

AM I CHICANA ENOUGH?: Identity (In)security in Chicana Poetry

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Abstract: Using a Chicana Feminist lens grounded in Anzaldúan epistemology, I offer a close reading of “Confessions of a Pseudo-Chicana” (2018) by liz gonzález and “Study of a Part-Time Pocha” (2019) by Sara Borjas to reveal how these poems continue the tradition of deconstructing predetermined or fixed understandings of Chicana identity via literary production. As multi-generational U.S.-born, non-native Spanish speaking Chicanas, both gonzález and Borjas delineate mutable parameters of that particular cultural and political identity, reconcile some of the contradictions that have been part of Chicana/x identity formation and performance, and interrogate perceptions of authenticity. Additionally, the poems articulate the feelings of inadequacy a Chicana like myself experiences, especially because I do not express or project what are often considered key traits or markers, and as an academic, often must conduct myself in accordance with mainstream norms. This analysis addresses the tension between the utility of demarcating an imagined community of Chicanas and essentializing Chicana identity.

Keywords: *Chicana feminism; identity; language; mestiza; pocha; Chicana poetry*

My favorite pocha, Sara Borjas, is one of ten inspiring poets featured on the cover of the January/February 2020 issue of *Poets & Writers*. In that interview, she says she is inspired by “The reliability of crop rows and how you can see all the way to the end no matter what” (Isokawa 2020, 57). Originally from Fresno, Sara is rooted in one of California’s agricultural regions, but relocated to Los Angeles. I, on the other hand, am originally from different farmland across the Southwest, but also reside in L.A. Sara and I met when a friend heard Sara’s poem “Study of a Part-Time Pocha” from her poetry collection, *Heart Like a Window, Mouth Like a Cliff* (2019) and thought of me, a light-skinned, bi-racial, non-fluent Spanish-speaking Chicana.

Fourth-generation Californian liz gonzález, who has been writing poetry for about thirty years, has a similar background to Sara and I. In particular, liz and I have faced similar linguistic struggles. She shared with *La Bloga*: “My grandparents advised my mother not to teach us Spanish because of segregation. . . . And when I tried to practice Spanish with Grandma, [my mother] told me she wanted to learn ‘educated English’ – the way I was being taught to speak in school—because she had to quit school so young” (García Echeverría 2014). My own mother recalls the nuns punishing her for speaking Spanish in school; as a result, my Spanish skills are also limited. The last time I saw liz read, she deviated from a selected slate of poems to share “Confessions of a Pseudo-Chicana” from her poetry collection, *Dancing in the Santa Ana Winds* (2018) and dedicated it to me.

These two poems tackle the enigma that is Chicana/x identity. Emerging from a social and political consciousness, rooted in testimonio, Gloria Anzaldúa calls this interlaced subjectivity a “mestiza consciousness, una conciencia de mujer” and describes its overlapping nodes as one where “I, a mestiza, / continually walk out of one culture / and into another, / because I am in all cultures at the same time” (1987, 77). Her philosophical stance reverberates through the writing of other Chicana writers like Cherríe Moraga, Demetria Martínez, and Michele Serros whose work has inspired mujeres like me, especially when I move in and out of Latina/o/x communities—since I am not typically racialized as Chicana or Latina—and when I navigate academic spaces—since I often must conform and perform whitestream (Urrieta 2010) behaviors and norms. These frictions are also present in Borjas and gonzález’s work.

Using a Chicana Feminist lens, grounded in Anzaldúa epistemology, I offer a close reading of “Confessions of a Pseudo-Chicana” (2018) by liz gonzález and “Study of a Part-Time Pocha” (2019) by Sara Borjas to reveal

how these poems continue the tradition of their literary foremothers of deconstructing predetermined or fixed understandings of Chicana identity via literary production, as well as its contingent and fluid nature. As multi-generational U.S.-born Chicanas, both gonzález and Borjas delineate mutable parameters of that particular cultural and political identity, reconcile some of the contradictions that have been part of Chicana/x identity formation and performance, and interrogate perceptions of authenticity. Additionally, the poems articulate the feelings of inadequacy a Chicana like myself experiences, especially because I do not express or project what are often considered key traits or markers, and as an academic, often must conduct myself in accordance with mainstream norms. I often feel that I fall short, that I am less than, or not enough of a Chicana both in and outside of my community. While similar to imposter syndrome for scholars and professionals, this sense of shame is personal; it is a doubt that resides deep within about being Chicana enough to claim this subject position, leading to great inner insecurity. Moraga's reminder that being Chicana means "I am a woman with a foot in both worlds. I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue" (1983, 58), emphasizes that a Chicana identity is an amalgamation of markers and is not easily delineated, nor is it static. Her work encourages conversations that resist monolithic understandings about who Chicanas/xs are, often relying on the trope of mestiza identity to inform understandings of its fluidity, range, and inconstancy. This analysis likewise addresses the tension between the utility of demarcating an imagined community of Chicanas and essentializing Chicana identity.

