

Chicana Memoir and the DREAMer Generation: Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* as Neo-colonial Critique and Feminist *Testimonio*

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Abstract: Reyna Grande's 2012 memoir *The Distance Between Us* exemplifies the ongoing influence of the Latin American *testimonio* on contemporary life writing by immigrants to the United States from the Southern hemisphere, in order to effect social change. Specifically, Grande's text aims to mobilise readers to facilitate immigration reform for the so-called Dreamers, undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as minors. The memoir further showcases how Mexican immigrant writers such as Grande continue genre-blending traditions in Chicana feminist literature in an effort to find an appropriate expression for their complex experiences with migration as gendered, raced, and classed individuals. In doing so, Grande produces a unique form of life writing that is equally inspired by oral narrative, *testimonio*, autobiography and memoir.

Keywords: Chicana memoir, *testimonio*, undocumented immigrants, Reyna Grande

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Each time I tell my story, I become more and more empowered by it.
The more stories we tell, the more we will be able to change
the conversation around immigration.

– Julissa Arce, *Beyond Borders: Undocumented Mexican Americans*

The subaltern cannot speak.

–Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

According to the Center for Migration Studies, an estimated 11 million people are currently living in the United States as undocumented immigrants (Warren 2016). Their lack of eligibility to acquire legal status renders them ineligible for social benefits and the right to vote, and limits their access to health care and financial aid for higher education, even though undocumented immigrants pay “an estimated \$11.64 billion in local and state taxes every year” (McCarthy 2016); it also puts them in constant fear of deportation. The vast majority of undocumented immigrants in the United States hail from Mexico, a nation with which the United States shares a long history ranging from imperial expansion to neo-colonialist trade agreements.

Two terms frequently associated with undocumented immigrants in public discourse, especially in right-leaning media outlets, are “invasion” and “illegal alien.” Both terms imply false connotations about the actual presence of undocumented immigrants from Mexico in the United States. One of the most effective ways to challenge such generalising vilifications and criminalisation consists in the production and distribution of counter-narratives from the perspective of undocumented immigrants themselves.

Among the plethora of narratives about the experience of undocumented Mexican immigrants in novels, short fiction, poetry, plays, feature films, and documentaries, one genre stands out as a particularly effective form of countering the “danger of a single story” (Adichie, online) of a perceived Mexican threat to the national security and allegedly uniform cultural identity of the United States: the memoir. It occupies a particularly important place in Mexican narratives of immigration as well as in Chicana accounts of what Paulo Freire has called “conscientisation” (Freire 1970: 15)—a process during which an individual comes into full and critical consciousness of the larger and intersectional structures of oppression along racial, classed, and gendered lines.

By discursively framing both documented and undocumented immigration from Mexico as a wave, as a violent and unwelcome inundation akin to the destructive force of a tsunami, and as an invasion by an allegedly foreign armed force, anti-immigrant rhetoric falsifies history in two important ways: one, when looking at the history of U.S.-Mexico foreign relations, the United States, rather than Mexico, emerges as an invasive, aggressive force, culminating in the Mexican American War (1846–1848). The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on February 2, 1848, and effected fundamental changes in the power relations between the United States and Mexico, as well as in the role of the United States in the Americas. It oversaw the incorporation of roughly 55% of formerly Mexican territory into the United States, gave the United States unprecedented access to the Southern Pacific Coast and its harbors and natural resources, and expanded the practice of slavery further West. In 1854, the Gadsden Purchase amended the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo by granting the United States

territory west of the Rio Grande and south of the Gila River, including the cities of Yuma, Tucson, and El Paso, as well as the Mesilla Valley, which was strategically important for the expansion of the transcontinental railroad in exchange of ten million dollars payable to the Mexican government (Acuña 2010: 10–14).

The multiethnic population in the formerly Mexican territories was given the choice to either move into the diminished Mexican territory, remain Mexican nationals under U.S. sovereignty, or become U.S. citizens. The very concept of a Mexican invasion of the United States is thus anachronistic at best. The second important element of falsification in the contemporary moment refers to the very myth of an unstoppable wave of immigration from Mexico, both legal and undocumented, when net immigration from Mexico has, in fact, approximated zero since the great depression of 2008 (Warren 2016: 2).

Legal residents of the United States who are not citizens, temporary workers on temporary work visas, and international students on temporary student visas are labelled “legal aliens” in U.S.-American legal discourse. This legal terminology has been adopted by anti-immigrant lobbyists and modified for undocumented immigrants, who are now referred to as “illegal aliens.” This infamous term dehumanises undocumented immigrants regardless of their national and ethnic backgrounds by equating legal status with membership in the human race. On October 26, 2016, the prominent Latina journalist and activist Maria Hinojosa schooled Steve Cortes, a member of Donald Trump’s National Hispanic Advisory Council, on MSNBC on the fact that “illegal” was, in fact, neither a noun, nor had it ever been applied to migrants in a democratic setting before. Instead, so Hinojosa, she was reminded of a conversation with Elie Wiesel, who, upon visiting Buchenwald, told her about the dangers of using dehumanising language as a weapon against marginalised and disenfranchised groups by calling them “illegals” (Hinojosa, MSNBC, online).

