Identities of the Periphery:
The Construction and the Collective Prodigy in
Chicano/a Writings

By

Emmanouilidou Sophia

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

to the Department of American Literature and Culture,
School of English,
Faculty of Philosophy,
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki,
Greece
2003
Dissertation Committee:  

Yiorgos Kalogeras, Adviser  

Savvas Patsalidis, Co-Adviser  

Michalis Kokkonis, Co-Adviser  

Approved
in memory of my loving father,

Takis Emmanouilidis,

whose peals of laughter

are still around
ABSTRACT

It has been generally argued that identity-formation is a complex co-relation of one’s conscious and subconscious intelligences, resulting in the fixity of a set of behavioral traits. From birth people enter numerous contexts, which shape their personalities. In fact, socio-political struggles, cultural practices, religious beliefs and even personal aspirations contribute to the delineation of the self. Hence, the notion of identity is not monolithic or static but subject to change. Self-perception is the outcome of a number of influences from the historical, social, political, ethical, and cultural contexts one enters or from his/her personal preferences resulting from circumstances. Adding to these perplexing issues, we can divide the concept of identity into two broad categories: the individual and the collective expressions of the self. In fact, human beings claim an identity which, more often than not, corresponds to a collective one. And since individuals do not inhabit a void but are active members of worldly socialization, they also form various organized groups of people, both political and apolitical. The corollary is that individual identity is not autonomous; instead, it takes a collectivity’s self-perception as its point of departure or reference.

In order to grasp the importance of the “individual vis-à-vis collective” interdependency, we have to consider the importance of a human agency’s continuity throughout time. If we assume that a given collectivity develops a distinct identity over the course of time, then we must acknowledge that the exact same collectivity propagates an indigenous history. And when an individual willingly acknowledges the history of a group of people, then this historicized identity-perception is incorporated into his/her present self representation. In fact, it becomes his/her collective past self to be consolidated into one’s rite of passage into the present and future. Seen in this light, collective consciousness implies a triple relation within a group of people: the avowal of a common ancestry, the identification
of self-same present experiences in time and space, and a consensus in the pursuit of their future aspirations.

In broad terms, this is the philosophical area where I have sought to approach Mexican-American identity in this dissertation, *Identities of the Periphery: The Construction and the Collective Prodigy in Chicano/a Writings*. My chief concern is to convey my conviction that Chicanismo is predominantly a collective identity, deeply rooted in the American Southwest (spatial factor) and one which is “the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product” (temporal factor) (Bourdieu 118). Mexican-Americans, in tandem with the rest of hyphenated groupings within the US, and even in the present turbulent global context of the 21st century, strive to conceive and delineate their self-identity. But their self-perception is a rather crooked path since it is the outcome of numerous binarisms: the politics of resistance versus the poetics of cultural identity, Mexican nation versus the US Southwest, individuality versus collectivization, and so on. This dissertation is an attempt to approach the multi-faceted Chicano identity and to present the ways in which the Mexican-American individual construes and builds up his/her self-awareness via the totality of his/her collective experience. It is my sincere hope to succeed in an in-depth understanding of Chicano identity as it appears through its literary expression.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dare to say with a touch of pride that this dissertation has generally been a solitary
venture and a hard-trodden path, which I was frequently tempted not to walk. I enrolled for a
Ph.D. degree on October 1, 1999, and my loving father unexpectedly passed away on October
19, 1999. At that moment I felt so confused and depressed that all philosophical treatises on
the concept of identity seemed to me a mere quibble or a bourgeois idle questioning of the
facts of life.

To study Mexican-American literature from the other end the globe is a difficult task
indeed. This is not just because the realities of border-crossings appear alien to the average
Greek student at the turn of the new millennium, but also because it is somewhat arduous to
find other academicians involved in the same field of study. This is the main reason why I
would like to express my deepest and most sincere gratitude to Professor Yiorgos Kalogeras
for his guidance and support from the very beginning of this program of studies to the
completion of my dissertation. When I was a M.A. student, he handed me a copy of Tomás
Rivera’s ... y no se lo trago la tierra / ... And the Earth Did not Devour Him (1971) and
encouraged me to work on Mexican-American literature. In a sense, he was more than a
supervisor to me. He was a mentor, a source of inspiration, a liberal thinker to be emulated,
and a constant reinforcement to my new-found ideas about the concept of identity-cognition.
Above all, Professor Kalogeras’s belief in my potential as an academic researcher has been a
constant driving-force in the fulfilment of the requirements of this degree of Doctor of
Philosophy.

Special thanks to Professor Savvas Patsalidis for his invaluable insight into
postmodernism and for stimulating my learning ever since I was an undergraduate; to the
National Scholarship Foundation of Greece for funding this project; to the Fulbright
Foundation for giving me the opportunity to travel overseas to Texas and study Mexican-
American *la vida* in its autochthonous space; to Professor José Limón, University of Texas, Austin, not only for graciously accepting my application to study Mexican-American literature with him, as well as providing me with an office and a P.C. at the Center for Mexican-American Studies which he directs at U.T. Austin, but also for being so willing to discuss the field of Chicano literary studies with me; to Ms Kathleen Hurt, who edited this study; to my sister, Maria, who gladly gave me her PC to write my thoughts on Chicanismo and to Babis for being patient all this time.

Finally, I would never have undertaken this course if it weren’t for my mother’s emotional support. A brave woman indeed my mother was the first to insist on my starting a M.A. course and coping with the sad realities of my early twenties. Being up to my neck in diapers, sad memories of my troubled teens, hard realities of a marriage doomed to divorce, court-houses and financial problems, I was advised by my mother never to give up, at least not until the end. It is this “end” which has been transformed into a means for my study of Chicano literature. Mexican-Americans’ search in the space of identity-cognition is also expressive of my place or “placelessness” in academic study. My own 32-year life experience has often been reflected in these people’s straddling the state of timorous surrender to an overpowering social elite and their optimistic struggle for a better life. What I have learned in the course of this project is that I have the power to resist stereotypes, attain my dreams and reach out for a better life for my beautiful daughter and for myself.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction**................................................................. 1  
Notes.................................................................................. 25  

**Chapter One**

Mythography and Collectivization in Rudolfo Anaya’s *Lord of Dawn: The Legend of Quetzacoatl* and *The Legend of La Llorona*................................. 31  
Notes.................................................................................. 75  

**Chapter Two**

Border Crossings and the Subject in Abeyance in Irene Beltran Hernandez’s *Across the Great River*........................................................................ 83  
Notes.................................................................................. 113  

**Chapter Three**

Barrio Vistas: The Spatial Perspective in Identity Formation.................. 119  
Notes.................................................................................. 163  

**Chapter Four**

Heterotopias and the Objectification of the Subject in Miguel Méndez’s Novel *Autobiography From Labor to Letters* and Tomas Atencio’s Lecture “Resolana: A Pathway to Knowledge” ............................................. 170  
Notes.................................................................................. 213  

**Chapter Five**

Literary Poetics and the Politics of Collectivization in Tomás Rivera’s *...y no se lo trago la tierra / ...And the Earth Did not Devour Him* .................. 217  
Notes.................................................................................. 242  

**Conclusion**................................................................. 247  
Notes.................................................................................. 256  

**Works Cited**.................................................................... 258  

where does it all lead to?
i mean, like where are we going?
and where did we come from?
where did it all begin?
and who started it?

is the problem social/
cultural/
political/
economical?
is revolution a sole solution?
or what?

whom do we attack, and must we?
are the panthers at fault/
the weather underground/
los indios/
or the Mexican people?

When does a rainbow coalition take place,
and when?
does aztlán mean utopia?
do we sacrifice our leaders?
do we burn high priest at the stake,
and light the pyre with soul on ice?
but that’s a black/white problem.
i shouldn’t be concerned
but I am.
just like I’m concerned about bernadine & angela
And carlos montez & gio
like the bombings concern me.
and the highjackings
y la marcha de la reconquista
And mayday concern me.
so much to learn . . . so much to do.
the man’s got an easy job
no wonder he finds such willing recruits,
Always!

USP – Leavenworth / 1970

---

1 Un Trip through the Mind Jail y Otras Excursions 67-8.
Introduction

It is no longer possible to conceive global processes in terms of a single center over the peripheries. Rather there are a number of competing centers which are bringing about shifts in the global balance of power between nation-states and blocs and forging new sets of interdependencies. This is not to suggest a condition of equality between participants but a process which is seeing more players admitted to the game who are demanding access to means of communication and the right to be heard. (Featherstone 12-3)

Today, more than forty years after the fervent politics of *el movimiento* in the 1960s and 1970s,¹ and the resulting literary acme of the Chicano Cultural Renaissance, the world of academia resounds with the Mexican-American voice more than ever before. Chicano novelists, poets, playwrights, filmmakers, musicians, art historians, anthropologists, sociologists and even graffiti artists have found their place in the world of multidisciplinary study and research.² In the US alone, there is a wide number of Mexican-American Centers for the study of Chicano/a issues, and international conferences across the world almost always include a plenary session on the varied Chicano experience. Nonetheless, this task has not been easily accomplished. Mexican-Americans have not crossed overnight from academic exclusion³ to the worldwide recognition that they presently enjoy. The Chicano transition from intellectual transparency to academic fame has been a hard-trodden path, on which they have struggled for “the retention of cultural integrity and an organic sense of unity” (Saldívar 3). In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that the majority of Mexican-Americans have never really given in to the oppressions of the dominant US culture, nor have they succumbed to the supposed merits of acculturation. On the contrary,
Mexican-Americans can proudly claim that they have sustained their cultural identity over years of silencing and subjugation, and have finally expressed themselves with ethnic sophistication, which enhanced their political and socio-economic advantage.

Drawing from James Clifford’s purview of the permutation of the formerly mighty “poetics-versus-politics” distinction in ethnographic study, I shall briefly go back to the two rather recent moments in Chicano history mentioned above: el movimiento and the Chicano Cultural Renaissance. In the history of Mexican-American life these two communal formulations are the most influential landmarks for Chicano Studies today. They paved the way for the political and collective understanding of Chicanismo, both for Mexican-Americans themselves and for the wider liberal public in the US. During the 1960s and 1970s the Chicano community emerged from obscurity, pursued identity-cognizance and gave birth to the community’s politicized self-confidence. The politics of el movimiento engendered causes such as César Estrada Chávez’s organization of mexicano agricultural workers in the National Farm Workers Association, with their commitment to non-violence not withstanding an ardent demand for better working conditions; the nationwide student movements organized within campus groups with their demand for educational quality and equality, as well as for bicultural education; and the Brown Berets, who politicized the moderate Chicano barrio youth. In a nutshell, el movimiento was influential in not only articulating the needs of the Mexican-American community but also raising the possibility of civic reaction against institutionalized American society. Besides its political contribution to Mexican-American communal life, el movimiento gave rise to the cultural current of the Chicano Renaissance. Having deeply felt the need to define themselves against offensive American stereotypes, like those of the bandido (robber), the bracero (a worker, a hired hand) or the lazy Mexican, the members of the Chicano Renaissance promoted pride in Mexican-American cultural identity. Coming out of the Southwest and depicting the needs of the Mexican-Americans, the bulk of
literature produced in the late 1960s and 1970s drew upon life experiences of migrancy, combining them however with the rich cultural reserves of Chicanismo’s distant Indianness and its more recent Mexican ancestry. To be precise, the Chicano Renaissance achieved multifaceted objectives: it cultivated self-esteem among the community members, it emphasized the ties with the Amerindian autochthony, it rebelled against American socio-cultural modulations and it opened the way for the Mexican-American redefinition of the self.

While the primary objectives of *el movimiento* were economic, political and social, the Chicano Renaissance clearly promoted the cultural issue. Despite their different approaches to social life, both *el movimiento* and the Chicano Renaissance managed to accomplish three objectives: they organized Chicanos against the dominant society, voiced a unique Chicano identity and sought to reconceive Chicanismo as a distinct ethnic group in the wider US context. In fact, this argument is central to what follows in this study; simply put, this dissertation proposes that for Mexican-Americans the socio-economic, political and cultural zones are not distinct aspects of experience; instead, they co-relate and sustain each other. The politics of *el movimiento* and the poetics of the Chicano Renaissance may show differing degrees of didacticism or polemicism, but they are both communal expressions of the Mexican-American community’s need for self-definition. If the Chicano political rhetoric is not detached from cultural poetics, and *vice versa*, then *el movimiento* and the Chicano Renaissance are interrelated. Seen in this light, the political agendas of *el movimiento* could not possibly have accomplished their objectives without the realization of a cultural flowering during the Chicano Renaissance. Indeed, Chicano activist leaders realized that the help of Chicano intellectuals was of the utmost significance to the rise of a collective consciousness. And from the beginning “Chicano leaders in the *movimiento* saw the arts as an important tool to achieve their objectives. The arts became a powerful agency in redefining
identity and expressing pride in ethnicity” (Meir and Ribera 235). Similarly, the Chicano Renaissance would never have succeeded without the prior politicized unity of Chicanos during *el movimiento*. The social, economic, political and cultural domains are not easily distinguished, but they all permeate the texts to be examined, and show a unique flair for bringing together the political with the poetic. In other words, these writers manage to combine the actual experiences they have lived with the more imaginary or cultural aspects of the literary text. In line with their history of living in-between cultures and nations, Mexican-American artists more often than not resort to a synthesis of the quotidian with the symbolic, or the everyday aspect of experience with the hallucinating sublime.

As one of the (post)modern immigrant literatures in the wider US context, Mexican-American literature provides the reader with a deep insight into the concept of identity. It should be stressed, however, that the profound scepticism over issues of self-consciousness and representation is not unique to Mexican-Americans, but a broader social phenomenon of minority groups in or outside the sphere of the US. Congruent with global processes of revolt against power, the propagation of the Chicano self is not only a “demonopolization and diffusion” of the Anglo-European hegemony, but also an interdependency with other postcolonial, formerly subjugated subjectivities (Featherstone 15). Quite superficially explained (mainly for the purposes of economy), the peripheral identity search is the outcome of a complex historical moment in world affairs, starting in the 1950s with the feeling of uncertainty after World War II, the Third World’s independence from European colonizing forces, and the civic upheavals of the Civil Rights Movement in the US. Amidst this political complexity stemming from the 1950s, Mexican-Americans have expressed the need to redefine and reconceptualize the Chicano collective or individual self. The publication of *Pocho* (1959) by Jose Antonio Villarreal, a semi-autobiographical novel exploring the *mexicano* immigrant’s culture shock from societal pressures in the US, *The City of Night*
(1963) by John Rechy, a controversial novel which inaugurated the new genre of gay ethnic fiction, and Tomás Rivera’s *... y no se trago la tierra / ... And the Earth Did not Part* (1971) describing the plight of *mexicano* farmworkers through the eyes of a child, are just a few examples of Chicano fiction which explore issues of identity-construction and subject-representation. All these texts show a common practice among Mexican-American writers: to turn to their collective as well as individual historical, socio-cultural and political experiences in order to apprehend the dynamics of an in-depth identity search.

Upon commencing this study, I puzzled over the theoretical perspective appropriate to the identity-focused concerns underpinning Mexican-American literature. Having read numerous studies by philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists on the issue of identity, I often found myself in a quandary about what identity is and how it is formed. Moreover, I often felt that identity is no more than an incidental construct, or the outcome of an obscure, relational process taking its course in social life (political and economic), cultural practices and individual whim, without of course pigeon-holing these categories. Although social sciences and history certainly prove valuable in this concern, there is also a profound preoccupation with spatiality markedly present in most Chicano conceptualizations of the self. Thus, the Mexican-American history of discrimination and social oppression can be fully grasped only in the “mobility zone of the Southwest,” or in the borderlands around the Rio Grande Valley, and this is the region where I have concentrated my study. Both Mexican-American identity and the Chicano novel are the products of a cross-cultural confrontation in the space of the borderlands, and are created under specific “sociological, cultural and historical conditions” (Saldívar 13). With this in mind, the postcolonial writings of Homi Bhabha, who locates culture in the “third space” of negotiation, and of Edward Said, who introduces the notion of an “imaginative geography” in order to problematize the power-discourse between dominance and subservience, truly enrich
my perspective of Chicano identity formation. The common denominator in Bhabha’s and Said’s contributions to social philosophy is that the issue of identity invokes a political juxtaposition, and the accordance of superiority or inferiority is neither truth nor fiction, but both. To explain, self-consciousness and the understanding of others is the product of a socio-political discourse during the construction of subjectivities. Nevertheless, a large part of my theoretical perspective has been drawn from European academia, and to be more precise I have found Michel Foucault’s concept of “heterotopias” and Deleuze-Guattari’s complimentary notions of “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” highly insightful. My use of European theories, postmodern in their majority, is not only the imprint of my schooling, but also my conviction that the critical and cultural discourses of the peripheral voice are “produced within the cultural dominant, within it but not entirely of it” (Sánchez 7).

However, the theoretical paradigm drawn from Cultural Studies which best correlates to an understanding of the rise of Chicano identity in textual practices is Stuart Hall’s investigation of cultural identity and representation, notably conceived in the context of Diaspora Studies. In the widely-acclaimed essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990), Hall starts off with the postmodern thesis which problematizes and questions “the very authority and authenticity to which the term, cultural identity lays claim” (222). In line with the postmodern relativization of knowledge, the loss of authenticity and the pastiche quality of identity, Hall destabilizes any preconceptions over cultural identity. Rather outspoken though he is, Hall declares in his introductory comments:

What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say “in our own name,” of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place. Identity is not as transparent or
unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as “production,” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation. (222)

Hall claims that there are two different ways of conceptualizing cultural identity: the first is “in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self,’ hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially-imposed selves, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (223). Hall suggests that the above approach to cultural identity fetishizes the past, and in its extremes promotes ethnic essentialism. If the past is there to be recovered and celebrated by an ethnic group, then the present cultural identity ceases to negotiate with the world. In this logic, Hall holds that the historicized conception of cultural identity can indeed be limiting in the process to self-cognition. The second view of cultural identity, which Hall openly espouses, defies any essentializing or static definition of identity without, however, discarding the past. This view focuses on “the ruptures and discontinuities” in historical time which formulate ethnic uniqueness. More like a paradigmatic approach, it flirts with the dynamics of time and perceives cultural identity as “a matter of becoming rather than being” (223). In line with this view, Hall claims that cultural identity is not a “fixed essence” and cannot be insulated from world history or social interaction; rather, cultural identities are always formed in relation to the world around, or

[they are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a “positioning.” Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic,
transcendental “law of origin.” (226)

Hall’s understanding of cultural identity welcomes the readings of a group’s historical and social representations. But he also focuses on the political dialectics, the crosscuttings among various groups where the sense of the self is constructed.

Obviously, Hall wishes to challenge the fallacy of a stable self-perception, be it cultural, political, personal, or collective. In doing so, he attributes meaning outside the self and to social interaction. As Hall suggests, the world surrounding the self, both contemporary and historical, is the actual source of meaning. The world presents dialectics of representation and one’s self is formed always-already in relation to the social stimuli with which he/she interacts. Hall goes one step further and maintains that all cultural practices are forms of representation. The implication here is far more complex than it appears on the surface. To begin with, if a subject represents the self in relation to other subjects then “difference persists—in and alongside continuity” (227). For Hall, “difference matters” because it welcomes the historical and the social facet of experience in the analysis of identity formation. Difference also destabilises the primacy of homogeneity and whatever has erroneously been considered stable, like the notions of communal understanding and self-identification. Hall’s proposition of difference is certainly unsettling; but at the same time it breaks the mighty barriers which have controlled diffidence and hybridity for too long. In Hall’s own words: “Difference challenges the fixed binaries which stabilise meaning and representation and show how meaning is never finished or completed, but keeps on moving to encompass other additional or supplementary meanings” (229). Hall discerns two axes in the formation of identity “simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity and continuity and the vector of difference and rupture” (226). Based on this principle, Hall renames “cultural identity” “production” and advocates primacy to the positionings minority groups take towards the narratives from the past, and also towards their present socio-cultural
negotiations. Fully aligning with Hall’s ideas, this dissertation uses the two key-notions of “the construction of identity” and “the collective prodigy” as guidelines in its subsequent five chapters. Along with abolishing the fallacy of authenticity or, to use Hall’s term, “uniqueness” of identity, the Chicano self is viewed as a construct, one that is drafted diachronically and synchronically through similarities and differences (229). Moreover, if according to Hall cultural identity is a form of representation, then the Chicano self-cognition is a social practice. To signify the self is to engage in “practices of freedom,” but that practice entails the presence of a hegemonic regime (Watney 157). Thus, when setting the perimeters of the Chicano/a self, mestizos (half Indian and half Spanish inhabitants of the Americas) in the US call for their collective rights as part of an organized resistance mechanism. Accordingly, the self becomes a collective prodigy, one that is composed under conditions of political and ideological contestation.

Apart from Hall’s cultural proposal, Chicano literary criticism has been very influential to this study. Although, the European schools certainly have a lot to offer in the present postcolonial and postmodern era, I often feel that European theorizing shows a preference for abstractions, whereas the Mexican-American critical approach greatly depends on the tangible, quotidian experience. Despite the fact that mythic and symbolic dimensions are regularly present in a wide number of Chicano/a writings, for example in the works of Tomás Rivera, Rudolfo Anaya, and Gloria Anzaldúa, their presence is not a mere fetishizing of culture, falsely detached from world experience, but an instrumental reserve of the Chicano collective memory. In particular, the way most Mexican-Americans deal with the past, distant or recent, tracing their Indian roots or their border-experience respectively, is not an aestheticizing fancy, but a translational practice or a “homomorphism” (Maranda 12). For Chicanos, the past, whether mythic, socio-cultural or historical, is subject to appropriation. Chicano texts turn to the past with a distinct objective in mind, which is to reuse, redefine
and adapt it to the contemporary needs of Chicanismo. With this supposition in mind, and with the knowledge that Chicano literary criticism is a relatively new school of study, I have turned to two widely-acclaimed literary theorists of Mexican-American fiction: Joseph Sommers and Ramón Saldívar. I feel that these two critics emphasize the historical and dialectical aspects of Chicano literature, and this mode of criticism aptly informs my own readings of Chicano writings in relation to problematics of identity. Moreover, Sommers and Saldívar advocate an interdisciplinary approach to literature, where the qualities of the literary text are no longer devalued as figurative, unstable abstractions, but are valorized as cultural representations in which “power and history work through them, in ways their authors cannot fully control” (Clifford, “Partial Truths” 7).

At the beginning of his essay “Critical Approaches to Chicano Literature” (1979), Sommers poses a key question to the study of Mexican-American belle lettres: Which is the best way to approach the Chicano literary text? His initial response involves a brief discussion of three different critical approaches to literature: “the formalist, the culturalist and the historical-dialectical” (143). According to Sommers, the formalist mode of criticism involves two common methodological features: “reliance on comparative criteria and stress on textual analysis” (144). However, Sommers objects to the formalist approach because it involves the blatant aestheticization of literature and “the assumption that literature is a phenomenon of print, with the most respected exemplars being those consumed by the educated middle class” (145). Sommers warns that this emphasis on the “aesthetic quality” of the text minimizes the significance of the social and historical aspects of Chicano literature. In addition, the study of literature as a “print phenomenon” of the bourgeois excludes oral tradition. On the other hand, the culturalist critical approach implies that “present-day Chicano mental structures, by dint of a sort of Jungian operation of the collective unconscious, retain continuity with the thought patterns and the cosmology of the Aztec past”
Unlike the formalist school, culturalist criticism sustains oral tradition and welcomes “the rediscovery of cultural origins, of original myths” (147). Yet, Sommers rejects the culturalist approach because it carries the two-fold danger of venerating the past, and of overlooking the present social signification of the text. Finally, the historical-dialectical method is Sommers’s preferred form of analysis for a Chicano text. As a dialectical form of criticism, this approach involves the combination of “formal, cultural and historical analysis” (149). For Sommers the dialectical study of Chicano literature opens up the sphere of research to multiple facets of experience, involving the political and the socio-cultural. Accordingly, the best way to discuss Chicano literature is to consider the writer not as “an omniscient vate [poet, bard], seer, nor self-anointed revolutionary, but rather a creative interpreter, one who is part of a group and must assume the contradictions of this social condition and struggle to resolve them” (150-1). Clearly, Sommers’s reasoning politicizes criticism and suggests that any approach to Chicano literature should bear in mind that the Chicano artist is above all a member of a distinct ethnic community, or, put differently, an individual voice which, however, rises out of a collective experience.

Heeding Sommers’s call for a historical-dialectical approach to Chicano literature, Ramón Saldívar undertakes the task of uncovering the historical, economic and social dialectics inherent in Chicano narratives. In the introduction to his seminal analysis of Chicano literature, Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference (1990), Saldívar celebrates the notion of ideology as the deus ex machina which bridges the gap between social sciences and literary criticism. Saldívar points out:

As literature, [Chicano] narratives embody new ways of perceiving social reality and significant changes in ideology. As resistant ideological forces in their own right, their function is to shape modes of perception in order to
affect new ways of interpreting social reality and to produce in turn a
general social, spiritual, and literary revaluation of values. Thematically,
aesthetically, conceptually, and politically, the works of these [Mexican-
American] women and men constitute no single literary tradition but they
do manifest a common idea of the function of literature as a result of the
specific historical, social, and economic experience that these authors have
been obliged to share. (6-7)

According to Saldívar, far from giving the description of real-life experiences “a simple
mirror of the life and folklore of a heretofore invisible segment of American society,” most
Chicano narratives interpret social life and then impart a revised social awareness on their
Chicano readers (6). Indeed, a persistent ideological trajectory is present in most Chicano
narratives, but not in its strict didactic sense. Ideology in Chicano literature emerges as a
combination of politics and poetics and as the production of “creative structures of
knowledge to allow its readers to see, to feel, and to understand their social reality”
(Saldívar 7).

Saldívar’s approach to Chicano literature involves a quest for self-cognition, realized
in “the history of dialectics in general and of the dialectics of difference, in particular” (28).
Dialectics, difference, destruction and reconstruction are key notions in Saldívar’s analysis,
and the theoretical claim is that a given Chicano writer seeks to reconceive the self by
looking at the community’s historical negotiations with the dominant culture. This regard for
the history of the Chicano community gives rise to the “oppositional ideological form of the
Chicano novel,” which Saldívar calls the “dialectics of difference” (6). History then becomes
the raw material which allows the Chicano writer to (re)conceive and (re)site the self. This is
how Saldívar puts his rather complex, though essentially insightful reasoning:
The subversive edge of [Chicano] novels [...] effects destruction. But this destruction is not simply the ordering of the chaos of reality. The Chicano novel’s ideology of difference emerges from a more complex unity of at least two formal elements: its paradoxical impulse toward revolutionary deconstruction and toward the production of meaning. A unified theory of the Chicano novel must be able to handle this duality. The general notion of “difference” I have proposed allows us to consider this dual tendency of the Chicano novel faithfully, for it uses a dialectical concept that determines the semantic space of Chicano literature as that intersection of the cultural-historical reality appropriated by the text to produce itself, and of the aesthetic reality produced by the text. [...] The Chicano novel is thus not so much the expression of this ideology of difference as it is the production of that ideology (sic). (27)

For Saldívar, the Chicano narrative is above all the product of historical time and social interaction. With this argument, Saldívar opts for a synthesis of the historical, cultural and literary approaches to the Chicano novel. Carefully avoiding the term “politics,” while showing preference for the “subversiveness” of Chicano literature, Saldívar frequently points out a political bias in all Chicano writings. And the politics of the Chicano narrative is not only expressive of the profound need to define the self against the dominant culture, but it also articulates a unique aesthetic quality.

One of the Chicano literary texts which inspired and helped formulate this study is Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands: La Frontera, The New Mestiza (1987), where the issue of the Chicano/a identity is placed within a “transpositional” context (Leach, Culture and Communication 15). Even though Anzaldúa’s lesbian-feminist perspective draws lines between male and female mestizo identities, and some critics have mistakenly decoded the
text as a polemical expression of the ethnic feminist tradition, it is my conviction that *La Frontera* establishes a syncretic Chicano identity. Anzaldúa calls for the *mestizo/a* consciousness, the revised self-perception by all and for all Chicanas, but she also transcends all dualisms in her definition of Chicanismo. Anzaldúa does away with any dichotomies of national, cultural, theoretical or concrete nature. Instead, she brings all facets of experience together because they are the real components of the Chicano collective identity. Anzaldúa also places emphasis on the spatial issue and conceives of Chicano identity as first and foremost formed at the juncture of two cultures, one located in the north and one in the south. The borderlands (*la frontera*) become the locus of Chicano self-consciousness; and the connected dual parameters, first of migrancy and second of the continuous flow of cultural data from Mexico into the Mexican-American community, inform the Chicano self. So, when she asks the question “¿Qué eres?” (What are you?), she identifies the Chicano self by several names, but does not locate nor ground that *mestizo* self in a specific geographic locale. For Anzaldúa, the Chicano is a nomad, a traveler who constructs his/her cultural identity always in motion. This is how she defines Chicano identity:
Si le preguntas a mi mama, “¿Qué eres?”

Nosotros los Chicanos straddle the borderlands. On one side of us, we are constantly exposed to the Spanish of the Mexicans, on the other side we hear the Anglos’ incessant clamoring so that we forget our language. Among ourselves we don’t say nosotros los americanos, o nosotros los españoles, o nosotros los hispanos. We say nosotros los mexicanos (by mexicanos we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one). We distinguish between mexicanos del otro lado and mexicanos de este lado. Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul--not one of mind, not one of citizenship. (62)

Anzaldúa bypasses the force of the borderline, “positions” Chicanismo at the borderlands and at the same time emphasizes Chicano racial identity. She further expresses the belief that the sense of collective-belonging is formed symbolically. Chicanismo does not equal a national identity; rather it stands for “a set of positions in language and knowledge, from which culture appears to be enunciated” (Hall 34). For Anzaldúa, the triad of the real, the symbolic and the fantastic constitute Chicano identity. Accordingly, she does make reference to real topographic parameters in the use of the word lado (side) or in the symbolism of the borderline between Mexico and the USA, but she transcends the very significance of this borderline in the formation of a collective identity. Moreover, she argues in her preface that mexicano identity is the metaphysical knowledge of a collective self which encompasses the fantastic and the creation of a mytho-logic in the “mesquite flowering, the wind, Ehecatl, whispering its secret knowledge, the fleeing images of the soul in fantasy” (preface).

In her desire to sustain a mestizo consciousness, Anzaldúa unites the mestizo people by drawing attention to their common experience; in other words, historical-cultural
knowledge takes supremacy over political or national consciousness. La Frontera celebrates the cultured self as the cornerstone of the formation of a collective cause. And by bringing together the competing discourses of otro lado and este lado, Anzaldúa establishes the autonomy of Chicanos, not literally in the sense of cartographic confines, but on a symbolic cultural paradigm:

I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. Soy un amasamiento, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that has not only produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings. We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but the center holds, we’ve made some kind of evolutionary step forward.

Nuestra alma el trabajo, the opus, the great alchemical work; the spiritual mestizaje, a morphogenesis, an inevitable unfolding. (81)

Anzaldúa’s autonomy or freedom, if the term is preferred, is in her ability to recognize the self as in-between cultures. The cultural element, however, is not an abstract facet of experience. More to the point, culture is all-encompassing because it pervades all expressions of life. Clarke and his colleagues suggest that:

Culture is the way, the forms, in which groups “handle” the raw material of their social and material existence; […] it is the practice which realizes or objectivates group life in meaningful shape and form. […] The culture
of a group or class is the peculiar and distinctive “way of life” of the
group or class, the meanings, values and ideas embodied in institutions, in
social relations, in systems of belief, in mores and customs, in the uses of
objects and material life. (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts 53)

Similarly, Anzaldúa’s cultured self is polysemous: the self expresses both the empirical (the
actually lived), and the structural (the patterns of socio-cultural negotiation and exchange). 10

Given that Sommers, Saldívar and Anzaldúa all adapt an identity-focused approach to
Chicano culture and literature, the focus of this study has become the Chicano identity quest
and interpretation of la vida (the life). However, it is my conviction that apart from the
commonly shared attack against white American society, Mexican-American writers do not
reach a consensus on the notion of identity formation. In fact, I believe that Chicanos
comprise a heterogeneous group, where the pattern of diffidence can be detected not only
against Anglo institutions, but also within their community. If we look at Chicano history as
the most easily accessible source for understanding the group’s evolution, we note that some
Mexican-Americans experienced migrancy after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), 11
others during the Mexican Revolution (1910), and some have never left the American
Southwest, but only experienced the southbound change of the border. My point here is that
we cannot homogenize the experience of Mexican-Americans because the conditions of their
identity formation are not identical. Similarly, Chicano culture may certainly have segments
and practices identifiable as unique to Mexican-Americans, for example the linguistic use of
caló, 12 or their indigenous religious practices combining Catholicism and the Indian mythic
traditions. Yet, it would be a mistake to consider the experiences of a third or second
generation barrio inhabitant as identical to the experiences of a first or second generation
migrant farmworker, or to that of an illegal border-crosser. Each of these categories may bear
the label of the Mexican-American, but the degree of their socialization or their interaction
with the world is quite dissimilar, which means that their life stories are quite dissimilar as well. Thus, the writers approached in this study take completely different attitudes to the notion of identity formation. Each of these approaches is well-formed and quite convincing to the reader, but follows different routes in achieving an objective. For some writers the past is a glorious moment in the group’s collective consciousness, as for example in Rudolfo Anaya’s use of the Indian mythopoeia in *Lord of Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl* (1987) and *The Legend of La Llorona* (1984) (Chapter One); for others the past functions as a point of reference to be demystified, transcended, or revised (Chapters Four and Five). For some writers the experiences of migrancy or *campesino* labor is formative to the present and a constant reminder of their rootedness either in Mexico or in the Southwest *la tierra* (Chapters Two and Five), while other writers promote their urban experience in the barrios as a prerequisite to their communal feeling of belonging (Chapters Three and Four).

Chapter One presents Rudolfo Anaya’s excavation of the cultural legacy of Chicanos by examining two Amerindian myths, one prior to and the other contemporary with Cortez’s arrival in the Americas. For Anaya, the Chicano collective identity is tied to the aesthetic perspective of the *mestizo’s* Indianness. This of course does not mean that Anaya foregrounds the fantastic while displacing the significance of the real or the symbolic. More to the point, Anaya chooses the myths of Quetzalcoatl and La Llorona to postulate a new meaning to the Chicano cultural legacy. The way the two myths are treated in the novels *The Lord of Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl* (1987) and *The Legend of La Llorona* (1984) shows that myths can be appropriated to serve the contemporary needs of Chicanos. In other words, Anaya undoes the rigidity of a mythical legacy, and turns these myths into instruments of self-understanding in the hands of contemporary Mexican-Americans; and in doing so, Anaya refrains from essentialism, the approach which Sommers disdains. Moreover, in opposition to the “critical imperialism” of the postmodern era, where “the magical and the real are made
redundant,” Anaya fluctuates between the “marvelous real” of the pre-modern and the recording of indigenous folklore (Sánchez 6). Anaya displays some flair in bringing together the quotidian experience of the present in terms of the mythical past. Thus, superficially the two narratives romanticize the Chicano legacy by thematizing the supernatural and the sublime; however, on closer reading the two texts seem to mystify the past in order to provide their Chicano readers with an enlightened awareness of their collective history and social reproduction.

Chapters Two and Three highlight a major aspect in the process of identity formation: the spatial parameter. Over the last few years, the theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja seem to have formulated a novel critical approach to literature based on the triadic relationship among “chronos, topos and body.” In line with this trend, most literature on the Mexican-American experience shows that the spatial is the primary concern in Chicano self-perception. Chicanos live in the US Southwest, where the border between the Mexican and the US nations is repeatedly crossed, both legally and illegally, since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the annexation of the present southwestern states from Mexico. In effect, the emergent culture of the borderlands, as Anzaldúa defines it, loosens the perimeters of the two nations. In other words, there seems to be a continuous flow of cultural data between the two nations, affecting mainly the Chicano ethnics of US citizenship. This means that Chicanos perceive their collective self in relation to Mexican newcomers and the representation of their subjectivity is realized via the real condition of border-crossing. The spatial dimension then is vital to the definition of the Chicano self. Chapter Two reflects on the issue of border-crossings and the experiences of illegal mexicanos. Kata, the protagonist in Irene Hernandez Beltran’s novel, Across the Great River (1989), is a young girl who matures initially as a result of illegal border-crossing, and subsequently while relating to a rich array of stock characters in the US Southwest. These
include the folk hero of a *curandera* (folk medicine practitioner), the evil *coyote* (person who organizes illegal border-crossing), the benevolent Mexican-American doctor, who has achieved the American Dream of success, and the working class barrio Chicano, protective of all wetbacks (undocumented Mexican border-crossers). Kata reconciles herself to *mexicano* origin and eventually returns to Mexico with the awareness that the US is not a promise land, but a battlefield. In effect, her home in Mexico becomes the mythical land of Aztlan. For Kata, maturity comes when she realizes that happiness is attained south of the Rio Grande.

Chapter Three, *Barrio Vistas: The Spatial Parameter*, examines the spatial facet of identity formation beyond border-crossings but within the barrio-nucleus of the US nation by delving into the barrio experience and approaching the neighborhood as decisive to Chicano self-formulation. In accordance with the sociological supposition that the neighborhood is an “intimate context” functioning as a passage to the larger world outside, the cultural consciousness of Chicanos is drawn and sustained by their presence in the barrio (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts 65). Through an approach to a variety of texts drawn from the fields of anthropological and sociological study as well as from the world of literature, this chapter promotes the space of the barrio as an essential constituent of Chicano identity, both collective and individual. However, the texts presented here do not constitute a homogenous attitude to the barrio. Each of the speaking voices in Chapter Three presents a slightly different perspective to barrio experience. Despite a slight tendency to fetishize the barrio, which often reaches the point of romanticizing an otherwise segregated collective experience, some of the narratives, especially those from the recent past, sound critical of the barrio state of affairs. Yet, in their variation they seem to agree that the barrio must be preserved against Anglo politics of spatial dispersal. What prevails in this selection of writings is a political cry first to resist the systematized Anglo policy to break up the barrio, and second to halt the barrio’s abandonment by its Chicano inhabitants.
Chapters Four and Five explore individual perceptions of identity formation and how these deviate from the peripheral norm, as seen from within or from outside the community’s confines. These two chapters reinforce the premise that multiple perspectives populate a given social reality, meaning that a real-life situation can be transcoded in numerous ways, depending on the mind supervising the transmutation. So, Chapter Four first considers the autobiography of Miguel Méndez, who records his personal experience of crossing from the labor force to US academia. *From Labor to Letters* (1997) is an experimental personal account populated by numerous voices, all inhabiting and at the same time formulating the single body of the autobiographer. Méndez draws attention to an identity formed in a complex experience where the social, the cultural and the personal meet. In short, Méndez comes to a standstill and looks at himself as a construct, as an identity prodigy. The second text presented in Chapter Four is Tomas Atencio’s lecture “Resolana: A Pathway to Knowledge,” which was delivered at Stanford University in 1988. Atencio, a sociologist by profession, blurs the lines between the personal and the collective. As his lecture testifies, the individual is not detached from the community; rather the individual mind and the community are mutually defined and defining. Thus, Atencio perceives autobiography as a collective record, and one formulated by the community’s experience. Chapter Five examines Tomás Rivera’s pilgrim to collectivization in his classic novel *... y no se lo trago la tierra* (1970). Delivered through the voice of an aloof boy-protagonist, *la tierra* is a collection of seemingly unrelated short stories and anecdotes, which are, however, all enacted in the boy-protagonist’s mind. Rivera’s novel is probably the best specimen of the emergent Chicano literary tradition in the 1970s, which deals with issues of identity cognizance, and a joyous celebration of the individual mind’s construction of a collective identity, and *vice versa*. *La tierra* is the first novel by a Chicano which has received such wide critical recognition although it was originally composed in Spanish. Furthermore, *la tierra* has inaugurated a new
era in the unique Mexican-American literary idiom, where the narrative and temporal structures of the text maintain a playful relation to its underlying themes.

To conclude, it is my conviction that the issue of identity is central to any discussion of contemporary society. But to describe postmodernity and postcoloniality one needs to adopt the adjective “plural” to modify a world order with so many social stratifications and cultural intersections. Far from the metaphor of the melting pot or the acculturating point of view, this study looks at contemporary American society as a host of numerous identities, interrelated and interdependent. Marginal groups may indeed accommodate certain identity poetics and policies, whether through common ancestry, folklore, rituals, history, kinship ties, linguistic distinctiveness or the utopian phase of ethnic solidarity. However, an ethnic group is not separated from other racial groups or the dominant society, but is involved in a “discourse,” and is thus constantly being defined and redefined by other voices or in relation to the ideas held by these other voices. In the present diasporic and universal era, when the free flow of data and information is the norm rather than the novelty, an ethnic group cannot possibly follow the route of essentialism; more aptly, other communities mold its profile and way of living. Mexican-Americans, the given marginal group under discussion in this study, approach life as a constant pilgrimage to self-identification and as an argument to the existent extraneous definitions of the self. And the process of self-identification involves fleeing from the tight grip of the socio-cultural establishment, undoing stereotypes and attempting to shape a revised rhetoric of existence. Hence, a recurrent concern of this research is that identity is ambiguous because it is recapitulative and prospective. And this is precisely the core of this study, Identities of the Periphery: The Construction and the Collective Prodigy in Chicano/a Writings: to explore the ways in which the Chicano peripheral subject delineates him/herself in relation to the hegemonic center(s), to look into how the marginal group of Mexican-Americans attempts to form its own center, in other
words its own manifesto of existence, and to show that marginal people wish to abolish the status quo, in order to form a new self-concept. Here the term the “construction of identity” signifies the process of developing a new self-awareness, a “collective prodigy” from a broad array of social, cultural and historical sources.

To the best of my knowledge, no study has yet attempted a specifically identity-focused exploration of Chicano subjectivity. Instead, the complicated issue of self-formation has been the peripheral concern of several cultural, political, social, literary or ethnographic treatises, without ever giving rise to a volume of its own identity-thematic concern. In all honesty, I admit that when conducting this study I have often felt that what I have to say has been said already. The simplest explanation I can give is that since my research is an interdisciplinary work, I have often dealt with already “constituted disciplines” and theories (Barthes 98). This means that my study is pervaded by and interwoven with “other” theories, to use this popular word in the realm of identity-cognizance, which do not, however, abolish the validity of my approach to Mexican-American construction, but instead create “a new work that belongs to no one but to myself” (Barthes 98). As Edmund Leach humorously accounts for his interdisciplinary approach to culture: “All the ideas are borrowed from others; the only thing original about the argument is the form in which it is cast. But the essay is about the semantics of cultural forms and since the form is my own so also is the meaning” (Culture and Communication 2). Similarly, I feel that the decodings and circumscriptions of the Mexican-American self are mine, but the theoretical framework is part of my formal academic schooling. I hope that this novel exploration of the Chicano/a identity will enlighten the enigmas of the postmodern ethnic self, and I welcome further analyses on the notion of self-awareness in Mexican-American literature.
Notes

1 The *movimiento* of the 1960s and 1970s was a direct consequence of *la raza’s* struggle for equal justice, educational rights and civic liberties in the 1940s and 1950s. The movement started as a reaction to Anglo discrimination, but soon there was a gradual move to ethnic separatism and independence. In its advocacy of a militant cultural nationalism, *el movimiento* demanded Chicano power and the development of a true Chicano identity, culture, and history. See Meir and Ribera *Mexican Americans*.

2 In this study the terms “Chicano” and “Mexican-American” are used invariably to signify US citizens of Mexican ancestry. Although in a conversation I had with the poet Raúl Salinas, he fervently objected to the use of the hyphen and to the label of a “hyphenated subjectivity” attributed to Chicanos, I believe that the hyphen helps to conceive of Chicanos as the products of a “cultural collision” (Anzaldúa, *La Frontera* 78). Less frequently I use the popular and politically loaded designation of Chicanos as *la raza* (the race of Mexican-Americans). Moreover, the term *mexicano* signifies Mexican nationals who either live south of the Rio Grande or have illegally crossed the border into US territory. Finally, the older term *nuevomexicano* appears in Chapter Three to refer to the Hispanic-Mexican inhabitants (mostly farmworkers) of the annexed New Mexico in the nineteenth century.

3 According to Don Luis Leal, before the decade of the 1950s no literary history nor any articles that discussed Chicano literature existed. Leal’s explanation to this fact is that Anglo supremacy had accorded Mexican-Americans with “no particular education--other than [their] official documents” (Cowan, *Bibliography of Spanish Press* 3). Mexican-American writers were kept voiceless and expressionless despite their having been prolific in the genres of autobiography and historiography, and in the more popular *corrido* tradition.
Leal attempts to carry out this much needed archival research into Chicano writings, which was composed prior to the outbreak of the Chicano Movement. Similarly, Ada Savin calls for a “prompt caveat” in the study of Mexican-American literature, due to these peoples “physical and spiritual presence in the North American Southwest to pre-Anglo-American times” (341). For more on the Chicano literary history, see D. L. Leal “Chicano Literary Heritage” and Savin “Mexican-American Literature.”

4 In “Partial Truths,” the introduction to Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (1986), James Clifford holds that ethnographic study raises methodological, ideological and ethical questions, which open up the parameters of the discipline to previously circumscribed zones. To begin with, Clifford believes that academic ethnography and literary genres interpenetrate because they deal with cultural representation at specific historical times. From this perspective, Clifford’s mode of ethnographic study goes beyond textual practices, and reaches “contexts of power, resistance, institutional constraint, and innovation” underpinning the text (2). Fully agreeing with Clifford’s theory, I believe that literature is currently overcoming the critic’s close reading of a genre’s writing style, and welcomes more experimental forms of reading where the ideological, the political and of course the poetic can co-relate in a textual analysis.

5 It should be noted that there is a nascent semantic controversy in the use of the term “renaissance” for the Chicano Cultural Movement. There is a substantial number of Chicano literary critics who claim that the term “renaissance” is erroneously used to define a literary tradition that has never ceased to be productive. These critics prefer the term “flowering” because it is considered an apt description of Chicanismo’s ongoing literary production since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Consider how Juan Rodriguez sides with this proposition: “Flowering, I believe, is the term that best describes the latest stage in the evolution of our
literature, a literature that since the middle of the past century has produced literary works under the most severe limitations. (This writer has found hundreds of examples of these works in the superb Spanish language newspaper collection at the Chicano Studies Library at the University of Berkeley, among other places). The term renaissance, in so much as it implies a previous static ‘dark age,’ ignores that production, and is therefore inadequate” (“Problematic in Rivera” 139).

The term “demonopolization” is drawn from Mike Featherstone’s attempt to sketch out a typology of the present postmodern world’s cultures in *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity* (1995). In his definition of culture against the looming fear of universalization, Featherstone appeases the intellectual world with the argument that the multiple cultures of the world are in no danger of having their differences levelled to a universal culture. Instead, cultured groups are more likely to interact with one another, and then define and be defined by each other, not locally though, but on a global scale. As for the concept of “demonopolization,” it is used in conjunction with its opposite “monopolization,” and as a remedy to the dangers of universalization or as a condition which promotes the free flow of data and information: “[W]e need to understand the emergence of relatively autonomous culture (knowledge and other symbolic media) in relation to the growth in the autonomy and power potential of specialists in symbolic production. We therefore need to focus on the carriers of culture and the contradictory pressures that are generated by changing interdependencies and power struggles of the growing fraction within the middle class towards dual processes (a) the monopolization and separation of a cultural enclave, and (b) the demonopolization and diffusion of culture to wider publics” (15). To my thinking, demonopolization translates into democratization with its antecedent effect of the emergence
of the peripheral voice, whereas monopolization equals hegemonic conditions, such as imperialism, colonialism or the claim to cultural supremacy.

7 The notion of an “imagined geography” is introduced in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and describes the concoction of a demarcation line between nations or cultures. In the essay “Orientalism Reconsidered” (2000) Said complements his definition of an imagined geography with the statement that the borderline is “less a fact of nature than it is a fact of human production” between the Orient and the Occident (199). For Said, the boundaries between the Orient and the Occident lay claim to social knowledge and cultural supremacy, which in turn empower the West over the East. Said has elaborated on the way we perceive the Other and the dominant in terms of a theatrical stage where the role accorded to the marginal is performed: “On this stage will appear figures whose role is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe” (*Orientalism* 68). Said suggests that the representation of a group of people is not always an objective truth, but a construct, or a type of conditioning to outside stimuli. See Chapters Two and Three of this study.

8 The term “homomorphism” is used in Pierre Maranda’s introduction to the thirteen anthropological readings of myth compiled in *Mythology* (1973). Maranda comments favorably on Claude Lévi-Strauss’s study of myth and claims that Lévi-Strauss attempts a “transformational analysis” of myths “which tackles the operations of the invariant human mind coping with variant environments and trying to reduce them to manageable systems. Like the scientist, the mythmaker builds homomorphisms, and both make their tasks easier by always bracketing away some dimensions” (12).
With the term “transpositional” I mean that a collectivity or a group of people represent the self not as a fixed mode of existence, but as likely to change positions and to transcend stereotypes and cultural legacies. Apart from the term’s correspondence to Stuart Hall’s “positionings” in social relations and Homi Bhabha’s “third space” in cultural representation, Edmund Leach uses the same term when he discusses cultural symbols and their metaphoric quality as a “paradigmatic transposition.” Leach uses music as an example in the process of transpositions: “In music we are familiar with the idea of a melody being transposed into a different key so that it can be played by a different instrument, but this is simply a special case of a very general process by which syntagmatic chains of signs linked by metonymy can be shifted by paradigmatic transposition (metaphor) into a different manifest form. […] An example of paradigmatic association is provided by the simultaneous transposition which occurs when a sequence of musical notes is interpreted as a sequence of finger movements across the keyboard of a piano, which, by further conversion, become a sequential pattern of sound waves reaching the ear of the listener. The relation between the written score, the finger movements and the sound waves is paradigmatic” (Culture and Communication 15). See also Hall “Cultural Identity” and Bhabha “Third Space.”

