

INTRODUCTION

WELCOME TO OXNARD!

When people ask me where I'm from, I tell them I was born and raised in Oxnard, California. Nine times out of ten, the person asking will respond with a slightly confused look, so I have learned to give a vague response with clarification when needed: "About an hour north of LA, right on the coast." This usually will suffice, and the conversation moves on. Once you're inside the LA psyche, it's easy to forget about what lies beyond the City of Angels.¹ But here's the thing. To answer the question of where I'm from, where most of my family of origin still resides, is ultimately to do the kind of scouring, digging up, and excavating that is painful but necessary. Like the late Chicana writer Michele Serros, whose body of work is explored in this story and who once referred to our hometown of Oxnard as her passion, those "people in my neighborhood, my community, my family members," I, too, feel strong emotions for this region, even as these feelings are riddled with the contradictions of pain and joy (Serros, "Small-Town Tales"). Serros's commitment to represent her city affectionately and critically underpins this entire study: our shared understanding that our Chicana Oxnard community is messy, flawed, imperfect, home and not-home all at once. How do I begin to tell the story of my Chicana adolescence in Oxnard, a city that to my mind has never loved me? How do I uncover a time that I wish could be buried in the past but that continues

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to haunt me, even as I have moved hundreds of miles, indeed, a whole state away? Telling my story requires that I tread lightly, although much of what I write will surely break my mother's heart. After all, Oxnard is the city that birthed me, the place my Mexican grandparents on both sides of my lineage made their home. My mother continues to reside in Oxnard, in the same home where I came of age, meaning that I return every few months, reopening old wounds and forced to confront a landscape that wields so much power and pain. To put it in California speak, it's hella complicated.

Oxnard has a fraught history that gets buried within narratives of its much larger, some would say more exciting, older sibling, Los Angeles. In my first years of elementary school, I attended Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish School, by far the most inexpensive private school in the city and situated mere blocks from my maternal grandparents' home in the Mexican barrio known as La Colonia. The church itself has "mainly served Mexican parishioners who were nationals of Mexico" (Barajas, "Resistance" 36). At the time, I had no idea this was a segregated city, never thought to question why the poor Mexicanos tended to live on this side of the tracks (Barajas, *Curious Unions* 93). Mexicans with ties to La Colonia often recall their families' labor in Oxnard's sugar-beet industry, work that continues to be overlooked in the city's history (Porras 19). All I knew was that this was the community that felt most like home, where my Mexicanness was never questioned, where Spanish was the dominant language at every neighborhood panadería, where the smell of pan dulce was as strong as the scent of nopales my abuela pruned in her yard. But as historian and Oxnard native Frank Barajas writes, "From the late nineteenth century onward, Mexicans encountered, in addition to a conflictual labor environment, a Southern California that both romanticized and vilified much that was Mexican" (*Curious Unions* 2). This long history of anti-Mexican sentiment has always been palpable to my family. My mother has recalled many stories of her own Oxnard adolescence, where the city's relatively small size meant she attended schools, at one time or another, alongside the children of the few white, wealthy landowners. While Oxnard is no longer the small town it was at the time of my parents' coming-of-age, it is what scholars like David G. García and others refer to as a "rurban" setting, not quite rural but not an urban hub, either (*Strategies* 2). In her study of the San Fernando Valley, a mere forty minutes south of Oxnard, sociologist Laura Barraclough describes the

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Valley's "pockets of rurality" that are scattered amid the bustling strip malls and traffic lined city streets (3), what in some ways can be used to describe Oxnard's shifting rural dynamic. In this patch of Southern California, driving a few miles in any direction will confront you with cities vastly different in size, dynamic, and history, even in places like Oxnard, which are slowly but surely leaving the rural farm days in the past, for better or worse.

During my mother's Santa Clara High School² days, the privileged elite mistreated and abused the Mexican students with impunity, as did most of the nuns and priests who were charged with educating them. Meanwhile, families like my mother's were largely forced to reside in Oxnard's barrio, La Colonia, a fact that historian Frank Barajas notes in his exhaustive study *Curious Unions: Mexican American Workers and Resistance in Oxnard, California, 1898–1961* (92). Barajas's research has shed an important light on Oxnard's history of Mexican resistance, particularly in the agricultural sector for which Oxnard continues to be known (Barajas, "Resistance" 30). The mid- to late 1800s would witness rampant anti-Mexican sentiment throughout the state of California, and part of this racialized violence and aggression would manifest through "spatial containment" (Villa 24). Thus, although my parents' families would not migrate to California until the following century, this racist vitriol continued into their generation and on through the present day.

While Oxnard has become more urbanized since the first half of the twentieth century, the city remains a more impoverished region than other cities in Ventura County like Ventura or Camarillo. Little has changed since my mother came of age in the 1960s, and to this day, La Colonia remains one of the poorest, most neglected neighborhoods in the city. In the early half of the twentieth century, streets were still largely unpaved throughout La Colonia. This was not accidental, as David García's monograph on educational and residential segregation in Oxnard underscores: "White architects strategically constructed La Colonia as a substandard place that housed a predominately Mexican population of factory laborers, field workers, and their families. At the same time, they developed Oxnard's west side to accommodate White supervisors, landowners, and school and civic leaders, replete with 'first class' residences and a business district that included all the amenities of a modern town (e.g., electricity, paved roads, sidewalks, gas, water, sewage, trash collection, street lights, and telephone service)" (39).

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García's research uncovers the ways these city leaders deliberately mapped the city of Oxnard that directly correlated to each group's status on the racial hierarchy. *Where* one lives is hardly a coincidence, in other words. My mother has recalled these disparate conditions to me. When she was a young girl, she was hit by a car while walking through her neighborhood, because there were no stop signs to slow down motorists. Unfortunately, my mother's accident was a common occurrence. These substandard conditions are visible even today. Still, this barrio is where I spent many afternoons with my primas and primos chasing after the paletero and relishing the stickiness of Now and Later candies or Big Stick popsicles on a warm summer day. The vestiges of white settlement and agribusiness are alive and well in the city of my birth, as present-day street names in a predominantly Chicana city still hold the names of early landowners (Barajas, *Curious Unions* 93). These street names are evidence of what feminist geographer Doreen Massey describes as "spatial form [which] is an important element in the constitution of power itself" (22). These contradictory realities of Oxnard—the place of my fondest childhood memories but also the city that has mistreated and abused so many of its gente, including my own family—need to be spoken aloud. In this light, I echo Chicano scholar Martín Alberto Gonzalez's words when he is invited to speak to Oxnard students about college, because to "not talk about Oxnard is to deny the disgraceful, yet important history of racial discrimination and segregation" that is built into the city's very fabric ("Brown Is Beautiful"). Like Gonzalez, I *must* talk about Oxnard, even as it pains me to do so.

