

**“If only I could get to that place”: Tragedy and the American  
Dream in Cristina Henríquez’s *The Book of Unknown  
Americans***

Senior Paper

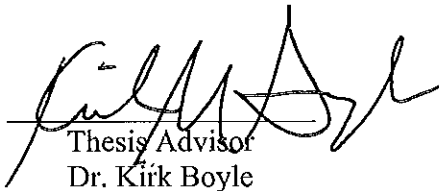
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with  
A Major in Literature at  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
Spring 2018

By *Cara A. Forbes*



Thesis Director

Dr. Deborah James



Thesis Advisor

Dr. Kirk Boyle

*“Maybe it’s the instinct of every immigrant, born of necessity or of longing: someplace else will be better than here. And the condition: if only I can get to that place.”*

*-Cristina Henríquez, The Book of Unknown Americans*

If you work hard, you will be rewarded. The people of the United States of America can work towards upward mobility since they are afforded equal opportunity to accomplish their goals. That is the assurance of the American Dream, which permeates the cultural fabric of the United States. A promise rather than a given, the American Dream must be earned in order to be realized. Such is the doctrine.

In *The Book of Unknown Americans* (2014), a novel by Cristina Henríquez, the theme of the American Dream unfulfilled forms the crux of the characters’ tragedies. *The Book of Unknown Americans* elicits an ambivalent reader response of empathy and repulsion. Henríquez arouses this response through juxtaposition, which lends the novel a tragic quality and calls the reader to critique the promise of the American Dream as they wrestle with their responses to the immigrants’ narratives.

In an interview with *NBC News*, Henríquez explains that she did not set out to write a social commentary about the current ongoing immigration debate when she penned *The Book of Unknown Americans*:

Certainly I read a lot and follow the news. But as a writer, I am not interested in a political story. I am searching for the humanity of the characters. I never set out to write a book about an “issue.” This was never a story about immigration; it is a book about immigrants. Immigration is a system, and immigrants are people. I just tried to focus on bringing people to life (“Novelist Cristina Henríquez: Immigrants as ‘Unknown Americans’”).

There is much focus on immigrants in terms of policy and border crossings within United States political discourse – particularly since the 2016 Presidential election. However, Henríquez set out to write a story that tunes in to the lives of immigrants once they arrive in the United States. *The Book of Unknown Americans* serves more as a commentary on individual immigrants' aspirations for the American Dream than it does on the immigration system.

The novel focuses on the lives of the Riveras, an immigrant family that chooses to come to the United States from México in order to help their daughter, Maribel, recover from a traumatic brain injury that occurs after she falls from a ladder. The injury impairs her ability to communicate and recall information. Maribel, who was once spontaneous and rebellious, is now left in a state of confusion and vulnerability. Alma, Maribel's mother, is guilt-ridden because she is asked to help keep Maribel steady before the fall. Alma's anxiousness to retrieve what she calls her "old" Maribel after the accident propels her to convince her husband, Arturo, that they should all move to the United States. There, Maribel attends the Evers School, which her parents hope will help her improve. Once they begin to get acclimated to their new home, the Recession hits. Arturo loses his jobs and, consequently, risks losing his worker's visa. Arturo desperately tries to search for a job in time to be able to maintain legal status for him and his family, but to no avail. When Maribel goes missing from school one day, Arturo confronts the neighborhood bully, Garrett, who he believes to be behind Maribel's disappearance because Alma previously catches him sexually assaulting Maribel one afternoon outside the apartment, with Maribel's shirt lifted up over her bra as Garrett presses her up against a wall. Alma wedges herself between them and tells Maribel to go back to the apartment. Not wanting Arturo to feel that she fails Maribel again, Alma does not say a word to him about the incident until after Maribel goes missing. As it turns out, Maribel is actually skipping school with her lover, Mayor Toro, who is

previously forbidden from seeing Maribel due to Quisqueya, their neighbor, disclosing that she sees Mayor taking sexual advantage of Maribel. But the dramatic irony is that the reader knows this is not actually the case. When Mayor and Maribel are alone together, Mayor prematurely ejaculates in his pants while he gives Maribel an innocent kiss. But all Quisqueya sees is that Mayor's pants are moistened around his groin when he pulls away from Maribel. Quisqueya tells the Riveras, who then tell Mayor's parents. As a result, Mayor is forbidden from seeing Maribel. Mayor steals his father's car and takes Maribel away from the Evers School so he can show her the first snowfall she has ever seen in her life. Mayor ignores the messages from his cell phone as the Toros and Riveras look for him and Maribel. When Arturo sets off to confront Garrett, he is killed – the killer left unconfirmed. All the reader is told is that Arturo goes to Capital Oaks where he becomes embroiled in a confrontation, and someone with a shotgun fires at him. The loss of Arturo's visa and, ultimately, his death, leave Alma and Maribel with no other choice but to return to Mexico.

