In-Between Cultures: Becoming Latin American Canadian

by

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Abstract

Rooted in my own experiences and extending to phenomenological interviews with seven Latin American Canadian youth between the ages of 18 and 29 in the Greater Toronto Area, this thesis examines how the dominant educational and cultural narratives shape the heterogeneous ways in which they perceive themselves and others. Findings show that such narratives engender a sense of in-betweenness among Latin American Canadian youth that both inhibit and empower them in pursuing self-fulfillment. This study juxtaposes these findings to feminist pedagogies of “third space” and “critical spirituality” which have the ability to enhance the educational experiences of not just Latin American Canadian students but all participants in education. The overarching objective of this thesis, however, transcends the case study and explores the intersections between discourse, identity formation and agency, proposing critical spirituality as a practice enabling agency and as a transformational “punctum” that embraces the process of becoming over being.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

At the age of thirteen, I was straddling between being an American, Canadian, and a Latino. Being born in El Salvador, raised as a child in Canada, and living in the United States as an adolescent led me to consistently experience movement, differences, and ambivalence when it came to my identity formation. I lived in the in-between state of the three cultures and never felt like I belonged to any one of them. Due to the civil war, my family and I left El Salvador when I was very young so I barely remembered anything about my “home” country. Indelibly, being raised by immigrant parents, the Salvadorian culture was the first culture I encountered and Spanish was the first language I spoke. But things quickly changed when I started going to school in Kitchener, Ontario. My parents opted to put me in Christian schools and I was always one of the few, if not only, racialized student in these settings. It was tough.

At the age of six or seven, I started to learn how to juggle two cultures; one at home and one at school. At home, I was Josue, but at school I was Joshua. I remember the ambivalence I felt when my peers would ask me where I was from. I would say something like, “I was born in El Salvador but I am Canadian.” I was always trying to prove the former identity to my family and the latter one to my peers and friends. But deep down inside, I felt like I was different, like an outcast. For example, I remember always interpreting between two languages (Spanish and English) at parent teacher conferences. For some reason or another, I started to feel embarrassed about my Salvadorian identity because I felt that people looked down on it. So, I tried extra hard to perform a Canadian identity, attempting to convince others and myself that I truly was Canadian. I obsessed over speaking “proper” English, ate Tim Hortons all the time, and even lied about liking hockey. No matter what I did externally, I felt inauthentic on the inside. I mean, I felt Salvadorian when I was at home eating pupusas and watching telenovelas with mi mama, but
everything would change as soon I stepped outside. And visa-versa, I felt Canadian at school or with my friends but there were always reminders that I was not fully one of them; whether it was the color of my skin, my parent’s financial hardships, or the fact that besides my father, mother, and younger brother, I had no extended family or relatives in Canada.

Unexpectedly, at the age of eleven, I was forced to move back to El Salvador with my father. I lived there for a year and along with being separated from my mother and brother, the culture shock of moving back to my “home” country was extremely difficult. Suddenly, I found myself being ridiculed for apparently speaking broken Spanish and for being Canadian or a “gringo”. Ironically, I was being ridiculed for an identity that I myself did not fully accept or belong to. Immediately, I found myself trying to perform a Salvadorian identity and was frustrated at the fact that no matter what I did, I was yet again seen as an outsider; as different. Everything about El Salvador was different for me. It is an extremely burdening situation when you feel like a foreigner in your “home” country. Fortunately, at the age of twelve, my father and I moved to Kansas in the United States and reunited with my mother and brother. However, yet again, I experienced another cultural shock when I encountered the American/Latino culture. For the first time in my life, I would hear people talking about being “Latino” or “Hispanic”. Once more, I was the different one because I was “from Canada” and on top of that I spoke “proper” English which apparently did not sit well with my American/Latino friends. At this point I was an expert, at least in my mind, at being a social chameleon and started to identify as a Latino. I changed my “proper” Canadian English and perfected an American accent in order to fit in. Whether it was because of my age or the fact I was living in Kansas, I started to encounter pervasive state, cultural and educational narratives defining and constructing the meaning of “Latino” and “Hispanic”.

This study examines the nature and effects of such narratives on Latin American Canadian youth in Canada. Rooted in my own experiences and extending to individual phenomenological
interviews with seven Latin American Canadian youth between the ages of 18 and 29 in the Greater Toronto Area, the study explores the following questions: What discourses encode the formation of Latin American Canadian youth identities in Canada? How do these discourses shape the multiple and heterogeneous ways in which Latin American Canadian youth perceive themselves, others, and the world at large? What are the implications of these processes of becoming “Latin American Canadian” for education?

In addressing these questions, the study foregrounds the role of mass media and cultural narratives that engender a sense of “in-betweenness” among Latin American Canadian youth that both inhibits and empowers them in pursuing individual self-fulfillment. Thus, as much as Latin American Canadian youth internalize raced and gendered popular narratives and stereotypes related to Latin Americans, they also share a deep sense of belonging to transnational formations while countering the political space referred to as “Latinidad”. During these formations, Latin American Canadian youth exhibit agency through resistance, resilience, and resourcefulness, enabling them to face and overcome racism, patriarchy and other oppressions in order to pursue their dreams. However, the interviews with the Latin American Canadian youth in this study demonstrate these young individuals have encountered educational spaces that do not embrace their transnational multiplicity, often creating gendered, raced and national binaries that enfold and submit Latin American Canadian youth into dominant world views and social ways of being. The study juxtaposes these arresting educational forces to feminist pedagogies of third space and critical spirituality which have the ability to enhance the educational experiences of not just Latin American Canadian students but all participants in education.

The study reveals that Latin American Canadian youth are constantly negotiating cultural and educational discursive constructions that attempt to establish hegemonic parameters around their Latin American identity. Hall (2000), defines identity as:
the “meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct as subjects which can be spoken. (p. 5-6)

This “meeting point” speaks to not only how discourse affects subjects, but also to the agency of subjects; in this case, the ability of Latin American Canadian youth to create new meanings and contest such discourses. According to Potter and Wetherell (1990), it is necessary and beneficial to analyze both “how people use discourse and how discourse uses people” (p. 213-214).

Therefore, the significance of this study lies in its contribution to critical theories on youth identity, cultural identity formations, and diasporic communities within Canada using the case study of “Latin American Canadian youth”. The study will also contribute to a better and deeper understanding of how discourse affects the actual lives of people, in this case Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. The overarching objective of this thesis, however, transcends the case study and explores the linkages between discourse, identity formation and agency, proposing critical spirituality as a practice enabling agency and as a transformational “punctum” that embraces the process of becoming over being (Barthes, 1978).

The study of these linkages between discourse, identity and agency have been an important component of feminist theories pertaining to power and resistance, which emphasize the subject’s ability to resist hegemonic discursive constructions by generating new meanings (Bacchi, 2005). Individuals actively mediate “structures and constraints to produce specific versions of themselves” (Stapleton & Wilson, 2004, p. 46). In this thesis, such versions of self are grouped under the meta signifiers of “Latinidad”; a term referring to perceived cultural and racial attributes ascribed to people in and from Latin America, including the Latin American Canadian youth in this study who actively negotiate these meanings. Magnusson (2005) speaks about how the ability to articulate multiple subject positions makes us “active co-producers”
[emphasis added] who use available understandings of the world and themselves” (p. 163). In this view, there is always a co-production of meaning between discourse and agency - constraint and contestation. In Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) delineates her borderland theory through the consciousness of the new mestiza. For Anzaldúa (1987), the new mestiza occupies the borderlands or a state of in-betweenness. This ambivalent and undetermined place is also known as nepantla, which is the Náhuatl word for an in-between state. Anzaldúa elaborates on this perspective and writes:

with the nepantla paradigm I try to theorize unarticulated dimensions of the experience of the new mestizas living in between overlapping and layered spaces of different cultures and social and geographic locations, of events and realities - psychological, sociological, political, spiritual, historical, creative, imagined. (2009, p.8)

Within this study, Latin American Canadian youth consistently conveyed the feeling of living in-between the overlapping and layered spaces of Latin American and Canadian culture. Along with being in state of ambivalence, the participants also expressed “feeling not good enough” when it comes to the formations of their Latin American Canadian identity. As a transnational identity, Latin American Canadian youth experience movement, differences, and ambivalence. Latina feminist theories elaborate on these concepts and emphasize the lived experiences of the marginalized, the non-dominant, los atravesados (Anzaldúa, 1987). By analyzing the everyday experiences of Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area, we can further explore how the hegemonic and cultural discourses of Latinidad affect them “in the flesh”. According to Cherríe Moraga (1983):

a theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives- our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings- all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience...We do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words. (p. 23)
The stories told in this study by Latin American Canadian youth speak to how the racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad (re)produce a scrutiny or *gaze* that, at times, induces *performative* identity formations.

While these psychological and sociological *in-between* realities can be troubling, all the participants expressed finding a transformational peace, or what Barthes (1975) calls “jouissance” (bliss), through *critical spirituality*. Regarding the importance of spirituality, hooks (2003) states:

> I knew only that despite the troubles of my world, the suffering I witnessed around them and within me, there was always available a spiritual force that could life me higher, that could give me *transcendent bliss* [emphasis added] wherein I could surrender all thought of the world and know profound peace. (p. 106)

For Latin American Canadian youth, *critical spirituality* was found to have the potential to create new forms of being that temporarily transcend both the constraint and contestation of Latinidad’s cultural performativity.

### 1.1 Latinidad

What constitutes Latinidad? Is Latinidad in the blood, in a certain geographic space? Is it about language, history, or culture? Alvarez (2013) defines Latinidad as a “communicative process in which Latina/os [sic] from different Latin American countries perform cultural identity in ways that enact our cultural richness and uniqueness, but also, simultaneously, construct discursive spaces in which we share, temporarily, one ‘common’ identity” (p. 51). Valdivia (2011) explains Latinidad as the “process of being, becoming, and/or performing belonging within a Latina/o diaspora of ethnicity, location, and culture” (p. 53). Latinidad can obviously have a plethora of meanings, thus, it is salient to dissect what is meant by this term and, particularly, the prevalent discourses surrounding it. There are some markers that are
immediately linked to Latinidad such as geography, language, and history. Other hegemonic narratives such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and body-type are less immediate but still taken for granted. Geographically speaking, a Latin American subject is assumed to be from, well, Latin America- which stretches from Mexico to the southern tip of South America, including some of the Caribbean (Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico). Basically, any country in the Americas that was once part of the Spanish and Portuguese empires can be defined as Latin America or Ibero-America. Thus, besides Portuguese (Brazil), Spanish is assumed to be the dominant language that defines a Latin American subject. Furthermore, historically speaking, a shared “legacy” of Iberian colonization is also a commonality between Latin Americans (Gobat, 2013).

Consequently, Latinidad signifies the social, cultural, geographic, and political construction of who and what is Latin American. In this light, Latinidad is the cultural performativity of identity, producing a sense of (be)longing or attachment to a symbolic community or in Anderson’s (1983) words, an “imagined community”. When it comes to a transnational community such as Latin American Canadian youth, how does the cultural performativity of Latinidad affect their identity formations? We cannot begin to answer this question without realizing that Latin American Canadians are a diasporic community- a “culture of hybridity that cut across and intersect national frontiers, and that are composed of people who have been dispersed forever from their homelands” (Hall, 2006, p. 265; italics in original).

Diasporic communities or cultures of hybridity, such as Latin American Canadian youth, problematize the “cultural and historical mechanics of belonging” and rattle the fundamental power of territory to determine identity. Diasporic and hybrid identity formations fracture the facile continuity of “explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness” (Gilroy, 2006, p. 123). In the case of Latin American Canadian youth, this fracturing of continuity leads
to a sense of not fully belonging to either Latin American or Canadian culture. As Hall (2006) continues to explain, cultures of hybridity are the “products of the new diasporas created by the post-colonial migrations. They must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them” (Hall, 2006, p. 266; italics in original).

1.2 Latin Americans in Canada

The Latin American community in Canada represents an interesting paradox. On one end, and in comparison to approximately 60 million Latin Americans living in the United States, they are perceived as an “invisible” minority in Canada. In fact, an article regarding ethnic communities in the influential Canadian newspaper, The Globe and Mail, called Latin Americans “Canada’s ‘invisible’ minority” on account of their “low profile” (Houpt, 2011). Yet, this relative lack of attention is juxtaposed with the visibility of culturally dominant discourses that (re)produce Latin American Canadians through racialized and gendered constructs. According to the most recent Canadian census, there are approximately 544,380 Latin Americans in Canada. Furthermore, with a population of approximately 99,920, the largest Latin American Canadian communities are located in the Greater Toronto Area (Statistics Canada, 2011). While the Latin American community in Canada represents 1.6 percent of the country’s total population, they display a growth rate roughly three times higher than the overall immigration population (49 percent vs. 12.9 percent between 2006 and 2011) (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Such a statistical portrait, accurate as it is, describes a construct that is a collection of individuals based on not only national origin but also ethnic self-identification (Armony, 2014). Consequently, within a Canadian context, Ginieniewicz and McKenzie (2014) point out that “diverse migratory statuses, difficulty in determining the ‘Latin Americanness’ of an array of
generations, and self-categorization have made it difficult for scholars, government agencies and community organizations to reach an agreement on who qualifies as a Latin American” (p. 263). Furthermore, Veronis (2010) describes Latin Americans in Toronto as “a diverse group not only in terms of nationalities but also class, ethnicity/race, culture, political affiliation, and religion”, and highlights the diasporic component many Latin Americans in Toronto share (p. 177).

