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Journal

TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 13(2)

ISSN

2154-1353

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Publication Date

2026-01-08

DOI

10.5070/T4.38397

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Ambivalent Identities in US-Mexico Border Literature: A Short Survey

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Abstract

The essay introduces common topics of Mexican American literature and suggests a connection with the phenomenology of the alien (Bernhard Waldenfels) and such resulting values as ambivalence, hybridity, and in-betweenness. This frame of reference allows a brief exploration of specific themes present in several US-Mexico border authors, including Rubén Martínez and the "zigzagging" consciousness of border life, Gloria Anzaldúa and the values of hybridity and indigenous ancestry, Tomás Rivera and intra-cultural conflict, Lucha Corpi and the clash between ideology and history, and Richard Rodriguez' problems of assimilation and familial contradictions.

Keywords: US-Mexico Border Literature, Ambivalence, Hybridity, Phenomenology of the Alien, Gloria Anzaldúa, Richard Rodriguez, Rubén Martínez

> I leap over to one side; I am Mexican!
> I leap back to the other side; I am American!
> I dance a jig back and forth across the line, laughing at it, damning it, and recognizing the mighty power of the very idea of a line that cannot, does not exist in nature but that exists, nevertheless, in political, that is, human terms.
> And just as I am marveling at the absurdity, an Explorer pulls up and two BP [Border Patrol] agents, one Asian, one Caucasian, saunter over.
> The Asian asks, in fairly good Spanish, *"Qué hace usted aquí?"* What are you doing here?
>
> Rubén Martínez, *Crossing Over* (218)

Introduction

The US-Mexico border has long been considered a material and figural place where identity is forcefully or unconsciously split, challenged, and reconstituted; a reality or fiction where cultures and individuals become perforce transitional, motley and mongrel, menacing and dangerous. The material and historical absurdity of the border, as suggested in the epigraph above, clashes with its natural nonexistence, leading R. Martínez to contradictory reactions of laughter and deprecation. This border confusion, sustained by historical and political changes occurring and implemented over the last 190 years or so (1830s Texas Mexico War), conceptualizes border discourse as an extreme paradox and, simultaneously, as a wished-for, sealable, utterly controlled space and narrative in spite of their continuous permeability (McC. Hayman 52; García Riera, qtd. by Kaplan 109; Grebler et al. 209-18; Johnson and Michaelsen 1-5).

The border for R. Martínez involves intercultural conflict as well as paradoxical and constantly fluctuating definitions, a fluid zigzagging dynamic aligned with a phenomenological understanding of it as a life-border. Gloria Anzaldúa's term, *los atravesados*, "the crossed-over ones," may similarly be linked to a conceptual dynamic that emphasizes openness and tolerance as values especially generated in such a phenomenological borderline universe. For Tomás Rivera, Lucrecia Guerrero, and others, the border alien performs a problematic subjectivity by exposing intra-cultural conflict, which counters romantic 1960s idealizations. To be sure, this conflict does not supplant intercultural clashes, but it balances and reappraises life-border subjectivity by incorporating a critical self-gaze. Richard Rodriguez, in turn, offers a variant of this critique as well as a solution: the contradictions of border life and the loss of private language and family life may be overcome through education and, finally, assimilation—a mastering of public discourse that nonetheless leaves open inter- and intra-cultural difference. His paradoxical identity is that of an ethnic, successfully assimilated Caliban, where assimilation may be understood as a collection of multivalent, contradictory life experiences occurring in a conceptual, historical, cultural sphere—a phenomenological life-border.

Theoretically formulated in multiple ways, the border has become a trope for a life experience both individual and public, cultural and geographic, historically past and present, linguistic and non-linguistic, a separation having to do with conflict, disjuncture, and intersecting trajectories—what Mary Louise Pratt has called in a related, colonial context, a "contact zone" (6-7; see also J. Martinez 59-78; Ortega 49-68). Pratt justifies the term by noting that interactions in such a place do not privilege one side over the other, colonizer versus colonized; instead, emphasis lies on improvisation and "copresence" of all groups involved. Subjects in "contact," understood as a neutral term, explains Pratt, "are constituted in and by their relations to each other," often amid asymmetrical power relationships. A narrow Eurocentric, patriarchal asymmetry, in fact, remains a fundamental subject for criticism for theorists of border thinking, who condemn such one-sidedness and suggest its replacement with a liberating narrative of post-modernity grounded on "the cosmologies and epistemologies of the subaltern" (Dussel 340-42; Quijano 184-90; Grosfoguel 2006).

Relatedly, for others in a philosophical vein, the border is the world of the alien, a phenomenological time and space, a life experience or life-world (*Lebenswelt*) involving necessary interaction with those others; a conception where alterity is not an isolated modality

but an integral part of hegemonic subjectivity (Husserl 184-86, 254-57; Moran 128; Waldenfels 77). Following previous philosophical inquiries that take into account the social dimension of human experience, the Husserlian self attains its entity through experience and memory: lived life and its recollection in the present, which involves an individual's permanent own re-acquaintance, the entailing acknowledgment of being incomplete, and therefore always in search of another, missing, self. As Dermot Moran puts it, "the self in recollection has to unify itself with the earlier recollected self," which amounts to "finding *another* 'I' within himself" (my emphasis 255).

