THE INTERSECTION OF ETHNICITY AND SEXUALITY
IN THE NARRATIVE FICTION OF THREE CHICANO AUTHORS:
OSCAR ZETA ACOSTA, ARTURO ISLAS, AND MICHAEL NAVA

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

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The Ohio State University
1998

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ABSTRACT

Like other ethnic authors with hyphenated self-awareness, Chicano/a authors grapple with the challenge of creating characters who negotiate with multiple identities. Whereas many of the early Chicano/a writers of the seventies emphasize ethnicity at the expense of other subjectivities, later Chicano/a authors create more complex relationships within the identity politics of the eighties and nineties.

Three writers, Oscar Zeta Acosta, Arturo Islas, and Michael Nava, represent different literary generations of Chicano/a authors whose fictions span the range: from emphasizing ethnic awareness at the expense of sexual dignity to affirming the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality.

In the first chapter, I interrogate Acosta's search for ethnic identity in two semi-autobiographical novels, written in the early seventies, that pit Acosta's namesake protagonist as *ethnic hero* against himself as *sexual anti-hero*. With aliases of "Brown Buffalo" as well as of "Zeta," Acosta searches for ethnic identity as his primary quest. Although the protagonist performs chameleon and at times even contradictory roles, nevertheless, he is in
search of self—one defined in terms of ethnicity, or what Acosta calls

*Chicano consciousness.*

In the second chapter, I find Arturo Islas infusing his writings with *Amerindian myths and symbolism* during the eighties. Unlike Acosta's nationalist protagonists, Islas' characters are more *post-nationalist* as they are not in search of their identities. Rather, they assume a Chicano awareness, leaving Islas free to explore how that identity is complicated by other subjectivities, specifically gay possibilities.

In the third chapter, I establish that writers of the nineties are much more comfortable with the interplay of various identities. Moving beyond Acosta's polarized identities and Islas' assimilated identities, Michael Nava writes murder mysteries about the American legal system that situate the protagonist in a *multicultural* complexity: "a gay public figure, a criminal defense lawyer and a Chicano." Whereas the centrality of culture is important to Acosta, and historical symbols and lore are central to Islas, Nava turns to law as a discourse for understanding a *politics of difference*, but at times, his hero is caught in the crossfire between his Chicano culture and his homosexual identity, and in the process, ethnicity conflicts with sexuality.

In the fourth and final chapter, I identify three important perspectives in critiquing Chicano/a literature: the *ethnocentric*, the *historical*, and the
multicultural approaches. As the first one is fixed on centrality of culture as an essential determinant in people's lives, the second mode is historically based and uses the past to illuminate and enrich the present, while the third perspective—the multicultural one—allows for maximum flexibility in shaping identity.

Informed by current debates about ethnicity and sexuality within Chi-cano literary studies, feminist studies, and critical race theory, this dissertation places the authors' viewpoints and characters in their historical and cultural contexts, so as to confront and complicate the contours of identity politics.
Dedicada a
mi familia y mi raza.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my adviser, Tony Libby, and my readers, Valerie Lee and Tom Cooley, for all their wonderful support and encouragement in helping me to finish this dissertation project. I also want to express my appreciation to those other individuals who have assisted me along the way: Debra Moddelmog and Jim Phelan as well as my department graduate adviser, Lisa Kiser, who always spurred me on to attain my degree. And, I won’t forget either administrative assistant, Cartha Sexton, or Mary B. Castoe, the English department secretary who has always been very loving and kind to me.

In addition, my sincere thanks go to Ms. Russell and Ms. Gower, two great high-school teachers who saw some promise in a young man whose only aspiration, at the time, was to become a truck driver. Finally, Project 1000, an “affirmative action” program—whose goal was to recruit a thousand Hispanics into graduate schools—deserves a lot of praise for giving me the opportunity to get into The Ohio State University and accomplish my dream—to be the first one in my family-clan to get a Ph.D.
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Conference Presentation

1. E. "Riggy" López. "Arturo Islas & Chicano/a ‘Post-Nationalism’ in
   the Eighties." Proceedings of The Breaking Barriers—Literature and
   Emerging issues International Conference at the Dept. of English &
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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: English
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CHAPTER 1

OSCAR ZETA ACOSTA & “CHICANO” CULTURAL NATIONALISM IN THE SEVENTIES: ETHNICITY AT THE EXPENSE OF SEXUALITY

Since his mysterious disappearance off the Mexican coast in 1974, Oscar Zeta Acosta still continues to attract critical attention as scholars rejuvenate literary interest in him by debating whether he is still alive or dead. His novels reissued fifteen years later by a prominent New York publishing house, Acosta—or the “Brown Buffalo” as the author anoints himself—has steadily acquired a larger-than-life reputation: Not only because of his legendary ways of living on the edge, but also because of his significant contributions to modern Chicano literature and the Chicano Power movements of the late Sixties and early Seventies. With quarter-century hindsight, I give this writer due credit for helping to transform Americans of Mexican descent into a strong cultural presence in contemporary society, as well as, to problematize the ethnic dialectical dilemma of Chicano/as in American literature: To be “...both Mexican and American and also neither one nor the other, completely” (Saldívar 174). And if a eulogy is overdue, then Acosta
deserves kudos for his literary contributions to the formation of *ethnic consciousness* as "...one of the most powerful social and cultural forces in the United States since the 1960's" (Paredes, 1992, 283), especially since it evolves from an "...intimate awareness of one's oppression" (Perez, 46). With the protagonist's poignant observation, "Sex and race. It's one and the same hang-up" (1972, 19), I therefore begin a critique of ethnic identity at the expense of sexual dignity in the writings of controversial Chicano author, Oscar Zeta Acosta, primarily focusing on two works of fiction, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and its sequel, *Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973).

We must remember that Acosta's writings are historically situated against the backdrop of an era when the idea of playing politics with one's identity is just beginning to crystallize. The interval between 1965 and 1975 is one of national visibility and political activism for la raza, a crucial time-period that gives birth to the "Chicano Movement" (Sanchez, 2). In a decade of social agitation and civil unrest, Mexican Americans are beginning to collectively accept a new political awareness "...ideologically rooted in cultural nationalism" (Alurista, 1981, 22), as well as to demand a national political agenda, one that acknowledges shared culturalist commonalities, such as having our "...own distinct history of colonization and a common
language that binds...[us] into one mind” (Montoya, 25). By contemplating what it means to be Chicano/a, Acosta helps to contribute to some understanding of all Latino/as in American society, and even though the Chicano/a struggle fizzled out in less than a decade, “...more transcendent aspects of human understandings prevailed...the most widespread being racial and cultural consciousness” (Elizondo, 18).

In his first Autobiography novel, Acosta’s namesake hero is desperately seeking an ethnic identity—one that he can relate to—meanwhile, comparing himself to the almost-extinct bison for lack of a suitable self-identification. By the second Revolt narrative, however, Acosta metamorphoses into “Zeta,” the militant Chicano with plenty of cultural savvy, thus beginning to lay an ethnic foundation upon which Chicano/a literature is initially built.

An enigmatic and perplexing figure spiked with a streak of notoriety, Acosta-the-author and Acosta-the-protagonist intertwine into a half-true, half-imaginary composite of a central character. His two novels are actually complementary semi-autobiographies highlighting a budding Chicano consciousness—one born out of a mix of ethnic recovery and radical politics—arising from the civil rights struggle of the sixties decade. Even though he’s in the forefront of the Chicano Movement’s ethnic skirmishes,
Acosta really misses the boat on two other revolutions of the time, the women's and gay liberation movements, as all three undertakings converge into a new, American social order—an identity politics of difference. In this unprecedented scenario, Oscar Acosta, a spirited desperado and rebellious lone ranger, changes ethnic masks as fast as the situation dictates; but in the narratives, this cultural chameleon basically plays contradictory, clashing roles—the *ethnic hero* vs. the *sexual anti-hero*.

In his insightful accounts about reshaping America's cultural as well as political landscapes, Acosta works to liberate his true ethnic self, but he manages to do so only by belittling the sexual dignity of others—namely women and homosexuals. Writing in the late nineties, though, I am a Chicano scholar—weaned on identity politics and critiquing Acosta some 25 years later—and therein lies my dilemma: *My tendency is to confuse Acosta's duty as writer with his duty as protagonist, or political actor.*

As *author*, is it Acosta's obligation to conform to rules of politically correct behavior that haven't been articulated yet, or as *hero*, is it his responsibility to tell the truth about his experiences no matter how uncomfortable that reality may be? I will argue that Acosta is not only a lot *more* aware (than many writers of his time) of this paradoxical problem within himself,
even including the possibility of repressing his own homosexual feelings, but also that he chooses to satirize his complicated situation—ethnic success at the expense of sexual respect for others—as a way to cope with it.

Acosta’s protagonist in *Autobiography* struggles to find himself in relation to other Americans—he is a lonely, frustrated Latino trying to figure out where he fits ethnically in modern U.S. society. Reminiscent of Jack Kerouac’s classic “beat” novel, *On the Road* (1957), Acosta’s narrative depicts a high-strung wreck of a hero engaged in a soul-searching, spiritual quest for ethnic recovery. He embarks upon a lonely trek to discover “...both personal identity and a place within two countries, Mexico and the United States, where he might belong” (Smith, 83). In a way, his journey—peppered with outward counterculture hipness yet seeking a sense of ethnic direction—becomes the driving force for the more inward, spiritual one, as Acosta initiates a process of interrogating the notion of what constitutes a *Chicano literary subject*, especially the *dialectical* nature of his complicated ethnic dilemma: To be “...both Mexican and American and also neither one nor the other, completely. It remains on that precarious utopian margin between the two, perhaps as the very sign of marginality
institutionalized in geopolitical terms by the border between the sovereign states of Mexico and the U.S.” (Saldívar 174).

Trying to cope with a paradoxical state of mind—a set of internal contradictions existing in an uneasy space of personal and cultural ambiguities—is the objective of a quixotic Acosta, the central consciousness of both narratives, as the infamous “Brown Buffalo” of the first and the self-christened “Zeta” of the sequel. In the process of reconciling racial and ethnic differences, Acosta achieves genuine hero-status when he is able to turn la raza’s negative standing—a seemingly confusing group-identity—into positive, political cohesion, resulting in the proud proclamation of Chicano consciousness.

On the other hand, Acosta never sheds an anti-hero mien, his bitter attitude about sex that doesn’t give females or homosexuals the time of day. If Acosta comes to terms with an elusive ethnicity, he does it only at the expense of sexual esteem for fellow human beings, as this anti-hero indulges obsessively in a culturally-compulsory sexual power that not only twists him into a macho predator—who shamelessly disrespects the opposite sex—but that also turns him into a sexual scourge, one who callously uses gays, lesbians, and bisexuals as social scapegoats on his personal whipping post. One might ask: Why is the protagonist compelled to oppress others while his
hands are full combating racial discrimination around him? Could it be that as Acosta deals with the dialectical pendulum between his Mexican and American identities, not necessarily brown or white but the continual pull from both ethnicities, he also represses subconsciously, at times even consciously ignores, the sexual ambiguities within himself, resulting in tension between his straight and gay tendencies?

While prominent critic Genaro M. Padilla raises "...questions about Chicano literary production as a major articulation of resistance to American social and cultural hegemony" (1993, 154), I propose that Chicano/a literary artists should also enact opposition to a dominant heterosexual hegemony, a social resistance already formulating in the early seventies but one that Acosta won't touch in his narratives. It would be easy to fault him for failing to rail against the blatant discrimination of a sexist and homophobic American culture, especially for his lack of tolerance for diversity. But it is more difficult than that, because relevant questions beg for answers: Should Acosta's commitment be judged inadequate because of feminist thinking twenty-five years later? Should Acosta's writing be further marginalized, because it doesn't meet someone else's expectations, criteria formed in a historical-dialectical context of almost the next millennium?
Perhaps the basic question: Why is Acosta—with social warts and all—considered important to Chicano literary productions, and what does a political movement have to do with American literature anyway? As Acosta begins to comprehend politically the literary implications of social upheaval—that Chicanos/as no longer will accept an invisible status in American culture, he realizes that “...the notion of our supposed [ethnic] non-existence...has historically been perpetuated through the act of omission in American literature” (Lomelí, 34). Only by subverting literary history can he therefore begin to perceive himself as a bona fide literary subject as Acosta engages in what prize-winning author Tomás Rivera claims should be the primary focus of Chicano/a writers: To see “...Chicano literature and the Chicanos in fiction as simply life in search of form” (91). In the Buffalo’s case, Acosta’s portrait of the ethnic artist consists of taking his audience on a roller-coaster tour around the winding passages of his twisted life, rummaging for the story and a reason for living. Though the ride is far from smooth, nonetheless, satire screams with ironic exuberance while sarcasm careens with double entendre; meanwhile, Acosta discovers literary art in a narrative penchant for paradox, parody, and hyperbole.

Though he will not admit it, as a “flower child” protagonist cruising the boulevards of new ideas, experimental lifestyles, and diverse cultural
productions, Acosta eagerly embraces *paradox* as a way to wrap an identity-blanket of ethnic affirmation around his Brown Buffalo persona in *Autobiography*. Using the image of the almost-extinct *Bison americanus* to depict a struggling ethnicity may sound a bit absurd, but Acosta is adroit in poking fun at himself—and at his raza. Though some perceive the half-witted, humongous buffalo as an easy target for hunters with Winchesters, to American Indians, the majestic bison represents an icon of entrenched native survival against white cultural encroachment. The author thus proposes paying homage to an animal which provides nourishment and sustenance to an indigenous way of life, by urging:

...that we call ourselves the Brown Buffalo people... Yes, the animal that everyone slaughtered. Sure both the cowboys and the Indians are out to get him...and, because we do have roots in our Mexican past, our Aztec ancestry, that's where we get the *brown* from... (1972, 198).

Even though readers may chuckle at Acosta’s choice of metaphor, the Brown Buffalo may still get the last laugh for he's using bull’s hide “to cover” satirically his sense of ethnic insecurity.

Also parodying sexuality and sexual dysfunction in his narratives, Acosta depicts the Freudian notion of unconscious sexual repression by utilizing the service of Jewish psychoanalyst Dr. Serbin. With the startling
realization that he "...could never get the bastard up to fuck women" (40), the Brown Buffalo acknowledges his sexual quandary with females, especially with his object of lust, Alice, who symbolizes to him the breaking of miscegenation taboos. Alice just so happens to be the old lady of his best friend, Ted, "the pudgy, black Irishman from Brooklyn." Craving a bisexual ménage-a-trois with this white couple, Acosta seems to be physically attracted to Ted as well, especially when the Irish would "grab his cock and pull up the crotch" (1972, 40).

Since he cannot keep his sexual ambiguities bottled up any longer, Acosta is forced to consult with his ubiquitous head-shrink who diagnoses the protagonist’s fantastical ribaldry as a "form of self-love." As the hero complains continuously that this "skinny fag without character butts in and spoils things" for him, Acosta succumbs to his id’s erotic impulse and engages in masturbation, "...the beast in your anxious hand in the darkness of the night sweating it over some hot fantasy you want to stab before she gets away..." (1972, 14), especially as Acosta imagines in the shower making it with sexy Alice.

In fact, Acosta lays it on even thicker when he conjures up oedipal fantasies, taking to heart Serbin’s psychological assessment of the hero: "In ten years of therapy the only thing the fucker [Serbin] has wanted to gossip
about has been my mother and my ancestry” (1972, 19). One such psycho-
neurotic concoction involves the hero indulging in titillating voyeurism as his
“little bugger enlarges, swells and expands” while peeking through a key-
hole at own mama taking a bath as she yells at him, “I called for your dad,
the protagonist’s bulletproof-vest of a conscience, the meddlesome Serbin
undoubtedly plays a superego role—that of moral arbiter of Acosta’s value-
system.

Many times, Acosta uses sexual connotations, bawdy innuendoes, and
rather vulgar depictions of bodily functions—to reinforce his use of over-
statement in his narratives. In describing the following passage,

I enter the bathroom and struggle to the toi-
let. With my large, peasant hands care-
fully on the rim of white, I descend to my
knocked knees. I stare into the repository of
all that is unacceptable and wait for the
green bile, my sun-baked face where my
big, brown ass will soon sit. (1972, 11-12)

one reviewer compares Acosta’s prose style to an “...earthy Henry Miller,
direct, [and] profane” (MacDonald, 41), while another critic focuses upon
Acosta’s knack “...to shock—perversely shaking up Puritan-types—by
bringing in something about his bowel movements or his vomiting”
(Ramírez, 53). In this shock-jock account of puke and despair, Acosta is
grappling with his own reflection in the mirror, "...hands to the hips, sand-baked elbows out like wings, and turn profiled to the floor-length reflection" (1972, 11), and is not at all thrilled with what he perceives is his utter lack of ethnic image. This narcissistic absence is very significant as it sets into motion the rest of the first narrative—the prolonged search for an appropriate self-representation that the protagonist can live with.

In a way, Acosta’s apparent "image" deficiency twists him grotesquely into a pathetic, self-loathing Chicano Caliban, who not only considers himself as an ugly duckling but is also tormented by physical ailments, such as reoccurring bouts of bleeding ulcers. As Caliban¹, the savage and deformed Shakespearean figure in The Tempest, Acosta realizes that the North American continent, the site of his Aztlanese homeland, has been taken away from him by Euroamerican settlers. Thus he suffers the blood-letting rituals of hemorrhaging ulcers, symbolizing possibly the side effects of modern ennui. In the following passage, "For twelve months now all I have done is stuffed myself, puked wretched water, stared at the idiot-box, coddled myself, and watched the snakes grow larger inside my head while waiting for the clockhand to turn" (1972, 24), Acosta may be stressed out, because he has lost control of his "New World" habitation. Just as the indigenous Caliban is able to rail against Prospero’s Eurocentric authority, for
this “man-fish” has become adept in his master’s tongue, Acosta goes a step further and learns not only his ruler’s language but also his law when the hero passes the bar exam. With madcap chuckling, Acosta thus tends to over-dramatize his Calibanesque characterization as he struggles to find his ethnic self in a world full of ironic bemusement.

Referring to Acosta’s erratic—at times appalling—behavior, Bruce-Novoa condemns Acosta’s foregrounding of “undesirable traits” (1990, 139), the critic’s nice way of alluding to the Buffalo’s alcohol-fueled and drug-induced, wild lifestyle, while another pundit depicts the hero’s unrelentless debauchery fittingly as “...struggling through and enduring a harrowing psychedelic American nightmare, typical of the late 60’s, mixing drugs, booze, drifters, and numbness” (Ramírez, 47). A master of overkill, Acosta has a tendency to use hyperbole to drive home the point that in the late sixties, he lacks a positive representation of self and thus succumbs to low self-esteem.

By the end of Autobiography, however, the crafty Acosta is able to turn the cultural tables around, so to speak, because instead of blindly fighting his dialectical dilemma—“...that I am neither a Mexican nor (sic) an American” (1972, 199), he comes to understand and respect it. In fact, Acosta should be lauded for being one of the first writers to accept and
celebrate Chicano consciousness as a cultural *mestizaje*, or mixture, "...a syncretic culture created through biological, linguistic, and social mixing" (Gutiérrez and Padilla, 19).

But, the *Autobiography*’s greatest strength is Acosta’s ability to use his pen to accord national symbolic status to Chicano/as: “No one ever asked me or my brother if we wanted to be American citizens. We are all citizens by default. They stole our land and made us half-slaves... Now what we need is, first to give ourselves a new name. We need a new identity” (1972, 198). Like Caesar Chavez’s farmworker movement which helped la raza rally around a national issue in 1965, Acosta’s literary contributions assist in the political packaging of this new Chicano national consensus. In a haranguing but insightful closure to his first narrative, Acosta proclaims that Chicano/as have the right to seek self-determination, “...I will present the demands for a new nation to both the U.S. Government and the United Nations...” (1972, 198), in their struggle for cultural survival on disinherit land. In this great performance of savvy grandstanding, Acosta—master of political panache—gives a serious, quasi-evangelical, “pulpit sermon,” declaring his intentions to save his people from the forces of evil by demystifying its cultural dilemma, by critiquing religious oppression, and even by identifying strategic political aims. Not only does Acosta give Chicano/as a
sense of national pride as well as one of ostensible symbolic purpose, but he also impresses upon them a social “self-reflection” of Third World political struggle in America. He even has the audacity to suggest going to third parties on the international scene, like the United Nations, for Chicano/a diplomatic recognition and global support, similar to appeals made by many underdeveloped but sovereign foreign states. Preparing la raza to face the new millenium, Acosta cries out for political unity and cultural survival: “That unless we band together, we brown buffaloes will become extinct. And I do not want to live in a world without brown buffaloes” (1972, 199).