Therefore, in attempt to fully capture these diasporic and transnational characteristics, throughout this thesis, I will be using the signifier “Latin American Canadian” when writing about the collective group. Latin American Canadians are Canadian citizens of Latin American descent or persons of Latin American descent residing in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). All participants in this study are of Latin American descent and were either born in Canada or arrived to Canada during their childhood years. That being said, participants in the study chose among a variety of signifiers and self-identified as either Afro-Latina, African Indigenous Latina, Latina, Latino, or Black Colombian. It is also salient to note that academic scholars and community leaders have created the signifier “Latinx” in order to battle the patriarchal gendered terms of Latino/Hispanic. While this is a great advancement towards being inclusive of people that identify as non-binary, “Latinx” is a signifier that may be limited to the North American context and academic lexicon. Finally, we must be cognizant that by using the signifier ‘Latin’, there is always a violent proximity to colonization since our Indigenous/African ancestors used the term Abya Yala (land of vital blood) before Spanish colonizers stole, raped, killed, and named the land we now call “Latin America”. Creating new linguistic signifiers that take into account the historical, diasporic, and transnational elements of our identities should be an ongoing aspiration.
Chapter 2

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks of Discourse and Identity

This thesis rests upon a constellation of feminist, postcolonial and critical theoretical and methodological frameworks pertaining to knowledge production, power, empire, race, gender and nation, which together allow for a comprehensive understanding of the youth identity formations under study. There has been extensive dialogue within academia regarding the ambivalent relationship between discourse and the subject or “whether we ought to think of subjects primarily as discourse users or as constituted in discourse (Baccchi, 2005, p. 200; italics in original). According to Foucault (1970; 1972), subject positions reflect historical power relations that produce particular types of subjects and are maintained by a cycle of practices that individuals employ in order to rationalize and reproduce our identities. What is required is “not a theory of the knowing subject, but rather a theory of discursive power” (Foucault, 1970, p. xiv).

Nevertheless, many scholars in academia have critiqued Foucault’s conceptualization of a subject that is completely formed and translated by discourse (Butler, 1993). For instance, Stuart Hall (1996) explains that Foucault’s discursive subject provides a “critical, but one-dimensional formal account of the subject of position” (p.10). Hall (1996) expands on this and writes, “Foucault reinscribes an antinomy between subject positions and the individuals who occupy them. Discursive subject positions become a priori categories which individuals seem to occupy in an unproblematic fashion” (p.10; italics in original). The inquiry of discourse and the agency we possess in the formation of our identity is a pivotal discussion within feminist analysis because it emphasizes the saliency of meaning-making (agency) in the subject’s political life (Bacchi, 2005).

Davies (1994), for instance, writes about subjects using discourses. For her, discourses “open up, or make possible, certain subject positions through and in terms of which we interact
with the world” (p. 23). One has the ability or agency to construct multiple, yet contradictory, subject positions in relation to existing dominant discourses. While in this view the subject still does not fully escape the power of discourse, Davies (1994) reminds us that subjects can maneuver through and around discourses, using them selectively as a political tool. Thus, the identity formations of Latin American Canadian youth are simultaneously shaped by “prevailing discourses/cultural meanings, and locally negotiated to produce specific versions of self” (Stapleton & Wilson, 2004, p. 48).

Equally, Potter and Wetherell (1990) acknowledge the tension between viewing subjects as “active users” of discourse and seeing discourse as “generating, enabling and constraining” (p. 213). Hence, this study explores how Latin American Canadian youth negotiate their way through pervasive but contradictory “discursive structures/meanings” (Stapleton & Wilson, 2004, p. 46). While the hegemonic discourses of Latinidad indelibly have a significant effect on the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth, there exists a compelling source of agency that actively (re)signifies the meanings of discourse since the “decentering of the subject is not the destruction of the subject” (Hall, 1996). By exploring both the constraining effects of discourse as well as the generating capabilities of Latin American Canadian youth, this thesis hopes to address scholar’s call for theories of identity that recognize the suturing of the discursive and psychic in the constitution of the subject (Butler, 1993), extending the dialogue of theoretical frameworks that combine the “discursive and disciplinary regulation with an account of the practices of subjective self-constitution” (Hall, 1996, p. 13). Furthermore, Dorothy Smith (1999) contends that we must find some alternative to the postmodern rejection of the possibility of the subject existing beyond discourse. She asserts that in order to find a subject that is independent of discourse’s positioning, we must pay attention to “the locally organized practices of actual people” (p. 98).
2.1 Scholarship on ‘Latin Americans’ and Study Contributions

There has been extensive work on how discourses affect the identity formation of Latin Americans in the United States. Negron (2014), for instance, probes the formation of “Latino/a” identity through a discursive analysis of the collective notion of “Latinidad.” She argues that Latinidad functions as a shared “Latino/a identity” and is best understood by taking into account the negotiations of collective identities in daily-situated social practices. Negron (2014) investigates how “Latino/as” in the United States invoke Latinidad in their everyday interactions, and questions to what end this affects their identity. Applying the ethnographic model, Masi de Casanova (2012) examines the “creation and diffusion of discourses of Latinidad and the ways in which individuals accept or reject these discourses” (p. 423). Although both studies are helpful in understanding the interaction between Latin Americans in the United States and the discourses of Latinidad, the effects of racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad are not specifically explored. Furthermore, both studies focus more on the linguistic aspects of Latinidad and how this affects notions of collective identity in the United States.

Hence, this study explores how the racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad (re)produce Latin American Canadian youth as the ‘Other’ by criminalizing, exoticizing, and racializing them. Edward Said’s (1978) critical work reveals that discourse shapes identities by articulating relations of Self and Other. What systems of Othering are in effect when it comes to the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth? Campbell (1992) explains that, “the construction of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an ‘inside’ from an ‘outside’, a ‘self’ from an ‘other, a ‘domestic’ from a ‘foreign’” (p. 8).

According to Coutin (2000) and De Genova (2005) Latin American identity has been discursively conflated with the criminalized Other. Research has also focused on how the state and media contribute to the prevalence of these negative identity constructions through the
“Latino/a threat narrative”, a relentless public discourse that perceives Latin Americans as a dangerous invading force who are linked to criminality and pose a threat to the nation (Chavez, 2013f; Carter, 2014). Nasreddine (2011) looks at the visual representations of Latin Americans in media and, similar to this study, problematizes the specific historical, gender, and racial homogenization of Latin American bodies. Nasreddine’s (2011) findings resolve that “Latino/a” identity, particularly for mixed bodies (racially or ethnically), as it has been constructed in the United States through media, film, and music, construct Latin American bodies as “tolerable in the U.S.” so long their diasporic and neocolonial histories are not explicitly exhibited and they are perceived to be assimilated (p.71). In a similar manner to Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area, Nasreddine (2011) concludes that Latin Americans in the United States are still imagined and represented reductively in discourse.

While such conclusions have salient comparisons to the discursive effects on Latin American Canadian youth, much of the literature is based on “Latino/a” adult immigrants in the United States. There are many intersections, such as age, immigration status, and socio-economic standing that differ significantly from the experiences of Latin American Canadian youth in this study. Factors such as undergoing adolescence or having a better socio-economic status in Canada have distinctly constraining and generating effects that adult Latin American immigrants in the United States may not encounter. Thus, it is also helpful to review the applicable literature on the discursive effects on the identity formation of Latin American youth in the United States.

Studies untangling how hegemonic discourses affect undocumented “Latino/a” youth in the United States have been helpful to understand a deeper theoretical understanding of the relationship between discourse and identity construction (De Fina, 2003; Fitts & McClure, 2015). According to Carter (2014), the dominant discourses that reproduce negative representations “problematize Latino/a identity formations and limits the types of identities available to Latino/a
students” (p.209). Furthermore, King & Punti (2012) demonstrate how these experiences are linked to Latino/a youth’s “sense of self and self-development” and the ways in which they “discursively make sense of the myriad of contradictions surrounding them” (p.235). The Latin American Canadian youth in this study also shared similar feelings of ambivalence and contradiction due to negative representations as gendered and racialized Others. Armony (2014) describes how Latino/a youth respond with alternating strategies at their disposition such as “self-denial/self-effacement, affirmation/confrontation, or choosing an alternative self-categorization” (p.16).

Resembling the Latin American Canadian youth in this study, Latin American youth in the United States adjust their behavior and construct identities in ways that deny, negotiate, or accept these narratives (Carter, 2014). Faced with malignant stereotypes, incessant discrimination and prejudices, the “negative social mirror” in which Latin American youth see themselves is especially harmful to school engagement. (Green, Rhodes, Heitler Hirsch, Suarez-Orozco & Camic, 2007). When speaking of Latin American youth in the United States, Delgado Bernal (2002) posits that critical analysis informed by race and gender allows educational researchers to “bring together understandings of epistemologies and pedagogies to imagine how race, gender, class, and sexuality are braided with cultural knowledge, practices, and spirituality (p.115).

When analyzing the hegemonic discourses surrounding racial signification, Yosso, T.J. et.al (2009) employ critical race theory (CRT) to analyze how incidents of racial microaggressions, experienced by Latina/o university students in the United States, inform their identities. In addition to race, class, and gender inferences, the authors resolved that racial microaggressions aimed at Latin American students carry “insinuations about language, culture, immigration status, phenotype, and accent” (p.7). Finally, the study established that Latin Americans students engage in very different stages of identity formation and resistance informed
by their experiences such as: “rejection, community building, and critical navigation between multiple worlds” (p.14). According to the Latin American youth in this study, multiplicity as well as critical reflection are key sources of agency to deal with the internalizing effects of the hegemonic discourses of Latinidad.

Umaña-Taylor, Diversi, and Fine (2002) analyze by what means are dominant discourses internalized and how this affects the relationship between self-esteem and racial identity among Latin American youth in the United States. Looking at Erikson’s (1968) work, which claims that “adolescence is a critical period for identity formation,” Umaña-Taylor et al. (2002) suggest that this period is especially critical for racialized youth as “racial identity appears to be more salient for members of racial minority groups than for those who are members of the majority culture” (p.304). The Latin American Canadian youth in this study expressed an ambivalence pertaining to their racial identity as the hegemonic discourses of Latinidad include colonial foundations that seek to establish whiteness as the superior racial signifier for Latin Americans (Mignolo, 2000). Furthermore, scholars have described the various ways, such as negative media images and undocumented status, that Latin American youth in the United States learn they are inferior to whites (Chang, 2011; Yosso, 2002).

Pahl and Way (2006) investigate how identity is formed by Black and Latino students in their middle to late adolescence. Their particular focus is on race and ethnicity, noting that the search for identity “includes the exploration of the meanings of their ethnic group memberships in the context of White mainstream society” (p.1403). The study engages in an in-depth analysis of the trajectories of two dimensions of Latino/a identity in the United States, 1) “ethnic identity exploration and affirmation” and 2) “belonging to one’s ethnic group” (p.1403). Likewise, being able to fit in and belong was crucial to the identity formation of the Latin American Canadian youth in this study. All of the study participants expressed being in-between Latin American and
Canadian cultures and histories, instilling doubts about really belonging to either one. In discussing the identity formation of racialized and gendered Others, or what Anzaldúa (1987) calls, “los atrevesados”, Anzaldúa writes the following:

we are the people that don’t belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. The overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit we are a threat. (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 209)

In “Hybrid Citizenship: Latina Youth and the Politics of Belonging,” Bondy (2015), analyzes how Latina youth in the United States negotiate and maneuver the gendered discourses regarding their identity. The study demonstrates that Latina youth experience being Latina as a signifier of otherness. This is due to the constant exoticization and sexual objectification of Latina bodies in media. Research has demonstrated that images of Latinas are often represented through the virgin/whore binary, where the virgin Latina is depicted as a housemaid or devoted mother and the whore Latina is depicted as promiscuous or sexually out of control (Morrison, 2009; Valdivia, 2000). Additionally, these gendered discourses position Latinas as cultural/racial/sexual threats to the United States (Chavez, 2013; Molina-Guzman, 2010).

Nevertheless, studies have demonstrated that Latina youth’s identity formation entail “both resisting and reinscribing the very hierarchies and meanings from which they seek to distance themselves” (Brody, 2015, p. 4). By resisting racist and sexist stereotypes, this degree of agency enables Latina youth to speak back to the limits imposed by identity categories (Garcia, 2012), hence creating new possibilities of transformation in their lives. Solorzano & Delgado Bernal (2001) examine the transformative potential of resistance on Latin American bodies in the United States. They insist that previous research has been too focused on the “self-defeating resistance” of Latin American youth “without acknowledging and studying other forms of resistance that may lead to social transformation” (p.310). The present study with Latin American
Canadian youth seeks to address this gap by considering alternate forms of resistance, including manifestations of agency that may temporarily relieve one of perpetual contestation.

While all the literature reviewed thus far is helpful for exploring the discursive effects on the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth, the experiences of Latin Americans living in the United States are inevitably different from Latin American Canadians located in the Greater Toronto Area. Armony (2014) reminds us that, “certainly an analysis of the Latin American population in Canada must find its own footing… by making clear which (Canadian specific) societal dynamics are at play” (p. 9). While all the racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad have colonial and cultural foundations that are (re)produced through various outlets such as media or music, the forms in which they are experienced, manifested, and enacted are particular within a Canadian context. Thus, it is crucial to develop a more distinct understanding of how the historical and dominant cultural discourses of Latinidad are applicable to Latin American Canadian youth (Guerrero et. al, 2013).

Most of the literature surrounding the Latin American community in Canada pertains to the “precarious” legal status of Latin American immigrants, emphasizing how certain discourses produce detrimental effects such as pernicious work conditions and the deprivation of social services (Goldring & Landolt, 2013; Villegas, 2015). Alternatively, there is also some research surrounding the political organization and participation of Latin American adult immigrants in Toronto (Ginieniewicz, 2010; Landolt & Goldring, 2009; Veronis, 2010). When it comes to youth studies, Simmons, Bielmeier, & Ramos (2000) examine how the discourse of multiculturalism affects the identity formations of Latin American immigrant youth in Canada. Their findings reveal that Latin American immigrant youth have a difficult time fitting in and claiming a Canadian identity. Similarly, Villegas (2013) explores the discursive effects of “precarious” status and belonging on Latin American students in the Toronto District School Board, finding that the
competing discourses of membership and rights hinder their ability to successfully advance within the Canadian educational system. Furthermore, Young’s (2013) study investigates how Latin American youth in Canada negotiate “legality and belonging in Toronto”. The study captures several dimensions of the lived experiences of Latin American youth in Toronto with “precarious” legal status. Their narratives reveal that “belonging is multidimensional and complex. It is negotiated in the encounter with moments of uncertainty when their identities must be reconciled with their contested presence” (p. 99).

While there are some factors within the mentioned studies that coincide with this study such as the discursive effects of not belonging and encountering “moments of uncertainty”, the daily experiences of Latin American immigrant youth living in Canada are qualitatively different then the experiences of the Latin American Canadian youth in this study. As mentioned in the introduction, all the participants in this study were either born in Canada or have acquired Canadian citizenship at an early age. Additionally, none of the participants in this study share the same socio-economic status of Latin American immigrant youth in Canada. Factors such as “not belonging” and “uncertainty” have particular material effects that the Latin American Canadian youth in this study, including myself, fortunately do not have to experience.