*The Book of Unknown Americans* is divided into chapters that are narrated by different residents of the apartment complex in Newark, Delaware where the Riveras live. These characters are immigrants who originate from countries from across Latin America, such as Nicaragua, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, México, and Panamá. Personal testimonies that detail who these characters are, where they are from, why they choose to leave their places of origin, what they dream of accomplishing in the United States, and what happens after they arrive interrupt the central narratives that are told from Alma and Mayor's points of view. In his article, "The 2014 Novel of the Year," Nathaniel Rich, writer for *Daily Beast*, calls Henríquez's narrative technique "a conceit that serves no urgent narrative purpose, apart from creating a sense of a vast multitude, each character standing for many, as if to show how many varied forms immigrant life

can take.” While I agree with Rich that Henríquez employs multiple narrators as a conceit of immigration, I disagree that there is no urgent purpose to this technique. The theme that connects all of these narratives is the characters’ experiences in pursuing their American Dreams and the ambivalent reader response that their stories cause.

Rich’s review of *The Book of Unknown Americans* also problematically labels Henríquez’s immigrant characters. Rich writes, “Henríquez’s unknown Americans have problems and triumphs as diverse as any group of Americans, but as their stories accumulate it becomes clear that they all have one peculiar thing in common: they are all virtuous” (“The 2014 Nobel of the Year”). While the immigrant characters have their endearing traits, these characters still make mistakes and they are not entirely virtuous. Part of what gives *The Book of Unknown Americans* its humanizing effect is that it makes readers recognize the immigrant characters’ human qualities in their entirety – the good and the bad. These characters should not be put up on pedestals; they are not without their errors. In fact, their blunders contribute to the novel’s tragic quality to begin with. We would not be discussing tragedy in *The Book of Unknown Americans* if the characters were purely virtuous. According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, tragedy should “imitate actions which excite pity and fear” (“Poetics”). Aristotle also dictates that the change of fortune from good to bad should “result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty” in a character “who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty” (“Poetics”). The characters’ errors and virtues combine to create an ambivalent reader response, which is the essential element that makes *The Book of Unknown Americans* a tragedy.

According to tragedy theorist, Richard Palmer, there is currently no working universal literary definition of tragedy that all scholars can agree upon. In his book, *Tragedy and Tragic*

*Theory: An Analytical Guide*, Palmer explains the difficulty that many scholars have with pinpointing exactly what tragedy is and coming to a collective consensus of how to define it (6). Nevertheless, Palmer provides a sufficient definition: “Tragedy is a dramatic form that stimulates a response of intense, interdependent, and inseparably balanced attraction and repulsion” (11). This definition is universally applicable across all works of tragedy because it focuses more on reader response instead of specific literary elements that may vary in different tragedies, such as noble heroes versus common men and devastating versus redemptive ends – all of which will be discussed later. In this paper, the word *attraction* is replaced with the word *empathy* since the attraction that the readers feel to the story comes from their ability to empathize with the characters despite their flawed traits and troubling decisions.

Tragedy manifests in the novel through an ambivalent reader response. This reaction occurs, for example, when readers are faced with Quisqueya’s motivations for telling what she witnesses between Mayor and Maribel and the consequences of her disclosure. In addition, readers are left feeling conflicted about the narratives from the immigrants who do not achieve their American Dreams but who, despite ending up in second-rate versions of how they originally envision their lives, are still comfortable with how their lives have turned out, especially Benny Quinto, Nelia Zafón, and Micho Alvarez. These three narrators do not detract from the Toros’ and Riveras’ main plotline, however. In the same vein, the tragedy of the Toros and Riveras makes the readers respond with the same ambivalence that causes them to reflect on the promise of the American Dream. For example, the Toros’ new car serves as a symbol of the freedoms and limits of the American Dream as well as a driving force for the tragic plot of the novel. The reader also feels ambivalence when, after Arturo’s death, Alma has an epiphany that Maribel is still the daughter she has always known and loved, leaving the reader to wonder if this

scene is redemptive in its miraculous and sentimental nature or tragic because it also means that the Riveras may have come to the United States for nothing. This is especially highlighted in the final chapter of the novel, where Arturo speaks. The characters' fates and their flaws that get them there repulse readers while the characters' first-person narratives reveal enough information for readers to empathize with them.