In relation to the discipline of social anthropology, Leach suggests that there are two major traditions: the empiricist (functionalist) and the rationalist (structuralist). The basic task of the former is “to record directly-observed, face-to-face behaviors of members of a local community interacting with one another in their day-to-day activities” (4). On the other hand, rationalist anthropologists undertake the task of recovering “the structures of ideas” governing a community (5). In relation to this distinction, Anzaldúa seems to be aligning with both schools of research. She looks at the empiricism in identity formation, but she also
uncovers the mythical and metaphysical aspect of the Chicano self. See Leach Culture and Communication.

11 With the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the United States acquired from Mexico the present territory of the states of Arizona, California, Nevada, Utah and half of Colorado, and received clear title to Texas. See Acuña Occupied America and Meier and Ribera Mexican Americans.

12 For more on the linguistic idiom of caló, see Chapter Three.

13 The notion of “discourse,” which is essentially a system of statements that can be made about peoples and among communalities, is drawn from Said’s Orientalism (1978). According to Said, the world’s groups of people are involved in political, ideological, cultural and ethical discourses, where power relations are played out and the sense of one’s self is formulated. To quote Said: “A discourse is a system of statements within which, and by which, the world can be known. Rather than referring to ‘speech’ in the traditional sense, [the] notion of discourse is a firmly bounded area of knowledge. [T]he world is not simply ‘there’ to be talked about, rather it is discourse itself within which the world comes into being. It is also in such a discourse that speakers and hearers, writers and readers, come to an understanding about themselves, their relationship to each other and their place in the world (the construction of subjectivity). It is that complex of signs and practices that organises social existence and social reproduction, which determines how experiences and identities are categorized” (3).
Chapter One

Mythography and Collectivization

in Rudolfo Anaya’s Lord of Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl

and The Legend of La Llorona

Myth, as a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present-day life and as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief. It is, therefore, neither a mere narrative, nor a form of science, nor a branch of art or history, nor an explanatory tale. It fulfills a function, *sui generis* closely connected with the nature of tradition, and the continuity of culture, with the relation between age and youth, and with the human attitude towards the past. The function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events. (Malinowski 146)

Introduction: Myth, Culture and Social Representation

The Mexican-American response to a long history of discrimination and geocultural displacement, roughly dating back to 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, was most resonantly expressed in the mobilizations of the Chicano Movement. As part of the broader Civil Rights Movement within the US since World War II, *el movimiento* is primarily a political movement against Anglo society, but also a means to reassess and fortify Chicano cultural identity. The resistance politics of *el movimiento* have been recorded as a revolt against Anglo institutional power, but at the same time they have given rise to a cultural
(re)affirmation of Chicanismo. Concerning the world of arts, the Mexican-American resistance to US dominance influenced the vast majority of Chicano artists, who drew their inspiration from the real life experiences of campesinos (farmworkers) and urban barrio (neighborhood or section of US city) dwellers. Chicano artists conceived of their works as political positionings, composed at the height of Mexican-American socio-political unrest and motivated by a combination of political, historiographic and aesthetic goals. By and large, Chicano literature of the 1960s sustained the political aims of the era, mainly by writing what could be labelled as Marxist literature or “littérature engagée” (Adereth 445). Indeed, until the end of the 1960s a common stylistic marker in Chicano writings was the realistic depiction of Chicano life in the fields and in the barrios, often shockingly detailed in order to trigger a collective reaction to discrimination and coercion. Turning the unique Chicano experiences of the distant or recent past into its raw material, Chicano literature of the 1960s more often than not thematized the Chicano peregrination against the background of “the US meritocracy” (Gutiérrez-Jones 101). Indicative of this trend, Luis Valdez’s actos (one-act plays) in his Teatro Campesino received widespread attention and Valdez’s name became synonymous with Chicano drama. Originally performed in the fields and then in barrio locales, Valdez’s actos were stage improvisations of the Chicano experience, which faithfully depicted the farmworker’s plight and the barrio subject’s marginalization. Besides the realistic depiction of the Mexican-Americans’ everyday life, many Chicano artists showed a marked concern for the history of the US Southwest. Among the most outstanding examples of a narrative text establishing the links between history, art and the politics of resistance is Americo Paredes’s classic study of the corrido tradition in With His Pistol in His Hand (1958). Paredes wrote about the legendary heroes of the Southwest, not only to carry out a folkloric or anthropological research into the Southwestern local color, but also to blend historiography with realistic fiction, and at the same time to introduce the validity of oral
tradition into Chicano literature. Paredes rediscovered the *corrido* “in the symbolic sphere” of resistance against Anglo domination and allowed his readership to discover the border balladry as a historical and political genre specific to Mexican-Americans of the borderlands (Saldívar 39).³

While Paredes was propelled by a folk and historical interest in the Southwest, and activists like Valdez promoted a politically motivated didacticism in Chicano literature, Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya introduced a third current into Chicano _belles lettres_ with his extensive use of folk motifs and folklore mysticism. Anaya’s first novel _Bless Me, Ultima_ (1972) received the Second Annual Premio Quinto Sol in 1971 and brought its writer wide critical acclaim and public recognition. Along with the subsequent publications of _Heart of Aztlan_ (1976), _Tortuga_ (1979) and the collection of short stories entitled _The Silence of the Llano_ (1983), Anaya’s novels are superb examples of philosophical and social skepticism, supported by the rich mythic stores of _mexicanos_ from both the north and the south sides of the Rio Grande border. Born, raised and educated in New Mexico, Anaya never really departs from the cultural richness of his native soil. Instead, he draws from the cultural heritage of his ethnic kin to form his artistic vision. Moreover, the fascination he maintains for the myths and _cuentos_ (tales) recited to him by his parents and other local _ancianos_ (the old ones) is proof of a keen cultural consciousness. Anaya seems to regard this rich store of myths, which is deeply rooted in the Southwest, as his primary source of inspiration. Thus, his unique literary idiom becomes an interpretive technique for contemporary social issues while it is persistently woven with the mytho-cultural reserves of Mexican-Americans.

Anaya started his writing career at the peak of Chicano activism at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s. This suggests that his contribution to Chicano literature may have been realized through the unique magic realism and local color of his novels, but the complexities of politics certainly influenced his work. If we accept the critical assumption
that history sustains and often sparks off most Chicano literary production, then the activist resistance to the hegemonic group and the political struggles for self-affirmation are the driving force for most early Chicano artists. Moreover, although Anaya departs from the literary norm of the realistic or political modes of writing elaborated by Paredes or Valdez, the cultural identity proposed by the majority of Chicano activists is not radically different from Anaya’s fascination with folk tales. Let us draw upon two instances from the \textit{movimiento} mobilizations of the 1960s where the symbolism of myths bound Chicanos into a collective politicized force. The Delano grape strike in 1965 was a non-violent induction into civil rights, a movement against US polity by the ill-used migrant workers, using the icon of \textit{La Virgen de Guadalupe} (Our Lady of Guadalupe) as its symbol. While Chicano strikers rallied and picketed against economic exploitation, banners of \textit{La Virgen de Guadalupe} led the protests and boycotts. The symbolic undertones in the icon of the brown-skinned Virgin represented “postconquest confluence of preCortezian and European religious imagery,” intensified self-identification for Chicano activists, and advanced the Chicano cultural identity as a historical conflation of Euro-Indian cultural elements (Pérez-Torres 172). In addition to the significance of \textit{La Virgen}, the mythical land of preCortezian Amerindians, Aztlan, has functioned as the symbolic homeland of contemporary Chicanos and has been a key term in Chicano politics since the late 1960s. The symbolic use of \textit{La Virgen} and Aztlan in the rise of the Chicano political consciousness highlights the legendary and religio-mythic aspects in these people’s self-affirmation and proves that the politics should not be studied in isolation from the group’s cultural practices. This sustains the present study’s critical belief that Anaya’s narratives do not in fact breach the highly political trend of the 1960s and 1970s. More to the point, his novels comprise a variation of literary creativity, promote the cultural facet of Chicanismo, and function as the means of interpreting socio-political life. Far from deteriorating into a useless “nativism,” Anaya’s deployment of indigenous cultural elements
is a powerful reclamation of Chicano heritage and a viable call for collective awareness. According to this hypothesis, Anaya’s use of myth suggests a highly political objective beneath the superficial stylistic marker of mystic aestheticism.

In order to consider Chicano mythography as a social activity, some theoretical points connected with the act of narration and the role of the narrator require discussion. Since mythography uses words to convey meaning, it is a mode of speech in essence. In both its written and oral forms, speech implies discourse. In turn, discourse involves three parties: the author (mythographer), the object (narrative) and the decoder (the audience or reading public). No conception is more relevant to this triad of meaning-exchange than the Aristotelian “ethos.” According to Aristotle, an orator performs before a crowd and exerts his “ethos,” where the term designates the speaker’s specific personal qualities. The orator is not unbiased but addresses his crowd with an objective in mind and his words, whether in oral or written form, function as a means of persuasion. In like fashion, the mythographer unfolds his/her narrative with a purpose in mind. This concealed purpose can be attained in a slow, tentative fashion unless of course the text is bluntly didactic. Through symbolism, allusion and connotative richness, the mythographer hopes to fulfill his/her goal, which is to inform the audience of his/her social perception of the world. The mythographer’s reading public does not merely contemplate a mythical past, but enters the dynamics of an “ideolegeme,” which is the mediation between “concepts of ideology as abstract opinion, class value, and the like, and the narrative materials” (Jameson 87). In the effort to impart meaning, the mythographer addresses both the object of contemplation (the myth per se) and the recipients of his material (the audience). This brief theoretical discussion introduces some of the questions that frequent this chapter: Who is the mythographer’s target group? Which mythic narrative is Anaya dealing with, and why so? How does he address his target group? How does he handle his material? In addition, this chapter concludes the approach to Anaya’s
mythic texts with the question: What moral or theme does the mythographer encode in his version of the myth? Or, in Fredric Jameson’s terms, what is the inherent “ideologeme” in the mythographic texts under scrutiny in the ensuing pages?

The aim of this chapter is to look into two of Anaya’s mythographic stories, Lord of Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl (1987) and The Legend of La Llorona (1984), and to explore the ways in which the two narratives construct a collective identity of the present, using cultural reserves from the past. Although the two short novels considered here have not received the same critical attention as Bless Me, Ultima or Heart of Aztlan, they are examined for their mystic plot patterns, which distance the contents of the novels from contemporary experience (unlike Bless Me, Ultima and Heart of Aztlan) but which also become vibrant affirmations of present-day Chicano identity. More explicitly, Lord of Dawn creates the social layers and the religious belief system of the Toltec community of the Americas in preCortezian times, and La Llorona creates an amalgam of indigenous religion, mythography and history against the background of mestizo genesis. Both texts refrain from any reference to contemporary campesino or barrio-experience, yet they serve the premise that Anaya’s use of myths supersedes the definition of an essentialist, nativistic “blithe celebration” (Pérez-Torres 9). Instead, his versions of these two ancient myths become symbols of social struggle and a means to self-affirmation. Far from projecting an obsolete gratification in mythic narratives, Anaya’s texts are instrumental literary productions, which construct the collective Chicano identity of the present. This chapter shows that the cultural expressions of Quetzalcoatl and La Llorona first retain the mythic memory of present-day Chicanos, and second juxtapose the cultural reserves of the indigenous peoples in the Southwest against the canonized capitalism of the Euro-American order. The two worlds Anaya presents, the preCortezian in Lord of Dawn and the early Cortezian in La Llorona, form socio-political ruptures in the individualism and misguided authenticity propagated by the dominant culture.
When Anaya undertakes the reconstruction of the Toltec cosmology and of the rise of *mestizaje*, he informs his readership through the lenses of cultural and epic insight. Finally, it should be stressed that this chapter approaches the two narratives as companion pieces and analyzes them according to the temporal specifications of their subject-matters. Thus, although *La Llorona* precedes the publication of *Lord of Dawn* by three years, this study commences with a discussion of the Toltec communal life and religious belief system in *Lord of Dawn*, complementing it with the colonial mytho-historical background of *La Llorona*.

The following discussion of Anaya’s mythic narratives is greatly supported by Bronislaw Malinowski’s anthropological research into the concept of myth because Malinowski was the first theoretician to reconsider the significance of mythic narratives in the formation of a collective sense of identity, and he was also the first to introduce the idea that the myth “cannot be divorced from its social function” (Block 135). 11 There are three major principles running through Malinowski’s theory, which supercede the canonized limitations of a religiously oriented study of myth. Malinowski claims that myths do not reside in the symbolic, fantastic or imaginary spheres, but

[s]tudied alive, myth [...] is a direct expression of its subject matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertions, even practical requirements. [...] Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force. (101)

The second principle of Malinowski’s work arises from the “hard-worked active force” of myths (116). With the claim that “the reality of the myth lies in its social function,” Malinowski in fact valorizes the socio-cultural force of myth (117). His theory forms a “functionalist” approach to myth and a proposition that “myth is an indispensable ingredient
of all cultures” (146). Malinowski works under the premise that myths and cultures are inextricably tied together, thus maintaining that each community elaborates on its cultural identity via the circulation of folk tales and legends. These narratives validate a sense of communality by bridging the gap between the legendary past, whether it is mythically or historically legendary, with the present perception of the self. The implication in Malinowskian writings is that the individual members of a community are open to the transmission of myths because through them individuals acquire a cultural and/or historical collective identity. If the “function” of the myth involves a sociological dimension, then the driving force behind the popularity of myths is the need for individuals to share a cultural ancestry, and to bond in a socio-cultural awareness. Finally, the third doctrine in Malinowski’s work is based on a historical consideration of myth. Malinowski suggests that myth is a type of historiography, but its tone and phraseology do not resemble the “sober, dispassionate history, since it is always made ad hoc to fulfill a certain sociological function, to glorify a certain group, or to justify an anomalous status” (125). Each mythic narrative is adaptive to the historical present of a collectivity and becomes “a semi-historic legend, a continuous sequence” for the fulfillment of a sociological function (126). Just like the experiences and needs of a group of people at a specific moment in time can give rise to a myth or a saga, differing and changing experiences and needs may verify the contents of an old myth. The myth is not a fossilized cultural segment, which remains unaltered in the flow of time. More to the point, in the process of handing down myths from one generation to the next, mythic expressions are determined by a quality of versatility because of the community’s changing experiences.

Malinowski’s introduction of the socio-cultural and historical dialectics in the study of myth brings up the issue of culture and the ways in which myths become vital socio-cultural expressions. As for the overly discussed concept of culture, it would not be an exaggeration to
say that the student of cultural studies can trace as many different definitions of culture as the books or articles written on the subject. Sociologists, anthropologists, politicians, psychologists and generally all varieties of disciplinary researchers can come up with their own definitions of the term. The approach to culture that appears most appropriate for the purposes of this chapter is the one proposed by the Chicano scholar Cecilio Orozco because it grasps the Malinowskian complexities in the triad of mythic memory, historical information and social agency. Orozco affirms, “culture is not ‘things,’ it is not what someone has done, or for that matter, what someone is doing. Culture can be understood (and perhaps accepted) by looking at the civilizations that put themselves at its disposal” (9). Orozco claims that culture is all encompassing, running through the mythic and historical, as well as the present experiences of a group of people. He then turns to the mytho-historical past of Chicanos, attempts to compile a genealogy of *mestizaje*, and proposes that in order to define Mexican-American cultural identity, one has to “turn to all the civilizations that have been at the disposal of all the previous cultures” (11). The implication here is that people of Mexican ancestry are the offspring of a mixture of civilizations and the rise of *mestizaje* is a complex combination of two major identities, the European and the Amerindian, each of the two, however, comprising numerous and diverse subcategories. Orozco graphically presents this combination of cultures, or more like a maze of civilizations, in the following chart.13
(Orozco, "Culture" 13)
For Orozco the mythic and historical past of Chicanos is a vital piece of knowledge for their contemporary self-identification. Beyond the past though, cultural identity is an expression of the present: “[W]hat a group of people looks like at a given moment, the way they solve their problems, and the values they hold” (Orozco 9). From this synchronic point of view, culture cannot be vague in time, but always specific in time. Orozco allows ample space for cultural variation with the claim that “the Chicano Culture of today [...] is not the same as the Chicano Culture of fifty years ago or ten years ago. Perhaps it is not even the same as it was yesterday, pointing to the fact that culture is and can be only understood at one particular point” (sic) (11). On these premises, myths become a vital aspect of Chicano cultural identity, but they are also subject to change and appropriation. Myths may run through the history of a group, but it is their unique realization at a particular point in time that carries historical significance and fulfills a social function. Based on a correlation between Malinowski’s discussion of myth and Orozco’s temporal relativization of Chicano cultural identity, this chapter follows the simple theoretical formula: myths are essential elements of culture, culture is time specific, and therefore myths should be construed in specific temporal dimensions. The aim of this chapter is to show that myths “cement”¹⁴ Chicano cultural identity in the contemporary US political and socio-economic scene, while at the same time they create the conditions for the collectivization of Chicanismo against the dangers of loss of memory.

**Mythography and Social Moral**

Anaya’s *Lord of Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl* depicts the “prototype” of an Amerindian folk society ¹⁵ and drafts the cultural history of contemporary Chicanos. The Toltecs, who people the course of events in *Lord of Dawn*, are the legendary inhabitants of Mesoamerica, the creators of an ancient civilization and the founding fathers of the city of Tollan, present-day Tula. Ruled by the vain, earthly Huemac, the Toltecs are visited by the deity Quetzalcoatl, who disdains Huemac’s worldly politics. Governed by greed and self-
conceit, Huemac wants to foster some sort of cooperation with Quetzalcoatl. The ruler of Tollan cherishes the idea that with Quetzalcoatl’s popularity among the Toltecs, his city would rise into an imperial center and he would become a powerful emperor. Quetzalcoatl, however, is not tempted by Huemac’s plans; instead, he resists Huemac’s earthly power and offers his wise counsel for the artistic and spiritual grandeur of the Toltecs. Frustrated as he is, Huemac undermines Quetzalcoatl: he plots against the deity with the help of the sorcerer Tlacahuepan and the war god Huitzilopochtli, and soon they succeed in luring Quetzalcoatl into sinful deeds. Quetzalcoatl dies and along with him the city of Tollan decays. Huemac has been so obsessed with ruining Quetzalcoatl that he has failed to see his own city being destroyed. The Toltecs mobilize and kill Huemac, whom they blame for Quetzalcoatl’s death. The two central characters of the novel, Quetzalcoatl and Huemac, reconcile in the underworld. The catharsis comes when the two opposite and conflicting characters finally reach a compromise. The story ends with Quetzalcoatl’s promise to the people to return from the East coast.

*Lord of Dawn* depicts the society of the Toltecs, who are the forefathers of present-day Chicanos. The text traces the Native-American mythopoeic source, thus reviving the links with an ancient cultural heritage. The novel regresses in historical time and reconstructs “the classic model of a folk society [which] shares certain characteristics, namely territory, sacred belief systems and biological characteristics” (Ringer and Lawless 3). Anaya elaborates on these three characteristics; and by taking the reader back to the precolonization era of the Americas, he specifies first the temporal dimension, which is set in a preCortezian context, and second the “territory” of Tollan, situated in the interior of the present US Southwest. Finally, he alludes to the “biological characteristics” of the Toltec race. Having specified three of the elements in the construction of a community, Anaya employs the myth of Quetzalcoatl to discuss the belief system and the social interaction of the autochthonous
Amerindians. The fascinating element in this endeavor is that as a mythographer Anaya plays with mythopoeia and historiography. There are no clear-cut distinctions as to whether he is recreating a myth in narrative form, or recording a cultural legacy which has nearly fallen into oblivion, or finally writing history on the ancestors of contemporary Chicanos. I would argue that instead of performing one of the above, Anaya’s narrative is an associative production. My premise is that Lord of Dawn combines mythographic elements with identity-issues relating to mexicano identity of the present so as to impart a moral and an ideologeme on the politics-versus-poetics controversy in the Chicano community. Written during the post-el movimiento period, Lord of Dawn functions as a symbolic warning to the Chicano community, perceived by Anaya as afflicted by the diverse attitudes of strict political activism and liberal artistic poetics.

Quetzalcoatl is a questionable god who fuses “two basic energies, that of the highest aspiration to the sun (godhead or the highest consciousness of mankind) and the serpent (creature of the earth)” (154). His Nahuatl name translates into the Plumed Serpent: he is Quetzal, “the bird of bright plumage” and he is Coatl “[the] serpent, aligned to the reproductive, intuitive energies of the earth” (154). In contrast, Huemac is an imperialist politician whose aspirations are limited to territorial expansion and the accumulation of riches. The dichotomy created in the portrayal of Quetzalcoatl and Huemac becomes the focal point of the story. But the two characters’ contrasting values are also experienced by the entire folk society of Tollan. Thus, not only the clash between Quetzalcoatl and Huemac but also the symbolic trajectory of their deeds in relation to societal forces constitutes the subject matter of Lord of Dawn. The Toltecs’ interaction unfolds simultaneously with Quetzalcoatl and Huemac’s conflicting plot-pattern and becomes a ritual of ascension, climactic crisis and catastrophe. The implication in this epic-like narrative structure is that the plot of Lord of Dawn elaborates the difference between Quetzalcoatl and his antagonist Huemac on the
surface, but on a symbolic level it looks into the opposing self-concepts within the Toltec community. The conflict between the two characters symbolizes a community torn by diverse moral and dispositional forces.

When Quetzalcoatl first presents himself to Huemac, “they faced each other, the ruler of Tollan and the priest Quetzalcoatl. One devoted to the material world, and the other devoted to poetry and song and the spiritual teachings of the Ancient Word. Sitting across from each other they were a study in contrasts” (37). Quetzalcoatl’s intention is to recite the Ancient Word to Huemac, enthrall the materialist ruler of Tollan with the religious beliefs of the Amerindian cosmology, and stress the significance of the arts. Quetzalcoatl is a “deity or supernatural, which play[s] the role of intermediary between the powers above and humanity below” (Lévi-Strauss 32). In the form of a messiah, whose destiny is to instruct the people of the Americas on the power of the arts, Quetzalcoatl recites the story of creation to Huemac. The priest declares that it was his soul, which spoke to him, telling him: “Do not weep, Quetzalcoatl. Man is mortal, but in song and poetry and art he can be immortal. This you will teach mankind” (42). Accordingly, Quetzalcoatl speaks the words of a god when he claims:

So I gathered the precious bones [of man and woman] in a bundle and delivered them to Quilaztli, she who is Serpent Woman, our Earth Mother. She ground the bones into powder and placed them in a jadestone bowl. With a jade knife I then pierced my flesh so that my blood was mixed in with the precious bones. So it was that Earth Mother and I gave birth to man and woman, the servants of the gods. (42)

Quetzalcoatl bequeaths his divine blood to the Amerindians, while at the same time he adopts the mortality of humans and visits mankind to teach them the sacred knowledge of the gods.

Being partly mortal, Quetzalcoatl
knew he would be tempted many times while he lived in the body of a man. He could not hide from temptations, he had to encounter and overcome each one. This was the way to understand the heart of man. He had come to Tollan to understand the flesh, to understand why man had left the teachings of the Ancient Word. He knew the path he followed in the heavens, far away from the realm of man. Now he had to understand that other side of his nature, that heart of man which throbbed within his chest. (54)

Quetzalcoatl identifies himself with a dubious existence: half-deity and half-mortal. He is in fact in a state of hybridity, while oscillating between his human desires and his godly knowledge.

Huemac is all too cautious and patronizing towards the alleged supernatural powers of Quetzalcoatl: “You call yourself a priest of the Sun, and yet I hear you do not perform sacrifices to the Sun. You call yourself a priest, and yet you do not drink the drink of the gods. I am interested in your story” (37). In fact, Huemac reacts to their introduction cunningly, as he “sat, sipped his pulque17 and gazed at the young priest,” while at the same time he is thinking that “he must go slowly, then propose an alliance” (37). Huemac is the politician par excellence. As a representative of mundane reality, he fails to discern Quetzalcoatl’s divine qualities. And although he is tempted to believe the priest, he recedes into a self-centered inner monologue:

The gods have revealed the Ancient Word to man; now the Toltecs were the mightiest empire in all of Mexico. Perhaps the gods had sent a new teacher to Tollan. What a rare opportunity that would be for Huemac if he used it to his advantage. After all, no other nation could lay claim to such a wise man. Imagine the power of alliance between himself and Quetzalcoatl? Tollan
would become the center of the earth, and Quetzalcoatl would continue to disperse his knowledge of art and agriculture. As long as Quetzalcoatl did not interfere in the politics of the empire and in the business of war, Huemac felt he could be controlled. What a powerful alliance it could be! (43)

Completely oblivious to Quetzalcoatl’s messianic powers, Huemac proposes diplomatic pacts, while “[h]e was only hearing his own internal voice, which spoke of his personal greatness” (44). Huemac is unable to grasp or interpret Quetzalcoatl’s story of creation and cries out with excitement: “Tollan will be an imperial city [...] [then] he raised his bowl of pulque, and in his excitement he spilled the liquid,” ready to seal a pact with Quetzalcoatl (44). In parallel to Quetzalcoatl’s ritual, when he blends his blood with the powder of human bones, Huemac spills the intoxicating pulque in his bowl, and symbolically bequeaths the land of Tollan with his earthly sentiments of vanity and animosity.

Quetzalcoatl and Huemac are on battling grounds from the beginning of the novel. Each one wishes to instill the community of Tollan with a specific attitude toward life:

It was a strange paradox, the old duality of things, the push and pull which generated energy for all nature. So it was in the society of the Toltecs. The highest aspirations of man, his yearning to learn the truth of the gods through art and poetry vied with the base desires which drew him down into war and sexual desires. How would it end? Would harmony come from this push and pull? Or would the great society of the Toltecs fall? (100)

On the one hand, Huemac supports expansion, imperialism and materialism, whereas Quetzalcoatl preaches the transcendental union of the Toltecs through spirituality and the flowering of the arts. Neither is willing to retreat or to reach a compromise with the other side. And once “the stage for conflict between Huemac, the earthly ruler, and Quetzalcoatl, the priest of the Sun, [has been] set,” each character withdraws into his own space (71). In his
temple, Quetzalcoatl “cast[s] himself into his work, teaching people, encouraging participation in the arts and the pursuit of knowledge” (72). Surrounded by the wise men, Tlamatinime, the priest of the Sun elaborates on the transient quality of life. As “a reflection of the light of the Spirit,” Quetzalcoatl preaches the temporality of the flesh and the eternity of the mind (55). He then invites his followers to join in a trance of singing during which they define human existence:

It is not true,

it is not true

that we come to this earth to live.

We come only to sleep,

only to dream.

Our body is a flower,

As grass becomes green in the springtime,

so our hearts will open,

and give forth buds,

and then they wither.

[..............................]

Is it true that on earth one lives?

Not forever on earth,

only for a little while. (103)

Quetzalcoatl sustains the song’s theme of the fleeting quality of life, and adds: “For man, life is a shadow, a dream. He yearns for the truth in his soul, and he is on earth but for a brief time” (104). His words of wisdom demystify mundane experience. For him humans are erroneously enmeshed in their daily activities. They experience “a circumstantial accuracy,” obsessed with present-day circumstances or the here and now, yet tragically oblivious to the
transcendence of the mind (Lewis 123). Quetzalcoatl’s words counterpoise the mystical existence of his people across temporal and spatial boundaries. In other words, he abolishes the supremacy of a strictly political rhetoric for prompt action with the suggestion of the timelessness of culture and art.

Conversely, the pragmatic attitude to life focuses on material reality, and thus strives “to achieve mastery over nature while [it perceives] myth [as] unsuccessful in giving man material power over the environment” (Lévi-Strauss 17). The pragmatist Huemac supports this attitude and pursues the glory of the Toltec empire without considering the importance of abstractions, such as myths, religion and art. Quetzalcoatl, however, claims that mythopoeia is essential to the community because it endows people with a cultural identity from the past and simultaneously provides the prospect of collectivization for the future. For the Plumed Serpent, myths are an essential part of communal experience since they are adaptive from the point of view of the society in that they promote social solidarity, enhance the integration of the society by providing a formalized statement of its ultimate value-attitudes, afford a means for the transmission of much of the culture with little loss of content—thus protecting cultural continuity and stabilizing the society. (Kluckhohn 41).

Quetzalcoatl teaches the Toltecs “to arrive at truth through song and poetry. [...] Divine inspiration was the way to eternal truth. Ometeotl was the singer, he was the foundation of the universe, his voice was the wind which reverberated in the songs of the man” (106). The priest of the Sun calls for the transgression of time and space in order to attain eternal truth. His proposition is for cultural rituals which can lay the foundations for the creation of a communal saga or a race of people that survives in time. Quetzalcoatl maintains that the flowering of arts is a survival mechanism for the community’s cultural identity. Contrary to
Huemac’s preoccupation with pragmatism and militancy, Quetzalcoatl counterproposes cultural expression as the only means to self-affirmation and collectivization.

Huemac resides in his palace surrounded by his warriors called the Captains of the Jaguar Cult, by the vendors who profit from war, by the promiscuous Butterfly Woman, and by the evil sorcerer Tlacahuepan. Huemac, as “a man of flesh, of the earth, a reflection of the material world,” yearns for the expansion of Tollan into a Toltec nation (55). As he marvels at the future territorial greatness of the Toltec empire, Huemac is the adversary of Quetzalcoatl’s practices: “In his heart Huemac hated Quetzalcoatl because they were opposites, and that which was ignorant and savage in Huemac’s nature drove him to destroy that which was wise and noble in Quetzalcoatl” (107). The worldly ruler’s ultimate goal is to gain power over the Toltecs, and in order to achieve this he has to destroy Quetzalcoatl. Therefore, with the help of Tlacahuepan, he tricks Quetzalcoatl into a series of mortal sins. Quetzalcoatl first becomes vain, when he wears the bright plumage of the sorcerers, then he drinks pulque and in a state of intoxication, commits incest, the worst of deeds in the Ancient Word. Huemac seizes the opportunity, exposes Quetzalcoatl’s faults to the crowd and stirs panic in the masses. A series of fatal curses plagues the city, all imposed on the Toltecs by the sorcerer. The former grandeur of Tollan is now replaced by “the stench of death” (120). In this chaotic state, the desperate Toltecs turn to Huemac:

[T]he people needed help, and so the spokesman for the multitude spoke. [...] “We beg for your help. We ask your help.” “What would you have me do?” Huemac asked angrily. “You are our leader,” the spokesman answered. “You must cleanse the city of this evil. [...] If you do not root out the evil which plagues our land, then Tollan will die, the Toltecs will die.” “Don’t blame me for your misery!” Huemac shouted. [...] “If someone is to blame
for the weakness of Tollan, it is Quetzalcoatl! Yes, those who have followed
him have brought this misery to Tollan.” Huemac paused; the people were
listening. Finally the people of Tollan were listening. His plan had worked.
He had induced fear and strife into the society, and now they had turned to
him for help. Now he could demand the banishment of Quetzalcoatl. No, he
would ask for more, he would demand the sacrifice of Quetzalcoatl. Yes, the
masses always looked for a scapegoat, they always needed someone to
blame. Let it be Quetzalcoatl! (119-20)

Huemac indulges in exposing the sins of the highest priest, convinces the Toltecs of the
latter’s veiled nature, and finally demands the sacrifice of Quetzalcoatl. At this point in the
story, Huemac’s politics seem to lure the Toltecs away from the poetics of Quetzalcoatl. The
rigid expansionist agenda appears to have overthrown the power of the cultural aspect of
communality.

The reversal in the story-line occurs with Quetzalcoatl’s death, which is not a sacrifice
to appease the gods’ wrath. Instead, the Plumed Serpent dies because he has “succeeded to
the temptations of desire so that he could know the heart of mankind” (131). And contrary to
Huemac’s expectations, the Toltecs do not celebrate the death of a treacherous impostor, but
mourn and rage over the loss of their beloved priest:

“Our beloved Prince is dead!” the people cried in the streets. Covered with
ashes and singing the songs of mourning, the long lines of mourners
gathered around the Temple of Quetzalcoatl to view the great urn, which
held the earthly body of their Dear Prince. Even from the provinces the
people came, from the farms in the valley the people came to pay homage to
their dead prince. From all the tribes of Mexico the rulers and nobles sent
emissaries to Tollan. Even neighbors upon whom Huemac had made war came to pay their final respects to the great teacher of wisdom. It seemed the entire world knew that Quetzalcoatl had died, and Tollan was filled with mourners. (133-4)

Despite Huemac’s propaganda, the Toltecs show great respect for cultural expression; and the power of Quetzalcoatl’s identity poetics diminishes worldly politics. In effect, the ruler of Tollan incurs the hatred of the masses and is betrayed by his ally, Tlacahuepan the sorcerer:

Huemac turned to run as the first stones fell. There was nowhere to go. He called for his guards, but there was no response, there would be no help. A stone hit his head and drew blood. Huemac fell to the ground; the shower of stones pelted his body as the angry crowd surrounded him. Even Tlacahuepan lifted a stone to throw at his master. The once mighty Huemac, leader of the Jaguar Cult, now lay like a commoner, dying in the dust of the street. (136)

Huemac dies disgraced and enters the underworld in a state of dishonor: “No one came to claim the body of the fallen Huemac, not his wife whom he had deserted, not his daughter whom he had misused, not Butterfly Woman. So the sorcerers delivered Huemac to the Land of the Dead” (137). In turn the abused laymen and feminine members of the Toltec society completely desert their worldly ruler, who now pays the price of his vile politics and self-conceit.

All the subjects previously under Huemac’s control renounce their earthly ruler. Only the spirit of Quetzalcoatl approaches the corpse “hanging on a lifeless tree, the once mighty leader of the Toltec Empire, for in Huemac he saw his earthly image” (138). Despite the particular emphasis throughout the text on the conflict between Quetzalcoatl and Huemac, the end of Lord of Dawn reconciles the two characters. The moral of the story is that the two
protagonists are not at the antipodes of self-representation, but resemble opposite sides of the same coin. Although on the surface they profess diverse social values, Quetzalcoatl representing humanistic poetics and Huemac embodying rigid politics, they are in reality inextricably tied together, precisely because they address the very same communal body. The implication in this is that in their symbolic trajectories the two characters reflect a schizoid society. The people of Tollan experience the conflict between Quetzalcoatl and Huemac, and in so doing they experience the old duality between pacifist poetics and activist politics. In this context, the plot unfolds as an allegory of contrasting life-attitudes: the pragmatism of Huemac versus the cultural flowering of Quetzalcoatl. Ferninand Tönnies’s classic concepts of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* are helpful in understanding the conflict between Quetzalcoatl and Huemac. According to Tönnies,

\[
\text{gemeinschaft} \text{ relations are essentially relations of the heart; they are based on sentiment, courage, and conscience; their virtues are sincerity, kindness, and faithfulness. In contrast, gesellschaft relations are essentially those of the head; they are based on deliberation, calculation, and ambition in which individuals seek to achieve their own ends and purposes. } \text{(Ringer and Lawless 3)}
\]

In line with Tönnies’ classifications, Quetzalcoatl represents *gemeinschaft* relations, whereas Huemac represents *gesellschaft* relations. Huemac pursues the expansion of the state and the fulfillment of his personal aspirations, while Quetzalcoatl encourages the Toltecs to transgress temporal and spatial boundaries. In this context, the old conflict between the synchronic glory of the community and the diachronic cultural survival of the group is the underlying ideologeme in *Lord of Dawn*. But as soon as Quetzalcoatl realizes that Huemac is a reflection of his earthly presence, then the two characters become different expressions of the same aspiration: to bind the Toltecs into a communal force. What Anaya suggests is that poetics
(gemeinschaft relations) and politics (gesellschaft relations) are only different approaches to the formation of a single collective body.

Quetzalcoatl’s and Huemac’s physical deaths symbolize a social death, one that strikes a community rent by hostility and treachery. Concomitantly, Lord of Dawn is an epic of an “initiation ritual,” where the two characters’ clash on earth is the climax, and their reconciliation in the underworld is the catharsis (Lewis 131). In their rite of passage from life to death, Quetzalcoatl and Huemac experience “the double mental process of disintegration and of synthesis, [and] the integration of the individual into a new world” (Lewis 133). Both Huemac and Quetzalcoatl reconcile themselves to their present situation in the underworld: Quetzalcoatl, as the representative of arts and wisdom, and Huemac, as the embodiment of worldly power, merge posthumously. Having attained a mutual re-affirmation and a dialectical relation with Huemac, Quetzalcoatl utters the eternal truth:

“I came to bring art and civilization, a gift of Ometeotl, the Lord who Created Mankind for His Pleasure. But to understand the heart of man, I had to take on the body of man. To redeem mankind, I had to fall.” “But we are not alike,” Huemac insisted. [...] “We are like two sides of a coin,” Quetzalcoatl said. “I saw that when we met. Our nature was one, but it was in conflict, it reflected the dual spirit of the universe. I could not conquer you, and you could not understand me. When you set out to destroy me, you were destroying yourself.” (139)

The significance in Quetzalcoatl’s words lies in bringing together the realities of earthly experience with the abstractions of art and philosophy. For the priest, life is tied “at one end to God and immortality and at the other to actual, living people” (Lewis 122). Quetzalcoatl’s words offer the moral of a multifaceted social identity which should learn to accept inner dualities and differences.
Quetzalcoatl’s and Huemac’s opposing values form the skeleton of the story. By correlating these two characters, Anaya echoes Lévi-Straussian thoughts on the development of the myth of twins. Twinhood for Lévi-Strauss is a recurrent, ever-present mythic pattern in the pre-Columbian Americas and an archetype of social friction. Consider how the renowned French anthropologist regards the myth of twinhood in relation to the concept of the womb:

> When there are twins, or even more children, in the womb of the mother, there is usually in the myth a very serious consequence because, even if there are only two, the children start to fight and compete in order to find out who will have the honour of being born first. And, one of them, the bad one, does not hesitate to find a short-cut [...] in order to be born earlier; instead of following the natural road, he splits up the body of the mother to escape from it. (32)

In the same way, *Lord of Dawn* deals with the competing power relation between Quetzalcoatl and Huemac. Huemac employs all sorts of devious and evil means in order to rule the Toltecs: he is the embodiment of the evil twin, or in other words, he is the one who does not play fair. On the other hand, Quetzalcoatl is the benevolent twin, who nevertheless fights to be the first. Both Quetzalcoatl and Huemac are archetypes of human behavior: they are the symbols of diverse approaches to the formation of a collective social being. As for the Lévi-Straussian “womb,” it is represented in the life of the Toltecs. According to this symbolic signification, the present Chicano reader of *Lord of Dawn* “returns to the uterus, to the *fons et origo* of all things, where [he] sees the tribal divinities, the creation of the universe and humanity, [...] and the establishment of social order” (Lewis 124). Anaya’s mythic presentation of Chicanismo portrays an inherent diversity. With the resolution of the plot, the womb-like ethnic ancestry is endowed with the promise of completeness, and the reconciliation between Huemac’s politics and Quetzalcoatl’s poetics. Hence, the Chicano
reader is left with the awareness that common discourse and the conditions of collectivization are viable only through the symbiosis of cultural promotion with socio-political rhetoric.

Myths are instrumental or functional since they evoke sentiments and direct identity-cognizance. The society of the Toltecs in Lord of Dawn makes a connection with contemporary Chicanismo, and the sentiments it calls for apply to the entire societal force. In fact, these sentiments bind Chicano community together because “a society depends for its existence on the presence in the minds of its members of a certain system of sentiments by which the contact of the individual is regulated in conformity with the needs of society” (Righter 16). Moreover, the use of a myth renders the community culturally specific. Not all mankind can grasp the symbolism in Quetzalcoatl’s legend. Myths are community-bound, which means that they apply to the sense of identity of a specific group. In this context, the myth is a controlled occasion limiting its advocates to territorially and culturally specified groups. The use of the Plumed Serpent legend summons forth “the collective memory of the Chicano in whom this heritage resides” (Shirley 30). Thus, far from an exotic mythography, Anaya seeks to record the communal history and the cultural identity specific to Chicanismo. Put differently, when Anaya focuses on a core myth, he establishes a folkloric common ancestry and descent. Accordingly, the Toltecs in Lord of Dawn are specified as the forefathers of Mexican-Americans, and as indigenous to the spatial environment presently inhabited by Chicanos. And once the legendary tradition is successfully passed from one generation to the next, it fosters the notion of collective awareness. Whether through oral or written tradition the diachronic succession of folkloric elements “reconstitutes a synchronic order” in the construction of identity (Lévi-Strauss 38). Upon reading and possibly ascribing to the myth of Quetzalcoatl, the Mexican-American subject supersedes contemporary experience. The Chicano individual leaps into the diachronic and seeks “the [ancient] device of myths to establish a common ancestry for an ethnic group” (Ringer and Lawless 5). Myths,
archetypes and rituals not only connect the past with the present, but they also make up the conditions for ethnic distinctiveness. Consider how Tamotsu Shibutani and Kian M. Kwan connect the mysticism of myths with the continuity of a group’s cultural identity:

For a person who identifies an ethnic category, its history provides a backdrop before which to review his own conduct. The history of any group consists of those collective memories shared by its members of the glorious deeds of their forebears, of their unfair persecution, and of the decisive events that resulted in its present situation. This historical past often includes fictitious accounts, but the way in which the history of a group is remembered is far more important than what it has actually been. Those who identify can conceive of themselves as a part of something larger than themselves, something of far greater importance. (43)

Retrospection in a mythical past calls for those collective memories which reinforce the sense of belonging to an ethnic group. In this process “the tendency is to emphasize the presumed heroic nature of this past; the accuracy of these memories is less important than the memories themselves” (Ringer and Lawless 5). Henceforth, the mythical world of Lord of Dawn no longer needs to be a logical presentation of events in order to be successful. The significance of Anaya’s story lies in its symbolic encoding, which applies to the imaginative abilities and social experiences of contemporary Chicanos.

**Chicano Cultural Identity and Collective Awareness**

In the short story The Legend of La Llorona, Anaya presents a fresh version of a classic southwestern tale whose general story-line centers on the hardships of a female folk character. La Llorona is the betrayed, abandoned woman who kills her children in order to avenge her husband’s indifference. From then on she turns into a ghost, haunting the earth with her shrieking cries in search of her children. The tale epitomizes the desperation of a
neglected woman, the urge to react to desolation, and the eternal quest for emotional completion. The story of La Llorona or the Weeping Woman, as the name translates into English, is probably the most popular tale in Latin America, and one passed on by word of mouth among *mestizos* across the Americas and throughout time. This tale can be further traced to the borderlands north of the Rio Grande. In the essay “La Llorona: Structure and Archetype” (1992) Arturo Ramírez describes the story of La Llorona as the best-known and most widely-(re)interpreted folkloric tale of the US Southwest:

> The story of La Llorona (the Weeping Woman) is clearly the most widely diffused and best-known legend, myth, and folktale in Mexican and Chicano culture and folklore. In terms of significance, relevance and prevalence of a legend, the United States has no equivalent. The significance, intensity and singular importance of the La Llorona legend are a distinctive element of Mexican and Chicano folklore. Over the past 500 years, with the emergence of the legend have come many versions and retellings as well as interpretations. Adaptations into the media have been common, from literary retellings to media treatments in radio, film, theater, and television. From scholarly studies to song adaptations, from musical versions to creative interpretations, La Llorona continues to hold the culture spellbound.  

(Ramírez 19)

Ramírez highlights the tale’s importance in Chicano folklore, but he also underlines the numerous adaptations, versions and interpretations given to it. The back-cover comment to Anaya’s *La Llorona* maintains this wide popularity and versatility of the story: “Throughout Mexico and wherever Hispanics live, the legend of La Llorona has been told for generation upon generation. There are as many versions of the tale of the wailing woman as there are story-tellers.”21 This statement classifies the tale of La Llorona as part of an oral tradition,
particular to Hispanic peoples and also specifies the geolocale of its reproduction as Latin America. Moreover, Ramírez’s emphasis on the numerous “adaptations,” “versions” and “interpretations” stemming from this tale is mirrored in the back-cover comment, which touches upon the idea of the varied modifications applied to La Llorona’s plot-pattern.

Indeed, there is a plethora of La Llorona stories, and some say they originated in Spain, while others locate their conception in the colonial Americas. The suggestion is that since the tale of La Llorona is a segment of the Latino cultural stock, one that can be traced back to the pre or early colonization era of the Americas, then it is almost impossible to retain its constituent parts unaltered throughout time. If culture is alive and always in flux and if myths are part of the cultural identity of a group of people, then the mythic reproduction reflects a contemporary social reality and fulfills a specific social function. In other words, a myth is likely to have as many versions as the story-tellers who undertake its narration. Accordingly, the present-day reader or listener can merely identify the motif of the folktale in its numerous modifications by individual story-tellers. And amidst this bewildering variety, or what Ramírez calls the “diffusion” of the myth, there is always a structural core in every story of the Weeping Woman. This structural core or plot-axis is adapted to the needs of a group in order to pass a social judgment, to convey an ideologeme, or to present the potential mythographer’s understanding of the mythic pattern. Similarly, Anaya draws upon the basic story-line of the tale, but at the same time he modifies the myth to convey a moral to his Chicano target audience. This point implies an inherent dualism: on the one hand, there is the cultural reserve of La Llorona’s tale, and on the other hand, there is Anaya’s fresh version of the legend. The implication is that there is the story of La Llorona as transmitted among mestizos throughout the race’s history, but there is also Anaya’s “homomorphism” in the reproduction and appropriation of a specific expression of the Chicano cultural legacy (Maranda 12). Looked at on a temporal scale, the tale of La Llorona is a diachronic cultural
practice, whereas Anaya’s *La Llorona* is the synchronic realization of the myth’s constituent parts and an instrumental production that serves a social function.

Anaya’s adaptation of the tale departs from the familiar crisis motif of most traditional Latino versions, and becomes deeply rooted in history. In fact, Anaya re-visions the tale as an allegory of the *mestizo* race’s origin and *La Llorona* is personified as *La Malinche*, the Indian daughter of a village chief on the east coast of the Americas, and the female originator of Latino miscegenation in her union with a Spanish conqueror. Anaya’s modification of the myth endows it with the validity of the true story of *La Malinche*. And contrary to the pejorative labels against Malinche as *la chingada* (the fucked one), which circulated in the Chicano community during the political activism of the 1960s, Anaya’s story elevates his Indian protagonist and restores her dignity. Despite the fact that Malinche pledges her love to the Spanish Captain, throughout the story she remains true to her indigenous cultural identity and to the native people. Anaya presents Malinche as widely respected by the Indians because of her beauty and supernatural powers. She is an insightful, politicized female character, who attends meetings with the village council “when it discussed the social ceremonies of the village” and argues that “the village should not be dominated by the Aztec empire and tribute should not be sent to Moctezuma, the lord of the Aztecs” (14-5). When the first Spanish *conquistadores* arrive in the Americas, the Indians mistake them for the priests of Quetzalcoatl. In awe, the local people welcome the Spaniards with the false belief that the prophecy of Quetzalcoatl’s return from the East coast has been fulfilled. However, Malinche realizes that the newcomers “in the floating houses” were not priests or gods, but “pale men” (15). Because of her unique ability to learn “customs and the languages,” she picks up the Castilian language immediately and helps the Captain of the shipwrecked Spanish soldiers to advance inland. To her unsuspecting mind, the pale men can help the Indians of the provinces resist Moctezuma’s harsh tax-collections. Soon, Malinche falls in love with the Captain and
gives birth to his twin sons, Olin and Tizoc. In the meantime, the Captain manages to conquer most of the Aztec territory including the imperial city of Tenochtitlan. Malinche becomes the Captain’s consort, and by having helped him advance inland, she unwittingly aids in the capture of her own people. Throughout this time she has undertaken to educate her sons in the Aztec ways. Thus, she instructs them in the local religious and cultural practices despite the Captain’s strict prohibitions. When the Captain becomes the powerful ruler of the New World, Princess Isabella from Castile arrives to lure the Captain back to Spain. This female character, who functions as the symbolic opposite to Malinche, provokes the Captain into attaining the pseudo-glory of imperialist power. The Captain decides to return to Spain with the twins, governed by his utopian ambition that the twins will be granted royal honors in the Spanish court. At the prospect of parting with her children, Malinche kills the twins. She, in fact, follows the Medea-motif of tragic infanticide, and sacrifices her children to save them from a future of slavery and degradation among the colonizers. At the end of the story, in the midst of a storm, Malinche appears as a half-deity and accounts for her horrible deed:

“Yes, I have been wronged” Malinche answered standing tall and noble before [the captain, Princess Isabella and the Spanish soldiers]. “My sons were to be made slaves, and I paid for their liberation dearly. Now they are dead […], but other sons of Mexico will rise against you and avenge this deed. The future will not forgive any of us.” (89)

The denouement brings together the mythic aspect of La Llorona with the true story of Malinche. In other words, Malinche becomes La Llorona upon declaring: “I, Malinche, princess and mother of the Mexicans, will forever be known as the woman who cries for her sons” (89). Then she disappears into the darkness leaving behind “her grief, and penance, and her wailing cry” (89). Shocking though it is, the end of the story encapsulates the moral of
Anaya’s myth, which is a powerful statement against exploitation and disenfranchisement, even at the cost of self-sacrifice.

