Early Signs of “Third Spaces:”
Creative Deconstructive Processes and Hybridization in Chicano Literature

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the extent to which selected Chicano authors have emphasized the crucial need for cultural hybridity. Although the current positive notion of hybridity was not yet available to these early writers nor was the process of deconstruction, each in their own creative ways challenges the general sentiment of their time and stresses the significance of embracing multiple cultural “Others” for the configuration of a Chicano/a identity. The central argument of this dissertation is that the respective novels redefine Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of cultural hybridity, which is rather static in the sense that it focuses on the formation of a hybrid identity based on one colonized and one colonizer. The Chicano novelists discussed in this dissertation, however, underline the pivotal role that both the first and second colonizer as well as the three resulting identities play within the contemporary Chicano/a community. The novels analyzed thus prove the need for a critical redefinition of the concept of hybridity in the context of postcolonial studies.
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**Introduction**

Recent discussions of postcolonial arts and identity politics have increasingly focused on the concept of hybridity, which in very general terms refers to “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.”¹ Since the 1980s various scholars, including Homi K. Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, Rafael Pérez-Torres, and Jorge Klor de Alva have explored the concept’s enabling potential in the context of (Chicano/a) identity formation. As the following chapters will show, this turn to a more positive connotation stands in stark contrast to hybridity’s derogatory implications during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to Monika Fludernik, hybridity was “negatively connoted as racial impurity.”² Scientific studies of anatomy were employed to argue that, for instance, Asians, Africans, and Indians were inferior to Europeans in terms of race, yet if one was racially mixed, this was worse than being racially inferior; hybridity was considered an ill mutation. However, as Robert J.C. Young argued, during the twentieth century hybridity came “to stand for the interrogative languages of minority cultures,” and cultural and racial differences came to “operate dialogically together, in a double-voiced, hybridized form of cultural politics.”³ In other words, hybridity gradually acquired positive connotations with regard to minority discourses on race and culture.

This dissertation will primarily focus on the positive development of hybridity as it manifests itself in three distinctive Chicano novels. Each of these novels represents and responds to the dominant identity paradigm of the time it was written. The first novel, *Pocho*, was written during the period of assimilation, when Anglo-Americans believed there existed “a unitary and unquestioned American way of life” to which minorities, like Chicanos/as, had

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to assimilate, in this way abandoning their bicultural / hybrid heritage. The second novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*, focuses on the Chicano Movement’s use of “strategic essentialism,” in which many Chicanos/as used their essentially hybrid identity to challenge Anglo-American domination. During the third period, as illustrated in *The Rain God: A Desert Tale*, the emphasis shifted toward a more inclusive notion of hybridity which replaced earlier forms of ethnic nationalism. The central argument of my dissertation shall be that all three authors employ the notion of cultural hybridity in order to demonstrate, in their own diverse ways, the damaging outcomes of cultural binaries like Anglo-American vs. Chicano/a or Catholic vs. Protestant. More importantly, I shall argue that the novels under discussion display a crucial need for acknowledging and negotiating forms of cultural hybridization at a time when the postcolonial theory concepts of hybridity, deconstruction and “Third Space” were not yet widely discussed. In this sense one can say that each author creates a particular form of proto-hybridity. In addition, I shall demonstrate the extent to which the triad of identities prevalent in the Mexican-American community, that is: the Indian (lower-class indigenous Mexican), the Spanish (upper-class Mexican), and the Anglo-Mexican, complicates but can also add a fruitful dimension to Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of hybridity primarily because his argumentation centers on *one* colonizer and *one* colonized. The novels under discussion, however, refer not only to *one* colonizer but *two*: Spain and the US. Moreover, these novels illustrate how all three identities affect and influence contemporary Mexican-American self-understanding in distinct ways, in this way exemplifying that issues of imperialism, colonization, and decolonization do not merely belong to the past, but that colonialism’s system of implied cultural supremacy is replicated in various ways, frequently along diverse asymmetric lines.

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The dissertation will be divided into four chapters, of which the first one will outline the development of the theoretical debate on hybridity and how various definitions of hybridity have influenced the mind-set of both Anglo-Americans and Chicanos/as. To do so, I will specifically concentrate on the works of José Vasconcelos, Homi K. Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jorge Klor de Alva, and Rafael Pérez-Torres while paying the closest attention to Bhabha because, despite being the most influential hybridity theorist, Bhabha’s notion of hybridity is still rather static as the novels will show.

In the second chapter I will analyze José Antonio Villareal’s *Pocho* published in 1959. I will argue that, although this novel was written during the assimilationist stage, it is only assimilationist to a certain extent. By means of his protagonist, Richard Rubio, Villareal undermines the pro-assimilation stance and exposes its damaging effects on a character who does his best to assimilate to the dominant Anglo-American culture but is still rejected, which causes an identity crisis for him. Villareal shows how Richard uses the process of *writing* to resolve his identity crisis and to create a more inclusive type of hybrid identity for himself.

In chapter three I will analyze the best-seller *Bless Me, Ultima* written by Rudolfo Anaya in the 1960s and published in 1972, a time shaped by ethnic nationalism and strategic essentialism. Anaya’s protagonist Antonio, who is educated at an American school and is supposed to become a revolutionary leader of the Chicano Movement, ultimately rejects the ethnic nationalism of the Chicano Movement and its political aim of self-determination because this will only reinforce the existing conflicts between binary oppositions of Mexicans vs. Anglos and obscures the diversity of the Chicano community itself, in particular in terms of sexual identities. Instead, Anaya proposes a different approach which rejects Chicano/a essentialism in favor of a historical awareness of all cultures involved in the formation of a Chicano/a identity and an active negotiation between these cultures.
In chapter four I will discuss Arturo Islas’ *The Rain God: A Desert Tale* published in 1984, and focusing on the story of the bi-national Angel family living in a village on the U.S.-Mexican border. Although the novel was published in 1984, it was written during the 1970s in which the Chicano Movement started to divide into two groups, those who adhered to “strong cultural nationalism…and those who wanted to recruit more support from non-Chicanos and gain political power within the current U.S. system.” Islas supports the latter group and, like Rudolfo Anaya, challenges the static position of the ethnic nationalists who tend to ignore elements which are disruptive to the construction of their identity, such as class, gender, and sexual preferences. I will argue that this novel is one of the first to actively address the issues of gender and sexuality before Anzaldúa’s influential work on the homosexual as the prototypical Mestiza identity. I will demonstrate that Islas undermines the dominant paradigm of gendered roles of men and women, including their sexual preferences, in the Chicano/a community and at the same time challenges the Anglo notion of cultural superiority by creating a new form of proto-hybridity that not only transgresses cultural and gender binaries, but also creates a bridge between them.

Ultimately, this dissertation attempts to show that the notion of hybridity developed in these novels can complement our current understanding of postcolonial identity formation, because all of these novels address the pivotal role of dual cultural domination on the configuration of Chicano/a identity. While deconstructive methods applied to postcolonial texts, such as Bhabha’s, focus mainly on the impact of one hegemonic cultural Other on a cultural minority, these novels illustrate that, with regard to Chicanos/as, it is important not to take the cultural hegemony of Anglo-America as the only paradigm but to acknowledge the complex role of Spain in the formation of Chicano/a identity as well. Put differently, although

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7 However, in his novel *Pocho*, Villareal also refers to the issue of homosexuality within the Chicano community but less than Islas does.
the positive notion of hybridity as developed by Bhabha is of pivotal value, it is nonetheless necessary to critically engage with it, as demonstrated in the following chapters.
Chapter 1:
The Theoretical Framework: the Development of the Concept of Hybridity

Today cultural hybridity has rather positive connotations. As, according to Pérez-Torres, mestizaje “often serves as an empowering thematic in Chicano expressive culture, one echoed in the formal hybridity so characteristic of that culture.” However, as this chapter will illustrate, this positive idea of hybridity has not always prevailed. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries hybridity was perceived in terms of race, rather than culture, and only gradually developed from a racial discourse connected to colonialism toward a cultural discourse related to ethnic nationalism and postcolonial criticism during the twentieth century. This chapter will focus on the theoretical development of hybridity and its influence on the identity formation of Chicanos/as throughout the twentieth century. More specifically, the chapter will critically evaluate the positive articulation of hybridity as it was developed by Homi K. Bhabha and Gloria Anzaldúa in the 1980s, as well as its further development by Jorge Klor de Alva and Rafael Pérez-Torres.

The debate on racial hybridity developed during the eighteenth century with a specific emphasis on racial hierarchization. Theorists like Renan raised the Caucasian race to the top of the racial hierarchy and “demoted Black Africans to the bottom.” This insistence on racial hierarchies was accompanied by the conviction that any fusion of races would result in a deterioration of superior and pure races. Hybridity was thus relegated to the bottom of the racial ladder. During the nineteenth century, according to Robert J.C. Young, “the alleged degeneration of those of mixed race came increasingly both to feed off and to supplement

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11 Ibid., 48.
hybridity as the focus of racial and cultural attention and anxiety.”¹³ This negative attitude was projected onto all racially mixed people living in the US, but specifically also affected those Mexicans who were formally incorporated into the US after the Mexican-American war (1846-1848).

Anglo-Americans perceived racial hybrids like Mexican-Americans as degenerate and thus feared miscegenation, for as the racist theorist Gobineau argued in the 1850s, “[t]he more this product [hybrid race] reproduces itself and crosses its blood, the more the confusion increases…Such a people is merely an awful example of racial anarchy.”¹⁴ Thus, after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), those Mexicans who decided to stay in the US were expected to disregard their racially hybrid heritage and adapt to Anglo-American culture and customs as closely as possible.

The Anglo-American urge to assimilate became more intense between the 1880’s and the First World War. During this timespan, the US experienced a massive influx of immigrants, including Mexicans. Consequently, assimilation was taken a step further to a level often referred to as “pressure cooking assimilation,”¹⁵ but, for Chicanos/as like for most other non-European immigrants, Americanization was merely a one-sided process: even if they fully assimilated culturally, they would arrive at a racially imposed “ceiling” as they would still be seen as racial Others / racial hybrids deemed permanently inferior by their colonizers. As Bhabha argues, “[c]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.”¹⁶ Thus, in Bhabha’s terminology, Americans wanted Mexican/Americans to be like them, but never regarded them as identical, because an equivalence of identities would undermine their justification for the process of colonizing Mexico and Mexicans.

