race, class, nationality, and ‘sexual orientation’ but, if “taken seriously as pure *difference*, [retain] the unaccounted-for potential to disrupt many forms of the available thinking about sexuality” (24–25, emphasis in original). The multiplicity of sexualities on the spectrum of sexuality is vast in terms of potential differences. Jeremy’s assumption that the narrator must be definable in terms of romantic love is an example of what Sedgwick calls a deterministic dimension, which, when extrapolated, locates a subject’s sexual orientation categorically. What stands out in the novel is the ample opportunity the narrator has to ‘come out’ and the ease with which he could, at least to readers, do so. The fact that he does not thus stands out as a silence that resonates with implied meaning.

The narrator leaves Jeremy and thinks, “Yes, maybe you’re right. Maybe I could love you. But I won’t” (Rechy 1984a, 368), which is in line with Anzaldúa’s (1999) emphasis that sexuality at times has more to do with choice and agency than with inherent categories (41–45). The narrator’s statement is

in the conditional tense, which is fitting for the ambiguous nature of the novel. Static categories are spurned for the freedom of ambiguity or lack of categorization. It is also framed negatively: the decision is to *not* accept one definition or role, but what exactly *is* accepted remains unstated. In this episode, the narrator rejects the normative assumptions and associations of the term 'love' and the homo//heterosexual binary to propel himself further into the in-between.

Careful readers of *City of Night* will have no choice but to remain in the condition of unknowing regarding the narrator's sexuality, which remains "forever beyond the reader's grasp" in what H. Porter Abbott (2009) calls the "egregious gap" (132). Nevertheless, such a reading is open to any number of potential solutions based on inference. In what follows, I outline the possibility that childhood trauma helps to explain one motivation for the narrator's adult sexuality while not demarcating how, exactly, that sexuality should be understood.

6.4 ONE POSSIBLE EXPLANATION: TRAUMA

Like sexuality in *City of Night*, my analysis has been negatively formulated. I have shown that a close textual analysis negates the possibility of positing the narrator's sexualized identity "once and for all" (Butler 1990, 143). However, literary criticism is above all optimistic in its ongoing writing and re-writing of possible meanings, which may and should be offered for narrative gaps based on textual evidence. I therefore offer an interpretation of the narrator's sexuality that, while remaining ambiguously open, may help to explain Rechy's narrative technique of silence at the heart of the novel.

City of Night offers some evidence on what has influenced the narrator's sexualized characterization as a young adult. By this I do not mean his sexual orientation (such as 'homosexual') but rather the way in which it is manifested (performing countless sexual acts as a hustler). Perhaps most importantly, the narrator describes how his father would pay to sexually abuse him as a child: "He would say to me: 'Give me a thousand,' and I knew this meant I should hop on his lap and then he would fondle me intimately—and he'd give me a penny, sometimes a nickel," an act the father's friends, "old grey men" (Rechy 1984a, 14), would imitate.

One plausible explanation for the narrator's unquenchable need to be desired in the form of amassing sexual contacts is that he is trying to fulfil his need to be accepted by his father.¹²⁹ In the act of sexual abuse, the narrator's father accepted him, which was symbolically confirmed through monetary

¹²⁹ Interestingly, for Giles (1974) sex is "the focal point of the narrator's rebellion against his repressive and suffocating childhood" (371) but the rebellion is directed towards his mother.

payment. For these short moments, the narrator was no longer an outsider but rather belonged to his father. However, and as can be expected, the oscillation between belonging and not belonging based on sexual abuse causes distress for the narrator. Four pages at the beginning of the novel (Rechy 1984a, 13–17) are dedicated to describing the narrator's hatred of his father but end in the latter's death, which means that "now Forever I will have no father, that he had been unfound." Subsequently, the narrator's journey will be to "try to understand his [the father's] torture: in searching out the shape of my own" (19). The narrator thus explicitly links his own *becoming*, which is framed as sexualized discovery, to his father.