In the same vein as *Lord of Dawn*, the short story of *La Llorona* discusses social antinomies: first, there is Malinche as the autochthonous subject in contrast to the Spanish colonizer; second, there is the dark-skinned Malinche in opposition to the fair princess Isabella; third, the heathen ways versus Spanish culture, and of course on the identity-politics level there is the *mestizo* race as it rises against both the indigenous and the European identities. Yet, whereas *Lord of Dawn* is racially and culturally specific to the precolonization era of the Americas, *La Llorona* shifts the focus to that turning point in history when the Spanish colonizers invaded the New World. The text of *La Llorona* is undoubtedly rich in socio-historical rhetoric relating to early colonial experience. However, my primary focus is on the mythographer’s agency in sketching out *mestizo* cultural identity and calling for collective awareness. Thus, this chapter approaches Anaya as a Chicano writer who informs his readership on his particular understanding of *mestizo* history and ancestry through his adaptation of a popular tale. In this context, Anaya’s mythography falls under the Malinowskian supposition that the function of myths is to bind a society, and create a structure governed by rules and habits. *La Llorona* is a combination of historical and folkloric data, which creates a mythical social structure. And as a mythographic production, it fulfills a double function: first, it appeals to the heart of the reader; and second, it “provides good, workable ways by which the contradictions in a society, the contrasts and conflicts which normally arise among people, among ideals, among the confusing realities, are somehow reconciled, smoothed over, or at least made manageable and tolerable” (Robertson xv). This chapter’s premise is that Anaya’s mythography in *La Llorona* is a complex production, an amalgam of sentimental writing and social praxis.
La Llorona becomes a double-faceted literary production in its fusion of mythical elements with the historical dilemmas Malinche confronted. First, the story touches upon the legacy of the wailing woman, and second it endows the myth with historical dimensions. To some extent, Anaya bridges the gap between symbolic mythmaking and factual historiography. Likewise, the characters of the story are not mere figments of the author’s imagination, but real-life personae that can be traced in the bulky pages of historiographic texts on *mestizaje*. Concomitantly, the folkloric essence of *La Llorona* is deciphered with Malinche’s experience, the Native-American woman who helped Cortez conquer the Americas and gave birth to the first Hispano-Indians. Moreover, the Captain in Anaya’s story personifies Cortez, the Spanish conquistador, who also embodies the colonizing aspect on Chicano identity. Being the archetype of a father-figure, Cortez is not only the representative of the intruders’ force, but also the one who engenders a half-breed race of Chicanos. The underlying doctrine in Malinche and the Captain’s union is that the history of the Chicano race is not complete unless it takes into consideration the links with Castilians across the Atlantic. Malinche and the Captain embody Anaya’s designation of *mestizo* origin, and the individual Chicano reader of *La Llorona* is the point of departure in his process to identity-cognition, once the progenitors of Chicanismo are specified. In fact, this is a crucial recognition and a point of reversal in Chicano self-identification, considering the profound emphasis on Indian-ness in the political rhetoric of *el movimiento*. Anaya’s emphasis on the Spanish-European ancestry in the Chicano gene pool is a bold departure from the Native-American biological identity so fervently propagated during the Chicano Movement.

*La Llorona* treats Chicanismo as a fractured group and provides the ground for viewing “the formerly unified [sense of identity as] split into his or her constituent parts, in which a single homogenous style is superseded by a number of heterogeneous fashions” (Gutiérrez 61). This heterogeneous quality of *mestizo* identity is advocated by Anaya with the
claim that the present-day Chicano individual does indeed avow a specific ethnic identity or practise certain poetics of existence, but Malinche and the Captain’s relationship provides the historical and cultural refuge which presents the Chicano as a fragmented cultural identity. The corollary is that subjects of Mexican origin cannot be either strictly Indian or Hispanic, but a combination of the two. As products of miscegenation, Chicanos view the world with a double-consciousness: on the one hand, that of the colonizing father-figure, and on the other hand, that of the colonized mother-figure. This double-consciousness means that their presence in the Americas is likely to structure a contrasting feeling for “apprehending and experiencing the world and [their] place or placelessness in it” (Gutiérrez 61). The twin sons, Olin and Tizoc, initially accommodate this model. They experience life in-between cultures and have the sense of non-belonging. Being half-Spanish and half-Indian, the two boys are contested by two opposing cultures: one of the colonizing force and the other of the colonized natives. The father-figure wants to take them to Spain with him and the mother-figure wishes to root their lives in the Americas among Native-Americans. On the one hand, the father-figure wishes to initiate his children into European logic, but Malinche, being the indigenous mother-archetype, draws her mestizo children into the cultural practices of the Aztecs, thus creating a strong bond with the geoculture of the Americas. Consider how Anaya claims that Malinche resists the male-dominated European logic with the indigenous belief-system, and how this wins the social recognition of the natives:

Malinche’s two sons brought her happiness. [...] The Captain spent most of his time in the provinces and in the outlying villages consolidating his rule over the country, so she spent most of her time with her sons. In the mornings when she went to the marketplace she took them with her, wrapped in her rebozo. The vendors of the marketplace grew to know the
two boys and admired them greatly. The priests told her that the boys had been born under a good sign. They said that these two boys were born to fulfill a great legacy. The people whispered and nodded approvingly when they saw Olin and Tizoc with their mother. In the afternoons Malinche sat in the shade of the trees in the garden, relating stories to the boys. She told them about the great Cacique who was their grandfather, and about her journey to Mexico, and how she had met the great Moctezuma. She taught them the pantheon of Aztec gods [...]. [T]he boys listened attentively as they learned the history of the people of Mexico. (35-6)

Malinche repeatedly exposes the twins to the intellectual and religious cosmos of the heathens. Thus, Olin and Tizoc easily accommodate the Indian culture and seem to side with their mother’s cultural identity. And when the Captain decides to take the boys to Spain, they protest against their father’s decision and “emplace”24 their identity among the Indians. Olin states:

“We cannot go with you. Our life is here, our people are here. I have vowed to follow the path of the War God, because our people will always need warriors. Tizoc will follow the path of Quetzalcoatl, and the day the true god returns to our land to save it from conquest and ruin, then Tizoc will be here and know how to speak to this God of Light. That is why we must remain.” (71)

The territorial distance with imperial Spain and the father-figure’s obsession with expansion pose the true obstacles against the initiation of the boys into Spanish ways. The mixed-blood children refute their Spanish ancestry and trace the history of their race in the geography of the New World. Culturally, territorially and racially the two boys, as the precursors of Chicanismo, root themselves in the American locale. The symbolic designation here lies in
the creation of a new racial and cultural subjectivity which gives rise to the new culture of \textit{mestizaje} in the Americas.

Malinche’s character is central in Anaya’s definition of \textit{mestizaje} not only for her role as the female originator of Chicanismo, but also for her symbolic connection to the colonization era of the Americas. Malinche’s actions and the way she corresponds to other characters in the story depict the new state of affairs between the indigenous people and the Spaniards. As far as the Indians are concerned, they always think highly of her. “Malintzin,” which is her true Indian name,

was truly a gifted woman, a noble person, and full of kindness when she went to heal the old and the infirm. An aura of light seemed to glow around her. On her eleventh birthday when she became a woman and was given her name, Malintzin, was dressed in a cotton skirt of white, with a huipil of many colors [...]. The young men of the village admired her beauty and smiled at her when she passed by, but Malintzin remained aloof. The Aztec prophecy had affected the life of her village, and according to it a new era was about to dawn. Malintzin had decided to wait and see what this new age delivered to her. (15-6)

Naming the central female character carries significant proportions in the story. The Indians call her “Malintzin,” but when the Captain meets her for the first time he changes her name into “Malinche,” thus symbolically interfering with her true identity. He observes:

A heathen who can speak the language of Castile, the Captain thought. What a beautiful creature. He took her hand and felt Malintzin’s strength. Then he smiled. “What is your name?” he asked. “I am Malintzin,” she replied. “Malinche,” he repeated the name, changing the sound, assuring she
According to postcolonial theory, a hegemonic or ruling class holds people in its grip “by a kind of perverted logic” which distorts and disfigures the colonized identity (Fanon 170). Similarly, the Spanish conquistador’s logic distorts “Malintzin” into “Malinche” and ironically wins the active consent of Chicanos, who henceforth use the name “Malinche” instead of “Malintzin.” Malintzin herself naively concedes to the renaming process, and in so doing she symbolically succumbs to the colonizer’s force. After the first encounter with the Captain, she establishes a new subjectivity defined by the colonizer’s authority. Her new name relates her identity-perception to the newcomers and the new era that all the natives anticipate is precisely this change in self-awareness, which goes hand-in-hand with the Spaniards. From now on, Spanish colonizers define the Indians. Therefore, not only the initial union between Malinche and the Captain, but also the colonizing power of naming becomes central in defining the mestizo race.

As the story progresses, the Spanish forces conquer most of the Aztec territory including the imperial city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, and Malinche realizes the inhumane imperialism of the conquistadores. In fact, Malinche comprehends that far from co-existing peacefully with the Spanish, the colonizer’s force subordinates and reduces the Indian socio-cultural life:

[The Captain] would return to court, but only after his hold on the New World was complete. He assured the king that everything he did was in the name of His Majesty, and when he returned to Spain he would be able to offer riches beyond belief. A famine had come upon the land, and one night a delegation of poor people came to Malinche. “Malintzin, beloved of your people, we come to plead with you,” the people said. “The soldiers have
taken our corn and beans, and many of the fields are destroyed. Now there is hunger among the people. We beg you to help us.” (39-40)

Playing the role of the chorus in the story, the Indians turn to the female protagonist for help and call her by her heathen name “Malintzin.” In a symbolic and highly political fashion, they strike the chords of Malinche’s Indian identity. If we accept the assumption that “to signify the self is to engage in practices of freedom” then the use of the name “Malintzin” is part of a resistance mechanism against the presence of a hegemonic regime (Watney 160). Thus, although the Castilians have (re)defined her as “Malinche,” the heathens cling to her indigenous name; and in so doing, they set the perimeters of their Indian-ness and refute the power of the colonizing force. With the juxtaposition in the use of the names “Malinche” and “Malintzin,” Anaya draws a line between Chicanos and Indians. “Malinche” is the only name employed by present-day Chicanos, whereas “Malintzin” has fallen into complete oblivion. What Anaya implies is that Chicanos have used and abused the name “Malinche” in accordance with the Spanish conquerors’ symbolic undertones. In contrast, the Indians in La Llorona retain the name “Malintzin,” thus reclaiming for the female protagonist her Indian identity. For Anaya, the Chicano socio-cultural identity is different from the Indian one, and the use of the names “Malinche” or “Malintzin” is the symbolic site where that difference is played out.

Towards the end of the narrative, the Captain reveals his imperialist intentions towards the natives. As the ultimate voice of authority, the Captain carries on naming and setting new identities for the Native-Americans, his twin sons and Malinche. He considers the New World as “the land of savages” (52) and does not pursue a peaceful coexistence with the Indians, but seeks to exploit and subordinate the colonized people of the Americas. In vain, Malinche protests against the abuse of the Indians. The Captain in turn exercises his power with the advancement of more “naming” instances towards their twin sons and Malinche. He asserts
that Malinche’s “own people don’t accept [the boys], because they are not pure Indians” (52). The Captain clearly designates the twin boys as mixed-blood subjectivities and stresses their difference from the locals. The Spanish colonizer forcefully names the boys and attempts to distance them from their Indian (half) self. By maintaining Olin and Tizoc’s non-purity, the Captain wishes to draw the twins away from their heathen identity. As for Malinche, he accords her the identity of a traitor to her own race. The Captain maintains that she is as much to blame for the captivity of her people as he is:

“You were my ally. You were at my side throughout the early days, during the march to Tlaxcala and Cholula, and here to Mexico where we met the great Moctezuma. You interpreted for me, so my words were yours. Don’t you see, among your people there are already some who whisper your name, and to them Malinche means traitor!” (53)

The Captain openly speaks the words of those present-day activist Chicanos who embrace “the historical representation of Malinche as a treacherous whore who betrayed her own people” (Gutiérrez 52). Indeed, the Spanish conquistador is the one who defines the Indian woman as a chingada, “the passive, inert and open [female], who is defenseless against the exterior world” (Gutiérrez 52). In contrast to the Indian walk-ons, who people the story of La Llorona and turn to their native “Malintzin” for help, the Captain is the one who endows Malinche with this identity of a traitor to her race.

Anaya seems to undertake the task of rehabilitating Malinche’s archetype. The story of La Llorona has the Captain speaking the words of Malinche’s treachery, whereas the Indians consider her differently. After the climactic argument with the Captain over the boys’ departure to imperial Spain, Malinche attempts to break free from Tenochtitlan along with her sons. Because she has been faced with the immediate danger of being parted from the boys, she decides to escape, but her effort is thwarted:
“If you will be so kind as to let us pass.” Her voice was stern, but the guard did not move. “I am afraid I cannot do that, senora,” he said. “You cannot let us pass?” Malinche asked. Her voice rose in anger [...]. “Who gave these orders?” Malinche asked. Her voice rose but inside she trembled. She knew she was trapped. “The orders came directly from the Captain General. Every gate has been ordered not to allow you or your sons to pass.” “I am a free woman,” Malinche said aloud. “I may come and go as I wish.” (62)

Although Malinche declares her freedom, she realizes that she is trapped. Then, she instantly considers the option of reacting violently to her captivity or stirring a mass protest. So, she attempts to push her way through the guards and to free herself from their grip. Yet, she retreats not out of fear, but because she does not wish to be the cause of more bloodshed among her people:

She stepped forward again, but the sergeant raised his hand and instantly the other guards jumped forward, their hands on their swords. Malinche’s sons stepped to her side, surprised by the actions of the guards. The vendors around the gate also rose, sensing the confrontation taking place; they drew their machetes from their belts, ready to protect this woman they knew and admired. A tense silence filled the air. Malinche looked into the guard’s eyes and sensed his fear. One word from her and the vendors would attack, the path of escape would be clear. But that would mean a battle, injury and death, the very thing she blamed on the Spanish soldiers. She shook her head, turned to the vendors and spoke in their native language, telling them she had changed her mind, she would respect the order not to leave. The men nodded and retired to their business, but still keeping an eye on the
soldiers. (62)

The indigenous people hold Malinche in high respect and are willing to defend her dignity even at the cost of their own lives. Their prompt reaction to the incident with the guard is proof against the Captain’s assertion that Malinche is a traitor. For the Indians, Malinche deserves their respect and while they can endure their own peregrination and subjugation, they revolt against her mistreatment at the hands of the Spaniards.

Not only have orders been given not to let Malinche leave the city of Tenochtitlan, but also she is not allowed to pledge her faith to the heathen gods. Malinche is both physically and culturally in captivity. Her Indian identity is controlled and marginalized by the rule of the newcomers. Now she realizes that “she was being backed into a corner from which there was no escape” (63). Her choices are limited and she must act quickly in order to stop the Captain’s plan to take the boys away from her:

The game was becoming deadly serious; in her anger she had underestimated the Captain, and her mistake might prove to be disastrous. She should have known that he would block her escape route. He was determined to take her children from her, and he would use all the power at his disposal. Now she was trapped with no one to whom she could turn. She was cut off from her family, a prisoner in her own home. The anger flared like fire in her breast. What could she do? (63)

Malinche has to act accordingly in this new condition of enslavement. So, she tricks the Captain into granting her a little time alone with her sons. She takes the boys to the hidden temple of the Aztec gods, where she decides to offer them as sacrifice to the War God Huitziopochtli. At the heathen temple she prays to the war god, asking for strength to proceed with the sacrifice:
She prayed and revealed her soul to the God of War, and the dark chamber grew suffocating with the sweet smoke of incense [...]. “Make me strong!” she cried. “Blind my eyes to the blood I must shed! As I was once the first consort of the Spaniard, now make me a warrior against his enslavement! I pray, tell me what I must do! Mexico must be free! Must my own sons be the first warriors to die in this struggle? Must they lead the way for the future?” As before, she heard the god answer her prayers. Yes, the voice in the interior of the chamber seemed to say, the spirits of your sons will guide the warriors of the new struggle. A new breed of men born of this world will come behind them to free Mexico, to free the spirit of the people. Mexico will be free! And you, Malinche, will live forever in the legends of your people. Go on spill the blood of the warriors! The blood will cleanse you of the past, Mexico will enter a new age! Go! (77)

Malinche commits the sacrifice not to avenge the Captain’s betrayal towards her, but as a token action for future generations. Malinche demystifies the illusion of a Hispanic-Indian coexistence and faces the present reality of the Indians’ subjugation. She acknowledges how wrong she was to trust the newcomers, and decides to act for the future of both Indians and mestizos. So, “she puts away the past and thinks of her commitment to the freedom of her people” (78). And that commitment is carried out when she commits infanticide in order to protect her children from eternal enslavement. As a mother-figure to the whole race of mestizos, she professes self-sacrifice as the ultimate defense against peregrination.

Anaya sets things right for the character of Malinche and suggests that mexicanos should take pride in her because she is the precursor of la raza and the one who sets the foundations for activism against racial exploitation. For Anaya, Malinche is neither a chingada nor a traitor. She rises to mythic stature because the whole race of present-day
Latinos stem from her existence. And the way the mythic element of La Llorona’s tale blends with the historical perspective attributes legendary qualities to Malinche. Infanticide may sound cruel and inhumane, yet Anaya justifies it as a brave deed, which allows room for a better *mestizo* future. Finally, in connection with the cultural trajectory of *La Llorona*’s narrative, one must consider the codes that Anaya employs to arouse *mestizo* communality. Anaya addresses his narrative to a specific group, which is peoples of *mestizo* origin, and expects to evoke an emotional response from them. The story of La Llorona, which has been recounted among *mexicanos* since time immemorial, applies both to the unconscious mind and to the “conscious co-ordination” of the members of the same group (Bourdieu 54). The legend of La Llorona is a popular story, identifiable to the majority of Chicanos. Popular tales have the power to root themselves in the subconscious mind because their audiences mystically internalize them. And since popular tales address an entire group of people, even whole nations, they bring about a sense of collective awareness. Indeed, folkloric tales have the impetus of “homogenizing” a group, because they practice the conditions of bringing community members together through emotional attachment (Bourdieu 54). Tales accumulate in the storage of collective memories; and memory “is not merely something that we deliberately evoke, but is also something that comes charged with emotion and is highly prized” (Warnock 14). In other words, the power of a popular story is in its capacity to “co-ordinate” people by means of a subconscious emotional arousal. Because “communication of consciousness presupposes community of unconsciousness,” subtly, yet successfully, Anaya negotiates the homogeneity of *mestizos* (Bourdieu 58). A legend is a folk element which regenerates the past, thus becoming a major part of a given group’s cultural identity. Thus, in a participatory mood the myth (in our case the myth of La Llorona) draws the people together to a communal experience. In short, the reading or listening public of the myth are urged to communicate, not literally, but in an emotional trajectory. The mythographer’s intention then
is not truly innocent. On the contrary, Anaya assumes the role of a social agent, seeking “collective mobilization,” and his text is an instrumental narrative in this direction (Bourdieu 59). 27

Conclusion

Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya is a mythographer who treats two expressions of the mestizo cultural legacy, the legend of Quetzalcoatl and the tale of La Llorona, adaptively to the contemporary experience of the Chicano community. Resuming the role of a social agent, Anaya infuses the legends with real-life complexities, and by doing so he illuminates contemporary Chicano life. Therefore, Anaya’s versions of the two tales are not deviations or transgressions against a mythic prototype, but vibrant entities on their own. The original myth or legend is not a holy or sacred narrative; and the (re)interpretation of its contents is not a sacrilege. More to the point, the skeleton of the mythic story can be altered and embellished to accommodate the needs of a collectivity, which are always already specific in time. In this context, we can describe the core of the myth as mutable, and Anaya’s narratives are merely varying modes of speech, which stem from the same mythic matrix. The mythographer then can produce his or her own interpretation of a mythic pattern. The implication is that the individual story-teller objectifies the legend. The process of objectification means that the basic elements of a story are transformed, (re)named and (re)visioned in order to project a synchronic reality. If we simplify the syllogism, the legend is a diachronic abstraction and a vibrant part of a community’s identity. Conversely, each new version of the story is the instrumental, synchronic decoding of that subconscious cultural self. This argument for the objectification of a legend is best supported by Pierre Bourdieu’s definition of “objectivism”:

Objectivism constitutes the social world as a spectacle offered to an observer who takes up a “point of view” on the action and who, putting into
the object the principles of his relation to the object, proceeds as if it were intended solely for knowledge and as if all the interactions within it were purely symbolic exchanges. (51)

What Bourdieu suggests is that cultural practices (including mythography) are no more than “the acting out of roles, the playing of scores or the implementation of plans” (52). The storyteller does not merely seek to entertain his/her audience, but functions as a powerful social spokesperson, who draws from a community’s past to convey messages for the present. The story-teller’s realization of the myth is a complex activity, indeed. It is the outcome of the capacity to transcend “the antinomies of determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society” (Bourdieu 54). Similarly, the story-teller Anaya crosses borders and composes his myth-narratives based on his community’s past experiences, present needs and future aspirations.
Notes

1 According to Max Adereth, the concept of “littérature engagée” applies to those literary works which express a political commitment to the realities of the world and which also make a contribution to the requirements of society. For Adereth, the role of the writer is “to commit himself. This simply means that he becomes aware that the real nature of his art is to focus attention on an aspect of reality and thus, inevitably, to pass judgement on it. […] His success in this respect is determined by the fact that he himself is no mere spectator in the drama that he depicts, he is also an actor. What is required of him is that he should be a conscious actor” (“What is littérature engagée?” 445).

2 The flowering of Chicano literature is often synonymous with Luis Valdez’s theatrical work in his Teatro Campesino. Besides Valdez’s contribution to the formation of a Chicano literary tradition, his actos, which were performed in 1965 in agricultural locations, have played a crucial political role in keeping the spirit of United Farm Workers’ Union alive during its first strike. See Valdez, Actos and Acuña, Occupied America.

3 Ramón Saldívar extols Paredes’s contribution to Chicano literature and claims, “Paredes’s With His Pistol in His Hand became the primary imaginative seeding ground for later works because it offered both the stuff of history and of art and the key to an understanding of their interrelationship for Mexican-American writers. Paredes’s study is crucial in historical, aesthetic, and theoretical terms for the contemporary development of Chicano prose fiction because it stands as the primary formulation of the expressive reproductions of the sociocultural order imposed on and resisted by the Mexican American community in the twentieth century” (“Dialectic of Difference” 26-7). Fully agreeing with Saldívar’s laudatory comments on Paredes’s work, I believe that a recurrent element in
Chicano literature is the synthesis of an aesthetic element with specific historiographic and socio-political concerns.

4 See the introduction to this study, where I discuss Joseph Sommers’s “historical-dialectical” preferred form of literary analysis, and Ramón Saldívar’s notion of “the dialectics of difference” in Chicano literature.

5 For more on the “socially counterhegemonic meaning” endowed to the Virgin of Guadalupe, see Limón, Mexican Ballads 160-2.

6 Aztlan is the mythical homeland of the Aztecs situated in the present US Southwest. For some archaeologists, however, Aztlan’s location has been exacted “near the estuaries or on the north coast of northwestern Mexico, though other archaeologists have gone as far as to locate the present town of San Felipe Aztlan, Nayarit.” See Azteca <http://www.azteca.net/aztec/aztlan.html>.

7 In an insightful discussion of Chicano poetry, Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins (1995), Rafael Pérez-Torres comments on the citation of myths as a common technique among Chicano poets. Pérez-Torres considers the use of myth often illuminating in the process of self-affirmation, but he also warns that myths can induce artists and their readership to embrace escapism, what he terms “nativism.” In Pérez-Torres’s own words: “At one point there exists the need to distinguish oneself from the colonizing society. This involves the re-evaluation of traditional cultural forms, [...] an affirmation of the unique characters of the colonized culture. This can, when productive, empower an entire constituency. At worst, it can result in an unexamined nativism that values without scrutiny those things it takes to be precolonial. [...] At moments, the uncritical (and often reified) reclamation of the Aztec comes dangerously close to being a blithe and uninformed celebration of anything non-Western” (8-9). Pérez-Torres quite successfully points out the
possible dangers in the use of myths. Nevertheless, Anaya’s texts escape this trap of appearing “blithe” because their writer employs the myths with a critical eye, and with the will to adapt them to contemporary Chicano communal needs.

8 The term “ethos” denotes the disposition of a person, a literary work or a whole community. The entry in The Oxford Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases (1988) is: “The characteristic spirit of a culture, era, community, institution, etc., as manifested in its attitudes, aspirations, customs, etc.; the character of an individual as represented by his or her values and beliefs; the prevalent tone of a literary work in this respect.” For an insightful approach to the Aristotelian use of the terms “ethos” and “pathos,” see Wisse, Ethos and Pathos 9-76.

9 Aristotle conceived rhetoric and oration in terms of persuasion as their end or final objective. According to the Greek philosopher, there are three modes of persuasion: the persuasive power of his own character, the excitation of desired emotions in the audience, and the proof or apparent proof. For the Aristotelian theories on ethics or rhetoric, see Aristotle, “Rhetoric 1” 2152-94.

10 The concept of the “ideologeme” is introduced in Fredric Jameson’s The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act (1981). Jameson sees an ideological drive in all forms of narrative production including the rewriting and restoration of a mythic text. In his thesis, Jameson uses the ideologeme as a combination of ideology and fiction writing. This is how he defines the term: “The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as a pseudo idea--a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice--or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the ‘collective characters’ which are the classes in opposition. This duality means that the basic requirement for the full description
of the ideologeme is already given in advance: as construct it must be susceptible to both a conceptual description and a narrative manifestation all at once. The ideologeme can of course be elaborated in either of these directions, taking on the finished appearance of a philosophical system on the one hand, or that of a cultural text on the other; but the ideological analysis of these finished cultural products requires us to demonstrate each one as a complex work of transformation on that ultimate raw material which is the ideologeme in question” (87). According to Jameson, the ideologeme is already present in a mythographic text and the critic’s or analyst’s task is to unravel the structural and social purpose of the text’s raw material, which is the myth itself.

11 It is of great interest to the modern analyst of literature to consider the impact of mistaken definitions attributed to myth. According to Haskell M. Block, “[t]here is no doubt that Myth is one of the most muddled and abused concepts of our critical vocabulary. It has been defined as a lie, a popular delusion, as mystical fantasy, as primitive science, as record of historical fact, a symbol of philosophical truth, a reflection of unconscious motivations, indeed any unconscious assumption” (sic) (“Cultural Anthropology” 134). Avoiding any misuse of myths, Malinowskian theory looks into myth as an index of socio-cultural behavior. Thus, writings with a profound celebration of myth show that the understanding of the mythic past and the radiance of the mythic memory are crucial to the formation of a collective identity.

12 According to William Righter, “functionalism describes myth in terms of its operation within a social structure, often in connection with a ritual which marks a stage in the development or progress of the individual through his life-cycle [...] or whatever stages a society choose to mark” (15). For the purposes of this chapter, the Malinowskian functionalist approach to myth as a social activity adequately informs my readings of Anaya’s texts as
temporally and racially specific narratives. To study the psychological and religious theories on myth in contrast to Malinowski’s functionalism, see Righter, *Myth* 14-24.


14 The verb “cement” is borrowed from Rudolfo Acuña’s excellent historical approach to Chicanismo, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (1988). In the second part entitled “The Cementing of an Underclass: A History of Chicanos,” the emergence of Chicano minority is dealt with as a complex socio-historical phenomenon, which involves the influence of the dominant as well of other minor cultures.

15 By the term “prototype” I mean the first or original type of a social system. The entry for “prototype” in Collins English Dictionary is of “a person or thing that serves as an example of a type.” Moreover, I have used the term according to Milton Myron Gordon’s designation of a folk society as the “prototypic community” for an ethnic group (23). According to Gordon, the characteristics of the prototypic community can be factual or constructed in order to solidify the sense of communality in the ethnic group. See Gordon, *Assimilation*.

16 Nahuatl is the common language of the ancient Amerindians in the valley of Central Mexico. The name Nahuatl or Nahua also came to signify the large language group of Indians, which included Aztecs, Toltecs, Tlaxcalans, and Chichimecs.

17 “Pulque” is an alcoholic drink whose “distillate is sold today as tequila” (Anaya, *Lord of Dawn* 154). Pulque is what Huemac constantly drinks throughout the story, and it is the spirit which causes Quetzalcoatl’s sinful activities and his eventual downfall.

18 Claude Lévi-Strauss’s ethnographic discussion in *Myth and Meaning* (1978) focuses on the dichotomy between scientific thinking and mythical narratives. My intention is
to draw on Lévi-Strauss’s paradigm in order to form a parallelism between realistic politics and mystical identity poetics.

19 Ometeotl, the “Lord of Earth” is “the god of duality, [...] the father and mother of all gods […]. Everything seemed to flow from Ometeotl, the foundation of the Universe. In abstract thought he was the central androgynous godhead” (Anaya, Lord of Dawn 153).

20 For the co-relation of the terms *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* in the formation of a folk society or an ethnic group, see Tönnies, *Concepts of Sociology*. However, the definitions of the terms given in this chapter are quoted from Benjamin B. Ringer and Elinor R. Lawless’s excellent reading of Tönnies’s sociological studies in *Race, Ethnicity and Society* (1989) because Ringer and Lawless have successfully combined Tönnies’s theory with issues of identity cognition.

21 The terms “myth” and “folktale” appear frequently in the second part of this chapter. I admit that I have found great difficulty in grasping the similarities and differences between them. In fact, I have come to the conclusion that there are only rudimentary distinctions as to what the aforementioned terms signify. The most concise definition I have read is the one proposed by Geza Roheim, who claims that “[i]n a myth the actors are mostly divine and sometimes human. In a folktale the *dramatis personae* are mostly human and especially the hero, frequently with supernatural beings as his opponents. In a myth we have definite locality; in a folktale the actors are nameless, the scene is just anywhere. A myth is part of a creed; it is believed by the narrator. The folktale is purely fiction, and not intended to be anything else” (34). Should we accept that the myth and the folktale “[h]ave a common origin, a type of narrative from which both have developed in the course of evolution,” then they are both offspring of the same imaginative impetus. Thus, myth and folktale share basic elements in their plot structures (37). When I refer to the folktale of *La Llorona* I signify the
stock of a recurrent narrative within *mexicano* communities. On the other hand, the use of the term myth, points to Anaya’s version of the story, which elevates the central female character to tragic and godly stature and specifies the chronotope of the story. See Roheim, “Myth and Folktale.”

22 From this point onwards, the Spanish article “La” will be omitted and references to the female protagonist of *La Llorona* will be made as “Malinche” in accordance to Anaya’s use of the name. There is certainly an intricate semiotic register in Anaya’s omission of the Spanish article “La,” which is also a political designation of both Malinche and his reading public as English-speaking peoples. However, the ongoing “functionalist” approach to myth in relation to identity-cognizance does not allow space for a comparative linguistic study of the names “Malinche” or “La Malinche.”

23 The term “legend” appears quite often in this paper. A simple definition to the term would be that in a legend “the protagonist is a person rather than a supernatural being” (Abrams, *Glossary* 111). The difficulty in Anaya’s *La Llorona* is that the text combines all three terms, that is myth, folktale and legend. First, Anaya considers the mythic cultural context of La Llorona, but he also creates a legend by naming La Llorona after Malinche the Indian woman who had Cortez’s children. Furthermore, the short story itself is entitled *The Legend of La Llorona*. For the purposes of this second section of Chapter One, the three terms (myth, legend and tale) are used interchangeably.

24 For more on the Foucauldian concept of “emplacements,” see Chapter Four of this study and the discussion of identity cognizance in relation to “heterotopias.”

25 For more on the importance of folklore in the construction of a collective identity, see Tomas Atencio’s mode of social research in Chapter Four.
The terms “conscious coordination” and “homogenization” are loans from Pierre Bourdieu’s “Structures, Habitus and Practices” (1990), where the notion of the “habitus” is discussed in relation to collectivization. According to Bourdieu, habitus is “a product of history [...] a system of dispositions--a present past that tends to perpetuate itself into the future by reactivation in similarly structured practices, an internal law [...]--the principle of the continuity and regularity which objectivism sees in social practices” (54). In this chapter an attempt has been made to describe myths as part of the Latino habitus, which is a shared cultural compatibility, running through time, but also being modified to adapt a specific social and historical reality. In short, similar to Bourdieu’s habitus, myths combine primordial and synchronic elements, the mystic and the pragmatic.

The specific use of Bourdieu’s term of the “collective mobilization” does not imply activism against groups of power, but a conscious reconsideration of a group’s identity. My point is that Anaya inspires a new perception of mestizo identity and encourages his Latino reading public to explore their common history and culture. See “Structures, Habitus and Practices.”
Chapter Two

Border-Crossings

and the Subject in Abeyance in

Irene Beltran Hernandez’s Across the Great River

The border-crosser is both “self” and “other.” The border-crosser “subject” emerges from double strings of signifiers of two sets of referential codes, from both sides of the border. (Hicks xxvi)

The social spaces of difference are important because these sites are constituted by the presence and activity of people whose voices continue to be silenced. These voices belong to those who occupy subordinate positions of power, including women and children. Culture, portrayed in terms of a unified system of meaning, privileges the voices of the powerful. In turn, cultural meanings that may be held by the groups that oppose dominant interpretations continue to be excluded in order to uphold this representation of culture. (Caputo 19)

The old certainty that cultural identity is spatially and/or nationally bound has misdirected ethnographic fieldwork and the literary world for many years. Deeply influenced by the concept of monastic isolation, the Cartesian autonomy of the self and the colonial era with its claim of the supremacy of European cultures, but also by the 20th century political insistence on the drawing
of borders and the extended warfare in defense of those borders, Western academia has often conflated cultural identity with national identity. Consider for example the tradition of “literary travel,” which attained wide popularity from the end of the 19th century until the early 1900s. This genre adapted the travelogue mode of writing, where a “civilized” narrator would compose memoirs of crossing borders and entering the “uncivilized” worlds of Africa, the Orient or the American Wilderness.¹ These “punitive expeditions” of the travelogue highlighted and construed different geographies as different cultures (Clifford 65).² Similarly, the age-old political agendas of the Western World’s colonial powers often marked out cultural identity in terms of national topographies. Based on “the myth of spatial immanence” (Keith and Pile 6), which erroneously accorded a landscape with a specific, different and also inferior cultural identity,³ the Western World kept the Other in suspension. First, by naming its Otherness, but also by locating it within specific geographical perimeters, distancing it from the First World, or crediting it with “immutability,”⁴ the colonial culture deciphered the colonized peoples as exotic, queer, and also unchangeable. This implies that for the First World the borders between countries not only divided neighboring national geographies, but also set up a cultural breach. In other words, the geographical demarcation of the globe entailed the creation of cultural enclaves; and to be a national of one country meant bearing the cultural identity of that given nation.

The discussion of cultural identity vis-à-vis territoriality necessitates a consideration of the issue of power-relations. By means of wrapping cultures into neat and insulated geographical wholes, the Western World has exercised (or still exercises) its power over naming and defining the Other identities of the world. In this same perspective, Homi Bhabha holds that the First World has the attitude of a controlling collector or appreciator in a “musée imaginaire” of
cultured identities from the periphery. Bhabha “translates”\(^5\) this hegemonic localization and surveillance of Otherness with the following claim:

\[\text{[T]he sign of the “cultured” or the “civilized” attitude is the ability to appreciate cultures in a kind of \textit{musée imaginaire}, as one should be able to collect and appreciate them. Western connoisseurship is the capacity to understand and locate cultures in a universal time-frame that acknowledges their various historical and social contexts only eventually to transcend them and render them transparent. [...] A transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that “these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid.”} \]

(Bhabha 208)

According to Bhabha, in the articulation of cultures there is an ongoing power-play. In this power-logic, the border is presented as a potent, defining line between cultured groups. In other words, with the help of borderlines, the First World recognizes the existence of many different identities, but at the same time distances this difference from its own culture. Set and defended by powerful nations, the border entails “the creation of cultural diversity and a containment of cultural difference” (Bhabha 208). Moreover, trespassing and transcendence were considered (and in some cases still are) deviations from the norm or to the extremes they were dealt with as pure anomalies. Thus, since World War II strict laws have been passed across the world against the crossing of national borders, and the migrant subject has been considered an alien. More specifically to the foreign relations between the US and Mexico, the political understanding between these two neighboring countries was first to control Mexican migration with Bracero Program and then to reduce the illegal entry of \textit{mexicanos} into the US with Operation Wetback.
Whereas Bracero Program aimed at recruiting labor hands from Mexico for a limited period of time under the auspices of the Texas Good Neighbor Commission, the implementation of Operation Wetback fulfilled exactly the opposite role. In plain terms, Operation Wetback was the violent deportation of thousands of undocumented Mexicans from US land. And as a US legislative act, it expressed and reified the Anglo fear of border-crossers.\(^6\) In other words, for white Americans the undocumented immigration to the US meant illegal entry. In this context, the Border Patrol assumed the authority to defend the US border against wetbacks (a pejorative term for undocumented Mexican), and US society felt protected and distanced from the “illegal aliens.”

Yet, along with all the post-isms of contemporary times, both the border and the sense of identity formed in relation to a border-experience have been reconceptualized.\(^7\) Distinctly voiced by minority groups, the recent quest for identity defies the doctrine of the isolated, autonomous self. Modern theories of identity-construction consider the self “by reference to an unknowable other, be it God, exotic or primitive peoples, nature, a myth of primordial origins, adversaries of war, the mad, the poor, criminals” (Delanty 3). This means that contemporary philosophies of self-identity recognize the need for self-affirmation, but realized in relation to the Other. Seen in this light, the border is more than a stretch of land or water between neighboring countries and/or distinct cultures, but a trope, which both distances and at the same time locates adversarial identities. Furthermore, the contemporary process to identity-perception answers back with the groundbreaking recognition of “the conflict between belief (the realm of possibilities) and knowledge (the realm of limits)” (Delanty 2). Possibilities and limits are two key-terms directing us to transcendence and the projection of the self across borders. As far as the related notions of transcendence and crossing are concerned, the spokespeople of peripheral communities focus on
the construction of a third party in any identity-discourse: the identity formed at the interstices of cultures. In this context, borders (both spatial and cultural) are now recognized to be a construct. Sociology, anthropology and political science currently interpret borders as an unjust means to tie peoples of diverse historical backgrounds to specific locations. Accordingly, migrant, diasporic and minority narratives have radically debated the former despotic territorialization of culture. The concept of culture is no longer a bounded, autonomous whole but a “contact zone,” which signifies a site of cultural representations where meanings are shared, contested and eventually articulated. The issue at hand is in fact of a semiotic nature. If the Center exists only in contrast to the Margin, Black against White, Evil as opposed to Benevolence, Autochthony versus Alienness, then the border is an obsolete term without the potential or the realization of its crossing. In other words, the protection of the border entails the real possibility of the same border’s (il)legal crossing. In regard to the US Southwest, the crossing of the Rio Grande border between Mexico and the USA is not a rigid, insurmountable obstacle for the contact between two cultures, but a lucid mobility zone. With its long history of crossings and political negotiations, the Rio Grande area is the border trope that never fully realized its function precisely because the crossings from Mexico to the US have never really ceased.

Borders entail the concept of the borderlands, which signify the actual land or the more abstract term of the cultural space at or near the border of two nations, cultures, social groups, genders and so on. This definition implies a “third space” where cultural identity is formed in-between nations and cultures. Originally proposed by Gloria Anzaldúa in her groundbreaking autobiography Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987), the notion of the borderlands has been formulative in the recent academic turn to issues of identity-cognition as identity-construction and negotiation. Conceived in parallel to the notion of the borderlands, Anzaldúa’s
perception of the Chicano/a self is drawn under relational, confluent and often oppositional parameters. Thus, the study of the Mexican-American self of the borderlands welcomes the following: the examination of the distant past (the Indian socio-cultural legacy) and the more recent Chicano self-representations (ethnic Chicano identity in the US Southwest); patriarchy versus ethnic feminism; social subordination as opposed to social ascendancy and the dangers of assimilation. Beyond this wide array of social, cultural, gendered and political self-positionings, Anzaldúa complicates the issue even further with the suggestion that the borderland-identity is perpetually “worked on”:

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 the tejas-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape. [...] Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an “alien” element. There is an exhilaration in being participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being “worked on.” I have the sense that certain faculties—not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened.

Strange, huh? (preface)

Anzaldúa’s proposal of identity-perception displays a fleeting quality. Since the self criss-crosses borders and tiptoes over fragile borderlines, then the script of one’s self is an open-ended story,
or a perpetually changing construct of borderland-contacts. But the borderlands is not a utopian space in-between distinct nations and cultures. They are

not just places of imaginative interminglings and happy hybridities [...] to celebrate. They are equally minefields, mobile territories of constant clashes with the Center’s imposition of cultural fixity. Borders are zones of loss, alienation, pain, death--spaces where formations of violence are continually in the making. To live in the border is frequently to experience the feeling of being trapped in an impossible in-between. (Lavie and Swedenburg 15)

People living in the borderlands are the products of “ambivalence and process” (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 9). Their identity is a text which is (re)written, elaborated and articulated in the cultural negotiation of different cultures. And the subjects who experience these encounters of diverse cultures take on a “fleeting, shifting, and emergent character” (Lavie and Swedenburg 17). In short, the border-crosser is the subject-in-the-making.

Irene Beltran Hernandez’s Across the Great River (1989) looks the border-crosser straight in the eyes and embarks upon a fresh approach to the border region in the Rio Grande valley. The characters in Hernandez’s undertaking are specific to the US-Mexico border zone, including “the pollo (the border-crosser), the mosco (the helicopter of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service), [...] the coyote (the person who brings the pollo across the border), the cholo or chola (the young bicultural inhabitant of the border region)” and the curandera (a practitioner of healing through herbs whose talents may include some supernatural powers) (sic) (Hicks xxiii). The protagonist in Across the Great River is a little girl who experiences the trauma of fragmentation and dislocation. Along with her family, her Papa, Mama and baby brother Pablito, Kata leaves Mexico, crosses the Rio Grande and reaches Texas. While crossing the river the
family becomes separated, as the Border Patrol hunts the family, the coyote does not protect them, and the wounded father drifts down the river. With her Mama seriously injured, Kata assumes the role of the head of the family. The three Mexican border-crossers find shelter in the home of a curandera, an inhabitant of the Southern Texan region and a US national. Doña Anita helps the children and Mama, and stands by them during all their adventures and misfortunes in the US. Throughout the story, Kata meets a wide array of characters, such as the kind-hearted Mexican-American Doctor Mendez; Nell, the white American director of the orphan’s home where Kata is put for a short period of time; Ramona, a helper at the orphanage; and Pilar, Doctor Mendez’s frustrated wife. At the end of the novel, Kata, with her mother and Pablito return to Mexico, where they are reunited with Papa, who had not drowned in the Rio Grande, but had been held in custody in Mexico charged with illegal border-crossing.

Kata’s story is one of identity-formation, which takes place at the borderlands north and south of the Rio Grande. Indeed, when Kata leaves Mexico, she parts with the mexicano cultural region and is born ex nihilo across the border. However, at the end of her story, Kata returns to Mexico and constructs a new mexicano identity, which combines her experiences from both sides of the border. The child assumes various roles, juxtaposes experiences and becomes the border-trope of a mutating identity. For Hernandez, Kata is the cultural prodigy of the borderlands. Her quest for identity is not a solitary venture; more to the point, hers is a collective identity since it is the outcome of a polyvocal experience. Moreover, Kata is a little girl, so from this perspective Across the Great River offers a reconsideration of childhood on the premises of questioning the socialization models that have kept children powerless and silent. These models promoted “a view that children are part of a process in which social knowledge is imparted to them from adults. In turn, children are transformed over time into mature adults” (Caputo 23). However, far
from depicting a passive receptor of adult culture, Hernandez portrays Kata as an active agent in her own right. In view of the above, the primary focus of this chapter is to look into the process of identity-construction realized in the experience of border-crossings, through a close reading of Hernandez’s text. Furthermore, as a secondary objective this chapter explores the degree of Kata’s interaction with the adult world, her conceptualization of real-life experience and her participation in social border-encounters.

Although *Across the Great River* unfolds in a linear chronological order, certain aspects of the migrant family’s background can be approached by inference. The story commences in *media res* since Kata ventures into darkness, following a route envisaged solely by her parents. The child-narrator is ignorant of the reasons for the family’s exit. She does not know why she is subjected to the ordeal of crossing the Rio Grande, why the family’s integrity is being jeopardized and finally why she is roaming in a hostile and alien environment. Geographical dislocation is imposed on her without any logic, at least from her viewpoint. Kata merely experiences the effects of her father’s decisions. If the situation is to be approached symbolically, the father figure represents a master-voice. He takes the decisions for the family’s well-being and proceeds to realize his vision for a better life in the US. On the other hand, Kata counterpoises her first-person narrative, not to account for her father’s decision to flee Mexico, but to decode the experience from her own perspective.

At the family’s departure from Mexico, Kata is “culturally incomplete and require[s] a progression through stages in order to attain the completeness attributed to adult members of society” (Caputo 24). While crossing the river though, the child-protagonist begins a process of social cognition. After having transgressed a territorial border, Kata accumulates knowledge, rationalizes experience and appropriates culture through interaction with others. In this linear
developmental process, the initial feeling is wonder. Kata cannot comprehend the adult world. In effect, she asks herself numerous questions so as to decode her experience: Why must she run to the river? Why should she wait without moving? How come her mother remembers all those prayers and why is she murmuring them in the middle of the night? Why do these strange men call the land across the river “the land of opportunity” (13)? Indeed, little Kata remains stupefied, passively bombarded by a variety of new experiences. She does not know where she is going and why the family is fleeing their homeland. Yet, what strikes Kata as peculiar is her mother’s continual sobbing and reluctance to flee:

Mama touches her waist. “Yes, but Carlos, it is such a long walk for the children.” She picks up Pablito, my Baby brother, and hugs him tightly. I watch as she dries her tears on the baby’s shirt. With red eyes she looks around our hut, then she comes over and touches my shoulder. (5)

But Papa has made up his mind. Completely unwilling to succumb to his wife’s pleas, Papa proceeds into migrancy:

“We cannot return! This is a dream that I shall make come true.” He walks onward removing himself from her grip. (6)

Papa obstinately defies Mama’s wishes and warnings. His dream for a new life across the river awaits him. Fully infused in his wild-goose-chase for a better future, Papa blurs reality and fails to discern the dangers involved in the forthcoming venture. He romanticizes the crossing of the Rio Grande, and “picks up his guitar which he slings carefully over his shoulder” (5). Papa is the romantic fool, the Don Quixote fighting real-life evilness with dreams and music, while in contrast Mama holds on tightly to her children and “puts bread and a piece of dried meat in a
scarf” (5). In an analogy, the father-figure feeds on dreams, whereas Mama strives to bring him back to reality.

On reaching the Mexican bank of Rio Grande, Papa commences the negotiations with the *coyote*, who is responsible for transporting the family to US territory. Little Kata is unaware of the realities of the situation and cannot grasp what is happening in its essence. Instead, she glances around and decodes the scene in the manner of a Biblical allegory. The child-protagonist’s narration changes into a sustained moral and religious soliloquy, and her perception of nature as well as of the illegal border-crossing is realized accordingly. In this allegorical mood, the *coyote* is a mere shadow, which converses with Papa, while in the background the sound of the doves can be heard. The doves impart a sense of peace and serenity, and juxtapose the bleak, evil aura of the shadowy man. With their ambiguous cooing, whether imparting a warning against the family’s exit or shedding a tear for the family’s peregrination to follow, the doves function as a chorus. Furthermore, these benevolent emblems of paradise give way to the Mephistophelean man-in-the-shadow with his large tattoo which depicts a fearful sight: “It is a picture of a woman with some kind of rope around her waist. No [...]. It is not a rope. The woman holds a snake in her hand. The snake’s body is curled around her waist” (8-9). And as the *coyote* cautiously steps out of darkness, the shadow takes form: “He has large teeth that sparkle white in the moonlight” (9). The *coyote* is the devil himself leading the family out of the heavenly *mexicano* land into the hell across the border.

Before crossing over to the new land, everything becomes silent, apart from Papa’s reassuring voice whispering words of comfort: “Do not fear. All is ready and a new life across the border awaits us” (8). Yet, Kata is wary: “I can no longer hear Papa’s footsteps and I can hear Mama’s footsteps, but not my own. My heart is pounding away and I wonder why” (8).
Subsequently, the whole family rushes frantically into darkness. At this point the border-crosser experiences an allusive (re)birth. While waiting on one side of the border, Kata is in an identity-limbo, not knowing where she is going and why she is abandoning her homeland. In Mexico, Kata was a cultural embryo, which was kept well-protected from the outside world. The Mexican home was the womb, but now she experiences a symbolic birth. In parallel to a baby violently exiting the mother’s womb, confronting light and overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness, Kata runs downhill in complete darkness, dodging rocks and cactuses, sees “large lights beam upon the water” and finally reaches Texas (9). However, whereas a baby inherits a kinship identity or enters a well-formed social context, Kata is forced into non-identity. Being baptized in the Rio Grande, Kata is ascribed with the hybridity of the border-crosser. Indeed, the child-protagonist assumes the role of Bhabha’s transparent subject, who hides from the outside world since the new social context is unwilling to incorporate her. The corollary is that Kata inhabits the margins along with the hordes of *mexicano* illegal border-crossers. In fact, the little girl becomes a shadow herself, and assumes the symbolism in the *coyote*’s tattoo: after crossing the Rio Grande border, Kata represents the woman suffering under the snake’s tight grip. And hers is the emergent identity of the borderlands, which confronts power-tensions and their concomitant dynamics of oppression.

To the extent that Kata socializes with her family and the *coyote*, she has not obtained the power to oppose the adult world. The child-protagonist cannot resist “deterritorialization” other than by clinging to Papa’s pouch, her doll, and her kin—her mother and little brother.¹¹ These three expressions of Kata’s resistance to the new state of affairs become tokens of cultural inheritance. First, protecting Pablito and the injured mother is a legacy passed on to her by Papa.
In the new land, Kata is expected to take care of the family especially in the absence of the father-figure, who has drifted down the river:

How could Papa let this happen? Did he make it across the river safely? How will he know where we are? Tears fill my eyes and this time I cannot stop them from flowing. I pick up Pablito and hold him tightly. “Pablito, it’s you and me [...] at least, until Mama wakes up, and I will be glad when she does.”

I squeeze him hard and he cries out.

