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**“Mexican Roots and Life Aspirations: Writing and Identity in Isabel
Quintero’s *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (2014)”**

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Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze Isabel Quintero's 2014 coming-of-age novel *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, written by and featuring a Mexican American woman. This work, intended for a young or adolescent audience, was awarded the *Tomás Rivera Book Award* in 2015, one of the most prestigious prizes in Mexican American children's literature. The reason for focusing on Mexican American literature lies in a demographic justification: if one looks at the most recent statistical data from the United States Census Bureau website, a total of 37,414,772 Mexican Americans were registered in 2022, accounting for 60% of the entire Hispanic American population (United States Census Bureau 2022). As the majority Hispanic group, it is worth asking about their representation in works written for young adults. The thesis written by Dallas Gomez on Latinx characters in Young Adult literature is of great interest as he explains that books can be sliding glass doors, windows, or mirrors. In this sense, the reader can enter different worlds, get alternative points of view, or see himself or herself reflected within a literary work, thereby understanding his or her own life and story as part of a larger human experience (2020, 8). This reinforces the importance of having chosen an award-winning work, since it is given fundamental recognition and projection, and thus reaches a wider audience.

The motivation to carry out this research arises from the need to verify whether, as Adrienne Rich (1972, 20) argues, writing can be a subversive tool, allowing women to take control of their own narratives, challenging the patriarchal structures that have silenced their voices for centuries. Thus, through this work, I will attempt to test the hypothesis as to whether the diary serves the novel's protagonist Gabi Hernandez, a Mexican American teenager, as a coping mechanism for dealing with the expectations of her Mexican heritage and life aspirations in the United States. To carry out this analysis and to find out how the protagonist constructs herself as a woman, I will combine close reading techniques with the theory of intersectionality, paying special attention to the use of the diary as a feminist practice. Thus, in the first chapter of my dissertation I begin by providing a theoretical framework that presents Young Adult literature as the genre to which the selected novel belongs, as well as the most relevant ideas to set the basis of my analysis: intersecting power relations and writing as a subversive, liberating tool. Once the theoretical foundations of my work have been established, in the second chapter, I analyze Gabi's fragmented identity. This chapter is divided into three sections. First, in 2.1., I highlight some of the most common ethnic images and stereotypes about Mexican Americans, mostly superficial and unrealistic, that the protagonist of the novel is confronted with. Then, in 2.2., I discuss the dichotomy between what is socially considered

to be a good or a bad Mexican daughter, according to adherence or rejection of patriarchal gender codes, and how this causes Gabi identity crises and a certain confusion with her cultural heritage. Subsequently, in 2.3., I explore the ravages of otherness and the embracing of a bicultural identity as the only way to fluctuate between the two worlds to which she belongs. After analyzing the different dimensions of the protagonist's identity, in the third chapter, also divided into three sections, I consider writing as a space of her own, free of expectations and pressures, and where the protagonist's personality further develops. Hence, in 3.1, I delve into the importance of certain Mexican American women writers as reference figures for the protagonist of the novel, following, in 3.2., with an exploration of literature as a tool for self-discovery, to find her true self in a world that constantly tries to silence her. After that, in 3.3., I present her diary as a hybrid, inclusive space, full of different themes and textual genres, reflecting the identity of the protagonist herself. Finally, having examined the protagonist's identity formation process, and the role that writing plays in it, I provide the conclusions I have reached: the diary of Gabi Hernandez, a Mexican American teenager in transition to adulthood, serves as a vital tool for dealing with the challenges of assimilation into a culture divergent from family expectations and understanding the need to embrace biculturalism to bridge the gap between Mexican heritage and life in the United States.

Considering all these points, through this research I will try to demonstrate that Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* is a powerful example of how literature can have a significant influence on the development of Mexican American teenage female identities. Quintero introduces readers to a protagonist who uses her diary to reflect on her family, love, and identity struggles. Thus, through writing, not only does she explore her own internal and external conflicts, but she also questions and actively challenges the gender roles and norms traditionally imposed by the patriarchy. It will be no easy task for this Mexican American girl, constantly surrounded by restrictive expectations and cultural norms that limit her autonomy and expression, to try to find a safe space where she can be herself, have a voice of her own and assert her own worth.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this first chapter is to lay the foundations of the theoretical framework on which this work will be based. Bearing in mind that the object of analysis corresponds to the so-called novels of formation, it will be necessary to introduce Young Adult literature and get to know those aspects that intervene in the construction of people's identity. More specifically, I intend to delve into the formation of the gender identity of the protagonist of the novel, paying attention to the different interrelated factors and the role of the diary as a feminist practice.

1.1. Young Adult Literature

Young Adult literature, also known as juvenile literature or YA (Young Adult), is a literary category that encompasses books intended for readers between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Most young adult stories focus, as is the case in Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, on teenagers who are beginning their transition to adulthood. They discover aspects of themselves, deal with personal and familial problems, and learn to take responsibility for their actions. As such, YA stories are also called coming-of-age stories. Although no precise origin can be traced, according to Michael Cart—author and former president of the Young Adult Library Services Association—the roots of YA literature can be traced back to WWII, when teenagers were granted their own distinction as a social demographic (Strickland 2013). Indeed, *Seventeenth Summer*, released by Maureen Daly in 1942, is the first book written and published explicitly for teenagers (Strickland 2013), albeit the term “young adult” was not coined until the 1960s by the Young Adult Library Services Association. Ellen Conford is considered one of the pioneering writers of what was then a nascent literary movement (Blakemore 2015). Although the genre began to take shape in the first half of the twentieth century, teachers and librarians were slow to consider teen books as a genre, often for fear of parental criticism or the possibility that teens might later want to challenge social boundaries, which, as I discuss later in this chapter, is precisely one of the goals of such stories. Contrary to what one might think, the themes dealt with in these stories are just as deep and relevant as those addressed in adult literature. Nevertheless, it was not until the 1970s that the legitimacy of YA literature as a genre and its popularity among its target audience began to be recognized.

At present, YA literature has been gaining more and more recognition and popularity. In fact, “today, young adult fiction is a force to be reckoned with—books for children and young adults gained 22.4% in sales in 2014, and a whopping 55 percent of YA novels are now purchased by adults. The genre's road toward legitimacy has been a rocky one, but we can thank pioneers like Ellen Conford for blazing a trail for YA” (Blakemore 2015). As for the

Mexican American literary tradition in particular, Francisco Lomelí argues that it has been undergoing a period of significant flourishing, based on the convergence of Mexican and North American traditions. It is precisely in this confluence that its originality lies, in the fact that it complements two literary traditions, thus achieving its own hybrid identity. From the 1980s to the present day, the emphasis has been more on the individual and inner experience, thus making the personal political. In other words, the individual experience becomes a collective reality. In Mexican American literature, moreover, not only are several conventional values, such as the traditional role of women, questioned, but women are also depicted as taking a more active, even conflictive role (1995, 11).

Authors writing from Mexico and the United States, as well as from Latin and Central American countries who reflect in their works the concerns and realities of young Latinx or Spanish-speaking people in different socio-cultural contexts have contributed to the growth of this genre. Some pioneering figures in YA Latinx literature are Nicholasa Mohr, of Puerto Rican descent, known for her works exploring the lives of young Latinxs in New York. Her novel *Nilda* (1973) is considered one of the first works in YA literature to present realistic characters and situations of the Latinx community in the United States. Mohr addresses issues of cultural identity, family, and the challenges of growing up in an urban environment. Sandra Cisneros, another author worth noting who is internationally known for her work *The House on Mango Street* (1984), a collection of vignettes that follow the life of a young Latina, Esperanza Cordero, in Chicago's Hispanic neighborhood. Through poetic and evocative prose, Cisneros portrays Esperanza's struggle to find her voice and her place in the world, as she navigates issues of identity, gender, class, and community. Nor should we forget Judith Ortiz Cofer, also of Puerto Rican descent, known for her poetic and prosaic narratives that explore the experience of being a young Latina in the United States. Her work *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* (1995) is a collection of short stories that capture the complexities of adolescent life in Latinx communities. Ortiz Cofer addresses issues of culture shock, discrimination, and the search for identity. On the other hand, some relevant more contemporary writers in the field of YA literature include, among others: Benjamin Alire Saénz, author of *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012). Set in 1980s El Paso, Texas, the work captures the nuances of the two protagonists' cultural heritage and the challenges they face in coming to terms with their identities. Isabel Quintero, author of *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (2014), which is precisely the object of analysis of my research. Written in the form of a diary, Quintero portrays Gabi's journey with authenticity and empowerment, shedding light on the intersections of race, gender, and class within the Latinx community,

which I will discuss in greater depth in the following chapters. Erika L. Sánchez, author of *I'm Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017). Set in Chicago, the novel addresses issues such as cultural expectations, mental health and the generation gap between immigrant parents and their US-born children. As for works that include Afro-Latinx characters, special mention can be made of Elisabeth Acevedo, a Dominican American author whose work *The Poet X* (2018) has received critical and popular acclaim. The novel follows Xiomara Batista, a young Dominican American girl who finds her voice through slam poetry as she struggles against her family's cultural and religious expectations. Acevedo's work offers an important representation of diversity within the Latinx community, highlighting the experiences of Afro-Latinxs and exploring the intersections of cultural and racial identity.