The term “illegal” criminalises all undocumented immigrants regardless of circumstance. This rhetorical criminalisation of Latinas/os in the United States is exacerbated by the ratification of a series of anti-immigrant laws, such as Arizona SB 1070, Alabama HB 56, and, most recently, Texas SB 4, which always already render brown bodies suspicious and potentially criminal. Julissa Arce, who entered Texas as an undocumented child immigrant at the age of 11, was able to earn a college degree thanks to Texas HB 1403, and worked as a successful managing broker at Goldman Sachs in Manhattan prior to her conscientisation as an immigrant rights activist, perhaps sums it up best by asserting, “Justice and the law are not the same thing.” She elaborates, “The problem is we have a system that makes people, like myself, have to make choices that then turn us into criminals” (*Beyond Borders*). Rather than embracing a rhetoric that criminalises all undocumented immigrants, Ms. Arce asks us to call into question the ideology behind the very laws that produce such alleged criminals.

Julissa Arce's story, and that of tens of thousands of child immigrants like her, also draws attention to the important fact that undocumented immigration to the United States from Mexico is not only a raced and classed, but also very much a gendered phenomenon. Women and girls who cross borders are at a higher risk of sexual assault and rape. In addition, many women who cross are mothers who either leave their children behind in the hopes of providing an economically more secure future for them, or take their children with them on the perilous journey, which puts both mothers and children at a higher risk of deportation by *la migra*¹, sexual violence, injury and even death. Chicana memoirs, perhaps more than any other genre in Chicana/o letters, highlight the plight and resilience of undocumented immigrant mothers and their children in moving, persuasive, and creative ways.

The past decade has seen a proliferation of memoirs, (auto)biographical narratives, novels, feature films, and documentaries that address the plight of migrating mothers and their children, who are left behind in the care of at times indifferent relatives or accompany their mothers on the perilous journey with the understanding that they will never be able to return to Mexico. Many fictional tales, such as the feature films *La Misma Luna (Under the Same Moon)* and *A Better Life*, heavily draw on the sentimental mode that highlights the allegedly unbreakable bond between mothers who left for *el otro lado*² and their children who were left behind. Memoirs and other non-fiction accounts, such as *Enrique's Journey* by Sonia Nazario, *Which Way Home?*, a documentary directed by Rebecca Cammisa, and Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* paint a more sobering picture, and highlight how the often harrowingly violent experience of migration and the many years of separation have, in fact, severely damaged the familial bond. Memoirs thus do not only focus on first-hand accounts of migration, they also challenge stereotypical and sentimental notions of motherhood. They highlight the resilience of migrants, emphasise the power and limitations of memory in recreating family in the United States, and reject a facile equation of emigration with upward social mobility.

Reyna Grande's 2012 *The Distance Between Us: A Memoir* is a prime example of the political and social power of the Chicana memoir as a feminist reinvention and literary expansion of the *testimonio* that functions as a harsh critique of neo-colonial practices in Mexico and the United States, which are among the main reasons for emigration from Mexico and Central America to the North. According

¹ La "migra" is a colloquial reference to an increasingly militarised United States Border Patrol, whose officers are in charge to apprehend and arrest "illegal aliens" who are crossing the border without documents.

² „El otro lado“, literally the other side, generally refers to the United States from the perspective of migrants from Mexico and Central America. „Al otro lado“ refers to the migration “to the other side,” into U.S.-American national territory.

to John Beverley, one of the founding scholars in the area of testimonial literature in Latin America, the *testimonio* is a “novel or novella-length narrative told in the first person,” which is usually written or told to an amanuensis by an individual who has witnessed a traumatic event, often as the result of genocide or civil war (Beverley 1996: 24-25). *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la consciencia* (*I, Rigoberta Menchú*), the 1983 *testimonio* by Quiche activist Rigoberta Menchú Tum, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize nine years later for her work towards reconciliation and justice for the indigenous victims of the Guatemalan genocide, is perhaps the internationally best-known example of a *testimonio* in Beverley’s traditional sense. In the context of Chicana Studies, the testimonial mode has acquired great significance for feminist approaches to the experiences of Chicana women and girls, and especially for the experiences of Chicanas who identify as members of the LGBTQ community. True to the border-crossing nature of Chicana literature since its inception, most Chicana memoirs are neither *testimonios* in Beverley’s narrow definition of the term, nor are they the individual-driven narratives that dominate most of U.S.-American autobiographies; instead, they draw on conventions of the testimonial mode and defy mutually exclusive binaries by blurring generic boundaries and creating a hybrid form of life writing that is partly memoir, partly *testimonio*, and partly autobiography. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “[t]his fluid boundary has particularly characterized narratives by writers exploring the decolonization of subjectivity forged in the aftermath of colonial oppression” (Smith, Watson 2001: 10), an observation all the more relevant for life writing produced by women of color who are also immigrants. In addition, “one of the most powerful attributes of *testimonio* is that, as a genre, it intentionally blurs the lines between fact and fiction” (Smith 2010: 22). As a result, these hybrid memoirs-cum-*testimonios* are ideally suited to express the complex and contradictory border-crossing experiences of Mexican immigrants to the United States.