While these historically and psychologically split subjects are being constituted through experience and recollection, they live in a surrounding, all-enveloping world, sharing it with others as "co-subjects" and being "vitally at one with the other person in his … life-situation" (Husserl 328). Although referring to the European modern subject, Husserl's concept reinterprets previous ones where the other has been recuperated as a component of the constituted self, as in Hegel's well-known dialectical and psychological master-slave dynamic. This dynamic highlights both the necessity of mutual recognition before the subject can be synthetically completed as well as the slave's work, the action of the other that allows the process of subject constitution to occur: "Action by one side only would be useless because what is to happen can only be brought about by both… They [the master and the slave] *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another" (Hegel's emphasis 112; Kojève 45-63).

Along with its geographic or natural meaning, then, the figural border can be conceived as a life-world—a cultural experience involving psychological, ethical, historical, social, and ethnic elements in a context of globalizing associations. The border is a phenomenological space-time where the potential for mutual recognition between the master narratives of centered subjects and their alien counter-discourses can take place. Recognition in this figural space, in fact, is no longer a mere potential or utopian event; the experience involves inevitable clashes and combinations of Western and border epistemic systems, which is the rationale of the life-border as an "intercultural encounter" (Waldenfels 70).

The border is defined (*finis*, border, limit) as a barrier to keep aliens at bay, yet it is the space, and life-experience, where "we encounter something alien." In the process, "our experience itself becomes alien," because the border and the alien act as conduits to the subject's own foreignness and alienation. Interpreting Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny, Waldenfels explains that the concept does not come from the outside alone: Outside taboos

are channeled by inside taboo energies, "the uncanny…permeates the home; it does not dwell outside our own walls. As interpersonal alienness begins from intrapersonal alienness, so too does *intercultural* alienness begin from *intracultural* alienness" (Waldenfels 70, his emphases). The alien, the Western subject's mirror image, exists as a parallel in a "double rhythm" towards unity, not just on a conceptual plane but on a historical, colonizing one as well. For the borderlands, as another critic points out, "are first and foremost boundaries that serve the interests of the colonizing forces" (J. Martinez 66).

Moreover, the concept of life-border is not to be understood as opposing Husserl's life-world but rather blending into it. The border emerges from the "surrounding world" and from the ego-driven, master narrative of the "near-world" or "home-world," *Nahwelt*, *Heimwelt* (Moran 188, 211); these are discourses that are constantly and synthetically self-combining and self-incorporating. The inclusion of the alien in such an order is justified because Husserl's multivalent concept of life-world is "for everyone" (*für jedermann*). Such a subject cannot exist as an isolated, Romantic, utopian, solipsistic entity à la Robinson Crusoe in a world of experience for him or her alone. On the contrary, the world involves an "open-ended and infinite plurality of possible 'co-subjects' to experience it" (Moran 198).

The emphasis on the world around us (*Umwelt*) would seem like an obvious strategy to study the border without resorting to any philosophical rationalizations. It may be pointed out, in response, that in spite of globalizing forces and migratory movements that shift cultures and ethnicities across the globe, there persists an absolute, center-driven essentiality attempting, on the one hand, to embrace sealed-off, national realms, totalizing institutions, and marginalizing practices, and, on the other, to disallow en masse significant contributions of European/US origin, what Ramón Grosfoguel calls "Third World nationalisms and fundamentalisms" (2006, 177-78), both of which either reproduce colonial or postcolonial power structures and binary oppositions within their nationalistic or fundamentalist configurations.

A phenomenology of the alien counters these discourses by refocusing on the alien's fundamental role in creating and re-inventing postmodernity upon such values as in-betweenness, ambiguity, paradoxical definitions, and the split self (Waldenfels 47, 71, 74; J. Martinez ix-xiii; Ortega 7-11). In this sense, Husserl's contributions prefigure current approaches by recent theorists who, training their eye on colonial and neocolonial impositions, emphasize the subaltern's situation, point of view, and body politics as the only way to access

a coherent, participatory epistemology. Examples include Enrique Dussel's "geopolitics of knowledge" and "body-politics of knowledge" (Grosfoguel 2006, 167-78). Rejecting René Decartes' Eurocentric and deceptively neutral "cogito ergo sum," and offering instead the colonially charged and historically accurate paraphrase "conquiro ergo sum", "I conquer therefore I am," these theorists illustrate the relevance of the colonial, capitalist imposition that brings about modern Western consciousness.

In addition, Dussel's notion of transmodernity seeks to criticize the imperial tendencies of pre-1789 religion as well as the resulting post-1789 revolutionary secularism, given their share in similarly imperialistic epistemic practices (Maldonado-Torres 382-83). Just like transmodernity attempts to go beyond such oppressive systems originating in the so-called two modernities—firstly, the colonial and religious impositions of Western conquest, and, secondly, the oppression of secularism resulting from the French revolution—the notion of a globalized, ambiguous, multivalent border offers a critical approach to our understanding of today's world by focusing on the phenomenology of the alien—the ego's consciousness and experience of both self and alien leading to a more evenhanded, or complete, worldview, one where subjects are thoroughly interwoven in their conflicting environment, their inter- and intra-cultural peers and alien others. Husserl's life-word results from the juxtaposition of the "familiar," "near," or "home" world, on the one hand, and the strange, unfamiliar world of the alien (*Fremdwelt*), on the other. As Moran puts it, "The taken-for-granted nature of our world is such that it is only when we encounter another alien world that our own world is foregrounded" (211).

