

## **Building Bridges in Marie Arana's *American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood***

**by Danielle French**

From the acclaimed prose texts of Karr's *The Liar's Club* (1995) and Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017) to celebrated graphic narratives such as Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) and Sattouf's *The Arab of the Future* (2015), professional writers and artists often turn to memoir to communicate something significant faced in childhood. But why write about childhood experiences as an adult for adult readers? Are memoirists and readers romanticizing childhood by consuming media centered on experiential knowledge from early life?

Psychologists acknowledge the benefits of returning to childhood through varying mediums of storytelling, which has been historically linked with healing. Judith Herman (1992) points out that sharing one's story is used for psychotherapeutic treatment of trauma. Moreover, Alan Parry and Robert E. Doan suggest, "in addition to being inescapably born into an already storied world, children actively enter these stories as soon as they equip themselves with a language, continuing them as a means of making them their own reality" (38). Storytelling then becomes a mode of self-legitimizing and negotiating a space for the self in our current postmodern context (25). Still, why do career writers and artists, many already successful, record childhood experiences in memoir, and what is the purpose of publishing memories of childhood?

Inscribing one's life by piecing together memories in writing creates a space in which the author can not only make sense of what has happened, but she can also decide which version of her life, "that, given a few days, a few weeks, a few years, [ . . . ] will be the only one worth writing and, therefore, worth remembering" (Aciman par. 16). The memoirist may have any number of motivations or purposes in authoring a self-revelatory text, and avid readership of both adult and children's nonfiction shows only increasing demand for more literature that centers on lived experience. According to the "2015 U.S. Book Industry Year-End Review" by the Nielson Company, "In looking at category trends, non-fiction was the highlight of 2015, with 12% growth in children's non-fiction and 7% growth in adult non-fiction" (para. 3). Similarly, the German Book Office of New York reports, "The adult nonfiction segment remained the largest print category. The juvenile nonfiction category post an increase of 11.7% over 2014" (1). On *Statista*, "U.S. Book Industry/Market- Statistics & Facts" forecasts that the global book market will increase from \$113 billion in 2015 to \$123 billion in 2020 and reports that "31 percent Americans said biographies and memoir was their preferred type of book (Fuller para. 1 and 6). So, to the extent that they are reading at all, Americans are reading life writing at both the adult and juvenile levels, indicating the desire for knowing "real" stories about how people have struggled, overcome, and lived.

Popular memoirs published over the last fifty years often recreate childhood experiences in order to reanimate and reexamine long-past experiences, places, and people. Again, the purpose of writing a memoir of childhood experience differs widely. For Ishmael Beah, author of *A Long Way Gone* (2007), writing "had become for me a way to prove my existence" and by detailing his experience as a child soldier in Sierra Leone, Beah hopes "to deepen their understanding of the other, of places that may seem far away" (Maran 4). While writing about

childhood in memoir form has a variety of motives and purposes, a coming-of-age memoir typically focuses on the maturation of the narrator and is similar to the *bildungsroman* in fiction in that we see characters mature in some way; often, this growth does not just refer to physical development, but it also includes spiritual, emotional, and psychological development. Though primarily focusing on her childhood and adolescence, in *American Chica: Two Worlds, One Childhood*, Marie Arana includes excerpts from her present, flashbacks and flash-forwards in time, specifically detailing her parents' lives. Juanita Heredia notes that Arana writes in English instead of Spanish, and because "Arana is located at the interstices of being a U.S.-based Latina and Latin American author, I suggest that she can be considered a cultural and literary translator of Peruvian society" (112). As a child, Arana shuttles between the United States and Peru easily, but in her adolescent years, she struggles to forge her identity with her cross-cultural background. Illustrating the difficulty of reconciling between two very different ways of life, Arana continues, "There is a fundamental rift between North and South America, a flaw so deep it is tectonic. The plates don't fit. The earth is loose. A fault runs through. Earthquakes happen. Walls are likely to fall" (3). She continues, "The reality is I am a mongrel. I live on bridges; I've earned my place on them, stand comfortably when I'm on one, content with betwixt and between" (301). The dominant and recurring image in *American Chica* is a bridge, and by constructing her own bridge with this memoir, readers see Arana negotiate the complexities of identity formation with a bicultural childhood when she is both Peruvian and American but neither one exclusively.

