

# Caramel Rebozo and Weaving Cultural Memory: Haunted Body and Story-Telling in Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*

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Every year I cross the border, it's the same—my mind forgets.  
But my body always remembers. — Sandra Cisneros

This study considers haunting, memory, and oral history in relation to the female body and identity in the Mexican American writer Sandra Cisneros' work, *Caramelo or Puro Cuento: A Novel* (2002). The female protagonist, Celaya Reyes, listens to and writes the life story of her dead grandmother, Soledad Reyes, ("the Awful Grandmother") who haunts her after death. In the context of haunting, the work discusses the significance of memory and oral history in construction of body, identity and community. Through writing the story of her grandmother's life including pregnancy, marriage, and death, Celaya finally deepens her understanding about her own culture, which enables her to construct a transcultural identity and reconnect with the community. In the work, the grandmother laments that the female body has been objectified by the male gaze and thus becomes invisible, when after the body no longer serves the cultural purpose imposed on the female body. As a ghost, the grandmother evokes the image of famous Mexican folkloric figure *La Llorona*, the Weeping Woman, which is also linked with Celaya. When Celaya realizes that she is living the same unfulfilled life that her grandmother has lived, she seeks a new life and identity for a Mexican/American girl.

Juanita Heredia positions Cisneros "as a transnational ambas-

sador living in the U. S. /Mexico borderlands” arguing that in *Caramelo*, the writer claims the voices of the marginalized people such as immigrants, indigenous, mestiza/os, women and the working class, who remain invisible in dominant culture in both U. S. and Mexico (35-36). She points out that the migrations between cities in the United States and Mexico is critical factor in constructing her protagonist’s transnational Latina identity that transcends the U. S. /Mexico borderlands (40). In the novel, Celaya crosses geopolitical border and travels back and forth between two countries. Similarly, the Grandmother as ghost represents the grotesque body, which transgresses borders and resists the patriarchal traditions and masculine Mexican culture that historically silenced women. The haunting appearance/disappearance of the Grandmother’s ghostly body suggests the elusive nature of the past. However, the ghost is tenacious in insistence that Celaya records her life story exactly the way she wants it and that the Grandmother stays alive in the present as memory Celaya weaves. Cisneros’s novel explores the formation of identity in relation to the female body and the meaning of haunting in particular as well as the significance of oral history in ethnic autobiographical representation.<sup>1</sup>

The female body has a significant relationship with the perception of identity in ethnic literature in general. Examination of the representations of the female characters’ bodies, reveals their significance in the context of identity formation. The representations of the bodies of the narrator Celaya and her Awful Grandmother (who formerly appears as a girl named Soledad) show that control over both corporeal and cultural identity is achieved by crossing borders. Her thoughts about memory of body and constant confirmation of the resemblance of her facial features to those of her father and grandmother indicate that Celaya embodies familial connection and

the personal history of a Mexican family: "When it comes down to it, I guess I inherited the worst of both families. I got Father's Moorish profile, a nose too big for my face, or a face too small for my nose, I'm not sure which. But I'm all Reyna from the neck down. A body like a tamal, straight up and down" (258).

The women in the family are bitter and mean to Celaya and she hates her family and her body, in which she recognizes familial connection. Celaya has an inferiority complex about her unbalanced facial features and body, when she refers to her body to such symbolic Mexican food as *tamal*. However, in the end, she becomes able to accept her body as she communicates with her grandmother and understands her experiences. The memory of the past is conveyed through her body as Celaya crosses the border: "Every year I cross the border, it's the same—my mind forgets. But my body always remembers" (18). The story starts even before Celaya was born when her body as story-teller of communal history is formed: "When I was dirt...' is how we begin a story that was before our time" (89).

The novel starts with the life of Soledad Reyes (Celaya's grandmother as a girl), who works as household servant in the Reyes family; she lost her mother when she was young and sent to her aunt. Just as her name represents solitude and includes meanings of "solitude," "grieving," and "orphanage," she feels desperately lonely being disconnected from the family. Soon young son of the family, Narciso Reyes approaches her with the intention to exploit her. However, the relationship with him seems to satisfy her, seeking comfort in a sexual experience, since she had led an extremely lonely life before meeting him. The physical experience with Narciso makes her regard him as the savior of her desperately lonely life:

She felt when this man, this boy, this body, this Narciso put himself inside her, she was no longer a body separate from

his. In that kiss, they swallowed one another, swallowed the room, the sky, darkness, fear, and it was beautiful to feel so much a part of everything and bigger than everything. Soledad was no longer Soledad Reyes, Soledad on this earth with her two dresses, her one pair of shoes, her unfinished *caramel rebozo*, she was not a girl anymore with sad eyes, not herself, just herself, only herself. (154)

