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Rebellious Reading: The Dynamics of Chicana/o Cultural Literacy

Title

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Publication Date

2004-07-01

Humor, Literacy and Chicano Culture

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For various and complicated reasons, race and ethnic studies in the United States have yet to explore fully the cultural work with humor undertaken by artists of color. Despite growing interest in Mikhail Bakhtin's work on carnivalesque humor, and despite considerable attention devoted to "trickster" figures, the study of multicultural texts has produced readings that invite, yet frequently do not pursue, a sustained treatment of humor and its significance.¹ Given their struggle to win legitimacy for their burgeoning fields, it is understandable that some race and ethnic studies scholars would have second thoughts about committing themselves to terrain that might in itself be used by detractors to declare the frivolity and superficiality of multicultural studies. Lost in this process are the rich ways in which the art builds on a genealogy of critical humor (extending from figures like Cervantes and Erasmus) in order to present searching critiques of western rationalism.² I would suggest that race and ethnic studies has developed this complicated relation with humor in part because the cultural and political significance of race and ethnicity has been so intimately tied to the discourse of the law, a discourse that marshals authority and power by striving to speak from a position of transcendent rationality.³ Understanding that race and ethnic communities have been profoundly invested in legal interpretation and its ramifications, one can see why many politically engaged artists, scholars and audiences might argue that the work of enfranchisement strongly encourages the development of cultural artifacts that adopt a weighty moral seriousness befitting the claims of legally adjudicated injury they describe. In the midst of protracted fights with the courts, a venue

in which transparent motives and literal meanings dominate, humor can look like an escape valve, or perhaps a disruptive sideshow. Equating political efficacy with seriousness, a tendency has existed among many teachers and scholars to read artists of color as practitioners of a realism of victimization, as advocates for causes who have too much to say to fool around with humor in its own right.⁴ To the extent that race and ethnicity have been incorporated into the academy as markers for a complicated and extended history of victimization, discussions of the moral implications of this history have fostered heated arguments regarding blame, as well as frequently tendentious calculations in terms of prioritizing competing claims of injury.⁵ These circumstances have sometimes made an engagement with the humor in race and ethnic culture appear inappropriate, if not offensive.

The desire to explore the experimental aspects of artistic expression deriving from racialized and ethnic communities has helped temper the bias against humor. Among other things, this focus on experimentation has promoted questions regarding the implicit values that have accompanied the use of particular forms and conventions of expression.⁶ Working from the premise that U.S. institutions have manipulated the structure of discourses about race and ethnicity in ways that foster white supremacy, multicultural experimental work has asked the following: what are the forms of discourse that evade or undermine white supremacist presuppositions?⁷ While a host of artists and scholars have suggested the ways in which this undermining and evasion are operating in a variety of texts, much remains to be done in terms of knowing under what conditions, and using which interpretive strategies, readers will be most likely to fully discern and engage these experimental practices, especially as regards the use of humor to address race and ethnicity dynamics.⁸

Contributing to this project, this essay offers a case study of Chicano culture and the ways in which humor has been used by Chicano artists and critics to rethink both literacy and victimization. In a context in which the meaning of race and ethnicity is profoundly contained by the reading practices codified by the courts, any attempt to rethink injury and its remedy will likely involve a simultaneous engagement with the competing modes of literacy that vie for dominance in U.S. legal culture. The legal system, and the media industry that widely disseminates legal culture, have not simply displaced other institutions like the church. Instead, the courts have become a dominant cultural clearinghouse for the great variety of reading practices that seek legitimacy at any given time.⁹ In this setting, it makes sense that artists of color would explore elaborate and fundamental challenges to legal institutions, and to the literacies that they perpetuate. Many of these artists have turned to “engaged humor,” and Chicano culture in particular offers compelling evidence of this strategy as Chicano artists have built on the traditions of political humor derived from Mexico, and on the longstanding struggles over literacy that were played out in the courts as the United States unmade the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the treaty that ceded half of Mexico to the U.S. as a result of the U.S./Mexico war of 1846-48.¹⁰ While I will not attempt to offer similar arguments regarding the cultural materials produced by other racialized and ethnic communities in the U.S., the methodologies informing this essay are drawn from comparative cultural studies and as such are potentially valuable for the analysis of “cross-border,” color-line violating contact that is a fundamental feature of U.S. culture. The argument presented here also stands as an invitation to scholars and students who might probe the critical work of humor in and among race and ethnic cultures for its institutional and policy implications.