Through examining her parents' relationship, Arana observes that though complete opposites, her parents have managed to stay together for half a century. Her mother represents the United States with her individuality, self-reliance, and experience, and her Peruvian father hailing from a traditional Latin American family provided Arana with two polar-opposite parents and cultural backgrounds. She writes, "They were so different from each other, so obverse in every way. I did not know that however resolutely they built their bridge, I would only wander its middle, never quite reaching either side" (3). Wandering around on the bridge of her parents' relationship, Arana finds herself stuck in an in-between space of unbelonging. Arana's bridge echoes of the "stairwell" in Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, which is "a liminal space, in-between the designations of identity" (4). Though this space of unbelonging is confusing, Arana needs this space for negotiation and constitution of identity, and she writes, "I love to walk a bridge and feel that split second when I am neither here nor there, when I am between going and coming," showing her courage and willingness to explore the unknown (301). Not only does Arana need this bridge space, but she also creates it herself both through her own negotiations of identity and her recording of it in her memoir. With this backdrop, Arana records her childhood in *American Chica*, and though the lens of childhood, she begins to unravel and reassemble the construction of her identity in retrospect, recognizing the complexities of bridging bicultural, transnational spaces and with a community of others, negotiates a space for herself in the liminal in-between.

## **“We were neither; we were both”: Identity Construction and Bicultural Influences of Race, Socio-economic Status, and Gender<sup>1</sup>**

With a focus on negotiating identity in a transnational, bicultural experience, defining identity is vital. What is identity, and what influences the construction of identity? In “Theorizing at the Borders: Considering Social Location in Rethinking Self and Psychological Development,” Kelli Zaytoun addresses identity by focusing on developmental psychology: “the study of psychological growth across the lifespan” (54). Zaytoun defines identity as “self-concept, or knowledge about the self as a distinctive being in the world” and notes that this understanding of the self “becomes more sophisticated as one learns to reflect on (not just perform) their actions and interactions in the world” (54). Zaytoun questions the after the fact consideration of race, gender, and ethnicity when determining the process of self-conception, or identity; instead, she posits a preliminary consideration of “race, gender, and other socially constructed categories of identity, to raise new questions and perspectives on what constitutes and influences self-concept and psychological capacities” (54, 53). Furthermore, she calls for “more cross-cultural critique and exploration of foundational concepts within development,” which is where Arana’s memoir becomes particularly salient (55). Arana searches for a place, a sense of belonging in her memoir; when one is from both places and belongs to neither, where does one live? Judith Jordan’s notion of the “relational self” perspective, based on studies of women’s psychological growth, which emphasizes that humans ‘thrive in being in connection’ is important for understanding Marie’s development in the text (Zaytoun 55). In *American Chica*, this concept of the relational self is a primary foundation for the understanding of identity, because it is by retrospective consideration of external influences and making human connections that Arana constructs her identity as a Peruvian American, which is notably unhyphenated. Accordingly, Arana must consider the factors of how race, culture, social status, and gender interact and influence her when trying to determine what her “self-concept” is.

In *American Chica*, Arana questions the construct and constructions of race. Since her parents represent the two Americas for her, Arana finds herself a mix between the two, especially when it comes to color and nationality. At the train station in St. Louis in 1956, there are “Colored” and “Whites” ladies’ restrooms, and Arana is confused by the idea of color and the cultural assignments for people with different shades of skin (173). Though she has no African blood, Arana is still a darker hue than what many consider “white,” despite her mother’s insistence. Using words like “ocher,” “hazelnut,” and “chocolate” to describe the skin tones of her Peruvian friends and family, Arana determines that though Vicki, her older sister, can pass as white, there is no way she would be considered “white” (174). Later, when she is in Rawlins, Wyoming, she determines, “There was nothing white about me. I was colored, for sure,” which further pinpoints her dilemma of being colored enough not to be considered white but not colored enough to be black (193). Heredia points out that her mother complicates the process by asserting that her children are American, instead of half-American and half-Peruvian (116). Heredia continues, “By negating their Peruvian heritage, she [Marie Campbell] may think that she is protecting them, but she may also be causing further confusion, which may be problematic and lead to an identity crisis when they become adults” (117). With this cross-