Late in the novel, Jeremy also offers this insight into the way the narrator's sexuality plays out: it may be a "wayward revenge on your own sex—your father's sex..." which causes the narrator to wince for Jeremy had "aimed too cruelly." The narrator remembers his father's abuse at this point, compulsively twists the ring that his father had given him on his finger, and thinks that his father had been, through sexual abuse, "reassuring me, in that strange way—so briefly!—that he did... want me." He concludes, however, "But ... somehow ... that was much too easy [of an explanation]" (Rechy 1984a, 350) and adds, "I cant blame my father—for anything." He is amazed at the certainty with which he "had been able to vindicate [his] Father" (351).

Two elements are important here: first, even if the father is not guilty or blamed by the narrator, this does not rule out the possibility that the father is a driving force in the form that the narrator's sexuality later takes. The sexual abuse had shown the narrator that his father "wanted" him, and it is possible, in the words of Jeremy, that the narrator's promiscuity is a form of "revenge" on his "father's sex" based on being continuously wanted yet remaining out-of-reach and detached. As a hustler, the narrator is in a position of power regarding the scores: he can stoke desire without reciprocating. In the hustling arena, the power differential is symbolized by monetary payment. Jeremy's analysis seems to be acknowledged by the narrator, at least in part. Second, the narrator is accepting, or perhaps rather exerting, agency in regard to his own sexuality. Though his father is an influence, the narrator makes it clear that he has decided to live out his sexuality in a certain way and hence rejects the conclusion that his father is guilty for his sexually informed turmoil.

When the narrator is asked by Jeremy if he could accept reciprocal, romantic love in their long, roundabout discussion, he thinks, "How impossibly difficult it seemed to explain to him that it was the mere proffering of the sexmoney that mattered; the unreciprocated sex: the manifestations that I was really Wanted." In the discussion with Jeremy, the narrator explicitly links the "proffering of the sexmoney" to his conception of 'love,' which in turn is associated with his father paying him for sexual favors (Rechy 1984a, 350). Hence money from clients may be a symbol of the 'love,' expressed as physical desire, that he longed for from this father. This is supported by the narrator's frequent references to being wanted and his need to be the object of desire.

This is one possible manner by which the manifestation of the narrator's sexuality may be explained. However, ambiguity remains unless one is prepared to accept that the narrator's father explains everything to do with his sexuality, which is simplistic given the evidence, and overrides the narrator's own conclusion that it is "much too easy" of an explanation (Rechy 1984a, 350). I have argued that the narrator's sexuality is more complicated than the word 'love' or the hetero-/homosexual binary can encompass, and it can be linked, among other things, to his childhood, but no *one* element conclusively explains or defines the narrator's sexuality. This is what Sternberg (1989) calls the "play of ambiguity" (239) in which the text leaves any number of possible explanations open. Nevertheless, the trauma of sexual abuse can begin to explain the narrator's inability or unwillingness to speak of his sexuality in categorical terms.

Literary trauma studies has been premised upon the understanding that trauma is often unspeakable or perhaps repressed entirely (Meretoja 2020, 24). Figurative language is understood to be able to 'speak' of trauma when normal language fails (Caruth 1995, 1996; Richardson 2012, 178). Joshua Pederson (2014), however, has shown that clinical studies—specifically those collected in Richard McNally's *Remembering Trauma* (2003)—have undermined two, long-held truths in trauma studies. Pederson (2014) takes Cathy Caruth's (1995; 1996) literary theory of trauma to task on two accounts: "the notion that traumatic memories are 'unregistered' or 'unclaimed,' and the idea that traumatic memories elude straightforward verbal representation" (336). Pederson cites McNally's view that victims may not think about their trauma often, but that choosing not to think about something or talk about it is different from being unable to remember or describe it (McNally 2003, 184; from Pederson 2014, 337). Pederson (2014) summarizes the difference as follows: "traumatic amnesia is a myth, and while victims may *choose* not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they *cannot*" (334, emphasis in original). He and goes on to support his argument based on texts in which traumatic events are described in precise detail.¹³⁰

