Ethnicity, Ethics, and Latino Aesthetics

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But now one day Bellerophon too
Incurred the gods' wrath—and alone he moped
On Aleian plain, eating his heart out,
Shunning the beaten track of men.

Homer, The Iliad

Wandering homeless, desolate, speaking only to the wind and his self, Bellerophon comes down to us as the image of man in perpetual exile. He haunts the very heart of Western philosophy. The melancholic thinker, meditating on his own fate and that of his now alienated companions, is an image that appears in the writings of René Descartes, Walter Benjamin, and Julia Kristeva. Bellerophon as a figure of perpetual homelessness hovers in the shadows of Georg Lukács’s first—arguably most nuanced—work, The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature (1920). Writing during World War I, Lukács meditates on the fate of civilization come armistice. In his preface, he recalls thinking during those dark hours of 1915 that Russian tsarism might fall and the West might defeat Germany. “But then,” he writes, “the question arose: who was to save us from Western civilisation?” (11).

This question, raised at the onset of the twentieth century, is still asked now at the cusp of the twenty-first. The last half-century has seen the legacy of European and American imperialism come to fruition. Both the intensified battles of anticolonialism and the intense struggle over unequal development wrought by modernization form a part of this legacy. The question Lukács posed to himself in 1915 proves yet a pressing one. Today, however, the question is most often asked by the offspring of Western civilization’s past: migrants and immigrants, resident aliens and illegal aliens, the diasporic and the exiled, the minority identified
and the ethnically marked. The ringing question “who is to save us from Western civilization?” sounds still and resonates with the vexed and difficult problematic sometimes termed “identity politics.”

This problematic is marked out by the root of the term “ethnic,” deriving from the Greek ethnos, denoting nation or group, and ethnikos, denoting national or foreign. The distinction between “us” and “them” is already inscribed in the very term of ethnicity. The contradictory nature of the term is teased out by Werner Sollors in his work Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture (1986): “[T]he very assertion of the ethnic dimensions of American culture can be understood as part of the rites and rituals of this land, as an expression of a persistent conflict between consent and descent in America” (15). The naming of an ethnic self is implicated in a twin desire. One consents to a constructed self-identification, the other relies on a claim to some biological or cultural descent. Sollers’s discussion of ethnicity as a cultural construct is powerful in its anti-essentialist analysis. However, as Ramón Saldívar has noted, Sollers’s discussion of consensus and dissensus does “not apply to those outside the ruling group or their educational, cultural, and political state apparatuses: working-class people, people of color, gays and lesbians, women” (Chicano 216). The problem with naming a fully inclusive public space—even a discursive one—is ever vexed.

Discussions of Chicano identity and identification are marked by this difficulty. In naming difference and sameness simultaneously, the nature of Chicano identity is perpetually problematized. Out of this turmoil, there is a productive result.

These discussions tend to invoke an ethical dimension, focusing on the ethos of the ethnos, making ethics central to the deployment of ethnic labels. In his essay “Towards a Chicano Poetics: The Making of the Chicano Subject, 1969–1982” (1986), José Saldívar points to the corrido, the border ballad as the poetic form most influential in the development of Chicano poetry. Anticipating José Limón’s 1992 discussion of Chicano poetry in Mexican Ballads, Chicano Poems: History and Influence in Mexican-American Social Poetry, José Saldívar argues that the aesthetic form of the poem draws up the ethical dimensions of Chicano cultural production: “The nature of the corrido as form and content is social and revolutionary, drawing heavily on the deepest levels of what Fredric Jameson has called ‘the political unconscious,’ defining relationships between temporalities and ultimates. The corrido is sung by Chicanos who live throughout the Southwestern United States. The corrido’s function is to recon-
cile individual experience into a collective identity” (12). This ethical element of Chicano expressive culture, this concern for the social dimension of the aesthetic, has been a central concern in the development of Chicano critical history.

In his work on Chicano narrative, Ramón Saldívar has sought to spin out some of the same theoretical and critical concerns that his brother elucidates about poetry. In the introduction to *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (1990), he asserts that Chicano literature “presents a serious challenge to the established ways of defining the canons of both the theory and the practice of literature and its criticism as these have developed in the Anglo-American world” (3). Two drives propel Chicano literature. On one hand, an oppositional stance emerges, an opposition framed in terms of hegemonic and counterhegemonic evaluative, critical, and analytical forms. In contrast to this oppositional impetus, on the other hand, Ramón Saldívar foregrounds the processes by which notions of community and identification are forged via cultural objects: “[T]hese imaginary and symbolic productions serve both a unifying communal function as well as an oppositional and differentiating end” (*Chicano* 4). As with the corrido, the novel serves to formulate a critical consciousness while it forges an imaginary basis of community. The novel helps articulate an ethos vis-à-vis issues of cultural inclusion, social equality, and political resistance and seeks to develop that ethos within an ever-evolving community.