There is a remarkably limited amount of research that investigates the discursive effects on the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. Schugurensky et al. (2009), for example, address the high “drop-out” rate among Latin American high school students in Toronto. Some of the factors for Latin American youth having one of the highest “drop-out rates” (push-out) in Toronto are 1) family economic conditions 2) English as a second language and 3) discrimination towards the community. Schugurensky et al. (2009) explain how educational discourses perform an ambivalent role since it “promotes upward social mobility but at the same time reproduces social inequalities” (p. 10). Too many times, the identity
formations of Latin American youth in the Greater Toronto Area are negatively affected, pushing them to “giving up altogether or by finding a new sense of belonging through gangs” (p.8).

Comparably, Guerrero et al. (2013) also conducted a study with Latin American students in Toronto, called Proyecto Latin@. Congruent with the previous study, it was found that economic and linguistic factors greatly affect the level of engagement between Latin American students and educational spaces. In addition, Guerrero et al. (2013) examine the negative stereotypes and discourses that depict Latin American youth as “academically incapable and prone to violence, theft, and laziness” (p. 108). Notably, the study also explores the various ways Latin American students resist and navigate such discursive constructions.

While there are connections that can be made with this study, particularly the ambivalent nature of discourse and how this precipitates feelings of not belonging among Latin American Canadian youth, there are three ways this study is unique. First, the Latin American students enrolled in the Toronto District School Board represent a mixture of students; some have a “precarious” legal status while others are either permanent residents or Canadian citizens. As a Latin American with Canadian citizenship, I will be the first to acknowledge the privilege we hold when navigating racialized and gendered discourses. However, this distinction does carry particular discursive effects, processes of internalization, and forms of enactment that this study seeks to explore. Secondly, while Guerrero et al. (2013) investigate the various ways in which narratives or discourses emanating from the media affect Latin American students in the Toronto District School Board, there were no studies found that explore the colonial/cultural foundations of the hegemonic discourses surrounding Latinidad and how they affect Latin American Canadian youth differently than Latin American youth in the United States.

Lastly, most of the studies, if not all, of the research conducted on Latin American Canadian youth encompass students in high school grades or lower. This study seeks to address
this dearth, exploring the discursive effects on youth ages 18 to 29 years old who navigate educational spaces as university students, Toronto District School Board employees or leaders in the Latin American community. Furthermore, this age group have the ability to look back at school experiences with mature eyes to provide valuable insights that allow for educational practices grounded in the lived experiences of participants in education.
Chapter 3

Methodological Frameworks

The study explores these specific variances using a cantillation of qualitative methods inspired by a conversation I had with my son, himself a Latin American youth straddling the complexities of his own identifications. The conversation began with the following question: “Dad, what am I?” I looked at my twelve-year-old son in bewilderment and replied: “What do you mean?” With a flustered tone my son responded: “Well, if you are from El Salvador and my mom is American, what am I? I mean, I don’t speak Spanish, never been to El Salvador, but at the same time, people always ask me what I am mixed with. Am I just an American born in Kansas…or am I a Latino born in the U.S.?” I immediately asked him what he felt regarding his ambivalent identity. He pondered for a little bit and confessed, “I don’t know… all I know is that sometimes I feel Latino, while other times I feel American, but I never feel like I completely belong in one or the other.”

The multiplicity, ambiguity and liquidity of the self, illuminated by my son’s inquiries, call for methodological approaches, such as phenomenology, that capture fluidity while providing lenses that dig deeper into such personal experiences of the self. Methodology here refers to the process or design lying behind my choice and use of particular methods concerning this study. Furthermore, it provides the space to convey the theoretical perspectives that inform and ground my methodology’s logic/rationale (Crotty, 1999). This section will also give me the opportunity to explain my methods of analysis, which should not be confused with methodology. The methods of analysis or the “how of the study” (Todorova, 2016) define the means and modes of data collection. While both terms are not interchangeable, they are interrelated.

The phenomenological approach used in this study places the individual at the center of knowledge and uses their articulations to explain the overall effects of discourse on identity
formation. More specifically, the approach involves semi-structured interviews with Latin American Canadian youth (ages 18-29) in the Greater Toronto Area, followed by a narrative analysis of the data collected. The interviews took place at community centers, schools, and work, as these sites embody the daily lived experiences of Latin American Canadian youth.

In the *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) delineates archeology as a method of investigation. As a method, archeology takes theory and practice as simultaneous, with neither one as a pre-existing condition or construction. In defining the practice of archeological analysis, Foucault (1972) engages the site of contradiction as a nexus of knowledge, he notes:

> By taking contradictions as objects to be described, archeological analysis does not try to discover in their place a common form or theme, it tries to determine the extent and form of the gap that separates them. In relation to a history of ideas that attempts to melt contradictions in the semi-nocturnal unity of an overall figure, or which attempts to transmute them into a general, abstract, uniform principle of interpretation or explanation, archeology describes the different spaces of dissension. (p. 152; italics in original)

This method of analysis is salient for the study in order to analyze the “spaces of dissension” or spaces of in-betweenness experienced by Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. Other than the always-present power dynamic between the researcher and the potential participant, there was no anticipated individual-level vulnerability. Participants were asked to reflect on how the racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad affect the negotiation and formation of their Latin American Canadian identity. The study does carry a potential psychological/emotional risk of feeling uncomfortable, agitated or dejected. In order to manage these risks, participants were made well aware prior to the start that they may decline to answer any questions during the interview. Participants were recruited through query posts via Facebook and flyers at the University of Toronto, Ryerson University, and York University. By conducting deep extensive interviews, an assortment of data that explores how the racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad affect the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth was
analyzed using a mixed-coding approach. Individual interviews were tape-recorded for subsequent transcription. An inductive approach was utilized to analyze the data, allowing for major themes to emerge from the data upon analysis, as opposed to approaching data analysis with preconceived themes (Thomas, 2006).

Furthermore, the study used critical narrative analysis in order to examine the counter-narratives that Latin American Canadian youth produced as forms of resistance and transformation. Narratives within interviews are especially powerful sites for the construction of identity and the representation of social relationships (De Fina 2003; King & Punti, 2012). Therefore, “narratives are one mechanism through which relatively stable models of identity can emerge and become robustly associated with particular groups” (Wortham, Allard, Lee, & Mortimer, 2011, p E57). This method is particularly relevant for studies on identity formation (Reissman, 1993). By telling their testimonios (narratives), the participants will be able to use their voices and everyday experiences to challenge the racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad. While there is no universal definition of testimonio, it has been used in Latin American scholarship as a method to denounce negative discursive formations experienced by marginalized groups (Booker, 2002). Scholars also emphasize how testimonio is a process of “collective memory,” transcending a single experience and connected to a larger group struggle (Beverley, 2004; Huber, 2010).

The participants presented in this study are all “subjects-in-process”, consequently my analysis can only be read as an attempt to assign meaning to identity formations in the process of becoming and never finished. Indeed, analyses of such becoming freezes identities for the purpose of narration yet it also foregrounds their fluidity. Furthermore, my shift from one theoretical or disciplinary space to another is “not seamless; indeed, the interstice, the discontinuity, the gap is precisely a site of textual production: the historical and ideological moment in which the subject
inscribes herself” (Alarcón, 1996a, p. 44). Needless to say, this thesis is committed to prioritizing the experiences and epistemologies of those in the margins; *los atravesados* whose voices have been historically silenced.

This study moves *in-between* the intersections or, borrowing from Foucauldian thought, the “interstices” of discourse, agency, and identity formation. As noted above, it focuses on the effects that racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad have on the identity formations of Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. It attempts to do this through a three-fold process. First, this study examines the historical and hegemonic discourses of Latinidad; particularly racial and gendered ones. Weedon (1987) provides a succinct Foucauldian perspective of discourse as:

> ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. (p.108)

My use of the term hegemony derives from Gramsci’s theory, which conceives the term as a set of ideas or cultural beliefs by which the dominant ideology is practiced and spread as “common sense” (Gramsci, 1971). Secondly, this study explores how these hegemonic discourses (re)produce a scrutiny or *gaze* that, at times, induces *performative* identity formations from Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. This will be done by analyzing the personal narratives or *testimonios* of seven Latin American Canadian youth (ages 18-29). Finally, this study takes a deeper look at the interaction between discourse and agency; specifically examining how critical spirituality can be a transformational form of agency for the participants involved in this study.
As such, this study utilizes a phenomenologically critical feminist framework that is grounded on in-depth interviews with qualitative data analysis. It seeks a deeper understanding of individual lived experiences and utilizes these experiences to describe, analyze, and make a profound assertion that is meaningful. Qualitative research is an interpretative paradigm that emphasizes that there is no objective separation between the known and the knower (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Consequently, qualitative research does not seek to capture an external or objective reality, independent of the participants and researcher. There can be no absolute reality outside of the interpretations and representations made by the subject experiencing it, as well as the researcher attempting to study said phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, a universal truth can never be objectively possible since knowledge is partial and subjective (Smith, 1999).

3.1 Researcher’s Self-Positionality and Reflection

As a researcher, I cannot capture lived experiences objectively, as I possess the power to (re)interpret, (re)present, and (re)articulate these experiences based on my subjective biases. Thus, knowledge is always dependent on the interpretation and articulation of meaning (Lugones, 2003). In a qualitative approach, the researcher cannot be the ultimate representative of authority who “discovers truth.” Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), among others, warns us against this quest for objective truths and links the term “research” to Eurocentric imperialism/colonialism. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue that qualitative research is in a historical “moment of discovery and rediscovery” (p.20), where notions of objectivity must be rejected and traditional theories, epistemologies, and methodologies that once instructed both the quantitative and qualitative field must be challenged. Instead, critical qualitative research is a “multicultural process” that produces knowledge or truths by taking into account personal histories, gender, race, class, sexuality etc.
(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 20). All of these intersecting factors must be considered when exploring the identity formations of Latin American Canadian youth.

A phenomenological approach is useful in analyzing the discursive meanings of race and gender by focusing on the lived experiences of Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. Phenomenology “begins its analysis of intuitions of presences not in their objective sense, but precisely in terms of the full range of ‘givenness’, no matter how partial or marginal, that are present, and in terms of the meaning that the phenomena have for experiencing subjects” (Giorgi, 1997, p. 237). Ultimately, by using this approach to understand the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth, a phenomenological perspective:

    clarifies the nature of our everyday experience of objects and the world, and thereby clarifies both (1) the nature of those objects and that world precisely as objects of experience and (2) the nature of ourselves and of other subjects in and of the world. (Drummond, 1990, p. 243)

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) developed his rendition of phenomenology. For Heidegger, we and our activities are always “in the world”, our being is “being-in-the-world”, so we do not study our activities by bracketing the world, rather we interpret our activities and the meaning things have for us by looking into our contextual relations to things in the world. This Heideggerian account of self as “being-in-the-world”, a *Dasein* (therebeing), directly confronts a Cartesian epistemic subjectivity, in which the subject is understood as a thinking entity separated from the body, whose primary relationship to the world is via mental representations. Instead, for Heidegger (1962), the self or *Dasein* is always in direct relation to the world; *she* is always situated within the world and the materiality of her existence is pivotal, if not primary. This research endeavors to explore the dialectical relationship between materiality and existence by looking at the everyday lives of Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. Now, I must interject and convey two things. First, this study is not focused on finding the answers to any of
the questions being explored. The thesis focuses on the means or the process, disregarding any teleological end. I am aware of not only the temporality of being but also the temporality of knowledge, meaning this epistemological and ontological journey will always be moving and can never be fixed. By the act of writing, I can only attempt to momentarily halt this inevitable temporality.

Secondly, while Heidegger’s and Foucault’s insights are helpful; considering they emanate from Eurocentric men, we must also critically explore notions of agency and being. For this to happen, the invocation of critical theories is extremely useful. Critical theories allow us to impede the Eurocentric production of knowledge in academia, which determines what research methods are credible/reliable. Since no truth is ever absolute, no single method can establish absolute validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As such, this thesis will fuse Latina Critical Race (LatCRT) theory, Post-colonial theory, and Latina feminist phenomenology in order to interpret and analyze the identity formations of Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area.

LatCRT is useful for revealing the ways Latin Americans experience race, class, gender, and sexuality, while also acknowledging the Latin American diasporic experience with issues of immigration status, language, ethnicity and culture (Huber, 2010). LatCRT in particular has pushed scholars forward in analyzing identity construction of racially subordinated people at both the individual and group levels and within post-identity politics (Valdes, 1996). As mentioned earlier, Latin American Canadian identity is not solely based on the social construction of race but rather is “multidimensional and intersects with various experiences” (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Thus, LatCRT enables scholars to better articulate the experiences of Latin Americans, specifically, through a more focused examination of the unique and various forms of oppression this group encounters (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). A LatCRT theoretical framework in
This study analyzes the intersectionalities of discourse, agency, and identity formations that Latin American Canadian youth encounter and negotiate in the Greater Toronto Area.

Post-colonial theory is an academic discipline that scrutinizes the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Post-colonialism does not necessarily imply “after colonialism”; instead the theory refers to how the history of colonialism continues to shape the relationship between the colonizer and colonized (Childs & Williams, 1997). It challenges neo-colonial systems of knowledge production as well as cultural and social depictions of the colonized/colonizer binary. This binary actively employed by neo-colonialism (re)constructs a Us versus Them dialectical relationship; the latter representing the Other (Said, 1978). Consequently, post-colonial theory is aimed at destabilizing hegemonic discourses and ideologies that stem from colonial relationships by establishing an intellectual space for the subaltern to speak for themselves and produce counter-forms of knowledge (Bhabha, 1994). Additionally, Prasad (2003) notes that:

post-colonialism’s deployment of the notion of discourse, therefore, is meant to highlight-in the context of exercise of imperial power- the mutual imbrication of the material and the ideological, and to emphasize the importance of not collapsing either of these categories into the other. (p. 8)

As Ramos (2001) potently illustrates, Latin American “as an organized, demarcated field of identity does not exist prior to the intervention of a gaze [emphasis added] that seeks to represent it” (p. 251). Consequently, an analysis of Latin American Canadian youth identity cannot be investigated without considering there imperialistic and colonial elements. In “Globalization and the Borders of Latinidad”, Walter Mignolo (2001) examines the historical and political conditions that have shaped the term’s nuanced meanings. Specifically, he suggests that modern examinations of Latin American identity cannot be understood without a grasp of colonality since “the success of the self-definition of modernity consisted in creating the illusion
that coloniality was something that belonged to the past, and that modernity was destined to supersede it” (p. 3). In other words, for Mignolo (2001), Latin American identity is a modern-day representation of colonization.

