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Latino-Indigenous Influence on U.S. Catholicism in Demetria Martínez’s *Confessions of a Berlitz-tape Chicana*

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**Abstract:** The ideas presented by New Mexico novelist-writer Demetria Martínez in her collection of columns, *Confessions of a Berlitz-tape Chicana*, explore how she espouses and represents Latino Catholicism, applied as a practice rooted in indigenous culture merged with Catholic imagery during the colonial era. Her writing and stances indicate that Latino Catholicism is built on principles of community and social justice. Critical commentary is drawn from Chicana/o writers and recent texts on Mexican-American spirituality.

**Keywords:** Chicana/o Literature; Chicana/o Autobiography; Latino Spirituality; Demetria Martínez’s Non-Fiction; Indigenous Customs; Mexican and Colonial Catholicism

Although not as highly recognized as other Latina/o novelists, Demetria Martínez’s novel *Mother Tongue* (1994) made a strong impact much like Arturo Islas’s first novel, *Rain God* (1984), and is highly significant to the field of Chicano literature, just as Tomás Rivera and Rudolfo Anaya’s foundational novels of the 1970s. In 2011, the University of California-Santa Barbara selected her for their prestigious Luis Leal award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino literature, high-lighting *Mother Tongue* and bringing attention to her impressive non-fiction writing. Her narrative, at turns both lyrical and philosophical, plunges into history, current events, faith and trauma to evoke the very soul of Latino ethos. Her writing style, with both universal and personal themes, is to bring into focus issues and systems of Latino heritage and experience, with occasional twists. While defying easy categorization, *Mother Tongue* is a text that opened U.S. awareness to reasons for the presence of Central American refugees in the U.S., while also bringing to the forefront childhood psychological trauma. It was centered in Albuquerque, with two protagonists: a young Chicana, and a Salvadoran refugee living under the auspices of a local church group. Those who have read the novel likely remember the disturbing experience, how during the first half of the book it seemed trite or simplistic (the young woman character goes to Kmart to buy a black bra because she keeps thinking about the man she likes), then, shock and reaction in that hard-hitting moment that links two traumatic experiences: the refugee’s brutal beating by the military, and the main character’s revelation of childhood sex abuse.

For some readers, there could be connections to personal experiences, or better understanding of the experience of political refugees, but the critical rendering is a need for attention to the healing of human beings. Harmony and balance is a cornerstone of indigenous and native-to-this hemisphere philosophy: When nature or life is out of balance, specific acts are needed to restore harmony.

Born and raised in New Mexico, Martínez represents an extensive population group that is at once Hispanic (Spanish heritage), indigenous (the roots and practices of Native hemispheric culture), Catholic (as practiced...
by Mexicans and colonial-heritage Hispanics), and U.S. American. In the process of her column writing (composed for over 20 years), she demonstrates the practices of a demographic group largely ignored by mainstream U.S. society, whose beliefs and experiences run deep, and whose presence is an integral part of the U.S.

As a journalist, Martínez came to visibility in the late 1980s when she was summoned to federal court to testify of her involvement in the Sanctuary Movement: She had accompanied church members who had been transporting female Central American political refugees across the border. The refugees were trying to escape death and holocaust, a 12-year turmoil that erased villages and killed thousands and thousands of innocent people. The Reagan administration refused to acknowledge Salvadorans as legitimate political refugees, and was spending nearly one and a half million dollars ($1.4 million) a day in “aid” to assist the military which was targeting them. Martínez’s stand for the women she accompanied, her court trial and her writing laid the groundwork for U.S. understanding that some immigrants seek refuge from government-sponsored torture and genocide, and that even females cross the border. Thrust into the national limelight, English-language readers could contemplate the complexity of “Latino” identity in Catholic, gender and indigenous frames.

Martínez has stated she identifies foremost as a poet, and that influence on her narrative is evident: short, crisp sentences; images that leap off the page and remain with you for days; heartbeat together with joy and amazement in the details of life. Her columns are not about her own life so much as introspections communicated in a collective sense, a perspective not ‘me’-oriented but humanity-focused, and the experience of a cultural group of hybrid colonial–Catholic, indigenous practice. Attesting to a longstanding habit of writing each and every day (despite debilitating illness1), Martínez in Confessions of a Berlitz-tape Chicana reveals the angst of her own life through a context of community experience.