She feels as though she has become larger than herself in the unity of Narciso's body and hers. Soledad enjoys this physical pleasure of feeling happiness through bodily contact and sense of fusion she feels inside. The experience brings her the greatest satisfaction and feeling of bodily connection: "Everything, oh, my God, everything. A great flood, an overwhelming joy, and it was good and joyous and blessed" (154). Through the bodily unity she feels with Narciso, she identifies him with herself and overcomes loneliness at that moment. In reality, however, Narciso, whose name connotes narcissism, seems to take advantage of her and satisfy sexual needs. In spite of Narciso's intention, Soledad loves him, their physical connection surmounts her alienation, and she eventually cares about his body as if it were hers: "It was as if her body extended itself to encompass his, another body with all its needs" (154). The intercourse results in her pregnancy and the bodily changes that followed influences her body tremendously. Narciso unwillingly decides to marry her in order to take responsibility and protect the family honor. She is surprised by the changes in her body shape and the pain caused by pregnancy. The changes in her body overwhelm her and it starts to seem monstrous to her eyes: "The final nightmare was her body. Holy Mother of God! A body that didn't look as if it belonged to her. She was a disaster of buttocks and hips, as wide and heavy as the stone goddess Coatlicue. When she looked at herself in the

mirror, it gave her a little shudder” (189). As the fetus develops, it significantly hurts her spine and ribs. She starts to have difficulty sleeping and chokes when she sleeps on her back. The pregnancy makes her more vividly aware than ever of her body. This state of uncontrollability makes her think that she can “have her body back” (190) when the pregnancy is over. Thus exiled from her body, she neither has agency over her body nor her life.

Her pregnant body brings to mind the Kristevan notions of abjection and the grotesque, which have been historically associated with the maternal body. She fears her own uncontrollable body, in which both life and death are imagined, as in Julia Kristeva’s terms, the maternal body as a type of grotesque in which both sublimity and terror reside.<sup>2</sup> Soledad’s body makes her feel bound as well as disconnected to her body. Both fear and challenge are imposed by this event, and the resulting lack of agency can be considered as a state of bodily exile. Though she had associated with her husband and his body before she becomes pregnant, she does not have the means to communicate with him about “a loss of control of her body, but also, her life” (191).

Soledad later becomes Celaya’s “Awful Grandmother” who is no longer signified in the narrative by her name. Her nameless old body symbolizes her invisibility and loss of identity, which she desperately tries to claim back as ghost. Her characteristics change greatly as she becomes the “Awful Grandmother,” a mean, angry, and stubborn character in the novel. The body of “the Awful Grandmother” reveals issues of aging and its negative image. Though the body ages and eventually dies, the body of the Awful Grandmother resists social erasure by its foul odor and haunting behavior by crossing the border between life and death. Her monstrous pregnant body as a girl as well as her aging and smelling body also

evokes the concept of female abjection:

In Kristeva's schema, the abject is always ambiguous: desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous; and moreover, the process is never simply one of repudiation [...]. That sense of the abject as both the alien other who threatens the corporeal and psychic boundaries of the embodied self, and as an intrinsic, but unstable, part of the self resonates with the widespread cultural unease with bodily, and especially female bodily, fluids. In the effort to secure the 'clean and proper' male body, the body that is sealed and self-sufficient, it is women who are marked by the capacity of that which leaks from the body—menstrual blood is the best exemplar—to defile and contaminate. In short, women are both dangerous and excluded others, but also, as mothers, an originary presence. (Price and Shildrick 7)

In addition to the Grandmother, women in Celaya's family influences Celaya to have ambivalent attitude toward female body. Celaya negatively represents of menstruation and seems to fear maternity as abject. Given her failure to establish a meaningful connection with other female characters in the family, and her exposure to the grotesque and stigmatized body of the Grandmother, Celaya seems ambivalent toward the female body and toward femininity.

On the other hand, the Grandmother has actively takes on aggressive role in educating her granddaughter Celaya to live a life as a woman, after her death. The Awful Grandmother convinces Celaya to write her life story for the purpose of memory-making as well as education. By having Celaya tell her story, the Awful Grandmother verifies her existence both before and after her death, which demonstrates that her power of self-preservation is tremendous. She constantly appears to Celaya and gives her instructions on the

way she tells her life story, encouraging Celaya to live her life in a different way than she did, associating herself with most Mexican women in the history in a patriarchal Catholic culture.

Marisa Parham argues that the “in-between” nature of haunting parallels border identity. She explains that “[h]aunting is not compelling because it resonates with the supernatural, but rather because it is appropriate to a sense of what it means to live in between things—in between cultures, in between times, in between spaces—to live with various kinds of doubled consciousness” (3). Seeing the way it negotiates with different conditions, it is reasonable to think that haunting relates to constructing identity by consciously crossing multiple borders. Kathleen Brogan also comments on cultural representations of the ghost in contemporary literature. She discusses that contemporary ethnic writers use the ghost figure to represent ethnic experience as the recovery of history:

The curious dual force of the ghost who makes present what is absent powerfully shapes the American story of cultural haunting. A both presence and absence, the ghost stands as an emblem of historical loss as well as a vehicle of historical recovery. It offers writers who take as their subject the survival and transformation of ethnic cultures, who recognize disconnection even as they assert continuity, a particularly rich metaphor for the complexities of cultural transmission. (29)

Thus, the cultural representation of ghost is strategically used to recover and restore repressed history and redefine both individuals and the future community. By communicating with her grandmother’s ghost, Celaya finally discovers with surprise that she is not only telling her story, but that she is the Awful Grandmother herself. Therefore, the Awful Grandmother plays a central role in

this novel as double; she is dreadful yet powerful in educating the younger generation of Mexican American women. She embodies the history of the traditional Mexican woman who is angry and eagerly demands to be given voice. In that sense, Soledad, who has been without agency and could not control her body, controlled her identity after her physical death. Celaya endows the grandmother's invisible body with voice by writing her story.

