

Gabriele Pisarz-Ramírez\*

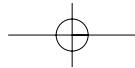
## ➲ From Nepantla to Amerindia: Transnationality in Mexican American Literature and Art

In 2004, the then president of the American Studies Association, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, dedicated her presidential address entitled “Crossroads of Culture—the Transnational Turn in American Studies” to the late Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa. Calling Anzaldúa “a brilliant theorist of the arbitrariness of borders,” Fisher Fishkin pointed out the importance of the study of the transnational “[a]t a time when American foreign policy is marked by nationalism, arrogance, and Manichean oversimplification” (Fisher Fishkin 2005: 21). Referring to the many scholarly efforts, in recent years, to look beyond the nation as a basic unit for analysis to the many contact zones in the Americas, the critic described American Studies as an important site of knowledge “where borders both within and outside the nation are interrogated and studied, rather than reified and reinforced” (Fisher Fishkin 2005: 20).

Fisher Fishkin was, of course, not the first to point to the specific importance of the Mexican-U.S. American border for transnational studies. Especially the critical endeavors which have more recently been subsumed under terms such as “New American Studies”, “Postnational Studies”, and “Hemispheric Studies” and which focus on the multiple historical and cultural connections between the various regions of the continent have identified the border to Mexico as a prototypical site of interculturality, transnationality and critical revisions of the nation state (Kaplan/Pease 1994; Pease 1994; Jay 1997; Rowe 1998). Janice Radway has called border discourses an important body of work which helps us understand that “territories and geographies need to be reconceived as spatially-situated and intricately intertwined networks of social relationships that tie specific locales to particular histories” (Radway 1999: 15). And Amy Kaplan, in her seminal essay, “Left alone with America”, has identified the Mexican-American borderlands as one of the spaces that “link the study of ethnicity and immigration inextricably to the study of international relations and empire”, and she observes that “Chicano Studies has brought an international perspective to American studies” (Kaplan 1994: 17). Quite a number of years before the significance of border discourses for American studies became evident, Chicano theoreticians such as Ramón Saldívar and José David Saldívar,

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\* Gabriele Pisarz-Ramírez is Associate Lecturer of American Literature and Culture at the University of Leipzig. Her research focuses on interculturality and transnationality in the Americas. Among her recent publications is a book on postnational discourses in Chicano/a cultural productions (MexAmerica, 2005). Her current research is concerned with the transnational contexts of national identity formation in the early USA.



Hector Calderón and others, had already pointed out the revisionist potential of these discourses with respect to critical renegotiations of national identity and national culture (J.D. Saldívar 1991; R. Saldívar 1990; Calderón/Saldívar 1991; Herrera-Sobek/Viramontes 1988). Studies such as Ramón Saldívar's *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (1990) and José David Saldívar's *The Dialectics of Our America* (1991) and *Border Matters. Remapping American Cultural Studies* (1997) read the border not as a peripheral but as a strategic space.

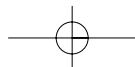
While the intercultural subject position of "Chicano/a" has come to be seen as an epistemologically privileged one with regard to transnational perspectives and revisions of traditional concepts of nationality, it is hard to ignore the tacit reproduction of academic hierarchies in many theoretical projects in which Mexican Americans are posited as important objects of study while their own conceptual production remains unacknowledged. So far, even New Americanists such as Donald Pease, who in his introductions to his two volumes *New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon* (1992) and *National Identities and Post-Americanist Narratives* (1994) names 'marginalized groups' such as Mexican Americans in the U.S. as 'postnational forces', but fails to mention the contribution of these groups to the New Americanist debate. Apart from the consideration of a few key texts of Chicano/a theoretical discourse, such as Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, analyses of cultural production by Mexican Americans are scarce even within these new transnationalist critical fields. While many critics recognize the importance of the border as a discursive realm, the contribution of Mexican Americans to changing notions of America is all too often reduced to areas such as food, popular music, and what urban sociologist Mike Davis has termed the "tropicalizing [of] cold urban space".<sup>1</sup> Addressing this problem, critics such as Günter Lenz have called for a more explicitly dialogical approach to the post-national project of the New Americanists in order to

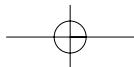
transcend the self-critical and self-reflective stance of white intellectuals that again resituates the counter-hegemonic articulations of those "figures of race, class, and gender" in the complex and expansive dramatizations of their own discourses (Lenz 1999: 12).

In this essay, I will explore a variety of cultural productions by Mexican American writers and artists from the 1990s with the aim of investigating how these texts and artworks revise the conventional script of nationalism. I will argue that these productions reinvent Americanness in a multiplicity of ways and from various subject positions, while at the same time participating in major theoretical debates about globalization, migration, subalternity, gender, sexuality, and ecology. As I will demonstrate, these artists and writers critique and reinterpret linear versions of national culture and identity, constructing new visions of community, identity, and cultural citizenship, and offering alternative read-

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<sup>1</sup> In his study *Magical urbanism. Latinos Reinvent the US City* (2000), Davis claims that the Latino population is re-shaping not only the city, but the United States and the Americas, but reduces their agency to the "magic revivification" of urban spaces. Davis' examples of how Latinos change the city in terms of culture are restricted to sparse references to Latino food and to the refurbishment of Latino housing areas, overshadowing a history of conceptual and artistic production which has more thoroughly redefined Americanness and American urban space than tropical looks and Latino shopping centers.





ings of “America”. At the same time I will focus on the contradictory aspects of some of these cultural productions, especially as they attempt to replace the national collective with pan-American visions of community. The texts and artworks under study here span the genres of essay, fictional autobiography, performance, travel writing, and muralism. While I will be referring to a series of different authors and artists, I will concentrate on works by Pat Mora, Luis Alfaro, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Yreina Cerváñez.

