

The “Imaginative Geography” in Arturo Islas’  
*The Rain God*.

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## Introduction

Today's multicultural world brings about attention to the relation with the "other" as a crucial feature of one's configuration of identity. In the context of global migration and transculturation, the concept of identity politics is not only linked to social movements and political struggles, but it reaches the interstices of people's everyday life in their attempt to figure out one's fundamental location among different and contrastive definitions of the self. This is particularly true for those ethnic groups that have fought against their social marginalization inside a national context excluding them from its monologic structure— inside which they became "second-class" citizens— and that still must fight against a representation of inferiority that was imposed from the outside but that they have, in many cases, interiorized. This form of oppression derives, according to Taylor, from the distorted representations that can arise in our universal need for identity recognition. The recognition of the fundamental characteristics that make up one's definition as human beings is at stake in the struggle against destructive external impositions of identity—what Taylor regards as misrecognitions or non-recognitions. As the "colonized other" (Arteaga 77), the Chicano ethnic group engages in a struggle that is nationalistic in its earlier stages, advancing as it does its own articulation of difference through monologic discourse. The indigenous system of representation that the Chicano affirms in rejection of an externally imposed one, is contained inside the limited perspective of "privileged discourse", transforming a possibility of dialogue into "the clash of senseless monologues" (Arteaga 78).

These basically monologic forms of discourse imagine a definition of identity as negatively determined against the "other", so that difference exists only when it is negated, only when it is ascribed to the "other" as "there and

marginal”, that is, absent. In this case, the fundamental dialogic character of human life upholds oppression as a way to define both the “self” and the “other”. Inside a monologic dynamics of relation where difference is assumed as antithesis, recognition is demanded for at the expense of one’s freedom.

Born out of the struggles for discursive dominance, Chicano discourse starts disengaging itself from such premises in order to envision cultural *mestizaje* as a fertile condition for what Saldívar has called the “dialectics of difference” (Saldívar 1990). Difference becomes a crucial element in a dialogic relation with the “other” that does not aim at controlling other subjects’ identities according to analogical or antithetical principles, but that, rather, entails difference as necessary for the “completion” of one’s identity. As Taylor explains, the individual reaches his completeness in the reciprocity with the “other”, when the “other” is engaged in a dialogue of dissimilarity. The social space ceases to be “deaf” to difference, it seeks, instead, its nurturing and conservation<sup>1</sup>. The value of difference now lies in its destabilizing potential which compels to a continual reassessment of the perspective, and which, in the Chicano hybridized discourse, opens up to a “*bivisualismo*” or “*bisensibilismo*” (Villanueva 54) as the capacity to visualize and react to the same reality in two different ways, depending on the Mexican or Anglo American “sensitivity”. By virtue of its bilingual nature, the Chicano comprehends difference in the very composition of discourse. Most importantly, he perceives difference as part of his sensitivity, as a measure of his own sense of self.

The non-recognition of a Chicano identity in the monologic Anglo American society results in the frustration of his authenticity as human being, and in the consequential self-hatred and self-obliteration that can become, in the end, extreme strategies of survival as “autocolonialism”: “the other assimilates both [hegemonic] discourse and the relationships it systematizes,

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<sup>1</sup> See Taylor 26.

so to the degree the discourse suppresses, the autocolonist effaces or denigrates him/herself from within” (Arteaga 77). In *The Rain God*, Arturo Islas stages his own struggle for identity formation and recognition, critical of both external and interiorized distorted images of the self. His struggle takes on the less overt and more intimate terms of a psychological quarry inside the space of the family. This space, he shows, can be the most treacherous of all for an individual projection of identity when it combines affectivity with interiorized social distortions of the self. It then becomes a reproductive site of forms of oppression that exist in society and that are naturalized in its fabric. In this case, the Mexican American family is a complex construction standing between the necessity to conform to society so as to be accepted by it, and the parallel need to refer to itself as a shelter from the rejection that comes from the outside. Central to this ambivalence is Arturo Islas’ need for recognition which is fulfilled by his relation with the others. As the social space where affective nourishment and protection are codified values of its meaning, the family nominally provides a “safe place” for the individual’s development and his identity formation. In Arturo Islas’ narration of the Angels’ experience through a more than thirty-year-span of time, he represents the difficult development of identity inside the ideological entrapment that the family constitutes: from Mama Chona, who founds a legacy of self-destructive individuals, to Miguel Chico, who turns self-destruction into release by retracing and recomposing the threads that help making sense of past traumas. These events and their different recollection according to the character’s perspective, resemble tormenting images which recur in the author’s life and which link him in an obsessive way to his past. Their narration through the novel aims at transforming the “family secrets” into meaningful instances that inform the ideological distortions structuring the family group: the private becomes public while the interiorized borders as sites of repression are transformed into an articulation of self-determination through knowledge. Anzaldúa’s delineation of the border as a

*"herida abierta"* finds its authentic representation in *The Rain God* as the performative process of continual regeneration through the effective interpretation of painful experiences.

The epistemic privilege that people suffering from race, gender, and sexual oppression possess, as Mohanty explains, is inscribed in the effective interpretation that they can derive from their particular experiences. Arturo Islas *represents* this interpretive process through self-reflexivity which, in the novel, operates in both content—as the narration of an individual's conscious development of his awareness of oppression through the dialogic relation with history and the past—and form—through the self-reflexive mode of a third person narration which stages a stratified perspective always readdressing the gaze to its origin. As a conscious and critical understanding of the relation between one's "positioning and positionality", that is, between one's location within a given social reality and one's imagined standpoint to that positioning, reflexivity prepares us "to seek new understandings and explanations that can point the way to emancipatory practices and, by the same token, unmask false antagonisms" (Sánchez 2008, 43). Arturo Islas points at knowledge as the acute awareness of contradictions arising from the dialectical link between experience—Islas' experience inside the family context—and its re-interpretation. He thus shows how members of the same family, who share the same location, can live and interpret their situation in different ways, thus arriving at different and also contradictory articulations of identity. Implied in the difference is a wider or narrower comprehension of the social factors that concur into shaping our knowledge of our social location, that is "different degrees of legitimacy and spuriousness" (Mohanty 1997, 230-231) in relation to our identity definitions. By representing difference through the characters' conflictive relations among/with themselves, Islas both explains the difference and focuses on its dialogic relation as a means through which we

can get knowledge of, or “epistemic access” to, reality: from the particular to the universal.

The process through which Islas interrogates the epistemic and affective consequences of his own social location inside the family, leads to “cultural decolonization” as the dismissal of historically learnt habits of thinking and feeling (Mohanty 1997, 236). He represents the development from autocolonialism to decolonization both through the family’s generational conflicts and through the personal symbolic growth of Miguel Chico. By acknowledging that “he had a long way to go” (29)<sup>2</sup>, Miguel Chico points at the open-endedness of a discourse on identity where difference and cross-cultural conflicts become vital features for cooperative understanding, so as to develop “a rich notion of cultural diversity as a social good” (Mohanty 1997, 198).

*The Rain God* thus epitomizes a central issue of Chicano literature, which is the delineation of a Chicano identity amid authoritative definitions that try to set the conditions or characteristics prior to the individual and necessary for him to validate his existence. And this is evident from the very moment when Islas tried to publish it. In 1974, Islas was at his fourth year as a faculty member at the University of Stanford in California. *The Rain God* was already completed, but it would not be published until 1984, “ten years of frustration ... while Arturo struggled to interest a publisher ... in the novel” (Skenazy 170). Before the novel was accepted by the Alexandrian Press in Palo Alto, Islas received several rejections based on *a priori* notions about the “ethnic cultural message” a Mexican American novel was expected to convey and that *The Rain God* failed to give. Such rejections, as the ones reported by Skenazy, read like: “There is not enough *barrio* life in the novel; there is no reading public to buy the work of a Mexican American; the book lacks the voice of protest and political rage that should be part of any work

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<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, quotations from *The Rain God* by Islas will be indicated in the text by page number in brackets.

from a so-called minority population” (Skenazy 170). The novel indeed refuted a conception of the Mexican American as was expected by the average publisher and reader of the time, that is, a conception that was based on an arbitrary notion that tended to define its characteristics in essentialist terms: a *preconceived* notion projected on ethnic groups that fixed, and so stereotyped, their identity. What the publishers that rejected Islas’ novel saw as a representation of the characters like not enough “real people”, was, in the end, Islas’ own representation of himself and the people he grew up with, that is, Islas’ articulation of identity. Through the autobiographical representation in *The Rain God*, the round image of the “other” as expected by an essentialist viewpoint becomes, instead, as blurred and ambiguous as reality is. The non-linearity of the plot, with its numerous flashbacks and flashforwards, combines with an interest in the past, as Miguel Chico, alias Arturo Islas, states, “for psychological, not historical reasons” (28). He thus penetrates the surface of things so as to arrive to psychological assessments: “he preferred to ignore facts in favor of motives, which were always and endlessly open to question and interpretation” (28). Each character is dealt with according to this principle, so that the ethnic *color* or “brown” cultural elements, the *exotic* traits that appeal and are encoded in the hegemonic reading of the ethnic “other”, remain at the surface of events, while Islas is concerned with their bewildering depths.

In addition, the “I” of the autobiographical impulse is replaced by a “he” in an attempt to split the focus of attention among all the characters that form the family. The family becomes the organizing principle and, as Islas conceives it, “the hero of the novel” (Torres 69): a multivoiced collectivity depicted in its contradictions and differences. Consistent with Miguel Chico’s psychological reading, the sense of clannishness that arises from the Angels’ acquaintance becomes a collateral reflection of Islas’ portray which focuses, instead, on the ideological thread pulsating under the surface. By dealing



with a three generation Mexican American family covering a span of time that goes from the days of the Mexican revolution to the “Civil Rights Movement” and beyond until the 1970s, *The Rain God* brings into conflict different ideological formations. Although the novel does not directly address the social and historical contexts traversed by the Angels’ lives, each character resounds with the power structures of the social reality that forged him in a particular historical time. Thus, if Mama Chona, a 1910 Mexican migrant, is at the head of the family and imposes patriarchal rules on its members, her grandson Miguel Chico, who writes the family’s story from his San Francisco office at the University, rejects her oppressive system and starts questioning the legitimacy of his own interiorized biases.

Both the characters’ divergence from the representation that a hegemonic worldview inscribes into the unfamiliar “other”, and the lack of a central character marking off the novel’s organization in explicit terms, are elements in Arturo Islas’ novel that account for the publishers’ rejections, since, as Islas explains, “they didn’t find characters they could identify with so they didn’t find a central intelligence” (Torres 69). Arturo Islas’ difficulties in publishing his first novel reveal the ideological calculations and ethnic assumptions of one part of the Anglo American middle class who defines itself within the already established “taste hierarchy” (Saldívar 1991, 106).

In Islas’ novel, as in his life, a delineation of identity takes form out of a struggle against distorted notions of it that are both external and internal to the individual. Miguel Chico’s reappropriation of control over a definition of the self must go through the necessary recognition and elaboration of his painful past and present experiences inside the context of the family, which constitutes the public and social location inside which Miguel Chico is both defined and defines himself. The existing hierarchies of race, class, gender and sexuality that operate inside this particular Mexican American social location uphold matrices of power that are generated in broader national and cultural contexts, specifically the Anglo American and the Mexican ones.

Miguel Chico's particular struggle toward emancipation from limiting definitions of the self, becomes paradigmatic for acknowledging the dynamics of power relations that permeate the individual's private sphere. Since an individual's private dimension is strictly intertwined with his public one, then a public recognition of identity becomes fundamental in the formation of a private definition of one's identity. The individual's social location is encoded in his most private sphere extending as far as his "inner" self, since, according to Scheman, even emotions are situated in the social world. "Emotions-as-inner-states" is a picture of the mind and our privileged access to emotions is an ideological outcome of our society: "matters of political choice come to seem matters of unchangeable fact. We think that emotions just *are* particular states of individuals, specifiable independently of social context" (Scheman 179).

Islas' quest for knowledge focalizes on the distressing emotions arising from the complex relationship with his family, as the starting point of an analysis that will lead him to "make peace with his dead" (160). As Scheman explains, the reading of emotions, as located in a specific social context that influences and produces them, "can change the way we read ourselves": their contextualization can change the way we "put a name to a mass of rather different stuff" so as to reach closer to an understanding of our identity. In Scheman's words, this process "enable[s] us to be" and this enabling "is not just freeing us to feel in the future but, equally importantly, showing us how to read the past" (Scheman 175). Islas narration of his experience within the family, focalizes on events as significant conjunctions of feelings and behavior. They constitute significantly rich ground for an investigation of the relationship that exists between the individual and his society. The autobiographical thread of the novel also inscribes in this project a delineation of an expanded self, as comprising both the individual and the communal identities.

In so doing, *The Rain God* inserts itself in the context of the Chicano referential writing of the 70s, which is characterized, as Bottalico explains, by a *multidiscursive* perspective where the “I” of the writer corresponds to the “we” of the community he represents<sup>3</sup>. The group perspective can also develop into a *generational* perspective, as is the case of Islas’ novel, when the discourse of the ideal “we” becomes representative of a whole generation inside the community. According to Bottalico,

*le opere di carattere autobiografico ... convergono nell'intento di generare una più completa e profonda comprensione del sé, nei suoi aspetti positivi e negativi, che a sua volta conduce ad una definizione più accurata e veritiera della comunità chicana, mirando a stabilire una dialettica delle differenze ove l'eterogeneità non sia necessariamente vissuta o interpretata come frattura. In questa prospettiva, esse contribuiscono a delineare una nuova storia non solo del gruppo etnico da cui scaturiscono ma degli Stati Uniti nella loro totalità, minandone la monocultura egemonica e alterandone il canone. (Bottalico 2008, 159-160)*

The individual self can represent his community without risking to engage in the same practice of ideological normalization and exclusion typical of hegemonic practices of misrepresentation. What the collective “we” implies, in fact, is not an all-comprehensive, universal representation of the Chicano community, where only some aspects of its complexity are believed to be salient and, thus, representative of the whole. Because of the synthesis of the individual “I” with the ideal “we”, the novel actually brings into focus the individual differences that “form” and characterize the community. *The Rain God* exemplifies this heterogeneous collectivity through the analysis of the ideological differences embodied by the characters, through the exposure of the conflictive relations that exist inside the apparently compact space of an extended family. Moreover, *The Rain God* leaves open the possibility of a definition of the self, since it focuses attention on the “process” of its

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<sup>3</sup> See Bottalico 2008, 159.

formation: in fact, “*il bisogno di un’autodefinizione identitaria ... è malgrado tutto ancora problematica e in divenire*” (Bottalico 2008, 174).

In the context of Chicano self-referential writing, *The Rain God*'s particularity lies in the third person narration that substitutes the individualist “I”. Arturo Islas employs an autobiographical third person point of view that, while fulfilling the collective impulse of the “I/we” perspective, also implies a self-reflexive elaboration that directly touches the author in the act of writing. Islas thus emphasizes through the act of writing the importance of a critical elaboration of the self and the community in which it is embedded. The exposure of oppressive practices of misrepresentation in the text finds its key foundation in the formal constitution of the viewpoint: the “he” that creates critical distance and returns the gaze to himself, reflected among all the characters in the novel. Through this formal device, Islas focuses attention on the recollection of past events as a critical elaboration that he performs through the act of writing: he translates theory into performance. His critical approach, in fact, is corroborated in the novel by what Miguel Chico asserts to be his credo: “He believed in the power of knowledge” (28). Knowledge and the interpretation of experience become the key words that lie beneath Islas’ project in *The Rain God*.

*The Rain God* has been the starting point of my thesis in that it has inspired a deeper elaboration of the theoretical assumptions that frame the discourse on identity in the contemporary merging of cultures.

I thus chose to divide my present study into two parts: the first part presents a study of the theories of identity formation as they have evolved from a postmodernist critical approach toward essentialist positions, to a critical articulation of certain postmodernist stances, as it has been advanced by theorists like Satya Mohanty and Paula Moya in the elaboration of what they call a “post-positivist realist theory of identity”. Inside this theoretical context, the analysis of the Chicano border identity combines a

postmodernist standpoint that disrupts Anglo American hegemonic identity elaborations, with a notion of multiculturalism as an “epistemic cross cultural cooperation” (Mohanty 1997, 240).

Finally, I have analyzed the outcome of those theoretical identity elaborations inside the context of the family, in a study of the sociological implications of the concept of *la familia* in the Mexican American community, as it intertwines with the individual elaboration of it staged in *The Rain God*.

The second part is committed to the presentation and interpretation of those formal and semiotic features in *The Rain God* that have triggered my interest toward a more elaborated study of the concept of identity.

PART I

**Knowledge and geography**

## Dialectics of unpredictability

Postmodernism is about language. About how it controls, how it determines meaning, and how we try to exert control through language. About how language restricts, closes down, insists that it stands for some thing. Postmodernism is about how “we” are defined within that language, and within specific historical, social, cultural matrices. It’s about race, class, gender, erotic identity and practice, nationality, age, ethnicity. It’s about difference. It’s about power and powerlessness, about empowerment, and about all the stages in between and beyond and unthought of... It’s about those treads that we trace, and trace, and trace. But not to a conclusion. To increased knowledge, yes. But never to innocent knowledge. To better understanding, yes. But never to pure insight. Postmodernism is about history. But not the kind of “History” that lets us think we can know the past... It’s about chance. It’s about power. It’s about information. And more information. And more. And. And that’s just a little bit of what postmodernism [is].

--Brenda Marshall

In his study *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric J. Hobsbawm considers the concept of tradition in its cultural construction, that is, as a mental elaboration of the historical connection of a group of people: tradition is a rhetorical product that endorses a feeling of cohesiveness among different people by upholding the imaginary of the community.

His study also explains man’s ability to acclimatize to the swift changes of the modern world: technical and economic evolution is always matched by a cultural adjustment to the changes brought about inside society. Man is able to adapt to new social and historical configurations by extending and stretching his historical imagination in a way that it can translate the novel structure into a continuation of the old one. A social transformation is accepted and incorporated in the daily performances through this continuity with the past which Hobsbawm calls “factitious”.

Hobsbawm explains that such an apparently “ancient” and “linked to an immemorial past” set of practices like that embodied by tradition is instead “quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (Hobsbawm 1). An “invented tradition”, he explains, becomes a “response to novel situations that take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their past by quasi-obligatory repetition” (Hobsbawm 2). This is true when old situations are not able to cope with the demands of new historical times, that is, when old traditions lose their vital meaning and function in contemporary society and must be abandoned. These traditions are thus replaced through their partial recovering: through the reintegration of some of their aspects, new ways of life and new values and norms can be introduced and implanted in society as being part of a natural, consequential process triggered by old established practices and values. Radically new values can be labeled as traditional in the same way as those they come to replace, by means of an “invented” historical connection with them.

Modern world, as Hobsbawm explains, is characterized by the contrast between “constant change and innovation and the attempt to structure some parts of social life as unchanging” (Hobsbawm 2). Hobsbawm’s approach to tradition reveals how notions of “being rooted in the remotest antiquity” and of “natural” formation suit any declared rupture with the old, since they endow novelty with the necessary legitimacy and uncontested nature to become integrated as “accepted” and thus “normal”. At the same time, he uncovers the fragility of that eternal language which belongs to hegemonic constructions, like that of the nation, so that, as Sollors explains, investigations that seek to determine the “typical” features that characterize a nation “do not have to give way to vague discussions of ahistorical rhetorical patterns, but can now be historicized” (Sollors xiii). The nation’s rhetoric reveals the non-objectivity and elusiveness of its assumptions when they are reconsidered through a historical approach that aims at grounding those assumptions in the ever-changing process of reality. The nation’s



discourse is thus a rhetorical discourse that, in the specificity of its vagueness, produces clear notions of identity unity and stability, out of “the realm of uncertainty and of messy peculiarities” (Minh T. Nguyen 199). By historicizing investigations on national identity, then, both the factitiousness of identity constructions and the rhetorical nature of the discourse that builds and fixes them are revealed.

Sollors’ study on ethnicity draws on Hobsbawm for what he calls the “decoding techniques familiar from the scholarship of ‘invention’” (Sollors xiii), and applies them to a modern and postmodern context. Sollors discusses “the forces of modern life embodied by such terms as ‘ethnicity,’ ‘nationalism,’ or ‘race,’ as ‘inventions’” (Sollors xi), by contextualizing them in the postmodern “dynamic interaction and syncretism” (Sollors xiv). The postmodern approach, as Joan Nogué Font explains, implies

*la resistencia a la cerrazón paradigmática y a las formulaciones rígidas y categóricas, la búsqueda de nuevas formas de interpretar el mundo empírico y el rechazo a la mistificación ideológica. Se desconfía, en efecto, de las ‘metanarrativas’, esto es de las grandes interpretaciones teóricas y de las explicaciones ideológicas egemónicas. El posmodernismo se rebela contra el fetichismo de los discursos totales, globalizadores y supuestamente universales y propugna un nuevo lenguaje de la representación. (Nogué Font 23-24)*

This change in the language of representation focuses the attention on the importance of language itself and on its constructionist function. As Sollors explains, “the interpretation of previously ‘essentialist’ categories ... as ‘inventions’ has resulted in the recognition of the general constructedness of the modern world” (Sollors x), and consequently in the deconstruction of those essentialist, universal categories into signifying linguistic signs or symbols that are, in the end, “arbitrary”. Since, according to postmodernist deconstructionism, there is no *natural* relationship between the sign and its meaning, the natural appearance of such categories is conveyed by the

ideological import produced by power relations. In this context “language and rhetoric become productive forces that constitute the ideological terms which then appear to be ‘natural’ signposts in our universe” (Sollors xi).

This view, mentioned by Sollors, of concepts as “signposts in our universe” introduces the discourse over the relationship between knowledge and geography as intended by Edward W. Said in *Orientalism*. In the chapter “Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: Orientalizing the Orient”, Said describes the process through which the mind conceives its own spatial correlation with the outside world. He describes the way it approaches a chaotic reality and produces meaning out of it: “Despite the distraction of a great many vague desires, impulses, and images, the mind seems persistently to formulate what Claude Lévi-Strauss has called a science of the concrete” (Said 1991, 53), that is, “mind requires order, and order is achieved by discriminating and taking note of everything, placing everything of which the mind is aware in a secure refindable place, therefore giving things some role to play in the economy of objects and identities that make up an environment” (Said 1991, 53). The mind thus perceives reality as an intricate thread of different elements whose specific role is codified according to a logic of interrelation among them. This relation is classified according to both historical and spatial coordinates, and is always dependent on the specific cultural code that imprints meaning by “fixing” the relationship between concepts and signs. Thus, if on one side, as Said explains, this classification has a logic to it, on the other side “the rules of the logic by which a green fern in one society is a symbol of grace and in another is considered maleficent are neither predictably rational nor universal” (Said 1991, 54). In fact, “there is always a measure of the purely arbitrary in the way the distinctions between things are seen” (Said 1991, 54).

This classificatory process, besides, encompasses both familiar and unfamiliar things, so that also that which is unknown is codified, that is, “assigned roles and given meaning” (Said 1991, 54). The space of one’s

imaginative geography is thus unlimited, it reaches beyond the confines of what is familiar and known, while it extends the realm of the familiar unto the unfamiliar which, accordingly, becomes predictable. This imaginative practice that exceeds the boundaries between the known and the unknown, has the paradoxical function of producing boundaries, since it substantiates those spatial distinctions it imagines to reach. Thus, “a group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call ‘the land of the barbarians’” (Said 1991, 54). The “imagined” acquires consistency, it becomes “real”, through rhetoric and language; at the same time the rhetorical practice by means of which the unknown becomes “the land of the barbarians” results from the ideological structure of a particular culture.

Said goes on to explain how rhetorical devices work in the definition of existential hierarchical categories. Implied in the concept of imaginative geography are both the textualization of space and the reduction of that space, which is infinite, to an analogical representation based on the familiarity of the known. The space thus “dramatized” becomes, as Said explains, an “enclosed space”, a “theatrical stage”, and its boundaries are delimited by the exigencies of an “authoritarian” voice whose language is exemplified in “declarative and self-evident” propositions, in the “timeless eternal” tense, in the sense of firmness and strength conveyed by repetitions, and in the analogical constructions that reduce, bind, and subject the “other”. All these rhetorical devices make up a self-contained, quasi-mythical world, “a self-reinforcing ... closed system, in which objects are what they are because they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter” (Said 1991, 70). The vocabulary and imagery of the analogical representation, by virtue of their reflexive nature, are thus “limited” since they “impose themselves as a consequence” (Said 1991, 60): “‘they’ become

'they' accordingly" (Said 1991, 54), thus marking the spatial coordinates like "signposts in our universe".

## The sanction of truth: ideology and the authoritative discourse

The “authoritarian” nature of the voice that defines “our universe”, *inside* which “the land of the barbarians” is located, is of ideological formation. In fact, “texts are not mere reflections of existing differences but also, among many other things, productive forces in nation-building enterprises” (Sollors xv).

According to Said, “if we agree that all things in history, like history itself, are made by men, then we will appreciate how possible it is for many objects or places or times to be assigned roles and given meanings that acquire objective validity only *after* the assignments are made” (Said 1991, 54).