Some of the most groundbreaking texts in Chicana non-fiction, such as Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, are thus not testimonies in Beverley’s sense, but they do draw on, adapt, and expand the mode of the Latin American *testimonio* to bear witness to sexual violence and discrimination of queer women of color both in their own communities and in encounters with the Anglo-American mainstream. They also build a movement grounded in solidarity and empathy among women of color and their Caucasian allies. The communal importance of the memoir engaging and adapting the *testimonio* in Chicana literature and culture becomes apparent in the collected editions ranging from the pioneering 1981 *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, to *Telling to Live*, published by a collective named the Latina Feminist Group in 2001. The ongoing significance of the *testimonio* in current research in Chicana Studies

is further evidenced by an interdisciplinary research initiative by the Chicana/Latina Research Center at University of California, Davis. The initiative, entitled “Testimonios as Critical Tools in Theorizing Chicana/Latina and Indigenous Women’s Studies” is directed by Inés Hernández-Avila and Lorena Oropeza and focuses on the importance of the *testimonio* to Chicanas in the 21st century.

Whereas most pioneering Chicana testimonial non-fiction and fiction focused on the experiences of second generation Chicanas who were born in the United States to immigrant parents from Mexico, the 21st century has refocused its attention to narratives by undocumented immigrants. The choice of the genre of the *testimonio* here fulfills two major functions: first, it links the plight of undocumented immigrants today to the plight of victims of genocide and political violence in the 1980s, and second, it highlights the constant threat of domestic violence and sexual abuse to women and girls both as reasons for emigration and as a specifically gendered danger to the experience of migration. The memoir is an effective tool in humanising oft-vilified and criminalised migrants, and counters the silencing of these additional dangers to children’s, women’s, and queer bodies. Reyna Grande’s memoir is thus a persuasive example of what happens when the subaltern—an undocumented child immigrant—acquires speech and no longer relies on or requires an amanuensis to “translate” her words from oral narrative to written account.

After the great success of *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006)—Grande’s debut novel was awarded the Premio Aztlán Literary Award 2006 and a National Book Award in 2007 – Grande published a second novel, *Dancing With Butterflies* (2009). Yet, in the aftermath of the powerful 2006 protests in favour of immigration reform, and when being faced with the heartbreaking stories of her students while working as a middle-school ESL teacher in the Bay Area, Grande felt compelled to return to her own immigration story. She had started writing her memoir as early as 1997, while still in high school, but felt the experience was still too fresh and raw in her mind to effectively write about it. In 2009, Grande embarked on completing *The Distance Between Us*, a memoir of her childhood in Iguala in the Mexican state of Guerrero, that begins with her father’s departure for the United States when she was just two years old, continues with her heartbreak over her mother’s emigration to the United States two years later, her and her siblings’ difficult relationship with their abusive paternal grandmother in whose care they had been put, her own experience of crossing the border with her father and her siblings with the help of a coyote³ at the age of nine, her life as an undocumented immigrant in California, and finally culminates in her graduation, the first in her extended family, from college. Grande’s

³ “Coyote” is a colloquial term describing an individual who makes an often lucrative business out of smuggling undocumented immigrants across the U.S./Mexico border.

memoir is a passionate call for the need for immigration reform and an overhauling of NAFTA, a chilling indictment of corruption and poverty in Mexico, and an inspiring tale of resilience and success at great personal cost. It is also a moving illustration of the devastating impact of migration and anti-immigrant legislation on families, and a critical commentary on the romanticisation of motherhood in a neo-colonialist era, showcasing that migration is always a deeply gendered experience and that motherhood is all but an impossible-to-attain ideal in the era of deportations and family separation.

After two failed attempts to cross the border with her father and three siblings, Reyna finally crosses the border in 1985, one year before the passing of the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which initiated the militarisation of the U.S.-Mexico border. She is able to obtain a green card and eventually earns citizenship in 2002. This path to citizenship is no longer available to the so-called DREAMer generation, undocumented immigrants who had entered the United States as children under the age of sixteen. Her memoir, she stated in multiple interviews, is intended to open up readers' minds and hearts about the plight of immigrant families, and to become involved in the U.S. immigration reform, most specifically in efforts towards signing President Obama's 2012 executive orders DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and DAPA (Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents) into law.⁴