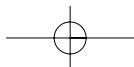
Since it first came to prominence in the culturally nationalist 1960s and 1970s, the narrative, artistic and theoretical production of Mexican Americans in the United States has undergone enormous changes. Against the background of eroding visions of a collective identity as propagated by the Chicano Movement, the 1980s and 1990s were characterized by an ongoing discursive heterogenization process resulting in representations of a highly diverse range of historical experiences and cultural practices in literature and art. At the same time, the concept “Chicano/a” has become subject to an increasingly wide scope of performative definitions. From their diverse positionalities, Mexican American writers and artists have come forward with new discursive constructions of community which are not constituted through homogenizing mechanisms excluding difference but often have a relational, dialogic character. Moreover, Chicano/a cultural productions nowadays participate in a wide range of theoretical discourses and institutional contexts. Many Mexican American intellectuals, writers and artists teach at US American academic institutions; Mexican American painting has moved from the street (community murals) into galleries and art centers; supermarket chains organize sales exhibitions of Mexican American artworks.<sup>2</sup> Whereas identity constructions in the 1960s and 1970s were frequently characterized by the articulation of a specific ethnically defined and closely confined subject position like Chicano/a, more recent cultural productions transcend the concerns and claims of a “minority culture”, formulating new claims on the American imaginary, often from subject positions which emphasize the differentiated, decentered, and transnational character of the Mexican American experience.

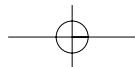
The Mexican American author Pat Mora, who was born in 1942 in El Paso, calls herself a “Texican”, a name which points out the cultural dynamics of an identity between Mexico, Texas and the U.S. In her book of essays, *Nepantla. Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993), she describes the state of cultural liminality at the border. *Nepantla*, a nahua word which means “land in the middle”, emphasizes the plurality of worlds coexisting among the nahuanas in the sixteenth century. This concept has been used by other Chicano/a writers, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, who calls *nepantla*

an in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity to a new identity [...] The border is in a constant nepantla state and it is an analogue of the planet (Anzaldúa 1993: 110).

In using the concept of *nepantla*, both Anzaldúa and Mora focus on the potential of liminal border spaces for an epistemological critique, for perspectives beyond conven-

<sup>2</sup> In 2002 and 2003 the supermarket chain *Target* organised the exhibitions *Chicano Now: American Expressions* and *Chicano Visions: American Painters on the Verge* which toured 15 American cities. DaimlerChrysler was a major sponsor of these exhibitions.





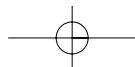
tional definitions of identity and history. They claim a specific inter-cultural border identity, from which monological concepts of national culture and linear history are questioned. At a time when concepts of liminality have become somewhat inflationary in theoretical debates, when heterotopias, thirdspaces, and inter-spaces are about to lose their critical edge because of sheer overuse, Mora's and Anzaldúa's use of *nepantla* marks both a convergence of Chicana/o critical discourses with these debates and at the same time a specific contribution to them which is very much grounded in the situated knowledge of the Mexican American border space in South Texas. Mora's focus is on the possibilities and the responsibilities of her position "between worlds". Arguing from an ecofeminist point of view, she compares the wealth of residual voices that exist at the margins of homogenizing national narratives to endangered species in nature. She emphasizes the interdependence of cultural and natural diversity and the necessary preservation of cultural heterogeneity. Like many life forms that have been destroyed in the course of genetic manipulation and the domestication of desert spaces in the Southwest, she maintains, the variety of cultural, sexual and racial and gendered subject positions needs to be preserved (Mora 1993: 15-39). She considers all of them essential for the continuation of life on earth:

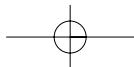
Pride in cultural identity, in the set of learned and shared language, symbols, and meanings, needs to be fostered not only because of nostalgia or romanticism, but because it is essential to our survival. The oppressive homogenization of humanity in our era of international technological and economic interdependence endangers us all (Mora 1993: 36).

Mora's call for cultural diversity is a call for what cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has termed cultural citizenship. Rosaldo expands classic definitions of citizenship which are based on civic, political, and social rights, by an important dimension:

The way force is deployed at the border expresses dominant Anglo cultural views of limited Latino rights to full U.S. citizenship. [...] Cultural citizenship operates in an uneven field of structural inequalities where the dominant claims of universal citizenship assume a propertied white male subject and usually blind themselves to their exclusions and marginalizations of people who differ in gender, race, sexuality, and age. Cultural citizenship attends not only to dominant exclusions and marginalizations, but also to subordinate aspirations for and definitions of enfranchisement (Rosaldo 1997: 36f).

Rosaldo thus formulates a claim to citizenship also for those subjects that remain excluded in traditional conceptualizations of national community. But Mora's approach transcends the demand for an equal representation of all cultures: her call for the preservation of different perspectives and cultures reevaluates marginal and liminal spaces not only as sites of "difference" but as sources of knowledge. Mora establishes liminal spaces as spaces of alternative epistemological production, revising concepts of multi-cultural diversity which see differences mainly as peripheral addenda to a basically mono-cultural center. This becomes particularly visible in her poetic family biography *House of Houses* which was awarded the prestigious Premio Aztlán. In this text she unfolds the histories of several generations of her family on both sides of the border as stories that are closely linked to the intercultural and transnational history of South Texas. These stories mark what literary critic Walter Mignolo has described as alterna-





tive “loci of enunciation” from which alternative perspectives on the region emanate and from which monotopical and linear versions of history are questioned. Mignolo has pointed out the significance of such a “pluritopic” approach:

What a pluritopic approach emphasizes is not cultural relativity or multiculturalism, but the social and human interests in the act of telling a story as political intervention. The politics of enacting and of constructing loci of enunciation are at stake, rather than the diversity of representations resulting from differential locations in telling stories or building theories (Mignolo 1995: 15).