I sit on the edge of the bed, holding Mama’s cold hand and staring at her frozen face in which I cannot see any movement. I pull the blankets up tighter around her and bend to kiss her cheek. (20-1)

Despite the abrupt transition to maturity, Kata retains her links with the homeland. To be precise, the doll and the pouch are the items of a cultural smuggling. On the one hand, the doll is a constant reminder of Kata’s tender age and imparts symbolic undertones of her upbringing in a closely-knit family. Thus, when asked by her sobbing mother, “M’ija, daughter, is there something you would like to take on this trip?” (5), Kata instantly reaches into the cot and pulls out her cloth doll. On the other hand, the stone in the pouch symbolizes the Mexican *la tierra* (the land). Even though Kata is not completely aware of the worth of this shining stone, she never breaks her promise to Papa to keep the pouch with the gold nugget around her waist. Tightly hidden in this womb-like spot, the stone becomes a legacy passed on to her by the older generation:

I remember the pouch. [...] I lift my skirt and undo the straps of the pouch. In it I find some paper money, a few Mexican coins that fall onto my lap and the yellow stone that the shadow [the *coyote*] so greatly admired. I take the stone
and it feels rough in my fingers. It is unusual in that it has smaller rocks of a different shade planted in it. [...] I stuff everything back in the pouch, then I tie it around my waist. I straighten my skirt and then peek out to the garden.

(20-1)

A recurrent element in the plot, the shining stone is a cultural sign. Figuratively speaking, the experience of border-crossing endows Kata with the pretty stone. The child instinctively protects it from the outside world in the same way a mother would protect the embryo she bears. Furthermore, the rock stands for the object of desire contested by most adults in the story. Her father tries to conceal it from the cunning coyote, who in turn attacks the helpless women of the family in order to obtain it. Kata succeeds in protecting the golden nugget in the New World and only at the end of the story is its true value revealed. The shining stone in the pouch is of pure gold, picked up by Papa in the fields surrounding the family’s humble house in Mexico. The nugget symbolizes the profound significance of Kata’s homeland.

While en route to the new environment, Kata develops a relationship with a curandera (folk medicine practitioner). Doña Anita, who is an American citizen of Mexican ancestry, is a bizarre character. She is the Southwestern borderland folk-hero who represents those mystic, benign and respected qualities derived from Mexican paganism and its healing practices. The old woman is a shaman and an aloof outsider of organized society, who bridges the gap between Mexican myth-making and the realities of American life. Indeed, in the story curanderismo serves to juxtapose the mysticism of mexicano culture with the pragmatism of American society. The overwhelming significance attributed to Doña Anita’s judgments and the liking held for this folk character by little Kata are expressive of Hernandez’s marked preference for mexicano life. In fact, Doña Anita embodies the only true friend to Kata’s family, who protects them and attends
to their needs with the constant enforcement of her magic powers. Living with Doña Anita is a step forward to self-perception for Kata because the interaction of the two female characters creates a “contact zone [...] a set of exchanges of push and pull” (Clifford 192). In this contact zone at Doña Anita’s ranch, the parties involved “invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. This contact perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other” (Clifford 192). Moreover, the organizing structure of the characters’ interaction is one of give-and-take. Thus, although on the surface there seems to be a romanticizing of Kata’s relationship with Doña Anita, following the cliché of the forlorn helpless child and the elderly wise woman, the stereotype is undone since Kata is portrayed as a strong carrier of knowledge. Doña Anita has a lot to learn from Kata, and vice versa. First and foremost, the two characters bypass the opposition between rootedness and displacement. Whilst Doña Anita claims the quality of rootedness in the US Southwest, she is literally detached from the world, being fully involved in employing her magic potions. On the other hand, Kata dwells in displacement. She is the diasporic subject who roams about Doña Anita’s ranch without feeling like an outsider. In other words, Kata is “rooted in a particular landscape [...] [forming] an interregional network” (Clifford 254). Kata embodies the migrant subject who maintains, revives and invents a connection with a home, using Doña Anita as a link or medium. Similarly, Doña Anita uses Kata and Pablito’s presence to construct her connections with the world:

“Anita, you [...] mean that [...] we can stay here with you? We can live here?

Oh, Anita. I always thought that you were a bad person, but you’re not and I have gone out of my way to make it hard on you.”

She crushes me to her belly. “You are not the first to think that, Kata. It’s all
right, for I am an ugly old woman set on having my way and helping others in my own way. I get lonely at times, but you and Pablito have eased my loneliness.” (34)

Upon resuming responsibility for the children’s needs, Doña Anita transgresses the borders of isolation, and enters the trajectory of functioning as a protector of this wretched mexicano family and a mentor for little Kata.

Doña Anita is the inhabitant of the US border-zone. She is the documented autochthonous yet peripheral subject, while Kata is the diasporic trespasser. Besides the difference of legality-versus-illegality in relation to their presence in Texas, both characters represent the hybridity of marginal cultured identities. First, they express themselves linguistically through the code of Spanish in contrast to the dominant US language of English; second, they mediate a culture distinct from the one professed by the (white) Center; and finally, they normalize a process of distancing themselves from organized social webs of relations. In this light, Doña Anita and Kata acculturate themselves to one another’s practices and produce a novel separatist culture. In fact, the two female characters articulate the force of a consciousness which is “culturally-bound,” but at the same time not “territorially-defined.” Doña Anita and Kata’s relationship could be considered an allegory of a transnational dialectic. More explicitly, Doña Anita is the representative of an older generation inhabiting US national land, but she truly matures into a social identity only after she takes the migrant family under her protection. In a similar fashion, Kata, who is spatially and culturally displaced, plunges into a (re)negotiation of her identity-perception. She is far from Mexico, deprived of any parental sanctuary and tenderness, while she strives to protect her baby brother Pablito, herself and the only item of a family fortune, the shining stone in the pouch around her waist. In short, Kata wakes up to the responsibilities of the
adult world and holds the future of the family. Yet, the child-character penetrates the New World only with the help of Doña Anita. A predominant feature in their contact relation is that they articulate their coming-of-age only by depending upon each other. Maturity in the story is two-fold and applies both to the localized and the diasporic subject.

The two female characters embody the traveler par excellence, both physically and mentally. Kata is a traveler in the sense that first she is away from home and second she displays cultural and personal competence. The child border-cropper undergoes the experience of travel under

strong cultural, political and economic compulsions. These specific circumstances are crucial determinations of the travel at issue--movements in specific [...] diasporas, borderlands, exiles, detours, and returns. Travel in this view, denotes a range of material, spatial practices that produce knowledges, stories, traditions [...] and other cultural expressions. (Clifford 35)

By comparison, Doña Anita is also a traveler in a fantasy world of her own. While Kata trespasses a physical border to enter an alien world, Doña Anita habitually crosses the thin borderline between fact and fiction. The old curandera’s favorite pastime is to rummage through her wide collection of postcards and mentally to surpass spatial limits. Both experiences touch upon the real trajectory of experience, whilst they toy with imaginative parameters. Indeed, there is symmetry between the two travelers: the factual embodied in Kata and the imaginative in the character of Doña Anita. In both instances, the parties involved experience their parting with an indigenous environment and their displacement in material and socio-spatial practices. At the same time, though, they create the illusion of an experience. Kata has left her homeland, but she adopts the stance of a recluse. She is on US land, but not until the middle of the story does she
take part in any extended socialization. Locked up either in Doña Anita’s hut or the derelict lodging her mother rents in a small Texan town, after she has recovered from the border-crossing traumas, Kata does not fully integrate into the new social cosmos across the border. On the other hand, Doña Anita fantasizes drifting among the inhabitants of major city-centers. Both characters supplement each other: Kata’s youthfulness with Doña Anita’s mature decisions; or Kata’s real presence in an alien space with Doña Anita’s daydreaming.

In adjusting the scales between fact and fantasy, traveling transforms into a chronotope “a setting or scene organizing time and space in a representable whole form--a site of travel encounters as of residence” (Clifford 25). When the self parts from a cultural enclave, transplantation or, to use the Deleuozo-Guattarian term, “reterritorialization” is the corollary. These circumstances create the emergence of a diasporic or migrant culture. The sites of crossing create “specific histories, tactics, everyday practices of dwelling and traveling: traveling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-traveling” (Clifford 36). This argument points to the relativist localization of the border-crosser. The deterritorialized subject oscillates between here and there, balances on a tight-rope over diverse cultures and often (re)enacts the cultural identity of the borderlands. The traveler negotiates the “here” in the light of the “out there.” The place and the experience are translatable via the representational modes of a cultural inheritance. In accordance with this, Kata decodes Texas through her Mexican perspective:

“Sometimes I forget that I’m no longer in Mexico.” Anita chuckles, “That’s very easy to do in this little town with its plaza and market which are so much like the ones in Mexico. You see, the people here are mostly Mexicans, but they are born on this side of the river and that makes them Mexican-Americans. You were born on the other side of the river and that
makes you a native Mexican.” (58)

Similarly, Doña Anita visits the US metropolises as a shadow:

“Yes, Kata. I tell you, every Sunday night I go through them. It’s like I’m visiting those places on a trip. Can you picture a miserable old woman like me walking down such streets?” (31)

In dealing with migration and traveling, Kata invariably accommodates her new experience in Mexican terms, while Doña Anita becomes an omniscient observer. These two approaches to self-awareness are open to the influence of numerous narratives, ranging from the imprint of their past activities to their present conditions or their future anticipations. In either case, Kata and Doña Anita are travelers, who are always aware of their difference and act accordingly in any new context they enter.

Crossing a border and/or a cultural enclave involves a tension in the relationship between identity and non-identity. The border-crosser is stripped of a pre-set identity and then ascribed with a new one. Thus, Kata enters the story with the knowledge of her Mexican identity, but the experience of border-crossing introduces her to a new perspective of identity. This is how Doña Anita initiates Kata into her new role in the US:

“How much money did your Papa give [...] to smuggle your family across?”

“Smuggle? What is that?” Doña Anita’s laughter boxes my ears [...] “Girl! It’s illegal to cross the border without papers. Do you have papers?” Not knowing anything about papers, I say nothing.

(19-20)

From now on little Kata is the undocumented Mexican and the social distinction between herself and Mexican-Americans is crystallized. Kata may not be able to decipher for herself her present
experience as a new identity, but there is Doña Anita who provides evidence for the girl’s mutability. For a period of time, Kata is transformed into a wetback, while her primordial identity is that of a Mexican national. Nevertheless, she persists in retaining and even declaring her Mexican identity, which becomes evident in the constant use of the Spanish language. Whilst Doña Anita attempts to convince Kata to accept her alienness on US territory, Kata argues: “But [...] everyone speaks Spanish” (58). The deterritorialization of the subject is accompanied by the (re)territorialization of language. Kata may have entered an alien context, but the language she uses functions as a constant reminder of her place of origin. Moreover, this linguistic smuggling is Kata’s means of concocting a social web based on Mexican-ness, since the people in “the new land” converse in Spanish, just like back home (58).

Before crossing the Rio Grande, Kata is a passive receptor of adult culture and life. Thus, she obediently gives substance to her Papa’s dream to start a new life across the river. Yet, as soon as she steps on American soil, she develops her own social cognition and involves herself in “the appropriation of culture through interaction with others” (Caputo 25). From now on, Kata is an active agent of resistance and deviance. First, she undermines the distinction between “alien” and “host gaze.” Being a border-cropper, Kata is territorially displaced and most probably she invites the host country’s gaze and runs the risk of revealing her alien-ness. As a token social presence, the border-cropper is fundamentally looked at. The border-cropper is the object of the new cosmos’s gaze and he/she merely possesses the quality of the passive gaze. However, Kata penetrates the new social context with her preconceived translation codes. Far from passively accepting the new cosmos, Kata decodes the new world order from her Mexican perspective and occasionally ascribes it with meaning:

I am not comfortable at our new home. Pablito does not seem to mind the
change, as long as I take him outside for long afternoon walks. For me, the room grows ever so small, as if the walls are closing on top of me, and I cannot stop them.

I enjoy the afternoon walks because they make the day shorter. Often we sit on the steps and watch the people pass. I study them silently. Is he a farmer? Or does he work in a laundry? How many children does she have? It’s a game I play with myself because I never speak to these people. I only wave if they wave at me. (50)

If “the true aim of seeing is not visual, but a function in a largely unconscious discourse,” then Kata undergoes a subconscious process of conversing with unfamiliar cultural values (Hicks 12). And in the midst of a silent discourse among diverse cultures, Kata develops her own decoding of the power-relations she witnesses. When she enters the US, she does not succumb to the role of the passive stranger accorded her by the host culture. Instead of acculturating, Kata exemplifies the unique power to resist framing. So, she does not adapt to the new value system she has entered, but becomes a powerful subject, who crosses the border with a strong sense of self-awareness. The child-protagonist in the story tiptoes around unfamiliar contexts, and then re-reads and re-writes them from her own perspective.

Near the middle of the story, the family moves to a small town since Mama has managed to get a job, and Doña Anita joins them to help them settle into the new urban environment. At this point, Kata parts with her doll and by extension with her childhood. The absence of the doll connotes the coming-of-age for the child, who confronts a new social context and faces a series of decision-makings. First, the migrants are tracked down by the shadow-man, who is in search of the golden nugget in the family’s possession. Lurking in the dark, the coyote dogs the
women’s steps, violates the privacy of their shabby room and attacks the helpless women. During a fearsome fight with innuendos of Mama’s sexual violation, the mother-figure is seriously injured and Doña Anita has to be hospitalized, suffering from broken ribs, teeth, and a swollen face. Under the circumstances, Kata can no longer maintain her state of transparency. The police arrive at their lodging and as representatives of metropolitan officialdom they draw the border-crossers out of obscurity. Now that Kata has entered the world as a visible human being, she is approached and questioned by many people, the police being the first. The child turns to Doña Anita, who is ill in hospital, and whispers in despair: “The police are going to ask me questions. What shall I tell them?” (78). Doña Anita instructs her in how to act like an ignorant, innocent child. Thus, when questioned by the police sergeant, Kata plays the role prescribed by Doña Anita and answers the sergeant’s questions accordingly. But she also succeeds into reversing the power-relations in the investigation when she asks the sergeant questions about the coyote’s identity:

“Did he live at the apartment house?” He taps his pencil against the desk.

“I don’t know.”

I watch as he bites his lips, “He’s dead you know.”

I nod. “Yes, I heard them shout that he broke his neck when he fell down the stairs.” I wiggle in my chair. “Who was he?” I ask.

“That’s my question!” he snaps. “Are you sure that your Mama didn’t know him?”

I shrug. “We just came from Anita’s ranchito.” (79)

Kata outsmarts the sergeant, confounding him with misinformation, which she then cautiously imparts:
“Are you [Doña Anita’s] grandchild?” He waits for my answer, but I give none. Instead, I cough a long time […].

The sergeant stares at me a long while, then says, “That man probably crossed the border illegally. Perhaps he’s a wetback who doesn’t have papers or identification. We get men like that here all the time.” (80)

Following the charade of baffling the representatives of US authority, Kata faces a crucial decision. She can either join Anita and Pablito, who are setting off for the ranch, or stay behind and tend to her ailing mother: “The decision is yours says Anita. [...] It’s hard to make up your mind but you must do it yourself” (84). Kata is once again presented with the dilemma of childhood-versus-adulthood. She “chews her fingers and glances from face to face seeking the answer. Doctor Mendez smiles and Anita pats her hand, but they both wait” (85). All of a sudden and without and reasons stated, Kata decides to enter an orphan’s home: “It is settled. [...] I shall stay with Nell [the Anglo director of the orphanage] and Pablito will go with you [Doña Anita]” (85). Yet, in the back of her mind she still cherishes the dream that “Papa might be there [at the orphanage]” (86). The child is not fully aware of the realities of her present condition, that of the forlorn, parentless child. On the contrary, she treasures the dream that her mother will fully regain consciousness and Papa will rescue the family from this unfriendly environment.

Kata has overcome her “transparency” and is now an “overt” subject. In this context, her identity is again challenged. Up to this point in the story she has been the unseen border-crosser, but she now adjusts to the rank of the identifiable, undocumented trespasser. After her encounter with the police, Kata becomes an alien, seen and treated as one in the white American socio-cultural trajectory. To forfeit this new identity-role, Kata enters the orphanage and then a foster home, where she makes direct comparisons between cultures as if commencing “a metaphorical
journey of intellectual thought” (Chambers 5). From the rural Mexican context, she traverses to hostile American territory. And a location in the perspective of the undocumented migrant is “an itinerary rather than a bounded site--a series of encounters and translations” (Clifford 11). Kata unwillingly abandons her homeland to enter a socio-cultural space with which she is totally unfamiliar. In fact, she undergoes a process of relocating herself in space and time. However, she responds to the new context as if confronting a cultural display, just like visiting a museum or reversing the roles in Bhabha’s *musée imaginaire*. Kata is delighted to discover what a cake is, and remains stunned at the sight of swirling water in the tub. Apart from the tangible objects, people *per se* become sites of meaning, and Kata treats them analytically. She is troubled at witnessing Doctor Mendez and Nell’s unrequited love, and becomes cautious when introduced to Pilar, the Doctor’s neurotic Mexican-American wife. Kata directly converses with the host culture and becomes a stranger who problematizes the host society’s life. As Iain Chambers puts it: “The stranger is an emblem--she or he is a figure that draws our attention to the urgencies of our time: a presence that questions our present. For the stranger threatens the binary classification deployed in the construction of order, and introduces us to the uncanny displacement of ambiguity” (6). Similarly, Kata (re)reads life across the river and then becomes “a ghost that shadows every discourse, [...] the disturbing interrogation, the estrangement, that potentially exists within us all. It is a presence that persists, that cannot be effaced, that draws oneself towards another” (Chambers 6).

Interestingly enough, the characters in the story do not hold an empowered position against Kata’s will and sense of freedom. Instead, there is a negotiation of self-consciousness, which arises out of “cross-cutting determinations, not as homelands, chosen or forced, but as sites of worldly travel occasions for dialogue” (Clifford 12). Thus, Kata does not compromise with the
set of values proposed across the border. Instead, she juxtaposes a critical viewpoint through her youthful, Mexican value-system. Kata forms a symbolic axis around which social relations rotate. In the value-exchange of cultural information, Kata always reacts referentially, that is she compares her present experiences with her stored memories. Likewise, the past is not a mere mental representation in her memory, but an active reminder of her preconceived sense of identity south of the border. Kata reacts to crossing the border armored with the experiences gained south of the Rio Grande. She has vivid memories of the village she grew up in, and the kinship ties back home constantly revive the links with her homeland and undermine any full acculturation into the host country. At no time in the story is Kata willing to accommodate the new state of cultural affairs. More to the point, Kata translates the new context from her own perspective. And if to translate means to change, the migrant child-protagonist deceters the fixed sites of a Western value-system, rocks its foundations and finally alters it. In a symbolic analogy, the peripheral identity defines the Center. Primarily with her depiction of the Western self as problematic, and also by voicing her emergent awareness, Kata becomes a special child. She in fact instigates an internal displacement in the heart of the West by means of weakening the mighty Western cogito. To Kata’s migrant perception, Doña Anita is a wonderful person and not an exotic sorceress; the Doctor’s wife is an evil, vindictive woman and not the pride and joy of the Mexican-American bourgeois community; interracial marriage is not a curse, but a blessing, as in the case of Doctor Mendez and Nell’s union; and Ramona, the silent middle-aged, dark-skinned helper at the orphanage, is anti-social because of her unfulfilled longing for a child of her own. All the characters across the Rio Grande find Kata to be a remarkable child because she imparts knowledge, which has the power to change lives. Indeed, Kata is a marginal identity, which brings the American socio-cultural system to an enlightened awareness.
Across the Great River develops a framework of thought that makes “the migrant central, not ancillary, to historical processes” (Chambers 5). While living in another country, Kata functions as a savior. She unravels the socio-cultural hindrances of life in the US borderlands and also acquaints border-people with alternatives ways of being. Kata’s journey acquires “the form of a restless interrogation,” which undoes the Western world’s terms of reference (Chambers 2). Her outward journey is an allegory of a mundane experience followed by critical thinking and concluding in the reconceptualization of Western identity. Through the fragments of her varied new social encounters, Kata counterpoises a manifesto against the society across the river. And from the site of the transparent, voiceless shadow, Kata matures into the healer of a whole community. It is at this point that Kata functions once again in parallel to Doña Anita. Just like the latter heals and saves people who suffer from a wound, a snake-bite or an illness, Kata is the divine, blessed border-prodigy who saves this cluster of Texan people (both Mexican-Americans and white Americans) from their sad realities. Thus, at the end of the story most characters seem to have been freed from the “Fairies and Furies” of their cultural values: Ramona regains her smile, the Doctor commences a new life with his beloved Nell, and Doña Anita successfully bridges the gap between herself and humanity.

Towards the end of the narrative, Kata leaves the orphanage and returns to Doña Anita’s ranch, where Pablito is staying. Mama recovers from the coyote’s attack and goes to the ranch as well. The return to Doña Anita’s ranchito is like a rewinding in the novel’s narrative structure. The mexicano characters in the story seem to be recovering their original status and re-tracing the route to their homeland. And although Kata feels comfortable with Doña Anita, she constantly searches for a way out of Texas. Doña Anita, the only character Kata fully aligns herself with, becomes the confessor of the young protagonist’s yearning for a return: “Anita, […] do you think
you could get us back home? [...] I mean find a way to get us back to Mexico” (122). In the course of the story, Kata never embraces either deterritorialization from Mexico or reterritorialization in the US. Instead, she repeatedly reminds herself of her Mexican identity and concludes: “I will miss the Doctor as I miss the gift of quietness that Anita’s place offers. But for me, our little village in Mexico will always be home, no matter where I go or whom I meet” (120). Tracing this backward route in the story-line, Kata admits how deeply she wishes to return to Mexico: “I really want to go home. I’ve even lost Anna [her doll]!” (123). And when she is unexpectedly handed her doll, that precious symbol of childhood, Kata is deliriously happy: “I scream as I reach her and I crush her to my chest, then hold her at a distance to examine her dress, which is wrinkled, but not torn. ‘Anna, you’re home too’” (123). Just like the doll’s dress that has been wrinkled but not torn, Kata’s life perception has been enlarged and stigmatized but stays intact. Kata now recovers the proper role of a child and a Mexican who is about to re-root the self in Mexico. Furthermore, while she is smoothing Anna’s dress, she reveals the golden nugget to Mama and Doña Anita:

“If we need money we can sell the pretty stone.”

“What stone?” asks Mama turning sharply toward me.

“The one that was in the pouch.” I lift the skirt and undo the pouch.

Mama’s eyes bulge out. “I thought I had lost that pouch!”

“No, I had it all the time, Mama.” I hold the pouch upside down and the stone falls into my palm. “It’s a little pretty isn’t it, Anita? Maybe we can get three or four American dollars for it.” (123)

In a symbolic transaction, Kata regains the doll and her childhood, while she simultaneously passes the golden nugget and its concomitant responsibilities over to the adults. From now on the
grown-ups take over and Kata regresses into serenity. The child-protagonist’s ordeal seems to have reached its denouement.

After Mama and Doña Anita get hold of the stone, they discover its worth. The stone, which Kata has protected all along, is a valuable piece of gold and the means to the family’s homecoming. The gold nugget is exchanged for rolls of dollars, which ensure a better life in *mexicano* territory. When Doña Anita has the stone evaluated, she declares its worth to her stunned friends:

“Look!” She jerks open the bag and rolls of green money flow forth.

“Anita!” shouts Mama, “where on earth did you get so much money?”

“I just told you. Weren’t you listening?” she cries. “It’s all yours. The man bought the gold nugget for $600 American dollars.”

“Bless all the saints! Kata, now we can go back home!” screams Mama for joy as she lifts me into the air. (126)

But the journey back home commences with the lingering question: “Where would Carlos [Papa] get a gold nugget?” (125). The mystery is solved when the family is reunited in Mexico and Papa shares the knowledge of the gold nugget’s origin:

“I found that as I walked back from town. You see, I decided to take a short cut through the back hills. I grew tired and decided to sit near this large boulder. The stone was embedded in that boulder. I thought it looked different, so I dug it out with my knife and stuck it in my pocket.” (135)

Ironically, it is in Mexican space where the family’s happiness lies. The pilgrimage across the great river concludes with the awareness that the homeland is the true “land of opportunity” (13). The story demystifies the dream of the wetback entering US territory, and symbolically revives
the myth of Aztlan, the Golden City of Indian antiquity, but in Mexican territory. In the same
spirit of crossing borders, Hernandez relocates the spiritual homeland of Chicano political
rhetoric, where Chicanos could trace their origins, by transferring it from the American
Southwest to Mexico. Papa can stretch out his hand and grasp numerous pieces of gold on
mexicano land. Yet, this awareness comes into being only after Hernandez has filtered the
family’s life through migration.

By subjecting themselves to the state of the debased, uprooted strangers, Kata’s family
manages to revise their indigenous homeland. In this context, their return is not freed from
cultural transmutation and transformation. Together with the enunciation of cultural borders and
crossings, subjectivities, who break barriers of thought and experience, are likely to develop a
unique border-identity, one that is realized always en route. And the homecoming cannot be
unproblematic, but a deeply troubled re-rooting. This realization compels the border-crooser to
recognize

the need for a mode of thinking that is neither fixed nor stable, but is one
that is open to the prospect of a continual return to events, to their re-
elaboration and revision. This retelling, re-citing and re-siting of what
passes for historical and cultural knowledge depend upon the recalling and
re-remembering of earlier fragments and traces that flare up and flash in
our present “moment of danger” as they come to live on in new
constellations. These are fragments that remain as fragments: splinters of
light that illuminate our journey while simultaneously casting questioning
shadows along the path.

(Chambers 3)
The question to ask oneself is: Can Kata, Mama and Pablito pick up their lives as if nothing has intervened in the temporal space between crossing the border and returning to Mexico? Doña Anita acts as a catalyst to this thematic concern, when addressing Papa with her advice: “Señor [...] you should stop all that foolish dreaming and provide for your family. They have been through much pain and heart-ache, which will take many years to forget” (134). What Doña Anita’s words suggest is that migration and dislocation can certainly be painful experiences. But above all they denote a point of departure, the dream of a homecoming and the constant mutation of identity.

Notes

1 In Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (1997), James Clifford mentions that ethnographers criticized the tradition of “literary travel” for being superficial. However, Clifford criticizes all forms of scientific ethnographic fieldwork as guilty of subjective data-collection. In his own words: “With colonial (and neocolonial) regimes ethnographers typically have asserted their aim to understand not govern, to collaborate not exploit. But they have navigated in the dominant society, often enjoying white skin privileges and a physical safety
in the field guaranteed by a history of prior punitive expeditions and policing. Scientific fieldwork separated itself from colonial regimes by claiming to be apolitical. This distinction is currently being questioned and renegotiated in the wake of anti-colonial movements, which have tended not to recognize the distance claimed by anthropologists from contexts of domination and privilege” (65). All subsequent references to Clifford in this chapter are drawn from Routes.

2 The influence of “literary travel” lingered on in fictional writings long after the genre lost its popularity. A striking example is Joseph Conrad’s modernist masterpiece on European colonialism, written at the turn of the 20th century. The Heart of Darkness is a shocking story of a search for identity in Africa, where the First World agents are “decivilized” during their contact with the autochthonous culture. Moreover, Jack Kerouac’s seminal novel of the Beat Generation On the Road, which was first published in 1958, follows a similar premise with a narrator roaming around post-war America in search of his social positioning.

3 In “The Politics of Space” (1993), Michael Keith and Steve Pile introduce the politics of space by arguing against two “equally unacceptable arguments: a myth of spatial immanence and a fallacy of spatial relativism. The first is the notion, self-evidently bizarre on close inspection, alarmingly common in much social description, that there is a singular, true reading of any specific landscape involved in the mediation of identity. On the other hand, it is invidious and disingenuous to suggest that each and every reading of a specific landscape is either of equal value or of equal validity; such notions lead to an entirely relativist notion of spatiality” (6). For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on the impossibility of spatial immanence because in the present postmodern world this impossibility is an invaluable starting point to any political theory against the hegemonic attempts at spatial and cultural demarcation.
I use the term “immutability” to signify that element in social life which is rendered unchangeable by the dominant culture. As used by Charles Baudelaire in his discussion of modernity, “immutability” is the exact opposite of the transient quality of experience, and thus obsolete or uncalled for in any approach to identity-formation. Baudelaire’s definition of modernity is as follows: “By Modernity I mean the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” (Painter of Modern Life 13).

I use the verb stem “to translate” influenced by Homi Bhabha’s notion of “cultural translation” with which he suggests that “all forms of culture are in some way related to each other because culture is a signifying or symbolic activity. The articulation of cultures is possible not because of the familiarity or similarity of contents, but because all cultures are symbol-framing and subject-constituting, interpellative practices” (“Third Space” 209-10).

Operation Wetback was a US official reaction first to the increasing number of Mexican workers on US land and second to the rising unemployment numbers after the economic recession in 1953-4. Drawn up in 1954, Operation Wetback embarked upon a massive deportation drive against Mexicans. Matt S. Meir and Feliciano Ribera discuss the dramatic impact of Operation Wetback and its inadequacy to control border-crossings: “In implementing Operation Wetback the civil liberties and human rights of deportees and their families were often callously ignored, and physical treatment of deportees was sometimes marked by intimidation, harshness, and contempt. Of the approximately 3,700,000 undocumenteds returned to Mexico only 63,500 were expelled as a result of formal deportation proceedings. Many left the country ‘voluntarily.’ In its 1955 annual report the INS confidently announced that ‘the wetback problem no longer exists,’ although, in fact its causes had not even been addressed. The roundup did not
end illegal crossing and it had only a short-term effect in reducing undocumented immigration” (Mexican Americans 189-90).

7 There is a strong historicity in this argument, which relates the two paradigms of spatiality and temporality in the process to self-consciousness. In fact, this is an argument that permeates most of this dissertation, but is considered more directly in Chapters Three and Four. As for the post-isms and the historicity of philosophical thinking, I believe that no schools of thought can be fossilized into sublime philosophical dogmas, but are influenced by a rapidly changing world order, thus giving way to new theories. Brian McHale calls it “historical consequentiality” and he aptly comments on the issue at hand: “As for the prefix POST, I want to emphasize the element of logical and historical consequence rather than sheer temporal posteriority. Postmodernism follows ‘from’ modernism, in some sense, more than it follows ‘after’ modernism. [...] Every literary-historical moment is ‘post’ some other moment, just as it is ‘pre’ some other moment. [...] Postmodernism is the posteriority of modernism--this is tautological, just as saying that pre-romanticism is the predecessor of romanticism would be tautological” (Postmodernist Fiction 5).

8 The argument here is that all facets of life undergo a process of semiotic reference and juxtaposition. A short definition of the term semiotics is: “The study of signs, their production and communication, their systematic grouping in languages or codes, their social function” (Fowler, Dictionary of Literary Terms 354) In this context, the sign-function is basic to both language and culture. This chapter approaches the semiotics of culture at the crossroads of migrant and indigenous subjectivities.

9 Bhabha’s notion of a “third space” in cultural articulation is relevant to the notion of hybridity. This is how Bhabha elaborates on the two concepts: “The importance of hybridity is
not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges; rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (“Third Space” 211).

10 An allegory is a narrative in which “the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived so as to make coherent sense on the literal, primary, level of signification, and also to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts and events.” Although the device of allegory can apply to historical and political events, the allegorical imagery in this instance focuses on abstract ideas relevant to the crossing of a territorial border. For a brief discussion on allegory, see Abrams, Glossary of Literary Terms 4.

11 According to Eugene W. Holland, the pair of concepts “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” were first used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to “designate a crucial dynamic of the capitalist market: the disconnection and reconnection of working bodies and environments--for example, the disconnection of peasants from grazing land by the Enclosure Acts in England, and their reterritorialization onto textile looms as wage-labor in the nascent garment industry” (“Schizoanalysis” 242). Originally Lacanian concepts relevant to the psychology of the embryo and the new-born, Deleuze and Guattari apply “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” to social analysis. For the purposes of this chapter, the Deleuzo-Guattarian term “deterritorialization” refers to the condition where one leaves his/her country or place of origin. The process of “deterritorialization” is always followed by “reterritorialization,” but in between there is an intermediate stage of hybridity. As for Kata’s identity-profile, the story starts with her being deterritorialized, then being transparent and hybrid (initial illegal border-crosser condition), and finally reterritorialized first in the US (while held in custody or at the
orphanage as an overt illegal border-croesser) and then in Mexico. See also Deleuze and Guattari, What is Philosophy.

12 According to José Escalera, curanderos/as are related to the “New Age” of colonization in the Americas. Curanderos/as are medical physicians in Mexico who combine the healing practices of the Aztecs, Mayans and other Indian groups with the teachings of Hippocrates and fifteenth-century, Spanish, folk medicine. Besides the use of herbal remedies, curanderos/as also “rely upon religious paraphernalia, such as crosses and pictures of saints” (39). As for the present, Escalera holds that curanderismo is more than a cultural fetish for mexicanos, but a relief from the impersonal and technologically-advanced modern life: “Curanderismo [...] adds a new and different dimension to modern society. It represents a throwback to an earlier, supposedly more innocent era; yet, it also represents an alternative, another way, a current of thought, a mode of medical treatment, a way of life that in some ways represents lost dreams and possibilities, a way out of health crisis of hospitals and technology that at times has treatments that are worse than the illness. It is only natural to turn to curanderismo as an invaluable resource as its long-standing folkloric tradition to counterbalance and have us learn more about life in the midst of the virtually perpetual crisis of health care in modern society” (“Curanderos” 41).

13 The concept of the “gaze” is discussed extensively in Emily Hicks’s Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text (1991). Studied in relation to Lacanian assertions, the notion of the gaze, as Hicks views it, “is the functioning of the whole system of shifts. The functioning of the ‘whole system,’ that is a double or a multidimensional critical view of power-relations, is what the border-croesser needs to develop in order to survive” (12). As for the adjectives “active” and
“passive” used to define the notion of gaze they refer to “the act of watching/being watched” (13).

14 My argument here is influenced by Edward Said’s politicization of the concept of identity. According to Said, cultural identity is a political construction and all identities are products of negotiation and assertion. See Said, Orientalism, and Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, Edward Said.
Chapter Three

Barrio Vistas: The Spatial Perspective in Identity-Formation

The barrio is not a ghetto, though there are ghettos in the barrio. It is a microcosm of a Chicano city, a place of dualities: a liberated zone and a prison; a place of love and warmth, a place of hatred and violence, where most of La Raza live out their lives. So it is a place of weddings, bautismos, tardeadas, bailes, velorios, and patriotic “enchilada dinners.” It is a place of poverty and self-reliance, of beloved ancianos [the old ones], of familias, of compadres.
(Valdez and Steiner 145)

If the barrio is a complex and contradictory social space for its residents, the motives of defending its territorial and cultural integrity against external disruption must be similarly variegated. The nature of these complexities begs the question: Why is this vulnerable urban milieu so important to Chicanos? (Villa 8)

Introduction: Reflections on Time, Space and Self-Cognizance

Object Relations theory holds that the emergence of the self is a relational process, which involves the juxtaposition, combination and transmutation of all the parties involved in social life.1 Doing away with instinctual drives, the framework concept of Object Relations theory highlights the absolute sociability of people, and maintains that the sense of the self is drawn out of social procedures. For Object Relations people inhabit a dual world of “external
and internal relationships” implying that self-formation is a dynamic process: the interaction between external reality and the internal perception first of one’s own self, and also of the surrounding world (Gomez 2). Put differently, the numerous identities of the world are not cut off from external reality, but are part of it, constituted in and at the same time constitutive of the world. In tune with this, close relationships, termed ego-relatedness in the jargon of psychoanalysis, become a major factor in the development of the self. Furthermore, the sense of identity is not a concrete, unchangeable pattern, but a fluid structure which is modified according to the relations it holds with a vast social cosmos. The individual or the collectivity is not an ipso facto stable representation, but a construct which is formed in a vibrant and mutating context, through and through. The corollary is that a given society is vibrant because it consists of human agents, and mutating because the relationships among its agents are in constant flux. In other words, social life is as alive as its participants. And identities are constructed within the context of social practices, whether the latter are realized culturally, politically or in a class-conscience.

Drawing from the associative and changing aspects of the self and social life, as advanced by Object Relations, the following discussion of identity-formation considers the dimension of what I term the “involuntary definition of the self.” To define means to make one’s self meaningful and recognizable to the world. Thus, the construction and the representation of the self are relational processes because they essentially value the perception of others. The world is not demarcated into neat, fossilized units, insulated from one another; instead, the world is a complex locus where groupings coincide, collide and most of the times meet at the interstices of social friction. The self is realized in a series of relations no matter how localized or global they may be. Social reproduction, in turn, is no longer treated as a mechanical process of socio-cultural transmission, but is studied in relation to the construction of the pluralistic life of its participants. As for the adjectival
aspect of the term I coined above, the definition of the self is an involuntary process because
the self cannot overcome the powerful impact of complex social interactions. Simply put, the
world around us has an immense impact on our lives. Having been greatly influenced by
contemporary postmodern theories, which have overcome the fallacy that an identity,
whether individual or collective, can control or direct the forces of social relations, this
chapter views the self as interwoven in enigmatic social processes. Departing from the
Cartesian motto *cogito ergo sum*, social theories currently view contemporary identity as
standing in a reflexive analogy to the surrounding world, and in a core of togetherness both
the world outside and individual inner perceptions are in mutual dissemination. Put
differently, both sides of the scale define and are being defined at the same time.
Concomitantly, individual and collective identities share the same figurative space: they are
the opposite sides of the same coin. As for the sense of the self, “[i]t is not so much a private
individual attribute as a public reality, created by and having its primary existence in public
interaction” (Collins 71). The individual is the outcome of the social correlation among
numerous other individuals; and *vice versa*, the vast realm of society is a reflection of the
quasi-molecular relationship among individuals and among even larger social groups.

The process of identity-formation can only be approached in a social context, one that
is predominantly multi-layered and complex. Yet, all theoretical abstractions require their
localization and the recent suggestion is that the discussion of social practices needs to be
rooted in a secular world, one that is readily identifiable to the agents it foregrounds. Theory
now considers the space where social enactment takes place. And before or, more aptly,
along with the histories of any of the world’s groupings, theory now approaches the target
group’s topographic experience. This recent concern with the study of space has given rise to
a controversy between the schools of thought investigating the temporality of social life and
those theorists advocating the spatial aspect in the formation of socio-cultural relationships.
In recent sociological and philosophical literature, a rift seems to prevail between those scholars discussing the history of a cultural group and, conversely, those focusing on the geographical and territorial dynamics involved. In fact, a preoccupation with history has characterized academic study for a long time, relegating the concept of space an ancillary importance. Among the treatises tackling the temporal-versus-spatial controversy, and probably the most cogent one, is Edward Soja’s Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory (1989). Elaborating on the deficiencies of Western Marxism, because of its saturation in history, Soja advocates space and territoriality as the key concepts to a fuller understanding of social life:

Life histories have a geography too; they have milieux, immediate locales, provocative emplacements which affect thought and action. The historical imagination is never completely spaceless and critical social historians have written, and continue to write, some of the best geographies of the past. But it is always time and history that provide the primary “variable containers” in these geographies. [...] An already-made geography sets the stage, while the willful making of history dictates the action and defines the story line. (14)

For Soja, spatiality has remained on the peripheries of academic study, and has only been granted the specialization and artistic expression of the professions of architecture and interior design. Soja attempts a critique of historicism as “a necessary step forward in the spatialization of critical thought and political action” (6). Thus, he proposes what he terms a “spatialized ontology,” and claims that the formation of identity has to overcome two disciplinary illusions about space: that it is either a concrete materiality or a concrete abstraction. This is how Soja formulates his thesis:
One can see more clearly an existentially structured spatial topology and *topos* attached to being-in-the-world, a primordial contextualization of social being in a multi-layered geography of socially created and differentiated nodal regions nesting at many different scales around the mobile personal spaces of the human body and the more fixed communal locales of human settlements. This ontological spatiality situates the human subject in a formative geography once and for all, and provokes the need for a radical reconceptualization of epistemology, theory construction, and empirical analysis. (8)

Soja, however, does not wish to erase the historical hermeneutic completely. His intention is to add spatial highlights in his approach to social consciousness. In other words, he proposes that the fabric of everyday life cannot be adequately discussed unless it considers the material landscape where social enactment takes place. And his contribution to contemporary study is the proposition of dialectics between time and space in the study of the self. Soja’s social representation is a relational process, taking place in specific temporal and spatial dimensions.

The aim of this chapter is to become privy to the barrio as the unique space where Chicano social experience unfolds. The primary objective is to explore how Chicanos view the barrio, including those who had and still have a first hand experience of it, those who have chosen to move out and those who return with a political awareness in its defense against Anglo metropolitanization. This chapter also looks into how mainstream society, predominantly the white middle class, regards the barrio as a marginalized space where *la raza* congregate to form a minor collectivity. Needless to say, focus is drawn only on a limited number of texts which portray the barrio with the hope that they are representative reflections of barrio experience. Influenced by Soja’s spatio-temporal dialectic, I start off
with an approach to the Chicano historical experience in the Southwest in an attempt to show that the temporal hermeneutic of Chicano identity is fundamentally informed by the Chicano geographic experience of dislocation. I then look into two cultural expressions of Chicanismo originating in the barrio: the peculiar Chicano language caló and the zoot-suit dress code. My next step to barrio analysis examines two more directly politicized texts: Guillermo Flores’s and Rosalio Muñoz’s interviews, which defend the barrio against Anglo systematized efforts for barrio dispersal. Finally, I turn to two short stories by Mario Suarez and Amelia Valdez both of which unfold within the barrio, but which show their respective writers’ different reactions to this particular space where the construction of Chicano identity takes place.

**Historicism, Spatiality and Chicano Cultural Identity**

The majority of Chicano narratives exhibit a concern for the historical experience of Mexican-Americans, but at the same time they foreground “a spatial or geographical imagination” (Soja 15). Indeed, the more one reads Chicano literature, the more one is likely to detect a virtuoso affinity for space: locale, territory and migrancy are ever-present themes in Chicano belles lettres. If we take into consideration the bloody history of the US government’s imperialist advances against Latin America and the annexation of the present US Southwest from Mexican national land, with the implementation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, we conclude that the modern Chicano population has a long history of spatial dislocation. This dislocation is realized on both a literal and a figurative level. Literally the redrawing of the borderline changed the territories of the two neighboring countries, Mexico and the US. But beyond the borderline between the two countries, mapping the Southwest entailed attributing a new subjectivity to Mexicans. In *The Lost Land: The Chicano Image of the Southwest* (1984), John R. Chávez comments on how the acquisition of the present Southwest entailed an abrupt change in the consciousness of those Mexicans inhabiting the annexed land:
On February 2, 1848, with Mexico City occupied by the United States, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. With the exception of a strip of territory in what is now southern Arizona and New Mexico, the present Southwest was ceded to the United States. Fortunately for Mexico and for the United States as well, the cries of those who wished to annex the entire southwestern republic remained wisely unheeded. In exchange for the land, the United States paid $15 million, assumed claims of its citizens, promised to restrain Indian raids from the Southwest into Mexico, honored Mexicans land grants, and offered U.S. citizenship to Mexicans remaining in the ceded territories.

Because this treaty officially separated the first Chicanos from their mother country, it permanently changed their image of the homeland, which had now become the Southwest. No longer was the region a threatened defensive outpost of Mexican civilization or a potentially fertile part of the Mexican nation. Mexicans in the Southwest were now a conquered people in a conquered land. (41-2)

With the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo the so-called nuevomexicanos (Hispanic-Mexican inhabitants of the US Southwest in the 19th century) experienced the demarcation of their national consciousness. As the border between the US and Mexico changed, Mexican nationals ceased to be the inhabitants of the northern part of the Mexican nation; instead, they were given the identity of the exotic southwestern inhabitants of US territory, and they began to see themselves as “foreigners in their own land” (Weber vi). Nuevomexicanos experienced an abrupt transition from their Mexican citizenship (before 1848) to their marginalization in the US nation state (after 1848). Prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, mexicanos of the present US Southwest were legitimate subjects of the Mexican nation historically,
territorially, politically, culturally and racially. After 1848, *mexicanos* of the Southwest became the *nuevomexicanos*, and a curious cultural group within the rule of the US: they inhabited the periphery; their language was different from white Americans’ and the color of their skin reflected a gene pool that made them alien in their own land, which had been annexed by US government. The embedded paradox is that the politics of annexation stripped a whole group of people of their indigenous rights to the Southwest and ascribed them with a new identity.

Since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexican-Americans have experienced a cartographic anxiety. As the borderline shifted up northward or southward, depending on which country’s perspective one takes into consideration, people of Mexican ancestry in the Southwest felt that their land was vulnerable to intricate political pacts: when the material space of a nation-state changed, some people’s citizenship changed as well. Indeed, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo deprived Mexican-Americans of their political claim over the Southwest. The change in national rule brought along the displacement of *mexicanos* not only in territorial terms, but also in relation to their political claim over their indigenous land. And although geographically *nuevomexicanos* did not migrate, politically and socially their status changed in the new state of affairs: they experienced political and economic degradation as US domination tentatively turned *mexicanos* into colonized subjectivities, and the formerly *mexicano* communally and individually owned land was gradually and shrewdly usurped by Anglos. In an absurd way, *nuevomexicanos* inhabited their homeland, but they were made to feel like “aliens” by the new political order. However, the ties with the national homeland were not abruptly nor completely cut. The flow of Mexican nationals during the Mexican Revolution and afterwards, as well as the migrancy of *mexicanos* in search of work in the US meant that linguistic and in general cultural ties with Mexico were retained. Mexican migrants flocked the US, took up menial jobs, mainly in agriculture, construction and
railroads, and formed the first *mexicano* urban neighborhoods in the US. City centers provided Mexican-Americans and *mexicanos* alike with work and they in turn housed their families in closely-knit, homogenous districts called “barrios” (neighborhoods or US city districts).

The annexation of the Southwest States brought about a bizarre feeling of non-belonging to Mexican-Americans. By the time the Civil Rights Movement emerged, Chicanos were already aware of their need for a homeland, and for a cultural policy distinct from Mexico and the US. In the 1960s civic upheaval, Chicanos reformed the ties with their homeland and the Southwest became Aztlan, the mythical land of the Aztecs. Chávez discusses how Chicanos, participating in *el movimiento*, rediscovered the myth of Aztlan in order to locate *la raza* people in the Southwest:

After gaining independence from Spain and again after the revolution of 1910, Mexicans had turned to their ancient Indian past for inspiration. It is no surprise that Chicano activists did the same thing during the radical 1960s, especially given the example of contemporary nationalist movements. In the ancient myth of Aztlan, activists found a tie between their homeland and Mexican culture that antedated the Republic of Mexico, the Spanish exploration of the borderlands, and even Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) itself. […] [A]ncient Aztec legends, recorded in the chronicles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, recounted that before the founding of Tenochtitlan the Aztecs had journeyed from a wondrous place to the north called “Aztlan.” Since this place of origin, according to some chronicles, was located in what is now the Southwest, Chicano activists reapplied the term to the region, reclaiming the land on the basis of their Indian ancestry.
In an effort to voice their cultural claims over the States of Texas, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and California, Chicano activists rediscovered the ancient Native-American myth of Aztlan and echoed it as their rallying cry. At the same time, Chicanos delineated their cultural identity, primarily by specifying the geography of their Indian ancestry. Once Chicano activists rendered the Southwest as their race’s mytho-historical locale, they became by implication autochthonous to the territory. Chicano activists proclaimed their *mestizaje* (physical blending of Europeans and Indians) heritage and maintained that being a *mestizo* meant being half-Spanish, half-native-American, and thus the truly legitimate inhabitants of the Americas.

Nevertheless, Aztlan was a mythic Indian legacy which required application to real material space. In effect, the barrio served as the specific locale for the proclamation of a distinct Chicano cultural identity. This combination of the triad of mythology, topology and culture was most successfully realized in “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan,” written at the First Chicano National Conference in Denver in 1969 by the activist poet Alurista (Alberto Urista Heredia). More like a cultural-nationalist manifesto, the plan declared the Chicano identity and its political agendas, and located Chicano experience in urban barrios and *la tierra* (the land) of the Southwest. Consider how the plan sketches the topographic parameter of Chicano identity:

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 Aztlan from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call
of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny. We are free and sovereign to determine those tasks which are justly called for by our house, our land, the sweat of our brows, and by our brows (sic).

(Alurista qtd. in Arteaga 12)

Alurista combines Soja’s historical and spatial imaginations. First, he invokes the history of Chicanos and then he localizes their ancestry in the Southwest. Quite aptly, Alurista picks up the myth of Aztlan and materializes it within real space. Opting for the subversion of US hegemony, “El Plan” gives material form to Chicano experience, bearing in mind the dimensions of both space and time. In other words, geographically and temporally Chicanos develop a collective identity specific to the Southwest and to barrio spaces. As for the Chicano self-formation, Alurista perceives it not as a mere transgression to US politics, but as a clear case of cultural nationalism, localized in the Southwest. And with its distinct register of cultural politics, “El Plan” suggests that American citizens of Mexican ancestry are sovereign subjects of the Southwest in their own right.