On the verge of death, the Grandmother becomes even more pain for Celaya and her family, by smelling terribly and taking time for the old body to perish: "There's the horror of the body giving up, just giving up, and the nuisance of that collapse, gradual and steady. I'd promised Mother I'd help as much as I could, but the truth is I don't have the courage to look when I'm supposed to look" (342). The intense odor represents not only the persistent presence of the Grandmother's body but also the anger, horror and abjection associated with female aging. The resistance of her dying body affects the people around her in an intensive and aggressive way. When given voice, her story seems to reveal the bodily experience of a culture that sexually objectifies the female body. It can be interpreted as her challenge to a culture that alienates and stigmatizes the aging body:

In her forties she was most acutely aware of this shift of herself and her place in society, and it had made her difficult and quarrelsome, subject to sadness that seized her suddenly, and just as suddenly disappeared. Eventually, she grew used to being ignored, being not seen, not looked at, and there was some relief to that, some calmness, as if a knife had been put away (347).

As to female body, being visible is negative even though it seems to have positive aspects are discussed. Drawing attention



to her young female body makes her feel positive and visible, while leaving her with senses of insecurity and discomfort at the same time. Here the text reveals the issue of aging body and abjection, Soledad becomes invisible as her body turns old and undesirable. Thus, the female body problematically serves as the basis of identity formation in a dominant culture that heavily privileges female physical attractiveness and motherhood: "And then when she no longer was vain and cared about taking care of herself, she began to disappear. Men no longer looked at her, society no longer gave her much importance after her role of mothering was over" (347). Here the aging itself is perceived as a kind of death by being neglected from the society which heavily values youth. On the other hand, as women are deeply influenced by cultural standards under which the female body is evaluated as an object, therefore death seems to be perceived more like release, freedom from lifelong strain and fear: "It both delighted and frightened her. She was turning invisible. She was turning invisible. What she had feared her whole life. The body led her, a wide rowboat without oars or a rudder, drifting. Giddy, she didn't need to do a thing, simply be. Like floating in a lagoon of warm water" (347). The description of how the Grandmother feels facing death is characterized by a kind of relief and joy. Her experience reveals restlessness as she sheds the burdensome aspects of female bodily experience in life.

That's what she felt now as she was dying and her life was letting her go. A saltwater warmth of well-being. The water lifting her and her self floating out from her life. A dissolving and a becoming all at once. It filled her with such emotion, she stopped thrashing about and let herself float out of her body, out of that anchor her life, let herself become nothing, let herself become everything little and large,

great and small, important and unassuming. (348)

As she is dying, there is a prevailing image of water as she pictures herself as floating. The experience of death is characterized by passivity, flexibility, and sense of comfort in letting the body flow with the water by being released from everything that binds female body. There are frequent images of the ocean evident in relation to body in this novel:

We're thirsty, thirsty. We're salt water and sweet. And the bitter and the sad mixes with the *dulce*. It's as if we're rivers and oceans emptying and filling and swelling and drowning one another. It's frightening and wonderful all at once. For once, I feel as if there's not enough of me, as if I'm too small to contain all the happiness inside me. (382-83)

Here the body itself is associated and synthesizes with oceanic water. Again the image of water and ocean represents the feeling of ever-changing flexibility, ambivalence, and nostalgia. Filled with emotions, her body is considered too small to contain them within. These are expressions of the strange physical feelings of emotional hunger and passion, reflected by using representation of ocean in the work.

The sea water carries such images as "primordial creation" and "eternity" as well as association with "loneliness" and "collective unconscious."<sup>3</sup> These images link Celaya's existence before her birth, with primordial creation and eternity of history when a story is told: "'When I was dirt...' is how we begin a story that was before our time" (89). More, it also connects to sadness when the Grandmother talks of the ocean and it can also be interpreted as image of collective unconsciousness longing for "home," followed by a sense of loss, as the ocean links with Mexico for the characters. The repeated use of the ocean image is significant because it symbolizes the nature of

immigrant lives in border-crossing along with sense of nostalgia.