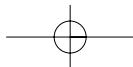
Mora (as Mignolo) rejects the universalist idea that the world can be interpreted from one “central” position. Observing natural phenomena around her, she also visualizes the idea of a “pluritopic” world constitution:

I watch the river, its surface tension, and think of parallel universes, unknown realms, *on either side of eyes, mirrors, water*, how we see through these reflective surfaces, *how they reverse images*, how the surfaces reveal and conceal (my italics; Mora 1997: 270).

The imagination of “parallel universes” acknowledges the plurality of traditions of interpretation and knowledge which are not subsumed under a universal model of explanation. In her family biography Mora concretizes this perspective in the polyvocality of her narrative which tells family history from different and diverging angles. Sometimes family members—living and dead ones—debate about different versions of a past event, or a story narrated by one family member is supplemented by others with further details. The fictive house in Mora’s text has rooms for all the living and the dead in her family, privileging spatial over temporal structures. The spirits of deceased family members have as much discursive agency as the living. This signals, on the one hand, the importance of the past and of past generations as integral parts of the family. On the other hand, the ghosts function as what Avery Gordon has called “figures of the unrepresented”. Gordon describes haunting as “a constituent element of modern social life (Gordon 1997: 7) and views ghosts as “social figures” which bring back the repressed and the silenced. She names examples of “haunting presences” in texts by Luisa Valenzuela, Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison, and calls haunting a social phenomenon which points to the limitations of our “prevailing modes of inquiry” (Gordon 1997: 8). In *House of Houses* the ghosts bring back moments of an invisible history excluded from dominant national narratives: the history of Mexican Americans in South Texas which is here related through the story of a family of six generations.

Patricia Mora, born in El Paso, Texas, daughter of the desert, of the border, of the Río Grande del Norte, daughter of Estela Delgado, who is the greatgranddaughter of Anacleta Manquera and Nepomuceno Delgado, granddaughter of Ignacio Delgado y Maquera and María Ignacia Barragán [...] (Mora 1997: 44).

Like an ethnographer Mora collects stories from relatives, dead and alive, which are told to her at the kitchen table, on the porch, or during walks in the garden. From the memories of her aunt Ygnacia, who functions as the most important “informant” on family history on her father’s side, she reconstructs the unsentimental story of her grandfa-



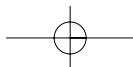
ther, a highly respected judge from Chihuahua, who fled from Villa's troops with his family during the Mexican Revolution and who settled in Texas like many of his compatriots. Mora reports that the grandfather, who was unable to carry on his business in Texas, crossed the border twice daily to work in a law office in Ciudad Juarez, often in the company of destitute migrants who were forced by the border authorities to wash themselves with gasoline before being allowed to enter the U.S. She also tells of her mother Stella who won rhetoric contests as a child and dreamed of going to college but who lost every contest on a regional level when the jurors saw her Spanish last name: Delgado. In telling these stories, Mora revises existing master narratives of the border and of the Mexican American population in the region, narratives that represent Mexican Americans as picturesque and exotic outsiders and that eclipse the power asymmetries between Mexican and Anglo populations in Texas. Influential historians such as Frank Dobie, who were not willing or not able to perceive the complexity of interrelated histories in South Texas, participated in the perpetuation of such narratives.<sup>3</sup> From the local position of an inhabitant both of the border and the desert who knows about the precarious state of life under unstable conditions, Mora reimagines cultural space and critically revises the exclusionary mechanisms of what Ramón Saldívar has termed an "American cultural nationalism" (R. Saldívar 1995: 376).

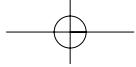
In *House of Houses*, Mora develops a model of community that links ecofeminist approaches with the specific situated knowledge of southern Texan culture and its indigenous origins. Mora's concept of the family does not associate family with the political construct of nation, nor with any Mexican American cultural essence; rather, throughout the narrative, families are metaphorized in images that emphasize notions of natural diversity and ecological balance:

I look around the living room at six generations of desert dwellers now gathered in this dream house hovering near el Río Grande between El Paso and Santa Fe, between the pass to the North and holy faith, a treacherous pass, the route to faith, all of us immigrants. Made of earth as we are, this nested adobe house, its body inherited and temporary, like ours, is protected by exterior walls we create and construct around the fertile interior, layers of vulnerable beauty. Within the body of the family dwell the homes of the next generation, another nesting, and within each of our bodies, all the selves we've been and are, held together by skin, fragile yet sturdy; a paradox, like the house that's green yet in the desert, visible yet private, unique yet organic, old yet new, open yet closed, imagined yet real, a retreat, private yet communal (Mora 1997: 289).

Mora's liminal perspective is made concrete in metaphors of multiplicity and merges traditionally separated concepts such as nature/culture and man/nature. This "ecotopia" situates the family in a scenario of mutual protection, sharing, and continual renewal. Mora compares families to living bodies or to gardens. The metaphor of the family as a living, breathing body and as part of a network of interdependent life systems emphasizes the interconnectedness of human communities with the natural world around them. The metaphor of the garden suggests that families, like gardens, can only survive through adaptation, flexibility and tolerance of diversity. If they are tended, Mora suggests, "gar-

<sup>3</sup> For a study of this kind of narrative, see Limón (1994).