Her essay writing is highly different from that of another Mexican-origin essayist who addressed Catholic contexts, but whose writing demonstrates little connection to Chicano roots, Richard Rodríguez. For Martínez, Indigenous culture and beliefs, and Catholicism, are inseparable from Latino/Hispanic heritage and experience. Bill Shuter has observed the significance of Rodríguez’s own description of Hunger of Memory (1981): “essays impersonating an autobiography,” (96–97) and that the text would be “incomprehensible to his parents.” (103) Shuter remarks that despite identifying as Catholic, Rodríguez is incapable of “entirely calling himself a Catholic;” he suggests that the second title should have been “the confessions of” rather than “the education of” Richard Rodríguez, “because the history of his education is a history of youthful transgression” (95).

Rodríguez has stated that Catholics by tradition are “the most communal of Christians,” but also identifies Catholicism as a practice contrary to U.S. individualism (which he appears to find more worthy or necessary). He criticizes the fact that a parish would provide one mass in English and another in Spanish, stating that it only divides it into two parishes (see Paul Elie’s study). He does not see in Mexican-American heritage, or Catholicism, the binding influence that Martínez brings forth in her accounts. Both writers have lived and worked in Boston, but their observations and experiences are markedly different. In the first chapter of Confessions of a Berlitz-tape Chicana, titled “Invocation,” Martínez subtly weaves the longevity of U.S. Hispanic history into and during a walk through Boston:

“I am searching for just the right cemetery” for her ancestors’ (in plural) ashes, she says, and readers will likely visualize the many cemeteries and markers of the earliest Anglo-origin settlers of the U.S. in Boston. Martínez then switches to the longstanding history of the U.S. southwest as she examines Boston’s trellises and vines, contemplating different terrain in New Mexico, she begins reciting the names of a host of her predecessors since the 1700s.

The narrative voice then sits in a coffee shop: Stirring her coffee, she considers similarities between the coffee grains and the ashes of her ancestors, and knows that their “spirits are safe” with her. She cites Spanish arrival in New Mexico (late 16th century), the bloody Oñate conquest, and the murder and mutilation of the Acoma people. Her relatives, she adds, in addition to Spanish-colonial, are also Acoma and Navajo. With these reflections, she “welcomes the ashes—[coffee grounds in metaphor]—into the temple of my body,” acknowledging they are all in her blood, from the “murderous impulses” to the “sweetest hopes.” The account concludes with a new meditation:

How does one live so as to atone, to bring full circle? How to finish the
sentence that was their lives and write myself into the odyssey that is my own future, my own sentence?

Working full circle, Martínez merges local description into regional and historical terms, to then bring the context back home. Her assessments are built through the frames of contemporary location, arrival of European ancestors, and their impact on native residents of the American continent, uniting all of them through a process of ceremony (significant in both Catholic and indigenous practice) that involves the contemporary descendant. The healing process for Martínez requires spiritual understanding and community. In the Introduction to Confessions, she states:

Our stories entwine like trumpet vines. Together we may break the spell of the official story and grant ourselves and the gods the open ended destiny that is our right.

She often addresses harm being done to humanity by other humans, imploring acts to bring healing through acknowledgment and recognition. In a December 2010 blogpost for the National Catholic Reporter, she issues a call for reckoning:2

If we want to step back from the brink of self-destruction, God will help us do so, but if we choose the other path, God will start over with the amoeba. Which shall it be for us?

A question proposed in terms of a collective “we,” an approach inherent both to indigenous spirituality and basic tenets of communal Catholic participation, reconciliation is found in coming together.

Few critical texts have addressed the spiritual nature of Chicano and Latino literature, but an opening is evident. A recent study published by Duke Press, Mexican-American Religions, Spirituality, Activism and Culture (2008), makes a strong case for scholarship in Mexican-American religious studies as a rich field of inquiry. Each contributor addresses diverse disciplinary perspectives, including the historical legacy of Catholic-imbued social protest activism. In the Introduction the editors, established scholars Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García, argue for inclusion of Latino religiosity in critical studies, in connection to the study of society, culture and history, and to be validated in publications and tenure cases.3

A recent book by historian and cultural theologian Timothy Matovina, Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America’s Largest Church (2011), finds that U.S. society is being changed by the growing Latino majority because of, and through, Latino Catholicism (in itself transformed, hundreds of years ago, through; and by indigenous figures and beliefs). He points out that many parishes are now Latino-majority, and that a great number conduct masses in both Spanish and English: according to statistics, one third of Catholic parishes have two-language parishioners. Other statistics provided:

- 68% of U.S.-resident Latinos are Catholic;
- 40% of U.S. Catholics are Latinos, and trends show it will climb;
- One-fourth of newborns, and one-fifth of schoolchildren in the U.S. are of Latin American origin (a fact being recognized in the media).

