A Dialectic of Difference: Towards a Theory of the Chicano Novel

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In a recent and widely acclaimed essay, Joseph Sommers issued a challenge to all literary scholars, but especially to Chicano scholars, to justify the theoretical suppositions of their work. Sommers argued that the students of Chicano literature were, if not wrong, at least partially misguided in our critical efforts. He implied that a move could be made toward the proper path of criticism. As proof of his own critical self-awareness, he revealed the critical presuppositions of his work, which were to serve as models for our own future critical acts.

Sommers's reasoning was clear and the distinctions he offered between the "formalist" and "culturist" criticism on the one hand and his own "historical dialectical" method on the other, were basically correct. One could quibble with his admittedly partisan interpretations of formalist methodology, but such is not my intention. Of greater moment, both for literary studies in general and for Chicano literary studies in particular, is the urgent need for a reassessment of the critical act. Sommers, to his great credit, knew this. What his essay was not in a position to recognize, however, was that this reassessment is already taking place in Chicano studies, through what has been inelegantly termed "post-structuralist" criticism. I do not necessarily align myself within that revisionist criticism; nor am I one to take up challenges indiscriminately. But Sommers's challenge, as his legacy to Chicano literary criticism, is one which cannot be easily ignored. In what follows, I would like to respond to Sommers by outlining what I take to be the possibility for a new, revolutionary critique of narrative structures, and by attempting a partial survey of the Chicano novel, based on a "post-structuralist" methodology. At the outset I will admit that I side with Sommers, at least to an extent. I too believe that a confrontation with the sociological, historical, and cultural conditions under which the Chicano novel has been created is virtually indispensable to an informed "ethnic student" in our time of legal, fiscal, and moral retrenchment.
I. The Dialectics of History

In the second chapter of José Antonio Villarreal's germinal novel, *Pocho* (1959), Juan Rubio, paradigmatic hero, patriarch, and warrior, having participated in the "world-historical" event of Mexican history, the Revolution of 1910, finds that he must flee in defeat from Mexico to the United States. For Chicanos, Juan Rubio's flight dramatizes an equally historical event: it marks the beginning of the rapid growth of Mexican communities in the American Southwest. And it is, of course, not accidental that here, at the beginning of the Chicano novel, we find the events of fiction firmly rooted in the events of history. The novel, more so than any other literary genre, insists on this tie to the real. In respecting the necessity of this tie, Villarreal offers us not so much a slice of reality, as he does a representation of the cultural rules and conventions by which the fictional character Juan Rubio, and real men like him, dealt with that reality.

For all its sociohistorical significance, the Revolution is mainly important in this novel for the tremendous personal meaning Rubio has attributed to it—as a result of its shattering events, the world of Juan Rubio's values has been radically polarized. The rules of personal conduct personified in his character sharply specify that one must live and die with dignity, or existence has no value at all. Juan Rubio is therefore represented as an independent and autonomous source of absolute value, which value he holds even against life. But already from the beginning of the novel, when confronted first with a pimping gachupin, whom he kills, and then with an old friend now a general in the army of the institutionalized revolution, whom he mocks, Juan Rubio begins to suspect that the passing of the revolution will mean more than political defeat. He realizes that with the death of Pancho Villa, the grand dream of social and individual dignity will be subverted.

From this subversion will emerge a new class of men, like René Soto, a political intriguer, whom Juan sees as worthless: "He was nothing," Rubio says to one of them, "and you are nothing." This is Juan's vision of the world: one is either something, dignified and real, or one is nothing. In this formulation, Villarreal seems less concerned with portraying "abstract stereotypes drawn from the popular Mexican collective unconscious" as Tino Villanueva suggests, than with representing the themes of the patriarchal will to power. What is to be willed here is the power of absolute value over and against any other formulation concerning human action. From the perspective of narrative stratagem, not only is Villarreal's ploy of skirting with stereotypes dramatically effective, it is also essential for the intended analysis of value which is now to
follow. Life, as action, manifests itself in Juan’s view in a continuing resistance to that which would negate it. For Juan there can be no middle ground, no reconciliation between the poles of being and nothing, which have become ethical as well as ontological terms. The result of this irreconcilability is, as various readers have pointed out, a narrative about “the menace of chaotic discontinuity.” What has not been pointed out, however, is the dramatic effect of this discontinuity in Juan Rubio’s life.

But the novel is, of course, not about Juan Rubio. It is rather about his son, Richard, the pocho born in a melon field of the Imperial Valley in California. In the remainder of the novel, the cataclysmic Revolution freezes into a past of intractable and alien value. The United States is not Mexico, and the old values do not seem to apply. This does not mean that the novel idealizes the remote past of the Mexican Revolution in order to explain the present disintegration of Chicano cultural life. Nor does it mean that the novel offers the conventions of Anglo-American culture as a positive model. Instead, it offers us a difference. Among the various options of absolute value posed for Richard Rubio by Anglo-American culture, by the Roman Catholic Church, by his father’s demands, and by his mother’s wishes, Richard consistently chooses not to choose. Herein lies Richard’s special and generic difference.

