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Surviving the Alamo, Violence Vengeance, and Women's Solidarity in Emma Pérez's *Forgetting the Alamo, Or, Blood Memory*

Adrianna M. Santos

Abstract

This article analyzes Chicana feminist texts to frame a discussion of survival as a theoretical concept. Using Emma Pérez's historical novel *Forgetting the Alamo, Or, Blood Memory* as a window into the decolonial imaginary, I introduce the concept of *survival narrative* as a framework for analysis of Chicana literature, and briefly review Chicana feminist theory to support the argument. Examples from Pérez's novel illustrate the power of the survival narrative to advance a decolonial perspective. The novel reinscribes mainstream representations of gender violence that characterize the traditional Western by focusing on the empowerment that comes from solidarity amongst women and storytelling as central to cultural survival in the borderlands.

Keywords: survival, narrative, violence, borderlands, Western

Chicana feminisms often address issues of violence and survival as they pertain to the lives of marginalized peoples whose stories have been erased and/or misrepresented, actively engaging with the discourse of rape and assault to challenge the dominant narrative. Their counter-stories act as corrective narratives by documenting the lives of women, people of color, and queer subjects specifically. Chicanas have also addressed the shifting geopolitical space of the U.S.-Mexico border in their cultural productions in order to illuminate the ongoing effects of colonization. My research analyzes Chicana feminist texts to frame a discussion of survival as a theoretical concept. In this article I will specifically examine one case study that is part of a larger project of defining a body of literature I call *survival narratives* (Santos 124). Using Emma Pérez's historical novel *Forgetting the Alamo, Or, Blood Memory* (hereafter *Blood Memory*) as a window into the decolonial imaginary, I introduce the concept of the survival narrative as a framework for analysis of Chicana literature, and briefly review Chicana feminist theory to support the argument. Examples from *Blood Memory* illustrate the power of the survival narrative to advance a decolonial perspective. The novel reinscribes mainstream representations of gender violence that characterize the

traditional Western by focusing on the empowerment that comes from solidarity amongst women and storytelling as central to cultural survival in the borderlands.

Emma Pérez's historical novel, *Blood Memory*, is a border revenge tale told through the memories of a lesbian, gender fluid, Tejana anti-hero. By queering the Anglo-centric, masculinist representation of the South Texas borderlands, Pérez's main character, Micaela, offers an alternative protagonist to the rogue white cowboy of the popular Western genre. She is herself a survivor of violence and her journey, as well as her relationships with other victimized women in the novel, contest mainstream understandings of the region and the genre, and examine the long-term effects of colonial trauma. I refer to *Blood Memory* and other Chicana literary works as *survival narratives* because they are social protest literature that articulate subjectivities beyond victimization for survivors of colonial oppression, as well as demonstrate broader implications for anti-violence movements. I define the survival narrative as a hybrid form of literature that emphasizes collective struggle and storytelling as radical acts of cultural survival that are key components of empowerment and healing and that challenge the cultural erasure of colonization. Survival narratives are grounded in a long tradition of texts by marginalized peoples that address oppression and violence, participate in the subversion of the dominant narrative, and promote resistance through writing.

Blood Memory revisions the boundaries of genre and critiques the culture of violence that has been perpetuated through heteropatriarchal and colonial projects in the borderlands. The imagined community of *Blood Memory* disrupts the dominant historical and cultural narrative that has obscured the stories of women, minoritized, and queer individuals in the postcolonial project of nation-building in the United States of the Américas. Of particular note are the relationships forged between the characters, which demonstrate the survival strategies by which "herstory" recuperates the American epic and destabilizes a traditionally exclusionary representation of the border. What's more, the novel highlights the importance of networks of women coming together to save themselves and each other, and the importance of alternative family constructions through a distinctly Chicana feminist lens. While the novel does not have a "happy ending," it does feature a queer anti-hero who survives to tell the tale, strongly emphasizing the theme of survival and importance of storytelling, demonstrating the cultural imperative to return to our historical archives and as Pérez has argued *write* Chicanas into history.