Nonetheless, it is a fact that representation is still lacking: according to an analysis conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center, despite the fact that Hispanic students currently account for nearly a quarter of students enrolled in the United States, non-white Latinx children rarely see themselves represented in books written for young readers (Rich 2012), which could be an obstacle for young individuals to connect with the story depicted and conversely, promote the development of a sense of alignment with the environment in which they find themselves. Quintero's work precisely exemplifies the importance of YA literature as a means of exploring and validating the experiences of adolescents, especially those belonging to ethnic or cultural minorities. Typically, through a first-person narrative that favors an intimate style and immediacy, she presents themes focused on the most common experiences and issues adolescents face, namely friendship, family problems, love relationships, sexuality, pregnancy, abortion, drugs, body image and identity, among others. These themes are especially relevant in Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, which tells the story of Gabi Hernandez, a Mexican American teenager struggling to find her place in the world while facing challenges such as discrimination, social pressure, and domestic constraints. Through Gabi's authentic and sincere voice, readers can identify with her experiences, and feel represented in a world that often ignores or stigmatizes Latinx people.

YA literature, therefore, plays a fundamental role in the development of adolescents' lives, providing them not only with entertainment, but also with a reflection of their own experiences. Michael Cart (2008) argues that "young adult literature is made valuable not only by its artistry but also by its relevance to the lives of its readers. And by addressing not only their needs but also their interests". Adolescents are constantly evolving, in quest of their own identity, and this type of literature offers them the opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages. Works such as Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* are noteworthy examples of

how literature can influence identity formation and empower young people to challenge the gender codes that limit or prevent them from achieving their aspirations.

1.2. Intersectional Theory

Intersectionality is defined by Greta Bauer et al. as “a theoretical framework rooted in the premise that human experience is jointly shaped by multiple social positions (e.g., race, gender), and cannot be adequately understood by considering social positions independently” (2021, 1). Kimberlé Crenshaw was the first to delve into this observation and the workings of intersectionality in “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” (1989). Taking *All the Women Are White; All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* (Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith 1982) as a point of departure, Crenshaw aimed at developing a Black feminist criticism that would not be set on the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis. She wanted to examine how this tendency is perpetuated by a single-axis framework that is dominant in antidiscrimination law and that is also reflected in feminist theory and antiracist politics (1989, 140). In general, efforts to combat racism had focused on black men and efforts to combat sexism had focused on white women. That is, these emphases had centered on the most privileged of the marginalized within these categories, often erasing black women from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse (Colfer et al. 2018, 4). Hence, Crenshaw focuses her analysis on black women in order to demonstrate the multidimensionality of Black women’s experiences, eventually concluding that:

If any real efforts are to be made to free Black people of the constraints and conditions that characterize racial subordination, then theories and strategies purporting to reflect the Black community’s needs must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy. Similarly, feminism must include an analysis of race if it hopes to express the aspirations of non-white women. The praxis of both should be centered on the life chances and life situations of people who should be cared about without regard to the source of their difficulties. (1989, 166)

Crenshaw focuses on the effects of a combination of marginalized identities in interaction with related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination, bearing in mind that the black women’s experiences cannot be derived from the sum of sexism towards white women and the racism experienced by black men. The intersectional experience, indeed, is greater than the sum of racism and sexism and then, any analysis that does not take

intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated (1989, 140). Systems of oppression overlap to create distinct experiences for people with multiple identity categories. Crenshaw, therefore, began to study the circumstances of Black women to show that oppression could not be encompassed exclusively with the terms “racism” or “sexism,” if they were framed as an either/or proposition, since the different oppressions do not operate independently but together or simultaneously (The Editors, 2020).

Additionally, Crenshaw’s ideas are intimately related to the question of power, where ‘power’ refers to the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others. It also refers to the ability to direct one’s own life (agency), a characteristic that Carol Colfer et al. consider intrinsically important in identity formation. Power, nevertheless, is not always exercised by physical authority. Following Michel Foucault’s understanding, power is also embodied in dominant structures and discourses (1991). Thus, power creates, classifies, and reinforces social categories through, for example, the process of racialization of groups and individuals (Colfer et al. 2018, 5). The focus, then, in an intersectional analysis is not only to identify dominant and marginalizing discourses and systems, but also to investigate the processes by which power and inequality are produced and reproduced. Indeed, it is within this intersectional and interlocking framework of systems of power that I situate the protagonist of my analysis, for whom the axes of gender and race will be the most important ones, as she is a Mexican American teenager.

Gender cannot be coherently dissociated from race and class, and therefore the intersectional elements that define identity should not be viewed in isolation. As Colfer et al. claim, “the intersection of race and gender means that women of color experience violence and policies aimed to remedy adverse conditions qualitatively differently from white women” (2018, 7). As a Latina woman in the process of formation, Gabi is not represented by the hegemonic feminist parameters either, since she cannot be defined only as a woman or as a Mexican. Gabi Hernandez is, necessarily, a combination of both categories. My aim here is to demonstrate that women are not only victims of patriarchal oppression as a matter of gender but are also subjected to a combination of other factors such as race or class. Therefore, we must pay attention to how the different categories interact and intersect with each other, thus creating unique identities that vary according to person, place, and time. Ultimately, identity is not something easy to define, as it is not something fixed, but rather fluid and multifaceted.

1.3. The Diary as Feminist Practice

Once I have detailed how the construction of gender identity is not something that resides in a single dimension but in a set of categories, I will focus on the diary as a feminist practice. The different forms of writing present in the work as a focus of analysis offer an ideal context in which to observe the evolution and growth of the protagonist. Besides, it will be precisely in this space where the protagonist's personality will have a greater development.

Throughout literary history, handwritten and published diaries by widely known authors such as Virginia Woolf, as well as by lesser-known authors such as Eliza Dickenson, Marianne Brougham, and Marianne Estcourt, have been excluded from traditional literary study, accused of lacking rigor, and considered the very antithesis of much of literature. Yet, it is indeed in this dissimilarity that the value of the diary lies. Like feminist criticism, the diary, by means of its diversity of approaches and points of view, as well as its fusion of various disciplines, makes it possible to weave together the inner and the outer (Huff 1989, 6). In her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision", Adrienne Rich explicitly addresses the importance of women taking control of their own narrative, challenging the patriarchal structures that have silenced their voices for centuries. Rich argues that writing can be a tool of liberation, allowing women to reinterpret their reality and reclaim their autonomy (1972, 20). This approach deeply resonates in the context of the diary, where women can find a safe space to explore their identity and express their experiences in an authentic and uncensored way. It is no mistake, therefore, when Adrienne Rich refers to the diary as a profoundly feminine and feminist genre, for like feminism as a literary and social practice, the diary interrogates virtually any subject, establishing connections and communications between previously separate parts of experience.

Nonetheless, perhaps the clearest expression of the diary as a feminist tool comes from Virginia Woolf. As Cynthia Huff maintains, for Woolf, the diary form is enigmatic because the connections it fosters are mysterious. That is, the diary can, by its very nature, encompass anything, and in its ability to bring together such diverse and seemingly disparate objects, it illuminates them and our view of them. The diary is, moreover, an emblem of feminist practice, presumably because it was the only form of writing that women were allowed to practice (1989, 7). It is precisely its (in principle) non-literary, non-public nature that has made the diary a form of writing socially considered appropriate for women.

In the context of feminist literature, works such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's critical work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) are significant in their exploration of the role of writing in the

struggle against patriarchal oppression. Specifically, in “*The Yellow Wallpaper*”, the protagonist is prescribed “rest, air, absence of stimuli and a ban on writing” (Horowitz 2010, 178), having been diagnosed with hysteria. However, her mental anguish is multiplied when she is forbidden to write. In effect, the treatment of rest and isolation that women were subjected to restricted their bodily and mental freedoms. In this context, though, the protagonist uses her diary as a means of resisting medical authority and reclaiming her own agency: “Here comes John, and I must put this away, he hates it when I write a word. We’ve been here two weeks, and I haven’t felt like writing since that first day. Now I am sitting by the window, in this atrocious nursery, and there is nothing to stop me from writing all I want, except lack of strength” (2008, 3-4). Thus, despite her lack of strength, she overcomes her alienation from the world through writing.