Quisqueya is a character easy to disdain. While acquainting herself with Alma, Mayor's mother, Celia Toro, describes Quisqueya as a "busybody" who "doesn't know how to connect with people" (Henríquez 56). Indeed, Quisqueya is a judgmental and jealous gossip. However, the addition of Quisqueya's narrative helps the reader gain context of her background enough to develop sympathy for her and empathize with why she feels so compelled to divulge what she perceives to be Mayor taking sexual advantage of Maribel. In her narrative, Quisqueya describes the sexual abuse she endures from her stepbrother. The consequences of Quisqueya's disclosure are followed by such disastrous results in the end that the reader experiences a dramatic irony where they grapple with acknowledging Quisqueya's traumatic past and what they know actually happens between Mayor and Maribel. In addition, Quisqueya's story presents readers with an immigrant character who does not come to the United States by her own initiative. Instead, she comes alongside her mother, who marries a United States citizen and moves to California. When Quisqueya tries to tell her mother what is going on, her mother accuses her of trying to ruin everything (Henríquez 117). Quisqueya says, "I was less important than the things she had now – a nice house and diamond jewelry, an expensive car and a big refrigerator" (Henríquez 117). Quisqueya's tragedy is that her mother prioritizes her American Dream over her daughter's well-being. Nevertheless, Quisqueya moves on with her life, doing what she can to make it better for both herself and her community. Unfortunately, as a result, Quisqueya becomes a catalyst for the

Rivera family's own downfall when she tries to save Maribel from Mayor by reporting what she witnesses between them.

Another character that is easy to dislike but also easy to empathize with is Benny Quinto, an immigrant from Nicaragua. Benny is an example of a common man in tragedy. In "Tragedy and the Common Man," Arthur Miller unpacks how tragedy – more specifically, the element of the tragic hero – has evolved in the modern era. Scholars traditionally agree that tragedies have a hero of noble status, such as a king or knight, but can tragedy exist in a modern and American framework? Kings and knights are nonexistent in the United States, after all. Miller asserts that tragedy is still possible today because a common man can be a tragic hero:

For one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy – or tragedy above us.

The inevitable conclusion is, of course, that the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly, and where this admission is not made in so many words it is most often implied. I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were ("Tragedy and the Common Man").

Benny fits the bill for a common man. He is also unique as a tragic hero in *The Book of Unknown Americans* because, as a member of the priesthood in Nicaragua, he holds some virtuosity and sense of nobility. With his position as a priest, his immoral decisions, and the oppressive system he is up against in mind as the reader learns about Benny's journey to the United States and his pursuit of the American Dream, the reader feels ambivalent about him.

One of the most troubling things the reader learns about Benny is that he steals money from his church so that he can pay to go to the United States. The image of Benny stuffing offering envelopes up under his shirt while he is supposed to be carrying out his priestly duties is disturbing. He is a priest, but he is open about his sins in the narrative. The reader also finds that



Benny comes to the United States undocumented, which puts him in a tough situation where his smugglers blackmail him into dealing drugs for them. This leaves Benny as a rock in a hard place: deal drugs in order to stay in the United States or refuse and get sent back to Nicaragua. Benny agrees to make drug deals, saying, “Figured I’d burn through it, you know, just *get it done*, until I had enough to leave, and then I’d be on to bigger and better things” (Henríquez 46). But Benny does not stop – even after his dues are paid. He says, “Problem is, you get a taste of that kind of money and it’s hard to go back to anything else” (Henríquez 46). In this way, Benny can be read as the negative stereotype of an illegal immigrant – the drug-dealing, thieving villain.

However, Benny has his redeeming qualities. While he is sinful, he still maintains a relationship with God and wants to do the right thing: “I was trying so hard to be on the straight and narrow. I was talking to God about it all the time” (Henríquez 46). And although Benny turns to a life of crime to stay in the United States, he is still put in a tough situation. After all the trouble he goes through to get to the United States, it would have been a shame for him to be sent back for making the moral decision. While his having to deal drugs to remain in the United States is also unfortunate, but, in his case, he decides that breaking the law to achieve his desired result is the best route for him to take. He also sees it as a temporary situation, so he decides complying is the best decision to make in that moment. Although he relapses into criminal activity when he knows he wants to stop, he does eventually break out. Benny ends up working in the fast food industry, which does not seem like the “bigger and better thing” that he may have had in mind. Benny’s decision to leave his life of drug deals behind him for a better life is admirable. However, his ending up in a job where he flips burgers is not the immigrant success story that a reader may want to hear.

As Miller says, “Tragedy enlightens – and it must, in that it points the heroic finger at the enemy of man’s freedom. The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts” (“Tragedy and the Common Man”). The ambivalence that readers feel about Benny and his story makes them think about immigrant humanity; on one hand, Benny is a victim to the immigration system since his getting blackmailed convinces him to turn to a life of crime. On the other hand, Benny *does* come undocumented to begin with. But, then again, he does it to help improve the quality of his life. After all, the financial opportunities available to him in Nicaragua are limited. The reader’s ambivalence can make them go back and forth infinitely. There is no easy answer on how to feel about Benny. His story is controversial. What he navigates through is complex. And that is the point.