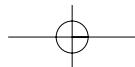


dens, like families, can be timeless". Mora recontextualizes community in an ecocritical framework, taking the socio-ecological and cultural situation of the border region as the basis for an alternative model of kinship. Her utopian vision of the family calls for communal relations based on solidarity which reach beyond the family or the nation.

While Pat Mora writes from the position of a border dweller rooted in the inter-cultural space between Texas, the United States, and Mexico, Luis Alfaro's locus of enunciation is his situation as a gay Latino man in the urban landscape of downtown Los Angeles. Alfaro is one of the first male Mexican American performance artists who explicitly articulate a queer subjectivity. He is part of what theater critic María Teresa Marrero has called a "remarkable explosion of Latina/o gay and lesbian performers and writers" in the late 1980s and the 1990s and which includes plays and performances by authors such as Carmelita Tropicana, Cherrie Moraga, Monica Palacios, Nao Bustamante, and Migdalia Cruz (Marrero 2000: 136f). Alfaro grew up in the inner city Latino District of Los Angeles in the 1960s as the son of Mexican parents. In 1997 he received one of the prestigious MacArthur foundation genius scholarships for his performances, most of which deal with the themes of being Latino and being queer. Alfaro's autobiographical play *Downtown*, a solo performance, recalls in brief episodic pieces memories which highlight his neighborhood, his family, and his biography, reclaiming and recontextualizing downtown Los Angeles from the perspective of a Latino and a gay man. In this piece, he also focuses on the exclusivist mechanisms of his own ethnic group: rejecting the hierarchical structures which characterize the family and the nation, both in Chicano cultural nationalism and in dominant constructions of the U.S. American nation state (see McClintock 1993, 1997). Alfaro embarks on a search for new visions of community beyond traditional heteropatriarchal definitions of both these constructs.

In a montage of monologues and music, as well as various visual materials, the audience sees Alfaro as a child, a young man, and as an adult. Family and local history constitute the frame of an identity search between various contexts: traditional Latino family structures which are shown as repressive but also providing intimacy and a sense of belonging, U.S. American popular culture, a gay community segmented by race and class as well as the postmodern urban climate of Los Angeles which constitutes the background for Alfaro's multicultural socialization.

*Downtown*, which was performed for the first time in the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco in 1992 as part of the Sole Mio III Festival of Performance Art (director: Tom Dennison), begins with the replay of the famous Petula Clark song "Downtown", a number one hit in the U.S. charts in the sixties. The song conveys the white mainstream attitude of the "swinging sixties" and presents the inner city as an erotic and exotic adventure playground, cultivating a voyeuristic gaze on Downtown as a sinful and dangerous space into which one may step for an evening. Within the performance, the song signals the cultural influences that mark the youth of a performer who says of himself that he grew up "in the shadow of the Hollywood sign" (Alfaro 1998b: 315), and it also serves as a contrastive foil for the "other" reality of the inner city. This other reality is presented as Alfaro starts telling "stories from the block", suggesting a walk through his neighborhood and recalling episodes from his youth. Alfaro calls his performances "memory plays" (cf. Villa 2000: 142): he sees memory as something which remains archived in the body like on a cognitive map. In his memory the inner city emerges as a place characterized by encroaching skyscrapers, by competition for space within as a



result of increased Latino immigration, by gang activity and police violence as well as by patriarchal hierarchies within the community.

In several scenes in *Downtown* the performer narrates his neighborhood as an unprotected site of physical and verbal violence emanating from within his own ethnic group. A woman is described as dancing in the street and being subsequently beaten by her husband; a drunk man pushes his way through a crowd with his fists; a man harasses a woman on a bus and is slapped.

A man got slapped  
 A woman got slugged  
 [...] A drunk staggered  
 An earthquake shook  
 A slap. A slug. A shove. A kick (Alfaro 1998a: 321)

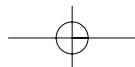
In one monologue Alfaro describes his family's protection strategies against life in the *barrio* by recalling a rotating Virgin Mary figure made of plastic that blesses the room. The undiminished symbolic power of this religious kitsch object which the father had bought on one of his drinking binges in Mexico becomes evident in her regularly emphasized protective function which, as Alfaro recalls in his performance, was often reiterated by various family members: "blood is thicker than water, family is greater than friends, and the Virgin Mary watches over all of us" (Alfaro 1998a: 321). The fiction of the all-encompassing and intact Mexican American family is deconstructed by Alfaro as he recalls the abusive and violent behavior of his father. In a scene called "Roller Derby", Alfaro appears on the stage with rollerblades and a helmet; he skates and falls several times while appearing to be engaged in a verbal fight with the father. Again Alfaro employs his body as a medium of memory as, through the physical pain caused by falling, he recovers the psychic pain caused by the father's distant and indifferent attitude, questioning the function of the family as a protective space:

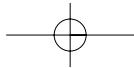
[N]o matter how many pads and layers of clothes I wore, it always hurt so much. But never as much as conversations with my dad.