¹⁵ Quoted in Gordon, 99.
¹⁶ Bhabha, 122. Emphasis in original.
In 1925 this negatively connoted notion of the Mexican racial hybrid for the first time received a positive redefinition in Latin-America. In his work *The Cosmic Race*, the Mexican author José Vasconcelos argued for the superiority of the so-called “cosmic race,” which he defined as a fusion of the four major races, “the Black, the Indian, the Mongol, and the White.”\(^{17}\) Vasconcelos maintained that the Mexican people, including those living in the US, constitute a supreme example of the “cosmic race.” He argued that “[w]hat is going to emerge out there is the definitive race [cosmic race]...the integral race, made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples, and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and of truly universal vision.”\(^{18}\) Vasconcelos’ theory was organized around a hybrid mestizo race that would constitute a new culture that transcended boundaries; it would be a hybrid culture “able to assimilate and to transform.”\(^{19}\)

Despite Vasconcelos’ efforts to emphasize the value and importance of hybridity, it remained a racially inflected theory nonetheless, because it “tended to reproduce many of the racist assumptions of the preceding ‘Westernism,’ which it formally opposed.”\(^{20}\) The theory resonated with earlier race theories because it echoed Western arguments of superiority, only in reverse. Alan Knight argued that the so-called *indigenistas*, who strongly favored Vasconcelos’ theory, were not able to escape “the racist paradigm;”\(^{21}\) in fact, all they could do “was shake the bars of their conceptual prison.”\(^{22}\) Some *indigenistas* even argued that “the Indian or mestizo was actually superior to the white.”\(^{23}\) Yet it is understandable that they spoke in terms of racial hierarchies because they continually had to respond to Eurocentric


\(^{18}\) Ibid., 18.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 17.


\(^{21}\) Ibid., 87.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 87.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 87.
racial theories. Nevertheless, despite its racial overtones, Vasconcelos’ positive redefinition of hybridity and its cultural influence provided a fruitful theoretical basis for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans to assert the importance of their hybrid heritage. However, it took another four decades before this positive redefinition would be fully acknowledged by Mexican-Americans, let alone by the Anglo-American community.

After the Second World War, Mexican-American veterans believed Anglo-Americans would accept them as first class citizens, but they did not. They were, according to M. E. Rodríguez, still discriminated against despite their war efforts and patriotism. Therefore, the Mexican-American community sympathized with civil rights organizations, such as LULAC, which had fought for immediate equal status. When, during the 1960s, many Mexican-Americans realized that not much had changed they began to actively fight for their civil rights and their right to assert their ethnic and racial identity.

Many Mexican-Americans, who now started to call themselves Chicanos/as, believed it was time to throw off the shackles of assimilation and revive their long lost past. It was primarily Alurista, a Mexican poet, who raised the consciousness and voices of Chicanos/as with his poem “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán.” His poem, out of which a larger programmatic political plan of the same title developed, tried to reconfigure the Chicano/a identity and restore all that enforced assimilation had destroyed. The plan stated that Chicanos/as should become aware of their historical heritage, the “‘gringo’ invasion” of their land, Aztlán, and the US’s failure to implement its promises proclaimed in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

25 During WWII at least 500,000 Mexican-Americans fought on behalf the US army.
26 Quoted in: Richard G. Del Castillo, World War II and Mexican-American Civil Rights (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 59.
27 LULAC stands for League of United Latin American Citizens and was already active prior to the Second World War.
(i.e. equal civil rights). It announced that Chicanos/as should reclaim their homeland Aztlán and said: “we... declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny." Moreover, it asserted: “we declare the independence of our mestizo nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture.” This recalls Vasconcelos’ arguments in favor of a “cosmic race.” Again, the emphasis was placed on the hybrid race of Chicanos/as; a mestizo race worthy of respect instead of being relegated to marginality. Alurista’s “Spiritual Plan” subsequently became the Chicano Movement’s central manifesto in the late 1960s.

Another source of great significance to the Chicano Movement was the poem “I am Joaquin” written by Rodolfo Gonzales. It too criticized the American disregard of Chicano/a civil rights: “I have made the Anglo rich, / Yet / Equality is but a word– / The Treaty of Hidalgo has been broken / And is but another treacherous promise. / My land is lost / And stolen, / My culture has been raped.” Moreover, this poem constructed a Chicano/a identity based on Indian (Aztec) myths, racial blending, Spanish colonization, American colonization, loss of land, exploitation, and revolution. Eventually it stated: “we start to MOVE. / La raza! / Méjicano! / Español! / Latino! / Chicano! / Or whatever I call myself, / I look the same / I feel the same.” As these two texts illustrate, the Chicano Movement attempted to identify specific fundamental aspects of Chicano/a race, history, culture, religion, and language as a basis for their political struggle. In general, the Chicano/a identity was defined in terms of essential qualities, values, and norms that all Chicanos/as adhered to. These aspects were perceived as innate and everlasting. Hybridity, in particular, was raised to the level of such an essential quality; it was considered an aspect pivotal to the identity formation of Chicanos/as.

30 Alurista, “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán.”
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
Yet, this hybridity was defined in both inclusive and exclusive terms. To Gonzales the
diversity intrinsic to the Mexican identity permitted Chicanos/as to assert the grandeur of
their Spanish heritage and simultaneously the cultural legitimacy of their Indian roots.
However, Gonzales’ poem argued, to assimilate to and blend with Anglo-Saxon America
would validate America’s conquest. His poem, therefore, generated a Chicano/a identity that
only upheld the Indian/Spanish hybridity while excluding any Anglo-American aspects “in
order to reinforce [the Chicano’s] status as a subject defined by resistance,”34 resulting in a
hybrid Chicano/a identity that deliberately excluded the hegemonic Anglo-American element
in Chicano/a identity formation while at the same time including the Spanish colonial one.
The reason for this was, according to Christina Beltran, that assimilation required “a
renunciation of one’s racial and sociopolitical identity. This mestizaje would merge into
assimilation, and the Chicano subject would no longer be able to invoke a radical and
politicalized racial identity.”35 Ultimately, the Chicano Movement can thus be said to
reproduce the binary opposition of Mexican vs. Anglo-American. Simultaneously, this
construction of a so-called essential and “authentic” Chicano/a mestizo/a identity was
insensitive to the group’s internal differences in terms of gender, class, sexual preferences,
and regional identities.

The Chicano Movement’s use of a Chicano/a essence can be described in Gayatri
Chakravorty Spivak’s terms as an example of “strategic essentialism.”36 Spivak argued that
among subaltern groups, like Chicanos/as, one can often detect a “strategic use of positivist
essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.”37 The Chicano movement can be
said to have used their construct of an essential ethnic mestizo/a identity to challenge and
subvert Anglo-American domination. Spivak argued that this form of essentialism can either

34 Christina Beltran, “Patrolling Borders: Hybrids, Hierarchies, and the Challenge of Mestizaje,” in Political
Research Quarterly Vol. 57, no. 4 (December 2004), 599.
35 Beltran, 599.
37 Ibid., 3.
be a trap or, if applied correctly, an enabling way to organize “people to do political work without invoking some irreducible essentialism.” The latter only works, however, according to Spivak, if strategic essentialism is used in a self-reflective mode that is critical of the essentialist principles underlying its own strategy, “[o]therwise the strategy freezes into something like what you call an essentialist position.”

Yet such a lack of self-reflection was prevalent in the Chicano/a movement because it refused to acknowledge the racial and cultural impact of the US on Mexican-Americans; it wanted to isolate its culture and its hybrid identity in order to define itself against Anglo-Americans. Even though it can be argued that a certain degree of strategic essentialism was necessary to mobilize Chicanos/as “into collective political action,” in the end the discourse of self/other was merely reversed. The Chicano Movement reduced its own identity to the same degree as Anglo-Americans had done previously, and due to this exclusionary focus discarded the possibility of negotiating the full complexity of Mexican-American identity.

During the 1980s the debate on hybridity received a more inclusive impetus. The limiting notion of hybridity altered when Homi K. Bhabha developed a more comprehensive theory of hybridity and cultural negotiation on the basis of deconstructionist principles. Bhabha’s theory is particularly important for the formation of the culturally hybrid identities represented in the novels that I will analyze because for both Bhabha and the novels’ authors, “the active agency of the colonized” is of crucial importance. The novels address exactly this agency that Bhabha insists upon because the main protagonists not only recognize the binary opposition of Chicano/a vs. Anglo-American but also deconstruct it and thus eventually dismantle racial and cultural hierarchies all together. Although the authors did not

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38 Ibid., 3.
39 Ibid., 3-4.
41 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994).
42 Ibid., 2.
have Bhabha’s theory at their disposal, they realized that merely raising the Chicano/a voice against Anglo-America while subscribing to the polarities would lead them nowhere. Instead, the authors recognized in Jacques Derrida’s words, that they “were not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy” and therefore concluded, 43 in keeping with Derrida, that overturning the hierarchy is quite important. Yet deconstruction cannot instantaneously continue to neutralization. “It must,” Derrida argues, “by means of… a double writing, practice an overturning of the classical opposition.” 44 Only then can deconstruction supply “the means of intervening in the field of oppositions it criticizes.” 45

As shall be demonstrated throughout the following chapters, the authors discussed in this dissertation use the hegemonic history, which represses the Chicano/a history, and the English language together with their own language and history in order to produce an area of “in between” or, as Bhabha designates it, a “Third Space.” In this particular area the protagonists can formulate their own identity beyond any notion of a Chicano/a essence. This “Third-Space” allows room for the kind of cultural negotiation that polarities do not tolerate.

According to Bhabha, “[i]t is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.” 46 While the authors thus ensure that the hegemonic Anglo-American culture no longer “defines where the margins lie,” 47 they at the same time acknowledge the crucial importance of Anglo-America for the formation of their identity.

44 Ibid., 41.
46 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 55.
because as Bhabha explains, “identification is a process of identifying with and through another object.”