The Distance Between Us continues a longstanding tradition in immigrant narratives, Chicana/o literature, and the *testimonio*, and is clearly indebted to these models in form and content. The emergence of Chicana/o and Latina/o literatures is intimately intertwined with grassroots movements that support social justice and fight for the civil rights of historically disenfranchised groups. The first novel to be published in English by a Mexican American writer, for example, Maria Amparo Ruíz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), for instance, is replete with a sophisticated critique of the legal expropriation and discrimination of American citizens of Mexican descent in the aftermath of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The novel's Mexican hero, Don Mariano, is a thinly veiled fictionalisation of Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, an erudite and savvy military commander in the former Mexican state of Alta California. The *corrido*, an art form Américo Paredes has defined as highly stylised and often romantic ballads that celebrate Hispanic history and culture along the Texas–Mexico border (Paredes 1942), emerged in the early decades of the 20th century, concomitant with the height

⁴ The Trump administration rescinded President Obama's DACA memorandum on September 5, 2017, allowing Congress only 6 months to resolve the fate of ca. 800.000 Dreamers, now threatened with deportation by February 2018, after having entrusted the U.S. government with their personal information.

of state-sponsored violence committed against Mexican migrants and Americans of Mexican descent committed by the Texas Rangers. In the early 1960s, performances of Luis Valdéz's *Actos* accompanied the grape strikes organised by the United Farmworkers' Union. Poetry, short fiction, and novels about the plight of refugees fleeing atrocities and the civil wars in Central America emerged at the same time as the Sanctuary movement of the 1980s. Since 2010, the threat to civil liberties and Chicana/o Studies in Arizona due to the passing of SB 1070, which effectively legalised racial profiling, and HB 2281, which abolished Mexican American Ethnic Studies in public schools, has led to a revival of the spirit of grassroots Chicana/o resistance in the shape of the *Librotraficante* movement. The members of the movement—public school teachers, poets, and civil rights activists—draw awareness to the importance of Chicana/o Ethnic Studies to accurately teach the American experience and “traffic” banned books back into Arizona en route in their caravans.

This investment in social justice in Latina/o narratives is perhaps most marked when it comes to Latina feminist writers. As Luz de Alba Acevedo, Norma Alarcón, Celia Alvarez, and other members of the Latina Feminist Group observe,

Latina feminists come from a long line of workers, activists, theorists, and writers within their respective communities. They have participated in various movements that denounce social injustice, including civil rights, anti-war, labor, human rights progressive Cuban American politics, Puerto Rican Independence, Chicano political autonomy, Native American sovereignty, Central American solidarity... They have taken part not only in the political but also in the literary and artistic activity around these movements-*teatro* and *floricanto*... which provide a language to celebrate cultural identity. (The Latina Feminist Group 2001: 3)

Among these literary genres, all of which are associated with social protest, the memoir stands out at the intersection between migration studies, gender studies, literary and postcolonial theory. The memoir links, in important ways, politically invested journalism with creative writing, providing a space for the social sciences and the arts to meet in order to complete a fragmented official history with individual and collective memories and instill historiography with accounts of lived experience. In her reading of John Beverley and Kimberly Nance, Marta Caminero-Santangelo has emphasised the transformative potential of reading testimonies, and suggests, “identification, or empathy, is a crucial starting point in reorienting readers from an alienating distancing to involvement” (Caminero-Santangelo 2016: 35).

One significant form of such an involvement between authors and audiences originates in what Mary Louise Pratt has called “autobioethnographies.” In “Arts of the Contact Zone”, Pratt defines autoethnographies as texts

in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them... they involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror... Their reception is thus highly indeterminate. Such texts often constitute a marginalized group's point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture. (Pratt 1991: 35)

Autoethnographies, as a form of life writing that resulted from the Spanish conquest of indigenous Latin America, have had a strong influence on the work of Chicana memoirists, including Reyna Grande, for mainly two reasons. Chicana memoirists are painfully aware of and deeply familiar with historical and current practices of (mis)representation of Mexican immigrants in the United States, and consciously engage with such misrepresentations in their own work by adopting literary forms recognisable to their opponents. A highly literate undocumented immigrant, Grande wrote her own memoir in English, rather than telling it in Spanish or an indigenous language to an amanuensis, and actively participated in the marketing and distribution of her book, becoming an agent of change through her specific form of *testimonio*.

Drawing on Pratt's work, Chicana scholar and writer Norma Elia Cantú has developed the term "autobioethnography" to add another layer to the hybrid genre that is Chicana memoir. In "Memoir, Autobiography, Testimonio" Cantú discusses the importance of life writing to the Chicana experience:

As a life-long reader of biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, *testimonios*, and what Gloria Anzaldúa called autohistorias, I expect certain features or characteristics of books that pretend to render a person's life on the page... As a creative writer of what I call autobioethnography, I am also interested in the cultural or ethnographic aspects of that life; furthermore, as a Chicana/Latina feminist scholar, I am also very much interested in life-writing that explores the intersections of oppressions in Latino/a communities. And finally, I expect such writings to offer a glimpse into someone's life that will illuminate my own. (Cantú 2012: 312)

In addition to engaging and dismantling misrepresentations of Mexican immigrants in their own work, autobioethnographies allow Chicana memoirists to show how the very act of writing such texts impacts their communities and the Chicana writers' own lives in turn. Autobioethnographies are thus the ideal narrative model in which the urgency of the *testimonio* merges with the cultural and political critique of the autoethnography as well as with the deeply personal accounts of the memoir, emphasising not only how immigration but also the process of writing about this experience in a narrative form recognised by the host country changes the author's

view of herself, affects the community's self-awareness, and ultimately challenges what we have considered life writing in the United States thus far.