Oye, Papa, ¿cuándo vas a parar de tomar?  
 Oye, Papa, ¿dónde duermes cuando no estas aquí?  
 Oye, Papa, ¿te gusta cuando me pegas?  
 Oye, Papa, ¿por qué no me dices que me quieres? (Alfaro 1998a: 321).<sup>4</sup>

Alfaro's performance exemplifies a progressive thematic current in critical Chicano narratives, namely that the deconstructive gaze applied to externally dominant social forces and agents is simultaneously directed against oppressive elements within the ethnic social space, elements such as normative heterosexuality and patriarchal authority. Struggling with his experience of familial violence, he starts looking for an alternative

<sup>4</sup> Listen, Dad, when are you going to stop drinking? / Listen, Dad, where do you sleep when you are not here? / Listen, Dad, do you like beating me? / Listen, Dad, why don't you tell me that you love me? (my translation, Alfaro 1998a: 324.)





“familia”, moving out of the barrio and into the neighborhoods of the white gay community of Los Angeles, where he finds the same patriarchal structures reproduced that he knows from his family: “machos” humiliate and beat up “sissies” or “queens”, and his utopian visions of an imagined “queer community” are destroyed by the observation that “I saw us act like our parents” (Alfaro 1998a: 329). Moreover, in his first relationship with a white middle class man, he experiences his own objectification as an exotic Latin body of transitory attractiveness. As he relates that “[w]hen I was eighteen I met this guy with a rotating Virgin Mary doll. He bought it in Mexico, so, of course, I fell in love” (Alfaro 1998a: 323), Alfaro constructs a parallel between the curiosity of the Mexican Virgin Mary in the possession of the white lover and the latter’s temporary “possession” of his brown body which is soon discarded for another object of interest.

Alfaro’s search for a place that crosses the borders of the Latino community and the gay community is the search for a space of difference that can flexibly integrate aspects of both communities. In a section of *Downtown* called “Orphan of Aztlán”, Alfaro exemplifies his border position between the various imagined communities and describes the mechanisms of exclusion that he considers responsible for his status as an “orphan” both in the imagined Mexican American nation of *Aztlán* and in the U.S. American national space:

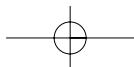
I am a queer Chicano / A native in no land / An orphan of Aztlán / The pocho son of farm-worker parents.

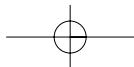
The Mexicans only want me / when they want me to / talk about Mexico / But what about / Mexican queers in L.A.?

The queers only want me / when they need / to add color / add spice / like salsa picante / on the side (Alfaro 1998a: 343).

Therefore Alfaro in his final monologue asks his audience “[to] blur the line / take the journey / play with the unknown / deal with the whole enchilada / Race / Class / Sex / Gender / Privilege” (Alfaro 1998a: 346). Instead of the separate “salsa picante” he uses the image of the *enchilada*—a mixture of different ingredients stuffed into a tortilla—to visualize the concept of a community of equals in the multicultural urban space. In a similar way to Cherrie Moraga in *The Last Generation*, who evokes a “queer Aztlán”, a “Chicano homeland that could embrace all its people, including its jotería” (Moraga 1993: 146), Alfaro imagines a heterotopian vision of kinship and belonging, a community of “queer Latinos [who...] try once again to create a language / a sense of what it means / to be in community” (Alfaro 1998a: 346). In Alfaro’s view, at the moment this heterotopian vision can only be achieved within the imaginative field of performance, and it is queer Latinos who play a vanguard role in this, due to their marginal position “at the edge/at the border/at the rim/of the new world” (Alfaro 1998a: 348).

In the last scene of his monologue Alfaro undresses and appears in a black slip, imitating the movements of the rotating Mexican Virgin Mary figure from his childhood and blessing his audience, while calling upon the spectators to transgress the boundaries between different camps. The gesture of blessing implies a provocative fusion of two contrary bodily constructions as the Catholic virgin merges with the figure of the despised drag queen within the space of an altar, demanding the respect and attention customarily denied him. The final image merges the disparate worlds of the Chicano community and the gay community, opening both up to each other, as the body of the gay Latino is constructed as a bridge between them. Alfaro presents himself as border



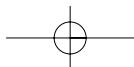


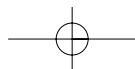
crosser, as a mobile individual between various worlds; his body and his subject participate in different projects and communities. The body of the gay Latino from the barrio appears as the site where these processes of multiple cultural inscription become manifest. The gay Latino emerges as an intercultural, postnational figure which subverts the essentialisms both of an imagined coherent national culture and of Chicano nationalism.

A series of texts in Mexican American literary and artistic production displays what may be called an explicit “Latino point of view” which is based on the construction of a pan-ethnic community of Latinos within and without the United States. For many Mexican Americans the intercultural border space becomes a space of first encounter with other Latin Americans, encouraging, as Román de la Campa observes, “a sense of plurality deriving from a dual linguistic and cultural heritage” (2000: xv). The critical value of this perspective lies precisely in the revision of the narrative of the United States’ singular position on the continent as well as in a critique of the hegemonic power relations between North and South and their manifestation in exclusivist constructions of a Latin American Other. The most prominent early advocate of this perspective and the first critic of U.S. hegemony on the continent from within the United States was the Cuban revolutionary José Martí who lived the last fifteen years of his life—from 1880 to 1895—in Manhattan. Martí’s concept of *Nuestra América*—“our America”—refers to Latin America and is contrasted with an America that is “not ours”, that is, North America. Martí’s most well-known claim throughout *Nuestra América* is that of resisting U.S. domination on the continent by insisting that Latin America has a history and culture of its own which is not subsumable under Eurocentric perspectives. In his wake, Chicano/a border writers, from within the borders of the United States, have introduced a North-South dimension into the concept of Americanness, drawing on the intercultural, transnational and migratory experience of Mexican Americans and the fact that they, due to their specific historical condition, have a history not only as citizens of the U.S. but as Americans in a wider, continental sense of the word.