Gloria Anzaldúa’s book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) is based to large degree on Bhabha’s notion of hybridity and is particularly important for the analysis of Chicano/a culture. Anzaldúa counters the essentialist hybrid Chicano/a identity established in the late 1960s and 1970s, which was solely based on Indian mythology and the Spanish heritage. Drawing on Bhabha’s notion of deconstruction, Anzaldúa warns Chicanos/as of thinking in terms of exclusion and fixation. While she recalls Vasconcelos’ notion of the “cosmic race,” she redefines it in terms of a more inclusive Mestiza consciousness: “[f]rom this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestiza* consciousness.”

She criticizes the ethnic nationalism and anti-Americanism of the Chicano Movement as follows: “it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed;... The counterstance refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant.” In Anzaldúa’s view, simply opposing the hegemonic Anglo-American culture will not lead to productive results; instead, she argues, “on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes.” Thus, Anzaldúa’s notion of Chicano/a hybridity is re-conceptualized as a form of flexible and multi-perspectival agency, rather than a static notion of essentialism as it was used by the Chicano Movement. According to Anzaldúa, “[t]he new *mestiza* copes by

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50 Ibid., 100.
51 Ibid., 100-101
developing a tolerance for contradictions...She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view.”

It is of crucial importance that Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness does not discard any element of the Chicano’s/a’s identity; in addition to its Anglo-American roots, it takes into account elements such as class and sexual preferences as well. Ultimately, Anzaldúa’s theory of the mestiza consciousness thus transformed the notion of hybridity into a more inclusive notion able to transcend the binary opposition of Chicano self vs. Anglo other, but she was not alone in this theoretical development.

Jorge Klor de Alva and Rafael Pérez-Torres have also contributed to the debate on the positive characteristics of hybridity and mestizaje. Analyzing the theoretical and political precariousness of mestizaje, Klor de Alva argues that its nature is chameleonic, that mestizaje is “Western in the presence of Europeans, indigenous in the native villages, and Indian-like in contemporary United States barrios.”

Put differently, mestizaje is context specific and its positive chameleonic feature is its most pivotal element. Pérez-Torres, on the other hand, analyzes the meaning of Aztlán for the identity formation of Chicanos/as and argues that it is necessary “to explore the connections between land, identity, and experience in relation to Chicano/a populations.” Moreover, he insists that the mestizo should not be viewed as “a fixed signifier,” but rather as, in Chela Sandoval’s terms, “a tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted.”

In adopting Anzaldúa’s vision of mestizaje, including “the importance of both feminist and queer insights into our understanding of Chicano/a identity,” he argues that
“[t]he incorporation of mestizaje makes present a persistent oscillation between presence and absence, resistance and capitulation, agency and victimhood, power and fatigue.”

While all three of these theorists, Anzaldúa, Pérez-Torres, and Klor de Alva, heavily rely on Bhabha’s deconstructive notion of hybridity that strives to dismantle cultural binaries and hierarchies, they reveal one crucial shortcoming in Bhabha’s approach that they try to remedy. Bhabha’s framework is founded upon the principle of one colonizer and one colonized people, assuming that there exists an antagonism between one Self and one Other, thereby disregarding any potential other historical and cultural influences. When Bhabha refers to Chicanos/as as having a hybrid identity, he only mentions the significance of their inhabiting “an intervening space” between the US/Mexico border. Thereby, Bhabha disregards Spain’s colonial influence on the formation of Chicanos/as’ identity. While Bhabha has helped subsequent generations of Chicano/a hybridity theorists to recognize the crucial role played by Anglo-America in the formation of a Chicano/a identity, he obliterates the implications of Mexico’s double colonization and its complex results, dividing Chicanos/as into Indian-identified as well as Spanish-identified Mexican-Americans.

The three novels discussed in the following chapters show that the triad of identities (Indian, Spanish, and Anglo-American) shaping contemporary Mexican-Americans can extend Bhabha’s theory because the main protagonists, in their search for identity, deconstruct multiple hierarchies reinforced by Spanish as well as American colonial powers and establish a hybrid identity that negotiates three cultures, instead of two. As Bhabha argues, in order to move away from static binaries and establish a deconstructionist hybrid identity it is necessary to look “at the processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences,” yet with regard to Chicanos/as, this means it is pivotal to look at both

58 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 10.
59 Ibid., 2.
cultural “Others.” According to Raoul Guzman, Chicanos/as are “‘forced to look at one’s self through the eyes of others,’”\textsuperscript{60} but do so by resisting and undermining the culture of both of their assumed superior “Others,” thereby creating a hybrid identity that neglects neither of these. A good example of this double deconstruction can be found in José Villareal’s \textit{Pocho}. 

Chapter II:
Creative Deconstruction: The Embrace of Chicano/a Cultural Hybridity Beyond Assimilation in José Villareal’s Pocho

Today the term “pocho” refers to “a Mexican who has adopted American cultural values,”61 and especially since the 1960s the Chicano Movement has tried to re-conceptualize the term into a more positive and inclusive direction, but as the current definition illustrates this has proven very difficult, because for many Mexicans it is still “a derogatory term” to designate those Chicanos/as who are considered to have rejected or forgotten part of their Mexican history, traditions, and values.62

The term “pocho,” however, did not merely manifest itself in social reality; it was also explicitly discussed in Chicano literature. In 1959, José Antonio Villareal published the novel Pocho,63 which describes the energetic life of Richard Rubio, who is born in the US as the son of Mexican immigrants. Richard’s father, Juan Rubio, who had fought alongside Pancho Villa during the Mexican Revolution, immigrated to the US because he was afraid of persecution. To Juan the main struggle was immigration and its subsequent changes for his family because while in Mexico he was a respected man, in Texas he was like any other Mexican immigrant, trying to make a living working in the cotton fields. Feelings of pride forced Juan to seek his fortune in California together with his wife, Consuelo, who, shortly after their arrival in California, gave birth to their only son, Richard.

As the son of immigrant parents, Richard is confronted with growing up in two contrasting cultures: the Mexican legacy of his parents and the Anglo-American cultural aspects he experiences at school. While Juan strongly believes he will eventually return to their homeland, Consuelo wants Richard to focus his attention on becoming a Catholic priest.

63 To many Pocho is considered the first Chicano novel.
Yet Richard develops his own goals because his parents’ homeland appears to him as a historical fiction and he never conceives of himself as pure Mexican. At the same time he questions the Catholic Church’s doctrine and challenges his parent’s way of life in general. In the end, Richard tries to convince his parents that he is different than they are due to the fact that he grows up in the US. He follows his own path and tries to develop his own identity, but in due course encounters the harmful effects of cultural binaries as well as the US’s emphasis on assimilation.

This chapter will argue that although this tale was written during the assimilationist stage, it is only pro-assimilation to a certain extent. By means of Richard, Villareal undermines the pro-assimilation stance of many of his contemporaries and exposes the damaging effects of juxtaposing the Chicano/a Self to the Anglo-American Other. In the following, I shall first discuss the many forms of inferiority that affect Richard’s life, such as racism, stereotypical thinking, and the denial of his Chicano/a history, and, subsequently, analyze the negative consequences that these feelings of subordination have on Richard’s identity formation process. Anglo-America expects him to assimilate but, even if he does so, keeps him at bay and never allows him to become an equal, which propels him into an identity crisis out of which he can only free himself by becoming a writer. His new identity as a writer finally allows Richard to undermine and dismantle the binary oppositions between Anglo and Chicano culture in an artistic, creative manner.

Before turning to the analysis of the deconstructive process, however, it is important to first highlight the familial situation that governs Richard’s life, because the changing familial circumstances have a crucial impact on how he perceives and responds to his own environment. Of particular significance are his parents and how they cope with the cultural and geographical transition from Mexico to the US and their response to assimilation. From

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the beginning of the novel the Mexican element is present and is significant for Richard’s parents’ sense of self. It is primarily the history of Mexico and its relationship with Spain and the US that informs the lives of Juan and Consuelo. Juan refers to the Mexican war of independence against Spain and asks a Mexican general: “[o]f what good was all the fighting? The Spanish milk still flows into our women!,”65 to which the general answers: “I know. We are no better off than we were before.”66 This exchange is important to understand most of the novel, because it suggests that liberating oneself from the colonizer (Spain or later the US), does not necessarily eliminate cultural and racial oppression. The above-mentioned war has made Juan aware that political independence cannot undo the effects of colonialism for a people’s sense of their cultural identity.

Juan also emphasizes that, in addition to the Spanish impact and the US’ conquest of parts of Mexico, the indigenous legacy of Mexicans is significant for their ethnic and racial heritage as well. Juan asks the general: “[d]o you not remember that our people [i.e. indigenous Mexicans] have better manners than this aristocracy [the Spanish aristocracy], that our ancestors were princes in a civilization that was possibly more advanced than this one?”67 To which the general answers: “[f]orgive me, Juan Manuel…[y]our rebuke was well deserved, living in that society [the Spanish aristocratic one] makes me talk like the people [Spanish] in it. I haven’t really forgotten my heritage.”68 What occurs here can be regarded as a glorification of the Indian cultural legacy and as Villareal’s suggestion that no matter how far colonial influences and the process of assimilation go, the Indian ethnicity will always also influence the course of Chicanos/as’ identity formation.

Consuelo, likewise, is also constantly reminded of the complexity of Mexican identity and projects these polarities onto her son, whom she considers “[a]ll Indio this boy of

66 Ibid., 7.
67 Ibid., 8.
68 Ibid., 8.
mine…except inside. The Spanish blood is deep inside him." This thought exposes her binary thinking in terms of Indio vs. Spanish. It appears that Consuelo is not able to move beyond these polarities, because she is constantly reminded of the very similar polarities (Mexican vs. Anglo) that shape her life in the US.

It is important to note that Consuelo merely refers to her son as having both Indian and Spanish characteristics despite Richard’s official status as American citizen, which might suggest that she perceives the Americanization of her son as insignificant for the formation of his identity. The novel, however, rather suggests the opposite, namely that she realizes the impact assimilation has on Richard. This interpretation is supported by Consuelo’s firm belief that Richard is becoming “such a rare one,” asking questions about religion and explaining that he prefers to be alone (as an individual) instead of “with the Portuguese and the Spaniards.” Yet, unlike Juan, Consuelo does not judge the Spanish as negative or elevate the Indio over the Spanish, because, for her, the Anglo is the more problematic category.