With their first-person autobiographical poems, liz gonzález and Sara Borjas offer an interpretation of the power dynamics that have historically subjugated Chicana/o/x communities via their personal histories and angst about asserting and performing a Chicana identity. Employing a Chicana feminist critical analysis, I offer an interpretation of gonzález and Borjas

that “dismantle(s) historical and structural conditions that oppress women, demystif(ies) the truisms within culture that hold Chicanas to a subordinate role in society, and finally recast(s) dimensions of power in all facets of life” (Hernández 2006, 61). gonzález and Borjas “recast” Chicanas in positions of social consciousness and cultural awareness that alter the biases of dominant white America, patriarchal notions within Chicano culture that Chicanas/xs wrestle with, and delimiting notions of legitimacy at times imposed both within Chicana/o/x spaces and outside of them. I begin by unpacking the titles and artistic devices used in “Confessions of a Pseudo-Chicana” (2018) by liz gonzález and “Study of a Part-Time Pocha” (2019) by Sara Borjas to destabilize singular understandings of Chicana identity and notions of authenticity. Next, I examine the ways gonzález and Borjas address the relationship between assimilation and language to Chicana identity formation. Then, I explore how both poets treat the role of political (in)action as a benchmark of Chicana identity. Finally, I conclude by the sharing how the frictions between Chicana identity formation and fixed understandings of this subjectivity impact my understanding of myself as a Chicana.

Declarations of Doubt

gonzález and Borjas satirize the genuineness of their respective Chicana identities with the titles of their poems, “Confessions of a Pseudo-Chicana” and “Study of a Part-Time Pocha,” much like Michele Serros did with her sardonic book title, *Chicana Falsa* (1993). All these titles imply impersonating bona fide Chicanas.

With the title, “Confessions of a Pseudo-Chicana,” gonzález interpolates Catholic dogma to infer that she will request forgiveness from the Chicana/o/x community for the flawed ways she has embodied being a Chicana. Similar to the guilt many Catholics face for failing to live up to the Church’s expectations

of devotion, I empathize with gonzález's guilt because I understand the peccadillo she references: my Spanish has been criticized by native speaking peers and I have dismissively been called güera all my life, resulting in a grueling self-reproach for lacking the linguistic skills or phenotype considered sufficiently Chicana. From the onset, gonzález concedes to the inauthenticity of her Chicana identity, writing that at some point in her adult life, she realized "how pochafied I've become" (line 28). gonzález further reveals how her self-claimed Chicana identity has been reproached by other Chicanas, allowing her to deconstruct the touchstones of a Chicana cultural identity. According to Olga García Echeverría, with these rhetorical maneuvers, gonzález "brings into her poetry and prose the complexities of her identity, challenging assumptions of what it means to be Chicana" (2014).

In "Study of a Part-Time Pocha," Borjas likewise challenges the solidity of her identity in predominantly white spaces and makes it the focus of self-examination. The title teases a scientific or scholarly inquiry about identity—an identity that has been obscured by the articulation of professional, bourgeoisie, western, and Eurocentric forms of comportment that are required for success in higher education. Borjas advances instead that the Pocha is "Part-Time" because identity is contextual—how Chicana a person behaves depends on where she is and who she is with. Historically, calling someone "pocha" has been an insult, used by Mexican nationals to charge Mexican-descended individuals with being too Americanized. It is a form of identity policing. Anzaldúa reframes this label, writing that a pocha "distorts and reconstructs the language according to the influence of English" (1987, 56). Borjas draws from Anzaldúa's reappropriation of this term. Instead of internalizing the designation of "pocha" as an insult, she uses the term with pride. Indeed, Borjas employs the term "pocha" in the titles of two other poems in her 2019 collection: "Pocha Café," a space which features the

cuisine and music of Borjas's community, yet rejects problematic cultural traditions and "Pocha Heaven," which illuminates an idyllic space, managed and maintained by a higher power that values brown bodies. With these three titles, Borjas demonstrates what pop culture scholar Cruz Medina points out in his examination of the *Rhetoric of Cultural Deficiency*:

"the once pejorative poch@ has come to serve as a symbol for resistance against the enduring rhetoric of cultural deficiency and colonial narratives ... poch@ incorporates critical consciousness and a love of cultural contradiction that allows the trope to be woven into a much more elaborate tapestry of cultural and linguistic mestizaje (mixed blood)" (2015, 7, 16).

The corresponding poems, likewise, reject a pejorative use of the term and embrace a pocha identity as part of Borjas's strategies for survival and subversion in spaces that were not meant to include her.

Another similarity between "Confessions" and "Study" besides titles that challenge homogenous understandings of Chicana identity, is that both gonzález and Borjas employ the use of first-person speakers, relying heavily on personal experience. This type of autobiographical writing allows poets like these and their contemporary Serros "to engage readers in a more familiar way by dismantling the barriers that a more traditional omnipresent narrator would provide" (García 2009, 109). The use of first-person similarly offers gonzález and Borjas the opportunity to unpack doubts about being Chicana enough and demonstrate how swiftly cultural identity fluctuates, ultimately allowing them to not only embrace their respective fluid Chicana identities, but also accept its instability.

