

THE AMERICAN DREAM: DISILLUSIONMENT IN SELECTED WORKS OF ANA CASTILLO, JUDITH ORTIZ COFER, AND VIRGIL SUAREZ

by

Filimon Orozco Cortes

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Approved by:

_____ José M. Irizarry, Ph.D. President, Graduate Committee	_____ Date
_____ Nickolas A. Haydock, Ph.D. Member, Graduate Committee	_____ Date
_____ Rosita L. Rivera, Ph.D. Member, Graduate Committee	_____ Date
_____ Bernadette M. Delgado Acosta, Ph.D. Representative of Graduate Studies	_____ Date
_____ Betsy Morales, Ph.D. Chairperson of the Department	_____ Date

Abstract

The concept of the American Dream exerts enormous influence on American life. The promises of wealth and success of the American Dream are powerfully appealing. This thesis presents a critical analysis of representations of the concept of the American Dream and its impact and response on the Latino protagonists in So Far From God by Ana Castillo, The Line of the Sun by Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Going Under by Virgil Suarez. In these texts, the Latino protagonists must confront the dilemma of choosing between pursuing the promises of the American Dream or recovering and preserving their cultural heritage. Characters must contend with the promises of success on the one hand, and with the demands of traditional Latino culture on the other. The pursuit of the American Dream leads the protagonists to cultural alienation from their own heritage and forces them to an introspective reconsideration of their cultural identity.

Resumen

El Sueño Americano es un concepto de enorme importancia en la vida cultural y en la literatura estadounidense, incluyendo la literatura de escritores de descendencia Hispana que publican dentro de la creciente tradición de literatura Latina. La influencia del Sueño Americano es tal que casi nadie se escapa de ella. Este trabajo presenta un análisis crítico del concepto del Sueño Americano que se representa en los textos So Far From God de Ana Castillo, The Line of the Sun de Judith Ortiz Cofer, y Going Under de Virgil Suárez. En estas novelas se analizan el impacto y la respuesta de los protagonistas Latinos a este importante concepto y la ideología subyacente. El análisis busca indagar la complejidad de los efectos culturales y de identidad ante el Sueño Americano que se reflejan en los protagonistas de estas novelas. Los actores principales se encuentran ante la opción de conseguir las promesas del Sueño Americano o preservar su identidad y su herencia cultural.

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1 Introduction

“The Sky is the Limit” to the foreigner-born who comes to America endowed with honest endeavor, ceaseless industry, and the ability to carry through.”

Edward Bok

At the very core of American life lies the paramount concept of the American Dream. As suggested by Edward Bok epigraph, the promise of success, great wealth, power and fame define the American Dream. It offers these enticements to everyone alike, to the poor to become rich and the rich richer, to the native-born or the immigrant, and to women and men. The native Latino community in the United States as well as new immigrants from Latin America and elsewhere are not averse to the pursuit of the American Dream.

In the growing genre of Latino literature there is a vast corpus of texts in which the protagonists race to achieve the success promised by the American Dream. In many cases, the results of their efforts and dedication to its attainment, are however too distant from its promises. Literary examples of protagonists in Latino texts demonstrate that these characters believed in the ideals of the American Dream as a cultural construct that in the United States of America, honesty, diligence, determination, and hard work can lead unequivocally to success and an unheard of lifestyle of riches, and luxuries. Even today the ideology of the American Dream permeates a wide spectrum of discourse ranging from presidential campaign promises, popular media to academic journals.

Marjorie Connelly reports in the Interactive Graphic section of “Class Matters”, part of a New York Times series on class published in 2005, that across all social classes “there remains strong faith in the American Dream” and that “more than ever, Americans cherish the belief that it is possible to become rich”.¹ Becoming rich implies moving up the ladder of social class. In this report Connelly writes that in the survey conducted for the series, respondents identified occupation, education, income and wealth as the four major components of class. Yet class, except in a few myth-making exceptions, is arguably the single most important element in achieving the American Dream of the good life of affluence and happiness. Contrary to what would appear on the surface, data from the study shows that class mobility has become more stable since the 1970s. For example, for the income component of class during the 1990s, 40% of American families remained in the same quintile of the income scale. Thirty-nine percent of the respondents moved up or down one fifth, and only 21% moved up or down two quintiles or fifths. Even if the total percentage of families where there was some mobility seems large, the amount of change was comparatively small. There were no massive spectacular jumps from the bottom to the top of the income scale or vice versa. So, the nightmare of one day finding yourself at the very bottom of the economic scale is as unlikely to happen as the dream of finding yourself at very top. However, in fiction as it sometimes happens in reality, there are examples of quantum leaps going from the bottom to the top of the whole scale of income and beyond.

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald is one of the most representative works of fiction on the achievement of the American Dream. Jay Gatsby is the representation par excellence of

¹ “Class Matters” is an excellent series of articles offering thoughtful commentaries into how the construct of class interrelates with health, marriage, religion, education, immigration, status, and culture in the United States.

the “rags to riches” story in American literature. When Gatsby met Daisy, he was a “penniless young man without a past” (178). However, upon meeting Daisy at her impressive mansion, Gatsby “was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves” (179), and redoubles his determination to acquire wealth at any cost. Gatsby believes in the theory that “the end justifies the means” as he becomes incredibly wealthy, presumably in the bootlegging business during Prohibition in the prosperous decade of the twenties. Fitzgerald may have not agreed with his character in so far as the means of acquiring wealth and the way to spend it since he did not let Gatsby either enjoy his wealth in frequent lavish parties for hundreds of guests or enjoy his illicit love affair with Daisy, a married woman. The idea of the American Dream pursued by Gatsby is not only presented in works of fiction, it is also extensively discussed in non-fiction publications such as the already mentioned “Class Matters” series.

In the article “Shadowy Lines That Still Divide”, also part of the “Class Matters” series, Janny Scott and David Leonhardt point out that universities across the country are interested in extending opportunities to low-income students because if they don’t, as Massachusetts University at Amherst president Anthony W. Marx, indicates “we will face a risk of a society of alienation and unhappiness. Even the most privileged among us will suffer the consequences of people not believing in the American dream” (5). The American Dream first and foremost promises riches together with the constellation of advantages that wealth surely affords. Regardless of social class, hard and consistent work is perhaps the single most important element for the achievement of the American Dream. In A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America, Ronald Takaki highlights that in the early period of American colonization,

“pamphleteer William Bullock warned planters about the men and women who, ‘not finding what was promised’ had become ‘dejected’ and recalcitrant workers” (62).² Alienated and unhappy people much like the potentially dejected workers of today, were viewed in England as “the matter or fuel of dangerous insurrections” (63) with the potential to subvert the ‘rights and privileges’ in the country. Anthony W. Marx is correct in his conclusions that even privileged classes will suffer the consequences of people not believing in the American Dream.³

The universal appeal of the American Dream and its promises of success justify an inquiry into the ideological foundations of this persistent concept. The association of the American Dream to notions of great material success is one of the most pervading ideas deeply rooted in American society. The promise of the American Dream is that virtually anyone can accumulate great wealth if only one works hard enough. Success is assured in exchange for hard work.

A different view of the American Dream is presented in works by Latino writers Judith Ortiz Cofer, Ana Castillo and Virgil Suarez. The list of Latino writers whose works have received critical attention is extensive. In addition to the Latino authors already mentioned, there are others whose works have been canonized into their own category of “Latino Literature”.

² Ronald Takaki offers in A Different Mirror a compelling account of the contributions and sacrifices that many minority groups have made, often under excruciating working conditions, to the progress and prosperity of the United States. In particular, he explores how Native Americans lost their ancestral lands, and how Mexico lost half of its present day territory to the oncoming waves of “civilization” embedded in the idea of “Manifest Destiny”.

³ The Americans: The National Experience is the 2nd volume of a three volume collection on the history of the United States. The first volume is titled: The Americans: The Colonial Experience, while the third and last is titled: The Americans: The Democratic Experience. These volumes present an extraordinary account of the history of the United States, a grasp of which is essential for the understanding of the formation of the powerful ideology of the American Dream.

Among the authors who have treated the theme of the Latino experience with the American Dream in the United States are Cristina García from Cuba, Julia Alvarez and Junot Díaz from the Dominican Republic, Esmeralda Santiago and Abraham Rodriguez Jr. from Puerto Rico. Among authors of Hispanic descent but native-born are Rudolfo Anaya, Sandra Cisneros, Oscar Hijuelos, and Ernesto Quiñones. All these authors and their texts are worthy of extensive scholarly attention, yet the selected works by Judith Ortiz Cofer, Ana Castillo and Virgil Suarez represent three of the most numerous groups within the Latino ethnicity from different countries.

The representations of the American Dream in The Line of the Sun by Judith Ortiz Cofer, So Far From God by Ana Castillo, and Going Under, by Virgil Suarez are in stark contrast to notions of success, wealth, power and fame. This study focuses on the American Dream as an ideology that exerts a powerful influence on the Latino protagonists in their decision to pursue the accumulation of material possessions with enormous consequences for their cultural identity and spiritual fulfillment. This thesis will show that the American Dream ideology is a determining factor that shapes these characters' cultural identities in ways that are often detrimental to their own cultural survival and lives. In The Theory Toolbox Jeffrey Nealon and Susan Searls Giroux describe identity as “a process of recognition” (51). This recognition, they continue “takes place among a series of differences: straight, gay, white, black, thin, Republican, cute” (51). These and many other “cultural categories of recognition” (51) define the uniqueness of an individual as member of a group. This paper refers to identity as the process of the construction of the sense of self as proposed above.

In the contemporary cultural milieu in mainstream America, Latino subjects must

navigate in the turbulent waters of homogenizing undercurrents. As Ana Castillo points out, Latino characters are “torn into a rather countryless state of existence” (Torres 182) in reference to the common Latino experience of divided loyalties between the values and beliefs of their Hispanic heritage and culture and American mainstream hegemonic culture with its offer of assimilation or exclusion. The definition of assimilation offered by George Domino as quoted in Saddling La Gringa by Phillipa Kafka as “the complete loss of the original ethnic identity, as the person is absorbed into the dominant culture” (Kafka xxii) is the most useful definition for the objectives of this thesis. Likewise as also noted by Domino, acculturation refers to an “individual being able to participate actively in several cultures without having to negate one's ethnic identity” (xxii).

In the selected texts the main characters in spite of achieving some degree of material comfort, some even enough to lead a leisurely life style, as in Suarez's Going Under, end up with an identity crisis in which the search for their cultural roots and spiritual fulfillment overrides their desire to continue on the path to the meaningless accumulation of wealth. As the day of the settlement of their cultural and spiritual accounts arrives for the Latino protagonists, they must choose between success, power and fame, or their history, cultural heritage, and language. They have to redefine their identities. They have to find and construct their “point of reference”. They must settle the account of who they are. As Judith Ortiz states “characters make political choices that have to do with keeping their dignity and surviving” (Hernandez, 10), these characters find that they need more than wealth to live. They need an identity true to their cultural heritage, or as it will be shown, lose forever the cultural heritage of their ancestral homeland and those of their parents and other ancestors.

In Chapter II, I will first explore the ideology of the American Dream as discussed in The Epic of America by James Truslow Adams, The American Dream of Success by Lawrence Chenoweth, and The American Dream by Jim Cullen. Scholarship on the American Dream is voluminous, yet these three representative examples allow us to track the development of this critical discussion of the American Dream from the thirties into the present.

Truslow Adams' book offers a historical perspective, from the Pilgrims to the western pioneers, of the environment in which different forces converged to shape the ideology of the American Dream. Chenoweth's The American Dream of Success focuses critically on the powerful concept of "success" and its association with other concepts in the ideology of the American Dream. Cullen's The American Dream offers a more recent history of the American Dream that includes some recent versions such as those promoted in Hollywood by many in the commercial film and entertainment industry.

Chapter II also considers The Americanization of Edward Bok by Edward Bok, and Ragged Dick or Street Life in New York by Horatio Alger, texts that epitomize the American Dream. Both these books served as exemplum for their American reading public. Edward Bok is best known as the publisher of the widely popular The Ladies' Home Journal. Ragged Dick or Street Life in New York is a dime novel popular from the late nineteenth century. Ragged Dick, the protagonist, is a character who, although more modestly than Bok, did achieve the American Dream. The discussion of these two texts will establish the standards by which someone can claim to have achieved the American Dream. The establishment of such standards is necessary to set as reference points for the comparison of the main characters in the three primary texts that will be analyzed in later chapters. In So Far From God, The Line of the Sun, and Going Under,

the main characters must confront the rising issue of losing their cultural identity as they begin to yearn for the cultural roots that they have neglected and forgotten while pursuing the American Dream. In the final section in this chapter, a brief summary will be included of some of the major works of the most frequently anthologized writers in the Latino literature canon.

Chapter III will discuss the theme of the Latino awakening to the American Dream as presented in the novels under discussion. In So Far From God, Esperanza, Fe, Caridad, and their mother Sofi, become consciously aware of “the American dream of a better, richer, and happier life” (Truslow vii) as they confront their present conditions of social marginalization as members of one of the most numerous disenfranchised minority groups. Sofi’s daughters constitute the first generation of Latinos able to look beyond the narrow confines of their small hometown where the traditional family culture appears to imprison them. The world beyond the village of Tome looks to Esperanza as a way to escape from an unhappy life and a stagnant professional career.

In the small town of Hormigueros, fictionalized as Salud in The Line of the Sun, two central characters in this text by Judith Ortiz Cofer, hear about the untold opportunities for overnight riches in New York. Rafael and Guzmán dream of returning to Salud in “style”. Rafael and Guzmán become aware of the American Dream as they hear fictionalized accounts from others who have migrated ahead of them from Salud. The mythical proportions to which the American Dream is elevated in their minds blurs and deflects their thinking from asking practical questions such as the time they needed to carry out their get-rich quick plan.

Chapter IV will discuss specifically the theme of awakening from the cultural nightmare that the American Dream turned into for the protagonist in Going Under. In Suarez's Going Under, Xavier, the main character, suffers a "nervous breakdown" after years of meaningless efforts and stubborn determination to become rich at all costs selling life insurance, sometimes even to characters of questionable reputation but with plenty of cash, such as drug traffickers. After sleeping for three days following his nervous collapse, he wakes up with the seeds of desire to find and recover his Cuban heritage which denied him since his early childhood by his acceptance into mainstream American Culture. As the novel develops Xavier comes to a crossroads where he must choose between going back to his recently shed meaningless "successful" existence or going forward to construct his new identity with his Cuban heritage. In Going Under, Xavier's breaks away from the pursuit of riches in an environment of endless and meaningless routines, and begins a reconnection to his cultural roots. Xavier's mind becomes the site of an epic battle for his consciousness between competing ideologies. He must grapple with the contending values and beliefs of the culture of his education and the traditional Latino culture of his parents and ancestors.