* * *

In order to understand why race and ethnic studies has tended not to explore more fully critical humor, we can consider the ways in which victimization has become a defining feature of race and ethnic cultures.¹¹ In the Chicano context, this line of inquiry invites us to rethink the resounding impact made by Gloria Anzaldua's formulation of border culture as the product of

una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of the two worlds merging to form a third country.¹²

Even a cursory knowledge of these cultures tells us that more is at work than a reaction to harms done, yet there is a way in which any engagement with claims of injury seems to call forth an all or nothing response. As William Connolly has argued, a logic of "moral equivalences" exercises considerable influence in the U.S. cultural context, a logic that dictates that any injury must be accompanied by an equivalent object of blame.¹³ Feeding the U.S. obsession with litigation, this impulse to ignore the paradoxes that can attend moral interpretation frequently compels readers to place race and ethnic art that treats injury into a conceptual box. Such a box, in turn, can promote a single-minded project of assigning guilt for the traumas that presumably create and legitimate race and ethnic communities as social groups.

This phenomenon helps clarify some of the stakes of the culture wars in the U.S. The dominant and very narrow parameters for discussing injury (grounded in legal discourse) suggest that a person occupies one of two camps: victim or perpetrator. This moral economy does not sufficiently allow for an engagement with questions of injury that recognize the complex responsibilities and potentialities of bystanders, collaborators, resisters, etc. As a result,

interpreters of multicultural texts who work within the dominant modes of U.S. legal interpretation tend to find themselves choosing between the two forced and simplistic roles. The strength of feeling behind reverse discrimination arguments, arguments that have been central to efforts to eradicate race and ethnic studies, is fed precisely by the apparent unfairness of blame foisted in blanket fashion upon white males and “their” cultural traditions.¹⁴ In this way, the law’s strictures block more effective discussions of race, and in fact promote the censorship of race as an interpretive category. More and more, the “exception” comes in the extreme legal cases where the reading of race is itself considered an irrational act.¹⁵

Frequently lost in the canon debates has been a fuller understanding of how the race and ethnic texts are challenging both these legally-grounded modes of thinking and the values that they perpetuate. Perhaps most strikingly, one finds in many of these texts a representation of literacy that reveals many different, oftentimes competing, modes of reading. Recognition of some form of racial or ethnic injury receives varying degrees of attention in these texts, but this recognition is frequently juxtaposed in self-conscious ways against the narrow perpetrator/victim economy of blame that is disseminated by the courts. At stake for many of these artists is the question of how best to “work through” the injuries that cannot be ignored or censored without perpetuating a crucial form of interpretive violence.¹⁶

Rich, on-going work focusing on border conflicts has prompted an intense exploration (and sometimes celebration) of hybridity by Chicano cultural critics. In this vein, Chicano studies has devoted considerable attention in recent years toward developing an increasingly subtle understanding of how *mestizaje* and hybridity are produced, and the implications of this production.¹⁷ Complicating our understandings of how the culture engages injuries, numerous Chicano studies scholars have argued for a better historical grounding of hybridity as a cultural

practice.¹⁸ For many of these scholars, this work is leading to a diversification of critical attention that extends to often overlooked, mass cultural processes, including the production and reception of music, film, and television.¹⁹ In part, these critics are reacting to analyses of hybridity that have grown out of postcolonial studies, for instance Ella Shohat's argument that more analysis should be devoted to dimensions of power embedded in distinct expressions of hybridity and syncretism.²⁰ As part of this process, cultural workers are complicating overly global, historically-loose conceptions of hybridity and *mestizaje* by inviting us to focus on cultural sites that suggest hybridity may be productively understood as a mediation among competing forms of literacy. In Chicano art, one finds complex processes of hybridization, both thematic and stylistic, that are self-consciously structured to comment on experiences of trauma, as well as on the interpretive conventions attached to these events. As works in the Chicano context demonstrates, these conventions have symbolic and material consequences that significantly shape communities.