If we take the narrator's sexual abuse as a trauma—and the vehemence of his hatred expressed towards his father suggests that this is the case—and link it to the manifestation of his sexuality in his adult self, it is possible that the narrator is aware of his trauma but unwilling to concede that it has agency over his actions. He makes the link between "proffered sexmoney" and his father explicitly, as shown above, but chooses not to elaborate further on this line of thinking. The narrator refers to actively controlling what he allows himself to think about (Rechy 1984a, 350) and hence narrate, and states that there are thoughts he cannot yet verbalize (363). It may be too painful or not intended for the implied narratee.

¹³⁰ One example Pederson gives is Lawrence Langer's (2019) research showing the detailed accounts of Samuel Bak, a survivor of the Holocaust.

Relatedly, it is possible that the narrator is narrating his trauma and, by not delineating his sexual category, is expressing—as clearly as he can—the messy, contradictory post-traumatic space that informs the manifestation of his sexuality. In this sense, his language and sexuality can both be understood as a performance. Through speaking-as-a-performance, the narrator may be enacting his own process of healing and be giving order to “allow the reconstruction of the [his] shattered psyche.” In other words, “[r]eaders who accept the restorative power of language are likely to see the literature of trauma not as a collection of faltering or failing speech acts but instead as efforts—no matter how halting—at rehabilitation” (Pederson 2014, 339). Assuming that speaking of something—a trauma in this case—means using categorical and precise language to clearly delineate the trauma’s contours is problematic at best. One should leave open the possibility that ambiguity, confusion, and in-betweenness are the language and representation of that traumatic state.

This way of understanding language is in line with Anzaldúa’s (2015) theorization of the *Coatlicue* stage, which, as mentioned above, is marked by chaos, confusion, and depression. Anzaldúa also writes that the act of creation, which for the narrator is writing his story, can be the imposition of order onto chaos through the imagination, which is the psyche organizing itself and giving significance and direction to human suffering. The narrator’s text is outside the frame of the narrative itself. The novel *City of Night* could be the “language that expresses previously inexpressible psychic states and enables the reader [and writer/narrator, my comment] to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form real experiences that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible” (Anzaldúa’s 2015, 39). The novel may be part of the narrator’s healing process on his path through *Coatlicue* nepantla to some posterior integration of his selves. Within the storyworld, however, the narrator remains at the stage of not belonging and chaos, though it is nevertheless underpinned by a sense of agency.

The narrator states that the underlying emotional motivation for his journey is the loss of the father “Forever” and that he had been “unfound” (Rechy 1984a, 19). Relatedly, Judith Butler (2003) posits that loss produces a “strange fecundity” (469) that can be understood as “a melancholic (or spectral) agency” (467–68; see also Bolaki 2011, 36). A fecund, melancholic agency is illustrated in the novel through the narrator’s repeated framing of his sexual experiences, linked to the melancholy loss of his innocence, as an active choice. As cited earlier, the narrator states that his goal is to “try to understand [his father’s] torture: in searching out the shape of [his] own” (Rechy 1984a, 19). This is the motivational frame for the novel, which is linked both to his estrangement from his father, which in turn, I argue, is related to his quest of nihilism. As mentioned, both Maese-Cohen (2014, 91) and Giles (1974, 371) read the episode in which the dog Winnie dies as the narrative’s catalyst. While this may be a decisive factor, I believe the long dark shadow of the father is a more important motivator. This view is supported by the

reoccurrence of the father in the narrator's discussion with Jeremy towards the end of the novel. And despite perhaps sounding anthropocentric, Winnie is after all a dog while the father is—well, a father.

City of Night stands out from the other novels included in this dissertation due to its unapologetically negative formulation of in-betweenness: the narrator's goal may be to understand his own torture, but the novel ends without even a nominal reconciliation of his contradictory positionings. It also represents in-betweenness as a nihilistic understanding of the impossibility of belonging to shared frames of reference. The extreme refusal to belong leads the narrator to chaos and *Coatlicue nepantla*. Failure, chaos, not belonging, trauma, the inexpressibility of one's position, and more have taken our understanding of nepantla to the endpoint of this dissertation's nepantla continuum.

