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SPECIAL ISSUE

Contemporary Challenges in Chicana Literature & Culture



## INTRODUCTION

This issue of *RCEI* is devoted to “Contemporary Challenges in Chicana Literature and Culture,” with some incursions into Latinx authors to show the inextricable link between them in the US mosaic. The reader will find an ample selection of articles, notes, and also creative works, a tribute and an addendum essay. Eleven papers in the “Articles” section show a variegated display of perspectives and tackle diverse topics nowadays in full force. Among the most recurrent ones, we can highlight gender studies, dealing not only with masculinity: music and booze, US state prison crises ..., but also with Chicana spiritual feminism, or “queering” Aztlán. Some of them peep into the mistreatment of human rights: undocumented aliens, violence against minorities, border traumas... Others examine ideology and culture: utopianism, filmic representations of the “Day of the Dead,” chicana documentaries, hermeneutic studies about distancing ... All in all, a plethora of innovative critical analyses are offered to show the vitality of the Chicana polyphonic vision of the nation (and by extension of the Occidental world); one capable of transforming centric attitudes and decoding hegemonic positions. This section is accompanied with an addendum essay that analyses the misuse of a Romance written by a white American female writer and activist in the late nineteenth century to simplify and act against native peoples’ rights in favor of “progress and civilization.”

Four short papers by young scholars can be read in the “Notes” section that follows, with a predominant taste for social, gender and environmental studies. Two of them are devoted to Chicano authors in their quest for intercultural communication and bridging social gaps in the problematic North American borders and boundaries. The other two delve into engaged feminism and an ecocritical reading of the land. Proudly enough, this issue includes eight Chicana/Latinx poets in the “Creation” section plus a moving tribute to recently passed away acclaimed novelist Rudolfo A. Anaya. Apart from the literary material, a series of drawing images can also be found. The result is harmonious and mindful, aesthetically powerful and radically non-conformist in equal parts.

Finally, the editors want to express their gratitude to all of the contributors, academics and writers, who have participated in this monograph, making it, to our viewpoint, a complete, challenging and compelling manual for future Chicana studies to come. Besides, Juan Ignacio Oliva acknowledges the support of the research project “Aesthetics, Ethics and Strategies of the New Migratory Cartographies and Transcultural Identities in Twenty-First-Century Literature(s) in English” [PID2019-109582GB-IOO], granted by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

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# CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES IN CHICANX/LATINX LITERATURE & CULTURE

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& Universidad de La Laguna/GIECO-Franklin-UAH/Ratnakara

## ABSTRACT

This introductory paper traces a general perspective of the nowadays Chicax/Latinx state of the question, including articles, notes, creative poems and drawings, and a tribute in memoriam Rudolfo A. Anaya (1937-2020). Challenging canons, norms and genres seems to be particularly appropriate when tackling ideology from the polychromatic gaze of transcultural minorities in the US. As such, Chicax/Latinx literary and artistic expressions act as catalysts of renovation and change, not only in terms of content but also playing with forms in a freer, experimental way. Transgressing what is considered “normal” seems to be the only way to cope with fringes and frames, and thus a contemporary redefinition of the world is reached to highlight the “real” truth of artistic normativity.

**KEYWORDS:** Chicax/Latinx Literature & Culture, Innovative Perspectives, State of the Question, Redefining Artistic Normativity.

## RETOS CONTEMPORÁNEOS EN LA LITERATURA Y CULTURA CHICANA/LATINA

## RESUMEN

Este artículo introductorio ofrece una perspectiva general del estado de la cuestión actual, incluyendo ensayos largos, notas de lectura, poemas y dibujos, además de un tributo in memoriam Rudolfo A. Anaya (1937-2020). Parece propio de las minorías transculturales en los EE. UU. (que afrontan la ideología con una visión polícroma) el poner a prueba los cánones, las normas y los géneros. Así, las expresiones literarias y culturales chicanas/latinas sirven como catalizadoras de la renovación y el cambio, no solo en cuanto contenidos sino en su uso más libre y experimental de las formas. Transgredir lo que se considera “normal” parece la única manera de tratar con las estructuras encorsetadas, y de este modo redefinir el mundo que nos rodea para resaltar la “verdadera” realidad de la normatividad artística.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** literatura y cultura chicana/latina, perspectivas innovadoras, estado de la cuestión, redefiniendo la normatividad artística.

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Literary and artistic expressions by Chicanx and Latinx continue to make important inroads into realms of the American mainstream like never before. In fact, what was considered marginal or on the fringes by the academy nationally is oftentimes becoming a trailblazer of a new norm with new expectations as something groundbreaking within transnational circles. As useful as it is to deal with iconic authors from the United States, Chicanx/Latinx writers and other artists are chiseling away at the fortresses of standards and so-called artistic normativity. Readers/viewers across the world now pursue new voices who develop their craft in literature (a pan-Latinx phenomenon), art, film and other areas of creativity. Whereas aesthetic expression by Chicanx/Latinx used to be viewed as an anomaly, something outside the norm, we more and more find that they are pushing the envelope to challenge such antiquated notions of artistic normativity. This is why the different, the unorthodox, the unconventional, the untraditional have broken down glass ceilings and walls to occupy a reasonable place within the center of the canon, because this canon has become extended, expanded and redefined.

Precisely for these reasons, this special volume of the *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* checks the pulse of the most recent production via criticism to examine a wide array of works in different aesthetic forms. Thus, we offer a widespread collection of critical treatments on literary works by Chicanx and Latinx, but we also include innovative studies on art and film—which too often tend to be segregated as phenomena apart from the rest of the aesthetic world among Latinx. What we discover is that the critics from throughout the world here explore new avenues of discourse, theory, symbolism, technique, craft, language and ingenious approaches to render inventive treatments on works that otherwise might have remained undeveloped or understudied. *RCEI*, therefore, attempts to valiantly tackle such gaps while demonstrating unapologetically that criticism by international authors offers fresh views thanks to engagements with works that require a uniquely informed reader/viewer to decode what the creators are attempting to express. The authors and artists studied in this interdisciplinary volume truly present and offer nuances of new ground to discuss and analyze through a series of uniquely qualified prisms that most mainstream critics have not approached or tackled yet. This makes literary and artistic production by Chicanx and Latinx something with which to reckon as the world becomes an aleph, a twitter message, an Instagram, a blog or a nexus of new information within an instant.

Ever since the landmark work *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2011) appeared, it is becoming more difficult to keep calling writings by Chicanx and Latinx thinkers a minority literature. In fact, authors and artists are fast

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gaining readerships and audiences as they consistently inflect and transform the qualifications of aesthetic judgments. As a consequence, they are being recognized even among mainstream circles with prizes ranging from a US Poet Laureate (Juan Felipe Herrera) to PEN Awards, or from American Book Awards to many other stellar recognitions. So, this is not an isolated production, but rather, a new avenue in its own right that is becoming mainstream Americana (and international) like the salsa, guacamole, tacos and “Día de los Muertos.”

The first section of the monograph consists of ten articles (plus and addendum) that offer contemporary approaches to Chicana literary and cultural works of art. It opens with Amaia Ibarraran-Bigalondo’s “*Corridos*,” Tequila (and others), and Mexican/Chicano Masculinity,” where she delves into “people’s stuff” in a critical analysis that coalesces drinking tequila and the *corrido* tradition. Scrutinizing the song corpus of the *corrido* band Los Tigres del Norte, Ibarraran-Bigalondo tiptoes around varied significations connected with the consumption of alcohol, including masculinity, collectivization, belonging, borderland culture(s), and reciprocated or unrequited romantic relationships. The article offers two comprehensive axes for the reading of drinking tequila: the compensatory and the celebratory. In the first axis, the use of alcohol is a solitary act, part and parcel of the “ethic model” of manhood, but it also becomes a way to compensate for emotional pain. Celebratory drinking, however, is performed as a collective act, a fiesta that reinforces some of the more “manly,” or *macho*, characteristics of “lo mexicano/chicano.”

On her side, M.<sup>a</sup> Isabel Pérez Ramos looks into the conjoined issues of migration, labor exploitation, environmental degradation and toxicity in Lucha Corpi’s novel *Cactus Blood* (1995). The author gives a close-up account of the migrant’s vulnerability because of his/her exposure to social, political and environmental adversity. Pérez Ramos propounds that the migrant is conceived of as a “stranger,” and as such becomes an identity in abeyance in the US-Mexico borderlands. The article departs from the critical interest in the Chicana feminist aesthetic(s) of Lucha Corpi’s detective fiction. Instead, it discusses the novel from the socio-environmental and eco-cosmopolitan angles, which divulge the discriminatory policies of a global status-quo that turns people into “subaltern beings” for the growth rates of world agricultural production.

Giorgos Dimitriadis, accordingly, probes the multilayered, but also conjoined, uses of the Mexican celebration of the “Day of the Dead” (*Día de Muertos* or *Día de los Muertos*) in three film narratives: the surviving footage of *¡Que Viva Mexico!* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1931, unfinished), *Coco* (Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, 2017) and *Spectre* (Sam Mendes, 2015). Dimitriadis comments that although the three filmic representations of the “Day of the Dead” are markedly different from one another, all three films showcase a technical and thematic concern with liminality, or as the author phrases it, with the “in-between” quality of the specific cultural tradition. The article comprises three analytical sections, each focusing on a separate filmic event, but concludes with the in-depth argument that the cross-cultural, transnational use of the tradition eludes the Mexican-specific paradigm of analysis. According to Dimitriadis, the “Day of the Dead” has transcended spatial and/or national identifiers, thus stretching its signification to the larger public. And



in this light, he adds that the “Day of the Dead” immerses viewers to a cultural resemantizing of spatio-temporal confines, folklore and aesthetics.

Next article, by Aikaterini Delikonstantinidou, discusses two Chicana/o revisions of the tragic myth of Oedipus in conjunction with recent studies of the American prison crisis. The author argues that Luis Alfaro’s “Oedipus el Rey” (2010) and Law Chavez’s “Señora de la Pinta” (2012) are plays that largely intertext with Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Delikonstantinidou bears upon Ernest Drucker’s notion of the “plague of prisons” to further explore the repercussions of mass incarceration on barrio family, communal life and, eventually, Chicana/o social standing in the US. The article maintains that the imprisonment of Chicana/o youth is not the outcome of a current social crisis, but the transmutation of an age-old tale of victimization: a tale that sheds light on the tragic fate of a *corpus pinta*, a fate inscribed on poor communities of color upon birth. Ultimately, Delikonstantinidou pinpoints the quasi-didactic quality of “Oedipus el Rey” and “Señora de la Pinta” with the critical statement that in their distinct attempts at dismantling the pipeline, both plays summon communities to facilitate the reintegration of *pintos* into barrio life, thus eluding the dual perils of recidivism and incarceration.

Sebastián Imoberdorf, a new PhD in Latin American and US Latino literatures and cultures from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, offers an insightful display of the relationship between official documents (i.e. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”) and literary works by two male and one female writers, who capture intimate connections to Latin America and the US. He discusses in considerable depth the vulnerabilities and issues that certain marginal characters experience. Specifically, he focuses on illegal or undocumented persons to which he refers to as “irregular” status, homosexual individuals (in this case from Cuba), and women who suffer one kind of abuse or another. Together, the three examples confront violence in various forms: physical, sexual and psychological. The works he uses to exemplify such situations are as follows: *El corrido de Dante* by Eduardo González Viaña (dealing with immigrant issues); *Antes que anochezca* by Reinaldo Arenas (concentrating on homosexuals), and *El sueño de América* by Esmeralda Santiago (emphasizing violence toward women). The study makes strong cases for couching their thematics within the legal and moral purviews of human rights.

Film is another area that fortunately is included in this volume, thanks to David R. Maciel who presents an extensive study titled “Vision of Aztlán: The Chicano Documentary Film,” a topic inexplicably but rarely studied in depth. As a Professor Emeritus from California State University at Dominguez Hills and an Associate Professor at the Centro de Investigación y Docencias Económicas in Mexico City, he presents an exemplary overview of Chicano documentary film from its inception during the Chicano Movement (1965-1980) to current times, thereby providing critical vistas of some of the salient works, their characteristics and contributions. Complementing a meticulous examination of each documentary, the author also gives extensive historical background along with enlightening commentary on the directors themselves and the trailblazing efforts on their behalf. As a result, the reader can also find considerable discussion of a variety of cultural entities that supported such a filmic enterprise and the difficulties involved producing



documentaries by both Chicanos and Chicanas, but also by other directors who saw the merit of documenting certain life experiences related to this ethnic community.

Another important topic that is central to Chicana literature overall is the focus on Chicanas or Latinas as writers, particularly in fiction. Monica Got, a lecturer at Bucharest University of Economic Studies, precisely explores this topic in great detail in her study titled “Toward a Geography of Trauma: From *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* to the Birth of Chicana Spiritual Feminism.” Based on careful examinations of various authors in relation to a nuanced theoretical apparatus, the critic presents a robust discussion and analysis on how Chicanas overcame their social-cultural predicaments within the Chicano Movement, which proved to be strongly male-oriented. The barriers ceased to be only symbolic but actually became very real, so Chicanas experienced a rebirth of their own, while at the same time they created a literary movement within a movement beginning in the early 1980s. First of all, they had to confront, escape and challenge their own community’s deep-rooted or entrenched sexism, racism and homophobia. The author here provides the background and context under which Chicana literature took on its own particular characteristics and features, thanks in part to such pioneers as Gloria E. Anzaldúa, considered the foremother of their feminism, particularly in *Borderlands/La Frontera: A New Mestiza* (1987). Therefore, the contrast between a male-dominated movement and a Chicana-centric literary production generated a new aesthetic and a long list of writers who are integral to the field of Chicana literature. By concentrating on the geography of trauma, we are informed of the key roles by such writers as Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Cherríe Moraga, Emma Pérez, and others who have created a feminist discourse of resistance.

In another study, “Hermeneutic Distanciations in Postmodern Chicana Literature: Utopian and Dystopian Horizons in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* (1993) and Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper* (2005)” by Michael Grafals from Florida International University, the author proposes a fascinating read of two key postmodern novels from Chicana literature. Heavily based on concepts and ideas by theoreticians Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Stuart Hall, Emma Pérez and others, we are able to determine how such works emerge from larger social-cultural backgrounds that are intimately couched within postmodern aesthetics. Part of the argument is that Chicana works are no longer isolated literary productions that would otherwise be deemed provincial or limited in scope. The critic outlines with compelling evidence that such works can be viewed as having ties with Ricoeur’s concept of “distanciation” (related to estrangement), Gadamer’s “hermeneutic phenomenology,” Pérez’s “decolonial imaginary,” and Stuart’s “conception of articulation”—all within the theoretical impulses of postmodernism. The original readings of *So Far from God* and *The People of Paper* will forever change and tilt the way we approach these novels, opening up new ground for critical consideration.

Allison Ramay from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile presents “Radical Hope in Cherríe Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*” in which she studies a foundational writer who engages in recreating a Greek myth, in this case a Mexican Medea. By focusing on such a myth, the author is able to unravel the contents of a radical hope as it pertains to how some Chicanas not only



reevaluate key female figures, but also how they actually propose a radical critique of patriarchy, heteronormative and other macho social constructions. What emerges is a clear concept of “Queer Aztlán,” as often propagated by Cherríe Moraga in this work and others. A detailed recreation of Medea helps us reevaluate how patriarchy and feminism can coexist while the symbolism of the protagonist within a Mexican/Chicano cultural setting is valued in terms of deconstructing modern machismo. The use of myth, in this case a strongly feminist archetype, opens up new theoretical possibilities to understand the past and prepare for the future. It would appear that only a radical hope can accomplish this.

Finally, in “The Coatlicue’s State in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*: A Postmodern Interpretation of How to Reach the Mestiza Consciousness,” Mariela Aguilar outlines a clear and extended analysis—both theoretical and textual—of Ana Castillo’s *The Mixquiahuala Letters* in relation to some of the key tenets of Gloria E. Anzaldúa, who produced a watershed landmark in 1987 with *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. The study marks a significant contribution toward decoding central aspects of Castillo’s novel which too often has been glossed over by critics by effectively discussing its genesis, its inspiration and its strategies for reading it. Consequently, we come away with a deeper sense of unraveling the novelistic apparatus used to develop technique, point of view and ideology of the narrator, all couched within postmodernism and a revitalized feminism. The result is a more critically holistic approach toward understanding the many complexities of the novel’s context and the warning signs the Chicano Movement was unable to see at the time of *The Mixquiahuala Letters*’ publication in 1985.

The “Articles” section closes with an interesting addendum to the study of Chicana/Latina literary and cultural corpora. Carolina Fernández Rodríguez, in “Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Ramona*: The Romance that Became a Tourist Guide and Silenced the *Mestiza*,” peeps into the subjective, often dismissive, portrayal of Latina in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, tracing a detailed research of historical and narrative value. As it is well known, José Martí (1853-1895), the leader and spokesman for Cuba’s revolution of independence against Spain, spent a great part of his adulthood in exile in New York City. In October of 1885 he attended a conference on Indian affairs at Lake Mohonk in upstate New York. There he learnt about Helen Hunt Jackson, who had recently passed away, and about her novel *Ramona* (1884), which she had intended as a piece of activism on behalf of the Indigenous peoples of California. Martí was so struck by Jackson’s novel that he decided to translate it into Spanish and to publish it at his own expense. His translation came out in 1888. In the introduction, he stated: “Few books are of greater interest than *Ramona*, and few leave the reader with so sweet an impression” (357).

Ever since then, many Hispanics have felt compelled to read Jackson’s romance story between Ramona—a mestiza, and Alessandro—a Native—set in California in the days after the Mexican American War. In the introduction to the 2005 edition of Jackson’s novel, Chicana writer Denise Chávez recounts her first reading of *Ramona*, when she was in her fifties. Unlike other friends of hers who had read the novel as teenagers, and were therefore infatuated with the romantic elements in the story, she approached the text as a knowledgeable adult: “I was inculcated





with the fantasy of the American West, you White, you Injun, me Mexican—make that a wetback. I knew my place” (xiii). Because Chávez was a critical reader, she was soon appalled by the stereotypical portrayal of Indigenous characters and those of Mexican descent. Only a few pages into the novel, she saw it not as an example of social advocacy, as its author had intended it to be, but of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo views on people of other ethnic backgrounds: a “legacy of untruths,” as she puts it (xv). Chávez went on reading, nonetheless, compelled to do so by the lyrical beauty of the descriptions of the landscapes of California before the arrival of estate development and agribusiness, and also because at times she identified with the novel’s heroine and her strength in adversity. In any case, Chávez admits that reading *Ramona* from the point of view of a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chicana was “a deeply disturbing journey” (xix), and yet, one from which present-day Americans could learn a poignant lesson: “Little has changed” (xix).

Indeed, today, just as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many people of minority ethnic backgrounds, Indigenous and Latinx, keep losing their mother languages; the land that was taken from them is forever gone, and now they are running out of water, too; racism and denigration still exist; immigration policies continue to cause immense pain, even the deaths of hundreds of people as they cross the border; racial violence keeps triggering mental issues, exactly the way it did to Alessandro. In short, all the problems denounced by Jackson’s novel remain virtually unchanged, or worse, increased. In Chávez’s opinion, that *Ramona* portrays not only the struggles of 19<sup>th</sup>-century minoritized peoples, but also those of present-day Latinx justifies that we continue to read Jackson’s romance and to learn from it. Chávez suggests that we ask ourselves: “Who does the land belong to and who belongs to the land?” (xxi), and also: “What matters to us, as a nation and a people who are of the people, for the people, and by the people? And just exactly who would those people be?” (xxi). In other words, Chávez argues that *Ramona*, despite its shortcomings, can still help Americans ponder on issues related to the question of national identity, that is, who belongs in the country’s collective imaginary as American. Even more importantly, Chávez claims that Jackson’s novel can impel contemporary readers to consider the extent to which American democratic principles, as stated in the country’s Constitution, still fail to apply to certain Americans on account of their ethnicity. Thus *Ramona* speaks to us and invites us to see the plight of many present-day Latinx in the context of a long history of discrimination and usurpation.

This issue of *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* includes as well a special “Notes” section, devoted to young scholars, featuring four contributions by postgraduate students enrolled in the Master’s Degree in English and American Studies at the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. Foteini Toliou’s article looks into the transhistorical subordination indigenous and *mestiza/o* identities were/have been/will be subjected to in the borderlands between Mexico and the US. In her reading of Alejandro Morales’s novel, *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992), Toliou examines a tripartite strategy of control and/or suppression in the borderlands: Spanish colonialism, US racism and eco-destruction, each strategy transpiring in different moments of ‘New World’ history. The sociopolitical and cultural dominations that Toliou analyzes illustrate diverse expressions of a





borderland crisis in the three Books that comprise Morales's novel. The article concludes with an insightful comment that in *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Morales sustains the belief that *mestizaje*, intercultural communication and the reclamation of the indigenous and Mexican cultural traditions, like *curanderismo*, can arise as the analeptics to the plight of racial discrimination. Stylianos Papadimitriou zooms on Gregory Nava's film narrative *My Family* (1995) in a critical analysis that investigates the development of Chicana/o identity in the American Southwest. The article offers a close reading of a Mexican and/or Chicana/o family's spatial peregrinations, cultural negotiations and personal struggles amidst a wide array of changing and often perilous social realities. The parents of the family enact the hesitations of the first-generation Mexican immigrant to embrace the American lifestyle. In fact, the parents' identity profile showcases a close adherence to their Mexican roots, while their children, having been raised in the US, challenge the traditions and norms they have inherited from them. Papadimitriou adds that most of the children in *My Family* question and defy mandates of being-in-the-world, thus crafting the novel identity of a contemporary Chicana/o, an identity that is molded by layered socio-cultural conflicts.

Maria Ntokli examines Ana Castillo's use(s) of the archetype of La Malinche, the woman who has embodied the role of the female traitor in Latin American history and folklore. The article attempts a nuanced approach to Castillo's feminist perspective in her epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* with the central critical comment being that the author draws from La Malinche in the creation of her Chicana protagonist, narrator and letter-writer. Ntokli purports that Teresa is a reinvention of La Malinche, a character who is faced with multiple difficulties north and south of the border: gender suppression, violence, emotional depravity, the commodification of her skin color/body, the challenges of being a cultural mediator, and so on. Ntokli claims that in order to subvert the derogatory connotations associated with 'brown' women, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* unravels the sexist double standards both La Malinche and Tereza have had to endure. Channeled through historical and cultural narratives of sexism, narratives perpetrated by Europeans, Indians, Mexicans and Chicanos alike, sexist agendas dominate and hinder both La Malinche's and Tereza's efforts to attain historical truth, emancipation and personal bliss. The article concludes with an insightful coalescence of *las tres madres* (La Malinche, La Llorona and La Virgen de Guadalupe) in Tereza's character arch and suggests that Castillo delves into Tereza's experience so as to propose a Xicanista vision, a vision that urges our understanding of the past in order to be able to craft a more equitable future. Anastasia Miskaki departs from the usual feminist angle with her critical venture into an ecofeminist reading of Sandra Cisneros's "Eyes of Zapata." The article holds that Inés, one of Emiliano Zapata's mistresses and the narrator of the novella, embodies the strange and/or formidable Other in traditional, androcentric communities. Miskaki underlines the parallel structures between Inés and the physical cosmos: both have been silenced, perceived as threatening, used and abused in humanity's histories. The article claims that Inés is sketched out as a *curanderalbruja*, character traits that allow Inés to develop a spiritual relationship with nature. Through her broodings and visions, but also her immersion in the



practices of *curanderismo* and *brujeria*, the female narrator achieves an accord with the natural environment, a harmonious union that alleviates the pain caused by abandonment, rejection and betrayal. Apart from the analogies between Inés and nature, Miskaki elaborates on the contrasts between Inés and Emiliano Zapata, her lover and the father of her two out-of-wedlock children. Zapata's domineering and imperious approach to the elements of nature is strikingly different from Inés's nature-inspired actions and survival tactics. Finally, the article claims that despite patriarchy's and *machismo*'s attempts to weaken and/or efface her, Inés prevails as a potent female character, one who empathizes with the physical cosmos and, by extension, voices the historical experiences of silenced women.

The "Creation" section that closes the monograph includes a preliminary piece by Francisco A. Lomelí, in which a moving and most necessary tribute is paid to the recently passed away founding father of the contemporary chicanx narrative: Rudolfo A. Anaya (Oct 1937-June 2020). After the sensible discourse of the distinguished scholar devoted to the reputed author and friend, a short and personal biography is also included. Furthermore, we are very fortunate to offer a variegated list of authors from various generations as examples of current poetic production among Chicanx and Latinx in the US. We immediately discover that the approaches, thematic, techniques and forms utilized vary drastically: from the lyrical to the personalized chronicle, from the political to the meditative, from an emphasis on image to the petite histoire, from the evocative to experimental, or from the haiku to the prosaic reflection. We also recruited well-established writers and upcoming ones, again, to provide a representative cross-section of the kind of voices and topics that concern these poets. Juan Felipe Herrera as the first Chicano US Poet Laureate leads the list followed by the iconic Alurista, who has had the most extensive career of our contributors. In addition, we also have scholar-poets such as María Herrera-Sobek, Alejandro Morales and Gustavo Segade (also an artist) who share with us deeply personal reflections about their lives. Plus, Thelma Reyna and Luivette Resto are experienced writers of poetry who enhance the thematic in this section of poetry, accompanied by Juan Casillas Núñez whose participation is more well known for his book on Estela Portillo Trambley, offering us a unique view of current political discourse in the United States.

Among the contributors to this poetry section are:

Juan Felipe Herrera, the first Chicano to have been appointed as US Poet Laureate in 2015 and 2016, here offers glimpses into new waves of poems and styles as he continues to experiment with form and language. He has an extensive career of over 20 books, mainly poetry but also some novels, including novels for young adults and children's literature. He is currently the most anthologized and coveted Chicano poet after having garnered many literary awards. Among some of his most well-known books are *Akrilica* (1989), *Cinnamon Girl: Letters Found Inside a Cereal Box* (2005), many others and most recently *Every Day We Get More Illegal* (2020) and *Borderbus* (2020). Alurista here contributes hikus from his most recent book *ZAZ*, which is about to be published in 2020. He returns to a poetic genre he developed extensively in the 1970s and 1980s, while combining some with glyphs and highly experimental imagistic poetry in Spanglish. Most of us know



him as the principal and most transformative poet of the Chicano Movement for his creativity, his teaching and his fight for social justice. Among his most classic works are *Floriscanto en Aztlán* (1971), *Spik in Glyph?* (1981), *As Our Barrio Turns... Who the Yoke B On?* (2002), among others. Gustavo Segade of Puerto Rican and Cuban background was instrumental in the founding of the Mexican-American Department at San Diego State University in 1969. He initiated his career as a critic of Latin American poetry and has since indulged in drawing and painting highly original sketches (often of five faces or five people) in very unique color schemes. His poetry is indeed contemporary in dealing with the coronavirus and issues of coming to terms with his sons' sexuality.

Thelma T. Reyna, moreover, offers personal glimpses into her formation as a woman and poet. Her books have collectively won 16 national literary awards, having written 6 books, and edited 3 anthologies. Her most recent book is *Dearest Papa: A Memoir in Poems* (2020). Her fiction, poetry, and nonfiction have appeared in literary journals, anthologies, textbooks, blogs, and regional media for over 25 years. She was a Pushcart Prize Nominee in Poetry in 2017. She received her Ph.D. at UCLA and was named the Poet Laureate for Altadena, California for 2014-2015. Alejandro D. Morales has a well-chronicled career in fiction writing, having produced a series of landmark novels that are considered must-reads in the US and abroad. His originality in terms of thematics and subject matter are unmatched, but here he offers one poem that is intimately related to a Spanish subject. We can see his poetic prowess, which is thought to be somewhat obscured by his novels and short stories. Clearly we view another important facet of this diverse author. He is about to publish his first book of poetry, titled *Zapote Tree* (in press; 2020). Luivette Resto, a mother, teacher, poet, and Wonder Woman fanatic, was born in Aguas Buenas, Puerto Rico, but proudly raised in The Bronx. Her two books of poetry *Unfinished Portrait* and *Ascension* have been published by Tía Chucha Press. Her latest poetry collection *Promises Are Coffee* is forthcoming by FlowerSong Press. She lives in the Los Angeles, California area. María Herrera-Sobek is a world-class critic of Chicana literature who has exhibited superb ambassadorial skills by promoting Chicana literature throughout the world, including Latin America, much of Europe, the Middle East and even Siberia, Russia. She has published numerous poems from a feminist perspective (in a collection titled *Three Times a Woman: Chicana Poetry* (1989) along with Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Demetria Martínez) turning now to a more personal, almost existential view of the world. And last but not least, Juan José Casillas-Núñez has published various short stories, his genre of predilection, in various literary journals in the US and Spain. His specialization is teaching the Spanish language to students with a focus on heritage speakers. However, his innovative poem-calligram touches a sensitive nerve of what is occurring in the United States at the social and political level, showing that politics is sometimes inevitable. He has published a critical study titled *Estrategias filosóficas y discursivas de Estela Portillo Trambley* (2017).

To sum up, this issue offers the outcome of a transcontinental, transnational and interdisciplinary collaboration, a border crossing of critical thinking. Naturally, compiling the articles that appear in this volume required the combined skills of



negotiation, receptiveness and courtesy. Given that distinguished and young scholars from Europe and the United States conferred and also joined their distinct theoretical perspectives and academic backgrounds in the production of this collection of articles, it is our sincere hope that the dynamics of Chicanx Culture will be further explored in this vein. Pondering on Francisco A. Lomelí's critical proposition, "[w]hat matters most is to measure what is being produced, what is occurring, and how it opens new grounds for experiential knowledge or vicarious enlightenment within an interdisciplinary focus of multicolored components" (221). So let us conclude with a familiar motto: "With discipline we perform, with difference we thrive!"

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# CORRIDOS, TEQUILA (AND OTHERS), AND MEXICAN/CHICANO MASCULINITY

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## ABSTRACT

The Mexican *corrido* is one of the most popular cultural manifestations both in the United States and Mexico. From its origins in the mid-nineteenth century, the *corrido* has dealt with “people’s stuff,” such as war, love, honor, immigration and/or belonging to a land, among other everyday life issues. The *corrido* is, in short, a symbol of identity and belonging, and can be considered a marker of the Mexican identity on both sides of the border. In this sense, it is to be expected that the *corrido*, as an expression of “people’s stuff,” voices the relevance of a “national” symbol. In the same way, tequila is regarded, at least internationally, as directly related to “lo mexicano/chicano,” and in many cases also to Mexican/Chicano masculinity. Starting from this premise, the aim of this article is to observe the presence of tequila and its significance as a symbol of “lo mexicano/chicano” in the work of Los Tigres del Norte, one of the most prominent *corrido* bands, both locally and internationally.

KEYWORDS: *Corridos*, Tequila, Masculinity, Los Tigres del Norte.

## CORRIDOS, TEQUILA (Y OTROS), Y MASCULINIDAD MEXICANA/CHICANA

## RESUMEN

El *corrido* mexicano es una de las manifestaciones culturales más populares tanto en los Estados Unidos como en México. Desde sus orígenes a mediados del siglo XIX, el *corrido* se ha ocupado de “cosas de la gente”, como la guerra, el amor, el honor, la inmigración y/o la pertenencia a una tierra, entre otros temas de la vida cotidiana. El *corrido* es, en resumen, un símbolo de identidad y puede considerarse una marca de la identidad mexicana en ambos lados de la frontera. Del mismo modo, el tequila se relaciona, al menos internacionalmente, con “lo mexicano/chicano”. Y en muchos casos, con la masculinidad mexicana/chicana. En este sentido, es de esperar que el *corrido*, como expresión de “cosas de la gente”, exprese la relevancia de este símbolo “nacional”. A partir de esta premisa, el objetivo de este ensayo es observar la presencia del tequila y su significado como símbolo de “lo mexicano/chicano” en el trabajo de Los Tigres del Norte, una de las bandas de *corrido* más prominentes tanto a nivel local como internacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Corridos*, tequila, masculinidad, Los Tigres del Norte.

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“Los *corridos* son las cosas del pueblo” (“Jefe de jefes”)

Alcohol is the “stuff of everyday life” (Wilson 12). Starting from these two simple statements, this article observes the way *corridos* represent the “everyday-stuff” status of alcohol, and, in particular, of tequila as a vehicle for the construction of a Mexican/Chicano masculine identity. For this purpose, the article looks into the signification and relevance of the portrayal of (tequila) drinking behaviors for the construction of a Mexican/Chicano male identity in the *corridos* of Los Tigres del Norte, likely the most representative and internationally acclaimed *corrido* band.

## A SHORT HISTORICAL REVIEW

Alcohol consumption is an ancient personal and social practice. In the particular case of tequila, considered by many to be the Mexican national drink, the first records that account for its use and consumption date back to pre-Columbian times. In her 2014 comprehensive study on the origins, uses and meanings of tequila, Marie Sarita Gaytán purports that:

Pulque, mezcal, and tequila derive from the agave, also known as the maguey, or the century plant. Indigenous legends recorded by Mesoamerican and Spanish clergy relate stories about the origin of agave, pulque, and their interconnections. For example, the fifteenth century pre-Hispanic Nuttall codex described seventeen types of agave used by the Mixteca. Spanish chronicler Fray Bernardino de Sahagún noted that the Olmeca credited male gods, including Tepuztecatl, Quatlapanqui, Tliloa, and Papaztactzocaca, with inventing pulque. (18)

These words, which expose the ancient origins of the drink, highlight two other issues that are relevant for the development of this article. The first is that the existence and consumption of all drinks deriving from the agave plant were recorded and transmitted through diverse forms of popular culture; the second is that it was, as observed in the said records, both by the indigenous populations and the Spanish ones, directly related to “*lo masculino*,” and, in this particular case, to male Gods.

Gaytán highlights the relevance of pulque (a drink derived from the distillation of the agave tree) to pre-Hispanic civilizations. The tree was not only used in daily-life organization, such as for building, etc., but the beverage was also used for celebrations and social acts, a fact which was regarded by the colonizers as an act of an inferior moral value. The indigenous peoples, when mixing it with other roots and drinking it in large quantities, lost their reasoning capacity (*gente sin razón*

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as they were considered by the colonizers), and engaged in violent acts, or worse, in carnal ones (20). For the following centuries, drinking pulque was considered an inferior act in the hierarchical organization of the colonies and remained as such for centuries. According to Gaytán, it was in this period that pulque and its derivations were soon equated to indigeneity (25). However, according to Chantal Martineau, for the indigenous peoples, drinking pulque was considered to be a sacred act available only to a few chosen individuals, and “[o]nly high priests and tribal chiefs were permitted to partake of the beery liquid, which they believed allowed them to communicate with the gods. The general population was mostly banned from drinking pulque; exceptions were made for the elderly or those who had taken ill and were in need of pulque’s mysterious healing powers” (56). The colonists, for their part, drank wine and ate food brought over from Spain, in an attempt to mark a clear hierarchical gap between the two communities. By the seventeenth century, however, the drink became more popular among the *mestizo* and *mulato* populations, as well as the lower-class Spanish. *Pulquerías* were established and selling pulque became a regulated act, which brought an illegal commerce too (Gaytán 25). As Martineau explains, by the twentieth century, “the drink had become synonymous with the lower classes—and with a swarm of health risks. Unsanitary conditions in production facilities plus poor handling, storage, and shipment of pulque were rumoured to be the cause of widespread poisoning” (59). This was until it became, once again, a popular, even hipster drink, both in Mexico and outside its borders, directly linked to “*lo mexicano*,” a widely recognized national symbol.

## TEQUILA AND “LO MEXICANO”/“LO CHICANO”

In *The Philosophy of Food*, David M. Kaplan affirms that:

Food and drink figure into our everyday lives in countless ways. A diet expresses ethnic, religious, and class identification; it prescribes gender roles; it is embodied in rituals and manners; and it relates directly to our aspirations to perfect ourselves. Food and drink tap our pleasures and anxieties, memories and desires, and pride in or alienation from our heritage. This connection between diet and identity raises a number of philosophical questions. Nothing we eat (short of poison) determines an identity. And yet dietary preferences are indeed a part of who I am individually and who we are collectively. Sometimes the role of food is trivial (e.g., one’s idiosyncratic tastes and food memories); sometimes significant (e.g., sugar and the Atlantic slave trade, or Ireland and the potato in the 1840s). Either way, food is a marker of identity. (18)

Regardless of risking being essentialist and stereotypical, it is today undeniable that definitions of “*lo mexicano*,” in terms of drinking habits, are related to tequila. As mentioned previously, however, this direct equation of Mexican identity and the drink was not always a positive one, and it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the drink acquired international recognition, a social status, and the labelling of “the national Mexican drink.” According to Martineau, a key moment





of this turn to national and international status came in the 1940s and 1950s, when Mexican cinema introduced tequila in the plots of movies, which dealt with *charros* and cowboys and, thus, in the imaginary daily lives of the protagonists of popular movies (298). Indeed, Gaytán affirms that, “Tequila’s ubiquity in Mexican cinema heightened its ties to Mexican identity both within and outside of the nation. On the legislative front, industrialists began initiating steps to conserve tequila’s association as an exclusively Mexican drink” (10). The relevance that tequila acquired both within and outside Mexico, transcended the economy that surrounds the production and consumption of tequila, but, as highlighted by Gaytán, reached the popular notion of the drink as a marker of a collective identity, which would define “*lo mexicano*.” Similarly, this identity has permeated both the national and international assumptions on the collective, imaginary identity of Mexicans, and tequila has become an uncontested popular emblem with which Mexicans relate.

In her work *¡Tequila! Distilling the Spirit of Mexico*, Gaytán expands deeply on this relationship between tequila and “*lo mexicano*” and proposes a direct link between the essentialist universal understanding of Mexico with the Mexican Revolution, and with Pancho Villa in particular. For her, this link between the revolutionary, the revolution, Mexico and the drink has presented “tequila as a populist symbol of *lo mexicano* (Mexicanness). The rise of Villa as a tequila-drinking national icon is the result of a factious interplay of clashing political ideologies, racial stereotypes, notions of masculinity, and media representations” (45). In this sense, the post-Revolution rise of the notion of *mexicanidad*/*lo mexicano* encouraged the idea of a mestizo identity and raised revolutionary masculine symbols, such as that of Villa. According to Gaytán, in a country where the majority of the foundational identitarian symbols of the country were related to feminine figures, such as the Virgen de Guadalupe,

after the revolution this phenomenon shifted, and male figures became more visible in order to accommodate the patriarchal impulses of modernization. The momentum of modernity operated within the scope of a masculine agenda, or “national fantasy” in which male icons mapped the country’s “glorious” past onto its “coherent” present. Specifically, the *charro* became a prototype used for marketing “Mexican culture for public consumption both inside and outside of Mexico.” ... Drinking and fighting were expressly prohibited because carrying a real gun was part of the *charro* regalia. ... Although the *charro* was one example of a particular version of Mexican manliness and a symbol of “good” citizenship that was promoted locally and internationally, another icon also started to emerge during this period—one that stood in opposition to the state’s representation of respectable Mexican manhood: the legendary rebel General Francisco “Pancho” Villa. (51)

As expressed previously, the masculine symbol of Pancho Villa has permeated better in the international imagination of the Mexican identity, and together with it the idea of a certain type of masculinity, which, as observed earlier, directly related to bravery, honor and drinking tequila.



## DRINKING AND MASCULINITY

Drinking is considered, in most societies, a social act. In fact, one could talk of the existence of a “drinking culture” (Wilson), which is performed not only individually, but mostly in a group environment. For Thomas M. Wilson, in fact, drinking is (as *corridos* are), “the stuff of everyday life, quotidian culture which at the end of the day may be as important to the lifeblood of the nation as are its origin myths, heroes and grand narratives. Drinking cultures are aspects of other cultures, part and parcel of wider webs of significance, broader fields of affiliation, identification and action. Drinking is itself a practice of differentiation, an example of cultural praxis” (12). In this process of collective communion, the kind of alcohol one drinks is undoubtedly also a product of cultural differentiation, and of national or even regional identification and differentiation. Tequila, including each of its types and derivations, is considered to be a symbol of Mexican identity, both outside and inside its national and cultural borders.

Similarly, the social act of drinking is directly assimilated as an act of individual identification within a group. When this social act is performed, traditionally in public spaces, such as bars, pubs or cantinas, there occurs a “natural” (socially constructed) gender separation during the performance of such a social act. Drinking in public has traditionally been considered an act related to the public sphere of life and is, thus, a male act. Many scholars have related drinking to a certain public reinforcement of masculinity, or a particular hegemonic masculinity, recurrent both in the social, cultural praxis of societies and in its popular cultural representations. Such is the case of Mexico and the United States, and we could translate this same notion to other Western countries. Thus,

American culture has linked “being a man” (dominant masculinities) with alcohol use. Toughness means being able to “hold your liquor” or drink vast quantities (binge drinking) without serious social consequences. Cultural themes of being able to fight, if challenged, play out daily in the media and in bars as a man seeks to maintain his sense of his masculinity. Alcohol use enables non-relational sexuality—being able “to get a girl” for sex, homosociality, and “having fun” where drinking with the boys is very different from drinking with the girls. (West 373)

Hence, drinking is a social, public, male act and it has been represented as such in popular culture. In the particular case of Mexican tequila, both in real life and in its several popular representations, men are protagonists and women, as in the case of the *comedias rancheras*, “on occasion worked as servers, sold snacks, or sang songs” in the cantinas (Gaytán 69). There, “tequila is almost always the drink of choice for male characters” (Gaytán 69).

As a representative of the popular manifestation of “las cosas del pueblo,” *corridos*, the popular sung narrative form originating in the mid-nineteenth century, are valid examples to observe the relevance of tequila for the construction of a Mexican/Chicano national identity, and in particular, a male one. *Corridos*, as observed by Américo Paredes (1958) among others, are typically songs that account



for the bravery and honor of male protagonists, who are, in many cases, involved in acts of defence of a just cause, such as fighting the oppressive authorities, and so on. For this purpose, and starting from the idea that alcohol has traditionally been linked to the enhancement of a public performance of masculinity, I find it interesting to observe the way drinking, or drinking tequila in particular, as a Mexican/Chicano national symbol is represented and acquires meaning in the popular (male) form of the *corrido*.

## CORRIDOS, LOS TIGRES DEL NORTE AND TEQUILA

*Corridos* have traditionally served to “pass stories on,” to transmit popular knowledge, to account for daily life issues, to connect people across geographical boundaries and generations and, in sum, to maintain popular culture and traditions. The case of Los Tigres del Norte is an exceptional one of national and international success and recognition: their cross-cultural essence (all their members were born in Mexico, but the band was formed in San José, California) provides them with the authority to speak for people on both sides of the US-Mexico border. As such, they have become, for many, the voice of immigrants who want to reach El Norte, of citizens on both sides of the border, and as such are “the voice of the people.” Mariana Rodríguez, in her comparative work on the political relevance of Los Tigres del Norte and El Vez, says about the band: Los Tigres del Norte record and celebrate the Mexican migrant experience of immigration in their lyrics. They sing about the discrimination faced by Mexicans while emphasizing the importance of Mexican immigrants in the US, labor market and their contribution both to the USA and to the construction of El México del norte/el otro México. They also continue, explicitly or implicitly, the *corrido* tradition’s main function as a genre that narrates Mexican immigrant community life and aspirations. But Los Tigres del Norte also depart from traditional border *corrido*, those narrating the adventures of a brave man and his struggles with the Texas Rangers and other agents of the US state, by using female characters in their songs.

These words summarize the political and cultural relevance of Los Tigres del Norte and their indubitable role in bringing the stories of those who live an invisible existence (immigrants, undocumented people, laborers, and so on) to the public scene. In this light, numerous works from academics, journalists as well as cultural and music critics have taken note of the band’s activism. In this essay, however, it is not my intention to disregard their relevance on these matters, but rather to observe the way the band include in their lyrics elements of what is considered “Mexicano/Chicano,” such as drinking (tequila), and the way this promotes a certain understanding of Mexican/Chicano masculinity.

Scholars such as Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz equate Mexican/Chicano masculinity to the macho figure, or to his praxis, machismo. Chicano sociologist Alfredo Mirandé labels this definition of machismo as the “compensatory model, ... ultimately motivated by feelings of powerlessness that can be traced to the Spanish



conquest of Mexico. ... The powerless, colonized man thus compensates for feelings of inadequacy and impotence by assuming an overly masculine and aggressive stance relative to women and the rest of the world” (67). Mirandé, on his part, defends the historical and sociocultural evolution of the term, and defines machismo, or being a macho, as a positive model, “the ethic model,” where the macho

is not cold and insensitive, but warm and emotional. Rather than being driven by feelings of inferiority or a desire to control others, his behavior is motivated by the desire to uphold his own honor and the honor and integrity of the group. The essential components of machismo are not violence, aggressiveness, or virility, but honor, respect, dignity, and bravery. A real macho is a man who has earned the respect of his family and community. Within the family, the wishes of the man as titular head of the household are more likely to be heeded because he is honored and respected than because he is feared. ( 68)

In this context, this essay originates from the following three premises: 1. The relevance of Los Tigres del Norte to the expression of “las cosas del pueblo;” 2. The symbolization of tequila as “una cosa del pueblo Mexicano/Chicano;” and, 3. The importance of alcohol for the performance of masculinity. Thus, it is my intention in the following paragraphs to observe the way (drinking) tequila, or even drinking in general, is portrayed in the lyrics of Los Tigres del Norte with the aim of drawing conclusions about the way this is related to a particular understanding of Mexican/Chicano masculinity. It is interesting, at this point, to include several lines of two *corridos* by Los Tigres del Norte, lines which support the two conceptual axe of the three promises: on the one hand, the relevance of *corrido*, and on the other, their understanding of masculinity.

The first stanza of “Jefe de Jefes,” from the album of the same name (2008), is an example of the relevance of the *corrido* as an expression of “people’s stuff:” “A mí me gustan los *corridos* / por que son los hechos reales de nuestro pueblo / Sí a mí también me gustan / por que en ellos se canta la pura verdad” (I like *corridos* because they account for our people’s real facts). These words account not only for that fact, but also for the idea that what is said in *corridos* is “la pura verdad,” the truth, and in many cases, even the historical truth. Especially relevant to this work is the following *corrido*, where Los Tigres del Norte clearly define their ideological standpoint in terms of the gender relationship and their conception of traditional machismo.<sup>1</sup>

“El macho y el hombre”  
Yo iba adorar la grandeza de un hombre  
por todos los hijos que dejó regado  
y he visto inocentes llorar su desgracia  
vagar por el mundo triste y olvidados.

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<sup>1</sup> A summary of the *corridos* will be offered hereafter.



Yo he visto mujeres llorar su abandono  
perderse en el vicio por un mal cariño  
morir poco a poco cual dijo el poeta  
recordando un macho y arrastrando un niño.

El macho y el hombre son polos opuestos, uno es la vergüenza y otro es el deber  
macho es el que deja hijos por doquiera  
hombre el que los cría, los educa, los guía y les da de comer.

He visto a los machos matar por la espalda y llenar de lodo a una buena mujer  
presumir su hombría cuando andan borracho

pero enfrente a un hombre no saben que hacer.<sup>2</sup>

The lyrics of “El macho y el hombre,” from the year 1986, are coincidental with Mirandé’s theories on *machismo*, both in chronological and conceptual terms. El macho, “la vergüenza” (shame), a man who “mata por la espalda” (kills from behind), “presume de su hombría cuando anda borracho” (boasts about his manhood when he is drunk), “deja hijos por doquiera” (leaves children everywhere) responds to the traditional notion of Mexican/Chicano masculinity, addressed in what Mirandé denominates as “the compensatory model,” or what Scott Baugh defines as “the power a macho male possesses within the family structure [that] represents his primary outlet of self-expression” (4). Interestingly enough, in an attempt to bring the *corrido* to the field of study of this article, the macho is a man who drinks, gets drunk and, implicitly in the text, is violent and aggressive because of his use and abuse of alcohol. El hombre (the man), for Los Tigres del Norte, is a man who represents “el deber” (duty), “el hombre el que los cría, los educa, los guía y les da de comer” (los hijos) (raises, educates, guides and feeds them). This description of “el hombre” (the man) similarly corresponds to Mirandé’s ethic model: a man who is caring, affectionate and responsible towards his and his family’s life.

The observation of the many *corridos* that Los Tigres del Norte have recorded in their long and prolific career leads me to a first general conclusion. Alcohol, tequila in particular, is not among the most recurrent themes of the lyrics of the band. However, within the songs that address the act/fact of drinking in general, and drinking tequila in particular, I will, in the following lines, group them into what I label (mimicking Mirandé’s and Mary Douglas’s terms) songs which portray *compensatory drinking* and those which portray what I will label as *celebratory drinking*.

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<sup>2</sup> The *corrido* makes a clear differentiation between the macho and the man as they represent opposing masculine figures. The former symbolizes shame: he has several children and does not care about them and boasts about his manhood when he is drunk. The latter symbolizes duty, educates and feeds his children.



## LOS TIGRES DEL NORTE'S *CORRIDOS* AND COMPENSATORY DRINKING

Most of the *corridos* of Los Tigres del Norte that include drinking in general, or drinking tequila in particular, can be included under the group that portray “compensatory drinking.” All of these, as a general rule, have a man as their main protagonist, who, in most of the cases, is presented as an abandoned man, crying for the loss of a woman. Love, or unrequited love to be more specific, is at the center of this group of *corridos*, whose tone and style is repeatedly similar in all of them. Thus, in “Amorcito Norteño” (1976), the voice sings:

Amorcito norteño  
Aquí está tu dueño  
Que te viene a cantar  
Yo también me desvelo  
Porque sé que te quiero  
Sin poderte olvidar.  
Si me miras borracho  
Si me miras tomando  
Por tu amor ha de ser  
Porque tú no comprendes  
Cuando lloran los hombres  
Por alguna mujer.

Cuando alguna mujer  
Se nos mete en el alma  
Sólo queda el beber  
Y la vida se acaba.<sup>3</sup>

Or, in “La mesa del rincón,”(2011) (the corner table), a man cries equally for a woman and does not want to be seen: “Ahí en la mesa del rincón,/ Les pido por favor,/ Me lleven la botella./ Quiero estar solo, / Ahí con mi dolor, / No quiero que alguien diga / Que le he llorado a ella.”<sup>4</sup> Also, in “Cariño dónde andarás” (1993), an abandoned man wonders where “his lost woman” is, who she is with and resorts to drinking as the only way out. “Cariño donde andarás con quien te andarás paseando / no me calienta ni el sol por eso vivo en el trago / sólo la muerte es ausencia, tú volverás a mi lado.”<sup>5</sup> Or “El artista” (2002), which states that “desaparece las penas con tequila y con canciones” (sadness disappears with tequila and songs), tequila is used to compensate for sadness. “Qué voy a hacer sin ti” (2009) similarly portrays the sadness of a lonely man, who, this time, blames the woman for his use of alcohol.

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<sup>3</sup> A man is crying and drinking for the love of a woman, who left him. He affirms that, in such a situation, drinking is all that is left.

<sup>4</sup> A man is crying and drinking alone and does not want anyone to see him cry for a woman.

<sup>5</sup> A man wonders where “his woman” is, who she is walking with. Only drinking helps him.



Que voy hacer sin ti  
hoy tu ausencia me lastima  
no era cliente de cantinas  
pero ya lo soy por ti.  
Esta copa va por ti,  
las que siguen van por ti,  
si me enfermo, si me muero,  
si me lleva la tristeza,  
todo ese montón de culpas  
te las van a echar a ti.<sup>6</sup>

This same situation is portrayed in “Se me acabó el Tequila” (2014), this time with a direct reference to tequila, instead of a generic, symbolic reference to alcohol or cantinas as a whole. In these *corridos*, tequila is portrayed as having healing properties for men who feel abandoned and betrayed by women.

Que venga el cantinero a servir  
Se me acabó el tequila  
Aquí en la cantina voy a estar  
Bebíendome mis penas.

Si antes era un triunfador  
Hoy vivo derrotado  
De cuerpo y alma me entregué  
Y solo me han dejado.

Estoy encadenado a mi dolor  
Y yo no sé hasta cuando  
A veces me reclama el corazón  
De amar sin nada a cambio.

Voy a tratar de cauterizar  
La herida que yo traigo  
Con sal, limón y tragos de tequila  
Que me está faltando.

Se me acabó el tequila que vengan a servirme por favor  
Hasta que yo la olvide o deje de latir mi corazón  
Se me acabó el tequila y a nadie yo le pido compasión  
No voy hacer el último borracho  
Que sufre, muere y llora por amor.

Que venga el cantinero a servir  
Se me acabó el tequila

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<sup>6</sup> A man says he was never a cantina customer. He blames a woman for having left him and having “pushed him” to the cantina, making her responsible for his fate (death, diseases, etc).



Que ponga a los norteños a cantar  
Que sea las golondrinas.

Adonde ira la que se fue  
Y que juro quererme  
Maldigo en que la encontré  
Y que me enamoré nomas para perderte.<sup>7</sup>

...

The *corrido* “Te odio y te quiero” (1990) similarly makes reference to forgetting and drinking alcohol (wine, in this particular case) and says: “No quiero nombrarte y busco en las copas / El vino y olvido que nunca será” (I don’t want to name you and I find in drinking and wine the oblivion that will never be). Likewise, in “Tu recuerdo y yo” (2008), the protagonist sings: “Estoy en el rincón de una cantina oyendo una canción que yo pedí me están sirviendo ahorita mi tequila ya va mi pensamiento, rumbo a tí” (I am sitting in the corner of the cantina, listening to a song I asked for. As my tequila is being served, my thoughts are about you). Finally, in “Un mar de vino” (1995), the man defends himself from his ex-lover’s friends, who accuse him of having to forget the woman’s love through an indiscriminate use of alcohol (wine in this particular case).

Un mar de vino  
yo no lo necesito  
con unas copas me basto para entender  
que los amores no son buenos a la puerta  
tampoco es bueno rogarle a una mujer  
aunque no niego que todas son hermosas  
pero hay ingratas que no saben amar  
por que un espejo refleja su belleza  
luego el desprecio su contra vanidad

que yo te quiero dijiste a tus amigas  
que no te olvido ni teniendo un mar de vino  
por que me vieron tomado en la cantina  
grite tu nombre cuando estaba bien bebido  
que yo te quiero dijiste a tus amigas  
que cuando quieras me tienes en tus manos  
eso es mentira por que aunque no lo creas  
si yo te quise ya se me esta olvidando

un mar de vino  
yo no lo necesito  
con unas copas me basto para sanar

---

<sup>7</sup> A man is drinking and crying in a cantina. He was once a successful man, but “his woman” has left him and he is a loser now. He tries to forget about his sad situation by drinking tequila.





aquella espina que dejaste aquí en mi alma  
por tu cariño no volveré a tomar<sup>8</sup>  
...

All in all, the compilation of *corridos* that portray men drowning their grief in alcohol, wine and tequila particularly, lead to two general conclusions about their message regarding masculinity and the use of alcohol for men. First, we can clearly conclude that the protagonists of all these *corridos* are men and the songs are sung by men. This apparently insignificant fact is symbolically quite relevant. On the one hand, it connects all men who are experiencing the same situation, have experienced it, or will in the future. On the other hand, this fact makes the stories of the *corrido* partly universal and, thus, they instantly become shared and received as “las cosas del pueblo.” Second, the characterization of the male protagonist of these *corridos* is astonishingly similar in all of the songs: they are suffering, crying, sensitive men, who show their feelings openly and share them with those participating in the performative communicative act that these *corridos* propose. Both the singers, the protagonists of the lyrics and those receiving and eventually reproducing them are men (and women), who have (or have not) experienced the same situation and, thus, understand that crying, grieving and showing emotions publicly are all part of what being a man is. This masculine model responds to the one defined by Mirandé as representing the “ethic model” of manhood and masculinity. As for the portrayal of women in these *corridos*, we can conclude that, on the one hand, women are portrayed as agentic individuals who have a voice and, in this particular case, women who have chosen to abandon these men. As Rodríguez affirms: “These female characters are often as powerful and brave as their male counterparts, thus marking the group’s rejection of the subordinate place of women in Mexican immigrant and Chicano/a patriarchal cultures” (3). On the other hand, this same act, the act of speaking up, can be understood as an act of betrayal on their part towards the male protagonists of the *corridos*. This is, in a way, a contradictory portrayal of the women, who are represented as free, voiced women, but they are also represented as unfaithful, to-blame women.

With respect to the act of drinking alcohol, two conclusions can be reached as well. On the one hand, drinking is in many cases represented as an abstract concept, with its consequences, such as being drunk, *borracho*, being emphasized. On the other hand, we also see the protagonists just drinking, *tomando*, or with a glass in their hands, or with a *botella*, a bottle. The second conclusion relates to the idea that this act of drinking, considered “compensatory drinking,” is always an individual act. As expressed by Douglas, “Just because alcohol in this setting is the gate of access to all that is most desired, a person suffering social rejection would understandably turn to compensatory drinking, to possess at least the symbol of what he does not have” (8-9). Feeling sad, the protagonists resort to drinking to compensate for the

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<sup>8</sup> A man defends himself and accuses the woman who left him of telling her friends he is in love with her and crying for his loss. He says that he does not need to drink a lot, but just needs some wine to forget about her.



loss of the loved person and this is performed solitarily, even if it is always done in a cantina, a bar or a public drinking space. Finally, we could affirm that, in this type of *corrido*, tequila is not necessarily the preferred drink, and, thus, tequila is not conceived as the only alcoholic drink that one could use for this purpose. In this light, the opening premise that equated (drinking) tequila with Mexican/Chicano masculinity does not prove to be true after the observation of these *corridos*.

## LOS TIGRES DEL NORTE'S *CORRIDOS* AND CELEBRATORY DRINKING

The second group of *corridos*, which deal with the act of drinking alcohol in general, or tequila in particular, can be labelled under the name “celebratory drinking.” A notable example is the *corrido* “Ando amanecido” (1999):

Si las despierto chiquillas bonitas  
Si se molestan ustedes perdonen  
Allí me dispensan que yo ande contento  
Traigo al conjunto cantando canciones  
El acordeón que bonito retumba  
Allí me dispensan muchachas el ruido  
Allí me reclaman mañana o pasado

Ahorita no porque ando amanecido  
Por Dios santito que México es chulo  
No hay otra tierra como el suelo azteca  
Por eso es que ando arrastrando al conjunto

Con mis amigos con vino y cerveza  
Hasta que el cuerpo y la bolsa me aguante  
Voy a gozarla mientras que yo pueda  
Ahorita somos mañana quien sabe  
Ya lo sabemos qué mundo allí te quedas  
No tengo yo compromisos de amores  
Yo soy de todas y a todas las quiero  
Soy como el pájaro de rama en rama  
Y cuando quiero levanto mi vuelo  
Por Dios santito que México es chulo  
No hay otra tierra como el suelo azteca  
Por eso es que ando arrastrando al conjunto  
Con mis amigos con vino y cerveza<sup>9</sup>

...

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<sup>9</sup> A man celebrates life, friendship and the beauty of Mexico by drinking wine and beer with his friends. He boasts about the fact that he likes all women and can have them all.



There is also “El cheque” (1972), which says: “Despues de cambiar el cheque, me fui para una cantina para aventarme unos tragos / estaban unos mariachis, sin sombrero y con huaraches / cantando el Juan Charrasqueado.”<sup>10</sup> “Al estilo mejicano” (2006) sings to the beauty of women all over Mexico and celebrates Mexican identity by praising the different alcoholic drinks that define each of the Mexican regions. The *corrido* says: “Lo mismo tomo una cerveza allá en el norte / Que me echo un Pulque en las tierras del bajo. / Voy a San Luís a saborear de su Colonche / O un buen Tequila si ando en suelo Tapatío.” “Le felicito amigo” (2002) celebrates the gifts of a man, who says: “Me gusta la parranda, la vida bohemia/me gusta el buen vino y puedo amanecer tomando / la copa con buenos amigos” (I like partying, bohemian life, and good wine. I can stay up all night drinking with good friends). In a similar vein, “Los malportados” (2007) praises the deeds of a group of friends, who like *parranda* (fiesta, partying), and are portrayed as wholly indifferent to what the rest of society thinks of them.

Los mal portados nos dicen todos,  
porque gozamos al vivir a nuestro modo  
nos entregamos a los placeres,  
el canto el baile la parranda y las mujeres  
Los mal portados así nos llaman  
y nuestra fiesta es siete días a la semana  
porque el futuro siempre es incierto  
por eso amigos hay que vivir el momento.<sup>11</sup>

In general terms, the *corridos*, which fall in the “celebratory drinking” group and are less abundant than those labelled as belonging to the group of “compensatory drinking,” are also present in the Los Tigres del Norte’s song corpus. After browsing some of their lyrics and their symbolic representation of the act of drinking, we can come to two conclusions. Contrary to the previous group, most of these *corridos* portray drinking as a collective, social act with friends, families and/or colleagues. The idea of *parranda* (partying, fiesta), which implicitly includes drinking in/with a group, is present in most of them, and drinking is performed as a celebratory act. In this sense, the idea of celebration, making the most of life and enjoying it, is directly related to drinking and its ensuing *parranda*. Douglas would label this as “constructive drinking,” and as a whole it is represented as a collective ceremonial act, an act which unites people (men, mostly) and creates a sense of collectivization and belonging. As expressed by Douglas, in this case, “drinks also act as markers of personal identity and of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion” (8). In this sense,

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<sup>10</sup> After cashing a check, (a man) goes to the cantina to celebrate it with some drinks. Some mariachis are singing.

<sup>11</sup> This is a *carpe diem corrido*, where a group of men explain that they like partying, drinking and women. For that reason, they are called “the bad-behaved.”



and as observed, some of the *corridos*, which celebrate drinking, do connect with praising Mexican identity, as is the case of “El cheque” and “Al estilo mejicano.”

It is, however, interesting to note that, in some of these *corridos*, their protagonists are representative of what Mirandé calls the macho figure, a persona who follows the “compensatory model,” where a man boasts about his freedom and his relaxed relationship with women, as in the case of “La hija la mama” (2014).

Sentado en un bar  
tomándome un trago  
de pronto que veo  
una alucinación  
Había en la puerta  
dos hembras muy lindas  
la hija, la mama  
ay válgame Dios

Que se para mi  
debo estar tomado  
señor cantinero  
ya no me dé más

Porque ya no puedo  
saber cuál de todas  
la hija o la mama  
me quiero llevar.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of connecting the act of drinking with engaging in a relationship with women, and not only that, as in the case of seeing oneself able to “choose” between the mother and the daughter, represents a kind of manhood which, according to Mirandé and even Los Tigres del Norte themselves, as we saw in the *corrido* “El hombre y el macho,” shows no positive characteristics.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, we can infer that the starting premise of this article, that is to observe the way Los Tigres del Norte’s *corridos* represent the “everyday-stuff” status of alcohol, and in particular of tequila, as a vehicle for the construction of a Mexican/ Chicano masculine identity, results in the following general conclusions. On the one hand, drinking is present in many of the *corridos* of the band. However, there is no proof of the prominence of tequila above other drinks. The idea of drinking as an abstract act, portrayed directly as a means of getting drunk (most of the times,

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<sup>12</sup> A man is sitting in a bar, drinking, when two women come in: a mother and her daughter. He “wants them” both.



alone), is vital in many of the songs of the band. When there is direct reference to the kind of drinks that are used for the act of drinking, tequila, wine and even beer are named, but there is no prominence of one over the other. In many of the cases, the idea of partying, or what we label “celebratory drinking,” is also present in many of the band’s *corridos*, and once again there is no prominence of one drink over the other, but it is also true that when drinking is used to celebrate, this is always connected to a collective, communal act.

The most relevant conclusion of this observation, however, is related to the way drinking connects directly to a particular performance and representation of masculinity. In most of the cases, all *corridos* by Los Tigres del Norte are not only performed by men, but they also show men as protagonists. We could even infer that, implicitly, many times one could think that they are addressed to men and create an empathic connection with the male audience. In the case of the observed *corridos* and the way they portray a representation of men and masculinity, there is a clear distinction between those songs that portray “compensatory drinking” and, on the other hand, that allude to “celebratory drinking.” The former show sad, sensitive men, men who are crying for the loss of love or of their beloved women. In a way, these *corridos* portray a positive representation of men, at least in the public performance of their grief and in the wholehearted statement of their feelings. However, it is also true that in many of these *corridos*, the women are not portrayed in such a positive light and, in fact, they are blamed as betrayers. Finally, those songs which portray drinking as a celebratory act are in many cases related to men, whose attitude is more aggressive or related to the macho figure, the boasting, proud and even aggressive man, whose relationship to women is more traditional or “relaxed.”

All in all, drinking is undoubtedly part of the everyday life, as well as individual and social acts of most social communities, and the case of the Mexican/Chicano is no different. As such, and in the “sung newspapers” that *corridos* represent, drinking is present in these songs, songs which connect to their audience by sharing the praxis and the results of the act of drinking because, “los *corridos* son las cosas del pueblo” and “drinking is the stuff of everyday life.”

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# ECO-COSMOPOLITAN STRANGERS: MIGRATION, TOXICITY AND VULNERABILITY IN THE US-MEXICO BORDER THROUGH A REVISION OF LUCHA CORPI'S *CACTUS BLOOD*

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## ABSTRACT

Migration flows are common in the US-Mexico border region. However, it has never been so complicated for Latinas/os to cross northwards as it is today. This is due not only to political factors, but also to worsening environmental conditions. Migration, environmental degradation, toxicity and vulnerability are all entangled issues in the US-Mexico border region, as Lucha Corpi's novel *Cactus Blood* (1995) depicts. When analyzed from an eco-cosmopolitan perspective, the migrant character in the novel, understood as a "stranger"—in the sense of an in-between, insider-outsider character that makes boundaries porous—discloses an environmental awareness that she can use to face her own vulnerability, while at the same time revealing the (global) networks responsible for the environmental degradation and toxicity of certain places, such as the US-Mexico border region. A socio-environmental revision of *Cactus Blood*—a novel written a quarter of a century ago—highlights issues that are extremely pertinent to confront contemporary challenges.

KEYWORDS: Migration, Eco-Cosmopolitanism, Stranger, US-Mexico Border Region.

EXTRAÑOS ECO-COSMOPOLITAS: MIGRACIÓN, TOXICIDAD Y VULNERABILIDAD  
EN LA ZONA FRONTERIZA ENTRE EE. UU. Y MÉXICO A TRAVÉS DE UNA REVISIÓN  
DE *CACTUS BLOOD*, DE LUCHA CORPI

## RESUMEN

Los flujos de migración son comunes en la zona fronteriza entre Estados Unidos y México. Sin embargo, para las personas de origen latino cada vez resulta más complicado cruzar la frontera hacia el norte. Esto se debe no solo a factores políticos sino también al empeoramiento de las condiciones medioambientales. La migración, la degradación medioambiental, la toxicidad y la vulnerabilidad son aspectos que están ligados en la zona fronteriza entre EE. UU. y México, como muestra Lucha Corpi en su novela *Cactus Blood*. De acuerdo con un análisis eco-cosmopolita, la inmigrante de la novela, entendida como una "extraña" —en el sentido de un personaje que está en medio, dentro y fuera, de modo que hace que los límites se vuelvan porosos— muestra una concienciación medioambiental que le puede servir para enfrentar su propia vulnerabilidad. Dicho análisis sirve a su vez para mostrar las redes (a nivel global) responsables de la degradación medioambiental y la toxicidad de ciertos lugares, como dicha zona fronteriza EE. UU.-México. Una revisión socio-medioambiental de *Cactus Blood* —escrita ya hace un cuarto de siglo— sirve por tanto para mostrar aspectos que resultan tremendamente pertinentes para afrontar retos contemporáneos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: migración, eco-cosmopolitismo, extraña, zona fronteriza EE. UU.-México.

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Migrants are themselves nature on the move.  
—Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker,  
*Environmental History of Modern Migrations*, 9

Migration, environmental degradation and toxicity, as well as vulnerability, are all entangled factors in the US-Mexico border region. Chicana/o literature often depicts this interrelation through the figure of the migrant and from an eco-cosmopolitan perspective.<sup>1</sup> The migrant can be understood as an “in-between stranger”: “Strangers make social, cultural and physical boundaries porous and unstable; rather than reinforcing boundaries, ‘ambivalent people’ make them problematic” (Marotta 108).<sup>2</sup> In this sense, migrants as in-between, insider-outsider characters make boundaries porous, challenge notions of nationality and belonging, as well as environmental understandings and global networks through eco-cosmopolitan attitudes. The eco-cosmopolitanism of some migrants can reflect their environmental awareness—through the way they might use their environmental knowledge(s) to learn from and adapt to their new places of inhabitation, while learning to care for them. This awareness, in turn, might help them face their own vulnerability, itself (partly) derived from their (illegal) migrant/strange status, which might force them to face precarious working and living conditions, often linked to degraded and/or toxic environments. Simultaneously, this awareness exposes the existing (global) networks responsible for migrants’—and other subaltern peoples’—vulnerability and overexposure to toxicity and environmental degradation in the border region. Characters such as the border women in Ito Romo’s *El Puente/The Bridge* (2000), the farmworkers from Ana María Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) or the undocumented Carlota Navarro in Lucha Corpi’s detective story *Cactus Blood* (1995) are notable literary examples of these eco-cosmopolitan migrants/strangers. The latter novel is particularly relevant in the context of the eco-cosmopolitan strangers for the significance the plot confers to illegal migration issues as interconnected with toxic environments and socio-environmental concerns.

Corpi has written a set of detective stories that not only criticize racial and economic injustice in the US Southwest, but that revisit key events in the history of

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula Heise’s concept of eco-cosmopolitanism implies “a sense of planet, a cognitive understanding and affective attachment to the global ... that is, an environmentally oriented cosmopolitanism” (59).

<sup>2</sup> For more on the figure of the stranger see Baumann “Strangers”; “Making and Unmaking”; and Simmel “The Quantitative Aspect”; “The Stranger”.

Chicana/o Civil Rights of the 1960s and 1970s. In the case of *Cactus Blood*, this is the farm workers' strikes against pesticides and for labor rights. The novel—the second in the Gloria Damasco series—starts with the PI-in-training, Gloria Damasco, being hired to investigate a case in Oakland, her hometown, together with her associate and mentor, Justin Escobar. The case is about the presumed suicide of a common friend, Sonny Mares. A video-taped documentary about the United Farm Workers' strike from 1973, some suspicious grapes and two small cuts in the mattress are all the clues they have to start their investigation. Parallel to this, Gloria comes across a recording, an audio tape that was part of the materials for her deceased friend's, Luisa Cortez's, manuscript, "*The Chicana Experience*, which contained Luisa's interviews of Chicanas who had been involved in the political movement of the sixties and seventies" (30). That tape contains the tragic story of Carlota Navarro, a Mexican orphan who was sold at age fourteen as a domestic to an Anglo-American family living in the San Joaquín Valley, only to end up being raped by the husband of the family, a reputable medical doctor. In her flight from the doctor's household after the rape, she runs "across lettuce and onion fields, passing through vineyards where the sweet but deadly smell of pesticides hung, still fresh, in the air of a hellish dawn" (52). Since she had undergone some deep scrubbing before her escape—"I scrubbed between my legs, around my nipples, and inside my mouth with very hot, sudsy water to wash every trace of Dr. Stephens's sweat, saliva, and semen off my body" (52)—the pesticide, a nerve gas, penetrates deeply into her skin, causing her a toxic trauma that will affect her somatically and psychologically for the rest of her life (Pérez Ramos, "Lands of Entrapment" 136). Carlota's story, therefore, is inevitably linked to that of pesticides—not only because she is physically affected by them, but because she gets involved in the activism against their use, something she has in common with the farmworkers' struggles at the time. This, coincidentally, happens to draw a link with the deceased Sonny Mares, also a Chicano activist involved in the cause against farm workers' exploitation and pesticide (ab)use. *Cactus Blood* is first and foremost a detective story with a plot which ends up revolving around seemingly unlike issues such as pesticide contamination, toxicity, public health activism, extra-marital affairs, guilt and revenge. It has all the necessary elements of the genre: a sleuth, a doubtful suicide and a wide range of suspects to investigate. According to Carol Pearson, "Corpi follows tradition ... regarding the gathering of evidence and the pursuit of clues; the themes of murder, family intrigue, and danger are all present in full measure" (42). Intrigue and suspense are thus guaranteed. Corpi, nonetheless, subverts the genre by integrating some significant changes: she depicts a female Chicana detective with family commitments, with a strong communal sense, a psychic sensibility and a political message, instead of the loner male detective, the hard-boiled white womanizer, who depends solely on rationality to solve the crime and return to the status quo. What one, particularly a reader not familiarized with Chicana/o and/or Corpi's detective fiction, would probably not expect is to find a detective story set in the 90s with the Chicana/o struggle for civil rights of the 60s and 70s in the background and with an environmental dimension that transcends the Chicana/o cause. Due to her subversion of the detective genre and her feminist political commitment, Corpi's work—particularly her Gloria Damasco series—has



mostly been analyzed from a socio-political and/or feminist perspective so far.<sup>3</sup> However, the socio-environmental facet has barely been explored, except for the work of Carmen Flys Junquera.

## 1. SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM IN *CACTUS BLOOD*

Flys Junquera argues that authors such as Corpi subvert the detective genre by adapting it to a Chicana/o ethos of communal values and connection to nature (“Murder”; “Transgressive Appropriations”). The critic stresses how “[t]his [Chicana/o] worldview is clearly involved with community values, the relationship with the land and nature, social justice, and a more intuitive and non-linear way of accessing knowledge” (“Transgressive Appropriations,” position 1982). The novel’s socio-environmental dimension thus transcends the most evident references to pesticide toxic poisoning. It adds other layers such as environmental traditional knowledges—e.g., *curanderismo*; water-mindedness in arid, drought-stricken environments;<sup>4</sup> and a critique of green colonialism/imperialism—through the symbolism of native and alien plant species. She, moreover, questions key border issues, such as illegal migration, and how these issues contribute to the frailty of non-standard Mexican (American) identities, who end up exposed to deficient labor and living conditions and/or to toxic or degraded environments. Corpi, therefore, extends the socio-environmental concerns from the 60s and 70s into the 90s, the time of the novel, concerns that are still unresolved nowadays, when the Covid-19 crisis is an added problem that is increasing even further migrants’ vulnerability.<sup>5</sup> Hence, it is through eco-cosmopolitanism and the particular “strangeness” of Carlota Navarro that the reader learns about the ongoing unsustainability and socio-environmental injustices that occur in the US-Mexico border. While the social and political commitment of the

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<sup>3</sup> Corpi’s work has been discussed from the perspective of its political transgression and postcolonial take/revision of empire (Libretti, “Lucha Corpi,” “Detecting Empire”); its Chicana feminist transgression of the detective genre (Pearson); its aim to redress history through a review of historical cultural narratives (Steblyk); identity issues such as cultural memory and *chicanidad* (Rodríguez); Chicana feminist aesthetics and cultural perspectives that contribute to forge a new *mestiza* consciousness (Maloof); and even through the lens of night, nighttime and darkness as portrayed in the novel in relation to the Mexican (-American) characters (DeGuzmán).

<sup>4</sup> Water scarcity in California and its relation to social inequity, is made explicit in the novel mostly by noting water privileges during a drought. For example, when Gloria is visiting an affluent neighborhood in Fresno, “hidden behind tall eucalyptus trees and oaks” with “dark green, freshly-cut turf” and well-watered rose gardens, she claims, “In this Shangrila, people seemed to care nothing about the drought or other people’s needs, I realized sadly” (102). See also pages 71 and 189 of the novel. Water scarcity is a key socio-environmental issue in California and the US Southwest. For more on the pressing water issues that affect the US Southwest, and their interrelation to social inequity as portrayed in southwestern literary fiction, see Pérez Ramos “The Water Apocalypse.”

<sup>5</sup> See Dyer, and Smith and Judd.



novel is common in Chicana/o detective fiction, the socio-environmental dimension is quite innovative for the genre. *Cactus Blood* integrates environmental concerns into the plot without making the text revolve exclusively around those issues—a common feature in (Chicana/o) literature with a socio-environmental justice and decolonial take. This narrative technique shows how environmental issues relate to other aspects—social, political, economic, and so on—without necessarily turning the story into a sanctimonious claim for sustainability. It rather presents environmental matters as deeply intertwined with livelihoods and everyday concerns, particularly of the working class and the underprivileged social strata—including undocumented migrants. Corpi’s writing has a characteristic activist dimension, being “politically grounded and ideologically radical” (Maloof 99) in line with other detective fiction by Chicanas/os, for “[m]ost Chicano detectives have a worldview that is communal, acutely aware of racism and social injustice, and politically committed” (95). The story displaces “the importance of the individual crime to what she identifies as the larger source of criminality: the social structure itself” (Libretti, “Detecting” 80). Some of the main social issues that surface in *Cactus Blood* during Gloria’s investigation are illegal immigration and human trafficking, male physical abuse (mostly domestic and sexual violence) and farmworkers’ labor struggles. All of these aspects, together with the socio-environmental issues, interweave in the narrative, being part of the characters’ personal stories and interrelations, and determining their life choices. Among the array of characters, women stand out as particularly sympathetic, pro-active and strong. Carlota Navarro is a central female character. A Mexican illegal immigrant, victim of human trafficking and sexual violence in her adolescence, who also suffers the effects of toxic contamination, Carlota proves to be a resourceful and resilient person through adversity, described as having endless will power and a relentless spirit.

The fact that an undocumented immigrant in California becomes such a relevant character in the plot is not casual. Corpi is herself a Mexican migrant—although she entered the country legally in the 60s, as the wife of a Berkeley student. Moreover, the 90s was a decade full of governmental initiatives intending to hinder illegal migration into the US through its southern border.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, illegal migrants and migration were a particularly hot topic that decade. In contrast to this attitude, Corpi often mentions the landed aristocracy of Spanish and Mexican descent who

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<sup>6</sup> “Interest in keeping Mexicans and, more recently, Central Americans from immigrating to the United States resurged in the 1990s. The US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) inaugurated Operation Hold-the-Line in 1993, Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, and Operation Safeguard in 1995” (Golash-Boza viii). At state level, in 1994, California Proposition 187, known as the SOS or Save our State initiative and endorsed by the Republican Party, was passed—although it was eventually revoked afterwards (McDonnell). This proposition intended to prohibit undocumented immigrants from receiving services, such as health care and public education. For a news report on 1994 California Proposition 187, see *Migration News*. For a first-person recollection of the social uprising that came as a reaction to California Proposition 187, see Arellano. The 90s was also quite significant from the Chicana/o activist perspective, due to the death in 1993 of farmworker leader César Chávez.



had once owned all of California, reminding the dominant US audience of a history long 'forgotten.' The rediscovery and reconstruction of Chicano history and culture, how it was suppressed, together with the increasing awareness of feminist, ecological and social problems, present a different worldview from the dominant Eurocentric one. (Flys Junquera, "Transgressive Appropriations" position 2065-2068). Some of Corpi's main objectives, therefore, are to voice social concerns, fight historical forgetfulness, "increase ecological awareness and incite the reader to action" (Flys Junquera, "Murder" 342). This way "the reader is compelled to reassess his/her position vis-à-vis environmental, social, and political issues. The comfort of apathy and conformism, typical of the genre, is disrupted" (Flys Junquera, "Murder" 353). Corpi promotes that critical attitude through her own protagonist, Gloria, who recognizes that: "I myself have been thinking that I am growing politically apathetic and quite selfish ... And when this is over, I know I have to do a lot of mental and emotional housekeeping" (174). This is a feeling readers could identify with, inciting them indirectly to follow Gloria's example and to stop having a noncommittal, even permissive, attitude—e.g., asking them to practice a responsible and ethical consumption of products such as grapes (Corpi 177-178)—in light of the uncomfortable injustices depicted in the novel, fictional portrayals of current realities that have deep historical roots.