Chicana Survival Narratives: Healing Colonial Wounds

Chicana identity is influenced by indigenous roots as well as settler colonialism. The story has always been violent, but the women have always been survivors. I center "survival" as a key thematic consideration in order to intentionally highlight agency and the power of storytelling, reframing "victimization" as a consequence of the colonial project that purposefully excludes subversive voices. In so doing, I examine how literature that addresses violence seeks to actively participate in social change through radical storytelling.¹ Through documenting their experiences of trauma, Chicana artists, activists, and scholars have cultivated methods of healing that are based in collectivity, creativity, and empowerment. Chicana literature often includes both graphic descriptions and symbolic representations of gender violence and Chicana feminists have frequently written about the importance of centering survivor's narratives in order to specifically challenge the status quo that criminalizes, ignores, and erases their stories. Rather than sensationalize or exploit these experiences, Chicana authors present strategies of both personal and cultural survival in response to that violence. Further, the writing, publishing, and distribution of this politicized liter-

ature constitutes a series of socially conscious acts that resist mainstream representation as well as add depth to the depiction of Mexican American women's experiences of life in the borderlands.

The battle cry "Remember the Alamo!" is generally meant to invoke nostalgia and nationalistic pride but when examined in the context of a Chicana feminist lens, it becomes a critical juncture to employ the tools of the decolonial imaginary that Pérez introduced in her germinal work. The phrase, "*Forgetting the Alamo*" in the title of Pérez's novel thus becomes a reference not to a heroic narrative of sacrifice and bravery that has characterized American nationalism, but rather to the causalities of a war for independence that dispossessed Texas Mexicans, further entrenched systems of slavery, enabled the genocide of indigenous peoples, and established white, patriarchal, heteronormative control in the borderlands of south Texas. *Blood Memory* opens in 1836, the end of the Texas Revolution, in the area near the "Golfo de Mejico," as it is marked in Chicana artist Alma López's map that accompanies the novel. The story is told mostly through the eyes of Micaela, who is quick-witted, intelligent, and confident, though she often goes unnoticed by others. This trait allows her some flexibility of movement in the story. In fact, the first scene features a card game in which Micaela holds the winning hand against the men she plays, but she gets no recognition for it. Fighting erupts between the men over the outcome of the game, particularly between the scoundrel Rove and Micaela's bi-racial cousin Jedediah. The fight is a petty display of violence, narrow-mindedness, and self-aggrandizement that foreshadows the later bloodshed at the battle sites. Pérez, therefore, begins her story by critiquing pervasive masculinity and aggression through the metaphor of a card game.

The novel is told in flashbacks, as a series of memories that Micaela cannot forget, in spite of reliance on alcohol as a coping mechanism. She becomes obsessed with vengeance, to the detriment of every relationship in her life, her own health, and her family's remaining stability. In Micaela's revenge story, Pérez constructs the kind of "imagined violence" to which Judith Halberstam refers in describing a representation of rage against oppressive, powerful white men in literature and art, what she calls "ground for resistance" (188). Micaela is driven to vengeance after she runs away from home, leaving her mother and young siblings alone, to follow her father and cousin Jed to the Alamo, a place where she, as a young woman, is not welcome. She begins to transform, adopting a masculine gender identity, after arriving at the Alamo and finding her father dead amongst the carnage. After donning her father's jacket and taking his knife, she returns to her family's ranch only to find it pillaged, her mother raped, and her twin brother and sister murdered by a gang of what she calls "Anglo thugs," who were searching for the Spanish land grant to her father's 49,000 acres. She writes, "All that kept me alive was my conviction to find the men who killed the twins during a senseless battle that ruined our peaceful lives" (45).

Unlike many revenge stories, in which the moral code is clearly defined, Micaela's journey is fraught with contradiction and ambiguity. Her revenge story as grounded in this violence is an investigative commentary on racism and dispossession, and the ongoing suppression of women's freedom. She writes, "An ache in my heart reacquainted me with the reason I had left home at all, reminding me that I could not return until my purpose was fulfilled" (81). She has a mission and she feels compelled to fulfill it in the name of her parents, her siblings, and all the people who lost their lives and their lands in the bloody conflict. There has been a recent revival in interest of the rape revenge film genre, a hybrid, feminist mode of cultural production (Barker 2015; Henry 2014; Hellar-Nicholas 2011). Similar to the rape-revenge film genre, Pérez has created a hybrid genre with elements of the historical novel, the Western, and the rape narrative. This amalgamation of literary methods informs my reading of the novel as a survival narrative, articulating the importance

of challenging colonial violence in both a historical and contemporary context and empowering communities through storytelling.