2 The American Dream as an Ideology of Success

2.1 From “Go west young man” to Winning the Pulitzer Prize

The idea of the American Dream is a particular construction resulting from the conflation of a specific time and place. The historical component can be traced as far back as the early European colonists who arrived with “dreams” of freedom achievable with their new lives on the eastern seaboard of North America. The place in which these dreams of religious and political freedom were going to be realized was the vast territory of the North American continent. The promise of material resources in unfathomable quantities in this enormous continental land mass and people with the ideals of a historic mission as the “chosen” ones created a very unique social formation capable of establishing the foundations of a unique “dream” life of prosperity and progress. As historian Daniel J. Boorstin notes in The Americans: The National Experience, the mushrooming prosperity of the United States was due to a unique intermingling of “personal and public growth” (119). During the western expansion for example, a few entrepreneurs made millions of dollars laying thousands of miles of railroad tracks that in what seemed to them like a blink of an eye crisscrossed the country from East to West. In this monumental feat of engineering, entrepreneurship, and hard work, thousands of Irish, Mexican, African American workers and Chinese found employment in this always back-breaking, and sometimes deadly work. The Chinese thought of the United States as the “Gold Mountain”, and it is easy to see why they imagined America as a rich and prosperous country: in the latter part of the 19th century Chinese laborers made three dollars a month in China while in the United States they could make thirty dollars in the same time laying tracks for the railway system all across America. A Chinese laborer could return a rich and respectable man to his village in China after

working for two years in America. Many did return with their fortunes furnishing further visible proof that indeed America was a land of “dreams” and a “mountain of gold”. Likewise for Japanese farm laborers around the 1900s making a dollar a day in the United States was a “fantastic” dream. Earning a dollar a day “meant that in one year a worker could save about eight hundred yen – an amount almost equal to the income of a governor in Japan” (Takaki 247). What was missing from the myth of unbounded prosperity was that laborers were “reduced to supplies along with fertilizer, pitted against workers of other nationalities, and excluded from skilled employment” (254). The explosion of prosperity in the United States was viewed overseas as a myth. The myth of unbounded abundance exerted its influence at the national level on native-born Americans equally as powerfully as it did on continents and lands across over the oceans.

With regards to the influence of the American Dream on North American society and its writers, Truslow Adams, who is credited with coining the term “The American Dream” in his book The Epic of America claims that the early ideas of progress that later coalesced into the single ideal of the American Dream were not an intellectual production of the learned classes in the New World. Rather they were a product of the common folk. In the very early stages of colonial settlement, there were few social and economic distinctions between settlers. It could be argued that the idea of equality among settlers was more vigorously alive then than it is today because all settlers started from zero, as far as material advantages and possibilities, although not so in the intellectual arena, since some were more prepared to lead than others. Perhaps the closest to Utopia that the United States has ever been was in the period of the very early settlements, and not in contemporary American society because we all start with something,

some with immense economic and social resources and advantages and others with nearly nothing, but the early settlers all started with nothing, so the playing field was truly level for all. As time went by, distinctions of all sorts began to appear among settlers. Shortly before the Revolutionary War, Truslow Adams notes that “a distinction had developed between rich and poor, nevertheless even the poor were better off, freer and more independent than they had been in Europe. Above all, they glimpsed the American dream” (61). Since the leaders had already secured enormous tracks of land and were in positions of power in the nascent country, they did not really need a “Dream”. It was rather the masses of the dispossessed that clung to the emerging ideology of the American Dream. In fact, Truslow Adams notes that there was opposition from the upper classes to the spread of land ownership and wealth among the masses, but the idea of “a home where toil would reap a sure reward” (61) took root deeply in the hearts and minds of the masses. The feverish activity that led to a quickening pace of progress of early settlers shows that the idea of progress is inextricably tied to inequality. Inequality grew in proportion to the degree of progress. Some began to accumulate more wealth than others. The early idea of the American Dream was an ideological response arising from the poor masses, as Truslow Adams points out, to the quickening rate of inequality. This early version of American Dream was an ideological mechanism of hope that allowed the economically poor masses to believe that they could be equal to those who had accumulated great fortunes. The American Dream was therefore a delusional articulation of the masses in their quest to attain instantly equal status with the affluent, powerful and famous. The beauty and power of this concept cannot be underestimated. The American Dream had the same effect as it does today on the economically

limited masses: it makes them work hard all their lives believing that they will get as rich as the bosses they work for.

The westward expansion and the frontier life and culture were crucial to the spread of the American Dream ideal. Horace Greeley's famous phrase "Go West! Young man!" was part of what Henry Nash Smith in Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth calls the foundation of the myth of the West as "The Garden of the World", the promised land for the destitute from the city. American ideologues like Greeley believed in and encouraged western expansion as a safety valve. Greeley saw the opening up of the West as a mechanism to relieve mounting social pressures and class distinctions in the industrial cities of the East coast. The garden of the world became a master narrative because it "embraced a cluster of metaphors expressing fecundity, growth, increase, and blissful labor in the earth" (Nash 123). Although the portrayal of the West as a myth of blissful abundance did not have the desired effects of settling the West with excess laborers from overpopulated cities in the East, it did promote economic interests to invest more in its domestication by the introduction of technical innovations such as railroads for land transportation and navigation in canals, rivers, and lakes based on the steam engine. The American Dream proved to be an extraordinarily flexible and adaptable idea since it had served well first to attract laborers for the factories and then to promote the taming of the Wild West by promoting the idea of the realization of the American Dream through agrarianism.

Truslow Adams points out that that there were a series of overlapping frontiers where the ideal was passed on from one frontier to the next until it became an integral part of the American consciousness. Truslow Adams sets the common citizen on equal footing with the rich and powerful: "If America has stood for anything unique in the history of the world, it has been for

the American dream, the belief in the common man and the insistence upon his having, as far as possible, equal opportunity in every way with the rich one” (123). But the reality was profoundly different. Industrialism, in the nineteenth century, with its emphasis on mass production needed large numbers of workers, who of course toiled under some of the worst conditions humanity has ever known. Truslow Adams notes that “The poorer people, who under country conditions had had homes of their own, began to be herded into small quarters in the cities in the hope of finding employment.” (144). The realization of the American Dream for a handful of industrialists meant a nightmare for millions of factory workers. Evidently, the common man did not have an equal opportunity to better his lot as the established factory owners had of accumulating more wealth. Undoubtedly, hundreds of instant fortunes were made by a few fearless and lucky adventurers. However, for the masses the illusion of the Dream kept them hoping and believing in a level playing field and an equal opportunity to strike it rich. Within a couple of generations, the first ideas of the American Dream of having a place to call home had evolved into the idea of getting rich quickly. The Industrial Revolution with its ever increasing need of all sorts of services raised “a spirit which demanded riches overnight instead of by the efforts of lifetime of toil” (146). Thus the American Dream evolved more attuned to economic conditions rather than to spiritual or cultural concerns.

The American Dream centered on a piece of land to call home was further endangered by raising the making of money to a patriotic duty and a moral virtue. The rich did not find it patriotic to pay taxes for free education of the poor. Truslow Adams points out that the rich were almost universally opposed to free education precisely due to the taxation they felt lay heavily on them, more so than on the poor, in spite of the impoverished masses being the main source of

cheap manual labor on which “progress” was heavily dependent. In Latino texts, some of the protagonists are college educated, however, they seem to struggle just as hard as previous generations did to achieve their objectives under the ideology of the American Dream.

Together with Nash’s myth of the West as the symbol of the “Garden of the World”, another powerful theory that contributed to the formation of the ideology of the American Dream was the concept and historical events of “Manifest Destiny”. In the 1830s and 1840s Manifest Destiny was the name given to the imperialist thrust for continental westward expansion. In practice Manifest Destiny meant the conquest of the Southwest which by then Mexico had claimed as its own. Westward expansion had such an impetus that there was virtually nothing that could stop it. Truslow Adams concludes that Manifest Destiny “meant inevitable expansion towards the Pacific at any cost” (209). The “cost” that the quote refers to makes reference to those who had to pay it – the native inhabitants of that territory. The West was not a “virgin land” as Nash implies in his book’s title. Manifest Destiny by definition overrode any claims to land ownership of the native inhabitants of the West, who were constituted mainly by Native Americans and Mexican settlers.

Manifest Destiny had its triumphant conclusion with the annexation to the Union of almost a quarter of its present land. With just a little over eighteen million dollars the United States acquired from Mexico what is presently Texas, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, California, and almost all of Colorado. Before Manifest Destiny, the west had been inhabited by more Native Americans than Mexicans. Manifest Destiny arrived at the California coast in the form of “thirty armed Americans” (Takaki 166) to the small town of Sonoma. By 1821 there were 21 missions scattered along the California coast, and only about three thousand Mexicans.

In 1835 there were four thousand Mexicans in Texas. The Hispanic presence in these vast territories was negligible and was easily overridden by a more numerous American presence with dreams of landownership, industry and riches. Thus for these few Hispanics, the American Dream came to them, instead of them going looking for it. From this initial contact with the expanding culture, Hispanics in growing numbers had a much more numerous presence and contributed with their labor to the prosperity of the country. Hispanics worked alongside other minority groups such as the Chinese, Japanese, African Americans and Irish among others in the fields, in the mining industry, on cattle ranches, rail road construction, and factories.

At the forefront of the western expansion was the “common man”, and to him, and not to the “selfish industry leader”, the “cynical statesmen”, or to the “scholar of European tradition, that America owes the preservation and strengthening of the American Dream. Truslow Adams notes that Walt Whitman was one of a few who could grasp the grandiosity of the American Dream. Whitman made “a clear attempt to put into winged and singing words the authentic American Dream.” (301). The ideals of the American Dream would be “harvested from ‘plowing up in earnest the interminable average fallows of humanity” (301).

At the conclusion of the western expansion, there was no more land available for new settlers. The unavailability of land coupled with the industrialization of the East meant that the Dream of unbounded progress based on land ownership was no longer reachable for millions. In the age of the powerful trusts of the early twentieth century, the daily grind in the pursuit of the American Dream became a bleak enterprise on account of a few men who controlled great corporations and through them wielded absolute control over the destinies of millions. Little more than a decade after the end of World War I, the United States faced one of the severest

economic declines in history. In the years following the Great Depression, consumerism and materialism became fore-grounded and prominent. It would seem from these facts that the American Dream is fundamentally constructed upon economic and material prosperity. The decades following World War II are characterized by enormous economic prosperity as the workplace opened its doors to millions of women, and the war economy kicked into high gear. The massive incursion of women into the economy allowed for even more material progress for individuals and families. The American Dream of upward social mobility, equality, homeownership, and for many, the Dream of the Coast, seemed to be more accessible to a wider range of citizens. The conditions for the unprecedented progress in the post-war years leading into the Cold War were made possible by men and women in uniform serving in the armed forces thousands of miles away on distant lands. In The Greatest Generation Tom Brokaw presents a deserved tribute to the men and women who served proudly and bravely in the armed forces in World War II to defend the country. The fact that men and women from a great variety of ethnic backgrounds fought shoulder to shoulder with Americans of European descent often slips unnoticed. In his book, Brokaw recognizes the great contributions and sacrifices made by members both men and women of many “minority” groups. When the war broke out in 1942 the government declared that “all young men of Japanese ancestry would be designated...as ‘enemy aliens,’ unfit for service” (459). Daniel Inouye, a Japanese American young man recalls: “I considered myself patriotic, and to be told you could not put on a uniform, that was an insult. Thousands of us signed petitions, asking to be able to enlist” (459). Men and women of non European ancestry were as willing to defend the country as non hyphenated Americans. Brokaw concludes: “they were fused by a common mission and a common ethos” (xxxv). If World War

It was perhaps the single event in history that galvanized the nation into a single purpose as never before, it also brought into sharp relief the gross inequalities then much more blatant and common than today. The ideals for which the United States was fighting abroad made the country reflect on the treatment dealt to its own citizens of non Caucasian descent. The Civil Rights Movement emerged with a renewed call to the Dream of equality as a result of the postwar national dialogue on democracy and equality.

In an article in American Literature, in which J. Fred Rippy reviews Truslow's The Epic of America, he writes that Truslow traced in his book "the evolution of American traits and the formation and operation of the 'American dream', the dream of a richer, fuller, and more satisfying life for every inhabitant of the commonwealth" (Rippy 331). Truslow however, finds that the idea of the American Dream needs to be reconceptualized because its original propositions have been substituted by "materialism, lawlessness, intolerance, ruthlessness, depreciation of artistic and spiritual values, haste and impatience, bad manners, and aimless or utilitarian education. (331). To Truslow Adams, the Dream in the hands of the rich was headed for destruction. Truslow Adams advocated a Dream rooted in the common man, that is, the poor and underprivileged. Thus one limitation of the Dream is that: "It is a dream which appeals almost exclusively to the underprivileged struggling upward and it will inspire this group only so long as its components are not crushed by the hopelessness of defeatist attitudes" (332). Indeed, in the Latino texts to be discussed we will see repeatedly that the protagonists are inspired by the promise of opportunity until defeated by reality, a trajectory of boundless optimism followed by a fall, boom and bust, that is homologous with the economic cycle itself.

2.2 The Changing Formula for Success

In articulating the American Dream, Truslow Adams equated the term “dream” with the word “hope”. Americans were entitled to a dream, he said, people had the right to hope. Lawrence Chenoweth in The American Dream of Success makes a reference to “hope” in the sense that Truslow Adams was likely referring to: “Hope represents recognition of tragedy and a willingness to confront problems in order to improve the condition of life for both oneself and one’s own contemporaries” (120). Thus to dream is to hope. Chenoweth discusses the American Dream from a socio-economic viewpoint. He argues that the conceptualization of the American Dream as the degree of success achieved is a measure not of people’s success but rather, it is a measure of the influence of its ideology. Success is perhaps the most important component of the American Dream. In fact, success is the yardstick for measuring the degree of achievement of the American Dream. Chenoweth categorizes the requirements for success into two groups. The first group constitutes the major requirements for success: diligence, virtuous character, salesmanship and ambition, while the second group of minor requirements is: imagination, luck, efficiency, positive thinking, talent, courage and prudence. Chenoweth claims that “the success ethic promotes elite interests under the guise of boasting that the average citizen can advance as far as he wishes” (10). Chenoweth asks “Why do so many citizens fail to see the elitist orientation of success ideologies? At its root, the success ethic encourages supremacy not equality” (10). If success is absolutely necessary for the achievement of the American Dream, but success encourages inequality, we might see why then the dream of equality remains so distant for the Latino protagonists to be discussed in the next chapters. It looks as if the American Dream and equality are two mutually exclusive goals in which success is the element

that separates them both. Chenoweth quibbles with the argument that the ideology of the American Dream confounds individual success with corporate success. Corporate success is made to look as if it were the success of the public: “In response to advertisements and articles praising businesses for providing jobs, goods and services to the public, citizens are led to consider business demands to correspond to their own interests” (11). Or as the popular motto has it: ‘the business of America is business.’ Chenoweth derived his concept of success from, among other sources, the analysis of self-help books, which are coincident with the rise of the American Dream ideology and presently in great demand. He concludes that “Self help writers maintained that the dream of success was more important than the attainment of success” (136). Success as defined by the self help literature did not mean that a successful person would become rich, powerful and famous, but rather that the successful citizen would direct his efforts towards diligence and enthusiasm. The ideology of success deflects personal interests from the desire for wealth to the desire to be “well adjusted,” by adopting an always cheerful personality. In Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream, Barbara Ehrenreich also has noted that “one kind of personality seems to be in demand, one that is relentlessly cheerful, enthusiastic, and obedient” (*Bait and Switch* 228). She made some insightful observations about demanded or desirable personality traits for successfully finding employment after going undercover as an unemployed professional looking for work in corporate America. Ehrenreich notes that “The message is that you and you alone are responsible for your fate. It’s a long-standing American idea, in other words, that circumstances count for nothing compared to the power of the individual will” (*Bait and Switch* 80). Chenoweth and Ehrenreich concur in pointing out that the ideology of the American Dream lacks a social component that will ensure

more equal starting conditions, a more leveled playing field for individuals in their quest for success. Likewise, Ronald Takaki in A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America remarks that neoconservative intellectuals point out that many ethnic groups have been able to “lift themselves from poverty into the mainstream through self-help and education without welfare and affirmative action” (10), but what they fail to acknowledge is the “initial advantages of many of them as literate and skilled” (10).