Having shortly outlined the parental situation, Villareal soon shifts his main focus to Richard in order to illustrate the detrimental effects of assimilation on someone who is a prime example of a Chicano who tries to fit in, but is never fully accepted. Despite his US citizenship, Richard encounters the skeptical and distrustful consequences of binary thinking and racial hierarchies in the US. At a young age Richard is already confronted with an inexplicable feeling of inferiority, because he is regularly bullied by other children for being Mexican. The children often say to him: “everybody knew that a Spaniard was better than a Mexican.” On a different occasion, Richard is excluded from a group of children and is asked why he, as a “cholo,” does not “go home and eat some tortillas.” Richard is scared

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69 Ibid., 35.  
70 Ibid., 35.  
71 Ibid., 35.  
72 Ibid., 41.  
73 Ibid., 41.
and starts to cry, which indicates the extent to which he feels excluded on account of his race and culture, which severely challenges his self-worth.

Even at school, at the institution which is supposed to assimilate Mexican-Americans, Richard experiences that the social distance between the Anglo teachers and the Mexican-American children remains. A good exemplification of this is when Richard is in the school library and an Anglo girl, Mary, joins him. The female librarian / teacher, Miss Moore, asks him (as Mary reluctantly enters the library): “[w]ill you help this young lady select a book?” Miss Moore’s question was not a friendly request, but a demand to be subservient to Mary. As the story develops it becomes clear that, at first, Miss Moore still had some hope of educating the Mexican children to become full Americans, but she gives this up after a short while. Her attitude reflects a more general mind-set among Anglo-Americans at the time because, according to García, no matter how liberal minded Anglo schools were in believing that teaching the English language and American values to Mexicans would turn them into Americans, “American public school administrators and teachers…designed ‘Americanization’ programs that contained …assumptions about Mexican immigrant culture as less ‘advanced’ than American culture.” Miss Moore represents exactly that superior attitude toward Richard and he personally experiences the “ceiling” of assimilation.

This Anglo notion of cultural superiority also manifests itself in the contexts of religion and sexuality. Despite his efforts to assimilate Richard is considered a “heathen” by Mary’s Protestant mother, who moved from Oregon (a state which was dominated by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants) to California which was much more culturally heterogeneous. Increasing numbers of Catholic immigrants also increased “the paranoia of many

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74 Ibid., 69.
76 Villareal, 72.
Thus, in terms of religion, Richard is marginalized as well. Likewise, many Anglo-Americans, but also his father Juan, reject homosexuality and depict it as unnatural. This becomes apparent when Richard’s queer friend, Joe Pete Manõel is accused of raping a girl and is therefore incarcerated without trial. Richard’s conversation with the American police officer illustrates that the policeman “had trouble phrasing his questions” about Joe’s homosexuality. When Richard plainly asks the officer: “[y]ou mean was he a homosexual?” the word “homosexual” is new to the officer. This ignorance and the fact that the officer designates Richard as a “[w]ise little bastard” shows his strong disregard of queer people. Fear of the unknown, that is homosexuality, led the Anglo-American officer to elevate heterosexuality to a superior status and refer to queerness as something abnormal and inferior. To Richard, however, Joe’s sexuality does not matter, but he does feel he has to assure his father he has “the feelings for girls already.”

In the course of the novel, Villareal demonstrates Richard’s growing resistance against this Anglo sense of superiority. When Richard visits a communist gathering, a Mexican delegate explains: “we are tired of being stepped upon.” This argument resonates with Richard as he feels that many Chicanos/as are getting tired of the persistent segregation and discrimination despite their efforts at assimilation. This holds true for Richard’s father as well, for he not only constantly thinks of going home, but also forbids Richard to speak English (“the dog language”) in his house.

This mindset of cultural superiority, however, is not limited to Anglo Americans because, in his younger years, Richard too has internalized a particular sense of white

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78 Villareal, 89.  
79 Ibid., 89.  
80 Ibid., 90.  
81 Ibid., 49.  
82 Ibid., 133.
superiority. Richard at one point asks his father if he could have a horse, specifically a white one. Juan responds that he can have one, but questions his choice of color, to which Richard replies: “Everybody knows that a white horse is the best there is.” This shows that Richard has an innate belief in white being superior to black. Yet Juan points out the racist assumptions underlying this statement: “if you knew anything about horses, you would know that a good horse is not chosen for his color.” By means of this statement Juan tries to teach Richard that color and its meanings are not universal; he learns that white does not signify superiority in every context.

At this point Richard is also confronted with arguably the most negative element of assimilation, namely the distortion of history, which is a key feature of his family’s identity. Richard explains to Mary, who has in the meantime become his friend, how American teachers misrepresent elements of Mexican history: “[w]ell the teachers teach us all kinds of things, and sometimes they’re not really honest about it…Sometimes I read things in books that show me teachers are wrong sometimes. I guess they think we’re too dumb to know about two sides to a story.” Richard’s point here is that history is a construct, devised and fabricated by those in power and is, therefore, one-sided. This really upsets Richard, because, as he explains to Mary: “I don’t like them to always tell me that they know everything.” To Richard, the one-sided history he is taught is one of exclusivity; one that neglects to articulate the specific origins of his people and instead illustrates “the violence of one powerful nation writing out the history of another.”

Yet even Richard’s friend Mary is not immune to the feeling of cultural superiority shared by so many Anglo-Americans, which manifests itself when Mary tells her father that she wants to marry Richard: “when we’re married, I’m going to make him change a little, so

84 Villareal, 97.
85 Ibid., 97.
86 Ibid., 71.
87 Ibid., 71.
88 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 136.
he’ll be just right.” Villareal shows here the cruelty of assimilation, since for Mary, although she apparently “loves” him, Richard is not yet suitable and assimilated enough to be a “proper” husband. Her father replies: “[y]ou shouldn’t, Sis. That wouldn’t be very nice—to change him. After he changes, maybe you won’t like him.” As Villareal illustrates, on the surface Mary’s father seems to be supportive of Richard, yet at the same time he seems to be ignorant of the fact that he and other white Anglo-Americans continuously try to modify Richard into a figure of their preference, thereby completely changing the nature of his identity.

One possible way for Richard to deal with the failure of assimilation (i.e. with the fact that despite his own efforts to fit in, he is never fully accepted as American) would be to react like his father and reject all things American while elevating the indigenous part of his identity. Yet this is not the way chosen by Richard. Nor does Richard opt for the oppositional stance chosen by a Chicano youth gang named Pachucos, who have contempt for everything American and simultaneously “a marked hauteur toward Mexico.” Villareal explains that “[t]he former feeling came from a sense of inferiority … They needed to feel superior to something, which is a natural thing. The result was that they attempted to segregate themselves from both their cultures, and become truly a lost race.” To Americans “these zootsuiters were a menace” and were considered undesirable. Nonetheless, Richard tries to comprehend them and sympathize with them, but only to a certain extent, because “their way of life was not entirely justified in his mind” as the pachucos were merely resisting American values much like his father was resisting Consuelo’s attempts to speak her mind and exercise her rights as a woman in the US. Richard grasps that, although the Pachucos

89 Villareal, 78.
90 Ibid., 78.
91 Ibid., 149.
92 Ibid., 149.
93 Ibid., 150.
94 Ibid., 150.
might provide him with a sense of what it is like to be different, their offensive stance will not bring him further in life, because, as Anzaldúa argues, “it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank…A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed.”

Therefore, Richard sets out to find his own solution for his fragmented sense of self by defining himself beyond the cultural polarities created by his environment.

To redefine the term “pocho” is a small first step in Richard’s embrace of the triad of Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo culture and their respective languages. Richard redefines this term when he speaks to Pilar, a young Mexican girl, whom he tells proudly: “I am a Pocho and we speak like this because here in California we make Castilian words out of English words. But I can read and write in the Spanish, and I taught myself from the time I had but eight years.”

To which Pilar answers: “[i]t matters not…I understand you perfectly well.”

In this passage, Richard is proud to be a pocho and defends himself against the old meaning of the term (a reference to Chicanos/as who have rejected their Mexican and Spanish legacy) by indicating that he speaks English but also learned the Spanish language in a short time. In turn, Pilar’s answer, “it matters not” indicates that the Mexican girl understands and accepts that Richard changes words while at the same time demonstrating that he has not forgotten where he comes from.

This is Richard’s first step toward the development of a proto-hybrid identity which strives to dismantle cultural binaries and linguistic oppositions. Richard, ultimately, refuses to have an Anglo identity superimposed upon him in keeping with the Anglo-American hegemonic discourse of assimilation, while he at the same time also refuses to glorify his Spanish or Indian heritage to the exclusion of other parts of his identity.

The way Richard resolves this dilemma is by becoming a writer: “I want to learn and that is all. I do not want to be something—I am…. I have to learn as much as I can, so that I

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95 Anzaldúa, 100.
96 Villareal, 165.
97 Ibid., 165.
can live…learn for me, for myself.”\textsuperscript{98} This sounds rather individualistic, but it is exactly this learning process that provides him with the space and freedom to define himself. Although his parents perceive his urge to learn and read as “blasphemous,” he perceives it as a way to reinvent the environment he is in. He tells his mother, who believes that they cannot escape reality, that “everything does not necessarily have to be real.”\textsuperscript{99} This sentence implies that realities such as racial binaries do not necessarily have to be taken at face value, but can be perceived as constructed and can therefore be questioned and possibly also overturned by learning how they operate.

In addition to his questioning of “reality,” Richard discusses, together with his queer friend Joe, another feature that assists him as a writer to redefine himself, namely the arbitrariness of language and the relationship between signifier and signified. Joe explains to Richard how the world operates and teaches him that “[e]very one of us has his own meaning of the word ‘better’—his own meaning of any word.”\textsuperscript{100} This statement resembles Saussure’s theory of the relationship between signifier and signified.\textsuperscript{101} Joe teaches Richard that words (the signifiers) and their meanings (the signifieds) are open to interpretation, context-specific and therefore, open to change. This lesson provides Richard with an important tool in the writing process, for it allows him to transcend the subjective definitions and interpretations of what it means to be Chicano/a or Mexican-American in both the English as well as the Spanish language.