Healing colonial wounds of trauma is an unremitting project. And while rape narratives are important tools for individuals to describe their experiences of rape and assault, survival narratives are stories that emphasize collective healing from trauma as a result of colonization. They often do this by highlighting instances of personal victimization but do not stop there. They contextualize these individual experiences with larger systems of oppression and violence that effect entire communities. Micaela inhabits a hostile world, yet also manipulates the social norms and expectations of that time and space in order to enact her revenge plot. It does not go well, and in the end she is saved by women who love her and have also been affected by the violence she seeks to avenge. It should be noted that the women in *Blood Memory* are not able to flourish; they survive but cannot thrive. This is an interesting commentary on the limits of the decolonial imaginary to challenge the historical record. Even in the fictional world Pérez creates, the characters are subject to the violent processes of colonization and the struggle for geopolitical power. In *The Decolonial Imaginary* she writes, “The repetition of struggles, of oppression, seems endless, as if never to gain movement forward into another future, one where change would be hopeful or better. Perhaps all one can really hope for is survival” (76). Pérez further underlines this point by continuously referencing Micaela’s self-inflicted facial scar that refuses to heal throughout the narrative but which she fails to mention in the end. Ultimately, the best one can hope for is empowerment, choosing one’s own fate, and as Micaela muses, the only real power lies in “telling our own stories” (206).

I draw upon several citational footprints to identify this specific Chicana feminist Western revenge tale as an example of a survival narrative. My standpoint is based in several critical approaches. Centering a Tejana lesbian subjectivity in the heteropatriarchal, Anglo-centric genre of the Western genre, *Blood Memory* offers what Alicia Gaspar de Alba has called an “alter-Native intervention” into American literary history, a view of a culture that is “not immigrant but indigenous, not foreign, but colonized, and not alien but different from the overarching hegemony of white America” (106). More crucial to my own critical perspective, however, is Pérez’s own scholarship and creative work. In “Queering the Borderlands: The Challenge of Excavating the Invisible and Unheard,” she reflects, “I write fiction not only because I have a passion for literature, but also because I am frustrated by history’s texts and archives. I’ve always wanted to find in the archives a queer *vaquero* [cowboy] from the mid-nineteenth century whose adventures include fighting Anglo squatters and seducing willing *señoritas* [young ladies]” (122). She fashions this character in Micaela, who survives a violent sexual assault, and bears witness to the rape and murder of close members of her family as well as a mass slaughter of an indigenous tribe.

All of these acts of violence are committed in service to the land-grabbing and villainous acts of White supremacy that characterized the struggle for “independence” which led to the short-lived Republic of Texas and eventual Mexican American War.² Pérez crafts a distinct historical project in *Blood Memory*. Through a fictionalized account of the contested territory that the Mexicanos called Coahuila y Tejas, she demonstrates the theories she originally proposed in *The Decolonial Imaginary*. In this germinal text, Emma Pérez describes the decolonial imaginary as “a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history...that time lag between the colonial and postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated” (6).

Authors of survival narratives are necessarily concerned with the links between embodiment, representation, and social justice issues because violent acts generally manifest as both physical

and psychological trauma and have implications inter-generationally. Pérez also implies that a historical transcript of events is forever inscribed in the cultural memory of a people and that all are affected by the legacy of conquest and colonization. According to Pérez, cultural memory is passed down through generations. Chicanas live with the inherited scars of their foremothers (109-12). They are born in the context of colonial violence that continues to affect brown women through disproportionately higher poverty rates, incarceration, and lack of access to social services like health care and education. The lasting inscription of violence to the physical body has been a necessary component of Chicana feminist theory. For instance, Pérez argues, “The past, its memories, becomes so much a part of the body’s desires that it will attempt to re-create what has come before, the way flesh has been caressed. The memories, even when objectionable – such as in sexual abuse, for example – haunt the body” (109). The wounds of colonization are deep and lasting and continue to effect communities for generations.

