

# EARTHQUAKES, FISSURES, AND BRIDGES OF LOVE: TROPES OF THE TRANSCULTURAL, TRANSLINGUAL EXPERIENCE IN MARIE ARANA'S *AMERICAN CHICA*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay studies Arana's memoir of girlhood in Peru and the U.S.A. as part of a subgenre of autobiography, the memoir of language and culture. Beyond its linguistic and cultural construction of identity, this memoir is a relational life story, representing Arana vis-a-vis her parents. The essay examines her portrayal of the clash between Peruvian and U.S. gender roles. Moreover, the essay discusses how Arana uses tropes to depict her life: tropes of hybridity, tropes of fissures and earthquakes to suggest her parents' turbulent marriage and her own upheavals, gendered tropes to represent her maturing femininity, and tropes of her identity as a bridge between herself and her parents, between North and South America. Finally, the essay discusses Arana's direct tale of language-learning, especially her wordplay and manipulations of her transcultural/translingual condition.

KEY WORDS: Transculturalism, translingualism, Memoir, Peru, U.S.A., gender, trope, hybridity.

## RESUMEN

Este ensayo estudia las memorias de infancia de Arana en Perú y los Estados Unidos como ejemplo de un subgénero de la autobiografía, las memorias de lenguaje y cultura. Más allá de la construcción lingüística y cultural de su identidad, estas memorias son una historia de vida relacional, que representa a Arana junto a sus padres. El ensayo examina su retrato del choque entre los roles de género peruanos y norteamericanos. Además, el ensayo analiza cómo Arana usa los tropos para describir su vida: tropos de hibridez, tropos de fisuras y terremotos para sugerir el matrimonio turbulento de sus padres y sus propios altibajos, tropos genéricos para representar la madurez de su femineidad, y tropos de su identidad como un puente entre ella misma y sus padres, entre América del norte y América del sur. Finalmente, el ensayo explora la narrativa del aprendizaje del lenguaje de Arana, especialmente sus juegos de palabras y manipulación de su condición transcultural/translingüística.

PALABRAS CLAVE: transculturalismo, translingüismo, memorias, Perú, Estados Unidos, género, tropo, hibridez.

As people have the kinds of transcultural experiences that lead to romance, marriage, and family, the offspring of these experiences have begun to reflect in thoughtful memoirs upon the complexities of dwelling in the interstices of cultures, on the challenges and excitement of moving between two languages. Steven G. Kellman posits that because they inhabit a space between languages, their “translingual imaginations” are kindled. Alice Kaplan has called what they write the memoir of language or language learning, and Stanislaw Baranzak names it the semiotic memoir (Fjellestad 143-44). Because culture and language are so interdependent, I call it the memoir of language and culture. The memoirs of language and culture written in English by authors for whom English is a second language pay eloquent tribute to their second idiom and give readers insightful narratives of conflict, change, and human interactions.

Memoirs of language and culture published in the United States of America represent many kinds of cultural intersections. Some, for example, are written by immigrants from Poland (*Lost in Translation*, by Eva Hoffman), Chile (*Heading South, Looking North*, by Ariel Dorfman), and Malaysia (*Among the White Moon Faces*, by Shirley Geok-Lin Lim); others are by authors that have one American parent and a second parent from abroad, such as Iran (*To See and See Again*, by Tara Bahrampour); still others are by Americans venturing abroad to places such as France (*French Lessons*, by Alice Kaplan) and Vietnam (*The House on Dream Street*, by Dana Sachs). This essay focuses on Marie Arana’s *American Chica*, which explores the experiences of a woman raised in Peru, of a Peruvian father and American mother, who shuttled back and forth between the U.S. and Peru during her girlhood and who also regularly crossed the border between Spanish and English.

Arana has experienced and written about the complexity and tumultuousness of having the blood of two cultures in her veins. I consider how Arana’s narrative represents her learning of two languages and two cultures through the following means: the structuring of her narrative as a relational life story which portrays her parents and their marriage in relation to her evolving identity; her use of tropes—witty tropes of the translingual imagination—that express the tensions of being double and symbolize her efforts to bridge the tense gulf between Peruvian and U.S. beliefs and customs; and her direct descriptions of recollected experiences and scenes of language learning at home and at school. In addition, these tropes and scenarios of language learning depict the gendered aspects of Arana’s evolving identity and track her passage into a translingual, transcultural womanhood.