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cultural, biracial focus in mind, Zaytoun submits, “There is much research that suggests that people of color have multiple consciousnesses and knowledge systems due to experiencing the world as a minority” (67). Though she understands shades of color in Peru, Arana confides, “Here in March of 1956, in the St. Louis train station, however, where black and white was spelled so boldly—where colors were carved on doors with directives—I do believe that for the first time I feared a little for myself” (175). Thus, Arana, somewhere between the stark white and black binary of race in the Jim Crow era of the US, must determine where she fits, or if she fits at all.

Yet how does a child negotiate with race? Particularly toward the end of Jim Crow, Arana is forced to confront her being “colored” enough to not be considered white but also that she is not black. Particularly situated in the history of slavery and Jim Crow segregation in the United States, Nikki Khanna and Cathryn Johnson highlight the importance of the “one-drop rule” that “defined multiracial people with any drop of black blood as *black*” (380). Arana is faced with being brown in segregated America, and despite her mother’s attempts to affirm that young Marie is both American and white because she, Marie Campbell, is American and white, young Marie is still a racial outsider and has the particularly difficult and complex task of identity development as a child belonging both to ethnic and racial minority groups (Spencer and Markstrom-Adams 290). Though a number of theorists and psychologists affirm “*all* adolescents are faced with the task of identity establishment,” children and adolescents of minority people groups face additional difficulties through childhood precursors including “constructs of ethnic and racial identification, ethnic and racial preference, ethnic and racial attitudes, and reference group orientation” (292). Spencer and Markstrom-Adams also note important differences between race and ethnicity within minorities saying, “Hispanics are distinguished by their shared language (Spanish) although they may differ by race,” which is something that Arana notes herself when she first becomes aware of racial difference (292).

Thus, the racism Arana sees is not constrained to the United States, but location and environment play key roles in how racial and ethnic identity is constituted and perceived. Recalling her first consideration of race, she writes,

I had not yet turned seven, but I knew what race meant. There were Peruvians who measured color with what seemed the precision of laboratory calipers, but I had never suspected that any of it would pose a danger to me. I had balked at not being permitted to invite an *india* to my birthday; I had pressed my ear against the bedroom doors to hear the scandal of the laundress’s daughter, I had been humiliated by a schoolteacher who didn’t think I was sufficiently brown. But race in Peru was a subtler issue than in the United States. *Indios* came down from the mountains, in from the jungle, went to convent schools, mixed with *mestizos*, and then their *mestizo* children mixed with the *blancos*, mixed with the *chinos*, mixed with the *sambos*, moved to the cities, mixed it up more. (174-175)

Though she understands the idea of racial difference in a Peruvian context, when she arrives in Rawlins, Wyoming, Arana and her brother, George, are confused by their icy reception. When an old man confronts them for no other reason than overhearing them speak to each other in Spanish, he immediately insists that they are “[o]n the wrong side of town,” saying, “They just

sittin' there spick-a-da Spanish. What they doin' here anyway? They got a school over there fer these varmint” (192). It is after this incident that Arana begins to see that color is not seen in gradients as it is in Peru; in the Jim Crow era of the United States, the fact that she is not one hundred percent white makes her “colored,” despite not being of African origin, and confines her to that side of town, school, and experience, though she is also shunned there for not being “colored” enough.