Speaking of those topics that cause pain and healing is crucial to Chicana feminist writings. For example, in their second edition of *The Panza Monologues*, Chicana playwrights Irma Mayorga and Virginia Grise explain their creative decision to include what they call "autogeographies" as a necessary context to understand the locations in which the stories are set, mainly San Antonio, Texas (114).³ As they state, "To better understand the socioeconomic and political dynamics that *The Panza Monologues* was created within, we present written topographies each of which in its own way attempts to map the history of our city, which in turn tells the story of people's relationship to economics, food, place, and other insidious forces of oppression" (114).⁴ Much as Gonzalez insists that he *must* talk about Oxnard, the good, the bad, and the ugly, Grise and Mayorga uncover a historical, political, and feminist "topography" that impacts their voices as Chicanas/Tejanas. While this

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book does not claim to be a history of Oxnard or Southern California, my analysis factors in location and landscape to ask what it means to grow up Chicana within these settings that carry with them centuries of colonial violence, segregation, and everyday racism against Mexican American communities.⁵

Welcome to Oxnard: Race, Place, and Chicana Adolescence in Michele Serros's Writings thus weaves in history, autoethnography, and literary analysis that centers setting to deepen our understanding of Chicana adolescence and young womanhood, using the work of Oxnard born and raised writer Michele Serros as the context to ground my analysis of Chicana adolescence in a specific region—Oxnard, California. “Place-making, at its root,” explains Jennifer Garcia Peacock, “is about the materiality of belonging. Subjects form attachments to their material objects, produced in specific times and places, and these allow them to move through the past, present, and future” (117). This explains why Oxnard features so prominently in Serros’s writing, even years after she moved away. As José David Saldívar says of artists and writers who show how “Chicano/a identities are entangled with social spaces: parlors, writing rooms, hospital rooms, *curandera* rooms, *barrio casitas* (houses), *ferias* (fairs), and the US-Mexico borderlands” (72), Serros mapped out a distinct sociocultural geography of Oxnard that manifests throughout her writing. Oxnard was as foundational to her sense of self as it has been for me, no matter the time or our distance and separation from the city of our birth. In this book, I read Serros’s Chicana young adult (YA) literature, poetry, and essays alongside my personal Oxnard story to uncover moments of Chicana adolescent subjectivity that are vocalized and constructed within this Southern California locale. In being mindful of the centrality of place and youth to this study, I also make linguistic choices throughout that are regionally and culturally specific—particularly one of my favorite expressions, *hella*, a contraction of *hell of a*—that may also replace more formal speech patterns.

If, as Andrea Fernández-García explains, “children’s identities and lives are reconstituted in and through everyday spaces such as the school, the home, and the city” (2), I contend that the Chicana writer Michele Serros used her hometown settings to broaden understandings of who and what constitutes Chicanx communities and identities. As this book further underscores, to be attuned to *how* Chicanas process and narrate their adolescence and young womanhood, we must

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pay attention to *where* this development occurs. My process of developing a Chicana adolescent voice began in Oxnard.

To tell my Oxnard story means I must also recall the other half of my heritage, my father's, a topic that is undergirded by my family's collective trauma from his abandonment and cruelty. Like my mother, my father is also a first-generation Chicano, but the similarities end there. I often divulge to trusted friends that my childhood was a storm of confusion because of my parents' vastly different lives that subsequently impacted how they raised their children. While my mother was raised in La Colonia and experienced firsthand the realities of racialized poverty, my father's parents were one of the few Mexican middle-class families in Oxnard. Because of my father's relative access to economic privilege, his parents stressed the necessity of assimilation, enforcing a racial amnesia that I now see was psychologically damaging to my father, who could never quite come to terms with his ethnic and racial identity. My father's circumstances are indeed unusual, given that "the majority of Mexicans [in Oxnard] did not experience much permeability of the residential and schooling 'color line'" (García and Yosso 82). My father learned Spanish from his maternal grandfather, my great-grandfather Lorenzo, a fiercely proud man from the Mexican state of Yucatán, who made delicious tamales wrapped in banana leaves and who wanted his mestizo grandchildren to learn about their Maya ancestry. Despite my bisabuelo's attempts to instill in his grandchildren pride in lo Yucateco, my grandparents would often override these cultural lessons with overt messages to my father and his sisters that they should consider themselves American, not Mexican. I have no doubt that my grandparents' staunchly pro-American parenting was a result of their own internalized racism, and I could tell they disapproved of my parents' decision to give us decidedly Mexican names like Elena and Cristina (minus the *h*).⁶ The irony, of course, was that my father's inherited wealth could only go so far. Money certainly helped, but my father and his family could never pass for white, even as they desperately attempted to do so.

As a result of my parents' drastically different upbringings, my youth was a whirlwind of conflict and confusion. With my maternal grandparents, especially mi Mamá Chonita, I was surrounded by a proud, powerful sense of Mexicanidad in every interaction. I listened to my abuela's riveting stories and chisme with gusto, and I learned from her how and why storytelling is necessary for my community's

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survival. But with my father's family, I rarely spoke Spanish aloud, as my cousins or my aunts would tease or admonish me for betraying the lie of whiteness they attempted to maintain. Once, my cousin teased my sister and me when we asked him to pass us un aguacate, a simple act that led our cousin to laugh cruelly while repeating the ridiculous phrase "agua what?" From that point on, my sister and I forced ourselves to remember that it was an avocado we wanted, not un aguacate. My childhood was thus a navigation of these disparate realities. Even in the present, people I meet presume to know what my life must have been like as a child, seeing my light skin, brown eyes, and nose just like my mother's, as "proof" of my distance from racialized poverty, obscuring and erasing the heterogeneous experiences of Mexican gente in the United States, evident in my own family's histories.

For my mother, marrying my father meant moving away from La Colonia into a more middle-class neighborhood in North Oxnard, where she raised her four children. This is where I grew up, where my twin sister, Elena, and I played hopscotch, rode our bikes, and learned how to throw a baseball. Roderick Avenue was a diverse street where working- and middle-class Chicana residents lived alongside white families, where our best friend and next-door neighbor, Billy, taught us the magical game known as ding-dong ditching. The three of us could terrorize our neighbors with impunity, squealing with laughter as we tripped and fell over rose bushes in our speedy getaways. Danger was out of the question. The only danger was getting busted by our neighbors, who would most assuredly tell our parents and guarantee us all at best, una regañada, or worse, a grounding. Today, however, the neighborhood scarcely looks how I remember it. Most of the neighbors I grew up with have long since moved away. As housing prices have skyrocketed in Oxnard (as they have in the rest of the state), my mother's neighbors now routinely rent out rooms, causing a backlog of parking, noise, and sadly, even crime. Many of the neighbors or tenants leave as quickly as they move in, preventing any meaningful connection; my mother now only knows a few of her neighbors, nothing more. It's no wonder that this neighborhood that witnessed my growing pains, that one strip of the road where my sister fell off her bike and cut her nose, now feels like another place entirely. So I must draw deep from memory, to recall what it was like to witness all these changes during a time of life, adolescence, that haunts me, saddens me, and that still fills me with dread.