This community is forged around dynamics of identification and self-identification that can, of course, prove multiple. In “Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective” (1988), Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has argued for the necessary relationship and self-identification between a Chicana feminist critic and a larger imagined community based not just on ethnicity but on gender, political commitment, and social standing. The Chicana feminist critic “is a Chicana-identified critic, alert to the relationships between her work and the political situation of all Chicanas. The exclusion of Chicanas from literary authority is intimately linked to the exclusion of Chicanas from other kinds of power monopolized by privileged white males. Their struggle to appropriate the ‘I’ of literary discourse relates to their struggle for empowerment in the economic, social and political spheres” (139). The numerous negotiations and difficulties of maintaining a critical position while assuming a self-simultaneity with a Chicana community are undoubtedly intricate. Yet in this articulation of a critical-political project, Yarbro-Bejarano mirrors some of the same ethical-political concerns voiced by the Saldívars.
These concerns about the relationship between ethnic and gender identification, aesthetic creation, and ethical articulation become part and parcel of the critical vocabulary deployed in analyses of Chicano culture. The ethos of this cultural identification is enmeshed in a stance of oppositionality. Yet this emphasis tends to erase what should be a central contradiction: opposition to hegemonic thought is implicated in the very forms of thought it opposes. If we consider the Chicano novel, its aesthetic incorporates a political-social oppositionality. Simultaneously, it employs that most alienated art form native to Western civilization: the modern novel. There is, then, an interesting and inescapable engagement between oppositionality to Western thought and an identification with Western traditions evident in the very meat, body, and bones of the Chicano novel.

The oppositionality of Chicano expressive culture is always mediated through discourses about Latino identity in the US. The ways "Latinoness"—Latinidad—is discussed shape the contours of any discussion of Latino or Chicano identity within a postcolonial framework of discursive and political resistance. The contradictions within the discourse of Latinidad make present the ambivalent qualities of the Chicano novel. This is a productive ambivalence, one which illustrates the ways the Chicano novel arises from and against the modern Western world.

1. Our Present Danger

In order to consider the oppositional quality of Chicano identification, it is important to consider the discourses developing around notions of Latinidad—Latino identity—both within and without academic discussions. There is, I would argue, an increasing tendency to enclose discussions of Latinidad within well-established patterns of national identity. Bonnie Honig, for one, has noted the contradictory results of a xenophilic embrace of foreigners in response to a renewed US anti-immigrant sentiment. She offers the observation that this embrace has led to a renewed faith in the myth of an immigrant America. This, she argues, "draws on and shores up the popular exceptionalist belief that America is a distinctively consent-based regime, founded on choice rather than inheritance, on civic rather than ethnicities. The exceptionalists’ America is anchored by rational, voluntarist faith in a creed, not by ascriptive bloodlines; by individualism, not organicism; by mobility, not landedness. The people who live here are people who once chose to come here, and, in this, America is supposedly unique. In short,
the exceptionalist account normatively privileges one particular trajectory to citizenship: from immigrant to ethnic to citizen" (2). The condition of Chicano identification within a larger discourse of immigration is, of course, complicated by ingrained patterns of migration and immigration too numerous to consider here. Significant to our concerns, however, are ingrained patterns of response—the discursive habits that help shape the contours of Chicano identification—prevalent in the US.

The contested and complicated histories of the Americas have elicited the formation of a signifier to identify the misplaced (or displaced) children of Latin America in the US: Latino. This term—under which the more specific sign "Chicano" is often situated—is meant to signal a sense of self and place within a history of US expansion and intervention. "Latino" (and more problematically "Hispanic") can be a signifier full of neither sound nor fury and certainly signifying nothing. Unless one takes into account particular economic concerns, social or political contexts, the specificity of region and locale, the multiple historical conditions that have brought us to this place, this time, Latino may signify nothing more than a well-rehearsed but hollow gesture of inclusion.

