

Testimonio Witnessing of Gender-Based Violence in Belinda Acosta's *Sisters,* *Strangers, and Starting Over*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Belinda Acosta's *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over* (2010) through the lens of testimonio narrative methodology, particularly as employed by US Latina feminist writers. This second book in Acosta's *Quinceañera Club* series is set in San Antonio, Texas, interweaving plot connections to Juárez, Mexico. A close analysis reveals that Acosta's novel reflects characteristics of Latinx testimonio narrative methodology with its inclusion of the character Perla Sánchez, who is erased from her family's history and then killed in Juárez decades later. While the novel focuses on family separation and healing with the quinceañera in the background, Acosta highlights the erasures of young Chicanas and the violent consequences of breaking with hegemonic expectations for girls in Latinx culture. Acosta's novel testifies to the social injustice of women who are disappeared and violated in the Latinx culture, and even silenced and forgotten in the Latinx family. Moreover, the novel

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employs the quinceañera ritual and strong Chicana characters to correct the condoned silences in the Latinx family.

INTRODUCTION

“[...] not everyone gets their story told. If you don't tell it, who will?”

Perla Sánchez in Belinda Acosta's *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over*

When Belinda Acosta published her second *Quinceañera Club* novel, *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over* (2010) – a young adult novel about a teenage Chicana who experiences the traumatic kidnapping and murder of her mother in Juárez, Mexico – the heinous Juárez femicides had been startling the globe for nearly twenty years.¹ Anthropologist Tamar Diana Wilson documents “many monographs and edited collections [...] dedicated to describing and attempting to come to grips with the causes of the rape, murder, and mutilation of young women in Ciudad Juárez” (8). Fictionalized cultural productions have also appeared in literature, most notably Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) and Stella Pope Duarte's *If I Die in Juárez* (2008). These novels draw attention to the extremes of gender- and class-based violence for females in Chicanx and Latinx cultures. While Acosta's second *Quinceañera Club* novel primarily focuses on 14-year-old Celeste Sánchez, her trauma and settlement into extended family, and her coming of age culminating with a quinceañera,² the unfolding of her mother Perla's mysterious disappearance and demise dominates the plot with pointed purpose. As a teenager herself, Perla had been erased from her family's history for sexual promiscuity and then, decades later, she is killed in Juárez for her maquila labor activism. Similarly, her daughter Celeste is confronted with patriarchal and anti-nativist sentiment from several male members of the Sánchez-Milligan household in San Antonio, particularly her non-Chicano uncle who views the arrival of a Chicana from the Juárez border as a threat to his idyllic family home. Acosta's intricate plot documents the erasures of young Latinas and the violent consequences of breaking with traditional expectations for females in Latinx and Chicanx culture.

This article contends that, through narrative elements reminiscent of Latinx testimonio methodology, Acosta's novel gives voice to Perla and the many other women in Latinx culture who get silenced, rejected, victimized, and even killed for their nonconformity to Latinx family and cultural norms. Acosta takes the testimonio act further by reinscribing Perla back into her Chicanx family history, a testament to a Latina writer's ability to address the social

1 The terms 'Latina' and 'Latinx' are used in this article to refer to the umbrella term that includes people of Chicanx, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, Central and South American heritage. The terms 'Chicana' and 'Chicanx' refer to US women or people with Mexican heritage, respectively.

2 Quinceañera refers to the Latinx rite of passage celebration that marks a girl's 15th birthday and the recognition of her coming-of-age in the presence of her family and friends.

injustices in Chicana and Latina culture through the creative act. As Christina Rhodes suggests, in a literary field dominated by a “white-as-default ethos, the publication of Latina children’s [and YA] literature is a radical intervention” and a form of social activism itself (4). Not only is *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over* significant for its cultural representation – in 2015, less than three percent of YA publications were by and about Latina culture, while Latina people comprised 18% of the US population (US Census qtd. in Rhodes 7) – it is also the only YA novel to date that highlights the Juárez femicide history.