Nelia Zafón, like Benny, achieves a second-rate version of her American Dream. In 1964, at the age of seventeen, she comes to the United States from Puerto Rico with dreams of living in New York City and becoming a famous dancer and actress. She works hard and makes sacrifices to try to realize her dream of becoming a star – putting money she earns from her waitressing job into dance and acting classes and feeding herself with leftovers from diners’ plates at the restaurant where she works. Despite this, she does not get a single role. She partially blames her inability to land roles on her ethnic background:

The world already had its Rita Moreno, I guess, and there was only room for one Boricua at a time. That’s how it works. Americans can handle one person from anywhere. They had Desi Arnaz from Cuba. And Tin Tan from México. And Rita Moreno from Puerto Rico. But as soon as there are too many of us, they throw up their hands. No, no, no! We were only just *curious*. We are not actually *interested* in you people (Henríquez 177).

Frustrated by her inability to score any roles due to her ethnicity, she eventually imagines a new dream for herself – one where she opens a community theater – and leaves New York for Delaware, where taxes for new businesses are lowest. She opens the Parish Theater, which barely stays afloat: “The theater wasn’t making much money, but we were bringing in enough to keep the plays on. That by itself was some kind of miracle. Now, twenty years later, I still run the Parish Theater. We do just one production a week” (Henríquez 178). While the Parish Theater is not putting on productions that bring in a full house of people and while she does not realize her original American Dream, Nelia is still content with her life.

Nelia’s error is that she has high hopes. Her mami points this out to her before she leaves, However, Nelia’s pride and optimism drive her to set out for her dreams anyway: “I told my mami, You can look for me in the movies! And I left” (Henríquez 175). Nelia is sure that her hard work will pay off, but she finds that there is a greater force that works against her: the industry. She redeems herself, though. Nelia’s attitude and outlook on her life and her definition of success changes to something that makes her happiness more feasible.

Readers feel ambivalent to Nelia’s story and her response to how her life turns out. Unlike Benny, the reader’s ambivalence comes more from Nelia’s situation than from her occupation or the decisions she makes. The real root of the Nelia’s tragedy is that she is no match for the institutionalized racism in her industry, which limits the roles she can land. One of the roles she auditions for is a housekeeper for *Man of La Mancha*. According to Tre’veil Anderson’s 2017 *Los Angeles Times* article, “4 Latino stereotypes in TV and film that need to go”, Hollywood tends to fall back on the stereotype of Latino janitors or maids, gangbangers, and Spanish-only speakers. To this day, Hollywood still lacks diversity in the types of roles that Latino actors would be cast in. In addition, the number of Latino actors who land top film roles is

still miniscule. According to Esther J. Cepeda's 2018 column in *Chicago Tribune*, "Hollywood still has a long way to go in casting Latinos", the latest Hollywood Diversity Report by UCLA's Division of Social Sciences found that "2.7 percent of the top film roles of 2016 were performed by Latinos". So one may imagine that this number is worse in the 1960's, when Nelia is pursuing her career as an actress. However, interestingly enough, it is about the same. The representations are just different. According to Roberto Rodriguez's 2007 *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* article, "The early years – the portrayal of minorities in Hollywood film industry", a study done by the Washington, DC-based Center for Media and Public Affairs found that there were actually more Latinos in television in the 1950s than in the present. Rodriguez reports that Luis Reyes, author of *Hispanics in Hollywood*, says, "the reason there were more Latinos in television or Hollywood in the past [...] is because the industry is no longer making westerns." Nelia's situation is reflective of the struggles that Latinos have faced in the world of theatrics for several years. At one point, when addressing her difficulties in landing a role, she recalls: "I would think, Is this what it is? This country? My life? Is this *all*? But even when I thought that, I was always aware of some other part of me saying, there is more. And you will find it. Oh, I didn't find it, though" (177). What Nelia gets out of her efforts is far from what she initially expects. Her experience does not ring true to the American belief in hard work paying off. According to the Pew Research Center, surveys show that Americans are more likely to believe that hard work pays off when compared to the rest of the globe: "When asked, on a scale of 0 to 10, about how important working hard is to getting ahead in life, 73% of Americans said it was a "10" or "very important," compared with a global median of 50% among the 44 nations (George Gao)." The disappointing results of Nelia's efforts and sacrifices are disheartening. It does not reflect well on what the United States has to offer.