The young Richard early reasons that since, as the Church teaches, there is only good and evil in the world, and that since the differences between good and evil are inherently ambiguous, then it is possible that these differences cannot be known. “He was frightened,” the narrator tells us, “because he could not know [the differences]’ and because “somehow God was in the middle of the whole thing. To do ‘bad’ things had something to do with being alive, but really what were bad things?” (Pocho p. 37). This naive conflation of “life” and “bad things” is later expressed in more exact terms: “I was scared,” says Richard, “because if He willed it so, I knew that the earth would open and it would swallow me up because I dared to demand explanations from Him. . . . Then, one day, I knew that . . . if He could do the best thing in the world, He could also do the most evil thing in the world” (Pocho p. 65). If after this recognition the two concepts of good and evil are still to be differentiated, then the difference must be based on a perception of something other than a pure meaning or idea to serve as the substance of good or evil. Richard’s question of the nature of good and evil is posed, therefore, not to eliminate their opposition, but to show that the terms appear as the difference of the other: in Richard’s view, “good” constitutes itself by its very relation to what it absolutely is not. Good is not evil; but it is evil that has not yet happened, and vice versa. The
significance of Richard’s elementary intuition into the differential structure of moral codes is that it removes value, and therefore meaning, from the realm of a static, transcendent sphere and places it instead within the active domain of history and culture.

By the same token, this recognition of the differential structure of moral codes leads to Richard’s later rejection of all “codes of honor,” in so far as they are founded upon falsely absolute standards. He does so because he sees that moral codes, as cultural artifacts, are contingent upon time, and therefore not to be arrested into static presences by human knowledge. This inability to know absolutely characterizes the development of Richard’s character and culminates in his portentous response to his mother’s insistence that he be something when he grows up: “I do not want to be something; I am” (Pocho p. 64).

The melodrama of adolescence aside, Richard’s affirmation of being indicates that for him the world is not a source of value as it is for his father. Richard wishes rather to appropriate the world to himself, and to subjugate it by shaping it with his understanding, in the commanding mode of divine self-reference, “I am.” The real world is thus not to be seen as a determinant of action, but more accurately, as the scene of action. Socioeconomic conditions of rural California in the 1930s preclude, however, that Richard’s action can be anything more than a spiritual rebellion against the various imposed forms of cultural reality. Yet, by resisting the imposition of cultural norms, Richard wishes subversively to devalue reality: “Everything does not have to be real,” he claims (Pocho p. 65).

If everything is not real, then what is it? Richard Rubio, at the source of contemporary Chicano narrative, is not afraid of the un-real, the nothing, which his father rejects. But at this point, as his mother realizes when she says to him, “I have really lost you, my son!” (Pocho p. 66), Richard is indeed no longer with us. It may be instructive to find out where he is.

The novel Pocho has always been somewhat of an embarrassment to Chicanos. Even the preface to the Anchor paperback edition seems to show the need to apologize for the novel. Richard’s rejection of his father’s values, his statements that “codes of honor are stupid” (Pocho p. 108), his rejection of the Catholic faith, and, of course, his departure at the novel’s end to join the United States armed forces in the months just prior to Pearl Harbor are seen as assimilationist tendencies. But given the fact that Richard has always been a tolerant person among social, religious, sexual, and moral intolerants, and given the fact that he sees the coming war as an event spawned by wrong and bound only to create further wrongs (Pocho p. 185), Richard’s decision to enlist can be
seen either as a supreme contradiction, or as a positive step in a dialectic of developing understanding.

As an indication that we may pursue this second option, it should be noted that at the conclusion of the novel, Richard is in fact closer in spirit to his father than he has been at any other time in their relationship. He realizes that within that other world of value, “Father had won his battle” because he “had never been unaware of what his fight was” (Pocho p. 187). “What about me?,” asks Richard, for he enters a battleground where definitive distinctions between right and wrong are not as apparent as he imagines they must have been for his father. Richard’s decision to fight for his country is made with the clear recognition that his is a country that refuses him his own measure of justice, that imprisons his friends, and that makes economic serfs of his family. As soldiers and as men, Juan and Richard thus symmetrically oppose and reflect one another, with history serving as the mirror of their reflection.

For both men, life constitutes itself on the basis of concerted human action. Life does not happen to men and women; they happen to life. The first and foremost moment of this constituted life is that which is presently in action against anything which would restrict it. But the dialectics between fathers and sons are such that while for Juan it is the “nothing” which would restrict life, for Richard it is the codification of life which would destroy it. In dramatic terms, Juan’s and Richard’s opposed different lives and values might thus be seen as Villarreal’s artistic intuition of the differential structure of human values as revealed by a Marxist transformational criticism.10 Juan projects personal power into separate spheres—codes of honor and traditions of action—which dominate him. Richard’s desire for an authentic existence within a new historical reality requires him to turn his father’s values around, making codes of honor valid only as they arise from the actual movement of personal history. The interaction between these two ways of perceiving the value of human action creates the novel’s complex dialectical force. Since this dialectic of values is inherent in the reality the novelist describes, it makes little difference whether the novelist intends to reveal it or not; the economy of opposed forces which he dramatizes reveals it for him.