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More than solely about Oxnard, this book is a narrative of what it means to grow up Chicana in this complex Southern California city, using Michele Serros's novels, poetry, and essays as primary sources that speak to my personal Oxnard story. To date, there is no scholarly monograph that fully engages with Serros's corpus of writing, marking this study as a key intervention into scholarship on this incredibly important Chicana literary figure.⁷ Given our shared histories of growing up in Oxnard, I cannot discuss her work without connecting it to my own personal history. It is not merely that I see myself reflected in the pages of her books; though, it is often the case that I have visited and know intimately the very sites, settings, and locations she references in her writing. When I read street names like Vineyard Avenue in her writing, I am transported to this scene, and I am reminded of the countless drives on this intersection for a quick El Pollo Loco run with my twin sister or mother. I find myself audibly laughing when I recall learning how to drive up and down H Street, turning right on Vineyard Avenue, abruptly intersecting with that busy road known as Oxnard Boulevard, gripping the steering wheel of my mother's larger-than-life Ford Crown Victoria so hard that my knuckles turned white, sweat beads forming on our foreheads because my driving skills were poor enough to cause panic in both driver and passenger alike. I find myself drawn to what scholar Cristina Rodriguez argues in her excellent book *Walk the Barrio: The Streets of Twenty-First-Century Transnational Latinx Literature*: "To write about place, you have to experience place. . . . By 'experience' here I don't mean just plumbing the local archives or reading about the town's history: I mean walking the streets, talking to people (often the authors themselves), and placing oneself physically in the spaces that one is attempting to understand" (4, original italics). Indeed, even as I largely wrote this book far from Oxnard city limits, I can visually and viscerally experience Serros's Oxnard because it is my Oxnard as well. Being more than a casual reader of her texts, I find something endearingly familiar and familial in her works, one former girl from Oxnard reading the brilliance of her fellow 805 Chicana kin, one whose presence on this earth was cut far too short.

While this book engages in traditional literary analysis, of which I am a trained practitioner, I insert myself, my own narrative, freely throughout and against Serros's novels, poetry, and nonfiction that I examine. In writing of my adolescence in Oxnard and insisting that my lived experiences necessarily ground my analysis of Serros's texts,

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I am disrupting the tendency within “traditional” literary scholarship to separate the author from the work at hand. In this way, I push the boundaries of scholarly convention by insisting that my Oxnard story be central to my analysis of Serros’s Chicana YA fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. But the personal or subjective is not always easily embraced in academic scholarship. In her masterful book *Fatherhood in the Borderlands: A Daughter’s Slow Approach*, Domino Renee Perez explains how the personal is typically construed within mainstream academic discourse: “In its capacity to convey emotions, thoughts, and beliefs embodied by an individual, the subjective is often viewed as uncritical or biased. However, the subjective can be used as a means for disrupting academic conventions and expectations to produce nuanced and community-based scholarship rooted in the real world” (31). Perez’s call to conduct research “slowly,” with intention and joy, comes from a position that advocates for a rethinking of how knowledge is produced and understood. I am inspired by Perez’s unabashed, sensitive disclosing of memories of and with her now estranged father, a daughter’s wound that shaped how she created and wrote her book and that I find invaluable for what I am attempting to do with *Welcome to Oxnard*. But this exposure of the personal is a tricky thing. And it’s risky, as Perez affirms (31). How will my family respond to what I have written? How will Oxnard residents react to my critical approaches to unveiling the traumas that lay within the city’s fabric, a reality which has always been strategically buried? How will I be perceived, this critical Chicana who no longer lives in Oxnard, someone who occupies the simultaneous, unenviable position of both outsider and insider?

In her discussion of woman-of-color feminist methodologies, Aída Hurtado explains, “Theory should emanate from what we live, breathe, and experience in our everyday lives, and it is only in breaking boundaries, crossing borders, claiming fragmentation and hybridity that theory will finally be useful for liberation” (216). Understood as “theory in the flesh,” as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa call it, this perspective “legitimizes alternative frameworks to develop feminist analysis” (Román-Odio 26). Thus, this book owes its existence to Chicana feminist methodologies that deconstruct how we define theory, theorists, and subjects worthy of theorizing. I am indebted to the interventions made by Chicana feminist scholars in education, who have argued that “Chicana/Latina feminist scholarship disrupts Western colonial assumptions such as the ideas that research needs to be

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neutral or unbiased” (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 102). In this regard, it is not merely the literary analysis in which I engage that should serve as knowledge; rather, my story and lived, bodily experiences are knowledge in and of themselves.⁸

As Chicana queer historian Emma Pérez puts it, “If we do not identify ourselves as Chicanas, lesbians, third world people, or simply women, then we commit social and political suicide. Without our identities, we become homogenized and censored” (“Irigaray’s Female Symbolic” 89). For Pérez, as it is for me, naming myself as Chicana, and by extension, giving voice to my particular knowledges gained from my lived experiences, is a conscious act that resists erasure and silencing. By centering my own story within an analysis of Serros’s YA novels, poetry, and essays, this book speaks to what the Latina Feminist Group names as part of the testimonio tradition, in which Latinas claim the personal as a subversive and crucial mode of feminist research that privileges these experiences (3). Ella Maria Diaz cogently explains of the Latina Feminist Group, “Naming street theater, poetry, and music as a ‘language to celebrate’ culture and identity, the Latina feminists experienced the link between testimonial narrative and the visual arts long before the twenty-first century” (“Seeing” 43). Diaz’s analysis of what she describes as visual testimonios expands our understanding of how subjectivity and agency are produced. These “new ways of theorizing” are legitimate, powerful, and necessary (Latina Feminist Group 6). For many women of color, our stories and testimonios are all we have. Without these stories as a lifeline and as a foundation to ground my Chicana feminist ways of knowing, little else matters.