While Acosta offers a *Quinceañera Club* novel to attract YA readers interested in this Latina cultural rite of passage and a plot with complex relationships between Chicana mothers and daughters, Acosta’s novel becomes a vehicle for raising questions of patriarchal mechanisms that silence young Chicanas within the family and for raising awareness of a persistent and global social justice issue through its fictionalized depiction of a Juárez victim of femicide. Acosta’s novel can be read in the tradition of testimonio, albeit fictionalized, because it weaves testimonio-like characteristics into plot, character, and dialogue that turn the attention of the YA reader to a social justice issue largely ignored and unresolved. In addition, by weaving these various plot threads together, Acosta makes the connection between the gender-based injustices in the family with those that occur in larger Latina culture.

Despite its label as a *Quinceañera Club* novel, *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over* does not employ the Latina cultural celebration as a focal point of the plot, such as one finds in Malin Alegria’s middle-grade novel, *Estrella’s Quinceañera* (2008). Nor does the author emphasize a stereotypical or over-glamorization of the quinceañera, like in Veronica Chambers’ *Amigas: Lights, Camera, Quince!* (2010). In fact, when Acosta agreed to write the two *Quinceañera Club* novels “using the quinceañera as a backdrop”, she was guided by specific “ground rules” regarding cultural representation: “unlike so-called ‘chick-lit’ novels, [her] books are not about dresses and shoes and up-dos as much as they are about the relationship between Mexican-American mothers and their daughters” (Acosta, “Write” 26). Acosta’s work utilizes the quinceañera in intentionally pivotal ways for character, narrative, and thematic development. Written from a third-person omniscient point-of-view, this narrative mode allows Acosta to creatively weave several subplots into a complex story and effectively develop multi-dimensional characters. Although several interwoven subplots, including the quinceañera, add to the rich tapestry of this poignant YA novel, Acosta primarily focuses on the developing relationship between its two main characters: Beatriz Sánchez-Milligan, an educated, middle-aged Chicana in San Antonio, Texas, and her 14-year-old niece, Celeste, who comes to live with her aunt after Celeste’s mother Perla Sánchez becomes one of the many females murdered in Juárez, Mexico. The novel traces their lives as each main character comes to terms with emotional issues surrounding Perla’s life and death. Cristina Herrera’s analysis of Acosta’s first *Quinceañera Club* novel, *Damas, Dramas, and Ana Ruiz* (2009), notes that Acosta utilizes the quinceañera backdrop in that novel “to

comment on the increasingly tense relationship” between a Chicana mother and her daughter in an effort to heal their damaged relationship (79). Similarly, in *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over*, Beatriz’s character devises the idea of a quinceañera party as an opportunity to form a deeper connection with her estranged niece who is struggling with trauma.

More than a decade after Acosta’s publication, journalists continue to report on Juárez femicides, which include the murders of both Mexican and US Chicana border residents (Kocherga).³ Mexican and Chicana women who live in Juárez continue to suffer fear, violence, and loss of life, and yet no progress has been made to find the perpetrators of these horrific crimes. Juárez victims do not live to testify about it. However, the community-centered and social justice work of Chicana and Latina writers document the lives of the silenced, erased, and violated through both nonfiction and fiction; they tell the story on behalf of the victims because witnessing the hidden is the key component of testimonio writing. Although Acosta’s *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over* primarily focuses on the developing relationship between Celeste and Beatriz with the quinceañera as a backdrop, Acosta weaves social justice into the plot by connecting Perla to gender-based silences in the Latinx family and gender-based violence in the Juárez femicide history. With Perla’s experience and even her name being erased from her family history, and her kidnapping and murder, Acosta creates a story of family healing through the revelation of the hidden, as well as a testimonio for the women of Juárez.

TELLING TO LIVE: TESTIMONIO GENRE AND LATINA LIBERATION

In *Telling to Live*, the Latina Feminist Group – a group of Latina scholars, writers, and artists – proclaims that testimonio methodology acts as a “crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived experiences that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (2). Similarly, in *Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity*, Aurora Levins Morales asserts that “the only way to bear the overwhelming pain of oppression is by telling, in all its detail, in the presence of witnesses and in a context of resistance, how unbearable it is” (20). Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* has inspired many Chicana writers to “rail against [our] culture” when it oppresses women (43). Although Anzaldúa’s upbringing on the US-Mexican border in south Texas made her completely immersed in “mexicanismo” and her home culture “permeates every sinew