The epistolary, nonetheless, is not only relevant in the feminist literary tradition; the diary still inspires and resonates in YA literature. Precisely during the period of adolescence, it is common for young people of both sexes to find themselves immersed in worlds full of contradictory emotions. As they try to become adults, they often experience self-doubt and despair. Emily Wasserman (2003) maintains that at that particular moment in a person’s life, the personal thought and private worlds of letter writing are well suited to the reflection and identity construction that takes place in young people’s literature. In this sense, the diary becomes a vital tool that allows readers to enter the minds of a young adult to gain an intimate insight into their struggles for identity in a confusing and often frightening world. Literature written for young adults can be a useful coping mechanism for adolescents experiencing traumatic difficulties or for those dealing with everyday experiences associated with a changing mind and body. A notable example of this dynamic is found in Isabel Quintero’s *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (2014). The entire work is written in the epistolary format, and, in addition, the protagonist includes various letters, poems and zines, thus making writing a coping mechanism. The protagonist makes writing “a room of her own”, an intimate but creative space where she can express her deepest feelings and thus ultimately achieve a greater understanding of herself and those around her. It is particularly this use of writing as a form of self-care that I will discuss more in depth in the third chapter of my work.

Chapter 2. A Fragmented Identity: Contrasting Ethnic Stereotypes, Cultural Misconceptions, and Gender Codes

This second chapter is devoted to the analysis of the ethnic images and Mexican American stereotypes discussed in the novel. I take as my starting point the preconceived idea of the diary as a space that offers an intimate and authentic insight into the life of Gabi, a teenager of Mexican descent who struggles to find her identity in an environment that often imposes gender and racial codes with which she does not feel comfortable. Throughout this chapter, we will see how Gabi attempts to challenge these stereotypes that apparently determine what it is to be a good or bad Mexican daughter and find her identity between two worlds that often collide.

2.1. Ethnic Images and Stereotypes of Mexican Americans

Dallas Gomez (2020, 3) states that the Latinx community is rapidly growing in the United States, so it is important for young readers to find books with characters who are members of this community. However, there are many stereotypes about this group in society and, consequently, also in literature. When Latinx characters are presented in YA novels, the stereotypes that exist for this group of people precede them, thus imposing an identity on the characters before readers can even understand who they are reading about. The Merriam-Webster's dictionary indicates that the noun 'stereotype' refers to "something conforming to a fixed or general pattern" and, more specifically, to "a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment" (2019). These stereotypes, which often present an unrealistic image of an individual, can nevertheless be found in many media, including literature. Indeed, while numerous novels portray Mexican American characters as hard-working, family-oriented people, they sometimes also reproduce many stereotypes, such as, for example, that Mexican Americans are criminals, drug dealers or teenage mothers. Yet, as is the case with Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, it is important to acknowledge that literature, beyond reproducing ethnic images, also serves to challenge these stereotypes.

In the case of this novel, Gabi's voice resonates with authenticity as she reflects on her ethnic identity and the perceptions others have of her. One example is when she questions her own appearance and compares herself with other characters: "People look at Sandra's long brown hair, dark brown eyes and skin that doesn't need sun, how perfectly Mexican" (Quintero 2014, 35). Gabi is aware that Sandra represents the perfect canon of a Mexican woman or 'beauty queen': "Morena. Bonita. Preciosa. Flaca. Flaquita" (2014, 35), in comparison with her, who is "short, plump, long straight hair, and super light-skinned" (14), clearly deviating

from conventional beauty standards, and influencing her self-perception and how she is perceived by others. In fact, Gabi's skin color is another issue that makes her struggle with her identity: "The other problem with being me –and my Mexican ancestry– is that people don't believe that I am any kind of Mexican. They always think I'm White, and it bugs the shit out of me. Not because I hate White people, but because I have to go into a history lesson every time someone questions my Mexicanness" (35). Contrary to what one might assume, for Gabi, passing as a white person is not a blessing; rather, it entails people questioning her racial identity and making racist remarks about her. Luis Noe-Bustamante et al. (2021, 6) assert that the perceived impact of skin color on the lives of U.S. Latinxs is significantly broad. Indeed, in a National Survey of Latinxs conducted on March 15-28, 2021, by the Pew Research Center, 59% say that having a lighter skin color, and therefore passing as white, helps Hispanics get ahead. In this excerpt, colorism is presented as a form of discrimination, a phenomenon that often favors lighter skin color over darker skin color. For Gabi, her skin color is actually a bone of contention, something she herself explicitly comments on repeatedly throughout the novel: "My skin is there for all the world to see and point at and judge. Guerra. Casper. Freckle Face. Ugly. Whitney. White girl. Gringa. I've been called all of those names. Skin that doesn't make me Mexican enough" (35). Her appearance is a source of discrimination, since she is not what a Mexican woman is supposed to look like: olive skin, curly hair, brown eyes. However, a darker skin color is not the only racial stereotype that Gabi defies in the novel as a condition for being fully Mexican. As embodied by the protagonist, besides being brown-skinned, Mexicans are all supposed to wear sombreros and, in the case of men, to have a mustache. For example, when Gabi writes: "Cinco de Mayo! Woo! Another holiday where people get to wear sombreros and fake mustaches as proof of their understanding and commitment to learning about my heritage. I mean, I love fake mustaches as much as anyone –they're pretty hilarious– but I don't think I've seen a Mexican in a handlebar mustache since Emiliano Zapata" (231). Through Gabi's reflection, Quintero wants the readership to understand that, instead of recognizing the diversity and complexity of Mexican cultural heritage, this day is limited to reproducing simplistic and caricatured representations. Again, as with skin color, we find an image that perpetuates superficial and generally unrealistic racial stereotypes.

Some other stereotypes, such as teen pregnancy in Latinx communities, are more complex in how they are perpetuated and publicly perceived. Health expert Jane Delgado and former teen mother Christina Martinez say that there has been a lot of progress in reducing the number of teen pregnancies in recent decades, but the teen birth rate continues to be a reality (2014). We often think that, among the Latinx community, the culture is marked by a strong

religious background and that often influences whether they want to start a family early. Yet, when Gabi discovers that her best friend Cindy might be pregnant, her first reaction is quite averse: “I was so pissed at the situation. Pissed and disappointed. Not at the fact that she had sex, but that she hadn’t been careful. That she had just become another statistic: Hispanic Teen Mom #3,789,258. Or some ridiculous actual number that we had been lectured about last year and had sworn we would never become” (Quintero 2014, 11). This shows that Latina adolescents do not receive messages encouraging them to start a family early. The typically more conservative values of Catholicism, imbued in Mexican American culture, however, may play a role in the decision to continue with the pregnancy or have an abortion. This is the case of Cindy, who despite having been raped, decides to have the baby, just before going to college and without having made any decisions about her future. Pregnancy or its termination is not an isolated incident, but a recurring theme in the novel. Georgina, one of Gabi’s high school classmates, also becomes pregnant. She clearly states that “I can’t have this thing” (176), but she is not supported by her parents, a strongly religious family. Filled with fears, Georgina reflects on abortion, considering that “that’s like murder” (177). The conservative values of their communities influence the thoughts, and sometimes also the futures, of these teenage girls.

Often in young adult novels, women are shown either as self-sacrificing and innocent or directly the opposite, as promiscuous, as in the case of teenage mothers. Nevertheless, these characteristics do not seem to depend solely on age (Dallas 2020, 23). Gabi’s own mother also becomes pregnant and, albeit not a teenager or a single mother, she is once again proof of how the Mexican American community favors childbearing over abortion. As in the case of Cindy and Georgina, pregnancy is not received with joy here either: “My mom is pregnant. Can my life get any more complicated? I can tell she’s not happy about it because she was really sad when she told us” (2014, 81). Gabi’s parents have a dysfunctional relationship, as her father is always on drugs, and her mother is desperate with him because of the suffering he inflicts on her and her children. Consequently, the pregnancies of these three “fallen women”, as Gabi’s grandmother tends to call unmarried mothers, seem to be a source of shame and almost repudiation to their family and friends. But abortion would lead them to be considered almost murderers, which is rather contradictory. Through Gabi’s diary, Quintero invites readers to challenge these social codes that often mark a meaningless patriarchal distinction between what is considered a good woman-daughter and a bad woman-daughter in Mexican American communities, as I will discuss in more depth in the next section.

2.2. The Good/Bad Mexican Daughter Dichotomy

This section is devoted to the analysis of the good/bad Mexican daughter dichotomy. The theory of intersectionality provides a lens to examine how factors such as gender, race, class, and culture act as an interlocking system of oppressions towards women, and in particular, Mexican American women, influencing the expectations and stereotypes that are imposed on them within their families and society at large. Therefore, prior to the analysis itself, it is necessary to take a closer look at what happens inside their homes. Lam et al., (2012, 3-4) explain that, in U.S. Mexican American families, girls, more than boys, are expected to preserve ethnic culture and help maintain extended family networks. Mexican American mothers in the U.S. conform to the humble and selfless ideal and teach their daughters to cook and clean, making everyday experiences important in shaping girls' development within these families. Indeed, the exploration of mother-daughter relationships has been a constant theme throughout Mexican American literature, especially in relation to Mexican American identity, often dominating the works of writers such as Sandra Cisneros in *The House of Mango Street* (1984), Ana Castillo in *So Far from God* (1993) and, more recently, Isabel Quintero in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (2014) and Erika Sanchez in *I'm Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017). In this type of literature, readers often encounter contentious and strenuous relationships between Mexican American mothers who refuse to give up traditional cultural norms versus their strong-willed and stubborn daughters who seek to establish their own identities beyond the constraints set forth by their families (Cantú-Sánchez 2018, 1).