For U.S. race and ethnic studies, a renewed debate about what constitutes literacy, and how literacy operates, is fundamentally important. The fight for inclusion that was such a crucial part of making the canon more multicultural could, and frequently did, displace a critical focus on the process of canon-making itself, which is to say on the perpetuation of particular reading practices that reproduce certain values. While John Guillory has been particularly effective in highlighting the ways in which promulgating certain forms of literacy over and against others is the goal of canon-formation, artists and critics throughout the Americas have pursued similar critiques. While Minister of Education under Salvador Allende, Ariel Dorfman promoted the same sort of analysis when he co-wrote *How to Read Donald Duck*, a pointed challenge to the capitalist and colonially-informed reading practices perpetuated by Walt

Disney's Latin American comics.²¹ Carlos Fuentes has also approached this project by rethinking the modern era through the lens of Cervantes' work. Arguing that Cervantes promulgated a critique of reading that informs Western thought by establishing an alternative to rationalism, Fuentes identifies a critical potentiality in the origins of the novel, and in the play of folly in particular.²²

In a crucial sense, Chicana/o studies has always fought for a nuanced understanding of literacy, one that registers the *mestizaje* of border zones as a *rasquache* of reading practices.²³ Given the legal processes that have been used to segregate and under-develop Chicano communities, much of this focus on literacy has targeted interactions with the courts.²⁴ Counseling activist legal practitioners to respect and engage the sophisticated reading skills developed by sub-altern workers as they negotiate unequal power relations, a host of Chicano lawyers, including Oscar Z. Acosta, Richard Delgado, Gerald Lopez and Margaret Montoya have worked to bring greater recognition to the sophisticated ongoing dialogue about literacy that has animated Chicano culture.²⁵ This culture has in various ways addressed fundamental issues regarding the quality and meaning of life by staging and working through sites of embattled reading alternatives.

Thinking back to one of the foundational texts in the field of Chicano Studies, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero*, we find the biting humor that Americo Paredes drew out of popular culture, and the *corrido* tradition in particular.²⁶ Paredes used this humor to rewrite the history of the US/Mexico border by tracing the trail of jokes and satire that recorded in oral and written culture a view of events radically different from those penned by Anglo historians like Walter Prescott Webb.²⁷ We also know from Paredes' writing on border folklore that he had a sophisticated understanding of the ways Chicanos and Mexicanos used

jokes to perform highly-charged cultural work. In this vein, the analysis of “intercultural jests” in Paredes’ *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border* adds an important framework for understanding the humor mobilized, although not self-consciously analyzed, in *With His Pistol in His Hand*.²⁸ Undermining the hero-status afforded the Texas Ranger in Anglo histories, *With His Pistol in His Hand* employs a dark humor as it recounts the troubled efforts on the part of the Anglo-controlled legal system to capture and to try Gregorio Cortez, a lone cattleman whose modest identity was exaggerated into a threatening gang of murderous thieves by the Rangers as they attempted to justify their own role in Texas law enforcement. Much of the humor conveyed by Paredes is understated, and relies on the exposure of uncanny similarities between the racist accusations made regarding Mexicano behavior and the realities of Texas law enforcement.

The title of the book conveys what is perhaps the epitome of this humor. Having waged a vigilante war against a great many unarmed Mexicanos who were labeled members of Cortez’ non-existent gang, the Rangers cannot manage to disarm the lone Cortez when they finally capture him after a chase that covers a good part of Texas. Cortez makes his trip to jail with his pistol drawn on the Rangers, and the cowardice attributed to the Mexicanos is at least implicitly lived out by the Rangers. As Paredes demonstrates, the events surrounding the conflict informed dozens of popular ballads about Cortez. These ballads, in turn, drew on the conventions of the epic in order to sustain a group identity, an identity that was bound in part by the sharing of a critical posture toward the interpretive practices of a racist legal system.