I will focus here on Juan Felipe Herrera’s text *Mayan Drifter: Chicano Poet in the Lowlands of America*, a book that represents, in the corpus of Chicano/a texts constructing pan-American communities, an exception, as it does not remain on an abstract level but is based on the experience of personal contact. More often, the community between Chicanos/as and other populations in the Americas is claimed in a much more programmatic way, as in Cherrie Moraga’s *The Last Generation*, who envisions an alternative community of non-white Americans, an “America of Color” based on the numeric superiority of non-white people on the continent, or in Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s *The New World Border* who proclaims “a great trans- and intercontinental border zone, a place in which no centers remain” (Moraga 1993; Gómez-Peña 1996: 7). Juan Felipe Herrera, who is Associate Professor of Chicano and Latin American Studies at California State University, is one of the most well-known Chicano poets of the era that followed the culturally nationalist Chicano Movement.<sup>5</sup> In *Mayan Drifter*, Herrera sets out on a threefold reconstructive endeavor: “to rethink America, to rethink myself, and to rethink Ameri-

<sup>5</sup> Herrera has published numerous books of poetry and prose, among them *Facegames* (1987) *Night Train to Tuxtla* (1994), *Border-Crosser With a Lamborghini Dream* (1999), *Notebook of a Chile Verde Smuggler* (2002), and *Cinnamon Girls* (2005).





can writing” (1997: 8). The book is a very personal exploration of his own connections to “America” against the background of his Mexican origin (his mother is a Maya) and his biography in the United States.

The South Mexican province of Chiapas becomes Herrera’s point of departure for an investigation of the representative structures of a “master America” that defines itself as the continent’s center. In his multi-generic text, a trip to San Cristobal de las Casas, the province capital, and to the rainforest Mayas in the weeks and months preceding the Chiapas revolt marks the beginning of his “search for America” beyond the dominant patterns of thinking and writing, outside the mental and linguistic structures in which northern America frames the rest of the continent. Herrera recounts how the Maya have been invaded by the Spanish, by anthropologists, and by multinational corporations, and how they have survived and resisted these forces. Looking for his own indigenous heritage, Herrera aims to redefine himself as an “American” in a frame of reference transcending national borders. “America” in the text refers both to the U.S. and to the continent. The unmarked use of the term destabilizes North American usages that exclude the Latin American part, and questions the idea of the American nation state occupying a singular position on the continent.

In his introductory essay, Herrera contextualizes his own work in a literary and critical tradition of “writing in and for America” from the margins, a tradition that for him is shaped by Latin American writers such as Miguel Angel Asturias and Alejo Carpentier, but also by human rights activists such as Rigoberta Menchú, Latina theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa and by African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston und Langston Hughes. Thus situating himself within a set of discourses outside the Euro-American tradition, he calls his project a “poem of and for America”, that is not meant as a “Joycean, Ulyssean epic” but rather as a “writing from Other locations”, as he explains with a reference to the Guatemalan Nobel peace prize winner Menchú (Herrera 1997: 9). Herrera’s self-positioning starts out with a series of disclaimers in which he enumerates the traps that he wishes to avoid in his writing on America:

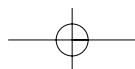
This is not an attempt to carve a Chicano or Mexican monument, a grand summation of “who we are” or a totalizing exhortation on “the real America”. I do not want to add another tired volume to the racks of the Chicano movement literature, the roots stuff of the sixties and also of minority nationalist narratives that tunnel through history in search of an ethnic essence to be conjured in a self-induced Ouija-spell. This is not another torch song pitting Mexicans against non-Indians, “Americanos” against Mexicanos. In a similar fashion, I am not interested in melting pot opera and other facile “multicultural” platitudes unaware of class relations, local interconnections and culture history (Herrera 1997: 5-6).

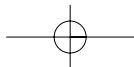
Conscious that his project nevertheless mirrors a colonial gesture he self-ironically admits:

[...] an old project of European expedition and “discovery” frames the language that I utilize, which in turn orients my innermost self. “From San Francisco to la selva”<sup>6</sup> I repeat with consternation. Colonial consciousness assaults my personal writing project (Herrera 1997: 4).

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<sup>6</sup> selva (sp.) jungle.





Against the background of all these ideological constructs, Herrera chooses the position of the Chicano poet as a starting point for rewritings of “America” from a non-hegemonic stance. He uncovers a hemispheric history in which the Mayas in Chiapas become a symbol for the destruction faced by indigenous populations in the Americas. To Herrera, the situation in Chiapas and what he describes as Mexico’s neo-colonial dependence on the U.S. are signs of the lasting power hierarchies on the American continent. The guiding metaphor of the text is that of drifting: the drifting of people through a scarred landscape, the drifting of cultural values, the drifting of borders. In a region increasingly damaged by petrol industries, deforestation and the privatization of collective soil,<sup>7</sup> Herrera’s text frames the Mayas as a figure representing the losses brought about by Mexico catching up with continental and global economic developments. He describes Mexico as

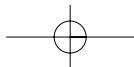
[...] drifting-contracting, rising and collapsing into a new figure or a last Dis-figure on the eyeteeth of its own technohungers and coyote billionaires, of the United States and the new wave of globalized capitalism (Herrera 1997: 258).

