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“In the course of my dissertation, I speak of literature as art...”
– José Antonio Villarreal

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INTRODUCTION

AZTLAN FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS: THE CHICANO SOLUTION

It will not be necessary to underline the fact that there now exists a Chicano literature because it already exists. It is out of the oral or latent states. We can observe the Chicano's frenetic intent in getting into the labyrinth and searching for forms. We can sense that there is life in search of form.

– Tomás Rivera

During a charged scene in Rudolfo A. Anaya's novel *Heart of Aztlan* (1976), the character Clemente Chávez attends a railroad workers' meeting. Angered by their managers' inattention to the dangerous working conditions claiming employees' lives, and frustrated by their union's complicit failure to intervene, Clemente and the other workers discuss their options. The cacophony of voices offering different strategies— including violent resistance, (new) union organizing, and legal retaliation—threatens to fracture the group into competing factions. The workers quiet down only when a blind bard named Crispín begins to strum his guitar and sing traditional folk songs. They may all disagree about what to do next, but in that moment they exist as a group, listening. Stirred by the music, Clemente wonders, “But the strike? The strike and the railroad? What do these stories have to do with that?”¹

The scene stages one of the most pressing questions concerning the relationship between Mexican American literature and a working-class politics. What do “stories” have to do with the plight of workers? And the novel as a whole dramatizes an answer. Stories could function as the cultural arm of a nascent labor movement by enabling a group to recognize its solidarity. The function of these stories, and of the literature they help constitute, is not the procurement of policy nor the legislation of tactics. Rather, stories help bring a community into being via a circular logic of self-production: a people coming into being via their production of art, the art in

¹ Rudolfo A. Anaya, *Heart of Aztlan* (Berkeley: Editorial Justa, 1976), 86.

turn enabling the people's recognition of itself as "a people." In the novel's last scene, the railroad workers march in unison, proclaiming "Adelante!" ("Forward!"). Where they are going is left unclear and what they will do once they got there is left unstated, yet the conclusion's forward momentum appears to lead to a utopian if blurry horizon.

Were that the end of the story, we could continue to assume that "the people" that Crispín's stories bring together and the "working class" are effectively identical. But whereas the political drama involving workers and management takes center stage in *Heart of Aztlan*, it is relegated to the margins in Anaya's next novel *Tortuga* (1979). Considered by Anaya as part of a trilogy that includes *Heart of Aztlan* and his more famous *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), *Tortuga* tells a related story about a boy—implied to be the son of the protagonist of *Heart of Aztlan*—who suffered a paralyzing accident and is taken to a hospital for extended therapy. At the hospital, he undergoes a spiritual journey to understand the meaning and purpose of his life. Close to *Tortuga's* ending, the boy receives a letter from his mother, in which she informs him of two things: "the battle" between workers and management "has continued. It is like a war. Nothing is settled. The workers are without work." And she informs him of Crispín's death, "That is why I am writing. He left you his guitar, the one he would play in the evenings."² The news from home interrupts the novel's plot and the phrase "the workers are without work" dampens the optimism which *Heart of Aztlan* had ended. While the persistence of both the worker's "battle" and the ancient cultural "stories" could continue to suggest their interconnectedness, *Tortuga's* plot and the trilogy of which it is a part focus mostly on the continuation of culture at the expense of the depiction of class struggle. The boy will become the bard who relates the stories of a people who are sometimes workers, sometimes not, but always identifiable as "a people." In short, Anaya's novels depict how a cultural tradition can and does persist independently of political concerns

² Rudolfo Anaya, *Tortuga* (Berkeley: Editorial Justa, 1979), 168.

and outcomes. Although this tradition could have a momentary rallying effect when used to address localized conflicts, say, between workers and management, such conflicts are but blips along a cosmological timeline.³

Anaya's novels present themselves as assuming a position along an ancient cultural continuum, one described by Tomás Rivera in the excerpt I use as this chapter's epigraph. Mexican Americans' cultural production participates in an evolutionary "life in search of form" that progresses from an "oral phase" (represented in Anaya's novel by Crispín's folk songs) to the Chicano moment of cultural efflorescence and self-awareness. This evolutionary story of the emergence of Chicano literature is told in an academic *métier* by Americo Paredes's foundational 1958 study of Mexican American border ballads.⁴ Paredes became important to Chicanos of the mid-1960s and 1970s because he described how a distinctly Mexican American "cultural homogeneity" led to a culture "of resistance against outside encroachment."⁵ As Paredes himself came to argue in a 1979 essay titled "The Folk Base of Chicano Literature,"⁶ this 19th-century culture of resistance became the foundation of Chicano literature as such. Mexican American "resistance" counters various threats as they emerge, yet its bedrock is the identity that it makes dialectically available.

This political function of Mexican and Mexican American "culture" is not as ancient as Anaya's novel implies, nor does it originate in the 19th century as Paredes and Rivera contend. Yet this understanding of culture tends to dominate descriptions of Mexican American literature and identity as such. *Heart of Aztlán* relates a story concerning what happens to a Mexican-

³ In Anaya's Sonny Baca detective novel series, the dimensions of the ongoing "war" expand until they encompass the very battle between good and evil as such. The drama of that battle is ahistorically cyclical and manifests itself archetypically in Anaya's stories.

⁴ Americo Paredes, *"With His Pistol in His Hand": A Border Ballad and Its Hero*. (Austin, TX: Univ. of Texas Press, 1959).

⁵ Paredes, *With His Pistol*, 241, 244.

⁶ Americo Paredes, "The Folk Base of Chicano Literature," in Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, eds., *Modern Chicano Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 4-17.

descended family when it is forced to change its way of life radically, and this story sometimes assumes the name “the Chicano narrative.”⁷ But one of the arguments this project develops is that the term “Chicano” does not name the story. The term Chicano implies a *solution* to the problems the story describes. That solution, which circulated most heavily from 1965 to 1981, centers on a particular conceptualization of “culture” as created and made available through a self-consciously Chicano literature and art. Whereas a “Mexican American” was considered as such because of the contingency of his or her birth, a *Chicano* self-consciously chose that designation as a way to indicate his or her self-awareness as a historical actor who is part of a collective.⁸ Chicano literature similarly tends to differentiate itself from other works published by Mexican Americans by explicitly thematizing literature’s role in enabling a hegemony-resisting consciousness.

To see the Chicano solution we need only return to *Heart of Aztlan*’s plot. Clemente’s family must figure out what life looks like when they are no longer anchored to an agrarian way of life and are forced to move into a city. Newly employed, Clemente’s daughters begin to assert their independence and question Clemente’s authority over their behavior and bodies. Clemente’s sons consider the dangerous allure of life on the streets, where respect, money, and diversion are all readily available. When Clemente loses his job at the railroad, he gradually slips

⁷ Ramón Saldívar refers to this story when talking about the novel *Pocho* (1959), which he sees as providing “the paradigmatic Chicano narrative.” The many variations on this story include: Mexican people fleeing to the US in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution; Mexican Americans displaced from the American southwest when their agricultural lives are no longer economically viable; Mexican landowners living in California being dispossessed of their land by a government failing to meet its end of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; Mexican and Mexican American migrant workers travelling across the US in search of meager wages.

⁸ According to Dorothy E. Harth and Lewis M. Baldwin, “the term *Chicano* is, for the younger Mexican-American, more than simply a term for one’s ethnic origin or cultural identity, as it stands also for an active political consciousness that will no longer tolerate second-class citizenship.” “Introduction,” *Voices of Aztlan; Chicano Literature of Today* (New York: New American Library, 1974), 3. See also Juan Gómez-Quiñones description of how “wider public usage of the term as the self-designation for the community appeared in the sixties, when it was given political connotations by young activists.” *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise, 1940-1990* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 7.

into alcoholism and despair because his life “no longer had meaning.”⁹ The relocation of the family thus entails a crisis of patriarchy, which the novel implicitly parallels with the railroad workers’ crisis of unsafe working conditions. Above the shouting voices of the worker’s meeting, one person cries out for unity through strong leadership: “the familia without a strong father soon falls apart... a pueblo without a good leader is not united in its effort to serve the people...” “Leadership” and “patriarchy,” here, operate as homologous terms and both are depicted as not only necessary, but in need of the scaffolding that Crispín’s “stories” could provide. This is why when Clemente reaches the nadir of his despair, he nearly drinks himself to death until he sees “the face of his father.”¹⁰ The approaching figure that looks like his father turns out to be Crispín, who becomes Clemente’s spiritual guide, helping him find his purpose. “That is what I need to live!” Clemente comes to discover, “I will search for those signs, I will find that magic heart of our land about which you whisper, and I will wrestle from it the holy power to help my people!”¹¹ He comes to realize that the “stories” conveyed through Crispín’s songs already reside within him. He learns how to take a psychic journey within himself and tap into his embodied “memory,” thereby discovering a longstanding tradition of ancient archetypal myths captured in Mesoamerican—and now Mexican American— storytelling. Stories and the culture they transmit enable the rise of a messianic patriarch who will lead his people.

Anaya’s novels—which tend to depict how older spiritual mentors help guide younger apprentices—thematize their own function in relation to readers. Like Clemente, readers must learn to search Anaya’s texts for “the signs” and interpret their symbolism, an interpretive experience that connects them to a—to our—mythical past. Literature, for Anaya, functions as a source of both a symbolic (substitute) paternalism to guide us and a metaphorical (metaphysical)

⁹ Anaya, *Heart*, 121.

¹⁰ Anaya, *Heart*, 121.

¹¹ Anaya, *Heart*, 123.

essentialism to unite us. The people that make up the “we” share an archetypal “heart,” the mythic blood of which pumps through us all. We need only interpret the signs and search within ourselves to find there our spiritual anchoring home, Aztlan.

How this symbolic search will help, exactly, is left to the reader to imagine. In *Heart of Aztlan*, a character describes the predicament: “we’re in the same pinch all the time just holding our noses above debts so we won’t drown, hoping things at the shops don’t get worse and hoping el Super doesn’t shut off our credit at the store...”¹² These economic problems resulted in part from the shift during the 1970s from a manufacturing-based economy to one of finance and service employment. The situation for manufacturing and railroad employees would only worsen during the 1980s when deregulation became the norm (evident in such acts as the Staggers Rail Act of 1980 and the Northeast Rail Service Act of 1981). As Judith Stein has argued, during the 1970s, the guiding “assumptions that labor and capital should prosper together” was replaced with the idea that “the promotion of capital will eventually benefit labor.”¹³ The motivation behind the Chicano cultural intervention reproduces this metonymic faith: what is good for Clemente will be good for the people he leads. What is good for the leadership class will be good for the rank and file.

Published in 1976, *Heart of Aztlan* implicitly evokes the events that had taken place a decade prior, in which the playwright Luis Valdez assisted the labor organizing efforts of César Chávez. The bard Crispín can be read as a stand-in for Valdez, whose Teatro Campesino operated as the cultural arm of the effort to organize farm workers during the mid-1960s. And Clemente Chávez could be seen as César Chávez’s analog, the character’s names emphasizing the comparison. Valdez’s one-act plays were staged on the back of flatbed trucks on the very

¹² Anaya, *Heart*, 16.

¹³ Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

fields where the migrant fruit and vegetable pickers worked and protested. Workers were invited to fill the acting roles, and the plays were meant to raise the workers' understanding of their solidarity and their place in history. They learned the value of not crossing the picket lines even as their families faced starvation. The workers also learned to connect themselves to a much longer cultural history. One of the imperatives of the Teatro Campesino, according to Francisco Jiménez, was "to inform the Chicano of his rich heritage so as to instill in him pride in his culture."¹⁴ This centuries-long cultural history is evident in Valdez's introduction to *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature* (1972), wherein Valdez claims the Olmecs, Mayans, and Aztecs as Chicano cultural predecessors.¹⁵ Seen in this context, Valdez's style of *indigenismo* and cultural nationalism can be considered homologous with the activism of labor organizing.

But just as Anaya's novels dramatize how "culture" operates independently of labor organizing, Valdez's subsequent works exemplify a similar dynamic. Valdéz went on to write the play *Zoot Suit* (1978), whose local success led to its being staged on Broadway in 1979 and adapted to film in 1981. Valdéz did not "sell out" by turning away from migrant workers to an American mainstream audience. Rather, his work's trajectory emphasizes what his cultural intervention had always made available. His work makes it possible for the Hollywood movie and Broadway play audiences to feel connected to a larger community even as this connection is more symbolic and affective than practical. His work makes it possible for the "Chicano community" to come into being by recognizing itself as such. And when we turn to César Chávez, we encounter a similar divergence of ethnic culture and working class politics.

¹⁴ Francisco Jiménez "Dramatic Principles of the Teatro Campesino," *Bilingual review / La Revista Bilingüe* 2.1-2 (1975), 102.

¹⁵ *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature*, Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner eds, (New York: Knopf, 1972).

According to the historian Jefferson Cowie, Chávez embodies “irreconcilable values,” including a commitment to an explicitly union-oriented movement and a commitment to an ethnic movement. “In the ‘twin souls’ of Chavez’s life—spiritual/civil rights leader and labor leader,” writes Cowie, “the patron saint of *Chicanismo* continued to live on, bolstering the civil rights of Mexican Americans... but the union cause died out.” Chávez’s charisma, which galvanized sociocultural fervor, did not operate as effectively in the more mundane, day-to-day world of labor organizing. Cowie acknowledges the difficulty and courage involved in consolidating a distinctly Mexican American identity, yet he argues that this identity “fused more easily with American political traditions of individual civil rights than did the unionization of the farmworkers for collective economic rights and the material betterment of those who toiled in the fields.”¹⁶ Extrapolating from Cowie’s analysis, we could see how the Chicano intervention was ultimately not a critique of market exploitation as such so much as it was an argument against the exploitation of certain types of bodies with certain histories. Stated differently, the Chicano intervention attempted to ensure that some people would no longer be sorted into exploitative labor pools; these people would instead become the market’s beneficiaries.¹⁷

¹⁶ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 49-54. On this point I would agree with Cowie’s assessment of the 1970s, even though his ultimate diagnosis of the failure of the working class ironically reproduces the tension he sees embodied in Chavez. Cowie claims that unions failed to sustain a working class movement because they refused to address issues of race, gender, and sexuality. But as Judith Stein’s political history of the 1970s has so persuasively shown, American political policies pursued the latter at the expense of the former.

¹⁷ Identifying the fundamental difference between identity and class politics, the literary historian Marcial González carefully and compassionately writes,

the former is premised upon experience, while the latter is premised upon class as structure.... In general, these other [identity] group formations promote strategies for unity directed at correcting democratic inequalities—broadening the possibilities for civic inclusion and participation—which are worthy causes in and of themselves, but which are not aimed at comprehending, much less eliminating, the systemic causes of inequality. Thus, in the Lukacsian sense, group identities are more likely to obfuscate or mystify the same relations, especially with regard to social class, than to encourage revolutionary change to take place.... Political practices aimed at challenging oppression are important and absolutely necessary, but without a class standpoint they nonetheless remain contained within an ideology of systemic maintenance and reform, despite the many admirable, courageous, and even sometimes life-threatening actions carried out against the various forms of social abuse and injustice.

Aztlan for the Middle Class

To read the journals that early Chicanos produced is to encounter the enthusiasm of the Chicano community's self-identification and self-declared unity, but also its definitional differentiation from the working class. The first three articles printed in the inaugural 1970 issue of the journal *Aztlan: Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and the Arts* each offer an argument about the existence of such entities as "Mexican Americans."¹⁸ (Fernando Penalosa's article, for example, offers "an Operational Definition of the Mexican American"). These articles also provide an argument for the existence of a distinctly Mexican American "culture" (See Jaime Sena Rivera's "Chicanos: Culture, Community Role—Problems of Evidence, and a Proposition of Norms Towards Establishing Evidence"). But the sociologist Deluvina Hernández's article identifies "La Raza" as the unifying concept:

The Mexican American, although included in the proletariat, is not an oppressed class, per se. It is instead an oppressed *ethnic* group. Thus identified, the Mexican American ethnic group will not readily seek to abolish itself in order to abolish the oppressive conditions, as Marx would have the oppressed classes do. The reverse is in fact the case: Mexican Americans seek to maintain their identity while abolishing the oppressive conditions, utilizing the concept of nationalism as the ideological framework for community organizing.¹⁹

For Hernández, a shared ethnicity—not class solidarity—kept otherwise disparate material and political interests united. She argues that Chicanos saw ethnicity as the fulcrum to undo social oppression. José F. Aranda is right to note that Hernández's argument sought to "consolidate a larger nonacademic political identity, while also promoting university leadership of that

Marcial González, *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class, and Reification* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 35.

¹⁸ Fernando Penalosa's "Toward an Operational Definition of the Mexican American"; Deluvina Hernández's "La Raza Satellite System (An operational definition of contemporary Chicano or Mexican American social action)"; Jaime Sena Rivera's "Chicanos: Culture, Community Role—Problems of Evidence, and a Proposition of Norms Towards Establishing Evidence." *Aztlan: Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and the Arts* 1 (1970).

¹⁹ Hernandez, "La Raza," 29.

constituency, a blueprint for future organizing and for the movement vanguard.”²⁰ These young activists and university leaders pushed for a strategic, unified front that effectively downplayed class inequality within the Chicano community because of the exigencies of the oppressive discriminatory atmosphere. As Aranda argues, “The middle and upper classes of any ethnic group historically have been adverse to collective action in the United States, except where ethnicity is the primary basis for political action; the Mexican American community proved no different.”²¹ So as “young university and community activists... entered the cultural, educational, economic and political arena on behalf of ‘La Raza,’” as Hernández describes, they did so on the assumption that the problem they sought to dismantle was discrimination.²²

Not only could the use of the myth of “Aztlán” as the rallying narrative and “La Raza” as the unifying label operate independently of the material interests of the working class, the myth advances its *own* political agenda by delineating the parameters of what constitutes injustice.²³ The myth of Aztlán, the original homeland of the Aztecs—said to be located in part of the land annexed by the U.S.—became a diagnostic and galvanizing metaphor because it invoked both the fall of indigenous civilizations to Spanish colonialism and the loss of Mexican land to American imperialism. This useful myth attributed social injustice to a history of colonization and exhorted action based on the aesthetic “resistance” to Eurocentrist standards of beauty. Insofar as the problem was understood to be one of conquest, the solution could be one of decolonial resistance. Far from offering an alternative to a hegemonic mainstream, however, the

²⁰ Aranda, José F. *When We Arrive: a New Literary History of Mexican America* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2003), 15.

²¹ Aranda, *When We Arrive*, 15–16.

²² Hernández, “La Raza,” 29.

²³ The Chicano diagnosis of social injustice came into prominence precisely at the time when the country underwent a drastic shift in policies. If before the 1970s the liberal consensus maintained a tenuous detente between capital and labor with the state playing a mediating role, by the 1980s the state came to be seen as the cumbersome interloper. Versions of the Chicano diagnosis persist in contemporary accounts explaining the high percentage of incarcerated Mexican Americans, which could be understood in relation to the economic shifts since the 1970s but are more often seen as rooted in the very old colonizing practices meant to subjugate Mexican Americans.

model of decolonial resistance inherent in the Chicano myth of Aztlán proved to be entirely consistent with the Civil Rights politics of inclusion.²⁴

So although Chicano literature tends to be associated with a working-class politics, it is more precise to think of it as the psychic support for a growing Mexican American middle class, especially the students who headed to college to improve their class status.²⁵ While this may appear as an unfair characterization, we need only turn to Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales's poem "Yo soy Joaquín" (1967) to see the Chicano intervention placed in relation to upward class mobility. Widely mimeographed and performed during conferences and student demonstrations, the poem is generally understood as one of the primary works inaugurating the Chicano literary renaissance. But notice how the poem presents the problem it addresses:

My fathers have lost the economic battle
and won the struggle of cultural survival.
And now! I must choose between the paradox of
victory of the spirit, despite physical hunger,
or to exist in the grasp of American social neurosis,
sterilization of the soul and a full stomach.²⁶

The "paradox" for a new Mexican American generation, here, centers on the simultaneous desire for upward class mobility and cultural integrity: How can one climb the class hierarchy without

²⁴ This politics of inclusion came at the expense of a politics of redistribution. According to Mary Dudziak, "the Cold War would frame and thereby limit the nation's civil rights commitment. The primacy of anticommunism in postwar American politics and culture left a very narrow space for criticism of the status quo. By silencing certain voices and by promoting a particular vision of racial justice, the Cold War led to a narrowing of acceptable civil rights discourse. The narrow terms of Cold War-era civil rights politics kept discussions of broad-based social change, or a linking of race and class, off the agenda." Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2000) 13.

²⁵ Juan Gómez-Quiñones, for example, stresses the "predominantly working class" origins of the college and university students who organized groups including the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), claiming that their invigorating activism was so successful that it "reached even the Mexican middle class" (my emphasis). Yet he later describes MAYO as "a student organization in San Antonio and South Texas, whose leadership was, from the first, heavily influenced by José Angel Gutierrez, a well-educated son of a professional family." He then argues that MAYO eventually suffered because of its inability to maintain other goals. With the "increasingly heterogeneous class makeup of Mexican students," MAYO eventually disbanded. His account of MAYO shows how interclass solidarity within the group was not a given but a problem to be solved, which it ultimately did not. Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *Chicano Politics*, 122-128.

²⁶ Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, "I Am Joaquín, an Epic Poem, 1967," in *Message to Aztlán: Selected Writings* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico, 2001), 16.

selling out? How might one be both economically secure and culturally proud? This way of framing the problem seems to accept the racialization of class but also points to a Chicano solution: the identity declared and enabled by the poem itself.

Professors associated with the Chicano movement thus assumed the responsibility of making Chicano literature visible to their undergraduates by editing anthologies that provided a forum for neglected voices. Philip D. Ortego, editor of *We Are Chicanos: An Anthology of Mexican-American Literature* (1973), for example, laments the psychological effects of cultural deprivation on Chicanos' self-esteem:

So deep is the lack of attention to the Mexican-American literary heritage that few of the 10 million Mexican-Americans themselves are aware of its existence as an organic body. For a people whose origins antedate the establishment of the United States by well over a century (and even more considering their Indian ancestry), this bespeaks a shameful and tragic negligence. And the shame and tragedy are compounded when Mexican-American youngsters learn about their Puritan forebears but not about their Hispanic forebears about whom they have as much right—if not more—to be proud.²⁷

The underlying metonymic belief motivating the Chicano literary intervention understands college undergraduates as stand-ins for the much larger percentage of the 10 million Mexican Americans not in college. The faith in Chicano literature's liberatory potential rests on the belief that a politics of redistribution—through which workers might begin to avail themselves of the profits their labor makes possible—is nested *within* a more primordial politics of recognition. The historical context supporting this view includes the publication in English of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). As Charles Taylor summarizes in his essay "The Politics of Recognition," Fanon "argued that the major weapon of the colonizers was the imposition of their

²⁷ Phillip D. Ortego Y Gasca, *We Are Chicanos: An Anthology of Mexican-American Literature* (New York: Washington Square, 1973), 296.

image of the colonized on the subjugated people.”²⁸ Freedom, in this account, is enabled through self-representational acts of resistance against the circulated caricatures of the oppressed. The gains made by social movements in the U.S. and liberation movements in Africa fueled the momentum leading to the establishment in Berkeley of the first independent Chicano publishing house, Quinto Sol. Through its journal *El Grito*, Quinto Sol offered a venue for articles, poetry, short stories, and visual artists’ portfolios, which collectively helped to debunk the existing social scientific mischaracterizations of Mexican “traditional culture.” In the social science literature of the time, Mexicans were depicted as “cultureless” or as having a damaging traditional culture that prevented generations of Mexican Americans from achieving individuality, goal-orientation, and economic success.²⁹ In 1969, Quinto Sol published the first anthology of Chicano literature, titled *El Espejo—The Mirror*, with a preface by Octavio Ignacio Romano-V declaring the importance of self-recognition through self-representation: “To know themselves and who they are, there are those who need no reflection other than their own. Thus... EL ESPEJO—THE MIRROR. Enough said... let this book speak for itself, and for the people that it represents.”³⁰ The metonymic power of Chicano literature invoked by the preface does not appear to require any explanatory commentary because it can speak for itself and for “the people.” The identity asserted by these anthologies’ titles (*We Are Chicanos*) creates a sense of unity between college students’ cultural alienation and workers’ labor alienation by suggesting that art “mirrors” both their experiences equally.

²⁸ Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” *Multiculturalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 65.

²⁹ Octavio Ignacio Romano-V, “Minorities, History, and the Cultural Mystique,” *El Grito* 1, no. 1 (1967): 5-11. Octavio Ignacio Romano-V, “The Anthropology and Sociology of the Mexican-Americans,” *El Grito* 2 (1968): 13-26.

³⁰ Octavio Ignacio Romano-V, “Preface,” *El Espejo—the Mirror: Selected Chicano Literature*. Quinto Sol, 1969, n.p.

The historian Juan Gómez-Quiñones recognized the divergence of the struggle for recognition and that of economic redistribution. In 1977, a year after *Heart of Aztlan*, Gómez-Quiñones published an essay titled “On Culture” that emphasizes how an ethnic culture is not synonymous with a working-class politics. “The problem of culture,” writes Gómez-Quiñones, “consists of understanding its makeup and its process historically and in contemporary times and understanding the relation of culture to conflict both conceptually and politically.”³¹ By “understanding culture” “historically,” Gómez-Quiñones means understanding it dialectically, the emergence of culture being a response to structural conditions. Such a culture, he argues, must actively be placed in the service of class struggle by academics (operating as “organic intellectuals”) who continually foreground class dynamics. Without this maintained connection between culture and class, culture will remain complicit in class inequality. “In sum,” he writes, “this essay explores the ‘problemática de ser Mexicanos y trabajadores’ [the problem of being Mexicans *and* workers]. The task is to work to bring about cultural unity on a given basis to a given end.”³² The question that Gómez-Quiñones leaves unaddressed, however, is whether the term “Chicano” could provide the interclass solidarity he advocates. Historically, that has not been the case because the “given end” to which Chicano culture has continually been brought to bear has been the perpetuation of the identity the culture helps enable. Indeed, if in 1977 Gómez-Quiñones called on organic intellectuals to use culture as the means toward class solidarity, by 2015 he came to see 1977 as the year the Chicano Movement lost its momentum.³³

³¹ Juan Gómez-Quiñones, “On Culture,” *Revista Chicano-Riquena* 5, no. 2 (1977): 290–308.

³² Gómez-Quiñones, *On Culture*, 29.

³³ In *Making Aztlán: Ideology and Culture of the Chicano Movement* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014), a comprehensive account of the historical emergence of the Chicana Chicano Civil Rights Movement (CCCM), Gómez-Quiñones and Irene Vásquez suggest the 1966 United Farm Worker March as a useful starting marker for the CCCM because it “indicated a visible sign of rising Mexican American public pro-equities sentiments” (6). The effervescent, collective sense of political possibility evident in 1966 showed signs of exhaustion by 1977, during the Immigrant Rights Conference held in San Antonio, Texas. The well-attended conference indicated a “transnational ethos” in which “previous tenuous camaraderies faded as did an ethos-driven

Periodizing Chicano Literature

Literary historians and critics too often describe all Mexican American literature as “Chicano literature,” which they tend to characterize as a literature of “resistance.” Resistance, in turn, is often defined as homologous with workers’ rights. This set of assumptions too often preclude historians and critics from seeing how “workers rights” and “Chicano literature” are not only not identical but ultimately discordant. Furthermore, these assumptions preclude them from seeing how works by and about Mexican Americans offer various and competing definitions of “self-determination.” Even literary historians have been insufficiently attuned to the moments in which Mexican American writers have engaged with (and not simply “resisted”) traditions as varied as British Aestheticism and American liberalism (in José Antonio Villarreal’s novel *Pocho*, for example), German Idealism and American New Criticism (in Villarreal and Tomás Rivera’s writing), and artistic modernism (in Gloria Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness). This inattention to such moments of engagement has led to a distorted view of the literary works in question and an inadequate account of twentieth-century American history.

Just to provide one example, which my first chapter develops, José Antonio Villarreal’s novel *Pocho* (1959)³⁴ presciently invokes an indigenous past as a way to resist Eurocentric standards of beauty. It appears to predict Chicano decolonial resistance. Yet the novel also shows the *limitations* of decoloniality’s inability to explain and address conditions of poverty. *Pocho* depicts the strained relationship between poor Okies and poor Mexican migrant workers, who share a class position that the Okie can psychologically counteract by having recourse to the myth of white superiority. The novel makes available a competing diagnosis of social injustice

will to act in concert” (6). The “transnational ethos” they highlight is indicative of the dissolution of “Chicano” as a unifying term that could address specific, targeted goals.

³⁴ José Antonio Villarreal, *Pocho* (1959; repr. New York: Anchor, 1989),

that emphasizes class exploitation (of both Okie and Mexican migrant workers) instead of invoking the persistent colonial subjugation of the indigenous by European invaders. But because the novel did not advance an ethnic politics, it was read by Chicanos as ultimately praising the superiority of whiteness instead of depicting its historical emergence, and his call for Mexican American writers to be “artists” instead of “hack politicians” was understood to be moral evasion instead of aspirational.³⁵

Anomalies in the evolutionary story of Chicano literature—works that neither “resisted” nor highlighted an ethnic identity—had to be explained away as either benignly “assimilationist” or presciently “pre Chicano.” Some novels—including *Pocho*—could not be dismissed by later self-described Chicanos because the works offered the very evidence of an ongoing culture that Chicanos wanted to highlight (the novels helped *produce* a Chicano literature). The novels thus required some mitigating efforts before they could be fully appreciated and seen *as* Chicano literature (the novels *became* Chicano retroactively). Ramon Saldívar, for example, helped rescue Villarreal’s *Pocho* from being too “embarrassing” to Chicanos by justifying its inclusion in the Chicano canon.³⁶ Saldívar claims that “later Chicano writers can become a reality only after [Villarreal’s protagonist] Richard Rubio postulates his own identity as a new and different source of personal, cultural, and political consciousness.”³⁷ For Saldívar, the telos to be reached is a “Chicano identity” and *Pocho* offers an important step toward its actualization. More recently, José F. Aranda similarly saves the writer Richard Rodriguez, who explicitly rejects Chicano politics, from being a “pariah” within Chicano Studies. For Aranda, the telos to be reached is Chicano “hybridity,” as most fully articulated in

³⁵ Francisco Jiménez and José Antonio Villarreal, “An Interview With José Antonio Villarreal.” *Bilingual Review / La Revista Bilingüe*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1976): 66–72, www.jstor.org/stable/25743667.

³⁶ Ramón Saldívar, ““A Dialectics of Difference: Towards a Theory of the Chicano Novel,” *MELUS* 6, no. 3 (1979): 76. Saldívar mentions this embarrassment but does not endorse it.

³⁷ Saldívar, “Dialectic,” 70.

the writing of Gloria Anzaldúa, and Rodriguez offers an important step toward its actualization.³⁸ Through the concepts found in the writing of Rodriguez—which progress in the writing of Cherríe Moraga then further progress in the writing of Anzaldúa—“Chicano studies has come into a new maturity.”³⁹ The narrative of the development of Chicano studies appears to be a Bildungsroman.

Against this teleological impulse, Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez chides Chicano scholars for not having taken heed of poststructuralist critiques of historiography. Although Chicano critics engage in what he considers “progressive” forms of scholarship (including canon critiques and archival recovery), they continue to employ “traditional means,” including a heavy reliance on teleology, on “chronology and successions of works and writers.”⁴⁰ But when Martín-Rodríguez provides an account of the changes within Chicano literature—in which he includes the 19th-century novels of Maria Ruiz de Burton—he inevitably falls back on the traditional means he comes to view with suspicion. In an earlier essay in which he tracks the developments of “Chicano Aesthetic Concepts,” Martín-Rodríguez describes the “relative unity that the Chicano Movement offered in the 1960s” and posits the later 1970s as “a period of reflexive maturity—of self-questioning.”⁴¹ Like Aranda, once the literature reaches a stage that is more to Martín-Rodríguez’s liking, he dubs it “mature.” Martín-Rodríguez might be more methodologically self-aware than previous literary historians, yet by calling all of Mexican

³⁸ Rodriguez “has inadvertently encouraged Chicanos/as to come up with more sophisticated answers to questions of citizenship, immigration, justice, and history” (26). Cherríe Moraga adds an emphasis on complexity (“If the choice is between the grayness of complexity and the fantasy of uniqueness, Moraga chooses complexity” [29]). Both Rodriguez and Moraga progress towards the articulation Aranda likes best, Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the borderlands: “Moraga is an interesting link between Richard Rodriguez... and Gloria Anzaldúa” [28-9]).

³⁹ Aranda, *When We Arrive*, 33.

⁴⁰ Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez, “‘A Net Made of Holes’: Toward a Cultural History of Chicano Literature,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 62 no. 1 (2001): 2.

⁴¹ Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez, “Aesthetic Concepts of Hispanics in the United States,” *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States: Literature and Art* Francisco Lomelí, Nicolás Kanellos, Claudio Esteva-Fabregat eds. (Houston, TX: Arte Público, 1993), 110.

American literature “Chicano,” he cannot help but fall into teleology and anachronistic projection.⁴²

The chapters that follow instead make a case for the periodization of Chicano literature, even though “periodization” has fallen out of fashion. I follow Juan Gómez-Quiñones and Irene Vásquez’s lead when they concede that periodization has its shortcomings.⁴³ The temporal movement of history cannot be explained by tidy “origins,” which are always multiple and diffuse. History does not offer decisively concluding “epiphanies” that settle the case once and for all. Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez nevertheless maintain that periodization can function as a useful heuristic. They suggest 1967 as the start of the Chicano literary renaissance, when Quinto Sol published such programmatic statements as Nick Vaca’s *Mexican-American Liberation Papers* (1967). They offer Anaya’s “ambiguous novel” *Tortuga* (1979) as an indicative endpoint to the renaissance. *Tortuga* projects a world “where all actions are individualized and also relative entities.” Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez’s account of Chicano literature and art is

⁴² Martín-Rodríguez’s account of Chicano literature is simply incoherent. He argues that throughout the history of Chicano literature, “Chicano” authors produced different texts for different readers, readers who in turn define the texts in question. “Chicano/a literature has had diverse audiences since its origins in those colonial texts,” he writes, a statement that is trivially true were it not for his qualification of the literature as “Chicano.” If different authors wrote for different audiences, and insofar as these audiences defined the type of literature in question, how can we understand these “colonial” audiences, authors, and texts as “Chicano”? For him, “a work of literature has no existence beyond the materiality of its physical components without a reader or a group of readers who would respond to, interact with, and make their own the precise formal arrangement of materials that a text or a book offers them” (2). A text exists as nothing but its brute material components (the pulp of the paper, the ink of its marks, the glue of its binding) until a reader activates its meaning. The ontology of a text *qua text* thus requires the circuit of constitution produced by the act of reading. But insofar as readers make the text “their own,” the meaning produced by one reader/interpretive community can and will differ from another’s. Literary history becomes the history not of literature but of reading practices. Insofar as the meaning of, say, the novel *Pocho* is constituted by its readers and not by its self-identity, the only grounds left for *Pocho* scholarship are sociological and historical. One could record the various ways people have constituted the novel throughout its history. But, on this account, the novel *Pocho* read in the 1950s, is not the same novel as *Pocho* read in the 1970s. So one is faced with the problem of identity: *Which* books should one study? Which interpretive communities should one track? How can the study of *this* interpreted book (whose meaning is brought into being by readers) be connected with the study of *that* interpreted book (whose meaning is brought into being by a different community)? What connects the interpretive communities themselves, to each other, across time? Literary historians are faced with the problem of positing the parameters of Chicano texts and Chicano readership, which ultimately cannot be resolved unless one presupposes the category “Chicano” and projects it onto various texts and interpretive communities. His account cannot help but reproduce chronology, succession, teleology, the very “traditional” methodologies he wants to reject.

⁴³ Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez, *Making Aztlán*, 270.

thoroughly instrumental. They thus contrast the “Tough graphic statements calling for public action” evident in “an angry stamped poster” of the 1960’s to the later 1970’s works of art “calling for inward reflection without the political” evident in “a sentimental watercolor.”⁴⁴ Some works of art galvanize political, collective action, others prompt solitary reflection and self-absorbed individualism.⁴⁵

Despite the periodization they provide, however, Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez appear unable to resist the temptation of claiming John Rechy’s popular novel *City of Night* (1963) as a Chicano novel. “Clearly,” they argue, “his work delineated the context and the circumstances from which sixties’ activities arose. Rechy’s Mexican American protagonist, an alter ego, was a pre-movement Mexican American youth seeking personal self-determination through the strength of his own will.” Their analysis begs the question of why readers should consider Rechy’s protagonist’s search for “self-determination” in light of the Chicano movement, whereas Anaya’s protagonist in the novel *Tortuga* should be seen as an “individualized,” “relative entity.” What is the difference between pre-Chicano self-determination and post-Chicano individualism, and how might we tell which is which? Their answer is syllogistically metonymic: “Arguably related to his border background, his creative work as well as his interviews and editorial prose garnered positive reviews.”⁴⁶ Because readers know about Rechy’s “border background,” and because his protagonist is Rechy’s “alter ego,” Rechy’s background has led to his and his novel’s success.

⁴⁴ Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez, *Making Aztlán*, 7.

⁴⁵ Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez’s account of Chicano literature and art is thoroughly instrumental. They thus contrast the “Tough graphic statements calling for public action” evident in “an angry stamped poster” of the 1960’s to the later 1970’s works of art “calling for inward reflection without the political” evident in “a sentimental watercolor” (7).

⁴⁶ Gómez-Quiñones and Vásquez, *Making Aztlán*, 270–71.

When we turn to Rechy's novel, however, we can highlight the moments in which it dramatizes the *reductiveness* of explanations having to do with one's "border background." The novel's most extended depiction of the rejection of this type of explanation involves a professor who enjoys categorizing the young male prostitutes he hires:

"Now to get to know you," he went on. "Let me guess your birthplace. Im good at this. You dont talk like an Easterner. Now where would it be likely you would have been raised Your descent first?" he asked me.... "Oh, yes.... The Southwest! Thats it!.... Texas!" And then he blurted the name of the city where I was born. I was tempted to say no, he was so smug, he had embarked on his game with such cocksureness. [sic]"⁴⁷

The "smug" professor is not mistaken, yet to the unnamed protagonist his sin here is that of presumption. The protagonist runs away from what he deems to be the parochial domesticity of his southwestern hometown, to the "freedom" of New York, yet his past seems to haunt him.⁴⁸ Reading provides him with the means to, as he puts it, "Escape!" Ironically, while he reads in the New York Public library, he is confronted by a stranger who identifies him as a prostitute and propositions him. "You've got me all wrong" is the protagonist's immediate response,⁴⁹ a response he repeats when another stranger propositions him in a bar. "His assurance bugs me," admits the protagonist, because he was "taking a lot for granted."⁵⁰ Another stranger assures him, "I can easily place you," by which he means he could find the protagonist other work with other johns. The phrase "I can easily place you" ironically highlights how easy the john *did* indeed "place him." He (like the professor) correctly identified him as a prostitute for hire, leading the

⁴⁷ John Rechy, *City of Night* (1963, repr. New York: Grove Press, 2013), 78-9.

⁴⁸ During his first paid sexual encounter, he looks at a picture of "a sad tree draped in something like moss [...] if I squint, the tree looks like a shawled Mexican. I stop looking at the picture immediately. I try to stop thinking...." (34). Whereas his mother's love had served as a foil to his father's abuse, the protagonist perceives her as emotionally stifling and stunting. Whether he feels guilt in this scene or frustration over not being able to leave his past behind him, the novel's point does not center on his reconciliation with his past.

⁴⁹ Rechy, *City*, 70-72.

⁵⁰ Rechy, *City*, 136.

protagonist to “feel a sharp resentment.”⁵¹ Although he tries to avoid identification, he is continually categorized, much to his irritation.⁵²

The model of the literary experience presented in *City of Night* is one in which reading enables the individual’s temporary escape from social identification. If people would just leave him alone and stop trying to figure out who he “is” and where he is from, his act of reading would at least momentarily provide him the freedom he desires. Indeed, the narrator’s blatant disregard for grammatical propriety points to an idiosyncratic writerly voice that is so specific to *this* protagonist that one could identify it by sight yet never know the protagonist’s name. The protagonist’s omission of his name and the name of his hometown emphasizes his disdain for origin stories. He rejects even the comfort of a psychoanalytic explanation for his life as a prostitute. So although his father molested him as a boy— giving him a nickel every time he fondled him— for the protagonist, the

Roots of rebellion went far, far beyond that. Beyond the father, beyond the mother. Far beyond childhood—and even birth. An alienation that began much earlier. From the very Beginning.... Something about the inherited unfairness—that nobody’s responsible but we’re all guilty.⁵³

The terms of the problem, for him, are existential. My point is not that Rechy is unsympathetic to the Chicano movement. Rather, my point is that *City of Night* does not affirm the power of

⁵¹ Rechy, *City*, 47.

⁵² When he visits New Orleans, for example, a stranger confronts him,
“Youngman!”

I cant tell where the woman’s voice is coming from. Im not even sure im being addressed.

“Yes, *you!*... Youngman. I have an Important Message from you!”

[...]

“Youve got me confused with someone else.”

“No. It’s for *You*. Come in,” she coaxed.

[...]

“Just got into town, didn’t you, boy?” she asked me.

I nodded.

“See!” she exclaimed proudly. “I *know!*” (350)

Just as the professor knows where the protagonist is from, and the johns know him to be a prostitute for hire, the stranger here easily pegs him as a greenhorn.

⁵³ Rechy, *City*, 433.

literature to reconnect an individual to his ethnic past and, through that reconciliation, to his identity as a Mexican American. The term “Chicano” not only does not help a reader interpret the novel, but even distorts what the novel depicts.

“Our Aztlan period”

My dissertation, then, shows the interpretive utility of thinking of the term “Chicano” as a historical term. I follow Ana Castillo’s character in the epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986) when she looks back on her life and writes, “We call it by name [...] 1974, ‘76, a moment of Southwestern influence, our Aztlán period.” “Chicano” should be understood as a category that was mobilized for specific albeit varied political ends at a particular time. The writing of earlier Mexican Americans only subsequently became categorized as “Chicano” because of the very objectives of the Chicano agenda of cultural empowerment.

My first chapter is set in 1959 and focuses on what used to be considered the “first” Chicano novel, Villarreal’s *Pocho*. *Pocho* shares a similar vision of the literary experience to that depicted in Rechy’s novel *City of Night*, which I describe above. For Villarreal’s protagonist, reading at the library allows him to “soar above the multitudes,” multitudes that would otherwise subsume his individuality.⁵⁴ Like *City of Night*, *Pocho* provides a vision of individual “self-determination” that is opposed to the communal “self-determination” invoked by Anaya and Chicanos like him.⁵⁵ *Pocho* is situated at the intersection of two competing accounts of “traditional culture” that started to clash at the end of the 1950’s: on the one hand, the liberal and sociological critiques of the supposed pathology and anti-individualism of traditional culture, and on the other hand a celebration of longstanding communal resilience found only within an ethnic

⁵⁴ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 180.

⁵⁵ Anaya dedicates *Heart of Aztlan* to “people everywhere struggling for freedom, dignity, and the right of self-determination.”

tradition. I argue that midcentury American novelists including Villarreal posited the novel as the genre uniquely equipped to explore the possibility of individual freedom as made possible through the achievement of the novel *as art*. *Pocho* simultaneously dramatizes the tragic consequences of the type of callow idealism that animates facile understandings of freedom (i.e., freedom from social expectations) while also enacting what a more enduring ground of freedom could be: a disposition toward social engagement—one of aesthetic distance—that allows for recognition without distortion, and social participation without loss of individuality, an aesthetic sensibility that enables the exploration of the limits of freedom while imagining, by enacting, its possibility.

After the Chicano intervention of the mid-1960s, however, such an exploration would have to be understood in communal terms (the “I” seeking freedom becomes the “we” of Chicano liberation) and be seen as operating *within* a Mexican American cultural tradition. Ethnicity was not something to be “transcended” in art but the very ground of communal self-determination as such. This intervention was in part meant to register the reality of an economy whose treatment of Mexican American laborers amounted to their complete objectification, rendering human life into fodder for agrarian commerce. Villarreal, like his liberal contemporaries, seemed to take for granted the luxury of a relatively stable economy in which one was free to explore his or her “individualism.”

Chapter 2 thus focuses on Tomás Rivera’s *...y no se lo trago la tierra* (1971), which dramatizes the historical emergence of a group consciousness that called itself “Chicano,” a self-awareness that entailed the recognition of one’s place in history as part of a people struggling to survive. Rivera defines “the Chicano” as a “life in search of form,” by which he meant a growing communal self-consciousness that sought to understand itself through art. No longer positing the

novel as the central genre, as it was for Villarreal, Rivera instead uses poems, short stories, essays, and a novella in concert—his oeuvre itself producing (by demanding) the type of reader who does not see the world as composed of discrete, alien objects. Instead, Rivera's reader becomes the type of person who can, as he puts it, seek to understand “the totality of the Chicano being”: “To relate this entity with that entity, and that entity with still another, and finally relating everything with everything else.”

But if the recognition of oneself as a Chicano was in part the result of a growing working-class consciousness, the sought-for *permanence* of this identity came to be perceived as sclerotic. The response to reification itself had a reifying effect. The explicitly Chicano representational strategies developed throughout the 1970s reached a point of exhaustion during the 1980s. “Chicano literature” could no longer be presented as “representative” of “a people” coming to know itself as such without significant qualification.

Chapter 4 thus shows how work by feminist writers took the question of “representation” as the very problem to be resolved in their work. Writers including Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Ana Castillo, and Alma Luz Villanueva experiment with genres (producing a blend of poems, journal entries, and letters) to create representational strategies that imagine the possibility of transcending representation as such. These strategies (which include “spectral haunting,” “blood memory,” and photographic indexicality) allowed writers to imagine a literature that did not speak for or represent a community so much as index that community's presence via its textual personification.

These strategies did not resolve the question of representation so much as reaffirm its centrality, which is why a separate kind of critique of Chicano representation was also necessary in the early 1980s. This critique, evident in the controversial writing of Richard Rodriguez and

“Danny Santiago” (Daniel James), highlights the political shortcomings of advancing “a literature” as such. By representing the “culture” of “a people”—a group that included the working class and the poor— *instead* of foregrounding this people’s exploitation, writers risked converting a condition of exploitation in need of material transformation into one demanding respect (deflating any impetus to change). Poverty becomes a stigma to be neutralized through empathy instead of a condition to be addressed with political and economic reform. Poverty and harsh working conditions (of, say, migrant workers) are treated *as* a culture, aestheticized by literature. I show how this critique did not obtain because it did not correspond with the most common diagnoses of the problems affecting American life.

Ultimately, my dissertation depicts the development and exhaustion of the representational strategies associated with the Chicano renaissance. I end the project by suggesting that the Chicano politics of recognition proved to be unable to instantiate the claims it set out to achieve because it defined “recognition” too narrowly. As Charles Taylor argues, by invoking Hegel’s understanding of “recognition,”

The struggle for recognition can find only one satisfactory story, and that is a regime of reciprocal recognition among equals. Hegel follows Rousseau in finding this regime in a society with a common purpose, one in which there is a “‘we’ that is an ‘I,’ and an ‘I’ that is a ‘we.’”⁵⁶

Chicanos converted the “I” of the individual artist into the “we” of the Chicano community but the recognition that this conversion enabled become simultaneously sclerotic and hollow, too rigidly defined and too empty of any actual representational weight. The Chicano identity invoked a community only to support the viability of its own subjectivity.

I conclude with a coda that studies what I call the Mexican American middle-class narrative. This narrative—as made available in the later work of Rolando Hinojosa, Arturo Islas,

⁵⁶Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994), 50.

Manuel Ramos, and Daniel Chácon— highlights the disappointment that ensues with the integration of Mexican Americans into the middle class. These works depict an ambivalent class's nostalgia for the working-class consciousness that had produced the conditions for Chicano solidarity. There is the lurking recognition that middle-class life is not, in fact, the good life it was thought to be. In Chácon's short story collection *Chicano Chicanery* (2000), Hinojosa's episodic novella *We Happy Few* (2006), and Ramos's *King of the Chicanos* (2010), literature is allegorized as the ironic corrective to disillusion, and its curators provide the sense of cohesion missing in middle-class Mexican Americans. The "middle-class narrative," then, tells the story of wanting to enter into a class that enables material comfort, only to discover that the very self-interest that brought the middle class into being fractured it into competing, self-interested desires. The pointed irony of this story centers on the writer's realization (allegorized in the works I mention) that he needs a Chicano community more than the working-class community needs the writer who claims to speak on its behalf.

However much these later works depict a nostalgia for the solidarity implied by the term "Chicano," they also show its waning relevance in regards to the more hemispheric sense of belonging captured by the term "Latino." This new term variously appears as hopeful and ambivalent: a more inclusive term, but one that erases the specific histories of racialization, political struggle, and economic inequality. In *King of the Chicanos*, for example, the term appears as the label that comfortable middle-class academics use, those whose interests do not coincide with a struggling community, the potential referents for the terms "struggling" and "community" abounding. These novels depict how middle-class individuals seek the recognition that "belongingness" enables, so the characters yearn for the Chicano politics of recognition even as this politics appears to be no longer viable.

This yearning could suggest the possibility that a broader albeit more philosophically specific account of “recognition” can yet motivate a collective sense of literary ambition, one that is not hobbled by social protest or a restrictive sense of “belonging.” This ambition could acknowledge one’s personal identity *as* personal, not to say solipsistic. This ambition could strive for a collective sense of recognition based on the notion of a differently defined “liberationist” account of autonomous art instead of the more restrictive and ultimately coercive understanding of the art of authenticity. My coda suggests that the literature that strives to be art presents a way that Rivera’s account of a “life in search of form” can remain vital today, one in which the “I” that becomes a “we” is no longer understood as “Chicano.” Whatever form this literature takes, the terms Chicano and Latino will probably be the wrong words to describe it.

CHAPTER ONE

THE NOVELIST AS ARTIST: JOSÉ ANTONIO VILLARREAL'S *POCHO*, LIBERAL FREEDOM, AND THE PROBLEM OF CULTURE

“In the course of my dissertation, I speak of literature as art, and as a novelist I speak of the novel.”¹

As José Antonio Villarreal's novel *Pocho* (1959) draws to a close, its protagonist Richard Rubio finds himself burdened with the weight of familial obligation. Responsible for his mother and sisters in the wake of his father's departure, Richard grudgingly assumes the “role of breadwinner.”² This position proves particularly devastating to a character who has consistently maintained a stance of detachment,³ to the point at which the overarching arc of his life has been a search for freedom. If life is to prove worth living, he feels, it need be first of all *his* and not the product of social coercion. He revisits the library, where he has always found the means to escape mentally his life's material obligations, at this stage in his life. And he seeks out another institution: “he enrolled in a course in Creative Writing at night school.”⁴ The reawakening of his interest in writing precisely when he feels his “self” dissolving into the “nonentity of the worker, the family man”⁵ suggests that self-expression and creative freedom might provide him the means of living the self-determined life he cannot otherwise maintain.

¹ José Antonio Villarreal, “Chicano Literature: Art and Politics from the Perspective of the Artist,” in *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*, ed. Francisco Jimenez (Tempe: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 1979), 162.

² José Antonio Villarreal, *Pocho* (1959; repr. New York: Anchor, 1989), 175.

³ While still a boy, for example, he and his father attend a Communist council meeting, which Richard observed with interest, “Always, however, there was a part of his mind that carefully observed from a detached point of view” (51). Richard can thus observe the Communists' impassioned pleas critically without succumbing to their rhetorical effect. And as a young adult, Richard begins to associate with a neighborhood Mexican American gang, “withdrawing” from them whenever he feels as if his association becomes too involved (155).

⁴ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 175.

⁵ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 180.

But at night school, “he does not learn a thing about writing.”⁶ Readers might understand Richard’s turn to a systematized form of instruction and its disappointing results as reproducing a version of the plot’s central conflict: the tension between individual consciousness and social convention, here manifested as the difference between the freedom of self-expressive creativity and the codified creativity taught in an institutional setting.⁷ But the novel does not comment on the nature of Richard’s disappointment. It focuses, rather, on his relationship with his classmates who were “educated and liberal.” Richard is initially enthusiastic about meeting them; here, at last, were *liberals* who might share his commitment to individual liberty, who might value not the suffocating traditions of divine mandate or moral doctrine but the self-governing individual’s ability to choose rationally the best “plan of life” for him or herself, as John Stuart Mill would say. Yet Richard soon realizes that *they too* “constituted a threat to his individuality” because “they considered him an interesting subject” only to the extent that his subjectivity remained legible: they “insisted he dedicate his life to the Mexican cause.” For Richard, “it was the same old story” he had faced throughout his life.⁸ What people see when they look at him is not an individual, but a type—a family man, a worker, a representative “Mexican.” And what such types should do, according to their narrative, is follow a path prescribed by others.

That the “story” besieging Richard’s life reappears in the context of a creative writing course—where one explores just what stories one might tell and how one might tell them—should prove significant for an understanding of *Pocho*. In a deeply ironic turn of events,

⁶ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 175.

⁷ After all, if writing does constitute a source of creative freedom, what could anybody teach Richard that he should not learn by himself, for himself? *Pocho* invokes institutionalized creative writing only to dismiss it, simultaneously delineating the historical availability of such courses but thematically rejecting their influence.