Having finally found in his first narrative a cause to live for—i.e. to save his ethnic group from cultural self-destruction, Acosta in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* moves to East L.A., home to the biggest bevy of brown buffaloes in the entire world. In this *Autobiography* sequel, the Brown Buffalo anoints himself as “Zeta,” a self-styled “Chicano Che Guevara” revolutionary who fights all heads of authority in Los Angeles. In one scene, Zeta chides Cardinal McIntyre, an established figurehead of the Church; in another episode, Acosta raises a legal issue with Judge Alacran, a magistrate; and yet in another segment, the hero lambastes city-hall politician, Mayor Yorty. As our ethnic hero shifts his tactics, mainly refocusing attention from rhetoric to direct political action, Acosta also changes his
self-image in an all-out war against “an urban horror that nurtures violence, injustice, and human folly to an extent unmatched in any other city...” (Paredes, 1984, 219)—Los Angeles.

Leading the charge against the entrenched and corrupt Anglo system of justice, a zesty Zeta now espies himself as the jefe of a cultural network of cockroaches, emanating from a swarming East LA colony-nest: “...the Cockroach People are these cucarachas, the modern-day descendents of [Pancho] Villa and his followers, marching to the tune of the song, ‘La cucaracha’” (Ramírez, 48), a catchy folk-jingle, “barrio-tagged” against the canvass horizon of a modern urban revolution. With wide brush strokes of a muralist’s panoramic eye, the author attempts to capture the rousing of a group consciousness with clever portraits of roach resourcefulness. Painted with a positive panache, Acosta’s insect vermin reflect shrewd organizing and, in survival of the fittest, these cucaracha arthropods have escaped extinction for thousands of years. Paredes maintains that “Cockroach people, as the lowest of life forms, are exterminated even more casually than buffaloes” (215), but as a group, these feisty, little critters are almost invincible. Some feel more inclined, however, to accept Ramírez’s “kafkaesque” assessment that “The poverty-stricken, marginal insect is at once a rebel and an outcast, an alien facing absurdity who revolts against nightmarish
anguish, trying to overcome downtrodden insignificance” (48). If cucharachas symbolize marginal status, then Zeta realizes that political success will only be achieved by building an army of insect soldiers:

Three hundred Chicanos have gathered in front of St. Basil’s Roman Catholic Church. Three hundred brown-eyed children of the sun have come to drive the money-changers out of the riches temple in Los Angeles...It is a night of miracles: never before have the sons of the conquered Aztecas worshipped their dead gods on the doorstep of the living Christ. (1973, 11-12)

Picketing against the Catholic hierarchy, gutsy protestors rush the altar as a melee disrupts the mass service, thus setting the tone for the rest of Revolt—as one of politics of confrontation.

However harmonious the chime of nationalist rhetoric might be in a world overrun by Chicano/a roaches, Angie Chabram-Dernersesian crashes a discordant cymbal in this idealistic symphony of ethnic unity, because Chicano “.... nationalism’s preferred male subject is imbued with a masculine, patriarchal ideology” that contributes to gender objectification and thus removes “...the silenced Other, Chicanas...from full-scale participation in the Chicano Movement...” (83). In a playful, tongue-in-cheek essay, Chabram-Dernersesian hurls a sharp lampoon against Armando Rendón, author of the acclaimed The Chicano Manifesto (1971). This text defines the Brown
Power ideology of a *movimiento* criticized for being too sexist and chauvinist, and by extension, criticizes Acosta’s male roach-dominated movement as well.

This feminist critic complains that Rendón (and the same could be said for Acosta) “... grounds his symbolic treatment of machismo in a specific male body: his, equating macho with Chicano, a term generalized to embrace the nationalist objective: nationhood” (83). Since cultural consciousness is probably “the most valuable piece of identification...[to] come out of the heroic period of Chicano activism in the sixties” (Elizondo, 18), in both Rendón and Acosta’s case, illumination is achieved mainly through an “anti-Chicana” frame of mind that makes a cultural mockery of the entire cause, especially “....given that the Movement embodies as its principal motivator the notion of consciousness raising” (Lomelí, 33). Beyond ethnic awareness, Acosta seems to resist the raising of other forms of social sensibility in his writings.

As Acosta gains more notoriety than prominence, his sexual ego becomes inflated way out of proportion as his vulgar references toward women become increasingly more blatant. A typical example of the hero’s anti-female attitude is found during the sequel’s morgue scene where he brazenly refers to Chicanas as “broads, wenches, witches, veils...and [even] changas
[monkeys]" while making a harem out of "the Zeta girls," his cult of Chicana groupies whom he enjoys comparing to the "shaved-headed" apostates of crazed killer Charles Manson. As the cool Zeta fancies himself to be God's gift to women, he perceives females as always wanting and seeking his affections, hence swelling his delusions of sexual grandeur. For instance, after immediately fancying one female UCLA professor that he doesn't even know, Acosta brashly infers that "She is a genius who wants to be a woman; I intend to help" (1973, 221), as if he thinks that he's going to acquire stature by seducing anyone in skirts. In critiquing the author's sequel, one male critic actually attempts to dismiss Acosta's sexual excesses, ironically, as the common bonding between macho activists, "Their pelado [manly] antics are humorous, and events before and after revolutionary death struggles are comically dissipating: i.e., the orgy that followed the Safeway bombing" (Smith 88). Still, at other times, Zeta even has the gall to invite out for a drink the court stenographer "with a fine ass," and, after a long and grueling trial, he shows his true appreciation to a black female juror by sweet-talking her into bed after she helps to acquit most of the defendants. Getting away with all these "sexcapade" shenanigans, Zeta begins to symbolize the tacky flaunting of sexual impudence in an era just beginning to accept the "politics" of identity politics.
Serving only "... to reinforce the saliency of the Chicano male subject within authoritative Chicano/a cultural productions" (Chabram-Dernersisian, 84), Acosta’s male-centered narratives tend to be full of sexual indiscretions, because Chicana activists are not allowed enough responsibility in the cockroach movement. Zeta’s female disciples are never given serious instructions of any kind, only menial chores to do for men; these homegirls are either sexually available to the Chicano Militants or off buying the ingredients used for homemade bombs, but they are not allowed to participate in the actual acts of violence itself. In a book review of Cockroach People, another feminist critic, Angélica Martínez, rebukes Acosta’s intrinsic sexism:

The women are presented as flat images of second-class cockroaches at the merciless pen of Oscar Zeta Acosta...[He] never seems to discard his sexism in his development of a revolutionary spirit in the course of the story...Caught up in a revolution decrying economic subjugation, Acosta misses the point in his exploitation of these women. (19)

But one might ask: Why does Acosta choose to ignore la Chicana in his novels? Is it deliberate or just an oversight? Could it be that he starts off so ethnically insecure that he has a greater need to play the gender role of the tough, macho male—who flexes his masculinity by putting down “bitches”
(and "queers" too)—maybe because he fears females and their perceived threat of emasculation.

In one case, this apprehension leads him to suffer premature ejaculation while having sex with his "bad" Armenian girlfriend; at another time, his obvious impotence is spurned by June MacAdoo, his "Frisco broad" who manages to scar him for life by outright rejection of him; finally, an acquaintance of his, Maria, abruptly remarks for all to hear: "Snatch?...And just what would Osca (sic) do with a snatch, even if he could get one?" (1972, 45). By this time, Acosta suddenly imagines himself beset by so-called "fags" and eventually brands—with a lit cigarette—one gay bar patron in anger. At this point of sexual uncertainty and insecurity, Oscar’s stern father usually enters the mental picture, because his dad—referred to pejoratively as the "horsetrader"—greatly impacts the hero in a negative way. Reacting with aversion, Brown thus runs away with "a head full of speed, a wilted penis, and a can in...hand" (1972, 71).

But does the protagonist really have a choice about the social inflexibility of a rigid gender role that was forced upon him by an imposing "male authority" figure during early childhood? Driving a naval barge in Okinawa during WWII, Acosta’s old man raises his son as if the younger Oscar was also in the navy ranks, with the Seabee’s Manual as sacred writ.
Figuratively, he is a boy-sailor overshadowed by the commanding presence of a strong father-figure who demands absolute subordination from the son, thus turning him into a macho zombie of sorts: “We were supposed to talk like un hombre, walk like a man, act like a man and think like a man” (1972, 75). He thus enjoys imagining himself as his “three favorite men in the mirror,” all depicting various facets of a impenetrable “Mister Joe Cool” persona—either a suave Humphrey Bogey, or an uncontrollable James Cagney, or maybe a cigar-chumping Edward G. Robinson (1972, 12). As a result, young Oscar’s sociosexual role is carved out in stone very early in life.

I will argue, however, that when Acosta’s hero does not initially find an identity tag of his own among the scripted walls of L.A.’s underpasses, Brown proceeds to construct a unique racial identity, but only by repressing his own homosexuality as evidenced by his homophobia, especially with his use of such terms as lesbian and homosexual to designate recipients of his derision. To Acosta’s protagonist, construction of ethnicity is done strictly under the guise of an authoritative, male-oriented ideology, and when this Chicano subject grapples with the issue of sex, it is mostly aimed at degrading women as objects, or at stereotyping gays, lesbians, and bisexuals as the “others.” Because he cannot deal with the possibility of being gay himself,
Acosta—the sexual anti-hero—continues to fuel the contemptuous attitude he heaps upon females, “fruits,” and foreigners.

While within the confines of a favorite hangout bar, his comfort zone, Acosta reigns supreme as he hurls nasty, ethnic barbs after sexual epithets, to fellow barhoppers and flies: *Fags, chinks, Jewish switchhitters (or bisexuals)*, no one escapes Brown’s ugly expletives. And, when it relates to the subject of homosexuality, our anti-hero loves to dish out loads of smirking condescension, such as “Although the Polk District was filled with queens, butches, and fags, Jose Ramon Lerma was one of the few homosexuals we tolerated at JJ’s...So we permitted him our holy heterosexual company” (1972, 47). It is blatantly obvious that Acosta is merely insecure with his own dubious sexuality; but he loves pretense, especially when he imagines himself to be a poor, heterosexual artist, suffering from his “blue television period” and thus needing plenty of female sexual affection, yet wanting company *in his terms*—him “…as their protector and they as...[his lovers and] maids...” (1972, 52).

As *Autobiography* unravels the search for “his fucked-up identity,” *cultural chameleon* is the best moniker to describe Acosta, and the following satiric illustrations indicate Acosta’s constant cultural transformations: Before arriving at the Idaho town where Papa Hemingway is laid to rest,
Acosta is all of a sudden "Henry Hawk," a freewheeling, free-traveling Samoan; then when the hero hits the local wateringhole, Oscar introduces himself as a "Blackfoot Indian trader," a real chief "with no feathers;" and finally when he reaches Colorado's alpine country, his "family's the last of the Aztecs." According to Rivera, "...fiction creates another reality...an imagined, invented one" whose "...prototype is the labyrinth" (90). Now, what does Acosta's enigma symbolize?: "For it is a vicarious notion of humanity, or man, to attempt to search for the other, 'alter ego,' in order to comprehend himself better" (Rivera, 90). So, in the process of trying to understand himself, Acosta first dubs himself as Brown Buffalo; then after shucking a lawyering career, he transforms into a Jack Kerouac persona, a self-styled, beatnik roadhog; and after taking LSD for the first time, he turns into a Allen Ginsberg-like hippie-mystic, experiencing a rebirth of sorts: "I curled up in my old fetus position and cried for my mother's breast [Freudian slip]...in the darkness of her womb" (1972, 38). It is the late sixties, and as Acosta embarks on a journey to find himself, he begins the adventures of a modern Chicano.

As he starts to experiment with drugs, especially hallucinogenic ones like LSD, peyote, and the magic mushroom, these doors of perception are to help him "...understand. To see things." As Oscar probes deeper into the
self, he deconstructs personal crises, and in the course of his own self-
analysis, the world around him is turned into a zoo of sorts. In one particular
instance, when he and his merry friends go out to eat, Acosta delights in
painting colorful imagery of beasts of nature to describe those around him,
and throughout the dinner, he seems to be experiencing—while under the
influence of drugs—some kind of "ethnic rebirth," surrealistically set in a
manger-like atmosphere, and surrounded by the owl, gorilla, ape, ants, mice,
vultures, frog, chickens, elephant, and horse, all animal images described in
his first narrative. While having a "last supper" with his psychedelic apos-
tles, Acosta deludes himself into believing that he is a man with a greater,
grandiose mission—"the same age as Jesus when he died"—a Christ-like
figure who is unmistakably "...moving toward his own crucifixion" (Smith
84).

In addition to sojourning across America, Acosta also initiates the
journey within, by savoring childhood memories of his hometown, trying to
analyze his ethnic roots which helped shape his sociosexual gender role. In
the Californian town where the hero grew up, ethnic demarcations are
clearly set: There are Mexicans, Okies, and Americans, and in "the battle
for group survival," you didn’t fight one of your own (1972, 78), because the
Mexicans had to band together against what Padilla calls the "consistency of
misrelationship” with whites, and their never-ending taunts of “greaser, spic, and nigger”. This critic claims that:

...American society has repeatedly defined and limited him [the hero] to a type, and likewise as a result of his often misdirected recoil against such limitation. Always a ‘greaser’ regardless of desire or achievement, the Chicano comes into being largely as a response to a perverse interplay with the outer world. (243).

So, can we really blame a self-hating Acosta for railing against women and homosexuals if he is merely caught in a cycle of discrimination himself?

Take Acosta’s own Mexican family, as a vivid reminder of the internal contradictions that our ethnic hero must deal with, this one pertaining to skin color. To family members, Acosta’s swarthy complexion indicates that he is of indio origin—or the negative binary of a supposedly positive European reaffirmation of white skin. So, why is this the case? According to Gutiérrez and Padilla, the Spanish conquistadores, who settled the Americas in the early 16th century, quickly established a “consciousness of color”—or as they call it, a pigmentocracy—a “legal code that measured one’s genealogical proximity to those that were stigmatized by conquest and forced into subjugation and toil” (19). In other words, the darker one’s skin, the lower on the social totem pole. Three hundred years later, this social attitude is
still embedded in the Mexican collective unconscious, and struggling under the weight of being a dark-skinned Mexican, Oscar sometimes yields to a self-loathing frame of mind—one that somehow connects a warped sense of ethnicity with feelings of sexual inadequacy. Even though “the family, regardless of its extension, is an important factor for self-identity” (Elizondo, 16), Acosta always seems to shy away from his relatives except maybe to borrow money from his siblings. As a direct consequence, Acosta is made to feel like “a mere Indian with faltering tits,” a non-white who suffers from “feelings of confused self-image” (Padilla, 243).

As remembrances of childhood put-downs creep into his self-consciousness, Brown distinctly recalls awkward situations in elementary school, such as when a pig-tailed American girl loudly remarks to the entire class that a sweaty, bare-chested Oscar “stinks.” Recoiling in shock, Acosta never forgets the incident: “The room is filled with laughter. My ears pound red. I am done for. My heart sags from the overpowering weight of the fatness of my belly. I am the nigger, after all” (1972, 94). This episode is especially hard on Acosta, because Oscar somehow begins to reject sexual interest in females of his own culture for he “...did not know one Mexican girl that aroused the beast within” him (1972, 112-13); instead, he begins to concentrate all his efforts on gaining the affections of Anglo girls—who tend
to spurn him because of his skin color—thus reinforcing pigmentocracy tendencies within himself. Similarly, in another occasion but this time in high school, Acosta is "...strictly straight until a broken love affair with an Anglo girl left him confused, impotent, in a rage against society" (Publishers Weekly, 1972, 66). When he begins to interact with the opposite sex during his early teenage years, Acosta thus links ethnic self-loathing with sexual rejection, and as a result, both negatives are reinforced in a self-invalidating manner, and the hero feels constantly assailed within his own Mexican culture as well as from without.

Eventually, after Acosta’s wanderings lead him into "...the land of his ancestral inheritance, El Paso and Juárez," where he finds "...rejection and symbolic death" (Smith 84), he winds up in jail, facing a Mexican magistrate who admonishes him: “Why don’t you go home and learn to speak your father’s language?” Yet when he returns to the USA, customs officials ask him to show proof of citizenship as he does not look Yankee enough to them. Oscar thus laments about his cultural inconsistency—"I’ve checked it all out and have failed to find the answer to my search. One sonofabitch tells me I’m not a Mexican and the other one says I’m not an American. I got no roots anywhere" (1972, 196). He becomes torn between the dialectical tensions of his double ethnicities, in effect becoming an alien in no
man’s land. In this dialectical daze, the Buffalo roams the trails of the American Southwest, as well as the bar-lit Mexican alleyways of Juarez, in hopes of striking it rich with an ethnic claim in *Chicanismo*, a “...basic concept which embodies both the Indio and the Spanish aspects our heritage” (Montoya, 26) in the landscape of *Aztlan*, the “...imaginary geography claimed as the true site of Chicano subjectivity” (Chabram-Dernersisian, 82). Yet, Saldivar also states that “It remains on that precarious utopian margin between the two, perhaps as the very sign of marginality institutionalized in geopolitical terms by the border between the sovereign states of Mexico and the United States” (174). However the critics want to explain it, achieving a “Chicano” state of mind is what Acosta’s first narrative is about, with the sequel reflecting its political ramifications.

Finding *la causa*, or a political cause to latch unto in *Revolt*, Acosta becomes the leader of the “CM’s,” or “Chicano Militants,” who advocate ethnic nationalism at any expense. A good example of Acosta’s challenging the US is the incident at Lake Elsinore, where they have gone for rest and relaxation. During the trip, Acosta and his comrades decide to form the official Brown Buffalo Party in their burlesque-yet-symbolic attempt at self-government, as one of them surmises, “I think we can run our own country” (1973, 68), a reference to Chicano/a self-determination in a “sovereign”
nation of Aztlán. Even before aspirations are fully savored, however, Acosta and his co-conspirators are suddenly spotted from a plane to be on private property, and thus this pseudo-political assembly is dispersed by white men with guns. Undoubtedly, this scene reflects historical claims that la raza has been mistreated in the past by its Anglo counterparts, as Mexican American land has been stolen by force, legal wrangling, and/or taxation, and Chicano/as are not really allowed to participate fully in American democracy. With lofty, nationalistic ideals in mind, the militants urge Acosta to resume his lawyering career by becoming a defender of political underdogs, a sort of “Chicano William Kunstler².” Eventually, he winds up representing such defendants as the “St. Basil Twenty-One,” arrested for protesting the affluent Catholic Church, or the “East LA Thirteen,” rounded up for organizing school blowouts against a racist educational system. Recognizing oppression as shared experiences with other Chicanos, Zeta is able to justify his acquiring a “CM” political tag, a group identity which he desperately seeks in the first narrative but is unable to attain until its sequel.

Basically, Acosta’s Revolt represents a “David vs. Goliath” conflict between a small but vociferous group of ethnic activists and the powers-that-be, or rich folk. At a time when people are questioning political beliefs, challenging the economic status quo, and arriving at new political
consensus, the early seventies allow Acosta-turned-Zeta the opportunity to undergo a change in political identity and social awareness. He thus transforms a belief “in absolutely nothing” into a defense of his group identity with burning passion. As Chicano critic Francisco Lomelí acknowledges, “The overt assertion of an identity in 1970 was seen as a political act—something viewed with widespread suspicion” (29). At the time, it was no easy task for Acosta to spearhead a movement fraught with political risk and even physical danger.

For instance, take the autopsy scene in Acosta’s sequel, where a mere medical procedure creates highly charged political tension. In order to find the truth in the jail-cell hanging of a young vato loco named Robert Fernandez, Acosta fights the justice system tooth-and-nail. After the victim’s family cried foul play, Acosta is able to intimidate the county coroner into ordering an autopsy. Our hero subsequently finds himself directing a team of pathologists doing a postmortem examination of “the brown body of that Chicano boy, just another expendable Cockroach” (1973, 104), in hopes of ascertaining the cause of death, to trace the victim’s killer(s). In a strange way, Robert’s corpse comes to represent Acosta’s old image: As the hero orders physicians to cut open the cadaver—“Slice, slice, slice ... Saw, saw, saw... the goddamn face is gone; the head is wide open; no mouth, nose,
eyes...” (1973, 103), Acosta is symbolically dissecting and discarding parts of his old self while resurrecting a new identity in the second novel. But as the whole affair takes its toll, Zeta demonstrates a rare sense of guilt by spoofing a burial’s last rites: “Forgive me, Robert, for the sake of the living brown...I am no worse off than you...I will suffer the knowledge of your death and your second death and your ashes to my ashes, your dust to my dust...Goodbye, ese. Viva la Raza!” (1973, 104). In a way, Acosta’s protagonist stitches together a new Frankenstein-self out of a formaldehyde jar of leftover organs—to become “Zeta,” the subversive leader of a rebellious cockroach army.