3 *El Paso Matters* reports the continued waves of violent Juárez femicides. As recently as January 2022, the online newspaper reported the case of a US Chicana lesbian couple from El Paso, living in Juárez, whose bodies were found dismembered in garbage bags and dumped on a public road (Kocherga).

and cartilage in [her] body”, she admits “conozco el malestar de mi cultura” (43).⁴ Referring to the entrenched patriarchal ideology in Latinx/Chicanx culture, Anzaldúa declares:

I abhor some of my culture’s ways, how it cripples its women, como burras, our strengths used against us, lowly burras bearing humility with dignity. The ability to serve, claim the males, is our highest virtue [...]. The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century. [...] For 300 years she was invisible, she was not heard. (43-5)

Anzaldúa’s statement directly applies to the Juárez femicides as one of the extreme examples of social injustice towards Latinas giving cause for railing against our culture. Testimonio offers “multimodal resistance”, Cruz Medina argues, as “[t]he Latinx storytelling practice of testimonio not only bears the rhetorical element of contextualized truth, but also has been incorporated as a critical methodology for addressing issues of social justice” (n.p). Unlike alternative Latinx genres, such as *cuentos* (stories) and *consejos* (advice), “testimonio embodies the mission articulated by the theoretical underpinnings of critical race theory (CRT) and the genre of counterstory” (Medina n.p.). Since the 1980s, US Latina feminist writers like Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Levins Morales have employed the testimonio genre to speak about the previously unspoken and to counter the erasures of Latinas.

Testimonio’s purpose is to document silenced histories, to voice the unspoken experiences of the oppressed, to reveal truths of injustices, and to set historical records straight (Beverley; Flores; Latina Feminist Group; Patai; Pratt; Yúdice). Lindsay Pérez Huber considers testimonio “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (644). Although testimonio literature is a broad genre incorporating various forms of fiction and non-fiction, certain characteristics remain common to testimonio narratives. The first of these is that testimonio, which literally translates as “testimony”, involves bearing witness or testifying to events the narrator has personally seen and/or participated in (Beverley 14). As an eyewitness to these events, the testimonialista gains credibility with the listener or audience of the testimonio. Another characteristic relates to the intentionality of the narrator. The testimonio situation has to involve an “urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself” (Beverley 14). Third, testimonio involves the verbal or textual “affirmation” of the self (15); the testimonialista demands visibility from the audience: to be seen, heard, and taken seriously. As Elizabeth Flores’ dissertation on Chicana testimonio and autobiography suggests, these narrative forms offer Chicanas self-empowering methods to represent and

4 English translation: “I know the illness (dis-ease, suffering) in my culture.”

create their identities (6). Fourth, while the testimonio provides self-affirmation and self-representation, it should also connect the testimonialista to her community: “The speaker does not speak for or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective” (Yúdice 15). Moreover, the testimonialista speaks in the name of this collective in a non-hierarchical manner (Beverley 16). Without this connection to the community or group, contends Beverley, the narrative ceases to be a testimonio and becomes autobiography.

The testimonio-like quality of *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over* merges the personal story of Perla’s silenced history in her Chicana family with the collective experience of the murdered women of Juárez, Mexico. A testament to Acosta’s storytelling, Perla stands out as an unforgettable character in the plot, even though the reader never gets to know this character firsthand. Acosta unfolds Perla’s testimonio through other characters in the novel, such as Beatriz, Celeste, and Josie Mendoza, a magazine journalist writing a story on the women of Juárez. The Chicana characters, storyline, and Acosta, a Chicana writer, bear witness to Perla’s story and to Perla as representative of the forgotten Juárez murder victims; thus, the novel itself becomes a testimonio to a glaring social injustice that continues to be condoned through a global silence.

