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**CROSSING BORDERS: CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC
PASSAGES IN THE POETRY OF PAT MORA AND GARY SOTO**

by

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**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

in

**Literary Studies
in the Department of English**

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Summer 2011

Abstract

Poets Pat Mora and Gary Soto have long been a presence in anthologies citing their multicultural content, yet their work has not been placed as part of the classroom canon. By leaving their work out of the classroom, we have lost the benefit of their diverse poetry. As the demographics of Utah shift, including works such as Mora and Soto's becomes more essential for student success. In a close textual analysis of seventeen poems by Mora and Soto we can see that each poet uses a variety of themes to frame their verse. Not only does an overall analysis show the literary value of their work, but a more specific comparison of their work according to theme shows the possible applications for the classroom. I have placed each poem in a group with other poems that share similar themes. Each section can be read on its own or as a part of the entire analysis for easier application.

While each poet has her/his favored style, many of the themes overlap. For example, both writers place an emphasis on the border between life and death. They use several poems to discover various perspectives and their respective relationships to death. On the other hand, Soto frequently uses organized religion as a theme, while Mora uses the land and family as her spiritual connection. In the final section, Cultures, both the Soto and the Mora poems embody their style and cross multiple borders. These are at the end to signify that cultures include all the previous sections, as does the style contained in the final two poems analyzed.

Throughout the analysis, Mora and Soto's work has shown that people can cross the cultural and linguistic boundaries that divide them, but the process requires skill and patience. Mora's emphasis on family and determination contrasts Soto's emphasis of humor and action, but both seem to agree through their poetry that only by attempting to cross these borders can we truly begin to connect people with each other, overcoming generations of prejudice and hate.

For my mother, she listens to all my tales of woe then sweetly reminds me that I can do anything;

I just cannot do everything.

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Background

The world is changing. Within the state of Utah alone, demographics are shifting rapidly. According to the US Census Bureau, there has been a 9% increase in Utah's Hispanic/Latino population from 2000-2007. That increase will only continue as more families immigrate to the western United States hoping for greater opportunities. Utah schools, both primary and secondary, are one place we can clearly see the change. As the student population moves toward greater diversity, so must the curriculum. Literary understanding needs to include the situations that so many students experience. And for those students who are not experiencing it personally, educators must expose them to the ideas that will help them understand the future of which they are a part.

Although educators across the state seek to provide their students with a comprehensive knowledge of literature, they have not been given the tools necessary to do so. Instead, they must often rely on curriculum generations old with little, if any, multicultural and multilingual inclusion. Crossing the borders of language and culture is an important part of adapting to the expanding demographics of both Utah and the United States. Pat Mora's and Gary Soto's work give examples of how this crossing over can begin. In Utah, one of the fastest growing groups is the Latino/a population. How can we expect Utah to keep up with the global market if at the public education level, students are only learning about their own culture? Many residents of Utah claim a second language from travel abroad. Although Utah may be bilingual, it is not bicultural yet. I would argue that to prepare students to compete globally, teachers need to include more multicultural literature in their curriculum. Due to misunderstandings concerning language laws, often multilingual literature is left out of the classroom so as not to create a stir in

the community. The more points of connection educators have with students, the more capable they are of teaching to their students' cultures and needs.

It isn't that the widely accepted canon lacks merit, nor that it should be cut out of the curriculum. Instead, I argue that less familiar authors such as Soto and Mora will enrich the curriculum and broaden the understanding of all students, whether they share a dual heritage or not. By including these poets, we are "demonstrating to our students that the American story becomes much richer when we hear it told in all its voices" (Romero and Zancanella 25). By understanding the works themselves, educators and community members can be more prepared to teach the value of the work to students.

Previous Research

Language is something used to bring readers into an experience and establish authenticity of experience. In the same way, Latina/o authors today use Spanish and certain cultural themes within their writing as a way of breaking down barriers between the foreign and the familiar. Although most readers of bicultural writing will not share the fluency of the author in the second or other language, they become "armchair" travelers with the writer, crossing a thematic border through the act of reading.

Since the early 1970's, Mexican-American writers have been publishing at a rapid pace, even if much of their work has remained underappreciated by their communities. On a wider scale, Mexican-American poetry is an up and coming subject of research. Much of the work focuses on the ever-changing demographics of the United States and on educational issues related to bilingual education. That leaves a gap in the literary understanding of poets such as Pat Mora and Gary Soto.

Although much has been written about Gary Soto and Pat Mora as people, very little time has been spent critically analyzing and interpreting their poems. Much of the modern coverage focuses on their biographies (still unfinished since they continue to write) and their current projects. I am not arguing against the value of biographical knowledge, but pointing out that their work is not usually biographical. Thus, looking at the work critically is the only way to truly make their poetry available to wider audiences. Most of the current writing on either poet shares only a brief introduction to the poem without placing it in a thematic context that would be useful for educators and researchers.

Gary Soto

Gary Soto has long been a part of the poetic landscape in modern US anthologies. Beginning in 1977 he has been publishing on many levels: children's literature, novels, and verse. His childhood was spent in Fresno, California. There he was exposed to the racial stereotypes of middle-class America and struggled to balance between desire to be part of the majority and a repulsion of the superficial feel of media-represented culture. That struggle has shaped his life, and he "still searches for his place in American society" (Erben and Erben 51). Even as he gained financial success with his writing, he retained the frustration of being caught in-between. As Don Lee points out, "He was, after all, a pocho, a Mexican American who was neither here nor there, who didn't belong to either culture, whose Spanish and English were both poor" (188).

According to Soto, he was not even fully literate until college. It was then he realized the value of writing, modeling his own style after famous Beat poets such as Ginsberg. Although his poetry tends to follow a more narrative style than many Beat poets, he maintains the vibrant

images of the style. Despite little training in his early writing, he found a way to connect with his readers, “he knew that the more personal he was in his work, concentrating solely on his individual experiences, the more universality he could attain” (Lee). And his personal experiences were a mixture of “amusement and cynicism,” balancing laughter with the deeper frustration of injustice (Erben and Erben 46). His goal, as he puts it, “is to provide high-level literature for Mexican-American kids” (qtd. In Rinn).

His work, although frequently anthologized in recent years, has relatively little critical analysis. Most of the current research focuses on his life and his own quotes about his work, since he is still writing and publishing. Whether it is his accessibility as a person or the modernity of his work, there is simply not enough written to assist those wishing to understand and share his poetry. His work is widely available, many of his poetry collections have been translated into “German, Italian, French, Estonian, and Yugoslavian as well” (Rinn). Yet his original English work still needs greater analysis, for it is straightforward enough to be accessible to students who have little experience with poetry and yet rich and subtle enough to reward even the most sophisticated reader” (Romero and Zancanella 27). A more complete appreciation and understanding of his work comes as it is examined critically.

Pat Mora

As a young mother, Mora read to her own children and found that the stories did not represent their own culture. She decided to write her own children’s book. From that point, she immersed herself in writing both for children and for adult audiences. Even before her debut as a writer, Mora had a long dedication to education, especially for children and young adults, those

caught in-between in age as well as ethnicity (Howrey). She worked in education and administration previous to her career as a poet.

With a strong background in both Spanish and English, Mora identifies herself as a Chicana. She writes to conserve her own culture, but reaches beyond that goal, “she also addresses respect for, and awareness of, other cultures internationally and the differing degrees and kinds of effects that dominant U.S. culture has on subordinated cultures within the U.S. and worldwide” (Murphy 60-61). Just as she longed for her own children to have a recognized identity, she wants all people to feel that they are part of a culture, their own.

Mora seeks to recover and preserve heritage, not through stagnant acceptance of tradition, but through conscious connection with ideas and legacy. Specifically, Mora rejects the tradition of sexual oppression within her poetry. Instead she moves toward the idea of powerful desert women, connected to the land and nature. Her first collection of essays is titled *Nepantla*, meaning “place in the middle” (Murphy 59). As Patrick Murphy asserts:

Mora makes it clear that she not only recognizes herself as having come from such a physical place, the Tex-Mex borderlands, but also from such a psychic and cultural place as a Mexican-American. Mora seeks in her writing, as well as her life, to conserve the generative tension of the dynamic plurality that is borderland existence. (59-60)

The background Mora comes from is often the only piece of information analyzed by those in the field.

Mora’s poetry is increasingly popular in anthologies. Her particular experience of growing up in a bilingual household, where Spanish and English were used equally, makes her writing an excellent example of crossing linguistic and cultural borders. The reader does not

have to share Mora's background and language in order to understand her writing. She typically includes either a direct translation following the Spanish phrase or theme or a footnote describing not only the language meaning, but the cultural context as well. However, like Soto, her work is often mentioned, but seldom critically analyzed.

Soto and Mora: A Comparison

The purpose of including Gary Soto's work becomes clear given the claims that I will be making about using thematic borders to reveal personal experience. Soto's narrative style and intense imagery contrasts with Mora's chant-like verse. In comparison to Mora's often serious tone, Soto breaks down cultural borders with humor. For example, in his poem, "Mexicans Begin Jogging," Soto describes the experience of being caught in a raid for illegal immigrants and joining the race to escape authorities, even though he is a natural-born citizen of the United States. Soto's humor stands in excellent contrast to Mora's serious social commentary. These two writers provide an excellent comparison to each other. First, they share similar language backgrounds, but grew up in different areas of the United States: Mora in El Paso, Texas and Soto in Fresno, California. Point of view differs widely between the two. Mora frequently writes of the desert landscape and the voices of mothers and grandmothers. Soto, on the other hand, uses the streets of Fresno and childhood adventures as his primary subjects.

Not only do the experiences of Soto and Mora reflect their own respective backgrounds, they also provide an example for others struggling to cross the political, lingual, and cultural borders of life. Their poetry spans diverse situations, but the message is the same: differences do not always have to separate us. The speakers in their poetry face difficult circumstances, but

frequently realize ways to bridge the gap between people, connecting those who think themselves helpless and alienating only those who stereotype and prejudge.

For both poets, border issues are key, but they approach the issues differently. Soto uses his sense of humor to engage the reader and create a lighthearted atmosphere. Often, it is only after the poem is already read that the more serious tones become obvious. His speakers, often young males, follow a distinct narrative style, a descriptive story. It is through the story that his themes reveal themselves. Mora on the other hand, uses a deep connection with land, family, and women as the background for her verse. She regularly sets up vignettes instead of full stories, providing the reader with a brief but vivid scene or idea.

Applications

Further examination of authors from all cultures existent in the United States can provide a context for the future of both the high school and the university classroom. As Jon Huntsman, former US Ambassador to China, predicts, “Beyond the home, the earliest and most influential impact on the skills of a person is the classroom.” As teachers begin making decisions to use a more diverse curriculum, they will “shape the future of Utah’s long-term economic potential and involvement in the global market” (Huntsman). Learning to break down the cultural borders is a necessary part of shaping the future of the United States.