Moreover, in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria E. Anzaldúa famously wrote of the border as an open wound, suggesting the violence that border-crossers encounter in passing between worlds. She outlines how Chicanas survive everyday lived experiences of assault in what she defines as the borderlands and acknowledges the border, both physical and metaphorical, as a trauma from which Chicanas are constantly attempting to heal (102). Chicanas, however, learn to survive through oppositional tactics of resistance like those described in Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Survival narratives describe Chicanas who make their own fates, write their own stories, subvert the norms and continue to struggle for equity of representation, opportunity, and agency. Chicana writers articulate a discourse of survival through adopting language to reflect their personal and collective experiences as oppressed peoples. So, my research begins from the premise that the kind of profound storytelling in Chicana survival texts that questions hegemony, acts as resistance through writing.

Intersections of Genre: Not Your Typical Western

Emma Pérez demonstrates her decolonial imaginary in *Blood Memory* by creating a narrative community that is multi-racial, multi-dimensional, and non-gender binary conforming, one that is reflective of the lived reality of Texas shortly after the contested territory was seized from Mexico by invading Texians. Some other books on Texas history that represent the complexity of multicultural, multiracial populations in the region include *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the US-Mexican War* (2008) by Brian DeLay and *Peace Came in the Form of a Woman: Indians and Spaniards in the Texas borderlands* (2009) by Julianna Bar, but the common image of the Republic of Texas remains Anglo-centric and hypermasculine. So, the use of the Western genre to tell these particular stories of women’s and queer resistance is apt for several different reasons. First, the form generally romanticizes the “frontier” of 19th c. America through hypermasculine, Anglo heroes. Women or people of color in these narratives are either mute, one-dimensional, or evil, an antagonist to the hero or a plot device to drive the action. As Madelon E. Heatherington writes, “The ladies of duty blend into a single creature, whose fictive function is to swell a procession, to gather firewood, to keep the children out of the way and the dishes unbroken in the flour barrel, to minister to her man’s marital advances, and occasionally to be abducted, raped, or murdered in order that the men might avenge her” (646).

Nina Baym adds in her sweeping study, *A History of American Women’s Western Books, 1833-1928*, that in the white privileged works of women of the American West that she reviewed, the

“menacing Mexicans” appear often “as the all-purpose villains of Southwestern White mythology” (77). Further, the father of Southwest Folklore, Américo Paredes, considered the border corrido, or ballad, one of the earliest representations of Mexican American cultural production, as crucial to understanding Mexican American literary history. He points out the positioning of the Tejano man in these songs as adopting a rebellious stance against the violent Anglo Texas Rangers, with “his pistol in his hand.” Catriona Ruida Esquibel points out, however, that Chicana Lesbian re-envisionings of this history make use of this phallic symbol as well as other historicized mythologies to trouble gender norms and representations.

As a response to the lack of multidimensional women in Western narratives, Pérez’s novel complicates the representation of women and women’s relationships, though the themes of rape and revenge persist. The novel functions as a device to challenge both limiting literary representations and the historical erasure of women’s perspectives. This is important work in recuperating female experiences of life in our historical record. *Blood Memory* therefore subverts the traditional Western literary genre by both “writing Chicanas into history” while at the same time contributing to the construction of a queer archive that privileges non-mainstream histories. Pérez writes, “I have no intention of offering conclusive stories about Chicanas and our past, a past that crosses geographic terrains and political borders. I am more concerned with taking the ‘his’ out of the ‘story,’ that often becomes the universalist narrative in which women’s experience is negated (*Decolonial Imaginary* xiv)” As she notes, the book is aimed at breaking down a singular history of White supremacy and misogyny in Texas. Pérez creates a revisionist history in which the erased narratives of women, Native Americans, enslaved blacks and Texans of Mexican descent are told. Lucius, an enslaved black man who Micaela encounters on her travels through south Texas, and one of the only men who perceives her biological sex, refers to the coming changes in Texas and warns Micaela that she should get out with her love while she still can. He urges, “Look here, you better wake on up to what’s coming. You might as well get yourself back to Mexico and leave this place to ole whitey because, darlin, it’s slave lynching country and it’s Mexican killing country and it’s Indian scalping country and it’s going to be that for a long time” (102).