Although Arana provides a good deal of explanation of Peruvian history, cultural practices and beliefs, some basic historical and ethnographic information may enrich our reading of the text. First, Peru has a long history of intercultural mixing between its indigenous peoples and those of the colonial society founded by the Spanish conquistador Francisco Pizarro. Frequent marriages between indigenous people and Europeans mean the majority of Peruvians are mestizos. Reflecting this cultural mixing, there are two official languages, Spanish and Quechua (Dawson, Dawson, and Cruz 402). Another major indigenous group speaks Aymara. Moreover, at least 53 other ethnolinguistic groups live in the tropical jungle Amazon region. Linguistically and ethnically, then, Peru is a complex nation for whose



natives bilingualism and transculturalism are the norm. (<[www.peru-travel-adventures.com/people-culture.html](http://www.peru-travel-adventures.com/people-culture.html)>).

Arana clearly wishes to distinguish her family from the average mestizo citizenry. Through her tropes and also in direct statements she declares, “*somos puros Hispanos* —we were Spaniards to the core” (220). Note her impulse to place Spanish words in the middle of that statement to underscore the fact of her undiluted European ancestry. She further decodes the Peruvian hierarchical socioeconomic system for North American readers: “the more Spanish blood in your veins, the more power you had... It was the coin of the realm” (220). As the sentence’s monetary trope suggests, the Arana family were ethnically wealthy. Despite this elitist pride of our author, nevertheless, she has still been raised in a community in which many ethnic groups and several languages mingle on a daily basis, and I think this sharpens her powers of observation about the workings of bilingualism and transculturalism. Moreover, even if her Peruvian blood is purely of Spain, this blood is still mixed with her mother’s North American blood —which contains diverse samplings of many nations’ immigrant blood. She is simply a new kind of mestizo, a North/South American version.

An important trope tied to a childhood scene in *American Chica* depicts well Arana’s many-blooded identity. She re-creates the scene, a conversation involving herself, her brother George, and their neighbor, Dr. Birdseye, the naturalist, botanist and biochemist. Dr. Birdseye tells Marie and George that scientifically speaking, they are hybrids, and thus they are “better specimens... It’s the cross-fertilization that improves things ...That’s what makes us more advanced” (155). The doctor describes positively their complexly mixed blood: “Half Spanish, half Indian. A little Chinese. A little Arab. Americans are half this, half that, too” (155). The concept of biculturalness becomes Arana’s multicultural condition. Dr. Birdseye’s explanation temporarily mollifies her.

While Dr. Birdseye’s interpretation of Marie’s hybridity is that mixing of blood strengthens the genetic material, Arana’s narrative elsewhere suggests that her personal experience of transculturalism is tumultuous and at times quite negative. She describes the atmosphere in which she grew up as fraught with tensions due to her parents’ troubled transcultural marriage. By textually representing her own identity as shaped by her parents and by their conflicted yet affectionate marriage, Arana creates a “relational life story,” a term coined by Paul John Eakin. Eakin adds, “[in] one important variety of relational autobiography[,]... the family memoir... the lives of other family members are rendered as either equal in importance to or more important than the life of the reporting self” (85). In *American Chica*, Arana’s parents are central to the memoirist’s narrative, beginning with the prologue, where readers learn of the emotional and cultural fissures and flaws with which their turbulent marriage is afflicted.

Earthquakes and fissures, to which Peru herself is often subject, become dominant tropes of the story of Marie’s own life. Earthquakes and related geological phenomena —tectonic plates, force fields, fault lines, aftershocks— suggest literally and figuratively the many upheavals in the author’s life that contribute to her identity-formation; these include the family’s moves within Peru (from Lima to

Cartavio to Paramonga, due to her father's work and also to her mother's conflict with her mother-in-law), as well as their visits back and forth between Peru and the United States. They visit their maternal grandparents and cousins in Wyoming and return when Grandma Lo Clapp falls ill. Marie's mother nurses her through her final illness. Eventually they leave Peru and settle in Summit, New Jersey although Marie's father shuttles between Summit and Lima.