Grande's *The Distance Between Us* is one example of a testimonial autobioethnography by an undocumented Mexican child immigrant to the United States, whose thwarted relationship with both her mother and the country of her birth allows readers a "glimpse" into the life of undocumented DREAMers. Equally important, the text contributes important specifics to literary critiques of neo-colonial practices in the times of NAFTA, by making the plight of average working-class Mexicans tangible and concrete as economic hardship is experienced through the framework of Reyna's memories as a young child: "I was two years old when my father left. The year before, the peso was devalued 45 percent to the US dollar. It was the beginning of the worst recession Mexico had seen in fifty years" (Grande 2012: 6). Grande describes her father's journey in search of work from Guerrero to California,

Back then, I didn't know that Guerrero was the Mexican state with the most people emigrating due to scarcity of jobs... At first, he had lived in California's Central Valley and had slept in an abandoned car while working in the fields harvesting crops, just as he had done in his youth. Eventually he left to try his luck in Los Angeles, where he was fortunate enough to find himself a stable job as a maintenance worker at a retirement home. (Grande 2012: 58–59)

In the epilogue to her memoir, Grande concludes that economic hardship is the main push factor for immigration to the United States from Mexico. She writes, "The cycle of leaving children behind has not ended. Nor will it end, as long as there is poverty, as long as parents feel that the only way to provide something better for their children is by leaving" (Grande 2012: 320). In stark contrast to currently popular fear mongering that fuels xenophobia and anxieties about waves of criminal "illegals" inundating the United States, the net immigration from Mexico to the United States has been at zero level since a massive economic recession hit the United States in 2008 (Warren 2016:2). In the late 1970s, when Grande's father left for the United States, on the other hand, the economic situation and employment opportunities were infinitely more promising in the United States than in Mexico, and by chapter 8 of the memoir, Papi's photograph becomes the only tangible representation of the long-absent father—he becomes "the Man Behind the Glass" (Grande 2012: 58).

One of the most significant formal features of the memoir, and the Chicana/o memoir in particular, consists in the inclusion of family photos, which render the experience of reading the memoir akin to browsing through a friend's family

album. Photographs are often associated with preserving personal and collective memories, and documenting the lives of those whose stories tend to be marginalised or forgotten. As Roland Barthes has famously pointed out in *Camera Lucida*, the power of the photographic image lies in its dual effect of what he calls “studium” and “punctum” (Barthes 1980: 5). While the studium supports the documentary function of preserving a historical moment that might otherwise be forgotten in great detail, the punctum describes the affective response of the viewer to the image, which establishes a relationship of familiarity and even kinship between the viewer and the subject of the image, the very shift to “involvement” Caminero-Santangelo has identified in her reading of *testimonio*. When viewing, for example, a yearbook photo of a teenaged Reyna Grande at her high school graduation, replete with the accoutrements of this very U.S.-American rite of passage, a reader to whom Reyna’s life is otherwise completely foreign recognises a familiar gesture in the photograph, and must thus develop a personal connection to Grande’s story.

The photographs, and their captions, play another intriguing role in the memoir and complicate any facile division between fiction and non-fiction. For example, the caption under the first photograph reads “Reyna, at age two” (Grande 2012: 3). By putting her first name, Reyna, in the caption rather than simply stating “I, at age two” Grande creates a distancing effect. While the story is clearly hers, she seems to insinuate, it could also be someone else’s who also happens to be named Reyna. This way, Grande moves the memoir into the realm of the *testimonio*, which accounts not only for the authors’ personal experiences, but speaks for a larger collective experience.

The images themselves also tell a story of rites of passage into what is considered part and parcel of the U.S.-American mainstream: an image of Mago, Reyna’s older sister, dressed up as a “Rainbow Brite” [sic] at Halloween, a school book picture of “Reyna in the fifth grade” (Grande 2012: 188), “Reyna and family outside the U.S. Consulate in Tijuana finalizing green card applications” (Grande 2012: 229), “Mago’s graduation, 1990” (Grande 2012: 250), “Reyna at her *quinceañera*” (Grande 2012: 263), “Reyna as a member of the All City Honor Marching Band” (Grande 2012: 265), “Reyna in her senior year” (Grande 2012: 293) with a decorative rose in hand, “Reyna and [her favorite teacher and mentor] Diana at a scholarship dinner 1996” (Grande 2012: 307), “Reyna’s graduation from Pasadena City College, 1996” (Grande 2012: 308), and the culmination of all her efforts, “Reyna at UCSC graduation, 1999” (Grande 2012: 319).