⁸ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 175. As the narrative voice describes earlier in the novel, “Everybody was telling him what he should make of himself these days, and they all had the same argument” (107). From a school counselor who tries to steer him to “automechanics [sic] or welding or some shop course, so that he could have a trade and be in a position to be a good citizen, because he was Mexican”; to a police officer who suggests that he pursue a career in law enforcement, “There’s a lot you can do for your people that way” (162); to a boxer who offers to train Richard, “Mexicans don’t get too much chance to amount to much. You wanna pick prunes the rest of your life?” (106-7)

however, the novel's thematized rejection of politics—from the nationalist politics of “the Mexican” to the labor politics of the supposed “nonentity,” the “worker”— came to be read by some critics as enabling a Chicano identity politics. In a 1979 essay advancing a theory of the Chicano novel, Ramón Saldívar argues, “That Richard does turn to the politics of change is apparent, I think, if only by the fact that the book that he has always hoped to write *is* written, as semi-autobiographical fiction, in the form of the novel *Pocho*.”⁹ The injunction that Richard should subscribe to “the Mexican cause” seems ultimately to be heeded as the novel is transformed into a prefiguration of “La Causa” of the Chicano Movement. For Saldívar, “*Pocho* is the central Chicano novel” because its plot provides the “paradigmatic Chicano narrative.”¹⁰ Francisco A. Lomelí makes the case even more explicitly in an essay that takes stock of, as his title states, “Contemporary Chicano Literature, 1959-1990”: “Despite the work's pretense to be accepted as one more novel within American letters, it clearly unfolds a distinctly Chicano worldview and thematics,” argues Lomelí, “Ultimately, the moral of the story is that people of Mexican descent have a rightful place they can claim their own that is both Mexican and Anglo American ...”¹¹ Insofar as the novel became significant to these readers, it did so not despite its relation to ethnicity but because of it.¹² For Richard, it is “the same old story,” still.

But what does the qualifier “Chicano” *do* for the novel and our understanding of it? What would it mean to take seriously instead *Pocho's* motivation to contribute to *American* literature,

⁹ Ramón Saldívar, “A Dialectic of Difference: Towards a Theory of the Chicano Novel,” *MELUS* 6.3, The Ethnic Perspective (1979), 78.

¹⁰ Saldívar, “Dialectic,” 79.

¹¹ Francisco A. Lomelí, “Contemporary Chicano Literature, 1959-1990: From Oblivion to Affirmation to the Forefront,” *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States*, ed. Nicolás Kanellos, Thomas Weaver, Claudio Esteva Fabregat (Houston, TX: Arte Público, 1993), 88.

¹² The novel had been out of print until 1970, when the Chicano cultural efflorescence produced a market for a second edition. This second publication required an explanatory introduction wherein Ramón Ruiz explains the novel's resistance to ethnic politics. As Ruiz explains, “the self-evident truth is that Villarreal wrote [*Pocho*] before the advent of the chicano movement.” Ramón E. Ruíz, “On the Meaning of *Pocho*,” *Pocho* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), xii.

or as Lomeli less charitably describes it, to be “one more novel within American letters”? What did this ambition mean to Villarreal, and why was it converted into a different “story,” the “moral” of which appears opposed to the story the novel would otherwise convey? The answers to these questions can not only inform our reading of *Pocho*; they can also begin to clarify how we think about the relation between American and Mexican American literary history during the mid-twentieth century. Because previous historians of Mexican American literature tended to stipulate a distinctly Mexican American cultural tradition, one that is relatively continuous and formed in opposition to American and European intellectual thought, they did not recognize how *Pocho* shows the limitations of an interpretive framework based on Mexican and Mexican American cultural continuity.¹³ Their stipulation precludes them from seeing the extent to which a liberal tradition informs *Pocho*'s ambition to *be* a distinctly, self-consciously American novel.

The following argues that Villarreal was driven by an aspiration to not only contribute to American literature but to do so by writing a *good* novel—a qualification I will define in terms

¹³ See Ramón Saldívar's *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1990), the very first sentence of which is, “In struggling for the retention of cultural integrity and an organic sense of unity, the Mexican American communities of the American Southwest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have produced a significant body of literary texts” (3). Because Saldívar stipulates a distinctly Mexican American “cultural integrity” and “organic unity” in *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (1990), for example, he can come to offer virtually identical readings of novels as different as Villarreal's *Pocho* and Americo Paredes's *George Washington Gómez* (published in 1990, but written between 1935-1940). To be sure, there are thematic similarities. Just as *Pocho* ends with Richard joining the US Navy (in the wake of the Pearl Harbor bombing), *George Washington Gómez* ends with the Mexican American protagonist, Guálinto, joining the Army as counter-intelligence border security (also during WWII). Referring to *Pocho*, Saldívar argues that “Richard's decision to enlist” in the Navy at the novel's conclusion should not be read as a “supreme contradiction” but rather as “a preliminary step in a dialectic of developing prototypical understanding” (66). Richard steps into the forces of history, thus “acquir[ing] a shadowy, in-between identity” and thereby learns to “abide on the borderline” (68). Similarly, “The ending represented in Paredes's novel should not be read as “apocalyptic ... it is, rather, an initial and tentative expression of the now widely explored complexities of Chicana and Chicano subject identity as a ‘heteroglot interzone, a hybrid overlapping.’” So, in Saldívar's view, insofar as Richard and Guálinto achieve a resolution to their existential identity crises, it is precisely the solution of the conceptually interstitial “borderland” that writers from the 1980s like Gloria Anzaldúa would advance. Mexican Americans writers contribute to a narrative (his *Chicano Narrative*) by dialectically resisting and teleologically progressing toward the terms enabling their self-identification.

of the novel's success *as* a novel.¹⁴ *Pocho* uses its generic conventions (characterization, unreliable point of view narration, nonlinear plot, dramatic irony...) not simply to reproduce the ideologies of its time but to offer the possibility of critiquing them. The novel strived to be art and, if achieved, this status would enable the possibility of carving out for *Pocho* a discursive vantage point that was distinctly its own. Given the lofty terms of this ambition, perhaps the project cannot help but fail, as some have argued,¹⁵ because the very terms enabling the discursive "transcendence" are the terms one would want to "critique." Yet Villarreal does not offer an explicit, positive account of what such a transcendence would entail; instead, he insisted *Pocho* was a tragedy, implying a sense of possibility that only comes into view negatively.¹⁶

Richard's brief, disappointing experience at night school is telling and doubly ironic because it demonstrates a critique not of liberalism (or night school) but of liberalism's failed

¹⁴ The terms "success" and "good" here are synonymous, and the achievement of this status is the achievement of the work's very ontology. This understanding of the "work" as "art" is not unique to Villarreal. His exact contemporary John Okada thematizes such an account of art in the novel *No-No Boy* (1957), in which the Japanese American protagonist cannot find a way to belong to American society after having been imprisoned for saying "no" to two loyalty questions in the wake of the Pearl Harbor bombing. He encounters another person in his situation who seems to have figured out a way to live a fulfilling life: "Maybe it's a little easier for me [...] I am a painter—that is, I think I am. I want to be a good painter, an artist." For him, being "a painter" is not a description of his actions but an aspiration he strives to *achieve*. The ontology of the products of his effort is contingent on their success as art: "If I had spent the time painting that I did talking," he confesses, "I might have had a painting now, a real painting" (197). He has produced works, of course, yet their status as "real" "paintings" depends on their *success as* paintings. On this view, something like the status of art must be achieved, and if it is achieved, it can exist as what it is, for itself. The aspiration to create that work, however fleeting its possibility, gives the character the solace to endure his lot as a Japanese American in the wake of WWII. This ambition could describe—should describe—Okada's own. The irony of *No-No Boy's* reception—much like *Pocho's*—is its being understood in relation to what Frank Chin in 1976 described as Okada's "yellow soul." John Okada, *No-No Boy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).

¹⁵ Rafael F. Grajeda argues that *Pocho* should be judged as an "unmistakable failure[e]" *qua* novel. The moral judgments are almost wholly made through a hero who, because he is unbelievable, cannot be trusted. When one considers that, as unbelievable as he is, the hero has the full sympathy of the author, the reader finds himself in the position of having to judge on more than literary grounds. Neither fictive character nor creator of the fictive character can be trusted. Literature and life, in this regard, touch at most significant points, and ultimately art is the liability.

The novel, in other words, is unintentionally inconsistent. Villarreal's desire to write a good novel fails, and this failure leads to the collapse of what would have been the novel's aesthetic distance from the discourse it would otherwise critique. Rafael F. Grajeda, "José Antonio Villarreal and Richard Vasquez: The Novelist against Himself," in *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*, ed. Francisco Jimenez, (Tempe: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 1979): 336.

¹⁶ See Roberto Cantú, "José Antonio Villarreal: Pioneer of the Chicano Novel." California State University, Los Angeles, accessed November 20, 2016, <http://readraza.com/joseantoniovillarreal.htm>.

enactment by “liberals.” This depiction of failure was published precisely at a time when midcentury liberals were calling *for* creative writing to be a healing force to what was perceived as an ongoing “crisis.” The irony of this scene indicates the novel’s broader narrative strategy wherein a negative depiction implies the unarticulated conditions of possibility.¹⁷ Richard’s experience at night school is meant to be registered as a missed opportunity, even as Richard himself does not recognize the event as such.

As I will show in what follows, attending to the novel’s continual use of dramatic irony allows us to begin to answer questions that *Pocho* raises about its relation to the “dominant ideologies of its time,” as Rosaura Sánchez puts it.¹⁸ Since its second publication in 1970, critics have examined the extent to which *Pocho* merely reproduces what Sánchez calls “the myth of individualism” as it was continually articulated during the midcentury. For her, the novel ultimately “accedes to the dominant ideologies and accepts their definitions of reality” by depicting “middle-class aspirations.” This is why Richard’s desire to “develo[p] his individuality [by] attending the university in order to become a writer” “fitted in perfectly well with a growing capitalist economy.”¹⁹ Although Sánchez is certainly right to critique *Pocho* in this way, what makes the novel interesting is its narrative awareness of its relation to the ideology she identifies. For example, the novel contrasts the goals of Richard and his Italian friend Ricky, their very names suggesting the comparison. Ricky imagines himself going to “Notre Dame or maybe U.S.C.” as his way of ascending to the middle class, whereas Richard insists to his mother, “I do not care about making a lot of money.” He wants to go to school for the development of his self: “I have to learn as much as I can, so that *I* can live... learn for *me*, for *myself*” (64; emphasis in

¹⁷ Amanda Anderson analyzes something like this dynamic, as deployed during the 1950s, in *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Rosaura Sánchez, “Ideological Discourses in *The Rain God*,” in *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*, ed. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 114.

¹⁹ Sánchez, “Ideological Discourses,” 115.

original). The desire to establish one's "self" (as a relatively free, self-reflective, rational individual) is not entirely identical to the aspirational class ambitions of bourgeois subjectivity even as the latter potentially could enable the former. The novel's simultaneous acceptance and qualification of something like "the myth of individualism"—what Robert Pippin provisionally calls "bourgeois philosophy," the "highest value" of which is "freedom"—is not simply ideological but exploratory: How can an individual *qua* individual *be* self-directing, if at all?²⁰ What would the minimal conditions of possibility be to live a life considered self-legislating?

As articulated during the postwar era, however, these questions too often reflected a conceptualization of "liberalism" that related to the economy but was usually detached from the problem of economic inequality and exploitation.²¹ In the wake of WWII, which led to a period of highly relativized economic stability in the U.S., liberal writers lamented the waning of "individualism" in a context that included a perceived totalitarian threat from abroad and a changing workforce. Whereas Richard agonizes about losing his "self" to the function of "worker," writers like William H. Whyte worried about Americans losing their "individuality" to their status as "bureaucrats."²² The "liberal consensus" in effect tabled questions of class

²⁰ See Robert Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²¹ "During the 1940s," argues Carol A. Horton, "a new understanding of American liberalism was consolidated that centrally featured a strong, principled stand against racial discrimination." This new "commitment to antidiscrimination was uncoupled from any conception of the more economic dimensions of racial inequality, as well as from any form of class analysis more broadly" (122). For Horton, this consolidation involved a "rejection of social democratic interpretations of the New Deal legacy" (126). Although most historians note the 1970's shift in the American economy—from manufacturing jobs to service sector work—Horton traces the shift to the 1950s, when cities including Detroit began to lose hundreds of thousands of jobs (129). Carol A. Horton, *Race and the Making of American Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²² William H. Whyte's bestselling *The Organization Man* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956) argued that the nineteenth-century American commitment to the Protestant Ethic's "pursuit of individual salvation through hard work, thrift, and competitive struggle" (4) had been replaced in the mid-twentieth century by a new "Social Ethic" of bureaucracy and complacency (6). Highlighting his account by turning to literature, Whyte argued that whereas popular fiction around the 1870s displayed the "Protestant Ethic in full flower," what passes for "realism" in the "popular fiction" of the midcentury masks a thoroughly ideological function: "by the use of detail, the flagrant plainness of their characters, they [popular works of "slick fiction"] proclaim themselves realistic slices of life." This deceitful realism continually dramatizes the irrelevance of individual responsibility in the face of institutions (252). Insofar as literature provides a picture of what constitutes society and everyday life, Whyte implies, the

exploitation in favor of attending to concerns about one's "character" and questions about "culture." Take, for example, David Riesman, Reuel Denney, and Nathan Glazer's *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950), a bestselling text whose argument *Pocho* continually paraphrases.²³ Summarizing the questions driving Riesman's work, Daniel Geary writes,

[W]hat kind of individuals would Americans become? How would they find meaning in their work in an economy increasingly dominated by large corporations? How [would they] spend their considerable leisure time to develop a sense of individuality? Riesman believed that middle-class Americans, unconstrained by the need to secure scarce economic resources, had the luxury of attempting to achieve more autonomous selves."²⁴

Notice the extent to which Riesman's line of questioning presupposes a degree of privilege: free of economic necessity, what will such a person do with his (presumably gender specific) time? Although Riesman considered *The Lonely Crowd* to be descriptive, not prescriptive, his pronouncements assumed the aura of advice and were read as such. The "autonomous," he writes, "are capable of conforming to the behavioral norms of their society," yet "they are free to choose whether to conform or not."²⁵ The autonomous can exercise this choice because they have the special capacity "of transcending their culture."²⁶ Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*

fiction that Americans *should* produce should instead promote and reinforce the notions of individualism and self-determination precisely by dramatizing these values. Yet, as Whyte's very examples show, the prominent novelists of the midcentury were producing the very picture of society that Whyte wanted, one comprised of individuals fighting (albeit unsuccessfully) against determination from without and for the freedom to live the life of their own choosing, against reductive mischaracterizations and for recognition. To read many of the other most enduring novels of the midcentury is to encounter a vision of the social good as motivated by individual effort and stunted by its limitations.

²³ Riesman describes a significant shift in American "social character," from "inner-directed" to "other-directed"; whereas inner-directed individuals tended to be self-motivated, self-reliant individuals with clear goals, "other-directed" types look to their peers and the mass media for guidance. Inner-directed individuals internalized their values from an early age, from parents and authority figures, and were able to translate these values into the self-motivation toward the pursuit of their self-determined goals. I subsequently refer only to Riesman, though I will have more to say about Riesman's collaboration with a poet (Denney) and a sociologist (Glazer) in what follows.

²⁴ Daniel Geary "Children of the *The Lonely Crowd*: David Riesman, the Young Radicals, and the Splitting of Liberalism in the 1960s," *Modern Intellectual History* 10.3 (2013), 606.

²⁵ David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: a Study of the Changing American Character* (New York: Doubleday, 1953), 278.

²⁶ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 282.

translates economic, political, and legal questions regarding the distribution of resources (Who had “leisure” time?) into a cultural question (Who had the right attitude toward “culture”?).

Villarreal simultaneously accepts this vision of society—one comprising individuals exploring the relation of their agency to external determination—while showing its limitations. When situated in the thick of characterization, setting, and plot, the otherwise rarified questions of “individuality” achieve a degree of entangled concreteness.²⁷ Villarreal dramatizes the failure of imagination that attended conceptions of the purportedly “universal” liberal subject not to dismiss the promises of liberalism but as a way to soberly evaluate these promises from within liberalism’s own terms. He joins the influential literary critic Lionel Trilling in critiquing the “liberal imagination” in order to, as Trilling puts it, “recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility,” which Trilling claims had come under pressure from a bureaucratic tendency to “organize the elements of life in a rational way.”²⁸ More than simply sharing a view of liberalism’s potential, Villarreal follows what Trilling sees as liberalism’s reinvigoration. “The will of our society is dying of its own excess,” argues Trilling, positing the *novel* as the genre uniquely qualified to rescue society by enabling the “restoration and

²⁷ To read some of the most enduring novels of midcentury is to encounter questions of (mis)recognition in the face of reductive categorization. Mark Greif persuasively argues in *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016, 148) “The writers of the turn of the 1950s urgently wanted to know whether there was any such thing as a human being outside of social types, and, if so, what that abstraction would mean for them. To discover this abstract man, they had to know first whether the identity as Jew or black or, indeed, any subset of men, any category by which men would be recognized, was a hindrance or an aid to reaching the purely human state.” So, just to provide a few examples, the protagonist of Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man* (New York: Vanguard, 1944) is an “unattached” man who does not work, and thus has as much “freedom” as he can stand. But because he has no job, he realizes, he has “no resources—in a word, no character.” Like Villarreal’s Richard, he joins the Navy and welcomes the Navy’s regimented discipline. The novel shows how even “unattached” figures remain tethered—“dangling”—because “man” cannot exist without the webs of influence forming the very parameters of character. Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* (New York: Viking, 1953) shows how the “influences” helping “form” Augie’s character were ready for him (45), and it shows Augie’s performance of a willful “opposition” to this determination: “No, I didn’t want to be what he called determined. I never had accepted determination and wouldn’t become what other people wanted to make of me. I had said ‘No’... To lots of people” because they had all “wanted to exert influence” (127). John Okada’s protagonist in *No-No Boy* (Rutland, VT: C.E. Tuttle Co., 1957) also says “no”—to the loyalty questions administered during the interment of Japanese Americans but also to people offering him a job in the wake of his return from prison. He does not want special treatment; he simply wants to be “an American.”

²⁸ Lionel Trilling, “Preface,” *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review, 2008), xxi.

reconstitution of the will.”²⁹ As he argues in the 1947 essay “Manners, Morals, and the Novel,” “there never was a time when [the novel’s] particular activity was so much needed, was of so much practical, political, and social use—so much so that if its impulse does not respond to the need, we shall have reason to be sad not only over a waning form of art but also over our waning freedom.”³⁰ Summarizing Trilling’s position, Mark Greif offers the aphorism, “No novel, no freedom!”³¹

It is especially revealing that in an endorsement on the back cover of *The Lonely Crowd*, Trilling calls the work not only “one of the most important books about America to have been published in recent times” but also “one of the most interesting books I have ever read.”³² Trilling, of course, *would* offer such a glowing review; Riesman implicitly affirms his own argument for the necessity of a literary practice. “Play,” Riesman writes in the book’s final section titled “Autonomy,” “may prove to be the sphere in which there is still some room left for the would-be autonomous man to reclaim his individual character from the pervasive demands of

²⁹ Trilling, “Art and Fortune,” in *The Liberal Imagination*, 266-267.

³⁰ Trilling, “Manners, Morals, and the Novel,” in *The Liberal Imagination*, 222.

³¹ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, 109. While admittedly extravagant, this account of the novel’s importance resonated in an environment that included the literary historical work of Robert Spillers and F. O. Matthiessen. Both historians also employed the language of “crisis” and posited literature and its history as a potentially redemptive bulwark against the assault on the values they considered constitutively American. When Spillers reviewed Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance*, he wrote, “In an era of crisis, a people naturally turns to its historians and critics and prophets for reassurance of its faith in its own destiny.” For Spillers, the nation needed to reflect on its identity and reaffirm, by reasserting, the qualities that made it unique, which it could do by studying its best cultural artifacts. Matthiessen agreed. After reading Spillers’s review, he wrote to him stating, “I was delighted that you singled out the democratic strain, which no other reviewer so far has given the weight which seems to me to attach to it” (53). For Matthiessen, what the “American Renaissance” writers achieved was the artistic exemplification of American democracy and individualism. Employing an implicit typology, he argued that Melville and his contemporaries of the “American Renaissance” actualized the revolutionary, distinctly American spirit, which in turn animated the Cold War efforts to renew the American ideals of freedom and democracy. The point here is not to claim a causal connection but to note the resonance. So although Ralph Ellison rejected the prescriptive accounts of “the critics” in an essay titled “Society, Morality, and the Novel”—surely meant to be seen as a kind of response to Trilling’s “Manners, Morals, and the Novel”—we can nevertheless register the affinity critic and author. Compare Trilling’s hortatory plea—for the nuanced writing of Henry James, against the determinism of Theodore Dreiser—to Ellison’s rejection of Richard Wright’s Dreiserian naturalism in *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952) and Wright’s own experimentation with existential philosophy in *The Outsider* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953). Ellison shared with Trilling the conviction that the American novel had acquired a fundamental role that surpassed mere entertainment: the novel, he argues, could be a “function” of “American democracy.” See “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy.”

³² Lionel Trilling cover endorsement, *The Lonely Crowd*, Doubleday, 1953.

his social character.”³³ Riesman does not specify what activities should constitute “play” as such, yet *The Lonely Crowd*’s myriad literary references—including mentions of Tolstoy, Edward Bellamy, and Henry James—suggest that literary production is one important source for the reclamation of individuality from the assaults of social determination. Given Riesman’s precondition for autonomy (the relative “transcendence of culture”), it is not surprising that *The Lonely Crowd* invokes a literary practice that opens up “a sphere” where this transcendence seems possible. “Thoreau,” he writes, “was a first-class surveyor; he chose this occupation ... as a well-paying one that would give him a living if he worked one day a week. Dr. William Carlos Williams is a popular general practitioner in Rutherford, New Jersey.”³⁴ The necessity of work and the reality of day-to-day subsistence are present for Riesman, but more than this, he sees work as the activity that enables a sense of freedom so crucial to the likes of Thoreau, a sense of autonomy so vital to the poetry of Williams.

So insofar as the precondition for autonomy is the ability to maintain one’s sense of “self-direction” in the face of social conformity, and insofar as “play” makes this transcendence apparent, we seem to have a practical solution to the existential questions Richard faces. If his dilemma centers on his inability to determine what to make of his life, because the existing plans for living available to him inevitably lead to misrecognition and social coercion, then the role of “writer” might offer a solution by offering the possibility of a socially recognizable role that remains true to his lifelong penchant for “detachment.” Richard could fully participate in life yet simultaneously mediate this participation through a writer’s point of view.

³³ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 315. Following Riesman’s concern that the mass consumption of media could lead to “other-directed” individuals who value conformity over “inner-directed” individuality, readers of *Pocho* could understand why Richard needs to become a writer and not simply a reader. In order for his autodidacticism to result in a self that is his own, *he* must become both the source and product of his efforts.

³⁴ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 314.

Indeed, the novel demonstrates how Richard has always possessed this artistic sensibility. Even as Richard feels the need to “withdraw” from a gang with whom he associates, he thoroughly enjoys a gang fight, “strain[ing] every sense, in order not to miss any part of this experience. He wanted to retain everything.”³⁵ Richard personifies the type of artist who luxuriates in intense experiences while simultaneously recognizing these experiences as potential content. From its very first full description of Richard as a young boy, the novel presents him as a thoroughly sensitive being whose “every sense responded to life around him,” an embodied responsiveness that is qualified by his desire to not intrude upon nature. As he walks outside, he simultaneously laments having to “trample” on the grass while enjoying watching animals “endowed with the ability to make play out of life.”³⁶ Richard cannot help *but* exist in the world, have an effect on it (the trampled grass), yet he can value a sense of play that his interest does not instrumentalize for its own ends: the animals’ “play” does not serve a function apart from its own self-satisfaction. Richard’s recognition and enjoyment of this kind of practical self-sufficiency—of this sense of autonomy—might lead him to realize that a non-instrumental notion of play could itself be the ground for his freedom as such.³⁷ Play, here, does seem to be what Riesman says it could be: “the sphere” wherein “man” can be “autonomous.”

“Absence of an education tradition”

³⁵ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 155.

³⁶ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 32.

³⁷ The novel’s early description of Richard places the young character in a distinctly post-Kantian aesthetic and decidedly liberal tradition wherein “play” is understood as a supremely important activity able to be cultivated in the study and practice of art. The exploration and cultivation of this aesthetic sensibility mirrors—perhaps even enables—the type of reflective self-direction that is the hallmark of post-Kantian liberalism, “enlightened” because of its deliberate scrutiny of systems of beliefs and their relation to authority and tradition. For a useful, cogent summary of post-Kantian aesthetics, particularly Schiller’s account of the “faculty of play,” see Nicholas Brown’s brilliant encyclopedic entry on “Aesthetics” in Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman, *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2005), 4-10.

But the problem with *Pocho*'s seemingly wholesale endorsement of Riesman's position is the suggestion that some relations to "culture" are more productive than others. More specifically, Riesman describes how what he calls "inner-directed" parents teach their children useful values whereas "tradition-directed" parents—he explicitly mentions Mexican parents—bestow suffocating traditions.³⁸ This all too familiar story concerns the supposed backwardness of traditionally "Mexican" ways of life.³⁹ At the time of *Pocho*'s publication, a story about the inadequacy of Mexican culture was already in circulation, most prominently in the social sciences.⁴⁰ In 1959—the same year that *Pocho* was published—the anthropologist Oscar Lewis published his infamous study of Mexico's "culture of poverty," *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. Lewis describes this culture as generationally perpetuating poverty and dependency.⁴¹ In both Riesman's critique of Mexican "traditional culture" and

³⁸ "The tradition-directed person" from countries including Mexico, argues Riesman, "hardly thinks of himself as an individual. Still less does it occur to him that he might shape his own destiny in terms of personal, lifelong goals or that the destiny of his children might be separate from that of the family group." This generationally perpetuated traditional culture "provides ritual, routine, and religion to occupy and to orient everyone" but does so by "control[ing] behavior minutely" and stifling individuality and self-determination.

³⁹ Villarreal continually uses language that is identical to Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, ventriloquizing it through Richard. Richard "saw clearly" how "the transition from the culture of the old world to that of the new should never have been attempted in one generation" (*Pocho* 135), just as Riesman argues that "In some cases" immigrants from countries like Mexico "were and are forced to make, in one lifetime, the jump from a society in which tradition-direction was the dominant mode of insuring conformity." Such an accelerated process of assimilation leaves a people scrambling for guiding models, argues Riesman, which *Pocho* delineates by showing how the breakdown of the traditional patriarchal way of life leads to a vacuum that his mother and sisters fill by following the lead of their American friends. And for Riesman, instead of producing a healthy sense of independence, the failed process of assimilation produces a "locus of resistance and resentment," he exemplifies by invoking the "costume and manners of the zoot-suiter," "a pathetic example of the effort to combine smooth urban ways with a resentful refusal to be completely overwhelmed" (51-2). Richard similarly observes the "marked hauteur" of zoot suiters "toward México and toward their parents for their old-country ways." Both Riesman and Richard understand the zoot suiters as attempting self-expression, yet they both show how these efforts are merely the products of "resentment," as Riesman puts it (52), and "compensation" as Richard describes (150). To Riesman, the zoot suiters' efforts are "pathetic" (52), and to Richard they are "ludicrous" (*Pocho* 150).

⁴⁰ See Octavio I. Romano-V, "Minorities, History, and the Cultural Mystique," *El Grito: A Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought* 1 (1967); "The Anthropology and Sociology of the Mexican-Americans" *El Grito* (1968), "Social Science, Objectivity, and the Chicanos" *El Grito* (1970).

⁴¹ According to Lewis, when a group of people must endure impoverished conditions for an extended period of time, they develop a set of values, beliefs, and practices that comprise a "design for living" and a "way of life." This "culture" proves itself to be "remarkably stable and persistent, passed down from generation to generation along family lines." Although it arises in response to deprivation, this design for living persists even when the conditions surrounding it change. Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York:

Lewis's analysis of Mexico's "culture of poverty," Mexican culture precludes productive, self-directing behavior and does not provide a model of what this behavior should be.⁴²

We can note the reductive danger of these sociological arguments by turning to their application in Luther S. Luedtke's essay from 1986 "*Pocho* and the American Dream." Luedtke celebrates *Pocho* as a paradigmatically American "novel of initiation."⁴³ Uncritically citing assimilation theory sociologists, Luedtke argues that self-determination requires a decisive break from a traditional culture: "Sociologists have discovered that Mexican-Americans hold onto their language and cultural habits more tenaciously than other immigrant ethnic groups; in general they have been the slowest to assimilate."⁴⁴ The sociologists he references enumerate the "factors retarding acculturation" that have "prevented the ultimate cutting of ties, physical and psychological, that propelled other immigrant groups in the Melting Pot. Absence of an education tradition has been another important deterrent."⁴⁵ Mexican American culture, here, is simultaneously the source of pathology ("preventing the cutting of ties") and lack ("absence of an education tradition"), which is why for Luedtke, "the importance of the *self* requires that Richard transcend the hereditary bond of family."⁴⁶ "Initiation" involves "assimilation," which itself involves leaving "traditional" ways of life behind. Assimilation appears as the ground of

Vintage, 1963), xxiv. Although the fifth family he studies in his infamous *Five Families* is "*nouveau riche*," they are nevertheless plagued by unproductive, regressive behavior (including sexual promiscuity) that for Lewis "reveals the extent to which the father in this family has carried over lower-class patterns to his new status." Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: New American Library, 1959), 16.

⁴² It is not a coincidence that one of the co-authors of *The Lonely Crowd*, Nathan Glazer, went on to co-write *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1963, second expanded edition 1970), one of the most influential accounts "explaining" why the Melting Pot theory of assimilation failed to describe why some ethnicities were less successful at assimilating and becoming upwardly mobile (the paucity of certain ethnicities' culture). It is also not a coincidence that *Beyond the Melting Pot's* co-author, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, went on to write one of the most infamous re-articulations of the "culture of poverty" thesis—the "Moynihan Report"—once again explaining why black people remain impoverished (their "pathological" way of life).

⁴³ Luther Luedtke, "*Pocho* and the American Dream," *Contemporary Chicano Fiction: A Critical Survey*, ed. Vernon E. Lattin (Binghamton, NY: Bilingual Press, 1986).

⁴⁴ Luedtke, "*Pocho*," 42.

⁴⁵ Luedtke, "*Pocho*," 42.

⁴⁶ Luedtke, "*Pocho*," 47; emphasis in original.

“universality”—“He [Richard] is a universal man”— a universality that seems possible only for non-ethnic American males. To be “free,” then, seems to require what Richard Rodriguez criticizes as an “acid bath”: “The price of entering white America is an acid bath, a bleaching bath... I mean the freedom to become; I mean the freedom to imagine oneself free.”⁴⁷ Insofar as *Pocho* seems to simply parrot Riesman and arguments like his, we have returned to Rosaura Sánchez’s critique: *Pocho* reproduces the “dominant ideologies of its time.”

This reproduction will appear as especially problematic to Chicano writers because a competing account of Mexican American culture was itself already in circulation. Just a year before *Pocho*, Americo Paredes had published an influential study of Mexican American border ballads titled *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and its Hero* (1958).⁴⁸ Paredes argues that the geographic isolation of the area along the Texas Mexico border led to a Mexican American “Cultural homogeneity,” a *culture* “of resistance against outside encroachment.”⁴⁹ With the perspective he makes available, it becomes possible to identify work that affirms—by contributing to—a distinct ethnic culture (part of the resistance), and work that capitulates to the demands of the hegemonic society (work that betrays its people). This perspective helps explain why in Paredes’s own novel *George Washington Gómez* (published in 1990, but written between 1935-1940) the designation “the leader of his people” regularly describes an early aspiration for his protagonist Guálinto.⁵⁰ Whereas Villarreal’s Richard continually questions just “who the hell

⁴⁷ Richard Rodriguez, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 140. In another example of ironic reception, readers too often take Rodriguez to be advocating *for* this acid bath, when his point—in a text titled *Brown*—is the exact opposite. Rodriguez historicizes the emergence of whiteness to identity within its history what he calls “the brown”: “White is an impulse to remain innocent of history... Brown marks the passage of time.” (139).

⁴⁸ Americo Paredes *“With His Pistol in His Hand”: a Border Ballad and Its Hero*. 1959. (repr. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Paredes, *Pistol*, 241, 244.

⁵⁰ Americo Paredes, *George Washington Gómez* (Houston, TX: Arte Público, 1990), 300.

were his people”⁵¹—then later, “I’m no Jesus Christ. Let ‘my people’ take care of themselves”—Paredes’s Guálinto can at least temporarily realize, referring to a group of dark-skinned Mexicans, “These were his people, the real people he belonged with.”⁵²

We have, then, two competing accounts of “Mexican” “culture,” both of which began to come to a head during the late 1950s: on the one hand, liberal writers dismissed Mexican culture as inadequate or nonexistent; on the other hand, Mexican American writers began highlighting a long cultural tradition showcasing precisely how this culture had always enabled productive engagement. Situated at the discursive intersection of these competing accounts, *Pocho* chooses the liberal critique of “culture.” What was then considered one of the first—if not *the* first—novels written by a Mexican American appears to succumb to the very reductive narrative that Chicanos wanted to dismantle.⁵³ Indeed, according to the novelists Tomás Rivera and Rolando Hinojosa, the Chicano literature of the late 1960s and 1970s emerged precisely as an effort to dismantle the “stereotyped view of the Mexican-American” prevalent in both the social sciences and broader American literature.⁵⁴ But given the very entailments of the Chicano intervention, it

⁵¹ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 162.

⁵² Paredes, *George Washington Gómez*, 247. Although readers might experience some degree of surprise with both novels’ conclusions (Why would Richard, who rejects social categorization, ultimately join the Navy? Why would Guálinto, a would-be race leader, accept a position spying on his people?), the bitter irony at the end of *George Washington Gómez* is meant to register as disappointment; early in the novel, Guálinto’s mother predicts, “he’s going to grow up to be a great man who will help his people” (16), yet in the novel’s concluding scene Guálinto—who now goes by “George”—will be called a “*vendido*,” a sellout, *by* his people (294). Paredes’ characterization of assimilation as betrayal implies the desirability of ethnic loyalty. Not only could Guálinto have chosen to help his people, he should have.

⁵³ It would not be an exaggeration to say that many of most well known Chicano novelists significantly rewrite portions of *Pocho* in their work. See for example Rudolfo A. Anaya’s *Heart of Aztlan* (Berkeley: Editorial Justa, 1976), which he dedicates to “people everywhere who have struggled for freedom, dignity, and the right of self-determination.” Instead of starting with the Mexican father-figure’s perspective only to transition to the American born son’s story, *Heart of Aztlan* begins with the son’s perspective only to emphasize the importance of his father’s. And whereas *Pocho* imagines a future for the first generation son, *Heart of Aztlan* shows this son’s street life as a dead end—literally crippling the son at the novel’s conclusion. The novel concludes with the father’s realization that he is a part of his family and ethnic community who share the same the same cultural history and mythic homeland: the “heart of Aztlan.”

⁵⁴ It is, according to Rivera, “the reflection of a false interpretation of the Chicano, sociologically and anthropologically.” Tomás Rivera, “Into the Labyrinth: The Chicano in Literature,” in *Tomas Rivera: The Complete Works* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2008), 266. Hinojosa agrees; for him the novel, “to a considerable degree, has

would be insufficient simply to exclude *Pocho* from the Chicano tradition as a benightedly “individualistic” novel when this tradition and its literary history benefit from *Pocho*’s existence. First published by Doubleday, then one of the largest American publishing companies, *Pocho* served as evidence of the very Mexican American creative potential that Chicanos wanted to highlight. This recuperation has taken the form of efforts including Ramón Saldívar’s (“*Pocho* is the central Chicano novel”) even though these efforts perform precisely the type of categorization that *Pocho* continually eschews.

“The oppressors, the rich ones”

When we turn to the novel itself, a more complicated story emerges than the simple proto-Chicano/anti-Chicano narrative would have us believe, and the *manner* in which this story is conveyed demands our critical attention. The novel periodically digresses from its central plot and offers the reader informed, historical explanations unavailable to the characters. An early section, for example, momentarily halts the plot in order to provide the backstory of “Mario,” one of the many Mexican immigrants who “did not reason, did not know, had but a vague idea of his battle.”⁵⁵ The relatively insignificant character would have gone unnamed had it not been for the plot’s digression and the narrator’s more informed point of view—which seems even to know Mario’s motivations better than he knows himself.

This digression echoes the novel’s opening gambit, which instead of starting with the protagonist’s story begins with his father’s, a Mexican revolutionary figure named Juan Manuel. Like Mario, Juan Manuel “became a part of the great exodus that came of the Mexican

served as a misleading sociological interpretation of the Chicano.” Rolando Hinojosa, “Mexican-American Literature: Toward an Identification” *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*, ed. Francisco Jimenez, (Tempe: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 1979), 10.

⁵⁵ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 19.

Revolution.”⁵⁶ Juan Manuel is introduced in a scene where he murders a Spaniard, which he justifies by claiming that the Spanish “must be driven out of México” lest their “milk” continue to “flo[w] into our women!”⁵⁷ The Mexican Army General who is supposed to arrest Juan Manuel is instead chastised by him for boasting of all the “well-bred” white women he enjoys in the border city of Juárez. Reprimanding the General for “forgetting” his “big white breeches and huaraches [sandals],” Juan Manuel exhorts him to remember his culture: “Do you not remember that our people have better manners than this aristocracy, that our ancestors were princes in a civilization that was possibly more advanced than this one? [...that] the india [the indigenous woman of Mexico] is still the most beautiful woman in the world.”⁵⁸

Read one way, Juan Manuel’s actions and rebuke could be understood as anticipating the “internal colony model” that became prominent in Chicano scholarship during the 1970s, in which Mexican and Mexican American social marginalization was seen as part of a long tradition of colonial subjugation.⁵⁹ Juan Manuel’s characterization of Mexico as an “aristocracy”—even though Mexico had declared its independence from Spain a full century prior— displays the persistence of a colonial power structure in which light-skinned colonial elites maintained their control by perpetuating a value hierarchy that naturalized the subjugation of the indigenous. By emphasizing the beauty of the indigenous and characterizing its appreciation as an act of memory, Juan Manuel’s counter aesthetic enables a resistant “decoloniality” that counteracts contemporary problems by celebrating an older, native cultural tradition.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 15.

⁵⁷ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 7.

⁵⁸ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 8.

⁵⁹ See Charles M. Tatum *Chicano and Chicana Literature: Otra Voz del Pueblo* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 2006), 28.

⁶⁰ What came to be called the Chicano Movement of late 1960s and 1970s involved a similar circulation of Pre-Columbian iconography as part of a counter-aesthetic negating the Eurocentric standards of beauty. The myth of

Yet the ironic distance between Juan Manuel's self-understanding and the narrative's perspective significantly qualifies the explanatory value of this framework by exposing Juan Manuel's commitments as misguided. In order for Juan Manuel's characterization of the problems plaguing Mexico to remain consistent, he needs to stipulate a unifying identity that aligns the oppressive Spanish colonizers to their present-day counterparts while maintaining a clear-cut separation between the colonizers and their indigenous victims. The novel's mention of Juan Manuel's "fair" skin and "blue-grey" eyes—on its very first page—suggests that his vulgar nativist desire to keep European "milk" out of Mexico is misdirected because futile, as his very body shows.⁶¹ Indeed, although some of the revolutionaries fighting alongside Juan Manuel's contemporary Emiliano Zapata were the Náhuatl-speaking, huarache and white breaches-wearing descendants of subjugated indigenous tribes, they were not fighting "the Spanish." Rather, Juan Manuel and his fellow revolutionaries fought the Mexican Federal Army in an attempt to replace the Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz, who for over three decades had enabled the accumulation of vast amounts of wealth and land in the hands of a concentrated Mexican elite.

Juan Manuel's actions are better explained, because motivated, by a left-leaning class politics; such a politics helps explain why he helps poor white migrants ("Okies" and "Awkies") who travel to California during the Great Depression, and why his new friends in the U.S. are all *Spanish* immigrants. As Juan's wife explains to Richard, who points out the apparent contradiction, "when he says [negative things about] the Spaniard, it does not mean that he is against the race, only that it fell upon the lot of the landowners to be Spanish."⁶² Spaniards in Mexico "were the oppressors, the rich ones," but the Spaniards living in the U.S. "are different—

"Aztlán"— which names the original homeland of the Aztecs, said to be located within the area annexed by the U.S. — became popular in part because it provides a useful symbol and narrative that unifies Spanish colonialism and American imperialism.

⁶¹ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 1.

⁶² Villarreal, *Pocho*, 101.

they are also from the lower class although some of them take on airs here.” The novel’s one mention of the term “Chicano” appears as structurally equivalent to “Okie,” both referring to poor migrant workers exploited by Californian landowners. This structural equivalence does not dismiss their racial antagonism but helps explain its prominence. As Juan Manuel describes, the landowners’ self-interest benefits from Chicanos and Okies competing against themselves, vying for employment and thereby driving down the cost of their labor.⁶³

These scenes thus depict the gradual emergence of Juan Manuel’s historical self-understanding and the consolidation of “whiteness” as a form of compensation for poverty but not its primary cause (the causes, as the novel is well aware, include plunging farm incomes, devastating droughts, and the economic depression of the 1930s). Racism is the way the Okies—like the poor Spaniards—might feel better about their plight; they may be poor but thank god they’re not brown. Anticipating the academic cottage industry of “How the X Became White” titles, *Pocho* stages a brief history lesson about the consolidation of “American” as a category of ethnic deracination available to those whose phenotypes are not as readily racialized. When the Japanese character Thomas Nakano tries to assure his friends (and himself), “I’m an American, just like you guys,” the historical context of this statement—the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor bombing—betrays the profound limitations of his declarative self-identity. And when the young character of Italian descent named Ricky Malatesta admits, “I’m going to get myself an American name, ‘cause Malatesta’s too Dago-sounding. I’ll change it to Malloy or something,”⁶⁴ he reveals the extent to which becoming an “American” is more available to less obviously-marked ethnicities. Malatesta can become Malloy, but Nakano remains Japanese, which is why,

⁶³ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 124

⁶⁴ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 111.

by the end of the novel, while Nakano and his family are forced to locate to a Japanese internment camp, Malatesta prepares for Officer Candidate School.

The novel, then, portrays the development of whiteness not as a formula to be followed but as a problem to be addressed; the promise at the core of America citizenship was not extended to all Americans. But it is precisely in its dramatization of this problem that it most follows the lead of Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, which argues that Mexican immigrants face a racialized "value hierarchy" perpetuated by the American media. This hierarchy, argues Riesman, devalues their "facial type or coloring" and thereby precludes their incorporation into "managerial or professional positions."⁶⁵ The novel shows this dynamic in effect when depicting young Richard's self-identification with the heroes of 1930's American Westerns: "I am Buck Jones and Ken Maynard and Fred Thompson, all rolled into one—I'm not Tom Mix [however] because I don't like brown horses."⁶⁶ Insofar as the bad guys of such titles as *The Texas Ranger* (1931) and *Border Law* (1936) tended to look a lot like him, Richard's identification could lead to something like self-hatred. In a historical detail that Villarreal surely knew, the one actor Richard rejects, Tom Mix, actually fought against the Mexican Federal Army in the famous Battle of Ciudad Juarez—a battle that Richard's own father is proud to have fought in. Richard, in short, appears to be rooting for the wrong side.

His very preference for white horses indicates this false consciousness: "They call it breeding," Richard tells his father, "regular horses have small feet" whereas plow horses, have big wide feet."⁶⁷ Richard's evocation of "breeding" echoes the General's mention of "good breeding" and the implications one could draw out are rather obvious. Richard, immersed in the American pop culture of the 1930's, could potentially grow up believing not only that white

⁶⁵ Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 50.

⁶⁶ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 96.

⁶⁷ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 97.

horses are better, but also that certain kinds of bodies (the browner ones) are better suited to perform hard labor. This racial sorting into disparate classes is portrayed later in the novel, when Richard's high school advisor assumes that he is not a good candidate for college prep courses, guiding him instead to "automechanics or welding or some shop course, so that he could have a trade and be in a position to be a good citizen."⁶⁸

But notice how, by following Riesman's lead, the novel's implied assessment of Richard's potential false consciousness differs in kind from Juan Manuel's class analysis: whereas Juan Manuel comes to realize that American society consists of competing class interests, the novel's depiction of the problems of racialization suggests a picture of society as ultimately sorted by race. So although Juan Manuel comes to realize that he could share a sense of solidarity with poor Spaniards and even poorer Okies, Richard remains focused on the status of his individual freedom in relation to forces of racialization that would preclude his life's options. The novel provides two different accounts of the problems affecting American society: one of exploitation, the other of exclusion. In a characteristic move of the American mid-twentieth century novel, *Pocho* ultimately emphasizes the fundamental problem to be addressed as the assault against individual autonomy, of the importance of developing one's character.

"An idea of will itself"

But even this delineation of the importance of self-development is itself not without significant qualifications. *Pocho*'s concluding scene portrays him on a train, bound for Naval training, thinking about the people who have had an influence on his life, and decidedly breaking from them:

⁶⁸ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 108.

He thought of all the beautiful people he had known.... What of them—and why? Of what worth was it all? His father had won his battle, and for him life was worth while [sic], but he had never been unaware of what his fight was. *But what about me?* thought Richard.

Because he did not know, he would strive to live.

He thought of this and he remembered, and suddenly he knew that for him there would never be a coming back.⁶⁹

Unlike the character Mario who “did not reason, did not know, had but a vague idea of his battle,”⁷⁰ Richard describes his father as having ultimately “won his battle,” having ultimately selected for himself the type of life he wanted to live.⁷¹ Although Richard admires his father for his sense of conviction,⁷² in order for Richard to confront his destiny, depicted throughout the novel as cyclical repetition, he needs to reject his father’s commitment to a “cause.” So although he too becomes a soldier, apparently fated to repetition after all, Richard enlists in the Navy simply to escape his “role as breadwinner”— *not* to defend the beliefs he could claim as his own without contradiction: freedom from totalitarian imposition, the right to deliberative democracy, the value of individual life regardless of religious creed or background. Richard’s individualism is decidedly self-involved.

This concluding scene delineates Richard’s continued search for his own life’s purpose, offering at least two possibilities. The second to last sentence suggests an affirmative outlook on life that takes his self-centeredness in a positive direction: “Because he did not know” what makes his life “worth while,” he will make of this life a constant search for its self-worth. The novel’s concluding sentence, however, refers to a recollection that seems to interrupt this affirmation, barging in as the return of the repressed. What he recalls is not described, but we could read the sentence as the sobering realization that “to live” *necessarily* entails social

⁶⁹ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 187.

⁷⁰ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 19.

⁷¹ Juan Manuel knew what is life was about, however contradictory this life remained. Juan Manuel ends up betraying the two things he tells Richard he must uphold: allegiance to his people and to his family. In one last attempt to reassert his position as patriarch— policing women’s bodies and ensuring the rigidity and (to him) comforting clarity of gender normativity— Juan Manuel leaves his family for his countryman’s wife.

⁷² Villarreal, *Pocho*, 101.

relations. The fullest articulation of the desire to transcend the expectations of others thus seems to amount to a death wish because whatever form “coming back” takes will always result in the same predicament. Of the two competing conclusions—one affirmative, the other tragic—the novel lands on the latter.

Yet the novel’s last sentence—which offers an interruption that takes place as a recollection *within* a brash, younger mind, which is to say within the scene’s diegetic space—does not present the novel’s ultimate statement. That last word belongs to the narrative voice that has on several earlier occasions broken the plot’s temporality. Commenting on Richard’s naiveté from a point of view situated in the future, this wizened perspective periodically interrupts the novel to highlight how Richard “did not know that he could never be really free” despite his unwavering independence.⁷³ “The young,” the narrator observes, are arrogant enough to believe that “nothing is impossible” including the transcendence of the “abstract bonds” that will always anchor one’s life.⁷⁴ Although apparently jaded, this narrating perspective *has* learned something that the protagonist has not (at least, not yet): the network of associations that inevitably surround one’s life cannot be simply disavowed. To think so would be naïve.

Here again, the novel emphasizes a distinction between a character’s naiveté and the narrator’s more informed perspective—a perspective that, as commentators including Ramón Saldivar have pointed out, could belong to Richard himself. The novel’s narrative conceit allows for the interpretive possibility that Richard not only survives the war but returns to delineate his life’s story. This delineation is ultimately tragic (“there would never be a coming back”). This tragedy, however, is highly qualified by what we can understand as a retroactive achievement of consciousness that ultimately recognizes its ability to continually explore the possibility of its

⁷³ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 117.

⁷⁴ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 153.

flourishing by narrating *itself*, even as— especially as—the possibility of this flourishing remains under assault.

The novel comments on tragic narratives and qualifies their function when, after watching a movie, Richard's mother Consuelo (Spanish for "consolation") considers tears to be the "mark" of a "good story"; she "cried and cried" and felt "relaxed, like after a good laxative."⁷⁵ What could be characterized as catharsis is instead likened to a relieving shit. The narrative intrusion of the word "laxative" distances the mother's criteria from the novel's: the story his mother would consider "good" is not the story Richard ends up writing, which readers could instead consider "great" based on a set of criteria available at the time of *Pocho*'s publication. According to Trilling, "The novel at its greatest is the record of the will acting under the direction of an idea, often an idea of will itself."⁷⁶ Assuming the perspective Trilling makes available, we could argue that *Pocho*'s ambition to be a great novel is centered on the tempered triumph of Richard's will continually considering the conditions of its own flourishing, the *evidence* of which is the existence of the novel itself.

Pocho thus simultaneously dramatizes the tragic conclusion of the type of callow idealism that animates Richard's facile understanding of freedom (as freedom from social expectations) while also *enacting* what a more enduring ground of freedom could be. It shows how it is not enough to simply profess one's commitment to self-determination in the abstract; one must establish the conditions of its possibility. So instead of paying lip service to a body of ideas one might call "liberal," the novel delineates a disposition toward social engagement— one of aesthetic distance— that allows for recognition without distortion, and participation without

⁷⁵ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 126.

⁷⁶ Trilling, "Art and Fortune," 266.

subsumption, an aesthetic sensibility that enables the exploration of the limits of freedom while imagining, by enacting, its possibility.

Should Richard survive the war, as his author did, he could finally “go to the university,” despite his mother’s insistence that it is his “duty to take care of us.”⁷⁷ Richard could join the thousands of other veterans availing themselves of the GI Bill, and with his novelist’s eye, take his place in the growing English departments of American institutions of higher learning. These departments were then starting to offer more robust courses in American literature, which would have used the newly published literary historical texts by F. O. Matthiessen and Robert Spiller, texts that helped institutionalize a vision of American literature as a noble object of study because it reinforced the (“American,” “exceptional”) values of independence and self-determination. He would have thought about the types of stories he would tell in a context in which storytelling assumed a degree of heightened significance on which the very possibility of individual freedom seemed to depend.

I am of course not suggesting Villarreal simply *is* his character. Rather, the novel’s conceit suggests that Villarreal’s character becomes its own author (or narrator), a process that would have led him to the university. There, Richard would have learned about an aesthetic tradition that Villarreal in fact invoked during the annual meeting of the MLA in 1975, in a talk (later published as an essay) titled “Chicano Literature: Art and Politics from the Perspective of the Artist.” Villarreal distances himself from the “politics” of his title and aligns himself firmly with “art.” He references Wimsatt and Beardsley’s essay “The Affective Fallacy” to help reinforce the distinction between the work of art’s ontology and its potential political effects. He accuses Chicano scholars of confusing the two: “By making what the work *did* more important

⁷⁷ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 171.

than what it *was*, the work itself lost its identity as an artistic object.”⁷⁸ Villarreal does not deny the importance of emphasizing one's Mexican heritage. Nor does he deny the possibility that literature written by Mexican Americans could "lay bare, for the world to see, the soul of our people.”⁷⁹ Yet—using *Pocho*'s native idiom—Villarreal describes how some authors are “categorized” as Chicano despite their own “intentions,” a categorization whose “sphere of influence” he rejects insofar as it seeks to dictate what his work should be. “Either we maintain our commitment to art,” he argues to the room of writers and critics of Chicano literature, “or dance to whatever tune is prepared for us.”⁸⁰

In light of this argument, a seemingly casual reference he makes to the year 1848 speaks volumes about his commitments. He invokes 1848 *not* as the start of a Mexican American self-awareness as both “Mexican” and “American,” a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; rather, 1848 for him marks the beginning of the “Aestheticist Movement,” which defined literature “in the purest sense” as “art-for-art's sake.”⁸¹ The tradition he invokes thus extends from the Aestheticists to the New Critics, a decidedly formalist tradition that highlights art's ontological self-legislation separate from the (political, affective, social) effects this ontology might have on an audience. Novelists, in the purest sense of the word, should strive to produce art, which is why his own novel does not pursue political goals nor induce readers' tears. It strives instead to achieve the status of art and in so doing establish the beleaguered conditions of autonomy's possibility.

“Have been almost silent”

⁷⁸ Villarreal, “Chicano Literature,” 164.

⁷⁹ Villarreal, “Chicano Literature,” 167.

⁸⁰ Villarreal, “Chicano Literature,” 162–63.

⁸¹ Villarreal, “Chicano Literature,” 162.