This *a posteriori* validity that concepts acquire acts like an ideal justification of reality, that is, a sophism, which Renato Poggioli identifies with ideology (Poggioli 20)<sup>4</sup>. Along this line, identity derives its legal justification from an *a posteriori* social practice which produces identity categories according to concepts like ethnicity, nationality, race, gender, sexuality. These categories are this way “attached” to an individual in order to define his identity according to a cultural conceptual map. The “trick”, in Sollors words, that these categories pass themselves off as blood is realized in the ideological terms of their definition, and its focus is “on the group’s preservation and survival, which appear threatened” (Sollors xiv). Any society in any historical time, for the only reason of its being in the world, aims at the preservation of its existence. In order to do so, it must also see to the preservation of all the components that work together and collaborate to the functioning of its mechanisms. It is thus assumed that “no production is possible which does not allow for the reproduction of the material conditions of production: the reproduction of the means of production” (Althusser 1972, 128). Ideology is

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<sup>4</sup> In the context of national discourse, Poggioli describes ideology as an *a posteriori* creation in relation to an established form of social organization, and it serves the purpose of legalizing that organization by giving it a universal sense.

the “glue”, or “superstructure”, that allows for an interstitial control and regulation of the whole system, so that it can reproduce itself through the reproduction of its means. Inside all this reproductive process, ideology inserts itself in the reproduction of society’s ends: its own self-preservation. Ideology, thus, helps maintaining society’s fundamental *status quo*.

Both the solemnity of ancient traditional practices lost to an immemorial past, and the authenticity of unquestioned identity characteristics, by which persons or things are *recognized* and familiarized, belong to the vocabulary of social strategies of preservation. The central motif is “truth”, as a singular and universal entity. Its universality *fixes* its uniqueness which is claimed by the individual, idealized group or nation. Truth becomes a thing: an inanimate monolith which dissolves boundless plurality into a controlled system of differentiation. Truth, as Said explains, “becomes a function of learned judgment, not of the material itself” (Said 1991, 67). In fact, the material is open to a variety of interpretations and can become the object of a variety of truths depending on the “culture of enunciation”. According to Vila, “each set of individual and group identities is constructed within a culturally specific system of classification and with the help of narratives about oneself and ‘others’” (Vila 2003, 105).

Thus, a leading culture—a hegemonic culture—becomes the one which succeeds in making truth derive from the material itself, winning the “battle for meaning”. By deconstructing the concept of “Truth”, Pablo Vila argues that

because experience is discursively created, there is an ongoing struggle among discourses for the shaping of that experience. According to this approach each social position a given actor occupies—including his or her ethnic position—is the site of a struggle about the meaning of such a position; in other words, each position is intersected by a variety of discourses that are trying to make sense of this position. With regard to ethnic positions, the outcome of this discursive struggle is that the ethnic labels at stake enter the realm of the battle for meaning. (Vila 1998, 186)

In the context of this discursive struggle for meaning, “what this discourse considers to be a fact, is a component of the discourse, a statement the discourse compels one to make” (Said 1991, 62). This poststructural approach maintains that the social construction of identity involves a struggle over the ways in which meanings get fixed. All cultures, according to Said

impose corrections upon raw reality, changing it from flee-floating objects into units of knowledge ... Cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be. (Said 1991, 67)

and he adds,

... this process of conversion is a disciplined one: it is taught, it has its own societies, periodicals, traditions, vocabulary, rhetoric, all in basic ways connected to and supplied by the prevailing cultural and political norms of the West. (Said 1991, 67-68)

Thus, the ideological construction of each society is reproduced, in space and time, through a “didactic process” (Said 1991, 67) which can be exemplified by the bulk of “widely shared ... collective fictions that are continually reinvented” (Sollors xi). If, Sollors explains, “such terms as ‘ethnicity,’ ‘nationalism,’ or ‘race’ can indeed be meaningfully discussed as ‘inventions’” this is not to evoke “a conspirational interpretation of a manipulative inventor who single-handedly makes ethnics out of unsuspecting subjects” (Sollors xi). On the contrary, the ideology that sustains these narratives is especially “inconceivable”, since it lies behind, above, or beneath the actual *thinking*. Althusser maintains that ideology is produced according to an immutable mental structure similar to Freud’s unconscious, and he regards it like “a non-historical reality, i.e., an omni-historical reality” (Althusser 1972, 161), namely, eternal. “Ideology is eternal” Althusser maintains, “exactly like

the unconscious”, and “the eternity of the unconscious is not unrelated to the eternity of ideology in general” (Althusser 1972, 161). Beyond the life and death cycle of particular ideologies, the general concept of Ideology as part of our mental structure is above history, while, at the same time, it affects history in its unfolding.

This reasoning may thus lead to the equation of the structures that exist at the bottom of each abstract construction. Ideology and the unconscious function according to the same rules, and these rules are immutable and omnipresent throughout history, they are eternal:

It is customary to believe that ideology belongs to the region of “consciousness” ... In truth, ideology has very little to do with “consciousness” ... It is profoundly unconscious ... Ideology is indeed a system of representations but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with “consciousness”: they are usually images and occasionally concepts, but it is above all as structures that they impose on the vast majority of men, not via their “consciousness”. They are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and they act functionally on men via a process that escapes them. (Althusser 1990, 212)

Ideology is a world outlook, a determinate cultural representation of the world: each outlook speaks of an absolute “belief” in it on the part of the individual who naturally thinks it to be *true*, that is, real. Since every world outlook is a representation of reality through an effort of the mind to make it intelligible, ideology intervenes in sealing the reality of its appearance, so as to prevent that it will be rejected by the mind for what it is, that is, an illusion, an invention, a fictional reality. The process itself through which we represent reality to ourselves takes place unconsciously, and the individual, in his daily life, is not aware of being interpreting, by means of his representation, every single action, utterance, image that holds for a moment his attention.

Particular ideologies, as derivations of particular cultural structures, are internal to the individual for they are inculcated inside him since he was



born; ideology cannot be apprehended in the course of a life, for it would remain external to the individual and thus likely to be continually questioned and contested. Ideology is so integrated to the individual's everyday consciousness, that it is extremely hard for him to raise to the point of view of ideology: "individuals live 'spontaneously' or 'naturally' in ideology" (Althusser 1971, 171), since their outlook and existence are thoroughly compromised by its action that works inside the unconscious.

In this way, one's commonsense ideas about oneself and the others employ a variety of classifications and labels (age, class, gender, race, occupation, etc.) whose credibility and supposed "authenticity" are never questioned, thus perpetuating what Vila calls a "discursive destiny" (Vila 1998, 189) of social actors set by hegemonic cultures. According to Vila, common sense is "a 'truth' that is not typically contested" (Vila 1998, 189), a closed realm inside which the equivalence between language and reality is sanctioned, where the power to sanction ensues from the field of forces within which the struggle over meaning takes place. In the U.S. case, Vila explains,

the label "Hispanic" is the hegemonic label those in power propose to address people of Mexican (and other Latin American) descent, and "Chicano" is the counterhegemonic label the most important Mexican American social movement opposes to such a hegemonic definition ... Here is where classification systems and the struggle for hegemony converge with narrative identities. (Vila 1998, 190)

### **The Chicano counterstance**

Since the 1960s a variety of new ways of addressing the challenges of diversity in American society have combined around the term “multiculturalism”. The classic liberal American response to difference is “assimilationism”, a negative conception of multiculturalism that has to do with what multiculturalism is not or what it stands in opposition to. Multiculturalism, in this usage, represents heterogeneity as opposed to homogeneity, diversity as a counterpoint to unity. One has to situate oneself with respect to the presumed unity of the social whole as against an alternative conception of society, imagined as a collection of discrete and presumably divided ethnic and racial communities. Social and cultural differences in this view may be tolerated, but they are always divisive and are therefore a threat to social unity. Difference is understood as something dangerous, to dispose of or at least minimize, while the emphasis is instead on cultural homogeneity and conformity. Therefore, this vision deals with difference by removing it. In America, the central metaphor for assimilation is that of the “melting pot”—new elements take on the characteristics of the whole, thereby losing their distinctiveness.

Under this strong pressure to conform to a white-middle class society as the center of the order of symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern it, the Chicano response exploded in the 1960s as an affirmation of one’s ethnic identity and a reaction against discrimination that, although nationalistic in its earlier, more radical stages, had the effect of bringing, as Khalifa states, “a marginal spatiality to the center of discourse” (Khalifa 174).

The Chicano civil rights movement mixed political activism with a cultural reawakening, breaking from the assimilationist Mexican-American consciousness toward a search for wholeness and authentic identity. The “Chicano Renaissance”, as it was named, then meant *“il grande risveglio delle regioni sud-occidentali degli Stati Uniti, dopo quattro secoli di*

*dominazione, spagnola prima e poi anglosassone*” (Bacchiega 19). The reappropriation of one’s history and identity through the recovery of one’s origins was inscribed in the Chicano political agenda for self-affirmation. The call for human dignity, which was at the base of a liberal universal homogeneity, motivated, in the Chicano nationalist verve, both a focalization on one’s ethnic particularity and pride for one’s *mestizo* cultural origins. The artistic production of the time turned its gaze toward a past that had been lost in the historical dispossession of the land since the Spanish conquest, and images of pyramids, calendar stones, feathered serpents, and deities of all sorts found their way in the popular consciousness of *La Raza*. The mythical land of the Aztecs, Aztlán, became the signpost of a Chicano imagination that started assessing the ideological import of notions like “homeland”, “tradition”, “*carnalismo*”, and “family”, as signifiers conjuring up a communal sense of belonging.

Central to the Chicano stance was the defiance against corrupting representations of the *mestizo* self that tend to erase cultural differences by repressing them. As a reaction against cultural colonialism, the emphasis on ethnic pride produced the rhetoric of Chicano nationalism that celebrated the “Bronze People” as a race against racism—the “Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán” against the “‘Gringo’ ... the foreign Europeans”<sup>5</sup>—and that projected on the myth of Aztlán its utopian dream for independence. This reaction as counter-stance had not the merit to transcend the same imaginative “geographical” stage that previously enclosed the Chicano as the object of the hegemonic discourse. Aztlán indeed became, as Priewe states, “the central signifier for conceptualizing a specific, exclusionary ethnic essence” (Priewe 47). It became a means to

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<sup>5</sup> I quote from the *Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, a political manifesto advocating Chicano nationalism and self-determination for Mexican Americans. It was adopted by the First National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, a 1969 convention hosted by Rodolfo Gonzales’ Crusade for Justice held in Denver, Colorado. For the whole text, see <http://studentorgs.utexas.edu/mecha/archive/plan.html>

claim control over one's life and destiny, and it did so by connecting the present to a real/mythical past: the land of Aztlán, as emphasized by Hobsbawm, is an "invention"; through the lenses of an assumed past the present is legitimized, it acquires consistency and consensus: Aztlán thus helped substantiating "politically motivated feelings of peoplehood" (Sollors xii-xiii). The representation of an ancient homeland as the original place of birth of an ethnic group had the importance of materializing an imaginary line that linked the present to the past, thus providing a "tradition" for a revolutionary movement.

Although isolated within the limits of an identity negatively affirmed, the Chicano as the subject of discourse posits himself at the center of a historical perspective which imbues the present with meaning only through a rationalization of the past. The connection with history through memory is, according to Bottalico "*l'unico modo per ridare integrità a una storia interrotta e compromessa da una serie di perdite*" (Bottalico 2008, 26). The importance of the "Chicano Renaissance" is thus characterized by the acknowledgement and reappropriation of the present history in the continuity with a forgotten past, a past that is thus recreated and transformed in the literary production that followed.

The Chicano historical dispossession of a land, a culture, and a language, is elaborated as a deprivation of the imagery that defines one's identity, as well as the metaphoric suppression of a voice through which to articulate it. Thus, the affirmation of a Chicano identity ensues from the act of re-representing one's culture through the reappropriation of a space, a voice, and a history: the historical events of dispossession and migration are textually re-covered and the distance that separates the Chicano from his past is covered by memory and recorded on the written page. The Chicano experience that was "lost", or misrecognized, in the hegemonic representation of history, is

recovered through Chicano writing as a process of both “unwriting” and “rewriting” history through memory.

Through this symbolic thread that linked past and present along a political ideal of self-affirmation, the Chicano Renaissance opened the way toward a search for identity in the dialogic relation with history, expanding from the “forgotten past” of the pre-Hispanic world, to the multicultural reality of the present.

In the post-civil-rights era, new discursive strategies started to emerge that switched attention, as Bottalico explains, toward a transnational vision of hybridism and *mestizaje*, no longer considered as distinctive elements of an ethno-cultural group, but as paradigm of the complex dynamics of relation that take place in a global culture<sup>6</sup>.

In this context, the articulation of a Chicano voice, among other so called “marginal” realities, starts substantiating the nature of the Anglo American hegemonic discourse as “arbitrary”. Through the reappropriation of one’s experiences and meanings, Chicano discourse brings into life difference as a subjective expression of marginality itself. It disrupts the borders of its definition by showing the breach that necessarily exists between universal truths and reality itself, intended as one’s lived experience.

In Rafael Pérez-Torres’ analysis of Chicano poetry, the reappropriation of identity engages with tradition and history through their “unwriting”, “reenvisioning” and “rewriting” (Pérez-Torres 8). This process implies the subversion of disempowering identity representations through their inclusion inside the cultural production. The Chicano poetry’s movement “against” myths and margins, as Pérez-Torres suggests, is then a movement toward *mestizaje*, hybridization and crossbreeding, where “poetry writes itself” not only in counterposition but also in juxtaposition to history. Poetry writes itself as a conscious act of re-creating one’s history, and “the poem represents history in order to propel Chicanos—by making them see

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<sup>6</sup> See Bottalico 2008, 19-20.

themselves as agents in history—toward a more empowered and gratifying future” (Pérez-Torres 70). Chicano cultural identity thus emerges from a “keen historical consciousness” (Pérez-Torres 8) that projects itself onto a transcultural scene as a “shared epistemic and social space” (Mohanty 1997, 147).

Through the reenvisioning of history, concepts like border and borderland take on different meanings. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*, epitomizes their elusive nature: “A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). Geopolitical boundaries of national thinking are thus proportioned to signs and symbols of an unnatural mapping of space. The same agencies which arbitrarily project on the outer space monological representations of the “self”, give impetus to the formation of a new identity which arises in the erased interstices. According to Harris, “the social and political forces that have since been responsible for migrations, exiles and displacements have engendered new and revised definitions of people’s identity which are based on a more fluid transition of cultures that merge and create changed identities” (Harris 175). Borders of national identities are no longer as definite, and the symbolic borderland, where “people of different races occupy the same territory” (Anzaldúa preface), signifies an all-encompassing concept of “place, placement and displacement”; border culture initiates, according to Harris, “an oppositional positioning of location with dislocation, memberment and dis-memberment; the inevitable creation of invisible boundaries within a given space and within a given society” (Harris 176).

Chicano counterculture—through its deconstructive action which moves toward a dismantling of beliefs and attitudes that open up to accepted or internalized ways of coping with identity conflicts—discloses the existence of a new reality, there where different and contradictive cultures coexist inside

the same physical and symbolic territory. This new reality is embodied by an image of Aztlán “that is no longer homeland” (Pérez-Torres 11). It becomes, instead, “the borderlands between various terrains” (Pérez-Torres 11), a space of liminality intended as “becoming”. The borderland as “betweenness” thus entails

a sense of cultural and personal identity that highlights flux and fluidity while connected by a strong memory of (a discredited) history and (a devalued) heritage ... The borderlands become a region in which possibilities and potentialities abound for new subject formations, new cultural formations, new political formations. (Pérez-Torres 11-12)

By insisting upon the right of agency, the right to name and construct a self-identity, Chicanos point at unearthing the ideological restraints that mine their capacity to “differently” react—those ideological boundaries which define difference according to nationalistic, racist or sexist categories, and which become interiorized sites of an acute identity struggle. Ultimately, they formulate a new identity theory which is informed by that struggle.

The written text becomes a re-composition of the historical threads that help make sense of Chicano experience, while the writer constitutes the beholder of stories that must be told so as to enter the text of history and be able to engage in a dialogue with “other” texts. Implied in the Chicano historical re-composition is, therefore, a restoration of experience that can only be possible through a subjective articulation of it. The Chicano “counterstance” issuing from a process of identity reaffirmation focuses on the way identity is articulated, that is, on the terms through which difference can engage into dialogue as opposed to a “clash of senseless monologues” (Arteaga 78). If the individual constitutes himself as a subject of history through a historical representation of memory, then the Chicano representation of “tradition” ironically questions both the legitimacy and the

very import of essentialist claims to a privileged “immemorial past”. By materializing one’s sense of origin and community through the creation of a mythical space, the Chicano stance aims at exposing the basically ideological formation of societal established customs.

At the same time, by admixing history and myth the Chicano focuses on memory as a creative process inscribed in the Chicano “historical imagination” through which the past is recreated. According to Márquez, “historical imagination is a rubric that encompasses the hybrid nature of certain novels. It is a creative process that meshes autobiography, biography, myth, history, and fiction; moreover, it offers a historicity that places the characters in relation to history and culture, and it also discloses the author’s recasting or interpretation of history” (Márquez 5). The affirmation of one’s identity thus testimonies of an experience which is not individual but collective, and the search for one’s self along the path that leads to the reconstruction of one’s history, becomes a search for a “plural self”, “a singularity that nevertheless embodies a collective experience and call to action” (Noriega v). The focus, according to Noriega, is on “the process of self-naming—the ubiquitous ‘I am...’” (Noriega v).

The process of self-naming becomes part of a larger social project. By historicizing the “I” as a “mirror-image of an ethnically and culturally specific collective Chicano/a identity” (Khalifa 173), Chicanos respond to an “existential urge” that switches the “traditional autobiographical question of ‘Who am I?’ or ‘How did I become who I am?’” into “‘How did we live and think?’” (Noriega viii). In this process, the “I” regards himself as a “historical subject”, and the act of writing as “a practice located at the intersection of subject and history—a literary practice that involves the possible knowledge (linguistical and ideological) of itself as such” (Minh-ha 6).

In the expanded history of the multicultural contemporary world, the attention thus focuses on the dialogic relation through interaction with the



“other”. Individual identity is achieved dialogically by way of a mutual recognition that, while entailing the guarantee of individual rights and personal autonomy achieved by political struggle, it must also transcend toward a sympathetic relation. As Taylor explains, when people see projected back in their cultural relations demeaning images of themselves, they cannot be said to have equal access to dignity, even though they may have the right to vote and to express their ideas. In fact, their basic right to be themselves has been compromised, because the culture from which they draw their self-definition has relegated them to second-class status<sup>7</sup>.

The Chicano struggle against distorted images of the self, alienating/ed representations of the “other” that ensue from mis- or non-recognition, turns its focal point toward the spaces of the Chicano community as mirror of the individual self. *The Rain God*, which epitomizes the autobiographical impulse that develops among the literary practices of representation, expands the work of memory toward the conscious re-enactment of past experiences, thus reviewing history through its representation inside the family microcosm. By delineating the dialogic relation among the characters that form his fictive family, Islas shows aspects of his cultural heritage in the light of the many perspectives that are embodied by different ideological representations of reality. By focusing on the family’s dynamics of relation, the author favours a psychological reading of events over their simple recapitulation, thus revealing his quest for knowledge through the act of remembering. The novel’s title alone reminds of a connection with an ancient past, which is problematized in the contrastive ideological aspects that form Chicano reality and that are represented by the family’s generational conflicts. The idea of difference as it is represented by the multicultural debate, switches, with *The Rain God*, its public framework to the more intimate space of the family, and it critically reproduces the same

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<sup>7</sup> See Taylor 11-12.

contrastive stances that belonged to the “Chicano *versus* Anglo American” stance.

In the words of the family’s matriarch, we can read the same dread toward and consequent erasure of difference, through the self-denial that the woman betrays in her persistent belief that “the Indian in them ... was to be suppressed, its existence denied” (142). What she displays through her “perverse oral history” is her commitment to cultural principles as the “workings of inherited ignorance” (Márquez 13-14).

## **Realist theory of identity**

According to Moya, “while [neoconservative minorities] are justified in their efforts to identify a core of humanity which is universal to all people, they make a serious mistake when they identify that core with a historically and culturally particular model of humanity” (Moya 2002, 12).

The texts and lived experiences of oppressed and marginalized people are necessary to construct a more objective understanding of the social world.

Actually,

while the experiences of Chicana/os are admittedly subjective and particular, the knowledge that is gained from a focused study of their lives can have general implications for all Americans. The texts and lived experiences of Chicana/os and other marginalized people are rich sources of frequently overlooked information about our shared world. (Moya 2002, 3)

Moya analyses “minority” identities on the background of postmodernism. According to postmodern theories, the subject is a cultural construction created by a multiplicity of discourses that form a codified network. As a result, the self is defined as lacking existence beyond the discourse that produces it. In Moya’s analysis, the postmodern discourse is likely to underpin hegemonic discourse in that it belies the same possibilities it tries to endorse. In fact, by “internalizing difference”, that is, by focusing on the contradictions and fragmentation of the self, postmodernism displaces the possibility of a discourse that takes place in the syncretic relation among different cultures. On the other hand, the implied illusoriness of any representation of reality leads, in the end, to the very subversion of difference: “postmodernists reinscribe, albeit unintentionally, a kind of

universalizing sameness (we are all marginal now!) that their celebration of 'difference' had tried so hard to avoid" (Moya 2002, 24).

The mistake, she implies, lies in assuming that our options for a theory of identity are inscribed within "the postmodernism/essentialism binary—that we are either completely fixed and unitary or completely unstable and fragmented selves" (Moya 2002, 38). The theoretical approach for the study of identity that Moya upholds, goes beyond both postmodern and essentialist conclusions in that it allows for an "acknowledgement of how the social categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality function in individual lives without *reducing* individuals to those social determinants" (Moya 2002, 38).

This approach considers identities as social constructions based on the material conditions of existence that are embedded in a particular historical context. Identities, in their theoretically mediated form, thus "refer outward ... to the social world within which they emerge" (Moya 2002 13). In this sense, cultural identities become "good everyday instances of our deepest social biases" (Mohanty 1997, 201) and their interpretation can produce knowledge about the social context that engenders them.

The link between knowledge and geography shifts in nature: the *a priori* relation between them is replaced by a relation that is "historically variable and mediated through the interpretation of experience" (Moya 2002, 38). In the same way, the form of "radical realism" (Said 1991, 72) that Said identifies with the kind of vision he has called "Orientalism", is contrasted by a "realist" account of experience that focuses on its constructedness as a potential source of objective knowledge. According to this position, objective knowledge is understood as "an ongoing process involving the careful analysis of the different kinds of subjective or theoretical bias and interest through which humans apprehend the world" (Moya 2002, 14). Through this process, the interpretation of experience is more likely to reach an understanding of the structures of power involved in identities production.

What makes one's experience unique is the kind of interpretation that the individual conceives according to the simultaneous action of both the "mutual interaction of all the relevant social categories that constitute [one's] social location" and "the particular social, cultural, and historical matrix" (Moya 2002, 39) in which an individual exists.

In his study of ethnicity, Sollors focuses on the use of the vernacular as an example of the "effect of 'authenticity'" which is derived: in the linguistic mixing of "elements of a widely shared everyday life" that make up a slang, Sollors grasps the "natural" effect of the vernacular; he detects authenticity in "the ethnic text's ability to generate the sense of difference out of a shared cultural context" (Sollors xv-xvi). According to Sollors,

it is not any a priori cultural *difference* that makes ethnicity ... It is always the specificity of power relations at a given historical moment and in a particular place that triggers off a strategy of pseudo-historical explanations that camouflage the inventive act. (Sollors xvi)

The value of authenticity is achieved through the narrative technique which centers attention upon the individual experience such as it is lived and interpreted by the individual. Furthermore, an individual experience is the outcome of shared everyday life, that is, it ensues from one's social location in a given society. In Sollors' analysis, the inventive act which constitutes ethnicity and which is camouflaged by pseudo-historical explanations, also constitutes its authenticity.

Identities, according to Moya, are

subject to multiple determinations and to a continual process of verification that takes place over the course of an individual's life through her interaction with the society she lives in. It is in this process of verification that identities can be (and often are) contested and that they can (and often do) change. (Moya 2002, 41)

Since identities both condition and are conditioned by the kinds of interpretations people give to their experiences, it is also true that external representations of an individual's identity can influence and thus change his own way of perceiving himself. Anzaldúa's account of the many identities she acknowledges according to the group of belonging constitutes an example of the way identity misrecognition functions in the production of interiorized forms of oppression:

As a culture, we call ourselves Spanish when referring to ourselves as a linguistic group and when copping out. It is then that we forget our predominant Indian genes. We are 70-80% Indian. We call ourselves Hispanic or Spanish American or Latin when linking ourselves to other Spanish-speaking peoples of the western hemisphere and when copping out. We call ourselves Mexican American to signify we are neither Mexican nor American, but more the noun 'American' than the adjective 'Mexican' (and when copping out). (Anzaldúa 1987, 62)

Anzaldúa, in this way, focuses on the lack of commitment which underlies the splitting of a Chicano prismatic identity. According to Moya,

What distinguishes a Chicana from a Mexican American, a Hispanic, or an American of Mexican descent is not her ancestry or her cultural upbringing. Rather it is her political awareness; her recognition of her disadvantaged position in a hierarchically organized society arranged according to categories of class, race, gender, and sexuality; and her propensity to engage in political struggle aimed at subverting and changing those structures. (Moya 2002, 42)

The term Chicano is the label that was selected by the youths of the Chicano social movement in the 1960s and it is used "when referring to a politically aware people born and/or raised in the U.S." (Anzaldúa 1987, 62). It is conceived as "the only term that was especially selected by us, for us" (Anzaldúa 1987, 63).