The barrio is a mobility space where subjects of Mexican ancestry, mainly working class extended families, “reproduce” and “add to” the Mexican cultural legacy. Yet, as cultures change over time, Mexican-Americans have devised new cultural expressions, in a synthesis of their Mexican cultural reserves and their present socio-cultural situation in the US. This cultural being in-between Mexico and the US has given rise to the hybrid culture of the borderlands. Probably the most outstanding example of a borderland cultural element is caló, the peculiar language of the Mexican-American barrio. Caló is a combination of Spanish and English, enriched with the coinage of new words, like pachuco (Chicano zoot-suiter), vato (guy, dude), la julia (police paddy wagon, also called la chirona), la pinta (prison). Barrio lingo mixes languages: there is Spanish, there is English and there is hybridization. In Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities (1997), Alfred Arteaga
describes *caló* as an interplay of languages, which delineates the Chicano multicultural discourse and reflects the intercultural dynamics at play in constructing Chicano identity. For, being for Chicanos occurs in the interface between Anglo and Latin America, on the border that is not so much a river from the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso and a wire fence from there to the Pacific, but rather, a much broader area where human interchange goes beyond the simple “American or no” of the border check. It is the space to contest cultural identities more complex than the more facile questions of legal status or images in the popular culture. (68)

Arteaga suggests that a given subjectivity’s language is locus-specific, and in the chapter “Mestizaje/Difrasismo” he elaborates on this issue. \(^5\) Arteaga’s syllogism approaches “body, place, and language” interchangeably. These three concepts are defined in relation to one another, as if they form an organic whole to self-cognizance: subjectivity, topography, and language are interrelated in the formation of a collective self. *Caló*, called Chicano slang by some, is a multi-lingo, and is quite similar to *mestizos*, who are in reality a confluence of races (European, Indian, Moorish, African). In other words, multi-racial *caló* is a confluence of languages. Furthermore, these barrios in US cities are crossroads where different cultures meet and then conflate. As for the barrio lingo, Arteaga holds that it is a characteristic expression of the Chicano community’s cultural identity, and significant in the delineation of a homeland and its people, […] suited to the task of envisioning a national origin, and to the tasks of defining a people, their place on the planet, and their future. […] [*Caló*] speaks for and forges a hybrid people, a mestizo, borderland people who articulate in
language the cultural conflicts in which they are enmeshed. (17)

According to Arteaga, the cultural expression of *caló* truly positions Chicanos in the borderlands. But beyond that, the lingo of *caló* has the power to construct the hybrid Mexican-American identity. Mainly by means of distribution within and across temporal and spatial barriers, *caló* manages to spread among the members of the Chicano community. Thus, it becomes an expression and a reproduction of the Chicano hybridized identity.

Born in Mexico, Ernesto Galarza discusses the same issue of a hybridized lingo in his autobiography *Barrio Boy: The Story of a Boy’s Acculturation* (1971). Along with other barrio cultural expressions, Galarza picks up the barrio lingo of *caló*, while he emerges as a Chicano. Highlighting his personal experience, Galarza recalls his pilgrimage from a mountain village in Mexico to the American barrios, and details how a Mexican boy is gradually molded into a barrio subject. The acculturation in the title of his autobiography refers primarily to Galarza’s endorsement of the Chicano identity, while at the same time abandoning his identification with Mexican culture, and learning to distance himself from Anglo society. Language plays an important role in Galarza’s coming-to-being as a Chicano. While inhabiting the barrio, he realizes that language is anything but a unified whole. Rather than a clearly defined means of communication Galarza treats language as a reflection of material experience. Indeed, his own familiarity with a multi-cultural barrio teaches him that language adapts to everyday life; and as races and cultures mix, languages mix as well. This is how Galarza describes the linguistic practice in the barrio:

> Problems with the Americans were the same [...] especially their language. To begin with, we didn’t hear one but many sorts of English. [...] There was no authority [...] who could tell us the one proper way to pronounce a word and it would not have done much good if there had
been. Try as they did the adults in my family could see no difference between “wood” and “boor.” Words spelled the same way or nearly so in Spanish and English and whose meanings we could guess accurately—words like principal and tomato—were too few to help us in daily usage. The grown-ups adapted the most necessary words and managed to make themselves understood. [...] Miss Campbell [the schoolteacher] and her colleagues lost no time in scrubbing out the spots in my pronunciation. Partly to show off, partly to do my duty to the family, I tried their methods at home. It was hopeless. They listened hard but they couldn’t hear me. Besides, Boor-lan was Boorlan all over the barrio. Everyone knew what you meant even though you didn’t say Woodland. (243-4)

The quote suggests a situation of conflict between hegemonic Anglos and subordinated ethnics in the US, a conflict that is relevant to linguistic and cultural practices. With reference to language, the US schooling system claims the primacy of Standard English over any of its variations or ethnic appropriations. However, the barrio, as a vibrant space of social enactment among diverse cultures, has the power to overcome such a dogmatic attitude toward language. And barrio inhabitants practise their lingo, understand each other through the adaptation of various words, like “Boor-lan,” defy the supremacy of Standard English and ascribe a unique cultural identity to their community.

Spanish, English, and the combination of the two dominate Galarza’s acoustic experience. With mixed feelings, the young Galarza learns a new vocabulary and gradually realizes his difference in the new environment of the barrio:

The barrio invented its own version of American talk. And my family, to my disgust, adopted it with no little delight. My mother could tell someone at
the door asking for an absent one: “Ess gon.” When some American tried to rush her into conversation she stopped him with: “Yo non pick een-glees.”

[...] Prowling the alleys and gleaning along the waterfront I learned how *chicano* workingmen hammered the English language to their ways. On the docks I heard them bark over a slip or a spill: “Oh, Chet,” imitating the American crew bosses with the familiar “Gar-demme-yoo.” José and I privately compared notes in the matter of “San Afabeechee,” who, he said, was what Americans called each other in a fist fight. (235-6)

Furthermore, young Galarza matures in the barrio and through the use of a different idiom he realizes that *mexicanos* and Chicanos are two distinct identities. Although WASP society has projected the fallacy that all citizens of Mexican ancestry are one and the same, Galarza undoes the equation. Contrary to the Anglo haphazard homogenization of Hispanic cultures, Galarza maintains that *mexicanos* and Chicanos are different identities, which meet in the barrios and correlate in a subconscious resistance to US cultural supremacy. The difference in the language of the two groups (*mexicanos* and Chicanos) is telling proof of their different cultural backgrounds. Thus, Galarza translates his acculturation into becoming a Chicano, and the use of the linguistic system of *caló* is proof of his newly informed self-identification.

If the barrio is a material space where Chicano cultural elements are formed, then it also stands in contrast to the dominant culture. Differences between the Mexican-American space of the barrio and its opposite, the Anglo suburbs, can of course instigate social unrest. Probably the most remarkable event of conflict between the American home-front and the barrio is the “zoot-suit riots.” The confrontation between American servicemen and zoot-suiters occurred in Los Angeles and lasted ten days, between the 3rd and the 13th June, 1943. Breaking out at the same time as US participation in World War II, the riots signify a complex moment in history where the psychodynamics of socio-cultural difference are at
play. To begin with, the confrontation involved groups of American servicemen and zoot-suiters, mainly Chicano youth following a peculiar dress code. Wearing fingertip-length coats, pegged, draped trousers and styling their hair in ducktails, the zoot-suiters were the exact opposite of the servicemen, mostly trainees, not only in their appearance, but also in their carefree and rebellious behavior. During the riots, groups of servicemen waiting to be sent to the warfront cruised the barrio, spotted young zoot-suiters and stripped them of their attire. The streets of LA soon became a figurative war-zone. Classes and races were in conflict, and before long the situation became analogous to that of gang fighting. The bizarre element of the particular historical event is that the riots

were not about zoot-suiters rioting, and they were not, in any conventional sense of the word “riots.” No one was killed. No one sustained massive injuries. Property damage was slight. No major or minor judicial decisions stemmed from the riots. There was no pattern to arrests. Convictions were few and highly discretionary. There were no political manifestos or heroes originating from the riots, although later on the riots would assume political significance for a different generation. (Mazón 1)

Mazón suggests that the conflict of the Zoot-Suit Riots was a mock one. There were no casualties and no social rhetoric was evident at the time of the riots. In other words, the riots were the result of the nascent socio-cultural differences between the two groupings: the barrio zoot-suiters and the servicemen. More explicitly, it is the symbolic trajectory of the two groups’ lifestyles that primarily started the riots, and not the outbreak of racism or the conscious declaration of an ethnic group’s identity.

Racial and cultural conditionings were certainly two of the factors which aggravated the riots. To begin with, the majority of the zoot-suiters came from the working classes of California’s barrios, and the overall cultural representation of the zoot-suiters, in relation to
race, age and even language (*caló*), stood in contrast to the law abiding Anglo serviceman. Consider how this difference was perceived at that time:

The *zoot-suiters* projected a deceptively anarchistic image […]. The narcissistic self-absorption of the *zoot-suiters* in a world of illusory omnipotentiality was in opposition to the modesty of individual selflessness attributed to the […] soldier. *Zoot-suiters* transgressed the patriotic ideals of commitment, integrity, and loyalty with non-commitment, incoherence, and defiance. They seemed to be simply marking time while the rest of the country intensified the war effort. (Mazón 9)

Los Angeles hosted two diverse groupings: the national heroes of World War II and the anti-conformist *zoot-suiters*. Their apparent striking contrast, reinforced with racial discrimination and the impact of a US political propaganda against foreigners, as exercised by the State against the Japanese, led to the eruption of the riots. The issue at hand though is of an inherently spatial nature. The general LA area hosted the servicemen, and within it there was the barrio, which hosted the *zoot-suiters*. The servicemen followed US national propaganda against difference while, on the other hand, *zoot-suiters* protected their barrios. The servicemen were expressing the “transcendental signifier” of the State and were drawn by a psychosocial desire to control a different subjectivity (Goodchild 109). Conversely, the *zoot-suiters* fought for their individualism. In an analogy, the servicemen driving through the barrios were symbolic invasions and acts of cultural imperialism, whereas the *zoot-suiters*’ resistance was an effort to hinder that invasion. Warfare was definitely occurring during the *zoot-suit* riots, but not in the conventional sense of the word. On a symbolic trajectory, *zoot-suiters* were revolutionaries, who declared the barrio their homeland and fought for the right to express themselves freely within it.
Bearing in mind that the difference between the servicemen and the zoot-suiters is more complicated than appears on the surface, one can conclude that the zoot-suiters enunciated a collective identity in contrast to the one dictated by the US nation. To explain, upon rejecting the obedient, clean-cut motif of the serviceman, the zoot-suiter highlighted an alternative cultural identity. And if the representation of the self is the interaction of “frontstage” and “backstage” social relationships, the zoot-suiters realized their identity through social rituals of protest. To stress the same point, both the servicemen and the zoot-suiters were wearing uniforms. But the zoot-suiters’ appearance was the exact opposite of the military attire and the short haircut of the servicemen. Moreover, beyond the trajectory of appearance, the zoot-suiters presented an antithesis to the servicemen, because they positioned themselves within the barrio. They formed a peer-group of their own in line with a regionalization of the self. The communal self of the zoot-suiters was realized not only in their distinct appearance and general lifestyle, but also in their localization in the barrio. Whereas the average young serviceman was uprooted from home to serve a national cause, the Chicano zoot-suiter was in his barrio home-locale. The barrio provided the confines, the safe territory, where Chicano youth rebelled against the authoritarian and nationalistic mood of the time. In other words, it became the space where the peripheral identity of young Chicanos enacted its own revolution against the invasion of the status quo. While the servicemen were homogenized in their uniforms and under the nationalistic propaganda against the Japanese, the zoot-suiters consolidated a different communal identity out of their distinct cultural experience in the homeland of the barrio.

This chapter has thus far considered the space of the barrio as determinative to Chicano identity-formation based on two premises: first, Chicano political perspectives of the barrio seem to be articulated under the looming fear of dislocation and demarcation, as a result of US expansionism and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; and second, the barrio is
both a material and metaphorical borderland space, which is conceived at the interstices of
two national rhetorics, the Mexican and the US American, with the emergence of \textit{caló} or the
peculiar dress code of the zoot-suit as telling proof of an ongoing cultural exchange. Barrios
then are the urban locales where subjects of Mexican descent congregate and eventually
preserve their sense of a collective self. However, existing barrios cannot safeguard the
reproduction of Chicano culture. Against the coercive forces of the ruling class, barrio
dwellers presently perceive an organized attempt to dissolve the cultural cohesion of the
barrios. In particular, contemporary Chicanos, both members of academia and laypeople,
acknowledge the threat of “metropolitanization--the growth of super cities and the
swallowing-up of smaller, more human communities that stand in the way of the
developmental plans of the giants” (Barrera and Vialpando 2). In their interviews to Mario
Barrera and Geralda Vialpando, Guillermo Flores and Rosalio Munõz report on two Chicano
areas in the Southwest, Union City and Lincoln Heights Los Angeles barrios respectively,
and respond to the threats of disruption to barrio existence.\footnote{Both social researchers’ field of
interest is the protection of the barrio against the major forces of US expansionism, after
having detected in the latter’s political agenda a clear instance of internal colonialism. The
editors to the published report introduce the most cogent points from the two interviews,
thus:

Two points emerge from these interviews that may provide clues for
linking barrio displacement to a broader conception of the Chicano’s status
in society. One lies in the common observation of Chicano powerlessness
and exclusion from decision-making processes, a reflection of a system of
racial stratification that some writers are now referring to as “internal
colonialism.” The other lies in the role of Chicanos in the labor force. If it}
is true that many of the existing barrios were formed in their present locations as a consequence of Chicano concentration in certain industries (agriculture, railroads), then tendencies towards fragmentation and dislocation may be a reflection of the dispersion of Chicano labor in the urban areas. (2)

Three hypotheses are promoted in the above quote. First, the barrio is a modern construct springing out of the conditions of advanced industrialism, migrancy and the US politics of racial exclusion. The second suggestion calls for a cultural parameter in the preservation of the barrio. That is to say, the barrio is more than just the locus which subjects of Mexican ancestry inhabit; it is the space where Chicano culture is effectively reproduced. The third hypothesis implies that US federal and/or municipal politics wish to fragment the barrio’s unity.

Flores’s interview, entitled “The Struggle for Community Control: Some Lessons” (1974), gives three interesting examples to support this third hypothesis. First, he recounts the construction of a freeway, which will cut the Union City barrio in half, and result in the dispersal of the barrio community. Second, the freeway will entail the demolition of many barrio houses, and their replacement with condominiums and duplexes, which will eventually house middle class WASPS, mainly to make their access to the freeway easier. Finally, the freeway and the new houses will result in alterations in the area’s housing codes. The impact of such a manifold geographical intrusion is that economic pressures will finally displace all working class Chicanos from the barrio. As Flores clearly puts it:

In the process, the nature of the barrio would be transformed. [...] That would mean that the 26% of the housing in the area that is dilapidated or deteriorated would probably be demolished or the owners would be forced
to take out loans to renovate their houses up to standards. The net effect would be completely to change the community atmosphere of the barrio. It would also mean higher tax levels, which would force most present residents out of the area. Families that weren’t forced out because their houses were destroyed, probably would be forced out because of the high taxes. (20) 10

Similarly, Muñoz holds that the barrio of Lincoln Heights in the East Los Angeles area is subject to demarcation. In his interview, with the telling title “Our Moving Barrios” (1974), Munóz urges people to act against the polity’s intention to “recycle the inner city, [and to] revitalize the downtown area” (30). Munóz claims that the whole project of building a hospital, a medical complex and housing estates will eventually end in higher taxes and marginal homeownership for the Chicano community. Thus, rather than planning local improvements for public welfare, the Community Re-development Agency, with the City Hall’s concession, proceeds in the systematic breaking up of the barrio. Munóz claims that the whole idea encompasses both economic and political interests. In particular, he reveals the hegemonic political rationale against the barrio in response to the following question by the interviewer:

Interviewer: You’ve described these processes, which have the effect of dislocating and removing Chicanos from the area. What do you see as the basic causes or forces behind these processes?

Muñoz: There’s too many of them Mexicans. They’re spreading all over the place. It’s too hard to keep them gerrymandered, they’re going to start electing politicians, they’re going to start taking over the city and getting political power […] There are also economic causes - such as declining tax
bases in the city as whites and factories move to suburbia. So there’s an attempt to reverse the process and again make the city the place for the middle class white person.

(31-2)

Munoz believes that the preservation of the Chicano neighborhood is paramount for two reasons. First, there is the economic parameter, since the barrio is close to downtown LA and Chicanos’ work loci. Furthermore, the houses have been especially built to meet the needs of the extended, working class Chicano family. Third, the barrio is essential for the preservation of Chicano cultural identity. In Munoz’s own words, “[it] is a way of maintaining our culture. Personally, I’m not for acculturation--I’m not becoming white” (34). Munoz raises the question of acculturation-versus-accommodation, yet in a novel way: he relates the sense of cultural identity with space, and in so doing draws attention to the significance of space in the formation and perpetuation of the Chicano cultural identity. In other words, Munoz spatializes the sense of cultural identity, and fears that once the geographical and cultural web of the barrio is broken, its residents will be free-floating subjects in search of a homeland.

In parallel to the concept of Aztlan, as employed by Chicano activists in the 1960s, Munoz and Flores treat the barrio as the homeland of contemporary Chicanos. The difference, however, lies in the fact that Aztlan is a metaphorical concept applied to the broader Southwest area, whereas these two activists’ conceptualization of the barrio focuses on the pragmatics of everyday life. Put differently, the barrio is highlighted as a real material space, which often reinforces the cultural and political present of Chicano communal identity. Consider how Flores describes the importance of the barrio for Chicano collective awareness:

Interviewer: To what extent do you see the preservation of the barrio as a
desirable thing?
Flores: I think the existence of the community is very important for the sense of collectivity, which comes through Chicanos living together, and maintaining their culture. When developers come and try to disperse people it breaks that cohesiveness. […] I think the struggle to maintain the physical existence of the community has acted to solidify the spirit of the barrio and increased the determination to make it a real Chicano community. (26)

As a homeland, the barrio is an active social space with various material places which host a whole array of cultural conventions, such as the cantinas for celebrations, and the churches for worshipping La Virgen de Guadalupe or holding the bautismos. This definition of the barrio directs to its “active” quality because within their unique space Chicanos form their collective consciousness. The day-to-day contact of barrio subjects helps them maintain their cultural identity, mainly through the elements of “intensity (vibrancy and vitality), consistency (hanging out together), singularity (unique and remarkable, or limit of a process), actuality (concrete presence), virtuality (real potential that is imperceptible in itself)” (Goodchild 6). All the above mentioned elements develop a set of social relations, which are consistent to one another, identifiable to Chicano subjects and realized in the geographical context of the barrio. In short, localization intensifies and reinforces Chicano communality.

The (re)production of the Chicano community’s immanent social relations takes place within the social space of the barrio. But the social relations pre-exist the space of their enactment. Thus,

[i]nstead of acting out roles given to them by some real or imaginary third party in the role of a transcendent scriptwriter, [social relations] are capable
of shaping, affecting and changing any mediating factors just as easily as these can shape the relations, as if the script can also affect the scriptwriter.

The social space does not pre-exist the relations that are formed in it.

(Goodchild 3)

Two propositions can be drawn out of this co-relation between the concepts of socialization and space: first, subjects are capable of transcending the forces of a master-narrative, in our case the WASP status quo; and second, the relations already formed among Chicano subjects can be retained as a form of resistance to the “third party in the role of a transcendent scriptwriter” (3).11 The implication is that barrio inhabitants can resist US policies by actively constructing their social relations in a specific locus. The social space of the barrio provides the foundations for stability and self-cognizance among barrio dwellers. And if this stability is disrupted, confusion can occur. Munõz detects the lurking dangers when one willingly dislocates oneself from the barrio, with the claim that:

A middle class Chicano may move out of the barrio to get better schools for his kids, but these kids are going to run into a lot of problems in the mostly white schools also. And they may grow up being Americans of Mexican descent rather than Raza, and I don’t want that. (34)

Adding the risky parameter of bourgeois social ascendancy, Munõz warns Chicanos not to sacrifice their cultural and racial legacy for the false ideals of better schooling and social recognition. Muñoz suggests that it is preferable to live in a space where one’s cultural past can be freely reproduced rather than inhabit the alien context of gabachos (Anglo-Americans). When middle class Chicanos exit the barrio, they expose themselves to the danger of losing their identity because the process of cultural reinforcement ceases. Once this space, which functions as the background of social relations, changes and the Chicano subject enters mainstream suburbia, then the set of social and cultural relations changes as
Thus, the Chicano subject enters an entirely new context, which is both alien and perhaps even hostile to the newcomer. Muñoz implies that the dangers threaten the younger generations more acutely because they are the ones who first experience an identity-crisis. To oscillate between the past and the present, or between the Chicano and Anglo spaces, entails the possibility of schizophrenia, where one is always in search of a homeland. Munoz necessitates the preservation of the barrio, no matter how derelict it appears to the middle classes, as the only means to minimize the likelihood of an identity-crisis. Munoz seems to maintain, “[i]t is better to be a paranoid slave than a schizophrenic nomad” (Goodchild 3).

**Self-perception and the Barrio in Chicano Fiction**

Possibly the most celebrated depiction of barrio life in the form of a chronicle is Mario Suarez’s vignette “El Hoyo” (1972). Written and published during the Chicano Movement, “El Hoyo” is among the first attempts to draw attention to and to glorify the barrio as the unique space for the emergence of the Chicano cultural identity. Consisting of only four paragraphs, the narrative of “El Hoyo” resembles the structure of an argumentative paper, with an introduction, a main body and a conclusion, although it is essentially a sentimental description of the barrio locale where Suarez was born and raised. “El Hoyo” begins with the main negative stereotypes of barrio life and then sets out to demystify them with a series of counter-arguments. In fact, Suarez attempts a succession of reversals in order to assign social significance to the barrio. The context of these reversals is realized in the opening paragraph where, imitating the style of a cultural nationalist, Suarez declares the distinctiveness of the barrio by directly detaching it from the vast Anglo society, but by implication from Mexican culture as well. Located on the banks of the Santa Cruz River, not far from the center of downtown Tucson, Arizona, Suarez’s El Hoyo is a section of a US city-center predominantly inhabited by Chicanos. The buildings, the roadways and in general the ecology of the barrio are anything but appealing. As Suarez’s description suggests:
It is doubtful that all these spiritual sons of Mexico live in El Hoyo because of its scenic beauty. […] Its houses are simple affairs of unplastered abode, wood and abandoned car parts. Its narrow streets are mostly clearings, which have, in time, acquired names. Except for some tall trees which nobody has ever cared to identify, nurse or destroy, the main things known to grow in the general area are weeds, garbage piles, darkened chavalos, and dogs. And it is doubtful that the chicanos live in El Hoyo because it is safe—many times the Santa Cruz has risen and inundated the area. (155)

Suarez gives a cultural identity to the barrio and to Chicanos, whom he calls the “spiritual sons of Mexico,” he attributes this unique cultural flair of El Hoyo. However, with the ambiguous reference to the spiritual ties with Mexico, Suarez tactfully implies that barrio people form a distinct subjectivity from that of Mexicans. Suarez certainly acknowledges that Chicanos culturally descend from Mexico, but at the same he separates the two groups. And the transition from the pure Mexican heritage to the US ethnic one is not a loss of “cultural mooring,” but a natural condition of change (Atencio 16). In the flow of time, barrio people have formed a different identity to that of Mexican nationals, mainly because of their immediate contact with Anglo culture. Similarly, the above quote from “El Hoyo” contextualizes identity-formation, and implies that the sense of one’s self is conditioned by varied cultural and social environments: Mexican ancestry, ethnic presence and Anglo hegemony. Suarez’s suggestion is that in the process of identity-formation change is a viable parameter to be considered. In other words, in “a balance between space, time and social being” identity changes along with these three conditions of its conceptualization and along with the interplay between them (Soja 23). Indeed, the first paragraph of “El Hoyo” points to an ontological exchange at play, where the triad of spatiality, temporality and social being interact and give rise to the sense of the self. Suarez’s introductory notes suggest that
identities, either individual, collective or spatial, are continually elaborated and rewritten, in the triple dialectic of time, space and socialization.

While the negotiation of identity takes place within the barrio, Suarez discerns two unanswered questions which form the thematic concern of his narrative. First, there is the issue of naming: the streets of El Hoyo are named haphazardly in the flow of time and by the people’s whim. El Hoyo itself means hole, and Suarez wonders, “why it is called El Hoyo is not very clear” since it is simply the river’s immediate valley (155). Alluding to the genre of the ballad, with its emphasis on oral tradition, the text approaches the name of the given barrio as a distinctive cultural element, one that has been handed down from generation to generation, and in the process undergone changes in many of its facets. The next question Suarez poses is: “Why would Chicanos love the barrio?” (155). Suarez attempts to answer both of these questions in relation to each other, and in so doing he brings together Chicanos and the barrio, in other words, the social agents and their unique space. In fact, he defines the people and their habitat as interchangeably tied together, and as aptly approached one via the other. The first of these two questions is addressed by implication in the first paragraph of “El Hoyo.” Suarez’s introductory paragraph outlines the cliché of a dirty, turbulent barrio that most Anglos have in the back of their mind, but at the same time this introduction distances barrio consciousness from WASP space(s). In other words, the first paragraph of the short piece suggests its writer’s realization of the dominant culture’s disdain for the barrio, and whereas Suarez recognizes the transparent relations the barrio holds with the outside world, he still deems them of secondary importance. What prevails is how Chicanos essentialize the barrio. Echoing the spirit of mystifying poetics, Suarez turns the barrio into the center of existence for its Chicano inhabitants. The outside world is deprived of its power and attention is drawn solely to the barrio. Naturally, Suarez sets barriers between the two world orders: Anglo society and barrio life. In this demarcated urban US context, Suarez
elaborates on the poetics of everyday life. Chicanos within the barrio construct their own unique set of cultural relations and reproduce them to perpetuate their collective identity. And although the actual question of why El Hoyo means “hole” remains unanswered, Suarez assigns symbolic significance to this name. The barrio locus stands for a figurative hole in Anglo hegemony: the barrio is the hole which cannot be controlled or penetrated by the despotic rulers because it is a hideout, a mystic place for the community’s cultural reinforcement.

The barrio of El Hoyo is at the antipodes of the bourgeois “exclusionary, purified space” of the North American suburb (Silbey 38). Whereas the Anglo suburb exemplifies its impeccable cleanliness, manicured lawns, social and racial purity, Suarez’s barrio presents a complete antithesis. The locale of El Hoyo sustains the cultural identity of the Chicano subject-group, developing amidst the taboos of pollution and economic discrepancies. In fact Chicanos in the barrios build an image of their own, which stands in contrast to US suburbs. Therefore, the construction of the self is manifold, as it takes place on economic, cultural, political, and the all-embracing social aspects of existence. Leaving aside the fact that most barrio inhabitants are of the lower working classes, with the corollary of not having the money to reach suburban Anglo standards, focus should be drawn on the socio-spatial symbolism of the barrio. The average middle class reader would surely find the barrio in Suarez’s introductory depiction an appalling, uncivilized locale. The mainstream ideals of purity, civilization and superficial individualism are in contrast to the actual space of the barrio, thus relegating it to a so-called “high-risk locality” (Sibley 64). The barrio is rendered as the unsafe, grotesque, ethnic, inner city section, a place inhabited by “Other” subject-groups, as opposed to the homogenous WASPs of a suburban, middle class locale. Thus, the barrio not only designates a lower economic and social status, but it is essentially associated with the “color-span” demarcation of the US nation. In this context, Anglo phobias are
relevant both to the subject-groups and to their neighborhoods, and this stereotypical perception of the brown peoples transfixes itself onto the ethnic minority’s spatial context. In addition, the barrio is “tainted and perceived as polluting in racist discourse, and place-related phobias” (Sibley 59).

The second paragraph of the vignette opens with Suarez’s statement of reversal: “In other respects living in El Hoyo has its advantages” (155). The rest of this paragraph reveals Suarez’s affirmative presentation of barrio life, and outlines the Chicano cultural imprint on El Hoyo. Evidence of this cultural domination over the territory is the enumeration of scenes where

Chicanos raise hell on Saturday night and listen to Padre Estanislao on Sunday morning; [...] [and one can listen] to Octavio Parea’s Mexican Hour in the wee hours of the morning with the radio on at full blast; [...] when someone gets married everyone is invited; anything calls for a celebration and a celebration calls for anything; [...] [and] if one, for any reason whatever, comes on an extended period of hard times, where, if not in El Hoyo, are the neighbors more willing to offer solace? (155-6)

The barrio of El Hoyo is alive with cultural practices, which in turn generate a communal experience for its Chicano inhabitants. Suarez’s overall quasi-sentimentalized presentation of El Hoyo suggests ethnic pride and the need to defend the barrio against the Anglo clichés of its defilement. Undermining the initial negative stereotypes associated with the barrio, Suarez depicts El Hoyo as a socially contingent place of Chicano consciousness. In this context, “El Hoyo” works both for the cultural poetics and the social politics of barrio life. On the one hand, Suarez as a writer of short stories and chronicles wishes to record the poetics of everyday day life within the barrio; but on the other hand, as a politically involved Chicano he wishes to express his own indignation at mainstream master-narratives, and so practices “a
spatially politicized aesthetic” (Soja 40). In other words, “El Hoyo” is a sample writing of a literary genre, but at the same time it is a political appraisal of the barrio which brings about the Chicano collective awareness of their unique space.

In the third paragraph, Suarez enhances the politicized dimension of the barrio. To be precise, the barrio stands for the origin of its inhabitants’ ethnic identity, but it is also a refuge from the dangers of a hostile Anglo society. El Hoyo “is something more” than the space for the collective consciousness and joy of *mexicanos*, because it is the locale where Felipe Sanchez could return after World War II “with his body resembling a patch-work quilt to marry Julia Armijo. It brought Joe Zepeda, a gunner flying B-24’s over Germany, back to compose boleros. He has a metal plate for a skull” (156). El Hoyo is the symbolic space where Chicanos hide or recover from Anglo exploitation and denigration. The barrio then is like a social hideout. Given its deviance from mainstream spaces, the barrio is a locus of social exclusion, but not in the racist meaning of the word. Suarez implies that the conditions of exclusion make the barrio a protective shield from the outside world and for its dwellers. Thus, it is not a mere environment of segregated ethnics, unable to succeed in the highly competitive, entrepreneurial standards of US capitalism, but “a proof that those people exist, and perhaps exist best, who have as yet failed to observe the more popular modes of human conduct” (156-7). In like fashion, the barrio might be mistaken for “a wasteland of the modern world,” but in reality it is a vibrant communal space where the Chicano subject-group constructs a unique identity. By participating in barrio life, Chicanos detach themselves from mainstream society and concoct an alternative mode of existence. The barrio then is both a locus for cultural regeneration and for political resistance to Anglo morals. It stands as the space for communal identification, where Chicanos reaffirm their identity by reaffirming themselves in their own spaces, […] [and] daily creating the
social frontiers of postmodernity; finding and making new paths with wit and ingenuity. The inevitable breakdown of modernity […] is being transformed […] into opportunities for regenerating their own traditions, their cultures, their unique indigenous and other non-modern arts of living and dying. (Esteva 4-5)

The apparent simplicity of barrio life is what attracts Suarez’s attention, and what becomes evidence for the primary argument of “El Hoyo” in defense of the Chicano space. In fact, Suarez suggests that beneath the superficial simplicity of barrio life, there is a complex cultural mechanism at play. For one thing, the barrio provides a radical insight into the life of the marginal. In the jargon of “grassroots postmodernism,” barrio life invents “postmodern social realities for the preservation of the social self and the soil, the community and the culture” (Esteva 2). For instance, the breakdown of barriers, such as fences, strict cleanliness and quiet time, shows that barrio dwellers overcome “the sacred cow of individualism” embedded in Anglo society (Esteva 11).

Aiming at a reconsideration of the Chicano communal space, Suarez elevates barrio life, while at the same time he dismantles the negative mainstream assumptions about Chicano grassroots:

Perhaps the humble appearance of El Hoyo justifies the indifferent shrug of those made aware of its existence. Perhaps El Hoyo’s simplicity motivates an occasional chicano to move away from its narrow streets, babbling comadres and shrieking children to deny the bloodwell from which he springs and to claim the blood of a conquistador while his hair is straight and his face is beardless. Yet El Hoyo is not an outpost of a few families against the world. It fights for no causes except those which soothe its
immediate angers. It laughs and cries with the same amount of passion in
times of plenty and want. (157)

Despite the prevalent quasi-romantic presentation of the barrio, Suarez is also aware that there can be varying attitudes towards the Chicano space. First, there is the dominant ideology, which shrugs at the barrio’s “humble” appearance. Second, and even more alarming for communal life, there are the barrio defectors, those who assimilate and deny their Amerindian identity. At this point, Suarez comments on those who would rather pursue the myth of the American Dream and repulse their autochthonous identity, thus identifying themselves with the *conquistadores* (the colonizers), than stay true to their origins. Suarez’s political argument is obviously a critique on Chicanos who desert the barrio, because for him the locus of the barrio creates the possibility of a “we-soil culture” (Esteva 57). As Raul Homero Villa puts it, “[t]he barrios have tended toward positive articulations of community consciousness, which contribute to a psychologically and materially sustaining sense of ‘home’ location” (5). Once the assimilationist Chicano/a evades the home location of the barrio, he/she then automatically adopts a new identity. And this new identity outside the barrio poses the threat of an illusion of the ethnic self.

In the concluding fourth paragraph, Suarez brings all barrio inhabitants together on a figurative level. In his discussion of *capirotada*, a traditional dish of uncertain origin, made with a variety of ingredients “according to the time and the circumstance,” and then “served hot, cold, or just on the weather as they say in El Hoyo,” Suarez marks this Mexican dish as a reflection of communal life. Despite the fact that “the Sermenos like it one way, the Garcias another, and the Ortegas still another,” it is still *capirotada* (157). Each household may vary its preparation and serving procedure of *capirotada*, nevertheless it remains a traditional dish of the barrio, thus retaining the cultural idiocracy of Chicanismo. The differing and pluralistic quality of *capirotada* is extended to the members of the barrio community. Suarez elaborates
a reciprocal relationship between food and communal life when he says “[a]nd so it is with El Hoyo’s Chicanos. While being divided from within and from without, like the capirotada, they remain Chicanos” (157). Barrio life and cultural practices are subtle and complicated, but at the same time they project “the sophisticated folkway” of a community (Park 2). Chicanos in the barrio are not homogenized under a single label, whether it is of a mexicano, paisano, ethnic or US marginalized identity. Each of the members of the barrio group has his/her particularity to defend, but at the same time he/she identifies with a transcendent ethnic identity. The significance of the barrio is that it sustains the equilibrium between the particularity of the individual Chicano subject and the broader ethnic identity. In Suarez’s barrio, Chicanos are allowed to develop their own unique identities--as many as the number of people inhabiting the barrio--but always within the scope of their collective Mexican-American identity. In other words, the barrio revives the community’s ethnic identity, but it also acknowledges the individual’s variance. Suarez’s barrio is not a sovereign monolith of existence, but ensures that Chicanos develop their own uniqueness under the umbrella notion of an ethnic identity.

While “El Hoyo” unfolds through the voice of an omniscient narrator who is detached from the events in the story that become a panoramic picture of the barrio, Amelia Valdez’s “Surviving the Barrio” (1991) is a first person narrative, in which the narrator is the protagonist of the text. The story presents “the true facts” of a Chicana’s barrio life, as its narrator confesses her own experience and viewpoint of the barrio, which frequently verges on a brutal criticism of barrio life (21). Far from prettifying or romanticizing, Valdez attempts to depict an accurate picture of the barrio space. The text’s novelty lies in the fact that it was published along with other stories by Black, Jewish and Latino writers, whose premise is to “challenge the conspiracy of separateness, misinformation, and ignorance” among ethnic/racial groups in the US (Schoem 3). The anthology Inside Separate Worlds
(1991) seeks to bring to the awareness of all US minority groups their intertwined social, economic and political conditions. This literary project enriches a multi-ethnic experience “by its open sharing of personal and group secrets” (Schoem 5). Revealing the similarities among the various ethnic visions of the US, the compilation allows its narrators to transcend the barriers of their immediate environment, and at the same time to align themselves in inter-racial relationships. In the context of channeling the ethnic and personal into a collective public voice, Inside Separate Worlds consists of the autobiographies of eighteen to twenty-two year-old students, thematizing their respective personal identities and individual differences, but at the same time providing the feedback for the study of “intergroup relations and intragroup experiences” (Schoem 12). This “intragroup experience” is what stimulates the flow of questions in Valdez’s short autobiography. Her narrative projects the daily struggle in the barrio, with its concomitant marginalization from the mainstream and the shocking hostility among her racial/ethnic peers, and also discusses the barrio where Valdez grew up as a dubious locale, both as a turbulent ethnic womb and as the space of exclusion from mainstream society.

Growing up in the barrio, Valdez learns to identify herself as a Chicana, although her grandparents, the respectful token figures of the anciano league, “did not like the word Chicano because to them it was a radical word” (23). As the descendant of Mexican grandparents from Mexico City, Valdez speaks Spanish at home and with her friends, and learns to live with traditions “some of them good and some made-up” (28). She develops a genuine respect for her mother, who has endured all the hardships of life with grace and self-denial, and a fear for her father, whose alcoholism tormented the family life for many years until her mother left him. In the barrio, Valdez learns to live with fear and anger, arising from the “boundaries that [she] could not cross” (21). Among the borders imposed in the barrio are the geographical ones, such as the “ghost town,” a section of the barrio where Valdez as a
“Casiano” was never to cross; or peer-pressure borders, such as her desire “to get a decent education for a decent job,” which is laughed at by most Chicano youth; as well as identity-boundaries, which define the barrio inhabitants “as bandits because [they] were isolated from the outside world” (22-3). The majority of barrio dwellers similarly experience insurmountable pressures. For example, her father, whose frustration about not achieving the American Dream of “the Dick and Jane story--a house with a white fence, two kids and a dog named Spot” turns him into an abusive alcoholic, and barrio Chicanos in general who, after having been “pushed aside and forgotten,” develop a struggle for possession among themselves, which in turn provokes violence as the daily event in their barrio life (29).

“Surviving the Barrio” is primarily an autobiographical depiction of barrio life, but also a critique of the barrio’s “social deformities and cultural affirmations” (Villa 8). Valdez criticizes the barrio for being a socio-spatial context where violence and hostility, predominantly among its dwellers, is the daily norm. In fact, barrio residents are stereotypically labeled as violent, uncouth and largely excluded from the mainstream. The “structurally unstable family unit” with the overprotective mother and the violent, alcoholic macho father, the gang activities of barrio residents, the oversexuality of girls who “get in trouble” at a young age are just a few instances of communal dissipation. Valdez experiences all the above and as a result feels frightened among her own people. In this perspective, Valdez’s barrio is not the locus for joyous communion among Chicanos, but a segregated hell. This is how Valdez expresses her barrio experience:

I always seemed angry and frustrated because I was trapped in an area that was exploding with anger. The gangs and the fighting among the same race made me realize that things do not change because you want it to change. It just is the way things are, and the only way to change is to help yourself and
try to live with the horror of it. But sometimes I feel for my people, and I want them to get the same opportunity I have. I don’t want to leave them behind, but life goes on for me, and I can only help the ones that want to be helped. (24)

Unlike Suarez’s “El Hoyo,” Valdez’s barrio residents do not co-exist peacefully, accepting the individuality of their neighbor while building on a communal identity. Suarez’s depiction of the barrio is a utopian hole (El Hoyo) from the outside world, whereas Valdez’s is “a place that time was passing it by, and the fighting was a constant struggle for survival. […] [It] was a place that had no ending, like falling into a black hole” (22). Chaotic images of darkness seem to prevail in Valdez’s initial reaction to the barrio. And her frustration is voiced through her inability to hold on to any ideal, while she feels consumed in hatred and inter-racial animosity within the Chicano space.

Valdez sounds remarkably candid in declaring that during her stay in the barrio she could not fully grasp the social realities and the history of her own peoples. She was isolated from the outside world, constantly devising mechanisms of survival in the battlefield of barrio life. In a way, she presents the barrio as an ambiguous place of both “inclusion and exclusion” (Sibley 75): the color of her skin and her Mexican ancestry included her in the barrio, but the barrio mode of existence excluded her. Valdez presumes the barrio as the space where Chicano social relations emerge, but she also recognizes the need to re-evaluate that space in order to trace her ethnic pride. So, she acknowledges that in the barrio individual and communal identities are formed, and amidst the infra and/or extra barrio relations a community consciousness comes to being. But she also uncovers the age-old existential questioning of a concern for identity. She wonders who she is, who the Chicanos are, why they cannot live peacefully together, how their definitions of identity are formed within and outside their community. The questions are scattered throughout the text and
insofar as their main focus is identity-perception, Valdez conveys to her audience an existential approach to the barrio. Consider some instances of Valdez’s identity-aporia:

Why can’t people of the barrio forget their problems and get it together? [...] When do people start listening to one another? (25)

Why are Chicanos concentrated in one area? Why is there so much segregation? How far can we go before we as Chicanos catch up? (27)

The barrio had identity problems: Who are we? What do we do? [...] Who do you blame? Where do I go for answers? [...] How can someone live in a dream if the dream was not even his or hers? Who are we? The barrio helps the anger go away--but for how long? (29)

Valdez wrestles with the above questions in order to reach a personal and communal Chicano identity. In other words, Valdez’s objective in “Surviving the Barrio” is to delve into everyday experience in the barrio, in order to discover who she is and who Chicanos are.

As Valdez reminisces, the prevalent feeling is her fear of barrio life. Yet, the fear she feels, both in her family environment and in the streets, is overcome once she moves to Michigan to join her mother, who has already left her alcoholic husband. At the age of seventeen, Valdez abandons the barrio and starts receiving a “proper” education. Freed from the constraints of barrio life, Valdez opens up to new peer groups and a new social life. She becomes involved in school activities, totally different from the street-wise lifestyle of the barrio gangs, and she makes a tremendous leap by entering the university. Among students, Chicano campus organizations, as well as classes on social theory and history, Valdez reassesses her identity:

It was not until I attended the university that I started to identify myself as a Chicana. I went to a university for a year and joined a Chicano organization.
I had new experiences there and finally knew who I was. I attended a lot of functions and met a lot of Chicanos. I learned not to be ashamed of who I was, and I also felt comfortable of who I was, and I also felt comfortable with them. This organization was my new family, which I was proud to be part of. (33)

When she enters the space of academia, Valdez becomes affiliated with a new “family,” one that is closer to her personal aspirations. And her education helps her reconsider the barrio and re-envision her barrio roots. By delving into her ethnic history and socializing with people sharing the same concerns as hers, she finally understands the essence of the barrio. Thus, via academia she re-considers barrio social relations and comes to terms with her ethnic identity:

My experience at this university was a learning experience. It taught me a lot about Mexicans and Mexican Americans. It made sense to me why some Mexicans were always having rallies on behalf of their people and why there was so much anger and violence. [...] I learned so many things about myself at the University of Michigan. My opinions are my own, and I believe in myself. I know who I am and where I come from. The identity is very strong and I don’t hesitate to say I am Mexican American. (33)

Even though her first reaction to Chicano space sounds like a harsh accusation, it turns out to be a sincere confession and a cathartic moment towards her re-evaluation of barrio life. Yet, only through academic schooling does Valdez learn to function as both an individual and a member of the Chicano subject-group. As a member of a Chicano minority group in the US she belongs to the barrio, but as an individual in search of knowledge she feels the incessant drive to evade the barrio enclave.
In her attempt to account for the angry barrio, Valdez calls forth the Chicano political unconscious, and discusses the Chicano experience of land-loss. Now that Valdez has studied history in an institution of higher education, she can understand gang-activity and the Chicanos’ need to preserve land borders. As she says towards the end of her barrio life-story: “The Anglo society manifested itself through a large area of the United States, breaking some of our cultures and stripping us of our land. Even the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which gave rights to our land, did not mean anything” (33). Valdez likens the barrio to a historical black hole, where the past experience of dislocation and the subconscious fear of it instigate the ongoing outbreaks of violence within the barrio. The locale of the barrio is not only a cultural enclave for Chicanos, but also a place where the community’s political past and present experiences fuse. In other words, the barrio is not truly cut off from the outside world, but its social activities are the outcome of a long historical experience. The memories of geographical migrancy and land loss are ever-present aspects of Chicano communal identity. Of course, they may not be active or prevalent memories of political activism, at least in the barrio context that Valdez presents, but they inhabit the subconscious mind. The political unconscious of barrio residents in relation to land-loss is what forms barrio misdemeanor, and, in turn, gang fighting is only a reaction to the prospect of “detrimentalization.”

Valdez considers the need of barrio dwellers to protect their territory from intruders, whether barrio gangs or Anglo metropolitanization, as a reaction to the Mexican peoples’ long history of land-loss. Greatly concurring with Raul Homero Villa’s seminal treatise, *Barrio-Logos: Space and Place in Urban Chicano Literature* (2000), Valdez seems to claim that “the consequences of geographic displacement loom large in Chicano historical memory, characterized, among other things, by the determining effects of land loss, shifting and porous national borders, coerced and voluntary migrations, and disparate impacts of urban
development” (Villa 1). Similarly, the fear of outsiders intruding a barrio territory is what brings about the constant fighting between the “Casianos” and other Chicanos of the “ghost town” in the barrio where Valdez grew up. Valdez recollects trespassing a rival gang’s territory, and the warfare among Chicanos to protect some imaginary barriers:

We live on the side of the “Casianos” because this is the name of the park that we live in front of. The ghost town Chicanos did not mix with the Casianos Chicanos. [...] There was one incident that I will never forget. My mother and I were taking a shortcut through the ghost town. We crossed the bridge over to our side, and the Casianos Chicanos on our side were watching us cross. My house was about a half mile from the bridge, and in order to get to my house you needed to cross the park. As we were walking along, the ghost town Chicanos [the gang] started shooting at us, but my mother kept saying, “Run and don’t stop until you reach the house.” I kept hearing the bullets hitting the ground next to me. [...] The guys on our side were returning fire, which led to some injuries on the other side. [...] The only way fights got resolved was by revenge. The next strike would be ours. These kinds of incidents always happened, and we lived in fear day by day. I never knew why these gangs were always fighting, but the fights were carried on from past generations. (22)

Valdez views the barrio where she grew up as geographically demarcated among its barrio residents. Each gang had its territory to control and the trespassers were to be punished. The protection and defense of gang-borders seems to be a primary concern in everyday barrio life. The corollary is that this constant eruption of violence becomes the norm in the barrio.

Valdez certainly considers that barrios are formed as an unconscious defense against the dominant racist society. Yet, she also implies that the barrio is not only a marginalization
imposed on Chicanos by Anglo society, but also a wilful withdrawal from “the real world” (29). Although she is cautious about using the word “segregation,” she suggests that the confinement of Chicanos within the barrio creates the illusion of a self-contained society. For Valdez, the cultural and social structures evolving in the barrio are not “self-contained, homogenous and unchanging,” but are developing in a subtle relationship with the outside world (Rosaldo, *Culture* 21). Valdez reiterates the pressures of the real world, but she claims that Chicanos in the barrio learn to live “with the habit of not living in the real world” (29). This statement suggests that barrio residents concoct an illusionary space, where they feel protected from Anglo racism. Nevertheless, now that she writes from US academia, she perceives the barrio as a place which “covered up problems by not dealing with the problems” (28). Barrio inhabitants are presented as content with their barrio life because they remain secluded from the outside world. Valdez herself confesses to having had mixed feelings for the barrio:

I was always angry at myself for not running away farther. How could I escape from an angry barrio that protected itself from the invasion of others? The barrio protected what was theirs and then some. (26)

Having realized her confusion, Valdez now sees that even though she wanted to escape the barrio, a feeling of pseudo-protection from the outside world that the Chicano space offered hindered her flight.

Valdez sees barrio dwellers as stubborn. “Surviving the Barrio” suggests that Chicanos are not willing to overcome their problems because they feel safe in the barrio. Valdez’s mixed feelings apply to all barrio dwellers, who feel both frightened by gang-fighting, yet at the same time protected from the outside world. In this context, Valdez’s barrio is “a phantasmatic social space”: on the one hand it is a real neighborhood, but on the other hand it is a fictitious construct (J. D. Saldivar 86). According to Valdez, life in the
barrio becomes fiction, when its residents declare the barrio cut off from the outside world, whereas in reality it is a reflection of the very pressures of violence in the real world. Indeed, Valdez claims that “the outside world did not exist, but the oppressions of it did” (21). This short declaration suggests that the barrio refuses to deal with the intricate socio-political web outside. Insulating themselves from the world, barrio inhabitants project their problems onto each other. In different terms, barrio people channel Anglo oppression onto one another and express their anger among their racial kin, instead of rising against the mainstream. The result is that none of the barrio dwellers grasps the problem at its roots. Rather than fighting the oppressive mainstream, the barrio has devised bizarre modes of “intra-group” hatred (Schoem 12). The gang reality of the barrio is an instance of “a family within a family,” which however restricts the communal potential of barrio life (22). As Valdez recollects:

The gangs were at their strongest while I was growing up, and the one way to survive was to be in one. [...] The gang members were always angry, and their faces were tight from the anger [...]. There were always fights and gangs seeking revenge. The fights were endless, and I lost cousins and uncles, killed by other gangs. It is sad to know that even within the same race problems still existed. The identity of the group was in the conflict of who we were and what we stood for. Why could we not get along? (22)

Valdez’s presentation of gang-activity implies “an underclass--a kind of lumpenproletariat, a stratum of men and women who simply revolve around and around, with little if any chance of escaping the realities of their decayed and defeated neighborhoods” (Moore 5-6). Valdez considers the gang as a destructive element in the barrio. She questions the validity of these group-formations in enhancing a communal experience. And despite the fact that the formation of gangs is characteristic of barrio life, Valdez locates this phenomenon’s ultimate
Valdez’s approach to barrio experience epitomizes the process of an identity-search which follows the path of spatial and cultural redefinition. However, upon composing her autobiography as a barrio resident, she distances herself from the object of her study. In doing so, she fulfils a triple task: first, she refrains from the authoritarian, theoretical tone of voice of the scholar “because she would like [her] audience to read [her] paper and know where she is coming from” (21); second, she blends the personal with the scientific, since personal experience is the subject matter of her “Surviving the Barrio” approach; and third, she detaches herself from the emotional and ethical impulses of barrio life. Valdez decides to record her viewpoint of the barrio while she is not among barrio residents. Being at a distance from the geo-culture of the barrio, Valdez works as an autoethnographer, delving into the socio-cultural practices of the barrio peoples. To take the perspective of Valdez’s barrio documentation one step further, her attempt to describe the world of the barrio follows the “participant-observation” mode of research in social sciences, “a technique by which the investigator attempts to verify hypotheses through direct participation in observation of the community” (Blea 14). The narrator of the story is not presenting a fictional barrio scene, but becomes an active participant in the social behavior of the barrio residents she discusses. Yet, Valdez seems to face a conundrum: running away from the barrio is certainly her defense-system against a violent environment, but it is also an act of individualism. Without realizing it Valdez has assimilated the Western idea of the individual self, suffering more and more within “the unbearable straightjacket of loneliness, the disease of homelessness” (Esteva 11). Despite her claim that she has fostered a new family in academia, Valdez is nevertheless aware that she belongs by right to the barrio. Thus, her homelessness and loneliness are
conditions relevant to space. Once she moves away from the barrio, she retains only distant relations with her unique ethnic space of origin. She might not be lonely and homeless in the literal meaning of the words, but upon abandoning her barrio residency, she forfeits her barrio self. Despite this flaw in “Surviving in the Barrio”—in other words, its writer’s distance from the barrio—Valdez has created a bold text, which exposes the chaotic aspects of barrio life.