Not all Latinos are Catholic, of course. Another recent and well-researched book, Living “Illegal”: the Human Face of Unauthorized Immigration (2011), describes the lives of Central American and Mexican-origin residents in various cities of Georgia and Florida. They demonstrate involvement in community churches, both Protestant and Catholic, alongside other church members. The authors are two professors in religious studies and two in political science. They find two and three-language parishes (in one case, Korean) where collaborations occur among all members, including longtime residents of European origin. They describe specific initiatives of recruitment of undocumented workers to those regions, the work accomplished by undocumented people of longtime residence, as well as the economic hardship now experienced as a result of the new political climate, including unexpected...
result of the deportation crackdown: In many cases undocumented residents can no longer leave to attend to funerals and family needs outside the U.S., for they would not be able to return to work and their families.

Mexican Catholic practice, however, is built on cultural heritage. An innovative study by Theresa Delgadillo, *Spiritual Mestizaje: Religion, Gender, Race and Nation in Contemporary Chicana Narrative* (2011), applies aspects of Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory to her own reading of a “spiritual mestizaje” in Chicana novels (including *Mother Tongue*) where characters reject hierarchies and power structures along lines of difference. For Delgadillo, spiritual mestizaje represents a critical process of coming to consciousness (*concientización*) by discovery of how our “physical presence in the world, our very bodies, are shaped by oppressive discursive paradigms.” (8) Conscious recognition opens the way to a “metamorphosis” of sorts—acts of interpretation that connect spirituality, politics, social justice, and narrative. Her reading is not of the mixed races and cultures usually contextualized in *mestizaje*; instead, an experience that draws on inherited spiritual traditions, to historicize, critique and imagine culture and spirituality in a simultaneous past, present and future.

Case studies and arguments documented in these recent books are discerned in Martínez’s columns, descriptions that are at once Mexican-Catholic-Indigenous. The narratives of the early Chicano Renaissance (new creative texts published in the 1970s) primarily viewed Catholicism as a destructive instrument of the Spanish conquest, for the elimination of indigenous civilization and supplanting of indigenous customs (as in Anaya’s novel). Chicano writers and poets sought to represent Aztec symbology to evoke a truer essence. Later, Catholic-endorsed indigenous imagery fell into a category dubbed *folklóre*, now elevated to academic study. Chicana poets, and certain novelists since the 1990s, such as Denise Chávez, Norma Cantú, and others, demonstrate Catholic practice that is closely intertwined with local and community customs. For Martínez, the continuity of Indigenous heritage and colonial roots in Catholicism gives evidence of continuity in community, as well as a powerful hybrid practice that is part and parcel of contemporary life.

For the Chicano/Latino subject (with origins in Catholic-colonial, Mexican-indigenous and U.S. history), experience is rooted in the symbols and customs of Indigenous heritage, as demonstrated in the following examples from Martínez’s columns. At every turn they reveal the story of the U.S. Latino, a story that is complex, often Catholic-devout, and deeply rooted in indigenous culture and colonial history.

Alternating from philosophical to globally conscious, each section of *Confessions* carries a bilingual title: “Columnas Privadas,” “Columnas Fronteras: Inherit the Earth,” “Columnas Católicas: Hola Mary;” and “Columnas en Tiempos de Guerra: Hell No.” When Martínez brings attention to death in war, her references are to U.S. involvement in the Middle East. Even here, the nature of the aggressions is tied to the holocaust of indigenous peoples after the Encounter, after consideration of the famous interpreter and symbolic mestizo mother. The account, “Tongues,” opens with:

> When the United States invaded Iraq, the word “translation” appeared in a number of my dreams. I suppose it should come as no surprise. As a Chicana, I am the daughter of Malintzin, the mother of the Mestizo people. Fluent in several Native tongues, she learned Spanish when the conquistadores arrived in the New World. She acted as translator for Hernán Cortés. She gave birth to his child, the first Mexican, a child of Indian and European ancestry. The old story is that she betrayed the Indian people, fell in love with Cortés, and told him what he needed to know about the Aztecs so that he could carry out the conquest. (158)