In American literary canon, certain points of reference – manhood, whiteness, middle-class status, heterosexuality – have reinforced heteropatriarchy and linked it with citizenship and subjectivity. This is particularly true of the Western genre. Heatherington argues that limited characterization of women into “the virgin and the bitch” begs examination of how “the basic dynamics of romance are aborted in these novels and therefore most fiction of the American West has never allowed itself to explore and develop its own full potential” (644). Furthermore, Baym contends that while the body of *women’s* work about the West is much larger than previously documented, of the documents she uncovered, only 3% were penned by what she calls “ethnically ‘minority’ women” (63) and those from California and Texas “insist on their pure Castilian – as opposed to Native American – legacies. Native women affiliate with their local groups [and] usually accepted some kind of assimilation as at least inevitable” (65). Pérez’s novel offers multiple perspectives of the Texas borderlands through the development of several main characters of Mexican, African, and Native American descent that transcend the racist representation on which Westerns have historically relied.

Other scholars have explored alternative constructions of the West in contemporary novels, like Linda Lizut Helstern who argues that American Indian author Louis Owens’s *Nightland* “reminds us that westering was never a single story but rather a multiplicity of stories, often conflicting [that] interrogate the myth of the Old West and its associated racial and gender stereotypes” (119). Al-

though more recent Westerns may have begun to trouble the flat female characters and stereotypical representations of natives, however, none have attempted to subvert the genre so completely by centering lesbian desire, female masculinity, and survival through the bonds of sisterhood like *Blood Memory*. As Pérez notes, similarly to Helstern, “There is no pure, authentic, original history. There are only stories – many stories.” (xv). The Texas that Pérez describes through Micaela’s eyes is a third space territory, a liminal place, shifting between national allegiances, economic alliances, and the evolving identity of its rapidly increasing inhabitants. This is echoed in the make-up of multiracial and sexually fluid characters that Pérez creates.

Pérez’s protagonist is a queer border crosser and survivor of violence who contests mainstream representations of Texas history and women in the Western. With the singular goal of avenging her family’s murder, Micaela takes on a male persona in order to gain access to certain spaces that have been historically occupied by men only. She has what she sees as the misfortune of being born a woman and therefore having no access to her wealthy Tejano father’s land as an heir. She is also unwelcomed at the saloon and in male-only poker games, and she is unable to biologically father the children that her lover, Clara so desperately wants. And, so she straddles the gender binary, cross-dressing and passing as a man on most occasions in her quest for revenge. She enacts many forms of stereotypically masculinized traits of violence and jealousy, alcoholism and gambling addiction, challenging the mutually exclusive binary categorizations of what is male and what is female, exemplifying the border-crosser, or what Anzaldúa would call a “nepantlera” or shape-shifter. Her embodiment of what Halberstam has deemed “female masculinity” is best represented as oppositional and indicative of a rejection of the normalized version of masculinity performed by the biological males in the story, a “queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity” (9). These affirmative representations of gender fluidity serve to expand notions of subjectivity and cultural productions as sites of exploration and resistance to oppression. Francisco Galarte notes the importance of Pérez’s text to the inclusion of transgender individuals in narrative:

In the decolonial imaginary, transgender Chican@s are also actors and part of the project of re-writing and disputing what is written in history. The decolonial imaginary allows for the unraveling of binary gender categories and relations we have inherited from historical circumstances that have rendered the transgender Chican@ impossible, unseen, or adrift in a sea of discourse. (133-4)

Galarte argues that the representation of the embodied experiences of trans people makes visible their contributions to Chicanx history and literature and that Pérez’s decolonial imaginary challenges the historical legacy of erasure present in mainstream history books. Additionally, as a man, Micaela enjoys some limited gender privilege and is free to roam about in male-only spaces. This does not, however grant Micaela access based on skin color. The character is subject to the same racial hatred, profiling, stereotyping, violence, and oppression that other men of Mexican origin experienced at the time due to the shifting allegiances between the Mexican government and the rebelling Texians. Because of the bloody turn of events at the Alamo, life in Texas is changing rapidly and the outlook for residents of Mexican origin is dire. As Micaela’s experiences demonstrate, the Republic of Texas is hostile towards non-whites, women and anyone who expresses same-sex desire or has a fluid gender expression but in Pérez’s novel these historically marginalized characters are the hero(in)es.