Many scholars have documented the variability in Chicana/x identity that is represented in literature, like the poems examined here. In an essay written for the collection *American Identity in Transition*, literary scholar Elda Maria Román examines this turn in ethnic cultural production, or “the output of texts that depart from the aesthetic and ideological strategies associated with the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s” (2018b, 17). She focuses specifically on “texts that expand the connotations of racial-ethnic identities and expand what we assume are characteristics of ethnic literary texts” (2018b, 17). The poems offered here by González and Borjas illustrate a departure from earlier ethnic literary norms and serve as exemplars of the post-ethnic expansion. For example, in “Study,” Borjas questions the Part-Time Pocha’s expected place in scholarly institutions, illustrating Román’s post-ethnic form: “authors producing in a post-canon-building era [who] express freedom to push against expectations of ethnic writing and racial-ethnic identities” (2018b, 27). While Borjas is primarily concerned with articulating the historical displacement that plagues people of color in academia, she also highlights feelings of insecurity regarding her unstable Chicana identity, locating them as the result of the identity expectations she learned as part of her own education. González’s “Confession” similarly draws on her lived experiences, but it also questions her place within Chicana cultural history. Her qualms about her identity are the result of internalized notions of a monolithic cultural identity, criteria which she questions in the poem, signifying this “post” era. As such, both González and Borjas both demonstrate what Vera and De los Santos assert: “a Chicana is keenly aware of the social, cultural, and political milieu that shapes her existence” (2005, 103).

Assimilation and Adaptation

Additional scholarship on Chicana/o/x literary productions note underlying appraisals of nativist and patriarchal discourses in these genres. For instance, in *Ends of Assimilation*, John Alba Cutler (2015) argues twenty-first century

Chicana/o/x literature reflects and critiques assimilationism, as well as the role of gender and language in cultural production. Specifically, Cutler examines Lorna Dee Cervantes's poem "Refugee Ship" found in her poetry collection *Emplumada* (1981) and asserts that "the code-switching and repetition indicate an internally divided speaking subject, one who has already crossed some sort of boundary before knowing it was there" (2015, 2). He focuses on the ways Cervantes' brings attention to the linguistic divergence, class conflict, colorism, and shifting geographical consciousness that mestizas face. Comparable poetic strategies, themes, and conflicts are similarly present in liz gonzález's "Confessions of a Pseudo-Chicana." Like Cervantes, she questions the expectations placed on Chicanas that delimit multiple articulations of this identity.

To demonstrate this complexity, gonzález invokes the Virgin Mary, the Catholic mother, a tool used for the colonization and subsequent assimilation of gonzález's ancestors. gonzález opens the poem asking for forgiveness via Catholicism's sacred ritual of confession. The structure of the first stanza mimics the traditional preamble to Catholic confession: "Forgive me father for I have sinned, it has been [amount of time] since my last confession. These are my sins." However, gonzález does not implore a male deity, instead offering her sins to "Our Lady Virgin of Guadalupe" (line 1), the most revered figure for Mexican Catholics and acknowledges that she has "offended" (line 2) the Virgin with her past actions. At this point in a Catholic confession, tradition dictates a litany of wrongs, transgressions of faith. Instead, gonzález confesses to cultural violations. Instead of referring to the time passed since her last confession, she laments the "eight months since I lit a votive or ate a bowl of menudo" (lines 3-5), a traditional Mexican dish that would have marked her as indisputably Chicana. These two images situate gonzález within the Catholic and Chicana cultural traditions, supplanting repentance for sins with remorse for ethno/racial/cultural shortcomings.

In “Confession,” gonzález discloses her assimilation, questioning her own Chicana authenticity because of it. Six stanzas—about half the poem—serve as an apology for that assimilation and lack of engagement with time-honored rituals. gonzález juxtaposes cultural expectations like “taste hot chili” (line 7) and “make tortillas” (line 10)—things she did not do—with her more Americanized reality of consuming “Hamburger Helper and Macaroni & Cheese” (line 8). In the next line, gonzález jests that her mother is to blame, as she “never made a pot of beans” (line 9). Because certain foods are integral and recognizable components of Chicana culture, these violations are humorously considered heinous. In my experience, Chicanos who do not enjoy traditional Mexican food or who think pre-formed taco shells and Pace Picante sauce are acceptable cuisine are often teased. In my own social circles, a friend who does not eat salsa is ribbed for being a “fake-xican”; a derisive term that challenges her sense of identity. For those like gonzález and myself who were raised by Americanized mothers, these culinary deviations can be a source of embarrassment. Some Chicanas might expend excessive energy in their adult lives trying to reconcile their palates, as their insecurity can lead to overcompensation. It may be the reason why gonzález “learned how to make tortillas / from Mrs. MacDougall in home ec” (lines 10-11). She rectified this perceived cultural deficiency, even if the “cultural” knowledge came from a white woman—not her mother or grandmother. By reclaiming this knowledge—even through non-traditional means—gonzález bolsters her cultural competence.

But this is still not enough. In the poem, gonzález explains why she did not inherit this cultural know-how from her elders. For instance, she writes that it was “mama who thought Chicano was a dirty word” (line 23), situating her reservations about her Chicana identity in assimilationist logics. This line alludes to gonzález’s mother’s interpretation of the term Chicano in its