Although students realize this change, the teacher population remains generally the same, but must examine a greater variety of texts to meet the needs of their students. For Utah in particular, Spanish is becoming a frequent language and Mexican culture is becoming a common background. Many students come to school with not one, but two languages. Not one, but two cultures are represented in their home and school life. Although teachers cannot assume to

understand the particular background each student comes from, they can seek to teach from authors that represent this diversity of ideas.

At the forefront of classroom inclusion is poetry. Poetry can easily be integrated in to a classroom because it requires less financial backing than other literature and allows educators to examine them during classroom time. Gary Soto and Pat Mora stand at the front of the poetic movement of Mexican-American writers. Their work has been widely publicized and accepted in to various collections for student use. However, much of their work remains on its own, without interpretation and analysis. Both for the benefit of educators and the literary world at large, a deeper examination of Mora and Soto's poetry will show that the bicultural experience has commonalities despite differences between the cultures.

Not only is a close analysis of Soto and Mora's poetry important for educators, but for those in the literary field as well. Their work is the forefront of modern poetry, setting the tone and themes that will shape the literary future. By critically examining their work, we are bringing this shift to the eyes of readers and writers alike.

Findings

Both Mora and Soto provide a rich inventory of themes for readers in and out of the classroom. With interpretation and analysis provided, educators and readers can find application, not only for themselves, but for those with whom they share the poetry. In this brief analysis of both writers, the application for the classroom is limitless, and simple. Each poem can easily be added to a curriculum by itself or in connection with a comparative piece from the other poet. By presenting the poems in contrasting views, the themes are more apparent for the reader. Not only are they more easily seen, but the more subtle aspects of the poems come to the surface, allowing

students to both find a personal connection and to practice the important skill of comparative analysis.

The paper is in several sections, each section representing a thematic grouping of Mora and Soto's poetry. While each poet has her/his favored style, many of the themes overlap. For example, both writers place an emphasis on the border between life and death. They use several poems to discover various perspectives and their respective relationships to death. On the other hand, Soto frequently uses organized religion as a theme, while Mora uses the land and family as her spiritual connection. While many of the poems could be placed in multiple sections, the main theme of the poem has decided their placement in this manuscript. In the final section, Cultures, both the Soto and the Mora poems embody their style and cross multiple borders. These are at the end to signify that cultures include all the previous sections, as does the style contained in the final two poems analyzed.

The purpose of the paper is not to give a complete comparative analysis of all seventeen poems, although some comparison serves to clarify and reveal certain themes. Neither is the analysis comprehensive. However, this sampling represents many of the major themes both writers use in their poetry. With an analysis of each poem, we are able to see that the ideas are repeated and broadened between the authors. Then, we can see that Soto and Mora's varying styles can be applied to many settings, both within the realm of education and in the literary world at large.

Gender/Women

Two ordinary events are portrayed in these two poems. First, a woman has a conversation with her domestic servant as she struggles for inspiration in her writing. Second, a little boy and

girl experience the beginnings of courtship and gender roles. Both poems deal with the relationships between men and women. While at first it seems that “Illegal Alien” has a far more destructive view of the male role, the little boy and girl in “Oranges” are playing into the pattern that has been set for them. Not only can these poems be read for a discussion of gender roles between men and women, but also interaction between women of different socio-economic backgrounds.

“Illegal Alien”

Two women work in a kitchen together. One of these women sits and pulls creative works from her mind, poetry, while the other cleans for her. “Illegal Alien” begins with the domestic spheres of these two women overlapping. The speaker of the poem, the woman sitting, calls the other “Socorro:” meaning help, aid, or relief. Not only does this title apply to the woman’s position as a helper in the home, but also metaphorically as a relief for the speaker, making it possible for her to continue “waiting for a poem” (3). After the initial realization that Socorro helps the speaker in more than one way, the roles are immediately reversed. Although the speaker seeks inspiration, Socorro shares something less hopeful, a tragedy.

The poem is complicated when, instead of staying in their separate worlds, these two women begin to interact with each other. The housekeeper opens her heart to her employer, admitting that across the border, across the Rio Grande, her husband beats her. The speaker, unable to fully understand, feels like an outsider herself. She notes that her words are of no use to this woman, and only act as a “plastic bandaid” (24). The border between the two women, although recognized and despised, is still not overcome. The speaker notes the connections they share, “we are both women, / both married, both warmed / by Mexican blood” (19-21). She goes

as far as calling Socorro her sister. The socio-economic border set up at the beginning is broken down so that these two, although differing in situation, can relate to each other. As the poem ends though, we see that the speaker's intentions to comfort her metaphorical sister have all only been in her mind. She has not actually given the embrace that she knows is needed, sister to sister.

Just as she says, the speaker offers “foolish questions / when I should hug you hard” (16-17). The questions are mimicked within the poem itself. Mora gives the reader the answer, but leaves us unsatisfied because it never happens in the reality of the poem. She tells us that Socorro needs “soothing hands” instead of words (23). Mora can only relay words through the poem, but her tone suggests that there is more, action is required to overcome the barrier between these two women, and between those of similar circumstance. Thematically, some borders are broken down, but others remain for the reader to address personally.

Those borders that remain throughout the poem require external action to overcome: man to woman, sister to sister, and physical labor to creative work. However, Mora does break down some borders for the reader during the poem. She crosses the border emotionally between these two women, helping them realize they can confide in each other. She gives the language border a translation. Although the woman from Mexico would probably have spoken in Spanish, her dialogue is written in English, “My husband’s fury is a fire” (8). It is so important that we, as the reader, understand what’s happening that Mora gives it to us directly in English.

Within the images of the poem Mora makes the borders more apparent. All warm images and words are associated to Mexico and connections (although not always positive ones). The woman’s experiences with her husband are referenced with heat, “fury like a fire. / His fist can burn.” (8-9). Later, it is the warmth of their Mexican blood that connects these two women

together. In contrast, the questions and words the speaker offers Socorro are “cool” (22) and “plastic” (24). The cold separates them further from each other.

Reflecting the messages presented, the poem holds to no classic structure in its metre and rhyme, but relies on the “cool words” to present the images and ideas (22). The title itself “Illegal Alien” leaves a question and not an answer. Who is the alien? While Socorro may be the actual illegal alien (although this issue is never addressed within the poem), the speaker feels more like the outsider in the situation, unable to connect with Socorro. Mora ends with the speaker’s realization that even within her home, she is “the alien here” (26). Her inability to comfort Socorro has made her the outsider to experience and the warmth of her own blood.

In the same collection, Mora uses another poem titled “Legal Alien” to discuss the insider/outside perspective (see page 33). The difference between Mora’s two poems dealing with aliens provides a contrast for the reader and is emphasized in their titles. While one poem discusses how a lack of connection makes the speaker feel like an alien within her own home, “Legal Alien” discusses the fact that to be acceptable to one culture is impossible while taking part in the other culture as well. No matter how hard the speaker tries, s/he cannot bridge the gap because s/he is an outsider, even though s/he knows the workings of the culture.

“Oranges”

Through his poem “Oranges,” Soto gives a slice of life experience. From the eyes of a twelve year old boy, Soto shares the story of the first time a boy goes out with a girl. The speaker tries to impress the girl with not only the home treat of an orange, but with store bought candy. The girl, not realizing the financial struggle of the speaker, picks a candy bar that costs more than he has. Without a word, he takes all the money he has, and an orange, and offers it as a form

of payment for the chocolate bar. Instead of sharing the same experience, the boy eats an orange while the girl eats her chocolate bar, more expensive than she realizes.

Just as Mora often separates based on gender, Soto does in this poem. The young boy already bears the weight of responsibility for the girl he takes out. She seems not to realize the impact of her decision to get the more expensive chocolate bar. She only knows that he is giving her a gift and does not stop to ponder whether the gift is more than he can give. The emphasis of the poem is on pleasing her, bringing the “Light in her eyes, a smile / Starting at the corners of her mouth” (28-29). The speaker only wants her to be happy, and wants to be the one to make her happy.

The girl in the poem is submissive at the same time she’s asking so much of the speaker. She follows the stereotypical pattern of girlhood, with rouge on her cheeks. She follows the speaker quietly. Neither of them speaks. Instead they simply communicate through smiles, touch, and gesture. The speaker seems all too willing to follow his gender role given as well. Although he knows that he may not actually have the money for the candy the girl may choose, he does not communicate a restriction. Instead, with pride, he lets her pick whatever candy she wants from the shelf. Then, he sacrifices not only all the money he has, but also the rare treat of an orange, so that she may have what she wants.

The way that they communicate forms a type of barrier between them. They do not use many words with each other, although the silence is not as awkward as most initial romantic encounters for a twelve year old love. Instead, they seem to understand all that they need to. Instead of asking her to go out with him, he simply “smiled, / Touched her shoulder, and led / Her down the street” (15-17). The tone of the poem suggests that although language may have separated them, because they would fail to communicate about financial matters, it did not

actually separate them from each other because physical contact replaced the words. However, their system is based on strict roles that must be followed. Even when the speaker does actually speak to the girl, it is only to ask “what she wanted” (27). Soto points this out quite dramatically for the reader. As the young couple approaches the store, the only sound is that of their breathing. This situation, though placed in the innocence of youth, presents a serious image of the harsh payment of gender roles as they grow older. Even as children, they are willing to go through all of the motions that are expected of them.

Generations/Death

This section shows the variety between Mora and Soto’s work. In his poetry, Soto speaks from the perspective of the adult looking back on his youth. The maturity that comes with age teaches the speakers lessons, but also taints their perception of the past. In this way, Soto suggests that while we can learn from experience and from parents and grandparents, their example is not always a positive one. In “Behind Grandma’s House” it is the grandmother who perpetuates the cycle of abuse. It is the children who have a fresh view and are able to challenge the norm. Mora’s approach to age is much more positive. She uses aunts and grandmothers already dead to teach those who are still living. Although her speakers are adults in this section, they are still learning from their predecessors, wishing for their guidance.

“Behind Grandma’s House”

The narrative of a little boy drives this Soto poem. In it, the speaker, remembering his life at ten years old, shares of the experience he had behind his grandmother’s house. There, a different world existed, one of order and rules with his grandmother and one of freedom and “fame” in the alleyway. The speaker goes to the alley to “prove [he] was tough” (5). As he

clanks around, kicking cans, throwing glass, and yelling at imaginary figures of authority, his grandmother comes outside and punches him back to his senses.