Villarreal's MLA paper evinces his frustration concerning *Pocho*'s reception, which from the start understood the novel in relation to Villarreal's ethnicity. In an early review published in *The Nation* in 1960, for example, John Bright writes,

Unlike Negroes, Jews, Italians, Irish and other second-class citizens, the million-odd immigrants from Mexico and their second-generation offspring have not yet produced their spokesman and their bards. Therefore *Pocho*, a first novel by a young Californian Mexican, is notable not only for its own intrinsic virtues, but as a first voice from a people new in our midst who up to now have been almost silent.⁸²

For Bright, *Pocho*'s value lies not simply in its "intrinsic virtues" *qua* novel but in its capacity to express a particular, ethnically marked group of people.⁸³

Although Bright's well-intentioned review shares with Chicano literary critics the assumption of a novelist's representative role, his review seems to refer only to the 1940s' influx of Mexican immigrants ("new in our midst") who helped fill vacant jobs during WWII, either through the government-subsidized Bracero Program or as undocumented workers. He ignores (or is ignorant of) the generations of Mexicans whose homes had already existed within what became the southwestern part of the United States since long before the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. "Mexicans Americans" seem to him to be a homogenous group of "second-class citizens" who are not included in the "us" of *The Nation*'s reading public. And if we recall that this characterization of Mexican Americans' "silence" had been underwritten by then prominent social scientific accounts of Mexican American "passivity" and political disengagement, we can register how Bright's review demonstrates a form of marginalization that

⁸² John Bright, "The Cut-Off People" *The Nation*, January 9, 1960, 36.

⁸³ Such an understanding of the novelist's function—as ethnic spokesperson—would become paradigmatic during the 1960s. From Saul Bellow's "so-called Jewish novel," as Alfred Kazin described it in 1971, to John Okada's *No No Boy* (1957), who Frank Chin in 1976 described as representing the "yellow soul," critics invoked the injunction that novelists function as representative "spokesmen" for their race, even when the writers' work dramatized a profound ambivalence to—if not outright dissatisfaction with—racialization and ethnic group identity. Alfred Kazin, *Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Story Tellers from Hemingway to Mailer* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 130.

it unwittingly characterizes as Mexican American cultural deficiency.⁸⁴ Seen from a different perspective, one that the Chicano intervention makes available, Mexican Americans have always produced their own forms of expression since as long as there have been “Mexican Americans.” Their “silence” has been the result of the continued exclusion of their contributions from the sanctioned existing national histories. Chicano literary historians thus fought to establish the critical apparatus that would help highlight a long tradition of Mexican and Mexican American cultural production.

By the time Villarreal delivered his MLA paper, then, his aesthetic vision would have most likely appeared to be atavistic and evidence of Villarreal’s self-loathing. The project of exploring the possibility of self-determination through art would have to be understood in communal terms (the “I” seeking freedom becomes the “we” of Chicano liberation) and be seen as operating *within* a Mexican American cultural tradition. Ethnicity was not something to be transcended in art but the very ground of self-determination as such.

Villarreal himself comes to offer a version of this grounding, in the novel *Clemente Chacón* (1984), which as I argue in my third chapter, dramatizes arguments made by the conservative Thomas Sowell in *Markets and Minorities* (1981). It is difficult to identify the critical distance between ideology and the novel, a distance that *Pocho* is at pains to establish; that is, *Clemente*’s relation to the neoliberal narrative that rose to prominence during the Reagan Era seems to be one of acceptance. So, whereas in *Pocho*, Richard notices how a librarian offers him “Horatio Alger books” because “the Horatio Alger books meant as much to her as the Bible

⁸⁴ Mexican Americans established the publishing house Quinto Sol in the 1970s, the first publication of which was Nick Vaca’s “Mexican American Liberation Papers,” (Berkeley: Quinto Sol: 1967). Vaca’s first sentence famously declares, “Mexican-Americans have never been passive or docile” (38). Quinto Sol also published a quarterly journal, *El Grito: A Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought*, which provided a forum for articles dismantling the social sciences’ account of the inadequacies of Mexican culture.

meant to Protestants,”⁸⁵ in *Clemente Chacón*, the novel describes itself as a Horatio Alger book: “He, Clemente Chacón, was Horatio Alger, even if he *was* Catholic and brown” is how the novel describes its protagonist on its first few pages.⁸⁶ Clemente’s being both “brown” and upwardly mobile is initially treated as a seeming contradiction in terms that the plot will eventually reconcile by showing Clemente’s continued pride in his Mexican heritage. And whereas in *Pocho* ethnically marked individuals such as the Japanese American Nakano cannot seem to be “an American” in the way that Malatesta can, Clemente’s “brownness” is delineated as ultimately not a hindrance but a potential asset: the ground of (communal) individuality.

This difference in narrative strategies between *Pocho* and *Clemente Chacón* should prompt us to reevaluate the story that has been continually proffered of Mexican American literature: that of 1950’s assimilationist Mexican American “individual” (therefore bourgeois) subjectivity giving way to the communal (therefore progressive) Chicano subjectivity of the 1960s and 1970s. As my next chapter shows, in the final analysis the Chicano is not the progressive subjectivity many take it to be. Villarreal’s ambition to not write a novel but write a *good* novel, his ambition to not simply be a novelist but an artist, is not evidence of his being subsumed by the ideology of his day. Rather, his ambition to produce good art makes available the possibility of ideology’s critique. But the difference in narrative strategies should also highlight how this ambition to imagine the conditions of possibility for individual self-determination can and often does devolve into the celebration of the market. Villarreal, like his liberal contemporaries, seemed to take for granted the luxury of a relatively stable economy in which one was free to explore his or her “individualism.” A market-centered economy touts the value of individuals while wholly objectifying them, rendering them into the fuel driving its

⁸⁵ Villarreal, *Pocho*, 109.

⁸⁶ José Antonio Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón* (Tempe: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 1979), 8, original emphasis.

engines. And with the rise of neoliberal politics, the mediating role of the state was diminished and characterized as meddling and inefficient. It is to this social context—one of an atrophied state and of impoverished workers—and to the sense of art it produced—one of collective solidarity but also reified tribalism—that we turn to next.

CHAPTER TWO

CHICANO AESTHETICS: TOMÁS RIVERA'S POETICS OF TOTALITY AND THE MAKING OF THE CHICANO COMMUNITY

“All reification is a forgetting.”¹

Tomás Rivera's novella *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* begins with a paradox. The action indicated by the first sentence—“That year was lost to him”—attenuates what would be the sentence's indexical description. The deictic “that” points to a year the nameless character cannot recall. This difference between what the sentence does and what the boy cannot do highlights the paradox of the boy's relation to his self-knowledge. He appears to be a self who knows that he has forgotten what he knows and that this forgetting has occurred during a span he comes to call “a year,” even as the designation “year” loses its referential coherence the more he tries to recall it.² The boy seems to have started “losing” the year when he fell asleep, during “a dream in which he would suddenly awaken and then realize that he was really asleep.” This lucid dreaming (somehow) simultaneously affirms the power of self-awareness while bringing it into suspicion. Rehearsing a problem Descartes made famous, the boy wonders how he could be sure of *anything* insofar as he might have been dreaming all along, might be dreaming still. Yet the boy's dilemma and Descartes's solution part ways. Whereas Descartes can step “outside” of himself by first establishing a part of the world that cannot be cast into doubt—his thought—for the boy there is no stepping outside of oneself to the world “out there”: “He thought he thought

¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* quoted in Alex Honneth, *Reification: a New Look at an Old Idea*, (Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

² With each passing sentence in the novella's introduction, the designation “year” begins to appear amorphous, as his efforts to recall “when that time he had come to call ‘year’ had started” are frustrated by a series of false starts (“it sometimes began...” “it always began...” “that's when it started...”). Tomás Rivera, *...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, *Tomás Rivera: The Complete Works* (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 2008), 63.

and from this there was no way out.”³ If for the philosopher the very recognition of thought offers the foundation upon which to ground epistemological certainty, then for the boy the phrase “he thought he thought” instead indicates a self-critical mind in which “thinking” turns on itself, interrogates the conditions of its possibility and finds *it* doubtable. As Ramón Saldívar puts it, “the first page of Rivera’s novel... gives us what we might liken to a phenomenological reduction to absolute consciousness,” a process that “belie[s] the certainty of the Cartesian cogito.”⁴

Saldívar usefully references Husserl’s *epoché*, but the boy’s passive relation to his thought marks the limit of the analogy. For the Husserlian phenomenologist, consciousness is not a “passive receptacle for contents from the outside world” because it instead “directs itself actively and even creatively towards its objects to posit, constitute, and give meaning to them.”⁵ For the boy, “consciousness” seems to be a blank screen upon which memories and thought project themselves. Because “memory” for him is not an activity he initiates so much as an event that unfolds itself, “thought” as such can appear alien. He is the self that tenuously “knows” but also the self that doubts that he knows, a divided self whose “self-awareness” comes to look like a stranger (himself) calling him by a name (his name) he does not recognize.⁶

The novella’s introduction dramatizes the question of how a mind relates to itself and the world, and phenomenology offers one way of understanding this relation. As the following will

³ When Evangelina Vigil-Piñón translates the sentence “Se dió cuenta de que siempre pensaba que pensaba y de allí no podía salir” as “He became aware that he was always thinking and thinking and from this there was no way out,” she fundamentally alters the meaning of the sentence and misinterprets the significance of the novella’s opening episode. Her phrase “he was always thinking and thinking” suggests an unproblematic, ongoing activity. Rivera’s sentence, however, is much more complicated: “He realized that he always *thought he thought* and from there he could not get out.” To overtranslate: “He thought *that* he thought.”

⁴ Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: the Dialectics of Difference* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 79.

⁵ Paul B. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University Of North Carolina Press, 2011), 3.

⁶ “It always began when he could hear someone calling him by his name but when he turned his head to see who was calling him, he would make a complete turn and there he would end up— in the same place. This was why he never could discover who was calling him nor why. And then he even forgot the name he had been called.” Rivera, *...And the Earth, Complete Works*, 63.

make clear, however, phenomenology alone proves to be insufficiently dialectical to help us understand Rivera's novella and, without a dialectical understanding, we miss important aspects of his total aesthetic project. As I will show, comprehending one part of Rivera's writing often demands relating the part to the whole of Rivera's body of work (but also political history, the history of philosophy, and economics). The very ambition of what Fredric Jameson calls "dialectical writing" is motivated by this "totalizing" drive: "as though you could not say any one thing until you had first said everything; as though with each new idea you were bound to recapitulate the entire system."⁷ To understand what Rivera calls "the totality of the Chicano being"⁸ is to encounter one of the most ambitious iterations of Chicano aesthetics. Rivera's writing necessitates—and seeks to enable—the type of dialectical reader who works to understand one piece and its connection to the whole and through that understand begin to comprehend his or her own interconnection to the very totality of social relations.

In what follows I attempt to think with Rivera, to become the reader his work demands. The inevitable shortcomings that ensue are a product of my limitations as a writer but not of the approach. What I hope becomes clear is that my references to thinkers including not just Descartes and Husserl, but Hegel and Marx, whom I discuss below, will not be taken as unnecessary flourishes. Rivera himself cites the work of Pedro Laín Entralgo, whose *Theory and Reality of the Other* (1961) uses Hegel's dialectical approach when narrating the history of philosophy.⁹ Entralgo depicts an unfolding drama whose principles actors are "the self" and "the

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. (Princeton University Press, 1974), 306. Marcial González uses this quotation from Jameson and a quotation from Rivera's novella, correctly arguing that this idea of "totality" should be understood as a response to—indeed, an undoing of—the fragmentation dramatized in the novella's opening scene. My understanding of Rivera's "derefication" in relation to "totality" would not have been possible without González's work. Marcial González, *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class, and Reification*, (University of Michigan Press, 2009), 1.

⁸ Rivera, "Into the Labyrinth: The Chicano in Literature," *Complete Works*, 272.

⁹ Pedro Laín Entralgo offers a dialectical account tracing the concept of "the other" as found in writing of philosophers including Hegel and Marx's dialectical appropriation of him, and Descartes and Husserl (who Entralgo

other” as they manifest themselves dialectically. I argue that Hegel’s dialectical approach as has been reformulated by Marxist thinkers— but also more recently by Robert Pippin— is interpretively relevant and useful when reading Rivera.¹⁰

Hegel will help me show how, for Rivera, an understanding of a work of art as meaningfully unified is homologous to understanding what an action as such is. Rivera sets his fiction in a historical moment in which intention and action, meaning and art, appear to be misaligned—a disjuncture that he presents as a product of capitalism. At a time when literary theorists were declaring “the death of the author,” foregrounding a disconnect between the author’s intention and the text’s multifarious meanings, Rivera was instead emphasizing the unity of the writer’s “will” with that of “form” and doing so *as* a critique of capitalism. Rivera’s writing suggests that the act of producing a work of art one takes to be meaningfully coherent could be understood as a critique of capitalism’s alienation of the worker’s labor. And the reading public’s act of *understanding* such a work of art could itself become political insofar as it refutes the objectification that is a central feature of the market.

As I address in the conclusion, however, the politics of this interpretive act become complicated by the fact that the class who best seems equipped to understand Rivera is comprised of the college educated literary critics who are the market’s relative beneficiaries. Just as Marx replaces the “proletariat” for Hegel’s “spirit,” Rivera replaces both with “the Chicano,”

understands as perfecting Descartes’s method). *Teoria y realidad del otro*, Revista De Occidente, 1968. Here is Rivera’s revealing footnote: “I make reference to becoming cognizant of the expansive and evolving thought in our era, on this matter; the other in the bosom of reason itself, as the object of the sentimental and instinctive ego, as the moral activity of the ego, as found in the dialectics of the subjective spirit and the dialectics of nature, as an invention of the ego, as phenomenological reflection, et cetera. See Laín Entralgo’s *Teoria y realidad del otro*.” Tomás Rivera, “Chicano Literature: Fiesta of the Living,” *Complete Works*, 293.

¹⁰ Robert B. Pippin’s *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) will be especially helpful.

a substitution that becomes sclerotic in ways that “spirit” and “proletariat” were not.¹¹ Whereas for Chicano critics this substitution marks one of Rivera’s most important contributions, in the conclusion I question their assessment while nevertheless attempting to understand what it is Rivera’s work enables.

The Meaning of Form

Rivera’s fiction depicts an American economy that courts migrant workers from Mexico to work as fruit and vegetable pickers. Wanting the cheapest and most productive workers—especially during the labor shortage of WWII—landowners benefitted from a large pool of laborers who had travelled hundreds of miles to find any available work. Rivera’s short story “The Salamanders” shows the conditions of drastic material deprivation that result from unprotected contingent labor. As a family is continually turned away from the farms that no longer require their work, a nameless boy describes his family’s despair, “We were tired. We were hungry. We were alone. We sensed that we were totally alone.”¹² The treatment of workers as bodies to be used, then discarded, leads to a sense of alienation that seems to dissolve even the boy’s filial bond, “I truly felt that I was no longer a part of them.”¹³ Considering this story in relation to the novella’s opening scene, we can begin to see how the nameless boy of the novella presents an extreme case of alienation; not only is the novella’s boy alienated from social relations and his family, he begins to experience alienation from his own thought as such.¹⁴

¹¹ The dialectical teleology for the worker centered on *undoing* the conditions that led to the very emergence of the worker’s status as such.

¹² Rivera, “The Salamanders,” *Complete Works*, 160.

¹³ Rivera, “The Salamanders,” *Complete Works*, 160.

¹⁴ This much about the novella has been said in the existing criticism. The more Saldívar explicates the phrase “Thinking that he was thinking,” for example, the more he offers a Marxist analysis. With this phrase, writes Saldívar,

Rivera’s narrator-protagonist refers the question of knowledge to its concrete situation in social reality and to the class affiliation of the subject. In their very alienation and their sense of

A Hegelian Marxist such as Georg Lukács might thus describe Rivera's character as so alienated from himself that he can no longer recognize his thought as his own, perceiving it as a foreign intrusion of unconnected images. With the development of social arrangements that radically divide labor, Lukács would argue, the migrant workers' bodies are reduced to sheer labor power abstracted from the totality of human relations. The workers' minds assume a "thing-like" quality, failing to see themselves within the objects they produce, objects which seem to come into existence of their own accord. The division of labor also leads to the philosopher's mind as abstracted from its relation to praxis, so much so that mind can take itself to be primordially related to the world as such. "Phenomenology" would be a symptom of this ahistorical mistake because it understands consciousness—which is a product of history—as the primary "cause" of the world that comes to appear knowable only by reference to the structure of mind itself.¹⁵ But, and this move is crucial not only for Marxism but for our understanding of Rivera, the worker's consciousness can *eventually* learn to take itself as its own object of consideration and understand its self-emergence, recognizing itself within the totality it attempts to comprehend. Indeed, the worker—more so than the phenomenologist— can come to understand his ability to externalize himself, project himself into the world and recognize himself there.¹⁶ An epistemological move akin to the phenomenological *epoché*, then, is not a starting

themselves as commodities to be sold, Rivera's characters come to apprehend reality as a process and as a reification into separate and unrelated things" (89-90).

What Saldívar fails to explain is the interpretive problem he creates: How can the two explications of the phrase "thinking that he was thinking" (one phenomenological, the other Marxist) be possible simultaneously insofar as they seem so mutually exclusive?

¹⁵ For Marx, necessity gives rise to the "praxis" that enables the preservation and perpetuation of human life via tools and language—and thus production and self-awareness. To quote one of his famous aphorisms, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness." Lewis S. Feuer ed., *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1959), pp.43-4.

¹⁶ This epistemological move makes use of Hegel's master slave dialectic. Hegel described the process leading to "self-consciousness" as involving a relation between "self-consciousness" existing, on the one hand, "for itself," unattached to things in the world (including its own physical embodiment); and, on the other hand, self-consciousness subsisting in the physical world, "consciousness in the form of *thinghood*." Hegel dramatizes the

point but a *late achievement* that might stand in opposition to the effects of reification and operate as reification's undoing.¹⁷

The novella's narrative structure reproduces this epistemological move. Compare the novella's introduction I describe above to the novella's conclusion, wherein the boy hides in the crawl space underneath a wooden house. At first he cannot ignore the biting fleas and scratching wood impinging on his body, yet he is able gradually to strip away his senses until the text gives way to a three-page long paragraph of the boy's stream of consciousness. Here, he is not merely a body constituted and abused within a world that contains him; his thought becomes the container of a world he now projects and tries to understand. In *this* scene his consciousness "directs itself actively and even creatively towards its objects to posit, constitute, and give meaning to them" (to put it in phenomenological terms);¹⁸ the boy not only remembers that his memories are his own, he also creatively fills in some of the memories' narrative gaps creating a whole out of what had been discrete entities.

dialectical relation between the two parts by personifying them and writing them into a dramatic life and death struggle. The victor of this struggle successfully risks "his" body and can emerge unattached, achieving the autonomy necessary in the path toward "spirit." Hegel calls this victor "the lord" because he chooses to spare the loser so as to affirm the lord's identity as such. This dynamic (ironically) renders the lord into the dependent of what it considers a thing. And, in a further ironic twist, because the slave works *on* the world, he can actively change the world, externalizing himself in the world through the objects he creates. The slave becomes capable of independence because he can recognize himself in his work and thereby rely on his own productive relationship. The path toward freedom is made possible by the (slave's) self-awareness that leads to the undoing of the master/slave's dialectical relation.

¹⁷ Writing just five years after the novella's publication, the professor of philosophy Marx W. Wartofsky considered the relation between Marxism and phenomenology:

The Ego is not an agent until it has been constituted. The world is not an achievement of the Ego, but rather, the Ego is an achievement of the world. It then is capable of *re-achieving* this very world which generates it, by way of reflection: it can objectify what in the first place it has interiorized; it can project an image of the world from the fact that it is a subsumption, or a product of this world. [...] the separation of the Ego, as a self-conscious agency, as a distinctive entity within this 'ensemble of relations' is therefore a *late achievement* in this process and *not* its origin.

I understand Rivera's novella to be dramatizing this very dynamic. Marx W. Wartofsky, "Consciousness, Praxis, and Reality: Marxism vs. Phenomenology," in *Interdisciplinary Phenomenology*, ed. Don Ihde and Richard M. Zaner. (Leiden: M. Nijhoff, 1977), 137-8.

¹⁸ Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James*, 3.

The distinction between what the novella's opening sentence can do and what the boy cannot (point to a year) is explained by the fact that the boy does two things simultaneously: he is the narrating subject and the object of the narration, bringing his self-consciousness into being by first performing this consciousness's objectification. But by showing reification in effect, the novella can depict the conditions of reification's undoing. Insofar as the division of labor leads to commodity fetishism and reified minds, as Marcial González argues, "the undoing of reification requires a consciousness that strives to comprehend the historical connections and interconnections of discrete objects within larger social totalities across time."¹⁹ The novella's concluding lines shows this dereification in effect:

He had made a discovery. To discover and rediscover and piece things together. This to this, that to that, all with all. That was it. That was everything. He was thrilled. When he got home he went straight to the tree that was in the yard. He climbed it. He saw a palm tree on the horizon. He imagined someone perched on top, gazing across at him. He even raised one arm and waved it back and forth so that the other could see that he knew he was there.²⁰

Whereas in the novella's introduction the boy cannot think of process and causal relations, in the novella's conclusion his epiphany leads him to start thinking of a totality that is reification's other. If in the introduction he does not recognize "himself" as he "calls himself" by his very name (a name he does not recognize as his own), in the conclusion the boy sees a product of his imagination (somebody perched on a palm tree), recognizes this figure *as* a product of his imagination ("He imagines someone"), and hails that projection with a self-generated gesture that he understands to be meaningful. The type of mind that can "piece things together" can also understand its meaningful, intentional, unalienated relation to its own actions.

As the language I employ already begins to show, Rivera dramatizes Hegel's "self-realization theory of freedom" cogently summarized by Robert Pippin:

¹⁹ González, 29.

²⁰ Rivera, ...*And the Earth, Complete Works*, 124.

In the most general sense a free action is one that fully expresses me, as I have come to understand myself, such that I can fully recognize myself in the deeds I bring about, and so it represents the realization over time of some intention in my bodily movements... Expressed negatively, I am free if I stand in a nonalienated relation to what I have brought about, a standard that places a great deal of weight on achieving the right sort of understanding of “who I am”²¹

An action can only be considered as “free” when it is understood as self-generated and “nonalienated,” an understanding that requires one’s self-recognition as the author of one’s deeds. This fundamental self-understanding itself requires what Pippin calls a “network of social relationships that serve as conditions for the collective intelligibility of my deeds.” Waving one’s hand cannot be understood by others as a meaningful speech act signifying “hello” if the network of social relationships instead understands the action as signifying something else entirely. As Pippin puts it, “those bodily movements count as the deed I intend only if that act description is one recognizable as such in the community in which I express and realize myself.”²² The novella’s conclusion dramatizes the idea that there can be recognizable, self-generated embodied meaning that is socially shareable. The boy’s epiphany and his gestural self-hailing point to a resolution of the antinomy of his objectification and his subjectivity, a resolution that is embodied *formally* in the novella’s very narrative structure.

As I will further argue below, this conclusion—wherein a boy recognizes the power of his imagination, realizes his capacity for self-awareness, understands his ability to imaginatively project himself “outside” of himself and see this projection as unalienated—allegorizes the

²¹ Pippin, *After the Beautiful*, 19.

²² Not coincidentally, the most famous philosophical examples showing the difference between actions and mere events tend to involve the movement of one’s arm, as in Wittgenstein’s distinction between “the fact that my arm goes up” and “the fact that I raise my arm.”

emergence of “Chicano literature” as such. In his essays Rivera characterizes the historical emergence of this literature as a communal “search for form” that enables the externalization of a collective consciousness seeking to understand itself dialectically. Here is how Rivera describes the process of self-recognition as made possible by Chicano literature:

It is the opinion of this writer that the invention of ourselves by ourselves is in actuality an extension of our will—really an exteriorization of our will. Thus, as Chicano invents himself, he is complementing his will... This is of great importance because these lives are trying to find form. This development is becoming a unifying consciousness. The thoughts of the Chicano are beginning to gyrate constantly over his own life, over his own development, over his identity, and as such over his own conservation. This, of necessity, encases the political field, the economic field, the social field, and of course—the creative impulse.²³

The Chicano collective consciousness that is beginning to realize seeks “forms” through which it can reproduce itself. It can thereby recognize itself in its products and affirm itself as the collective consciousness it is. This process of an emerging self-understanding via self-realization involves the totality of human relations, from economic policies to political arrangements, and can be recognized by being expressed in artistic production. Compare Rivera’s account to Pippin’s useful summary of Hegel:

Very roughly, Hegel’s view was that the production or “externalization” of our ideas in artworks represents a distinct and, until very recently, indispensable form of self-knowledge. His unusual phrase is that the human being, understood as *Geist*, must “double itself” ... in order to be able to experience and understand itself in its deeds and objects.... And this occurs within an ongoing collective, continuous attempt at self-knowledge over historical time, a project one had to understand in the light of interconnected attempts at such knowledge in religion, philosophy, and even in the social and political practices of an age.²⁴

Rivera’s description of “form” as the “exteriorization” of a collective “will” echoes Hegel’s account of the “externalization” of a collective human consciousness attempting to understand itself through art. Rivera literalizes this self-understanding via externalization in the novella’s

²³ Rivera, “Into the Labyrinth,” *Complete Works*, 262-263.

²⁴ Pippin, *After the Beautiful*, 32.

conclusion with his depiction of the boy's projected imaginary self: the boy "doubles" himself (to use Hegel's word) and thereby "complements" his will (to use Rivera's). If for Rivera the search for self-knowledge encompasses politics, economics, and art, for Hegel it also involves religion and philosophy, sociology and politics.

Rivera's novella depicts self-knowledge as socially self-constituting in the sense that the boy's coming to know himself requires that he think about his relation to the people who surround him. The novella dramatizes this emergence of self-consciousness not through a linearly connected sequence of events, the causal relations of which appear intelligible as such. Rather, the interconnectedness of the novella's episodes appear retroactively. The boy emerges as the author of his thought, capable of acting on the world by recognizing himself externalized within it. And the text places the reader in the boy's disorienting epistemological position, wherein we too must learn to "piece things together. This to this, that to that, all with all." We are not simply passive observers of this emerging epistemology; rather, the reader actively reproduces the boy's epiphany through his or her own retroactive understanding of the novella's meaningful connections.

Here, for example, are the first four narrative units that the reader encounters after the novella's opening scene: a three-sentence-long vignette simply depicts a boy (the same boy as the opening scene?) who drinks the nightly glass of water his mother sets out to propitiate "the spirits." (How is this vignette connected, if at all to the opening?) The very next episode simply offers a story of how a boy (the same one?) is accidentally shot and killed by the landowner who hopes to scare the boy away from taking water breaks when he should be working; after that comes a short vignette about a mother attending a seance hoping to learn anything about her son

who is missing in action; next comes a short story about a mother (the same mother?) who prays for the well-being of her son fighting in the Korean war.

Using the account I am drawing out, we could articulate the following interpretive story: The first vignette dramatizes the distinction between the boy's action (drinking the water) and his mother's potential misunderstanding (the ghosts drink it).²⁵ The historical significance of a boy's ability *to choose* to drink water—and understand himself to be doing so—is made tragically apparent in the very next episode, which depicts how children workers live in society wherein those in power can control that choice. Something as basic as humans' need from hydration becomes utterly dominated by an economy of severe calculation, wherein profit comes at the expense of workers' health. The market economy in which these characters exist forces children to work (because their families are not paid a living wage) and subsumes every aspect of their life (to maximize productivity and profit). Such an economy renders a misalignment between intention and action: the boy wants to drink water but cannot; the boss does not want to murder a boy, but does. As the narrative voice puts it, "What he [the "boss"] set out to do and what he did were two different things."²⁶

The next couple of stories and vignettes delineate a group of people's efforts to take control and understand their lives, efforts that include spiritualism (evident in the depicted seance) and religion (practiced in the depicted prayer). Taken together, these stories show how powerlessness is comforted by what looks like superstitious appeals that ultimately alienate people from their constitutive role in history. These appeals attribute an explanatory power to spiritual forces outside of humans' control. Such efforts to understand and control their own lives demonstrate their relative ignorance of their position in history—indeed their ignorance of their

²⁵ It is entirely plausible that the mother *knows* that her son drinks the water and *that* is why she places it under his bed.

²⁶ Rivera, ...*And the Earth, Complete Works*, 65.

very geographic location. This is why the next vignette depicts one migrant worker asking another if he knows where Utah is, to which the others responds, “Well, we’ve never been there but I hear it’s somewhere close to Japan.”²⁷ Whether a boy is murdered by a landowner in Utah or sent to be killed while fighting in Korea—or near Japan—he is being instrumentalized, utterly objectified into cheap labor he will not own and cannon fodder for a war he does not understand.

The importance of understanding this objectification—by the market and by war—is made most apparent in the vignette that follows the Utah/ Japan exchange. The dialogue of this vignette simply offers the following:

“Why do y’all go to school so much?”

“My dad says it’s to prepare us. He says that if someday there’s an opportunity, maybe they’ll give it to us.”

“Sure! If I were you I wouldn’t worry about that. The poor can’t get poorer. We can’t get worst [sic] off than we already are. That’s why I don’t worry. The ones who have to be on their toes are the ones who are higher up. They’ve got something to lose. They can end up where we’re at. But for us what does it matter?”²⁸

The dialogue offers a cynical distortion of Marx’s use of Hegel’s dialectic of lordship and bondage—one that empties the bondsman’s position of its symbolic power. The “ones who are higher up” in a stark economic hierarchy do indeed have their position to lose, as Marx would argue, but here the poor simply wait passively for this loss to occur, just as they wait for *any* opportunity to present itself. When the boy recalls this vignette in the novella’s conclusion, however, he adds the topic of war to their discussion: “*The ones who will pay for it are the ones on top, the ones who have something. Us, we’re already screwed. If there’s another war, hell, things might even get better for us....*”²⁹ The characters continue not to recognize the role they can play in their own liberation, yet they begin to consider the advantages of playing the game.

²⁷ Rivera, ...*And the Earth, Complete Works*, 69.

²⁸ Rivera, ...*And the Earth, Complete Works*, 75.

²⁹ Rivera, ...*And the Earth, Complete Works*, 121, italics in original.

They mistakenly assume that their situation is as worse as it can get. But unless they try to understand—and thereby change—their status, they will continue to be used by “the ones who are higher up.” At stake in self-knowledge and active self-authorship is liberation itself.

So when, in the novella’s conclusion, the boy begins to recognize his memories as his own, he becomes simultaneously the writer and active reader of his thought. He begins to remember and rewrite his memories so that they become meaningful. He fills in what had been missing in the vignettes comprising the novella: historical context, political analysis, meaningful intertextual coherence. He recalls an earlier episode that simply depicts a grandfather who has suffered a stroke that leaves him paralyzed from the neck down. In the episode, the grandfather asks his twenty-year-old grandson what he “most desired in life,” to which the latter replies that he wants the next ten years of his life to pass in an instant “so that he would know what had happened in his life.”³⁰ The vignette concludes abruptly with the grandfather ending the conversation by calling his grandson stupid. In the conclusion, however, the boy reimagines the grandfather as an orator exhorting the “the people” to recall their status as “free citizens”:

*Free citizens, this is a day of magnificent and profound importance. It was in the year eighteen-hundred and seventy-two that Napoleon’s troops suffered a defeat against Mexican soldiers who fought so valiantly—that was how I would begin my discourse. I always used the words “free citizens” when I was young, son, but now ever since I had the attack [the stroke that leaves him paralyzed] I can’t remember too well anymore what I would say to the people. Then came the Revolution and in the end we lost. Villa made out well but I had to come out here. No one here knows what I went through. Sometimes I want to remember but, truth is, I’m not able to anymore. All my thoughts become hazy. Now tell me, what is it that you most desire at this moment of your life.*³¹

In the original vignette, the grandfather’s paralysis threatens to render him into nothing but a damaged body with a failing memory (reminiscent of the boy’s own objectified body and reified

³⁰ Rivera, ...*And the Earth, Complete Works*, 89.

³¹ Rivera, ...*And the Earth, Complete Works*, 121.

mind); but in the boy's recollection, the grandfather can analyze his role in history and understand the political and economic context that led to his migration. If he had help—if someone were to transcribe his oral history—the grandfather could relate his account and thereby galvanize his audience, “the people,” to recall (if they are older) and learn (if they are younger) the history that led to their situation.

Rivera thus provides a glimpse at the power of a literature written by a younger generation of Mexican Americans who attempt to learn about their place in the world, to recognize their relationship to the older generations that made their current life possible, to imaginatively inhabit the older generation's consciousness thereby freeing it from the limitations of failing bodies and reified minds that threaten to degenerate into objecthood. The grandson represents the grim apogee of the incoherent determinist worldview captured in the joke about the waiter who asks a diner what he would like to order, to which the man responds, “I'm a determinist so I will just wait and see what I decide.”³² The mistake the grandson makes, his “stupidity,” centers on his desire to become a *passive reader* of his own life instead of recognizing himself as its active author. Rivera depicts the crucial significance of establishing the conditions for one's self-recognition as the active self-author of one's life. He makes available an interpretive experience that highlights the irreducible necessity of an engaged readership that can experience the boy's epiphany with him. This reader can learn how to make the necessary meaningful connections. At stake in this active, collective self-authorship and critically-engaged, knowledgeable readership is freedom itself.

Rivera's Poetics of Totality and the Chicano Reader

³² The joke is often told by John Searle, see for example “Do You Have Free Will?” *Cal Alumni Association*, 8 July 2015, alumni.berkeley.edu/california-magazine/march-april-2008-mind-matters/do-you-have-free-will.

This type of self-knowledge necessitates the social practices and labor—the praxis—that collectively render its externalization meaningful, legible. Understood in this way, the Chicano search for form is fundamentally embedded within the social relations that bring the Chicano consciousness into being. The effort made by Chicanos to own the means of production—an effort that must involve owning publishing houses like *Quinto Sol*—can thus be understood as part of a struggle to end their alienation. Writers can externalize their will in their self-published forms and recognize themselves there as the selves they take themselves to be instead of the reductive, objectified stereotypes that the market needs.³³ The Chicano search for the conditions that would not alienate their labor and the Chicano “search for form” are homologous.

Rivera thematizes that homology in the short story “The Salamanders,” which depicts a family desperately searching for work, a story he retells as part of his long poem “The Searchers.” When a boy’s family is at their most desperate state, looking for work (which they cannot find) and a place to sleep (which they will never call their own), they find a field on which to camp for the night. As they sleep, the area is infested with salamanders:

When we slept in wet ditches
frightened by salamanders
at night
reclaiming their territory
and we
killing them
to maintain it as our—
then, our only—possession³⁴

The “it” the family attempts to maintain as their singular possession cannot ultimately refer to the “territory,” which they do not own. Rather, the “it” refers to the conceptual ground of self-fashioning on which they can assert their self-possession. The family does not simply kill the

³³ Such stereotypes include the image of the cultureless Mexican who is all too happy to work like a mule; the lazy Mexican unworthy of a decent wage; and so on.

³⁴ Rivera, *The Searchers, Complete Works*, 226.

salamanders that invade their area, they “wanted to find more to kill... to seek them out.” The family’s search for work that will inevitably alienate their labor becomes a search for salamanders, the killing of which makes them feel unalienated from each other. (“I began to feel that I was becoming part of my father and my mother and my brothers and sisters again”³⁵). Through their active search, the family are agents who can affect the conditions of their own existence instead of appearing as objects to be used by the engines of agribusiness.

As the boy kills a salamander, he looks into its eyes and says, “what I saw and what I felt is something I still have with me, something that is very pure—original death.”³⁶ The phrase “original death” would remain cryptic if readers did not have access to Rivera’s other writing, specifically his paragraph-long essay titled “Poetics,” wherein he writes, “Poetry, gives me pure feeling—time, beauty, man and original death.”³⁷ The act of killing the salamanders gives to the boy what “poetry” gives to Rivera: “original death.” “Poetry,” writes Rivera, “is the birth and death of the word and the poet.” In giving birth to the word, the poet “freezes abstractions” and “severs relationships with his utterances.”³⁸ The formalism of the account—the act of providing a static form to the “abstractions” of thought— seems to echo the New Critics William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, for whom every poem “is detached from the author at birth.”³⁹ Rivera’s account also appears to echo the language of postmodern literary theorists including John Barthes, who in 1967 proclaimed the “Death of the Author.” But whereas for Barthes, “writing is the destruction of every voice, every point of origin,”⁴⁰ and for the New Critics the poem “goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it,” for Rivera the death of the

³⁵ Rivera, “The Salamanders,” *Complete Works*, 161.

³⁶ Rivera, “The Salamanders,” *Complete Works*, 161.

³⁷ Rivera, “Poetics,” *Complete Works*, 193.

³⁸ Rivera, “Poetics,” *Complete Works*, 193.

³⁹ William Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *Sewanee Review*, vol. 54 (1946): 468-488. Revised and republished in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3-18.

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath. *Image, Music, Text*. (London: Fontana Press, 2010), 142.

poet's body leads to a radical *union* of his "will" with form. For him, poetry metaphorically "kills" the poet because *through* poetry the poet can leave behind his body and formally externalize his thought: "Poetry denies the poet but *not* his expression and utterance."⁴¹ Poetry is thus the way in which the poet becomes "nothing and everything": "*nothing*" because the poet has become disembodied, and "*everything*" because the formal externalization of the poet's thought can be limitlessly projected. The poet can extend his reach beyond the physical limitations of his body and find infinite expression in form. When the boy looks into the eyes of the Salamander that he kills, then, he sees what the poet sees when the poet voids his or her own body in order to achieve textual immortal life through unalienated poesis.

Rivera's "Poetics" thus provides an interpretive key to understanding the short story "The Salamanders" (that key being the definition of "original death") but also such poems as "Awakening":

When everything is nothing
and nothing is in everything
I blind myself in the instant.

Nothing is in everything.

My senses execute me.

I die
I die upon awakening
in the world.

And I wait
and I must wait
until nothing will be in everything

forever and the perfectly white surrounds me.

Performing another figurative *epoché*, the poet "blinds" himself "in the instant" because his

⁴¹ Rivera, "Poetics," *Complete Works*, 193, my emphasis.

sensory perception must be voided, bracketed. When the perceived world goes “blank”— when “everything” that is the world perceived becomes the “nothing” that is thought itself — then the “nothingness” of thought *qua* thought can project itself, can externalize itself, onto everything. By nullifying his senses he can convert “everything” into “nothing” because “everything” assumes the form of the “nothingness” that is his disembodied consciousness projected infinitely outward: “Nothing is in everything.” But when the poet *perceives* the world, he cannot help but exist within the world as a sensory being, which is why the poet’s “senses execute [him].” He dies “upon awakening” into “the world” because he *can die* in the world as a perceiving being subject to the world’s natural laws. Only when voiding the body can he externalize his will, which could be “forever” contained within the “perfectly white” of the nothingness “surround[ing]” it. This surrounding “whiteness” refers to the color of the page containing his formalized, externalized will converted into text.

This textualization— the formal externalization of being via text—is exemplified on the very next page in a poem titled “Palabras” (“*Words*”):⁴²

En esta hoja blanca
dejo caer pedazos vivos de
sesos
Aquí me quedo para siempre
Ahora ya me conocen
Detrás de cada letra mis ojos
les siguen
Los veo, y los veo, a ustedes
No quiero salir de aquí
Aquí estoy para siempre
Qué fácil fue romper
el secreto eterno.
Por qué no me siguen?
Métanse conmigo entre las

On this white page
I drop live pieces of my
brain
I remain here forever
Now you know me
Behind every letter my
eyes follow you
I look and look at you
all
I don’t want to get out
of here
I remain here forever
How easy it was to
break

⁴² Rivera, “Palabras,” *Complete Works*, 241, my translation.

palabras
[...]
y el secreto ¿qué fue?
Soy una palabra

the eternal secret
Why don't you follow
me?
Come inside with me
within these words
[...]
and the secret what was
it?
I am a word.

The poem's metaphors refer to the poet's presence that "remains" on the page, revealing the "eternal secret." The revelation of this "secret"— that the poet is "a word"— only becomes significant in relation to another poem, titled "I am a word" ("Soy una palabra").⁴³

Soy una palabra
Seré una palabra

I am a word
I will be a word

En esta hoja,
aquí.

On this page,
here.

Te sigo desde aquí

I follow you from here

Espero,
siempre espero

I wait,
I always wait

el secreto eterno
contigo.

the eternal secret
with you.

Soy una palabra.

I am a word.

In this poem, the poetic voice also "waits" on the page for the reader to solve "the eternal secret." But, of course, the poem's title and the last line have already revealed this secret, yet this revelation is registered *as such* in relation to the poem "Words" which explicitly declares it *as a* revelation: "and the secret what was it? / I am a word." The significance of both poems is made available through their intertextual relation.

⁴³ Rivera, "Soy unapalabra," *Complete Works*, 249, my translation.

Notice the interpretive dynamic at work here. The short story “The Salamanders” refers to the poem “The Searchers” which connects to the essay “Poetics” which itself helps explain the poem “Awakening” which refers to the poem “Words” which refers to the poem “I Am a word.” *All of Rivera’s writing is intertextually related in this way, and the connections deepen the more readers engage with the texts.*⁴⁴ On this basis, it seems necessary to bring this intertextual interpretation to bear on Rivera’s novella. The phenomenological reduction depicted in the poem “Awakening”—in which the poet “blinds” himself—echoes Rivera’s novella’s conclusion, wherein the boy buries himself. This figurative burial suggests the death of the writer’s embodied limitation, which leads to the birth of the artist’s imagination. “I would like to see all of the people together,” says the boy underneath the house, “And then, if I had great big arms, I could embrace them all.” The fact of his physical embodiment limits the actualization of his desire (his arms are too short), but the power of his imagination enables its possibility: “Only by being by yourself can you bring everybody together.”⁴⁵ It is only through an “original death” as made available by poesis that the Chicano artist emerges and with him the community as such.

This process explains the meaning of the speaker’s invitation to the reader in the poem “Words”: “Why don’t you follow me? / Come inside with me / within these words.” This reader can learn how to search for the poet in the word, and through this search learn to recognize him or herself in the work. “For me,” writes Rivera, “the literary experience is one of total communion, an awesome awareness of the ‘other.’ of one’s potential self. I have come to recognize my ‘other’ in Chicano literature... Chicano writing [is] a ritual of immortality, of awe in the face of the ‘other.’”⁴⁶ Rivera’s boy imagines *his* “other”; he projects his imagined other

⁴⁴ Another set of terms readers must work to define and connect, for example, are: “spoken word,” “voice,” “seed of love in the darkness,” and “seed in the hour of seeds.”

⁴⁵ Rivera, *Complete Works*, 123.

⁴⁶ Rivera, *Complete Works*, 274.

outside of himself, recognizing that self not as an alien intrusion but as unified with the will that created it, (a “communion” of will and projection). For the reader, the “literary experience” involves a “communion” with the author as “other” via the engaged readerly activity that makes intertextual meaningful connections, a “communion” of minds. We discover our own ability to understand and thereby re-constitute the meaning of Rivera’s texts, revivifying his thought, seeing it alive in our present, a readerly “ritual of immortality.” The “awe” we experience when coming to terms with Rivera’s thought is simultaneously an awe of our own ability to understand the meaningful connections his work makes available. We start our reading practice alone but we emerge as Chicanos.

Being Chicanos

This aesthetic self-recognition constitutes the power of Rivera’s poesis. Rivera’s texts help reorient their reader into the type of thinker who can begin to understand his or her relation to an emerging and historical group consciousness. This group consciousness emerged in part as the result of a racialized division of labor based on importation of a cheap labor force. Once this labor force recognizes the processes that have led to its situation—including an awareness of the political context in Mexico, Mexico’s relation to a world market, the United States’s domestic self-interest as it relates to global politics—it can recognize itself as a historical actor capable of changing the world. And by reading Rivera with the attention his work demands, we might affirm his claim concerning what the literary experience makes available: a communion of minds; the transcendence of our finite, embodied particularity to inhabit the consciousness of another; becoming a part of a reading public that reinforces an aspirational vision of ourselves.

In his famous 1971 essay “Into the Labyrinth: The Chicano in Literature,” Rivera describes this growing group consciousness. “A renaissance has been developing,” he writes, “perhaps since the years after the second World War, perhaps as late as the years after the Korean War.” Although his couple of qualifying “perhaps” allow for some historical latitude, he nevertheless maintains a progressive account that tracks the evolution of a distinct literature from its “oral phase” of folk songs to the efflorescence of printed forms.

The more he narrates the evolutionary story, however, the more questions it begs. Rivera describes an “assimilationist phase” that he loosely dates to the 1950’s (“twenty years ago”), a phase of cultural self-disavowal that he contrasts to his current moment of Chicano self-invention. Whereas Mexican American “lives” sought to “disengage themselves from anything which was not Anglosaxon” during the assimilationist phase, “now the intent is different. These [“assimilationist”] lives are coming to know themselves as Chicano lives; better, they are inventing themselves as such.” Yet he does not comment on the apparent overlap between the assimilationism of the 1950s and the self-invention of Chicanismo coming into being since at least 1953 if not 1945. Nor does he comment on another apparent contradiction when mentioning the existence of hundreds of newspapers published by Mexican Americans: “Between the years 1848 and 1958,” he writes, “there have existed more than five hundred *Chicano* newspapers” (emphasis added). These newspapers “all have in some form a literary input. An invention of sorts of the Chicano—be it poetry, short stories, legends.”⁴⁷ Rivera thus simultaneously describes the mid-century *novelty* of a Chicano self-consciousness coming to know and invent itself as “Chicano,” yet this consciousness has been expressing itself and “inventing” literary genres since

⁴⁷ Rivera, “Into the Labrynth,” *Complete Works*, 264. Rivera responds to the mischaracterization of “Mexican Americans” as culturally backward. What might appear as a cultural void (no published novels, poetry, drama, etc.) is in fact filled with hundreds of newspapers that included poems, short narrative vignettes (called *costumbrista* sketches), and prose essays (*cronicas*).

at least 1848 in “Chicano” newspapers. And although Mexican American literature supposedly began with the oral histories recorded in the folk songs (“corridos”), *textual* “forms” were apparently available from the start.

The historical emergence of a Chicano identity he describes retroactively incorporates the past into its ken. Not only does the past become “Chicano,” this identity is then projected into the future via the strictures of authenticity. So when, in the early 1980s, Richard Rodriguez began to reject Chicano identity politics in favor of defending an account of liberal individualism, Rivera criticized him for not dealing properly with the “question of place and being” as captured in the two Spanish words for “being.” According to Rivera,

Being born into a family is equal to being, *Ser*. Education and instruction teaches us to be, *Estar*. Both are fundamental verbs. *Ser* is an interior stage, and *Estar* is an exterior one.... In the Hispanic world, the interior world of *Ser* is ultimately more important than the world of *Estar*. *Honra*, honesty, emanates from and is important to the *Ser*.⁴⁸

The word “ser” tends to indicate *permanent* or lasting attributes, whereas “estar” indicates *temporary* states and locations. For Rivera, Rodriguez mistakenly treats his ethnic past and familial ties as secondary to his status as an intellectual; he treats his family as a temporary site he can leave in order to inhabit a public persona made available through his education. Rivera’s account of identity assumes a sense of authenticity that one cannot represent through the language one learns in school; it needs to “emanate” from one’s very being, an unchanging core (“*Honra*, honesty, emanates from and is important to the *Ser*”). Kwame Anthony Appiah, whose defense of liberal freedom and individualism greatly resembles Rodriguez’s, highlights how an identity politics of recognition tends to entail such “notably rigid strictures.” “We know that acts of recognition, and the civil apparatus of such recognition, can sometimes ossify the identities that are their object,” argues Appiah, calling this ossification the “Medusa Syndrome.” Appiah

⁴⁸ Rivera, “Richard Rodriguez’ *Hunger of Memory* as Humanistic Antithesis,” *Complete Works*, 241.

readily admits that the construction of identities may be “historically, strategically necessary” yet he pushes us to consider if “the identities constructed in this way are ones we can be happy with the longer run.”⁴⁹

Insofar as Rivera’s writing attempts to dismantle the effects of reification, we should ask whether the identity he supports ultimately has a reifying, “ossifying,” effect. We should question Saldívar’s ultimate assessment of the emerging self-consciousness delineated by Rivera. Quoting Lukács, Saldívar writes, “Unable to raise themselves above the role of object, their consciousness is what Lukács has termed ‘the self-consciousness of the commodity’” Yet, Saldívar continues, “Rivera’s figures” are *not* “the romanticized symbols of the Worker engaged in a world-wide class struggle.” Instead, the Chicano identity is a “fluid and nonsubjectified character” that calls itself “*la raza*.” For Saldívar, the “fluidity” of “*la raza*,” constitutes its “its historicity and political force.”⁵⁰ The repeated use of “fluid” in reference to Chicano is meant to resist the characterization of it as “ossified.” But just as phenomenology provided a useful analogy that was ultimately insufficient, here we have also reached the limit of the Marxist analogy. We have taken the comparison to Lukács’s “reification” as far as it will go because the point of Lukács’s “standpoint of the worker” is to *undo* the structural conditions that give the proletariat class its identity as such. Saying that an identity that calls itself “The Race” is “fluid” does not make it so.

For some Chicana writers publishing in the mid-1980s, Rivera represents an inroad to creative writing and the university.⁵¹ Denise Chávez’s novel *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986),

⁴⁹Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 110.

⁵⁰ Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative*, 90.

⁵¹ As I show in my fourth chapter, however, Gloria Anzaldúa, Alma Luz Villanueva, Cherríe Moraga, and Berenice Zamora would reject Rivera’s thematized ability to transcend his body. This supposed transcendence becomes the mark of male privilege and self-deception. These writers did not seek to bracket the queer, gendered, racialized body in their work. Such a bracketing, for them, reproduces the metaphysical binaries of Western art (including Cartesian

for example, describes how its protagonist Rocío would “crawl through the hall closet and into the concrete passageway that was our house’s foundation. Down I would go, into the unfinished space below the house...”⁵² This underground refuge enabled the emergence of the imagination that will come to write the stories that constitute the novel as such. Pat Mora, also in 1986, memorializes Rivera’s premature death in the elegiac poem “Tomás Rivera.”⁵³ Mora’s poem celebrates Rivera’s transition from migrant laborer to university chancellor, and concludes with Rivera encouraging the reader to follow in his footsteps: “Now you.” Mora follows this institutional inroad a few poems later in “University Avenue,” wherein the poetic voice declares “We are the first / of our people to walk this path [...] We do not travel alone. / Our people burn deep within us” (*Borders* 19). So just as Rivera and Chicanos like him cleared the way for Mora’s generation (“Now you”), she will continue to make inroads into the university for Mexicans and Mexican Americans (“Our people burn deep within us”). In Mora’s collection of poems, the recurring references to college classrooms and corporate boardrooms indicate the inroads to the middle class Rivera and his generation made available.

This commemoration of Rivera’s work expresses a sense of gratitude that I share. By understanding Rivera and his generation’s aesthetic ambition, I too pay homage to the sacrifices made by the previous generations of immigrants, those who sacrificed their very bodies so that the next generation might live the life of the mind. Our mental labor could and often does feel much less alienated than that of our forebears. The danger of our mental labor, however, centers on the mistake warned against by Marxism: the projection into the past of the mind’s concepts, the assumed primordial relationship of concepts that are historically emergent and ultimately

dualism) in its privileging of a detached “mind” over embodied experience. These writers instead considered their texts *as* bodies.

⁵²Denise Chávez, *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1987; repr. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2004), 23.

⁵³ Pat Mora, “Tomás Rivera,” in *Borders* (Houston: Arte Público, 1986), 13-14.

evanescent. By narrating the emergence of the Chicano identity as decades (if not centuries) in the making, we risk presenting ourselves as the apogee of this identity's search for itself.

CHAPTER THREE

“HERE’S TO CHICANOS IN THE MIDDLE CLASS”: THE NEOLIBERAL MEXICAN AMERICAN NOVEL, 1981 – 1984

In his autobiography *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1982), Rodriguez describes an anguished encounter between himself and a group of “Mexican aliens,” six men (whose ages ranged from twenty to sixty) hired for the day by a contractor to perform manual labor.¹ Rodriguez calls them “Anonymous men” because the contractor never introduces them to the other workers, a separation he has the opportunity to bridge when asked by the contractor to convey a message to them in Spanish. Rodriguez imagines “engag[ing] them in small talk,” thereby assuring himself of their shared “familiarity,” yet agonizes about how to gain their trust. He considers asking them what part of Mexico they were from and, if necessary, lying to them that his parents were from there too. Ultimately, however, he finds himself simply relaying the message and saying nothing else. The familiarity that he fails to establish on ethnic grounds (their shared language, cultural heritage) appears to be made available momentarily by the seeming class solidarity of one man’s response; he nonverbally acknowledges Rodriguez, then looks past him “toward *el patrón*.” “For a moment,” Rodriguez describes, “I felt swept up by that glance in the Mexicans’ company.”² But, of course, Rodriguez may not be “*el patron*,” yet he is certainly not one of “*los pobres*”— his mother’s term for those whom Marx would call the “surplus population.”³ His position, although also temporary and paid, is practically voluntary as he takes the summer job while enrolled at Stanford, “the school rich people went

¹ Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography* (New York: Dial Press, 2005), 144.

² Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 145.

³ For an excellent account of the problematic usage of the term “surplus population” “in all its declensions (the unemployed, the impoverished, immigrants, the excluded, the underclass, the insecurely employed, etc.)” see Daniel Zamora’s “When Exclusion Replaces Exploitation: The Condition of the Surplus Population under Neoliberalism” http://nonsite.org/feature/when-exclusion-replaces-exploitation#foot_src_8_6493.

to”⁴ At the summer’s end, he could and would leave the working poor and rejoin the university’s rich.