## 2. MIGRATION, STRANGENESS AND ECO-COSMOPOLITANISM

Carlota's migrant character serves to remind the readership that the history of the United States is a story of migration and colonization. She embodies "the history of racial and sexual oppression and labor exploitation ... as an undocumented worker, and 'illegal alien' in her own colonized land" (Libretti, "Detecting Empire" 79). Carlota and the other Chicana/o characters remind the reader that the United States is a country created in the eighteenth century by European migrants, who first claimed and then took over territories all across North America; territories already inhabited by numerous Native American communities, who were decimated and often expelled through coercive tactics from the territory they had traditionally inhabited. Later, in the mid-nineteenth century and after the Mexican American War was over with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), half of Mexico's territory—Mexico being officially a Spanish colony until 1821—became US territory with numerous Mexicans becoming US citizens in their own right. This history is long past, but not forgotten by those whose roots in the North American continent go all the way back to pre-colonial times, such as the Chicana/o community. Moreover, since the annexation of the northern Mexican territories, there have been numerous Mexican (and other Latina/o) citizens, such as Carlota, who have crossed the so-called Tortilla Curtain, migrating (legally or illegally) to the northern neighboring country in order to work. Priscilla Solis Ybarra pinpoints the hegemonic ethnocentric connotations of the historization of migration flows in North America since colonial times in the following terms:



The Europeans who moved north into Sonora were hailed as conquerors, those who landed on the east coast of North America were revered as pilgrims, and the Europeans who moved West were admired as pioneers. ... Undocumented travelers [nowadays] are labelled 'illegal aliens.' (183)

While the European migrants from colonial times have been “hailed,” “revered,” and “admired” as “conquerors,” “pilgrims” and “pioneers”—concepts traditionally regarded as synonyms for victory, faith and adventure—other migrants, mostly Latinas/os, such as Carlota, are nowadays rather assigned the pejorative label “illegal aliens.” “Illegal aliens” are defined as those who live or work in a country other than their country of origin—thus regarded as “alien”—without the legal right to do so. According to this definition, the “conquerors,” “pilgrims” and “pioneers” who travelled to North America could all be regarded as illegal aliens, but that concept did not apply at the time and history has rather depicted them in much more positive and heroic positions: as audacious men—for women were mostly depicted as passive, if not invisible, characters in these narratives—men who risked and/or sacrificed their lives in the name of Christianity and civilization. Naming and labelling, of course, have a lot to do with who tells the story.

What can be inferred from US southwestern history is that the connection between the US and Mexico has always gone beyond their geographical proximity, in the form of (legal as well as illegal) human flows moving constantly and bidirectionally across the border—wherever this was located. A border that, since its inception, has gone from being something mostly conceptual (a political division) to being something solid and physical: a fence or a dreaded wall. Despite the different measures taken by the US government to keep immigrants from crossing its southern border, people have kept migrating north, which has led to an increase in the number of deportations. Focusing on the massive deportation of Latino men from the United States, Tanya Maria Golash-Boza argues that the systematic deportation that has been increasing in numbers since the 90s is part of what she terms “the neoliberal cycle”: a system of labor and political reforms that follow neoliberal economic principles.<sup>7</sup> Building on her neoliberal-cycle theory, Golash-Boza comments on the existing contradiction that promotes labor migration, “opening borders for capital,” while offering few options for legal migration (16). Monica Varsanyi calls this contradictory pattern the “neoliberal paradox” (879). This paradox forces most Latina/o migrants, such as Carlota, in search of better living conditions than those they can afford in their native countries, to risk their lives to enter into the country illegally in order to access the kind of jobs available to them—mostly non-skilled service jobs. Golash-Boza claims that the neoliberal cycle is behind what Joseph Nevins and Mizue Aizeki term global apartheid, “a system where mostly white and affluent citizens of the world are free to travel to where they

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<sup>7</sup> This cycle is constituted by elements such as inequality and outsourcing, low-wage works resulting from economic restructuring, cutbacks in social services, the enhancement of police, the military and immigration enforcement, and privatization of public services (Golash-Boza 2-3).





like whereas the poor are forced to make do in places where there are less resources” (Golash-Boza 3). This term in turn relates to the concept of eco-apartheids, “(urban) environments [at local, regional, or even national level] in which the wealthy and the privileged inhabit shelters or sheltered areas to escape pollution, toxicity, and the effects of climate change, while the underprivileged are endangered in the remaining degraded and exposed areas” (Pérez Ramos, “Toward” forthcoming).<sup>8</sup> In the case of the US-Mexico border region, multinational trade agreements, such as NAFTA, have greatly contributed to foster eco-apartheids, sending not only manufacturing industries to the southern side of the border, but also their waste products (Pérez Ramos, “Lands of Entrapment” 137-141).<sup>9</sup>

What the concept of eco-apartheid discloses is that, other than social, racial and economic factors, there are environmental causes behind patterns of migration, segregation and discrimination. Environmental factors are often key to explain the flows of human beings across the globe.<sup>10</sup> Environmental degradation and/or resource scarcity can be key causes that help explain migration patterns. Nowadays, climate change—due to its particularly adverse effects on certain parts of the planet—is becoming another important migration factor (*Climate*). One should also keep in mind that, “[w]ars and poverty, two crucial causes of migration, can also be explained as consequences of environmental—more specifically climate—changes” (Armiero and Tucker 2; “Climate Change”). In the case of northward migration through the US-Mexico border, there are mainly two environmental problems that might foster it: (toxic) pollution and water scarcity issues.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, migration has an important socio-environmental impact on the migrants that has to be acknowledged. As Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker put it:

The experience of migration often left indelible traces in the bodies of those who were exposed to unfamiliar threats and hazards. ... [I]f planting grapes, harvesting the sea, mining coal, or simply surviving in the tenements of the metropolis, had

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the concept of eco-apartheid, see also Pérez Ramos, “Water Apocalypse”; Ross 17, 70-71, 239-240, 250.

<sup>9</sup> NAFTA stands for North American Free Trade Agreement (1994-2020). In 2018, a new trade agreement was signed by the United States, Mexico and Canada to replace NAFTA: The United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). USMCA came into force on July 1, 2020. This new agreement supposedly increases environmental and working regulations, although NAFTA also contemplated some environmental provisions that were not followed eventually (Pérez-Ramos, “Lands of Entrapment” 137).

<sup>10</sup> Some classical texts that investigate the socio-environmental factors and/or consequences of migrations are Alfred Crosby’s *The Columbian Exchange* (1972) and *Ecological Imperialism* (1986); Richard Grove’s *Green Imperialism* (1995); Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997); and Thomas Dunlap’s *Nature and the English Diaspora* (1999). See also Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker’s *Environmental History of Modern Migrations* (2017).

<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of how Chicana/o literature has addressed the toxic pollution of the US-Mexico border, see Pérez Ramos “Lands of Entrapment.” For information on how climate change is affecting Mexico, increasing water scarcity in the country, see “Comments” and “How.”



a 'natural' substance, then migrants do indeed have their environmental stories waiting to be told. (5)

The way migrants interact with the new environments can affect them both physically and mentally. This is certainly the case of Carlota, whose body and mind are living witnesses of all she has endured as a migrant: a rape survivor who could not go to the police due to her illegal status; who suffers from speech disorder, a failing memory and emotional instability, mostly as a consequence of her pesticide intoxication during her escape, and her inability to access the healthcare system; a person who suffers from an unspecified fatal condition that will take her life soon. As argued in the introduction, migrants can themselves be regarded as in-between strangers, as uncomfortable characters who question the status quo. Carlota is certainly proof of this. On the one hand, she is an all-too-clear, disturbing example of the consequences of the fluctuation of (toxic) matter in the environment and atmosphere, and the inevitable interrelation of toxicity with bodily natures, what Stacy Alaimo terms "trans-corporeality." Carlota's brain damage shows the terrible effects of toxic chemicals in a porous, living organism (as it has been so often the case with farmworkers). Through her accidental exposure to pesticides, she becomes an uncomfortable proof of the "human price to be paid for the unblemished apple or grape. ... The proverbial poisoned apple" (Corpi 114). Her neurological disorders, moreover, represent the general condition of the Chicana/o and the Mexican migrant communities in the US:

In her capacity to represent the violence enacted on farmworkers bodies, Carlota becomes a metonym for the Chicana/o body politic. She is a frightening representative because the neurological damage she suffered affects both her speech and her memory. Her failing voice speaks to the agency often denied marginalized communities, but it is her failing memory that truly haunts Gloria. The chemicals rotting her memory are not unlike the canon of history denying voice and identity to Chicanas/os. (Rodríguez 67-68)

Carlota embodies the consequences of the invisibility of the Chicana/o community in the US—a community often exposed to toxic pesticides, something particularly problematic in the case of undocumented workers due to their impossibility to access proper health care—while she constantly challenges her invisibility through her perseverance and activism. Her illegal status and the derived inaccessibility to proper health care, moreover, introduce the aspect of *curandería* and shamanism as alternative environmental knowledges; "*curandería* (folk medicine) ... expresses a worldview anchored in spiritual awareness and a connection to the natural environment" (Lomelí et al. 302). Various characters in the novel try to help Carlota with these means after she is poisoned, but to no avail. Contrary to what it might seem, the novel does not present this as proof of the inefficiency of these traditional knowledges, which are "still very much a part of [Chicana/o] culture" (Lomelí et al. 302). The novel rather seems to claim that traditional, natural remedies are not enough to treat patients who have been overexposed to laboratory-designed toxic substances. Carlota's body, therefore, serves as a bridge between cultures





and knowledges, being treated by several different healing traditions that in the story appear as equally valid, necessary and complementary. Eco-cosmopolitanism and critical cosmopolitanism are particularly relevant concepts when considering how migrants' own environmental awareness and knowledge can help them in their adaptation to new environments and challenges. Critical cosmopolitanism, according to Walter Dignolo, consists in a re-conception of cosmopolitanism from the perspective of coloniality—key in a transnational world (723-724). Two necessary conditions for critical cosmopolitanism are “[b]order thinking or border epistemology—... the recognition and transformation of the hegemonic imaginary from the perspectives of people in subaltern positions,” and diversity or “diversity as a universal and cosmopolitan project in which everyone participates instead of ‘being participated’” (736-737; 744). The character of Carlota Navarro certainly partakes of these conditions, both literally—from her subaltern position as an illegal border migrant—and figuratively—as a stranger who proactively transgresses political, cultural and social borders through her socio-environmental awareness and commitment as an activist. On the other hand, Ursula Heise presents eco-cosmopolitanism as a way to address the current global socio-environmental challenges we are facing, without losing perspective of the different varieties of environmentalism and the value of situated knowledges. It is, moreover—and in contrast to other theories on cosmopolitanism—inclusive of the more-than-human world, that is of communities formed both by humans and by more-than-human animate and inanimate nature (Heise 60-61). Heise’s eco-cosmopolitan theory aims to unveil the political frameworks that sustain communities, as well as make salient connections among peoples and environments, something that is also essential in migration narratives (62).

Carlota, as someone who confronts pesticide poisoning, practices eco-cosmopolitanism—albeit inadvertently—for “[a]lthough trans-corporeality as the transit between body and environment is exceedingly local, tracing a toxic substance from production to consumption often reveals global networks of social injustice, lax regulations, and environmental degradation” (Alaimo 15). Carlota’s ailments problematize pesticide production because of the interconnections it bears with abuse, migration, labor exploitation and environmental degradation. Her predicament reveals the international consequences of the “neoliberal cycle” theorized by Goulash-Boza, where someone who lives and works in a country, having survived human trafficking, labor exploitation, sexual abuse and pesticide poisoning, cannot resort to the government for assistance. Moreover, Carlota, in contrast to traditional characters in Chicana/o literature, who practice a deep sense of place and of belonging to a particular locale, is an uprooted character. She is an orphan who left her homeland at age fourteen with the promise of a better life in the US, who twenty-years later still remains an illegal immigrant, always on the run, until, upon learning that she is fatally ill, she decides to return to her homeland to die. Nevertheless, this does not mean that she does not have an environmental awareness. Proof of this is that she does not travel alone. To her emotional luggage, consisting of memories of her life in Mexico, as well as her memories and knowledge of the place(s) and environments she has known and left behind, Carlota adds a



travel companion, a prickly pear cactus:<sup>12</sup> “A few clothes and my family photos in a Mexican burlap shopping bag, together with that tiny, one-leaf, Mexican cactus Chuchita [a friend] and her mother gave me the night before I left were my only possessions” (45). Since the day she left her native village, she carries a prickly pear cactus everywhere with her. The relevance of cacti in the plot is quite clear from the title of the novel: *Cactus Blood*. Although cacti might seem to relate exclusively to Gloria’s vision at the very beginning, a vision that predicts the denouement of the story, the relevance and symbolism of this plant goes well beyond that. Carlota’s *nopalito* is “a symbol of her land, her relationship to the earth” (Flys Junquera, “Murder” 353); it also represents Carlota’s own spirit: resilient, adaptive and tough. Carlota is also referred to as “flor/florecita de nopal” by her friend Ramón Caballos (216-217), and the nickname is certainly quite appropriate since, as Carlota relates, her own life parallels the cycle of the nopal flower:<sup>13</sup>

‘Dicen que florea una flor azul, casi morada,’ I remembered Chuchita telling me as she explained that the cactus flower was a violet blue, that it bloomed in cycles of five years. My grandmother, the only grandparent I knew, died when I was three years old. Just before her death, she consulted the stars and the corn kernels on my behalf. She predicted that my life would evolve in cycles of five years, that I would shed many tears, but that, finally, on the seventh cycle I would find happiness. (45-46)

Indeed, Carlota’s life does change significantly every five years. For example, the day before turning fifteen she is raped, and she is likely to die at the age thirty-five, “on the seventh cycle”—but not before returning to her beloved homeland with a good friend, who cares deeply for her, leaving behind a life of suffering. A nopal, moreover, is always by her side at the most difficult times, like when she is suffocating in Dr. Stephens’ car trunk while crossing the border and the nopal pricks her to remind her that she is still alive (46). Again, after being raped and before leaving the Stephens’ house, she digs her cactus up from the place where she had planted it and takes it away with her. A few drops of her blood symbolically drip over the cactus’ stem, bringing to mind once again the book’s title, with her blood denoting her physical and emotional suffering, as well as her uprootedness from yet another home. The cactus also serves to call attention upon the concept of “alien,” often used to refer not only to immigrants, but also to introduced plant species. When departing from the Stephens’ house, and in order to take her cactus with her, Carlota leaves behind a crushed gardenia in a very symbolic gesture:

I planted it [the cactus] into a pot from which, a moment ago, I’d yanked out a favorite gardenia that Dr. Stephens intended to transplant ... I tore out the blossoms

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<sup>12</sup> Prickly pears, also known by the Nahuatl term *nopales*, are native to the Americas with numerous varieties native to the arid and semi-arid regions of northern Mexico and the US Southwest (including California, where the action of the novel takes place).

<sup>13</sup> Notice that “nopal” is also a cultural symbol to indicate origins and connection to roots and identity.



and mashed them with my foot until the sweet aroma of the fresh blossoms turned into a sickening stench of crushed flowers. (52)

Gardenias are native to China and they require abundant humidity to live, therefore being quite alien to and unfitting for the US Southwestern climate, unlike Carlota's nopal. Moreover, in China they are symbols of "feminine grace; subtlety" (Cooper 375). Carlota, the survivor of a rape, rebels against the exotic flower, unfit for that place and climate, crushes it as her abuser crushed her—perverting her blossoming femininity. Cacti also represent Carlota's trace in the lives of her close friends, who all have a series of *nopales* planted in their yards, plants that symbolize the roots she has put down in that land, and the reciprocal positive impact between those people/land and her (unlike the Stephens' house from where she dug up her cactus). Before leaving for Mexico, Carlota gives her last nopal to Gloria, who aims to honor Carlota's memory by planting it in a place with a particular personal significance: "Tomorrow, or when this is over, I will plant the tiny nopal at the foot of Luisa's grave,' I promised aloud, looking up at the morning star punctuating the canvas of the night" (250). Ralph E. Rodríguez goes as far as to regard "the Chicana/o community as metonymically represented by the cactus," with nature serving "as a beneficent marker of memory" (69); memories of human flows, of sorrow, suffering and survival, of friendship and kinship.

Interestingly enough, throughout the book, Carlota is not only identified with prickly pear cacti, but also with an "alien" plant species, weeping willows.<sup>14</sup> Weeping willows are part of her happy childhood memories:

I remembered the weeping willows, bordering the river and dancing in the moonlight like gigantic grass skirts. My friend Chuchita and I used to help our mothers do the wash at the Media Luna, then bathe and play in the cool water before we went back to our school. (44-45)

The specific plant species is also present at her friends' yards: "If this weeping willow wasn't here before, Josie [Carlota's friend] surely planted it for Carlota" (71); "There, in the front yard [of her friend Maria Baldomar], ... stood a weeping willow next to a prickly-pear cactus—green sentinels guarding Carlota Navarro's memories of her village in Mexico, lifetimes ago" (79). Although weeping willows can be seen as symbols of mourning (Cooper 1028), they are also well known for their endurance and "strength in weakness," surviving storms and strong winds by bending instead of resisting (1029). Weeping willows, thus, represent quite well Carlota's endurance through her tough life— orphan, migrant, (illegal) alien, undocumented worker, rape survivor, pesticide-poisoned person. Therefore, both prickly pears and weeping willows—one native to the arid biosphere of northern Mexico and Southwestern US, one not—are symbols of Carlota's eco-cosmopolitanism, proof of her environmental

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<sup>14</sup> Weeping willows, native to Asia, are nowadays present all over the world, particularly in arid regions, near rivers and water courses, used mainly to give shade and provide erosion control.



awareness as well as of her strength, endurance and adaptability. At the same time, the symbolic uses of these two plant species, as well as of gardenias, serve to question green colonialism/imperialism discourses by questioning the concept of “alien,” common in those discourses as well as in the context of human migrations.

### 3. CONCLUSION: ECO-COSMOPOLITAN STRANGERS FOR CHANGE

With its claims for socio-environmental justice, *Cactus Blood* is not the typical detective story. It presents a clear and unusual political stance against labor exploitation, pesticide poisoning and male physical abuse, and voices a claim for migrants’ and women’s’ rights. In the process, Corpi highlights the “strangeness” of (illegal) migrants, as people that challenge the status quo and established notions of what is fair and just, people that question existing laws and regulations, becoming living proofs of uncomfortable truths, such as the high and cruel price to pay for something as capricious as the consumption of flawless fruits and vegetables, or as unsustainable as the intensive agricultural system. In the particular case of this novel, this challenge goes hand in hand with the migrants’ (in this case Carlota’s) eco-cosmopolitanism, as a key resource to counter and expose the vulnerability of subaltern beings in the fragile—often toxic and degraded—environment of the US-Mexico border.

Judi Maloof concludes her analysis of Corpi’s detective Gloria Damasco series stating that, “Damasco also has an extraordinary ability to see how the past is linked to the future, and how the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s is linked to current struggles for racial equality and social justice” (111). Unfortunately, this is still true nowadays, a quarter of a century after the publication of *Cactus Blood*. Golash-Boza’s work shows how the situation for Latina/o migrants, such as Carlota, willing to go to the US to access jobs that need labor—as well as for those that are already in the country working, albeit illegally—keeps getting worse. This, in turn, keeps increasing their vulnerability, which is further affected by other factors, as in the current times of global pandemics, when migrants are not requesting medical attention for fear of being deported or of being denied the right to citizenship.<sup>15</sup> Books such as Corpi’s *Cactus Blood* keep reminding readers fifty years later, when old challenges have yet to be overcome and new threats and difficulties keep arising, that a change is necessary. The eco-cosmopolitan stance of the novel proves that this change cannot only be local or community-based, but that it has to address the economic system, as well as social and environmental policies at national and transnational level. It is time to honor Corpi’s subversion of the detective genre with her personal style and political message, by working actively in order to foster eco-cosmopolitan attitudes to tackle old and contemporary challenges,

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<sup>15</sup> See Dyer.



by disturbing the status quo and by reacting to longstanding and pervasive (socio-environmental) injustices in the border region and beyond.

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# IMMERSION THROUGH CULTURE: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE “DAY OF THE DEAD” IN FILM

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## ABSTRACT

The Mexican celebration of the “Day of the Dead” (*Día de Muertos* or *Día de los Muertos*) has been recurrently used in film, with three of the most notable examples ranging from the recent *Coco* (Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, 2017) and *Spectre* (Sam Mendes, 2015), all the way back to the surviving footage of *¡Que Viva Mexico!* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1931, unfinished). Though vastly different from one another in almost every respect, all three cases explore the topic of “in-between” both thematically and technically: the celebration that merges life and death becomes a visual metaphor and a tool for filmmakers to explore the ways in which film technique creates overlapping areas between cinema and reality. In each film, a visually powerful cultural asset such as the “Day of the Dead,” is combined with different aspects of film technique, explicitly, but differently, appealing to a kind of sensory immersion in order to attract viewers inside its world. By doing so, the “Day of the Dead” exemplifies the ways in which a common cultural element can help translate the personal visions of different filmmakers into distinct filmic events.

KEYWORDS: Immersion, Film, Montage, Long Take, Animation, “Day of the Dead,” *Que Viva Mexico*, *Spectre*, *Coco*.

## INMERSIÓN CULTURAL: REPRESENTACIONES DEL “DÍA DE MUERTOS” EN FILMES

## RESUMEN

La celebración mejicana del “Día de muertos” ha sido utilizada repetidamente en el cine, con tres ejemplos muy conocidos que van desde las recientes *Coco* (Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, 2017) y *Spectre* (Sam Mendes, 2015), hasta la clásica escena que sobrevivió de *¡Que Viva Mexico!* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1931, inconclusa). Aunque muy diferentes en casi todos sus aspectos, las tres exploran el hallarse en un “limbo” tanto en el contenido como en la técnica: el gozo que surge de fusionar vida y muerte resulta para los directores una metáfora visual y una herramienta para indagar en el solapamiento entre cine y realidad. El “Día de muertos” (como demostración cultural visualmente poderosa) hace que en cada película se combinen diferentes técnicas fílmicas que explícitamente, pero de forma muy diversa, aluden a una inmersión sensorial que atrae a los espectadores a dicho reino. De este modo, el “Día de muertos” epitomiza las formas en las que un elemento cultural común puede ayudar a la traslación de las visiones personales de los directores en eventos fílmicos diferenciados.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Inmersión, filme, montaje, tomas largas, animación, “Día de muertos”, *Que Viva Mexico*, *Spectre*, *Coco*.

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## INTRODUCTION

The level of engagement between viewers and the content of a film has been discussed extensively in film studies, acquiring yet another dimension in the context of culture. Often discussed as the level of immersion, it may refer to the ways in which the viewers' reality and the world of the film communicate with one another. Such an approach, wide as it may be, can offer insight into some of the reasons that enable the "Day of the Dead" (*Día de Muertos* or *Día de los Muertos*), a holiday with a strongly identifiable ethnic footprint, to become a recurring theme for films that are both chronologically distant and thematically diverse. It is not difficult to explain why the theme of the "Day of the Dead" has been used in cinema several times so far; the exuberance of its aesthetic wealth, the depth of its folklore and religious roots, and the weight of its references both to family ties and the ultimate human fate can easily serve as inspiration for films of different genres, eras, creative aspirations and target groups. The present article is a brief exploration of the ways in which these qualities of the "Day of the Dead" render it an experiential catalyst for the reality of viewers to cross paths with film watching; and in order to demonstrate the range of this ability that the "Day of the Dead" seems to possess, three entirely different films are selected: the surviving footage of *¡Que Viva Mexico!* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1931, unfinished),<sup>1</sup> *Spectre* (Sam Mendes, 2015) and *Coco* (Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina, 2017). The selection of these particular films aims at highlighting the inspirational potentials that a traditional, ethnic holiday is capable of carrying, especially when it is attached to a modern art form with an international scope, such as cinema.

The starting point for discussing the "Day of the Dead" in film is its ability to expand and affect people outside its originally Mexican borders. The film industry, not known for shifting its attention to indifferent or meaningless things, takes advantage of this exact resonance that the holiday has, not only among the general Latinx population in the US, but also Anglos or even international audiences that film distribution is capable of reaching. Even since the earlier days of cinema, projects, such as Eisenstein's for instance, attempted to use the dynamics of this holiday to explore the idea of change, regeneration and diachronicity by comprehending those dynamics in contexts that, indeed, on one hand encompass the strictly Mexican one, but on the other they are also capable of expanding even further, both geographically

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<sup>1</sup> Citing and dating *¡Que Viva Mexico!* is a remarkably challenging task, since the film never came to existence as a released film the way Eisenstein intended it. The version of the film which is probably the closest one to Eisenstein in historical terms was completed under this title in 1979 by Grigoriy Aleksandrov, his close associate during their time in Mexico, but even that version "can at best be regarded as a generalized notion of what Eisenstein may have intended" (O'Mahony 140). For reasons of economy, the present article uses the title to refer to the sum of Eisenstein's lengthy footage, and in particular to the part of that footage that features the "Day of the Dead." The citation and year (1931) also refer to this material, as it was during October 1931 that Eisenstein shot most of the Epilogue part of the movie, to which the "Day of the Dead" footage belongs (Salazkina 140-141).



as well as ethnically.<sup>2</sup> Concerning the other two films in relation primarily to the US, which is a significant market for the film industry, the “Day of the Dead” can be discussed both in terms of its status as a strengthening factor for both a specifically Mexican as well as a pan-Latinx ethnic identity (Brandes 194), as well as aiming at “asserting a positive Latino presence in the US public sphere” (Marchi 2): although people of Mexican descent represent 60% of the US Latinx population and the holiday has been generally associated with Mexico, it is a tradition in other Latin American countries as well, made known in the US through the work of Chicana artists, who “provided the artistic and ritual framework for others to participate in the celebration” (2-3). The weight of this information, combined with the increasing popularity of the holiday even outside Latinx communities, echoes into cultural production, of which cinema is a significant part, in two ways: first of all, according to Regina M. Marchi, it is an indication that Latinidad (Latin-ness) defies assumptions that premodern traditions are being abandoned under the homogenizing influence of Western culture (4-5); and second, it is connected with the fact that the “massive demographic presence” of Latinx minority in the US, is now shaping mainstream pop culture production in the country (Aldama 3-4). Considering all this information together, it is probable that the flexibility in which the “Day of the Dead” expresses a wider Mexican, Chicana and Latinx identity is based on the same features that allow the holiday, as an important cultural asset, to be transplanted with relative ease to the US cultural production in general, and gradually find its way to the much wider audiences that the film industry in particular is interested in.

Issues of identity related with the celebration of the “Day of the Dead” contribute to assessing its value as a cross-cultural experience. As it becomes apparent from the multiple times the specific cultural tradition has been utilized in film, its themes seem to be able to penetrate cultural, aesthetic, ideological, or other boundaries. The three movies based on the “Day of the Dead” presently selected are all aimed at wider audiences, without confining themselves to the cultural proprietors of the holiday, i.e. the strictly Mexican (geographically speaking) or the wider Chicana and Latinx communities. These movies, therefore, borrow elements from the “Day of the Dead” in order to appeal to a much wider target group for various reasons, e.g. financial, ideological, or other; each of the three films selected for discussion utilizes some of the features from the “Day of the Dead,” as discussed further down, and uses cinematic language and technique to translate those features into an immersive experience for viewers. Such experiences allow viewers to virtually cross the borders of their own culture into another one. Stephanie Schütze and Martha Zapata Galindo see the “redefinition of cultural borders through intercultural encounters” as one found in what they call “transcultural spaces, which connect different space-time venues even when distant

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<sup>2</sup> After all, Eisenstein’s project came from his aspiration to complete a film in the West and it was his international status as a filmmaker that would have imbued the film, had it been completed, with a more global outlook.



geographically and chronologically” (qtd. in Montes de Oca 95). Extending this statement to the cinematic experience, the use of the “Day of the Dead” in film exemplifies the way in which cinema can function as a contemporary vehicle for the migration of cultural elements, a kind of globalized techno-artistic surrogate for the physical migrations of the past.

## CINEMA, TRANSGRESSION AND THE “DAY OF THE DEAD”

Understanding some of the essential characteristics of the “Day of the Dead” is an important step in also understanding its popularity as a theme in filmmaking, as well as the various technical ways in which it is featured in films. The feature of the holiday that is mainly of use here is the fact that, from its roots to the present, the “Day of the Dead” essentially celebrates the “in-between” in practically every sense of the term. For centuries, diverse geographical, ethnic, religious and cultural elements were welded together to produce what would consequently become an experiential fusion, with the elements of combination and integration overpowering those of clashing and exclusion. First of all, with regard to its origins, it is connected to rituals and folklore practices that combine pre-Columbian and Roman-Catholic traditions (Shujaa 358-359); over the past centuries, the “Day of the Dead” crystallized into an inclusive feast, a combined variant of the Roman-Catholic holidays of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day on November 1 and 2 respectively (Brandes 6). In some central parts of Mexico specifically, an additional day is added to the holiday before November 1, but this extra day neither relates to, nor is recognized by the Roman-Catholic church (Brandes 8); this demonstrates and further accentuates the inclusive nature of the holiday as a whole.

Second, in terms of its appearance, the “Day of the Dead” is in itself an artistically significant event. Its aesthetic origins in the work of José Guadalupe Posada, as well as Manuel Manilla and others before him (Brandes 61-62), are trademarks not only of the Mexicans’ “undeniable fascination with skulls, skeletons, and other representations of death” (45), but of an essentially modernist practice: on one hand, Peter Wollen notes that the artistic value of Posada’s work was recognized, albeit posthumously, by the circle of established modernist artists around Diego Rivera (qtd. in Brandes 62); and, on the other, William H. Beezley, Cheryl Martin and William E. French observe that his art was among the things that provided the common people with a kind of “popular resistance” (qtd. in Brandes 63). The result of this recognition is much more than a colorful celebration of the ties between this world and the assumed next one, which blends the vivid colors associated with life with the morbid black of death, rituals with art, and flowers with graves and plastic mementos: instead, such a mixture manages to translate the folk cultural element of “an almost irreverent, macabre confrontation with mortality” (Brandes 7) with the kind of art that serves the people by acquiring extensions of political significance through its recognition, and ultimate inclusion, in the realm of the ideologically charged artistic movement of modernism.



Finally, and perhaps most importantly as well, the “Day of the Dead” celebrates an uncannily pleasant encounter of life and death in terms of emotion, as humor is in a tight embrace with morbidity. Stanley Brandes stresses that the holiday is essentially a defiant mocking of death itself (60) and that it is designed for the living rather than the dead (49). Laughing in the face of death in such a manner normally elicits contradictory emotional responses that may coexist in the same person at the same time. This is probably the most profound and elementary kind of blending that can exist, in relation to being human: the two extreme polarities of the human condition, being and not being, are meant to clash and, through that clash, produce an aesthetic result that may be translated to all kinds of significations, i.e. cultural, political, artistic, or other.

In its representations of the “Day of the Dead,” film normally and extensively builds on these features; at the same time, one must not forget that film, for all its global expansion, remains a cultural, commercial and technological product with a significant part of its identity being related to the US in one way or the other. It is therefore justifiable to consider the representations of the “Day of the Dead” in film keeping the American film industry in mind as an aspect of the American culture at large. In the US, the “Day of the Dead” seems to be expanding geographically and does so beyond its Chicana and Catholic origins (Agredano-Lozano 78) with significant variations from one community to the other and with its various celebrations being “generally contested events, creating new rivalries and reviving old ones” (Brandes 157). One noteworthy point of comparison is that some American variations seem to have shifted the nature of the holiday from a private, family affair, to a more social, communal and secular celebration (Marchi 1-2; Brandes 178; Agredano-Lozano 79-80). As Brandes notes, the apparent suppression of many of its religious elements in its US versions today can make the holiday “appear to be as much of a secular family affair as Thanksgiving and as devotional an occasion as the Fourth of July” (145). In fact, he adds, celebrations are often aimed at establishing or strengthening relationships other than familial ones, specifically with “one’s friends, political allies, local neighborhood, or wider ethnic community,” with political causes being particularly common (158).<sup>3</sup> The affinities of such conditions to cinema work on several levels. First of all, film, especially in the US, is a commercial product of mass entertainment that normally aims at attracting wide audiences in order to remain profitable. Because of that, the movie industry favors a kind of entertainment that, even if it includes specific ethnic or cultural elements, does not exclude others from enjoying them, effectively also becoming a communal experience. In addition to that, the occasional utilization of film as a vehicle for passing some kind of message included in it, thus drawing politics and ideology closer to the film experience, is

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<sup>3</sup> Making use of “Day of the Dead” celebrations for political reasons is not limited to the US, though, as similar occasions also take place in Mexico (Smith 57). Clara Irazábal and Grace R. Dyrness also note that religious festivities for the “Day of the Dead” along and across the Mexican-US border are “usually full of sociopolitical commentary, even if covertly” (364).



a known reality practically since the beginning of the medium. Under this light, it is evident that both film-watching and “Day of the Dead” festivities seem to share common ground: they can both be seen as artistic expressions that serve as the basis for communal, cross-cultural experiences, occasionally carrying a political or ideological load as well.

Taking a step back and considering the “Day of the Dead” as an experiential holiday, in relation to cinema as an art that is also based to a great extent on emotion and experience, it is remarkable to realize how much these traits of in-betweenness described earlier resemble in several ways the transgressive experience of film viewers. In fact, celebrating the “Day of the Dead” presupposes a relatively solid belief in the afterlife and its occasional communication with the world of the living. Film-watching, on the other hand, entails an experience of the filmic world that requires acceptance of its verisimilitude, at least for the duration of the film’s runtime, effectively transferring viewers temporarily to an in-between situation in which they accept a kind of validity for the filmic world without surrendering the stability of their own reality. The following section discusses different aspects of this resemblance as it is technically manifested in entirely different films. The features of fluidity and deliberate blurring of boundaries between elements that are otherwise placed in contrast to one another are common in all three of them, and yet explored in remarkably different ways, thus making definitions of immersion more flexible and adaptable. This preoccupation with the “Day of the Dead” found in such diverse films effectively demonstrates the value of the holiday as a visual manifestation of the inclusive thematic polysemy in cinema as a whole.

## SERGEI EISENSTEIN’S CROSS-CULTURAL IMMERSION

In his “Mexican adventure,” as it was referred to by the American novelist Upton Sinclair (308), Sergei Eisenstein was fascinated by the Mexican landscape as well as the traditions and history of the area. In a story most of the details and background of which are well-known and documented, Eisenstein’s venture to the West was to bring him in contact not only with the filmmaking practices of other countries, but also with artistic stimulation that drove him to create what would become an ill-fated, but still invaluable piece of film history. After his release from a contract with Paramount due to a discernible inability to find common ground between the two parties, which made any prospect of their cooperation in a new film rather unlikely,<sup>4</sup> Eisenstein traveled to Mexico financed by Sinclair to create a film driven by his fascination for the country and its history. Part of the footage he gathered would produce a visual monument to the “Day of the Dead,” imbued

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<sup>4</sup> Mike O’Mahony describes several possible film projects that were discussed between Eisenstein and Paramount, none of which would eventually come to be, leading to the termination of his contract (130-133).



with cinematic qualities that go well beyond the geographical or cultural limits of Mexico specifically.

Eisenstein's Mexican project is a quite complex topic both from an aesthetic as well as a historical viewpoint, even if its consideration is only limited to the final Epilogue section of its originally intended six-episode structure, for which the director shot scenes from the "Day of the Dead" festivities. For all the significance of Eisenstein's editing theories and skill, historical reasons will inevitably never allow what survives of this particular film to be seen in the form that he wanted it to have: Eisenstein was never given the opportunity to edit himself the exceptionally lengthy footage<sup>5</sup> he shot in preparation of *Que Viva Mexico!*, and he was explicitly dismayed to see others' "senseless" attempts to do so (qtd. in Vassilieva 700). Nevertheless, the underlying assumptions behind Eisenstein's attitude towards editing are still present—albeit latent—in his aspirations while planning the film and shooting the footage, as revealed in his own surviving rough outline of the movie.<sup>6</sup> In that outline, Eisenstein refers to the use of the "Day of the Dead" in the film as a "unity of death and life," and the wisdom of mocking death by actually enjoying the process of things passing and being replaced by other things, in a continuous "eternal circle" in which death and rebirth perpetually co-exist (252). The intended arrangement of the film's episodes is in itself a denotation of this circularity: the film would begin with the theme of death in the Prologue and then revisit it in the Epilogue, engaging the viewer in its circular, or as Masha Salazkina prefers to see it, spiral structure (140-141). The film techniques that Eisenstein uses to best express these notions magnify the same elements that also enhance the diachronic and transcultural symbolisms of the "Day of the Dead."

The Epilogue features the "Day of the Dead" as its main element in order to capitalize on the holiday's primordial themes of life, death and regeneration that are not strictly or necessarily associated with religious practices. Many decades ago, Eisenstein apparently saw in the "Day of the Dead" extensions that Brandes believes are becoming more widely obvious in recent years: Brandes notes that globalization has caused the "Day of the Dead" today to acquire a "definite political meaning and ideological symbolism far beyond its original religious essence" on both sides of the Mexico-US border (14). Sidestepping the political shades that connect this usage of themes with the history of Mexico in particular, especially following the Revolution of 1910, what is presently suggested is that Eisenstein's artistic vision made use of the "Day of the Dead" in a way that denotes elements that are present

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<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that, due to duplicate footage, the total time of original material was approximately six hours, Eisenstein shot close to a quarter of a million feet of film rushes with a runtime of approximately forty hours (Salazkina 1).

<sup>6</sup> O'Mahony mentions that Eisenstein was known for using scenarios only as "as little more than rough guides" while making his films, and cites Marie Seton's note that this outline, apart from its use in the film's production, was probably also meant "to appease Sinclair and the Mexican censors" (140). Nevertheless, the outline is still an invaluable source of information on how the director treated his subject matter and planned to proceed with the project.





in the essence of the holiday itself, and, as such, have been carried along and made more visible in today's geographical, cultural and media-related transplanting of the holiday north of the Mexico-US border. Similar to the "Day of the Dead" having acquired today, at least partly, a more secular and social aspect in the US, Eisenstein was probably inspired by the secular extensions of the holiday as well: the permeating feature of achieving harmony through contrast, expressed in a constant embrace of antithetical features, connects the film with the spirit of the celebration as an all-encompassing occasion, similar to its transcultural perpetuation in the present day. It is this same feature that stubbornly refuses confinement: having expanded beyond both Mexico and the wider Latinx culture, this holiday is similarly used in the US today as a tool for teaching the "multiculturalism and ethnic diversity that prevail throughout the urban United States" (Brandes 134).

Despite the fact that Eisenstein never edited the surviving footage into a coherent film that would reflect his vision, Robert Robertson traces in that footage the driving force behind Eisenstein's ideas about montage: the power that contrasting, "arbitrarily chosen" elements have when brought together to collaborate through their juxtaposition to "an 'essential' ideological theme" (4). In this particular case, Eisenstein himself saw the composition of contrasting elements in the serape, the colored stripes of which symbolized multicultural contact, "violently contrasting" and yet held together harmoniously by the "unity of the weave;" as the various cultures in Mexico were held together through the centuries by the same "spirit and character," the director planned to utilize rhythm and music to denote the internal bond between them, thus also to hold together the intended Episodes of what was meant to be the final film (251). Specifically about the "Day of the Dead" sequence, viewers of what survives of the Epilogue see in that footage the same spirit of "inclusion through contrast" that characterized Eisenstein's stylistic and theoretical aspirations. Andrea Noble states that Eisenstein found a "proto-filmic quality" in Mexican social reality: the shocking juxtapositions otherwise achieved in editing were already there, without the need for the camera or editing to bring them to the surface (182). In other words, all Eisenstein had to do to denote harmony through contrast was simply to use the filmic language in *¡Que Viva Mexico!* in order to showcase the magnetism of existing cultural elements in a fascinating contrast to each other.

The same harmonious unity found in contrasting elements is also visible in the way Eisenstein makes use of the theme of skulls and skeletons. Eisenstein actually had an "early attraction" to them well before his trip to Mexico, even from the time he saw Georges Méliès's silent work for the first time (Chinita 187). Viewers that are culturally unfamiliar with the holiday might see in skeletons an unsettling reminiscence of their mortality, and this sudden awareness of the inevitability of death is a kind of engagement that may easily achieve the opposite of the desired escapism generally associated with film-watching. Eisenstein prominently uses close-ups and deep focus when filming paper masks that represent skulls. Close-ups, apart from featuring an alarmingly intense proximity, also reveal the artificiality and temporality of the paper masks; by doing so, they accentuate the ability of fearlessly staring in the face of death as something not only funny, but also transient and



defeated. With this technique, Eisenstein demonstrates his explicit intention for this scene to be a provocation and mocking of death (252). The close-ups further heighten the effect of the shots in which masks are removed, revealing smiling faces mostly of children, some of which look straight into the camera, representing an image of the force of life prevailing over death (Salazkina 144). The use of deep focus creates a visual contrast between the foreground and background, and the content of the shots is anything but static, presenting the scene “in constant movement” (144), this way visually validating the thematic contrast between life and death. This “valorization of the life force” in the visual symbolisms of the skeleton and skulls (Chinita 187), intensified and refigured through Eisenstein’s technique as a Dionysian feast that stimulates the senses,<sup>7</sup> signals an eternal and essentially harmonious balance between the two elementary states of the human condition, represented by the living and the dead, therefore alluding to the inescapably inherent human fate which cannot but attract the attention of the viewers at a fundamentally existential level, and, as such, draw them inside the essence of the depicted scene.

The “Day of the Dead” episode is probably the most known and celebrated part of the unfinished *¡Que Viva Mexico!* In fact, in relation to acknowledging the role that media played in the preservation of the “Day of the Dead” until the present day (Marchi 1), it is important to mention that the circulation of stills from Eisenstein’s footage around the world was quite impactful and is believed to have contributed considerably to the international recognition of the cultural significance of the holiday (Salazkina 139). The experience viewers have of the film’s Epilogue, even in its unfinished state, is based on both film technique and content, placing emphasis on the concept of transgression. Eisenstein’s venture to the West was to become a metaphor for artistic border-crossing: among the other elements he used in the film, the “Day of the Dead” was meant to demonstrate “a model for a (utopian) total synthesis and the overcoming of all class, race, and gender differences” (Salazkina 169). Taking advantage of visual themes from a holiday that flourishes on contradictions, Eisenstein intended to immerse audiences in his film—only a glimpse of which will unfortunately ever be seen—by an acute stimulation of their senses.

## REALISTIC ENGAGEMENT IN SAM MENDES’S LONG TAKE

Eisenstein’s unrealized creative vision in *¡Que Viva Mexico!* is one version of the ways in which cinematic immersion may be attained, but it is certainly not the only one. The expressive wealth of filmmaking techniques allows for similar goals to be achieved in diametrically opposite ways. It is therefore a challenging task to search for common ground between Eisenstein’s intentionally clashing sensations and the

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<sup>7</sup> As much as the footage gives this impression in the form that it currently survives, it is worth stressing that Eisenstein intended to further enhance it by applying to this film his innovative ideas about the use of sound in movies (Robertson 102).



smoothness of Sam Mendes's long takes.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the opening scene in *Spectre*, which features an impressive four-minute long take, most of which takes place during an elaborate representation of the "Day of the Dead" as a massive community feast, emerges as a perfect example of how immensely different filmmaking techniques may actually serve similar purposes. Considering Eisenstein as a theorist of montage and placing him opposite André Bazin, who was a proponent of the long take, David George Menard summarizes this difference between approaches to film style: "It is a determined fact that Eisenstein represents reality (i.e. reality is manipulated as art remains a pure constant), that is, *reality is taken to art*; while Bazin presents reality (i.e. it is the art that changes and never the reality), in other words, *art is taken to reality*."<sup>9</sup> In Menard's view, and for all the considerable aesthetic differences between these distinct approaches to film style, connecting the film-watching experience to reality is, in one way or the other, obviously central in both of them.

The value of the long take as a cinematic device has received adequate critical attention so far, and *Spectre*, the 24<sup>th</sup> installment of the James Bond franchise, is a clear example of the importance of effectively combining technique and content in filmmaking. Although there is no general agreement among directors or theorists as to what the long take achieves, its ability to draw attention to itself has often associated it in Hollywood with auteurism and high-profile productions (Udden 37-38). Although it is visually and technically distanced from any kind of visible editing, it also features an uncanny proximity with a kind of real-life experience, a "certain sort of realism" as Nicholas Bugeja calls it, that does not go by unnoticed. Donato Totaro identifies claims that the long take has generally been used in cinema either as an "emphatic device" at the beginning or closing of a film, or as a tool that draws attention to cinematic technologies for reasons of impression and overall effect. Both these purposes seem to be fulfilled in *Spectre*, as the opening scene aims at capitalizing on all the technical, production-related, aesthetic and narrative elements that it features: respectively, these are the successful impression of a continuous long take (although invisible editing of a sequence of shots was actually used), the star caliber of Daniel Craig as an already successful Bond from preceding films, and, most importantly, the prominence of the "Day of the Dead" as both an aesthetic and narrative theme. This theme helps create a lavish background for action and emphasizes the character's position, constantly being at the crossroad of life and death throughout the franchise.

The way in which the main character is re-asserted in the opening scene, which is not unusual in James Bond films, is provided in *Spectre* through an extravagant representation of a holiday that fuses the two extremes of the human condition, being alive vs. being dead. This polarity is established on screen right

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<sup>8</sup> Steve Neale defines long takes as shots that extend unusually longer than normal, compared to "historical or national norms" (28). Although easily spotted in a film, it is worth noting that there is no agreement, let alone any standardization, of the duration of long takes (Udden 42).

<sup>9</sup> Emphasis in the original.



away, with the sentence “the dead are alive” appearing on a black background right before the scene opens: first the phrase “the dead” appears, setting the tone for the scene, followed by a subversive and contradicting “are alive” after four seconds, right before a huge mechanical skeleton fills the screen parading in a massive “Day of the Dead” festival. In the rest of the scene, the camera follows Bond in a skeleton mask, marking his target and smoothly moving throughout the long take successively in the street, then inside the hotel, and, finally, through an open balcony door, on a rooftop, where he prepares to carry out an assassination. The camera allows viewers to follow Bond closely as he moves around the setting through open doors in a way that connotes an almost natural gliding between life and death: from the festive, vivid atmosphere in the crowded street and the beautiful woman waiting for him in the hotel room, to the loneliness of the rooftop as he gets closer to shooting his target.

It is obvious here that the essential theme of in-betweenness that the “Day of the Dead” encompasses is a thematic concern visually translated to cinematic technique. The long take has been widely appraised in terms of the effect it has on viewers, which is generally established on two features, both of which are realized fully in this scene: a resemblance of the space-time continuity that viewers are used to as a norm from the experience of the real world, which infuses the long take with “an anticipation of unmanipulated integrity” (Gibbs and Pye 8); and “sustained looking,” which contradicts the way the viewers’ gaze is commonly manipulated by either continuity editing or the various types of montage (15). The fluidity of camera movement as it follows Bond both promises integrity of content, which immediately enhances the weight of the scene, and preserves the viewers’ attention to it. With the visual aid of the setting and the metaphysical load it carries, it provides viewers with a glimpse of the ultimate truth about their own nature, i.e. the inevitability of passing away. Bond’s actions place the value of life in question, both his own and that of his target, as he effectively operates in an area where the boundaries between the dead and the living are blurred. Both the fate of the living and the return of the dead, as symbolized in the “Day of the Dead” in general as well as in the way the holiday is featured as a narrative trope in this scene, are meant to be disquieting and, as such, more engaging realizations that directly allude to viewers’ own reality. Bond himself embodies the concept of death being brought down to the size of man: without losing the larger-than-life quality that is distinctive of the character throughout the franchise, he removes his skeleton mask when he is ready to proceed with the assassination, revealing that the true face of death is indistinguishable from the face of a normal living person; the underlying message being that, essentially, everyone is both alive and dead at the same time, only they do not realize it. The flow of the camera underscores this feeling: viewers follow a kind of continuous action as they would do if they were actually present, but at the same time occupying physically unnatural positions, such as high above the ground and of course remaining invisible to the characters. In this manner, they are effectively placed in the same position as the eerily omnipresent souls of the deceased, who are considered to be the invisible participants in the “Day of the Dead.”

On a final note and similar to *¡Que Viva Mexico!*, the use of the “Day of the Dead” in *Spectre* is also an example of the way cinema production realizes the



transcultural dynamics of a holiday otherwise built on solid ethnic foundations, and even drives it forward. Andrew Chesnut and David Metcalfe note that the depiction of the “Day of the Dead” in *Spectre*, in addition to the increasing popularity of the holiday in the US, contributed to the reviving interest in this tradition. In fact, following the success of the film, real-life “Day of the Dead” parades have been organized in Mexico City;<sup>10</sup> the imagery of the “Day of the Dead,” as Chesnut and Metcalfe note, is now “an able ambassador for Mexico’s cultural heritage around the globe.” The contribution of *Spectre* to this situation further asserts the power of cinema to commercialize and globalize a cultural product with an already inherent attractiveness, thus actively affecting aspects of the viewers’ reality. Besides, within this spirit of commercialization, cinema has generally shown interest in the cultural character of various ethnic groups; at the same time, as Brandes notes, tourism may in fact prove to be a factor that helps perpetuate local ritual performances instead of becoming one that contributes to their demise (70).

### LEE UNKRICH AND ADRIAN MOLINA’S COLORFUL AFTERLIFE

Whereas *¡Que Viva Mexico!* and *Spectre* use the “Day of the Dead” as a thematic chapter, Lee Unkrich and Adrian Molina’s animated film *Coco* is exclusively about this particular holiday, and the film’s success is an opportunity to explore its full impact to the audience. In contrast to the use of the holiday by Eisenstein to complete what he understood as the essence of his Mexican mural, and by Mendes as yet another location for Bond’s international missions, *Coco* is “uniquely situated in a line of Disney ventures in Latin America combining policy and storytelling” (Castro 33). The massive success of *Coco* is an indication that the type of cultural immersion of audiences that Disney aimed for is, to a great extent, well-executed. The film uses the adventure of the main character, a boy named Miguel with a strong desire to become a musician, to highlight the “love shared amongst family” (Castro 33), thus managing to recreate the roots of the “Day of the Dead,” as described earlier in the present article, and at the same time create a highly commercial product that appeals to wide global audiences. Positive reviews of the film include statements that it builds a “bridge of understanding among cultures” (Encalada) and that “Hollywood finally redeemed itself” for the stereotypical misrepresentations of Mexicans on film (Rose). Considering the obvious as much as financially understandable fact that the creators, and Disney in general, had a global outlook when putting *Coco* together, it

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<sup>10</sup> There has been considerable international press coverage of these parades, especially in 2016, which was the first time they were organized after the release of the film in 2015. Indicatively, see Jack Shepherd’s article published on 27 October 2016 in the online edition of *The Independent*, which notes that even the original props and wardrobe from the film was to be used that year in the Mexico City parade.



seems that the film managed to massively draw international audiences to cinemas, largely owing to the appealing transcultural quality that the “Day of the Dead” emits.

Disney went to great lengths to keep the film both appropriate and faithful to the background theme of the story. The company invested itself in making it work not only financially, but also aesthetically and culturally. In spite of Disney’s initial marketing-related miscalculations<sup>11</sup> and the fact that it proved to be a demanding production for a number of reasons, the overall result was both commercially successful and critically praised. In fact, the directors themselves claimed in an interview with Terry Gross that it took six years for the film to be completed, and their purpose was for “Latinos to see themselves on screen represented in a way that they can be proud of and in a way that reflects the things that they value about their culture and they value about their families.” In addition to that, despite his fears about the reception of the film by Latinx audiences (Ugwu), Unkrich also noted in an interview with Brendon Connelly that he and his co-director were very proud about the way they “depicted Mexican culture and the Latino community.” In their cited interviews, the directors do not seem to distinguish between Mexican and Latinx communities when referring to the audience that would reasonably have a cultural affiliation with the “Day of the Dead.” The creators casted “a long list of Latinx voices” for the characters, as well as renowned artists from the Chicano art scene in Los Angeles for the artwork of the movie (Castro 34). Combined with a solid box office performance<sup>12</sup> and a generally positive critical reception, this demonstrates the fact that the creators managed to bring to the surface the inclusive nature of the “Day of the Dead” and address the wider audience with it.

Technology was a key factor in visualizing on screen the communal cultural experience that the “Day of the Dead” represents. This is also true for both *¡Que Viva Mexico!* and *Spectre*, although the results in each case were substantially different: apart from using the technique of deep focus, Eisenstein was eager to experiment with the newly introduced technology of sound; and Mendes created the impression of unified space and time through an elaborate invisible editing of successive shots. *Coco*, on the other hand, showcases Disney’s abilities and how far the quality of animation has gone in the past decades. Reviews often cite the meticulous attention

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<sup>11</sup> Disney received massive backlash by the Latinx community after the company tried to trademark the phrase “Day of the Dead” / “Día de los Muertos” (Agredano-Lozano 79; Rose; Castro 33; Rodriguez; Ugwu). In addition to that, their decision to show the twenty-minute short movie *Olaf’s Frozen Adventure* right before *Coco* in its initial screenings did not fare well either. Possibly an attempt to draw family audiences to cinemas using an already established product due to concerns about the universal appeal that *Coco* would have, this move was also received negatively by audiences and critics, with Disney being accused of “cynical marketing” (Kyriazis). There could have been indeed many more ways for the project to get derailed: brown-facing, for example, has been noticed to happen in Disney animation in the past (Aldama 7-8), and when the famous cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz was asked to join the production of *Coco* as a cultural consultant, he directly asked if there was going to be any brown-facing in the movie with regard to voice acting (qtd. in Castro 33-34; qtd. in Gomez).

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Castro mentions that *Coco* is among the most profitable films of all time in Mexico (34).



to detail during production; Unkrich, for instance, describes how Miguel's fingers while playing his guitar were accurately reproduced from videos of real guitarists, so that he would be shown playing with maximum believability (Connelly). The film has also been praised for the quality of its color and visual depth, with its "living and breathing" settings being compared to the quality of those created by the acclaimed Japanese animation film company Studio Ghibli (Harrison). The result of these efforts is an example of visualizing a kind of imagined reality that would probably have been inaccessible otherwise: compared to Eisenstein's deep focus that brought the dead and the living to a productive clash, and Mendes's long take which extended cinematic space and time outside the screen, technology in *Coco* speaks to audiences by creating a version of the afterlife that is emotionally comforting and pleasurable, thus addressing the thorny issue of death with an inviting kindness. The movie touches on the theme of death with a sincerity and directness which seem to be more frequent in children's films (Collin), addressing a truth of life that is inevitably common for all viewers alike, regardless of descent.

Perhaps the most important technical parameter in the animation technique of *Coco* is the use of color. It is important to stress the fact that this is the only movie out of the three presently discussed that actually recreates the place where souls linger after death. Therefore, the use of color had to remain faithful to the extravagant aesthetics of the actual holiday itself, and at the same time to establish both the distinction between the world of the living and the world of the dead; this is achieved by the rich, but generally coherent, visual palette which is maintained throughout the film. Traditionally, color in film has been viewed in two opposite ways, i.e. either as a factor that enhances realism due to its "aura of authenticity," or as a means to escape realism and represent fantasy owing to its "wide range of signifying possibilities" (Costa 333-334). Although this normally refers to live action cinema, where both the signification and the use of color are quite differently understood compared to animation, it is also important to consider the fact that *Coco* has an important real-life referent as its main theme: getting it right means establishing ties with aesthetic levels connected with cultural and ethnic identity. Audience immersion in *Coco* works partly because colors are successfully associated with this aesthetic reality; the way warm and cool colors are combined in the same palette, building on the colorful festivities of the actual holiday, not only bridges effectively the two worlds portrayed in the film, but also reconciles, in a way, the two opposing views of film color that Costa describes: the recognizable realism of the colors used in the actual holiday blends smoothly with a culturally acceptable way for representing the imaginary world of the dead.

## CLOSING REMARKS

The "Day of the Dead" has come both to transcend its original geographical and cultural boundaries, as well as to expand its variety of cultural significations, without losing its strong and recognizable originally Mexican, and Latinx at large, cultural imprint. Being a recurrent source of creativity and inspiration, the holiday





obviously offers itself as the background for lavish aesthetic explorations, not always related to the folklore specifically, as well as a metaphor for transgression. The religious, visual and emotional themes of the holiday as described earlier, all playing with the concept of offering a peek to the—otherwise inaccessible to the living—land of the dead, effectively place participants in multiple positions: boundaries between conditions of being (faith-related or secular), unusually festive visual interpretations of the macabre and contrasting emotions, all dissolve under the combined weight of a deeper need for transgression and the excitement of experiencing the other side of things. These themes eventually serve as much wider, even primordial signifiers of spatial otherness, i.e. bridges that connect this world with the world of the dead as the ultimate “somewhere-else,” therefore engaging participants to an experience of immersion that promises a temporary transference, which may be spiritual, but nonetheless operates through the natural human senses.

Considering this transgressive nature of the “Day of the Dead,” its encounter with cinema has been a fortunate one, at least with regard to the three films presently discussed. Inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2008, the holiday already has something universally human at its core, without surrendering or compromising its narrower ethnic origins and immediate audience. This universality is the point of crossover with cinema as a form of mass entertainment that represents a massively exported and globally circulated artistic product. A film works by enabling its narrative world to unfold based on its own self-sustained credibility that viewers accept for the duration of film-watching; a successful filmic world creates some affectual connection with viewers, so that the latter invest their emotions—or at least their attention—to that world and let themselves be absorbed by the spatio-temporal flow of the narrative. In similar ways, David Carrasco describes the ability of festivals that are based on the “Day of the Dead,” thus capitalizing on its affectual attraction, to “temporarily rivet human attention onto an alternate world;” the spirit of such festivals, Carrasco continues, is able to “transform our experience of time and place thereby ‘transplanting’ us, during these nights of wonder, danger and stunning symbols, into another section of our cosmos” (4). In order to show aspects of this alternate world, regardless of individual creative goals, films that feature the “Day of the Dead” for close to a century so far have been thematically varied, aesthetically extravagant and technically stunning; and film history will be grateful for this, as it should be with anything that contributes to making good movies.

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# OEDIPUS-INSPIRED PINTOS: THE PLAGUE OF PRISONS IN TWO CHICANO TAKES ON THE PROTOTYPICAL MYTH OF CRISIS

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses two revisions of the tragic myth of Oedipus in the light of recent studies on the American prison crisis. In 2010, Luis Alfaro's "Oedipus el Rey," a play that draws on Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, addressed the national prison crisis which has encroached on barrio life with dreadful repercussions. One year later, Ernest Drucker employed the term "plague of prisons" to describe the phenomenon of mass incarceration in the US and shed light on its effects on poor communities of color, such as barrio communities. As if responding to Drucker's study and Alfaro's play, Law Chavez's "Señora de la Pinta," presented in 2012, gets its inspiration from the myth of Oedipus to dramatize US prison experience as a plague threatening the self and the barrio. The two plays are examined for what they reveal about the impact of the prison crisis on Chicano barrio life and *Chicanidad*.

KEYWORDS: Oedipus Myth, Prison Crisis, Barrio, "Oedipus el Rey," "Señora de la Pinta."

PINTOS INSPIRADOS EN EDIPO:  
LA PLAGA DE LAS PRISIONES EN DOS OBRAS CHICANAS  
SOBRE EL MITO PROTOTÍPICO DE LA CRISIS

## RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta dos revisiones del mito trágico de Edipo a la luz de los nuevos estudios sobre crisis carcelarias americanas. En 2010, la obra teatral de Luis Alfaro, "Oedipus el rey" (basada en el "Edipo tirano" de Sófocles) analiza la crisis nacional en las prisiones, que ha tenido terribles secuelas en la vida del barrio. Un año más tarde, Ernest Drucker acuñó el término "plaga de las prisiones" para describir el fenómeno de las encarcelaciones en masa en los EE. UU., explicando sus efectos en las comunidades pobres de color, como las del barrio. Con su dramatización de la experiencia carcelaria Americana como una amenaza a la identidad personal y colectiva del barrio, la obra de Law Chavez, "Señora de la Pinta" (2012) parece dar respuesta al estudio de Drucker y a la obra de Alfaro. El análisis de ambas piezas teatrales nos revelará el impacto de la crisis carcelaria en la vida cotidiana del barrio y en su "chicanidad".

PALABRAS CLAVE: El mito de Edipo, crisis carcelaria, barrio, "Oedipus el Rey", "Señora de la Pinta".

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The scapegoat ... becomes a judgment on that [social] order in its very being, embodying what it excludes, a sign of the humanity which it expels as so much poison. It is in this sense that it bears the seeds of revolutionary agency in its sheer passivity; for anything still active and engaged, however dissidently, would still be complicit with the *polis*, speaking its language and thus unable to put it into question as a whole. Only the silence of the scapegoat will do this.

—Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, 279.

## 1. PROLEGOMENA

Prison riots were neither unheard of nor uncommon in the US before the 1980s. The prison riots of the early 1950s and early 1970s set regrettable precedents. However, they received scant interpretations as to their immediate and underlying causes and effects, and they prompted even less preemptive responses by national super/infrastructures. According to retrospective studies, the blatant lack of adequate understanding and responsible action vis-à-vis the uprisings and prison violence in general, along with a series of “shocks” to US economy, “a host of other social ills” (from racism and corruption to disorganization and poverty) and the concomitant demise “of ideological commitment to rehabilitation” (Colvin 1) caused the emergence of what is currently known as the country’s “prison crisis.” It is to the latter phenomenon that both Luis Alfaro’s “Oedipus el Rey” (2010) and Law Chavez’s “Señora de la Pinta” (2012) attend. Both plays draw on the tragic myth of Oedipus and, specifically, on the mythic episodes dramatized in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, “the prototypical model of the theatre of crisis” (Taylor 54), to frame their responses to the prison crisis, albeit focusing on different expressions of it.

Chavez’s play thematizes the 1980 uprising at the New Mexico State Penitentiary in Santa Fe (PNM), the most violent in American history to date, which became a landmark event in the American prison crisis. The protagonist’s participation in the riot forms the dark background of a modern Chicana tragedy, which throws into sharp contrast the characters’ struggles with honor, sexuality and loss. In the realm of recorded history, the thirty-six-hour bloodbath cost the lives of thirty-three prisoners and compromised the wellbeing of hundreds of tortured prisoners and officers. From the beginning of 2020, several local and national news outlets have been offering commemorations of the forty years since the horrific event, the most thought-provoking of which focus on its effects, still visible today. Brian Horton, for instance, writes of a lingering legacy of violence. Among other manifestations of that legacy, Horton mentions fragmentation among inmates, mutual distrust and thus derailed relationships between officers and inmates, as well as a profound “impact on the daily operations of the prison system”; a system which, in the post-riot years, grew exponentially bigger and, at the same time, far more contained. To these effects we should add the deep scars left by the 1980 penitentiary riot on New Mexico communities, especially in barrio communities and their Chicana constituencies. To these effects Chavez, a native of New Mexico, points attention with his “Señora de la Pinta.”



The extent and depth of these effects comes as no surprise if we consider that most of New Mexico's population is Hispanic; that, at the time of the riot, the majority of the prison "guards and commanders were also Hispanic"; and that the Chicano prison population was high, as was Chicanos' power in prison society (Unseem and Kimball 89). In fact, although "African Americans were disproportionately represented at PNM relative to their population in the state and region," Chicano cliques had the greatest influence and thus "ran the joint" (Unseem and Kimball 89). Contrary to what one might expect, however, the Chicano prison population was disjointed and lacked intra-group solidarity or, at least, support. As Ernest Morris, then Deputy Warden, contends, Chicanos and other Hispanic inmates were subject to "the worst abuse and brutalization" (qtd. in Unseem and Kimball 89). This reality is painfully dramatized in Chavez's play, which also reveals that the fragmentation of the Chicano population inside the PNM mirrored and reduplicated a wider reality: serious friction and divisions became evident among Chicanos even before the *Raza Unida* ideology and the *Movimiento* energy, which supported the Chicano nationalist project, but started losing ground gradually after the mid-1970s (Muñoz 123-152).

The increasing prevalence of gang subculture within Chicano and other Latino barrio communities, as well as the conflicting views held by these communities on gangs, especially after the subsidence of the radical activism of the 1970s, produced further friction and contributed to the development of factionalization within the Chicano population (Michonski 25). Institutional, economic, demographic and social structural variables, all of them associated with class inequities and the rootedness of racism in the US, led to the formation of the gang subculture and, more noticeably, after the late-1970s, allowed gangs to spread throughout and gradually take control of the barrios (Acosta 5; Vigil, 41-42). The corrosion of community ties, for which the presence and workings of gangs (particularly their involvement in drug trafficking) is partially accountable, resulted in the destabilization of barrio communities. Yet, this unfortunate development had not only the side effect of fragmentation prevailing within the Chicano prison population; it also contributed to the country's prison crisis.

As scholar Ernest Drucker has argued, the destabilization of poor communities of color emerged, in the second half of the twentieth century, as one way "in which the plague of prisons has become self-sustaining" (47). He explains that high levels of arrest, imprisonment and recidivism concentrate in poor communities of color and are causally related to ethnoracial and class biases, discriminatory treatment, regimes of surveillance, as well as to the attendant social and economic insecurity of the said communities. The overrepresentation of these communities in the US prison system, in turn, damages "the social bonds that sustain life" and thus leads to increased crime, as punishment via incarceration "replaces the moral mechanisms of family and community" (47). According to Drucker, together with prison privatization, the industrial advantages derived from inmate labor, the multiplication of industries connected to and feeding back into the prison industry, and other super-structural interests vested in maintaining the prison-industrial complex, community destabilization resulted in incarceration



taking on the contagious and self-perpetuating features of the plagues of previous centuries (47).<sup>1</sup> And as the funding allocated for mass incarceration grows in reverse proportion to that allocated in public services that could keep down crime in at-risk communities, the “plague of prisons” only becomes more pervasive.

Here is where the focus of Alfaro’s “Oedipus el Rey” lies. In Chicax barrio communities all over the country, a vicious circle has been established since the late 1970s and is still at work in 2010, when Alfaro’s play is presented as a call for action towards its breaking. The play propounds that marginalization, economic vulnerability and oppression sustain the gang subculture, which leads to further community destabilization and increases criminal activity, which, in turn, leads to high levels of incarceration and reinforces the presence of gangs in and out of prison, which then causes further marginalization/vulnerability/oppression and thus community destabilization, and so on. In other words, the ethnoracial and class targeting of mass incarceration re/creates the conditions of its own perpetuation, entrapping the country’s more vulnerable youth in a mechanism of “social and political constitution,” which establishes and preserves racist agendas, ethnic marginalization and class dominance (Whitt 185). In what follows, we examine how Alfaro’s and Chavez’s dramatic revisions of Oedipus’ tragic myth respond to the noxious ways in which prison culture and barrio culture have come to interact and intersect in the past four decades. Our discussion of the two plays in the light of studies on the prison crisis will, hopefully, elucidate the repercussions of the crisis for Chicax barrio communities and *Chicanidad* more generally, but also on the ways in which the resources of the community can be harnessed to create a front of resistance against the crisis.

## 2. OEDIPUS’ RECEPTION

The presence of the Oedipus myth or, more accurately, Sophocles’ version of the myth on the American stage dates to the nineteenth century. Yet, as Helen Foley documents, in the longest part of the myth’s reception in the US, the eponymous hero was presented as “a descendant of the (Christianized and martyred) heroes of heroic melodrama” (6). It was in the 1970s that a more subtle “American identification with Oedipus’ search for identity” emerged, “as well as an increasing willingness to confront Oedipus’ role as a compelling yet potentially dangerous leader” (6). Along with the parallel outgrowth of new narrative and directorial

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<sup>1</sup> These include a relatively “well-defined starting point” in the early 1970s as reported by Drucker: identifiable/identified causal agents, such as the ones noted above, as well as profiles of hosts; specific aspects of the environment that make the transmission possible, thus allowing the disease to spread; clear geographic foci; “subsequent evidence of the diffusion of new cases outward beyond” the initial geographical foci; as well as identifiable/identified “mechanisms of reproduction” and “sequences of cause and effect” conducive to the plague’s perpetuation, which are contingent on the “three essential components of any epidemic: agent, host, environment” (50-67, 78-107).



trends, new approaches and patterns developed to the myth's revision. In some cases, the myth gets structurally updated, as when a play modernizes the mythic elements yet follows the outlines of the myth, thus emerging as its "contemporary correlative"; in others, the myth undergoes what Miriam Chirico calls "catalytic conversion," when a play depends on the myth as impulse or catalyst to explore certain issues without, however, necessarily following its distinct outlines ("Divine Fire" 532). Among the varied patterns of revision that Chirico identifies, diegetical transposition, transfocalization, transvalorization, transmotation, dramaturgical adoption and pragmatic transformation are six of the most commonly encountered on the US stage ("Hellenic Women" 18-20). These patterns of revision correspond to various degrees of inventiveness and experimentation with the mythic material "without being mutually exclusive" (20). The foregoing approaches and patterns, together with variously creative attempts at syncretizing Oedipus' myth with diverse US social identities, cultural traditions, even subcultural modes of expression and representation, allowed the myth to function as a potent vehicle for the exploration of a wide range of topical issues (Delikonstantinidou 2020). This is the case with "Señora de la Pinta" and "Oedipus el Rey," two instances of syncretic revisionary theatre, which serve to demonstrate that the myth of Oedipus belongs as much to the Chicax world as to any other.

### 3. "SEÑORA DE LA PINTA": PRISON EXPERIENCE AS THE OEDIPAL PLAGUE

In his commentary on Chavez's play, which precedes an in-depth interview with the play's director Daniel Banks, Patrice Rankine grants that "the play is neither a one-to-one adaptation of the classical play [of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*] nor an easy case of classical reception" (689). The application of Chirico's categorical classification with respect to patterns of dramatic mythic revision on Chavez's play shows the latter to be an instantiation of pragmatic transformation: a "type of revision [that] alters the mythic material so much that one-to-one correspondences between the original and the revision are no longer visible or important" (19). As commonly happens with the looser/less faithful cases of pragmatic transformation, in "Señora de la Pinta" the myth of Oedipus only "serves as a germ of an idea, a basic jumping-off point, from which the playwright takes full license to create" (Chirico 19). Although Chavez has not necessarily relied on contemporary audiences' knowledge of the myth, the age-old tale does allow a "certain 'in' for the audience," to borrow Rankine's words (690). Chavez, then, has used the myth as a frame through which to look at and explore loyalty and honor, sexual identity and gender expression, and, importantly for our purposes, the traumatic experience of the 1980 prison riot in PNM and its implications for the Chicax community of a Santa Fe barrio where the action is set.

Chavez makes sure he establishes early on that this play should be understood as an instance of *mestizx* theatrical mythmaking. "Señora de la Pinta" opens with a syncretic twist to the classical device of the chorus which, besides commenting





on the action and foregrounding the presence of the community as in the classics, evokes ritualistic associations and points to a cross-cultural bond between the ancient Greek culture and the indigenous/Chicanx culture. The play's chorus consists of three *lechuzas*, human/wise speaking owls and "fabled characters in local lore" (Rankine and Banks 691), creatures which constitute symbols of knowledge, like owls did in ancient Greece. Yet, *lechuzas* take on extra roles in the local tradition and in the play: they will blind anyone who looks at them straight into the eyes, punishing both the ignorant and those who proud themselves of too much knowledge; they help heal those in need as the companions of barrio *curanderas*; and, quite suggestively in view of mother-son complications here, they enforce "the moral admonition to honor one's mother" (Miles 46). Thus, the conjoined issues of ignorance and the limits of knowledge are introduced from the play's very beginning and weave through it up until the end, when the play assumes its climactic significance.

The *lechuzas*, Yvonne's sympathetic neighbors named after the *curanderas* they serve—Isabelle, Angelina and Dolores—are the first to learn on TV about the carnage in the New Mexico Penitentiary (PNM), where Yvonne's youngest son, Tito, was serving time for selling barbitures. The three *lechuzas* are also the ones who shoulder the burden of breaking the news to his mother. After she learns of her son's hideous death during the riot (he was found raped and burned almost beyond recognition), Yvonne decides to honor his memory by remaining in ignorance of the ones responsible for his death. In her view, this decision will allow her to forgive his murderers "within reason" and thus let his soul rest in peace (Chavez 22). Contrary to Yvonne, who strives to leave behind knowledge of the riot's shocking specifics by holding tight onto the happy memories of Tito, the *lechuzas* seem both unable and unwilling to get past the traumatic event. One year later, and in their role as the embodiments of the spirit of the community and the voice of its values, beliefs and viewpoints, they keep returning to the issue of the riot. They repeatedly reflect on the conditions that led to it (including the inhuman living conditions of the PNM inmates and the power abuse suffered by them) (16-17), as well as on the costs the riot had in human lives and suffering, both immediate and long-term. Among the most insidious of these costs has been the growing distrust and aversion toward *pintos*; that is, ex-felons, like Gringo (or Vincente). This is no other than Yvonne's new partner, who was in prison at the same time as Tito and arrived at the barrio from PNM a while after the riot's suppression, having secured parole.

It is through Gringo's enigmatic background, shrouded in mystery for the most part of the play, and his search for the truth, which will ultimately destroy him, that Chavez joins the myth's plot with the plot of "Señora de la Pinta." Yet, Gringo's Oedipus-like figure does not search for the truth regarding his origins, but regarding the murderer of Yvonne's son and the circumstances of his death. Against Yvonne's wishes, and triggered by her daughter Jose (short for Josefina)—the Creon-like figure of the play with whom he has an antagonistic relationship—, Gringo sets out to find the one responsible for Tito's violent end and avenge the victim and his family. His proclaimed goal is to honor her son's death and thus her and her loss, but equally important to him is to gain the acceptance of the barrio community that treats him with suspicion and as an outsider due to his *pinto* status.



Barrio opinion is indeed divided over Gringo as the *lechuzas* serve to demonstrate; namely, although a small segment of the community sympathizes with Gringo for what he suffered while in prison and during the riot and for his wish to heal and “start a new life after going through that hell” (Chavez 16), others doubt that he is “a different man,” one who has put his criminal ways and nightmarish experience of the riot “behind him” (18). Gringo is definitely not considered part of *la familia*, the barrio’s sacred structural unit and principle, even when he is engaged to Yvonne. Therefore, any concerns as to his wellbeing are overshadowed by the most important concern of all, the wellbeing of the barrio (17). As Dolores revealingly comments, before she or anyone else knows what he did to get in prison or while in it, “Maybe it’s not the riot that won’t leave our minds, but having a killer like Gringo living here with us” (26). In this sense, he is seen as carrying the darkness of the prison experience with him like a plague, even before he is found guilty of anything. By means of Gringo’s equivocal and rather problematic relation to the barrio and its people, the play underscores an important point: the rules by which the barrio abides are as binding and unforgiving as the prison rules. For all his macho confidence and good intentions, Gringo has been no more a free agent in the barrio than he was in prison. In both contexts, he is a largely overdetermined and peerless subject.

One of the most heart-rending strands of the play is that Gringo is aware of his outsideness and this affects all his decisions, including the one that sets tragedy into motion: finding Tito’s killer. Like a curse, the omnipotent force that shaped Oedipus’ mythic biography throughout the myth’s reception history, prejudice fuels his determination to prove himself to the barrio people while, at the same time, sealing the tragic destiny of the major players in the drama. As he says to Jose, when the latter confronts him about his past convictions, “Once you’re a convicted felon you’re automatically guilty for everything no matter what. The second time I was around the corner from an old lady that got robbed. They throw you in the pen for everything now, that’s why it was so crowded” (Chavez 26). By thus dramatizing Gringo’s position in the barrio world and his victimization by the omnipresent prison apparatus, the play’s social critique evinces two related prongs. On the one hand, there is the ethnoracial disparity in imprisonment, which is correlated with a similar disparity in police stops and arrest, which, in turn, is correlated with overt or even unconscious ethnoracial bias, and the implementation of policies and practices evincing ethnoracially disparate assumptions and effects, such as law enforcement profiling (Behnke). On the other hand, there is the criminalization of individuals who have treaded on a path similar to Gringo; that is, Chicanos reduced to subcitizenship within the “hierarchies of membership, security, and agency” instituted by the prison apparatus “inside and outside prison walls,” “what is sometimes called ‘social death,’” as Matt S. Whitt remarks (184). Affected by the workings of the prison apparatus in the manner on which we reflected earlier, barrio culture colludes with it to filter Gringo’s access “to the bases of social recognition and political agency” (Whitt 184). Indeed, barrio culture relegates him to a caste of “internal outsiders,” against which the rest of the community, the population of “free” full citizens, is defined *via negativa*. Differentially interpellated in this way, *pintos* and non-*pintos* get ensnared in an “us versus them” opposition that, inevitably,



exacerbates the community's corrosion. Substantial disparities, center/periphery relations and the skewed dynamics of persistent social hierarchies within *Chicanidad* come into prominence and belie nationalist narratives suffused by the (masculinist) ideology of *carnalismo* with its emphasis on unity and cohesion.

As Gringo starts probing into the specifics of Tito's life and imprisonment, we realize that Yvonne's son was similarly to Gringo stigmatized in the barrio community due to his unstable low-class life, as well as due to the unfortunate circumstances of his birth (as he and his sisters were born out of Christian wedlock and thus viewed as inferior to their peers). Like Gringo, Tito was relegated to the fringes of the community and left to his fate. It was a fate that soon came to take the form of law enforcement for him the same way it did for Gringo. Yet, the divisions within *Chicanidad* that the play unveils do not only concern Chicanos' *pinto* status, but also sexual and gender orientation. Tito, described as a "flamboyant" gay man by the parish's homophobic priest, suggestively named Father King, was treated as an embarrassing oddity in the barrio community (Chavez 12). Despite his excellent character, as revealed in the loving reminiscences of Yvonne, Jose and the *lechuzas*, Tito presented an aberration to the macho barrio culture. For his part, Gringo repeatedly voices the homophobic premises of macho barrio mentality by overemphasizing his masculinity, largely to salvage whatever acceptance and respect he can amidst the wary community. However, his fact-finding mission regarding Tito soon leads to a fatal discovery that discloses extra layers of meaning to his hypermacho declarations: Yvonne's son is no other than his lover in prison, called "Tattoo," due to a tattoo-like birthmark on his chest.

The recognition, catalyzed by the age-old birthmark device encountered in many a mythic career, including that of Oedipus, allows Gringo's masculinist behavior throughout the play to be interpreted in a different light, as an attempt to deflect his sexual frustration at having engaged in homoerotic practices while in prison. At the same time, by exposing the sexual hypocrisy of its protagonist, the play challenges the homophobic and manipulative strands of the modern cult of machismo and its pernicious effects on the politics and ethics of the Chicano community, including the propagation of rape culture.<sup>2</sup> Yet, it is not the secret of Gringo's "struggle [with] his sexuality inside *la pinta*," as Rankine put it (695), nor the fact that Tito/Tattoo looks a lot like his mother<sup>3</sup>—although the latter certainly adds pathos to the erotic complications of the drama— but Tito/Tattoo's death in Gringo's own hands that tunes the play to the tragic mode.

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<sup>2</sup> The first crime for which Gringo was convicted is viewed in a different light once his sexual complications become apparent. His unwilling participation in the rape of a teenage girl for fear that he would be rejected by his gang peers can be interpreted both as a mechanism for venting his frustration and as a traumatizing experience (Chavez 28). The play's treatment of Gringo's crime also comments on the presence of rape culture in the barrio world.