Jim Cullen, a lecturer in expository writing, history and literature, became curious about the development and history of the concept “The American Dream” and wrote The American Dream: A Short History of An Idea that Shaped a Nation. He argues that the American Dream has a tremendous power over vast numbers of people, not only in the present, but throughout the development of the nation. The American Dream arises from hope. Hope through opportunity was not only offered to leaders of early mass migrations from Europe. This hope through opportunity was equally available for the common man. “The opportunities of the New World were painted in glowing colors, and those who were sinking in the social and economic scale in England began to look toward it as land of refuge and hope.”(Truslow 26). The early waves of immigration from Britain and other European countries were encouraged to fulfill the quest for opportunity. For Cullen, being typically American implies having a dream which is also typically American; the American Dream of a “better, richer and happier life”. However he comments that “the devil is in the details” in pointing out the difficulty of defining what precisely “better”, “richer” and “happier” means. This paradox has become the theme of many fictional works as the disenchantment with the Dream increases.

The dream advocated by Truslow Adams was one in which the common man could set himself up on the path to progress in exchange for a lifetime of work. However, the American Dream has not remained impervious to changes. Cullen gives a short but interesting definition of the American Dream. He concludes that: the term the American Dream "today appears to mean that in the United States anything is possible if you want it badly enough" (Cullen 5). Barbara Ehrenreich notes that even people who have gotten college degrees are finding it increasingly hard to get a job. She challenges Cullen's definition of the American Dream by pointing out that in her research she found that for thousands of people it did not matter how badly they wanted a job, they simply could not find one. Ehrenreich concluded that: "while blue-collar poverty has become numbingly routine, white-collar unemployment—and the poverty that often results—remains a rude finger in the face of the American dream" (*Bait and Switch* 2). As Ehrenreich notes, education is not sufficient for the achievement of the American Dream. The self-help manuals and their self-fulfilling discourse of prosperity that pose success as function of individual diligence and character offer abundant proof of this gap.

The ideology of the American Dream emphasizes the role of individual diligence in the attainment of success and tends to deemphasize the role of the economic system on individual success. Individuals from different socioeconomic strata interpret the American Dream in different ways. The lower the socioeconomic status, the more ardently people believe in the American Dream, while more affluent individuals are more skeptical towards it. Cullen cites Jennifer Hoshchild as suggesting that more affluent citizens "see the dream as an opiate that lulls people into ignoring the structural barriers that prevent collective as well as personal advancement" (Cullen, 6). It is precisely the ambiguity of the idea of the dream that gives it its

mystique. It cannot be shown to be completely false nor can its truthfulness be scientifically proven. This uncertainty raises a crucial question. Only a handful of individuals achieve the American Dream of going from rags to riches, and the majority fails in their attempt. The problem comes in the assignment of blame for failure to achieve it. Is it the person or the system that is to blame? Cullen suggests that this question is a lingering dilemma, even for those who see themselves as having achieved their dreams. The main idea for progress seems to rest on a social system that strongly supports individual entrepreneurship and rewards personal effort.

Cullen focuses on identifying the beliefs underpinning the composition of the American Dream ideology. He suggests that the American Dream ideology is formed by a composite of various beliefs. Cullen identifies four dreams, all of which collectively make up the American Dream. Cullen concurs with Chenoweth in arguing that there is not one single American Dream, but rather, the American Dream is a phrase that means different things for different people. Chenoweth titled his book The American Dream of Success, implying that this is one of many dreams. Similarly, Pat Mora in Nepantla also highlights the notion there isn't just one American Dream. She points out: "How dull to think that there is only one American dream, that regardless of color or race, we all want small nuclear families that have Porsches and pools, that look eternally young, whose sex drives, if harnessed, could heat a major metropolitan metroplex" (46).

In The American Dream: A Short History of An Idea that Shaped a Nation, Cullen's identifies four beliefs that make up the ideology of the American Dream. These four beliefs are upward class mobility; equality; home ownership; and the "Dream of the Coast". The belief of upward class mobility dates back to the very beginning of the United States. The Pilgrims are credited as the creators of the initial version of the ethics incorporated in the American Dream.

At the core of the Puritan creed was the belief that “the world was a corrupt place, but one that could be reformed” (15). They dreamt of a homeland where they could be free to worship their God. It is noteworthy to point out that the seed of what today is widely accepted as the American Dream, has its roots in religious beliefs. In turn, Cullen continues “This faith in reform became the central legacy of the American Protestantism and the cornerstone of what became the American Dream” (15). The most fundamental belief of the American Dream is that human existence in many aspects “could be different.” This “difference” is not a difference dictated by fate or forces outside our own control, but rather, a difference in which human agency plays the crucial role in shaping our futures. The notion of mastering one’s own future resonates harmoniously with, according to Cullen, “the pursuit of happiness”, a phrase that defines the America Dream more than any other. The American Dream is thus inherently an individual enterprise rather than a group or social objective. The second belief, upward mobility was measured no less by wealth than by economic prosperity, a prestigious occupation and the leisure to pursue personal objectives. But not everyone was equally entitled to pursue this upward mobility. Native Americans and slaves for example, were totally excluded from the Dream of upward mobility. For Indians and slaves it did not matter how resolute they were to succeed in keeping their ancestral lands, or reclaim their freedom until the twentieth century.

Cullen discusses the belief of equality for all people, the most elusive of all the beliefs within the American Dream. The Emancipation Proclamation made slaves free, but it did not make them equal. The rhetoric of equality made some distinctions in relation to the various kinds of equality. For example, Cullen highlights political equality, civil equality, and social equality. In spite of the high-minded discourse of the belief in equality and the important role it plays in

our lives, in race relations, it is “almost wholly theoretical.” Cullen articulates the notion of equality of opportunity as: “the notion that everyone has the hypothetical possibility of being equal in public life” (108). The notion of equality of opportunity is a mystifying proposition as it tends to shift the blame for all individual failure from problematic social systems of support to individuals themselves. Cullen points out a crucial distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of condition. While equality of opportunity “is a standard we consider practical” (108), he argues, “equality of condition we typically do not” (108), for it is this type of equality that Americans have equated with Marxism, socialism and communism. Cullen refers to what Barbara Ehrenreich in her non-fiction narrative of low-wage, working class Americans Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America, calls “starting conditions”. She states that “In poverty, as in certain propositions in physics, starting conditions are everything” (27).

Inequality of condition is palatable as long as we can imagine the possibility of different outcome, that is, that there is a theoretical equality of opportunity. The concept of equality of opportunity is the theoretical construct that allows us to observe that: “there’s no obvious external barrier forcibly preventing a Latina child from attending an Ivy League university” (Cullen108).

The next dream that Cullen discusses is homeownership, a modern-day dream, and the most widely realized. As imperfect as the dreams of upward mobility and equality are, so is the dream of home ownership. In this regard Cullen asserts that:

Frequent statements to the contrary, the United States was never a “free,” “open,” or “virgin” land. It has, nevertheless, afforded opportunities for a great many people

(including some black and Latino people, among others) to do something that was previously difficult, if not impossible: acquire a place they could call their own. (136)

The dream of homeownership is related to the dream of upward mobility as owning a home can afford upward mobility, and functions as an indicator of wealth. When Horace Greeley made his historic proclamation of “Go West young man, go forth in the country”, land was “the defining criterion of what it meant to be truly free in the United States” (140). Not owning the land on which people lived or worked meant they were not being truly free. Of course this dream did not offer equal opportunity to all to buy homes where they chose. Cullen points out that in the emblematic suburb of Levittown in New York, with nearly a hundred thousand residents by 1960, “not a single resident was black” (152).

Although the dream of home ownership has been achieved to higher degrees than the dream of upward mobility and equality, it remains elusive and problematic. The most pressing concern for ordinary working Americans is living arrangements. Ehrenreich comments that “Housing, in almost every case is the principal source of disruption in their lives” (*Nickel and Dimed* 25).

The final belief Cullen identifies is “The Dream of The Coast”. The Dream of the Coast differs radically from the others in that “it does not celebrate the idea of hard work, instead enshrining effortless attainment as the essence of its appeal” (160). The dream of the Coast had its origins in the West Coast in California during the gold rush. Cullen writes that: “The California gold rush is the purest expression of the Dream of the Coast in American history” (170). The prospect of overnight riches had a powerful appeal for hundreds of thousands of gold seekers whose imaginations prompted them to believe that wealth was just there for the taking.

But the pursuit of this dream was not free from danger: “The almost mythic tale of the Donner Party, trapped in the mountains during an overland journey into California and forced to eat human flesh, became a potent symbol for the nightmares that could result from the pursuit of this dream” (169). The potential for instant riches, even long after the gold rush proved deadly for some and futile for many, continued to have “enormous metaphorical power for generations” (170) including Latinos in whose imaginations the powerful influence of the American Dream never ceases to direct their efforts into the attainment of riches. The fundamental idea behind the Dream of the Coast is “easy living”. Cullen comments that: “The idea that you could make something once in a fixed period of time and earn income from it continuously thereafter without further effort is one of the most cherished scenarios in the Dream of the Coast” (173). The goal of the beliefs of upward mobility, equality, home ownership and the dream of The Coast “has always been to end up with more than you started with” (159). Clearly, the argument presented by Cullen demonstrates that the American Dream fosters almost exclusively the tangible and the material as a measure of success.

With the preceding discussion of the American Dream as presented by Truslow Adams, Chenoweth and Cullen, we have established the ideological setting within which the protagonists in the Latino works to be discussed in the next chapter play out their roles in the drama of the pursuit of the American Dream. The cultural stage for the Latino experience of the American Dream is truly dramatic. It is so because the Latinos in fictional works are sooner or later virtually forced to contend with two powerful forces. The first is represented by the American Dream that articulates profitably the natural drive of human beings to succeed, and the other is the equally natural drive to preserve one’s cultural heritage.

2.3 Certainty of Success

The circumstances under which the characters in the texts by Latino writers make their attempts to achieve the American Dream as discussed in the preceding section, and the consequences of their sometimes blind, and almost always futile faith, are of central importance to understand their disillusionment with the Dream. In the following section I will discuss two examples of characters who have achieved the American Dream to contrast the Latino narratives discussed later in this thesis. Many stories are told to affirm the certainty of success; among them are the highly popular “rags to riches” narratives. Among these stands out the narrative of Edward Bok and Ragged Dick or Street Life in New York. The first is the 1920 Pulitzer Prize winner The Americanization of Edward Bok. The Bok family arrived on The Queen in New York in 1870 from the Netherlands, seeking “fame and fortune” in the New World. Edward, the more ambitious of the two sons, was destined to become a legend in the publishing world in the America of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. White and Christian, Edward found a world teeming with opportunity and is often cited as the embodiment of the American Dream. Edward Bok went literally from “rags to riches”. In his autobiographical work The Americanization of Edward Bok, he narrates his meteoric rise from selling drinking water to the editorship of The Ladies’ Home Journal, one of the most influential magazines in home life in the history of the United States.

Bok is the quintessential example of the American Dream fulfilled, as measured by the enormous success he achieved as editor of The Ladies’ Home Journal for thirty years. Bok received the Pulitzer Prize for best autobiography. David Shi in "Edward Bok and the Simple

Life” writes that “Bok is best known today as an example of the ‘rags-to-riches’ success story: an immigrant youth who made good in America and then became a public benefactor and inveterate booster, telling others how to do the same” (100). Presumably, Shi’s reference to “others” includes not only immigrants, but I would suggest that the “others” also include native born Americans of any ancestry. The question that Bok’s narrative seems to ask is how it is possible that an immigrant who came here with nothing can succeed to such an exceeding degree while generations of native born Americans, hyphenated or not, remain so grossly marginalized from virtually all spheres of national life. Bok says of his adopted country that “here a man can go as far as his abilities will carry him” (Bok 446). This statement of course frees the state of any responsibility for failed citizens in their pursuit of the Dream, since if they fail, it will not be because opportunities were lacking.

The second example that shows how to achieve the American Dream is the case of Ragged Dick, a literary character that seems to have all the right abilities and the correct personality profile. Ragged Dick is the young protagonist in Horatio Alger’s Ragged Dick or Street Life in New York, one of his most widely known novels. Ragged Dick is by all means the quintessential positive thinker. When asked early one morning before going to work whether he had any money to buy breakfast, he responds, “No, but I’ll soon get some” (10). His enthusiasm and positive outlook, in spite of the bleak conditions for vagrant boys in New York City in the 1860s, inevitably leads him right away to his first shoe shine of the day. Ragged Dick fits the personality profile of being “relentlessly cheerful, enthusiastic, and obedient” that Ehrenreich concluded was in high demand in the job market. Ragged Dick “was above doing anything mean or dishonorable. He would not steal, or cheat, or impose upon younger boys, but was frank and

straight-forward, manly and self-reliant. His nature was a noble one, and had saved him from all mean faults” (8). In *Ragged Dick*, “energy and industry are rewarded”, while “indolence suffers” (21). Laziness is the cause of poverty. Alger places all the burden of homelessness and poverty exclusively on the individual and exonerates the government for failing to provide resources that could help youngsters out of the appalling living conditions into which they have fallen, not exclusively through faults of their own. *Ragged Dick* can’t get ahead in life with his efforts alone. He needs some initial help, the “starting conditions” alluded to earlier. This initial kick start for *Ragged Dick* comes through Mr. Whitney. For *Ragged Dick*, Mr. Whitney is a paternal figure. Mr. Whitney and *Ragged Dick*’s relationship is a metaphor that implies that the poor must submit to the recipes of the more affluent classes, if the poor ever want to rise in life. As much as *Ragged Dick* wants to succeed, he cannot do it alone, in sharp opposition to the most prominent tenets of the American Dream which suggests that the quest for success is an exclusively individual affair, devoid of any collective human effort. *Ragged Dick*’s success depends on others to a great degree. Apart from being enthusiastic, energetic and “positive thinker”, he needs a leveled playing field to succeed.

Alger’s pedagogical interests in the character of *Ragged Dick* are represented in his teachings that in order to achieve success, one must undergo a reformation of one’s outlook on life. In a single day, *Ragged Dick* underwent a radical transformation, not only an external one, with his new suit, but also a psychological one. He resolved to stop gambling, and therefore begin saving, curb his drinking, get as much education as he can, and to strive for success. He made these decisions in one day, thanks to the inspiration of his friend Frank, and Mr. Whitney’s advice. Contrary to the beliefs that positive thinking, “perpetual good spirits”, hard work, and

determination, among other qualities can lead one to success, the Ragged Dick narrative shows that these traits can help, but are not the sole determinants in one's success. Perhaps the most important event in Ragged Dick's young life was when by a pure stroke of good luck he rescues a boy that has fallen into the water while on board the South Ferry. Ragged Dick is rewarded with an office job at ten dollars a week at the boy's father's business. With this new start, a considerably less ragged Dick is well on his way to "fame and fortune" (296).

