

## Planting the Seeds of Change: Im/migrant Life Writings

By Michelle Johnson Vela<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The subject of land, working it and owning it, is an inherent part of Chicano/a autobiography, as exemplified by the life writings of Elva Treviño Hart. The term “im/migrant” connotes transition and mobility, crossing borders, shifting parameters, all of which are fundamental facts of life for Chicano/a authors. A collective sense of community proves to be the only stasis in the narrators’ young lives, and the migrant camps become a microcosm in which societal and cultural rituals are conducted, despite the lack of control over the constantly shifting spaces they occupy. Being Mexican American, however, signifies a precarious existence in both the Mexican (home, barrio, field) and the Anglo world (school, marketplace), and this coexistence creates a tension between the collective and the individual, which results in an “open wound,” as expressed by Gloria Anzaldúa. From the outset, Elva Treviño Hart depicts her life on the periphery in terms of work, class, ethnicity and gender. Her physical detachment at the edge of the field is symbolic of her sense of alienation at home and in Anglo society. Like Treviño Hart, many Chicanos/as portray their family’s need to claim their own space, to declare ownership, and to procure a sense of stability in an often alien(ating) world. Ultimately, however, many of these authors reconcile the two worlds they navigate by separating from their community through the process of writing and self-discovery. In so doing, they embrace their culture and become empowered, not devalued, by their difference. Thus, these Chicano/a writers help to restructure the traditional notion of autobiography by (re)claiming their space and re-defining and re-negotiating the literary and cultural parameters which once were perceived to be immutable.

*Keywords:* Chicanos, Latina autobiography, migrant labor

### Introduction

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican American authors produced, and occasionally published, accounts of life in the Southwest. However, it was not until after Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, inspired by Martin Luther King and César Chávez, founded the militant Chicano civil rights organization "Crusade for Justice" in Denver and published his epic poem "I am Joaquín/Yo soy Joaquín" in the 1960s that the development of Chicano literature and the nationalist ideology truly materialized (Kanellos 162-3). From that point on, Chicano/a literature and theater also began to question and denounce openly the second-class status of and racist attitudes toward the Mexican American in the United States and to celebrate the Chicano/a heritage and gain the respect and appreciation of a wider audience, White and non-White. El “Teatro Campesino,” founded in 1965 by Luis Valdez, altered the Latino/a literary and artistic landscape as well, by educating migrant workers through theatrical enactments on ways in which to evoke social change. Latino/a migrant literature blossomed during this period, with Tomás Rivera’s ...y no se lo tragó la tierra and Raymond Barrio’s The Plum Plum Pickers, both published in 1971. With this increasing literary production and the founding

---

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of Spanish, Texas A&M University-Kingsville, MSC 162, 700 University Boulevard, Kingsville, Texas 78363

of national magazines and literary presses dedicated solely to Hispanic literature, such as the Revista Chicano-Riqueña and Arte Público Press, U.S. Latino culture and literature at last have been able to gain a broader recognition and a stronger foothold in "mainstream" literature. Chicana authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Mary Helen Ponce also have produced literary works that voice the experience of the Latino/a migrant workers, but none has produced a more personal, comprehensive autobiographical account of the childhood of migrant workers than Elva Treviño Hart with Barefoot Heart (1999). For this reason, my study will center on Treviño Hart's memoir within the larger context of the Latino/a migrant workers' plight. Barefoot Heart portrays the childhoods of migrant children in an intensely personal fashion and is relatively traditional in form and chronologically linear. Although little criticism has been devoted to this particular autobiography, the theme of Latino/a migrant life writings is one that certainly will be granted increasing scholarly attention in the near future as the U.S. Latino population continues to rise.

In response to the political movements organized by Chicanos in the 1960s and 70s and to the growing interest in autobiography, recent literary criticism has begun to call particular attention to ethnic autobiographies written by women and to demonstrate the fundamental differences between the autobiographies of Euroamerican women and those of women of color. Whereas the former tend to be more individualized and self-reflective, the life stories of women of color often portray a family and community-oriented consciousness that frequently conflicts with the author's desire for independence. In contrast to the highly individualized Anglo autobiographical tradition that has endured for centuries, stands an autobiographical corpus of works by Latina writers in the U.S. which displays a more "other-directed" (Castillo 242) communal countenance, frequently political and often socio-economically cogent. Although the subject clearly is an individual, she is not, nor can she be, the "individualist" characterized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Alarcón 29). Much commentary has been made on the reasons for this non-individuation, one of them provided by Susan Stanford Friedman, who affirms that:

It [Isolate individualism] is [...] the privilege of power. A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex. He can think of himself as an "individual." Women and minorities, reminded at every turn in the great cultural hall of mirrors of their sex or color, have no such luxury. (75)

Latinas in the United States have even less "luxury" than Anglo-American women, who at least have the privilege of "forgetting" the color of their skin. For this reason, the Hispanic female author rarely accentuates her individuality at the expense of her national, racial, familial origin or gender.