In this sense, the first aspect to be analyzed in this section is the relationship established between Gabi and her mother. Ross D. Station maintains that in both Mexican and Mexican American families, the mother-daughter relationship is the closest, as they tend to bond because of the male-dominated world in which they live (1972, 328). However, the protagonist of Quintero's novel does not show a particularly satisfactory relationship with her mother. Their bond is marked by the sinful way in which this girl was conceived: "My mother named me Gabriela after my grandmother who –coincidentally– didn't want to meet me when I was born because my mother was not married and was therefore living in sin" (Quintero 2014, 7). Gabi is thus associated with sin from the beginning of the novel. Occasionally, the protagonist is also disappointed with her mother: "But my mom doesn't understand this. She never does. I don't get it. I guess it's because we have a lightswitch relationship. Sometimes she's wonderful. Sometimes not so much [...] On and off. Like light itself –bright and dark. Mother and daughter. That's us. I wish it were different. I wish she would be more understanding, but that's not who

she is, I guess” (25-26). While it is not as close a relationship as Ross D. Station holds, Gabi does not completely reject her mother, she is somewhat resilient and loyal as we will see below.

The controversial perception of sexuality also makes Gabi be regarded sometimes as a bad daughter. Margaret Cantú-Sánchez explains that conflicts arise especially when a mother identifies herself as more traditional and adheres to the ideology of the virgin/whore dichotomy, versus a daughter who chooses to fight against these expectations (2018). Historically speaking, this dichotomy has its origins in the colonization of Mexico by the Spanish conquistadors, specifically in the forced “relationship” between Hernán Cortés and Malintzin Tenepal, or La Malinche, the archetype of the ‘bad’ woman. The patriarchal Mexican ideology insists that women must remain pure and virginal, and deviation from such characteristic points to a bad woman like La Malinche (2018, 3). Gabi’s mother continuously gives her moralizing lessons throughout the novel: “[Mom] always says that we don’t want to be faciles [sic]—easy, sluts, hoes or ofrecidas [...] that I can’t go from one boy to another. ‘Oh, que te crees? Americana? We don’t do things like that’ [...] She said that girls are never free. They always have to comportarse bien” (Quintero 2014, 107). Gabi’s mother tries to impose a patriarchal ideology on her. Thus, when Cindy is raped and becomes pregnant, Gabi’s mother sees her as the spitting image of a bad daughter and lets out a wave of criticism:

Earlier today she had gone on this whole spiel about Cindy’s pobrecita madre and the pain that she was going through because of her *bad, bad* daughter. It was really long. It was something like— “You can’t hang out with her anymore. She is a *bad* influence. She’s a *bad, bad* girl [...]. Always so desperate and siempre de ofrecida, no se daba a respetar. No respect for herself at all. (20; emphasis added)

Gabi’s mother does not approve of her friendship with Cindy since she thinks that she offers her a very different and distant example of Mexican correctness. It is precisely the female figures in her family who try to show Gabi the way to become a respectable Mexican American girl, always under the idea that any sexual transgression or deviation from “virginal” behavior can be a reason to consider them ‘bad’ daughters, resulting in humiliation and rejection by their families. All the values that these mothers transmit to their daughters are backed up by a certain fear of the subversive power that the younger ones have within them. As the protagonist of the novel holds, “every time I go out with a guy, my mom says, ‘Ojos abiertos, piernas cerradas.’ Eyes open, legs closed [...]. I don’t necessarily agree with that whole wait-until-you’re-married crap though. I mean, this is America and the twenty-first century, not Mexico one hundred years ago. But, of course, I can’t tell my mom that because she’ll think I’m bad. Or worse:

trying to be White” (7). Once again, we see how for these conventional women the value of a woman lies in chastity, and the American girls are the antithesis of a good daughter. Aunts represent another group of women in the family who influence the identity development of adolescent Mexican American girls. Specifically, tía Bertha tries to impose virginal behaviors on Gabi: “I want you to remember that God will know. He will know what you did... or what you do. He knows every sin you commit, and he will be watching you. I want you to be thinking about that tonight before you do any cochinadas that might condemn you to Hell. Because you don’t want to go to Hell, mi’ja. Do you?” (245). For tía Bertha, sex not only determines one’s worth as a woman-daughter-niece, but she goes beyond that and considers it a sin.

Nevertheless, the demands of these Mexican female figures change markedly towards men. In this case, I will focus on the protagonist’s brother, as the father will be of greater relevance in the following chapter. Both fathers and brothers reside in the households, but the gender role dynamics are abysmally different. Ross D. Station explains that relationships between men and women are based on the cultural belief of male superiority and female inferiority. The result of the long process of socialization of men and women is that men are considered to be biologically, intellectually, and socially superior (1972, 325). This idea is particularly reflected in the novel: “Beto gets arrested, and my mom blames me [...]. ‘Is this what you teach him? ¿Ese es el ejemplo que le das?’ I want to scream, *I am not his mother! You are!* But I cannot remind her of this, or it is to the chancla I go, no matter how old I am” (79-80; emphasis in the original). Simply because he is a male, Gabi is expected to adopt a helpful attitude towards her brother and, if she does not, she will be judged as a ‘bad’ daughter. Gabi openly questions her mother’s sexist attitude: “This is part of the ‘boys will be boys’ mantra that we live by. Like my brother doesn’t have the same rules I do [...]. But my brother is going out with some girl [...] and all she says is, ‘Make sure you take a condom with you?’ Really, Mom, what the hell is all about? [...] She was only going to say, ‘It’s different. Beto is a boy, and they can’t help it. Besides, you have more to lose than him’” (235-36). These differences in gender codes are a source of conflict in numerous arguments between mother and daughter and lead the protagonist to adopt a feminist and vindictive attitude. Another point of conflict is when Gabi shares her desire to go to university and write poetry, something that is intolerable for tía Bertha: “She says that a nice woman does not expose her thoughts like that to the public. That writing is something that only men should do, like going to college” (131). This proves how Mexican American boys and girls even today are raised very differently and opposite expectations are created for their lives.

Overall, each of the fragments cited above provides examples of the expectations that are created around the protagonist, setting the context in which Gabi must acquire the foundations of her gender identity and internalize each one of the features that define a good Mexican daughter: chastity, submission to the male figure, and staying at home. The good/bad Mexican daughter dichotomy is a burden that follows Gabi throughout the novel (Rodriguez 2014). The reality is that this patriarchal discourse, based on the good/bad and virgin/whore binaries ends up depriving Mexican and Mexican American girls of freedom. Precisely because of this, the protagonist will need writing as her own creative place, where she can challenge the imposed gender roles and express her interests and concerns, which I will analyze in more depth in the third chapter.

2.3. Otherness and Bicultural Identity

Once the complex web of gender and racial stereotypes that Gabi Hernandez has to deal with, as well as the patriarchal expectations she is expected to fulfill to be a ‘good’ Mexican daughter have been addressed, I will analyze how all these aspects come into conflict with her life aspirations in the United States. Gabi’s bicultural identity is developed through her experience as a young second-generation Latina in the United States. Individuals are considered bicultural if they speak both the language of their cultural context of origin and the language of their host cultural context, if they have friends from both cultural contexts, and if they watch television programs and read magazines from both cultural contexts. This means that biculturalism implies maintaining values from one’s heritage and host cultural streams, as well as identifying with both cultures (Schwartz and Unger 2010, 27). From the beginning of the novel, Gabi reflects on her bicultural identity and the difficulty of combining two cultures: “Being Mexican American is tough sometimes. Your allegiance is always questioned. My mom constantly worries that I will become too Americana” (Quintero 2014, 34). She may not feel Mexican enough for Mexicans or American enough for Americans. In striving to find a sense of belonging in-between two different cultures, her experience somewhat reflects the notion of “double consciousness” proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois, forced to see the world through two different cultural lenses and negotiate her identity between two cultural worlds that often clash with each other. Perhaps one of the aspects that most explicitly reflect Gabi’s bicultural identity is her language and her way of interacting with her family and friends. She alternately uses English and Spanish in her speech, reflecting her ability to navigate fluently between both cultures. This aspect is related to the notion of “code-switching”, a term coined by sociolinguists to describe the phenomenon of changing between different dialects or languages

according to the social context (Rampton 1995). For Gabi, code-switching is a vital tool to adapt to different environments and communicate effectively within her bicultural identity and she uses it on numerous occasions: “Hola Muchacha! What is so urgent I had to leave [...]?” (Quintero 2014, 11); “Oh well. Así es la vida. That’s my life at least” (26); “Actually, I think Little Payasa wouldn’t do that. She’s a chismosa and a bitch most of the time, but [...]” (102).