historically pejorative sense and did not embrace it even though it was reclaimed by the Movimiento in the 1960s and 1970s. Like many ethnic Mexicans of the post-Movement era, especially those growing up in isolated rural areas where protests and political action were not visible daily, the goal was to become more Americanized, to fit in, to distance themselves from those other trouble-making Mexicans. Additionally, in gonzález's "Confession," her unstable sense of identity has deeper intergenerational origins that are rooted in the logics of colonialism and colorism, as well. gonzález had a "grandma who claims she's Italian" (line 24). The grandmother ascribes her phenotypical features to be the result of a more desirable and superior European ancestry, a conceit which may have prohibited gonzález's access to and embrace of Chicano culture. In my experience as a biracial Chicana, I have struggled with acceptance based on the privileges made possible because of my lighter skin color. Moraga writes about this as well. Because of her white father, Moraga's light skin also constantly made her feel insecure. She wrote about these frustrating feelings of inadequacy, noting that "nobody else has to prove who they are, prove who they aren't ... working to maintain that conexion [with La Raza] under constant threat of denial" (1993, 127). As a white-passing Chicana, when I was an undergraduate, I waited in an empty room for a Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana/o de Atzlan (MEChA) meeting to start and was asked by the MEChA Calmécac organizer to leave because they were going to set up for their meeting. I had to insist, twice, that I was there for that meeting, that I understood the importance of Chicana/o/x retention and wanted to help first- and second-year students find scholarships and other resources. Often, a racial/ethnic hierarchy based on phenotype becomes internalized and causes compounded shame when asserting a Chicana identity. The result is gonzález feeling like a "Pseudo-Chicana," disconnected from the Mexican part of her Chicana identity. Through the process of cultural production, however, gonzález releases some of these misgivings.

Borjas's also addresses the hardships of oppression-laden assimilation ideologies that Chicanas endure. One coping strategy for this unremitting process is laid out in *Ends of Assimilation* when Cutler (2015) analyzes Rosa Alcalá's "Everyday Authenticity" found in her poetry collection, *Undocumentaries* (2010). He explains how Alcalá's use of plants depicts "adaptation as the key to their survival, suggests how desire and survival are intertwined, how adaptation is simultaneously action and reaction" (2015 13). Borjas's "Study" similarly grapples with the need for adaptation, but in this instance, the Part-Time Pocha herself adapts to navigate assimilationist discourses in white majority spaces. Borjas resists some of the contours of assimilation while simultaneously acknowledging that sometimes conforming to these norms are a requirement for professional survival. For instance, Borjas writes that this complicity allows the Part-Time Pocha to gain access to and eventually create academic opportunities for the larger collective community of Chicanas/os/xs. As Vera and De los Santos emphasize, "the issue of dual or multiple identities is particularly salient. Chicana feminists point out that a necessary survival skill when living between two cultures is learning how to maintain our ethnic or cultural identity while learning to adapt to the dominant culture" (2005, 105). Vera and De los Santos articulate an application of Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness," and like Moraga, have one foot in each culture but "refuse the split."

The Part-Time Pocha's ability to abide by dominant norms in order to succeed within the academic establishment is also evident through her performance at scholarly social functions. In the poem, the Part-Time Pocha notes that as scholars of color: "We fill the Dean's / dinner table with our brown body. We eat the crumbs / of the institution saying *mmmm* like it's cake. We are / not TV stars but we convince" (lines 10-13 italics in original). The "crumbs" represent the meager or token resources Part-Time Pochas and other

people of color have historically been given in other aspects of society; the Part-Time Pocha must pretend to appreciate these morsels in the academic setting in order to impress the gatekeepers as she performs her role. The Part-Time Pocha initially adapts to the historically subordinate position in this exclusionary environment in order to advance her career. Her self-awareness of her own marginalization by the academic power structures validates the vulnerability people of color in academia face and prevents her from becoming an agent of her own domination. The Part-Time Pocha desires to become what Elda María Román calls “mediators ... who use their new class positions to work on behalf of poorer coethnics” (2018a, 23). Instead of economic mobility, however, the Part-Time Pocha wants to facilitate the elevation of others’ academic status, which could lead to a higher economic status in the future. Borjas illuminates the Part-Time Pocha’s strategic performance in the academic realm. While she may not be as effective as a professional actor, she knows that her assimilation is believable. This is how she adapts, survives, intervenes, and prospers.

Borjas’s mock scientific analysis of Chicana identity formation further involves theorizing about the ways clothing, language, music, and political consciousness can signal a cultural, racial or ethnic identity. For instance, in “Study,” Borjas uses first-person plural pronouns to situate herself in a collective struggle shared by her fellow academic women of color regarding professional dress. In the opening stanza, she writes “we” are conscious of our comportment within academia, “we power dress ... in high heels” (line 1), being “all tidy and linear” (line 3). Borjas recognizes these are requirements to participate in the patriarchal, white-dominated world professionally; however, with the modifier “all,” she criticizes the arbitrariness of these norms, the necessity of blending into a world that does not readily or regularly accept or include people of color. Within that same stanza, Borjas acknowledges

that “we know it’s quite pathetic” (line 2) to cast light on the insincerity of this performance and how it creates disquiet around a Chicana identity that has to be concealed behind permissible attire. Simultaneously, there is a recognition that participating in the deceit is necessary for survival. Vera and De los Santos propose: “Key characteristics of the mestiza identity are adaptability and flexibility. Chicanas must be flexible enough to switch constantly between different cultural codes of conduct and languages” (2005, 106). Successfully switching between “cultural codes” can ameliorate the apprehension of being enough temporarily, but it is also grueling and can lead to feelings of defeat. The Part-Time Pocha shifts gears (Sandoval 2000) in response to her often-oppressive surroundings. Through this differential consciousness (Sandoval 2000), perhaps, she seeks to gain some advantage for herself as well as for her community.