PERLA’S ERASURE FROM THE “CHICANO FAMILIA ROMANCE”

Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over tackles the insidious nature of keeping silences in the Latinx family and culture: of silencing and erasing girls from family histories, of silencing and murdering young females in Latinx culture, and even the invisibility of single working-class mothers and their children. Acosta’s novel challenges the cultural ideology of the Chicana family that Rosa Linda Fregoso calls the “Chicano familia romance” in *meXicana encounters: The Making of Social Identities on the Borderlands* (71). Chicano familia romance is the “reigning model of la familia in cultural discourse” based on an ideology of patriarchal kinship and a “code of family loyalty and solidarity” (Fregoso 73). “Intracommunity silences” (Fregoso 86) act as a linchpin of the Chicano familia romance to preserve its stronghold in the culture. In *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over*, the patriarchal ideology of the Chicano familia romance is represented by Perla’s erasure from the Sánchez family. An unspoken family rule exists in the Sánchez familia that forbids the mention of Perla’s name. In the present in which the story is told, no one has broken this rule since Perla was last seen alive 25 years earlier: “Even Beatriz didn’t know how that rule came into being or when it was understood that she would not be included in talk of old times or mentioned in the family tree. She knew it was wrong—to have Perla’s name erased from their tongues, even if she was alive in their memories—but she went along” (Acosta, *Sisters* 122). Beatriz’s pregnant sister-in-law gets non-verbally chastised by female relatives gathered at a family barbeque when she

starts to pronounce the “P” in Perla as a possible name for her baby. They look at the mother-to-be with “a silent and harsh *Callate!* [... and] “she shuddered at the unknown penalty she would endure if she’d broken that one, unspoken family rule” (121-22). Whether on a smaller scale in the immediate or extended family or on a larger scale in village and nation, community silences contribute to the symbolic and literal disappearance of females in Latinx communities.

Beatriz feels ashamed for participating in the Sánchez family’s long-held silence around Perla, and this shame contributes to feelings of guilt for most of the novel: “[Beatriz’s] silence was her way of hiding her shame” (122). Readers learn that 25 years earlier, Beatriz failed to assist her younger sister Perla after an unplanned pregnancy. Perla had traveled more than 1200 miles to Michigan, where Beatriz was attending university, to seek her help; however, fearing Perla’s troubled life would cause a rift in her relationship with then-boyfriend, Larry Milligan, Beatriz immediately sent her sister back home on the bus. Essentially, Beatriz chose her white male lover over family, an act of betrayal between sisters but particularly disruptive of the Chicano familia romance where loyalty presides.⁵ The “pull to identify with the oppressor”, suggests Cherríe Moraga in “A Long Line of Vendidas”, can divide families based on alliances of race and sex (84). The Sánchez family never hears from Perla again until Celeste arrives in San Antonio at the Sánchez-Milligan doorstep, and they learn later that she was living on the El Paso-Juárez border. During those lost years, the Sánchez family labels Perla as “the black sheep”, someone “to be ashamed of” (Acosta, *Sisters* 257) due to her sexual transgressions and rebellious nature as an adolescent. Since the silence around Perla has lasted 25 years, over a generation, Acosta reminds us of the way patriarchal ideology works in Latinx communities, specifically that the ideology and act of silencing, hiding, controlling, and violating Latinas is transmitted from one generation to the next. In fact, Perla’s daughter Celeste has interactions with the male members of the Sánchez-Milligan family that demonstrate the perpetuation of race and gender discrimination within Latinx families in subsequent generations.

From the beginning of Celeste’s arrival to the Sánchez-Milligan household, her presence creates tension between Beatriz and Larry. Larry Milligan comes from working-class Irish cultural roots, having risen from childhood poverty and neglect by way of higher education. His family history as a child of a single mother drives his need to function as an overprotective patriarch of the family. Larry’s marriage to a Chicana positions him in a unique intermediary space as both outsider and insider. The Sánchez family considers him “un güero quemado”, literally a tanned white man, but figuratively “an honorary Mexican” (23). Yet, much of Larry’s internal dialogue regarding Celeste reveals prejudicial and nativist attitudes and beliefs about Latinx people. Reminiscent of anti-Latinx immigrant rhetoric, Larry believes that Celeste has brought a “mess from the outside world” into “his house” (44);

5 This type of betrayal in the Mexican and Chicax culture has roots in Aztec history when Malinche was called a “vendida” (sellout) after Hernan Cortes takes her as his concubine and translator.