The Chicana's connection to the land remains an integral component not only of her livelihood, but also of her identity. Indeed, her "ideology is in this earth, this continent" (Váldez 89-90). As evoked in multiple texts, the forced separation of Chicanos/as from their land parallels the separation from the indigenous mother(land), the very essence of one's self. Gloria Anzaldúa celebrates the indigenous composition of the Chicana and her intrinsic bond with the earth, contrasting this connection with a "White America" (Borderlands 68), which "she feels has only attended to the body of the

earth in order to exploit it, never to succor it or to be nurtured in it" (68). She underscores the importance of respecting the land and the Chicana's cooperative role in the eternal circle of life:

Growth, death, decay, birth. The soil prepared  
again and again, impregnated, worked on. A  
constant changing of forms, *renacimientos de la*  
*tierra madre*.

This land was Mexican once  
was Indian always  
and is.

And will be again.

(Borderlands 91)

Anzaldúa depicts the borderlands as an "herida abierta," which continually bleeds as the First and Third World grate against each other (3); however, this wound initially was inflicted by the Mexican people's lost connection with the earth and is deepened by the fact that Mexican (American) migrant workers are exploited and are forced to toil for a pittance the very land that was snatched from their indigenous ancestors. In a very real sense, these workers have been bastardized, disowned and abandoned, and they represent the condition of many Chicanos in the United States.

While great strides have been made in the appreciation of the Chicano/a, a sense of not belonging, or at least of living in the margin, often persists. What is of paramount concern in this study is the manner in which the contemporary Latina in the United States relates autobiographically to the Anglo world in which she lives, and how her family and community participate in the formation and representation of her selfhood and her interpersonal relationships. These very relationships will be shown to have political implications, whether gender or class-based.

### **The Migrant Years**

In Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child, Elva Treviño Hart depicts with poignant clarity the plight of Mexican (American) migrant agricultural laborers in the United States, arguably the most neglected and under-represented minority group in the nation. Treviño Hart offers the reader a bildungsroman of a young Mexican American girl who defies the odds and attains the seemingly unattainable; unlike Ponce, however, Treviño Hart paints a childhood picture of inconstancy, endurance and want on multiple levels, as well as the struggle between the individual and the collective and the longing to escape despite the compulsion to remain. Thus, Treviño Hart proffers an intimate portrayal of a sector of society often ignored and disdained by Anglos: the Mexican (American) migrant worker. Young Elva struggles with living on the margin of society as she and her family travel each year from Texas to Minnesota, where the adults and older children work as manual laborers in the beet fields. Within her own family, she vacillates between her sense of isolation as the youngest child who is unable to go out and work the fields, and the sense of security and belonging that community and family bring. Although her family migrates to Minnesota each year, Elva and her siblings must attend school and finish the academic year in Pearsall, Texas at the insistence of their

father. The fields and the classroom thus represent sites of transculturation and conflict for Elva, as well as an example of the cross-cultural terrain she navigates.

The first summer in Minnesota, Elva, the youngest child by a number of years, and her sister are separated from their family working the fields and are placed in a home under the supervision of nuns, which results in an excruciatingly painful experience for the two. In later years, Elva, still too young to work, is relegated to the edge of the fields, as her parents and siblings work. Her physical marginality at the side of the field reflects her sense of alienation within her family and within society at large. As a child, she possesses no toys and must pass the time in virtual solitude; in fact, she remembers her birthday being celebrated only once during her childhood (Treviño Hart 58). Thus, on numerous occasions throughout the text, Treviño Hart illustrates the solitude that characterized her working-class upbringing. Even within a close-knit family and community, she is perpetually "stamped with aloneness" (41).

Throughout her narrative, Treviño Hart vacillates between the individual and the collective. A sense of living on the margin, of not completely belonging, pervades her existence:

It seemed I had been singled out for aloneness my whole life. In the womb was the first time I was unwanted, not part of the family. [...] Then I was separated by age. My brothers and sisters were all teenagers, one or two years apart. [...] the only time I was all right was when I was alone. And now it looked as though there was more aloneness in my future. (205)

Elva's notion that she was unwanted in the womb frequently is contradicted in the text by the abundance of security and warmth that her family brings to a life of poverty in every other sense of the word. Her contradictory feelings of alienation and family security engender Elva's need to write about her life and attain a sense of belonging through the act of writing as an adult. Solitude alternately provides comfort and loneliness; although she feels "all right" when she is alone, communing with nature or reading, young Elva still is conscious of her status as "a Mexican migrant child with dirty, bare feet playing at the edge of the field" (206), belonging neither completely to the Anglo world nor to her family and community.