The word "Latino" is sometimes invoked to help name a subjectivity formed via an uneven history of displacement and dispossession. From this perspective, Chicano identification finds an affinity with Latinidad. Ethnic identification plays into the ways Latinos engage with regimes of power, an engagement overwritten with racialized and/or nationalist identities. The historical forces of slavery and colonization in which Latino ancestors played both protagonist and victim form a far horizon in various engagements with power. More immediately, the numerous positions within the heterogeneous contours of current US political and social life form a nearer horizon for most Latinos. These horizons of power, both near and far, political and historical, impinge on ways Latinos—as individuals or as a group, as subjectivities or constituencies—can assert an ethnic identity.

One contour of power very much at work within a hegemonic, normalizing discourse of national citizenship via the narrative of immigration is to view Latinidad as a form of benign hyphenation. The term "Hispanic" all too often serves at best as a signifier evoking flavor and spice, a nomination that suggests some quaint concern with extended families and coy, sometimes leering evocations of coitus, climax, and sexual heat. At moments, the term "Latino" can be configured in even more banal terms.
Geoffrey Fox, in a rather pedestrian study titled *Hispanic Nation: Culture, Politics, and the Constructing of Identity* (1996), situates Latinos within a familiar paradigm of immigration and assimilation: "Being a public, even ostentatious Hispanic is not so different from wearing a button saying ‘Kiss me—I'm Italian' or ‘Erin go Bragh!' These are all ways of saying, Yes, I'm an American, and part of being American is having the freedom to be a little different!" (240). His position is emblematic of those that proffer an assimilationist model at once binaristic, simplistic, and politically disingenuous. Ultimately, it is an intellectually bankrupt position, pointing as it does toward a simple teleology: “Declaring oneself ‘Hispanic’ is a step back from allegiance to Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, or some other land and a step toward joining America” (241). Under erasure in this and other discussions of immigration as part and parcel of American incorporation is the critical function the signifier “America” can play.

The invocation of “America” within a Latino context is in some manner nearly always ironic. From José Martí’s *Nuestra América* (1891) to Rubén Blades’s *Buscando América* (1983), the terms “America” and “American” signify a sense of a transnational (anticolonial or anti-imperial) identity. Their use within a Latino context can form a resistant reclamation of place and identity. At the same time, as Fox’s discussion attests, it is clear the term “American” too often signifies an unproblematic evocation of US national identity. Similarly, then, the notions of a Latino culture or a Hispanic nation may too easily erase too many differences and discontinuities.

The strength and allure of the term “Latino” is not its ability to encompass a variety of shared experiences and conditions, or similar economic, political, and social situations under the rubric of a shared linguistic or cultural background. Indeed, these notions of shared language (whether Spanish or Caló or Spanglish) and shared culture (celebrating *Los Mago Reyes* or the ability to dance salsa) only produce a superficial sense of collectivity or alienation, anxiety or affirmation, among potential Latinos. Nor is the term simply an instrumental one permitting greater access to the benefits of political and economic power just awaiting any Hispanic eager enough and willing enough to drop the facade of ethnic difference and oppositionality.

When discussing the ethnic Hispanic as a position of shared cultural identity, inevitable questions arise: what shared values or beliefs do Latinos hold? Do we share, as Ilan Stavans suggests, a repertoire of certain symbols as collective strategies by which
“we organize and make sense of our experience” (21)? Do we regard our geographies as a form of a borderland in which we represent a diaspora north of the Rio Bravo? Are Latinos in search of some authentic identity that is not European and not Anglo-American? Are Latinos the ultimate manifestation of a Heideggerian anxiety of being, suffering a melancholic loss like that so brilliantly critiqued by Roger Bartra in *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character* (1992)?

All these conceptualizations do some violence to history. The experience of immigrants to the US from Latin America as from elsewhere is always colored by the quantity of money they carry, the quality of their educational experiences, and the color of their eyes, hair, and skin. These conditions arise from very specific social histories. So, too, for Latinos born and/or raised in this country, identity issues prove equally complex.

What of a subjectivity that is forever cast as neither “American” nor Latin American? In *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (1995), Suzanne Oboler observes that when US Latinos “go to their parents’ countries in Latin America, although they often find some commonalities in the cultural and religious traditions as well as in the family stories they might share with relatives abroad, they also encounter significant cultural and linguistic gaps, particularly in the public sphere, between their lived experience in the United States and that of their parents’ respective homeland populations” (168). More to the point, given the conflation of race and nationality in this country, Latinos are assigned a minority, stigmatized position, one not transformed by dreams of perpetually floating identities, cosmic justice, or even the triumph of demographics.