All different labels are codified into symbols which represent different identities. They cannot be indifferently interchanged and their specific usage

says something about the individual to whom they are “attached”. It especially says something about the relations of domination that an individual does or does not acknowledge, does or does not uphold. The cultural identity of a “Hispanic”, for example, speaks of a self-conception as a member of “a more assimilable ethnic group in what is simply a nation of immigrants” (Moya 2002, 43). Moreover, factors of class, race and gender get obscured in this identity, while a normative heterosexuality is simply presumed.

In the Chicano textual space, therefore, the specific use of language becomes a strategic choice pointing out the ideological structure of cultural constructions.

In José David Saldívar’s study, *Chicano Narrative*, contemporary Chicano fiction is analyzed in its social and ideological context. Drawing on Edward Said’s notion of imaginative geography, he focuses on the symbolic features of the constructions of meaning of Chicano fiction. That is, while the social world represented in such fictional works is a political one, he emphasizes how, as deliberately constructed sets of imaginary and symbolic productions, they serve “a unifying communal function as well as an oppositional and differentiating end” (Saldívar 1991, 4). As he explains, his concern is not merely aesthetic, but material as well, as he focuses on how the imaginary and symbolic operate in Chicano narratives to constitute an integral part of Chicano history and society.

Saldívar’s analysis of the complex interplay of discursive strategies is his notion of “the dialectics of difference”, as the book’s subtitle significantly reads. By rejecting the “assumed homology” between narrative language and narrative representations, Saldívar defines the language of Chicano narrative as a “strategy” to enable readers of these texts to “understand their real conditions of existence in postindustrial twentieth-century America” (Saldívar 1991, 5). This narrative strategy, in fact, is the process he terms the dialectics of difference of Chicano literature. The dialectical form

of the narratives he discusses in later chapters constitutes an authentic way of grappling with a reality “that seems always to transcend representation” (Saldívar 1991, 5). The strategy allows both the author and the reader to recover the very history encoded in the subtext of the discourse of Chicano literature. History does not provide, then, the background for literature, but rather “the decisive determinant of the form and content of the literature” (Saldívar 1991, 5).

Chicano narratives, Saldívar maintains, are not to be considered mirrors of a problematic social reality, because they delve deeper into it to reveal reality’s underlying ideological structures. Chicano narrative, he insists, “has provided a mediated truth about a culturally determinate people in a historically determinate context” (Saldívar 1991, 5). Consequential to the statement that “words have power”, Mary Helen Ponce explains: “I may argue that my work is not political, but more and more I see the power of the pen and how literature serves to contradict, illuminate, and refute negative stereotypes of Mexican Americans/Chicanos” (Ponce 201).



## **Border identity**

International borders constitute real geopolitical divisions between states and people, but they also have powerful shaping effects upon the subjective identities, meaning, and memories that become attached to the objective, physical spaces of the social reality. Edward Said coined the concept of “imaginative geography” to describe the process of “setting up boundaries in our own minds” between “a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs’” (Said 1991, 54). According to Said, imaginative geography is intrinsic to the formation of collective identities that are defined against the other: “‘they’ become ‘they’ accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ‘ours’” (Said 1991, 54). Within such “mental boundaries”, according to Peter Read, “layers of meaning” become ascribed to a place, and “emotional attachments” are built up and deepened over time, in memories of social life (Read 2, 7-8). These constitute “senses of belonging” that define and potentially exclude those others who are perceived to inhabit a different imaginative world composed of other remembered associations and attachments (Read 3).

The Chicano borderland is conceived as both a physical and a symbolic space, where emotional attachment to the “place” is informed by a complex interweaving of different elements. As Read explains, the sense of belonging that ensues from the act of living a place, is individually formed according to the culture with which one is familiar and which “helps to enlarge, diminish, shape or transform it” (Read 3). The sense of belonging which is shaped by a culture that is the result of a clash of different cultures, cannot but enclose contradictory stances and feelings. These ambiguities coexist both among the individuals living inside the Chicano culture, and inside the Chicano individual himself. Issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, become daily “battle fields”

delimiting the struggle of what Gloria Anzaldúa named the “consciousness of the borderland” (Anzaldúa 1987, 77). A “struggle of borders” that results in psychic restlessness: “because I am in all cultures at the same time,/ *alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,/ me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio./ Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan/ simultáneamente*” (Anzaldúa 1987, 77).

Identity is not a unitary, independent and absolute entity which can be analyzed in itself, but, as Moya explains, is always related to a wider social and historical context that defines it. In the case of Chicano identity, this context is fundamental since it shapes and determines different identity constructions in the conflictive and complex reality of the borderland. Beyond the geographical delineation of the U.S.-Mexico border, the space of the borderland also exceeds any binding definition and stretches its contours beyond the familiar paradigm of a reality negatively created. According to Said, “the geographic boundaries accompany the social, ethnic, and cultural ones in expected ways” (Said 1991, 54), producing knowledge according to a sense of belonging whose boundaries are distinctively traced. Their lineaments are discernible in the deep furrows erected in the earth which are marked by fences fixing the physical border of a nation, as much as they are perceived in the web of binary categories and definitions binding identity inside the national imaginative geography. The space of the borderland disrupts essentialist definitions of both identity and the physical determination of the borderland location. As a line of national differentiation, the U.S.-Mexico border gives birth to Chicanos “not just for having crossed it or having been crossed by it, but for living in the border zones between nations that the line engenders” (Arteaga 9). The Chicano border zones Arteaga refers to exist “on either side of the border, in Tijuana or Los Angeles, in Juárez or El Paso, and the border patrol hounds [Chicanos] as far as Chicago” (Arteaga 9). The geographical location of a borderland is

determined not so much by the essentialist perspective of the nation but by the border subject himself and follows him in his migrations. The characterization of the border is thus entwined to the self-definition of the border-subject so much so that the borderland becomes “the place where the *mestizo* body resides” (Arteaga 11); a body which is, as Arteaga explains, a hybrid essence, the product, more than the sum, of diverse roots. The *mestizo* is the product of “historical-political and historical-racial facts” (Arteaga 9) whose implications he daily confronts in the context of uneven cultural and social interactions. In this framework, “the border means that the Chicano identity is constructed in defiance of the simple and absolute discretion of the state. To be Chicano in the borderlands is to make oneself from among the competing definitions of nation, culture, language, race, ethnicity, and so on” (Arteaga 10). The border subject thus reshapes both his own identity and the configuration of the borderland by bringing a “marginal spatiality ... to the center of the discourse” (Khalifa 174), in this way transforming the very concept of marginality.

The different historical and racial aspects of the Chicano’s identity are symbolized in Arteaga’s definition of the border as “a line, half water, half metal” (Arteaga 1) which opens the first part of his poem *Cantos* (Arteaga 1). By this definition he intends to evoke both the physical configuration of the political border—as it is delimited from the Rio Grande river from the Gulf of Mexico to El Paso, and from a wire metal fence from El Paso to the Pacific Ocean—and the racial *mestizaje* that constitutes the essence of the Chicano identity. The image of the border is suggested in a poetical line by means of a trope which is borrowed from the Nahuátl language as it was used by Aztec poets. As Arteaga explains, this particular trope was not only characteristic of Nahuátl poetry but it was a “general feature of Nahuátl language and thought” (Arteaga 6). He is thus recalling “a sense of Indianness” (Arteaga 8) that is peculiar to Chicano literature in its attempt to reaffirm an aspect of the Chicano identity that constitutes the most ancient root and that was

repressed by an exclusive dominant discourse. At the same time, by reinstating a sense of Indianness by way of a Nahuátl trope, Arteaga affirms not only the pervading existence of the Indianness in the Chicano articulation of identity, but also its existence as a constituting feature of the articulation itself. Arteaga relies on Ángel María Garibay concept of *difrasismo*<sup>8</sup> as “the means of representing something in the coupling of two elements ... two to suggest another” (Arteaga 6), showing how by means of tropes like synecdoche or metonymy the *mestizo* identity is encoded in and expressed through language. As Arteaga explains “I put *difrasismo* to the task of signaling from the onset the character of thought in *Cantos*, in Chicano poetry, and in Chicano thought in general. *Difrasismo* seems to me a characteristic feature of how my poetry comes to meaning and of how one comes to being Chicano” (Arteaga 7). Ultimately, both Arteaga’s use of *difrasismo* in his poem, and the general sense of Indianness that pervades Chicano literature in different ways, correspond to an intent of Chicano authors to construct Chicano identity “in defiance of the simple and absolute discretion of the state”, in an effort to deconstruct and reveal long-established practices of discrimination that have inhibited the Mexican-American sense of self through psychological colonization. As Arturo Aldama explains, “colonial powers, first Spain and then the various nations that followed, controlled institutions, while legitimizing subordination under the guise of a ‘natural ordering’ of the universe. One of the darker sides of this colonist ‘natural ordering’ has been the psychological effects on colonized

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<sup>8</sup> The term *difrasismo* was coined by Ángel María Garibay (1892-1967), a Mexican Roman Catholic priest, philologist, linguist, historian, and scholar of pre-Columbian Mesoamerican cultures. He is one of the first scholars who studied Nahuátl language and culture in Mexico. The main characteristic of this trope consists in the juxtaposition of two or more lexical units, where meaning is conveyed not as the result of the sum of the parts but by alluding to a third concept that transcends them. As Montes de Oca Vega explains, “básicamente son entidades conceptuales, construidas a partir de dos términos cuya unión resulta en un significado distinto del que enuncia cada palabra”: “in tēmōxtli in ehecatl”, “polvo y viento” to mean “enfermedad”; “in ātl in metlatl”, “agua y metate” to mean “mujer”. Vega explains that *difrasismos* cannot be reduced to mere tropes or figures of speech, since they express a way of conceptualizing and thus conceiving reality that belonged to the XVI century’s mexica society. Montes de Oca Vega, Mercedes. *Los difrasismos en el nahuátl, un problema de traducción o de conceptualización*. [http://celia.cnrs.fr/FichExt/Am/A\\_22\\_03.htm](http://celia.cnrs.fr/FichExt/Am/A_22_03.htm), 1997.

people, embedding in them a subordinate and submissive sense of being and place” (Aldama 2002, 356). Chicanos articulate their protest in “decolonial voices”, by employing a language that also represents a site of cultural interaction. Both a Chicano protest and a different worldview ensue from the language that becomes a symbolic system codified with disrupting signs and significations.

In the same way, Gloria Anzaldúa describes her multi-voiced subjectivity through the image of Coatlicue. This Earth goddess of life and death in the Aztec mythology becomes in Anzaldúa’s translation “one of the powerful images, or ‘archetypes’, that inhabits, or passes through, my psyche” (Anzaldúa 1987, 46). She thus derives a sense of Indianness in her writing as a product of “una herencia” that resides in the deepest part of her subjectivity: Coatlicue is “the symbol of the undergrounds aspects of the psyche” (Anzaldúa 1987, 46), a force that, in her feminist struggle, “disrupt[s] the smooth flow (complacency) of life” and “propel[s] the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself” (Anzaldúa 1987, 46). She describes the distressing feeling that comes from “the agony of inadequacy”, as a Coatlicue state, a “prelude to crossing”, an increment of consciousness that leads to “awareness”, “knowing”, “making sense” (Anzaldúa 1987, 45-48). It is a prelude to the rising of the “mestiza consciousness” that allows for a continual and conscious crossing of borders: “every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in a new territory. And again, and again” (Anzaldúa 1987, 48). The “Coatlicue state” is also symbolized by the act of writing, an act that produces anxiety since she must confront with her interior conflicts: “being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls” (Anzaldúa 1987, 72). In the act of writing she ascribes both the acknowledgement of her subjectivity — “to write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice for the images” (Anzaldúa 1987, 73)—and the creation of a “New Consciousness” as an “underground

movement” that allows crossing. According to the Nahuátl language, writing is “In Xóchitl in Cuícatl”, “flor y canto”, a *difrasismo* for poetry. Anzaldúa epitomizes in the Nahuátl trope the Coatlicue state of the act of writing, bringing all elements (the Nahuátl trope, the Coatlicue state and the act of writing) around the axis meaning of the trope: “it is always a path/state to something else” (Anzaldúa 1987, 73).

This language as a “path to something else” is thus the Chicano text in its diverse transcriptions: through the racial body, as well as through the material literary texts where terms in Spanish, *Nahuátl* and *calò*<sup>9</sup> are admixed to English. The *mestizo* body is symbolically retraced in the text as physical racial features are translated into language. The combination of the parts is the Chicano body and text. This kind of syncretism is characteristic of codeswitching languages like *pachuco* or *calò*. Through a syncretism of elements that derive from Spanish, Indian, and English, the use of *calò* actualizes a continual crossing of borders as they are defined by a “purist” language ideology. What Urcioli calls “language boundedness” is the dominant language’s practice of setting boundaries “as metonymy of person, language, and origin category” (Urcioli 525), thus excluding all alien elements that exceed the conformation of the language. According to Urcioli, “when languages take on sharp edges, i.e. borders, they are mapped onto people and therefore onto ethnic nationality. Given that ethnicity has become nonlocalized as people move into ‘global ethnoscapes’, much of what the ‘border’ represents is in effect deterritorialized, as is, for example, the case with foreign languages, especially Spanish, in the United States” (Urcioli 533). So that both *calò*, as a hybrid language, and Spanish, in its deterritorialized actuality, become marginalized entities in the context of the United States, and they are relegated at the border, that is, they become border languages. The use of these languages by Chicano literature points at reinstating their dignity by reinserting them at the center of history: not only

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<sup>9</sup> *Pachuco* or *calò* constitute the Chicano argot of Mexican American Spanish.

through their incorporation in the written text, but also by “narrating” them as important elements in the recovering of a people’s collective memory; by reifying them in the text, these forgotten languages become “agents” in the Chicano construction of history. Either through their mere use or by their narration, languages like Spanish and Indian, and their hybridization, suggest past memories and traditions particularly within the family circle: they are the languages that especially belong to the first generation immigrants, and they are usually symbolized by the figure of the grandparent. As in Dario Ruiz’s narration of “cut tongues”: “As a Yaqui/Huichol/Xicano, the realities of a cut tongue are especially disturbing. When I was young, my great-grandmother, Rita Cubedo ... would speak to me in our native Yaqui language. ... One image I remember in particular is of my great-grandmother and me speaking to each other in Yaqui, Mexican Spanish, and bits of English while she made tortillas on a wood-burning stove. After I enrolled in school, I learned to leave such stories and language skills behind. Tongues were cut from my heart” (Ruiz 355). In his essay, he analyzes how subaltern cultural practices create alternative discourses and serve to counter colonial cultural hegemony whose dominant discourses and languages relegate Chicanos to live with “cut tongues”. If, on one side, “border-making” languages are “locational markers” since they “assign people a place, often opposing places between those who ‘have’ the language and those who do not” (Urcioli 539), on the other, border languages, in the articulation of the people who reside in the space of the borderland, become potential instruments through which “remapping” space and unsettling borders. In the context of the dominant ideological discourse of exclusion, the border becomes a geographical and symbolic concept that produces alienated subjects inside the limits of the nation-state: “Borders are places where commonality ends abruptly” (Urcioli 539). According to Ruiz, “the border, immigration regulations, and restrictions on naturalization and citizenship contribute to the construction of racialized and gendered Xicanas/os. The racialization of Xicanas/os in

relationship to the state positions Xicana/o culture into “something” that is easily cultivated into an ‘other’ political subject. As such, the Xicana/o has been historically cast into an ‘alien-ated’ relation to the category of citizenship” (Ruiz 361). In the Chicano translation of the border concept through *difrasismo*, the binary constitution of reality is loosened and rendered “into something else”; as Emily Hicks explains, “border writing must be conceived as a mode of operation rather than definition” so that “by choosing a strategy of translation rather than representation, border writers ultimately undermine the distinction between original and alien culture” (Hicks xxiii). The border, articulated in light of the mode of *difrasismo*, translates a dual concept into a “non-definition” that considers the crossing of the border, so that the meaning of the trope can be apprehended as the process of “two to suggest one”. In this interpretation, the Chicano border suggests a new type of commonality that the previous concept of border abruptly excluded. Like in Anzaldúa’s “*mestiza* consciousness” this commonality is “where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs” (Anzaldúa 1987, 79). Almost paraphrasing the *difrasismo*’s structure, Anzaldúa delineates the process in which this new way of perceiving reality works:

This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (Anzaldúa 1987, 79-80)



In the postmodern globalized crossing of borders, individuals construct their sense of belonging in the continual negotiation among many and contradictive allegiances: the physical borderland becomes, according to Anzaldúa, psychological, sexual and spiritual, since it exists “wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa 1987, preface). Identity is thus constructed in the contingency of a changing geographical, historical and social environment, and cannot correspond to any definite theoretical elaboration of it.

According to Khalifa, the search for a delineation of a Chicano identity is motivated by “the shifting narratives of Chicano/a experience and Hispanic-American interaction [that] suggest different dynamics of hybridity and interstitial identifications” (Khalifa 173), and therefore emphasizing the need to “write down” a discourse on identity which can comprise shifting identifications. A discourse thus envisioned is an infinitely open one, since it captures specific aspects of the Chicano identity in its changing process of formation: and consequently this identity elaboration affirms its own legitimacy in the ever deferred possibility of a definition. The complementary impulses that, as Khalifa affirms, lie at the heart of a Chicano sensibility, correspond to “a certain existential urge” to both “historicize and narrativize Chicano/a selfhood (the self not as a monadic, insular entity, but as a mirror-image of an ethnically and culturally specific collective Chicano/a identity)” and “express and conceptualize Chicano/a selfhood as the locus of shifting identities/identifications, a space of ‘nomadic’ displacements” (Khalifa 173). In both cases, a definition of identity is always tied to “erratic” experiences actualized in what Glissant calls “*Poétique de la Relation*”, meaning with it that the errant is opposed to the categories of adventurer/explorer/conqueror, since he reaches out toward a dialectics of a “totality-world” (*totalité-monde*) which he can imagine but he cannot gauge,

abandoning any claim of possession. In the errant's search for identity, the concept of the root—the enclosed original space controlled by a national discourse of dualist categories and binary choices—is decolonized through a conceptual transgression of its limits:

*C'est bien là l'image du rhizome, qui porte à savoir que l'identité n'est plus toute dans la racine, mais aussi dans la Relation. C'est que la pensée de l'errance est aussi bien pensée du relatif, qui est le relayé mais aussi le relaté. La pensée de l'errance est une poétique, et qui sous-entend qu'à un moment elle se dit. Le dit de l'errance est celui de la Relation.* (Glissant 1990, 31)

The Chicano narration of identity thus refers to “various forms and spaces of identity that emerge within the logic of the nation-state and transcend its reductive standards of nationhood, territory, citizenship, and unitary ethnic belonging” (Khalifa 173). The space of the borderland is an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybrid subject: “*Los atravesados* live here ... those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). If ‘normality’ is defined as the affirmation of an identity whose characteristics are generally both unchanging in time (since, as Hobsbawm explains, even tradition is an invention and thus the manifestation of a desire for “eternity”), and fixed in space (since the perimeter of a definition, its enclosed space, is thought of as “real”, that is, reproducing the “mate-reality” of the outside world, to which the definition “naturally” corresponds); then, the hybrid subject disrupts “normality” by exceeding its confines, and by bringing into focus, from the margin to the center, the plurality of existence. In the context of postcolonialism and of globalized multiculturalism, the language of hegemony is laid bare as the language of the oppressor, that is, a language which is limited by its own power codification of reality: “In the past we made history and now it is made of us” (Fanon 23). The hegemonic mapping of reality is deconstructed while, at the same time, reality becomes relative

to any construction which can be made of it. According to Aldama, “in its postmodern (relativistic and constructivist) new guise, the territory has lost all objective existence and the ‘map’ is but an illusion; the world is no longer that which is out there, whether I or the human race exist or not, it is what I and the society I live in ‘make’ of it and say it is. It is ‘that’ which is constructed by society or ‘conceived’ by language, through language, within the limits of language at a certain time and place” (Aldama *Brown*, 18). Thus, if, on one side, reality is narrowly focalized in the hegemonic perspective, on the other, it is lost in the distance of its relativistic fragmentation, the moment of “truth”, or objective knowledge, being ever-deferred.

In the contemporary merging of cultures, unpredictability, Glissant explains, is the law. Glissant opposes the unpredictability of a “*chaos-monde*”—“*le choc, l’intrication, les répulsions, les attirances, les connivences, les oppositions, les conflits entre les cultures des peuples dans la totalité-monde contemporaine*” (Glissant 1996, 82)—to the predictability of deterministic systems of thought whose aim is dominion over physical and symbolic space through its measuring. The western practice of the “mapping” of territories as well as of identities, according to Glissant, is consistent with a desire to avoid the destructive nihilism identified with the uncertainty of chaos. Glissant thus envisions in the “chaotic” unpredictability of reality a possibility of disengaging from a deterministic mentality and its pessimistic projections, in order to conceive a different way of approaching the contemporary world. “*Connaître l’imprédictible*”, he affirms,

*c’est s’accorder à son présent, au présent que l’on vit, d’une autre manière, non plus, non pas empirique ni systématique, mais poétique ... Je crois que la poésie, et en tout cas l’exercice de l’imaginaire, la vision prophétique à la fois du passé et des espaces lointains, et de partout la seule manière que nous ayons de nous inscrire dans l’imprédictibilité de la relation mondiale.* (Glissant 1996, 89-90)

In imagination, that is, in the effort of regarding the world in the totality of space and time, lies the actualization of his poetics of relation: through the imaginary of relation, the meaning of existence is overturned, so that it is possible *“se concevoir, humanités, et non pas Humanité, d’une manière autre: en rhizome et non en racine unique”* (Glissant 1996, 90).

To a postmodernist celebration of fragmentation, which claims that there can be no ‘objective’ truth, Mohanty opposes a realist theory of identity that, like Glissant’s poetics of relation, also evaluates the epistemic privilege at the heart of today’s globalized merging of cultures. According to Mohanty, although knowledge is always theoretically mediated, it nonetheless can be objective if experience is “properly interpreted”. By analyzing the relation between subjective experience and its theoretical definition into an identity construction, Mohanty gets to the conclusion that “experience ... can yield reliable and genuine knowledge, just as it can point up instances and sources of real mystification”; it nonetheless “has a cognitive component” (Mohanty 1997, 32). Starting from the assumption, which he shares with postmodernist critics, that theory is necessarily part of our understanding of the world, and that reality is unavoidably always mediated by it, he then withdraws from a postmodernist relativist conclusion by affirming that “it is precisely in this mediated way that [experience] yields knowledge” (Mohanty 1997, 33). In one’s interpretation of private experiences the whole structure of the social and cultural environment in which we are immersed and which determines our different responses to it, is encoded. Since, according to Mohanty, “experiences would not serve as foundations because of their self-evident authenticity but would provide some of the raw material with which we construct identities” (Mohanty 1997, 32), their interpretation becomes a necessary part of the process that helps making objective meaning out of reality. This is only so in a social context where meaning is contended by different social and political groups, that is, where different perspectives and different approaches to reality lead to a continual revision and

reinterpretation of particular experiences, so that discussions over identity become ever closer to an objective representation of it. Through the reevaluation of the information that we can acquire and develop about our experience, we eventually, as stated by Mohanty, redefine the contours of "our world". In this way, we focalize on the overall interweaving of causes and effects that trigger the feelings and beliefs inextricably tied to the interpretation we give of our experience. The sort of objectivity espoused by realist critics is one that, in Moya's words, "can be built on an analysis of the different kinds of subjective or theoretical bias or interest" (Moya 2000, 13). Since they assume any truth claim to be "fallibilistic", that is, "open to revision on the basis of new or relevant information" (Moya 13), their quest for objectivity rejects absolutist assumptions and is constructive and utopist in nature: according to Moya, "just as it is possible to be wrong about one's experience ... so it is possible to arrive at more accurate interpretations of it" (Moya 13).

Both Glissant's poetics of relation and Mohanty's realist theory of identity affirm the immeasurableness of reality: they both find in its unpredictability and fluctuation the very determinants of our knowledge of it. By assuming that knowledge is objective when constantly influenced by the variables of an indeterminate world-system, Mohanty inscribes himself in what Glissant calls the unpredictability of our world relation. The borderland as a "vague and undetermined place" (Anzaldúa 1987, 3) becomes thus the context for a different elaboration of identity in a new relation with the "self" and the "other".

## La Familia: Origins of an imaginative geography.

But Marlow was not typical ... and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine.