she is essentially disrupting the tranquil family life he has sought to establish. Larry's racist and nativist attitudes clearly reveal themselves in a scene in which he considers the packet of documents on Juárez victims in Celeste's possession: "He didn't know what the connection was between Celeste and the Women of Juárez—or if there even was one. All he knew was that what he saw among Celeste's papers disturbed him. *She disturbed him, small and dark and quiet*" (163, my emphasis). Furthermore, he "didn't want to admit it, but when it came to Celeste, her unexpected appearance, the daughter of the black sheep of the family, who, like his own sister, Lucy, was a source of embarrassment and anxiety, Larry couldn't help himself. *There was just something dangerous and, well, too foreign about Celeste that he couldn't shake*" (164, my emphasis). While the reader is privy to his internal dialogue, Larry's character is oblivious to the racist attitude he harbors against Celeste because his consciousness is obfuscated by the beliefs that he is protecting his family, that he has become a cultural insider via marriage to a Chicana, and that he is a "good Texas liberal" (163). Ultimately, Larry intends to drive Celeste out of the house because then, with his boys at college, he can have Beatriz all to himself. On multiple levels, Larry's character demonstrates an unconscious adherence to racial and gender ideologies that aim to control both Celeste and Beatriz.

The internalized prejudices of Larry's adult character are cloaked by his outward liberalism, but his young nephew, Seamus, does nothing to hide a racist attitude toward Celeste, particularly when in the company of his uncle and bi-racial male cousins. On one occasion, Seamus asks his uncle Larry: "what do you want with a wetback in the house anyway? [...] she looks like she just crossed over, right?" (69). The Sánchez-Milligan sons, Carlos and Raul, take offense to their cousin's racist questions but Seamus simply responds that he is not insulting them as they are of mixed blood. Seamus views Celeste as an outsider threatening the relationship with his uncle and his safe space in the Sánchez-Milligan household. Ironically, the Irish given name Seamus means "he who supplants". Seamus is so angry at his disempowerment by this young Chicana that at one point he bullies his other cousins at a family barbeque because "he needed to take charge of something – anything" (116) to reinstate his (white) male privilege again. Seamus never directs his racist comments to Celeste herself; he simply dismisses her, looking past her as if she is invisible, or in Celeste's description, "wallpaper" (239). Among the male Milligans, Carlos and Raul are the most accepting of Celeste; however, Carlos stereotypes Celeste based on her skin color and phenotypical features when first meeting her. The morning after Celeste's arrival to the house, Carlos assumes the dark-skinned Mexican-looking girl before them is the neighbor's maid because, to him, she looked like most of the cleaning women in the neighborhood. Larry, Seamus, and Carlos all cause Celeste to feel unwelcome and foreign in her new home. While Larry and Seamus, in particular, want Celeste to leave – to disappear, in effect like her own mother – to keep their lives intact, Beatriz's prioritization of Celeste disrupts these

desires because she refuses to allow history to repeat itself. Moreover, at the close of the novel, Beatriz takes the lead to repair the erasure of Perla.

During Celeste's quinceañera, Acosta challenges the "intracommunity silences" that reinforce the Chicano family romance and lead to Perla's erasure. Acosta crafts the quinceañera scene in a way that shatters the silence around Perla's name and counteracts her erasure from the family history. Beatriz ceremoniously breaks the family silence when she introduces Celeste as Perla Sánchez's daughter in the presence of the entire Sánchez-Milligan family. As Celeste makes her entrance, Beatriz declares the following:

"I don't have much to say except that I am so grateful to see this day come, when I can present to you, mi sobrina, Celeste Josefa Sánchez, the daughter of our dear, departed sister...".

For a split second, Beatriz could sense the catch in her throat, as if all those years of imposed silence might cut off her breath and keep the words from coming out. But Beatriz was tired of being silent, tired of feeling guilty, tired of not saying the name of her sister.

"Perla Sánchez, en paz descansa," Beatriz said proudly. (298)

After a moment of silence, Beatriz begins a call and response sequence, shouting the name "Perla Sánchez!" over and over until each family member begins to respond "Presente!", ending with the entire family roaring "Presente!" in unison (298); "[t]he guilt that had suffocated [Beatriz] all those years had been cleared like cobwebs and let loose to fly off and away" (299). Through the shattering of the silence, Perla becomes reinstated into the family's history, and Beatriz is able to move forward from the guilt. Thus, Acosta employs Celeste's quinceañera as a vehicle for reinscribing Perla back into her Chicana family history. The intracommunity silence within the Sánchez family is broken, creating a counternarrative to the Chicano familia romance ideology. A major theme in Acosta's novel is breaking the silences that cause familial and cultural damage. Repair occurs by bringing past hurts and betrayals out into the open, and by bringing young Chicanas' and Mexicanas' stories to light for all to hear and know, as a testimonio to their existence.