As Paredes reveals, many of the ballads pay homage to Cortez’ remarkable horsemanship, as well as to his savvy and endurance. In this sense, the humor, found both in the ballads and in Paredes’ analysis, creates a contrast between the hegemonic assessments of Mexicano culture (identified with blood lust, cowardice, criminality, and lethargy) and the skills

and knowledge exhibited by Cortez. A pioneer in the study of popular culture, Paredes played on the humor in the ballads so as to help work through the injuries gathered together in figures like Gregorio Cortez. This project becomes more clear as we turn to Paredes' *Folklore and Culture* which undertakes an analysis of humor in order to critically juxtapose U.S. and Mexican "healing practices" -- "healing" here referring to processes affecting the physical, the psychological and the spiritual (49-72). As Paredes demonstrates, such "healing" humor could map out for its audiences different methods of reading the social world, and in turn provide listeners and viewers with a greater critical purchase regarding the stakes of competing literacy practices.

In a number of the jokes that Paredes studies, U.S. doctors are befuddled by *curanderas* who successfully read spiritual signs and thereby reveal the Anglo doctors to be hog-tied by their own pompous commitment to the virtues of Western rationalism (51-53). Poking fun at the pretensions of the Anglo doctors, these jokes form part of a genealogy of critical humor that informs the Western tradition at least as far back as Cervantes. Part of this humorously heretical tradition, the jokes analyzed by Paredes challenge the authority of elite figures, a gesture reminiscent of José Guadalupe Posada's profoundly satirical visual art. Like the jokes taken up by Paredes, Posada's political cartoons and art draw upon everyday, readily accessible scenes, while also promoting a radical transvaluing of the images depicted. In this sense, Posada's portrayal of animate skeletons invites a reading of latent or "x-ray" significances in everyday life. In a similar manner, the humor studied and exercised by Paredes (in his scholarship, poetry and fiction) invites readers to look beyond the screen of a supposedly transparent literacy to see the ideologically-invested struggles wrestling beneath.

Turning to more recent work in Chicano studies, we find a wealth of thinking about the critical aspects of humor, including Rosa Linda Fregoso's work on Cheech Marin's *Born in East LA*, and Guillermo Hernandez's treatment of Chicano satire.²⁹ Both of these efforts are particularly valuable for the ways they place Chicano humor in the context of U.S. and Mexican cultures, and within different cultural sites, including popular, mass and elite production. Of these critics, however, it is Fregoso who best conveys the critical implications of how Chicana/o humor may work. My stress here falls on the "how" because too often the analysis of humor can be narrowly content-driven, a point David Foster makes in his analysis of Latin American graphic humor.³⁰ As Fregoso demonstrates in her analysis of *Born in East LA*, image and narrative can interact in such a way as to suggest alternative reading practices (51-52). In the film, such practices satirize a fundamentally masculinist Chicano voyeurism. By focusing on this aspect of the work, Fregoso delineates competing modes of visual literacy. Jose Saldivar undertakes a complementary project when he closes *Border Matters* by turning to the Chicano performance artist El Vez (Robert Lopez). As Saldivar reveals, artists like El Vez draw on trickster traditions to rework popular music and iconography while simultaneously engaging public policy debates (191-97).

In terms of Chicano artistic production, I would suggest that it is difficult to find a work that does not participate in some form of the humor that I have been describing. Certainly one of the earliest texts to come out of the Chicano movement, Acosta's quasi-autobiographical *Revolt of the Cockroach People*, reveals the way in which strategic humor can both affect legal outcomes, as well as direct a bold critique of legal practice. Acosta's humor drew the media into the courtroom as a surrogate jury and encouraged the media to convey pointed Chicano criticisms of the educational and legal systems, criticisms that gained unprecedented hearings by

the judges that Acosta confronted. Unattractive as his self-portrayal can be, given the sexism and homophobia it exhibits, this novel offers a unique representation regarding the mediation of political activism, memory, mourning and desire. Engaging individual and group experiences of racist violence and pursuing focused institutional challenges growing out of Chicano nationalism, Acosta is deeply invested in the prospect of working through profound injuries by engaging a critical humor that heightens the reader's awareness of rhetorical dynamics and reading processes.