--Joseph Conrad

Arturo Islas' novel *The Rain God: A Desert Tale*, depicts the many contradictory aspects internal to an extended Mexican American family living at the border between Mexico and the United States. Through the overlapping movement of a narration touching on events that mark the lives of a three generation family members, the author focuses on the dynamics of relation among them as an example of the way identities constitute and shape themselves inside *la familia*. *La familia* constitutes a privileged sphere where rhetoric underpins authoritative discourse through affective involvement.

The hegemonic constitution of reality stems from the assumption that there exists only one reliable interpretation of experience (the one given by the authoritative voice) which can establish a one-way relation between the "material" object and the subject of interpretation.

The values that the rhetoric of the family represents are translated from a heterogeneous terrain of experience inside it to a homogeneous domain of an idea of family that acts like a universal archetype. Those values are encoded in the very name (signifier) thus imbuing it with a meaning which becomes immediate, that is, non-mediated by experience. In this process, a symbolic meaning of the family becomes its substance, its "material" reality. The rhetorically constituted hegemonic narration of the family creates the illusion of a one-to-one relationship between the sign and the reality which it represents, thus legitimating and fixing the primacy of the given meaning.

In the same way as the hegemonic meaning of the external world is channeled through a frozen set of linguistic mirrors, the particular emotion that a given concept conveys follows the same unambiguous process of interpretation from an original spring. Emotions are figured out as inner possessions, expressing non-mediated feelings that privately take form inside the individual (Scheman 1980). By situating the cause of feelings of distress, guilt, or anger in the individual's private emotional reaction to events, the individual's capacity to give an effective meaning to them is limited since his elaboration ignores the role that society plays in the formation and channeling of feelings. The notion of emotions as inner possessions is thus misleading since it obliterates the infinite possibilities that concur into affecting, shaping, creating the emotional experience and that are determined by "the nonindividual social meanings that the theories and accounts supply" (Mohanty 1997, 207).

The idea of a nuclear family as a unitary, safe and private space is what the sign "family" traditionally stands for, thus casting out of its conceptual borders all that is not part of that definition. The variety of human associations that constitute spaces to which individuals feel they belong to and which they call family, are thus not recognized as such. "Family" is encoded with both the values and the emotional charge determined by a hegemonic rhetorical discourse. In this way, the positive values that the rhetoric of the hegemonic discourse affirms become desirable points of reference to aspire to.

The imagery resulting from this rhetorical process blurs the distance which exists between fiction and reality, and creates the immediacy of the perception, as a non-mediated feeling, that is, as produced by the individual of his own accord.

Family, as the signifier, is strictly tied to its signified as the hegemonic narration, so that the varieties of tales about the family remain confined to a

secondary, often obscured, position. Because of the authority of the signified, the sign conveys a limited and thus distorted meaning of reality: this meaning remains outside reality, enveloping it “in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are visible by the spectral illumination of the moon” (Conrad 4). Since the perspective that illuminates reality is partial because it claims to be definitive, the resulting image is unnatural, spectral-like and, ultimately, mystifying.

The family, as a privileged context where normalizing views of reality connect to moral precepts of behavior, becomes of central concern in the representations of subjectivity. According to Neate, the Chicano cultural production “recognizes the family as a place for the conservation and transmission of cultural identity” (Neate 217).

In this sense, the hegemonic perspective, with “positivist assumptions about a fully knowable world” (Moya 2000, 6), binds all identity discourse inside the borders of a world-system that “can be described, hierarchized, named and mastered” (Moya 2000, 6), producing a deceiving image of it. In this context, identities are mystifying “precisely because they treat fictions as facts and cover over the fissures, contradictions and differences internal to the social construct we call a ‘self’” (Moya 2000, 6).



### *Writing family and Indianness*

By writing down the story of his family Miguel Chico “would feed them words and make his candied skulls out of paper” (160). Implicit in the equation of words with food and candies, as they are ritually offered to the dead on *el Día de los Muertos*, is the suggestion of their both evocative and creative function: words are like *ofrendas*, “cornucopia of goods” that for the Aztecs, to whom the origin of the ritual is retraced, represented the “quest for fertility and the renewal of relations with dead friends and family members” (Carrasco 241). The richness of the symbolic meaning of the *ofrendas* is matched by the actual opulence of their structure that resembles a florid and intensely scented mountain of different kinds of fruit and flowers. This “Mountain of Sustenance”<sup>10</sup> is, according to Carrasco, “a pre-Catholic, Aztec symbol of rain and fertility, and the container of the most valued supernatural powers” (Carrasco 241), and, he adds: “in part, the *Día de los Muertos* altars and *ofrendas* symbolize the body of the life-giving earth with its forces of regeneration” (Carrasco 241).

In this comparison between words and *ofrendas*, Islas’ art of writing becomes the art of both evoking images, smells and sounds from his past—thus building an imaginary bridge connecting with his family and his childhood—and creating new perspectives through which he can enlighten the past and reinterpret it.

Just like candied skulls, words are “offered” to the dead by establishing a relation with them through the written page: the novel, thus, becomes a ritual within which a symbolic sacrifice is consumed that will enable the

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<sup>10</sup> David Carrasco describes the overall image of a typical Mexican *ofrenda* like “a sacred Mountain of Sustenance that orients and nourishes the family community”. In fact its aspect is that of a “four-sided pyramid decorated along the edges with *zempoalzochoitl* flowers. At each of the four corners are placed mounds of mandarins and oranges on top of sugarcane cuttings. Cooked dishes, liquids, finger foods, loaves of *pan de muertos* (bread of the dead), candied fruits, tamales, bananas, and oranges constitute the bulk of the offering. The most impressive objects of the *ofrenda* are crystallized sugar skulls of different sizes and with various kinds of decorations.” (241)

writer to regenerate and recreate his own relation with himself, his own identity, through the reconciliation with his past. It becomes a ritual within which, as Rosaura Sánchez states, “the writer is both confessor and collective sinner” (Sánchez 1994, 119).

The image of the sacrifice is also evocative of the ritualistic practices performed by the Aztec people, for whom the blood sacrifice represented an act of creation: “blood nourished and fortified the gods” (Aguilar-Moreno 173), so that the exchange of energy in the Aztec universe was preserved and all living things received sustenance<sup>11</sup>.

By writing *The Rain God*, Arturo Islas is thus symbolically performing a ritual in the tradition of his ancestors: his *ofrenda* is meant to conjure up a past that goes beyond his own family’s horizon by reaching the Aztec times, the old branch of his family’s genealogy which makes up Chicano identity. In this way, he is also reproducing a theme drawn from the Chicano literary tradition of the 1960s, when the nationalist and separatist verve emblemized in Corky Gonzales’ political Manifesto was echoed by the many novels and poems reclaiming the importance of the Chicano Indian origins. In the name of a Chicano identity reconstruction and reappropriation, concepts like the myth of Aztlán, la *Raza*, or the “Bronze People”, were to rouse a political sense of community in the struggle against discrimination. In the context of *The Rain God* the invocation of the Indian past is purified of any nationalist meaning, being translated, rather, into an affirmation of a more comprehensive principle of cultural miscegenation. In the writer’s prospect, the different categories that make up identity (not only race and ethnicity but also gender, sex, and class) become intertwined elements for the

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<sup>11</sup> As explained by Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, a fundamental Aztec belief “envisioned a shared cosmic energy between all living things—plants, animals, humans, and gods—that need to be exchanged regularly. This energy was transported from humans to the gods through various forms of sacrifice, human and otherwise. The gods returned it in the form of light and warmth (from the Sun), water and food, especially maize. The Sun was the supreme recipient in this exchange of energy, for the Sun provided the key elements to the sustenance of life” (173). *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World*. London, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2007.

composition of infinite kinds of allegiances and exchanges in the relation of different cultures. The sense of community is also developed and expanded in contrast to limited structures of negatively constructed identities. Consistent with this approach, is the analysis of the relation with the other inside the space of the family, where the dynamics of the group's filiations and affiliations take on particular affective meanings. For this reason, they can be both healthy spaces where individuals' identities can receive nourishing, and, as in the case of the Angel family in *The Rain God*, spaces for the reproduction of the nation's dynamics of denial. Miguel Chico's *ofrenda*, in the form of a novel, is thus symbolic for a renewal of the relation with his family in order to "explore different possibilities for community" (Neate 226).

### *Family myth*

According to Andolfi, the concept 'family myth' refers to "a series of well-integrated beliefs shared by all family members, concerning each other and their mutual position in the family life, beliefs that go uncontested by everyone involved in spite of the distortions which may conspicuously imply"; family myths therefore rest on "emotional factors based on attributions of meaning" (Andolfi 97). Through the family myth, the individual can read, classify, and interpret the world around him according to a model of values and prescriptive functions which are at the base of the myth's production of codes: the myth supplies the individual with a codified way of knowledge production which binds his own particular observations of reality.

The myth code is shared inside the family group, and it promotes the harmonious relationship among its members. In fact, "myth becomes a 'matrix of consciousness', representing an element of union and a cohesive factor for those who believe in its truth. To create a myth, therefore, means to translate a series of real events and behaviors into a narrative accepted by all, in which each individual can discover a key to reading his own daily experience and the meaning of his life, while feeling at the same time that he is participating with the rest of the group" (Andolfi 97).

The emotional component is fundamental in the cohesive power of the family myth since it creates those strong feelings of attachment and loyalty with family members that bestow the imperative of family cohesion with a sacred aura. *La familia* thus becomes a centripetal force of cohesion in that the particular interests, desires, and freedom of each of its members are bound to be focalized, as their ultimate horizon, on the solidity and safety of the overall family group. The set of well-defined moral rules of behavior that underpins the cohesion of the family structure is processed through the emotional power of the family's affective code. The family unit becomes the

private space toward which the individual polarizes and satisfies his need for love, acceptance, belonging, in contrast to the outside world which, in the context of the Borderlands, becomes a major threat. According to Patricia Hill Collins, by “idealizing the traditional family as a private haven from a public world, family is seen as being held together through primary emotional bonds of love and caring” (Collins 1990 47), so that the family’s cohesive force is also augmented by the external world’s negative impact.

A sense of uniqueness and of being rooted in one space to one group is also central to the family’s meaning: “It is through the experiences of growing up within the confines of the family” McAdoo states, “that we first begin to get a sense of who we are, what we are, and what direction our lives will take. When we examine ourselves, we find that who we are and who we can become depend in great part on who we started out to be. This is found within our families” (McAdoo x). She calls “family ethnicity” an identity that “transcends individual differences” (McAdoo ix) and that is more effective precisely because of its more generalized inclusive power: “Family ethnicity is the sum total of our ancestry and cultural dimensions, as families collectively identify the core of their beings. Their ethnicity is fundamental to the all-encompassing core of their identities” (McAdoo ix). Thus the family also recruits its members through the concept of an ethnic unity, when ethnicity is held to involve “the unique family customs, proverbs and stories that are passed on for generations. It incorporates the celebrations, the foods that are eaten, the religious ceremonies that are shared, and the stories of how they came to this land ... the essence of ethnicity lies in the very basic elements of our being” (McAdoo x).

In *The Rain God*, the dynamics of family affective code and “family ethnicity” are continuously disrupted by the author’s personal search for meaning that questions the family’s dynamics of relations based on those emotional factors. Most of the times, the affective code adheres to discriminating and

oppressive practices, which it thus both camouflages and promotes. Miguel Chico, who belongs to the third generation, develops his own strategies of survival that will contrast with Mama Chona's family project. Miguel Chico and Mama Chona constitute the two axis around which the novel orbits: they represent respectively the family's origin, with its myths of family's founding, the burden of a rigid idea of history and tradition to honor, respect and reproduce; and the family's development and change, in accordance with the particular displacements and the flexibility of everyday life, the ferment of the fluctuation of time and space; the family's ideological construction mirrored in an immemorial family ritual—"a perverse oral history" (Márquez 14)—is placed against its deconstructive and regenerative forces.

The opening image of the novel is that of a family picture which shows these jointed polar influences

A photograph of Mama Chona and her grandson Miguel Angel—Miguel Chico or Mickie to his family—hovers above his head on the study wall beside the glass doors that open out into the garden ... She and the child are walking hand in hand. (3)

This picture is mentioned in the first and final chapters of the novel as if to open and close a circle of collective identity formation. In the middle chapters, the narration builds around other characters whose stories interweave with those of Mama Chona and Miguel Chico: they are Miguel Chico's parents, uncles and aunts, *compadres y comadres*, who compose the structure of the Angels' "extended" or "joint" family, consisting of two generations living in the same barrio; this urban ethnic neighborhood serve, as Falicov explains, as a "buffer against culture shock" and recreates "a continuity of faces, voices, smells, and food" (Falicov 232). The extended family thus brings in the new environment those structures of emotional support which were disrupted by displacement in the experience of Mama Chona's crossing of the border together with the loss of her husband and

three sons. The extended family which she recreates in the Anglo American territory feeds on close, personal relationships that give the security of their irrevocable nature and imply reciprocity, trust, obligations and respect. At the same time, the illusion of a safe haven is offset by those dynamics of discrimination that exist inside the family sphere and which are “inconsistent with the literature that casts the Mexican American family as the primary source of emotional support and a hedge against mental illness” (Mendelson 81).

According to Goodwin, “joint families often evolve a hierarchical and authoritarian structure in order to operate in a smooth manner, and are likely to stress obedience and respect for authority and family reputation” (Goodwin 113). Concepts like “family reputation”, “honor”, “respect”, are pivotal concepts in Mama Chona’s worldview and they are supported by a minute observance of family rituals and traditions.

“Rituals” Andolfi explains,

are a series of acts and behaviours, coded within the family, which are repeated over time and in which ... the family participate. They have the task of transmitting ... particular values, attitudes, or ways of behavior in specific situations or emotional experiences attached to them” (Andolfi 110).

This overall picture about the forms in which the emotional idea of “*la familia*” moves the threads of the dynamics of relation among its members in order to preserve the family unity, is functional to the reading and interpretation of the author’s focalization on those dynamics. Hidden under the surface of the family’s rituals are the particular desires and needs represented by the novel’s characters: these are sacrificed to the family’s “well-being”.

### *Socialized family*

In Gayatri Spivak's discussion of "cartographies of bonded space", the family is "the first step towards collectivity", it is the "machine for the socialization of the female body through affective coding" (Spivak 82). As with feminism and gender politics, the family is the basic form of human organization where also ethnic and other forms of identity politics are congealed, repressed, reproduced, and socialized.

Defined as a natural or biological arrangement based on heterosexual attraction, this monolithic family type, according to Patricia Hill Collins, "is actually supported by government policy. It is organized not around a biological core, but a state-sanctioned, heterosexual marriage that confers legitimacy not only on the family structure itself but on children born in this family" (Collins 1990, 47).

She explains that systems of inequality like gender, race, nation, social class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and age, intersect in family rhetoric and practices, so that the family nucleus becomes the site where hierarchies are naturalized and internalized: "Families" Collins states, "are expected to socialize their members into an appropriate set of 'family values' that simultaneously reinforce the hierarchy within the assumed unity of interests symbolized by the family and lay the foundation for many social hierarchies"(Collins 2000, 158). The hierarchies that exist within family units, Collins states, "correlate with comparable hierarchies in U.S. society" (Collins 2000, 158). The family becomes a microcosm where social structures are replicated and at the same time rendered "normal" expressions of natural, even biological, forms of organization. The family roles of father, mother, daughter, sister, etc, or gender, racial, ethnic, sexual labels coupled to their equivalent oppositions, in the binary constructions of woman/man, black/white, Mexican/European, homosexual/heterosexual, are assumed like constitutional of the identity of an individual and go unquestioned. In fact



individuals typically learn their assigned place in hierarchies of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nation and social class in their families of origin. At the same time they learn to view such hierarchies as natural social arrangements, as compared to socially constructed ones. Hierarchy in this sense becomes 'naturalized' because it is associated with seemingly 'natural' processes of the family. (Collins 2000, 158)

The union of the supposed inherited constituents of one's group identity is called ethnicity. Ethnicity is, in the multicultural society, an important element of cohesion of the family. The concept of ethnicity is a vague and ambiguous one since it has been variously employed with reference to different contexts: from physical features, to mythical elements of culture, historical legacy, cultural and social rules, behaviors and beliefs. Ethnicity is considered by the members of the group it characterizes and distinguishes, like an inherited matter of fact which must be preserved and transmitted. On the other hand, according to Marazzi, a global analysis of a multiethnic society shows that the concept of ethnicity is a *choice* which also undergoes a continual process of recreation through the group's internal and external dynamics of relation<sup>12</sup>. Cultural identity is thus a choice, and it does not follow an impersonal path of objectification, universal and static. It depends on the individual group's propensity toward the valorization of certain characteristics in spite of others, in accordance with the time and place it lives. It derives, as Marazzi explains, from concrete and always negotiable strategies, and, since it is a product of cultural creation, it is vital and thus constantly redefined. In this sense, also specific genetic characteristics may be understood like creations, since their nature is in great part influenced by social rules on marriage and by the strategies of esogamy.

In a multiethnic society, the invention of one's ethnicity is very much the rule. Immigrant people must adapt themselves to the new cultural environment they meet, and the same is true for the nation where they move in, which must reassess its structure to the new reality it

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<sup>12</sup> See Marazzi 61.

comprehends. The ethnic identity of immigrants is a construction they elaborate in the “here and now” of the new territory. In the case of Chicanos, to feel more Mexican than American, more *mestizo* than Spanish, is the consequence of a personal choice, which can be more or less conscious, more or less free.

The choice leads to a constant cultural creation and regeneration that answers to specific historical needs: it can depend on the group’s stance of self-determination, as in the time of the Chicano Renaissance, which was triggered by a social reality of poverty and discrimination; or it can depend on the group’s need to find a refuge in its own tradition, which it is forced to re-create through a *bricolage*-work of personal and collective memory.

In the same way as Benedict Anderson writes that nations are “imaginary communities”, so the family becomes the social space where the analysis of these human dynamics of relations is focalized to its roots and origins.

In a multiethnic society, families represent the primary location of biologic and cultural reproduction of single groups. Moreover, in a less evident way, families, according to Marazzi, influence the social sphere by supplying it with ethnically characterized models that function on a symbolic level. It is very uncommon, he explains, that a group will not believe its own family to be a model of primary importance inside the system of social relations, and the core of the most significant ethnic values<sup>13</sup>. The particular configuration of the family group neither depends on any universal model, nor functions like an independent microsystem inside the bigger system of society. It must be considered, instead, like the mere site where blood family relations with their filiations and affiliations interlace, that is, like a magnetic point of attraction to where these relations converge and from where they spread, and which moulds itself according to a long list of historical, social, and cultural factors. Each family group is potentially different from another with the same characteristics since the changing conditions of its environment

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<sup>13</sup> See Marazzi 63.

determine unpredictable reactions in any one of them. What seems to be universally shared by different cultural groups, according to the different perspectives in relation to particular cultural contexts, is the importance bestowed to the family as the primary and primal location of social relations. There exists a universal symbolic correspondence between the social and the family contexts: the family is, in fact, the location of the production and reproduction of social practices and ideologies<sup>14</sup>.

Just like any cultural manifestation, the family is an invention, that responds to the personal emotional needs of its members, to the ideological constructions of the societies where families are integrated, and always to the shifting moods of history.

The very concept of “family myth” explains the arbitrary nature of its formation, since the creation of a myth involves the translation of real events into a narrative accepted by all, “in which each individual can discover a key to reading his own daily experience and the meaning of his life” (Andolfi 97). As stated by Sollors, “the category of ‘invention’ has been stressed in order to emphasize not so much originality and innovation as the importance of *language* in the social construction of reality” where language and rhetoric “become productive forces that constitute the ideological terms which then appear to be the ‘natural’ signposts in our universe” (Sollors x-xi). In fact, myth is “authoritative narration and instrumental knowledge” (Bernstein 91), it incorporates the inventive category of language, and at the same time gives events “an intelligible structure” by “presentation, confirmation, explanation”. It is “a narrative accepted by all” (Bernstein 90-91). It is thus authoritative in its ideological representation of reality.

According to Sollors, “the interpretation of previously ‘essentialist’ categories (childhood, generations, romantic love, mental health, gender, region, history, biography, and so on) as ‘inventions’ has resulted in the

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<sup>14</sup> See Marazzi 66.

recognition of the general cultural constructedness of the modern world. What were the givens in intellectual pursuits until very recently have now become the problematic issues” (Sollors x).

In this sense, concepts like border and borderland—which, in the context of Chicano literature, refer, as Anzaldúa states, both to the actual physical borderland of the U.S/Mexican border and to the psychological, sexual and spiritual borderlands that are not particular to the Southwest of the United States—become central in contemporary debates; they have emerged from the marginal sphere where they had been inscribed and left unquestioned. In fact, as Anzaldúa observes, “the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Anzaldúa 1987, Preface). If these concepts are now attended as crucial issues for the definition of identity, they do not remain entrapped inside new essentialist classifications, but they are regarded as processes, since they are cultural constructions influenced by “productive forces in nation-building enterprises” (Sollors xv). A Borderland is thus “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (Anzaldúa 1987, 3). This perspective values the concept of “choice” which resounds in that of invention: “What am I?”; Anzaldúa’s answer to this question scorns at the idea of splitting identities into categories, and reveals the syncretic process of invention which identities undergo: “*A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings. They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label*” (Anzaldúa 1983, 205). Or, again, in Richard Rodriguez’ affirmation of identity: “I have come to this lecture room ... to say that I am an American like you. Thomas Jefferson is my cultural forefather, not Benito Juárez. I claim Martin Luther King. And Walt Disney. And Lucille Ball. And Elvis Presley. And Benjamin Franklin. And Sister Mary Regis” (Rodriguez 5). In

choosing their allegiances, they form new families and find their location in the world.

Miguel Chico represents his identity to himself through the narration of his own family. His representation also constitutes his quest for identity. His fictive autobiography is told in third person as to include himself in the narrative process: his third person self mingles in the narration with those of the other characters who represent the members of his family. On the whole, the quest for identity results in the intersecting selves which constitute the complex thread of *la familia*. Although the setting of the present of his writing is the San Francisco studio of his adulthood, he locates his identity search in the past of his childhood. He thus weaves his identity in the continuous process of his quest which connects the past with the present and the future. His past is not estranged from him: it is still with him, both haunting him, and healing him through its narrative re-creation. What Miguel Chico affirms is his belief in “the power of knowledge” (28). Knowledge enables him to discern in the fibre of history the chaos of reality. He must walk his way back to the point where nothing existed since nothing was named yet, and then return to his present where, with his new awareness, he would start his own act of creation.

Perhaps he had survived to tell others about Mama Chona and people like Maria. He could then go on to shape himself, if not completely free of their influence and distortions, at least with some knowledge of them” (28).

The narrative recollection of his family’s story enters through the meanders of the psychological analysis of motives: Miguel Chico, the author, re-enacts the character of Miguel Chico the child, and reproduces the child’s interrogatives filtering their substance through the lenses of the analyst. Both the recollection and the analysis become a questioning into the structure of those ideological dynamics of relation that rule under the screen of the family’s affective coding.

At the same time, it reveals the arbitrary nature of the family's essentialist constructions which regard it as a private and safe haven, and whose essential values are uncontaminated by the external reality and are reproduced through time.

The family's representation in the narrative form of the novel thus replicates and corroborates the actual reality of the family, that is, its truth as an invention. The family is a construction of language caught between the forces of power production and the human need for love. It is a cultural invention which shapes itself on the dynamics of power.

Miguel Chico, back to San Francisco after a visit to his family, awakens from a dream with a sense of release. The last chapter of the novel is "*The Rain God*", and opens with the narration of the dream

The "monster"... said to him softly, almost kindly, "I am a nice monster. Come into my cave." The two of them were standing on a bridge facing the incoming fog. The monster held Miguel Chico closely from behind and whispered into his ear in a relentless, singsong way, "I am the manipulator and the manipulated." It put its velvet paw in Miguel Chico's hand and forced him to hold it tightly against his gut right below the appliance at his side. "I am the victim and the slayer," the creature continued, "I am what you believe and what you don't believe, I am the loved and the unloved. I approve and turn away, I am judge and advocate." Miguel Chico wanted to escape but could not. The monster's breath smelled of fresh blood and feces. "You are in my cave, and you will do whatever I say." (159-160)

At an intimation of the monster to jump down the bridge and into the void image of a sea no longer visible through the fog, Miguel Chico thus reacts

Miguel Chico felt loathing and disgust for the beast. He turned to face it. Its eyes were swollen with tenderness. "All right," he said, "but I'm taking you with me." He clasped the monster to him—it did not struggle or complain—and threw both of them backward over the railing and into the fog. As

he fell, the awful creature in his arms, Miguel Chico felt the pleasure of the avenged and an overwhelming relief. (160)

The monster represents the contradictive feelings Miguel Chico holds toward his family. It is a loathing figure, nonetheless its eyes are swollen with tenderness. The cave where the monster resides is home, *la familia*, a place that shows the disenchantment of its interior structure in the disgusting image of its dweller.

The place where Miguel Chico confronts the monster of his past is over a bridge: the bridge is connecting the sides of some unknown territories, and even the sea below is blurred by the fog; indeed, the mist confuses both space and time, so that the overall resulting picture is that of a crossing suspended on emptiness.