Latinos as a group represent the inheritors of an imperial legacy, situated unequally and simultaneously within the US nation-state and an economically, politically ruptured continent. In the essay “Chicano Ethnicity, Cultural Hybridity, the Mestizo Voice” (1998), I discuss the ways in which Chicana/o writers enunciate a critical subjectivity not only under the rubric Latino or Chicano but also under the equally contentious terms “mestizo” and “mestiza.” These terms are shot through with inconsistencies and problems. Yet they also make present a critical sensibility, foregrounding human bodies as the present representation of a contentious and vexed history. Here, these terms may help bridge concerns and considerations associated with Chicano critical discourse and other international discussions of postcolonial criticism. At the same time, the evocation of racial mixture—*mestiza*—may serve to distinguish some of the critical elements
developed within Chicano cultural discourses from the depoliticizing conceptualizations of Latinidad discussed above.

2. Postcolonial Mestizaje

While part of an incredibly complicated racial discourse that varies by place, nation, and time, the term mestizo/mestiza does serve to evoke the ways phenotypes, family histories, and paradoxical self-identifications serve to testify about a history marked by slavery and genocide, by discrimination and hatred, by love and tolerance, and by hope and (dis)illusion. At its best, critical mestizaje takes into consideration the pressing significance of the past. “To be sure,” the Marxist mystic Benjamin observes, “only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment he has lived becomes a citation à l'ordre du jour [a call to the day’s agenda]—and that day is Judgment Day” (254). Come apocalypse, all meaning becomes clear, the significance of all experience revealed. Obviously, such a clarity of meaning is not made present to any ethnic group. Yet the evocation of Chicano and Latino identities does suggest a recognition of an imperial past incessantly manifesting itself in an uneven present.

Mestizaje can serve as a strategic identity, an image of identification, always an ever-receding position of anti-ideological subjectivity. Mestizaje does not offer Latino identity a metonym for a redeemed mankind receiving the fullness of its past. It does offer, however—in the bits and snippets of stories, jokes, and legends told around coffee cups and kitchen tables—the material of an unauthorized, often unrecognized, but nonetheless very real history. This history is one of struggle and survival, of endurance and triumph, a story of suffering and defeat told with “courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude”—those qualities Benjamin notes that bring to our lives refinement and spirituality (255).

This history, in short, manifests itself through forms of storytelling first made familiar in the comfort (or discomfort) of home, storytelling made unfamiliar (but authorized) within academic spaces under the category of postcolonial criticism. Thus an emphasis upon mestizaje serves to highlight the historical conditions of identity. Discussions of Latino identity generally, and Chicano identity specifically, form a direct and necessary dialogue with notions of postcoloniality. Amy Kaplan, for one, has noted that “Chicano studies has brought an international
perspective to American studies in part by reconceiving the concept of ethnicity (traditionally treated as a self-enclosed entity) through the theory and politics of postcoloniality" (17). In order to unravel this connection and further dissolve the self-enclosure of ethnic identification, we may consider the work undertaken by Homi Bhabha on postcoloniality and postmodernism. In considering the critical position of postcoloniality vis-à-vis modernity and its constitutive discourses of progress and inclusion, Bhabha argues:

Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of "minorities" within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic "normality" to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the "rationalizations" of modernity. (171)

Bhabha's observation highlights the idea that cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination serve to reveal the darkness at the heart of the imperial project. Mestizo bodies stand as dark manifestations of imperialism's own contradictory tack. Through the mestizo body, power—in terms of cultural capital, in terms of social control, in terms of political agency—crosses with ever-present discourses creating and delimiting identity. Racial identity, sexual activity, gender formation, class affiliation, linguistic ability, economic mobility, national citizenship, and political engagement are all delineated by the bodies that move through their networks of signification. These discourses are instrumental in ensuring that power gets distributed and imposed unequally.

As a response to these discourses, some carry forward stories told by parents and grandparents, stories of other places and other times, other customs and other tastes. These stories construct memories of traditional practices and beliefs that help to create a sense of time not apportioned by the clock but, rather,
recollected by the calendar. This connection to the past is not simple, and it is seldom comforting.

3. Custom and Culture

In order to explain our current postcolonial condition, Bhabha—relying on deconstructive rhetorical moves—under-scores the importance of culture’s relation to the historic past. Cultures created and recreated by people of color in the US serve to revalue the “authority of customary, traditional practices . . . as a form of anteriority—a before that has no a priori(ty)—whose causality is effective because it returns to displace the present, to make it disjunctive” (177). The present is disrupted by the past through the evocation of customary practices, traditional knowledges, forms of knowing and speaking, and being authorized within prior cultural spaces of ancestry.