As well as the merging of the body in the image of the ocean, smell also carries significant meaning in the novel. Similar to the way the Grandmother seems to force her family to remember her by her own unpleasant smell, she remembers her husband by his smell. The smell of her husband Narciso also remains and seizes her after his death: "The smell of Narciso haunts her, his strange tang of sweet tobacco and iodine. She opens all the windows, but can't get the smell out of the house. —Don't you smell it? You don't? A smell that makes you sad, like the ocean" (250-51). In considering the representation of smell in the work, the Grandmother as ghost comes back with the smell which stubbornly stays in the house: "I can't sleep, it stinks in here like rotten *barbacoa* [barbecue]" (349). Her presence after death represents her clinging to life with rage, her strong will, and her purpose to be remembered. The smells of both the ocean and Grandmother's body are significantly noticeable. Smell is an important symbol in the work because it represents the dead Grandmother's body approaching and influencing Celaya, who has been nothing more than her father's mother, without any affectionate interaction with Celaya before death: "This [rotten barbecue] is what I'm thinking instead of the prayer I'm trying to compose, because I can't think of anything to say for my grandmother who is simply my father's mother and nothing to me" (350). Though Celaya does not have particular emotions of attachment for her grandmother, her smell like spoiled meat, keeps returning to her as if she is haunted by it.

The novel refers to the physical sense of smelling, especially the smell of the Grandmother. Both her presence as ghost and her smell have cultural meaning. Constance Classen and David Howes position that studying cultural history of smell deals with investiga-

tion of “the essence of human culture” (3): “Smell is not simply a biological and psychological phenomenon [...]. Smell is *cultural*, hence a social and historical phenomenon. Odours are invested with cultural values and employed by societies as a means of and model for defining and interacting with the world” (3). Concerning memory in relation to smell, Trygg Engen argues that odor memory can be impressive compared to other types of memories. The memory of a certain odor relates closely to a memory of a vivid physical experience: “Everybody has odor memories that stand out because of the vivid way in which they recapture the past, including the feeling of the remembered event. This fact has contributed to the common opinion that odor memory is better than other kinds of memory” (5). Hans J. Rindisbacher also discusses olfactory perception in literature and its close relationship to memory: “The olfactory with its virtual lack of recall potential for smell seems in its textual representation to be one step further removed from reality than other senses but, by the same token, especially close to memory” (14). Thus, the physical sense of smell can be used to represent memory and help one’s imagination effectively.

With the foul odor, the ghost of the Grandmother starts to appear repeatedly in front of Celaya: “I know when I open my eyes, she’ll be there. As real as when she was alive, or if you can imagine this, even more alive now that she’s dead. Her. The Grandmother. With her stink of meat frying” (362). Her presence is sensed as more real than when she was alive. She seems to be more visible and stronger in that she greatly influences on Celaya after death. Her body becomes invisible when she dies but she comes back with the odor to remind Celaya of her Grandmother’s appearance. To Celaya, the Grandmother seems to have started to monitor Celaya, and she is even more real because it leaves physical markings on Celaya’s

body as if to prove her presence: "It was bad enough when she was alive. But now that she's dead, the Awful Grandmother is everywhere. She watches me pee, touch myself, scratch my butt, spit, say her name in vain, watched me with my scarf come loose and one shoe untied running across Interstate 35" (363). Unlike common ways of haunting, the Grandmother makes physical contact possible with her granddaughter. She impresses her with deadly presence through corporeal inscription. Celaya starts to see the ghost of the grandmother everywhere, especially when she is weak and vulnerable: "I can't explain it except to say they don't even know who the hell I am. This is what hurts me the most. When I don't expect it. When I'm alone. When I don't want it to. The Grandmother comes and gets me. When I shut my eyes" (379). The Grandmother comes to Celaya when she is feeling weak, alone and lost, having trouble with her identity between traditions and American culture left without female role models. Her way of thinking toward her life is hard for her family to accept and understand. Finally one night, she finds the Grandmother in the mirror.

I fall asleep with all my clothes on, on top of the chiffon bedspread, without bothering to get under the covers, and wake up with my head hurting, my mouth dry. Fumble to the bathroom, flick on the lights, and it's her! The Grandmother's face in mine. Hers. Mine. Father's. It scares the hell out of me, but it's only me. Amazing the way I look different now, like if my grandmother is starting to peer out at me from my skin. (394)

She realizes that she is just like her and she thinks as though the Grandmother's body comes out of Celaya's. It seems to indicate that their bodies are becoming one—Celaya is beginning to embody her grandmother. After seeing the Grandmother's ghost multiple

times, eventually she challenges and confronts her ghost. In addition to feeling annoyed by her appearances, Celaya thinks the Grandmother is a troublemaker, who loves her son so much that she tries to take Celaya's father with her. Then her grandmother's confession surprises Celaya:

The room floods with the stink of fried meat. Perched on the headboard, it's her! The Awful Grandmother. At the sight of me she clambers down and wraps herself around him. Well, that's fine, because I'm you. Then she laughs a terrible laugh like a knife slicing my cheek. This takes me by surprise, and I let go of my grip. (405)