Richard uses this open interpretation and the concomitant alterability of stereotypical labels and racial terms in his writing to deconstruct the dichotomies that his social environment has created. By means of his joining a “Creative Writing” class, Richard finally

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 64. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{101} Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics (London: Duckworth, 1983).
modifies his identity into one that is more inclusive. This becomes especially apparent at the end of the novel when Richard has a conversation with his father:

Father: “This acquaintance I spoke about, he is a writer.”

“That is what I will be”, said Richard. “Do you want that more than anything?” “Yes, my father. More than anything, and forgive me if I put that before you and my mother.”

“There is nothing to forgive…Only never let anything stand in your way of it…[and] promise me – that you will be true unto yourself…do not ever forget that you are Mexican.” “I could never forget that!,” said Richard.\(^1\)

Immediately after this dialogue, Richard talks to his mother about joining the US army to fight in the Second World War and in this voluntary act embraces, next to his Mexican legacy, his Anglo identity as well. These two dialogues show that for Richard it is important to define himself beyond societies’ binaries; he will not forget his Mexican past, nor will he forget that he is an American citizen; yet he will first and foremost become a creative writer.

Ultimately, this novel thus shows that Richard can define himself beyond the limitations of binary oppositions. Villareal did not have Bhabha’s or Anzaldua’s theoretical framework at his disposal, yet he manages to delineate a character that criticizes the negative consequences of binary cultural oppositions and creates a more fluid and inclusive form of identity; an identity that expresses a specific degree of hybridity. Yet, unlike Bhabha’s emphasis on two cultures being negotiated in the “Third Space,” Villareal stresses that Richard deals with three cultures. Hybridity, therefore, for Richard, does not consist of two, but three different identities and for this reason has, as Rafael Pérez-Torres argues, “an

\(^1\) Villareal, 169.
endlessly innovative dynamic.\textsuperscript{103} The novel that will be analyzed next, \textit{Bless Me, Ultima},
will move this dynamic one step further.

\textsuperscript{103} Rafael Pérez-Torres, \textit{Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture} (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 35.
Chapter III:  
The Ultimate Negotiation: An Alternative Approach to Ethnic Nationalism in Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*

Compared to Villareal’s *Pocho*, Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* focuses even more strongly on the rigidity of established identity categories. In this novel both Anglo-Americans and several Chicano/a protagonists are depicted in a rather essentialist way. *Bless Me, Ultima* can therefore be read as a critical response to Chicano ethnic nationalism and strategic essentialism as it was practised by the Chicano Movement during the late 1960s. Anaya’s novel offers a dialectical analysis of oppositions between cultures, and the narrative strives to produce a historical and social awareness among Chicanos/as instead of merely disseminating a one-sided history of La Raza by means of the Aztlán myth, as the Chicano Movement has often tried to do.

In *Bless Me, Ultima* Anaya narrates the early years of his protagonist, Antonio, who, as a child, is quite receptive for new ideas but is naïve about what truly occurs in his environment. Like Richard in *Pocho*, Antonio is also exposed to a multitude of cultures while attending an American school to learn the English language and American values. But, unlike Richard, Antonio is socialized by both his parents *and* a local curandera called Ultima, who is Antonio’s tutor and source of Chicano/a history. Together with Antonio’s mother, Ultima tries to nurture Antonio into becoming a revolutionary leader for the Chicano Movement, a strategy by means of which Anaya implicitly addresses the significance of women in the creation of potential revolutionaries. In other words, Antonio is expected to prepare himself for leading the Chicano community, defined as a specific ethnic group with its own linguistic, historical, and cultural traits.

In this novel Anaya is actually applying a method similar to what is currently known as double reading. Anaya first explains the emergence of Chicano ethnic nationalism and its political aim of self-determination based on José Vasconcelos’ most influential work “The
Cosmic Race,” which accentuates the value and significance of the Mestiza race. In this way, Anaya’s depiction of La Raza on the one hand supports the Chicano Movement’s official narrative of a Chicano/a essence, to be used for strategic political purposes. Yet, on a second level Anaya simultaneously discloses the gaps inherent in this dominant narrative by showing the neglected elements and problematic aspects of Chicano ethnic nationalism and strategic essentialism. By means of his two main protagonists, Antonio and Ultima, Anaya illustrates that the Chicano/a identity is far from being so easily definable within neat boundaries as the Chicano Movement tries to convey. In fact, Anaya emphasizes that the perspective of the Chicano Movement is rather limited and that historiography should be an all encompassing process instead of a selective one. In particular, Anaya shows that neglecting the Anglo-American aspects of their identity while only embracing the Spanish and Indian ones means denying a pivotal factor of their identity. He insists that the binary opposition between the Chicano/a / Mexican and the Anglo-American culture can and must be overcome and should be replaced by a hybrid identity, which is much more flexible and remains open for any form of transformation in the future. By foregrounding cultural hybridity in this way, Anaya suggests that Chicano/a cultural identity cannot be fixed or essentialized, not even for strategically political purposes.

The initial step in this development is represented by Antonio’s parents, who try to nurture Antonio in such a way that he will unquestionably accept their clearly circumscribed Spanish cultural heritage. At the very beginning, Antonio describes in a dream how his parents visualize his future identity for him: “This one will be a Luna…he will be a farmer and keep our customs and traditions. Perhaps God will bless our family and make the baby a priest…The blood of the Lunas is strong in him….He is a Máréz, the vaqueros shouted. His forefathers were conquistadors, men as restless as the seas they sailed and as free as the land

they conquered. He is his father’s blood!” They conquered. He is his father’s blood!”¹⁰⁵ This debate between the Lunas and the Márezes shows how Antonio’s parents, despite their disagreement over his specific role, envision a clearly defined Mexican-Spanish identity for Antonio, based on blood. This resembles, to a certain extent, the Chicano Movement’s political definition of La Raza, which is also strongly related to blood.¹⁰⁶ This dream shapes Antonio’s life for quite a long time because he believes his mother, who said to him that his dreams “were visions from God.”¹⁰⁷

Not only in his dreams, but also in real life is Antonio continuously exposed to similar discussions. His uncle Juan, for instance, tells Antonio’s mother: “After his [Antonio’s] first communion you must send him to us a summer, he must learn our ways—before he is lost.”¹⁰⁸ His father, on the other hand, continuously discredits his wife’s peasant lifestyle and privileges a Vaquero lifestyle instead. Yet, despite their differing views, Antonio’s parents and his uncle represent the Spanish-Mexican position by showing their respective love for farming and cattle running. According to Morrisey, “in the ranching and farming empire of the Southwest, where still the vaquero [Márez] guards cattle,…, and the Labrador [Lunas] tills the field, the Spanish legacy is present.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, their Spanish-Mexican legacy is of the utmost importance for Antonio’s parents’ identity construction.

While Antonio’s parents disagree about their respective lifestyles, they also disagree on how to view the American individualistic and capitalistic influence on their homeland. Antonio’s father, for example, says that in the past “[t]he Ilano was still virgin, there was grass as high as the stirrups of a grown horse…and then the tejano came and built his fences,… it was like a bad wave of the ocean covering all that was good—.”¹¹⁰ The American influence did nothing but limit the freedom of the vaquero to ride his horse wherever he

¹⁰⁶ Vasconcelos, 18.
¹⁰⁷ Anaya, 4.
¹⁰⁸ Anaya, 49.
¹¹⁰ Anaya, 54.
wanted. Antonio’s mother, on the other hand, is more optimistic, because she perceives the New Mexican town they live in as an opportunity for a better life and an educational chance for Antonio. This is not to say, however, that Antonio’s mother wants him to be exposed at school to, for instance, Protestantism too much. On the contrary, she wants him to become a Catholic priest who knows the Luna way of life.

His parents’ pro-Spanish cultural opinions are not the only one-sided views instilled in Antonio because he experiences another binary opposition, namely that of supposedly clashing religions, as well. He experiences this polarity by means of being exposed to the native story of the golden carp; a story he was familiar with, but never knew the essence of. Antonio merely accepts what he has been told about it. For instance, when Samuel, his friend, asks him “[h]ave you ever fished for the carp of the river?” Antonio tells him that he never fishes for the carp because it is bad luck to do so, but he does not know why. Samuel then elaborates on the story of “the people” and the golden carp, in essence telling Antonio a story that is similar to the Aztlán myth that was promoted and essentialized by the Chicano Movement. Samuel says: “A long time ago, when…only wandering tribes touched the virgin grasslands…, a strange people came to this land. They were sent to this valley by their gods. They had wandered lost for many years but never had they given up faith in their gods, and so they were finally rewarded. This fertile valley was to be their home.” Antonio asks him: “[w]ere they Indians?,” to which Samuel answers: “[t]hey were the people,” thereby implying that these people were the one true and pure people whose lives ought to be remembered with great respect. Moreover, as soon as Samuel delineates that the golden carp used to be a god in heaven, Antonio is shocked and it unsettles his belief in the Christian God. Later he tells

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111 Anaya, 2.
112 Ibid., 78.
113 Ibid., 80.
114 Ibid., 79-80.
115 Ibid., 80.
Cico: “I am a Catholic…I can believe only in the God of the Church—.” Antonio is clearly disconcerted here by the opposition between indigenous religion vs. Catholicism. He perceives them as two quite distinct belief systems that cannot be reconciled in any way.

As the novel progresses, Antonio is further immersed in the native history of the Chicano/a people and hears many positive things about it. What Antonio is confronted with is actually an exemplification of the nationalist manifesto of the Chicano Movement, called “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán.” This Plan strove to promote an active remembrance of the Chicano Indian legacy and in particular the Indians’ ties to their ancestral homelands. That is why his parents also focus so much on being tied to the land, respectively roaming around free over the Ilano. Anaya in this way stresses the major influence the ancestral lands have for Antonio and his parents, an influence which can be related to the Chicano Movement’s emphasis on the myth of Aztlán.