As Acosta finds himself bogged down in the trenches of courtroom drama, he begins to adopt a more radical strategy of organizing. Assuming the new name of “Zeta,” Spanish for the last letter of the alphabet, allows Acosta to shed his old “slave name,” thus parodying Black leader Malcolm X, who had dropped his “white” surname when he became a practicing Muslim. With a new radical image, Zeta may be trying to spoof the great civil-rights leader and his motto, “By any means necessary.” But at times, “Z” becomes more vitriolic and violent than “X” ever was, as Zeta comes to realize that whites have stacked the political deck against la raza. In his dealing with the state apparatus like the cops, courts, and institutions of
imprisonment, Zeta becomes more and more disenchanted with legal re-
courses in his attempt to right the wrongs in American society. Eventually
he seems to become a “Chicano Frantz Fanon,” a self-styled firebrand who
understands how the power of ideology is used in controlling and manipu-
lating the underprivileged masses of cockroaches, usually the victims of the
state’s racist and class-laden double standard.

The ideological stronghold over people is depicted when the coroner
conducts an official inquest into the death of Fernandez, the young cock-
roach ruthlessly crushed by the state, whose family is hapless to do anything
about it. Theorist Louis Althusser defines the state as “...a force of repres-
sive execution and intervention in the interests of the ruling class” (137).
Acosta runs up against it when he decides to find who is responsible for
Robert’s death. In this incident, Robert Fernandez—whose cultural image is
one of the “pachuco” social outcast—is representative of inhabitants of the
Tooner Flats barrio, “the area of gangs who spend their last dime on short
dogs of T-Bird wine, where the average kid has eight years of school. Eve-
rybody there gets some kind of welfare” (1973, 90). In this blatant case of
police brutality, Acosta pits an average Chicano cockroach against the cop
apparatus, a vato loco who “has been fighting with the pig since the Anglos
stole his land in the last century. He will continue to fight until he is
exterminated” (1973, 91). Attempting to explain the pachuco phenomena in
the U.S., Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz theorizes that “They are in-
stinctive rebels, and North American racism has vented its wrath on them
more than once.... Their attitude reveals an obstinate, almost fanatical will-
to-be, but this will affirms nothing specific except their determination...”
(14). Viewed as a lower-class pachuco misfit and “Having been cut off from
his traditional culture, he asserts himself for a moment as a solitary and
challenging figure....he becomes his true self, his supremely naked self, as a
pariah, a man who belongs nowhere” (Paz, 17). As Zeta investigates the un-
usual circumstances of a poor roach’s extermination as he trudges along
through the politico-legal superstructure of L.A.’s Hall of Justice, he is
thwarted at every turn by government administrators and civil service em-
ployees, who cover up police misconduct, obstruct justice, and condone offi-
cial police corruption.

During inquest proceedings, Zeta comes up against his own kind, Chi-
cano cockroaches, who have been subjected to city hall’s ideological propa-
ganda machine—or the attempt to brainwash “...every citizen with daily
doses of nationalism, chauvinism, liberalism, moralism, etc. by means of the
press, the radio, and television” (Althusser, 154). Since ideology plays such
a powerful role in keeping the Chicano/a masses in line, Zeta faces nothing but an uphill battle to get to the bottom of the young Fernandez’s murder.

Fernandez’s cellmate during the victim’s brief-but-fatal incarceration was another young Chicano named Mickey de Silva, the nephew of a has-been Chicano movie actor, “a three-hundred-pound ex-\textit{vato loco} who became famous by acting like a dumb greaser” (1973, 106). The older de Silva is in cahoots with the city’s political old guard as he “...and his cronies, the small businessmen and a few hack judges, could always be counted upon to endorse whatever program the Anglo laid out for the Cockroaches” (1973, 94). Zeta is certain that Mickey knows what happened to the deceased during a scuffle with police shortly before the prisoner was found dead; Robert’s face was bruised from a severe beating, and his body found hanging from a jail bedsheets. After the inquest officially rules death by suicide, Mickey still refuses to reveal any incriminating details about the incident, testifying only that he “...heard some noise...It was the police. They were taking Fernandez out of the cell...I didn’t see nothing” (1973, 117). The de Silva uncle, having been bamboozled by money and a false sense of power, and the nephew, having been brokered a plea bargain, are both clear examples of Chicano lackeys who seriously believe that concealing the real truth about Fernandez’s murder will be good for them. Even though the de Silvas
may think that they did the right thing for themselves, nonetheless, they are slaves to the state’s insidious ideology that chews up and spits out people at will, as demonstrated in the Fernandez’s case.

To prolong as long as possible their own power, LA authorities utilize machiavellian arts of deceit and manipulation as well as of conspiracy and cover-up. But Acosta also uses the cockroaches as his own personal, political pamphleteers to enhance himself—not only as a community leader but also as an artist—especially as a paperback writer about political intrigue in cockroach land. At times, Zeta’s radical fervor rings hollow, however; after defending revolutionary ringleaders, for example, our hero usually decides to “drop out again” and go on extended vacation like the one he took to Mexico, always claiming that he wants to pen his memoirs and capture the essence of a contemporary rebellion for future posterity. When the Chicano Moratorium protests against the Vietnam War turn ugly and are subsequently crushed by the county’s Robocop-deputies, Zeta, the righter of wrongs in Aztlán, however, is nowhere to be found as he’s off basking under the Acapulco sun.

Thus, Acosta’s insistence in finding “THE STORY” and writing “THE BOOK” (sic) is a constant source of friction between “Brown the artist,” recording history for posterity, and “Zeta the radical,” shaping and
molding the present: The “artist” in him is interested in extracting a real story of substance by playing along with the Chicano Militants, because as Montoya claims “...we have learned to use our art as an organizing tool to strip ourselves of the mental sedimentation of over three hundred years of colonization; our art reflects the emotional and sociological scars of our oppression” (25). But once Zeta gets the scoop of his life, he does not hesitate to split and write about it. In short, Oscar tends to romanticize the tension between Brown, writer of pastiche and exaggeration, and Zeta, instigator of revolution and serious change: “I’m a writer, yeah, and a singer of songs. I just happen to be a lawyer and a fighter” (1973, 207). Maybe, that’s why Zeta is both an artist and a politico simultaneously, because he wants a hungry, reading public to consume a revolution that he helped to foment.

After Robert Fernandez’s death is officially declared a suicide, Acosta decides—out of a sense of desperation—that he wants to take some form of political action against the whole system of government, “Now here it is, February, 1970, and I am looking for a man to kill” (1973, 124). After much deliberation, it is agreed upon that the militants will attack a symbolic location rather than actually kill a cop as discussed: “The Farmworkers are picketing Safeway Stores. Why don’t we hit one of them?” (1973, 126). Frustrated with the whole justice system, Zeta and his comrades-in-arms
thus agree to participate in a molotov-cocktail caper, an act of violence to get their message across. They decide to firebomb an East LA supermarket and celebrate with a victory party afterwards. However, that very same night, Zeta gets it into his head to run for elected office. He believes ideali-
istically not only that the cops "...are the violent arm of the rich and I would get rid of them" (1973, 136), but also in practical terms, he knows that he will get a lot of instant name-recognition by running for public office. In a single evening, he thus goes from being a staunch revolutionary against the status quo, to ironically achieving political accommodation within the state apparatus by running for sheriff (even though Acosta claims that he will abolish the position once he gets in). As an aspiring politico, he might be attempted to believe that he can change the system from within—"Hey, why don't we infiltrate the Sheriff's Department?" (1973, 132), but Zeta does not win the race. Later on, however, he begins to advocate a most strident, eth-
nic nationalism, one that could actually be considered as "separatist" in some quarters: "We need to get our own land. We need our own govern-
ment. We must have our own flag and our own country. Nothing less will save the existence of the Chicanos (1973, 201). Acosta readily dismisses these apparent self-contradictions by billing himself as "...the only
revolutionary lawyer this side of the Florida Gulf" (1973, 214) and actually believing his own rhetoric.

After the trial is finally over for the “Tooner Flats Seven” (the Chicano Moratorium leaders who were charged with arson, riot, and conspiracy), Zeta has now become the underground leader of the extremist Chicano Liberation Front (CLF), an ultra-radical group analogous to the Black Panthers. Eventually, the CLF decides to get revenge against the entire California justice system by setting off a homemade bomb in the courthouse where one of the Chicano leaders has been found guilty and sentenced to forty days in the clink. Even though one Chicano brother is killed in the exploding ruckus, Zeta escapes the consequences of his extreme actions by going “back on the road,” claiming again that he needs to finish his “memoirs before I go totally crazy,” although his leaving may suggest that he is experiencing some guilt about his misdeeds. Yet, he still considers himself very fortunate to have been “one of a bunch of Cockroaches that helped start a revolution to burn down a stinking world,” while also being proud to be a warrior who has “...been forced to carry on, chained to a war for Freedom just like a slave is chained to his master” (1973, 258). By the end of the book, Oscar Zeta Acosta rides off into the sunset and is never heard of from again.
In a major statement made supporting Chicano literary writers during the first nationwide Chicano literary conference, *El Festival de Flor y Canto* in 1973, Oscar Zeta Acosta makes the charge “...that for too long the politicians, historians, and sociologists have spoken for the Mexican American. Now it’s time for the Chicano writers of creative works to tell an even truer story of our people...These are the people who can put some soul back into the movimiento” (*El Chico*, 4). In the process of telling that truth, Acosta uses parody, overstatement, and exaggeration to underscore the need to get to the bottom of a Chicano revolution that was a long time a-coming. Even though the hero engages in satire and self-contradiction in the late sixties and early seventies, the Brown Buffalo-turned-Zeta never gives up the hope of one day finding his true self. Maybe he was still searching that fateful day in 1974 when, according to his son, Marco, “he disappeared from Mazatlán, Mexico, via a friend's sailing boat” on his way back to the States (Acosta, 1972, 201). Perhaps he drowned or went underground, but the fact remains that no one—not even family or friends—has ever seen or heard from him again.

Oscar Zeta Acosta’s lasting legacy is that he helped shape Chicano consciousness into political action, a great feat in itself. But, in the process of attaining ethnic awareness, he sacrifices the sexual dignity of others—
mainly, women, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals—and pays a heavy price for it:

A tendency to ignore and shun him by contemporary feminists and gay activists because of his political incorrectness.

Notes

1 One of the characters in William Shakespeare’s drama, *The Tempest* (1611), New World native “Caliban” is considered a villain by Prospero, probably one of the Bard’s most “imperialistic” protagonists. The play itself is interpreted by many a scholar as a dramatic discourse sanctioning the Old World colonialism of the 16th and 17th centuries. During the 1980’s, however, Latin American critics, like Retamar, have turned Caliban into a hero by arguing that he symbolizes the struggle of the mestizo/a majority of the “Other America.”

2 In its 1995 obituaries column, *The New York Times* wrote about William M. Kunstler that “the gravel-voiced radical lawyer whose wild hair seemed to symbolize his distrust of government and his kinship with unpopular people and causes” died at the age of 76 of heart failure. “Mr. Kunstler’s championing of left-of-center causes dated from the early days of the civil rights movement and spanned the bitterest days of the Vietnam War....[He] made...a life out of representing people and movements that were disliked, even despised...Perhaps his best-known case was that of the “Chicago Seven,” who were tried on charges that they conspired to incite riots that made a tumult of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.”

3 A native of one of France’s “oldest colonies,” Martinique, Frantz Fanon was a medical doctor and psychiatrist who wrote numerous political articles for respectable newspapers and journals as well as writing four books. His *The Wretched of the Earth* (1965) was probably his most famous. According to *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, “Fanon’s contributions to an understanding of the psychology of colonialism are considerable....First, as a politicized psychiatrist, he was among the early pioneers to recognize that individual and collective emotional disorders were associated on a large scale with the social pathology of colonialism, which by its very nature, denied validity to indigenous peoples and their cultures. More specifically, the syndrome fostered widespread social diseases such as feelings of rage, alienation, inferiority, self-hatred, and withdrawal—all products, he believed, of a conflict-ridden colonial pathology.”
CHAPTER 2

ARTURO ISLAS & CHICANO/A "POST-NATIONALISM" IN THE EIGHTIES: THE ETHNIC CONSTRUCT CHALLENGED BY AN EMERGING SEXUALITY

Tagged an "ethnic writer" by New York publishers, Chicano author Arturo Islas struggles for years to get his fiction published as East Coast editors do not consider his work marketable enough—it is unwittingly assumed that no one will read him. When a small press in California eventually discovers Islas, his first narrative proves all the pundits wrong by winning literary acclaim, and today a prominent publishing house has paperback rights to the author's major novels.

In his moving accounts of Chicano/a survival along the Texan-Mexican border, Islas constructs a strong ethnic consciousness in his characters, one that could be referred to as "post-nationalist," because his hero, Miguel Chico, or "Mickie" to his familia, clearly identifies with his Chicano ethnicity, and is not in search of one, as is the case with the namesake protagonist of Oscar Zeta Acosta's writings. Because the construction of
Mickie’s ethnicity is sufficiently stable, Islas is subsequently able to explore other sensibilities like feminist, gay, and lesbian subjectivities in his narratives.

Not only are Islas’ characters ethnic enough, but the author solidifies their ethnicity further by incorporating Amerindian imagery into his writings, in particular the cosmic beliefs of Mesoamerica’s Nahuatl culture—the same native tradition behind the Aztecs’ famous legacy. Their Nahuatl ancestors came from the north, settled in the Valley of Mexico, and founded in 1325 the ancient Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, the site of present-day Mexico City. From the Nahuatl’s religious beliefs, Islas uses a deity figure, “Tlaloc, the Rain God,” to explore issues of sweeping importance, such as those dealing with family relations, homosexuality, and death.

From a historical perspective, Islas gives his ethnic subjects a strong “lineage”: Chicano/as are not immigrants, rather they are migrants to the North American continent, and whether documented or not, Chicano/as as such have the same inalienable right—as the descendents of the pilgrims—to live, work, and pursue happiness in this country. At the same time, Islas investigates the seething sexuality of his mestizo/a characters, such as the lamentable Mickie who loves to wallow in his tortured-homosexual role, acutely
aware of and despondent about his queerness. While ethnicity is still of utmost importance to Islas, male gay sexuality is beginning to surface as a social identity marker in Chicano culture, as this writer paints a stirring portrait of a protagonist struggling with being a sexual pariah to his own flesh and blood—la familia. As the central character’s sexual orientation begins to reveal itself during the first narrative, Islas is making a definitive statement about the overlapping of sexuality with ethnicity, resulting from the writings of Chicano male writers who depict an emerging homosexuality.

Although lesbian Chicana writers, such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, have been contributing to queer writings for more than a decade, Islas is one of the first Chicano, male, gay authors to gain a wide-reading, “ethnic” audience with his first two works of fiction, The Rain God (1984), and its sequel, Migrant Souls (1990). But, as the author probes even further into taboo subjects in Chicano culture, such discouraged subject-matter as talk of homosexual/lesbian relationships and/or of inversion of sexual-gender roles, some may feel that this exploration begins to challenge, at least obliquely, the essentialist foundation of Chicano/a ethnicity along the Texas/Mexico frontier. In critiquing Islas, I will use Gloria Anzaldúa’s definition of a shared border as “an open wound” (una herida abierta) where
the Third World grates against the first and bleeds in this vague and unde-
termined place, the “lifeblood of two worlds” merging to form a third coun-
try—“a border culture” (3). According to Anzaldúa, since borders some-
times lead to marginalized spaces where “The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (3), the notion of transgressing boundaries is prevalent throughout Islas’ novels.

In a way, the author finds himself in a paradoxical narrative maze as he investigates the ethnic confines of his characterizations, because Chicano culture has a tendency of collapsing under its own oppressive weight when it comes to matters of violating traditions, either compulsory heterosexual ori-
entations or culturally-assigned gender roles. As his Chicano/a characters experience, grapple, and at times even confront mainstream social values, Islas seems to paint himself into a sort of a problematic cultural dilemma—
 mestizo/as have access to the more open and tolerant values of American morality, while trying to adhere to their Mexican mother-country’s inflexible code of social conduct that tends to choke them. For example, Mickie and his cousin Josie know who they are and where they come from, but it’s their own immediate family who sometimes creates uncertainty and tension in them, simply because Mickie and Josie choose to be themselves. Whether
it’s the case of a troubled Mickie begrudgingly “coming out” to his brother as a gay, or a divorced Josie refusing to accept a “bad girl” perception by others of herself.

Islas tends to downplay the physical and/or political demarcations between Mexico and the U.S. in *Rain God*, and especially between Mexicans from the homeland and Chicano/as from the gringo north, while at the same time narrating the social and cultural experiences of generations of the Angels living along the “fringes” of American society. As Islas infuses the creative imagination of Chicano literary space with the *mestizaje* roots of his indigenous cultural ancestry, *The Rain God* makes a direct reference to the pre-Columbian cosmology of the Aztecs. In fact, the novel’s title is the Nahuatl appellation of *Tlalocatecli*, god of death and the underworld. As the divinity of precipitation, *Tlaloc* is meteorologically important to tillers of the soil, especially in times of drought. With the soothing raindrops of death, the rain-god renews the parched existence of life, and in the process, the human spirit is quenched, nature is cleansed, and life is reconciled all over again.

According to the Nahuatl cosmic view, the earth is always in cyclical evolution, subject to the influence of cosmic forces throughout the universe.
When there is an equilibrium of forces, an age or “Sun” exists, but soon thereafter, within a determined period, the equilibrium is upset and a cataclysm occurs (León-Portilla, 45). As in cyclical rhythm, the character’s personal life is always subjected to the cruelest of human intensities; in Mickie’s case, unrequited gay-love adds confusion to his uncomfortable status as prodigal son returning home with Ph.D. in hand. As he attempts to move on with his life after the sour affair, Mickie is haunted by memories of his hometown, at times feeling more like the proverbial ugly frog than the princely heir-apparent of the family’s esteem and admiration. Lacking in balance in his relations with la familia, Mickie consequently deteriorates mentally as well as physically as this Chicano hero suffers tremendously from the burden of being a first-born Mexican male who just happens to be joto, or queer.

Feeling morose and suicidal, Mickie experiences memories of his moralistic and strict, matriarchal grandmother as well as of an authoritative father-figure, all giving him a “lost, uneasy feeling,” and, at times, a longing for that consciousness which is “the highest form of existence: pure, bodiless intellect” (1984, 8). In other words, he seeks death—something which he feels will bring him invigoration in the long run. When Mickie
undergoes a “colostomy,” or the surgical reconstruction of the colon area, this almost fatal operation could be construed as a symbolic attempt to fix his “damaged” frame of mind. Subconsciously, the protagonist is an individual who is unable to dislodge obsessive memories, dreams, and fears from his psyche, or “mental digestive system;” therefore, he must undergo a critical internal operation, in order to cleanse psychological and emotional hang-ups that are figuratively clogging his well-being.

Utilizing a cerebral, articulate subject but one sinking in the emotional quicksand of desperate despair, Islas examines the hero’s rough-hew childhood that has left him—as an adult—feeling embittered and resentful. In *Rain God*, Islas writes about the eternal struggle between intellect and passion in the depressed Mickie, depicting the hero’s plight as a barren and sweltering wasteland. Although Angel family members feel a collective pride in the hero’s academic achievements, they still harbor “…contradictory feelings toward him, because he was still not married and seldom visited them in the desert” (1984, 4). In other words, because he’s gay. Already feeling marginalized by his own blood relatives, Mickie doesn’t fit their mold of him as “first-born son,” a standing of honor in the Chicano family nucleus. That is why Islas uses the desert metaphor to depict the
borderlands as a desolate, forsaken place full of woes and tribulation—a scorching landscape to be rejuvenated only by seasonal thunder and downpour from the deity of dying and redemption, the rain-god. As a streak of lightning over life’s dark underlining, death provides essential relief and assuagement to a world full of pain, suffering, and moral degradation.

