

2020

Latinx characters in young adult literature: Perpetuating and countering stereotypes

Dallas Gomez

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.emich.edu/honors>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Latinx characters in young adult literature: Perpetuating and countering stereotypes

Abstract

The Latinx community is rapidly growing in the United States, and it is important for young readers to find books with characters who are members of this community . However, there are many stereotypes that exist about this group in society, some negative and some positive . To determine how the Latinx community is depicted to readers of young adult (YA) fiction, I selected a set of novels featuring Latinx people as main characters based on their publication date and targeted audience age . By reading and analyzing different books written at different times, not only was it found that there are certain stereotypes that exist within YA literature about the Latinx community, but also that it is possible for characters to challenge these stereotypes . While characters in these novels are sometimes shown as criminals, gang members, or teen moms, they can also be shown as hardworking and family-oriented or can be depicted in complex, multifaceted ways that defy stereotyping . It is important to recognize not only how stereotypes exist in works of literature but how they can be challenged as well . In this way, these books can help readers who identify as Latinx to find characters that are authentic and readers who do not identify as Latinx to learn that there is more to this community than just the common stereotypes we see in much mass media .

Degree Type

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department

English Language and Literature

Second Advisor

Joseph Csicsila

Subject Categories

Children's and Young Adult Literature | English Language and Literature

LATINX CHARACTERS IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE:
PERPETUATING AND COUNTERING STEREOTYPES

By

Dallas Gomez

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Children's Literature

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date 4/17/2020

Supervising Instructor: _____

Date: April 16, 2020

Departmental Honors Advisor:

Date: April 16, 2020

Department Head:

Date: April 16, 2020

Honors Director:

Date: May 12, 2020

Latinx Characters in Young Adult Literature:
Perpetuating and Countering Stereotypes

By

Dallas Gomez

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Children's Literature

April 17, 2020

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction: Exploring Latinx Characters	4
Literature Review	5
Methodology	11
Findings	17
Boys and Men as Delinquents and Criminals	17
Girls and Women as Religious and Innocent Promiscuous and Pregnant Teens	22
Latinx Characters as a Part of the Lower Classes and as Hard Workers	26
Trends	31
Conclusion	35
Works Cited	37

Abstract

The Latinx community is rapidly growing in the United States, and it is important for young readers to find books with characters who are members of this community. However, there are many stereotypes that exist about this group in society, some negative and some positive. To determine how the Latinx community is depicted to readers of young adult (YA) fiction, I selected a set of novels featuring Latinx people as main characters based on their publication date and targeted audience age. By reading and analyzing different books written at different times, not only was it found that there are certain stereotypes that exist within YA literature about the Latinx community, but also that it is possible for characters to challenge these stereotypes. While characters in these novels are sometimes shown as criminals, gang members, or teen moms, they can also be shown as hardworking and family-oriented or can be depicted in complex, multifaceted ways that defy stereotyping. It is important to recognize not only how stereotypes exist in works of literature but how they can be challenged as well. In this way, these books can help readers who identify as Latinx to find characters that are authentic and readers who do not identify as Latinx to learn that there is more to this community than just the common stereotypes we see in much mass media.

Introduction: Exploring Latinx Characters

Growing up I loved to read, and still do. I was always searching for books with characters I could relate to who shared similar experiences or problems with me.

However, as a Latina, I was also always looking for characters who looked like me.

There were a few: I read *Esperanza Rising* at a young age and later on I found the Perfect Chemistry series. However, even though there were similarities between characters in these books and myself, I also noticed that these characters were all kind of similar to each other.

I chose to write this thesis to explore the Latinx characters in the novels for younger readers that I read as a teen and in books that are currently popular. I wanted to see how Latinxs were represented in young adult (YA) Literature and if the characters were well-developed or followed certain stereotypes. I believe it's important that other Latinx young adults find books that showcase their heritage, culture, and identities in positive ways. Of course, before they can do that, they need to be able to find books that include Latinx characters at all, a problem I outline in the following literature review.

Literature Review

The term *Latinx* emerged in the United States around 2014. Before then, the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino/a* were used; *Hispanic* was used to describe people who came from Spanish-speaking countries whereas *Latino/a* was used more generally when talking about people who come from places such as the Caribbean, Mexico, and countries within Central and South America. The term *Latino/a* was also used by the United States government to “label individuals who identify as mestizo or mulato (mixed White, with Black and Native) people of Central or South America” (Salinas). The term *Latinx* came from the LGBTQ+ community in the United States as a way to “promote inclusivity in language” (Padilla). It is a way to describe those of Latin American heritage while also being inclusive of genders.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of 2019, Latinx people make up 18 percent of the population in the United States. They are considered the nation’s “largest minority group” (Gandara), and from 2017 to 2018, the population grew by 1.2 million (PEW Research). With so many people a part of this growing community, it’s surprising to note their lack of representation within literature. It’s difficult to find novels in which Latinx people are a main character and through which readers can get more than just a slight glimpse of authentic Latinx culture.

Additionally, when Latinx characters *are* present in novels for young adults, the stereotypes that exist for this group of people precede them, giving the characters an identity before readers can even understand who they are reading about. The term ‘stereotype’ can mean many different things. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines stereotype as “a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment” (“Stereotype, n”). However, Berlinda Saenz and Adrian Quinones-Rivas make note of a different definition by Charles Judd and Bernadette Park in their article “Pop Goes La Cultura: American Pop Culture’s Perpetuation of Latino Paradigms and Stereotypes.” According to these authors, “a stereotype is an individual’s set of beliefs about the characteristics or attributes of a group” (Saenz and Quinones-Rivas, 2). Saenz and Quinones-Rivas go on to say that “the negative Latino stereotype within the United States is the representative belief of what the majority of America has characterized Latinos to be due to the negative depictions shown through the array of pop culture venues” (2). Stereotypes of Latinxs can be found in multiple mediums like television, film, theater, and literature.