What remains visible is the struggle of man with his torments, against the ideological restraints of hierarchical, homophobic, heterophobic society. The bridge is key word in Borderlands' studies: it focuses on the connection, on the straddling of different cultures and languages, on the blurring of frontiers and on the endorsement of more tolerant approaches in intercultural relations.

Miguel Chico's struggle is resolved through his will to know and to understand, through the questioning of the *status quo*. The deadlock is unleashed once the monster is tossed into emptiness, that is, once the psychological strain provoked by self-loathing and interiorized prejudices is tamed.

*“Trajectories of denial”*

Guilt is the most recurrent feeling that plagues the characters in the novel and that causes them to react in destructive ways against themselves and the others. According to Neate, the rigid family structure that Mama Chona aims at instituting through the deletion of identity's vital features, triggers “a nexus of trajectories of denial ... that impedes community and prevents the Angels from establishing linkages beyond themselves and their own private familial sphere” (Neate 226). The repression of the self provokes a limitation of the capacity to relate with the others, and this is evident in the relation that the members of the family also establish among themselves. Starting from Mama Chona, who, according to Neate, embodies “varied possibilities of authorship” (Neate 226) as both the “author of the clan” (the matriarch) and the author who “directs her kin as characters in her pre-written text or script of the family” (Neate 226); she thus represents the root—as both the one who “gives birth” to the next generations of the Angels’, and the one whose example envisages, in Neate’s words, “the superiority and conservation of the clan through a recognition of and adherence to binary categories of difference” (Neate 226). In this second case, she represents the root in opposition to the rhizome, a possibility which is instead envisaged by Miguel Chico in his return to and regeneration of community through the symbolic ritual of the novel, that is, through, accordingly, the novel’s evocative and creative functions. But before Miguel Chico can envision that stage, he must go through other stages in the development of his identity. He feels that he is the child and the extension of Mama Chona who influenced him, “the way a seed continues to be a part of a plant after it has assumed its own form which does not at all resemble its origin, but which, nevertheless, is determined by it” (25-26). As Mama Chona personifies the root of a rigid hierarchical structure, her influence on Miguel Chico derives from the authority and control she is able to exercise on him as well as on



the rest of the family. The strong ties that she creates among them are thus constituted in a negative way since they are based on a dynamics of psychological dependency triggered by feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Miguel Chico recognizes he has been deeply affected by Mama Chona in his childhood education in that he feels he is like a seed of a plant: by making a comparison between psychological influence and genetic encoding, he focalizes on the nature of that influence, which is powerful and ineluctable at the same time. Thus if, on the one side, he is unable to escape that “nexus of trajectories of denial”, on the other, he contributes in reproducing it. A tendency exemplified in an episode that witnesses Miguel Chico’s own failures toward a desperate father who has fallen in love with his wife’s best friend. The present scene of the episode is Miguel Chico’s home in San Francisco embedded in that time of the “prudish period of his life” (89). Both Miguel Chico’s physical location and his overall psychic attitude coact, in the present episode, to convey the distance and the detachment he has managed to create between his family and himself. His family is left behind in El Paso, or confined to those “old childhood feelings” that are “dredged up” (88) every time he spends some time with them. In this last case, he has “to be alone for several days after his return to the West Coast” (89). San Francisco gauges the distance and the aloofness that Miguel Chico has been able to achieve: there, he can be alone, disconnected from his childhood feelings, uncommitted to any cause, an individual without community. He is described as arrogant, a man who “believed he was finding ways out” (91) of his family’s entrapment--exemplified in “the Catholic guilt and desire for punishment that plagued his parent’s generation” (91)--through his university education. San Francisco is also symbolic for Miguel Chico’s projections into a future that envisages a different reality from that of his family: his academic career would allow him to be free of his family’s ties and limited horizon, since “the power of knowledge” (28) would help transform his own sense of guilt and inadequacy. At the same time, we are informed

that the present time of the episode is not yet ripe for Miguel Chico to be able to fully appreciate, in its sympathetic implications, the importance of knowledge: “he was in the prudish period of his life; the operation that would change everything was a few years away” (89). The devastating experience of the operation marks a significant change in both his physical and spiritual nature, since only after he has survived it, he becomes aware of the connection that real knowledge implies, as the narrator explains, between learning and experience. This *awareness* leaves his present arrogance aground, and frees him from the limitations imposed by a dynamics of trajectories of denial.

In the present scene of San Francisco, Miguel Chico is still leading an unproductive struggle against his vulnerability: “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” (91). To such a degree that “faced with an uncontrollably weeping father” (92), Miguel Chico does not feel empathy, which would prompt an affective projection into the feelings or state of mind of his father, but he is described as coldheartedly *facing* a situation that imposes him to re-act. His reaction, as the outcome of an intellectual elaboration, places him at a distance from his father’s feelings, and allows him the necessary detachment required by an analytic outlook. After all, “he, Miguel Chico, was the family analyst” (28), interested in the psychological reasons of facts. Miguel Chico’s arrogant attitude is combined with his attempt to cope with his perceived impotence in “the power of knowledge”: both functions aim at marking a distance from his family through an unconditional endorsement of values that are typical of western culture. In fact, according to Marta Sánchez, “psychoanalysis is primarily a white, middle-class phenomenon, generally uncharacteristic of a Mexican-Chicano culture” (Sánchez 1990, 287-288). Miguel Chico adopts what Anzaldúa calls “a Western mode”, that is, a “convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal”

(Anzaldúa 1987, 79). In the same line, this kind of thinking complies with the Catholic dualistic splitting between body and spirit, and its restraints against spiritual knowledge characteristic of native religions. These religions are thus stigmatized and their fearsome sides “tamed” (Said 1991, 65): they “are called cults and their beliefs are called mythologies” (Anzaldúa 1987, 37). Miguel Chico is skeptical at his godmother Nina’s will to share with him her spiritual experiences:

“After dinner I want to tell you about the spirits. You’ll never believe what I’ve seen.”

“Right,” he said.

“Don’t make fun, Mickie. You just won’t allow yourself to see how psychic you are.” (92)

And confronted with his desperate father

Miguel Chico didn’t feel very psychic. (92)

Here, prudishness is mixed with irony (another form of rupture) and anger, or what Rosaura Sánchez terms resentment, which is also, in the end, “a form of adherence and consent” (Sánchez 1994, 120). In fact, Miguel Chico’s education “would allow him to escape the stranglehold of his father’s patriarchal standards but not to subvert the power relations altogether” (Sánchez 1994, 120). During this phase in Miguel Chico’s life, his belief in the power of knowledge is still captivated inside the limits of those power relations, and is used as a tool through a “vindictiveness in the impersonal tone” (93), and a certain sadistic ability in talking with his father when Miguel Chico “began to feel the exhilaration of cruelty, of being able to injure as one has felt injured” (94) and he “used the knife as if it had been in his hands forever” (97). To some extent, the narration of the father-son conversation reproduces a climax in Miguel Chico’s reappropriation of power over his father. According to Marta Sánchez, “in a position of power and control over his father-repressor, the son expresses his grievances and finds

redress against his father in his writing” (Sánchez 1990, 291). The redress he experiences in the exhilaration of cruelty is also translated into a feeling of manliness that Miguel Chico gains from his recognition of the roles’ reversion: if “traditionally the talk between him and his father had never gone beyond Miguel Grande’s questioning and his replies” (96), now Miguel Chico is able to hold control of the situation, and to actively lead the conversation according to his own choices. Now, “it was his turn to question” (97), thus changing from a passive to an active role in the relationship with his father, from the manipulated to the manipulator, from the victim to the slayer. During the conversation where his father is confessing both his guilt and his weakness, “he felt his own manliness in choosing not to answer to his father” (97): silence reverberates with an answer as an act of defiance, but it ends up becoming a re-ly of the roles in their alternation.

Miguel Chico’s revenge over his father is conducted in the silence of his private thoughts. It thus becomes a private retribution for his father’s sins, a redress which takes place in his writing. Miguel Chico, according to Marta Sánchez, “does not offer the comradery that another macho man might give his father, but he is not cruel or nasty to him, either” (Sánchez 1990, 291), and Miguel Chico’s handling of his father’s desperation are not noticed by him who remains confident of his authority as a father.

He could only look on his father’s pain in an abstract way, and he knew enough not to touch him. Years before, helping him pack in the middle of the night for his journey to Los Angeles to attend his brother Armando’s funeral, Miguel Chico had attempted to comfort his father. It was the first time he had seen Miguel Grande cry and, still a child, he had reached out to him.

“Don’t do that,” his father had said, pushing him away. “Men don’t do that with each other. Let me cry by myself. Go away.” (92-93)

Miguel Chico's lack of empathy, as the text shows, is described as part of a chain of events that infinitely reproduce the same practices of denial. Inside this process, the other is annulled since he becomes the projection of one's taught limits and fears.

He always felt that his father disliked him for being too delicate, too effeminate. Miguel Grande had consistently refused to acknowledge that his son's feelings and needs might be different from his own, and he had thus failed to help the boy understand life. Because he had not looked at himself or others truly, the son could see no way of helping him now. Miguel Chico did not want the responsibility of his father's guilt; he had guilts enough of his own. (94)

Miguel Chico's cold reaction facing his father's desperation is, first of all, a reaction to an interiorized self-denial: they both perceive homosexuality as a deviation. In fact, although Miguel Chico knows that his needs differ from those of his father, he is unable to accept and externalize them, since his father "had ... failed to help the boy understand life". When Miguel Chico looks at his father he cannot go beyond his own limits: he does not see his father as himself a victim of a patriarchal system, but as the agent of his own (Miguel Chico's) oppression. In this sense, he looks "on his father's pain in an abstract way". The other is deprived of his "thickness" and becomes an abstract projection or representation of one's frailty.

Just like his father who "had not looked at himself or others truly", Miguel Chico cannot see through his own representation of reality that prevents him from truly facing it, that is, from considering it from perspectives that diverge from or oppose his personal projection on them. In fact, "he was still seeing people, including himself, as books ... And so he continued to read them as if they were invented by someone else, and he failed to take into account their separate realities, their differences from himself" (26).

Miguel Chico's analytic passion for persons and episodes acts like a continual return of the intellect over the psychological reasons of their being, their "motives", thus trying to penetrate a dimension which is "always and

endlessly open to question and interpretation” (29). His analysis does not remain focalized on the person or episode he is considering, but it moves away, instead, like caught inside the vortex of all the possibilities of thought. “He preferred to ignore facts in favor of motives” since motives are much more flexible. Consequently, his analysis does not aim at really approaching motives, but is a playful act of creation: people are like books that he can “edit ... correct ... make behave differently” (26).

When people told him of their lives, or when he thought about his own in the way that is not thinking but a kind of reverie outside time, a part of him listened with care. Another part fidgeted, thought about something else or went blank, and wondered why once again he was being offered such secrets to examine. Later he found himself retelling what he had heard, arranging various facts, adding others, reordering time schemes, putting himself in situations and places he had never been in, removing himself from conversations or moments that didn't fit” (26).

He turns away from reality in order to transform it into something else. His interest when “he listens with care” is diffracted from focus and dispersed into different directions in “a kind of reverie outside time”. In this way, he can escape reality, and the parts of it he is unable to accept, and substitute it with a tolerable one: “most of the time his versions were happier than their ‘real’ counterparts” (26).

The transformative power that writing has at this stage of Miguel Chico's elaboration of existence is utopist in its effort to detach himself from “reality”. It mirrors his inability to create a connection with himself and the others as an outcome of Mama Chona's destructive “trajectories of denial”. Her effort at reinforcing the family ties has produced, instead, a disintegration of the family community and of its members' identities.

### *Acknowledgement*

In the final chapter of *The Rain God*, Islas introduces a change in the way Miguel Chico starts perceiving himself and, consequently, the other.

Repression plays a key role in the relationship among the different characters in the novel, and it is dealt with both in terms of conscious and unconscious processes. The overall tension that pervades the novel is epitomized, in the final chapter, by the image of an “awful creature” (160), who materializes in one of the recurrent dreams that keeps waking Miguel Chico during the night. Islas describes the sense of oppression internalized by Miguel Chico as a “monster” who “held [him] closely” (159) and compelled him “to gasp and struggle for air” (160). In the description of Miguel Chico’s dream is encoded the acknowledgement of an internal struggle between conscious and unconscious motives. The repressed guilt that lie at the bottom of Miguel Chico’s distorted vision of reality is, in Mohanty’s terms, “the theoretical prism through which [he] views [his] world and [himself] in it correctly” (Mohanty 1997, 209). Through the recognition of his guilt he can reinterpret his past experience as a child and focus on the “real” causes (the family’s sins) of his distress. By uncovering the family’s sins, he thus gets through a “blood sacrifice”, like a purification, which he performs through writing, an act which also represents, as Anzaldúa describes, a development, or transformation, from a condition of distress to one of emancipation: “for only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth’s body—stone, sky, liquid, soil. This work, these images, piercing tongue or ear lobes with cactus needle, are my offerings, are my Aztec blood sacrifices” (Anzaldúa 1987, 75). In the same way, Islas describes the sense of relief that follows the dream: “Awakened by this dream in that silent hour before dawn when he felt the whole world was his, the sense of

release was very much with him” (160). The experience of the dream acts like a pre-conscious awakening from a state of dormant repression, and it is followed by its plain, conscious recognition symbolized in the morning rise and his waking up: “Awakened by this dream ...”. The latent becomes plain, the metaphoric is replaced by its literal correspondent, the act of writing seems to seal the miracle of the transformation.

Signs of a change are already noticeable in the following passage: “this time he did not try to go back to sleep ... but instead sat at his desk and recorded the details of the dream. He needed very much to make peace with his dead ...” (160).

The act of “making peace with the dead” is an act that implies an effort by the writer who, according to Anzaldúa, has to “go against a resistance” (Anzaldúa 1987, 67) in order to overcome it. The Chicano social struggle against the oppressive practices of heterophobia<sup>15</sup> also becomes a private struggle against interiorized forms of oppression which are frequently endorsed by the family unit. The struggle is already a moment of action that issues from and is consequential to the recognition of those interiorized borders as a fundamental step which triggers the whole process toward the reappropriation of one’s identity.

The writer as “confessor and collective sinner” experiences the tension which is provoked by the recognition of one’s internal conflict, and must act against his own established convictions. He must thus reconcile with himself before he can reconcile with his own environment, constituted by his family and the society he lives in. He experiences what Ramón Saldívar calls “the anxiety of moments of truth—moments of personal crisis, of the loss of identity, or of the agonizing political polarizations of revolutionary situations such as those suffered by the characters in much of contemporary Chicano fiction” (Saldívar Ramón 14).

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<sup>15</sup> See Marazzi 72.



Miguel Chico Angel reveals the conflictive feelings he holds toward himself and his family, he names them and defines their contours and limits through the act of writing: the page becomes the space where the unmentionable is stated and recorded, where the secret is revealed, and finally, where the anxiety provoked by a vague and unconquerable burden is overwhelmed:

He looked, once again, at that old photograph of himself and Mama Chona. The white daises in her hat no longer frightened him; now that she was gone, the child in the picture held only a ghost by the hand and was free to tell the family secrets.  
(160)

In the recognition that “she was gone” is enclosed the whole painful process which leads to the ultimate stage when he regains control over his identity definition and he consequently experiences psychological and physical relief. Relief comes to him through confession, by symbolically letting out what had been hidden inside: when the private becomes public and he “was free to tell the family secrets”.

In this context, the act of writing finally involves a double process: in the first place, the narration of the family’s crises and unwholesome dynamics of oppression is also an attempt at a reconciliation: the space from which he had always been trying to run from (by plunging in the world of books, by leaving the “desert of his childhood” when he moves to San Francisco), becomes the space to which he must return, through memory, in order to be able to live his present. The past which had been haunting his present life in the image of ravenous ghosts he needs to placate by feeding them on blood sacrifices, is also the past he wants to redeem and set free in the regeneration of the family relations through his creative act.

Miguel Chico establishes a connection with his past through the symbolic reenactment of Aztec rituals. Tradition is revealed in the performative repetition of its rituals through time and its ever changing action: Miguel Chico, at the desk of his San Francisco apartment, far from the world of his childhood, builds his altar of words as a “feast for the spirits of the dead,

who will return and be nourished” (Carrasco 241). San Francisco, with its different milieu, is Miguel Chico’s new “home” where the altar finds its place: according to Carrasco, “the most important altar appears in the individual household [where] it serves as the *axis mundi* of the ritual and ceremonial life of the family” (Carrasco 240). Miguel Chico’s creation of a symbolic altar in his Californian house reveals his need to connect his past with his present and future: his new family location does not cancel the old one by replacing it; instead, it constitutes its outcome and extension.

A second process which the act of writing involves is a cathartic one: the author’s act of naming the family’s conflicts, of delimiting their boundaries, is also correlated to the one of creating a distance which objectifies them: a distance which he establishes both in the actuality of his new geographical location from where he thinks back to his past, and inside the space of the written page; according to Rosaura Sánchez “once narrated, discourse becomes estranged, *ajeno*: in this way the narrator means to be free of this burdensome collective memory, this textual ‘other’ which is a multitextual ‘inner speech’, in effect the discourse of the living and dead” (Sánchez 1994, 119).

The written text is, like a Mountain of Sustenance, “the container of the most valued supernatural powers” (Carrasco 241). Accordingly, the modern writer is here placed alongside the ancient Aztecs, and, specifically, he is compared to the scribe, who had supernatural power since he used the “the red and black ink” to paint on codices. As explained by Anzaldúa, these colors symbolized “*escritura and sabiduría* (writing and wisdom)” a conjunction of “poetry and truth” (Anzaldúa 1987, 69). In the chapter “*Tlilli, Tlapalli: the Path of the Red and Black Ink*”, of her book *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she explains the specific kinds of *mestiza* power that shape her own writing as a tumult, an anxiety of thought unfolding in language: in fact, she states, “living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create” (Anzaldúa 1987, 73).

The red and black ink which Aztecs used on their codices is also symbolic of the way through which a “communication with the Divine could be attained, and *topan* (that which is above—the gods and spirit world—could be bridged with *mictlán* (that which is below—the underworld and the region of the dead)” (Anzaldúa 1987, 69). In *The Rain God* this connection between the dead, the living and the world of gods is attained through the act of writing, through the use of metaphors and symbols.

The images of sacrifice and death, of fertility and regeneration, are also condensed in the poem Miguel Chico receives from his aunt Mema as a curiosity she found in the “old chest of family photos and letters” (161):

All the earth is a grave and nothing escapes it;  
nothing is so perfect that it does not descend  
to its tomb.

Rivers, rivulets, fountains and waters flow,  
but never return to their joyful beginnings;  
anxiously they hasten on to the vast realms  
of the Rain God.

As they widen their banks, they also fashion  
the sad urn of their burial.

Filled are the bowels of the earth  
with pestilential dust once flash and bones,  
once animate bodies of men who sat upon thrones,  
decided cases, presided in council,  
commanded armies, conquered provinces,  
possessed treasure, destroyed temples,  
exulted in their pride, majesty, fortune,  
praise and power.

Vanished are these glories, just as the fearful smoke  
vanishes that belches forth from the infernal fires  
of Popocatepetl.

Nothing recalls them but the written page.

Netzahualcoyotl

King of Texcoco

1431—1472

Life and death are mingled in the image of natural elements like rivers which carve their existence in the same flowing effort as they symbolically carve their end, represented by a burial urn; the path naturally taken by these rivers has the same and one end as the most ambitious life-paths chosen by men through their admirable enterprises and collection of glories. A long list of gold-resonant words that suggest what is more valuable for men in life, like pride, power, fortune, is followed by the inevitable announcement of death: “vanished are these glories”: they are glories that rarefy, just like nature’s gold in its “joyful beginnings”, since “nothing gold can stay”, and like Eden sinks to grief, the noble shapes of those fierce men fill the earth with pestilential dust. Their memories are like dense smoke, suggesting that they will soon vanish too. In fact “nothing recalls them but the written page”.

The image of the infernal fires of the Popocatepetl is redolent with the horror of the human sacrifices with which the Aztec people worshipped Tlaloc, the rain god<sup>16</sup>. The Aztecs, Miguel Chico’s ancestors, whose presence is recalled in the written poem, are thus connected to the Angels, Miguel Chico’s family, through a description of Mama Chona which he recalls in the novel:

How silent she had been even when she talked—silent like those pyramids he had finally seen in Teotihuacan built to pay tribute to the sun and moon. He had felt the presence of the civilizations that had constructed them and, as he climbed the steep, stone steps so conceived as to give him the impression that he was indeed walking into the sky, he had seen why those people, his ancestors, thought themselves gods and had

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<sup>16</sup> Tlaloc is the Nahuatl name for the Aztec rain god who was represented in art by eyes surrounded by rings and by a mustache-like upper lip with long fangs. According to the English naturalist Lucien Biart (1829-1897), in the ideographic manuscripts the image of Tlaloc “is painted green and azure, representing the various shades of water. It is armed with a golden wand twisted into a spiral, ending in a sharp point, in representation of a thunder-bolt ... Festivals in honor of this god were of frequent occurrence: on these occasions he was worshipped with strange ceremonies, and human sacrifices, especially of children. The cemetery recently discovered” she adds “ on one of the slopes of Popocatepetl, and in which only bones of children were found is considered ... as the burial-place of the young victims sacrificed to Tlaloc” (Biart 127).

been willing to tear out the hearts of others to maintain that belief. The feeling horrified him still. (27)

What is clearly perceivable is the parallel between the beliefs and cultural practices of the Aztecs and the beliefs and cultural practices of his own family, in that both ideological realms are stained with the blood, real and metaphoric, of their victims.

A symbolic sacrifice of words through the idea of the novel as *ofrenda*, is performed in order to exorcise the sacrifice of all the family members who had been, in one way or another, the victims of the family myth, an ideological construction of family as a “safe refuge”.

PART II

**Arturo Islas' *The Rain God***

## Hybrid identity: the subject of consciousness<sup>17</sup>.

Arturo Islas' identity is informed by his cultural, racial and sexual sense of being a homosexual Mexican American. The psychological tension provoked by the conflictive coexistence of elements inherited by different cultures, gives rise to what Feith calls a "painful dual consciousness" (Feith 27). According to Aldama, "his layered sense of being Mexican American (and later "Chicano") informed the way he inhabited, complicated, and transformed—and in turn was inhabited, complicated and transformed by—a variety of culturally, racially, and historically circumscribed spaces" (Aldama *Dancing*, 129). The reciprocal transformative action which informs the relation between the Chicano subject and the "space" he inhabits, stems out of the conflictive turmoil of the cultural contradictions that characterize him. This relation is exemplified by Feith as healing, chafing, nurturing and suturing, through "a to-and-fro movement of '*atravesados*' between the two sides": a smoothing action as the result of a continual "swamping of psychological borders" (Anzaldúa 1987, 79).

The reiterated action, the repetition of the paradox, the recurrent "[shifting out] of habitual formations" (Anzaldúa 1987, 79), have the effect of translating the impact of the extra-ordinary into the ordinary, just like the rigidity of schematic mental constructions is transformed by the fluidity of the perspective, an incessant change in "the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave" (Anzaldúa 1987, 80).

Coping with the conflict means developing a "tolerance for contradictions", whose empowering source is necessarily a "new consciousness", a "third element", whose energy comes "from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (Anzaldúa 1987,

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<sup>17</sup> In a context where identity is outlined as the product of one's dialogic relationship with the others, the subject of consciousness is the one who self-consciously identifies himself in accordance with that relation. See Paula Moya, 2002, 86.

80). This performative identity is in Feith's words, "constantly negotiating fluid interpersonal boundaries rather than fossilized communal definitions" (Feith 27).

In *The Rain God*, this process is represented through the recurrent image of the desert: the wind-swept sands that cover/uncover/recover, exemplify both the corrosive and the healing action of repetition. The desert represents both conflict and reconciliation through the ever fluid creative and transformative motion of the perspective.

Through this shifting motion, duality is transcended: the third element added by the self is, "greater than the sum of its severed parts" (Anzaldúa 1987, 80), since it comprehends contradictions inside itself. To develop a tolerance for ambiguity means learning to be "an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view ... to juggle cultures" and, at the same time, "nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing is rejected, nothing abandoned" (Anzaldúa 1987, 79).

Thus, the frontier is maintained, only its nature changes: "the natural fluid boundary subverts the artificial (unnatural) one, creating an objective correlative for a human geography that always transcends national and logical dichotomies" (Feith 27).

The desert of *The Rain God* is this objective correlative, a fluid boundary as an external equivalent for an internal sense of self, a layered stratification of meanings which are continually swamping their symbolic frontiers, covering and recovering them, replicating them infinitely by transforming their contours.

Islas, as Aldama explains, "had to negotiate a path in a complex social world, first in El Paso, as a light-skinned Mexican American, and then in Palo Alto, as a Chicano. In this negotiation, we hear the more public voice of Islas, first as a boy living in the U.S./Mexican borderlands, and later as Chicano scholar, professor and mentor. His contributions are all the more remarkable in view of the inner doubts he wrestled with" (Aldama *Dancing*, 129).



Islas' perspective deconstructs the absoluteness of hegemonic constructs and calls them unnatural, as a first step toward a reconciliation with one's internalized contradictions.