In her pathbreaking work, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas Into History*, Emma Pérez takes the field of history to task for its colonial obsession with “great men” who make up the archives, in effect silencing the stories of women, Chicanas especially (xiv). Pérez introduces her readers to her theory of the “decolonial imaginary,” which brings previously silenced voices to the surface. While *Welcome to Oxnard* is not solely about me, I believe telling the story about this former Chicanita from Oxnard responds to Pérez’s call to enact a decolonial framework that writes from the margins. Like Cristina Rodriguez, who “walks the barrio” to understand the centrality of place to the writing itself, Serros and I recall our Chicana adolescence through our interactions with Oxnard, a city with whom our relationship has always been messy, tense, ambivalent, and passionate. Chicana voices

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are seldom given credibility in speaking about our hometown's buried history. Simply put, my working-class Chicana voice was never intended to make it to the page. I was "educated" in schools that taught me to believe that my community "was little more than a necessary but disposable and unappreciated work force" (Villa 76). The YA fiction, essays, and poetry by Serros that I discuss in this book insist on privileging the voices of Chicana young women that are seldom taken seriously or even heard.

ENJOY YOUR STAY!

In my 2020 book, *ChicaNerds in Chicana Young Adult Literature: Brown and Nerdy*, I described my teenage years as a period in my life when my twin sister and I "found ourselves like lost fish trying to swim upstream, doing everything we could to simply survive a day in our invisibility" (1). As was true then and now, it is rare for me to speak of the city of my birth without also recalling the anguished time of adolescence. As this book attests, I cannot separate my coming-of-age from *where* I came of age. Setting, location, landmarks, and sites all matter, exposing the ways that our growing-up stories are highly influenced by our physical surroundings. My growing-up story is no different. While I recognize that it may seem as if I place the blame of these devastating years on Oxnard, the truth is that my relationship with my hometown has always been rather fraught, even ambivalent. Oxnard has a mild climate, and my abuela's loving arms pulling me in for un abrazo fuerte when I needed one. Oxnard is the name of the high school where my bullies and tormentors roamed the halls. Oxnard means the scent of the nearby strawberry fields. Oxnard witnessed my grandparents' backbreaking labor in the construction yard and factory. Oxnard, home to my favorite Toppers Pizza. Oxnard, the city my father left us in to fend for ourselves. Oxnard, final resting place of my beloved abuelos. Like I said, it's hella complicated.

Many years after leaving the city of my birth, I find it difficult to go back. The streets are familiar yet foreign. I drive to my mother's house, where I grew up, out of muscle memory, yet I have also forgotten certain landmarks throughout the city. My maternal grandparents' home, where I spent many days of my childhood, now sits empty. I have never uttered these feelings to members of my family, except to my identical-twin sister, Elena, whose relationship to Oxnard is equally laden with regret, trauma, and painful memory. Like me, Elena has long

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since left Oxnard, choosing to plant roots many miles away in the Bay Area. After being away for so long, returning is a complicated and even confusing event, as seen in Cherríe Moraga's soulful memoir, *Native Country of the Heart* (2019), for example.⁹ In this text, the celebrated theorist, playwright, and poet centers California in telling her mother's story, specifically the San Gabriel region of Moraga's birth.¹⁰ Moraga's youth was marked by the desire to flee home and her mother: "In 1977, as I stuffed my Volkswagen bug to its metal gills and headed north on 101, following in the highway wake of thousands of young people in pursuit of 'liberation,' I had no way of knowing that twenty-five years later, I would return to San Gabriel to uncover what was left there" (174). Sandra Ruiz states of Moraga's memoir, "In her search for home, she returns to the ancestral history of Alta California, acknowledging that this land belonged to the Gabrieleño-Tongva people, whose dead reside in the grounds of the Catholic mission." For, as Moraga explains, "Ostensibly in search of my mother's history, it was my own buried remains I sought" (174). This "search," however, is complicated by the region's insistence on maintaining a "Spanish fantasy" that relegates indigenous peoples to the past rather than as fully fleshed, contemporary human beings (Ramírez).¹¹ As a Chicana and former resident of the San Gabriel Valley, Moraga occupies the ambivalent dual position of being both colonizer and colonized. Likewise, historian Catherine S. Ramírez, another Chicana from the San Gabriel Valley, acknowledges herself as a "beneficiary of settler colonialism and indigenous dispossession," placing her "at home" yet also as a trespasser.

Moraga's excavation entails a search for un pueblo that the erection of Spanish colonial missions attempted to squelch, to bury beneath the rubble the Spaniards created.¹² Moraga's search, for her mother, for community, for a history rooted in her family's mixed-race heritage as a result of violent colonialism, requires a looking back *and* a simultaneous return to this fraught landscape. More than anything, what Moraga's memoir longs for is remembrance, a refusal to forget. While Moraga's mestiza family and the Catholic mission of her surroundings may attempt to "forget" what in fact remains alive, returning home and writing is both celebratory and a necessary pain. San Gabriel, for Moraga, is the site of these conflicting and warring emotions and histories. Catherine S. Ramírez's description of this San Gabriel Valley as being "the other southland" and "the other valley" attests to the ways that certain regions are erased, their histories obscured, and communities dis-

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placed. This region, while symbolizing childhood and family memory, means something else entirely when one returns as an adult, as in the cases of both Moraga and Ramírez. A return, however, is almost always met with loss, a confrontation of memories that causes the trauma to resurface.

To this day, when I visit Oxnard and drive near my old high school, I cringe or sometimes even look away. There is no high school reunion in my future, a fact that my older brothers are confounded by, as they have attended every single one of theirs. I do not wish to speak for them, but I can venture to say that their Oxnard story does not mirror mine. Whereas my brothers frequently tout the city of their birth and still hold close relationships with high school friends, I can't say the same. I had few friends in high school, largely kept close to my twin sister, and have rarely seen any of my classmates since we graduated, except for the occasional times I have run into them when I'm in town for a visit.

When I was fourteen, I spent most of that first high school year in fear and dread. Our father had essentially vanished from our lives, choosing to divorce his children in addition to our mother. That same year, our mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and my sister and I grew up overnight, it seems. Gone were carefree days of youth, if indeed they ever existed. Instead, at fourteen years of age, Elena and I quickly learned a new routine. Go to school. Hide from the bullies. Come home. Check on our mom. Do homework. Throw in a load of laundry while we futilely attempted to finish our algebra homework. Find something to make for dinner. Go to bed. Repeat. Smiles and laughter were rare that year, substituted by the intense anxiety that our mother would die and we'd be orphaned. This fear crept into our high school days, as Elena and I were frequently targeted by bullies who teased, threatened, and disliked us for no apparent reason. I often remark to myself that it's a miracle I managed to avoid being beaten by bullies, but I think it's because I got really good at hiding. Like, really good. I rarely spoke in class, seldom raised a hand, and I kept my eyes locked on distant objects or my feet rather than my classmates. I moved out of the way, carefully keeping my backpack balanced so as not to bump into anyone. I was invisible, but it kept me out of harm's way, for the most part. Teachers likewise mainly ignored me, and with the exception of a Spanish teacher, few seemed to care if I was there or not. Nobody at school talked to me about college. SATs? What are those? The school

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I attended, the same one Martín Alberto Gonzalez attended, routinely and systematically left most Mexican students like me out of advanced placement and honors classes in comparison to my white classmates, leaving us “shortchanged” and “almost as if [we] had attended an entirely different school with far fewer resources” (Gonzalez, *21 Miles* 79). I doubt any of my teachers, should they still be around, would ever know that the quiet, brown-eyed Chicana student in the back would eventually grow up to be a college professor. Nobody asked, What do you want to be when you grow up? If someone had asked, I would have answered, I want to be a writer.