Though Arana understands that there is ethnic and racial bias in the world, due to of the more subtle distinctions of color and ethnicity that she sees in Peru, readers see young Marie completely unprepared for the very deep racial lines in the mid-twentieth century US. Heredia also highlights this issue: “Arana draws attention to the fact that the United States perceived itself as a ‘black and white’ nation, therefore obliterating the incorporation of any ethnicities, cultures, and races that differed from these two models” (117). Because Arana is neither white nor colored enough, she is left hanging in the balance by the fixed color segregation in the US. According to Nadine Dolby, “identity is produced and reproduced” because “race and other categories of identity are not fixed entities but are contingent on political and historical context” (Zaytoun 56). Returning to *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha emphasizes the complexities of the “transnational dimension of cultural transformation,” saying that despite “natural[ized] unifying discourse” and “embedded myths of culture’s particularities. . .it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition” (172). Because socially constructed categories and how they are privileged in any culture can change, developing a singular self-concept when you “come from” two places becomes increasingly difficult. This appears to be Arana’s struggle—how to reconcile her feelings about herself in the context of Peru and the United States.

In the memoir, Arana identifies as being culturally both Peruvian and American. She writes, “I knew, with a certainty I could feel in my bones, that I was deeply Peruvian” (7). With her mother’s influence and teaching, Arana begins to develop an “American indoctrination,” in which she begins to “see the world through a foreign scrim, feel apart” and “become the creature of a place I’d never smelled or seen” (114). Thus, Marie Campbell, her mother, begins to assimilate her children into American culture, even though they are still reside in Peru. Moving to a completely American context, after the family moves from Peru to Summit, New Jersey in 1959, Arana declares, “As for us children, we were Americans now. We hardly thought of our pasts; we hardly spoke Spanish. As the months went by, I shucked Peru entirely, referring to it only when I thought it would give me a moment’s advantage, a teacher’s attention” (280). However, when she talks to her father about a social studies project on the Andes and tells him that she is *Peruana*, her father replies, “No, Marisi. You’re a gringa, like your mother. You’re not a Peruvian anymore” (282). Pinpointing this dilemma, Zaytoun notes, “Culture determines the possibilities and boundaries for how an individual perceives themselves in relationship to their surroundings’ (58). With two very different cultures privileged at different points, Arana seems to have an Eriksonian identity crisis because instead of the stability of a dominant culture, there is a competing, bicultural experience, and she must determine how or if she can reconcile the two (see Rumbaut 753). At this point, the reader sees her struggle to hold on to her Peruvian self while trying to assimilate and become an American. In “Psychological Impact of Biculturalism: Evidence and Theory,” LaFromboise et al. theorize biculturalism stemming from an alternation method of acculturation (seemingly similar to codeswitching in linguistics) in

which the bicultural child is competent in each culture, leading to high degrees of competence in “cultural beliefs and values,” maintains a “positive attitude toward both groups,” has “bicultural efficacy,” “communication competency,” “role repertoire,” and exhibits “groundedness” (402-403, 408-409). LaFromboise et al. even indicate “research suggests that individuals living in two cultures may find the experience to be more beneficial than living a monocultural life-style,” but caution that “the key to psychological well-being may well be the ability to develop and maintain competence in both cultures” (402). Furthermore, citing Ramirez and Castaneda (1974), Spencer and Markstrom state, “ideally, children should be allowed to develop a bicultural identity that consists of a dual identification; however, Arana’s family, particularly her parents, do not allow her the option of dual identification, so Arana has to turn to other means of negotiating and substantiating bicultural selfhood (302).