Borjas’s “Study” also seems motivated by a desire to articulate the liminality she feels, inhabiting a world where she is not sure she belongs, where she exists in between two selves. As Anzaldúa notes, “The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness. In a constant state of mental nepantlism . . . in a state of perpetual transition” (1987, 78). Part of the “perplexity” comes from not feeling qualified enough to be in either world. Existing in between two worlds contributes to perpetual feelings of insecurity around one’s identity. The “psychic restlessness” necessitates the coping strategies that allow the Part-Time Pocha to comply with dominant norms in one space and still engage in oppositional behaviors and practices. In “Study,” Borjas treats individual and collective Chicana identity as performance, acknowledging that Pochas cannot always be themselves in certain environments. It is this volatility that fuels her self-doubt about her cultural/ethnic/racial identity.

Our Language is not Broken

Part of the assimilation and adaptation process for Chicanas often includes losing fluency in the Spanish language. This loss can make it difficult to communicate with abuelas, embarrassing to respond when tías ask a question—especially when understanding the question but lacking the vocabulary to form an answer. These familial encounters, like academic ones, contribute to feelings of not being sufficiently Chicana. Similar to Cutler’s analysis of the speaker in Cervantes’s poem, “Refugee Ship” discussed earlier, gonzález’s “pseudo-Chicana” laments her linguistic inadequacies. She confesses in line 18: “(I can’t even speak fluent Spanglish.)” The comment is a parenthetical, framed as an aside to the audience, a secret gonzález is ashamed to admit. It is not her lack of English skills or solely the loss of Spanish language that gonzález regrets, but the inability to utilize the hybrid linguistic variety common in Chicana/o/x culture. Anzaldúa calls it, “A language which [we] can connect to [our] identity, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to [our]selves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*, but both. We speak with a forked tongue, a variation of two languages” (1987, 55 emphasis in original). The blurring of the two languages is such a prevalent characteristic of Chicana identity and frequently utilized in Chicana cultural production. gonzález does not embrace the “forked tongue” because she is still in the process of connecting to that part of her identity, which is evident in her poetic “Confession.” gonzález’s poem also illustrates the conundrum presented by Demetria Martínez in her essay “Confessions of a Berlitz-Tape Chicana.” She writes, “We refer to our ‘broken’ Spanish as if it were a broken bone and speak of how, when we least expect it, the language ‘comes back’ as if it were a preexisting condition. We are ashamed, for something precious shattered under our watch” (2005, 43-44). Both gonzález and Martínez feel inadequate and in need of repair. gonzález’s denial

of fluency and Martínez's shame are derived from the fear of being corrected or labeled deficient. This lack of fluency can generate insecurity for English-dominant Chicanas/xs.

Borjas also pinpoints language as a factor in the Part-Time Pocha's identity struggles. Instead of apologizing for her deficiencies, Borjas reconfigures notions of linguistic insecurity to recast how the hybrid elements of this language can be empowering. She suggests: "Let's scare white people with our Spanglish / Let's make up fake Spanish and talk to each other / in the faculty kitchen real loud" (lines 25-27). In the suggested scenarios, language is no longer a source of insecurity but instead a device used to forge bonds and confidences, while also subverting the monolingualism of the power structure. In her poem, Borjas politicizes language to circumvent academic institutions, reflecting the creativity that language scholar Ana Sánchez-Muñoz alludes to when she states that "Spanglish is a way ... to deal with complex linguistic and ethnic identity issues in a creative manner. ... the use of Spanglish creates another level of meaning where the hybridity of the Chicana/o experiences are negotiated" (2013, 440). The Part-Time Pocha negotiates linguistic hybridity and refuses to be shamed for her lack of Spanish-speaking skills, reappropriating the slipperiness of this linguistic form so it functions as a source of empowerment. Thus, Borjas illustrates one way to reject the oppressive strategy of language loss and shaming that is rooted in a history of colonialism. Martínez, too, reworked language to gain affirmation in academia. In her poem, however, she describes mastering English as a way to assert belonging and worth. She recalls using a word so obscure that a childhood teacher did not believe it was actually a word. As her recollection unfolds, she proves that teacher wrong. She recalls, "It would be years before I would grasp the politics of the tongues in which we speak and witness the privileges heaped upon those who can wield English like a sword" (2005, 45). Borjas recognizes that a proficiency in English—the

language of power—as a consequence of assimilation can be weaponized, and like Martínez, uses her prowess with words to gain access to higher education, situating herself as a mediator and when necessary, using “English like a sword” to forge access for others. She balances academic English with a working-class vernacular in order to align with the cultural community and secure her Part-Time Pocha status. In doing so, Borjas situates her Pocha identity within the Chicana feminist literary tradition. The precarity of this strategy is that it can result in internalizing shame and embracing privilege. The problem for her, Moraga writes, was that she simultaneously “disowned the language I knew best—ignored the words and rhythms that were closest to me” (1983, 55). For many post-movement Chicana/x writers, the inability to speak Spanish remains not only a source of individual shame but also a reason their Chicana identity can be questioned.