Signaling her appearance with the intense odor, the grandmother comes and try to take her son. The grandmother confesses that she is Celaya herself, and she claims to be stuck between life and death: "Well, it's that I'm halfway between here and there. I'm in the middle of nowhere! *Soy una anima sola*. Me? Haunting you? It's *you*, Celaya, who's haunting *me*" (406). Paradoxically, the Grandmother insists that it is Celaya who is haunting her and trapping her in an "in-between" space. Claiming to be haunted by Celaya, the grandmother crosses the border of life and death as well as that of past and present, by appearing to her son and granddaughter. Although they never interacted when the grandmother was alive, the ghost of the Awful Grandmother gives her advice on the way in which Celaya chooses her life so she will have a life different than her own: "Ay, Celaya, don't wind up like me, settling with the first man who paid me a compliment. You're not even a whole person yet, you're still growing into who you are. Why, all your life you'll be growing into who you are. That's the trouble" (407). She, who has been silenced when she was physically alive, is eager to teach a lesson to her granddaughter as ghost:

Celaya, it's so lonely being like this, neither dead nor alive, but somewhere halfway, like an elevator between floors. You have no idea. What a barbarity! I'm in the middle of nowhere. I can't cross over to the other side till I'm forgiven. And who will forgive me with all the knots I've made out of my tangled life? Help me, Celaya, you'll help me cross over, won't you? (408).

The Grandmother insists that she is wandering in an "in-between" space because she cannot escape from the place in which she feels trapped and exiled. Remained in a borderland where she does not belong, this state of alienation and displacement seems to parallel the experience of immigrants. Being lost, she asks Celaya to save her by listening to her and writing her life story. The Grandmother is also similar to Celaya in that she is yet to have agency in constructing her own identity. Only Celaya can take the role and thus help her grandmother cross the borders between life and death as well as past and present through recording memory. Celaya represents a Mexican woman of the new generation, who has the possibility to gain control and lead an independent life. Thus, it can be stated that haunting is used to convey unfulfilled will as well as the cultural experience of immigrant displacement. Moreover, the presence of the ghost of the Awful Grandmother can be understood in the context of the discussion on contemporary postcolonial Gothic literature.

David Punter and Glennis Byron describe the Gothic mode in the context of postcoloniality. They point out that in the postcolonial world, "[t]he cultures and histories of colonized nations are shadowed by the fantasized possibility of alternative histories" (54). In these postcolonial conditions, we can recognize a ghostly presence.

The very structure of the term 'postcolonial' itself, its apparent insistence on a time 'after,' on an 'aftermath',

exposes itself precisely to the threat of return, falls under the sign of an unavoidable repetition; the attempt to make, for example, the nation in a new form is inevitably accompanied by the traces of the past, by half-buried histories of exile, transportation, emigration, all the panoply of the removal and transplantation of peoples which has been throughout history the essence of the colonial endeavour. (55)

Thus, the Grandmother as ghostly presence speaks of postcolonial conditions of those who are buried and forgotten in the history. The Grandmother pressures Celaya to save herself, emphasizing matrimonial bonding: "You're the only one who can see me. [...] You're the only one who can help me, Celaya. You've got to help me. After all, I'm your grandmother. You owe it to me" (408). Lamenting her life, the Grandmother thinks that Celaya is the only person who can help because through her, the Grandmother believes that she can obtain her own voice. Thus, Celaya has been selected as heir to speak for the silenced history of Mexican women. The Grandmother, as a symbol of those anonymous women, is desperate to be understood: "I feel a great relief, like if I'd forgotten how to breathe until now. You'll tell my story, won't you, Celaya? So that I'll be understood? So that I'll be forgiven?" (408). The Grandmother's cruelty and anger when she is alive as well as the strong will to have her story told indicates the urge to create memory to prove her existence. She exercises control which she has never able to have before, giving specific instructions on the manner of storytelling. Through Celaya's oral history, the grandmother attempts to be remembered and thus becomes immortal in the memory of the family.

Since the Grandmother asks Celaya to tell her story in return for letting her father stay in this life, Celaya promises to listen and



write her story so that her father will stay alive. Though they never interacted when the Grandmother was alive, Celaya becomes able to communicate with her through story-telling, thus learning about the historical and cultural conditions surrounding Mexican women in the past. The Grandmother's ghost wish to take her son's life associates her with the image of the well-known Mexican female folkloric figure of *La Llorona*, Weeping Woman. This confession of regret can also be read in relation to *La Llorona*, who is said to have killed and lost her children. Since then, the woman keeps crying and wanders in the forest forever in search of her children. The Grandmother's plea resembles the lament of the wandering and weeping *La Llorona*, which is considered as an ambivalent figure of both tragedy and subversion in Chicana literature.

By asking Celaya to write her life story, the Grandmother shows remarkable strength in resisting her imposed condition of silence, gaining the ability to communicate with her granddaughter for the first time after death. The grandmother's request that Celaya tell her story is a form of restoring historical memory of the oppressed. Since the interaction leads to the construction of identity for both the Grandmother and Celaya, as well as uncover the lives of Mexican women who are nameless and remain anonymous in history. Thus, it can be said that Cisneros' novel rediscovers the manner and the significance of the traditional role of oral history.

Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson discuss that oral history, which is traditionally weaved by story-telling in relation to historical memory:

In certain projects a primary aim has been the empowerment of individuals or social groups through the process of remembering and reinterpreting the past, with an emphasis on the value of process as much as historical product. In

this regard oral history has influenced and overlapped with some of the most important contemporary uses of historical memory: in the ‘truth and reconciliation’ projects of post-conflict societies, or in legal responses to human rights abuses, such as war crime tribunals or the land claims of indigenous peoples. (x)

Thus, particularly within feminist history, “oral history retains an urgent political importance in many parts of the world where women’s oppression is reinforced by the silencing of women’s voices and histories” (6). In the work, Cisneros reflects herself in Celaya to emphasize the significant role of story-telling in constructing the historical memory of community. Celaya is aware of the tradition of silence inherent in Mexican culture: “Maybe he [Celaya’s father] wants to hear, or doesn’t want to hear, about me and Ernesto [Celaya’s boyfriend], but he doesn’t ask. We’re so Mexican. So much left unsaid” (428). Her father keeps secret the truth about his hidden daughter Clanderalia who Celaya already knew about. Celaya analyzes this secrecy as part of the tradition and culture of leaving much of conversation remain untold among Mexicans. Indeed, both the act of the Grandmother’s story-telling and Celaya’s record of ancestral life history demonstrate their resistance to an oppressive culture that silences women. By listening to and writing the Grandmother’s story, Celaya counteract the tradition.

The Grandmother’s appearance as ghost relates to her representation of ethnicity and communal memory. Kathleen Brogan describes cultural haunting and the ghost as a transcultural figure relating to communal memory: “Centrally concerned with the issues of communal memory, cultural transmission, and group inheritance, stories of cultural haunting share the plot device and master metaphor of the ghost as go-between, an enigmatic transitional figure moving

between past and present, death and life, one culture and another" (6). Brogan points out in Cisneros' work that "the ghosts who straddle boundaries can be read as hybrid inhabitants of the border" (16), thus proving that haunting parallels the immigrant experience. As she states, cultural haunting involves cultural transformation caused by immigration. Therefore, it relates to the ways in which culture is inherited and identities are constructed in America (16-7). Haunting in contemporary American ethnic literature is used to express concerns and hold positive meanings that emphasize "storytelling and the narrative construction of experience; and, finally, the peculiar position of ethnic writers as both 'heirs' and 'ethnographers'" (17). She argues that the creation of ghost narrative reshapes the past, in which storytelling has a significant role in ethnic ghost literature and in rediscovering the past. In this context, Celaya represents both "heir" and "ethnographer."

The Awful Grandmother's body can be read as a ghost that exercises uncanny power. Brogan explains that the uncanny power of the ghost represents the destructive force of strong women that are being repressed in societies. The ghostly body which is fluid, elusive and shape-shifting serves as alternative to female body that is too often physically trapped in monolithic and stereotypical role imposed on women in real life (26). Thus, exercising extraordinary power, as the Grandmother insists after her death and as is often the case with contemporary immigrant narratives, memory-making can be positioned as a central theme in Cisneros' novel.

After seeing and interacting with the ghost multiple times, Celaya recognizes that she has become the Awful Grandmother herself: "It hits me at once, the terrible truth of it. I am the Awful Grandmother. For love of Father, I'd kill anyone who came near him to hurt him or make him sad. I've turned into her" (424). The transforma-

tion of Celaya also is associated with La Llorona, who is said to have gone insane with love for her children. Although Celaya's love was toward her father instead of her child, her protective love for him she shares with her grandmother associates her with La Llorona. She feels the need to embrace the Grandmother as well in order to continue to love her father, as they are discovered as inseparable. Sharing love for Celaya's father, the granddaughter feels connected to her. Celaya finally understands her grandmother and the reason for her behavior:

I have to find room inside my heart for her as well, because she holds him inside her heart like when she held him inside her womb, the clapper inside a bell. One can't be reached without touching the other. Him inside her, me inside him, like Chinese boxes, like Russian dolls, like an ocean full of waves, like the braided threads of a *rebozo*. *When I die then you'll realize how much I love you.* And we are all, like it or not, one and the same. (425)

As she refers to Chinese boxes and Russian dolls, she holds an image of her body to be inside her father's body, which is contained within the Grandmother's body and feels responsible to inscribe her identity and history. Again, the image of ocean appears, when signifying historical, cultural, and familial connections. They see the ocean when they travel back and forth to Mexico, a country that is associated with ocean compared with Midwest Chicago where they live in America.