These stereotypes are commonly found in YA literature as well. Rarely is there a depiction in a young adult novel where a Latinx character does not at least start the story by fulfilling a Latinx stereotype. In some YA novels, the characters continue to embody the stereotype without challenging it. They accept the role they are placed into without

question and their character never develops fully enough to be more than just a stereotypical Latinx. Additionally, in some books, a character might try to challenge the roles created by our culture, but then, by the end of the novel, they revert to the stereotypical Latinx that the media portrays elsewhere.

While there are quite a few stereotypes that Latinx characters are portrayed as, there are a few that are the most common for people to see and recognize. According to Ediberto Roman, “Latinas and Latinos are still largely portrayed as one of the following: (1) the hot-blooded sexy character – the macho man or sultry curvy vixen, (2) the gangster or gang member, who is almost always a drug dealer, (3) the snazzy entertainer, or (4) the immigrant, often an illegal immigrant” (Roman 39). Teresa Velasco mentions in her article “The Effects of Latino Stereotypes and Negative Online Comments” that “Latino characters in the media are usually portrayed as lower-class, criminal, inarticulate, and poor” (Velasco 11). Finally, Joseph Erba writes that “in the media, Latinos are usually hot-tempered, knife-carrying delinquents, whereas Latinas are either portrayed as self-sacrificing, with virginal qualities, or as manipulative sexual temptresses” (Erba 85). These stereotypes all portray Latinx characters in a negative way and can all be found in multiple mediums, literature included.

Not all stereotypes are negative. For example, Sylvia Manzo and Tyler Reny did a study in which 90 percent of respondents said they saw Latinxs as family-oriented, 81 percent saw them as hardworking, and 77 percent of respondents saw Latinxs as religious

and/or church-going. Religion is a big part of Latinx culture. In her article “Understanding Latino Families, Implications for Family Education,” Linda Skogrand says that “religion is central to marriage and family life in the Latino culture” (Skogrand, 2). She also explains that a big belief in Latinx culture is that things that happen in someone’s life are usually out of a person’s control. Another aspect of religion that is important in Latinx culture is that “local religious institutions where Latinos are members are usually viewed as trustworthy and influential in the lives of Latino families” (Skogrand 2).

It is important that stereotypes are recognized, whether they are positive or negative, because there are so few mirrors for Latinx readers to begin with. The idea of reading for mirrors is common in the children’s and YA literature world. The way Rudine Sims Bishop describes multicultural literature is by saying books can be windows, sliding glass doors, or mirrors. If a book is a window for the reader it allows them to get different views of different worlds. Books as sliding glass doors let readers step into those different worlds. Lastly, books that function as mirrors let readers see themselves within a work of literature because it reflects experiences back to the audience and they then can see their own lives and stories as being part of the larger human experience.

Bishop mentions that when books work as windows for readers, they not only get a look into imaginary worlds, but into reality as well. Books like these allow the audience to “understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in” (Bishop). Racism is still very much a problem in today’s society. If children in their daily lives are not familiar with or exposed to different backgrounds and cultures, books might be the only way they can learn about people who are unlike themselves. Bishop writes that, if children in majority cultures only ever see themselves and their own culture represented, “they will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world” (Bishop). Conversely, for Latinx people living in the United States, and for other minority cultures, it is rare to see their own lives reflected back in literature, or reflected accurately and authentically. This lack of representation, Bishop writes, makes children “learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are part” (Bishop).

Even though Latinxs are highly underrepresented in YA literature, it is possible to find characters from this community. While depictions of Latinx characters might not always be positive, it’s important to recognize that many in the children’s literature community have been advocating for a long time for Latinx characters to simply be included at all. Cristina Rhodes writes in her article, “Seemingly on the inside ... but really on the outside: Reading for Mirrors in ‘Mexican Whiteboy’”:

Beyond having so few mirrors, Latinxs must also constantly confront a range of inadequate or false mirrors in media and culture. Debbie Reese (debreese, 2017) has referred to these as fun house mirrors, which throw back a distorted portrait of reality. Fun house mirror representation means that rather than seeing their lives rendered as sympathetic if at all, children of Latin American descent are told that they, and those like them, are criminals, lazy, and unwanted. (Rhodes 2)

What is being reflected by the fun house mirror is a distortion, a stereotype. When young Latinxs see themselves in these “fun house mirrors,” it tells them that they are only seen in one specific way, no matter what they might actually accomplish in life or who they might grow to become.

Sometimes, the Latinx characters in YA novels recognize that there are certain stereotypes held against them and they are given the choice of taking one of two paths: They either decide to challenge these stereotypes and show their fictitious world that they are more, or they conform to the stereotype, thinking that no matter what they do or how they try to change, the world will always see them in a certain way. Latinx readers who come across these characters searching for mirrors see these characters having to fight against existing stereotypes. Furthermore, since most of the stereotypes of Latinx characters are negative, the characters and the readers must struggle to see themselves or their community in a positive light.

Methodology

This thesis explores Latinx representation in YA literature published through the 2000s. As mentioned previously, the Latinx population is highly misrepresented and underrepresented in YA literature. When I started this thesis, I wanted to answer the following questions: Why are Latinx characters so rarely represented? When they are represented in YA literature, why are they often perpetuating common stereotypes, and are they ever represented in ways that counter the stereotypes? Does the type of book or author determine how they handle stereotypes or adversity? Understanding why Latinx characters are represented differently in literature not only is essential to the study of literary history, but also to how society values the Latinx population in today's culture.