For example, Clara, Micaela’s love interest and often voice of reason, also embodies the liminality Pérez describes. She is both bisexual and biracial and Micaela is drawn to her not only for her

beauty, but also the allure of mystery represented through her romantic, but often ambivalent, character. Micaela feels hidden in the safe nature of Clara's femininity, noting, "I was content when no one gazed at me but instead at her and the stares did not indict or suspect" (113). Through this relationship, it is revealed that Micaela is also struggling with her ethnic and racial identity. While boasting and lying to Clara about her own heroism at the Battle of the Alamo, refusing to accept a reality of exclusion and loss, Clara questions why she would murder her own people. Micaela, however, explains that she does not identify with Santa Ana's Mexican army, but rather with the Tejanos with whom she closely interacts, fights, laughs, and drinks. It is with Clara, however, that she plots her revenge against two of the men that harmed her family. It is Clara that dresses her in feminine clothes so that they can get close enough to lure the men through sexual advances. Clara represents the possibilities of transcending both sexual and gender borders set against the backdrop of a fictional borderland. Though Micaela prefers to present as a man, it is ironically in female dress that she is able to perform the acts of vengeance she so desires. But, as she begins to accept the violence to which she has been subjected, and the shifting gender expression that tenuously drives her journey, Micaela eventually comes to realize that this kind of justice does not bring the satisfaction she was hoping for.

Other scholars have also examined the queering of literature and its relationship to history, time and space (Rivera 2015; Cuevas 2014; Morgensen 2011; Freeman 2010; Hernández 2003). One notable example is Karen Alison Fielder, who observes the female masculine in *Blood Memory* in a queer studies context. She writes, "Femme-macho character, Micaela dwells outside of traditional norms of feminine performance, rejecting both compulsory heterosexuality and modification by men" (35). Her study primarily focuses on Micaela's butchona lesbian identity as the central point of focus in the novel as an articulation of Anzaldúa's *nepantla*, or in-between. An important intervention, indeed. Fielder reads Micaela through several key Chicana scholars like Hurtado and Moraga, while also incorporating Hall and Halberstam to situate her female masculine subject within a broader cultural context, particularly to address the erasure of those same subjects. She also briefly invokes Foucault and Bhabha to address the "gaps" in the tether between literature and history that Pérez seeks to fill.

Fielder notes further that "As a displaced figure within the already inferior classification "women of color," Micaela as female masculine heroine represents a kind of outer limit of cultural representation" (37). This specific reading of female masculinity as a "powerful form or interstitial opposition" is crucial to understanding how Chicanas resist misrepresentation and erasure. My characterization differs from Fielder's because in my estimation, the romanticization of the character is not necessary to see her value within the American literary canon, particularly in the context of the hyper-masculine genre of the Western. Her character is not a paragon, perfect representation of an ideal of female masculinity or an idealized *nepantlera*. She is an anti-hero, flawed and single minded in her quest for vengeance. She is often thoughtless, selfish, and rash. She objectifies her lover, and drinks until she blacks out. Fielder also highlights the "violent marking of the racially other, [and how the] female body becomes an important trope in Pérez's novel, forcing us to examine the very harsh corporeal realities for mestiza women in mid-nineteenth-century South Texas" (39). And, while Fielder merely hints at the importance of the other female characters in the novel to the challenging of a heteropatriarchal ideology and representation of the old west, I posit that it is precisely this interconnected web of female allies that are crucial to the novel's main premise of survival, both individual and collective. Micaela survives because of the women in her life.

Women's Networks: Violence in Common

Survival narratives are also defined by collective struggle. The network of female relationships between Micaela, Carla, Ursula, and Miss Elsie are indicative of Pérez's grounding in Chicana feminisms. To further illustrate my point, the characters' common experiences of violence represent a range of reactions that often include solidarity, resistance, and healing. Pérez humanizes women who have been abused, but have then found community and safety in Miss Elsie's whorehouse, giving voice to characters who, as I indicated earlier, rarely speak in Westerns. Miss Elsie is quick to refute the claims of heroics at the Battle of the Alamo, having witnessed first-hand how some of the valorized men:

used to beat up on women. [One] poor girl...got scars on her back cuz them boys used to whip her and once they took a knife and cut her, thinking they wanted to brand her like she was an animal belonging to them. And that Bowie. Nothing but a damn drunk. And a thief to boot. Stole so much land you cain't even count how much. Them boys ain't heroes" (23).