In addition to representing these upheavals, earthquakes and fissures also become associated with the author's construction and representation of her fragmented identity, which she begins to become aware of around age four. The book's opening passage describes a memory, retrieved from a moment when the child "Marisi" did *not* feel fragmented, when her parents' marriage flourished and they were all happy, a moment in which the author recalls feeling "seamless, and faultless, and whole" (3). Here she plays upon the word "faultless," referring at once to geological faults or fissures and to a sense of being at fault or to blame. This word-play signals readers to notice how Arana internalizes the faults or tensions of her parents' marital problems, making her feel blameworthy or somehow corrupted.

The mature narrator, who is more oriented in real space and time than her younger incarnation, more able "to register the ground beneath...[her] feet" (2), looks back with a cognizance that the child had lacked and understands the effects of this fissured marriage on her. Now she is aware of the shaky foundation—the image of sand is used—of the bridge her parents tried to build between North and South American values, gender roles, cultural practices and beliefs. This bridge image, also introduced in the prologue, becomes the other key trope that dominates Arana's narrative. The bridge is Arana's figurative dwelling-place in life, and she confesses to being trapped there. The bridge's linking of North and South, its effort to span the chasm between Peru and the U.S., represents her life's delicate cultural and psychological negotiations. The bridge is Marie.

Arana closes the prologue with another use of the bridge trope as she describes the cultural situation of a five-year-old girl living in New Jersey, whose father is a North American anthropologist and whose mother is a Yanomama woman (from a tribe of Amazon nomads). Arana identifies with this child because they both perform a similar filial role: "How delicate a bridge she was between the northern man and southern woman. What I thought of was me" (4). They both know the difficulty of this role.

Bridges are present in important passages throughout Arana's narrative, as I will demonstrate shortly, but I want to note here that these bridge tropes hold up and join both *ends* of the narrative. Arana very deliberately returns to the bridge in her epilogue to sum up its contribution to her textual self-construction. Her hybridity is evident in her symbolic positioning on bridges, where she feels like "God's being in transit... [b]ecause I'm neither gringa nor Latina. Because I'm not any one thing... I live on bridges; I've earned my place on them, stand comfortably when I'm on one, content with betwixt and between" (301). She declares here that she will never choose between Peru and the U.S. and that she is neither her mother nor her father, but herself in relation to both parents. She performs her identity transculturally in a small interstice between her parents' two cultures. An oxymoronic pair of terms



aply describes her as both “north-south collision” and “New World fusion” (305). Although the two terms still reflect the tension within Arana, I think she is mostly the latter, spanning the hemispheres and uniting them. She is a bridge—the final word that closes her book.

Arana’s narrative links the origin of her “bridgeness” to her parents. Her father is an engineer trained at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. There his graduate project required the development of an invention, so he devised an instrument that would measure the load on a *suspension bridge* and determine the range of weight it could bear. Cambridge, Massachusetts is also where Jorge Arana met the author’s mother, Marie Campbell, and the author playfully uses the bridge trope to describe the beginnings of their relationship: “The filament is flung. A fragile span arches down on the other side” (30). The fragility of this span foreshadows the instability of their union although the surface of the bridge itself, which Marie takes for her own identity, is certainly enough to bear the weight of her existence. The “wavering in the bridgework” of her parents’ marriage intensifies as a war develops between the author’s mother and paternal grandmother, the reigning family matriarch (64).

Theirs is a war of words that begins, appropriately for a memoir of language, with a letter that Arana reprints for readers. The letter declares mother Marie’s rights and grievances. Daughter Marie—in Peruvian voice—states that her mother composed it “in ridiculous Spanish” and gave it to her mother-in-law. Readers get the author’s wry translation of it into a kind of pidgen English that conveys how ridiculous the Spanish must have sounded (62-3).