When Richard claims at the novel’s end that for him “there would be no coming back”, we cannot be certain that his earlier confrontations with death, “the infinite nonentity” (Pocho p. 180), have not been foreshadowings of his own real death in war. But even if Richard does not here embrace a literal death, he welcomes a figural one: the death of the child he was, at the mercy of random historical events and of determin-
nant social codes. Now he begins to seem capable of overcoming the opposition between the real and the unreal, between the options of absolute value and the nothing, by plunging directly into the dynamics of history. He does so not so much to validate either the world or the self in isolation, as to validate the actions of the self in the world. Richard’s acceptance of the unreal allows him to transform his father’s idealist concept of history as the realization of Value through Man, into the materialist concept of history as the self-realization of men and women, through the detour of alienation in the spheres of society and culture. As Marx points out in the Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, the necessary logical step after this *interpretation* of the world is to *change* the world. That Richard does turn to the politics of change is apparent, I think, if only by the fact that the book he has always hoped to write is written, as semi-autobiographical fiction, in the form of the novel *Pocho*.

In contrast to the imposed word of cultural and ethical law, the “traditions which could take a body and soul . . . and mold it to fit a pattern,” (*Pocho* p. 63), Richard sees the possibility of creating his own world, in the difference between absolute value and nothing, which might serve as the foundation for a revitalized personal and cultural identity. But the price of this emancipation is the security of the known, lamentable reality in favor of “the unknown” (*Pocho* p. 144). In effect, *Pocho* might well be thought of as the narrative equivalent of that earlier declaration of independence, “I don’t want to be something; I am.” The force of both his singular utterance and of the novel itself is such that it brings about an alteration in Richard’s subjective condition, solely by virtue of the fact that the declaration and the novel have been performed. His words, embodied as narrative, testify to the power of language to constitute a state of subjective integrity, even if it is an integrity founded upon an initial act of renunciation. Thus, the writing of this text does initiate a substantial change; it changes the world of literature by opening a place for Chicano literature, a place from which future Chicano authors might open up the vistas of the genre of the novel to their own significant culture. From the perspective of literary history, therefore, the historical phenomenon of cultural consciousness expressed by later Chicano novels can become a reality only after Richard Rubio postulates his own identity as a new and different source of personal consciousness. At least this recognition is due Villarreal’s first novel.

After *Pocho*, the question concerning the Chicano novel is no longer one of where it exists but of how it exists. The question is a proper one because the Chicano novel, individually and as a genre, constitutes itself by posing this question in explicit and concerted terms. In effect, the problematic of generic form, in both the real and fictional worlds, be-
comes the substance of its content. The preceding description of Villarreal’s novel attempts to emphasize this fact: Richard’s story is an operation of rectification, of ontological restitution, of values which have ceased to be effective in a new cultural, historical, and psychological space. It emphasizes the novel’s own operation of interpretation as it moves in narrative time from Juan’s to Richard’s life; and within Richard’s story, from belief to doubt and back again, as he attempts to pass from a surface to an underlying reality and finds a measure of certainty only in the opposition of their difference. That Richard has failed to locate that reality absolutely in either personal or cultural terms by the novel’s end does not negate the procedure. The failure simply indicates that the closure of interpretation, by characters within fiction or by readers outside of it, cannot be established in this or perhaps any linguistic text. What a linguistic text can do, however, is activate the components of our concrete social life—words, ideas, desires, intentions—by revaluing, or even devaluing, them. This foregrounding of value can neither create a meaning which was not already present in the words of the text, nor can it cause the end of interpretation. But Pocho succeeds as a novel, and more significantly as the paradigmatic Chicano novel, precisely because in bringing to the fore the question of value it both violates and subverts our received ideas of value, and forces us to define in real historical terms what has not been defined within the text.

Given the strength of the model text, Pocho, it should not be surprising that subsequent Chicano novels have looked to it, consciously or not, for inspiration. I am not here making a case for a Chicano “anxiety of influence,” but I am suggesting that in its isolation of the differential structure of meaning, of the dialectic between history and art, and of the roles played by these issues in the protagonist’s creation of a new cultural and personal consciousness, Pocho is the central Chicano novel. Like all progenitors, it has had its good and its bad offspring. I neither intend to discuss Macho, nor Chicano, nor the unfortunate Fifth Horseman. I would like to sketch a brief history of its impact on Tomás Rivera’s y no se lo tragó la tierra, Oscar Zeta Acosta’s The Revolt of the Cockroach People, and Ron Arias’s The Road to Tamazunchale. I caution that I offer here simply a tentative model of a possible Chicano literary history.