At the same time, readers can find solace in Nelia's resilience and optimism. When she remembers coming to terms to the racist forces she is up against in her industry, she says: "But I'm a fighter. You get me against the ropes and I will swing so hard – bam! So I thought, well, if I'm not going to find it, then there's only one other option: I will create it" (Henríquez 177). Her attitude is admirable. Instead of sulking in failure, she makes the best out of an unfortunate situation and creates a goal that is more feasible for her means. She does research on the tax rates for new businesses in different areas, saves money, signs up for extra night shifts at the restaurant, and works on her new business endeavor during the day. Finally, her hard work pays off. She has regular audience members who show up for the productions she puts on. The pleasure she finds in her business is giving roles to young actors since she can relate to their enthusiasm for acting. Her ability to pick herself up and find joy in a new venture where she shares her passion for acting with the next generation is inspiring.

Like Nelia, Micho Alvarez also talks about how stereotypes of Latinos in the media dehumanize him and how he settles on a more feasible version of his American Dream. He is frustrated by how the media portrays people like him:

These people are listening to the media, and the media, let me tell you, has some fucked-up ideas about us. About all the brown-skinned people, but especially about the Mexicans. You listen to the media, you'll learn that we're all gangbangers, we're all drug dealers, we're tossing bodies in vats of acid, we want to destroy America, we still think Texas belongs to us, we all have swine flu, we carry machine guns under our coats, we don't pay any taxes, we're lazy, we're stupid, we're all wetbacks who crossed the border illegally. I swear to God, I'm so tired of being called a spic, a nethead, a cholo, all this stuff. Happens to me all the time (Henríquez 236).

Micho talks about how all of these negative media representations of people from México impact his day-to-day interactions with others who buy into the stereotypes. He walks into a store and the employees either ignore him or watch him closely, thinking he is going to try to steal something. Micho's story raises awareness of how marginalized Méxicans like him are in the United States. His narrative also sheds light on the circumstances of people like Benny Quinto, who, as addressed previously, crosses the border illegally himself (though he is from Nicaragua, not México):

The whole thing is very, very complicated. I mean, does anyone ever talk about *why* people are crossing? I can promise you it's not with some grand ambition to come here and ruin everything for the gringo chingaos. People here are desperate, man. We're talking about people who can't even get a toilet that works, and the government is so corrupt that when they have money, [...] instead of using it in ways that would help their own citizens, they hold on to it and encourage people to go north instead. What choice do people have in the face of that (Henríquez 237)?

Micho's call for people to consider the complexities of Latino immigrant experiences is thought-provoking. He offers a perspective that makes the reader place themselves in the shoes of the people he describes – those who come from tough situations that make them feel like they have no other good option but to leave their home countries and cross the border. This also makes readers feel a strong sense of repulsion – not at Micho, but at the people who buy into negative stereotypes and marginalize Latinos because of them. Part of this response comes from the way that Micho makes his delivery. He goes on an impassioned rant that wakes readers up to his frustrations.

Micho has a strong desire to raise awareness of peoples' suffering. After getting frustrated with his photography career in Sinaloa, where he tries to report on the drug war to make people conscious of what was happening, he comes to the United States because he wants to make a difference:

They kept sending me out to take photos of crime scenes they'd plaster on the front pages. I did it at first because I thought, you know, that's what people needed to see. [...] But after a while I realized that it was all just spectacle. Photos of decapitated bodies weren't helping anyone. So I wanted to come to the other side, across the border. No one here wants to admit it, but the United States is part of México's problem. The United States is feeding the beast, man (Henríquez 238).

Since coming to the United States, Micho finds work with a group in Wilmington that advocates for legislation reform for immigrants, taking all the photographs for their newsletter and website. Micho does not seem to feel like he makes a huge impact: "I don't know. We don't make much progress most of the time. But what else am I gonna do? I gotta fight for what I believe in" (Henríquez 238). While he does not wield the level of influence that he wants from his work as a photographer, he still feels compelled to be an advocate. Micho's narrative makes readers simultaneously reflect on the prejudice that is still prevalent in the United States as well as the people who are willing to work to create positive social change.

While Henríquez does not directly address solutions to the social and political forces that immigrants like Benny, Nelia, and Micho face, she does put the spotlight on their humanity. A reader who may initially hold prejudiced views of Latino immigrants before reading these narratives should be able to learn something that could help reshape their worldview. The ambivalent reader response that Henríquez's work evokes makes readers jump back and forth

between an empathy and repulsion that brings awareness to the complex and diverse situations that Latino immigrants experience.

Aristotle says that a well-constructed tragic plot should be “single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain” (“Poetics”). His teachings, while certainly valuable in the context of classical tragedy, however, are not applicable to a modern and American tragic framework. Tragedies such as what Henríquez provides *can* be well done *and* diverse in the issues their plots contain so long as the complex way in which the story is weaved is done with purpose. In Henríquez’s case, it helps her present readers with a wide array of immigrant narratives. She achieves her goal of writing a book about immigrants. As Henríquez says in her interview with *Bustle*, *The Book of Unknown Americans* is “an American story (Luchette)”.