Arana’s reportage of the skirmishes between these two women suggests that the clashes come out of a constellation of differing cultural values and assumptions about gender and family roles. The author’s analysis is insightful regarding how a Latina mother raises her son to worship women—to admire the matriarchal strength of the family—and teaches him to tie himself to the family, with the understanding that he will be allowed his “petty narcissisms”—his affairs, his drinking, and other self-indulgences (66). Because of his Latino upbringing, Jorge is unable to side with his wife against his mother in these conflicts. And Marie is unable to do what most Latinas learn to do for their men, massage their egos, “the way a Latina learns to baby a man” (163). About this gender dynamic Anglos like Marie Campbell are uncomprehending. She also refuses to conform to the traditional role of Peruvian wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, which requires the surrender of autonomy and power to the mother-in-law. Hence, *un pleito*, a lifelong grudge, a Peruvian standoff, develops between them, which injures the marriage; the bridge “totter[s]” until a “temporary ceasefire” is arranged when Jorge takes a job in Cartavio and the family stops living with the Arana in-laws (77).

That the memoirist chooses what she claims is an untranslatable word—*pleito*—to describe the trouble between these two women testifies to her Peruvian understanding of the situation and its intensity. The choice also underscores her mother’s lack of comprehension of and resistance to Peruvian gender roles—in the author’s view. She teaches norteamericano readers Peruvian views of gender, acting as a bridge between North and South America. Moreover, by using the word *pleito*, she subtly

pays tribute to the richness of Spanish's connotations even while she disapproves of some Peruvian cultural practices and assumptions embedded in the language.

Although she calls the term *pleito* untranslatable, she does try to translate it for gringo readers, playing with its meanings through a string of images that instructively contrast familiar to unfamiliar emotional situations: "It's more than a simple resentment, less than an all-out war. It's coal fire beneath a prairie, hell under the vista. You come, you go, you chat in the *sala*... but a fire is reaming your gut" (63). The burning personal and cultural anger between the two women suggested by these metaphors is also linked to the bridge trope: the anger from the *pleito* causes a cable of the marital bridgework between Jorge and Marie to tighten, implying a lessening of its equipoise (64).

The family's moves from Lima to Cartavio to Paramonga are, indeed, accompanied by increasing instability and an atmosphere of irreconcilability (163). Now Arana complicates the earthquake trope by describing her parents' growing conflict through an earth image from Inca folklore, one that describes the earth's possession of energy bubbles or force fields. Each of these force fields is inhabited by its own supernatural being, or *apu*. Each *apu* has its own domain. As the legend goes, when two energy bubbles or force fields intersect, the earth has a violent reaction. She concludes that although her parents had been drawn together by a strong magnetism, "[t]he crossing of my parents' force fields was now entering a volatile stage" (163). The volatility of their interactions bodes ill for the future.

Much later, when the family is back in Lima, readers can see the long-term effects of *el pleito* on this marriage. Arana now turns to the arts for a trope that compares the intensification of her parents' marital tensions to "when opera swings into a devil's dance" (227). Imagery of high drama's showy exits and humble re-entries conveys their passionate anger, the anger born of cultural and personal misunderstanding as well as the desire for separation, which alternates with longing for [re]union. Once when the author's mother storms out in her nightgown in the middle of the night, Arana complicates the drama trope by mixing it with astrophysics, comparing her mother to a fiery missile exiting earth, "with the tail of her nightgown behind her. Missile afterburn" (229). Re-entry is downplayed, predictable: "Exit stage right, in a rage. Enter stage left, forgetful. Do it again, night after night, though your audience be numb, your critics seething" (230). Often these interactions between her parents become like a Wagnerian opera (245). The audience in real life are the cringing children. Readers are the retrospective audience, invited to see the toll this tempestuous marriage takes on the children. Finally the author's mother, after fourteen years in her husband's country, moves back home.

With the mother and children settled in Summit, New Jersey, Jorge works for a time in New York City. However, he returns to Lima for long periods because it is the center of his social life. These periods of separation are punctuated by regular visits to New Jersey: he cannot live with his American wife and he cannot live without her. Because their mother tongues are so closely linked to their native cultures and to their differences, Arana offers a linguistic reference that epitomizes their sparring and also their hard-won moments of "fusion" (298); the reference is embedded in this description of Papi's visits: "His first week home was the easiest ...



by the second month they were bickering about... Peruvian versus American mores, about how each of them misused the other language's preterite past. By the third month, Papi's bags were packed" (297-98).