The violence of the poem is startling at first. Although it seems ordinary for a boy to rebel by performing small acts of aggression toward animals and insects, his grandmother's reaction seems so intense. She seems to think she is actually helping him by hitting him. The speaker does not comment on the hit. Soto ends the poem immediately afterward. It is as if he is allowing us to draw our own conclusions. Was the punk kid in the alley deserving of a punch from his grandmother? What kind of grandmother hits her grandchildren? Is this a story of abuse or a story of learning?

The answers to the questions may be impossible to find within the poem, perhaps they are too shaded by the reader's own experiences. Regardless of the answer though, the dichotomy is set up. The speaker as a child represents the rebellion and frustration of youth. The grandmother represents reality and order. They seem so different, separated by age, gender, and action. As the poem ends, the grandmother has just performed the same action as her young grandson. She proves her own toughness with her fist in his face.

Yet, the speaker is harmful. The closer we read the poem, the more we realize that his seemingly harmless rebellion is malicious. He not only creates a mess by kicking over trash cans, he also throws "light bulbs like grenades" at men walking by (8). He is enacting his own war on the world around him, defying authority with violence. The violence continues as he "flicked rocks at cats" (11). The more he acts, the more levels of violence. He not only hurts men and animals, he also wars on insects, mercilessly spitting on them and breaks the branches off of flowering trees. His yells suggest his anger at rules, yelling at an imaginary priest.

His fun and angry rampage continues until, finally, someone comes to stop it. But it isn't anyone he has actually hurt, it is his grandmother. The image Soto provides for her seems common: apron, mussed hair, and the kindly words, "Let me help you" (20). But her actions stop his violence cold. The reader is taken unaware of the last line, it change the entire tone of the poem, based on each reader's individual experiences.

The barriers here are clear, but with a closer look, they become blurred. What is the right answer to the questions? Is violence the answer in this situation? Again, Soto leaves the answers out of the poem, similar to the style of Mora in many of her poems. Instead, Soto breaks down the barrier between reader and speaker. The speaker looks back on this experience, making him more equal to the reader's experience. The surprise ending leaves the reader questioning the speaker and his grandmother. In the questioning, we begin to become democratic readers, filling in the blanks of the experience on our own. By doing this, Soto has made the readers into participants in the process, making us play the same role he plays in shaping the world around us, or being affected by the shape that others suggest.

"Saturday at the Canal"

The image Gary Soto gives in his narrative poem, "Saturday at the Canal" is quite distinct at first. A couple of teenagers sit by a river on a warm day, wanting to get out of their hometown and find somewhere bigger. They embody the image of semi-rebellious teenagers: avoiding drugs or alcohol, but taking on atypical long hair. Although both teenagers are still in school, they cannot quell the desire to leave behind what they know for something new.

Typical of Soto's style, the narration pulls the poem along, drawing the reader in to the story with vivid imagery and deceptively straightforward language. Although the image of the two teenagers seems distinct at first, the ambiguity of the scene leaves room for the reader to fill

in the blank with the details that connect the story to them personally. We are not told the background of the speaker, racial, cultural, economic, or even a definite gender. From the image of long hair as rebellion, we can assume that the speaker is male, but no other definite details are given. With this vagueness, the reader is more able to relate to the situation. In one way, leaving personal details out of the poem opens the readership up.

Soto has given the reader a slice of life, a perspective into one stage of life that many can relate to. By allowing the reader partial ownership of the poem, Soto breaks down the barrier between reader and author. He creates the impression that we also could have experienced this kind of thought process, wanting to get out of where we came from. Unlike many of the poems I will examine, this poem has no reference to cultural boundaries. It's as if they don't exist, or aren't important to the speaker. What's on his mind is the frustration of the present and the hope for the future.

The speaker addresses the present and the future during the poem. The past tense of the poem suggests that the speaker is actually looking back on the situation, looking at one day of many similar days. "I was hoping to be happy by seventeen" he tells the reader, but the situation he describes keeps him from his happiness (1). Even though the poem begins with a perspective from the future, the lack of punctuation and the continuous gerund phrases make it appear that the situation is more present than past. In this way, the readers, whether in the same situation or much older, can relate.

Soto seems to want his readers to relate to the speaker. Instead of giving them a new experience, he offers them a familiar one. With the familiar comes the opportunity to ponder anew the meaning of sitting by the side of a river, hoping for more. The reader is told that the speaker's hopes are not fulfilled from the beginning: "I was hoping to be happy" (1). Yet, they

stay on the water's edge, only observing the freedom the water has as it moves away from them, away from the situation.

Water becomes emblematic of the freedom the speaker seeks. From the image near the beginning of the speaker and his friend, "hurling rocks at the dusty ground," it becomes a contrast between freedom and water and constriction and land (9). Notice that they do not throw the rocks into the water; they leave the water alone, not daring to touch it and only following it with their eyes. Instead, they throw the rocks at the ground, where they will stay put. Their efforts to progress, by throwing the rocks at the ground, are futile.

Even the distinction between the "white-tipped" water on top and the "dark underneath" shows that the speaker, remaining behind in his home town, notices that either way the water appears, it is moving onward and outward (21). He is stuck where he is. They are left behind, their "eyes followed the water" (20). They can see the potential, but cannot seem to grasp it for themselves. Just as quickly as the water moves away, their hope for happiness rushes away from them.

Not only does Soto experiment with the ideas of present and future, with the future having endless amounts of hope, he also points out the conflict between the young and the old. In other words, he shows the speaker's lack of understanding with the mention that his hopes were growing while those older than he is have hopes that are failing. He notes that those older, the teachers, were "Too close to dying to understand" (5). And yet, by pointing out his perception, he makes it clear that the perspective of the teenage speaker is skewed. The speaker is unable to see that his future is the same as his teachers.

With the image of the postcard of San Francisco, the goals and plans are made even more hopeless. Although the reader is never given a geographic location for the event at the river, it

seems that San Francisco is close. All they have to do to get there is, “Hitchhike under the last migrating birds” (12). Just as the birds follow the warmth and the water, these two teenagers wish to move with the group toward freedom. This image also shows the fear they have though, for they are unwilling to travel unless they are led by a large flock of birds. But they wait too long, and cannot join the migration because they wanted to travel with the “last” of the birds.

As we examine the poem overall, more dichotomies become apparent: the sharp edges and sounds of the words associated with school and life in the present. Notice how each word has a hard consonant, creating the sense of confinement the teenagers feel, “School was a sharp check mark in the roll book, / An obnoxious tuba playing at noon” (2-3). The noise of the lines, from the words and the references, make it hard to hear the speaker’s dreams.

However, later in the poem, as the speaker and his friend watch the water, they do not talk much. The words themselves contain far fewer hard consonants, and instead hold the smooth words, “warming” (8), “hurling” (9), and “loneliness” (17). Whereas everything with school is related to rules and restriction, the portion of the poem related to their day by the water is related to emotions. They feel loneliness, hopelessness, and desire. Their desires are left unfulfilled though; as they simply watch their dreams float by on a fast-running river.

“Who Will Know Us”

Gary Soto creates an endless question in his poem “Who Will Know Us?” The poem leads the reader down a train ride, wondering who the speaker is, who the “us” is that he so frequently identifies, and who we are. With each question come images of the country of the speaker. It seems that the speaker doubts whether his own country has given him an identity that will last after his death. And yet, the speaker remembers previous generations. He goes to visit

them on this train trip of thought. In order to understand this poem, we have to examine it a piece at a time, looking at the parts to understand the whole picture.

First, we will examine the narration of the poem. The speaker is on a train “rocking toward the cemetery” to visit the graves of his ancestors (2). He connects with his relatives because through them, these dead still exist in some form. The world outside, and the condition of the train, interfere with his connection to the dead. He feels the cold of the train, even the combustion engine’s source of life, coal, is “icy” before it bursts into flame (8). This cold begins to represent isolation, and sets the tone for the entire poem.

Even as the speaker looks outside, he sees the color white again and again. White reflects the cold of the train, and cloaks the scenery with loneliness and silence. Even though the speaker realizes that there are cows, farms, and horses, it is the silence and loneliness that seem to overwhelm him. Within this solitude, the speaker turns to other places where he has felt love: Paris and Athens. These places, separate from where he is now, cause the rift between himself and his dead relatives to widen. He thinks back on England, and the traditions he wishes he were a part of, but that he is not.

Despite the fact that the speaker seems to despise the loneliness of his country, he continues to claim it as his own. He does not separate himself from his own identity, national or familial. But because he remains loyal to his country, he alienates himself from other connections: women, friends “across the room,” and even the jokes others can laugh at (29). Instead he must imagine connections. He must “make up women in [his] head” to give him company (34).

We are given some hints for the reasons of this separation. The speaker has been part of war in some way; he has memories which bring nostalgia and tears. The sorrow of his past

creates a barrier between him and others who can laugh, smile, and connect with one another.

Whatever country the speaker actually comes from is unknown, but we are told that it is in some ways corrupt, for the cows he sees are meant only to feed “Officials” (19). He sees the horse, but it is in a wretched condition, different than a robust horse. We get the feeling that the speaker is alone on the train, or feels that way, for he says the train’s cargo is coal, and not people.

And yet, the speaker brings the reader in to the poem as well. We are also on the same train, meaning everyone, “the old and young alike” (38). The train becomes less physically tangible and takes on a metaphorical meaning. It is the train of life, bringing us closer to the dead because we will share their fate. He closes the poem with more questions, questions that he does not even attempt to answer. “Who will know us when we breathe through the grass?” the speaker asks (39). In typical Soto fashion, he leaves these questions unanswered, letting the narration speak for itself and the readers add in their own flavoring of questions.

But he does leave a sense of hope amid the despairing tone of the poem. The speaker himself is traveling to visit the cemetery. He has remembered the dead. Perhaps there will be others who will remember the future dead, that is to say, us.

“Oral History”

A mother sits in a rocking chair as her children lean over to kiss her goodnight. As she sits, she listens to tape recordings of her mother before she died. Although the speaker is a grown woman, she reminisces of her own childhood. She experiences a role reversal, changing from mother to child. Even the action of her “teenagers bend[ing] / to kiss me goodnight” (4-5). She is like the child, or at least, she is in the position of the child. Not only is she physically in the position of her childhood, she is also placed there rhythmically, being “lullaby- / rocked by your

rhythms” (5-6). As she places herself in the position of her childhood, she becomes a child listening to one of her parent’s stories.

The sound of the stories comforts the speaker, “like a mother’s heartbeat, familiar” (7). Although we do not know the details of the speaker’s need for comfort, some of it stems from this role reversal, wanting to be the child, taken care of again. The mother turns to her parent’s stories for help, and they do so.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker is quite sure of reality. She knows that her mother is dead, and states it directly. But the more she listens to the stories pouring out of the tape recorder, the more she begins to question what is real and what is fantasy. The second stanza repeats the same sure phrase, “You’re dead” but instead of a voice spinning out of a tape player, her mother is there walking and talking within the speaker’s dreams. Far more substantial than a voice, her mother’s actual presence enters her sleep each night, making at least a part of each day filled with the hope that her mother is still living.