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has focused on the spatial parameter of identity-formation, not only because the barrio grounds Chicano la vida (the life) in actual geographical confines, but because it also throws light on some mystifying processes to self-cognizance. Indeed, the barrio takes the form of a home-locale where individual and collective identities are formed, and where a distinct Chicano cultural identity is sustained against the political pressures of the dominant society. Moreover, this chapter has undertaken to prove that throughout time the space of the barrio has been conceived differently by different agents: it has functioned as the urban core for subjects of Mexican ancestry, the locus where different cultures conflated to give rise to the Chicano hybrid one, the shelter for marginalized Mexican-Americans, the target of Anglo power display and the pride of la raza in need of an urban homeland. Above all, the space of the barrio allows Chicanos to claim their historicism over the present US Southwest, to form their unique ethnic ideology and social consciousness, and to strengthen their cultural distinctiveness against the totalitarian forces of the hegemonic Anglo culture. The barrio sets the foundations for the perpetuation of Chicano identity, in defiance of any socio-cultural pressures from the dominant center.
Notes

1 Object Relations theory has grown as a psychoanalytic field of study, starting from a set of Freudian approaches to psychotic and borderline states. The significant contribution it makes to cultural studies is that it puts forward the complex and interfacing relationship between “the object” and “the subject.” To clarify the two aforementioned terms, Lavinia Gomez explains, “[t]he term Object does not refer to an inanimate thing, but is a carry-over from the Freudian idea of the target, or object, of the instinct. In Object Relations terms it is used in the philosophical sense of the distinction between subject and object. Our need for others is the need of an experiencing ‘I’ for another experiencing ‘I.’ [...] Object can also include, though, secondarily a non-human thing or idea, which is subjectively important through its human associations, such as home, art, politics” (Object Relations 1-2). Obviously, Gomez claims that the context, in which an identity (the experiencing “I”) can spring, is always and perpetually in relation to other “Is” and the world around. The aim of this chapter is to incorporate Object Relations and its distinction between “the object” and “the subject” in an approach to the space of the barrio.

2 In response to the United States’ entrance into World War II, the US Employment Service and Mexican Foreign Policies enacted the Bracero Program, which was a regulated importation of Mexican nationals. The braceros (workers, hired hands; from brazo “arm”) were to offer help mainly in the agriculture of California and Texas. There was no time limit on the stay of the braceros, but the pact was tentatively drawn to protect the US growers, while at the same time it did not fully safeguard the labor rights of the Mexican nationals. See Meir and Ribera, Mexican Americans.
Reproduction and addition are key terms in relation to cultural representation. Both terms signify processes in the formation of a collective self, mainly through the cultural practices of a given collectivity. By “reproduction,” I refer to the “method by which the total social ensemble, including modes of circulation, distribution and consumption, is protected and repeated through time” (Wolch, *Power of Geography* 5). The effect of reproduction is the perpetuation of a standard set of cultural segments, and the stress of a group’s historical continuity. As for the term “addition,” I use it to refer to the cultural modification taking place on a synchronic temporal paradigm.

In the *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (1984), Mauricio Mazón says that the majority of Chicano scholars mistakenly identify *caló* as the barrio language, and a creation “largely credited to neologisms of Mexican-American youth” (3). On the contrary, Mazón claims, “this version of regional pride is understandable, but historically incorrect. *Caló* was neither a pachuco nor a new world contribution. *Caló* has its ancient roots buried deeply in the fertile gypsy tongue (Cale, Romano, Zincale and Calogitano, which is a lingo of Cale); classic Castellano fractured in spelling, crippled in meaning; mutilated French, English, Italian, and the dead languages of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, plus Medieval Moorish. *Caló*, originally *zincalo*, was the idiom of Spanish gypsies—one of the many minorities in Spain. The conquistadores brought *caló* to the New World. Already identified by the upper classes as the argot of the criminal, the poor, and the uneducated, *caló* and its variants became well known to conquered Indians” (3). Mazón historicizes the language of the barrio. However, due to the constraints of space this chapter does not consider the linguistic ancestry of *caló* in depth, but only discusses *caló* as the peculiar idiom of relatively contemporary barrio Chicanos.
Difrasismo is a trope, which signifies “the means of representing something in the coupling of two elements. In this way, city is *atl in tepetl*, water and hill; body is *noma noxci*, hand and feet. And perhaps the most well known difrasismo is that of poetry, *in xochitl in cicatl*, flower and song” (Arteaga, Chicano Poetics 6-7).

My argument here points to a capitalist society, with its crude distinction between the ruling class and the peripheral subjectivities. According to Henri Lefebvre, the dominant class exercises its hegemonic privileges on many levels, apart from the apparent distribution of capital and the social relations of production. For Lefebvre, “[h]egemony implies more than an influence, more even than the permanent use of repressive violence. It is exercised over society as a whole, culture and knowledge included, and generally via human mediation: policies, political leaders, parties, as also a good many intellectuals and experts. It is exercised therefore over both institutions and ideas. The ruling class seeks to maintain its hegemony by all available means, and knowledge is one such means. The connection between knowledge (*savoir*) and power is thus manifest, although this in no way interdicts a critical subversive form of knowledge (*connaissance*); on the contrary, it points up the antagonism between a knowledge which serves power and a form of knowing which refuses to acknowledge power” (Production of Space 10). For Galarza, the bliss of knowing coincides with the identification of the self, and with the distinction between *mexicano* and Chicano identities. In this process, language serves as evidence for understanding the self.

The term “transcendental signifier” is borrowed from Philip Goodchild’s Deleuze and Guattari: An Introduction to the Politics of Desire (1996). According to Goodchild, “[d]esire is entirely invested in the aim of revenge, the attempt to bring the despotic power to justice. [...] The despot, with his overcoding and punishments, acts as a point of subjectification. This transcendental signifier becomes fixed without the freedom of the
despot. The State operates an effective repression upon its scapegoats because it emits them as solitary flows” (109). The suggestion here is that the State is a controlling, ever-present force, despite its invisibility, and the difference of the periphery is scapegoated not as a threat to the center per se, but as a viable means to assert the despotic power of that same center.

According to Randall Collins’s reading of Erving Goffman’s approach to social life, the enactment of the self takes place in complex “rituals of frontstages, supported by backstages. One’s homes, and especially bedroom and bathroom, serve as backstage areas for hiding the less impressive aspects of the self: for getting rid of dirt and garbage (literally), for putting on a frontstage self in the form of clothes, makeup, and hair styling. These same places also are psychological backstages, where one can plan, brood and complain about frontstage social relationships of the past and present, as well as act spontaneously without concern for the proper impression one is making. Conversely, part of the frontstage self is the mood one tries to get into, the facial expressions that one wears, the style of one’s talk” (71). For more on Goffman’s social theory see Goffman, Interaction and Collins, “Erving Goffman.”

Flores’s and Muñoz’s interviews are part of a project called Action Research: In Defence of the Barrio (1974). The body of the report consists of three interviews (there is also one by Ernesto Galarza), which have two closely-related purposes. The first of these is to call attention to “a set of policies and processes that are having a broad impact on Chicano communities, and whose signficance has rarely been appreciated, to stimulate the formation of barrio defence projects and to lead to a better understanding of the situation of the Chicano today” (1). The second purpose is to halt the systematic dispersal of the barrio. It is worth noting that the editors deliberately chose to publish the report in the interview format rather than adapt it to an elaborate academic abstraction because “it was felt such a format, which is
very personal in nature, would better emphasize the personal involvement which is so essential in such projects rather than the abstractions which predominate in academic publications. Too often we lose sight of the fact, in the final analysis, *people share events*” (emphasis added) (3). Muñoz echoes the editors’ views when he accuses the “academic cats” of not being interested in collecting data from the public records for the protection of the barrio. The reason he gives for this is that “the community’s immediate need is not some innovative concepts in sociology” (33). The whole attitude to research and publication brings to mind Said’s key concepts of “secularism” in academic study and the need for the “worldliness” of the text. See Said, “World, Text, Critic.”

10 Flores reports on Union City, a broad area in California with a long history of Chicano labor activity. According to Flores, in Union City there are two distinct barrios, the Alvarado and the DeCoto areas. During the late 1950s, the freeway divided the two barrios: “Highway 17 went through the middle and broke the barrios, Alvarado on one side of the freeway, DeCoto on the other. Then a few years later considerable construction began and expensive housing was built, some of which requires that you earn a thousand dollars a month to live there” (sic) (19). This quote discusses the effects of the freeway’s geographical incision on the DeCoto barrio.

11 For Deleuze and Guattari the concept of a scriptwriter is a major influence to the development of social relations. Goodchild explains that for Deleuze and Guattari “[t]he obstacle that prevents social relations from developing is always the interest of some third party in the relation: conventions, values, expectations, economic structures, and political entities, whether real or imaginary, provide a script for social agents who merely play out roles” (2). This suggests that a controlling scriptwriter assigns roles, and the liberation from
so-called postmodern anxieties can occur only through collective action. See Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy* and Goodchild, *Deleuze*.

12 Edward Soja uses the term “spatially politicized aesthetic” to describe John Berger’s critical thought. Berger insists on the balance of history and geography in all facets of academic study, including the field of literary criticism, and proposes the introduction of the spatial aesthetic in all forms of art studies. Consider how Berger puts his premise in relation to fiction writing: “We hear a lot about the crisis of the modern novel. What this involves fundamentally is a change in the mode of narration. It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. And this is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the storyline laterally. That is to say, instead of being aware of a point as an infinitely small part of a straight line, we are aware of it as an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the center of a star of lines. Such awareness is the result of our constantly having to take into account the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities” (Look of Things 40). Berger suggests that social relations occur on a time span that moves horizontally, vertically and diagonally. The danger he pinpoints is that an approach to social relations and the venture to truth and meaning are doomed to be thwarted if looked at solely from a historical perspective. In contrast, he points to the direction of a spatial analysis as the proper route to an understanding of social life.

13 Grassroots Postmodernism is a philosophical attempt to bring together “the academic and the illiterate; [it is] a fancy academic concoction to give a new lease to life, however ephemeral, to the fast fading fashion of academic postmodernism. […]” Through the marriage of ‘grassroots postmodernism,’ [theory] brings these terms out of the confines of the academy to far removed and totally different social and political spaces […] [which] give a name to a wide collection of culturally diverse initiatives and struggles of the so-called
illiterate and uneducated non-modern masses” (sic) (Esteva, Grassroots Postmodernism 3). I believe that grassroots postmodernism aptly informs the study of barrio life, since the latter is the space for socio-cultural expression which openly defies the paradigms of elitist Anglo life.
Chapter Four

Heterotopias and the Objectification of the Subject:

A Case Study of Miguel Méndez’s Novel Autobiography

From Labor to Letters and

Tomas Atencio’s Lecture “Resolana: A Pathway to Knowledge”

What does [one] see, in the depths of [his] mirror? Nothing else, really, but
his desire and the secret of his greedy heart. It reflects and nothing more.
But precisely here is the absolute subterfuge of the observed. In looking
the one does not know that, at bottom, he is seeing himself; the other, not
knowing he is being looked at, is vaguely aware of being seen. Everything
is organized by this awareness that is at once skin-deep and beneath words.
(Foucault, “Cruel Knowledge” 61)

You don’t assess results when you feel yourself still on the move, and
whatever conquests have been obtained, there always remains something
more to conquer. (Breton qtd. in Matthews 173)

Introduction: Chicano Autobiography

As a result of the socio-political rhetoric of el movimiento for the collective awareness
of Chicanos, as well as of the attempt to elaborate a distinct Chicano literary tradition,
Mexican-American scholars have stressed the importance of autobiography. The Chicano
literary canon now proudly includes books termed as either “semi-autobiographical” like Jose
Antonio Villarreal’s Pocho (1959), Arturo Islas’s Migrant Souls (1992) and Sandra
Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1983), or texts that are “specifically autobiographical” like the widely discussed and frequently cited *Barrio Boy: The Story of a Boy’s Acculturation* (1971) by Ernesto Galarza (R. Saldívar 155). In fact, the increasingly popular bulk of Chicano literary production, which is conceived and published within the US and in opposition to the socio-cultural Anglo dominance, more often than not uses the rhetoric of autobiography from its conception. Autobiographical techniques such as the claim of first-hand experience and direct involvement in social life on the part of the writer and/or narrator are recurrent stylistic markers in most socially “engageé” Chicano literature (Adereth 445). Partly because the genre of autobiography lays claim to real life experiences, and also because autobiography is in tune with the 1960s postcolonial trend among ethnic groups to (re)define and (re)perceive the self against Euro-American culture, numerous Chicano writers have turned to autobiography in order to present a revised perception of the self.

Seeking a conscious redefinition of the self, Chicano autobiographical tradition has evolved into a literary space where the social meets the philosophical and the real crisscrosses the quixotic. Chicano autobiography departs from the norm of canonized, self-centered, autobiographical narration. More explicitly, traditional autobiography has persistently called upon the validity of history, thus proposing a single, authentic perspective of a life-story. Probably the most resonant example of a one-sided autobiographical narrative can be drawn from the Augustinian ecclesiastical legacy, which has greatly influenced the Western literary tradition for ages, at least until the advent of postmodernism.¹ In contrast, Chicano autobiography, along with other ethnic literary traditions within the US, uses the value-marker of history in order to transcend the One story proposed by the hegemonic viewpoint. Put differently, the claim to historical or factual recordings is called upon by the Chicano or, more generally, the ethnic autobiographer to supersede the tenacious rigidness
and one-sidedness of Western autobiography. Chicano autobiographers present their life-stories from the historical perspective of the subordinated subject; and in so doing they counterpropose their specific ethnic bias to their texts, which often gravitate towards a political idiom. However, the political element in Chicano autobiographies does not weaken the artistic or philosophical validity of these life-stories; more to the point, the resonance of their specific ethnic perspective strengthens the related senses of identity-cognition and self-affirmation on their part. Motivated by the will to define marginalized identities in the US, Chicano autobiographers exercise a will-to-power in their process to self-cognizance, and implement an enfeebling strategy against the dominant culture. The sweeping vision of most Chicano autobiographies is to develop a cultural and literary (re)naming of the self and to work toward spiritual and political agency.

Chicano autobiography is a narrative of resistance against US dominance and it constitutes a break from the Western autobiographical tradition, so it follows that Chicano autobiography is deeply politicized. In other words, Chicano autobiographers map their ethnic literary tradition in the space of politics. The concept of politics per se deviates from the isolated perception of one’s identity, and implies the involvement of a vast social group. When the Chicano autobiographer invests his/her text with a political perspective, his/her individual life-story on the printed page becomes public property and imparts a communal knowledge. Thus, it is more apt to re-term Chicano autobiography as Chicano “autobiographical discourse,” and in so doing we open up the potential of the autobiographical thematic concern to a social issue. The literary critic who fully approaches Mexican-American autobiography as a social praxis is Ramón Saldívar with his seminal work Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference (1990). In his seventh chapter, “Ideologies of the Self: Chicano Autobiography,” Saldívar presents Chicano autobiography as “an ideology of the self,” which signifies the conscious representation of the self in given
temporal and spatial dimensions. Saldívar claims that “[b]ecause of its fundamental tie to themes of self and history, self and place, it is not surprising that autobiography is the form that stories of emergent racial, ethnic, and gender consciousness have often taken in the United States and elsewhere” (154). Saldívar welcomes autobiography in the canon of Chicano literature because it exemplifies the unique flair to turn “what seems an inherently private form of discourse onto the public social world” (154). The implication here is that the autobiographer inhabits two spheres of existence, the public and the private, not alternatively but concurrently. In fact, for Saldívar it is this interplay between the public and the private worlds which initiates Chicano autobiography. In relying upon what he calls the “false insularity” (170) of the public and the private selves, Saldívar suggests that the composition of an autobiographical text is always-already a conscious social act both of the individual self and of his/her broader social environment. In his words:

[T]he act of knowing and writing the self is an act of critical consciousness, an act of knowing oneself as a product of historical processes that can be interrogated, interpreted, and perhaps even changed. (170)

Whereas Saldívar explores the “ideologies of the self” and the private vis-à-vis public role of relatively contemporary Chicano autobiographers who were writing in the heat or the aftermath of the Chicano Movement, Genaro Padilla develops a slightly different approach to Mexican-American autobiography. With the publication of My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography (1993), Padilla’s task resembles that of a historian or a cultural autoethnographer, since he gathers and discusses old autobiographical narratives by writers of Mexican ancestry. The aim of his research is to record and publicize historical reserves of the Chicano self. Although the primary sources of My History, Not Yours predate the politicized era of the 1960s with the resonant activism of el movimiento, Padilla discerns the same interplay between the private and public facets of the self that
contemporary autobiography exemplifies. In strong accordance with Saldivar, Padilla holds that “autobiographical narratives transform life-history into textual permanence, [they are] social and cultural histories in which the ‘I’ encloses itself in a language of topographic identity, cultural practice and political intrigue” (4). He further states that “autobiographical desire [arises] as part of a discursive necessity: memory--shocked into reconstructing the past [...]--gives rise to autobiographical formation in which the desire for historical presence is marked in everything” (4). Padilla’s focus is on the historical significance of autobiography and on the genre’s contribution to the formation of a collective consciousness. But Padilla’s major advance in the critical approach to the Chicano autobiographic genre comes with the introduction of two notions: the reconstruction of the past and the topographic identity. These two concepts develop a reciprocal relationship in their definition to autobiography. More explicitly, Padilla suggests that the autobiographer (re)constructs the past, albeit from a spatialized context. Thus, an autobiography is only a version of a life-story; it is not a strictly authentic or objective narrative, but a sheer fortuitous conception of the self. Padilla’s autobiographer is a topographic identity, one that is essentially pertinent to time and place. Topos (space) and chronos (time) define his existence. The corollary is that the self, which is projected on the page, is the outcome of a self-fashioning. The autobiographer does not present a static view of the self. More to the point, he/she adjusts or appropriates his/her self-presentation to the demands of time and space. So, the autobiographic narrative is a conscious positioning of the self, which is also essentially compatible to the time and locale of its conception.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the ideologies of the self and the socio-political dialectics woven through Miguel Méndez’s autobiographical narrative From Labor to Letters (1997) and Tomas Atencio’s lecture “Resolana: A Pathway to Knowledge” (1988). The contents of this chapter are separated into three sections, the first of which deals with
Méndez’s autobiography as a social act for Chicano communal identification, while the second considers the philosophical codes fundamental to From Labor to Letters. The third section introduces Tomas Atencio’s innovative mode of social research. More precisely, the first section discusses the process known in Foucauldian terms as “the objectification of the subject,”4 and explores how and why Méndez himself becomes the object of his study. The intention here is to unravel the social function of From Labor to Letters, and this is achieved by examining the text’s underlying thematic concern of Chicano collectivization. In addition, this section analyzes the text according to Saldívar’s co-presence of the private and public selves in autobiography, and concludes that Méndez blurs the distinction between the personal and the collective facets of experience and/or self-cognition. Through his autobiographical narrative, Méndez highlights communal life as vital to the individual’s identity-formation, and he simultaneously stresses the necessity for individual knowledge to become public awareness. Essentially, From Labor to Letters presents mundane experience and the individual’s perception of the world as inextricably tied together. A further consideration of this section is to elaborate Méndez’s stylistic and literary devices which, first, elevate everyday Chicano experience; second, justify his prestigious, yet unorthodox academic status; and finally, create the feeling of pride for all those Chicanos unwilling to assimilate to Anglo standards of success. The second section of this chapter deals with Méndez’s autobiography through the lenses of a major Foucauldian concept: heterotopias. The intention is to adapt postmodern theories of contrasting yet symbiotic constituents of self-presence in a single work environment, individual identity or communal social body. The heterotopic element in Méndez’s autobiography deeply informs the inherent play of diverse, and yet co-present aspects in the Chicano self, and allows ample space for portraying Chicano autobiography as a perpetual reconstruction and a topographic self-representation. The third section of this chapter presents Tomas Atencio’s social research in US academia as
the scientific equivalent to Méndez’s self-perception. The general premise of this chapter is that for the novelist Méndez and the sociologist Atencio collective experience and the individual’s perception of the world work hand-in-hand in the formation of the unique Chicano identity.

**The Objectification of the Subject**

The autobiographic narrative *From Labor to Letters* traces Miguel Méndez’s life-story from his childhood years in Mexico through his solitary journey across the Rio Grande border, then to his settlement in the American Southwest, and ultimately to the moment he drafts his memories from the vantage point of a Full Professor at the University of Arizona. Born in Bisbee, Arizona, Méndez was still a toddler when his parents crossed the border to settle in Mexico. In the small communal village of El Claro in Sonora, Méndez attended school, learned to read and write, “devoured literature” and joined his first peer group, a bunch of young troublemakers who explored the desert and the ways of grownups (2). During his youth, Méndez behaved like a delinquent: uncontrollable, foolhardy, unhindered, and unafraid. The first turning point in his life came at the age of fourteen when he crossed the border again to settle in the United States, but without his family this time. Apart from a spatial relocation, Méndez experienced the abrupt transition to adulthood. In the autobiographer’s own words:

I passed overnight from the protection of the hearth to complete defenselessness. Installed in adolescence, in the antechamber of youth, still a neighbor to childhood, I became a construction worker during eight months of the year and a day laborer in the fields for the other four. My character and experience as a wage earner was migratory in both cases. (3)

During these years of menial labor, Méndez developed a passion for literature: he wrote short stories and composed poetry, and eventually saw the publication of his highly acclaimed first
novel *Peregrinos de Aztlan* (1974), translated into English as *Pilgrims in Aztlan* (1991). The deep social and philosophical concerns in his narratives, and his conceptually intense writing style, often verging on the baroque, won Méndez a wide critical audience, and in 1984 he was awarded a Doctorate of Humane Letters *honoris causa* by the University of Arizona. Following the critical recognition of his work, the second migratory turn in his life came in 1986, when the forty-year-old Méndez became an instructor of Spanish and creative writing at Pima Community College in Tucson, and also a Professor of Chicano literature at the University of Arizona. Once again Méndez crossed a border, but a figurative one: from the labor arena he crossed over to academia.

Méndez explores the origins and the evolution of his identity. In this endeavor, he discusses fragments of his experience, ranging from his birth to his academic status. Superficially, the text seems to follow the success motif of the migrant who strives in an alien context to attain the American Dream. The title itself mischievously indicates this direction: From Labor to Letters nicely accommodates the cliché of the underpaid, perhaps even undocumented foreigner who achieves recognition and social ascendancy by means of physical exertion and academic achievement. Indeed, the Western capitalist belief, which somehow has prevailed over the way Americans perceive life, holds that hard work and academic expertise are the means to joining an elitist environment. Far from that, Méndez’s autobiography startles his readership by juggling the Anglo notions of the Work Ethic and Academic Excellence, and he tricks his audience through into a startling reversal. The unexpected element in Méndez’s life-story is that despite his present status, he has only received a six-year elementary school education in El Claro, Mexico, and upon his arrival on US soil, he took up menial labor, working as a *campesino* (farmworker) or a brick-layer on construction sites. Moreover, during these years of manual labor in the American Southwest, Méndez completely refrained from any formal schooling. Like a magician in a show, Méndez
bypasses the academic institutions of education, and in so doing takes his reading public and the whole academic intelligentsia by surprise. His present status, however, as a novelist and a university professor is a fact, and it is this very success which demystifies and shocks the dominant culture that privileges hard work and educational expertise. Méndez’s success story departs from the all-too-familiar Horatian or capitalist motif “from-rags-to-riches” with its overwhelming preoccupation for the accumulation of wealth as the means to social recognition. Instead, it directs attention to natural talent and a deep understanding of social life as the way to success. Thus, a persistent thematic concern in all of his works, including his autobiography, is the plight and the abuse of the downtrodden Chicano in the unjust US social order, but also the Mexican-Americans’ rebellion against the dominant culture. Méndez does not lament the cruel fate of the oppressed Chicano. Far from securing ground for the clichés of Chicano misery, Méndez’s task is to project and elevate Chicano social experience as the means to the attainment of the power to conceive the self. For Méndez, the ability to define the self, both collective and individual, is a powerful awakening toward social resistance. In this context, Méndez’s work is a disruptive force against US society and a heroic social praxis for his people because he does not merely explore the degrading stereotypes of the Mexican low-class migrant worker, but takes pride in the working class communal identity of Chicanos. Méndez’s contribution to Chicano literature is clearly made when he devises his thematic synthesis of physical and philosophical labor.

From Labor to Letters commences with Méndez seated at his office desk, looking over students’ papers and assignments for his course. It is as if the university office and the tasks of a professor impel him to record the story of his identity-evolution. As the story unfolds, it offers glimpses into Méndez’s varied experience, since he was and still is enmeshed in familial, cultural and ethnic enclaves. The readers receive background information on the autobiographer’s relationship with his parents and friends in Mexico, with
his co-workers on the construction sites and with the members of his nuclear family, wife Loli and two children. But the emotional impetus of these characters’ interactions is not fully touched upon until filtered through Méndez’s memories for the purpose of recording his autobiography. In short, emotions, attachments and dedications spring out of the writing activity \textit{per se} (since being a novelist is Méndez’s present vocation) and not the other way round. In fact, Méndez’s initial concern is with his transitions in work loci and labor ethics. His speaking voice may well articulate private moments, but this is done in relation to his two-fold labor history: the menial and the academic. The point of departure is certainly his academic status as a professor and a novelist, and from this point he reflects on the past and reconstructs his identity. However, Méndez insists that his past identity as a laborer is the cornerstone of his present self. In this playfulness of past and present labor identities, notably hosted by the same individual, Méndez conceives the objective of his autobiography: to explore how his real life experiences as a working class \textit{mexicano} have added to his present status. The corollary is that Méndez does indeed start off with the presentation of a fragment of his identity, which is his present work within US academia, but he does not insulate his work from his past migrant, socio-historic and ethnic representations in world affairs. In this context, Méndez’s autobiography is an all-encompassing self-projection and a relegation of the self as fundamentally multi-faceted and polymorphous.

Méndez draws upon literary devices which make the text look like a surreal performance. To be precise, the text avoids the linear unfolding of events, omits the use of punctuation, blurs the verbal exchange among the characters, as it rapidly switches from first to second-person narration or to dialogues, and in general provides the reader with a torrent of jumbled memories. Yet, the most striking characteristic of the narrative is that it moves back and forth in time, in order to tackle the varied nature of the autobiographer’s experience. The surreal element in Méndez’s story is that it approaches the sense of the self as
contradictory, one which arises from varied past and present experiences. The effect is that
the narrative verges on the schizophrenic; or, to use a phrase from André Breton, *From Labor
to Letters* seems to be reaching “for the profound levels of the mental personality” (qtd. in
Matthews 170). More specifically, Méndez’s autobiography unfolds like a surreal self-
presentation because it takes the reader through two stages of experience: “First disturbing
[the] sense of reality, as it discredits the world of everyday convention and habitual
relationships, it then reveals and sets about exploring another world, that of the surreal which
it has brought within reach” (Breton qtd. in Matthews 170). Indeed, Méndez destabilizes his
readers’ sense of time. The present is not necessarily real or factual, and has to be analyzed in
correlation with its precedent temporal dimension, the past. Thus, what Méndez calls the
“dimension of temporality” cannot be isolated from the flow of historical time (72). For him,
time is multi-dimensional, and the past becomes the essential relegation of the present

*From Labor to Letters* presents a multi-faceted Méndez from its first page to its final
sentence: poor boy growing up in the deserts of Mexico, hardworking teenage laborer, yet
ardent lover of literature, and a scholar of Hispanic Letters who, nonetheless, displays a
puerile affinity for scatological language. All these various aspects of Méndez’s personality
seem irreconcilable, not because they have been experienced by the same persona at different
points in time, but because they are overlapping. Rather than speaking of himself as a
character, who has linearly evolved from one stage to another, or isolating his experiences in
his memory reserves until he reaches the peak of his career, Méndez co-lives the past and the
present. Every single memory he records in writing is not simply retrieved from his memory
archives, but is a constituent part of his present self-perception:

I, the one who is eternally ignorant and identified with some ciphers and a
name, do not know who I am. As a consequence, I delve around in the
innards of what I once was, searching for something that will define me as to whether I will proceed forward toward the future, or maybe I’ll advance backwards, in a circle, to stumble over the very instant prior to my birth [...]. I am still a mischievous child [...]. I ruin ideas and cast their pieces to the wind like so many drops of color, so that time and space will swallow them up as though they were happily volatile confetti. (11-2)

Quite playfully, Méndez describes his ideas as “volatile confetti.” The metaphor suggests a mutating individual mind, and a self-identity whose presence in social life resembles a carnival fiesta. So, whenever Méndez is in a reminiscent spell, he changes his identity; or, more to the point, he retrieves the identity-profile which best suits him in a given circumstance. And yet, the constant switching of time perspective or identity-profile does not denote a deviant psychological condition; instead, this code-switching is an assertion that Méndez is the carrier of collective wisdom. Quite simply put, Méndez identifies the individual self as the product of collective experience. Méndez acknowledges the impact of social life in the formation of the self and perceives his identity not in isolation to the rest of the world, but as the product of a wide array of social experiences and encounters.

Méndez identifies himself as the bearer of the collective Chicano experience, markedly varied in its essence since it comprises the experiences of the border-crooser, the urban working-class subject, and the campesino, in addition to the educated and privileged Chicano social being. All these aspects of Chicano representation in the US become different stages in Méndez’s life-story and are all present in his memory matrix. It seems as if this autobiography hosts the whole range of Chicanismo. However, it is not easy for Méndez to accommodate such diverse life-stories, and when he resumes the issue of his memories and past identities, he admits how tormenting multiplicity can be:
Added to the [academic] stretch, my first fourteen years as a Sonoran peasant, along with any number of intervening adventures, prepare me—and indeed impel me—peremptorily to write a procession of reminiscences about some of the facts gleaned from this heavy wake of memories. They are tenacious memories that cling with claws to the retinas of my melancholy. How many memories there must be that serve as paths for my nostalgia begging to be fed, go and fetch the past in the realm it inhabits, and bring it back to me alive, putting it on the exact plane where perennial time and space reside. (5-6)

Méndez employs a gothic, or more precisely, an eerie metaphor. Memories become vultures whose claws cling to his mind. Then, he takes this instance of figurative language one step further. Nostalgia is craving for memories and in order to satisfy this nostalgic mood, Méndez travels in time. Yet, he undoes the linearity of time, as he shatters temporal barriers or distinctions and presents a pastiche of past and present:

[N]othing, no distance can erase the trail of the days that my life is playing out. My periods as a child, a young man, a mature person, an old man continue to work together to enliven the spirit that has always sparked my behavior. There are none of those banishments. The present never overtakes the past because the traces of the latter stretch out toward the future. Eternity resides in the soul, despite the rotations and wearing down of the body. (91)

There’s no such thing as the future only the advance of the past. (114)

For Méndez, the self emerges from this temporal dialectic between what has formerly been experienced and what is currently being experienced. In his recollections, Méndez does not romanticize; instead he relives the past and grasps it to interpret the present.
Méndez sets himself a tricky task. To recover the past and to put memories in black and white is a far more agonizing experience than it appears on the surface, mainly because it is an effort to gather the self into a whole. As an autobiographer, he attempts to create the utopian subject, one who can sort out socio-cultural and historical experiences. But Méndez’s self is not monolithic or one-dimensional. On the contrary, his postmodern self is perceived as decentered and fragmented. Méndez realizes that the self is elusive and the varied memories he has constitute different identities, all inhabiting the same body. Thus, he is faced with the self-discovery that he embodies numerous identities:

Sometimes, since I’ve been a university professor for twenty three years, and before I did construction work for twenty-four, including some time in the fields, not to mention my first fourteen years spent on the communal farm in El Claro, where I was raised, precisely, with the impression moreover of everything my father told me about life in the mines where he worked up to the age of thirty, so many situations, images, anecdotes, people from all social levels that I have come into contact with and lived with all jumbled together in my mind, and it’s not unusual for me to experience on occasion confusion over a mason, a professor, a peasant, according to the circumstances. All of these immediately interfacing microcosms are joined by the countless fictional motifs that have acquired existence in the pages of my published books. Because once given literary form there are many characters that assume autonomy without caring one whit about how surprised the unfortunate mortals are that engendered them. Eventually, individuals who have been invented are no different from those who are from mothers born. (76-7)
Méndez does not construe the self as one-sided, but as a polyphony of experiences, or the bizarre crisscrossing of diverse social realities. He cannot discern at which point his previous identities stop and where a novel one begins. Instead, all of his identities are in a jumble. And with the realization that social reality has set in motion each of these self-conceptions, he soon witnesses the randomness of his present identity:

I get lost among so many faces. This is something like trying to give shape to one of those hazy dreams that plop us down in the middle of strange situations and that deck us out, through the effect of oneiric magic, with a personality that is not our daily one, but something that one could call alien because it is so fortuitous. (91)

Each encounter in time--past or present makes no difference to Méndez--gives rise to a different sense of the self. And the more knowledge the self stores, the more complicated it becomes. Méndez’s multi-faceted self-identity implies a philosophical theorem, which works on three levels: first, knowledge is the outcome of numerous social, cultural and philosophical encounters; second, the self is a complex carrier of knowledge; and third, fragmentation is the result of knowledge. These three levels are interlocked and reciprocal. The one elicits the other, as if they all form an organic circular whole.

Since Méndez regards himself as the carrier of collective knowledge, his identity is best analyzed in relation to madness. Like Foucault, who claims that “it is so cruel a knowledge […] [because it] creeps up the sides of the fine, simple forms of ignorance, innocence, naïveté, and prudence,” Méndez enriches his collective knowledge, but at the same time this wisdom takes away his peace of mind (“Cruel Knowledge” 58). Knowledge for Méndez takes the form of past experiences, but excavating the past is a laborious rite of passage to self-cognition. So, once Méndez has laid bare the vast array of bygone times, he destabilizes his present. Indeed, Méndez appears unstable, which is not to suggest that
Méndez is a sheer madman, but his speaking voice does often touch upon the liminal space between sanity and insanity. To begin with, his writing style is a chaotic stream of consciousness. He also talks to himself, speaks the words of other characters and appears to be in a frightfully serious physical condition:

I’ve developed a stubborn and annoying fever with respect to bygone days.
It gets worse at night, quite a bit worse. Loli [Méndez’s wife] insists I rest.
She claims I’m exhausted. It makes me laugh. How can these tasks of a well-cushioned man tire me out? (7)

Méndez speaks his memories out loud, resembling the ravings of a madman, and he suffers from high fever and hallucinations. All this paranoia takes place while writing his autobiography, which alarms his wife:

My God, What a hateful fever. Instead of getting better it gets worse. I can’t wait for dawn to come, so I can see you conscious without such high fever. If you’d just stop mumbling so many weird things. You keep right on talking, and you toss around and fling your arms in the air. Tomorrow I’m going to take you to the doctor for sure. Here, take some aspirins. (21)

Méndez’s raving voice and the declaration of his life-story as multi-layered sustain the prevalent surreal element in the text. In a perplexing mood, Méndez pairs numerous binaries onto the printed page exactly as he experiences them: there is past versus present, the philosophically abstract versus the historically specific, the academic versus the menial, migrancy versus territorialization, to highlight just a few of the polarities in the narrative.

Méndez, however, does not wish to bridge these dichotomies. His anguish springs from an effort to persuade his reading public that he is not a madman, but the postmodern decentered subject *ad hoc*:
The numerous anecdotes and episodes to be found in a life full of convergences and circumstances are determined by the marked influence of settings and microcosms that generate the most extraordinary appearances, constant incubators of things unheard of and sublime, in a going rather than a becoming, one that is alternately fortunate and bitter and more than often chaotic, the result of any one of a number of passions that constantly besiege and constrain us. Nevertheless, life inspires me to laughter. My fellow men are oh so very silly, and I am the only one among them who is a clown devoid of anything funny. Yet [...] when I cry on the inside like a lonely child, I hide among the mirrors. So I won’t feel sad. That’s when I really laugh out loud. (v-vi)

Méndez discerns the difference between himself and the rest of the world. When others cry, he laughs, and when others inquire, he comes up with the answers. Méndez finds himself in the “magic mirrors” of self-perception. With this enticing figure of speech, Méndez portrays himself as a multiple personality. He thinks that the venture of his autobiography is like walking in the Hall of Magic Mirrors in an amusement park, where the individual visitor sees his reflection in various distorted forms. However, he once again insists that he is not insane. Bearing the knowledge of his inner diversity, he compiles his autobiography to express his sadness. Méndez feels marginalized; he is a “sad clown” who performs his life-story in front of an audience with the hope that they will understand him. At the same time, however, Méndez does not revel in isolation. Instead, he wishes to incorporate the social realm and uses his autobiography to reach out to the whole of Chicanismo. Thus, in his introductory reflections he apostrophizes his readers and welcomes them to his “cosmos” (vi). His autobiography reaches out to his readers and functions as Méndez’s communication with the world. Far from a gratification in individual memories, Méndez’s “novel autobiography,” as
he enigmatically calls it, objectifies the individual self as a symbolic call for collective identification.

Méndez describes his life in what we could term a real-and-mythic mode of existence. First, he accepts the transient quality of life and then acknowledges the randomness of the written word. His autobiographic narrative unfolds in relation to time and place, and is therefore subject to change. Méndez’s syllogism is quite simple in fact: the perception of an incident may differ immensely from another perception of the same incident, which is realized in a different temporal and spatial context:

I believe I could write several autobiographies but all essentially the same. There are so many isolated facts that end up on the fringes of our summations. This is perhaps, because real or willed forgetfulness has shrouded them in mist as the result of our passing through the space of the spheres, whose time appears to be infinite. Certainly it is immeasurable. (v)

Méndez is extremely outspoken. He brazenly confesses to his concoction of a self-perception, and defends it with the claim that the linguistic means of communication is “metamorphic.” For Méndez, language changes with the flow of time. And if his autobiography is realized in words, then the meaning of the printed page is as metamorphic as the language it employs. Méndez renders the text of his autobiography as real and unreal at the same time, because the words he uses can be decoded in a variety of different ways. Based on this, he does not hesitate to use the well-turned phrase “I have forged this story” to discuss the production of his life-story in written form:

I have forged this story bearing in mind as a model the specter of a river of letters and words in widening currents of jargon, slang, dialects, hybrid and foreign voices, in swirling linguistic colloquialisms that make up, express
languages that are evolving, turning revolutionary, and therefore metamorphic to a large degree. [...] Certainly the most varied means of communication are highly effective, but the demographic phenomenon that alters spaces and times are the determining factors for bringing about these vertiginous changes that end up being chaotic for those academics who have lost sight of the onomatopoeia of languages, children of the basest and, what’s worse, bastard terminology. Yes, a river of letters into which linguistic streams and even tributaries flow dynamically, to the point of madness. (54)

Méndez suggests that language “is a changing product of the interactive process of materiality” (Hampton 1). Furthermore, he maintains that the more one socializes, the more dialects and modes of speech he learns depending on the “ideological contentions” he expresses (Hampton 2). Thus, self-perception is not only related to unequivocal social and cultural parameters, but to the concealed politics of language as well. For Méndez, language is a living organism, which corresponds to the people who use it. Each social group uses specific words and idioms, which are characteristic of their socio-cultural experience. Having straddled different social classes, Méndez uses all of those “varied means of communication,” and *From Labor to Letters* presents different speaking voices, from the philosophical to the pragmatic, and from the sophisticated to the most obscene.

In composing his autobiography, Méndez in fact engages in a double metacommentary. First, he places himself at the center of the narrative, and second, he discusses autobiography and the role of the autobiographer. In both cases, Méndez is the center of the discussion: his own life-history is the subject-matter of his book, and the autobiographer himself comments upon the art of autobiography. As for the first task, Méndez sets about to “objectify the subject” in Foucauldian terms. According to Foucault’s
syllogism, “the subject and the object are both constituted only under certain simultaneous conditions, which are constantly modified in relation to each other, and so they modify this field of experience itself” (“Foucault” 462). The implication is that the subject and the object are always and perpetually involved in a discourse. The discourse between the two parties is certainly one of power relation and one of identity-formation. The subject attempts to define the object, which then becomes the carrier of knowledge. But the subject conveys that knowledge to the object. In other words, the subject looks at his/her reflection in the object he/she has defined, as if both parties are connected in a narcissistic relationship. In this philosophical Foucauldian definition of the self, Méndez embodies both the subject and the object. Méndez assumes the role of the subject when he sets out to define himself, but at the same time he is the object of the book. The corollary is that he both defines and is being defined, constitutes and is being constituted, declares and acquires. And Méndez’s narrative is the arena of this reciprocal relationship. From Labor to Letters becomes the figurative space where the subject and the object merge. Foucault has shown an interest in mental illness and deviant behavior because they are conditions of simultaneous, yet diverse realities. In a similar fashion to any autobiographer, Méndez accommodates this Foucauldian definition of mental disorder. The suggestion is that the intellectual who discusses his or her own personality is either a schizophrenic, since he or she presents conversations within the same body (an instance of madness) or is a sheer egoist (an instance of deviant behavior). Méndez certainly flirts with madness and deviancy, but he seems to follow a politicized route towards the act of autobiography. The need to write about himself comes from the need to retain his ties with the past. And not just to retain them in his mind, but to submit them as a cultural legacy and an identity-perspective to his Chicano readers. Therefore, his autobiography is a historical text and an instrumental act of self-portrayal. Méndez not only writes about the private realm of his philosophical contemplations and past
experiences, but also endows his life-story to the public, meaning that he transforms the self into public knowledge. In this context, the purpose of his autobiography is to turn the individual experience into collective identity-politics.

**Heterotopias**

For the heterotopia of Chicano scholarship, which is the second objective of this chapter, a consideration of the problematic dialectics between time and space should be made. Méndez perceives his identity in a temporal negotiation between the past and the present, as outlined above. This self-perception often disempowers the self, especially with the personification of time, into the whimsical character of “Mr Chronos,” whom Méndez describes as “the catalyst of all actions” (75). However, on a different level Méndez situates the self in a number of emplacements. To draw again from Foucault, “emplacements [are] defined by the relations of proximity between points or elements” and they designate intricate relations of an immediate social context (“Different Spaces” 176). Emplacements make reference to both tangible objects and abstract socio-cultural and political codes surrounding the self. What the concept of the “emplacement” suggests is that at some point in time the self is positioned either willingly or unwillingly to a certain social context, which in its turn exerts an overpowering definition onto the self. Méndez seems aware of this and the emphasis he lays on his varied work loci implies the power of space over the formation of his identity. Emplacements, which connote a socio-political positioning of the self, often include juxtaposing elements, irreconcilable and yet symbiotic. Such an emplacement is a heterotopia. Defined as a universal social phenomenon, Foucault proposes that heterotopias are

- in every culture, in every civilization, real places, actual places, places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually
realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same, time represented, contested and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable. (178)

The definition suggests that heterotopias welcome all sorts of dualities: they are both spaces and non-spaces; they are the loci of mixed social experiences and cultural ethics; they are the ultimate projection of an innate juxtaposition; they are “different spaces, a kind of contestation, both mythical and real” (“Different Spaces” 179). Heterotopias project a reality which is fiction at the same time, through and through.

Méndez’s autobiography creates four heterotopias. First, and in the context of literary criticism, the real space of Méndez’s autobiographic book comprises a heterotopic literary production. More explicitly, the autobiographer objectifies his own identity in the form of fiction, and Méndez’s identity becomes both real and fictional. Méndez is a real physical body, a “topographic identity” with a name, social security number, a family of his own, and a steady job. On the other hand, he is a character in a novel. For Foucault, the exemplary case of a heterotopia is the mirror “in the sense that it makes this place that I occupy at the moment that I look at myself in the glass both utterly real, connected with the entire space surrounding it, and utterly unreal--since, to be perceived, it is obliged to go by way of that virtual point which is over there” (“Different Spaces” 179). Similarly, Méndez’s autobiography is a mirror projection of the autobiographer, and it constitutes that intermediary space between “the space where [he is] and [himself] over there” (Foucault, “Different Spaces” 179). When Méndez undertakes to record his life-story in black and white, he in fact looks at himself in a mirror. Thus, the composition of his autobiography is a reconstitution of his identity and an attempt at self-cognizance. Should we abide by the autobiographer’s identity as a binarism of his real and fictional roles, then “autobiography
may very well contain fantasy, dream, and illusion” (R. Saldívar 162). The implication is that the autobiographer may hallucinate, daydream or even fabricate. To these, we can add the notion that the autobiographer is not entirely truthful because he is biased. This inherent bias in the autobiographic text gives rise to the second heterotopia in From Labor to Letters, which is also relevant to the act of autobiography, but from a communal point of view. When Méndez writes his memoirs, he does not do so in an ethnic void. Instead, he appropriates the contents of his printed life-story to his own ethnic understanding of the world. Consonant with this, From Labor to Letters is not a mere abstract reflection of the self, which is detached from the world or the ethnic community’s life, but a conscious emplacement in a given social reality. But then again the reading public cannot be sure whether Méndez is sincere in his recollections. His autobiography is the heterotopia of a scholar who presents his life in a whimsical and unverifiable manner; or it is its writer’s self-reflection on the printed page, reality and fiction together.

If the production of an autobiography is a conscious emplacement of the self, then the autobiographer’s ethnic bias is inherent in his drive to compose the autobiographic text. In Méndez’s case, this innate drive is to address Chicanos evidenced by the fact that his text is composed in caló, the distinctive Chicano idiom which is a combination of English and standard Spanish. The fact that Méndez writes in caló is a constant reminder of his Chicano cultural identity, and proof of the fact that “linguistic and behavioral [acts] are muddled up” (Leach, “Aspects of Language” 40). In other words, language is for Méndez both an artistic idiom and an ethnic emplacement. In the essay “Miguel Méndez: The Commitment Continues” (1995), Salvador Rodríguez Del Pino stresses that Méndez’s persistence to use the Spanish language is indicative of his commitment to the Spanish-speaking peoples of the Americas. According to Del Pino, “[Méndez’s] commitment, in the sense of being [politically] engaged, is a commitment he made to the nascent Chicano literary movement in
order to rescue its oral history and to create the necessary images to document Chicano history, culture and presence through the vehicle of the Chicano’s ancestral language” (89). Indeed, Méndez identifies himself as a Chicano thinker. Prior to a poor boy, construction worker and professor, Méndez has always been a subject of Mexican ancestry and the use of caló is testimony of his Mexican-ness and of his dedication to his ethnic community.

The third heterotopia Méndez develops stems from his emplacement in US academia. Méndez has received no formal schooling in the United States whatsoever. Nevertheless, he was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters and achieved the position of professor. It appears that Méndez bypassed all the years of hard working study in libraries, course attendance and presentations. Méndez’s heterotopia is traced through his becoming a university professor, albeit one who has never acquired the otherwise necessary degrees for the post. In fact, his emplacement as a “Maestro” of literature is both a reality and a myth. Without extensive elaboration, one can simply say that his emplacement in US academia is real because he lectures, supervises and corrects assignments. In short, he performs all the duties of a university professor. The mythical aspect of his academic emplacement is more complicated, and can be aptly conceived in connection with his Chicano identity. Beyond and beneath his academic position, Méndez always identifies himself as a Chicano subject. Thus, aside from the privileges he enjoys in the elitist environment of US academia, Méndez has always shown a sincere dedication to Chicano social problems. Similarly, since his autobiography addresses Chicanos, and since it is a text crammed with social morals and identity-politics, it certainly has a message to convey. This is not to suggest that From Labor to Letters is a didactic or propagandizing narrative in the conservative definitions given to the words. More to the point, Méndez projects his own life-history of a wetback in order to direct all of his Chicano readers to create a myth or a saga out of it. His autobiography is mythological because it is a story with a strong emotional impetus, which embraces the vast
community of Chicanos, and can change the community’s collective self-awareness. Nevertheless, Méndez often feels impelled to justify his non-academic education. It is, in fact, an instance of identity-policy (if we are to refrain from the characterization of an “identity-apology”), which frequently appears in the narrative. Méndez’s (counter) argument to his lack of formal education is that “the School of Life is the Great University” which provided him with the best knowledge he could ever have (sic) (84). Once again, Méndez stresses the merits of his understanding of social life, and incorporates this knowledge into his contribution to Chicano literary tradition. In fact, the message for the construction of a unique Chicano literary idiom that he tries to convey to his community is encapsulated in the following lines:

[Chicano] literature is art, testimony, a flag of rebellion, if you want. We provide a reflection of what is ours, including our popular speech: jargon, slang, whatever expression may be valid for showing our inner feelings.

(72)

From Méndez’s point of view, the man of letters should not be secluded in an ivory tower. The artist is first and foremost a representative of his ethnic community and the appropriation of his art to communal needs and politics does not occur at the expense of his work, but becomes the driving force of the literary text. Works of art flourish as a result of social encounters, and literature should be the prodigy of everyday life.