The poverty that marks the life of a migrant worker reveals itself through Treviño Hart's narration; the economic deprivation that she and her family suffer results in a poverty of words and emotions. Indeed, Treviño Hart clarifies that, rain or shine, "There were no good days here" (38). A world where "The skinny legs and arms of all the kids were full of pain and felt heavy, even though they weighed nothing" (42) renders Apá (father) and Amá (mother) unable to bestow much love or affection on their children. In addition, Elva, the youngest, is painfully aware that she was an unwanted pregnancy and feels the alienation every day of her life. Whether exaggerated or not, this perception contributes to her sense of marginality within her own family. Treviño Hart clarifies her sentiments thus:

I grew up with a vague feeling of being unwanted and wondering if anyone could love a child like me. I spent much time feeling as though I bothered everyone; the only time I was all right was when I was alone. And I was alone a lot. (73)

Though this passage appears to reflect a countervailing sense of community and family that brings her security and that characterizes much of her childhood, Elva recognizes that she initially was unwanted and realizes that she is unable to contribute to the economic welfare of the family. Thus, as in many autobiographies by U.S. Latinas, a tension arises between the draw of the community and the countervailing need to be an individual within and outside of it. Because of Elva's sense of modern alienation, she often feels "authentic" only when she is alone. She craves Amá's attention but realizes that she is only one of many and that the intimacy she feels with her mother is but temporary. Thus, young Elva, starved for attention, eagerly anticipates her mother's routine search for lice on her scalp, hoping she finds one, in order to prolong at any cost the rare intimacy these moments bring with Amá.

### **Shifting Parameters**

Ever conscious of her reader, Treviño Hart commences Barefoot Heart with a proclamation that challenges the Western notion of the importance of the self: "I am nobody. And my story is the same as a million others" (prologue). Thus, the author negates her selfhood and asserts her collective conscience, while concomitantly disproving both declarations. In as much as Anglo society has defined her in terms of ethnicity, class and gender, Elva feels herself and those like her to be invisible, nobodies. She, like all women of color, "can never assume an individual identity because they are at every turn reminded [negatively] of their gender [...] and color" (Torres 278). Consequently, conflict emerges between young Elva's desire to assert her autonomy, free of the markers placed on her by society, and her consciousness of the fact that she never can separate herself from its definition of her as a (poor) Chicana female. The alienating effect of economic exploitation dehumanizes the worker and engenders a sense of having little, if any value to the society in which he or she lives. By the same token, Elva witnesses others like her and internalizes the "Other's" (the Anglo's) devaluation of her people.

Narratologically, Treviño Hart portrays her navigation between the Self and the Other by switching subject pronouns within paragraphs. She frequently vacillates between "we" and "they" in her narration: "They were afraid the gringos would laugh and say nasty things. We still tried to hide our Mexicanness, not believing yet that it was impossible" (26). In this instance, as in others, young Elva remains separated from her siblings because of the difference in age, and even as a very young child, she has internalized the feelings of inadequacy resulting from Anglo bigotry. In the following excerpt from Barefoot Heart, Treviño Hart adopts the use of the direct object pronoun "them" to refer to Anglos, as many Anglos do when referring to people of a lower economic status or a different race: "There were very few of them that I hated, and then only for specifically bigoted acts. I truly liked some of them" (189). Though Treviño Hart finds "some of them" likeable, her use of "them" versus "I"/"we," as in the "dialectics of difference," indicates the chasm which exists between the Anglo and Latino communities and reinforces the idea of having to navigate cross-cultural terrains.

Treviño Hart presents a detailed testimonial of her experiences as a child of migrant workers in South Texas and the fields of Minnesota and Wisconsin. Indeed, she devotes more than half of her autobiographical narrative to depicting the precarious and

painful existence endured by itinerant workers and their families. Despite her mother's admonitions, young Elva constantly sheds her shoes, preferring to remain barefoot, connected to the earth. Through the sensations in her feet, she contrasts the hot, sandy dirt of Pearsall, Texas, with the cool, wet clay of Minnesota (109), the two lands she constantly navigates in her autobiographical text. In this manner, Treviño Hart explores quite literally the plight of "Mexican-Americans confronting their current situation on American soil" (Rocard 82).

Treviño Hart depicts the shame which arises from not having "a room of her own," much less a house. Whereas Virginia Woolf is compelled to find her own room within a patriarchal world, Treviño Hart, among others, seeks to fulfill a fundamental need to claim ownership within a society that is foreign to her on multiple levels, not only in terms of gender, but also class and ethnicity. Thus (re)claiming a personal space within the community and the larger Anglo world becomes highly significant. Again, the themes of desired constancy and forced transition prove to be of primary importance in many of the autobiographical works produced by U.S. Latinas.