By the final stanza the speaker has another sure statement, but it has changed. She refuses to allow her mother’s death to be real, “No. You’re my grand wolf again” (23). Now the speaker is sure that her mother lives again, through the tapes and her dreams. She knows her mother was once dead with the “again,” but she lives now, at least to the speaker. In this way, the speaker makes memory a reality, a border that can be crossed with thoughts of the deceased and things past. Her own children’s existence vanishes after the first stanza. She only has thoughts of her mother and how her mother can bring her comfort.

There are several areas where the speaker reveals just how present she feels her mother is to her. Each time she speaks of her mother, the words are in the present “wearing” (9), “walk” (14), and “savoring” (17). Even when she seems sure of her mother’s absence from her life, the

speaker is still speaking directly to her mother, “You’re dead” she tells her mother, as if trying to tell her what to do (1). It seems that the speaker is also trying to convince herself that her mother is gone and she must press on alone.

But the same time she tries to convince her mother and herself that she’s alive, she crosses the border between life and death, making the dead come back to life in her mind. Not only has she brought back the dead, breaking down the seeming solid line between life and death, she has also broken through the border between generations. Her connection is so close with her mother that she can communicate with her through the border of death. Or at least, that is what she tries to do in the poem. In reality, she remains sitting in the chair and simply listening and reminiscing of the past. Just as she could not stop her mother from dying when she was in the hospital, she also cannot make her mother come back to her, to be her “lobo” (24).

In reality, we are not even sure that the speaker is discussing her mother. It seems that Mora stays with women through most of her poetry, and in her personal writing “lobo” meant her own mother, but the way the speaker discusses this parental figure is so vague that it could be almost anyone. It could be an aunt, grandmother, or father. Even the speaker does not have a clearly defined gender. Teenager children could, although it seems unlikely, kiss their father goodnight just as easily as their mother. So Mora connects with her readers on another level, by refusing to distinguish completely between genders. Thus the reader can feel as the speaker does, caught up in the memories.

Time borders are embedded in the poem, emphasizing the time since “lobo” died and the speaker has had to move on with her life. The speaker continuously moves from the present to the past to the long distant past. The borders of time are blurred the longer you read the poem. These crossings accentuate what, in the end, is real and what is fantasy. As hard as the speaker

tries, or the reader tries, or anyone tries, some borders cannot be completely overcome. For the speaker, the only time she has her mother is when she listens to the tapes or dreams of her. Her children do not know their grandmother in any other way.

“Gentle Communion”

In another poem that addresses the border between life and death, Mora’s speaker more directly interacts with the dead. In this poem, the speaker has brought her Mamande back from the desert, and she follows her around all day long, not just during night dreams. In this interaction, Mamande never speaks, but seems to invite questions about her life, her past, and her story. The speaker feels a disconnect even while she sees her Mamande, the disconnect of never communicating while she lived, never asking those questions she knew she should have asked. Yet the actions of her Mamande suggest many things about her: spirituality, dedication, seriousness, and deep affection for the speaker. In the closing of the poem, the speaker references a memory instead of the present visitation. In it, Mamande and the speaker share an intimate moment: eating grapes, playing I Spy, and being close to each other. This image of closeness suggests that the speaker, though separated in many ways from her Mamande, feels connected to her through memory, through shared experiences.

Each stanza of the poem has a common theme, almost as though Mora is addressing different borders through each stanza. First, Mamande comes with her from the desert, crossing both the physical border and the metaphysical, death. We are told that Mamande is not just dead, but “long-dead” (1). She has been absent from the speaker’s life, it seems, since she was a little girl. All of the memories surround those little girl days. Mora begins the poem almost as though she were making an argument, telling the reader that moving is an important aspect of life. As the speaker tells us, “Even the long-dead are willing to move” (1). This statement suggests that

others may be unwilling to move, but even those who are beyond the grave can and do move for a purpose. They willingly cross borders in order to come in contact with loved ones.

Though Mamande has come back to the speaker, following her in her daily chores, there are some levels that Mamande cannot attain. She cannot hear the speaker, and thus refuses to answer any questions the speaker has, answers of which would connect them on a more equal plane. Here it is not a choice though. Before, Mamande could choose to move or not, but now she has no choice to hear. She is deaf to the questions of her young relative. The speaker is not satisfied with this situation. Having Mamande there isn't enough. She wants her questions answered, questions about, "her younger days, her red / hair, the time she fell and broke her nose / in the snow" (7-9). The border between generations is addressed in this section. The young cannot know the old on equal terms, because they cannot communicate with each other in the same terms. Mamande cannot speak with the speaker, nor hear her.

By the third stanza, the speaker is attempting to create equal ground between herself and Mamande. She resists the awkwardness of the silence by trying "to make her laugh" (10). The difference in their attitudes is evident here. Mamande sets up a distinction between them, even going as far as leaving the room in order to avoid changing (11-12). Although this stanza continues the discussion of generations, it furthers it to the border between progressivism and tradition. Mamande is of the tradition of solemnity. She will not smile for pictures, wear makeup, or learn English (12-13).

However, Mamande does not stop the speaker from progressing. She simply moves on, to a different room or a different task. While the speaker works, in her distanced work of writing, Mamande "sits and prays" (14). She is a picture of tradition and faith, praying in the same position, always keeping the strictness of her habits. But this time the speaker notices the

difference in the shadow of Mamande. This time she notices that although Mamande is strict, her hair, though white, is “girlish” in its look (17). As the prayer continues, the speaker realizes that Mamande resembles a child despite her age. She is childlike in her faith, “[pressing] her hands together, / her patient flesh steeple” (20-21). There is this border crossed yet again. Although they seem to be so different in age, Mamande represents both the childlike faith and the wisdom of age with “skin / worn, like the pages of her prayer book.” (21-22).

The speaker, feeling now more connected than before, leaves the idea of Mamande’s visit to her and moves into the realm of memory. She still has the same chair that they once shared together, when she was a small child. She uses the past tense, indicating that she has re-realized the border of death and time, but she can still connect through memory. She remembers the games they played together, the food they ate, and the closeness they felt. Each other these memories are so vibrant in the speaker’s mind that she can still taste the grapes they ate together (27). Thus through memory, they are connected again.

This connection brings the poem to a close, also creating a vivid image. The grapes seem to represent the poem as a whole. It begins with a peel, gently pulled off by Mamande and placed in the mouth of the speaker. Instead of violently trying to break through the border, she doesn’t “bite or chew” (30). Instead, she lets the grape dissolve in her patience. This “private green honey” is the same thing we can partake in as we follow the example of Mamande, moving through borders “without a word” and, like the speaker, allowing borders to dissolve with patience and gentleness. Thus the “Gentle Communion” is that of slow but steady crossings, creating bridges of memory that can connect people.

Religion/Belief

This section only contains poems by Gary Soto because of his direct relationship to Catholicism. However, Pat Mora's poetry does contain connections to the ritualistic spiritualism of what she names desert women. Those poems can be found in the Generations/Death section. Soto's work carries a mixture of attitude toward religion, from a small child's impatience to a young adult's increasing skepticism. Instead of advocating a specific religion in his use of Catholicism, he suggests that the two speaker's experiences are common for anyone who has grown up with a set of beliefs thrust upon them. Only by taking the assumptions and challenging them did the speakers find any sense of fulfillment.

"Bodily Responses to High Mass"

Through humor and vivid imagery, Gary Soto shares the story of a speaker who sits in High Mass, so bored that he begins to notice his body's response to the sermon instead of paying attention to the sermon itself. In the world of his body, he learns much. The sermon metaphorically lasts long enough to age him into an old man, with a white beard and a stumbling step. Images not only bring laughter in the poem, but also consideration of the conflict he sets up between religion and a single person, between the ideas of heaven and hell. With these conflicts, Soto addresses religious borders, both setting them up and tearing them down simultaneously.

The terminology Soto uses in the poem assumes that the reader will understand specifically Catholic words such as "High Mass," "homily" (6), and the mantra, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (16). Although the terms are relatively well known, even outside of Catholicism, they are still setting apart the non-Catholic reader from the speaker worshipping at High Mass. Instead of being immediately included as we often are in Soto and Mora's verse, we

are perhaps alienated because of the religious verbiage. As the poem progresses though, Soto does not leave the reader outside of the meaning. Instead, he brings the speaker outside as well.

As the speaker listens to the homily, or religious sermon portion of the mass, he is suddenly separate from his body. Instead of being within the situation, he becomes apart, just as the speaker has been separated from the experience by the unfamiliar verbiage. He views his body as a separate entity almost. Although he puts on “a white shirt and tie” (1), he then allows his body to take over and “weep sweat” (2). This image is strikingly similar to the weeping of penitent sinners, but in his case it’s only an expression of his discomfort. By giving his body the freedom to act, the speaker in many ways alienates himself from the sermon. He realizes, “The homily / Had nothing to do with me—“(6-7). The speaker feels the lack of connection, mirrored by the reader’s lack of connection to the religious imagery at the beginning.

Each image of reverence on the speaker’s part becomes another example of his disconnect. The bowed head shows not devoted prayer, but disinterest. The summary of a New Testament story brings not reflection but a yawn. Even the tears that come, come not as a result of sorrow, but from exhaustion. The movement of his hand, although reminiscent of crossing himself, is more for trying to keep cool. Again he weeps not tears, but sweat. And the final image of an old man going toward his heavenly reward is not of death and heaven, but of sweet powdered doughnuts tempting him to indulge.

The contradictions Soto brings up in the poem enforce the borders that religion can create. The sermon has had its toll on the speaker. He is now an old man, “shuffling down / The aisle, pausing every third pew” (34-35). Being disconnected has aged him. But, as he leaves mass, having been preached to, the reader wonders at the effectiveness of the sermon. Instead of going upward, ascending to heaven, the speaker descends the stairs to the basement. There, in the

symbolic hell of the building, he receives what he calls his “heavenly reward,” powdered doughnuts (39). Although the reward resembles “stacked halos” as they sit on the plate, they are only temporary, earthly rewards (38). The contrast between the idea of heaven and the sweet indulgence of a dessert leads us to ask several questions. Is the speaker duped into hell instead of heaven by a devilish treat? Is he saying that heaven is just too much trouble, and the temporary tastes so good? Or perhaps all that is important to know is that the line between right and wrong is blurred.

Instead of focusing on the relationship between himself and the priest or the other parishioners, the speaker withdraws into himself. He has an intimate relationship with his environment. He breaks down the distance between the heat, the geography of the church, and the reaction of his body. As he does this, he makes connections, not spiritually, but physically with the food at the end.