A globalized border is also a digital one, that is, non-existent in material terms. Subjects framed within this border are constituted by a culture, and psychology, that overflows individuals' inner experiences, which become common enough as to be potentially studied as global iterations—part of a virtual *Umwelt*, or "surrounding" world. Understanding the phenomenological border as materially and virtually perceived experience, a zone of contact with the alien within and without, this border-life-world can be envisaged as a multiple cultural complex involving, among other concepts: habit and practices, nature and politics/history, psychology and gender. Such a border, incompatible with unitary interpretations, embraces blurred, dispersed epistemologies, in tune with a reality of crisis, migration, and unstable institutions that require constant reappraisal.

Rubén Martínez

The desire to seal the border usually intensifies, in literary and filmic representations as much as in legalistic measures, following ideological evolutions and regressions tied to real or politically conceived social or economic crises. In addition to its commercial and aesthetic uses, the border becomes a discursive, ideological weapon in a predictable fashion: Almost every time the U.S. economy retracts, a social crisis looms, or a political faction senses a partisan advantage, the border is apt to be declared notoriously dangerous and porous while immigrants may be forcefully deported, persecuted, and emphatically reviled in well-known negative stereotypes. This latter practice has been recorded by U.S. observers well before the nineteenth-century American takeover of Mexican territory in the 1830s and 1840s, and has since become functionally embedded in the American consciousness (Acuña 8, 190-93; Dana 167-70; Gaviglio 398-405). As pointed out, however, far from following real economic or social crises, these xenophobic measures and sentiments may be the product of false images of political or cultural turmoil. The resulting counterfeit crisis serves an ideological rationale whereby the immigrant others are blamed for any number of social setbacks the majority groups deem them guilty of—following in general lines the mechanism, or social dynamic, of the scapegoat (Girard 107-127; Frear, Jr. 118).

The immigrant, border crosser and border dweller sometimes reclaim and transform these negative stereotypes into positive representations of misrecognition and marginalization. This rhetorical move is not undertaken for the sake of simply opposing ideological domination, or against established traditions and master narratives that alienate and marginalize them. Rather, the open acceptance of certain slurs (for example, *mojado*, wetback) follows a cultural rationale seeking to re-define those negative connotations from the immigrant's own perspective—the aspersion describes both a fact of life and its ideological, biased interpretation, both the river crossing and the crossers' marginalization, their othering. From a Mexican and Mexican American perspective, this specific slur recognizes and sums up, through the marginalized gesture of the river crossing, the migrant's work ethic and family responsibility, a historical tradition of twentieth-century migration, a nostalgic memory of lost land in the nineteenth-century, and the subsequent imposition of new territorial divisions. By adopting the *mojado* moniker, in sum, the immigrant recognizes their origin (geographic, cultural), the fact of the river crossing, their worker status on the American side of the river,

and a historical tradition tied to the first act of colonial dispossession and to latter-day, globalized, postcolonial oppression.

Not only is Martínez's anecdotal border the space where at least two cultures meet, the Caucasian agent and the Mexican-looking reporter, the latter potentially an illegal immigrant. Other cultures enter this space as well, giving rise to suggestive questions and ambivalent answers: Is the Asian agent an American? Yes, but how so? And why and how does he speak "fairly good" Spanish? The border, a seal designed to reject immigrants, to keep out purportedly contaminating influences from the outside, also brings in "inner' immigrants, individuals more or less attuned to this transitional and multicultural space. Some one hundred and fifty years after the racist 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act that kept Asians from coming to the U.S., the Asian agent appears as a figure both of compensation and rejection—at any rate, yet another border paradox, a natural presence now in charge of enacting an exclusionary policy against another group. As one critic notes, the Exclusion Act provided the rationalization and the "legal architecture structuring and influencing" how perceived "undesirable" others, including Mexicans, would be henceforth treated (Lee 37).

Martínez's jigging back and forth on the borderline, though hardly original, suggests the seemingly absurd and paradoxical fact of the border, an ethnographic look at "transnational migration" (Oliver-Rotger 181-90). Such paradoxes have fascinated artists and critics, inspiring interpretations of the border as an in-between space, a rich locus where individuals can shift personalities, creating "zigzagging" psychologies whose very nature implies the rejection of totalizing master narratives. One critic offers the example of the final image of Chaplin's movie *The Pilgrim* (1923), which shows "Chapl(a)in receding into the distance, straddling the borderline of both the geographic and his own symbolic landscape as he negotiates a line between the law and the outlaw" (Kaplan 104). The tramp, playing both an outlaw and a chaplain—both images fusing later on into a third one, that of the pilgrim as an immigrant—fades away straddling both sides of the US-Mexico border. According to Gilles Deleuze, this movement "along the frontier between America where the police are on the lookout for him, and Mexico, where bandits are waiting for him," is a "zigzagging" that pushes the pilgrim into an equivocating, constantly changing identity (qtd. by Kaplan 114).

Gloria Anzaldúa

Though perhaps not aware of Chaplin's imagery or Deleuze's interpretation, Gloria Anzaldúa declares her embrace of a similar "zigzagging" psychology openly. She states, "I have been straddling the Tejas-Mexico border, and others, all my life" (3). Hers is the psychology and identity of *los atravesados*:

> *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead… Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the whites (25).

Los atravesados, those who have been "crossed-over" by the border and by dominant culture, assert their rootedness in this space, a dynamic area of historical, political, and cultural instability. Anzaldúa thus embraces a multivalent, bodily epistemology based on the personal experience of her marginalized, "queer," "gassed," or "maimed" body, a cognitive method that one critic calls "risking the personal" (Keating 6-7).