<sup>3</sup> The title's "Señora" refers to Tito/Tattoo, endearingly called that by Tecato, an ex-con, who is confused by the boy's resemblance to his mother—confusion that exacerbates his mental distraction and becomes quite evident when he conflates mother and son during his revelations.



The dramatic agent that sets the stage for tragedy here is not some otherworldly force as in the tragic myths of the Greeks, but the violence of the prison experience, during but also before the riot. Violence unravels in all its gruesomeness and goriness first, through Gringo's prison memories that the *lechuzas* conjure up (Chavez 55-60); then, through the quasi-mystical encounter between Gringo and Tattoo (70-74); and finally, through the semi-coherent revelations of a slightly unhinged ex-con named Tecato (85-89), who was in prison at the same time as Gringo and Tito. Tito's horrible death and Gringo's involvement in it are shown to belong among its multifarious implications. In love with Tattoo, Gringo had been protecting the young man during their serving time from sexual abuse by the other inmates, who were incited by Tattoo's conspicuous homosexuality. When the riot broke out, Gringo hid Tattoo to save him from the other prisoners, who would rape and torture him to death. Upon realizing that he would be unable to stave off the rowdy mob for much longer once they found their hiding place, he tried to grant him a painless and quick death by breaking his neck. He then left to save himself without realizing that his attempt had failed to kill him. It was eventually Tecato who unintentionally finished off Tattoo by putting his body in the dryer to prevent the other prisoners from violating it.

Any hope that Gringo has been harboring of making peace with his deed, his (arguably controversial) motives and the haunting prison experience collapses when the truth is out in the open. His future with Yvonne is destroyed when the latter takes her own life, devastated by the realization that she is in love with her child's lover and murderer (Chavez 95). Knowing how much it had cost her not to have been married in church (due to the fact that her husband had been married before) and to have been unable to offer Tito a Christian funeral (denied to him by Father King due to his homosexuality), Gringo takes the blame for Yvonne's death so that she can be honored the way she wanted. But he cannot look at himself anymore, nor can he return to prison having seen what he has seen. Thus, he asks the *lechuzas*, the ones' who blind the ignorant and the arrogant like himself, to punish him by digging out his eyes (96). Initially hesitant, they eventually grant his wish and write the coda to this tale of loss by musing on the anti-prison qualities of the heart, holding close but holding free those it loves, and thus keeping them alive—in memory, if not in fact.

The play's success in eliciting a sense of catharsis is due, in large part, to the authentic and consistent humanness with which the main characters and the relationships among them have been animated. But it is also due to the authenticity of the connection on which the play has been grounded between the violence of Oedipus' story and the "brutal and devastating violence" of the prison experience, to use Banks locution (693). The play's director perceptively argues that "Señora de la Pinta" has capitalized on the connection that Chavez has discerned between the tragic myth of Oedipus and "what happened in his own backyard, in his community ... and the prison, ... two backyards" that are not just contiguous, but conjoined (693). The play has allowed the mythic material to speak resonantly to the present and create the context to which the playwright needed to direct attention. Ultimately, "Señora de la Pinta" manages to communicate to its audiences that the "plague



of prison,” as manifested in all its violence via the 1980 riot, has shaped Chicana communities, and has affected the internal workings and constitutive relationships of *Chicanidad*. It may even be, as Banks argues, that the ethical and political statement of the play reaches further to show that: “This doesn’t just happen in New Mexico. This didn’t just happen with the prison riots here. This isn’t a racialized local story reduced to a bunch of criminals, of New Mexican Hispanos. This is a time, age-old issue, problem, journey, situation. And we need to see ourselves as part of that world history ...” (193).

#### 4. “OEDIPUS EL REY”: RECIDIVISM AND THE PIPELINE AS THE OEDIPAL FATE

The same imperative that Banks spells out, to explore the contact points between our present(s) and the age-old question of violence affecting world history, as well as between ourselves and others whom we rarely consider “our own” enough to care about, motivated Alfaro to create “Oedipus el Rey.” The Oedipus myth, and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* more particularly, served as inspiration and ultimately structured Alfaro’s response to the “plague of prisons,” the implications of which the playwright had experienced firsthand when working with young people caught in the cogwheels of the Californian penal system. The play constitutes, in Chirico’s terminology, a “contemporary correlative” of the mythic episodes that Sophocles dramatized in his renowned tragedy (“Divine Fire” 532). It also evokes the revisionary pattern of diegetical transposition, insofar as specific analogies are revealed “between the earlier depiction of the myth and the latter-day revision,” set in 2010s California (“Hellenic Women” 20). Both the analogies and the inevitable anachronisms that “Oedipus el Rey” involves underscore the similarity and also the dissonance “between classical antiquity and the contemporary moment and ignite a spark of recognition” (19); recognition not necessarily of the myth itself, but of the timeless and transcultural resonance of the question of violence and the ways in which violence (mis)shapes fate, faith and love.

Similarly to “Señora de la Pinta” and also to his other dramatic revisions of the myths of Electra (“Electricidad”) and Medea (“Bruja” and “Mojada”), Alfaro’s “Oedipus el Rey” grew out of a community need. In this case, it was the need to deal with the multifaceted problems of recidivism and the “cradle-to-prison-pipeline” as these affect US barrios and, more specifically, Chicana youth of an at-risk background, whose lives are tied, in one way or another, to the gang subculture and its geopolitics. The two related phenomena, which have been shown to feed into the country’s prison crisis (Wright Edelman 152), and their implications for Chicana communities form the focus of the play. In fact, their combined stress and impact function in Alfaro’s revision as “a stand-in for Fate,” as reviewer Chris Jackson notes. This Oedipus’ struggle to transcend his fate and rewrite his/story translates into a struggle to overcome his ethnic and class origins and determine his future beyond or, rather, against “the sordid realities of the prison system and the gang-infected barrioscape” (Jackson). At a time when more and more members



of America's growing lower-class citizens of color are being "condemned at birth to fulfill an ugly, impoverished, criminalized destiny" (Adler), the story of Alfaro's Oedipus gains special poignancy.

Yet, as Chay Yew, the director of the play's Chicago production stresses in the program of the performance, besides dramatizing the predicament of many a young "homeboy," the play also served as "a call to action," but also, we may add, as action itself. Both the play's dramaturgy and its production history sought to direct audiences' attention to the need for assuming individual and communal responsibility vis-à-vis the phenomena of recidivism and the pipeline. Both sought to galvanize target communities into attempting interventions aimed at "a fundamental paradigm shift in child policy and practice" (Wright Edelman 152), and at remedying realities that spell tragedy for disadvantaged/at-risk young people like Oedipus. More than that though, "Oedipus el Rey" became itself such an intervention through several means: by inviting diverse audiences (other than a theatre-going elite) for the play's productions; by flanking the productions with such events as forums with guest panelists (community leaders, professionals working in fields and areas relevant to the play's focus, social scientists and other social agents), pre- and post-show conversations, online dialogue and blogging; by collaborating with the intervention organization of the Homeboy Industries;<sup>4</sup> and by creating professional opportunities for Chicana performers and other theatre professionals, but also for at-risk and gang-involved youth. In one sense then, it has been an intervention on the tracks of social theatre, since "Oedipus el Rey" combined myth-making and theatre-making with activism to explore together with its variegated audiences "the same questions faced by those in Ancient Greece about the limits of free will and how to best break free of the tragic ties that bind into a more hopeful, liberated future," as Kevin Moriarty grants in the Production Note for the Dallas Theatre Center production.

Both the syncretic interplay between the Greek source material and the Chicana culture on which "Oedipus el Rey" rests, and the interpenetration of prison culture and barrio culture, around which it thematically revolves, are established from the play's beginning via the device of the chorus or *coro*. The *coro* here operates as an instrument for giving expression to the communal spirit that permeates the play, as in "Señora de la Pinta," but the character is double. Namely, it stands both for the barrio community in the greatest part of the play and for the protagonist's surrogate family of tough inmates in Kent County State Prison at the beginning and end of the play. In taking on this double group personality, the *coro* mediates between the two communities both literally, via its interaction with and in its choreographed stage presence amidst the audience, and symbolically, via representing alternately the

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<sup>4</sup> Homeboy Industries is the name of an organization that serves endangered gang-involved youth with services and programs constructed to meet their practical and educational needs. The organization has grown to become "the largest gang intervention, rehabilitation and re-entry program in the world." See, <https://homeboyindustries.org/>.





community of prisoners and the community of citizens (Delikonstantinidou 153). This is a mediatory role that becomes all the more poignant and effective given the participation of actual former prisoners and gang members in the play's productions and their inclusion as attendees in the audience. In a sort of theatrical sleight of hand, Alfaro creates a bridge between the two communities, thus facilitating each to reach out to the other across a long-upheld cultural divide. At the same time, in having the members of the *coro* gradually slipping into their roles as the main players of the drama, that is, Oedipus, Tiresias, Laius and Creon, but not Jocasta, the play introduces the conflation of inside (prison)/outside (prison), which lies at the heart of its overriding prison metaphor (Delikonstantinidou 166; Jenkins 180).

It is through the *coro*'s polyphonic, metatheatrical reflections on the nature of storytelling and fate, strongly alluding to the reception history of Oedipus' myth, that we are introduced to this new Oedipus: the "destined / to be ... / Destined" protagonist of the story they decide to collaboratively re-create (Alfaro 11). Oedipus is a young homeboy who has spent most of his life shuffling between barrio streets and correctional institutions, believing that he has lost his mother in early childhood and been raised essentially within institutional walls by the man he knows to be his father, Tiresias, the now blind ex-gang member (11). As one after the other the *coro* members slip into their respective roles in Oedipus' story, the truth about his origins—the same truth that he will not discover until it is too late—is revealed via a number of flashbacks enacted on stage. These are essentially the episodes that lay out the backstory of the main events: the parricide prophecy that Laius (the East L.A. barrio/gang "King" invested in territorial intergang warfare) receives by a healer, when his child is still unborn (22-23); the birth of the ill-fated child (25); his violent snatching out of his mother's arms, which leaves Jocasta devastated (26); his exposure as an infant (27-28); and Tiresias' (then Laius' henchman) noncompliance with Laius' order to murder the infant (28). Like many a child lost in the pipeline, Oedipus has led, since Tiresias saved him, the kind of life where dreaming of loving mothers, or dreaming at all, is dangerous. "It's better to have nothing in your night, but sleep," he admits. For people like him, the night is either "deaf" (33) or plagued by nightmares.

In corroboration for Oedipus' wariness of dreaming, it is in a dream that he learns about the parricide he is fated to commit by a parliament of wise owls (Alfaro 35-36). As in "Señora de la Pinta," the owls, rich with knowledge-related symbolism, assume supernatural qualities. Here, they take up the role of the Sophoclean oracle, which sets the hero inexorably on his tragic life path. Forces beyond the control of the world's Oedipuses set a self-fulfilling prophecy and/as tragedy into motion in this case too, albeit cast in a different mold. Shadowy, otherworldly forces conspire with the worldly forces of ethnoracial bias, systemic disparities of quality and access to material and social resources, the omnipresent prison apparatus, and the gang-inf(lect)ed barrio with its intracommunity divisions and conflicts give his life its distinct and "destined" shape. Despite Oedipus' quasi-blasphemous declarations against divine agents, borne of his youthful impiety and arrogance, the young man would never risk harming his beloved father. Thus, he makes up his mind to apply for parole and be released from prison to avert the fateful outcome (40). Tiresias, for his part, strives to prevent both kinds of forces from destroying his son by giving



him specific guidelines as to his post-release steps and by making him promise he will not head to L.A. in pursuit of “a place, possibility,” as Oedipus longs to do (44). But Oedipus’ desire to “be something ... more ... *el mero mero*” (9-11) and his hunger for another future get the better of him. Soon after his release, he breaks his promise and thus, unwittingly, the hope for a different outcome to his story.

The gears of tragedy begin to spin relentlessly, grinding his future to the stuff from which cautionary tales are made of from the moment Oedipus heads to L.A. His encounter with his biological father in a literal and metaphorical “middle of the road” is another lacuna in the Sophoclean model of the myth (that is, besides the episodes that preceded the post-oracle events) that the play fills. The mythical episode is amplified and dramatized: Laius bursts into a fit of rage against the stranger who blocks the narrow one-way lane with his car. Oedipus quickly joins in the display of macho bravado, ultimately outmatching Laius’ exaggerated, masculine histrionics (Alfaro 49). The game of machismo, manifesting in distinctly misguided—even downright ugly—ways in the gang context where both men have been socialized (Michonski 25), turns the road-rage exchange between them into a murderous “*quien es mas macho*” vignette. Laius recognizes that it is his own son who is punching him to death moments before he breaths his last breath. He even yells out to him, but his voice and the truth it contains do not register with Oedipus, who hits Laius “in the face repeatedly with an absolute savagery and lack of emotion. It’s hard and quick, like in a prison yard” (Alfaro 50). The stage directions here reiterate the conflation of inside/outside and lay truth to Thomas Jenkins’ claim that “[e]ven outside of the prison yard, Oedipus seals his fate as if inside a prison yard: there is no outside, outside” for him (180). Prison culture, macho gang culture and the perverted masculinist ethics of both push Oedipus beyond the point of no return.

By the time he reaches downtown L.A., Laius has been dead for days, but Oedipus is, in a very real sense and much like Chavez’s Gringo, already socially dead: a *pinto*, stigmatized due to his impoverished and prison background, criminalized for life and reduced to subcitizenship. Like Gringo, and like many a disadvantaged and at-risk youth struggling with the reality of the bulging prison pipeline (Edelman 152), he is received by the barrio people as a man “scarred” since birth, bearing a social stigma that prohibits him from becoming fully integrated into society and for whom it is only a matter of time to get outlawed once again (Delikontanidou 164). Besides their self-serving edge, the suspicions and spiteful comments of Jocasta’s brother, Creon, against Oedipus, when the latter invokes their former acquaintance at Juvenile Detention for a point of entry to barrio life, reflect the stance of the barrio community toward the young *pinto* (Alfaro 51-57). Creon’s and the barrio *gente*’s grievances against Oedipus become acuter as when he becomes Jocasta’s lover and partner, especially as the barrio/gang “Queen” starts investing him with power and authority at the same time as she assigns him more responsibilities related to gang workings (94-97). From the moment the two announce that they are about to get married, the presence of the young usurper of the barrio “throne” becomes the source of a plague of rampant discontent at the new order that threatens to destabilize the barrio community. Jocasta’s lifelong fears at the barrio’s unforgiving stance toward any threat of disruption to its fragile normalcy thus gain more and more substance.





In his attempt to thwart their plans, Creon embarks on a fact-finding mission regarding Oedipus' past, but also appeals to the authority of the community's healers, who traditionally sit at the "King's" side, collectively known as *Esfinge*—an equivalent of the mythical Sphinx. Oedipus must get their permission to marry the "Queen" and thus rule over the "kingdom." Having paid light heed to Jocasta's warning as to the barrio mentality and intent on winning over the *gente* and thus standing proudly by her side, Oedipus defies *Esfinge*'s authority. He not only triumphs over it/them by answering their localized version of a well-known riddle, but, in a hubristic display of macho power, he humiliates the three healers by forcing them to eat the pages of the Bible they have offered him as a welcoming gift (Alfaro 109-110). However, his overpowering of the *Esfinge*/healers only serves as a prelude to his defeat. The marriage of Oedipus and Jocasta is literally built on the wreckage of his blasphemy: the entire event is enacted on the Bible-littered stage (Delikonstantinidou 173). Jocasta cherishes the moment and places the "King's chain" around Oedipus' neck in utter ignorance of what has passed at Oedipus' meeting with the healers (Alfaro 111). Only after the wedding is over, one of them approaches her and informs her of Oedipus' actions. Realizing what the confetti-like bits that are covering the floor really are, she is shaken. And before the shock of this realization has worn off, Creon enters with Tiresias and the two men proceed to devastating revelations as to Oedipus' true identity.

As is the case with Sophocles' hero, this "Oedipus' simultaneous discovery of his identity and his crimes entails not only admission of guilt, but also consciousness that his attempt to thwart the prophecy has failed"; thus, the discovery entails the "burden of self-consciousness" that only adds to his suffering (Edmunds 45). In a resonant display of self-referential awareness, Oedipus speaks of himself as a subject of/to a larger destiny that he was never able to change, while simultaneously nodding to the pedagogical import of his story: "Am I the way the lesson looks? Am I?" (Alfaro 120), he asks Tiresias. The play's gripping climax culminates in Oedipus' blinding by Jocasta's own hands after his desperate pleas to that effect and her suicide with his small prison-made blade (123). At the same time that a *coro* member is leading blind Oedipus to Tiresias so that they can head back to prison, the barrio exacts its revenge on Creon in "the old school way," with "the stealthy sound of one silencer bullet being shot" (123). "Can no man be *feliz* / until he's six feet under?" the *coro* asks (127), now donning the "prison character" once again and reiterating the gnomic statement which Sophocles used for the coda of his *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1678-1684). The age-old question is to remain suspended, showing the existential distance between the ancient past and the present to be closer than one would expect. The sound of prison doors opening is heard and the play closes the moment the doors do too. Oedipus is back to prison and one wonders whether he ever truly left it.

"Do we lay down / and take the fate / this world has given us? / or / can we break *esta* cycle / and tell new stories?" (Alfaro 128). If the predicament of Alfaro's Oedipus mirrors that of thousands of young people in contemporary US, the *coro*'s concluding intonations underline the community's responsibility for remedying the realities of injustice, discrimination and dispossession that determine the storylines of those lives. This idea has been put forward by the play's productions in every community they have addressed and engaged, along with the related



notion that the tragedy they witness—the betrayal of efforts at self-determination by uncontrollable worldly forces—does not simply concern an isolated individual fallen victim to the prison plight and his immediate context. Rather, it is the tragedy of barrio, Chicanx and other communities of/in crisis all over the country, a tragedy that reverberates across the ages. In this sense, Alfaro’s “Oedipus el Rey” is akin to Chavez’s “Señora de la Pinta.” However, the former has taken a step further in the attempt to intervene remedially to the conditions it dramatizes by accompanying the play’s performances, as well as the ethical and political statements advanced by the dramaturgy, with strategies that fall the tracks of social theatre. The strategies on which we earlier commented have rendered “Oedipus el Rey” into even more than a public forum of storytelling and listening (Delikonstantinidou 178). Indeed, they transformed Alfaro’s interdisciplinary theatre/project into a kind of itinerant social theatre workshop, which offered participants a multifaceted, socially remedial opportunity and urged them to further act upon it.

## 5. EPILEGOMENA

One discernible incentive behind “Oedipus el Rey” and “Señora de la Pinta” is the need to have audiences conceive of young men like Oedipus, Gringo, Tito, youth victimized from birth, as their children, their people. By establishing this connection, both works seek to galvanize audiences into civic action toward contributing to the dismantling of the pipeline and the reintegration of *pintos* into the social fabric. In line with official reports and studies, both works have served to make the point that the way out of the prison crisis, out of recidivism and the infamous pipeline, can be found from within the community. As long as the barrio culture works in tandem with the prison culture, the social ills that are brought forth and fostered by this symbiotic relationship will only lead to the proliferation of tragedies like Oedipus’: of lives destroyed while struggling against the binds of a fate made inexorable by society’s neglectful ignorance (Delikonstantinidou 177). Certainly, the imperative for structural responses to this crisis is dire. Still, no large-scale changes are going to be effective at the structural level and in terms of law- and policy-making, unless people like the protagonists of the two plays are given better chances within the immediate community context in terms of acceptance and belonging, as well as of everyday strategies of survival, to be able to lead different lives than the ones dictated by a deplorable combination of unfavorable origins, systemic neglect and lifelong social exclusion. However, the development of a front of resistance to the “plague of prisons” using community resources is shown in both plays to involve concurrent efforts to remedy divisions within *Chicanidad* that have been proven conducive to it. Whether *Chicanidad* have managed to harvest the rethought and retooled post-*movimiento* energy to respond to this challenge in the past decade is the subject of another paper.

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# BEYOND THE MARGINS: HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AGAINST UNDOCUMENTED PERSONS, HOMOSEXUALS, AND WOMEN IN INTER-AMERICAN NARRATIVE

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## ABSTRACT

This study is greatly based on article 7 of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” that states: “All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.” Latin America is viewed as a place where injustices and atrocities tend to be the order of the day: violent processes of conquest and colonization, military dictatorships, drug trafficking, kidnappings, the increase in crime and insecurity, etc. Such violations have generated frequent waves of emigration (often irregular) to the United States where they seek protection and freedom but, too often, they find neither, thus producing a vicious cycle in the inter-American literature of US Latino authors. The focus is to examine three distinct groups: immigrants, homosexuals and women.

**KEYWORDS:** Human Rights Violations, 20th and 21st Century Inter-American Literature, Latinos in the US, Marginalized Groups.

TRASPASANDO LOS MÁRGENES:  
VIOLACIONES DE LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS EN PERSONAS INDOCUMENTADAS,  
HOMOSEXUALES Y MUJERES EN LA NARRATIVA INTER-AMERICANA

## RESUMEN

Este estudio se basa en gran parte en el artículo 7 de la “Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos”, que dice: “Todos son iguales ante la ley y tienen, sin distinción, derecho a igual protección de la ley.” Latinoamérica es vista como ejemplo donde injusticias y atrocidades han estado siempre a la orden del día: violentos procesos de conquista y colonización, las varias dictaduras militares, el narcotráfico, los secuestros, el aumento de la delincuencia y la inseguridad, etc. Tales violaciones han generado frecuentes olas de emigración (a menudo irregulares) hacia Estados Unidos, donde intentan encontrar protección y libertades, pero con frecuencia tampoco las encuentran, produciéndose así un círculo vicioso en la literatura interamericana de autores hispano-estadounidenses. El enfoque consistirá en examinar tres grupos distintos: los inmigrantes, los homosexuales y las mujeres.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** violaciones de los Derechos Humanos, narrativa interamericana de los siglos XX y XXI, latinos en EE. UU., grupos marginados.



Por un lado, se podría decir que una de las razones de ser de un Estado democrático es la protección de los derechos humanos de los ciudadanos. Por el otro, debemos ser capaces de defender los derechos humanos de quienes no son ciudadanos. Si el Estado no puede proveer tal defensa, ¿qué hacemos? Es una cuestión de los derechos de quienes no pertenecen a ningún Estado y están implicados en acciones de guerra, pero también es cuestión de los indocumentados cuyos derechos humanos también deben ser protegidos. Si sólo consideramos como merecedoras de derechos a aquellas vidas que representan al Estado-nación, estamos definiendo tácitamente al ser humano en relación con su pertenencia a un Estado.

Judith Butler (“La lucha debe ser por una vida vivible”)

## I. INTRODUCTION

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and its American equivalent, the *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man* (1948), have existed for more than seventy years now. Although this may sound good in theory and seems sufficient to guarantee the defense of human rights in the world, the reality is often very different. Human rights violations in the Americas do not represent isolated or sporadic cases: on the contrary, they are the order of the day, so it is pertinent to ask the question why, despite the legal tools, we continue to witness such violations? The answer to this question is not unequivocal. Some specialists speak of the seniority of governments and the incompatibility between the universality of rights and the cultural particularities of different countries; others even reproach corrupt behavior of the various institutions responsible for overseeing by its not always strict compliance (Reyes-Zaga 121-122). Be that as it may, the problem remains.

It is noteworthy that this issue is also reflected in current inter-American narratives. Furthermore, literature not only plays an important role in denouncing human rights violations, but also in raising the awareness of the reader and transforming them into a social entity capable of actively participating and politically influencing the creation of a more equitable society. In other words, social participation is understood as that process in which people are consciously involved in the public sphere to generate positive change on issues that matter to them, as confirmed in Sidney Tarrow’s *El poder en movimiento* (17-19).

This study tries to show different forms of human rights violations presented in US Latino narratives, focusing on three groups, often marginalized, within the larger community of Hispanics migrated to the US: undocumented persons, homosexuals, and women. In this essay, we concentrate on the analysis of three exemplary works of each group, which will be introduced with a short legal section: *El corrido de Dante* by Eduardo González Viaña, *Antes que anochezca* by Reinaldo Arenas, and *El sueño de América* by Esmeralda Santiago<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Since *El corrido de Dante* and *Antes que anochezca* were first written in Spanish, we will use and quote the original versions in this study. In order to be consistent, we will also use the Spanish version for *El sueño de América* (auto-translation by the novelist).



## II. I. THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS AND THEIR VIOLATIONS

In the first subchapter we look at the rights of undocumented migrants and the violations they suffer. In accordance with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man* proclaims both the “Right to the inviolability and transmission of correspondence” (14) as well as the “Right to nationality” which provides for the following: “Every person has the right to the nationality to which he is entitled by law and to change it, if he so wishes, for the nationality of any other country that is willing to grant it to him” (4). It is precisely in this additional clause where the problem resides, given that not all States are willing to grant nationality to persons who, without the proper requirements, remain in their territory and who, therefore, are left in an irregular situation and without protection of their rights.

In the selected novels we will focus on the abuses of human rights during the different stages of migration, taking into account both the violations before emigrating (i.e. in the country of origin) and during the different phases that constitute the migration process, which are: the departure from the place of origin, the passage and often stay at the border; the crossing of the border; and finally the stay in the country of destination (Reyes-Zaga 126). A further stage, which does not occur in the works examined, would be the return to the home country, which entails specific problems and human rights violations (cf. Imoberdorf).

### II. II. *EL CORRIDO DE DANTE* BY EDUARDO GONZÁLEZ VIAÑA

*El corrido de Dante* by Eduardo González Viaña can be considered one of the canonical works that deal with irregular<sup>2</sup> Mexican migration to the United States. For the protagonist, Dante Celestino, the departure from the place of origin turns out to be motivated by economic reasons, when he recognizes that he can't get a job in Sahuayo, Michoacán, or Mexico in general and then decides to go to the United States to find his fortune there (González Viaña 61). We could say that this decision transforms Dante into the archetype of the (il)legal Mexican migrant who tries to find work, better possibilities and the protection of human rights in the North like many others of his compatriots.

For the irregular passing and crossing of the border, as the second stage of the migration process, there are several possibilities that may imply, each of them, a high risk of infringement of the migrant's human rights: the passage through the Río Bravo, the crossing of the desert, the access through the border fences, the hidden

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<sup>2</sup> In our study we prefer the terms “irregular” or “undocumented”, which are more neutral than the pejorative designation “illegal”.





journey by car or train, the transfer with or without the help of a coyote, etc. The risk of human rights violations is yet increased by the new, tightened immigration policy of Donald Trump which promises to reduce irregular migration and makes it more difficult for people to immigrate to the US. As a consequence, migrants seek even more hidden and dangerous paths to reach their destination and so become particularly vulnerable.

In Dante's case, we learn that on his first entry into the United States he had chosen to cross the desert with two other migrants. The dimension of the danger of this type of border crossing becomes apparent to the reader when the characters discover three dead bodies (or at least see a Fata Morgana of three cadavers) and when Dante and his two companions are stopped by immigration agents who interrogate them before sending them back to Mexico (González Viaña 47-50).

But even Dante's wife Beatriz's passage does not take place without problems nor under better circumstances. There are several attempts to cross the border and all are made with the help of coyotes. At first, she intends to enter the United States by crossing the river and succeeds in doing so. But when she reaches the other side, she is immediately detained by the US Immigration Service and deported. A second attempt is even worse than the first: Beatriz approaches a gang of criminal coyotes whose only objective is to take advantage of the desperate situation of migrants. In addition, the reader learns that she narrowly escapes from attempted sexual abuse and this illustrates yet another danger that migrant women face. Javier Manzano Franco, for example, claims in his essay "*El corrido de Dante* de Eduardo González Viaña y la irrupción de lo mítico en la novela de la inmigración" that Beatriz's solitary journey reflects the considerably worse conditions in which female migration to the United States takes place, frequently as victims not only of economic, but also of sexual extortion (44). This episode also shows the trade mechanism behind illegal human trafficking in which the coyotes act as businessmen and the migrants are often simply seen as a commodity. Although some States are already paying attention to the smuggling of migrants (if we think, for example, of the 2006 *Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air*), the problem, and the human rights violations it entails, continue to exist. Nonetheless, Beatriz turns to the same family with whose help Dante was able to enter the United States, the Facundo family which has contacts throughout the US-Mexico border, and eventually manages to cross through a tunnel and finally meet her husband.

Once the migrants enter the United States, the next and, in the case of *El corrido de Dante*, the last phase of the immigration process begins. For some this stage is not as problematic, but for a large majority it implies major difficulties and conflicts such as, among other things, culture shock, absence of documents and, consequently, lack of work. This idea is supported by Audrey García in her article "Mexican Immigration and Popular Culture in *El corrido de Dante* by Eduardo González Viana" where she states: "For illegal Mexican immigrants the American dream is not to have material richness and freedom. Their only dream is to have a visa that enables them to work legally in the United States" (234). And that's exactly the case of Dante who's waiting 25 years for his green card.



Another related problem is the often poor labor conditions for migrants without documents. In section VIII, “Rights of undocumented migrant workers”, of the *Advisory Opinion OC-18/03*, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights declares that as soon as undocumented migrants are hired, they immediately become holders of the labor rights to which they are entitled and therefore must not be discriminated against because of their irregular situation. This issue is of major importance because one of the main problems that arise in the context of immigration is that migrant laborers, compared to other workers, are employed under unfavorable conditions without their work permits (106). Thus, in *El corrido de Dante* several rights are violated at the same time, such as that of Article 23 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which demands, without discrimination, “equal pay for equal work” (6) or that of Article XIV of the *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man* which declares: “Every person has the right to work, under proper conditions, and to follow his vocation freely, insofar as existing conditions of employment permit” (15).

We realize the human rights violations in the field of labor when we learn that Dante does not receive nearly the same salary as regular workers and that he must work more to support his family. The narrator of *El corrido* adds that everything Dante could spend was the product of many years on minimum wage which was the most a man without a green card was paid (González Viaña 17).

However, labor rights violations are by no means the only ones that Dante and his family have to face. A key episode in the novel, in which González Viaña demonstrates his great ironic finesse in revealing the discrepancy between the feigned intercultural policy of the United States and the rather discriminatory reality, is when Dante reports his daughter’s disappearance to the police and an indelicate interpreter:

Al final, [la intérprete] le leyó la declaración de igualdad de oportunidades según la cual todos son iguales ante la ley y no se hace ningún tipo de discriminación por el origen, las convicciones ni la raza de las personas.

– A continuación, se pregunta aquí cuál es la raza de tu hija. ¿Puedes decir cuál es la raza de tu hija?

Dante se quedó callado un instante asombrado por el contrasentido, pero la señora no lo dejó responder.

– De color. Voy a poner aquí “de color” porque todos los hispanos son de color. (36-37)

This fragment is full of contradictions and the interpreter, who can be considered the stereotype of an archetypal conservative American woman, ignores with her retrograde and racist behavior several of the basic human rights. This episode of the incompetent translator at the police station in which Dante denounces Emmita’s disappearance is inseparable from the one in which she, despite possessing American nationality and speaking perfect English, is sent to a class supporting ethnic minorities –where her training is spoiled– by her teachers, who, rooted in clearly racist prejudices, identify the Hispanic with the *mestizo* and cannot explain the white skin and light eyes of the girl, as Javier Manzano Franco (46) and Fredrik Olsson (67) consent in their respective essays.



As an intermediate conclusion, it can be said that the migration process of undocumented migrants is a particularly vulnerable one, as can be seen in the analyzed novel *El corrido de Dante*. Various dangers already lurk on their way to the United States. Some of them opt for the risky crossing on the freight train “La Bestia” or “The Beast”, where they are constantly exposed to the risk of falling off and being killed. Others cross the desert of the border zone, where the possibility of dying of thirst or being struck down by the sun is very high, as shown by Dante’s encounter with the carcasses. Finally, there is the great danger of organized crime – coyotes can be an integral part of this– that targets migrants with not only economic but also sexual exploitation, especially women. Besides, undocumented migrants in the US may face many problems, such as inhumane and exploitative working conditions or unequal and racist treatment, as evinced with Dante and his family.

### III. I. THE HUMAN RIGHTS OF HOMOSEXUALS AND THEIR VIOLATIONS

No less complicated can be the situation for homosexual migrants. As far as their human rights are concerned, both the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and the *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man* remain quite general, as shown in Article 2 of the former: “Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” (2) Obviously, homosexuals or other member of the LGBTQ community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) also fall under this definition, but they are not explicitly mentioned. It is precisely this fact that can lead to false or even non-applications, particularly in countries where homosexuality is considered unnatural, sinful or even illegal and punishable as was the case in Cuba between the 1960s and 1980s. It is worth adding that at that time (and until 2009) Cuba was suspended by the Organization of American States (OAS) and therefore it lacked the control of that organization and thus also any form of protection. As a result, several human rights violations occurred and even laws were passed that contradicted the same human rights, as seen in the following sequence from the documentary *Conducta impropia* by Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez Leal in which Reinaldo Arenas was interviewed:

Cuando Fidel Castro habla, incluso cuando pronuncia o publica, aquellas leyes que condenan a los mismos homosexuales o a cualquier ser humano, estos seres humanos tienen que ir a la Plaza de la Revolución y aplaudir aquellas leyes. O sea, resulta increíble que aquellas leyes por las cuales vamos a ir a los campos de trabajos forzados o a la cárcel, nosotros tenemos que aprobarlas y aplaudirlas. Todo ser humano tiene que hacer esta simulación porque uno depende del Estado. El Estado es que le da a uno trabajo, el Estado es que nos puede meter en la cárcel o que nos puede dar la posibilidad que uno puede, por ejemplo, estudiar en una universidad o que puede que uno pueda mejorar su empleo. Es decir que todo este



tipo de leyes delirantes llevan a la persona a un estado paranoico ... (*Conducta impropia* 00:45:55-00:46:40)

It is not until 2013, quite recently, that the *Inter-American Convention against All Forms of Discrimination and Intolerance* was created, which in Article 1 does specify “sexual orientation” (3) as an independent factor. But it should be added that not all States of the OAS have yet signed the new treaty: among others, Cuba’s approval is still missing.

### III. II. ANTES QUE ANOCHEZCA BY REINALDO ARENAS

The fact that Cuba was suspended by the OAS from 1962 to 2009 does not mean that during that time there were no violations to human rights. On the contrary, the lack of control and defense led to a high number of such violations. Reinaldo Arenas’s novelized autobiography<sup>3</sup> *Antes que anochezca* represents, in various ways, an eloquent testimony of such infractions. Unlike *El corrido de Dante*, the description of the migratory process does not occupy so much space as does residence in the country of origin itself, which is presented as a panopticon with no exit.

A first violation of a fundamental right is already evident in the non-application of Article II of the *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man* (which is a combination of Articles 2 and 7 of the *UDHR*). There the “Right of equality before law” is proclaimed according to which: “All persons are equal before the law and have the rights and duties established in this Declaration, without distinction as to race, sex, language, creed or any other factor” (2). But the reality turns out to be different. In Cuba at that time, being homosexual also meant, in addition to a condition of inferiority, a state of high risk, as the following quote from Arenas in *Antes que anochezca* illustrates:

[Y]o padecía todos los prejuicios típicos de una sociedad machista, exaltados por la Revolución; en aquella escuela desbordada de una virilidad militante no parecía haber espacio para el homosexualismo que, ya desde entonces, era severamente castigado con la expulsión y hasta con el encarcelamiento. Sin embargo, entre aquellos jóvenes se practicó de todos modos el homosexualismo, aunque de una manera muy velada. [...]  
“Pájaro, eso es lo que tú eres”, volvía a escuchar la voz de mi compañero de estudios cuando estaba en la escuela secundaria y comprendía que ser «pájaro» en Cuba era una de las calamidades más grandes que le podía ocurrir a un ser humano. (Arenas 71-72)

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding the literary genre, see Flores 128.



As the documentary *Conducta impropia* by Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez Leal point out as well, homosexuals not only had to hide their sexual preferences but needed to repress and even deny them.

In the case of Arenas, another problem was added: his condition as a writer. Although there are several laws on freedom of opinion and expression, such as Article IV (“Right to freedom of investigation, opinion, expression and dissemination”) of the *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man*, Article 13 (“Freedom of Thought and Expression”) of the *American Convention on Human Rights*, and even a *Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression* was adopted in 2000, it is still dangerous to publicly express criticism against the Cuban state. However, it was always a high risk as the cases of José Lezama Lima and especially Heberto Padilla show: “Lo más peligroso para el régimen era la gran cantidad de jóvenes que seguían a aquellos escritores disidentes y, por tal motivo, había que desmoralizarlos para que no se convirtieran en un símbolo; había que humillarlos y reducirlos” (Arenas 161).

Arenas, as a member of both communities, homosexuals and writers, realized the “futility” of his existence within the Cuban society when in an interview with Jacobo Machover he declared that both homosexuality and artistic creation were linked because they were both outlawed, since they did not lead to practical productions in life (266).

In addition to the human rights violations, they discriminated anyone who tried to criticize the State, but above all it targeted homosexual intellectuals because of the so called *parametrage*<sup>4</sup>. This consisted of each homosexual writer, artist and playwright receiving a telegram saying that he did not meet the political and moral standards for the position he held and was therefore left without a job or offered another one in a forced labor camp (Arenas 164). They were even arrested and imprisoned, as was the case of Reinaldo Arenas.

The human rights violations did not end there. The *Principles and Best Practices on the Protection of Persons Deprived of Liberty in the Americas* have been in existence since 2008. It makes explicit, among other things, the humane treatment, equality and non-discrimination and freedom of expression, association and assembly of prisoners. Even in the *American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man* of 1948 there appears an article (Article XXV) on the “Right of protection from arbitrary arrest” which states: “No person may be deprived of his liberty except in the cases and according to the procedures established by pre-existing law. [...] He also has the right to humane treatment during the time he is in custody” (17). It is not just that Reinaldo Arenas’ detention was more than arbitrary. In *Antes que anochezca* we also realize that the treatment in El Morro prison was extremely inhumane because homosexuals occupied the underground galleys of that prison, which filled with

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<sup>4</sup> The terms “parameter” or “parameterization” can be seen as processes of establishing parameters and declaring anyone who falls outside them as “marginalized”. These concepts also have been used in Cuba to discuss restrictions to public expression, especially for homosexual writers (Grenier 178-181).



water when the tide rose (Arenas 206). Therefore, and for many other reasons, they were not treated as human beings, but as beasts.

Although most of Arenas's life was spent in Cuba, his final stage of exile in the United States should not be forgotten. It is true that several human rights declarations proclaim the "Right of asylum", but emigration from Cuba, with its system of closure and surveillance, was quite difficult except during the three main migratory waves: the "Golden Exile" from 1959 to 1965, the "Freedom Flights" between 1965 and 1973 and the departure of the "Marielitos" in 1980. Unlike the first two, the last one, in which Arenas himself participated, was characterized by being much more selective. Fidel Castro did not want just anyone to become an exile either, especially when it meant a danger to the country's reputation. That's why he let leave the common delinquents and criminals, who were in the prisons, the secret agents, which he wanted to infiltrate in Miami, and the mentally ill, but not the professionals, who graduated from the university, nor the writers, with books published abroad, as was the case of Reinaldo Arenas.

However, since there was an order to let all undesirable persons go, and within that category the LGBTQ members came in first position, an immense number of homosexuals were able to leave the Island in 1980 (Arenas 299-301). In this way, and by changing a letter of his name in the handwritten passport (from Arenas to Arinas), he managed to escape.

At first, Arenas enjoyed the new freedom offered by his host country, but because of his illness, AIDS, he soon realized the vicious circle that determined his life and from which there seemed to be no way out. The scholar Beatriz Flores states in her essay "La retórica de la autobiografía en *Antes que anochezca*" that the autobiographer becomes a person again only in exile. His status as a homosexual is allowed without any repression. And yet, the criticism of the new system in which he lives appears shortly thereafter, sexual freedom gives way to the terror of his illness, and his life, the only thing remaining from when he left Cuba, is blurred (141)<sup>5</sup>.

But this was not the only challenge Arenas had to face. His situation as a stateless writer also caused him problems. Abroad he had to endure the same attitudes and discrimination he had already suffered in his homeland. So exile, for him, meant a great disappointment as he confirms in an interview with Jacobo Machover in which he says that where he thought he would find a certain solidarity in the face of the suffering he endured on the island, he found only mistrust, hostility or incomprehension (195). In *Antes que anochezca* as well, he states that he was living a paradox and, at the same time, the tragic circumstances suffered by all Cuban writers throughout the ages: on the Island they were condemned to silence, ostracism, censorship and prison; in exile, to contempt and oblivion by the exiles themselves (Arenas 312).

In conclusion, it can be surmised as probable that different conditions contributed to Arenas' suicide. The reasons are probably related to the various human

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<sup>5</sup> See also Hasson 170.



rights violations and the areas of tension in which Arenas found himself. On the one hand, as a homosexual writer, he was trapped in Cuba as if in a prison. In his exile in the United States, he was disregarded by the other Cubans because of his rebellious behavior and his dissident texts. On the other hand, Arenas was also traumatized because he could not freely live out his sexuality, neither in Cuba nor in the United States: while he was persecuted, arrested and abused on the island because of his homosexuality, in the United States he suffered from the consequences of his AIDS illness. Finally, for many migrants of the LGBTQ community, in addition to the loss of cultural identity while facing homophobia, the factor of racism is added to the problem, making their new life in the host country even more difficult.

#### IV. I. WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS AND THEIR VIOLATIONS

Finally, it is appropriate to also analyze the human rights of women and the violations of those rights in *El sueño de América* by Esmeralda Santiago. Although the *American Declaration* establishes in Article II the "Right to equality before law", where every person is given the same rights "without distinction as to race, sex, language, creed or any other factor" (2), again it remains very general, even vague. More specifically, but belatedly, the *Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women* ("Convention of Belém do Pará") was adopted in 1994, which, in its Article 4, again highlights the rights of women like: "The right to have her life respected," "The right to have her physical, mental and moral integrity respected," or "The right to personal liberty and security" (80-81).

Despite all of the explicit rights, the conditions of women in the Americas are still often precarious, and so violations of laws are predetermined. In their countries of origin, where a patriarchal system frequently prevails, women often face social, religious, economic, physical and psychological pressures. If they aspire to free themselves from such a system, they often choose emigration as an alternative. But in making the decision to migrate, they must face new, difficult and dangerous situations, related to the process of irregular migration, such as economic extortion or sexual exploitation. And when they finally arrive in the United States, they may suffer from being uprooted and from having to abandon their families or from discrimination by the host society, as will be seen below.

#### IV. II. EL SUEÑO DE AMÉRICA BY ESMERALDA SANTIAGO

Esmeralda Santiago's *El sueño de América* is a classic example of the treatment of gender violence in literature. It is characterized by a high number of human rights violations and, therefore, appropriate for this study. The *Belém do Pará Convention* understands as violence against women "physical, sexual and psychological violence"





(2). In the country of origin, the protagonist, América, is confronted with all three types of violence. Correa, her lover, possesses her sexually. When he has his “needs,” she must satisfy them even if she does not want to (sexual violence). If she doesn’t obey him, he abuses her badly (physical violence). And, on top of that, América is emotionally dependent on Correa, because he oppresses her, and she is afraid of him (psychological violence). In other words, Correa lives, in fact, on the other side of the island, has other women, children and a legal wife in Fajardo. But he always returns to América on the pretext of seeing his daughter. And when he does so, he stays in América’s bed. Moreover, if any other man dares to offer América his friendship, he beats her up badly so that no one dares to enter her life for the fear that he would kill her (Santiago 27). Moreover, Correa’s violent behavior is also reproduced by América, when she punishes her daughter with beatings for running away from home (Santiago 46-47), which, in turn, is an expression of the vicious circle in which the protagonist finds herself.

It should be noted that the protagonist’s name does not appear coincidental. América could be seen as the embodiment of an entire continent and the abuse she experiences a metaphor for the exploitation of Latin American countries by the United States. That’s what Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez confirms in her essay “Cultural Lessons by a Puerto Rican American: Esmeralda Santiago’s First Novel, *América’s Dream*”:

Patriarchal control is also a metaphor for imperialistic control, just as the character América is a metaphor for a continent and a people taken by force. Correa ‘participates in what he calls his pleasure, the taking of América whenever and however he wants her’ (109). A mate who brutally rapes her when he is drunk, jealous, or when she is at a baby-sitting job, has no regard for her just as the “yanqui” or gringo control of the island has no regard for Puerto Rican culture and existence. (91)<sup>6</sup>

This also becomes evident with regard to the tourists’ dealings with América when they look through her and pretend not to see her, when they see her as if she were part of the strange landscape, or when they look away quickly, ashamed of having seen her (Santiago 32).

Thus, the departure from América’s place of origin does not have mainly economic or political reasons but rather personal and social ones. With emigration, she tries to escape the gender-based violence Correa exerts on her and does free herself from the outdated social structures that prevail in her homeland.

Since América is Puerto Rican and therefore a citizen of the United States, crossing the border does not cause her so many legal problems. However, passing a border can also be a highly dangerous act for female migrants, as we have already seen with Beatriz in *El corrido de Dante*. Besides, as mentioned in the documentary *Los invisibles*, directed by Gael García Bernal and Marc Silver, migrant women are

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<sup>6</sup> See also Domínguez Miguela 229.





exposed to a high risk of sexual extortion, because an estimated 6 out of 10 women are sexually abused on their way to the United States (*Los invisibles* 00:08:06-00:08:12).

Once they arrive in the host country, female migrants frequently find themselves with a new division of sexual roles. Their function is not mainly limited to the domestic sphere, but they are often offered various possibilities for self-realization. Antonia Domínguez Miguela adds in her study *Pasajes de ida y vuelta: la narrativa puertorriqueña en Estados Unidos* that on the island women should not go to bars where men drink and play; they should not work except at home. However, in the United States everything is different. Women are not as repressed by cultural and moral norms. Machismo is not as recalcitrant as on the island, where a single woman is the object of derision and mockery (243).

Nonetheless, it is not easy for a woman like América, who has internalized the patriarchal patterns, to free herself from the corset imposed by her society of origin. However, she too is gradually learning to enjoy her new freedoms, when she recognizes that her life is not the same she brought with her, because she has changed and evolved. For the first time in her life she's the one in control of herself and her own decisions, for example, when she's driving an almost new Volvo or when she's riding alone on a train to the city –things that would have been denied to her in her home country– (192-193).

Despite the advantages she experiences, in the United States, also there she becomes a witness to human rights violations. Article 6 on the “Right of women to be free from all forms of discrimination” (81) of the *Convention of Belém do Pará*, for example, is violated when Mercedes, a Latin American friend, tries to help a fallen baby girl and the girl's mother treats her in a racist way by saying to her “No la toques” [“Don't touch her”], as if she were contagious, and with a look full of mistrust and resentment. As we learn from the narrator, the same reproachful gaze follows América and her fellow employee friends wherever they go: in the shops, the assistants don't leave them alone, waiting in the hopes of catching them stealing everything they touch; on buses and trains, no one wants to sit next to them, as if sharing a seat were a too intimate association; on the street, people avoid eye contact, as if not seeing América and the other Latinas would make them disappear (Santiago 239-240), which are clearly racism based behavior patterns.

América is also confronted with discriminatory behavior in her work as a nanny. Although the host family treats her quite kindly, social differences are explicitly manifested, and a number of human rights violations occur. On the one hand, the “Right to work and to fair remuneration” (Article XIV) of the *American Declaration* is abused. After three months working for the Leverett family, América realizes that she is paid less than other employees. When she asks for a salary increase, she is denied, even though her boss Karen's clothes cost as much as a house in Vieques. Furthermore, in cases of emergency, they require her to stay and work during the weekend or on days off, which, moreover, violates the “Right to leisure time and to the use thereof” (Article XV) of the same declaration which states that: “Every person has the right to leisure time, to wholesome recreation, and to the opportunity for advantageous use of his free time to his spiritual, cultural and physical benefit” (15). The ultimate expression of discrepancy in the relationship between employer



and worker is presented at the end of the novel: when Correa comes to the United States, he violently enters the Leverett house, beats América and dies in an attempt to kill her. Instead of backing her up, Karen blames América for unprofessional conduct and fires her, which in turn is evidence of the employer's ineptitude. In summary, Coonrod Martínez observes:

In her new job in New York state, América has time in the evenings to think about her life and develop a dream, but she also learns that women in a higher economic class also fail to recognize the plight of women trapped in the poverty/abuse cycle. [...] When Correa does come to New York, breaks into the house and beats América, she awakens in the hospital to find her employer there, telling América she must understand why she must fire her. Indeed, upper-class women also need to learn how to help the women who must help themselves. (90-91)

Finally, a few specific human rights violations can also be summarized for female migrants: in *El sueño de América* the issue of domestic violence, caused by patriarchal structures, is addressed and, once again, the topic of inhumane working conditions and racism, especially against women of color in the United States. But also the journey from Latin America to the US can pose particular dangers for women: robbery, sexual abuse (in which the young women often become pregnant) or even killing. Lastly, América barely escapes her death when Correa breaks into the Leverett's house with the intention to kill her. So, in the end, the past catches up with her and she is once again confronted with the violent abuse of her lover, although, this time, with a more positive outcome for her.

## V. CONCLUSION

The discussion of the works by three different groups of people, often considered marginal, has allowed us to substantiate from a literary approach the different obstacles that migrants can face between Latin America and the United States. However, although *Antes que anochezca* is the only autobiographical novel, many of the events narrated in the three works turn out to be realities of everyday inter-American life and, thus, also a reflection of the current situation in the Americas.

The abovementioned analysis has helped to provide testimony that human rights violations can be addressed from multiple points of view. *El sueño de América*, for example, criticizes gender-based violence that abuses the right to respect life, physical, psychological and moral integrity and personal safety (Article 4 of the *CBP*). The novel furthermore addresses the violation of the "Right of women to be free from all forms of discrimination" (Article 6 of *CBP*) in the social and labor fields. In *Antes que anochezca*, the "Right to equal protection against any form of discrimination and intolerance" (Article 2 of the *ICDI*), the "Right to freedom of investigation, opinion, expression and dissemination" (Article IV of the *ADRDM*) and the "Right of protection from arbitrary arrest" (Article XXV of the *ADRDM*),



among others, are violated. Finally, in *El corrido de Dante*, rights such as free “Movement” and “Residence” (Article 22 of the *ACHR*) and “Just, Equitable, and Satisfactory Conditions of Work” (Article 7 of the “*Protocol of San Salvador*”) are infringed. Despite the different forms of expression, for which each of the works analyzed stands out, there is a common thread running through all three novels: the denunciation of human rights violations.

This study has concentrated on a relation, confrontation, or setting in perspective of three types of references on the subject in question: the existing legislation, what happens in reality, and the contribution or position of literature. We have seen that, on the one hand, there is a huge gap between legislation and reality. On the other hand, we have literature that often expresses reality in a much more authentic way than the existing laws, despite, or thanks to, the recourse to fiction. In this regard, the US Latino or, more generally, inter-American narratives serve as tools for raising the reader’s awareness of the human rights violations that occur in the Americas and, in the ideal case, for leading to concrete action. The mere existence of human rights is not enough to prevent their violation. There is a need for social participation in high-risk places. Literature, in this instance, can have the function of an impulse, of a first step towards the improvement of the situation, but it does not give us definitive answers or ideal solutions. It is up to each individual to look for possible procedures to change the situation and improve it.

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# VISIONS OF AZTLÁN: THE CHICANO DOCUMENTARY FILM

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## ABSTRACT

In the decade of the 1960s and 1970s, a transcendent social movement –which was known as the Chicano Movement for Civil Rights– took place in the United States. One of its major achievements was a cultural flowering that encompassed all the art forms and practices. Among them, one of single importance is the documentary film. This article presents an overview of the origins, first steps and current developments of the Chicana/o documentary cinema. Such films address a multitude of topics and combine highly artistic value with a definite political message. In addition, the Chicana/o documentary is an outstanding and highly informative mirror into Chicano experience. Since its inception to the present, over 100 documentaries have been produced and exhibited in the US, yet they have not been well-distributed in the Spanish-speaking world.

**KEYWORDS:** Chicano Movement, Chicana/o Documentary Cinema, Genesis and Stages, Evolution, Directors.

## VISIONES DE AZTLÁN: EL FILME DOCUMENTAL CHICANO

## RESUMEN

En las décadas de los 1960s y 1970s, un movimiento social trascendental –conocido como el Movimiento Chicano por los derechos civiles– tuvo lugar en Estados Unidos. Uno de sus grandes logros fue el florecimiento cultural que incluyó todas las formas y prácticas artísticas. Este artículo presenta una panorámica de los orígenes, primeros pasos y desarrollos recientes del cine documental de Chicanos y Chicanas. Estas cintas se refieren a múltiples temas y combinan un alto valor artístico con un contundente mensaje político. Además, los documentales realizados por Chicanos y Chicanas constituyen un espejo extraordinario y muy informativo sobre la experiencia Chicana. Desde sus orígenes hasta el presente más de 100 documentales se han producido y exhibido en EE. UU.; sin embargo no han sido bien distribuidos en el mundo de habla hispana.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** movimiento chicano, cine documental chicano/a, génesis y etapas, evolución, directores.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Mexican-origin population in the United States (called here Chicanas/os) is currently made up of 36.6 million people, according to the Census Bureau,<sup>1</sup> which makes it the largest national minority in numerical terms in the United States. Its population growth is quite extraordinary with experts pointing out that it is almost doubling in number every forty years. This community is also well known for being geographically dispersed throughout the US. Additionally, its members have become uniquely important and increasingly influential in all areas of American society: economic, political, social, and cultural. Chicanas/os, in fact, are changing the very fabric and essence of the country.

In the 1960s and 1970s, this community actively participated in a heroic social struggle for civil rights, known as the Chicano Movement (or *La Causa*). This social conflict was framed in the context of intense mobilizations from different sectors of American society (African Americans, women, indigenous peoples and young people), who demanded justice and social equality. Among its many achievements and legacy, *La Causa* fostered a cultural flourishing that included all artistic genres: letters, art, theater, music, and certainly cinematography. In this last field, the Chicana/o documentary film certainly stands out and its development has continued in a remarkable fashion from the time of intense activism in the 1960s and 1970s to the very present (Maciel “El florecimiento, 82-86). During these decades, more than a hundred documentaries have been produced and exhibited,<sup>2</sup> and this number increases each year. By now there are already three generations of Chicana/o filmmakers.<sup>3</sup> Due to the diversity of its topics, it is more than evident that the documentary has been a primary source for the knowledge of the social, political and cultural experience of the Chicana/o people. Frequently, documentary filmmakers have addressed important issues that have even eluded the attention of specialists, bringing forth critical images and narratives to their artistry. Their works have had a profound impact on addressing the invisibility and the denigrating and negative stereotypes about the Chicana/o population, the latter being the norm in American cultural, visual and print expressions (Maciel and Racho 375-378).

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<sup>1</sup> See “US Census Bureau 2017 American Community Survey B03001 1-Year Estimates Hispanic or Latino Origin by specific origin.” [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_17\\_1YR\\_B03001&prodType=table](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_17_1YR_B03001&prodType=table).

<sup>2</sup> Personal interview with the filmmaker Héctor Galán (29 Aug 2020).

<sup>3</sup> The author greatly appreciates that various Chicano documentalists have generously shared with him their time and experiences over the years: Isaac Artenstein, Nancy de los Santos, Paul Espinosa, Héctor Galán, Cristina Ibarra, Lourdes Portillo, Susan Racho, Rey Telles, Joseph Tovares and Jesús Salvador Treviño among others.



One main characteristic of these filmmakers is that they often serve as writers and producers as well as directors of their documentaries. Another essential premise is the increasing participation of Chicanas in this cultural practice. Nowadays, over a third of Chicana/o documentaries are produced, written or directed by Chicanas.<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that the documentary as a film genre was defined by Scottish filmmaker John Grierson in 1926 as the “creative treatment” of a real situation that presents “life as it is” (Hardy 12-14), which certainly differentiates it from a fictional work. For his part, Bill Nichols points out that the protagonists of the documentary are people or social actors related to events that occurred in real life, and underlines how the documentary filmmaker gathers evidence to construct a story that becomes a way of observing the world. The director then develops his/her own style and with his/her team have important decisions to make: how to cut, edit or juxtapose images, how to frame and film each shot, what type of music accompanies the images, the possible presence of narrators and translators of testimonials; as well as the order of the presentation of events that can be chronological or not (Nichols 14; 34-35). Nichols also states that the documentary can help create a sense of community, especially in the face of adverse situations (p. 215). Adding to this last point, Jane Chapman affirms that the documentary is a discursive formation that uses images to inform creatively about different social problems (8). These points are most pertinent to the study of the Chicana/o documentary. Above all, Chicano documentaries have exemplified narratives that masterfully capture the two essential issues of the Chicana/o experience: on the one hand, the multiple practices of oppression, discrimination, harassment and violence that have been carried out against this community by the dominant society throughout its history. On the other hand, there is also the extensive and courageous trajectory of resistance—through multiple and very diverse efforts—to maintain their Mexicanness, language, identity and traditions, as well as their constant fight for their civil rights and for greater representation in politics, social life and cultural practices in the United States.

Nichols outlines a typology of documentaries, in which there exist certain modes that are crucial for an understanding of Chicana/o documentary cinema:

- Expository mode, where verbal comment and logical argumentation are emphasized (these are more traditional documentaries).
- Poetic mode, characterized by visual associations with descriptive passages that are typical of an experimental cinema.
- Observational mode, in which the participants of the documentary are filmed in their daily activities.
- Participatory mode, where the director interacts with the subjects of the documentary through conversations or interviews (31-32).

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<sup>4</sup> Personal interview with the filmmaker Héctor Galán (29 Aug 2020).





Documentaries from each of these categories have been brought to the screen encompassing the history of the Chicana/o and Latina/o communities, the current issues they are faced with, as well as selected themes related to Mexico and Latin America.

## GENESIS AND FIRST STEPS

It was during the effervescence of the Chicano Movement that a first generation of Chicano documentary filmmakers emerged. They became the first filmic chroniclers of the events of their community. Most of them were university students who took to the streets with their Super 8 cameras, because they felt the prevailing need to film the strikes, demonstrations and other political actions carried out in the different facets of this extraordinary social conflict. Their pioneering film works captured on screen the intense energy, commitment, creativity and challenges that characterized *La Causa* (Treviño 54-68). The documentary was the film genre of choice for these incipient filmmakers, given that its cost was much lower than that of feature films, and at the same time it was the ideal medium for filming day-to-day scenes of the social struggle and other relevant issues that the community of Mexican origin faced. In addition, the development of the documentary was also due to the fact that it found ample spaces for its exhibition through university circles, community centers, art circuits, public libraries and—already in the 1970s and later—on television and through film festivals.

The list of Chicano documentaries grew at an impressive rate during its first stage (1966-1979), which runs parallel to the emergence of the Chicana/o Movement and the years after. Its extensive thematic range includes: Chicano history (deeply linked to Mexican history); the social and political struggles; gender issues; cultural practices; immigration issues and the US-Mexico border, among others (Maciel *El bandolero*, 142-56). All the documentaries clearly reflected the double commitment of Chicano filmmakers: to contribute works of high artistic value and to transmit a political discourse associated with the ideology of Chicanismo. The prominent director Jesús Salvador Treviño—activist and pioneer in the incursion of Chicanos in the media—clearly pointed out the relationship of Chicano filmmakers with the social context, in the following terms: “Chicano cinema must be clear in its denunciation of past and present brutalities and must go further: it must serve the needs of the community, reflect the beauty of our lifestyle, pave our way into the future [and] unite us with our common cause. Our art must be one of defense and support” (Treviño 68). Treviño was a major participant and chronicler of seminal events of the Chicano Movement, such as the farmworker strikes, the student demonstrations, the founding of the Chicano Youth Conference in Denver, the movement to recover lost lands in New Mexico, the *Chicano Moratorium* (against the Vietnam War) and the founding of the La Raza Unida Party.

In this early period, two films of pioneering directors—now considered classics—stood out: *Yo soy Joaquín* (1969) by Luis Valdez, and *Yo soy Chicano* (1971) by Jesús Salvador Treviño. *Yo soy Joaquín* has a unique aesthetics as it is based on



the epic poem by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, and has Luis Valdez as its narrator. The film reviews the historical roots of the Chicano and largely draws from pre-Columbian civilizations while intertwined with Mexican history. The central theme of the documentary is the formation of Chicano identity. Joaquín is not one person, but represents an entire race. The documentary was done in an artisanal fashion in a matter of a few weeks, as the director himself related.<sup>5</sup> To date, it has become a cult film that is now part of the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress. The other major documentary, *Yo soy Chicano*, is divided into two segments: the first draws upon a concise and creative sketch of the historical development of the Chicano population, includes scenes with actors representing historical figures and, in general, offers a succinct narrative of the historical process(es) at play. The second segment contains interviews and chronicles about the iconic leaders of the Chicano Movement, such as Dolores Huerta, César Chávez, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, José Angel Gutiérrez and Reies López Tijerina. Above all, this film beautifully captures the ethos of the Chicano Movement. Another great achievement of *Yo soy Chicano* is its musical score that adds a great deal to the images and narrative of the documentary.

These pioneering films were followed by numerous documentaries that reviewed both the Chicano Movement and the agendas of its leaders (Noriega 152-88). Among them are: *Strike* (1965) by Luis Valdez on the union movement of César Chávez; *Tijerina: Fighting for the Land* (1968) by Paco Pérez on the leader Reies López Tijerina, who fought for the recovery of the land usurped by Anglos in New Mexico; *Chicano Moratorium* (1970) by Tom Myrdahl and *Requiem-29* (1971) by David García on critical Chicano protests against the Vietnam War (the *Chicano Moratorium*); *Sí se Puede* (1972) by Rick Tejada-Flores and Gayanne Fietinghof on César Chávez’s farmworker movement; as well as *Raza Unida* (1972) by Jesús Salvador Treviño and *Cristal* (1975) by Severo Pérez on the emergence and importance of the political party named La Raza Unida. In this first stage, there were pioneering Chicana documentary filmmakers who produced other important works. Esperanza Vázquez filmed *Agueda Martínez: Our People Our Country* (1977) that explores the essence of Northern New Mexico through the eyes of a weaver, who lives in great harmony with nature. In 1979, Sylvia Morales wrote and directed the documentary *Chicana*, which is an influential and pioneering reflection on the role of women from pre-Columbian times to the present. This film contains powerful imagery, historical narratives, and testimonies of Chicanas from the 1970s, women who discuss their achievements and lingering challenges (Leen 207-10).

In regard to the social problems of the Chicana/o community, various documentaries stand out: *Soledad* (1971) by Jesús Salvador Treviño addresses the plight of Chicano prisoners in the jail of the same name, and *América Tropical* by the same director documents the censorship of a mural painted by David Alfaro Siqueiros in Los Angeles; *Cinco Vidas* (1972) by José Luis Ruiz and Moctezuma Esparza recounts stories of Mexican-American characters living in East Los Angeles;

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<sup>5</sup> Luis Valdez (lecture delivered at the Cineteca Nacional, Mexico City, 10 Aug. 2014).



*La Onda Chicana* (1976) by Efraín Gutiérrez touches on rock music created in the community; and *The Unwanted* (1975) by José Luis Ruiz represents an exceptional analysis of the enormous contributions of Mexican migrants in the United States, thereby denouncing their exploitation and their treatment as criminals by the US immigration agencies. During this period, various Chicana/o documentarists (as well as fiction filmmakers) sought new paths toward greater professionalization and more substantial ways to finance their films. As never before, some directors participated in public and private television programs, such as *Acción Chicano*, *Reflections*, *Realities* and *Unidos*. Most of these programs were produced in California, although others were broadcasted in major cities, such as Chicago, New York and San Antonio (Noriega 160-61).

In addition, the support for Chicano filmmaking—*el cine chicano*—in terms of promotion and distribution came from various organizations, such as Carisma, Latino Consortium, National Latino Media Coalition and Chicano Cinema Coalition. Furthermore, around this time film festivals began, such as the Chicano Film Festival in San Antonio in 1975, which contributed to the widespread dissemination of new film works. Also, some filmmakers, such as Moctezuma Esparza, José Luis Ruiz, Severo Pérez, Jesús Salvador Treviño, Sylvia Morales and Lourdes Portillo began establishing their own production and distribution companies. This was the case with Moctezuma Esparza Productions in 1974, Ruiz Productions in 1975, Learning Garden Productions in 1976, New Vista Productions in 1977, and Sylvan Productions and Xóchitl Films in 1979. Their main objective was to seek greater control over the production and distribution of their tapes and, additionally, to diversify their funding sources, which combined donations from specialized groups and foundations with funds from both the public television network: the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) (created by the Public Broadcast Service Act of 1967) and the US Department of Education (using funds allocated by the Bilingual Education Law of 1968) (Noriega 9-21).

## 2. A MARVELOUS FLOWERING

Generally speaking, all of these endeavors by Chicano documentarists became more difficult in the 1980s and early 1990s as a result of the shift to the political right in the United States during the republican governments of Ronald Reagan and George Bush. Both presidents were against the public financing of artistic expressions, especially those that were critical of the status quo and concerned with issues, such as racism and discrimination. Nonetheless, PBS continued to be a vital element in the expansion of the filming and broadcasting of Chicana/o documentaries.<sup>6</sup> This entity gradually opened the doors to an affirmative action program that allowed the funding and national-level screening of Chicana/o

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<sup>6</sup> On PBS, see, <https://www.pbs.org/about/about-pbs/>.



documentaries as well as the attainment of the professionalization of Chicana/o filmmakers, who until then produced film with minimal resources. In fact, the Latino Public Broadcasting Service (LPB) was established in 1998, thanks to the advocacy of acclaimed actor Edward James Olmos, who was the founder of such an initiative and its first executive director. Since then, LPB has been in charge of providing considerable financial support for the filming of documentaries, which would later to be shown by PBS, the public television network in the United States.

PBS has become the cultural alternative to commercial television stations. It has the advantage of being an integral part of the open television system, given that its access is free and does not require a cable or satellite subscription to view it. Through its three hundred and fifty affiliated stations across the US, PBS can reach an audience of up to one million people nationwide in a single night. For this reason, according to filmmakers, like Héctor Galán, audiences for Chicano documentaries far exceed the scope of Chicana/o feature films.<sup>7</sup> In this scenario, the Chicana/o documentary had a time of exceptional flourishing from 1980 to 2000 in which artistic maturity and breadth of content came together. Both Chicanos and Chicanas contributed unique experiences and perspectives to their craft. They already belonged to two generations and came from various regions of the United States, consequently bringing different realities to the screen (Noriega 16-28). With great creativity, their films covered multiple themes on history, gender issues, immigration, contemporary problems of the Chicana/o and Latina/o communities, as well as topics related to Mexico and Latin America.

Lourdes Portillo is a pioneer director of valuable documentaries. In *Las Madres: The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (1985), she depicts a seminal woman's organization that was in the front line, denouncing the excesses in human rights violations committed by the brutal Argentine dictatorship. This film was nominated for an Oscar for Best Documentary in 1986. *La Ofrenda: The Days of the Dead* (1988) is a film that explores the tradition of honoring the dead in Mexico, and how this tradition has been transplanted into the United States. *Corpus: A Home Movie for Selena* and *Conversations with Intellectuals about Selena* (both from 1999) refer to the famous Chicana singer of the same name who tragically died at the age of 24, having achieved great popularity inside and outside the US. The first film deals with her personal and professional life, and the second brings to the screen a discussion among Chicana intellectuals about Selena as a cultural icon and as a role model within the community.

Other Chicana documentary filmmakers also made important contributions. Nancy de los Santos ventured into the complex issue of migration in *Port of Entry* (1981). The film focuses on the story of an immigrant family, who moves from Mexico to the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago; it highlights not only the multiple challenges faced in the US, but also its contributions to its destination community. Beverly Sánchez Padilla directed *El corrido de Juan Chacón* (1983), a famous Chicano

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<sup>7</sup> Personal interview with the filmmaker Héctor Galán (11 Dec 2016).



union leader from the 1950s in New Mexico, who played a crucial role in the dramatic strike portrayed in the cult film *The Salt of the Earth* (1954). Sylvia Morales produced the documentary *AIDS Is AIDS* (1989) about the impact of this terrible disease on the Chicana/o community (Fregoso *Lourdes Portillo*, 34-36). Another of her films, *De mujer a mujer* (1993), focuses on the bearing of sexual violence against Chicana women in South Texas. In 1997, Laura Angélica Simón, an elementary school teacher from Los Angeles, filmed *Fear and Learning in Hoover Elementary*. It was an extremely revealing documentary about the anti-immigrant environment in schools, a filmic event that received a great deal of positive critical reviews.

At this stage of the Chicana/o documentary, filmmakers such as Héctor Galán stood out. He became a prolific filmmaker in this genre, given that his films were characterized by great thematic originality and artistic quality. *Los Mineros: The Miners* (1991), written by Paul Espinosa, narrates the Chicano labor struggle in Arizona copper mines (1903-1946), which had a profound influence on the history of the Mexican-American community in that state. *The Hunt for Pancho Villa* (1993), produced and written by Paul Espinosa, addressed a controversial chapter in the Mexico-United States relationship: the failed US military incursion (the Pershing Expedition) into Mexican territory in order to capture General Francisco Villa during the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Producer/writer/director Paul Espinosa contributed to other important films in various capacities.<sup>8</sup> As a director, in *The Lemon Grove Incident* (1985), he focused on the mobilization of a community against institutionalized discrimination in a school district near San Diego. In addition, he filmed documentaries on key aspects of the Mexico-United States relationship. This was the case of *Uneasy Neighbors* (1989) and *The New Tijuana* (1990), which focus on major border issues between the two countries. Also, in *The US-Mexican War* (1998), director Espinosa addressed the 1846-1848 conflict that resulted in the loss of 51% of Mexico's territory (which became the southwestern part of the United States), and certainly changed the destiny of both countries and led to the emergence of the Chicana/o community that remained in *el Mexico perdido* (Maciel *El bandolero*, 150-56). Other documentaries highlighted several notable episodes in 20th century Chicano/Mexican history. *The Ballad for an Unsung Hero* (1983) by Paul Espinosa as producer/writer and directed by Isaac Artenstein recounted the story of Pedro J. González, who became the first celebrity of Spanish-speaking radio in the US in the late-1920s and during the Great Depression years. Another film, *After Joaquín: The Crusade of Justice* (1985) by Daniel Salazar et al., dealt with key aspects of the life of the leader of the Chicano Movement, Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales. *The Struggle in the Fields* (1997), by Ray Telles and Rick Tejeda-Flores, chronicled the plight of the agricultural workers led by César Chávez by using narratives, interviews and actual footage of critical aspects of the movement. And *Pancho Villa & Other Stories* (1999) by Phillip Rodríguez

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<sup>8</sup> Personal interview with the filmmaker Paul Espinosa.



narrated popular views on the famous general of the Mexican Revolution, Francisco Villa (Maciel *La otra cara*, 354-55).

Among the documentaries of the late-twentieth century, the masterful series *Chicano! History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement* (1996) occupied a very prominent place. The film was sponsored by PBS with José Luis Ruiz and Jesús Salvador Treviño as co-Executive Producers. They hired Héctor Galán as the supervising series producer and the episode producers were Susan Racho, Mylène Moreno and Sylvia Morales.<sup>9</sup> This four-episode series is the most comprehensive and ambitious documentary on the significance of the Chicano Movement and its legacy. Its narrative powerfully and artistically captures the development of the Chicano Movement from 1965 to 1975, as well as the main agendas and achievements of its iconic leaders, including César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, Reies López Tijerina, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales and José Angel Gutiérrez. Prominent filmmakers participated in the writing of the script and in the direction of its four parts, including Héctor Galán, Sylvia Morales, Mylène Moreno, Susan Racho, José Luis Ruiz and Jesús Salvador Treviño. In the making of this series, four renowned academics served as advisers to the filmmakers.<sup>10</sup> Upon acknowledging the enormous importance of this series, what remains is that a similar film endeavor about the many achievements and challenges of the Chicana/o community in the new millennium is very much pending.

### 3. CONSOLIDATION AND SPLENDOR

In the new millennium, the Chicana/o documentary has had a prodigious development in terms of its growing number of films and their high artistic quality and creativity. It has also continued addressing diverse topics related to history, culture, gender issues, social policies, politics and immigration, among others. This process has continued to the very present, making the documentary the dominant genre of *el cine Chicano*. The most recent Chicano documentaries—of at least three generations—still embody the double purpose of offering works of high artistic value, while integrating strong political messages of ethnic pride. The fine-tuning of financing and exhibition mechanisms has brought the Chicana/o documentary to its prime. It is important to note that the funding and wide distribution provided by PBS and its Latino arm, the LPB, have been crucial to its continued blossoming.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, independent films have been produced and later on distributed in art and university cinema circuits. This is the case of several documentaries financed

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<sup>9</sup> Personal interview with the director Jesús Salvador Treviño (14 Sept 2020).

<sup>10</sup> See Francisco A. Rosales, *Chicano!: The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (1996). This is a synthesis of the topic of the series *History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement*.

<sup>11</sup> Personal interview with Luis Ortiz (a high-ranking official of Latino Public Broadcasting). See also Latino Public Broadcasting (2020).





since the late 1990s by the Center for Regional Studies at the University of New Mexico. One of its most ambitious documentary projects was *Colors of Courage: Sons of New Mexico* (2002) by Paige Martínez, which recounts how during World War II thousands of US and Filipino soldiers were captured in Bataan, the Philippines, by the Japanese and forced to perform the “death march” towards a prison camp. Among them was a battalion of soldiers of about 2,000 members—the vast majority of them Chicanos from New Mexico—who suffered abuse and many of them died. This tragic event was later considered a war crime.

Chicana filmmakers have also significantly contributed to the development of *el cine Chicano* during the two decades of the present millennium. Lourdes Portillo has produced key documentaries. For example, *Señorita Extraviada: Missing Young Woman* (2001) is a shocking, groundbreaking film about the terrible tragedy of the ruthless femicides of more than three hundred and fifty women that have been committed in Ciudad Juárez, the most violent city of Mexico at that time. This film collects insightful and moving testimonies, while exploring the root causes of such horrendous gender violence. The same prolific director examines the realities of drug trafficking in the broader Mexican-Caribbean region in *Al Más Allá* (2008), a film that includes interviews and her own narrative. In *Night Passages* (2013), director Portillo deals with an autobiographical reflection on her experience with the diagnosis and treatment of cancer.<sup>12</sup> Other Chicanas depicted key women’s issues in their documentaries. Sylvia Morales in *Crushing Love* (2009) reviews the personal history of five notable Chicana activists, highlighting their contributions to empower the lives of other women: Dolores Huerta, Elizabeth “Betita” Martínez, Cherríe Moraga, Alicia Escalante and Martha Cotera (Leen 212-13).

Cristina Ibarra develops various films related to the complexity of the transboundary links in the US-Mexico border. *The Last Conquistador* (2008), co-directed/co-produced with John J. Valdez, traces the great controversy that divided people in the city of El Paso, Texas, around the building of a statue of the Spanish conqueror Juan de Oñate. In *Las Marthas* (2014), this director addresses the story of a group of young Chicanas in Laredo, Texas, that are changing a traditional American celebration by introducing Chicana/o and Mexican cultural traits. With great creativity, Ibarra ends up generating an insightful reflection on complex social and cultural interactions that occur at the border.<sup>13</sup> In *The Infiltrators* (2019), Cristina Ibarra along with Alex Rivera follow the story of two *Dreamers*,<sup>14</sup> who narrate their experiences of having been incarcerated in one of many US “private prisons,” where

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<sup>12</sup> See *The Films and Videos of Lourdes Portillo* (2016).

<sup>13</sup> See *Las Marthas* (2013).

<sup>14</sup> At one point, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) allowed more than 700,000 youth (who met certain requirements) to legally reside in the United States—the *Dreamers*. These young people were brought in their childhood or adolescence by their undocumented parents from Mexico, but also from other countries in Latin America and around the world. Many of them were college graduates, ready to start their careers and contribute to the future of the US. The Trump administration has done everything possible to end DACA. So far, the immigration authorities have



undocumented individuals are routinely sent. Currently, director Ibarra is working on a documentary about El Paso in the era of the COVID-19, a film that according to her own words: “traces, step by step, a portrait of a place with deeply complex bicultural roots.”<sup>15</sup>

A most prominent documentary is the impressive collective work, *The Bronze Screen: 100 years of the Latino Image in Hollywood* (2002), by Nancy De Los Santos, Susan Racho and Alberto Domínguez. It recreates images and clips from the original films, the negative representation and stereotypes of Latinas/os—the vast majority of them Chicanas/os—in Hollywood cinema from the silent era to the 1990s. This documentary contains incredibly valuable interviews with prominent Chicana/o and Latina/o actors and actresses such as Katy Jurado, Rita Moreno, Lupita Tovar, Ricardo Montalbán, and Anthony Quinn, among others, who offer key insights into their experiences in Hollywood. In addition, *The Bronze Screen* had the virtue of including four of the most renowned specialists in Chicana/o Film Studies as advisors in the making of its script: Rosa Linda Fregoso, David R. Maciel, Chon Noriega and Charles Ramírez-Berg.

When reviewing the documentaries of the new millennium, a unique, ambitious series must be highlighted: *Latino Americans* (2013).<sup>16</sup> Adriana Bosch was the Series Producer with the key participation of other Producers: Nina Alvarez, Dan McCabe, Ray Telles and John Valadez. This monumental series that includes a three-part, six-hour documentary is particularly illustrative of the highly artistic and political commitment of Chicana/o and Latina/o filmmakers. The series narrates critical aspects of the origins and development of the four principal Latina/o communities in the United States: Chicana/o, Cuban-American, Puerto Rican, and recently Central American from the 16th century to the 2000. The series, the first in depicting Latina/o issues in a comprehensive format, received (when showed) the largest Latina/o viewing audience in PBS history. This excellent series depicts the demographic growth of these communities and their increasing participation and influence in all aspects of American society, politics and culture. Its ultimate purpose was to demonstrate the similarities as well as the singularities of each of the four major Latina/o populations in the United States. An important point is that this series supports what academic studies have already documented: the transcendental significance of the process of “Latin Americanization” of the United States that is definitely changing forever the profile and future of the US.<sup>17</sup> Nancy de los Santos along with Dan Guerrero produced *Lalo Guerrero: The Original Chicano* (2006), which recalls critical episodes of Chicana/o cultural history of the 20th century through the life of this extraordinary singer and prolific composer of all kinds of genres and musical themes. For his decade-long career, Lalo Guerrero

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stopped receiving new applications for DACA. See, Caitlin Dickerson, “What is DACA and Why Did It End Up in the Supreme Court of the United States?”.

<sup>15</sup> See *Cristina Ibarra Films & Work in Progress* (2020).

<sup>16</sup> See *Latino Americans* (2013).

<sup>17</sup> Personal interview with the director Ray Telles.





became a famous and influential artist in the United States as well as in Mexico, where he achieved fame with his very popular children's album *Las ardillitas* (1958). Ultimately, this documentary reflects on the great transboundary legacy that Lalo Guerrero left in Mexico and the US.

In 2011, Ray Telles filmed *The Storm that Swept Mexico*, which constitutes an impressive, diligent and unique interpretive discussion of the history of Mexico from the prelude to the 1910 Revolution and into the 1990s. This excellent documentary is divided into two segments; one covers a time span from the origins of the Mexican Revolution to its consolidation in the late-1930s, while the other segment focuses critically on Mexico's neoliberal reforms of the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> The documentary illustrates the development of Mexico through most of the 20th century. It offers an insightful analysis by skillfully interweaving actual historical footage with interviews with Mexican participants in all of these events as well as well-known specialists.