“Home Course in Religion”

Narration is the thread that holds together this, and many of Soto’s poems. The speaker examines his history with religion, what he knew, and what he learns through his own life experiences. The major delineation of the poem is the separation between what he has been taught and what he realizes to be true on his own. He begins with the technical definitions given him by books supposing to cover religion and metaphysics. The definitions completely confuse the speaker, distancing him from the very ideas he hopes to understand.

The first border introduced, then, is that of reality versus the philosophies of thought. The speaker tries to understand and apply the knowledge he reads from religious books, but instead he is left more confused. The chaos of the books is mirrored in his own life as he and his roommates record their thoughts on current events, Nixon and the Watergate scandal to be

specific. Their own thoughts are just as confused as the written books and the speaker struggles to find what he really knows and understands.

What is truly real for the speaker is the Top Ramen they eat for dinner, the laughter of his friends and he, and the physical pain associated with his karate class. He realizes the difference between what he has been taught by his instructor on the philosophy of pain, and the “red welts” on his chest (58). He begins to see that the word of experts can be distrusted. Indeed, he outright tells us that his “instructor was wrong” (57). In this, he begins to break down the border between expertise and experience. For him, experience is the ultimate lesson. The expertise of others, written or told, means nothing if it is not backed up by his own personal experiences.

And yet, the speaker continues his search for understanding through the words of others. He turns to the Bible, but seems to gain no insight from it, neither from the “Zen master, Xu Yun” (64). Instead, he finds the reality of a jar of peanut butter, three crackers, and a visit from his girlfriend. He cannot seem to grasp the connection between his own life and the philosophy of others. He continues to read, to pray, and to struggle. Only the Top Ramen marks the passage of time with a crunch.

The speaker does not limit his reading only to religious materials, but expands it to history, science, geography, and more. Each subject has little meaning for the speaker; he is more entranced by the reality of the sweat on his teacher’s eyebrows (89). There seems to be a hard barrier that the speaker simply is unable to cross, the barrier of understanding. He cannot connect with his teacher, with religion, with politics, or even fully with his friends and girlfriend. When his mother calls, the barrier remains. She only yells at him and he only tries to assure her that he will be a success someday. His struggle for existence is an added brick to the wall that separates him from understanding his purpose and his own beliefs.

When his girlfriend returns to the picture, it seems that the connection may finally occur. They talk, he seems to listen, and they share a physical closeness. Their kisses, his hand against her breast, all suggest that he is so close to feeling an understanding of himself and his life. The speaker, searching for a true connection, reaches for a more intimate moment, but his girlfriend pushes him away. He has misread the signals. He has missed his chance. He is left alone to figure things out again. Reading the Bible, he cannot forget what he has done and how his own actions have distanced him from his girlfriend, the only possible confidant. He loses his link with God fully then, wondering where his belief is centered, unable to find understanding anywhere.

In this poem, the speaker only enforces the borders between himself and others. He does this by seeking understanding through distanced methods such as reading, instead of personal experience. Although in the end, he realizes that only his own reality can apply, he is left then alone, unable to find what the answer is. All the beliefs he has examined have left him empty inside, frustrated with the God he had always assumed real, and frustrated with himself for his own lack of belief and inability to decide for himself.

Language/Education

Pat Mora's dedication to learning comes through in her poems on education. Despite her personal support of education, she points out the conflicts that arise when education separates the learned from the unlearned. In "University Avenue" the speakers realize that although they have the support of family and friends in attending college, they will be creating alienated from their community as they rise in socio-economic status. On the other hand, Mora recognizes that without the ability to speak English, parents are unable to communicate with their English-

speaking children. By examining both sides of the issue, Mora points out that while education is important, a complete understanding of its benefits and frustrations is essential.

“University Avenue”

In “University Avenue” Mora follows the story of those students coming from a minority culture and attending college for the first time. Although the speaker never directly identifies who s/he is, it is clear from the Spanish words and remedies that s/he is a first generation university student, walking the metaphorical path toward graduation, toward the loneliness that accompanies the hike away from family and toward higher education. From this speaker’s perspective the university atmosphere is one “unfamiliar” and new to the Mexican American people.

The speaker does not remain a single voice, but instead gathers with all others who walk the same path, forming a group identity. “We are the first” the speakers state outright (1). By being the first, these speakers, these students, cross in to an unknown land. If not for the title, “University Avenue,” the reader would not suspect that the speakers are students. Instead, we would think they were travelers to a distant land, given mementos from home to guide and comfort them. As travelers, they cross the border from home and family to academia and strangers.

The tools they are given help the travelers cross the borders. First, these travelers are given “Yerbabuena,” or spearmint(9). With its medicinal ability to calm troubled stomachs, spearmint is a generous gift to these young of their family. Surely the stress and newness of the experience not only troubles the speakers, but their families as well. Not only do the travelers go with herbal remedies, but with the symbolic love of their families and people, “*abrazos* linger round our bodies” (9). These embraces from loved ones give strength, even when it’s just a

tactile memory, the recollection of how it felt to have them close . Finally, the stories, *cuentos* in Spanish, follow in the minds of the travelers (12). With their physical, emotional, and mental needs taken care of, the travelers can go forth to the new land.

They will need all the gifts given them as they travel somewhere, “unfamiliar with the sounds” (4). We are not told what these sounds are, the “guides for those who follow” (5). Perhaps they have reference to other languages, or to the path that has been set for those who will follow in the footsteps of the first. However, Mora sets up a pattern for her other poems with the theme of guides. There are those in this poem who have gone before, standing between the speakers and the harshness of the world. The speakers’ family, through sacrifice, cleared the way for the future generations. Important to these travelers are not the relationships they will have in the new place, but those they leave behind. I find it interesting that no mention of other people is made during the poem. This new land of university seems absolutely bereft of people, so much that the newcomers must bring with them hugs and the essence of their people to keep them company.

So at the same time that these first generation students are crossing the border of education to grow and learn, they are setting up boundaries between themselves and the others at school. In essence, the speakers break down one border only to set another one up when they reach their destination. The border is also set up between those they left behind though, for as students they will be separated physically and in some ways, intellectually, from their family and friends of the past.

The collection that contains “University Avenue” provides translations on the bottom of each page for the reader. Even though this poem contains only a few Spanish words, the translations are given for easy access. Within its own section, *Blooms*, this poem is evidence of

what happens when the plant is watered and fed. It flourishes. Or at least, that is the image Mora predicts for the poem. By making this poem part of a set, she shows that the past affects the future, not only within the poem, but within her poetry as a whole. The entire collection is actually geared toward young adults, those who would be in the same position as the speakers of the poem. In this way, the “we” present throughout the poem becomes a powerful collective voice of many, including the reader. The same time Mora recognizes the progress made, she also notes the sacrifices of both generations. In order to overcome borders, these students may end up creating some within their own family.

Even within the poem itself, each contribution is noted, “We do not travel alone” (14). The legacy, those that made it possible for these travelers to continue their education, symbolically go with them. And according to the speakers of the poem, their family’s embraces physically follow them and their stories echo in Spanish to them. With the unfamiliarity of the new landscape, the students cling to their home and culture, but move forward with courage that they truly are not alone.

“Legal Alien”

In “Illegal Alien”, Mora discusses further the borders that are allowed, making people from a Mexican-American background partially accepted and partially shut out (see page 10). Instead of placing two people in contrast and similarity, Mora places the speaker as a partially undefined person against the two majority cultures s/he faces. We do not know if the speaker is a man or a woman, young or old. We do know that s/he can speak English and Spanish, and feels caught in between two cultures by the perceptions of others.

The primary focus of the language of the poem is in the hyphenation of the speaker. Almost as a definition, each hyphen separates and explains the stereotypes. “Bi-lingual, Bi-

cultural” visually provides the separation that would not normally exist between the prefix *bi* and the root words (1). By making the separation visual, Mora points out that anytime a person is defined strictly, the definition will shut them out from one part of even their own culture. As the poem progresses, Mora inserts multiple references to the border of definition: “American but hyphenated” (8). The speaker is never *just* American, but always needs more explanation. The poem begins and ends with the same visual element of the hyphen, “pre-judged / Bi-laterally” (21-22). With this strong ending, the speaker points out that both cultures are judging at the same time, making it impossible to exist without the perception of “otherness” about her/him.

Not only does Mora use visual separations within the poem itself, the speaker also discusses the feeling of being caught between as, “a handy token / sliding back and forth” (15-16). Just as the hyphen visually connected and yet separated the two words, so does a token show communication and connection, but separation. A token’s value is set and defined. A token is used by both parties without acting of its own volition. So is the Mexican-American judged by both cultures and used by both cultures, but accepted by neither.

And yet Mora gives the speaker and those like her/him a sense of power to their identity. They can switch from English to Spanish without pause, functioning in “a paneled office” (4) as well as in a “Mexican restaurant” (7). And unlike the token they are likened to, the speakers can act for themselves, “by smiling / by masking the discomfort” (19-20). They can choose how to handle the situation even if they have no power to change the reaction of the Americans and Mexicans. While the action of the Mexican-Americans is in the present tense, all of the judgments are written in the past tense, “viewed by Anglos as perhaps exotic” (9) and “viewed by Mexicans as alien” (11). The judgment has already happened. The only part of judging that is

present tense is the speech of Mexicans, “their eyes say, ‘You may speak / Spanish but you’re not like me’” (12-13). Their words still have the power to hurt.

The language of the poem shows how quickly English turns into Spanish and then back again. From the demonstration of bilingualism at the beginning the speaker uses both, but then the words of the Mexicans are translated to English. Why is this so? Part of the answer may lie in the fact that the audience is mainly on the American side of the judgment. Although the speaker does not critique one above the other, the use of English suggests that Mora knows her audience. She knows that English is the primary language they will be reading.

Encompassing the entire poem are assumptions about the speaker and both cultures s/he takes part in. As readers, we are given a seemingly dictionary definition through the eyes of someone who is discriminated against. The view then, is biased, but based on personal experience. The only time the speaker is actually referenced is when spoken to by the eyes of the Mexicans, “You may speak” (12). The “you” there is accusatory instead of inviting. Mora shows that on an individual level, understanding can occur, but when people are bound to a certain definition they are left without personal identity.

By placing these poems next to each other, we can see that Mora frequently crosses metaphorical borders. Here she discusses how being termed "Mexican-American" creates a loneliness. Specifically, she mentions living within the hyphen. Not only does this speaker act as a "token" between cultures, but s/he also must face being ostracized because s/he is not actually part of either community. So at the same time Mora is showing the error of the borders, she also is creating a border between those readers who can empathize and those that have not shared the emotion.