I describe his position as voluntary because of his own reason for accepting this summer job, which he does out of a desire to connect with workers and to display what his mother always advised him to protect against the sun: his “dark skin.” “Dark skin was for my mother the most important symbol of a life of oppressive labor and poverty,” he writes, exemplifying the text’s intermittent conflation of terms denoting class (here, the one including *braceros*) and terms describing physical appearance (dark skin).⁵ *Braceros*, “those who work [outdoors] with their *brazos*, their arms... for very little money,”⁶ of course, had dark, sunburnt skin, yet Rodriguez comes to “envy” “their physical lives, their freedom to violate the taboo of the sun” by sometimes working shirtless.⁷ Their indifference to the sun marked their unconsciousness of their skin; stated differently, their indifference to their skin made them unconscious of its darkening. So upon arriving at his first construction site gig, “No longer afraid,” he takes off his shirt and “At last become[s] like a *bracero*.”⁸ Just as shame might have been irrelevant to the shirtless workers, pride might also have been as beside the point, yet Rodriguez, here, converts what amounts to a matter of indifference but obvious inconvenience into an exercise in self-esteem. Job-related side effects (being hot, getting burned by the sun) become the means for his self-acceptance.

One way of looking at *Hunger of Memory* could continue to track the extent to which Rodriguez understands the life of workers in cultural terms detached from the exigencies of necessity (the “freedom” of their “physical lives”), and note how he racializes this culture (the

⁴ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 140.

⁵ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 127.

⁶ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 121.

⁷ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 135.

⁸ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 140, 141.

“dark skin” produced by outdoor work). By wanting to justify his own phenotypically dark skin, he places himself in the position of a worker, as if to finally accept and take pride in who he is by becoming himself through labor. Which is to say, as John Alba Cutler concisely puts it, *Hunger of Memory* continually “confuses class and race,”⁹ a claim that could help explain why, for example, as a child Rodriguez did not think a black girl was “black” because “she wasn’t poor,” yet his neighborhood’s black garbage men appeared to him “unmistakably black.”¹⁰ In this hierarchical conception of race and culture—which conflates the terms with class—upper middle-class status seemingly nullifies blackness. “Mexican” culture likewise neutralizes class difference by producing a less distinguished identity shared by people as different as the “anonymous men” (Mexican “aliens,” presumably undocumented); his parents (middle class, legal American residents); and braceros (“Mexican nationals who were licensed to work for American farmers in the 1950s”¹¹). From this perspective, Rodriguez’s description of both his class ambition and his dedication to his education stem from his self-disavowal. It is almost as if he believes that once he achieves a degree of upper middle-class comfort, he will stop being dark-skinned; and once he avails himself of the fruit of European high culture, he can sever himself from his family’s ethnicity. This is why the presence of Mexican American undergraduates at Stanford comfortably and proudly asserting their cultural identity discomfits him: “I needed to tell myself that the new minority students were foolish to think themselves unchanged by their schooling. (I needed to justify my own change).”¹² Their pride belies his self-hatred.

⁹ John Alba Cutler, *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature* (New York, Oxford University Press: 2015), 89.

¹⁰ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 126.

¹¹ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 121.

¹² Rodriguez, *Hunger* 171.

Yet this understanding of *Hunger* (which has been de rigueur since its publication) is not only the least interesting, it utterly fails to recognize the ultimate point of what Rodriguez is trying to convey, an effort that is simultaneously agonized and admittedly self-aggrandizing. The pivot on which the bildungsroman turns—what separates the boy who thinks a rich girl is not “black” from the man who writes the autobiography—is precisely his realization of the *limits* of cultural identity because of his recognition of class inequality. His experience as a temporary worker offers this lesson because it highlights the fundamental difference between himself and “those who work with their bodies all their lives.”¹³ He is naively surprised that construction workers were diverse “middle-class Americans” whose interests could include Rothko’s paintings, yet he comes to realize the disparity between them, himself, and most radically, the “pobres”—the anonymous men. Try as he might to feel like he belonged, his very ability to luxuriate in the daily soreness of his muscles marked his status as a labor tourist, enjoying the workout. It is this acknowledgment of inequality—his awareness of the disparity between their class positions—that ultimately stops him from attempting to establish what he realizes will only be a facile sense of camaraderie with the Mexican workers: they, unlike his coworkers, are not even middle class. His staccato description of their encounter—“I stood there. Their faces watched me”—emphasizes not only his awkward uncertainty about how to talk to them but also their silent unavailability to reciprocate his efforts. It is almost as if the men themselves do not turn to look at him, only “their dark sweaty faces” do, his repeated reference to them as “the faces” going beyond synecdoche and bordering on objectification. This recognition of their unavailability to him is a function not of Rodriguez’s personal relation to the men, but rather of the structural difference between them. Insofar as they are objectified, it is a result of *capitalism* and not his condescension. Their silence is thus an emblem of this objectification and structural

¹³ Rodriguez, *Hunger* 142.

division, a silence that ultimately haunts Rodriguez as he recalls their encounter. “Their silence is more telling” of their “disadvantaged condition,” he writes at the end of the chapter wherein he narrates the encounter, “They lack a public identity. They remain profoundly alien.”¹⁴

It would not be an exaggeration to say that for almost forty years the negative reaction against *Hunger of Memory* focuses in part on Rodriguez’s refusal to give others a voice by representing the voice they already have. This response continues to willfully misunderstand Rodriguez’s position, a misunderstanding that I will argue indicates a fundamental disagreement between Rodriguez and his critics about the political significance of a Mexican American literature as such. In his review of *Hunger of Memory*, for example, Tomás Rivera describes his own encounter with Mexican “rural communities” and refers to his own “struggle” when trying to write about “this phenomenon... the impenetrable face/masks and their silence.”¹⁵ More so than Rodriguez, Rivera makes explicit the mask-like inscrutability of these “faces,” yet unlike him he does more than simply register their silence; his novel *...y no se lo trago la tierra* (1971), as José F. Aranda describes, “tells the stories of a migrant community shaped by one hundred years of cultural displacement, neglect, and loathing. And yet, the beauty of Rivera’s narrative is that these people also shape themselves.”¹⁶ That is to say, his novel acknowledges and represents what Rivera describes as the “worldview and perceptions” *behind* the face/masks of the Mexican rural workers;¹⁷ he recognizes the dignity of the poor by acknowledging their cultural agency. Because of Rodriguez’s inability to render the voice of anybody but himself, Rivera argues, *Hunger of Memory* is not representative “of any Hispanic group”; it is rather “a personal

¹⁴ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 149.

¹⁵ Tomás Rivera, “Richard Rodriguez’ *Hunger of Memory* as Humanistic Antithesis,” in *Tomás Rivera: The Complete Works* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico, 1991), 342.

¹⁶ José F. Aranda, *When We Arrive: A New Literary History of Mexican America* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2003), xv.

¹⁷ Rivera, *Complete Works*, 342.

expression,” a “singularity”¹⁸ against which Rivera contrasts “a body of Chicano literature.”¹⁹ From Rivera’s perspective, the difference between Rodriguez’s autobiography and Chicano literature centers on questions of representation and culture, more specifically the representation of a culture (a people’s worldview and perceptions). By emphasizing his difference from Mexican migrant workers (and even his own parents, who had established themselves in the U.S.), argues Rivera, Rodriguez denies his and their own “cultural root, the native tongue.”²⁰ And this denial risks perpetuating the long history of reductive dehumanization (including their stereotyping and objectification) of Mexicans and Mexican Americans that Chicano literature as such was meant to counteract.

Rivera, writing in 1984, thus criticizes Rodriguez because he “offers no recognition of the cultural uniqueness of his parents.”²¹ And in 2015 John Alba Cutler argues that Rodriguez’s parents “appear silent only because Rodriguez fails to give them a voice.”²² Yet Rodriguez himself insists “I do not give voice to my parents by writing about their lives. I distinguish myself from them by writing about the life we once shared.”²³ That is to say, his access to a privileged education *does* “distinguish” him from his parents (in part by allowing him to write the way he does and publish where he does), and further differentiates him from the Mexican workers, and this fundamental difference between them is not at all mitigated by whatever affective relation he has towards either. He thus argues that by advocating for cultural recognition, instead of highlighting class inequality, “the middle class blurs the distinction so crucial to social reform.”²⁴ By representing the culture of the anonymous men instead of

¹⁸ Rivera, *Complete Works*, 341.

¹⁹ Rivera, *Complete Works*, 347.

²⁰ Rivera, *Complete Works*, 342.

²¹ Rivera, *Complete Works*, 342.

²² Alba Cutler, *Ends*, 95.

²³ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 202.

²⁴ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 5.

foregrounding their “disadvantage,” writers highlight the poor’s self-pride instead of arguing for the grounds enabling redress. For Rodriguez, the Mexican workers are crucially “Persons apart. People lacking a union obviously, people without grounds,”²⁵ redress thus taking the form of union organizing (i.e. efforts to ensure job security, safe working conditions, living wages, health care, legal protection against labor abuse...). In contrast, when one looks at, say, Aranda’s litany of the ills of migrant work I quote above— “cultural displacement, neglect, and loathing”—the list fails to make explicit their poverty, thereby psychologizing the solution to their situation. Poverty becomes a stigma to be neutralized through empathy instead of a condition to be addressed with political and economic reform. Poverty, in short, becomes something like a culture to be respected, aestheticized by “the beauty of Rivera’s narrative,” represented by Chicano literature.

The question of the function of Mexican American literature had relatively clear-cut, albeit varied, answers from the late 1960s through the 1970s: a distinctly *Chicano* literature could articulate the community’s specific identity (group self-empowerment via self-representation) and ensure that this identity be recognized within the U.S. as part of the country’s history and curricula (works that garner sociopolitical recognition and counter existing distortions). This question of the function(s) of Mexican American literature was raised anew during the first half of the 1980s partly because the answers of the previous decade depended on the representational claims made by Chicanos that were rejected on several different fronts, most powerfully by feminists (the topic of the next chapter). These rejections emerged just as Chicano Studies and Chicano literature enjoyed the benefits of institutional recognition, the result of the very Chicano activism under question. Rodriguez’s infamous negative assessment of Chicanismo prompted Rivera, who by then had become the Chancellor of UC Riverside, to offer a tally of

²⁵ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 149.

Chicanos' accomplishments. Rivera describes the Chicanos' successful efforts "to establish a literature" and the growing institutional presence of this literature "in a total of 135 universities."²⁶ Rivera was not suggesting that such efforts were over, of course, yet he could in 1984 look back and summarize the accomplishments with a celebratory tone meant to counter Rodriguez's own bleak diagnosis. Yet the very increase in access to publishers and the growing collegiate readership Rivera invoked provided the forum for writers to publish their thoughts—as I will show, often thematized in novels—about the particular function Mexican American literature as such served (if any) when Chicanismo no longer appeared tenable.

I start this essay with an extended analysis of *Hunger of Memory* because its rejection of Chicanismo proves to be importantly unique (or, using Rivera's term, a "singularity"), and the negative response to the autobiography indicates the extent to which his perspective did not obtain. I will show how what I am characterizing as two potential ways of reading *Hunger of Memory*—one that focuses on its seeming dismissal of Mexican culture, the other that highlights the text's argument about the problem of class—correspond to two competing diagnoses about the fundamental problem of American society. And just as there are two broad accounts of these problems, there are corresponding trajectories that literature written by Mexican Americans could have taken in the wake of Chicanismo—one suggested by Rodriguez's perspective, the other encapsulated by what he rejects. I argue that the Mexican American novel of identity replaced the Chicano novel of the 1970s and that this change reflects the way in which the diagnosis that gained traction since the 1970s within the national discourse was and continues to be that of ethnic memory, of therapeutically testifying about historical trauma.

This diagnosis became salient just after the American political consensus moved away from the consolidated efforts to protect simultaneously the strength of manufacturing and that of

²⁶ Rivera, "Richard Rodriguez' *Hunger of Memory* as Humanistic Antithesis," *Complete Works*, 241.

American labor, towards the 1980's faith in growth models based on finance and relatively unregulated transnational trade—a move that proved detrimental to the livelihood of American workers.²⁷ The years that loosely frame this essay—1981 to 1984— saw the triumph of neoliberalism, exemplified in such feats as Ronald Reagan's resounding defeat of the PATCO strike in 1981 and Margaret Thatcher's equally definitive dissolution of the British miners' union in 1984. Unbridled Reaganomics produced the recrudescence of the bootstrap "rags to riches" narrative in political discourse,²⁸ a narrative that depicts upward class mobility as made possible by individual responsibility and hard work. Although characteristic of the "American Dream" as such—the literary depiction of which has a long history that often goes by the shorthand "Horatio Alger"—the bootstrap narrative during neoliberalism can be distinguished by its explicit aversion to "market intervention" including that of social welfare programs and union organizing. So while Alger describes in the preface of *Ragged Dick* (1868) his hopes that readers will be inspired to help the efforts of the Children's Aid Society "to ameliorate" the "condition" of impoverished child bootblacks,²⁹ José Antonio Villarreal's titular protagonist of the novel *Clemente Chacón* (1983), himself a child bootblack, praises those who reject being "on the dole."³⁰ Clemente Chacón might call himself a "brown" "Horatio Alger" (8), yet his faith in self-reliance and hard work surpasses any depiction of individualism found in Alger's work.³¹ As one

²⁷ An insightful and crucial account of the American transition into neoliberalism remains Judith Stein's *The Pivotal Decade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), a political and economic history that tracks the difference between "assumptions that labor and capital should prosper together" and the radically contrasting idea that "the promotion of capital will eventually benefit labor."

²⁸ The very idiomatic use of the term "bootstrapping" as a metaphor, of course, originally pointed at the absurd impossibility of a task. See Anne Curzan, "Just Try that with Your Bookstraps"

<https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2017/03/07/just-try-that-with-your-bootstraps/>

²⁹ Horatio Alger, Jr., "Preface," *Ragged Dick: Or, Street Life in New York with the Boot-blacks* (New York: Signet Classic, 1990), 2.

³⁰ José Antonio Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón* (Binghamton, NY: Bilingual, 1984), 103.

³¹ The thematic prominence of *luck* in Alger's novels as well as the repeated role played by wealthy benefactors belie a faith in individual effort alone. Sheer self-reliance and personal gumption certainly contribute to upward class mobility in Alger's novels, yet *Ragged Dick's* journey to becoming Richard, for example, would have been prolonged indefinitely had it not been for the coincidental meeting of Dick's innate moral bravery and a wealthy

of the identity novels I analyze in what follows, *Clemente Chacón* explicitly highlights the way in which the this type of novel so prominent during the 1980s and the coterminous neoliberal bootstrap narrative are not only historically contiguous but also deeply homologous, which is why I argue that Rodriguez’s rejection of a certain type of fiction derives from his rejection of a certain type of politics, suggesting the possibility that the advancement of the fiction centered on identity and testimony leads to the advancement of the politics of neoliberalism.

“They thought I was a Mexican, of course”

Rodriguez dramatizes his rejection of the politics of Chicano literary representation by describing another encounter, one that took place in his campus office during the late 1970s. A “group of eight or ten Hispanic students” approach him “to teach a ‘minority literature’ course at some barrio community center” because “this new literature had an important role to play in helping to shape the consciousness of a people lacking adequate literary representation.” This confrontation could be understood as potentially compensatory to the first one I describe above: the precariously working “anonymous men” described by Rodriguez *can* have a “public identity” and a “voice”; Chicano literature gives it to them by representing it. But just as he had the opportunity to connect with Mexican workers but seemingly could not, in this encounter Rodriguez has the opportunity to establish solidarity with the Hispanic students but will not. Citing the history of the “relationship of the novel to the rise of the middle class in eighteenth-century Europe,” he notes how novels have always been written by the middle class for the middle class. Even when the novels are about the lower class, they cannot help but register the deep disparity between the writer and depicted subject. “Any novel or play about the lower class

benefactor. As Alan Trachtenberg argues, “Communal redemption,” the “making of ‘good citizens,’ is the novel’s moral lesson rather than “individual success.” Trachtenberg, “Introduction,” *Ragged Dick* (New York: Signet Classic, 1990), xiii.

will necessarily be alien to the culture it portrays,” he argues, offering Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1976) as a case in point. Haley’s novel “tells us more about his difference from his illiterate, tribal ancestors than it does about his link to them.”³² From this perspective, Chicano literature amounts to a decidedly middle-class phenomenon, one which claims that the beneficiaries of upward class mobility remain “unchanged” from their working-class “community” and thus share and advance their political interests.

Hunger of Memory thus remains skeptical of the progressive efficacy of such literature because Rodriguez questions the possibility of the middle class’s perspective to advance any interest but its own. Which is why *Hunger* invites us to interrogate the appreciation of the “beauty” of a way of life when that life is, as Rodriguez continually describes, “disadvantaged,” an interrogation that becomes clarified when we compare his labor tourism to another famous depiction of Mexican migrant workers—Jack Kerouac’s portrait of them in *On the Road* (1957). Written and published when the American Bracero Program was still legally importing hundreds of thousands of Mexican nationals for temporary field labor, *On the Road* romanticizes the act of picking cotton as “beautiful”—in contrast to how his Mexican girlfriend describes it: “it’s very hard picking cotton.” Its protagonist Sal Paradise admires the Mexican workers’ skill and that of “an old Negro couple” who “picked cotton with the same God-blessed patience their grandfather had practiced in ante-bellum Alabama.”³³ After a few days of staying with the Mexican workers, Paradise is mistaken for one of them, prompting him to admit, “They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am.”³⁴ (98). Paradise does not pathologize Mexican workers or “Negroes”; he appreciates their dignity. Indeed, just as he identifies with the Mexicans, he “wishes” he “could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America”

³² Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 173.

³³ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957; repr. New York: Penguin, 2003), 95-6.

³⁴ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 98.

because the life of the Negro “knows nothing of ‘white sorrows’ and all that.” I compare both accounts in order to highlight the distinction between Rodriguez, who although Mexican American registers the difference between himself and the Mexican workers, and Paradise, who though calling himself a “white man,” professes a basic equivalence between himself and the Mexicans. Yet Paradise does not explicitly comment on the irony of being able to walk away from the migrants’ camp (and a life of labor) in order to pick up a check wired to him by his aunt (who “saves [his] lazy butt again”).³⁵ And later in the novel, when he again wishes he were “a Negro... a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what [he] was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disillusioned,” Paradise waxes poetic about how all were “humanity,”³⁶ but in yet another brilliant display of dramatic irony, just a few sentences later, Paradise relates how he went to “see a rich girl” who “pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of her silk stocking... So all my problems were solved.”³⁷ When he thinks he is a Mexican, his aunt bails him out. When he dreams of being a Negro, a rich girl solves his problems.³⁸ Rodriguez’s summertime employment, however, not only teaches him that he is not like a bracero, he realizes that he need not be ashamed of his skin: brown skin might be an index of the sun but need not be a sign of a class. But whereas brown skin might be the mere index of melanin, it could also be a symbol of an identity. “[N]o longer ashamed of [his] body,” he writes, he joins “middle-class black Americans” who at the time “began to assert with pride, ‘black is beautiful.’”³⁹ One way of

³⁵ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 101.

³⁶ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 180.

³⁷ Kerouac, *On the Road*, 181.

³⁸ See Manuel Luis Martinez’s “With Imperious Eye” for an extended reading of how Kerouac “romanticizes the reality of migrant labor.” Martinez reads Paradise’s Mexican girlfriend’s name “Terry” as symbolizing “Kerouac’s romantic desire for a primal connection to the earth, ‘tierra,’” no longer available to the “postwar American male” (89). I ultimately disagree with Martinez’s assessment that the “migrant worker text” is “truly countercultural in that it does not give in to or endorse the individualist version of democracy” (4), but appreciate his work’s efforts to highlight the ideological underpinnings of the postwar “counterculture.” *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

³⁹ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 146.

describing the difference Rodriguez invokes in his badly phrased refrains “not all blacks are equally ‘black’” and “all Mexican-Americans certainly are not equally Mexican-Americans”⁴⁰ is by foregrounding the class who gets to symbolize its indices more easily; the difference between being merely brown and proudly brown, in short, *is* for Rodriguez class privilege.

The sheer controversy of this position renders it immediately objectionable because it seems to deny the poor their claims to a culture and an identity, a denial that continues Rodriguez’s seemingly objectifying dehumanization of the “anonymous men.” But the central point worth emphasizing again centers on the distinction between the privileged and the exploited, a distinction between those for whom a class position can more easily be perceived and chosen *as* a cultural identity. He describes how some of the migrant workers he would see in California wore “Texas *sombreros* and T-shirts which shone fluorescent in the twilight,”⁴¹ attire that contrasts with the “dandyism” of his own “double-breasted Italian suits and custom-made English shoes.”⁴² Stated crudely, those who *choose* to wear fluorescent t-shirts and sombreros over tailored suits and bespoke shoes must have the money to make that choice; those who choose wide-brimmed hats and thin, sun-reflecting t-shirts not because they work in the sun all day but because they are expressing their cultural preference are manifesting a choice not everybody has. *This* is the reason why Rodriguez lambasts Mexican American college professors and undergrads for wearing the “costumes of the rural poor”: for them, the clothing functions as a sign of allegiance to a culture that eliminates the class difference between university professors

⁴⁰ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 161.

⁴¹ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 122.

⁴² Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 146.

and the lower class.⁴³ When detached from the specific context that led to their use, articles of clothing become “mere costumery.”⁴⁴

Which is to say that a focus on cultural identity tends to occlude class inequality even if that focus is unsympathetic to the value of diversity. In Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*, for example, he reports how the majority of student protestors at Stanford in 1988 wore “Oxford button downs, Vuarnet sunglasses, baseball caps, Timex and Rolex watches” but not “tribal garb, Middle Eastern veils, or Japanese samurai swords.”⁴⁵ He means to highlight the irony of the student body that on the one hand rejects “western culture” (they wanted to read texts including *I, Rigoberta Menchú* instead of the canon of dead “white males”) but on the other hand fully embraces it (apparently, by wearing baseball caps and t-shirts).⁴⁶ But when Rodriguez describes the campus at Stanford during the 1970s, he notes the increased sightings of “Hispanic students wearing serapes.”⁴⁷ The irony of *his* observation is meant to highlight the disconnect between the students and the Mexican rural identity they represent with their clothing. So although D’Souza has a hard time finding ethnic garb on the campus of Stanford but Rodriguez does not, what they would both be hard pressed to find would be students from the bottom quintile of American income—and that is Rodriguez’s point. Whether the students walking across Stanford’s campus do so wearing *huaraches* or oxfords, and whether these students read Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio* instead of Augustine’s *Confessions*, they will nevertheless be “among the fortunate ones, America’s favored children” because they have been afforded the expensive privilege of attending one of the most prestigious schools in the country.⁴⁸

⁴³ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 168.

⁴⁴ The phrase is Georg Lukács’s. See his critique of “historical novels” that treat “history as mere costumery” in *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell, 3rd ed. (London, Merlin: 1974), 19.

⁴⁵ Dinesh D’Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 59.

⁴⁶ D’Souza, *Illiberal*, 59.

⁴⁷ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 171.

⁴⁸ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 176.

The very text that helped incite this much-publicized Stanford protest, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, demonstrates how this focus on culture obscures class inequality even when the goal of the Spanish-language *testimonio* genre was revolutionary class warfare. As “an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.),” the *testimonio* genre had always been considered first and foremost a form of propaganda.⁴⁹ This genre rose in prestige and visibility during the 1960s when, according to Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, the Cuban Casa de las Américas award distinguished it as equally artistically and politically significant. By highlighting and circulating the first-person account of the “lower classes,” describes Burgos-Debray, some hoped that the genre might “grant visibility to the oppressed, in the name of whom organic intellectuals would lead the revolution, which would occur through guerrilla warfare.”⁵⁰ From the very onset, she argues, the production of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was understood as “a political campaign, not anthropology or literature,” a campaign meant to change international opinion about the efforts of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) against the Guatemalan army. Yet the English translation of the *testimonio*’s title itself exemplifies a tension between two competing accounts of the text and its aims. The Spanish title *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchu Y Asi Me Nacio La Conciencia* (1983) (“My name is Rigoberta Menchú and this is how my consciousness was born”) became *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984); one title centers on her identity and subject position, the other foregrounds how this identity was radicalized—who she is being of relevance because of what she came to believe. The English title represents

⁴⁹ George Yúdice further defines *testimonio* as: “Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history” quoted in Georg Gugelberger, *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 9.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Burgos, “How I Became Persona Non Grata,” in *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, by Dave Stoll (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2008)

the type of text Menchú's testimonio was taken to be: an account of a way of life that should be preserved as such, to the extent that its potential political ambition became eclipsed by its participation in the discourse of multiculturalism.

Published a year after *Hunger of Memory*, Menchú's testimonio is often contrasted to Rodriguez's text because it purportedly represents the voice of the poor by allowing the poor—embodied by Menchú—to speak directly (bracketing the controversy concerning the authenticity of the account).⁵¹ Yet the tension between the text's explicit radical politics (its call for change) and its depiction of a culture (its call for cultural autonomy) runs throughout the whole of the work, raising Rodriguez's very questions about *who* gets to appreciate a way of life as such, and whether literature could offer a political intervention that is not primarily that of the middle class. Readers can register the relevance of these questions when in her introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Burgos-Debray herself describes Menchú's "politeness" and "delicacy," which, Burgos-Debray comes to learn, are products of a culture that teaches "Indian children" the importance of "delicacy from a very early age; they begin to pick coffee when they are still very young and the berries have to be plucked with great delicacy if the branches are not to be damaged."⁵² Burgos-Debray, here, in effect, becomes Sal Paradise admiring the "God-blessed patience" of the black workers picking cotton. According to her, the importance and necessity of Menchú's testimony are that it draws readers' attention to the fact that "She and her people are taken into account only when their labour power is needed; culturally, they are discriminated against and rejected... She is fighting for the recognition of her culture, for the acceptance of the

⁵¹ The anthropologist David Stoll's infamous *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999) was the first to challenge the veracity of Menchú's account. See the 2008 edition for the forward by Elizabeth Burgos in which she lists the inconsistencies of Menchú's statements since the testimonio's publication. For a collection of essays debating the issue see Arturo Arias, *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (2001). For a defense of Menchú, see Victoria Sanford's "The Silencing of Maya Women From Mamá Maquín to Rigoberta Menchu" in *Social Justice* 27.1 (2000).

⁵² Elisabeth Burgos, "Introduction" in Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1994), xiv–xv.

fact that it is different and for her people's rightful share of power."⁵³ (xiii). The point of Menchú's testimonial may be to draw the necessary attention to a particularly egregious political situation, in which people are massacred with impunity, so that this situation could change—but when the relatively privileged readers of the text seek instead to make sure the people are not murdered so that they can continue living their way of life, they effectively make it safer for them to remain poor. Those who empathize with indigenous Guatemalans are faced with the contradictory situation of wanting to help change the oppressive conditions while nevertheless wanting to maintain a culture that is their product. As Menchú herself puts it referring to indigenous birthing rituals: "This way of thinking comes from poverty and suffering" (15). She is referring to how, for example,

when [a pregnant woman is] in her seventh month, the mother introduces her baby to the natural world, as our customs tell her to. She goes out in the fields or walks over the hills. She also has to show the baby the kind of life she leads, so that if she gets up at three in the morning, does her chores and tends the animals, she does it all the more so when she's pregnant, conscious that the child is taking all this in."⁵⁴

What Menchú is describing are sleep-deprived women in their third trimester of pregnancy who continue to perform manual labor, a situation portrayed here as a tradition. Readers could in fact understand the whole of the chapter titled "Birth Ceremonies" in terms of cultural preservation (the value of introducing children to an earthbound way of life) *or* in terms of oppressive labor conditions (the necessity of introducing children to a life of endless work) but not both simultaneously. Enjoying this culture as such requires extricating this way of life from the conditions that brought it into being. This either means changing the conditions, which leads to the possibility that said way of life is fundamentally altered, or it means converting a way of life *into* a culture, one that can be appreciated by those not having to live it. Menchú's beautiful,

⁵³ Burgos, "Introduction," xiii.

⁵⁴ Menchú, *I, Rigoberta*, 7–8.

handmade clothes can become not only “costumes” that some might want to purchase and wear (that would be putting it too dismissively), they become more like works of art that can be admired and appreciated.

If, following the argument derived from *Hunger of Memory*, Chicano literature is itself a literature of the middle class that claims to represent the voice and politics of a people and the beauty of their way of life even when that way of life is sometimes “disadvantaged,” and if *Hunger of Memory* is instead a text that describes some of these disadvantaged people as economically vulnerable, in need of union advocacy, it then seems odd that *Hunger* is so often seen as “a foe to progressive Chicano/a politics,” as Aranda describes it.⁵⁵ As one of the rare texts to explicitly highlight class inequality—presumably the target of a progressive politics—it seems odd, too, that *Hunger of Memory* would be characterized as foremost representing a “neoliberal ethos” by Alba Cutler.⁵⁶ Part of the reason this criticism is so common and Rodriguez’s version of the critique of Chicano politics and literature so seemingly singular—contrasting even with his own later work—is because *Hunger of Memory*’s characterization of the fundamental problems of American society was not what in the 1970s and 1980s had become the dominant account of what constituted inequality and injustice *as such*. The “lesson that survived the turbulence in the South of the fifties and sixties,” he describes, was “that there are forms of oppression that touch all levels of a society,” a recognition that prompted “liberation movements of women, the elderly, the physically disabled, and the homosexual.” Just as legal segregation did not discriminate in terms of class, all women are potential victims of sexism and misogyny; and just as addressing discrimination at the very top of the economic hierarchy advances the cause against discrimination for all, efforts advocating against sexism,

⁵⁵ Aranda, *When We Arrive*, 24.

⁵⁶ Alba Cutler, *Ends*, 107.

heterosexism, ageism, and ableism benefit the victims regardless of their class position. Yet, argues Rodriguez, “racism rhetorically replaced poverty as the key social oppression,” and anti-racism became a synecdoche for a progressive politics that ignored class inequality by claiming to combat it with anti-discrimination. So while of course legitimate in and of itself, “the woman business executive’s claim to be the victim of social oppression” risks the danger of “ignor[ing] altogether the importance of *class*.”⁵⁷ And although Rodriguez believes the “black lawyer” when he describes how “there is never a day in his life when he forgets he is black” because he is discriminated against, Rodriguez insists on the difference between the experiences of those in the upper middle class who face discrimination and the lives of the working class structured by economic exploitation. His argument here is not that the executive’s and lawyer’s complaints are not worthy of redress nor that misogyny and racism have not historically functioned to maintain the elite. Rather, the point is that efforts to diversify and adequately respect the elite (as he puts it, efforts to “form a leadership class” and an “elite society”) do not alone constitute a Left politics. Such efforts are in fact antithetical to the definition of the Left as such, for which the very establishment and caretaking of a “leadership class” constitutes the problem.

But because his text is not sufficiently committed to advancing the cause of anti-discrimination, it has been perceived as aiding a conservative agenda. Rodriguez, of course, places himself in the position of the Right’s poster child because of his longstanding vocal opposition to affirmative action and bilingual education. Yet the opposition to affirmative action articulated in *Hunger of Memory* does not derive from the Right’s politics. His critique of identity politics centers on what he considers a false, ahistorical analogy between the African American and Mexican American collective experiences of discrimination. The specificity of legalized segregation created the conditions for a black, interclass political vision because Jim

⁵⁷ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 160, emphasis in original.

Crow laws did not differentiate between the “black businessman and the black maid.” “Thus,” argues Rodriguez, “when segregation laws were challenged and finally defeated, the benefit to one became the benefit for all; the integration of an institution by a single black implied an advance for the entire race.”⁵⁸ Because of the analogy between African and Mexican Americans, the institutional integration of Chicano scholars could similarly be characterized as an advancement for “the race.” Yet such activism that focuses on increasing the number of minorities in higher education is limited not only in scope but objective because it ignores crucial features that contribute *to* the lower representation of Mexican Americans at the college level—namely, their inability to afford tuition and the gross disparities in their education that precluded their even applying. Rodriguez questions the pervasive valorization of the college campus as the site enabling upward class mobility because those *already* in a position to avail themselves of elite opportunities (including college enrollment and eventual professorships) are strictly speaking not the most vulnerable members of society. “The campus,” he argues, “has become a place for ‘making it’ rather than a place for those who, relatively speaking, already ‘have it made.’”⁵⁹ Stated a bit more sharply, by focusing on race-based initiatives to increase the numbers of minorities at universities, activists effectively advance a bourgeois class politics disproportionately benefiting students of the middle and upper middle class.

Writing in the wake of the Bakke decision, Rodriguez knew the nail-against-the-chalkboard effect his position would elicit among his academic reading publics, those for whom the university was understood as a potential gateway to social justice. As Chris Findeisen has recently argued, the massive growth since WWII of American higher education “has

⁵⁸ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 160.

⁵⁹ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 165.

fundamentally altered both its social function and its meaning within the cultural imagination.”⁶⁰ American higher education has come to be seen as a medium enabling social change (the answer to increased economic inequality being the promise of upward class mobility) instead of being the mechanism producing and maintaining the status quo (upward class mobility predicated on the reality of class inequality). A particular expression of this cultural re-imagining of the university can be found in American literature published since the 1980s. Reading novels thematically about American higher education, Findeisen argues that the “American campus novel” has helped “redescrib[e] the postwar university as an institution that can combat social inequality” by “making invisible a social inequality that the university not only doesn’t combat but instead helps promote.” The central drama motivating the plot of campus novels tends to center on the shame felt by the poor at elite campuses, a form of psychological distress that becomes but another obstacle in the way of the poor’s class ascendance. Yet the (ideological) fiction perpetuated by campus novels is that this interclass drama takes place with some frequency when the percentage of poor people at elite universities is in fact relatively negligible.⁶¹ Psychologizing the reality of class inequality by redescribing it in terms of the affect of shame, campus fiction suggests that the virtue of inclusion presents a viable solution to the problems of capitalism.

And just as campus fiction produces a vision of the world in which increasing inequality can be addressed by the politics of inclusion, campus politics as such have been motivated almost entirely by this vision. The 1980s culture wars were partly based on efforts to introduce new voices to an ossified Western canon and debunk the American myth of exceptionalism—a myth founded on the unacknowledged exploited labor of slaves, bodies of Native Americans,

⁶⁰ Christopher Findeisen, “Injuries of Class: Mass Education and the American Campus Novel” *PMLA* Volume 130, Number 3 (March 2015): 284–298.

⁶¹ See Walter Benn Michaels “The Neoliberal Imagination.” *N+I* 3 (2005): 69-76.

and land of dispossessed Mexicans. The call for a focus on such historical sins helps explain the rise in importance of Walter Benjamin's description of the way in which the transmission of a cultural tradition bespeaks the atrocities committed in the name of progress. For Benjamin, the "document[s] of civilization" are always "document[s] of barbarism," tainted with the blood that enabled their existence.⁶² As a corrective to American exceptionalism specifically, and "Western culture" generally, these new voices advanced the uncirculated histories of the victimized and marginalized. So along with the "campus novel" studied by Findeisen, the 1980s also witnessed the increased popularity of "the kind of novel," according to Ursula K. Heise, whose "primary objective," was that of "publicization of those alternative histories of women, cultures colonized by Western powers, or racial and ethnic minorities that had been ignored or repressed in mainstream historiography."⁶³ Here, Findeisen's political critique of the American campus novel remains relevant because, as Mark McGurl suggests (albeit hypothetically), *all* novels of the postwar period "aspiring to the honorific status of literature must be considered campus novels of a sort."⁶⁴ What McGurl means is that as a direct product of university creative writing programs, postwar fiction displays the "metafictional reflexivity" readers have come to associate with ambitious self-consciously literary fiction as such. So although Heise differentiates the ethnic historicist novels ("alternative histories") from her work's focus on what she considers formally experimental postmodern novels of the 1960s and 70s, McGurl's more careful analysis shows the

⁶² Quoted in Jonathan Arac, "What Good Can Literary History Do?" *American Literary History* 20.1/2, Twenty Years of American Literary History: The Anniversary Volume (2008). Arac's article offers a concise example of the argued relevance of Benjamin's account for present day literary history.

⁶³ Ursula K. Heise, *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 16. Heise makes a general argument about the way in which western conceptions of time have changed—as registered in what she considers "properly" postmodern, formally experimental novels—yet she chooses to leave out novels about identity. By doing so she misses the opportunity to justify her claims about the culture at large because the novels in question could be seen as exemplifying her claims insofar as they too employ postmodern formal experimentation and radical reconceptualizations of time.

⁶⁴ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 47.

deep formal and thematic connections between both.⁶⁵ But insofar as postmodern novels (the “technomodernism” of, say, John Barth and Thomas Pynchon) and ethnic novels (the “high cultural pluralism” of writers including Chang-Rae Lee and Toni Morrison) are products of what he calls the “Program Era”—insofar as both types of novels are products of the university— they visibly feature the driving intuition of the campus politics I describe. Indeed, McGurl’s own optimistic historical narrative of the growth of creative writing programs highlights the gradual inclusion of marginalized voices into the ambit of the university—a narrative that is evidently socially progressive. But just as the Findeisen-described campus novel masks the reality of class inequality, the fiction perpetuated by McGurl’s broader “campus novel” suggests that by solving the problem of discrimination the country will be headed toward the path of economic equality. The campus politics in question, in short, are those of inclusion and recognition *instead* of the more radical politics of dismantling and redistribution, yet the former is treated *as* the latter while the latter is perceived as irrelevant and insidious insofar as it does not address the former.

It is in this context that we can appreciate Rodriguez’s rejection of Chicano literature and his overdetermined selection of Haley’s exceedingly popular *Roots* as the pertinent example to dismiss. Not only does the novel’s television adaptation continue to top lists of most-watched television series (its episodes ranking alongside those of *M*A*S*H*), Michael Eric Dyson credits *Roots* with inciting a national discourse about the continued relevance of slavery in American

⁶⁵ While exemplarily nuanced, McGurl’s breadth sometimes glosses over the finer distinctions necessary for a literary historical understanding of Mexican American literature. Within his category “high cultural pluralism,” for example, I would differentiate Chicano fiction of the 1970s from what he calls “Chicana/o Literature” of the 1980s. This differentiation becomes apparent when his primary example of Chicana/o literature is Sandra Cisneros, who has consistently identified a lack within the canon of a perspective like her own. With the publication of *The House on Mango Street* in 1984, she did not understand herself to be contributing to an existing Chicano tradition so much as introducing something missing but necessary. See Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* [1984] (New York: Vintage, 1991). See also Cisneros’s 1994 preface in which she describes how she “later” “discover[ed]” novels including Tomás Rivera’s *...y no se lo trago la tierra*, which features a similar vignette style as *The House on Mango Street*. See also Cisneros’s Nabokovian *Speak, Memory*-like preface to the 25th anniversary edition of the novel, in which, referring to herself in the third person, she claims “Where she gets these ideas about living like a writer, she has no clue... She doesn’t know anything. She’s making things up as she goes.” *The House on Mango Street* [1984] (New York: Vintage, 2009), xv.

society. By reminding the nation of its sullied past and by reconnecting African Americans to their history, argues Dyson, *Roots* helps the country through “the long midnight of slavery’s haunting presence.”⁶⁶ As with any claim about a novel’s galvanizing influence, we might take Dyson’s praise of *Roots* with a grain of salt. Whether the novel produced or merely reflected a burgeoning American discourse about the ongoing effects of slavery, Dyson’s diagnosis of what constitutes social injustice—“racial amnesia”— and the prescribed solution— “grappl[ing] with the past”— found a ready audience with *Roots*’ readership and remains just as salient today.⁶⁷ *Roots* dramatizes the effort to maintain ancestral ties in its very opening scene, with Kunta Kinte’s naming ceremony involving the gathering of the village and a recital of his forefathers’ names, “which were great and many, [and] went back more than two hundred rains.”⁶⁸ Echoes of this naming ritual resound towards the novel’s conclusion, wherein Kinte’s great-great-granddaughter Cynthia gathers a “houseful of family” and recited to her newborn daughter (Alex Haley’s mother) “the whole story back to the African, Kunta Kinte.”⁶⁹ Indeed, throughout the novel Kinte’s lineage maintains the oral tradition practiced by the African *griots*, “men who were

⁶⁶ Michael Eric Dyson, “Haley’s Comet,” in Alex Haley, *Roots* (New York: Vanguard Books, 2007), ix-xii.

⁶⁷ Just to provide one recent popular example, in *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015) Ta-Nehisi Coates describes to his son how “They [Americans who believe that they are white and thus superior] have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery” (143), which is why Coates exhorts him to “Remember that you and I are brothers, are the children of trans-Atlantic rape” (128). By insisting that his son remember their shared history, he suggests that this historical recognition provides them a perspective from which to discern the fundamental problems in American culture (including its rapacious globalism and decimation of resources). But the diagnosis of *racism* does not explain, say, the depletion of resources in the way that the diagnosis of *capitalism* does. Indeed, his account of the legacy of slavery rearticulates it as the means through which the myth of whiteness and white supremacy maintained itself instead of being a source of free labor that sustained an agrarian economy. This is not to say that white supremacy does not continue to protect the status of the privileged. But as Coates’ justly affecting description of the way in which his wealthy college acquaintance is murdered by a police officer demonstrates, the problem, here, is not exactly racism, it is hegemony: power’s efforts to maintain itself. Coates’ moving example is meant to showcase how state-sanctioned violence affects blacks of all class levels, yet the fact that the police officer was not only black himself but was employed by a wealthy, predominantly black district in Washington D. C. shows how the elite (including the victims of racism) will always seek to protect their class interests against those they think threaten to disrupt their privilege.

⁶⁸ Haley, *Roots*, 3.

⁶⁹ Haley, *Roots*, 659.

in effect living, walking archives of oral history.”⁷⁰ For Haley, *Roots* functions as an act of testimony and preservation, reinforcing the griots’ task by assuming their place; by resounding his ancestral names the novel renders history and connects the past to the present, thereby enabling the present’s identity.⁷¹ But whereas the novel represents Haley’s controversial (because sometimes plagiarized and fictive) and decades-long effort to trace his lineage,⁷² efforts that include his going to the “crumbling ruins” of a slave fort in Africa,⁷³ Rodriguez provokingly asserts, “Aztec ruins hold no special interest for me. I do not search Mexican graveyards for ties to unnameable ancestors.”⁷⁴ Just as the recognition of a shared cultural ethnicity would facilitate the camaraderie between Rodriguez and the anonymous men, *Roots* and other works like it produce the grounds for a shared culture and identity and thereby effectively occlude the fundamental differences between people that Rodriguez insists on maintaining. Only by identifying this difference and registering it as a *problem* (“difference” being the result of material deprivation) could its neutralization begin to be possible.

“*You’re not a Mexican.*”

The tension, then, evident in the responses to texts like *I, Rigoberta Menchú* maps onto the two potential ways of reading *Hunger of Memory* that I rehearse above, which themselves correspond to the two competing diagnoses about the fundamental problem of American society

⁷⁰ Haley, *Roots*, 674.

⁷¹ Haley describes how the death of the African griots constitutes the loss of a living library, the potential erasure of which entails the eradication of present-day identities: “The memories and the mouths of ancient elders was the only way that early histories of mankind got passed along... for all of us today to know who we are” (viii original ellipses). The importance of invoking history here centers not only on the exorcism of its haunting specters but also in the maintenance of history’s very presence incarnated within the black body: As Dyson puts it, “The true impact of Haley’s book is that it started a conversation about black roots that continues to this day. DNA tests to determine black ancestry are more popular than ever” (xi).

⁷² The controversy surrounding Haley’s novel was initiated by the writer Harold Courlander, who sued Haley for plagiarizing his novel *The African* (1967). The suit led to a financial settlement and apology by Haley. See Phil Stanford’s article “Roots and Grafts on the Haley Story,” *Washington Star*, April 8, 1979, F4.

⁷³ Haley, *Roots*, 676.

⁷⁴ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 3.

thematically represented in literature: one based on the problem of cultural amnesia (“forgetting” the past secures its perennial return), the other highlighting the continued struggle between labor and capital (the persistence of which necessitates, at the very least, union advocacy).⁷⁵ And just as there are historical reasons why *Hunger of Memory* has been received the way it has, it stands to reason why the understanding of Menchú’s account that became salient in the U.S. during the culture wars was that of its account of a cultural identity and the importance of this culture’s history. Note the primacy of the notion of “culture” in Burgos-Debray’s introduction:

Her voice is so heart-rendingly beautiful because it speaks to us of every facet of the life of a people and their oppressed culture. But Rigoberta Menchú’s story does not consist solely of heart-rending moments. Quietly, but proudly, she leads us into her own cultural world, a world in which the sacred and the profane constantly mingle, in which worship and domestic life are one and the same, in which every gesture has a pre-established meaning. Within that culture, everything is determined in advance; everything that occurs in the present can be explained in terms of the past and has to be ritualized so as to be integrated into everyday life, which is itself a ritual.⁷⁶

In this account, the persistence of Menchú’s identity bespeaks the historical continuity of an indigenous way of life, the attempted eradication of which amounts to genocide insofar as it prohibits the continuity of an identity as such. Such is the prevalent notion of cultural identity that informs Haley’s *Roots*, which ensures that the past is not forgotten so that its crimes can be addressed, its victims redeemed, and its lessons learned. So it is not only the case that the concept of “culture” became crucial to the American social imaginary since the 1980s, but a historicized notion of culture which understands the present as fully explained and determined by the past.

⁷⁵ My repeated valorization of unionization should not suggest that it provides the only means for economic justice. But insofar as it highlights the problem as one of class conflict, labor organizing is certainly one relevant start towards that goal.

⁷⁶ Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1994), (xii).

Although the very contemporary economic and political policies of neoliberalism affected the livelihood of workers and led to increasing economic inequality, what I am characterizing as the fiction of testimony understood these effects of neoliberalism as products of this past. Danny Santiago's *Famous All Over Town* (1983), for example, begins with an epigraph taken from Bernal Díaz del Castillo's sixteenth century account of the magnificence of the Aztec palaces, the demolition of which provides Díaz del Castillo's account its poignancy: "But of the wonders that I then beheld, today all is overthrown and lost and nothing is left standing."⁷⁷ The novel's narrator, Rudy ("Chato"), witnesses the demolition of his childhood home in East Los Angeles by the S.P. Railroad, which through coercion and brute institutional strength decimates an entire neighborhood in order to make a large parking lot for its trailers. As Chato watches the bulldozers raze the houses on his block, he tells himself to "Stop and look even if it hurts... Look hard so later you could testify."⁷⁸ The novel's epigraphic invocation of Díaz del Castillo suggests a historical resonance if not continuity between crimes against indigenous societies and the perpetuation of injustices against Mexicans living in the U.S. Just as nothing remains of the Aztec buildings' splendor except for their textual depiction, Chato's account—in the form of the novel—can at the very least circulate and resist being relegated to oblivion.

The novel thus begins with Chato recalling his past, speaking his childhood address aloud as a form of incantation, as he drives through what was his neighborhood. Yet characteristic of the novel's tragicomic tone, he describes how his car's "patriotic bumper was the loudest noise in sight. 'CHICANO POWER,' it yelled. 'BROWN IS BEAUTIFUL. FULANO FOR SHERIFF,'" a visual display of racial politics he tells to "Shut up."⁷⁹ It is crucial to note that the fictive conditions of the narrative's possibility—Chato recalling his childhood—*brackets*

⁷⁷Danny Santiago, *Famous All Over Town* (New York: Plume, 1984) np.

⁷⁸ Santiago, *Famous*, 278.

⁷⁹ Santiago, *Famous*, 7.

(figuratively silences) the kind of activism that might get “Fulano” (Spanish for “what’s his name” or “so-and-so”) elected as sheriff, an election that might presumably mitigate racial tensions between the police and community. Chicano politics, while not entirely irrelevant, will not be central to Chato’s tale even though later in the plot a police officer shoots his friend Pelón in the back as he evades arrest. Responding to Pelón’s murder, for which the officer received only two weeks’ suspension, Chato’s school counselor angrily asks “And nobody protests? Nobody brings charges? Where’s the ACLU? Where’s the Mexican Political What’s-its-name? I’m going to bring this to the attention to the B’nai B’rith.”⁸⁰ *Somebody* should protest, the novel seems to suggest, yet the counselor’s groping about for an(y) organization—and these organizations’ silence—implies their disinterest if not ineffectuality. Which raises the question if *Famous All Over Town* will serve that function, whether it will be what James Baldwin called Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940): a “protest novel.”⁸¹ But an interpretive question worth asking about this novel is this: does it serve to archivally save a way of life by representing it,⁸² or does it draw readers attention to this way of life not simply to commemorate it but to begin to address its shortcomings? Is the point of the novel to garner retribution by way of recognition, or does it point to the kind of justice only made available by a more radical form of redistribution?

This interpretive question becomes a more general one about Mexican American novels as such when we consider the extent to which the plot of *Famous All Over Town* explicitly raises the question regarding the function of Mexican American literature.⁸³ What this literature should

⁸⁰ Santiago, *Famous*, 192.

⁸¹ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon, 1955).

⁸² The first chapter, for example, depicts how what should be a rite of passage on Chato’s fourteenth birthday becomes a marker of the waning of something like his father’s Mexican culture. Chato’s father asks him to kill a chicken the “Mexican way,” by slitting its throat. When Chato cannot, he instead shoots the chicken, the blood of which sullies the birthday present given to him by his father: a new pair of Mexican boots.

⁸³ Indeed the novel’s very conditions of publication raise the question of who gets to write about Mexican Americans and to what end. As John Gregory Dunn infamously disclosed a year after the novel’s publication, “Danny Santiago, strictly speaking, is not his name. He is not a Chicano. Nor is he young. He is seventy-three years

do is asked explicitly during a classroom scene wherein Chato has been assigned a story about a Mexican American. As Chato puts it, the story is about “a certain Mexican kid named Pancho which [sic] his father worked for the railroad and his sister Maria cleaned house for rich old ladies.”⁸⁴ The parallel between this assigned reading and the novel should be obvious, as *Famous All Over Town* is itself about a certain Mexican kid called Chato, whose father also works for the railroad and his sister works in a factory. The question Chato’s teacher poses to the class—“Why is it we really need to read well and easily?”—becomes more specific as she guides the conversation away from the more obviously practical answers offered by the students (which include “so we can get to college and make money” and “[so] we can buy stuff at the store”) towards questions concerning identity and identification: the characters in the story, she points out, are “both Mexican-American young people like so many of us here. We can identify with them, can we not? And learn from their experience.” The question she is actually asking, then, is not simply *why should we read well* but rather *why should we read fiction about Mexican Americans*; and the answer she suggests is one that the novel partially discredits. Chato, who has the most in common with the character, finds the story tiresome, while another Mexican American female student points out how the story’s female character is “working and I wish I was.”⁸⁵ Insofar as the value of Mexican American literature is self-development through identification, it is a value that this scene prevents.

Famous also tellingly precludes another scene of potential identification involving ancestral ruins. When Chato has the opportunity to go to Mexico, his school counselor

old. He is an Anglo. He is a graduate of Andover and Yale”—biographical facts that beg the question concerning who gets to represent the lives of Mexican Americans and to what end. “The Secret of Danny Santiago,” *New York Review of Books*, August 16, 1984. Daniel James had tried publishing the novel in 1977 during the Chicano literary renaissance, which partly explains James’s use of the Spanish pseudonym. Tellingly, publishers were not interested in the novel until the 1980s. See Danny Santiago, “Danny Santiago Makes a Call on Daniel James.” *Los Angeles Times* 15 Aug. 1984: C5.

⁸⁴ Santiago, *Famous*, 70.

⁸⁵ Santiago, *Famous*, 75.

enthusiastically encourages him to go: “What an opportunity, Rudy,” the counselor tells him, “The temples of your ancestors, the land of your fathers, you’ll see them with your own eyes.” The counselor describes his own trip to “the Promised Land,” in which he “banged his head against the Wailing Wall and learned to be a Jew again.” Just as a trip to Sinai reinforced the counselor’s identity, “One day in Mexico” could teach Rudy more about himself than “six whole months” of a class on Mexican history ever could, which is why the counselor advises Rudy not to “miss the pyramids”: “Find your roots! Discover your identity!”⁸⁶ But just as identification is not enabled by a story about Mexican Americans, Chato also misses an opportunity to connect with his ancestors because his father decides not to take the family to see the pyramid (bypassing the highway exit). If for Rodriguez “Aztec ruins” and “ancestors” “hold no special interest,” in *Famous* ancestral ruins might have been productively compelling. The novel seems to simultaneously satirize the counselor’s advice concerning his head-banging self discovery while nevertheless recognizing its well-intentioned practicality. The overly-enthusiastic counselor, who is “busy shouting” and has to “run his fingers through his hair to calm down,” might be a bit “crazy,” as Rudy’s sister puts it, but “he likes” Mexican American students.⁸⁷ He relates to Chato, describing his own impoverished childhood in the run-down tenements of New York and its anti-Semitic public school system. “We won our A’s in spite of them,” he pronounces (again, a bit too excitedly), “We made it,” enumerating the many Jewish lawyers and doctors that came out of the tenement. The counselor’s encouraging narrative is thus that of perseverance in the face of adversity, the narrative of the upward class mobility enabled by changing one’s perspective and through “cooperation.” By becoming a proud Mexican, in short, Chato can begin to advance to the middle class.

⁸⁶ Santiago, *Famous*, 205.

⁸⁷ Santiago, *Famous*, 205.