II. The Dialectics of Difference

At the outset of such a history, we have Villarreal’s novel. Tomás Rivera’s magisterial work, y no se lo tragó la tierra (1971), however, takes the formal and thematic issues raised by Villarreal’s novel to their limits.\[79\]
The twelve sections of Rivera's novel, preceded and concluded by a frame story, relate the seasonal events in a year of the life of an unnamed migrant child. As is the case in the major Chicano novels after *Pocho*, Rivera faithfully situates his story in the day to day life of present social reality. The poverty, hardships, and exploitation which his characters experience is no more than that which he himself might have experienced. But apart from the reality of economic exploitation, Rivera's novel also represents the anguish of a transcendentally spiritual exploitation: his anonymous narrator, born of absence and of loss, seeks to recover "un año perdido."16

Without a name, initially without a sense of specific geographical space or real time, unable to decide whether he wakes or dreams, the child calls out and turns, not realizing he himself has spoken: "oia que alguien le llamaba por su nombre pero cuando volteaba la cabeza a ver quién era el que le llamaba, daba una vuelta entera y así quedaba donde mismo" (Rivera p. 1). ("He would hear someone call him by name. He would turn around to see who was calling, always making a complete turn, always ending in the same position and facing the same way.") Thus situated between madness and chaos, the child reacts by beginning immediately to construct a context for order: "Se dio cuenta de que siempre pensaba que pensaba y de allí no podía salir. . . . Pero antes de dormir se veía y oía muchas cosas" (Rivera p. 1). ("He discovered that he was always thinking that he was thinking, and that he was trapped in this cycle. . . . But before falling asleep he would see and hear many things.") In terms more grandly absolute than any imagined by Villarreal, Rivera thus sets the scene for his own portrayal of a radical revaluation of values.

Through a series of wire-tight chapters, which amount to no more than an interior monologue repeating snatches of half-heard conversations, Rivera portrays la raza's indomitable will to survive. With the two core episodes of the novel, "La noche estaba plateada" ("It Was a Silvery Night") and the title piece, "y no se lo trago la tierra " ("And the Earth Did Not Part"), Rivera now chronicles the rise of an even more intractable will to power. But it must occur by degrees. First, one silvery night, the child walks into a wood to summon the devil because: "Lo del diablo le había fascinado desde cuando no se acordaba" (Rivera p. 55). ("The thought of the devil had fascinated him since he could remember.") Flashing back to another time, the child offers us a possible motive for this inexplicable summons of the devil when he recalls overhearing that "con el diablo no se juega. Hay muchos que le han llamado y después les ha pesado. La mayoría casi se vuelve loca. . . . Hay unos que se mueren de susto, otros no, nomás empiezan a entristecer, y luego ni hablan.
Como que se les va el alma del cuerpo" (Rivera p. 55). ("You can’t fool around with the devil. There have been many who have summoned him and they’ve later regretted it. Most have been on the verge of going insane . . . there are some who die of fright; there are others who are overcome with sadness and eventually stop talking altogether, as if the soul had left their bodies.")

But the child is of a mind to summon the devil: “Nomás quisiera saber si hay o no hay,” (“all want to know whether the devil exists”) he says in innocent simplicity, and adding with a line of logic we have seen before, “Si no hay diablo a lo mejor no hay tampoco . . . No, más vale no decirlo” (Rivera p. 56). (“And if he doesn’t, then one can doubt the existence of . . . no. I’d better not say it.”) He calls repeatedly but nothing happens: “No se apareció nada ni nadie ni cambió nada” (Rivera p. 56). (“No one appeared. Everything was the same.”) Returning home, relieved and proud of himself, it occurs to him that the devil has not appeared because “no habia diablo” (Rivera p. 56). And since in the rhetoric of the Church evil is inseparable from good, the absence of the devil leads him to the partial conclusion: “si no hay diablo tampoco hay . . .” (Rivera p. 56). The binary pattern of what I have termed the Chicano novel’s “differential structure” necessarily brings into question the complement of evil and the supreme origin of value, God Himself. At this point, however, the child’s inability to separate himself from the ultimate of imposed value systems, especially from an apparently beneficent one, is designated by the inconclusive ellipse. It is curious, moreover, that his intimation of the world as a place without devils or gods, “No hay diablo, no hay nada” (“there is no devil, there is nothing”), does not lead him into existential despair. On the contrary, the child senses the possibility of freedom in their absence. He now understands that “Los que le llamaban al diablo y se volvian locos, no se volvían locos porque se les aparecía sino al contrario, porque no se les aparecía” (Rivera p. 56). (“Those who summoned the devil and later went insane did not do so because they had seen the devil. On the contrary, it was because the devil had not appeared.”) In an impressive rhetorical move, the narrator signals the sublimity of this partial recognition by transferring metaphorically the joyful serenity of the child’s insight to the moon hovering over his head, “contentissima de algo” (Rivera p. 56) (“happy about something”).

The protagonist’s reticence before the annihilation of traditional value schemes in “La noche estaba plateada,” is overcome in the climactic conclusion to the following section, “y no se lo tragó la tierra.” There, haunted by his inability to understand why a beneficent God would allow disaster to strike unremittingly a good and innocent people, the
protagonist finally brings himself to curse God. This ultimate rejection of an ideology of acceptance and submission allows him to elevate his own creative will into a higher sphere of existence and thus to produce his own history. Here too, as in Pocho, the act of rejection isolates a systematic distrust of any pre-existent, transcendental rule of value because such systems contribute to the enslavement of the individual will. It is only in the context of present historical conditions and under the influence of its own productive intellect that the individual can create a personal and cultural identity. With “y no se lo tragó la tierra,” the Chicano novel moves from a possible to an actual state of being.