2.4 Latino/a Texts in the United States

Latinos writing in English in the United States have just recently gained wider acknowledgment as noted by the increasing publication of their texts by mainstream North American publishers. The mass diffusion of these texts indicates that the Latino experience in the United States, including the experience of the American Dream from the Latino perspective, is now being read by a larger and more diverse readership. In "Chicana/o Fiction from Resistance to Contestation: The Role of Creation in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*" critic Ralph E. Rodriguez, comments that Chicana/o literature has seen and unprecedented growth in the past twenty years in the United States, and places Ana Castillo as one the most effective "contestatory voices" among Latino writers for her "alternative originary narratives and their usefulness in critiquing social domination".

As happens with all major groups, there is certain disagreement among the Latino population as to what makes a person a Latino. The disagreement arises partially from the question of who does the labeling and for what purposes, and who is included and who is not.

In Latina Self-Portraits: Interviews with Contemporary Women Writers Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia suggest that what distinguishes a Latino/a writer from other writers is that these writers “descend from a combined U.S.--Latin American heritage” (2). There is no universal agreement as to what exactly makes a person a Latino/a writer. Definitions of this sort are generally problematic as they seem inadequate to a few writers and plainly unacceptable to many. For example Judith Ortiz Cofer defines herself as neither Latino nor Hispanic. She calls herself a “Puerto Rican Woman”. Born in Hormigueros, Puerto Rico, and raised and educated in Paterson, New Jersey. Cofer negotiates her cultural identity as a woman of two worlds through writing in English, the language of her education, to write about her experiences as a Puerto Rican woman. In “A MELUS interview: Judith Ortiz Cofer”, she explains: “I write obsessively about my Puerto Rican experience”, although she was educated in the United States and has lived there for many years. Cofer has done for Puerto Rican culture what many Puerto Rican writers writing in Spanish on the Island have not been able to do. She has introduced into the English speaking mainstream texts in which she articulates and develops important cultural themes of Puerto Rican life. Other equally important Latino writers also have their say in relation to Latino/a identity. Pat Mora defines Latina and Latino as “those who share and respect the Spanish language,” and share “values such as family and community” (7). Yet, Ana Castillo prefers to be identified as a Chicana writer, but several biographies identify her as a Hispanic. What is relevant for the discussions of the texts is that its authors share the commonality of finding themselves situated between two cultures. Kevane and Heredia point out: “What is certain is that each [Latino] writer has roots in more than one culture, that each is a hybrid” (2). The two cultures common, although not in equal proportions, to these writers and their characters in their

texts is mainstream American culture and the Latino culture typically influenced by the particular characteristics and manifestations of each writers' specific ancestral home country.

The term Hispanic typically refers to the group of people sharing a common Spanish heritage. This definition traditionally excluded countries with African influence as Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. The term Latino is more suitable because it includes these Caribbean places.

Before summarizing briefly some of the major works of the most frequently anthologized Latino writers, it is important to present a theory of acculturation posed by historians and sociologists. This theory known as "Hansel's Law" posits that:

that the *first* generation (grandparents), uprooted from their ancestral culture, remain fundamentally estranged from the new society regardless of economic attainment; the second generation (parents), embarrassed by their forbearers' backwardness and eager to prove themselves "American," pursue the goals and behavior of the majority culture in an exaggerated way; the third generation (children), sensing their parents' rootlessness, look again to the grandparents for clues to their moral identity and seek a synthesis of old and new values. (Leudtke 41)

The texts analyzed in this thesis involve the interpersonal, intergenerational, and community conflicts between first, second, and third generation characters. In the case of first generation seekers of the American Dream, not only are they uprooted from their native countries and its culture, but remain unable to acculturate within their lifetime into the dominant mainstream culture. As Takaki writes of a first generation Jewish immigrant named Levinsky in New York in

the late 18th century: “To be an American Levinsky thought he had to become economically successful” (301). He does. Levinky becomes a wealthy garment manufacturer in New York. However, in spite of his wealth “he always felt insecure, uncertain about his own American identity” (302). Second generation characters in the novels discussed in this thesis, generally do achieve higher levels of economic attainment, but are culturally disenfranchised from the culture of their parents. For the third generation often the ancestral land of their forbearers is only an imaginary amalgamation of tales and stories told by parents and grandparents.

Cristina García has written two novels exploring the experience of identity, exile, immigration, and success of Cubans in the United States. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, García presents the complex relations between Cuba and the United States after the Revolution and the separation both physical and ideological that this event forced many families into. Lourdes represents the experience of the Cuban exile in Miami. She starts out in Miami as a policewoman, but eventually she realizes the American Dream. Lourdes becomes a very successful business woman establishing a bakery chain making pastries that she sometimes decorated with the United States flag in a show of patriotism to her adopted country and rejection of the regime in Cuba. Celia del Pino, her mother, works as lookout in the north coast of Cuba in Santa Teresa del Mar, scouring for possible Yankee invaders and *gusano* defectors. She’s ready to die for the ideals of the Cuban Revolution. Lourdes and Celia meet, but never reconcile their political views. In spite of Lourdes respectable achievements in the United States, she never stopped yearning for Cuba. Her material possessions and success in business were not enough to sustain her cultural identity as she resolves to go back to Cuba.

Fatima Mujcinovic's analysis of Cristina García's Dreaming in Cuban in "Multiple Articulations of Exile in US Latina Literature: Confronting Exilic Absence and Trauma" remarks of the main character Lourdes Puente that: "America allows her to live in one time frame and create an ideal, yet false, self-image; a successful business owner who has transcended her past obstacles and has a promising future" (167). Lourdes' departure from Cuba after the triumph of the revolution in 1959 is the starting point of her long exile in the United States. Lourdes represents the politics of no reconciliation. As long as no change to Lourdes' liking takes place in Cuba, she refuses to engage in any discussion about her homeland. Mujcinovic continues "She follows the classic American ideal of the self-made woman, adopting the mainstream culture and pursuing the American Dream" (167) only to discover that she could not erase her Cuban culture by pretending that her cultural heritage simply did not exist. In The Aguero Sisters, García traces the story of Reina and Constancia. While Constancia escapes the Cuban Revolution, Reina remains there as a fervent believer in the Utopian promises of *El Líder*. Constancia becomes a successful cosmetics entrepreneur in Miami with an expanding manufacturing operation of beauty products with names such as "Piernas de Cuba" and "Caderas de Cuba". The material success that Constancia has achieved with her "Cuerpo de Cuba" operation merely highlights the need she feels to face the pressing challenge to return to the past to reconfigure her true identity. Bridget Kevane has remarked in Latino Literature in America that the protagonists in both works felt "a sense of alienation, a lack of communication, an intransigence among the characters that will only be broken by the characters when they are willing to face the past and how it has divided them" (86).⁴ For these characters the "past" and the divisions it caused refer

⁴ U.S. Latino Literature: A Critical Guide for Students and Teachers. Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 2000

to the triumph of the Revolution in Cuba. The material success achieved in America by these characters did not keep them from wanting to go back to the Island of their birth, even if it was just as tourists for a short visit. The illusion of becoming Cuban by visiting Cuba was just as idealist as being Cuban in America. The drama of familial and geopolitical separation of immigrant as well as exiled Cubans illustrates the fierce fight for connectedness to home cultural roots of people from other countries.

Julia Alvarez's How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents is the saga of a Dominican rich family who is forced to immigrate to the United States to avoid political persecution. Once in the United States the family enters the space of ideological struggle between competing cultural and economic forces. On the one hand, The Garcías feel loyalty to the Hispanic cultural tradition of the home country. On the other hand, they also want to succeed economically and establish themselves in a socially comfortable position. An affluent family in the Dominican Republic the De La Torres did not confront the pressing needs of physical survival many immigrants do in the new home, although they had to use some economic help from a grandfather. "Without Papito, we would have to go on welfare" (174), Laura confided in her daughters. Without Pipit's help, the Garcías would have become homeless beggars, like the beggars the sisters had only seen, but never thought they could become, outside *La Catedral* in *La Zona Colonial* back in Santo

edited by Augenbraum, Harold and Fernández Olmos, Margarite offers a more comprehensive list of Latino authors. In addition to the authors whose selected works are summarized in this chapter, it also lists: Alvar Nuñez Cabeza deVaca, Maria Amparo Ruiz, Piri Thomas, Edwin Rivera, Richard Rodriguez, and Gloria Anzaldúa. There are of many more anthologies on Latino literature featuring a more extensive list of authors.

Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. This idea of receiving aid from a relative abroad runs counter to the widely publicized claim that it is the other way around: the new comers are the ones sending remittances to their relatives back home.

With economic support secure, the type of survival the Garcías sought was “moral, spiritual, and affective” (115) as Heather Rosario Sievert writes in “The Dominican-American Bildungsroman: Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*”. The García sisters, especially Sandra, thinks that she is assimilating into mainstream culture by happily submitting to the national mania of wanting to look extremely thin, even at the expense of her own health. Mr. García, the father, represents the old country with the typical values and beliefs of traditional Hispanic culture. Cultural tension and intergenerational strife are present throughout the novel as the parents face their own accommodation to the new culture as well as the acculturation of their daughters into the mainstream American culture and its ideas. Mr. García is perceived as overly protective by his daughters, particularly by Sofia, the youngest, who doesn't want to be told what to do. Mr. García wants his daughters to stay virgin for marriage. He uses the image of “going behind the palm trees” (65) to mean sexual intercourse outside marriage. He admonishes his daughters to avoid “going behind the palm trees”, but Sofia ignores his counsel. Yolanda cursed her “immigrant origins” (95) because she had not mastered English sufficiently enough to say “‘no shit’, without feeling I was imitating someone else” (95). Yalanda like Lourdes Puente in *Dreaming in Cuban* go back to their native lands after many years but find themselves alienated from their own culture in their own country. They return to their countries of birth on their own terms and can leave when they choose. They now have more power and control over their lives. But this power does not materialize into a more solid sense of their cultural identity.

Yolanda and Lourdes, as many other characters in Latino texts, find themselves inhabiting what Gloria Anzaldúa calls *La Frontera*, the “borderland”.⁵ The borderland that Anzaldúa constructs exists on the psychological plane. Yolanda and Lourdes do not have to be physically in Santo Domingo or in Havana to feel as if they were invading a world that is no longer theirs. This ceaseless feeling of otherness Anzaldúa attributes to hegemonic structures imposed from the outside. The effects of these socially constructed paradigms label as “transgressors” those who do not fit in these narrowly defined constructs. This is what occurred to Yolanda when she went back to Santo Domingo to stay. She felt she was not *Dominicana* enough to feel comfortable as one, thus ending up as an outcast from both cultures. Junot Díaz also from the Dominican Republic won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. He also published *Drown*. In a review of his fiction in *Drown* in *Latino Literature in America*, from among the authors reviewed in this book, Díaz is said to be “the most critical of the role the United States has played in creating a gap between ‘the world that they [politicians and government] swear exists and the world that I know exists [that of immigrants, poverty, African Americans, inner cities] (*The Beacon Best of 2001 3*)” (72). Díaz refers to what Martin Luther King Jr. had described four years after his historic “a have a dream” speech in Washington. Touring cities and towns Martin Luther King Jr. commented: “I watched that dream turn into a nightmare as I moved through the ghettos of the nation and saw black brothers and sisters

⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa is best known as one of the founders of Chicano/feminism. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa sets the groundwork for a new “meztiza consciousness.” *Meztiza/o* is in itself a “borderland”. A meztiza/o results from miscegenation. The new consciousness proposed by Anzaldúa is capable of appropriating and subverting the socially enforced paradigms by using “surface” and “conceptual” metaphors which are used to label individuals as belonging or not to socially defined groups. Surface metaphors are direct comparisons while conceptual metaphors are less obvious, but function as the foundation for surface metaphors.

perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity” (Takaki 410). Clearly, the world that politicians and government assure people exist is the world that they inhabit, the world of the American Dream. The world most of us know is not the world of affluence promised by the American Dream. As noted in the Introduction, no presidential candidate will waste a single opportunity to sell the American Dream ideal to the very subjects Díaz refers to in his comment, who by the way are the least likely to achieve it if we factor in the element of class as defined in the series “Class Matters”. Unless the American Dream is reached by a freak accident of statistics such as winning the lottery jack pot, the chances for this rung of the social ladder to go from rags to riches are indeed thin. There are however bright spots to this otherwise negative image of the American Dream. One is that as it was the case with the very first colonists in the East coast, it is so today with the most recent arrivals from other countries: they are better off in the United States than they were in their native lands.

Esmeralda Santiago and Abraham Rodriguez Jr., among others, are two writers of Puerto Rican parentage who are frequently anthologized in volumes on Latino Literature. Both writers explore the cultural experience of people of Hispanic roots living in the United States. Santiago’s When I was Puerto Rican, is a memoir of her early childhood in Puerto Rico and teenage years in New York. The main theme discussed in the novel is identity. As Aileen Schmidt writes in “Writing a Life: When I Was Puerto Rican by Esmeralda Santiago”, Santiago narrates the story of how Negi, the main character, from a village in Puerto Rico “becomes another New York City person” (135). Santiago’s coming of age narrative treats the controversial theme of cultural assimilation. As Negi grows up, she becomes a different person with cultural identity different

from that of her parents. As in Alvarez's How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents, Santiago also not only explores the process of growing up in a different country with different and often opposing values and beliefs from those of the native land, but also incorporates into the narrative the central element of assimilation. As many stories of successful immigrants in the United States show, immigrants have "to give up certain customs and cultural traits that had been tied to their ethnicity" (Takaki 298) as part to the price to pay for the success they seek to attain. The title aptly suggests that the narrative is concerned with leaving a way of life behind and embracing a new identity. Santiago's family moved to the mainland in search "of a better life". The novel is thus also concerned with the American Dream. Negi always thought that education was her only way out of the crowded tenements and a door to success. Like Edward Bok and Ragged Dick, Negi represents an American Dream success story as she broke through the social barriers of class and economic constraints to become a model student and a successful graduate from an Ivy League university. Abraham Rodriguez Jr. was born in New York from Puerto Rican parents. What he experienced growing up as a member of a second generation of immigrants in the Barrio was "the underbelly" of the American Dream. In The Boy Without a Flag: Tales from The South Bronx, his first short story collection, the narrator-main character of the story that gives the book its name complains of a culture, his family's, not preoccupied with providing direction for him. As an avid reader, he wanted to share with his father some of the novels he read, but his father never took the time to read them. He felt he lived in a cultural orphanhood in the home. When he told his father he wanted to be a writer, his father told him 'You have to find something serious to do with your life' (16). As a second generation in exile, he finds a cultural schism growing between his father and him. A second important theme in this

story is his defiance to authority. The protagonist feels literally as a subject without a country. He refuses to salute Old Glory in a Puerto Rican *barrio* high school in New York. He refuses to obey because he believes he is free. “That’s why you should salute the flag” (18) his teacher tells him. The protagonist accepts that there are limits to freedom. He will find a compromise “away from the bondage of obedience” (30).