The utility of identification enabled by Mexican American literature and ancestral ruins is thus explicitly connected to upward class mobility. Stated in the barest terms, had Chato identified with Pancho, he could have learned from his story; had Chato seen the pyramids, he may have considered his ancestors worthy of his respect, instead of thinking about them as historical “losers.”⁸⁸ While in Mexico, Chato learns that his ancestors had been “famous all over Mexico for the clay pots and idols they made,”⁸⁹ the phrase “famous all over Mexico” echoing Chato’s titular desire to be “famous all over town” through his graffiti. If only Chato identified with these ancestors and channelled his creative energy into a more productive form of cultural expression (if only Chato became, say, a writer of fiction instead of a writer of graffiti) he too could have “made it.” Such a reading of the novel, however, would ignore the fact that Chato, in the end, *does* become a writer; he is the fictional author of *Famous All Over Town*, a novel that, crucially, does not offer a happy ending. The significance of “happy endings” becomes thematically crucial when Chato is placed in the role of author when asked by the counselor to respond to a series of Rorschach and picture cards by “mak[ing] up a little story to fit them.” Chato produces “good stories... with lots of action,” yet the violence of his stories alarms the counselor, who asks Chato why he does not instead produce stories with “happy endings.” Chato responds: “That’s a sad bunch of pictures... so why lie about it?” Although Chato claims to be producing a story that is adequate to the images, the *truth* of the tests is that there is no “true” narrative, only what is projected by the observer. Sadness and violence are not features of the images themselves but are rather the projections of Chato’s state of mind. Another way to put it would be to say that the problem here (violence) is not structural (about the images themselves) but rather perspectival (about Chato), the solution thus requiring a change in his attitude. But

⁸⁸ Santiago, *Famous*, 247.

⁸⁹ Santiago, *Famous*, 246.

while the theme of perspective and of attitude recurs throughout *Famous* (much more than I have accounted for here), it would be a mistake to think of the problems the *novel* delineates as merely perspectival. Unlike the Rorschach and picture cards, the novel's problems are not about its writer's (or audience's) projected emotions; its central antagonist—"the enemy," as Chato puts it⁹⁰—is the S.P. railroad. Insofar as one wants a change in perspective in children like Chato, the novel shows, one would need to change the structural context in which children like him are raised.

When the counselor points out that he himself does not find the picture cards sad, Chato offers a reason why: "You're not a Mexican," a statement whose irony, as Marcial González argues, Santiago certainly recognized as he wrote it.⁹¹ "Danny Santiago," of course, is "not a Mexican," either. The actual writer Daniel James lies about being "Danny Santiago" much like Chato's sister lies about herself when she calls the doctor for her pregnant mother. "They never believe you if you tell the truth," she advises Chato, "If our name was O'Toole or Shitzenheim the damn doctor would be on his way already."⁹² Her lie is not at all malicious (her mother does after all require urgent care) so much as expedient; by changing some biographical facts about herself, she obtained the necessary attention from her audience. So if, for her, lying is a way to circumvent racism and get a doctor to see a Mexican woman, lying, for Santiago (née James), is not only a way for a privileged white guy to publish a novel about Mexican Americans but also a way to (like Chato's sister) bring the audience's attention to a precarious situation involving Mexican Americans living in east Los Angeles. The optimism of this novel's potential happy ending, like the advice given to Chato by the counselor and like the story of some Mexican kid

⁹⁰ Santiago, *Famous*, 7.

⁹¹ See Marcial González, "The Dereification of Cultural Authenticity: Santiago's *Famous All Over Town*," *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class, and Reification* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

⁹² Santiago, *Famous*, 20.

named Pancho, would have highlighted the importance of perseverance made possible through the power of identity and identification. Yet Santiago's aesthetic ambition instead parallels Chato's when Chato writes his name on the walls of his neighborhood; he imagines how his name will bother "the vice president of Bank of America" "like a toothache."⁹³ Discomfiture—not identification—is the point. So to answer the question I raise at the beginning of this section, *Famous All Over Town* is a protest novel like Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Like *Native Son*, through which Wright sought to preclude the sympathetic identification that might elicit "tears of banker's daughters,"⁹⁴ *Famous* tries to perturb the bankers themselves thereby critiquing the political economy that values and protects bankers and the institutions they serve at the expense of its most vulnerable citizens. And like Wright, who became disenchanted with the Communist Party but learned the value of "using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club,"⁹⁵ Santiago had also been associated with the Communist Party; and even though Santiago came to say that he "got rid of the 1930s Marxist insistence on art as a social weapon," *Famous All Over Town* is still meant to be affecting in precisely this way, as a weapon that hurts, as a toothache that discomfits complacency.

Famous All Over Town, then, invites us to think about the function of the literature about Mexican Americans, portraying at least two possibilities: this literature could offer uplifting narratives of perseverance and progress explicitly connected with identity and upward mobility (a call for inclusion into the structure), or it could instead offer provoking narratives that affect like weapons, hurt like toothaches (calling this structure into question). It chooses a version of the latter, while not dismissing the former. Whereas the story of Chato's life is not uplifting but is affecting, the novel also includes another Mexican American character named Eddie

⁹³ Santiago, *Famous*, 283–84.

⁹⁴ Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 454.

⁹⁵ Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

Velasquez, “a straight-A student with horn-rim specs to prove it,” whose ambitious attitude helps clear the way to a job as an accountant. Eddie, assigned to assist Chato with his English homework, helps Chato see that the “moral” of the story about the Mexican kid named Pancho is about “Attitude to Life”: “you can’t keep a good man down irregardless of his race... so don’t holler if they discriminate you, [sic] just be patient and your time will come.”⁹⁶ Eddie might not believe this moral, but he recognizes that playing the game will earn him the A’s: “Attitude... and cooperation, guy, that’s what gets you grades” and grades gets one an office and a position as a CPA.⁹⁷ “Santiago,” then, could have written a novel with a happy ending; he could have produced a story like Pancho’s by making his protagonist be Eddie instead of Chato. But insofar as the situation for so many Mexican Americans is grim, the novel thematically asks, why lie about it? Such a narrative of perseverance would suggest that the problem they face is one of perspective, the solution being a sense of self reinforced through Mexican American literature. And such a suggestion further implies that publishing more novels about Mexican Americans helps the most impoverished instead of being the way in which the writers themselves attempt to become famous, all over town. Given the logic of the novel, that would be a lie indeed.

“I don’t want him to forget that he’s a Mexican”

By characterizing Mexican American literature as potentially practical because inspirational, *Famous All Over Town* highlights the deep homology between narratives of identity and narratives of bootstrap upward mobility.⁹⁸ Stated simply, learning who you are, *Famous* suggests, can enable you to make it. José Antonio Villarreal’s *Clemente Chacón* (1984),

⁹⁶ Santiago, *Famous*, 72.

⁹⁷ Santiago, *Famous*, 72–73.

⁹⁸ Walter Benn Michaels, “Model Minorities and the Minority Model: The Neoliberal Novel,” *The Cambridge History of the American Novel* ed. Leonard Cassuto.

published a year after *Famous*, offers the clearest articulation of this homology but from the opposite direction: “He, Clemente Chacón, was Horatio Alger, even if he *was* Catholic and brown,”⁹⁹ is how the novel describes its protagonist in the opening pages, immediately setting up a narrative tension between “being brown” and being upwardly mobile. The novel’s identity plot, wherein Clemente will realize he is, proudly, a Mexican (embodying as he does Mexico’s mestizo history),¹⁰⁰ and its bootstrap “Rags to riches, success story,” wherein “work, ingenuity and smarts” enables “the American dream achieved in the American way with just enough ruthlessness,”¹⁰¹ are initially seemingly at odds because being Mexican in his mind stands in an inferior relation to the class position he seeks. As a boy he and his single mother were poor, so he leaves Mexico and refuses to return because he is ashamed of her poverty (which leads her to prostitution). “I could not afford to associate with semi-literate or illiterate campesinos [farmers] if I were to achieve my meta [goal],” he explains, yet this justification mistakenly conflates a cultural identity with a class position; “I always believed that when I achieved success I would rise above old customs and traditions,”¹⁰² he states, equating being “Mexican” and being destitute. The narrative resolution thus entails Clemente’s realization that being brown need not be an obstacle to becoming rich.

So Clemente initially insists that his son “must learn English well; in fact, it did not matter, or perhaps it was important that he *not* learn Spanish;”¹⁰³ yet, by the end of the novel Clemente will realize that his son “has to know where he comes from; he has to learn some Spanish. And he won’t begin to think he’s better than a Mexican when he learns he is really one

⁹⁹ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 8, emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁰ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 7. His Spanish father, who originates from “the region [in Spain] that had sent the conquistadores,” rapes Clemente’s mother, a violence that conceives Clemente who will in turn leave his family to seek his fortunes abroad (24).

¹⁰¹ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 7.

¹⁰² Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 139.

¹⁰³ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 11.

himself.” He wants his son to be successful, yet he does not want him to feel superior to his grandmother and other Mexicans. Like Chato, Clemente’s son could learn who he is by going to Mexico so he “does not forget he’s a Mexican.”¹⁰⁴ Being a “Mexican,” here, is not simply reducible to nationality, rather it is an identity bestowed by blood and reinforced by frequent trips to visit his Mexican grandmother. Although being taught and continually reminded of one’s identity helps mitigate potential snobbery, the novel also shows how characters cannot help but be who they are. The choice they have is not between identities (say, between Mexican or American) but rather between integrity and dishonesty. Explaining the felt pressure to “pass,” Clemente uses terminology that would have made much more sense during the 1920s than in 1972, the year the novel is set: “I mean that in the United States a drop of black blood is considered offensive, so it is hidden... people are frightened into acting this way.”¹⁰⁵ Blood, the novel continually suggests, will out. Embarrassed by her name because “it sounds Mexican” (11), Clemente’s wife Calixta takes to being called “Queli” (pronounced “Kelly”). The ironic spelling of her new name highlights the foolishness of her attempt to conceal her past; all one has to do is read Queli’s name and/or listen to her pronounce it to know not only that Spanish is her first language but also that she attempts to hide her background. Calixta’s class ambition is thus a form of self-denial. She sleeps with Clemente’s boss in order to secure Clemente’s promotion (which, unbeknownst to her, he had already received). The difference between Calixta and Clemente’s mother (who both sleep with men for money), is therefore not one of class (Calixta having much more money) but one of moral and personal integrity: Clemente’s mother’s prostitution “is not immoral because it is done to survive” whereas Calixta’s affair “*is* immoral,

¹⁰⁴ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 124.

¹⁰⁵ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 125.

because it is done for pleasure.”¹⁰⁶ Consistent with the heavy-handed allegorical mode that pervades the novel, Calixta thus symbolizes the wrong type of class ambition, one that entails the loss of her self-integrity.

The concept of “integrity” proves crucial to what Villarreal thought Mexican American literature should aspire to. When asked (in a 1976 interview) how he felt about the conscription of his 1959 novel *Pocho* into the service of the Chicano cause, Villarreal does not mask his skepticism:

I think of myself as a writer, and if I should do something good, it will be for the world I live in, not merely for a select group... If, in fact, we arrive at a point where we can say that the term Chicano literature is valid, then I would say that my contribution has been my insistence on maintaining my integrity. Then, I believe, the young Chicano writer can perhaps take example and maintain his fundamental honesty as a writer. The idea of universality... will be there if the artist does not allow himself to be manipulated.¹⁰⁷

If Villarreal (and his novel *Pocho*) is to be useful to Chicanos, it will not be *as* a Chicano representative but rather as an individual who stays true to himself. This emphasis of integrity proves illuminating for *Clemente Chacón*, which Villarreal sets in 1972 during the height of Chicano activism. Villarreal allegorizes the reception of his 1959 novel *Pocho* by reproducing the basic outlines of the charged confrontation Rodriguez will later describe between himself and the group of Hispanic students. In Villarreal’s novel, the confrontation also takes place in an office and also involves a request made by a group of Chicano students. “The boys from the University—from MACHOS,” the “Militant Arm of the Chicano Organization for Students,” ask Clemente to “come out in the open” as a self-proclaimed Chicano. While the students ask Rodriguez to teach a representative literature, these students ask Chacón to “serve as an example of what our young people can aspire to, you have shown that you can compete

¹⁰⁶ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 119, emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁷ Francisco Jiménez, “An Interview with José Antonio Villarreal,” *Bilingual Review / La Revista Bilingüe* 3.1, Bilingualism in the Bicentennial! (1976), 69.

alongside the Anglo in an Anglo endeavor.”¹⁰⁸ Taken together these requests represent one of the most salient intuitions of the Chicano movement: empowerment via (literary) self-representation and identification. And just like Rodriguez, Chacón refuses to participate, but his reason for doing so comes from the opposite political direction. He declines the request and disagrees with their position because they dismiss the possibility of an actual meritocracy. Clemente believes that his exemplary career is the result of his wily industriousness and ambition. Yet, in the Chicanos’ account, white supremacy amounts to a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, Mexican American upward class mobility thus rarely occurring (thereby remarkable) and seemingly only made possible when whites allow it. The disagreement thus centers on the status of Clemente’s representation: he either typifies the bootstrap narrative in which anybody willing to work can make it (as he puts it “that it can be done by *anyone*”¹⁰⁹), or he provides what the Chicano students want: “an example of what our young people can aspire to, you have shown that you can compete alongside the Anglo in an Anglo endeavor.”¹¹⁰ By ventriloquizing his own feelings towards Chicanos through his protagonist, Villarreal makes it clear how his novel *Clemente Chacón* should be read: it is a story about upward class mobility that *anybody* might read and find inspirational.

But what is immediately obvious about their confrontation is the virtual emptiness of their disagreement. Whether companies hire Mexican employees because the employers “actually” “believe in democracy” (as those in MACHOS would like), or whether they simply hire the best person for the job (like Chacón, who sold over a million dollars in insurance for his company), both positions lead to profits. So whether it is “good business” (as Clemente puts it) not to discriminate against Mexicans, offering them opportunities because they are just as good

¹⁰⁸ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 53.

¹⁰⁹ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 103, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁰ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 53.

as anybody else, or whether it is “good business” (as those in MACHOS put it) to pretend to like Mexicans, offering them token opportunities to appease Civil Rights advocates, the logic of the market prevails when discrimination does not interfere. Such, of course, is the insight offered in conservative economist Gary Becker’s *The Economics of Discrimination*, republished in 1971 the year before the events of *Clemente Chacón* are supposed to take place. Becker argues that employers pay a price for their discriminatory hiring practices, which operate as a form of market intervention; “articulating a stereotype is cheap, while acting on it can be costly,” is how Becker’s University of Chicago graduate student Thomas Sowell makes the point in a chapter also titled “The Economics of Discrimination” from his book *Markets and Minorities*, published in 1981.¹¹¹ Both Clemente’s and the Chicanos’ perspectives are entirely compatible with—indeed historically coterminous with— the version of the bootstrap narrative neoliberalism makes available. Milton Friedman, writing in 1980 about Thomas Sowell, describes his attempts to dissuade Sowell from accepting a position at Howard University: “I urged on him that he would do far more for blacks by demonstrating that he could compete successfully in the largely white scholarly world as a whole than by teaching at a predominantly black institution which was less renowned in scholarship and research than other institutions from which he had offers.”¹¹² That is, by pursuing his self interest, Sowell could benefit others (including blacks) by serving as an example. Sowell, who was adopted by his aunt and as a child lived in relative poverty, graduated from Harvard, Columbia, and the University of Chicago’s prestigious and infamous Department of Economics.¹¹³ He, like Clemente, exemplifies the truth of the American

¹¹¹ Thomas Sowell, *Markets and Minorities* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 29. For Becker and Sowell, discrimination functions as a form of market interventions because individuals *not* discriminated against could in effect charge a premium for their labor, which employers have been more or less willing to pay (or forced to pay) at various moments in American history.

¹¹² Sowell, *Markets and Minorities*, viii.

¹¹³ Thomas Sowell, *A Personal Odyssey* (New York: Free Press, 2000).

Dream; their story, like that of Santiago's characters Eddie and Pancho, demonstrates the value of hard work and perseverance in the face of adversity.

"This entire situation is a matter of economics," is how Clemente's PR manager, Natividad Villegas, puts it, yet he grants the advantageous role racism can play in securing profits: "Racial bigotry is the result of an economic condition" that benefits capital by keeping groups of people "in ignorance," thereby ensuring "a source of cheap labor" (101-2). But while employers benefit from large sources of cheap labor, they also benefit from a wide, varied pool of ambitious, qualified employees. What subjugated individuals should do, this account necessarily implies, is enlighten themselves of the reality of racism's role in the market and become like Clemente, who equipped with nothing but a counterfeit high school diploma could nevertheless eventually become the regional vice president of one of the oldest insurance companies in the U.S., a company founded when Connecticut was still a British colony. Mexicans and Mexican Americans can make it in the U.S. if they so choose, even in the WASPiest of settings; they can counteract racist efforts to keep them in ignorance, and pull themselves out of poverty. And they could do *that* by maintaining their integrity. They could, like "the Indians" "retai[n] their pride." By remaining true to who they are, "They're not out for the dole; those sonsabitches fight."¹¹⁴ Stated differently, the integrity of personal identity rejects the government's aid for the poor; such is the *ne plus ultra* of the neoliberal narrative.

By delineating a resolution to the presumed tension between class ascendancy and ethnic identity, the aesthetic and rhetorical force of *Clemente Chacón* mitigates the sense of ambivalence (if not guilt) that middle-class Mexican Americans (who have made it) might feel about their class ascendance, which cannot help but differentiate them from other Mexican Americans (who have not). The form this mitigation takes is the denial of the fundamental

¹¹⁴ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 103.

difference class produces: Clemente's son will not be a snob, and think of himself as better than his grandmother; Calixta may have more money than her mother-in-law, but she does not have her poor mother-in-law's integrity. *Clemente Chacón*, moreover, represents the dissolution of Chicano literary (and political) representation in favor of advancing a literature of the integrity of identity, an identity that ultimately renders class difference relatively unimportant even as it portrays yet another iteration of the American Dream narrative.¹¹⁵ But although Clemente lambasts the hypocrisy of Chicanos' claims to help the community, the basic homology underlying their perspectives renders any difference between the Chicanos' position and his own inconsequential. Whether we read *Clemente Chacón* as representative of a distinctly Mexican American class ambition, or a relatively "universal" class ambition, whether we read *Clemente Chacón* as a Chicano novel or yet another novel about the middle class, the central feature of the novel remains, its neoliberal political vision.

"Who wants to read about Mexicans?"

This political vision remains operative in Arturo Islas's novel *The Rain God*¹¹⁶ (published in 1984, the same year as *Clemente Chacón*) yet teasing out its relevance to the novel's narrative logic requires more work. Whereas *Clemente Chacón* foregrounds how "The whole situation is a matter of economics" yet ultimately relegates intracultural class difference to the narrative background, *The Rain God* mitigates class difference so successfully as to render it a mere symptom of pretentiousness. Like *Clemente Chacón*, *The Rain God* is also about a Mexican

¹¹⁵ He notes, for example, how a Chicano university professor's seemingly self-sacrificing act of threatening to leave his job, because of the lack of Chicano faculty and administrators, is entirely invalidated by the fact that he already has more attractive job offers elsewhere (56). And Clemente's PR manager rebukes the "Mod groomed, impeccable, healthy, smug" Chicanos who help Nixon get elected and man the booths at Ronald Reagan fundraisers, "passing out expensive scotch and equally expensive literature" (103). It is unclear whether this "expensive literature" refers to *Chicano* literature specifically or literature as such. But what is clear is the absolute disconnect between the Chicanos' self-interest and "their utter disregard for the lack of social progress" (103).

¹¹⁶ Arturo Islas, *The Rain God* (Palo Alto: Alexandrian, 1984).

American who “makes it.” The novel opens with the protagonist Miguel Angel (“Miguel Chico”), by then a professor, sitting in his study and looking at a photograph of himself and his grandmother, Encarnación Olmea (“Mama Chona”). The narrative intermittently returns to this initial setting, suggesting that its plot (like *Famous*) takes place within the protagonist’s memory as he reflects on his relation to his family. And like *Hunger of Memory*, the novel reproduces the sense of familial isolation resulting from a college education; yet, Miguel Chico feels as if “he was still... an extension of them, the way a seed continues to be a part of a plant after it has assumed its own form which does not all resemble its origin, but which, nevertheless, is determined by it.”¹¹⁷ Although he realizes that he “had survived severe pruning,” he wonders “if human beings, unlike plants, can water themselves.”¹¹⁸ The answer, the novel suggests, is no. In a sentence that reads as if a direct response to Rodriguez’s *Hunger*, the retrospective narrator can look back on the younger, naive Miguel Chico and realize how “In his arrogance, Miguel believed he was finding ways out of it through his university education. He had not yet had time to combine learning with experience, however, and he still felt himself superior to those who had brought him up and loved him.”¹¹⁹ Having received a formal education that enables him to think he can leave his past behind him, Miguel Chico must then confront the inescapability of his family’s determinative influence on who he will always be.

Apart from becoming a professor, Miguel Chico is now also a writer, and *The Rain God* represents the efforts of his coming to terms with himself and the types of stories he will create. Unlike Chato, the stories Miguel Chico produces end up being “happier than their ‘real’ counterparts,” a penchant for happy endings he attributes to his grandmother’s rejection of what she takes as the seedier parts of life. His grandmother’s selective idealism includes her attempted

¹¹⁷ Islas, *Rain God*, 25.

¹¹⁸ Islas, *Rain God*, 26.

¹¹⁹ Islas, *Rain God*, 91.

erasure of the Mexican and Indian parts of her identity. She “refused to associate... with anything Mexican or Indian because it was somehow impure,”¹²⁰ and she “had taught all her children that [members of her family] were better than the illiterate riffraff from across the river.”¹²¹ Like Villarreal’s Calixta, who suppresses her Mexican past and identity but cannot help evincing both, Islas’s Mama Chona rejects Mexicans and Indians but cannot change her darker skin and “Indian” cheekbones; whereas all one has to do is read Calixta’s name or hear her pronounce it to recognize her attempted self-disavowal, all one has to do is look at Mama Chona to register the irony of her presumed superiority. Mama Chona’s real name, Encarnacion Olmeca, doubly registers the irony: she “incarnates” the Olmecs, one of the oldest civilizations of what is now Mexico.¹²² Like Calixta, Mama Chona’s attempted self-renaming registers her self-hatred. And like Mama Chona’s belief that she is “better than the illiterate riffraff from across the river,” Calixta’s disassociation from the “illiterate campesinos” is her own expression of her self-hating snobbery. Miguel’s earlier “arrogance” and sense of “superiority” thus reproduces his grandmother’s “snobbery,”¹²³ and it is this snobbery, differently articulated, that is reinforced by Miguel’s family’s American education: “After his first year in school [Miguel’s cousin] JoEl learned to be ashamed of the way his mother abused the language,”¹²⁴ and “Home economics classes at school” taught Miguel’s other cousins that “the brilliant colors” their mother used to paint their home’s rooms were not in “good taste.”¹²⁵ If in *Famous* literature and an education

¹²⁰ Islas, *Rain God*, 27.

¹²¹ Islas, *Rain God*, 15.

¹²² Islas’s next novel *Migrant Souls* (1990) elaborates on Mama Chona’s self-denial. Her marriage to Jesus Angel, a name whose “celestial reverberations” compensated for her embodied indigeneity, “elevated” her and her children “into civilization for all time.” Jesus Angel’s ancestors were the Spanish *conquistadores*, and he supposedly retained “documents and relics that proved that the Angels had descended from castles in Spain.” Arturo Islas, *Migrant Souls: A Novel* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 8, 10.

¹²³ Islas, *Rain God*, 128.

¹²⁴ Islas, *Rain God*, 119.

¹²⁵ Islas, *Rain God*, 120.

could be the potential enablers of upward class mobility, in *The Rain God*, an education primarily enables condescension.

Ultimately, *The Rain God* is itself the novel Miguel Chico will come to write.¹²⁶ Part of the novel's self-commentary on the fictive conditions of its production entails Miguel Chico's coming to terms with his family, their assimilation and snobbery. He begins to learn that the supposedly illiterate Mexicans and Indians are not inferior, nor are they persons apart; they partially constitute his family's genealogy (however much this lineage is denied) and his family, in turn, determines him. The novel Miguel Chico writes, in short, is, like *Clemente Chacón*, a novel about identity. This is why whereas ancestral ruins hold no interest for Rodriguez and they were literally bypassed in *Famous*, Miguel Chico's rejection of his grandmother's self-refusal leads him to "finally" visit the Mexican pyramids. And while at Teotihuacan, Miguel Chico encounters just what Chato's counselor suggests: he "felt the presence of the civilizations that had constructed them... his ancestors."¹²⁷ The sublimity of this experience at the pyramids (his simultaneous awe and terror) recurs toward the end of the novel when, awakened by a nightmare, he begins to write. "He needed very much to make peace with his dead," he realizes, "He would feed them words and make his candied skulls out of paper."¹²⁸ The reference to the *día de los muertos* ritual converts the act of writing into an offering that honors and propitiates the dead by feeding them. But if writing keeps the dead at bay, it also provides the medium for bringing them into being by representing them. Which is why the novel quotes a fifteenth century poem (written by the poet king Netzahualcoyotl, whose city-state bordered Teotihuacan) that describes the inevitable ephemerality of human achievement: the "once animate bodies of men who sat

¹²⁶ This conceit is confirmed in *Migrant Souls*, which mentions Miguel Chico's novel *Tlaloc*—the Aztec's name for their "Rain God."

¹²⁷ Islas, *Rain God*, 26.

¹²⁸ Islas, *Rain God*, 160.

upon their thrones” become “pestilential dust... Vanished are these glories.” *The Rain God’s* quotation of the poem, however, stops at its more optimistic line: “Nothing recalls them but the written page.”¹²⁹ Dead bodies wither into dust, but the printed word reanimates their spirit. Indeed, present-day readers know about Netzahualcoyotl and his belief in the novel’s eponymous “Rain God” because of the written word, while much less is known about the “ancestors” who built the pyramids of Teotihuacan and predate Netzahualcoyotl by centuries. The presence of the Teotihuacan pyramids stand as testimony of their creation yet the names of their creators remain textually absent.

This longing to commune with the ancestral dead—and their linguistic resuscitation—animates *The Rain God’s* epigraph, taken from Pablo Neruda’s epic poem *Canto General*. In the canto titled *Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu*, the poet describes travelling to the magisterial Incan site, “the dwelling of what earth / never covered in vestments of sleep.”¹³⁰ Like Teotihuacan, Macchu Picchu’s endurance bespeaks the absence of its inhabitants: “Stone upon stone, and man, where was he?” wonders the poet, “Macchu Picchu, did you set stone upon stone on a base of rags?”¹³¹ The poet here apostrophically addresses the site because of “man’s” absence. Whereas the ruins may remain “never covered” by earth and sleep, such was not the fate of its builders “because everything, clothing, skin, jars, / words, wine, bread, / is gone, fallen to earth.”¹³² The imaginative capacity of the poetic vision, however, does end up seeing “the ancient human, a human slave, sleeping / in the fields,” while the poetic voice’s rhetorical power imagines the dead’s resuscitative awakening. Here is Islas’s translation of the canto’s crescendo that serves as

The Rain God’s epigraph:

¹²⁹ Islas, *Rain God*, 162.

¹³⁰ John Felstiner and Pablo Neruda. *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1980), 84.

¹³¹ Felstiner, *Translating Neruda*, 95.

¹³² Felstiner, *Translating Neruda*, 85.

*I come to speak through your dead mouths...
Give me silence, water, hope.
Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.
Fasten your bodies to me like magnets.
Hasten to my veins, to my mouth.
Speak through my words and my blood.*

The poet's ambition, then, is to speak for the dead, to provide the conduit through which he can imagine the dead speaking for themselves.

While this ambition motivates Islas's *The Rain God*, it assumes a heightened ethical role because the dead that are recalled are ordinary people and the victims of injustice. So whereas Netzahualcoyotl's poem invokes and recalls those who "decided cases, presided in council, / commanded armies, conquered provinces," Miguel Chico realizes that he should instead tell the stories about ordinary people— his family, which includes his godmother, Nina. Nina does not enjoy reading novels in part because of what she takes to be their typical subject matter. "Why don't they write about us?" she asks her sister, to which her sister, in turn, asks, "Who wants to read about Mexicans? We're not glamorous enough. We just live." *Just living*, though, is precisely what interests Nina, who finds "daily life and real people" "infinitely more interesting" than the depicted "endless suffering of southern belles."¹³³ Although she dislikes novels, she learns to enjoy séances during which she once experienced the presence of her dead mother and sister.¹³⁴ Séances, unlike novels, are about "us," and our families "just living" even when the "us" in question have already died. The type of narrative Nina *would* enjoy, *The Rain God* implies, is the kind that Miguel Chico would come to write. After having almost died of intestinal cancer Miguel Chico wonders if "perhaps he had survived to tell others about Mama Chona and people like Maria," his Mexican nanny (both of whom pass away during the course of

¹³³ Islas, *Rain God*, 41.

¹³⁴ Islas, *Rain God*, 34.

the novel).¹³⁵ His writing would thus be about the people Nina wants to see portrayed; and by representing the spiritual return of characters that die during the course of the plot (including the return of Miguel's uncle, Felix) *The Rain God* functions as a kind of metaphorical séance enabling the figurative spiritual return and reconciliation of his family. (Felix's spirit returns during the novel's conclusion to usher away Mama Chona's as she dies.) The novel's conclusion loops back to its introduction wherein Miguel Chico, professor and writer, recalls Mama Chona's deathbed utterance ("*La familia*") and considers just what it means to be a part of his family. Miguel Chico's status as an educated professor— should he let it— could function as the moral equivalent of Mama Chona's disregard of Mexicans and Indians. Miguel Chico's position as a writer, however, serves the ethical function of testimony and recuperation, of representing those who are not portrayed in literature because of who they are not (they are ordinary Mexicans, not southern belles) and he can recoup a sense of dignity for those who have been murdered for being who they are (his uncle Felix, murdered for being gay).

Such a novel of identity effectively replaces the political reality of class distinction, which cannot help but be strictly hierarchical, with an ethical call for anti-snobbery and respect, testimony and memory. Class distinction (in which university professors enjoy the material benefits of having a better education) is rearticulated as mere difference (wherein those that have more money learn to respect those that do not) and the fact of economic inequality is replaced with the commonality of a shared identity. So whereas Rodriguez argued that writers cannot help but capture the difference between themselves and their "illiterate" "ancestors," the rhetorical force of *The Rain God* erases such a difference between writers and ancestors by recognizing the irreducibility of a shared identity and producing the narrative grounds for self-pride in which that identity could be affirmed. And whereas Rodriguez dismisses the narrative possibilities offered

¹³⁵ Islas, *Rain God*, 28.

by “Aztec ruins” and the “Mexican graveyards” where his “unnamed ancestors” are buried, *The Rain God*’s rhetorical effect centers entirely on the ethical function of testimony.

“Here’s to Chicanos of the middle class!”

This, then, is why I argue that the trajectory of Mexican American literature through the 1980s can be characterized as assuming a testimonial function, one that dismisses Rodriguez’s perspective and embraces what he rejects. Stated simply, Mexican American literature since the 1980s tends to look more like Alex Haley’s *Roots* than it does *Hunger for Memory*. So whereas Victor Villaseñor’s 1973 novel *Macho!* depicts the fraught relation between undocumented Mexican workers and Cesar Chavez’s efforts to unionize workers and boycott agribusiness, Villaseñor came to realize that the type of writing he should be doing involved tracing his ancestral roots by accumulating “over two hundred hours of taped conversations” with his family and publishing their story in *Rain of Gold* (1991). Like Haley—who praised *Rain of Gold* because it “enhances and enriches the American experience”¹³⁶—Villaseñor recognized the necessity of visiting the country of his ancestors, and (like Haley too) spending twelve years writing their account.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Victor Villaseñor, *Rain of Gold* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1991), back cover.

¹³⁷ Of course, not all novels written by Mexican Americans look like *Roots*, some, like Demetria Martínez’s *Mother Tongue* (1994), look more like Rigoberta Menchu’s testimonio. *Mother Tongue* dramatizes the performance and circulation of Spanish-language *testimonios* by depicting how the Salvadoran José Luis became a refugee during El Salvador’s vicious civil war and spoke of the crimes against human rights (“My name is José Luis Romero. I was born in Cuametl, department of San Juan in El Salvador...” (29). As Walter Benn Michaels argues, however, the happy ending of *Mother Tongue* involves the son of the long-since vanished refugee returning to El Salvador, learning to speak Spanish, and ceasing to feel his “heritage” as a “burden” when he learns to share it with people who “look like him.” Redescribing the political system that threatened the father as the cultural heritage that welcomes the son, the novel makes the social problem that begins it into a social solution that can conclude it. (*Model Minorities*, 1026–27)

Notice the extent to which *Mother Tongue*’s identity plot follows the standard narrative of a son coming to terms with his heritage by visiting the country of his ancestors, and how this narrative converts the implementation of neoliberal politics in El Salvador during the 1990s into an occasion for the reconciliation of an identity.

Insofar as I have attempted to characterize a few *Mexican American* novels and their relation to what I am considering a “trajectory” within Mexican American literature (toward the literature of identity and testimony), some of my readers might object to the very narrative form my accounts assumes, as well as my selection of “representative” texts. Why revisit Rodriguez, who has long ostracized himself from Mexican American letters? Why include Daniel James, a privileged Anglo graduate of both Andover and Yale who pretended to be a Mexican American in order to stimulate his stagnant writing career? Yet notice here Islas’s description to his editor about the difficulty of reviewing *Famous All Over Town* for the *San Francisco Chronicle* (qtd in Cutler):

Look at this pathetic fact: in the last two years, the ‘major’ presses have published two books by writers of Mexican heritage born and brought up and educated in this country. One of them [Richard Rodriguez] hates his heritage and capitalizes on the backlash against affirmative action and bilingual programs; the other [Danny Santiago] writes about victimized, absolutely helpless Mexicans in a barrio. And that is the image the rest of the country gets of Mexican-Americans and Chicanos. I know it doesn’t bother you as much as it bothers me and the rest of us who do not fall into either category and who have been working our asses off all our lives to rise above such stereotype [*sic*]. I am completely demoralized.¹³⁸

Explicitly connecting both *Hunger of Memory* and *Famous All Over Town*, Islas’s comments highlight, on the one hand, the growing attention paid to Mexican American writers (James’s identity had not yet been disclosed) by large publishing houses (including Random House, Simon and Schuster, and Penguin); and, on the other, he demonstrates how those invested in Mexican American literature were taking stock in its development and status. His rejection of *Hunger* and *Famous* invites us to consider what in *his* estimation amounts to what the literature written by Mexican Americans should be. For while evidently frustrated, it cannot be the case that his irritation is merely about the propagation of “negative” images. Here is how Islas

¹³⁸ Alba Cutler, *Ends of Assimilation*, 107

allegorizes the reception of his first novel *The Rain God* (1984) in his subsequent novel *The Migrant Souls* (1990):

A modest, semi-autobiographical work, it [the novel *Tlaloc*] was published by a small California press that quickly went out of business. *Tlaloc* was an academic, if not commercial, success and its author became known as an ethnic writer. After seeing what the world did to books, he returned humbly to the classroom and to criticism... The dumb sociologists want only positive images, whatever they are, from fiction writers. As if the whole world, especially their own little one, were one big happy collection of ethnic groups.”¹³⁹

The thinly-veiled allusion to his own *The Rain God* is obvious, and like the fictional novel *Tlaloc* (the Aztec “Rain God”), *The Rain God* was published by a small Californian press that did in fact go out of business. And just as the fictional author does not at all care what the sociologist literary critics want from literature, Islas’s own novels show how he himself was not overly invested in delineating only positive images of Mexican Americans. The seeming tension between the quotations (one rejecting negative images of Mexican Americans, the other rejecting the call for positive images of them) stem from the same position: by not representing how people exceed the sociological particularities besetting their lives, writers like Danny Santiago render a group as merely reactionary, unable to change their situation. And by wanting positive images of these people, “sociologists” reduce literature to propaganda. Islas’s objection is thus evaluative: a novel like *Famous* was, put simply, not *good*. My argument tried to show that what Islas might consider to be a better novel looks more like Haley’s *Roots* insofar as it is committed to the virtue of testimony and the primacy of one’s identity and (ancestral) family. And I tried to show that the politics of Islas’s good literature amounts to an ethics of *being* good (because empathetic and respectful of difference). Yet the ethics of being good people paradoxically supports the neoliberal justification of continued class disparity.

¹³⁹ Islas, *Migrant Souls*, 211.

According to John Alba Cutler, however, the ethics of testimony has a more progressive politics: by imagining and writing about Mexicans just living, by representing a diversity of voices, Islas expands the otherwise monolithic western literary canon and thereby “suggests strategies for *redistributing* literary cultural capital,” a redistributive effort that Alba Cutler describes as the novel’s “literary multiculturalism.”¹⁴⁰ Alba Cutler contrasts both this diversification of the canon and Islas’s “ethics of imaginative sympathy” to Rodriguez’s unwillingness to represent any other voice but his own; Rodriguez’s faith in a western canon and his proficiency with what is considered proper English evinces a “neoliberal ethos” of conservative assimilation, an argument Alba Cutler supports by citing the use of Rodriguez’s work in college composition anthologies.¹⁴¹ The comfortable fit of Rodriguez’s writing in classes that teach undergraduates the language of corporate management suggests that Rodriguez’s advancement of “soft multiculturalism” suits the needs of the future managerial class (“multiculturalism as diversity management”). Although Alba Cutler does not mention Islas’s posthumous novel, *La Mollie and the King of Tears* (1996), its narrator Louie Mendoza clearly elucidates his argument:

Don’t get me wrong, neither. I think everybody needs to know English to get by in this country—the real English, not that liar’s language the businessmen, lawyers, and politicians use. Don’t even get me started on those dollar-bill words and sentences we’re supposed to learn cause it ain’t English... I even like Shakespeare’s language better than that gobbledygook.¹⁴²

The “real English” here is not comprised of corporate speak and legalese but rather the variously inflected language that ordinary folks, and Shakespeare, use. But as the introduction of Shakespeare here already begins to show, Louie wonders why “some accents are okay and some ain’t,” why some accents (say, Shakespeare’s) count as the markers of cultural distinction while

¹⁴⁰ John Alba Cutler, *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature* (New York, Oxford University Press: 2015), 116, emphasis in original.

¹⁴¹ Alba Cutler, *Ends of Assimilation*, 107.

¹⁴² Arturo Islas, *La Mollie and the King of Tears* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 136.

other accents (Louie's own) evince cultural ignorance. As the novel's repeated allusions to Shakespeare suggest (the titular "King of Tears" refers to both Louie and King Lear), the literary canon, like the English language, is enriched when multifarious voices and accents are allowed to flourish. In sum, Islas's novels expands the canon by diversifying it while Rodriguez demonstrates his maintenance of not only the canon but the western public sphere as such by refusing to represent the voices of his parents and the Mexican workers (the "anonymous men"), and by using only "the voice of masculine disinterestedness, the only voice allowed in the public sphere."¹⁴³

Although I am largely in agreement with Alba Cutler here concerning the ease with which some of Rodriguez's concepts (including, say, his description of the "the browning of America")¹⁴⁴ can fit into corporate America's touting of multiculturalism (is there any American corporation today whose HR department is *against* multiculturalism?), the burden of proof is Alba Cutler's: he needs to show how the study of ("hard") culture could be seen as anti-neoliberal.¹⁴⁵ If a certain kind of English remains the English of the managerial class, how might a more diverse form of English prove to be against the logic of the market? The rise of multiculturalism in the 1980s has never existed in an adversarial relation with the coterminous dominance of neoliberalism. As the politically empty "culture wars" demonstrated, the diversification of the canon could suit the needs of both conservatives and self-described liberals.

¹⁴³ Alba Cutler, *Ends*, 95.

¹⁴⁴ See Richard Rodriguez, *Brown* (Penguin, New York: 2002).

¹⁴⁵ See George Yudice, "Rethinking Area and Ethnic Studies in the Context of Economic and Political Restructuring." Poblete, *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*. "Because the expediency or instrumentality of culture is increasingly evident, appeals to cultural difference do not carry the legitimizing force that they once did. It is no longer invoked only by minority groups seeking greater inclusion but also by governments, international nongovernmental organizations, the corporate sector, and even multilateral development banks. With the inflation of culture, its value in the project to democratize society wanes partly because of its absorption into the strategic gambits of capital and politics" (235). It is worth questioning Yudice's characterization of the original "legitimizing force" that "culture" played for "cultures seeking greater inclusion" and whether this force stands opposed to its institutionalization, or if such corporate institutionalization is its logical outcome.

Whether the undergraduates at Stanford read the epistolary novel of Alice Walker instead of those by Samuel Richardson, they will nevertheless be receiving the training to be the country's future corporate managers.

Regardless of Rodriguez's own political views (whatever they might be) or the "neoliberal" use of his "soft multiculturalism," it is *he* who in *Hunger of Memory* explicitly questions the Left's endorsement of the consolidation of a leadership class. He describes being "groomed for a position in the multiversity's leadership class"¹⁴⁶ because of the belief that "From our probable positions of power, we would be able to lobby for reforms to benefit others of our race."¹⁴⁷ In an effort to diversify their faculty, the most elite institutions were more than willing to welcome Rodriguez to their campuses. Yet the rhetorical position of *Hunger of Memory* that provokes his opponents is its insistence that he does not represent the poor; by advancing his career, Rodriguez does not represent the interests of anybody but himself. The diversification of the elite, just as the diversification of the bearers of "cultural capital," is not "redistributive" in the sense that such a word is meant to carry for a Left politics because the beneficiaries of this redistribution are not the most vulnerable disadvantaged members of a society. Multiculturalism has never posed a challenge to neoliberalism because the two are completely compatible. The politics of Alba Cutler's "literary multiculturalism" has been the politics of the middle class.

If there is any doubt about *The Rain God's* middle-class focus, its sequel *Migrant Souls* (1990) should help clarify my argument. "Here's to Chicanos in the middle class!" exclaims Rudy, one of Miguel Chico's cousins who had become a lawyer.¹⁴⁸ He offers this toast as he "gulped down a drink" and performs a kind of public roast of himself and the Angel family, who have "finally made it into the middle class. Hated by the workers and taxed to death by the Great

¹⁴⁶ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 162.

¹⁴⁷ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 158.

¹⁴⁸ Islas, *Migrant*, 165.

White Fathers!” (163). Although he is being ironic, the liminal state he describes the Angels occupying—between “workers” and “White Fathers”—quickly and unironically transitions into an account of their spiritual and geographic dislocation and liminality:

“Just like our souls are between heaven and earth, so are we in between two countries completely different from each other. We are Children of the Border.” [...] “You brought up history. I’m glad because usually everybody wants to forget it or change it to suit themselves. This was Mexico before it was the land of liberty and equality for some. And before that it was Indian territory. They knew how to live in it. So where are we?” [...] “We are on the border between a land that has forgotten us and another land that does not understand us... So what are we educated wetbacks and migrant souls to do?” He had been the editor of the *Law Review* at Berkeley during the Free Speech Movement. The house was silent and waiting. “Let’s keep the border and give both lands back to the Indians!”

Notice, here, how an explicit class position recedes, becoming instead a vertiginous identity. The novel’s titular “Migrant Souls” are not those whom one might expect— the migrant workers toiling in the fields— but are instead the spiritually wandering, dispossessed souls of the Mexican American middle class. While not as explicit as *Clemente Chacón’s* praise for the “proud Native Americans” who “are not out for the dole” (i.e., those who manage their inequality as neoliberals would have it), Rudy’s praise of Native Americans operates similarly. Native Americans, at the very least, knew their existential position even when dispossessed. The continued existence of the Native American identity thus attests to a form of resistance. Unlike these Native Americans, however, the “educated wetback” Mexican Americans seem to have lost their sense of place. Miguel Chico’s cousin Ricardo, whose “dream was to be a respected member of the middle class on the north side of the river,”¹⁴⁹ achieves that ambition, yet he subsequently teaches his children “to ignore their Mexican heritage and to live according to the myths of North America.”¹⁵⁰ Reversing Alger’s rags to riches narrative represented in *Ragged Dick’s* Dick-to-Richard transition, and in yet another obvious shot against Richard Rodriguez,

¹⁴⁹ Islas, *Migrant*, 202.

¹⁵⁰ Islas, *Migrant*, 204.

Migrant Souls’ “Ricardo” starts going by the name of “Richard” and is soon called “Dick” by his friends; which is to say he loses who he is when he becomes successful, thereby becoming a dick.¹⁵¹

Ascending to the middle class entails the forfeiture of an important part of his cultural history, ensuring his continued psychological displacement, which raises the question of whether a novel like *Migrant Souls* serves to fortify a sense of self and place; whether the brief history lesson rehearsed by Rudy is meant to reinforce a sense of identity by connecting the past to the present; that is, it raises the question of whether Rudy’s performance here, however satirical, nevertheless contains some truth. After all, the novel does describe “the Angel manner of imparting wisdom by mocking it.”¹⁵² Rudy mocks the “Children of the Border” whose motherland has forgotten and whose adopted forefathers have rejected, yet his suggested solution—“let’s keep the border”—is not itself a joke. Such is precisely the innovation that Gloria Anzaldúa made explicit in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), which the following chapter examines. The metaphor of the border could function as the figurative, fractured, shifting ground upon which a sense of fluid albeit thoroughly *indigenous* self could be theorized. Islas’s novel, however, represents its middle class characters as migrant souls who have not yet fully inhabited their borderland status, bemoaning an ever-fleeting mythic wholeness. Ultimately, then, novels like *The Rain God* and *Migrant Souls* offer a sense of solace to those in the middle class who have had the great fortune of upward class mobility but may now find themselves wondering if their class ascendance negates their identity. It need not, these novels suggest. All we have to do is remember where we came from so that we do not forget who we are.

¹⁵¹ Islas, *Migrant*, 204.

¹⁵² Islas, *Migrant*, 244.

When Islas's Miguel Chico bristles at the being labeled an "ethnic writer" we can hear in his discomfort his author's own aspirations to write novels with a broader appeal. (Islas was not shy about voicing his discontent about being labeled an ethnic writer and ignored as such by New York publishers.) And as we saw, this is the ambition that Villarreal has for his own novels ("the idea of universality")— which is why *Clemente Chacón* includes the otherwise superfluous detail describing Clemente's PR manager's finishing a study of "Tasso's influence on the development of the short story;"¹⁵³ the PR manager, Natividad Villegas, may be a proud Mexican American, but his literary interest lies in what Pascale Casanova calls the "World Republic of Letters."¹⁵⁴ Indeed, all of the main texts I analyzed thematically bracket if not outright reject the Chicano label, pointing to the waning relevance of Chicanismo during the early 1980s and suggesting that the supposed "universality" of a specifically ethnic literature no longer appeared practical in the way it had for Chicano authors.¹⁵⁵ Which is not to say that ethnicity as such became irrelevant; as we saw, the narrative tropes Rodriguez rejects—including the significance of "ruins" and relevance of "ancestors"—remain crucial. But while these tropes abound in the Chicano literature of the 1970s, their recurrence in the literature of the 1980s has less to do with the political rhetoric of cultural nationalism and everything to do with the importance of personal, racial identity where the payoff is more often self-discovery.

¹⁵³ Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón*, 104.

¹⁵⁴ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁵⁵ By evaluatively rejecting the sociology of *Famous*, Islas engages with a problem that Chicano authors had themselves faced, as Luis Leal describes in his 1979 essay "The Problem of Identifying Chicano Literature" in Francisco Jiménez, *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature* (New York: Bilingual/Editorial Bilingüe, 1979). According to Leal, self-described Chicano authors wanted to counteract the widely-circulating reductive stereotypes of Mexican Americans, but in doing so they did not want to forfeit nuance. The compositional problem of concrete universality at the heart of the literary as such plagued Chicano writers because, as Leal puts it, "it is not easy to give universality to the regional or particular if the writer does not go beyond his immediate circumstance" (4). If writers remained too interested in local, partisan concerns, their work amounted to bad sociology; and if they remained too invested in counteracting negative images with positive ones, they simply reproduced the reductive Manicheism that their writing was meant to dismantle. Yet Leal ends the essay by claiming that Chicano writers *qua* Chicano *had succeeded* in producing a literature that met the challenge, and that Chicano literary criticism had followed suit: "The identification of Chicano literature has progressed from the narrow, sociological definition to the broad, humanistic, and universal approach" (5).

When Mexican American novelists see the term “Chicano literature” as too constrictive, they can picture their work participating in “literature’s” much longer history, yet this history has never been politically neutral because it has always served the interests of the class it has consoled since their mutual historical emergence. (Just as Villarreal’s novel advances a neoliberal politics, Islas’s novels provide comfort to the middle class.) The by-now familiar story of literature’s role in the historical transition from feudalism to capitalism is just as relevant in the U.S. as it has been in the Latin American context wherein, according to John Beverley’s now classic *Against Literature* (1993), literature “had a central role in the self-representation of the upper and upper-middle strata of Latin American society; it was one of the social practices by which such strata constituted themselves as dominant.”¹⁵⁶ Stated in the broadest terms, literature has historically tended to support the politics of hegemonic maintenance, which is why Beverley is much less sanguine about Neruda’s poem than Alba Cutler. Whereas for Alba Cutler, Neruda’s desire to speak *as* the dead demonstrates his “ethics of imaginative sympathy,”¹⁵⁷ for Beverley this admirable desire cannot help but engage in “a vertical model of representation (in the double sense of mimesis and political representation) and of the relation between progressive intellectuals and the popular masses of past and present Latin American society.”¹⁵⁸ It is, after all the *poet’s* claim to redeem the silenced, dead masses by pretending to speak as them. Neruda engages in the politics of elite brokerage in which the beneficiaries of some degree of success speak for the more disadvantaged.

Beverley’s commendable efforts to highlight the limitations of literary, political representation leads him to look for an alternative “horizontal” “position of enunciation” that

¹⁵⁶ John Beverley, *Against Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), ix.

¹⁵⁷ Alba Cutler, *Ends*, 111.

¹⁵⁸ Beverley, *Against*, 17.

removes the intermediaries and allows people to speak for themselves.¹⁵⁹ If literary forms emerged with and abetted the bourgeoisie, he wonders, then perhaps the anti-bourgeoisie will produce their own forms. He thus offers *I, Rigoberta Menchu* as an example of such an alternative form: the *testimonio*.¹⁶⁰ So although the very first page of the text presents Menchú's representational claim, ("This is my testimony... I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people... My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people"¹⁶¹), for Beverley her *identity* makes all the difference.¹⁶² She is not representing the Guatemalan poor as, say, the novelist Miguel Angel Asturias does, because the voice of her testimony *is* the voice of the Guatemalan poor. Such a desire to neutralize the politics of representation by invoking the power of identity helps explain the paragraph-long description (by Menchú's editor Elizabeth Burgos-Debray) of the cultural authenticity of Menchu's attire, which itself testifies to her authenticity as a spokesperson.¹⁶³ Menchú's voice can pierce through the layers of mediation (she uses a language, Spanish, that is not her native tongue, which is then recorded and edited by Burgos-Debray, who is then translated by Ann Wright), and her authentic identity seems to figuratively transcend representation itself; according to Burgos-Debray, Menchú's voice's "inner cadences are so pregnant with meaning that we actually seem to hear her speaking and can almost hear her breathing."¹⁶⁴ Menchú's very presence, seemingly made available textually, apparently entails a politics because it evinces the perseverance of an identity in the face of its attempted decimation.

¹⁵⁹ Beverley, *Against*, 18.

¹⁶⁰ Beverley defines *testimonio* as "a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, graphemic as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts" (*Against*, 70). See also note 14 above.

¹⁶¹ Menchú, *I, Rigoberta*, 1.

¹⁶² "There is a crucial difference in power terms between having someone like Rigoberta Menchú tell the story of her people (and win a Nobel Prize herself) and having it told, however well by someone like the Nobel Prize-winning Guatemalan novelist Miguel Angel Asturias." Beverley, *Against*, 76. .

¹⁶³ Menchú, *I, Rigoberta*, xiv.

¹⁶⁴ Menchú, *I, Rigoberta*, xii.

Menchú can thus employ the mechanisms of the university (its editors, publishers, and readership) “without succumbing to an ideology of the literary generated and maintained by the university, or, what amounts to the same thing, without abandoning her identity as a member of her community.”¹⁶⁵ And by remaining true to her identity she can remain true to her community, organically advancing their collective interest without the risk of self-interest or cooptation. This ability enabled by identity is why Beverley approvingly cites “Chicana feminist and lesbian writers like Gloria Anzaldúa.” Feminists do not succumb to the masculinist discourse of university; they maintain the integrity of their identity, which in turn unifies their enunciation with that of their nonacademic community: “Academic feminist theory and criticism do not just ‘represent’ a political-legal practice that happens essentially outside the university; the contemporary women’s movement *passes through* the university and the school system.”¹⁶⁶ So even as Anzaldúa and other Chicana and lesbian writers “are using poetry and narrative”—i.e., even though they are using the object of his criticism, literature— they do so “to redefine and reenergize a previously male-centered identity politics.”¹⁶⁷ Their identity and their identity politics makes all the difference.

As I will explore more thoroughly in the next chapter, this purported neutralization raises the question of the politics of testimony—and reasserts all of its problems—with a vengeance. The solution to the politics of representation is to neutralize representation via an identity, the voice of which does not “represent” the people so much as exist metonymically *as* them. Yet this form of metonymic representation reifies an identity as *itself* bespeaking a politics when any self-appointed “spokesperson” of any identity group can quite easily misrepresent the “community” s/he claims to embody. Having an identity does not logically entail having a set of beliefs; and

¹⁶⁵ Beverley, *Against*, 14.

¹⁶⁶ Beverley, *Against*, 18.

¹⁶⁷ Beverley, *Against*, xiii.

having a set of beliefs, whatever they might be, does not necessarily require one's having any particular identity. The neutralization of vertical politics reifies an (indigenous) "culture" as anti-neoliberal when neoliberalism has proven to be perfectly comfortable capitalizing on cultural diversity. The ease with which we might align the represented commendation of an indigenous identity in *Clemente Chacón*, the neoliberal novel *tout court*, with the various laudatory celebrations of the integrity of Menchú's indigenous identity is telling.