The fourth heterotopia in From Labor to Letters is pertinent to Méndez’s border-experience. Méndez is the inhabitant of the borderlands, not only geographically, but also culturally, philosophically and nationally. Border-zones are heterotopias. They are dynamic spaces where the real meets the mythical. The border-subjects in turn have to mutate and devise mechanisms for their survival. For Del Pino, the borderland is “the dumping ground of two countries […] a place full of life and energy. A place where races and languages mix.
freely together, and whose economic strength relies upon the creativity of the people, with no holds barred. Anything goes, as long as you don’t get caught” (91). Del Pino defines border-zones as sites of plurality and Méndez finds himself in the eye of the hurricane. Moreover, he grows up to be a breadwinner and a man of fame once he crosses the border. His coming of age as a laborer and a philosopher takes place in an alien context, which he inhabits, but does not assimilate to. In other words, Méndez has created a heterogeneous space for himself because he constantly crosses borders, both real and symbolic: he is a Mexican-American, a philosopher and a mason, a professor and a person who has received only a six-year elementary school education. His own identity-heterotopia “has the ability to juxtapose in a single real space several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves” (Foucault, “Different Spaces” 180). The real space is Méndez’s body, the actual person in flesh and blood. The juxtaposing emplacements are the various conflicting identities which he represents. Thus, in relation to who he is, the answer is not a simple one. Méndez suggests that merely calling out his name cannot identify him. His status in world relations is formed at the crossroads of identity-perspectives. This is Méndez’s heterotopic self-portrait which is a continuous flow of words and thoughts and the only italicized fragment in the story:

*I'm a mason and a poet-writer with the agility of my hands and the disciplined rigor of my mind with a mixture that gets as hard as stone plus eternal chains of bricks I have built homes and universities at the same time I have put forth galaxies of words chains of words in a procession of syllables following penetrating and labyrinthine thoughts I forge exemplary constructions to the sound of poems in verses while simultaneously walls and buildings arise stories novels poems and an endless number of projects eight hours of hard labor leave me silent my hands my back my whole being aches nevertheless invention persists and persists a new wall looks solid*
and airy the letters glow in an illusory mosaic now I sleep inertly worn-out in absolute repose deep in my subconscious chimeric visions sing me lullabies I see myself as a writer alongside famous authors they address me I pretend to run away flee a setting that is alien to me but they really do treat me with deference young journalists girls boys smilingly interview me without scorn is it possible I am the perfect impostor I proclaim that I am this and that and there are those who believe me but I was only playing ah they take my picture I smile cynically Maestro! your literary work ... who called me Maestro which work gentlemen one of the two winners of the national prize for literature ... is ... who is that old man who walks like a laborer with rough hands who is receiving that medal he’s bursting with happiness he is a lonely child who finally finds some friends like himself even if for only a moment as shining and fleeting as a bolt of lightning tomorrow will be another day I will once again build with my hands and I will create with my mind from the scaffolding I still see a humanity that passes by indifferent to the cosmos ideals decked out with elegance they appear to be solvent and well fed they usually look at me with a touch of pity and I in turn express for them with a smile a certain commiseration some walk with a pride of someone with education of means and strong while I proclaim exclusively a sea of letters poor laborer they probably say he has neither capital nor property they haven’t the faintest idea how happy a dreamer usually feels who constructs fantasy motifs from reality to make fun of his suffering and who cries over the happiness for those who so blithely and with so much power dig the grave of illusion when they no longer desire a single thing whose price is not found on a sticker hey chump
it’s time to eat what the hell you don’t have a fuck of an idea get off your high horse go screw you mother you bastard son of a rotten bitch how quick you learn you jerk yes sir and no one gives you the time of day because they’ll kick you in the snout well yes kiss my ass on the green grass if they don’t like it they can eat it what the fuck the guys don’t screw you over because they think you’re a real card funny as hell you sure can dish it out in Pachuco lingo hey you got it quick as a wink anyway yellow fellow don’t try to give them a rough time to they’ll get you good if their balls decide so what do you mean balls ass more like it I’ll fight with one arm tied behind my back and to any dude stomped by the devil I’ll give him a chance to give me a kick in the balls you know the balls you crush but then they’re as fresh as ever you who call yourself a poet and in the air you fixed them jerk me off by hand without any of those damn plots early in the morning with the balls fried I’m nothing of the sort and I won’t ever be what I carry in my pants is for the good of you know who my little dove in your aunt’s shack you can get a swell fuck OK that’s it for now what the heck old body that’s how a bunch of those masons who know I think they’re all about the same (sic). (34-5)

Méndez considers the border-subject to be a complicated space of analysis because he/she inhabits the interstices of cultures. As for border-zones, Méndez implies that they “should be regarded not only as analytically empty transitional zones but as sites of creative cultural production that require investigation” (Rosaldo qtd. in J.D. Saldivar 24). The long soliloquy quoted above indicates that Méndez is the recipient of numerous voices, dialects, feelings, perspectives and social attitudes. Méndez forges his identity out of this torrent of images and social encounters. In so doing, he deprives the self of any authenticity. His
suggestion is that the individual can be defined in relation to the chimera of different beliefs, values and ideas which he/she experiences. In other words, the subject is elusive and can be approached by deference because it mutates to adjust to varied social realities. Moreover, the borderland-subject is essentially the product of negotiation. Similarly, as a border-crosser Méndez is constantly redefined. At one time he is a Mexican, at a different time he is a professor with American citizenship. His novels are published in the United States, funded by US dollars, and yet composed in Spanish, addressing Hispanics. Méndez’s heterotopia allows him to transgress barriers. He, in fact, compiles his divergent identities onto the postmodern mode of existence of the decentered subject. Méndez looks at himself as multiple narratives. None of these narratives prevail over the other. More to the point, they all co-habit the real space of his body. The significance of From Labor to Letters lies in the suggestion that the realization of the self can take place only in the context of borderland-juxtapositions. And Méndez has reached the final version of his identity, the neurotic voice we hear in his autobiographical narrative, only by crossing borders. For him, self-perception takes place in racial, national and social border-zones.

Chicanismo and Academic Social Research

In much the same way that Méndez presents his self-portrait by creating a heterotopia for the Chicano autobiographer and scholar, Tomas Atencio in his lecture “Resolana: A Pathway to Knowledge” (1988) redefines the Chicano scholar and then confronts the issue of communal identity. Atencio’s lecture was delivered at Stanford University, and its theme was “the emancipation and the democratization of knowledge” (1). The subject-matter of the lecture is the work of Academia de la Nueva Raza (Academy for the New People), a center for social research, among whose founding members Atencio himself belongs. The center’s objective is to accumulate data from Chicano subjects by means of informal meetings and conversations, which are basically adaptations of the resolana gatherings in Mexican
Atencio starts his lecture with a discussion of the *resolana* concept, which is a place, protected on all sides, [...] where men *resolaneros* spent countless hours talking. [...] At times they engaged in idle gossip or made sharp, satirical comments about some event or occurrence of village interest. They related *cuentos, chistes, dichos*, and they joked and laughed about the tragicomedy of life’s paradoxes. (1-2)

The description is reminiscent of a hideout, where *resolaneros* turn up, insulate themselves from the outside world and participate in a give-and-take of cultural data. Experiences in real life situations and stories from the past circulate during their gatherings, along with a parade of indigenous cultural practices. *Resolana* has a double signification: on the one hand, it is a real place in villages of Mexican population, and on the other hand, it is the symbolic space where people flock to share their understanding of social issues. Those men present develop a reciprocal exchange of information, which means that discourse is the founding element of *resolana*. In *resolana* gatherings, the interlocutors first share their experiences, second they hear other stories, and finally they reach a communal understanding of the world. During their gatherings, the villagers form a collective identity, and *resolana* becomes the cultural refuge or the space for the formation of communal bonds.

Atencio’s novelty is that he has incorporated the *resolana* concept into the academic fields of Social and Cultural Studies. Along with Padre Luis Jaramillo and Facundo Valdez, he established *Academia de la Nueva Raza*, a Center of Chicano Studies which “builds a Chicano body of knowledge from the everyday life experience of people” (4). The inaugural announcement of the Center claimed that *La Academia’s* “body of knowledge would grow from the barrios of the Southwest, from the mining towns in the Rocky Mountains and the desert foothills of Arizona, from the farm labor camps across the West and the Midwest, from
the penitentiaries, and from the mountain villages of northern New Mexico” (4). Clearly, the Center’s objective is to collect, record, process and finally circulate Chicano knowledge mainly by means of publication. With this objective in mind, Academia de la Nueva Raza follows specific steps for documentation. To be precise, in the collection of data, a dialogue takes place between an interviewer and an interviewee: “a tutor (or collector) and a contributor” (6). This discourse is called *platica*, which follows four paths to knowledge: “personal history, oral history, folklore and art” (5). A dynamic relationship evolves between the parties involved since the contributor presents his or her reaction to society, folklore and history. The important thing in this documentation is that the collector is not digging out the actual truth on a given topic under discussion. The purpose is to record the contributor’s perception of an incident, but “whether the story [is] factual or not, [is] not important” (6). What initially matters is the contributor’s reaction to social life.

According to Atencio, the relationship between the tutor and the contributor becomes a mystic one as it progresses from “the more rational and verbal to the less rational and non-verbal--from words to no words, from the rational to the intuitive. Ultimately, those involved in the dialogue would be SEEING the way of the mystic” (sic) (6). Atencio holds that by means of the empirical, the rational and the verbal both the collector and the contributor let their preconscious knowledge emerge. 12 During the discussions, “the content of information conveyed through personal history, oral history, folklore and art represents not only social and cultural action, but also uncovers the preconscious forces and images not readily apprehended” (7). Images, belief systems and cultural segments are reconsidered by the conscious mind, which in turn revises the sense of the self. Atencio suggests that during the *platicas* the contributor and the collector reach some sort of an epiphany. They start off by a mere exchange and analysis of social stimuli and they end up submerging their present and conscious individual identity-perceptions into all the primordial images of the self. The
platica opens up the frontiers to the space where the conscious mind engages its preconscious side, and where social identity intersects cultural identity.

The dialogue between the collector and the contributor is similar to the resolana gatherings in Mexican communal villages. Similar to Mexican villagers, who set up resolana gatherings to discuss their daily activities and the community’s cultural practices, the collector and the contributor isolate themselves from the rest of the world and discuss a topic in order to bring about a mystic communication between them. At this point, isolation denotes a physical detachment from the social environment. Thus, during the platicas no other people are in the proximity of the collector and the contributor. Yet, their discussions revolve around society and culture. Their private discourse is not cut off from the world; instead, it draws its material from actual lived experiences. Atencio terms the face to face communication between the collector and contributor as the “micro spiral” and its aim is to produce self-knowledge (6). The next level of data-collection is the “macro spiral,” which refers to “the exchange of ideas and information by several individuals who come together because they have contributed similar information in the individual collection” (6). So, first there is the individual member of Chicano community (the contributor) with a representative of academia (the collector) and then all of the contributors with academia, whose final collective discussion “produces practical knowledge” (6).

There is an intriguing aspect of the platicas, which has to do with the relationship between the parties involved. The idea of the resolana concept, at least as materialized in the platicas, is to objectify Chicano experience through discussions with Chicanos from all walks of life. The interesting element is that the roles of the subject and the object converge, just like in Méndez’s autobiography. Atencio suggests that one cannot objectify his/her own culture without simultaneously objectifying his/her own self. Atencio points out that in the discussions there is an inherent drive to mutual understanding, provided that all participants
in the *platicas* are of the same cultural background. Despite the fact that the collector is a
delegate of academia whereas the contributors are not, their communication is successful
because in their preconscious they belong to the same ethnic group: they have heard the same
stories as children, they have been exposed to the same folklore and oral history, they speak
the same language and their racial characteristics are the same. In short, they may occupy
different social strata, but they bear the same ethnic identity. The corollary is that the roles in
the *platicas* are not clear-cut: once the experiences of the contributor apply to the cultural
experiences of the collector then their roles coincide. Moreover, if initially the collector
undertakes the role of the controlling subject, whose aim is to collect scientific data, at the
end of the *platicas* the subject himself is objectified. The collector identifies with the stories
of the contributor and through them he/she revises his/her self-perception. In other words, the
collector rediscovers his/her cultural identity through the contributor’s stories. In this context,
the contributor has more power over the collector: the contributor’s reaction to the world
brings a revised self-awareness to the collector’s identity-perception.

During the mystic communication of the *platica* the contributor introduces the
collector to communal awareness. Thus, the knowledge which is stored during the *platicas* is
objectified to bring about a communal feeling. The contributor’s beliefs and the practical
knowledge derived from the discussions “are committed to print or adapted to other media
and disseminated. Once objectified, this knowledge logically becomes material for further
discussion at a wider spiral of thought and action” (6). Atencio’s suggestion is that the
knowledge derived from the *platicas* can become transcendent ethnic knowledge, and the
publication as well as the wider circulation of this knowledge in the media can create “the
imagined community” of Chicanismo. As for the material space for the collection of
Chicanismo’s practical knowledge, Atencio uses academic institutions as the spatial
intermediary to the community’s self-awareness. Leaving aside questions such as “In which
rooms do the *platicas* take place?” “Who sponsors the project?” “Are the contributors qualified scholars or undergraduate students?” it is worth noticing that Atencio highly values his own position in US academia, and throughout his lecture he often refers to his experiences as a student of Philosophy, a social worker and a mental health consultant. Similarly to Méndez, who has used his post of a professor and his wide popularity to transmit the importance of his ethnic heritage, Atencio perceives knowledge and ethnic awareness through the space of academia.

The *resolana* concept in academic study forms the space where Chicano intellectuals meet the community. In fact, Atencio’s aim is to emplace Chicano scholars in everyday experience, following the Foucauldian concept of emplacements. The *platicas* constitute a heterotopic space because they bridge the gap between the philosophical and the social fields of study, and they bring together “everyday life experience with the knowledge of other intellectual achievement” (2). Atencio implies that the relationship between the worlds of society and academia has always existed, but only in the subconscious mind of Chicanos. Thus, throughout his lecture he stresses the fact that academic study has ostracized the study of material Chicano experience, not as an aware acculturation to the American institutions of scientific study, but as a gradual adjustment to the requirements of an elitist work environment. *Academia de la Nueva Raza* undertakes to retrieve the common ground between Chicano academics and Chicano grassroots. In this endeavor, Atencio’s work becomes a heterotopia because in accordance with Foucault,

in the course of history, a society can make a heterotopia that exists and has not ceased to exist operate in a different way; in fact, each heterotopia has a precise and specific operation within the society, and the same heterotopia can have one operation or another, depending on the synchrony of the culture
in which it is found. (“Different Spaces” 180)

According to Foucault’s principle, society is the cognizant body of action while culture is the subconscious storeroom of images; and depending on the requirements of an era, society can retrieve a specific set of cultural practices in order to fulfill a social function. Subsequently, Atencio along with other Chicano scholars established Academia de la Nueva Raza because the current need to maintain Chicano cultural identity dictates the recollection and adaptation of the resolana practice, where people of diverse social statuses, but of the same culture, gather to comprise their communal identity. With this need in mind, Atencio along with all the participants of Academia de la Nueva Raza have created a heterotopic relationship between scholarship and real life experience.

A simplified definition of the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia would include temporal transgression, combination of juxtaposing elements, emplacement of this combination in space (fictional or real), and the use of this combination for a socio-cultural goal. The corollary is that heterotopias mutate experience and knowledge. And if the platicas are heterotopias of an organized identity-policy, then we need to look into how they perform the four principles mentioned above. First, they transgress time barriers by following the resolana concept, which is a cultural practice from the past. Atencio points out this diachronic quality of the resolana concept, which is certainly a cultural practice of contemporary Mexican nationals, but also dates back to “the Papago Indian view of communication” (2). Therefore, as a cultural expression resolana is tied to the indigenous practices of Native Americans and can also be traced to the precolonization era. Second, platicas combine contrasting elements since they bring together the academic and the non-academic, the intellectual and the quotidian. Third, a platica is positioned in US academia. Unlike resolanas, which were held in Mexican villages after resolaneros had returned from work, platicas take place on the premises of an American academic institution. Finally, the
accumulation of practical knowledge has a goal in mind—to build knowledge from experience and to “democratize” that knowledge for those who will use it (18).

As for the democratization of knowledge, Atencio explains that this kind of change is needed to make knowledge accessible to Chicanos. His assertion is that academic study does not take place in a socio-cultural void, but should be directed by the needs of the ethnic group to which the scholar belongs. Atencio contends, “information and knowledge are controlled by a rising knowledge-elite whose economic power grows from the industrial base” (17). Like a Marxist sociologist, Atencio divides social strata into those who control capital, information and knowledge and those who provide the material for it. Atencio proposes that knowledge (both socio-economic and philosophical) should direct Chicanos of the “industrial base” to protect themselves from exploitation. From this perspective, he holds Chicano scholars responsible for the education of the less fortunate Mexican-Americans. For Atencio, academic studies are a means to communal politics. Thus, he calls for knowledge and academic pursuits to become more humanitarian, to address Chicanos per se, to instigate the feeling of communal awareness and to inspire the necessity of social change to Chicanos’ advantage. The path he follows to achieve his four-fold goal is to collect data from Chicanos themselves. This is how Atencio puts forward his vision of social change for and by his ethnic community:

Knowledge created from the community and interpreted within a larger body of information develops a captive audience and an interested readership—conditions necessary to mobilize people to action to sustain freedom. This supports the thesis that knowledge is democratized by creating it out of the everyday life experience of those who will use it. (18)
Atencio directs Chicano scholars to work with a political objective in mind, and suggests that the more academics turn to Chicano real life experience for their research material, the more the Chicano community will benefit from the outcome of a given research.

Atencio uses his own experience as a student of Philosophy and Sociology to support his proposition for the “democratization” of knowledge. When he was a student at an American university, Atencio experienced the totalitarian ethos of academic study. He felt that his education cut off his ties with Chicanos and their real life experience. Thus, he currently thinks of his initial education as a theoretical endeavor, which showed no allegiance to Chicano subjectivity. This is Atencio’s autobiographic recounting of his experience as a college student:

At about the same time that my views about classical knowledge were forming, I was wrestling to make sense of a dominant society whose values I could not easily accept, and this made it difficult for me to adjust in the social world in which I lived. Reflecting on my own experience, I concluded that the social structures--social, political and economic institutions--that shaped my existence were impairments to my own fulfillment as a Chicano. Committed more to an understanding of values and the superstructure than to an understanding of the structures themselves, I saw the social, political and economic institutions of society giving birth to the values that in turn guided behavior within these institutions. Values and the institutions were interlocked with each other. These values and norms underpinned the structures that gave them birth. Values such as competition, individualism, and progress were difficult for me to incorporate as guides to my life, since they were in conflict with the beliefs and commitments of traditional people...
in the villages of northern New Mexico where I was born and raised. There was no way for me, I concluded, to penetrate the dominant social structures unless I changed my values--my culture. But if, on the other hand, I wanted my own values to be affirmed and to flourish I had to rename the world, if not reconstruct it. […] Naming the world from my historical and cultural experience became my vocation. (3)

Atencio sees a discrepancy between his academic and cultural worlds. The institutions of his education taught him to disdain his ethnic background. Soon, he realized that he was in a quandary about what to do: either he would assimilate to the Anglo narratives or accommodate his ethnic heritage. The decision Atencio made was to create a heterotopia of his academic work. Thus, he has founded a new world of study, where the historical and cultural sides of his ethnic identity prevailed over his education. Instead of choosing between US academia and Chicanismo, Atencio has in fact reversed the roles in the academic power relation. And in this new mapping of academic work, he stresses the importance of retaining the ties with Chicano culture and the need to record el pueblo’s everyday experience.

The same agony Atencio experienced as a student, he now projects onto the whole Chicano community through his lecture. In a way, Atencio objectifies his own experience only to turn it into communal problematics. Thus, his identity becomes the topic under discussion, which is then extrapolated to a wider social issue. Similar to Méndez, who composed his autobiography to discuss identity-issues of the Chicano community, Atencio objectifies the subject (his own self) and functions as both a collector and a contributor. Within himself he has performed the micro spiral, and by recording his individual experiences as a college student he proceeds to the macro spiral stage. As he reads his lecture, the macro spiral is fulfilled, and the personal experience mutates into public knowledge. Yet, there is a persistent feeling of exigency in Atencio’s lecture. Whereas he...
maintains his dedication to the preservation of Chicano cultural traits, he realizes that the Chicano community does not follow the same route. He fears that Chicanos tend to disavow or forget their cultural heritage and will eventually assimilate into Anglo mainstream society. Chicanos, he asserts, run the risk of losing “their cultural mooring” (16). For Atencio, Chicano identity is at stake because on the one hand, the community wants to succeed in the American land of opportunity, but on the other hand, they are emotionally attached to their cultural heritage. Thus, he warns that Chicanos are both “at the threshold of opportunity and on the brink of cultural extinction” (16). It is either accommodation or assimilation. Atencio seems to favor accommodation and resolana comes along to strengthen the needed ties with the past. Oral history and folklore, *parables, cuentos, moralejos, consejos* and *indirectas* become the subject of his study because they regenerate the unique Chicano cultural identity. And establishing *Academia de la Nueva Raza* is the outcome of Atencio’s urge to preserve the community’s identity, not just for the delegates of Mexican-American academia, but also for the whole of Chicanismo.

Nonetheless, Atencio is not an accommodationist in the conservative meaning of the word: first he works within American institutions of education, and second he acknowledges the importance of the communications revolution. As for the second point, Atencio closes his lecture with the enumeration of the tools available in collecting practical knowledge: phones, computers and modern technology in general. It is worth noticing the lecture’s concluding sentence:

La Resolana suggests a way of linking Myth with Culture by means of technology, a process of Myth-Tech, which may be the way to a post-industrial spiritualism as the basis for survival and another step towards *la Nueva Raza*.

(20)
If Atencio were an accommodationist, he would strive for the exact spatial (re)enactment of the *resolana* cultural heritage. Instead, he proposes a synthesis of ancient practices with the advances of modern technology. Not only does he propose this combination, but leaves a lingering notion that this is the only means of survival in the present post-industrial era. However, modern technology is taught to Chicanos in Anglo institutions of education from elementary schools to universities. Thus, what Atencio really suggests is the adjustment of cultural politics--as the activities of *Academia de la Nueva Raza* could be aptly termed--to the advanced technology and information systems of American society. It does sound like a paradox in terms, and it is this paradoxical nature of Atencio’s closing sentence which creates another heterotopia. Tradition (culture) and innovation (technology) must be combined: the juxtaposing elements of myth and technology are brought together to form a “myth-tech” concept, as Atencio describes it, a real and non-real space of analysis (21).

Since Atencio is not an absolute accommodationist, this means that he is partly an assimilationist. In fact, Atencio seems to hold that assimilation is not an anathema to the ethnic identity in US society, but a conciliatory representation of the self. Atencio’s suggestion is not a separatist break from Chicano organized politics and is in fact supported by a number of contemporary Chicano theorists. An instance where accommodation befriends assimilation can be found in Renato Rosaldo’s paper “Assimilation Revisited” (1985). Rosaldo analyzes the assimilation-versus-accommodation issue, and speaks in defense of assimilation. Moreover, he accords two significations to the term assimilation, the “structural” and the “cultural”:

Cultural assimilation, often going under the name of acculturation, has to do with fluency, both in the linguistic terms and in the broader sense of the skills required to succeed in the majority group’s formal institutions and
informal social situations. People who are acculturated speak properly, know how to behave, and are well educated for the job at hand. Structural assimilation in contrast, refers to equal opportunity, or the capacity of minorities to enter any available position in the dominant society. Such people depending on their talent and desire to apply it could in principle become anything, from president to street sweeper. Thus the term refers both to personal identity (acculturation) and the social availability of opportunities (structural assimilation). (1)

According to Rosaldo, assimilation can become the means to one’s success, while at the same time it can retain a distinct ethnic identity for the community. Rosaldo’s rhetoric embraces the postmodern perspective, which views individuals and, by extension, communities as multi-faceted and elusive. For Rosaldo, communal identities and cultures are not static; they are “not seated by impermeable remembrances, but instead they are always in process, borrowing and lending the porous boundaries, and inventing ever new scenes and combinations of scenes” (10). In the same manner, Atencio practices structural assimilation and seems to embrace the common proverb which says that “times change.” Although he utters the bold claim “assimilation is the path to mainstream American society” (16), he also adds:

If Hispanics and other peoples with a heritage of marginality do not accommodate appropriately and learn to use the technology of the Communications Revolution and have access to information and knowledge, the gap the “haves” and the “have-nots” will grow and we will have been by-passed by the new trend. On the other hand, if Hispanics assimilate indiscriminately, we will sever our cultural roots. (17)
So, it is proper accommodation that Atencio favors or, more aptly, selective assimilation. Atencio urges Chicanos to educate themselves and to catch up with the modern world of communications without, however, forgetting their ethnic background. And this is precisely where he meets Rosaldo’s theory. Assimilation is double-faceted: partly applying to personal identity and partly applying to social status. In the quote above Atencio seems to warn his audience against cultural assimilation, because it entails the loss of the unique Chicano identity, but he supports structural assimilation as a means for Chicanos to lay claim to better living conditions.

**Conclusion**

Miguel Méndez and Tomas Atencio set out to write about one dimension of their identity: their respective work. On the one hand, Méndez’s autobiography reflects his transition from the construction sites in the American Southwest to the institutions of higher education. On the other hand, Atencio discusses his social work in *Academia de la Nueva Raza*. An undiscerning scholar would faultily assume that *From Labor to Letters* and “Resolana: A Chicano Pathway to Knowledge” express individual perceptions of the self related to labor issues. Nevertheless, the major breakthrough of these two texts is that they transgress the isolation of the individual mind in a given work environment. Apart from documenting personal reactions to reality, Méndez and Atencio underscore Chicano consciousness as the driving force in academic work. In a way Méndez and Atencio have shifted the focus from the almighty, enterprising and resourceful mind\(^\text{15}\) to the socio-cultural facet of identity. For both scholars, the self is not only personal, but communal as well. Inspired by their own active emplacement in the Chicano community, Méndez and Atencio conclude that the outcome of their academic endeavor is not a private matter, but a public affair. Writing literature and doing social research take place at the interstices of the philosophical and the mundane. The underlying doctrine in both texts is that the personal is
not devoid of the public and *vice versa*, because the one sustains the other. In the same context, they position academic work within the broader Chicano struggle for self-affirmation. For Miguel Méndez and Tomas Atencio, the idea of the self (either conceived in academia or in the working classes) is deeply rooted in the ethnic identity it bears.
Notes

1 For the Augustinian paradigm of autobiography, see Lyotard, *Confessions*.

2 Obviously, Padilla has been influenced by the Bakhtinean concept of the “chronotope,” which foregrounds experience within specific temporal and spatial dimensions. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, an act of agency always-already assimilates to real historical time and space. See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 84.

3 The quotes included in this paper are extracted from David William Foster’s translation (1997) of Méndez’s Spanish edition *Entra letras y ladrillos* (1996). Méndez has been faithful to the use of Spanish throughout his writing career and it is of interest that the title of his autobiography could be translated as “Entering Letters (Academia) Through Labor.” The Spanish title to the book is more informative to the major assumptions this chapter undertakes to support, namely that Méndez enters the hall of literary fame via his labor experience.

4 Michel Foucault considers the concepts of “objectification” and “subjectification” central in the process of acquiring knowledge (*connaissance*). For Foucault “objectification and subjectification are not independent of each other. From their mutual development and their interconnection, what could be called the ‘games of truth’ come into being--that is, not the discovery of true things but the rules according to which what a subject can say about certain things depends on the question of true and false” (“Foucault” 460). Foucault problematizes the dogmatized authentic or truthful narrative. In his view, individual or collective perceptions of the world and of the self are the outcome of a complex negotiation between the process of narrating one’s identity and at the same time being narrated, defining and being defined. It is also interesting that Foucault elaborates on the notions of “objectification” and “subjectification” in an essay entitled “Foucault.” However, Foucault
concealed his role as both the object and the subject of his paper by writing under the pseudonym “Maurice Florence.”

5 For more on the Horatian motto “from rags to riches” see Tebbel, Rags to Riches.

6 By “utopian” I mean idealized. The utopian self cannot be realized, because a utopia is a non-place ad hoc. Utopia is quite different from heterotopia. The former is a fantasy whereas the latter is the creation of a real-and-mythic experience or topos, as discussed in the second section of this chapter.

7 Postmodern theories of the decentered self sustain the largest part of this chapter. However, for the purposes of economy I have refrained from any detailed reference to the philosophical literature on the issue of identity-cognizance. For a well-rounded discussion of self-identity in the present postmodern era, see Shotter, Texts.

8 The prefix “meta” is a loan from Greek, which means “after” or “beyond.” In literary criticism, it is used in compound words to signify reproduction or self-reflection. For instance, the word “metanarrative” refers to the discussion of one’s own field of study or experience.

9 Foucault was intrigued by the concepts of madness and dreaming, and he extensively discussed their similarities. In fact, by bringing madness (especially the multiple personality case) so close to dreaming, Foucault successfully demystified mental illness. See Foucault, “My Body, This Paper, This Fire” and “Madness and Society.”

10 A linguistic approach to the word “heterotopia” is most enlightening. Heterotopia is a compound word, consisting of two borrowings from Greek, “hetero” and “topos.” “Topos” means place, whereas “hetero” means different or other. Let me also refer to the Greek word “etairos,” which signifies partner. From this brief semiotic discussion of the word “heterotopia,” where I have attempted to break it down into its constituent parts, one understands that the concept of a heterotopia signifies a displacement or in Foucault’s jargon
the “emplacement” of diverse elements in a single idea or space. A heterotopia is in fact a combination of diversity and partnership: contradictory or distinct realities become constituent elements of a new experience. For a fuller understanding of heterotopia, see Foucault’s discussion of the cemetery and the mirror in “Different Spaces.”

11 I use the linking phrase “prior to” and not “along with” because I strongly believe that the concept of identity is bequeathed unto a people by their kinship and social environment. It is my premise that no one is born into the world as a *tabula rasa*.

12 The preconscious is that portion of the mind which exists prior to consciousness. It comprises all the cultural data which shape identity-formation. See Dixon, *Preconscious*.

13 The term “imagined communities” is a loan from Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983). Anderson’s premise is that communality, and especially nationalism, can be brought about by the circulation of newspapers, magazines and of course by the sight of the flag. A parallelism with Anderson’s imagined communities is drawn here because Atencio also supports the publication of material in order to maintain Chicano communal identity.

14 Foucault does not treat heterotopias as a spatialized concept *per se*, but opens up his theory to a temporal dimension. Thus, one of the major principles in a heterotopia is the transgression of time. According to Foucault, “[h]eterotopias are connected to temporal discontinuities (*d’écoupages du temps*); that is, they open onto what might be called for the sake of symmetry, heterochronias. The heterotopia begins to function fully when men are in a kind of absolute break with their traditional time” (“Different Spaces” 182).

15 My argument refers to Descartes’s “thinking subject” and the all-too-familiar logo *cogito ergo sum*. Descartes held that the “I” is a thinking thing (*res cogitans*) and that the mind is completely distinct from the body. Ethnic literature and cultural studies cannot follow Descartes’s syllogism simply because the thinking process is transplaced from the conscious
mind to preconscious cultural reserves, as Atencio points out. Furthermore, the body (i.e. matter) is a corporeal part of thinking. Méndez, for instance, approaches his self-formation in relation to both bodily experiences and mental processes: For more on Descartes’s identity-concerned philosophy, see Descartes, Philosophical Writings.
Chapter Five

Literary Poetics and the Politics of Collectivization in
Tomás Rivera’s \( \ldots y \text{ no se lo trago la tierra } \)
/\ldots \text{And the Earth Did not Devour Him}\

Introduction: Towards an Identification of Tomás Rivera’s Work

Tomás Rivera (1935-1984) is probably the best known Chicano novelist,\(^1\) whose work was the first to exceed the confines of the Mexican-American community and to receive wide critical acclaim in US academia. Born into a family of farm workers and raised in Texas, Rivera’s early experiences are inextricably related to the labor migration of campesinos. Thus, the Southwest is the primary locale of his works of fiction, and the hardships of Chicano farm laborers provide his recurrent subject-matter. Nevertheless, despite the homogeneity in Rivera’s choice of characters and the space and time of their action, there is a pervasive complexity in the thematic concerns in the bulk of his literary work, which has been generally construed as the outcome of “an antithesis of individualism and the affirmation of the collective self” (Sommers 105). According to Julio A. Martínez and Francisco A. Lomeli:

Rivera’s works are structured around a binary thematic development. In the first instance, his stories deal with a rite of passage on an individual level from a state of innocent childhood to one of personal and adult awareness. At a different level, there is a passage from a complete lack of knowledge and awareness on a social level to one of socioeconomic consciousness and a desire to rid oneself of the harsh reality of the farm workers’ condition. These works offer a dynamic presentation of the protagonist who acts as the center
of the action and proposes to aid his people to reach a new level of consciousness. He offers change from a deeply rooted tradition of obedience and from set laws in religion, the family, and the powerful [...] while in search of a renewed awareness. (Martínez and Lomeli 344)

From Martínez and Lomeli’s perspective, Rivera seems to relate the individual mind with a deep desire for collective identification, but not in the rigid politicization invested in the latter term, where one makes conscious decisions of aligning with a specific peripheral group against the hegemony. Instead, Rivera’s sense of identity expresses a more philosophical insight, where the individual negotiates the self through his/her contemplation of collective history and experience. And this contemplation can be interpreted as a quest for the reconceptualization of the self against the background of familiar traditions and enforced stereotypes.

Rivera’s fiction has been discussed as a concealed form of autobiography, and his protagonists are believed to represent their writer’s “alter ego” (Grajeda 113). Indeed, these characters’ search for a “renewed awareness” reflects Rivera’s own rite of passage from social subordination and intellectual ignorance to an empowered position enabling the identification of the self (Martínez and Lomeli 344). The autobiographic element of Rivera’s work is also reflected in his involvement in social struggles, and in his insistence on the education of Chicanos. Rivera was supportive of the idea that Chicanos should educate themselves so that they could delve into everyday life efficiently and effectively. As the son of poor migrant farm workers, Rivera used his own life-story and experience as a paradigm of success. Thus, he was often held to be the token Chicano who attained the power to define the self through education. Having strived to attain his B.S., M.Ed. and Ph.D. degrees, Rivera’s teaching career from public schools to Junior Colleges and Universities was always marked by the effort to encourage his Chicano students to undertake a profound search of the
self. Thus, apart from his contribution to the Chicano literary tradition, Rivera was also one of the founders of the National Council of Chicanos in Higher Education and instrumental in the formation of the Tomás Rivera Institute for Public Policy on Chicanos in Higher Education. Both in his artistic and academic roles, Rivera sought to convince Chicanos of the necessity to pursue knowledge in order to be intellectually armored against the all-pervasive Anglo society. Seen in this light, his literary and academic work, as well as his contribution to society, constitutes an “antagonistic voice” to the “hegemonic discourse” and a reflection of his own struggle to escape the dominant society’s “strategies of confinement” (Dowling 131).\(^2\) This argument suggests an essentially Marxist insight into Rivera’s work in its entirety. Indeed, the economic and socio-political specifications in his writings often highlight the dangers of “the sheer pervasiveness [and] the ubiquitous presence” of the hegemony’s power to subordinate Chicanos (Hampton 5). In line with Rivera’s political drive, his protagonists’ pilgrimages to self-knowledge have formulated the role of the intellectual as a resistance to domination and oppression. According to Christopher Hampton, an intellectual who is involved in counter-hegemonic affairs

> has a particularly important part to play, not only in defining and clarifying the issues involved but also in resisting and exposing the ruthless forces of ideological manipulation that are at work upon us all. For the trivializing and divisive welter of signs and signifiers these forces are continually generating as the agents of commodity system they function in terms of threatening to reduce everything indiscriminately to the [...] demands the system itself has set up. (5)\(^3\)

Rivera certainly fulfilled the role sketched out by Hampton. First, by exposing the oppressive “welter of signs and signifiers” engulfing Chicanos, he revealed to the Chicano community the multiple injustices imposed upon them. Second, he countered established “strategies of
containment,” and third he inaugurated the new era of a socio-politically engaged Chicano literary tradition. Thus, along with the thematic binarisms of his literary work, Rivera exhibits two political manifestations or signs: first there is Anglo-American society’s systematized subordination of Chicano farm workers, and second there is Rivera’s challenge to stereotypes and ideological manipulations. In other words, Rivera’s search for identity-cognition is a revolutionary process to spiritual emancipation. And in this context his writings merge the poetics of literature and the politics of collective struggle in an intriguing manner. In its totality, Rivera’s work “invents [Chicanismo’s] liberty and plots out a space of movement” (Giard ix).

Rivera was also fundamental to the emergence of the tradition of Chicano literary criticism. With the essay “Chicano Literature: Fiesta of the Living” (1979), Rivera identified Mexican-American literature as a “total experience [...], like that of the complete and splendid act of sexual union, of birth, of death, of the joy one has in loving mankind, because of the feelings involved--compassion and brotherhood” (19). This approach to literature shows a profound dedication to el pueblo, and “a bond that comes from a feeling of uniqueness, from a common set of beliefs, from a sense of destiny” (“Fiesta” 21). In contrast to the highly specialized analytical mode of literary study where art is celebrated for art’s sake, Rivera identifies individual literary production as a communal prodigy. His claim is that each novel, short story or poem by a Chicano/a represents the ethnic group’s literary canon as long as it expresses the living culture of the community, and it embodies “a ritual from which to derive and maintain a sense of humanity” (“Fiesta” 22). Furthermore, if the Chicano/a writer seeks to embrace humanity or communal life, then his/her undertaking implies the element of multiplicity. For Rivera, humankind cannot be homogenized, otherwise it would form a super-strategy of containment. Instead, his vision of Chicano community consists of numerous individual identities, which attempt to construct a collective self. In “Into the
Labyrinth: The Chicano in Literature” (1971), Rivera accentuates this quality of an embedded multiplicity of ideas or doctrines underlying the Chicano literary text:

> Literature and fiction provide tension. Literature represents man’s life; it also reflects his inner search and his outward search. It is in a sense an intricate maze to provide either exteriorization or internalization of the human involvement and evolvement. [...] And the search can only exist if there is an impulse into the labyrinth of the human totality of conditions. Thus, the search and labyrinth complement each other to bring forth a vicarious sensibility to the perceiver. (18)

According to Rivera, the literary text is “an intricate maze” or “a labyrinth,” where the author or the reader can follow an infinite number of routes in his search for meaning. Rivera conceives of the literary text as an enterprise for the Chicano “who wishes to create a labyrinth, who wishes to invent himself in the labyrinth [...] where he can vicariously live his total human condition” (“Labyrinth” 19). In other words, Rivera locates Mexican-American literature in the borderline between “immediate and millenary” rituals (Conley 137). Moreover, he claims that Chicano literature molds human experience, and *vice versa*, Chicano experience searches for its unique idiom in the world of literature: “We find Chicano literature and the Chicanos in fiction as simply life in search of form” (“Labyrinth” 19). Indeed, it is this unique interplay between Chicano literature and the search for self-cognizance that has given shape to the subsequent interpretation and appreciation of Rivera’s *y no se lo trago la tierra / And the Earth Did not Devour Him*. The primary intention of this chapter is to explore the tension Rivera has created in his search for self-understanding and in his “pilgrimage” to collective identification as realised in the literary inventions of *la tierra*’s narrative and temporal structures.
Individual Identity and the Pilgrimage to Collective Consciousness:

Theme and Narrative Structure

No one can deny the impact of Tomás Rivera’s award winning la tierra in the formation of the relatively recent Chicano literary canon. Published in 1971 as the winner of the 1970 Quinto Sol prize, la tierra gave impetus and recognition to the aesthetic and ethical concerns of Chicano writing, constituted a major break from the monolithic Chicano social protest literature of the 1960s, and is probably the text written by a Mexican-American that most widely evokes critical response. In an attempt to create a new form of fiction which departs from the conventional novel structure, Rivera compiled fourteen vignettes with their accompanying thirteen anecdotes, framed by the central character of a boy-protagonist who appears in the first short narrative “The Lost Year” and in the final one “Under the House.”

Haunted by his inability to comprehend life in the labyrinth of time, the boy-protagonist finds refuge underneath a house. Keeping an embryonic posture, where la tierra (the soil) becomes the fons et origo, the boy-protagonist pursues a symbolic journey to self-knowledge, while the vignettes and anecdotes of la tierra become his frequent stops in the collective life of Chicanismo. These stops reflect the degradation of the subordinated Mexican-American across the US: el pueblo’s experience in the fields, in the barrios or on the road in search of work. But they also portray a peculiar cultural identity for Chicanismo, and subtly suggest political activism, which springs out of the need to comprehend the depth of one’s personal and collective identity. Thus, although the boy-protagonist’s isolation under the house has been inaccurately construed as a separatist act from the community’s material reality, this chapter maintains that the boy’s confinement constitutes a political decision to a short-term detachment from organized social relations in order for him to re-emerge as the carrier of collective knowledge. Concurrently, la tierra becomes a struggle to selfhood and a landmark text for the emergent Chicano “literature of liberation” (Grajeda 113).
In “The Lost Year” the boy-protagonist is in a confused state of mind. He tries to “remember and just about [when] he thought everything was clearing up some, he would be at a loss for words” (111). This numb feeling is interpreted as a hallucinatory state where the boy’s conscious and subconscious intelligences fuse. True enough, the boy-protagonist cannot tell whether what he experiences at this point is factual or just an incident in a dream-world. It is “almost always [like] a dream in which he would suddenly awaken and then realize that he was really asleep. Then he wouldn’t know whether what he was thinking had happened or not” (111). In this semi-rational state, he hears voices calling him “by his name but when he turned his head to see who was calling, he would make a complete turn, and there he would end up in the same place” (111). The boy undergoes a bizarre process towards a discovery of an existential nature, but every start in this direction points to himself. In fact, everything happens in his own mind, and even the calling of his name does not come from outside. In this context, all the stories and vignettes are nothing more than an inner performance with the introductory frame-piece setting the inward mood of the book.

la tierra provides a faithful insight into the everyday life of Mexican-Americans. The text comprises realistic snapshots drafted by the boy-protagonist, who also serves as a thematic binding agent. Through this character, Rivera provides la tierra with cohesiveness: the little child frames the novel and ties the in-between individual and seemingly unrelated stories into a narrative whole of Chicano la vida. Even though we cannot be certain whether the boy appears in the book outside the introductory and concluding stories, we can safely claim that whatever the numerous characters--children in their majority--experience in the body of the novel, he experiences this as well. The young child embodies the collective consciousness of Mexican-Americans and constructs a “we-identity [...] through some sort of psychological or conceptual coming together of individuals, each of whom is pre-equipped with a personal identity” (Mennell 176). In the solitude of his mind, the boy-protagonist re-
enacts familiar tragedies, whether personally experienced, witnessed or heard via oral tradition and within the realms of his ethnic community. The swift succession of vignettes and the accelerating tension created by the intervening anecdotes are two of Rivera’s ingenious techniques which give close-ups into the Chicanos’ plight. More explicitly, the rapid display of the misfortunes of life creates a Brechtian shockwave, leaving the readers coolly reflective and critical of the story-line. The alienation effect brought about by the loosely related episodes and the interspersed enigmatic anecdotes are warnings against the mere identification with the story, and a subtle summoning to action. Rivera seems to underline that what is repeatedly experienced can indeed become routine, no matter how tragic it initially appears. Thus, he assumes the political role of the intellectual who dispels the community’s illusions in order “to uncover the causal complex in society--to unmask the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the rulers” (Brecht 424). His intention in la tierra is to sow the seed of political awareness, to “unmask” the causes of Chicano subordination, and to promote a sense of collective (re)action among his people.

In the concluding frame-piece “Under the House,” the boy-protagonist rises from his quasi-trance of asceticism beneath the house. The cumulative effect of la tierra culminates in a regenerative and optimistic realization as the boy “had discovered something. To discover and to rediscover and to synthesize. To relate this entity with that entity, and that entity with still another, and finally relating everything with everything else. That was what he had to do, that was all. And he became even happier” (177). Having paved the way for the modern Chicano intellectual, the boy achieves the sublime knowledge he has sought and is now prepared to share it with the world. The boy has attained self-identification and has resumed the power to decode life collectively. This tentative progress to self-awareness is another metaphor of the incubating collective Chicano self. But the state of awareness the boy achieves can grow further or rather it can multiply and attain universal transcendence. Like
the boy-protagonist, who creeps out of the darkness under the house, climbs a tree and waves at someone perched on a palm tree on the horizon, Mexican-Americans can also forge their ethnic solidarity and a unique mode of communication. It is of no importance whether the boy-protagonist waves to himself in a self-reflexive “projection forward in time” or whether he symbolically discovers the first like-minded person in a long chain (J. Rodríguez 130). The significance lies in the fact that the boy-protagonist’s discovery can stretch across time and space. The message is that wherever a mexicano is or whatever difficulty he encounters, there is always the awareness that he belongs to a self-identifiable group. Similarly, the triumphant identity-awareness the boy-hero attains in the last vignette signals an optimism in Rivera’s hope that eventually all Mexican-Americans will reach self-cognizance upon reading the final page of la tierra.

The boy-protagonist resorts to his own mental potential in order to (re)discover the collective Mexican-American experience. Thus, he is depicted as a loner, a sensitive individual in search of a liberated selfhood. Upon hiding under the house in order to evoke memories from a collective past or present, the boy sets himself apart from the community to resolve the perplexities of his inner world. These thoughts acquire the significance of “screen memories,” analogous to “the memories a nation preserves in its store of legends and myths” (Mennell 192). In this light, the boy-protagonist recollects the past in order to acquire the role of his community’s enlightened consciousness. The use of the word “enlightened” implies that the boy seeks a deep and true understanding of life, or the wisdom which consists of being free of false beliefs. Thus, he approaches Chicano life in its totality, and searches for friends and foes in an all-inclusive manner, within and outside the Mexican-American community. Resembling the roles of both participants in a psychoanalytic session, the boy-protagonist refrains from his collective existence only to study it at a distance. His isolation under the house transcodes into a self-reflexive attempt to read the whole (Chicano life) via
the particular (boy-protagonist). And in this context, Rivera underscores his personal realization that individual identity and collective identity are interdependent concepts.

If the boy-protagonist functions as a “rememberer,” who undertakes the task of screening his community’s memories, then he assumes multiple roles (Grajeda 114). Accordingly, Rivera conceptualizes the boy as a semiotic identity, whose thoughts derive from “the triadic form of sign-object-interpretant” (Wiley 143). In other words, the boy undergoes an eternal process of decoding and encoding. On the one hand, he acquires the roles of the signifier and the interpretant since he decodes messages from the world. On the other hand, he functions as a sign: he becomes the lucid object of multiple interpretations and all the individual stories he hosts in his mind are part of his identity-complex. As a semiotic self, the boy-protagonist surveys la raza’s experience in its totality and ventures upon the task of interpreting it. At the same time though, he subconsciously becomes the object of his observations. Every discovery he makes in his mental pilgrimage ends in self-awareness and in the formation of a well-rounded individual personality. His complexity then lies in being a three-dimensional character: he is the sign, the object and the interpretant of la tierra’s problematics.

Apart from the formation of a collective self, la tierra deals with a variety of individual identities, separately projected in twelve of the text’s short narratives except for “The Lost Year” and “Under the House.” Since the boy-protagonist groups together “individuals sharing similar or same historical experiences [...] below or marginally outside the center,” one wonders how these individual identities are formed (Lemert 104). Rivera warns his Mexican-American readers that their long experience of degradation and injustice stifles any “existential search,” so necessary if they wish to “tackle problems of collective action” (Mennell 176). The implication is that the average Chicano is spiritually numb because he is caught in the mundane day-to-day struggle for survival. However, Rivera
acknowledges that Chicanos identify with their community, mainly on a socio-cultural subconscious trajectory. In this context, Rivera’s perception of individual identity-formation is a prodigy of a collective self or, to use an apt metaphor to the setting of *la tierra*, the collective identity is “the social habitus [and] forms the soil in which grow the personal characteristics through which an individual differs from other members of his society” (Mennell 179). Communality is the starting point and *la tierra*’s individual identities spring from a collective experience; or, put differently, collective identity spurs numerous individual identities. The corollary is that Rivera does not pursue an essentialized, static or rigid self-perception. His concept of identity-formation is liberal in its essence since it embraces the component of individual personal qualities. In fact, Rivera conveys the need to retain one’s individuality through the boy-protagonist’s concluding words: “[I]t’s not bad [under the house]. I could come here everyday. [...] No one to bother me. I can think in peace” (201). *la tierra* certainly searches for the common elements in the Mexican-American socio-cultural experience, but it also allows ample space for the individual to develop solitarily.

The cathartic last vignette has a therapeutic effect and creates a sense of release from tension. But this state of calmness at the denouement of “Under the House” presupposes a rising action and a climax. As for the rising action, it is realized in the narrative succession of the stories and vignettes between the introductory frame-piece “The Lost Year” and the climatic moment in the last but one short narrative “When We Arrive.” Each of these stories or vignettes functions as a thematic projection. Put differently, each story focuses on a particular theme, which also appears peripherally in other stories or vignettes. Rivera’s technique is to recycle the messages to be transmitted, thus creating an aura of continuity as if *el pueblo*’s experiences form a chain, while the objective is to expose the enemies and obstructive forces which prevent Mexican-American community’s intellectual emancipation. The climatic moment is easily recognized in the vignette “When We Arrive,” where the boy-
protagonist synthesizes individual accounts of migrant campesinos into a collective experience. The thoughts of the various Chicano farm worker characters in a broken-down van form the chorus in the mind of the boy-protagonist, who transforms into an “intellectual hero,” one who grasps the “power of thought. [...] [His thoughts] generate further thoughts, which in turn lead to more thoughts etc.” (J. Rodríguez 136). Thinking per se is power, and the boy-protagonist resolves problems of selfhood with a Nietzschean will-to-power. However, the intellectual boy-hero moves a step further, as he picks up the pieces of the scattered life stories in “When We Arrive” and reassembles them into a communal jigsaw. Quite similar to the poststructuralist bricoleur, the boy-protagonist merges the short monologues into a coherent whole. In its essence, “When We Arrive” attacks isolation and celebrates communication and collectivization. And the boy-protagonist is a liberal humanist who entrusts the realization of his vision for communality to the power of the mind.