Another major group of authors with important works in Latino literature are those of Mexican or Chicana/o ancestry as Sandra Cisneros, Rudolfo Anaya, and Oscar Hijuelos, again among many others. Sandra Cisneros similar to Esmeralda Santiago, is also a woman “who lives on the border of cultures, a translator for a time when all these communities are shifting and colliding in history” (Kevane and Heredia 53). Cisneros is the daughter of a Mexican father and a Mexican American mother, a second generation child. One of her best known fictional works is the bildungsroman novel The House on Mango Street. The plot of this novel is fundamentally the story of a young woman succeeding in her quest to leave the oppressive *barrio* in a poor Latino neighborhood. Esperanza Cordero, the main character is able to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Cisneros was inspired for this novel by her experiences as a teacher in poor communities. She says “I felt my own outrage and my responsibility” (Kevane and Heredia 49) at the despair she felt working with socially disadvantaged students. Like Abraham Rodriguez Jr., Cisneros too saw “the underbelly of the American Dream” as a teacher of former gang members in marginalized communities. For her too, as for Esmeralda Santiago, education meant breaking up with the traditional Hispanic culture that places women in subordinate roles in the home. “I had just come back from graduate school. I had tasted freedom and I liked it!”

(Kevane and Heredia 50). For these writers education was the single most important event in their lives that opened doors of opportunity that would have otherwise remained closed. The success of these writers, too few for sure, also bring attention to a motif in contemporary Latino feminist fiction. The feminist discourse typically depicts Hispanic culture as gender repressive, and that this repression is reflected on women not being encouraged to study. Patriarchy as the dominant ideology in contemporary social formations encourages women to stay in the house as home keepers and to raise children, so the argument goes. This assertion about Hispanic culture in the US needs to be reassessed because the facts fail to bear out its claim. A simple data analysis on the ratio of male to female students in an average university classroom in Puerto Rico will tell a different story. In many institutions of higher education, women outnumber men by a wide margin. For example, the data contained in the file “Nivel de Estudios y Género Primer semestre 2000-01 al 2006-07” in the section Población estudiantil – Matrícula Total in the Libro de Datos Estadísticos - *FACT BOOK 2006-2007* of the Rio Piedras Campus of the University of Puerto Rico contains the following statistics: of a total of 19,075 students enrolled in 2006-07 there were only 6,299 male students and 12,776 female students. This is a ratio of more than two female students to one male student. The depiction of Hispanic culture as educationally repressive for women may sound marketable in the traditional Latino Literature, but it does not bear out its claim any longer. Why this shift in the Latino community patterns on female education is taking place is a contested matter, but at any rate, it will be difficult to assume it is taking place if there was not due partly to a change in attitudes for more gender equality in Latino homes.

What Horatio Alger did in his novels of social upward mobility more than a century ago in New York, the Latino writers whose works have been summarized in this section are doing more recently. Similar to *Ragged Dick*, the main characters in these texts are invariably representations of attainment of the American Dream. The starting conditions of *Ragged Dick* and these Latino characters are essentially the same. They started out poor, come from an underprivileged, disenfranchised social class, but thanks determination, honesty, virtuous character, ambition, imagination, talent, courage, and connections they emerge triumphant from the epic battle of rising from poverty to respectability. They go on to become leaders in the community showing others that they too can succeed. The plot of Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick or Street Life in New York* and of the Latino texts is fundamentally the same. The difference between *Ragged Dick* and the characters in these Latino texts is that the protagonists, often with Hispanic first names and nearly always with Hispanic surnames, are either immigrants or children of immigrants and therefore have to negotiate a balance between the traditional Hispanic culture of their forbearers and the demand laid upon them by the dominant Anglo culture with its unifying ideology of the American Dream as suggested by Hansel's Law. Assurances, as Junot Díaz points out, that a reality different from the one they experience every day in the housing projects, ghettos as Takaki calls them, and abandoned communities flow unceasingly from an array of sources at differing physical and psychological distances from them. First the most distant both physical and psychological source is comprised by what Theodore W. Adorno calls the "culture industry". This industry is product oriented, not process oriented. Consumers of cultural products see these products already carefully wrapped for market consumption, but do not see how or why they were manufactured. The invisibility of the

manufacturing process hides from view a series of sub process such as the selection of popular potential, making the public believe that these new stars were just average viewers like them. Adorno notes: “Talented performers belong to the industry long before it displays them” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1124). These performers are the standard bearers of the American Dream. Contrary to the emancipatory effects that Walter Benjamin hoped the mechanical reproduction of art with new technology as film and photography would bring to western culture, the “culture industry”, a “pleasure apparatus” as Adorno underlines, has appropriated these means of artistic reproduction and has turned them into a “business” serving its own interests. And as a business the amusement industry, which is structurally an extension of the workplace, reduces people to objects as it views them as customers and employees. Second, as Junot Díaz has pointed out, politicians and government officials are another group that promotes the American Dream in poor communities. This group is closer to the communities they say they represent and serve. Senators, representatives, mayors, school administrators and university presidents may appear closer to people since they may stop a few times in the communities for political rallies, meetings, speeches, and other types of social gatherings, to remind their audiences that the American Dream is just around the corner waiting for them. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa of Hispanic parents sermonizes in an interview published in La Política: “the American Dream is a dream that needs to be a dream that every one of us can aspire to”. With the promises of success, fame, and wealth of the American Dream audiences are focused on these promises instead of questioning the social conditions that keep them living in squalor where politicians like Villaraigosa visit only when they are campaigning for themselves or mobilizing votes for somebody else. There would be more success stories if our

government and educational institutions in our country allocated more resources to provide education in disenfranchised communities than assuring tenants in poor neighborhoods that the American Dream exists and that all, as Villaraigosa says, “can aspire to”. Villaraigosa is not actually incorrect, for everyone can aspire to the promises of the American Dream in the same sense that millions of Latino children may aspire to become the next Oscar de La Hoya in boxing, for young African Americans to become the next Magic Johnson, or for poor Dominicans to become the next Alex Rodriguez as these are the predominant nonstop images that the “culture industry” bombards poor homes with.⁶

A third group, which is the closer to the community, is constituted by the very members of these poor communities who have achieved the American Dream as Junot Díaz and Sandra Cisneros, along with many others who also do community work in poor neighborhoods. These leaders form a group that is more skeptical of the American Dream and may offer the community more viable and concrete steps than the former two groups to actually see and question their real conditions of existence.

⁶ Oscar de la Hoya was born to a very poor family in East L.A. He is known as “The Golden Boy” in the boxing world. He won a gold medal in boxing in the Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain in 1992. In an interview with Jorge Ramos of Univisión, de la Hoya commented that he had lost a million dollars in one night gambling in Las Vegas. His latest book published in 2008 is titled Un Sueño Americano. His success is hailed as an example of what anyone can do in the United States. His success story is meant to serve as inspiration especially for the Hispanic population for which there are but a few heroes, a synopsis of the book says.

2.5 From Real Conditions of Existence to the American Dream

In analyzing the Latino texts for this thesis, I would like to suggest that the American Dream as an ideological construct exerts its influence by “subtly molding human subjects” (Althusser 1476) not by actual rewards, but by merely the promise of rewards and the way that promise structures the desires of their characters. The Dream as an ideological construct that molds subjects by persuading them to engage in the pursuit of a set of goals seemingly within reach, but unreachable in reality. In Althusserian terms, the Dream “interpellates” individuals and “recruits” them for subjection by its promises of riches, if they only try. The power of the Dream becomes the promise of power for its seekers. Analyzed from the ideological state apparatus viewpoint, the American Dream is not enforced by repression or coercion but rather by consent concretized through institutions like the school, the church, and the entertainment industry. Subjects submit by consent to its demands. Individuals unconsciously accept the proposition of the American Dream to become rich, a proposition that they consciously know will be virtually impossible to realize. But the proposition is unconsciously accepted because they rationalize that it is possible on account of the evidence in front of their eyes of that infinitesimal proportion of individuals who “made it”. The parading of star athletes and popular celebrities by the popular media naturalizes the idea in the eyes of euphoric viewers that there is nothing that can prevent them from becoming the next sports star or pop celebrities, especially after being reassured that the interminable procession of smiling faces and twirling bodies came from the same poor neighborhood from where TV believers are watching the “special” on prime time television.

The type of subjectivity that the ideology of the American Dream constructs is principally formed by the influence of cultural institutions such as print media including books, magazines, the movie and music industries, the entertainment industry and the sports industry, among others. However, a closer look at some of these industries and their influence on subjects reveals a dismal reality. Many people, especially the inner city young and poor, seek to achieve their dreams through sports. Statistically, the probability of success in sport is astoundingly low. Nealon and Searls Giroux in The Theory Toolbox point out that “the chances of attaining professional status in sports are 2 in 100,000 for black men and 3 in 1,000,000 for Latinos, there are real limitations in imagining a future in basketball or other sports as an answer to the disappearance of wage labor and a means of escape from poverty, although it remains the dream of many” (122). The 1994 documentary film Hoop Dreams follows two inner city young African American young high school boys from Chicago as they waste thousands of hours pursuing their dream of playing professional basket ball. Socially constructed structural barrier keep these two young men from achieving their dreams. Family disintegration, lack of medical care, lack of training facilities in their neighborhood, insufficient funding, unprofessional coaching, among many other factors, prevent them from achieving their dreams. Yet, at the end of the film, the viewer is left with the impression that the unsuccessful attempt was a personal failure of the prospects, and not an insufficiency of the social structures that are supposed to provide the means to a successful end. Popular culture celebrities make their contribution too in maintaining the ideology of the Dream. Nealon and Searles Giroux quote Jennifer Lopez: “Don’t be fooled by the rocks that I got, I’m just, I’m just... Jenny from the block.”(119). Their interpretation of the comment is that “With a little ingenuity and a lot of luck, anybody can

supposedly make it.” (119). The phrase can easily be linked to Lopez’s wish to identify with her followers by suggesting that in spite of the money, power, and fame that she now has, she is still one of theirs. Jennifer Lopez’s comment articulates the ideological assumption of the Dream that “anybody can make it” that is, the American dream is within reach for anybody, that the attainment of the Dream doesn’t fundamentally change people, and that we shouldn’t resent their success because though living in a penthouse on Central Park South, they still maintain their spiritual residence in the “barrio”.

In Criticism and Ideology Terry Eagleton explains that every social formation has various modes of production, one of which is the general or predominant mode of production (GMP). Likewise, subordinate to the general mode of production in a given social formation, there exists a literary mode of production (LMP). In the capitalist mode of production in developed social formations, the literary mode of production relates to the dominant mode in production in various ways. Eagleton concludes that “The most significant relation of the LMP to GMP is that of the LMPs’ function in the reproduction and expansion of the GMP” (49). In the United States, the LMP has made possible the production of a significant number of Latino texts including the ones above mentioned and those to be discussed here. The Latino texts summarized in the previous section both reproduce and expand the ideology of the American Dream. While these texts dramatize and denounce the excruciating conditions of existence of socially and economically disadvantaged segments of the population, these texts also provide examples of characters that were Algers-like characters able to rise from poverty to respectability and wealth. The authors of these texts also disseminate further the ideology of the American Dream by working close with the community placing themselves as models showing others what to do

and how to do it.⁷ Eagleton concludes that “An ideology exists because there are certain things which must not be spoken of” (90). In relation to the ideology of the American Dream, what would be those “things which must not be spoken of? One of those “things which must not be spoken of” is the realization that many will try but most will be unsuccessful. Only a fraction of individuals will fulfill the American Dream to the degree that popular culture celebrities or politicians such as Antonio Villaraigosa have. Thus the American Dream ideology exists to render invisible the contradictions between the real social conditions of people and the imaginary existence promised by the American Dream. The structural barriers such as lack of education, insufficient funding for community projects, low wage jobs, among others will prevent people in poor communities from achieving the American Dream. With this understanding the Latino writers under discussion Castillo, Ortiz Cofer, and Suarez become important because they are counter hegemonic. Their stories bring to light the unspeakable, contrary to the Latino ideal of the American Dream achiever represented by popular celebrities and elite athletes such as boxing champion Oscar de La Hoya. In the same manner that disenfranchised Mexican Americans in East L.A. see a victory of Oscar de la Hoya as “their victory”, so too millions of children and youth make JLo’s success their own. As Eagleton highlights in Literary Theory: An Introduction, hordes of people trapped in the cycle of poverty in neglected communities “could take pleasure in the thought that others of their own kind” (2246), from their very own communities had been able rise to celebrity status.

⁷ In “Towards a Science of the Text” in Criticism and Ideology, Eagleton offers a detailed account of the relation of the text to ideology and history. History, he writes “enters the text as *ideology*” (68), ideology being the “imaginary production of the real” (76) and that the “real” presented in texts has already being “preformed” by ideology regardless of aesthetic modes of discourse. The text doesn’t simply reflect the dominant ideology of a particular social formation, but it produces it. Ideology is present in texts in the “form of its eloquent silences” (89).

The American Dream ideology is a hegemonic formation. Gramsci's idea of *hegemony* applies to the ideology of the American Dream to the extent that it predominates over other ideas like consistent and persistent collective organization for political action in poor communities. The hegemonic idea here is that it is better to pursue the American Dream individually than to organize collectively to press for more funding for education for example. The idea to pursue the promises of wealth of the American Dream individually produces a Gramscian "consent" in economically and socially marginalized groups by accepting unconsciously that the material conditions of existence are not important for success. What mediates between the grim reality of aspiring celebrity status, fame, and wealth seekers from disenfranchised communities is "a kind of screen or blockage which intervenes between us and the real world" (The Eagleton Reader 237). The American Dream is an ideological formation insofar as it promotes a set of cultural practices that legitimate the power commanded by hegemonic formations. As Eagleton puts it succinctly, the common areas between culture and ideology are "the points at which our cultural practices are interwoven with political power" (The Eagleton Reader 237). A common cultural practice currently in Puerto Rico is for Mayors of various towns to host their own "informative" TV programs in which they highlight the accomplishments of their administrations. What turns these programs into ideological weapons are the "eloquent silences", the conspicuous omissions from their speeches. These programs do not seek the well being of their constituencies; rather the goal is to perpetuate the rulers or their party in positions of power. For example, a mayor of any town could choose to fill the potholes in a major street in a town instead of using public funds to pay for weekly TV programs to boost heir image.⁸

3 The Latino Awakening To The American Dream

3.1 So Far From God: So Close To The United States

In the discussion of the American Dream in the previous chapter, we established that the American Dream functions in society as an ideological state apparatus because it produces a subjectivity that facilitates the formation of malleable subjects. In this chapter, I will discuss the consequences and effects of superimposing the ideology of the American Dream on subjects of Hispanic culture and heritage as depicted in the Latino characters in Ana Castillo's So Far From God and Judith Ortiz Cofer's The Line of the Sun. Castillo's So Far From God takes its title from a well known phrase widely attributed to Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz. He ruled Mexico for more than thirty years. Díaz was toppled by the armed movement of the Mexican Revolution in the early years of the 20th century. He is credited with having coined the phrase "So far from God, so close to the United States" in reference to the historically conflictive political relations between the two neighboring countries. Up until the 1960s the flow of citizens from both countries crossed the border as they pleased. Hispanics who came North to work and stayed, migrated inland to states farther North from border cities and towns. In addition to the immigrants that brought with them and tried to preserve their Hispanic cultural traditions, there was a significant Mexican population in the present states of California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas. So Far From God is set in Tome, as small village in New Mexico settled by these Mexican populations. In So Far From God, Castillo presents us with a Hispanic family of five:

⁸ A common cultural practice in Venezuela currently is to listen or to watch a broadcast on Sundays entitled *Aló, Presidente*, hosted by Mr. Chávez, president of Venezuela. There are some aesthetic differences between *Aló, Presidente* and the Puerto Rican mayoral broadcasts, but the content, and more importantly, the objectives of maintaining power through ideology are the same.