It is fitting that Arana selects the preterite past as the linguistic trope for their misconstruing of one another since each spouse views their shared past differently, and they are divided by their different upbringings in the more distant past. Moreover, while the Spanish language has a preterite past tense, English does not; English designates some of its categories of past-tense verbs by different names. Although differences between the two abound, the narrator of the story of this half-century marriage finally concludes that love sustains their union even when hemispheres intermittently divide the husband and wife: "The two halves of my parents stayed together" (299) —because they were quite simply "ardently, irrefutably in love" (298).

Because this is a relational life story, the tumultuous tropes of her parents' marriage contribute almost as much to Arana's self-fashioning as do the more positive metaphors of the bridge and eugenic hybrid. All suggest the challenges of spanning the chasm between cultures, even when great love initiates the union. They also reveal the bicultural person's yearning to overcome a sense of fragmentation.

These tropes are juxtaposed, moreover, to other decidedly negative self-characterizations of the memoirist's doubleness. In the epilogue, despite her pride in being purely Spanish on the Arana side, the author refers to herself as a mongrel, disparaging term for a mixed-breed dog, one lacking in the purity and beauty of a pedigree. She also describes in herself "the palsy of a double soul" (292); being double makes her shake, lessens her self-control, makes her ill. The shakiness may be connected to her self-described attribute of having two brains: "If I could feel both gringa and Peruvian, it was because I juggled two brains in my head" (74). Two brains, literally, might have been less confusing than the one she has, which must switch back and forth between cultural cues and between linguistic codes. This movement between cultures and languages inflicts a "two-way vertigo" (194). She feels dizzy, on the edge of a precipice, wavering between two ways of orienting herself in space and culture. Her doubleness makes her feel like a freak; a trope describes Arana's sense of abnormality and also suggests the precariousness of her position: "I was as unwieldy as Siamese twins on a high wire: too awkward for equipoise, too curious about the other side" (194). While Arana seeks a stable, unified self, she and her brother continue to feel an awkward doubleness: "We were the cobbled ones" (265). Note the negativeness of "cobbled": put together haphazardly, clumsily, or piecemeal, lacking in cohesiveness.

Arana's direct story of language learning, beyond the tropes already discussed, underscores the sense of perpetual motion, imbalance, and ambivalence in her identity and performance of self. This direct tale of language acquisition includes some witty game-playing with the memoirist's two languages. Language acquisition and linguistic play are often represented in scenes from her school life, both in her home schooling and later when she attends schools in Peru and New Jersey. Linguistically the "cobbling" of Marie (and her brother George) begins in their language learning at home. Arana seems steeped in both Spanish and English





from her earliest linguistic development in Peru. The narrative focuses on how her mother exposes Marie to the linguistic “spaces” captured in American English through the poetry of Whitman and the songs of Irving Berlin, Stephen Foster, and George M. Cohan. In imagination they tour the topographies of the United States, its valleys, plains, giant oaks, and wildflowers, and especially the “range-roving West” (14). This Yankee culture unfolds within her mother’s bedroom in Lima.

The author’s mother, through the English language’s songs and the poetic imagery that portrays the sweep of the North American landscape, roots her daughter in North America. She is acutely aware of the power of language to orient and anchor a person within a culture and within her own identity because when she moves with her new husband into her in-laws’ house in Lima, her poor Spanish makes her feel “marooned, untongued, expatriated, alone” (59). She does not want her children to feel this way when they travel to the States. She also plants Marisi on North American soil by teaching her American-English slang: for example, she describes her own face, with its uneven mouth, as a “slop-pail mug” (15).