These customary, traditional practices cannot, of course, be allowed to become staid symbols of negation and outworn contrivances, what in his essay on national culture Frantz Fanon calls “mummified fragments.” Fanon insists: “Culture has never the translucidity of custom; it abhors all simplification. In its essence it is opposed to custom, for custom is always the deterioration of culture” (224). Fanon draws a distinction between two understandings of culture: one in which custom configures culture as epistemology, and one in which custom serves to make culture a form of enunciation.

When culture is viewed as epistemology, custom possesses a function and an intention in which the fulfillment of customary practice becomes the reflection of some perceived value or tradition. That is, there exists an empirical referent or object that custom ostensibly makes present in its observance. When the intellectual, the cultural critic, evokes that stock of particularisms called “the customs of his people”—gifts placed in the shoes of little children on the Day of the Magi, altars built to Frida Kahlo, offerings made on the Dia de los Muertos—he or she may wish to embody the people but does little more than “catch hold of their outer garments,” as Fanon puts it (224). Culture becomes a static depository of knowledge due, in large part, to what Bhabha observes about the epistemological: epistemologies are “locked into the hermeneutic circle, in the description of cultural elements as they tend towards a totality” (177). Culture as epistemology ostensibly moves one toward a totality—of self, of culture, of tradition, of oppositional praxis, and of identity politics.
By contrast, culture as enunciation, the form of culture Fanon opposes to custom, represents a more dialogic process that, as Bhabha a bit optimistically explains, “attempts to track displacements and realignments that are the effects of cultural antagonisms and articulations—subverting the rationale of the hegemonic moment and relocating alternative, hybrid sites of cultural negotiation” (178). Culture from this view helps articulate the discontinuities produced by a heritage of colonialism. It simultaneously calls up and calls into question an understanding of unauthorized and devalued practices, beliefs, and knowledges.

To view culture as enunciative is to emphasize the constitutive and productive: “[It] opens up possibilities for other ‘times’ of cultural meaning (retroactive, prefigurative) and other narrative spaces (fantasmic, metaphorical). My purpose in specifying the enunciative present in the articulation of culture is to provide a process by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience” (Bhabha 178). Bhabha calls on the enunciative, the performative, as the mode that best serves the postcolonial in constructing an inventive and responsive cultural space. He values those critics who most clearly focus on the temporality of the enunciatory present in minority writing. Within the context of sociopolitical empowerment broadly understood, culture as a form of becoming emphasizes the dynamic and fluid over the static and formalized. This is why the enunciative stands in contradistinction to the epistemological.

Culture in a postcolonial register is, as discussed by Bhabha and Fanon, anti-ideological. In understanding culture as enunciative, as a dialogic process, one that may involve the given elements of folkloric and elitist culture, that may engage the devalued and the fetishized, there comes into view, in the words of Fanon, “the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (233). Fanon, of course, seeks to describe these people keeping themselves in existence as the constituency of a nation. Others may think in terms of racial or ethnic, linguistic or tribal, affiliations.

If we take seriously Fanon’s notion of the intellectual as one who shakes the people, we may find—as Latinos and/or Americans—a position by which to both interrogate and affirm the cultural formations that come down to us. These forms of culture are multiple, conflicted, and overwritten by history, just as we are overwritten by history in our various positions as the inheritors of the colonizer and colonized, the empowered and disempowered, the central and marginalized, the racial and not. In this
sense, postcolonial culture, the culture we seek to create and discuss in these racialized American times, is enunciative, just as the articulation of Latino subjectivity within a postcolonial register is enunciative, engaged with the creation of something not already entirely given.

In questioning notions of Latinidad that emphasize an easy and playful sense of multiplicity and proliferation—and rejecting uncritical acceptance of unequal political-economic acquiescence—I do not mean to dismiss the actual or potential uses of the term as a strategic one within cultural, political, economic, and educational enterprises. Movement is possible under the auspices of this nation’s “Hispanic Caucus” and economic gains can be traced between the covers of Hispanic Business. However, the contradictions of our lived subjectivities are not resolved by recourse to Latinidad as a form of epistemology.