Photographs are also important tools in preserving fleeting memories, as a young Reyna ponders: “I glanced at the photo of Papi, wishing for the thousandth time that we had a photo of Mami, too. I was forgetting what she looked like, smelled like, felt like. I couldn’t remember the sound of her voice, the way she laughed”

(Grande 2012: 68). The photographs serve as mnemonic devices for children torn apart from their parents due to economic hardship. And yet, the photographs Reyna does have access to also freeze the familiar face in a specific moment in time. Reyna, in a moment of desperation, realises that “Even though I had memorized every part of his face I could not leave the Man Behind the Glass” (Grande 2012: 72). The “Man Behind the Glass”, Reyna’s absent father, haunts his daughter’s imagination before, during, and after her crossing into the United States. To Reyna, he is a symbol of her social, cultural, and affective ties to Mexico; he also comes to represent the personal sacrifice most emigrants make in order to improve their economic circumstances and create opportunities for their children in Mexico. For a period in Reyna’s childhood, her father unexpectedly emerges as a more stable force than her mother; and yet, Papi, unlike his children, never finds sure footing *al otro lado*.

The children are not the only ones suffering from a misconception of the passing of time. The parents, too, fall victim to the illusion that the children stay the same as they were in their memories and in the family photographs they took while still in Mexico. When the parents, for example, send presents to their children in Mexico for the first time, Reyna and her siblings Mago and Carlos are in for a sad surprise—none of the clothes or shoes fit; they are all one to two sizes too small, testimonies to the lost time between parents and children:

But it was as if our parents had not realized that while they’d been gone we had grown, as if somehow in *El Otro Lado* time stood still and over there I hadn’t yet turned six, Mago ten, and Carlos almost nine. The shoes they sent were a size too small, and so were the dresses. The sleeves of Carlos’ shirt were two inches above his wrists. The skirt of my dress didn’t even graze my knees. (Grande 2012: 56)

One of the biggest threats to young Reyna is the birth of a new sister in the United States. She believes that the new sister will replace her in her parents’ imaginary, and that she is now, truly, an orphan. Reyna’s anxiety is, tellingly, only somewhat alleviated when she considers her baby sister’s appearance:

But then I looked at her skin. She was very dark, this little girl. And it made me feel glad that she was so dark. I had heard people say that in *El Otro Lado* there were a lot of golden-haired people with eyes as blue as a summer sky and skin as white as a pig’s belly. But this little girl, who was born in that special, beautiful place, was almost as the Nahuas, the indigenous people who came down from the hills to sell clay pots at the train station. (Grande 2012: 74)

Mexican colorism, a legacy of the centuries-long impact of the Spanish *casta* system in *Nueva España*, merges, in shocking yet effective ways, with U.S.-American racism in young Reyna's mind. She instinctively seems to understand that a child of Mexican parentage whose skin color marks her as indigenous will be marginalised in both the country of her birth and in her parents' country of birth. Here, Reyna anticipates over anti-Mexican legislation passed in Arizona in April 2010 (SB 1070), in Alabama in June 2011 (HB 56), and in Texas in May 2017 (SB 4) which advocates for racial profiling of residents whose skin color and physical appearance marks them, allegedly, as potential undocumented immigrants.

One of the biggest disappointments for Reyna and her siblings is the long-anticipated eventual return of their mother to Mexico. And yet, her mother's return is not the triumphant Horatio Alger story both her mother and Reyna had been hoping for. Instead, mother Juana returns with a young Betty in tow, humiliated by a husband who abandoned her for another woman, and, as she states, "not even a blue eyed *gringa*" but Mila, an indigenous Mexican woman with documents in the United States. Reyna observes, "The woman standing there wasn't the same woman who had left" (Grande 2012: 76), and concludes that her father "had returned to us a different version of my mother, one who was bitter, heartbroken, and weighed down by the knowledge that she had four children to support and was on her own" (Grande 2012: 78).

Again, Grande's *testimonio* offers a keen observation of the impact of NAFTA on the daily lives of working class Mexicans, like her mother: "In August 1982, two months after my mother had returned from *El Otro Lado*, the peso was devalued for the second time that year due to the national debt crisis. What little money my mother had brought with her was quickly spent" (Grande 2012: 77). Rather than returning with the hoped-for wealth, earned from the proverbial rags to riches, Juana has to start over from scratch in her small hometown in Guerrero.