But beyond language, Gabi’s bicultural identity develops in her struggle to reconcile the cultural expectations of her Mexican family with the American cultural influences she encounters in her environment. In Mexican communities, familism is especially relevant. The *familia* is more important than the individual. The nuclear family serves as a focal point for social identification and as a protector of the individual. Each individual is considered a symbol of the family and must therefore maintain the honor and integrity of the family through his or her behavior (Station 1972, 326-27). It is in this context then that we must understand “Gabi’s dilemmas to become her own person despite a scripted, pre-arranged narrative for her life” (Rodriguez 2016, 93). However, “Good Mexican daughters stay at home” is one of the paradigms that Gabi most rejects. When the protagonist learns that she will have a little brother she reflects on her own future in these terms: “Does that mean I’ll have to get a job? Will I still be able to go away to college? My mom is always going on about how good Mexican girls stay home and help their families when they are in need and how that differentiates us from other people. Kind of wishing I was other people right now if that is what is going to determine my Mexicanness at the moment” (Quintero 2014, 83). Similarly, for her tía Bertha going to college is not an option, since what good Mexican daughters should do is lose weight and learn how to cook and clean to get a husband (132). Her desire to go to college is therefore considered something that only *gabachas* (Americans) do. Gabi does not agree with all those patriarchal rules that try to impose on her the good/bad and Mexican/American dichotomy. However, going against what the family expects of young ones is especially difficult and painful, because they can be considered disloyal or bad daughters. Another source of conflict involving a cultural shock is the duty to preserve virginity until marriage: “Being a virgin can’t be the only thing that makes you a ‘nice young lady’ because I know plenty of girls who are virgins but could never be called nice-young-anythings because they are straight-out spawn of Satan. But the *untouched* hymen is one of the requirements, my mother has insisted, that is inherently present in the anatomy of a young lady (275; emphasis added). For Gabi, her mother is a walking contradiction: she wants her to be a strong woman, but also to be obedient and behave like a ‘respectable’ girl. To the protagonist, housework and an intact hymen are totally overrated.

Furthermore, as a senior student, Gabi mentions at different times the importance of the Prom party as a ritual passage in her life in the United States. However, she is penalized without being able to participate in the graduation after having slapped the boy who had raped her best friend, which causes her great distress: “The very very very bad news: I won’t be able to walk during graduation. I felt a huge pain in my chest and even got a little dizzy [...]. That last rite of passage. That last step of being an American teenager –knocked out from under me [...]. This was going to be awful –one more reason my mom would have for calling me a bad girl” (268). What these words demonstrate is that Mexican American teenagers associate their transition to adulthood not so much with Mexican *quinceañeras*, but rather with the celebrations of the United States. Her role as a bad daughter is reiterated and a certain disappointment towards her is revealed as she approaches American culture and the values that this entails. Nevertheless, despite developing a certain sense of rejection of her ethnicity on certain occasions, Gabi does not seem to get rid of the Mexican tradition: “Good Mexican girls never turn away their parents, no matter how awful they’ve been. My mother taught me that” (88). Once again, we witness the importance of familism, described above by Station (1972), and of remaining loyal to their family nucleus: “they need each other –they’re blood. Family. Familia. And while familia is the glue that keeps us crazy, it is also the glue that makes us who we are” (Quintero 2014, 65).

The protagonist constantly navigates the dichotomy between good and bad daughters, between her Mexican heritage and her life in the United States. She feels disconnected from her Mexican roots while sometimes simultaneously feeling like an outsider in American society due to her ethnicity and cultural background, which leads her to develop a sense of otherness and problems of identity. Nonetheless, Gabi is aware of her bicultural identity and does not seem to feel too far from where she lives: “I mean Santa Maria is known for smog and overcrowded highways, not for its love and acceptance of gay folk. But still... I love my city with the same force that I love my dad. There’s no escaping my roots, and I guess it’s better to embrace them than to cut them” (85). All this leads readers to understand that, as Rodrigo Joseph Rodriguez explains in an interview with Isabel Quintero, there is no single way to be a family, as there is no single way to be Mexican, Mexican American, or woman (2016, 95). Gabi often must fight against restriction, since restriction is one of the things that would make her a good girl, and this causes her conflicts with her family and her identity. In general, the protagonist opts for the guidelines of her friendships and the aspirations of life in the United States, although not without feeling confused with her cultural legacy. The next chapter will address this girl’s true desires and concerns and how she uses writing as a coping mechanism.

Chapter 3. Weaving Identity: Writing as a Path to Authenticity and Self-Care

Considering the pressures that the protagonist of the novel receives both from her family –that withdraws her by imposing traditional gender codes on her– and from American society –which forces her to assimilate–, she will have to find a space where she can feel recognized and in harmony with herself. Until now, Gabi Hernandez has always been defined by figures in a position superior to her own, which offer only two opposing alternatives: the good and the bad daughter. The aim of this section, therefore, is to analyze the use of writing as a potentially subversive strategy: a space where she can transgress everything that relegates her to the domestic sphere and where she can freely define herself both physically and mentally.

3.1. Mexican American Women Writers as Reference Figures

Melissa S. Kearney and Phillip B. Levine explain that children and young people spend a great deal of time away from their parents and family members. During that time, they interact with others, including potential role models and mentors, who may ultimately shape their attitudes and behaviors in profound and lasting ways (2020, 84). This is precisely the case of the protagonist of the novel who, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, does not have a particularly good relationship with her mother, but shows great appreciation for her teacher Ms Abernard. Prior to the analysis itself then, it is necessary to introduce the term ‘mentor’. Broadly speaking, a mentor is defined as a person who acts as an advisor, trusted counselor, or guide of some kind. A role model, on the other hand, is a person who serves as an example for another individual to imitate. Role models can be important people in someone’s life or peripheral and may include parents and peers or someone whom the individual does not know personally but has encountered through the media or in some other way (2020, 85). Ms Abernard stands out as a crucial mentor figure for Gabi. This is largely due to Gabi’s dysfunctional relationships with her family, including her father, mother, and tía Bertha. In the absence of strong family support, Gabi finds refuge and guidance in her teacher, whom she describes as “the coolest teacher” (Quintero 2014, 97). Besides, Ms Abernard acts not only as a mentor, but also as an emotional supporter: “You were great up there, Gabi. Never stop writing. You have a gift that many would like to have. Don’t ever give up on your writing, it would be a waste” (137). Aware of the young girl’s talent, she encourages her unconditionally to do what she likes the most and she is best at, which makes this young girl sometimes idealize her teacher in some way: “She almost seemed like a regular person. *Almost*” (137; emphasis added). The special connection between Gabi and Ms Abernard deepens in creative writing classes when the teacher introduces Gabi to Mexican American women writers who serve not

only as examples of purely literary references, but also as role models. Coinciding with a poetry workshop, Ms Abernard asks her students to compose their own poems to read in class. It is on this occasion that Gabi, together with her boyfriend Martin, refers to a great discovery regarding the use of two languages for writing:

Martin did great. His poem had some words in Spanish and so does mine. We have been practicing using two languages in writing since after we read some poems by two superpoets: Michele Serros (who is still alive AND from California!) and Sandra Cisneros (she's still alive too, but nor from California). Before we read their poetry, I didn't even know you could use two languages in a poem. I thought they either had to be in English or Spanish. Turns out I was wrong. (2014, 67)

This discovery is linked to Michele Serros and Sandra Cisneros, two great Mexican American writers and role models for Gabi Hernandez. Moreover, the inclusion of these two women writers in the novel is no coincidence. In an interview for *School Library Journal*, Isabel Quintero said that *Chicana Falsa* by Michelle Serros is her favorite book written by a person of color: "I bring that book up all the time [...]. So that book was the first book that I ever read that I saw myself in [...] and the first time I realized that Mexican is right" (Diaz 2017, 4' 36"). Indeed, role models can significantly influence how people view themselves and the world around them and, ultimately, influence their decisions about how to conduct their lives (Kearney and Levine 2020, 85). Michelle Serros serves Gabi (and Quintero), as a role model for exploring and embracing her hybrid language, her biculturality, and eventually her own identity. In an interview with Kelly Duarte (2017), Quintero states her desire to highlight Mexican and Chicana women. In particular, she places special emphasis on Michele Serros, since she is one of the reasons why she writes. She confesses that she used to write, but she only wrote in English. Serros made her understand that she could be as Chicana and Mexican as she wanted to be. Quintero, like Gabi, thanks to a literary role model, realized that hybridity is not wrong, but natural (Quintero 2014, 67).