Homi Bhabha (1994) has suggested that the “signifying position” of the minority subject becomes a contestation of totalizing structures of knowledge, producing simultaneously the sites of “subaltern signification” (p. 162). The struggle for representation and meaning produces a politics of location situated in feminist theories of border subjectivities. In Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) writes how the “new mestiza” occupies the borderlands or a state of *in-betweenness*. She defines a borderland as a:

> vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’. (p. 3; italics in original)

As mentioned earlier, this “undetermined place” is also known as *nepantla*, which is the Náhuatl word for an in-between state. Referring to the theoretical salience of this *in-between* state, Anzaldúa (2009) uses a “nepantla paradigm” in order to theorize the everyday experiences of individuals living “in-between overlapping and layered spaces of different cultures” as well as difficult political and spiritual realities (p.8). My methodology takes a deeper look at the ways Latina feminist theories (re)appropriate the concepts of experience and identity. By offering a rich description that calls attention to the complexity of their marginalized experiences, Latina feminist theories offer a powerful intersectional or “intermeshed” analysis pivotal to examining the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area (Lugones, 2003). Norma Alarcón (1996b) articulates how discourses on difference and identity create knowledge about subjects and the way subjects speak back to create new bodies of knowledge. She points
out that no single construct can fully inscribe the historically marginalized subject whose theoretical existence and insights have been “thought out from the site of displacement” (p. 136). Instead, Alarcón’s (1996b) theorization of the “subject-in-process” is one that engages in a politics of “not yet” as a response to the different attempts to determine their subjectivity, even as they construct temporary identities, or what Chela Sandoval (1995) calls “tactical subjectivities”.

Lastly, Ortega (2016) defines the characteristics of what she calls a Latina feminist phenomenology as the following:

- attention to the lived experience of Latin Americans in the U.S. and Canada;
- emphasis on concrete, embodied *everyday* experience;
- attention to the intersection or, as Lugones describes it, the intermeshedness of race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, ethnicity, and so on;
- disclosure of the way in which the gendered or racialized aspect of Latin American experience is covered up in traditional philosophical discussions that take white male experience as the norm;
- attunement to historical and cultural processes that recognizes the heterogeneity of Latin Americans; and
- critical deployment of experiential knowledge in order to contest or reimagine established notions of Latinidad.

Therefore, by merging critical theories such as LatCRT, Post-colonial theory, and Latina feminist phenomenology, this study seeks to explore how the racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad affect the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area.
Chapter 4

Latin American Canadian Youth Constructing and Deconstructing “Latinidad”

Silvia Argentina is a 29 year-old who identifies as an African Indigenous Latina. She was born in Nicaragua and moved to Canada at the age of 4 years old. She received two undergraduate degrees from York University. Silvia Argentina is currently working in a community organization that serves the educational needs of Latin Americans in the Greater Toronto Area. In Silvia Argentina’s words:

Um, that’s still a journey for me. I don’t know if I’ve found an identity that I completely feel I can own. Or that I’m allowed to own. But right now, one that I’m learning to identify myself would be African Indigenous Latina. And so the journey for me is to figure out how to navigate what is internalized racism within my family. Having said that, I can’t negate that I have Spaniard blood, I mean the light skinned feature is the fact that my people were raped by Spaniards, by the colonizers. (Personal communication, October 7, 2016)

Like Sylvia Argentina, Andrea experiences herself as someone in the making. Andrea is a 28 year-old who identifies as an Afro-Latina/Colombian. She was born in Colombia and moved to Canada at the age of three years old. Currently, she is pursuing a graduate degree at the University of Toronto. Seeking to define herself, Andrea shares the following thoughts:

Latinidad has its limitations, whereby it locates its identity on a brown body and necessarily dark brown and black bodies. There is this notion of being mestiza or mulatta, which essentially is always trying to bring you closer to whiteness. And so, you definitely see anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity within the generic identities of Latinidad. But a lot of people don’t necessarily see it, unless you attempt to deconstruct it. (Personal communication, November 2, 2016)

Both Andrea and Sylvia Argentina express their sense of self through “Latina” and “Latinidad” signifiers which cross national borders yet are deeply racialized and gendered. Deconstructing the colonial and racial ingredients of these signifiers is therefore central to
understanding what it means to be “Latin American” in Canada today. In Spanish, the word *casta* means lineage, breed, or race. During colonial Hispanic America, Spanish elites created a *sistema de castas*, a hierarchal system of racial classification, in order to socially rank the mixed-raced people born during the post-conquest period. The three “original’ races- Spanish, Amerindian, and African- were used as the foundation of this system, with Spanish being at the top and African at the bottom (Gobat, 2013). Due to the intermixing (read: rape), of Amerindians and Africans, classifications such as *mulato* (Spanish and African ancestry) and *mestizo* (Spanish and Amerindian ancestry), emerged as signifiers. The Spanish (read: white) signifier represented civilization, reason, and superiority while the Amerindian and African signifier represented savagery, primitiveness, and inferiority (Mignolo, 2000).

Historically speaking, the Spanish empire was obsessed with systems of classification or, better put, *systems of Othering*. In order to justify the conquest of the “New World”, Spain discursively (re)constructed the idea of “limpieza de sangre” (purity of blood) which distinguished Christian Spaniards (pure) from the “taint” of the “enemies of Christ” (Amerindians and Africans). When this theological system of classification was no longer suffice, a revised version was introduced. This reproduced, as Sylvia Wynters (2003) explains, a shift from an ecclesiastical system of classification to an even more powerfully legitimating one. The new system of classification was based on phenotype or race, where Indigenous peoples and the mass-enslaved peoples of Africa were now to be “classified as ‘irrational’ and ‘savage’. The projected ‘space of Otherness’ was now to be mapped on phenotypical and religio-cultural differences between human variations”, while the new idea of social organization was now to be delineated in terms of “degrees of rational perfection/imperfection” (p.296).
What we see here is an obsession to define what and who is Spanish based on a stratified system of Othering. The Spanish colonizer could only be made into a subject by reproducing the Other as an illegitimate object. In other words, the only legitimate subjectivity was a subjectivity indelibly linked to the “sangre pura” (pure blood) of white Spanish subjects. During the mid 15th century, this precisely was debated between the theologian Bartolomé de Las Casas and humanist scholar Sepúlveda, in what is known as the Valladolid debate (Gobat, 2013). The former arguing that the Amerindians were free subjects in the natural order despite their practices of cannibalism and idolatry, among other customs. Moreover, Las Casas argued that the Amerindian was “capable” of reason and could be “redeemed” by Christianity. On the other hand, Sepúlveda based his arguments on Aristotle’s theory of natural slavery to assert that Amerindians were “naturally” predisposed to slavery, thus, could be subjected to bondage or genocide. The Spaniards, according to Sepúlveda, were “entitled” to conquer the Amerindian because they were gente sin razon, sin una alma (people without reason, without a soul) (Wynter, 2003). By making the Amerindian an illegitimate subject or human, Spanish subjectivity constituted reason and, ultimately, humanity. Needless to say, the Valladolid debate did little to alter the brutal treatment and genocide of Indigenous populations.

Furthermore, it seems both Las Casas and Sepulveda agreed that the African body was not only naturally disposed to slavery, but could never be redeemed. Essentially, what this reveals is that while the Amerindian was discursively consigned to an inferior status of “sub-human”, the African was discursively relegated to a “non-human” status. The former could never be fully human like the Spaniard, but at least had the “capability” to evolve into the status of “almost” human. The latter could never attain this status and was placed at the bottom of what Sylvia Wynter (2003) refers to as the “Chain of Being”. She defines this concept as a “projected Chain of Being comprised of differential/hierarchical degrees of rationality and
humanity between different populations, their religions, cultures, forms of life; in other words, their modes of being human” (p.300). And while the West placed itself as the highest representation of humanity, relegating the Black and Indian body as referents of human Otherness, there was also a “marked differential in the degrees of sub-rationality, and of not-quite-humanness, to which each group was to be relegated within the classificatory logic of the West’s ethno-cultural field” (p.301). Wynter (2003) continues to explain that from the beginning, it would be the Black body that would be “consigned to the pre-Darwinian last link in the Chain of Being- to the ‘missing link’ position, therefore, between rational humans and irrational animals” (p.301).

This system of Othering continues to affect the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth since it attempts to place whiteness not only as a superior racial signifier, but as Wynter (2013) alludes to, the superior signifier of humanity This notion of superiority has been generationally passed down in Latin American culture and produced what Silvia Argentina mentioned as “internalized racism” within her family. Diana, a participant in this study, also asserts this when discussing her Colombian family’s pride in having German blood:

Yeah really proud. Because it’s attached to the European blood line. It’s like they wanna shy away from, I guess, the history of Indigenous and Black. It’s seen as superior. Seen as a pure form, which is the words that my dad accidentally used once and I called him out on it because he said that we’ve always been pure. I’m like, ‘what does that mean?’ So, I think pure means superior as in white, not Black, not Indigenous. And I think this comes from the whole ‘mejorar la raza’ narrative. (Personal communication, October 14, 2016)

Similar to Andrea’s sentiment regarding how being a mestiza is eminently valued based on its proximity to whiteness, Diana shares how the erasure of Indigenous and Black ancestry is something deeply rooted in Latin American culture. As such, whiteness is constantly internalized as the superior racial signifier. The historical influence of this internalization stems from the discourses of blanqueamiento and mestizaje (Wade, 2007).
In the 19th century, revolutions took place in Latin America that resulted into the creation of many independent countries. After decades of inter-mixing, the power dynamic had shifted from “pure” Spaniards to a mestizo population. The discourse of mestizaje offered an ideological (re)construction surrounding racial classifications. Nevertheless, the backbone of this discourse continued to be vested in the “superiority” of whiteness. Mestizo elites became fixated with the idea of “mejorar la raza” (improve the race). Following a Darwinistic evolutionary perspective that was very prevalent at the time, the mestizo elites of the newly formed Latin American nation-states strived towards a supposed ideal of whiteness. This goal would be accomplished through a process called blanqueamiento (whitening) (Wade, 2005).

Contemporary and postcolonial articulations of blanqueamiento are not only biological-that is signifying processes of whitening by marrying a lighter skinned individual in order to produce lighter-skinned offspring- but also represent a symbolic whitening of Latin American identity in general. According to Aníbal Quijano’s (2000) coloniality of power theory, symbolic blanqueamiento was the continuation of a Eurocentric classificatory structure. Coloniality of power was manifested in three forms- systems of hierarchies, systems of knowledge, and cultural systems (p. 540). Again, just like we saw during colonial times, systems of hierarchies (Chain of Being/ontology), of knowledge (discourse/epistemology), and of culture (reason/modernity) were still highly invested in a proximity to whiteness. Wade (2016) succinctly illustrates how this investment in whiteness is also a fascination in the management of different bodies; “as an ideology in practice, blanqueamiento and mestizaje are not just about the definition of non-citizens and their assimilation or violent eradication but is also the active production and continued management of difference” (p. 328). The making and eradication of Indigenous “Latinidad” is captured by the experiences of another study participant. Ana María is a 27 year-old who identifies as a Queer, Andean woman of color. She was born in Colombia and
moved to Canada at the age of 10 years old. She pursued a university degree in Latin American Studies partly because of a desire to explore her own unfinished identities:

I have a hard time identifying as Indigenous. I’m still kinda exploring that. I don’t have any Indigenous knowledge or family that identifies as Indigenous. But you know, I look in the mirror and I’m like, ‘I definitely have Indigenous blood. I always knew I was Colombian, I was Latina. But I was also different. We are taught that we belong to the ‘raza cosmica’. That we all came together to make the Latin American race. But I never understood why we never learn anything about our Black and Indigenous ancestry. So like in Colombia and here (Canada), no one in my family, I think, would identify as Indigenous or Afro, even though it’s in our blood. (Personal communication, October 30, 2016)

The desire to evolve beyond Indigenous or African lineage articulated in Ana Maria’s story is best explained in the work of the Mexican philosopher Jose Vasconcelos (1979), who is known as one of the major exponents of the idea of blanqueamiento/mestizaje and its conceptualization within the ideological context of early twentieth century. Vasconcelos (1979) defined mestizaje as the “cosmic race” of modernism, whose improved makeup was clearly the product of superior biological crossbreeding. Thus, he continued with an essentialist view of race, whereby whiteness epitomized civilization while Indians and Africans were characterized by lower intellectual and aesthetic qualities. In Cosmic Race, Vasconcelos (1979) contends a new civilization that entails the mixing and fusion of all peoples, but where “the Indian has no other door to the future but the door of modern culture, nor any other road but the road already cleared by Latin civilization” (p.16). Vasconcelos (1979) discursively constructs a mestizaje or Latinidad that shares many components of Darwinist eugenics, where a superior type of Latin American eventually absorbs and erases lower types. Following this limited train of thought, “the black could be redeemed, and step by step, by voluntary extinction, the uglier will give way to the more handsome. Inferior races, upon being educated, would become less prolific and in a
few decades, the black may disappear” (p.32). Vasconcelos (1979) is clearly articulating both an aesthetic and cultural norm for Latinidad that is based on whiteness.

Although the racial signifier of Latin American identity continues to be articulated through the discourse of blanqueamiento/mestizaje, to be Latin American is now to “evolve” from any Indian lineage and erase any African presence. While the “cosmic race” still represents a biological superiority due to its attachment to whiteness, it increasingly represents a cultural superiority as well. Thus, we see what Gall (1998) calls “assimilationist racism” in that to be Latin American is to renounce any Indian or African identity and to assimilate into a hegemonic, seemingly homogeneous identity of mestizaje. Yet again, we witness a system of Othering (Chain of Being) in Vasconcelos’ (1979) theorization of Latinidad. The Indian body has the “opportunity” to “evolve” into the future through the “door of modern culture” (p.16) while the Black body can only be “redeemed by voluntary extinction” and, in time, “may disappear” (p.32).