Among the various economies of desire at work in the autobiographical novel, one particularly traumatic experience stands out for Acosta: his participation in the autopsy of Ramon Fernandez (89-104). The narrator finds himself self-consciously repeating (acting out) the police murder of Fernandez by virtue of his desecration of the body during the procedure. Acosta's efforts as a lawyer are thus implicated in not only the violence of the autopsy, but also in the violence of the murder itself. The critical humor of the text is profoundly shaped by this injury, and although he is not entirely successful in terms of self-consciously using carnivalesque strategies to work through trauma, Acosta does convey to his readers the problem of acting out, a problem that is figured in the text through a pattern of uncanny returns. The novel in fact concludes with an uncanny question that invites a rereading of Acosta's own "revolutionary" violence. Here Acosta asks:

Those bastards know every single act of violence that I ever pulled off with the lunatics from Tooner Flats. But why don't they arrest me? Why don't they haul me in? That's the nut. (257)

The explicit suggestion in the novel is that Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty and his collaborators in the legal system have succeeded to the extent that they have converted Acosta's critical humor into violent acts (including the bombing of a courthouse) that legitimate repressive police actions against Chicanos generally. Inasmuch as Acosta invites a reading of his violence as acting out, the action of the narrative may stand as a negative example. Significantly, the novel begins with a scene in which Acosta goes untouched by police during a brutal riot that Acosta has helped to organize. Playing up the ludicrous irony of the scene, and the insidiousness of the police efforts to isolate Acosta as a lawyer, as one of their own, the novel signals from the outset that understanding this "joke" will be crucial if the narrator is to avoid further manipulation by the legal system. Unfortunately, this knowledge only comes to the narrator in vague forms. At the same time, *Revolt of the Cockroach People* demonstrates that engaged humor has been experimented with to address violence, its repetition, and its remedy, since early in the Chicano movement.

As Acosta's text reveals, humor as an analytical tool is subject to the same kinds of potentialities and limitations that have been associated with the notion of hybridity. From a cultural studies point of view, the concept of humor becomes considerably more revealing when examined for its imbrication in dynamics of power and historically-situated processes of social mediation. Certainly two of the most celebrated theorists of humor, Henri Bergson and George Meredith, believed that a critique of social dynamics dwells at the heart of the comic mode.³¹ Focusing on the mechanization of life in their respective cultures, Meredith and Bergson portrayed the comic as a kind of explosion of intuition that dismantles repressive interpretive gestures and discursive strictures.³² In this framework, the liberating aspect of the comic experience comes with the sudden and surprising awareness of the "mind-forged manacles" that

are the dominating intellectual complement of the industrial and rational age.³³ Crucial here is the discursive and rhetorical self-consciousness that is attributed to humor. Humor can certainly work as a scapegoating mechanism as suggested by Freud's work on wit, but humor can also draw on a fundamental play, effecting a "disruptive (not suspensive) irony" that eschews reconciliation and harmonizing impulses, including those purchased through sacrificial exclusion.³⁴ A means of fostering a critical distance to discursive habits that we take for granted, this play may provide a crucial element for the projects of rethinking literacy and working through the injuries so often represented in Chicano culture.

Along these lines, Sandra Cisneros' short story, "Woman Hollering Creek," provides an excellent example of the complex mediations among forms of literacy.³⁵ In the story, a Mexicana, Cleófilas DeLeón Hernández, marries a Texan, Juan Martínez Sánchez, and follows him north across the border. Their new home degenerates into a site of emotional and physical abuse. Playing with modes of literary realism and symbolism, Cisneros conveys in this story a profound sense of the isolation experienced by Cleófilas. For much of the narrative, she is surrounded by three symbolically-named women: Dolores, a widow trapped in perpetual grieving; Soledad, an abandoned wife; and the ectoplasmic La Llorona, who is said to inhabit the arroyo behind Cleófilas's home. Refusing to accept more of Juan's abuse, Cleófilas gains support from an alternative network of women who help her to escape her isolation and return to her family in Mexico.