The theme of collectivization is further enhanced by the wandering poet Bartolo. Before the last vignette “Under the House,” Bartolo appears in an anecdote selling poems to mexicanos who have returned from up north. As a vate (bard) he is very popular “because the names of the people of the town appeared in his poems” (199). Bartolo is a street-corner philosopher. Not only does he recite the forgotten history of Mexican farm workers, but he also preaches the need to communicate the words of el pueblo’s social understanding, “to read the poems out loud because the spoken word is the seed of love in darkness” (emphasis added) (199). In this instance “darkness” is a symbolic state of loneliness or of a complete lack of communication, whereas the “spoken word” is the only panacea for el pueblo’s misery. Bartolo serves a double intellectual function: first, he represents the long-standing Mexican oral tradition, where villancios (poetic compositions of a religious nature) and corridos (narrative ballads) provide an emotional impetus, as well as a folkloric identity to the Mexican-American community; second, Bartolo symbolizes the need to use these popular
poetic forms politically, since reciting becomes a feast for the downtrodden Chicanos and simultaneously a call for collective action.\textsuperscript{12}

Through the character of Bartolo, Rivera accords oral tradition a significant role in the formation of the community’s cultural identity. However, Rivera suggests that rigid cultural practices can intimidate people or halt the wished-for liberal definition of the self. A recurrent theme of \textit{la tierra} is that the cultural past can retard one’s effort to exceed his potential, and thus culture often becomes another master-narrative or a strategy of containment, which has to be demystified for the people’s emancipation. In the story “A Silvery Night,” Rivera describes a boy’s determination to summon the devil. His curiosity makes him bold enough to step into darkness and head for the center of a knoll. Nature echoes the hero’s yearning for a revelation, since “everything was clear and it even smelled like day” (139). The story-line is set at midnight, which is symbolic of the twilight-zone, when night changes into day, or a calendar day draws to its end and the future commences. Likewise, the boy is just about to expel an old, conditioned self and attain a renewed awareness. All alone on the top of the knoll, he curses the devil but nothing happens. The discovery he makes of the devil’s non-existence acquires diachronic significance: “There \textit{was} no devil [...] No, there’s no devil. \textit{There isn’t}” (emphasis added) (141). The boy has created a culture without the intimidating fear of the devil, and he extends this cultural knowledge to the past, the present and the future. The boy’s transition from Simple Past to Simple Present is only symbolic of a cultural discovery which breaks temporal barriers and reaches for the millenary. Then, feeling “disillusioned and a little brave,” the boy heads back to the house (141). The hero’s disillusionment prepares us for another revelation. Only on the way home does he realize that the sole presence in the woods is his own “voice.” And this is the greatest discovery he makes. In other words, he now demystifies the devil as a superstitious anathema, and what prevails is his realization that the “self” is the only point of reference or center of existence.
This powerful, rational self uproots a cultural symbol with its concomitant fears. Thus, the narrating voice becomes pathetically fallacious and the boy’s self-confidence is so radiant that it is reflected in the natural surroundings. Everything now seems peaceful and calm. At the conclusion of the story, the little boy falls asleep “gazing at the moon as it jumped through the clouds and the trees, as if it were extremely content about something” (142). The hovering presence of demons or divine spirits is dissolved, while only nature and the boy’s awareness are present after the revelation.

Apart from the demystification of myths and superstitious rituals, a recurrent theme in la tierra is the reconsideration of mexicano traditional religious practices, most strongly elaborated in the story “... And the Earth Did Not Devour Him.” In this vignette, a boy-hero witnesses the deprivation of his family. First, his aunt dies of tuberculosis, his uncle spits blood and their children are scattered among the relatives. Then the hero’s father suffers sunstroke while working in the fields. In all this suffering, the hero feels a rush of exasperation and anger, but does not know whom to blame. Only when his parents clamour “for God’s mercy” does the boy realize that “God doesn’t care about us” (146). In a state of frustration, the child questions the very existence of a superior benevolent being: “Tell me, Mother, why? Why us, buried in the earth like animals with no hope for anything? You know the only hope we have is coming out here every year. And like you yourself say, only death brings rest” (147). He even reviles his mother for putting her trust in God and cherishing hallucinations such as “the poor go to heaven” (147). The next day the boy-hero “began the day’s labor” along with his brothers and sisters (148). After a while, his little brother, who is only nine years old, suffers sunstroke. In his helplessness, the boy-hero asks himself “why,” and this question keeps reverberating in his mind (149). Unable to find an answer, he becomes furious and curses God. The hero commits the ultimate sin for the pious, religious Mexican-American community. Having been the subject of cultural conditioning for years,
he instantly feels that “the earth [opens] up to devour him” (149). However, he realizes that the ground stays solid, his vent becomes self-confidence and he “feels at peace as never before” (150). The boy-hero of “... And the Earth Did not Devour Him” is the eldest son of a family of migrant farm workers, and on a symbolic paradigm he occupies the middle ground between the broken-down, older generation and the younger one of confident Chicanos. In other words, the hero is a philosophical pioneer. He opens up the cognitive frontiers for a better future, and the deconstruction of the God-figure is the boy’s rebellion against ignorance and passivity. Just like the boy-protagonist in “Under the House,” this boy considers revealing the non-existence of God to his mother. He hesitates though and decides “to keep it a secret for a while” (150). The boy-hero in this story is another character in la tierra who resorts to philosophical solitude. Yet, Rivera’s optimistic tone of voice implies that it is only a matter of time until the boy-hero shares his revelations with the members of his community. By renouncing the godly false emblem of benevolence and hope, the hero makes the first step into a new phase of cognition. The boy’s insight is the fertile ground on which a new perception of life will grow and spread within the Chicano community.

It is not only religiosity and superstitions that torment Rivera’s young heroes. la tierra’s children are solitary characters because of their low self-esteem amidst the dominant socio-cultural forces. The hero in “It’s That It Hurts” undergoes this experience, while his parents encourage his schooling only to place him at the heart of Anglo racism. But the school environment scars the boy with a series of traumas: when he arrives at the building, a nurse asks him to undress and then “examine[s] his behind [...] and head” leaving the boy ashamed, and in class he is ostracized “when they put [him] in the corner apart from everyone” (124). Illiteracy becomes the boy’s worst nightmare since the whole class laughs at his inability to read. And when he stands up for himself and defends his dignity against an Anglo schoolboy’s racist remarks and aggressiveness, he is expelled from school. The whole
story is a retrospective account of the young hero’s recent experiences at school. It is the frantic soliloquy of a distressed child who wants to organise his thoughts and resolve the tensions in his mind. Unfortunately, the boy gets entangled in feelings of guilt towards his parents. They are the ones who cherish the dream that the hero will become a telephone operator and they even “pray God helps him finish school” for the fulfilment of their dream. The irony is that the dual illusion of a job as a telephone operator and the escape from the fields originate in Hollywood movies, the ultimate industry of image-fabrication. The fictional world on the screen becomes the source of hope and optimism for this handful of wretched Chicanos in “It’s That It Hurts.” In other words, the boy was encouraged to pursue an education for the wrong reasons. All these thoughts fluctuate in his mind until half-way home he halts at a cemetery, enchanted by the place’s tranquility. The hero is driven to solitude as he gradually distances himself from the rest of his family’s expectations. All alone in the cemetery, he ponders over how his family will react to the news of his expulsion from school. Fear overcomes the boy at the thought of being sent to reform school. He even considers lying to his parents and keeping everything a secret. The lie resonates in his mind: “Maybe they didn’t expel me. Sure they did’ (sic) (125). This soliloquy alludes to a dialogue between the boy’s conscious mind and subconscious desires, which places his experience in a dream world. Thus, the young hero becomes engaged in the dialectics of reality versus illusion, self-assertion versus self-depreciation. Nevertheless, he gradually realizes that it is his parents’ dream he was fulfilling while he hated reading to his padrino and he could not tolerate submissiveness. The last catch-phrase of the story “No, yeah” (128) signifies the hero’s denial of the lies, not just the ones spoken by himself, but also the ones imposed on him by a delusory cultural environment. Put differently, it is “no” to a fallible past, and “yeah” to a rational perception of the self for the future.
Rivera stresses the need for rational thinking and “psychological control over the world [and] intellectual emancipation” if el pueblo is to attain a liberated self (“Labyrinth” 25). Moreover, he highlights the written word as the source of power for the “liberated self” of the present and especially for the future generations. Rivera seems to make the suggestion that a league of rational Chicano intellectuals can relieve the present discontent of Chicanos. This does not single out Rivera as a privileged person who wants to enthrone himself as the idol of success for the unfortunate Chicanos. However, the fact remains that Rivera’s education was his means to self-knowledge and academic recognition. Moreover, Rivera encourages his Mexican-American readers to draw inspiration from their own unique experiences. Let us consider the fact that Rivera records the sufferings of his own people, and that la tierra becomes one of the first best selling narratives in the US, which deals with the Mexican-American farm worker’s ordeal. Obviously, Rivera records the Mexican-American real life experience, adding, however, to these people’s social concerns a sophisticated literary idiom. Thus, la tierra is a reflection of its own author’s life-story, and the boy-protagonist is Rivera’s reflection on the printed page. Just as the boy-protagonist hides under a house and discovers a liberating truth, so did Rivera isolate himself in academia in order to develop his liberating vision for Chicanismo. In this context, the boy’s “lost year” under the house and Rivera’s “lost time” in his studious seclusion are the same. But nothing is really lost. As la tierra concludes, when the boy-protagonist comes out “he realized that in reality he hadn’t lost anything. He had made a discovery” (206). More explicitly, he discovers the power of the mind and Rivera, in turn, resumes the power to conceive the literary word for la raza.

The process to self-identification implies a search into the labyrinth of time and selfhood with a political purpose in mind. After considering this chapter’s initial premise that la tierra is a “literature of liberation,” the only way to grasp the political import and mastery
of this text is to accept the assumption that Rivera aims at a specific “searching” audience. Indeed, Rivera advances subtle politics of identity, and the question that immediately arises is: Who are the searchers Rivera is addressing and what do they search for? As for the first part of the question, Rivera provides a straightforward answer:

The spiritual strength, the concept of justice so important for the American continents [is] within those migrants. [...] They may be economically deprived, politically deprived, socially deprived, but they keep moving, never staying in one place to suffer or be subdued, but always searching for work; that’s why [...] migrant workers still have that role: to be searchers. (“Remembering” 70)

Moreover, la tierra’s most resonant specification of his readership target group is the choice of language. The use of Spanish in the original composition of la tierra is Rivera’s salient statement in addressing the Spanish-speaking peoples of the Americas. Rivera limits his audience even further by depicting the experiences of the Mexican-American farm worker in the US Southwest. However, the second part of the question is more complicated: What do Mexican-Americans search for? At the outset of an attempt to answer this question, it is crucial to consider Rivera’s searchers as carriers of symbolic connotations. This implies that the migrants’ wish for better living conditions is of secondary importance to Rivera’s conceptualization of identity-politics. Instead, greater importance is attached to the Chicano quest for a better self-image within their community, but also in their broader social context.

Rivera’s perspective of a quest for identity is closely linked to the arrival at the mythical land of Aztlan, which is in a symbolic sense the Garden of Eden for Chicano culture. And since every myth is open to interpretations of various sorts, in Rivera’s case Aztlan translates into a purely psychological state of being. In other words, he interprets Aztlan as the serene state of self-identification and self-appreciation. Moreover, Rivera suggests that only through a
meticulous search into their quotidian experience can Mexican-Americans revise their past, regain their self-confidence and envisage a better future. This is exactly the identity-politics principle on which Rivera builds his novel: through numerous individual identities, one can synthesize the collective Chicano self. Indeed, Rivera proceeds similarly to the boy-protagonist who at the end “felt happy because [...] he realized that in reality [he] made a discovery. To discover and rediscover and piece things together. This to this, that to that, all with all” (206).

To conclude this first section, it must be noted that children are Rivera’s archetypal figures of resistance who embody a dual symbolic potential. First, they are most likely to perpetuate a socio-cultural legacy, and second, they are the ones who can rebel against “the often invisible social and economic forces that govern their lives, the institutions, and the physical environment in which they live” (Grajeda 118). Children experience the tension created “between the opposing values of resignation and rebellion” (Grajeda 119). In short, children can grow up to be either passive victims or active reformers. Rivera attaches great importance to childhood because he considers it the most promising phase in a person’s life cycle. Youth has the advantage of not being burdened with years of deprivation or cultural enforcement. Thus, after witnessing the injustices of life, the children in la tierra can assume the power to react “with pride and arrogance, and perhaps even insolence” (Villarreal 167). This handful of children undertakes to demystify all the futile, false and repressive myths of their culture. And their determination to recover a lost selfhood turns them into ruthless or even blasphemous repudiators: they question the validity of superstition, myth, religiosity and submissiveness, values that have been revered by their Chicano forebears for a long time. In short, they deconstruct Mexican-American traditions and strive for the establishment of a renewed Chicano selfhood. And upon deconstructing mexicano timidity towards change, they not only unravel the overpowering Anglo hegemony, but more importantly they lay bare the
irrationality of previous Mexican-American generations in having endured deprivation and having embraced the wrong cultural practices for too long.

*El Pueblo and the Mythical Logic of Time*

The concept of time has been widely emphasized as a major structural device of *la tierra*’s story-line. In the essay “Tomás Rivera’s Appropriation of the Chicano Past” (1986) Ralph F. Grajeda maintains that apart from the introductory and concluding stories of the boy’s obvious participation in the *mise en scène*, the in-between stories and anecdotes of *la tierra* represent a communal and social experience, which is, however, an appropriation of the boy-protagonist’s past. Despite appearing unrelated on the surface, the various frame-pieces of *la tierra* are part of a self-reflection or, in different terms, the boy’s semi-conscious flight into his own life. In conjunction with this, there is interplay between the private and the public realms of selfhood, which is acted out on a temporal dimension. Grajeda undertakes to account for this time-matrix, where the life of Chicanos in *la tierra* is enacted, with the claim that the form of the book is cyclical. Though there is no attempt to shape a strict correspondence between specific months and particular stories, the twelve stories in a general sense represent the year that the boy seeks to recapture.

The first story is set in early April; the last anecdote is set in December. This cyclical movement functions effectively to delineate the cyclical and repetitive nature of the migrant farm workers’ lives as they yearly retrace the same roads to the same fields, from Texas and cotton in the winter months to Utah, Minnesota, Iowa, and Michigan in the spring and summer. It is, therefore, appropriate that the first story treats a family working in the Texas fields, the twelfth story a truckful of workers journeying north to the beet fields of Minnesota. (114-5)
Grajeda reduces or perhaps even oversimplifies the structure of the novel into a twelve-month cycle of a calendar’s conventional succession of time. Cyclical time is generally construed as historical time, “alluding to the circular aspect of objective time and also suggesting the recurrence of the same patterns until the cycle is broken” (A. Rodríguez 127). The qualities of objectivity and linearity, however, are expressive of a Western cultural background which perceives of cyclical time as “clock time, true time, chronological time, conceptual time [moving] in a linear form uninterrupted and unaffected by external objects and events” (Garcia 307). In this context, Grajeda deprives la tierra of its revolutionary or liberating character; instead, he attributes to the novel the qualities of a conventional “bildungsroman” that follows the development of the hero in his quest to self-identification (J. Rodríguez 133). If the boy-protagonist is entangled in a solitary quest for identity, then the life stories of those grassroots Chicanos in the frame-pieces of la tierra’s main body acquire rudimentary importance. Grajeda’s response to la tierra detaches the boy from the community, by construing the individual vignettes and anecdotes as mere instruments aiding the boy’s search for identity-cognition. Furthermore, la tierra elaborates on a series of cycles, both major and minor. The most prominent cycle is the boy-protagonist’s identity-evolution in the first and last stories, the less important ones are the individual vignettes in-between, and the minor cycles are the short anecdotes preceding or following the vignettes. These cycles are not totally separate, but they seem to overlap and at times form a fuzzy, spiral, temporal succession instead of a large neat circle.

If the notion of the objective, horizontal cyclical time does not suffice in an insightful description of Rivera’s narrative and temporal succession, we should look into the temporal fuzziness of la tierra, and the concept of abstract time. In the paper “The Concept of Time in Nambé-Year One” (1986), Nasario Garcia relates abstract time to fiction writing. His assumption is that the relegation of the self in an abstract temporal context is a liberating
experience, where the individual mind can make associations between reality and imagination:

Unlike Cyclical Time, Abstract Time is not measurable and is much more complicated; its abstractness emanates from personal and subjective value judgments. Critics and writers have categorized it as psychological time, private time, inner time, or perceptive time. No matter what classification one adopts or invents, Abstract Time is man’s personal clock that measures time according to his perceptions rather than by conventional means. [...] Since memories tend to be somewhat vague in the writer’s mind, regardless of the time that has elapsed between the writing and the actual occurrence of the event, he avails himself of his greatest literary weapon--imagination. Imagination affects memories and the values linked to them. Imaginary embellishment of memories in the abstract world is unavoidable. (308)

Garcia’s “imaginary embellishment” connotes to a free-floating literary text, and a narrating voice which employs poetic license to transcend existing barriers and to construct his own psychological reality. Similarly, an actual occurrence appearing on the printed page with imaginary undertones is a polarity in its essence, fact and fiction through and through.¹³

Although Garcia’s definitions of time are thoroughly enlightening, he has omitted the prerequisite of the “mythical images” underpinning Chicano fiction. According to Luis Leal’s identification of Chicano literature, Mexican-American artists evoke these images in most of their fiction writings because they “give expression to the universal through the regional” (Leal 4). In Leal’s own words:

[T]he creation of a new image is precisely the problem that confronts the Chicano writer: for it is not easy to give universality to the regional or particular if the writer does not go beyond his immediate circumstance. The
Chicano has to create a new synthesis out of history, tradition, and his everyday confrontation with the ever-changing culture in which he lives. But he cannot do so unless he creates mythical images. (4)

Leal describes a cosmic Chicano literature, which surpasses both temporal and spatial borders. The creation of these images, however, is expressive of the individual writer’s need to reconceptualize “the ever-changing culture in which he lives,” and thus appropriate his cultural identity to the socio-political demands of his/her time. The cosmic vision of the writer then is not a utopian or idealistic relegation of the self, but “a synthesis out of history, tradition and the ever-changing” Chicano self-perception.

Drawing upon the above theoretical speculations on the related concepts of time and literary production, the remainder of this section proposes to combine Garcia’s abstract time with Leal’s mythical parameter in the study of Chicano literature in an attempt to draw a parallel between Rivera’s *la tierra* and the Aztec calendar system. In order to understand the Aztec calendar it is essential to know that it fell within a cosmology which created equilibrium of competing divine forces acting on real life experience. These elemental forces performed their shifting powers onto the Aztecs within a cyclical calendar called *tonalpohualli* in Nahuatl, and which translates into “day-count.” *Tonalpohualli* was reproduced every 52 years (an Aztec century), and related the Aztecs on earth with the sacred forces beyond. The day-count system of *tonalpohualli* can be best understood by imagining two wheels one on top of the other as if forming a binary interdependent relationship. One wheel had the numbers one to thirteen written on it and the other wheel the symbols of the Aztec gods. Each daysign was ruled and governed by a god, each *trecena* (a 13-day week period) associated an elemental force with worldly life, and a year completed its cycle after 260 days, when the wheels returned to their initial position.14
The built-in narrative component of la tierra resembles the Aztec sacred calendar of tonalpohualli. First of all, there is the 13-day trecena, which reminds the reader of the 13 anecdotes in la tierra. Deliberately planted in between the frame-stories of “The Lost Year” and “Under the House,” the anecdotes function as short commentaries by the people and for the people. Moreover, the larger vignettes amount to 14 independent stories, a number also symbolic in the Aztec 13-day trecena. If we isolate the first vignette “The Lost Year,” then this story relates to the end of a first trecena period, where the forces of confusion reign over the boy-protagonist. The succeeding 13 vignettes comprise the new trecena of communality, and the end of the 14th vignette, when the boy-protagonist waves to someone on the horizon, foretells the start of a new trecena. More explicitly, instead of one trecena cycle (structured either narratively or temporally) Rivera’s work corresponds to three periods of time: past, present and future. The past is traced in “The Lost Year,” the present comprises the in-between vignettes with their presentation of a mosaic of Chicano characters, and finally the cosmic future about to commence is revealed in the story “Under the House” through the symbolism invested in the stranger waving to the boy-protagonist from the far end of the horizon. This new era of communion with the two characters waving at each other epitomizes Rivera’s vision of the emancipated el pueblo. In this context the anecdotes number 13, in contrast to the 14 vignettes, because symbolically Rivera welcomes his readers to compose the 14th short comment and to plot out another phase of self-cognizance for the Chicano community. Finally, instead of the Aztec gods competing for power over their allocated space on the Aztec calendar-wheel, Rivera uses a plethora of Chicano characters like the migrant farm worker, the barrio-inhabitant, the forlorn child and Bartolo the wandering poet in order to elevate the worldview of these people to a sublime status.
Conclusion

... y no se lo trago la tierra / ... And the Earth Did not Devour Him is a symbolic representation of Chicano real life experience. Although the book describes the ordeals of Chicanismo in the US Southwest, it also exhibits a subtle fusion of multiple temporal dimensions, spatial environments and individual consciousnesses. The most intriguing element of the text is precisely that it can accommodate various interpretations and provide a deeper understanding of the campesino’s or the barrio-dweller’s day-to-day struggle for survival. And although to the untroubled reader la tierra elaborates on how Chicanos have tragically succumbed to the forces of WASP hegemony, at the same time the text draws this handful of unfortunate Chicano characters out of their subordination. The novel’s mastery lies in its depiction of the Mexican-American’s inner explorations and his/her pilgrimage to personal and communal self-awareness. In this context, Rivera’s suggestion for a better future offers a perceptive study of el pueblo’s experience, and the whole narrative becomes an allegory of coming of age. In the fourteen stories and thirteen adjoining anecdotes of la tierra, Rivera develops his vision of maturity for Mexican-American collective identity. In fact, it appears that the book elaborates on the resurrection of a moribund Chicano spirit. What at first is described as an eternally static and frightening state of being develops into a culminating transcendence at the end of the book. There is definitely a very mystical element running through ... y no se lo trago la tierra’s narrative, which springs from Tomás Rivera’s trust in the sublime character of the human spirit, as well as from his belief in the possibility of a better future for all Chicanos.
Notes

1 Tomás Rivera was also a poet, a critic and a professor in US academia. He is certainly best known for the novel *... y no se lo trago la tierra*, but his writing career includes poems and short stories, as well as a number of publications in Chicano periodicals. See Martínez and Lomeli, Reference.

2 According to Marxist theory a dominant culture forms an ideology which is a “false consciousness” and a means to exploitation in its essence. For William C. Dowling, “an ideology viewed in this alternative light is a strategy of containment, a way of achieving coherence by shutting out truth about History. [...] The notion of ideologies as strategies of containment, and of literature as an ideological production mirroring such strategies at the level of individual works, becomes more suggestive if we emphasize [...] ideology not merely as limitation [...] but as the repression of those underlying contradictions that have their source in History and Necessity” (Jameson 77).

3 Christopher Hampton’s *The Ideology of the Text* (1990) is a “polemical response” to the study of literature in isolation from its economic and historical contexts. According to Hampton, the study of the literary text should always bear in mind the historical and socio-economic contexts that give rise to literary production. And the critic’s task is to relate these complex political contexts to the poetics of literature: “To be in a position to consider the problems of literary theory and practice, it is necessary first of all to consider the problems of context--the underlying conditions which define the functions and limits of cultural activity, including language and literature as forms of creative social practice. [...] [I]t may be said that all cultural manifestations in society are to be defined on the basis of the economic forces and relations of production, as determined by their particular place in history and by the stage of material development of the operative social system and the structures (institutions, laws, politics, beliefs, etc.) it gives rise to, which in turn have their own influence on the underlying
conditions of production. Assuming this is so [...] the ideology of the operative system, as
generated by the class interests that control it, throws up idealized reflections of these
underlying conditions, [...] by which the system enforces the submission of majorities into
acquiescence and conformity with minority will” (1). Hampton’s mode of literary analysis
clearly favours Marxist criticism with its profound emphasis on historicism, material
production and ideological consciousness. For the purposes of this chapter, Hampton’s
Marxist criticism nicely accommodates an analysis of early Chicano literature, including
Rivera’s work. For a connection between the socio-economics of politics and literary study,
see Dowling, Jameson.

4 Subsequent references to ...y no se lo trago la tierra will be from the edition
containing Evangelina Vigil-Pinon’s translation And the Earth Did not Devour Him (1987). I
will also refer to the text as la tierra. It should be noted, however, that the first English
translation of Rivera’s seminal novel was ... y no se lo trago la tierra / ... And the Earth Did
not Part (1971) by Hermino Rios C. with the assistance of Octavio I. Romano V.

5 There is a notable non-uniformity in the critical response to la tierra, in relation to
the terms used to describe the structure of the text. Juan Rodríguez calls the fourteen chapters
“stories,” and the thirteen short pieces preceding or following the stories “short comments.”
Alfonso Rodríguez introduces the term “vignette” to describe the short stories, and the term
“frame-piece” to discuss the introductory story “The Lost Year” and the concluding one
“Under the House.” Moreover, Ralph F. Grajeda uses the word “anecdote” to discuss the
short comments. Most critics, however, agree that la tierra belongs to the genre of the novel.
For the purposes of this paper, the terms “short story” and “vignette” are used
interchangeably, and so are “short comment” and “anecdote.”

6 My reference here is to Juan Rodríguez’s harsh and inaccurate attack on Rivera in
the essay “The Problematic in Tomás Rivera’s ... and the earth did not part” (1986).
According to Rodríguez, la tierra promotes bourgeois individualism and an elitist break from the simplicity and naiveté of Chicano community: “It is our belief that Rivera’s accelerated ascension of the social-class ladder resulted in his having a false vision of the Chicano people and their struggle, a vision that is evident in his characterization of them as simple, helpless and backward, timid in the face of oppression, etc., and in his suggestion that the Chicanos’ main struggle for liberation must be against their own religiosity, that what Chicanos need to do is to learn to think, to use words in order to create a liberated world, and that all of this can be done in isolation and by ourselves alone. Ultimately, Rivera’s false concept of the Chicano people—a concept in harmony with the one held by the social class to which he ascended—suggests that Chicanos themselves are to blame for much of their condition, an old idea which returns to haunt us in a new more subtle form” (138).

7 A comparison is being made here between Bertolt Brecht’s social-protest Epic Theatre and Rivera’s vignettes on the life of Chicanos. The tradition of the Epic Theatre evolved as a reaction to age-old epic conventions which enchanted the audience in a mythical world, populated by historical or legendary characters (i.e. Iliad, Odyssey). Brecht emulated the epic narrative, but at the same time his aim was to prevent the audience from identifying with the events on stage. Similarly, Rivera creates an epic narrative of Chicanismo, but at the same time encourages his readers to evaluate and comprehend the social conditions that la tierra presents. For more on Epic Theatre, see Brecht, “Popular” and Jameson, Political Unconscious.

8 According to Alfonso Rodríguez, “The house, in Freudian logic, can be taken as the symbol of the mother’s womb, which offers protection and security” (“Time” 129). Although this is an interesting decoding of the boy-protagonist’s retreat into seclusion under the house, this chapter approaches the matter as a symbol of the creation of an ethnic cleavage or of the intellectual’s short retreat from material reality.
A brief connection can be made here between the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment and Rivera’s concept of identity. According to thinkers of the Enlightenment, the application of reason could release the human mind from superstition, prejudice and the forces of authority. Moreover, one of the era’s major principles was that individual identity deduced and processed knowledge from the world outside; thus, the individual was separated from any socio-cultural determinations as a “self-enclosed subject who inwardly represents to him or herself a world to which he or she is only externally related” (Zaretsky, “Identity Theory” 203). There are obviously parameters connecting *la tierra* to the Enlightenment’s conception of identity. However, the purpose of this chapter does not allow space for such an in-depth theoretical approach.

American pragmatists advocated the theory of “the semiotic self” as a politics of identity. The American school of Pragmatism described “human variation as the result of a highly plastic, semiotic process” (Wiley 142). For an extended approach to (Neo)Pragmatism and the contemporary politics of identity see Norbert Wiley, “Politics of Identity.”

The terms “rising action,” “climax” and “catharsis” are used according to the Aristotelian sequence for the composition of a unified plot. One of my readings of *la tierra* produced a comparison with a play from Ancient Greek drama, where after a series of rising complications and a climatic crisis the action ends in the cathartic resolution of a problem. However, my intention in the ongoing critical response to *la tierra* focuses only on the text’s narrative structure as supportive to the theme of Chicano self-cognizance.

We can certainly make a connection here with the autobiographic element in Rivera’s work, which is briefly discussed in the introduction to this chapter. In “Chicano Literature: Fiesta of the Living” (1979), Rivera shares his childhood memories of Bartolo, the *vate* who roamed the *campesino* settlements selling his poems. As Rivera recollects: “Bartolo’s poetry was my first contact with literature by my own people. It was to be my only
contact for a long time. The bond that I felt with him and that I feel with other Chicano writers is the same” (20).

13 Apart from the cyclical and abstract categories, Nasario Garcia conceives of time on a third dimension: retrospective time. According to Garcia, retrospective time alludes to a selective reference to the past “which does not command a true beginning or a definite ending because something precedes and something follows it. Because of the author’s choice, time is irreducible and constant, yet he may wish to restrict or to expand time itself within that time frame either to underscore or de-emphasize certain episodes and thereby achieve the proper fullness and continuity in the work” (“Concept of Time” 310-1). In its retrospective definition, time is flexible, distractive and can be demarcated to serve the writer’s ulterior motives upon conducting his work of art. Although I find the notion of retrospective time enticing, I believe that it best describes experimental autobiographical narratives, like Miguel Méndez’s From Labor to Letters (2001) or Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987). So, for the purposes of this chapter I deal solely with the concepts of cyclical and abstract time.

14 For more on the Aztec cosmology and calendar system, see Read, Aztec Cosmos.
Conclusion

Recently I was told by an old friend, a scholar, a sincere man intensely involved in the Cause, that we cannot afford the luxury of attempting to create art. It is not a luxury, of course. It is an obligation, a responsibility we dare not shirk. As artists we must, through our pride and arrogance, and perhaps even insolence, ignore the warnings from the gods and, although it be a grievous sin, transcend the codes of the Movement as we create. Then, and only then, we will have a literature. Then, we will truly contribute to the Cause. What we create may not be called Chicano Literature--most probably it will be a sub-genre of American Literature because it is in English, no matter how many pochismos we use--but it will belong to us and it will express our singular experience and lay bare, for the world to see, the soul of our people. (Villarreal, “Chicano Literature” 167)

In the essay “Chicano Literature: Art and Politics from the Perspective of the Artist” (1979), Jose Antonio Villarreal issues a caveat in the production and critical approach to the “embryonic” Chicano literature (166).¹ For the writer of the controversial novel Pocho (1959), which was largely attacked for espousing assimilationist views as well as constituting a separatist act with regard to the politically organized Chicano community, Mexican-American literature has been the brunt of Anglo academic discrimination, being relegated to a simplistic or ethno-generic form of art, lacking the philosophical and universal sophistication of Euro-American traditions or schools of thought. At the same time, Villarreal discerns the hazards of the suffocating politicization exerted by the delegates of the Cause on any Chicano artistic endeavor. Villarreal identifies early Chicano literature of the 1960s and the 1970s as an intrinsic expression of the causes of el movimiento, and as irreversibly governed by the
political “codes” of the time (163). For Villarreal, the artistic implications and aesthetic values elaborated by Chicano writers were submerged in the tide of a sweeping political rhetoric. Moreover, the work of art was critically approached only in relation to its political “intent” and the early Chicano critical school seems to have reversed “[Oscar] Wilde’s posture” of art-for-art’s sake “in an equally absurd manner by insisting that ideological and political considerations were totally independent from aesthetic values” (164). With the bold confession that “the ethnic label has been detrimental only in that it retarded the development of [his] writing skills,” Villarreal attacks the ethnocentrism of the Cause without, however, abolishing the significance of his cultural and ethnic identity in the formation of his artistic idiom (166). In other words, he does make a salient argument against an overly political bias in literary composition, while at the same time he accounts for his ethnic identity as a paramount factor in the emergence of the Chicano literary tradition.

Villarreal is probably the first novelist and literary critic who locates Mexican-American literature in a subcategory of the North American literary canon. Thus, he calls for a critical reconsideration of Chicano literature from its political relegation as coterminous to Latino or Hispanic belles lettres into the space of the US Southwest socio-political and cultural affairs. According to Villarreal, the politics of el movimiento created a mythic-reality over the Indian-ness of mestizaje, which in fact distorted Chicano cultural identity. With a touch of humor, but mostly expressing his exasperation, Villarreal claims that:

Political rhetoric no different from harangue, appealing to emotion at the expense of reason, was expected from us [the artists]. The fact that those of us with artistic temperament could not interpret the function of art in this manner was not considered. Our Spanish or European heritage was repudiated out of hand; our indigenous beginnings were heralded. And in reviving ancient Indian myths, we create a new mythology which gave a
picture of Aztec Arcadia [...]. This attitude became so widespread that it is surprising that we [Chicanos] did not begin to take on Indian names, build temples, and search for virgins to sacrifice. (164)

Villarreal summons both artists and critics to rebel against “the demagogues in [their] political forefront” and to produce their artistic or critical object with “integrity, honesty [and] fidelity” (164). Seen in this light, Villarreal politicizes the production of art as an “insolent” and “arrogant” resistance to stifling socio-political rhetoric (167). He also urges artists to repudiate *el movimiento*’s dogma of “the luxury of art” and to contribute to the Cause with their unique artistic idiom: “Either we [Chicano artists] maintain our commitment to art, or dance to whatever tune is prepared for us” (163). Villarreal pinpoints the social potential of the artistic endeavor in the sense that it should resume the responsibility “to lay bare the soul of our people [Chicanos]” (167). Accordingly, the work of art and the socio-political propaganda should not develop a power-relation of lead over the people’s consciousness. Instead, their co-relation should be in the form of “the common metaphor of *el espejo* [the mirror]” to the community’s needs and to one another (Parr 137). In other words, Villarreal’s argument is for both social politics and artistic poetics to reflect their sincere dedication to people, and not to become a means to their own end.

Much in accordance with Villarreal’s speculations on the role of the artist and the function of art, this study held that Mexican-American literature provides a disciplinary challenge to any literary critic because it is produced on the borderlands between two nations, cultures, histories and realities. In its reflection on the *mestizo* race’s history (mythical or factual), the Chicano/a’s present and his/her anticipation of a better future the Mexican-American literary canon becomes the re-reading of Chicano life in its totality. According to Luis Leal, this holistic quality of Chicano literature “give[s] expression to the universal through the regional” and is also a major step forward to the identification of the Chicano
literary tradition (“Identifying Chicano Literature” 4). Chicano literature contains a sense of transcendence and exhibits universal concerns although on the surface it appears regional. The sufferings, the deprivation, the existential quest, the longing for justice and the formation of a closely-knit community are not the *mexicano’s* experience *ad hoc*. They are all just fragments of a universal discontent, which nevertheless take shape in immediate temporal and/or spatial circumstances, and in our case in the unique Chicano experience. Nonetheless, due to the realistic idiom of most Chicano literature, critics often fail to recognize the mythic, symbolic and allegorical elements of Chicano texts. In reality though, Mexican-American writers of the twentieth century have endeavored to create a new image of Chicanismo mainly via the revival of indigenous myths, sagas and symbols. Chicano intellectuals have demanded “a new synthesis out of history, tradition and everyday confrontation with the ever-changing culture in which [they] live” (L. Leal 4). Through the collective Chicano *la vida* (the life) a whole set of myths and universal values is born. Charismatic writers, like Tomás Rivera, Jose Antonio Villarreal, Mario Suarez, Rudolfo Anaya, Miguel Méndez, Gloria Anzaldúa, Irene Hernandez Beltran, to name just a few, produce their fiction narratives as contemporary Chicano allegories. So, it would be a mistake to point to texts which deal solely with the *campesino’s* struggle or the *colonia’s* slums as representative samples of Chicano literature. And even if for some schools of literary study the large bulk of Chicano fiction appears one-dimensional, crudely realistic or socially oriented, it is the discerning critic’s task to uncover “the mythical images” intrinsic to most (if not all) Chicano narratives (L. Leal 5).

The symbiosis of politics and poetics in literature has been a major theme throughout this study. In my close readings of this limited number of texts by Mexican-American novelists and sociologists, I tried to show that the study of the unique Chicano literary aesthetic cannot be separated from the community’s social struggles, and *vice versa*, the political rhetoric of *la raza* cannot be fully realized unless it accounts the poetics of the
Chicano Cultural Renaissance. This premise informed Chapter One, where I explored Rudolfo Anaya’s mytho-historical narrative *Lord of Dawn: The Legend of Quetzalcoatl*. To my understanding, this text clearly elaborates on the devastating paranoia of the conflict between the advocates of cultural aestheticism and those of political activism. The differences between the deity Quetzalcoatl and the ruler Huemac result in their inability to compromise and negotiate for the benefit of the people. Thus, their conflict, which is essentially a clash of politics and poetics, becomes an instance of social catastrophe. The narrative of *The Legend of La Llorona*, which was analyzed in the second section of Chapter One, encapsulates Anaya’s defense of the abused character of La Malinche, who has become synonymous with the stereotype of *la chingada* (the fucked one). In fact, *machismo*’s depiction of La Malinche has embodied *movimiento*’s harsh attack on Chicana feminism and a repudiation of the community’s European identity. With *La Llorona*, Anaya resists “the political harangue” which subordinated Chicanas and also revives Chicanismo’s links with their Spanish ancestry (Villarreal 164).

By locating Chicano literature in the intermediary space between politics and poetics, a major concern of this dissertation was to look into how Mexican-American artists perceive the self, both collective and individual. Thus, Chicano identity was viewed as a construct, which is conceived and realized at the interstices of two cultures, nations, topographies, and ethnic or social representations. In other words, I detected numerous sets of binary polarities at play in the formation of the unique Chicano identity: there is Chicano culture similar and yet distinct from *mexicano* culture; *mestizaje* versus the Euro-American white race; the elitist, academic *la raza* versus the barrio base; mythological aestheticism related to historical positionings of the self; temporal versus spatial perspectives of the self, and so on. These binarisms give substance to a discourse in the mind of the Chicano intellectual or artist, which in turn gives rise to his/her “borderland” perception of the self. This is to suggest that in the
The construction of identity the individual mind takes into consideration the collective experience of the whole community and throughout time, which is then assessed, prioritized, and often selectively sorted out. Conversely, the community often turns to individual conceptions of a complex world order in search of meaning. In fact, it is this “hidden dialectic” between the individual mind and the community which gave shape to this study. To my understanding, Chicano literature expresses a solid interdependency between the notions of individuality and communality, and the peripheral “borderland” identity of Chicanismo is construed as the prodigy of a collective experience and identity-negotiation.

Thus, Chapter One considered the co-relation of the community’s mytho-historical past with contemporary Chicano identity. In Chapter Two, the emphasis was on how Irene Hernandez Beltran’s novel *Across the Great River* has problematized the concept of identity in the condition of border-crossings. Chapter Three looked into the dialectics of space and time, and the Chicano barrio was approached as the unique space or homeland where Mexican-American identity is initially constructed, but also sustained, reproduced and enhanced in the flow of time. The thin line between individual and collective identity was examined in Chapter Four. Through a close reading of Miguel Méndez’s autobiography *From Labor to Letters* and Tomas Atencio’s sociological purview in his lecture “Resolana: A Pathway to Knowledge,” I attempted to define individuality and communality as twin concepts, interrelated and complementary to one another. Chapter Five investigated this interpenetration of singleness and plurality further, and also resumed the major points raised in previous chapters. My reading of Tomás Rivera’s *... y no se lo trago la tierra / ... And the Earth Did not Devour Him* was a deliberate critical choice which binded this study into a circular whole, much in keeping with *la tierra*’s spiral thematic and temporal structures.

Despite the recent tendency to appropriate the literary text for a certain philosophical paradigm or political rhetoric, I tried not to deprive these Mexican-American narratives of
their magical artistry. In fact, as a critic and an avid reader of literature I strongly believe that for the average reader (both Chicano and other) fiction retains its mysticism due to the genre’s hybrid quality, where fact and fiction merge for the purposes of producing art in written form. In yet another binarism, the Chicano literary text carries elements easily recognizable to the writer’s initial target audience. If this readership comprises mainly Chicanos, then their tangible everyday experience is easily detected in most of the texts this study undertook to discuss. At the same time, however, the composition of art implies some fictional characteristics embedded in a text. Despite the fact that it may seem an exaggeration, the nature of Chicano literature seems “schizophrenic” in its very essence, since it fosters numerous dualities such as fact/fiction, real/unreal present, past/future. The corollary is that the production of literature is flexible: it toys with numerous narrative techniques in order to serve a writer’s ulterior motive or Villarreal’s “intent.” Nevertheless, it is hard to isolate, let alone universalize, a writer’s problematics, simply because they are always filtered through the reader’s or critic’s perception of the world. To give an example, a literary text, which focuses on la raza’s experience, most frequently describes life in the barrio realistically. But what is easily identifiable to a Mexican-American as the hard facts of life it may simply appear to be a vivid description for the WASP lover of fiction, or a different version of ethnic degradation to an Afro-American activist. Moreover, the present demarcation of the world of literature into cultural or ethnic traditions seems to me rather haphazard. For instance, some academicians study Chicano literature in the larger scope of the Hispanic or Latino literature of the Americas, others categorize Chicano literature as an offshoot of the North American ethnic literary tradition, and finally there is the more recent comparative tendency to classify Chicano literature at the interstices of the North-American and the Mexican cultural or literary sophistications. Refraining from an exhaustive list of examples, it is rather obvious
that we cannot be sure what the forthcoming movements of textual analysis will have in store for the students of Mexican-American literature.

In the process of drafting this project, I often feared climbing into the infamous Foucauldian tower of the Panoptikon myself. In fact, I have been cautioned in my role as a critic not to regard Chicano literature as a controlling agent or a spokesperson of a supreme critical viewpoint. Rather than shedding light onto figurative “literary cells” in the critic’s capacity as a “surveillance guard,” my reading of these texts was marked by a personal desire to enhance my own self-understanding. Moreover, along with Villarreal’s fear of the social politicization of literature, I also feared the philosophical politicization of my critical response. Hence, Chicano literature became for me more than a cultural or ethnic tradition under study--it acquired the validity of “a step toward universality” (Parr 135). From my critical viewpoint, Chicanos epitomize José Vasconcelos’s concept of the “cosmic race” (la cosmica raza), which is defined as “[a] race of synthesis, that is integral--made of the spirit and the blood of all peoples, and for that reason, more capable of true fraternity and a really universal vision” (130). Similarly, the Chicano experience in the borderlands (both physical and psychological), along with the repeated transgressions of borderlines, can be construed as an adaptation of a universal mode of existence. Migration, adjustment to a host nation, negotiations between the dominant culture and the peripheral one(s), subordination and resistance are themes undertaken effectively in Chicano literature, but they are also expressions of a global socio-political concern. The vision of the limited number of Chicano artists examined in this study is a reflection of a general anguish over identity-cognition. Thus, the mirror motif (el espejo) is not only appropriate to the interpellation over the politics-and-poetics relation, but also in the comparison made between the regional experience in the US Southwest and the broader world. In this context, Tomás Rivera’s boy-protagonist in ... y no se lo trago la tierra / ... And the Earth Did not Devour Him is symbolic
of the emergent Chicano literary tradition, which metaphorically speaking perched on top popularity, “raised one arm and waved it back and forth so that the other could see that he knew he was there” (206). And this other character at the other end of the horizon is a symbol of the many peripheral, borderland and migrant identities of the world.

This study primarily drafted my identification of Chicano self-perception in the race’s literature, and it also expressed my own critical response to advanced literary criticism. I feel inclined to conclude with this confession because I experienced a mystifying loss for words in many of my attempts to write on some Chicano narratives, especially during my readings of Miguel Méndez’s From Labor to Letters and Tomás Rivera’s ... y no se lo trago la tierra / ... And the Earth Did not Devour Him. Despite my initial critical interest in issues of the poetics-and-politics of identity, I came to realize that these texts are so rich in content, copious in their thematic concerns and cleverly structured that in every of my readings new critical ideas seemed to spring from their pages. Moreover, this study never intended to pigeonhole the texts under scrutiny into a broader category of ethnic literature which explores issues of identity-cognition. Throughout my research into and appreciation of Chicano literature, my primary concern was to explore how Mexican-American identity is constructed in the contexts of multiplicity and polyvocality.

Notes
All subsequent references to Villarreal are taken from “Chicano Literature.”

In his discussion of the role of the artist and the function of art, Villarreal shows a preference for the term “intent” instead of “goal.” “Intent” expresses an inner or mystic desire to apprehend the world, whereas “goal” points to a socially and politically directed literature. Accordingly, he claims that “[o]ur external or visual reality can be expressed by craftsmen, but our innermost reality, the nuances of real life, human situations, human circumstances—our corazón—-can be exposed only by the artist. [...] We often speak of gifted writers, painters, composers, or perhaps sometimes we speak of particular gifts, yet what I have just mentioned is the most singular gift of all. I use the term ‘intent,’ which we can substitute for ‘goal,’ but the fact remains that the greatest gift is the opportunity to make a decision as to whether one should pursue art or be content with something else” (“Chicano Literature” 162-3).

The phrase “hidden dialectic” is a loan from Andreas Huyssen’s treatise into the negotiations between individuality and mass culture in the present postmodern era. After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (1986) deals with the relationship between modernism and mass culture not as antagonistic, but as symbiotic, agonistic and complementary. Moreover, Huyssen supports the premise that the sense of the postmodern identity is drawn out of the social representations and differences unleashed in the present polyvocal era. The modern individual identity and the postmodern polymorphous one are not distinct philosophical phases of self-perception, but the former precedes the latter, and the latter antecedes the first. Similarly, it is my premise that in a critical approach to Chicano literature individual and collective identities are not to be studied separately. Instead, they should be dealt with as symbiotic and complementary to one another.
In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979), Michel Foucault undertakes the notion of identity or knowledge construction in a system of surveillance. Foucault draws a parallel between the surveillance of identity-cognition and the Bentham architecture of the Panoptikon, which is essentially a tower in the middle of a prisonhouse surrounded by backlit cells. The guard inside the tower would see the prison inmates, but they would be unable to meet the overseeing gaze. Instead, they would just have the knowledge that they are being watched without seeing their observer. In an intriguing parallel to Bentham, Foucault directs the acquisition of knowledge and the construction of one’s identity in a power context, where the force of the surveillance in the tower is the dominant culture while the peripheral cells are the minor cultures. However, my use of the Panoptikon makes a connection to an overviewing critical response, which to my understanding often jeopardizes the mystic quality of the literary text. Thus, upon commencing this study into Mexican-American literature I repeatedly reminded myself of the dangers of extreme emotional detachment from the literary text. And rather than writing cold, utterly professional literary criticism, I often allowed myself to become emotionally involved in a narrative.
WORKS CITED


---. ... y no so lo trago la tierra / ... And the Earth Did not Devour Him. Trans. Evangelina Vigil-Pinon. Houston: Arte Publico, 1987.


268


Sophia Emmanouilidou was born in Thessaloniki, Greece, on January 31, 1971. In 1988, she completed her secondary education at the American College “Anatolia,” and having been instilled with love for American literature, she sat the national university entrance exams for the School of English, Faculty of Philosophy, at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. During her Undergraduate Studies she was granted a scholarship by the European Union to attend the University of Westminster, London, for two semesters and received a Certificate of Excellence for outstanding academic average. In 1993, she received her B.A. in English Language and Literature and a year later she gave birth to her daughter, Christina. In 1996 she commenced a two-year graduate course on American Literature and Culture at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and upon completion of her M.A. she was awarded a prize of academic excellence by the Department of American Studies for the originality of her thesis entitled “Chicanismo and Identity Formation: The Quest for the True la vida.” In 1999 she commenced her Ph.D. research at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki with a scholarship from the Foundation of National Scholarships in Greece (IKY). Between June and August 2001, she carried out library research at the University of Texas, Austin, under the supervision of Dr. José Limón, on a project wholly funded by the Fulbright Foundation. Parallel to her studies, she has attended a great number of lectures and conferences and in May 2000 she presented her paper “Subjectivity and the Transgressive Aesthetic in David Henry Hwang’s M Butterfly” at the Fourth International Conference of the Hellenic Association of American Studies, “Culture Agonistes: Text against Text,” in Athens. In March 2002, she presented her paper “Foucault’s Objectification of the Subject and the Heterotopia of the Academic Intelligentsia in Miguel Mendez’s From Labor to Letters” at the Biennial Conference of the European Association of American Studies, “The United States of/in Europe: Nationhood, Citizenship, Culture,” in Bordeaux, France. In June 2002, she took part in the Third MESEA Biennial Conference, “Sites of Ethnicity,” in Padua, Italy, with a paper on Tomas’s Atencio’s social work in Academia de la Nueva Raza. In June 2003, she presented her paper “Border Crossings and the Subject in Abeyance in Irene Beltran Hernandez’s Novel Across the Great River” in the international conference “Close Encounters of an Other Kind” at the University of Joensuu, Finland. Apart from Chicano literature and identity-focused theories, her interests also include border cultures, social studies and political sciences. She has done a lot of different jobs from waitressing to teaching an introductory course to poetry at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. At present, she lives with her daughter, and one of her most enjoyable pastimes is creative writing, an activity that has been with her since adolescence.

by M.A.E.