So, how does Miguel Chico deal with his sexual non-conformity? Basically he tries to subordinate sexuality to ethnicity by keeping his sexual orientation a secret from his kin, especially from his heterosexual rival, the “bastard” Ricardo. Mickie’s “macho” upbringing is so entrenched that it discourages him from being candid with his primo-hermano (or cousin-brother) about his gay sexuality. If he bares all to his family, Mickie then feels vulnerable to rejection, because according to Octavio Paz, the Mexican’s “...ideal of the manliness is never to crack, never to back down. Unlike other people, we believe that opening oneself up is a weakness or betrayal. Our relationships with other men are always tinged with suspicion. Every time a Mexican confides in a friend or acquaintance, every time he opens himself up, it is an abdication” (29-30). Since Mickie cannot divulge his secrets to Ricardo for a number of reasons, he eventually resigns himself to self-destructive behavior, succumbing to the bottle and devils of
depression, as he comes to realize that he cannot measure up to his parent’s high expectations of him. Thus, the hero perceives himself as a homosexual threat to the heterosexual matrix of the traditional Chicano family.

In *Migrant Souls*, Islas focuses on a very distraught Mickie who loves to wallow in self-pity, in fact, even joining Josie as honorary members of their very own society of sin and suffering, the “Order of St. Wretched.” In this fraternity of satirical agonizing, the two cousin-warriors “laugh at misery” together as they poke metaphorical lances at the windmills of Mexican culture. A quixotic knight-errant skirmishing with the fire-breathing ignorance of society, Mickie challenges his family’s myopic outlook on life, typified in defiant declarations such as his aunt’s staunch belief that “There are no homosexuals” (1990, 121), while Josie resists gender stereotyping of her sex, asking “Why is it that the women are the ones who always have to clean the toilet bowls and change the diapers?” (1990, 103). Ruminating, Mickie wonders why her cousin “hid her beauty by keeping herself just overweight enough to be noticeable and by not caring what her hair looked like most of the time” (1990, 119), while Josie condones Mickie’s excursion into his “secret territory”—that her cousin “was a lover of men” (1990, 120).
These two fantastical crusaders are also drawn together by a common thread—“Mama Chona”—the indomitable matriarch of the Angel Clan, who sets the high ideals and moralistic standards of la familia. Mickie is expected to abide by a code of conduct cast from the exemplary life of Chona’s late husband, Jesus Angel, who “had more Spanish than Indian blood in his veins.” In the narrative, this patriarch represents an important aspect of the Angel clan’s rose-colored, historical perspective. After he dies during the family’s attempt to cross the border into the U.S., Mama Chona inducts her husband into the House of Angel’s hall of martyred saints. A God-fearing spouse who was kind, honest, and absolutely devoted to his family, Jesus Angel becomes a larger-than-life figure not only to the younger generations such as Mickie and Josie but also especially to the clan’s future progeny. Mickie is expected to follow in his grandfather’s footsteps, i.e. to be morally upright, faithful, and totally dedicated to the family, something that Miguel Chico cannot fulfill because he is gay, unmarried, and has no offspring. Thus, a sense of moral shortcoming and savoring the ensuing guilt tends to characterize the entire Angel family and all because of Grand Dame Chona.

So who is this matriarch whose real name is Encarnacion Olmeca de Angel? Why does this matron have such a tremendous impact on both the
lives of the hero and of Josie? It seems that the cousins have always been trying to escape the grasp of the old woman who is, in a way, almost indistinguishable from Eva Peace, Toni Morrison’s character in her novel, *Sula* (1974): Both are very strong characters who must do whatever is necessary to survive a world full of “brutes and fools.” In Eva’s case, she may have sacrificed a limb—actually her own leg—to collect insurance money to feed her a starving family; in Chona’s instance, Mama seriously considers, at one point, the idea of selling her youngest son, Miguel Grande (Mickie’s father), because she is left a widow in dire straits. That is why Chona “hated flags and from the start had looked with scorn on the Revolution” (1990, 38), because it costs her a husband as well as her firstborn. As a consequence, Mama Chona never really forgives Mexico for the death of her loved ones, and for that reason alone, abhors “the pomposity of men at war” (1984, 163), especially after her husband is “…struck by the train that brought the family to Juarez on their way out of the country they were fleeing to avoid the revolution” (1990, 231). Somehow, Mama Chona manages to endure her harrowing ordeals, and in due course, plants the roots of the Angel clan in Texas, establishing herself as a family-clan fixture who lives to be almost a century old, eventually becoming an institution of her own.
Raised in a strict Catholic upbringing and educated from a quasi-medieval perspective by Spanish nuns in Mexico, Chona is greatly influenced by Mother Church. Mexican critic Samuel Ramos attests that “The only civilizing agent of the New World was the Catholic Church, which by virtue of its pedagogical monopoly shaped the American societies in a medieval pattern of life...Education, and the direction of social life as well, were placed in the hands of the Church, whose power was similar to that of a state within a state” (27). Correspondingly, a medieval-scholastic-educated Mama Chona harbors stoical views about the torments of existence as well as the predestination of providence:

‘Life is letting go of what you love’ she tells her children, teaching them to strike a rigid moral stance toward life, and forever stressing hell and damnation: In her world, there were no accidents. Every event was divine retribution or blessing...and she accepted suffering in this life without question or any sense of rebellion. (1984, 164)

For example, Chona decries the daily ritual of drinking coffee as “the Devil’s brew” and banishes java from her home as a forbidden luxury, thus making her family feel guilty for whatever sins committed. In a similar vein, Mama Chona “bore her children out of duty to her husband and the
Church” (1984, 164), viewing marriage only as “a handicap and burden” with no pity or solace to be extended to her because of her role as wife.

When it comes to ethnic matters, Mama Chona feels absolutely sure that she and her children were “elevated into civilization for all time” (1990, 8) with her marriage to the “Castilian” Jesus Angel. Here, Mama Chona clearly follows a creole’s “pigmentocratic” mentality that confers social and class status according to one’s skin color, as she is “...part of a Spanish conquistador snobbery that refused to associate itself with anything Mexican or Indian because it was somehow impure” (1984, 27). The irony is that Chona’s real name, Encarnacion Olmeca de Angel, translates into English as “angelic incarnation of the Olmec,” with this Mesoamerican Indian culture reflecting one of the most advanced and influential Amerindian civilizations. Since she embraces an unyielding Eurocentric attitude, embodying “the most rigid element of Mexican character” (Ramos, 28), Mama Chona cannot help but disparage incessantly the native lineage of her own ancestry, a cultural self-contradiction that the entire Angel clan must bear.

Not only is Chona proud of her strict Spanish upbringing at the expense of her indigenous roots, but she is also puritanical and morally obstinate when it comes to matters of sex, teaching her granddaughters that “It’s
more difficult for girls to be like angels because they are born wicked in a
different way from boys” (1990, 14), and that the biological variance has
something to do with something “down there.” Using the Angel clan sur-
name to imply qualities of purity and holiness, the author is interrogating the
idea of being “virtuous,” something that Mama Chona expects all family
members to strive for, especially the females. Chona also obligates the
clan’s younger generations to submit to her rules, “because they must follow
the family’s traditions” (1990, 105), and to Chona, rallying around one’s kin
and protecting its “saintly” image, is of utmost importance. One of the most
“unforgivable” sins that a female Angel can commit is to become an “un-
wed” mother, such as the case with Mickie’s aunt Mema, who overnight be-
comes a “woman of the streets” (1984, 165), or a mala mujer (“bad
woman”), because of giving birth to an illegitimate son, Ricardo. In
Chona’s world, there are two types of women: the virgin who is “unreach-
able and incorruptible,” and the vixen, who is fleshy, alluring, and un-
abashed. Once an Angel woman crosses the border between the two, she in-
curs Mama’s wrath, or in other words, divine retribution; in Mema’s
instance, Chona figuratively excommunicates both her own daughter and the bastard grandchild from the family, something that she regretfully recants later.

From a socio-economic perspective, Doña Chona also subscribes to the most snobbish attitudes of the Mexican upper class, deliberately forgetting that she was once poor and destitute. Chona takes on a very uppity mien about her status in Mexican American society, especially in her interactions with so-called “wetback” housekeepers like Mickie’s nursemaid, Maria, whom the matriarch dubs la indita: “Mama Chona did not approve of any of the Mexican women her sons and daughters hired to care for her grandchildren; these women were ill educated and very bad influences, particularly when allowed to spend too much time with her favorites” (1984, 14), the grand kids. Ironically, as Chona’s daughters retain undocumented workers as criadas (or housemaids), because the Angel family cannot afford to hire otherwise, Chona considers such practices as coarsely beneath her, as if the family is rich enough to do without domestic help. In fact, quite the opposite is true as Chona and her sister actually wind up living almost in destitution while retaining their “aristocratic airs” and remaining “...señoras of the most pretentious sort. Their hands were never in dishwasher, and
cleaning house was work for the Indians...” (1984, 147). Accordingly, they love to fancy themselves “...highborn Spanish ladies who just happened to find themselves in the provinces of Mexico” (1984, 141). This reflects a racial attitude that Ramón A. Gutiérrez calls \textit{scientific racism}:

European Aryan races were deemed to occupy the top of the a complex chain of beings, with Indians and native peoples at the bottom of that hierarchy, close to animals. The whiter and more European one was, the higher was one's position in society. Individuals of Spanish/Mexican heritage living in the Southwest thus embraced their historic association with Spanish culture so that they would not be stigmatized by their Mexican Indian ancestry. (244).

So, from Mama Chona's worldview perspective, if you are a dark-skinned person from the lower classes, then you are a mere Indian and thus not worthy of respect. Ethnically,

The snobbery Mama Chona and Tia Cuca displayed in every way possible against the Indian and in favor of the Spanish in the Angels’ blood was a constant puzzlement to most of the grandchildren. In subtle, persistent ways, family members were taught that only the Spanish side of their heritage was worth honoring and preserving; the Indian in them was pagan, servile, instinctive rather than intellectual, and was to be suppressed, its existence denied. (1984, 142)
One must ask: How did this European racial attitude evolve, one that is condescendingly degrading and used against the swarthy mestizo/a offspring of the New World? According to Ramos,

From the beginning, colonial organization tended to depress the spirit of the new race. The conquerors were not workmen, but soldiers who had to utilize the vanquished race in order to take advantage of their new possessions....Mexican will and initiative lacked opportunity for development. Wealth was not acquired by work but by the unjust privilege which permitted exploitation of the poor (33).

As a “creole,” or a person of European descent born in Spanish America, Mama Chona considers any colored member of the Mexican working class as uncivilized and thus unfit to be associated with—a nefarious stereotype that should not be condoned by any society.

As an ethnic author, Islas realizes that in *Migrant Souls*, he faces an uphill battle in his attempt to recover a positive ethnic image of Chicano/as in American culture, not only within society at large, but also sometimes even within his own raza as typified by Mickie’s vainglorious grandma. As Islas makes lineage connections between present-day raza and their North American forebears, he makes a most important and crucial ethnic declaration: As the direct cultural descendants of the mixed offspring of Indian and Spanish blood, mestizo/as cannot be considered as mere immigrants to
American soil. Rather the *mestizaje* journeys (of the past) as well as Mexican workers’ treks *al Norte* (of the present) should all be seen in the same light of *generational migrations* by indigenous people. Coming and going between habitats in North, Central, and South Americas, la raza’s ancestors eventually created, during the 16th century, great centers of art and culture in Mexico.

In Islas’ second novel, that is why Josie’s father Pancho Salazar gives her daughter a history lesson about the migrant connection between Mexican Americans and Amerindians, one originating from a northern land called *Aztlán*, “the ancestral home of the Aztecs located in the American Southwest [which] became a controlling metaphor for many [Chicano/a] writers” (Paredes, 1993, 42). Through Sancho’s character, Islas instills pride in the younger Chicano/a generations about the roots of their “ethnic nobility,” especially since Mexican Americans suffer continuously the disparagement of being called “illegal aliens” in what the author declares is their mythical homeland. As Raymund A. Paredes elaborates, “Aztlán freed Chicanos from the onus of being recent, displaced immigrants and provided them a sense of place and continuity” (Paredes, 1993, 42). As a Chicano writer, Islas utilizes a narrative strategy to eliminate geo-political borders within
Chicano/a literary space as he constructs a Chicano/a ethnic identity—one heavily based on the mestizo/a consciousness of the borderlands—whose inhabitants, as Anzaldúa believes, have inherited strong hereditary traits and characteristics: “At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly ‘crossing over,’ this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool” (77).

In order to keep their border culture intact, at times even having to get rid of negative Chicano/a images in American culture, Mexican Americans maintain alive their ethnic identity, customs, and traditions, providing a cultural opposition to the dominant Anglo establishment. Sometimes though when ethnic amistad crosses sexual taboo, the result can be brutally violent, as in the case of Mickie’s uncle Felix, the victim of a gay bashing. By all accounts, the entire Angel family suffers when the bisexual Felix attempts to seduce one of his favorite targets, naive heterosexuals, this time a young, blue-eyed, Anglo soldier from the nearby military base. After this G.I beats Felix to a pulp, Miguel Grande (Mickie’s father) then suffers the indignity of being denied a promotion that could be attributed indirectly to his brother’s sexual orientation.
Miguel Grande is the epitome of a Latino seduced by the ideological lure of the American success story, one who felt that “The North American dream had worked for him. Only his family reminded him of his roots, and except for his mother he avoided them as much as possible” (1984, 78). Yet, as much as he succumbs to his dream of success, he eventually has to come to terms with the intransigent racism in Anglo-Mexican relations. When Mickie’s father is up for job advancement in the cop ranks, to become Del Sapo’s first Mexican American chief of police, he is denied the position because of racist and homophobic positions prevalent in the city administration. Since Felix’s death occurs at the time of the promotion opportunity, word leaks out about the homosexual circumstances of the fatal beating, and Miguel Grande is seriously concerned that “the stigma of being jotos would not reach past his brother” (1984, 87). After his promising law-enforcement career is cut short, it forces Miguel Grande “...to understand what life was really like for ‘low class’ Mexicans in the land that guaranteed justice under the law for all” (1984, 88). And, to pour salt over the family’s wound, Felix’s killer is not even prosecuted for murder, and thus appropriate punishment is not meted out to the perpetrator, who is merely reassigned to another base. A very frustrated Josie concludes that “I know that this stupid
town is narrow-minded, religious in the worst of ways, and condones murder” (1990, 121), because closure is never reached in her uncle’s murder.

From a chronological perspective, the history of the borderlands is not on Josie’s side. Since the 19th century, Paredes claims that “Resentment was particularly high among those Mexican Americans who...had at some point supported the Anglo presence in their homelands, only to be betrayed” (32). In Del Sapo, the past is a constant reminder of this sense of loss permeating in its Chicano/a citizens since they, “like the Native Americans...became an ethnic minority through the direct conquest of their homelands,” leading to the development of “a decisive sense of opposition to Anglo-American forms and institutions” (Saldívar, 13). But in the process of rebelling, a patriarchal system is produced that keeps Chicanas, like Josie, helpless to act. Eventually, this male-oriented mentality is challenged by Chicana writers in the seventies and eighties as ethnic conflict inevitably leads to the power struggle between the sexes, especially between Chicanos and Chicanas.

In 1987, one of the most profound challenges to male superiority in Mexican/Chicano culture comes from Gloria Anzaldúa, who writes a book of mixed genres—criticism, poetry and prose—entitled Borderlands/La
*Frontera: The New Mestiza.* Anzaldúa’s work is one Chicana’s feminist exposé of cultural-sexist tendencies in the concept of Chicanismo. In this critical hybrid of a text, the author explores the idea of identifying a new Chicana feminism that relates to the mestiza. According to Anzaldúa, her people’s cultural tyranny—the patriarchy inherent in la raza—is just as bad as the imperialistic, racist practices of white Anglo culture. Not only does she indistinct cultural hegemony, but she also attacks the macho patronizing system of Chicano culture that stifles Chicanas’ sexuality on a regular basis. While Islas’ characters may seem to lack the fervor and courage to declare their homosexuality in public, Anzaldúa engages in a critique that spares no one as she attacks both the racism of American society and the sexism of her own people, especially those living along the South Texas border region. In the same vein as Anzaldúa’s bicultural critical approach, Saldívar states that

...the literature produced by Chicana authors is counterhegemonic to the second power, serving as a critique of critiques of oppression that fail to take into account the full range of domination...Chicana authors advance the resistance to dominant ideologies initiated by male authors by adding both male/female and hetero/homosexual binarisms to the discussion of the social construction of a Chicano identity. (173-75)

Half criticism and half literary composition, *Borderlands* is a landmark in Chicano/a criticism, because it captures the anger and rebellious
spirit of Anzaldúa herself, a Chicana subject who doesn’t hesitate: to rebel against certain ethnic cultural practices, to denounce her culture’s warped sense of female social roles, and to rebuke an intransigent heterosexuality that stifles homosexuals, lesbians, and bisexuals. In Anzaldúa’s scathing review of both American racism and Mexican sexism, the issue of a female sexuality challenges the ethnic domain, and in the process, rips apart the apparent unity of Chicano/a cultural homogeneity as a new feminist awareness—a “mestiza consciousness”—arises like a phoenix from the ashes.

As it pertains to this new mestiza/o consciousness, I propose that a comparison can be made between the two Angel cousins. If Josie Salazar is the new Chicana feminist, then Mickie Angel is the new mestizo—a feminist-oriented, Chicano male whose gay sexuality also threatens the ethnicity of the Angel clan.

Josie Salazar typifies this “new mestiza” image, because she defies traditional Mexican female behavior—as decreed by Mama Chona, who exemplifies indirectly cultural tenets critiqued by Octavio Paz. Josie copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity as the new mestiza takes the “cultural bull by the horns,” so to speak. From the very start, Josie is adamant against relenting to the mala mujer image that
has been imposed upon her by her family. Paz postulates that a bad female is “almost always accompanied by the idea of aggressive activity” (39) on her part. In Josie’s case, she takes decisive action to divorce a louse of a husband, who has already deserted his own family; she believes that if she has to be independent and act macho, then so be it. Josie does not care if she is not considered a “self-denying mother,” because she is merely standing up for her rights as a woman and, more importantly, as a human being. Thus, Josie will not renounce herself in favor of men, because she strongly feels that females are not subservient to males.

As the only Angel divorcée, Josie is perceived to be tinged with the curse of la chingada, or of the concept of the violating mother. This breach of female gender role is considered to be the opposite of Mama Chona’s modest femininity and her rules of lady-Latina etiquette. In Islas’ second novel, when Josie returns home to Del Sapo after a long absence (with two young daughters in tow and without a husband), Josie declares that “There are no prodigal daughters” (1990, 110) in reference to Chona, thus making Josie feel like she is the perpetrator of an injustice instead of its victim. With the “Josie vs. Chona” binary, the battle of the generations continues to rage, because Josie, representing the younger Angels, will not submit to the
social-cultural paradigm as defined by Paz’s critique of traditional Mexican culture: “...the Mexican considers woman to be an instrument, sometimes of masculine desires, sometimes of the ends assigned to her by morality, society, and the law” (Paz, 35). “She is submissive and open by nature...her natural frailty is made a virtue and the myth of the ‘long-suffering Mexican woman’ is created” (Paz, 38). Paz does acknowledge “...that she has never been asked to consent to these ends and that she participates in their realization only passively, as ‘repository’ for certain values” (35). Since Josie does not cater to the traditional Mexican female role that Paz analyzes, then she chooses to acquire an identity of her own—one that does not include living with a man in Del Sapo—and eventually Josie pays dearly for her autonomy.

Another image—that Josie must shrug off but has trouble doing so—is the one of La Malinche in Chicano/a literature. Reclaiming the Malinche figure, critic Cherríe Moraga decrises the “legacy of betrayal” perception that Latina women are forced to bear when they are imputed the Malinche complex, a collective sexual guilt shared by all Mexican/Chicana women and tied directly to “the historical/mythical female figure of Malintzin Tenepal” (1983, 99). During the Conquest of Mexico, acting as translator, vital guide, and lover to Hernán Cortéz, La Malinche collaborates
with the Spanish conquistadors, thus earning her the dubious title of traitor: “Ever since, brown men have been accusing her of betraying her race, and over the centuries continue to blame her entire sex for this ‘transgression’” (Moraga, 1983, 99-100).

Josie not only marries outside her Mexican culture (to an Anglo husband), but she is also somewhat seen as a vendida—or “sell-out”—a sort of betrayer of both her ethnicity and sexuality. Since Josie’s spouse splits after ten years of matrimony, she must bear the burden—in the eyes of family members—of being a Malinche outcast after she returns home with two mouths to feed and no hubby. Thus Josie is automatically stigmatized, because as a divorced mother, she carries the burden of a “fallen woman,” one who must put up with the cold shoulder of the Angel clan, because it’s perceived to be her fault, as her husband must had a reason to leave her.