Anzaldúa is part of a generation of Mexican American writers who veer away from the concept of a unified cultural conscience and towards an incorporation of marginalized others traditionally shunned or obscured, not just by the dominant culture, but by Chicano cultural patriarchy as well. She insists on not erasing these limitations, instead recognizing in them a cultural illness, or *malestar*: "*Conozco el malestar de mi cultura*" (43). Curiously, her use of this very sentence echoes the Spanish translation of *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur, El malestar de la cultura*, Sigmund Freud's attempt to explain the self-destructing tendencies of Western civilization as manifested during the First World War. Consequently, Anzaldúa's critical vision involves the recognition of intra-cultural conflicts and flaws in Chicano patriarchal consciousness that need to be confronted before they can be eradicated or fundamentally weakened.

Cherríe Moraga, in a similar fashion, rejects male-centered paradigms, the "*Machista* view of women, based on the centuries-old virgin-whore paradigm of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* and *Malintzin*" (qtd. by Lakey 204). Such a paradigm represses women by forcing them into subjugated, either/or positions: the suffering and submissive Indian mother or the sexually stigmatized "chingada," a woman loathed for her willingness to sleep with the enemy. In keeping with this intra-cultural criticism, Moraga's play, *The Hungry Woman,* sets out to liberate Chicanas from patriarchal control, to recuperate mythical figures of indigenous and Western traditions (Coatlicue and Medea) and to re-encode them as multiple and excessive in order to

offer open possibilities for Chicanas by way of hybrid cultural practices and fluid gender roles (Lakey 206-10).

For some writers like Anzaldúa and Moraga, who came during and after the high point of the 1960s Chicano movement, romanticized cultural depictions, like Rodolfo Gonzales' "I am Joaquín" (1967), are gradually being replaced by realistic representations showing ethnic, cultural, and gender-related limitations. For example, pejoratives like "raza", "Indian" or "pocho," sometimes idealized by 1960s Mexican-Americans, are exhibited as racialized slurs that Mexican Americans and Mexicans fling at one another, a fact that exposes intra-cultural stereotypical divisions on the basis of skin color, class, place of birth, national origin, cultural separateness, and gendered orthodoxies (J. Martinez 107-113).

A significant number of Latin American authors have attempted to trace their indigenous roots through a type of performativity based on naming so as to shape the novel identities for the emerging Latin American nations (Brotherston 291-309; De León 259-286). Naming grounds cultural-historical connections rooted in ambiguous, theoretical introspection. When considering the genesis of Mexican identity, for example, common references involve Cuauhtémoc, Malintzin/Malinche, or any number of gods from the Aztec pantheon; in Chile an extensive corpus focused on Caupolicán starts in the sixteenth century and includes modern poems by José Santos Chocano and Rubén Darío (Messinger Cypess 14-25; Zugasti 3-28). Anzaldúa likewise uses the names of indigenous groups, especially Toltecs and Aztecs, as well as an assortment of Nahuatl gods, in order to establish a closer connection to a desired historical past conceived as conveying pristine and matrilineal themes: "Matrilineal descent characterized the Toltecs and perhaps early Aztec society" (55). Much is argued hurriedly about Coatlicue, Tlazolteotl, or Cihuacoatl in an attempt to reach for a non-generic native by means of these specific names (68-73). More than the names themselves, however, which remain a matter for interpretive debate by critics, anthropologists, and sociologists of indigenous and Mexican stereotypes, Anzaldúa's naming practice becomes an end in itself, a strategy to stake cultural, psychological, and identity claims in a hostile borderland where unconventional discourses like hers had been traditionally drowned out.

For social critic Roger Bartra, the ideological, indigenous substratum that forms Mexican identity is a generational concoction by the national intelligentsia followed by cooption via schools, media, and political apparatuses, creating a self-reproducing model that some Mexicans may end up accepting, even as they simultaneously realize that those

stereotypes hardly conform to their actual condition, behavior, or interests: "los mexicanos cada vez se reconocen menos en ese axolote que les ofrece el espejo de la cultura nacional como paradigma de un estoicismo nacionalista unificador" (Bartra 233). While the Nahuatl appellation remains for the sake of nation building (*axolotl* and, by extension, other indigenous names), the worn-out paradigmatic stereotype mirrors, instead, the possible extinction of the animal or, analogically, the exhaustion of similar naming practices. Anzaldúa and other Mexican American writers seizing on indigenous names represent a US trend also seeking in those mythologies the roots that mainstream culture does not provide or has actively erased. By leaning on such practices, these writers establish a magical, ritualistic link to the past, though the ethnic meaning seems to spring more from the author's affect, their preoccupations and subjective interpretations. The strategy seemingly replicates an intelligentsia-driven modality that does not match the characteristics of its intended recipients, nations or social groups thought to have nationalistic or ethnic coherence.