The notable directors Héctor Galán and Jesús Salvador Treviño continued to increase their outstanding filmography in the recent period. Galán produced and directed another of his innovative works: *The Children of Giant* (2015). With inordinate sensitivity, the film shows the discrimination and oppression of Chicanas/os in South Texas in the 1940s and 1950s. The documentary is principally based on dramatic episodes of the epic production *Giant* (1956) by George Stevens. This remarkable Hollywood film was unique in addressing the theme of institutional racism in Texas society. Galán also filmed *Willie Velázquez: Your Vote is Your Voice* (2016) about the founder of the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project, an important and successful organization created for the fostering of civic culture. Velázquez became a titan in the promotion of political participation and the voting rights of the Chicana/o and Latina/o community throughout the Southwest. Veteran filmmaker Jesús Salvador Treviño continued augmenting his filmography. He directed, for example, innovative documentaries in the last decades. In the film *In Search of Aztlan* (2004), which was broadcasted on PBS in Los Angeles, he intercuts historians and scholars commenting on the historical and mythical concept of Aztlán with comedy drama from the group Culture Clash.<sup>19</sup> In *Visiones de Aztlán* (2010), he delves into the meaning and development of Chicana/o art in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s. The film includes the testimonies of more than twenty prominent Chicana/o artists. In 2012, Treviño founded *Latinopia*, an imaginative and pioneering website dedicated to Chicana/o and Latina/o topics. In the case of film, the site projects five-minute mini-documentaries on his interviews with noted Chicana/o filmmakers, such as Héctor Galán, Myléne Moreno and John J. Valadez.<sup>20</sup> Among the documentaries of the most recent years, there are several that refer to the Chicana/o social struggle. In *Zoot Suit Riots* (2014), director Joseph Tovares explores the context of racial tension in Los Angeles in 1943 that culminated

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<sup>18</sup> See, *The Storm that Swept Mexico* (2020).

<sup>19</sup> Personal interview with the director Jesús Salvador Treviño (31 Aug 2020).

<sup>20</sup> See, *Latinopia* (2020).



in terrible episodes of racism and violence against young Chicanos and Chicanas (the *zoot-suiters*) at the hands of members of the US Navy, who literally went out to “hunt them down.”<sup>21</sup> In *Adiós Amor: The Search for María Moreno* (2017), Laurie Coyle refers to the somewhat forgotten woman leader of the rights of migrant workers, who preceded the struggle of César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. Paul Espinosa, in *Singing our Way to Freedom* (2018), depicts the story of Ramón “Chunky” Sánchez and his musical contributions carried out during the Chicano Movement. In *The Unafraid* (2018), Heather Courtney and Anayansi Prado portray the story of three young undocumented people, who came out of their forced invisibility to become activists in favor of immigration reform in the US. Their efforts came to fruition during the Barack Obama administration with the approval of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that granted temporary residence to the *Dreamers*, permitting them the continuation of their studies and to work legally.

The prolific and creative filmmaker Philip Rodríguez probed into critical themes in important documentaries produced for PBS. For example, *Mixed Feelings: San Diego/Tijuana* (2002) contrasts the material conditions and attitudes of the people in both border cities. In addition, *Los Angeles Now* (2004) showcases the “Latin Americanization” of Los Angeles, considering it as a prelude to what will also happen in the US in the years to come. *Brown is the New Green: George López and the American Dream* (2007) examines how the mass media has shaped the Latina/o identity, highlighting the story of an influential entertainer. *Latinos '08* (2008) and *RACE 2012* (2012) explore the role of Latinas/os in US politics in general and in the electoral processes of such years in particular.<sup>22</sup> *Rubén Salazar: The Man in the Middle* (2014) portrays the career and tragic death of this journalist writing for *Los Angeles Times*. And, *The Rise and Fall of the Brown Buffalo* (2018) narrates the life and influential work of the controversial and enigmatic lawyer, novelist and social fighter of the peak era of the Chicano Movement, Oscar Zeta Acosta (Hernández E8).

Professor, producer, writer and director John J. Valadez has consolidated his career through his extensive filmography on Chicana/o and Latina/o issues in the new millennium. In 2003, he was the producer of the PBS series *Visiones: Latino Arts and Culture*, a pioneer and panoramic view of major cultural trends and perspectives. In 2008, he was the co-director and co-producer of *The Last Conquistador* (along with Cristina Ibarra) about a controversial statue of the Spanish conqueror Juan de Oñate in El Paso, Texas. In 2010, in *The Longoria Affair*, Valadez addresses the contentious relationship between President Lyndon B. Johnson and the Mexican-American leader Héctor P. García on the question of forging civil rights for this population. In 2013, he filmed *Prejudice and Pride* dealing with the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, part of the monumental series *Latino Americans*. More recently, his film, *The Head of Joaquín Murrieta* (2016) deals with the story of this Chicano “social bandit,” who ended up being decapitated in 1853 by the US authorities.

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<sup>21</sup> See, *Zoot Suit Riots Gallery* (2020).

<sup>22</sup> See, *About Philip Rodriguez* (2020).



The film narrates a search to locate and bury the head of Murrieta, but ultimately provides a view from the Chicano historical perspective of this legendary activist, his time and his plight.

Other recent documentaries produced by PBS address a variety of additional themes of the Chicana/o and Latina/o community. *The Pushouts* (2018) by Dawn Valadez retells the story of Professor Víctor Ríos, a Mexican migrant who was originally a gang member, but who turned his life around. He ultimately dedicated himself to helping adolescents expelled from schools, guiding them onto the right path. And, *Harvest Season* (2019) by Bernardo Ruiz chronicles the stories and problems of small producers and workers in the wine industry of Northern California, whose tasks and contributions are essential to the state economy, but are practically invisible to the Anglo community in the area.<sup>23</sup>

In 2020, Latino Public Broadcasting and PBS announce various new films,<sup>24</sup> which means that these entities continue to be crucial for the funding, distribution and exhibition of Chicano documentaries. *Building the American Dream* (2019) by Chelsea Hernández deals with the real estate boom in Texas, derived from the exploitation of immigrants employed in the construction of luxury buildings. The film also narrates the immigrants' heroic efforts to improve their situation.<sup>25</sup> *Siqueiros: Wall of Passion* (2019) by Lorena Manríquez depicts the highly symbolic value for the Chicana/o and Latina/o community for the rebirth of the mural "American Tropical" of the famous muralist David Alfaró Siqueiros, a work of art that was censored and partially destroyed by local authorities. *Time of the Phoenix: The First Rainbow Coalition* (2019) by Ray Santiesteban recounts an unknown story from 1969 of how the Chicago Black Panther Party intended to create political alliances with other local groups, including Chicanos. Finally, in a critical electoral year in the United States, *VOCES: Latino Vote; Dispatches from the Battleground* (2020) by Bernardo Ruiz chronicles the efforts of activists and community organizations to promote the registration among Latinas/os entitled to vote in key states: Florida, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Texas. An interesting phenomenon in Chicana/o documentary filmmaking is that non-Chicana/o filmmakers have made important documentaries on critical themes of the Chicana/o and Latina/o communities. There exist various examples of this trend in this new millennium. Academic and filmmaker Joanne Hershfield, in *Nuestra Comunidad: Latinos in North Carolina* (2001), collects insightful testimonies from the fairly unknown experience of members of the growing Mexican and Latina/o immigrant community in North Carolina. Jordan Mechner produced and directed *Chávez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story* (2004). The film gives an account of the unjust eviction of three hundred families from the Chávez Ravine area of Los Angeles in the 1950s (as a pretext in the process of gentrification, but which served to establish Dodgers Stadium) without receiving

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<sup>23</sup> See *Trailer. The Pushouts*. (2020); and *Stream Harvest Season* (2020).

<sup>24</sup> See *Latino Public Broadcasting* (2020).

<sup>25</sup> See *Building the American Dream* (2020).



any compensation for their valuable land and the destruction of their property. In addition, Peter Bratt directs *Dolores* (2017), an award-winning documentary that traces the heroic life of the Chicana leader Dolores Huerta, who at ninety years old continues with her intense activism. This documentary faithfully captures the lifetime devotion of the noteworthy social activist to larger causes and how she has become a true icon for the Chicana/o community as well as a source of inspiration for contemporary social movements.<sup>26</sup>

In *They Called Me King Tiger* (2017), director Ángel Estrada Soto and producer Inti Cordera depict the exceptional life of the Chicano leader Reies López Tijerina and his plight for the recovery of the lands lost by Mexicans/Chicanos in New Mexico after the war between Mexico and the US. These two Mexican filmmakers made a valuable contribution by extensively interviewing Tijerina. In fact, this film captures the famed activist's own testimonies about his outstanding activist career and provides the last images of this charismatic icon of the Chicano Movement. The documentary, without a doubt, will become an invaluable tool for future scholars and writers interested in investigating the contributions and legacy of Reies López Tijerina.

Another notable effort is *Porvenir* (2019). This is a documentary directed by Andrew Shapter and produced by Héctor Galán. It examines a most tragic episode in Chicana/o history. In 1918 in Porvenir, a small Texas town near the Mexican border, the infamous Texas Rangers murdered more than a dozen Mexicans without any cause and with total impunity.<sup>27</sup> This incident was part of the hundreds of others that occurred against the population of Mexican-origin in the so-called "killing fields in Texas." In fact, historians William Carrigan and Clive Webb documented in their recent books that more than five thousand cases of Mexicans/Chicanos were victims of extreme, institutionalized violence in the American Southwest from 1848 to 1928, particularly in Texas (De Carrigan & Webb 179-238).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

It is undeniable that the Chicana/o documentary is one of the most outstanding and innovative cultural manifestations of the community of Mexican origin in the United States, both in terms of its artistic value and visual practice as well as its ability to interpret and analyze the Chicana/o experience. Its thematic variation and the fact that Chicana/o documentary filmmakers have well-incorporated all the categories of this film genre is noteworthy. Furthermore, it is evident that the Chicana/o documentary is a terrific source for the community to know and reflect on itself, including its history, culture and contemporary issues. In addition, these outstanding films have showcased the richness of its cultural practices to many

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<sup>26</sup> See *Me llaman King Tiger* (2019); and *Dolores* (2018).

<sup>27</sup> See *Porvenir Massacre* (2020).



audiences both within and outside the United States. The fact that current generations of Chicana/o college students are on the rise and that many specialize in visual arts ensures that the Chicana/o documentary has an extremely promising future. Furthermore, there are still many Chicana/o historical and contemporary themes, episodes and characters pending to be addressed and examined. The co-sponsorship of PBS and LPB, and the founding of Chicana/o production companies (such as Galan Inc.) have opened up new possibilities for the financing and exhibition of documentaries in the near future.

In addition, it would not only be desirable, but also imperative to have broader dissemination and discussion of the Chicana/o documentary, including a concentrated effort for lobbying in terms of financing, distribution and exhibition by different governmental and non-governmental educational and cultural institutions, as well as digital platforms. Undoubtedly, documentary filmmakers would clearly support these important tasks. If better disseminated, the historical experience and growing importance of this population would be fully acknowledged for all its worth. As director Lourdes Portillo states: “we have been struggling for a long time, we have our history and we’ve fought it in our way, as the films speak to that.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Personal interview with director Lourdes Portillo (11 Sept 2020).

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# TOWARDS A GEOGRAPHY OF TRAUMA: FROM *EL PLAN ESPIRITUAL DE AZTLÁN* TO THE BIRTH OF CHICANA SPIRITUAL FEMINISM

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explores the unbreakable link between Chicana literature and its political/ideological/militant/subversive component, based on a new interpretation of “cultural nationalism.” Explaining the sociopolitical motivations that led to the California student revolts of the 1960s and the Chicana Movement’s *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, I also discuss the ensuing falling-out between the feminine/feminist faction of the Movement and its androcentric majority. I draw on the formal/conceptual/linguistic hybridity of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a metaphor for the radical character of the entire Chicana literary phenomenon.

KEYWORDS: Chicana Feminism, Cultural Nationalism, Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

APROXIMACIONES A UNA GEOGRAFÍA DEL TRAUMA:  
DE *EL PLAN ESPIRITUAL DE AZTLÁN* AL NACIMIENTO  
DE UN FEMINISMO ESPIRITUAL CHICANO

## RESUMEN

El artículo explora el vínculo inquebrantable entre la literatura chicana y su componente político/ideológico/militante/subversivo, basado en una nueva interpretación del concepto de “nacionalismo cultural”. Explicando las motivaciones sociopolíticas que llevaron a las revueltas estudiantiles de California en la década de 1960 y el *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* del Movimiento de las Chicanas, este estudio también analiza la consiguiente disputa entre la facción femenina/feminista del Movimiento y su mayoría androcéntrica. Acudo a la hibridación formal/conceptual/lingüística de *Borderlands/La Frontera*, de Gloria Anzaldúa, como una metáfora del carácter radical de todo el fenómeno literario de las chicanas,

PALABRAS CLAVE: feminismo chicano, nacionalismo cultural, *Borderlands/La Frontera* de Gloria Anzaldúa.

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It would be a fallacy to attempt investigating the utterly unique literary phenomenon that is Chicana fiction without recognizing the vast amount of feminist theory it contains, virtually transforming it into a new literary subgenre altogether. In short, one cannot speak about Chicana fiction unless acknowledging its political, subversive, and militant components. The blatantly obvious, self-declared, and deliberate break it takes from the intensely patriarchal values of the original Chicano literary movement becomes manifestly visible starting with the pioneer writings of the first Chicana novelists. Undeniably, Chicana fiction draws much of its creative and theoretical juices from the seminal work of Chicana matriarch and all-encompassing symbol, Gloria Anzaldúa.

As Aída Hurtado pertinently notices in her study “Sitios y Lenguas: Chicanas Theorize Feminisms,” Chicana feminist activism unfortunately remains, to this day, vastly and severely underdocumented. Strongly linked to all the significant progressive political movements of the 1960s both in the United States and elsewhere, the Chicana literary movement perhaps shares more in terms of ideology and overall values with these than with the more patriarchally-minded, male dominated initial Chicano movement. Albeit rather vague in the beginning and not very coherently defined to this day, given the intensely fragmented nature of the philosophies held dear by the poignantly heterogeneous Chicana community, one aspect remains undebated when describing the core characteristics of Chicana literature: it is largely and unapologetically feminist. There were many spaces of discontent when it came to deciding the Chicanas’ adherence to already established movements and groups seeking to revolutionize the masses’ mentalities, as well as the perception popular with the dominant culture or mainstream points of view.

In a way, Chicanas felt a dire need to create and define an entirely new type of movement built from the ground up on their own terms and according to their own particular view of things, seeing as how none of the progressive movements already in existence at the time included all the dimensions that Chicanas deemed highly significant and *sine qua non* in their struggle for visible and durable transformation. From the very beginning, the Chicana political agenda was mainly centered around the issue of oppression in all its forms and shapes, and it was not about to allow any of the four crucial dimensions of Chicana struggle—namely class, race, gender, and sexual orientation—to fall through the cracks. In Hurtado’s own words,

Chicana feminisms were born out of acts of disruption... to create spaces of resistance to patriarchy in general and patriarchy in their own ethnic/racial groups. ... Chicana feminisms are characterized by finding absences and exclusions and arguing from that standpoint. (135)

As such, the spirit of opposition and symbolic violence that lies at the core of any revolutionary wave or progressive movement becomes the *modus vivendi* for Chicana activists very early on, and to this day remains a fundamental trait of this group’s identity. Unlike white feminists, who seemingly forgot to factor in the issue



of race, and even unlike their fellow brothers in arms from the Chicano community, who failed to push on for women's rights, Chicanas always remembered to put equal emphasis on each and every one of the four dimensions that render the Chicana movement so unique and fierce in its unapologetic ideologic adhesions.

Given the convoluted history of the Chicana/o movement and the aura of controversy which somehow seems to surround all things Chicana/o even today, embarking on the academic journey of describing Chicana literature (namely some quintessentially marginal and feminist women's writings) to a completely alien and lay public proves no easy feat.

When describing the Chicana/o phenomenon, one cannot ignore the highly political red thread that traverses this oftentimes problematic, vastly divisive, and overwhelmingly rich topic. The 1960s' Chicano Civil Rights Movement or *El Movimiento* saw the light of the day during the overtly politicized "atmosphere of protest" (Rosales xiii) that characterized most American campuses during that time of unique intellectual effervescence and civil awakening. Since it started out as a chiefly academic protest and had universities in California as its birthplace, the Chicana/o movement and the game-changing literature it subsequently produced cannot be explained in the absence of a sound critical apparatus and in permanent observance of its ethnically-motivated and social justice-seeking struggles.

For a sample of the outrageous negative clichés that were being perpetuated in the US by Anglo authorities throughout the first part of the 20th century, the following is a characterization given to Mexican immigrants in 1929, in a report drafted by a US Customs agent at the Texas border: "a horde of low-caste Mexicans—ignorant, immoral and unassimilable" (*Official Records of the National Commission* 924).

Just like many other revolutionary movements, whose very core was dissent, rage at both existing and perceived injustice, as well as the dire social circumstances of the community members it represented, *El Movimiento* was not devoid of its occasional exaggerations, which were justified for the most part, given the highly volatile political and societal context in the United States at the time. As such, a type of cultural nationalism also embracing certain separatist tendencies pervaded the Chicano Movement, whose very canon held true the fact that the Anglos and even the representatives of the Mexican American community in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s had taken part in cultural genocide, knowingly stripping the upcoming Chicano generations of any form of genuine cultural heritage and sense of ethnic identity.

But because for many Chicanos the very concept of Mexicanness remained elusive, since they were citizens of the border, having forged a hybrid type of identity—a dual one—, what seemed to make sense more, in terms of ideological coherence, was the newly-coined notion of "cultural nationalism." As F. Arturo Rosales explains in his thoroughly researched book, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*, "*Movimiento* participants reconciled themselves to expounding a profuse ethnic pride and cultural affirmation, which was called 'cultural nationalism'" (56). This revival of ethnic identity was meant to counter the dramatic effects of decades of being exposed to the colonizer's rhetoric



in public schools, which many Chicanos claimed had resulted in a form of ‘cultural amnesia’.<sup>1</sup>

*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* set the basis of what we know now as *Chicanismo*:

In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage, but also of the brutal ‘gringo’ invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán... declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny (qtd. in Rosales 184).

It is impossible to distinguish between the strict literariness of Chicana/o texts and their ideological wiring—the echo of such notions as social struggle, race and class equality, economic justice, and ethnic or gender identity being ubiquitous in Chicana/o literature, regardless of the shape or form that the latter might take. The fact that ideology is the lifeblood, the underlying essence of any form of Chicana/o art is an aspect that becomes clear even to the most unversed reader shortly after going over the first pages of any work authored by a Chicana/o writer. It seems only natural that this would be the case for a literary movement born out of a civil rights one, which in turn took a term—Chicano—that had been long used to shame and humiliate an entire community and transformed it into a symbol of empowerment, pride, and resistance.

## “EL MONOLINGÜISMO ES UNA ENFERMEDAD CURABLE”<sup>2</sup>: SPANGLISH AS A DISRUPTIVE FORCE AND LOCUS OF HEALING

“Cuando entras a esta casa, hija, pisas México.”<sup>3</sup>

As previously explained, Chicana texts cannot be theorized and properly understood without a thorough grasp of the utterly unique strain of feminism that fuels and nourishes Chicana literature. As certain theorists have argued (Hurtado 135), disruption is what stands at the very core of Chicana feminisms—with one of its more aggressively visible forms being linguistic hybridity. For most writers, the language in which they write is their home, their most private and guarded space of memory, the symbolic locus of their creative energies and the source of their literary power.

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<sup>1</sup> An assertion widely attributed to Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, founder of Denver’s Crusade for Justice (Rosales 56).

<sup>2</sup> “El multilingüismo es el anuncio de un mundo multicultural del cual la ciudad de Los Ángeles, ese Bizancio moderno que habla inglés, español, coreano, vietnamita, chino y japonés, es el principal ejemplo mundial. Hablar más de una lengua no daña a nadie. Proclamar el inglés lengua única de los Estados Unidos es una prueba de miedo y de soberbia inútiles” (Fuentes 12).

<sup>3</sup> Pat Mora reminisces about how her grandfather completely forbade the use of English in his house (81).



It comes as no surprise, then, that starting with the foremother Gloria Anzaldúa's seminal *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Chicana writings have built up a resistance to the Anglo/mainstream canon by using language itself as a weapon for change. Chicana literature per se is a hybrid breed, taking manifold shapes and forms, following and integrating no fixed recipes imposed by traditionalist schools of thought, and focusing on little other than innovation and staying true to the spirit of the Chicana/o values. As Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga have proven, the use of Spanglish is not the only disruptive technique employed by Chicana narratives, multidisciplinary approaches and the creative blending together of improbable genres being yet another such method by means of which Chicana literature has managed to undertake the conventional order of things.

The language of resistance and opposition to anything and everything that represents the oppressive status quo—that is, the majority, the mainstream, the stifling mold established by the nebulous figure of the colonizing authority—is, in short, the lifeblood of Chicana literature. In the words of Sonia Saldívar-Hull,

We have to look in nontraditional places for our theories: in the prefaces to anthologies, in the interstices of autobiographies, in our cultural artifacts, our cuentos, and if we are fortunate enough to have access to a good library, in the essays published in the marginalized journals not widely distributed by the dominant institutions. ("Feminism" 206)

What cannot and must not be circumvented when attempting to define Chicana literature or at least find common ground among its various displays, is that the diversity of shapes and forms that characterizes Chicana artistic expression, its hybrid and multifaceted nature, mirrors the concrete, real-life diversity of the Chicana/o community in that such creative endeavors are trying to best represent and make known to the world. As such, the interdisciplinary nature of Chicana feminists' writings is meant to do justice to the complex and often puzzling intricacies of the Chicana/o community itself.

Even the dynamics of traumatic experiences that Chicanas face on a regular basis is as diverse as the particularities of the Mexican American community that these women belong to. A unique cocktail of deeply rooted patriarchal and misogynistic tendencies, widespread poverty and lack of education, arguably misinterpreted religious devotion and obedience to antiquated principles, as well as racist behavior at the level of the entire society towards immigrant communities has made the Chicana into a perfect victim on a variety of objectively noticeable levels.

The fact that, as Aída Hurtado clearly states, the majority of "current Chicana feminist writings are produced by individuals who participated in the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s" (139), there is no denying that political undertones cannot and should not be ignored when striving to interpret and decode the motivations and messages of Chicana writings, regardless of their narrative form.

Hurtado argues that, in addition to its Marxist values, the Chicano movement was infused with a bizarre type of secularized, cultural Catholicism, devoid



of its religious and dogmatic core, yet highly representative of the Chicana/o community as a cultural and its age-old traditions. Although defying religious norms per se and straying from traditional, organized forms of dogmatism, Chicana feminism and its literary transmutations benefit from a deeply rooted spiritual component that is virtually indistinguishable from the spirit of Chicanismo itself.

That is why, when it comes to describing the ultimate symbol of femininity engrained within Chicana/o culture, one always feels compelled to resort to religious and/or spirituality-imbued figures or symbols. The premier, most notorious such dichotomy is that which includes the Virgin of Guadalupe and *La Malinche*, both prominent symbols of the Chicana/o collective consciousness. For many Chicana feminists, theorizing the status of women within their own community's culture started from analyzing the notion of conquest in Mexican history and the role played by female figures in the process.

This is when the stage is taken by *La Malinche*, whom historical accounts unanimously considered a traitor, the ultimate villain who sold out her own people to the colonizer enemy. As Hurtado explains, "Skepticism about women has its origins in the cultural and sexual violation of *La Malinche*. Historically, *La Malinche*, a woman, is the ultimate traitor of Mexico" (140). By accepting the role of translator between the Spaniards and the various Aztec tribes the former were trying to conquer, *La Malinche* earned the metaphorically charged moniker *la lengua*, which literally translates as 'the tongue.' To this day, she is deemed to have enabled the Spaniards' conquest of her own people, thus committing an unpardonable crime. By means of this betrayal, she ended up giving birth—both on a symbolic and literal level, by actually carrying one of the Spanish soldiers' children—to modern Mexico.

So it comes as no surprise that the historical figure of *La Malinche* has managed to elicit many a passionate reaction on all sides of the board, converting *Malintzín* [*La Malinche*] into either a symbol of protofeminism, dissent, and defiance, or a representation of disloyalty and typically feminine weakness—depending on whether the group making the appraisal consisted of feminist or sexist members, respectively. One way or another, *La Malinche* did not remain ignored. As Hurtado observes, alluding to Chicana critic Norma Alarcón's own point of view, "many feminists have engaged the polemics around *La Malinche* either to redeem her, to commiserate with her, or to appropriate her as a feminist hero" (140).

In addition to *La Malinche*, there is a number of iconic female figures that have played a pivotal role in laying the foundation of a strongly Chicana-specific type of feminist conscience. Among them, perhaps the most prominent is the Mexican version of the Virgin Mary, namely *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, who is the definitive role model for what it means to be the ideal woman in both the Mexican and the Chicana/o community: the motherly giver of unconditional love, the nurturing martyr, capable of suffering all and forgiving all, she is the symbol of obedience—the embodiment of everything that the Chicana is expected to be by her family and community. Much like *La Malinche*, *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is a puzzling and twofold kind of icon. On the one hand, from a purely feminist point of view, it clearly contrasts with the ideals of rebellion and disruption that Chicanas have been fighting for, but on the other hand, seeing as how it is a highly relevant cultural and



ethnic symbol, it stands for a set of values in which many Chicana/os have found comfort in the face of racially-motivated oppression.

Caught between the urge to “critique the inherent sexism in dichotomizing their womanhood between *Malinchismo* and *Marianismo*” (Hurtado 141) and their duty towards an intensely patriarchal and family-centric community, many Chicanas have been reluctant to embrace any feminist claims for fear they might be considered betrayers of the traditional Chicana/o cause and subsequently ostracized. Because the emerging Chicana movement stood for principles that overtly contradicted the gender dynamics and practices within the entire group, it was violently rejected by many of its more traditionalist members as an attack on the Catholic foundation of the Chicana/o community—in short, as a departure from what the majority considers to be the very essence of Chicanismo, namely its religion-inspired policies regarding gender role assignments and gender-related attitudes. As a result, Chicana feminism was even dismissed by some as “anti-family, anti-cultural, anti-man and therefore anti-Chicano movement” (Nieto-Gómez 35), with its representatives being labeled traitors, sellouts to the white feminist movement, and ‘accused’ of lesbianism.

Chicana feminism, however, took things one step further than just challenging traditionalist gender norms; it introduced homosexuality into the mix, thus scandalizing its opponents even more. Rejection was toughest for these particular members of the Chicana/o community, since—given the ethnic group’s strong reliance on Catholic dogma as part of its cultural identity—lesbianism was universally regarded as a capital sin, while opting for women instead of men as sexual partners was regarded as the worst kind of offense to the patriarchal status quo.

The most well-known and celebrated Chicana feminists—Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Emma Pérez, to name only the most widely recognized—have managed to make sexuality into a key element in their attempt to theorize Chicana feminism, challenging homophobia as yet another layer of rebellion towards the domination of patriarchal values and beliefs. Although improbable, given their commitment to reshaping the image of womanhood and its perception by an otherwise deeply conservative community, Chicanas did not attack the notion of motherhood, celebrating it by way of idealizing their own mothers and making them into anonymous feminist heroes—symbols of strength and resilience in the face of adversity and routine displays of misogyny.

Sexuality did not start playing a central part in the puzzle of relevant aspects that made Chicana feminist writings unique and clearly distinguishable from their Anglo equivalents until the seminal book *This Bridge Called My Back*, first published in 1981 and coauthored by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, which overtly converted such previously taboo issues as lesbianism, sexual pleasure, and female desire into legitimate topics of discussion and analysis. A mixture of sexuality and questions of race—addressing how skin color is the main criterion meant to set the standard for a woman’s physical beauty and desirability—is what sets Chicana feminism apart from other forms of similar attempts at theorization, bringing the notion of *mestizaje* into the limelight. Since there is a bizarre strain of racism practiced even within the Chicana/o community itself, light-skinned women (*las güerás*) are favored because they meet the Anglo-imposed standards of beauty, in opposition





to the dark-skinned ones (*las prietas*), who are shunned because of their phenotype and instructed to avoid sunlight, in order to downplay their tan complexion and thus become more desirable (Zavella 205).

By integrating *mestizaje* into their newly forged feminist discourse, Chicana theorists managed to demonstrate how no one particular community can escape its own deeply-rooted racist, sexist, and homophobic tendencies, regardless of how otherwise revolutionary and disruptive it regards itself to be. By challenging the hegemonic status quo, Chicana feminism went beyond merely scratching the surface of the problem and chased after all those entrenched underlying aspects that compromised the integrity of the Chicana/o community's core of values, shifting the entire perspective so as to transform it into a more female-centric one altogether:

... Chicanas were triply obsessed because they confronted not only gender discrimination but also racial discrimination and, as mostly daughters of working-class Mexican Americans, class prejudice as well. While combating sexism by Chicano men, Chicanas focused not on men as their oppressors but on the American capitalist system that created the racial, class, and gender divisions facilitating oppression (M. García, *The Chicano Generation* 11).

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Chicanas adhering to *El Movimiento* started taking issue with the fact that the feminist agenda was not a priority within the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, just as racial oppression was not deemed an essential concern by second-wave Anglo feminists. As such, a new group emerged representing the interests of Chicana feminism, one not claiming balance and moderation as its strong suits, but rather resorting to vehement revolt as a kneejerk reaction to anything the dominating group saw fit to impose. Political moderation and including representatives of the middle class were not a priority for Chicana feminists, who leaned towards the hard left on the ideological spectrum, without any notable exceptions, and remained committed to protecting the interests of the working class in Marxist key, even if it meant alienating middle-class women completely. However, when it came to race, Chicana theorists always steered clear of allowing any type of hierarchies of oppression to be created, realizing that the Chicana or 'woman of color' is itself a racial construct.

This only brings one back to another concept of crucial importance for truly grasping the essence of Chicana/o identity—the symbolic significance of the border and the notion of 'borderlands.' Starting from the historical moment of the 1848 Mexican-American War, a permanent alteration of such concepts as nation, space, and territory took place. The border stopped being a geographical sign, a physical limit, and converted into something fluid and animate—a living, breathing marker of experience put into writing.

In the wake of the physical conflict, the newly-drawn border turned out to be so much more than just a line on the map, the cold representation of defeat made visible on paper. Somehow, the border developed its own aesthetic, acquiring an identity of its own through the stories of those who—once conquered on the battlefield—decided to challenge their conquerors by creating a new "network of cultural codes involving liminality and hybridity, the rewriting of borders, and



the challenging of boundaries created by mainstream cultures and official truth” (Velasco 313). By way of autobiographical texts—including Cherríe Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* (1983), Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), and Ana Castillo’s *Essays on Xicanisma* (1994), spaces of political demands are being articulated, individual knowledge is being distilled into experiential coming-of-age stories left as testament for an entire community, and the myth and collective imaginary of said community are being reinforced and made new again.

In his book *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*, critic José David Saldívar focuses a great deal of the unbreakable bidirectional relationship between culture and the manner in which the border is being experienced by the very community it defines, both on a physical and symbolic level. In “Borders of Fear, Borders of Desire,” Rolando Romero summarizes the manifold metaphors of the border put out there by the numerous authors—writers and critics, poets and theoreticians—that have resorted to it, each projecting their own vision and personal take on the concept and thus, some might argue, abusing the paradigm:

Gloria Anzaldúa has described the border as an open wound while Carlos Fuentes has depicted it as a scar. The border has been drawn as a zipper and characterized as a sore. It has been called a “tortilla curtain” and a geological fault line. It has been allegorized as a scrimmage line and, more currently, has been portrayed as a two thousand mile Love Canal and garbage dump. (36)

When invoking the symbolic inherent in the Anzaldúan term of *La Frontera*, one must not interpret it simply as having the same connotations as its English counterpart. On the contrary, if the English-language words ‘frontier’ and ‘border’ convey the idea of confinement, of restricted spaces and imposing limits, of isolation and separation, the Spanish *La Frontera* is inseparable from the concept of *Borderlands*—a space of contact, interaction, and inclusion. Another important aspect is the role played by border narratives in articulating personal traumatic experiences via autobiographic exercise and integrating them into a collective repository from which the entire Chicana/o community might benefit in the process of healing. As Juan Velasco puts it, it is imperative to link

... the related aspects of cultural forgetting and remembering of trauma to the use of technologies of autobiography through which to represent the personal/collective meanings of loss. I argue that historical trauma and loss complicate the representation of personal history, and trauma recasts the narrative and literary histories of the Americas. (317)

Drawing from this point of view, it is important to add that Chicana autobiographical writings—with Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* being the most appropriate case study—help cultivate agency, which eventually leads to a renegotiation of the very construction of the *mestiza* self, thus creating a new symbolic identity for the Chicanas in the syncopated spaces constructed by the metaphors of hybridity, transculturation, *mestizaje*, and borderland consciousness. Seeing as how, according to Benedict Anderson, a community only exists inasmuch as it is ‘imagined’ or reconstructed by its own members, Chicanas who write give



their community the power of rebirth and redemption from collective trauma by narrating their personal tragedies and therefore exorcise their individual demons by (re)writing (hi)story. As Juan Velasco poetically explains, “through the use of *mito*, Chicana/o writers have connected the histories of loss with the geography of trauma (the border)” (322).

By way of self-representation, Chicana writers in fact give a voice to the countless voiceless, faceless, oppressed, anonymous, and ignored individuals whose stories were never told, but who are still in need of recognition, salvation, and even symbolic avenging. Writing trauma can be a traumatic act in itself, yet this symbolic self-immolation is a necessary sacrifice if it means speaking for those who cannot—the disenfranchised people with no name and no home, spread along the border, claimed by no one and victim to everyone: “When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart, a Nahuatl concept” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 73).

Because Chicanas have written about it, the border can no longer be rendered metaphysical, nor can it be used as a symbol of silence and oppression. By appropriating the source of hurt and redefining it according to one’s own terms, the victim takes control and is suddenly empowered. Thus, the frontier is no more a locus of silence and silencing, but a “contact zone”<sup>4</sup> meant to reveal the truth of the narrativized self. Taking control of one’s past and history by writing traumatic memory is the ultimate gesture of liberation and agency. The disregarded and oppressed, the ones whose voices had been silenced and stories rewritten by the hegemony are finally experiencing de-marginalization and validation thanks to the power of myth and storytelling. Hence, by voicing out all the pain and sorrow that an entire community had endured in silence for so long, the Chicana writer becomes a *curandera* of sorts—the Anzaldúan ‘new Mestiza,’ reclaiming Aztlán in Spanglish, by writing about trauma, suffering, and loss.

#### BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE: PINPOINTING THE LOCI OF IDENTITY-ALTERING TRAUMA IN CONTEMPORARY CHICANA FICTION

“We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.”<sup>5</sup>

—One of the Chicana/o Movement’s most famous mottos  
“A woman who writes has power. A woman who writes is  
feared. In the eyes of the world this makes us dangerous beasts.”

Gloria E. Anzaldúa (*This Bridge Called My Back:  
Writings by Radical Women of Color*)

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<sup>4</sup> “I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 34).

<sup>5</sup> Los Tigres del Norte, “Somos más americanos.”



The image of the Chicana that is being portrayed in novels by female authors is a reclaiming of power and sense of identity in response to the forced molding and shaping of the Chicana's sense of self by a violently retrograde and misogynistic society. Before earning the right to speak for herself, find her own voice and stand up to the unjust and demeaning role that the patriarchy had assigned her, the Chicana had to overcome various obstacles and tear down a series of limitations built entirely of taboos, clichés, glass ceilings, preconceptions, and automated behavioral patterns.

Even more so perhaps than in the case of Anglo sexism, the type of gender normativity perpetuated within the Chicana/o community is enforced by way of a cultural canon that cannot be separated from certain core values of the group, lest the group lose its cohesion and identity. Being a wife and a mother speaks to the very function of womanhood—a woman who is not a wife and mother can hardly be called a woman at all. Moreover, the one attribute that distinguishes between the 'good' woman and the 'bad,' as part of the oversimplified dichotomy employed by the typically *machista* discourse, is obedience. The inclination towards submission, the willing acceptance of a position of inferiority advertised by the male authority as 'natural' and 'normal', is the only prerequisite in order to be considered a 'good' woman. Any form of rebellion or deviation, any curiosity or propensity for asking questions or challenging the status quo is immediately identified and results in a symbolic (and sometimes quite palpable) exclusion of the guilty party from the community. Rejecting abuse and making any claim at independence is considered a betrayal, a form of *malinchismo*, a symptom of corruption, and even a tendency to embrace alien, non-traditional views of the world in an attempt to get rid of one's Chicana/o heritage.

With the emergence of the Chicana feminist movement and its ensuing literary fruit—in the form of fiction by Chicana household names such as Cherríe Moraga, Ana Castillo, and Sandra Cisneros—, a violent shift in common perspective and radical change in perception took place. The quest to redefine one's identity and place in the world became a widely accepted and commendable endeavor within the Chicana/o community, with women being introduced to a whole new set of attributes which completely redefined what proper womanhood was supposed to be.

In Sandra Cisneros' works, the narrative space is defined by multiple instances of duality, with the female figure struggling to escape an oppressive and overbearing existence, marred by abuse, poverty, humiliation, and physical violence at the hands of a male persecutor. The oppression of the fictional Chicana in Cisneros' novels, mirroring the real-life torment of its flesh-and-blood counterparts, is manifold, taking place on several levels. Within the Chicana/o paradigm, she is discriminated against for being a woman—victim to the *machista* worldview of her own community, which expects her to suffer in silence whenever faced with her male abusers' whims—, whereas according to the Anglo society's norms she is also rejected because of her ethnic background.

Cisneros' fictional Chicanas go through the process of either constructing a previously inexistent identity or discovering a renewed perception of the self, as the readers are allowed to witness these characters' journey of becoming over several stages of their life, from adolescence to adulthood. The metamorphoses take place



on an individual level, usually including a sexual awakening, but they also impact the entire community, helping a whole new collective conscience to develop.

In both *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, Cisneros seems to assign crucial importance to the notion of cultural identity, whose key elements are instilled into the Chicana/o's mind very early on, both within and outside of the family home. There is always emphasis on the poor living conditions of the characters that the reader is introduced to, with financial hardships and economic inferiority as elements that prove to be essential in the development of the individual's psyche and perception of oneself. There is a lot of self-defining by means of the main character's impressions and her relationship with the outside world. The name of the main character in *House*—Esperanza, which translates as 'Hope'—is of course symbolic, signaling that one's initial expectations in life almost always end up clashing with a much harsher reality down the line.

The physical space one owns confines them to a certain state of mental imprisonment. Acutely aware of her social status, Esperanza becomes painfully aware of her need to overcome her circumstances—something of which she is always reminded at school, where her house is repeatedly used as an indicator and reminder of her class inferiority: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn't it. The House on Mango Street isn't it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says papa. But I know how those things go" (11).

Esperanza's crisis of identity becomes apparent when she rebels against her own given name, which she knows is the same as her grandmother's, as she fears such an overlap would somehow condemn her to the same existence of submission and defeat that her female predecessors have had to endure:

She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window (11).

Although continuously in search of role models throughout the entire book, ironically Esperanza only seems to come across negative versions of who she should become. In an attempt to mature and develop her own personality, breaking free from the constraints of a deeply patriarchal and restrictive tradition, Esperanza finds herself subject to a never-ending cycle of oppression from her own family, as well as witness to the violence that surrounds her from all directions.

Esperanza's friend Sally is the perfect example of the young Chicana whose innocence is lost due to the actions that adults in the community either perpetrate or turn a blind eye to, because certain dynamics of familial relationships—such as a father's complete control of his daughter or a husband's ownership claims over his wife—are considered normal and admirable: "Until one day Sally's father catches her talking to a boy and the next day she doesn't come to school. And the next. Until the week Sally tells it, he just went crazy, he just forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt" (93).

For these female characters, marriage is not just a normal step, resulting from a process of emotional evolution, as they independently decide to leave their father's



home and start a new life with the man they love. On the contrary, it appears to be a mere transition between one unfortunate situation to the next, in a scenario where the Chicana is little more than a piece of merchandise being exchanged between two people in positions of power:

She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape. Sally says she likes being married because now she gets to buy her own things when her husband gives her money... Except he won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. (101-102)

In a desperate attempt to flee a violent household, where the role of abuser and oppressor is played by the father, the young Chicana hopes to escape the restrictive and controlling environment of her childhood and finally achieve some degree of independence, but what she gets in return is the need to submit to a different 'master,' whose rules and methods are no less cruel and identity-stripping. The cycle of tyranny, dependence, and abuse is thus reinitiated, with the victim living under the reign of routine terror, without any possibility of escape. Trauma as an individual experience, repeating itself *ad infinitum* under different forms, sends a ripple throughout the very fabric of the Chicana/o community's psyche, mutating into a collective form of traumatic experience and eventually altering the very essence of what it means to be a Chicana in the first place.

Unable to forge a genuinely personal identity, always mirroring the desires and expectations of others—namely the abusive male Other, for the most part—, the Chicana is accustomed to little else than the experience of pain, loss, and the constant infliction of gratuitous violence by those who were supposed to emerge as her protectors (be they fathers, husbands, or lovers). Trauma becomes a fundamental part of who Chicanas are as individuals and thus they develop what I call a *traumatic identity*, which extends to describe the circumstances of an entire group of subaltern women.

The traumatic experiences that the Esperanza must face on a daily basis are not restricted to only one particular space, but find their roots in both worlds where she leads her existence: the Anglo environment (the school), on the one hand, and the Chicana/o one (the neighborhood/the barrio). Since she can think of no physical way of escaping the confines of her life, Esperanza finds symbolic refuge in the world of literature, seeking solace in stories that soon convert into a gateway to acquiring a true sense of identity and individuality: "That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant" (61).

The creative process provides the escape that Esperanza had been longing for. The house she dreams of is not the lavish bourgeois abode of any child's imagination, but a space where her creativity can run free, where there are no rules and restrictions, where she is not expected to be the 'good' Chicana, but herself. There is no rejection of her community's values in Esperanza's quest, but a striving to achieve her independence as a woman, away from any form of violence and male dominance: "Not a man's house. Not a daddy's... A house of my own. On a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as a paper before the poem" (108).



Adjacent to the issue of male-inflicted physical violence, another crucial theme in Cisneros' writing is that of Chicanas' sexuality. Esperanza's voice throughout the book changes from the innocent one of a child to that of a young woman whose personal history of abuse has left a deep mark on her sense of self. Cisneros discusses the notion of virginity and what it means for the Chicana within her highly traditionalist community. The stern code of conduct that Chicanas are expected to follow puts enormous pressure on the female representatives of the group, with the burden of a family's honor and reputation being laid on the shoulders of the wife or daughter. The smallest misstep is considered a severe transgression and punished accordingly, with virginity until marriage being the ideal that all women strive for. In Cisneros' works, however, virginity is not only used as a means of controlling women and removing any possibility of making personal decisions regarding their own sexuality, but also represents a form of acquiring an identity and deciding over one's destiny—a tool for individual development and a form of rebellion.

For Cisneros' female characters, virginity is a marker of the male influence over their bodies and overall existence as human beings. They are not allowed to decide for themselves when it comes to their own sexuality, as virginity is regarded as shared property, belonging to the entire community. The family, not the woman, decides when the loss of virginity should occur. Sexuality is only meant as an intramarital act and should only be used for procreation, not pleasure. In *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, the character Ixchel in "One Holy Night" seems to live in a mythical world, with little understanding of reality. Her childlike simplicity and naïve perception of the world is either a consequence of her extremely conservative upbringing or the reason that she accepted its rules and limitation without questioning them in the first place. When Ixchel breaks the taboo and loses her virginity without her family's consent, thus automatically becoming a 'bad' woman in the eyes of her community, she achieves a liberation of sorts, realizing that the power attributed to this initial erotic act had been arbitrary and exaggerated all along:

The truth is, it wasn't a big deal at all. I put my bloody panties inside my T-shirt and ran home hugging myself... Did I look any different? Could they tell? We were all the same somehow, laughing behind our hands, waiting the way all women wait, and when we find out, we wonder why the world and a million years made such a big deal over nothing (30).

Ixchel's first sexual experience is an act of unconscious rebellion, a rejection of what her community's customs and traditions indicated as admirable and wise. Without even realizing, by taking control of her sexuality in this manner, she takes the first step towards her liberation from the confines of male-established boundaries. However, the symbolic rebellion is an insignificant progress if compared to the amount of abuse, violence, and misery that any given Chicana is subjected to in Cisneros' writings, one way or another. The physical infliction of pain is always complemented by psychological torment, leaving the woman traumatized on multiple





levels, chipping away at her sense of self and stripping her of any genuine identity. At all times, the Chicana is property, left at the mercy of the male master, a victim of patriarchal dominance, with no right to protest her condition or any real chance to improve her circumstances—a caged bird:

This man who farts and belches and snores as well as laughs and kisses and holds her. Somehow this husband whose whiskers she finds each morning in the sink, whose shoes she must air each evening on the porch, this husband who cuts his fingernails in public, laughs loudly, curses like a man, and demands each course of dinner be served on a separate plate like his mother's, as soon as he gets home, on time or late, and who doesn't care at all for music or telenovelas or romance or roses or the moon floating pearly over the arroyo, or through the bedroom window for that matter, shut the blinds and go back to sleep, this man, this father, this rival, this keeper, this lord, this master, this husband till kingdom come (49).

The social pressure that the Chicana must endure is tremendous. Regardless of the abuse she suffers in the context of her familial circumstances, the harsh criticism from the community is unidirectional. The Chicana is automatically assigned the blame for whatever goes wrong in her family, with a high degree of misogyny being perpetuated by the more purist women themselves. Public shaming is a widespread means of keeping rebellious Chicanas in line, with the community deeming unsuccessful marriages—without exception—the personal failures of none other than the female victims.

The notion of oppression cannot be separated from the possibility of resistance. As María Lugones argues in her essay, “On *Borderlands*,” Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of mestiza consciousness cannot be understood outside the oppression-resistance relationship:

Oppression theory may have as its intent to depict the effects of oppression (alienation, ossification, arrogation, psychological oppression, etc.), without an intention to rule out resistance. But within the logical framework of the theory, resistance to oppression appears unintelligible because it lacks a theoretical base. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* is a work creating a theoretical space for resistance (31).

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa pinpoints concrete instances of oppression and the boomerang effects of opposition that they generate, thus providing the reader with a time-lapse, a temporal map of how the oppressed community has written its day-to-day history of resistance. Anzaldúa refers to herself as having a split or manifold identity—the result of subjugation and trauma on several levels: the self which has repeatedly fallen victim to the outside/Anglo expectations, the self which is under domination by the retrograde and limiting worldview of the Chicana/o community, and the newly emerging third Self—perhaps the most genuine—, which is a progeny of the borderlands.

Torn between her true Self (the innermost sense of identity she has developed as an offspring of the border) and the perceived self (the image of the ideal obedient self, projected onto her by her community), Anzaldúa provides the reader with a





perfect metaphor of her state of being by invoking the Mesoamerican goddess of creation, *Coatloqueuh*, whose dual identity—part *Coatlícue*, an image of darkness, part *Tonantsi*,<sup>6</sup> representing light—mirrors her own twofold status as a rebellious Chicana of the border.

Anzaldúa explains how the male-dominated Azteca-Mexica ethos forced *Coatlícue* and other similar female goddesses out of the picture, with *Tonantsi* being stripped of her dark attributes and becoming the epitome of maternal kindness. Such a simplification of womanhood became more radical still with the contribution of the colonizers and the traditions promoted by the Catholic Church, with *Tonantsi* metamorphosing into *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, the ultimate religious representation of the chaste and nurturing mother. However, Anzaldúa fully rejects the desexualization of *Tonantsi* into *Guadalupe*, embracing *Coatlícue* as its genuine, decolonized version and making her into a symbol of resistance to oppression through creation: “She, the symbol of dark sexual drive, the chthonic (underworld), the feminine, the serpentine movement of sexuality, of creativity, the basis of all energy and life” (*Borderlands* 35).

What Anzaldúa labels ‘the *Coatlícue* state’ is a mental space where the traces of trauma are being repaired through the healing power of creation. The border and borderlands it consequently molds give way to the construction of a brand-new sense of self, in isolation from the corrupting and restrictive power of outside expectations. Terrifying as it may be, the process of *making oneself anew* through resistance is a form of liberation that Anzaldúa attains not just for herself, but for an entire community of Chicanas whom she represents and thus provides with a legitimate voice.

The *Coatlícue* state allows for the birth of the *new mestiza consciousness*, a concept which Anzaldúa explains as the result of “racial, ideological, cultural, and biological cross-pollination” (*Borderlands* 77). In opposition to monolithic ideals and monochrome female role models, Anzaldúa’s new mestiza consciousness embraces duality and contradiction, hybridity, plurality, and the superposition of seemingly incompatible values, encouraging the transgression of inflexible concepts and obsolete paradigms towards a new system of ideals and principles.

However, in her aforementioned essay, Lugones argues that the concept of dual personality should be dismissed as an Anglo construct—“The dual, hyphenated, personality is an Anglo creation”—and replaced with the notion of plural personality, which is inherently Chicana/o: “The Mexican and the American in the dual-personality construct are both animated from the outside; that is why there is no cultural ‘cross-pollination.’ But the plurality of the new mestiza is anchored in the borders ...” (“On *Borderlands*” 35).

In her “Tongues of Fire: A Tribute to Gloria Anzaldúa,” when speaking about the seminal impact that Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* has had in shaping an

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<sup>6</sup> Here I utilize *Tonantsi* versus the commonly used *Tonantzin* as Alan R. Sandstrom uses it in “The Tonantsi Cult of the Eastern Nahua” in *Mother Worship: Themes and Variations*, ed. James J. Preston (University of North Carolina Press, 1982), pp. 25-50.



entire collective consciousness of empowerment and resistance, Maylei Blackwell inadvertently describes the process through which Anzaldúa manages to convert traumatic experiences into redeeming ones, integrating the traumatized self into the 'plural identity' construct which results from the Chicana's physical and symbolic existence in the borderlands:

Gloria first named and then theorized the violence of exclusion and the space in between binaries. She spoke powerfully and lucidly to our sense of marginalization and demanded that we do the seemingly impossible: to transform those spaces of exclusion and isolation into spaces of community, coalition, and empowerment (155).

Whereas before Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* the border had universally been theorized as a space of exclusion, control, and separation, her revolutionary input rendered possible a shift in the concept's significance, with the border subsequently being interpreted as a space of possibility, a crossroads of transformation and fluidity, as well as a locus of changing power dynamics. Anzaldúa named the borderlands' "intimate terrorism" as the main external factor of friction and opposition, although there are equally many internal elements which contribute to the traumatic experience that the border self must go through: "Homophobia is the fear of going home" (*Borderlands* 20).

In her book *Writing a Woman's Life*, feminist theorist Carolyn Heilbrun states that there are two central aspects to the emancipation of women, namely anger and the act of raising social awareness. Using language and writing as a road towards resignification, Anzaldúa uses Heilbrun's interpretation of anger as a catalyst for social change:

Like my race that once in a while drops its slave posture of obedience, quietness, and acceptance, I have an anger in my flesh. Underneath my look of humility, there lies a rage ready to explode. The price for my rebelliousness [new consciousness] and anger is high-filled with pain and doubt, and filled with feelings of uselessness, stupidity and impotence. I am filled with rage whenever anyone—my mother, the church, the Anglo culture—tells me what to do [to be] without considering my desires (*Borderlands* 37).

As Richard A. García explains in his article, "Toward a Theory of Latina Rebirth," Anzaldúa's theorizations laid the groundwork for the retextualization of gender and reconceptualization of culture in a number of celebrated works by Chicana authors, such as Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* and Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (34). In the same vein as Julia Kristeva, Anzaldúa attempts a subversion of the prevailing discourse and longs to establish a new ethno-feminist ethos by redefining the Chicana experience altogether. Reflecting on the most significant Chicana writers' newly emerging visions and ideas—including the relationship between one's community and the self, the dynamics of gender-related power and control, heteronormativity, border identity, and ethnicity-generated crises of identity—, Anzaldúa draws from the



acutely nationalist, separatist tropes so typical of the 1960s, also focusing on the responsibilities deriving from the mestiza status.

Simone de Beauvoir's influence on Anzaldúa's theories is quite obvious, with ideas from *The Second Sex*—such as the distinction between sex and gender, as well as the independent nature of a woman's assigned social roles, which should not be conditioned by her biology—being embraced by Anzaldúa in her theorizations of the Chicanas' place in the world. The objectification of women and the fact that they are only regarded as “mirrors”—allowed little else than simply reflect the dominant paradigm and patriarchal discourse, perpetually oozing subservience and victimization—causes Anzaldúa to incite acts of symbolic rebellion, calling for the creation of the *new mestiza consciousness*:

I am a border woman, I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that Tejas-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradiction. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape (*Borderlands* 19).

Drawing from the Jungian notion of the collective unconscious, as well as Albert Memmi's thesis of the colonized mind's double consciousness in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Anzaldúa recommends slipping into the *Coatlicue* state in order to have access to a reality which transcends all binary oppositions, polarized perceptions, and ethnic reifications. Since Aztec tradition describes *Coatlicue* as a “symbol of the fusion of opposites: the [male] eagle and the [female] serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror” (47), Anzaldúa claims that by entering the *Coatlicue* state, the Chicana unlocks her unconscious dual nature, at the same time gaining access to a state of superior perception, where history and individual spirituality align with one another and merge:

Anzaldúa argues that every person, every woman exists with an unconscious interiority of dualities, as well as paradoxically with a synthesis, and a dialectic of those dualities. For Anzaldúa, everyone has the potential to exist in ... a spiritual and mystical state consisting of a simultaneity of interior selves engaged in a dialogical process of constant change, repetition, and interrelation (R. García 40).

At present, nearly four decades after the highly influential work, *This Bridge Called My Back* was first published, there is unanimous consensus that Moraga and Anzaldúa have been, as Ricardo F. Vivancos Pérez states in his book *Radical Chicana Poetics*, “the trailblazers of radical Chicana feminism,” leading the way for members of all diasporic/displaced communities to embrace their liberating theories and join their “search for a method of oppositional consciousness” (87).

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# HERMENEUTIC DISTANCIATIONS IN POSTMODERN CHICANX LITERATURE: UTOPIAN AND DYSTOPIAN HORIZONS IN ANA CASTILLO'S *SO FAR FROM GOD* (1993) & SALVADOR PLASCENCIA'S *THE PEOPLE OF PAPER* (2005)

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## ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the concept of distancing in hermeneutic phenomenology and its relevance to an understanding of the utopian and dystopian dimensions in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993) and Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005), two postmodern novels that perceive Chicanx history aslant. I analyze how distanciations in these novels open possible cultural worlds that aid readers in interpreting new and/or estranging historical traditions. Ultimately, the distanciations in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* pattern the hope for an emergent queer Chicanx spiritual-activist identity, while the distanciations in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* pattern a dystopic neoliberal worldview hidden behind decontextualized kitschy representations of Chicanx identity. Although seemingly opposed, both cultural worldviews emerge through ruptures that occur between actual and possible worlds afforded by the novels' distanciations of Chicanx identities and histories.

**KEYWORDS:** Postmodern Chicanx Literature, Distanciation, Estrangement, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Utopia

DISTANCIAMIENTOS HERMENÉUTICOS EN LA LITERATURA CHICANA POSTMODERNA: HORIZONTES UTÓPICOS Y DISTÓPICOS EN *SO FAR FROM GOD* DE ANA CASTILLO (1993) & *THE PEOPLE OF PAPER* DE SALVADOR PLASCENCIA (2005)

## RESUMEN

Este ensayo se centra en el concepto de distanciamiento en la fenomenología hermenéutica y su relevancia para la comprensión de las dimensiones utópicas y distópicas en *So Far From God* (1993) de Ana Castillo y *The People of Paper* de Salvador Plascencia (2005), dos novelas postmodernas que perciben la historia Chicana oblicuamente. Analizo cómo los distanciamientos en estas novelas abren posibles mundos culturales que ayudan a los lectores a interpretar tradiciones históricas nuevas y/o extrañas. Los distanciamientos en *So Far From God* de Ana Castillo modelan la esperanza de una identidad Chicana espiritual, activista, queer y emergente, mientras que los distanciamientos en *The People of Paper* de Salvador Plascencia modelan una cosmovisión neoliberal distópica escondida detrás de representaciones *kitsch* que descontextualizan la identidad Chicana. Aunque aparentemente opuestas, ambas visiones del mundo cultural emergen a través de rupturas que ocurren entre mundos reales y posibles que ofrecen los distanciamientos de las identidades e historias Chicanas en las novelas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** literatura chicana postmoderna, distanciamiento, extrañamiento, fenomenología hermenéutica, utopía.

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In Toni Morrison's essay "The Sources of Self-Regard", she describes her disappointment on reading letters from a high school class on their thoughts of *Beloved*. She felt that they did not "question the history," that they failed to "analyze it or confront it in some manner that is at odds with the historian or even the novelist's version of it": "One sort of takes it, swallows it, agrees with it. Nothing is aslant. Although in fact, the reason I had written the book was to enter into that historical period from some point of view that was entirely different from standard history" (Morrison 306). The terms of Morrison's critique are relevant to the narrative and reading strategies solicited by postmodern fictions. The goal in writing *Beloved* was to enter history from a specific "point of view" that perceives history "aslant." These special slanted forms of perception are both implicit in the text and encouraged as a reading practice. This perception corresponds to the concept of distanciation in hermeneutic phenomenology. Distanciation refers to a suspension of our immersion in an actual world and an opening up to a world that the text proposes as possible (MacAvoy 15). This essay analyzes the different social and historical horizons these "slanted" forms of distanciation can take in postmodern Chicana fictions, looking especially at Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993) and Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005). Ultimately, the distanciations in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* pattern the hope for an emergent queer Chicana spiritual-activist identity, while the distanciations in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* pattern a dystopic neoliberal worldview hidden behind kitschy and decontextualizing representations of Chicana identity. Although seemingly opposed, both cultural worldviews emerge through ruptures that occur between actual and possible worlds afforded by the novels' distanciations of Chicana identities and histories.

Although the concept of distanciation refers to the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, the sense of the idea is already operative in the writings of Chicana postmodern cultural theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez and Chela Sandoval. Anzaldúa conceptualizes her aesthetic vision as the need to experience "a radical shift in perception, otra forma de ver" (*Light/Luz* 16) and Emma Pérez describes the "decolonial imaginary" as surviving in colonialist historiography as "a faint outline gliding against a wall or an object" (Pérez 7). Distanciations resonate with Chicana decolonial strategies that work within and against hegemonic historical narratives. Although there is much to critique in Gadamer's notion that the goal of interpreting distanciation is to better belong to a tradition (*Truth and Method* 293), I reorient this understanding of tradition through Stuart Hall's conception of articulation, which sees cultural identity as "the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" ("Diaspora" 225). Within the hermeneutic play of perceptual positions that we find in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* and Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*, we can then take a fresh look at the hermeneutics implied by Gloria Anzaldúa's "mestiza way": "Pero es difícil differentiating between *lo heredado*, *lo adquirido*, *lo impuesto*. She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been part of. *Luego bota lo que no vale, los desmintos, los desencuentros, el embrutecimiento*" (her emphasis, *Borderlands* 104).





This archeological metaphor distanciates a reading process that strives to discover utopian and/or dystopian dimensions in a text.

Distanciation is Paul Ricoeur's translation of the German word *Verfremdung* which can refer, according to Ernst Bloch's metaphor, to a "distancing mirror above the only too familiar reality" ("Entfremdung" 125). Bloch's metaphor will be useful for our purposes since the experience of a distanciating distance, experienced by our novels' protagonists, open gaps in their ordinary perceptions of reality. While *Verfremdung* is often translated as distanciation, the term bears the trace of other concepts, that is, both alienation and estrangement are considered by some scholars to indicate the essence of "literariness". For instance, Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky called *Ostranenie* (or "making-strange") the way writers "give back the sensation of life, in order to make us feel things". For Shklovsky, estrangement leads to the "complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception" (Shklovsky 80). Shklovsky opposes this artful strangeness to "automatization," a form of perception that objectifies reality, converting it into a formula or stereotype. Shklovsky direly warns his readers: "This is how life becomes nothing and disappears. Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife and the fear of war" (ibid). With this opposition, Shklovsky reflects the tension in our novels between a dystopic vision that commodifies and exploits reality and one that disrupts objectification through creative distanciations. Similarly, in Ato Quayson's definition of postcolonial literature, he notes the importance of "perspectival alienations" that "alienate the referent from itself, and ultimately lead to a new view of society that moves beyond the existent, here defined as the dominant of social and political relations" (Quayson 94). Quayson's definition is important because it points to the way perspectival alienations help "discompose and reconstitute political reality" (ibid). What Quayson adds to Shklovsky's conception of estrangement is the way these estrangements or alienations intimate forms of political experience.

Hermeneutic phenomenology studies these moments of distanciation or estrangement of an ordinary or first-order of reality. In the analysis of novels, hermeneutics then traces the significance of these distanciations within the contexts of the narrative and its implied historical horizon. The moment of distanciation and the configuration of these moments in narrative (implicit both in the text *and* in the mind of the reader) would be understood as opening an *invisible light* or horizon on the world. Distanciation here relates to the concept of the *epoché*, central in phenomenology, which for Paul Ricoeur, contributes to perceptions that suspend ordinary reference and project new possibilities ("Metaphorical Process" 153). The *epoché* or distanciation (Ricoeur innovatively blends these conceptions together in his writings) have both negative and positive movements. As Ricoeur hyperbolically suggests, "the role of most of our literature is, it seems, to destroy the world" while also providing a world that it "unfolds, discovers, reveals" (*Hermeneutics* 103; 106).

A brilliant example of distanciation is the *malogra* in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*. In the novel the *malogra* is a mythic creature that attacks the character Caridad. The amorphous quality of the being brings out important metaphoric implications:





A thing that might be described as made of sharp metal and splintered wood, of limestone, gold, and brittle parchment. It held the weight of a continent and was indelible as ink, centuries old and yet as strong as a young wolf. It had no shape and was darker than the dark night, and mostly, as Caridad would never ever forget, it was pure force. (*SFG* 77)<sup>1</sup>

Although this description mystifies our perception of the creature, it can be read as envisioning an attack by a colonial-patriarchal power as a structural-historical force operative in history, considering the reference to “parchment” and “ink” (and thus to writing and the law) and its possible reference to a ship of “sharp metal and splintered wood” and other exploitable resources. *Estranging* the description envisions a deeper historical reality obfuscated by ordinary reality. Plascencia’s *The People of Paper* uses distanciation differently, often gesturing to more shallow realities as a means of playfully engaging with Chicana literary and historical traditions.

Plascencia’s narrator deliberately entraps readers into his dystopian neoliberal horizon of the world but he also gives them the literary resources to escape his imaginary. Part of the interpretation game of reading *The People of Paper* is outsmarting Plascencia’s kitschy illusions. Plascencia, as a character in his own novel, has a girlfriend named Cameroon who has the habit of pressing the stingers of honeybees into her body. The fever from the stings gives off a saintly halo and she is frequently described as removing “thorns” from her body. When asked why she has this habit, she says that “when one is sad there is only insects or sex” (Plascencia 128). This bizarre distanciation appears to idealize through “nature” and religious imagery an ordinary drug addiction. Although this may make it seem like a more superficial distanciation from Castillo’s passage, this perception builds on a configuration of others that skillfully intimate the Plascencia-character’s broader pessimistic horizon of representation for the “ethnic fiction” writer, whose role in the publishing industry seemingly is to provide commodifiable images of ethnic suffering, or more specially the private pleasure-in-pain the novel calls “sadness”, a feeling that resonates with a discourse on “soledad” in Latin American literary traditions that Plascencia engages with in his allusions to Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) and Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (1967). Plascencia’s representation of *soledad* resonates with the idea of *jouissance* in psychoanalysis, which terms a pleasure-in-pain for a lost fantasy object.

As intimated, the concept of distanciation resonates with a host of concepts that includes terms like alienation, estrangement and enchantment. The concept(s) can resonate with negative experiences of *alienation*, as described for instance by Karl Marx’s description of estranged labor or in Franz Fanon’s description of racial interpellation in *Black Skin, White Mask*. Or it can resonate with positive moments of *enchantment*, as explored for instance in nature poems (for instance of the pastoral lyric tradition, implicit in early passages of Plascencia’s novel). As with

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<sup>1</sup> From here on out, I will use *SFG* to indicate *So Far from God*.



the examples of the *malogra* or Cameroon's bees, distancing can move within a spectrum that accounts for alienating or enchanting experiences, moments that heighten and complicate perception. Ernst Bloch in his article "Entfremdung, Verfremdung: Alienation, Estrangement" makes a distinction between evil alienation and beneficent estrangement, which will be crucial when we examine our two novels. Evil alienation corresponds to a perception of human life as one dominated by the rule of commodification and exploitation: "Everything becomes a commodity. All objects and people turn into goods for sale. Relationships between people are reduced to their exchange value, while the circulation of commodities becomes an independent force behind the backs and above the heads of human beings" ("Entfremdung" 122). In contrast for Ernst Bloch, there is a positive strangeness "that does not betray and sell us" and that lets us "contemplate experience separated, as in a frame, or heightened, as on a pedestal" (ibid 122). The affects this beneficent estrangement inspires are "amazement and concern" (125).

Bloch's descriptions are helpful because they echo the implicit concerns of both Castillo and Plascencia about the dangers of commodification as maleficent forms of human objectification and literary perception. Yet postmodern literary strategies complicate Bloch's neat binary of a negative alienation versus a positive estrangement. Postmodern literature often offers a heightened and nuanced awareness of the effects of commodification on everyday perception, but they often use deliberate deception to trick readers into identifying with characters, images and plot sequences that reduce human characters to simplified abstractions and that falsify history into stereotypical ideological myths. This is especially true of the sly awareness of commodification in Plascencia's novel. Commodification also complicates representation in Castillo's *So Far From God*. The novel concludes with the legacy of the novel's deceased sisters coming to a ruin as their mother Sofia becomes the "presidenta" of the organization "MOMAS, Mothers of Martyrs and Saints", a cross between the Vatican and Disney World. The novel ends with a lengthy description of "useless products and souvenirs" and tacky rituals used to honor the dead sisters that the novel has been trying to triangulate into a utopic pattern of emergent Chicana female identity. Both novels deploy the postmodern literary strategy of resisting narrative closure. This allows the novels to create the kind of open fiction envisioned by Anzaldúa, one that "questions its own formalizing and ordering attempts, its own strategies, the machinations of thought itself" (*Light/Luz* 7). By undoing closure these novels encourage what the narrator of *So Far From God* calls "connect-the-dots game" (120), a critical reflexive turn on the reader's part to discover what corresponds to Ricoeur's conception of the "dimension of reality that is signified by the plot" (*Figuring* 58). This dimension is what is known in hermeneutics as the "horizon" proposed by a work of art, which for Hans-Georg Gadamer "takes place in the work of art itself in such a fashion that at the same time it is sustained in an abiding" (*Ways* 104).

For Ricoeur, this dimension intimated by the plot "exposes" readers (this metaphor echoes an ethical encounter) to what he terms an "enlarged self" which can be linked to Ernst Bloch's concept of "anticipatory illumination". Ricoeur describes this hermeneutic encounter thus: "It is not a question of imposing upon the text our



finite capacity of understanding, but of *exposing* ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed” (*Hermeneutics* 106, my emphasis). In Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, this exposure to an enlarged self echoes an existential process of the subject coming into a new awareness of self through an experience of distanciation: “it must be said that the subjectivity of the reader comes to itself only insofar as it is placed in suspense, unrealised, potentialised” (ibid). This experience is prominent in first-person narratives in Latinx literature, where we often find characters feeling intense existential moments of distanciation that echoes this hermeneutic process of the self becoming suspended. For instance, in Piri Thomas’ Nuyorican memoir *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) the protagonist’s moment of self-distanciation comes as he becomes radically aware of his own toxic masculinity, his previous mode-of-being. This event is described as feeling as “though I had found a hole in my face and out of it were pouring all the different masks that my *cara-palo* face had fought so hard to keep hidden” (Thomas 321). Similarly, in the recent Miami Bildungsroman by Jennine Capó Crucet, *Make Your Home Among Strangers* (2015), the Cuban-American protagonist comes home to Miami after living for a semester in a predominantly white university in the Northeast and she describes her feeling of alienation on seeing her mother, in a moment of distanciation that has class and ethnic implications:

But spotting her before she saw me in the terminal—in that fake gold outfit, her face oily, her hands fidgeting with the rings on her fingers—had made my stomach turn, and I just wanted to be alone somewhere to catch my breath, to have a minute to sync up my idea of home with reality” (Capó Crucet 139).

Both moments in these first-person narratives entail processing different understandings of reality, moments that Gloria Anzaldúa theorized as the experience of *nepantla*. These expressions of self-distanciation in Latinx subjects echo the textual effect of distanciation in Ricoeur’s description of literary discourse: “The strategy of this discourse involves holding two moments in equilibrium: suspending the reference of ordinary language and releasing a second order reference, which is another name for what we have designated above as the world opened up by the work” (*Hermeneutics* 54). But while the existential distanciations above relied on depictions of first-person experiences, a distanciation of a character’s identity can also occur implicitly in the structure of the text by means of the “new dimension of reality that is signified by the plot” (*Figuring* 58).

This is the case of the configuration of characters in Castillo’s *So Far From God*. The novel takes place in the New Mexican town of Tomé and concerns the separate yet shared lives of four sisters in a working-class family headed by their mother Sofia. The four sisters are Esperanza, Caridad, Fe and La Loca (which translates to Hope, Love/Charity, Faith, and Crazy), names referencing what are known as the theological virtues in Paul the Apostle’s First Epistle to the Corinthians: “At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known. So faith, hope, love remain,



these three; but the greatest of these is love” (*New American Bible* 592). The biblical allusion and the metaphor of the mirror suggests a configuration of characters, as if they mirrored each other. After Caridad recovers from her attack by the *malogra*, she discovers she has healing powers and decides to become a *curandera*, or folk healer. The narrator (unnamed, but who often adopts the tone of a neighborly *chismosa* or gossip) describes a moment of Caridad realizing her renewed identity, alluding to the passage from Corinthians: “Caridad had always been charitable. She had faith and hope. Soon, she would have wisdom from which she had sprung, and sooner still her own healing gifts would be revealed” (56). The novel reconfigures Paul’s virtues, now adding wisdom (*sophia* in Greek), also a reference to her mother Sofia. The reference to both the virtues and the characters urges us to think conceptually about the characters as a configuration of beings.

The passage clues readers into ways of engaging the characters in what Edmund Husserl would call the “imaginative variations” experienced in an *epoché*: a hermeneutic *epoché* or distanciation allows one to meditate on exemplary figures (like the sisters) and vary their features in order to “imaginatively produce other possibilities” (MacAvoy 21). In the novel’s plotting of characters, the sisters form what José Esteban Muñoz calls (in his reflections on Ernst Bloch’s hermeneutics in *The Principle of Hope*) “blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity” (Muñoz 1). A description of the sisters can help intimate what Ernst Bloch calls the “anticipatory illumination” of the text:

The anticipatory illumination of a work of art is an image, a constellation, a configuration which is closely tied to the concrete utopias in reality that are lit up on the frontal margins of reality illuminating the possibilities for rearranging social and political relations so they engender *Heimat*, Bloch’s symbolic term for the home that we have all sensed but none have ever experienced or known. (Zipes 32)

A description of the characters may help intimate these anticipatory illuminations. There is the oldest Esperanza, the more pragmatic and politically conscious of the sisters and “the only one to get through college” (*SFG* 25). Her leadership in student protests lead to the introduction of the first Chicano Studies classes offered in the curriculum (239). She becomes an “ace reporter” and advances in her career, soon leaving New Mexico to broaden “her horizons” and free “herself from the provincialism of her upbringing” (35). She is sent on an assignment to the Middle East where she is taken hostage and dies (although she sometimes returns “ecoplasmically” to inspire the political consciousness of her mother and younger sister La Loca) (186). Fe is the sister most critiqued by the narrator. She is described as “since birth [acting] like she had come as a direct descendent of Queen Isabella” (157), “light-skinned” (157) and desiring “a life like people do on TV” (189): “with her own hard-earned money from all the bonuses she earned at her new job” she is described as finally getting “the long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR” (171). Her name ironically suggests a faith in material success and she suffers for this: striving on “moving up quick at Acme International,” she dies from cancer cleaning chemicals from high-tech weapons (178). When she



dies the narrator plainly asserts that she has no chance of returning as a spirit like the other sisters: “Fe just died. And when someone dies that plain dead, it is hard to talk about” (186). The youngest sister La Loca appears to be loosely based on the Belgium Saint Christina the Astonishing: when at three years of age La Loca (her family forgets her original name) dies, visiting hell, purgatory and heaven, she returns to life at her own funeral, suddenly becoming “repulsed by the smell of humans” (23) and living out the rest of her days as a hermit in her family home, where she has visions and receives paranormal visits from spectral apparitions like *la Llorona* and from a mysterious “Lady in Blue” that comforts her as she inexplicably dies from AIDS (244).

Yet much of the novel’s focus is on Caridad who undergoes an initiation process as a curandera under her landlady Doña Felicia. When Caridad and Doña Felicia visit the pilgrimage site of Chimayó, she catches a fleeting sight of Esmeralda and her presence inexplicably so overwhelms Caridad that she falls into a spiritual meditative state that sends her to live a year alone in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. When she finishes her year-long spiritual retreat, she soon discovers Esmeralda, but their relationship is cut short by the overzealous Francisco el Penitente, who stalks the couple up a mountain where they leap or are taken-in by Tsichtinako, a goddess of the Acoma Pueblo Indians who guides “the two women back, not out toward the sun’s rays or up to the clouds but down, deep within the soft, moist dark earth where Esmeralda and Claridad would be safe and live forever” (211). The lives of the sisters are all cut short too soon, and although this lends a fragmentary quality to the novel the implication is that (apart from Fe, who has no spiritual rebirth) the sisters have become saints or martyrs that the reader needs to understand as a configuration. Although there is an ironic effort at official canonization when their mother Sofía creates the institution of the “MOMAS Mothers of Martyrs and Saints,” the meaning of the “saints” are never fully clear. Devotees for instance never figure out the spiritual purpose of La Loca after death: “She was not particularly noted for answering the pleas of the desperate and the hopeless, neither, like el Saint Jude, for example, who is the patron saint of los desesperados. In other words, people never really could figure out who La Loca protected and oversaw as a rule, or what she was good to pray to about” (248).

Yet there are various passages when the narrator gives a metacommentary on the novel, leading us to believe there is a purposeful design to the sisterly configuration. The novel articulates a metacommentary in a digressive chapter, a fragmented narrative of María and Helena, a couple on a road trip going to “where María’s ancestors had been buried for the last nine generations—until her father had left New Mexico to try his luck in California, where indeed, he had done well with a string of taquerías in East LA” (*SFG* 122). They find themselves stalked by a mysterious male driver (echoing what will happen later with Esmeralda and Caridad). The narrator asks the reader for patience: “Now, neither the woman nor her companion in this account was Caridad’s Woman-on-the-wall in Chimayó, but with some patience (a virtue no one could ever have too much of) a few people actually made the connection in the end” (120). The title of the chapter, a sly nod to the kind of chapter titles found in Cervantes or García Márquez, states: “What



Appears to Be a Deviation of Our Story but Wherein, with Some Patience, the Reader Will Discover That There is Always More Than the Eye Can See to Any Account” (120). She says this fragment is like “one of those connect-the-dots games” (120) and that it will be about “all kinds of beginnings and endings but mostly, like all accounts, about what goes on in the middle” (124). This metacommentary alludes to what Ricoeur calls, in his work on narrative theology, an “art of emplotment” that “provides then heterogenous elements with the ambiguous status of a concordant-discordant whole” (*Figuring* 239). Although the meaning of the mother-sisters configuration cannot be explicated straightforwardly, if we analyze the ways the sacred becomes distanced we can uncover the outlines of a spirituality that is activist, queer and historically and ecologically conscious.

In Chicana narratives, religion and spirituality often provide contested positions for negotiating actual and possible cultural worlds. This is especially true of postmodern Chicana novels, whose parodic and intertextual articulations of the religious and the spiritual work to position these into new configurations. The religious and the spiritual provide important archives of meaning for the unfolding of a Chicana identity, for as Theresa Delgadillo states, spirituality in Latina narrative offers important linkages between racial, ethnic, national, gender and sexual identities (Delgadillo 240). Though postmodern Chicana narratives often approach religion and spirituality in a skeptical and playfully irreverent way, nonetheless their intricate understandings of the sacred aid in what David Vázquez terms narrative triangulation, or the “dynamic technique that engages multiple way points, distances, and recalculations in the process of navigation” (Vázquez 3). Ana Castillo and Salvador Plascencia distance the religious and spiritual in order to project specific and/or emergent ways of belonging in Chicana cultural worlds.

For instance, a new queer projection of the spiritual operates in Caridad’s retreat to the cave in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. The retreat combines spirituality, queer desire, and a reverence for the natural world that anticipates Nicole Seymour’s thesis in *Strange Natures* (2013) that there is an implicit “tradition of queer environmentalism” that links “the queer to the natural world” (1). The narrator reveals Caridad’s spiritual point-of-reference during the retreat: “she did not think of time or of no one, not Doña Felicia, not her mom or the other members of her family, not even herself, but not a sleeping or waking moment went by when her heart did not long for Woman-on-the-wall in Chimayó” (*SFG* 89). Yet a paragraph before this we see how this love emanates outward towards the natural world: “she woke to a delicate scar in the horizon that gradually bled into day and saw the sun then raise itself like a king from its throne over the distant peaks, Caridad only knew that she wanted to stay there and be the lone witness to that miracle every dawn” (*ibid*). The metaphor of the scar on the horizon bleeding into day evokes the linkage that is being established between inner desire and natural reality. When she is discovered near the time of Holy Week, hundreds of Catholics (who went “instead of going to Mass at their local parishes”) (87) and Indigenous people from the pueblos, “made their way up the mountain to la Caridad’s cave in hopes of obtaining her blessing and just as many with hopes of being cured of some ailment or another” (*SFG* 87).





Although she remains silent and immobile in her encounters with visitors, some believe her to be “the ghost of Lozen, Warm Springs Apache mystic woman warrior” (88) while Francisco el Penitente looks on her “as one looked upon Mary,” as “all that was chaste and humble” (192). These conflicts of interpretation reveal what Ricoeur terms “the opposition between alienating distanciation and belonging” (*Hermeneutics* 93). In other words, we see a tension between a foreign horizon of being and two traditions (Catholic and Indigenous) attempting to appropriate this distanciation. Castillo positions Caridad’s queer spirituality as *aslant* of these two traditions. This narrative strategy is linked to Castillo’s attempt to situate an emergent identity in-between traditions. Castillo is explicit about this strategy in *Massacre of the Dreamers*: “Creating some distance from the last generation allowed such guerrilleras to adapt a spirituality to their own needs while still operating within their culture” (*Massacre* 166-167).