Mickie’s fate is not too different from that of his cousin Josie, except that he takes rejection much worse than her. Although he never marries, the hero does share a San Francisco flat for three years with his male lover; so in effect, Mickie could be construed as a “fallen man” who is sorely disappointed when his relationship doesn’t work out. But, while Josie’s divorce turns her into a stronger person, one able to withstand the slings and arrows
of *la familia’s* scorns, Mickie’s unrequited love story transforms him into a miserable chap, one, in fact, who almost has a nervous breakdown.

If Josie refuses to play the part of the “long-suffering Mexican woman,” Mickie willingly jumps head-first into the portrayal of the “anguished Mexican male,” a role that he plays magnificently. At one point, he even considers suicide as a way to end his self-torture, one engendered by homosexual feelings, and which lead him to doubt God: “Why did our Father make me suffer so much at the end?” Because “our Father is a sadist” (1990, 176), exclaims Mickie.

As the hero begins to lose faith in himself, Islas engages in a critique of religion and its pious attitude when the hero actually chastises Josie about her perpetuation of Catholic religious traditions: “You hate the Church and then you get married and baptize your children in it. Sheep. All sheep” (1990, 191). Since Mickie has “…not taken communion for years,” he himself could be viewed as a Catholic expatriate who rails against the Church, because it does not acknowledge his sexual desire. Yet, when despondent because of his gayness, he runs to his older priest-brother Gabriel, seeking spiritual solace and comfort of absolution to keep from destroying himself. In itself, Mickie’s confession is a sort of soul-cleansing as well as an
allaying of sexual apprehension: “The novel itself ultimately is the answer; it assumes the form of a collective confession, an act of exorcism, a ritual within which the writer is both confessor and collective sinner” (Sánchez, 1991, 119). Usually getting depressed during the holidays when he thought “about how much he did not love Christmas Eve,” Mickie contemplates his lonely, miserable, intolerable life. Always trying to find an answer to his inquiry—“Who is God?”—as well as challenging the ultimate existence of a higher being, the hero inquires incessantly why God makes him suffer so, lamenting that “The morning demons were wrapping barbed wire around his heart” (175). Mickie thus struggles for personal survival within the oppressive confines of generations of Mexican traditions and customs, as well as grapples with a sense of insecurity concerning a homosexual lifestyle, forbidden by society.

During the eighties, Arturo Islas reenergizes Chicano ethnicity by excavating into la raza’s historic past. In the process, the author discovers Amerindian myths, pre-Columbian symbolism, and Nahuatl religion from among the relics. Because he stands on solid cultural ground, the ethnic identity of Islas’ hero Mickie is never in question and can actually be said to be “post-nationalist,” because Mickie is not in search of his ethnicity, unlike
Acosta’s namesake protagonist. Therefore, Islas-as-author has the opportunity to explore other subjectivities like the hero’s gay sexual orientation, and in the process, opens up the subject of homosexuality to Chicano/a scrutiny, never to be bottled up again.
CHAPTER 3

MICHAEL NAVA IN THE NINETIES: ETHNICITY & SEXUALITY
FROM A “CRITICAL RACE THEORY” PERSPECTIVE

In two of his best murder mysteries, Howtown (1990) and The Hidden Law (1992), gay Chicano author Michael Nava writes multicultural fiction about the modern survival of his “legal-eagle” protagonist Henry Rios in the old urban jungle, a world teetering on the edge because of domestic abuse, incurable AIDS, and a legal justice system, which plays a crucial role in creating racial and sexual hierarchies that oppress people. In these “whodunit” paperbacks about homicide and the American courts, Nava—as-author eschews universal and abstract values—in favor of a socially constructed view of reality that valorizes the primacy of personal experience in the act of storytelling—as a way of creating, understanding, and reconciling the world around us.

A good approach to understanding Nava’s fictional world is through the perspective of “critical race theory” (or “crit”), a legalistic point of view that supports a social construction perception of reality—that all knowledge
is contingent upon social convention. Because Rios claims in Howtown that his "... values were acquired through trial and error...they were learned, not given, and came out of my own experience..." (1990, 56), I therefore suggest that our hero tends to view reality from the down-to-earth perspective of critical race theory. From a crit’s vantage point, truth and knowledge are contingent upon social-cultural conventions, such as language, morality, religion, ethnic traditions, etc., and Nava describes a world in which basic beliefs and social practices are, in effect, overwhelmingly determined by racial, gender, and sexual backgrounds, and not necessarily shaped by some universal and transcendent "objective reality."

As a "gay public figure, a criminal defense lawyer and a Chicano" (1990, 21), Henry Rios struggles to endure his own conflicting realities, straddling a jagged palisade of identity politics between his Mexican American ethnic culture and his homosexual orientation. In the process of balancing these two aspects of himself, at times at odds with one another, the hero enacts another crit position by interrogating racial and sexual "master narratives" that take for granted—knowledge, rule of law, and even reality.

In Howtown, Rios explains it to one of his patrons—that just by being different, one automatically draws resistance from a predominately white,
heterosexual society: "...I tell my gay clients the same thing I've just told you, and my black and Latino clients, too, for that matter. You don't need to invent a conspiracy against you...Society is a conspiracy and everyone who's different is its target..." (1990, 54). In his narratives, Rios therefore attempts to deconstruct some people's social constructs, which have the power to oppress others simply because of their differences or nonconformity.

And if knowledge is socially invented or constructed, then truth tends to vary between social groups. And that is why critical race theory challenges the social-power relations in existence when laws are passed, interpreted, or administered. If knowledge and truth are discerned differently from the myriad perspectives of various social groups, then who's to say which group reflects the real truth? Since racial and sexual pecking orders are created by people who reject this relativism, critical race theorists admit that "...there are competing racial versions of reality that may never be reconciled" (Lewis, A11), thus positioning social groups in relation to shifting hierarchies of power in American society.

Heading into the next millennium, Rios is ready to face, and if necessary, challenge the overwhelming power of postindustrial society, a
socio-economic milieu heavily depended on the global economies of multi-
national corporations. As demonstrated by one of Rios’ high school chums, 
the real-estate developer Mark Windsor, the postindustrial managerial class 
has probably become the most powerful social group, controlling the status 
quo in our modern times. Challenging the so-called “impartiality” of law 
derived from a justice system which bases truth and objectivity on the dic-
tates of the dominant group’s political whims, crile believe that legal “... in-
stitutions are socially constructed to serve the interests of the powerful, es-
pecially straight, white men” (Farber and Sherry, 5). In Hidden Law, as one 
Chicana tries to explain her dread of police to a white female counterpart, 
“Lady you don’t know the cops....I grew up in Boyle Heights. Those bas-
tards always had it in for Chicanos” (122), reinforcing a crit contention that 
“...racism is normal, not aberrant...[but] Because racism is an ingrained 
feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the cul-
ture” (Delgado, xiv), especially to the Anglo “lady.” If this is so, then rule 
of law merely serves to disguise its white male bias.

Stanley Fish gives an interesting critique of master narratives that take 
a certain “white racial reality” for granted:

Those we now criticize as racists, those who 
in the nineteenth century and for the first 
sixty years of the twentieth argued for
second-class citizenship and segregated facilities and limited access to the ballot box, did not think of themselves as evil persons pursuing evil policies; they thought of themselves as right, and from the vantage point of the story they were living and telling—a story I find unpersuasive and repellent—they were. (74).

If reality is a social convention and thus subjective by its very nature, then critical race theorists offer an alternative way of grasping the “real world” out there, mainly through individualized glimpses of life. In litigation, the act of telling stories about real-life experiences can play a significant role in establishing alternative evidence, in creating optional strategies of defense, or in clarifying shared meanings and understandings, in order to counter somebody else’s “objective” truth, itself only narratives espoused by people in positions of power and influence like lawmakers and court magistrates. By divulging fables, parables, chronicles, and all other forms of personal narratives, Nava—like other critical race theorists—uses “stories” both to create and destroy social constructs of the world around us.

After rejecting an absolutist’s interpretation of existence, Nava follows a more flexible positioning, one that assumes that “...knowledge is communicated not so much by dispassionate reasoning as by telling stories that inspire faith” (Farber and Sherry, 31). By chronicling the lives of
homosexuals, lesbians, and bisexuals in his murder mysteries, for example, the author recreates their shared understanding of reality in the form of entertaining, intriguing narratives; at the same time, by challenging the dominant majority’s outlook on life via their “stories,” Nava uses gay “counter-stories” to destroy another myth of the powerful, one that assumes heterosexuality is the only accurate depiction of reality.

Since individual experiences are impacted by various social factors, it can be assumed that people of color, women, and gays have different sorts of knowledge to share, thus inspiring counterhegemonic narratives that collide head-on with the sources of oppression in dominant culture—mainly its metanarratives.

*Hidden Law* describes an American society which has become a politicized substrata of sorts where the masses are mired in economic atrophy, while the privileged few rise to the top of the heap. The L.A. urban megasprawl is depicted as a cultural debacle, a sort of capitalists’ plunder, where the bottom dwellers of the social totem-pole live in rundown, downtown districts, consisting of “...boarded-up storefronts that reeked of urine” and abutted by parking lots “...where the homeless lived in tents made out of plastic garbage bags and cardboard boxes” (61). Pervasive in this pyramid
of social relations is the possession of power by those with political
clout—such as judges, legislators, and elected officials—who are able to
manipulate discourses of knowledge and thus masquerade their own con-
structed views of reality as the “truth.”

In *Hidden Law*, a good “crit” example of how lawmakers can tread on
minorities’ constitutional rights—in the name of law and order—is when a
bill is introduced in the state senate that makes it a crime to “actively par-
ticipate in any criminal street gang with knowledge that its members engage
or have engaged in a pattern of criminal gang activity” (1992, 2). Consid-
ering the proposed legislation to be clearly unconstitutional, because it
would make it easier for law enforcement to stop, question, detain, harass,
and even arrest Latino/a and Black members of L.A.’s ethnic communities,
Rios testifies against it in public forums, and in his small way, battles the
master narratives that shape society. Oftentimes trapped in a social hierar-
chy that tries to impose upon him someone else’s reality, Henry Rios’ life
has not always been smooth for he is trying to survive between two social
determinates usually at loggerheads with each other—as an ethnic minority
in a predominately Anglo culture, and as a gay person in a mainly hetero-
sexual society.
Growing up as an unhappy Chicano, Henry manages to withstand the racially-biased intransigence of dominant culture as well as the pangs of poverty in an unstable family situation, one tinged with child abuse, alcoholism, and domestic violence. Considered by Anglo society as the “other,” Chicano/as sometimes sense that the “truth” is stacked against them as a social group, and they feel helpless, undervalued, and overpowered by other groups. At one point in Howtown, Rios comments about the anti-miscegenation sentiments of his hometown, “...anglos didn’t mix; each was “they” to the other [groups]” (36) as well as refers to his bilingual background, growing up in Los Robles, as “…a kind of linguistic apartheid” (48).

At the same time, Rios struggles to accept his gay sexuality despite the social distaste of others. As critic Monique Wittig puts it, “…straight society is based on the necessity of the different/other at every level. It cannot work economically, symbolically, linguistically, or politically without this concept” (55). Including ironically Rios’ own ethnic group, the members of this dominant “sexual” hegemony feel threatened by any deviation from what it perceives as the sexual norm—heterosexuality. Paradoxically, Chicano/as—as an ethnic group—are categorized by Anglos as “others,” while la raza, in turn, classifies homosexuals as “others” as well, continuing
unabated the discriminatory finger-pointing. So, Henry Rios eventually becomes an “other” and is thus caught in the middle of two social groups leading to the inevitable clash between ethnic group allegiance and sexual self-acceptance.

If Chicano culture presupposes a close-knit, nurturing family unit as the norm, then Nava rejects this kind of essentialist thinking, opting instead for a narrative that exposes the grubby inner sanctum of one Chicano family, which attempts to maintain a semblance of ethnic solidarity.

Growing up in an unsympathetic household, Rios doesn’t seem to fit his father’s gender casting of his first-born son, “He let me know I wasn’t his kind of man” (1992, 77), because the son didn’t aspire to his father’s machismo ideal. A violent drunk, dad abuses Rios, leaving him with a guilt-ridden complex, “…that what I had suffered—the beatings, the neglect—I had in some way deserved” (1990, 145). Since he cannot meet a tyrant’s macho expectation of him as offspring, Rios must bear the blunt of the old man’s rage, and to compensate, Rios depicts contemptuous awe for the paternal colossus by not even giving him a name in the narrative. In a way, the son dismisses his dad by just using the generic apppellative of “father.”
Nava’s archetypal literary image—of the larger-than-life “father-figure” looming menacingly over the young brood—brings to mind the confessional poetry of Sylvia Plath. In “The Colossus” (1959), Plath writes:

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pierced. Glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It’s worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser.....(lines 1-10).

In Plath’s work, the young narrator is trying to cement back together again a fragmented image of her father, who not unlike “Humpty Dumpty,” had a great fall, but in daddy’s case, it’s a moral plummet because of the child’s estrangement from the father. Yet, while papa was still alive, the narrator placed him on a pantheistic pedestal, one comparable to the heights of Mount Olympus, home to the Greek gods. Similarly, Nava’s hero deals with a fractured memory of his male parent by trying to reconstruct the reasons why the father hated the son so much: “Growing up, I was sensitive and strong willed....He thought I was simply weak and disobedient” (1992, 73).

In another of Plath’s parent-poem, “Daddy” (1962), the narrator actually obliterates mentally the father figure, “Daddy, I have had to kill you./”
(line 6), as she proceeds to “worship” him with the anguish of a Nazi Holocaust victim, “Every woman adores a Fascist./The boot in the face, the brute/Brute hear of a brute like you “ (lines 48-50). Correspondingly, one day at a AA meeting, an alcoholic Rios realizes that he is on the way to beating his addiction when he overhears “…someone say he knew he was recovering when his thoughts turned from suicide to homicide …The man I [Rios] really wanted to kill was the father whom I had had so much trouble talking…about” (1992, 46). Whenever he remembers his late father, Rios nearly reaches his breaking point, a traumatic experience that leaves him shaken up at times.

Not only does Rios’ father physically as well as psychologically pick on his own son, but this vulture of a parent, a law-and-order type who rules *la familia* with an iron claw, also manages to injure irreparably the hero’s sister Elena as well, allowing us to sympathize with her gender narrative. As a matter of fact, it comes as no surprise to the Rios’ family when the father lays down the law, forbidding Elena to continue her schooling and forcing his only daughter “…to refuse admission to Berkeley on the grounds that she had had enough education for a woman” (1990, 2). To dearest daddy, a female having too much enlightenment is too much of a threat to
his antediluvian, macho narrative. As a consequence, a taciturn daughter retaliates against a spiteful, uncaring parent by joining a convent, actually "...a teaching order of nuns after she graduated from high school" (1990, 2). By becoming a novice, she gets ultimate revenge against him by scuttling any prospects of marriage, and thus with a calculated decision, ends at least one strain of her father's lineage.

As the weakest link in the Rios clan, Henry's mother—anonymous in the novels as well—also endures domestic abuse, but only by remaining obdurately silent throughout the family's boxing bouts with the father. Her religious devotion-turned-fanaticism is of no avail to the rest of the family, so her only other recourse is to bury herself in the kitchen:

    My mother was a wonderful cook, but there had always been too much of everything. Even then I understood that this was how she apologized and so I ate very little, no matter how hungry I was, pretending an indifference to food that in time became real. (1990, 220-21)

To Henry, his mother's role as duteous wife—"...in the family [where] the father ruled, irrevocably and without question" (1992, 169)—becomes a fable, only serving to underscore even more, the son's misery in the nest, as the mother-hen in effect becomes a persona non grata to her own offspring.
Seriously dysfunctional, the Rios family has so many bad stories to tell, that the hero blurts out, “Being born into my family was like being thrown into an accident” (1990, 148). Maybe because Rios’ personal narrative reflects working-class roots, it could shed some light on why his father becomes such a patriarchal oppressor himself. Actually, the Rios’ proletarian background is a good example of the Chicano/a political situation in America—that Mexican Americans comprise an internal colony of the United States.

Sociologist Robert Blauner claims that “Native Americans, Chicanos, and blacks are the third world groups whose entry was unequivocally forced and whose subsequent histories best fit the colonial model” (54). Relying on the class struggle as a basic explanation, the internal-colony paradigm reinforces the position that the Chicano/a experience has been one of a colonized relationship—with la raza as the oppressed, mestizo/a population up against the dominant Anglo-American hegemony as oppressor. Eventually, one good way to subjugate and maintain control over the colonized is through racism, and as Rios’ father confronts it in his real life, he eventually becomes an inured victim of a racist society. To make matters worse, Rios’
old man compensates for his feelings of powerlessness by playing the role of the sexist, macho male, out to even the score by being mean and tough to his own *familia*.

To show the socio-economic victimization of the family, Nava packs his narratives with plenty of examples of biases against Chicano/as, even against those who are educated. After graduating from college and becoming a legal professional in *Howtown*, for instance, Rios is never really able to escape ethnic animosity, having always to endure such humiliating remarks as “...a Mexican in a suit and tie was still a Mexican and probably up to no good” (1990, 120), aimed at him mainly because of his mestizo phenotype. Blauner confirms that “Social oppression is a dynamic process by which one segment of society achieves power and privilege through the control and exploitation of other groups, which are *literally* oppressed, that is, burdened and pushed down into the lower levels of the social order” (22). If Rios is constantly misjudged by peers because of his melanin pigmentation, imagine the social bigotry that his own father must have tolerated all his life while living in the barrio:

My father had been a man who, outwardly, was a respectful, responsible member of our small community...[but] Outside, in the larger world where they labored under the contemptuous eye of Anglo bosses, the
fathers were social and political ciphers. No wonder, then, that in the families they tolerated no dissent from wives and children. And they drank. They drank to wash down the slights they endured by day and to enlarge small lives which became heroic in alcohol-glazed rumination, but at their cores the fathers knew the full measure of their unimportance and, so, finally, they drank to quiet the rage. (1992, 169)

By the time of Rios' father's death during the son's college days, this weather-beaten, old man "... looked like someone who'd been in a concentration camp" (1992, 73).

As disparaged people of color, both Rios and his father have a right to blame the capitalist system for letting them down. If the American economy needs a large pool of uneducated and unskilled workers to feed free-market capitalism, then Rios' dad is merely representative of the large number of Chicano/a proletariat needed to keep the wheels turning. Eventually labor exploitation of workers has its human toll on the families of the oppressed: "When the rage exploded, they struck out at the only ones over whom they had any power: wives, sons, daughters, particularly the sons in whom they saw their own lost youth" (1992, 169).

While racism keeps the working masses fighting each other over scraps doled out by the upper crust, then sexual oppression adds a twist to the "divide and conquer" strategy of the powers-that-be, because it cuts
across class lines and even racial/ethnic divides. In Henry’s case, his homosexual lifestyle creates serious problems with his already-estranged sister Elena, the ex-nun living with an Anglo roommate. Ironically, it happens that both brother and sister exemplify the queer narrative, although Elena has a harder time accepting her same-sex attraction than does Henry:

When I [Rios] told her [Elena] about myself there was an appalled silence at her end of the line and then a sputtered, vehement lecture, complete with biblical citations, on the evils of homosexuality. Furious I accused her of hypocrisy, spelling out exactly what I meant [that she was lesbian herself but wouldn’t even acknowledge it]. (1990, 3).

Since Rios refuses to cloak his sexual orientation, he must confront Elena with this socio-sexual issue, even at the expense of total alienation from the last surviving member of his immediate family—her, since he regrets not discussing the touchy subject of homosexuality with his parents.

To her brother, Elena is a prisoner to a second degree, not only because she is a female in a patriarchal society, but also because she’s enslaved in her own delusions about being straight: “Over the years I [Rios] had learned that only a few of us come to accept that difference. Most of us [like Elena] struggle against our homosexuality and never learn to trust our natures” (1990, 236). But living as a nun under the intransigent doctrine of the
Church doesn’t help her either, and once she joins the convent, Elena can really do nothing but languish in the institutionalized constraints of holy life. Once opening up to him, Rios’ sister confides sadly that “Those who have been tortured go on being tortured” (1990, 145).

Nava’s use of the “prison” metaphor—to depict the torment and suffering of living with the Rios family—is reminiscent of the writings of Chicana lesbian critic Cherrie Moraga, particularly her collection of essays, entitled *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca paso por sus labios* (“what never passed through her lips”). In the introduction to her book, Moraga also utilizes the metaphor of being society’s “political detainee,” to elucidate the predicament that she—as a cultural critic—finds herself in relation to her lover: That her partner and herself can experience the act of loving only really in a “state of war” mentality against mainstream society. In other words, their “queerness” makes them comrades-in-arms against a heterosexual hegemony that is out to get them.