Rivera’s story places us in the full misery of a South Texas field, parched by the noonday sun, as a small group of Chicanos weed a crop. The previous day, the young boy’s father, working under these same conditions, has suffered a sunstroke. Trapped as much by his mother’s passive faith as by the exploitative economic system, he screams, “¿Qué se gana, mamá, con andar . . . [clamando] por la misericordia de Dios? . . . si Dios no se acuerda de uno . . . N’ombre a Dios le importa poco de uno de los pobres . . . Dígame usted ¿por qué? ¿Por qué nosotros nomás enterados en la tierra como animales sin ningunas esperanzas?” (Rivera pp. 67–68). (“What do you gain by doing that, mother? . . . [clamoring] for the mercy of God? . . . God doesn’t give a damn about us poor people . . . tell me why should we always be tied to the dirt, half buried in the earth like animals without hope of any kind?”) But his previous day’s anger and despair of their bondage to the earth are nothing compared to this day’s, as his youngest brother also falls now from the sun’s devouring rays: “¿Por qué a papá y luego a mi hermanito? . . . ¿Por qué?” (Rivera p. 70). (“Why my father, and now my little brother?) Rushing home with his brother in his arms, the protagonist brings himself to do openly what he had done previously by indirect: “Maldijo a Dios” (Rivera p. 70). (“He cursed God.”) At this instant, he imagines that the earth might indeed open to swallow him up; but it does not. Instead, he continues homeward with the solidity of the material earth beneath his feet. With his acceptance of his own universal isolation comes “una paz que nunca había sentido antes” (Rivera p. 70). (“He was experiencing a peace he had never known before.”) This almost Nietzschean serenity, a liberating joyful wisdom, is the direct result of his appropriation of the site of God’s former existence as the place for his own self-determined presence: “por primera vez se sentía capaz de hacer y deshacer cualquier cosa que él quisiera” (Rivera p. 70). (“For the first time he felt himself capable of doing and undoing whatever he chose.”) The religion of Job reconciled or of Christ crucified here has not diminished but rather added to man’s burden of suffering. By rejecting that religion, the protagonist implies that in this life understanding, the
source of humanistic power, is salvation; it survives and replaces the
decay of faith in the divine. Freed now of transcendental myths, he
knows that the earth cannot “swallow” and the sun cannot “devour.”
He saves himself to act within the bounds of history by realizing that
those anthropomorphic projections of human will onto unfeeling nature
are, like the myth of God Himself, only the fraudulent means by which
the force of the individual human will can be diminished and enslaved.
Authentic life is constituted by the will’s interpretive act, the determina-
tion of its own fate. Having attained this level of dialectical insight, the
child’s recovery of his “lost year” cannot be far off:

Se dío cuenta de que en realidad no había perdido nada. Había en-
contrado. Encontrar y reencontrar y juntar. Relacionar esto con esto, eso
con aquello, todo con todo. Eso era. Eso era todo. Y le dió más gusto
(Rivera p. 169). (He realized that he hadn’t lost anything. He had dis-
covered something. To discover and to rediscover and synthesize. To re-
late this entity with that entity, and that entity with still another, and
finally relating everything with everything else. That was what he had
to do, that was all. And he became even happier.)

If in Rivera’s view life can be stabilized only after we have experi-
enced its instability, in Oscar Zeta Acosta’s representation, life is con-
stituted only as instability, as chaos. Around the chaos, order can be
momentarily constructed, but precisely because this order is a human
construct, it cannot be made permanent. In the tragicomic antics of his
fictional persona, Buffalo Zeta Brown, lawyer, writer, and would-be rev-
olutionary, Zeta Acosta attempts to transform the debilitating effects of
psychic doubt into political action, to fashion out of the absence of abso-
lute value, a new hypothetical order. In the process, he creates one of
the most outrageous and iconoclastic novels of recent years. The Revolt of
the Cockroach People (1973) is, as the stinging irony of its double-edged
title suggests, a profane, ambiguous attempt to reconstruct the tradi-
tional values of an ostensibly rural people in a modern urban society.

Despite the narrator’s overt sexism, his blatant anti-clericalism, and his
heavy-handed egoism, no single feature of this novel offends the com-
mon reader more than Buffalo Zeta Brown’s assessment of the American
legal system as an arbitrary weaving of semantic threads created to hide
the empty forms of notions such as “justice” and “natural rights.”
Whereas we would expect Law, at least in its ideal form, to permit us an
approximation of the state of transcendental right, Buffalo Zeta Brown
shows us, in a series of increasingly allegorical trial scenes, that the truth
of justice is intimately tied to its differential opposite, the lie of justice:
“All of them,” he tells us in the climactic scene of the novel’s closing trial,
... every single witness, both prosecution and defense ... is lying. Or not telling the whole truth. The bastards know exactly what we have done and what we have not done. . . . But they have all told their own version of things as they would like them to be.17