The final scenes of the story deserve close attention because it is here that Cisneros models a critical humor that Chicanas and Chicanos may use to rewrite the discourse surrounding domestic abuse. A key part of what keeps Cleófilas in the abusive relationship is shame, a shame that would be compounded in her mind by returning to Mexico having failed to

realize her *tele-novela* inspired romance dreams. It is no accident that her decision to leave comes as Juan strikes her in the head with her favorite romance novel. Cisneros, of course, is not suggesting with this symbolism that Cleófilas has been done in by reading. Instead, Cisneros is making a point about certain kinds of reading and one's relationship with these modes of literacy.

The alternative mode of literacy offered in, and by, the narrative crystalizes as Cleófilas makes her escape. Here she finds herself in the company of a Latina who wields an independence that would have been virtually unthinkable at an earlier stage in Cleófilas' life. Employed, unmarried, and the owner of a pick-up truck, Felice is unlike any woman Cleófilas has ever met. But what really sets Felice apart is her laughter and Tarzan-like *grito*. Cleófilas almost jumps out of her skin as Felice lets out this exuberant yell, a mildly subversive ritual Felice enjoys every time she drives across the arroyo that the locals associate with the sadness of La Llorona.

The story ends with Cleófilas returning to Mexico and recounting her experience with Felice, a recounting that merges Felice's laughter with Cleófilas' in a "ribbon of water," an image that Cisneros uses to invite readers to rethink the legend of La Llorona. Specifically, this ending suggests that the audience juxtapose the reading practices of patriarchal romance with the interpretive gestures of Chicana feminist humor. These gestures help promote healing and enfranchisement, first by using laughter to foster a critical distance from one's experiences, especially those experiences that would reduce a person to a racialized body in pain, and second, by facilitating community in a context otherwise defined by women's isolation from one another.

A very similar dynamic is at work in Ana Castillo's *Mixquiahuala Letters*, where, playing with a set of competing, Cortazar-esque reading instructions, the author invites her

audience to identify with a “Quixotic” mode of interpretation that most closely aligns with the character Teresa’s desire to “take (her) ghosts . . . , confront them face to face, snarl at them, stick out (her) tongue, wiggle (her) fingers from the side of (her) head,” and yell “nya-nya!” (124)³⁶

In a book treating the ways in which U.S. and Mexican societies undercut affection and trust among women, it is highly telling that this desire to confront her ghosts leads immediately to one of Teresa’s most explicit calls to break out of the very limiting structure of the novel. This structure, which includes letters written from Teresa to her partner Alicia, but none from Alicia to Teresa, limits the exchanges among the women, and suggests to the reader a defining block in the relationship between the two. Teresa rebels against these limitations when she announces, “I don’t want to ramble, i want to talk with you” (124).

A significant part of what distinguishes the critical humor found in Cisneros and Castillo is its engagement with play. Formally, this play is frequently exercised in Chicano cultural texts as a self-conscious traffic between realism and symbolism, a traffic that poses the reading of signs, such as *La Llorona*, as a problem, as work “under construction.” In “Woman Hollering Creek” and *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, this play takes the serious risk of combining laughter and domestic abuse. Chicano humor can, of course, work in ways that can recreate inequities and abuse. But as I have tried to suggest here, there is a long-standing dialogue about, and practice of, humor in Chicano culture which deserves more analysis, and which can teach us much about the conflict of literacies animating Chicano cultural texts.

This critical labor regarding literacy is remarkably important, particularly given what has been termed on many fronts the U.S. “crisis in education.” Building on similar assessments to be found across the U.S., the media coverage in my home state of California has focused with some pains on our very low educational achievement rankings, frequently pointing to the woes created

by immigration while quickly glossing at best the fiscal fallout of Proposition 13, the California voter initiative that radically cut property taxes, thereby gutting a key source of education revenue.³⁷ Perhaps predictably, standardized test scores have become the defining feature of the educational crisis as it is represented in the media, a feature that appears to displace difficult questions about diminished resources devoted to schools and how these resource issues should be addressed. It is the rare coverage that delves into the pronounced segregation of educational resources along racial and ethnic lines. Instead, the obsession with standardized tests reinforces notions of literacy that assume students work with a transparent processing and reprocessing of information. In this sense, conservative educational reformers like E.D. Hirsch have had a pervasive impact on public opinion and policy making.³⁸

