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The colorful buffet of derogatory terms for when people of color "act white" includes coconuts, oreos, apples, and twinkies. In contemporary Latinx children's and young adult (YA) literature, a character can be labeled a "coconut" for not knowing Spanish, listening to certain genres of music, or excelling in school. Quijana in Rebecca Balcarcel's *The Other Half of Happy* and Malú in Celia C. Pérez's *The First Rule of Punk* are hurt when classmates call them coconuts and both struggle with their racial and ethnic identities as children with one Latinx and one White parent. Implicitly, accusations of "acting white" rely on narrow and stereotypical definitions of what it means to be a person of color and function as a gatekeeping mechanism designed to determine authenticity within constricting and inaccurate parameters. In aligning academic achievement with whiteness, mainstream narratives about nerdiness and who is college-bound participate in the erasure of young people of color from school settings. Given the reality of the school to prison pipeline and the literal disappearance of youth of color from society due to state-sponsored violence, the erasure of Black and Brown young people as intellectuals in children's and YA texts is part of a larger narrative of deviance. Cristina Herrera's timely *ChicaNerds in Chicana Young Adult Literature: Brown and Nerdy* is a counternarrative of empowerment for young Chicanas in YA novels that "align nerdiness with academic intelligence, Chicana feminist resistance, Chicana community and familial love, and joy" (5).

In *ChicaNerds*, Herrera outlines a sophisticated argument that effectively harmonizes the various tensions she sees in six Chicana YA novels. In order to define the young protagonists' "unabashed pleasure in learning" within a working-class Mexican American context, Herrera coins the term "ChicaNerd" to describe "interesting, sometimes quirky, smart, astute young women who exist outside the white mainstream and on the fringes of the Chicana communities they love and critique" (2). The identity of these "studious and smart Chicanas who love their

families and aspire to attend college... include traits of nerdiness that have traditionally not been associated with this population" (3). Herrera argues that the ChicaNerds in these six YA novels combine academic and artistic intelligence with "burgeoning Chicana social consciousness" in texts that attempt to "undo the common script of adolescent Chicanas as 'at risk' and their families as uncaring about education" (2). Herrera effectively develops her argument across a diverse range of Chicana protagonists, including light-skinned and blue-eyed young women, who excel academically at spelling, literature, calculus, poetry, writing, and performance. While Herrera's texts share characteristics such as class, cultural background, and academic setting, she carefully points out the individual ways each ChicaNerd carves her own path toward college.

Herrera opens *ChicaNerds* with testimony of her high school years and painful memories that span both private and public spaces. In sharing her story, Herrera grounds her scholarly project in the personal and establishes the stakes of the conversation as profoundly connected to the lived experiences of Chicana youth—specifically, young Chicanas who delight in their studiousness. The six novels Herrera examines counter "deficit narratives that advocate for assimilation at the expense of their Chicanx communities" through stories about ChicaNerds who find "support, love, and acceptance" in their families (6). In *White Bread Competition* by Jo Ann Yolanda Hernández, *What Can(t) Wait* by Ashley Hope Pérez, *Under the Mesquite* by Guadalupe García McCall, *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika Sánchez, *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* by Isabel Quintero, and *Ghosts of El Grullo* by Patricia Santana, Herrera explores the ways young Chicana protagonists navigate issues of cultural identity as Mexican Americans, challenges as first-generation college students, encounters with teacher mentors, and tensions with their mothers and communities on their path to empowered identities as ChicaNerds.

Before her individual analysis of each novel in chapters two through seven, Herrera explicitly names two stereotypes that ChicaNerds dismantle: what a nerd looks like and who is "at risk" academically. Drawing from education, sociology, and girlhood studies, Herrera demonstrates that intellectual curiosity and good grades do not mean the ChicaNerds are "trying to act white." In fact, they are proud of their ethnic heritage and "define their intelligence and nerdy attributes as *part* of their ethnic identities" (21). These Chicana YA novels reject the figure of the nerd as an awkward, white male social outcast and reveal that low educational achievement among Latinx populations is the product of structural racism and not due to an inherent flaw in the culture. In this first chapter Herrera establishes that ChicaNerds take up space in academic settings to loudly stake their claim to intellectual identities and show resilience by succeeding in spaces designed to keep them out via gendered and racialized barriers.