### **Mexican Migrant Labor and Community**

Treviño Hart informs the reader that she had no childhood home to which to return for many years. Indeed, the first line of Treviño Hart's narrative informs us that she never even had a bed throughout her entire childhood (3). She is quick, however, to affirm the security provided by family, the only constant in her life. Treviño Hart explains that, after performing the nightly ritual of each family member's wishing the others good night, the family was reassured, "Close and sweet and loving. Lucky me on my small pallet on the floor" (4). Until she reaches adolescence, the "home" Elva and her family return to in Texas after the harvesting season proves to be nearly as mutable as their living quarters in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Treviño Hart articulates the forebearing resignation of her laboring family as they readily adjust to Tía Nina's laundry room with broken windows as their temporary home in Pearsall: "Having lived in other people's houses, barns, and in migrant housing in various stages of decay and repair, it felt as though we could make a home out of anything" (99). After working in the beet fields of Minnesota every summer, Elva and her family travel to Wisconsin to work the fields during the month of August. Here again, their life is marked with uncertainty: "We never knew from one day to the next, from one year to the next, where we would go or live or what we would do. The word about what kind of work was available and where came by word of mouth and by chance" (127).

Treviño Hart's mother and siblings toiled alongside her father each summer. This constant displacement of "home" and the back-breaking labor performed by Elva's parents and siblings render an ordinary childhood virtually impossible, especially for girls, as Patricia Zevalla observes:

The effect of uprooting and traveling hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles rendered childhood a blur of names and places. Many women [...] assumed adult roles early and experienced few if any years of ordinary childhood activities. (83)

Indeed, Elva's father treats his six children as adults, "expecting adult responses from us. We were a team going to work" (12).

Treviño Hart portrays the bleak desperation of her family's life in Minnesota with sparse description. No hint of romanticization is present in her succinct accounts: "This family never talked. Hard work, sadness, and silence" (46). The resignation of her family in their plight is palpable, and the monotony often is expressed thus:

There were no Sundays, no holidays, no days off. Every day, sunup to sundown, was the same. Work all day, eat what you can, crash for the night. Do it again the next day. (59)

While rainy days and grocery days bring some relief (59), Treviño Hart explains that they must pay the price for the saving rain afterwards, for fieldwork is all the more trying because of the thick mud created by the rain. Yet family solidarity provides the principal, if not sole, means of escape from the hardships endured. Without a television or radio, the family members seek solace in each other's company, sharing stories after dinner, escaping to a distant place in their memory. Though exhausted and sore, they are able to find an oasis in the unfriendly Minnesota night: "The love and closeness in the room was like a warm sea in which we swam" (60).

Patricia Zevalla has contrasted the circumstances of Mexican American agricultural laborers with those of Japanese and Filipino workers, noting that Mexican Americans often worked as families, whereas other groups did not (8). Thus, as exemplified in Barefoot Heart, "a collective sense of family, neighborhood, and cultural bonds created thriving colonias among Mexican agricultural workers" (Ruiz 16). This sense of community provides a modicum of stability despite the daily uncertainty confronted by the workers. In Barefoot Heart, the migrant camps become a microcosm in which societal and cultural rituals are carried out: family ties are strengthened; friendships are forged, and dating rituals are conducted. Time is measured by the number of rows worked, as is personal interaction, as exemplified in Elva's account of her mother's conversation with another female worker: "Amá, a great listener, could really get the other lady to talk a lot - to dump all the gossip she knew in one length of row" (40-1). Treviño Hart also depicts the bittersweet coming-of-age romance between her brother Rudy and a young girl from the migrant camp. Unfortunately, the impermanence of the workers' life terminates these budding relationships before they truly take proper shape or materialize. The literal navigation of terrains results in disruption and inconstance. Hence, the fields become a microcosm of the *barrio*, as relationships are forged, and bonds are created. Normalcy is sought and marginally attained until the season ends, and the families return to their other homes. Therefore, relationships are interrupted continually, and a sense of impermanence becomes the only true constant. Once again, the harvesting season proves to be a defining factor in the social, economic and personal aspects of the lives of the workers and their families.