Political (In)action

A Chicana/x identity has been a political identity since its inception during the *Movimiento* of the 1960s and 1970s. It was formed out of necessity because women were often silenced and frequently excluded from leadership positions within the nationalist movement (Espinoza, Cotera, and Blackwell 2018). *Mujeres* recognized the gendered component of this racialized and political identity, using this intersectionality to advocate for farmworkers, students, factory workers, and oppose the Vietnam war. Cognizant that they were uniquely positioned as racialized women allowed them to embrace a racialized identity while at the same time assert their matrilineal roots.

With these historical roots, it makes sense that González grapples with her lack of political awareness. She confesses: “my biggest sin of all – / I ate grapes during the boycott. / But Mama made me” (lines 19-21). As a child, González owns up to not participating in boycotting grapes as a form of solidarity

with the United Farm Workers. Her revelation implies that she was a child during this political action and because her mother did not support this cause, gonzález did not have the power or sentience to refuse to eat grapes. As an adult, she has developed an awareness of the significance of this political action and the role solidarity plays in Chicana identity. She owns the guilt and bids forgiveness for her indiscretion.

However, the second half of gonzález's poem reflects her growing critical consciousness and her anti-assimilationist efforts to redress these prior transgressions. She implores "Madre Maria" (line 22) to prevent her from becoming "a vendida" (line 25) or "coconut" (line 27). These derogatory terms are commonly used, even today, to identify brown people who have sold out, become Americanized, as they signal being brown on the outside but white, or assimilated, on the inside. Those labels are probably ones gonzález has heard often. The insults are a form of identity policing, what Román calls "gatekeepers ... [who] police ethnic allegiances through markers that designate those inside and outside the group" (2018a, 22). This type of disparaging criticism for lacking knowledge of or personal experience with the language usage or political awareness that shaped the Chicana/o/x identity of the 60s leads many Chicanas like gonzález to be insecure about their cultural identity. Demetria Martínez calls out these "gatekeepers" as the source of her insecurity as well. She reveals: "some of our own are our worst enemies: the more-Chicano-than-thou and more-Mejicana-than-thou intellectuals and activists who look down on the rest of us—perhaps because we reflect so explicitly their own struggle to find their voices" (2005, 47). Martínez deconstructs this behavior, suggesting that identity insecurity fuels this assumed superiority. Michele Serros also documents the practice of identity policing—comments that belittled her as a lighter-skinned Chicana. She criticizes this process of cultural shaming in her poem, "La Letty." Her sister Leticia, aka "La Letty,"

calls Serros's Spanish "sloppy" and accuses Serros of being a "Homogenized Hispanic" (1993, 1). "Hispanic" is intentionally used here because of its history. It is a category the federal government instituted to "create and shape ethnic and racial boundaries [for the purpose of enacting] new social legislation" (National Research Council 2006, 38). It lumped all Spanish surnamed individuals together for the purpose of applying anti-discrimination standards in the 1970s and was vehemently rebuffed by the Chicano Movement since it was imposed on the community from without. It continues to be rejected by self-identifying Chicana/o/x people today. The practice of identity policing is additionally problematic in Serros's poem because the modifier, "Homogenized," implies that Serros succumbed to the socialization processes that enfolded her into conformity, encouraged integration and commended blending in. Given the efforts made by previous generations to resist this process, this assimilation can feel especially egregious, a rejection of political foremothers who fought for a Chicana-fueled hermanidad. Because this self-identified "Pseudo-Chicana" already has qualms about how she measures up—much in the same way that Martínez and Serros express their own reservations about their respective Chicana identities—gonzález feels compelled to seek divine intervention to avoid this grave offense.

Subsequently, "Confession" includes a litany that pays homage to gonzález's ancestors, rectifying some of the omissions of ancestral knowledge she has admitted to: great-grandpa who built the Santa Fe railroad, godmothers working in garment factories, and tío who labored in the fields. Through them, gonzález re-connects with the legacy of Chicana/o/x activism and embraces that identity. She is proud of her people—Brown people—who create products for American indulgences and harvest food for their consumption. She highlights the ways in which Chicanas and people of Mexican descent are othered, seen as necessary but still not included. She

rejects that othering—as is the tradition of La Chicana. gonzález also bears witness to the physical and psychological damage caused when her “tios’ skin, eyes, lungs / get fumigated with pesticides every day” (line 35) and the horrors when “good ole boys brand and corral cousins / like cattle they own and slaughter” (line 31-32). By naming this tradition of violence and dehumanization of people of color in this country, gonzález calls attention to the discrimination in the U.S. that continues today, where Brown bodies are treated like animals at the U.S.-Mexico border, by the U.S. government and racist immigration policies. She demonstrates what is now understood as intergenerational trauma. This is the “collective social trauma [that] relates to specifically man-made events, usually at the hands of the state or a powerful group” (Carranza 2010, 2). No matter what contributions members of gonzález’s family make, they will still be subject to inequities. Brown bodies will continue to be brutalized and demonized without collective action for systematic change. gonzález concedes these injustices as part of her personal history. Her poem also recognizes the power of collective consciousness; consequently, her poem is a response to the political climate that drives her own cultural production.

gonzález’s attention to social conflicts, in addition to her personal experience, are evidence of her changing consciousness. She exemplifies Anzaldúa’s nepantla aesthetic: “The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” (1987, 80). gonzález transcends the duality in the final stanza of her “Confession” when she returns to the traditional Catholic prayer structure and offers the Virgin a non-traditional penance: “instead of kindling / candles with your image to look cool, / I’ll light the wicks in remembrance of them” (lines 37-39). gonzález is no longer apologetic for her failings, but instead memorializing

her ancestors with a spiritual flame. Chicanisma is not a performance; it is a literary effort to reclaim cultural history and honor those who forged her future opportunities. Through the process of her mock “Confession,” gonzález fortifies her connection to her heritage, using reimagined prayers as a conduit for restoring that relationship, instead of proving her worthiness as a Chicana.