Sandra Cisneros also emerges as another crucial literary role model in Gabi's life. Like Serros, Cisneros is a Mexican American writer who has deeply influenced the identity and personality development of many young Latinas. For Gabi, in fact, Cisneros is her favorite author, as she demonstrates when she comes of age: "Then I opened Martin's gift. It was an autographed book by Sandra Cisneros. SandraFREAKINGCisneros. It was signed to me! It was her collection, *Loose Woman*, and it said, 'To La Gabi, on the loose!' I just about wet myself" (144; emphasis in the original). In the absence of referents in her own home with her

nearest women, Gabi takes this author as a true role model. Cisneros, moreover, is a relevant example, given that she openly addresses the tension between maintaining the connection with Mexican culture and challenging the patriarchal norms that often limit Mexican American women like herself and Gabi:

I think that growing up Mexican and feminist is almost a contradiction in terms. For a long time –and it’s true for many writers and women like myself who have grown up in a patriarchal culture, like the Mexican culture– I felt great guilt betraying that culture. Your culture tells you that if you step out of line, if you break these norms, you are becoming anglicized, you’re becoming the *malinche* –influenced and contaminated by these foreign influences and ideas. But I’m very pleased to be alive among the current generation of women. Many writers are redefining our Mexicanness and it’s important if we’re going to come to terms with our Mexican culture and our American one as well. (Satz and Cisneros 1997, 170; emphasis in the original)

Sandra Cisneros, through her writing, tries to offer a window to her personal experience as a Mexican woman and feminist. She addresses the need to deal with two cultures and the social and gender expectations that many Latina women, including Gabi, often face in their quest for identity and autonomy. It is in this sense that Gabi takes these Mexican American writers as role models. But beyond helping her cope with two cultures, they also serve as vital role models: “I think my mom needs to read Sandra Cisneros’s poetry. Especially her poem ‘Loose Woman’. That’s the kind of woman I want to be when I grow up. That’s the kind of woman I wish my mom saw herself as” (Quintero 2014, 149). Gabi admires the strength and independence conveyed through Sandra Cisneros’ poem and wishes her mother to find that same strength. She craves autonomy and highlights the importance of female empowerment and self-acceptance. In fact, “Loose Woman” is a bold poem that challenges social expectations and celebrates women’s autonomy. Through vivid and challenging language, Cisneros encourages readers to break free from oppressive norms, embrace their own agency and celebrate their unique identities (Benard 2024).

Nevertheless, Michelle Serros and Sandra Cisneros are not the only literary role models for Gabi Hernandez: the protagonist also mentions another poet of the Spanish American tradition like Pablo Neruda and his “Tonight I Can Write” (Quintero 2014, 237). Additionally, she refers to other writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sylvia Plath, Maya Angelou and Robert Burns, among others. Gabi is willing to explore different sources and literary traditions without adopting a reductionist position. Thanks to Ms Abernard all these

writers emerge, to a greater or lesser extent, not only as figures of academic inspiration, but also as a beacon of self-acceptance and empowerment. Ultimately, Ms Abernard becomes an indispensable person for Gabi, whom the protagonist even describes as “[her] new hero” (252), and who is her biggest support to pursue her dream: go to university and become a writer, which is precisely the object of analysis of the next section.

3.2. Literature as a Tool for Self-Discovery

Despite all the efforts of her family to keep her at home and be a ‘good’ Mexican daughter, Gabi Hernandez refuses this approach. The protagonist of the novel chooses the university path to continue her education. Thus, the next step after finishing high school is to devote herself to her studies and not to her potential maternal role. Gabi is convinced that she does not want to follow the example of her friend Cindy: “And that is not anywhere near where I want to be at this moment in my life. I want to go to college. I want to be free. I want to move out of this one-horse town. *Gabi*, I said to myself, *you do not need a baby in your life*” (Quintero 2014, 243; emphasis in the original). There is an evident desire to leave the family home to go to college, thus disassociating herself from the patriarchal codes that her family tries to impose on her. Gabi wants to major in poetry, and her dream is to be admitted to Berkeley:

Berkeley is my number one choice. Berkeley has an awesome English program which is what I want to study. Ms Abernard suggested I study English and take creative writing classes but then get a Masters in Fine Arts –an MFA– in poetry. I don’t know what I would do without her. [...]. Ms Abernard said a lot of famous poets have made their home there, and that it has a poet-friendly community. I pray every night for the college gods to admit me into Berkeley. (84)

Once again, the protagonist of the novel leans on her teacher, who somehow influences the future destiny of the girl. Her mother, however, does not approve of her decision for a very specific reason: “One of her biggest fears is that I will become less Mexican, she has said that the only way I am leaving this house will be if I get married” (185). She fears that Gabi will adopt inappropriate customs of American girls or what *tía Bertha* calls *libertinaje* (187). Estrada explains that it remains a stereotype that Hispanic women feel pressured to fulfill the roles of mother and wife. In fact, this pressure is amplified in the case of Hispanic women due to the importance given to the family in Hispanic culture (2015, 2-3). It is relevant, then, to highlight how such expectations can be an obstacle for a Hispanic woman seeking higher education. Luckily for Gabi, after a constant struggle against her family’s expectations and cultural pressures, she will finally achieve her dream of attending college with the help of state

support. This step towards higher education, considered a ritual transition to adulthood in American culture, will give her the opportunity to discover her true desires and concerns, challenging the traditional norms imposed on Mexican women.

The protagonist of this coming-of-age novel is trying to define her identity, a maxim that is repeated even before the beginning of the work. The title of the novel is already revealing: *Gabi, A-Gordita, A-Fatgirl, A Girl in Pieces*. Quintero herself explains that this character [Gabi] is trying to find out who she is, and they have put these labels on her, when in reality she is like a mix of all of them. So, she is not just fat, she is not just a *gordita*, she is not just this, she is who she is (Isabel Quintero in Teen 365 2018, 21' 12'). Her identity is multifaceted and intersectional, and it cannot be limited to a single label or dimension. Gabi thus finds in his diary a safe and private space: "But alas, Journal, I cannot lie to you. This is the only place I can be the most myself and I have to be honest" (Quintero 2014, 261). In it, she can explore her deepest concerns and release her thoughts without fear of external judgment. Within these pages, for example, Gabi questions the social conventions that dictate that girls must wait for boys to take the first step in a relationship. After kissing her first boyfriend Eric, the protagonist tells her friends that it was she who took the initiative: "'Wait. You kissed him' asked Cindy. 'Yes!' I said, super excited. But then she went on and on about how that made me seem desperate and easy and blah blah blah" (56). There is a clear difference in attitude between these two girls in the experience discussed. Cindy reflects a mindset more rooted in restrictive and patriarchal gender norms, while Gabi appears to have a more liberated and non-judgmental attitude towards the expression of female sexuality. This conversation leads the protagonist of the novel to write the following reflection: "And where is it written that girls have to wait for boys to kiss them?" (57). Gabi tries to reveal the absurdity of gender stereotypes and the so-called tacit set of rules between girls and boys. It should be remembered that, as explained in the first chapter, writing is a tool of liberation that allows women to claim their autonomy and challenge patriarchal codes (Rich 1972, 20). Gabi, indeed, uses literature as a subversive tool to challenge patriarchal codes, although she sometimes encounters difficulties when it comes to taking action: "I have written Eric a few more letters (that I obviously won't send because as a girl I cannot be too forward, at least that is what my mom says- 'No seas ofrecida. You seem desperate'" (Quintero 2014, 76). This restriction is partly due to the influence of her environment, especially the conservative mentality of her mother. As Cantú-Sánchez (2018, 3) explains, conflicts can arise within the family nucleus especially when the mother adheres to the Mexican patriarchal ideology, and the daughter tries to fight

against sexist codes. Gabi's ambivalent attitude then reflects the internal conflict that many women may face in trying to reconcile their own values and desires with social and family expectations. Once again, we understand the importance of familism (Station 1972, 326-27): although the protagonist actively questions restrictive gender norms, she sometimes hesitates to challenge them for fear of social repercussions or rejection on the part of her environment.

Furthermore, the diary also helps Gabi deal with self-image issues, exacerbated by her mother's negative comments and cultural expectations of what her body should look like: "My own mother is constantly pointing out that I need to lose weight" (Quintero 2014, 47). Throughout the novel, the protagonist shares numerous instances in which she suffers fat shaming, which is the act of making people feel ashamed, inferior, anxious, or guilty because of their body shape. In fact, it is a form of bullying and discrimination, and there is no evidence that shaming people for their weight has any positive effects (Biggers 2023). Yet, her mother systematically scolds her when she finds her eating junk food: "My mom found the Cheez-its. I don't get it. It's not like she's a supermodel. Why does she always have to be telling me to lose weight? (Quintero 2014, 78). The body is undoubtedly a delicate and complex terrain, especially during adolescence, where self-image is shaped and molded under the influence of multiple factors. In Gabi's case, her mother emerges as a critical and demanding figure when it comes to her daughter's physical appearance. Her negative comments, including constant reminders that Gabi needs to lose weight, are not only discouraging, but they can also be profoundly detrimental to Gabi's self-esteem: "I don't want to get too excited because I am always afraid that boys will only pretend to like me as a joke. Because, really, who would like the fat girl?" (2014, 46). The fact that her own mother, who should be her greatest support and source of unconditional acceptance, perpetuates this kind of criticism seriously undermines Gabi's sense of worth. It should not be overlooked, moreover, that Gabi could suffer some kind of eating disorder triggered by these criticisms, a common phenomenon in adolescents and closely related to the stigma of weight (Biggers 2023). The inclusion of physical appearance, therefore, is not arbitrary but justified. Quintero believes that body image for young people, and for people in general, is very important, especially in the United States: "It makes you question how you are, how you are not, how you should be [...]. I confess that as a teenager I felt fractured, that there were times when I was fine with some weight [...], and then other days when I felt like wanting to be thin" (Quintero in Teen 365 2018, 19' 15"). Body image sadly dictates a lot of how we see ourselves and our value, and it really is a relevant issue in forming a person's identity.