Warning against the way a student's academic advancement is being keyed solely to standardized test results, researchers have argued that already disastrous minority student drop-out rates will soar in the near future if these policies are maintained.³⁹ The research is very clear on this point: if standardized testing and its underlying assumptions continue to drive educational policy decisions, California will become even more segregated as it makes the transition to a Latino majority. In this vein, researchers have considered what it means to make decisions about a student's progression from one grade to the next based solely upon standardized test measures. In addition to socially stigmatizing students and labeling them as failures, this gesture ignores and devalues alternative forms of knowledge.

Chicano culture speaks directly to this situation, which is, after all, hardly new. Rethinking injury and literacy, these texts suggest that Chicano identity is created through the strategic exercise of reading practices. Although the institutionalization of race and ethnic identities in the U.S. academy has not always fostered the point, critical humor has played a

central role in terms of sustaining these identity-forming reading practices. The implications of this fact are considerable, and pertain to a wide variety of policy issues (especially educational), as well as to debates regarding identity politics.

Notes

1. The few exceptions include Guillermo Hernández, *Chicano Satire: A Study in Literary Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), and Darryl Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); regarding the carnivalesque, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
2. For an extended discussion of this genealogy, see Carlos Fuentes, *Don Quixote, or the Critique of Reading* (Austin: Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas, 1976).
3. Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Rethinking the Borderlands: Between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1-49.
4. Within Chicano studies, this bias has contributed to the relative neglect of important artist-activists, including Oscar Zeta Acosta. See for example Rodolfo Acuna, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 307-362.
5. For an elaboration of this argument, see Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives: A Study of Race, Rhetoric and Injury* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 21-47.
6. For a particularly helpful analysis of the links between canonical practices and values, see John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 3-84.
7. Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, eds., introduction, *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8-9.
8. Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., introduction, *Race, Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 4-15.

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9. Mark Kelman, *A Guide to Critical Legal Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 269.
 10. *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, February Second, 1848*, ed. George P. Hammond (Berkeley: Friends of the Bancroft Library, 1949).
 11. Wendy Brown, "Injury, Identity, Politics," *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 149-166.
 12. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1988), 3.
 13. William Connolly, *Identity/Difference : Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 76-80.
 14. Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives*, 48-68.
 15. The courts can therefore punish overt acts of discrimination and racialized violence by claiming that the perpetrators were wrong because they took race into account at all; such a logic allows the courts to acknowledge race, but in a negative fashion that denies the legitimacy of race as a concept.
 16. For a definition of "working through," see J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 488-489. Although "working through" is a psychoanalytic term that has been defined in a largely clinical context, the concept has been particularly useful for intellectual historians and race theorists who would grapple with the problem of how best to address the continued effects of socio-psychic injuries. Although the two concepts are intimately related, "working through" may be understood as an alternative to "acting out," "an action in which the subject, in the grip of his unconscious wishes and phantasies, relives these in the present with a sensation of immediacy which is heightened by

his refusal to recognize their source and their repetitive nature” (4). In this context, “working through” is understood to be “a sort of psychological work which allows the subject to accept certain repressed elements and to free himself from the grip of mechanisms of repetition”; this process is expedited “by interpretations from the analyst which consist chiefly in showing how the meanings in question may be recognized in different contexts” (488). Laplanche and Pontalis are careful not to pose “working through” as a simple ideology of liberation from the constraints of the past; instead, Laplanche and Pontalis argue that “working through is undoubtedly a repetition, albeit one modified by interpretation and—for this reason—liable to facilitate the subject’s freeing himself from repetition mechanisms” (488-89).

17. José David Saldívar, *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Emily Hicks, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Karen Mary Davalos, *Exhibiting Mestizaje: Mexican (American) Museums in the Diaspora* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001); Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*.

18. See for example José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 122, 208.

19. Saldívar, *Border Matters*, 34-35.

20. Ella Shohat, “Notes on the Post-Colonial,” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 99-113.

21. Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*, trans. David Kunzle (New York: International General, 1975).

22. Fuentes, *Don Quixote*, 43-46.

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