Borjas’s resistance to hegemonic power takes on a different form. She critiques her own behavior, her indoctrinated mentality. She shares: “We pose cross-legged in a room lit like a spaceship / ... *never shouting never / crying never doing anything truly dramatic / like the oldiez taught us to like our parents / did screaming at each other leaving and coming / back into the room to apologize*” (lines 5-10 italics mine). She has yielded to the norms of the academic establishment. Her “pose” is part of the performance, the patience required to be fully immersed in this scholarly world. She knows she has earned this place, deserves to occupy this space, but expresses regret for her complicity. The repetition of “never” three times emphasizes her remorse for not speaking up or talking back. Borjas acknowledges the value of previous generations disrupting the status quo, the first indication that the Part-Time Pocha apprehends the possibility of rebellion. While her ancestors may not have raised their voices in academia, they used their passion to incite social change. Creating conflicts that upend hierarchies is now the responsibility of the Part-Time Pocha. She can worry about making amends later.

Borjas’s writing, like the shouting of her parents and the boycotts during the Movimiento, becomes a form of political engagement, an act of resistance. The Part-Time Pocha delineates ways in which “We write politically / no matter what we write even if we say *I like surprises / or I woke up today with my hands or I love*—it is / against an expectation that we suffer” (lines 13-16 italics in original). Because of their marginalized position, Chicanas/xs

writing about identity is highly politicized. Any topic Borjas chooses to write about, any imagery she chooses to employ is part of the Chicana/x tradition and reflects mestiza consciousness. The Part-Time Pocha advocates for exploration of the mundane, a celebration of the quotidian because it validates the cultural identity she and other contemporary Chicanas/xs have developed. Borjas further proposes that while temporary or part-time, this self-aware conformity is a byproduct of increased consciousness. Pocha academics have a responsibility to subvert the dominant narrative through active—and often covert—resistance. With this reflexive awareness, she advocates: “Let’s not treat / our presence like an occasion or accept it as lineage. / The way we go is not an opportunity or a pattern in / concrete. It’s twice the work much like a beautiful / nail job much like making the men believe it was / their idea” (lines 16-21). She asserts that it is crucial to not become complacent and rest on individual achievements if the larger Chicana/o/x community is to gain access and achieve mobility. Borjas acknowledges that being a mediator requires more labor than what white academics perform. It requires artistry and skills of manipulation. This is where the Part-Time Pocha draws on her non-academic talents to transform the academic world. She may appear to be assimilated but it is not permanent, never who she is all the time.

Borjas also contradicts academia’s expectations and further emphasizes the historical divide between cultures by invoking the vernacular within scholarly practice. She writes, “all holding / office hours and shit scaffolding curriculum” (lines 3-4). The Part-Time Pocha follows the script of the establishment by being available to students outside of class and making the literature in her courses accessible to students, helping them to understand so they can one day be in her position or a similar one elsewhere. In order to gain access to power and possibly garner confidence from people in power, she speaks the academic lingo but juxtaposes it with her disdain, sardonically

trivializing it by pairing it with “and shit.” The Part-Time Pocha’s minor act of resistance emboldens her acquiescence.

Borjas is aware of the carefully guarded restrictions within academia. The Part-Time Pocha accuses, “the gatekeepers know that we know / what we know” (lines 21-22). The gatekeepers, armed with this knowledge, have even more power over the Part-Time Pocha and other mediators, power that creates additional obstacles to upward mobility. The Part-Time Pocha, then, is in direct opposition to “the gatekeepers,” who “keep other coethnics from accessing resources they themselves enjoy” (Román 2018a, 23). It is evident from the Part-Time Pocha’s previously mentioned comportment, that she desires academic mobility, inclusion within the institution where she, at least while in that environment, knows how to play the part. She acknowledges that people in positions of power have the means to continue excluding her and other people of color or forcing gratitude for allowing them to be included at all. She maintains a reflexivity, recasting it as resistance in order to feel more secure in her choices and maintain her Chicana identity.

Instead of tolerating injustices, the Part-Time Pocha pursues a culturally conscious agenda. Borjas proclaims, “I’d rather spend time decentering / all this whiteness both inside and outside this mouth.” (lines 22-23) and “Teach only brown poets and not *ever ever* rationalize it / to myself before I send out the syllabus” (lines 30-31 italics mine). In literature, whiteness is often the default, the assumed point of view from which all other “American” literature is viewed. By privileging this one perspective in literary studies all others become devalued. The Part-Time Pocha recognizes her responsibility to alter that presumption and speak out against the norm. By relocating marginalized voices and giving them center stage, Borjas performs a critique of white Eurocentrism, refusing to give the previously dominant viewpoint sole power.