Aristotle comments on the type of tragedy that exists in the time he makes his commentary. However, *The Book of Unknown Americans* offers a modernized version of tragedy – one that reinvents tragedy. The immigrant narratives that are integrated into the novel do not detract from the main narrative involving the Toros and the Riveras because, like their narratives, the narratives of other characters such as Benny, Nelia, and Micho possess tragic qualities that evoke the ambivalent response that makes readers reflect on the American Dream. One such aspect of the main plotline that drives this evaluation of the American Dream is the Toros’ new car.

Celia Toro’s sister, Gloria, who still lives in Panamá, receives money in a divorce settlement and offers to send ten thousand dollars of it to Celia and Rafael. Despite Celia’s objections, Rafael decides that they should use the money to buy a car. The Toros go to a used car dealership where they purchase a Volkswagen Rabbit. The car becomes central in the reader’s feelings of ambivalence. It is also a vehicle for tragedy. The car symbolizes the



American Dream. According to Mayor, “It was no secret that since he was a boy, my dad had lusted after cars, and the pinnacle of his obsession would have been to own one” (Henríquez 159). Rafael’s lust for the very idea of owning a vehicle is reflective of the consumer culture that exists in the United States and the simultaneous benefits and pitfalls that culture can provide. The Volkswagen provides the Toros with more freedom, mobility, and status – though these things come with a price to pay for the Toro family.

The car helps make the reader more aware of the obstacles the Toro family faces as marginalized Americans. For instance, even though the Toros are driving on the interstate, Rafael is scared to drive the car fast because he does not want to be pulled over by the police. At one point, Arturo tells Celia that the men at his work say, “if you’re white, or maybe Oriental, [the police] let you drive however you want. But if you’re not, they stop you” (Henríquez 165). While the idea of white and “Oriental” people being able to drive “however they want” is problematic, Arturo’s fears are not entirely unfounded. According to Ranjana Natarajan’s article, “Racial profiling has destroyed public trust in police. Cops are exploiting our weak laws against it.” in *The Washington Post*, a 2011 report by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights found evidence of widespread racial profiling, with African Americans and Hispanics being disproportionately likely to be stopped and searched by police. In addition, the Rafael faces a language barrier when they purchase the car, leaving him to depend on Mayor to translate for him and the salesman:

The only reason I’d come was because my dad thought he might need a translator. To him, everything had its own language [...] He never talked about cars with anyone in English, he said. Therefore, he didn’t know the language [of cars]. It was no use explaining to him that I didn’t exactly spend my days talking about cars with people,

either. To him, I knew all the languages of English the way he did those of Spanish (Henríquez 161).

Neither Rafael nor Mayor feels entirely confident in talking to the salesman as the Toros determine which vehicle to purchase. Without his teenage son to translate for him, Rafael does not feel comfortable talking to the salesman. And even though Rafael has the funds to purchase the Volkswagen, he does not have the language skills or industry knowledge to make a well-rounded and educated decision. Rafael does not even drive the car before he asks if the salesman will accept a check (Henríquez 163). Rafael's disadvantages leave him and his family in a vulnerable position. The Toro's situation shows how having a car does not necessarily put them on an equal playing field with every other American. Although Americans are told that "all men are created equal", Rafael's story demonstrates that this is not always the reality. However, the economic uplift that the car provides with the Toros in the midst of the Recession should not be dismissed. Rafael, like others struggling with the job market in the Recession, loses his restaurant job. But his purchasing the car helps him land a job as a carrier for a newspaper since it gives him the mobility that is required of him for the position.

However, this also contributes to catapulting the story towards its tragic end. Rafael's elation at his good fortune is so strong that he decides to end Mayor's grounding. As previously mentioned, Mayor is grounded because Quisqueya previously says that he takes sexual advantage of Maribel. Mayor's liberation and his desire to see Maribel propel him to commit the acts of rebellion that lead to Arturo's death. Mayor steals Rafael's car so he can take Maribel for a drive in the snow. He has a newfound sense of authority to make his own decisions. This drives his desire to make Maribel feel the same way about herself: "Maribel and I deserved to be together and she deserved to see the snow if she wanted to and nobody was going to hold us

back. I was her one chance. I wanted to give her the thing that it seemed like everyone else wanted to keep from her: freedom” (Henríquez 231). However, Mayor is aware that his parents still have the power to discipline him again, so he turns off his cell phone when he hears it ring so that he can prolong what he knows is just temporary time with Maribel.