So although Beverley and Alba Cutler present competing accounts of Neruda's poem, they both ultimately agree on the political power of testimony, which is why they both offer the same criticism of Rodríguez's *Hunger of Memory*: Rodríguez, by not representing the voice of the anonymous men, mistakenly claims that they are deficient, *Hunger* thus providing the purest example "of the social production of a sense of the subaltern as other and of the implication of the university and literature in this act."¹⁶⁸ According to Beverley, Rodríguez's *creation* ("social production") of the anonymous men as "others" is an effect of his subsumption into the discourse of institutions, namely the university to which he relinquishes his identity as "Ricardo Rodríguez (*with the accent*)."¹⁶⁹ On Beverley's account, because Ricardo becomes Richard through his university education, he mistakenly condescends to the anonymous men. Which is why Beverley praises Menchú, Chicanas, and feminists for *using* the university while not being coopted by its masculinist discourse, because as he puts it, "I insist again on the role of the university and cultural institutions like museums in *making* things subaltern, as in the case of Richard Rodríguez's 'education.'"¹⁷⁰ But, of course, Rodríguez's anonymous men are *in fact* "subalterns" not because of Rodríguez's failure to recognize them, nor because of their literal and representational exclusion from institutions; they are "subaltern" because of capitalism. Denying

¹⁶⁸ Beverley, *Against*, 15.

¹⁶⁹ Beverley, *Against*, 15.

¹⁷⁰ Beverley, *Against*, 19, emphasis in original.

that fact denies the very problem; it converts their situation into an occasion for their appreciation (Sal Paradise exclaiming “all humanity—the lot”). But if we take their humanity and ability to create a culture as givens, then we might stop worrying about our affective relation to them and begin to worry about the system that is all too happy to recognize them as cheap labor. And while I am not ultimately interested in legislating what my readers’ relation to neoliberalism should be, nor do I care about what Rodriguez’s ultimate politics are, I have been instead invested in the preceding pages in providing a thorough account of the works in question so that insofar as literary critics insist on turning to literature to advance their politics, at the very least we have a clear account of what form of politics is being advanced.

CHAPTER FOUR

“OUR AZTLAN PERIOD”: THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF CHICANO REPRESENTATION

*From tomb to tomb voy andando, / Buscando un punto final / To an age ya mero olvidado.*¹

When the social fervor of the Chicano Movement is mentioned in Ana Castillo’s first novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), it is done so nostalgically. “We call it by name” writes the character Teresa, “1974, ’76, a moment of Southwestern influence, our Aztlán period.”² As an epistolary novel, the work’s brief mention of the Chicano Movement is highly personalized. Unlike some of the most well-known Chicano novels of the 1970s, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* does not claim to unify a community and represent its collective voice; the novel instead expresses one woman’s sometimes wavering voice as she attempts to remind her friend and traveling companion Alicia of their shared past. The importance of this delineated perspective—that of one woman as she speaks for herself to another woman about themselves—proves to be crucial to the novel’s mention of their Aztlán period. Although nostalgic about this historical moment, Teresa also disappointedly exposes the hypocrisy of Chicanos’ claims to speak on behalf of a community’s interests. In the same letter, which, like a few others in the novel, becomes a poem, Teresa also describes her participation in a forum that echoes the structure of the novel’s address: “*Somos Chicanas, a program about Chicana women by Chicana women, for Chicana women.*”³ She contrasts that description with an account of:

The eloquent scholars with the Berkeley Stanford
seals of approval
all prepped to change society articulate the

¹ Berenice Zamora, “Andando,” *Releasing Serpents* (Tempe, AZ: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1994), 52.

² Ana Castillo, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986, repr. New York: Anchor, 1992), 44.

³ Castillo, *Mixquiahuala*, 42, italics in original.

social deprivation of the barrio
starting with an
Anglo wife, handsome house, and Datsun 280Z in the drive-
way
they were our new brothers⁴

The third line's lack of a break that would indicate the pause separating "society" and "articulate" suggests the underlying continuity between the society's maintenance of economic inequality and the scholar's articulation of what they take to be the problem. In seeking to secure their positions within the upper middle class (thereby enjoying the material luxuries this position entails), these academics end up participating in the very structures of inequality, ultimately not addressing the "social deprivation" of their purported community. The very spacing that separates the line describing the "social deprivation of the barrio" and the line beginning to describe the scholars' actions captures the ironic disconnect: what the scholars *do* maintains the inequality between their class position and the barrio's by perpetuating class difference.⁵

Teresa's account thus displays the contrast between Chicanas' efforts to establish and maintain forums for themselves, and the institutional recognition of Chicanos whose credentials highlight their successful integration into the prestigious institutions of higher education. This institutional recognition, however, reproduces the exclusionary practices that had animated Chicanos' very calls *for* inclusion, as Chicanas were not always afforded the same opportunities. From early contestations of the reductive social scientific accounts of Mexican American "passivity" and "fatalism," to the critiques of the caricatures of "the Mexican" in canonized American literature, the will to Mexican American self-empowerment via the university meant the procurement of the means for Chicano self-representation. Yet the problem so effectively on display in the passage,

⁴ Castillo, *Mixquiahuala*, 43.

⁵ Teresa's dig concerning "Anglo wives" further suggests the scholars' betrayal of their community and their very self-disavowal.

a problem that the following pages will explore, centers on the inadequacy of the Chicano representational claims that ensued.

This chapter focuses on the response to this perceived inadequacy as articulated in some of the most recognized Mexican American feminist writing publishing during the 1980s. Although being an ever-present feature of the Chicano Movement, as I argued in Chapter 3, the tension between the “community” and its supposed “representatives” came to a head during the 1980s when writers publicized both their reservations about being tasked with representing a people, and their discontent with the self-declared representatives already claiming to speak on their behalf.⁶ Having themselves not felt represented by their supposed “spokesmen,” the authors I study in this chapter recognized the importance of their intervention. Yet, the relative ease with which 1970s writers could claim to represent “a community” was no longer as viable an option during the 1980s without some degree of overt self-consciousness.

Like Teresa, Ana Castillo herself travelled to California during the mid-1970s, where she too wrote poems, including one titled “Napa, California.” The poem, composed on the day she met Cesar Chavez, offers a voice that speaks as the grape pickers (“We pick / the bittersweet grapes”) and renders snippets of the workers’ speech (“Sí pues, ¿qué vamos a hacer, Ambrosio?”).⁷ As if Castillo herself went through an “Aztlán period,” the poem “Napa, California” stands out in relation to her published oeuvre, its dramatized communal voice resembling Chicano literature of the 1970s the most. The contrast between the perspectives delineated in “Napa, California” and her later writing suggests the extent to which Castillo came

⁶ For an earlier example see Mario T. García’s 1973 essay “The Chicano University,” wherein he describes how in San Diego State College, “the radicalization that initiated Chicano Studies has become deflated; Chicano Studies, in turn, now represents a bureaucratic organization laden with incompetent and opportunistic faculty members whose sense of commitment to the students and the Chicano Movement leaves much to be desired.” “The Chicano University.” In *Ghosts in the Barrio: Issues in Bilingual-Bicultural Education*, edited by Ralph Poblano, 349 – 356. San Rafael, CA: Leswing Press, 1973.

⁷ Ana Castillo, *My Father Was a Toltec: And Selected Poems* (New York: WW Norton, 1995), 142.

to see the term “Chicano” as “an outdated expression weighed down by the particular radicalism of the seventies,” as she put it during the 1990s.⁸ When in 1994 Castillo recalls her participation in the Chicano Movement during the mid 1970s, she tellingly calls it the “Latino Movement,” a nomenclatural revision that exemplifies her view that the term Chicano is obsolete.⁹

I follow Castillo in periodizing the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and extend the insight to Chicano literature itself. Although John Alba Cutler’s *Ends of Assimilation* (2015) is right to identify “the 1980s (rather the 1970s)” as “the decade in which Chicano/a literature truly solidified,”¹⁰ this fact says more about the continued institutional efforts to consolidate Chicano literature into a field of study than it does about much of the work produced by some of the most recognized Mexican American writers of the decade. What Chicana/o literature and Chicana/o Studies has come to be is indeed the result of the changes that took place during the 1980s, but it was during that decade that the term “Chicano” became no longer sustainable without significant qualifications. Apart from the narrow nationalist and gendered parameters that tended to frame some of the most pronounced statements of Chicano pride, another reason for prompting the rejection of the label is evident in the excerpt from Castillo’s novel: by claiming that their self-interest was representative, Chicanos could advance their careers and be recognized by prestigious institutions but not ultimately represent anything apart from their self-interest.¹¹

⁸ Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1994), 10. Castillo offers “Xicana” and “Xicanisma” as replacements for Chicano and Chicanismo.

⁹ Castillo, *Toltec*, xvi.

¹⁰ John Alba Cutler, *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature* (New York, Oxford University Press: 2015), 89.

¹¹ José Antonio Villarreal’s novel *Clemente Chacon* (1984) launches the assault from a different (grossly misogynistic) perspective yet lands on the same assessment. The novel describes how the “Mod groomed, impeccable, healthy, smug” Chicanos distribute “expensive scotch and equally expensive literature” at Ronald Reagan fundraisers, claiming to represent their community but in point of fact are only “representing their utter disregard for the lack of social progress” of anybody but themselves. José Antonio Villarreal, *Clemente Chacón: A Novel* (Binghamton, NY: Bilingual, 1984).

This is not to say, of course, that Mexican American writers share these concerns equally. The poetry of Pat Mora often indicates a seamless, unproblematic continuity between the Chicanos' efforts to integrate the university and those of the subsequent generations who benefitted from these efforts. Mora's elegiac poem "Tomás Rivera," published in *Borders* (1986), celebrates Rivera's transition from migrant laborer to university chancellor, and concludes with Rivera encouraging the reader to follow in his footsteps: "Now you."¹² Mora memorializes this institutional inroad a few poems later in "University Avenue," wherein the poetic voice declares "We are the first / of our people to walk this path [...] We do not travel alone. / Our people burn deep within us."¹³ So just as Chicanos cleared the way for Mora's generation ("Now you"), she will continue to speak for all Mexicans and Mexican Americans ("Our people burn deep within us").

Just a few poems later, however, this unselfconscious communal sensibility is qualified in the poem "Echoes," which depicts the speaker drinking white wine with other women "as our children / whacked the piñata." In *this* poem, the "us" in question does not include the Mexican maid, named Magdalena, whose "white uniform" contrasts with the women's "cool dresses / and sculptured nails." Initially, the speaker (somehow) seems to have access to Magdalena's thoughts, describing how the maid "set the table remembering such laughter / at fiestas in Zacatecas." This striking sense of intimacy between the maid and poet—who somehow knows where the maid is from, but also what she thinks and remembers—is falsified when the speaker and maid actually meet: "Her smile wavered when I spoke / to her in Spanish. Perhaps she wondered why I'd leave the other señoras, / join her when she served, why I'd / drift to the

¹² Pat Mora, "Tomás Rivera," in *Borders* (Houston: Arte Público, 1986), 13-14.

¹³ Mora, *Borders*, 19.

edge.”¹⁴ The telling “*perhaps*” bears the lie of the speaker’s earlier presumption (to know her thoughts) and projection. Try as the poet might to establish a sense of familiarity, the conspicuous inequality of their positions becomes a barrier that, though seemingly overcome with niceties, ensures that Magdalena labors at the “edge” of the party as the hired help. The host can insist that her guests discard their used dinnerware on the lawn because Magdalena is there to clean up after them:

Again and again I hear:
just drop the cups and plates
on the grass. My maid
will pick them up.
Again and again I feel
my silence, the party whirring round me¹⁵

The poem’s titular “echoes,” indicated by the phrase “again and again,” are the symptoms of the poet’s guilt who continually recalls the scene and her lack of action. The poem concludes with the poet wondering if “Perhaps my desert land waits / to hear me roar, waits to hear / me flash: NO. NO. / Again and Again.” Just as she wonders if “perhaps” Magdalena wonders why the poet leaves the party to talk to her, she also considers if “perhaps” the land waits to hear her “roar” and “flash.”

This concluding speculation becomes particularly striking when readers consider it alongside Mora’s first published collection of poems, *Chants* (1984), the first poem of which functions as an epic-like invocation to the “desert land” to inspire and speak through the poet’s words:

I hear Indian women
chanting, chanting
I see them long ago bribing
The desert with turquoise threads
[...]
Secretly I scratch a hole in the desert

¹⁴ Mora, *Borders*, 23.

¹⁵ Mora, *Borders*, 23.

By my home, I bury a ballpoint pen
And lined yellow paper. Like the Indians
I ask the Land to smile on me, to croon
Softly, to help me catch her music with words.¹⁶

In this poem the poet has access to the past and can hear the Indian women's "chanting, chanting," a phrase that could be heard as counterpoint to the echoed "again and again" of "Echoes." But while the "chants" of the poems collected in *Chants* are imagined as the music of the desert land linguistically channeled (via "words") through the poet, the echoes of "Echoes" depict the desert land *waiting* to hear the poet use language, or at least express anger ("roar"); the desert land waits for the poet to do *something* ("flash") on Magdalena's behalf. The failure of the speaker's voiced solidarity with Magdalena during the party subsequently leads to the emergence of the poet's voice—formalized in the poem but temporally separated from the diegetic scene of their potential solidarity. Its imagined shouted negation—a refusal to exploit and overwork workers for the benefit and comfort of the middle class—ultimately wants to compensate for the poet's silence at the moment when Magdalena and her boss could have heard her speak. What ultimately resonates in "Echoes," however, is not the poet's cry but her implicating silence, as if begging the question, what good does this poem do *now*?¹⁷ So even in the writing of Pat Mora, whose poems often do not hesitate to speak for "her people" through their use of the collective "we," there is also the haunting realization that class inequality exposes the limitations of both this communal voice and of the efficacy of poetic mediation. There remains the uncomfortable possibility that "perhaps" the poet only speaks for herself while imagining to be the voice of the land and her people.

¹⁶ Pat Mora "Bribe," in *Chants* (Houston: Arte Público, 1984), 11.

¹⁷ This question begs an even more troubling one: What good would the poet's refusal have done even at the very moment of the poet and Magdalena's solidarity (*No, I won't throw my dishes on the lawn!*) other than make the poet feel less guilty about her temporary privilege and Magdalena's lack of it?

This recognition of the limits of representational mediation proves salient in all of the examples that follow, and could be contrasted easily with the most obvious examples of a Chicano communal voice, evident in such poems as Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’s epic *I Am Joaquín*, which asserts “I am the masses of my people,” and Alurista’s poems, including one titled “i can’t.” Although written in the first- person singular, Alurista’s poem’s first lines introduce the speaker’s relation to a people (“gente”):

i can’t
keep from crying
my gente sufre¹⁸

The lines’ spacing indicates a parallelism between the poet’s seeming inability and his people’s suffering. And by attending to the verb “cry,” readers can understand the line connecting the poet and people as both a description of an emotive response to a sociological condition *and* a politically active declaration. The poet does not merely shed tears because his people suffer; he cannot *not declare* their suffering. By “crying” about their situation he demands their freedom, as becomes clear later in the poem:

i will my freedom
and it wills my people’s
my gente
Raza de Bronce

“Freedom” is enacted by the poetic exclamation itself because the act nullifies the facile characterization of the Mexican Americans as “silent” and “passive” (cultureless and politically apathetic), thereby counteracting the oppressive conditions in which Mexican Americans’ cultural production and political activism has been ignored. The poem’s unification of the poet’s cry and will, underwritten by the implied unity between poetic freedom and a politics of liberation, enables the assumed connection between the poet and a people for whom he speaks.

¹⁸ Alurista, “i can’t,” *Floriscanto En Aztlan*, (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2011).

This implied unity enables readers of the poem to see how the title “i can’t” actually says “we will.”

Compare Alurista’s “i can’t” to a poem like Cherríe Moraga’s “For the Color of My Mother,” which also includes an account of the speaker’s emerging cry:

at two
my upper lip split open
clear to the tip of my nose
it spilled forth a cry that would not yield
that traveled down six floors of hospital
where doctors wound me into white bandages
only the screaming mouth exposed¹⁹

Here, the speaker’s voice emerges from a torn body, the trauma of which resonates with a subsequent description of the speaker’s mother’s mouth, which was by contrast “pressed into a seam” when she is forced to speak English and endure physical labor. An italicized admission—*“I am a white girl gone brown to the blood color of my mother speaking for her”*—introduces the verse describing the speaker’s mother, autobiographically indicating how the speaker’s skin is not “bronze” (as in Alurista’s “Raza de Bronce”) and how she feels compelled to emphasize her “brownness.” Moraga’s poetic voice is not speaking for “La Raza”; she is only speaking on behalf of another woman, but doing so reluctantly, continually calling attention to her role as mediator so as to acknowledge its limitations.

Yet the poem’s conclusion rings a note of somber optimism as it depicts the gathering of “dark women [...] sitting in circles” among whom the speaker distributes her work:

I pass thru their hands
the head of my mother
painted in clay colors

touching each carved feature swollen eyes and mouth

¹⁹ Anzaldúa and Moraga, *This Bridge*, 12.

The poem anticipates the formation of a public comprised of women of color who will not scoff at a güera's claim to speak for her brown mother. Like *The Mixquiahuala Letters*' allusion to women's conferences ("Somos Chicanas"), the poem depicts the discursive space fought for and established by women, wherein a public can flourish and where their voices can resonate. Such a "public," as Michael Warner has described, convenes via the circulation of media, Moraga's poem thus dramatizing the aspirations of its own reception.²⁰ Indeed, the "head"—a painted and carved object—could refer to the poem itself, here materialized and held by the women who have gathered to see/read it. The circulation of this metonym creates a sense of shared intimacy that is forged slowly, tentatively, not taken for granted in forceful declarations. So although the poem's thematized representational reluctance leads to an acknowledgement of the limits of mediation, it also ultimately gives way to a desire to rhetorically transcend representation by figuratively converting the work into a materialization of the body the poem describes. The poet could write a poem that speaks for her mother because her mother has experienced a life of physical abuse and psychic pain, or she could instead show her mother's swollen eyes and mouth and let the traces of this abuse themselves speak.

As this poem illustrates, self-conscious recognition of the limits of mediation necessitates what I characterize as practical neutralizations that, although varying, tend to question the grounds of representational claims (Chicanos' "articulating" the "barrio's deprivation"). They instead foreground an identity that does not claim to represent, so much as to speak and/or exist as itself ("*We Are Chicanas*"). But as the example from *The Mixquiahuala Letters* already begins to show, the women's movement was not about individuals fighting for their particular voices to be heard. The Mexican American writers who confronted Chicanismo critiqued it for

²⁰ The kind of "publics" Warner describes are "the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation," Michael Warner *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 66.

not adequately representing the needs and respecting the agency of women *qua women*. So the questions that arise are these: How can feminism make a claim of representation that does not fall victim to the shortcomings it critiques? Asked slightly differently, how can the hard-earned institutional inclusion of women not reproduce the shortcomings of “elite brokerage” so brilliantly highlighted in *The Mixquiahuala Letters*?²¹

Of course, posing these questions might be considered a false dilemma: I risk perpetuating the “erasure” of women’s agency described by Maylei Blackwell; for her, the “false dichotomy between ‘the’ community as the site of authenticity and the academy (read: middle class or sold out)... dismisses the university as a critical historical site for the transformation of the relations of power/knowledge.”²² I do not presuppose the relative unity of a shared perspective grounded in a common identity, an organic grassroots community whose collective interests are threatened by institutionalization and bureaucratization. Such a presupposition suggests that university admittance necessarily entails a change in beliefs or political allegiance. I seek instead to highlight “representation” as a problem that writers felt compelled to address instead of taking their representative status for granted. I show how writers connect the questions concerning political representation (who gets to represent whom and to what end) to a related question (what constitutes a representation as such). More specifically, I am highlighting the connection between the prevalence of figurative personification and metonymy, on the one hand, and the critique of political and literary representation, on the other, arguing that the former should be understood as a response to the latter. By imagining ways to figuratively transcend the latter

²¹ For a definition (and trenchant critique) of elite brokerage as “a relation between governing elites and entities or individuals recognized as representatives of designated groups,” see Adolph L. Reed, *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: New Press, 2000), xxi.

²² Maylei Blackwell, *Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas, 2011), 32. The fundamental difference between Blackwell’s account and my own, especially the argument presented in the previous chapter, is that she understands higher education as a medium enabling social change instead of being the mechanism producing and maintaining the status quo.

writers saw a way to address the former. Writers do not “represent,” they “are”; their art does not seek to “mean,” but be.

This perspective could be interpretive and to an extent politically evaluative. When we acknowledge how the turn to the tropes of personification and metonymy could be seen as an attempt to neutralize what was perceived as a problem of representation, we are in a position to assess the effectiveness of the solution. If we agree that these tropes do not neutralize representation so much as reproduce it, we can begin to understand how the response to Chicano literature could not help but reproduce what was taken to be its shortcomings. And, more interpretive than political, my argument shows how works including Villanueva’s “Pyramids and Such” enact a shift away from Chicano symbology towards the primacy of the human body and its relation to women’s labor:

I never have put much stock
in pyramids and such (though
I’ve shied from saying
so, embarrassed): they
leave me cold [...]²³

Admitting that the pyramids stand as a “testimony to man’s brilliance,” the speaker nevertheless prefers to admire a young Mexican street artist performing in front of the monuments, as he spits out ignited gasoline. She parenthetically juxtaposes the labor that created the pyramids to the skill involved in the boy’s fire breathing, drawing a connection between the people who built the structures and their present-day descendants:

...He
took a mouthful (a hundred, at
least, shouldered the
stone in place)...

She concedes that the stone “endures” while the boy’s performance “will / not last for centuries,” but because she has “held life” she “can’t accept / anything less than / life.” By preferring the

²³ Alma Villanueva, *Life Span* (Austin : Place of Herons, 1985), 6.

living boy (who is literally hot because playing with fire) instead of the inert pyramids (which leave her cold), the speaker shows her preference for actual people instead of the idea of mythic greatness as represented by the pyramids. The boy is himself a kind of testimony, not of “man’s” brilliance but of *women’s*, their ability to create and nurture life. And although this labor—like the fire breathing performance— appears unenduring (leaving behind no pyramids), it creates that most fleeting yet most crucial monument: the hot-because-living human body itself. If for earlier Chicano writers symbols of indigenism provided the rhetorical, symbolic ground for community formation, here, the body is a metonym for a people that neither it nor the poet claim to represent while nevertheless functioning as a testament of women’s capacity to create. The poem, in short, dramatizes a shift from Chicano symbolism to the feminist critique of that symbolism, a shift from symbolic representation to a use of metonymy that does not claim to represent a people so much as embody them.

“speak through my words and my blood”

The existing scholarship tends to agree that not only did feminists expose the deficiencies of 1970’s Chicano nationalism and misogyny, they created alternative representational forms and methodologies that have to some degree successfully circumvented the shortcomings of (mis)representation. So, to take an older example, even as John Beverley argues in *Against Literature* (1993) that writers’ claims to “speak for” others cannot help but be compromised by a “vertical model of representation,” in which “elites” politically and artistically “represent” the voice of the poor by positioning themselves as this voice, he nevertheless also claims that “Chicana feminist and lesbian writers like Gloria Anzaldúa are using poetry and narrative to redefine and reenergize a previously male-centered identity politics, preparing the ground for the

emergence of new forms of liberation struggle.”²⁴ In his view, they are employing literary forms that somehow circumvent the “vertical” model of representation he critiques, offering instead a “horizontal model” that allows the “subaltern” to speak for herself as herself. And referring to “Academic feminist theory and criticism,” Beverley argues that feminist theorists “do not just ‘represent’ a political-legal practice that happens essentially outside the university, the contemporary women’s movement *passes through* the university and the school system.”²⁵ Feminists do not “represent” a practice, nor a community benefiting from that practice; they exist within and flow through the university *as* that community. And insofar as they maintain the integrity of their identity, one not subsumed by the institution, the forms and methods they create and employ will be “horizontal” because they will not represent the voice of a community so much as be the conduit through which that community, embodied by the feminists, speaks for itself.

Yet this argument seems to preclude the possibility of misrepresentation. Insofar as “subalternity” is a product of the patriarchy, the inclusion of women itself erodes the strength of the institutions perpetuating male dominance, and women *qua* women share a common political vision across all classes. Indeed, for Beverley having an “identity” entails political beliefs: “all politics, including our own, is identity politics, so that the issue is not so much identity politics as such, but rather whose and what identity politics.”²⁶ Returning to my opening anecdote from *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, and following the entailments of Beverley’s argument, one could argue that if it were women buying Datsuns their self-interest would remain expressive of their community.

²⁴ John Beverley, *Against Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), 17, xiii.

²⁵ Beverley, *Against*, 18, emphasis in original.

²⁶ John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004).

Similar to Beverley, Michael Soldatenko's more recent *Chicano Studies: The Genesis of a Discipline* (2009) argues that the publication of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga's 1981 edited volume *This Bridge Called My Back*²⁷ marked a significant watershed and offered a necessary corrective to what Chicano Studies became as it gained recognition. He describes how "the [Chicano] community was replaced by the institution" when the "success" of Chicano activism "was transformed into institutionalization."²⁸ The university's entrenched disciplines had a disciplining effect on Chicanos whose proposals for a "radical mutation of academic practices"²⁹ were abandoned as they became subsumed by "academic knowledge that privilege[s] scientism and empirical methods," methods that rely heavily on "a masculinist language" of "hard facts, science, and power."³⁰ But rather than acceding to the university's disciplinary ambition of achieving "objectivity," the feminist "theory in the flesh" called for in *This Bridge* begins from an embodied, partial, historically specific perspective. For Soldatenko, the Third World Feminism *This Bridge* collectively articulates signaled a return to Chicanos' original methodological radicalism and thus paved the way for subsequent feminist "oppositional epistemologies" that followed in *This Bridge's* wake.³¹

Yet what Soldatenko's research does not adequately show is how this recognition—that conclusions obtained "academically" were unsatisfactory—presupposes that there is a truth that such academic methods are not allowing. On this view, the problem is indeed methodological insofar as the purportedly neutral academic disciplines distort by imposing bias. But the desire to evaluate and discard flawed (because biased) methodologies was the very basis for invoking

²⁷ Anzaldúa, Gloria and Cherríe Moraga, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back* (London: Persephone Press, 1981).

²⁸ Michael Soldatenko, *Chicano Studies: The Genesis of a Discipline* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 8, 9.

²⁹ Soldatenko, *Chicano Studies*, 13.

³⁰ Soldatenko, *Chicano Studies*, 4, 5.

³¹ These "oppositional epistemologies" could comprise Gloria Anzaldúa's "new mestiza consciousness," Chela Sandoval's "differential consciousness," and Emma Pérez's "decolonial imaginary."

objectivity as the ideal in the first place, as objectivity was meant to serve as the (however unobtainable) measure with which to assess one's methods. The practical implications of the critique of objectivity cannot discard or replace one epistemology for another, better, one (however "better" is defined) without ensuring that objectivity remains the evaluative measure. Which is to say that the argument that "academic" methodologies are not objective cannot entail the conclusion that they are thereby false. Rather, the logical conclusion such an argument entails must be that "our" methodologies are simply our own, as opposed to "theirs." Such a conclusion presupposes the possibility of such a generalizable perspective, one capacious enough to include differences (not reducing "Mexican Americans" or "women" into a reductive homogeneity) while nevertheless specific enough to have explanatory value (such that "Mexican Americans" and "women" could be described). Without such generalizability my perspective would not count as yours and therefore as ours.

But replacing one general "perspective" (white, male, heterosexual...) for another (*any* other) begs some questions and courts some problems because the grounds of such a perspective cannot only be a matter of embodiment (i.e. essentialism); nor can the grounds be that of cultural nationalism without producing immediate suspicion (i.e. exceptionalism and jingoism). Which is why Soldatenko acknowledges how "At the center of this [Chicano methodological] perspectivist project was self-consciousness. A danger, however, existed on trying to ground this self-consciousness. It was easy to step from a perspectivist analysis over to essentialism and nativism."³² His account of a Chicano "perspectivism" seeking to ground its self-consciousness paradoxically—even if momentarily—presumes the possibility *of* an ungrounded, free-floating "self-consciousness," thereby reproducing the very problem that the critique of objectivity was meant to highlight: that of the impossibility of disarticulating subjectivity and objectivity,

³² Soldatenko, *Chicano Studies*, 92.

embodiment and perspective. The invoked “self-consciousness” presupposes a position outside of the self through which that self could be examined and evaluated. The point of the critique of objectivity was to argue that *there is no such position*. The problem of methodology is thus redoubled when it is characterized as a problem of objectivity and presumed solved with self-conscious perspectivism.

I discuss this argument at length at the outset, and will show its literary dramatization shortly, because it highlights the extent to which critics have tended to treat feminist methodologies as able to maintain a “perspective” and thus preserve their organic ties to a community, which these methodologies do not represent so much as embody. The embodiment implicitly underwriting this type of argument reflects the pervasive use of personification in the literary works. Indeed, literary personification is often imagined as more capable of embodying and transmitting a perspective in ways that critical methodology cannot.

The scholarship and theoretical contribution by Emma Pérez, for example, can be understood as one of the “alternative methodologies” described by Soldatenko. Her work exposes the constructedness of historical research by baring the presuppositions that frame its composition. She notes how during the sixteenth century, “Bartolomé de las Casas and Bernal Díaz, both chroniclers for the Spanish Crown, exalted La Malinche as a heroine” for being Hernán Cortéz’s lover and translator and aiding the Spanish conquest. But in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, nationalist writers including Octavio Paz condemn La Malinche for sleeping with Cortéz and betraying her people. But because the words of Malintzin Tenepal (“La Malinche”) “were not transcribed by anyone” she continues to remain silent. “Where, then, is the space for the story about women such as La Malinche?” asks Pérez, and the answer her work provides is simultaneously institutional and methodological: it is the hard-earned space created

by feminists within oppressive research institutions, as well as the theoretical, discursive space created by alternative methodologies.³³ And, crucially, insofar as “History” is merely the story told by “the conquerors,” a counterhistory could effectively consist of counternarratives that renders the victims’ voices. The space for La Malinche’s story will also be explicitly literary.

Which is why Pérez refers to the events of the 1836 Battle of the Alamo in her scholarly intervention *The Decolonial Imaginary* (1999), describing how she cannot “forget the Alamo” because it is “imprinted upon my body, my memories, my childhood,”³⁴ but she also delineates this claim in her more recent novel, *Forgetting the Alamo, Or, Blood Memory* (2009). Set in the Texas of 1836— on land that is simultaneously “slave lynching country and...Mexican killing country and...Indian scalping country”³⁵— the novel’s Mexican and Comanche protagonist witnesses and tries to avenge acts of violence against slaves, Mexicans, Native Americans, and women, only to face continued hardship and disappointment. The novel concludes with the character realizing that:

nobody can take away the memory in our flesh and nothing can take away the spirit in our blood... Maybe the only justice we’ll ever know is in surviving to tell our own side of things. Maybe that’s enough for now. Telling our own stories so we won’t be forgotten.³⁶

The future descendents of the victims of hate crimes, genocide, and imperial expansion will embody the victims’ blood, which “preserves memory and carries knowledge through blood vessels from heads to hands and legs and the knowing is passed down to the next generation.”³⁷

³³ Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), xv. She identifies a discursive “space” situated in the “time lag” between, on the one hand, the colonial imaginary that has informed historiography and, on the other, the expected postcolonial, utopian dissolution of this reductive imaginary. Not yet fully postcolonial, this constructed interstitial, decolonial space can be the discursive shifting foundation upon which to write Chicanas into history, by noting their exclusion and rewriting the old narratives of “history” into “herstory.”

³⁴ Pérez, *Decolonial*, 127.

³⁵ Emma Pérez, *Forgetting the Alamo* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 102.

³⁶ Pérez, *Forgetting*, 205–6.

³⁷ Pérez, *Forgetting*, 165.

The conveyance of the victims' narratives, the circulation of their history, will itself be the act of redemption unavailable to them in their present.

Although a novella like Rudolfo A. Anaya's *The Legend of La Llorona* (1984)—about Malintzin Tenepal— could also be understood as the attempt to provide “a space” for Malintzin's “story,” the novel's very form of narration, while serving as the medium for her story and voice, showcases the necessity of the feminist critique of reductive representation.³⁸ The novella's third-person narration— because disembodied and limitedly omniscient— unproblematically reports Malintzin's story, thereby reproducing the fiction of the objective, knowledgeable perspective sought by the university's disciplines. The novel's first sentence relates how “an era had come to an end,” simultaneously referring to end of a cycle on the Aztec Calendar (which the novel's characters are aware of) but also implying the end of the Aztec's way of life with the coming of the Spanish (which the characters could not know). Viewing the affairs of its characters from a position akin to that of the Aztec gods, the narrative perspective descends into the affairs of its characters, foretelling (in the voice of the gods) how “A new breed of men” will in the future “free the spirit of the people.”³⁹ This “new breed” will inherit the twin culture of the Aztec war god Huitzilopochtli and the god of culture Quetzalcoatl, implying that such “men” will be cultural warriors who will avenge the many sins of the conquest.⁴⁰ Anaya rhetorically positions himself as one of these future “sons,” avenging La Malinche by writing a novel about her. *The Legend of La Llorona* thus raises the problems of a “vertical position of enunciation” described by John Beverley when noting how Pablo Neruda's poem “Heights of Macchu Picchu”— although admirably desiring to provide a conduit for the voice of the dead—

³⁸ As the novel's narrative voice puts it, “If a history were ever written of these times, there would be many who would brand her as a traitor for what she had done.” Anaya instead depicts Malintzin as the loving mother of what would become modern-day mestizos. Rudolfo A. Anaya, *The Legend of La Llorona* (Berkeley, CA: Quinto Sol, 1984), 62.

³⁹ Anaya, *Legend*, 91.

⁴⁰ Anaya, *Legend*, 106.

engages in the politics of elite brokerage. This form of literary representation is homologous to the way in which “progressive intellectuals” claim to speak for “the popular masses of past and present Latin American society.” Neruda’s poetic voice exhorts the dead to “Speak through my words and my blood” yet places *itself* as their mouthpiece, unavoidably ventriloquizing what the dead might say. Beverley instead proposes a “horizontal plane” on which one can “question the structural privilege of sexism, colonialism, and imperialism,” while allowing one to engage directly with “subaltern social groups.”⁴¹

Drawing from Beverley’s insights, readers could compare Anaya’s narrative vertical position of enunciation to a novel like Graciela Limón’s *Song of the Hummingbird* (1996), which although also narrated in the third person is openly *self-conscious* about the limits of mediation. Set during the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the novel’s central character is a *Mexica* woman named Huitzitzilin (who was “very similar” to La Malinche⁴²) who asks that a Franciscan monk hear her confession and life’s story. Her confessor, Father Benito, had been “a university student” who studied the “several chronicles written by missionaries and captains,”⁴³ which is how he realizes the utility of Huitzitzilin’s confession for the Spanish’s efforts to colonize and convert the indigenous people. What he considers “valuable” enough to transcribe is only what is “of use,” the determination of which is influenced by his gendered bias and colonial ideology.⁴⁴ So when Huitzitzilin describes how La Malinche “dressed in white cotton, while her sandals were of iguana leather, and her jewelry, although simple, was finely wrought,” Father Benito “did not write this part of Huitzitzilin’s account because it was not new.”⁴⁵ Because he had previously heard of La Malinche, he does not consider the details about her life relevant.

⁴¹ Beverley, *Against*, 18.

⁴² Graciela Limón, *Song of the Hummingbird* (Houston: Arte Público, 1996), 72.

⁴³ Limón, *Song*, 24–5.

⁴⁴ Limón, *Song*, 24.

⁴⁵ Limón, *Song*, 95.

Throughout his transcription, he continually omits Huitzitzilin's description of women's attire, their handiwork, and their participation in Mexicas' cultural rituals. *Song of the Hummingbird* thus dramatizes how historically-situated chroniclers of the Spanish crown—each of which writes “a different version of Mexica rituals, names and practices”⁴⁶—distort and omit the story of indigenous women. Limón's novel depicts the inevitable reality of *embodied* perspective, demonstrating how knowledge is always local and partial, thereby protecting itself from *The Legend of La Llorona's* naiveté.

But to acknowledge how, as an eyewitness, Huitzitzilin's description of the events carries more epistemological weight than that of the Spanish mediators is to concede that there can be a more accurate account, one distorted by (spatial, temporal, ideological...) distance. The novel's invocation of ghosts from the past is its attempt to mitigate this distance. As Huitzitzilin puts it, the “the spirits” of the dead “are still with us... They're as present today.”⁴⁷ The past, in the form of the dead's spirits, remains in the present providing *its* firsthand account via a ghostly medium. And as long as the novel exists, these spirits can continue to live on in the readers' present. So although the last line of Anaya's *The Legend of La Llorona* ends with La Malinche's “leaving behind her wailing cry in the night,”⁴⁸ a cry that will continue to haunt the perpetrators of injustice, and Limón's *Song of the Hummingbird* ends with “silence” and the “emptiness created by her [Hitzitzilin's] absence,” Limón's last line also reminds its readers that the novel “had captured her words on paper and that her song would live on... forever.”⁴⁹ *Song of the Hummingbird*, like *The Legend of La Llorona*, dramatizes how the words captured in the novel

⁴⁶ Limón, *Song*, 25.

⁴⁷ Limón, *Song*, 93.

⁴⁸ Rudolfo A. Anaya, *The Legend of La Llorona* (Berkeley: TQS Publications, 1984), 106.

⁴⁹ Limón, *Song*, 217.

exists for present-day readers, “for those who will soon fill this land,”⁵⁰ and both novels end with an indigenous woman’s voice—one crying, the other singing—as made available by the novel.

As becomes apparent in these few examples, the use—however self-conscious—of the tropes of “blood memory” and of ghosts from the past haunting the present cannot but reproduce the “vertical model” of representation critiqued by Beverley even as they are understood as neutralizing it by providing the “perspectivist” approach promoted by Soldatenko. The writers’ conceits of ghosts who speak to and through them, and that of a past that resides in their blood, continue to exhort the dead—like Neruda’s poetic voice—to “speak through my words and my blood.” But because Soldatenko’s historical account does not attend to the literature produced by Mexican Americans he laments how “almost a decade would pass before Chicanos and some Chicanas would take seriously the promise of *This Bridge*,”⁵¹ and this lament echoes his overall assessment of what went wrong with Chicano Studies as such. For him, early attempts to develop radical methodologies were displaced as efforts were directed “increasingly towards the arts.”⁵² If only Chicanos had continued to develop their critiques of methodological objectivity, he seems to argue, Chicano Studies itself might have remained heterogeneous and fluid instead of ossifying within the university. Yet this turn to the arts in the late 1960s and early 1970s was understood *as producing* the very standpoint epistemology Soldatenko would like to have seen developed. As John Alba Cutler rightly describes, the “turn to literature” was understood as “an extension” of the critique of social science because literature functioned as “an alternative to

⁵⁰ Limón, *Song*, 211.

⁵¹ Soldatenko, *Chicano Studies*, 167.

⁵² Soldatenko argues that efforts to develop a “Perspectivist Chicano Studies” were “pushed toward peripheral journals or self-publication” and thus “never matured into a concise intellectual style” (7). He thus tracks how Octavio Romano (who helped found the publishing house Quinto Sol and the journal *El Grito*) abandoned his proposed “form of standpoint epistemology,” in part because “his work moved increasingly toward the arts” (26-7).

social science's self-authorizing empiricism."⁵³ Insofar as a positivist empiricism and its misguided faith in methodological objectivity led to reductive social scientific descriptions of Mexican Americans, literature written by Mexican Americans could offer a potentially radical discursive alternative. Indeed, the very assumption underwriting Chicano literature as such depends on a shared "perspective" (however heterogenous) that operates as the necessary principle of selection with which to determine which kinds of experiences count as producing a "Chicano." The consolidation of this literature suggests the specificity, the uniqueness of the delineated/delineating perspective: Chicanos *qua* Chicano brought something to bear on American literature that was not reducible to that literature yet was an integral part of it. But whereas Soldatenko does not fully acknowledge how the Chicano turn to literature was understood as providing an alternative discourse to reductive social scientific misrepresentations of Mexican Americans, Alba Cutler writes as if the Chicano claims bestowed on literature were true.⁵⁴ He therefore does not indicate how the Chicano literary intervention was subsequently seen as inadequate *because misrepresentative*. Writers including Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Alma Luz Villanueva, and Ana Castillo did not see themselves represented by Chicanos and thus employed different representational strategies. Yet these strategies reproduce the problems they are meant to circumvent because, like the Chicanos before them, these writers

⁵³ Alba Cutler, *Ends*, 84. According to Alba Cutler, "Quinto Sol's turn to literature was an extension of this mission [its critique of social science]" because Quinto Sol saw literature not "simply as an alternate form of representation," but more radically as "a mode of discourse that transcended the work of representation" (64).

⁵⁴ Part of the reason why Alba Cutler does so stems from his view of "the literary" as such: literature's ability to, in the words of Derek Attridge, go beyond "the limits of rational accounting." In the following chapter I will return to Alba Cutler's repeated invocation of Attridge's formulation and the prevalence of the idea that "literature" is an "unpredictable" "event." For now I will just mention that insofar as Chicanos turned to and produced literature as understood by Attridge, this literature would inevitably challenge the very basis of what Chicanos were trying to do. As Attridge himself states: "my quarrel with what I am terming instrumentalism is that it judges the literary work according to a pre-existing scheme of values, on a utilitarian model that reflects a primary interest somewhere other than in literature. If literature rests on a certain inaccessibility to rules, as the aesthetic tradition recognizes, there is no way it can serve as an instrument without at some time challenging the basis of instrumentality itself." Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 13.

ultimately turn to literature which they also understood as ultimately representative even as it claim not to represent.

“My people the Indians”

By suggesting that the publications by Mexican American women during the 1980s merely reacted to Chicanos, I risk reductively mischaracterizing an outpouring of highly ambitious creativity that saw itself as more self-determined than reactionary.⁵⁵ This is why Marta Ester Sánchez’s *Contemporary Chicana Poetry* (1985) places the label “Chicana” within a triad that also comprises the terms “woman” and “poet.” Each interrelated term offers an imbricated set of dialectical relations that shift in emphasis depending on a given situation and writer.⁵⁶ My explicit call to periodize Chicano literature might thus be read as participating in what Maylei Blackwell calls “the politics of periodization,” which she defines as “a historiographic device” that “denies the historical importance of women’s autonomous agency within the movement because it periodizes the emergence of Chicana feminism within the decline of el movimiento Chicano and situates Chicana organizing and feminism as occurring ‘after’ the height of the Chicano movement, usually during the 1980s.”⁵⁷ The very form a history can take—what Gloria Anzaldúa criticizes as the “ways of knowledge” taught in the university—sustains the silencing

⁵⁵ The self-reflexive imagery in Lorna Dee Cervantes’ collection *Emplumada* (1981), for example, emphasizes the primacy of the writer’s matrilineal influence. The poet’s grandmother “likes the way of birds” and “trusts only what she builds / with her own hands” because birds, as makers of their own homes, are models of self-subsistence. Which is one of the reasons why the dual imagery of “emplumada,” plumed and penned, birdlike and literate, serves as a recurring motif throughout the collection. Lorna Dee Cervantes, “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway,” *Emplumada* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 1981), 11.

⁵⁶ Marta Ester Sánchez, *Contemporary Chicana Poetry: A Critical Approach to an Emerging Literature*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1985).

⁵⁷ Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power!*, 11.

of women of color by relegating their contribution to later, reactionary moments, thereby failing to acknowledge women's active contributions.⁵⁸

Yet notice how Gloria Anzaldúa herself describes the changes that occurred when, as she puts it, “the Chicano Civil Rights Movement petered out”:

What you could say is that in the sixties and the early seventies the Chicanos were at the controls. they were the ones who were visible, the Chicano leaders. Then in the eighties and nineties, the women have become visible... names like Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa and other Chicana authors... So it—the Chicano Movement—has shifted into the *Movimiento Macha*.⁵⁹

Assuming the mode of narration that places “Chicana authors” “after” the dissolution of Chicano Movement, Anzaldúa periodizes the moment of Chicano social activism by registering a qualitative difference between the male authors associated with the Chicano Movement and the women that followed in their wake. While Anzaldúa does not claim that there were not any women participating in the Movement, in her experience there was a noticeable difference between her generation and “the older category of women, who were very staunch straight Chicanas who supported their men.”⁶⁰ Her assessment might be wrong, of course, but for her the Chicano Movement did not reflect her interests; nor did a feminist movement unwilling to acknowledge the importance of race and ethnic culture; nor did the university's disciplinary methodologies. So Blackwell is certainly right to intervene in the way women of color tend to be relegated to a “third wave” of feminism despite the evidence showing how “most feminists acknowledge that the 1981 publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherríe

⁵⁸ For an account of Anzaldúa's collegiate experience during the late 1970s, when she had “no voice” because the university insisted on specific “philosophies, systems, disciplines,” see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 230. My argument and the way I make it might be read as ignoring texts including Martha P. Cotera's *The Chicana Feminist* (1977), itself committed to highlighting how “Chicana feminist activities have been intricately interwoven with the entire fabric of the Chicano civil rights movement from 1848 to the present.” Martha Cotera, *The Chicana Feminist* (Austin, TX: Information Systems Development, 1977), 4.

⁵⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 229.

⁶⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 242.

Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, marks a shift in feminist consciousness.”⁶¹ But the very “shift in feminist consciousness” that Blackwell herself recognizes as a crucial to feminism is the result of Mexican American writers’ perceived disconnect between their voice and the available methodologies and forms of representation.

Anzaldúa’s response to her experience of exclusion was to enlist the aid of Cherrie Moraga and publish *This Bridge Called My Back*, which could be understood in part as her attempt to generate a forum in which writers might find the forms allowing their voices to ring forth.⁶² In a letter included in the volume, Anzaldúa describes how writing an essay felt “wooden, cold” because of the “esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing.” Anzaldúa thus wonders, “How to begin again? How to approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want? What form?” She settles on the genre most associated with intimacy among friends (“A letter, of course”) yet the letter she writes also includes excerpts from her journal entries and quotations from poems written by women of color. That journal entries and letters invite readers to share a sense of intimacy reserved for friends stands to reason; so too does the hesitation to write an analytical essay, the rational generality of which could render the particularity of the speaker irrelevant. But her use of *poetry* plays a more specific role:

It’s not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue—*organic writing* I call it. A poem works for me *not* when it says what I want it to say and *not* when it evokes what I want it to. It works when it surprises me, when it says something I have repressed or pretended not to know.⁶³

A poem “works” not when it represents a poet’s thoughts but when it is imagined as part of the poet’s body that becomes its own person; it works when it stops being a representation yet

⁶¹ Blackwell, 19.

⁶² When asked, “So *This Bridge Called My Back* was your response to all that?”— “that” being the forms of exclusion she experienced— Anzaldúa answers, “Yes, exactly.” Karen Ikas, *Chicana Ways: Conversations with Ten Chicana Writers* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001), 5.

⁶³ Anzaldúa, *Bridge*, 170, emphasis in original.

nevertheless continues representing, speaking for its author in ways that she could not predict nor control. Similar to Castillo's distinction between a Chicano claiming to represent a community and a group of women speaking for themselves as themselves, Anzaldúa highlights a difference between a poet that claims to represent with her poems and a poem that instead speaks for itself and by doing so speaks for her, too.

As made more explicit in the essays and poems included in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Anzaldúa's aesthetic converts the object of representation into a performing subject:

My "stories" are acts encapsulated in time, "enacted" every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and "dead" objects (as aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a "who" or a "what" and contains the presences of persons, that is incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic power.

The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be "fed" [...] ⁶⁴
Anzaldúa imagines her writing as not *meaning* but *being*, the work being a person made of Anzaldúa's blood. ⁶⁵

Although far from being modernist, Anzaldúa's work becomes clarified in relation to the critical vocabulary modernism made available. Anzaldúa does not mention the writing of the modernist art critics Michael Fried and Clement Greenburg yet it is clear that she rejects their aesthetic and decidedly aligns her writing with postmodernist performance art. As performance art was beginning to thrive in the 1960s, when the boundaries of medium specificity were being transgressed by an ecstatic celebration of blended media and genre, Fried instead championed the modernist art that sought to integrate whatever was on the surface of the canvas, the depicted image, with the material fact of the canvas itself, the shape of the canvas. Modernist art sought to integrate the depicted image into the support to make the work a unified whole. The *frame* of

⁶⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 67.

⁶⁵ In the section titled "Writing Is A Sensuous Act," Anzaldúa describes how, "*Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre.*" *Borderlands*, 93.

these modernist works of art thus thematize the ontological distinction between the work of art and mere objects in the world, between the *form* of art and the mere *shape* of objects. When describing her writing, however, Anzaldúa likens it to visual art, “In looking at this book that I’m almost finished writing,” she says, “I see a mosaic pattern (Aztec-like) emerging, a weaving pattern,

Numerous overlays of paint, rough surfaces, smooth surfaces make me realize I am preoccupied with texture as well. Too, I see the barely contained color threatening to spill over the boundaries of the object it represents and into other “objects” and over the borders of the frame.⁶⁶

Anzaldúa rejects the boundaries of the “frame” as such and the reified ontology of the work of art understood as separated from other objects. For Anzaldúa, the “sacrifice” made by Western cultures’ understanding of art is that Western works of art become decontextualized, severed from the world and rendered inert.

The aesthetic of virtuosity, art typical of Western European cultures, attempts to manage the energies of its own internal system such as conflicts, harmonies, resolutions, and balances. It bears the presences of qualities and internal meanings. It is dedicated to the validation of itself. Its task is to move humans by means of achieving mastery in content, technique, feeling. Western art is always whole and always “in power.” It is individual (not communal).⁶⁷

Yet notice how her poem “*Cihuatl*, Woman Alone”⁶⁸ performs precisely the ontological resolution of harmonies and conflicts that she claims to reject. The poem is such an integrated whole that it produces the conditions in which (modernist, heretical) paraphrase can only inadequately describe the poem’s structure. Even *quoting* the poem would reductively excise fragments at the cost of apprehending the textual whole (Figure 1).

⁶⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 88.

⁶⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 89.

⁶⁸ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 175.

Cihuatlyotl, Woman Alone

Many years I have fought off your hands, *Raza*
father mother church your rage at my desire to be
with myself, alone. I have learned
to erect barricades arch my back against
you thrust back fingers, sticks to
shriek no to kick and claw my way out of
your heart And as I grew you hacked away
at the pieces of me that were different
attached your tentacles to my face and breasts
put a lock between my legs. I had to do it,
Raza, turn my back on your crookening finger
beckoning beckoning your soft brown
landscape, tender *nopalitos*. Oh, it was hard,
Raza to cleave flesh from flesh I risked
us both bleeding to death. It took a long
time but I learned to let
your values roll off my body like water
those I swallow to stay alive become tumors
in my belly. I refuse to be taken over by
things people who fear that hollow
aloneness beckoning beckoning. No self,
only race *vecindad familia*. My soul has always
been yours one spark in the roar of your fire.
We Mexicans are collective animals. This I
accept but my life's work requires autonomy
like oxygen. This lifelong battle has ended,
Raza. I don't need to flail against you.
Raza india mexicana norteamericana, there's no-
thing more you can chop off or graft on me that
will change my soul. I remain who I am, multiple
and one of the herd, yet not of it. I walk
on the ground of my own being browned and
hardened by the ages. I am fully formed carved
by the hands of the ancients, drenched with
the stench of today's headlines. But my own
hands whittle the final work me.

Figure 1: Scan of Gloria Anzaldúa's poem "Cihuatlyotl, Woman Alone" from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987, 175.

The poem's justified margins produce a rigid structure, the automaticity of which could preclude any decisions regarding the specificity of the poetic line as such.⁶⁹ The inclusion of words in a given line could be seen as a function not of a meaningful decision about the line's ending, of the potential meaning and/or sound that is produced by the enjambment, but as the mere result of the mechanical determination of how many letters do or do not fit given the established margins. Yet readers can understand the internal spacing in each line as the poet's insistence on remaining the agent who decides which words will end a given line, and which spatial pauses can operate as a line's caesura. The pointed pause in the poem's third line ("with myself alone. I have learned") reinforces the line's depiction of the poet's isolated self-making, and the line's break ("I have learned / to erect barricades") can be read as equally meaningful because also nonarbitrary: the line break—a result of the intended spaces—enacts the barricade the poetic voice describes.

The poem's form reflects its content about the speaker's painful efforts to extricate herself from the community that would police her sexuality and dictate the boundaries of appropriate behavior (it would "put a "lock between [her] legs"). The formal imposition of the marginal frame reproduces the social imposition of norms, while the spacing within the lines mark the poet's creation of the conditions in which she could exercise her constrained freedom to *choose*. The efforts to reclaim the poetic line could be read as her efforts to extricate herself from a restrictive albeit familiar community, which she metaphorically figures as "cleav[ing] flesh from flesh." The textual gaps simultaneously indicate both the poet's agency (which aerate the imposed frame's stuffiness) and the resulting trauma of this agency (the remaining open wounds resulting from the "cleaving"); the simultaneity of this symbolism reflects the speaker's

⁶⁹ This reading reproduces an account of Susan Howe's *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979* delivered as a class lecture by Walter Benn Michaels at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL. October 21, 2014.

realization that “we Mexicans are collective animals,” whereas her “life’s work” “requires autonomy / like oxygen.”⁷⁰ The poet must exert a sense of self-sufficiency separate from the “collective,” a solitary sense of self-making reinforced by the autonomy of her “work.” The marginal “frame,” while dramatizing the imposition of norms, thus also simultaneously dramatizes the separation of Anzaldúa’s work from the collective, functioning as an emblem of containment that reinforces a work’s internal coherence by seeking to produce it.⁷¹

Anzaldúa may claim that the art of Western European cultures attempts to “manage the energies of its own internal system such as conflicts, harmonies, resolutions, and balances.” And she may further claim that her own work does not. Yet notice how she produces a *frame* that contains the contradictions of her own poem in a formal stasis. Anzaldúa, here, is like the modernist painter who is not content with the contingent accident of the shape of her canvas. This modernist painter instead wants to activate this shape and convert it into artistic form by rendering it meaningful.