Nonetheless, Gabi is not alone in her quest for self-discovery. She finds support in her best friends, Cindy and Sebastian, whom she affectionately calls “tackys” (Quintero 2014, 33). In particular, the protagonist of the novel finds deep understanding in her best friend Cindy: “[She] is my kindred spirit. She laughs when I say that. How I love that girl. She never judges me. Or tries to change me. Nope. She loves me just the way I am. Peas in a pod (uña y mugre my mom says)” (49). Although Gabi openly acknowledges that these two people are the best friends she would never have asked for, she also knows that sometimes they cannot understand how she feels completely, notably when she lives the death of her drug-addicted father (161). As such, beyond personal relationships, where Gabi finds true comfort and clarity is in literature. Whether through her diary, or poetry, this young girl finds in literature a way to express herself completely and find solace in difficult times. Thus, the reading of inspiring works such as “Project Princess” by Tracie Morris (273) or “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou (280) are two good examples of how by identifying with the experiences of other writers and poets, Gabi finds the strength to move forward on her journey of self-discovery and acceptance.

Through college education and her intimate relationship with literature, Gabi Hernandez finds the space to explore and accept her true self, finding her voice in a world that constantly tries to silence her. The novel is fantasy, but there is a quest in it. Indeed, Isabel Quintero states that “My writing is my activism. I had always talked about the power of writing and how it could change things, because it had changed my life. Other writers’ work changed how I saw the world and how I thought about things like patriarchy and white supremacy. It taught me to call those things by their name. Most importantly, their work taught me to question everything” (Quintero in Rhodes 2017). Quintero’s writing is really something very political, since it says something about herself, and where she is from, she uses her work as a platform to speak and say something. This is precisely the object of analysis of the following section: Gabi’s use of the diary as a tool to challenge dominant narratives, thus transforming each page into an act of empowerment and self-affirmation.

3.3. Gabi’s Diary: A Hybrid Space

Gabi Hernandez’s diary equals her autobiography and spans almost a year, the last in high school. This diary is a hybrid space, since it is not only dedicated to her love stories, but also includes her family concerns, such as the suicide of her drug-addicted father, the absence of her grandparents or discrepancies with her mother. It is, at the same time, a multiform space, in which a diversity of textual typologies such as letters, poems or collages are inserted. Although the protagonist of the novel decides to opt for writing as a way of life, this should not

be understood as a radical break with her past, but rather to negotiate the different influences she receives and seek her individuality (Sekercan 2017). Gabi retains respect for her family and Mexican roots but transcends the oppressive role as mother and wife by choosing to develop a line of her own. It is, therefore, necessary to analyze her productions, of which two main kinds are distinguished: personal writing and more creative, challenging writing. The first type includes the various letters and poems that the protagonist writes throughout the novel. Maupin holds that letters carry personal truths and expose the author's innermost feelings and thoughts (2016, 63). In fact, in these intimate and emotional pieces, Gabi expresses her inner struggles and concerns, using writing to find clarity amid the chaos of her teenage life. Thus, when her first boyfriend Eric tells her that he loves her, she writes him a letter (which she finally does not dare to send) to tell this boy what she does not dare to verbalize (Quintero 2014, 64). She resorts to writing to express especially her sorrows, as she herself claims that "writing when you're sad is so much easier. And it makes you feel a little better" (101). It is of special interest how Gabi opts for the epistolary genre, writing several letters to his drug-addicted father, to deal with the pain and rage that he afflicts her. However, as in the case mentioned previously, the protagonist does not get to deliver the letters to whom they are addressed. These letters are simply a way of relating to him, of trying to understand his situation and express her feelings towards her absent father:

Dear Papi, I write this letter to you knowing that you cannot read it because you are too high. I want to let you know that you make me mad [...]. I know it's the meth talking and not you [...]. Papi, I want you to come back. I don't want the dad who wanders the streets and sleeps in parking lots. I don't want the dad who grows long beards [,] who gives away everything— even his family for a fix. Papi, I want to know when you are coming home, so I can say I love you, and you will understand what those words really mean. Papi, I miss you. (30-31)

With these words, Gabi shows how addiction can tear relationships apart and cause deep emotional suffering. Caponnetto et al. explain that addiction negatively affects the relationship with children, undermining the relational field. Indeed, addiction acts as a destructive factor within the family environment, negatively affecting all its members (2020, 7). But perhaps an even more heartbreaking testimony is found in the letter that Gabi writes a few days later in her diary:

Dear Papi, I can't find the words to say this, but I will try. This is bullshit. You have broken my heart again. [...] I want to believe that you would never make a deal that

involves trading your wife for drugs, but then I would be lying to myself. I want you to get help. We all want you to get help [...]. Please get help. Mom is not a prostitute. She shouldn't have to pay for your debts [...]. Papi, I love you. Te quiero con todo mi corazón. Come back, please. (Quintero 2014, 41)

Gabi confirms what she feared in the previous letter: that her father is capable of anything, even of trading with his wife. Yet, despite her anger towards her father, she continues to struggle to reconcile their love and find healing amid adversity. She does not lose hope of getting her father back, for good Mexican daughters never reject their fathers, no matter how horrible they may have been. As Station (1972, 326-27) explained, in Mexican communities familism is especially relevant, and the nuclear family serves as a focal point for social identification. What Gabi does is to externalize what happened through writing to detach herself from the feeling of pain. Likewise, she describes the same feeling when writing poems: "I'm finding out that I really like poetry. It's therapeutic. It's like I can write something painful on paper and part of it [...] disappears. It goes away somewhere, and the sadness I feel dissolves a little bit. I've always liked poetry, but I didn't realize how powerful it could be" (Quintero 2014, 83-84). She finds in poetry another intimate genre, a great ally to express her opinions without fear of the pressures of family and friends. It is a neutral space, free of stereotypes and expectations. An interesting example is that dedicated to her boyfriend Martin and entitled "Love Poem Inspired by Martin (And Robert Burns)". In this poem, Gabi contradicts the romantic ideal that Burns described about eternal devotion to the beloved, that red rose. Rather, she considers that "love is like a white geranium [...]. Yes, Mr. Burns, I think love is like a stubborn geranium" (237-38). She swaps the rose for a geranium that blooms and withers quickly to show that love is not an infinite feeling as Burns believed. Given that Gabi has already known heartbreak when Eric betrayed her to another girl and broke her heart (100-01), she may no longer believe in idealized love. It is likely that this girl knows the dangers of romantic love in adolescence, fundamentally creating the stereotype of women as disinterested, willing to love men and subjected to the dictates of patriarchy (Pascual Fernández 2016, 68-69).

Poems dedicated to family members also appear repeatedly in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*. One of the most emotional examples is the one she writes to her deceased grandfather: "In that box / he is just an old man who looks like him. / Who goes to earth (forever) / Who will not be there when you get married. / Who will not be reunited with your children. / Who will go underground and rocks and grass / no matter what you say or how much you cry or cry"

(Quintero 2014, 69-71). Through poetry, Gabi tries to process her emotions and face the reality of her grandfather's death. Thus, she can externalize her pain and make it more manageable. Following this melancholic approach, the protagonist also writes another poem about her grandmother's dementia: "When your grandmother forgets / she will forget all about you / [...] or why she exists. / [...] And when your abuela dies/ you will feel guilty. / Because... / well, because you are thankful. / Because at least now / she can't forget anymore" (86-88). Through these lines, Gabi expresses the pain of seeing her grandmother lose memories and identity, as well as the complexity of emotions that arise in situations of illness. Again, writing plays a therapeutic role, helping the protagonist process feelings that would otherwise be too overwhelming to articulate verbally. She can thus begin to accept her loss and find a sense of catharsis. Both poems, therefore, show that this girl does care about her family. She chooses the academic path, but that does not mean she is a bad daughter as she is sometimes led to believe. She respects her family, but simply does not adhere to servility or pressure.

As for the second type, that of creative writing, it is the space in which the protagonist is best defined. Even if it is also of a marked personal character, in these productions Gabi gives greater free rein to originality. At the beginning of the novel, she adds an entry to her diary with a list of her purposes for the new academic year, of which I stand out for their transcendence the following: "I SWEAR to lose weight", "to get straight A's", "to wear a small size by the beginning of summer", "to be happy in my skin", "to read more" and "to write a lot of poems" (47-48). Gabi's promises revolve around the issues that most concern her: her academic future and her physical appearance. Some of them, furthermore, are a direct consequence of that body shaming that Biggers spoke about (2023), which her own mother aggravated. Another similar example is a series of questions that Gabi would like to ask her mother, but she does not dare, since they all have to do with taboo topics between them: "Do I have to get married to be happy?", "Why do you tell me that sex is bad, but you tell my brother to use a condom?", "What if I don't want children?", "Do you know that every time you point out how much weight I have to lose, I love myself less? and "If I do not like makeup or dresses, does that make me less of a woman?" (Quintero 2014, 147-48). They are not only taboo questions, but they also reflect Gabi's fear of being branded a bad daughter or whitewashed. In general, both lists reflect the concerns and desires of a girl who navigates between two different worlds which are often also contradictory.