The aftermath of the rebellion leaves Mayor feeling tremendous guilt over Arturo’s death. Mayor wonders if he is to blame for Arturo’s fatal end and cannot help but think about how the car gave him the ability to take Maribel from school. At one point, Mayor thinks, “Maybe if my dad had never bought that car, I wouldn’t have had a way to get to the beach” (Henríquez 261). In this way, the car becomes a representation of the guilt Mayor feels over Arturo’s death. In the end, Mayor settles on the notion that, perhaps, nobody is really fully to blame:

You could trace is back infinitely. All these different veins, but who knew which one led to the heart? And then again, maybe it had nothing to do with any of us. Maybe God had a plan and He knew from the second the Riveras set foot here that He was putting them on a path towards this. Or maybe it was completely random, just something that happened (Henríquez 261-262).

The number of people and things that could be blamed as the ultimate source of Arturo’s death is too much for anyone to be able to decide on with full confidence. Realizing this, Mayor comes to peace with Arturo’s death and his part in it.

The novel’s ending suggests that Alma and Arturo come to peace with their circumstances as well. However, the reader may have mixed feelings about how the book concludes. In the book’s final chapter, Arturo expresses his gratitude for being able to come to the United States:

I'm overcome when I think about this place and about what it's given us. Maribel is getting stronger. I can see it. Every day a little bit more. A safe area to live. Such good friends. It's incredible. One day when we go back to Mexico and people ask me what it was like here, I will tell them those things. I will tell them all the ways I loved this country. (Henríquez 286)

The placement of Arturo's narrative, which is the final chapter of the book, is interesting considering that Arturo is dead in previous chapters. Because of this, the chapter operates as a flashback. What is also noteworthy about the placement of Arturo's narrative is how it not only comes at the end of the text, but how it also follows Alma's epiphany that Maribel is actually getting better and that, in some ways, she is still the "old" Maribel that she was before her brain injury. The coupling of Alma and Arturo's narratives at the book's end evokes an ambivalent reader response where the reader grapples with what to make of the story of the Riveras in its entirety. While they are on their way to return to Mexico, Maribel tells Alma that she wants to dye her hair purple, which is something that the "old" Maribel would have said. This makes Alma reach a realization:

Suddenly, out of nowhere, there she was. My Maribel. The one who once upon a time had painted her nails black and now wanted to dye her hair purple. [...] The person Arturo and I had been waiting for, the reason for all of this. [...] All this time I had been buried too far under my guilt to see her (Henríquez 282).

Finally, Alma reaches a breakthrough where she realizes that Maribel will never completely be the girl that she was before her brain injury, but all that she loves about her still remains. As a result, Alma forgives herself and decides to move forward. However, the reader is still left to consider what to make of Arturo's narrative at the end. Arturo's narrative reminds the reader of

his death. One cannot help but think that had Alma experienced her realization about Maribel and her before, she and her family would never have felt the need to leave Mexico and, consequently, Arturo would not have died. Thus, Arturo's narrative creates a strong emotional impact for the reader as he speaks beyond the grave.

Aristotle dictates that tragedies must have a particular plot structure: "The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty [...] A tragedy [...] to be perfect according to the rules of art should be of this construction" ("Poetics"). The peculiarity of how tragedy operates in *The Book of Unknown Americans* is that the characters reach redemption. Although Alma has a period of tremendous grief after Arturo's death, she is reconciled with Maribel. Alma's narrative draws the empathy of readers, moving them away from the feeling of repulsion they are left with after Arturo's death. Readers can take comfort in what Alma learns. However, readers can still feel left slightly upended during Arturo's narrative at the end. Their reaction stems from a major point of the novel: that what has been read as the "American Dream" is, in truth, the dream of any family: to be able to provide for the nurture and development of the people they love – a place and means for one to grow "whole." What we call the *American* Dream may not be limited to the United States. The tragedy here is that Alma fails to recognize this until after Arturo's death. And Arturo will never be able to see Alma experience her epiphany. All this leaves the reader to wonder whether Arturo dies in bliss or in vain. In addition, Benny, Nelia, and Micho fail to realize their original versions of the American Dream, but redeem themselves by being grateful for what they have at present. In classical forms of tragedy, the reader response entails catharsis, what Aristotle theorizes as a purging of emotions like pity and fear. One must wonder if there can be catharsis in ambivalence and if the indecision

readers are left with in the conclusion of *The Book of Unknown Americans* makes the novel a distinct form of tragedy – or, rather, a *modern* tragedy.