Brown’s version of the law offers us two correlative qualities: Law is arbitrary because it is constituted by a systematic difference between truth and lies and not by its own individual, de jure, fullness. It is differential because law does not function from the compact force of meaning at the core of “truth” and “lies” but by the de facto network of oppositions that distinguish them and relate them to one another. The major consequence to be drawn from this double recognition, as Brown realizes, is that an objective truth, sufficient unto itself and available for all to see, can never be made present, either in the courtroom or elsewhere. Brown does not mean that there are not statements that we can judge “true” or “false.” He does suggest, however, that every attempt to specify “truth” forces us to define it in terms of an abstract entity which is only a cultural convention: All speak “their own version of things as they would like them to be.” From Brown’s point of view, truth and falsehood are not by-products of the direct adhesion between a word and some actual state of the world but functions of coincidences or discrepancies between multiple versions of the same event. This recognition is at once frightening and exhilarating for Brown, for it allows him to fashion, if only temporarily, the unity of his earlier schizophrenic desires, to counsel at law and to write “THE BOOK” of his life (RCP p. 14).

This reconciliation is possible because Brown comes to see living, like lawyering and authoring, as a play of stylistics. The play allows the fashioning of a formal context into a thematic content. And all three activities finally entail a play with “lies” so that “truth” might be revealed. But all also entail the possibility that in the play with form, the form itself can become an end and seduce one away from the hard-won recognition of its foundation upon arbitrary difference. The flow of judicial, as well as fictional, language points to no meaning other than its own pleasurable self-reproduction. In other words, legal and artistic truth depend not on a direct relation between a linguistic expression and a real object or state of affairs, but rather on the process of continuously displaced sign functions, which attempt to name the truth. The arbitrariness of truth statements, however, does not lead Brown either to nihilism or to a sense of powerlessness. On the contrary, his understanding of the arbitrary difference of truth statements permits him to establish meanings as cultural units materially accessible to the indi-
vidual will itself. He comes to realize that forms of law, political, philosophical, religious, and even artistic ideologies are products of the concrete social relations into which people enter at a particular time and place. As products, they can also be reproduced. Reality thus becomes a shocking montage of dissimilar qualities which the revolutionary artist can help transform. Buffalo Zeta Brown accepts this fact and uses it to convert chaos into a palatable anarchy of both forensic and poetic form.

Oscar Zeta Acosta’s novel, in tandem with his earlier *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), is probably the most concerted attempt by a Chicano novelist to create a truly “radical” art. But as we have seen in both Villarreal’s and Rivera’s novels, the general impulse of the Chicano novel leads it to examine root concepts. Thus its radical tendency can emerge in various ways.

With Ron Arias’s *The Road to Tamazunchale* (1975), the Chicano novel begins to exploit its privileged position at the juncture of the North and South American novel, and to perform the deconstruction of value in yet another way. Fausto, the hero of Arias’s novel, wanders imaginatively from the *barrios* of East Los Angeles to the rain forests and mountain clearings of Peru, as he attempts to track down the scene of his own death. In this novel, the realism of American literature is mixed with the “magical realism” of Latin American literature to create a super-natural Chicano realism. As Pablo Neruda has shown, the supernatural musings of the solitary poet at Macchu Picchu can have significant impact on the course of events in the mundane communal world. It is just such a synthesis of poetry and life that Arias seeks to effect through the figure of his dying protagonist, Fausto.

While the texts we have previously examined begin with a moment of spiritual decay, Arias’s novel begins with a dream of material decay:

Fausto lifted his left arm and examined the purple blotches.... He tugged at the largest one, near the wrist.... Slowly it began to rip, peeling from the muscle. No blood. The operation would be clean, like slipping off nylon hose.

A life of smog, poverty, and emptiness behind him, Fausto amuses himself now “waiting for the end” (*RT* p. 14), by metaphorically stripping the shreds of life from his skeletal frame. But of late, he has begun to hear again what he calls “the song of life ... somewhere beyond the house” (*RT* p. 14). Seized with a sudden “monstrous dread of dying,” Fausto begins the most unlikely quest man has ever undertaken. Pursued by the death of life, Fausto decides to find, in present real terms, a life within the bounds of death. But the life within death he seeks is not...
that of traditional Christian theology; Fausto’s life-in-death is to be one of his own making.

Once the old man sets out on his wanderings through the surrealized landscape of East L.A., accompanied only by Mario, a weird “goateed teenager . . . dressed all in black” (RT p. 25), we cannot be certain when “real” events end and hallucinatory Faustian or Quixotic ones begin. In fact, in scenes such as that of Fausto’s self-excoriation at the beginning of the novel, of his escape from the police by hiding and later emerging from an occupied coffin (chapter 3), of the appearance of a singular snow-cloud over Los Angeles (chapter 5), of the figurative rebirth of David, the drowned illegal alien (chapter 7), or of Fausto’s attempted wholesale smuggling of hundreds of “mojados” across the U.S. border (chapter 8), the normal lines between the real and the imaginary have totally disappeared. Fausto’s masque, “The Road to Tamazunchale,” which is enacted on the stage of his imagination in chapter 11, sums up the fact that what persists is a metaphor of reality.