As Vicki L. Ruiz observes, "Migrant workers, both past and present, have occupied a vulnerable, precarious sector of the working class" (16). Indeed, migrant agricultural laborers may be considered a "subclass" within the working class because of their perpetual economic instability, as well as their lack of control over the constantly shifting spaces they occupy. Treviño Hart clarifies that classism was part of her

childhood existence (118). The Anglo and Mexican communities in her native Pearsall, Texas, were clearly bisected by the railroad tracks, and from a young age she was conscious of the distinctions between the two sectors of society. In her prologue to Barefoot Heart, Treviño Hart addresses her Anglo reader by poignantly, if not ironically, adopting his or her anticipated hegemonic perspective and responding to it:

Poor Mexican American. Female child. We all look alike: dirty feet, brown skin, downcast eyes. You have seen us if you have driven through South Texas on the way to Mexico. We are there - walking barefoot by the side of the road. During harvest time there are fewer of us - we are with our families in the fields. (prologue)

Thus, class and ethnicity are fused together and are often indistinguishable from one another. Treviño Hart compares her sense of not belonging in Anglo society to the old beggar woman she spots inside the door of a Mexican church. The author identifies with this indigent woman: "I have felt like her before, as if I want to be in a place, but I don't know if I belong. A beggar in a room full of monied gringos" (202). Just as Elva constantly is on the periphery because of her ethnicity and class, the beggar woman she witnesses in Mexico is marginalized because of her economic condition. Elva identifies with the sense of hopelessness she detects. Yet, after the priest gives the old woman several rolls of bread, Elva realizes her mistake; the woman does have hope, which is reflected in her broad smile. Thus, Elva's sense of marginality based on class and ethnicity in the United States mirrors the class-based ostracism suffered by the mendicant in Mexico, but a glimmer of possibility is revealed in the old woman's smile, both for herself and for Elva. By identifying with the old beggar woman, in terms of class, gender and ethnicity, and by re-evaluating her own achievements in rising above her material conditions, Elva appears to consider briefly the idea that change is possible if people gather together with a sense of community and that joy may be experienced as a source of community and power (Faulkner 146).

### **Women in the Fields**

The role of work in the Latino community is of primary significance in Barefoot Heart. Gender roles within the context of employment provide insight into an often contradictory situation. Whereas second-generation Latinas in the United States often work outside the community, their immigrant mothers and grandmothers generally do not, and both generations continue to face conflicting messages from both within and outside the *barrio*, as demonstrated in many of these women's autobiographies. Despite a proud and lengthy history of labor activism<sup>1</sup>:

the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy contains an inherent contradiction: capitalists and husbands have competing interests in women's labor. In different historical periods, capitalists have preferred either that women enter the labor market (during World War II) or that they return to homemaking (immediately after World War II). In all periods, husbands have been interested in personal and family service. (Zevalla 3)

Patricia Zevalla further asserts that the incorporation of the southwestern U.S. into the capitalist world economy has been instrumental in developing the Chicano working class (6).<sup>2</sup> Immigrant women's work outside the home which supports the continuity of family and community, such as the summer beet picking conducted annually in Barefoot Heart, is accepted and often is the rule rather than the exception. Indeed, the "nexus of community and family resonates throughout the history of Mexicans in the United States" (Ruiz 87), as evidenced by the network of communication among Mexican American migrant workers. As Georgina Dodge observes, need for employment and "the 'grapevine of job information' [...]" (qtd. in Galarza 201) (155) "[...] fuels communal dependency within the *barrio*" (155). Similarly, an immediate connection is formed when unacquainted migrant workers come into contact with each other away from the fields.

Though first-generation Mexican females frequently remained within the *barrio* and were relegated to "women's work" inside the home, agricultural work during the harvest proved to be an exception to the rule. With relatively few exceptions, women worked in the fields at the side of their husband or father out of sheer economic necessity. These conditions rendered discrimination between the sexes often implausible, at least in the fields. Ramón Saldívar asserts that, even in the nineteenth century, Mexican American women often worked in the general labor markets, as well as within the home, because of their dire economic conditions (20). Even so, they were not permitted to be employed as waitresses, maids or laundry help, as they were not culturally 'protected' in those arenas (qtd. in Sánchez 7). Evidence of this phenomenon is provided in Barefoot Heart when Treviño Hart recounts her father's position regarding outside employment:

We don't clean gringo bathrooms. Working in the fields with the vegetables is honest, clean work. Being a maid is not for us.' [...] No, we couldn't be waitresses either; it was better to have your daughters next to you in the fields, covered with pants, a work shirt, and a hat, where you could protect them. (28)

Though Elva's sisters long to work outside of the community, Apá's pride will not permit their commodification in the Anglo world. Though they continue to request their father's permission over the years, Elva and her sisters must surrender their desire, unable to voice their resistance as long as they remain under their father's roof. Thus, in addition to cultural "protection," not permitting work outside Mexican American society becomes a question of pride and a temporary means of retarding transculturation. The Mexican American female's position beside her husband in the fields may blur the division of labor according to gender, but it in no way diminishes or reduces the prescribed role of women's chores within the home (Ruiz 24). The majority of migrant mothers lead a 'double day' existence, toiling in the fields and returning to the chores at the camp (Ruiz 17). Elva's mother proves to be no exception to the rule.