In view of the centuries old power structures on the American continent, Herrera, in various passages of the text, constructs a bond between himself and the native indigenous population based on their common Mayan ancestors and their marginal positions in each society. It is in these passages that the ambivalences of his pan-American view become evident as Herrera’s text keeps oscillating between uncovering hegemonic patterns of thinking about America and signs of his consistent longing for an old or new “Amerindian” unity. To give an example, in an episode in which he describes a conversation with two Indian maids in a San Cristóbal hotel and talks about their inferior position with respect to white tourists, his desire for kinship overrides his awareness of the differences between him, the tenured Chicano traveller, and the Mayas. So Herrera, across the gulf separating him from the Mayas, creates an alliance between him and the two maids, including both them and himself in the utopian vision of a “genuine America [...] where Maids would no longer be Mexican or Indian, where the *criada* position itself would vanish” (Herrera 1997: 64). Significantly, for the linguistic construction of this fragile community, Herrera needs to fall back on mythical rhetorical structures which, in their vagueness, remind the reader of the clichéd thinking Herrera himself had rejected as “roots stuff” in his introductory essay:

We resembled each other: an ancient mother held in common  
our timelessness  
our green-brown color,  
our penchant for a religious smile (Herrera 1997: 64).

The author who, at the beginning of his book, explicitly rejects “Gauguin-like escapes into a tropical scrim of berry-eaters and long-haired, silent, punk Quetzalcoatl

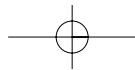
<sup>7</sup> In 1992 the Mexican government of president Salinas de Gortari effected a constitutional change which suspended the protection of collective “ejido” land (territories which were mainly in the possession of Indian communities in Chiapas) and made these territories available for privatization. With this step the land reform brought about by president Lázaro Cárdenas in 1934 was practically undone.



incarnates" (Herrera 1997: 8), at times finds it difficult to escape these clichéd constructions of Indianness himself. As he inscribes himself into what he calls a "new, contradictory, fictive kinship-system" (Herrera 1997: 8), his text displays a longing to see Mayan culture undisturbed by change. So Herrera's diary reflects the author's surprise and puzzlement at the modernizing tendencies in the rainforest village he visits. Arriving in the village and in sight of a huge satellite dish, he doubts that he is in a Mayan settlement as "[m]usic poured from the laminated roof-house, a high-pitch rocanrol that boomed [...] I peered at the satellite dish in the open patio. Maybe this was a colonia, and I had gotten off too early (Herrera 1997: 98). Herrera apparently has difficulties in acknowledging the transcultural strategies the Mayas have developed in dealing with the economic change afflicting their region. He is irritated by modern appliances in rainforest huts and by the Mayan chief's cooperation with ethnographic students. When he gives away his tape recorder in a symbolic gesture of giving up "ethnographic intentions", he remains guilt-ridden for "dumping [...] technology" and "proffering an exchange between the Modern and the Savage" (Herrera 1997: 112). The longing for authenticity—at times self-ironically admitted by Herrera—becomes visible in his astonishment at the agility with which his indigenous friend K'ayum and other Mayas exploit the needs of European and North Americantourists, reacting in creative and flexible ways to the altered character of their villages. One week Herrera spends with the Mayas, taking pictures, talking with people, listening to legends and displaying his surprise that "we had television in common instead of a fire at the center of our rooms" (Herrera 1997: 122).

The book ends with a symbolic rendering of a poet's flowers to the oppressed north and south. Herrera has joined Rigoberta Menchú and others in "writing America from different locations", uncovering economic, epistemological, and linguistic power structures that have shaped its histories. At the same time, his project to "find a new language for America" collides with his yearning for the Indian part of himself. This text, I argue, presents itself not only as a portrayal of the effects of centuries-old colonization processes in the Americas, but also as a document of the difficulties in writing against the language and representational patterns of a "European Indianism" from a subject position that is more distant from those of the Indians than the author would like to acknowledge.

In some cultural productions the experience of being fragmented between different camps becomes the basis for new affiliations and forms of bonding across national borders. Yreina Cerváñez' mural *La Ofrenda* foregrounds fragmentation as an experience of diasporic Latina women throughout the Americas. Cerváñez uses the *topos* of the altar as a symbol of homage and cultural memory, placing Dolores Huerta, daughter of a migrant worker and the first female Mexican American union leader, at its center. Huerta emerges as a liminal figure at the intersection of various cultural and epistemological systems, symbolized by the fluid arrangement of disconnected spiritual and cultural symbols. Within the accumulation of fragmented iconographic elements there are several topological constants through which Cerváñez constructs a community of Latin American women on the American continent. A first experience that is shown as being shared by many women in the Americas is the diasporic experience of migration and flight, combined with the experience of being culturally uprooted. This can be seen in the running figures in the spray-painted graffiti band at the bottom, as well as in the refugees fleeing from a helicopter, representing migrants commuting between various regions of the continent and the US. The topic of "crossing" appears central in this mural.



It explains the floating arrangement of elements from various cultural and iconographic systems which indicates rootlessness. Cerváñez constructs a transnational community based on the joint experience of liminality which she locates in diasporic Latin American women as well as in Chicanas.

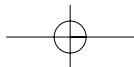


A second *topos* that emerges is the power of ordinary women on the continent. This power is represented in the figure of Huerta herself, who was not only a union leader but the head of a household with eleven children. It is also referred to in the poem on the right-hand side which celebrates indigenous and mestiza women on the continent. The poem was written by the Californian poet Gloria Alvarez and presents Latin American women as heroines of daily life.<sup>8</sup> The same theme also finds an iconographic echo in the pair of strong female hands upon which the poem appears.