“Learning English: Chorus in Many Voices”

Mora begins her poem “Learning English: Chorus in Many Voices” by immediately pointing out that there are multiple female speakers present. Each speaker has a distinct voice, and each shares in the frustration of learning to speak English in the United States. The speakers, although distinct at first, share a common bond in their struggle to learn English. They do it for different reasons. Some want to have opportunities for employments, some want to please their husbands, some defy their husbands to learn. Many are learning to help their children, destined to speak English better than their parents no matter how hard the parents try. They are students, different in age but working hard to master the second language of their lives.

What is it that keeps these women going? For in reality, the poem reflects deep frustration and not necessarily a hopeful perspective. Language acts a firm barrier to these women, making it impossible for them to fit in to their new atmosphere, regardless of their previous education and experience or intellect. None of the women mention people who speak English as helpful. It seems that those who are trying the hardest to achieve what many native English speakers take for granted, are the ones ostracized the most from the community, because they try and sometimes fail.

As we examine the poem, we must pick out the different voices. Notice how Mora makes each woman’s voice different by varying the indentations on the page. Even within the stanzas there are extra spaces to show either a move to another woman or a shared thought between two women. As separate as the speakers seem, they are able to converse with each other. The three women who discuss whether their husbands help them is one example of this. “my husband helps me” one woman says, “mine sneers” another adds, and finally “mine an obstacle” (15-16). It is almost difficult to place the women as poetic lines; instead they are apart, giving the image of

actual interaction between them. This interaction shows the reader how important communication is within the process of learning, and the possible difficulties that may arise when husbands hinder the process instead of supporting it.

The women mention different difficulties, each adding a barrier between her and her goal: future children laughing at them, unsupportive husbands, inability to understand, the age factor, embarrassment, feeling stupid, others laughing at them, homework on top of personal responsibilities, teachers teaching too quickly, and wondering if the main language will change again someday. Each of these challenges brings fear for the women. In reality, the poem gives them a voice that they seem unable to express most of the time. It brings forth the reasons which have been holding back communication between English-speaking readers and those desperately trying to learn Spanish.

Although the entire poem is written in English, Mora retains the marks of what would seem to be authentic writing from English language learners. The “I” is never capitalized, a frequent habit of those who have spoken a language without personal nouns made into proper nouns. However, this pattern is not consistent. The one time the “I” is capitalized is when it references an important concept of the poem “I feel stupid” (32). This concept is one that almost any reader can relate to, and it connects the speakers to each other. However, this same idea is that which keeps the speakers alienated from the majority language culture of their new home.

Not only are letters left in lower case within the poem, the wording also retains a feeling of insecurity of language. There are confusions between adverbs, “speak very simple” (2). The order of words is sometimes confused, or at least out of the normal range for native English speakers, “when i have children they laugh maybe” (4). Notice that in standardized English, the

sentence would read something like, “When I have children they may laugh at me.” Mora’s speakers, however, are using their own words. They are finally speaking.

Not only are the speakers given their own identities, indicated by different spacing, they are also communicating with us as readers, for what seems like the first time. Mora dedicates this poem “for the brave students who write me.” In this dedication, Mora points out that her voices are not created, but brought from real experiences. These women are real. They had the courage to write to Mora, and Mora in turn gave them a public voice. In this way, Mora removes the border of silence. Each speaker is struggling to have a voice in English, and Mora gives that to them through the poem.

Women connect with each other, connect through language borders, and connect between generations. Some of the women have children; some are looking forward to having children. But all the women, even though they have been separated by spacing, start to blend together, indicated by the title “chorus.” Although each woman has a voice, that voice is heard only as it is added to other voices to form a repeating refrain in a song of frustration and hope. Their lack of formal English makes them blur in distinction by the end, and the only parting thought is that these women, however many voices are represented in the poem itself, only represent a small fraction of women who are going through the same thing.

Mora’s poem also makes the point that Mora herself writes in direct response to her readers. She is aware of them. She connects with them, breaking down the border between writer and reader, speaker and reader. She knows that her readers relate to the topic; they provided it for her. And yet, the poem is not only for her readers who are learning English, since it is written entirely in English. Certainly the speakers who wrote to her would know that Mora speaks

Spanish (if that was one language they spoke), but Mora only leaves English. For the readers who speak English as their native language, she gives a lesson in the difficulties of the journey.

And in this lesson, she leaves some fears, some possible future borders that must be crossed eventually. Some of the mothers or future mothers worry that language would one day separate them from their children, “when I have children they laugh maybe,” and “my baby son three months an american / will he tease his mother / who can not speak English so perfectly” (4, 26-29). Will these children grow up and feel a border between themselves and their parents? Mora does not answer the question, but leaves it open. She does not claim to have the answer even, but knows just as well as her speakers that it is an issue of concern for many.

With all the Spanish Mora uses in her poetry, there is none in this one. She leaves it open for all who are concerned about the linguistic border between generations and people. The speakers, although from Mora’s background we may assume speak Spanish, could be from any linguistic background and fit the voice of the poem. They can be anyone struggling to learn English.

Geographic/Political

In perhaps some of the most political poems either poet wrote, they deal with the actual physical conflicts that come from physical borders between countries and people. Each poem has a strong political statement to make, but instead of pushing the ideas on the reader, Mora and Soto allow the reader to see through a different perspective than perhaps their own that the issues are complex and dangerous. While Soto uses humor in “Mexicans Begin Jogging,” he does not leave the reading merely laughing, but considering the implications of the situation. In “La Migra” Mora turns the table of power from an unscrupulous border officer to the once helpless

woman he chases. Although the political situations remain volatile, Mora and Soto do not place blame on a government, but on people who would take advantage of others in less favorable circumstances.

“The Elements of San Joaquin”

In an extended poem, Gary Soto distinctly provides a sort of border between sections, clearly labeling them, “Field,” “Wind,” “Stars,” “Sun,” “Rain,” “Harvest,” “Fog,” and “Daybreak”. Each section is distinct, separated by a line break and a heading, yet the ideas themselves continually overlap. Within each section of the poem, the speaker discusses the relationship between the element and himself. Each section could almost stand on its own, but Soto places them together, creating a montage of images that lead to a bigger picture, one that gets at the heart of many of his poetic themes, that of connection to land and the growing seasons.

As is customary of a growing season, it begins with the field, the area where the seed will be planted so that it may grow and bring fruit. In the same way, the speaker is part of the process. He works in the field, but the grapes seem secondary in importance to the dirt that envelops the speaker completely, filling his mouth, his skin, and even his pores. He tells us that the interaction with this dirt is already making him into the valley. But the connection to the land is not an altruistic one. Instead, the planting, the speaker writes, will bring no sprouts, no harvest, just like the valley that he works on so hard brings nothing permanent for him.

In this beginning, Soto sets up the poem. We are to examine the process of harvesting whatever can come of the supposed sterile soil of the valley. And more than examining the literal soil, we must apply the same ideas to people, to the speaker. We must ask ourselves what each

element does to influence and change the speaker. The field itself, made of dirt, has covered him and made him into a field himself.

First the wind comes. Normally we would associate wind and then rain, but Soto breaks does the expected order to show what this kind of valley does to a person. Here, the wind comes, dry. It is not the gentle wind of pollination, the breeze of summers. It is the harsh wind that “peeled mountains” (16), “strokes” (19) cattle to “white dust” (21), and removes the traces of life, even insect life, from the land. And yet, the wind has pleasant effects as well. By day it is harsh and unyielding, but in the evening, it cools the speaker. In the evening, it does pollinate, so to speak, as it removes part of the speaker and gives it to a “rabid dog (30),” thus creating new life, “another life” (31). The speaker is spread from one place to another.

But Soto does not leave the wind at that point. Instead he continues to identify the process the wind has in creating life. Now there is no wind in the daytime, harsh or other. The heat overwhelms the speaker. But again, the evening brings the wind that saves. This wind again cools the speaker, but does more. It is modeled after a beehive, removing breath from the speaker’s lungs for use elsewhere. In this section, the speaker is actually speaking to us, the reader. Up to this point he has been performing a monologue of description, but now it is as if he gives us direction, and explanation of past events. We did not know that when we got up, the sun “Blazed an hour in the sky” (33). Neither did we realize that when the sky became darker, the wind “Was moving under [our] skin” (40). It is as if the speaker is telling us how the process does not only apply to him, but to everyone. Everyone is affected by the elements.

As the poem progresses, the speaker adds in sections that are not technically elements. The stars, for example, which simply seem to mark the passage of time. But as an element, time is just as important as any other. It makes it possible for the events to happen inside the plant, so

that it may grow on the outside as well. Even when the speaker references the sun, it is to show that from night to day we have progressed from seedling to full blown blossoms and “Tassels of foxtail” (54). But thus far we have only discussed the change in season, time, and how that narration of the poem works. Slowly, through this narration, Soto is breaking through the borders of land and humanity. Just as a seed can make the soil part of itself as it uses the nutrients to grow, so can a person use the world around them to grow.

And here, finally, comes the rain in to the poem. But interestingly, it does not come until autumn. And although rain would be normally associated with growth and life, this section is dedicated to the winter of the fertile valley, the time of rain and no harvest. In the winter, the rain, there is no work to be found. And here, the metaphor of land and the speaker becomes thinner. With an end to growing comes a disconnection from the land. The speaker adds in objects completely unconnected from the land: silverware, plates, slacks, and lint. And as the speaker becomes less connected to the land, he also loses nourishment. As he says, “The skin of my belly will tighten like a belt” (74). Just as the soil compacts under rain, so does the skin of the speaker without the soil.

Soto does not place the growing season in order. Winter comes before harvest. But with the harvest comes future. Even the harvest does not have the positive connotation we would assume. It brings with it the rain again, ruining the harvest time, and reminding the speaker of an important point of the poem. The speaker works the land, but does not own the land he works. The harvest, though perhaps positive and rewarding for the owner, gives nothing to the speaker. The rain acts as “ropes...to pull” (81). They also keep the speaker from the fruits of his own labor. This disconnect is not solved by a connection to the land, because borders of ownership stand in the way.

In the fog, the view is distorted again. This section seems to have little relation to the others, but it demonstrates the effect of elements on the speaker again. Fog does distort what is real and what is fantasy. It cannot be conquered, even with “all the sweaters / Hung in closets all summer” (87-88). Technically, it isn’t even an element, but a combination of elements.

But then daybreak comes. Again, a non-element, daybreak acts as a cataclysm for time. With daybreak comes a reconnection with the land, where we, the speaker and the reader, “enter the fields to hoe” (106). But there is a difference created between the speaker and the reader. Again he addresses us, but this time we are made into the hypothetical owners of the land. Unlike earlier, when the anticipated harvest was sweet grapes, now the speaker grows onions. And although the reader may complain of the effects onions have on the eyes, bringing tears, the speaker argues that long before we connect with the harvest, he has cried over the onions. Through his work on the land, he has connected with the plants, has grown blisters, had them pop, and had the salt sting inside of them.