The next six chapters are deep dives into each of the Chicana YA novels to show how each protagonist's ChicaNerd trajectory models "brown girl self-love" and Chicana feminism (2). While the books share many characteristics, the six young Chicanas develop their ChicaNerd identities in unique ways. Herrera focuses on one story per chapter, but she explicitly makes connections between the novels when there is a particularly important idea. In a way, her book project's structure mirrors her overarching claim as the books receive individual attention without losing sight of the connective thread that links them together. The young Chicanas grapple with gendered and/or working-class family expectations, but ultimately all succeed academically; therefore, in the following paragraphs I will single out any characteristics or commentary that offers a perspective not present in the rest of the novels.

Chapter 2 explores how spelling whiz Luz Ríos in Jo Ann Yolanda Hernández's *White Bread Competition* moves from frustration with to appreciation for the enthusiastic support of her community. In centering this 1997 YA novel, Herrera unearths an important but understudied Chicana YA text that can help scholars track a trajectory of what has changed and what has stayed the same in narratives that feature young Chicanas. Chapters that feature adult voices, Luz's mother and grandmother, disrupt genre conventions, but this multigenerational perspective vividly shows the maternal legacies that shape Luz's ChicaNerd identity. Early in the chapter, Herrera makes the surprising claim that "Hernández's novel suggests, more so than the rest of the novels, that it is institutionalized racism found within schools and communities that truly threaten the ChicaNerd's journey" (38). It seems significant that a novel published over twenty years ago would make this claim so explicitly and begs the question of why the novels in the decades that followed have not made this fact as salient within their pages.

In chapter 3, Herrera looks at Ashley Hope Pérez's *What Can(t) Wait*. In the introduction, Herrera provides a detailed explanation about her decision to include a novel by an Anglo writer and why protagonist Marisa Moreno's story can be considered as Chicana YA. Several traits are worth mentioning that are unique to Marisa's ChicaNerd development. She is talented at calculus which makes her the only math nerd in the study, and the novel explicitly rejects the narrative of the white savior teacher and shows that accommodation not charity is what first-gen Chicanas need.

While there are white teachers in *What Can(t) Wait*, *Mexican Daughter*, and *Gabi*, Guadalupe García McCall's verse novel *Under the Mesquite* has the only Chicanx teacher in Mr. Cortés. His problematically assimilationist advice to lose her accent in order to be a successful thespian calls into question her authenticity as Mexican American, but Herrera traces Lupita's

shift from White literature to her own creative writing. While a love for canonical literature is also a characteristic for Yolanda in *Ghosts* and Julia in *Mexican Daughter*, Lupita and Yolanda both move towards Chicana-authored texts, either their own or others'. Lupita, like Yolanda, must also navigate the loss of her mother along her ChicaNerd path.

Julia Reyes' ChicaNerd path is arguably the most traumatic because she endures loss (her sister Olga's death), develops severe depression that culminates in a suicide attempt, and learns about her mother's rape while crossing the Mexico-U.S. border. Herrera begins chapter 5 with discussion of Julia as a "snarky brown girl" and "a challenging character" and demonstrates how this ChicaNerd is the most rebellious. Julia expresses "outright rejection of her parents" and is the young Chicana most desirous of escaping from her family and community (88). In her sharp critique of Julia's white savior teacher, Mr. Ingman, Herrera convincingly articulates how his mentorship illustrates white liberal racism, but she assumes that readers will recognize his performance of "liberal-mindedness" as problematic even as Julia vouches for him and follows his advice (97). The novel does not provide any commentary or scaffolding to challenge Mr. Ingman's opinions and mentorship practices. Herrera's generous reading of Sánchez's intentions considers the novel's important contribution to the study of mental health in YA and as a text that breaks the "silence surrounding the pain suffered by young girls of color" (100).