With its configuration of sisters, Castillo’s novel imagines what Ernst Bloch would term a concrete utopia which is “relational to historically situated struggles [and] a collectivity that is actualized or potential” as opposed to “abstract utopias” which are “are untethered from any historical consciousness” (Muñoz 3). Apart from Fe, the spiritualities of Sofia and her daughters are deeply grounded in material and social realities. This thematic aspect of the text culminates in a syncretic Good Friday procession of the cross, a seemingly spontaneous religious event in the novel that unites both Christians and Indigenous religions. As a figure of Jesus goes through the stages of the cross, the crowd gives testimony on the effects of environmental violence on their community. For example, one indigenous woman proclaims: “Our people have always known about the interconnectedness of things; and the responsibility we have to ‘Our Mother,’ and to seven generations after our own. But we, as a people, are being eliminated from the ecosystem, too...like the dolphins, like the eagle” (*SFG* 242). This juxtapositioning of environmental justice and syncretic religious ritual is implicitly contrasted with Francisco el Penitente’s vision of faith as articulated earlier in the novel, which obfuscates historical reality in favor of a vision of heaven uncaring of a broader historical or natural reality.

When Francisco is six, all the boys at his school are vaccinated for smallpox, but not his mother and sister, who soon die of the disease. Francisco’s idea of his mother soon becomes otherworldly: “as the years went on his mother ever ascending toward heaven became more remote as a former human being and more akin to a celestial entity” (97-98). Francisco imagines his mother affectionately as “una santita en el cielo watching over” her family (98). This distanciation begins to have an effect on Francisco’s horizon of being when he becomes a santero (in this context, a maker of “bultos” or “wooden sculptures of saints”) (96). Francisco believes he channels the divine essence of the saints when he crafts their images. But as he forms statues of St. Francis of Assisi, the essence he imagines is far removed from the actual earthly life of the Saint:

St. Francis himself could only guide Francisco’s hand since it wasn’t St. Francis the holy man whom Francisco was imagining, the one who had cared for the poor, the infirm and the hungry, the orphaned children and all the innocent creatures on



earth, but St. Francis in his rightful eternal place in heaven, from which privileged place he was able to work miracles for the all-too-human beings left on earth. (101)

The chapter soon reiterates this tension between material and celestial reality in its description of Francisco's apprenticeship with his uncle: "[they] labored with the natural elements, sun, air, and earth and prayed all the while as they worked together in silence—like their Spanish ancestors had done for nearly three hundred years on that strange land they felt was so far from God" (101-102). Both passages above reveal an ambiguity within religious tradition(s). In both instances, although Francisco labors with materials evoking deep connections to the natural world (as St. Francis and the "natural elements" imply), yet the horizon of being that ultimately emerges from his work, his specific distancing of the world, imagines the celestial as radically separate and uncaring of socio-historical and ecological realities.

So far we have seen how distanciaciones in Castillo's novel involve readers into different perceptions of seeing the world, often implying a imagined composite identity that is socially-conscious, queer, spiritual and earth-bound and that emerges within and against competing traditions. For instance, Caridad's spiritual retreat to the Sangre de Cristo mountains involves a play of horizons. We get her spiritual perception and connection to the natural world inspired by her sighting of Esmeralda, but just for a brief paragraph. We are then faced with a variety of perspectives attempting to articulate Caridad within a tradition, as we lose sight of her perception within conflicting articulations. And as a configuration of characters, the mother and sisters provide variations of what Ricoeur terms the "enlarged self" (*Hermeneutics* 106), or what Ernst Bloch conceptualized as an "anticipatory illumination" of an emergent identity. Finally, we saw how Francisco el Penitente is crucial for the further illumination of the novel's Chicana horizon. As Ricoeur states, "it is only in a conflict of rival hermeneutics that we perceive something of the being to be interpreted" ("Existence" 19). Francisco's devaluation of the "all-too-human" world for a celestial world conflicts with the significance of the Good Friday procession and the spiritualities of Caridad and even Esperanza who (although generally skeptical of the supernatural while alive) still prays "to Grandmother Earth and Grandmother Sky" (*SFG* 38). But for Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*, the distanciaciones do not ultimately reveal a utopic horizon; rather, its kitschy and sentimental representations demonstrate (albeit ironically) an escape from socio-historical and ecological realities and a movement towards a Chicana neoliberal individualism that enjoys its culture melancholically. David Vázquez's study of narrative triangulation in Latinx literature finds that its authors are "committed to countering liberal individualism as a primary aspect of their antiracist strategies" (Vázquez 23). Although on the surface Plascencia's novel promotes a racist and sexist neoliberal worldview, in an ironic way Plascencia's novel is attempting indirectly a similar strategy by encouraging its readers to negate its own radically dystopian cultural horizon.

In *The Plague of Fantasies*, Slavoj Žižek states that art is "fragmentary, even when it is an organic Whole, since it always relies on the *distance towards fantasy*" (Žižek 25). Fantasy in psychoanalysis refers to an illusion of a consistent, unified and desired reality that is generated to obfuscate and/or reveal an inconsistency





or antagonism within social-material reality. While Castillo's novel proposed a desired futurity, it does so in a fragmented way that takes into account competing traditions of interpretation, thus allowing a futurity to gleam between the lines. This is not the case with Plascencia's novel because there is a parodic postmodern shallowness or flatness at work in his novel that solicits our curiosity and critique. Although Žižek claims that "melodrama and kitsch are much closer to fantasy than 'true art'" (ibid 26), Plascencia parodies these modes as decontextualizing myths that readers should critique (unlike Castillo, there is no utopic alternative in the novel). As distanciations, the novel's illusions do not intervene to illuminate history in a new utopic way; rather, realities are parodically flattened and decontextualized into what Bloch terms abstract utopias. This is the case of Federico de la Fe, one of Plascencia's several stereotypes of the Mexican migrant to Los Angeles.

Federico's origins are hyperbolically pastoral: by the river Las Tortugas, Federico chases "goats and sheep to bring [his daughter] milk" (Plascencia 19) and when we first meet him he is carrying his "conjugal mattress past the citrus orchard" and towards the river to clean out the urine from the mattress he shares with his wife Merced and daughter Little Merced (18). A chronic bedwetter, Federico refuses to wear diapers "like the ones their daughter wore" (ibid). Both "child and husband" are described as sleeping in the nude "curled around Merced" (ibid). When Merced leaves, because she is fed up with being pissed on (or as she says "A wife can only take so many years of being pissed on") (18) this begins his "sadness" and the sensation of the "weight of a distant force looking down on him" (18) that he comes to believe is the presence of the planet Saturn, which turns out to be Plascencia the author. Federico realizes that the only cure to "the sadness" is what he calls "burn collection," which involves the infliction of constellations of burn marks on the body (187). The infliction of pain on the body becomes a repeated motif in the novel: for instance, Little Merced obsessively sucks on limes to feel pain (she later dies of "citric poisoning" only to be resurrected by a curandero) and Plascencia's girlfriend Cameroon seeks solace from being abandoned by her father by keeping a Mason jar full of bees that she uses to sting herself. The painful nostalgia for a lost past is described as a foundational "sadness" that is supposed to add a sense of depth to the emotional life of the characters. But what the novel is trying to promote in Federico de la Fe as a "biblical" sadness is mere infantile fantasy (128). This fantasy leads to a distortion of history, turning Mexico into a primitive Eden, a place built on "mud" and not cement like Los Angeles (as the novel repeatedly mentions).

The novel becomes an amalgamation of various genres and narratives of Chicanx literary and historical traditions, including the magical realist novel, the history of social protests, and narratives of migration, gang life, and drug abuse. But it distanciates these traditions, especially the history of protest movements. Federico and Little Merced migrate to the city of El Monte in Los Angeles where he works picking flowers with the Chicanx flower-picking gang "EMF" (El Monte Flores). It is a gang "not like city gangs": "They did not loot fruit stores or steal car parts; they just drank mescal and worked in the furrows harvesting flowers" (34). Apart from the "brinca" initiation ritual, they are described as mostly passively sitting "around the dominoes table drinking mescal and chewing rose petals" (38).



Federico soon enlists the gang to embark on a war on Saturn, in what he terms “a war of volition and against the commodification of sadness” (53). Federico tells the gang: “We are being listened to and watched, our lives sold as entertainment. But if we fight we might be able to gain control, to shield ourselves and live our lives for ourselves” (ibid). As part of the novel’s decontextualization strategies, the gang agrees with no mention being given of either debate or deliberation, or evidence of Saturn’s celestial control over their lives. Like the pastoral representation of Las Tortugas, El Monte is a kitschy abstraction of social reality, where no mention is made of structural inequality or exploitation. The goals of the war appear to be “dignity through privacy” and the “right to be unseen” (46), demands that estrange “representation” as a concept that means the depiction of identity and the political act of standing in for something.

There is a telling moment near the end of the novel when the gang rouses the city of El Monte to come outside and say “all the things we had always wanted to say, letting the words float” (209). The novel’s pages are divided into different sections, sometimes multiple columns, according to different characters, but in this sequence each page is chaotically filled with five or more sections, some passages even printed sideways. As the book becomes cluttered with different voices and columns, we read the voice of a minor character Little Oso. As he tries to freely write down what is on his mind, he realizes the limitations of his mental horizon: “I didn’t know what else to say. This is my home, this town of furrows and carnations, and I don’t care where our flowers go, if they are sniffed by royalty or movie stars. Whatever happens beyond our borders is not my worry, it is only Monte and its sky that I care about” (215). This myopic social perception connects with a series of other distanciations. For instance, Federico discovers on his way to Los Angeles a Tijuana mechanic who specializes in mechanical tortoises. By entering the lead of their shells, Federico is able to shelter his thoughts from Saturn’s penetrating gaze (we are even given a glimpse of Saturn’s perception, as half the page is filled with binary numbers) (97). The image of Federico crawling into the safety of the shell, and the reference to turtles (his hometown was called “Las Tortugas,” *The Turtles* in English) refers to Federico’s infantile fantasies at the start of the novel. Plascencia may be playfully echoing Octavio Paz’s critique of “the Mexican *macho*” who is described as “a hermetic being, closed up in himself” (Paz 31). Plascencia as Saturn also lacks broader social or ecological horizons. When the gang uses the lead of the turtle shells to cover their homes (though they eventually suffer from lead poisoning), Saturn is forced to contemplate nature:

Not all is about gangs and a sad man who wets his bed. There is time and space for everything, to observe the thousands of tragedies of a single growing season. To watch the flower stalks burst through the soil, interweaving their roots with the neighboring plant, tangling their wires under the privacy of soil, tightly gripping, gradually pulling themselves to each other to feel the brush of leaves against the stems. (92)

Saturn or Plascencia soon after develops a writer’s block and the novel is interrupted to shift its focus for several chapters on Plascencia’s family and



relationship with Cameroon. The passage above is remarkable as it describes in terms of vegetation a brief desire for interconnectivity and intimacy that challenges Federico's melancholic desire for privacy.

To conclude, Plascencia's distanciaciones parodically flatten our perceptions of Chicana identity and history to make us more keenly aware of what Shklovsky termed "automatization," a form of perception that commodifies reality and converts it into mere formula or stereotype. The postmodern novel in this mode encourages a critique of commodification as forms of dystopian perception. Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* is more utopian in its aims. It offers what Chela Sandoval describes in *Methodology of the Oppressed* as a "hope that a new subject of history can rise from the rubble of the old order to forge another, more liberatory" one (Sandoval 15). This utopic hope survives in the novel like Emma Pérez's "faint outline," intimating a decolonial imaginary gleaming just beyond our horizons (Pérez 7).

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# QUEER AZTLÁN IN CHERRÍE MORAGA'S *THE HUNGRY WOMAN: A MEXICAN MEDEA*

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on Cherríe Moraga's semi-autobiographical writings and varied scholarly work, this article contends that in her play, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2001), she not only critiques patriarchal heteronormativity, but she goes further by naming the necessary elements for a society in which her "Queer Aztlán" (1993), would be possible. Through a close reading of *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2001), this article demonstrates that the play not only focuses on the necessary deconstruction of patriarchal nationalism, but it also offers the unexpected seeds of change, found in the secondary character of Luna. By shifting our focus onto this character, we may better appreciate Moraga's forward thinking and the kernels of "Queer Aztlán" expressed in this play.

KEYWORDS: "Queer Aztlán," Medea/Coyolxauhqui/Coatlicue/Huitzilopochtli, Chac-Mool, *The Hungry Woman*, Aztlán, Patriarchal Nationalism.

## LA AZTLÁN QUEER EN *THE HUNGRY WOMAN:* *A MEXICAN MEDEA* DE CHERRÍE MORAGA

## RESUMEN

Considerando las obras semi-autobiográficas de Cherríe Moraga y los textos críticos de académicos, en este artículo mantenemos que en su obra dramática *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2001), Moraga no solo ofrece una crítica hacia la heteronormatividad patriarcal, sino que va más allá; nombra los elementos necesarios para una sociedad en la cual su concepto de "Queer Aztlán" (1993) sería posible. En la lectura que ofrecemos de esta obra, demostraremos que *The Hungry Woman* brinda semillas inesperadas de cambio a través del personaje secundario de Luna. Al cambiar nuestro enfoque hacia este personaje es posible que apreciemos mejor la visión de futuro de Moraga y las simientes de la noción de "Queer Aztlán" dentro de ella.

PALABRAS CLAVE: "Queer Aztlán," Medea/Coyolxauhqui/Coatlicue/Huitzilopochtli, Chac-Mool, *The Hungry Woman*, Aztlán, nacionalismo patriarcal.

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Xicana lesbian author and scholar Cherríe Moraga is renowned for having laid the foundation for Xicana written expression and resistance. From her earliest work in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) to her most recent *Native Country of the Heart: A Memoir* (2019), Moraga has recovered stories from the past and used them to shape new images and words for the present and future. Of her numerous multi-genre plays, poems, essays and anthologies, one of her most complex works is *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2001), which combines Catholic, Greek and pre-Columbian myths about women to demonstrate the patriarchal nationalism embedded within them. Most scholars to analyze this play have focused on the significance of Medea, the play's protagonist, whose actions signal an end to patriarchy. Drawing on the author's writings, both before and after the publication of *The Hungry Woman*, and that of critics, this article suggests that through the secondary character of Luna, who has received little attention from scholars, we find the playwright's articulation of an alternative understanding of nationalism.

*The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* is a complex treatment of overlapping myths, temporalities and spaces. While Medea's most evident connection is with Euripides's *Medea*, she also shares traits with Malinche, La Llorona and the Aztec goddess Coatlicue (known in the play as the Hungry Woman). All these figures have been used to limit female behavior, particularly those that could disturb or disrupt patriarchal order. In this play, Moraga explodes that order by fashioning a Medea who resignifies each of the mythical figures previously mentioned. She betrays the heteronormative rules in place, echoing Malintzin, the translator and lover of Spanish *conquistador* Hernán Cortés, and kills her child, like La Llorona and the Greek Medea, but for something bigger than revenge as this article contends.

In *The Hungry Woman*, Medea is an ex-revolutionary, who helped found Aztlán as a separate nation within the United States. The revolution defended aboriginal rights and anyone who supported the cause was allowed to stay within the territory. But after several years, hierarchies were formed between men and women, while all queer people were forced into exile. Sometime in between that period, Medea falls in love with a female stonemason, Luna. Once the heteronormative and patriarchal laws are put into place, the lesbian lovers are exiled to Phoenix, Arizona, (depicted as a wasteland) together with Medea's son, Chac-Mool, and her grandmother, Mama Sal. One of the conflicts centers on Chac-Mool, who has decided to return to Aztlán to be with his father. His return means that he will contribute to patriarchal nationalism, the very system of thought that exiled them. Jasón, his father, can only own land in Aztlán if Chac-Mool lives with him, because he, and not his father, has the proper indigenous blood quantity as part-Yaqui Indian and therefore his presence is instrumental rather than based on genuine fatherly love. In a symbolic act to interrupt and abolish the cycle, Medea ends Chac-Mool's life by giving him atole made of blue corn that, she says, will make him sleepy. Shortly after his death, Chac-Mool comes back in the form of a spirit, gives her a similar drink and tells her he will take Medea "home." Crucially, upon dying, each figure is held in a pieta image. First, Medea holds Chac-Mool and, later, Chac-Mool holds Medea, symbolizing the renewed life sought by Medea: an end to the machismo that overtook Aztlán and destroyed it as a promise land for all.



The exorbitantly extreme price paid by Medea to end patriarchal nationalism can be read in multiple ways. Some argue that it expresses the unlikelihood that heteronormativity will ever be truly defeated. In a fascinating discussion on death as a sort of gift in *The Hungry Woman*, Tania González argues that, “By playing with murder as an act of—and death as a space of—subversion of patriarchal power, Moraga highlights the difficulties in escaping ideologies that perpetuate discourses of difference” (50). And yet, Moraga seems certain that the best way to imagine a world without patriarchy is through a story as powerful and emotionally charged as the many stories that have killed women’s sexuality and agency. In an interview with María Antònia Oliver-Rotger, Moraga asks: “Well, if traición was the reason [for Euripides’s Medea to kill her children], could infanticide then be retaliation against misogyny, an act of vengeance not against one man, but man in general for a betrayal much graver than sexual infidelity: the enslavement and deformation of our sex?” (11). In other words, for Moraga, a story that rewrites Euripides’s myth, would emphasize the point that true liberation for women has yet to be achieved and that enormous sacrifices are still needed.

Patriarchy, as a system in need of dismantling, appears forcefully in much of Moraga’s writing on the 1960s and 1970s Chicano Movement. As Professor Emeritus Francisco A. Lomelí states, “the idea of a historic-geographical Aztlán served as the most unifying force in the emerging cultural renaissance” (2). It created a sense of self-determination, unity and a common dream. However, according to Moraga, the Movement “never accept[ed] openly gay men and lesbians among its ranks” (“Queer” 255). Heterosexual men maintained the most important leadership positions, invoking stories that would keep Chicanas “silent and sexually passive” (“Queer” 260). New and challenging stories, such as *The Hungry Woman*, speak back to this trajectory of patriarchal nationalism, in part, by placing death at the center. As Moraga says in her 2007 interview with Oliver-Rotger, “I chose tragedy, ‘because it teaches deeper and harder than happy’ ” (10). This tragedy uniquely places queer desire at the center and, perhaps ironically, can be read as expressing hope for the future of Xicanxs. As Michelle R. Martin-Baron shows in her consideration of a term she calls mythical enjambment (that is, the insertion of myths where they are not supposed to be, according to convention), one can find Moraga’s utopic vision in the play’s “recognition of multiple modes of oppression” (244). By overlapping and intertwining numerous myths of different origins, she also implies that there is a way to unravel them. In a related observation, Tanya González asserts that, “While death may not seem like a positive ‘beginning,’ Moraga’s play asserts that it can be a place to start imagining the world from a decolonized perspective. By telling history from that ‘future space,’ she is able to imagine another future without disappointment and disillusionment—a real place organized by love, but only reachable through death” (73). In line with these scholars, who understand *The Hungry Woman* as creating an opening for an imagined alternative future, this article argues that a new form of belonging becomes most visible in the figure of Luna. To best understand the significance of this character, we must consider the patriarchy held within her counterpart, Medea.





## THE UBIQUITY OF PATRIARCHY

The powerful and enduring phrase that Xicana women needed to “unlearn the puta/virgen dichotomy,” coined by Gloria E. Anzaldúa, continues to resonate with feminists around the globe. The message is that patriarchy is based on binary divisions, embedded in the thinking, speech and practices of both men and women. In Moraga’s play, this notion manifests itself in Medea, who is unable to detach herself completely from the patriarchal nationalism practiced in Aztlán.<sup>1</sup> Medea states: “I still have allies there. People don’t forget so easy. I’m building a bridge back. For both of us. I’ll send for you” (1.9.47). Luna, however, is more realistic: “I am not the kind of revolutionary they are looking for” (1.9.47).<sup>2</sup> Medea’s inability to imagine a full life without Aztlán makes her unwilling to commit entirely to her relationship with Luna and this reflects Medea’s hubris. During most of the play, and despite her profound disapproval of Aztlán’s heteronormative laws, she is not capable of separating herself from it. In Jorge Manuel González’s reading of the play, Medea’s participation in heterosexist discourse could reflect “the possible origins of a liberated Aztlán caught in the contradiction of its machista revolutionary rhetoric” (134).

One element that makes Medea a complex character is that she is not blind to her internal contradictions and the contradictions she represents for Aztlán. Perhaps for this reason, she predicts her own death at the beginning of the play, much before the double death at the end:

I am the last one to make this journey. My tragedy will be an example to all women like me. Vain women who only know to be the beloved. Such an example I shall be that no woman will dare to transgress those boundaries again. ... I am the last one to make this crossing, the border has closed behind me. (1.8.46)

When she states that she only knows how to “be the beloved,” she implies that she has not learned to fully love another. In her environment, loving a woman and a man involves two mutually-exclusive systems; a person cannot be a revolutionary in Aztlán and also be a lesbian, which means that she has not been able to give herself completely to any person or cause. Furthermore, heteronormativity is represented in the play as intimately connected to patriarchal nationalism (Aztlán and Jasón), and because she still loves the idea of Aztlán, she is partially complicit with it. Recognizing that she is part of both systems allows us to better understand the significance of her death at the conclusion of the play: her own passing is also needed for heteronormative and patriarchal nationalism to end.

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<sup>1</sup> For a consideration of Medea as practicing patriarchal motherhood, see Jorge Manuel González’s dissertation chapter “Sacrifice of the Primal Mother/Sister: Decolonial Horizons and the Dialectics of Death in Cherríe Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*”, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Tania González also agrees on this point: “Medea’s refusal to commit to Jasón or Luna is less a reflection of her disillusionment with her idyllic understanding of love and of the nation-state, and more an inability to live outside of the nationalist construction” (57).



We learn more about the subtle presence of patriarchy operating within Medea through the play's use of the Mesoamerican myth of Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of creation and destruction. According to the stage directions, Act I opens with a chorus made up of Aztec women, who have died in childbirth ("Cihuateo") and tell a shortened version of the Coatlicue myth, with an altar to this goddess in the backdrop. In the story, Coatlicue is impregnated by an eagle feather. Her children know that the gestating child is the God of War, Huitzilopochtli, and fearing him, Coatlicue's daughter, Coyolxauhqui, and her four hundred siblings, prepare a plan to kill their mother. However, Huitzilopochtli is warned about their plan by a hummingbird and as soon as he is born, he dismembers Coyolxauhqui, who is "banished to the darkness and becomes the moon" (*Last Generation* 73). References to this myth appear throughout the play. Crucially, Act II begins with a re-enactment of the Coatlicue myth where each of the play's characters is assigned to one of the myth's figures: Luna is the daughter/Coyolxauhqui, Medea is the mother/Coatlicue, and Chac-Mool is the son/Huitzilopochtli.

The primary problem with this myth, according to Moraga, is that it imposes symbolic violence on the relationship between mothers and daughters, a point she highlights in *The Last Generation*:

Here, mother and daughter are pitted against each other and daughter must kill male-defined motherhood in order to save the culture from misogyny, war, and greed. But el hijo comes to the defense of patriarchal motherhood, kills la mujer rebelde, and female power is eclipsed by the rising light of the Sun/Son. This machista myth is enacted every day of our lives, every day that the sun (Huitzilopochtli) rises up from the horizon and the moon (Coyolxauhqui) is obliterated by his light. (73)

In this myth, the mother is complicit with and facilitates a dominant and violent son, who represents a world based on binaries, where he is the strongest unit. In this scenario, mothers and daughters are not at peace, nor are siblings. In *The Hungry Woman*, though, this imbalance is symbolically avoided because Medea kills the son. Chac-Mool's death is the death of Huitzilopochtli, which leads to the end of heteronormative patriarchal nationalism, and Jasón will never own land or have descendants in Aztlán.

Beyond undoing the dichotomies implied in the myth by taking Huitzilopochtli out of it, Moraga also makes an important addition, which involves healing the mother-daughter wound. Immediately following the infanticide and before her own passing, Medea denounces Coatlicue for betraying her daughter, which she did when she allowed her son/Huitzilopochtli to murder her daughter/Coyolxauhqui. Medea, then, proclaims allegiance to the daughter/Coyolxauhqui: "Ahora, she is my god. La Luna, la hija rebelde" (2.8.92). Indeed, Medea's antidote to age-old patriarchal violence is to transfer her loyalty to the daughter who never had the chance to have a proper relationship with the mother. In the play, this daughter is Luna. As Kathryn Quinn-Sánchez maintains, Medea offers "life and freedom to the goddess of the moon, and by extension to all women" (42). In this way, Medea has made an essential move toward abolishing the patriarchy within her.



We know that Medea's new allegiance to the daughter/Coyolxauhqui, and also Luna, is important because the entire play culminates in a scene where the moon is fundamental. In the last scene, Chac-Mool comes back for Medea in the form of a spirit to "take her home." He gives her a drink made of powdered herbs, and when confused, Medea asks him where home is, he tells her to look at the moon. She attempts to do this, but complains, "The sun is too bright" (98). Eventually she sees the full moon and Chac-Mool repeats: "You're going home" (98). Medea's vision was at once eclipsed by the "sun," but then she is able to see her new home with the moon. So, unlike the Coatlicue myth, where Medea/Coatlicue is about to be murdered by her daughter, here quite the opposite occurs; she symbolically goes to rest with the daughter (the moon), together with the son/sun (Chac-Mool). By embracing Chac-Mool and Medea (read as Coyolxauhqui receiving Huitzilopochtli and Coatlicue), the three figures, who were pitted against each other in the Coatlicue myth, are now united. Moraga, also, resignifies the holy trinity entirely, placing the daughter as the one who lovingly holds the mother and the son in a relationship free of hierarchies.

### LUNA AS "QUEER AZTLÁN"

The fact that the character of Luna continues to live in the physical world after the death of Medea and Chac-Mool is also important. Luna, who Moraga envisioned as just as much of a border figure as Medea (Oliver-Rotger 13), symbolizes alternative knowledge and renewed forms of belonging. As a lesbian, Luna has no chance of being welcomed back into Aztlán, and this could explain, at least in part, her sense of freedom and certainty her identity. Medea even seems to envy her: "You act so free" (1.9.48). Luna uses her freedom to help Medea, by trying to convince her to leave Jasón and Aztlán forever. She also attempts to rescue others. At one point, Luna illegally crosses into Aztlán and tells the Border Guard that she wanted to free "them." When the Border Guard asks "who?" she responds: "Ancient little diosas, the size of children's toys. They were trapped, sir, behind the museum glass. They belonged to us. ... I wanted to free my little sisters, trapped by history" (2.1.59). Luna's message is that by helping the "little diosas," or sculpted "sisters," return to their families, she could free them from the static space of the museum, a space that unjustly claimed ownership over their bodies and depleted the communities who depended on their power. Although we do not know the identity of the clay sculptures, the Aztecs believed that the tangible representation of deities held the *teotl* (or divine power) of the god themselves. Freeing them would, then, restore the community's strength.

Luna is somewhat successful in freeing these figures as her goal is to hold their hands, which she manages to do, but she is not able to convince Medea to let go of Aztlán. Mama Sal sees this clearly:

MAMA SAL. When you're a girl, hija, and a Mexican, you can learn purty quick that you got only one shot at being a woman and that's being a mother.



LUNA. Tell Medea. She's the mother, not me.

MAMA SAL. You go from a daughter to a mother, and there's nothing in between. That's the law of our people written como los diez commandments on the metate stone from the beginning of all time.

LUNA. Well, that ain't my story.

MAMA SAL. Exactly. You go and change the law. You leave your mother and go out and live on your own...You learn how to tear down walls and put them up again. Hasta tu propia casa, you build with your own hands. (1.9.50)

While the burden of lesbianism is clear in that they have been banished to a wasteland, Luna is depicted as capable of creating something new, as a sculptor and as a person who does not adhere to heteronormative laws. Mama Sal's encouragement here for Luna to build her own house and set of laws, foreshadows the future that she may facilitate.

At the end of the play, Luna is the only figure remaining from the Coatlicue myth and she represents the possibility of an alternative future that she would not only build for herself, but for others as well. This is interesting because Luna's way of being in the world resembles Moraga's "Queer Aztlán," a concept she developed with Xicano poet Ricardo Bracho<sup>3</sup> only a few years before the play was read for the first time to an audience.<sup>4</sup> The two authors dreamed of a Chicano homeland that could "embrace *all* its people, including its *jotería*"<sup>5</sup> ("Queer" 254). And Moraga adds that this nation would be based on an all-inclusive nationalism (as opposed to the conventional divisive nationalism), where one would find a range of people with different racial, sexual and gender expressions (264). Like the notion of Aztlán during the Chicano Movement, "Queer Aztlán" is not ambiguous about its Indian identity and adopts an indigenist worldview, where people "take the rights of indigenous peoples as the highest priority," and who "draw upon the traditions ... of native peoples the world over" (265).

Luna's character, in many ways, practices citizenship and an alternative form of nationalism as it would seem to work in "Queer Aztlán." The economy she represents is not of accumulation (capitalistic), but rather of subsistence, seen in her recommendation to Chac-Mool: "Plant corn. A single corn can produce enough grain to feed a person for a day" (1.1.13). Luna's reverence of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin, who connotes to mother earth, agriculture and human fertility, also demonstrates her closeness to the indigenous ways of being. Her knowledge of the earth's cycles and abundant harvest in a barren land, where corn would not typically survive, let alone flourish, also indicate her closeness to indigenous knowledge of

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<sup>3</sup> In the essay, originally published in 1993, Moraga states: "'Queer Aztlán' had been forming in my mind for over three years and began to take concrete shape a year ago in a conversation with poet Ricardo Bracho" (225).

<sup>4</sup> The first staged reading took place at Berkeley Repertory Theatre on April 10, 1995 (*The Hungry Woman* 5).

<sup>5</sup> Moraga includes an endnote stating that, for Chicanos, *jotería* means "queer" folk.



the land, which surpasses that of other characters, even the elderly Mama Sal, who is surprised by Luna's "experiment" to plant blue corn in Phoenix (1.4.30). Perhaps most importantly, her knowledge of maize brings her into a caring relationship with Chac-Mool; he asks her to teach him the harvest ritual for planting maize, which she does in an abandoned lot near their building. Chac-Mool understands that this knowledge is the foundation of the "real revolution" and he dreams of bringing that knowledge back to the misguided and deformed Aztlán.

To a degree, Chac-Mool and Luna are interdependent; he is the apprentice and she the mentor. Chac-Mool is furious, when he learns that Luna is no longer in Medea's life, right at the time of harvest: "Where is she? She doesn't even get to see it. She planted it. Why can't she see it? Why did you send her away?" (66). Their relationship is interrupted because of Medea's inability to commit to Luna, who consequently leaves her, and because of Chac-Mool's interest in returning to Aztlán, which leads Medea to end his life. Stated in another way, complementarity between Luna and Chac-Mool (moon and son) is not possible because of Medea's inability to separate herself from her own desire to return to Aztlán, and because of the laws in Aztlán that make Chac-Mool's return inevitable.

Although a relationship of complementarity between Luna and Chac-Mool is not completely achieved, we are led to imagine that such a relationship occurs in a future and perhaps spiritual world, when Chac-Mool takes Medea "home" to the moon. Some feminist scholars argue that when societies move toward a patriarchal structure, myths of complementarity between gods and goddesses are sometimes replaced by myths like the Coatlicue one, where there is an "ousting of a goddess by a male god" (qtd in Lara 105). This is an essential point because a move toward complementarity between Luna and Chac-Mool would mean an overhaul and the healing of the dichotomous relationship they exhibit in the Coatlicue myth of the moon and the sun. We could use the same concept to think about the relationship between the mother and the daughter: Medea as the mother/Coatlicue and Luna as daughter/Coyolxauhqui. They, too, require healing and unity, which seems symbolically possible in this new home with the moon. As readers/viewers, we are made to imagine that harmony is reached at the end of the play; patriarchy has not only come to an end, but an alternative collectivity, one that is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional, is left as an offering.

The moon/Coyolxauhqui is an important symbol for Xicanas' response to the historic Xicano Movement, because she resembles the fragmentation that lesbian and gay Xicanos felt, "that of being 'mutilated' by her brother" (Luna and Galeana 17). She is also symbolic of the "pain many Chicanas understood living under a system of patriarchy, but more so, having been literally 'sacrificed' by their Chicano brothers during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s-70s" (Luna and Galeana 17).<sup>6</sup> In this play, Moraga rewrites her symbolism entirely for she is anything but the victim; she is, rather, a manifestation of the future that begins at the end of the play. In this

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<sup>6</sup> See also Judith L. Huacuja's "Borderlands Critical Subjectivity in Recent Chicana Art."



way, her significance comes closer to Jennie Luna and Martha Galeana's translation of her name as she who prepares for and is a visual manifestation of ceremony (15). Similarly, in Moraga's telling, we may also understand the moon/Coyolxauhqui, who is Luna, as offering, the gift of preparing for and realizing ceremony.

If we think of death in the play as not necessarily physical, but rather as mental and spiritual and needed for rebirth—as Coatlicue, the goddess of death and rebirth implies—, then we can visualize the subtle proposal for the future implied at the end. In other words, death symbolizes not only the end of one kind of thinking, as Tania González aptly demonstrates, but also a shifting of minds toward the alternative, non-normative, queer ways of being, embodied specifically in Luna.

Moraga states that she first learned about Coatlicue from Anzaldúa (Oliver-Rotger 12). Although Anzaldúa's writing on Coatlicue did not seem to influence Moraga, her interpretation of Coyolxauhqui may have. Anzaldúa explains that this daughter-goddess is similar to the art of composition: "tanto si estás componiendo una obra de ficción o tu propia vida como si estás componiendo la realidad, siempre significa que tomas piezas fragmentadas y las pones juntas, formando un todo que tenga sentido" (283). Crucially, Moraga's Luna is also not fragmented—as she appears in the pre-Colombian myth—, but represents a source of wholeness, capable of aiding others and creating new realities.

As a "pionera" writer, Cherríe Moraga states that she did not receive guidance from the generations before her regarding the past. In her most recent work, *Native Country of the Heart* (2019) she states: "Growing up, my elders, well-meaning, told my generation 'Go that way, hijos. Look north to your future.' They asked us to betray them, to forget them. 'Walk that way, mi'ja.' They didn't know the cost." (4). Moraga responds to this lack of guidance by dedicating her life to providing alternative stories to lead her readers into the future. In her interview with Oliver-Rotger, Moraga is in agreement with Toni Morrison, when she states that the colored artist's duty is to explore and make more accessible their versions of the past:

And unraveling history, the multitude of versions of the story, the story from multifarious perspectives, this is limitless. And how great is our task to remember if we are people of color artists ... Because our version of the story has never been told. Still. (Oliver-Rotger 15)

As we have seen in this play, Cherríe Moraga takes on the very difficult task of weaving together myths that have been told about women, in such a way that it will change the course of the present and future: "Because history in all its limitlessness determines the future" (15), she adds. The road map that Moraga creates for her readers/viewers leads not to a particular geographical space, but rather to a new understanding of collectivity and belonging: Aztlán's heteronormative nationalism is no longer available to organize Xicanx society. In the physical world, Luna may lead a group of people to practice farming based on indigenous practice and ritual, and create new laws that demand inclusivity in all of its many forms. Through the character of Luna, we now have a story of an alternative to national belonging. While Moraga's Luna is a fictional character, her collaborative, non-binary thinking reflects



a refusal to settle, reminiscent of Paolo Freire's theory of radical hope in *Daring to Dream*. This is the future Moraga has worked toward for decades, and one that comes within reach in *The Hungry Woman*.

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# THE COATLICUE'S STATE IN *THE MIXQUIAHUALA LETTERS*: A POSTMODERN INTERPRETATION ON HOW TO REACH THE MESTIZA CONSCIOUSNESS

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## ABSTRACT

During the Chicana Literary Renaissance of the 1980s, Chicana writers—influenced by the Third World Feminist Movement—revealed new forms of representation of the Chicana experience. While concentrating on the subversive reading of the subject-object duality in Ana Castillo's novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1985), Gloria E. Anzaldúa's theory of the mestiza consciousness is also reviewed. Castillo represents the mestiza consciousness through her protagonist in a process of self-discovery through the reflection of *autohistoria-teoría* within the forty letters. The dichotomies of patriarchal ideologies that divide her from the Other are examined through the Coatlicue State, as inflected by such writers such as Julio Cortázar, Anaïs Nin and Miguel de Cervantes. Castillo creates a postmodern hopscotch style novel in which the reader is fundamental to the subversive interpretation of the three reading options (the conformist, the cynical, and the quixotic).

KEYWORDS: *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, The Mestiza Consciousness, Coatlicue State, *Autohistoria-teoría*, Postmodern Writings.

EL ESTADO DE COATLICUE EN *THE MIXQUIAHUALA LETTERS*:  
UNA INTERPRETACIÓN POSTMODERNA DE CÓMO LOGRAR  
LA CONCIENCIA MESTIZA

## RESUMEN

La literatura escrita por chicanas en su renacimiento durante la década de 1980 —influida por un movimiento tercermundista feminista— reveló nuevas formas de representación para la experiencia de la chicana. Al concentrarnos en una lectura subversiva de la dualidad entre sujeto-objeto en *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1985) de Ana Castillo, también nos fijamos en la teoría de Gloria Anzaldúa sobre la conciencia mestiza. Castillo representa tal conciencia mestiza a través de su protagonista en un proceso de auto-descubrimiento mediante la reflexión conocida como la *auto-historia-teoría* dentro de las 40 cartas. Las dicotomías de las ideologías patriarcales que la dividen del Otro también se examinan mediante el Estado Coatlicue de acuerdo a la influencia de escritores como Julio Cortázar, Anaïs Nin y Miguel de Cervantes. Castillo crea una novela estilo rayuela de tipo postmodernista en la cual el lector es fundamental para la interpretación subversiva de las tres opciones de su lectura (conformista, cínica y quijotesca).

PALABRAS CLAVE: *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, la conciencia Mestiza, estado de Coatlicue, *Autohistoria-teoría*, escritura postmoderna.

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The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.

Gloria E. Anzaldúa  
*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

As the first modern novel, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615) has left a cultural legacy that has transcended temporal and geographical boundaries. It is no surprise postmodern writers are influenced by the novel's intertextuality in a literary quest to maintain a dialogue between the novel and other texts or authors; modern or otherwise. If what stands out in the Miguel de Cervantes de Saavedra's novel is the ambivalent identity of the modern man in his main character, for the postmodern world Don Quijote is a symbol of resistance, enabling us to imagine other worlds in search of freedom and justice. Thus, for the Chicano/a writer Don Quijote represents a *modus operandi* for liberation – found when the Chicano community becomes conscious of its colonized history. The qui jotization of Teresa's life, in Ana Castillo's novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1987), is what this paper seeks to analyze to demonstrate how being qui jotized enabled the protagonist to transform her personal experiences into a retrospective life lesson at the age of 40. The trope of qui jotization in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1985) could be better understood as what Gloria E. Anzaldúa termed the mestiza consciousness. For this reason, our study will highlight how the intertextuality in this novel under the influence of Cortázar's hopscotch style, as evidenced in *Rayuela* (1963), demonstrates the process Teresa undergoes to reach the mestiza consciousness to define her identity.

Although published in different periods, *Don Quijote* and *The Mixquiahuala Letters* share similar aspects in the temporal context exhibited in its plots and characters' constructions. First, it is important to highlight what Zygmunt Bauman has defined as modernity and its consequent postmodernity. Bauman clarifies that order and chaos are creations of the modern world, due to its insatiable task of giving order and classification to the world. However, he contends that this task's result has created a sense of ambivalence because the function of classifying and categorizing has imposed an unsustainable order. Imposing order is:

[...] a fight of determination against ambiguity, of semantic precision against ambivalence, of transparency against obscurity, clarity against fuzziness. Order is a concept, as a vision, as a purpose could not be conceived but for the insight into the total ambivalence, the randomness of chaos. Order is continuously engaged in the war of survival. The other of order is not another order: chaos is its only alternative. The other of order is the miasma of the indeterminate and unpredictable. The other is the uncertainty, that source and archetype of all fear. (Bauman 6-7)



Therefore, the idea about the order imposed by the modern world, considering those designs of a ruling by the sovereign state, is nothing more than a manipulation strategy, proving that language played an indispensable role in categorizing and classifying to separate and exclude. According to Bauman, intolerance is one of the most notable symptoms of modernization, which “calls for the denial of rights, and the grounds, of everything that cannot be assimilated— for de-legitimation of the other” (8-9). The modern state’s purpose is to exclude the Other and erase its citizens’ differences to form an assimilated and homogenous entity. It comes as no surprise that the postmodern era calls for change to respect and honor those differences by searching for other ways of seeing and thinking beyond the modern age’s binary order. Bauman clarifies that although these two epochs are not so different, and the Other continues to be marginalized, the postmodern era contains a new determination: “to guard the conditions in which all stories can be told, and retold, and again told differently” (244). Since the creation of the new modern state divided the world by adopting ideologies and practices that did not tolerate the ambivalent, the postmodern world to observe and respect these differences is an act of consciousness that opens the possibility to imagine another world where everyone is accepted.

*El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* and *The Mixquiahuala Letters* are two creations of the modern and postmodern eras that expose humans’ ambivalence in the face of the classifying power of the sovereign state. As mentioned above, these two novels, although conceived in different epochs, have a common denominator: quijotization as a way of life. On the one hand, these novels showcase the feelings of disconformity their characters experience toward the order imposed by the societies they inhabit; while at the same time, both books describe what the process of accepting ambivalence is like. In *Transnational Cervantes*, William Childers points out that what is common between Cervantes, as a writer of the first modern novel, and the Chicano writers of the postmodern era is the concept of “internal colonialism” (4). Both Cervantes and Castillo are members of sovereign societies in whose neocolonialist ideologies perpetuate heteronormative hegemony, creating a fragmented reality between a sovereign and subordinate society. According to Childers, internal colonialism in Spain started when the monarchy began the conquest and colonization of the new world. Although this colonization was external, Childers clarifies that this imperialist project was also internal. Domestically, the approach of internal colonization fell onto the ethnic-religious minorities of Jews and Arabs by imposing centralized authority under a Christian’s power. Childers concludes that the creation of the nation-state had as its first step the implementation of internal colonization. As a result, all those cultures that did not assimilate to the dominant culture experienced the ambiguity of not belonging: “[...] their own culture was rendered valueless, except as a sign of inferior status or of defiant resistant; yet they were not accepted as full belonging to the new culture imposed upon them, and became instead the object of vigilance, scrutiny, and suspicion” (Childers 7).

As in Spain, the United States, as a sovereign nation-state, also contains an ideology similar to the former Spanish empire. The former, like the latter Spain, also has a long history of internal colonization in which cultural minorities have been monitored and discriminated against for not assimilating to Anglo-Saxon cultural



hegemony. In this regard, the Mexican American, Chicano, and Latino/a/x minority are the product of double colonization that continues to relegate them to a status of inferiority to maintain power over them. Both Cervantes and Castillo managed to observe how this hegemonic power, which continues to fragment the world, affects their protagonists' identity and sense of belonging.

The United States is a country made of immigrants; therefore, its society is multiethnic and multicultural, and the Chicano culture has been one at the forefront of resistance. This group has been classified throughout its existence, under Spanish and American forces, as being inferior and predestined to subjugation. However, the Chicana/o/x and Latino/a/x communities have shown to be one of the groups that have imposed the most resistance on the nation-state. Chicanas have demonstrated that internal colonization is not only the product of the nation-state but of any entity that seeks to impose their ideologies onto the Other. As a result, Chicana writers such as Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Ana Castillo have responded strategically through art mediums, such as literature, to offer those experiencing the exclusion caused by ambivalence the tools to accept the fragmented parts of our identities to continue healing and resisting to make other worlds possible.

Chicana feminist literature has evolved over the last quarter of the 20th century, focusing on the critical literary output of women's traumatic experiences living between borderlands— both physical and psychological. Chicana feminists have also highlighted the impacts the outer social, cultural, economic, and political measures, laws, and policies of the patriarchal and heteronormative Nation State have had on Women of Color's livelihoods. The breakup of a nationalist Chicano literature, influenced by new trends, both feminist and postmodernist, brought forth new forms of representation and interpretation of the Chicana experience and identity. The formulation of a new identity for Chicanas, free of cultural prejudices, has manifested itself through a subversive reading of breaking the duality paradigm between subject-object. The objective here is an interpretation of Castillo's novel as a subversive text that contains elements of quijotization. *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is a novel that confronts the dualities perpetuated by the order imposed in the social construction of gender and race, made visible by the Coaticue State and the concept of the Other, to create a collective consciousness to redefine the identity of Chicanas through the *petite histoire* of two mestiza women, Teresa and Alicia.

In analyzing *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, the theory proposed by Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) on how to attain the mestiza consciousness and forge a new destiny free of discriminatory/oppressive dualities, will help reinterpret the personal experiences of Teresa. As a Chicana writer, Castillo takes her protagonist into a retrospective self-discovery process to help her reach the mestiza consciousness through the act of writing and self-reflection in the 40 letters that compose the novel. It will later be explained how the act of writing exerts a highly significant power in Teresa's life, as an author(ity), narrating her own story, or *autohistoria*. In this manner, Castillo deconstructs the dichotomies of the patriarchal ideologies within the Mexican and American cultures to set her protagonist free from the traumas that divide her from the Other, in this case, Alice, her life-travels companion. Another part of the objective is examine how the influence of writers



such as Miguel de Cervantes, Julio Cortázar, and Anaïs Nin, along with other postmodern elements, enabled Castillo to construct a novel in which the reader is fundamental to the interpretation of the letters in its three optional readings.

In the introduction to the third edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2007), Castillo, one of the voices that make up this introduction, explains that the act of writing allows the writer to enter a meditative state for introspection. Gloria E. Anzaldúa has identified this as the Coatlicue State, or Coatlicue's heritage-imperative to understand and deal with "opocisión e insurrección," a state in which an individual understands pain is inevitable for change to happen (Anzaldúa, 73). In the Coatlicue state, the mestiza ponders the contradictions—or ambivalence, as Bauman calls it, of living between two cultures and being the recipient of societal ideologies that oppress both women and those who live alternative lives to the periphery of the hegemonic and heteronormative dominant culture. By confronting these oppositions, the mestiza can attain liberation to forge her destiny and identity free of all forms of oppression imposed by nation-state. However, reaching the resurrection point, or the mestiza consciousness, is a painful and fragmentary process. Through this meditation state, Teresa begins a journey through the Coatlicue State to experience the quijotization of her life by learning how to deal with the ambivalence of being Mexican American or a Chicana. The active reader soon realizes that the only possible way to interpret this journey through Castillo's is through the three postmodernist readings. Castillo limits the reader to choose one of the three imposed paths: the conformist, the cynic, and the quixotic. Nevertheless, no single reading path captures the complete life or totality of Teresa's experiences. For this reason, to comprehend the way of life that Teresa carries out in the quixotic path, the reader needs to understand the experiences lived by the main characters in the conformist and cynical trajectories.

Several critical studies have classified *The Mixquiahuala Letters* as an epistolary novel. However, it is essential to emphasize that Castillo transgresses this genre's limits. Epistolary novels are generally classified by the narration of letters written by the characters, but Castillo uses letters and reflections, memories, poems, stories, dreams, and even myths told through Teresa, the only author of the text's letters. Besides, an epistolary novel's structure consists of the compilation of an epistolary exchange between the sender and the recipient, emphasizing different views and perspectives on the narrated events through dialogue and plot development. For this reason, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* has been classified as an epistolary novel due to the exploration of lived and shared experiences between two women, Teresa and Alicia. Yet, the letters' subjective authorship has been ignored, as the reader can only read those letters penned by her. More importantly, the text does not provide evidence to confirm that Alicia, the recipient of the letters, exchanges written correspondence with Teresa. For example, in letter number three, Teresa writes:

Each time, a few days passed, a week, and i'd receive a copy of Neruda's poetry, you, a ten-page letter of self-recrimination, you, a long distance call in the dead of the night, i, a hand-painted postcard, you, a copy of the *Diary of Anaïs Nin*, i, a pair of copper earrings from your recent collection, you, seven poems fresh out of the typewriter, i, a ceramic brooch. (Castillo 23)



Thus, throughout the forty self-styled letters that make up the novel, the reader can examine only the letters written by Teresa. These letters in exchange allow the reader to come to know the interiority of Teresa's being because her reflections contrast and compare her life through the life and actions of Alicia and other secondary characters. The influence of postmodernist literary tendencies is why this epistolary novel transgresses this genre's frames since the mixture of genres and intertextuality, such as the reference to other literary texts or writers, has been widely displayed.

It is essential to consider the novel's paratexts as a postmodernist technique employed by Castillo as critical pieces to decipher its content within the story. According to Gerard Genette, paratexts—such as; captions, dedications, and self-referentiality—are crucial elements for interpreting a postmodernist literary text (15). The influence of writers such as Anaïs Nin, Julio Cortázar, and Cervantes are elements that demonstrate how Castillo uses their influence to guide the reader on the paths that will lead Teresa to redefine her identity.

On the one hand, the caption attributed to Anaïs Nin shows the rupture in the practice of patriarchal ideologies that Castillo wishes to implement to lead her main character to develop the mestiza consciousness. The caption quoting Nin states: "I stopped loving my father a long time ago. What remained was the slavery to a pattern"—evidence shows, in a very intimate way, the relationship of subordination that exists between the social construction of binary gender roles, male and female, more specifically between father and daughter or men and women. This subordination, subject vs. object, is well outlined in the three reading trajectories Castillo references in her novel's intertextuality. Throughout the forty letters, it is clear that Teresa lacks a father figure while, and in her love life, she or her romantic partners continue to end their romantic relationships. The lack of the male authority presence represents a symbol of approval to corroborate the value of the female independence.

For this reason, the relationship between men and women is a subtheme that helps Teresa reflect on her life: what it means to be a woman, and its implications in both cultural societies—American and Mexican—to which she belongs. Judith Butler, in *Cuerpos que importan: sobre los límites materiales y discursivos del 'sexo'* (2010), examines how the social construction of gender and sex have kept patriarchy, or the Father's Law, as a social discipline, which has created a phallogocentric discourse that highlights the superiority position of the male over the feminine or abject as a subject of inferiority (89-90). As a queer theorist, one of Butlerian criticism's most important objectives is to question the heteronormative discourses of the Father's Law to offer new alternatives to create a supportive and inclusive society of bodies that this law has marked as intelligible or abject. Butler argues that to accomplish this,

La tarea consiste en reconfigurar este 'exterior' [lo marginal] necesario como un horizonte futuro, un horizonte en el cual siempre se estará superando la violencia de la exclusión. Pero también es igualmente importante preservar el exterior, el sitio donde el discurso encuentra sus límites, donde la opacidad de lo que no ha sido incluido en un determinado régimen de verdad cumpla la función de un sitio



desbaratador de la impropiedad o la impresentabilidad lingüística e ilumine las fronteras violentas y contingentes de ese régimen normativo precisamente demostrando la incapacidad de ese régimen de representar aquello que podría plantear una amenaza fundamental a su continuidad. (Butler 9l)

In this case, Nin's intertextuality and her diary provide Teresa the opportunity to re-evaluate this regime to provide a new horizon to free the female body from the bondage of inferiority. As stated before, imposing order on the modern world, social constructions such as patriarchy categorized society into dualities, thus creating a state of ambivalence and confusion for all those who did not fit into these classifications.

Therefore, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin* (1966), like the caption, is key to understanding Castillo's literary text's subversion and, consequently, the letters. In the introduction to the diary, Gunther Stuhlman states that the diary is

[...] more than a mere record of her days, her conversations, her encounters, though she captures them with vivid immediacy. The diary is the log of her journey through the labyrinth of the self, of her effort to find, and to define, the woman Anaïs, the real and the symbolic one who balances "between" action and completion, involvement and self-preservation, emotion and intellect, dreams, and reality, and who sometimes despairs of ever reconciling these disparate elements. (Stuhlman vii)

As a result, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin* appeals to Teresa, as an artist, a pretext to write the letters in a diary entry style in order to reflect on her own experiences and encounters with the Other and to redefine her own identity and re-discover herself in the maze of life as a mestiza woman. Simultaneously, the same diary is mailed to Alicia, the adventure companion, so that Alicia can free herself from the law of the Father that governs and affects both their lives. In this way, like Nin, Teresa has to choose which experiences to include in her letters and what to write about such experiences. This is how Castillo's hopscotch game subversively hides her novel's many interpretations that the reader has to decipher.

*The Mixquiahuala Letters* manages to show the practical experience of "oposición e insurrección" through Coatlicue's heritage aided by the hopscotch's literary game, first experimented by Cortázar in his famous novel, *Rayuela*. This is another way that Castillo subverts elements of the epistolary genre since the author does not provide a clear beginning, plot, or outcome. However, what Castillo offers is an unlimited or open text as the final fate of his characters is unknown. This is not only due to Castillo's dedication of her novel to "[...] The master of the game Julio Cortázar" (6) but to the imitation of the structural style of the Cortázar's novel. Like *Rayuela*, in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, Castillo interacts with the readers by making them an active participant in the text. Like *Rayuela*, the reader is confronted with choosing one of the three possible paths in which to read the book. In Castillo's novel, the three options are the conformist, the cynic, or the quixotic. In structuring the text in this way, the reader encounters an endless novel, since none of the routes include the reading of all forty letters that compose it (unless the reader reads letter 1 to letter 40 in order, which is in itself another reading among the almost infinite





readings). Simultaneously, the letters are atemporal, as none of them include a date, but fragmentally they narrate adventures or happenings of the last decade of life of the protagonists. More than a compliment to the master of the game, in order not to offer a traditional reading of the novel, Castillo also offers a critique of it since his novel does not critically include the abject bodies of those who Butler and Anzaldúa reference to create a third space of tolerance while confronting the dichotomies presented by the Law of the Father. Although in *Rayuela* Cortázar attempts to project “the dramas of the human condition” by exchanging incomprehensible and unbearable reflections made by his male characters, Ana María Simo proposes that this is a vertical cutting resource of a sexist society (65). By presenting a reading from a feminist perspective, Castillo is not merely imitating Cortázar but creates her own game to represent commonly marginalized women’s stories. Therefore, navigating the three reading routes proposed by Castillo is essential to discover how the structure of the text reflects how Teresa is transitioning from the Coatlicue’s State to finding her way into the mestiza consciousness by seeking a greater totality and complexity.

As previously mentioned, the Coatlicue State is not a pleasant experience, as individuals can experience painful events in this state. Entering the serpent state is like a “confrontation with the soul” (Anzaldúa, 54). However, entering this state is not always voluntary, as the Coatlicue State can manifest itself in women’s and men’s lives without warning. Anzaldúa clarifies the following:

We need Coatlicue to slow us up to that the psyche can assimilate previous experiences and process the changes. If we don’t take the time, she’ll lay us slow with an illness, forcing us to “rest.” Come, little green snake. Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent. The soul uses everything to further its own making. Those activities or Coatlicue states which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life are exactly what propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself. Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The Coatlicue state can be a way station or it can be a way of life. (Anzaldúa 67)

That “illness” to which Anzaldúa refers to can provoke the Coatlicue State, and Teresa describes it in multiple letters as a “heartburn” (Letter 2 and Letter 21) and that “to be rid of it, i must create distance” (Castillo 64). The betrayal revealed in the cynic path’s final letter—letter 38, is one of the denotations, or “illness” that leads Teresa to enter Coatlicue’s State. Although the letter lacks a date and is atemporal, the estrangement between the two friends is caused by Alicia’s betrayal of their friendship with Teresa’s ex-partner (Vicente das Mortes). This is the denotation that leads Teresa to confront not only her friend but also her soul. As she faces this betrayal and estrangement with Alicia, Teresa draws on the memories of their previous experiences to create changes in her life. In this way, the beginning of the conformist, cynical, and quixotic routes make sense with Letter 38, which can only be read once along the three paths proposed by Castillo. The intimate friendship between Teresa and Alicia is the same one that leads her to (re)evaluate her life to get rid of the pain of the “heartburn” caused by Alicia’s betrayal.



The conformist and quixotic reading routes share the same opening letter, Letter 2—a prosaic poem. It is noticeable that the (re)evaluation of Teresa and Alicia's friendship considers only the last ten years of their lives and their interactions with other men on both sides of the US-Mexico border. Teresa writes, "Finally we end the cesspool/twirl of our 20s / that will be remembered always [...]" to congratulate Alicia on her 30th birthday (Castillo 17). This letter gives insight into how these letters were written periodically and recollected to compose the novel. Meanwhile, in the opening letter to the cynical route, Letter 3, Teresa begins her (re)evaluation through her friend Alicia's figure. She recalls about their friendship: "We were not to be separated. A fine-edged blade couldn't have been wedged between our shared consciousness [...]" (Castillo 18). Therefore, the cynical route delivers and explains what caused the falling-out between Teresa and Alicia, which leads the protagonist-narrator to enter the Coatlicue State. The cynical option in Castillo's hopscotch reading game is the one that shows the balance of what can happen in the Coatlicue State. The closing letters of the conformist and quixotic routes—Letter 34 and Letter 1, respectively—are possible demonstrations of how entering the Coatlicue State can help the mestiza navigate the contradictions imposed on her. However, if ignored, it can keep one stagnant in disconformity if a didactic meaning of traumatic or painful experiences is not evaluated.

Thus, from the image and memories of Alicia and other secondary characters, Teresa can generate a retrospective self-assessment of her being to reach the mestiza consciousness. In her introspection, Teresa codifies how the intersectionality of her ethnicity, gender, and class affect her political persona and her experiences as a woman of color, thus subjugating her to double oppression by the Law of the Father imposed by both cultures to which she belongs. In Letter 19, Teresa reflects on how "Destiny is not a metaphysical confrontation with one's self, rather, Society has knit its pattern so tight that a confrontation with it is inevitable" (Castillo 59).

The differences between Alicia and Teresa's physical and moral values and the treatment they both receive as women and transgressors of the cultural values rooted in Mexican and American patriarchal societies lead Teresa to experience that metaphysical confrontation with herself. In a letter detailing the first encounter of both protagonists, on a study abroad trip to Mexico, Teresa confesses: "I'm not certain what your first thoughts were of me, studying the dark newcomer from across the dining table" (Castillo 18). Ethnicity, and especially the differences of their skin color, is one of the elements that separates them. In Letter 13, Teresa acknowledges why she hated white men and women at some point in her life, as "Society had made them above all possessions the most desired. And they believed it" (Castillo 43). Alice, as a white-passing woman, did not inspire confidence in Teresa. Nonetheless, their friendship enabled Teresa the opportunity to learn more about herself: "not being [economically] comfortable, white or an only child made me less concerned with myself. i found sources to direct my anger / pointed at them / called them white/privileged / and unjust" (Castillo 44). Through the concept and figure of the Other, Teresa understands how ingrained hatred toward the unknown is the cause of division and violence against the Other.



Despite what society claimed that made Teresa and Alicia different, the shared consciousness about gender and women's rights brought them together. Teresa, a young, married woman, awakens in Alicia the curiosity to understand how "... any woman of [her] generation could willingly commit herself to slavery", obviously referring to marriage (Castillo 32). A woman's enslavement into serving a man is what marriage symbolized for Alicia, a liberal young feminist. Therefore, when Teresa decided to travel alone in Mexico through colonial states such as Yucatán, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, and Puebla, she began to experience how her consciousness on gender roles made her a stranger where she felt more excluded in her ancestral motherland. For example, when traveling alone in this country and meeting several Mexican men and women, Teresa understood "how revolting we were, susceptible to ridicule, abuse, disrespect. We would have hoped for respect as human beings, but the only respect granted to a woman is that which a gentleman bestows upon the lady. Clearly, we're not ladies. What was our greatest transgression? We traveled alone" (Castillo 59). Undoubtedly, in a patriarchal country like Mexico, being a liberal woman does not mean having the agency of free will but "simply meant a woman who would sleep non discriminately with any man... liberal: trash, whore, bitch" (Castillo 73). These kinds of reflections, in the meditative state of the writing process, propel Teresa to subversively question how the dualities that the Law of the Father has imposed on society have enabled all the state-violence against women.

Undeniably, the analysis of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* subverts in its fragmentary structure a puzzle that requires an active reader willing to listen attentively to all the transformations the protagonist experiences. The explicit references made about Coatlicue in Teresa's letters indicate that Castillo wants its readers to understand the act of writing as a tool to make sense of the ambivalence in which Western societies thrive. By confronting the reader with three possible reading paths or options, and more as each letter is a story, the readers can infer that Teresa is taking an inventory. When Teresa states: "i want to take my ghosts...confront them face to face, snarl at them, stick out my tongue, wiggle my fingers from the sides of my head, nya-nya" (Castillo 124), she is becoming the *moldeadora*, the shaper, and subject of her own life. In contrast to the conformist path, in which Castillo presents how society only values good women, the cynical way offers another perspective. In this path, where women are categorized as the treacherous or the bad woman for their free-spirited behavior, this can lead only to a third space—the borderlands, or the quixotic path. Both women and/or abject bodies can break alienating dichotomies of thought just as Anzaldúa delineates the mestiza consciousness. All the reading paths or options presented in the novel reveal different realities in the life experiences that make up Teresa's total—or at least close to it—identity as a Chicana woman. It is not surprising that the 40 letters represent her contradictions and come to terms with who she is as she writes her personal experiences and analyzes her life evolution.

As we have seen, what Castillo exhibits in her novel is the long Eurocentric and colonized traditions that continue to perpetuate the dichotomies that divide men and women to foster intolerance. Bauman believes that this strategy of imposing order to combat chaos has only achieved the creation of a state of ambivalence in which abject beings and cultures not assimilated to the hegemonic culture question



their condition as marginalized beings. According to Bauman, the postmodern era has to accept that the order of chaos proposed by the modern era is unattainable because the ambivalence created in the excluded bodies is greater and highlights the dissatisfaction imposed by the status quo (251). Developing the mestiza consciousness to recognize the contradictions evoked during the Coatlicue State is what Castillo structures as a young Chicana woman's life experiences in search of identity.

*The Mixquiahuala Letters*, as an epistolary correspondence or diary, is a postmodernist and feminist hopscotch reading puzzle that proposes to create a third space or new horizon to include what the patriarchal nation-state has classified as abject beings. In this text's construction, Castillo has created a dialogue that requires an active reader to understand the contradictions that patriarchal cultures imposed in that abject body. The act of writing a narration of self-introspection demonstrates its cathartic powers to confront the ambivalence that fosters violence against that which is deemed inferior. As a shaman and quixotic writer, Castillo finds in writing a highly demystifying ability to confront the historical and symbolic power of the patriarchal system that continues to create dichotomies and foster divisions. Therefore, after her rift with Alicia, Teresa undergoes a personal transformation—under the Coatlicue State—leading the reader to better understand how change starts from within. To break down the dichotomies imposed by the Law of the Father, one must first learn to overcome the internal struggles and the effects of colonization that divide us from the Other. Much like Don Quijote and Teresa, the power to conceive a just world starts with the symbolic power of imagination.

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# HELEN HUNT JACKSON'S *RAMONA*: THE ROMANCE THAT BECAME A TOURIST GUIDE AND SILENCED THE *MESTIZA*

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on American writer and activist Helen Hunt Jackson and aims to explain why her romance *Ramona* (1884), originally intended as a form of literary activism on behalf of California's Native Americans, failed to effect actual change in the situation of the state's indigenous population and, instead, ended up as an accomplice in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century development of Anglo California. Said development brought along not only the advance of railroad companies, real-estate investors and the tourist industry, but, most poignantly, the displacement and consequent genocide of its Native inhabitants. All in all, the paper will prove that a social and political vision like Jackson's, weighed down by the systems of imperialism and capitalism, as well as the oppressive discourses of racism and sexism, was bound to entrench economic, sexual and racial inequalities despite its good intentions.

KEYWORDS: Helen Hunt Jackson, California's Mission Indians, Literary Activism, Literature and Tourism, Spanish Fantasy Heritage, *Mestiza* Identity.

*RAMONA*, DE HELEN HUNT JACKSON:  
EL ROMANCE QUE SE CONVIRTIÓ EN GUÍA TURÍSTICA  
Y SILENCIÓ A LA MESTIZA

## RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en la escritora y activista estadounidense Helen Hunt Jackson y tiene por objeto explicar las razones por las que su romance *Ramona* (1884), concebido como una forma de activismo literario a favor de los nativo-americanos de California, fracasó a la hora de cambiar la situación de la población indígena del estado y se convirtió, en lugar de eso, en cómplice del desarrollo de la California blanca a finales del siglo XIX, el cual trajo consigo no solo el avance de las compañías de ferrocarril, las inversiones inmobiliarias y la industria turística, sino también el desplazamiento y el genocidio posterior de su población nativa. En definitiva, el artículo demostrará que una visión como la de Jackson, lastrada por los sistemas imperialista y capitalista y por los discursos opresivos del racismo y el sexismo, estaba abocada a afianzar las desigualdades raciales, sexuales y económicas pese a sus buenas intenciones.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Helen Hunt Jackson, indios de las misiones californianas, activismo literario, literatura y turismo, patrimonio español fantasioso, identidad mestiza.

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## 1. CALIFORNIA, HOME OF RAMONA

In the summer of 2017, I was admitted by the Beatrice Bain Research Group at the University of California at Berkeley as a Visiting Scholar. Soon after arriving in Berkeley, I met an Anglo woman whose three-year old daughter was called Ramona, and was deeply shocked by the name, which, despite being Spanish, is considered terribly old-fashioned in Spain. Soon after this surprising anecdote, and while, as tourists will do, strolling around the city of San Francisco, I was once again taken aback by a street plaque that read: “Ramona Street.” Now this had to mean something, but I did not know what. It was only after a few more days in California that a member of the Berkeley Meeting of the Society of Friends, Sue Friday, after hearing me say that I was planning to do some research on romances, told me that she was not a fan of the romance genre, but that there was one romance novel that she did like. The author, she told me, had married twice, and her second husband, William S. Jackson, was a renowned Quaker in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where he worked for the Denver and Rio Grande Railway Co and founded the El Paso Bank. The writer she had in mind was called Helen Hunt Jackson, and the title of the work she was talking about explained my previous shocking experiences. It was *Ramona*, of course.

These personal anecdotes certify what most Californians know for sure: “Oddly, the most important woman in the history of southern California never lived. Nor has she yet died. She is the fictional heroine of Helen Hunt Jackson’s 1884 novel *Ramona*, and her mark on southern California’s landscape, and on social memory in the region is indelible even today” (DeLyser 886). To this I could well add that not only is the southern Californian landscape affected by Jackson’s *Ramona*, but also that of Northern California, as my experiences in the Bay Area attest. Indeed, there is a plethora of Ramona sites in the whole state of California: a Ramona Valley, where one can find a Ramona Valley Inn or a Ramona Valley Grill; dozens of Ramona Streets, apart from the one I saw in San Francisco, crisscross the towns and cities of this western state, as for example in Ventura, or in Palo Alto, to name but two; there are Ramona Elementary Schools, Ramona Libraries, Ramona shops, and an endless number of Ramona products; needless to say, there are Ramona kids, too. As one person put it in the 1920s, “I doubt if there is any town in Southern California that does not boast of a street, hotel, garden, park, or public place named

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‘Ramona’” (qtd. in DeLyser 889). Again, I would add that nearly as much might be said of Northern California as well.

## 2. HELEN HUNT JACKSON, AN ACTIVIST ON BEHALF OF NATIVE AMERICANS

The author of the novel that triggered the Ramona craze that continues well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century was a woman writer from Amherst, Massachusetts, called Helen Hunt Jackson (1830-1885), although she published some of her works under various pseudonyms: “‘Marah,’ ‘Rip Van Winkle,’ ‘H.H.’ and ‘Saxe Holm’” (Whitaker 56); in many cases, too, she resorted to the complete anonymity of “No Name” (Dobie 93). She was first a poet, later on a novelist and for part of her adult life an activist. In 1879, after hearing a lecture in Boston by Chief Standing Bear, of the Ponca Tribe, she grew interested in Native Americans (Mathes, “Helen Hunt Jackson and Southern” 263). Moved by Standing Bear’s description of the forcible removal of the Ponca from their reservation in southeastern Dakota to a reservation in Oklahoma (Nevins 272), she carried out an investigation into government misconduct in regards to Native Americans, and subsequently began to denounce said misconduct. Her work on behalf of the Ponca tribe took the form of petitions, fund-raising, letters to the editor of the *New York Herald Tribune* and articles for the *New York Independent*.<sup>1</sup> Besides, she published *A Century of Dishonor* (1881), an exposé of the plight of Native Americans in which, apart from documenting the conditions they were made to live in, she denounced federal Indian policy and called for significant reform in government policy toward Native Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Unabated by the lack of significant repercussions of her work, Helen Jackson continued gathering evidence on the mistreatment of Native peoples in the US. In 1881-1882 she toured southern California gathering material on the so-called Mission Indians<sup>3</sup> for a series of articles commissioned by Richard Watson Gilder of *Century Magazine* (Mathes, “Helen Hunt Jackson and the Southern” 263). Her Quaker

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<sup>1</sup> An in-depth analysis of Jackson’s involvement in the so-called Ponca Controversy is offered in Mathes, “Helen Hunt Jackson and the Ponca.”

<sup>2</sup> Jackson’s reformist activities have been thoroughly studied by Valerie S. Mathes (“Nineteenth Century Women” and “New York Women”) in the context of 19th-century women’s Indian reform movements and associations; among these, there stands out the Women’s National Indian Association (WNIA), of which Jackson was a member for a brief period before her death in 1885 (Mathes, “Helen Hunt Jackson and the Ponca” 53).

<sup>3</sup> I feel compelled to use the terms “Mission Indians” and “Indians” in this paper, despite their incorrectness, as they were the labels employed by Helen Hunt Jackson and her contemporaries back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I nonetheless quite agree with Gonzalez’s conviction that said expressions should be critically read: “The ‘Mission Indians’ moniker lumped together the tribal nations of southern California forcibly Christianized in the colonial Spanish mission system. Although I can scarcely avoid using the hegemonic terminology of the era in my discussion of Jackson, I critically acknowledge how such labelling serves as a colonial representational strategy to symbolically







husband, the prominent Colorado entrepreneur William S. Jackson, accompanied her for a portion of the tour.<sup>4</sup> In 1882 her concern with Native Americans was acknowledged by US authorities, who appointed her special commissioner of Indian Affairs in California, a position that provided her with additional opportunities to travel and observe. Thus, “[w]ith coagent Abbot Kinney, [Jackson] spent six months in 1883 travelling by wagon or mule, visiting Indian settlements and observing the deplorable conditions under which Indians lived” (Smith-Baranzini 157). Thanks to these travels around California, Jackson deepened her knowledge of Mission Indians, the label often used to refer to California’s Indigenous peoples, whom the Spanish colonizers had forced to move from their traditional dwellings, villages, and homelands to live and work at 15 Franciscan missions stretching from San Diego (1769) to San Francisco (1776), the so-called *Camino Real*.

After gaining independence from Spain (1821), and later on in the years of Mexican California, the Mexican government provided for resident Indians to continue to occupy mission lands, but in 1833 Mexico secularized the missions and subsequently gave or sold the lands to non-Natives. Many of the Mission Indians worked on the newly established *ranchos* with little improvement in their living conditions. Their situation further deteriorated after the Mexican-American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo that settled the dispute between the two contending nations. In fact, in US California (after 1848), Anglos often expelled “Californios” (the colonial residents of Spanish California) from their *ranchos* and the US disregarded Mission Indian occupancy claims. A look at the population decline of the state’s Native peoples between the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries offers appalling proof of the fatal impact of first Spanish, then Mexican, and finally US rule over California. In 1769 there were about 300,000 Native peoples; by 1821, they had been reduced to 100,000 as a consequence of the Spanish Empire; by 1860, Mexican independence and the Gold Rush of 1848, which brought disease, starvation, homicide and a declining birthrate, had reduced the number of Indigenous peoples to 30,000; in 1900, a California saturated with Euro-American incomers has been left with some 15,377 Native individuals (Padgett 839-840).

On realizing the unacceptable situation of California’s Native population, Jackson resolved to do something to attract attention to the problems of Mission Indians. Together with Abbot Kinney, she filed a 56-page report in July 1883 (*Report on the Condition and Needs of the Mission Indians of California*)<sup>5</sup> including

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detritorialize specific tribal nations and thus to delegitimize their past and present territorial claims” (458).

<sup>4</sup> Helen Hunt Jackson met William S. Jackson in the winter of 1873, when she travelled to Colorado Springs, Colorado, to try and improve her health; the couple was married in a Quaker ceremony in October of 1875 in New Hampshire (Marsden 110). They “made their home in Colorado Springs, which Mrs. Jackson regarded as her legal residence from then on, although she actually spent most of her last five years in California” (Arlt 106).

<sup>5</sup> John R. Byers (“The Indian Matter”) has thoroughly explained the close relation between Jackson’s 1883 report and her 1884 novel, pointing out the similarities between the descriptions of

eleven points and recommendations about the California Indians (Mathes, “Helen Hunt Jackson: Official” 68). For example, it recommended extensive government relief for Mission Indians, including the purchase of new lands for reservations and the establishment of more Indian schools. A bill embodying her recommendations passed the US Senate but died in the House of Representatives. It would therefore be appropriate to say that, all in all, it fell on deaf ears. Just as *A Century of Dishonor* (1881) had done little to improve the situation of the Ponca Tribe, her 1883 report was similarly ineffectual in bringing about actual improvement. However, Jackson’s resolve to effect change remained unfaltering, though she did realize the need to modify her tactic. Given that letters to the editor, essays and reports had had little impact, it became clear to her that “only *an emotional plea* would attract popular sympathy toward the Indians” (Smith-Baranzini 157; emphasis added). Her “emotional plea” took the shape of *Ramona: A Story* (1884), a novel about Indian life in Southern California with which “Jackson hoped to do for the southern Californian Indian what *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had done for the African-American slave” (Stevens 158).<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the fate that awaited her oeuvre on behalf of Native Americans, a year after the publication of *Ramona*, in 1885, in a letter to Thomas W. Higginson, Jackson expressed her satisfaction at the pieces of writing she had produced, while hinting at the influence her marriage to a Quaker may have had on her dedication to the Native cause: “You have never fully realized how for the last four years my whole heart has been full of the Indian cause—how I have felt, as the Quakers say, ‘a concern’ to work for it. My ‘Century of Dishonor’ and ‘Ramona’ are the only things I have done of which I am glad now” (qtd. in Mathes, “Helen Hunt Jackson and Southern” 272). This might explain why those are the only two of her works that she signed her full name to (Dobie 94).

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real-life locations from her report and of fictive settings in *Ramona*, as well as highlighting the unfair situations that befall both real Native Americans and her Indigenous characters. He thus proves that the research Jackson carried out in her travels around Southern California was first transmitted in her report and subsequently in her novel.

<sup>6</sup> Valerie S. Mathes has called attention to the irony that, in the long run, Jackson’s 1883 report may have left a more enduring legacy in terms of legislation reform than *Ramona*, which, as will be explained, failed to obtain the expected results. In particular, Mathes argues that the recommendations given in the 1883 report “became the foundation of legislation setting aside thousands of acres of land on over thirty reservations—reservations that still exist and can be traced directly to [Jackson’s] work” (“The California Mission” 339). She is specifically referring here to the 1891 “Act for the Relief of the Mission Indians in the State of California,” described by Quaker Albert K. Smiley as “the bill of Mrs. Jackson, with some modifications” (qtd. in Mathes, “The California Mission” 341).



### 3. RAMONA, THE BATTLE CRY THAT WENT AWRY

#### 3.1. THE NOVEL, MEDIA ADAPTATIONS AND FANTASY HERITAGE

Jackson's *Ramona*, written at the Berkeley Hotel in New York City, was first published in serialized form in the *Christian Union* beginning in May 1884 (Mathes, "Helen Hunt Jackson: Official" 75); it was later on published by Roberts Brothers in Boston in November (Mathes, Helen Hunt Jackson and Southern" 270-271). Set in Southern California after the Mexican-American War, it portrays the life of a mixed-race Scots-Native American orphan girl, Ramona, a dark-haired, blue-eyed 19-year-old beauty who suffers racial discrimination and hardship. She is first abused on the Moreno Ranch, whose owner, the stern widow Señora Moreno, of Castilian descent, has always resented Ramona's mixed-race origin, and the fact that she was forced to become Ramona's foster mother and to raise her together with her own son, Felipe Moreno. Ironically, the latter has been in love with Ramona for as long as he can remember. Ramona, for her part, has been kept ignorant of her mixed-blood heritage by her foster mother, and she feels only sisterly love for Felipe. She learns about her Indian blood soon after falling in love with Alessandro Assis, a young Luiseno<sup>7</sup> shepherd who was often hired by Señora Moreno. When Ramona expresses her desire to marry Alessandro, Señora Moreno opposes the marriage on the grounds of miscegenation and condemns the lovers to exile. On leaving the Moreno ranch, the couple is forced to move from one location to another, constantly plagued by Anglo advancement, brutality and land-takings, which results in the couple's displacement, uprootedness, disease, hunger, the death of their first baby and, later on, of Alessandro himself, who is shot by an Anglo settler who falsely accuses him of horse-stealing. For Ramona, respite from Anglo-European encroachment comes rarely, and only from two sources: her piety, reinforced by the character of Father Salvierderra, the benevolent Franciscan priest from whom Ramona seeks constant counselling, and her love, first for the Native Alessandro, and ultimately for the *Californio* Felipe Moreno. But it will be Felipe who, in the end, will rescue her from a life of poverty and ignominy among Cahuilla Indians by marrying her and giving her a home in Mexico and plenty of children.

The novel soon became immensely popular, "an instant and tremendous success" (Arlt 107). During her own time, Jackson enjoyed the praise of the masses, and some of the greatest literary figures of the period, like Emerson and Dickinson, also admired her. The latter, in particular, a childhood friend with whom Jackson corresponded for a number of years, declared that "Helen of Troy will die, but Helen of Colorado, never" (qtd. in Byers, "Helen Hunt Jackson" 143). To this day,

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<sup>7</sup> The term "Luiseno" is commonly used to refer to the Payómkawichum, a group of Native Americans who inhabited the coastal area of southern California. After the establishment of Mission San Luis Rey de Francia in 1798, Natives living in the vicinity of the mission began to be called Luisenos by Spanish missionaries.



Jackson's *Ramona* has had more than 300 printings (Byers, "Helen Hunt Jackson" 146), with a variety of covers that attest to the multiplicity of readings that each editor and publishing house has deemed appropriate to instigate, though, generally speaking, five approaches seem to be favored. There are covers that feature a girlish Ramona of unmistakable Caucasian descent, like the image chosen by CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform for their 2014 edition, or covers that show a youngish Scottish-like Ramona, which is the image selected for the 2016 edition by CreateSpace Independent Pub; other covers, however, prefer to cast Ramona as a young woman of Spanish decent, as is the case of the Signet Classics 2002 edition. All of these seem to prefer to imagine a Ramona who is mostly a European character, thus shaping the Ramona myth in a way that late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo settlers in California would find more appealing. There are other covers, however, that opt for the unapologetically Indian woman, an example of which is offered by the Halcyon Press 2010 edition, while others choose the Native American Ramona, but do so more symbolically, as The Modern Library Classics 2005 edition, which rather than showing Ramona's full or upper-part body, simply pictures a long, dark braid. For the editors of these editions, Ramona's mythical force lies in her Indigenous connection with the land, and when it comes to imagining California's past, they favor the Native thread over the European one. Lastly, there exist a number of covers that avoid the perhaps more problematic decision of picturing Ramona's mixed-race ancestry one way or another by choosing, instead, to depict a landscape scene, as do both the Signet Classics 2002 Kindle edition and the Signet Classics 2010 version. Significantly, the landscape chosen in these covers is an empty one, which would imply the land's readiness for Anglo settlement, and Ramona, absent in them in either her European or her Native impersonation, is nothing but a ghost that confers an exotic, quaint and romantic aura onto the land, one that never implies any sort of obstacle, but simply an elusive enticement.