Anzaldúa's affective stance, however, motivated by a generous desire to free her ethnic, hybrid individuality from the constraints of dominant orthodoxies and ideologies, enacts (through indigenous, quasi-magical appellations to Tlazolteotl, for example) the very value being pursued. The foreign nature of the Nahuatl label will have scant historical value except as a sentimental strategy that advances the critic's rhetoric of marginality or hybridity, which is meant to confront and displace totalizing, or academic, naming practices suggested by standard names like "Indian" or "American native." Even if dominant ideologies may not be subverted in the end, the rhetoric of naming specific Aztec goddesses and myths lays the basis for the critic's Mestiza consciousness, rooting it in a desire for connectedness to a past that satisfies her present, personal needs. By loosely interpreting such ethno-historical, cultural roots, the critic's move takes on a studied façade of naiveté, which will be stronger in its discursive power the less historically or anthropologically grounded it may be.

History and mythology may not factually sustain her views. By definition, however, an essay writer like Anzaldúa works as a thaumaturge whose wonder-working mythologies tend to be structurally at odds with orthodox, or scholastic, interpretations. Naming practices involving indigenous mythologies, and the weight of personal, individual affect, emerge as ambivalent, hybrid values that liberate her discourse, her testimonial and poetic style, by opening up hegemonic ideologies to the complexity of border culture and to such neocolonial

implications as inequalities, limited inclusivity, and ethnic marginalization, leading her down a foundational "crossing" and into a *sui generis*, self-realized completeness (Anzaldúa 70-73).

Such unequal disparities clearly characterize the US-Mexico border, and one critic emphasizes "the complex patterns of interrelated inequality in the borderlands" as well as the value of hybrid phenomena: "Both nations are complex race and class stratified societies, so that a vast web of unequal exchanges—cultural as well as economic—takes place between variously situated actors." And he adds that while "border hybrids" remain fundamental to study the border, they cannot "exhaust all border experiences and positions" (McC. Heyman 60). Although hybridity would appear, at first blush, to allow for all types of nonstandard gender, racial, and cultural practices, it might seem potentially limiting in forcing all expression and individuals into hybrid patterns or essences. The very complexity being extolled remains nonetheless an open possibility for yet undetermined cultural productions, especially if the focus remains upon personal, phenomenological lived experience—the "praxis" or "struggle of the flesh" (J. Martinez 1-6, 103-120).

Tomás Rivera, Lucrecia Guerrero, Lucha Corpi

It is true that some early writers like Tomás Rivera eschewed ethnic idealizations. Others, however, preferred affirmative representations, partly as a strategic move to counter the pervasively negative stereotyping that has consistently been used to denigrate minorities. Nonetheless, for Rivera, intra-cultural conflict plays a key role in representing the harsh realities that Mexican Americans face irrespective of new political movements meant to pull them out of their marginalization. In Rivera's … *y no se lo tragó la tierra,* … *and the earth did not swallow him*, the protagonist, a young boy perhaps representing the "collective minds of the group" (Daydí-Tolson 137), undergoes a series of bad experiences, not all of which occur because of interactions with a racist Anglo world, but sometimes through contact with Mexican or Tejano individuals, instances of intra-cultural conflict.

In one notorious vignette, "La mano en la bolsa," "Hand in pocket," the boy, an unwitting accomplice in the murder of an undocumented immigrant by a seemingly good, socially respected Tejano couple, provides one such example of intra-cultural malaise. The couple turns out to be opposites of what they socially represent—they are hoarders and petty thieves who decide on the murder of a "wetback" to steal his money and belongings. Nor do they fear any consequences because, as they put it, their victim "es puro mojado y si le pasa

algo, ¿tú crees que se va a preocupar por él?" "He is nothing but a wetback, and if something happens to him, you think his boss is going to worry about him?" (17, 90). The *mojado's* instability and vulnerability exemplify the existence of intra-cultural conflicts removed from the US versus Mexican/Tejano binary. The critical distance achieved by Rivera here and in his poetry includes the unfavorable commentary of Mexican American religious practices, which sets him apart from other contemporary or later writers (Daydí-Tolson 137-41). The realistic description accords with critical appraisals of Chicano culture, which writers like Anzaldúa and Moraga would come later on to emphasize, even if they reaffirmed Mexican American folk religious practices as an inspirational value towards a full-fledged, Mestiza, queer identity.

Mexican American fiction has also focused on some of the changes brought about by the 1990s militarization of the border and neoliberal economic measures like maquiladora industrialization. Such fiction highlights conflicts and instabilities on both sides of the border, offering ambiguous narratives containing romanticized and realistic depictions. In *Chasing Shadows* (2000), for example, a collection of short stories by Lucrecia Guerrero, we see a combination of romanticized indigenous mythology in the sympathetic character of Tonantzin Salazar (in the short story "The Curse"), whose Nahuatl name, "Our Mother," is that of the Virgin of Guadalupe, suggesting a connection "with the Chicana/o myth of a unified Southwest" (Sadowski-Smith 43). Romanticized connections to an indigenous past remain, but Tonantzin's poverty and vulnerability attest to the new realities of the border culture, which supersede the idealized notion of a mythical Aztlán, the unspecified original land of the Aztecs lying somewhere in the U.S. Southwest or northern Mexico.

Another short story, "Even in Heaven," reaffirms these new border developments. The character Cookie McDonald, once an undocumented immigrant and now a citizen through marriage to an American, reiterates the racial inequalities on both sides of the border: "Rather than reject the racially inflected class ideology that oppressed her in Mexico… Cookie affirms its U.S. variant" (Sadowski-Smith 43). She betrays to the Border Patrol an undocumented worker whose name, Joaquín, evokes that of Joaquín Murrieta, a nineteenth-century California mythic hero in the years after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. The shame of complexion, and the experience of rejection as an undocumented Mexican that this character once shared with other co-nationals, illustrates a seemingly miraculous but otherwise expected transformation. This is but one of several borderland paradoxes intensified over the last forty years by globalized neoliberal, political, and militaristic practices.