Not only does Arana deal with family barriers to bicultural identity formation, but she also has barriers by virtue of her environment and location. When Lucilla, an African-American girl who bullies Arana, calls her a “wigggle-butt wetback” and tells her, “You oughta go back where you belong,” Arana explains, “We were the ‘neither-here-nor-there people’: one thing when here, the other when there. Or forever from some other place. We were neither; we were both” (283). However, the cultures within the United States are very different, and Arana struggles with her childhood perception of Rawlins, Wyoming, and later her move to Summit, New Jersey. She says, “Summit was nothing like Mother, really, nor was it anything like the American school in Lima, nor like Rawlins, Wyoming, whose lingo we heard in our dreams” (265). Because of the drawling, Western English she heard before, Arana adopts this accent when speaking English in New Jersey (266). It is only after Suzi, a friend, points out that Arana is “talking weird” and saying “things all wrong” that she modifies her English (266). This is mirrored when numerous American characters accuse her of being Mexican; although this is most likely just a racial stigma, it also might be because these characters only associate speaking Spanish with Mexico and are unable or unwilling to differentiate between a Mexican and a Peruvian accent. However, Arana and her siblings eventually learn to differentiate between the culture of the rural Western US and that of urban New Jersey. Flashing forward to the present, Arana calls out Lucilla: “There are nearly forty million of us in your country now, Lucilla. We belong here. Just like you” (283). Yet this retrospective dual identification as both an immigrant and an American is spoken from Arana as an adult, not as a child, and before Arana is able to articulate this stance as an adult, she had to negotiate an identity process in spite of the barriers to healthy identity formation, necessitating the “bridge” that is her memoir.

Adding another layer, the categories of social status and class also affect Arana’s development of identity. In Peru, she is set apart in Cartavio as the daughter of the young engineer in a US owned town, and the family resides in a gated house that is “impervious to vendors, to factory workers, to ordinary Peruvians, to the sprawl of humanity that struggled a few hundred feet from the door” (9, 10). She also notes that her Abuelita is “a thoroughly social Limeña” who loves parties and dressing up “in her velvets and satins” to attend socialites’ weddings and have tea with relatives (120). Overall, Arana comes from an aristocratic family in Peru, and this is highlighted when she is not permitted to invite certain kinds of children to her birthday party and in how she is expected to act when she stays at Abuelita’s house for three months (174, 119-122). However, in New Jersey, bills pile up while her father is in Peru, and Mother takes a job at a dress shop, which is something that her father would never approve of

(292). Addressing how identity and social setting interact, Zaytoun states, “The self is intricately embedded in relationships not only to other people, but to aspects of the world that include social groups, communities, and inanimate and spiritual entities that are deemed important to the individual according to social influence and identity categories within which they relate” (59). Going from being the daughter of an American-trained engineer in Peru to the only Latina in public school in New Jersey, Arana struggles with belonging to different social classes in two hemispheres.

Finally, gender constructs also affect Arana’s self-concept in the memoir, and two different female constructs are seen in two women who play a special role in her life: Mother and Abuelita. Arana muses, “The difference between my mother and my grandmother—I know it now after all these years—was not one between woman and woman. It was the difference between an Anglo’s daughter and the mother of a Latin male. It was a difference between men and men” (65). Arana describes how the Latin male is groomed and coddled by his mother; it is this fundamental difference that drives Abuelita and Mother apart, though they are physically very different, as well (65-66).

Arana’s mother, Marie Campbell, does not conform to the cultural customs of Peru and offends her mother-in-law when Vicki is born. The cultural custom of family celebration and heavy involvement during labor and the early infancy of a child is foreign and frightening to Mother; instead of bowing to the pressure of the Arana Cisneros, “She digs in, marks her turf” (60). Because Abuelita considers Vicki “an offering to the family matriarch,” Rosa demands most of the time with the newborn, only relinquishing Vicki to Mother for feedings (62). In response to this treatment, Mother writes a “declaration” of sorts, explicitly telling Abuelita and the rest of the family to back off, which creates a *pleito*, “that inching toward fury, that lingering grudge to the grave,” which Arana finds difficult to navigate, even as an adult (62, 63).