Don Domingo, the father, Sofi, the mother and four “fated” daughters. Esperanza and Fe are half second generation characters of interest for this study. As second generation Chicanos, they want to conform to the norms of the dominant culture more so than their parents. Esperanza is the only one of her four sisters who goes to college and obtains a B.A. in Chicano Studies. Esperanza’ interest in her own Hispanic culture and heritage moves her to get involved in the Chicano movement in the 60s and 70s. The Chicano movement seeks to understand and form an identity of people of Hispanic ancestry living in the United States. As F. Arturo Rosales in Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement explains: the Chicano movement “believes that the US violently invaded Mexico, wrested from it what became the American Southwest, then subjugated its inhabitants; this event has been portrayed as the first of a series of actions casting Mexicans as victims of US imperialism” (2.) Esperanza’s college education represents the beginning of a new tradition of going to college since neither of her parents, Sofi and Domingo, or anyone before them, had gone to college. Esperanza, Fe, and Caridad, constitute a generation more aware than their parents to the ideals of the American Dream. Sofi and her daughters, face the challenges posed by the cultural space they inhabited in at least two relevant ways. First, they live in an average Latino home with a traditional, albeit watered down, patriarchal structure. Castillo attempts to diminish the role of Don Domingo in the home to nothing more than a decorative object by making him abandon his family when their daughters were small and bringing him back into the scene when their daughters were grown up. The absence of Don Domingo from the home renders patriarchy as a crippled social construct unable to maintain together the unity of his family. Don Domingo represents a “light” version of

the traditional patriarchal Hispanic home. Second, notwithstanding the absence of a strong form of patriarchy in Sofi's home, the family has to live within a hegemonic cultural space.

Esperanza's education increases her degree of knowledge of her own identity as a Chicana. She begins to question her condition and that of her family. Esperanza wants to be successful. She now demands more equality, and looks beyond the confines of her little town for more opportunity.

Esperanza returns to college for an M.A in communication. In spite of her academic success and her new job at a local T.V. station as a newscaster, she is not happy because the demands of her job put her at odds with her cultural life outside her professional career. She wasn't happy with the type of traditional life that her small town of Tome could offer her. Her ambition to obtain more success in her career and the realization that Ruben her college boyfriend had only been interested in her potential for providing him sexual pleasure makes her realize that Tome was not the place for the fulfillment of her dreams. Esperanza decides to pursue the American Dream by accepting a job offer elsewhere. While Esperanza makes preparations to leave her hometown to look for better opportunities, her sister Fe wants to pursue the American Dream in a more modest way together with Tom, her high school sweetheart. Fe and Tom's story resembles in its beginning the stories of Edward Bok and Ragged Dick: humble beginnings, but lofty goals. Foremost in Fe's objectives is to fulfill what Cullen identified as the dream of home ownership. While Fe worked as a clerk at a local bank:

Tom ran one of those mini-mart filling stations, sometimes working double shifts. He did not drink or even smoke cigarettes. They were putting the money away for their wedding,

a small wedding just for family and a few close friends, because they were going to use their savings for their first house. (28)

But home ownership is not as simple as placing a down payment and buying a mortgage. For Fe, the dream of owning her own home had to be postponed on account of Tom's getting cold-feet and baling out just before the wedding, due to, according to Tom's mother, "susto", which could translate as a case of extreme fear in the face a serious commitment such as marriage. Of the four sisters, Fe thought herself as the most desirous of achieving success. In reference to her sisters, Fe "just didn't understand how they could all be so self-defeating, so unambitious" (30). The conflict between what Fe had at home and what she learned she could have outside the home leads her to reject her own house and her family's Latino ancestry and condition. She "had been too ashamed of her family to bring Mrs. Torres [Tom's mother] over to her house" (31). While Fe recuperates from the shock of her wedding cancellation, Esperanza is offered a more prestigious job in Washington, D.C., a job she thinks will help her by "broadening her horizons, freeing herself from the provincialism of her upbringing" (35). This new job represents for Esperanza a new challenge, a step up the ladder in her career as a newscaster. From the professional side of Esperanza's life, her prospects looked really good, but on the spiritual side, she was leading an empty life as she was unable to "consolidate the spiritual with the practical side of things" (37). At this time Esperanza was seeing her long time boyfriend Ruben, but her mother did not see any signs of a serious commitment between the pair. Esperanza's mother, Sofi believes in a traditional Latino cultural value which does not permit sexual relationships outside marriage. Sofi does not approve of her daughter spending the night with Ruben. But Esperanza did not see any trouble with her romance with Ruben until she began to notice

Ruben's pattern of wanting to see her only when he wanted to sleep with her. Sofi's disagreement with her daughter's assessment of her relationship with Ruben puts some strain on the mother-daughter relationship. Esperanza's saw her relationship with Ruben in a more casual "American" manner. For her spending the night with Ruben was a matter of having some fun without any serious commitment and its concomitant responsibilities. For her mother however, sleeping with someone outside of marriage was a matter of great concern. Their conflict represents a hotly contested theater of operations in a cultural war between the moral teachings of traditional Latino culture and the more modern "practical side of things" of contemporary living in American society. In her quest for more success, Esperanza, accepts an assignment as a journalist with the military in Saudi Arabia shortly after taking a new job in Washington, D.C. Don Domingo, Esperanza's father, "was proud of his college-educated, career-oriented daughter" (48), but questioned the right "her bosses had to send someone so obviously unprepared to defend herself" (48) out to the frontlines as part of her "career". Just as Ruben was using Esperanza to obtain pleasure from her, and occasionally some money as well, so Esperanza's new boss saw in her a naïve reporter willing to take on dangerous job assignments overseas. Esperanza accepts the dangerous assignment in Saudi Arabia as a reporter. Not long after her deployment to the frontlines in Saudi Arabia, Esperanza's dream came to a shattering halt, as her parents back in Tome heard on the news, at the same time that she used to give the news on T.V as a newscaster, that Esperanza was a prisoner of war together with her crew. In an ironic reversal of roles, the T.V. anchorwoman giving the news was now featured on the news as a "famous prisoner of war" who "was alive but still being held captive" (64). Esperanza begins to question the role of women in traditionally structured Hispanic families in the United States as

the first generation in her family to become politically conscious of the Anglocized milieu. She also questions the role of Hispanics, Chicanos people specifically, within mainstream culture. Esperanza represents an awakening to the promises of the American Dream. Esperanza, which translates to English as “hope”, is quite an apt name for a character that represents academic achievement in the family. She represents the hope that someone in the family would attain the status that a college education confers. Truslow Adams used the word hope as a synonym for “dream”. As discussed earlier, hope is related to the concept of the American Dream in a crucial way. The American Dream offers all equally an opportunity or hope to escape from their present conditions. There is also the hope of upward social mobility in the American Dream. Thus Esperanza, as her name implies, indicates that she is the hope for social advancement for her family and for her society. Esperanza was the *mitotera*, the “revolutionary”, in her family. But her zeal to meet demands of her job by going to the Arabian Desert took her to a dangerous place from which she would never return. Esperanza is the first in the family who questions the status quo of poverty and alienation that to Tome’s population seems so natural because it has always been the way of life for hundreds of years, as Sofi’s friend attests: “all we have ever known is this life, living off our land” (139). There was no need to send armed forces into Tome to put order within the population. Ideology kept people in their places. The older generations of Hispanics in Tome did not question why progress seemed so far away for them and their families.

Esperanza responds to the ideology of the American Dream by thinking that what’s good for the country is good for her. Chenoweth suggests that through ideological manipulation and the ethos of success, corporations and institutions of social control teach people to identify with the objectives of those corporations and institutions. But the world outside of Tome and outside

the country was not a safe place to look for success as shown by Esperanza's tragedy. That world was a world from which women in Sofi's family "came back disappointed, disillusioned, devastated, and eventually not at all" (152). What had for Esperanza started as a dream job with an important news organization, in an attempt to achieve economic success, turned to a nightmarish experience for her and her family since they could not legally sue either the private corporation or the government, since going overseas was part of Esperanza's job. Esperanza had accepted the assignment voluntarily, therefore freeing both the news organization she worked for and the Army from their responsibility to bring home those deployed in perilous distant lands to protect vital national interests-- their vital interests, not Esperanza's vital interests.

After a few months in captivity, it was confirmed that Esperanza and her colleagues, had been tortured and killed. A letter to Sofi from the Army ironically stated that "Esperanza died an American Hero" (159). Sofi went to Washington, D.C. to "receive a medal posthumously awarded to her daughter" (159). Esperanza's life of effort and struggle for upward social mobility and equality came to an end.

Fe (Faith in English), on the other hand, had left her job at the local bank in Tome for a new job, and "it was that job that killed her" (171). Fe clung to her American Dream of a "better, richer and happier life." Among the four daughters, Fe was the one that always showed more ambition, but she did not get far in the realization the Dream because, "A year from the time of her wedding, everything ended, dreams and nightmares alike, for that daughter of Sofi who had all her life sought to escape her mother's depressing home" (171). After getting married to Casimiro, her cousin, Fe wanted to realize the American Dream of homeownership as she and Casimiro planned to buy their home as soon they could. Fe thought of herself as having the

requirements to achieve the American Dream. She “considered herself the steady and dedicated worker type, always giving her one hundred percent to the job, even when she was passed up twice for promotion at the bank and remained in New Accounts. Fe decided to leave her job at the bank and joined Acme International where the pay was twice as much. But what Fe did not know is that in her new job she was going to work with deadly chemicals. Fe was extremely efficient and took on specifically tough jobs. But she did not know that prolonged contact with the cleaning chemicals was killing her. The ironic and sad situation for Fe was that loved ones around her, like her husband and Sofi, were more aware than she was about her decaying health. Fe did not admit that her deteriorating health was related to her job at Acme International. Casey, her husband, was in a constant fight with Fe and her destructive loyalty to the corporation. Fe did not distinguish between degrees of loyalty. Hers was a case of loyalty that kills. Unaware that she had been working with carcinogenic chemicals, Fe got cancer in a few months time after starting in her new dream job. The work of ideology molded Fe into pledging unwavering loyalty to the corporation. The corporation had its own goals, goals that never coincided with Fe’s, although she believed that what was good for the corporation was good for her as well, as claimed by Chenoweth. Acme went to bigger and better subcontracts manufacturing parts for weapons for the Pentagon using manual labor from unsuspecting workers and Fe’s dreams and those of her relatives were irreparably shattered forever.

Not only were Fe’s dream of upward mobility and home ownership not realized, but Sofi’s own home and land were lost to the judge. Don Domingo, Sofi’s soon to be ex-husband, had fallen into a gambling relapse, and had lost the house and their remaining property to the judge in a bet in a cockfight. Now Sofi had not only lost Esperanza, Caridad, and Fe, but had

also lost the very land that had belonged to her family for centuries. She exclaims “No more land and to top it all off, I am renting property built by my own abuelos!”(217) as the new owner permitted Sofi to continue staying in the house for a modicum of rent. Sofi, with an ex-husband, in her ex-home and remembrances of daughters lost to dreams is a representation of strength and resiliency. Although she did not set out to conquer the American Dream, she led a rich cultural life not only reaffirming her heritage, but enriching it with her own critical observations of those cultural practices she found oppressive to women while carrying on with a rich and meaningful spiritual life experience.

For Sofi, life appeared to offer her no viable choices. She could not fight the overpowering expansion of mainstream culture, including the participation of her daughters in industry and the military. The sacrifice that she is forced to make is to offer her two daughters to the industrial-military complex. The alternative for Sofi would have been practically impossible as there is no possibility of keeping her family confined for ever in the small cultural life of her home. Neither faith, hope or charity served to maintain Sofi’s family as everything was lost to the American Dream

3.2 The Line Of The Sun: Eclipse Of The Dream

Lourdes Díaz Soto writes in Boricuas in America: The Struggle for Identity, Language and Power about the Latino experience in the United States: “[We] find ourselves in a place of displacement filled with contradictions and reconfigurations that begin to influence the construction of our present Latina attitudes” (349). Not only do Latino immigrants find

themselves populating spaces of “contradictions and reconfigurations” but as in So Far From God, even Latinos born in the US find themselves inhabiting regions of “displacement”. Cofer writes in Silent Dancing in relation to reconfigurations immigrants seeking a better life are often encouraged to make: “We were going to prove how respectable we were by being the opposite of what our ethnic group was known to be--we would be quiet and inconspicuous” (64) in reference to the new apartment her father had moved his family into away from the “vertical barrio” famously depicted as “El Building” in The Line of the Sun. Respect is conforming to the standards of the dominant culture in order to be accepted. The group whose respect the family seeks is the respect of the new culture, not the respect of the ethnic group. Respect seems to be a function of how much of the home cultural attributes are dispensed with. Assimilation into the receiving culture or assimilation figures prominently in immigrant Latino texts such as The Line of the Sun. Blending into the new culture requires a measure of homogenization on the part of the immigrants and their children. Resistance to assimilation in immigrant groups occurs because it “challenges their definitions of self” (90) argues Karen Christian in Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction. For immigrants and their progeny, the definition of the self is an ongoing process as the biculturalism created by the new culture and the home culture of the parents requires a continuous “reinvention” of the self.

In The Line of the Sun, Rafael and Guzmán, both young men with ambitions of a “better, richer and happier life” moved to the mainland from the town of Salud in western Puerto Rico. Rafael and Guzmán represent varying degrees of economic attainment and assimilation with its

resulting socioeconomic success in the US and its resultant alienation from the home culture for migrants as they attempt to achieve the American Dream.

Rafael, Guzmán brother in law, migrating to the US was a dream in itself regardless of how much of the American Dream he could realize. He migrated with his family with intentions of staying permanently, while Guzmán thought of the mainland as a place to make a quick fortune and return to Salud. Rafael similar to Edward Bok saw his moving to America as a permanent move. There was no “make money and come back” as in the Latino dream of Guzmán. The realization of the American Dream for Edward Bok meant becoming American and staying there. Even after becoming rich and powerful, Bok does not indicate anywhere in his autobiography that he entertained even remotely, the possibility of going back to the Netherlands. For him, realizing the American Dream meant severing all cultural ties to his homeland. One of the few references that he makes to his Dutch culture and heritage is his “instinct”. In the case of Rafael and Guzmán, they were closer to their homeland than Bok was to his. As it is regularly argued that geography plays a crucial role in the degree of assimilation of immigrant groups. Geography, the argument goes, explains why the Mexican population in the US are so recalcitrant to assimilate.