Outside of her Yankee mother’s bedroom, the narrative reports, the child Marisi was immersed in Spanish. Arana uses a topographical image to express her cultural orientation: from girlhood she knew for sure that she was “deeply Peruvian... [and] was rooted to the Andean dust” (7). The magisterial Andes Mountains, which dominate the landscape of the South American continent, aptly suggest the power of Peru over Arana; that the Mountains’ dust spreads across the landscape represents well the pervasiveness of Peru’s influence on Arana. The adult Arana recalls, in addition, that the “narrow Peruvianness” of her English skills as a girl made decoding the already-mentioned “slop-pail mug” expression difficult: she wonders “what any one of those inexplicable American words — *slop*, *pail*, or *mug*— could possibly have to do with that lovely face” (15). This important linguistic memory measures how Hispanic she was as a girl and how limited was her bilingualism, even with the schooling by her gringa mother.

The narrative then reports the author’s brief negative experience at a new public school in Cartavio, Escuela Primaria. Consequently, the author and her brother return to the sphere of their mother’s influence with home schooling. Their home schooling is officially grounded in North American culture through curriculum and materials sent from the Calvert School in Baltimore. Marie and her brother would complete their exercises, and her mother would mail them to Baltimore, to be evaluated by teachers there. Although the memoirist recalls with high praise her mother’s fierce commitment to “our cognitive welfare” (113), she criticizes this Baltimore education in Lima as having an isolating and deracinating effect upon her (114). It trained her to assume a foreign perspective within her native land. She expresses its alienating effect linguistically: “Mine would be an American indoctrination in a language I hardly used outside” (114).

The author’s North American indoctrination continues during her attendance at the Roosevelt School in Lima, which her mother sees as “‘A real school! With English books and American teachers!’” (214). Each grade has the main English “stream” and another stream for Spanish-speakers. Incoming students are tested for placement in the proper stream. This is when the author really begins to play

language games. Her reply to the questions of the principal about which language she is better at and which language she uses at home is that she speaks and reads both English and Spanish well. This does not help him to determine her placement. He insists that there should be a difference in her linguistic skill levels in the two languages (216). When he asks her to read aloud from a book in English about Native Americans, *Indians of the Great Plains* (apt reference to a major theme of the memoir: native identity) she casts her lot with *los nativos* of Peru, her Spanish-speaking classmates; because she has just made friends with another student, Margarita Martinez, a poor English-speaker, she pretends to be unable to read the English text. A folksy North American trope depicts her “faked” linguistic performance, borrowed from her Wyoming Grandpa Doc: she “play[s] possum” (217).

Arana manipulated her Peruvian Americanness, the adult narrator argues, in order to acquire power within the school system: “With Peruvian children at Roosevelt, I bragged I was really a gringa. With gringos, I crossed my eyes and retreated into Spanish” (219). While her mother’s halting Spanish disempowers and infantilizes her (she has “the verbal capacity of a backward child in a society that prizes, above everything, the turn of a graceful phrase,” 58), putting her on the margins of the family and the social life of Peru, the author uses the leverage of her own bilingualism for all it is worth. She recognizes as an adult this manipulation of her linguistic doubleness in girlhood: “I was playing two worlds off the middle. At the Roosevelt School [in Peru], I was *muy Peruana*, careful not to speak English well, hooting at the lumbering Anglos. But once we hit the street, I was a yee-hawin’ rodeo, playing Anglo for all I could get” (237). Indoors she is very Peruvian; outdoors she is the epitome of the gringa cowgirl.

Not surprisingly, this manipulation of language and culture has a pointedly gendered dimension. Arana’s performance of the outdoorsy cowgirl reflects her Wyoming roots, which she switches off at times for sedate performance of domesticated Peruvian femininity, a “virginal image [of] the way good Latinas ought to behave” (34). She was schooled in traditional Peruvian femininity by her *abuelita* (grandmother), who taught her the importance of fine shoes, skillful conversation, perfume (185). Yet she was allowed to play outside when the Peruvian girls whose parents were both from Peru “were [always] in their houses, in starched dresses, teetering on their mothers’ high heels, kissing their dolls” (144). Peru’s traditional views of women, moreover, required their sexual purity until marriage; they “lived monitored girlhoods... [and in adolescence] their virtues would be guarded like family jewels” (144). Marie, in contrast, fled the “cloister” and roamed around with her brother and his friends; she experienced a sense of independence and equality with the young males in her life that is atypical of Peruvian girls (144). Readers can understand her confusion about her female identity.