In Fausto’s play-within-the-novel we are, as in Rivera’s novel, on the road in search of a lost or never fully present plenitude of being. “Tamazunchale” is a real Mexican village, but more significantly, it becomes a metaphor of the inaccessibility of that plenitude. In fact, the road to Tamazunchale may be, as one character tells us, the road to no place at all: “You see,” says the stage-director of Fausto’s play, “whenever things go bad, whenever we don’t like someone, whoever it is . . . we simply send them to Tamazunchale. We’ve never really seen this place, but it sounds better than saying the other, if you know what I mean” (RT p. 84). The director thus sees the name of Tamazunchale as signifying, without actually denoting, “the other” unnameable resting place. In contrast, Fausto’s personified self-presence, the “Tio” in the play, makes Tamazunchale significant in its own right. Responding to a child’s question, “What’s [Tamazunchale] like?”, Fausto’s alter ego claims:

Like any other place. Oh a few things are different . . . if you want them to be. . . . [If] you see a bird, you can talk to it, and it’ll talk back. . . . If you want to be an apple, think about it and you might be hanging from a tree. . . . You can be the sun. . . . You can be the stars. . . . No one dies in Tamazunchale . . . Tamazunchale is our home. Once we’re there, we’re free, we can be everything and everyone. If you want, you can even be nothing (RT pp. 89–90).

Before he too vanishes “between the horizon and the stars,” Fausto thus succeeds in doing something he has never before accomplished—he isolates a place of free and absolute self-presence. He does not need someone to die for him to bring him everlasting life because he is per-
fectly willing to die, and to live, his own death. Through the various transformations Fausto experiences in the moments before his death, he realizes that death is the ultimate mirror against which life is reflected and in the face of which life's only values exist. By sheer force of will, he manages to carve from the give and take between life and death, from the difference between being and nothing, a fleeting point of eternal space, unaffected by the decaying effects of time.

Thus, even in this most fantastic and abstract representation of Chicano life, we find the dialectics of differences at work, reevaluating, restructuring, and reinterpreting the nature of human experience. The novel's abstractions and ambiguous time relations are precisely intended to be read in situation, as neither fantasy nor reality, against the reader's urge to reduce their complexity. In fact, the complexity of the interaction between life and death as Fausto envisions it not only provides the novel's aesthetic base, but it also serves as a clue to its ideological direction. The novel's complexity demands a descent on the reader's part into what one writer has called "the materiality of language and the consent to time itself in the form of the sentence." The reader's descent into the materiality and temporality of the text is thus the concomitant of Fausto's production of life from out of the tightly woven fabric of life's interaction with death. By making us work through the concrete details of this interaction in the form and content of the text, Arias removes his work from the simple bounds of either reality or abstraction in isolation. Through the very act of reading, Arias forces the dialectical method upon us. Far from bearing no relation to the real world, Arias's text registers in its very structural and thematic forms the phenomenological fact of the density of contemporary life.

In contrast to this density, the simplicity of Fausto's death becomes an act of revolutionary art: it allows the ground of life, which is death, to become visible and manageable. And it makes the gap between subjective experience and the empirical world collapse in a moment of pure insight. Fausto's creation of "Tamazunchale" as the symbolic place of life-in-death forces upon us the view that reality is a changing, discontinuous process, produced by men and so transformable by them. It demonstrates how character and action can be different and need not be conceived of as historically fixed. Writing about how the storyteller "borrows his authority from death," Walter Benjamin notes that "The novel is significant . . . not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about." Seen as the
storyteller who can let the wick of his life be consumed by the flame of his story, Fausto thus joins the ranks of philosophers and poets who produce their own valid reality. In effect, Fausto transforms his death into the triumphant life of art, which is the difference between life and death.

III. History as Dialectics

The subversive edge of each of the novels we have examined effects destruction. But this destruction always implies the reconstruction of what has been undone at the site of its former presence. This reconstruction is not simply the ordering of the chaos of reality. The Chicano novel's ideology of difference emerges from a more complex unity of at least two formal elements: its paradoxical impulse toward revolutionary deconstruction and toward the production of meaning. A unified theory of the Chicano novel must be able to handle this duality. The general notion of "difference" I have proposed allows us to consider this dual tendency of the Chicano novel faithfully, for it uses a dialectical concept that determines the semantic "space of Chicano literature" as that intersection of the cultural-historical reality appropriated by the text to produce itself, and of the esthetic reality produced by the text. Opting for conflict rather than resolution, for difference over similarity, the Chicano novel is thus not so much the expression of this ideology of difference as it is a production of that ideology.