## **Arturo Islas: a biographical note**

Arturo Islas was born in El Paso in 1938. He grew up in El Paso and spent his undergraduate and graduate student years, as well as his career as professor and writer, in the San Francisco Bay Area. He died 1991 at his home in Palo Alto. The several very different worlds of Islas' experience helped shape his complex personality. His early experiences as a child and adolescent in El Paso and his years as a student at Stanford University all contributed to a constantly shifting sense of self.

### *El Paso*

Islas' initial experience growing up on the border of Texas and Mexico raised issues of class, race, sexuality, gender and religion.

Third generation son of a Mexican American family, he spent his early childhood inside the Mexican neighborhood of the city known as *El Segundo Barrio*. His family had lived in this part of town since his grandparents migrated to the United States in the late 1910s. This area, as Aldama explains, was "a womb space where children like Islas were looked after by the tight-knit, extended family community" (Aldama *Dancing*, 130), and it was detached by the north side of the city where the Anglo elite lived. Although this Mexican *barrio* was in itself a multicultural area where "African Americans and some older Anglos lived" (Aldama *Dancing*, 130), it constituted a closed entity owing to the marginalization and discrimination coming from the Anglo community. If, on one side, the *barrio's* internal "geographical identity", as Villa states, "has been a vital mode of urban Chicano community survival against the pressures of a dominant social formation" (Villa 5), on the other side, the closure of the Mexican tight-knit family community also became the space where the same dynamics of discrimination and oppression were daily performed.

If “the social dynamics within barrios produced their own pressures and contradictions” (Villa 15) Islas experienced those related to the cultural hegemony of patriarchy and normative heterosexuality through the strict education he was imparted especially by the older members of his family, his grandmother and her sisters, and by his father.

“With their complicated conjuncture of internal and external forces”, Villa explains that the *barrios* “have been real and rhetorical locations from which, and about which, to enact ideologically expressive critiques of domination, whether this comes from within or from outside their social spaces” (Villa 15). Thus, Islas’ critique of Anglo Americans’ intolerant practices extended to a critique of the “*intracultural*” space of the *barrio*—and especially of the family unit within it—based on his own challenging experiences, as a gay Chicano, of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion within that ethnic space. His sense of being, both accepted and rejected, led him toward a questioning of his “home” location, its assumed security and its consistency as an ethnic cultural place of identification.

Arturo Islas’ education was early influenced by his grandmother Crecenciana Sandoval, a woman who had been stiffened by her tough life experiences and who, unlike Islas, had found no way to channel her distress toward an intellectual rationalization of it. Instead, her interiorized racism and homophobia led her to the reproduction of discrimination through the education she imparted to her children and grandchildren.

She was forced north of the border at the time of the Mexican Revolution, and once in El Paso, the premature death of her husband, Jesús Islas, left her alone with the task of raising her ten children in an unfamiliar environment. She thus became the matriarch of the Islas family and the most fervent preacher of a dogmatic Catholic morality. At the same time, she imbued in her kin the importance of learning Spanish and English with a perfect accent. Her ever-present obsession with “purity” instilled by a sense of inferiority, was her means to cope with self-annihilation prompted by a racist society.

Thus, she internalized what Rodolfo Acuña calls the “Anything but Mexican” mindset<sup>18</sup>: specifically, an assortment of ethnic prejudices based on a pure (Spanish) / impure (*indio*) duality which led to a denial of the Indian traits that still characterized her. At the same time, she looked at education as both representing a conceptual detaching slash between her binary notions of lower/higher, inferior/superior, impure/pure, and the fundamental means for her family’s members through which they could aspire to a better life. The child Arturo Islas absorbed her preaching and suffered with it before he could, at an older age, react in his own terms.

At the same time, he could get away from the closure of the *barrio* space thanks to his academic achievements which led him to Stanford and to California.

At the age of eight, he was diagnosed with poliomyelitis that would eventually result in a limp. The event marked a fracture in the already problematic relationship with his father. Arturo Islas senior was a man with a strong, exaggerated masculine pride, who had learnt to look for his proper role in life according to his mother’s dogma. He became “well respected as one of four Mexican Americans in an Anglo police force” (Aldama *Dancing*, 8). He himself had internalized racial discrimination and aspired to that WASP ideal of life endorsed by the American Dream. He worked as a patrolling policeman inside his *barrio* premises. His choice to enter the domains of a repressive state apparatus contradicts, as Villa explains, “implicit social knowledge regarding historical *barrio*-police relations” (Villa

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<sup>18</sup> In *Anything but Mexican*, Rodolfo Acuña explains: “It is more than a cliché that many Mexicans and Latinos want to be white, or at least consider fairer skin to be better. The innocuous praise of relatives and friends for a newborn child, ‘*¡Qué bonita pero prietita!*’ (‘How pretty she is, but a little dark!’) thus takes on special meaning: darkness has many connotations, most of them negative. Some Mexicans, despite their strong indigenous faces, will confide that they have a French grandmother. Latin Americans recently arrived from countries much less developed than Mexico will be offended when asked, ‘Are you Mexican?’ For some Latin Americans, to be Mexican is *ser indio* – to be Indian; this signifies racial and social inferiority in much of Latin America” (8). *Anything but Mexican*. NY: Verso, 2000.

118), according to which a fracture is determined between Chicano's sense of identity and belonging to a place, symbolized by the *barrio* area, and the physical, repressive, ideological hegemonic strategies of containment through which "Chicanos were subordinately located in the dominant social space" (Villa 16). Islas sr.'s identity was thus delineated inside a thread of classist, racist and homophobic ideological paradigms, as is exemplified in Aldama's outline of his daily performative activities: "the father worked long hours as a policeman patrolling the streets and in his spare time fixed cars and played handball at the El Paso YMCA: he was all physicality" (Aldama *Dancing*, 8).

This essentialist picture of the man explains the reciprocal negative responses which existed between father and son: Arturo Islas's weak complexion since he was a child contradicted the ideal image of manhood which his father hoped to hand down to his son. Also, Islas' inclination for reading and studying, in comparison to the father's fondness for physicality, prevented them a deeper understanding of each other by sharing time and activities together. Arturo Islas sr., on the contrary, "was emotionally distant from 'Sonny'—the first born who would fail to live up to fatherly expectations" (Aldama *Dancing*, 8). The father's detached and severe attitude toward his son led to extreme consequences when he miscalculated the son's symptoms of what would later turn out to be poliomyelitis, for weakness of character. Due to the delayed attempt to cure the illness, Islas was marked with a limp which prevented him from sharing the same interests with his friends and schoolmates. His dedication to intellectual activities deepened as well as the fracture in the relationship with his father. The aloofness from the father's figure, brought him nearer to his mother, Jovita Islas, through a kind of solidarity: she was a devout woman, also subjected to her husband's dominance and control; Islas "identified himself mostly with his mother's melancholy sensibility and her victimhood" (Aldama

*Dancing*, 13), although he held contradictive feelings about her too, owing to her remissive nature and weakness of character facing her husband.

### *Stanford*

In 1956, Islas entered Stanford University as an undergraduate.

In those years, race relations and politics in the United States were changing. “Within a context advocating conformity, optimism, and consumerism, Mexicans formulated and sought to defend their political goals and interests, which were influenced greatly by the particular discrimination they endured” (Quiñones 42). Many Mexican American social organizations had begun to galvanize around issues of desegregation and bilingual education, but their efforts were met with strong Anglo resistance. And at the level of national policy making, the government sustained laws that treated Americans of Mexican descent as raw labor force with no civil rights. This was the time of Eisenhower’s administration during which “operation wetback” was resumed, deporting any Spanish-surnamed person who could not prove U.S. citizenship.

“Ironically” Aldama explains, “it was within the walls of Stanford’s ivory tower, void of racial diversity or sense of community, that Islas experienced the freedom to choose how to define his role in a racially conflicted United States” (Aldama *Dancing*, 134). Islas was one of the few racial minorities admitted to Stanford in the 1950s.

Winning a scholarship based on high school achievement, Islas left the desert and his Mexican American environment behind, and entered “Stanford’s well-manicured, lushly green, palm-tree-filled campus, with its majority WASP student body” (Aldama *Dancing*, 134). Within this ivory tower, Islas started to become more aware of his racial identity: he became acquainted with Chicano literature, and supported the Chicano social organizations that fought for civil rights<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> He followed and supported MAPA (Mexican American Political Association) (Aldama 135). This political organization was founded in California in 1959, where it would become, according to Quiñones, “the political voice of the state Mexican community” (Quiñones 67).

His political fervor became deeper with the explosion of the countercultural movements and civil rights activism of the 60s. It was the time when Islas graduated with a BA in English and then entered the Stanford English department as a PhD candidate. After completing his dissertation, he was hired by the University as a tenure-track professor in the same department. His social and political involvement led him to establish, together with other Chicano professors, the “Chicano Fellows Program” to address the needs of Chicano faculty students at Stanford.

In 1976, he was promoted to associate professor on the basis of a draft of his novel, *Día de los muertos* (an early version of *The Rain God*), as well as on the basis of his teaching.

Ten years later, during which he successfully continued his career as a writer, he learned that he had tested positive test for HIV antigens. He died of pneumonia at his home on the Stanford University campus.

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It focused on ethnic identity and direct electoral independence and its slogan was “Opportunity for All through MAPA”.

### ***The Rain God: an introduction***

Arturo Islas' novel *The Rain God* tells the story of a three generation Mexican American family living in the border region between Mexico and the United States. The novel focuses on a particular aspect of reality from a point of view which is internal to it. Islas gives voice to a sphere of humanity that has been symbolizing the "other" in relation to a hegemonic worldview. His approach in representing this social reality, as is the case for all Chicano texts, is thus, as Saldívar explains, "an emphatically political one" (Saldívar Ramón 4). In fact, it takes into consideration "the right of formerly un- or mis-represented human groups to speak for and represent themselves in domains defined politically and intellectually as normally excluding them" (Said 1991, 91). The Chicano social world, with its complex inherent differences and contradictions is, in Saldívar's words, Islas' "point of departure" (Saldívar Ramón 4).

The "other" as the narrating voice already resounds in a revolutionary tone: according to Saldívar, the switch in perspective is fundamental in order to define both negative and positive articulations of the subject-object discourse. In fact "from the perspective of the dominant culture, the peoples of the American West and Southwest, Native American and Mexican American alike, helped define Anglo America by serving as its contrasting personality, idea, and experience. Yet from the other perspective, this contrastive function has had, paradoxically, both debilitating and potentially liberating effects. It has been debilitating when as the contrastive other of the dominant culture, Chicano culture has become for Anglos subordinate in all respects. It has been potentially liberating when as the contrastive other Chicano culture has produced for Chicanos a consistent and highly articulated set of oppositions to the dominant cultural system surrounding it" (Saldívar Ramón 4). But only the focus on the origin of the narration's



perspective, the actor's viewpoint, loosens the paradox and makes clear how the Chicano contrasting function can be both debilitating and liberating in its effects. This focalization can define the limits of representation and misrepresentation as contrastive practices dependent on the correspondence between the subject and its object: in its liberating effect, the contrastive function takes place when Chicanos "speak for and represent themselves"; on the other side, Chicanos can become "subordinate in all respects" only when they are represented by an Anglo American perspective that regards them as "others".

In Arturo Islas' text, the narrative's contrastive action is performed through both content and form. At the level of content, the narration of the characters' dynamics of relation among themselves and inside the Anglo American context reveals the ideological contradictions that arise from a study of the social and cultural practices that the characters adopt. Rosaura Sánchez' essay focuses on the "representation in *The Rain God* of the social practices ... as well as on the ideological discourses used by the characters to represent, interpret, and make sense of their experiences" (Sánchez 1994, 117); she then defines what she calls the "affirmation of difference" as the counterdiscourse that Miguel Chico's generation opposes to the older generations represented by both his father Miguel Grande's and his grandmother Mama Chona's; specifically, "the older generations will be seen to conform to dominant ideological practices and identify with them while the younger generations counter specific but limited aspects of parental practices" (Sánchez 1994, 117-118). The affirmation of difference thus delineated pertains to only a section of the Angel family, what could be defined the younger rebels, and is conditioned, and thus limited, by the hegemonic discourse carried on by the family's older, more conservative, components. Their counterdiscourses, Rosaura Sánchez explains, "will be seen to be tied to the same formulations and power systems, so that the rejected practice is either simply reversed or replaced by different but

analogous power relations” (Sánchez 1994, 118). According to Sánchez, the strategies adopted by the third generation so as to contrast dominant oppressive cultural and social practices, are already “contained” inside a limited ideological framework where their contrastive forces are translated into posts supporting the entire hegemonic structure. In fact, “that is the nature of counterdiscourse; it does not formulate a distinctive alternative but merely opposes what it, ironically, affirms” (Sánchez 1994, 118). While, on the one side, the novel narrates the characters’ entrapment inside a dynamics of “strategies of containment”, on the other, this narration “allows a reconstruction of cultural practices and ideologies, collective memories which are subsequently deconstructed to reveal their contradictions” (Sánchez 1994, 126). Through the narration of social and ideological struggles as counterdiscourses the text allows for a reading which goes beyond the superficial thematic level: by presenting a reiteration of oppressive practices of relation along the succession of the family’s generations, Arturo Islas switches attention toward the reiteration itself, thus revealing the contradictive and entrapping nature of the younger generation’s counterstance. The reader is presented with the image of a circular pattern where recurrent practices of denial are ever corroborated and where also the possibility of escape seems to be denied.

This thematic contrastive action of the novel is further enriched by a narrative formal feature that transforms the text into a fictional autobiography, or semiautobiographical novel, in third person. Through the self-reflexive mode of Arturo Islas’ multiple narrator, the counterdiscourse opens to a wider spectrum of possibilities of difference that, in the end, break the circle of ideological entrapment.

*The Rain God* is built around the clear correspondence between the novel’s main character, Miguel Chico, and the author Arturo Islas. It is autobiographical since Arturo Islas is narrating his own and his family’s experiences covering a historical span that goes from the 1910 Mexican

Revolution to the 1980s, the present time of narration. The facts of his life are then variously altered to fit into the aesthetic exigencies of his fictional rendering. In addition, he lets a third person narrating voice recount his own story through the focalization on a “Arturo Islas alias Miguel Chico” character. The resulting impression is that “Miguel Chico is the presumed narrator, although all mentions of the character are in third person as well” (Sánchez 1994, 119). Miguel Chico becomes both the real and the fictional author: he embodies the omniscient narrator’s perspective and at the same time he is addressed in third person, so that the authorial resounding of his voice is diluted and made disappear among the overall concert of the other characters’ voices. As Marta Sánchez explains, “this narrator is self-conscious both about his identity with and difference from the protagonist. He thus reveals that the hero ... is not solely an ‘object’ but also an unintrusive ‘subject’ of narration” (Sánchez 1990, 286). The text provides hints of the third person character-narrator analogy, thus revealing that the “‘he’ referred to, or Mickie, is the narrator observing the action and controlling the narration ... that ‘he’ reverberates to include this narrator, who performs the actions he attributes to Mickie” (Sánchez 1990, 286).

The emblematic passage hinting at this analogy also reveals the formal expedients the author(s) use(s) in order to translate facts into fiction:

He was still seeing people, including himself, as books. He wanted to edit them, correct them, make them behave differently. And so he continued to read them as if they were invented by someone else, and he failed to take into account their separate realities, their differences from himself. When people told him of their lives, or when he thought about his own in the way that is not thinking but a kind of reverie outside time, a part of him listened with care. Another part fidgeted, thought about something else or went blank, and wondered why once again he was being offered such secrets to examine. Later he found himself retelling what he had heard, arranging various facts, adding others, reordering time schemes, putting himself in situations and places he had

never been in, removing himself from conversations or moments that didn't fit. (26)

According to this narrative strategy, Islas *alias* Miguel Chico is Islas at another time, in another place, and in another way, that is, inserted, or translated, in a fictional time and space. Through the writing of the novel, Islas can enter a different dimension since “once narrated, discourse becomes estranged, *ajeno*” (Sánchez 1994, 119); he thus creates a distance between him and himself that will allow him to observe from a privileged position, that is, the position of the “innocent”: in fact, since discourse becomes estranged when “the narrator deliberately [situates himself] outside the character’s consciousness” (Fowler 92), in the correspondence between character and narrator Islas pretends placing himself outside his own consciousness, thus freeing himself, in a symbolic way, of the awareness of having to deal with his own painful childhood experiences, his own and his family’s sins. He treats himself, and the emotions that derive from his memories, as an ‘object’, the fictional production of imagination, “as if he were invented by someone else”. A gap opens inside the author’s consciousness which is symbolized by the device of “creating a gap between narrator and character and yet having them to be one and the same” (Sánchez 1990, 286). Islas superposes figures and functions in a stratification of personae that separates himself from his own self: the resulting image is that of two mirrors placed one in front of the other, infinitely reflecting each other and producing a sense of profundity in perspective. “In ‘reading,’ editing, and correcting people, Mickie will tell and write the family secrets—suicide, adultery, homicide, homosexuality, hypocrisy, and drugs—that have long haunted the Angel family ... But these secrets are already told and written by the omniscient narrator or Mickie, character in the past and writer of the future” (Sánchez 1990, 286): Islas writes that Islas *alias* Miguel Chico writes, that Miguel Chico writes... Through a juxtaposition of mirror-personae, Islas produces distance, and the distance produces perspective: if

the perspective discloses a will to regard himself and his past from a distance which helps blurring the wounds, it is also instrumental for their narrower focalization. In this sense, the gap that opened inside Islas' consciousness and between narrator and character, closes again in the final reconciliation of all the personae into one: "the gap closes between narrator and character, and their identity becomes, ironically, the key to their difference. Thus *The Rain God* is about the formation of the protagonist's 'I' with no 'I' overtly present at any time" (Sánchez 1990, 286).

A both internal and external perspective that allows Islas to objectify into a persona and at the same time to analyze himself. He takes on the role of the "family analyst" as described in the novel:

His need to give meaning to the accidents of life had become even more intense, and he had not yet begun to laugh at that need. Years earlier, he had started out to be a brain surgeon but had found his pre-med courses lifeless and impossible. Literature had given him another way to examine the mind. ... He, Miguel Chico, was the family analyst, interested in the past for psychological, not historical, reasons. (28)

Islas' voice is filtered through Miguel Chico's voice in this passage where the writer's vocation is ironically delineated.

As a reconstruction of cultural practices and ideologies, *The Rain God* declares its commitment to history, since, as Said has argued, we must realize that all art is discourse-specific, that it is to some degree "worldly", even when it appears to deny any such connections (Said 1983, 4). Márquez defines Miguel Chico as a "Proustian character and inner historian who recalls, recasts, assesses, and seeks an understanding of events from his family history" (Márquez 6). In the comparison, Márquez comments on Marcel Proust's novelistic innovation regarding the fusion of psychology and history: "the same can be said of Islas's fiction; Marcel (Proust's autobiographical persona) and Miguel Chico (Islas's autobiographical persona) are self-appointed 'family analysts' and psychogenetic explorers"

(Márquez 6). Thus, the passage above lets a certain ironic criticism surface through the assertive tone of Miguel Chico's (self-)description. Moreover, an immature seriousness is also remarked in his stubborn incapacity to regard himself in an ironic way. Through the formal device of the third-person omniscient narrator, Islas allows himself to play with meaning, thus assuming the role of the judge as well as that of the victim. According to Marta Sánchez, "this splitting allows Islas a flexibility toward and an ironic distance from his own limitations and blindness, providing him with a method to analyze his estrangement from himself and his native culture" (Sánchez 1990, 287).

Both irony and the one-and-multiple subject of consciousness concur to create distance so as to be able to see in a different way, through the distance. In both Marta Sánchez's analysis—which underlies "this self-conscious feature of a narrator who calls attention to himself as both subject and object" (Sánchez 1990, 287)—and Antonio Márquez's definition of *The Rain God* as "fiction that comments on its own fictionality" (Márquez 8), the gaze is re-directed to the speaking subject. It is self-reflexive in that it emphasizes its critical aspects. In Marta Sánchez, self-reflexivity "opens up 'new' possibilities for questioning traditional hierarchical relationships within both a Mexican-Chicano culture and a 'dominant' literary tradition" (Sánchez 1990, 287). In Antonio Márquez, it is an important feature at the base of Arturo Islas' "historical imagination" (Márquez 5). The act of writing his family's memories, the "emphasis on 'the written word' and the self-consciousness of Miguel Chico as historian/writer swerves the narrative toward the self-referential or 'reflexive' mode" (Márquez 6). Arturo Islas uses historical imagination in order to "give expressive voice to the dead" and to "retrieve the ghosts of a family and extended families from the oblivion of unrecorded history" (Márquez 4). In the tradition of the Latin-American historical narratives, Arturo Islas "unwrites" and "rewrites" history for a reconciliation between life and death, past and present, self and community.

He admixes “history and myth, fact and fiction, empirical truth and magical realism” (Márquez 5) in order to convert the “burden of history” and recreate the past. Arturo Islas uses “third-person omniscient point of view, for ironic distance and to throw the flimsiest camouflage over the autobiographical strata” (Márquez 8). Self-reflexivity produces irony, it is a way of creating critical distance so as to expose the ambiguity and incongruity of the context. In this sense, it is similar to parody in the postmodern redefinition suggested by Linda Hutcheon as a “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (Hutcheon 185). As she explains, “in historiographic metafiction, in film, in painting, in music and in architecture, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity: the Greek prefix para can mean both ‘counter’ or ‘against’ AND ‘near’ or ‘beside’” (Hutcheon 185-186). In Arturo Islas, the need to look at history through this parodic recall of the past is a way of both countering and establishing a clear connection with it.

It is also a way of achieving it from a point of view which is internal to the experience recalled: “from his position within his family, he observes and reacts; as narrator he judges from the outside” (Sánchez 1990, 288). As the family analyst, and in contrast to his grandmother’s repression of the body, Miguel Chico “wanted to look at motives and at people from an earthly, rather than otherworldly, point of view” (28). Ironic parody, then, becomes a form, as Hutcheon explains, “to reinstate a ‘worldly’ connection” (Hutcheon 186) for Arturo Islas’ discourse. This is also true since, by means of the self-reflexive form, Arturo Islas does not situate himself outside but inside the experiences he recalls, himself “subject to its echoing history and its multivalent meanings” (Hutcheon 192). Through memory he is not anymore a prisoner of the past: recollection allows him to be free “of this burdensome collective memory” (Sánchez 1994, 119), and at the same time he is able to both reinstate a connection and find a reconciliation with his past: “he needed very much to make peace with his dead” (160).

In the end, the characters' counterdiscourse, entrapped inside a circular pattern defined by a dynamics of "trajectories of denial" (Neate 226), is liberated, fragmented and reconstructed in Arturo Islas' recollection and recreation: in the end, "the self-reflexive parodic introversion suggested by a turning to the ... past is itself what makes possible an ideological and social intervention" (Hutcheon 199).



## **Self-reflexivity**

As the author explains, the third person device ensues from a desire to focalize on the family as the central reference of his novel: “ ... I knew that the organizing principle was the family—the Ángel family. I didn’t want there to be a central character or a central voice. I wanted the family to be the hero of the novel, or the idea of that family, and I think I succeeded” (Torres 69). By centering on the family as the primary constituent of his fictional autobiography, the author expressly presents his individuality not as a “monadic, insular entity but as a mirror-image of an ethnically and culturally specific collective Chicano/a identity” (Khalifa 173).

Arturo Islas’ device of a third person narrating voice disclosing a multiple spiral perspective, allows for the formation of a “fragmented” point of view through which he can enlighten different aspects of both his own and his family’s history. The peculiarity of this narrative technique lies in the spiral-like perspective that explains the imaginary narrative gaze into the past like a curve emanating from a central point, and then getting progressively farther away as it revolves around the point. This central point--the author’s sense of self embedded in the Chicano community--is to be considered as both the point of departure and the target of the novel.

Arturo Islas’ creation of a third person narrator as both the author and the character of the novel, becomes a means to analyze identity through the enactment of the process of analysis itself, thus introducing in the narration a self-reflexive mode of writing constituent of metafiction. As a “metafictional awareness of its own constructedness and textuality” (Huber et al. 9) self-reflexivity allows the author to use the text in order to signify something that goes beyond its content. This “something” refers to the epistemic possibilities that the act of writing itself can both disclose and simultaneously perform inside the author’s selfhood. Before delineating the way in which Arturo Islas represents/performs in and through the text his

search for identity, it is important to note how the meaning of the self-reflexive technique is transformed according to Arturo Islas's representation of a Chicano reality. Arturo Islas' self-reflexive mode, in fact, seems to go beyond the constraints of a postmodern "skeptical" attitude toward knowledge.