THE TESTIMONIO OF PERLA SÁNCHEZ: BREAKING THE SILENCE OF THE WOMEN IN JUÁREZ

Acosta links Perla's own poignant personal story with the collective story of Juárez women by creating a life for Perla among this community during her lost years. Perla settles along the

El Paso-Juárez border, gives birth to Celeste, becomes employed in the Juárez *maquiladoras*, and becomes a community activist on behalf of the *maquila* women workers. Then, due to her outspoken community activism, she becomes a silenced victim of the Juárez murderers. Most of the details about this period in Perla's life in Juárez are discussed in only a portion of one chapter, with the rest embedded into a few scenes in the novel that focus on the contents of an envelope Celeste carries to her aunt's house, an envelope containing Perla's documentation on Juárez victims. In an article about her *Quinceañera Club* novels for *The Texas Observer*, Acosta discusses the changes her book publisher, Grand Central Publishing, asked her to make to the original manuscript of this novel. These changes required her to keep the story of the Juárez murders "deep in the background, with the story of Beatriz and Celeste more up close and personal" (Acosta, "Write" 48). Observing that her second novel's original manuscript had "too much Juárez, too much violence, [and] not enough party planning", Acosta's publisher reminded her that "as the second book in the *Quinceañera Club* series, it had been positioned in the market in a certain way" ("Write" 48). Despite changes to the original manuscript, Acosta's novel carefully and effectively weaves the Juárez women's experience with Perla's story through the developing relationship of Celeste and Beatriz and Chicana journalist Josie Mendoza, enough to make a compelling, testimonio-like statement of these silenced atrocities.

Perla's personal story of mistreatment by her Chicano familia – first by their lack of support during a predicament in young adulthood and then by erasing her memory from the family history – is told through dialogue and reflection from various characters in the novel. We learn about Perla's early adulthood through Beatriz, her later years and motherhood through Celeste, and her labor activism through Josie. The reader must do the work of piecing together the fragments of information about Perla to understand most of her story, just as Josie's character painstakingly constructs the story of the women in Juárez in preparation for a book on the topic. Myriam Jehenson reminds us that, in traditional testimonio methodology, "two voices are forever present in the testimonio, that of the native informant who narrates her account, and that of the ethnographer who gives that account 'meaning'" (145). Josie is a magazine writer based out of Austin, Texas who is interviewing people on the Juárez-El Paso border to write *Women of Juárez: Then and Now*. Josie's character represents Acosta herself since, at the time she was writing *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over*, Acosta was living in Austin and writing articles for *Texas Monthly*. With Josie (Acosta) as her interlocutor, Perla becomes a testimonialista for the women of Juárez, Mexico, the "capital of murdered women" (Sarria 1). Regarding earlier Latin American testimonios such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, scholars of the genre have pointed out the potential exploitation or misrepresentation of a non-native ethnographer, often from a privileged, developed-nation background, speaking for or representing a subaltern native informant, typically illiterate and from a colonized or developing nation.

This early criticism of testimonio arose before marginalized people began to write their own testimonios. As discussed earlier in this article, US Latina feminist scholars and writers, like Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Levins Morales, do not need the interlocutor because they tell their own stories and connect them to the suppressed voices in their Latinx communities. They use testimonio to create “laboratories of their lives in order to come to terms with their identities and develop solutions, arguments, defenses, and theories that speak to their realities; they seek to reach other Chicanas who remain marginal within the marginalized” (Flores 14). In Acosta’s text, Beatriz, Celeste, Josie, and Perla are all Chicanas who have been born and raised in south Texas (albeit Celeste and Perla have spent more time along the Texas-Mexican border), so they have a similar cultural background. Nevertheless, Acosta depicts Perla as mistrusting of Josie’s intentions during their initial meeting, asking her if she was like other ethnographers who “go back to their nice lives while things for las mujeres here stay the same” (Acosta, *Sister* 94). Josie responds: “I’ve known what’s been happening here for a long time. I want justice to be served just as much as you do” (94). Although Josie is more educated than Perla, they are both Chicanas and both raise a child without a husband, the latter a connection that inspires Perla to draw closer to Josie and share her future aspirations for Celeste. Unfortunately, the disappeared, murdered, and globally ignored women of Juárez need interlocutors to tell their stories; the fiction and nonfiction work of Chicanas remind the globe that these women are not to be forgotten.