Besides its popularity in the novel format, *Ramona* has enjoyed great success across various genres. In fact, it has been adapted into film and other media on numerous occasions. In 1910, D.W. Griffith directed *Ramona*, a 17-minute silent short starred by Mary Pickford; Donald Crisp's 1916 film *Ramona* is partially lost; the 1928 take, *Ramona*, directed by Edwin Carewe, features Dolores del Río and Warner Baxter, while the 1936 version, *Ramona*, directed by Henry King, is starred by Loretta Young and Don Ameche; the Screen Guild Theater produced a 1945 radio broadcast, and Víctor Urruchúa's film *Ramona* came out a year later, in 1946; more recently, in 2000, a Mexican *telenovela* called *Ramona* saw the light. To round off this list of media adaptations, it is worth pointing out that since 1923 a Ramona play has been performed annually outdoors "under the auspices of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce" (Rawls 352): "The towns of Hemet and San Jacinto united in 1923 to launch the Ramona Pageant, a full-scale outdoor dramatization of the novel that has run nearly every year since" (DeLyser 889), thus becoming the largest and longest running outdoor play in the United States and the official state play of the state of California.

But the phenomenal success of Jackson's *Ramona* is not only measured in its numerous editions or its transmedia adaptations, notwithstanding their



large numbers. As a matter of fact, the novel's greatest legacy has been said to lie in its capacity to spawn not simply a "fantasy heritage," a term coined by Carey McWilliams in 1949 to describe "the Anglo-American's propensity to romanticize and mythify the white European, Spanish presence in the American Southwest" (del Castillo 3), but more specifically, a "Spanish Fantasy Heritage" (Padget 835). In fact, it has been argued that the novel's sentimental portrayal of Mexican colonial life contributed to establishing a unique cultural identity for the state of California.<sup>8</sup> As its publication coincided with the arrival of railroad lines in the region, countless Anglo tourists fled to Southern California to see the locations of the novel. They were eager to experience with their own eyes the romanticized vision of *Californio* livelihood that the novel gave, and to revel in the nostalgia for genteel Spanish California that it fostered. For them, it seemed to matter that the book mythologized the Spanish colonial mission system by promoting the idea that the Mission Indians were happy and well protected by the benevolent Spanish priests like Father Salvierderra and the land-owners, or *hacendados*, of Castilian descent like Señora Moreno. Indeed, the book carried out a "beatification of the Franciscan missionary effort in California" (Padget 852)<sup>9</sup> and validated "not only the social and economic inequalities on which elite *Californio* society was based before and immediately after the U.S.-Mexican War but also the social and economic inequalities that prevailed in turn-of-the-century American society" (Padget 834). In so doing, the novel gave shape to a form of "California pastoral" (Padget 840) that thousands of Anglo tourists became enraptured with. In the words of Glen Gendzel:

By embroidering her story with Spanish-themed nostalgia, Jackson unwittingly supplied Los Angeles writers with the raw material for a competing mythology. *Ramona's* depiction of Edenic bliss before the American conquest marked the first appearance of a new cast of characters in California historiography. Here were the dashing *rancheros*, courtly *caballeros*, enchanting *señoritas*, and most of all, the noble Spanish *padres*, represented as devoted missionaries who lavished Indians with loving kindness and built a chain of elegant missions up and down the California coast. (66)

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<sup>8</sup> Yolanda Venegas uses a slightly different phrase to encapsulate the same idea, i.e., "the Spanish-heritage myth," which, in her words, offered uprooted Euro-American settlers in California "an epic antiquity, a California Plymouth Rock as ancient (and pure-blooded European) as the nation's traditional cultural centers in Boston and New York." Besides, "California's 'pure-blooded' Spanish heritage, complete with its missions, pious priests, and 'humble Indians,' provided Euro-Americans with antiquity and a sense of stability in a newly racialized California" (67).

<sup>9</sup> Yolanda Venegas has similarly criticized *Ramona's* "nostalgic presentation of missionization," and its refusal to portray "the presidio compound and the mission complex during the colonial period" as "integral components of a feudal-like forced labor system," thus failing to acknowledge the complicit relationship between the church and the military: "Franciscans subsidized the military by providing the food and other supplies during the colonization effort" (73). Moreover, Venegas denounces Jackson's choice not to inscribe Native Californians' steadfast resistance strategies to Spanish colonization, which included, among others, "labor strikes, subversion of agricultural production," and "escape from the missions" (73).



Thus was born the exotic fantasy that countless of Anglo migrants at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were to take solace in while settling in California. Thus was history translated into fantasy heritage, through a process that entailed selection, distortion, bias, and fabrication on the part of a number of agents, among which *Ramona*, if unwittingly, played a major role, as it came to epitomize what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo calls “imperialist nostalgia,” or “morning for what one has destroyed” (qtd. in Gendzel 76). Indeed, the very same Anglo settlers, many of them Midwesterners, and tourists that flooded the state at the turn of the century and virtually wiped out its Indigenous people, simultaneously rejoiced in its Spanish fantasy heritage, while mostly ignoring the *mestizo* population who strove against their encroachment. That “myth and fantasy play an unusually large role in the social construction of all travel and tourist sights” (Rojek 53) seems to apply with exquisite precision to the case of *Ramona* and Southern California.

### 3.2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND LITERARY GENRES

If Jackson’s *Ramona* has fascinated dozens of readers and critics ever since its publication, it is in part due to the abysmal gap between the author’s noble intentions when she set up to write it, and the dismal results. In a letter to friends in Los Angeles, Jackson expressed her desire to write the “emotional plea” already referred to: “I am going to write a novel, in which will be set forth some Indian experiences in a way to move people’s hearts. People will read a novel when they will not read serious books” (qtd. in DeLyser 891). The limited success of her nonfiction work had convinced her that the story of the Mission Indians would reach a wider audience if told in fictional form, which explains why in a letter to W.H. Ward, the editor of the New York *Independent*, she similarly stated her intention to write a novel that would encapsulate her activism on behalf of California’s Native peoples, following the example set by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*: “If I can do one hundredth part for the Indians that Mrs. Stowe did for the Negro, I will be thankful” (qtd. in DeLyser 891). Similarly, in a letter to Amelia Stone Quinton, the president of the Women’s National Indian Association, she hinted at her intention to follow Mrs. Stowe’s precedent: “I do not dare to think I have written a second *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—but I do think I have written a story which will be a good stroke for the Indian Cause” (qtd. in Mathes, “Helen Hunt Jackson and Southern” 271). With *Ramona*, it seems unequivocally clear, she meant “to make us sick to our stomachs and angry over the treatment of the ex-mission Indians of southern California and to make us understand the lawlessness of the Americans and their occupation of California” (Monroy 139).

Jackson based her story loosely on real people, places and events that she had seen or learned about during her travels in southern California. In a letter to Thomas Bailey Aldrich, she herself states that “[e]very incident in *Ramona* [...] is true. A Cahuilla Indian was shot two years ago, exactly as Alessandro is—and his wife’s name was *Ramona*” (qtd. in Mathes, “Helen Hunt Jackson and Southern” 271). But in the transposition from real life into fiction she had to make a number of decisions that negatively influenced her authorial intention, making it go awry.





The historical period in which she wrote it is also to blame for this derailing. As already mentioned, in the 1880s California sees the spectacular development of the railroad. Various competing companies had reached the south of the state, which triggered a plummeting of railroad fares; this, in turn, was followed by massive real-estate speculation. Together, both facts gave rise to a colossal wave of incoming tourists and home-seekers. The region was then rapidly Anglicized and it underwent immense social change and urban growth (DeLyser 888). Thus the historical context contributed to the novel's phenomenal success. Ironically, thanks to its success, this unfortunately well-timed novel ended up participating in the further dispossession of the very same people it had set itself to save.

As for the literary decisions Jackson made in writing the story of *Ramona*, there stands out the question of the novel's various generic adscriptions to regional fiction, the sentimental novel, and the romance. First, *Ramona* can be adequately placed under the genre of regional fiction, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century served as an important stimulant to domestic tourist travel: "regional fiction's picturesque portrayals of 'remnant' cultures found tremendous appeal. And as domestic tourism rose first in popularity and then in affordability, Americans began to explore their own country in increasingly large numbers, adding literary shrines such as *Ramona* landmarks to the list of canonical tourist attractions" (DeLyser 891). Second, Jackson's novel qualifies as a sentimental novel,<sup>10</sup> in line with other similar texts written in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>11</sup> *Ramona*, in fact, has been described as "a quintessential sentimental heroine, standing in a long American tradition of female characters who exercise sympathy" (Havard 105); she is "a young woman of feeling," uninterested in serious study or deep thought, "simple, joyous, gentle," comparable to "a clear brook rippling along in the sun" (Havard 105). Jackson, like other authors of sentimental novels, believed that "in order for someone to exercise sympathy for another, that someone must imagine him or herself to occupy that other's position" (Havard 102). Reassured by this conviction, Jackson believed her novel was to be a call for people to imagine themselves in the position of the abject Native American. *Ramona* would be, she hoped, a sort of battle cry that would first call attention to the plight of California's Native peoples, and would then trigger social and political action on their behalf.

But the novel's adscription to the genre of regional fiction did not serve to direct Anglos' attention to Indigenous people's dispossession, so much as to attract

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<sup>10</sup> For John Havard, given that *Ramona* portrays the recurrent dispossession of the protagonist couple and their various uprootings, Jackson's work is, in effect, a novel that "takes the form of a sentimental travel narrative" (107).

<sup>11</sup> For example, in her article on José Martí's reading of Jackson's *Ramona*, Susan Gillman refers to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and also to "Cuban Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's abolitionist *Sab* (1841)," and "the Peruvian Clorinda Matto de Turner's pro-*indigenista* *Aves sin nido* [Birds without a Nest] (1889)" as examples of 19<sup>th</sup>-century women intellectuals who "aligned themselves, and their national visions, with the racially oppressed" (94) and, in so doing, produced novels that some might consider as "sickly sweet or sentimental" (95).





herds of tourists to Southern California: “Rather than prompt its readers to search out social injustice, *Ramona*’s success sent them looking for the places where the novel’s characters had lived” (Stevens 161). For its part, *Ramona*’s belonging in a long tradition of sentimental heroines further prevented Jackson from accomplishing through literature what she had been unable to achieve through direct political action. Indeed, *Ramona*’s simple, pious, and gentle nature stripped her character of any political force. As Kevin Starr has put it, in *Ramona*, “sentiment overcame outrage” (qtd. in Gendzel 65), which undercut Jackson’s authorial intention. Though Jackson’s heroine was meant to move Anglos to empathize with Native Americans, she actually led them to focus almost exclusively on the romantic elements that abound in her story. In the words of Valerie Mathes: “Instead of being perceived as an indictment of the assault of Anglo California society upon the California Indians, [*Ramona*] was seen as a romantic love story that became a stock symbol of Southern California chambers of commerce and tourist bureaus” (*Helen Hunt Jackson* x).

For her novel to be converted into a conventional romance, Jackson had to make her characters acceptable to her audience. As seen, she wanted them to be Mission Indians who would inspire Anglo readers to feel sympathy for Indigenous peoples in California, but she could not make them “real” Mission Indians and, simultaneously, “palatable” for an Anglo audience. Thus, neither of her main characters, *Ramona* and *Alessandro*, are Mission Indians who ring authentic. To start with, *Ramona* is part-white, and she has traits that 19<sup>th</sup>-century Euro-Americans could find appealing, namely, that she is extremely pious and kind. Of equal importance is the fact that, like many other Californians, she is a mix, a cross, but she possesses great physical beauty and her blue eyes help her pass for white: “She is *Europeanized* and, in her case, her mysterious Indian origin only serves to exoticize her. *Ramona* is beautiful, strange, devoted, and uncomplaining—what more could a man want?” (Monroy 143; emphasis added).

For his part, *Alessandro* is a full-blooded Indian, but he is superior to the average Mission Indian: he can read, play the violin, and has, surprisingly, neither a Native nor a Spanish name, but an Italian one. His skin color is so light that he does not look like an Indian. Paradoxically, his own tribe respects him precisely because of these unusual traits. In the words of John Havard, “*Alessandro*, who is educated and somewhat *European* in his ways, is an atypical *Cahuilla* Indian” (105; emphasis added). His talent for music, his religiosity, and his sensitive, refined, virtuous, and tender nature make him a fantasy figure for Victorian women, “a domesticated man” (Monroy 143). In other words, both *Ramona* and *Alessandro* are “fantasy” romance characters (she, the uncomplaining and stunningly beautiful heroine; he, the sensitive and caring Beta hero); besides, rather than *authentic* Mission Indians, there is general agreement that they look like *Europeanized* Indians.<sup>12</sup> The main characters’ lack of

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<sup>12</sup> Despite his being *Europeanized*, it should nonetheless be noted that *Alessandro*, like his father before him, goes insane and dies, which, according to Yolanda Venegas, suggests that Native Americans are “unfit for the modern world, inevitable victims of Manifest Destiny” (74).



authenticity and romance-like heroic status made it possible for many readers to lose “track of the boundaries between the book’s story and the reality that it purported to describe” (Stevens 161). In keeping with this, “Ramona’s success as a romance undercut its effectiveness as an exposé of the problems of California’s Indians. For most Americans, Southern California and the Mission Indians simply provided an interesting setting and exotic characters for a conventional love story” (Stevens 161).

### 3.3. THE TOURIST INDUSTRY, PHOTOGRAPHY AND COMMODIFICATION

*Ramona*’s deviation from battle cry into romance is not exclusively attributable to the historical context in which the novel was written and the literary genres it was modeled on. The tourist industry soon came to profit from the novel in as much the same way as the businesses of real-estate development and railroad communications were doing. Photography, film, and, ultimately, commodification supported California’s nascent tourist industry while helping to cancel *Ramona*’s potential as a call to action in favor of Native Americans. In the end, the novel was entrenched as a love story that could make wonders, money-wise, while working in compliance with capitalism. Indeed, promoters of California as a tourist destination and place of residence “found photography to be one of their most important tools in transforming Ramona the social problem novel into Ramona the tourist attraction. Photographers eagerly recorded images of any person, object, or location that could have had a conceivable connection to the story” (Stevens 162). Thousands of photographs were taken and sold of places that were said to have been the exact settings where the characters had been born, raised, married, etc. And it was thus that “[t]he belief that characters and locations in the novel must correspond to real persons and real places became part of the culture of tourism in southern California” (Stevens 162).

Of the novel’s settings, one of the easiest places to recognize in real life was the San Gabriel Mission, said to be Ramona’s birthplace. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the missions of *El Camino Real* had been for some decades on the verge of crumbling down,<sup>13</sup> but they were now beginning to receive renewed interest as potential tourist destinations and, ironically, as solid reminders of California’s fantasy heritage. Though they can be considered the sites of the Indigenous peoples’ genocide, they were nonetheless chosen to impersonate the “padre myth” (Gendzel 69), that is, the idea that during the Spanish era and under the mission system, “California was the happiest country in all the world,” as in those days “people were not concerned with the strenuous materialism and commercialism of modern life” (McGroarty, qtd. in Gendzel 69). As Gendzel has put it, “[o]nly a vivid imagination could endow Spanish California with ‘romance,’ given the isolation, rough conditions,

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<sup>13</sup> “The missions had long since fallen into ruin by the time Jackson toured southern California in 1883” (Gonzalez 447).



and shocking Native American death rates that prevailed at the time.” In fact, he continues, [t]he missions probably stand closer in comparison to concentration camps than to the happy religious communes of Spanish mythology” (Gendzel 71). Regardless of the myth, many late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo tourists disregarded the historical genocide of Indigenous peoples under the mission system, and chose instead to stick to the romanticized myth.<sup>14</sup> In this context, the San Gabriel Mission was to occupy a special position among the missions, since it could be related not just to *El Camino Real*, but also to Jackson’s *Ramona*.

Other settings acquired prominence thanks to their connection with the novel. The real-life Camulos Ranch, for instance, became the first contender for “Home of Ramona,” or the fictive Moreno Ranch. It was conveniently located within walking distance of a station of the Southern Pacific Railroad. A mere two-hour train ride from Los Angeles took tourists through beautiful country to this ranch owned by the del Valle family. Photographers visited the ranch and made hundreds of photographs which were later on reproduced in magazines, tourist brochures, illustrated editions of *Ramona*, and as individual prints: “With little regard for the fact that Camulos was a private home, sightseers swarmed over the grounds, picking flowers and fruit, stealing souvenirs, invading the house, and generally offending residents with their ‘Boston’ manners” (Stevens 164). Owners of Camulos Ranch were first overwhelmed by the avalanche of tourists, but eventually they “used their rancho’s notoriety to their benefit, marketing their citrus under the ‘Home of Ramona’ label, which featured an image of their by-now-famous south veranda” (DeLyser 896). In D.W. Griffith’s 1910 first film version of the novel, Rancho Camulos featured prominently. For the first time in motion-picture history, a film director was thus giving screen credit to the location: “Camulos had become so important as the Home of Ramona that Griffith’s film would have lacked authenticity without it” (DeLyser 900). Ironically, then, the film gained “authenticity” by being filmed on a location that had been commercially chosen to represent the novel’s setting; in other words, fiction came to confer validity to fiction, and, ultimately, to offer considerable revenue both to the owners of the ranch and to the railroad company that promoted it as the Moreno Ranch.

Greed for profit gave rise to a second contender for Ramona’s home: Guajome Ranch. The Southern Pacific’s rival, the Santa Fe Route, took a special interest in this ranch, which it promoted as the “real home of Ramona” (Stephens 165). The chapel, the washing place and the sheep-shearing place on Guajome Ranch were locations that closely matched descriptions in the novel; moreover, this ranch was

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on the so-called “Mission Myth,” it is advisable to read James J. Rawls’s “The California Mission as Symbol and Myth.” This 1992 article offers a panorama of the evolution of the different attitudes that travelers, historians, journalists and others have had in regards to California’s Franciscan missions, from the discrediting reports of Spain’s imperial rivals in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to the romanticization of the missions as a symbol of the state’s golden age in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, without forgetting Indigenous American’s “indictment of the mission’s system destructive effects on the native peoples” (358) from the 1980s on.



only a mile and a half from the San Luis Rey Mission, a place frequently mentioned in the novel (Camulos Ranch, unlike the home in the novel, is not near Mission San Luis Rey). It is true that “[t]he owner [of Guajome Ranch] complained that he had to re-roof the house because photographers had broken many tiles climbing up to find the best shot of the patio” (Stevens 166), but the railroad company profited from these unintended consequences; besides, through this other ranch, another mission, that of San Luis Rey, could likewise capitalize on the proximity to Ramona’s supposed home.

Estudillo House or La Casa Larga in San Diego’s Old Town was subsequently chosen as Ramona and Alessandro’s wedding place “through a combination of popular lore and the efforts of the owners of the Hotel del Coronado” (Monroy 137). Real-estate and light-rail developer John D. Spreckels bought the run-down adobe already popularly known as “Ramona’s Marriage Place” and restored the building in 1910 (DeLyser 889). Picture postcards displayed “recently planted palms trees and imported agapanthus from Africa and the begonias from South America in its garden” (Monroy 137). Thus, photography was once again used to confer verisimilitude to a setting in a doubly paradoxical move: the adobe had been chosen because it seemed convenient to boost some businesses, not on account of any specific reference to Casa Estudillo in Jackson’s novel, and the rehabilitation of the building was carried out without any concern for historical accuracy, respect for Indigenous architectural construction techniques, or autochthonous landscape design. Casa Estudillo was one among countless of examples of the power of photography to create “its own truth,” in a process perfectly summarized by Errol W. Stevens:

Once such a place had been identified as part of the Ramona story, it underwent a transformation. No longer was it merely a ranch, adobe, or even a run-down old building, but became one of those special places where Ramona lived, got married, or went to school. Thus transformed from fictional location to a place in the real world, the site became a tourist attraction. Because it was a physical entity, photographers could take pictures of it. In the odd way that photography creates its own truth, the resulting images validated the authenticity of the story. (167)

Casa Estudillo was “upgraded” with a souvenir shop which sold dried flowers from the courtyard, teaspoons, postcards, toothpick holders, letter-openers, ash trays, salt-and-pepper shakers, napkin rings, and pocket notebooks, among countless of other Ramona curios. Couples could even marry in the restored chapel where the fictitious Ramona and Alessandro were said to have taken their vows. Tourists were encouraged to buy souvenirs, and thus contribute to the success of this particular business, but also to leave something of themselves behind (coins in a wishing well, notes, etc.) (DeLyser 898-899). In this way, meaning was gradually invested in objects and places, and tourists began to feel an intimate connection, probably an “authentic” one, in their view, with Estudillo House, and, more generally, with the Ramona of their fantasy heritage.

The widespread obsession to relate the novel’s fictive settings to actual locations was taken one step further when photographers and tourists alike decided



to go for the “real” Ramona. Many claimed that a Cahuilla Indian called Ramona Lugo or Lubo was the woman after whom the novel was named. She was the widow of Juan Diego, a man who, like Alessandro, had been murdered by an Anglo. In the novel, Alessandro’s murder triggered a kind of “ritual death” in Ramona, a sort of coma that leaves her listless and totally dependent. It is a group of Cahuilla Indians who live in the San Jacinto mountains that look after her until Felipe, her foster brother, comes to her rescue. For those searching for the “real” Ramona, Ramona Lugo was therefore a perfect match, both on account of her name and her murdered husband’s death, and also of her ethnicity. The attention she received was such, that it only brought her negative and undesirable consequences. For once, “the commodity value of outsiders’ interest in her figure helped strain her relations with fellow Cahuillas” (Padget 861). Moreover, photographer George W. James, the author of *Through Ramona’s Country* (1913), failed to treat her with due respect, molesting her even while she was mourning her husband, and condoning his unethical behavior on the basis of a supposedly greater good. In his own words: “It seemed almost a sacrilege to make a photograph of her at this moment [while she is visiting her husband’s grave], yet I trust she and the recording angel will consider the kindness of my heart towards her and her people in balancing the amount of my culpability” (qtd. in Padget 861). It seems that for those profiting from the success of Jackson’s *Ramona*, either through commercial enterprises (railroad companies, real-estate development, etc.) or the commodification of places and individuals, their means were all justified, and respect for California’s Indigenous peoples or rigorous history need not apply.

Indeed, California’s late 19<sup>th</sup>-century market economy was put to boost the peculiar fantasy heritage built on the basis of *Ramona*. As Mike Davis has expressed it, Jackson’s novel became “a romance that generations of Angelenos,” and one could rightly add thousands of tourists from elsewhere too, “have confused with real history” (qtd. in DeLyser 890). In similar terms, writing in 1910 for the opening of Ramona’s Marriage Place, journalist Edwin H. Clough underlined people’s confusion between fiction and history when it came to Jackson’s novel: “The legend of Ramona and Alessandro assumed form and presence as palpable as living things of actual history,” and he further elaborated on how “the romance colors the old chronicle and weaves itself on the fabric of fact until it is impossible to discriminate the true from the false, the real from the unreal.” In a lighthearted and careless way, though, he wondered, “And what matters it, after all?” (qtd. in DeLyser 900). But to the novel’s author who had striven to write “an emotional plea,” a work that would do for the Native American what *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had done for the African American, it would have mattered to see her battle cry turned into a powerful tool for capitalist greed. Many others too, myself included, have mourned the lost opportunity, and have lamented capitalism’s capacity to profit from injustice:

Sadly, Jackson’s book failed completely as a social problem novel. Instead, its importance to history was that it provided the basis for one of the most important early tourist attractions in southern California. Ironically, as promoters turned the fictional places where Ramona lived into real places, the Mission Indians and



their problems became increasingly invisible and irrelevant to the larger society. The real tragedy was that the new society coming into being at the turn of the century could so easily integrate a romanticized version of the history of one of its victims into its own sunny success story. (Stevens 167)

#### 4. RAMONA, THE SILENCED *MESTIZA*

One may rightly wonder with Errol W. Stevens what was it that made it possible for the new society coming into being in California at the turn of the century to totally misread *Ramona* and consequently romanticize the state's victims, its Indigenous peoples, and to capitalize on them while concocting its own sunny success story. Or, more generally, as Douglas Monroy has expressed it: "What is it about humankind that they tend to misread such great novels, and, instead of being roused to action or even mere indignation, personalize the stories and respond in such narrowly self-centered ways?" (135). Throughout this paper, I have attributed the novel's derailing to a number of factors. Of paramount importance was the historical context in which the novel came out, which coincided with California's opening up for massive Anglo settlement thanks to the arrival of various competing railroad companies and the presence of aggressive real-estate developers. The author's choice of literary genres for her work can also be ascribed some responsibility, as seen, because regional fiction, the sentimental novel and the romance have not traditionally aided any revolutionary spirit, but have often crashed it under their profit-oriented nature (particularly acute in the case of regional fiction and the romance), their many conventionalisms and, by and large, respect for the status quo. As argued, the state's nascent tourist industry similarly did little to help Jackson's authorial intention flourish; instead, tourism buried it under tons of photographic compositions and rehabilitated buildings that ironically gave verisimilitude to made-up stories, entrenched the neglect for real-life Native peoples, and, paradoxically, encumbered a romanticized version of a past that never was.

Underneath all these factors, though, there lies a coalition of systems and discourses of oppression, that, in my view, more adequately explain Jackson's failed project, i.e., the alliance formed by imperialism, sexism, racism, and capitalism. All four combined can be blamed for the cancelling of Jackson's novel as a call to action on behalf of Native peoples, and for the erasure of *Ramona* as a potentially subversive *mestiza* with enough power to unsettle, or at least question, race, gender and class relations. Indeed, under the force of this all-powerful alliance, Jackson's heroine, the symbolic center of the novel, as the title underscores, goes missing, irredeemably lost for the cause of Indigenous peoples' rights.

Undeniably, imperialism plays a major role in suppressing *Ramona*'s potentially subversive power. Land takings, first by the Spaniards and subsequently by white Mexicans and Anglos, as well as enforced labor, genocide and cultural erasure are all at work in a society where eventually Native peoples have it infinitely worse than *Californios*, as they are left with no place to escape to. Helen Hunt



Jackson did not spare details on the injustices that Anglo colonization brought to California, both to those of Spanish descent and to Indians. “Nobody need feel himself safe under American rule,” denounces Señora Moreno (Jackson, *Ramona* 15), for whom the Anglo presence has meant a considerable reduction in the number of acres of her *hacienda*. Father Salvierderra also criticizes Anglo despotism: “We are all alike helpless in their hands, Alessandro. They possess the country, and can make what laws they please” (Jackson, *Ramona* 66). But Jackson shows that Native peoples fare even worse in this society, since none of them have deeds to prove they own the land they live in, and so they have absolutely no right, and are condemned to constant dispossession and permanent displacement. “We have no right in Temecula,” says Alessandro to Ramona, “not even to our graveyard full of the dead” (Jackson, *Ramona* 174). Confronted with all these injustices, Ramona naively declares her wish that “it were the olden time now, [...] when the men like Father Salvierderra had all the country. Then there would be work for all, at the Missions. The Señora says the Missions were like palaces, and that there were thousands of Indians in every one of them; thousands and thousands, all working so happy and peaceful” (Jackson, *Ramona* 223). Alessandro, however, offers a different version: “The Señora does not know all that happened at the Missions,” he replies, quick to add: “My father says that at some of them were dreadful things, when bad men had power” (Jackson, *Ramona* 223-224). These statements prove that Jackson’s vision of the Mission system was not totally romanticized. Nonetheless, Alessandro’s words do not radically disqualify the Mission system, but only “some” missions where there were “bad men” in power. Thus the novel fails to criticize Spanish imperialism as a whole, as it attributes its shortcomings not to the system in its entirety, but simply to the occasional, and one might say inescapable, existence of “some” “bad” people.

As for Anglo imperialism, Jackson likewise managed to exonerate it in part. The characters of the Hyer family, especially that of Aunt Ri, recently arrived in California from Tennessee, prove to be “[g]ood-natured, affectionate, humorous people” (Jackson, *Ramona* 278), capable, even, of abandoning their racist attitudes towards Indians and eventually helping Ramona and Alessandro on many occasions. They are the proof that not all Anglos are exclusively after money, and that not all of them are violent and cruel. However, the fact that in the end a widowed Ramona is reunited with Felipe and both escape to Mexico, where they will marry and lead a better life, clearly suggests that California is no place for either those of Spanish descent or of Native ancestry. For the latter, there is no option but to remain hidden in the mountains, away from water sources, or worse, dead and buried while the crimes committed against them are never to be met with justice. The former, on the contrary, do have a chance to improve their lot. The Moreno lands have been so encroached upon by American settlers that the life the family once led in California is no longer possible for them under Anglo rule. Mexico remains an outlet, though, for those like the Morenos who have the means to acquire lands south of the border.

In terms of gender, Father Salvierderra’s words admonishing Alessandro that “[w]e are all alike helpless” are equally proved wrong in the end. Felipe has





spent months looking for Ramona, only to find her, at the novel's denouement, in an unrecognizable state inside a Cahuilla house: "Was that Ramona,—that prostrate form; hair disheveled, eyes glittering, cheeks scarlet, hands playing meaninglessly, like the hands of one crazed, with a rosary of gold beads?" (Jackson, *Ramona* 331). Aunt Ri looks after her and helps her recover from her feverish state, in keeping with women's traditional role as caretakers. But it is Felipe that finally takes her away from the Cahuilla people, who rejoice in "her having found such a protector for herself and her child" (Jackson, *Ramona* 339), as if they were incapable of offering her any comfort. Ramona, for her part, "made no inquires as to Felipe's plans. Unquestioningly, like a little child, she resigned herself into his hands" (Jackson, *Ramona* 339). Her acceptance of Felipe's power of deliverance and her submission to his leadership are evident. Besides, her willingness to remain silent, emphasized by the narrator's reference to the fact that she "made no inquires" and failed to question his decisions further reinstate her passive role; even more so, her disposition to act "like a child" definitely renders her helpless. At this point, one wonders how José Martí, the Cuban revolutionary and ardent defender of Jackson's *Ramona*, which he translated into Spanish in 1887, could possibly see the novel's protagonist as "the arrogant mestiza" (358), when, in fact, by the end of the book, her spirit has been utterly broken.

Unlike Ramona, Felipe has raised in stature towards the novel's denouement, first by admitting he was wrong in uncritically accepting his mother's commands, of which he exonerates himself on the pretense that he was "under a spell" (Jackson, *Ramona* 262), and finally by becoming the rescuer of the damsel in distress *par excellence*: "A power greater than hers was ordering her way; Felipe was its instrument" (Jackson, *Ramona* 339). Felipe's power, in this instance, is that of the patriarch who has finally discarded his mother's control and has fully taken his responsibility over his estate and "his" people. Not only that, but he is the *white* patriarch to whom the victimized *mestiza* must "[u]nquestioningly" and silently surrender.

As the white patriarch, indeed, he has not only superseded his domineering mother, but he has similarly replaced Ramona's Indian husband, who throughout the novel failed to protect his wife and child, offer them a means of living, a house, healthcare, and dignity. Ramona, the mixed-race heroine, was never fully Indian, in any case. Father Gaspara himself, the Franciscan priest that married Ramona and Assesandro, ponders on Ramona's race: "I don't believe she is a Temecula Indian. [...] She is quite superior to the general run of them" (Jackson, *Ramona* 250). At the end of the novel, the narrative seems to somehow correct the unsuitable match of such a superior woman to Alessandro, an Indian after all, if an unusual one. By marrying her off to Felipe, of Castilian ancestry, the novel guarantees that Ramona and her second husband's offspring will be whiter and more Moreno-like, or European-like: "Sons and daughters came to bear *his name*," the narrator foretells in the last paragraph (Jackson, *Ramona* 353; emphasis added). And though it also advances that the eldest daughter, who was Alessandro's, not Felipe's, remained a favorite of her parents, the fact remains that the narrative has reinstated the white patriarchal order by literally pushing Alessandro to the grave, and foregrounding Felipe's numerous descendants, who will thrive in welcoming Mexico: "The story



of the romance of their lives, being widely rumored, greatly enhanced the interest with which they were welcomed” (Jackson, *Ramona* 353).<sup>15</sup>

In this new Mexican context, Ramona is said to “doubt her own identity” (Jackson, *Ramona* 353), which may just as well be so, given the multiple uprootings she has experienced in her life, as well as the various identities she has been imposed: first, that of a supposedly white woman of Spanish descent, a “Spanish *señorita*”<sup>16</sup> living on a *Californio* ranch in Anglo California; second, that of a mixed-race woman married to an Indian (Alessandro) and forced to constantly abandon their land; finally, that of a *mestiza* married to a white man (Felipe), both residents in Mexico. Her identity confusion is only natural, since her final marriage to Felipe, that is, “the way in which she is insulated within a high-caste ‘Spanish’ family[,] suggests that Ramona’s *mestiza* identity is denied” (Padget 867). Through Ramona’s capitulation to the white patriarch, the symbolic center of the novel can be said to have gone missing, in as much as the Indian traces in both Ramona and her offspring to Felipe are whitewashed, diluted among that “high-caste, ‘Spanish’ family” that her second husband has given her.

In terms of the novel’s racial assumptions, it is also of great significance that Ramona and Felipe, an inter-racial couple, are sent off to Mexico, where they are allowed to marry, miscegenate, and lead a happy life, thus leaving the US symbolically empty of *Californios* like Felipe and crosses like Ramona (Natives like Alessandro have been previously, and conveniently, wiped out). The US is now for whites only, “free from the insidious atavistic influence of mixed blood” (Gonzalez 454). According to Margaret Jacobs, Ramona and Felipe’s escape to Mexico would suggest that “the mixings of certain kinds of blood,” namely that of “Spanish and Indian” (218-219), are a non-desirable mix. Once the Anglo empire has rid of them, it can proceed to advance across the southwest, unimpeded by the presence of inferior races and the threat of miscegenation. This is how Jackson’s *Ramona* ends up fostering “a gendered and sexually charged Manifest Destiny ideology” (Venegas 64) despite its efforts to the contrary.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Robert McKee Irwin has argued that given Ramona’s *mestiza* identity, her decision to identify as an Indian and to marry an Indigenous man “would hardly have been looked upon favorably by urban elites in late nineteenth-century Sonora or Baja California,” as “belief in white supremacy ruled in certain social strata throughout the borderlands region” (559). This points to the racism that Ramona would have encountered in historical Mexico, which further compromises the verisimilitude of Jackson’s novel, whose happy ending is predicated on Mexico’s welcoming attitude towards Felipe, and, more problematically, his marriage to a *mestiza*.

<sup>16</sup> “Despite Ramona’s Indian blood, Jackson constructs her culturally as a fully assimilated Spanish *señorita*. As a proper ‘Spanish’ *señorita* she has attended private Catholic school in Los Angeles and learned all the skills characteristic of a refined *señorita*: embroidery, weaving, and painting. Even after she leaves her adopted Spanish family and goes Native with her love, Alessandro, she acts according to her Spanish upbringing” (Venegas 76).

<sup>17</sup> Of equal relevance in this racialized construction of a Manifest Destiny ideology is the characterization of Ramona’s Native mother, who is completely silenced in the novel, and of the saucy Mexican maid, Margarita, who is presented as being “immoral and sexually and racially impure”





As seen, in Jackson's novel imperialism, sexism and racism are conveniently combined to aid the capitalist system in a number of ways. At the end of 19<sup>th</sup>-century California, agents of capitalism, that is, real estate developers, railroad companies, and owners of various tourist businesses (hotels, souvenir shops, etc.) took advantage of gullible and uncritical consumers, mostly uprooted Midwesterners who were eager to buy a piece of land in sunny California and were consequently reluctant to admit that the land was not empty, though they were ready to accept that, if necessary, it should be emptied. These business transactions required dispensable victims, i.e., *Californios*, most of whom were of mixed-race descent,<sup>18</sup> and, above all, Native Americans, who were even more vulnerable.<sup>19</sup> A necessary accomplice was added to this in the form of *Ramona*, the novel, the myths and stories it gave rise to, as well as the photographs that paradoxically granted it verisimilitude, and even the architecture that was purportedly inspired in Mediterranean building techniques in an attempt to link Southern California to its romanticized Spanish past.<sup>20</sup> As Douglas Monroy has put it:

Real estate developers and railroad companies captured the story of *Ramona* and used the compelling myths it contained about the halcyon days of old California to sell house plots and train tickets to newcomers. Thus it was that people uprooted from the Midwest could find rootedness in California as they adopted the captivating myths of the new place, stories that *Ramona* helped generate. To this day developers use whimsical Spanish names with faux Mediterranean architecture that recall Californio society to sell real estate. (Monroy 137-138)

Supported by the inter-locking discourses of imperialism, sexism and racism, the capitalist system virtually erased the Native presence in California. Meanwhile, literature and the arts, despite Jackson's intention to use her novel to promote social justice, became accessory in imperialist and capitalist ruthless practices. In this way,

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(Venegas 79). Moreover, the representation of *Californios* as "idle, illiterate, semi-savage Mexicans" builds up a "hidden text shrouded in romance and nostalgia" and proves to Anglo readers of the novel that *Californios* "were surely unable to develop the land to its full potential" (Venegas 80), which further justifies Anglo rule in California.

<sup>18</sup> According to Glen Gendzel, among the *Californios*, "fullblooded Spaniards were greatly outnumbered by Mexicans of mixed descent—mestizos who combined European, Native American, and African ethnicities" (75). Del Castillo concurs that *Californios*, "wealthy families who had been given large grants of land by the Spanish and Mexican governments," may have "considered themselves 'Spanish' but in reality they were almost all mestizos, having a mixed cultural and racial heritage" (3).

<sup>19</sup> American rule in California resulted in three statutes that vitally affected Native Americans: no Indian could testify in court; Indians might be declared vagrants upon the petition of a white person, and Indian children could be forced by ranchero owners, or dons, to become apprentices with the "consent" of their parents (Dobie 95).

<sup>20</sup> The popularity of "Mission Revival architecture" in California, beginning in the 1880s and continuing through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, gave rise to the wide-spread use of "the stucco, tiles, gables, and towers of the missions," which were "copied in thousands of houses, hotels, office building, schools, and train stations around the state" (Rawls 352).



*Ramona* was turned into “a boosterist device, rather than a battle cry” (DeLyser 893), one which condemned Indigenous voices to the margins in much the same way as Alessandro’s dead body and Ramona’s abated *mestiza* spirit were both buried under California’s sunny skies. If there is a lesson to learn from Jackson’s *Ramona*, it could well be what Chicana writer Cherríe Moraga concludes in her 2019 memoir *Native Country of the Heart*, a poignant reflection on her mother’s life across the US-Mexican border and her own *mestiza* identity:

There is no religious justification for the Spanish mission system, which effected a genocidal practice of slavery, dislocation, disease, and rape against Native Californians, and laid the groundwork for the two centuries of Native obscurity that followed. There is only greed.

There is no justification for the betrayal of the promises of Mexican Independence against the Tongva, the Chumash, the Cahuilla... There is only greed.

Since the arrival of the gringo in the mid-nineteenth century, it is first and last greed that has whitewashed the entire history of Native California, even as it walks still in the bodies of its “Mexican” descendants.

There is no justification, but there is so much need for reckoning... (238)

There is, indeed, much need for reckoning in the history of California’s Native peoples, but before embarking upon it, one should realize the limitations of a social and political vision that, like Jackson’s, comes from “the center.” Despite her good intentions, her perspective and others like hers may well be said to be inevitably laden with systems and discourses of oppression. These systems permitted the author to barely scratch the status quo, if at all, or, worse, allowed her to contribute to the entrenchment of economic, sexual and racial inequalities, and needless to say, to the silencing of the *mestiza* spirit. Had Jackson’s project been fueled by the latter, the results would have been, presumably, less disappointing. Indeed, as Yolanda Venegas has argued, when it came to confronting the tyranny of the church and state, “Native women played a pivotal role in resistance activities” (73), and, as proved by the case of Toyipurina (1760–1799), a Tongva medicine woman from the vicinity of San Gabriel Mission who organized the 1785 revolt against Spanish colonial domination, they did so by resorting to non-Western strategies and by refusing to give up on their identities. Ramona, surely, would have fared better as a role model for women of mixed ancestry if she had followed Toyipurina’s example instead of surrendering her *mestiza* spirit to empire and romance.

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## NOTES



# MESTIZAJE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS THE ANALEPTICS TO THE TRANSHISTORICAL BORDERLAND CRISES IN ALEJANDRO MORALES'S NOVEL *THE RAG DOLL PLAGUES* (1992)

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Alejandro Morales's novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) and explores the transhistorical dimensions of the subordination indigenous and *mestizalo* identities experience against colonial and postcolonial authoritarian forces in the borderlands between Mexico and the United States. Spanish colonialism, US racism and eco-destruction, each transpiring in different moments of the New World history, are the diverse forms the borderland crises take up in the three Books comprising the novel. *Mestizaje* and intercultural communication, as well as the retrieval of the indigenous and Mexican cultural traditions, foster the ongoing creation of new hybrid racial, ethnic and cultural identities in all the three Books and, thus, emerge as the analeptics to the diachronically persistent plight of racism.

KEYWORDS: Borderland Crises, Transhistoricity, Transference, *mestizaje*, Intercultural Communication.

MESTIZAJE Y COMUNICACIÓN INTERCULTURAL COMO  
ANALÉPTICOS FRENTE A LAS CRISIS FRONTERIZAS TRANSHISTÓRICAS  
EN LA NOVELA *THE RAG DOLL PLAGUES* (1992) DE ALEJANDRO MORALES

## RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en la novela *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) de Alejandro Morales e investiga las dimensiones transhistóricas de la subordinación de las identidades indígenas y mestizas bajo el dominio de las fuerzas autoritarias coloniales y postcoloniales en las zonas fronterizas entre México y los Estados Unidos. El colonialismo español, el racismo estadounidense y la eco-destrucción, que ocurren en diferentes momentos de la historia del Nuevo Mundo, constituyen distintas formas de crisis fronterizas en los tres Libros que componen la novela. El mestizaje y la comunicación intercultural, así como también la recuperación de las tradiciones culturales indígenas y mexicanas, fomentan la creación continua de nuevas identidades de hibridación racial, étnica y cultural en los tres Libros y, así, surgen como analépticos frente al problema diacrónicamente persistente del racismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: crisis fronterizas, transhistoricidad, transferencia, mestizaje, comunicación intercultural.

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In borderland spaces, different ethnic and cultural identities clash and, thus, they largely tend to be marked by intricate power relationships between antithetical narratives of existence. Fierce antagonisms are created due to the forceful imposition of hegemonic discourses on cultures and identities that are viewed as alien and subordinate on account of their racial, ethnic and cultural difference. The borderlands between Mexico and the United States is a locale where *mestizo/o* (racially mixed), *mexicana/o* and Chicana/o subjectivities constantly struggle against socio-political and cultural injustices established by imperialist and capitalist enterprises. According to Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “[t]he US-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds. And before a scab is formed it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (3). Conceiving of this border region as a site of conflict as well as intercultural communication, Anzaldúa also states that “[a] borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (3). Namely, the coalition of antagonistic modes of being-in-the-world that transpire in the borderlands and give rise to new hybrid subjectivities reveal the ever-changing and transitory dimensions of ethnic and cultural self-identification. In his novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992), Alejandro Morales offers a transhistorical perspective to the struggles indigenous, *mestizo/o* and *mexicana/o* subjectivities experience against colonial and postcolonial authoritarian forces in the borderlands between Mexico and the US and explores how the process of *mestizaje*<sup>1</sup> and cultural blending, a process that unfolds in frontier spaces, fosters the on-going regeneration of ethnic and cultural identities.

Each of the three Books comprising *The Rag Doll Plagues* takes place in different temporal contexts of the post-conquest New World history, where collective social crises, allegorically manifested as lethal diseases, confront borderland subjectivities. The collective predicaments affecting indigenous, *mestizo/o* identities take up the diverse forms of Spanish colonialism, US racism, and eco-destruction, each being different moments of New World history, but all located and invariably transpiring in the borderlands. Thus, in Morales’s novel, “[b]order spaces are

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<sup>1</sup> The term *mestizaje* originally means miscegenation and it “refers to the biological, cultural and religious commixture between the indigenous populations of the Americas and the Spanish *conquistadores*” (Emmanouilidou, “Temporal Dynamics and Spatial Horizons” 138). The process of *mestizaje* that took place during the colonial encounter between the Spaniards and the Native Americans in the New World brought about the emergence of new hybrid racial and cultural subjectivities. The meaning of *mestizaje* has progressively been extended by scholars and today it connotes the blending of multiple diverse racial, ethnic and cultural identities (138). In this essay, the term *mestizaje* is used to refer both to the process of racial inter-breeding as well as to the intermingling of diverse cultural narratives.



explained as socio-political locales, markedly defined by turbulent and riotous human enactment throughout time” (Emmanouilidou, “Temporal Dynamics and Spatial Horizons” 135), and the self-identification of borderland subjectivities emerges as a process diachronically underscored by struggles against oppression and injustice. Interestingly, the ways through which borderland identities tackle the crises they experience in the face of various agents of authoritative power are slightly altered repetitions of the process of *mestizaje*, the coalition of antithetical cultural narratives that constantly leads to the creation of new ethnic and cultural identities. As Michel M.J. Fischer states, “the search or struggle for a sense of ethnic identity is a (re)-invention and discovery of a vision,” which is constructed through the “meaning abstracted from [the] past” (196).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Fischer suggests that since “ethnicity is a deeply rooted emotional component of identity, it is often transmitted ... through processes analogous to the ... transference of psychoanalytic encounters” (195-96).<sup>3</sup> More precisely, “[t]ransference, the return of the repressed in new forms, and repetitions with their distortions are all mechanisms through which ethnicity is regenerated” (207). In *The Rag Doll Plagues*, the oppression of *mestiza/o* identities by authoritative discourses, a plight transferred across diverse historical moments, is differently manifested as Spanish colonialism, US racism and ecocide, resulting to significant changes in the social structures, the racial relations and the cultural dynamics functioning in the borderlands. In fact, as the novel explores both the colonial encounter between the Spaniards and the Native Americans and the clash between Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans in the US-Mexico borderlands, it also highlights that these violent superimpositions have brought about a similar process of *mestizaje* between antithetical narratives of identity. Since racial and cultural blending is alternatively enacted between different ethnic groups and cultural traditions across the diverse historical interventions taking place in the New World, ethnic and cultural identities are constantly re-invented and renewed. This essay argues that in Alejandro Morales’s novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992), borderland identities manage to resist their transhistorical subordination, a struggle which relates to multifarious colonial and postcolonial discourses and to the interlinked threat of ecocide, through embracing the process of *mestizaje* and intercultural communication as well as through the retrieval of the indigenous and Mexican cultural traditions.

In “Book I: Mexico City,” which takes place in the capital of New Spain in the eighteenth century, Morales addresses the material abjection and the physical pain the indigenous inhabitants of the New World experienced during their

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, Fischer’s view that the re-invention of ethnicity requires the recovery of the collective knowledge of the past is, grounded on “the Pythagorean arts of memory” (198), a notion suggesting that “[o]nly through memory ... could one purge the sins of past lives ... and escape meaningless repetitions” (197).

<sup>3</sup> To explicate, Fischer suggests that “the ‘transference’ mechanisms of ethnicity” relate to “the conquest of an anxiety that manifests itself through repetition of behavioral patterns and cannot be articulated in rational language” (204).



subordination by the violent forces of Spanish colonialism. Particularly, the narrator-protagonist Gregorio Revueltas, a Spanish physician and “Director of the Royal *Protomedicato*” (15), who arrives in New Spain in order to attend to “the medical needs of His Majesty’s colonies” (16), is challenged to combat a contaminating disease of unknown origin, a disease which ravages both the indigenous populace and the Spanish conquerors at an alarming rate. The plight first attacks the patients’ limbs, progressively weakens the body and causes brain damage at its last stages. This disease has been named La Mona by the native people as “[it] leaves a corpse that feels like a rag doll,” remaining soft after death (30). Despite the scientific medical knowledge the narrator possesses, he feels powerless against La Mona and the overall tragic state of the indigenous masses’ living conditions. Gregorio, who initially regards the natives as “immoral racial mixtures of humanity” (11), is indeed astonished and appalled by the atmosphere of “decadence and death” dominating the colonial center (19). In Mexico City, “people squatted along the draining canal, tending to their daily needs” (26), bodies of La Mona victims were constantly added to “a pile of dead” stretching on the street (27), “dying male and female prostitutes who suffered from the epidemic and/or venereal diseases” performed sexual acts in public places (28), while “the dungheaps and the garbage dumps” (29) contributed to the “filthy stench of the city” (26). Witnessing the grotesque reality of the indigenous people, which is sharply contrasted with the wealthy lifestyle of the Spanish colonists, Gregorio gradually comprehends that the luxuries the conquerors enjoy are grounded on the exploitation of the enslaved natives. During his attempts to fight *La Mona*, the narrator also develops a unique relationship with Father Jude, a Catholic priest and a *curandero*,<sup>4</sup> appointed as his assistant, a character who communicates to Gregorio his critical stance towards the imperial power as well as his determination to heal the pain of the indigenous people. Therefore, the narrator gradually becomes able to acknowledge that the forceful subjugation of the Native Americans by the Spanish conquerors is an unethical master narrative that reproduces tremendous inequalities and immense human suffering.

The infectious plague ravaging New Spain in “Book I” and the urgent need to tackle it also reveal imperial Spain’s attempts to eradicate the cultural traditions of the indigenous people in order to sustain its hegemony. According to Marc Priewe,

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<sup>4</sup> *Curanderas/os* are healers that practice alternative ways of medicine by combining traditional Amerindian healing methods with elements of Catholicism. As Ana Castillo states in *Massacre of the Dreamers*, “the traditional practices of curanderas ... which may be traced back to the Nahua people (Aztecs) and certainly to various other Mexic Amerindian peoples ... also have similarities with European beliefs” (151). More specifically, “[t]he methods of curanderismo which apply the use of mental, spiritual, and material expertise descend from Native American, European, Eastern, and Middle Eastern philosophies and knowledge” (154). *Curanderismo*’s practices are mostly based on “Native American healing knowledge, which, in addition to herbal medicine, also has included baths, setting bones, and other remedies” (154). Castillo stresses that although “[t]he curandera ... is a specialized healer, learned in the knowledge of specifically healing the body ... in non-Western thinking, the body is never separate from the spirit or mind and all curative recommendations always consider the ailing person as a whole” (156).



the process of constructing the national identity that transpired during the eighteenth century both in Europe and its colonial settlements coincides with “the projected fear that alien elements infect and ultimately destroy the ostensible unity of the national body through racial and cultural difference” (397). In the first narrative of *The Rag Doll Plagues*, the Spanish colonists’ view of indigenous cultural traditions as a potential threat to the monolithic national and cultural narrative they ventured to impose in the New World is traced in the Spanish medical institutions’ refusal to co-operate with the *curanderas/os* in order to alleviate the effects of the devastating plague. Although La Mona quickly turns into a collective health crisis that needs to be tackled immediately and by all means, the Spanish conquerors designate the *curanderas/os*, who apply healing methods relating to indigenous cultural traditions, as “practitioners of witchcraft” (16) that ought to “be forced out of circulation” (16). Priewe states that agents of political power often seek to maintain their authority over collective national bodies through exercising what is termed “the ‘*bio-politics of the population*,’” that is, a set of “various measures of population control and discipline,” including the establishment of national health policies (399).<sup>5</sup> In this light, *curanderas/os* are persecuted by the Spanish conquerors, since the indigenous traditional healing methods they apply challenge imperial Spain’s endeavors to establish European medicine as the sole repository of knowledge that can effectively treat illnesses and ensure the collective well-being of its subjects. However, as Emmanouilidou states, “[s]adly ... the loss of local-based knowledge exacerbates the suffering of the people, and eradicates medical information that can save people’s lives” (“Temporal Dynamics and Spatial Horizons” 136). Indeed, when Gregorio asks “the General Secretary of the Holy Office, Father Antonio” to suggest some possible treatment for La Mona (Morales 39), the indigenous Catholic priest answers that the Viceroy and the Spanish crown should “stop persecuting the *curanderos*, for they are an asset” to the confrontation of the plague (40). Gregorio recognizes that the intercultural exchange of medical information, namely the coalition of the scientific tenets of European medicine with the healing practices of *curanderismo*, seems to be the only possible way to improve the living conditions of the afflicted populations in New Spain. In this way, Morales signals that the colonial power needs to transcend its despotic attitude and depart from its exclusionary practices aimed at the indigenous people and their cultural traditions in order to ensure the survival and prosperity of Spanish Mexico.

In fact, in “Book I” of *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Morales highlights that the conjoined process of *mestizaje* and intercultural communication, which transpired

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, the “*bio-politics of the population*” (399) that Priewe analyses in his article is a notion presented in Michel Foucault’s book *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction* (1976). Priewe notes: “As Foucault has outlined, one of the primary elements in the exercise of power has been the state’s attempts to control and ensure the longevity of its people” (399). More particularly, Priewe utilizes the notion of the bio-politics throughout his analysis of Morales’s tripartite novel and stresses that “[t]he exertion of ... bio-politics entails discursive and material practices that seek to exclude impure elements that threaten to contaminate ... (the myth of) the healthy national body” (399).



between the Spaniards and the indigenous populations in eighteenth century Mesoamerica, gave rise to the emergence of the *mestizalo* ethnic and cultural identities that offered the hope of transcending the racial and cultural barriers the Spanish colonial forces have established. When Gregorio is challenged to cure the Viceroy's indigenous mistress, Marisela, and her *mestiza* child, who suffer from La Mona, he becomes immersed in the cultural values and the mindset of these indigenous female characters with whom he develops a relationship based on mutual understanding and respect. Marisela is presented as an indigenous woman who demonstrates a brave attitude towards illness. Despite witnessing her daughter's death and experiencing the amputation of her limbs, a part of the treatment implemented for La Mona that points to the patient's imminent death, Marisela retains her optimistic worldview and her faith that the continuation of life's circle will take its course through the *mestiza* child growing in her. In fact, Marisela's newborn *mestiza* child that Gregorio manages to save embodies the new *mestizalo* nation, which is already rising into existence and will prospectively break free from the yoke of Spanish colonialism. Bearing the blood and the cultural traditions of both the Spanish and the Native Americans, the new *mestizalo* identities arising in New Spain question the colonial power's attempts to efface cultural difference through the forceful imposition of a monolithic cultural narrative on the subordinated indigenous groupings. "Book I," then, suggests that the emergence of *mestizalo* identities can potentially alleviate the pain and enmity Spanish colonialism has introduced into the New World. The narrator states that "[i]t seemed as if with [the *mestiza* child's] birth, La Mona's attacks on the people had dwindled to nothing" (61), and that "[he] sensed a new attitude towards life grow within the people," people in the New World who gradually "conversed about freedom and equality" (61) and envisaged a future that would not be defined by rigid, unjust social and racial relations. Moreover, the process of intercultural communication in which Gregorio partakes throughout "Book I" brings about his own personal transformation. The Spanish physician, who initially espouses the discriminatory, superior attitude of the conquerors, transmutes into a new cultural identity, as he embraces the way of life and the cultural traditions of the indigenous people, and continues to work for the communal well-being of the new *mestizalo* nation.

"Book II: Delhi," set in Delhi barrio in Southern California, explores how racism and the HIV-virus penetrate human relationships and affect social values in the multicultural landscape of the US-Mexico borderlands during the mid-1970s. Because of his job as a doctor the Chicano narrator-protagonist, named Gregory Revueltas, comes in contact with the Chicana/o inhabitants of Delhi that constitute the majority of his patients. Sadly, he realizes that the lives of his ethnic kin are marked by violence, criminality, substance abuse, marginalization and racism. Gregory detects that "[t]he results of drive-by shootings, usually gang related, unfortunately had become too common" (71) in the barrio clinic where he is constantly challenged to cure "bleeding barrio warriors" (72) or drug addict, pregnant teenage girls. Living segregated in the southwestern barrios, Chicanas/os also experience marginalization and racial discrimination by the dominant Anglo-American society, which views Mexican Americans as inferior, disposable existences



due to their *mestizalo* identity profile. In fact, since the Mexican American war (1846-1848), the supposedly racially pure Anglo-American populations held the belief that “Mexican inter-racial mixing was ... the key source for the overall racial inferiority and barbaric disposition” of Mexican Americans (Escobedo 184).<sup>6</sup> In the second narrative of *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Morales demonstrates how white American racism aimed at Chicanas/o is reinforced by various US institutions. When the protagonist’s Jewish-American lover, Sandra Spears, experiences an excessive hemorrhage due her hemophiliac condition and the Chicana/o barrio homeboys help her get to the hospital, the fierce racism of the US medical institutions is revealed. Namely, once the barrio boys arrive at the hospital along with the bleeding Sandra, “the nurse straightaway [hits] the security bottom” (Morales 99) and reports a “stabbing victim in emergency” (99). White American society’s stereotypical view of Mexican Americans as violent criminals leads the hospital personnel to the misguided assumption that Sandra is a victim of a racially motivated knife crime. Thus, although the barrio homeboys try to import their hemophiliac friend to the hospital in order to help her receive medical treatment, they are “searched for guns” (99), undergo a police inquisition and are taken into custody.

“Book II” addresses AIDS as a collective health crisis afflicting US society, and juxtaposes the discriminatory attitude US culture displays towards HIV-positive patients with the humane approach to pain and disease indigenous and Mexican cultures take. Gregory’s beloved girlfriend Sandra is infected with the HIV-virus through one of the blood transfusions she receives as treatment for her hemophiliac condition. Suffering from this infectious disease, the previously successful actress, Sandra Spears, is blatantly excluded from social life in “narcissistic health-conscious Orange Country” (72), which now views her as a “contaminated animal” (108), as “a Pandora’s box filled with diseases capable of destroying humanity” (112). For instance, the director of the Orange Country theatre denies Sandra access to his auditions due her status as an AIDS patient and declares that “[n]obody wants to endanger their lives by working with [her]” (109). Moreover, Sandra experiences ruthless discrimination and acute indifference in the hands of the US medical institutions. The fear and repulsion the medical personnel demonstrate towards the contaminating malady ravaging Sandra is overt, as “nurses and doctors absolutely refused to be in the same room with her” (112), regarding this AIDS-afflicted woman as “a job risk” (112). Shockingly, the hospital janitors purposefully neglect their sanitary duties in the ward Sandra is consigned until this place “[transforms] into a waste bin” (112). Yet, when the lovers cross the US-Mexico border and visit

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<sup>6</sup> More specifically, “Mexico’s heterogeneous population [is] largely made up of an indigenous class, former African slave communities, and the Spanish populace,” diverse populations that intermingled during the Spanish colonial period (Escobedo 184). On the contrary, for the Anglo-Saxon myth of origin, “Americans claimed a direct line to the Anglo-Saxon Germanic tribes of the European continent ... [which] were thought of as racially pure and unmixed” (179). By extension, “[p]opular folklore claimed that the Anglo-Saxon trait of possessing pure bloodlines carried a biological inclination for higher moral values” (179).





Mexico City, they find out that indigenous and Mexican *curanderas/os* demonstrate sincere compassion and respect towards the ailing Sandra and regard her disease as one part of life's circle. The *curanderas* teach Sandra to deal with her bodily pain and psychic anxiety optimistically, as they instruct her that she is experiencing as "transmutation" and that "[d]ecay is a natural process" (119). In fact, they help her embrace death suggesting that "God and the energies of the earth are calling [her] to join them in the metamorphosis of all of us" (119). The positive attitude to illness these *curanderas/os* communicate to Sandra during her sojourn in Mexico makes her feel empowered against her harrowing disease. Indeed, despite being a dying woman, dilapidated by AIDS, when Sandra returns to the Southwestern barrio she is revered by all her friends and relatives. The barrio homeboys, friends from Delhi, the couple's parents and Gregory tenderly attend to Sandra's needs and keep "guard against death" until her last moments (128). In this light, "Book II" reveals that unlike the scientifically developed US society, which excludes and dehumanizes ailing human beings, the values emanating from the indigenous and the Mexican cultural traditions, widely practiced in the borderlands between Mexico and the US, can offer possibilities to alleviate human pain.

In the futuristic scenario of "Book III: Lamex," the abuse of power by authoritarian discourses takes up the form of aggressive ecocide, which ravages the populations of the transnational, borderless confederation of Lamex. Particularly, "the region from the center of Mexico to the Pacific Coast is known as the Lamex Coastal Region of the Triple Alliance" (134) through which "two computer travelways" run connecting Mexico City and Los Angeles (133). Although Morales envisages that the US-Mexico border will have been abolished by 2079, the technologically advanced confederation of Lamex continues to implement a compartmentalized arrangement of space in order to categorize people according to their socio-economic conditions as well as their racial and ethnic identities. In fact, imaginary borders are drawn within Lamex to demarcate Higher Life Existence residential areas, Middle Life Existence settlements and Lower Life Existence zones where "the criminals and the dregs of ... society" are consigned (137). Interestingly, most of the Lower Life Existence (LLE) areas are "near what used to be the international border between Mexico and the United States" (137). These borderland spaces, cities such as "Chula Vista, or beautiful view in English" (137), are mainly inhabited by Spanish-speaking communities that have been formed by "long-time Mexican immigrants" (148). Thus, in the futuristic context of "Book III," the *mexicana/o*, *mestizalo* inhabitants of the borderlands are still downgraded and treated as inferior due to their racial and cultural difference, since they are restrained to the LLE zones of the borderlands and are, consequently, excluded from the social mainstream. Moreover, the Mexican *mestizas/os*, who live south of the former US-Mexico border, in "the Middle Life Existence Concentrations surrounding Mexico City" (144) enjoy socio-economic comforts "that about thirty years past most Mexicans lacked" (144), as most of them are recruited in the military. Still, they continue to face racial discrimination, marginalization and emotional estrangement in the transnational context of Lamex, which is permeated by "an attitude of apprehension, particularly toward Mexicans" (144).



Nevertheless, eco-destruction poses a serious, collective threat to the multi-ethnic citizenry of Lamex, as excessive environmental pollution creates new kinds of lethal diseases that attack and rapidly exterminate the people. The narrator-protagonist, a Mexican in origin “doctor of gene engineering” (134), once again named Gregory Revueltas, attempts to take control of these new epidemics along with his Asian colleague, Gabi, who has a robotic hand. Gregory communicates that “these spontaneous plagues ... [p]roduced by humanity’s harvest of waste ... traveled through the air, land and sea and penetrated populated areas, sometimes killing thousands” (138). Ecocide is identified as the outcome of the capitalist and imperialist politics of Lamex, which engage in rampant naval activity, creating huge amounts of organic waste in the ocean and establishing “garbage colonies” in areas where the less privileged indigenous populations reside and in economically deprived neighboring countries (164). In the speculative fictional context of “Book III,” the imprudent exploitation of natural resources by humans and the disruption of the earth’s ecology backfire on humanity and threaten it with extinction, since the different forms of life inhabiting the planet are co-dependent.<sup>7</sup> And although the fierce consequences of environmental pollution take a greater impact on the racially different and the less powerful *mestiza/o* communities of the coalition, eco-destruction quickly transforms into an immense crisis, one which affects all the racial identities and social groups inhabiting Lamex.

The threat of ecocide and the health crisis transpiring in “Book III” are tackled through the narrator’s groundbreaking medical discovery that the hybrid genetic makeup of the Mexican people has become resilient to adverse environmental conditions. Gregory finds out that the inhabitants of the “hyperbolically contaminated” Mexico City (168), people who have been exposed to “the worst polluted air in the Americas” (164), have undergone a genetic mutation and their *mestiza/o* blood has become able to cure the lethal pulmonary diseases constantly caused by eco-destruction. Notably, the narrator decodes the healing powers of *mestizaje* through studying the historical, fictional and medical writings of his grandfather Gregory, the protagonist of “Book II,” writings that bring him in contact with his Mexican cultural traditions and enable him to unearth the illuminating potential arising from the healing practices of *curanderismo*. Gregory’s revolutionary medical findings subvert the long-standing belief that the *mestiza/o* biological profile

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<sup>7</sup> In her article “Waging War on Nature: Ecospaces, Ethnoecologies and Chicana/o Writings,” Emmanouilidou notes that “Paul J. Crutzen’s groundbreaking findings on the detrimental impact human activity has had on the ecosphere established the geological chronology of the Anthropocene Epoch” (28). By extension, since “there are fundamental ties that attach the human to the non-human, which reveal a ‘dense network of relations’ and the delicate balance of the ecological framework” (29), the disastrous repercussions the Anthropocene has had on nature take their toll on humanity’s living conditions as well. Particularly, the relentless economic and technological progress that Western societies aspire to results both to eco-destruction and to “the unfair treatment of local communities (most often non-white)” that are usually “disproportionately exposed to” the detrimental effects of environmental pollution (33-34).





of the Mexican people is degenerate, since they present *mestiza/o* blood as the antidote to eco-destruction and human extinction. On an allegorical level, Morales suggests that the coalition of different ethnic and cultural identities can also be the panacea to the socio-cultural and racial inequalities troubling humanity.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, when a disastrous epidemic resulting from the concentration of toxic waste in the ocean strikes Los Angeles, the members of Lamex's elitist medical institutions are urged to "overcome psychologically structured prejudices" towards Mexicans (Morales 183), as they acknowledge the healing powers of *mestizaje* and appoint Gregory to transfuse Mexican blood in the afflicted Anglo-American populace of the city. Since the diachronically subordinated *mestizas/os* turn out to be the saviors of humanity in the fictional context of "Book III," it becomes apparent that "the delineation of intended repetition or reproduction of cultural forms [leads] to unintended distortion, inversion, and change" (Fischer 209).<sup>9</sup> Namely, the view of *mestizas/os* as subordinate, a view that has been reinforced by the Spanish conquerors and the Anglo Americans in the socio-historical contexts of Books I and II respectively, is radically altered when it is transferred in the futuristic context of "Book III," where the resilience of *mestizalo* blood to environmental pollution offers the promise of humanity's survival.

In *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Alejandro Morales presents the oppression of *mestiza/o*, borderland identities by authoritative power structures as an ordeal tantalizing humanity throughout time, since he transfers the persistent pattern of subordination across different moments of New World history in each narrative of the novel. The borderland crises affecting *mestizalo* subjectivities take up the multifarious forms of Spanish colonialism, US racism and ecocide in each distinct time frame they transpire. Yet, they are all resolved through the regenerative potential of *mestizaje*, a process that Morales foregrounds as the analeptic to the pain caused by forceful superimpositions and racial inequalities in all the three Books.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, it is

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<sup>8</sup> The redemptive and regenerative potential of *mestizaje* that Morales delineates in "Book III" also lies at the heart of José Vasconcelos' theory of *La Raza Cósmica* (1925). Vasconcelos, a cultural philosopher and politician of Mexican descent, suggested that inter-racial mixing will bring about "the union of all men into a fifth universal race, the fruit of all the previous ones and amelioration of everything past" (405). Vasconcelos envisaged that the new 'superior' cosmic race, which will emerge "[i]n Spanish America", will be "the synthetic race, the integral race, made up of the blood and the genius of all peoples and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and of a truly universal vision" (408). The notion of *La Raza Cósmica*, then, embraces *mestizaje* as a process that fosters humanity's progress through the creation of new, hybrid racial identities and challenges the discourse of white supremacy, which is based on an essentialist view of race.

<sup>9</sup> In his discussion of the notion of transference, Fischer suggests that the repetition of certain behavioral patterns brings about "the indirection of cultural dynamics" (207). This repetition can be traced in *The Rag Doll Plagues* as the pattern of oppression directed at *mestizas/os*, but it is also exposed and subverted during its transference in different historical contexts.

<sup>10</sup> In his essay, "Place and Culture: Analeptic for Individuality and the World's Indifference," Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that "place and culture ... [can be] a salve or analeptic for our ineluctable separateness ... and the world's indifference" (28). More specifically, Tuan notes that "attempts to overcome this indifference ... constitute the crucial meaning of human struggle with fate, and that



the three narrator-protagonists' quest for knowledge and their attempts to regain contact with the Mexican and indigenous cultural traditions that put forward the fruitful exchange of cultural information and the regeneration of racial and cultural identities throughout the novel. Therefore, a theme that emerges in *The Rag Doll Plagues* is that ethnic and cultural self-identification is approached as a process of "retrospection to gain a vision for the future" (Fischer 198).<sup>11</sup> Morales's tripartite novel explores the unfolding of self-identification in the borderlands across New World history's trajectory and conjoins past, present and future, constructing an optimistic vision of the world. As the author states in his interview with Maja Neff: "I think there is always some view of the future in my books ... Even if I write about the past, it is moving, it is viewing towards the future" (175). In *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Morales envisages "[a] future based perhaps on the idea of miscegenation, that there will be more and more of this miscegenation" and that it will hopefully lead to the indictment of the diachronically persistent plight of racism (Neff 177). The author speculates that "[s]lowly, once people look at each other as human beings, race ... [is] not important, it is really a social structure, a construction that people used to identify one another" (Neff 177-78). Indeed, the projection of *mestizaje* as the antidote to transhistorical borderland crises and the illuminating possibilities arising from the retrieval of indigenous and Mexican cultural traditions throughout *The Rag Doll Plagues* evince that Morales's imaginative novel points towards a future where racial and cultural differences will no longer be the grounds for the classification and the subordination of human beings.

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the measure of success in this struggle lies in the creation of human culture in all its myriad forms" (41). In this light, in *The Rag Doll Plagues*, *mestizaje*, which leads to the creation of new hybrid racial and cultural identities allowing differences to co-exist, alleviates the acute human suffering resulting from the indifference, exclusion and discrimination against racially and culturally different groups of people.

<sup>11</sup> In *The Rag Doll Plagues*, the protagonists' constant quest for the knowledge embedded in ethnic cultural heritage aligns with Fischer's view that self-identification and the re-invention of ethnic identities require the unearthing of past traditions. In fact, Fischer states that during the process of ethnic-identification "[w]hat ... seem initially to be individualistic ... searchings turn out to be revelations of traditions, re-collections of disseminated identities," and "[i]n so becoming, the searches also turn out to be powerful critiques of several contemporary rhetorics of domination" (198).



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# BRIDGING SOCIAL GAPS IN GREGORY NAVA'S *MY FAMILY* (1995)

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## ABSTRACT

The development and transmutation of Chicana/o identity in the American Southwest is a central theme in Gregory Nava's film narrative *My Family* (1995). The parents of the titular family represent the traditional, immigrant identity, which entails a hesitation to embrace the American lifestyle while showing a close adherence to their Mexican roots. The children, however, born and/or bred in the ethno-racial 'battlefield' of the borderlands in the US, challenge the socio-cultural norms they have inherited from their parents, but also those of white America. This article examines the children's cultural deviations as endeavors to confront socio-cultural conflicts in the borderlands and to carve a path towards a better individual and, symbolically, collective future for *la raza*.

KEYWORDS: Chicana/o Identity, Borderlands, Cultural Conflict, *Machismo*, Gender Roles.

## REDUCIENDO LAS BRECHAS SOCIALES EN *MY FAMILY* (1995) DE GREGORY NAVA

## RESUMEN

El desarrollo y la transmutación de la identidad chicana en el Suroeste de Estados Unidos es un tema central en la narrativa de la película *My Family* (1995) de Gregory Nava. Los padres de la familia a la que se refiere el título de la película representan la identidad tradicional de los inmigrantes, que implica una cierta resistencia a adoptar el estilo de vida americano y, al mismo tiempo, un profundo apego a sus raíces mexicanas. Sin embargo, los hijos nacidos y/o criados en "el campo de batalla" étnico-racial de las zonas fronterizas de los EE. UU., desafían las normas socio-culturales que han heredado de sus padres, así como también las normas de la América blanca. Este artículo investiga las desviaciones culturales de los hijos como intentos de enfrentar los conflictos socio-culturales en las zonas fronterizas y de forjar un camino hacia un futuro mejor para *la raza*, tanto a nivel individual como a nivel colectivo, simbólicamente.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Identidad chicana, zonas fronterizas, conflicto cultural, machismo, roles de género.

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Gregory Nava's *My Family* (1995) explores the life stories of a Mexican American family during the first part of the twentieth century, emphasizing the generational gap between the parents and the children. Following the trend in contemporary ethnic storytelling, *My Family* shows that "ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual" rather than "something passed on from generation to generation" (Fischer 195). Overall, while the parents represent a more traditional Chicana/o identity with closer ties to the Mexican culture, the children assess and challenge the ways of both Mexican and American cultures. Specifically, this article examines the socio-cultural deviations of the children as attempts to negotiate their position within both the American society and the Chicana/o community by overcoming the oppressive social and cultural structures of the borderlands.

According to Francisco A. Lomelí, "[a]lthough much of American culture still manifests itself through opposites, there seems to be a tendency toward bridging the gap and concentrating more on common points of contact" (166). A similar, yet ambivalent, tendency is central in *My Family* and is communicated through the symbolic function of the bridges connecting the prestigious West Los Angeles with the East Los Angeles *barrio*. The bridges stand as a symbol of the cultural interaction of the borderlands, but also, and quite ironically too, of the segregation and exclusion of Chicanas/os from the American society. Although the bridges create contact points and possibilities between white American and Chicana/o cultures, an unequal relationship develops. The West side of Los Angeles is depicted as prestigious and industrialized, while the East side is a suburban slum, secluded and distanced from the mainstream United States. This implies the existence of two distinct "worlds" within the American borderlands; a "civilized" world of advanced technology and infrastructure and an impoverished, underdeveloped world with all the accompanying connotations for each area's residents. Additionally, it becomes apparent that, while for Chicana/o workers, crossing the bridges on a daily basis is a matter of survival, white Americans rarely cross over to East Los Angeles. This alludes to the fact that white Americans almost invariably expect Chicanas/os to bridge the cultural gap, usually by integrating or assimilating, while they show little interest of exposure to Chicana/o culture. However, *My Family* challenges this unilateral relationship. As Bruce Williams observes, "[o]n a meta-filmic level, the bridges suggest the reality of Chicano film practice as it negotiates its way between community and the broader Hollywood mainstream" (54). Indeed, *My Family* is written for both white and Chicana/o audiences and attempts to bridge cultural and cinematic gaps between the United States and the Chicana/o community.

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*My Family* offers an overview of the major incidents in the lives of a Chicana/o family residing in East Los Angeles. Paco, the eldest son, narrates and simultaneously writes these incidents into a book meant for publication. As a result, the film is structured as a *testimonio*. According to George Yúdice, a *testimonio* is “a personal testimony” recounted to a wider public as “an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective” (15). In other words, it relates individual experiences, which are also identifiable at a communal level. Furthermore, “testimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative” which is “told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation” (17). The impetus for Paco’s testimonial writing is the act of watching the Los Angeles bridges and considering their symbolic significance. However, Paco chronicles a considerable number of events, which he has not witnessed. Arguably, he has been informed of these events by the other members of his family. In this sense, *My Family* is a collective *testimonio*; it is mediated through Paco, but practically narrated by the entire family. For all these reasons, the film also serves as a historical overview of the Chicana/o community for the most part of the twentieth-century United States. It is as much the story of a specific Chicana/o family as of the Chicana/o community as a whole.

*My Family* also tackles the issue of how mainstream representations can arbitrarily assign meaning to minority groups. While writing his *testimonio* into a novel, Paco realizes that he will not be able to sustain himself by pursuing a career as an author (Nava 1:09:22-1:09:26). This is due to white America’s long history of excluding Chicana/o perspectives in favor of its own racist narratives. Nevertheless, Paco chooses to present an authentic account of his family’s lives rather than accommodate his writing to the dominant narratives. In this context, *My Family* emerges as a counter-narrative, one which disputes hegemonic representations and works towards reinstating the historical and cultural presence of *la raza*. According to Stuart Hall:

[I]dentities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (4)

While *My Family* does not outright deny the existence of various stereotypical Chicana/o archetypes, such as that of the pachuco involved in criminal activities, it deconstructs and re-semanticizes these stereotypes by bringing attention to the sociopolitical circumstances that engender them. Thus, by providing an insider’s narrative of the Chicana/o life experiences in the American Southwest, Paco’s *testimonio* challenges the politically-driven misrepresentation of the Chicana/o community. Furthermore, by being autobiographical in nature, the *testimonio* “has a commitment to the actual,” a commitment which cements Paco’s narrative as a reliable representation (Fischer 198). As a filmic representation itself, *My Family* establishes a valid depiction of Chicana/o life by providing the Chicana/o viewpoint of the borderlands and popularizing it through the cinema screen. Furthermore, by



promoting a positive account of Chicana/o life, *My Family* seeks to minimize the gap between the Chicana/o and the broader American communities.

Having established itself as an authentic narrative, one which ventures to falsify dominant white American narratives, *My Family* explores the children's reinvention of the Chicana/o identity in the 1950s and onwards. This reinvention is developed in comparison with the previous generation, which is represented by the parents, José and María. José and María's lifestyle is distinctly traditional due to their close ties to the Mexican homeland. For them, family is of the utmost importance. A major indication of this is that they effectively devote their entire lives to the upbringing of their children; indeed, they appear to have no personal desires other than their children's welfare. This is aptly communicated in the film, when Paco explains that, as a display of the magnitude of the father's affection towards his eldest daughter, the expense of Irene's wedding brought the family at the edge of bankruptcy (0:28:09-0:28:14). The wedding is followed by a big and distinctly Mexican celebration with a sizable number of guests and traditional food and music. Furthermore, José and María are deeply religious. María, in particular, has strong spiritual connections to the Mexican tradition through her devout belief in Mexican Catholicism and the myths of the Aztec cosmology. Prominent examples include her belief that the owl, which appears as she and her newborn son, Chucho, battle the currents of the river, is an incarnation of the "the spirit of the river" (1:00:05) as well as her conviction that the women who die in childbirth become "*cihuateteo*" [divine women], beings who "helped the sun to set" (1:34:37-1:34:52). This mixture of Christian and Aztec beliefs reveals María's development of a *mestizalo* spirituality, which is also highlighted by her frequent evocation of La Virgen de Guadalupe, the *mestiza* goddess of Mexican Catholicism.

The second generation, however, largely denounce their parents' worldview by espousing varying lifestyles of resistance to the oppressive structures of both American and Mexican cultures. For instance, Chucho's foremost act of resistance towards the American status quo is his subscription to the pachuco culture. The concept of *machismo* has been an emblematic feature of pachucos and is central in their portrayal in *My Family*. Its primal aspect in *My Family* is male-to-male competition, suggested by the recurring confrontations between Chucho and his rival, Butch. Paco explains that Chucho and Butch have no scores to settle and the main motivation for their actions is their excessive amounts of "hate and anger," which cannot be directed back to their source (0:31:49-0:32:04). Gloria E. Anzaldúa explains *machismo* as "an adaptation to oppression and poverty," resulting from the fact that in the United States "the Chicano suffers from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of self and self-deprecation" (83). As these properties run contrary to the concept of *machismo*, men over-perform their masculinity in order to bring it to the spotlight and downplay the imposed non-macho qualities. As Harvey Mansfield explains, "[m]anliness is steadfast; it is taking a stand, not surrendering, not allowing oneself to be determined by one's context" (48). In this sense, *machismo* constitutes a reaction against the pressure of external forces in one's environment. *My Family* seems to zoom on Chucho and Butch as representatives of two separate strands of *machismo*. While Chucho's *machismo* is portrayed as a controlled and assertive act of protest,





Butch, who functions as Chucho's foil, is a macho caricature, short-tempered and disrespectful, excessively competitive and gratuitously violent.