But—and this qualification is crucial—this modernist characterization of the poem and the essentially New Critical reading I have rehearsed are, according to Anzaldúa’s own aesthetic, precisely the *wrong* way of attending to her work. Differentiating the “ethno-poetics and performance” of her “people,” “the Indians,” from the artistic practices of “Western European cultures,” she describes how the Western view of the work of art renders an artwork into a “whole” by severing it from its use (“An Indian mask” becoming a work of art in the museum, but also “a dead ‘thing’ separated from nature and, therefore, its power”).⁷² Her practice instead

⁷⁰ To think of a work as requiring oxygen and “autonomy” simultaneously personifies the work (it needs to breathe) and introduces a modernist aesthetic of self-sufficiency. For an account of the surprisingly crucial concepts of *breath* and *air* and their relation to early twentieth century literary modernism and its understanding of autonomy, see Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷¹ See Derrida on Kant’s *paragon* in Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁷² Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 90.

exercises the “power invoked through performance ritual” that enlivens the work in part by refusing its decontextualization:

The aesthetic of virtuosity, art typical of Western European cultures, attempts to manage the energies of its own internal system such as conflicts, harmonies, resolutions, and balances. It bears the presences of qualities and internal meanings. It is dedicated to the validation of itself. Its task is to move humans by means of achieving mastery in content, technique, feeling. Western art is always whole and always “in power.” It is individual (not communal).⁷³

The *recognition* of Anzaldúa’s shamanistic aesthetic is surely a crucial part of achieving a “mestiza consciousness” that is the aim of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. It enables a perspective that rejects the separation between work and world so crucial to much of Western aesthetic theory, and it produces a consciousness that prefers the fusion of work and audience so prevalent in what has come to be known as postmodernism. One could look at a work and see *not* a unified whole, the coherence of which underwrites and reflects a desire for individual artistic autonomy. One would instead see the work as a torn body that belongs ultimately to a collective and see oneself as part of this body and collective that is not artistically separated from the world so much as continuous with it.

So when Anzaldúa writes a poem about a mestiza woman making tortillas, the reader recites what looks like an exercise in metaphor that converts Anzaldúa’s third-person account of the mestiza into a first-person collective account in which poet, mestiza, and reader fuse:

We are the porous rock in the stone *metate*
squatting on the ground.
We are the rolling pin, *el maíz y agua*,
la masa harina. Somos el amasijo.
Somos lo molido en el metate.
we are the *comal* sizzling hot,
the hot *tortilla*, the hungry mouth.
We are the coarse rock.
We are the grinding motion,
the mixed potion, *somos el molcajete.*
We are the pestle, the *comino, ajo, pimienta,*

⁷³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 89.

We are the *chile colorado*,
the green shoot that cracks the rock.
We will abide.⁷⁴

The poem dramatizes Anzaldúa's exhortation to abandon the tradition of "the Western Cartesian split point of view" that separates subject and object. Anzaldúa would instead have herself and readers "root ourselves in the mythological soil and soul of this continent,"⁷⁵ which is why the declaration "we are the grinding motion" conjoins subject and object, agent and action. Readers of her work could be so rooted in "soil and soul" that the very perspectival and ontological distinctions between both figuratively vanish as soul and its personification in the soil become metaphorically fused. Participation in the incantatory reading converts the reader into a shaman revivifying the poem, bringing its metaphors into being by voicing its communal perspective, performatively eliminating the separation between work, author, and reader. This performing "we" brings the work into being while the work creates the conditions for its unity.

While the invoked "we" and the "communal" sensibility of her work may seem to continue the rhetorical strategies of Chicano literature, Anzaldúa's aesthetic does not presume a unity; it instead creates the figurative grounds for that unity's possibility. If for Chicanos, including the poet Alurista and playwright Luis Valdez, *indigenismo* and symbolism of "Aztlán" (the mythic pre-Conquest, pre-U.S. homeland that included what is now the American Southwest) were crucial tropes for rallying an otherwise disparate community into solidarity, Anzaldúa helps reveal how these symbols mark the procrustean force that reduces the complexity of "a people" into what a monolithic "bronze race." The grounds for her art's attempted "unity," as José F. Aranda has argued, move away from "the rhetorical power of

⁷⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 103–4.

⁷⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 90.

Aztlán,” as the unifying myth to that of the concept of the “borderlands.”⁷⁶ This conceptual “border” retains the trauma of the rupture separating people and highlights the remaining scars of their separation and attempted reunification. The very title of Anzaldúa’s “*Cihuatlyotl, Woman Alone*” dramatizes this dynamic. A variant spelling of “Cihuateotl,” the title refers to the group of Aztec women who died during childbirth. Because the Aztecs “likened childbirth to obtaining a captive in war,”⁷⁷ these women were considered warriors whose spirits joined those of other fallen soldiers who accompanied the sun on its path across the sky. The singularity of the titular “woman alone” offers a contrast to this female collective, a conflict between an individual and a group—between the “*Cihuatlyotl*” and the “*Woman Alone*”— that in the poem becomes a “lifelong battle” between the speaking “I” and the addressed “you” of “*la Raza*”: (“Many years I have fought off your hands, Raza”). This conflict between the speaker and addressed Raza continues throughout the poem until the speaker declares “I remain who I am, multiple / and one,” refusing to coalesce into a reductive “we” while nevertheless acknowledging the multiplicity that comprises her speaking “I.” This is not a resolved synthesis but a remaining uncomfortable contradiction: she is “of the herd, yet not of it”; she is simultaneously “carved / by the hands of the ancients” but also self-formed: “But my own / hands whittle the final work me.” She is part of the Aztec Cihuatlyotl (a part of the ancients) yet simultaneously a “woman alone” (her own self-creation), a contradiction readers could understand (New Critically) as held in stasis by the title’s comma; more accurate to Anzaldúa’s project, however, this comma should be understood as the “open wound” that is for her the “border” itself.

⁷⁶ José F. Aranda, *When We Arrive: A New Literary History of Mexican America* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2003), 33.

⁷⁷ Mary Ellen Miller and Karl A. Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997).

“I am not / the indian she is”

One of the main difference between Anzaldúa’s communal art and Chicano literature, then, is a heightened sense of self-interrogation that does not take for granted its representative status but instead questions the grounds of representation. This critical self-awareness also characterizes the efforts of the other co-editor of *This Bridge Called My Back*. In essays including “La Güera” (a title that can be translated to “The White Girl” or “The Blonde” or “The Light-Skinned Girl”), Cherríe Moraga describes being the daughter of a white man and a Mexican mother, the privileges that her light skin had afforded her, and the detachment she came to feel towards what she describes as a Chicano community. In her introduction to *Loving in the War Years* (1983), she relates how her college experience made her feel as if she “grew white” because it “separated me from them [her family], [it] forced me to leave home. This is what has made me the outsider so many Chicanos, very near to me in circumstance, fear.”⁷⁸ This perceived separation signals a potential crisis of representation for someone considered to be, as she puts it, “a movement writer.” She describes how “Sometimes I feel my back will break from the pressure I feel to speak for others”⁷⁹ because she worries that her voice might prove to be too “specific” and “private” to be considered “representative.” She imagines the community responding negatively to her work (“You don’t speak for me! For the community!”) and even seems to reject the mantle of movement representative when deciding not to “let *anybody’s* movement determine for [her] what is safe and fair to say.”⁸⁰

The poem “Entre nos,” spatially highlights this separation between poet and represented subject:

I am not

⁷⁸ Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), ix.

⁷⁹ Moraga, *Loving*, v.

⁸⁰ Moraga, *Loving*, vi.

the indian she is
but am witness to the story
of the dirt
and the trees and the land before the road they built
through the mountain.⁸¹

The contrast between *I Am Joaquín*'s pronouncement "I am the mountain Indian / superior over all" and that of this poem's dialectical identity statements ("I am not / the indian she is") should be obvious. Yet the adversative conjunction "but" qualifies this difference between speaker and subject. "I" may not be "she" yet the intrusive "they" creates a "we," and it is this "we" (the *nosotros* of "*nos*") to which the titular idiom "entre nos" alludes. The poetic voice does not ventriloquize what the indian woman might say, but the speaker can, as a "witness," *testify* on her behalf. The poem economically performs such an act of testimony, alluding to the degree of intrusive violence disrupting an indigenous way of life tied to a land now infiltrated by colonial expansion and trade. The poem thus simultaneously acknowledges their difference but also establishes a sense of their solidarity. So although the difference Moraga feels from "so many Chicanos" after she attends college is intensified when the other in question is an "Indian," the poem establishes a figurative, intimate space "entre nos" ("*between* you and me"). The phrase "between you and me" marks a space reserved for gossip and secrets, where prejudices and fears can be shared.

Yet as a *lyric*, the speaker admits her difference from "the indian" not to *her* but to the implied audience that is a built-in function of the genre. The "entre nos" in question must also be understood as not only referring to the sought after familiarity between speaker and the woman but also the intimacy created between speaker and *reader*. Only those readers who will recognize "entre nos" as a familiar idiom will feel and thus actualize the poem's intended inducement of intimacy. This established relation between poetic speaker and reader ends up being primary not

⁸¹ Moraga, *Loving*, 151.

in spite of the difference between speaker and Indian but because of it. Which is to say that the poem anticipates but does not resolve the problem that Gayatri Spivak first introduced in 1984 in the essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in which Spivak argued that academics’ efforts to provide a voice to the marginalized compounds the very silence they seek to remedy.⁸² Moraga in effect brackets this problem when agonizing about the relation between herself and audience. She worries that she “speak[s] in a language that maybe no ‘readership’ can follow,” which is why she decides to include essays with her poems because the genre’s analytical language helps “translate” the private experience conveyed in her poetry.⁸³ Like Anzaldúa, however, Moraga expresses misgivings about the analytical language found in essays, language she associates with her white father, because such is what she had honed while in college:

in my development as a poet, I have, in many ways, denied the voice of my own brown mother, the brown in me. I have acclimated to the sound of a white language which, as my father represents it, does not speak to the emotions in my poems, emotions which stem from the love of my mother... I had disowned the language I knew best.⁸⁴

What remains *untranslated* in her poetry—what Moraga partly characterizes as the “brown” “in” her— becomes the very grounds for the establishment of a public. So what at first appeared to Moraga as a problem—the specificity of her poetic voice that might not speak of any experience but her own—becomes the very solution to the creation of something like a “community.”

As Moraga’s friend advises, “The only way to write for la comunidad is to write so completely from your heart what is your own personal truth.”⁸⁵ And as the use of Spanish here indicates, the community—*la comunidad*— in question is linguistically circumscribed. The purest articulation of this sentiment of a “personal truth” expressed poetically— of the

⁸² Gayatri Spivak first delivered the essay at the 1983 conference “Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.” The essay has been reprinted in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), 271.

⁸³ Moraga, *Loving*, xii–xiii.

⁸⁴ Moraga, *Loving*, 47.

⁸⁵ Moraga, *Loving*, vi.

testimonial power of the poetry that arises in response to trauma— remains Paul Celan’s, who on being asked what it is like to write in a different language after WWII stated, “Only in the mother tongue can one speak one’s own truth. In a foreign tongue the poet lies.”⁸⁶ The “truth” that Celan refers to here, as Mutlu Konuk Blasing rightly argues, cannot be “the propositional or factual truth content of what one says, which one can say in any language.” The “truth” spoken in one’s mother tongue is, as Blasing puts it “who one *is*” (original emphasis).⁸⁷ Anybody can learn a new language and use it to communicate, yet one cannot reproduce the introduction *into* language that an infant undergoes when learning his or her mother tongue. Celan’s “own truth,” like Moraga’s “personal truth,” is not one that can be “translated”; it need be experienced in its mother tongue and recognized as such.

So when in the essay “La Güerra,” Moraga exhorts women of color to abandon the “dogma” that ossified within the discourse of women’s liberation and to abandon the “rhetoric” that the women’s movement had let “do the job of poetry,” she is asking women to instead make use of a language that resists the reductive translation and simplification of their selves. As Michael Warner describes, the overvaluation of “rational-critical dialogue” that is “propositionally summarizable,” of “discursive claims—of the kind that can be said to be oriented to understanding,” tends to occlude the “performative dimension of public discourse” involved in the formation of publics.⁸⁸ In language matching Moraga’s, Warner contends that when “persuasion rather than poesis” is privileged, the principles of an abstract “rationality” tend to occlude the thoroughly embodied and historically-situated particularity of people. What is left behind by propositional argumentation is something like Moraga’s figurative “brownness.”

⁸⁶ Quoted in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 26.

⁸⁷ Mutlu Konuk Blasing, *Lyric Poetry the Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁸⁸ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 114.

Moraga, then, anticipates the formation of a public via the use of language that is imagined to transcend representation by functioning indexically. She imagines the poetic use of language that does not speak as another woman but instead figuratively presents a piece of that woman's body so that she could be herself ("the head of my mother"). She imagines the use of language that does not offer propositional statements so much as offer traces of the speaker's identity (the brownness that speaks for *la comunidad*). The problem of representation is partly neutralized because the speaker's words not only mean (referentially), they *are* (functioning indexically), and what the words capture *is* Moraga, who herself is part of the community she invokes. Moraga may have worried about "speaking for" a community that "don't/won't/ can't read" her writing,⁸⁹ but insofar as poet and community share a sense of an identity, one expressed through a shared language externalized in poetic form, her utterances can be experienced as the community's, a community that her poems themselves enable.

"The Indian in me"

Just as poetry offered Anzaldúa and Moraga a way of circumventing representational problems, Ana Castillo also turns to what she calls poetry's "freedom." She describes how in 1979 she was a graduate student at the University of Chicago working on a thesis titled "The Idealization and Reality of the Mexican Indian Woman." Because "the Mexic Amerindian woman had been gagged for hundreds of years," Castillo's research efforts were frustrated by the paucity of material. "In neither the creative literature nor the ethnographic documentation," writes Castillo, "did I hear her speak for herself." Castillo thus turns away from academic research and writes what she calls an "autobiographical poem" in which she "liken[s]" her own struggles in academia to those of the Indigenous woman whose voice she was trying to unearth:

⁸⁹ Moraga, *Loving*, xiii.

The Indian woman carries her flag
over her face
blood stained
her scars run
like old roads through her land
and the Indian woman does not complain⁹⁰

Like Moraga's "Entre nos," Castillo's poem also references an unspeaking "Indian woman," her land, and the roads that traverse it. This poem is more indigenous to itself than Moraga's, however, because its mentioned roads are not imposed from without. They, like the woman, are native to the land. However much Castillo wants to hear the her voice, the poem does not ventriloquize what the woman might say, the way she had spoken for the grape pickers in the poem "Napa, Valley."

When in the 1990s she recalls writing this poem, however, she comes to realize and declare:

I was unable to unearth the female indigenous consciousness in graduate school that I am certain is a part of my genetic collective memory and my life experience. Nevertheless I stand firm that I *am* that Mexic Amerindian woman's consciousness in the poem cited above and that I must, with others like myself, utter the thoughts and intuitions that dwell in the recesses of primal collective memory.⁹¹

"Collective memory" unites their voices in effect by absorbing Castillo into the poem's thematized indigeneity. Just like the woman and the "old roads" are indigenous to the land, the very perspective describing the woman becomes inherent to that woman's point of view by being imagined as emerging from her own consciousness (which is how Castillo considers the poem "autobiographical"). And just as Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* contrasts the self-appointed Chicano spokesmen's misrepresentation of a community to the women's declaration of their

⁹⁰ Castillo, *Massacre*, 8.

⁹¹ Castillo, *Massacre*, 17, emphasis in original.

identity (“*Somos Chicanas*”), in this poem she imagines the conditions in which she does not try to represent what the Indian woman might say so much as provide her a conduit through which that woman can speak for herself. She does *that* by converting the question/problem of representation (how A can claim to represent B) into the assertion of an identity (A *is* B). Which is also to say that like Anzaldúa and Moraga, Castillo invokes a version of an understanding of language functioning indexically instead of simply representationally.

Although poetry can index something like “brownness” and be the conduit for collective memory, when Castillo turns to write her first novel—*The Mixquiahala Letters*—she depicts a scene of representation that poetry is initially unable to address. Castillo’s poet protagonist Teresa makes a return trip to Mexico, a trip she calls “Mexico revisited” because she had studied there for a summer and met her friend Alicia. As she puts it, “the Indian in me” sought “a place to satisfy my yearning spirit... a home.” The excursion to Mexico is motivated by her desire for a spiritual homecoming, which leads her to “seek the past by visiting the wealth of ancient ruins that recorded awesome, yet baffling civilization.”⁹² But once Teresa arrives at the ruins of Monte Albán, the “awesomeness” of the ruins’ matches their overwhelming effect on her. She cannot “respond as immediately with a poem” as she would like, thus turning to the “snapping of pictures.”⁹³ Instead of functioning as a symbolic home for Teresa’s Indian spirit, the ruins instead present her with a question of representation: *how* could Teresa possibly delineate the ruins and their effect on her? Photography’s immediacy proves useful to the Wordsworth-like poet who prefers to take some time to process the intensity of the experience because the medium can bracket the question of representation she faces. Insofar as snapshots present her visual perspective of the ruins without rendering her thoughts about them, the photographs do not *mean*

⁹² Castillo, *Mixquiahala*, 52.

⁹³ Castillo, *Mixquiahala*, 62.

the ruins so much as are records of their presence. Stated slightly differently, the photographs share an indexical relation to the ruins that looks more like a relation of identity than one of representation.

To put the point this way is to already see how this relation of (near) identity can temporarily foreclose the question of representation, but it is also to recognize how this question remains ultimately unaddressed. The snapshot risks functioning merely as a kind of souvenir but not as an expression, a formal externalization of the effect the ruins have on Teresa's sense of self. This search for a "home" for her inner "Indian," after all, is why she is there. When her travelling companion Alicia, a painter, returns to New York after their trip, she "arrived with souvenirs and sketches" that she will then "piece together,"⁹⁴ insofar as Alicia's own motivation for making the trip was the search for "new dimensions" of her "creativity,"⁹⁵ what "piecing together" the trip will mean for her is using the gathered material as inspiration for her paintings. Years after their trip, however, Alicia confesses "never having been able to pull apart its entanglement in [her] memory," suggesting the extent of the trip's influence but also her inability to externalize this influence by expressing it in her painting. "You sensed, in the end," Teresa writes to Alicia, "it all had to have meant something, that, if we were able to analyze, it would be pertinent, not just to benefit our lives, but womanhood." If their experience might count as somehow *representatively* "pertinent" to "womanhood," their recollections must be loosened from their entanglement in memory (i.e. "analyzed") and formally rendered. Which is why Teresa confesses that she had herself finally begun the process of retrospective analysis: she had started to "open the sealed passages to those months" and "writ[e] about it." And when she refers to the trip by the name she gave it, she now does so more formally—"Mexico Revisited"—

⁹⁴ Castillo, *Mixquiahala*, 48.

⁹⁵ Castillo, *Mixquiahala*, 52–53.

italicizing and capitalizing it as if it were the title of a book instead of a name for a set of memories.⁹⁶

The conceit of *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, then, could be understood as its character's retrospective attempt to come formally to terms with the "meaning" of her experience, "piecing together" the memories into letters and poems. But while the novel's letters represent Teresa's "analysis," the most significant fact about the novel's epistolary form is its refusal to order the letters into a sequence, thus refusing to dictate just what that meaning will be. In an introductory note to the novel, Castillo encourages readers to determine the letters' order and hence the novel's overall significance.⁹⁷ *The Mixquiahuala Letters* thus takes the neutralization of the problem of representation offered by snapshots and uses it to inform the structure of its own epistolary form, the letters functioning as linguistic snapshots. Like snapshots—which cannot be ontologically perspectival—the letters *only* provide Teresa's perspective (readers are never privy to Alicia's responses). Like snapshots, too, the letters could be perceived as not in themselves meaning anything, their ultimate significance becoming a product of the reader's preference. Teresa does not claim to be "representing," whether it be the ruins or a community. The novel does not speak for women, nor does it represent "womanhood" (or "Mexicans").⁹⁸ Nor is the novel at all committed to historical representation, documenting, say, "Chicano history."

The novel instead simply depicts personal expression—one woman's thoughts to another

⁹⁶ Castillo, *Mixquiahuala*, 53.

⁹⁷ The novel forcefully differs from a text like Erna Fergusson's travel narrative *Mexico Revisited* (1955), a title which Castillo's novel indirectly but repeatedly adduces. In her preface, Fergusson describes how "the most interesting Mexicans are those who are going ahead" which is why her section on Mexico City concludes the book: "They change most rapidly in Mexico City, which in a way sums up the country, and which I have therefore left for last in this book." Fergusson's travel narrative assumes an evaluative teleology narrated from the perspective of one who knows and can describe something like a "Mexican" character. Erna Fergusson, *Mexico Revisited* (New York: Knopf, 1955).

⁹⁸ See Alvina E. Quintana's "Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters*: The Novelist as Ethnographer" for an account of how Castillo's "postmodern pastiche" functions as a "meta ethnography" that satirizes ethnography by using its formal gestures to expose its limitations. Printed in *Criticism in the Borderlands. Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture and Ideology*, ed. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

woman, about themselves— a perspective that nevertheless might in the end be “pertinent” not only to themselves but also to “womanhood” as such. The novel’s readership is ultimately included into the novel’s significance by becoming what determines that pertinence and significance, which is how its readers are brought into the novel without having been represented within it.

As we have already begun to see, part of the reason why such a negative form of representation is perceived as necessary originates in the reaction against the gendered forms of institutional and methodological exclusion experienced by Castillo. Although she received a Master’s degree from the University of Chicago in 1979, and later a Ph.D. from the University of Bremen, Germany (because she “was not given the same invitation to submit such work for scholarly review by any university in the United States,” these experiences led her to recognize the long history of the misrepresentation of women.⁹⁹ She describes how the research she conducted for her M.A. thesis recovered only “stereotypes”: “At best I found ethnographic data that ultimately did not bring me closer to understanding how the Mexic Amerindian woman truly perceives herself since anthropology is traditionally based on the objectification of its subjects”¹⁰⁰ (7). The charges here stem from different though related fronts: women are excluded from institutions as students and faculty, while their voices are omitted from the university’s disciplines as studied, speaking subjects. When the history of women *is* studied, its complexity and specificity tends to be reduced to stereotypes; and when women are included into institutions as researchers, they must subject themselves to the available, limiting disciplinary boundaries, what Emma Pérez would in the 1990s describe as the “systems of thought which have patterned

⁹⁹ Castillo, *Massacre*, ix.

¹⁰⁰ Castillo, *Massacre*, 7.

our social and political institutions, our universities, our archives, and our homes.”¹⁰¹ Describing her own experiences in graduate school, Pérez relates how “A historian must remain within the boundaries, the border, the confines of the debate as it has been conceptualized if she/he is to be a legitimate heir to the field.” Such boundaries distortedly “frame Chicana stories”¹⁰² and “predispose us to a predictable beginning, middle and end to untold stories.”¹⁰³ This methodological reduction reproduces the distortive containment that has haunted the history of women, simplifying their otherwise intricate stories into recognizable narrative arcs.

From this perspective, the very form of *The Mixquiahuala Letters* can be seen as a response to the problem. By not privileging a single narrative with a “predictable beginning, middle, and end,” the novel offers an implicit critique of such framing constraints by exposing them as reductive limits. The novel’s opening note to the reader offers three distinct sequences for encountering the book’s letters, each of which orders the narrative towards a “conformist” “cynical” or “quixotic” reading. A fourth option, “for the reader committed to nothing but short fiction,” offers the group of letters as “separate entities.” This introductory note pays tribute to Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1963), which itself opens with a “Table of Instructions” offering two different sequences for reading the chapters. The novel, writes Cortázar, “consists of many books, but two books above all.”¹⁰⁴ Castillo builds on Cortázar’s formal experimentation by highlighting the salience of the reader’s perspective, implicitly echoing the insight of Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973). For White, the writing of history tends to assume generic forms of “emplotment” (romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire) that provide a structure and narrative arc

¹⁰¹ Pérez, *Decolonial*, xiv.

¹⁰² Pérez, *Decolonial*, xiii.

¹⁰³ Pérez, *Decolonial*, xiv.

¹⁰⁴ Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), n.p.

to unconnected events. For Castillo's novel, the reader's preference dictates the narrative form that organizes what could otherwise remain "separate entities," which is to say non-teleological episodes unstructured by emplotment.

So although *The Mixquiahuala Letters* is not a historical novel, its form bares the constructed nature of "history," offering an implicit critique of positivist epistemology.¹⁰⁵ Its formal innovation converts an epistemological problem (how one can know and represent something) into a practical one (how one can employ the conventions of genre to exploit its mediating limits), a neutralization that captures the postmodern insights described by Jean François Lyotard. In Lyotard's account of postmodernism—which became available to an English audience with the translation of *La condition postmoderne* in 1984—the gradual dissolution of the "grand narrative" meant that the belief in empirical, scientific progress could no longer be overtly declared without betraying a degree of naiveté. Lyotard's argument had obvious implications on the field of history, with its own roots in nineteenth century empiricism captured in Leopold von Ranke's exhortation to historians to "show what actually happened." Postmodern historiography renders such a goal impossible insofar as "what really happened" is understood as irretrievable as such, while the very act of "showing" cannot help but betray its mediating perspective. "There is no pure, authentic, original history," is how Pérez makes this point, "There are only stories—many stories."¹⁰⁶ Insofar as the stories that circulate about women (when they circulate at all) tend to reduce them to flat, static stereotypes, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* instead offers "only stories—many stories" about two women as framed by Teresa's memory and narration, which the novel's form exposes *as* a mediating perspective that

¹⁰⁵ *The Mixquiahuala Letters* could be understood as what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction" in this respect. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 87-101.

¹⁰⁶ Pérez, *Decolonial*, xv.

it will not privilege as *the* decisive narrative of the novel (i.e. what “really happened” between Teresa and Alicia).

When encumbered by the limitations of academic research, Castillo turns to the “freedom” of poetry, which allows her to realize her “communal memory.” Yet when Castillo turns to the epistolary genre, she presents to her poet protagonist a scene of representation that poetry is initially unable to address but that photography can. It is as if the scene thematizes Castillo’s transition away from poetry to the epistolary genre, which does not exhaust the poetic form so much as absorb it, using its conventions alongside those of the epistolary and structured by what I called the logic of the snapshot. This logic presents a perspective without insisting on a meaning, and the non-prescription of the approach enables a reader-determined experience wherein her preference becomes “pertinent” to the work without having been represented within it.

“pyramids and such”

Castillo’s formal innovation instigates that experience but does not fully determine it, and this open-endedness ultimately insists on the primacy of the reader’s experience instead of the form. The first novel by the poet Alma Luz Villanueva, *The Ultraviolet Sky* (1988), will also insist on the primacy of experience and follows the insistence to the logical conclusion of eschewing form as such. The novel highlights the insufficiency (indeed, even danger) of form, depicting the necessity of aesthetic experience that goes beyond what form (while helpful) can enable. So whereas in *The Mixquiahuala Letters* photography’s perspectivalness served as the temporary, strategic solution to the problem of representing Mexican ruins and their relation to Teresa’s sense of self, Villanueva’s novel imagines a problem that photography itself cannot

address. Julio, a photographer whose work includes beautifully rendered “large black and white photographs of the Mexican pyramids,”¹⁰⁷ has an ambition to take a self-portrait, yet the “photograph he longed for” was one of “his face” as he waited for the Viet Cong during combat. Not only does he want to be in the state of absolute absorption involved when confronted with a life-threatening situation, *he* wants to be the one to take the picture. The photographs others took of him in Vietnam “made him look like a caricature of a soldier,” the difference between being a soldier engaged in battle and simply looking the part appearing absolute.¹⁰⁸ Yet being completely absorbed and watching oneself be so absorbed are actions that are, as Todd Cronan has helpfully put it, “ontologically” distinct. Referring to the two different German definitions of “representation” (*Vorstellung* and *Darstellung*), Cronan explains “One cannot both fully act and watch oneself at the same time.”¹⁰⁹ The state of absorption would be broken by the act of taking a picture. “The problem,” as the novel puts it, “was he could only see it from one angle and there were many.”¹¹⁰

So while photography’s perspectivalness captures the Mexican pyramids, it cannot capture *Julio*. The novel’s diagnosis of this representational problem—“he could only see it from one angle and there were many”—aptly describes the specificity of the photographic medium but

¹⁰⁷ Alma Luz Villanueva, *The Ultraviolet Sky* (Tempe: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1988), 50.

¹⁰⁸ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 8.

¹¹⁰ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 37. The more recent work by the German photographer Barbara Probst helps dramatize this point. Probst sets up multiple cameras, the shutters of which she simultaneously triggers using a wireless control. The resulting images capture a single moment from various perspectives. Because Probst uses a wireless shutter release, she often includes herself in the captured moment. This approach allows her to find one solution to the “problem” of being able to “only see it from one angle and there were many” (37). Probst’s technique brilliantly complicates the often unexamined assumption that “the camera doesn’t lie.” The slightest shifts in perspective often dramatically alter the captured moment, changing the scene’s connotations, radically transforming the look of an object or a person. What this approach does not capture, however, is the absolute state of absorption Julio would like to see in a self-portrait. As many commentators tend to point out, Probst’s photographs draw attention to photography itself, offering an often playful, performative commentary on the photographic process. A useful point of comparison to Probst’s photography would be Michael Fried’s characteristic insightful readings of the “to-be-seenness” of photographs by artists including Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

also Julio's stubborn inability to see the world from a perspective not his own. He remains mentally entrenched, stuck as it were in the psychic trenches continually tormented by "helicopters, automatic rifles, screams, night patrols. Human violence at its most unguarded. War."¹¹¹ Which is why when he teaches a Beginning Photography class his advice to students sounds like he was "giving a war cry in the genteel, silent classroom." "I want to see a picture of all of you, every one of you, waiting for your mother-fucking enemy," he imagines telling his students, "Shoot it, you stupid bastards before it escapes—before it gets you."¹¹² The act of representation becomes an act of aggression when shooting a camera sounds too much like firing a weapon. Stated differently, when the desired "shot" one wants to take is *of* oneself and *at* the enemy, "before it escapes—before it gets you," art becomes war and one's self becomes the enemy.

When his wife Rosa looks at her reflection in the mirror, however, she "fe[els] herself looking back at herself like an old friend, a patient friend, who asked no questions but answered all of hers."¹¹³ To see oneself not as enemy but as friend requires (to put it simply) a "shift" in "perspective." The novel marks this perspectival difference between Rosa and Julio as crucial because it connects the difference between their artistic ambition to an insidious will to power. Reminiscent of the *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, the painter-protagonist Rosa and her best friend, a poet named Sierra, also take a brief trip during which they discuss their work. Rosa, whose paintings include a series involving an "Indian woman" kneeling on an enlarged map of Mexico,¹¹⁴ describes her ongoing struggle with a painting of a lilac sky. "It's the elusiveness of

¹¹¹ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 11.

¹¹² Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 36.

¹¹³ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 275.

¹¹⁴ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 305.

that color that's so distracting," she tells Sierra, "I mean. the sky *is* always changing."¹¹⁵ Later in the trip, when Sierra suggests to Rosa that she try writing poetry, the painter replies, "No, not me. I freeze up when I know my words will be formal or permanent. Color gives me room to breathe, imagery can mean something else."¹¹⁶ So although the "elusiveness of color" constitutes part of the representational problem she must overcome to complete her painting of the lilac sky, it is precisely this elusiveness that makes painting an attractive medium for her art. Because "color" is less "formal" and "permanent" than language, she suggests, it can be more ambiguous because its connotations can shift. Yet at the novel's conclusion, after having read one of Sierra's poems titled "The Sky," Rosa is struck by the poem's colorful imagery, particularly the words "the ultra violet shadow." The poem helps Rosa realize that the painting she wants to complete is ultimately impossible to render because she wants to capture—formally represent—a shade of lilac that is ultraviolet, therefore unrepresentable by color. Painting might be less "formal" and static than language, yet it is ultimately *too* formal to capture a shifting sky the color of which cannot be seen.

The impossibility of Julio's photographic self-portrait and of Rosa's painting of an ultraviolet sky are thematically connected to the conflict driving the novel's plot, which centers partly on their marital strife. A result of his overt masculism, Julio expresses this tension in bouts of jealousy and aggression that clash with Rosa's desire for respect and the autonomy necessary to create her paintings. "It was a love story of their time," is how the novel describes it, by which it means that their tension is symptomatic of a global conflict between destructive forces. Just as "The major powers could exterminate an entire planet with ease, [so too] Rosa could've speared

¹¹⁵ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 88.

¹¹⁶ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 90.

Julio belly up.”¹¹⁷ The novel’s central recurring question— “How will *we* survive?”¹¹⁸—is simultaneously global and personal: how can a world subsist when its inhabitants continually threaten to destroy it and each other? How can a woman and man coexist if one of the ultimate expressions of intimacy becomes a battle in which Rosa wants to “devour” him and Julio wants to “watch her convulse with an orgasm?”¹¹⁹ The novel suggests that the answers to these questions, whatever they may be, must strive for a “balance” between the forces of creation and destruction, love and hate, continually referring to a requisite sense of “harmony” and “wholeness.” But while the ambition to achieve these qualities and states is more easily attainable in art than in the world—especially a world continually threatened by “nuclear holocaust”¹²⁰—the novel complicates such an artistic, formal “solution.” It depicts Julio’s desire for an impossible photograph as a localized expression of a global violence that also expresses itself as the attempted policing of Rosa’s life. Like Anzaldúa’s critique of the desire for artistic “mastery” found in “Western art,” which seeks to be “whole and and always ‘in power,’” Rosa instead recognizes the limitations of her artistic practice. She epiphanically realizes that she cannot “see” ultraviolet light, “only witness what it does”; she cannot represent ultraviolet light, only experience its effects. In the face of the unrepresentable, one could, like Julio, remain trapped by one’s perspective, or one could, like Rosa, see things differently: she abandons an ambition that is ultimately futile but sees within this failure a triumph of her consciousness.

The point is not to obtain the formal mastery unobtainable in the world—art’s unity separated from the world’s incoherence. Rather, art can be an experience enabling an extension of the non-alienated self into the world, achieving a balance and totality *with* the world, what

¹¹⁷ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 17.

¹¹⁸ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 17, emphasis in original.

¹¹⁹ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 38.

¹²⁰ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 58.

Rosa calls “The whole damn thing.”¹²¹ Whereas the passionate yet aggressive sex with Julio leaves Rosa feeling as if “She didn’t belong to herself,”¹²² when she touches herself by the seashore she “blend[s] her body with the sea until the union was complete.” Just as art can be war when the self is an enemy, and the will to formal mastery can be homologous to the will to domination, sex can be war when the self is threatened by a desire that compromises one’s self-possession. Masturbation becomes a way for Rosa to affirm herself and fusing this self with the world via a “complete orgasm.”¹²³ Aesthetic experiences, like masturbation, can likewise be seen as a solution to a world stricken by war when understood not in terms of a formal will to mastery, but as an experience fusing the self and world. Which is why Rosa compares a flamenco dancer’s orgasmic performance to self-birth and uses it as a model for her own ambition: “Tonight [the dancer] gave birth to herself, hands raised toward an unseen sky. Yes, Rosa thought, that’s what I must do.”¹²⁴ As the dancer ecstatically embodies the dance, her snapping fingers produce “a naked sound compared to the castanets.” Just as castanets are extraneous to the body’s “naked” sounds, words, because they are parts of a conventional system of representation, are not Rosa’s in the way the sound of her own voice, because originating within her, *is* her. Self and art fuse in a conception of art as self-initiated, self-birthing, which the novel’s final lines reproduce: “she begins to sing, but words feel clumsy to her [...] A single sound, a single note, comes out of her mouth, and she repeats it in varying tones until it lets her go. It is longing. It is praise. It is hers.”¹²⁵ This emanation of herself as voice— that ultimately “lets her go” yet remains “hers”— is a kind of bearing of the self wherein the newborn self is simultaneously autonomous from and non-alienated to the self that births.

¹²¹ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 67.

¹²² Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 53.

¹²³ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 41.

¹²⁴ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 28.

¹²⁵ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 379.

The concluding scene thus ultimately reproduces and reaffirms Villanueva's poetic ambition evident throughout her writing. The poems collected in *Life Span* (1985)¹²⁶ dramatize the novel's concluding desire to go beyond representation by thematizing its "wish" for "a life to / be [...] pregnant with words," as the poem "Communion" puts it. The photograph on the cover of *Life Span* (Figure 2) echoes *The Ultraviolet Sky's* depiction of Rosa "blending her body with the sea until the union was complete" (Sky 41). The tattoo in the image, like Rosa's rose tattoo on her shoulder, evokes the novel's description of Rosa's body as a "living canvas—color and form merged harmoniously" (Sky 103). This harmonious merging is thematically invoked in poems including "The Labor of Buscando La Forma" ("The Labor of Looking For Form"), a title that indicates the wish for the writing of poetry to be the bearing of life. The poems of the collection figuratively become *bodies* with the titular "Life Span." Just as the Catholic understanding of the sacramental Communion does not see the wafer as representing the body of Jesus—the "wafer / of living flesh" mentioned in "Communion" *is* his body—the poems imagine linguistic representation to function as transubstantiation. Which is why Elizabeth J. Ordóñez describes how Villanueva "synthesizes sexuality (or the female body), spirituality, and the poetic text."¹²⁷ So although the communication of "life's experiences... requires language as a mediating vehicle," for Ordóñez, Villanueva's writing refashions "mediation" into something like emanation: "form never becomes intrusive" because "Woman and word... become one."¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Alma Luz Villanueva, *Life Span* (Austin: Place of Herons, 1985).

¹²⁷ Elizabeth J. Ordóñez, "Body, Spirit, and the Text: Alma Villanueva's *Life Span*," *Criticism in the Borderlands. Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture and Ideology*. Edited by Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), 61.

¹²⁸ Ordóñez, "Preface," *Life Span* (Austin: Place of Herons, 1985), v.



Figure 2: Front cover of Alma Luz Villarreal's *Life Span*. Austin: Place of Herons, 1985.

“trying to be Native People”

Early in the *The Ultraviolet Sky* Rosa meets a German named Rolf to whom she is mysteriously attracted. Rosa wonders, “Why does Germany, Hitler, blondeness, this opposite of myself named Rolf appear right now?” (35). The answer, she realizes, is that a German is not the “opposite” of herself (her potential enemy) but a part of her; she comes to discover that her

estranged father was German, too. More importantly, however, she also realizes that the Holocaust represents America's original sins writ large: the attempted extermination and absolute subjugation of a people. Readers can thus rearticulate Rosa's question as "What does Hitler and the Holocaust have to do with America? Rosa's answer, referring to Germany's relation to the Holocaust, is this: "[W]e're all in that position, globally. To not accept our common reality... is to deny our awareness, our part in it, as a part of it. The whole damn thing"¹²⁹ To see oneself not as an enemy but as a friend requires the same capacity to see the German not as the enemy but as part of ourselves. Which is why when Rolf writes to Rosa about the "anti-nuclear demonstrations in Berlin" called the "Back to Nature Movement" consisting of German artists "dressed up like Indians," she smiles at their silliness but also recognizes their efforts to live a more harmonious life with the planet: "they were trying, weren't they? she thought. They were trying to be Native People. Native People of the Earth."¹³⁰ So while indigeneity is a product of her ancestry (her grandmother was a Yaqui Indian), it can also be a subject position, available to be inhabited. Insofar as the fundamental problems plaguing contemporary societies throughout the world are characterizable as crimes against identity and crimes against the planet, the protection (via enactment) of an endangered identity that sought to be one with the land can be a solution.

The figure of "the Indian"—specifically the "Indian woman"—continually recurs throughout the examples I provide above not only because it offers a sense of rootedness. The "Indian woman" becomes a figure that feminist writers must rescue from obscurity and misrepresentation, which is how the community these writers saw themselves as representing

¹²⁹ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 67.

¹³⁰ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 266.

came to include women from the past whose voices had been suppressed.¹³¹ The various forms of personification at work in the examples I have adduced are imagined to function as the tropes enabling a thematic circumvention of representation that can be also be seen as enabling the recovery and revivification of those in the past who were unjustly silenced. Anzaldúa's "organic writing" "contains the presences of persons, that is incarnations of gods or ancestors"; Castillo's "primal collective memory" allows her voice to be the voice of the past. These tropes are not used naively, of course, but are understood as enabling devices that are necessary to combat oppressive ideologies already in circulation. The speaker of Moraga's poem "Winter of Oppression, 1982" describes how "simple" it would be "to fall back / upon rehearsed racial memory"¹³² when she tries to answer the question of "whose death" should remain the most salient in our collective consciousness (potential candidates of these deaths include the victims of the Jewish Holocaust and the black victims of lynching). The speaker acknowledges how her particular genealogy could offer an answer to the question, yet her qualification of "racial memory" as "rehearsed" suggests that one's "history" is not innate, genetically inscribed in blood, but rather taught and circulated, repeated and learned. As such, one's "racial memory" can begin to include the history of other victims of injustice, even those outside one's racial genealogy. Her poem attempts to forge solidarity among the other descendents of racially-motivated tragedies, which during the "Winter of Oppression" of 1982 was necessary to a women's movement not coming to terms with racial and ethnic diversity. The figure of "the Indian Woman" throughout the texts I adduce functions as a stand in for victims of genocide as

¹³¹ Just as the Chicano intervention sought to counteract the facile characterization of Mexican Americans as politically apathetic and passive, feminist writers countered the characterization of what the Mexican poet Octavio Paz described as the inherent passivity of "the female." "The female is pure passivity, defenseless," writes Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, while the "Indian woman" known as "La Malinche" represents for him the ultimate figure of passive victimization. Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto De La Soledad*. Mexico, D. F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica Mex, 1994.

¹³² Moraga, *Loving*, 75.

such because, as *The Ultraviolet Sky*'s Rosa puts it, she is "closer to their racial memories" than are the victims of the Holocaust.¹³³ But as both Villanueva's *The Ultraviolet Sky* and Moraga's "Winter of Oppression" suggest, the point is not to mourn only one's ancestors but to reject the continuity of crimes against identity as such.

Mexican American feminist writing of the 1980s participates in what Amy Hungerford has described as a "tendency" in the literature, literary theory and criticism of the post WWII era "to imagine the literary text as if it bore significant characteristics of persons."¹³⁴ Hungerford connects the prominence of personification of literary works to the salience of the Holocaust and to the reconceptualization of "genocide" it prompted. Genocide came to include not only life-threatening acts targeted towards members of an identity, but also acts of "vandalism" defined as the "malicious destruction of words of art and culture." When weapons of mass destruction made the reality of genocide all too real, the culture of the persecuted could be seen as equally threatened. One could begin to tally the cost of what would be lost if a people disappeared, an estimation that links "a people" with "their culture." Such an implied conflation of works of art and a people is matched by a prevalence of literary personification which itself asserts the absolute importance of texts by conferring to them the status of personhood. According to Hungerford, "Advocates of multiculturalism in the 1980s take this logic a step further. Recognizing first that Western traditions of valuing the person do not value all persons equally, multiculturalism suggests a way to compensate for this by building up the cultural and political value of particular kinds of persons."¹³⁵ If texts embody a culture, and culture entails an identity, the failure to include some texts in syllabi amounts to a form of silencing. And insofar as

¹³³ Villanueva, *Ultraviolet*, 17.

¹³⁴ Amy Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, Personification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4

¹³⁵ Hungerford, *Holocaust*, 11.

“silence equals death” to quote the AIDS activists of the 1980s, this silencing amounts to a kind of cultural genocide, the texts’ lack of circulation amounting to their murder. Whereas conquest and genocide threaten to eradicate a people, and academic discourse can continue to maintain their silence, dialogue through literature can maintain their voice by staging their resurrection.

The feminist intervention no doubt was and continues to be necessary. My point throughout these pages has not been to discredit it, nor to denigrate the highly ambitious creative output of the writers I mentioned. Their work imagines nothing short of saving the world via a revolution of consciousness, while their reflections on “representation” has produced some of the most formally interesting and thematically engaging literature of the twentieth century. None of that in my view remains in question. The focus on the Holocaust as the model of social injustice, however, suggests that the inequality produced by capitalism is the result of the inadequate recognition of identities. While capitalism will always exploit the most vulnerable for its own gain, a political intervention based on identity politics only ensures that the preyed upon do not always come from the same populations. This—it must be said—is not nothing. But as the category of the “oppressed” becomes capacious enough to include those “colonized by race, class, sex, gender, culture, nation and power,” to quote Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), and as class exploitation is understood on the model of discrimination, the solution to inequality becomes recognition and inclusion. Indeed for Sandoval, late capitalism has produced a situation in which *everybody* must face the reality of instability: “it is no longer the ‘outsider’ who bears the burden,” she writes, because late capitalism has produced the “democratization of oppression.”¹³⁶ When racism and other forms of discrimination become the model of exploitation as such, when oppression is rhetorically “democratized” such that everybody is facing it, the reality of class exploitation can be ignored by being imagined as

¹³⁶ Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 34.

solved with efforts toward representative inclusion and recognition. But as Deborah L. Madsen argues, in *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature* (2000), the “emphasis on getting women into positions of power and prestige has meant preserving the existing socioeconomic system, and the result has been increased poverty of the majority of women.” The problem stems from an overly myopic focus on “sexism” separate from “racism” and what she calls “classism.” When class is not understood as a central problem, feminism can perpetuate inequality. Yet for Madsen, “literary theory and the literary work produced by women of color,” does focus on “class and race as they affect the experience of gender and sexualized power relationships.”¹³⁷ It is as if the fusion of race with class results in the former being a synecdoche for the latter. Yet when we turn to Marta Ester Sánchez’s *Contemporary Chicana Poetry* (1985), the interpretive triad she offers to understand Chicana poetry (woman, poet, Chicana) focuses on gender and ethnicity but leaves out class, an omission not because the “dynamic of social class is not of significance” but “because Chicana intellectuals and writers were more conscious of race and gender than of class as factors shaping their lives.”¹³⁸

Ana Castillo admits, referring to her novel *The Guardians* (2007), “It would be presumptuous, even arrogant, to say that I give voice to the otherwise silenced,” she nevertheless describes her profession as a “calling” that allows her to “stay in and move on from the world” constituted by a class from which she (as a novelist) can “now move on.” Yet she imagines herself able to “stay in” that world because her status enables her to speak for a people “who are powerless to speak for themselves.”¹³⁹ She reconciles the glaring tension between the “presumption” of “speaking for” others, on the one hand, and her description of their being

¹³⁷ Deborah L. Madsen, *Understanding Contemporary Chicana Literature* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 2.

¹³⁸ Sánchez, *Contemporary*, 340n16.

¹³⁹ Ana Castillo, *The Guardians* (New York: Random House, 2007), 219.

“powerless to speak for themselves,” on the other, by suggesting that “In fiction, we have to let our ghosts speak.”¹⁴⁰ She relates how she is haunted by ghosts who ask her to deliver messages: “I am haunted. I am haunted by my ancestors,” she writes, ancestors who were themselves immigrant workers during the 1920s.¹⁴¹ The conceit is that when she writes a novel about the hardships and injustices of immigration, she shows ghosts who speak for themselves instead of telling readers about the dead’s ordeals. She imagines this conceit to be effectively the case insofar as she is an intimate member of the depicted community. So whether its communal memory or ancestral haunting, the writer becomes the conduit for the past and can speak for others when she imagines herself not as representing them but as being part of them.

Even as it dramatizes performance, *The Ultraviolet Sky* does not invalidate blood memory as such. Rosa doesn’t learn about the Holocaust by encountering an account of it; when she grabs a gun “brought back from World War Two, from a German soldier,” a “pain shot right up her arm” and “the image of dead men came to her mind—and then the image of the little girl in her dream.”¹⁴² She dreams about this little German girl in a concentration camp surrounded by other children, and wakes up to realize “That girl, that young girl *is* me [...] this time she knew, she knew it *was* her thirty-four years ago when she died in a concentration camp.” Like Castillo who comes to realize that she “*was* the Mexic Amerindian woman’s consciousness” because they share a “primal collective memory,” Rosa realizes that she too carries the memories of a young German girl in the recesses of her “racial memories” because she (through her father) is German too.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Castillo, *Guardians*, 219.

¹⁴¹ Castillo, *Guardians*, 217.

¹⁴² Castillo, *Ultraviolet*, 186.

¹⁴³ Castillo, *Ultraviolet*, 57.

This conversion of history to memory helps explain what had come to appear in the mid 1990s as a “puzzling contradiction in our culture,” to quote Andreas Huyssen: the paradoxical relation between the “undisputed waning of history and historical consciousness, the lament about political, social, and cultural amnesia,” on the one hand, and the “memory boom of unprecedented proportions” on the other.¹⁴⁴ If the postmodern disenchantment with grand narratives led to a radical questioning of the possibility of historical inquiry (history understood as ontologically and epistemologically irretrievable), postmodernism also motivated, seemingly paradoxically, a renewed interest in a multiplicity of heretofore silenced or ignored perspectives. But Huyssen’s very characterization of the “waning of history” as “amnesia” demonstrates how both the wane and the boom share a common discursive ground. The desire to establish an origin and identity through an archive (in, say, the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project) and the critique of the very possibility of establish an origin via an archive (in, for example, Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*¹⁴⁵) both depend on the authenticity of presence as the grounds of the discussion: one wants the authenticity of presence (variously represented as ghosts, captured in the archive, and felt by the present historian as memory), the other says that such authenticity is impossible (the archive can never offer such authenticity of presence because there is no such presence, only it’s ghostly lack). Both feature the conflation of epistemology with ontology: wanting to know about the past is understood as a fraught desire to relive the past, while knowledge about the past is understood as “memory” of it. If we can no longer naively believe in historical progress or can no longer be certain about our epistemological relation to the history, we could instead think of it as ongoing within us, bypassing the need to learn and know it, envisioning our ability to remember and experience it.

¹⁴⁴ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.

¹⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

If the problem with represented knowledge as such is one's subjective perspective, then either there can be no truth that embodied, perspectival beings can understand, or the only truths we could be certain about are those that we ourselves embody. Stated differently, a desire to know the meaning of something becomes the desire to be the entity that can embody that truth. And, on the more sophisticated deconstructionist accounts, if self-knowledge already fractures the knower from the known by the translation of knowledge into its mediation, then something like certainty cannot be consciously possible because of the separation such mental mediation produces. The problem with certainty would not only be that of the impossibility of objectivity but also the impossibility of maintaining a radical self-same subjectivity, an identity rendered so intense that it could never be different from itself. By imagining word and woman as one, Villanueva imagines the conditions for such that self's possibility—a self that not only embodies herself but carries within this self her ancestors, too. But perhaps it remains more politically efficacious to highlight the difference between persons so that the inequality between selves can be seen as such.

CODA

HOW LATINO ARE CHICANOS?: THE END OF THE CHICANO NARRATIVE

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Piensas en Cuba, Venezuela, y en revolucionar
Creando consciencia en niños con literatura ¹

Daniel Chacón begins the short story titled “Aztlán, Oregon” by describing the protagonist’s excessive anger. “When white people in Portland stared at Ben Chavez as if they had never seen a Mexican” states the story’s first sentence, “it pissed him off”— so much so that Ben imagines “coldcocking them, feeling their noses explode on his fist.” The dramatic irony differentiating the character Ben and the narrative voice commenting on him highlights how his anger is misplaced. Not only is Ben walking into a place named “Cafe del Cielo” (so he is probably not the first Mexican they have seen) he is also an anchorman on the local news (so they may be staring because they “recognized him from TV”).² The narrative distance created by this irony can allow for some degree of sympathy for his situation while also exposing the limitations of Ben’s worldview. He seems unnecessarily on the defensive, hoping that white passersby will “mad-dog him” so that he could respond in kind. But when “the one man that did look at him” does nothing but smile, “Ben couldn’t help but smile back.”³ And because he ultimately does not heed the proffered advice to “get over it” before he “do[es] something

¹ Bardo Martinez, “Soniatl,” *Chicano Batman*, 2010. Chicano Batman’s band name and logo show how the term Chicano and its Mesoamerican iconography continue to persist as postmodern kitsch. Their logo merges the Batman symbol with the Aztec eagle logo created, by César Chávez’s brother, for the National Farmworkers Union. In the song I cite, the addition of the suffix “tl” to the Spanish personal name Sonia renders it into a Nahuatl variant. The name implies the Spanish second-person imperative “soña,” *dream*. The lyrics’ playful alliteration (“Soniatl sigue soñando sueños alegres,” “Keep dreaming happy dreams, Soniatl”) resonates with the implied utopian vision of a socialist revolution made possible through consciousness-raising literature. As rendered in the song, this utopian dream is fun; it is kitsch.

² Daniel Chacón, “Aztlán, Oregon” in *Chicano Chicanery: Short Stories* (Houston, TX: Arte Público, 2000), 59

³ Chacón, “Aztlán,” 63.

stupid,” the “*thud thud thud*” sounds of his fists hitting his boss’s body brings the story to its rousing conclusion.⁴

This story offers a test case for the periodizing thesis developed throughout my chapters. If, as I claim, the representational strategies used in what writers called “Chicano literature” changed during the 1980s, so much so that the term “Chicano” no longer described the work writers produced, how do we make sense of this story named “Aztlán, Oregon”? Published in a book titled *Chicano Chicanery* (1996), is “Aztlán, Oregon” not evidently “Chicano”? This question, as I will show, is not pedantically classificatory because it is entirely interpretive. How one reads the story— including how one understands Ben’s anger and how one feels about the plot’s resolution— depends on whether or not one considers it a Chicano story. As my comments above begin to indicate, Chacón’s dramatic irony establishes a sense of ambivalence concerning the continued efficacy of Chicanismo. I argue that this ambivalence regarding what I have called the “Chicano solution” marks *Chicano Chicanery* as significantly *post* Chicano. The question that will follow this argument becomes this: does the term “Latino” literature better describe this story? If Chicano no longer appears to be helpful, does the word “Latino” offer an alternative?