This is the first paragraph; the second begins:

> Feminist scholars have offered other possible versions of the story. Love? She was property. And useful because of her facility with languages … (158)

She explores several other interpretations, then concludes with:

> Was she a traitor? A failure? Do these words even apply in the face of an apocalypse that was impossible to prevent?
The scenario that tugs at me the most is this one: I imagine she tried to thwart a holocaust by translating not just the Indian’s words, but also their world-views, their stories. But she miscalculated. The Spaniards may have listened to what the Indians said, but they dared not hear what was meant. To wrestle with what another person means, and not just says, is risky business. The speaker might become human to the listener. Ultimately, the Indians could exist only insofar as they remained in the shadow of the Christian cross and the Spanish crown. (158)

Without referring again to Iraq, she gathers in one paragraph better scientific, historical and political conclusions than those propagated by simplistic invader-and-vanquished lore about Mexico, bringing U.S. wars afar home to the invasion that created present societies on the American continent. By examining Malintzin’s role (without using the pejorative term “Malinche”), accused (unfairly) of betraying the Aztec empire, she makes her everywoman, all of us. The account concludes with:

And this is what nations and individuals do, still. None of us is exempt. We flatten people, assume they have no stories, and in doing so inflict a thousand psychic injuries upon one another. Or we simply bomb whole nations. Poets everywhere share the struggle of Malintzin: We must translate not only one another’s works, but one another’s lives. (159)

Always fully cognizant of the female subject, Martínez brings her own female perspective to topics, on occasion even criticizing Church philosophy. The account “The Divine Mother,” begins with:

God or Goddess? I have long been uneasy with either name for the Divine … … but now, having journeyed back to New Mexico—for reasons I wouldn’t have connected with religion—I have embraced a name for the sacred that I can live with: the Divine Mother. (75)

Such an attribution might appear to bend toward sacrilege in terms of Church teachings, but Martínez regularly espouses her strong faith and connection to the Catholic Church. As the account continues, she places a corsage worn earlier in the day before a painting of the Virgen of Guadalupe, steps back and gazes at the:

Budda-like smile, her brown hands pressed together in prayer … It was as if I had never seen her before, even though she appears everywhere, tattoos, carved out of cottonwood, painted on walls of restaurants. Given a blank surface, her devotees will find a way to enshrine her. (75)

Focusing on the corsage, Martínez recalls moments when she has presented flowers to her mother and grandmother, and the Virgin Mary’s role in her upbringing: how her statue is carried from home to home on feast days, and how she is called the Divine Mother. The narrative weaves to a defense of single mothers who struggle in near poverty, and Christianity’s mandate to see Christ in all people:

… but sometimes Mary emerges as the more visible in the face of a woman. That is her great gift to a world that has rendered too many women faceless, voiceless and powerless. (76)

The account continues as Martínez reflects on childbirth and her own life:

It might seem odd to some, this devotion to the Divine Mother on the part of a forty-three year old woman—childless by choice.” … “in my early 30s, I learned that an anticonvulsant medication I take for bipolar disorder can cause a birth defect in which a child is born without a brain. Today I hear of friends’ struggles as they make last-
ditch efforts to conceive. Yet I never felt I was missing out on something. (76)

The following final three paragraphs of the column are critical of the Church, but Martínez retains a spiritual context while taking her stance. The account serves to portray how Latinos, especially Chicanas, bring change to the modern Church through the values of their own familia:

The men who run the Church would have me feel like the odd woman out. They offer no blessings to the millions who have discerned that motherhood is not our calling. Instead, they issue dire warnings against birth control. Catholics quietly "break the rules" or dribble out of the church rather than have their intelligence—indeed, their God—insulted. I have watched Latina friends, left and right, abandon Catholicism for Buddhism ... I might have followed them but for the miraculous appearance of the Divine Mother in the mirror. I see myself in her light, loved. She affirms that all women (and men) who hew to the path of truth are giving birth. ... I, too, am part of the Holy Family, la familia sagrada, in a way I always wanted to be: the crazy "spinster" aunt (to a niece and two nephews) whose bed is piled high with books, a sanctuary for any child who needs to be read to. (77)

It is not just the Church’s teachings, but also the community (the body of the church) that imbues meaning and guidance: members who support each other, provide a sanctuary for children and understanding from tías. The continuity of practices in Indigenous-turned-Mexican culture and traditions helps fortify church and community. Indigenous symbology, and the role of women in curing and ministering to the community, are significant aspects of the Latin American Church. Women have powerful roles in Latino societies, asserts Yolanda Broyles-González:

Mujeres are the chief transmitters of spiritual practices in the home, and to the seven generations, while also often serving as the chief mediators between the home and external religious institutions and sites, be they the Catholic Church, religious pilgrimages, spiritual pageants such as Posadas, or at wakes as rezadoras (ones who pray), whose prayers help move the deceased to a place of rest. (117)

In addition to "chief mediators," women, according to Broyles, are the "primary authorities" of indigenous-derived practice. Through her own choices and decisions, Martínez has demonstrated reasons she remains in the Church, and how she is or can be an influence for the Church.

In Latino communities, religious practices are always already interwoven with community practice. In his chapter in the book Mexican American Religions, Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo asks the provocative question: “Are Latinos going to merge with the Euro-American population, much as Saxon with Norman in England, so that both groups grow more like each other?” (58) In his study of one of the more intriguing of the Espinosa-García text, he explores the lack of use in the U.S. of the term transculturation, of frequent usage in Latin America and Europe. He urges its application for descriptions of Latino cultural practice: “During the centuries under Spain, the dynamics of religious traditions gradually forged a new identity for today’s Latinos—a successful mestizaje—that created a new people by erasing most of the distinctions between the conquered and the conqueror.” (59) He proposes that a lack of relations, and cultural understanding, between Euro-Americans and Latinos prevents meeting “most of the criteria for transculturation,” (59) thus the refusal to see the human behind the term illegal. The study Living “Illegal” considers that it is not politics but church interactions and church leadership that will guide a change in acceptance and understanding of the presence of the U.S. Latino.

While some writers are moving away from conceptual mestizaje, others, including Martínez, have not. In April 2005, she attended a panel discussion at the Harvard Divinity School in Boston, on a new book published by French anthropologist Jacques Audinet, The Human
Martínez demonstrates the influence of a term connected with Mexico: created in the colonial era, it was appropriated by Mexican Revolutionary ideology to celebrate the mixing of the races and to highlight, in equal importance, Indigenous heritage.

So what inspires Martínez? Many writers and artists call attention to their muse. In English-speaking societies, it is usually a Greek or Roman figure. For Martínez, it is not. So begins her column titled “La Música:”

My muse is not Greek … the spirit that guides me is La Llorona." (64)

A surprise, as readers may have expected the Virgin of Guadalupe or some other central religious icon. With “music” (in the title of her account which she does not discuss), it could perplex some readers, but those familiar with the influence of Náhuatl language on Spanish will know that “song” and “poem” are synonymous in Nahua (Mesoamerican traditions) with “philosophy and letters,” or art and literature. Interpreted in Spanish as “Flor y Canto,” also written Floricanto (Flower/Beauty and Song), since the early 20th century post-Revolution Mexico, and later the Chicano movement, it often serves as a title for creative venues and publishing houses. Martínez’s column continues:

Prophet of the conquest or mad woman driven to kill, Chicanos everywhere have feared and revered her [La Llorona]. They’ve written scholarly papers about her and even warned their children to behave les La Llorona appear at the window. La Llorona is the Chicana poet’s muse: she is a woman who will not be silenced. Her grief is as cosmic as her fury … She is [an] everywoman, dead and alive, hell-bent on testifying, from the murdered maquiladora workers of Juárez to the poet fidgeting with a pencil in a café, staring at a photograph of a Sudanese refugee. (65)

Mostly unrecognized in English-language lore, La Llorona is however a significant figure for Chicano and Mexican culture derived from ancient Nahua cultural history: A legend passed down for hundreds of years by persons of Mexican heritage, notwithstanding Catholic faith, it is present in everyday life. Variations of the legend have suggested connections to Malinche, but Nahua scholars have found evidence of its existence prior to Spanish arrival.