In addition to these cultural and religious influences, Antonio is confronted with yet another cultural opposition, namely that between the Chicano/a and the Anglo-American culture. According to Marta Caminero-Santangelo, “[u]nlike…Pocho…that dealt with issues of assimilation…versus cultural preservation, Bless Me, Ultima contains no such struggles; no obvious or foregrounded ‘Anglo’ influences are trying to Americanize Antonio at the expense of his Mexican roots.” I would argue, however, that this is not quite correct. There is a very obvious form of Anglo-American cultural influence identifiable in this novel, which can be perceived as soon as Antonio tells his name to Miss Maestas, his teacher. She asks him in Spanish, and he replies by saying “Antonio Márez,” but she writes down “Anthony Márez” in her book, thereby Anglicizing his name and indicating that the English version of his name is more important than the Spanish one. Moreover, Antonio notices that the older Chicano/a generation perceives the English language as cultural domination: “[m]any of the old people

116 Anaya, 107.
did not accept the new language and refused to let their children speak it.” These examples are definitively signs of Anglo-American cultural hegemonic influences Antonio struggles with.

This influence also manifests itself in the use of stereotypes, because Antonio experiences this form of degradation and its concomitant sense of American superiority as soon as he opens his lunchbox at school: “[m]y mother had packed a small jar of hot beans and some good, green chile wrapped in tortillas. When the other children saw my lunch they laughed and pointed again…They showed me their sandwiches which were made of bread. Again I did not feel well.” Antonio’s American classmates clearly felt their food to be superior and made sure Antonio felt like “an outcast.” But he was not alone, for a few other Chicano boys, “who were like” him felt just the same and they became friends and in their “union found strength.” This in- and out-group thinking, caused by the racist reaction of the Anglo-American children, resembles the response of the Chicano Movement to Anglo domination, as it strove to mobilize its people as a unified and exclusionary cultural front against the cultural supremacy of Anglo-Americans. This exclusionary perspective, however, is exactly what Anaya criticizes, for he shows that the strategic use of Chicano/a essentialism against the cultural hegemon means denying a pivotal element of the Chicanos/as’ identity. Instead, Anaya promotes cultural hybridity very much in the sense of Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness: a Chicano/a culture that is concentrated on inclusion and which recognizes both its historical roots and its dynamic interaction between the Spanish, Indian-Mexican, and Anglo-American cultures.

One way in which Anaya highlights this is by depicting Antonio as having some sort of mysterious character trait that prevents him from making either- or choices such as those

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118 Anaya, 180.
119 Ibid., 58.
120 Ibid., 59.
121 Ibid., 59.
expected of him by his parents. When Antonio discusses the issue with Ultima and tells her:
“[n]ow we have come to live near the river, and yet near the Ilano. I love them both and yet I am neither. I wonder which life I will choose?,” Ultima answers him: “do not trouble yourself with those thoughts.”\footnote{Anaya, 41.} Ultima makes it clear that choosing is not essential for Antonio and, therefore, she prevents Antonio from limiting his cultural identity to one of his parents. At another point in the novel, Ultima also refers to Antonio by using his middle name, Juan, and, thereby, confirms the necessity to stay away from his parent’s polarity.

A similar subversion of polarities manifests itself at the level of religion. With respect to indigenous religion vs. Catholicism it is Cico who dismantles the hierarchy of the two seemingly opposite belief systems by asking Antonio: “[w]ill you make an oath?” To which Antonio answers: “Yes,” while thinking that “the commandment said, Thou shalt not take the Lord’s name in vain.” Then, Cico says to him, while pointing to the cross: “[s]wear by the cross of the church that you will never hunt or kill a carp.”\footnote{Ibid., 107.} By making Antonio swear in the Christian God’s name not to violate an indigenous God, Cico deconstructs the binary between Christianity vs. indigenous religion and thereby demonstrates to Antonio how he can simultaneously believe in and respect both.

Yet it is Ultima who continuously cautions Antonio against the dangers of choosing between separate cultural identities. Instead, Ultima convinces Antonio to embrace a combination of cultural identities consisting of Anglo-American, Indian-Mexican, and Spanish parts. By means of Ultima, Anaya thus goes beyond the revitalization of the Chicanos’ Indian legacy as advocated by the Chicano Movement and argues for a more inclusive Chicano/a identity that also acknowledges its Anglo side. There are many ways in which Ultima teaches Antonio not to step into the pitfall of Chicano/a essentialism, but to choose in favour of cultural hybridity. For instance, Antonio learns from Ultima that his
“spirit shared in the spirit of all things” and thereby is part of many cultures.\textsuperscript{124} Ultima’s role as cultural negotiator becomes even more apparent in Antonio’s dreams, which symbolize Antonio’s transition from being confronted with making choices between cultures to his awareness of his hybrid identity. There is one particular dream in which this becomes very clear: [Antonio] “thought the end had come to everything…[he] heard a voice speak above the sound of the storm.”\textsuperscript{125} At that moment he saw Ultima, and the dream continues as follows:

\begin{quote}
Cease! she cried to the raging powers, and the power from the heavens and the power from the earth obeyed her…Stand, Antonio, she commanded, and I stood. You both know, she spoke to my father and mother, that the sweet water of the moon which falls as rain is the same water that gathers into rivers and flows to fill the seas. …The waters are one, Antonio. I looked into her bright, clear eyes and understood her truth. You have been seeing only parts… and not looking into the great cycle that binds us all. Then there was peace in my dreams and I could rest.\textsuperscript{126}
\end{quote}

In this dream Antonio realizes that all cultural parts that contribute to his identity flow together, furnishing him with a hybrid identity that consists of mixed blood, mixed histories, and a mixture of religion. Moreover, like the flowing water, his hybrid identity is fluid too in the sense that it continuously negotiates different cultures like Anzaldúa’s mestiza who constantly packs and repacks her backpack.

The “peace” is Antonio’s starting point for embracing the three cultures that shape his life. As can be seen in his dream, Antonio accepts Ultima’s wisdom and embraces, on the one
hand, the Spanish and Mexican cultures of his parents, which becomes apparent in his discussion with his father, who says to Antonio: “[p]erhaps it is time we gave up the old differences [between the Lunas and Márezes],”\textsuperscript{127} to which Antonio answers: “[t]hen maybe I do not have to be just Márez, or Luna, perhaps I can be both…it seems I am so much a part of the past.”\textsuperscript{128} In turn, his father answers him: “[a]lready, every generation, every man is a part of his past. He cannot escape it, but he may reform the old materials, make something new—.”\textsuperscript{129} Antonio realizes that this is exactly Ultima’s wise lesson to him.

Yet, after the dream is over, Antonio also accepts his American identity, because, although his teacher Miss Maestas had earlier embarrassed him in front of the class “and the boys and girls laughed” at him,\textsuperscript{130} he now “was happy to see her” and felt glad he could go to school and learn from her.\textsuperscript{131} He decides to use “the magic in the letters” to comprehend and articulate his hybrid identity in the English language that used to be foreign to him.\textsuperscript{132} Moreover, while at the start of the novel Antonio cannot imagine a life beyond the safety of his community, after the dream he becomes very self-reliant and individualistic, telling his father that “I decided on my own…[a]nd that is what I must do.”\textsuperscript{133} At this moment Antonio releases himself from the traditional Spanish-Mexican family life and embraces the Anglo-American notion of individualism. Furthermore, at the end of the novel, Antonio recognizes that “[s]ometime in the future I will have to build my own dream out of those things that were so much a part of my childhood.”\textsuperscript{134} He hereby means that he will build a future from the cultural elements which he experienced at his Spanish-Mexican home, at the river of the golden carp, and at his Anglo-American school.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{127} Anaya, 247.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 247.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 247.
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 58.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 246.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 261.
\end{flushleft}
In this way Anaya’s novel, in Lamadrid’s words, “incorporates a dynamic, even dialectical awareness of historical forces, from the colonization by Hispanic farmers and ranchers to the coming of the Anglos.” While at first being raised to be a leader of the Chicano Movement, Antonio leaves their essentialist and exclusionary definition of Chicano/identity behind when Ultima raises him to be a different leader, representing no longer Chicano/a ethnic nationalism, but a new movement that identifies with and embraces all cultural “Others.” Ultima thus develops in Antonio what Anzaldúa has termed the “new mestiza consciousness” and prevents Antonio from being locked into a mindset limited by either- or choices. Eventually, Bless Me, Ultima thus shows that “strategic essentialism,” as it was employed by the Chicano nationalists, is a mere reproduction of the dominant view, except on one’s own terms. It may well function as a way to raise one’s voice against the oppressor, but it inevitably denies the significant impact of the “Other” on constituting the Chicano/a identity. Instead, the novel articulates a process of identity formation that is based upon the dialectical interaction between three distinct cultures; in this way illustrating Bhabha’s point that: “[hybridity] displays the necessary deformation…of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power.” Put differently, Anaya’s novel moves the process of identity formation beyond incompatible cultural binaries. Yet, as the following novel will illustrate, this kind of identity formation ultimately has to go beyond the categories of race and ethnicity.

136 Anzaldúa, 99.
137 Ibid., 100.
138 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 159-160.
Chapter IV:
A Queer Narrative Takeover: The Significance of Homosexuality and Gender for Chicano/a Cultural Hybridity in Arturo Islas’ *The Rain God: A Desert Tale*

In comparison to earlier decades, the positive characteristics of hybridity as a cultural marker for the configuration of Chicano/a identity were developed to a more sophisticated level during the 1980s by theorists of post-colonialism. In many of these theories, as outlined in Chapter one, the notion of hybridity became more inclusive in that it took account of socio-economic positions, sexual roles, and gender. It was especially Anzaldúa who emphasized the need for the Chicano/a community to embrace the valuable roles their homosexual members could perform as supreme transgressors of cultural boundaries. Bhabha too emphasized the significance of sexuality and gender and argued that the “body is always simultaneously inscribed in both the economy of pleasure and desire and the economy of discourse, domination, and power.”

Put differently, in the discussion on hybridity the dichotomy of heterosexuality vs. homosexuality, or, more concretely macho vs. queer, and its deconstruction acquired a crucial importance.

One particular Chicano novel embraces this turn in hybridity studies most explicitly and that is Arturo Islas’ *The Rain God: A Desert Tale* (1984). Although this novel’s title implies an indigenous tale, it primarily tries to negotiate a wide range of socio-cultural binaries (Indian vs. Spanish, Mexican vs. Anglo-American) and various cultural positions (pro Spanish, pro Anglo-American, pro-acculturation, and anti-assimilation) in relation to issues of class and sexual preferences. Sexual preference is a very important element in this novel and manifests itself in the opposition between a macho (in its original meaning a strong man who marries a woman, leads, and protects the family) and a homosexual. Islas is one of the first to actively address the issues of gender and sexuality before Anzaldúa’s influential work on transgressing borders and hailing the homosexual as the prototypical Mestiza.