And by the end of the poem, the speaker is showing us that failing to see the patterns of the sun, the connections made between land and people, is an unforgivable sin. Because of it, “nothing will heal / Under the rain’s broken fingers” (122). In other words, the lack of connection that so many have with the land leads to wounds that cannot heal, because they are never noticed.

“Mexicans Begin Jogging”

The imagery in Soto’s poem “Mexicans Begin Jogging” serves to communicate the story he tells. Soto, while working in a factory, has a close encounter with the Border Patrol. Although he is in no personal danger, those around him perceive that he is, and force him to take part in the group of illegal workers fleeing the factory. The story like quality of Soto’s verse comes through

here with the dialogue and image mix between the two stanzas. Soto acts as speaker in the poem, allowing his personal experience to speak to anyone, whether they share his background or not. By reading this poem, the reader gets to know Soto in a personal way, as well as experiencing his experience with him.

With the lively action of the story, the meaning is not at first apparent. Instead, there is a feeling of humor in the story of someone who has some Mexican heritage being mistaken for an illegal immigrant in danger of capture from the border patrol. Soto makes sure to write in the humor with his wry thought process, “Since I was on his time, I ran” (11). He does not take offense nor think too deeply about the mistake. He joins the line of workers fleeing, yelling “vivas” (17). His one Spanish phrase, “live” calls the situation a new perspective, that of “those sociologists” (18) and his “great, silly grin” (21). He smiles at the situation, suggesting a sense of ease in a situation that would be much tenser than he writes to.

With his humor and smile, Soto lets the reader experience the situation with him. We then begin to recognize the borders he sets up and just as easily runs over. He sets himself apart from his boss, his skin and hair color making him a target for the border patrol. Even though his boss is judging him without real cause, Soto points out the care his boss shows with the image of the “pressed / dollar in my palm” (8-9). That dollar symbolizes the assumed difference in financial situation, nationality, and eminent danger, but it also shows that his boss cares enough to try and protect him. At the same time, his boss refused to belief his claim that he “was American” (7). Instead he rushes him out the door, shouting, “No time for lies” (8). The boss and employee situation points out how strictly the boss enforces the lines between them.

Yet Soto easily reasons his way out of offence and anger with the simple realization that he is just at work and doing as his boss tells him, being “on his time” (11). Just as easily, the

speaker forgets his boss and gets involved in the crowd, like a celebrity, he “Ran past the amazed crowds that lined / The street” (13-14). Just as he literally moves away from the supposed danger of the border patrol (for him at least), he moves away from the prejudice of his boss and accepts the situation, changing it into an adventure.

Soto gives images of stereotypical Americanism, “baseball, milkshakes” (18). These images again remark on the borders drawn between cultures, and yet he runs past them, “into the next century” while smiling (20). In some way, he creates a sense of hope that the next generation will be able to move beyond the judgments and to equality. Soto breaks down the border between cultures personally. Without offering advice or direct calls for action, he still has shown that these boundaries are as false as the danger of the border patrol to him, born in the United States.

Within the structure of the poem, there is a definite separation between the work environment of the first stanza and the road away, and metaphorically to the future. Within the first stanza, the pressure is powerful. The factory has images of tension with the “fleck of rubber, under the press / Of an oven yellow with flame” (2-3). The way Soto phrases the description makes it sound as if he is the one pressed and burned. He is caught in the work, the heat of the situation. Within this context, the border patrol comes and actually frees him of the prejudice of his boss and the tension of the situation.

With the idea of borders in play, the border patrol, instead of making sure the borders are enforced, frees Soto from the binding of his workplace for a while. He comes to realize how his boss really views him, forcing him out “the back door” (10). However, once he is outside, the poem changes tone to lighter, freer description of open spaces and the autumn sky. The softness and air seem to change with the stanza change. Borders are unclear here, the people and the

streets, “blurred like photographs, in rain.” (14). Rain, melding together people and houses, frees Soto to be himself. Here Soto remarks that his situation, and the experience he has, will be realized by sociologists of the future as a race away from prejudice.

“La Migra”

From the seeming perspective of a child, “La Migra” has a much harsher tone than child’s play would suggest. The poem has two parts to it. First, the portion where the speaker takes the role of La Migra in their game of pretend. During this portion, the chase ensues; the Border Patrol sets all the rules. It is assumed the Border Patrol is a man, who can have his way with the “Mexican Maid” (3). There is a feeling of hopelessness as the game begins, for the Mexican maid “can’t get away” from La Migra (6). However, the roles are reversed as the second section of the poem comes in to play. In this section, the roles are the same, but the coveted role is now that of the Mexican woman. Instead of powerlessness, she embodies strength and knowledge of the land. Although the obvious struggle between the Border Patrol and the Mexican woman occurs in both sections, the power changes places based on the speaker’s perspective.

The obvious separation between the sections of the poem represents a different perspective. First, La Migra is shown. He is given power from his badge (4), sunglasses (4), jeep (7), boots (15), handcuffs (16), and gun (17). These physical items make him a dominating presence that he uses to take advantage of the woman he chases. It’s almost as if the first section suggests a bigger child, a bully, making up unfair rules to the game as he goes. The smaller child gets stuck with the unwanted role, that of the “Mexican maid” (3). However, the same premise is used again in the opposing section of the poem. It’s as though the smaller child has taken charge and stood up for herself. Instead of playing by the rules assigned her, she changes the game.

Instead of a chase game, it is now a game of survival. The woman is no longer helpless and alone, but strong from her connection to the land, the wind, and other people. The only change in the situation is a flat on the tire of the jeep. And yet, that one thing changes everything. The borders still exist strongly in this poem. In fact, they are accentuated by the situation presented. However, Mora shows something interesting by the game the speaker/speakers play. She shows that the borders present very real dangers to both sides, but that the connection to others and to the land creates safety and power. The very thing that makes the Border Patrol strong also makes him weak. The very thing that creates the situation of the woman running from the Border Patrol also provides her safety, the land.

I find it interesting that the actual political border is not brought in to the poem, though it's obvious that it exists. We aren't sure as readers whether the speakers are on the Mexican side of the border or on the US side of the border. They are playing around the border so much, emphasizing where the land ceases to become a border and the people create the border by their actions. The speakers do not even seem to realize the purpose of the Border Patrol. To them, it is only a power position. There is no mention of returning to their Mexican homes or across the border. Instead, the emphasis is on what happens when you try to cross over the border. The element of danger is the exciting part of the game for these children.

That danger relates to different separations. La Migra is man while the Mexican is a woman. However, Mora does not give power to La Migra because of his gender alone. She does not seem to be demeaning men, but showing that when opposite genders interact in this situation, there are more serious consequences. The man can, "take you wherever" and "touch you wherever" (8, 12). His selfishness is emphasized, with the excessive use of "I can" and "I want". These phrases move La Migra to act.

Not only does gender separate these two people, but language (and along with that, the country they come from). From the perspective of the Border Patrol, the woman should not speak Spanish because he will not understand. He does not have to understand any questions she would ask. The language he speaks is violence, "I've got / boots and kick" (14-15). Even as he ironically explains the rules in English to the other player, the Mexican woman, we know she cannot understand *his* language. The rules, unfair as they already are, become impossible because she can only learn them through experience.

On the other hand, the woman knows Spanish. The speaker then sets up Spanish as the language of the desert, the language that leads to water and safety. She, and the others with her, are "singing / and laughing with the wind" (31-32). Their language is associated with joy and connection. As the feminine speaker points out to La Migra, "since you can't speak Spanish, / you do not understand" (34-35). As he cannot understand, he is lost because he has no connection to those who could save him, no connection to the land that will kill him.

Finally, this connection to the land separates La Migra from the Mexican woman. La Migra has all the technology that keeps him separate from the land. Initially the technology gives him power over the woman, but as his technology malfunctions, he loses his ability to dominate and must instead struggle for survival. When in direct contact with the desert, his technology now weighs him down. Because he refused to connect with the land before, he never learned "where to rest, / where to drink. "(28-29). Instead, the woman who had only herself is suddenly safe because she can find her way, she knows the desert (27).

The game the speakers play is not resolved by the end. Both scenarios actually end with a beginning, "get ready" (18, 36). Only the premise of the games has been set up. Which game will the speakers choose to play? Who will "win" the fight? We as readers are not given the answer.

We are given the dialogue of the speakers who know that although La Migra is dangerous and unfair, the desert is more powerful and deadly.

Cultures

In the climax of their poetry, Soto and Mora suggest a sort of idyllic vision of what the world could be like if we would overcome the borders that surround us. Soto uses the variety of a market through a child's eyes to show that differences can be fascinating instead of frightening. Mora literally speaks to women across the world, telling them to symbolically hold hands despite differences. Both bridge the gap between cultures, languages, and ages. Instead, they suggest that we are all people and can unite, if we will look for the similarities and not just the differences.

“Saturday in Chinatown”

Early in Soto's poem “Saturday in Chinatown” he establishes the context of the speaker. He is a child, only able to jog to keep up with his uncle who is taking him to visit Chinatown. Soto overwhelms the reader with so many tastes, smells, and sights that we have to start accepting the varying cultural identity in order to manage to simply see the same things the speaker sees within the poem. By seeing the world through the eyes of the young speaker, we are given as readers a new perspective on the world around us, and hopefully, a way to see past the borders which separate all the situations presented in the poem and elsewhere.

Just as in the Mora poem, the speaker encounters multiple nationalities. It's interesting that although the title may seem to suggest simply those of Chinese descent, Chinatown is actually a gathering spot for many nationalities and cultures. Not only does the speaker come across different nationalities, but he also comes across varying cultures, regardless of country of origin. It's almost impossible to name everything this young boy encounters on his Saturday trip

to the market, but the cataloguing of people, animals, and events creates a sense of overwhelming chaos in the speaker and the reader's mind.

Despite the many things going on around the speaker, he still has the ability to look at himself, his own culture. Just as those at the market have a variety of interesting tools and items: apples, tobacco, chickens, shoeshine, etc., the speaker has his own pockets full of items that hold meaning for him (11-19). He has little knick knacks: marbles, bottle caps, caps, and a foxtail (30-33). Each item is not as it seems, but holds special meaning for the young child, acting as a game of pretend. This game is what makes it so he was "putting the world to use" (33). For this little boy, the world is full of wonder, and there are none to tell him that he cannot pretend, that the people around him are so different that he cannot connect with them.