The books I chose for this project were chosen to answer these questions, but also met several criteria. I selected, read, annotated, and analyzed 10 different books ranging in year of publication from 2000 to 2019. Additionally, the novels varied in the age range of the intended audience, with the youngest being for eight years and up and many of the others being for high school readers, ages 14-17. Popular books such as *Esperanza Rising* and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* were included, but so were some lesser-known books with Latinxs as the main characters. The authors of the novels came from different backgrounds and most of them were either directly a part of the Latinx community or had some strong connections to it. After deciding which books to

use, I went on to organize my notes in a table (see Figure 1), divided into columns so that I could more easily record and compare information.

Figure 1: Ten YA novels featuring Latinx characters

Title, Year published, Publisher and Age range	Author and Bio	Quick summary and Main characters
<p><i>Perfect Chemistry</i></p> <p>2008</p> <p>Walker Books for Young Readers</p> <p>14-17</p>	<p>Simone Elkeles</p> <p>Born and raised in the suburbs of Chicago. Graduated from University of Illinois with a degree in Psychology, later went on to obtain her Masters in Industrial Relations from Loyola University.</p>	<p>Brittany Ellis is partnered with bad boy gang member Alex Fuentes in chemistry class. He makes a bet with his friends to lure Brittany into his life, threatening her seemingly perfectness. But once they start getting to know each other, the bet turns into something more.</p> <p>Alex Paco Luis Carlos Carmen</p>
<p><i>Chain Reaction</i></p> <p>2011</p> <p>Bloomsbury USA</p> <p>14-17</p>	<p>Simone Elkeles</p>	<p>Luis Fuentes was always the “good boy” in his family. He got straight A’s and had plans to be an astronaut when he graduated college. When he finds out interesting facts about his real father, he has to choose between his future and the girl he falls for, and the gang his father was a part of.</p> <p>Luis Nikki Alex Carlos</p>
<p><i>I am not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter</i></p>	<p>Erika Sanchez</p> <p>Daughter of Mexican immigrants, grew up in</p>	<p>When her sister dies, Julia is left to try and fix their shattered family. She is stuck in the shadow of her sister, even after the death and</p>

2019 Ember 14-17	Cicero, Illinois (right outside of Chicago). Graduated from University of Illinois at Chicago and then received MFA in Creative Writing at University of New Mexico.	becomes fixated on the idea that her sister wasn't as perfect as everyone thought she was. Julia Olga Lorena Julia's mom
<i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i> 2012 Simon & Schuster Books for Young Adults 12-17	Benjamin Saenz Born and raised in New Mexico, studied Theology at University of Louvain and was a priest for a few years in El Paso, TX. Earned an M.A. degree in Creative Writing at University of Texas. American poet, novelist and writer of children's books.	Ari and Dante live different lives but when they meet each other at the pool one summer day, their friendship allows them to learn new things about themselves and who they want to be in the future. Dante Ari Dante's parents
<i>Gabi, A Girl in Pieces</i> 2014 Cinco Puntos Press 14-17	Isabel Quintero Born and raised in Southern California, Mexican parents crossed the border and met shortly after. She has a B.A. in English; M.A. in English Composition from California State University.	Mexican-American high school senior Gabi Hernandez tells her story through diary entries. She writes about big issues in her life, such as her best friend Cindy getting pregnant, her father's meth addiction, and her own mother's pregnancy. She also discusses the not-so-major issues like kissing a boy for the first time, writing her first Zine, and discovering her love for writing. Gabi Gabi's mother Cindy Beto - Gabi's brother
<i>Esperanza</i>	Pam Muñoz Ryan	When her father is killed by bandits and a

<p><i>Rising</i></p> <p>2000 Scholastic</p> <p>8+</p>	<p>Born in Bakersfield, CA. She received her bachelor's degree from San Diego State University and then became an early childhood teacher. She then received her master's degree in Post-secondary Education with the intention of teaching Children's Literature to college students. She became interested in writing after finishing her graduate program. Many of her stories reflect her half-Mexican heritage</p>	<p>jealous uncle burns their house down, Esperanza and her mother flee to the United States. Now living a completely different life than the one she's used to, Esperanza struggles with the changes and is almost forced to grow up at a very young age.</p> <p>Esperanza Ramona - Her mother Miguel Her grandmother</p>
<p><i>Mexican White Boy</i></p> <p>2008 Delacorte Press</p> <p>14-17</p>	<p>Matt de la Pena</p> <p>Born in San Diego, California to a Mexican father and white mother, he shows this in his stories with characters who are also mixed. He received his BA from University of the Pacific and his MFA in Creative Writing from San Diego State University.</p>	<p>After his dad goes back to Mexico and his mom gets a new boyfriend, Danny spends the summer with his Mexican cousins. He struggles with identity because at home at his private school he isn't considered "white" enough but when he's with his cousins and family, he doesn't feel "Mexican" enough. He meets Uno, a friend of his cousin Sofia and the two end up starting a sort of business to help Uno raise money to go live with his father and get away from his mom and her abusive boyfriend.</p> <p>Danny Uno Sofia</p>
<p><i>The Tequila Worm</i></p>	<p>Viola Canales</p> <p>Originally from</p>	<p>Sofia, a 14-year-old Mexican-American is offered a scholarship to a private boarding school 350 miles away from her home in</p>