To be true to the principles of the text and the world which conditions it, criticism must, as a consequence, take the text's deconstructive pattern as its analytical model. We must remember, moreover, that a true dialectic necessarily involves us in negation. In a relationship between opposed terms, one annuls the other and lifts it up into a higher sphere of existence: development through opposition and conflict—neither Mexican, nor American, nor yet a naive Mexican-American, but something else. This something else is the differance of contemporary Chicano literature, which allows it to retain its special relation to both its Mexican and American contexts, while also letting it be marked by its relation to its own still unconditioned future. It should be clear that in pointing out this differential structure of the Chicano novel, I have not intended to reduce the significant differences among Chicano novels. The rich and varied profundity of these texts would frustrate any critic's attempt to squeeze them into any kind of reductive schema. What I have intended is to provide a theoretical context within which a practical literary history and criticism of the Chicano novel's difference might be elaborated.
As a genealogy of significant inter-textual relationships, such a history would not provide a tool for revealing immediate and essential truths, for the novels consistently show us that such truths are never unambiguously present, either in the text or elsewhere. It would provide us rather with a theory of the Chicano novel, with a framework of analysis, which, while remaining alive to the social and historical forces present in the artistic word, would allow the word to free itself from the enslaving myth of absolute and universal truths. It would place "truth," as does the Chicano novel itself, in brackets and consider the analytic process as an ongoing operation, rather than as a static event in historical time and cultural space. And it would permit, I believe, perhaps for the first time, the development of a truly "new" American "criticism." The primary value of this "new criticism" and its dialectics of difference is that it allows us to examine the formal and thematic dynamics within the literary text and to account for the nature of its special interaction with both the Mexican and American social and literary history that surrounds it with a clarity which other critical methods do not allow. In short, this prospective literary history situates Chicano criticism where it properly belongs, as part of the history of dialectics in general and of the dialectics of difference in particular. As Joseph Sommers suggested, to the extent that the Chicano novel accurately represents in rhetorical terms the dynamics and economy of social forces, it challenges the reader to become aware of the nature of the critical act. It is a challenge well worth accepting.

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Notes


2. Sommers, see especially pp. 55-62, where these distinctions are specified.

3. Sommers was correct in noting that, as of the time of his essay, semiological, structuralist, and post-structuralist methodologies were not yet being widely applied to Chicano texts. This is still the case. Recent studies, however, begin to apply these critical theories, if not wholly, at least in part. See, for instance,

4. The term “world-historical” event (or fact) is Marx’s and is defined in Sections 1 and 2 of The German Ideology (1888) as the process by which local individuals, facts, or events become empirically significant on a wider scale: “World-historical existence of individuals, i.e., existence of individuals which is directly linked up with world history.” I use the text edited by Robert C. Tucker in the anthology, The Marx-Engels Reader, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 161, 162, 163, and 172. See also Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism (London: Methuen, 1976), pp. 28–29.

5. The purported “awakening” of Chicano letters in the 1960s was, of course, not an absolute beginning. Various studies have shown recently the extent and quality of works by Mexican-American authors in non-traditional formats prior to the flowering which did take place in the early ‘60s. See, for instance, the essay by Raymund Paredes, “The Evolution of Chicano Literature.” See also, Tomás Rivera’s discussion of the importance of Mexican-American newspapers of the nineteenth century, “Into the Labyrinth: The Chicano in Literature,” in New Voices in Literature: The Mexican American. A Symposium (Edinburg, Texas: Department of English, Pan American University, 1971); Doris Meyer’s study of a rediscovered nineteenth century Mexican-American novelist, “Felipe Maximiliano Chacón: A Forgotten Mexican American Author,” New Directions in Chicano Scholarship, pp. 111–126; and Luis Leal’s essay on the early interactions between Mexican and Mexican-American literature, “Mexican American Literature: A Historical Perspective,” Revista Chicana-Riqueña 1 (Spring 1973), pp. 32–44. The question of “origins” is itself an important issue in contemporary critical theory.


A THEORY OF THE CHICANO NOVEL


10. See Robert Tucker’s “Introduction” to his Marx-Engels Reader, pp. xix-xxxviii, for a discussion of Marx’s development of a “transformational criticism” from Hegel’s theory of history.


14. The phrase is of course Harold Bloom’s in The Anxiety of Influence (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973); it refers to the intertextual debts incurred and reissued among “weak” and “strong” poets.


20. The “fantastic” quality of Arias’s novel has led some readers to ignore its substantial critique of both Mexican and American ideologies of death. See, for instance, the strident misreading and false question posed by Mariana Marin in “The Road to Tamazunchale: Fantasy or Reality?” *De colores*, Vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 34–38. Bernice Zamora offers a more perceptive reading of the novel in her forthcoming review essay in *Mester*.


23. The pattern I have been describing is also evident, in different ways, in other major Chicano novels. A complete history would specify how Raymond Barrio’s *The Plum, Plum Pickers*; Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*; Miguel Menédez’s *Peregrinos de Aztlán*; Alejandro Morales’s *Caras viejas, vinos nuevos*; and Rolando Hinojosa’s *Estampas del Valle*, and *Semblanzas y generaciones* adhere to the structure of difference.


25. Sommers, p. 62: “The role of the critic is to challenge both writer and reader to question the text for meaning and values (which are inseparable from its formal disposition), and to situate this meaning and these values in a broad cultural framework of social and historical analysis.” The status of the concepts “meaning” and “values” are of course also implicated in the analysis.