Lastly, when it comes to the context of Latin American Canadian identity, a multicultural notion of difference leads us to the latest variation in the genealogy of Latinidad. In the 21st century, the racial basis of blanqueamiento/mestizaje has shifted from a biological explanation (sangre pura) into a cultural one and it has done this through the discourse of multiculturalism. While superficially, this discourse proclaims a “color blind” society- that is the notion that discriminatory racial barriers no longer exist and that race has no bearing on an individual’s social status (Amado, 2012), realistically, it does not threaten “how racial logics and racial frames of reference are articulated and deployed, and with what consequences” (Donald & Rattansi, 1992, p. 1). Consequently, the discourse of a color blind Latin American Canadian identity is simply an illusion of a homogeneous cultural community that greatly resembles the imaginary community of a nation- both having ideological commitments to
whiteness (Gilroy, 1992). In 1971, Canada was the first country in the world to officially adopt “multiculturalism” as a national policy (Kymlicka, 2001). The discourse of multiculturalism has been and is disseminated through the educational system, media, and the Canadian state.

This discourse depicts Canada as a benevolent nation that is accepting of all races, ethnicities, genders, and cultures. It alludes to everyone being treated as equal, constructing Canada as a moral and egalitarian society. Multiculturalism is imagined as something positive that evades racial, gender, and class inequalities. Hence, Canada is presented as a “model” country to the world, masking its neo-colonial attachment to whiteness. Bannerji (1997) further elucidates this point by stating that Canada is a discursive construction “embodying certain types of political and cultural communities and their operations. These communities were themselves constructed in agreement with certain ideas regarding skin color, history, language, and other cultural signifiers- all of which may be subsumed under the ideological category White” (p. 24).

In other words, a “Latin American Canadian” is a discursive formation that attempts to establish everyone as equal, when in reality it does not include visible minorities, immigrants, refugees, and women of colour among others. The notion that every Latin American, regardless of race or gender, are all the same is deceptive because it conceals the systemic power of white masculinity. This sentiment is shared by Silvia Argentina when she states:

People continue to deny themselves. It seems as if people are trying to grab onto whiteness for whatever reasons. And kinda like that whole notion of identity where you have people that are like, ‘well we’re all the same, we’re one human race, we’re one race because we’re all Latin Americans’, so they don’t see the systemic issues as much. Because although there’s color differentiation, they don’t attach it to racist and systemic structures. (Personal communication, October 7, 2016)

While new variations of blanqueamiento/mestizaje have emerged in the 21st century, by examining the genealogy of Latin American identity as a discursive construction, we can clearly
see the continuous alignment and investment in whiteness as the ‘superior’ Latin American racial signifier. Heeding Foucault’s (1972) suggestion regarding discursive constructions, “we must map the first surfaces of their emergence: show where these individual differences, which according to the degrees of rationalization and conceptual codes, will be accorded the status of alienation, anomaly, neurosis or degeneration, etc.” (p. 41).

Regardless of the epistemic variations or “degrees of rationalization” espoused since the 15th century, the racialized discourses of blanqueamiento/mestizaje have been and are about who belongs and who does not. Though there have been variations regarding the racial constructions of Latin American identity, the foundation remains in systems of Othering. The participants’ testimonios in this study confirm how the ontological and epistemological foundations of Latin American identity include the internalization of “evolving” the Indian in us and “erasing” the African from us. Furthermore, we see how both Latinidad and Canadian hegemony embody colonial legacies that uphold whiteness as the preeminent signifier. Andrea expands on this internalization and states:

In regards to my experience, this is due to white supremacy, due to the colonizer, due to, at times, feeling if you’re Black your body is gonna be degraded. And it’s something subconscious, it’s like your psyche has been conditioned to not claim your Blackness, not claim your Indigeneity. I think it is definitely due to the colonial legacy. (Personal communication, November 2, 2016)
Chapter 5

The Sexing and Gendering of “Latinidad” in Canada

Diana is a 25 year-old who identifies as a CIS gender, straight, able-bodied, Latina woman. She was born in Colombia and moved to Canada at the age of 2 years old. She lived in “predominantly black” communities but went to school where “everyone was white privileged”. She is currently working on a graduate degree at the University of Ryerson in Toronto. Diana makes meaning of her place in the world through her gendered and sexed body:

As a Latina, I think many of the stereotypes have to do with our bodies. We all have curves. Big boobs. Big butt. Luscious lips. We’re all spicy. We’re possessive. We’re aggressive. Um yeah… you’re psycho. You’re exoticized. You’re sexualized. You’re promiscuous. (Personal communication, October 14, 2016)

Ana Maria expresses similar perceptions:

Something I get a lot is that we’re like very promiscuous, that we’re very fiery, and you know voluptuous and hot. But then there’s also what comes with that. Men think, ‘I can be extra sexual with you or expect you to be there for me sexually without me knowing you or whatever. Just because you’re Latina. (Personal communication, October 30, 2016)

Similar to racialized dualisms of self/other, gendered dualisms enforce aesthetic norms and a hierarchy of body types. In the above testimonios, both Diana and Ana Maria express the constant exoticization and sexual objectification their minds and bodies experience as Latin American Canadian women. Gendered discourses within Latinidad have existed since colonial times and, as indicated by all the participants, continue to be disseminated through the media such as movies, telenovelas, and music. Regarding the “Latina body”, Mendible (2007) writes:

that “since the early nineteenth century, her racially marked sexuality signaled a threat to the body politic, a foreign other against whom the ideals of the domestic self, particularly its narratives of white femininity and moral virtue, could be defined. At the same time, the Latina body offered a tempting alter/native: an exotic object of imperial and sexual desire. (p. 8)
The imperial conquest and sexual exoticization of the “Latina body” echoes the Mexican narratives of la Malinche, the emblematic mistress and translator of Cortés, who came to be known as *la chingada* (she who gets fucked). Malinche was one of the key players in the 16th century conquest of Mexico by Spanish conquistadores (Cypress, 1991). At a young age, Malinche’s Aztec family sold her into slavery. During this period, she learned several languages, including Mayan and Nahuatl. This allowed her to become a translator and guide for Cortés. She became fluent in Spanish and eventually had a child with Cortés (Alarcón, 1989). Some have argued that without her help, Cortés and the conquistadores would not have been successful in conquering the Aztec empire (Romero, 2005). The vilification of Malinche in Mexican history can be traced to the expulsion of the Spaniards by the Mexicans in 1821. Mexican nationalists (read: mestizo men) blamed Malinche for betraying her indigenous people (the same ones that sold her into slavery) by assisting the Spaniards. Malinche was depicted as a scarlet woman whose actions were driven by extreme sexual appetite (Alarcón, 1989). In other words, she was reduced to being Cortés’ sex-starved mistress who betrayed her people.

Many Latina feminists have denounced this representation of la Malinche as patriarchal scapegoating which virtually ignores her role as an interpreter, strategist, and diplomat (Alarcón, 1989; Hurtado, 1998). The work of Rosario Castellanos (1966) was particularly significant. In a poem written by her called, *Otra vez Sor Juana*, Castellanos recasts Malinche as a victim instead of a traitor. Hence, she is defended as a woman caught *in-between* cultures; forced to make difficult decisions and who ultimately was trying to survive patriarchal and racist oppression (Cypress, 1991). The depiction of la Malinche as sexually promiscuous, untrustworthy, and domesticated reveal the ideological underpinnings that (re)present the gendered discourses found within Latinidad (Hurtado, 1998). These gendered discourses (re)produce a system of Otherness that bind “Latina femininity to bodily excess, sexuality, or
indulgence and imbuing Latinidad with a fixed set of traits, values, and images” (Mendible, 2007, p. 3).

Indeed, the “Latina body” is continually a space of discursive signification and hegemonic markings that is “mass produced” through telenovelas, movies, music videos, celebrities, and so forth. As such, “an epistemology of the body” is used to legitimize both racialized and gendered systems of Othering. Thus, by examining the “Latina body” as a site of knowledge production, we can further unveil the hegemonic discursive constructions of Latinidad through the marked body of the gendered Other. The “Latina body” functions within a social taxonomy that is mediated through numerous visual representations while being commodified in every day culture (Dávila, 2001). Bria is a 22 year-old that self-identifies as an Afro-Latina. She was born in Canada and grew up in Scarborough within a “predominantly Black” community. Her mother was born in Belize and her father was born in the Guayanas, while her step-father is from Jamaica. Currently, Bria is an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto. She expands on the performative effects of gendered discourses:

And I guess because of the telenovelas, and how Latina women are shown in the mainstream media. Even like Modern Family, Sofía Vergara talks about the directors asking her to just fit into these stereotypes that the world has put us in. Dress a little bit raunchier, sexualize your accent, they tell her how to speak even! (Personal communication, October 15, 2016)

As we can see through Bria’s testimonio, popularized versions of what it means to be a “Latina” woman frequently construct them as sexual and exotic objects to be consumed. Such discursive constructions do not solely emanate from U.S. media but are also located in Canadian representations. For instance, in a relatively recent article, the National Post (2003) posed the question, “Are Latinas the new blond bombshell?”, constructing Latin American Canadian women as sex symbols to be objectified. When speaking about the stereo-types she experiences
on a daily basis, Diana discloses that “Jenny from the block is like a big one. Having a big butt and being ‘hot’ like JLo. It’s all you see in commercials, movies, and music videos” (personal communication, October 14, 2016). Once more, by implying that “Latina” women are “bombshells”, “hot”, or “spicy”, the media habitually construct Latin American women as objects of desire and fetishized commodities. As Arrizón (2006) points out, “the Latina body is tied to the ideological structure of heterosexuality and its compulsive tendency to locate the feminine in relation to the masculine desire and fetish” (p. 33). By continuously pushing stereotypical images of “Latinas”, the media makes invisible the complexity and heterogeneity of Latin American women, reducing them to exoticized objects to be consumed and taken advantage of.

Likewise, Latino male identifications in Canada are also shaped by media and cultural narratives that arrest Latino masculinity within binaries and performances stemming from colonial taxonomies of race. Stu is a 25 year-old Canadian Latino man, who identifies himself as a “Black” and “Colombian”. He was born in San Andreas, Colombia; a population that predominantly consists of Black Caribbeans. Stu came to Canada at the age of 11 years-old. He received his undergraduate degree at York University in Toronto. In Stu’s words:

When I think of a Latino man, I automatically think of like vatos, just the whole hood kinda atmosphere. Violence. Gang culture. That’s just how it’s portrayed in music videos and movies. We’re always portrayed as one thing you know what I mean and usually that’s the role we have to play and stuff like that. So, I think the media definitely is a huge one. (Personal communication, August 25, 2016)

The term vatos in media typically refers to a negative connotation associated with gangsters, thugs, and criminals. The list of movies and music videos with these depictions are almost endless. With movies like, Scarface (1983), Blood in Blood Out (1993), Mi Vida Loca (1994), and Vatos Locos (2011), just by reading the titles, one can envision the negative imagery
and nefarious representations that are displayed. For instance, in the movie *End of Watch* (2012), the entire plot is two cops (the good guys) fighting “Latino gangsters” and drug dealers in East Los Angeles. Throughout the movie, the same depictions of shirtless Latino *vatos*, with tattoos, being involved in crime are recycled over and over again. In “Distorted Reflections: Media Exposure and Latino [sic] Adolescents’ Conceptions of Self”, Rivadeneyra et al. (2007) point out that stereotypical character representations not only affect how Latin American youth perceive themselves but also how other people act towards them. Furthermore, it is important to note that while most of these stereo-typical images derive from U.S. media, all the Latin American Canadian youth in this study revealed that the effects are the same since Canadian media is modelled after American media, and many times are identical. The unfavorable exoticization and sensationalism engendered by these depictions and imagery only further cement the systems of Othering in place that Latin American Canadian youth must resist daily.

Through the vilification of la Malinche, we have analyzed the historical discourses that construct Latin American women as “promiscuous, untrustworthy, and domesticated”. Incontestably, the media has done little to change these narratives and continues to proliferate Latina women as “hot and spicy”; as commodities to be fetishized and consumed. We also saw how Latino men are depicted in the media as “*vatos*”, deviant, and threatening. Lastly, whether it is “trying to bring you closer to whiteness” (Andrea, personal communication, November 2, 2016), being “voluptuous and hot” (Ana Maria, personal communication, October 30, 2016), to “dress a little bit raunchier” (Bria, personal communication, October 15, 2016), or labeled as a thug/ *vato*, in the next section, we will see how the racialized and gendered discourses contain a hegemonic gaze that beckons a certain performative aspect in the formation of Latin American Canadian youth identity. As Stu discloses, “we’re always portrayed as one thing you know what I mean and usually that’s the role we have to play (personal communication, August 25, 2016).
Ultimately, along with the patriarchal and Eurocentric underpinnings, all gendered and racialized discourses of Latinidad maintain a (re)production of the systems of Othering present since colonial times. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez (2003) alludes to this gaze, performance, and Othering when he talks about the degrading abundance of sexist, racist jokes that have characterized the fixation on Jennifer Lopez’s “Latin butt”. He writes how even in major music award shows such as the MTV Music Awards, male hosts are constantly make humiliating and vulgar jokes about Lopez’s body shape. It has turned into “such an obsession that this kind of vulgar behavior must be read within the parameters of the Eurocentric imperialist gaze of the Other” (p. 31).

5.1 The Third Meaning

Minh-ha (1990) cautions us that in order to proceed with the inquiry of identity formation, we must “reopen again the discussion on the self/other relationship in its enactment of power relations” (p. 371). As we have examined, placing the colonized as the position of the Other helped to construct and validate the colonial’s identity as being the only legitimate subject. This, in turn, established a hierarchy of dualisms. First referred to by Edward Said (1978) as “Orientalism”, the term “postcolonial gaze” is used to explain this dualistic relationship between colonizer/colonized or self/Other. Said (1978) presents “Orientalism” as a discourse that serves as “a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient” (p. 3) And even though he primarily focuses on the West’s relations with the Middle East and Islam, he argues that the Orient is not so much a geographical actuality as “a European invention” and “one of Europe’s deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (p. 1).