Tey Diana Rebolledo, in her critical text Women Singing in the Snow, finds La Llorona as significant a figure for Mexican and Mexican-American heritage as the curandera and Virgen of Guadalupe. Figuring prominently in Chicana writing, this figure “brought together Indian and Spanish folklore and legends …, a syncretic image connected both to a Spanish medieval notion of ánimas en pena and to the Medea myth, [but also] closely identified with pre-Colombian Aztec cultural heroes such as Mocihuaquetzue, valiant women who died in childbirth. These women were held sacred by Aztec warriors, who believed that carrying the third finger of Mocihuaquetzue’s left hand into battle would protect them. The women were believed to have supernatural powers, … however, when they had achieved their afterlife, they were known as Cihuapipiltzin, night ghosts who lay in wait at crossroads, … they were also vaguely connected to attributes of Coatlicue, who also at times roamed the crossroads.” (63)

Martínez discovers in La Llorona a nurturing figure, a guide who can help resolve problems but also brings inspiration:

Call La Llorona and she will take you walking along the Río Grande after dark, her arm around your waist. I know. She’s come calling for me whenever love has died in my hands like a
sparrow and I’ve run out of friends to repeat the story to. We go out under the cottonwoods, remove our shoes, and step into the water. The tears of all humanity swirl around our ankles. We dip our hands in and taste the blood and salt of sorrow. (64)

One particular night, the narrative voice says she doesn’t want a ceremony, only “a tranquilizer.” But La Llorona does not accommodate her: she is “shushed,” and told:

Your work is to feel—and not only your own pain but that of others. We walked on. She cradled in her arms, in a black rebozo, all that I was not ready to say. She held me up as I cried out for my dead children, my dreams and delusions of love. I feared I was going mad . . . So go mad she said, haven’t we all? I will be here to bring you back from the brink. One night I waited for her as usual on my front porch, but she did not show up. I knew this could only mean one thing. I went back inside. On my desk I found, wrapped in a black rebozo, some papers, the kind the Aztecs made out of wild fig trees and the bark of mulberry. Amatl it is called. ‘Llorona, Llorona,’ I whispered. What did she want me to write? …What had gone unsaid for months began to spill onto the page. When the poems were done, I read them out loud on my front porch at midnight, facing the river. La Llorona’s dead child, this one, was coming back to life. (65)

This is an account deeply sensitive and spiritual, one of Martínez’s longer columns. It culminates with three new poems by Martínez, of great intensity. The final poem ends with:

Does my strength scare you?
Come close. There’s no storm you hear, just a breeze.

And the chimes the sound of your own voice. (67)

According to Rebolledo, the figures of Malinche and la Llorona are “distinct cultural symbols for Chicana writers, never confused nor united: their identities remain clear and defined.” (112) While the former was a flesh-and-blood everywoman for Martínez, the latter is a spiritual symbol, and one of the more positive representations for strength and inspiration in contemporary literature. This Latina muse aids in the approach to contemporary life.

In “Spirit Matters,” Martínez speaks of writers giving themselves over to silence, marching across the blank page to find “the world at its worst,” but in hopeful anticipation “to push our creations toward safety and right action.” Souls, even fictional ones, she says, are not so easily manipulated … the novelist must eventually get out of the way so that characters can become their own persons, enter into their own pacts with God and the devil. (53)

When the creative writer,

begs an answer to the question, ‘Where were you, O God?’ We leave it to theologians to formulate answers. Our work is to stand in solidarity with those who have no answers. (54)

Humor is sometimes the best response to mystery and the unknown. In “Sign Language,” she describes a situation which required deeper contemplation: sitting, on a sunny day, in one room of her house, she hears a sound in the next room “like plaster falling”, and walks toward the location of the sound,
threw an egg into the room from outside. An account that plays with magical realism, it lends philosophical rendering to the meaning of life: the unexplainable in happy or silly child’s play.

An aspect of Latino heritage is the Spanish language, although few non-Latinos realize that at least one-third of U.S. Latinos are not at all fluent (since it was discouraged by parents of a previous generation in order to help their children get ahead). Many Latino writers, such as Martínez (and Rodríguez) are English-dominant. Although she occasionally sprinkles Spanish vocabulary in her columns, Martínez confesses to a desire to learn more Spanish in the account that gives name to her book: She purchased Berlitz tapes to improve her command of the language. She urges other Latinos of the “tongue-tied generation” who understood relatives when they were young to “come out of the closet” and renew a passion for this language. In "Bendita Soy Yo," she describes a habit of quality bedtime reading in Spanish:

Every night now I fall asleep reading Spanish: Vivir para contarla, Gabriel García Márquez’s memoir; the fifty-cent Hispano Times out of Amarillo; the Nuevo Testamento, you name it. I rarely have bad dreams when I do this, perhaps because reading in another language is a sort of meditation. One slows down, thinking takes on the quiet patter of a gentle rain. I’m not sure why I continue to refer to Spanish as “another” language. With each new experience of it, Spanish becomes more and more my own, mi tierra. I can dispense of my passport and roam freely. (68)