In the retrospective sections of her narrative about the construction of her femininity, Arana writes that she continually had to make choices between being a gringa and being a Latina as she matured, at every crossroads in her life: a North American in high school, she switches to a Latina identity in college, and is Latina in her first marriage; then she transforms herself into a gringa in her second union, “throwing out all the rule books and following my heart” (145). She implies here



that emotionally she is now more *gringa*: more liberated and loving, less constrained by rules of propriety—and she suggests this leaning in a narrative that is in American English. But this stabilizing choice comes much later in adulthood.

Arana's retrospective narrative depicts her in girlhood as frequently switching cultural codes for femininity, trying on her two cultures' various gender roles, and even lying about who she is, probably because the role-switching makes lying seem so natural. When she confesses to readers a lie she told a classmate about her piano-playing skills, she reflects, in linguistic terms, on the reason for her considerable skill as a liar: "Lies. I was so good at them... I loved them so. Why not? If I could slip from English to Spanish, from boys to ballet, from pledging American allegiance to swearing on life I was a Peruvian... why not from role to role, truth to truth?" (252). Arana recognizes that from childhood she intuited and acted out the constructedness of cultural and gendered identity. Her reference here to switching from English to Spanish suggests a notion of linguistic "acting" or faking of communication, which she extends to other notions of inauthentic identity or false self-construction.

When the narrative shifts geographically to the States as the author enters seventh grade, Arana highlights her linguistic development in English and also the Americanization of her blossoming womanhood. Marisi "molts" into Marie, an American (281). This identity is usually fine with her, but when her father calls her a *gringa* and claims she is not Peruvian anymore, Marie feels diminished, "like a leaf in a winter wind" (282). Other geographical tropes suggest her sense of loss and disorientation in the U.S. as they illuminate the differences between Wyoming and Peruvian landscapes. When the family visits their maternal grandparents in Wyoming, for example, they "might as well have lurched onto the moon" (176). She also marvels at the big sky there, the sweep of the vast horizon (190). And their move from Lima to the alien turf of New Jersey is "like wandering into Belgrade from Bombay" (261).

Her whole family's adjustment to life in New Jersey is measured linguistically in the narrative. While not as uncomprehending of American slang as he had been when a graduate student in Boston (27), Papi feels increasingly isolated because he has "trouble understanding the fast-talking, slang-slinging suburbanites" (264). His daughter becomes more like a parent to him as he looks to her for help in translation (264). Arana herself reports having to adjust from the Western drawl of her cousins to the puzzling accents of Easterners' English (265). The children get tutelage in pronunciation, vocabulary, and usage from two sisters, Suzi and Sara Hess, who are their new neighbors. They aim to teach Arana how to fit in well in the American school (266-67). Suzi's assessment of Marie's linguistic limitations is blunt, and Arana reports her words wittily, imitating Suzi's Eastern accent: "'Gee, Marie, you gotta stop talking weird. You say things all wrong. And I don't know why. I hear your mother talking just like everybody else'" (266). The American-born Suzi has an ear that recognizes Marie's mother is a *gringa* born and bred, while she hears Marie's accent betraying her foreign upbringing, her cobbled identity.

Living in a town without other Latinos, the author recalls her isolation. She dramatizes a conversation in which a classmate named Kelly makes fun of how she



pronounces the words “butcher” and “books,” hurls the epithet *spic* at her, denounces her for ruining the neighborhood, and spits at her. (269). Many of the typical prejudiced labels for immigrants to the United States are apparent in this dialogue. Arana, a survivor, does get even with Kelly, again through her cultural code-switching: she acts the “pretender par excellence,” performing a primitive Peruvian self on Halloween in a wild-Amazon costume and hurling a spitball back at Kelly (270). This passage underscores the difficulties of being transcultural, especially due to the hostility of natives and their power to inflict wounds on immigrants. Immigrants’ code-switching has to improve in order for them to survive.