Fiction characters like Cookie McDonald may be examples of frustrated assimilation or satirical imitation. In point of fact, Cookie insists on emulating the all-American mothers she watches on television, replicating stereotypical American cuisine, and rejecting anything Mexican or Mexican American (Guerrero 11-17). Cultural critic Homi Bhabha, employing a different contextual lens and wielding his notion of mimicry, analyzes such global, hybrid, cultural citizens. Seemingly meant to weaken exemplary master narratives through obsessive, ridiculous, counterfeit behaviors, these characters denounce and displace dominant, marginalizing discourses as they enter a process of mainstream incorporation that entails the simultaneous rejection of their original cultures. Bhabha quotes from V. S. Naipul's *The Mimic Men*, referring to colonized individuals who "[pretend] to be real" but are aware of the "corruption" of the model they are imitating (128; Naipul 146). Naipul's novel, for all its satirical intent, depicts the sincere, poignant condition of mimics who sometimes are exhilarated upon realizing they may be the last representatives of a colonized, fleeting, passive culture: "We were an intermediate race, the genes passive, capable of disappearing in two generations… But what release to be the last of one's line!" (Naipul 57).

The Mimic Men stands as a parody of full, slavish assimilation involving an attack against their ethnic brethren. Somewhat like Cookie McDonald, who rejects the complexion and action of undocumented border crossers, the character Sandra in *The Mimic Men* "hated the common—her own word—from which she nevertheless freely acknowledged herself to have sprung and about which she therefore claimed to speak with authority; no one knew 'them' as well as she" (44). Mimicry, whether parody or reality, emerges as a cross-cultural border dynamic driven by the desire of subordinate individuals for social and discursive incorporation, ready to run over others like them in pointedly ironic practices. The logic of mimicry, and simultaneous self-humiliation, entails a reinforced knowledge of self-culture malaise based upon affect rather than fact. Material class status or lower income may play a role, but emotion, tied to ethnic-cultural markers like complexion or cuisine, remains the key cultural driver.

Denunciation of such cross-border, cultural contradictions and ironies takes on a new historicist strategy in Lucha Corpi's hardboiled narratives. There is in her novels, featuring the female detective Gloria Damasco, an evolution from traditional, romantic portrayals to a realistic, ambiguous prose. By definition, the hardboiled depicts a harsh reality in equally coarse tones, especially when reality is seen as contradictory, absurd, and therefore obscure, difficult to understand and ambivalent in its meaning. In *Black Widow's Wardrobe* (1999) we discover a

romantically nostalgic writing that accepts the ambiguity of historical narrative, one that questions simplistic portrayals of indigenous mythical representations.

Although we encounter typically ethnic figures and resonances, such as the Day of the Dead, Malintzin/La Malinche, and the conquistador Hernán Cortés, there is an admission that such imagery can hardly convey a definitive truth, for it depends on individual perspectives, contexts, and biases. The image of Malintzin, for example, at times idealized or stereotyped by early Chicano writers, turns out to be another construction with no more or less value than the vilified imagined woman that she has become in conventional Mexican culture and history. Corpi's narrative "argues, à la Hayden White, that history is narrative… that the teller of the story determines the emplotment of the historical narrative," and that "ideological positions bias history" (Ralph Rodriguez 163; Corpi 85). Although the incarnated Malintzin in the novel is granted a degree of agency, she hardly represents the naïve ideal that early writers might have imagined, especially if we consider her vulnerability and credulousness: she believes herself to be the modern embodiment of the mythical, constructed woman.

Gloria Damasco, the narrator, affirms the inevitability of historical bias and guesswork, asserting that truth in history rests upon relative, subjective knowledge. Following Hayden White, it is suggested that cold historical facts are interpreted through allegoresis, that facts are "troped" into genres, or filled with intentionality, so that the historian's desire ultimately determines historical explanation (White 46-47). Referring to the sixteenth-century historical figure, Damasco says, "Without [Malintzin's] own written testimony, I can only second-guess her reasons for fighting beside Cortés against the Aztecs. I can only speculate on the speculation of others. Not much truth left in that" (Corpi 120). In so affirming contingency and ambiguity of truth in history, Corpi attempts to extricate her prose from stereotyped cultural clichés that permeate much of Mexican American artistic and literary expression, though she retains some of those commonplaces, as attested by chapter titles like "La zorra," and "Valley of the Fifth Sun," or the theme of the Weeping Woman, *la llorona*. Retention of these cultural markers seems inevitable in a literary corpus grounded upon them since the 1960s, themes that continue to play a significant role in everyday Mexican cultural practices on both sides of the border. For all that, Corpi's novels reclaim Chicanas' feminine agency and contributions, an effort that parallels other women writers of hard-boiled detective fiction in gendering a canon once the exclusive field of male authors (Pearson 38-43; Smith 78-84).

Richard Rodriguez

Given these depictions, whether realistic or romanticized, the question of whether to resist or assimilate need not be an either/or proposal. Responding to complex and ambiguous realities, the writer sometimes opts for complexity, accepting with candor what he states to be full assimilation but recognizing at the same time the cultural values of his national and ethnic ancestors. Richard Rodriguez starts off his autobiography, *Hunger of Memory* (1982), by calling himself "a middle-class American man. Assimilated." Yet on the same page he states that his "dark-skinned" complexion and "Indian features" "would pass notice on the page of a *National Geographic*," and calls himself a Caliban who has stolen Prospero's books, "I have taken Caliban's advice. I have stolen their books. I will have some run of this isle" (1).