As to representation of body and identity, food plays significant role in the work. Celaya and the Grandmother were also on bad terms with one another when the Grandmother was alive. This relationship is clearly expressed in Celaya's rejecting the food the Grandmother serves: "When I get back, I throw myself on the bed,

and pretend to be sick from my period, and that's how I get out of having to eat a plate of *mole* the Grandmother has waiting for me. —No, thank you" (262). Generally, the act of a grandmother giving food to her granddaughter can be read as symbolic act of passing on the culture, especially in ethnic literature. Therefore, Celaya's refusal of the Grandmother's food shows rejection of her culture. *Mole*, the food she manages to avoid, is a popular Mexican dish made from avocados. She invents the excuse that she is ill from her period, which implies that her femininity is burdensome since her period can be associated with child-bearing and maternity. Her rebellious idea toward maternity as well as to Mexican culture is explored in the work. Menstruation is also represented with *tamales*, a staple of the Mexican diet, which are made from corn flour: "A thick wad of cotton like a tamal sandwich between my legs. A river roaring in my brain. Muddy water sweeping everything along" (262). This expression indicates that the image of menstruation is deeply embedded in her own culture. Celaya constantly talks about periods that bring her physical pain and discomfort, which also shows that maternity is unappreciated by Celaya. Celaya's closer association with her father as substitution indicates the absence of a female role model for Celaya's generation. At other time, Celaya craves Manila mangoes, which evoke a sweet nostalgic memory of Mexico because this fruit can only be bought at "home" in Mexico: "Ay, what I would give for a Manila *mango* right now with a little lemon and chile [...]. Manila *mango* can only be bought in Mexico, that country where sweets are sweeter, isn't that so?" (277). Craving for Manila mangoes parallels the immigrants' aspiration for their "home." Symbolizing sustenance for the racialized body, Food such as mole, tamales and mangoes indicate that Mexican food evokes nostalgia toward own culture, particularly in the writings of immigrants.

The body is emphasized in this text, captured as it speaks for itself: "A dream is a poem the body writes. Even if we lie to ourselves in the day, the body is compelled to speak its truth at night" (201). Celaya's eyes are on other female bodies, examining beauty as well as differences. She particularly pays attention to the bodies of the Grandmother, Aunt Light-Skin and her half-blood sister Clandalaria:

Mexican women never dress or undress unless they have their back to you and the room is dark. The shape of Aunt's body like a mermaid. On the swan of her spine, a big black mole as lovely and perfect as an elevator button. When I was little I once asked if I could touch it. How is it ugly things can be so beautiful? (264)

Celaya watches the shape of her body and notices "a big black mole," which she thinks is "so beautiful." Her body represents beauty as well as ugliness, which can also be associated with Kristevan abjection of female body. Celaya also watches the skin of Clandalaria, who is her hidden half-blood sister. Although other people find Clandalaria's skin dark and unpleasant, Celaya is drawn to it and finds the caramel color skin attractive. Her skin color is also associated with the caramel rebozo, which is something Celaya values and appreciates as a symbol of cultural memory.

Regarding the making of memory, there is a scene involving the construction of familial memory: "Then everyone realizes the portrait is incomplete. It's as if I didn't exist. It's as if I'm the photographer walking along the beach with the tripod camera on my shoulder asking, —¿Un recuerdo? A souvenir? A memory?" (4). She is not in the photograph when she was not sympathetic with the importance of memory and familial history. When she does realize it, she takes part in memory-making through telling story of her grandmother. Moreover, she insists that she remembers the formation of

her body before she was born, which indicates a crossing of the corporeal border: "I remember, I say. How could you remember? You weren't even born yet! Rafa says. Yeah, Lala, Tikis adds. —You were still dirt! Ha, ha! I do so remember. Honest! You mean you remember the stories somebody told you, says Mother" (19). Although her mother corrects her, she insists that she remembers even before she acquires body. It indicates that the memories are shared and remembered through story-telling, indicating that remembering makes the past alive and present:

That terrible ache and nostalgia for home when home is gone, and this isn't it. And the sun so white like an onion. And who the hell thought of placing a city here with no large body of water anyway! In less than three hours we could be at the border, but where's the border to the past, I ask you, where? (380)

It matters to Celaya that the city is not close to water. It can be read that the image of oceanic water evokes "home" in Mexico to her, thus she becomes disillusioned. Though she can cross the geographical border, she is unable to cross the border to the past that leads to her "home," reflecting on the the meaning of crossing a geopolitical border for immigrants: "Home. I want to go home already, Father says. Home? Where's that? North? South? Mexico? San Antonio? Chicago? Where, Father? All I want is my kids, Father says. —That's the only country I need" (380).

Because the immigrant family is exiled, they do not have a physical space of "home" anywhere, either in Mexico or in the United States. The family is the only thing that they can turn to as "home" as well as "country": *"Always remember, Lala, the family comes first – la familia. Your friends aren't going to be there when you're in trouble. Your friends don't think of you first. Only your family is going to*

*love you when you're in trouble, mija. Who are you going to call? [...]*  
 La familia, Lala. Remember" (390).