A third *topos* that is shown as linking women on the continent is spirituality. It can be observed in iconographic elements pointing to popular, non-official religious practices, such as elements from indigenous cosmologies like the figure of the *indigena* on the left side whose upper torso has been replaced by the figure of a jaguar and who wears earrings symbolizing the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui. Another indigenous spiritual element is the “Ojo de Dios”, a representation of divine power in Huichol culture. Several symbols indicate syncretic forms of indigenous and catholic beliefs, such as the Virgin of Guadalupe in the right part of the image, the candles and Calla-lilies as typical elements of the *ofrenda*, as well as the *milagros*.

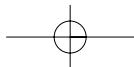
Cerváñez poses these articulations of spirituality as a counterforce to the diasporic experience described. The function of spirituality in the mural is the reinscription of the fragmented subject with alternative spiritual visions—spirituality assumes a healing function. This representation of spirituality displays many parallels to a sphere of feminist

<sup>8</sup> “*Heróicas, mujeres de piedra / que se alzan soberanas / por toda la América entera, / laboriosas, sonrientes / generosas, forjadoras de futuro / cada día construyendo / una mañana diferente*” [my italics].



Chicana discourse that is closely associated with the name of Gloria Anzaldúa and which links the border position of Chicanas with the revaluation of indigenous spiritualities. Both Anzaldúa's texts and Cerváñez' mural represent a contradictory alliance of spirituality and fragmentation. While on the one hand fragmentation is accentuated and binary paradigms are rejected as models for identity construction, these Chicanas on the other hand privilege holistic visions of an indigenous spirituality. Cerváñez' mural can be seen as an iconographic translation of this branch of Chicana feminist discourse which foregrounds indigenous concepts as a counterpart to fragmentation. One example is the symbol of Coyolxauhqui: Chicana feminism represents Coyolxauhqui as a symbol of both fragmentation and healing. In indigenous legends, Coyolxauhqui was the moon goddess who was beheaded and dismembered by her brother, the war god Huitzilopochtli, who wanted absolute power (Knab 1994: 23f). Chicana feminism reads this story as an allegory of patriarchal violence and sees in the reconstruction of Coyolxauhqui a performative gesture of healing and the reconstruction of the female subject. Coyolxauhqui has become quite a prominent figure in feminist Chicana artworks, as, for example, in the work of artist Alma López who in her mural *Las Four* (1998) makes the goddess the mythical starting point for a series of historical figures of reference such as the feminist poet Sor Ines de la Cruz, the Adelita, Dolores Huerta and Rigoberta Menchú. What these artworks effect is a kind of "feminist neo-indigenism" that does not repeat the totalizing visions of its cultural nationalist predecessors but nevertheless insists on non-deconstructable essences. At the same time Cerváñez, with her assemblage of spiritual symbols, the reading of which requires specific cultural knowledge, inscribes herself into a critical discourse which questions the subalternization of non-dominant knowledge by privileging alternative epistemologies. Cerváñez' mural not only displays the wide range of indigenous symbols of spirituality, it also refuses their interpretation within a universalist frame of knowledge. Assuming a position which bell hooks, in 1990, called "choosing the margin" (hooks 1990) and which Doris Sommer has described as "resisting the heat"—the heat which melts differences—(Sommer 1993: 413), Cerváñez rejects complete discursive transparency. The different symbols of indigenous spirituality, as well as the untranslated poem by Alvarez and the spray-painted graffiti at the bottom of the mural signal a refutation of unobstructed "readability" and interpretation.

The texts and artworks described in this essay can be seen as examples from a larger corpus of cultural productions which construct different forms of a "transnational American imaginary". From two strategically employed and at times interrelated critical positions—the reclamation of a "border identity" and the subject position of "Latino/a"—writers and artists renegotiate the position and cultural authority of Mexican Americans within the United States, opening up the notion of the nation for differential constructions of "American" identity, while accounting for the historical relations that for centuries have linked—although often on uneven terms—North America and Latin America. They reintroduce histories and cultures excluded from the national narrative into their texts and artworks, producing what I call a "spatialization" of linear master narratives of national history. At the same time their cultural and theoretical production increasingly converges with contemporary theoretical discourses, especially as writers and artists partake in the discursive network of U.S. institutions. Some texts and artworks—Herrera's text in particular—also shed a light on the ambiguities that lie in the assertion of belonging to a different "America" from the position which is rooted socially and culturally in

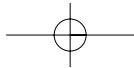


the U.S. Herrera's claims of kinship with the Mayas tell as much about his own quest for belonging as about a transnational American identity.

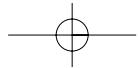
Despite these contradictory aspects, the Mexican American cultural productions discussed here make an important claim, as they locate "Americanness" outside the ideological discourses that have accompanied the construction of the U.S. American nation state. They participate, on the one hand, in critical discourses which in recent years have repeatedly stated the permeability of the cultural borders between the United States and Latin America, talking about a "latinization" or "tropicalization" of the U.S (e.g. Davis 2002, Aparicio/Silverman 1997; Fusco 1995). On the other hand they are part of a larger discursive field of transnational critique: cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai regards Mexican Americans in the U.S. as part of a "a series of nodes in a postnational network of diasporas" (Appadurai 1993: 413) and refers to the many "transnations" which have formed in the U.S. and which are not subsumable under existing definitions of "U.S. American nationality". As Mexican American cultural productions create an interethnic, comparative, and transnational dialogue with other revisionist positions excluded from dominant national discourses, they play a significant part in North American redefinition of Americanness.

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