In the chapter segment that focuses on Josie’s experiences with Perla in Juárez, we discover what has become of the young Chicana who disappeared from her family for 25 years. Perla is not the lost girl labeled by her family; she developed into an outspoken leader positively impacting a Latinx community in need. In the period after her disappearance, Perla became a labor-organizer in the electronics maquila where she worked in Juárez, and she also did charity work in El Paso with the surviving family members of murdered women from this side of the border (93). Josie notes that while Perla’s physical stature is petite, she had become a large presence in Juárez due to her community-organizing efforts. The young outspoken, rebellious child had grown into an outspoken, fierce woman. Perla became known in Juárez as “la chingona”⁶ because she was “a fighter, a survivor” (93). Perla stands up for the women in Juárez, protective of the manner in which the media portrayed their stories, sensationalizing the violence with no direct effect on the lives of the mujeres who continue to be killed. Josie earns Perla’s trust and reminds her that breaking the silence about these experiences leads to a greater chance in changing the problem. These words convince Perla because she believes in the importance of documenting silenced histories; as she later states to her interlocutor, “[n]ot everyone gets their story told” (98). Calling to mind the purpose of testimonios, Perla reminds Josie, “If you don’t tell it, who will?” (98). During a series of interviews over several months, Josie becomes interested in knowing more about the past life of her outspoken testimonialista, but Perla never wanted to talk about herself.

6 Spanish slang term for “badass woman”.

Instead, reflecting the characteristic that distinguishes testimonio from biography, Perla “always stayed focused on the women—the murdered, the missing, their families, and the justice that they were still owed” (95). Perla’s focus on the community of women in Juárez, rather than on her own past experiences, positions her as a testimonialista, an agent seeking to transform these women’s oppression.

Due to limitations placed on Acosta by her publisher, the Juárez femicide theme predominantly exists in the plot’s background. Therefore, this section in the novel is not well-detailed regarding Juárez victims, such as facts or names of the young women murdered or even details after Perla’s kidnapping. Readers are told that Perla is killed by her kidnapers, leading to Celeste’s immigration from El Paso-Ciudad Juárez to San Antonio. Acosta relays some of these Juárez atrocities through the packet of materials Celeste carries with her to the Sánchez-Milligan’s. At one brief point in the novel, Beatriz musters the courage to go through this packet, and regretfully finds “the most gruesome photos she’d ever seen: a mutilated body, so distorted and swollen it didn’t look human” (193). Briefly, the novel provides a peek into the harsh reality of the Juárez femicides, of which Perla herself becomes a victim. Perla’s visibility and credibility through her community activism in Juárez cause her to become a target of the perpetrators of this crime because, in Josie words, “[t]here’s nothing more dangerous than a woman who’s discovered the full range of her power [voice]” (103). Chicana and Latina cultural norms encourage females to remain silent, voiceless, invisible, and compliant with the mechanisms that control them. “Perla had moved beyond that” controllable, silent woman, states Josie (103), and thus she becomes a victim of the oppressive violence she worked to expose. The details of her murder are not given, only that she was taken in the middle of the night and then later found dead. Perla’s story becomes the story of the murdered Juárez women that Josie is researching. When Perla is killed, Josie serves as a testimonialista for this missing part of Perla’s history to the Sánchez-Milligan family and to the reader of the novel. Having witnessed her mother’s life and work in Juárez, Celeste also testifies to this connection between Perla and the Juárez female collective, symbolically marked at the close of Celeste’s quinceañera ceremony when she places a rose on two empty chairs and then states: “This is my mother’s place [and] this is for anyone else who should be here and isn’t” (299). Just as Levins Morales recognizes a connection between the personal and political, self and community, with her realization that “excavating and revealing the truth about my experiences of abuse, and the sense of empowerment and release that process brought me was the same process as excavating and telling the truth about the centuries of invasion, enslavement, patriarchal rule, accommodation, collaboration and resistance” (*Medicine Stories* 3), Celeste makes the connection between reinscribing her mother with reinscribing Juárez women.