6.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

If Acosta's Oscar represented the starting point as the most positive and conscious embracement of in-betweenness in this corpus, then we've come to the end of the road in Rechy's *City of Night*. Not belonging has been radicalized into chaos. The breaking down of, or rejection of, stable categories and shared frames of reference have led us to a nihilistic non-meaning and the unsaid, a negativity that's made it difficult to even talk about sexuality, for example. Taking the text on its own terms means allowing ambiguity to stand in the place of meaning, or rather to constitute meaning itself. Moreover, in-betweenness can be a mental space unhinged from shared meaning and thus be desperately isolating. If categories are not quite true, strictly speaking, since multiplicity and ever-more-precise instances of individualized difference can always be found, they are also the basis for coherent meaning-making. Just as the Aztecs understood that *teotl* is what we see de re, they were happy to admit that de facto we see all sorts of different categories of individual things—the sun is not the moon; the jaguar is not the dog; and we are not, on a typical day, gods. The narrator's deep, visceral, and practiced not-belonging leads to a kind of madness. His absolute in-betweenness may be true, but it is only true at a very abstract level.

Perhaps, in this way, the novel's moral is that to avoid going mad and plunging into chaos, a certain degree of illusion is necessary. The happiest character in the novel is a cowboy from Texas named Chuck (Rechy 1984a, 125–143). He is content to live each day as it comes, to not think too much or struggle, but to look around, tell stories, and take money from paying customers since it is the path of least resistance. The narrator says that he knows “instinctively and without a doubt” (129) that Chuck is heterosexual: there is no ambiguity there. He is just too lazy and hustling is too easy. The narrator, on the other hand, is primarily characterized by struggle. Even drawing the parameters around what his struggle is is a struggle. As I have

shown, his sexuality cannot be understood “instinctively and without a doubt” but is rather characterized by doubt itself, though some readers may categorize him as homosexual despite his own careful avoidance of that category.

The novel can be read as a ringing endorsement of psychotherapy. However, the context indicates that, perhaps because of sexual abuse and trauma, the narrator is doing the best he can with what he has got. We must be merciful. He is still young and perhaps on the correct path. In any case, as the narrator reminds readers regularly, it is the path that he has chosen. He also seems to have drawn an outline of what causes him such distress, which is the duality of his self—his hustling mask and the inner self that remains hidden. He perceives these as incompatible, yet both define him. They’re not outer vessels into which he pours himself, but rather simultaneous aspects of the self that may, one day, be integrated, which would go a long way in helping him reach the authenticity that seems to be part of his underlying motivation.

As with the other novels in this corpus, the narrator leaves home, experiences many things, and then returns home at the end of the story. This return home acts as a way for the narrators (and readers) to gauge their development. Society and their places of origin do not change in the novels, but the protagonists do. Their change is premised upon in-betweenness being the point, the telos, and it is neither stable nor permanent. The novels represent the process by which these characters change. Because there is no stable end point to these stories, just as there is not for anyone who is still alive, these *Bildungsromane* can be said to represent the telos of process.

For the narrator in *City of Night*, his process of *becoming* leads to not-belonging, which is framed as a conscious choice, though I argue that it may be explained, in part, by his childhood experiences of sexual abuse. This extreme form of negativity results in chaos, and the text’s non-resolution through cycles of repeated experiences and ongoing despair means that his search for “some substitute for salvation” (Rechy 1984a, 19) has, as far as the period encapsulated in the text is concerned, ended in failure.