So does Henríquez's novel affirm or critique the American Dream? The novel actually reflects recent research conducted on attitudes towards the American Dream. According to Carol Graham's 2017 article in *The Guardian*, "Is the American dream really dead?" research shows that poor people in the United States are twenty times less likely to believe that hard work will get them ahead than their poorer Latin American counterparts – with white Americans being particularly pessimistic. Graham asserts that the doubt surrounding the American Dream may be a matter of perspective and an increasing sense of individualism:

Blue-collar white people – whose parents lived the American dream and who expected their children to do so as well – are the ones who seem most devastated by its erosion [...] In contrast, minorities, who have been struggling for years and have more experience multitasking on the employment front and relying on family and community support when needed – are more resilient and hopeful, precisely because they still see a chance for moving up the ladder.

In the case of the Riveras, their desire to improve Maribel's life and their modest starting point is what ultimately makes them hopeful despite their downfall and impoverished living conditions, which are set in contrast to the lens of a more privileged American reader's experience. *The Book of Unknown Americans* makes readers reflect on the promise of the American Dream and whether they think theirs will be fulfilled – whatever that entails for them. Whether a reader decides that the novel affirms or critiques the American Dream depends on the reader's individual identity and background. The tragedy in the novel creates an ambivalent reader response that leaves an ambiguous ending, and the decision that the reader comes to will cause

them to reflect their privilege or lack whereof. The tragedy in this novel acts as a mirror for our own experiences and a window that provides a glimpse into the lives of these unknown Americans.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Tre'vell. "4 Latino Stereotypes in TV and Film that Need to Go." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 27 Apr. 2017. [www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-latino-stereotypes-20170428-htmlstory.html](http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-latino-stereotypes-20170428-htmlstory.html).
- Aristotle. "Poetics." *The Internet Classics Archive*, classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.2.2.html.
- Cepeda, Esther J. "Hollywood Still Has a Long Way to Go in Casting Latinos." *Chicagotribune.com*, Chicago Tribune, 9 Mar. 2018, [www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/opinion/ct-ptb-cepeda-column-st-0309-20180308-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/opinion/ct-ptb-cepeda-column-st-0309-20180308-story.html).
- Gao, George. "How Do Americans Stand out from the Rest of the World?" *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 12 Mar. 2015, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/).
- Graham, Carol. "Is the American Dream Really Dead?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 20 June 2017, [www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/jun/20/is-the-american-dream-really-dead](http://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/jun/20/is-the-american-dream-really-dead).
- Henriquez, Cristina. *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Knopf, 2015.
- Luchette, Claire. "Q&A: Cristina Henríquez on 'Unknown Americans'." *Bustle*, Bustle, 25 Apr. 2018, [www.bustle.com/articles/27838-cristina-henriquez-talks-the-book-of-unknown-americans-poc-vs-mfa-and-compassion](http://www.bustle.com/articles/27838-cristina-henriquez-talks-the-book-of-unknown-americans-poc-vs-mfa-and-compassion).
- Miller, Arthur. "Tragedy and the Common Man." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 27 Feb. 1949, [www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller-common.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/11/12/specials/miller-common.html).
- Natarajan, Ranjana. "Racial Profiling Has Destroyed Public Trust in Police. Cops Are Exploiting Our Weak Laws Against It." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 15 Dec. 2014,



[www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/12/15/racial-profiling-has-destroyed-public-trust-in-police-cops-are-exploiting-our-weak-laws-against-it/?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main-police-racism%3Ahomepage%2Ft-top&utm\\_term=.5e45cbf1bb05](http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/12/15/racial-profiling-has-destroyed-public-trust-in-police-cops-are-exploiting-our-weak-laws-against-it/?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main-police-racism%3Ahomepage%2Ft-top&utm_term=.5e45cbf1bb05).

“Novelist Cristina Henriquez: Immigrants as ‘Unknown Americans.’” *NBCNews.com*, NBCUniversal News Group, 20 Jan. 2015, [www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/novelist-cristina-henriquez-immigrants-unknown-americans-n276336](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/novelist-cristina-henriquez-immigrants-unknown-americans-n276336).

Palmer, Richard H. *Tragedy and Tragic Theory: An Analytical Guide*. Greenwood Press, 1992.

Rich, Nathaniel. “The 2014 Novel of the Year.” *The Daily Beast*, The Daily Beast Company, 29 Dec. 2014, [www.thedailybeast.com/the-2014-novel-of-the-year?source=twitter&via=desktop](http://www.thedailybeast.com/the-2014-novel-of-the-year?source=twitter&via=desktop).

Rodriguez, Roberto. “The Early Years – the Portrayal of Minorities in Hollywood Film Industry.” *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, Diverse: Issues in Higher Education, 16 June 2007, [diverseeducation.com/article/7443/](http://diverseeducation.com/article/7443/).

“Stop-and-Frisk Data.” *New York Civil Liberties Union*, 4 Apr. 2018, [www.nyclu.org/en/Stop-and-Frisk-data](http://www.nyclu.org/en/Stop-and-Frisk-data).