<p>2005 Wendy Lamb Books 12-17</p>	<p>McAllen, TX. She graduated with a degree from Harvard and before she was a writer she was an attorney.</p>	<p>Texas. She struggles with making the decision as it would mean leaving behind her family, finding a way to pay for the room and board, and leaving her comadre/cousin Berta. She ends up going to school and later in life graduates from Harvard before moving back home to help her community and be with her family. Sofia Berta</p>
<p><i>The Poet X</i> 2018 Harper Collins 13-17</p>	<p>Elizabeth Acevedo Born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. Parents are Dominican immigrants. She received her BA in Performing Arts from The George Washington University and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Maryland. Her poetry uses Dominican boleros and portrays her city's toughness.</p>	<p>Xiomara Batista finds her love of poetry to be useful in understanding her mother's relationship with God and her own relationship with the world. She uses writing to get out all of her frustration and anger and to talk about issues in her life such as the unwanted male attention she receives, her gay brother, and her struggles with religion. Xiomara Xavier (Twin) Their mother</p>
<p><i>Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass</i> 2014 Candlewick Press 14-17</p>	<p>Meg Medina She grew up in Queens, NY and her parents were Cuban immigrants. She has written picture books, middle grade books, and YA fiction. Medina, in her free time, works on community projects that support girls, Latino youth, and/or literacy.</p>	<p>Piddy Sanches becomes the target of a bully at her new school for being stuck-up, shaking her stuff when she walks, and not being Latin enough. Piddy tries to shake off the concern by focusing on the father she never met, her overbearing mother, and her work shifts at the hair salon, but Yaqui and her gang don't let up and follow her home one day to attack her. Piddy Yaqui Lorena</p>

As I completed the table, I also went through each novel individually to find examples of the mentioned characters when they were either perpetuating or challenging stereotypes typical of the Latinx community. I collected these examples and quotations in a separate file so that I could analyze patterns. As I recorded my observations, I noted which stereotypes are the most common in these books. I also considered whether there might be books for younger readers that work to counter those stereotypes by creating complex, multifaceted characters.

Findings

After reading the books and organizing them as mentioned above, I collected examples of characters who either challenged stereotypes or perpetuated them. I found that, in each book there was not just one of the stereotypes but a mix of several. I chose to focus my analysis on the following stereotypes: For men I looked at them being portrayed as the macho man, criminal (which usually meant drug dealer and/or gang member), and for younger male characters, as a delinquent. For women I looked for the sultry vixen, the self-sacrificing and innocent virgin, or the stereotype of the very religious girl. Finally, I also looked at Latinxs in general to see if they fulfilled the stereotypes of being members of the lower classes or hardworking.

Boys and Men as Delinquents and Criminals

In the different novels, the main stereotypes I saw were Latinos being portrayed as criminals or gang members. There were many examples of this in Simone Elkeles' book *Perfect Chemistry*. Alex Fuentes is considered a dangerous, drug dealing gangbanger by his classmates:

“Half the time he comes to school high,” Darlene chimes in.

“I sit right next to him, Darlene, and I've never noticed him high at school.”

“Are you kidding, Brit? Alex does drugs before school, and in the guys' bathroom when he ditches study hall. And I'm not just talking about pot. He's into the hard stuff,' Darlene states like it's fact.” (Elkeles, 157)

Alex starts off accepting this stereotypical role, realizing that that's all anyone will ever see him as. They see his skin color, his Latino Blood tattoos, and immediately connect him with danger and gang violence. This male character begins the novel thinking that a gang member might be all he ever is to anyone, even himself:

As a little kid, I thought I could save the world . . . or at least save my family. I'll never be in a gang, I told myself when I was old enough to join one. I'll protect mi familia with my two hands. On

the south side of Fairfield, you're either in a gang or against them.

I had dreams of a future then; deluded dreams that I could stay away from gangs and still protect my family. But those dreams died along with my future the night my father was shot twenty feet from my six-year-old face. (Elkeles 109)

When Alex and his love interest's (Brittany Ellis) lives get intertwined, he starts to realize that maybe his life is meant for more than drug deals and collecting debts for the leader of the Latino Blood. He asked himself, "Why would it matter if I'm locked up for the rest of my life?," and answers, "Because deep down I don't want this life. I want my mother to be proud of me for being something other than a gang member. I want a future to be proud of. And I desperately want Brittany to think I'm one of the good guys" (Elkeles 210). Later, after getting jumped out of the gang and nearly killed, Alex moves on from his life in the Blood. He works to get his GED and eventually moves to Colorado to attend college and to stay close to Brittany as well. Alex might perpetuate the gang member/criminal stereotype at the beginning of the novel, but by the end he has left the Latino Blood and moved on to bigger and better things.

In *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, a more well-known book, we get a smaller glimpse of this stereotype in a secondary male

character. Ari's brother, mentioned early on in the book, is currently in prison at the time the novel takes place. His brother was a part of a gang and was eventually convicted and imprisoned for murder. In this case, compared to *Perfect Chemistry*, the stereotype is not so much challenged as it is offered up as a cautionary tale, a "type" of man not to be. Ari says, while thinking about his father, "He was trying to keep me away from the gangs at my school. He was trying to keep me from becoming like my brother who wound up in prison" (Saenz, 27). Ari's father wanted him to be a good kid, to not end up like his gang member brother and to take a different path. While Ari's older brother fulfills that stereotype of being a dangerous criminal and a gang member, the role is really put there to highlight that Ari has been put under pressure to not be like his brother. Ari's sibling, even from prison, makes it so that Ari is looked at as the good kid who doesn't cause trouble.