7 CONCLUSION

I have set out to better understand how in-betweenness is represented and created in literature. My methodology has been to start with four modified *Bildungsromane* that represent in-betweenness and read them through the concept of nepantla as developed by Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) and as understood in Aztec metaphysics (Maffie 2014). This allowed the characters' specific subjectivities, experiences, emotions, and more to lead to new theoretical insights. Each protagonist in these texts experiences in-betweenness differently. This method led to a feedback loop: the more carefully I read the texts, the clearer the concept of nepantla became. The more I applied the concept of nepantla to the texts, the more complex and 'deep' the readings became.

In part 1 of the dissertation, we saw an exceptionally clear and conscious acknowledgement of in-betweenness, framed as a decision, on the part of Oscar 'Zeta' Acosta's character narrator in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972). Being neither Mexican nor U.S.-American, Catholic or Protestant, Oscar created a new positionality in-between the categories that act as normative frames of reference in society. Sandra Cisneros's (2009) character narrator Esperanza also positively embraced a positioning in-between her inherited culture and her individualistic desire to create through writing. Her imperative to "come back" (104) for the women on Mango Street was premised on a nepantla-like positioning: to write their stories, she would have to sever her ties to the harmful aspects of the culture.

In part 2, I developed an analysis of the harmful and distressing aspects of nepantla. Kiba Lumberg's (2011) character narrator Memesa attempted to join majority-Finnish culture but failed, which propelled her into a state of in-betweenness through not belonging. Rather than being framed as a choice, Memesa's in-betweenness was a result of social forces, including racism. The trilogy ended on a somewhat reconciliatory note, however: coming to peace with aspects of her Romani culture through the symbolic killing of the harmful aspects, Memesa was able to enter the role of artist, who, stationed in-between cultures, languages, normative sexual categories, and more, could begin to accept in-betweenness as a potentially empowering identity. John Rechy's (1984a) *City of Night* took us to the negative end of our continuum, where not belonging was radicalized into chaos. The breaking down and rejection of stable categories and shared frames of reference led to a nihilistic non-meaning that made it difficult to even talk about his sexuality, for example.

The theoretical result of this dissertation is that nepantla is best understood as a continuum of many variations that can mix and coalesce into fascinating new positions, which, I believe, will be of special interest to colleagues working in the field of Chicana/o studies. I've written of in-betweenness as, roughly, either positive or negative for a character: it can be beneficial for their state of

mind and understanding of themselves in the world or it can be detrimental. The emotional core of these different kinds of nepantla has been boiled down to ‘belonging’ and ‘not belonging.’ Based on the texts themselves, characters can either feel like they ‘belong’ to in-betweenness and, relatedly, in part to many different categories that influence them, or their in-betweenness can be represented as a distance to various categories that they don’t belong to. In-betweenness, then, comes down to individuals who judge their experiences for themselves. This is a very simple way of thinking about nepantla but begins to shed light onto the complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities at the core of our topic.

The texts have shown that no character relates to in-betweenness as only ‘belonging’ or ‘not belonging,’ however, but rather both in complex processes of change. Despite this, it is my belief that, at its heart, nepantla is about the fundamental human need to belong (Baumeister 2012; Baumeister and Leary 1995), the pain of not belonging, and the dismay of experiencing both at the same time. It is about inner subjectivity in relation to outer objectivity, or the self as it meets the outside world and changes through time, which means that it is an ongoing process of negotiation.

These general insights allow us to become more aware of variations of nepantla as it is represented and lived. Some characters will have a realization or epiphany that in-betweenness defines them and are able to harness it to live fuller lives, like Oscar and Esperanza. Others, like Rechy’s narrator, will not; they remain in chaos, and, from a normative perspective, their story will end in failure. Some will partially recognize their in-betweenness and make peace with aspects of their inherited categories, such as Memesa did with her Romani heritage. Nevertheless, the “nightmare on the brains” (Marx 2010, 103) of society can make it impossible to achieve a positive closure, just as racism did for Memesa. Agency through nepantla can lead to empowerment, but a continuum of nepantla takes into consideration that there are forces outside our conscious subjectivity that may shape us and our realities against our will.