When Guzmán and Rafael discussed their future plans before they left for the mainland they felt that:

they could come back someday as successful, maybe even rich men. They would point out to the children the humble place where their father had been born. What they did not consider were the years likely to pass between that day when they were standing on the dirt

floor of the cockfighting pit, and the day when the long black car of their dreams would pull up in front Doña Amparo's little store, blocking almost all the street. (148)

The influence of the ideology of the American Dream makes them oblivious of their present condition and focuses them on the hopes and opportunities of the distant future. The ideology of the American Dream suspends subjects both in time and space. Rafael and Guzmán do not see themselves as they presently are, but how they will be in the future. They do not focus on what they need to do today, but see what they will be able to do or hope to be in a distant tomorrow. It can be inferred by Eagleton's discussion of ideology that the ideology of the American Dream bridges the gap between subjects' real conditions of existence today and an imaginary existence of riches tomorrow. The ideology the American Dream is capable of making subjects submit by consent to the belief that the problems of the present are not important for future success is a powerful ideology. This is exactly what the popular media shows everyday in their programs. The entertainment industry shows hundreds of sport stars and many popular celebrities that came from poor communities, although it also exhibits a few heirs to staggering fortunes. The throngs of popular celebrities are paraded as evidence that socioeconomic conditions in poor neighborhoods are not an impediment to great success, simply because they were able to succeed. The message for the masses is: it is possible to succeed without solving the socioeconomic inequalities in your communities. Affirming that solving socioeconomic inequalities in marginalized communities is not necessary would be unacceptable. The dirty job is done by ideology. As Terry Eagleton points out: "Ideologies are sets of discursive strategies for displacing, recasting, or spuriously accounting for realities which prove embarrassing to a ruling power (*The Eagleton Reader* 234).

Both men looked at the US as the land of opportunity, but from a different perspective. Rafael looked at the mainland as a land of educational opportunities, Guzmán believed in the possibilities of a quick fortune and riches in the United States. The mythical proportions of the American Dream had the same fascination for Guzmán as it had for the early settlers in the East coast and later for successive waves of native born Americans and new European migrants settling the West. Where as Rafael sees himself studying in the mainland to become a doctor, Guzmán envisions himself walking in New York, the place where “everyone had television sets and drove big cars” (*The Line of the Sun* 148). The mere mention of rewards, the promise of riches, molds Guzmán’s mind into believing just about every tale he hears from the recruiters. Rafael and Guzmán had lead a purposeless life in the town

Guzmán’s first job in the US was picking strawberries in a camp in of Hormigueros, fictionalized as Salud --until mounting troubles at home forced them to consider migrating to the mainland. The novel is set in the postwar years when the US had a great need for itinerant laborers to pick vegetables in the fields, fruit in the orchards, and to supply manufacturing corporations with workers for the labor intensive tasks required for mass production. Buffalo, N.Y. Guzmán’s next job after picking strawberries and escaping from the camp was as an “errand boy for the conductor in the subway system” (176). These survival jobs naturally were a far cry from realizing the vision of riches the recruiter in Salud had pictured in Guzmán’s mind.

For his part, Rafael fared somewhat better than Guzmán, but due to his job in the Navy, he missed out on his children growing up since he was away on duty most of the time, and only came home on leave occasionally. His dream of becoming a doctor and perhaps going back to the homeland rich and powerful were waning slowly as he became a stranger to his own family

on account of being deployed overseas for extended tours of duty. Rafael sought to make possible the American Dream for his family. And his family did recognize that they had certain advantages over the rest of the tenants in El Building: “Within the four walls of our flat he did everything possible to separate us from the rabble. He managed to do that. By dressing better and having more than any other children in El Building” (178). Rafael had a very high price to pay even for the modest advantages he was able to provide his family:

After nearly fourteen years in the navy he had risen only to the rank of noncommissioned officer, petty officer they called it. His job on an old World War II cargo ship was to watch the boilers. He spent ten to twelve hours a day below the water line, watching dials, alone. He learned silence there. He practiced it for hours, days, and months until he mastered it. When he came home to us, he found conversation difficult and the normal noise of life disturbing. (179)

By confronting their real conditions in life, both men had realized the futility and emptiness of the dreams or riches they had forged in Salud before going to the mainland in search of the American Dream. While Guzmán is recovering from a knife wound suffered in an attack at El Building, he talks to his niece about his dreams:

I dreamed of going back to the Island in style. You know, send a car first. A big car. Have it delivered to Mama Cielo’s house in Salud. Then I would arrive in a new suit, a wallet thick with dollars in my pocket. Stupid, isn’t it? Every bastard in this building is dreaming that same dream right now. But I thought I was smarter than the rest of them, and I was. I have money, girl. Not a fortune, but enough to buy that car, enough to have it shipped. What I don’t have anymore is...” (217).

Guzmán's pride coupled with the unfulfilled promise of wealth does not allow subjects to admit defeat, although he simply reaches a point where he decides to go back to the Island. He had managed to save barely enough to return to Salud, but not "in style" as he had dreamed. Rafael on the other hand, had spent his life in isolation in a navy job that produced scarcely enough to allow his family to get by modestly. The constant routine of his drab job of watching over boilers on a war ship deprived him of any cultural life and save for his sporadic visits while on leave: he became a stranger to his own family.

Esperanza, Fe, Guzmán, and Rafael are all representations of the complexities between the realizing the promises of the American Dream and preserving the Latino culture. These Latino characters certainly dedicated their life and efforts to hard work. They were ambitious and wanted to succeed. These characters too, highlight the cultural schism that seems to arise between maintaining their ancestral traditions and homeland heritage, and their pursuit of the promises of the American Dream.

Both Cofer and Castillo through their stories of their characters' pursuit of the American Dream show a disintegration of family and tradition. The reader leaves the text with a sense of loss of harmony.

4 The Nightmare Of The American Dream

4.1 Going Under: Identity Reemergence

Virgil Suarez's Going Under is a literary contribution to the evolving conversation of Latino writers on the search for cultural identity, its loss and recovery. In her article "Going under and Spared Angola. Memories from a Cuban-American Childhood-A Contrapunteo on Cultural Identity" Leira Annette Manso tells us that Suarez's voice in Going Under, is "critical about the terms for negotiating the return to one's cultural roots" (295). Xavier Cuevas, the protagonist, wants to return to his cultural roots because he had lost his cultural compass while searching for his personal realization of the American Dream. As the successful owner of an insurance company, Xavier can certainly be said to have achieved the American Dream. The making of money becomes his ultimate purpose and objective. He can never sell enough policies. The negotiation in going back to his cultural roots entails giving up his worldly pursuit of money and success.

We meet Xavier already as a successful businessman, but he begins to show some indications that something in his life is not going right. In the dense traffic jams with thousands of cars, "going nowhere", he gets stuck on daily in Miami, he sees a metaphor for the lack of direction for his life. Xavier is a second generation Cuban American. We may recall from Chapter II that part of Hansel's Law relates to second generation immigrants in that they are "embarrassed by their forbearers' backwardness and eager to prove themselves "American," and thus "pursue the goals and behavior of the majority culture in an exaggerated way". Apart from the intergenerational cultural gap between Xavier and his parents, an additional measure of

embarrassment is served to him when his divorced mother tells him that she is marrying her hairdresser and that she wants Xavier to give her away. Further, he must come to terms with the realization that his father lives happily with another man. Xavier makes the accumulation of money his main goal in life, or rather, ideology recruits him into the ranks of wealth seekers. Xavier is a firm believer in the American Dream ever since he heard a high school teacher preaching to his class that “the business of America is making money”(Suarez 14). His behavior as a child of immigrants was not influenced by the recurrent element of race common in the Latino tradition of the bildungsroman novel.⁹ Once he picked up English, he was mostly “left alone”. Since he was fair skinned and spoke English well no one thought of asking him for his ethnic or cultural roots. He never confronted being labeled the “Other” to the same extent as those who unlike him are more noticeable by their skin complexion. The quality of being “other”, that alterity common in racialized societies often imposes limitations on the constitution of cultural identities. As Karen Christian remarks in “Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction”: “For those immigrants with racial difference visibly inscribed on their bodies, no amount of performing will ever permit them to pass as white Americans” (92). In this sense, “passing” afforded Xavier a more extensive array of elements from which to build his own identity. His particular cultural orientation as a pursuer of the American Dream was not in tune with his conscious subjectivity of a Cuban culture. For him not being “American” was almost a

⁹ In the Critical Race Theory: An Introduction Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic write that: “The legal definition of whiteness took shape in the context of immigrant law, as courts decided who was to have the privilege of living in the United States. As many ordinary citizens did, judges defined the white race in opposition to blackness or some other form of otherness. Whiteness, thus, was defined in opposition to nonwhite, an opposition that marked a boundary between privilege and its opposite. Only those deemed white were worthy of entry into our community.”

secret as he was able to pass as one. Xavier's identity crisis highlights the social complexities of the politics of racial and ethnic ideas of "passing".¹⁰ Since Xavier was white enough to "pass", "He fit in so the children left him alone. That was the beginning of the transition in the unbalance of identity. More American, less Cuban" (138). Xavier's ability to pass created for him the "unbalance of identity" that led him to make the wrong cultural choices in identifying with the mainstream ideology of the American Dream. As shown also by Nella Larsen, "passing" for them did provide temporary access to a social class and a racial group different than their own. Passing for the protagonists did not solve any identity problems, it created them. Edward Bok is a case in which his "passing" was successful and permanent. However, he lost his Dutch identity forever. In Xavier's case, his nervous collapse was the point of no return from his trip into the space of "passing". On the one hand, Xavier was poised to live a comfortable life with a beautiful Anglo wife, two lovely children, a boy and a girl, driving a Volvo, living an up-scale neighborhood in Miami, and making good money. This is the living picture of the American Dream. On the other hand however, his spiritual and cultural life was crumbling to the ground. He came to a defining moment in his life where he had to make the decision whether to continue with his identity as an American or to go under. As Manso has remarked about the novel's title: "One must go under and search between the multiple layers that structure one's cultural identity as a hyphenated American". This crucial moment materialized in the shape of a nervous break

¹⁰ Nella Larsen's *Passing* of the Harlem Renaissance literary movement in the 1920s in New York has received a great deal of academic attention. The novel treats the theme of passing in the complications in the lives and marriages of two women of light skin who were able to pass as white. As in *Going Under*, passing led to a series of complications, that in the case of *Passing* ended up with the death, seemingly accidental, of Clare Kendry falling out of a window.

down, which for Xavier represented the end of his American Dream and the beginning of the attempt to reconstructing his cultural identity as a Cuban. The straw that broke the camel's back came in the form of a mugging in which his secretary lost Mr. Segovia's money, an important customer, and a drug trafficker who wanted a life insurance policy of ten million dollars. The nervous breakdown renders Xavier comatose. He undergoes a symbolic death that represents the extinction of his material pursuits. He emerges from this trance as a tabula rasa on which a new cultural consciousness will be imprinted.

The presence of Wilfredo's character in the novel highlights the extent of Xavier's estrangement from the Cuban culture. Wilfredo, Xavier's office partner, is a carefree bachelor who goes out frequently, enjoys varied female company, likes beer, boasts about his dates, and doesn't seem to be as focused on success and money as Xavier. Contrary to Xavier, Wilfredo, uses Spanish abundantly, listens to Cuban music and is much more in tune and comfortable with his Cuban cultural heritage. Wilfredo represents the cultural identity that Xavier has lost or has never endeavored to acquire. The obvious conclusion is that alienation from one's own culture leads to an unbearable imbalance of identity. The transnational Cuban American identity represented in the character of Wilfredo could be contested on the grounds that it is not a true representation of the Cuban American identity. Xavier's ambivalence in his cultural identification is rooted in the two, often antagonistic, sources of identification. The model for the Cuban identification is the diasporic transnational Cuban community in the US, a community which is for second and third generation Cuban Americans an "imagined" identity, since most second generation Cuban Americans have never been in direct contact with the home land of their parents. This imagined cubannes that Wilfredo represents in the novel is not a mirror

image of the cubaness experienced in Cuba. Immigrants and their descendants may think that they have remained culturally unaltered, but when they have an opportunity to return to the homeland, they find that it is very difficult “reconnecting with the societies of their birth” (Hall 3) even after just a few years away from the homeland. The second source for identification is naturally mainstream culture of the new home. Xavier’s inability to successfully negotiate a balance between the values and beliefs of the two cultures was the source of the nervous breakdown.

An additional source of strain in Xavier’s life leading up to his collapse was the deteriorating condition of his marriage to Sarah. Her parents were not thrilled to meet Xavier as they were “wishy-washy” about their daughter’s choice for a husband. Likewise Sarah did not like Carlos Antonio, Xavier’s father, calling her “Sarita”; a Spanish diminutive for names often used as a sign of care, love and appreciation in Hispanic culture. Sarah did not like her name Hispanicized. She did not identify with Xavier’s Cuban heritage and culture. Xavier spent most of the time either at work or in his home. Neither of these places appreciated or welcomed his Cuban culture. Xavier was under a culturally limiting environment in his work and at home. He could not use Spanish at home with his wife and children, and he was not passing on to his children anything of his Cuban culture. He was not able to be himself.

An additional psychological burden for Xavier came from the idea that when someone is perceived as identifying more with another culture different from that of their parents, he or she is seen as a betrayer of his or her own culture. The home culture exerts an enormous amount of cultural pressure to reclaim a subject it sees as lost to the opposing culture, and to secure those who are already committed upholders of the home culture.

After sleeping for three days, Xavier wakes up with a ravishing appetite. His voracity foreshadows an upcoming cultural ravenousness where he will devour everything Cuban. Through the window in his father's apartment, he watches a ship heading south. The ship sliding slowly south implies that from now on Xavier will be looking south, to Cuba. For Xavier Spanish had been the language of his childhood, but had stopped using it unless it was absolutely necessary for communication with his parents. It is symbolically important that Xavier began his physical recuperation and his identity reclamation at his father's apartment. Symbolically he was going back to his roots, the fatherland. Carlos Antonio, his father, represents for Xavier the bridge to happier times in his childhood when Spanish was used in the home. Xavier feels a reconnection to his past when he hears his father speaking in Spanish. Hearing his father speak in Spanish makes Xavier feel better whereas he had always complained before to Wilfredo for his using Spanish with an accent, especially if he, Wilfredo knew English perfectly. At his father's apartment Xavier has a moment of introspection:

Though he felt calmer and more relaxed, there was still something missing. Deep roots of confusion and angst had taken hold of Xavier's mind and soul. At best, Xavier felt lost. Something told him that he didn't belong. He didn't know the source of his detachment. He felt that the voice he heard coming from outside the room didn't belong to his father, someone he'd always known and cared" (Suarez 83).

The confusion and angst he feels clearly is the unresolved crisis of his identity between the two cultural forces operating on him. On the one hand his ambition to realize the American Dream had converted him into "a hard-core workaholic" (75) as Wilfredo calls him. On the other hand, the Cuban culture encouraged him to lead a more relaxed life style as exemplified by Wilfredo.