In their introduction to *Self-reflexivity in Literature*, Huber and Middeke discuss the epistemological problem that "human rationality and the gift of self-consciousness and self-reflection" have posed to "the modern, enlightened Cartesian subject since the Renaissance"<sup>20</sup> (Huber et al. 8). They argue that self-reflexivity has always been a major feature of the discourse of literature, but that its appearance has become "even inflationary" since the modern and postmodern twentieth century. According to them, postmodern metafictional writing has become both "a response and a contribution" to those epistemological questions, since "reality or, especially, history are provisional, the world inside self-reflexive metafiction no longer constitutes a world of external verities but rather a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures" (Huber et al. 9). In this frame, the text refers to reality only in relation to their shared constructed essence: since language is constitutive of both, the text ends up parodying the constructedness of reality. According to Huber and Middeke's definition, self-reflexive metafictional writing means "the examining of fictional systems, the incorporating aspects of both theory and criticism", so that "unconventional and experimental techniques are introduced by artists rejecting conventional plot lines, by flaunting and, ultimately, seeking to destroy all too simple mimetic concepts of life and art" (Huber et al. 9). In fact, any representation of reality is disrupted by the very postmodern principle that "no singular

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<sup>20</sup> Epistemological problems like: "Can the subject and the object ever converge in an act of understanding? Is there a reality outside the confines of our own subjective perception of the world, and, if so, how do we gain knowledge about it? How do we understand ourselves, in fact, *can we ever understand ourselves at all?*" (Huber et al. 8),

truths or meanings exist” (Huber et al. 9), and metafictional self-reflexivity aims at ultimately proving it.

In Arturo Islas’ appropriation, self-reflexivity acquires new potentialities of meaning. Islas is able to both appropriate and thus transform modernistic techniques<sup>21</sup> by “‘graft[ing]’ them onto Mexican-Chicano culture” (Sánchez 1990, 295). The use of self-reflexivity brings the metafictional cast even farther outside the space of the novel as it engenders a dialogue among different traditions in literary criticism: “By placing these techniques into the different setting of a Chicano novel, Islas (‘makes strange’) ‘defamiliarizes’ them, removing them from their usual perceptual field and allowing us to ‘see’ them in a new, fresh way. By defamiliarizing the device, he exposes it as artifice, as arbitrary, showing his readers that literary conventions associated with the dominant tradition are neither ‘fixed’ nor ‘natural.’ On the contrary, they are subject to movement, alteration and displacement. In the long run, both Chicano and dominant traditions shape and are shaped by each other, as each tradition helps to transform the destructive forces of the other tradition into creative weapons for the writing of the story” (Sánchez 1990, 295). Marta Sánchez thus envisions in the meta-fictional dialogue the possibility for a “multiculturalism ... as a form of epistemic cooperation” (Mohanty 1997, 240), as defined in Mohanty’s critiques of relativism and of postmodernist skeptical stances toward cultural others.

Similarly, Arturo Islas’ multiple narrative voice is also a self-reflexive device that points at representing the act of writing as an epistemic practice; he achieves this through the continual exchange, or cooperation, among the different voices involved in the narration: Arturo Islas, Arturo Islas alias Miguel Chico, Miguel Chico, including the other characters in the novel. In fact, by adopting a third person multiple perspective, the author’s selfhood is decentered and analyzed in the context of all the voices that constitute it:

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<sup>21</sup> Marta Sánchez signals specific modernistic techniques Islas uses in his text like “self-conscious narration, but also non-linear spatial and temporal sequences” (Sánchez Marta 295)

these voices are cultural and social inflections from both sides of the border, symbolized in the particular articulation of all the characters composing the Angel family. Through this narrative expedient, the monolithic, authoritative point of view of a narrating subject is meant to go through a process of dilution along with the development of the narration, until it gets blurred among the different voices that converge to form the novel. Marta Sánchez reads in the disappearance of the authoritative point of view an “implicit critique of the bourgeois autobiography and modernist novel of identity”. As she explains,

usually, the middle-class autobiography has been written by white males who ... are the center of the story, with everything and everyone else subordinate to their progressive evolution. The split between narrator and character gives Islas the advantage of permitting the other characters to step into the foreground and speak for themselves. (Sánchez 1990, 295-296)

According to Sánchez, the cohesive narrative of bourgeois autobiography as a “totalizing system” is disrupted by “the protagonist’s ‘I’ with no ‘I’ overtly present at any time”. As she explains:

Mickie does not occupy center-stage as he would with a first-person narration, nor does he presume to ‘speak for’ the other characters, a gesture generally associated with a conventional third-person omniscient narrator. Seldom the central focus of our attention, he is often absent or on the periphery of the action” (Sánchez 1990, 296).

The self-reflexive technique in *The Rain God* is connected to a project of identity-based politics in the multicultural context of the borderland. Given the epistemic status of cultural identity, Arturo Islas use of this technique reveals the contours of a realist approach to identity as it is performed through his fictive revision and elaboration of experience. In this sense, Islas’ novel corresponds to what Saldívar names the “dialectics of difference”: the

narrative language of *The Rain God* does not yield to an “assumed homology” (Saldívar Ramón 5) with its narrative representation. According to Saldívar, the language of Chicano narrative in general “can best be grasped as a strategy to enable readers to understand their real conditions of existence in postindustrial twentieth-century America” (Saldívar Ramón 5). This narrative strategy is the process he terms the dialectics of difference of Chicano literature. The dialectical form of Chicano narratives forms a “way of grappling with a reality that seems always to transcend representation” (Saldívar Ramón 5). The strategy allows the author and the reader to recover the very history that is the subtext of Chicano literature’s discourse. It is not a mere background for literature, but rather the “decisive determinant of the form and content of the literature” (Saldívar Ramón 5). In this way, Saldívar rejects a critical paradigm (an “epistemological theory of reflection”) that he considers sterile for the task of Chicano literature and which is not merely “to illustrate, represent or translate a particular exotic reality” but “to serve to realize the agency of thematic figures in the process of demystifying the old world and producing a new one” (Saldívar Ramón 6). Paraphrasing Saldívar, in Arturo Islas’s text, the symbolic features of its construction of meaning “deflect, deform, and thus transform reality by revealing the dialectical structures that form the base of human experience” (Saldívar Ramón 7). Arturo Islas’ writing thus reveals to be “an integral part of *material* Chicano history and society” (Saldívar Ramón 4), and in this sense, Islas’ text is necessary, as Moya affirms, to “construct a more objective understanding of the (social and economic world) we live in” (Moya 2002, 3). Islas writing takes on and transforms the concreteness, the materiality of lived experience since it *practically* realizes what would be an otherwise abstract possibility of a subversive cultural particularity: in Hicks words, “as the functional expression of the self-conscious attitude of a writer juxtaposed between multiple cultures, border writing must be conceived as a mode of operation rather than as a definition” (Hicks xxiii).

Emily Hicks uses holography as her metaphor for the multidimensional border text. In her text *Border Writing* she explains how holography creates an image from more than one perspective: "A holographic image is created when light from a laser beam is split into two beams and reflected off an object. The interaction between the two resulting patterns of light is called an 'interference pattern,' which can be recorded on a holographic plate" (Hicks xxix). By analogy, the border metaphor, as a metaphor, produces an interaction between the connotative matrices of more than one culture: "a border person records the interference patterns produced by two (rather than one) referential codes, and therefore experiences a double vision thanks to perceiving reality through two different interference patterns. A border writer juxtaposes the two patterns as border metaphors in the border text. The border metaphor reconstructs the relationship to the object rather than the object itself" (Hicks xxix). The holographic "real," then, is always understood to be a translation rather than a representation. It actively undermines any hierarchical original/alien distinction, resisting domination by the "monocultural or nonholographic" real (Hicks xxix) and giving the reader the opportunity, instead, to "practice multidimensional perception and nonsynchronous memory" (Hicks xxiii).

In this sense, formal literary features like *difrasismo*, "fractal personhood" or self-similarity in self-reflexivity, are all employed in the border text in order to translate the complexities of Chicano reality into viable forms of counterhegemonic alternatives.

*Difrasismo*, as a holographic mode of thinking and writing, is a border writing, which is a *modus operandi*. The final result is that of a translation of a way of thinking to another, a new way of perceiving the world.

## **A passage to the next world**

*The Rain God* is divided into six chapters, with each chapter projecting a particular image of the Angel family. All chapters are densely intertwined, since singular events are often repeated from different points of view according to the household on which each chapter focalizes. The first and the last chapters are fundamental in disclosing the mechanism of the third person narration and reflexivity. They also constitute the greater part of the whole novel where Miguel Chico is mainly present, with the only exception of a section in the third chapter where his relationship with his father, Miguel Grande, is described.

In the text, the reflexive mode is realized through a regression in the temporal perspective marked by a switch in the narrating voice's point of view: by obliterating the authoritative perspective of the first person narrating voice, Islas gives space to the characters' own voices, thus reproducing the events through the actuality of their original perception. In this sense, Miguel Chico's ideological and moral development is marked by the chronological change in his perception of events, from childhood to adulthood, by recreating, accordingly, the tone and the atmosphere of his voice.

Temporal markers accompany the chronological shifts in their numerous flashbacks and flashforwards, and, although the novel is entirely written in the past tense of the recollection, the opening paragraph bears the exception of a present tense establishing a sort of multiple point of departure.

A photograph of Mama Chona and her grandson Miguel Angel—Miguel Chico or Mickie to his family—hovers above his head on the study wall beside the glass doors that open out into the garden. When Miguel Chico sits at his desk, he

glances up at it occasionally without noticing it, looking through it rather than at it.(3)

The point from which Miguel Chico returns with the memory to his childhood and starts writing the novel itself, is conveyed in a present tense which is “timeless” in its iterative function: it describes Miguel Chico’s action of sitting at his desk as an atemporal prelude to the creation of the novel. “When” sets the atemporal and repetitively performed action that also alludes to the plurality of its actors: in a matryoshka-like structure, Arturo Islas *writes* about Miguel Chico who *sits* at his desk writing, again, about himself who *sat* at his desk: through a temporal refraction of the same image, rendered in the switch of tense, Islas actualizes the multiple effect of the third person narrative voice. In the same way, the image of Miguel Chico setting to write also recurs in the final chapter, when, awakened by a symbolically cathartic dream, he “sat at his desk and recorded the details of the dream” (160), the same dream whose details we can read about a few lines before in the novel: what Miguel Chico will write has, in fact, already been written. As explained by Marta Sánchez, Miguel Chico is “the omniscient narrator or Mickie, character in the past and writer of the future” (Sánchez 1990, 286).

The present tense of the novel’s opening paragraph refers to an out-of-time action which is simultaneously performed by Islas’ autobiographical strata. It thus suggests a multiple point of departure, in that it resounds by its own echoes.

The temporal and spatial coordinates of the present narrative voice are specified along the whole initial chapter which, in turn, represents a sort of introduction to the whole novel: through a complex interweaving of chronological shifts, the chapter covers Miguel Chico’s whole life-span, from childhood until the time he starts working at the novel. In an ironic way, the narration virtually continues to the time the novel is completed and then published in the form that we readers get.



The Miguel Chico who “sits at his desk” is a man in his thirties, living in San Francisco, “far from the place of his birth” (4), a university professor, whose maimed body survived a deadly illness, only after which he decides to write down his life: “perhaps he had survived to tell others about Mama Chona and people like Maria” (28). When on his deathbed at the university hospital, “Miguel Chico, who had been far from it for twelve years, thought about his family and especially its sinners” (4). His grandmother Mama Chona and his nursemaid Maria are among the protagonists of “the desert of his childhood” (5): the harshness of nature that characterizes the border region where he spends his childhood finds its objective correlative in his family’s bigoted members, the “sinners” who are “still very much a part of him” (28): “in some vastly, significant way, he felt he was still the child of these women, 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 at all resemble its origin, but which, nevertheless, is determined by it” (26). By writing down the story of his family, “he could then go on to shape himself, if not completely free of their influence and distortions, at least with some knowledge of them” (28). The first chapter thus introduces the concept of knowledge as a basic instrument through which Miguel Chico carves his own path toward a critical re-elaboration of his identity. By stating “he believed in the power of knowledge” (28) he thus refers to the symbolic act of revealing “the family secrets” by both recollecting them through memory and then re-elaborating their meaning. The ideological perspectives that he makes bare by letting the characters speak with their own voices, become self-addressed remarks that Miguel Chico acknowledges in order to understand his own internalized attitudes of rejection. Rosaura Sánchez distinguishes “resentment” among the principal “strategies of containment” that characterize the third generation counterdiscourse: “resentment, which in time turns into disdain, and deviance or departures from accepted norms, as evidenced in suicide, drug addiction, and homosexuality” (Sánchez 1994, 118). As she explains,

resentment is the major ideological strategy in the novel, specifically the resentment of “sons and daughters who reject the authoritarian position of the father and the deleterious effect of the family on its members” (Sánchez 1994, 119). Miguel Chico’s discourse throughout the novel runs counter to the patriarchal practices and the ethnic and class prejudices that connote his family members’ discourse: discourse and counterdiscourse seem to uphold each other inside a circular pattern of ideological entrapment. This is represented in the novel throughout a paradigm of father/son dialogues that expose both the cruelty and the hopelessness of non-communication which finds its fulfillment in the mere exhaustion of the emotions. The older generation’s discourse, so straight in its absolute assertion of truth as to become “literal and simpleminded” (25), is opposed by a correspondent extreme harshness of the young generation’s discourse that is described as totally entrapped inside this ideological battlefield, so much as to find a way out of it through madness or death. Or, as is Miguel Chico’s belief, through knowledge.

The first chapter describes Miguel Chico’s gradual distancing from, and then returning to, his family as a measure of his developing acknowledgement of these ideological “strategies of containment”. From a stupefied child to a resented man, his actions are read as reactions influenced by, and thus dependent on, the family’s discourse. His commitment to “the power of knowledge” at the end of the chapter is followed by his perception that “he had a long way to go” (28). Thus, his search for identity brings him to no conclusion, but to the awareness that it must remain an open chapter. The acknowledgement of his resentment—“he was still feeling bitterness toward [Maria] and all people who thought like her because they seemed so literal and simpleminded” (25)—is followed by a recapitulation of his family’s history through the act of writing, which brings toward “a sense of release” (161) in the final chapter, when he recognizes that “he needed very much to

make peace with his dead, to prepare a feast for them so that they would stop haunting him" (160).

The first chapter opens with a photograph that portraits Mama Chona and Miguel Chico walking hand in hand on the main street of some American border town:

In the middle of the street life around them, they are looking straight ahead, intensely preoccupied, almost worried. They seem in a great hurry. Each has a foot off the ground, and Mama Chona's black hat with the three white daisies, their yellow centers like eyes that always out-stared him, is tilting backward just enough to be noticeable. Because of the look on his face, the child seems as old as the woman. The camera has captured them in flight from this world to the next. (3-4)

This photograph that hovers above Miguel Chico's head on his studio wall in San Francisco is a recurrent motif that marks Miguel Chico's gradual reconciliation with himself.

By representing Miguel Chico's connection to his past, the photograph reveals his obsession with the dead that keep "haunting him", through the fascination that it produces on Miguel Chico's unconscious:

"He tried to read in his study and found that he kept looking at the photograph"(25); or: "Sitting at his desk, gazing at the garden, fixing that old photograph forever outside of time" (27).

In the final chapter, the photograph reappears only to confirm Miguel Chico's reconciled feelings toward his family:

He looked, once again, at that old photograph of himself and Mama Chona. The white daisies in her hat no longer frightened him; now that she was gone, the child in the picture held only a ghost by the hand and was free to tell the family secrets. (160)

According to Rosaura Sánchez, "the narration of the family secrets itself thus becomes a strategy of struggle" (Sánchez 1994, 125). A strategy that allows him to outdo the confines of an ideological containment, since, no more

obsessed with the sins of his fathers and his own, Miguel Chico replaces resentment with release: he “feels free to tell”, that is, he finally accomplishes his need to exteriorize the private sphere by making it public through written discourse, thus discharging the containment of energy implied in the meaning of resentment.

## Day of the Dead

The photograph is symbolic for “passage” or “crossing”, which is also suggested in the suspended movement of Mama Chona and Miguel Chico portrayed with a foot off the ground, in flight “from this world to the next”. The passage from resentment to release is thus intertwined with the passage from the world of the living to the world of the dead. In many ways, death is encoded in the photograph’s language, and it thus symbolically introduces the novel in a less overt way than the original bilingual title of the manuscript, *Día de los Muertos/Day of the Dead*, which eventually became *The Rain God*.

The photograph thus also symbolizes a passage to immobility: Miguel Chico and Mama Chona, objectified in the portrait, embalmed by the photographer’s act, become specters. As Barthes explains, the referent of photography is the *Spectrum*, a word that mingles in its root the meanings of both spectacle and specter, suggesting the awesome idea of the return of the dead (Barthes 11).

But the photograph is visible in the novel only through the imagination: there exists no picture, only its description. The passage to immobility implied by the photograph is thus only imagined, while the novel offers, instead, the reality of its narration: the death spell that characterizes the photograph is thus released by its novelistic description. The act of writing the image releases the image from its stillness, that is, it loosens the tenacity with which the photograph inexorably reiterates its contingency. The act of writing transforms the image tied to its inseparable referent by revealing the indefiniteness of the “self” portrayed in it. The self, as Barthes explains, with its light and changeable nature, can never be captured by the image, which is, in turn, heavy and immobile. The act of writing the image allows this passage from immobility to mobility: what the photograph renders

inexorable and immutable—infinately and mechanically reproducing what can never be reproduced existentially—is re-elaborated and transformed through the act of writing, opening up the possibility of an exchange of energy (meaning) between the past and the present of the experience. Mama Chona and Miguel Chico’s synchronous movement is “caught” and thus congealed by the photographer’s shot: “walking hand in hand ... each has a foot off the ground” (3); the fictional rendering of the image restores the possibility of this suspended movement, a possibility which is then realized in the novel as the ritualistic process of connecting with the dead, that is, of opening up a dialogue with the past so as to modify and expand its meaning through re-elaboration. The demonstrative, deictic language of photography, seems to dissolve in Miguel Chico’s symbolic self-reflexive act, “looking through [the photograph] rather than at it” (3).

The passage from the present time of the narration to the past time of Miguel Chico’s childhood memories is symbolized by the photograph, that also introduces the central theme of the family with which Islas can connect through memory and the act of writing. As the author explains, the novel assumes the form of a feast for the dead that keep “haunting him” (160), like one of those *ofrendas* that the living set up over the stones of the dead on the *Día de los Muertos*, “when they wandered about the earth until they were remembered by the living” (9). The author brings together different kinds of artistic practices in the form of religious rituals, since both the act of writing and the building up of *ofrendas* are in the novel associated with symbolic acts involving the exchange of energy between different but complementary worlds: the dead and the living, the private and the public, the particular and the universal.

The first chapter bears the ominous title “Judgment Day” thus suggesting another kind of symbolic passage “from this world to the next”: a passage to

a world beyond life, where hell, paradise, and purgatory await for the souls of the living.

From the setting of Miguel Chico's study in San Francisco Islas shifts to his childhood in the desert region of the border. The novel starts focusing on the social practice of religious beliefs as another strategy of containment. Islas describes the deep feelings of both guilt and horror aroused inside Miguel Chico by the religious preachments of his Catholic education. Images of saints, doomsday, and "the terrible power of God the Father's wrath" (17), linger along his early childhood unexplained, arousing feelings of both admiration and perturbation for the characters he is described when read from the Bible. The author thus exposes the literalness of a religious discourse imbued with bias and intolerance, as it is represented by characters like Mama Chona and Maria, opposed to the literalness of a child's naïve attitude toward the world.

The paragraph reported below stands as an example of the way the perspective switches to that of the child as he describes the "Seventh Day Adventist" services he is secretly taken to by his newly converted nursemaid Maria

The services ... were held in a place that did not seem like a church at all it was so brightly lit up, even in the middle of the day. There were no statues and the air did not smell of incense and burning candles. The singing was in Spanish, not in Latin, and it was not the sort he enjoyed because it reminded him of the music played in the newsreels about the war. The people at these services were very friendly and looked at him as if they all shared a wonderful secret. "You are saved," they would say to him happily. He did not know what they meant, but he sensed that to be saved was to be special. ... they spent most of the time smiling, though they talked about things that scared him a great deal, such as the end of the world and how sinful the flesh was. He could not rid himself of the guilt he felt for being there, as no matter how much they smiled, he knew he was betraying his mother and father and Mama Chona in some deep, incomprehensible way. (18)

In the same way, Miguel Chico's first approach with death is symbolic of an ironic critique against religious bias. The Day of the Dead marks the family's yearly visits to the cemetery which are described from the point of view of a five-year-old Miguel Chico, and thus conveyed with the same literalness with which he perceives them. He sees people who "knelt on the ground before the stones" (9); "'Campo Santo' [Mama Chona] called it, and for a long time Miguel Chico thought it was a place for the saints to go camping" (9); he "encountered no saints but saw only stones set in the sand with names and numbers on them. The grownups told him that people who loved him were there" (9); "they bought flowers ... to put in front of the stones. Sometimes they cried and he did not understand that they wept for the dead in the sand" (10).

The literalness of the language employed in the narration, serves both the purpose of connecting with Miguel Chico's experience through his perception, and that of countering the Catholic obsession with the existence of a world beyond the living that relegates the reality of the present to a subordinate and invalidated dimension. The author is now symbolically introducing what he will overtly affirm at the end of the chapter, as the older Miguel Chico, already living in San Francisco, articulates: "unlike his grandmother and Maria, Miguel Chico wanted to look at motives and at people from an earthly, rather than otherworldly, point of view" (28).

Miguel Chico's acknowledgment of the actuality of death occurs when faced with the dead body of his friend Leonardo who " ... tied a belt around his neck. Put one end of the belt on a hook in the back porch, stood on a chair, and knocked it over" (11). Only when Miguel Chico is taken to the mortuary to "see Leonardo", "he found out about the dead" (10). The stillness of death which he notices on his friend's face is what he cannot envisage before, when looking at the stones and "trying to see" the people in the stone, since that's what people become when they are dead, "stones in the desert" (10).



Still, before he can see “the sand and stones for what they were” (13), the reality of death exceeds his imagination, and he reads his friend’s face according to what he knows: “He was sleeping, but he was a funny color and he was very still” (12).

On the other hand, he has been taught the existence of a world beyond death, where people are/go, that is, where they somehow continue to live.

“Look at him one more time before we go,” Maria said to him in Spanish. “he’s dead now and you will not see him again until Judgment Day.”

That was very impressive and Miguel Chico looked very hard at his friend and wondered where he was going. (12)

As he turns to his mother for an answer, he discovers a reality that deeply scares him: “They are going to bury him in the cemetery. He’s dead, Mickie. We’ll visit him on the Day of the Dead” (12).

Death finally becomes stillness of the body and the terrible idea of being buried under the sand.

The literalness of Miguel Chico’s perception as a child reflects the demonstrative language of photography as described by Barthes:

*[la photographie] est le Particulier absolu, la Contingence souveraine, mate et comme bête, le Teel (telle photo, et non la Photo), bref, la Tuché, l’Occasion, Rencontre, le Réel, dans son expression infatigable. Pour désigner la réalité, le bouddhisme dit sunya, le vide; mais encore mieux: tathata, le fait d’être cela; tat veut dire en sanskrit cela et ferait penser au geste du petit enfant qui désigne quelque chose du doigt et dit: Ta, Da, Ça! Une photographie se trouve toujours au bout de ce geste; el dit: ça, c’est ça, c’est tel! Mais ne dit rien d’autre. (Barthes 15-16)*

Similarly, the photograph’s literalness can be compared to the literalness of Mama Chona’s authoritative discourse, whose “obtuseness” limits and reduces the perception of reality to a definition of the absolute universal.

Ultimately, the repetitive, circular pattern in the novel, represented by the self-reflexivity of the multiple subject of narration, acts like an imitation of the photograph's reproductive function, meanwhile it breaks the limits of its congealed paradigm. While the photograph is bound to reproduce the image in a dimension outside time, the novel reproduces it through time, thus adding to the image those historical layers that imbue it with a profundity of vision.

## **Mama Chona: black angel**

Inside the ideological space that reflects an uncritical adherence to the dominant cultural practices of oppression, the matriarch Mama Chona is an emblematic figure representing the center of power.

The character of Mama Chona, Miguel Chico's grandmother, is described as an old lady over her seventies, always wearing a black dress "that reached almost to the ground" (144), a black hat, black gloves, and carrying a black umbrella on sunny days to prevent the sun from burning her already dark skin.

She appears like a woman forever in mourning.

We get to know, in the last chapter of the book, that

the first Miguel Angel, Mama Chona's only child born of the love she had felt for her husband, was killed while walking down the streets of San Miguel de Allende at the beginning of the revolution that changed their lives and forced the family north from Mexico. (162-163)

The event of death in her life is not new, since eight years before her son was killed, her twin girls had drowned "in those few moments when one of the servants let down her guard" (164). Finally, her husband died in 1916, "as they traveled north toward the desert" (165).

Such extreme occurrences in her life add, in the end, a human note to a figure who had been pictured, so far, as a severe and tough matriarch, whose only intent was that of keeping the family united and protected under the shield of a moral set of rules she had internalized in her youth.

The author describes her interiorized rage and resentment--"Mama Chona never forgave Mexico for the death of her firstborn" (163)—and her consequent resignation of life

After the deaths of her first three children, Mama Chona resigned herself to Christ and His holy Mother with a fervor she would never have admitted was born of rage, and she accepted suffering in this life without question or any sense of rebellion. She renounced all joy on the day they buried Miguel. She was thirty-two. (164)

A resignation that lacks the Christian tinge of forgiveness, and is more in tune with an effect of revenge generated by rage and resentment: she gives up life and joy as her own retribution for the great pain life had her to endure. In her God-ruled world, she is described as torn between her Christian duty toward God, made of tolerance and mercy—in fact “in her world, there were no accidents. Every event was divine retribution or blessing” (164)—and a sense of injustice.