So I wrote on the DL, and I read books, most of which had little to do with my life. The first two years of high school are largely a blur, framed by a profound anxiety and terror over the reality of our lives: a mother who was sick with cancer and a father who occasionally sent birthday cards but who was no longer part of our daily lives. I was a terrified, painfully shy teen who thought herself ugly, who had crush after crush on boys who likely didn’t know I existed. I couldn’t understand how my older brothers, handsome and popular, had so many friends, how their high school experiences, at least on the surface, seemed to be the stuff of movies. Meanwhile, Elena and I, as the youngest, mainly stayed home, which forced us to witness our mother’s declining health. We had limited means to leave the house except to go to school. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that family members and friends often remarked at how “mature” we seemed for our age, a curious compliment that I still struggle to make sense of. There were certainly moments of “typical” teen rites of passage, such as homecoming and prom in our final year of high school. Like other nerds, Elena and I wrote for our school newspaper, *The Buzz*, in homage to our mascot, the yellowjacket. But aside from these few experiences of adolescent amusement, high school was a time of my life that seldom conjured joy. Had that been the case, this would have been an entirely different book.

Initially, I envisioned this book as an homage to Chicana adolescence in Southern California more generally. I began my search for Chicana YA literature with its protagonists that spoke of my own adolescent growing pains. Reading novels like Patricia Santana’s *Motorcycle Ride on the Sea of Tranquility*, Nikki Barthelmess’s *Everything Within and In Between*, Michele Serros’s fiction and poetry, such as *Honey Blonde Chica*, *Chicana Falsa*, and *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, a recurring question that came to mind as I read them was, What is it

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about these Southern California cities that matters so much? Varying in scope, voice, and theme, all of these texts nevertheless share a general concern with setting and specific regions of Southern California. I was especially drawn to novels that centered Southern California cities as integral sites of Chicana subject formation. While my 2020 book, *ChicanaNerds in Chicana Young Adult Literature*, centered on nerdy Chicana adolescents as a reclamation of Brown girl feminism to disrupt narrow myths and deficit thinking, this book in some ways expands and departs from that study. Throughout my brainstorming and journaling, I kept returning to the themes of Chicana adolescence, growing up, gender, race, and identity, and how these all were entangled and influenced by the protagonists' hometowns.

But something happened as I continued writing and researching—perhaps a common conundrum experienced by researchers, but for me, it became an epiphany. My plan to write about Chicana adolescents in Oxnard, San Diego, and Santa Barbara shifted, moving gears to a destination I had earlier refused to stop at. I moved in circles until Oxnard was no longer in my rearview mirror but suddenly facing me head-on in a collision I could no longer avoid. The more I wrote, the more I thought of Michele Serros, my circuitous path toward discovering her work despite our shared histories of Oxnard and familial network. I always knew, always felt, this book needed to be about her work and hers alone, but I must admit I kept her work—and Oxnard—at arm's length. To center this book about her work meant I needed to explore Oxnard's past and present in ways that I was not initially prepared to act upon. The hurt, resentment, and downright anger at Oxnard was (and is) still too raw for me, and this was evident when I returned in summer 2022 after a year away, the longest stretch of time I had gone without a visit. I explore these sentiments more in chapter 4 of this book, but suffice it to say, I came to the realization that I could not ignore or forget Oxnard any longer. I had to go back. I had to return to Serros's work, which was there all along, waiting for me to arrive and park in my own time. Domino Perez sums it up best for me: "Research does not materialize out of thin air. Sometimes ideation starts with an observation or question that will not leave us alone, an itch at the back of the brain. Maybe critical inquiry is a response to events that have touched us personally. Perhaps we conduct studies because we are best equipped to do so based on who we are, where we come from, and what we know" (15). This "itch" to write about Oxnard came slowly for me.

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I'm a stubborn person, always have been. When I am hurt, it takes me a long time to recover. To write about Michele Serros and Oxnard was unfathomable at first. Why expose the wound? So I first told myself firmly, this book is about Southern California, not just Oxnard. To look back to adolescence was to recall and summon those years: my father's abandonment, our mother's illness, the lack of money, the deep sadness and loneliness, the fear that I would never make it to college.

Like *ChicaNerds*, *Welcome to Oxnard* is also highly invested in Chicana adolescent subjectivity and the working-class Chicana feminist project of reclamation and voice. But *Welcome to Oxnard* argues that to fully appreciate Chicana adolescent agency, we must be attuned to *where* the teenage and young-women protagonists come of age and how this Oxnard, California, landscape complicates how they articulate what it means to be Chicana.¹³ The works by Serros center a specific Southern California region, Oxnard, in relation to the Chicana protagonists' sense of self and agency. This often entails messiness or ambivalence, what my eldest niece would simply call "drama." But this drama, I would argue, has less to do with the myth of teen angst and more to do with how the young Chicanas come of age in places like Oxnard that have troubling histories of intense anti-Mexican sentiment, heightened surveillance of Mexican communities, and continued reminders of a racially fraught past (and present).

While this book is singular in its attention to Michele Serros's Chicana teens and young women living within the Oxnard landscape, Chicana scholars have been invested in representations of urban Chicanas for several decades. Writing in 1981, Margarita Cota-Cárdenas argued that Chicana writers use urban settings to contest the limited gender roles for Chicanas (14). Writers like Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo, for example, were some of the earliest Chicana authors to centralize space and geographical locations like Chicago to critique women's mobility and movement in neighborhoods and barrios, antecedents to authors like Michele Serros. Scholar Andrea Fernández-García notes that this focus on the Chicana barrio has undoubtedly resulted in differing gender dynamics, where Chicano writers often used the urban setting to denounce race- and class-based hierarchies, in contrast to Chicanas who addressed these intersections with sexism and even violence (128). In his foundational book *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature*, Raúl Homero Villa examines how Chicanaxs have historically been "put in their place" via practices of An-

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glo capitalist, racist structures of domination. He explains: "Several of the most conspicuous subordinating practices active in contemporary barrio life were already present in nascent form in the 1870s and were consolidated by the turn of the century . . . (1) the physical regulation and constitution of space (via land-use decisions and the built environment); (2) the social control of space (via legal/judicial state apparatuses and police authority); and (3) the ideological control of space (via the interpellation of citizen-subjects through educational and informational apparatuses)" (3–4).