“Please let me tell your story”

A few flashbacks throughout Chacón’s story show how Ben had been a “gang member” without much of a future. But forced to work for a presidential campaign to earn credit for his high school civics course, Ben picks “an old radical named Marta Banuelos” who had no chance of winning. Banuelos had launched her campaign on “a platform telling white people to go back

⁴ Chacón, “Aztlán,” 63, 74.

to Europe and leave Aztlán to the Indians.”⁵ While out canvassing, rival gang members surround Ben. With his hand placed defensively on his knife, he starts to explain:

Listen, *vatos*, I don't mean no disrespect to your barrio. I'm campaigning for Banuelos. She's a Chicana, man, running for president. [...] He told them that *gabachos* had been running Aztlán since they took it from Mexico in 1848. [...] Even though they didn't have a chance in winning the national election, the process, he said, was a means of unification. Even if only for a moment, he said, we need to come together and acknowledge who the enemy truly is. He went on and on and at some point he ceased to know what he was saying; all he knew was that he was using words to do the one thing he had to do: survive.⁶

The occasional “he said” punctuating the breathless recitation highlights the near hysteria motivating his disquisition. So long as he kept talking and they kept nodding, they stopped threatening to “slice” him. He may only be reciting the party line as a form of self-defense, yet the “Chicano unity” he talks about becomes momentarily actualized by his words. And when Ben turns in his essay “on the importance of the Banuelos campaign to Chicano unity, an historical perspective,” his teacher declares it the “best paper [he had] ever read on this assignment.” The incident thus launches two things: Ben's unexpected career (motivated, he goes to college and majors in journalism), and Ben's political consciousness (*conscientizado*, he understands himself as part of history and a collective).

The present-day Ben, however, grows complacent, his moderate success leading to at least one European vacation and a new car. Looking at his naked, flabby body in the mirror Ben realizes, “He *was* getting fat. Fighting for his people is what he used to be about, but ever since he'd been away from Aztlán, all he took care of was himself.”⁷ So when he has the chance to advance his career (potentially scoring a national news anchor position) by recording “a good feature” on “Hispanic street gangs,” his enthusiasm to “tell it like it is” and “say something

⁵ Chacón, “Aztlán,” 64.

⁶ Chacón, “Aztlán,” 67.

⁷ Chacón, “Aztlán,” 69, emphasis original.

radical” rejuvenates him.⁸ Yet the next confrontation with another set of gang members does not end as he expects. Once again he diffuses their potential hostility by talking to them, but the young men are more impressed that he is on television than they are swayed by his account:

Ben felt the gold watch heavy on his wrist, the neck tie tight around his collar. ‘Listen, *ese*,’ he said, removing his tie and stuffing it in his pocket. I’m from the barrio, too. *Serio*. I’m from *Califas*. Involved in the same damn shit. I wanna tell it like it is. White people don’t know shit about us. I understand why you guys are in gangs, man. It’s this *pinche* society, *verdad?* Brown people don’t have a chance in this white, racist society [...] I’m just a Chicano, all right? I mean no disrespect to to your barrio, all right? I’m here because I need to tell your story. Please, let me tell your story.⁹

He no longer touches a knife in his pocket while talking to the gang members, he instead handles the symbols of his status that here seem to weigh him down and choke him. While his clothing mark the difference impeding the “Chicano unity” he is trying to establish, the greatest obstacle to that unity is one gang member’s resoundingly clear response: “What the fuck are you talking about?” The story that Ben wants to tell is at odds with the story that the gang member he interviews conveys:

He [Ben] had wanted it to say something radical, but when Rafa [the gang member] got to the heart of what *he* wanted to say, Ben didn’t want to hear it. Rafa had a dream of owning a house, having a wife, and kids and ‘nice things.’ He had no consciousness of a political struggle, no concept of the Chicano movement. He didn’t even know who Che was. Rafa said that if he could go to college he would want to major in business. He could see himself as a businessman, ‘making all kinds of money and shit.’ Whenever Ben tried to get what he thought of society into the interview—whenever he suggested that it was racist and responsible for the condition of Chicanos—Rafa looked at him funny, looked at Mara [the director], and back to Ben. ‘Well, I don’t know about that,’ Rafa would say, ‘but...’ and he’d continue saying things that hurt Ben to hear.¹⁰

Ben wants the story that gave *his* life meaning to be reaffirmed by the person he is placing as the stand-in for the community. What this person recites instead is the story of upward class mobility, which we might say has always been the story not of unity but of separation. It is the

⁸ Chacón, “Aztlán,” 72–73.

⁹ Chacón, “Aztlán,” 72.

¹⁰ Chacón, “Aztlán,” 72.

story of wanting to enter into a class that enables material comfort, yet a class that is fractured by the very self-interest that brings it into being.¹¹ And it is *this* story that describes what Ben's life has become.

After the footage is edited, Ben finds himself naked once again in his condo: "He was pacing his condo, naked, back and forth, faster and faster, full of energy but with no way to expend it." Ben wants to *do* something even though he had just completed what his director described as "the best interview Ben had ever done [...] what Rafa talked about was wise and sad and naive all at once, a real testimony to society. It was a great piece."¹² The resulting interview, in other words, is exactly what an audience would want. Yet what happens to those like Rafa when the news segment is over and the commercials appear is unclear. Or perhaps it is all *too* clear what will happen—not much at all—and this clarity, ultimately, might just be what leads to Ben's ineffectual self-destruction. Ben punches his boss, who has a "sickeningly sincere look on his face," just as he tries to shake Ben's hand, congratulating him on a job well done.¹³

How, then, is the reader supposed to feel? Should we lament the waning of the Chicano political narrative that no longer appeals to a younger generation? If so, we might consider "Aztlán, Oregon" itself as the medium *for* consciousness raising. Literature and history about Mexican Americans can, with the aid of encouraging teachers, bolster the self-pride necessary to envision personal success. The younger generation has yet to figure out what they want because they have yet to read the books that will show them who they are, books that do *that* by teaching their readers the history that should be theirs. The younger Mexican American generation has

¹¹ The sense of disillusion associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie coincides with that rise, the dissatisfaction emerging coterminously with the undeniable benefits it brought into being. For an excellent and relevant account of this dissatisfaction with modernity see Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991).

¹² Chacón, "Aztlán," 72–73.

¹³ Chacón, "Aztlán," 74.

lost something like the Chicano narrative; Chicano literature—like *Chicano Chicany*—can begin to give it back to them.

“Aztlán, Oregon” is not unsympathetic to this approach. The plot includes a detail about Ben reading a mystery novel in which the “bad guy” is a caricatured Mexican (“*Señor*, I theenk your time she is up”). Ben dislikes the mystery novels and wants them out of his house. So just as Ben benefited from the political process, he might have also benefited from reading the mystery novels of writers including Lucha Corpi and Manuel Ramos. By providing a much more nuanced depiction of Mexican American characters, such novels, like *Chicano Chicany*, go a long way to correct the problem of stereotyping. If Rafa, the interviewed gang member, had access to this literature, he might (like Ben) gain the self-confidence to imagine himself as more than what others have told him he is. He might imagine for himself a future that defies what others have predicted for him.

How this fortification of his self-esteem would mitigate the continued impoverishment of lower-taxed neighborhoods is unclear, in part because the approach looks a lot like the bootstrap narrative of getting ahead via one’s gumption in the face of obstacles (as if all it took to “make it” was *wanting* to make it). How could literature about Mexican Americans address the reality of underfunded schools, underpaid teachers, under-resourced libraries, and lead to admission-worthy credentials (aided by SAT prep courses and advanced placement high school courses), credentials that one just might obtain when supported by literacy initiatives that would foster reading habits from an early age?

Even if we accept this as a possible interpretation— that what Rafa and those like him need is Chicano literature and Chicano politics— we would still need to explain why Ben, who was exposed to one of the strands of the Chicano movement, is miserable. One reason is obvious

and can be stated simply: Ben wants to feel like he belongs. Ben tries calling his father (who keeps asking him, incredulously, how much he spends on things¹⁴), and he visits small towns “where some Mexican farmers lived just to hear Spanish being spoken” (though he never tries speaking with them¹⁵). What separates him from his family and the farmers is his success, so perhaps Ben needs to find a community of middle-class Chicanos that would reciprocate the vision he has of himself. He needs to find Aztlán, somewhere in Oregon, the place where he might receive the life-affirming recognition he needs. A belief *in* the Chicano narrative could maintain such a group’s cohesion and its self-understanding.

Yet “Aztlán, Oregon” highlights this narrative’s untenability.¹⁶ Readers can hear in Ben’s desperate plea— “Please, let me tell your story.”— an allegory of the fiction writer’s continued insistence to be the conduit for the voice of the people. Chacón’s short story allows its readers to consider just what would be gained when a person in Ben’s position— advancing his career— places a spotlight on youths at risk. The suggestion that a spotlight on poverty addresses its problems implies that the structural condition of poverty is the product of a fundamental lack of empathy and that an appropriate response to the situation is to have a television audience *feel* something about the poor. The story instead suggests that perhaps the material gains will be Ben’s alone. Ironically, Ben needs a community more than “the community” he imagines speaking for needs him. Although he can try to improve a people’s situation, it is the very effort to improve their lot that gives him his sense of self, “fighting for his people is what he used to be about.” Without the community and that effort, he’s just a guy, getting fat. This ambivalence

¹⁴ Chacón, “Aztlán,” 70.

¹⁵ Chacón, “Aztlán,” 63.

¹⁶ Suppose that a candidate like Marta Banuelos *had* won the election, leading, somehow, to every person of European descent being forced out of “Aztlán,” how would this political platform address the structures of impoverishment that would remain, only now operated by people from a different descent? Who or what would “the enemy” be then?

marks “Aztlán, Oregon” as post-Chicano and entails a diagnosis of the social problems affecting Mexican Americans and their treatment, a diagnosis that the Chicano narrative does not offer.

“*what Aztlán is really all about*”

Even a recent novel like Manuel Ramos’s gratingly-titled *King of the Chicanos* (2010)—which commemorates the rise of the messianic patriarch, the Chicano leader of the people that will usher in their salvation—displays this ambivalence. The narrative follows Ramón Hidalgo as he becomes a migrant worker, political organizer, then Chicano militant activist. The small but real gains of the Movement fall short of the envisioned utopian horizon, and Ramón is left disillusioned. This persists until he opens a coffee shop in which he,

loaned books to Chicano kids who needed to read Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* because they had no clue about their place in the history and culture of New Mexico. He sold tapes of Al Hurricane and Roberto Griego to University of New Mexico students who needed to maintain their equilibrium in the imposing and often indifferent world of higher education. He made coffee for poets and singers and artists and talked with them into the night and early morning about art and music and literature and la cultura. Never about the Movement.¹⁷

No longer enchanted by Chicano Movement politics, Ramón turns to art, wondering if “This could be what Aztlán is really all about.”¹⁸ By imagining himself as a curator of culture, he can continue to envision himself as a Chicano, as part of a community, because a sense of community coheres when based on shared tastes in art.¹⁹ Art can become a corrective to

¹⁷ Manuel Ramos, *King of the Chicanos: A Novel* (San Antonio, TX: Wings, 2010), 147.

¹⁸ Ramos, *King*, 148.

¹⁹ For a relevant account of the historical emergence of the concept of the “aesthetic” and its use to counteract “the tendency of the bourgeois public sphere [...] to splinter into a mass of conflicting private interests” see Nicholas

disillusion because its circulation among a public brings that very public into being.²⁰ It is what Aztlan is about in the sense that Ramón's small business creates the conditions for Aztlan's possibility.

King of The Chicanos would thus appear to suggest that what a character like "Aztlán, Oregon's" Ben needs is what Ramón discovers. Ben could envision himself as the person who gives gang members (like Rafa) Chicano literature. This literature would, in turn, provide Rafa the political consciousness and historical awareness necessary for him to persevere. This is why *King of the Chicanos* includes an appended reading list of nonfiction books about the Chicano Movement, and why the novel narrates some of the historical events affecting Mexican Americans by converting history into the protagonist's bildungsroman. Readers of *King of the Chicanos* become acquainted with Chicano history, the book thus appearing to be the *ne plus ultra* of Chicano literature.

Indeed, the plot depicts the merits of this type of education by showing how one of the café's younger customers, Roberto Urban, benefits from Ramón's influence. Roberto proceeds to go to college, entertains the idea of becoming a lawyer, but realizes that his passion lies in literature. When Ramón asks him what kind of literature Roberto would write, "Chicano Literature? Or maybe it's Latino Literature these days?" Roberto responds with a decidedly Chicano answer: "I'm developing a mystery story. A Chicano mystery story [...] Back when, during the Movement, there was a killing, and that killing haunted this guy who used to be heavy into the Movement."²¹ Describing the very plot of Manuel Ramos's own first mystery novel, *The Ballad of Rocky Ruiz* (1993), Roberto's mystery story could be what someone like "Aztlán,

Brown's brilliant encyclopedic entry on "Aesthetics" in Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman, *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), 7.

²⁰ Michael Warner *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005).

²¹ Ramos, *King*, 156.

Oregon's" Ben might read at a young age, benefiting his self-perception. (No more "Señor, I thenk your time she is up" nonsense!) Roberto is able to publish four collections of poetry that help land him a position as a "Chicano Studies and English associate professor," his educational experience thus placing him in a position to further benefit a younger generation.²² Roberto, we might say, has made it, and he can now help others make it too.

But once he has found the very job that allows him to live the life he wanted—"books and reading and writing were what he valued most"—his poetry takes an introspective turn. He feels ambivalent, publishing a book titled *Mezcla: This Mestizo Thing Has Me All Mixed Up*, the poems of which "poked fun at the author and his attempts to rationalize his existence as a middle-class, middle-aged, successful Latino who still thought of himself as a young, struggling Chicano."²³ The confusion he feels is not simply that of *mestizaje*, which after all could be said to be constitutive of the Mexican American identity as such. (Why should he feel confused about the "mestizo thing" now? What changed?) What confuses his sense of self seems to be the result of his new class status, which *separates* him from the disadvantaged community that gives his identity as a Chicano meaning. Once comfortably situated, Roberto wonders if he could still claim to be "Chicano" insofar as being a Chicano means representing a struggling community. The novel, here, is less sanguine, suggesting that once Roberto is a part of the university, he is a "Latino."

But why should this be the case? Why not show how Roberto continues to fight for *la causa* within the hallowed walls of academia? After all, one of the primary initiatives of the Chicano Movement was the integration of the university, which Chicanos would change from within. Chicanos could update the university's methodologies, in part by debunking a false faith

²² Ramos, *King*, 168.

²³ Ramos, *King*, 168.

in the objectivity of the social sciences, enabling them to revise facile accounts of Mexican “passivity.”²⁴ They could rewrite the literary histories, thereby helping to create a much richer narrative that does not simply begin with the New England colonies.²⁵ And by introducing new Chicano voices, the literary representation of Mexican Americans would counteract the reductive caricatures in canonized American literature.²⁶ Roberto could see himself as clearing a path into the university that younger Chicanos might follow. And just as Ramón, disillusioned with the Movement, could find Aztlán in his café/cultural center, Roberto could have reimagined Aztlán as the university, the mythical homeland now continually augmented by being refashioned within the nation’s centers of higher education. *This* Aztlán could become the homeland for those wanting to reaffirm their Chicano identity by circulating the media that constitute the Chicano public’s cohesion; the place where the struggle for publication and tenure *is* the struggle for community; where Chicanos can awaken their students’ political consciousness by introducing them to their histories that had been heretofore excluded from their education.

That the novel does *not* take this route suggests the waning of this form of the Chicano narrative, a waning that suggests that as long as the telos of the struggle continues to be the Chicano integration of the middle class, the resulting disappointment will be inevitable because its success (however limited) may not ever be enough. The ambivalent middle class’s nostalgia for a Chicano community, the desire for solidarity, assumes a radical tenor because it suggests that however comfortable a middle-class existence can be, there is the lurking recognition that it is not the good life that might otherwise be possible.

²⁴ See Michael Soldatenko, *Chicano Studies: The Genesis of a Discipline*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009.

²⁵ See the introduction of Dorothy E. Harth and Lewis M. Baldwin, *Voices of Aztlán; Chicano Literature of Today* (New York: New American Library, 1974).

²⁶ Philip D. Ortego Y Gasca, *We Are Chicanos: An Anthology of Mexican-American Literature* (New York: Washington Square, 1973).

In complete opposition to this radical political vision, however, the term “Latino” as used in *King of the Chicanos* points to an antithetical political horizon. Popularized in the 1980s, the term captures that decade’s touted multiculturalism. It appears in the novel as something like the polite, more inclusive term that erases the specific histories of racialization, political struggle and economic inequality among groups as vastly different as “Cubans,” “Mexicans,” and “Puerto Ricans.” The term appears as the label comfortable middle class academics use whose interests do not coincide with a struggling community, the potential referents for the terms “struggling” and “community” abounding.

Insofar as the shift from the term “Chicano” to the label “Latino” captures a kind of subsumption of political potential, we might wonder if Roberto’s self-satire might be the author Manuel Ramos’s self-satire too. After all, Roberto’s “Chicano” mystery describes Ramos’s *own* first mystery novel. *King of the Chicanos* may want very much to be Chicano literature. Like Ramón, it understands itself as the bearer of Chicano culture and history. But as the introspective, self-deprecating turn in Roberto’s poetry suggests, this desire says more about the person who is writing than it does about its connection to a community in need. Its ambition notwithstanding, *King of the Chicanos* cannot help but register the dissolution of the term “Chicano,” suggesting that maybe it, too, is “Latino.”

Why Chicano?

Yet apart from “Latino,” the novel provides a third aspirational possibility for contemporary literature written by Mexican Americans. After having read Alfredo Vea’s *God’s Go Begging* (1999), Ramón “did not know how to classify the book.” Perhaps not comfortable calling it Chicano, a term that may no longer apply to texts written by Mexican Americans, and

also not wanting to use what looks like the more pejorative term “Latino,” Ramón says that it is simply “A beautiful book.”²⁷ Ramón seems to imply that when writers are not hobbled by the need to write the novel of social protest, they can focus on perfecting their craft. But as W.E.B. Du Bois famously wondered in the essay “Criteria of Negro Art,” “What has this Beauty to do with the world?”²⁸ The pursuit of beauty for its own sake is all well and good “somewhere eternal,” writes Du Bois, but “here and now in the world” Beauty and Truth are linked inextricably. So if instead of writing Chicano literature, Mexican Americans aim to produce literature that is beautiful, does this literature have a politics?

Fortunately, Frederick Luis Aldama presented versions of these questions to Alfredo Véa himself in a 2010 interview. Aldama points out how Véa’s novels seem to always “cross cultural, racial and linguistic borders,” including one character in particular “who operates the drawbridge that ultimately brings two worlds together,” to which Véa’s responds positively, and with a sense of relief: “First, it’s pleasing to know that somebody’s really understanding what I’m trying to do in my books. I’ve been a little bitter about the literary academy, who don’t seem to get my novels. Worse still, the Chicanos don’t seem to get my work. It seems that they’re trying to build a little enclave of trendy Chicano writers.” Véa distances himself from “the Chicanos” whose enclave-making criticism clashes with Véa’s bridge-lowering writing. Yet, in his subsequent response to Aldama’s question, “You write novels that don’t fit the Chicano/a mold?” Véa position shifts:

They might fit into Chicano literature in about ten years, fifteen years from now, but today people don’t recognize them as part of the Chicano canon. Later, maybe the Chicano literary critics will realize that they don’t really know how to debate

²⁷ Ramos, *King*, 169.

²⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art,” in *Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 995

the role of literature and art—and their arguments fall far short of those debates that took place during the Harlem Renaissance with Langston Hughes and W. E. B. DuBois [sic] sitting around arguing about whether or not the black aesthetic should be utilitarian and for the sake of the people or not. But as a result of the kind of gatekeeping in Chicano letters, my novels aren't allowed to be a part of this canon. But I just keep writing²⁹.

The bitterness Véa expresses centers not only on the misunderstanding of his work but also on the resulting misrecognition. If only Chicano literary critics knew how to conceptualize the relation between art and its potential function, they would recognize Véa's novels for what they are. So, far from retreating from a parochial enclave, Véa seems to stand at the gates of the "Chicano canon," seeking admission.

For Véa, what Chicano critics seem to have forgotten is something they would recall by re-reading Du Bois; to the question "what has Beauty to do with the world" Du Bois says, in effect, *everything*. Insofar as Beauty and Truth are linked inextricably, art can and should be used as propaganda. So when Véa gives his account of "where Chicano literature stand[s] in all of this mass-generated, mass-consumable culture" it makes a lot of sense that he sounds like Du Bois:

What we need in the U.S. with Chicano writers is the formation of an intelligentsia. To do this, we need Chicano writers to look beyond themselves, to write with a larger sense of purpose—not, say, as politicians, but as writers interested in the art of their craft. They need to read and learn from Nabokov, Dostoevsky, García Marquez, Faulkner, and Eugene O'Neill. Chicano writers

²⁹ Frederick Luis Aldama, *Spilling the Beans in Chicanolandia: Conversations with Writers and Artists* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 281.

need to stop writing about the last tortilla. Good art is good art; good fiction is good fiction, and we must strive to produce this.³⁰

Like Du Bois's belief that "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men,"³¹ V́ea calls for the formation of an "intelligentsia" group of writers well-versed in their craft, a group that can counteract the corrosive effects of consumerism by being the creators and curators of culture. And like Du Bois's "Talented Tenth" model of "racial uplift," these bulwarks of culture can rescue society by protecting it from its worst elements. As Du Bois puts it, "the Best of this race [...] may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst."³²

Readers need only turn to V́ea's novel *Gods Go Begging* to see how such an intelligentsia responds to what the novel depicts as the central problem affecting inner-city kids: cultural deprivation. The protagonist, Jesse, a "Chicano lawyer", assigns novels to his client, Calvin, as a way of providing him a vocabulary with which to think about and articulate his situation.³³ Jesse refers to Calvin as "a seventeen-year-old black kid who's been stripped of his cultural memory"³⁴, so Calvin's assigned reading list includes works by Ernest Gaines, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. Because of his cultural education, Calvin can eventually come to say: "We rap about how bein black is hard. Then I read this book, I did not never know what black mean."³⁵ The novel (heavy-handedly) depicts an "urban Tourette's gas" that permeates the streets of San Francisco. The result of discarded fast food wrappers, cocaine residue, and television-generated heat, this gas "leaches the human spirit out of these kids. It attacks and destroys the hippocampus" leaving them with "no future and no cultural memory." Kids thus

³⁰ Aldama, 281.

³¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 842.

³² Du Bois, "Talented Tenth," 842.

³³ Alfredo V́ea, *Gods Go Begging* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 32.

³⁴ V́ea, *Gods*, 255.

³⁵ V́ea, *Gods*, 257.

idolize paragons of crass consumer materialism but are unfamiliar with the cultural icons that would otherwise constitute their “cultural history.” Part of the corrective to this deprivation is to turn to culture as the psychic scaffolding through which a sense of self can be constituted.

So, on the one hand, Véa seems to be right about his claim that his dedication to his craft and his virtuosity, we might even say the “beauty” of his novels, *is* connected to the Chicano canon in the sense that it is an effort to connect the present to their past. The younger generation does not have a future because they have been deprived of their past, which the literati could return to them by curating and creating the literature and history that will give them their sense of self. But, on the other hand, as even my brief example from *Gods Go Begging* shows, the novel is not simply motivated by the Chicano narrative but the question of “identity” itself. Apart from Calvin’s cultural education, the novel includes other recognizable identity plots, including a “passing” narrative concerning a Mexican chaplain whose “lips quivered as they pronounced a forbidden sentence”: “No, no, I am a Jew.” He had concealed his identity out of self-protection because “Hiding had been passed down in the blood.”³⁶ Véa’s very commitment to crossing cultural and racial boundaries, lowering bridges instead of creating enclaves, makes his work more profitably read alongside other novels of the 1980s and 1990s that center on the question of racial identity as such, than the Chicano literature of the 1960s and 1970s.

More specifically, the novel participates in what Kenneth Warren describes as a “cultural dominant in the 1980s and 1990s in a variety of texts”: an abundance of “fictions [that] are defined by their commitment to making the past present to us by any representational means necessary.”³⁷ This “historicist” strain of fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, first identified by Walter Benn Michaels, “re-describes something we have never known as something we have forgotten

³⁶ Véa, *Gods*, 213–14.

³⁷ Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 106.

and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience.”³⁸ By converting knowledge about the past into a memory of it, this fiction imagines what happened in the past as having happened to an extended us (hence our ability to recall and feel it).³⁹ According to Michaels, the paradigmatic example of the historicist novel remains Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), a novel that describes the history of slavery as independently existing “rememories,” picture-like memories that exist independent of people and can be seen by those in the present who visit the sites where the events took place. The novel’s infamous plot depicts a mother killing her own daughter to save her from a life of slavery, and the tragedy of this past continues to haunt their home. As if to solidify its relation to historicist fiction, *Gods Go Begging* describes how, after having read and learned about his history, Calvin can fall asleep and have a nightmare about “a huge flood washin’ my people away.” When he wakes up, however, he sees a “woman of African descent” who “had been in his dream. This woman had killed her own baby rather than see it suffer.” Calvin can dream about the transAtlantic slave trade and its aftermath that nearly decimated his people, yet upon waking he can see that these people are still alive and he is one of them. The “symmetrical scars burned into her cheeks and forehead” indicate that she is not

³⁸ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier, 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 137.

³⁹ But it is not just memory that enables one to make contact with the past in historicist fiction. Some novels like *Gods Go Begging* (1999) fold time so that two separate eras can “touch; others embody history in ghostly manifestations, like in Julia Alvarez’s *In the Time of the Butterflies* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1994) wherein one character, Olga, admonishes another, Dedé, that “It’s still 1960 for you... But this is 1994, Dedé, 1994!” Dedé responds, “You’re wrong... I’m not stuck in the past, I’ve just brought it with me into the present” (313). Part of what bringing the past into the present depends on, in this novel, is not only an unwillingness to forget past injustices but also the recognition that the past continues to haunt the present in the form of the ghosts of Dedé’s murdered sisters. Even though Dedé initially expresses skepticism about another character Fela’s claim that she could be “possessed by the spirits” of the dead, thereby becoming a medium through which others could “talk ‘through’ this ebony black sibyl” (63), she comes to accept the possibility that the spirits of the dead visit the present when their stories are told (174). Which is why just before Dedé begins to talk about her murdered sisters, she “takes a deep breath, just the way... Fela do[es] right before the sisters take over her and use her old woman’s voice to assign their errands” (66). As the family’s surviving Mirabal sister, Dedé becomes the “oracle,” bringing the voice of her sisters into the present (313).

merely a descendent of the Africans Calvin dreams about, but is instead the past, which he can now remember and see, come to life.⁴⁰

So although Véa may want to see his novels as participating in the Chicano canon, his work could be read more profitably alongside the novels that Warren and Michaels describe as “historicist”.⁴¹ By giving Calvin access not only to culture as such, but the culture that should be his own, Jesse introduces Calvin to the history that should constitute his identity: a “black boy” can “loo[k] back to see who he is” (254). The novel translates a lack of knowledge about the past into a lack of self-knowledge, and it posits literature (and itself) as the conduit for the past, connecting it to the present by bringing it to life. It thematically literalizes the past coming to life in the present by folding its temporal terrain in on itself, showing how “one era will touch another.” The plot’s past exists proleptically into the present, or as Jesse puts it, “human hands and eyes from the distant past can seek out and find... search for and contact... hands and eyes of the present time... our time” (282 ellipses in original). The very salience of this conceit in so many other works of literature renders the category “Chicano” insufficient to describe *Gods Go Begging’s* representational strategies.

What Was Chicano Literature?

Although readers can better understand the representational strategies found in *Gods Go Begging* in relation to historicist fiction, I nevertheless must take Véa’s normative claim seriously: *he* sees himself as producing Chicano literature. My argument throughout my chapters and in this coda has not been that Chicano literature is impossible to create today. I am instead

⁴⁰ Véa, *Gods*, 253–54.

⁴¹ In Warren’s account, these novels include Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Caryl Phillip’s *Crossing the River* (1997), Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World* (2003), David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981), and Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (1997).

arguing that the attraction of what I have been calling the Chicano narrative has no longer appealed to many of the writers publishing since the 1980s, but this is not to say that one could not imagine the resurgence of Chicanismo today. If I were to answer the question “what was Chicano literature?” I could say that it was not simply the literature written by Mexican Americans, and not simply the literature about Mexican Americans. Chicano literature was that body of work (from 1965 to 1981) that understood itself to be representative of a community; that understood its artistic achievements as evidence of the community’s cultural capital; that characterized itself as the mouthpiece for a community’s needs and desires; that saw itself as aiding the efforts to produce a political consciousness amongst its readers. The literary works I have cited above expose the limitations of this account of Chicano literature, and the chapters of my dissertation track the shifting representational strategies authors use at a given moment to suit what they take to be their needs. This is not to say that we could not today imagine a context producing a reformulated version of Chicano literature and Chicano studies that suits contemporary needs. Such is the case Jose F. Aranda makes in the essay “Making the Case for New Chicano/a Studies: Recovering Our Alienated Selves,” to wit: “Chicano/a studies is the same and yet different from its origins in the Chicano/a Movement.”⁴²

Although there appears to be an apparent contradiction between Vea’s critique of Chicano critics for making enclaves, and his wanting to be admitted into the Chicano canon, we can make sense of how the label works for him when he invokes Du Bois. What “Chicano” seems to specify for Vea is something like the sociopolitical motivation underwriting his

⁴² José F. Aranda, *When We Arrive: A New Literary History of Mexican America* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 2003), 33. The novelty of New Chicano/a Studies highlights contradictions, an acknowledgment of the fissures (which have always been present) and the eschewal of the myth of homogeneity. When we tell “our” story now, we should no longer omit difference for political expediency; instead, the contradictions should be the very basis of our narrative and our identity because such is more accurate (or at least more effective way to describe the postmodern, global world we inhabit). Chicano identity and culture are “fluid with regard to race, class, gender, sexuality and political affiliations” (23).

virtuosity and craft: the belief that literature written by an intelligentsia could (and should) elevate its people. To not see his work as doing *that* is to misunderstand it. Critics can and do get it wrong, and what they get wrong is not a question about *his* identity (is he Chicano?) but a question of what his work does or does not do (is *it* Chicano?). Following this logic, it remains possible to imagine other works written by other writers as not at all interested in elevating his or her people, maybe not even interested in identifying with a particular group of people.⁴³

So any comparison I have so far made between African American literature and Chicano literature is ultimately unsustainable. Nobody reading Langston Hughes today denies that his work is part of African American literature—and this even when Hughes at times trenchantly disagrees with Du Bois. (Véa gestures at this disagreement when he describes Hughes and Du Bois “sitting around arguing.”) So whereas Du Bois believed in a “Talented Tenth” model of racial uplift in which the literati and intelligentsia could serve as models and advocates for the rank and file, Hughes dismisses the idea that art and literature could improve the lot of the poor: “I don’t know what made any Negroes think that—except that they were mostly only intellectuals doing the thinking.” Those he calls “ordinary Negroes” had never heard of “the Negro Renaissance” he writes, and even if they had “it hadn’t raised their wages any.”⁴⁴ Commenting on Hughes’s criticism, in *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), Kenneth Warren observes:

Yet Hughes overstates the disconnect between ordinary Negroes and intellectuals in a telling way. For although black intellectuals were pursuing what amounted to a class politics through the medium of collective race-group interests—a politics that had it succeeded on its own terms would still have left unaddressed many of

⁴³ Does anybody consider the writing of Richard Rodriguez as Chicano?

⁴⁴ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 228.

the concerns of “ordinary” Negroes—what made such a politics seem plausible as a race-group enterprise was the presence of Jim Crow. Given that those in favor of upholding legal segregation adduced black difference or inferiority to justify their practices, black literary production could count, indexically or instrumentally, as a blow against the segregation order regardless of whether these readers shared the work’s political vision.⁴⁵

Notice the extent to which Warren in effect agrees with Hughes’s critique. The black intellectuals *were* advancing a “class politics” underwritten by the belief in “collective race-group interests,” a politics that would not have addressed the needs of “ordinary” (poor) Negroes. Yet—and this objection makes all the difference—regardless of whether or not Hughes saw his work as advocating for anybody, and regardless of the class politics inherent in the consolidation of a leadership class, the reality of legal segregation ensured that Hughes’s work did count as a blow in favor of African Americans *as such*.

Warren’s argument invites us to consider the specific conditions that enable the literary activity by a certain stratum of a society to stand in a representative relation to a group within that society, and it asks us to consider the specific conditions in which this literature could be seen as politically efficacious. This is not to say that literature is otherwise apolitical. What we now consider “literature” has long been related to the formation of the bourgeoisie and the maintenance of social power. (After all, when has the middle class ever thought of its worldview as anything other than universally beneficial and representative?) This general insight helps specify Warren’s questions: when does cultural production by the middle and upper middle class count as politically efficacious for those in the working class whose political interests do not coincide? When do the self-interested efforts of this stratum represent the interests of anybody

⁴⁵ Warren, *What Was?*, 109–10.

but themselves? The answer Warren's work provides is historically specific: the moment when people began to call for an African American literature was the moment where there was massive exclusion of southern black Americans from the political realm in the late 19th century. This large-scale political disfranchisement of blacks during the 1890s coincided with calls for the establishment of a black literature that, although produced in large part by Northern writers, sought to develop a sense of representative racial commonality. The depiction of this commonality and the delineation of black American humanity could put forward an appeal on behalf of the race as a whole, an appeal that was otherwise foreclosed. So although Hughes was right to point out the fallacy of race-group interest, what granted this political claim its purchase is the legalized segregation it fought against. To insist on the efficacy of such race-group interest in the absence of Jim Crow, when "black identity and black solidarity are ever more tenuous" becomes a much more difficult claim to justify.⁴⁶

This very difference in the contexts underwriting the calls for a Chicano intelligentsia and a black Talented Tenth, and the difference between Chicano literature and African American literature, allows contemporary critics to assess the extent to which the Chicano version of political intervention could be considered what Richard Rodriguez calls "a mistaken strategy."⁴⁷ His critique of Chicano politics centers in large part on what he considers a false, ahistorical analogy between the African American and Mexican American collective experiences of discrimination. In *Hunger for Memory* (1982) Rodriguez describes how the specificity of legalized segregation created the conditions for a black, interclass political vision because Jim Crow laws did not differentiate between the "black businessman and the black maid." "Thus," argues Rodriguez, "when segregation laws were challenged and finally defeated, the benefit to

⁴⁶ Warren, *What Was?*, 110.

⁴⁷ Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography* (New York: Dial Press, 2005), 160.

one became the benefit for all; the integration of an institution by a single black implied an advance for the entire race.”⁴⁸ Because of the analogy between blacks and Mexican Americans, the academic integration of Chicano scholars could similarly be characterized as an advancement for “the race.” Activism that focuses on increasing the number of minorities in higher education is limited not only in scope but objective because it ignores crucial features that contribute *to* the lower representation of Mexican Americans at the college level—namely, their inability to afford tuition and the gross disparities in their education that preclude their even applying. Rodriguez questions the pervasive valorization of the college campus as the site enabling upward class mobility because those *already* in a position to avail themselves of elite opportunities (including college enrollment and eventual professorships) are strictly speaking not the most vulnerable members of society. “The campus,” he argues, “has become a place for ‘making it’ rather than a place for those who, relatively speaking, already ‘have it made.’”⁴⁹ Stated a bit more sharply, by focusing on race-based initiatives to increase the numbers of minorities at universities, activists effectively advance a bourgeois class politics disproportionately benefiting students of the middle and upper middle class.

Rodriguez is therefore surprised that such efforts to diversify the elite (to “form a leadership class” and an “elite society”) were sanctioned by those on the Left, those for whom the establishment and caretaking of an elite leadership class should constitute the problem. And citing the historical “relationship of the novel to the rise of the middle class in eighteenth-century Europe,”⁵⁰ he expresses skepticism that literature—which has traditionally reinforced the bourgeoisie's sense of self— could serve the needs of the poor. Without the context that validates

⁴⁸ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 160.

⁴⁹ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 165.

⁵⁰ Rodriguez, *Hunger*, 173.

the claims to its universal representation, the middle class's self-interest tends to advance the politics that benefits itself.

To exemplify the limitations of Chicanismo today, we need only attend to José F. Aranda's call for a "New Chicano/a Studies," and pay attention to his claim that "New Chicano/a Studies has never been in a better position to advocate for the powerless, the uneducated, and *los olvidados*, the forgotten, of this country."⁵¹ Stated just slightly differently: the forgotten, powerless, uneducated require their relatively more powerful, and better-educated spokespersons to advocate on their behalf. In itself this claim could appear uncontroversial; those with, say, law degrees could advocate on behalf of those unfamiliar with the rights afforded to them by the law. When one looks for a concrete example of what Aranda means by "activism" and who he refers to as the powerless, uneducated and forgotten, one only finds examples of literary criticism and literary history that benefits students.

The main example Aranda offers of such activism is that of recovering the work of María Ruiz de Burton. Aranda disagrees with other critics who see her as a "subaltern" author.⁵² In many ways, she was not. One of the first Mexican Americans to write a novel in the U.S., Ruiz de Burton was the daughter of a generations-old *Californio* family, part of the Spanish colonial regime in California before the Mexican-American war of the 1840s. That is to say, she was part of the Californio elite who were gradually dispossessed of their landed power and status, a dispossession aided by Congress's blatant disregard for the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the gradual racialization that would render both Spanish *Dons* and Mexican peasants into "greasers." Drawing from political philosophy and legal texts, Ruiz de Burton's *Squatter and the*

⁵¹ Aranda, *When We Arrive*, 41.

⁵² For an account of Ruiz de Burton as "subaltern" see José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997). See also Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita's introduction to *The Squatter and the Don* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1992).

Don (1885) assumes the form of an impassioned rhetorical argument that aided Ruiz de Burton's case to reclaim land that was hers by birthright. The novel emphasizes the established hierarchy one finds in late nineteenth century literature of the northeast, wherein "good breeding" and "blueblood" status cannot be purchased. Demonstrating the extent to which the Spanish Californios, because they have had the proper "good breeding," are quite at home with the best Anglo families living in New York, the novel offers a counterargument to facile stereotypes that would paint all Mexican Americans with the same brush. The novel strategically emphasizes Spanish ancestry and upper-class status by contrasting the Californio "Dons" to a Mexican mestizo peasantry, identified by the peasant's use of vernacular Spanish ("Apa! viejo escuata ó cabestreas ó te órcas"). The Don, in short, is not a Mexican peasant, nor is he a poor American squatter. Yet the squatter can overcome *his* inferior status ("I was a thieving squatter, of course") by stealing the Don's land and calling him a "greaser." The novel thus highlights a previously existing social hierarchy that recognized the difference between peasants and landed Californios in order to expose the injustice of being treated as a second-class citizen by the U.S. government. The novel proffers a literary argument for elitism.

So recovering Ruiz de Burton, whose novels had fallen out of circulation, is part of what Aranda means by "recovering our alienated selves." Scholars can return a past to students and alienated self the students may not have realized was theirs by birthright and blood. When Aranda applauds literary scholarship for finally recognizing the author —by giving her a home in literary history, syllabi, and the classroom—he designates the university as the site that finally provides Ruiz de Burton the recognition she sought throughout her life. This irony is compounded when the college students on whose behalf Aranda advocates come increasingly from the top levels of national income. As the children of the elite take literature courses, they

read about their elite forebears. So when Aranda claims, “So long as the desire for activist scholarship remains alive, Chicano/a studies can never wholly become a vehicle for cultural elitism,”⁵³ we should instead hear the following: so long as students are labeled “minority students” and so long as the authors they read are labeled “recovered writers,” literary criticism becomes political activism, and the work we do as professors and students of literature acts as the agent of social change instead of the mechanism maintaining the status quo.

We Happy Few

My final example, Rolando Hinojosa’s episodic novel *We Happy Few* (2006), shows the limitations of this politics of elite-brokerage, and the limitations of the belief in the university as the site of justice with literature as its enabling instrument. The novel’s very first scene features a student quietly reading “a fat book” outside of a professor’s office, which a group of workers has just finished painting. One painter notices the student and asks, “And what you reading there? [sic],” to which the student responds by “shrugg[ing] and show[ing] him the book: *Great Expectations*. ‘Mostly about dreams, filled and unfilled, retribution, justice, memories, remembrances...’”⁵⁴ The difference between the question and its response is not lost on the worker (“Wow. Too deep for me, kid”), a contrast that registers what appears to be the irrelevance of the string of depicted concepts that the student rattles off as an answer. Insofar as somebody learns about retribution and justice from literature, it is the college student.

The novel continually highlights this difference between workers and university students, most powerfully in a later episode depicting a confrontation between a group of students and the university president. They barge into his office to announce their occupation of the building.

⁵³ Aranda, *When We Arrive*, 37.

⁵⁴ Rolando Hinojosa, *We Happy Few* (Houston, TX: Arte Publico, 2006), 2. Ellipsis in original.

Unperturbed, the president politely invites them to have a seat and welcomes them to proceed with their protest (“Occupy away”), but before leaving to attend his scheduled meetings (i.e., before carrying on with business as usual) he warns them in a more authoritative tone:

whatever trash is left in the offices and hallways is your responsibility. I will not have the men and women who clean your dorms, the classrooms, the labs, the offices, the libraries, restrooms, the Student Union, in short, every building on campus and the grounds on which they stand, I will not have them clean up after you. They’re overworked, they’re people in their fifties and sixties, and they do their jobs daily and nightly so you may enjoy a clean place in which to work.⁵⁵

Stated bluntly, it is more than a bit stupid of him to say that people in their fifties and sixties work as janitors not to sustain their own lives but rather to benefit students, students who are in school, presumably, to avoid such low-paying janitorial jobs. Yet the university president’s comments do register the irrelevance of what here looks like the students’ ineffectual activism to the kind of political intervention that would seek adequate compensation for these employees’ labor, reducing the need for their *being* “overworked.” Taken together, these two encounters concerning students and workers raise anew the questions concerning the relation of Chicano radical politics to a labor politics and the role of literature as such plays in that relation. When read this way, the novel’s delineation of Chicano politics is far from the working class activism that tends to be foregrounded. The novel can be read as demonstrating the extent to which Chicano activism and labor activism pursue competing political visions.

With *We Happy Few*, Hinojosa—one of the most recognized Chicano novelists of the 1970s—provides a sardonic representation of the waning efficacy of Chicano radicalism and its institutionalization. The novel’s depiction of the daily reality of university bureaucracy (meetings and search committees, tenure reviews and teaching, unfinished manuscripts and grading...) seems to leave no time for activism, as if to suggest that one is either an academic or an activist. One of the novel’s many characters, a professor whose “Ph.D. is six years old,” has yet to

⁵⁵ Hinojosa, *We Happy Few*, 30–31.

publish a peer-edited article or book because he will not “stop politicking.” According to him, his activism remains “important to the community,” but his colleagues remind him that “This isn’t the sixties or the seventies, man. We have more kids in school, some are sharper than we were at that age.”⁵⁶ To his colleagues his activism, because no longer as urgent, amounts to a form of procrastination: “the community expects us to work, just like they do.” Just who gets to count *as* this community is unclear. (Do the older janitors?) Unclear, too, is how these interlocutors seem to have access to this community’s collective expectations. The professor “politicks” on the community’s behalf, and his colleagues assure him that his efforts are not exactly what this community wants, all while the purported “community” hovers in the background while its interlocutors debate what it might want and need.

While the novel cites impressive statistics of Mexican American inclusion into higher learning, it satirizes these students’ solipsism. One student journalist concludes her column by writing, “This is my final column... and I’ll go job hunting on Monday after graduation, depending, of course, on when I wake up.”⁵⁷ Other excerpts from the student newspaper include dating gossip and details of intergroup bickering. The “Chicano Cultural Club” and the “Mexican American Cultural Committee” fight about a potential merger during “talks” that “last longer than the Hundred years war.”⁵⁸ While the students meet at the “Aztec/Maya Cultural Room” to argue about group dynamics, the “university’s employees... have to clean up the mess after every meeting.”⁵⁹ The profusion of adjectives (not simply Chicano but also Mexican American, not only Aztec but Mayan too) registers the gains of the 1960s and 1970s activism

⁵⁶ Hinojosa, *We Happy Few*, 60.

⁵⁷ Hinojosa, *We Happy Few*, 41.

⁵⁸ Hinojosa, *We Happy Few*, 42.

⁵⁹ Hinojosa, *We Happy Few*, 40.

that garnered such cultural centers on the campuses of universities while simultaneously satirizing what looks like ineffectual debates about labels.

By arguing for a more rigorous periodization of the term “Chicano,” I may be contributing to this type of debate. My purpose for doing so, however, is to foreground the historical specificity of the term, and its waning relevance since the 1980s. Insofar as the category Chicano continues to be invoked by critics, it is often done so not because of the descriptive or interpretive clarity the term helps produce about texts written since the 1980s, but rather the political benefits the term helps enable. Although the Chicano Movement produced achievements, these achievements have led to mixed reactions. A common regret about the historical outcome of the Chicano intervention is that Chicano Studies has become yet another socially conservative field of study. Perhaps such a politics of inclusion could not have led to fundamental social change because it does not ultimately pose a challenge to entrenched institutional and economic inequality. The inclusion of Chicano literature and the incorporation of Mexican American professors and students into academia have not fundamentally altered the status quo unless we consider the status quo in question to be the racial makeup of the middle and upper classes.

By continuing to insist on Chicano literary critical activism, present-day literary critics reproduce the same contradictions that the Chicano movement has always embodied. So when José F. Aranda calls for a “New Chicano studies” in his aspirationally titled *When We Arrive: A New Literary History of Mexican America*, readers of the work should ask: *Who* constitutes this “we”? Where is the there that we are headed? How will we know when we get there? How will a *literary history* help us? Ilan Stavans, the editor of the *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2010), offers some potential answers during a recent interview. He says, “In the last several

decades, Latinos finally have been entering the middle class. This anthology not only explains the forces behind that economic move but justifies the move. It is a book that all middle-class Latinos need, proof that we've made it: We've arrived."⁶⁰ Not only would the millions of Mexican Americans *not* in the middle class disagree with his triumphalism, Aranda and Stavans' shared perspective suggests that the gradual inclusion into the middle class of Mexican Americans marks the telos of decades of struggle. The goal is inclusion into "the middle class" and "a literature" offers proof of that goal's achievement. The title to Hinojosa's novel, *We Happy Few*, when placed in relation to Aranda's title, *When We Arrive*, thus becomes caustically ironic: as "we" make inroads into academia and arrive in the middle and upper middle class, unless our arrival somehow counts as representative, we will be a happy few indeed. And if the characters Ben and Roberto are indicative, maybe we won't even be all that happy.

"A beautiful book"

For those of us fortunate enough to make a living out of reading and teaching literature, it is in our self-interest to make of literature not only something valuable but something supremely important. Our sense of ourselves depends in many ways on the possibility that what we determine to be "good" and "art" aligns itself with our conception of the true. The story I have narrated throughout these chapters depicts the rise and fall of the Chicano narrative's ability to provide that self-reassurance. It becomes much harder to maintain a sense of solidarity when we recognize that our claim to speak for others is a claim we ourselves need to be true for our self-conception.

⁶⁰ "What Defines Latino Literature?" Interview with Ilan Stavans by Chloë Schama. Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Inst., 2 Dec. 2010.

As I show in my third chapter, Richard Rodriguez asks us to consider how the history of the novel is linked to the history of bourgeois subjectivity and how Chicano literature bespeaks class inequality even as it claims to speak for the disadvantaged. That chapter shows how the literature that emerges after the Chicano renaissance rejects the Chicano function of literature and thematizes what (new) role literature should play for Mexican Americans. This literature, however, repeats many of the Chicanos' contradictions. Perhaps literature, especially the novel, cannot but be the means through which the middle class can feel a sense of solidarity, belonging, and self-coherence. Literature is how we reaffirm and secure the subjectivity we hold so dear.

But I would like to end with the possibility raised by Manuel Ramos's novel when it suggests that perhaps the category of the "beautiful" might be resurrected from its post-Romantic ashes. Maybe this evocation is not merely a naive desire for the atavistic return of the aesthetic ideal (even as it is that too) but is instead the expression of a desire for a strived for artistic perfection. The point here would not be to present "the beautiful." Rather, the goal would be to produce a sense of artistic integrity, to produce works of art that strive to perfect their status as the art they try to be.

José Antonio Villarreal's contemporary John Okada dramatizes such an account of art in his novel *No-No Boy* (1957). Okada's Japanese American protagonist has trouble finding a way to belong to American society, a way of being in the world that does not feel to him coerced and thus inauthentic. After he has been imprisoned for saying "no" to two loyalty questions in the wake of the Pearl Harbor bombing, a fraught decision that reflects his anger over being placed in an internment camp, he continually rejects the well-intentioned efforts of those offering him employment out of pity or guilt. He encounters another Japanese American in this situation, someone who seems to have figured out a way to live a fulfilling life. "Maybe it's a little easier

for me,” he says, “I am a painter—that is, I think I am. I want to be a good painter, an artist.” For him, being “a painter” is not a description of his actions. It is instead an aspiration he strives to achieve. The ontology of the products of this effort is contingent on their success as art: “If I had spent the time painting that I did talking,” he confesses, “I might have had a painting now, a real painting.”⁶¹ He has produced works, of course, yet their status as “real” “paintings” depends on their success *as* paintings. On this view, something like the status of art must be achieved, and if it is achieved, it can exist as what it is, for itself. This view of art, of course, does not *solve* his situation; yet, the aspiration to create a work of art that is “real,” however fleeting its possibility, gives the character the solace to endure his situation in the wake of WWII. This ambition could describe—should describe—Okada’s own when he wrote his novel. The irony of *No-No Boy*’s reception, however, is its being understood in relation to what Frank Chin in 1976 described as Okada’s “yellow soul.” This invocation of a yellow soul, however ironic it might be, indicates a mistaken account of the novel because the individual recognition that the protagonist seeks becomes inhibited by the imposition of prescriptive norms he would otherwise reject. Such an imposition precludes the artistic ambition the novel makes available.

The idea that art can be autonomous, however naïve, is essentially “liberationist” and it enables “recognition,” yet the recognition in question involves social intersubjectivity and mutual understanding. Rivera’s description of Chicano literature as a collective “life in search of form” is at its absolute best when it describes the idea that art can formally embody our intended meanings that we recognize as our own, meanings that are shareable, collectively intelligible. The aspiration of this idea suggests that art can point to a resolution of the modern contradictions that perennially fracture us. As I show in my fourth chapter, Gloria Anzaldúa presents a version of this ideal— even as she critiques it—when she writes the poem “Cihuatyotl, Woman Alone,”

⁶¹ Okada, *No-no Boy*, 197.

which dramatizes the conflict between individual artistic autonomy and coercive social determination. This conflict is held in a formal stasis that intimates a resolution that perhaps is only possible in art. And as I show in my first chapter, José Antonio Villarreal hints at a harmonic resolution when his protagonist Richard appreciates a non-instrumentalized notion of play that he sees in “nature.” The pleasure Richard experiences indicates the possibility of his living his life not simply as a *type* placed in the service of somebody else’s *cause*. This moment intimates the ground for Richard’s potential freedom from social determination, but a freedom that is not solipsistic and detached, a rejection of all social categorization. Rather, this freedom, insofar as it is possible, would have to extend to the totality of social relations existing in a communicative relation among equals. This, I think, is the most aspirational explication of a collective “life in search of form,” a *collective* search (not just “Chicano,” not just “yellow soul”) for the conditions of possibility of the embodiment of our sensible intuitions and meanings in shareable form.

In the end, is this view of the liberationist possibility of literature as art ideological? Does it maintain the status quo and reinforce the self-satisfaction of the privileged? Yes, I think it can and does. But it also makes available so much more. Villarreal’s *Pocho* does not simply affirm the value of bourgeois subjectivity. His novel—when it maximizes the conventions of its genre— frames this subjectivity, delineates it so as to evaluate and critique it. Villarreal’s artistic ambition enables something like critical distance. But as we also saw in my analysis of *Clemente Chacón*, Villarreal’s celebration of individualism is entirely compatible with the celebration of neoliberal market economics. We know the fate of Villarreal and Okada’s essentially liberal vision of American society as comprised of individuals. We know the result of the clash of monadic self-interests.

Insofar as we can be aware of the politics that literature seems always to enable, then, we have a choice: We can make and celebrate art that conforms to and is in the service of our politics. This, in the view of art I am defending here, would not be art; it would be propaganda. Or we might instead strive for autonomous art. This art aims to exist as the formally embodied sensible meaning of free subjects who recognize themselves as equals existing in a communicative relation, individuals who are not subjected to the interest of anyone, but are self-determined and flourishing. That ideal is naive, to be sure, but it is worth maintaining and defending, if for no other reason other than that it makes available great art. If what we want instead—however “we” define ourselves—is to address the manifold problems of inequality, perhaps literature is not the best means to actualize the world we desire. This fact does not mean we should do away with the literary as such, but it does suggest that we appreciate the literary for what it is and not try to convert it into something else.

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