The reader sees Arana’s struggle with Peruvian and American gender constructs particularly illustrated in her marriages. After becoming “Peruvian again in college,” she marries and describes herself as: “a good Latina in my first marriage, going to the altar with the first man who ever touched me, hanging my future on his, never reaching for him in bed” (145). Heredia points out that it is during those years in Asia, specifically in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore, that Arana teaches, obtains degrees, and eventually finds her career aspiration of being an editor (110, 122). Arana recalls her second marriage: “And then I was a good gringa in my second [marriage], throwing out all the rule books and following my heart” (145). Not only does she become more in control of her sexuality and her heart, but Heredia notes that Arana also follows her career aspirations (122). Furthermore, Heredia stresses, “Essentially, Marisi Arana grows into an ‘American chica’ from experiences in both marriages as she redefines the limits of her gender as well” (122). Ultimately, Arana embraces both cultures in her name; she does not retain her full Latina name (Marie Elverine Arana Campbell), but she clearly publishes under Marie Arana. Thus, she claims her father’s name, which is an American/European practice, but decides to keep her family name instead of taking her husband’s name, Yardley, which hints at her Latin roots.

## The Importance of Community in Childhood Identity Formation

So, how does Arana navigate these socially constructed, bicultural categories of race, social status, and gender to negotiate her identity despite the barriers she encounters? The creation and publication of *American Chica* affords a community of readers, potentially from both hemispheres, and it is through Arana's human connections and eventual work on Peruvian history that she really discovers herself. Importantly, location plays a part in developing self-concept, Rita Felski writes, "If selfhood is formed in a dialogic and relational fashion, no basis exists for ascribing an unchanging core of identity to one or more members of a group," and continues, "What it means to be a certain kind of person will shift in accordance with external forces, under the pressure or seismological shifts in attitudes and forms of life" (46). By returning to childhood connections with similar "others" through the lens of self-revelatory literature, Arana sees how fellow outsiders continually negotiate and establish themselves in a space of unbelonging and hybridity. In "Memoir as Performance: Strategies of Hybrid Ethnic Identity," Shane T. Moreman turns to Angharad Valdivia for defining hybridity through elements that are "scientific (heredity), social construction (discourse, and even the strategic (choice of representation)," and he discusses Latino-white hybrid individuality through analysis of performance and identification (348, 349). So, just as Mother finds friendship in another outsider, Carmen, Arana finds companionships and connections with many other "outsiders" including Eddie, Antonio, Tommy Pineda, Kit, Carol, and Erika (164-166).

Eddie is described as being a "Blackamerican" (93). After finding out that his great-grandfather had been fathered by a slave owner, Eddie returns a different man; Arana writes, "When my friend got back on his motorcycle for the ride home, he did it with the eerie understanding that he would never again feel something so simple as pure, racial anger. He was black. But he was also white. He was master; he was slave" (93). She recalls Eddie's story specifically to connect Eddie's calling to Virginia to her own calling to Antonio (94). Antonio is a servant in her household and an "indigenous Peruvian, high-browed, straight-necked, with skin the color of cinnamon bark," and Arana is entranced by him (83). By being indigenous and a servant, Antonio is an outsider to her, but because he treats her as an equal, she seeks him out and asks him countless questions (83-84). Antonio represents traditional, indigenous Peruvian beliefs, not just the Catholicism of Abuelita, and it can be argued that her time with Antonio is what really links Arana with Peru.

Her experience with Tommy Pineda, a local boy in Paramonga who has a mental disability, builds on the Peruvian beliefs she learns from Antonio. Perhaps simply because of his mental disability, Tommy is large, drools, and is the subject of many superstitious rumors, making him very much an outsider. When their beloved German shepherd, Sigurd, is found dead in a molasses pit after an earthquake, locals believe that Tommy is to blame (160). However, it is not until Mrs. Birdseye confronts Arana about the truth of Tommy that she learns to distinguish between Peruvian beliefs and local superstitious gossip (168). After actually meeting Tommy, she thinks, "It struck me how impossible it would have been for this docile colossus to kill a dog, suck it dry, float it out in the country-club pool to be screeched at by servants" (168). He gives her a tiny, perfect seashell as a gift, and she takes this as foreshadowing her first journey from Peru to the United States. Despite the cultural and communal superstitious beliefs, Tommy's kindness overshadows her fear of him. With this

experience, she seems to be able to navigate among several different belief systems and emerge with remnants of each that ground and comfort her. Though later in life she is thrown into several religious ideologies, she seems to hold on to Antonio's *historias*, *qosqo*, and *leyendas*.