Understood through Aztec metaphysics, nepantla should generally be understood as quotidian. There are no essential manifestations because everything in the cosmos is always in flux. Though abstract, this aligns with common sense at the subjective and even atomic levels: you are not the same person today as you were yesterday, and all material is constantly in flux. Time marches ever forward and, with it, change. Though in-betweenness may be quotidian, we may not necessarily recognize it as such. *How* we view the world doesn’t necessarily correspond to *what* we are seeing. We see categories of things, people, and events due to the hardwiring of our brains (Spolsky 1993). As a result, recognizing in-betweenness may be an event—a revelation or epiphany—that changes our conception of the world. In this way, nepantla can be both quotidian and a temporal event. Some phenomena—such as bilingualism, immigrant experiences, and racism—may be better understood as quotidian, however, while others—such as a crisis, a conversation, or an

epiphany—may be better understood as temporal. One could say that temporal nepantla is *how* we come to recognize or see quotidian nepantla.

I have argued that nepantla can be understood through figurative language, such as the ‘space’ of houses that simultaneously represent the patriarchy on Mango Street, individualism through art, and the space in-between these two polarities. Nepantla is also a state of mind, such as how Oscar views ethnic, religious, and other categories as possibilities to be harnessed in an ongoing performance to suit his needs. While society sees a strict racial stratification system, for example, Oscar sees the possibility of taking aspects of these races to shape a new self. As a strategy, nepantla can be used to find common ground despite differences, such as Memesa’s desire to base her own, and others’, identity on a shared humanity. Nepantla can also be seen as an actant in stories and even lives: it is a force that drives you away from conforming to ill-suited and harmful categories and to instead seek more correct—which is to say more specific and neutral and less hierarchical—ways of viewing yourself and the world. Nepantla is the actant that drives Esperanza to first question the traditions of her Mexican American community and then to avoid accepting the status quo U.S.-American alternative unquestioningly.

Narrative theory has been used to better understand how in-betweenness is represented in texts, which is of benefit for literary scholars. Because words are signifiers that may only approximately correspond to the signified, and because we have set out to talk about that which is in-between the normative signifiers at our disposal, it follows that nepantla may be beyond language altogether. There are ways to work around this problem, such as by pointing to the signified through metaphorical language that the recipient then ‘fills in’ creatively to endue it with meaning beyond that which has been said. Irony is also one way of saying one thing and hoping the receiver will interpret the meaning differently, which may also point to something so mysterious—such as the prevalence and level to which people rely on stereotypes—that it is beyond any simple signifier. Negativity is also used: though we may be unable to describe the signified—the words don’t exist—we can begin to draw its outline by showing everything that it is not. Each of these is a narrative gap, which is the most prevalent literary device I’ve discovered for representing in-betweenness in my corpus.

A narrative gap is a place in a text where meaning or information has been omitted. Because the experience or phenomenon of nepantla in-betweenness may be impossible to describe conclusively, due to its contradictory premise and ongoing change, for example, the representation of nepantla may be best discovered where meaning or information has been left out. Oscar declares, for example, that he is a Brown Buffalo by choice, but he does not satisfactorily explain what that term means. Rechy’s narrator’s story is largely about sex, yet he never definitively explains what sex signifies. These are gaps because they’re important for the texts in question, but we cannot, based on textual evidence alone, conclusively say what they mean. We can interpret these gaps in any number of ways, and it is through the act of interpretation that each of

us will bring his or her own prior knowledge, experiences, personality, mood, and more into the gap to make up complex meaning that, since it is subjective, may be beyond language all together. And it will be correct—or at least as correct as anyone else’s—if it holds up against the text itself.

I have taken a liberal stance to reading these works as *Bildungsromane*, which I believe is the correct path because the genre’s criteria should not be used to limit whose experiences are acceptable as a significant telos. If in-betweenness, ambiguity, change, and process are shown to be the telos of a work, and that *Bildung* and *becoming* define these characters even as the story draws to a close, then I believe they can be taken to represent one form of modified *Bildungsroman*. I have argued that my corpus represents both the process and the telos of in-betweenness. In these narratives, the depicted process transforms into the telos itself. The meaning of these texts, which is to say their denouement in terms of social positioning, for example, is not clouded in ambiguity but rather ambiguity and in-betweenness are the meaning. Since this is a viable option for people’s lives and identities, it is also a viable telos within the genre of *Bildungsroman*.