Second-language-acquisition may have an expansive, liberating effect on a person’s expressiveness. However, not all of its consequences are positive. As Arana’s tale of bilingualism nears its conclusion, she returns to the theme of bilingual speakers as liars when she introduces readers to a scholarly monograph that suggests bilingualism can be a harmful condition because it evokes the imposter or the “two-face” hypocrite (270-72). Linguistic code-switching, as it becomes easier, may lead a person into identity-swapping. The harm comes in two ways. First, it comes as monolingual people, exposed to the person’s shifting between two distinct personalities while speaking the two languages, respond to that person with distrust. To many monolingual people, the “bicultural person seems so thoroughly one way in one language, so thoroughly different in another. Only an impostor would hide that other half so well. A liar” (271). Arana represents the shape-shifting between Latina and gringa as suspect to many. While *American Chica* celebrates bilingualism with imaginative tropes, engaging descriptions, and dialogue that capture well *la cultura de Peru* and life within her family, her story is also a cautionary tale about the perils of having a transcultural identity and two linguistic ways of expressing this identity.

While most people would probably not label these personality shifts of the bilingual individual as dangerously insincere, Arana does, not only because she fears being called an impostor by others, but also because she herself fears that she *is* a fraud. This is the second source of harm in bilingualism: it may lead to the breakdown of trust in oneself. Arana reports telling a friend who speaks two dialects (standard English and Black English) that she is haunted by self-doubts concerning her own trustworthiness, her own performance of self: “I had been fooling people for years. Slip into my American skin, and the playground would never know I was really Peruvian. Slip into the Latina, and Peruvians wouldn’t suspect I was a Yank” (272). This process could go one alarming step further, taking her not from the Yank to the Latina and back, but to a third form of self-invention (a kind of triangulation). Is it alarming because it threatens the assumption that who we are has an essence or a core that is not so protean? Or because who we are and how we change may slip from our control —just as Dr. Jekyll, in Robert Louis Stevenson’s scary short story, was no longer able to return from his Hydean form to his “own”? Arana fears that the borders of identity are not so firm, that imagination and skill at performance can change us from one self to another and to another.

Arana’s concerns coincide with postmodern thinking about the evolving, fluid nature of identity. This notion is played with by many memoirists of bilin-



gualism and transculturalism. Eva Hoffman talks about practicing triangulation of her selves in social conversations. And in the dialogue between himself and Richard Rodriguez that concludes *On Borrowed Words*, Ilan Stavans describes switching languages as “invoking the many personalities of an actor,” taking on new roles, donning new masks (249). He even has a momentary sensation of exchanging identities with Rodriguez, his alter ego (254). If you perform two languages, then you perform two selves, as Bialystok and Hakuta claim: “language is an active ingredient of our cognitive, social, and cultural identities” (214). And if you can perform two selves, buttressed by two languages and two cultures, why not more than two selves, supported by still other cultures and languages? The worry is that you will stop knowing the answer to the questions, Who am I? Can I trust myself to know? If the shifting of identities contemplated by these memoirists is continuous, one may well fear being set adrift from oneself. Therein lies a condition akin to schizophrenia. Despite the good things that bilingualism may accomplish, Arana recognizes that they may come at the price of not feeling anchored in a cohesive self, at the price of rootlessness and abiding inner tensions.

And so, readers come to know the memoirist as a woman in constant motion between her Peruvian and American selves. Arana is superstitiously haunted by the *apus*, those spirits of the Peruvian mountains, even while she works quite rationally as book editor for *The Washington Post*. She may continue to believe in the *pishtacos* (ghosts) that dwell in the landscape even though she takes walks on Capitol Hill. She may light candles and burn incense while praying to the Virgin, even as her Anglo self “snaps her out of it, snuffs candles, faces reality” (305). She may feel strong ties to Pachamama (the Peruvian Earth goddess), Peruvian folklore, the Spanish language, and Peruvian rituals, even while she is daily immersed in American customs and has written her life story in English. While her adult life is rooted in American soil and her epilogue depicts her in her American garden, all the while she is haunted by Peruvian flora and fauna. Near the end of her narrative, she recalls the heliconia butterflies that loved the floripondio bushes, the Amazonian hummingbirds that sought out her buddleia, the wild parakeets of her girlhood (304-5). This memoir of language and culture, written for North American readers, is witness to Arana’s Peruvian nostalgia and angst. Being a “New World fusion,” being a bridge, is no easy feat.



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