

Introduction, Michele Serros
Penn State University, November 7, 2005

There has been no more salient and influential concept in Latina/o culture and cultural studies over the past two decades than the notion of hybridity. Perhaps most famously defined in Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, hybridity, or *mestizaje*, as she calls it, is manifested in the intermingling and sometimes confrontations of indigenous, Mexican, and Anglo cultures—a mixture that comprises Chicana/Chicano identity.

Our guest today, Michele Serros, wonderfully and often humorously represents the complexities of Chicana identity in her prose and poetry. In her two books, she manages to uphold the importance of Chicana/o identity while simultaneously showing how impossible and even counterproductive it is, at times, to insist on neatly defined categories. What is a Chicana? A Chicana Falsa? A Chicana Role Model? The Mexican-American protagonists of Serros's stories eat Hamburger Helper, pudding pops, Hi C, and chicken pot pie. They speak Spanish, but not well enough to avoid the criticisms of authentic Chicana writers on the look out for "grammaticos wrongos." They know Mexico, but mainly as tourists going to study Spanish in a quaint Mexican village.

Yet this very hybridity is binding: the narrators and poetics voices also convey a strong pride in being Latina. They claim their indigenous roots. They object to Madonna playing Evita Peron. They critique the racism of the curious passenger on a plane who persists in asking "Where are you from?", doubtful that a brown-skinned person can be truly American even if her great-grandparents were born in California.

Due to the refusal to find easy answers, Serros's stories take unpredictable and often very funny turns—the writer visiting the fifth grade classroom is supposed to be the role model for all ethnic kids, yet they only complain when the teacher exhorts them to line up and give the writer a high five before recess. The real ally turns out to be the cook in the lunchroom, listening with a ladle in her hand. A consistent attention to questions of class and access to resources—including the writer's struggle to make a living—cuts across much of Michele's work.

Michele was born and raised in Oxnard, California. As an undergraduate student at Santa Monica College in the early 1990s, she had her first book of poetry and short prose published--*Chicana Falsa* and other stories of death, identity, and Oxnard, which was later republished by Riverhead Books in 1998, along with her book of short stories, *How to be a Chicana Role Model*. The latter became a Los Angeles times best seller. She is now writing *Honey Blonde Chic*, a young adult novel that will be published by Simon and Schuster this spring.

Serros also brings the written word alive, as I'm sure we'll see today. She has performed her poetry for the Lollapalooza poetry tour, recorded them for Mercury records, and was selected by the Poetry Society of America to have her poems placed on MTA buses throughout Los Angeles County. She crosses media: she has been a featured contributor for the Los Angeles Times' children's fiction section, a commentator for National Public Radio, and a writer for the ABC television sitcom, *The George Lopez Show*.

This is an important occasion for Latina/o Studies at Penn state, as we are now in the process of getting an undergrad and graduate minor in Latina/o studies approved and

in place for next fall. On behalf of the Women's Studies Program, the Rock Ethics Institute, and the Latina/o Studies Initiative, I would like to extend my appreciate to Michele for coming here today to help us consolidate a Latina/o community. I won't ask all of you to give Michele a high five at the end of today's presentation, but please do join me in giving her a warm round of applause.