Rodriguez's full-fledged call for assimilation into American culture is thus tinged literally with ethnic color and imbued with culturally diverse, conflicting, and nostalgic values (Nieto García 64-85; Staten 103-110). If American assimilation implies a possible acceptance of his dark skin, as well as the cultural values and paradoxical social practices attached to complexion, then this new notion of Americanness would have undergone an ethnic tilt and rejected the traditional type of the red-blooded, white American. The Caliban trope intensifies this seemingly insolvable possibility—the new ethnic American recognizes his marginal, "savage," or Indian nature and decides to appropriate his master's knowledge, or books, in order to re-conquer the stolen culture and land and have free rein in it, that is, in order to succeed in a more ethnically open (American/Western) society. Yet this liberating Caliban model, constructed as it is by discursive European literature (Shakespeare's *The Tempest* 1.2 ll. 308-73), remains an opaque paradigm, giving both resistance and assimilation unstable statuses that shift and resist any pinning down (Shakespeare, Hulme 239-49; Fuchs 265-85)

Another distinguishing feature in Rodriguez's oeuvre is the rejection of traditional Chicano group action and thinking in the 1960s and 1970s. It does not mean that he is apolitical—his text, life, and lectures have been extremely influential in the political world and in the ways that Mexican Americans have been appraised or criticized. Part of this rejection involves his belief that education entails loss as the student transitions into maturity. Education provides significant benefits but the process is fraught with cultural loss, isolation from family and society—a series of negative, nostalgic values that end up conferring on the student the longed-for public identity and the consequent achievement of success.

The Chicano movement is blind to this contradiction, according to this author. Activists at the time believed that education does not involve a separation from family, or a loss of culture, and that higher education should be undertaken by group, instead of individual, effort. Those "minority students," adds Rodriguez, "were proud, claiming that they didn't need to change by becoming students. I had long before accepted the fact that education exacted a great price for its equally great benefits. They denied that price—any loss" (172). Moreover, he claims that the push for affirmative action in higher education was made solely on the basis of race instead of class, income, or scholarly meritocracy, partly the reason why some incoming minority students, having been accepted on terms that ignored their "academic deficiency," would grow frustrated and soon drop out (166).

Consequently he rejects the benefits granted by affirmative action to college students. Upon deciding to reject an academic career that favors him as a product of affirmative action, his fathers tells him, "'I don't know why you feel this way. We have never had any of the chances before.' *We*, he said. But he was wrong. It was *he* who had never had any chance before" (his emphasis, 185). Rodriguez concludes that once he and others like him enter or graduate from a university and compete in professions like other educated Americans; once they get the chances that poor ethnic people, *los pobres*, never do, they cease to be like them, cannot truthfully represent them, and should not take advantage of any affirmative action designed for the poor and disenfranchised, whatever their ethnicity.

Hence his rejection, too, of idealistic but naïve "minority students" who come to visit him and request he "teach a 'minority literature' course at some barrio community center" (173). Rodriguez's educational experience and rationale involve the mastering of public discourse and the simultaneous sacrifice of private language. Becoming a student entails a measured loss of one's private speech—the ties to family, culture, or a child's past. Therefore, he tells those students, there is no such thing "as minority literature. Any novel or play about the lower class will necessarily be alien to the culture it portrays" (173). Using the example of Alex Haley's *Roots*, Rodriguez claims that once a person becomes a student or writer, able to read or write literature, even about their family or culture, the produced reading experience, or literary text, will tell more about "his difference from his illiterate, tribal ancestors than it does about his links to them" (173). The gap that education opens between the scholar and the culture he leaves behind is logically insurmountable—something George Orwell himself

had to admit: "[A]s a literate man, he would never be able to imagine what it is like to be one of the uneducated poor" (167).

Conclusion

The foreign or alien other living in the liminal space or culture of the border negotiates an identity forged through ritual practices, struggles of the flesh, and intra- and intercultural contentions. Thus lived experience, or personal phenomenology, illuminates the intimate, bodily, autobiographical existence of ethnic writers. In addition, history and education, as well as other related cultural fields, play a significant impact on erasing their experience and marginalization. Jacqueline Martinez explains that the traditional history of the California missions, for example, haphazardly expunges and sanitizes "the lived struggles of the native and Mexican people of this land to retain their own cultural and personal possessions" (116), and one way of correcting these erasures is by refocusing on the semantics of the body inscribed in history—a phenomenological past and present.

Reading Rodriguez as a border theorist suggests this very existential, bodily experience. Achieving desire, expressing the problematic of his religious, spiritual, and professional pursuits, and detailing the pitfalls of ethnicity (or complexion) and familial cultural separation—all of these personal issues point to a life situated in the middle of assimilationist aims and, simultaneously, outside them, a person straddling the borderline, between profession and family, education and complexion, public and private religion. He is an "other" even, or especially, among his familial circle, and no one, particularly in this intimate sphere, can know or understand his secrets. "My mother," he says, "sensed that the person whose essay she saw… was a person unfamiliar to her, some Other" (206). He is, after all, "Mr. Secrets."