Although he accompanies his uncle to Chinatown, the speaker only mentions him in the way that they walk together. His uncle's pace is so rapid that the small boy must practically run to keep up with him. In the speed of his little boy legs, he has to take in the sights quickly or he will lose them. His uncle, with his long legs moving quickly as well, ignores the sights, or at least, does not appreciate their wonder as the small boy does.

The contrast between the speaker and his uncle leads him to realize a few things about himself as a child. He realizes that as a child he was "living mostly by the judgments / My tongue made and a few hurts" (42-43). In other words, his own mistakes and experiences taught him how to judge others. It was not based on what other's told him, or what he read in books. Instead, it was what popped in to his head, as evidenced by what popped out of his mouth. His filter of appropriateness and political correctness had yet to be installed for him. So, he sees the world without many of the borders that adults have.

Part of the sorrow of the poem though, is that the speaker is remembering this experience as different than his current situation. As a reflective poem, it connects more with the readers, but also points out that the very fact that he remembers this experience as an example of innocence reveals that he no longer has that same innocence. His legs, longer and his eyes, more focused, lose the wonder of the world and the appreciation for the differences found therein.

It is as if the speaker is telling the audience that as a child he saw more fully and completely the world as it really was, with the analysis of a child. Just as a child plays with a magnifying glass and can concentrate light to create a burn, this little boy concentrates on the world, focusing on it through his toy magnifying glass (47-48). In doing so, he examines things more closely, but also has a tendency to burn the world up with his examination, losing the whole picture.

“Let Us Hold Hands”

From the beginning of Pat Mora’s poem, “Let Us Hold Hands,” we get the feeling that the speaker is a person very like Mora herself. Perhaps Mora is speaking from personal feelings, but regardless, the speaker of the poem has powerful feelings about women connecting with women. The line, “let us now hold hands” is repeated nine times, so many times that it starts to be unnecessary for the speaker to repeat the entire phrase. Instead, all she has to do is say “who” we are to hold hands with. Unlike Mora’s other poems, which play with diversity of language, this poem uses a chant like repetition to emphasize that all women, everywhere are included in the strength of womanhood.

Within the simple phrase also lies an invitation; the reader is invited to join the speaker. In fact, we get the idea from the “us” that there are many readers, across political and language boundaries, joining hands “the ring strong in our joining” (Mora 40). By making the reader an

interactive part of the poem, Mora does in action what she asks through the poem, combines women across the world.

After the speaker's initial call to action, she begins to list different women who broke down borders to help one another: the women of the past begin the catalogue. First, Mora speaks of the women who already lived in the Americas when settlers came: the Iroquois women. These women worked within their domestic roles as mothers and dreamed of the future, "plant[ing] stars with a wooden hoe" (3). We are to gather with these women, even though they are from the past. Quickly Mora moves on to the pilgrim women, helping each other get through the winter. In this beginning stage of the poem, Mora separates the Iroquois women from the Plymouth settlers by a new stanza. She sets up that border of cultures. They may be helping each other within their own culture, but they do not yet cross over to the other. Mora relies on the reader to join them together, through time and across culture as we "hold hands" with both groups.

Near the beginning of the poem, each two line stanza is a different kind of woman: the Mexican women who sew for their babies, the immigrant woman who is separated from her native land forever, and the woman who learns English despite her struggles. But each of these women was from the past, and their stories are written in past tense. Mora includes women from backgrounds other than her traditional Mexican-American one. She widens the circle to include first those who have lived in the United States: Iroquois, settler, Mexican, and slave woman forced here "in chains" (11). As the stanzas grow in length, time races to the present where the reader shares the story with the woman who "croons" (15), "teaches" (16), "whispers" (17), "holds" (18), and "bathes" (19). Notice that these women are not defined by who they are by race or socio-economic status, but by what they do, how they act.

But as the poem progresses, the boundaries between the women grow more indistinct. The form of the poem reflects this change: moving from short two or three line stanzas to longer catalogues of women. In the shorter stanzas the women are separated by their differences, but the longer stanza begins to blend experience and culture. By serving each other, the women are bound together. These acts of service lead to definitions of women who can be part of the circle. They can be from any city or country, from any emotion and from any ethnicity.

Even as the chant becomes faster, less of the “let us now hold hands with the woman” is given. The reader only needs to read the first chant and then we fill in the phrase ourselves, moving faster and faster in the circle around the world with “the woman who holds her sister in Bosnia, Detroit, Somalia, / Jacksonville, Guatemala, Burma, Juárez, and Cincinnati” (21-22). Women are not narrowly defined, as in “Legal Alien”. They are given the freedom to be from wherever they are from and speak whatever language they speak. As the circle grows wider, it spreads faster, connecting toward the moment where the reader and the speaker becomes part of the “ring of women circling / the world” (39-40).

Not only does Mora begin to break down the borders between women, she also breaks through the classic domestic roles women experience. As mentioned earlier, the beginning of the poem focused on domesticity: mothering, sewing, etc. However, with the crossing of cultural and linguistic boundaries, Mora also crosses gender role boundaries. These women heal others, build, and harvest. These women stand in protest against “the glare of eyes and gunbarrels” (23). These women have power over the world; the power to change it.

Perhaps in some of her previous poetry, Mora has given a sort of contrast between Spanish and English, making it act as an example of the challenges of borders. Since she comes from a Mexican-America background, her duet between Spanish and English makes sense. But

in this later piece of her writing, she seems no longer content to work with one border at a time. She moves beyond even her own experience to break down cultural borders between women worldwide. In this culmination of Mora's general theme: crossing over the border to break it down, she demonstrates the process of doing so. By recognizing where she came from and who she came from, she is also able to point out the equally powerful heritage all of her readers share.

Conclusion

Each theme introduced in the analysis of Gary Soto and Pat Mora's work recognizes, and often seeks to bridge, a gap of understanding. From Mora's point of view, women and family is the primary emphasis. Each of her poems, from "Illegal Alien" to "Let Us Hold Hands" tells a narrative that is distinctly feminine and celebrates the power and identity of women. This is something that Mora consciously chose to do within her poetry. As she writes in her collection of essays, *Nepantla*, "I do want to polish, polish my writing tools to preserve images of women..., unsung women whose fierce family love deserves our respect" (77-78). Each situation she presents within her poetry suggests that women deserve respect, whether they are young or old. Even as she branches out to include more gender neutral language, such as in her poem "Legal Alien," she continues the theme of mutual respect. She is not against men, but seeks to empower women through her writing.

One way in which Mora empowers women is through recognizing the accomplishments of women in the domestic sphere. The women she places the most recognition on are not those women who are famous or financially successful, but the women who paved the way for others to succeed. In "Gentle Communion" Mora mentions Mamande, the woman who teaches the speaker even after her death how to appreciate the quiet moments of life. In "Learning English:

Chorus in Many Voices” Mora creates a list of women sacrificing so their children may know more and accomplish more than they could. These women’s efforts to learn English are not in vain, although they feel it is so at times. Her poem “University Avenue” clearly shows that the families who sent their children away will lose them in a way, but do so willingly so that their children may learn and have success.

Mora’s work is not always full of hope though, often the shadows of failure taint the narratives. Within these shadows, Mora emphasizes the borders that separate, showing that even though sacrifices have been made, sometimes it is not enough. Prejudices remain. Some boundaries are important to retain. For example, within “La Migra,” it is the lack of understanding of the Border Patrol that allows the woman to escape into the safety of the desert. While her connection is positive, the separation between the Border Patrol and the woman is all that can keep her safe. Within “Legal Alien” the rigid borders that separate Mexican Americans from either culture makes them feel lonely and frustrated. Mora presents no solution to this unfair border, only points out how ridiculous it is.

Within Gary Soto’s work, many similar borders are addressed, but he uses the humor of the situations, and the distance of youth to address them. His poems are not as explicitly directed toward empowerment. Instead, he shows alternate methods of dealing with issues, as in “Mexicans Begin Jogging” where the wry humor allows the speaker to accept the prejudice around him and move beyond it, toward what he hopes to be a brighter future. Within “Bodily Responses to High Mass” he uses both the frankness of youth and the absurdity of bodily functions to emphasize the lack of union he feels between the speaker’s religion and his thoughts.

When Soto uses humor, he does not simply use jokes and silliness. Instead, the humor is a way to reach beyond what is comfortable. The situations he deals with are serious. Within “Behind Grandma’s House” there is what seems to be a cycle of abuse occurring. This is no laughing matter, but the ironic twists he adds, with the grandmother asking if she can help before she punches her young grandson, creates a double effect. Laughter begins, but then deeper thought follows. We are led to question as we laugh. What is so funny? What is really happening here?

As with his use of humor, the seeming innocence of youth allows Soto to tread on ground that would be too heavy otherwise. In “Oranges” he follows a young boy, trying to please the girl down the street. The story is sweet as the boy in his desperation tries to trade for the candy bar she wants. However, as we consider the long term effects of this kind of situation, we realize that it is the continuation of a stereotype. The little boy *must* provide for the girl down the street and she willingly follows his lead. Their difference in socioeconomic status becomes less sweet and more frustrating.

Although Soto uses a different reference point for his dialogue with the reader, he, like Mora, points out the gaps in connection and experience. What both poets leave unsaid is often as powerful as what they do say. Within “The Elements of San Joaquin” Soto speaks of a worker’s intimate connection with the land and how little it actually yields him. He does not, however, mention the actual owner of the land. Yet, in the fact that the owner is absent from the poem, we see how disassociated the owner is from his/her harvest despite the fact that s/he will certainly receive all the benefits of the crop. In Mora’s poem, “Legal Alien,” she never gives identity to the speaker, but that only adds to the idea that the problem of being hyphenated as a person is not

singular, but common. It also creates the idea that those placed in the gaps are often not even recognized enough to be given a name.

In the future, poets such as Mora and Soto will enrich the literary canon. Their style is that of the present and the future. As more analysis adds to this collection, Mora and Soto can finally take their proper place as American writers of the highest quality, telling the story of the United States in the voices that have too often been unspoken and unwritten. Not only should the analysis of their work continue, but the integration of it into the classroom both in the secondary and the college level. Further research opportunities include more comparison to each other, comparison to other poets within the same language set, and even comparison to other poets who choose to write along themes of multiculturalism.

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Author's Biography

As the youngest of seven children, Amber Bowden always knew that she would have to learn quickly to catch up with her intelligent siblings. Born and raised in North Ogden, Utah, she graduated from Weber High school in 2005 with a passion for learning and a desire to share her knowledge. From her first year at Utah State she knew she wanted to teach, and began her studies in English Education. After spending time in a secondary classroom tutoring bilingual students, Amber realized that she thrived on research opportunities and the academic scene. She changed her major to Literary Studies to speed her road toward graduate school. Amber graduated from Utah State University Summer 2011 and plans to continue at Utah State University for her Masters in English while working as a graduate instructor.