Another stereotype common among male characters is the idea of a "macho man" this is a common idea among Latinxs also known as "machismo." According to Celia Falicov in her article "Changing Constructions of Machismo for Latino Men in Therapy: 'The Devil Never Sleeps'":

The word machismo dates back to the ethnoindustry launched during the Golden era of Mexican cinema in the 1950s. These

movies created images and myths that invented and bolstered national identities and were later perpetuated for export. A central figure of these movies is the irascible Mexican bandido with pistols and sombrero ready to shoot for his honor and to get or regain the woman of his dreams. (Falicov, 311)

There are plenty of examples of this in the YA books I examined. We see an example of the machismo stereotype in Matt de la Pena's *Mexican Whiteboy*, especially in the novel's characterization of Uno's stepdad, Ernesto, who says in one scene, "'You don't pay bills! I do! You isn't the breadwinner here! I am! Me!' Ernesto pounds his chest. His breath is forty proof, his flannel shirt untucked, bushy hair falling in his eyes as he shouts. 'And don't you say shit back to me boy! Not shit!'" (de la Pena 138). Ernesto fulfills this stereotype by making sure Uno knows that he is the man of the house and he works the hardest, not Uno.

We see examples of machismo in several of Danny's relatives within *Mexican Whiteboy* as well. Even though the main male character, Danny, is very quiet and keeps to himself, his family is the opposite. When his Uncle Ray realizes that Danny's stitches weren't the fault of any accident, but actually caused by Uno, he's ready for a fight and doesn't care who's hurt by it because, after all, that's his "big brother's kid right [t]here." He boasts, "He ain't 'round

right now, but *I* am. And I swear to God, they gonna have to take my ass to jail. Nobody raises a hand on my big brother's kid" (de la Pena, 62). Danny's uncle portrays machismo very well here, as he is willing to fight for his family no matter the costs. He is, as Falicov mentions, fighting for his family's honor in this scene by intimidating Uno and threatening him for the harm he caused Danny.

Machismo is also visible in smaller ways in other novels I examined as well. It can be found in *Esperanza Rising* in Esperanza's uncle Luis, who is shown as a villain. When her father dies, Luis immediately swoops in to try and take over everything. "Tío Luis sat in Papa's chair as if it were his own. And then Esperanza noticed the belt buckle. Papa's belt buckle on Tío Luis' belt" (Muñoz-Ryan, 30). A short while later in *Esperanza Rising* Luis continues his takeover when he gives her mother an ultimatum. She can either sell him their house or she can marry him, saying to her,

"Even you can see that with your beauty and reputation and my position at the bank, we could be a very powerful couple. Did you know that I, too, have been thinking of entering politics? I am going to campaign for governor. And what woman would not want to be the governor's wife?...You will regret your decision,

Ramona...I can make things difficult for you. Very difficult.”

(Muñoz-Ryan 32)

Though Tío Luis doesn't necessarily use physical violence like Danny's Uncle Ray did, he still threatens her mother and even goes as far as burning their house down so that Esperanza and Ramona must flee to the United States in the middle of the night to escape him. Esperanza's uncle is portrayed as the villain throughout the novel and as the stereotypical macho-man, but he isn't the type of character we want to find in a novel and that readers should be looking for when they are looking for representation of Latinxs.

Girls and Women as Religious and Innocent or Promiscuous and Pregnant Teens

Frequently in YA novels, girls and women are either shown as religious, self-sacrificing and innocent or the direct opposite: promiscuous, vixen-like, and usually a teen mom. It doesn't seem to depend on the age, as these stereotypes can reflect back on any Latina character in the novel. For example, in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* Gabi's best friend Cindy gets pregnant as a senior in high school, right before they start applying for college and making decisions about their future. When this happens, a lot of the minor characters only see Cindy as a pregnant high school girl, especially Gabi's mom:

“You can’t hang out with her [Cindy] anymore. She is a bad influence...I knew that she would come to this. Always so desperate and siempre se ofrecida, no se daba a respetar...What’s she going to do? Quit school? Probably. She can’t do both.”

(Quintero 20)

These thoughts and impressions that Gabi’s mom has about Cindy as well as those that other characters have, such as their classmates and people in their neighborhood really affect Cindy. She later thinks about not even going to college because she’s pregnant and doesn’t think that she can do both. Cindy is shown as a common portrayal of Latinas, the stereotypical pregnant teen.

“Cindy says she’s scared she won’t make it. She’s thinking about just getting a job at the doctor’s office where her mom works as a receptionist. I told her that was a dumb idea, that she wanted to be a doctor, not work for a doctor.” (Quintero 85)

However, Cindy goes on to challenge this stereotype by having her baby boy, applying for college, and successfully graduating high school, with the support of Gabi.

We see more of the self-sacrificing qualities in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika Sanchez through Julia’s sister, Olga who tragically

dies before the start of the novel when she is hit by a semi-truck. Julia mentions, more than once that Olga was considered the perfect Mexican daughter to everyone, not just her parents. Even though Olga is dead, Julia is still casted in her shadow and is always reminded that she is not the ideal Mexican daughter, no matter what she does or doesn't do.

“Amá asks me to clean houses with her today...not exactly the way I want to spend a Saturday, but I have no choice. What am I going to say? “Go clean those mansions by your damn self. I feel like writing and taking a nap!” That would not be acceptable, especially since Olga, my angelic sister, was our mother's reliable helper.” (Sanchez 98)

Like her mother, Olga was also religious. The two attended a prayer group at their church that Julia hated. Though her mother was always trying to get her to go, Julia and her father refused. Julia hated the prayer group because it was “ a bunch of Mexican ladies sitting in a circle, complaining about their problems and talking about how God will help them endure” (Sanchez 69). Julia's mother, however, found the prayer group really helpful and even after Olga's death when she didn't have someone to go with her, she went because she found comfort in that group and in that church.