Treviño Hart's portrayal of Amá presents her as a rather enigmatic woman. Young Elva invariably seeks her mother's love and acceptance and procures intermittent moments of intimacy. Throughout the major part of the narrative, Amá is depicted as an overburdened woman with little to none of her selfhood remaining. She stoically accepts

her role, sacrificing what she can for her children, enduring without complaint the callouses on her hands from toiling the fields, returning home to prepare the evening meal. The only indication of her distress is indicated by intermittent sighs and utterances as recollected by Treviño Hart. Amá's individuality is completely subsumed by work and duty. Treviño Hart's poignant recollection of an incident involving her mother evokes not resentment, but sympathy. After staying up to clean after everyone has gone to bed, Amá stubs her toe in the dark on the way to bed. Upon hearing her cry and turning on the light, Luis and his siblings observe that:

She hadn't washed her feet and they looked filthy in the light of the naked bulb. But that wasn't the worst part. She had a peeled orange that she apparently planned to eat in bed. Fruit was an extremely rare treat. She had waited until everyone was asleep so she wouldn't have to share it eight ways. Poor Amá. (125)

Because self-indulgence is virtually unheard of in Elva's world, as is personal autonomy, especially for women, Elva's mother attempts to secure a bit of both on the sly, but is thwarted in her attempt at momentary emancipation. A piece of fruit, which would be taken for granted even by an individual of the middle-class, is coveted and considered a luxury by those in the migrant community. Amá attempts to enjoy a bit of individual pleasure, albeit temporarily. The accompanying frustration, suggest the very tension that Elva experiences in her quest for individual autonomy in a communal world. Thus, she empathizes with her Amá, recognizing the inherent desire and futility of her act.

Amá's quiet acceptance occasionally is shattered by violent anxiety attacks in which she "escapes" to another world. During these sporadic attacks, she completely loses touch with reality and becomes incoherent. The first such incident as characterized by Treviño Hart occurs when Apá and his son are late in returning home from an evening fishing expedition. The children, having experienced their mother's fits, sense the approaching storm with trepidation. Treviño Hart depicts her mother's disconnection from the world thus: "She had loosened her hold on the world and was in her own private hell. No one could reach her. She continued with her deep sighs and moans" (48-9). Upon regaining consciousness and control of her body after her husband's return, Amá has no recollection of what has taken place. The prospect of losing her husband and having to assume sole responsibility for her family is too overwhelming and sends her into a state of shock. Also plausible is Amá's need to disengage from her awesome responsibilities, to be alone and unaccountable, even if it is in a "private hell." I would posit that Amá's bouts with lunacy allow her to withstand the overwhelming obstacles she faces daily by reserving her own private space inaccessible to everyone but herself. Despite Amá's "retreats," Amá seems to lack reproductive control. Treviño Hart recognizes that her mother:

[...] was embarrassed when I was born. I was living proof that she still let my father part her legs, and she was ashamed. She had wanted the world to think that she was done with babies and with sex. (72)

Amá's acquiescence to Apá is emblematic of her inability to claim an autonomous space in her world, and in some part, justifies Elva's sense of not being "wanted."

As a child, Elva perceives inequalities in gender within her family, as she continually (and unsuccessfully) attempts to live up to the same standards set for her brother Rudy. Though she is witness to a seeming gender-based equality in the beet fields, Elva soon learns that girls are not as "useful" as boys in any of life's other arenas. Though Luis, the oldest son, is expected to be everyone's favorite, he soon loses out to Rudy, his younger, smoother brother (67-8). From then on, Elva seeks the favor bestowed upon Rudy with little success. Memories from her childhood reflect her need for acceptance by the men in the family:

I wanted my father to like me. I wanted my brothers to like me. Sitting at the base of the mesquite tree, I decided that no one would ever call me "presumida." I would never forget my place. I would be what the men in my life expected me to be: a poor Mexican girl who knew how to be quiet. (110)

Elva's decision to conform to her prescribed role as poor, Mexican, and female reflect an interconnection between class, ethnicity and gender. Despite her acquiescence, or perhaps because of it, Elva never relinquishes the idea that she is disappointing her male relatives. Treviño Hart recounts several incidents in which she was permitted to perform one of Rudy's usual functions: opening the latched farm gate and dicing jalapeños. Unable to complete either task successfully, she is labeled "una muchacha inútil" (182) by her father. Thus, her role is relegated to performing simple chores requiring little talent or skill, those better suited to a girl: "I was the one who got out of the car to deliver the hot lunch. The bringer of hot tortilla tacos and cool salsa" (183). Clearly, Elva's father had hastened to confirm the ineptitude of his youngest daughter and to cultivate within her an enduring sense of inadequacy in the domestic realm, which leads Elva to question again whether or not she "belongs" in this world. Consequently, Elva compensates for her sense of marginality as a female in a male-dominated world by resolving to succeed where no one else in her family has: academics. By the fourth grade, Elva is determined to focus all her energy on the goal of attending and completing college. Thus, ironically, Apá and her brothers assist in facilitating Elva's ultimate journey toward emancipation.