Finally, another element that deserves to be highlighted is a set of seven drawings (see Annex) that make up the fanzine that Gabi must present in a writing workshop organized by Ms Abernard with university students. This part is precisely where the originality I mentioned

about the protagonist's productions stands out. The young girl remembers the book that her mother gave her on women's body coinciding with her first menstruation and writes the following: "I decided that my zine would have all the information that book left out– the truth about the female body from a female point of view" (191-92). Each drawing occupies one page and contains a series of figures and a text under the title *The Female Body*. Thus, in "Diagram One", Gabi describes the pressure to reach an idealized figure and the possibility of motherhood. In "Diagram Two", she focuses on the experience of women with their breasts: from pain during their development to social pressure and self-esteem related to their size. "Diagram Three" is dedicated to the vagina and the consequent teaching: "You will be taught that this part of your body is more private and more dirty than any other part of your body" (198). In "Diagram Four", the protagonist encourages girls to let their hair down or cut it, thus challenging the idea that short hair is bad because it makes you a 'marimacha'. The fifth, "Diagram Five", is about the varied use of hands throughout life, from positive to compromising actions, highlighting their versatility in different roles and situations. In "Diagram Six", Gabi addresses the expectations associated with female legs, including pressure on their appearance, and associated behavioral stereotypes, especially the idea that respectable good girls sit with their legs closed. The last drawing, "Diagram Seven", is an appeal to the power of girls with their mouths: "If words are our weapons, we must ask ourselves, why should we use rocks and sticks when we have tanks available? And you will know how to answer" (196-202). Gabi suggests that instead of using simple and pretty words, we should use more powerful and persuasive arguments to achieve our goals. There is no doubt that these drawings are not innocent texts, but rather transgressive, since they bluntly challenge the traditional norms and expectations imposed on how women's bodies should be represented and perceived in society. Gabi's goal with this zine is to make people think about how we educate girls to think about their bodies and who decides what they think about them (204). Likewise, the importance of the female body is highlighted by presenting it in a fragmented manner. Each diagram represents a different facet of her identity and how they intertwine and intersect with each other, thereby showing the complexity and diversity of her experience as a woman and, more precisely, as a Mexican American woman in the United States.

Conclusions

The detailed analysis of Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (2014) has allowed me to corroborate the initial hypothesis: the diary is an effective coping mechanism to deal with the challenges faced by a Mexican American teenage girl in such a complicated moment as the transition from adolescence to adulthood. As a mixed-race woman, the aspects involved in Gabi Hernandez's development cannot be reduced to a single social category, but rather the interaction of several dimensions must be considered to reach a global vision of how her identity is formed. Therefore, the use of intersectionality theory has helped me to evaluate the way in which the different intersectional fragments that make up her identity fit together. Precisely in Chapter 2, we have seen how her identity as a female is constantly questioned and limited by the gender norms imposed by her Mexican environment. In her mother, we have perceived the continuity and deep rootedness of the values of familism. She is a particularly conservative person and clings to the tradition of the home, which leads her to create a series of expectations with which the protagonist does not feel comfortable, but which nevertheless establish the context in which she has to acquire the basis of her gender identity and internalize each and every one of the traits that define a good Mexican daughter: chastity, submission to the male figure and permanence in the home. Such is this young girl's distaste for the domestic pressure to become a good daughter that she longs for a life beyond the family, a place where she believes she can be completely free. To Gabi's misfortune, the school environment is not the place to be fully understood; rather, it is at times a focus of racism, on issues such as physical appearance and unrealistic ethnic images. All this affects her self-esteem and sense of belonging, leading her to develop a sense of otherness. In general, the protagonist opts for the guidelines of her friends, although not without feeling confused about her cultural heritage. It is no coincidence, therefore, that this has been the aspect generating the greatest conflicts with the interference of the home: her social life distances her from her Mexican heritage, americanizes her and, in the eyes of her family, makes her become a bad Mexican daughter, a Malinche.

To avoid falling into this dichotomy of good/bad daughter, in chapter 3, we have analyzed how the protagonist opts for a neutral space of her own, free of all kinds of stereotypes and oppressions, where she manages to be completely free. Her diary is the place where the influences she has received throughout her life flow and in which she is able to express her true concerns, thus turning writing into a self-care mechanism. Gabi makes her diary "a room of her own", an intimate but creative space where she can express her deepest feelings and

ultimately achieve a greater understanding of herself and those around her. Her escape route is definitely linked to writing. Gabi's diary, besides being a hybrid space, includes numerous literary authors with which the protagonist identifies herself and that sometimes even become vital reference models, like Sandra Cisneros, and explores different textual genres. The fact, moreover, that the novel was written in the last decade shows an updated vision of what it means to be a Mexican American woman today and demonstrates the importance of not pigeonholing young women into the classic prototypes of Mexican culture, since reality shows that their aspirations do not correspond to what that environment expects of them: to become good women and wives. This does not mean that Mexican tradition is undervalued, but rather that the work provides a faithful reflection of the real problem of the assimilation of these young women into a society and a culture that is increasingly distant from that of their families.

It is also worth noting that it has not been possible to isolate each aspect that influences the formation of Gabi's identity to analyze it independently and identify a series of non-transferable characteristics, which is proof that identity is fluid and multifaceted. Identity formation cannot be understood by considering only one category, but the inference from one to another must be appreciated. In fact, what the protagonist of the novel experiences is a negotiation between different socio-cultural codes to ultimately feel in consonance with herself. As such, YA novels can play a crucial role in the personal development of readers. Adolescents are constantly evolving, in search of their own identity, and this type of literature offers them the opportunity to see themselves reflected in its pages. Works such as Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* are notable examples of how literature can help readers understand that there is no single right or wrong option for their lives. As the protagonist of the novel has demonstrated, the alternative to choose is none other than the one that allows her to accept her biculturality, combining her Mexican roots with her life aspirations in the United States. This girl finally manages to fulfill her dream, betting on her own desires, but not breaking with her Mexican heritage. It is hoped, then, that in an increasingly diverse and complex world, YA literature will be a powerful tool for education, empathy, and personal growth.

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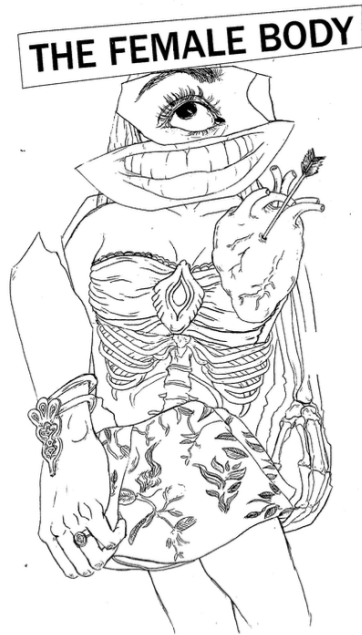
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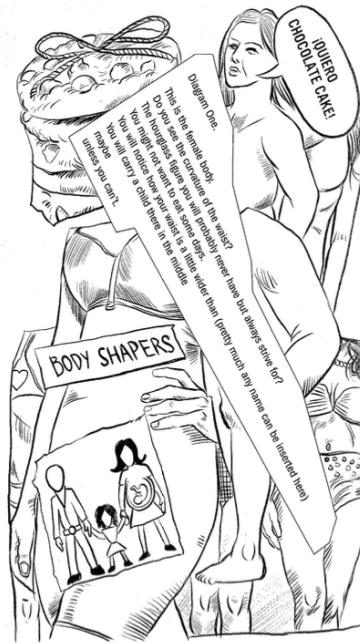
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Annex

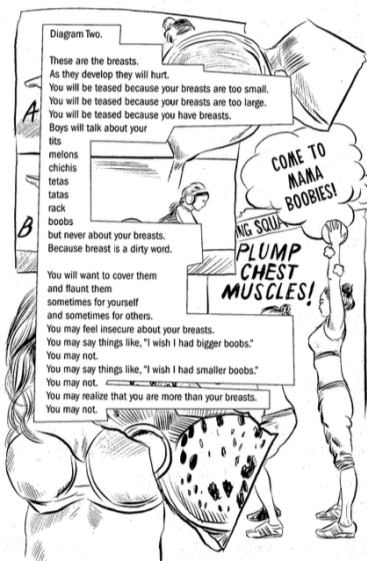
“Fanzine cover”



“Diagram 1”



“Diagram 2”



“Diagram 3”