The same holds true for Rios and Elena, because both suffer a perpetual anguish, like being placed on a mental torture rack and tormented for whatever sins committed. In a similar circumstance, a friend tells our hero: “You know, Henry, we’re the only people who get born into the enemy
camp. I mean, Black babies get born into Black families. Jewish babies get born into Jewish families, but gay babies, we get born into straight families. How we survive it at all is a miracle” (1992, 77). Throughout his popular novels, Nava loves to play with the idea of being a political/cultural/sexual prisoner of one’s society even though as an avowed homosexual, his protagonist is clearly out of the closet. But Rios’ sense of self-imprisonment is metaphorical as opposed to that of a closeted individual, like Elena, who chooses to imprison herself—in a convent—because of an inability to cope with her father externally as well as to deal with her gay tendencies internally. It is only after she breaks her monastic vows that Elena is able later to accept her lesbianism by living with her lover.

Another type of sexual oppression in Nava’s novels is the discrimination accorded those individuals with AIDS—as is the case of Rios’ live-in lover, Josh, who is HIV-positive (but isn’t sick yet) and aligned politically with the militant ACT-UP movement. Afraid to leave by himself the person he loves the most, Rios is very concerned about Josh’s well-being even though the boyfriend does not let Rios forget about the “…different sides of the fence that separated the infected from the uninfected” (1990, 132-33). This health issue eventually leads to their breakup in Hidden Law, but not
before Josh becomes “a gay urban revolutionary” (1992, 50), who fights politicians who refuse to spend public monies to fund AIDS projects.

Overall, Rios manages to sustain alcoholic recovery, survive a broken “marriage,” and withstand racial and sexual oppression by basically having the will to beat the odds, especially when he recalls past binges of drinking, drugs, and promiscuous sex. Nava’s use of the “hole” metaphor to refer to the hero’s destructive impulse is important, because this “gorge” imagery is very significant in Chicano literature. Nava visualizes the Great Void as a sort of black hole that consumes everything around it: “Drunks and junkies all had a big hole in their gut that sucked in panic like Pandora’s box in reverse unless it was already filled by booze or a fix. Eventually, that stopped working, and the panic went out of control until the only thing left was dying” (1992, 19).

The image of a lost soul looming over the abyss impacts not only Rios’ psyche, but in a very similar situation, also that of the child-hero of Tomas Rivera’s ...y no se lo tragó la tierra/...and the earth did not part (1971). By breaking cultural taboos, Rivera’s nameless protagonist dares to challenge divine authority when he risks being swallowed whole—as punishment—by the abysmal gorge:
He cursed God. Upon doing it he felt the fear instilled in him by time and by his parents. For a split second he saw the earth open up to devour him. But, although he didn’t look down, he then felt himself walking on very solid ground; *it was harder than he had ever felt it.* (78)

The winner of the prestigious *Quinto Sol* Chicano literary prize, Rivera spins a tale of paradise lost about a young, farmworker hero struggling to make sense of his miserable condition—lamenting a life of dire poverty with no end in sight—as he leads his younger siblings into the scorching fields to toil under extremely harsh, working conditions. As his father and uncle succumb to disease and death, the future of our Rivera’s hero looks dismal. Similarly, Rios is threatened with stumbling into the abyss by engaging in self-damaging behavior, such as stultifying drunken sprees that will eventually lead to death, unless something drastic is done—in Rios’ case, becoming a recovering alcoholic.

But, both Rivera’s protagonist and Rios have one thing in common—a drive and determination to succeed in life. In Rivera’s case, the young boy curses the heavens one day, railing against an unfaithful god whom the boy believes has let his family down. Yet, to his surprise, nothing happens—the earth does not open its jaws and devour him. As a result, Rivera’s boyish
hero senses that a great burden had been lifted off his shoulders, feeling great relief and peace of mind afterwards, as he comes to grips with the existential condition of his being. He has the ability to make choices about his “wretched” existence, take responsibility for it, and move on with his life. From that day on, he is subsequently able to tolerate his daily drudgery until the time comes when he can do better for himself.

Though Rios has been deprived of economic stability during his childhood, just like Rivera’s young hero, the Rios’ bourgeois counterparts—the Windsor brothers, Paul and Mark—have the best that materialism and excess had to offer, resulting in a dirty family secret—incest—as well as in the dynasty’s bankruptcy.

If there ever was a most encompassing and all-embracing formula about the human condition, it is Freudianism, especially the idea of the oedipal complex. If unresolved, it may result in serious neurosis, like the inability to form satisfactory sexual relationships later in life. In Howtown, one of the brothers gives insight into the state of domestic turmoil in the chaotic Windsor home which leads to an oedipal twist in Paul’s pathetic story:
There was no pleasing him [their father, Mr. Windsor], ever. The difference between Paul and me [Mark] is that I stopped taking it after a while. Dad and me had some real knock-down, drag-out fights, but I stood my ground. Not Paul. He’d cry and go running to Mom, but she was always too drunk to give a shit. (1990, 75-6)

It’s obvious that the sexual pattern emerging in the young Paul Windsor is an oedipal one, a situation where battling with the father leads the son directly into the arms of his mother. In fact, when Paul turns thirteen, the relationship between mother and son goes beyond oedipal attraction and turns to actual incest itself, when—in inebriated stupor—she rapes her own son and continues the sexual activity “Off and on, until I [Paul] went to college. She was always drunk. In blackouts” (1990, 202). So, how does the oedipal impulse-turned-incest affect Paul later in life?

In a way, the younger Windsor becomes a serious social problem as Paul marries another drunk for a spouse, but one whom he abandons emotionally as well as physically. Eventually, for having sex with the family housekeeper’s minor daughter, Windsor winds up getting charged with child molestation after the affair results in pregnancy. (Although he was arraigned, he was not prosecuted, because the victim later refused to testify against him.) Subsequently, Paul’s abnormal behavior again leads him into
more trouble, but this time it’s more serious. Becoming the main suspect in a murder investigation, Windsor is alleged to have tortured-killed an underground porno dealer, an individual believed to be dealing in the black market of white slavery as well. Poor Paul.

If the younger Windsor is the tabloid sibling, then his older brother Mark symbolizes free-wheeling, market capitalism. As a major mover-and-shaker in Rios’ hometown of Los Robles, Mark represents economic interests competing politically against environmental ones, culminating in his opposition to a “no-growth” ballot proposition. The local referendum allows the town’s newspaper editor, a stringent environmentalist, the opportunity to bash the dynasty’s development investments, as the election turns into a duel between developers and anti-growth crusaders. It’s really “...a vote against the Windsors, but first they have to make us out to be monsters...” (1990, 16), as Paul’s wife relates to Rios the intricacies of city politics.

To the Windsors’ political nemeses, Mark represents everything that is wrong with market-driven capitalism as he attempts to gentrify the town’s pastoral setting into a labyrinth of condominiums which “…promised a posh, worry-free, cable-ready existence on easy credit terms” (1990, 35). Thus, whereas Henry Rios represents the city’s original, Mexican families,
the proletariat living on the wrong side of the tracks, in decrepit barrios consisting of “...some [houses] little more than wooden shacks with corrugated metal roofs” (1990, 134), the Windsors live bourgeois-style in an antebellum mansion in a wealthy, Anglo suburb, leading to a situation that clearly juxtaposes the status of Los Robles’ social groups.

On the one hand, “Paradise Slough,” the name of Rios’ old neighborhood, is a misnomer, reflecting a sort of Garden of Eden pretense in a community that belies its own historical past, “...a very pretty town that bore no relation at all to the city’s preceding hundred years of colonia (sic) rule under Spain and then Mexico” (1990, 35). Yet the names of streets criss-crossing the passé exterior of this Chicano district—one main artery pegged “Los Indios Way”—do not let its citizens forget about the municipality’s long forgotten but proud mestizo/a past. And, whenever Rios claims that he’s from paradise, he gets the stare that people from the hood always get: “The look that says, if you’re poor, there must be something wrong with you...what people really want is to criminalize poverty” (1990, 135). Like the time when the Windsor mother bans Rios from the family pool, “...apparently out of fear that...[his] brown skin would soil the water” (1990, 75).
On the other hand, Mark Windsor represents the pinnacle of upper-class success as smugness lends him an air of civility, at least to those who agree with his politics. With patronizing condescension, Mark feels that he is liberal enough to accept his old friend’s homosexuality, enouncing with conviction, “I don’t care” (1990, 73), mainly because they shared a friendship during childhood almost as close as brothers. But, things are not as they appear to be—by the novel’s end, the tables have turned.

A Stanford law school graduate, Rios becomes a successful defense lawyer who typifies the “decolonization” process after his ethnic group experiences a long period of internal colonization, symbolically by the Windsor dynasty. Frantz Fanon writes that “If we wish to describe it precisely, we might find it in the well-known words: ‘The last shall be first and the first last.’ Decolonization is the putting into practice of this sentence...” (37). And when Mark’s tangled finances lead him to bankruptcy and eventually worse—to jail, the once proud Windsor family finds itself in turmoil and disarray, while the poor kid from the barrio is now a well-known criminal attorney whose radical politics puts Mark’s liberalism to shame.

A multicultural hero in *Hidden Law*, Henry Rios evolves into his own diverse persona as he skillfully maneuvers, not only in personal relationships
but also as a public figure, a sexual rebel out to change the world, who also becomes a well-respected lawyer. As Rios proceeds to fight injustice in a cold, uncaring world, he must first reconcile his personal morality as a gay person, having to deal constantly with the moral distaste of others because of his political stances.

First of all, this reconciliation must include a self-acceptance that redirects his rage and turns a potential negativity into a focused, constructive path, one leading to empowerment and social action for the common good. At one point in *Hidden Law*, Rios sums it all up by declaring that “…being homosexual as well as Chicano, I’d had to learn a level of self-acceptance that mitigated my anger. Having had to overcome my own self-hatred, I couldn’t sustain hatred toward other people very long” (1992, 64).

At the same time Rios has to deal with a public self, he must also contend with personal relationships, especially a monogamous one with his “significant other.” Rios considers his rapport with Josh as close as a symbolic nuptial union. But Rios’ lover tests the limits of their romance when Josh creates a division in their “marriage” by dwelling on the distinction between those infected with HIV and those not. Ironically, when Josh eventually winds up leaving Rios for another man—one that the hero really
can’t compete against—an “infected” AIDS activist for the ACT-UP movement, Josh, in effect, turns his ex-lover into the “other” status, continuing the novel’s pattern of presenting people as categorized into separate types and thereby creating artificial boundaries between human beings.

The choice between the politics of his ex-lover and those of the Chicano community always comes back to haunt Henry, who must decide between his personal sexual survival and the group allegiance of his Mexican American ethnicity. Delgado would definitely consider Henry Rios as a member of a racial outgroup “...whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective—whose consciousness—has been suppressed, devalued and abnormalized” (64). In all actuality, our hero is really a member of an outgroup within an outgroup in society, because he’s gay in addition to being Chicano, so Rios must learn to juggle these two aspects of his self-identity, not an easy task.

One of the things that Hidden Law clearly reflects is not only that “Ethnic and racial groups ...[are] first and foremost interest groups” with their own distinctive objectives (Blauner, 28), but also that Chicano/as are heterogeneous, actually revealing three main subgroups in the novel, representing the whole gamut of political persuasion in American politics. The
Right is reflected by Gus Pena, the Left by Tomas Ochoa, and smack in the middle of it all is Henry Rios, the moderate between the two, as identity and culture are critiqued and contested vigorously among the interpretative frameworks of these three respective Chicano subgroups.

The quasi-bourgeois Mexican American is Senator Gus Peña, the "high"-spanic public figure who wants to rise to the top of politics so badly, that he doesn't hesitate to assimilate wholeheartedly into the social mainstream to ensure his success. Peña therefore represents the "melting pot" model of assimilation that was prominent after WWII during the fifties—one that encourages Chicano/as to abandon ethnic-cultural "trappings," for the higher goal of becoming Americanized. Perhaps "the ranking Latino officeholder in the state, a symbol of the political aspirations of millions, and...the person most likely to become the first mayor of Los Angeles of Mexican descent in a 150 years" (1992, 3), Peña could be Rios' double, actually his heterosexual alter ego. The son of Mexican immigrants, Peña had an upbringing closely paralleling Rios' own rough childhood; in fact, if it wasn't for their different sexual lifestyles, both men could have been kindred spirits even though Pena's political convictions diverge dramatically from Henry's. For example, AIDS activists refer to Senator Pena as that
“homophobic pig,” because in the state legislature, he had “...refused to sponsor a bill to fund a minority AIDS project in East LA,” even moralizing that “...he wouldn’t be party to promoting homosexuality and drug use” (1992, 55). Pena’s lack of compassion and support for his own people, who are suffering from AIDS, reflects self-serving, crass opportunism, because his political career comes first, before his own raza or anybody else’s alternative sexuality. Though the main difference between Pena and Rios is political, their common denominator is still a shared struggle against a tough life: “I made myself into somebody from nothing, Rios, just like you” (1992, 11), both born barrio-poor, jousting all their lives in an Anglo-dominated profession:

Having had to work twice as hard for what he [Peña] deserved on merit alone, he’d developed a kind of rage, like an extra set of muscles, propelling him through life. The rage never went away. There was never enough to reward you for what you had suffered. And you never, ever, forgot you were an outsider, no matter how expensive your suits. (1992, 64)

But, whereas Peña probably believes that racial oppression is just an aberration in society, one that he thinks he’s able to rectify by swearing allegiance to the dominant “fraternal” ingroup, Rios perceives racism as inherent to American society, not as a mere anomaly waiting to be realigned, thus in
effect supporting a critical race theory position. No matter how much is Peña’s need for white blessing and social acceptance, he will always be considered as an “outsider” to mainstream society, because he’s of the wrong color.

It seems that Peña’s aspiration for higher office—of course always at the expense of other people—rears its ugly head again when lawmaker Peña decides to sponsor legislation that declares open season on gangs and gang-bangers, an act which infuriates many a Mexican American. During the public hearing on this “anti-raza” bill, Peña grandstands to the audience, feeding a media-news frenzy which anticipates an announcement from him, because the hearing is slated on “...the last day for mayoral candidates to file for the upcoming June primary” (1992, 2-3). There is nothing that an overzealous Peña won’t do for publicity, even if it means jeopardizing the civil rights of his own people; but later on in a private moment, Peña confesses that the hearing is “...all a show, Rios. Nothing personal” (1992, 11), just politics as usual to this Hispanic public servant.

Because of his old-line-but-safe politics, Peña inevitably earns the disdain of local Chicano activist Tomas Ochoa, politically to Peña’s left. To an irate Ochoa who preaches “...the revolution from a classroom podium at
the local state college where he taught in the Chicano Studies Department” (1992, 4), Senator Peña would be easily considered as a tio teco to la raza. Obviously belonging to the “nationalist” faction of the Chicano movement, Ochoa as an activist is always compelled to display his political aspirations: “On the wall of his office was a yellowing poster that demanded the end to the Anglo occupation of California” (1992, 4).

Nava’s reference is to the American conquest of the Southwest, formerly Mexican territory in the early 19th century. Historian Richard Griswold del Castillo claims that it is an important legacy of the Chicano activists movement, because the victory fosters a “...particular historical awareness: [that] The Southwest is really ‘occupied Mexico’ and Mexican Americans and Indians are a ‘colonized people’ whose rights have been violated...” (153), despite the guarantees of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty was an accord forced upon Mexico, a sovereign nation invaded by the U.S. during the Mexican-American War of 1845-48. To la raza, these early Mexican settlers were autonomous people who were forced to become American citizens against their will, and now Mexican Americans—as the direct heirs of these early pioneers—have a bona fide treaty with the U.S. government, one always violated against their best interests.
That is why Ochoa—an ethnic separatist—sincerely believes that “...the gangs are the best thing that ever came out of the barrio” (1992, 5), because their members are freedom fighters who could ideally win California back politically to la raza, the descendants of early Spanish explorers and subsequent Mexican settlers. Having a diehard belief in Chicano/a collectivism, Ochoa explicitly rejects the cult of individuality, one that subordinates group values to the whims of the “person,” as he believes is the case with Rios’ glorification of the Chicano male body, as evidenced by the hero’s constant pamphleteering on behalf of gay causes. Because of Ochoa’s fear of homosexuality, he makes a snap judgement of Rios, “So your solution is to plea-bargain them into prison” (1992, 5), accusing him of representing a legal system that tends to lock up Chicano/as and throw away the key. But, Ochoa is dead wrong concerning the hero’s legal positioning, because on this legal perspective issue, Ochoa represents a more extreme version of the crit stance that says the law represents merely shifting allocations of power between social groups. In this case, both Ochoa and Rios are actually on the same side, believing that it’s not in la raza’s best interests to allow Anglo authorities easy and legal oppression of Chicano gangbangers.
But to Rios, Ochoa’s ethnic militancy is interlaced with homophobic tendencies when it comes to pertinent issues of the gay community, like finding a cure for AIDS: “Ochoa took the position that it [the disease] only affected elements of the minority communities which they were better off without, homosexuals and drug users” (1992, 4-5). It is this kind of Chicano absolutist’s self-righteousness, one that assumes that “…the races [were] all united in their contempt for people of my kind [gays]” (1992, 5), that really irks Rios and alienates him from his own raza.

Henry Rios therefore comes to represent a moderate position in relation to the major differences between Gus Pena, to the right, and Tomas Ochoa to the left—with a triangle of oppositions forming eventually between the three. Symbolizing their respective political interests, each represents a separate faction—vying for power—with the context of the larger Chicano outgroup, and each desperately reciting a particular story that desperately needs to be told.

There is the ambitious Gus Pena, “…tainted by his success, careless about appearances, arrogant in the pursuit of his [political] objectives” (1992, 3), but who loves to retell his version of the Chicano “rags-to-riches” fairy tale about “making it big” within the system. Then, there is the
militant Tomas Ochoa who loves to spin a romantic spiel about the glorious Chicano Revolution and that with "...a little political education, they [gang members] could be urban guerrillas" (1992, 5) of the future. Finally, there is Henry Rios, the "moderate" multiculturalist, who weaves a fable out of "being homosexual as well as Chicano." An outsider to the other two, Rios sincerely believes that he can work as an attorney "within the system," all the while, agitating without by taking on public controversies to get his points across.

These three Chicano "subgroup" representatives give different accounts of the "reality" around them, because meaning about the world is shaped differently by each subject's personal subjectivity. But all three Chicanos eventually aspire toward the same goal: the disruption or subversion of the dominant hegemony, in this case, of the powers-that-be in California, including the legislative and judicial state apparatus. From a crit point of view, the various acts of storytelling thus "...help us understand when it is time to reallocate power" (Delgado, "Storytelling," 65), whether within the state assembly, as in Pena and Ochoa's case, or within the social sphere as in Rios' instance.
Important questions, however, need to be posited here: Is there a need to choose between one competing story and another? If not, does it lead to a complete relativism, where stories are considered connected to each other and all regarded as equal? In discussing a politics of narrative differences, Stanley Fish takes the postmodern perspective that “…each of us lives in a narrative, a story in which we are at once characters and the tellers. No one’s story is the whole story, and in the various lights shed by our various stories, different truths will seem self-evident and different courses of action will seem obviously called for” (74).

In a way, Rios learns to prioritize different narrative accounts, as this trial lawyer conducts his defense investigations, realizing that not all stories he hears are necessarily relative and thus equal—some do take precedence over others. For example, Rios does not succumb to Chicano peer pressure in Howtown when dealing with the precarious situation of Ben Vega, the young Mexican American cop who conspires, with an Chicano colleague, to frame an innocent man accused of murder because the latter was guilty of molesting the former during high school days. Rios’ suspicions are confirmed when he suspects that the main investigating cop in the Windsor case has fabricated evidence in the effort to nail Rios’ client for murder: “I don’t
think Paul Windsor killed McKay [the victim]. I think someone set him up, and I think it was Morrow” (1990, 189). Pleading that the suspect is a mere “white” pedophile with no social redeeming qualities, Vega begs the hero not to dig into the matter further. In an odd twist on the critical race theory perspective, this is then a last-ditch effort to appeal to Rios’ sense of equality, asking him in effect “to nullify” his verdict of the bad guys, the corrupt policemen attempting to frame Rios’ client. Vega is imploring the hero to let him go, since the cop would probably agree with critical race theory’s assertion that the law is written to serve the Anglo power structure, and that there are always mitigating circumstances whenever a person of color—such as himself—is accused of wrong-doing: “You’re Mexican...You’re one of us, Henry. We gotta stick together...Don’t be a traitor, man” (1990, 188). However, Rios snaps back that he does not select “…clients by the color of their skin” (1990, 189), and taking a page out of the old-fashioned detective story, the hero believes in getting at the truth no matter whose racial narrative is involved.