### **Living in the Margins**

Most of Treviño Hart's Barefoot Heart depicts the author's life on the periphery in terms of work, class, ethnicity and gender. From the outset, her physical detachment at the edge of the field is symbolic of her sense of alienation at home and in Anglo society. Elva witnesses her older siblings' embarrassment at bringing tortilla tacos to school, preferring to hide their "Mexicanness" and return home for lunch rather than endure the cruel remarks of the Anglo students (26). Though too young to work, Elva absorbs her siblings' sense of shame at having to leave home every summer and sweat in the fields, perceived as Anglos' slaves. Not only does her sister Delmira feel ashamed in front of Anglos, but she also feels compelled to hide her family's migrant status from her classmates:

She didn't know how she could ever tell them that she was being taken out of school to go in the back of a canvas-covered truck to work in the fields.

She knew their responses would be cruel. She decided to face the problem at the end of the summer. (12)

Relegated to living in a barn previously reserved for livestock, Elva's family, like so many others, must swallow its pride and endure its plight. Obligated to accept gratefully the Anglo farmer's wife's condescendingly generous offer of the "old" frozen food from the freezer she's clearing for fresh food, Delmira grits her teeth and later vows to escape the dire conditions she and her family must abide. Elva also witnesses her seemingly persistent Apá's insecurity and fear at the prospect of being so many miles from home in unknown surroundings (8). Thus, shame and insecurity plague Elva's family, as her sense of alienation intensifies.

Segregation and riding at the back of the bus are facts of life for Mexican Americans until the day that Elva's brother Rudy moves himself and his siblings to the front, proclaiming their right to be treated equally. Despite this victory, Elva is fully aware of her inferior status as a Mexican American, as she demonstrates in her depiction of the "Anglo" school and the "Mexican" school:

There was a green, grassy lawn all around the Eastside School. The playground of the Westside was bare red dirt and weeds. [...] There were only two or three elementary-school-age black children in town. They went to the Eastside School along with the white kids. In Pearsall, Mexicans came last. (75)

When Elva reaches the fifth grade, integration is mandated, though *de facto* segregation continues within her school. Institutionalized racism is prevalent and ethnic division is the rule.

Despite these obstacles, however, Elva soon discovers the power of knowledge and her academic prowess. She finds that she excels in school and works diligently to triumph in spite of the odds she faces. Treviño Hart's autobiographical character acquires a previously unattainable sense of fulfillment and belonging in books and writing: "I left the black and white movie of my childhood and escaped into the Technicolor world of books. Pearsall became too small for me, like an outgrown dress" (165). Elva repeatedly emphasizes the gratitude she feels toward her father for realizing the importance of education. Having completed very little schooling himself, Apá foregoes a month of extra income from work in the fields to allow his children to finish each school year in Texas. Never dreaming of more, he wishes for all his children to complete high school, a phenomenon unheard of in many Mexican American families at the time. Indeed, Elva's parents, ignorant of the school system, merely "[...] hoped I wouldn't get pregnant and that I stayed in school long enough to get a job that didn't involve dirt or being someone's servant" (175). Despite this limited goal, however, Elva longs to attend college and articulates her dreams to her father, who supports her wishes. Although he saves his pennies and delays the family's annual departure for the fields in order to see that his children attend school, the notion of attending college seems an unattainable, if not inconceivable, goal. However, Elva's success in academics compensates for her sense of inadequacy at home and in the fields. She ultimately achieves her goal, attends college and leaves Pearsall behind, at least in a physical sense.

Treviño Hart devotes generous attention to the role of education in her formative years. Even after integration, Mexican Americans are designated as being "different." The author relates the various ways in which her ethnicity serves to restrict her and her fellow Chicano/a students. An example of this repression is found in the story of Gilbert, a Mexican American classmate of Elva's. Having drawn a superb rendition of a charred forest for an art competition using only pencil and posterboard, Gilbert is disqualified. The Anglo administration denies or cannot conceive of the possibility that the boy could have produced such a work and accuses him of cheating. Rather than argue, he and his Mexican American friends do not refute the allegation. At such a young age, they are already aware of the futility of subverting Anglo hegemony. Despite being able to prove his innocence, the students say nothing, for they realize that:

They didn't want proof, and they probably wouldn't accept it, anyway. They saw what they wanted to see. A Mexican artist would not get far in Pearsall. (154)