When she moves to the United States, Arana connects with three girls with very different cultural backgrounds. Arana recalls, "My first best friend was Kit, a pale, black-Irish beauty, who was the tragic heroine that hung on my grandmother's wall. She was big-brained and cameo-delicate. Musical. Wicked. And she shared my passion to scare" (286). Connecting her childhood love of discussing *apus* and the supernatural, she and Kit become fast friends, bonding over reading Poe, having séances, and staging fits (268). This is the first time that the reader sees her connect her American friend with something from her Peruvian heritage in the text; however, after being bullied at school, the reader sees Arana struggle with both "halves" of herself.

Arana sees Carol, an African American friend, switching between cultures and using "two dialects, two personalities, two senses of humor, two ways of shaking a hand, two ways of saying hello—one for the world you're trying to make a way in, another when you're home with your kin" (271). From Arana's perspective in the text, Carol seems to have mastered the dual identity formation that Spencer and Markstrom-Adams discuss (302). On the other hand, perhaps Carol is exhibiting more of what Khanna and Johnson refer to as "doing" or performing race depending on her context (383, 389). Carol is an outsider in that she is a black woman who fears that "she'd always thought that whites who saw her in her other context wouldn't understand it. She worried they wouldn't trust her when she resumed standard English" (271). After Arana sees Carol act completely different with her black friends, they both agree that despite their different backgrounds, "the fear of being called a faker, an impostor, had meaning for both of us" (271). Thus, Arana examines her own cultural duality, observing her shift between being Peruvian and American for different contexts, and decides to "invent" a whole new person (272). This process is what Moreman refers to in his discussing of the hybrid strategy of the twin, which the individual "acknowledges the two-ness of his/her identity and lives in that two-ness" (362). Furthermore, these twin identities, though existing in the same body are separate and use contextual clues to determine which identity to perform, exhaust the individual, which is something that Arana indicates in the memoir as she describes herself as having "two heads, two hearts" (Moreman 363, Arana 194).

Finally, Arana finds friendship with Erika, a German immigrant with a single mother, Minna (285). Both Erika and Arana are bullied about their cultural backgrounds, but while Erika is clearly mocked as a German with faux-Hitler salutes, Arana's heritage is less certain, and she is often mistaken for being Mexican (286). Arana admires Erika's "twoness," and Erika holds on to her cultural background, replying to taunts by saying that "German dolls are prettiest" and the like (286, 291). However, Erika and Minna's presence seem to establish that is that she is "no foreigner" (290). Because Arana finds herself "deeply and indelibly American, from this hemisphere, taught Americanness from infancy," she learns that though she looks different, she can be both Peruvian and American (290). Thus, with each human connection she makes, each strategy she observes, she becomes stronger and learns more about her self-concept. By going outside her family and connecting with other outsiders, she is able to turn those connections into a bridge, which links her identity from North to South America.

Though the connections between Arana and the other characters in the memoir are important, Arana still needs to negotiate childhood identity formation outside the realm of identification and disidentification with similar though different “others.” Returning to Moreman, he identifies a continuum of strategies of hybrid identity and performance including “imposter, mongrel, homeless, bridge, and twin,” which are taken from his analysis of three memoirs, Moreman takes these five strategies verbatim from each text and analyzes how each author conceives, shapes, and performs each (356). Moreman discusses Arana enacting “bridge-hybridity strategy” through her movement between translator for her rather and good American daughter for her mother, which ultimately connects the two (361). He concludes that though this strategy “privileges the Latina/o-white hybrid as being able to understand both [cultures/spaces]” and that it may provide “a conduit for others,” the detriment of this strategy is that “the Latina/o-white hybrid is never completely a member of either culture, but is relegated to being a perpetual liminality” (362). In her final words in her memoir, Arana affirms being a manifestation of this perpetual liminality by stating, “I, a north-south collision, a New World fusion. An American *chica*. A bridge” (305).