Another example of a religious character is Xiomara's mother in *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo. Her mother spends most of her time at church and dedicates her entire life to God. She has always been a faithful Catholic and nothing matters more to her than her family and her religion.

“Since she was a little girl Mami wanted to wear a habit, wanted prayer and the closest thing to an automatic heaven admission she could get...And I don't think Mami's ever forgiven Papi for making her cheat on Jesus.” (Acevedo 22)

We see more of the promiscuous vixen in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* in Julia's best friend Lorena. Lorena is always looking for attention and people are always staring at her when she walks by. She dresses scantily and flaunts her body for everyone to see. Lorena is almost always the center of attention with boys and older men and she lives for it. Julia says, “I finally find Lorena in the back porch, surrounded by a circle of cretins who are way too old to be at a high school party...it doesn't surprise me because Lorena loves attention from men, no matter how old or ugly” (Sanchez 115).

Lorena doesn't mind the attention she gets, but only when she can control it. Her mother's boyfriend, Jose Luis, is described by Julia as “a creep” and Lorena doesn't like him because he's sleazy. He is ten years older than Lorena

and looks at her like a prize, even going as far as to assault her when her mother is sleeping, “Lorena told me he saw her going to the bathroom in the middle of the night and pushed her against the wall and kissed her. She said he crammed his tongue inside her mouth all nasty and she could feel his penis against her leg.”

(Sanchez 68). However, when Julia and Lorena are talking about this, Lorena is described as looking depressed instead of angry. Lorena might enjoy men looking at her, but Jose Luis’s assault is unwelcome and frightening to her.

Latinx Characters as a Part of the Lower Classes and as Hard Workers

A final stereotype I focused on in the novels chosen for this thesis was the idea that Latinxs are from lower classes. Though Latinxs were often shown as being from a lower class in many of the novels chosen for this paper, it was also made clear that they are very hardworking people, and that no matter how much they work, it never seems to be enough.

This is shown in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* during many scenes between Gabi and her mother. Gabi feels out of place because she doesn’t have the same expensive things as other kids at school. She always asks her mom for those things, which we see in one of her diary entries where she writes: “I begged my mom for clothes we couldn’t afford, asked for something that didn’t belong to me, that didn’t belong to a world where we get free food from school at Christmas or

where your dad spends his money on street corners or where your mom collects cans to make the rent” (Quintero 32).

We also see later in Quintero’s novel how Gabi’s mother has had to work very hard, and how her life has been difficult since she was young. Gabi’s mom considers her daughter to be lazy and irresponsible, never doing enough work by comparison. Because her mother grew up working in the fields and hasn’t stopped working since she was five, she chastises her daughter for not having the same work ethic:

“I’m labeled as the irresponsible and lazy one. When I asked my mom what I do that makes me lazy and irresponsible, she said, ‘I started working when I was five. En el campo. In the fields!...we started at the crack of dawn...then at seven we would go to mass...then to school and then back to the fields. And you can’t even throw out the trash?’” (Quintero, 55)

Another example of Latinx people being a part of the lower class is found in Viola Canales’ book *The Tequila Worm*. When main character Sofia is offered a scholarship to go way to boarding school, she worries that her family won’t be able to afford the room and board costs that the scholarship doesn’t cover. Sofia ends up getting a job in a cucumber shed, packing cucumbers to raise the money and ease the financial strain it would cause her family. Earlier in the novel, Sofia

also complains a little about how her family lives on the poorer side of town. She, even at a young age, realizes that the place they live in isn't as nice as other people's houses. Sofia struggles with the issue of poverty throughout the novel and wishes that her life was different and that her family had more money to live somewhere else.

“I wished we lived on the other side of town,” I said, looking out the window at the darkness. “Why mi'ja?” “Because they live in nice houses, and they're warm.” “But there's warmth on this side too.” “But...it's really cold at home, and most of the houses around us are falling apart.” (Canales 45)

Latinx characters as members of the lower class was a stereotype that was found among almost all of the novels. It was a big part of *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. Julia's family had always struggled and lived in a poor neighborhood and in a run-down apartment. Even though both of her parents worked tirelessly, her family still struggled. Julia and her mom argue about this when her mother wants to throw her a Quinceañera after Olga dies.

“Where are you going to get the money?”

“Don't worry about it.”

“How can I not worry? That's all you ever talk about.”

“I said, it’s not your problem. Do you understand?” Amá’s voice gets quiet, which is even scarier than when she yells.” (Sanchez 19).

Julia tries to argue right before this scene that her sister would’ve wanted her to use the money for school, but her mother isn’t having it. It’s clear that even though they are kind of struggling financially, Julia’s mother thinks that this party is necessary, whereas Julia sees it as a waste of money and time.

Socio-economic class is treated differently in works of historical fiction like *Esperanza Rising*. An example of this within the novel is the way Esperanza’s life has to change once she leaves Mexico for California. She starts the novel as a wealthy little girl who had servants doing everything for her. When she and her mother make the move to California, their lives change drastically, in both big ways and little ones. Esperanza has to learn how to do things that she’s never had to do before, like sweeping the floor and changing diapers. Esperanza struggles with the changes at first, due to the fact that she came from a life where someone else did all the chores and she did little work.

“Esperanza looked up to see Miguel, holding a broom and a dustpan.

‘How would you know how to sweep a floor? The only thing you ever learned was how to give orders. That is not your fault.’”