Elva's academic success also must be restricted by the Anglo administration. Though she probably has earned the highest grade point average of the entire class, Elva never knows for a fact because of the distinction between the categories of academic awards: "High Point Girl," "High Point Boy," "High Point Mexican Girl," and "High Point Mexican Boy" (174). These classifications are designated after the "integration" of the schools in Pearsall, Texas. Though Elva adores reading and writing, she is determined to excel in mathematics because "My history teacher could judge me less than the white kids, as could my English and band teachers, but I could fight the system in math and win" (177). Although Elva believes that the clean orderliness of education is trivial compared to working in the fields (179), for her, as one who lacks self-esteem at home and in Anglo society, academics becomes the medium in which she is able to subvert the master discourse. By using the tools provided to her by the "conqueror," Elva overcomes her sense of inadequacy. Despite attempts by the establishment to repress exceptional Chicano/a talent, Elva ultimately triumphs. Ultimately, the skills she acquires through education and her ability to express herself through writing will provide the deliverance she has longed for throughout her childhood. Elva now is capable of (re)claiming the grief "as I write the migrant stories--safely. So that experiencing my family's migrant days again as I write them doesn't destroy me. I am safe and deeply loved" (97). The process of writing proves to be cathartic for Elva, as it has been for so many Latinas. For Elva Treviño Hart, attaining monetary and professional success in the "nine-to-five" world ultimately leads to disillusionment, pushes her to re-evaluate her life, return to her origins and, as she says, "integrate my childhood Mexican side back into myself" (235). After confronting her aging father and reconnecting with her siblings, Treviño Hart finds solace and realizes the power of embracing her authentic self (236). In so doing, she is able to proclaim with honesty and assurance, "I am no longer alone; I have found my pack" (236).

At last, Elva is able to reconcile the two worlds she navigates, without shame or apology, no longer on the periphery, and she does it through the process of writing and self-discovery. By embracing "the ugliness of the migrant years" (Treviño Hart 236), Treviño Hart is able to discover that she is admittedly an individual who has found her

place in the community and is empowered, not devalued, by her gender and ethnicity: "I saw how much power there is in embracing exactly who you are. For me, it is being a Mexican American woman writer" (236). By challenging traditional concepts of autobiography, Elva Treviño Hart, and a growing number of Latina writers, are helping to re-define and re-negotiate literary parameters which once were perceived to be invulnerable.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup>In her chapter "With Pickets, Baskets, and Ballots," in From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America, Vicki L. Ruiz elucidates the many political organizations and strikes in which Mexican American women have participated, primarily since the 1930s. Her examples include, but are not limited to: LULAC, El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española, the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, the San Joaquín Valley Cotton Strike, and numerous others.

<sup>2</sup>Patricia Zevalla explains that: "The conquest of the "new world" by Spain in the sixteenth century brought gold and silver to the Spanish state and fueled primitive capitalist accumulation" (qtd. in Chapa 1981: 6). She adds that in the feudal society established in colonial Mexico, class structure was based on racial hierarchy. As Mexico colonized what is now the American Southwest, the same class and race categories were established there, forming the basis of class and racial stratification in the United States (p.6).

## References

- Alarcón, Norma. "The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo American Feminism. " Criticism in the Borderlands. Eds. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar. Durham: Duke U Press, 1991. 28-39.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.
- Castillo, Debra A. "Rosario Castellanos: "Ashes Without a Face." Decolonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. 242-69.
- Chapa, Jorge. "Wage Labor in the Periphery: Silver Mining in Colonial Mexico." Review 4:3 (1981): 509-534.
- Dodge, Georgina. Recovering Acts in American Im/migrant Autobiography. Diss. U of California at Los Angeles, 1996. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1997. 9640253.
- Faulkner, Mara. Protest and Possibility in the Writing of Tillie Olsen. Charlottesville: U Press of Virginia, 1993.
- Galarza, Ernesto. Barrio Boy. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame Press, 1971.
- Kanellos, Nicolás. Hispanic Firsts. Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1997.
- Rocard, Marcienne. The Children of the Sun: Mexican-Americans in the Literature of the United States. Trans. Edward G. Brown, Jr. Tucson: U of Arizona Press, 1989.
- Ruiz, Vicki L. From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Saldívar, Ramón. Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference. Madison: U of

- 
- Wisconsin Press, 1990.
- Sánchez, Rosaura. "The Chicana Labor Force." Essays on La Mujer. Eds. Rosaura Sánchez and Rosa Martínez Cruz. Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Center Publications, U of California, 1977. 3-15.
- Stanford Friedman, Susan. "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice." Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 72-82.
- Torres, Lourdes. "The Construction of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies." Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1998. 276-87.
- Treviño Hart, Elva. Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child. Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1999.
- Valdez, Luis. Interview. La Raza: The Mexican-Americans. Ed. Stan Steiner. By Stan Steiner. New York: Harper, 1970. 89-90.
- Zevalla, Patricia. Women's Work and Chicano Families. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.