Alfred Arteaga, in Chicano Poetics, addresses the sexualized and gendered nature and influence of “Catholicism, the Spanish language, [and] the Western system of writing” (in his chapter on “Sex and Color”). Each “descends to mestizos from the [conquistador] father,” who destroyed native culture and the native body, replacing them with his own.” (26) The Chicano subject, according to Arteaga, is born with the advent of postmodernism, to discover a new poetics, a new way of creative writing, a process practiced in ancient Nahuatl tradition: in xochitl in cuicatli—flower (aesthetics) and song (poetry)—or flor y canto.

La Llorona leaves parchments similar to those used by the Nahua civilization for Martínez—she is connected to her ancient foremothers. Her poetics bring to light the complex nature of the Latino. Martínez is neither bi-lingual, bi-cultural, or Catholic; her heritage and history is not Indigenous, or Mexican, or U.S. Latino—she is all of these. The Chicano inherited a legacy of invasions, conquests and impositions, but he/she has transfigured those impositions—they work and emanate from contemporary interactions and identity.

In another column, “Bendita Soy Yo,” Martínez brings into play the influence of Arabic culture on Spanish heritage from Spain. The account opens with a quote from an ancient hymn in Spanish, and follows with her own verses of spiritual reckoning:

Hold fast to the reins of Cervantes
When death closes in.
Spanish? That’s an Arabian Horse you’re riding.
You say, Dios mio: my God Ojalá, I hope. But listen,
It’s Allah you’re hoping in,
Your horse resting in The shadow of a tiled arch
A prayer away from the mosque.
My language is so close To God it doesn’t matter
If you believe or not For now death has given
Up on you. These words Never will. (68)

While Martínez is noted among Chicano/Latino writers for her spiritual angles and the lyrical quality of her short narratives, her creative intent and contexts are reminiscent of a writer who could have been her foremother. Also consistently Catholic, with carefully crafted texts written in English, Josefina Niggli (1910–1983), was a standout for Mexican content in the early 20th century. Her declared goal was to foment understanding of the roots and nature of Mexican culture (in addition to telling a good story).e She created, staged, and published plays in English during the 1930s, the example most studied that of Soldadera, with an Adelita figure. Niggli published two novels in the 1940s: Mexican Village (1945), an extensive book based in mostly rural northern Mexico, near the
Texas border, has been categorized as folklore, and is often the only text by her that is visible or recognized in contemporary scholarship. Her second novel, *Step Down, Elder Brother* (1947), set in the cosmopolitan setting of the city of Monterrey, undertook exploration of development of a mestizo society, through one elite class family and its employees, during the commercial boom of immediate post-Revolution Mexico. Niggli describes the social strata as “those above” and “those below.” The novel also featured elements of Mayan culture—Niggli was likely reading new translations and studies of Mayan texts appearing during the 1930s, especially by Yucatán anthropologist Antonio Médiz Bolio. The novel also includes an excellent rendering in English of the Mesoamerican fable, the “Rabbit in the Moon,” and enriching references to the little known Casasola collection of historic photographs (the first news photography agency in Mexico).

Niggli's final novel, *A Miracle for Mexico* (1964), is the first creative work in English on the miraculous appearance of the Virgen de Guadalupe in 1531, and includes an interesting minor character of Doña Marina (Malintzin). This text also builds background for the understanding of mestizo ideals in a newly-formed, hybrid colonial society. Thus, all of Niggli’s creations have a continuous flow of Catholic and Indigenous heritage in the understanding of a contemporary Mexican. Niggli has another aspect in common with Martínez: She published two texts (during the 1940s) teaching radio and playwriting tips. These are titled *Pointers on Playwriting* and *Pointers on Radio Writing*. In *Confessions*, Martínez includes a column/chapter titled “Pointers,” with excellent writing tips, based on her own experience. The account opens stating that she has been asked for tips on how to write a novel, but she declares that *Mother Tongue* was written in “a nine-month trance while working at a full-time job,” and that she had never taken a writing workshop (which she now teaches). She proceeds, however, to lay out seven strategic points, and encourages trusting one’s inner spirit about notes and descriptions made on a routine basis and stored away.