(Muñoz-Ryan 118)

With the help of Isabel and Miguel, Esperanza quickly learns new skills and finds her place at the camp. Isabel’s character is an important part of the changes Esperanza has to make. She finds joy in little things that many others wouldn’t care much about, like going to school and the *jamaicas*, or parties that they have in the camp every so often. Isabel is also really smart about how the farm camp works and says more than once how lucky they are to be at this camp instead of at others. When Esperanza arrives in California and meets Isabel for the first time, she tells her that at least at the farm they are going to, they don’t have to live in a tent, like they did in the past. In a later scene, Isabel also mentions their luck when she points out the toilets on their way through the camp.

“We’re lucky,” said Isabel solemnly. “In some camps, we had to go in ditches.” (Muñoz-Ryan 101).

Isabel enjoys hearing Esperanza’s stories about what it was like to be rich when they lived in Aguascalientes, Mexico and about her life before she moved to the United States, but Isabel also doesn’t let the fact that she doesn’t have as much as Esperanza did get in the way of her childhood and the little things that bring her joy. The two girls make a deal that Esperanza will tell Isabel all about how

she used to live, if Isabel will teach her how to do the daily tasks that she must do while the adults are working in the fields and in the sheds. With Isabel's help, Esperanza quickly learns and is able to handle things on her own when the younger girl goes off to school and she is left at the camp by herself to take care of the babies.

When her mother gets sick, Esperanza doesn't even have to think twice about taking her place and helping to pack the produce that comes in. By the end of the novel, Esperanza has learned to accept the changes that have been made in her life, and she has grown and matured into a hard-working member of the lower class community that she has been placed in.

Esperanza's mother has to learn to make some changes in her life as well. She begins working with the other ladies on the farm by packing grapes that the men pick. She changes from a woman who is used to staying at home while her husband takes care of the business, to a woman who works hard to make a better life for herself and her daughter.

Both of the women in the story experience major life changes, from being privileged members of a high class thanks to the successful ranch Esperanza's father had run to being low-class immigrants to the United States. Esperanza struggled with her new life living in the camp but eventually she figured it out.

She knew that it was better to have to work than to be stuck in a miserable life if they would have stayed in Mexico.

Trends

I found stereotypes of Latinxs in each book I read and analyzed for this thesis and I found that the stereotypes were more negative than positive. I also noticed that it was possible for stereotypes to be used as a negative way of looking at characters in one novel, but in a different novel this characteristic was a positive thing and vice versa. Stereotypes are complicated, and sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between a stereotype and a culture's values and characteristics. It depends on the context. The most important factor I look for is whether a character can change and whether they are allowed to have a complex, multi-faceted personality that cannot be boiled down to just one set of characteristics.

While it was common for main characters to, at some point in the book, perpetuate a certain stereotype, it was also common throughout the books for those main characters to challenge the stereotype by the end of the novel. For example, Alex Fuentes in *Perfect Chemistry* was in a gang, but he wanted something more out of life and eventually left the Latino Blood and went to college. Sofia in *The Tequila Worm* lived on the poorer side of town, but she went on to do great things after boarding school.

It was also common in some of the novels for main characters to challenge the stereotypes right off the bat. Xiomara in *The Poet X* was the opposite of a nice, complacent Mass-going religious girl. She says that her “parents probably wanted a girl who would sit in the pews wearing pretty florals and a soft smile. They got combat boots and a mouth silent until it’s sharp as an island machete” (Sanchez 8). She learned to use her fists at an early age when men around her made her feel like “all [she’s] worth is under [her] skirt and not between [her] ears” (Sanchez 14). Gabi in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* is a senior in high school and has never even kissed a boy, “I have never been kissed. Because girls shouldn’t be boy crazy, right? That’s what my mom always says. She says that we don’t want to be fáciles - easy, sluts, hoes or ofrecidas” (Quintero 106).

I also found that it’s usually common in these novels for secondary characters to perpetuate the stereotypes that are set for them, and not try to challenge them at all through the novel. An example of this is the Fuentes mother in the Perfect Chemistry series. She is religious, hardworking, and a part of a lower-class community in Chicago where the story takes place. Throughout the novel, we don’t see much of Mrs. Fuentes, only that she’s constantly working and trying to make life better for her three sons. We also see this in Lorena’s character in *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. Lorena starts the story by having

everyone's eyes on her as she walks into Olga's funeral service, and, throughout the novel, she is the point of attention for boys, men, and truthfully everyone she walks by. Lorena fills the promiscuous vixen stereotype and doesn't try to challenge it at all through the novel. In addition, in *Mexican Whiteboy* Danny's uncles are shown as the "macho men" of the novel, and none of that changes from when his Uncle Ray confronts one of them at the beginning of the novel, to the end when Ray and his buddies run over a guy on a bike in the street.

These differences between secondary and main characters are common through all of the novels that I examined for this paper. I found that many times the main characters worked hard to challenge the stereotypes and by the end of the book had done so successfully. Alex Fuentes is an example of this. Though he started as a gang member and a criminal, by the end of the first installation in the Perfect Chemistry series he had moved on from his gang and decided that he would go to college and make a life for himself and for his girlfriend. Side characters, however, were rarely shown challenging the stereotypes, only perpetuating them. If they were shown one way at the beginning of the novel, that is usually the way they are shown all the way through. Lorena showcases this very well. She never tried to change from the promiscuous, attention seeking girl throughout *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. She had the same

characteristics throughout the novel, and yet she was confident in who she was and how she acted.

Conclusion

The Latinx community is rapidly growing in the United States and yet they are very misrepresented in a variety of mediums. In literature, and as we have seen through this thesis, in YA literature, when Latinxs *are* depicted as characters in a novel, there are times when they are shown as perpetuating some sort of stereotype. For men, this means being shown as a criminal, a gang member, or the macho-man. For women, as promiscuous, religious, a vixen, or as self-sacrificing. In general, Latinxs were shown as being a part of the lower classes, even if they were also shown as hardworking. Significantly, when Latinx characters were the main characters in a novel, they were shown challenging those stereotypes in ways secondary characters do not.