As Villa's work highlights, these "subordinating practices" impact Chicana writers like Helena María Viramontes and others, whose fiction and poetry document how racialization and capitalist development projects undergird Mexican American communities and ways of life. In works by Viramontes, Mary Helen Ponce, or by newer generations of writers, including Alex Espinoza, Melinda Palacio, or Caribbean Fragoza, for example, Southern California marks its presence. The protagonists in their varying works face concerns like spatial encroachment, gentrification, violence, poverty, and resilience amid the hustle and bustle of cities like El Monte or even fictionalized Southern California cities like Agua Mansa. *Where* these protagonists live, breathe, and move factors greatly into how they perceive themselves as human subjects, as budding writers, artists, and community members. Although writing of the significance of the Los Angeles city space in *Their Dogs Came with Them*, Crescencio López-González's argument nevertheless is relevant for my study, as he notes that "el proceso de transformación del espacio forma parte de los procesos de subordinación laboral de la comunidad chicana" (169). The landscape is part and parcel of Chicana community members' resilience, survival, and racialized subordination. López-González astutely points out that spatial "transformation" cannot be separate from our understanding of white supremacist structures of power. Chicana barrio communities intimately understand that "there is little stopping the bulldozers of so-called urban progress" (Foster 20). When we factor gender, race, class, and youth, we can better appreciate how Chicana teens come to terms with their spatial surroundings that contain multiple paradoxes: their communities can be both liberating, validating, and empowering even as they may constrain and stifle.

As young women of color, the protagonists in Serros's texts must negotiate and navigate their home settings alongside the public spaces

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of the cities in which they reside. Although speaking of Viramontes's *Their Dogs Came with Them*, Juanita Heredia's discussion of gender, race, and youth in Los Angeles is useful for understanding what it means to be a Chicana teenager in Southern California: "In her novel, Viramontes further comments on the colonial effects of violence on the containment of women's bodies and minds in both private and public spheres to demonstrate that gender does matter as it intersects with surviving in a city plagued by injustices against Chicanas/os" (99). This book argues that narrating Chicana adolescence and young womanhood in my Southern California hometown of Oxnard requires us to examine how these Chicana stories are intimately connected to the city's history of anti-Mexican legalized practices, Chicana survival, colonialism, and present day issues of segregation and Chicana erasure. Serros's texts insist that we must examine the Oxnard region's fraught history of anti-Mexican, anti-immigrant sentiment that undergirds how these Chicanas develop their sense of autonomy and sense of self as adolescent Chicanas. The Serros novels, essays, and poetry that I examine all point a keen eye to their settings' complex histories, and like T. Jackie Cuevas explains of Viramontes's work, the texts here also "reject any romantic notions of a nostalgic Chicana@ past" (31). Like Viramontes, whose novel examines "contemporary politics of spatial control and dislocation" (Cuevas 31), *Welcome to Oxnard* is equally attuned to setting, space, place, and how these factors intersect with Chicana adolescence and young womanhood in Michele Serros's texts.

Landscapes and regional settings are by no means a new phenomenon in Chicana literature, and YA literature is no exception. Devon Peña explains that "the study of the relations of people, space, place, and physical objects reveals many hitherto unexamined dynamics of power. By studying the spatial dimensions of class, race, and gender boundaries, we can begin to map where and how people *place* themselves" (11, original italics). "Humans create meaning in part by inscribing feelings and memories onto particular sites or shapes of their natural and cultural landscapes," he adds (11). For example, my previous work has documented the ways Guadalupe García McCall's YA texts situate the Río Bravo/Grande region as a profound source of Chicana/Tejana subject formation ("Seeking Refuge" 195). In her novel in verse, *Under the Mesquite* (2011), García McCall's protagonist, Lupita, cultivates inspiration for her poetry through the Southwestern landscape of her

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birth, even as she leaves this region to attend college hundreds of miles away. Erika Sánchez's immensely popular *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017), in many respects a twenty-first-century answer to Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), situates Chicago as the urban backdrop to Julia Reyes's coming-of-age. Julia's desire to flee her Midwestern hometown takes up a large bulk of the novel's tensions, as she must navigate neighborhood issues like catcalling and the very real risk of sexual violence, or even racialized apparatuses of spatial control through the policing of her presence when she "trespasses" into her white boyfriend's part of town. For Julia, Chicago represents poverty and her parents' seemingly unwavering authority, while New York, the city of her dreams, signals endless mobility and potential. For the reasons Peña explains, it is why Oxnard factors so greatly into my adolescent storyline, even as I have moved away.

Chicana writers have a long tradition of exploring their home regions in relation to growing up, particularly in cases where coming-of-age coincides with writing styles that rupture literary conventions. In her chapter on the famed writer and scholar Norma Elia Cantú's hybrid text, *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera*, Ellen McCracken explains that this text is "a hybrid of the visual and verbal, fiction and autobiography, the novel and the short story, and ethnography and creative writing" (33). Though Cantú writes from a geographically distinct location from mine, her "autobioethnography," as she calls her work, nevertheless explores the ways our growing-up settings influence how we see the world around us, the way they have shaped us, and why, even years after we leave our hometowns, they continue to call us, to draw us in. Whether it is growing up in Laredo, Cantú's hometown, or Oxnard like it was for Serros or me, these sites profoundly impact our lives as contemporary Chicanas, because we have borne witness to towns that have never loved our gente, even as we have built these communities from our sweat and laboring bodies.

Much work remains to be done to theorize setting and landscape in Chicana and Latina YA literature, from the urban Chicago backdrop, to the bustling Miami metro, to the arid skies of South Texas.¹⁴ California figures prominently in Chicana literature, and Chicana YA literature is no different. This should not be surprising given that Mexicans have considered Califas their home for centuries, and "at no moment since 1848 has the flow of immigrants [to California] ever really stopped" (Gutiérrez and Zavella 1). In my work on Oxnard

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specifically and Southern California more generally within Serros's writing, I owe much to Chicana labor scholars like Vicki Ruiz and Patricia Zavella, who have published foundational studies of Chicana and Mexican women in California's canneries, with a region and gender specific perspective. Ruiz's *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950* (1987) and Zavella's *Women's Work and Chicano Families: Cannery Workers of the Santa Clara Valley* (1987) were game changers for Chicana Studies, as they uncovered a rich tradition of Chicana and Mexican women's feminist agency and working-class resistance. As the granddaughter of Mamá Chonita, whose toil in Oxnard's chilería (chile cannery) I remember, these Chicana feminist projects provide glimpses into my abuela's world in a distinctly Southern California space. I am also indebted to the trailblazing work of Chicana studies scholars from Ventura County, such as Frank Barajas and José Alamillo, who have situated their hometowns as important sites to examine Chicana history, activism, and resistance. In the important book *Mexican Americans with Moxie: A Transgenerational History of El Movimiento Chicano in Ventura County, California, 1945–1975* (2021), for example, Barajas centers this region as an activist hub in its own right and as a viable site for Chicana resistance and knowledge production. Although speaking of Jacqueline Woodson's foundational children's text in verse, *Brown Girl Dreaming*, Samira Abdur-Rahman's articulates the significance of setting and place, stating that her work "centers southern landscapes, revising static narratives and imagining the South as a capacious site" (187). Like Abdur-Rahman's exploration of the South as instrumental in Woodson's work, this book takes as its central argument that scholars must be attuned to cities like Oxnard and other overlooked Southern California landscapes to fully theorize Chicana narratives of adolescence and young womanhood.