Like Niggli, Martínez helps define Mexican heritage, presence and practice within U.S. society, fomenting a better understanding of both the U.S. Latino and U.S. Latino Catholicism. The influence on U.S. Catholicism by Mexican/Indigenous heritage and practice is revealed in examples that traverse everyday experiences, illness, celebratory moments and the impact of globalization and world crisis, while harmony and balance can be restored through recognition, and specific acts of healing. This process requires understanding of both indigenous practice and Catholicism, a spiritual understanding that is at once Catholic-Mexican-Indigenous.

While not an extensive book, the treasures of *Confessions of a Berlitz-tape Chicana* are huge: a lifetime of introspection, even retrospections, on the magical qualities and difficult turns of life, our collective living experience. Martínez's eloquent writing helps teach about a community and its history; her columns in *Confessions* provide a creative pathway to these lessons and consideration of indigenous concepts interwoven into colonial Catholicism.

N.B. Thank you to the blind reviewers of this study, and especially to Peter Casarella for his suggestions, including making comparisons to Richard Rodríguez.

**ENDNOTES**

1 Martinez says she finds relief and healing in writing: see interview with Michelle Johnson (2009).
2 Because of illness, she was not writing as frequently—her last blog post was in April of 2011.
3 This book only briefly makes note of Martínez's novel *Mother Tongue*, in a context of Central American refugees and the re-reading of Catholicism through liberation theology (upon citing Ellen McCracken's discussion on other Chicana novelists, 242–43).
4 Indigenous cultures of northwest Mexico were also evident: an interesting example is Estela Portillo-Trambley's novel *Trini*: ready for publication in 1973 (it received a Quinto Sol award), it was however held up for many years, as only male authors were being published. When finally released in 1986, the novel was completely overshadowed by Sandra Cisneros’ *House on Mango Street*, which was considered more feminist). The protagonist, Trini, is a brown-skinned *mestiza*, raised in Tarahumara country, who communes with indigenous spiritual guides. Having lost their mother, Trini's father sends for her aunt to care for her and younger siblings. She imposes Catholic teachings (against the girl's wishes). As a mother, Trini prays to Tonantzin, and alternately, Guadalupe.
Chapels devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe are longstanding and evident in every state of the U.S. Her image is also frequently depicted in a variety of cultural settings.

La Llorona (the weeping woman) is a Mexican-origin legend that has roots in Nahua culture, also linked occasionally to the indigenous interpreter, La Malinche, who was cast aside and had her child taken from her by Hernán Cortés (the child’s father) after he conquered now-Mexico City: it is said she cries out for her child. The indigenous legend states that she is a spirit found near bodies of water, searching for lost children, and that passers-by should beware or she could take their children. She is also emblematic of warning, a protective figure to prevent or warn of danger ahead: various figures in indigenous cultures serve this purpose, such as the cadejos (wolves or dogs in the wild, magical animals) in El Salvador.

In northern New Mexico her image even appears on county signposts, employed in warning to be careful of sudden, rushing waters in the acequias (as they are still called), drains along paths and roads. Sandra Cisneros’ story, “Woman Hollering Creek,” is a classic portrayal of her cultural influence on Chicano communities.

Born in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico to U.S. parents (although her father was born in Texas, he worked all of his adult life—from age 17—in Mexico), Niggli grew up in traditional a Mexican Catholic manner during the new post-Revolution years, even celebrating her quinceañera in Monterrey. After that, her mother took her to live in San Antonio, Texas, where she completed a bachelor’s degree at Incarnate Word College, and then relocated to North Carolina for a master’s in playwriting. Of commanding presence, Niggli was also a theater coach and college professor for many years.

Saluted by a prominent bishop in the Catholic Church upon his meticulous reading of her novel, for its explanations both scientific and spiritual, stating he had never seen such excellent description of the miracle. Because the publisher was trying to market a new “juvenile” series, this book was unfortunately labeled a “children’s book” and continues to be catalogued in this manner. But that was not Niggli’s intention, and current assessments are that it needs to be re-catalogued. This accounts for little awareness of the novel. The protagonist is a 13-year-old mestizo, the son of a Spanish conquistador and Indigenous woman who died in childbirth; he is being educated by the new system, and attempting to understand his identity. He is also already committed in marriage to a mestiza. Because he is fluent in both Spanish and Náhuatl, he ends up translating for the Bishop when Juan Diego appears, and is later sent to help investigate the matter. In the process he meets Malintzin, the wife of Juan Jaramillo.

**WORKS CITED**


**BOOKS BY DEMETRIA MARTÍNEZ**