The challenging facet in employing a discourse of Latinidad is—as with postcolonial discourses—to confound simplistic binaries: native and foreign, American and Latin, home and exile, self and other. Most cogently, the term “Latino” helps to locate a critique of such supposed dichotomies as the local opposed to the global, the regional to the universal. The comparative work that has most sought to understand the particularities of that evasive term “Latino identity” has been that most grounded. Only in specific localities do the contradictions of that term make themselves evident and play themselves out. That is, Latino studies as a form of postcolonial thought makes itself anti-ideological and highlights the enunciative.

What the term “Latino” means to any individual or group will always be constrained by the context in which it is evoked. There is no signification without context. And so to employ the terms Hispanic, Latino, and Chicano as signifiers of ethnic otherness (no matter how fluidly or dynamically conceived) empties them of agency and historical meaning.

4. Ethics and Aesthetics

This evacuation is not inevitable. In The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (1993), Paul Gilroy notes that analyzing contemporary forms of black expressive culture involves struggling with one problem in particular: “How are we to think critically about artistic products and aesthetic codes which, though they may be traceable back to one distinct location, have been changed whether by the passage of time or by their displacement, relocation, or dissemination through net-
works of communication and cultural exchange?” (80). This question resonates with considerations of the Chicano novel as it is written out of, responding to, and rejecting many dimensions of modernity.

Arguably, the means by which Chicano—and to a greater extent Latino—identity has been given a cultural voice for a broad audience has been via the novel and short story. While some might point toward music as the means by which Latino expression has been made most present in US cultural consciousness, the novel is where issues of Latino identity and identity formation have formed a central concern in a way music (for all its appeal, widespread distribution, and commercial success) has not. Be it the desolate and difficult images offered by Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), the deceptively playful narratives presented in Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991), Julia Alvarez’s consideration of an economically privileged Dominican immigrant experience in *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), Oscar Hijuelos’s assertion of Cuban cultural and social presence in US society in *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), or the celebration and deformation of New Mexican folk beliefs in Ana Castillo’s *So Far from God* (1993), assertion, interrogation, and complication of numerous cultural identities inform the narrative and thematic concerns of Latino novels.

The uneven and conflicted enunciation of identity through the novel form proves to be supremely appropriate. The novel is, after all, the only literary genre that continually is born anew. In many ways, Latino novelists draw on the unique qualities of the genre, gaining critical purchase by playing on the open-ended development of the novel. Mikhail Bakhtin has famously observed: “[T]he novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted. The forces that define it as a genre are at work before our very eyes: the birth and development of the novel as a genre takes place in the full light of the historical day. The generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities” (3). Thus the performative quality of Latino enunciation comes to find a home within a genre that is constantly developing and recreating itself.

The novel’s development and transformation is due in part to its status as the expression par excellence of a modern sensibility. Bakhtin argues that the novel is comprised of “three basic characteristics that fundamentally distinguish the novel in principle from other genres: (1) its stylistic three-dimensionality,
which is linked with the multi-languaged consciousness realized in the novel; (2) the radical change it effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image; (3) the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness” (11). That is, Bakhtin suggests, the novel is shaped from a polyglossic condition that expands its stylistic dimensions (unlike other genres), makes the passage of time centrally significant (especially in terms of character and plot development), and emphasizes an engagement with the present (including contingency and uncertainty).

Significantly, Bakhtin associates the development of the novel with the entrance of Europe into an age of modernity. He asserts that only with the opening of European nations to multiple languages (and their ideological conditions) can the polyglossia and dialogism constitutive of the novel develop. The three basic characteristics of the novel “are all organically interrelated and have all been powerfully affected by a very specific rupture in the history of European civilization: its emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships. A multitude of different languages, cultures and times became available to Europe, and this became a decisive factor in its life and thought” (11). Quite simply, he locates the novel's characteristics within the multinational and multicultural material history of modern Europe.

More than a simple periodizing, Bakhtin's argument implicates the aesthetics of the novel in the social, historical, and cultural networks of modernity as they produce and deflect meaning. In his discussion of modern literature, Octavio Paz emphasizes the negating capacity of modernity: “Since its birth, modernity has been a critical passion; insofar as it is both criticism and passion, it is a double negation as much of Classical geometries as of Baroque labyrinths. A dizzy passion, for its culmination is the negation of itself; modernity is a sort of creative self-destruction” (3). The novel, in its endless dialogism, its reliance on contingency, its quest for place and meaning—a sense of home in an age of alienation—becomes, then, the genre most fitting the modern age. Or, as Lukács puts it, “The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88).