She even describes one "gringo" firing his gun in church and killing a "meskin baby" a crime for which he receives no punishment "Like a meskin baby don't matter none" (23). She admonishes the changes in the area swearing "it didn't used to be like this" and that it "was downright peaceful" (23). Moreover, Miss Elsie later defends her position as madam saying,

I ain't one to sit in judgment. Look around. I'm a whore and I live in a whorehouse and what's more its my whorehouse and I keep whores for the like of men like Walker and old man Barrera. You think I like what I do? Alls I know is somebody's gotta give them poor girls a place to live cuz they been run out of their homes by some mean husbands or papas or brothers or uncles who raped them or beat them or expected them to be their dang slaves. Well, let me tell you, here they got a home and I ain't never let a man raise a hand to them and if them boys is gonna get a poke, well then they better pay up. I ain't proud of what I do but I'm sure pleased they ain't out on the street begging (25).

Ursula's sister, Lena, was one of Miss Elsie's girls, fleeing a family of abusers who began molesting her from early adolescence. Elsie condemns Ursula's family for turning away from Lena and not even coming to her funeral. Though she often disagrees with Ursula and resents gender norms and expectations themselves, expressing pity for their situations, Micaela has respect for her mother, describing her as such: "She had strength...a valor belonging to soldiers in battle. Somewhere between the death of her sister and the death of so many babies, she had become a warrior whose grieving my papi ignored but it was her strength that kept us all alive" (27). Ursula may be one of the strongest characters in the novel but her full story is restricted in Micaela's perception of her flaws. It is the witnessing of her mother's infidelity that drives Micaela to ride after her father to the ill-fated battle that would claim his life. It was a secret she already knew but the "particulars she had witnessed" were just the excuse she needed to run away, having never felt accepted by her mother.

In survival narratives like *Blood Memory*, relationships between women, the most saliently grounded networks of love and labor, actually make resistance sustainable in the borderlands. What's more, without the support from Miss Elsie, Clara, and her mother, Micaela would not have escaped the wild west "justice" for her crimes of vengeance against the men who violated and murdered her family. At one point, Micaela tries, in vain, to help a young girl named Juana who has been raped and impregnated by the villainous Walker, a white ranch hand vying for her family's land. Micaela takes her to a curandera who gives her a tea that terminates the pregnancy, but both

Juana and Micaela will later be raped. Micaela witnesses Juana being strangled to death by two of Walker's cronies and survives her own assault by denying the victimization for a time. It is her relationship with Clara that will later allow the memories to the surface.

Ultimately, Pérez turns the victim script on its head by metamorphosing the narrative into a vengeance odyssey in which she is assisted by other characters who have also been victimized by patriarchal and colonial violence. Secondary and tertiary characters like Miss Elsie, Ursula, Lucius, unnamed members of the native American community who are massacred, and Jed's mother all play a role in Micaela's coming to consciousness about her situation and that of her loved ones in the shifting space of the Texas Mexico borderlands. In one poignant and graphic scene, Micaela witnesses a massacre so gruesome she can hardly speak of it and passes out. Her inability to process the violence around her is indicative of the untold horrors of cultural genocide and attempted erasure of indigenous peoples that have taken pace in the contested space of the south Texas borderlands. Finally, Micaela is in denial for much of the novel about her assault, but her relationship with Clara and sexual awakening, as well as her commitment to children and family bonds of love, allow hope to emerge in the novel, though in the form of an ambiguous as opposed to "happy" ending. *Blood Memory* demonstrates that survival narratives create important spaces to represent what has been carved out and covered, revealing storytelling as an important process in the healing of colonial wounds.