Furthermore, as Beardsell (2000) explains, the postcolonial gaze “has the function of establishing the subject/object relationship… it indicates at its point of emanation the location of
the subject, and at its point of contact the location of the object” (p. 8). The subject gains its identity (point of emanation) by encountering (point of contact) the Other. What this gaze also does is define a hierarchal set of value-preferences. Kaplan (1997) explains this as the “imperial gaze” in which the Other is constantly devalued, trivialized, and sexualized into a feminine counterpart. Kaplan (1997) expands on the imperial gaze, writing that it “reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject” (p. 78). The interviews with Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area echo the politics and impacts of that “imperial gaze.” For instance, Diana explains:

I have performed whiteness by straightening my hair, actually that was huge. I was straightening my hair because I was following Eurocentric standards of beauty…Men predominantly tell me this, but it can be internalized. I think it is internalized by women. I’ve internalized it. I remember being like thirteen and I had a phase where I didn’t feel Latina enough. Kids at school would tell me that I didn’t dress like JLo or like a chola. So I had a phase where I wore big hoop earrings, I wore men’s sweaters and had to borrow one of my friend’s shoes with the tongue up to look like I was a Latina. So I internalized it. Or I conformed. As much as I performed whiteness, I performed being a Latina from the gaze of white society, the Canadian gaze, if that’s a thing. (Personal communication, October 14, 2016)

In this testimonio, Diana shares with us three of the four major themes found in this study. She speaks on internalizing the “Canadian gaze” and how this hegemonic gaze engenders a performance of both whiteness and Latinidad. The formation of her Latin American Canadian identity is performed by straightening her hair, wearing big hoop earrings, and dressing the part. When Diana confesses that she “didn’t feel Latina enough”, this speaks to the feeling of not being good enough or being in a state of in-between. This ambivalence produces the need to “conform” to certain narratives due to the internalization of the “gaze of white society”. When it comes to the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth, there is a gaze of Otherness reproduced by racialized and gendered discourses that indelibly mark the way they are read.
Many times, this gaze is internalized and incites a performance of identity in order to “fit in”, especially during adolescence. Leandro is a 23 year-old who identifies as a gay male; Chilean and Uruguayan but raised Canadian his whole life. He was born and raised in Toronto. His mom is a “Eurocentric Latina” born in Chile and his father is an “Afro-Latino” born in Uruguay. Currently, he is an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto. Leandro’s testimonio regarding this racialized gaze and the performance attached to it is very revealing:

People always read me as Black first. I know that. They’ll point out the hair. Like ‘you got curly hair’ or they’ll use words like, ‘you got nappy hair.’ Growing up I know I internalized certain types of racism. I know I used to draw myself even whiter or lighter. I would use peach pencil crayons. I used to even draw my hair sort of like spikey hair. I think I used to also see how people and teachers would interact with me versus other student. Just the general representation on TV, things like that, all came into play with how I felt. And to be honest, I almost wanted to be like a white person on the inside. But at the same time I did know that I had my differences, I just didn’t know how to embrace them until later on. (Personal communication, October 12, 2016)

Stu shares similar feelings regarding this gaze and performativity:

When I tell people I’m from Colombia, I always have to explain more because I’m Black and I have a Carribbean accent sometimes, so it’s not always perceivable right away. I usually come off as just a Black guy. People read me as a Black guy, so I guess I speak and sound like a Black guy. Some people are surprised because they think all Colombians are fair skinned. So, I can tell there’s look on their face like, ‘you don’t sound Colombian, you don’t look Colombian’ kinda thing. I think this affected me more at school cause if you study, you’re seen as white washed. So you’re looking at education as if it wasn’t important or it’s not something we are supposed to do. What we do is like smoke weed, get into trouble, or skip class. (Personal communication, August 25, 2016)

5.2 Canadian Gaze

In the first testimonio, Leandro immediately calls attention to the gaze of people always reading him as black and to the gaze of the “general representation on TV”. This, in turn, is internalized by Leandro as he attempts to perform whiteness on the outside through his hair while also wanting or desiring to “be like a white person on the inside”. Finally, we see that Leandro experiences a state of ambivalence when he conveys being caught between wanting to
be white but also realizing he is different. During these years, he is not able to “embrace” his differences which can also be interpreted as feeling not good enough about his Latin American Canadian identity. Similarly, in the second testimonio, Stu expresses how the racialized discourses discussed in the previous chapter inflict a hegemonic gaze that attempts to invalidate his Colombian identity because of his Blackness. When it comes to education, Stu internalizes this gaze and strays away from studying since he does not want to be marked as “white washed”. In this case, education or reason is equated to whiteness, while Blackness represents negative performative acts such as smoking weed and skipping class. In both instances, Leandro and Stu internalize the hegemonic gaze fixed upon them and attempt to perform either whiteness or Blackness.

Bodies are marked by discursive constructions and interpellated through the “network of relationships in which they are perceived. They are seen as black, therefore they are black; they are seen as women, therefore, they are women. But before being seen that way, they first had to be made that way” (Wittig, 1997, p. 313). Hence, the “gaze” from both Latinidad and Canadian hegemony have a powerful effect on the making and formation of the Latin American Canadian subject. We see an example of this in Fanon’s (1952) Black Skin, White Masks when the white child pulls the hand of her mother and says, “Look! A Negro!” Fanon (1952) explains how the gaze of Otherness fixes him an identity, writing “the Other fixes me with his [sic] gaze” (p. 89). The body becomes a vehicle of ideological or discursive markings that, to use Althusser’s (1971) term, “hails” or “interpellates” the subject. In the case of Latin American Canadian youth, the gaze of Otherness engendered by hegemonic discourses interpellate certain performative identities.

As mentioned earlier, gendered discourses of Latinidad rely on embodiment for reification. Similar to race being a project of the body that is either included or excluded,
gendered norms are utilized to validate/invalidate identity within the heterosexual matrix or to use hooks’ (2004) words, the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” that hails the “Latina” body (p. 17). The “Latina” body carries connotative codes that are (re)produced and (re)generated through discursive constructions of how she should or should not perform femininity. This follows Butler’s (1990) idea that:


to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (p. 404-405)

Clearly, the “Latina” body has gone through a historical process of cultural signification that measures her value by the enactment of a “repeated corporeal project”. Both Bria and Ana Maria share this sentiment in the following testimonios:

I’ve literally had people I’ve dated say, ‘oh yeah Latina women are so sexual’, they would just say all these stereotypes that exotify Latina bodies. And it just made me uncomfortable because in the beginning when I was trying to be this super Latina, I sort of embraced that. I was like, ‘yeah, I gotta be super sultry and mysterious or whatever’, which was not me. Then there is a lot of intersectionality within how Black and Latina women’s bodies are oppressed and over sexualized. Growing up my whole life, I was super athletic and I wasn’t super big. I could never gain weight and I always had people tell me like, ‘oh my gosh, for an Afro-Latina, your butt should be way bigger’. I’d be like, ‘can I just live?’ People have these kind of crazy expectations because you’re not only Latina, but an Afro-Latina. Mostly body expectations and how I’m supposed to present myself. (Bria, personal communication, October 15, 2016)

A woman must behave like a saint, she has to take care of children, she can’t have sex before marriage, she can’t put on tight, revealing clothes. But at the same time, there is this dichotomy of confusing beliefs cause in order to get a good man and get married, you have to be like hot, wear sexy clothes…and then if you get raped, it’s your fault because ‘you were wearing that’, even though everyone tells you that’s what you have to be to get picked up. It’s this crazy mumbo-jumbo that many women internalize. (Ana Maria, personal communication, October 30, 2016)

For Bria, the gaze of people she has dated exotify her as a sexual object and impose bodily stereotypes, such as having a bigger butt, due to her intersectionality of being an Afro-Latina. Again, we see how this gaze is internalized or “embraced” when she tries to be this
“super Latina” by performing sexual behaviors such as being “super sultry or mysterious”.

Correspondingly, Ana Maria speaks to a performative ambivalence or “dichotomy of confusing beliefs” as women are expected to be pious and nurturing but at the same time they have to be “hot” and “sexy” in order to “get a good man and get married”. The constant presence of an external gaze leads to self-surveilling behaviors and practices.

All the participants up until this point have spoken about how the racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad impose a hegemonic gaze that is internalized and, consequently, embodied through performative enactments. In Discipline and Punish, Foucault (1977) elaborates on the panoptic gaze and its power to produce self-regulating mechanisms on a subject. An important feature of panoptocism is “the total visibility of bodies, of individuals and things, under a system of centralized surveillance” (Foucault, 1997, p. 226). Scholars have used the concept of panoptocism and applied it to present day power relations, arguing that the panoptic gaze does not need to surround a physical structure of an institution but “permeates the spaces of everyday life” (Lyon, 2001; Scott, 2010, p. 220). Thus, in the case of Latin American Canadian youth, the panoptic gaze is analogous to the hegemonic gaze discussed in their testimonios. Foucault (1977) asserts that power is not simply imposed by a dominant group, but that we are all instruments of power because it is ingrained in discourses and norms that are part of the interactions, habits, and practices of our everyday lives. Through this process of normalization, we are pressured to conform to hegemonic norms and discourses. Such conformity or as Bria put it, “embrace” is achieved without coercion because of “a gaze- an inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his [sic] own overseer with each individual thus exercising this surveillance over the self” (Foucault, 1980, p. 155).
As mentioned earlier, Butler’s (1990; 1993) theory on gender performativity primarily states that gender identity should not be seen as a static marker but as a continuous activity; something that one becomes but can never be. Hence, expanding on the self-regulating mechanisms analyzed above, Butler (1993) writes that gender is the product of “the forcible citation of a norm, whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, and punishment” (p. 232). Nagel (2000) extends this theorization of performativity to racialized discourses or norms and writes that race is “performative... racial and ethnic boundaries...constituted by day-to-day affirmations, reinforcements, and enactments...of differences” (p. 111; emphasis in original). In other words, there is no “natural body” that pre-exists cultural inscriptions/signification, which means that being a Latin American Canadian is not an internal reality outside of discursive constructions or “the law”. In this light, the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth partakes in a process of performativity; “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (Butler, 1990, p. 19). Throughout their testimonios, the participants are aware of a hegemonic gaze and how they reflect this gaze back on their own bodies and the ways that they engage in self-regulated performativity.

Nevertheless, such interpretations create a picture of passive and unequivocal acceptance of norms or discourses by everyone. Where does the agency of Latin American Canadian youth fit in the analysis of internalizing a hegemonic gaze and engaging in performative identity formations? In an interview with Vikki Bell (1999), Butler gives the following critique:

the theory of subject constitution is too unilateral, it’s clearly too unnuanced. It’s as if the prisoner is simply made, it’s as if somehow the prisoner is constituted almost mechanistically... I felt that the predominant Foucauldian frame that I had been using didn’t give me a precise enough account of what it meant for a subject to be constituted in discourse given that a subject is only partially constituted, or is sometimes constituted in ways that can’t quite be anticipated: how do I talk about the failure of subject constitution? How do I talk about it tenuousness or vulnerability? How do I talk about its unpredictability? (p. 164)
Chapter 6

The Politics of “Nepantanla”

The third major theme that arose from the participants in this study was experiencing a state of *in-betweenness*. It is this unpredictability or ambivalence when it comes to the identity formation of Latin American youth that I would like to focus on next. Anzaldúa (1987) speaks of the ambivalence she experiences in the “borderlands” and how it causes an “intimate terrorism” (p. 20). This internal feeling derives from the belief that one does not fully fit or belong neither here nor there. As Anzaldúa writes,

> we are the queer groups, the people that don’t belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. The overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit we are a threat. (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 209)

The Latin American Canadian youth in this study expressed a similar sentiment surrounding their identity formations. They shared how living in a state of in-betweenness produces insecurities, feelings of not being good enough, and difficulties with fitting in. These experiences and feelings emerge from the hardship of straddling both Latin American and Canadian cultures. For instance, both Ana Maria and Diana confessed the following:

> I also feel like I’m a hybrid being, so when I say Colombian it’s because that’s where I was born. But when I immigrated to Canada, I was ten years old. So, I guess I’m Colombian/Canadian. Like an *in-between* kinda thing. You know, from Colombia and Canada but not really either. I did have times where I felt like I didn’t know what I was. It was kind of like insecure moments. Of me being like, ‘okay, well I’m not like these people, but I’m not like those people. It was like an internal questioning. (Ana Maria, personal communication, October 30, 2016)

> But I think, as marginalized communities, in a Canadian context specifically, Latinx communities we’re taught that we’re not enough. Oftentimes, we’re not enough here. We’re not enough back home, like where are you enough right? (Diana, personal communication, October 14, 2016)
According to Anzaldúa (2009), *nepantla*, the Náhuatl word for an in-between state, is an uncertain, insecure, and unpredictable space, “*tierra desconocida*” (unknown land) and a “bewildering transitional state” that is confounding and leads to a dissociation of identity (p. 243, 180). It is a space of constant alienation that leads to an uncomfortable and stressful feeling. From personal experience, it is akin to an internal tug of war, an ambivalence that creates “emotional states of perplexity” and a “psychic restlessness” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 78). One goes through a process of dealing with internal and external contradictions. This “*choque*” (cultural clash), as Anzaldúa (1987) calls it, causes an inner and outer battle that makes one question his or her identity on all fronts.

Apart from the cultural in-betweenness discussed above, the participants in this study also shared having experienced states of racial in-betweenness that engender comparable feelings of ambiguity and confusion. Consider Bria’s and Leandro’s *testimonios* when they reveal the following:

I would say that I am Latina, but then I’m Black first you know. Because I think when people see me, they see Black. But there was a big chunk of my life where I didn’t even know what to identify as. Because I would say that I’m Black in certain spaces and certain people would call me out. They would be like ‘I don’t think you’re Black because you say you’re mixed with all these things’ So then I didn’t wanna offend anybody and I kinda got confused cause I was like, ‘am I really Black?’ Because my percentage isn’t you know exactly a majority so what does that mean for me? I think that in itself was really confusing for me growing up. Cause I didn’t know, I’m like, ‘where am I supposed to belong.’ And it kinda goes back to that sentiment of like not fully fitting in with Black culture, but then not fully fitting in with Latin American culture, so being in this space of in-between. (Bria, personal communication, October 15, 2016)

I’ve had my mom actually ask me before if I ever felt more white or black. I didn’t know how to answer that question. I’ve always felt in-between. And then, she’s like, ‘well it seems you already chosen, you chose the black side of you’. So, I was like, ‘well other people see me as that so I have to navigate the world in that way and that’s how I respond to the world, but it’s not that I feel more black’. Sometimes, I play within the same narratives I guess but at the same time, I battle those narratives if I don’t agree with them. (Leandro, personal communication, October 12, 2016)
In both cases, Bria and Leandro experience a racial ambivalence that generates a sense of not belonging into a neat definition of being Black, Latin American, or white. Bhabha (1994) contends that one of the effects surrounding colonial discourses is the ambivalent production of “that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision” (p. 67). The ambivalence lies in that the discourses of Othering simultaneously recognize as well as deny racial, cultural, and historical differences. Thus, the discourses of Othering “produce the colonized as a social reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible [emphasis added]” (p. 70-71).