The repetition of “ever” indicates an infinite certainty in her decision to change the literary canon. The Part-Time Pocha makes a choice that could jeopardize her position as mediator within the academy, but she moves forward with intention, cognizant that it is imperative for future Pochas and other people of color.

As the Part-Time Pocha asserts confidence in both her identity and place in academia, she announces: “This performance / is over” (lines 28-29) and “Let’s / refuse these half-ass invitations to assimilate or refuse / to treat our assimilation as an invitation. No one ever / expected us to be here” (lines 34-37). In a *Los Angeles Review of Books* interview, Borjas explains how “historically underrepresented groups often are offered jobs in academia as goodwill or exposure or opportunity, but in reality, it’s the institution who needs us if they are truly trying to undo oppressive institutions that are rooted in racism” (Delfino 2019). As such, the Part-Time Pocha’s proclamation exposing the charade should come as no surprise. Pretending to be someone she is not comfortable being, facing constant criticism and ridicule, and fighting the systematic oppression within academic institutions is draining. The Part-Time Pocha sets clear boundaries to prevent further dilution of cultural identity and insists her knowledge production be valued. She vehemently rejects inclusion if it means betraying her culture and her self-worth. She accepts how shocking her presence is in this scholarly space; however, she is not advocating surrender. On the contrary, Borjas establishes a means through which she can undermine the system.

Borjas’s work further critiques the whiteness of academia and the way people of color have been treated within these institutions. Increasingly more confident, the Part-Time Pocha confronts two of the gatekeepers:

*No. Director of the MFA Program,
I do not need to use 'higher diction.' No, Chair of the
Department I do not believe poetry needs a 'good reason'
to not adhere to a traditional, Eurocentric form. (lines 37-40)*

She asserts her linguistic authority in response to microaggressions that are rampant in academia. She repeats “No” twice, rejecting the requests to conform her language and insisting on her right to challenge canonical texts with alternative poetic form. It is common for women faculty of color to “find themselves ‘presumed incompetent’ ... [and] entrenched in byzantine patterns of race, gender, and class hierarchy” (Gutiérrez y Muhs 2002, 1-2). Efforts to decolonize and diversify syllabi have also become trends in scholarly circles. For instance, creative writing professors are turning toward what Felicia Rose Chavez (2021) calls the Anti-Racist Writing Workshop, an approach that de-centers the instructor and gives the writer control over their own process.

The Part-Time Pocha also confronts the academy on its categorization of cultural studies:

*Yes,
Pocha Studies are Chicano Studies are American Studies.
Yes, white woman who evaluates me, race is a problem
in our workshops and no I will not teach whiteness
and call it craft. (lines 40-44)*

She insists her identity is part of the Chicano tradition, which is part of the fabric of not only this country but the broader history of both continents of the Americas. She specifically addresses the person in the position above her, her direct gatekeeper, informing her supervisor that the ongoing conflicts

create a hostile classroom environment. Knowing that this other woman has power over her professionally, the Part-Time Pocha professor takes the risk. She refuses to disguise “whiteness” in her creative writing classroom and asserts her right to decolonize the curriculum.

The poem ends with the Part-Time Pocha asserting her solution to a long history of Chicanas/xs struggling with feeling inadequate both as a Chicana and as an academician. Invoking the collective speaker, she demands, “We disaster / our whiteness until even mestizaje disappears” (lines 51-52). She wants to do more than just complicate identity politics. She advocates for destroying the racial hierarchies that keep people trapped in unequal positions. Eliminating the structures of white supremacy will eventually destroy the history of Mexico’s mixed blood people who maintain a false superiority over the Indigenous and African populations. What Borjas proposes abolishes colorism and possibly, by extension, the perceived superiority of one language over all others. The “Study” alters the notion that the Part-Time Pocha should be accepted because of her mixture and her intimacy with Americanized cultural production but rather in spite of it. She continues the tradition of political activism that confronts othering and elevates La Chicana. Like Moraga says, “Our ideas and stories are generated from actual experiences of alienation; and through our writings, we can take possession of that displacement” (2011, 121-122, emphasis in original). Moraga implies that we should reject the feeling of “alienation” and be Chicana/x however we can be. Because of the legacies of Chicana scholars like Moraga who articulate the multiplicitous ways of being a Chicana, mujeres like gonzález and Borjas and myself can embrace our identities, assured we are Chicana enough.

Conclusion

I have experienced identity insecurity in academic and social circles, around other creative people, and even with my extended family—a cousin called me “white girl” last time she saw me. It is exhausting to repeatedly assert my Chicana identity. However, gonzález, Borjas, and I persist. We confront hegemonic power as writers and educators; we honor the mujeres who fought before us with our scholarship, our pedagogy and our action.

gonzález’s and Borjas’s poems offer models for how to grapple with these apprehensions and negotiate cultural identity so that other part-time or pseudo-Chicanas might feel more confident in their sense of self in their personal lives and in their professional ones. These verses capture the instability and fluidity of a Chicana identity that shifts based on context, generation, geography, language use, phenotype, and political awareness. The stances reinforce a “differential consciousness” (Sandoval 2000, 139), a pocha identity that navigates assimilationist logics for their benefits and detriments. These poets resist fixed categories and reconcile cultural contradictions through their poems. As cultural workers, they situate themselves in multiple worlds and interrogate Chicana/x identity so it remains boundless, inclusive, welcoming, and enough for all.

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