These novels are important for young readers, even with their negative stereotyping. Almost all of these novels showed young readers that they can challenge whatever stereotype they are supposed to follow. We see many characters who try to break the norm and who work to fight against the typical Latinx role that precedes them. All of the novels I read and analyzed for this paper showed readers of YA literature that Latinx characters can both be present in a novel *and* be more than what they are expected to be. There can be characters like Mrs. Fuentes in *Perfect Chemistry* who are hardworking and care so much about their family, but there can also be characters like Xiomara in *The Poet X* who aren't complacent church girls and want something more out of life than to spend every day working and it still not be enough.

When readers find books like these ones with Latinx characters who fight the stereotypes, it lets them know that they don't have to fit into a box. We need to share these books with young readers so that they can have books with characters who look like them, as well as discover that just because certain stereotypes exist, doesn't mean they have to perpetuate them. This is important for young readers who are Latinx, but these books can be influential to readers who are not a part of this community as well. For those readers, books like the ten novels I read and analyzed for this thesis help them to discover that there is so much more to the Latinx community than just the accumulation of stereotypes that exist.

It's important to look at these stereotypes, whether they are negative or positive, because it's important to recognize the ways Latinxs are being represented in literature. It is significant as well that a lot of the main characters in these novels do try to challenge the stereotypes, which shows readers that Latinxs are more than the distorted pictures or fun house mirrors that our culture shows them to be. If young adult Latinx readers find these novels, and others like them, where the main characters look like them, they can learn that it is possible for them to be represented in literature in ways that challenge the stereotypes of Latinx people that are all too common in our culture.

Works Cited

- Acevedo, Elizabeth. *The Poet X*. HarperCollins, 2018.
- Bishop, Rudine Sims. "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors." *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, Vol. 6, no. 3. Summer 1990.
- Canales, Victoria. *The Tequila Worm*. Wendy Lamb Books, 2005.
- Elkeles, Simone. *Chain Reaction*. Bloomsbury USA, 2011.
- Elkeles, Simone. *Perfect Chemistry*. Walker Books for Young Readers, 2008.
- Ellison, Christopher G., et al. "The Contact Hypothesis and Attitudes Toward Latinos in the United States." *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 92, No. 4, 2011, pp. 938–958. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42956557. Accessed 11 Apr. 2020.
- Erba, Joseph. "Media Representations of Latina/os and Latino Students' Stereotype Threat Behavior." *Howard Journal of Communications*, Vol. 29, Iss.1, pp. 83-102.
- Falicov, Celia. "Changing Constructions of Machismo for Latino Men in Therapy: 'the Devil Never Sleeps.'" *Family Process*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2010.
- Flores, Antonio, et al. "U.S. Hispanic population reached new high in 2018, but growth has slowed." Pew Research Center, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/08/u-s-hispanic-population-reached-new-high-in-2018-but-growth-has-slowed/>

Gandara, Patricia. "The Potential and Promise of Latino Students." The

California-Mexico Studies Center, 2017.

<https://www.california-mexicocenter.org/the-potential-and-promise-of-latino-students/>

Manzano, Sylvia and Tyler Reny. "The Negative Effects of Mass Media Stereotypes of

Latinos and Immigrants." June 2016 DOI: 10.13109/9783666300882.195.

Medina, Meg. *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*. Candlewick Press, 2014.

Muñoz Ryan, Pam. *Esperanza Rising*. Scholastic, 2000.

Padilla, Yesenia. "What does 'Latinx' mean?" *Complex*, 2016.

<https://www.complex.com/life/2016/04/latinx/>

de la Pena, Matt. *Mexican Whiteboy*. Pelacorte Press, 2008

Quinones Rivas, Adrian E. and Saenz, Berlinda. "Pop Goes La Cultura: American Pop

Culture's Perpetuation of Latino Paradigms and Stereotypes." *Ursidae: The*

Undergraduate Research Journal at the University of Northern Colorado: Vol. 6,

No. 3 , Article 2, 2017.

Quintero, Isabel. *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*. Cinco Puntos Press, 2014.

- Rhodes, Cristina. "'Seemingly on the inside ... but really on the outside': Reading for Mirrors in Mexican Whiteboy," *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*: Vol. 1, Iss. 1, 2019. Available at: <https://sophia.stkate.edu/rdyl/vol1/iss1/6>.
- Roman, Ediberto. "Who exactly is living la vida loca?: The Legal and Political Consequences of Latino-Latina Ethnic and Racial Stereotypes in Film and Other Media." *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice*, Vol. 4, 2000.
- Saenz, Benjamin. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*. Simon and Schuster Books for Young Adults, 2012.
- Salinas, Cristobal & Lozano, Adele "Mapping and recontextualizing the evolution of the term Latinx: An environmental scanning in higher education." *Journal of Latinos and Education*, Vol. 18, Iss. 4, 2019, pp. 302-315.
- Sanchez, Erika. *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. Ember, 2019.
- Skogrand, Linda. "Understanding Latino Families, Implications for Family Education." Family Resources, Utah State University, 2005.
- "Stereotype." *Merriam-Webster*, 2019.
- <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stereotype>
- Velasco, Teresa. *The Effects of Latino Stereotypes and Negative Online Comments*, The University of Texas at San Antonio, Ann Arbor, 2016. *ProQuest*,

[http://ezproxy.emich.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1793669118?accountid=10650.](http://ezproxy.emich.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1793669118?accountid=10650)