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identity. Homosexuality, within the Chicano community, was and still is a taboo as it contradicts both the Catholic religion and the dominant Mexican notion of machismo.

In this chapter I will argue that Islas tries to interrogate the essentialist notion of Chicano/a identity upheld by many of his characters and to argue for greater inclusiveness, flexibility, and fluidity by sketching the many overlapping and enabling ambiguities between various identity categories (including heterosexuals and homosexuals). In particular, he tries to highlight the detrimental consequences of binary thinking on the protagonists. After having interrogated traditionally “stable” identity categories and hierarchically organized oppositions, the novel sets out to deconstruct them and establish a new identity by means of the main protagonist, Miguel Chico, who develops a form of proto-hybridity characterized by fluid identity constructions that include a tolerance for different sexual preferences. In this way Islas’ novel anticipates the notion of mestizaje / hybridity as it was later developed by the aforementioned postcolonial theorists.

Isla first outlines the fixed binary oppositions that Miguel Chico experiences among both his relatives, the Angel family, and in U.S. society in general. At the very beginning, Miguel indicates the negative associations his grandmother has with the Spanish language. His grandmother told everyone “to call her ‘Mama Chona’…and never, ever to address her as abuelita, the Spanish equivalent to granny,” thereby preferring the Mexican word “chona” over the Spanish word. This opposition between languages makes Miguel feel very uncomfortable about what language to speak and which culture he belongs to.

There are other instances where Miguel witnesses the presence of cultural oppositions. For instance, when his mother, Juanita, and her sister, Nina, get ready for a party, Nina asks her sister why they (Anglo-Americans) never write about them. Juanita answers her: “[w]ho

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141 Islas, 4. Emphasis in original.
142 Islas, 22.
wants to read about Mexicans? We’re not glamorous enough. We just live.”\textsuperscript{143} This discussion clearly indicates that they know how deprecatingly a large part of Anglo-America thinks of them. The fact that they drop the issue without contemplating it further makes Miguel, who is four years old at the time, simply accept and internalize the inferior position his family has in American society. At a later stage in his life, Miguel again experiences the denigrating attitude of Anglo-America toward Mexicans. This becomes apparent when Miguel is in a hospital, being treated by Anglo-American nurses who do not make any effort to pronounce his name correctly, pronouncing it just as “Mee-gwell.”\textsuperscript{144}

Anglo-American disregard of Mexicans is also apparent when Felix gets killed. His death, caused by an Anglo-American soldier to whom Felix felt attracted, barely makes the newspapers and the soldier is not prosecuted, because in Lena’s (Felix’s daughter’s) mind Anglo-Americans “did not give a damn about people like them.”\textsuperscript{145} Moreover, before he dies, Felix discusses the negative impact the Anglo-American school has on his son, JoEl: “I know what they’re teaching kids in those schools. How to disobey their parents...And they also teach them to be ashamed of where they come from.”\textsuperscript{146} These examples of a cultural collision between Mexicans and Anglo-Americans are Islas’ first step toward exposing how the prevalence of racial hierarchies has a detrimental impact on Miguel’s self-worth and cultural identity.

Yet, this sense of Mexican inferiority is at the same time combined with a sense of superiority vis-à-vis indigenous cultures. When Felix, Miguel’s uncle, decides to marry an Indian girl, Miguel’s aunts criticize him for it: [h]ow could you do this to us? After all the sacrifices we’ve made for you? Now you’re going to marry that India and leave the burden of

\textsuperscript{143} Islas, 41.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 124.
this household to us.” 147 The aunts clearly despise the Indian girl, showing a large degree of disrespect and superiority. Mama Chona has a similarly scornful attitude toward Indians and tries to denigrate Miguel’s Indian legacy, which leads to uncertainty about his identity: “[t]he snobbery Mama Chona and Tia Cuca displayed in every way possible against the Indian and in favour of the Spanish in Angel’s blood was a constant puzzlement to most of the grandchildren.” 148 Islas illustrates here not only Anzaldúa’s point that within Chicano/a culture “commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture,” 149 but he also shows that in order for the polarities and oppositions to be resolved, it is also necessary for many Chicanos/as to see how they duplicate the hegemonic attitude of Anglo-America in their reaction to their Indian past.

Next to racial binaries, Islas pays attention to another significant polarity, namely that of heterosexual vs. homosexual and in this way tries to create, in Anzaldúa’s words: “a tolerance for contradictions.” 150 This dichotomy becomes apparent in the Angel family’s consideration of homossexuality as abnormal. For instance, when Felix dies “‘The Family,’ as usual—more concerned with its pride than with justice—had begun to lie to itself about the truth.” 151 Put differently, the Angel family denies the role homosexuality had played in Felix’s death. This explicit focus on homosexuality counters Cherrie Moraga’s argument that Islas’ novel fails to address homosexuality. 152 Moreover, this explicit emphasis on the taboo is Islas’ way of illustrating the pivotal significance that homosexuality has on the configuration of Felix’s and, later, Miguel’s identity.

147 Islas, 127. Emphasis in original
148 Ibid., 142.
149 Anzaldúa, 100.
150 Ibid., 101.
151 Islas, 85.
In contrast to the two novels discussed above Islas emphasizes the importance of gender stereotypes and the need to challenge “male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos;”\(^\text{153}\) an element that assumed an increasingly central role in post-colonial theories of hybridity during the 1980s. Miguel’s father, Miguel Grande is one of the best examples of this because he can be perceived as the personification of the Mexican “macho.” He is a womanizer and does not feel bad about it, which, according to Octavio Paz, is a typical character trait of a macho.\(^\text{154}\) Mama Chona, for instance, describes him as shameless when he brings his lover home to his own children. This is the reason why his wife, Juanita, represents, in Paz’s words, the Mary-like “long-suffering Mexican woman.”\(^\text{155}\) Juanita is expected to keep up the morale of the family and to run the household, but all by means of self-sacrifice. Even when her husband, Miguel Grande, cheats on her she has to keep her head high and she even allows him to see his mistress, Lola. These representations of the stereotypical gender roles of the macho vs. the submissive wife prepare the way for Islas’ eventual interrogation of these very roles.

Islas not only questions traditional gender roles and sexual norms, but interrogates the dichotomy between upper- and lower-class in the Angel family as well. Mama Chona is a prime example of an upper-class mentality because she considers Miguel’s babysitter, Maria, as “ill educated” and as having “bad influences.”\(^\text{156}\) She prefers Maria to stay away from all of her grandchildren and explains to “her children that the Angels were better than the illiterate riffraff from across the river,”\(^\text{157}\) which refers to the uneducated Mexicans and thereby stresses the importance she places on social class differences.

\(^{153}\) Anzaldúa, 102-103.
\(^{155}\) Paz, 38.
\(^{156}\) Islas, 14.
\(^{157}\) Ibid., 15.
It is exactly these kinds of identity conceptualizations in terms of Anglo vs. Mexican vs. Indian, heteronormativity vs. homosexuality, machismo vs. marianismo, and upper vs. lower class that Islas tries to challenge by means of his protagonist Miguel. Instead of making Miguel side with any of his family members’ one-dimensional position Islas places him in a central position. Miguel, who figuratively is the family’s psychoanalyst, analyzes his family and its historical foundations and realizes that he does not want to choose between the polarities that exist in his life, but wants to move beyond opposites and focus on inclusion through historical awareness and the development of a hybrid identity; an identity that is analogous to Anzaldúa’s new mestiza consciousness, which in essence corresponds to Bhabha’s “Third Space,” that “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; [and] that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.”158 In his novel, Islas shows that an “in-between” state can be established once Miguel recognizes the dichotomies and deconstructs them. Islas focuses especially on what Bhabha describes as “productivity of internal differences which replaces colonial, racist or nationalist conceptions of exclusion of the other.”159

When Mama Chona, for instance, tells her grandchildren that their Indian legacy ought to be repressed because it makes them inferior, Miguel questions this and also makes it clear that even if she represses it, there is no way she could ever escape it: “no surgery could efface the Indian cheekbones” nor her “dark skin.”160 Moreover, Miguel shows that the polarity between the despised Indian identity and the celebrated Spanish one is not as static as Mama Chona believes it is, because she herself gives him the Indian poem “Netzahualcoyotl,”161 which undermines her attempted denial of her Indian past.

158 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 55.
159 Fludernick, 13.
160 Islas, 27.
161 Ibid., 162.
Miguel simultaneously realizes, however, that ignoring his grandmother’s pro-
Spanish influence on him also means to ignore a significant part of his own sense of self. While he acknowledges his Indian past, he cannot cast aside the dominant Spanish-identified view of his grandmother because she “was still very much a part of him.”\(^{162}\) Thus, although his grandmother represents a position of exclusion, it cannot be discarded completely. This echoes Bhabha who argues that “identification is a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness.”\(^ {163}\) Miguel’s identity thus becomes ambivalent because he realizes that both cultures, the Indian and the Spanish, are components of Miguel’s hybrid sense of self. Miguel wants “to tell others about Mama Chona and people like Maria. He could then go on to shape himself, if not completely free of their influence and distortions, at least with some knowledge of them. He believed in the power of knowledge.”\(^ {164}\)

With regard to racial hierarchies, Islas also challenges Anglo notions of superiority and the internalization of racism and cultural inferiority within the Angel family. Islas defies these hierarchies by means of the monster in Miguel Chico’s dream. As Miguel faces the monster, which represents both “the victim and the slayer,” and “the manipulator and the manipulated,”\(^ {165}\) he can let go of the binaries that exist. When the monster in the dream tells Miguel to jump off a railing, Miguel faces the monster and says: “[a]ll right, but I’m taking you with me.”\(^ {166}\) As they fall, the monster “did not struggle or complain,” indicating that the monster is part of Miguel himself because it represents exactly Miguel’s refusal to make a choice between the binaries that exist in his family and in Anglo-American society in

\(^{162}\) Islas, 28.


\(^{164}\) Islas, 28.

\(^{165}\) Ibid., 159.