Finally, I’ve taken the concept of nepantla and applied it to Finnish literature by and about a Finnish Roma, which will be of interest to my colleagues in Romani studies but also literary scholars in Finland and elsewhere in Europe. This move allows scholars to see how a concept developed in the U.S.-Chicana/o context may be adapted across geographies, which, I believe, will also be of interest to the field of Chicana/o studies. The analysis showed that historical and sociocultural differences bring about different and specific experiences of in-betweenness for Memesa and Esperanza. Memesa’s trajectory is similar to Esperanza’s in many ways except for the degree of racism she experiences in broader society, which is partly due to Finnish Roma being a tiny minority in an otherwise overwhelmingly homogenous nation. Esperanza has permission to dream in ways that Memesa does not. Esperanza can choose her positionality, to some degree, while Memesa tries to choose, is rejected, and hence fails. This has everything to do with history and context and underlines the necessity of taking these into careful consideration when reading through the lens of nepantla. When applying the concept of nepantla, these sociocultural and historical differences can be accounted for by taking nepantla as a continuum that can signify different experiences and positionalities. Nepantla can capture both the revelatory acknowledgement of an empowered position in-between influences and the melancholy understanding that, despite one’s desires, beliefs, and intentions, one cannot fully belong to any given group.

The books in this corpus are all bound together by being representations of in-betweenness that have gone beyond the subjective realm of experience to become part of the social fabric. These books have expanded understandings of normative categories for generations of readers by presenting protagonists who do not easily fit into our preconceived ideas of what Mexican Americans, Roma, and ethnic categories more generally, along with religion, sexuality,

language, immigrant experiences, time-place, and more, normatively are or can be. Moreover, by presenting these experiences through the experiences of protagonists, readers can approach how it feels to exist in-between categories.

I have here concentrated on ‘ethnic’ *Bildungsromane* with character narrators for the simple reason that questions of ethnic belonging, which continue to be starkly important in our day and age, are clearly expressed by narrators experiencing the phenomenon of growing up between minority and status quo groups. Identity is an important but well-gleaned field, and I believe more fascinating work deserves to be done with nepantla and formalism. How do internal contradictions complicate texts? How could nepantla be applied to the nexus of narrator, characters, fabula, and sujet? In which ways do grammatical structures bring about tension in these relationships? In short, how can we actively *move away from* definitive readings? I also believe the concept of nepantla can also be utilized across many genres of literature, not just stories of *becoming*. To take one example: rather than positioning a historical novel in two temporal planes (the one depicted and the one in which the story is written), could nepantla be utilized to open new temporalities? Middling ones? Can these join to create future-making? These ideas illustrate my belief that nepantla is a meaningful tool for narrative theorists going forward, as I hope I have illustrated in this dissertation.

Esperanza, by writing her story of in-betweenness, made nepantla a tool by which to weave a new social fabric. By reading her story, each of us, with our own tiny thread, are taking part in that weaving process. It has been said that literature will not save the world. Certainly not. But politics—and research, education, technology, business, parenting, public participation, discourse, and media—without an awareness of the myriad of ways we can each experience the world will further the righteous tribalisms that feed off solipsism. Stories teach us how to view the world more fully by allowing us access to others’ experiences and feelings, which is a skill we can practice and develop. Truly listening to how others experience the world is a nepantla strategy—the chance to discover the ‘sameness’ within all the differences as an interwoven whole. As literary scholars, we must become better at recognizing this complex and delicate interplay, which often means looking beyond the categories by which we usually make sense of the texts and the world.