Justice en La Frontera

As I have noted, Chicana writers specifically pen works that inform social justice movements against violence by using radical forms of storytelling in order to bring attention to the shared experiences of oppression that marginalized communities experience. Survival narratives are constructive insofar as they display pathways to recovery and a rewriting of the script of violence. Micaela embodies this imperative as a survivor who copes with pain in both productive and unproductive ways, all in an endless journey of self-healing. Micaela ultimately survives, abandoning the quest for revenge, unable to stay home, however, and on the run from a corrupt police force eager to serve out their own warped version of justice for the rapists and murderers Micaela killed. While this sequence of events is not a typical self-defense situation by today's standards, the imagined experience does point to an affiliation with the growing number of convicted survivors that crowd modern penitentiaries and are punished for protecting themselves by retaliating against their attackers. Micaela escapes with the help of Clara, Ursula, Elsie, and other female allies to live on and tell the story. Even though she is exiled from her homeland, Pérez explains in an epilogue that she returns annually and heals a little through each return. Micaela claims Clara's children, visiting them periodically and vowing to give future generations the tools to understand their own histories. Micaela no longer wishes to forget or deny her history, traumatic though it may be. Pérez ends the novel with the following passage, "Maybe the only justice we'll ever know is in surviving to tell our own side of things. Maybe that's enough for now. Telling our own stories so we won't be forgotten." (206).

In my broader research, I have identified survival narratives as social protest novels that represent resistance in the face of both interpersonal violence and structural oppression. Survival narratives are important tools of self-representation, empowerment, and healing for marginalized communities that have experienced racialized and gender violence. I argue, in line with many other Chicana feminist literary critics, that this type of radical storytelling builds bridges between liter-

ature and social justice movements. I ask how Chicanas, in particular, have constructed feminist texts of resistance by writing not only about violence but also methods of survival and resistance to that violence. By reading certain texts as survival narratives, i.e., as social protest novels that bring attention to violence and erasure, works like Pérez's demonstrate how literature can be an effective catalyst for social protest and positive transformation. The writing, publishing, and distribution of texts that attempt to ameliorate these cultural wounds of erasure, then, are particularly important to the self-representation and self-determination of these communities.

When stories are told that do not portray survivors as victims, but rather empower them, we have the potential to access new ways of thinking about legacies of colonial violence and gender policing. Much more attention should be given to Pérez's work, as well as other authors who are reimagining history and narrative. My main aim in this paper was to contribute to a body of scholarship devoted to framing literary spaces as platforms for change through a specific look at one Chicana novel that centers violence as a central theme. The characters in *Blood Memory* must fight for survival, through suffering, desire, redemption, and death. They resist the forces that obstruct them. If creative work is practiced as resistance to oppression, literature, art, and other cultural productions become a transformative method of healing. For Chicana cultural producers, art as activism has been a driving force behind social justice movements. But, as Ana Castillo writes, "Survival means you exist and we're not just survivors. We are women who go way beyond survival. We don't just exist. We have great faith and optimism in the future" (148). Survival narratives like *Blood Memory* are, in and of themselves, transformative but also point to a world in which the outcomes of social justice struggles are grounded in a variety of artistic, political, and academic interventions. By renegotiating the terms of the Western genre through the lens of the decolonial imaginary, Pérez has demonstrated the power of storytelling to transform our perspectives of women and survival in the borderlands.

Notes

- 1 Ways to talk about victimization vary depending on the aims of the individuals or organizations describing the phenomenon. The term "victim" is commonly used by law enforcement and the criminal justice system to delineate someone who has been the subject of a crime. Often those who have been victimized by assault tend to be retraumatized by the system itself; the term for this phenomenon is "re-rape." The term "survivor" was made popular by the anti-violence movements of the late 20th century in order to emphasize a move away from focus on the act of assault to the reality of life after assault. Some people who have been victimized by violence, however, still choose to call themselves victims because they wish to emphasize that the wrongdoing of the perpetrator and de-emphasize the expectation that they are compelled to participate in anti-violence projects simply because they have been victimized. Talking and writing about victimization, therefore is complex and there is not one way to describe all experiences of violence and trauma because individuals and communities experience it differently based on any number of factors. I choose survivor in solidarity with anti-violence movements.
- 2 Pérez's fictional novel was the first of its kind to be printed by the University of Texas Press, which, as is the case with most academic publishing houses, mainly distributes textbooks and social science texts.

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