Lukács explains in his preface to *The Theory of the Novel* that he was coping during the dark and devastating days of World War I with the search “for a general dialectic of literary genres that was based upon the essential nature of aesthetic cate-
gories and literary forms, and aspiring to a more intimate connection between category and history” than he found available in Hegel’s historicizing of aesthetic categories (16). For Georg Hegel, art is problematic at the point that historical reality becomes nonproblematic, when the world spirit has attained itself in both thought and social praxis. For Lukács, art presents us with problems precisely as “the mirror-image of a world gone out of joint” (17). The form of the novel itself is that “mirroring” which presents the disjuncture between the ideal and the real, the imaginary and the quotidian. Within a Latino context, this disjuncture manifests itself along numerous lines of rupture having to do with ethnic identity, affirmation and interrogation of tradition, the assertion of citizenship, an imposition of “alienness,” and the vagaries and delimitation of class identity all negotiated through the creative self-destruction of the novel form.

As his critics note, Lukács’s great contribution to understanding the novel are twofold: his insistence that the novel is composed by a language of irony and his observation that the idea of time forms a crucial organizing principle. The discontinuity between the ideal and the real, the abstractly perfect and the all-to-real imperfect, and the poetic and the prosaic is made evident in the novel through its language. The novel is ironic precisely as it reveals its awareness (in both theme and form) that perfection can be imagined but not realized. Lucien Goldmann takes up this line of thinking in his attempt to provide a sociology of the novel, suggesting: “[T]he novel has a dialectical nature in so far as it derives specifically, on the one hand, from the fundamental community of the hero and of the world presupposed by all epic forms and, on the other hand, from their insurmountable rupture; the community of the hero and of the world resulting from the fact that they are both degraded in relation to authentic values, the opposition resulting from the difference of nature between each of these two degradations” (2). The novel oscillates between poles of belonging and alienation, wholeness and fragmentation.

Paul de Man has argued that “Lukács’s originality resides in his use of irony as a structural category.” As such, “The ironic language of the novel mediates between experience and desire, and unites ideal and real within the complex paradox of the form” (56). The brilliance of the novel, in de Man’s reading of Lukács, is found in its complicated and always-evolving form, one that struggles with the relation between the ideal and the real rather than its thematic content as a mirror of reality.
5. Ironizing History

On one side, then, the novel is the only literary genre continually born anew. It is the appropriate expression of a new historical subjectivity like the Latino or the Chicano. On the other side, the novel is born in an age of modernity that has led to colonization, enslavement, exploitation, and exile, a history that has made Latino enunciation so difficult. The novel is born simultaneously with the modernity that sought out lands and peoples for economic and ideological expansion and gain. Out of this productive irony emerges the very form of the Latino novel as an aesthetic expression that calls up—via the alienated form of the modern epic—elements of a lost and ill-remembered age. Tey Diana Rebolledo is representative of critics who note that the loss of the past is, for example, a dominant motif in the Chicano novel: “The mythology of the past takes place spatially and emotionally: the past acquires enhanced meaning. These images contrast sharply with the stresses and ambiguity of today. The past then must be recorded to safeguard it, to preserve it, to re-enact it. The retelling of the text, the documenting of tradition, the creation of a myth in time past creates the history of the self, modifying and expanding it” (153). In part, this past is lost because of the demands of modernity economically, technologically, and philosophically. Modernity turns against the past, as Paz has noted, in a logic of creative self-destruction.

As this concern for the lost past in the Chicano novel makes evident, the novel as a modern epic is marked by disjuncture and irony, by the schism between the world as it should be and the fallen world as it makes itself painfully clear. “The utopian longing of the soul is a legitimate desire,” writes Lukács, “worthy of being the centre of a world, only if it is absolutely incapable of being satisfied in the present intellectual state of man, that is to say incapable of being satisfied in any world that can be imagined and given form, whether past, present or mythical” (115). This sentiment resonates with the singular sense of loss Rebolledo locates in Chicano novels, a loss due to the pervasive and persistent logic that bore the age of modernity and, with it, the novel form.

Chicano and other Latino writers highlight the ways in which representations of ethnic-racial subjectivities are shot through with dreams of an integral self incapable of being satisfied. These dreams are spun from the shards and remnants of a historical condition arising from the very contradictions of modernity. Their work demonstrates the legitimacy of various utopian longings of the soul. Often these longings manifest them-
selves in the narrative paths particular characters follow—the search for community, the dream of a fulfilled life free from the constraints of poverty, the development of effective political agency, the acquisition of love and acceptance by others, the recuperation of family unity, the recovery of a lost past, and the incorporation into a new social order. More significantly, the narrative forms that these authors employ manifest a profound rupture between the desired and the present.