Chucho is faced with a society that prohibits his way up the social ladder. Anzaldúa notes that "Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating" (63). In the film, as well as in the grim reality of the major part of the twentieth century that the film recreates, Chicanas/os who do not assimilate are limited to jobs characterized by low-paid manual labor. In essence, Chicanas/os are given two less than desirable options; to assimilate or to join the working class. If they assimilate, they betray their cultural roots; if they choose to stay loyal to their culture, they become confined to the working classes and their labor can only "support and maintain the standard of living of a socio-economic, political and cultural system that [relegates] them to a subservient class" (Lomelí 162). Ultimately, this limited social mobility entails a "reproduction of class inequalities," which "is inextricably linked to the maintenance of white supremacy" (Omi and Winant 107). Therefore, Chicanas/os who do not assimilate are stuck in a vicious cycle of exploitation and in the lower strata of the American society.

Chucho's father seems content with working class labor, as he perceives a certain "dignity" in toiling to provide for one's household (0:43:07-0:43:14). His *machismo* adheres to the traditional ideal of the father as a provider and protector of the family. He further attests to this when he proclaims during Irene's wedding that the family is one's single most valuable possession (0:30:12-0:30:18). Nevertheless, Chucho is not content with either of his options in the borderlands. As indicated by his adoption of the pachuco lifestyle, he refuses to assimilate to American culture and, at the same time, he does not wish to find a working-class job and become part of the vicious cycle of economic subservience to white Americans. The fact that Chicanas/os work in the West side of Los Angeles for the profit of white people further emphasizes the social and financial gap between West and East Los Angeles, white America and the Chicana/o community in general. Thus, since he regards both options as undesirable, Chucho resorts to a third option, that of crime. In doing so, he rejects both assimilation to American culture and participation in the economic exploitation of *la raza*. In this way, *My Family* dismantles racist explanations of Chicana/o criminality by pointing to the sociopolitical context that makes crime an appealing choice in the first place. Interestingly, Chucho's breaking of the law as a response to the injustice of the system echoes the Thoreauvian maxim: "I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn" (Thoreau 8). Chucho defends his choice by highlighting the importance of money as a status symbol in America and by claiming that moral concerns are outdated and irrelevant in a society preoccupied with obtaining money by any means necessary (0:41:34-0:41:49). In this way, he condemns American materialism and the rigid economic hierarchy, which confines Chicanas/os at the bottom ranks of the social ladder. His father eventually throws Chucho out of the family household, an act which completes the rupture between Chucho and the traditional Chicana/o *familismo*.

Chucho's resistance to the status quo eventually reaches a tragic conclusion. While in self-defense during a confrontation with Butch, Chucho accidentally delivers a fatal stab to his rival. He later runs away, perhaps out of awareness that, as





a “*master category*,” the color of his skin will deprive him of any possibility of proper justice (Omi and Winant 106). This fear proves true when a group of policemen arrives at the *barrio* to arrest him. A police officer delivers to his colleagues a racist speech, which paints a stereotypical picture of Chucho as a “known criminal,” who is an “armed and extremely dangerous” serial killer (0:52:38-0:52:45). The police officer also endorses state-sanctioned violence by encouraging his colleagues to open fire on Chucho for the sake of their personal safety (0:52:45-0:52:50). A few scenes later, a policeman casually shoots Chucho in the head and subsequently celebrates his death. By asking questions such as “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What *makes for a grievable life*?” Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* contends that the way lives are mourned by society is indicative of their position within it (20). Thus, the celebration of Chucho’s death by the police, a governmental agency, confirms the status of Chicanas/os as unwanted and dispensable in white American society. Ultimately, Chucho’s death aims to expose America’s institutional racism.

Having eye-witnessed Chucho’s death at a very young age, his brother Jimmy grows into adulthood filled with anger. His anger seems to stem from losing someone he loves in an unjust way before his very eyes. However, it would be insufficient to argue that Jimmy’s traumatic experience is the sole cause of his seething anger. In his deliberation of anger, Alison Bailey argues that “some angers are inherited along with the historical traumas of colonized and oppressed peoples” and thus “the memories of past injustices remain alive in these communities today, because these injustices continue under different names” (107). Jimmy grows up in the marginalized Chicana/o community and, having had a first-hand experience of discrimination as a child, he is better equipped to discern the injustices that surround him. He cannot be free of his anger as long as he is oppressed due to the color of his skin. Interestingly, he follows Chucho’s footsteps into minor criminal activities and is eventually taken into custody. Although the film skips the details of Jimmy’s first incarceration, audiences receive a taste of the American prison system during his second time in prison, when a guard comments that Jimmy’s return was expected because his “kind always comes back” (1:36:17-1:36:25). The prison guard not only makes the essentialist claim that Chicanos are criminals, but also excludes them from the category of human by referring to Jimmy’s “kind” as if they belong to different species. Thus, the prison recycles the narratives of the mainstream United States and further exposes its ingrained institutional racism. Jimmy’s unquenchable anger is not solely an instinctive reaction to the unjust loss of his brother, but also a response to his life-long oppression as a Chicano.

Jimmy’s anger evolves into a driving force, which orchestrates his defiance of the status quo. Jimmy’s initial act of resistance against the oppressive system of the United States begins with his first incarceration. Paco notes Jimmy’s “bad attitude” when he was arrested, which is more than likely to have continued in prison (1:01:09-1:01:11). Arguably, then, Jimmy’s time in prison is not spent in compliance with the values and rules imposed on him by the American jurisprudence, but in active resistance to these values and rules. The tattoo he acquires on his right forearm during his imprisonment is a symbol of this resistance. According to B.V. Olguín,



getting a tattoo in prison is an unlawful and, thus, subversive act, which constitutes “a victory” (125) over the prison authorities, because the tattoo “will permanently record the prison’s ‘failure’ and persist as a prominent and permanent mark of defiance” (128). Therefore, in spite of his exclusion from American society, an exclusion further underlined by his imprisonment, Jimmy manages to defy its oppressive structures.

Arguably, Jimmy’s foremost act of opposition to the racial discrimination in the United States is his marriage to Isabel. Isabel is a Salvadoran political refugee on the verge of being deported back to her country. Her father was murdered because he was a “union organizer” and it is highly likely that Isabel will suffer the same fate if she returns to El Salvador (1:10:50-1:10:52). In order to prevent this, Jimmy’s sister, Toni, proposes that Isabel marry an American citizen to legalize her presence in the United States. Although Jimmy is initially reluctant to help, he is quickly persuaded when Toni explains that by marrying Isabel Jimmy could take his revenge on all instruments of governmental oppression (1:15:14-1:15:27). Jimmy is eventually seduced by Isabel leading up to a scene of sexual and psychological bonding, where Jimmy realizes that they share the trauma of witnessing a loved one’s death at a very young age (1:29:14-1:29:41). The story of Isabel and Jimmy is a call for Latina/o solidarity against their common oppressor.

As a result of this bonding, Jimmy undergoes a radical transformation. When he learns that Isabel is pregnant, he abandons Chucho’s footsteps and becomes more like his father, as he makes the decision to start working in West Los Angeles to provide for his new family. However, Isabel’s death during childbirth reignites his anger, since he believes that the doctor purposefully let Isabel die because she was a “spic” (1:35:37-1:35:40). Thus, Jimmy relives the experience of losing someone he loves and links it back to Chucho’s death by assuming that Isabel’s death was due to her phenotype. As a result, her death cancels out Jimmy’s prior efforts towards a happy life and plunges him back to grief and anger. Jimmy concludes this cyclical movement when he intentionally gets arrested in a manner identical to his previous arrest. As a result, he leaves his son, Carlitos, parentless for the first years of his life. Jimmy’s return to prison is an instance of escapism, an attempt to run away from overwhelming feelings and problems he feels powerless to fix. This is also suggested by the fact that after his release he wants to leave his family and the *barrio* and start a new life in hopes of erasing his past traumas (1:41:38-1:41:46). However, after meeting Carlitos, Jimmy changes plans and makes considerable efforts to gain the love of his son. As their relationship heals, Jimmy teaches Carlitos how to plant corn in a scene meant to call to mind a previous scene when Jimmy was taught how to plant corn by his father. As Jimmy is the only second-generation character who has children of his own, this scene symbolizes the continuation of the family by passing on the knowledge and traditions of previous generations. Redeemed by his efforts to win the love of Carlitos, Jimmy espouses his father’s *familismo* and receives an opportunity to live a fulfilling life with his son.

Memo differs from his brothers in that he takes the path of assimilation and financial prosperity. Due to his meticulous studying, Memo is admitted to law school at West Los Angeles. As a professional, he anglicizes his name to “WILLIAM



SANCHEZ” (1:39:05) and calls himself “Bill” while in white company (1:48:24-148:25). Furthermore, he uses exclusively English and his Mexican accent is imperceptible. Therefore, Memo is portrayed as a *malinchista*, “a person who adopts foreign values, assimilates to foreign culture, or serves foreign interests” (Pratt 860). His betrayal of Chicana/o culture is made prominent when he brings to the *barrio* his fiancée, a white woman from a prestigious family in West Los Angeles. He systematically attempts to downplay the cultural gap between the two families by dismissing potentially embarrassing family stories as fabrications. He also assures his prospective in-laws that he has spent his entire life in the United States and, thus, further distances himself from his Mexican heritage (1:49:43-1:49:49). As Jaume Martí-Olivella phrases it, “Memo is ready to deny the family’s historical roots” to secure a positive impression on his familial background (22). However, in the end, José and María assist Memo in bridging the gap between the two families and thus confirm that the welfare of family members is their principal concern.

The younger daughter, Toni, is what Paco calls a “bossy” kind of woman (0:24:32-0:24:34). In her first scene in *My Family*, she is depicted undermining the traditional male authority of the Mexican household by vigorously arguing with her brother, Chuchó. Her forceful character is also manifest in her persistent endeavors to persuade Jimmy to marry Isabel, since she does not yield to his multiple demands to be left alone. During Irene’s wedding, she realizes that her attractiveness makes her an ideal sexual partner for virtually all the young men in the *barrio* and feels threatened by the prospect of becoming a wife like her sister (0:30:51-0:31:03). As a result, she frustrates all expectations and decides to become a nun. However, her choice is not due to religious sentiment. As Anzaldúa explains, for a Chicana “there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother” (17). Thus, to become a nun is not an ideal life decision for Toni, but merely the lesser of the three evils. Anzaldúa goes on to say that, in contemporary times, a number of Chicanas “have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons” (17). Toni may not have had this option, although as director Gregory Nava explains in a 1995 interview, “in the 1950s joining a religious order was the only way she could get an education, expand her horizons and avoid assuming the roles of wife and mother” (qtd. in Carty 81). Therefore, Toni’s choice constitutes her first step towards escaping from the patriarchal oppression of her community and living her life independently.

Toni violates cultural and religious norms to attain this independence. Much to the dismay of her parents, she falls in love and marries a white priest, after both leave their order. Notably, her marriage is rather untraditional, as she chooses to marry without the presence of her parents and kin and only announces her marriage after the union is sanctioned. Toni appears to have no regrets regarding her choices, while her parents consider her actions shamefully sacrilegious. In her parents’ eyes, Toni experiences a fall from grace. A scene in which Toni and the priest are seen having extramarital intercourse, illustrates this fall from grace, as from being a nun she becomes *la Chingada* [the fucked one]. This scene also accentuates her sexual liberation, a victory over the religious and cultural norms, which seek to control



her sexuality. Toni continues to challenge and transcend gender roles by becoming involved in political activism by means of providing aid to the downtrodden. Due to her strong will and character, she is never daunted by the fact that the men of the family frequently refer to her efforts as “political bullshit” (1:09:56-1:09:59; 1:13:43-1:13:45). Her preference for humanitarian over religious principles is further argued by the fact that she does not hesitate to use the “sacred” union of marriage as a means to save Isabel’s life (1:20:25-1:20:28). In brief, Toni manages to escape prescribed gender roles stemming from Mexican culture and becomes actively involved in endeavors to bring about the change she wants to see in society.

Although her deviations are important, Irene is the child who breaks away the least from a traditional life course. She is the only one to marry a Chicano, while the rest of the children—apart from Jimmy, who technically did not choose who to marry, and Paco and Chuco, who did not marry at all—have chosen white partners. She also shares some of her parents’ religious reverence, as she is appalled at the idea of Toni marrying a member of the clergy (1:09:40-1:09:49). However, unlike her parents and after many years of marriage, she does not have children. The reason for this is unspecified in the film and, thus, it is impossible to know to what extent it may have been her choice. It is telling, however, that throughout the film she never expresses the wish to have children. A possible reason, which also constitutes Irene’s major departure from the Mexican cultural tradition, is her refusal to be confined in the domestic sphere. Unlike her mother, who has stopped working ever since she has had her children, Irene becomes a successful restaurant owner with an active role in her business. Therefore, she also undermines the traditional gender roles by becoming a businesswoman and attaining a certain degree of economic independence.

In their own ways and to varying extents, the children in *My Family* break away from the traditional Chicana/o identity their parents represent. Their actions reveal a wish to overturn the oppressive sociopolitical structures they have inherited from the previous generations. Interestingly, the identity negotiations that each child undertakes differ depending on their gender. On the one hand, the men’s frictions with both cultures are attempts to escape the socioeconomic injustices imposed on them due to the color of their skin. On the other hand, the women’s resistance tactics chiefly seek to diminish patriarchal mandates in their lives. Toni, in particular, takes this a step further by also combating the hegemonic oppression of white American society through her activism. In short, their reconstruction of the Chicana/o identity is a result of the interaction between Mexican and American culture and is unanimously a process of fighting for a better position in one’s society. The children do not simply venture to bridge the gap between Mexican and American cultures; they predominantly seek to bridge the gap between the various levels of social stratification. In contemporary times, when the Trump administration stresses the importance of artificial barriers and other symbols and practices of division, the insistence of *My Family* on bridging gaps becomes all the more relevant.

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# A XICANISTA (RE)VISION OF A CONTEMPORARY MALINCHE IN ANA CASTILLO'S *THE MIXQUIAHUALA LETTERS* (1986)

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates how Ana Castillo revisits the archetype of La Malinche as a female traitor in her epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. Castillo unravels her feminist perspective in order to subvert the sexist connotations associated with La Malinche, and draws from this specific female figure in the creation of her Chicana protagonist, narrator and letter-writer. Teresa represents a contemporary reinvention of La Malinche, a character who exposes the sexist double standards Chicanas are subjected to. In this way, Castillo delves into the Chicana experience and proposes a Xicanista vision that emphasizes the understanding of the past in order to be able to envision a better future.

KEYWORDS: La Malinche, Malinchista, Machismo, Xicanisma.

UNA (RE)VISIÓN XICANISTA DE UNA MALINCHE CONTEMPORÁNEA  
EN *THE MIXQUIAHUALA LETTERS* (1986) DE ANA CASTILLO

## RESUMEN

Este artículo investiga cómo Ana Castillo revisita el arquetipo de La Malinche como mujer traidora en su novela epistolar *The Mixquiahuala Letters*. Castillo utiliza una perspectiva feminista, para subvertir las connotaciones sexistas asociadas con La Malinche, y se inspira en esta figura femenina para la creación de la protagonista y narradora chicana que escribe las cartas en la novela. Teresa representa una reinención contemporánea de La Malinche, un personaje que expone la doble moral del sexismo al que están sometidas las mujeres chicanas. De esta manera, Castillo indaga en la experiencia chicana, y propone una visión Xicanista que enfatiza la comprensión del pasado para poder visualizar un futuro mejor.

PALABRAS CLAVE: La Malinche, malinchista, machismo, Xicanisma.

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Pinche, como duele ser Malinche...  
Pero sabes, ése,  
What keeps me from shattering  
into a million fragments?  
It's that sometimes,  
you are muy gringo, too.<sup>1</sup>  
—Adaljiza SOSA RIDDELL (1973) (qtd. in Pratt 862)

La Malinche, also known as Malintzin, Malinalli or Doña Marina, is a controversial historical figure associated with the conquest of the Aztec Empire by the Spanish *conquistadores* (1519-1521), a woman who has been the subject of many debates and rewritings by Mexican and Chicana/o writers. Octavio Paz has elaborated on the negative connotations of Malinche's significance in Mexican national mythology, in which she functions as the symbolic mother of Mexico's mestiza/o people, because of her "illicit relationship" with Hernán Cortés (qtd. in Pratt 860). According to Mary Louise Pratt, in Mexican vernacular, *malinche* and *malinchista* are derisive terms meaning "traitor" of the nation, or "a person who adopts foreign values, assimilates to foreign culture, or serves foreign interests" (860). Ana Castillo, however, states that in recent years, "feminist writers have reinterpreted Malintzin in a variety of ways," and that by "viewing her with compassion," they have attempted to "clarify how the patriarchal conquest ultimately left this young Mexic-Amerindian woman little choice but to obey in the name of God the Father" (*Massacre* 166-167). La Malinche is not an overt reference in the epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, but according to Harryette Mullen, she is "an almost subliminal allusion" (4). In fact, Castillo uses elements of what Sandra Messinger Cypess calls "The Malinche Paradigm as Subtext" (153),<sup>2</sup> along with introducing new ones that perform a reinvention of the archetype. This article examines how Castillo draws from the figure of La Malinche in the creation of Teresa, the Chicana protagonist and narrator of *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, in order to undermine the misogynistic connotations associated with La Malinche and ultimately revise this specific female archetype. By creating a multilayered representation of a late-twentieth-century Chicana, Castillo essentially proposes a feminist or Xicanista<sup>3</sup> revision of Chicana/o literature and culture as an alternative to previous androcentric

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of Spanish: "Damn, how it hurts to be Malinche... / But you know, man, / very Anglo."

<sup>2</sup> Cypess applies this framework in her analysis of certain works by Carlos Fuentes, Elena Garro and others. The critic identifies defining elements, such as betrayal, cultural assimilation, rape or a woman "used as an object of exchange," that allude to La Malinche (153-155).

<sup>3</sup> Castillo coins the term Xicanisma to replace Chicana Feminism. For more on Castillo's subversive response to the pre-existing androcentric nationalism, see *Massacre of the Dreamers*.





interpretations of the female experience, and also subverts the established patriarchal narrative of La Malinche as a traitor.

Castillo suggests multilayered connections between La Malinche and Teresa, and in order to revise sexist and derogatory narratives of La Malinche, she foregrounds Teresa as a “malinchista” character, at least according to the standards imposed by patriarchy and machismo.<sup>4</sup> Teresa is perceived as a “malinchista” primarily due to her higher education, her feminist ideology and her reluctance to blindly abide by traditions, which result in the abandonment of her husband. More specifically, Teresa is a working-class Chicana from Chicago, who puts great effort in getting a higher education, a woman who “took [her] final exams” and graduated from the university (*Letters* 35),<sup>5</sup> when she was already married at twenty-one. Moreover, Teresa spends the summer after her graduation away from her husband, “bound in that yet undefined course known as The New Woman’s Emergence” (35), with her best friend Alicia, whom she met a year earlier when they were both twenty, studying in Mexico. As a result, Teresa becomes the target of “silent condemnation,” because “relatives and friends” believe that “bad wives were bad people” (35). An example of this is when Teresa’s godmother, Rosaura, who considers her behavior “sacrilegious,” warns her: “According to the Church, even if you get a divorce, you’ll always be married and you’ll live in sin with any other man” (21-22). However, in spite of the disapproval of her community, Teresa leaves her husband several times to travel to Mexico or New York to see Alicia, as she is on a “Woman’s Quest for Freedom and Self Determination,” and even though she goes back to him (37), she is not prepared to “honor patriarchal traditions” (28). The term *Malinche* “first entered the Chicano movement in its established popular meaning as ‘traitor’” (Pratt 862), and this derisive label according to Evangelina Enríquez and Alfredo Mirandé is “applied to Chicanas who left the community to seek higher education, a move regarded as assimilating to white culture, and to Chicanas who allied themselves with feminism” (qtd. in Pratt 862). Thus, even though Teresa is not directly called a “malinchista,” the fact that she rejects patriarchal expectations that hinder women’s free will, makes people in her community perceive her as a traitor. In addition, an important paradox that arises is that Teresa is seen as a “malinchista,” mainly for betraying the androcentric Catholic tradition and despite her desire to reconnect with the indigenous part of her heritage that leads her back to Mexico time and again.

Castillo proposes a Chicana feminist vision that reinvents the established patriarchal narrative of La Malinche, by centering on Teresa and Alicia’s close friendship, a relationship that unfolds through Teresa’s first-person fragmentary

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<sup>4</sup> According to Castillo, “machismo is an exaggerated demonstration of male virility that is inherent in most cultures,” including the Mexican and the Anglo. As regards the Mexican and Chicana/o cultures, one can trace the origins of machismo and male supremacist practices in the Mexican Catholic Church, but also in the Aztec civilization (*Massacre of the Dreamers* 14).

<sup>5</sup> Quotations from Ana Castillo’s 1986 novel *The Mixquiabuala Letters* follow the Anchor Books 1992 edition to which I refer as *Letters* for brevity.





narration of their past adventures in her letters to Alicia. This is evident in Letter Three, where Teresa declares openly her allegiance to her own gender, instead of to a man or even her husband. Alicia, a North American of Spanish descent, described as a “privileged white girl of the suburbs” of New York (*Letters* 48), becomes Teresa’s “sister, companion” and “friend” to whom her letters are “addressed and signed with the greatest affirmation of allegiance ... In sisterhood. In solidarity” (24). Teresa also narrates how she met Alicia at an almost “fraudulent” North-American institution with a “heavy Aztec name” in Mexico City, in which they both enrolled to study Mexico’s culture and language, only to find “gringo instructors,” who “didn’t speak Spanish,” much to Teresa’s disappointment (24-25). In fact, the highlight of that “summer of [their] fledgling womanhood” is when Teresa and Alicia visit “Mixquiahuala, a Pre-conquest village” (25). Barbara F. Weissberger emphasizes that “as Teresa’s privileged addressee, Alicia is essential to the letter-writer’s own search for self-knowledge,” given that Alicia “is the focus of Teresa’s reexamination of her past” (12). In addition, Teresa goes to Mexico after having left her “embittered” husband to run off “on her own for two months” (*Letters* 28). In this light, Teresa “is an insurgent” (*Massacre* 177),<sup>6</sup> and while she “evolves as a feminist, she is placed in the dangerous position of being viewed as a traitor to the male-dominated Chicano Movement” (178). Hence, Castillo further establishes Teresa as a contemporary subversive revision of La Malinche by highlighting the fact that she chooses to form an allegiance with Alicia, a woman outside of her community, a character who becomes Teresa’s partner in crime as she embarks on a journey of self-discovery across Mexico. What is more, Teresa’s journey reverses the historical tale of how La Malinche was practically forced by a strict patriarchal society into accompanying Hernán Cortés on his conquest of Mexico as his aide and interpreter. In other words, La Malinche was forced to serve a man’s mission and interests; whereas Teresa is on a mission of her own and enjoys a partnership between equals, despite class and race differences.

Moreover, men are not that important in Teresa’s journey of self-discovery. In reality, aside from inflicting various forms of painful psychological abuse on both Teresa and Alicia, men’s influence on either one of them is secondary. This is evident in the way Teresa describes her relationship with Alicia by implying that this is the most significant relationship for both of them. Teresa redirects the importance usually attributed to heterosexual romantic relationships into a female friendship by saying that “ours was a love affair” (*Letters* 45), “ours was a relationship akin to that of an old wedded couple” (53). Weissberger claims that Teresa and Alicia’s friendship “remains the one stable and mutual relationship in both their lives throughout the decade after the Mexican journey” (12). In addition, during their stay in Mexico, Alicia disapproves of Teresa’s “gold band on the wedding finger” (*Letters* 25), so later she tells Teresa that she has “no business being married” and finds it incomprehensible

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<sup>6</sup> Quotations from Ana Castillo’s *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* follow the Plume 1995 edition to which I refer as *Massacre* for brevity.



that any woman of their generation could “willingly commit herself to slavery” (38). Castillo suggests that by befriending “a burgeoning feminist” like Alicia, Teresa begins a “confrontation with herself as a conventional married woman from a conservative Mexican upbringing” (*Massacre* 177). Therefore, it is the defiant nature of this female friendship between Teresa and Alicia that further renders Teresa as a character likely to be interpreted as a “malinchista” by her community, given that she is in search of self-determination away from oppressive, male-centered, preconceived notions of how a woman should be. At the same time, this female friendship gives the novel a subversive, feminist, dialectical quality that questions the derogatory characterization of Chicanas as traitors for choosing to follow their own path and, thus, Castillo puts forward a new type of Chicana identity defined by feminist ideology.

Teresa, however, is not a traitor; as a young woman in her early twenties, she is simply in search of her own identity. In fact, both La Malinche and Teresa could be described as border-crossers. Teresa’s identity is essentially hybrid and, ultimately, represents mestizaje and in-betweenness, since she functions as a bridge between cultures, between North America and Mexico, in a way that brings to mind how La Malinche acted as a mediator and interpreter between the Spanish culture and the Aztec civilization. One example of this is when Teresa explains during “a battle of wits” to Ponce, a young Mexican engineer, what “a liberal woman” is, after he asks her in a patronizing manner if she is one (*Letters* 78-79). Teresa understands that in Mexico, “the term ‘liberated woman’ mean[s] something other than what [women have] strived for back in the United States,” it “simply mean[s] a woman who would sleep nondiscriminately with any man” (79). Thus, Teresa as a perceptive border-crosser gets the upper hand by replying intelligently to Ponce: “What you perceive as ‘liberal’ is my independence to choose what i do, with whom, and when. Moreover, it also means that i may choose *not* to do it, with anyone, ever” (79). Guillermo Gómez-Peña argues that the hybrid or mestiza must be understood, as a “cross-cultural diplomat, as an intellectual *coyote* (smuggler of ideas)” (qtd. in Carson 114), and Cordelia Candelaria points out that the story of La Malinche “might be read as an account of the prototypical Chicana feminist,” as she embodies intelligence and adaptability (6). Benjamin D. Carson claims that as border-crossers, Teresa and Alicia “have a tenuous relationship with both Mexico and the United States; both, in a sense, are alien to them, because, as mestizas, they live not in one culture, but between and among several cultures” (116). In view of the above, it could be argued that Teresa’s identity of a border-crosser, as well as her intelligence as a Chicana feminist, one who has to navigate different spaces, alludes to Malinche’s impressive skills of adaptation, as she also lived between different cultures.

The theme of betrayal, which is inextricably intertwined with La Malinche due to a deeply ingrained patriarchal ideology and La Malinche’s alleged role in the European Conquest of Mexico, is further explored in the novel, but Castillo subverts the sexist belief that betrayal is an innate characteristic of the female gender. As aforementioned, Teresa is the one who abandons her husband to find herself in Mexico accompanied by Alicia, a decision which is seen as the betrayal of a “malinchista” due to her refusal to uphold the traditionally assigned role of



a submissive wife. However, Teresa, and other women in the novel repeatedly fall victims to various forms of betrayal perpetrated by Mexican men. This becomes evident when Teresa mentions that Señor Aragón, a Mexican copperwork instructor, “was particularly concerned with the progress of his blond students” from Texas and New Jersey (*Letters* 26-27), whereas he disliked Teresa presumably because of her “Indian-marked face” (25), her “dark skin” (67) and her “dark hair,” which must have made her appear “like the daughter of a migrant worker or a laborer in the North” (27). Thus, Señor Aragón favors his blond students over Teresa, because he does not consider a female student of indigenous descent worthy of his attention. Another example of a Mexican man who betrays his Mexican “complacent wife” in order to have an affair with “a hot, young gringa” (35), who unwittingly happens to be Alicia, is Adán, “the Indian caretaker” of an unoccupied hotel in Acapulco (32). Adán does not think twice before betraying his “inconsequential” wife from the village for the sake of making “love to the infamous North American white woman” (33). Castillo emphasizes that “[s]ubversion of all implied truths is necessary in order to understand the milieu of sexist politics that shape the lives of women” (*Massacre* 176-77). Thus, despite the fact that Teresa is proud of her indigenous heritage and seems to be overall confident about her physical appearance, which diverges from Eurocentric beauty standards imposed by Colonialism, Mexican men seem to have internalized these beauty myths and hold them in high regard. As a result, Teresa experiences discrimination and a dual sense of rejection and betrayal.

Another important example of male betrayal that undermines the patriarchal myth of female treachery, at least as personified in the archetype of La Malinche, is enacted by Sergio Samora, a wealthy Mexican heir and Teresa’s “entrepreneur-suitor” (*Letters* 66-67). Teresa suggestively calls her relationship with Sergio “the Yucatán saga” (70), because he invites her to stay at his hacienda in Mérida (90). Sergio promises Teresa “a new life free of hardship” (99), he proposes marriage to her and tells her that she will become his assistant and “his interpreter” after the marriage (67), a role that directly links Teresa to La Malinche. However, during a house party hosted by Sergio, Teresa faces a confusing experience. Sergio, who surrounds himself with women from Belgium and Switzerland, “toasted to the incomparable bronze skin of the tropical woman” and “all his friends reached high up with filled glasses and smiled with open admiration at [Teresa’s] indigenous heritage” (66). Teresa concludes this scene by saying “i know now what a mockery that was” (66), as she speaks in hindsight after Sergio has jilted her via a melodramatic telegram (99), hence implying that during the party, members of the Mexican elite actually made fun of her indigenous ancestry by treating her as a token and essentializing her indigeneity. Moreover, after this incident, Teresa realizes that in fact Sergio proposed to her only to have sex with “a liberated gringa” (100). As a result, Teresa’s disorienting experiences in Mexico bring to mind Malinche’s plight and, in particular, how alienated she must have felt after being betrayed and treated as a commodity by her own people, given that La Malinche was “victimized by patriarchy well before she was victimized by Eurocolonialism” (Pratt 867). Thus, by offering a more candid representation of heterosexual relationships, in which women are often betrayed by men of their own ethnic/racial kin, Castillo openly questions the idea of the “female traitor of



the nation” that is attributed to La Malinche and by extension to those Chicanas who do not comply with established gender expectations.

The ever-present threat of rape and sexual violence in the novel further alludes to La Malinche. At the same time, Castillo subverts sexist assumptions that tend to blame the female victim for being raped, and instead presents sexual violence as an aggressive form of male betrayal equally perpetrated by Mexican men, as it was perpetrated by European men during the Conquest. In fact, many of the Mexican men Teresa and Alicia meet strive to gain their trust only to betray that trust afterward, when the opportunity arises. One prime example of this is Alvaro Pérez Pérez, Teresa’s colleague, who, in Letter Sixteen, after inviting Teresa to spend a few days on his father’s ranch outside a quaint Mexican town, he begins to argue with her, when he realizes that Teresa is not going to spend the night with him. Later on, to make things worse, Alvaro barges in Teresa and Alicia’s bedroom, but the two young women are prepared and have barricaded their door to avoid being ambushed (*Letters* 58). Moreover, Teresa decries the fact that both she and Alicia are perceived by men in Mexico as “revolting,” just because they are women traveling without a male companion, something which is seen as the “greatest transgression” (65-66). Thus, even though they both “hoped for respect as human beings,” they are instead “susceptible to ridicule, abuse, disrespect” (65) and have to be “on guard” all the time, a maneuver which “was draining” (77). Norma Alarcón insightfully asserts that “[b]ecause Malintzin aided Cortes in the Conquest of the New World, she is seen as concretizing woman’s sexual weakness and interchangeability, always open to sexual exploitation,” whether it be seduction or rape (184). Thus, Teresa as a twentieth-century Chicana, who aspires to equality, is still struggling to be respected in Mexico, a patriarchal society that refuses to see women as equals worthy of respect and in which men still use tactics of domination to deceive or abuse women.

Another example of the misogynistic attitude that perpetuates sexual violence occurs when Teresa and Alicia are in Veracruz, which Teresa calls “the City of Babylonia” (*Letters* 85). First, Alicia escapes “gang rape at [a] university auditorium” (92), thanks to Teresa’s fierce and instant response as she yells at the men who advance to “devour” Alicia to “LEAVE HER ALONE,” while trembling with rage (84). A final example of the ubiquitous threat of sexual violence occurs right after this incident, when Señor Montes, the head of the engineering department of the state of Veracruz, and Señor Salazar offer to give Teresa and Alicia a ride to Mexico City (94). Before departing, Teresa realizes that their two male engineer friends, Ponce and Luis, who work for Señor Salazar and have offered their hospitality to Teresa and Alicia, “just turned [them] over to the Romans for a few measly gold coins” (94-95), as if they were “object[s] of exchange” (Cypess 153). Teresa also realizes how these two conservative middle-aged Mexican men perceive them, and then her mind immediately starts racing to find a way out of a violent situation that “might likely ensue” (*Letters* 95), during the approximately three-hundred kilometer journey. As a survival tactic, Teresa pretends that she is both a Professor of Anthropology traveling with a respectable research objective, and that she has a father expecting her to return home (96). In addition, Alicia lies about her and Teresa, stating that they come from “respected families” (97). To top it off, the next day they both take



their “masquerade” one step further by pretending to be “the picture of the collegiate daughters whose loving parents would be waiting anxiously for their return” (98). Alarcón points out that one of the central, sexual political themes that Chicana literature explores, as inspired by Malintzin, is precisely how “women are seen not just by one patriarchy but by all as rapeable and sexually exploitable” (187). As a result, Teresa and Alicia go to great lengths to avoid being sexually assaulted and trick the time-honored and pervasive androcentric narrative of machismo, according to which women, who travel alone and are not members of a prominent family, are fair game for rape. Moreover, Teresa, as an educated feminist and a subversive, contemporary “Malinche,” fully apprehends the deep-rooted misogyny and, therefore, she becomes an efficient interpreter and reader of men’s intentions, while also undermining the belief that women are easy prey. Thus, Teresa is resourceful and knowledgeable enough to circumvent these aggressions and to counteract patriarchy’s hypocrisies in order to ward off sexual violence.

Another point that connects Teresa to La Malinche is her problematic relationship with her mother, which exposes the pattern of older women’s complicity in patriarchy, due to the overpowering influence of a male-dominated society. More specifically, Teresa’s mother initially disapproves of her daughter’s separation from her husband, so both mother and daughter “tried to keep out of each other’s way” (*Letters* 35). Then, when the wealthy Sergio Samora proposes to Teresa, her mother is so “ecstatic” about the prospect of her daughter marrying off to a Mexican millionaire that she is even willing to “take precautions” to make Teresa’s other marriage seem as if it never happened, and Teresa can then be “redeemed” (67). However, when Sergio abandons Teresa and she goes back to Chicago, her mother tells her unsympathetically: “You were married, divorced, been around, a veteran of various wars ... How could you have expected him to take you seriously? Men like that, with status, money, use women like you for playthings!” (100). Teresa is devastated by her mother’s insensitive response and she leaves her mother’s home for good “without saying good-bye” (100), because after this her family rejects her and “want[s] no part of [her]” (109). Alarcón incisively explains how misogyny is internalized even by mothers, who pass it down to their daughters, “[b]ecause the myth of Malintzin pervades not only male thought but ours too ... as well as our mothers,’ who are entrusted with the transmission of culture” (183). Therefore, it could be argued that Teresa’s mother’s behavior evokes to some extent how Malinche’s mother betrayed her own daughter and sold her out to benefit her son. This maternal betrayal renders both La Malinche and Teresa as outcasts in their own communities and both stories serve as a reminder of how insignificant daughters can end up in the patriarchal family structure that prioritizes sons or sons-in-law to the detriment of a more gratifying mother-daughter bond.

The way in which Teresa experiences the ambivalence of motherhood indirectly evokes once again the archetype of La Malinche. Castillo, however, enriches it by coalescing some elements from the other two Mexican archetypal mother figures: La Llorona, and La Virgen de Guadalupe. In Letter Thirty-One, Teresa describes the heartbreaking experience of an abortion after having conceived a baby by Alexis Valladolid, Alicia’s distant cousin from Spain (*Letters* 105). Teresa



makes the excruciating decision to have an abortion, a traumatic experience during which she pleads the doctor to stop, and which she describes afterward to Alexis as “having life sucked out” of her before throwing him out (114-16). All this demonstrates that Teresa is filled with crippling guilt and suffers enormously during and after the abortion as she repeats: “i killed my baby” (116). However, even though it is a very painful decision, Teresa makes it consciously, probably because of the fact that Alexis is a racist, a man who believes that being an Indian is even worse than being a Nazi (107). Hence, Teresa does not want to be linked with him for the rest of her life and decides “to be rid of him” (116). Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés claims that “[s]ometimes the *La Llorona* tale is told as a story about *Ce. Malinalli* or *Malinche*” (qtd. in Gonzalez 160). Nevertheless, Maria Gonzalez argues that La Malinche is “the mother/whore of the Mexican mythos,” hated for her apparent selling-out to the European conquerors (159), she is a woman who just has to be controlled, whereas La Llorona is feared, uncontrollable and “capable of enormous destruction” (161). Therefore, it could be argued that in Letter Thirty-One, Teresa symbolically transforms into a contemporary Llorona, by having an abortion and then grieving for it, probably because she wants to avoid at all costs repeating Malinche’s tale of having the child of a Spanish, racist man, something that will determine the rest of her life.

As a single mother of the child she has later and after the abortion, Teresa reverses La Malinche’s loss of her son, Martín, whom Cortés sent to Spain to be educated over her objections (Bernal Díaz, qtd. in Pratt 866). Teresa only implies that her son’s father is her ex-husband Libra, as if the child’s father is irrelevant, because Teresa is already determined to raise her only son alone as a single mother, one who wants to instill into him the values of gender equality (*Letters* 136), and avoid the predicament of androcentric indoctrination. Furthermore, Castillo introduces some elements of the archetype of La Virgen de Guadalupe, given that Teresa is a devoted nurturing mother, and considers her son “a miracle” (134). In addition, Teresa wants to have her son baptized as a Catholic, so that he can have a “spiritual insurance of another’s protection,” and asks Alicia to be his godmother because their “views on parenting are similar” (134), even though Alicia is not religious. According to Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Chicana/o culture has “tres madres” or three mothers: “*Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, *La Chingada* (*Malinche*), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and *La Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two” (30). Ambiguity surrounds these three “Mothers,” whose true identity has been obscured to encourage “the virgen/puta (whore) dichotomy” (31). Interestingly enough, in *The Mixquiabuala Letters* the three archetypal mothers of the Mexican culture converge. Indeed, Teresa’s narrative arch suggests an alternative Xicanista vision that perceives women as culturally polysemous individuals. By doing so, Castillo rejects dehumanizing patriarchal dichotomies that superficially pigeonhole women and mothers into good and bad.

To conclude, this article illustrated that Ana Castillo has created a compelling late-twentieth-century Chicana character like Teresa, a woman that personifies a contemporary Malinche, and a quintessential female outcast, in order



to expose the sexist double standards Chicana women are subjected to. Castillo brings to the surface the contradictions of patriarchal victim blaming by highlighting how Teresa is betrayed by her relatives, men of her own ethnic background, and even by her own mother. Thus, Teresa evokes the way in which La Malinche was unjustly scapegoated and blamed as a traitor, when in reality both La Malinche and Teresa have been betrayed by their own people. The superficial interpretation of Malinche's story based on an androcentric reading of complex historical events has been perpetuated for centuries, and has influenced the way in which Chicanas are perceived within their communities, because blaming women without examining the wider sociopolitical context that shapes their decisions is customary under patriarchy. Finally, by centering on the friendship between Teresa and Alicia, which is often dialectic in nature as regards gender issues, Castillo undertakes the difficult task of delving into the female experience, and proposes a Chicana feminist vision, or a Xicanista consciousness, that emphasizes the understanding of the past in order to be able to envision a better future.

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“LA MADRE TIERRA QUE NOS MANTIENE Y CUIDA”:  
AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF SANDRA CISNEROS’S  
“EYES OF ZAPATA”

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an ecofeminist reading of Sandra Cisneros’s novella “Eyes of Zapata.” Inés, the female protagonist of Cisneros’s narrative, is perceived as the strange and dangerous Other by her community, much like nature has frequently been conceptualised as threatening non-human matter. However, as a *curandera/bruja* she forms an empowering relationship with the physical world through her visions. She achieves complete union with nature which alleviates the pain caused by reality and her visions. Inés’s special relationship with the Mexican landscape contrasts Emiliano Zapata’s, her lover’s, disrespectful approach to the elements of nature. By creating a dynamic female character in harmony with the physical world Cisneros crafts a narrative which prioritises those who have often been regulated to the position of the oppressed: woman and nature.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, Emiliano Zapata, *Nagual*, *Curandera*, *Bruja*, Mexican Revolution.

“LA MADRE TIERRA QUE NOS MANTIENE Y CUIDA”:  
UNA LECTURA ECOFEMINISTA DE “EYES OF ZAPATA” DE SANDRA CISNEROS

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta una lectura ecofeminista de la novela corta “Eyes of Zapata” de Sandra Cisneros. Inés, la protagonista del relato, es percibida por su comunidad como la “Otra”, como una figura enigmática y peligrosa, que recuerda a la conceptualización usual de la naturaleza como una materia amenazadora, no humana. Sin embargo, Inés, como curandera/bruja, establece una relación de empoderamiento con el mundo físico a través de sus visiones. Logra una unión completa con la naturaleza, que alivia la pena que le causan la realidad y sus visiones. La relación especial de Inés con el paisaje contrasta con la actitud irrespetuosa de Emiliano Zapata, su amante, hacia los elementos de la naturaleza. Con la creación de un personaje femenino dinámico que está en armonía con el mundo físico, Cisneros construye una narrativa que prioriza aquellos sujetos oprimidos que en general han sido reducidos a ocupar una posición subordinada: las mujeres y la naturaleza.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ecofeminismo, Emiliano Zapata, *nagual*, *curandera*, *bruja*, revolución mexicana.

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Who ... would consider us holders  
of knowledge that could transform this world  
into a place where the quality of life for all living things  
on this planet is the utmost priority?

—Ana CASTILLO, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, 149

Sandra Cisneros's "Eyes of Zapata" was published in 1991 as part of the short story collection *Woman Hollering Creek*. Like many of the other short narratives of the book, "Eyes of Zapata" focuses on female experience and, more specifically, on the story of Inés Alfaro, one of Emiliano Zapata's mistresses. Set during the Mexican Revolution, the narrative presents the female perspective of the historical events that took place during that time and gives insight into the struggles and limitations women faced and are still facing in Mexican society. Upon a first reading, one would be tempted to examine these aspects of the text, that is how Cisneros creates a historical narrative and infuses it with the voice of a woman obscured by the mythical status of a Mexican revolutionary figure, Emiliano Zapata. However, the text offers a variety of readings and one of these regards the representation of Inés as a woman that manages to form a deep connection with the natural world around her. More specifically, this article aims to explore this link through an ecofeminist lens, since Inés's portrayal as an ostracized person in her community presents similarities with how nature has been conceptualized as the Other. This parallel helps her to achieve a special relationship with the land, evident in how nature is a vital part of her status as a *curandera/bruja* and of her recurring visions, even if these entail pain. Thus, Inés's bond with the environment, which appears to be a source of strength for her, comes into sharp contrast with the negative way in which Zapata is linked to nature, and in this manner Cisneros crafts the narrative of a powerful woman, subverting gender stereotypes in Chicana/o literature.

The association between women and nature has primarily been explored through the theoretical framework of ecofeminism. Janis Birkeland defines ecofeminism "as feminism taken to its logical conclusion because it theorizes the interrelations among self, societies, and nature" (17-18). These interconnections mean that "[e]cofeminism is a value system, a social movement, and a practice, but it also offers a *political analysis* that explores the links between androcentrism and environmental destruction" (Birkeland 18, italics in the original).<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, ecofeminism can be immensely useful when it is utilized in literary analyses of narratives of female experience, where conventional power relationships are very likely to be questioned. In fact, "the very essence of ecofeminism is its challenge to

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<sup>1</sup> All italics in quotes are henceforth left as in the original text(s).



the presumed necessity of power relationships. It is about changing from a morality based on ‘power over’ to one based on reciprocity and responsibility (‘power to’)” (Birkeland 19). Ecofeminism’s preoccupation with power is also related to its being “a holistic value system,” according to which all natural things possess “intrinsic value” and “[h]umans should not attempt to ‘manage’ or control nonhuman nature” (Birkeland 19-20).<sup>2</sup> In other words, what ecofeminism proposes as the antidote to a world characterized by unequal relationships among humans themselves and between humans and nature is the realization that all living things are interconnected and should function in harmony and reciprocal reverence.

In her seminal *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood argues that the root of the problem ecofeminists wish to attack is located in the different kinds of dualisms that have conditioned how we view the world. According to Plumwood, the term “dualism” refers to “the process by which contrasting concepts ... are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive” (31). What this definition highlights is that dualism constitutes a carefully planned mechanism, mostly employed to control who has power over whom. Indeed, the notion of power is of great significance in the context of dualism, since, from the moment two things are conceptualized as opposites, one is bound to be more powerful, producing a type of domination; thus, dualism “distorts both sides of what it splits apart, the master *and* the slave, the coloniser *and* the colonised, the sadist *and* the masochist, the egoist *and* the self-abnegating altruist, the masculine *and* the feminine, human *and* nature” (Plumwood 32). As a result of such dualisms, women and nature are relegated to the position of the oppressed, a position which does not conform to the master narratives that the marked categories of dualism create and sustain. The issue with this association is that “to the extent that women’s ‘closeness to nature’ is mainly a product of their powerlessness in and exclusion from culture..., affirmation of these qualities, which are the products of powerlessness, will not provide a genuine liberatory alternative” (Plumwood 32). This is why ecological feminists seek to assign positive meaning to the connection between nature and

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, this idea was originally voiced by a male philosopher and ecologist, Aldo Leopold. In his *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (1949), Leopold expands on biocentric ethics and argues for an ethical reformation of the relationship between humans and the land. In particular, he observes that, although ethics regulate human society and interpersonal relationships, “[t]here is as yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it” (173). This is because land is considered a possession and the way people view this physical world “is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations” (173). As a result, Leopold proposes what he terms “land ethic,” that is an ethic which “changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (173). Even though what Leopold essentially suggests is equality among all forms of life, it is surprising that he disregards women’s struggles in mid-twentieth-century American society.



women and thus shape new narratives which erase dualism and promote powerful associations between elements that previously fell into the category of the oppressed.<sup>3</sup>

Cisneros's novella "Eyes of Zapata" appears to be such a narrative. Inés's experience considerably parallels how nature has been perceived throughout time, and this correlation paves the way for a reading of Inés as a woman who connects deeply with nature and thus becomes a dynamic figure. To illustrate, as Marti Kheel writes, nature has largely been delineated as a female "alien force" in Western thought (244). This process of otherization has been achieved through the means of two kinds of imagery, namely nature as a "beast" and as "mindless matter" (Kheel 245-46). The image of nature as merely substance can be linked to what Plumwood terms as "backgrounding," meaning identifying women and nature as the backdrop to the ongoing progress that takes place in the world (21). These two broad categories, through which nature has largely been approached, apply to Inés's experience as well. Inés is indeed thought of as an evil and threatening entity by the members of her community, since she confesses that the villagers blame her for the destruction brought on by the Carrancistas: "It's *her* fault, the villagers said when they returned. *Nagual*." (104). The parallel between Inés and the environment is hinted by the word "nagual." In the Mesoamerican folk tradition, some people are believed to possess the power to transform into a nagual, that is into a dangerous mythical creature ("Nagual"). As a result, the imagery evoked in the text both associates Inés with elements of the physical world and affirms that the villagers consider her a witch in the form of a beast. Furthermore, for Zapata, Inés serves as the background of the main action of the Mexican Revolution and this is evident in the scant attention he gives her: "The months I disappeared, I don't think you understood my reasons. I assumed I made no difference to you" (105). Zapata only visits Inés and their children once in a while during the Revolution, therefore he does not notice when Inés disappears. He thinks of her as the background to his revolutionary/political action, since she is a woman and, in his eyes, unable to participate in an armed conflict.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Inés's experience has some striking similarities with the way the environment has been viewed as the incomprehensible and inferior Other.

The parallel between Inés and nature provides the foundations for an analysis of Inés as a woman, and, specifically, a woman of color, who connects to nature in a profound way, and perhaps the most enlightening manifestation of this can be found when she narrates her experience as a *curanderalbruja*. Chicana writer and scholar Ana Castillo describes *curanderismo* as "alchemy for cures, a combination

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<sup>3</sup> Ecofeminists stress the need for such connections. For example, scholar Catherine Roach writes that "we can agree that women are closer to nature but disagree that this association must be disempowering. We can instead promote this association as enriching, liberating, and as according both women and nature high value" (52). Roach terms this idea "the 'nature feminist' position" (52).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brinson Curiel supports that "Inés is a revision of the icon of La Adelita, the Mexican revolutionary woman also referred to as La Soldadera, who, like the other feminine figures, is frequently characterized by self-sacrifice and suffering" (422). This connection further accentuates the passivity attributed to Inés by Zapata.



of modern medicine and ancient practices” (146). Castillo distinguishes a *curandera* from a *bruja*, mentioning that the former focuses on curing physical pain or illness, whereas the latter is “a spiritual healer or psychic” (156). In the text, Inés appears to be both. For example, when her Tía Chucha falls ill, she attempts to cure her with natural treatments: “I used all her remedies and my own, *guacamaya* feathers, eggs, cocoa, beans, chamomile oil, rosemary, but there was no help for her” (102). Tía Chucha seems to be instrumental in Inés’s introduction to this holistic system of folk medicine, as she is a *curandera* herself: “My Tía Chucha cured me with branches from the pepper tree and with the broom. And for a long time afterward, my legs felt as if they were stuffed with rags, and I kept seeing little purple stars winking and whirling just out of reach” (104). What is of interest in this specific excerpt is that the tree rags are presented as an extension of Inés’s body, as if she has become one with the physical world. She has been cured with the help of nature, but she feels the effect of this contact for a long time afterwards. As a *curandera*, Inés has learned to be part of the environment, much like a free-roaming animal: “We’ve eaten like the birds, what we could pluck from the trees—guava, mango, tamarind, almond when in season” (102). She can live in harmony with nature, sustaining herself and her children on what the natural world offers. In fact, reverence for and respect towards the environment are the most important aspects of *curanderismo*, since the healing tradition is based on “a perception of life as being physically connected from atom to atom, no single part being more essential nor grander than the rest and that we are all vital to each other” (Castillo 156). As the aforementioned examples show, the belief in the interconnectedness of all things in the universe is what characterizes Inés’s relationship with nature.

Apart from a *curandera*, Inés is also a *bruja*, since she has visions, which are a vital aspect of her character, and these visions are inspired by the natural world. To explain, Chicana scholar and theorist Gloria E. Anzaldúa argues that Chicanas/os and *mexicanas/os* possess “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (38). Anzaldúa terms this ability *la facultad* and stresses its being different from reason; it is related to the psychical realm of a person’s existence (38). Additionally, the fact that Inés is familiar with and practises *curanderismo* further enables her to perceive more than what her concrete surroundings offer, as practitioners have access to the magical side of life (Castillo 155).<sup>5</sup> Although Inés’s supernatural skills are alluded to in the title (Curiel 407), it is not until much later, when she prays to the *Virgencita*, that her powers become explicit: “When I woke the world was filled with stars, and the stars carried me back to the village and showed me” (103). Stars have conventionally been associated with guidance and access to knowledge, both often symbolized by the

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<sup>5</sup> Maythee G. Rojas contends that Inés as a mistress inhabits “a liminal space—a fluctuating zone of liberation and oppression,” since she is perceived as belonging to a man, but she does not have the responsibilities of a wife, and in order to interpret this liminal identity, she depends on her body and her sexuality (136). Such a reading further affirms Inés’s status as a woman with a heightened and enhanced perception, since her liminality gives her access to multiple realities.





light they emit. Moreover, they are considered an important part of Aztec culture and they are often found in visual representations of La Virgen de Guadalupe.<sup>6</sup> Here, Inés awakes into a different world of transcendental knowledge, which the stars help her to explore. In this new realm, she achieves her own union with nature, manifested in the images of Inés as a bird throughout the novella. Although she is described as a *nagual* by the people of her community, she has wings which make “the sound of a velvet cape crumpling” (87), while she is hovering above Zapata’s body. Eventually, she transforms into an owl: “I turned into the soul of a *tecolote* and kept vigil in the branches of a purple jacaranda” (99). Owls are animals with exceptionally good vision, much like Inés, and since ancient times they have been symbols of wisdom and knowledge.<sup>7</sup> These qualities are transferred onto Inés and, thus, the text demonstrates how the natural world forms the basis of her visions.

Nevertheless, Inés’s supernatural skills are not necessarily a source of pleasure, since, as Anzaldúa observes, the concept of *la facultad* entails the element of pain (38). Inés reveals that Tía Chucha “was the one who taught [her] to use [her] sight” (105), as women have been granted the responsibility of securing the existence of a cultural continuum “with daily rituals of popular culture and by passing faith from generation and generation” (Castillo 145). Despite knowing how to use her powers, Inés falls into the trap of seeing Zapata with his other women in her visions: “I saw you asleep next to that woman from Villa de Ayala ... And her skin shone blue in the moonlight and you were blue as well ... Then I felt a terrible grief inside me” (98). The sight of Zapata with another woman evidently distresses her, but once again it appears that she resorts to nature in order to alleviate her pain, since her Tía gives her a tea made from flowers, “a tonic with the dried blossoms and [applies] a salve, mixed with the white of an egg” (97). Inés herself is highly aware of how pain is a constant parameter in her life: “We drag these bodies around with us ... these bodies that give us pleasure and pain” (89). If her physical existence can cause her pain and psychological suffering, then one can see why she considers her nature-inspired visions an integral part of her life. The above excerpt also indicates that, although she can separate body from soul willingly, Inés recognizes the necessity for both in her life, thus doing away with dualisms. She knows that life can be full of pleasure as well as pain, and she also embraces both her physical and her spiritual side, since, after all, she uses parts of her body in her visions, visions which are grounded in the natural world. Therefore, pain becomes only one of the aspects of how Inés conceptualizes her presence in the world as a holistic experience.

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Inés’s unique relationship with the natural world develops into a source of strength. More particularly, this becomes

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<sup>6</sup> Anzaldúa identifies La Virgen de Guadalupe as originating from Coatlicue, “the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb” (46). She stresses the significance of this Aztec deity as “Goddess of birth and death, Coatlicue gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes” (46).

<sup>7</sup> Owls have repeatedly been associated with *curanderismo* in Chicano literature. For example, in Rudolfo A. Anaya’s novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, an owl accompanies the titular *curandera*.

evident in the following passage: “I took to eating black things—*huitlacoche* the cord mushroom, coffee, dark chiles, the bruised part of fruit, the darkest, blackest things to make me hard and strong” (106). This is her reaction to the community that accuses her of being a witch because of her spirituality. By feeding on the diseased parts of corn and other brown or black foods, “Inés resists the oppression of whiteness and its association with patriarchy, thereby altering the power such a system possesses” (Rojas 152).<sup>8</sup> The resistance Inés displays proves that her interaction with the environment molds her into a powerful persona, one who may have been “a historical footnote” (Curiel 404), but who manages to resurface from obscurity through the strength with which nature provides her. Another instance of how nature empowers Inés appears when she takes refuge in the mountains: “Sometimes the people of the cold lands give us boiled water sweetened with cane sugar, and we stay until we can gather a little strength, until the sun has warmed our bones” (102). Even the simplest, yet most basic, natural elements, such as water and the sun, can be of benefit to Inés. For her, the land is “*la madre tierra que nos mantiene y cuida*” (110), the Mother that cares for all living things. As a historical person, Inés is excluded from the narrative of the Mexican Revolution and the myth surrounding Zapata, but as a literary character, her story is recuperated and her voice heard, since she is portrayed as a strong, inextricable part of nature.

Inés’s unique closeness to nature comes into sharp contrast with Zapata’s invasive approach to the land. In “Eyes of Zapata,” Cisneros “strips [Zapata] of his iconic and monumental heroic status” (Curiel 405). Throughout the novella, the General appears to represent domination over the environment. For example, his *charro* suit links him to horsemanship, that is to the taming of a wild animal (Curiel 411), something that hints at how detached he is from the environment. Unlike Inés, he does not find solace in nature, but annoyance: “Everything bothers you these days. Any noise, any light, even the sun” (86). Moreover, Zapata capitalizes on animal trade, “buying and selling livestock all through the *rancheritos*” (90). This is also the primary reason that Inés’s father does not like him: he is a *charro*, not a *campesino*, and, consequently, he does not have a genuine connection to the land. His inability to create a harmonious relationship with the natural world is further stressed by the fact that if he is associated with a natural element, this happens in a negative way. An instance of this can be found when Inés and Zapata meet for the first time: “You circled when I tried to cross the *zócalo*, I remember. I pretended not to see you until you rode your horse in my path, and I tried to dodge one way, then the other, like a calf in *jaripeo*” (108). Here, as Curiel correctly notes, “[c]ourtship is described in terms of a cattle roundup, with the man on horseback and the woman playing the part of pursued animal” (418). What is more, Inés discloses that she

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<sup>8</sup> According to Rojas, Inés becomes an even more dynamic character if one considers the historical female figures with whom she is linked, for example La Malinche (152). This becomes a considerably powerful connection if one takes into consideration the parallel between the sexual and cultural abuse of La Malinche and the destruction of the natural resources of the New World by the *conquistadores*.





feels as if she were a calf caught in a Mexican bull riding show, thus connecting the General to a treatment of animals that is devoid of respect and reverence.<sup>9</sup> If Inés is in harmony with the natural world, then Zapata stands for the wild force that comes to disrupt this balance. Given that Zapata's image, a heroic and all-powerful image, is continuously utilized by androcentric culture and symbolizes men's power over women as well as the unfair sexual double standards that relegate women in an inferior position (Curiel 422), "Eyes of Zapata," as a literary text, offers a counter-narrative from the ecofeminist angle. Cisneros portrays Zapata as a man at a distance from the environment and demythologizes the idealistic representations of him found in the master narratives of the Mexican Revolution. According to Ellen McCracken, "'decentering master texts' is a way of re-semanticizing community" (qtd. in Curiel 424), and this is exactly what Cisneros achieves in the novella. She dismantles Zapata's idealized image that history has produced, and she assigns new meaning to him and to Inés as historical people, thus demolishing and rebuilding the foundations of how we think about history, heroes, men, women and nature.

In conclusion, Sandra Cisneros's "Eyes of Zapata" is a text that can support an ecofeminist reading of Inés Alfaro, a woman who has been silenced in the historical evidence surrounding Zapata's involvement in the Mexican Revolution. In the novella, Inés connects to the Mexican land in a unique way, since she is a *curandera* and a *bruja*. She depends on nature to survive, feeding on plants on which animals usually feed, and she achieves complete union with the natural world through her visions; she transcends the boundaries of reality, transforms into a bird and gains access to a different kind of knowledge, beyond what is available to her as a woman in a restrictive community that perceives her as a threat. Moreover, for Inés the environment is a source of solace, as she uses natural elements to alleviate the pain she experiences as one of Zapata's numerous mistresses. While Inés's closeness to the land evinces admiration for and unity with nature, Zapata is exposed as a man who cannot grasp the ways of the natural world and, therefore, his reaction is to attempt to dominate it. Consequently, seen through an ecofeminist perspective that traces the links between nature and women, Cisneros's narrative alters the historicity of other narratives that either silence Inés or depict her in a negative light, and it offers a novel portrait of the heroine as a dynamic female figure, who draws her strength from her contact with the environment. Such a depiction challenges the power dynamics found in stereotypical representations of Mexican people and renders Cisneros a writer and a thinker who envisions a brighter future not only for Chicanas, but for all women.

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<sup>9</sup> Animal symbolism and, specifically, the figure of the bull, has been a central aspect of a number of American literary texts with a prominent example being Ernest Hemingway's depiction of bullfighting in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). However, a detailed analysis of the symbolism of the bull here is beyond the scope of this article.



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CREATION



# A TRIBUTE RECORDANDO A RUDOLFO A. ANAYA: FROM AZTLÁN TO MICTLÁN

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El llano is mourning the passing of Rudolfo A. Anaya (Oct 30 1937-June 28 2020) where time became suspended, the wind stopped, and the juniper trees sighed. His death marks a watershed moment in many ways: the Quinto Sol Generation just got smaller; his legacy is forever an indelible memory; and his fame transcends his patria chica. He was a child from the dry eastern part of New Mexico where hardy people live and eke out a living, surrounded by an intensely ingrained tradition of Hispanos who go way back to the XVI century. He always felt grounded in his gente and his long-standing Nuevomexicano culture. That solid foundation rendered him a particular lens of confidence and identity as someone who shared a common history. This is why his works did not dwell on formulating a new ethnos since he knew perfectly well where he came from. As such, the Chicano social and literary movements benefited from his perspective because his characters were not interlopers nor phantoms. Quite the contrary, they seemed of flesh-and-blood or what some consider an embodiment of un Nuevo México profundo.

Such lived experiences helped shape Anaya into a keen observer of the human condition filled with life stories from an earthy world view. He was fundamentally grounded in oral storytelling while transmitting a rich mix of folklore of Hispano and indigenous tales, legends and myths. This was the fertile ground of an infinite imagination upon which to situate his characters in search of harmony, much the way the protagonist Antonio Márez recounted in a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age novel known world-wide, the unforgettable *Bless Me, Ultima*. Antonio represented the synthesis of two peoples and two generations, their religious and cultural beliefs and social practices. The llano culture was the fountain that gave birth to his unique sensibilities: a deep appreciation for this rural culture that never left him. He instinctively returned to relive the quest to relish, explore and understand the New Mexican conscience because it nurtured his sense of place and purpose. In fact, most of his fiction, poetry, essays and plays are an extension of such a quest, a desdoblamiento of his inner questions and doubts about life, tragedy, death, a sense of resolution, spirituality and a deep awareness of humanity.

Of course, his long list of literary works in multiple genres denote a prolific writer of unmatched talents. He tended to produce distinctive groupings: the first as a trilogy about place and myth in his classic *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), *Heart of Aztlán* (1976) and *Tortuga* (1979); a second one as a pre-Columbian exploration

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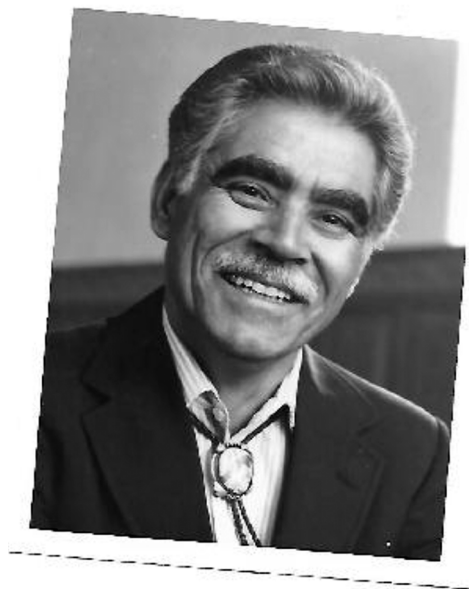


into the Chicano indigenous background in *The Legend of La Llorona* (1985), *The Lord of the Dawn: Legend of Quetzalcóatl* (1987), and to some degree *Jalamanta: A Message from the Desert* (1996); later a predilection for the detective fiction in *Albuquerque* (1992); followed by a series of mystery novels based on the four seasons such as *Zia Summer* (1995), *Río Grande Fall* (1996), *Shaman Winter* (1999) and *Jemez Spring* (2005); and folkloric renditions combined with science-fiction in *Curse of the Chupacabra* (2006), *Chupacabra and Roswell UFO* (2008) and *Chupacabra Meets Billy the Kid* (2018). He also made an impact in children's literature with his acclaimed *The Farolitos of Christmas; A New Mexico Christmas Story* (1987), *Roadrunner's Dance* (2000) and *The First Tortilla* (2007). In addition, he effectively explored philosophical topics on love and death, for example, in *The Old Man's Love Story* (2013). He has also excelled in writing plays, poetry, essays and chronicles (i.e. *A Chicano in China* [1986] or what Patricia Geuder calls "a chronicle of oneiric dimensions"). Y muchas más.

Such vast production has been extremely well received, although not unanimously as when certain school districts voted to burn *Bless Me, Ultima* for its supposed propagation of witchcraft and sorcery. Others questioned the mythic qualities as fanciful or anti-historical constructions, but he always tried to keep his feet on the ground while listening to the imaginative tales of his people. It is noteworthy to mention that the first Chicano works to receive international acclamation up through the 1970s were *Bless Me, Ultima* and *El Teatro Campesino*. During his career he was the recipient of some of the most prestigious awards, such as El Quinto Sol Literary Award, the American Book Award, the National Humanities Medal (presented by President Barack Obama), the NEA National Medal of the Arts Lifetime Honor (presented by President George W. Bush), and twice for the New Mexican Governor's Public Service Award, and many others.

Rudy Anaya was a man of simple tastes (red chile enchiladas at Barelax Café in Albuquerque) with profound convictions about Chicanos/as' potential. As a gifted storyteller, he masterfully created stories and characters, oftentimes with shamanistic and poetic qualities, that represent the struggle between opposite cosmic forces, usually ending with an optimistic outlook toward self-realization. In fact, most of his works embody a search for wholeness, opportunity, justice and goodness, as *Ultima* told Antonio. His writings inspire because they express universal truths and values. Talking to Rudy was often a memorable event for he possessed oracle qualities for his wisdom, passion for writing, and legendary generosity in promoting young writers. I loved calling him at his home because his answering machine seemed to share his humor by saying: "Can't answer the phone right now because I'm busy writing stories...". Rudy liked a good laugh con picardía, always promoting books, education and reading like an exemplary pied piper. He was a consummate conversationalist, a friend with a long memory, a gentleman. Only his humility was overshadowed by his greatness. He has now forever returned to the realm of his imagination, the world he sought in life to capture glimpses of owls, golden carps, black stones, subterranean lakes, blue guitars and La Llorona. Rudy has left us but he will be with us por y para siempre. Que en paz descanse nuestro amigo, hermano, maestro, Rudolfo A. Anaya.





## BIOGRAPHY ON RUDOLFO A. ANAYA

Rudolfo A. Anaya was deeply proud of being from Santa Rosa, New Mexico where the llanos reign in the dry eastern part of the state. With his iconic novel *Bless Me Ultima* (1972) set in that environment, he quickly gained notoriety, prompting a series of accolades as the godfather of Chicano literature. Others considered him one of the founders of the Chicano literary canon, while still others acknowledged that his work set the stage for an unprecedented acceptance of Chicano stories by the American mainstream. His realistic depiction of characters from the countryside or urban barrios along with magical real elements opened up new possibilities for understanding a long-standing Hispanic culture that had either been exoticized or ignored. He went on to produce a long list of memorable works of fiction, some non-fiction, along with plays, children's literature, essays, co-editions and poetry. He also mentored many emerging writers and his counsel and example became legendary.

He received all his education within New Mexico, the first years in the llano primary school and later high school and college in the city of Albuquerque. He graduated from the University of New Mexico with a BA in English and American Literature in 1963 and taught in the Albuquerque public schools until 1968. That same year he received his first MA in 1968 for English and his second MA in 1972 for Guidance and Counseling). In 1974, he was hired by the English Department at his alma mater and he taught there (mainly creative writing) until his retirement in 1995.

His common roots are attributed to his vaquero father and a mother whose family was devoted to farming. That grounded him well to appreciate the land, the





landscape and the rhythms of nature within New Mexico, including archetypal characters, time, death and other features of life. He also experienced the urban barrio at a young age, while witnessing social issues of railroad laborers and the trappings of urban temptations. Much of his writings contain autobiographical allusions that serve as the surface to unearth profound feelings about existence, a philosophy of life (in particular the mixing of Hispano-Indigenous elements), dynamics of power vs powerlessness and the politics of being from a deep-seated but minority culture. From such representations, Anaya garnered a widespread following world-wide because he presented every-day people and folklore along with larger life questions that need to be resolved. In the process, he often proposed or insinuated a philosophy of seeking harmony and balance—along with hints of social justice—despite the coming together of opposites. Essentially, Anaya will be remembered for being a unique storyteller where imagination dictates the substance of humanity.

Anaya was a tireless creator through not only his own writings but also for sponsoring journals, serving as a consultant for films, and assisting with plays and operas of his works. He is truly one of the contemporary giants who has helped in gaining a legitimacy for Chicano literature across the globe.

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## POEMS



5 Faces–Sunk Way into Reality (Gustavo Segade).

### TUTU SOL Juan Felipe Herrera (Poet Laureate)

Lissen:

Ok, ok – okaaaay - so

I'll tell you all about me, ok. Then you can do whatever you want to do, I mean do not stick around just cuz you think we are friends all of a sudden. I am out to save the world. And I am gonna start with one person - My father.

Ok? Anyway – as you can see by gazing at me. Stop right there. I am into the word “gazing.” Not “looking.” “Looking” for is dummies, ok? “Looking” is like sayin’ “kindergarten” or “kinnygarten” which is what people usually say. So why on

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Earth do people think they gotta say “Kinder”? Is that totally dumb? Where was I? Uh. Where was I? Uh, oh yeah. Ok. Okey. Uh. Oh yeah. Uh, look if you want to know me can you please just open your glorious watery eyes and tell me what you see? It’s not hard to know me. What am I wearing? Ok? Got it? Ok. Yeah – check me out. Cropped top, the color of what? And don’t say “yelloow.” Everybody on this planet says “yelloow.” And what else are you gazing at? It is not “red” on my hair either. It is pomegranate with cerulean blue. That’s better. And my feelings? Oh yeah. “Feelings” huh? Well. I do not believe in those little wiggly things you label as “feelings.” I am all about colors. What colors are my pants? Come on! Don’t just stand there. There’s people behind you waiting to order their Macchiatos too. Thalo green-bean! Speak up. Jeez. What are you? Are you a fishing pier? Like the Muni Pier at the end of Van Ness and Bay Street? Are you getting a sense of my “Inner self” now? Yeah. Sure. Just gaze and you got me. Ok? And my hands. These are not tattoos. That is totally too committed for me. Ok. Got that? It’s Henna. You you know that but you just do not notice anything. That is a mega-ballistic problema. By the way I speak Spanglish. How about my face or are you scared to gaze at my 15 year old face! 15! Is that old is that young? Wrong! It is gruesome, crazy and tough as bat-crap. What about my face? Glasses, correct. Don’t wanna hear about my acne, my face, my skin. Super dark brown. Hold it right there. “Dark” is totally out. “Dark” is political. Say *solar brown*. Cuz I am part sun-star. Stop right there. Look. My father, Silva, is from the central mountains of Mexico. Indian. Stop! And that’s the wrong word too – he is First People who believes when we die we become Sun Crystals. That’s it. I do not believe in explaining myself. Ok? Got it. Jeez. My strength is what you see – 4’9” inches of Sun Brown Power! Most of all – I am original. Not a cardboard girl. Not a weeper. Not a funny-bunny girlfriend. And – I don’t whimper when I talk. You get it. I am sure. Sure. You just make your little life and I’ll make mine. Uh-Oh. The line is getting shorter. There are so many people here at the Underground Café you can drown in people’s sweat, hipster sweat. Just to let you know, ok? You are not going to see me dressing like a Hipster or whatever they call themselves. Los Ricos. That’s what I say. Fashion and tight \$300 pants are not my thing or the 300 hundred flavors of shampoo like the girls love and fight about at District 24 High. My friends, well. Well. My friends are - I just got one friend. That’s all you need. Her name is Aliss. Lives in a group home. Plays guitar like me too. We write songs and whisper them to each other. Leo Villa, that’s another thing. She’s a girl in case you got your gender’s all upside down like most people do – well, she is my arch-archest-enemy – might as well spit it out. She says she knows where she is headed. Oh, yeah. And she says she has a *plan* for her life. Sure. And she says she’s better than me, smarter than me and that I better not get close to Parker Sanchez, the dude of her world. Or she will crack my skull on the curb of the Dolores Bus stop and scrub my face on the fence. Sure. She’s a total weak creature with two frog-legs. If she just lifts one hand above her waist headed my way in the halls, she is mine! Are you getting the picture? Where was I? Uh? Ok? Us. Jeez. Uh. Ahh. Oh yeah. My favorite thing. Check out my satchel - what a dumb word. “Satchel.” Said it so you can relate. Ohhhh yeah. Hehehe. You know what’s in it. No. Not an apple, duffus! My writing journals and my sketchbooks!



What else is there in the whole universe? Buying trinkets on the internet? Oh yeah, sure. Not me. I write. I draw. I am involved in the evolution of the planet because I am part solar star. Got it? Jeez. I am exhausted.

Don't think I am just bumming around ok –trying to get your attention! Got serious things on my mind. Just last week things were totally different. Was at the movies. The Galactic on Van Ness off of Market. Grabbing Lemon Meringue from a white box while watching Despicable 3 with my papa. Does not get better. Will never forget. It's gonna be my bestest memory. Last week ICE nabbed him when he went to register. No papers. Mama, no papers. Me? Papers. Don't pretend you know what that means. You don't! Just like the words "looking" - you see nothing. Absolutely nada! You just skip around thinking this big ol' world is a wavy pink-striped lollipop. Guess what? It isn't. It's a nuclear detention death trap set to go off at any second. Now what am I gonna do without my papa? Who is gonna tell me all about the Tutu - the messenger humming bird? Like my name. You know what I am going to do? Listen as hard as you can ok? I am going to bust him out of that stupid, bozo, detention center! How am I gonna do it? Dunno? Gonna have to drop out, probably. My mother is going to miss me so much. She's gonna burn a hundred candles and chant to her Catholic and Aztec stone statues. Poor little mama Alvina. And I am going to miss her so much it's gonna hurt my toe. Now it's gonna get really bad. And if I blow it – gonna be in a big gray cube for girls locked up forever. What shall I do? If only I knew how to live, I mean really, really, truly live. Without half of me always on the verge of fading. And the other half on the verge of exploding. That's all I want – to really, really live. Uh. Where was I? Hold on a second. Before I order my last Venti Passion on Ice, let me repeat something in case you are day-dreaming like everyone here. You want to know how I am feeling?

Gaze at me for a second.

Come on! 92 million miles away Tauyepá, our Sun Crystal Whirler, is sending me at this very moment ten thousand personal buckets of bronze-solar blood. And right now it is splashing over me and coming down my eyes.

Juan Francisco HERRERA  
8/2/20





Gears (Gustavo Segade).

HIKUS  
Alurista<sup>1</sup>

I

a whisper  
at the end of my thoughts  
old pain  
new birth  
ancient ashes  
spark new flame  
Zapatismo en Amerindia  
“everything for everyone  
nothing for us”

---

<sup>1</sup> Alurista’s *Hikus* will appear soon in a volume entitled *ZAZ* (FlowerSong Press, McAllen, TX, 2020). *RCEI* is indebted to editor in charge, Eduardo Vidaurre, for his generous help with this material.

VIII

did I tell u  
jesus saves  
moises invests  
ketzalcoatl xinga

XI

my toesie other  
self incarnate  
lubricating  
con pinceles  
xicanos la desnudez  
xicana vereda hums  
a nuestros pies

XXVII

sudote bonito  
tinta roja  
d la media noxe  
metafora pinta  
tu rostro lexuza  
luna creciente  
d la media noxe  
purpuramarillo  
d la media noxe  
tus sonrientes labios  
d la media noxe  
sandia rojiverde  
d la media noxe  
bonito t sudo

LXIII

amer indian  
whistle blow  
cemanahua pueblo  
xisme, rumor  
has it zat  
nazizona



alberganaciones  
con plumas kkke  
con rabos con  
cascos policia  
Cos

L

ke vivan los muertos  
ke mueran los ke se  
creen muy vivos  
a pus ke  
la jodienda taca  
bajo ke no?  
aki en tlaltipac  
nomas! se alzan  
los tuertos piratas





Super Doodle (Gustavo Segade).

POEMS  
Gustavo Segade

“Coronavirus”

It will kill you, Gus, Gustavo  
It will kill you, Irene, Irina  
It will kill you, Alexandro, Alex  
It will kill you, Mateo, Matt  
It will kill all your family and friends  
You can't touch anyone

You get to die miserably alone  
A masked nurse or doctor  
who can't come to close  
or she or he will be infected  
will be the last thing your wretched  
body will see  
The world's economy has gone to hell





We are in a depression  
Irina and I get fed through our neighbors  
and our son, Mateo and his partner, David  
The future  
What is coming  
no one knows  
In 1964 I began to write masters thesis  
about the Spanish dance of death in the Middle Ages  
La danza general de la muerte:  
*Yo so la muerte cierta a todas criaturas  
que son y serán en el mundo durante.*  
*I am death certain to all creatures  
who are and will be in the world forever*  
A *memento mori* from the fourteenth century  
The Back Death / La Peste Negra  
inspired this poem, a dialogue between  
a personified skeleton and all kinds of people  
kings, popes, politicians, teachers, laborers  
and only a village priest got to go to Heaven  
Who is going to heaven in the coronavirus plague?  
Certainly not the President of the USA  
who thinks all those people of color  
and laborers of meat packing plants  
and senior citizens  
and the prisoners  
are to be wiped out  
Open the country  
Business is business  
after all  
It's a hoax, he said  
I have got it under control  
Lying  
Lying  
Lying  
An old friend published a note  
on Facebook  
reminding us that her son works  
at grocery store  
and he is putting his life on the line  
to feed us  
The farmworkers are keeping us alive  
The medical professionals  
are our saints,  
are our heroes  
Rachel Maddow



is keeping us alive  
Her insistence on the meat packing plants  
on the senior citizen homes  
on the people doing time in the prison  
on the veteran's administration hospitals  
are keeping us informed  
about what is really going on  
in this disaster  
I have been drawing a lot  
That is what I have decided to do  
since I had a stroke 18 years ago  
I lost my speech, so I decided to  
paint my way out into life  
18 years of painting is a lot of painting  
If I live beyond this moment

Gustavo V. SEGADE  
May 10/2020 (Mothers' Day)

My Two Boys<sup>2</sup>  
"Alexandro"

Alexandro was born on April Fool's Day, 1973,  
when the Chicano Movement  
was in its cultural nationalist vs. marxist stage  
when the Feminist Movement started to really happen  
computers were things of the future  
the internet hadn't appeared  
there were no iPhones  
LGBT was not even in the cards  
Viet Nam was a killing ground

Alex cried for 18 months  
Irene and I saw The Exorcist  
We were horrified when Alex cried in the night  
He had a Dracula's widow's peak  
We got scared of our sleepy boy  
Irene and I had met a year before  
We got married after 5 weeks of courtship,  
now we had this screaming kid

---

<sup>2</sup> These two poems will appear in Gibran Güido & Adelaida Del Castillo, *Fathers, Fathering and Fatherhood: Queer Chicano Desire and Belonging* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).



and my Movement was almost ending  
I was kinda nuts.

At age 2, Alex was a real person.  
By age 4 he was showing real smarts.  
By age 6 he could read and almost write.  
By now he knew about the ancient Greeks,  
the ancient Mexicans and other Native Americans  
and the tales of their gods and heroes  
which made for many hours of Dungeons and Dragons  
into teen age with other nerds  
I had a judge friend who cautioned against this game  
This game became our whole lives  
We went to San Francisco on vacation,  
When Alex and Mateo heard the music and saw the sights  
in that glorious way-out Kaleidoscopic town  
our kids, Alex and Mateo,  
decided they were going to be artists  
The four of us have been, since then,  
consciously dedicated to the humanities and culture  
and of course  
to the arts

Alex could dance like his muse  
the goddess, Terpsichore  
I took him to ballet classes on Saturdays  
I didn't know for sure that Alex was gay  
until he graduated from high school  
I was at that moment  
recovering from a heart attack  
I never was against guys I knew were gay  
but I didn't want anything to with gay life  
Irene told me, *Your son Alex is gay*  
*At that time AIDS meant horrible meaningless death*  
*My colleagues at SDSC were dying*  
I went to see a Kaiser shrink,  
she let me cry my eyes out  
I recovered and life went on

Alex has had to work his way  
bus boy, library clerk, yahoo computer guy  
hounded by two Chinese room mates  
who thought he would rape them  
in their sleep  
He got a B.A. in English at UCLA



where he met, at 18, the love of his life  
His husband, Malik Gaines:  
African American father and White German mother  
Charles Gaines, now married to Roxanna  
Barbara Rosato, now married to Joe,  
famous artist and art teacher  
All these people form  
along with Mateo and David,  
our family.