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APPENDIX

Veijo Baltzar has published eight novels and many plays and other works, including poetry and a work of philosophy (see bibliography). In addition to the *Memesa* trilogy, Lumberg has written the novel *Irtiottoxxx* (2018), the screenplay for the television series *Tumma ja hehkuva veri* [Dark and Fervent Blood] (1997) (together with Anna Rajala), the comic books *Gipsy comix* (2010) and *Hullun taiteilijan päiväkirja* [Diary of a Crazy Artist] (2010), and three videos (1990; 1999; 2004). Armas Baltzar has written two novels, *Sadeaika* [Time of Rain] (2007) and *Pimeä kehä* [Dark Circle] (2008), a book of non-fiction entitled *Katuhaukat* [Street Hawks] (2009), a bilingual (Finnish/Romani) children's book (trans. by Henry Hedman) (2011), and three screenplays (1989; 1992; 2002). Kalle Tähtelä (1891–1919) published a collection of short stories, *Ihmisiä: siirtolaisnoveleja* [People: Immigrant Short Stories] (1913), and two plays, *Lowellin lakko* [The Strike in Lowell] (1913) and *Mustalaisen kosto* [Gypsy's Revenge] (1909) (see Tervonen 2012, 130). He also published the non-fiction *Ihmisteurastamo: kuvauksia yleiseuropalaisesta sodasta* [Human Slaughterhouse: Descriptions of the Pan-European War] (1915) together with Wilhelm Lamszus and *Natsaretin kirvesmies = The call of the carpenter* [The Carpenter from Nazareth = The Call of the Carpenter] (1916) with Bouck White. Children's books include, for example, Inga Angersaari's *Romaniukin satureppu* [Fairy-Tale Bag of Romaniuk] (2001) and *Yökettu* [Night Fox] by Helena Blomérus, Satu Blomérus, and Helena Korpela (2017).

There are a number of memoirs published by Finnish Roma, e.g., Rainer Friman's *Elämän estradilla* [On the Stage of Life] (2004) and *Miehen tie* [A Man's Way] (2008), Armas Lind's autobiographical account *Caleb – romanipojan evakkotaipale* [Caleb: The Refugee Journey of a Romani Boy] (2010), and Riikka Tanner and Tuula Lind's *Käheä-ääninen tyttö. Kaalengo tsaj* [A Hoarse-toned Girl: Kaalengo tsaj] (2009).

There is Erkkö Lyytisen's documentary *Puhdistus* [Purity] (2012) and Yrjö Tähtelä's cult anarchist comedy film *Topralli 66* ([1966] 2007). Reima Nikkinen wrote a radio play (1987).

In addition to numerous non-fictional media, perhaps most importantly the newspapers *Kiertolainen*, *Ziricklin*, *Kotitiellä* (now *Romano Boodos*), there is the rich archive of Romani oral narratives held by the Finnish Literary Society (SKS) and a long tradition of music and lyrics both in Finnish and the Romani language, also available in the SKS archives, as well as the songs collected by Arthur Thesleff, in the 1890s, which, in addition to the SKS archive, are also at the National Library of Sweden and the Folklore Archives at the University of Tampere.

Much of the Finnish Romani narrative field has been communicated in the Finnish language, though musicologists have studied the differences between

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songs sung in Finnish for a majority-culture audience and those sung in the Romani language for an in-group audience (see, e.g., Blomster 2012). The same differentiation applies to oral narratives in the Romani and Finnish languages. Written narratives, however, have by and large been intended to be in communication with society more broadly (i.e., both Romani and majority-culture audiences) or translated from Finnish into the Romani language at the behest of majority-culture Finns, for example religious tracts (Blomster 2012, 291). Risto Blomster and Kati Mikkola (2017; see also Blomster and Roman 2021) have also shown how Romani folklore poems, for example, were included and collected as part of Finnish folklore when they were seen as representing Finnishness. They identify 16 Romani informants in the publication *Suomen Kansan Vanhat Runot* [Old Poems of the Finnish People] from 1908–1948 and 1997 and its unpublished archives. They analyze the Romani informant August Herman Berg in depth.

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