Rios strongly feels that he has a clear obligation to save Paul Windsor from getting convicted for a crime that he did not commit. Even though the hero may empathize with Vegas, who is apparently experiencing sexual
insecurity, Rios rejects the young cop’s justification in killing McKay, a former coach-turned-sexual predator, and in trying to frame an innocent man to cover it up. Rios is thus not going to let guilty Chicanos (like Vegas and Morrow) go free, simply because of some shared ethnicity or because the murdered victim was perceived to be a bad guy. And, the fact that Vegas’ homicidal inclinations may be related to a sexual self-loathing does not deter Rios the least in his quest to get to the bottom of McKay’s murder.

If anything characterizes the precise circumstances of our postmodern moment, it’s the multicultural hero who refuses to categorize human beings as “others.” Henry Rios is not afraid to help the casualties of modern society, whether they’re victims of incest and pedophilia, or the injured parties of racist and sexist discrimination. He’s not even inclined to reject the suffering of those, like Paul Windsor, who are potential oppressors because of their economic position in society. He steadfastly refuses to condemn people to the fringes of society, allowing them to become mere instruments of social, economic, and political domination. That is why the hero interrogates—what others believe are “absolute”—concepts as truth and justice, revealing their complicity with power, as he engages in human resistance against the forces of ignorance, superstition, and fear.
Rejecting essentialist notions about Chicano/a culture, for instance, that it always provides a nurturing home life, a deeply religious nature, and an overabundance of food and tradition, Michael Nava forges ahead to portray Henry Rios' life basically from a vantage point of "anti-essentialism," resulting in more complex, fully motivated characterization.

By always being away from home, Rios establishes an emotionless relationship with his family as well as avoids observance of ethnic customs and traditions. Seemingly lacking in cultural substance, should his character be considered as "ethnic" enough, especially as reflected in classic Chicano literature? Or is he merely one modern "multicultural" figure whose creative response to the historical moment of postindustrial society involves shedding away past Chicano self-representations, for new ones like those of the gay Latino yuppy activist?

Could it be that a middle-class professional, like Henry Rios, has the consciousness to help those less fortunate than himself without engaging in a Marxist class struggle? Critiquing paradigm shifts in historical discourse, Chicano theorist Ramon A. Gutierrez comments on these new multiculturalist "positionings":

If the "old" Chicano history depended on certitude, on objectivity, on disinterestedness, and on "facts" gathered in a
systematic and unbiased fashion to reveal the truth, "new" Chicana and Chicano historical writings have been presented as "readings," "positionings," "perspectives," and "constructions" of the past... The un-marked universal "Man" of modernism who was disembodied and spoke from no particular place, was, in postmodern narratives, embodied in females and males, in bodies that were marked as brown, black, white, Asian, Latino, and hybrid, and that operated in erotic economies of multiple possibilities: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, transgendered. (8)

Jameson claims that "...the postmodern looks for breaks...for shifts and irrevocable changes in the representation of things and of the way they change" (ix). If Rios' Chicano self-images differ from those considered as authentic images, like the ones projected by Gus Pena or Tomas Ochoa, it's because Rios' reproductions offer a multiplicity of possibilities since the hero refuses to ignore the particularity, concreteness, or specificity of human nature.

This fits with Nava's hero's tendency to shun universal or absolute values, reifying his position in this anecdote:

A woman I'd once worked for—an excellent lawyer—used to say that the best lawyers were guided by ethics, not morality. What she meant is that since moral judgments are by nature absolute, once you've made one, you're stuck with it and that doesn't leave you much room to do your job. Ethics, on
the other hand, are boundaries, not judgments; they allow you to be impersonal without becoming inhuman. (1990, 56)

That is why Henry favors a new ethics, or a politics of difference which welcomes a variety of personal narratives that attempt to understand and reconcile the world from numerous angles. And one of Rios' most subjective stories is the one about his sexuality, especially as he fights the old stereotypes: "Gays are generically blamed for sexual excess and depravity" (Nava & Dawidoff, 35).

In a book co-authored with Robert Dawidoff, *Created Equal: Why Gay Rights Matter to America* (1994), Michael Nava elaborates about the history of the gay movement. The author writes that "...what happened in the seventies was that, for the first time in American history, a generation of gay men emerged who could openly pursue sexual relations with other men without too great a fear of being thrown into jail or a mental institution" (56). In the book, Nava attributes due credit to the sixties and seventies decades for creating a revolution of the mind that made gay liberation possible—in that:

...million of Americans, particularly young Americans, questioned the basic assumptions on which society operated and, as they moved into and influenced the political
system, began to change the rules on the ba-
sis of a liberationist vision of human poten-
tial. (Nava & Dawidoff, 93)

And, according to Farber & Sherry, “Advocates of storytelling believe that stories can play a fundamental role in advancing social reform. Only through stories, they contend, can society’s essentially racist, sexist, and homophobic structures be confronted and changed” (39). So if it’s wrong to hound people because of their differences, then one answer to persecution is to expose the underbelly of oppression, especially if it’s done through acts of subjective narration that undermine modern society’s master narratives and challenge racial and sexual hierarchies of power.
CHAPTER 4

“ETHNOCENTRIC, HISTORICAL, AND MULTICULTURAL” PERSPECTIVES IN CHICANO/A LITERATURE

Three important perspectives in critiquing Chicano/a literature are the ethnocentric, historical, and multicultural approaches. The first is fixed on centrality of culture as an essential determinant in people’s lives, the second one is historically based and uses the past to illuminate the present, and the third perspective—the multicultural one—allows for maximum flexibility in shaping culture. Ethnocentricity emphasizes cultural influence—though sometimes at the expense of sexuality, gender, and class—as the main driving force in literature. The historical approach reaches back, usually to an idealized past, to stabilize a sometimes stressful present. The multicultural vantage point allows a multiple of subjectivities—like gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities—to be interrogated in literary works.

Using one of the three perspectives for each author, I will critique the selected fiction of Oscar Zeta Acosta, Arturo Islas, and Michael Nava,
respectively. To Acosta, ethnic self-identity, and later a budding nationalism, is so crucial to his namesake protagonist that everything else is subordinated to cultural exigency; to Islas, reclamation of historical symbols and ethnic lore predominates in the characterization of his mestizo hero, yet homosexuality is beginning to emerge in his writings as a viable subject-matter; and since essentialist tendencies are minimized in Nava’s murder mysteries, his gay Chicano protagonist turns to the law as a way to deal with a multicultural politics of difference as perceived from a homosexual vantage point.

Writing during a time of great Mexican American social upheaval, manifesting itself as *El Movimiento Chicano*, a political and artistic renaissance in the sixties and seventies, Oscar Zeta Acosta attempts to harness a byproduct of the civil rights struggle—*Chicano ethnic consciousness*—into a new hypothetical social order. Preceding the author’s two major works expanding on this ethnic awareness, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973), are two relatively unknown short stories, “The Worm Dieth Not” (1966) and “Perla is a Pig” (1970). These two tales reflect the beginning of Acosta’s configuration of ethnocentricity in his writings. Essentialist attempts to define literature by
celebrating a particular culture, however, can be sticky, because the author runs the risk of inadvertently subordinating literary values to ethnic jingoism even at times when Acosta’s heroes face hostile historical situations.

Joseph Sommers critiques a key assumption of what he refers to as the “culturalist”—and as what I perceive as the ethnocentric—approach, one that incorporates “...a view of culture as static, but also construe[s] race (and ultimately nature and the biological process) as the controlling element in culture...” (148). This essentialist method stresses the notion of “cultural uniqueness” (146) with its tendency to idealize the concept of ethnic recovery, and according to Sommers, “…that rediscovery of cultural origins, of original myths, will impart a healthy consciousness of uniqueness to the generations of the present” (147). And that is exactly what we have with Acosta’s attempt at ethnic reclamation—he essentially positions the Mexican American experience in the interstice between past history and present politics, leading to the transformation from individual cognizance to ethnic group awareness.

As a writer describing one person’s subjective search for his ethnic roots, Acosta succeeds only by encircling the wagons around a collective theme of *viva la raza* ethnocentric solidarity, especially one with the hero’s
saber rattling against white culture’s dominant hegemony. Because of the protagonist’s Chicano/a mestizo background in Acosta’s “Worm” tale, for example, Fernando Garcia suffers discrimination under the helm of a new Anglo supervisor. At the Preston family-farm where he has been gainfully employed for a decade, Fernando is threatened with loss of his senior position as field-tractor driver. In this ethnic fable, Fernando is the Chicano everyman/woman who has been targeted for forfeiture of his livelihood (and probably loss of home too) due to an onslaught of white newcomers to the area. Acosta’s story could be easily considered as a modern-day analogy to the late-nineteenth century when Spanish-speaking vaqueros were imperiled by the arrival of English-speaking cowboys to Mexico’s northernmost territories.

In stereotypical fashion, the new boss is attempting to demote Fernando from tractor driver to field hand, because the mayordomo believes that “...you can’t trust them anymore...you got to watch out for them, they’ll rob you blind...and they sure is lazy, that’s why they need a si-ester...far’s I’m concerned they’s stupid, that’s why they can’t learn Amer-ican” (1966, 207). His use of ethnicity as a socially-determining factor in trying to sidetrack Fernando from a position of importance only infuriates
the hero even more, allowing him to stand up defiantly to the top banana’s intimidation, as Fernando makes a direct appeal to the *rancho* owner about keeping his employment status. In refusing to surrender, Fernando is forced to become ethnocentric, i.e. to turn inwards to the safety and comfort of his Chicano culture, using ritual, tradition and custom as a shield against a menacing, external world.

At this point in the story, Fernando experiences an instant flashback to elementary school when he is ten years old and practicing for graduation commencement. He remembers that “…the young Mexican boys were segregated and kept from marching in the ceremony with white girls” (1966, 208), a possible, vivid reminder of his first adversarial encounter with institutional racism. Now every time that Fernando perceives prejudice of any sort, the young hero counteracts it immediately by retreating mentally to the confines of his ethnocentricity. Fernando’s exposure to bigoted tendencies may be tied more accurately to the historical process, especially in times of massive lay-offs when the poor and homeless are scrounging to make a living. Although a specific time-period is not referenced in the plot, the setting could conceivably be the Depression’s dust-bowl days when thousands of desperate Okies were forced to wander the countryside in search of work.
Thus Fernando's potential joblessness may be created by larger economic forces at play, but since the situation is compounded by racism, the hero's initial reaction is to run for ethnic cover.

At times of social threat, Fernando entertains childhood remembrances of living with his father and thereby retreating back to an idealized past when ritual played such an important part in la familia's daily routine. He recalls a simple social protocol which involved a good friend of the family, El Huero, the half-blind, old man who visited his home regularly. Huero participated in the routine custom of visiting Fernando's father, Manuel, who in turn always invited the old man to stay for dinner; Huero then reciprocated Manuel's kindness by giving him corn, by playing his guitar, and most importantly, by narrating after-dinner accounts of yesteryear. In chaotic times, such as the case of Fernando's impending dismissal, the young hero feels a compulsion to ruminate on a highly-ritualized Chicano past when mutual respect of and deference to the individual are strongly emphasized in social relations, something lacking in Fernando's generation.

Eventually bequeathed to Fernando, Huero's old guitar also comes to symbolize to the young man a cherished possession reflecting positive cultural influences that seem to be lacking in the hero's precarious times.
When experiencing personal despair, Fernando strums the ancient instrument and reminisces about the guidance that Huero provides the young pup—lessons about life intertwined with solemn recollections of the old days.

On one particular occasion, El Huero is retelling a tale about his genealogical tree, one pertaining to his great grandfather, the prosperous Don Mercado. The legendary stubbornness of Huero’s forefather is well-known, and this time it involves the topic of education concerning one of Mercado’s offspring. Refusing to let his daughter Martina go to “…the mission school to learn to read and write” (1966, 220), the old fool is letting his bullheadedness tip the scales against a local priest’s advice “…to let his daughter get an education because Don Mercado is thinking about trading with the Army” (1966, 220). In the story, the army’s arrival unto the countryside signifies that times are rapidly changing, because arcadia is becoming more urbanized, usually to the detriment of older mestizo landowners like Mercado. Forced out of their original land-grants as a direct result of their lack of schooling, many hacienda owners unwittingly signed away their property rights, because some could not read and write and thus were easily duped into dispossession of their lands.
With this *cuento* (Spanish for tale), Huero is impressing upon the young Fernando that “...every story must have history...In a sense, every story must go back to the beginning of time...” (1966, 220), clearly insinuating that this fable is symbolic of what really happened to the Mexican American people living in the U.S. in the last century. From the wise old man, Fernando learns about the influence of the distant past upon the immediate present—that the young man should stand up for his rights and that education can only help you—although the good, old days are usually seen as idyllic, something common to all people. Critic Bruce-Novoa refers to ethnocentric texts such as Acosta’s as Chicano cultural productions, because the author “...has consistently engaged in reworking history into a more propitious content for Chicano existence” (1987, 30). Since in “The Worm Dieth Not,” Acosta juxtaposes historical threats (the army’s menacing presence to Mercado) with today’s endangerment (the Anglo foreman’s racist intransigence against Fernando), the story may not seem to be “propitious” to the Chicanos involved, but in dangerous intervals, both Mercado and Fernando tend to close ranks within their own raza, embrace their ethnic culture, and stick together no matter what. Thus, Don Mercado must keep up with the times by sending his daughter to the mission school, or else run
the possibility of losing his estate to the blitzkrieg of unscrupulous army bu-
reaucrats, while Fernando must protect his job seniority at all costs against
the blanket invasion of unemployed workers.

If the "Worm" tale reflects an instance where a monolithic group
(such as the story's Anglos) threaten to overwhelm an individual of color
(such as Fernando), then the "Pig" plot makes an ironic inversion of it—it is
the mestizo, ethnocentric majority that crushes the fair-skinned individual.

In the pig tale, social persecution of the individual continues when
Huero, a solitary, unmarried farmer, has trouble selling his crops to the bar-
rio. It seems that Huero’s bad eye causes a lot of rumormongering among
the villagers, usually they accusing him of losing his eyesight to VD. Plus,
Huero’s physical attributes—such as his blond hair, fair-skin, and one green
eye—already isolate him from the largely dark-skinned, mestizo community.
The quirky character Nico, the hero’s "counselor cowboy and business
agent/confidant" (1970, 126), believes that the solitary one must have some
reason for wanting to attract notice. Hence, Nico warns the stubborn Huero:
“You surround yourself too much with yourself thinking that by so doing
you are hiding from others. But you are only calling attention to yourself”
And to top it off, Huero—who generally has a green thumb when it comes to farming—decides to plant his corn in “round circular fields,” because “It helps the land. It rotates the soil…” (1970, 131), a scientifically-proved method unheard of by his fellow campesinos. Because Huero seems to be bucking tradition—or at least swimming upstream against the customary currents of doing things like linear plowing—some of the more superstitious types find cause in him for suspicion, while others believe that he is somewhat unclean and dirty because of his malignant eyesight. In short, the townspeople refuse to give Huero any business; they proclaim him as an ostracized person and disavow him as a member of their community.

If the barrio people boycott Huero because of his baleful eye, because of his “non-mestizo” attributes, and because of his strange plowing methods, are they engaging in an essentialist assessment of the old man, simply because he dares to be different and prefers to separate himself from the herd? Since the villagers shun Huero because he doesn’t seem to fit their mold of the traditional Chicano farmer, do we conclude that this is just another pariah story, something common to all cultures?

Wanting so hard to please his neighbors, Huero eventually succumbs to the slaughtering of his beloved pet-pig, “Perla” (Spanish for pearl), and
tries to sell the meat at a discount to the villagers; but the plan backfires when the barrio inhabitants still continue the embargo against Huero. Fed up and frustrated, Huero decides to bury “...the whole cart with the pork...” (1970, 141) in a big hole and be done with the whole thing. By the tale’s end, the old man is worse off than he is in the beginning of it, and the readers dismiss Huero’s plight as yet another pariah narrative. But there is more here than meets the eye.

As a critic, I enjoy the “Perla” tale, because it appeals to my sense of Chicano/a folklore legacy, and how an entire community can become so extreme about its health and well-being that it rejects one’s neighbor. Though I can attempt to understand why the village people are nervous about El Huero, whose wretched eye and fair-skinned phenotype makes him stick out like a sore thumb among a crowd of mestizo/as, actually one could say that his one green eye overshadows his green thumb!

Chicano/a folk myths also suggest that a man with one eye may have supernatural powers attributed to him, because this person can focus psychic energy—usually negative—unto other individuals and thus project an evil will upon those who are more vulnerable, such as young children or expectant women. Known as el ojo malo, the “evil eye” can have a malevolent
effect on unsuspecting souls which in itself provides much grist to the malicious mills of barrio gossip. And, I can understand the story’s ending, the scene where the local priest leads the barrio women in prayer for all the sick, including Huero’s devil-eye, because the townspeople are really afraid of the old man. In writing Huero’s pariah tale, Acosta is depicting the folklore—some may even call it “superstitious”—ethnocentricity of the villagers that eventually leads the hero to economic ruin, while the barrio loses one merchant’s commercial discounting.

As a critic, I therefore find Acosta’s folk tale to have a most obvious proverb about the meaning of life. Huero sacrifices his favorite barnyard pet, “Perla,” as an offering to la raza, in order to placate the local souls who are not consuming the old man’s products for whatever reasons of traditional beliefs, or “superstitions” as some may call it. Though too late, Huero finally realizes in the end that he has needlessly butchered his beloved livestock. The pigheaded villagers continue to boycott whatever he sells, simply because they refuse to accept anything new, odd, or peculiar in their normal lifestyles. To this Chicano, the tale’s moral adage is thus quite clear: Live and let live, and don’t ever cast your pearls before swine.
If Acosta’s writings represent ethnocentric tendencies, then Arturo Islas goes beyond them as he attempts to reclaim Chicano/a indigenous heritage in his novels while focusing attention on the subject of sexuality in his Chicano/a characters. While Islas died of AIDS in 1991, his last surviving novel, *La Mollie and the King of Tears* (1996), was published posthumously five years later by the University of New Mexico Press. The opposite of Islas’ Stanford-educated Mickie Angel, the lugubrious yet at times poignant, gay protagonist of the author’s first two narratives, *La Mollie’s* heterosexual hero—Louis Mendoza—is a barrio spokesperson who never received a post-secondary education but is nonetheless articulate in his own way and chock full of common sense.

Trying to capture in writing the dialect of an old pachuco from Texas—not unlike the backwoodsly idiom, uttered by Mark Twain’s rascal hero in *Huckleberry Finn*—Islas renders Louie’s *chuco patois* in a most realistic slang, giving us a glimpse into the mind of a street-wise, Chicano musician “with a gimpy leg” (1996, 4) who was born in the South El Paso “…projects near the river…” (1996, 5). Basically the entire book is the hero’s rendition of his life’s story into the tape recorder of an ethnographer, one treating the protagonist as a human specimen to be catalogued for some research.
purpose. In a way, Louie comes across to the listener as a Chicano picaro-everyman who reflects a proletariat background and uses his wits and street savvy to survive a cold, uncaring world, except for the love of one thing—women. With Louie’s ethnically-flamboyant character, Islas delves into a discussion about one Chicano’s perspective on biculturalism, bilingual dialects, and sexuality.

Though Islas emphasizes various aspects of his ethnic culture, he loves to talk about the bi-cultural pendulum between his American and Mexican selves, revealing underlying factors that deal with the historical process as delineated in Ramon Saldívar’s notion of a “dialectic of difference.” Saldívar’s difference is a description of narrative that grapples “…with a reality that seems always to transcend representation, a reality into which the subject of the narrative’s action seeks to enter, all the while learning the lesson of its own ideological closure, and of history’s resistance to the symbolic structures in which subjectivity itself is formed” (5). According to Sommers, culturalist criticism “…construes culture as static and separable from the historic process, rather than dynamic, creative and responsive to experience” (147). But to Saldívar, the Chicano/a situation “…grows out of the unique historical circumstances that have affected the
creation of this social entity as an ethnic minority in a conquered homeland” (12). In his writings, Islas infuses Chicano culture with Amerindian influence, highlighting the culture’s historical uniqueness and preparing us for the hero’s bi-cultural complexity in the present. The Mollie author also ties the protagonist’s experiences to real life, especially as Louie Mendoza deals with both his Mexican and American selves, as he recites his amazing autobiography into a machine recording the historical moment for posterity.