Apart from starting to appreciate and use more Spanish as part of his identity as a Cuban, Xavier chooses an unconventional treatment for his malady. He chose to see a *santera* instead of making an appointment with the family doctor. A *santera* is a spiritual medium. The *santeria* combine “Catholic symbols and ritual with ancient African rites to call forth spirits and to predict and heal” (The Line of the Sun 238). The decision to seek the help of a *santera* suggests a shift in cultural perspective. Seeking the assistance of a *santera* shows further that he now embraces more of the Cuban tradition, whereas in his pre-nervous collapse he would have dismissed the idea of seeing a *santera* as mere foolishness. Carlos Antonio seems to have been more aware of what was ailing his son than Xavier himself, as evidenced by his suggestion to seek out the help of a *santera*. Whether *santeria* really helps or not a patient is not relevant to this discussion. What is significant is that it simply shows that Xavier is well on the path to recapture his Cuban identity where he had left off as a child.

As Xavier embraces more and more elements of Cuban culture, he also shows a growing distancing from his old self. As Xavier looks outside his father’s car on their way to see Caledonia, the *santera*, the traffic jams so familiar to Xavier, look now “strange, foreign” (Suarez 84) to him. Parts of his life that connected him to his daily toil in pursuit of the American Dream began to look unfamiliar to him including English which “all of a sudden he failed to understand” (84). In the process of “Americanization” as defined by Edward Bok, that of becoming wildly successful, famous and rich, Xavier had lost his cultural orientation to his past as “he no longer felt he had one” (85). His return to his Cuban roots continues at his first meeting with Caledonia, the *santera*, at her Centro, in symbolic Little Havana, Miami. With a simple request from Xavier and a probing question, Caledonia uncovers and ascertains the nature

of his malady. Caledonia asks of Xavier “Are you Cuban or American?” This is a question that does not have a simple answer. The typical oversimplified solution to this question for millions of Americans of mixed cultural heritage is to hyphenate their cultural status to that of something-American. This solution poses a number of questions. For one, the American Dream as achieved by Edward Bok indicates strongly the unstated requirement that one must become “American” to be successful. For Bok becoming American meant a complete erasure of his Dutch heritage. Throughout his book, the only reference he makes to his Dutch heritages is his Dutch “instinct”. A second question that the hyphenation of one’s cultural status poses is that in the daily experience of cultural life, subjects tend to lean more on one side than on the other, thus creating an identity imbalance similar to the one that led Xavier to fall into a “nervous breakdown”. Xavier confides to Caledonia in response to her question about his identity:

his aspirations of one day making a lot of money in the insurance business, but yet all that had been undermined by a strong feeling of detachment and dislocation. Insecurities plagued him, so he no longer knew what he wanted to do, or whether what he was doing meant anything. (89)

Xavier felt a “detachment and dislocation” from his own family, his parents, his job. He was disconnected from his own cultural consciousness caused by the alienation resulting from the isolation imposed by the blind pursuit of the American Dream. At Caledonia’s Xavier agrees to undergo a ritual cleansing which is further evidence that he is accepting more of the traditional Cuban heritage. In the ritual cleansing a guiding spirit appears in his consciousness. This spirit materializes in Xavier’s imagination in the form a “voice” which represents the unconscious imperative to reconnect with his past. But the past in question is not only the past of his

childhood, but the past of his culture with all its richness and variety of manifestations. Xavier's new found "voice" warns him against pursuing the American Dream blindly: "You have high expectations. You demand too much from yourself. Good qualities, but not in excess. As I've told you already, you need to dig deeper and bring forth some other part of you. One that is less careful and more carefree" (102). Xavier's distancing from the mainstream culture of his upbringing and education in the US and the embracing of the Cuban culture of his ancestors, at least the Cuban American version of Cuban culture in Miami is a contest between two competing ideologies, each exerting its own influence in the creation of particular subjectivities. One set of ideas socially conditioned vying for power by a dominant culture is a struggle with another set of ideas also socially conditioned, but by a different cultural formation. It is clear too, that not everything that went wrong in Xavier's life can be attributed to his insistence on acquiring wealth, as can be seen, for example, by the complications in his marriage. As Eagleton argues "Ideology plays a part in persuading people to tolerate unjust situations; but it is probably not the major part, and it almost never does so without a struggle" (*The Eagleton Reader* 239).

After reflecting on his life for a few days, Xavier makes an attempt to negotiate his growing identification with the Cuban culture and his past life as a money maker. He goes back to his office to continue with his job, but he approaches his duties with a different perspective. He no longer pursues the American Dream with the same obstinacy as he did before his nervous breakdown. He dresses less formally, and is more relaxed. More importantly, he sets the cultural foundations for a new way of living truer to his Cuban heritage by embracing all manner of Cuban cultural manifestations. Shortly after his visit with Caledonia, Xavier wants to "Buy the finest set of congas. Practice and learn how to play" (111). Xavier had never before cultivated an

interest in Cuban popular music. He had at best been indifferent to this cultural manifestation. Wanting not only to listen to Cuban music, but to learn to play it, shows that Xavier had become more interested in pursuing cultural objectives and that he had become less devoted to the enterprise of “making a lot of money”. Xavier becomes more detached from the American Dream and more in tune with seeking his cultural roots as the spirit tells him that his healing will begin by regaining his “spiritual cultural connection” (Suarez 120). The fact that Xavier not only wants to listen to Cuban music, but wants to practice shows that he isn’t just a passive consumer of culture, but wants to become an active producer and contributor to the expressive richness of Cuban American culture. He made a cultural quantum leap by having become a cultural agent from fundamentally being a nonentity in the Cuban cultural landscape in Miami.

In a subsequent conversation with his inner voice, the spirit tells Xavier “You’ve lost your way because you’ve become a bland mix of nothing but routines. Thoughtless, meaningless routines” (119). This reflection on his own life coupled with the pathetic spectacle of a pair going house by house with pamphlets in their hands asking people for a moment of their time trumpeting how bad it is today and how good is going to be tomorrow made Xavier resolve to leave his job: “Selling for a living. No more of that” (128). Clearly Xavier is distancing more and more from his old self and is embracing more ardently his desire to become Cuban.

With a more authentic cultural identity, Xavier feels drawn to the Florida Keys as if by a strong magnetic, irresistible force. This force pulls him to Key West, the southern-most part of the Continental United States. There at the famous buoy, the most visited attraction in Key West, Xavier dives into the water to swim the ninety miles separating him from Cuba. Just as attaining

the American Dream for him was “chaotic, absurd, unpredictable, and impossible”, so is his quest to reach Cuba, his “home”.

4.2 Conclusions

The main objective of this study was to analyze the Latino experience of the American Dream as articulated in the selected texts of Ana Castillo, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Virgil Suarez. The argument in the thesis is that these authors through the texts show that the protagonists’ desire for a meaningless accumulation of wealth eventually needs to be overridden by a more powerful need to search for cultural roots and spiritual fulfillment. As it can be seen in Castillo’s So Far From God the dream of progress can end up in disaster. Not only did Sofi lose her daughters to the American Dream, but she ends paying rent for living in her own house that had been built on land belonging to her ancestors for hundreds of years. In a “culturally” misguided search of wealth and fame Esperanza lost her life in the desert in Saudi Arabia reporting for a news corporation while her sister Fe contracted cancer as a result of working with dangerous chemicals in a plant subcontracting for weapons manufacturing. In The Line of the Sun Ortiz Cofer illustrates through the life of Rafael the negative effects and frustration resulting from dull and unrewarding jobs offered to the newly arrived émigrés. Rafael became a stranger to his own family after being on long tours with the Navy for most of his life. Guzmán on the other hand, found that his job picking fruit in the strawberry fields was really needed to fulfill somebody else’s dreams. In Virgil Suarez’s Going Under what had appeared as a story of success in the life of Xavier turned out to be a tale of cultural loss. Xavier owned a profitable insurance business,

drove and expensive car, had a beautiful family, and lived in a up-scale neighborhood. He however, found that his material possessions were not enough to sustain his sense of self. He had to search for his cultural roots from which to build an identity true to the values and beliefs of the Cuban culture of his parents. These Latino authors (Ortiz Cofer, Castillo and Suarez) in their texts demonstrate that the protagonists had to redefine their identities – construct points of reference, make political choices to keep their dignity and ensure they survival, and that they need of more than just wealth. Xavier began his quest for identity by embracing Cuban cultural points of reference, such as learning to play the congas, relearning Spanish – connecting with his Cuban heritage. Guzmán in The Line of the Sun made political choices by reasserting his identity as a Puerto Rican by refusing to assimilate. These Latino writers underline the paramount importance of cultural agency as the characters must make political decisions to preserve their cultural integrity.

Pedagogical Implications

In Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach, Paulo Freire states that:

It is my conviction that there are no themes or values of which one cannot speak, no areas in which one must be silent. We can talk about everything, and we can give testimony about everything. The language that we use to talk about this or that and the way we give testimony are, nevertheless, influenced by the social, cultural, and historical conditions of the context in which we speak and testify. It should be said that they are conditioned by the culture of the class, by the reality of those with whom and to whom we speak and testify. (58)

I wish to make clear that following the beliefs and values of the American Dream, per sé, is not wrong, but to follow them mindlessly and blindly is. As Freire indicates the classroom is the site for dialogue. As such, the literature teacher-facilitator should use all the resources available to bring the relevancy between the students' lives and the texts used in the classroom. As Freire suggests, we can talk about everything and we can give testimony about everything. The pedagogical implications of these works, and Latino literature in the classroom are of enormous relevance in this day and age of increasing unquestioned acceptance of hegemonic beliefs and values but stubborn resistance to critical engagement on discussions of such values and beliefs. As Freire writes: "Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking" (Pedagogy 92). Within a multicultural framework, a study of Latino literature in the classroom can be viewed as promoting an understanding of an important and vital literary tradition in contemporary multicultural American society. A study of the values and beliefs that constitute the American Dream and how these values and beliefs can be engineered for the creation of a Latino consciousness that is fully open to the future and yet preserves its core cultural traditional values can only be of importance for this objective. As the protagonists in the texts analyzed in this thesis attest, no one can remain impervious to mainstream American culture. Esperanza, Caridad, and Fe in So Far From God could not live a culturally uncompromised life as Chicanas. Rafael and Guzmán in The Line of Sun could not be full Puerto Ricans in New Jersey. As Virgil Suarez's Going Under reminds us in the voice of Xavier Cuevas: we cannot be Cuban in the United States because "geography matters" (119). The futile insistence of the protagonists in converting the United States into Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, illustrates clearly that there must be a compromise. The fulfillment of such a compromise can be

realized within the framework of a multiculturalist attitude toward living in the United States. As noted by John Horton in Multiculturalism, Identity and Rights multiculturalism commonly refers to the “co-existence of a significant plurality of diverse cultural groups with sometimes conflicting values or ways of life within a single polity” (26). It is in this sense that multiculturalism can signify a possibility for the preservation of Latino culture in the US and still encourage Latinos to embrace the possibilities of a better future. Multiculturalism recognizes that individuals are entitled to the promises of the future and accepts, promotes, and respects the ethnic and cultural differences among individuals and groups that make up the rich tapestry of ethnic groups in United States. The texts analyzed in this thesis can be used in the classroom with young students, not to preach a pessimistic view of the future, but rather as Antonia Darder quotes Paulo Freire in Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love to promote the view that:

The future is something that is constantly taking place, and this constant ‘taking place’ means that the future only exists to the extent that we change the present. It is by changing the present that we build the future, therefore history is possibility, not determinism. (i)

Teachers can use these texts in the classroom as material for critical readings of the beliefs and values that constitute the American Dream. The authors of these texts do not conform to the traditional view of the American Dream as a vision of success, wealth, and happiness. Deconstructing the American Dream with the aid of the anti hegemonic portrayal of it in the works analyzed in this thesis, offers an opportunity for students and teachers to engage in dialogic critical analyses of the mistakes the protagonists made. Further, students can evaluate the ideology of the American Dream as presented in these texts in light of their own experiences,

drawn directly from their everyday cultural environment. As Paulo Freire claims in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, culture not only produces ideologies of oppression, it also contains the possibility to construct an ideology needed to initiate a cultural transformation leading to a freer, less oppressive social reality (45). Critical discussions of these texts in the Puerto Rican classroom, especially with undergraduate freshmen is relevant for their critical evaluation as they prepare their future goals as professionals and as cultural subjects with a unique identity and heritage. Whether students stay or move to the mainland or other countries, they will have a cultural identity to protect and choices to make with regards to their outlook and approach toward life..

Suggestions for Further Research

One direction to follow for further research is how less identity-damaging forms of integration of the most productive beliefs of the American Dream into the Latino identity can be achieved. The belief of equality as part of the American Dream is a value that definitely must be part not only of the Latino cultural tradition in the US but across all ethnic groups including the dominant culture. Further research in the area of language appropriation by ethnic groups, in particular by the Latino community is much needed. English as a language of cultural expression by Latinos in the US can be view as a liberating tool rather than as a cultural imposition from the dominant culture.

Another direction for further research is to analyze the literary production of other Latino writers, such as the new up and coming Dominican writers who are part of another major ethnic Hispanic Caribbean group with an important presence in the US. Julia Alvarez and Junot Diaz are two of the most important writers of Dominican ancestry. An important theme in their

novels is immigration to United States, but a study of representations of the American Dream in their texts would shed more light in the area of the Latino experience with the American Dream.

A further area of interest in relation to the topic of this thesis would be to analyze the similarities and differences of representations of the concept of the American Dream in texts written by Latino women writers and those written by men.

As the Latino population grows steadily and will soon become a dominant minority group, it will be of enormous academic value to study in what ways and which writers help transform old ideologies into new. A study of the up and coming “bilingual” texts will prove even more useful. As Phillipa Kafka points out in Saddling La Gringa the language of the dominant culture is used for cultural expression and identity construction in “the hope of accelerating movement into new ways, into a new world” (xviii). What this “new world” can look like in the future for Latinos will depend significantly on the subjects explored in their literary production and on what we do with these texts in academia. Further exploration on the relationship between language and cultural identity is of paramount importance as Latino writers “seek to break the barrier of culturally ordained silence” (xx). If English instead of Spanish is the language available for Latino writers to break into mainstream cultural America with their stories, let those stories be expressed in bilingual English as done by Gloria Anzaldúa in Borderlands/ La Frontera. It is more advantageous to have the Latino stories and experiences expressed in bilingual English, than to have no stories at all. Just a few decades ago Latino writers were not being published as widely as they are today. The works of those who did were relegated to the Foreign Language sections in bookstores. Today their texts are more

prominently displayed in bookstores, and since these books are written in English, they cannot be categorized as “foreign”, thus reaching a far more numerous readership.

Finally, as the protagonists in the texts analyzed here so thoroughly show, namely working and dreaming within a monolithic culture that denies and suppresses their cultural roots leads to cultural extinction. Teaching Latino texts in the classroom is clearly the alternative that offers this ethnic group a chance of preserving their cultural heritage and yet strive for upward mobility, fight for more equality, acquire their own homes, and surely aspire to the Dream of the Coast. A critical reading of these novels opens a dialogue in the classroom offering to our students what seems to be a most reasonable compromise and a solution for when they themselves experience the clash that often results from the contact between two different cultures. A constructive orientation in the analysis and interpretation in the area of reconciliation between the values and beliefs of Latino and the Anglo culture would be of value for both cultures.

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