Again, this speaks to the gaze that racialized and gendered discourses apply on the identity formation of individuals. However, the importance of this contradiction is that hegemonic discourses can never fully inscribe or fix the subjectivity of the Other, in this case Latin American Canadian youth and, thus, open a space of negotiation/resistance (Bhabha, 1994).

Latina feminist scholars have significantly elaborated on this space of negotiation/resistance. Anzaldúa (2009) explains that *nepantla* (in-between state) is the space that makes possible the new mestiza consciousness. This consciousness allows a tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction while opening possibilities for resistance and transformation. Both Anzaldúa (1987) and Lugones (1992) see the possibility for resistance developing from transgressing fixed conceptual boundaries of identity, the fragmenting of a unitary self, and the creation of a new value system through the eradication of dualistic thinking. Thus, implicit in Alarcon’s (1996b) theorization of this space of resistance/ transformation is the need to situate both the subject and the discourses surrounding subjectivity within a specific sociohistorical context, or what she names a “situated contemporaneous horizon of meanings” (p. 137).

Latin American Canadian youth are continually involved in negotiating the various discourses of identity that circulate within these localized “horizons of meanings” and the contradiction revealed within their articulations. Chela Sandoval (1995) describes this practice
of negotiating “between and amongst” different discourses of identity and resistance as “differential consciousness”. She writes,

differential consciousness is comprised of seeming contradictions and difference, which then serve as tactical interventions in the other mobility that is power… Entrance into this new order requires an emotional commitment within which one experiences the violent shattering of the unitary sense of self, as the skill that allows a mobile identity to form takes hold. (p. 225-226)

Silvia Argentina illustrates this mobile identity when she discloses the following:

I think my family is fearful of me identifying with my African Indigenous roots. They say things like, ‘well what does it matter, you know you’re speaking English properly, just continue to pass’ and what they don’t understand is that I can never just pass. But what I have been able to do is obtain my education, I can code switch or what I call being a social chameleon [emphasis added]. So, while I’m constantly being challenged in Eurocentric spaces, I’m also challenging or resisting these same spaces. (Personal communication, October 7, 2016)

In this testimonio, Silvia Argentina shares that while she is “challenged in Eurocentric spaces”, she also has the ability to resist and counteract these spaces through “code switching”. Nepantla is a space of in-betweenness that becomes a space of meaning-making and creativity.

The ability for Silvia Argentina to critically imagine or create new possibilities is connected to what Anzaldúa (1987) calls la facultad. She describes it as “confronting anything that tears the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness and that thrusts us into a less literal and more psychic sense of reality increases awareness and la facultad” (p.39). La facultad is a critical stance that encourages fluidity and flexibility when it comes to one’s identity formation. This flexibility alludes to what Chela Sandoval (1995) calls “tactical subjectivities”, the ability to shift and manage different identities. Anzaldúa (2009) writes, “I have many true faces, depending on the kind of audience or the area I find myself” (p. 211), thus she explains that at a conference, the intellectual Gloria takes the center stage; while at a meeting with Chicanos, the ethnic Gloria emerges. In his testimonio, Leandro expands on this strategic flexibility and asserts:
I think as long as a person is willing to accept the changes within themselves, people become flexible to change. I think people are always going to identify with whatever they feel is more comfortable at that time. But obviously you’re not going to change until you learn something different about yourself. People always identify with different labels all the time, depending on where they are located, who they are talking to, and what circles they are in. So like in some circles, for example, I can be a millennial amongst a bunch of older people. How I identify myself right now is just a reflection [emphasis added] of the general society that I’m in right now. It can change though. I never close the door on that. I don’t think I can say that I would forever identify myself as Afro Latino or even a gay male. I’ve used even queer in certain contexts. We change when our environments change. (Personal communication, October 12, 2016)

By inhabiting the space of nepantla, border-dwellers (los atravesados), such as the Latin American Canadian youth in this study, are more prone to develop a critically reflective stance.

The critical reflection that emerges from this “in-between place becomes a turning point initiating psychological and spiritual transformation” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 569).

6.1 Critical Spirituality and Ways of Knowing

The last theme that emerged from the participants in this study pertains to the fusion of critical self-reflection and spirituality, or what Wane (2014) theorizes as critical spirituality. When discussing the importance of spiritually based curriculum, Wane (2014) emphasizes the importance of critical reflection to cultivate in students (youth) a “sense of belonging, connectivity, responsibility, respect, and self-worth” (p. 133). In Experience and Education, Dewey (1938) explains that while we cannot be taught how to think, we must learn how to achieve the practice of critical reflection. A component of critical reflection is taking a holistic approach to the experiences one faces throughout our lifetime. This requires taking a deeper look into our past and present experiences while reflecting on how these experiences may influence our attitudes and choices.
When asked what options are available to challenge or shift dominant discourses regarding one’s identity, Stu asserts the following, “I think a big one is always like self-education. Being conscious, reflecting on where you come from and what you could do better to grow yourself” (personal communication, August 25, 2016). This is the reason why Wane (2014) insists on the saliency of critically inquiring the self with whole-heartedness, “responsibility”, and “respect”. This respect cannot only be directed towards the self but it must also be connected to letting go of one’s ego and respecting others experiences even if they’re not congruent with your own. Kegan (1994) succinctly writes,

being able to think reflectively is not just a discrete skill, it is an active demonstration of a mind that can stand enough apart from its own opinions, values, rules, and definitions to avoid being completely identified with them. It is able to keep from feeling that the whole self has been violated when its opinions, values, rules, or definitions are challenged. (p. 231)

When it comes to spirituality, many scholars have discussed the ambiguity surrounding how to define it (Palmer, 2003; Smith, 1999; Wane, 2016). In our current modern world, and especially in the West, spirituality is separated from the material validation of science. Thus, spirituality is many times undermined and undervalued since it cannot be objectively measured or theorized as a “valid” phenomena (Collins, 1998). In addition, many repudiate spirituality because it is typically conflated with religion and “dismissed as an apolitical, ahistorical form of escapism that inadvertently reinforces the status quo” (Anzaldúa, 2000, p. 8). Furthermore, within academia, spirituality is not considered a credible knowledge since academic epistemologies are typically grounded on rationality, logic, and objectivity (Ellerby, 2000). As Anzaldúa (2000) succinctly puts it, “this whole society is premised on the reality described by the scientific mode of observable phenomenon, while whatever is imagined or subjectively lived doesn’t have any credence. Spirituality is subjective experience” (p. 282). Nonetheless,
feminists of color have made great strides to challenge the notion that subjective experiences and the knowledges acquired through these experiences are not as important or valid as objective/observable phenomena (Alcoff, 2001; Anzaldúa, 1990; Collins, 2008).

While having different interpretations and definitions regarding spirituality, all participants in this study expressed how their subjective experiences of spirituality enable them to not only resist hegemonic discourses and the performative aspects of their gaze, but temporarily transcend them. By emphasizing the temporality of this transcendence, I wish to discard the notion that spirituality alone allows us to fully or permanently overcome structural impositions such as discursive constructions (race, gender etc.) as well as material impediments (socio-economic status). But for many, including all the participants in this study and myself, spirituality is the most powerful and authentic form of agency. Consider the following testimonios from Diana and Bria:

Honestly, it’s hard. It is a hard question. Like I question myself all the time and sometimes it stresses me out because I question myself so much. I question my authenticity, my performativity, and I call myself out on it and it’s almost like you’re not living at the point because of all this. I think my spirituality gets me by. My faith. Like my beliefs. Although I wouldn’t associate my beliefs in particular. I think what gets me by is addressing what kind of energy I have. I have a thing for like energy crystals and checking in with my feelings, checking in with my body. I see that more as a spiritual thing instead of a performativity thing. Like, why do I feel the way I feel? Why is my body reacting the way it’s reacting? Kinda like connecting with myself…mind, body, and soul. Instead of what is imposed on me. And more than just simply resisting, spirituality is the space where I feel the most authentic. (Diana, personal communication, October 14, 2016)

My spirituality as a Latina is just as complex and full of seemingly contrasting dichotomies, similar to my cultural and racial identity. I believe that I am a very spiritual person because I have to be…it grounds me. I’ve felt and seen supernatural things so much around me that I’m convinced that there is more to life than which we experience as humans. For the longest time, I felt that everywhere I went, I was trying to do too much. Because I wasn’t embracing all of me, it was hard to fit in. And I think when I let that go, that’s when I felt most at peace with myself and all of my racial backgrounds. Spiritual grounding has been the only consistent source of peace and rest for me as I fight through bouts of depression. I know that whatever inner strength that I possess when I completely drained is God given and somehow I’m able to push through. Who I am as a Latina is deeply rooted in my spiritual walk. Spiritual healing is necessary for
my personal authenticity on this planet. (Bria, personal communication, October 15, 2016)

Diana expresses dealing with performativity and the constant internal questioning that living in the *nepantla* (in-between) precipitates. Bria also reveals she was “trying to do too much” and the sentiment of not fitting in. Spirituality counters this as it is not a “performativity thing” and provides a space of authenticity for both. There are many elements that comprise spirituality. However, there are two specific elements articulated by the participants in this study which I would like to focus on. The first element has to do with how Diana and Bria interpret their spirituality as a feeling or a set of feelings. Diana conveys the importance of having a critical spirituality which enables her to “check in with my feelings” while critically asking, “why do I feel the way I feel?” Bria expresses the same attitude when she talks about “feeling supernatural things” and “feeling at peace” when she let go of trying to put up an act. In many ways, Diana’s and Bria’s spirituality of feelings entails the “passionate rationality” that Collins (1998) correlates with African American women’s spirituality. According to Collins (1998), “this type of passionate rationality flies in the face of Western epistemology that sees emotions and rationality as different and competing concerns… deep feelings that arouse people to action constitute a critical source of power” (p. 243).

Hence, the deep feelings that Latin American Canadian youth experience are a powerful source of agency that enables them to not “simply resist”, as Diana puts it, the hegemonic discourses of Latinidad but it provides a “consistent source of peace”. Critical spirituality becomes a catalyst for the awareness we need to tap into our deepest feelings or what Audre Lorde (1984) refers to as the “erotic.” She elaborates on this critical power and writes, “the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (p. 53). Consequently, our
deepest feelings or the erotic is a key component to critical spirituality because it “becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives” (Lorde, 1984, p.57).

The other element of critical spirituality that all the participants in this study discussed was a sense of interconnectedness. This entails the “I” feeling interconnected with not only herself, such as Diana “connecting with myself…mind, body, and soul”, but with all aspects of the universe. It is the belief or feeling that we are all connected both physically and metaphysically through a spiritual force that embodies itself in material and nonmaterial forms.

By advocating for a holistic spirituality, we are interconnected with humans, animals, plants, and the intangible world that creates an invisible harmony in the cosmos (Mazama, 2002). As Anzaldúa (2000) explains in an interview, “everything is interconnected. To me, spirituality and being spiritual means to be aware of the interconnections between things” (p. 9). To “be aware” of this interconnection is to practice a critical spirituality. What this means for me is that I am related to everything in one way or another, it speaks to an eternal relationship with the universe, even when I stop living. Both Ana Maria and Stu share this feeling:

Spirituality is a constant search, identification and revision for me. Essentially, it is feeling at peace with who I am and with the world around me…even in the chaos. This has led me to search for other spiritual paths and teachings. For example, Indigenous beliefs of creation and the power of pachamama, Afro-Brazilian candomble deities—representative of our brown and black skins but also manifestations of sacred humanity. The belief that we are connected [emphasis added] to all creation. My spirituality is necessary to not only the ways I construct my Latinx identity, but also how I navigate, deconstruct, and reappropriate the racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad. (Ana Maria, personal communication, October 30, 2016)

Spirituality keeps me grounded because it reminds me that my identity is not found in anything else but Jesus. If I didn’t have God, the racial tension and questions about my identity would affect me more. However, God helps me to see the bigger picture, which goes beyond racial barriers. When it all boils down, we are all connected [emphasis added]. Every human being as a soul, no matter what skin color or background they come from. God helps me to look beyond the physical. It’s not about categorizing or putting labels on people. It’s about seeing every person as a human being, a human being made in the image of their Creator. (Stu, personal communication, August 25, 2016)
In her testimonio, Ana Maria speaks of being “connected to all creation” as part of her critical spirituality. She also speaks to the temporality of this critical spirituality as it is a “constant search”, one that entails constant movement and change. But in this “constant search”, there is a feeling of peace, “even in the chaos”. Likewise, Stu’s critical spirituality enables him to be aware that all of us are connected through a common spirit or soul. For both Ana Maria and Stu, as well as the other Latin American Canadian youth in this study, critical spirituality offers the ability to “navigate, deconstruct, and reappropriate” the racialized and gendered discourses of Latinidad, giving them a special agency in the formation of their identity. Even if it is temporary, critical spirituality allows them/us to “see the bigger picture” that goes beyond discursive or structural barriers. Many times, the narratives that are imposed on us can be painful and confusing, making us feel like we don’t belong or fit in, nevertheless, critical spirituality engenders a powerful form of agency that replenishes with authenticity, peace, and love.