\(^{166}\) Ibid., 160.
When Miguel wakes up he feels relieved of the yoke of Mama Chona’s superiority-inferiority distinctions. Moreover, he also realizes that he does not have to choose between his prestigious American university and his family, that is between Anglo-American individuality and Chicano/a community membership.

In addition, the monster also represents the connection between the heterosexual and the homosexual behaviour of Miguel Grande and Miguel respectively and undermines the dominant sexual and gender paradigms for men and women in the Chicano/a community. The best example is when Miguel’s father, Miguel Grande comes to Miguel, whom he considers homosexual and therefore as “Other,” for advice on his marriage and affair. During the conversation Miguel gets his chance to indict his father’s machismo and depict its limitations, such as a lack of feelings of grief and expressions of guilt. As Miguel Grande acknowledges these weaknesses, he finally drops his macho behavior for he starts crying and feels guilty. In this conversation the hierarchy between the macho and the supposedly homosexual “Other” is dismantled. This does not mean, however, that Miguel now feels superior to his father. Although he exposes his father’s weaknesses, he does not do this in a vindictive way. Instead, Miguel addresses his father in both a sensitive and a somewhat distanced way, preferring neither of the two, but using them interchangeably. Thus, Islas demonstrates in this scene that “gay men have had the courage...to challenge the current masculinity.”

Next to the emphasis on homosexuality, Islas also pays attention to and deconstructs yet another dimension of traditional Chicano/a gender roles and demonstrates Anzaldúa’s argument that “women at least have the guts to break out of bondage.” There are at least two characters who illustrate this point. The first example is Lola, who is a strong, independent woman, not attracted to anyone, nor is she submissive or showing emotion. The
second example is Felix’s daughter, Lena, who, after her father’s death, sets out to investi-
gate the truth about her father’s murder on her own. By means of those two women, Islas
illustrates that women can perform an independent role within the Chicano/a community
and, as Anzaldúa argues, no longer have to “condone…and…no longer [have to] put up with” male domination.\textsuperscript{170}

In addition to challenging stereotypical gender roles, Lena also performs another
function in the novel. She is considered “a scandal to the family” because she hangs out with
“‘low-class’ Mexicans [and Pachucos],”\textsuperscript{171} which was outrageous for some of her family
members, such as Mama Chona. Lena’s dealing with Pachucos, but also Juanita’s hiring of
Maria, is Islas’ way of interrogating socio-economic binaries. Although Mama Chona
dislikes Maria, Juanita argues that people like Mama Chona are “no better than anyone else”
and she refuses to let her children to grow up with a sense of superiority. In this way, Miguel
receives mixed perceptions from his family about class and, thereby, learns to challenge
established notions of class in the Chicano/a community. Moreover, with regard to Lena’s
dealings with Pachucos, “Felix defended her strongly against the objections of” family
members.\textsuperscript{172} Hereby, Islas also emphasizes the mediating role the homosexual Felix has in
his family and in this way echoes Anzaldúa’s argument that the Chicano/a community ought
“to listen to what…[the] jotería [queer] is saying.”\textsuperscript{173}

Apart from acquiring knowledge about his own past and embracing the monster of his
dreams, Miguel also undermines the hierarchical ordering of binary oppositions by means of
reading and writing. He regards himself and others as books: “He wanted to edit
them…make them behave differently.”\textsuperscript{174} Recognizing his and others’ limitations and
subsequently editing this “text” allows Miguel to draft new identities that are no longer pre-

\textsuperscript{170} Anzaldúa, 105.
\textsuperscript{171} Islas, 85.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{173} Anzaldúa, 107.
\textsuperscript{174} Islas, 26.
determined by his society. Instead, these creative acts allow Miguel to define himself as “in-between,” that is the writing process permits him to negotiate the Indian, Spanish, and Anglo-American parts of his self, as well as its concomitant gender and class implications.

Simultaneously, writing is a form of, in Klor de Alva’s sense, “colonial discourse” for Miguel, which he uses as a creative strategy against both the Anglo-American and Mama Chona’s Spanish dominance to recover and re-evaluate his family’s history in a less exclusionary way. In this way, Miguel provides an inclusive narrative of his family’s recorded and unrecorded history, recovering also those parts of his family’s true heritage that had always been denied by the two hegemonic cultures. Miguel thus gives his family’s history a proper place and is able “to make peace with his dead, to prepare a feast for them so that they would stop haunting him.” Miguel realizes that he can neither deny the repressed aspects of his family’s history nor the Anglo-American impact on it because they have shaped his family and because, as Klor de Alva aptly explains: “the Other is always latent in the We.” Islas creates here a level of proto-hybridity, for the writing represents not only a transgression of the binaries, but also the creation of a bridge between the binaries, in the sense that Spanish and Indian, heterosexual and homosexual, Anglo-American and Mexican, lower- and upper-class can come together in a mutually sustaining way.

To conclude, *The Rain God* is a novel that not only aims at gaining the attention of Americans (by being written in English) nor is it a novel that exclusively focuses on Chicano/a history. Instead, this novel comes closest to promoting a hybrid identity as envisioned by Bhabha and Anzaldúa, among others. Islas shows that Chicanos like Miguel do not have to uphold the exclusionary binary oppositions of colonizer vs. colonized, Indian vs. Spanish, or Mexican vs. Anglo-American, but illustrates that those binaries can be

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176 Islas, 160.
177 Jorge Klor de Alva, 19.
transcended and can mutually transform each other because as Klor de Alva explained, the “Other” is always present in the “Self.” One needs the “Other” to define one’s “Self,” and therefore the “Other” ultimately becomes part of the Self. 178

It has become quite clear that Islas’ novel constitutes a reaction against the essentialist identity conceptualizations of the Chicano Movement that exclusively focused on the Chicanos’ Indian and Spanish heritage while denying any influence of the second colonizer, the U.S. However, Islas also demonstrates that the construction of one’s identity does not merely depend on the categories of race and ethnicity, but is also defined by aspects of gender, one’s sexual orientation, and one’s socio-economic position. Islas thus shows an anticipation of Anzaldúa’s multidimensional concept of the mestiza consciousness, as well as her emphasis on the significance of the queer as the ones who can “break down the subject-object duality,” 179 and are, in Anzaldúa’s words, “the supreme crossers of cultures” because they are interested in and have knowledge of the cultural “Other.” 180

In this context, the process of reading and writing can be a significant tool in establishing a “Third Space” of cultural negotiation. Reading allows Miguel to recognize the polarities that exist in his identity, but also permits him to see where the opportunities lie to challenge both the dominant Spanish culture and the American “Other.” Writing, then, “as a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, [and] quite simply mocks its power to be a model,” 181 can function as a way to challenge the hegemonic historical view of both colonizers and can allow one to write one’s own personal history. In this way, writing can perform the role of creating “a tolerance for ambiguity” and, 182 as Islas has shown, it can help to establish a space in which all aspects of one’s identity can eventually unfold and engage with each other.

178 Jorge Klor de Alva, “Nahua Colonial Discourse and the Appropriation of the (European) Other,” 19.
179 Anzaldúa, 102.
180 Ibid., 106.
181 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 125.
182 Anzaldúa, 101.
Conclusion

In a 1999 lecture, Homi K. Bhabha emphasizes the need to protect the process of narration: “[w]hen you fail to protect the right to narrate, you are in danger of filling the silence with sirens.” The novels analyzed in this dissertation represent counter-voices to these sirens by providing an oppositional narrative to the hegemonic Spanish and Anglo-American “Others.” Moreover, they represent an endeavour to challenge the multiple dichotomies constructed by the colonizers as well as the various traditions and taboos within the Chicano/a community.

More importantly, these novels, while being written at different stages in Chicano/a history and at various moments in the theoretical development of the concept of hybridity, set out to promote the crucial role that a positive notion of hybridity can perform in the constitution of Chicano/a identity.

Postcolonial theories of hybridity, developed by Homi K. Bhabha and others, are particularly helpful in analyzing these respective novels because of their deconstructive approaches. Yet these novels also illustrate the need to revise the deconstructive notion of hybridity in one crucial respect. While Bhabha’s concept, for example, is based on the central assumption of a single colonizer vs. a colonized people the history and identity of Chicanos/as is determined by two culturally hegemonic “Others.” This makes the process of deconstructing Self-Other polarities all the more complex.

Villareal’s Pocho and Anaya’s Bless Me, Ultima can be read as two early attempts to develop such a deconstructive notion of proto-hybridity by challenging the static racial and ethnic assumptions of the US’s assimilation policy and the Chicano Movement’s ethnic nationalism, respectively. Yet it is Islas’ novel that comes closest to Anzaldúa’s notion of a mestiza consciousness and Bhabha’s concept of “Third Space,” because this novel does not exclusively focus on race and ethnicity but also incorporates gender, sexual orientation

(specifically homosexuality) and class, thereby providing a much more inclusive and multidimensional concept of hybridity. This multidimensionality is of specific importance today because, as Zimmerman and Geist-Martin argue, “[a] queer gender body…disrupts this binary of all male or all female, creating a dialectical tension that offers a space to explore the temporality of Bhabha’s…proposed third space.”¹⁸⁴ Moreover, the element of homosexuality, as depicted in Islas’ novel, gains increasing currency today because of “the beneficial relationship between queer theory and the concept of hybridity.”¹⁸⁵ It is increasingly acknowledged that these theories are interrelated because they are both focused on resistance / confrontation and states of in-between.¹⁸⁶ One scholar who focuses on these interrelations is Laurie Grobman. In her study Multicultural Hybridity: Transforming American Literary Scholarship (2007) she draws heavily on Homi K. Bhabha in order to argue that texts by writers of color are multiply inflected hybrids that blur, but do not erase, cultural difference, thereby allowing for multiple crossings…of meaning…[and] that this notion of hybridity does not privilege or subsume competing forms, and that it enables readers to escape limiting binaries by considering the countless relationships among a text’s many variables.¹⁸⁷

Her theory reinstates the importance of the concept of hybridity in the analysis of American literature, including Chicano/a literature. In essence, this work thus illustrates the continuing pivotal role the concept of hybridity performs in American literature and literary scholarship,

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 89.
¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 89.
¹⁸⁷ Laurie Grobman, Multicultural Hybridity: Transforming American Literary Scholarship (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2007), xiv.
more than half a century after authors like Villareal, Anaya and Islas had started to foreground its importance.
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