At times this rupture is so great that the novel at the thematic level can only mark failure and dissolution. Yet at the linguistic level, a sense of struggle makes itself manifest. The ironizing quality of the novel problematizes the issue of linguistic expression: “A totality that can be simply accepted is no longer given to the forms of art . . . they must show polemically the impossibility of achieving their necessary object and the inner nullity of their own means. And in this case they carry the fragmentary nature of the world’s structure into the world of forms” (Lukács 38–39). Artistic narratives (narratives in toto, our postmodern sensibilities inform us) fail to grasp fully, to control adequately, and to maintain the world they describe.

This ironizing is the primary characteristic of the novel and one on which Latino fiction, more specifically Chicano fiction, capitalizes. A repeated characteristic of Chicano narratives is their reliance on stories that lie outside a normative Euro-American literary tradition. The familial and folkloric stories; the pre-Columbian, indigenous, African literary forms; the stories of migration and immigration; the numerous conjoined but distinctly disjointed national cultural identities; and linguistic distinctions—all these underscore the inner nullity of Chicano narrative. More compellingly, Chicano novels employ the very art form of alienated modernity in order to articulate the alienation modernity has wrought by incorporating and dialogizing the polyglossic condition of colonialism and postcolonialism, of slavery, of sexual violence, of genocide, and of economic exploitation and exclusion. This polyglossia reveals, too, the conflicted position of Chicano subjects who descend from both the slaveholders and the enslaved, the exploited and the exploiter, the cacique and the peon, the rapist and the violated. The multilingual elasticity of the novel—born in the heat of modern European development—comes to form an important, perhaps dominant, expressive means of giving name to the rupture that informs Chicano enunciation.

A concern with rupture is, of course, part and parcel of a poststructural concern with the impossibility of meaning. Poststructuralists remind us that the nostalgia for organic unity un-
derpins Western metaphysics as a whole. Thus the crisis of meaning made present via poststructural thought is a manifestation of the crisis of Western metaphysical thought. This sense of crisis has made itself present in the critical concerns of Chicano culture. In “A Dialectic of Difference: Towards a Theory of the Chicano Novel” (1979), an early version of the concerns he addresses more fully in Chicano Narrative, Ramón Saldivar reveals the influence that Derridean thought has had on his conceptions of narrative. He argues that the novel is sustained between a “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. . . . 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” (88). Situated at a point of rupture—historically, aesthetically, socially, and linguistically—the Chicano novel is produced as the result of and in response to the historical contradictions that mark the development of modernity.

In part, then, the Chicano novel serves as a reminder of a past that is ever present, reconsidered, and revisioned. This past is not one that simply adds distinct character or marks a benign difference. Rather, it works to highlight that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule. Benjamin, conscious of this rule, observed that fascism “thought fit to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength.” He adds to this seemingly odd statement: “This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren” (260). The same is true today for Chicanos and Latinos in the US.

Latinos are constantly told that demographically they are the future of this country, even as many are systematically denied that future. Latinos are promised that as a group they, somehow, will serve as redeemers of future generations. But this cuts the sinews of their greatest strength. And that strength lies in the past, in the specific lessons and particular mistakes one’s ancestors—subjects of imperialism, genocide, and conquest—have left behind. These lessons reside in the cultural forms of the Americas reconfigured by the passage of time and by their displacement, relocation, and dissemination through other networks of communication and cultural exchange.
Through the novel, alienation and irony are recharged with signification due to the disembodied voices of the past speaking through other artistic forms. The Latino novel, then, gives voice in its very form to the uneven development and disadvantaged histories of nations, races, communities, and peoples. It makes anew a world haunted by the persistent question asked by writers marked as Others, as beings both within and without the West: who is to save us from Western civilization? This question, posed by civilization's Others, contests the relationship of otherness. The question serves to make the West strange, to question the bases of modern civilization, and to make of the West an Other at once strange and familiar. The question of salvation—problematic, ironized, imagined, and contested in the novel—comes to us via the estranged aesthetic forms developed by Western civilization and its Others. As the inheritors of a history marked by the brutality of modernity, Chicano and Latino writers call on and supplement the artistic forms of modernity in order to imagine not salvation, but resistance.

Works Cited