Gabi in Isabel Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* voices "pain through poetry," and Herrera examines her story in chapter 6 (116). Herrera's analysis of how Gabi's embodied experiences as a light-skinned, fat Chicana does important work in bringing scholarly conversation about body image and skin color to YA literature. Herrera's commentary on how Gabi's teacher, Ms. Abernard, incorporates Chicana literature into the curriculum and encourages her students to include multiple languages in their poetry effectively demonstrates the difference

between a "white savior" and a "white teacher" (118). While teen sexuality and desire feature prominently in *Mexican Daughter* and *What Can(t) Wait*, *Gabi* offers the most sustained discussion and comments extensively on rape culture through Gabi's best friend's sexual assault and subsequent pregnancy. Herrera points out that this novel offers a different meaning for "acting white." Instead of peers aligning academic excellence with whiteness, Gabi's mother equates "acting white" with sexually promiscuous behavior.

The final chapter sees Herrera again bringing critical attention to an understudied text that deserves further study, *Ghosts of El Grullo* by Patricia Santana. Yolanda Sahagún expands the parameters of Herrera's argument to include a ChicaNerd already in college and growing up in the 1970s. Yolanda, with a setting decades in the past, "may be read as an antecedent to the real-life Julias, Marisas, Lupitas, and Gabis of the world," but also functions as an example of a ChicaNerd's future once they attain the goal of college acceptance (137). In showing the ways Yolanda struggled as a first-generation college student almost fifty years ago, readers and scholars can see that the intervening years have not changed academia into a welcoming, affirming space for young people of color from working class families.

In her concluding reflections, Herrera reiterates the personal stakes of her scholarship. She makes clear that while finding these characters was incredibly validating, "representation alone will not change the systemic reasons that make claiming a ChicaNerd identity challenging in the first place" (145). She ends her project on a hopeful note and looks forward to more ChicaNerd stories that can continue to defeat educational inequality.

Herrera's text selection is significant because the popular and award-winning titles are bookended by two titles that offer something different: Hernández's *White Bread Competition* and Santana's *Ghosts of El Grullo*. The inclusion of a novel from 1997 and one with a college

setting in the 1970s, respectively, expands the parameters of Herrera's claim to reach back and to stretch forward in time in order to establish a chronology of Chicana experiences.

In tracing the development of a ChicaNerd identity along a broad spectrum of young Chicana experiences, Herrera persuasively demonstrates how they manage to attain both individual academic success and communal belonging. Herrera's ChicaNerd framework is a portable concept that can open up important conversations about how Latinx children's and YA literature are working to undo damaging stereotypes. Moreover, the coherence of her multi-part claim and how clearly these six novels fit into her definition of ChicaNerd provides scholars in the field of children's literature, education, Cultural Studies, and Latinx Studies a shorthand way to evaluate other Chicana and Latinx novels. While Herrera effectively argues that this ChicaNerd identity is an empowered feminist response to the gendered and racialized forces that seek to derail their path to success, it is vitally important to notice if a positive depiction becomes a reductive trend that essentializes Chicana youth experiences.

As Herrera convincingly argues in *ChicaNerds in Chicana Young Adult Literature: Brown and Nerdy*, Chicana YA gives voice to smart, capable young women as they pursue academic excellence without severing familial ties. Contemporary literature and broadcast media are increasingly offering examples of Brown and Black youth enjoying learning and proudly claiming a nerdy identity like Marisol Fuentes in the Netflix sitcom *Mr. Iglesias*. ChicaNerds are also poised to gain a massive platform with the just-announced directorial debut of America Ferrera for Netflix's adaptation of *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. Herrera's book provides a necessary analysis of Chicana youth in YA literature that engages critically and emotionally with the texts and that can foster nuanced conversations about representation in contemporary youth media.