Readers are likely aware that in a book that purports to concern itself with Southern California Chicana narratives, there remains a heavy omission: Where is Los Angeles? Why would I leave out LA, or "el ley," as some of my Chicana friends and family jokingly call the largest city in Califas? The Los Angeles region is hardly foreign to my own family history, as relatives of mine live in Huntington Park and the surrounding suburbs. While scholars like Trevor Boffone have documented the significance of Los Angeles in Chicana cultural production, examining locations like Boyle Heights,¹⁵ this book turns to

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a specific region in Southern California, Oxnard, that has not received as much scholarly inquiry. In Chicana/Latina literature volumes that centralize California, such as *Latinos in Lotusland* (2008) or *Under the Fifth Sun: Latino Literature from California* (2002), Los Angeles and the Bay Area are prominent.¹⁶ As Villa maintains, Los Angeles is a “paradigmatic site of urban Chicano history” (2).¹⁷ Yet, despite LA’s central role in much Chicana culture, politics, and creativity, as Victor Valle and Rodolfo D. Torres outline, Latinxs living within this global metropolis are “invisible politically and economically” (9, original italics). In smaller cities like Oxnard, this invisibility becomes even more pronounced, I would argue. My intentional turn to spaces decidedly different from Los Angeles, both in terms of population size and history, particularly Oxnard, calls for a critical look at how these other regions make their way into Chicana young adult literature, nonfiction, and poetry. Los Angeles is, of course, paramount to much Chicana literature in the twentieth century, including the first decades of the twenty-first century, a region that José David Saldívar refers to as the “extended” US-Mexico borderland (95). Nevertheless, I believe it is pertinent to consider what we may learn about Chicana adolescence by paying attention to these smaller places, which have often been eclipsed in the Los Angeles-centered narrative.¹⁸

In Chicana adolescent coming-of-age films, such as *Mosquita y Mari* (2012) and *Real Women Have Curves* (2002), the Los Angeles metropolis factors greatly into the teen protagonists’ lives. For example, Ana’s journey in *Real Women Have Curves* entails leaving her home community for the bustling city of New York to attend Columbia University, and in frequent shots throughout the film, LA itself symbolizes Ana’s movement within and between these urban spaces to chart her Chicana path of intellectual curiosity. As Trevor Boffone and I explain in our book, *Latinx Teens: US Popular Culture on the Page, Stage, and Screen* (2022), *Real Women Have Curves* paved the way for playwright Josefina López to build her theater company in Boyle Heights, “which is still going strong today and serves as a fundamental cultural institution in the Los Angeles enclave” (51). To fully appreciate the film, we suggest, is to capture its attention to Ana’s development in relationship to the city of her birth. Likewise, *Mosquita y Mari* takes place not far from Boyle Heights, in the predominantly Mexican city of Huntington Park. To tell the story of burgeoning queer, Chicana love between two teenagers, the filmmaker, Aurora Guerrero, inserts city scenes to sym-

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bolize their hometown's role in their adolescent development as queer subjects: "In these deliberate, intentional shots of the community, Guerrero queers Latinx urban spaces to insist on the presence of young Chicanas who maneuver them to survive *and thrive*" (Boffone and Herrera, *Latinx Teens* 57; original italics). In his astute analysis of the film, Arturo J. Aldama comments on the film's use of "cars, bikes, mobility, and lack of mobility within this highly industrialized, congested urban space" (123). Los Angeles is undoubtedly the symbolic "home" of Chicana/Latinx culture, film, literature, television, and art, seen in classic films, including *My Family* (1995) and contemporary Netflix hit series like *On My Block* (2018–2021) or *Gentefied* (2020–2021). The importance of this larger-than-life city, which boasts the best tacos outside of Mexico (don't argue with me, reader), an economy that rivals that of some countries, and a hub of Latinx cultural life cannot be overstated. Los Angeles County itself is incredibly heterogeneous in terms of population, landscape, and history, and no two neighborhoods or cities are the same. Collections like *East of East: The Making of Greater El Monte* (2020), or monographs like Laura Barraclough's *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscapes, Urban Development, and White Privilege* (2011), and Yvette Saavedra's *Pasadena before the Roses: Race, Identity, and Land Use in Southern California, 1771–1890* (2018), attest to the diversity of the region known as Los Angeles. But this book's central concern with Chicana adolescent narratives that take place *outside* of Los Angeles questions what we might learn about these teen lives when we turn away from this metropolis and set our eyes to other settings.

Turning to smaller cities like Oxnard provides glimpses into what it is like to grow up in environments with agricultural pasts, or in the case of Santa Barbara, where colonial Spanish America is projected onto the landscape but Mexicanos are relegated to smaller barrios within a city that is popular with tourists of all ethnicities and backgrounds.¹⁹ Michele Serros is now widely taught in college classrooms across the country, but despite her status as a foundational writer, she was not from Los Angeles, even as she lived there during her short life. The fact is, Los Angeles's astronomical size notwithstanding, Chicanas regularly come of age in cities and smaller towns in Southern California with little fanfare. What are their stories? What is it like to live in a city that few outside the region know? How can we amplify their stories? Who are these young women? It's time we listen.

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COME BACK SOON!

I began writing the introduction to this book months after I left California to begin a new job and life in Portland, Oregon. Perhaps it is the physical distance that offers me the perspective to write about Oxnard, Michele Serros, Southern California, and me. Now, as I write, many questions circle my mind. Why Oxnard? Why write this book now, and why couldn't I begin to consider this project even a year ago? I think I was always meant to write this book, but I needed time. Distance. Separation. And then, serendipitously, I met Martín Alberto Gonzalez in late summer 2021 when we both started our faculty positions at Portland State University. When I learned we were both from Oxnard and that our families live mere blocks from each other, I took it as a sign, perhaps the universe's not-so-subtle nudge to get writing. I'm ashamed to admit that there were times I had to force myself not to make snide comments about resenting Oxnard when this brilliant and generous colleague of mine mentioned our hometown in conversation. How could I possibly write about a city that housed all of my hurts, the endless family tragedies, betrayals, and traumas? When Martín gifted me a pair of earrings with the words *hecha en Oxnard* emblazoned on them, I knew that I could no longer delay putting words to paper. But it was challenging at first. I had to confront my anger at the city of my birth, to revisit the multiple ways my hometown has hurt me and has hurt my family. I couldn't go back home, and yet I had to return.