Grande's memoir has a similarly ambivalent relationship to narratives that embrace a feminist ethics, as she highlights her mother's and her paternal grandmother's rather different roles. Neither self-sacrificingly maternal nor staunchly feminist, these women fit neither convention comfortably. Instead, Abuela Evila's cruelty, and Mami Juana's co-dependency on her male counterparts challenge stereotypical accounts of Mexican American women as "natural-born" mothers. The most nurturing family member who cares for all the children and brings them into the United States is, in effect, the father. This image of the caring, self-sacrificing father figure is in conflict with stereotypical concepts of Mexican *machismo*. It is here, among others, where I locate a postcolonial feminist critique in Grande's memoir, as she rejects, in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "a nostalgia for lost origins [that] can be detrimental to the exploration of realities within the critique of imperialism" (Spivak 1988: 274), in

this case a critique of both the U.S.-American neo-colonialist impact on the Mexican economy, and of Mexican patriarchal and racialised structures that are a direct legacy of the Spanish empire.

In the memoir, girls, especially the oldest daughters, are charged with tasks that are clearly gendered. When Juana first leaves for the United States, she puts Mago in charge of her younger siblings: "Do you promise to take care of your *hermanos* for me, be their little mother?" (Grande 2012: 12). However, Reyna's mother is a woman who defines her own value via her male partners' desire for her. Her social status is intimately intertwined either with her husband's triumphant return to Mexico as an economic success, or with him asking her to join him *en el otro lado*: "*My husband has sent for me. He needs me*, she said to everyone and the women, like Dona Maria, whose husband left long ago, would lower their eyes" (Grande 2012: 45). Juana puts the needs of her male companions, and her own need for validation by a male partner, before her children's needs twice. The first time she prioritises her husband's and her own desires when she leaves for the United States to join Papi; the second time, Juana leaves her children behind while she is bound for Acapulco with her new lover, an aspiring wrestler. Reyna's mother thus does not fit into the traditional narrative of the self-effacing mother who sacrifices her own needs and desire for those of her children, or the feminist ideal of a self-reliant, economically and emotionally independent woman. At the same time, Juana is never reduced to a villainous or merely monstrous character, but is rather shown as a woman with conflicting desires, whose maternal role, at times exhausts or bores her. In this sense, Grande's memoir adds important complexity to immigrant narratives, which tend to represent especially women in an unrealistic and limiting hagiographic roles.

Similarly, the stereotypical image of the self-sacrificing *abuelita*, who stays behind in Guerrero to take care of the children of emigrants, is called into question in the memoir. Papi's mother is neither nurturing nor a forgiving and loving matriarch; instead, she is profoundly materialistic, stingy, plays favorites with her granddaughter Elida by another, favored son, and is openly hostile to her other grandchildren. While Reyna speculates that the reason for her behavior may lie in the trauma she experienced during the Mexican Revolution, we, as readers, are less forgiving—the grandmother is more akin to a folktale about evil stepmothers who openly favor one child while mistreating and neglecting all others. The prologue to the memoir opens with,

My father's mother, *Abuela Evila*, liked to scare us with stories of La Llorona, the weeping woman who roams the canal and steals children away. She would say that if we didn't behave, La Llorona would take us far away where we would never see our parents again. (Grande 2012: 3)

This opening passage fulfills several important functions: one, it clearly establishes a non-Mexican readership as the target audience, since no such explanation would be necessary for the in-group. Second, the tongue-in-cheek game on words, by giving the *abuela* the odd name “Evila”, creates a suggestive bond between the speaker and her audience, who are obviously let in on a joke. Lastly, the grandmother threatens the children with parental loss and abandonment, tapping into the children’s primeval fears. Rather than being a protector and an ally, the grandmother thus emerges as a villainous figure reminiscent of Grimm’s tales.

As I have illustrated above, Grande’s feminist critique of immigration from Mexico to the United States offers an important contribution to conversations about gender roles in Mexican immigrant families. In addition, her *testimonio* also serves as an effective critique of neo-colonial practices in her own ambivalent relationship to and often critical distance to a romanticising narrative of the American Dream. Early on, she offers a sarcastic commentary on the uncritical adoration many Mexican emigrants hold for the United States: “Every time someone mentioned *El Otro Lado*, there was a reverence in their voice, like something holy, like God” (Grande 2012: 37). In this play on a notorious comment ascribed to Mexico’s reviled, long-ruling dictator Porfirio Díaz, “Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States,” and Ana Castillo’s canonical novel *So Far From God*, the United States is clearly established as the very opposite of God’s country.

The emerging of, fighting against, and finally accepting and even embracing distance are crucial experiences and practices in the memoir, for both protagonists and readers. The very title of Grande’s memoir, *The Distance Between Us*, already implies multiple layers of significant differences in the protagonists’ and readers’ politics of location, to channel Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich’s concern with the facile obliteration of difference as a crucial site of political sensibility and action. Even though a memoir, on the one hand, suggests and invites proximity, even intimacy, with readers in order to facilitate an empathetic response, it also manages to maintain an affective distance between Reyna, the narrator and main protagonist of the memoir, and us readers, who are predominantly located in the “U.S.” As Caminero-Santangelo points out in her incisive reading of Doris Sommer’s “Taking a Life”, we as readers are “required to safeguard distance as a condition of possibility” (Sommer qtd. in Caminero-Santangelo 2016: 36) in order to respect and do justice to a testimonial text. Grande’s memoir operates in precisely this tension between inviting U.S.-American (or European) readers into her personal, affective frame of experience and keeping them at a comfortable distance that is determined by the author of the *testimonio*. In this sense, the narrator’s complex relationship to her mother is similar to her relationship to her reader; it is a relationship she must control in order to protect herself.