Alex and Malik had to do a lot of college work  
At USC Alex attempted to get an MA  
He failed, and the damned program failed  
It was too Hollywood oriented to please Alex  
And me, too. I have never trusted that institution  
The failed MA cost about \$40,000 in student loans  
Back at UCLA Alex worked on an MFA  
in Performing Arts under Mary Kelly  
Malik worked on a Ph.D. in drama history

Then they went to New York  
Malik as assistant professor at Hunter College  
Alex as part time at Parsons School of Design  
They lived in a second story tenement in Brooklyn  
Alex got another part timer at Bard College  
Two new teachers, teaching art, in New York City

In 1994 they began the group My Barbarian:  
Jade Gordon, Malik Gaines, Alexandro Segado  
Jade can act, leading-lady act  
She sings, she makes masks  
and like Malik and Alex,  
she has, they all have: creativity  
The future was on them

They performed from raunchy bar nights at 2:00 a.m.  
to The REDCAT Theater  
in the Walt Disney Concert Hall complex in LA  
They have performed in Spain, Italy, France, Germany,  
Egypt, Israel, Canada, and Mexico from Tijuana to Mexico City

Greek tragedies were somber plays  
Women were allowed to see Medea kill her children  
Greek comedies were raunchy, and women were prohibited  
The actors often used large penises as props



My Barbarian offered a play in which  
Alex and Malik had penises three feet long  
Jade had six breasts all dangling out  
Irene's aunt and uncle left when they saw those schlogs  
Saying it was too noisy for their ears  
Irene's brother, Ira, was heard to have said  
*If your going to have penises, make them long long penises*  
My Barbarian had all those years of Greek mythology  
and years of Dungeons and Dragons  
My Brabarian made mythic future  
out of the classical past

Now Alex has seven year contract at Hunter College  
Now he is Co-chair of the MA summer program at Bard College  
My Barbarian has received accolades, including  
being included in the Whitney Biennial in 2014,  
which makes My Barbarian real artists in New York  
*The Mother and Other Plays* starring  
Barbara Gaines, Victoria Gordon and Irene Segade  
featuring performances by Eleanor Austin and Mary Kelly  
Irene, Barbara, Joe and I went to NY to see the whole thing  
It was great  
My mother Luisa/Louise always wanted me to be an artist  
The fates turned against me on that one  
My son is an artist in New York City, New York  
That's more than enough for me

Alex is constantly working on his drawing.  
He is creating a comic novel that has a lot of style  
Alex creates style  
He is learning Spanish  
He recently commented on my biography  
written in Spanish, which shows he can read Spanish

He knows and opposes  
what the current US president  
is doing to destroy our nation:  
malevolent idiot incompetent nazi crazy person  
whom we have to stop, before he stops us

Alex and Mateo get along now  
In LA they worked together on a play, *Future St.*  
Alex wrote, directed and was the lead actor  
Mateo did the music  
Mateo is a leading disc jockey



all over the country  
The cast of *Future St.* were students of Alex  
all the way from NY  
The play was published in *Theater*,  
Yale School of Drama, Volume 48. Number 1

This writing is about  
our family's history and myths  
It's not about our tragic flaws  
It's about our successes and achievements  
It's about our lives  
Life doesn't end with a big bang  
It doesn't end with a whimper  
It ends period

Alexandro Abraham Segade  
is trying to be a good man  
good to his spouse, his parents, his brother  
his friends and his society

“Mateo”

Mateo was born on April 22, 1975  
Vietnam was still killing people  
At first we thought that Mateo couldn't hear  
He was so silent compared to screaming Alex  
Alex had two years of relating to himself  
Mateo has always had a brother  
to be compared to and against

Matt is constantly on stage  
Sometimes he's Madonna  
Sometimes he's Tori Amos  
Sometimes he's Melanie  
Mateo is the surreal element in our family  
He is always out there, not in space  
but certainly way out of your mind  
He learned that if people laughed  
they couldn't hurt you  
that was his *l'chaim*  
Mateo was the kid with his underwear  
on his head that made you laugh  
and laughing often brings you to tears  
tragic and comic masks, but they are only masks  
what's behind them...



Mateo could act  
He and Alex took parts in Junior Theater at Balboa Park  
At 7 Mateo interviewed and got the part of Rumpelstiltskin  
He was a great Rumpelstiltskin  
In high school Mateo and Alex acted as brothers in a play

When Alex came out, Irina and I celebrated  
We had one gay son and one straight son  
Boy, did we get that wrong  
Irene and I knew nothing about gay life  
Irene has had to research and study LGBT life  
Now she is co-chair of education on gay life  
in San Diego County  
She and Dennis Nicely give workshops for GLSN  
She uses this the sentence  
*We had one gay son and one straight son*  
to introduce herself to the teachers and students  
when she begins to educate them about LGBT life

Mateo has had so many jobs:  
He made money drawing pogs  
He wrote articles for now extinct magazines  
starred in incidents on San Diego bus lines  
He worked in funeral parlor  
he attended the School of Performing Arts  
where they tried to drown his creativity

Irene and I knew there was  
something bothering Mateo  
His babysitter, a fine anglo woman  
and her upright macho spouse  
decided that Mateo should be naked  
among at least four kids under her care  
when Mateo did something wrong sexually  
in their home  
Mateo suffered mentally from that incident  
No one mentioned this to Irene and me  
To this day, I don't know what Mateo did  
We didn't know zilch

At one time in grammar school  
Mateo took some Barbie dolls to class  
The bilingual, Mexican-American christian teachers  
were trying to put Mateo and Alex  
into social concentration camps



because Irene and I were raising queers  
We had to get them out of that school  
The teachers and we knew nothing  
If that happened today  
Irina would have those teachers' ass

Mateo tried not to be gay  
In high school Mateo became friends  
with Alex's worst enemy  
Soon Alex was Mateo's worst enemy

Music became Mateo's life.  
Mateo studied the songwriters, and their histories  
He corresponded with super star music groups  
Mateo became a night club dancer  
he was only 17, but somehow he danced on stage  
where he tore a Bible up in a frenzied song and dance  
Drum-Drum-Drum-Drum-Drum

Mateo got hired by a music company that did not  
count your hours on the job  
They wanted your whole life  
all your hours  
And if you needed a bit of stimulation  
there were chemicals that could perk you up  
all the way to hell  
Mateo went to heroin hell.  
Mateo took Irina and me and smeared us  
into the drug culture  
Mateo went to fix up in Tijuana  
Buy at a certain *farmacia*  
go into the alley  
and shoot up  
almost caught by a border guard  
with a needle on the floor of the car  
Irene would stalk Mateo at work  
to get a glimpse of him  
He was forever in a bad mood  
He and Alex stopped talking  
This went on for years

In 2002 I hade a stroke  
It left me unable to talk  
I had to learn English,  
my Spanish pronunciation was gone





Mateo came to visit me one time in rehab  
He couldn't handle my being sick

Mateo met David  
things began to change  
David was not out yet  
His father who was over 80 did not  
know that David was gay  
David owns a business  
His employees did not know they had a queer boss  
Mateo started taking methadone  
At least that's a legal drug  
Mateo had been to rehab at Stepping Stone  
He clashed with them  
They didn't approve of methadone  
David finally came out to his father and to his friends  
I sense that David's life has improved  
since he met Mateo  
I sense that Mateo's life has improved  
since he met David  
That's called love

Mateo and David are the people  
Irina and I count upon to get our electronics fixed  
We go to lunch and holiday dinners  
Mateo and David, and Irene and I  
went to New York at Xmas 2016  
We had brunch at Alex and Malik's apartment  
in Greenwich Village  
We saw Stephen Colbert in person  
We had a wonderful time

Mateo loves animals  
Every where he goes he meets a cat  
They become friends  
One of Mateo's life long interests is  
The Serial Killer  
He has read all about them  
He wrote to one recently, and the killer wrote back  
Mateo does not want to be one of them  
The fact that he loves cats belies his being a serial killer

Mateo is now an honest to god D.J.  
Turn, turn turn the disc goes on turning  
Mateo travels constantly



San Marcos to LA and back  
San Francisco, Miami, Portland, Atlanta  
The Bearracuda Heretic Cruise, out of Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.  
Mateo works well with the drag queens  
LAs Queen Kong, Gamer Night at Precinct DTLA  
He works mostly for the Boulet Brothers  
Who are the drag queen owners of most of the places  
where Mateo performs

This writing is about  
our family's history and myths  
It's not about our tragic flaws  
It's about our successes and achievements  
It's about our lives  
Life doesn't end with a big bang  
It doesn't end with a whimper  
It ends period

Mateo David Segade  
is trying to be a good man  
good to his partner, his parents, his brother  
his friends and his society

Gustavo Valentín SEGADÉ  
July 7/2018





Gustavo Segade.

POEMS  
Thelma T. Reyna

“Broken Heart Syndrome”<sup>3</sup>

There is such a thing,  
doctors say—not  
the zigzag-split pointy hearts, two  
pasted halves on Hallmark cards.  
No, docs say, hearts really do fall apart.

Disasters shred our fibers like thieves picking  
pockets in broad day. Suddenness of things gone wrong, small or big,  
chip chunks of stamina and strength

---

<sup>3</sup> Originally appeared in a prior version in the author’s book, *Dearest Papa: A Memoir in Poems* (Golden Foothills Press, 2020).

from hearts like Greenland's glaciers sliding into  
open sea. Our chambers are invaded, locks picked,  
thresholds split, so heartbreak can slip in.

Yes, doctors say, there is such a thing.

A violent spat, a gun jabbed in your face. A lover in his mistress'  
embrace, caught in your bed. A husband with a  
bullet in his head, or found suddenly at dawn, blankets warm but skin  
cold. Startling things, ambush-grief, unplanned loss, faith shattered and  
tossed. World upended, though brief, can be enough to cleave your heart.

Yes, doctors say there is such a thing.

No wonder, then, that spouses married long and tight, depart this world  
in tandem, or one soon after. No wonder, then, that when Carrie,  
princess of galaxies, died sudden, her icon mother, consumed with grief,  
followed close. No wonder, then, that elders in love for life die days  
apace.

Yes, not all wounded depart, but they  
stumble along, with fluttering hearts, weakened  
pulse, leaking valves, raided chambers... pattering  
onward, broken heart syndrome and all.

Yes, doctors say there is such a thing.

“Pete & Tillie”<sup>4</sup>

When my breasts were young and round, my husband named them  
one night as we lay in afterward euphoria.

Pete.  
and.  
Tillie.

He tapped each one with a fingertip light as a feather's tip. Monarch  
knighting heroes with the delicate touch of a sword. Pete and Tillie.

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<sup>4</sup> Originally appeared in a prior version in the author's book, *Dearest Papa: A Memoir in Poems* (Golden Foothills Press, 2020).



Sounded like a Texas saloon, or a rock band (country?), or a law firm, or a boutique in West LA. Two dogs in a neighbor's house? Could've been all these, but no.

These were my skin, my veins, my capillaries, small outcroppings on the landscape of my flesh filling with blood, flushing, when his fingers alighted.

Women's boobs, docs say, are almost always asymmetric. *Pete's the bigger one*, my husband murmured as his fingers gently traced my right breast. *And Tillie's more feminine, slightly smaller*, he said in scientific tones.

His lips brushed each one gently, back and forth that night, wanting neither boob to feel ignored. *Now you, Pete. Now you, Tillie*. Back and forth, back and forth, his eyes closed, his lips smiling when he rolled onto his back and said again, *Pete and Tillie*, and sighed for his job well done.

#### "Hunger"<sup>5</sup>

I can take the grumbles, the groans that gurgle in my stomach morning, night, and throughout long hours at my desk.  
I can take my belly sticking to itself inside.  
I can take this.

As a child in little Texas towns, field to field, I learned that food is not a given, work doesn't magically bring food, and some of us aren't meant to eat as others do.

I can take this.

My father's back was black from sun, my mother's hands like broken stone. My own were criss-crossed red from cotton bolls, sharp leaves, and thorns.

*Your hands weren't meant for pencils*, mama said, *or for kissing*, papa muttered as he sat on dirt at noon. But he pressed my fingers to his lips, and smiled, and took a bite of bread.

I could take it, eating like birds, working like horses, pushing tired bones.

We piled on quilts spread on the floor at night and hummed

---

<sup>5</sup> Originally appeared in a prior version in the author's book, *Rising, Falling, All of Us* (Golden Foothills Press, 2014).



grandmother's songs to stave our hunger.  
We all took it, stripped of hearts but beating on.

But my children are a different test.

They look out dusty glass on windows high above the street, Chicago  
lights just twinkling on in shops and sidewalks far below, the long  
night just unwinding.

My boy and girl have drunk their cup of milk, and eaten the  
sandwich they split.

I gave them crackers in cellophane I picked up at the deli kiosk at my job.

They lie like urchins in my bed, two stowaways with legs entwined  
like twigs, and cold, bellies grumbling under the blanket that used to be mine.

When our room is black and still, neons blinking half a block away,  
with alley drunks passed out below, I wonder at the world.

I wonder at this world, at how it takes and takes and takes, at how  
our bones can break in toil, and our hearts collapse, and our spirits  
desiccate, without a murmur of protest.

I wonder at this world, at how children lie in cribs, or sit at desks, or  
lean on stoops with bellies vacant and souls the same, and how the  
world goes on.

I can take it, for myself.

I can take it.

But children...children...oh, children.





Gustavo Segade.

## MORENA SURVIVOR ON ANDALUSIAN SAND Alejandro D. Morales

Moroccan dark reddish-brown curly hair green eyes  
sharp nose full African gaze educated English French speaker  
full red lips smiles dreams of a *morena's* new life

Though unwanted by Spain steps off a slow barge  
a quarter-mile swim her uprooted body stands firm  
a survivor on Andalusian sand

She hides behind rocks she sleeps the sun rises the beach fills  
with German French Spanish families invisible nobody notices  
her fear hunger her blank lost eyes she tries to walk the beach  
nonchalantly like she belongs

An open bar too expensive she figures fifty euros in a plastic bag  
worries thirsty she sits at a table distant alone she asks the waiter  
“*una coca*” he holds two fingers high yells “¡*cocas!*” to the bar inside  
the waiter curious smiles leaves

A sudden panic grips her where's the money she loosens her belt  
Reaches under her pants children play laugh and scream on the beach  
in the palm of her hands the damp euros and a note with an address

The waiter brings a tall *coca* and *un trozo de tortilla*  
“¡Mira!” he makes a gesture toward the beach boardwalk  
she sees two *Guardia Civil* officers coming her direction

“¡Ven conmigo! Come!” she follows him to the women's  
*SERVICIOS* “Lock door. I come twenty minutes.”  
The waiter returns and takes her back to her table  
“No volverán. They come once no return.”

She wonders why he helps her she sips slowly eats  
little bites of the generous slice of *tortilla* she places  
a five-euro note on the table he pushes to her

He offers a small glass of red wine “*Toma, este tinto te calma.*”  
“I speak English like you.” “Relax.” the deep red wine moistens  
her mouth he wonders what it would be like to kiss her

His tall body stands by her he doesn't back away  
there is an immediate comfort between them  
his light complexion hand grazes hers he has brown eyes  
black wavy hair his father a *mestizo mexicano* his mother  
Irish Norwegian

He understands she needs help her clothes damp no shoes  
she finishes the last of the wine walks away from the bar  
she covers her head with a grey scarf suddenly removes it  
jams it in a small cloth bag she walks

He follows feels an unexplainable attraction to her  
she strolls not in any particular direction turns right  
again goes right five blocks later the girl stands obviously  
confused no doubt she is lost but can't admit to that fact  
fearful of the *Guardia Civil* she moves faster to a bench  
in a plush green park with her hands clenched on her lap stares  
angrily across the grass toward the sea

The bright intense Andalusian sun pulsates on her  
she reaches for a fragile wet folded missive that she  
carefully opens and flattens on the bench struggles to read  
what the sea has taken away tears cover her blouse as she  
sits glaring at the blank white sheet



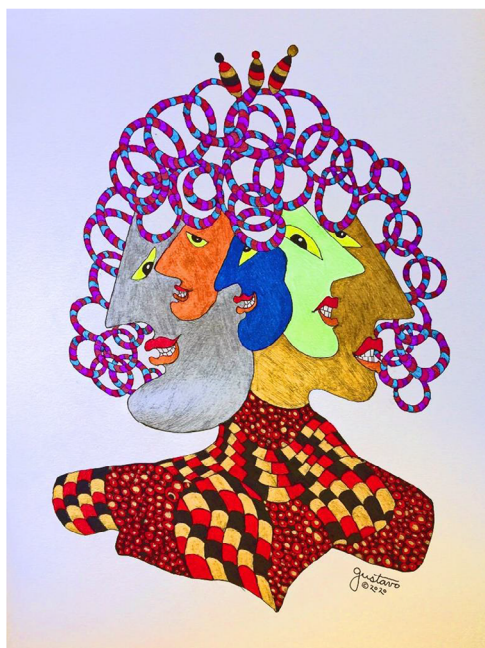


He remembers how he felt when he crossed the border  
the first time separated from his mother by the coyote  
pushed into another truck that drove him to the other side  
alone not knowing what to do he spoke with few English  
words at least he had a name address telephone and city of  
an uncle written on a small white dinner napkin in his wallet

She crossed an ancient sea swam a quarter mile to shore  
and the city where somebody would pick her up and take  
her to a safe place he knows salt water erases information  
and instruction about her contact no matter how much she tries  
nothing of that history is in her memory but in the Mediterranean  
under a hot golden sun in the bluest sky of the southern Spanish coast

Alejandro DENNIS MORALES  
10/11/2020 CalifAztlán





Gustavo Segade.

## POEMS

Luivette Resto

### “Nomenclature”

Carmen is her name when I flashback to red handprints on my thighs for dropping a plate of rice and beans. It was Carmen’s hair I pulled back over toilet bowls. Carmen’s body I lay to sleep.

Mamá wiped tears off my four-year-old face when the #42 bus never showed during a blizzard, and I had to miss kindergarten for the first time.

Luis is his name when asked, “Where does your father live?” and like a press secretary I reply, “He chose to stay on the island.” His decision become confessions as we overlook the foliage of El Yunque. I see my face in his silently hoping it is the only thing we share. Papá would have followed me like a character in a Tolkien novel, but Luis chose the women and vacilón over me.

Joseph is his name when I talk about his wife and other life across the George Washington Bridge. Joseph when my children and I are shooed away because how does he explain three brown nietos to white co-workers. Dad is the step-father who



called me baby bear on Sunday morning phone calls, danced with me at my Sweet 16, gave me away at the altar.

Pseudonyms detach them from the people they are and the people I need them to be.

“A Villanelle for the Kind of Woman”

I never took you for the kind of woman  
to let others sip her gin,  
allowing the unacceptable to happen.

Letters address me: tough vixen  
while comadres stand like sirens with songs that begin  
*I never took you for the kind of woman*

echoing hymns born from the breath of the feminine  
who never adhere to discipline.  
Allowing the unacceptable to happen  
underneath a transatlantic sky, widen  
by a thousand moons, still like a mannequin.  
I never took you for the kind of woman

who gave up searching for her own heroine,  
vibrant and memorable like tattoos on the skin,  
allowing the unacceptable to happen.  
Catholic verses brazen  
and overlapping W's on the chest, remind with chagrin  
I never took you for the kind of woman  
allowing the unacceptable to happen.

“Vinculum”

Noun

1. *Mathematics*. A horizontal line drawn over a group of mathematical terms.
2. A bond signifying union or unity.

She didn't need an abacus  
to remember the nights she feigned sleep  
gently caressing the middle of the bed  
where they placed their children  
the first time home from the hospital.

She didn't need to count  
the bras left scattered on the nightstand  
like fallen petals from red peonies,



hoping he would notice the beauty of her body again.  
She didn't need to read her daughter any more fairy tales  
about Prince Charmings riding on white horses,  
saving princesses from dark towers or fire breathing dragons,  
without crying each time she saw the words,  
"and they lived happily ever after."

She didn't need.  
She wanted.

To be undressed slowly  
as he unyieldingly stared at her eyes  
with the same curiosity  
when he asked about her unspoken dream  
to see her last name in the card catalog.

She didn't need.  
She wanted.

To believe in colorless promises  
repetitive like a merry-go-round  
hurtfully circling like silent responses  
when she begged for him to feel anything and  
to see reciprocity in his eyes  
when she said I love you.

POEMS  
María Herrera-Sobek

"The Long Journey"

Your life  
Hangs  
By a fine thread  
Like a spider  
You cling to it  
A long, silky  
Piece of life  
Swinging, wavering  
To and fro  
The end of a long journey  
Nearing its final  
Destination.



## “Life Cycle”

We do not have  
Much time to live  
Five, ten decades  
At the most.  
A mere wink  
In the cosmos'  
Chronometer.  
But I won't go  
Gently into the infinite  
I will soar  
On angel's wings  
Into the blue sky  
A flight of blazing atoms  
Will find a home  
In the nether world  
Of the universe  
And comingle  
With my ancestors  
In an eternal  
Embrace.

María HERRERA-SOBEK  
Sept 13/2020



## Is this my president???



Juan José Casillas-Núñez.

## IS THIS MY PRESIDENT???

Juan José Casillas Núñez

Racist  
Misogynistic  
Homophobic  
Xenophobic  
Narcissistic  
Sarcastic





Egomaniac  
Arrogant  
Ignorant  
Liar  
Hater  
Vulgar  
Divisive  
Belligerent  
Cruel  
Insensitive  
Misinformed  
SpoiledBrat  
AntiImmigrant  
AntiMuslim  
AntiSemitic  
AntiEnvironment  
Bully  
MockedHandicap  
Hatemonger  
Whiner  
Vile  
Poisonous  
Hypocrite  
RealityTV  
Celebrity  
ChauvinisticPig  
MrsUniverse  
MrsPiggy  
Braggadocios  
Gropper  
Bigly  
Nasty  
Unscrupulous  
Cunning  
Scandalous  
Border  
Wall  
MassDeportations  
FilthyRich  
LockHerUp  
Vindictive  
Unfaithful  
Bullshitter  
HackHerEmails  
Putin

DavidDuke  
NoTaxes  
MakeAmericaHate  
Birther  
VolatileTemperament  
Incompetent  
ConArtist  
Scammer  
TrumpUniversity  
Fear  
War  
Manboy  
Bigot  
AltRight  
YoureFired  
PostTruths  
Impeach  
LoveTrumpsHate  
DumpTrump  
#NotMyPresident







## MISCELLANY



# SERVICE-LEARNING AS PART OF THE L2 SPANISH CLASSROOM IN CANADA

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## ABSTRACT

Service-learning in foreign language classrooms is an effective resource for developing language motivation. Unfortunately, Canadian language programs have been off to a slow start in adopting integrative teaching such as service-learning in their foreign language curricula (Hale, 1999). This work reports on a Community Service Learning (CSL) initiative introduced at a Canadian university in the Hispanic Studies program. A total of fifty second and third year Spanish language students volunteered with various community partners on a weekly basis for a total of sixteen weeks. End-of-term questionnaire indicates that overall students had a favorable experience at their placement and CSL had a positive influence in continuing their studies in Spanish.

**KEYWORDS:** Canada, Community Involvement, Service-Learning, Experiential Learning, Language Acquisition, Spanish.

## APRENDIZAJE A TRAVÉS DE SERVICIO COMO PARTE DE LA CLASE DE ESPAÑOL L2 EN CANADÁ

## RESUMEN

El aprendizaje a través de servicio en las aulas de idiomas extranjeros constituye un recurso eficaz a la hora de desarrollar la motivación de los estudiantes por el idioma. Lamentablemente, los programas de idiomas canadienses han tenido un lento inicio en la adopción de un tipo de enseñanza integradora como lo es el aprendizaje a través de servicio en sus planes de estudio de idiomas extranjeros (Hale 1999). Este ensayo examina una iniciativa de aprendizaje a través de servicio comunitario (CSL) introducida en el Programa de Estudios Hispánicos de una universidad canadiense. Un total de cincuenta estudiantes de segundo y tercer año de español asistieron semanalmente como voluntarios a varias asociaciones comunitarias durante un total de dieciséis semanas. El cuestionario administrado al final indica que, por lo general, los estudiantes consideraron favorablemente la experiencia y muestra también cómo el CSL influyó de manera positiva en la decisión de continuar sus estudios de español.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Canadá, participación comunitaria, aprendizaje de servicio, aprendizaje experimental, adquisición de lengua, español.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is two-fold: first, we will present a new model of incorporating Community Service Learning (CSL) into the Spanish language curriculum at a Canadian university and secondly, we will report our findings on a post-CSL questionnaire completed by the Spanish students who opted for service-learning as part of their language learning experience. Our results show that the CSL experience has a positive impact on students' intent to further pursue Spanish courses as well as on their overall learning experience.

It has been well established that the language learning process for a child is distinct from that of an adult. While a child learning a first language is guaranteed to succeed (in natural conditions), an adult who has a fully developed first language and wants or needs to learn a second language is not guaranteed that same success. Montrul (2008) explains that the key differences in the two language acquisition processes are quality and quantity of input, personality and affective factors, and the outcome of the target system. Most importantly for the purpose of this paper, personality and affective factors only become a relevant *issue* with adults. Gass and Selinker (2008) demonstrate that there are many different “non-language factors” involved in the acquisition of a second language such as “age, aptitude, motivation, attitude, and socio-psychological influences” (Gass & Selinker 395). With this in mind, this work will demonstrate how a student's own motivation can be positively influenced by taking part in a CSL program.

## 2. WHAT IS SERVICE-LEARNING

One of the first definitions provided for service-learning was in 1979 by Robert Sigmon who explained it as a form of experiential education that is based on “reciprocal learning” (Sigmon, 1979). The idea behind this was that since learning comes from the service organization, both those who provide the service and those who receive it, must learn something from the experience. According to Sigmon, service-learning is successful only when both parties involved—the students and the service provider—benefit from the relationship. Today, although Sigmon's definition still holds true, Bringle and Hatcher (1996) take it one step forward, as outlined below:

Unlike extracurricular voluntary service, service-learning is a course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to course material through reflection activities such as directed writings, small group discussions, and class presentations. Unlike practica and internships, the experiential activity in a service-learning course is not necessarily skill-based within the context of professional education (Bringle & Hatcher 222).

There are therefore two streams to service-learning: Curricular and co-curricular. In co-curricular programs, the work that the students do is not for credit and they include placements such as “alternative spring break” where students



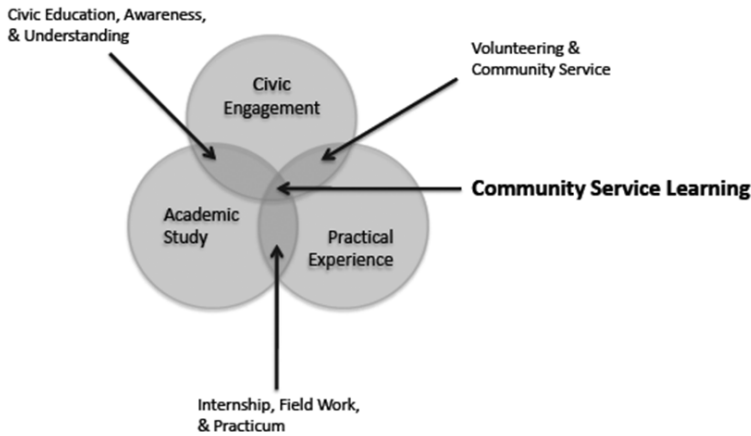


Figure 1. Visual definition of Community Service Learning.  
Was adapted from the Student Success Centre and  
Community Service Learning at Western University.

spend their spring break working for an organization, on their own time and for their own personal reasons. The stream that we are mainly concerned with here is the curricular one where students are graded for their work in the community as well as in the classroom. It gives students a chance to apply skills and knowledge acquired in the classroom to real-life situations, and at the same time it requires them to produce at least one reflection. As mentioned by Bringle and Hatcher, students are graded on reflections that are prepared as part of their in-class work and these may take several modes such as writing, telling, reading, and doing. It is important to note that reflections are not a didactic retelling of the events at a service site, nor are they an emotional outlet for feeling good about doing service, or feeling guilty about not doing more. Students need to be able to link their placement experience with the classroom but also with their own personal growth.

Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda and Yee (2000) have shown that Curricular CSL has positive effects on students in terms of their academic learning (grades, critical thinking, writing skills), personal growth (self-efficacy, moral development), social development (appreciation of diversity, social responsibility), career development, and in their overall engagement with the institution. From the point of view of the faculty who teach a CSL course, Astin and company report that faculty are satisfied with the quality of student learning and there is an increasing desire to integrate CSL in courses, however there is a lack of resources and reward for the professors which act as barriers. From the community's point of view, they have found that students provide knowledge, skill, or expertise that may fill an existing gap and they offer fresh perspectives to problems that may not have been solved as easily without this type of collaboration.



Figure 1 visually explains that service-learning is composed of academic study, civic engagement, and practical experience. As can be seen, where the academic study and civic engagement components overlap, it is expected that the student develop a form of civic education, awareness, and understanding of their role in the community. Civic engagement and practical experience make volunteering and community service possible, while practical experience and academic study provide the opportunity for internships, field work and practicum placements.

### 3. CSL AND LANGUAGE COURSES

When it comes to the second language classroom, the question that arises is: how can language educators combine academic goals and civic engagement, while maintaining motivation? In Canadian universities in particular, the initiatives of making CSL part of the foreign language class have been scarce. In most of the cases, the reason has been attributed to the lack of opportunity of effectively merging the academic requirements with the practical side. However, previous experiences have clearly shown (see for example Barreneche, 2011) that local organizations that deal with immigrants and newcomers are great opportunities for foreign language students to apply their classroom-acquired skills into the “real world”. Countries such as the US and Canada, with ever-growing immigrant populations and an extensive number of organizations to serve these communities, can and should certainly explore these opportunities. Nonetheless, even south of the Canadian border, in the US, it seems that language programs have been off to a fairly slow start in adopting integrative teaching such as community service in their foreign language curricula (Hale, 1999).

The 1999 publication by the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), *Construyendo Puentes: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Spanish*, as well as the AATSP Professional Development Series Handbook *Juntos: Community Partnerships in Spanish and Portuguese* (2004) are the two of the earliest attempts at documenting the service-learning experience as part of the Spanish classroom. Further publications in the field (extending to other languages) are Wurr and Hellebrandt's edited volume *Learning the Language of Global Citizenship: Service-learning in Applied Linguistics* (2007) as well as a considerable number of papers that appeared in academic journals such as *Hispania*, *Foreign Language Annals*, as well as the *Michigan Journal of Community Service-Learning*. Furthermore, two Spanish language instructional textbooks—*En comunidad* (2008) and *Comunidades* (2009)—with a focus on community engagement have also been made available to language educators.

Although, for many disciplines, CSL has been gaining momentum in Canadian universities as well, there are very few cases where this kind of learning has been adopted in the language classroom. For Spanish, there is one experimental CSL project reported on and it comes from the University of Alberta. Zapata and Tokarz (2008) and Zapata (2011) studied the impact of CSL on students' cultural understanding. In the first paper, the authors focused only on the effects of the



CSL experience on high-intermediate language learners, while the second one was expanded to include learners at the beginner level. Both studies point to the fact that service-learning is an essential instrument in the process of building intercultural communicative competence. As reported by the authors, these findings were consistent with those of others studying this phenomenon in the US, such as Beebe and De Costa (1993) and Varona (1999). In her 2011 study, Zapata brings up an important factor, which is that of the proficiency level in the target language. The author indicates that because of their limited knowledge of Spanish, students at the low-intermediate level were also limited in the duties they could perform during their CSL project. Zapata suggests that the participants' low proficiency level may have hindered their "overall perception of the project and their attitudes, all of which may have been the result of poorly articulated objectives and CSL duties" (Zapata 99).

As previously mentioned, motivation in adult language learners plays a vital role in maintaining interest and in continuing their study in the language. Lightbown and Spada (2008) mention two common types of motivation, which are linked to language learning: Integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. First coined by Gardner and Lambert (1972), integrative motivation refers to "language learning for personal growth and cultural enrichment, and instrumental motivation ... [refers to] language learning for more immediate or practical goals" (Lightbown & Spada 56). Both types of motivation play a crucial role because that is what drives the students to sign up for Spanish and in this case, choose to incorporate the CSL component into their learning experience.

Dörnyei (2000) proposes a motivation model, which allows for changes to occur over time. This model is composed of three temporal stages. The first stage is called the *preactional stage*, which is where wishes, hopes, desires, and opportunities turn into actual goals, and where motivation is generated. With respect to our students, this stage creates intention and commitment to register for Spanish, for example. Some of the motivational influences may be attitudes toward the L2 and its speakers, expectancy of success, and environmental support. The next stage is called the *actional stage* and this is where our students actually embark on the task (of signing up for a language class) and "the individual has committed him/herself to action and now the emphasis shifts from deliberation and decision-making to the implementation of action" (Dörnyei 2000, 527). In this stage a few of the motivational influences include quality of the learning experience, teachers' and parents' influence, and classroom reward and goal structure, whether it is competitive or cooperative (Dörnyei, 2005). The third stage of the motivation model is the *postactional stage*. In this final stage the completion of the action takes place. Dörnyei (2000) explains that "the main processes during this phase entail evaluating the accomplished action outcome and contemplating possible inferences to be drawn for future actions" (Dörnyei 2000, 528). Once the action is completed, the student reflects on what was expected at the initial onset of the goal and whether or not it was accomplished as first predicted. In the case of language students, the *postactional stage* is where they decide whether or not to continue with Spanish in the next semester or school year. Our study demonstrates that participation in a CSL program can positively influence the *actional stage*, which causes a positive





*postactional stage*, which in turn motivates our students to continue with learning Spanish as a second language.

#### 4. CURRENT STUDY

This section describes in detail the implementation process of the CSL component as part of the course curriculum for all intermediate and advanced Spanish language courses at Western University in London, Ontario, Canada. The idea of giving students the CSL option was motivated in great part by the CSL success stories mainly undertaken in the USA and secondly, the relatively large Hispanic population in the city of London, Ontario (as compared to others in Canada). Furthermore, the many organizations working with this community have made it possible for us to offer students a variety of opportunities to get involved.

As such, during the summer months (prior to the beginning of the academic year), with the support of the office for Service-learning at Western University, we began our work in establishing relationships with different associations in the city as well as determining the logistics of making CSL part of the Spanish classes. It was our goal that by participating in CSL, students would be able to:

1. Get a better understanding of the socio-cultural setting of the Hispanic community in London.
2. Have the opportunity to put into practice classroom-acquired knowledge in real life situations.
3. Establish friendly relations with members of the London Hispanic community.
4. Identify similarities and differences between Canadian and Hispanic cultures.

Thus in September 2010, Hispanic Studies became the first language program at Western University and the second in Canada to incorporate CSL as part of the curriculum for the intermediate and advanced Spanish courses. This initiative continued in the following academic year 2011-2012 and has now become a regular part of the academic curriculum for Spanish language courses at these levels. In this paper however, we will focus on thoroughly discussing our first year experience as well as the results we obtained from a post-CSL questionnaire completed by the participating students.

##### 4.1. THE COURSE CURRICULUM

The CSL option was made available to all intermediate and advanced language learners: six intermediate and three advanced sections, a total of approximately 200 students. Each course is eight months long (a total of two semesters) and both are fully taught in Spanish. Intermediate Spanish provides students who already possess knowledge of basic grammatical structures with more advanced training in the Spanish language. The primary emphasis is on effective oral



<b>Option 1 – Community Service Learning</b>	<b>Option 2 – Regular program</b>
	Labs (participation, preparation, etc.)...10%
Assignments (oral and written).....5%	Assignments (oral and written).....5%
Quizzes (around 5).....5%	Quizzes (around 5).....5%
3 (out of 4) tests (grammar, oral comprehension and compositions).....30%	3 (out of 4) tests (grammar, oral comprehension and compositions).....30%
4 reflective Blog Posts.....12%	4 compositions (home).....12%
1 Oral presentation.....8%	2 oral presentations.....8%
Evaluation by community partners...10%	
Final exam.....30%	Final exam.....30%
<b>Total CSL 30%, Regular 70%, 100%</b>	<b>Total 100%</b>

Figure 2. SP 2200 (Intermediate) Course Syllabus.

and written expression, so as to permit students who have completed this course to communicate their ideas and opinions with clarity in a variety of academic and social settings. Advanced Spanish is offered to third year Spanish students who already have knowledge in Spanish but wish to improve in both oral and written forms. The goal is that all students be able to express themselves in spontaneous contexts and be able to understand extensive discourses (oral) such as TV shows and movies. Because of the language limitations for all first year students (also pointed out by Zapata, 2011), CSL was not offered to this group of students. In total, there were forty-seven CSL placement slots available for students and they were assigned on a first come first serve basis to those who expressed interest. Furthermore, students were given the option of listing three preferred organizations, which allowed us to place them accordingly. To our content, the CSL initiative was received with much enthusiasm: a total of eighty students expressed interest in this program.

Below is a detailed description of how CSL was included in the Spanish course curriculum. Overall, the CSL component was evaluated at 30% of the final grade and it was to replace other regular class activities that non-CSL students had to complete. As opposed to the CSL program carried out at the University of Alberta (see Zapata and Tokarz, 2008, and Zapata, 2011), the class instructor was not responsible for the students' performance in the CSL option. Rather, a CSL coordinator was assigned and was made responsible for all CSL activities as well as the evaluation of all students that chose this option.

For a clearer explanation, Figure 2 and Figure 3 show the grade breakdown as it was outlined in the course Syllabus for intermediate (SP 2200) and advanced (SP 3300) students.

As can be seen in both syllabi, students at both levels had two options. For those who chose to participate in CSL, some of the regular program requirements were replaced with the following: four reflective blog posts (12%), one oral presentation on



## **OPCIÓN 1 – COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING**

Blog Post (4x 3) .....	12%
Presentación oral CSL .....	8%
Evaluación Community Partners ..	10%

## **OPCIÓN 2**

Proyecto 1 – Entrevista .....	10%
Proyecto 2 – .....	10%
Historia encadenada (2x5%) .....	10%

Figure 3. SP 3300 (Advanced) Course Syllabus.

the CSL experience (8%), and a final evaluation by the community partner (10%). The assigned CSL coordinator in the department was responsible of grading each of the reflective blogs, the final presentation, as well as maintaining regular contact with the community partner, who provided the coordinator with their evaluation of each student. Finally, at the end of the academic year, the CSL coordinator submitted the students' final grade to the course instructor for a total of 100%.

### 4.2. THE COMMUNITY PARTNERS

The community partners we worked with are from four different organizations within the city. Specifically, Western students were to dedicate approximately two hours each week to work with one of the following organizations: The London Public Library, The Canadian Diabetes Association, LUSO Community Services and The AIDS Committee of London. Each community partner accepted a predetermined number of students and different projects were assigned to each of them.

At the London Public Library, Spanish students participated in the "One on One Conversation Mentor for the Spanish Speaking Newcomers Program." This program was developed in order to address an immense need for the newly arrived Hispanic population in order to build up their communicative competence in English. Thus, students were paired with an adult newcomer whose mother tongue was Spanish and although the objective of the program was to encourage the Learner to speak and understand English as it is spoken conversationally, this was a great opportunity for our students to practice their Spanish language skills, as well as learn more about their partner's culture. The meetings were two hours at a time and they dedicated one hour to speaking English and one hour to speaking Spanish. In many cases, our students made long lasting friendships with their partners that extended well beyond the duration of the CSL program.

At the Canadian Diabetes Association, our students worked on three different translating projects: the CDA Learning Series Presentations, different literature



and the Banting House Museum Tour Guide. The Learning Series to be translated were a set of PowerPoint presentations used nationally by the Association. They are one of the vehicles used to educate communities about diabetes. Our students were required to translate and modify them to reflect the target population and make them culturally relevant. Once the work was completed, the presentations were shared with other CDA branches working with Latin American populations in Canada. The literature pieces that our students had to translate were mainly pamphlets and brochures used across Canada by the public and health care professionals in order to provide more education about diabetes. Finally, the London branch of the CDA is home to the Banting House National Historic Site of Canada – a museum attributed to the life of Sir Frederick Banting, discoverer of insulin. People from all over the world visit the museum and regular tours are offered to the public. Given the considerable number of Spanish speakers that visit the museum, the association wanted our students to also translate the tour manual so that in the future museum tours in Spanish would also be available. Evidently, the projects proposed by the CDA required an advanced level of Spanish and for this reason only students at this language level were assigned to work with this association. All translations done by our students were guided by the coordinator in order to ensure that the work was being done correctly, although the coordinator did not have any professional translation background.

LUSO Community Services is an organization that provides programs and services for children, youth, and families of diverse backgrounds. However, considering the large Hispanic population in London, the vast majority of those requiring their services are Spanish speakers. As such, the organization was interested in finding Spanish speakers to become part of their team. Some of our students' responsibilities at LUSO included assisting with follow up phone calls to Spanish speaking clients (booking appointments and gathering missing information for completion of their files), answering phone calls and assisting Spanish speaking clients with their requests, assisting the Employment Outreach Coordinator and the Newcomer Settlement Worker by translating for Spanish speaking clients with limited English skills during simulated work interviews and career counseling sessions.

Finally, at the AIDS Committee of London (ACOL) our students worked on a few different translation projects as well as participated in the "Network and Outreach" program by assisting ACOL educators with outreach at the Cross Cultural Learner's Centre and other venues in the city.

As seen in each case, students had plenty of opportunities to apply knowledge acquired in class to real life situations. Those students whose partnerships turned into friendships were able to take more away from the experience. The added bond allowed our students to get a closer look at the lives of recent immigrants in Canada with language barriers. Furthermore, all students who reported forming friendships also reported learning first-hand about different Hispanic traditions celebrated in their homes. The amount of culture and history that students learned was far beyond that taught in the classroom. The CSL program was certainly an invaluable learning experience for most of the students, especially as they had come to realize that their



Spanish skills are required locally and they do not necessarily have to travel in order to apply what they learned in class.

#### 4.3. THE STUDENTS

As described in the previous section, student participation in this program was completely voluntary and was assigned on a first come first serve basis, keeping in mind however, that certain projects required a higher Spanish proficiency than others. For example, intermediate students (students enrolled in second year Spanish courses) were generally placed in the one-on-one tutoring program at the Public Library or with another organization where the tasks did not require high proficiency in the language. By the same token, due to the increased difficulty of the task, only advanced students were assigned to the organizations that needed translation work.

Once notified of their placement, students were required to attend the initial orientation meeting at the location of the community partner and then follow through with their commitment during the academic year, which included a total of 32 volunteer hours over a span of eight months. Those that failed to do so automatically lost 15% of their final grade in the course.

Their responsibilities at the university (besides regular class attendance) also included the following: attending the initial CSL Orientation meeting, participating in regular monthly meetings with the CSL coordinator, which was where the coordinator was able to keep track of each student's hours and make sure that there were no problems with the placement. If students had any questions about their upcoming reflections or issues with their placements, this was the time that they were able to be answered or resolved. Furthermore, students had to complete four online reflections as well as one final reflective presentation, which was done in-class so that everyone (those who did and did not participate in CSL) in the language class could hear about the CSL experience. These assignments were evaluated by the CSL coordinator. The reflections and the final presentations were the academic part of CSL and thus it was clearly explained that the reflective assignments were not to be mistaken by mere reproductions of the CSL experience. Rather, we considered the reflections to be the link that ties student experiences in the community to academic learning (Eyler & Giles 171) and thus in their work, students were expected to actually ponder about their individual experience, abstract some meaning or knowledge from it and if possible, relate it to what they had learned in class. All reflections were written in Spanish and submitted online.

While the language instructor ran the language class, the CSL coordinator was exclusively dedicated to the students in the CSL program. The coordinator worked as a liaison between the community partners and the language department, making sure that the placements were running smoothly, that students were completing their volunteer hours, and grading their reflections and final presentation. In the case of our department, the role of the coordinator is given to a Ph.D. student who organizes the entire year and is in charge of everything that pertains to the program.



## 5. THE POST-CSL QUESTIONNAIRE: RESULTS

Because this was the first time the CSL option had been offered in our program, we were counting on student feedback to help us better appreciate the effect of this experience at all levels. It was important for us to determine the overall attitude that our students had developed towards the CSL experience. Furthermore, it was important to receive their feedback on how it could be improved for the following years. However, we were also seeking answers to a few specific questions. First, we wanted to know whether participating in the CSL program had influenced students into further pursuing Spanish courses. A second issue that we were interested in was to determine whether students had discovered new opportunities where they could apply their Spanish knowledge. One challenge among most Canadian universities is maintaining students' interest in pursuing Spanish courses beyond the beginner and intermediate levels. The number of students significantly decreases from first to second year and even more so in upper years. From our experience teaching Spanish courses, the most common answer students give when asked why they chose to stop taking Spanish courses after the second year, is related to the fact that they do not see any opportunities this language can offer outside the field of teaching. In other words, students seem to think that the only future for someone studying Spanish is becoming a Spanish teacher. It was our hope that the CSL experience would show them that there are also other areas where they could apply their knowledge of Spanish. These are the first issues we will be reporting on in this section. We will then discuss the CSL effect on students' overall learning experience, as per the answers provided.

Table 1 below outlines the answers to the questions we are interested in for the purpose of this paper. Although the office of Service-learning at Western University had provided us with their standard questionnaire, we made slight changes to it in order to better suit our purposes.

There were a total of thirty-seven students that completed the questionnaire and the table below shows their answers to each of the three questions we will be discussing here. Students were asked to rate the statements in the questionnaire on a scale of one to five (1 –strongly disagree and 5 –strongly agree).

TABLE 1. EVALUATION OF THE CURRENT CSL EXPERIENCE

QUESTIONS	OVERALL (N=37)		LIBRARY (N=23)		LUSO (N=4)		CDA (N=7)		ACOL (N=3)	
	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD
	Overall positive experience with partner	4.4	0.7	4.3	0.6	4.5	0.5	4.1	0.8	4.8
Experience influenced me to continue with Spanish	4.3	0.8	4.4	0.7	4.25	0.5	4.3	0.8	3.3	1.5
Because of experience I discovered relevance of Spanish in fields other than teaching	4.2	0.8	4	0.8	4.75	0.5	4.3	0.8	4	1



In the table above, we are reporting students answers overall as well as per Community Partner. This allowed us to determine whether one organization in particular had more impact on our students than others. As can be seen in Table 1, the vast majority of the answers are above four, which indicates that most of the participants tended to “strongly agree” with the statements. The fairly low standard deviations show there was not much variation between answers, meaning that most of the students’ answers were fairly close to the mean. As for a comparison between the experience with each individual community partner, there also does not seem to be much variation. Most students had a positive experience regardless of where they were placed. As far as the question addressing their intention of continuing taking courses in Spanish, it would appear that the experience at ACOL (the AIDS Committee of London) was the one with the least influence. However, the high standard deviation ( $sd=1$ ), suggests different opinions among the students. Furthermore, considering there were only three students from that organization that completed the questionnaire (out of the four working there), this final result cannot be taken as significant. Means of four and above and low standard deviations on the last statement suggest that most students tended to “strongly agree” with the fact that the CSL experience has allowed them to see that knowledge of Spanish can be relevant to fields other than teaching.

The following section of the questionnaire (section 4) specifically addressed the learning aspect of the CSL experience. That is to say, aside from building on their Spanish language skills, was there any other learning that took place during the CSL experience? Table 2 summarizes students’ answers on the four statements addressing this issue. After reading each statement, students were asked to rate it as (1) true, (2) neither true nor false or (3) false. Again, similar to Table 1, the first column outlines the overall results while the following ones are presented for each community partner that participated in the program.

TABLE 2. LEARNING THROUGH CSL

QUESTIONS	OVERALL (N=37)		LIBRARY (N=23)		LUSO (N=4)		CDA (N=7)		ACOL (N=3)	
	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD
Through CSL placement I developed/enhanced a new skill	1.3	0.5	1.2	0.4	1.5	0.6	1.5	0.6	1.7	0.6
Participating in CSL increased my sense of civic engagement and social responsibility	1.2	0.5	1.2	0.5	1.25	0.5	1.25	0.5	1	0
CSL taught me something new about community and/or social issue I did not know much about	1.1	0.3	1.2	0.4	1	0	1	0	1	0
I would like to see CSL incorporated into more courses	1.1	0.2	1.1	0.3	1	0	1	0	1	0





The results in Table 2 suggest that CSL has been an enriching experience. The majority of the students have developed a new skill, have increased their sense of civic engagement, and learned something new about the Hispanic community. The overall results show that most participants rated the statements they were presented with as “true” and the low standard deviations (in some cases  $sd=0$ ) show very little or no variation among student answers. Within the individual organizations, it seems that approximately half of the students that were placed at LUSO, CDA and ACOL do not think they have acquired a new skill through the CSL experience. This result is to a certain extent surprising, especially for the CDA group, since most students had to learn how to use a new computer program in order to design the promotional and informational materials they had to prepare for the Association. As for the following question, it seems that most students agree (within each organization as well) that the CSL experience has increased their sense of civic engagement and social awareness. The mean scores of 1.1 and 1 and the very low standard deviations for the third statement (as outlined in Table 2), make it clear that almost all students consider they have learned something new about the Hispanic community in their city. Finally, there seems to be a consensus among the CSL participants that they would like to be able to benefit from this kind of experimental learning in other courses they are taking as part of their undergraduate program.

## 6. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

Zlotkowski (1998, p. 3) defines CSL as a ‘meaningful community service that is linked to students’ academic experience through related course materials and reflective activities’. According to this widely accepted definition, it can be concluded that the CSL experiment presented in this study was quite successful. Students enrolled in the Spanish program at Western University had the opportunity to apply Spanish language skills acquired in the classroom by working at different organizations in the city. Furthermore, they had the opportunity to look back at their experience and critically reflect on it in the form of four different written online posts and a final presentation that they shared with the rest of their classmates. The responses outlined in the previous section further support the success of this program.

As previously mentioned, it is a common phenomenon that first year Spanish language courses tend to be very popular with hundreds of students enrolling for the beginner level and then there is a significant drop in interest, and maintaining student enrollment becomes quite challenging. What we have noticed through the introduction of the CSL program is that those students who chose the CSL option became more involved in the classroom. Several students commented that they felt much more confident in speaking Spanish in class in front of their peers, simply because they got to practice outside of the classroom with a native speaker, where they were more concerned with communication and getting their point across. This program creates active learners; students who would be too scared to answer questions in class became more involved and engaged in classroom activities and





discussions. The CSL option has given students the best of both worlds: although all Spanish classes within our program follow a communicative approach, where students have the opportunity to engage in many interactive activities, the reality is that much attention is also paid to teaching grammar and grammatical rules. The Service-learning option however, gave all participants the opportunity to apply what they learned in the classroom to real-life situations. Through this practical experience, students have the opportunity to actually see the relevance of the work done in the classroom and they are proud to be able to apply it.

From a pedagogical perspective, we have found that the quality of the work produced (both written and oral) is much higher. Students come to class prepared and excited to show that their CSL placement has helped them. Not only did they receive one-on-one language practice, they also learned a great deal about the culture of their partner's country, which is a lot more than any classroom could offer. On a larger scale, our students developed their language skills and they also grew as human beings by seeing how recent immigrants live in London, Ontario and getting an inside look into their daily struggles with their own language barriers.

## 7. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Most scholars working in the field of Spanish CSL have focused on whether there was any evidence of improvement in students' communication and cultural skills as a result of their participation in CSL (Beebe & De Costa, 1993; Darias et al., 1999; Hale, 1999; Jorge, 2003; Mullaney, 1999; Varas, 1999). In most cases, the findings were encouraging and it has been determined that CSL has an overall positive influence on these two factors. However, most of these studies have been carried out in the United States and not much has been reported on Spanish CSL in Canada. In that respect, the current paper aims to further add to this field of study and determine whether it could have the same impact in Canadian post-secondary institutions. The positive effects of CSL on language learning has been previously demonstrated by research on such programs in the US where opportunities for such initiatives are abundant due to the large Hispanic population that is part of the American society. Our results add to these previous findings by offering additional evidence that further supports the benefits of making experiential learning part of the CSL curriculum even in communities where the target language is not as widely spoken. Specifically, it shows that such positive experiences are also possible in Canada, despite the significantly lower Hispanic population. The main difference between the Canadian and the American CSL experience for Spanish language courses is probably the challenge in finding opportunities for our learners within the community, considering the already mentioned significantly reduced number of Hispanics in Canada. However, our initiative stands as proof that although more challenging, such experiences are not only possible but are found to be as successful as they are in the United States.

Furthermore, as one of the future goals –given the Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition background of the authors– it would be interesting to test



and analyze one specific aspect of the Spanish language and determine whether CSL plays a role in the actual acquisition process of the language by comparing students in the CSL option with those in the regular classroom, especially since it is well known that opportunities for language production are significantly more limited in the classroom. These results could then be compared to study-abroad programs to test whether there is a significant difference between language acquisition abroad and CSL placements.

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# ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH, THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

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## ABSTRACT

Graphic novels and comic books are no longer minor cultural artifacts which are produced to generate economic benefits, mostly consumed by young, not very literate, readers who do not hope to be educated but simply entertained. Quite on the contrary, authors such as Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman or Umberto Eco has vindicated the fundamental role these artistic manifestations play nowadays. The present paper analyzes Carol Shields and Patrick Crowe 2016 graphic novel adaptation of Susanna Moodie's seminal book *Roughing it in the Bush*. In order to reach this goal, a brief theoretical state of the art is introduced. Consequently, the original writer and text are equally studied. Finally, the contemporary graphic novel adaptation is considered, explaining the genesis of the project as well and the similitudes and differences it shows when compared to the original work by Susanna Moodie.

KEYWORDS: Canadian Literature, Susanna Moodie, Graphic Novels, Margaret Atwood.

## ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH, LA NOVELA GRÁFICA

## RESUMEN

Las novelas gráficas no se consideran ya como artefactos culturales de valor menor que se producen principalmente en pos de intereses comerciales y son consumidas por lectores jóvenes y, por lo general poco formados que buscan deleitarse, pero no instruirse con estas lecturas. Muy al contrario, autores de la talla de Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman, Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman o Umberto Eco han reivindicado el papel fundamental que estas manifestaciones artísticas desempeñan a día de hoy. El presente artículo examina la adaptación gráfica que en 2016 llevaron a cabo Carol Shields y Patrick Crowe de la seminal obra de Susanna Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush*. Para alcanzar este objetivo, ofrecemos un sucinto estado de la cuestión teórico. Asimismo, se presentarán a la autora y texto originales. Por último, estudiaremos en profundidad la novela gráfica, explicando su génesis, así como las diferencias y semejanzas que presenta con respecto a la obra original que Susanna Moodie diera a la imprenta.

PALABRAS CLAVE: literatura canadiense, Susanna Moodie, novelas gráficas, Margaret Atwood.

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## 1. POSTMODERNITY AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

Up to the twentieth century, there seemed to be many more certainties than doubts in virtually every scientific, social and cultural realm. Scientific laboratories did not stop making advances at an escalating rate and humanity seemed determined to reach levels of technical expertise that would make our future lives longer, healthier and happier. Nevertheless, during the second half of the century though our technical skill would have allowed us to reach an Edenic scenario we used it instead to deploy two devastating atomic bombs and the allies' efforts to destroy the evil Nazi axis required them to become mass-murderers like Stalin or Machiavellian as Churchill and Truman. In this particular scenario, Adorno raised the famous question of whether it was still legitimate to make poetry and pretty soon thinkers like Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault or Baudrillard concentrated on deconstructing any previous certainty we might have naïvely enjoyed in the past.

Needless to say, the radical frames of thought that demolished traditional comforting moral binary opposites were also destined to affect our traditional understanding of the arts. Thus, contemporary readers were forced to reconsider the extent to which a canon was possible and also whether the idea of genre was valid in a time in which, as Schrödinger proved, cats could be simultaneously living and dead. In other words, the barrier between high and pop art cracked and canonical texts that were not supposed to be treated frivolously were deprived of all their long-lasting scholarly traditional armor. Thus, John Barth rewrote many foundational American myths (like that of Pocahontas) and Donald Barthelme did the very same with some passages from the *Iliad*, just to mention some quintessential examples.

Together with the new postmodern frame of mind, the twentieth century was characterized by global literacy in a Western world in which it became less and less frequent to have the opportunity to enjoy time in a domestic, familiar environment. Consequently, new means of communication and entertainment like TV, "glossy magazines", pulp fiction and comic books flourished, trying to satisfy the demands of an increasingly high number of teenagers and young adults that had free time but lacked the company of their parents, who devoted more and more time to work in a capitalistic (sometimes cannibalistic) scenario that placed their safe suburban homes far away from their work places.

If we combine a playful philosophy that invited authors and readers to question the very nature of the Western canon and fostered collages and "mutant ways of artistic creation" with a huge mass of consumers that showed themselves to be hungry for escapist fiction, it is no surprise to discover that the second half of the twentieth century was full of science fiction, soap operas, detective stories and superheroes. These new cultural icons populated the bookshelves of libraries, bookshops and airports' and train stations' convenience stores.

At this point, we might wonder what place ancient cultural artefacts play in this novel and radical world. First of all, old-fashioned moral certainties and the great artistic pieces of the traditional past did not prevent the human race from committing the atrocities of Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Dresden, of the on-going massacres of a Cold War that was absolutely hot if you had the bad luck to live in



But there were thousands upon thousands of other people in the city who bought bad chemicals and ate them or sniffed them—or injected them into their veins with devices which looked like this:



Sometimes they even stuffed bad chemicals up their assholes. Their assholes looked like this:



Figure 1. Example from Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*.

the Balkans or Indochina, just to name two places. Thus, many postmodern artists rejected the certainties of orthodox art and dived deeply into the remote past or hidden areas of the mind. In search of a purer, less contaminated age, these artists journeyed far away, arriving at places that existed prior to our technological splendor and the simplistic Judeo-Christian sets of values and beliefs that led us to two World Wars and the ominous shadow of an atomic (and inherently apocalyptic) third one that seemed to be eternally waiting to be unleashed. Thus, prehistoric and aboriginal art (by definition impossible to be reduced to black and white interpretations) was rediscovered and reinterpreted.

It becomes necessary to point out that the entertainment industry, located basically in the UK and the USA, was influenced, if not driven, by extremely conservative forces. Thus, science fiction, fantasy texts and comic books would not be allowed to share the extremely radical attitude that was embraced by the writers of novels who on many occasions were not university professors but underground individuals who didn't need any sort of financial support or social recognition. Traditionally, folktales had played a crucial role in transmitting and consolidating values and attitudes that were fundamental to society. Consequently, in this new scenario, with new aesthetic preferences and very few moments in the company of the family, the *docere et delectare* functions should be fulfilled by new artistic and cultural manifestations.

Taking this socio-cultural context into account, it is not surprising that graphic novels stopped being considered as minor literary elements and began to be praised by intellectuals and scholars. Very clear examples of prestigious scholars and writers who didn't hesitate to defend graphic novels and comic books as artistic creations are that of Umberto Eco and Kurt Vonnegut.

In 1973, Vonnegut sent to the press the novel *Breakfast of Champions*, in which graphic elements did not only illustrate or accompany the novel but became indispensable elements of the plot, as the Figure 1 shows.





In the case of Umberto Eco, this brilliant intellectual did not only vindicate the ninth art but also contributed to it with his fascinating work *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana: an Illustrated Novel* (2004). Thus, Will Eisner's, Alan Moore's or Neil Gaiman's complex, exciting and extremely rich works gained critical reputation at the same time they entertained and educated millions of young readers. An even more exemplary case is that of Art Spiegelman's masterly graphic novel on the holocaust, *Maus*, which received the Pulitzer Award in 1992.

## 2. SUSANNA MOODIE'S *ROUGHING IT IN THE BUSH*: THE SOURCE TEXT

Susanna Strickland Moodie (1803) arrived to Canada in 1832, escaping from an economic situation in England that was starting to be quite difficult at that moment and would become even harder in the near future when Moodie's first son was born. She was the sixth daughter of Thomas and Elizabeth Homer Strickland, a well-read family that soon gained reputation within British literary circles. While in England, Susanna Moodie had already published some poetry books as well as children literature, but her fame as a writer is mostly due to the book *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852), in which she chronicles her first years as a settler in Upper Canada. In the introduction to *Roughing it in the Bush*, Susanna Moodie reflects upon the reasons why emigrants chose Canada as their destination, which were, in fact, mythical:

The choice of the country to which they devote their talents and energies depends less upon their pecuniary means than upon the fancy of the emigrant or the popularity of a name. From the year 1826 to 1829, Australia and the Swan River were all the rage. No other portions of the habitable globe were deemed worthy of notice. These were the *El Dorados* and lands of Goshen to which all respectable emigrants eagerly flocked. Disappointment, as a matter of course, followed their high-raised expectations. Many of the most sanguine of these adventurers returned to their native shores in a worse condition than when they left them. In 1830, the great tide of emigration flowed westward. Canada became the great land-mark for the rich in hope and poor in purse. Public newspapers and private letters teemed with the unheard-of advantages to be derived from a settlement in this highly-favored region.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, reality soon proves those unreal expectations false, reducing many of those fanciful colonists to a state of absolute poverty and desolation:

Oh, ye dealers in wild lands—ye speculators in the folly and credulity of your fellow men—what a mass of misery, and of misrepresentation productive of that misery, have ye not to answer for! You had your acres to sell, and what to you were the

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Moodie's *Roughing in the Bush* has been retrieved from: <https://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/moodie/roughing/roughing.html>.



worn-down frames and broken hearts of the infatuated purchasers? The public believed the plausible statements you made with such earnestness, and men of all grades rushed to hear your hired orators declaim upon the blessings to be obtained by the clearers of the wilderness.

Men who had been hopeless of supporting their families in comfort and independence at home, thought that they had only to come out to Canada to make their fortunes; almost even to realize the story told in the nursery, of the sheep and oxen that ran about the streets, ready roasted, and with knives and forks upon their backs. They were made to believe that if it did not actually rain gold, that precious metal could be obtained, as is now stated of California and Australia, by stooping to pick it up.

When the myth of a paradise on Earth where richness rained from the sky on a regular basis is subverted by harsh realities; two new foundational myths are attached to Canada: that of the American dream and the mythical spirit of the frontier hero:

The Great Father of the souls and bodies of men knows the arm which wholesome labour from infancy has made strong, the nerves which have become iron by patient endurance, by exposure to weather, coarse fare, and rude shelter; and he chooses such, to send forth into the forest to hew out the rough paths for the advance of civilization. These men become wealthy and prosperous, and form the bones and sinews of a great and rising country. Their labor is wealth, not exhaustion; its produce independence and content, not home-sickness and despair.

During her sojourn in Canada's backwoods, Moodie is faced with numberless difficulties and sorrows and she is often haunted by a debilitating melancholy. Thus, several passages from *Roughing it in the Bush* present us with a Moodie which dreams with returning to a land which is no longer real but idealized, in this case by the myth of the Common Wealth as a beacon of civilization, prosperity and happiness. But, at those moments of doubts and sorrow when nostalgia overwhelms the author, the sublime, mythical, beauty of Canadian landscape re comforts her, as the following stanza from the poem "Canada" shows:

By thy winter's stainless snow,  
Starry heavens of purer glow,  
Glorious summers, fervid, bright,  
Basking in one blaze of light;  
By thy fair, salubrious clime;  
By thy scenery sublime;  
By thy mountains, streams, and woods;  
By thy everlasting floods;  
If greatness dwells beneath the skies,  
Thou to greatness shalt arise!

And, step by step, the idealized sublimity of Canadian nature becomes productive of political and personal independence:



Canadians!—as long as you remain true to yourselves and her, what foreign invader could ever dare to plant a hostile flag upon that rock-defended height, or set his foot upon a fortress rendered impregnable by the hand of Nature? United in friendship, loyalty, and love, what wonders may you not achieve? to what an enormous altitude of wealth and importance may you not arrive? Look at the St. Lawrence, that king of streams, that great artery flowing from the heart of the world, through the length and breadth of the land, carrying wealth and fertility in its course, and transporting from town to town along its beautiful shores the riches and produce of a thousand distant climes. What elements of future greatness and prosperity encircle you on every side! Never yield up these solid advantages to become an humble dependent on the great republic—wait patiently, loyally, lovingly, upon the illustrious parent from whom you sprang, and by whom you have been fostered into life and political importance; in the fullness of time she will proclaim your childhood past, and bid you stand up in your own strength, a free Canadian people!

Another important myth that needs to be considered in *Roughing it in the Bush* is related to Moodie's Indian neighbors. The author's depiction of the local inhabitants shares features both from the myth of the *noble savage* and from Hobbes' nihilistic understanding of the human soul:

It was not long before we received visits from the Indians, a people whose beauty, talents, and good qualities have been somewhat overrated, and invested with a poetical interest which they scarcely deserve. Their honesty and love of truth are the finest traits in characters otherwise dark and unlovely. But these are two God-like attributes, and from them spring all that is generous and ennobling about them. There never was a people more sensible of kindness, or more grateful for any little act of benevolence exercised towards them. We met them with confidence; our dealings with them were conducted with the strictest integrity; and they became attached to our persons, and in no single instance ever destroyed the good opinion we entertained of them.

The men of this tribe are generally small of stature, with very coarse and repulsive features. The forehead is low and retreating, the observing faculties large, the intellectual ones scarcely developed; the ears large, and standing off from the face; the eyes looking towards the temples, keen, snake-like, and far apart; the cheek-bones prominent; the nose long and flat, the nostrils very round; the jaw-bone projecting, massy, and brutal; the mouth expressing ferocity and sullen determination; the teeth large, even, and dazzlingly white. The mouth of the female differs widely in expression from that of the male; the lips are fuller, the jaw less projecting, and the smile is simple and agreeable. The women are a merry, light-hearted set, and their constant laugh and incessant prattle form a strange contrast to the iron taciturnity of their grim lords.

To conclude with Susanna Moodie's original *Roughing it in the Bush*; the book started as a diaspora narrative in which the author felt exiled not only from her mother land but also from civilization and thrown into the barbaric shores of a country where nature and not society prevailed and conditioned the lives and destinies of the settlers. This creates a shock and Moodie is overwhelmed by loneliness, fear and even desperation. Nonetheless, in this book nature enables Moodie to be



transformed. By the end of the volumes, she is no longer an exiled British lady but a true, proud, Canadian. She is finally living the myth of the American dream and enjoying freedom and prosperity for her and her sons and daughters. The book closes with a poem, “A Canadian Son” in which it becomes clear that the above-mentioned transformation was only made possible by Canada’s nature, which is simultaneously real and mythical:

Hail to the pride of the forest—hail  
To the maple, tall and green;  
It yields a treasure which ne’er shall fail  
While leaves on its boughs are seen.  
When the moon shines bright,  
On the wintry night,  
And silvers the frozen snow;  
And echo dwells  
On the jingling bells  
As the sleighs dart to and fro;  
Then it brightens the mirth  
Of the social hearth  
With its red and cheery glow.

### 3. MARGARET ATWOOD’S INTRODUCTION TO ROUGHING *IT IN THE BUSH*, THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

Canadian publishing house *Second Story Press*, supported by several public agencies such as *Ontario Arts Council*; *Ontario Media Developing Corporation* and *Carol Shields Literary Trust* published the graphic novel adaptation of *Roughing it in the Bush* in 2016. The book opens with an introduction by Margaret Atwood (b. 1939), one of Canada’s most prestigious and prominent scholars and writers. Atwood is not only the most awarded and best-known Canadian woman writer but also a true expert in Susanna Moodie and *Roughing it in the Bush*.

In 1970, A young Margaret Atwood published *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, in which she puts herself in the shoes of pioneer woman writer Susanna Strickland Moodie, who arrived to Canada in 1832 and narrated her experiences as a settler in her seminal works *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) and *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853). Atwood’s fascination with Moodie and her chronicles are natural and inevitable. First of all, as a feminist young author searching for literary influences, Atwood couldn’t find an earlier or more powerful example of a Canadian woman who was free, strong and foundational for Canadian literature. In March 1995, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu spent a week in Toronto with Atwood. Their lengthy and extremely interesting conversations were published the following year. Creating a postmodern game of matriuska dolls, the title of this book echoes Hugh MacLennan’s novel, which echoes Rene Marie Rilke’s poem: *Two Solitudes*. In this book, Atwood remembers how little contact with Canadian literature she had while at college:



I started university in 1957, in English literature. We didn't learn much Canadian literature, or even much American literature. We started with Anglo-Saxon, and went on to Chaucer, and then to Shakespeare. And finally we got to the twentieth century and we studied a little Hemingway and Faulkner. I enjoyed it (31).

Obviously, the relation between these two Canadian women writers is complex and concepts such as *the anxiety of influence* or *negative influence* must be taken into account.

But Atwood could project her own quest for identity in Moodie not only because of Moodie's role as a literary mother.

As Rosemary Sullivan states: "the landscape of childhood provides the foundation layer of our psyche. Margaret's landscape was the north woods" (29). In *Two Solitudes* readers do discover the background of Atwood's childhood and the author herself confirms Sullivan's hypothesis, as the following set of quotations prove: "when we were little, we spent most of the year very isolated [...] in our house all alone in the woods" (9); "there were also a few Indians" (11); "our house was very isolated, and the lake was very big" (sp); "I spent a few months in school. Up to the age of twelve, I did only one complete school year, because we were in the bush" (19). Even when Atwood was born almost a century after Moodie experienced her Canadian life, the scenes described by Atwood above are more similar than different to Moodie's existence in the isolated scenario of Canadian backwoods.

As we see, it is not surprising at all that Atwood did choose Moodie's seminal examination of the origins of Canada as a model for her own examination of both the country and her own psyche.

As a result of Atwood's intimate knowledge of the source text in which the graphic novel is inspired, her introduction becomes extremely interesting, at the same time it increases the graphic novel's artistic and cultural aspirations and relevance. In this introduction, Atwood starts by affirming that,

I am not only pleased but astonished to have been asked to welcome this graphic novel version into the world. If you've told me forty-five years ago that such a thing would happen, I would have thought you were fantasizing. And if you've told Mrs. Moodie herself, she'd have thought you were talking gibberish (vii).

This first idea is fundamental, since it proves to what extent our understanding of comic books and graphic novels have changed in quite a short span of time. It makes sense that in the nineteenth century, Moodie could have thought that recreating her book as an illustrated story was an option which resulted equally absurd and impossible. But also in the seventies (a historical moment in which cultural revolutions were changing the world in such a fast and tremendous manner), an open-minded young woman poet would have thought the same.

Nonetheless, when writing this introduction in 2016 Atwood is an extremely prestigious 77 years-old artist and now the possibility of such a project does not only look feasible but also extremely enriching for the education of young Canadians: "I myself discovered Susanna Moodie on my parents' bookshelf in 1948, when I was eight {...} I was impressed. But the prose style of the book was too grown-up for



me, so I abandoned it. Had there been a Classic Comic available, however, I would have read that” (vii-viii).

In the paragraph which closes her introduction, Atwood declares in an enthusiastic manner that this graphic novel won't only be positive for those young readers who get a first contact with the original text and her author, but also fundamental for the future reception of Susanna Moodie's literary canon, both within and outside academia:

This graphic version does justice to the many facets of her tale. It will introduce a new generation of readers to a figure that remains both iconic and – despite all the attention lavished upon her over the past forty-five years – mysterious. She may not be finished with us yet. What new Susanna Moodie may yet appear in years to come? (x).

#### 4. CAROL SHIELDS AND PATRICK CROWE: THE GENESIS OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL ADAPTATION

The two writers behind this graphic novel adaptation of Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush* are Carol Shields and Patrick Crowe. Shields (1935-2003) is one of the most influential Canadian writer of the twentieth century, having published plays, poems, essays and novels. Her literary efforts have been awarded with honors as prestigious as the *Governor General's Award*, the *Orange Prize* and even a *Pulitzer Prize*. Just as it happened with Margaret Atwood, Carol Shields' familiarity with *Roughing it in the Bush* is extreme, since she wrote her Master Thesis on this book and later published several essays about it. She is also the editor of one of the best scholarly editions of *Roughing it in the Bush* appeared so far. Patrick Crowe is not a writer but a film director and producer who first got in touch with Carol Shields in 1997, when he wrote, produced and directed a 50 minutes-long documentary on Moodie and her literary work, *The Enduring Enigma of Susanna Moodie*.

As Crowe himself explains in the Author's Note to the graphic novel, since 1997, he and Shields have wanted to work together on Moodie again. Their original idea was not to write a graphic novel adaptation of *Roughing it in the Bush*, but rather to co-write the screenplay for a feature film on Susanna Moodie. Nonetheless, the project proved to be more problematic than the authors had originally thought. First of all, the very nature of the source material resulted very difficult to be transferred to the silver screen:

Carol felt very strongly that our goal was a psychological, not historical truth, and that all our choices needed to reinforce the best dramatic arc for a feature film. Simply by retelling Susanna's own story (itself highly edited, even redacted) would not realize the potential of film to inspire the viewer's imagination (139).

As a result of Susanna Moodie's apparent resistance to become a film character, the first draft of the screenplay took four years to be completed. And by that moment, Shields' breast cancer did re-appear and spread. As a consequence, the film



project was first delayed and finally cancelled. But in 2003, Patrick Crowe decided to resuscitate the enterprise, but this time, “not as a film but as a very cinematic graphic novel” (140). Then, with the inestimable financial support from the Canada Media Fund, Crowe got in touch with two young Canadian illustrators, Willow Dawson and Selena Goulding, who took care of the graphic part of this adaptation.

## 5. DIFFERENCES AND SIMILITUDES BETWEEN THE NOVEL AND ITS GRAPHIC NOVEL ADAPTATION

Once I have introduced the source text and dealt with the genesis of the graphic novel, it is time to consider the differences and similitudes between both versions. It becomes necessary to start by affirming that Shields’ and Crowe’s intimate knowledge of the original book and the author’s biography and their firm commitment with the project do guarantee the quality and loyalty of the graphic novel to the book it is simultaneously adapting, updating and paying homage to.

Starting by the narratological voice, the graphic novel version is absolutely coherent with the one which was written more than one hundred years ago. Susanna Moodie wrote herself into *Roughing it in the Bush* in a sincere, honest and familiar manner (which is not surprising if we take into account both the biographical nature of the text and the fact that Barthes’ theory of the death of the author was still far from appearing). Moodie understood his literary work as both a valid entertaining work and as a vehicle of social education (in this case it is impossible not to refer to Latin philosopher Horace’s concept of *prodesse et delectare* which prevailed in English literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before Modernism and Postmodernism made us question whether art could be educational at all). As a result, she made all the possible efforts to write her book in a way that grasped the readers’ attention at the same time she hoped those same writers could identify with herself.

The graphic novel adopts a similar strategy at the same time, it remains faithful to Moodie’s idiosyncratic prose. For instance, Shields and Crowe do not employ Canadian English but British one, since the Canadian variety had not evolved yet. As an example, on page: “My nearest neighbour in Africa was ten miles away” (9). As we see, British “neighbour” is employed here, rather than American and Canadian “neighbor”. The graphic novel is loyal to Moodie’s language and style even when the original version of the book crashes with the reader’s contemporary decorum and political correctness. In order to prevent possible misunderstanding regarding this matter, on the credit page, the authors state the following,

Upper Canada in the 1830s vibrated with a volatile mixture of many cultures, religious beliefs, and political views. Common prejudices in the nineteenth century resulting from antagonisms between Protestant and Catholics, or racism perpetrated by white Europeans against Blacks and Aborigines, were reflected in the everyday language people used to describe themselves and each other. Today it is unacceptable to use words such as *Indians, squaw, darkie, Negro, Yankee, or Papist.*





Use of such language in this book should be viewed in the context of its time in history.

The authors and publisher of this book do not condone the use of disrespectful language.

As well as being loyal to Moodie's voice, the authors of the graphic novel are equally faithful to the thematic elements from the original book. But, obviously, transferring a 500 pages long novel to a less than 130 pages graphic novel in which illustrations occupy a significant space necessarily imply the usage of several adaptation strategies. I will now examine the above-mentioned mechanisms.

The first change that is introduced in the graphic novel affects the structure and organization of the narrative. *Roughing it in the Bush* was published at a moment in which the canon of the novel as we know it nowadays was far from being established. As a result, Moodie's volume is characterized by a heterogeneous and fragmentary nature. The book is fragmentary because of the author's lack of experience as a novelist, because of the biographical nature of the work, due to the fact that she relies exclusively on her memory to transmit events that took places twenty years before and because before it appeared as a unified book, several passages from *Roughing it* had appeared previously in several British, Canadian and American journals and newspapers. And it is fragmentary because Susanna Moodie included not only prose, but also short poems and even drawings in the original version.

On the contrary, the graphic novel unifies the different materials and arrange them chronologically (often correcting mistakes Moodie has made), in order to offer contemporary readers a book which can be read in a swift and pleasant manner, without the burdens introduced by broken stories and disordered events which are inherent to heterogeneous and fragmentary texts from the past.

The second change that Shield and Crowe make in order to adapt *Roughing it in the Bush* to the demands of the graphic novel genre is related to Moodie's frequent digressions. In the original book, the plot is constantly being interrupted by the author's rambling and comments, which could be political, cultural, religious or even domestic ones. As a result, even when the book is, as a whole, exciting and interesting, we must accept the fact that it is not specially entertaining or easy to follow.

If digressions were acceptable (inevitable, I might say) during the nineteenth century, they are definitively incompatible with contemporary graphic novels. One could argue that Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, *V. for Vendetta*, *From Hell* or Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* are full of philosophical remarks. That's absolutely true but, at the same time, both Moore and Gaiman are skilled graphic novel writers who know when, where and for how long those footnotes are to be introduced. In the case of the work I am analyzing in this case, Shields and Crowe did consider that Moodie's wanderings off the subject wouldn't fit the resulting graphic novel. And I cannot but agree with them. Consequently, the immense majority of digressions have been eluded.

The third difference between the source text and the contemporary one involves subplots. While Moodie's original work offered numberless subplots





(which were not only fitting or interesting), Shields and Crowe have preferred to stick to the main plot in this case: Susanna Moodie's emigration to Canada and the many difficulties she and her family had to overcome in order to become wealthy Canadian citizens.

The final change that takes place in the graphic novel involves the final chapter. Susanna Moodie's book ended when the author and her family abandoned the backwoods of Canada, circa 1850, when the writer was 47 years old. The graphic novel, on the contrary imitates Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* and introduce two new chapters, which did not appear in the original version.

The new two chapters are included in the section "Epilogues" and are called "Niagara!" and "The Bush Garden". The action in these original chapters takes place in 1867 and 1884, respectively, when Susanna Moodie is a mature lady who lives comfortably in Beleville town, far from the dangers, discomforts and quests she had to overcome in the remote and wild bush. In these new additions, Shields and Crowe include elements from Moodie's last years of life that were not included in *Roughing it in the Bush* but are widely known due to later works by the author (such as *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush*, 1853) and the letters of the author which were collected, edited and published by Carl Ballstadt, Elizabeth Hopkins, and Michael Peterman in 1985 (*Letters of a Lifetime*).

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