Because of this psychological strain, she relinquishes herself to God with an absolute, unquestioned fervor, an act of resignation so extreme which leads her to annihilate her life in “this world”, as a painful moment of passage to the hereafter: “if there was justice in heaven, as she knew there was not on earth, the angels were preparing to welcome her with songs and jewels in their hands as offerings for the scars on her soul” (174).

Her life is thus the description of an endless “geographic displacement”, taking her to the extreme consequences of dreaming of a life after death as her only aspiration. This displacement is delimited in the novel by Mama Chona’s private sphere: it is the description of the loss of a point of reference in her life, an emotional space which imbues life with meaning (Mexico, the family), and its consequent replacement with a world of religious dogmas. The loss of her mother country coincides with the loss of her children “born of the love she had felt for her husband”, and the consequent loss of her love for life. What she leaves behind is a world of human affection and love relations, which she is not able to reproduce on the other side of the border. Religion, but especially the fanatic observation of its dogmas, provides a substitute for the loss: it fills the void left by the loss of both love and “home”. In Mama Chona, the imagery of this “lost land” is profoundly

emotional, and is not inserted in a context of symbolic reappropriation of it. Instead, the impossibility of its “recovery” is described by Mama Chona’s gradual detachment from her family’s members and from “this” life, through her total relinquishment to God.

She finds new space coordinates through a schematic religious morality: she defines her location in the world with reference to a system of dogmas which reconstitutes order and stability in the chaos and uncertainty that was triggered by death and displacement. This scheme, by promising a life after death, provides a behavioral point of reference in her present life, but it ever defers the recovery of Mama Chona’s loss to eternal time, to “the moment she had been waiting for all her life”(174). Unable to come to terms with a “life of loss and sacrifice” (174), Mama Chona envisions her place always on the other side of a border which separates this world from the next, and where “the life awaiting [her] will be much, much better” (179).

Thus, if, on one side, the role of religion is important, as Blea explains, for “religion and spirituality have helped Chicanos understand their place in the universe” (Blea 48); on the other side, religion helps losing that place when it becomes a utopian retreat from the world.

### *“Pride and prejudice”*

The role of religion, as described through Mama Chona’s character, also shows its ideologically validating nature when it triggers other mechanisms of coping with a difficult reality.

As a cultural manifestation, religion informs the ideological mindset of Mama Chona and helps endorsing some ideological deformations related to the context of racism.

The author analyses the complex and contradictory influence which religion has on the *mestizo* who has inherited both pagan and catholic credos and practices, and how these credos mingle with, or respond to, a discriminating social environment by underpinning or complicating social practices.

The example of Mama Chona delineates the ways in which the moral dogmas of her catholic credo, which derive from her Mexican milieu, are intertwined with the social practices of discrimination towards her Indian side, which are endorsed by her culture and which she has internalized. Throughout the novel, she reveals her racist ideology of an ethnic classification system in which, as Sánchez explains, “class relations are displaced and a chain linking illiteracy with paganism and servility with dark skin is created” (Sánchez 1994, 123).

She is described, from the beginning of the book, as a judgmental, pretentious and proud woman who ensures the transmission of her class ideology and bigotry to her family. She preaches her credo based on the dual categories of pure-moral-good-perfect vs. sinful-immoral-evil-corrupted, and to which all aspects of her daily life are related: from the correct behavior she expects her children and grandchildren to hold, to the correct pronunciation of their Spanish and English.

Her preaching aspires, as one of Mama Chona’s daughters states, “to greater things and to that perfection you and the Church have taught me is the only worthy goal in life” (167). Her ethnic and class prejudices which account for her detachment from other Mexicans whom she regards as inferior to her, are paralleled and endorsed by her sense of a divine hierarchy: the class split becomes a differentiation between those who are worthy of admission to heaven, like the Angels, and the other “worthless creatures” (174). The symbolic high /low levels pattern is continuously replicated and confirms Mama Chona’s retreat from life: “Slowly, she slipped into her fairy-tale world” (27). Her snobbish and pretentious attitudes are part of the

performative rituals of her life, through which she can believe, and make believe, the role she enacts

Tia Cuca was lighter-skinned than her sister Chona. Nevertheless, like Mama Chona, she was unmistakably Mexican with enough Indian blood to give her those aristocratic cheekbones the two sisters liked the younger generation to believe were those of highborn Spanish ladies who just happened to find themselves in the provinces of Mexico. Their Spanish was a cultivated imitation of the Castilian Spanish they believed reigned supreme over all dialects" (141).

Her real prejudiced world is also an imaginary world which she fantasizes, and where the crudeness of her relations with the others are obscured under a fascinating façade of aristocratic codes and manners.

Although they were always poor, the old ladies retained their aristocratic assumptions and remained señoras of the most pretentious sort. Their hands were never in dishwater, and cleaning house was work for the Indians, even if the old ladies could not afford to have them do it. Consequently, their homes were dusty, and his [JoEl's] aunt Juanita or his father would do the week's collection of dishes. The only time JoEl saw Mama Chona lose her composure was when his uncle Miguel Grande scolded her for letting the cockroaches lick her plates clean on the sideboard. After his uncle left, Mama Chona held the plates one by one under the faucet in such a way that her fingers did not get wet, and she cried before, during, and after the loathsome task (147).

Although she is able to wrap herself and her surroundings in "sugary tales", and she can pretend that she embodies that ideal she aspires to, her effort is continually contradicted by the author's device of always matching her fairy-constructions with some impacting image which not only brings the reality of Mama Chona's situation back to the humble terms of actuality, but also returns a grotesque translation of her abstractions.

All that concerns the body is related to the sphere of the sinful and corrupted. Sexuality is banded from her life and she "bore her children out of

duty to her husband and to the Church” (164). Again, the aspect of life that she wants to transform, is eclipsed by the act of her imagination

In her mind, she conceived him [Felix] and the rest immaculately—an attitude which made some of her children think themselves divine—blotting out the act which caused her to become distended like a pig bladder full of air (164).

And the image of pureness and immaculacy she conceives in her mind is degraded by a grotesque counter-image.

Sometimes her fairy-tale world is directly questioned by the other characters

What, Miguel Chico asked himself, did she see when she looked in the mirror? As much as she protected herself from it, the sun still darkened her complexion and no surgery could efface the Indian cheekbones, those small very dark eyes and aquiline nose (27).

Juanita, Miguel Chico’s mother, married to Mama Chona’s favorite son, Miguel Grande, scoffs at Mama Chona’s affected pride when she claims that her family’s members had to be raised in “the best traditions of the Angel family”

“They’ve eaten beans all their lives. They’re no better than anyone else,” she said to her sister Nina. “I’m not going to let my kids grow up to be snobs. The Angels! If they’re so great, why do I have to work to help take care of them?” (15).

### *Covering the body*

Mama Chona’s body is completely covered by a long black dress which gives her the puritan austerity of a nun. Her attire is a mask which helps her performing her role in life, and through which she can transform life into a theatrical act. It is also a disguise which suppresses the body by transforming



it. It is an act of imitation which inhibits creativity. Mama Chona's character is fundamentally sterile. Her body is the death of expression and her dress is the expression of this tomb: "Mama Chona denied the existence of all parts of the body below the neck, with the exception of her hands" (164).

Her dress also functions as a shield from other people's sight and touch, thus obliterating their very presence and existence. At the same time, other eyes cannot return her the image of her body because they cannot penetrate through the thick cover of her ideological convictions; other hands cannot touch her body because it does not exist, it is not of "this" world, but it is the body of an angel.

Mama Chona was not physically affectionate. Touching other people reminded her of her own body, and she encouraged her grandchildren to develop their minds which were infinitely more precious and closer to God. (164)

Her black dress wraps her inside an existence which "had been a long dying fall" (178).

As priestess of a patriarchal culture, she endorses the act of hiding women's body through garments like "*la gorra, el rebozo, la mantilla*" which are, as Anzaldúa explains, "symbols of my culture's 'protection' of women" (Anzaldúa 1987, 17). They protect women from themselves, since women, according to chauvinist ideology, embody sin, and according to Mama Chona, everything related with the body is sinful and corrupt. She regards her uterus as a monster, and when, in her senile years, it falls out of her, she finally discards what used to be, in her youth, one of the heaviest burdens

The monster between her legs was almost out and Mama Chona was glad that it showed no signs of life. All the better for it. It had not bothered her and she did not understand why everyone else was making such a fuss over it. One should ignore those parts of the body anyway. Filthy children, all they ever thought about was the body (177).

Her woman's body is repressed and cancelled by means of its objectification which passes through a functional reduction of the act of conceiving—it is reduced to a duty, a mere function of her organism—and ends with the rejection of her uterus.

Her Indian body is evil—a monster—for it betrays exactly those features her culture has taught her to despise and to cover. The Indian in her is what Anzaldúa calls "*raza vencida, enemigo cuerpo*" (Anzaldúa 1987, 22) denouncing the internalized ethnic prejudice of the Mexican toward himself: the Mexican means of estranging his Indian side from himself is enacted through the canalization of his distressing sense of self toward a scapegoat, a symbolic original sin committed by an Indian woman, *La Malinche*, who, in turn, becomes the historical and legendary traitor of her people because she helped the Spanish *conquistadores* to defeat the Aztecs. Gloria Anzaldúa denounces the patriarchal practices of oppression toward Indian and *mestizo* women like her for having them, she states, "police the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her. Male culture has done a good job on us. *Son los costumbres que traicionan*" (Anzaldúa 1987, 22).

Through Mama Chona's character, the author retraces the dynamics of "*las culturas que traicionan*" (Anzaldúa 1987, 15-23), depicting the ideological deformations of her patriarchal role.

If in Anzaldúa the accent is focalized on the deconstruction/reconstruction of history through a feminist reappropriation of "women of color" experiences and subjectivities; in *The Rain God*, the Mexican patriarchal tradition is perpetuated by women. Anzaldúa's image of her *mestizo* woman, whose voice declares "not me sold out my people but they me", and who is described as holding a "light [shining] through her veil of silence" (23), is contrasted by Islas' image of Mama Chona

How silent she had been even when she talked—silent like those pyramids he had finally seen in Teotihuacan built to pay tribute to the sun and moon. He had felt the presence of the civilizations that had constructed them and, as he climbed the

steep, stone steps so conceived as to give him the impression that he was indeed walking into the sky, he had seen why those people, his ancestors, thought themselves gods and had been willing to tear out the hearts of others to maintain that belief. The feeling horrified him still (27).

### *Black Llorona*

The author's ultimate attempt to reconcile Mama Chona with the Indian side of her self is accomplished by transforming her into a Llorona.

The repressed voice of a woman who had been colonized by her culture's ethnic prejudices and dominant/dominating patriarchal perspective, is faintly coming out at the end of the novel, and at the end of Mama Chona's life. She is nearing death when we meet her thus wandering about her house

Mama Chona now woke up in the middle of the night and wandered through the apartment searching for something.

"Mamá, what are you looking for?"

Mama Chona spoke only to herself, even as her daughter held her to keep her from falling in the darkness. She did reply once to Mema's question, "I am looking for my children."  
(171)

It is a clear reference to the Mexican legend of *La Llorona*, the "Weeping Woman" who kills or abandons her children and forever after wanders the world in punishing anguish for her sins.

She is also considered as the mythic form of the historical Malinche. The hundreds of variants of the Llorona tale share a kernel plot: as punishment for her conduct, a young, usually beautiful woman is condemned to wander

(often by rivers and other bodies of water) forever crying, unloved and homeless, in desperate search for her lost children.

According to Cordelia Candelaria, "La Llorona and her historical prototype, La Malinche, have been interpreted as emblematic of the vanquished condition and reputed fatalism of Mexico and its people" (Candelaria 93).

The author's last reading of Mama Chona like a Llorona, operates that transformation which "covers" the body in order to recover the meaning. He inscribes in the description of Mama Chona's delirious moments of her senility, the Mexican *cuento* of La Llorona: its position, filtering through the thread of a racist, patriarchal representation of reality, brings the mestizo paradigm to the surface, with a consequent de-stabilizing effect.

Moreover, La Llorona is a manifestation of the Indian culture as much as the practice of talking with the dead, which Mama Chona also performs in the novel

In the daytime, usually before the late afternoon meal, she would ask, "Where is your father?" The first time she asked, Mema, surprised, told her straightforwardly that he was dead. Without blinking, Chona retorted, "Yes, but why doesn't he come to see me? Where is he?" (172)

In different parts of the last chapter of the novel, Mama Chona talks to her husband Jesus, who "had taken to visiting her" (174).

Mama Chona's connection with the dead symbolizes the connection between "this" world and the "next", which she had separated by annulling the first as a passage toward the second. It is thus symbolic for her paradoxical "coming back to life" when she is nearest to death, a new beginning which animates and gives, as León states, spiritual strength. Her *días de los muertos* participate in what León calls border transformations, "sources of spiritual strength in the material world" whose "composition of religious essences is elaborated, extended, and perhaps overdeveloped to include the material world in one continuous loop, rather than as a discrete

realm completely different from the spiritual, each with its characteristic rhythms, textures, and rules” (León 122).

Octavio Paz argues that the *fiesta de los muertos* “is a return to a remote and undifferentiated state, prenatal or presocial. It is a return that is also a beginning, in accordance with the dialectic that is inherent in social processes” (Paz 51). For Paz, the celebration of the return of the dead belongs to the movement and symbolism of social dialectics, through which Mexicans remap space and time: “Time is transformed to a mythical past or a total present” writes Paz, and

“space, the scene of the fiesta, is turned into a gaily decorated world of its own; and the persons taking part cast off all human or social rank and become, for the moment, living images. And everything takes place as if it were not so, as if it were a dream ... We throw down our burdens of time and reason. (Paz 52)

He argues that Mexicans

oscillate between intimacy and withdrawal, between a shout and a silence, between a fiesta and a wake, without ever truly surrendering ourselves. Our indifference hides life behind a death mask; our wild shout rips off this mask and shoots it into the sky where it swells, explodes, and falls back in silence and defeat. (Paz 64)

Paz finds psychoanalytic mystification and delusion in the space of oscillation, of border crossing. The return of the dead then provides a means for Mexicans to accept the limitations of their mortality, of death, which, he argues, is an archetype of the primordial death introduced by colonization. To live with death, as he sees it, is to live with colonization.

Mama Chona symbolizes a Llorona who has repressed her weeping into a severe silence—“how silent she had been even when she talked” —, and congealed her existence into an unsentimental, hard-boiled resignation. She marked a fracture between the life of her past—life as a mixture of great joy

and great pain, where weeping becomes an act of rebellion—and the resignation of her present and future—she silenced the weeping, and “she accepted suffering in this life without question or any sense of rebellion” (164). Silence becomes a means to prevent the past from spilling over the brim of her containment, since “Mama Chona preferred not to say much at all about their life in Mexico” (161). Through her final connection with the past she symbolically reconciles herself with life, “the desert of thorns and ashes in which she had lived most of her life” (173).

## Conclusion

As an ethnic American literature, Chicano writing represents a way in which questions of individual and collective identity have been addressed in ethnic discourse in the United States. These questions concern the construction of otherness on the part of the national group, thus proposing an alternative perspective which stems from the assumption that so called "minority" voices must speak for and represent themselves.

Since literary and critical representations of "minority" identities in the national context are engaged in a complex relationship with dominant ideologies and their institutions, Chicano writing informs a discourse that, by disengaging from and countering the dominant practices of representation, reveals the structure of their ideological import. Chicano writing grasps the critical language of Western discourse in order to chisel a space which is *different* inside the space of the nation: it adopts the theoretical language of postmodern criticism in order to deconstruct the Western representation of the Chicano as "other". From a postcolonial standpoint, it engages in the examination of how non-Western subjects are viewed and represented, questioning the legitimacy of Western practices of representation as an arbitrary charting of imaginary spaces. Chicano critical discourse starts measuring the length to which Western "imaginative geography" has expanded itself in the composition of a reality which binds the perspective in the relation between a subject and an object of representation. It thus exposes the body of assumptions that serve the dominant discourse in its repressive practice of *silencing* the "other", by dismembering the ideological import of its biases. The concept of marginality becomes related to the ideological construction of a self-proclaimed national subject, which in the United States has been appropriated through the deprivileging and denial of non-WASP groups by means of what Sollors named, the "invention of ethnicity". Through an ideological narrative which legitimates the identity of

the national majority group in detriment of the “minority” group, ethnicity is viewed in terms of deviation from the former’s identity and the holder of a discourse which is situated at the margins of the national text. The Chicano reappropriation of discourse inside the postmodern theoretical framework is important in the deconstruction of essentialist notions of subjectivity and community, since it embodies a way of ethnic self-representation which displaces the very relationship between nationality and ethnicity so as to emphasize the illusory and unstable primacy of national identity over ethnic identity. Chicano discourse draws attention to the incompleteness of a subject—based on binary difference-- who cannot account for the plurality of ethnicity. In *Through a Glass Darkly*, Boelhower analyzes the tendency of ethnicity to escape the dualistic thinking of Western culture with reference to the American context itself. In his view, ethnic semiosis “generates a world of surplus signs and semantic excess which cannot but deregulate the principle of identity and non-contradiction upon which the characterological typology of American allegory is founded” (Boelhower 137). He suggests that, given their location “among a number of possible worlds, ethnic subjects ... will always represent a destabilizing factor for the dominant ideology of American identity and will always free it from its prison of a rigidly ordered code” (Boelhower 137). In other words, the identity of difference underlying the national ideology cannot tolerate the ambiguity of ethnicity, so that its narrative practices strive to repress what Boelhower terms the “surplus” of ethnicity. The Chicano literary context insists on theoretical discourses which are able to account for an ethnic semiotic practice which undermines the “grand Narratives” of Enlightenment governing hegemonic representations of subjectivity. Arturo Islas’ *The Rain God* inserts itself in this context, since it advances an alternative, anti-hegemonic, representation of the ethnic identity.



*The Rain God's* representation of the "I" as difference, in the end, responds in many ways to the diverse challenges envisioned by the multicultural contemporaneity.

Through an effective interpretation of experience, Islas is able to detect the mechanisms of oppression that condition his existence and to acknowledge his own limits. Since, according to Moya, "the meanings we give our experiences are conditioned by the ideologies and theories through which we view the world" then "experience *in its mediated form* contains an epistemic component through which we can gain access to knowledge of the world" (Moya 2002, 38-39). Through a fictional re-elaboration of his experience inside the family context, Islas shows the importance of certain aspects of his social location that are masked and silenced by some members of the family: aspects like the Mexican cultural heritage, the dark skin, the "Indian blood", homosexuality, become salient features in the affirmation of the Chicano identity, even more so since they are the targets of oppression. He thus shows the importance of acknowledging the ideological forces that drive people toward either a partial or a full recognition of their identities. By analyzing a particular Mexican American family's microcosm, Islas gains knowledge of the world in broader terms: a knowledge that can be called objective if objectivity is conceived "as an ideal of inquiry rather than an achieved condition" (Moya 2002, 15). In the process of elaboration of experience, Miguel Chico is able to revise and develop his own stances about the world around him in the light of the new evidence he acquires. He acknowledges the value of knowledge as a never-exhausted process of inquiry that would both free him from remaining entrapped inside ideological constrains—"he could then go on to shape himself, if not completely free of their influence and distortions, at least with some knowledge of them" (28)—and allow him to reach always deeper and more accurate interpretations of the world. This process is always open to

correction and improvement as is suggested by Miguel Chico's feeling that "he had a long way to go" (28).

Islas' notion of experience as a knowledge-generating element in one's construction of identity leads to the elaboration of an imaginative geography that disrupts both essentialist and postmodernist worldviews. The essentialist imaginative geography, as is epitomized by Said in his deconstruction of the Occidental view of the Orient, generates an image of the "other" constrained inside the limits projected by a familiar "we" onto the unfamiliar "they". The "other" is arbitrarily constructed and frozen into an image whose borders can be charted along an ideological misrepresentation of it. On the other side, the postmodernist exposure of universalizing systems is followed by a skeptic attitude toward the possibility of gaining objective knowledge of the world. Since all knowledge is mediated by language, any interpretation of the world is revealed as arbitrary and fictive. If, on one side, the postmodernist ability to discern repressive social practices under the guise of objective realities seems profoundly liberating, on the other side, the postmodernist view that identities are arbitrarily constructed rather than deduced from experience leads to a relativization, and consequent weakening, of the epistemic import of discourses on identity.

Stemming from the assumed geographic and ethnic liminality of its location, the disruptive potential of the Chicano "border consciousness" weaves its counterdiscourse around the material conditions of both its ethnic particularity inside the national context, and its situation at the frontier between two cultures. The Chicano counterdiscourse is encoded in the Chicano social and cultural *foundation* as a complex interweaving of different and conflicting cultural elements that problematize the hegemonic concept of national subjectivity. According to a theoretical line that understands identities as grounded in the historically produced social categories that constitute social locations, the subversive practices of *survival*—both in

reality and in fiction—cannot be conceived as separated from the Chicano identity since they substantiate it, instead, as a product of a particular social location. They are strategies encoded in the very language and rhetoric of Chicano representation, symbolic features that make “integral part of *material* Chicano history and society” (Saldívar 1990, 4).

The contradictions and paradoxes that characterize the Chicano identity configuration are part of the material reality of the Chicano social and cultural world and, in the national context, become both sources of pain and oppression, and sources of knowledge. In fact, the effective interpretation of the sources of pain leads to the origin of their formation and to the exposure of the ideological constructs that have released them. This process of self-acknowledgment considers an elaboration of identity that involves the relation with the “other” as part of its formation. The dialogic relation with the “other” becomes fundamental in the recognition of one’s oppression and in the shaping of one’s identity. In this context, the borders among individuals are continuously crossed over, and the differences are translated into sites of possible effective knowledge.

*The Rain God* best illustrates this endless process of interpretation that is part of the Chicano imaginative geography, where the “other” is *imagined* as a possibility of dialogue that will yield knowledge about the world. The Chicano imaginative geography is thus epitomized by the concept of the borderland, as the place where conflicts and contradictions carve the experiences of its inhabitants. These particular experiences as sources of knowledge through interpretation mark the epistemic privilege of the borderland.

*The Rain God*’s representation of the “I” as difference, in the end, responds in many ways to the diverse challenges envisioned by the multicultural contemporaneity. The autobiographical thread of the novel responds to Arturo Islas’ need to explore and expose those ideological constrains that have limited or *reduced* his self-definition to the social categories of race,

class, gender and sexuality. According to Saldívar, “autobiography can be used to advance a critical attitude toward social institutions, turning what seems an inherently private form of discourse onto the public social world” (Saldívar 1990, 154). In this way, Chicano autobiographical discourse can be appreciated in its political significance, since it becomes important for understanding the complex features of an “ideology of the self”.

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## Estratto per riassunto della tesi di dottorato

L'estratto (max. 1000 battute) deve essere redatto sia in lingua italiana che in lingua inglese e nella lingua straniera eventualmente indicata dal Collegio dei docenti.

L'estratto va firmato e rilegato come ultimo foglio della tesi.

Studente: Ada Agressi

matricola: 955169

Dottorato: Studi Iberici, Anglo-Americani e dell'Europa Orientale

Ciclo: 21°

Titolo della tesi: The "Imaginative Geography" in Arturo Islas' *The Rain God*

Abstract:

Between a conception of the "other" which is enclosed inside the boundaries of an essentialist worldview unilaterally projected, and a postmodern reassessment that deconstructs reality and exposes it as an arbitrary cultural invention, contemporary literary theory on multicultural studies endorses the possibility of a version of constructivism for identity that avoids both essentialist and skeptic positions.

By acknowledging that social identities are social constructions, the Chicano elaboration of identity focuses on the analysis of the theoretical understandings of the workings of oppression and resistance on which identities are based. The analysis of the formal and semiotic features in Arturo Islas' *The Rain God* shows how the interpretation of experience can yield broader knowledge about the way in which hierarchies of race, class, gender and sexuality operate to uphold existing regimes of power in our society. In this sense, by reflecting on experience as we make sense of it, that is, in its mediated form, it is possible to gain access to the ideological mechanisms that entangle our social and historical worldview, and therefore, to perceive deeper comprehension of the world.

La letteratura cicana costituisce un ricco ambito di indagine all'interno del dibattito multiculturale sull'identità. Gli studi cicani contemporanei sull'identità evidenziano come questa si definisca attorno alle categorie sociali di genere, razza, classe intese come costruzioni culturali ideologiche. Tali studi focalizzano in particolar modo l'analisi dell'identità sulla dialettica tra l'esperienza e la sua interpretazione.

Nel romanzo *The Rain God*, Arturo Islas narra la propria esperienza familiare e ne mette in luce gli aspetti ideologici che la formano. L'interpretazione dell'esperienza conduce ad un'elaborazione dell'identità come cosciente "riappropriazione" attraverso l'individuazione di prospettive ideologiche falsate.

L'analisi delle caratteristiche formali e contenutistiche del romanzo di Islas rivela come l'esperienza costituisca fonte epistemologica per uno studio dell'identità nel mondo contemporaneo.

Firma dello studente

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