## **Conclusion and Further Discussion**

Though Arana (and by extension, her memoir) is a bridge that spans Peruvian and American culture, there is a cost in remaining suspended between two cultures. Indeed, Arana is not alone in facing significant barriers to healthy identity formation, and though the US has progressed beyond Jim Crow era segregation laws and infringement of civil rights by virtue of race and ethnicity, children and adolescents face increased difficulty with “the influence of relevant social contexts on self-concept, self-regard, and psychological well-being” (Rumbaut 756). In the April 2018 “Prevalence of Mental Disorder and Service Use by Immigrant Generation and Race/Ethnicity Among U.S. Adolescents,” Georgiades et al. highlight the importance of “considering social, economic, and cultural influences in etiologic and treatment studies of psychopathology” and state, “Lower rates of service use, particularly among first-generation immigrant adolescents, highlight the need to identify and address barriers to recognition and treatment of mental disorders among adolescents from immigrant and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds” (280). Though Arana’s younger readers may be some sixty years behind her, the children and adolescents who are struggling to develop a healthy bicultural identity still face many of the same barriers and disadvantages of hybrid strategies of performance. As child studies theorists, postcolonial theorists, and psychologists mentioned in the text have all affirm, there is considerable work to be done to ensure that multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic children are afforded the formation of a healthy and positive sense of identity (Rumbaut 753).

At the end of the memoir, Arana brings up the image of the bridge again: “It connects points that might never have touched. Perhaps it is simply that a bridge depends on two sides to support it, that it is a promise, a commitment to two” (301). Thus, it makes sense when she writes, “I count both cultures as my own. But I’m happy to be who I am, strung between identities, shuttling from one to another, switching from brain to brain. I am the product of people who launched from one land to another, who slipped into other skins, lived by other

rules—yet never put their cultures behind them” (301). With this statement, the reader sees her “palsy of the double-soul” melt into a rich bicultural, transnational heritage that she has created for herself (292). Early in the text, she writes, “Connections are everywhere if I can make them,” but by the end of the memoir, Arana has matured before the reader’s eyes and has connected small pieces of both cultures into a bridge, and she confides, “The connections have not always been easy to follow. But they are there when I look for them. They are there” (73, 303). Felski argues, “Literary texts offer us new ways of seeing, moments of heightened self-apprehension, alternate ways of what Proust calls reading the self” (48). By returning to childhood experience in her memoir, Arana is able to trace the aforementioned connections, forging a self-concept that is rooted deeply in each location of culture, helping both Arana and readers navigate the rich complexities of bicultural, transnational spaces.

Furthermore, by publishing the connections she’s made in *American Chica*, Arana can claim what Mary Karr calls “the shiniest of gems: readers who get it” because though Karr had not even looked her memoir in years, talking about the memoir (and her childhood experiences) with others forged a powerful community (xiii). While Arana might not continuously re-read *American Chica*, discussing childhood experiences with readers from similar or different backgrounds likely provides greater support and understanding of childhood because of the community created through the publication of her memoir. Though not every reader will engage with the text favorably, reader communities open up dialogue for people to understand each other and have the power to effect pro-social change, particularly in dismantling essentialist narratives about those from unprivileged minority groups.

Cross-cultural coming of age memoirs like *American Chica* that grapple with difference and identity contribute to the larger global discussion about privilege and who fits where. Arana’s memoir addresses the bicultural complexities of race, socio-economic status, gender, barriers to healthy formations of bicultural identity, and questions of self when one is simultaneously both and neither. Arana is an *American chica*: she is a bridge (305). As Moreman suggests, this bridge is not just for herself, but for others also (362). But being a bridge has physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological costs, and Arana is stuck in the in-between: providing a space for understanding while still suspended between continents and cultures. Arana’s memoir and experience highlight the necessity for supporting healthy formations of identity, particularly for children and adolescents from multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic people groups. Arana’s memoir shows how, despite the myriad of barriers to forming a healthy bicultural self-concept in the early 1960s of the United States, it is possible to achieve a satisfying selfness as both a bridge between worlds, and as a unique individual.

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