CONCLUSION

This article began with a quote from Acosta's *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over* in which Perla tells Josie that "not everyone gets their story told. If you don't tell it, who will?" (98). In turn, we can ask: if writers like Acosta don't tell these stories, who will? As a Chicana YA writer, Acosta introduces the social injustice of Juárez femicide to the young adult audience through the quinceañera novel. With her second novel in the *Quinceañera Club* series, Acosta "was eager to push the envelope further [than with the first novel]" and she was "proud of how [she] was able to weave in an underreported, yet enduring problem (nowadays, overshadowed by the more sensational drug-war violence). [She] wanted Perla to be more than a nameless victim but someone readers would truly mourn, along with the other Women of Juárez" ("Write" 27). Acosta expressly dedicates the novel to "the missing, the murdered, the disappeared, and the exploited, here and the world over" (*Sisters* n.p.). *Sisters, Strangers, and Starting Over* offers a nuanced and consistently counter-hegemonic representation of Chicanas and the issues of female violence, creating strong Latina characters, both adult and young adult, who are multidimensional and differ from the stereotypical representations of Latinas in popular culture.

Acosta succeeds in portraying three strong Chicana main characters (Beatriz, Perla, and Celeste) and one strong Chicana supporting character (Josie). All of the adult Chicanas are educated, bilingual, working women with families to support. Rather than helpless victims, Acosta represents Chicanas as agents who consistently challenge gender-based hegemonic forces in and outside of the familia. Acosta uses her position as cultural insider to "rail against" her culture's mistreatment of young Chicanas, e.g. the abandonment of those who transgress sexual boundaries or are labeled as "hociconas"⁷ (Perla), and the condoned and silenced sexual violence in Latinx culture (the Juárez women). Acosta offers a critique of these cultural oppressions and embeds a challenge to nativist prejudice and discrimination through her portrayal of the white male supporting characters of Larry and his nephew Seamus who, like his uncle, views Celeste as a threat to the Sánchez-Milligan household. Acosta's novel never resorts to negative, stereotypical depictions, such as those found in Alan Lawrence Sitomer's YA novel *The Secret Story of Sonía Rodríguez* (2008), where Sonia's mother is depicted as lazy, pregnant, resistant to learning English, and watching telenovelas all day to the neglect of her children. Nor does it follow a trend in Chicana and Latina YA novels in which mothers, particularly working-class mothers, are not supportive of their daughters; for example, Kelly Parra's *Graffiti Girl* (2008) and Sandra Lopez's *Esperanza: A Latina Story* (2007) depict single-parent Chicana mothers who physically and emotionally neglect their teen daughters, and contemporary Latina writer Elizabeth Acevedo's breakout YA novel *The Poet X* (2018) depicts an emotionally distant and controlling Puerto Rican mother. Instead, Acosta's mother characters are shown as multidimensional, grappling with

7 Translated as "loud mouth women".

the complications of motherhood, whilst sharing mutual respect and love with their children. Perla becomes a role model for Celeste, who has seen the contributions of her outspoken, hard-working mother in the Juárez community. In turn, Celeste's mother encourages her daughter to pursue education "like her sister who went to a big school up north and became a great woman" (Acosta, *Sisters* 266). These positive Chicana mothers, who treat their daughters with equal respect and support, counterbalance the patriarchal treatment of girls in Chicana culture demonstrated in Perla's own story in the novel. Perla's character has learned the hard way what it means to be disregarded by one's family.

By telling the story of a Juárez victim, Acosta constructs a compelling testimonio-like critique of the insidious impact of silencing oppressions in Chicana/Latina family and culture. Moreover, she produces a YA literary narrative that challenges the Chicano familia romance and its intracommunity silences that must be broken to create change. Perla's name translates to "pearl", which is precious and rare when discovered, and for Acosta, the Perla's of the world are precious and should not remain hidden. Acosta's work is crucial to offering YA literature that introduces social justice issues to young adult readers. Diana Aramburu aptly argues that the important work of literature professors is to offer young adults this type of fiction: "to search for visibility and answers to human rights issues" (321), particularly femicide and gender-based violence (321). Acosta's creative work is helping young adults dialogue and reimagine a world without the hidden, silenced, or victimized in Latina families and communities.

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