Oxnard is my hometown but is no longer home. I still feel ill at ease when I am there, no longer comfortable, and I wonder if I ever really was at home. But maybe this book is a coming back to the city of my birth, the only kind of return that is possible, through writing and deep reflection. I am reminded of Gloria Anzaldúa's metaphor of the turtle who carries home with it no matter the distance: "in leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because *lo mexicano* is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry 'home' on my back" (43, original italics). Anzaldúa left the land of her birth, deep South Texas, but this region imprinted itself in her soul, arming her with a specific Tejana orientation by which to theorize the borders that mark our existence. Sometimes it is in the act of leaving home that we actually return, perhaps the only way we can return. As Norma Marrún explains, "Anzaldúa invites us to rethink home beyond a physical space by giving us the tools to recreate a sense of home wherever we go. . . . Home is within us in our corazones (hearts) and in our most intimate thoughts"

(69). Since I left Oxnard many years ago, I have often struggled with feelings of guilt, as if I have abandoned the city that gave me life, but Anzaldúa's words provide me comfort. Long after I left this city, I still carry it with me, revisiting it each time I write about Michele Serros, my family, or myself. I have left Oxnard, but Oxnard has never left me.

These ambivalent tensions and feelings populate the Serros texts I investigate in this book. In chapter 1, "You Have Arrived to the 805: Exploring Oxnard in Michele Serros's *Chicana Falsa*," I examine the significance of place in her most well-known publication, *Chicana Falsa and Other Stories of Death, Identity, and Oxnard*. To understand this collection, I argue, we must examine the politics of claiming Oxnard throughout these semi-autobiographical writings. Throughout this book, I may at times use Serros and Michele interchangeably, not to pose any confusion to the reader but to point to my own reading of the works that disrupt traditional categories of author and protagonist that we learn to see as unshakeable. My readings of Serros's texts correspond to my own personal anecdotes or even those stories related to me by family members, especially my mother. The specificity of location, I insist, is central to *Chicana Falsa*, as it situates the city of Serros's birth as a foundation to understand themes of identity, assimilation, and fitting in/not fitting in. Serros references Oxnard throughout these essays and poetry, and I argue that this claiming of her hometown roots is the lens by which she wants readers to approach her writing.

Chapter 2, "Between Malibu and Santa Barbara: Claiming Oxnard in *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*," likewise examines Serros's protagonist, Michele, and the ways Oxnard influences her trajectory as an aspiring Chicana writer. Like *Chicana Falsa*, *Role Model* also critically references Oxnard throughout, and these many examples at times take the form of family stories that teach Michele the importance of community, identity, and family.

Following my analysis of her works that are both semi-autobiographical and fictional, I move to Serros's fiction. Chapter 3, "To Those Who Live Sixty Miles North: The *Honey Blonde Chica* from Oxnard," examines Serros's YA chica lit texts, *Honey Blonde Chica* and *jScandalosa!*, to complicate Oxnard's history as an agribusiness town. While Oxnard's "founding" as a sugar beet town that predominantly relied on Mexican immigrant labor is well-documented by historians and would certainly have been known by Serros, this chapter questions what it means that the protagonist of these novels, Evie Gomez, basks

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in economic privilege. In an intentionally subversive move to challenge stereotypical views of Oxnard, I argue, the novel locates the city that is “sixty miles north” as central to Evie’s growth, subject formation, and identity. While it would appear that Evie’s lush Rio Estates life is antithetical to the realities of most Chicana communities in Oxnard, the novel pays homage to actual Oxnard landmarks to remind its readers of the politics of location.

Chapter 4, “Michele and Me: Archiving a Chicana Writer,” discusses my summer 2022 visit to the Michele Serros Collection at California State University, Channel Islands (CSUCI). Since 2019, the Chicana/o Studies Department at CSUCI has been entrusted with the care of this archive, along with an exhibit that is on display in the university’s presidential office building. I examine what it means to archive a Chicana writer from Oxnard, discussing my experience there to reflect on memory and place. In addition to my discussion of Chicana/woman-of-color archives, I delve into my personal experience documenting Oxnard with my mother and niece/goddaughter, what I discuss as a Chicana intergenerational, familial journey into the city that birthed all three of us. I read my experience at the archive alongside the personal story of three generations of Herrera women who drove around Oxnard one summer week in July 2022.

I conclude the book with a brief discussion of what it means to memorialize Michele Serros, as many community members, writers, and journalists have continued to do. I reflect on the words Michele’s friends have shared with me about this complex woman who loved telling jokes and had a silly sense of humor, but who treated those she cared about with the kind of tenderness we should all be lucky to have in our lives.

This book has been a passion project, a labor of love for Michele Serros and young Chicanas like her who have come of age in a city with a funny name that few people outside our community seem to know or care about. I did not know Michele personally, but even as I never had the privilege of meeting her, she has become, and has always been, familiar to me. Admittedly, there was a time that I did not want to truly engage with her works, particularly *Chicana Falsa* and that one word, *Oxnard*, which she had the nerve to insert in the title. I was grateful for a Chicana writer to name our hometown, especially someone whose familial connection to my own made her, in a way, family as well. But I kept the book hidden away in my shelves for many years, because

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truly seeing Oxnard before my eyes was too painful, too emotional, too much. For years I have been angry at the city of our birth, and I could not understand why Serros would deliberately choose to write about it. Why look back? Why even go there? Was it worth the pain?

Throughout this book, I have attempted to answer the *why*, but in addition to that, I have attempted to answer the *how*, that is, how Serros imagines what it means to grow up Chicana within a city in which young women are seldom seen or heard. How do young Chicanas see themselves within their city limits, through and against their own family experiences? How does Oxnard mark its presence within these young women's lives, hearts, and minds? I have written about my own memories of growing up alongside Serros's representations of protagonists named Michele or those named Evie to account for the personal and how writing from the "I" necessarily informs my reading of her poetry, essays, and fiction. To write about Serros's range of texts and their messy, funny, and complex expressions of Chicana young womanhood, I have to—I must—write about myself. Michele's Oxnard is and is not my Oxnard, just as her story is and is not my story. Yet, the experience of writing about her foundational texts has allowed me to finally come home and remember my city in a way that honors its ugliness, its resilience, its gut-wrenching history. Writing is remembrance: of Michele and of our painful Chicana adolescent stories. I will always remember Oxnard, as I will always remember Michele Serros.