The family is considered as "home" for immigrants and valued more than anything for its emphasis on memory and remembering, which bases one's identity. Celaya gradually comes to understand the value of family and community as well as personal history. The home is not merely a living space for immigrants, but in which family and community are. When Celaya tells her father about her wish to leave the house to live alone, he answers that she is not allowed to until she is married because it is against patriarchal tradition:

¿Sola? But why would you ever want to be alone? You have everything a niña could want here. Why would you leave all this? It's just that I want to be on my own someday. I just thought maybe I would want to try stuff. Like teach people how to read, or rescue animals, or study Egyptian history at a university. Girls who are not Mexican? Like other human beings. It's that I'd like to try to live alone someday. (359-60)

The conversation between father and daughter reveals that a life of ordinary Mexican girl is stereotyped and restricted, while Celaya seeks a new life and identity. However, her family does not understand what she hopes for and she struggles with the old traditional Mexican values imposed upon her body. Against her loving father's will she leaves her house and goes to Mexico City with her boyfriend Ernesto. Rejecting the lives of the Awful Grandmother, her mother, and her aunt, Celaya searches for her own identity in the United States. Celaya is part of the new generation in that she notices and articulates the diversity among Mexicans, who are often stereotyped in the dominant American culture. This imposition of identity makes Celaya resist conforming to monolithic ideas and val-



ues imposed on both male and female Mexicans, by displaying different types of Mexicans she can imagine:

There are the green-eyed Mexicans. The rich blond Mexicans. The Mexicans with the faces of Arab sheiks. The Jewish Mexicans. The big-footed-as-a-German Mexicans. The leftover-French Mexicans. The *chaparrito* compact Mexicans. The Tarahumara tall-as-desert-sanguaro Mexicans. The Mediterranean Mexicans. The Mexicans with Tunisian eyebrows. The negrito Mexicans of the double coasts. The Chinese Mexicans. The curly-haired, freckled-faced, red-headed Mexicans. The jaguar-lipped Mexicans. The wide-as-a-Tula-tree Zapotec Mexicans. The Lebanese Mexicans. Look, I don't know what you're talking about when you say I don't look Mexican. I *am* Mexican. Even though I was born on the U. S. side of the border. (353)

Here, she claims space for the diverse identities of Mexican bodies. The various images of Mexicans resist the racial stereotyping that is often an issue with Mexicans living in the United States. Sandra Cisneros has been acutely aware of her responsibility in writing about Mexican/American culture.<sup>4</sup> Her narrative rejects these ideas by emphasizing multicultural aspects and diversity. Celaya travels in between Mexican and American cultures, both countries back and forth in her life. She chooses to live the way that women never have done in her family, which is also true of Cisneros' life as she sought independence for her life as a writer. Both the protagonist and Cisneros negotiate patriarchal Catholic culture to seek a new identity. She takes a new step as a woman in the family.

As the title indicates, the caramel rebozo is a traditional Mexican shawl, usually hand-woven and multicolored, which is a significant motif in the novel. Soledad's mother left the unfinished rebozo

to Soledad which later passed down to Celaya after her death. Celaya appreciates it as much as her grandmother did. She wears caramel rebozo when Celaya visits Mexico to search her familial history. During the journey, she decides to live her life apart from other women in the family. The caramel-colored rebozo, which symbolizes the hybrid mestiza identity, has been passed on to Soledad by her mother and then to Celaya. Juanita Heredia states that "Cisneros delineates the historical voyage of the *rebozo* as a symbol of *mestizaje* and further hybridities in Mexican culture to illustrate how a seemingly simple piece of cloth can connect many distinctive cultures, histories, and nations" (52). As Heredia points out, Cisneros challenges through Celaya control over women's bodies and culture by having Celaya wear the rebozo, thus counteracts Spanish patriarchy and European imperialism. Cisneros uses the rebozo, which is woven to pass down to daughters as material that contains precious memories, bring together history with gender, race, and migrations that are not always rediscovered and recorded in history books (53-54).

Educated by the oral history told by the Grandmother's ghost, Celaya acquires a new life and identity by resisting the tradition of silence and accepting diversity. In their haunted relationship, both the Grandmother and Celaya can be associated with La Llorona, thus transforming the traditional female image as a tragic figure to a contemporary subversive female figure, which offers them strength and courage. The Grandmother also challenges the culture by appearing as the ghost that articulates her voice. Sandra Cisneros is a writer who is keenly aware of her responsibility to represent community as well as to inform other people of its diversity among Mexican people.<sup>4</sup> Cisneros, by having Celaya control the narrative, also acquires her voice as well as giving voice to the silenced women in history. It can be considered that Celaya is a representation of San-

dra Cisneros herself, who has commented on her mission to tell the story of grandmother who represents those Mexican women who do not have a voice. Cisneros' family and life are reflected in the figure of Celaya. Examination of personal as well as familial history about the life of crossing Mexican/American border shows the significance of cultural haunting, and building of a oral history in reading ethnic representations of body, identity and community in *Caramelo* and other contemporary American immigrant writings.

#### Notes

1. For her work as semiautobiographical novel, see Cisneros' interview in Kavane and Heredia (53) and Heredia (36) for an explanation of the publication of the novel: "[...]Cisneros published *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*, a semiautobiographical novel that depicts a family history of continuous migrations between the closest neighbor in Latin America, Mexico, and the United States over a hundred-year period" (Heredia 36).
2. For maternal body and grotesque, see Covino 8-11.
3. For the image of ocean, the study references the image of "sea" in De Vries 405-6.
4. Cisneros feels that she has the responsibility to represent community: "I am living at the border. I was much more concerned with representing different types of Chicanos on paper. I really felt my responsibility was to represent the entire spectrum of our community" (Kevane and Heredia 51-52).

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