Since Louie talks a lot in nostalgic terms, it is not easy for Islas’ hero to forget or ignore the past. But is he merely reproducing passive images of his own reality? Islas’ representation of subject is constructed through a set of imaginary and symbolic productions that serve to mirror that reality, even though Louie does not tend to sugar-coat the stark existence along the Tex-Mex border. Life is hard for Spanish-speaking Chicano/as attending English-only high schools where they were taught “...how to be good little obedient Mexicans and stay in...[their] place” (1996, 8), reflecting the historic situation of U.S Latino/as after WWII. Growing up during the fifties is not an easy for the young Louie, especially, since he goes to Korea right after high school and winds up recuperating in VA hospitals, suffering from combat fatigue and feeling “...like a man crawling away from a car wreck (sic)
he knows was his fault” (1996, 13). But, one must call into question “...the transparency of reading...” (5) as Saldívar suggests, in order to penetrate the external superficialities of Chicano cultural truth.

“The language of narrative, especially that of Chicano narrative in its place of difference from and resistance to American cultural norms, can best be grasped as a strategy to enable readers to understand their real conditions of existence in [the] postindustrial 20th century” (5), according to Saldívar. This narrative strategy for demystifying the relations between minority cultures and the dominant culture is the process Saldívar terms the dialectics of difference of Chicano literature. And the way to make that difference less mysterious is to transform and reconstruct reality by revealing the dialectical underpinnings that form the ideological basis of human experience.

Dubbing himself “Chakespeare Louie,” Islas’ hero also likes to compare his roughshod upbringing to Shakespearean tragic figures. At the same time, he not only shows a sophisticated awareness of classic literary works, but we also sense Saldívar’s dialectical difference tearing at him:

Hell, man, part of me is American, I admit it. I can forget the past and think positive about the future when I gotta. The Mexican part of me don’t like it, but that’s tough. What the past does to Mexicans is just as
bad as what the future does to gringos. It's just two side of the same craziness to be anywhere except where you are. (1996, 13)

That is why we link his Mexican self with the past, the future with his American one, and consequently the present with a "dialectics of difference:" In other words, his Mexican past relates to action; his American future is reaction; and synthesis—or in his case, the "difference" between the two—becomes the present.

Turning into a rolling stone after an army stint, Louie relocates to San Francisco "...when all those crazy Anglo hippies, the first ones, were still putting real pure drugs in the Kool-Aid and passing it out in paper cups to everybody" (1996, 19), another of Louie's many historical references to the drugs and pop culture of the times. In California, the hero has the pleasure of meeting Mollie whom he characterizes as "a spoiled Anglo brat" who comes from a famous Frisco family going "...way back, all the way to the Mayflower" (1996, 4) and who "...was trying to finish a dissertation on the 'underprivileged' along the U.S.-Mexican border so's she could get her Ph.D. in sociology from Berkeley" (1996, 29). After she becomes his girlfriend, Louie is very happy but feels rather uncomfortable hanging around with all her "...snobbish friends at Pacific Heights parties" (1996, 22). In
order to withstand Mollie's patronizing friends, Louie has to be just as astute—if not smarter—than most of them. One of his strategies to deflect white condescension is what he calls his "dumb Mexican" routine, whereby "...when anyone—specially another guy—treats me like a dumb Mexican cause of the way I talk, I just go ahead and act like one. That lets em stay all smug, and I can laugh at em for being so stupid. I been conning the gringos like that for years and they never catch one" (1996, 22). Anything but dim-witted, Louie asks his tape-recording anthropologist-friend a question about bilingual dialects: *Why are some accents better than others?* Louie may not be as educated as Mollie’s friends, but he’s surely aware—albeit in his own informal way—of his raza’s linguistic differences: "...Mexicans were in this country before it was this country, and long before any of her people took it into their greedy and warped minds to murder every brown or red human being in their way" (1996, 26). Yet, at times, Louie gets miffed at Mollie, because she seems to be trying to systematize, classify, and tag him as a bona fide case of social victimization, economic disparity, and educational deficiency.

As a sociology student who collects data on the poor, Mollie espouses her theory of social poverty, believing that Louie is "...a real example of
ethnic and racial poverty, resulting in cultural deprivation” (1996, 30). But through all her academic rationalizing, Mollie at times makes a lot of sense, especially when she lectures Louie about the economic deprivation of his people, reinforcing a critical, dialectical perspective:

It’s the racial bias that concerns me in the whole process. Think of the Indians on the reservations, the blacks in Harlem and Watts, the Puerto Ricans in New York, the Chicanos in East L.A., your brothers and sisters on this side of the border. Are they poor because poverty’s in their genes or because they are and have been historically exploited by white male society? [In turn, Louie responds that] ...if the privileged people [like Mollie’s wealthy family] used all that data to figure out a way to share a little of their money, poverty might disappear. (1996, 29-30)

Louie is also aware of la raza’s historical situatedness, first learning it from his own father, Anastasio Mendoza, who deserted the family after Louie’s mother dies and thus “…drank to swallow his pride…cause he hated them times when he couldn’t give us nothing” (1996, 42). Even though Louie’s old man was always down-and-out, he still has enough common sense to see the whole dialectical picture:

To my old man, America was this whole part of the world, not just the U.S.A. And he told us that we came from people who had great civilizations long before they were ‘discovered’ by the European guys
Anastasio engages in rediscovery of cultural roots by identifying with the native traditions of his raza’s pre-Columbian past. He also traces the impact of American history upon the Chicano/a consciousness of today, an awareness based upon challenging historical accounts written by Anglo American victors (or the ones with “the gold”) which tend to be biased against the real Chicano/a story. In the novel, Islas repeatedly writes about the brain-washing of Mexican American youth in Anglo-controlled educational settings where skewed history lessons are taught and always to la raza’s detriment. As Saldívar puts it: “It is a situation that grows out of the unique historical circumstances that have affected the creation of this social entity [Chicano/as] as an ethnic minority in a conquered homeland…” (1996, 12). And because of the loss of property rights and subsequent repression of civil rights after the U.S.-Mexican War, “Mexican Americans developed a decisive sense of opposition to Anglo-American forms and institutions” (Saldívar, 13). Thus some of Chicano/a writings become a literature of resistance to the hegemony of American culture.
But Islas’ narratives also establish a resistance to the *heterosexuality* of the dominant culture as well. In an interesting twist, Islas’s Louie Mendoza character is heterosexual as opposed to the gay Mickie Angel, the hero of the author’s two earlier novels. But Islas makes Louie a very sympathetic character who is hip to his brother Tomás’ homosexuality, allowing the hero to witness the gay lifestyle up close. In fact, one of the novel’s most humorous episodes involves Louie’s search for Tomás at a gay night club called “The Mind Shaft,” a sort of “Market Babylon for fairies” (1996, 141). In a more serious tone, though, Louie also quotes a gay friend’s insightful observations about sexuality in general: “Cause it’s not something you decide with your head….Gay or straight’s not something you decide with your brain” (1996, 72-73).

In addition to homosexuality, Islas also explores the concept of female power with Mollie’s character in the narrative. In fact, the novel’s driving factor seems to be Louie’s love for his girlfriend, even though he believes her to be a rich and spoiled gringa. But, that doesn’t dampen Louie’s enthusiasm for her as he adores women and holds female strength in awe as he explains it:

> Very few guys have that power, man, we’re too stuck to the ground punching it out all the time... Women outlive and out love us,
man no contest. I gotta laugh when guys think that just cause of this thing between our legs we can run the world and everybody in it, specially women...But it’s the women who have the real power, man, even if they never believe that, so guys take advantage. (1996, 34)

Louie also sees female strength in his saint of a mestiza mother, “La Pixie,” whom he always remembers very fondly for she “…had this beautiful round Olmec face and when it got all red, she looked just like a pomegranate” (1996, 6). Interestingly enough, Islas is playing here with the meaning of words, with his mother’s Christian name, as “Praxedis” is based on the word praxes defined as “a habitual or established practice or custom,” according to the American Heritage Dictionary. Since Louie claims that La Pixie had the face of an Olmeca, “an early Mesoamerican Indian civilization...whose influence was widespread throughout southern Mexico and Central America” (American Heritage Dictionary), Islas continues to stress how the distant past still shapes and controls the present by underscoring the influence of Olmec native culture on the mestizaje of Chicano/as. But, Islas has more fluidity in referencing his culture’s ethnic past, in order to construct, or “fine-tune,” a more favorable present, than does Acosta’s essentialist frame of mind, because the latter is struggling to identity his ethnicity whereas the former is already beyond it.
If Islas energizes his mestizo/a characters with the wisdom, myths, and symbolism of a pre-Columbian history, then Michael Nava interjects a multicultural dimension into the gay characters of his whodunit narratives. In his latest murder mysteries, *The Death of Friends* (1996) and *The Burning Plain* (1997), Nava’s gay hero Henry Rios continues to advocate a strident sexuality at the expense of Chicano ethnocentricity, but that’s because this attorney-protagonist is so secure about his Chicano identity that he is able to concentrate on reinforcing his other important self—his sexual orientation. Posing a relevant question that reinforces Nava’s stance against essentialist tendencies, Luis Leal asks: Why should the Chicano experience be limited to the campesino struggle or even to the description of life in the barrio? (Lomelí, 1982, 34).

Since some Chicano/as are becoming more upwardly mobile in society—like Henry Rios, yuppie and middle-class—many have eventually moved away from the barrio. So, why shouldn’t Latino/a authors go beyond ethnocentric essentialism and deal with issues that greatly impact human nature—like sexuality—or specifically in Rios’ case, homosexuality? As a
Chicano author, why should Nava be confined only to write about ethnic matters when gay sexuality may be more universal, cutting across all races, ethnicities, classes, and genders?

In an extension of a subplot from Nava’s prior novel, *Hidden Law* (1992), Rios has finally to deal in *Death of Friends* with the loss of his gay ex-lover, Josh Mandel, who doesn’t appreciate, until the very end, that “…dying would be such hard work” (1996, 59). In the author’s latest mystery, *Burning Plain*, Rios refuses to let go of Josh as the hero continues to see apparitions of his deceased boyfriend everywhere. In addition to dissecting the subject of death, Nava also engages in such relevant social topics as bisexuality, AIDS, and marriage.

If anything can be said of Nava’s multicultural narratives, it’s that his murder mysteries are rendered realistically from the vantage point of gays living in the nineties. With his latest novel, Nava is capturing the lives of AIDS victims in epidemic proportions, a terrible disease which continues to spread in densely-populated areas, where large numbers of homosexuals reside, such as LA or San Francisco. Nava’s writings therefore convey a keen sense of acknowledging that future history will one day reflect that the
modern AIDS pestilence will rival—in scope and devastation—the Middle Ages’ bubonic plague.

With paramours or beloved friends dying left and right, Rios is able to deal with the deadly AIDS virus with dignity and equanimity as the author describes it in minute detail. For instance, the hero narrates his lover Josh’s AIDS-wasting condition with a clinical precision: “HIV-nephropathy which leads to a condition called uremia, which means that his bloodstream retains the toxins that are normally excreted in the urine” (1996, 57), resulting in the body’s debilitation right before death. In short, since Nava’s emphasis is on matters concerning sexuality, and not just on ethnicity, he thus unwittingly reinforces Francisco A. Lomelí’s contention that “…cultural setting acquires less importance, for what matters above all is the dynamics of conflict between the individual and external forces…Ethnicity is no longer the ultimate aim...” (Lomelí, 1985, 34).

According to Sommers, one historical-dialectical assumption is “That literature, rather than merely reflecting historical experience, in its very form and structures interprets this experience and is capable of impact upon the
reader’s consciousness” (150). In Death, Nava wants to wake up his reading public—probably a largely gay one—about the risks involved with the mixing of bisexuality and AIDS.

In the story, the murder victim is the hero’s close friend, Chris Chandler, a Superior Court judge whom Rios has known for the last 20 years from college days. Maybe because of the narrative’s straightforward chronicling of Chandler’s wrestling with both his homosexuality and the legal profession, resulting in the judge’s vicious murder, the novel wins the Lambda Best Gay Men’s Mystery award for 1997. “That those two parts of my life, law student and homosexual, seemed irreconcilable bothered me considerably, because I couldn’t see having to choose one over the other” (1996, 8), Henry Rios muses about his as well as Chandler’s sexual dilemma—the law vs. gay desire.

Eventually, Henry’s bisexual friend makes a clear choice: he picks marriage over a gay life, settles into a comfortable position with his father-in-law’s prestigious law firm, and eventually winds up getting a bench appointment. Perceiving the gay lifestyle as an inability to make a difference in the world, Chandler decides not to become a gay advocate like Rios, because “Being gay meant being exiled from that ordinary world, banished to
the fringes where you met a lot of fringe people in some pretty dubious situations" (1996, 34). So, Chandler leads a straight life until he is arrested for lewd conduct, a criminal charge that Rios manages to plea bargain-down to a lesser offense to avoid the spectacle of a humiliating trial. Thus, the stage is set for murder when Chandler—considering himself to be "...a recovering homosexual...[because he's] been a good father and a good husband..." (84)—decides to live the great lie. After years of stable marriage and even fathering a son, Chris decides to take up with a younger guy, Zack, in a risky relationship which eventually costs him plenty—his life—in a bloody crime-scene caused by an avalanche of passion and anger. In short, Zack is the main suspect, and Rios winds up defending him.

After Zack is charged with murder in *Death*, Henry decides to defend his dead friend's gay lover even though all evidence is initially points to him as the culprit. As our hero investigates the murder of Chandler, one who "...was a complicated mix, no doubt about it, decent but self-aggrandizing, courageous but also cowardly, a man who lived a lie for most of his life but managed admirable achievements nonetheless..." (1996, 216), Rios discovers things about his old friend, which expose him in a whole different light: like that he was HIV+, and as a result, had infected his wife. In *Death*, Nava
writes about the real problems that bisexuals face every day of their lives. Because some might want to have offspring, but, at the same time, not want to forego their gay desires, as in Judge Chandler’s case, the end-result can be disastrous.

In both *Death of Friends* and *Burning Plain*, Henry Rios makes only oblique references to his ethnicity because he concentrates mainly on his other identity, that of an open homosexual. That’s why there are only indirect hints at his Chicano culture in the latter murder mystery: “From inside I heard a *rancheria* [a Mexican tune] I recognized as one of my father’s favorites” (1997, 31). Because in *Burning Plain* Nava focuses attention on gay life in large urban centers, his characters reflect a maelstrom of human problems, social concerns, and political hassles that homosexuals are subjected to everyday—and all this set against the gory background of a serial killer terrorizing L.A.’s gay community at random. Vividly describing one dead body found, the author notes that “On his chest were what at first looked like deep scratch marks but, in a second photograph, a close-up, were revealed to be letters spelling out the words: KILL FAGS” (1997, 56).

Despite the fact that *Death of Friends* has received acclaim, *The Burning Plain* might just be Nava’s finest mystery to date because of its
riveting suspense—especially since one of the accused is the hero Henry Rios himself. In this murder mystery, Nava refers to Dante’s description of hell where dead homosexuals wind up in *The Divine Comedy*—in purgatory’s seventh circle consisting of a “...plain of burning sand” (1997, 31); L.A.—especially Hollywood—is compared to a raging inferno of sorts, and not just because of the hot weather. We also get the behind-the-scenes drama of the machiavellian head of a major film studio, Parnassus Pictures. As always, Nava loves to quip about Greek mythology, referring to “Parnassus” as the Greek mountain-home of the Muses. In Nava’s horrific and suspenseful mystery, Duke Asuras plays the movie-executive antagonist perched atop his cinematic empire with a capacity to make or break artistic talent in the world of cinematography. For the first time ever, Nava turns his own hero Henry Rios into a murder suspect to make the mystery story much more intriguing.

Not only does *Burning Plain* involve the investigation of a gruesome, mad killer, but it also parallels the infamous O.J. Simpson murder probe. The plot includes a Mark Fuhrman-type character, a Detective Montezuma Gaitan, who has an inordinate number of excessive-force complaints and has also been alleged to have planted evidence in crime scenes to get
convictions. And to boot, there seems to be an “anti-gay” hit squad operating in the city, as Henry becomes one of its targets: “They hauled me out to the desert and put a gun to my head” (1997, 97) by “Sheriff’s deputies” who knock him unconscious; the next day Rios wakes up handcuffed to a hospital bed. With all the makings of a Hollywood movie, Nava’s mystery is set against a highly-charged atmosphere where the good guys—law enforcement—really wear the black hats and are suspected of engaging in homophobic activity as well as trying to convict innocent people.

Written in the late nineties, Death of Friends and Burning Plain can be easily critiqued from a multiculturalist perspective, because the author doesn’t really focus on the protagonist’s essentialist Chicano identity but rather on his gay sexuality as well as exploring lesbian and bisexual subjectivities. According to Sommers, the writer is “…a creative interpreter, one who is part of a group and must assume the contradictions of…[his] social condition and struggle to resolve them” (Sommers, 150-51). That is why the author writes about bisexuality in Death of Friends, because Nava wants to explore the contradictions of wanting a marriage and family, all the while, not wanting—or being able—to give up one’s gay desire.
Even though the writings of Acosta, Islas, and Nava can be easily critiqued from all three perspectives—the ethnocentric, the historical, and the multicultural, I found the authors gravitating mainly toward each of their respective approaches. Oscar Zeta Acosta’s writings invite an ethnocentric framework, because his namesake hero is engaging in an ethnic recovery which eventually launches Chicano awareness as a plausible cultural identity to his raza. His literary works are very important to the evolution of Chicano/a literature, because he is one of the first to begin building its ethnic foundation, as Acosta preoccupies himself in the process of discovering his “true self.” In order to do that, however, the author has to be overly ethnocentric—at times even essentialist—and Acosta winds up trampling on a lot of other sensibilities that come back to haunt him a quarter of a century later.

The approach that the works of Arturo Islas invite is the historical, because maybe more than any other Chicano/a novelist, Islas incorporates Amerindian background into his mestizo/a characters, using the past to enlighten the present. Yet, Islas’ emphasis is also very contemporary, because he is one of only a handful of male Chicano writers who introduce the subject of homosexuality into their writings. Islas loves to explore the friction created between his mostly gay hero (except for Louie Mendoza) and his
straight family relations. But because he is able to infuse his works with the
cosmic views of Nahuatl culture, it smooths the narratives’ rough edges,
allowing a heterosexual reading public to enjoy his works, which celebrate
the border culture between the U.S. and Mexico, while at the same time,
being exposed to what some people consider as a taboo subject—
homosexuality. The important thing to remember is that in both areas Islas per-
ceives identity as multiple, rather than just one single essence.

If both Acosta and Islas engage in some essentializing of characteri-
ization in order to depict Chicano culture authentically, Michael Nava ex-
plodes any myths, misconceptions, or stereotypes concerning Chicano/as in
his murder mysteries. But, Nava takes it a step further, and not only con-
centrates on the reality of the terminal disease AIDS (and how it leaves a
trail of death to those affected by it and of bereavement to those who survive
it), but he also focuses on the daily struggle of gays, lesbians, and bisexual
against a dominant heterosexual hegemony, one which tends to crush indi-
viduals who dare to be different.

Overall, Chicano/a literature has come a long way since the 1959
publication of Jose Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho*, considered to be the first
Chicano novel. A bildungsroman, this work of fiction chronicles the life of
a young Mexican American hero who struggles to survive externally two
different, competing cultures leading up to WWII, resulting in an internal
state of confusion and contradiction that the protagonist attempts to escape
by joining the armed forces. In the seventies, Oscar Zeta Acosta deals with
this bi-cultural, dialectical difference by engaging in an ethnocentric search
of self which results in the finding of ethnic identification—Chicano con-
sciousness—but basically at the expense of other perspectives like those
dealing with gender or sexuality. In the eighties, Arturo Islas expands on
this ethnic awareness by reaching back to mestizaje's historical past and re-
juvenating Chicano/a literature by fine-tuning it with indigenous myth, sym-
bolism, and religion. All the while, Islas is also introducing the issue of al-
ternative sexuality into his novels, a subject to be taken seriously in Chi-
cano/a culture from now on. In the nineties, Michael Nava, more or less,
supersedes questions of ethnicity with the interrogation of gay sexual orien-
tation. His murder mysteries reflect a multicultural perspective that may be
more in keeping with the diverse outlook of the new millennium. In varying
degrees, ethnicity intersects with sexuality in the fictional works of Acosta,
Islas, and Nava.
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