The very phrase “the distance between us” appears multiple times, and usually at strategic moments, throughout the memoir. When Juana leaves her children for the first time, she offers Reyna the following consolation: “She said that my umbilical cord was like a ribbon that connected me to Mami. She said, ‘It doesn’t matter that there’s a distance between us now. The cord is there forever’” (Grande 2012: 21). Juana thus implies that the maternal bond between mother and child is eternal and indestructible, regardless of extenuating circumstance. However, as Grande’s memoir shows, this allegedly “natural” bond is fragile and must be continuously nurtured if it is to sustain the multiple pressures and blows of a long-distance relationship. Ultimately, the bond is not an immutable essence, but depends on continuous attention and care in troubled times. Later in the memoir a now adolescent Reyna Grande remembers, “Two thousand miles was the distance between us and Mami. Between me and the place I had been born. Between me and my childhood, however painful it had been” (Grande 2012: 159). She accepts the distance as part of her reality, but no longer embraces the myth of a natural, immutable bond. As a result, Grande’s connection with her father, though also troubled, ends up being stronger than the bond with her mother, and the arguably strongest relationship young Reyna has is not a biological one, but rather her deep connection with her favorite teacher and mentor Diana Savas, who takes her into her home at a critical moment in Reyna’s life, and facilitates her professional choices. Similarly, a singular empathetic reading of the memoir is not enough to build a lasting affective relationship between reader and the community she wishes to support. Continuous action is needed if the connection is to be maintained.

In her epilogue, Grande summarises her complex relationship to Mexico and to the United States, to her family and her attitude towards the American Dream:

I have now been in this country for twenty-seven years. The United States is my home; it is the place that allowed me to dream, and later, to make those dreams into realities. But my umbilical cord was buried in Iguala, and I have never forgotten where I came from. I consider myself Mexican American because I am from both places. Both countries are within me. They coexist within me. And my writing is the bridge that connects them both. (Grande 2012: 320)

In this concluding comment, Grande discursively firmly places herself in the tradition of radical Chicana radical feminist writing, embodied in Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Cherríe Moraga’s groundbreaking 1981 edited collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, and its follow-up, Gloria Anzaldúa’s and AnaLouise Keating’s 2002 *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. The extended metaphor of personal narrative as the connecting tissue between the

United States and Mexico thus heavily draws on Chicana feminism of the 1980s, and brings Anzaldúa's vision of new mestiza consciousness as a radical, decolonising form of Chicana womanism into the 21st century of the DREAMer generation.⁵ In "La Consciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness," the seventh chapter in her pioneering work *Borderlands/La Frontera—The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa describes the origins and evolution of this "new mestiza consciousness" as follows: "From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an 'alien' consciousness is presently in the making—a new mestiza consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands" (Anzaldúa 1987: 99). I am particularly taken by Anzaldúa's prescient choice of the term "alien" as an adjective to describe this emerging revolutionary, third world feminist consciousness. By using the negatively connoted term "alien" in such an empowering and positive context, Anzaldúa reappropriates a profoundly xenophobic and anti-immigrant expression for the cause of radical feminism, and in doing so creates the radical vocabulary Reyna Grande uses in her testimonial memoir twenty-five years later. Anzaldúa has, indeed, given Grande and other undocumented child immigrants the gift of language, and empowered the formerly silenced subalterns to be heard in a deafening public discourse.

Reyna Grande became a citizen of the United States in 2002. Julissa Arce swore her oath as a new citizen in 2014. Both of these highly educated and successful women once were undocumented child immigrants. Both declared that they voted for the first female presidential candidate of a major political party in 2016. And both women, as writers, public speakers, and civil rights and immigration reform activists will not be silenced, but speak loudly, clearly, and unapologetically about their journeys, empowering others to do the same.

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⁵ Both collections can be firmly placed within a tradition of third wave feminism in their opposition to monolithic definitions of feminism which focus on the concerns of white, heterosexual, middle-class women in industrialised nations of the Western hemisphere. Following the example of the African American Combahee River Collective, which voiced its disdain with the exclusionary practices of second wave feminism in the United States and promoted self-segregation if necessary, *This Bridge Called My Back* emphasises the needs of women of color, queer women, working class women, women with special needs, and women of indigenous background. Similar to Audre Lorde's call for an open and honest embrace of "difference" within the movement, *This Bridge Called My Back* reaches across ethnic, racial, gender, and national borders, a gesture that is even more pronounced in the even-more inclusive *This Bridge We Call Home*.

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