Mariana Ortega uses María Lugones' notion of world-traveling to postulate the border as an in-between space where a phenomenological, compounded other resides, which allows her to suggest possibilities of authenticity and resistance for those border dwellers. World-traveling, she explains, is "a practice in which the multiplicitous self has access to an opening… from which she is able to understand herself and the conditions of the numerous worlds to which she travels" (126). Being seen in public while world-traveling amounts to an awareness of stereotyped social hierarchies, which steers this gendered self toward her own story or

traditions and, finally, resistance to stereotyped arrangements by accessing cultural fissures or cracks leading to a raised awareness about her condition (134-35).

If we consider Rubén Martínez's travelogue, literally and culturally an experience of world traveling, we discover that his research into the tragedy of an immigrant group dying in Temecula, California, is also a personal exploration, a rediscovery of his own past, the tracing of the immigrant path his ancestors once traveled. "My grandfather," says Martínez, "told me again of those journeys back to Old Mexico… in the early fifties… longing for home." He was "hard-working, hard-loving" and "a migrant to the core." A world traveller who has inherited his grandfather's "wanderlust," Martínez uncovers intra- and inter-cultural fissures to resist stereotyped depictions and to shape his identity, both when he reveals the racist divisions in Mexico based on class and complexion as when he concludes that the border is a cultural construct: "From the height [on a plane] there is no border; the line is an idea" (64-65; 324-25). Much as in Chaplin's movie, Martínez concludes that immigrants are pilgrims who cross the river hoping to reach Canaan. No matter the dangers of the crossing, marginalization, exploitation, or death, "to cross over, to be a wetback, is itself a baptism into a new life. The river anoints the pilgrim" as he enters "the Promised Land" (324).

In his "Declaración de desobediencia poética," performance artist Guillermo Gómez Peña denounces "paranoid nationalism" and "dying nation-states" while defining migrants as "nomads," "orphans" and "new barbarians." For, he claims, "*Todos somos mojados"* [we are all wetbacks] (Gómez Peña). This outlook reclaims a degree of agency through the outsider's lived experience—a phenomenological and existential component of the foreign/alien border dweller, the orphan of nations, the barbarian who rejects the confinement of binary definitions Hence those who insist on transparent concepts and easy definitions cling to falsifying tendencies meant to obviate the complexity of border cultures. Demands for clarity amount to embracing paradigms contrary to democratic inclusivity, as suggested by Dussel and other postmodern critics. Henry Giroux further explains, "The clarity vs. complexity binarism is based on the presupposition that a simple invocation of clear language can by itself confer sense" (17). Both language and speech, however, even at the level of syntax, are often fuzzy, a vagueness meant to reflect a complex reality instead of pressing such complexity into simplistic categorizations.

The resulting opaque, ambiguous expression turns out to be a value through which the multiplicity of the borderlands can be represented with a degree of clarity through

ambiguity, as Anzaldúa's ambivalent notion of mestizaje suggests—unlike the early twentieth-century concept defended by José Vasconcelos, who, according to Dwyer (14), denounced *pochismo* and championed in Mexico a purported superiority of "mestizo homogenization" "over other racial groups." Contrastingly, Anzaldúa's hybrid US-Mexico border culture can in fact be defined as the cultural and linguistic practice of *pochismo*, a multicultural amalgam of asymmetrical interactions.

The phenomenologist approach raises the level of the other and establishes a horizontal scheme instead of a vertical one, where Western and other epistemologies compete, not always in a harmonious fashion, for explanations of cultural and historical phenomena. Those others, the exile, immigrant, or foreigner, move in and out of the mainstream and on the same level as the dominant subjects. Except that under this new notion of alterity the loci of the "I" and "We" are not broken apart but fuse into one, a culturally and historically determined psychology along the lines of Arthur Rimbaud's poetic vision, *Car Je est un autre*, "For I is an other [somebody else]" (Angelino; "Lettre de Rimbaud"). This vision foregrounds the unknown inside, what is forbidden, sick, damned, or taboo (*l'inconnu, le grand criminel, le grand maudit*), as a fundamental part of an ego-rooted, phenomenological identity.

Husserl's subject perceives the other as another ego on the same plane and world, outside and inside, "perceiving that the other Ego and I are looking at the same world." My ego, he adds, "constitutes in himself another ego" (Welton 154), which suggests dominant systems of knowledge to be outgrowths, or mirror images, of displaced, marginalized, other epistemologies, and these latter to be essential substrata of the former. Husserl's *Crisis of the European Sciences*, as summarized by one critic, opens up a closed Western configuration and incorporates as yet unexplored or unaccounted-for perspectives (Antonio F. Aguirre, quoted by Moran 180-81). Husserl's notion of the life-world involves multiple, complex meanings arguably identified with values and content now attributed to the realm of the other: the "pre-given world" understood as a "correlate of the natural attitude;" a new practice of history that integrates "the life-worlds of peoples" instead of the Western traditional focus; and an "unthematized horizon" that has never been fully considered. This is a universal "horizon" having "spatial and temporal connotations" that express an indeterminate context (Moran 193). Historicity unfolds into this undefined empty space-time that involves all peoples, cultures, life-worlds, or life-borders. In order to understand the alien or the foreign inhabiting those uncertain peripheries, a possible solution lies not so much on an intention to situate

ourselves in their place but, rather, on recognizing that their place is also ours—the meeting of the home and the alien worlds into one compounded, indeterminate one.

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