The two elements of critical spirituality that have been discussed are feelings and a sense of interconnectedness. Moreover, the combination of both these elements manifests itself and takes form through something we all discuss but rarely fully understand. There is no greater feeling that breeds connection than love. For the participants in this study, love emerged as the integral source of their critical spirituality. Love, as the ultimate source of agency, is remarkably liberating, not necessarily because of its capacity to resist dominant narratives (which ultimately is a power struggle), but more so for its ability to let go of struggling all together. Consider Andrea’s and Diana’s concluding testimonios:

I think being able to name what you are feeling is powerful. I think love in and of itself is the most powerful. We’re not supposed to love each other, we’re not supposed to have self-love, so that in itself is contrary to the dominant narratives. They don’t want us to love each other. As a direct action, we are going to love. Like, that’s actually our revolutionary action. A revolution based on loving more than resisting. (Andrea, personal communication, November 2, 2016)
Love. I think we forget about that in a lot of the theories and all these conversations about agency and authenticity and identity. It’s like you feel things at the end of the day. I don’t think feelings are necessarily a performance. I tie that to my spirituality, like what is my body feeling? What is my soul feeling? What am I thinking? Doing things with love is really important because it allows you to let go. (Diana, personal communication, October 14, 2016)

What does Andrea mean when she talks about a “revolution based on love not resisting”? Or when Diana discusses how love “allows you to let go”? When discussing the liberating effects of a differential consciousness and revolutionary love, Chela Sandoval writes,

love provides one kind of entry to a form of being that breaks subject free from the ties that bind being, to thus enter the differential mode of consciousness, or to enter what Barthes perhaps better describes as “the gentleness of the abyss”. In this unlimited space, ties to any responsibility are broken such that, Barthes writes, even “the act of dying is not up to me: I entrust myself, I transmit myself (to whom? To God, to Nature, to everything. (Sandoval, 2000, p. 141; Barthes, 1978, p. 11-12)

Love provides access to a different consciousness that allows one to let go of control. In this “abyss” or nepantla (in-between), adherence to narratives must be let go, and a “third meaning” surfaces that releases one from the binaries of meaning and signification. Barthes (1977) describes the “third meaning” as always present in this “abyss” but not searchable because it is that which “outplays meaning” altogether; it “subverts not the content, but the whole practice of meaning” (p. 62) As seen through the experiences of the Latin American Canadian youth in this study, the passage into this “in-between abyss” is a painful crossing which produces ambivalence and a lack of authenticity (feeling not good enough). But this pain or what Barthes (1978) defines as a “punctum” is what enables the participants in this study to break free from the meanings of hegemonic discourses and the performative aspects of their gaze. Consequently, even though the meanings transmitted by, for instance, the racialized and gendered discourses of
Latinidad do not magically disappear, Latin American Canadian youth can temporarily transcend their significations.

While hegemonic meanings and significations generate internal turmoil, critical spirituality can provide a sense of stillness, creating a space for new imaginations. But this is only possible through the abandonment; albeit temporary, of meaning and one’s ego. Palmer (2003) reminds us that “spirituality is the eternal human yearning to be connected with something larger than one’s own ego” (p. 377). Thus, critical spirituality and the revolutionary love that it nurtures makes it possible to “entrust myself…to everything”, a place where the binaries of being oppressed/resisting oppression are interconnected, not opposed. Ironically, through the critical awareness of this interconnection, we are able to, at times, disconnect from the binaries of living and the “act of dying” as well as everything in-between.
Chapter 7

Conclusion: Toward Critical Spirituality in Education

This study began with the schism of my own cultural identities. At school, I was Joshua, while outside of school, I was Josue. I was stuck in this arresting dichotomy of either being a validated student within an educational space or being a vindicated Latino within the cultural space of Latinidad. I have come to realize that throughout these stages of my identity formation in educational and cultural spaces, there was always a constant scrutiny or gaze that influenced how I performed my identity as a student and Latino male. The interviews with the Latin American Canadian youth discussed in this study demonstrate that, invariably, this external gaze is experienced by other young people, yet it is often unrecognized in discussions about educational approaches that empower Latin American youth learners. Holland et al.’s (1998) social practice theory of self and identity comes to mind when they explain, “people tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act [emphasis added] as though they are who they say they are” (p. 3). The gaze or judgement of educators, peers, and even family made me feel like the only way to be validated was by performing certain narratives. In the end, no matter how well I performed, I still felt like I was not good enough and, like my son’s sentiment, I felt like I didn’t belong. Regardless of my performativity, it seemed there was always a discord between academic culture and my Latinidad. It was like I was forced to pick one. The former represented Eurocentric modes of being the ideal/universal student while the latter represented Latinidad’s construction of who and what is a Latin American. As a Latino male, I was expected to be tough (macho), dress like a thug (vato), seduce women (rico suave), and not do well in school (whitewashed). Indelibly, both modes of being have been influenced by a colonial legacy.
In fact, Schissel & Wotherspoon (2003) assert that Canada’s educational system imposes hegemonic practices that are far more reflective of the dominant colonial power, negatively impacting the identity development of marginalized students. In discussing Canadian education, Battiste & Semaganis (2002) write that, “loyalty and allegiance to Eurocentric civilization and oppression are glorified into daily curricula” (p. 93). As the participants in this study have confirmed, such pre-eminence to Eurocentric hegemony have significant implications for their identity formations as Latin American Canadians. The Canadian educational system produces, polices, and standardizes epistemologies that affect marginalized groups such as Latin American youth (Dei, 2008). This speaks to the power of hegemony in Canadian education to negate and deprive Latin American youth by privileging narratives that undermine, obscure and outright ignore their struggles against entrenched systems of domination.

Furthermore, Eurocentric hegemony in Canadian education is achieved despite, and perhaps through, publicly stated assurances that seek to portray equality for all. Insidiously, these public commitments to inclusion and equality allow Canadians to rest assured that Canada is a just society without feeling compelled to explore how and if these commitments are met. For example, in 1993, the Ontario Ministry of Education produced a document intended to guide the development and implementation of anti-racism in schools. This document titled “Antiracism and Ethno-Cultural Equity in School Boards” states:

Antiracist curriculum enables all students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum and provides each student with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors needed to live in a complex and diverse world. It challenges the Eurocentric nature of curriculum and of the society in which young people are growing up. Curriculum development and selection is made on the basis of what a student requires to function effectively in a culturally and racially diverse society. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 13-14)

When comparing these public commitments to the testimonios of the Latin American Canadian youth in this study, it seems that there exists a disparity between the theory and the
practice of the curriculum. This disparity has real effects on the lives of not only Latin American youth but all participants in education. One of the effects shared by the participants in this study is living in a state of in-betweenness which produces insecurity, feelings of not being good enough, and the overall difficulties of fitting in. These experiences and feelings emerge from the struggles of maneuvering both Latin American and Canadian cultures. It is a fragmented feeling that constantly searches for wholeness. Truth be told, it is a feeling that never completely goes away. Many times, it is hard to find this wholeness or peace in such a divisive world full of dominant narratives telling us who we are or what we are supposed to be. Nevertheless, this state of in-betweenness engenders a spiritual and intangible “conocimiento” (knowledge) that many have encountered which makes us feel whole; albeit temporarily, in a fragmented world (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 542).

Similarly, all the participants in this study expressed the importance of a critical spirituality in their lives when it comes to dealing with hegemonic discourses surrounding the formation of their Latin American Canadian identity. They conveyed how critical spirituality, releases them from the constraints of narratives, oppression, and even resistance. Through critical spirituality, a meaning of self that goes beyond the dichotomy of oppression/resistance is possible. Anzaldúa describes the potential of a self that rejects binaries and that does not form self-understandings based on external forms of identification such as race, sex, gender, etc., but instead imagines “a different story enabling you to rethink yourself in more global-spiritual [emphasis added] terms instead of conventional categories of color, class, career” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 561). Furthermore, Barthes (1978) speaks about a “third” or “zero” meaning that functions as a “punctum” which breaks social narratives and creates a “gentle hemorrhage” of being that can go beyond the dualisms of meanings/narratives (p. 12 & 19). When speaking
of this transcendental state, Barthes (1975) refuses to be “driven about my language’s illusions, seductions, and intimidations. I remove myself from narrative” (p. 18).

Critical spirituality consists of letting go of one’s ego in order to disarm the arresting components that social narratives have on our being. This is where the holistic component of critical spirituality is powerful. It engenders collectiveness, community, and relationships. The participants in this study spoke about how critical spirituality induces self-love and love for the other. This dialectical relationship between self-love and love for the other enables you “to rethink yourself in more global-spiritual terms” because critical spirituality is not just about the self, it is interconnected to other human beings, animals, the environment and so on (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002). The practice of critical spirituality seeks not only an inner transformation but a collective one as well. Unfortunately, due to neoliberalism and the meritocratic culture of education, many times individualism is rewarded over community, rights over responsibilities, and objectivity over subjectivity (Dei, 2008). Nevertheless, incorporating critical spirituality in educational curriculum or through university courses has been found to empower students to think beyond themselves and critically reflect on their relationships with the external world (Palmer, 2003; Wane, 2014).

Educators need to understand that critical spirituality is subjectively understood and enacted, thus, differences should not only be tolerated but be allowed to flourish. At the same time, there are many commonalities such as the need for community, relationships, and love that can incite both individual and collective liberation. For Anzaldúa (2006), “spiritual activism is spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as a catalyst for transformation” (quoted in Keating, 2006, p. 11). Critical spirituality is much more than simply meditating our way into a better world or having an out of body experience. Again, it involves a dialectical
relationship between imagination and actions or what Freire (1972) theorizes as praxis. The imaginative component of critical spirituality empowers and gives us the energy to act upon our reality. I believe praxis, the act of applying new possibilities, is what distinguishes humans from non-humans. According to Freire (1972) and others, praxis is the ontological process of becoming human. Critical spirituality allows us to imagine a revolutionary praxis that rejects oppression, while dialectically creating new forms of social, educational and political relationships.

Lastly, the testimonios of the participants in this study revealed that the space of in-betweenness along with critical spirituality is actually a space of liberation and reinvention. The reason for this is because it is a space of becoming as opposed of being. The hegemonic narratives regarding our identity will always be constraining because it limits the possibilities of becoming and instead seeks to impose a fixed state of being. Critical spirituality enables us to be at peace with the perpetual movement of meaning, identity, and social reality. It enables a critical understanding that nothing can be permanent, whether it be the constraining effects of social narratives on our identity or the transcendence from them. This is the beauty of living in the in-between state, it teaches us that nothing is stable or permanent such as the identity of the Latin American Canadian youth in this study.

However, critical spirituality is not necessarily embraced within education due to this unpredictability and lack of stability. Education is too preoccupied with objective standards that ensure docile and indifferent citizens (McLaren, 1988). At the same time, there is always hope because the educational system can become reinvented by politicians, educators, and students. The possibility of change must be the driving force of everyone who wants to see the educational system transformed. My hope is that this thesis provides not a revelation of these new possibilities but simply a reminder. That being said, the study is limited in that it analyzes
Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. It would be interesting to see if the findings would be similar within a non-urban context such as rural Canadian communities. Furthermore, how these findings translate to Latin American Canadian youth living in Quebec would be useful considering Francophone culture differs significantly from Anglophone culture in Ontario. Additionally, the findings could be enriched by increasing the data sample size of seven participants. A larger sample size could reveal significant variations that may not be present in this study. Lastly, the participants in this study, including myself, all carry the privilege of having a Canadian citizenship, a better socio-economic status, and the opportunity of a post-secondary education. Sadly, this is not a privilege or opportunity shared by most Latin American youth in Canada. How is critical spirituality understood and enacted similarly or differently by Latin American youth who have a “precarious” legal status or that cannot afford to receive a proper education because they are too busy working to provide for their family?

While these are some of the differences that should be investigated, my hope is that this thesis was a helpful reminder that movement, uncertainty, and vulnerability can become tools that generate new meanings, new imaginations, and new forms of becoming human. Critical spirituality fully embraces feelings like “I don’t completely belong in one or the other”, as my son conveyed to me about his own identity, because it embraces the unpredictability of becoming human. It embraces the perpetual suspension between the past (being) and the future (non-being). It thrives in learning to abide in the present moment, in the possibility of becoming something, someone new. I share Freire’s (1998) sentiment when he writes, “I like to be human because in my unfinishedness I know that I am conditioned. Yet, conscious of such conditioning, I know that I can go beyond it” (p.54). Based on my life experiences and the participants of this study, this journey or process of “unfinishedness” is at times contradicting and painful but can also be blissfully peaceful. To be human is to experience and embrace this
dialectical relationship between pain and joy, self-love and love for others, difference and commonality, and, as much as we don’t like to talk about it, life and death. La belleza de esta vida es que todo es temporal.
References


Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN PERSON INTERVIEW

Project Title: “Las Fronteras: Discursive effects on Latin American Canadian youth

Name of Researcher: Josue Tario
Contact Information: josue.tario@mail.utoronto.ca
Department: Master of Arts; SJE dept.
Name of Institution: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE)
Date: July 1, 2016

Project Description: This research project seeks to examine the effects of racialized and gendered discourses on the identity formation of Latin American Canadian youth. More specifically, this study asks: How are Latin American Canadian youth, ages 18-29, affected by narratives that associate certain stereo-types with being a person from Latin America? Do these narratives on Latin American Canadian identity affect the educational and life trajectories of these youth? The project will contribute to deeper and further understanding among scholars, educators, and community workers about the discursive and educational effects of identity narratives on Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area. The project uses personal interviews, or one-on-one conversations to collect primary information about an individual’s experiences, views, opinions and ideas on the effects of narratives or stereotypes surrounding Latin American Canadian youth. The project constitutes a Master’s Thesis towards a Master of Arts degree program completion. The Master’s Thesis may cite your views, experiences and your words to illustrate. For further information, please contact the study supervisor Dr. Miglena Todorova at 647-887-3581 or by email Miglena.todorova@utoronto.ca. You may also contact the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board for more information on this study and your rights as a participant at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416- 946- 3273.

Purpose of the Interview: To collect information on how Latin American Canadian youth in the Greater Toronto Area are affected by narratives and stereotypes regarding people from Latin America.

Description of Activities: You will participate in a one-on-one conversation at a public place (e.g., public library or coffee shop), where I, Josue Tario, will ask you questions related to your personal experiences as a Latin American Canadian. You will be invited to address each of these questions as you see fit. You will be audio recorded. The interview will take approximately one hour. You may leave or stop the conversation at any time without providing reason for doing so. If you agree, a copy of the interview will be provided to you at your request.
Confidentiality: Your name or any information you provide will be treated as confidential and will not be shared with other parties or indicate any written or non-written documents related to the project.

There is no known harm associated with participation in this interview.

Benefits include: Contribution to a study which seeks to empower scholars, educators and community workers to understand the discursive and educational effects of identity stereo-types on Latin American Canadian youth. If necessary, remuneration for travel (TTC tokens) will be provided.

PARTICIPATION IN THIS INTERVIEW IS VOLUNTARY. IF YOU CHOOSE NOT TO PARTICIPATE IN IT, YOU MAY WITHDRAW AT ANY TIME.

By signing this form, I agree that:

The interview activities and purposes have been explained to me.

YES NO

I consent to the interview being audio recorded.

YES NO

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from this interview at any time.

YES NO

I have a choice of not answering questions during the interview.

YES NO

I have been told that no information I provide will be shared or disseminated.

YES NO

I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form.

YES NO

I hereby consent to participate in this interview
Name of participant:

Signature: Date: