Hospitable Imaginations: Contemporary Latino/a Literature and the Pursuit of a Readership

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

The rise of Latino/a literature in the US has been fraught with difficulties that stem from matters of publication and audience. These difficulties, such as the often limited expectations publishers have for the forms Latino/a literature may take, have resulted in significant constraints on the development of this literary tradition. Despite these constraints, Latino/a authors have steadily worked to expand audience expectations by attending to narrative design and creating challenging reading situations—moments in which audiences are not only presented with a cognitively-challenging reading experience, but are also challenged to broaden its understanding of the forms Latino/a literature may take. Rather than compose their narratives with an actual audience in mind, many Latino/a authors sought to write for an ideal audience capable of engaging with even the most complex storyworlds. In essence, Latino/a authors, through their writings, invited actual audiences to break from their narrow expectations. My selected Latino/a texts reveal the narrative strategies used to challenge audiences, and also demonstrate how these challenges were received by actual audiences.

_Hospitable Imaginations_ explores how challenging reading situations have shaped Latino/a literature over the course of its development. I contend that early in the publication history of Latino fiction, publishers insisted on Latino/a writersforegrounding what were thought to be narrative modes and thematics endemic to Latinos themselves, while in more recent years publishers have placed more of a premium on
immersive storytelling—on the telling of stories that have the power to capture, and retain, the imaginations of the broadest possible readership. Focusing on Latino/a texts written from the late 1960s to the present, I show how authors such as Oscar “Zeta” Acosta, Gloria Anzaldúa, Piri Thomas, Giannina Braschi, Sandra Cisneros, Junot Díaz, and Gilbert Hernandez have worked to create a sophisticated readership through narrative features such as consciousness representation, bilingualism, code-switching, serialization, and intertextual/paratextual play.
For Ginger
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Vita

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Chapter 1—Introduction: Reading Latino/a Literature

The oft-cited metaphor that the United States is a melting pot might also be applied, theoretically, to the literary production of US authors. I hedge my claim by saying “theoretically,” mainly because part of what lends such vitality to the literature of the US is that it is comprised of disparate but related histories and cultural practices. With so many rich literary and storytelling traditions from the various aspects of the US citizenry, the vulcanization of the US literary tradition might be said to yield a literature of borrowing where literary traditions, narrative devices, and cultural thematics are not consigned to only one aspect of US literature. That is to say, the literature of the US has been enriched as a result of this strenuous process of borrowing.

Yet vulcanization means losing a vital part of one’s self. Certain groups in the US who historically have been marginalized resist this metaphor of vulcanization because they feel they have not had an opportunity for the same level of self-expression as dominant groups. Political movements that have arisen out of the struggle for civil rights such as the Chicano Movement, the First Wave Feminism Movement, and the Gay Movement all desire an equal platform from which they can be heard. They do not want to lose their sense of self by removing specific markers of identity.

If we adopt a similar understanding in terms of Latino/a literary production, this would mean that some proponents of Latino/a literature desire that such narratives be considered equal to other literary forms by hegemonic groups in the US without losing
that sense of Latinoness within its literature. Equality, in the sense of narrative design and production, means that authors—and in the case of my study, Latino/a authors—have the gamut of narrative devices at their disposal when crafting their storyworlds. However, Latino/a authors, indebted to their predecessors who have helped establish a rich albeit nascent literary tradition, run the risk of being manacled to those literary traditions. Thus, having the capacity to engage in all sorts of narrative designs often means moving away from what has come to be expected of Latino/a literature. These expectations are rooted firmly in the imaginations of readers. And, in order for these limiting *a priori* expectations to be dismantled, authors of Latino/a literature must contest these reader expectations by directly challenging them at the site of reading comprehension and as a result, storyworld design and reconstruction.

**Creating a Readership**

In order for authors of Latino/a literature to venture into all aspects of narrative, there must be an audience that is willing to engage with all sorts of Latino/a writing. While this is commonsensical on its face, audiences and publishers in the US have tended to have a myopic understanding of the potential and possibilities of Latino/a narrative. Manuel Martín-Rodriguez’s *Life in Search of Readers: Reading (in) Chicano Literature* (2003) is one of the first works of scholarship to explore how a readership (and lack thereof) has significantly impeded in the development of Chicano/a literature. Part of Martín-Rodriguez’s argument is that prior to the Chicano Movement, Chicano/a authors wrote with two specific audiences in mind: the “realistic” audience that these authors understood as their likely audience, as well as a larger potential audience (9-10). *Life in
*Search of Readers* does an excellent job of exposing the material realities that affected Chicano/a literary production and its intended audience.

Indeed, Martin-Rodriguez’s study is an important source from which I launch my own project. Specifically, I wish to expand the examination of works beyond those of Chicano/a literature (I examine, for example, works of Dominican American and Puerto Rican narrative) as well as the inclusion of graphic narrative in my investigation of how Latino/a narrative design operates vis-à-vis its audience. Further, though I acknowledge early examples of Latino/a narrative—from María Amparo Ruiz de Burton to José Antonio Villarreal to John Rechy—my case studies fall within a time period that begins with the publication of Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* in 1967 and runs chronologically forty years to the year 2007, the year Junot Díaz published *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Thus, this dissertation will examine a range of narrative texts that have created challenging reading situations over the course of the development of Latino/a literature—this body of Latino/a-authored works having been formally identified as a “literature” only rather recently, i.e., since the 1980s.

Prior critical investigations of Latino/a literature have tended to follow either a thematic, sociocultural, or political trajectory of inquiry; one readily thinks of Sonia Saldívar-Hull’s *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and the Border* (2000), for example. Saldívar-Hull’s book is expressly political, begun “in the late 1980s, when discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and class were under attack,” with the hope that *Feminism on the Border* would “contribute to the destabilization of antifeminist prognostications” (vii). It is a work that could not have been written without a deep
As a Chicana Feminist reading the creative works of other Chicana Feminists, Saldívar-Hull highlights the power of these texts through the process of reading. Not only does she engage in astute close analyses of texts by writers such as Helena María Viramontes, Sandra Cisneros, and Gloria Anzaldúa; what is more, Saldívar-Hull exposes the tacit reality that a text can have a very real and profound impact on its audience. So, while *Feminism on the Border* is ostensibly a political work, the impetus for it lies in Saldívar-Hull’s personal engagement with selected narrative prose and poetry. *Feminism on the Border* is an excellent example of how a text that is overtly political, enmeshed within sociocultural contexts, is still rooted in the fundamental cognitive and emotive transaction between author and audience via the text.

With the exception of Martín-Rodriguez’s examination of readers in and of Chicano/a literature, the development and evolution of Latino/a literature vis-à-vis a flexible readership—that is to say, how the changing demands of audiences directly influenced authorial narrative strategies and decisions, remains largely unexamined. Indeed, Latino/a literature has placed complex and challenging demands upon audiences throughout its development, positioned as it is to complicate and expand the umbrella corpus of US literature through thematic, linguistic, and formal contributions. However, a preponderance of scholarship on Latino/a literature has viewed the issue of presenting challenges in terms of undermining and destabilizing hierarchical and hegemonic structures in the US. In short, the politics of representation is omnipresent in studies of Latino/a literature. For instance, Arturo J. Aldama’s *Disrupting Savagism: Intersecting*
Chicana/o, Mexican Immigrant, and Native American Struggles for Self-Representation (2001) is a particularly good example of this sort of scholarly bent. Aldama frames his inquiry in a manner that positions certain narrative voices (e.g., Chicanos, Native Americans) as “talking back” to a power structure that may or may not hear them. Aldama’s book and others that take a similar approach focus on the power dynamic between the subject (often a product of colonization) who speaks and the hegemony that has the capital to listen and act but rather chooses to ignore. Again, such studies are articulated as a political struggle, but even in Disrupting Savagism one might argue that the crux of the issue rests in the authored text’s ability to impact and influence an audience. Aldama’s study is a significant one, but it elides the position of audience and concentrates on the larger ideopolitical structure of society. My study, on the other hand, is not motivated by the question “How does the subject speak, and who hears it?” but rather “How does the text, as a creative work, seek to engage and move its specific audience?” The difference, I argue, is a key contrast between my work and the majority of scholarship of Latino/a literature.

The Development of Latino/a Literature

The development of Latino/a literature, however, has not been without its own challenges, some of which originated in the publishing industry. Martín-Rodriguez has detailed the difficulties Chicano/a authors faced when attempting to find publishers for their works; major publishing houses were quite selective in the types of Latino/a novels they published. As a corrective to this, specialty publishers such as Quinto Del Sol Books, Bilingual Review/Press, and Arte Público Press formed in order to fill this need.
However, because these specialty presses often had a very particular vision for the type of Latino/a literature they wanted to publish, Latinos were frequently the victims of their own success. If we consider three of the bestselling Chicano works from the 60s-70s era—Tomás Rivera’s *y no se lo trago la tierra*, Ernesto Galarza’s *Barrio Boy*, and Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*—each bears the resemblance of being a *Bildungsroman* and arguably a *Künstlerroman*. Together with Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets*, these works fostered a desire within specialty presses to publish similar works by Latinos because they were seen as marketable. Here was a market that publishers could identify. While this was certainly a welcome opportunity for Latino/a authors, the success of these narrative forms soon proved a constraint.

A similar observation can be made about the use of “magical realism” in Latino/a literature. Because this literary technique, made popular by Latin American writers such as Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel García Márquez, was used by Latino/a authors such as Anaya and Ron Arias, “magical realism” became a way to market Latino/a literature. As Martín-Rodriguez notes:

> The label “magical realism” routinely applied to most Chicano/a texts that enter the mainstream is, in fact, the single most important solecism currently haunting the marketing of Chicano/a texts, as it works to reduce these texts to a quaint, facile imitation of what was a booming, revolutionary literary movement a few decades ago. When used by non-Latinos/as, as the term is mostly used, the label “magical realist” employed to define a Latino/a text suggests a reductionist approach to minority literature that actually works to make it meaningless and insignificant […]. As such, the magical realism definition is now being used to exoticize the texts to which the term is applied, to make them foreign rather than a product of the U.S. literary arena. (125)
So potent is the “magical realism” label that even the current generation of Latin American writers such as Chilean author Alberto Fuguet, Bolivian author Edmundo Paz Soldán, and Mexican author Jorge Volpi have all tried to shake the magical realist designation. As Argentine-Brazilian filmmaker Hector Babenco puts it, “Latin America is never remembered for having contributed anything to the world. Magical realism became our cultural export” (qtd. in Margolis 52).

Thus, early successes by Latino/a authors have made it difficult for successive generations of Latino/a writers to write in a manner that differed from those pre-established literary tropes. The result was that Latinos were poised to challenge readers any time they broke from what was expected of them. Over time, these authors have essentially “grown” a readership by continually working to push beyond narrow conceptions of what Latino/a literature “looks like.” Even so, in *Crowding out Latinos: Mexican Americans in the Public Consciousness* (2000), Marco Portales argues that “Chicano literature has not yet made a discernible difference in the lives of millions of book-buying Americans” (12). Though Portales focuses on one subset of Latino/a authors and texts, his study does demonstrate that the growth of a Latino/a literature readership has indeed been frustratingly slow.

Although the surge of Latino/a writing has only recently been acknowledged as a proper literature, the fact is that Latinos have been a significant presence in the US since the early nineteenth century—a presence that continues to grow and gain influence. In fact, the Latino/a presence in the US has consistently grown since as far back as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which nearly doubled the geographic size of the
United States overnight as a result of Mexico’s ceding of half of its territory. While this may have been the largest incorporation of Mexican-descended people at one time in the US, the number of Latinos that comprise the US population has grown steadily in the years since. Despite the presence of Latinos post-1848, it was not until the latter part of the twentieth century, with the emergence of an educated, urban, Latino/a demographic eager for cosmopolitan experiences that a low-, middle-, and high-brow Latino/a literature began to constitute itself—as an effort to satisfy this diversifying taste.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s we have seen a greater prominence of Latinos as creators and consumers of art and pop culture. As Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez note in *The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* (2007), “Within this context of canon formation a commonsense periodization has emerged for Latino/a literature, roughly dividing the contemporary literary scene into a Civil Rights generation and what we refer to in our title as the ‘post-Sixties’ writers that have followed” (2). Dalleo and Machado Sáez encapsulate their project as supporting earlier claims that view “a politics of social justice as incompatible with market popularity” (3). Specifically, Dalleo and Machado Sáez argue that rather than retreating from politics, or substituting what Nancy Fraser calls a “politics of recognition” for a “politics of redistribution,” recent Latino/a literature imagines creative ways to rethink the relationship between a politics of social justice and market popularity—a combination that the critical reception denies by either rejecting one of these elements or articulating them as binary opposites. (3)

Scholars thus acknowledge a break in Latino/a literature that occurred around the time of and immediately subsequent to the Civil Rights movement. Dalleo and Machado Sáez, for their project, also see the initial book reviews of Latino/a literature as taking a
preeminent role in shaping the market success of such texts, and they devote an entire chapter engaging two highly influential critics: Ilan Stavans and Gustavo Pérez Firmat. I disagree with the notion that reviewers are a meaningful and lasting influence on a text’s interaction with its audience. My position would be that the reviewer has the potential to drive readers to a text, or to thwart them entirely. Yet once a reader takes up the task of reading comprehension, the reviewer is of minimal import. So, while reviewers and their reviews can have an influence on a book’s initial sales or readers’ early orientation towards the work, such investigations are outside the scope of my study.

But this issue of visibility and volubility as it concerns Latino/a literature signals how this body of Latino/a authors has steadily flourished since the Civil Rights era. This growth of Latino/a works is the obverse of what has happened to indigenous culture and native peoples of the US; as their numbers shrink, their presence in the production of art, culture, and academic works becomes disconcertingly small—and limited in range. The same might be said of other groups who have assimilated, such as Norwegian Americans or the German Americans who settled in the Texas Hill Country in the 1840s. At first blush, one might assume that the greater the prominence that Latinos gain as a demographic group, the more influence and control over the forms of artistic expression circulating within that community and also more broadly. However, just as a larger Latino/a demographic in the US does not translate into a similar demographic percentage in higher education, Latino/a authors do not comprise a similar percentage of US authors published by, say, large presses that are the standard bearers of the publishing industry.
But it is a fact that the Latino/a subpopulation in the US currently outpaces all other subpopulations in growth.

In comparison with the European immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whose assimilation into US culture also heralded a migration (both literal and figural) from their ancestral culture, Latino/a culture balances between Latin American and Anglo cultures, though often tipping toward one or the other. Often we see scholarship counterposing Latino/a literature with other literary traditions in order to identify, correctly or not, Latino/a texts as being concerned with sustaining and negotiating a dual identity. This emphasis is evident in Gloria Anzaldúa’s “New Mestiza,” Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s “Life on the Hyphen,” Ilan Stavan’s “Hispanic Condition,” and Ramón Saldívar’s and José David Saldívar’s explorations of the dialectical nature of the US-Latino/a relationship in *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (1990) and *Dialectics of our Americas: Genealogy, Cultural Critique and Literary History* (1991), respectively. Indeed, this approach is so dominant in Latino/a literary scholarship that it is understandable why many of these scholars begin their examinations with questions of identity, leading them to examine Latino/a literature primarily through the lens of identity politics. While an identity-oriented approach to Latino/a literature has borne some interesting and suggestive fruit, the dominance of this approach largely ignores how both formal features of a particular narrative as well as its built relationship to an ideal audience radically complicates any dual-identity model. These considerations bolster, in turn, my contention that Latino/a literature has been (and still is) positioned to influence not only US literature but the audiences of US literature as
well—but not in the *a priori* ways that have been argued in the past (i.e., the dominance of an identity politics approach to examining Latino/a literature).

I must digress briefly in order to explain why I describe my approach to Latino/a literature in terms of *a priori* and *a posteriori*. For most of its history, ethnic literatures of the US have often been viewed by scholars, bookstores, and audiences through the lens of the author’s identity. This is not their fault; ethnic authors have historically written about matters of identity. Yet because the public comes to expect that, say, a Latino author like Tomás Rivera would write about the Chicano migrant experience, there is the tendency to adopt an *a priori* way of looking at all literature produced by Latinos. Conversely, there is not a similar, identity-based, *a priori* stance for engaging with non-ethnic literature in the US. So, when I say that my project eschews an *a priori* approach for examining the selected Latino/a works, I mean that I am not automatically imposing certain issues based simply on conventional expectations of Latino/a literature. Inherent in this position is the central concern of my project. Namely, that *a priori* ways of viewing Latino/a literature have tangible effects on the production and reception of Latino/a works. A couple of examples will illustrate this point.

John Rechy’s breakthrough novel, *City of Night* (1963), has, for most of its publication history, been largely ignored by the Latino/a community. *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2011) edited by Ilan Stavans points out that the success of *City of Night*, “based on a topic shied away from and condemned by macho Latino culture, was unacceptable to Chicano critics writing about traditional Mexican American lives” (1023). Equally, Rechy’s novel has been heralded by the LGBT community as an
excellent work of gay literature. The lack of reception of *City of Night* by the Chicano community underscores the limitations of an *a priori* approach to Latino/a literature. Because Rechy’s novel did not comport with established expectations for Chicano literature, many critics ignored the novel instead of viewing it as example of the diversity of Latino/a literature.

Another more recent example of a novel reveals how the identity of an author often relates to the subject of his or her novel, often in ways that confound readers and critics. Sesshu Foster’s 2005 novel *Atomik Aztex* is a work of alternative history that posits a world in which the Aztecs actually drove the European colonizers out of the Americas:

Perhaps you are familiar with some worlds, stupider realities amongst alternate universes offered by the ever expanding-omniverse, in which the Aztek civilization was ‘destroyed.’ That’s a possibility. I mean that’s what the Europians thot. They planned genocide, wipe out our civilization, build cathedrals on TOP of our pyramidz, bah, hump our women, not just our women but the Tlazkalans, the Mixteks, the Zapoteks, the Chichimeks, the Utes, the Triki, the Kahuilla, the Shoshone, the Maidu, the Klickitat, the Mandan, the Chumash, the Yaqui, the Huicholes, the Meskwaki, the Guarani, Seminoles, endless peoples, decimate ‘em with smallpox, measles and shit fits, welfare lines, workaholism, imbecility, enslave ‘em in the silver mines of Potosí, the gold mines of El Dorado & Disneylandia, on golf courses & country clubs, *chingados*, all our brothers, you get the picture. (1)

*Atomik Aztex* is a highly-imaginative novel that, despite its alternate universe conceit, deals frankly with what it means to be Latino/a in the US. But in direct defiance of literary expectations, Foster is an Asian American writing a novel built on Latino/a themes. In the end, is his novel best categorized as Latino/a or Asian American or neither? The answer, to my thinking, matters less than what occurs at the level of
narrative design. To hold an *a priori* expectation on Foster’s novel immediately puts the work at risk of being ignored altogether.

My approach, then, attends to the text, its relation to its ideal audience, and in turn, the way considerations of audience influence authorial decisions in creating a storyworld. Rather than claim that Latino/a authors (and they alone) have some capacity for writing a particular type of fiction, say, magical realism or a narrative of “borderland” consciousness, I argue that attending to Latino/a literature itself—its use of narrative techniques in creating storyworlds—allows us to understand how it has developed vis-à-vis an ever-shifting reading demographic and a publishing industry that has generally pressured and constrained Latino/a writing to conform to an *a priori* expectation of what such writing should be like, what is marketable, and what it should aspire to achieve. I argue that to understand how Latino/a literature has developed, one must adopt an *a posteriori* approach to examining this corpus, by letting the corpus itself dictate the sorts of questions we ask about it.¹ Doing so allows us not only to discern current trends but also to anticipate where Latino/a literature may be headed in the years to come. Latino/a literature has posed different sorts of challenges to readers during the last forty years—challenges that my dissertation aims to map out. Moreover, it is important to remember that reading challenges from the late 1960s may no longer be a challenge in the 2000s,

¹ I do not mean to suggest that my adopted approach allows me unique access to the text itself. On the contrary, a critic who examines, say, historical or political dimensions of the text may also allow such an investigation to be generated from the text itself. However, a standard criticism of more formalist approaches to ethnic literature is that they do not consider the social, historical, or political valences that are ingrained in such works. I did not set out to find examples of Latino/a texts that presented challenging reading situations to their audiences. Rather, I recognized that certain Latino/a texts share a common trait: a narrative design that challenged the audience, and I have investigated how that trait reflects in the publication and reception of Latino/a literature over the last forty years. In short, I have adopted an inductive approach in my project.
given the change in readership over time. Accordingly, tracing this shifting set of challenges, as well as how audiences approach these challenges, helps us understand the development of Latino/a literature as a “Literature.”

Here it is useful to take stock of the primary readers and consumers of Latino/a literature. Although Latinos invariably comprise a significant quotient of the readership, I pursue this study under the assumption that the large majority of the growing Latino/a literature readership is both English speaking and Anglo. In this connection, I draw on the terms coined by Patrick Colm Hogan to denote how people in groups identify with others. In *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity* (2009) Hogan uses the terms “practical identity” (a person’s set of representational and procedural structures) and “categorial identity” (any group membership that helps to define a person) to differentiate the two forms of identity formation. Again, I make this distinction in order to focus my study, not to create an artificial binary when the reality is clearly not that simple (i.e., Latino/a readers vs. Anglo readers). Besides, I have already declared that I do not wish to pursue an identity-based examination of Latino/a literature. My interests lie, rather, in specific challenges presented by a Latino/a text in light of its audience. It is foolhardy to claim that all readers and audiences engage with any given text in similar ways. Yet we can posit a certain type of reader based on an examination of the text as well as an exploration of how the author-text-reader relationship foregrounds differences of practical and categorial identity. What I aim to show is that reading challenges are not necessarily bound to differences in race or ethnicity; the challenges may arise from some other disparity having to do with either practical or
categorial identity. For example, Richard Rodriguez’s *The Hunger of Memory* (1982) presented a challenge to many Latinos because of his conservative stance on education—thus creating a conflict when it comes to practical identity, or rather to the way a range of practical identities typically intersects with a particular categorial identity.

Since its inception Latino/a literature has faced publication challenges born directly from matters of audience and reader expectation. This fact correlates directly with the types of viable narrative forms available to a Latino/a author wanting to have his or her work published by a major publisher with the distribution power to increase the availability of those works. In essence, with no readership receptive to an array of narrative forms by Latino/a authors, two consequences arose: 1) Latino/a authors were forced to abide by certain narrative conventions foisted on them by publishers, and 2) an open-minded readership needed to be developed over time. Novels that were directly affected by writing constraints include José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho* (1959) and Arturo Islas’s *The Rain God* (1984). Though it is often misidentified as the first Latino/a novel, *Pocho* in many ways stereotypes Mexican Americans in California. On the other hand, *The Rain God* suffered from publishing delay after delay that carried on for years; Islas’s publisher continually rejected his manuscript and pressured him to change certain key aspects of his novel.2

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2 In *Dancing With Ghosts: A Critical Biography of Arturo Islas* (2005) Frederick Luis Aldama chronicles Islas’s difficulties in his attempts to publish what would later become *The Rain God*, a novel that “broke with the formulaic migrant-farmworker or out-of-the-ghetto mold. To this day, Chicano/a authors celebrate Islas’s effort to challenge the mainstream publishers’ stranglehold on ‘ethnic’ fiction” (xiii-xiv). Regarding the publishing obstacles Islas faced, Aldama writes, “But Islas’s gay/straight, El Paso/San Francisco scenes made mainstream editors so uncomfortable that they refused to publish the novel. A mid-1970s New York publishing climate had not caught up with the change in the ethno-sexual climate. By the time Islas did publish a version of “Día [de los muertos],” he had received letters of harsh rejection for
A *New York Times* article by Doreen Carvajal sheds some light on the difficulties Latino/a authors face when trying to have their work published by major publishing houses. Authors Dagoberto Gilb and Demetria Martinez shared their respective experiences in the publishing industry. “My dream had always been to publish in New York,” Gilb noted. “It wasn’t that I thought I was wonderful. I thought I wasn’t any worse than what they were publishing” (Carvajal). Similarly, Martinez remarked on her attempt to publish her novel, *Mother Tongue*: “One editor felt it was too middle-class and the character reflected too much on her inner life. The impression she was giving me was that I didn’t write about someone picking lettuce in the field” (Carvajal). These comments by Gilb and Martinez demonstrate how publishing houses and editors are often prisoners of past success of Latino/a works. In other words, a Latino may write a superb novel about someone picking lettuce, but that does not mean it is the only type of novel a Latino may write.

While Latinos still experience resistance to publishing in all forms and all genres, Latino/a literary history has been fraught with lost texts. Indeed, one of the key issues in the development of a Latino/a body of literature is the lasting posterity of the books themselves. For example, Frances R. Aparicio has noted the difficulties encountered by scholars of Puerto Rican literature:

over a decade. Those that overlooked the same-sex sexuality pointed to an overreliance on Spanish; in fact only a handful of Spanish words appear in this manuscript. Islas transformed ‘Día de los muertos’ into a more ‘sanitized’ *The Rain God* (published in 1984 by a small house, it achieved a word-of-mouth success), but his borderland fictions continued to disconcert. Publishers also refused his second novel, *La Mollie and the King of Tears*. (It was rejected, ironically, by the very house that would publish it posthumously.) Islas made his breakthrough with *Migrant Souls*, a follow-up to *The Rain God* that William Morrow finally published in 1990” (xvi).
Many factors have led to this “absent” state of affairs in criticism. First, the isolation and marginalized status of many U.S. Puerto Rican writers and critics within academia and in the literary market has created not just a metaphorical “invisibility” of literature, but a material, pragmatic one. With only two main publishing houses, Arte Público Press and The Bilingual Press, catering to Latino writers, many publications are out of print and inaccessible for scholars and readers at large. (21)

Aparicio raises an important issue that not only affects Puerto Rican literature but the whole of Latino/a literature as well. Many smaller presses that specialize in Latino/a literature have often served as a springboard for Latino/a authors striving to have their books published by large presses. And certainly the growing numbers of Latinos in the US made the potential reach of Latino/a literature a seemingly-inevitable likelihood. *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* encapsulates the demographic expansion of Latinos in this way:

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1980 there were approximately 14,600,000 Latinos in the country. That number increased by 53 percent in the 1980s to some 22,300,000 by 1990, and the growth continued unabated in the 1990s. By the early years of the twenty-first century, Latinos had become the largest ethnic group in the country, surpassing African Americans. In 2003, the Census Bureau predicted that by 2050 one of every four U.S. citizens would have a Latino ancestor. By 2006, the Latino population had reached 43,168,000. By 2009, it had surpassed 45 million, and more people of Puerto Rican descent lived on the mainland than in Puerto Rico! (1461)

But despite the growing Latino/a demographic in the US, Helena María Viramontes reminds us that “[t]here’s a big difference between having numbers and power. Historically, the small presses have kept our work alive” (Anders). For Richard Rodriguez, Latino/a literature should not be seen as distinct from American literature:

“We Hispanics are not specimens of difference. We act as though we are separate. It’s as though we don’t live in the same country—and that is outrageous. I want to be on an
American shelf” (Anders). Further, Rodriguez has stated that “when he submits material [to a publisher], he wants it to reach the biggest group of readers possible” (Anders). Rodriguez makes a strong argument, but it is an argument that meets with resistance among many Latino/a writers and critics.

María Herrera-Sobek, for instance, considers Chicano/a canon formation and argues for different evaluative measures for ethnic literatures:

The vectors and parameters of minority literatures must of necessity be judged differently because they arise out of a different socio-cultural context, just as English literature emerged out of a particular socio-political context. Therefore, if the English had the right to formulate a canon for their own literature, Third World peoples have the right to formulate their own canon. (“Canon Formation” 217)

In her essay, Herrera-Sobek specifically targets works of Chicano/a literature that have been, as she argues, “marginalized, neglected or disdained by previous literary canons” (218). I agree that the recovery of forgotten works of Latino/a literature is crucial in understanding the totality of such a body of work. But I also maintain that Latino/a literature must be received—by publishers and public alike—whether or not these works make use of the conventions established by its publication history.

But the issue of publication of Latino/a literature is enmeshed with the issue of readership. In *The Hispanic Condition* (1995), Ilan Stavans elucidates the complex history of Latino/a literature and its audience:

Until the late 1980s, English-speaking Latino writers had received little attention from mainstream society. [...] a generation of perfectly fluent English speakers had to emerge for solid novels to break into the mainstream. Our audience was reduced to college professors and students. These works almost never ignited a global debate, or made it into the core curriculum, or enchanted more than a few initiated. (229-30)
Stavans’s point about the reduction of audience to “college professors and students” allows me to emphasize that the early breakout novels by Latino/a authors did have a significant, albeit small audience. But the passion of these particular (academically-oriented) audiences for Latino/a literature was not mirrored in what Stavans identifies as “mainstream” society, what I take to mean as society-at-large. The salient question here, then, is why works of Latino/a literature had small, devoted followings—followings that were unlike the mostly non-existent followings of mainstream readers. Stavans, again, is extremely insightful on this point:

At least for the time being, the audience reading Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* and Victor Villaseñor’s *Rain of Gold* may look as if it is mainly non-Hispanic, a white, genuinely democratic readership ready to give silence a voice, but a passionate, middle-class, English-speaking Latino readership, hidden in the shadows, is also active. The biggest Latino best-sellers are Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger of Memory*; Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, which, by 1993, more than two decades since its original appearance, had sold some 400,000 paperback copies; Oscar Hijuelos’s *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, which sold over 220,000 copies in paperback after it received the Pulitzer Prize; and Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek*, a critical and commercial success when it was published in 1991, which sold more copies than did Hijuelos’s book in a little over twelve months. The effect has been tangible. After decades of silence, José Antonio Villarreal, Ron Arias, and others are being reprinted today by major publishers, their tales of discrimination, drug abuse, and economic hardship slowly reaching the core of the American Dream. Other authors like Junot Díaz, Esmeralda Santiago, and Ernesto Quiñones have also become commodities of major New York houses. Their work is read in college and influences the younger generation. […] In any case, this new generation, already inspired, is happily aspiring to higher goals and preparing itself intellectually in ways that easily surpass its parents’ education, which means that a larger readership is in the making. (*Hispanic Condition* 232-33)

While Stavans concedes a mainly non-Hispanic readership for Latino/a literature, he also makes a compelling case for the rise of a Latino/a readership. That readership, he argues,
is out there. “No doubt, the challenge for writers and editors,” Stavans asserts, “is to find it” (233). Yet it is important to remember that a developing readership feeds off of a developing tradition of writers, and vice versa. Latino/a writers not only read works of Latino/a literature, but mostly they read works that reside outside of this specific tradition. It only makes sense that Latino/a authors would want to emulate more than just the early examples of Latino/a literature.

A study of the Hispanic book market conducted by Sarah Alonso indicates several key factors in how publishers conceive of readers of Hispanic literature, including the projection that the Hispanic market will be much more English-based and will respond less to Spanish-language marketing strategies that as of 2005, were in use (49). Book publishers recognize the purchasing power of Hispanics—$653 billion in 2003, rising to more than one trillion in 2007—thus making it a profitable endeavor to market directly to this group (52). However, Alonso’s study also indicates that the “book publishing industry’s response to the surge in the Hispanic population has been cautious” (56). One significant development, according to Alonso, is the move by major publishing houses to devote an entire division or imprint to Hispanic titles, such as HarperCollins’s imprint, Rayo (56). Yet these imprints have one eye on Spanish-language readers, and as Stavans noted above, publishers are still attempting to understand the readership Latino/a literature invites. Gustavo Arellano, author of syndicated newspaper column ¡Ask a Mexican!, uses humor to encapsulate what large-house publishers do not seem to understand:

A common misperception among publishing houses is that Latinos will buy any libro so long as the author has a Hispanic surname, the cover
features sombreros and the plot involves a talking burro. Sorry, kids: Latino readers don’t want the publishing version of affirmative action—they demand quality. They want crisp writing, fresh stories, writers who can illuminate all the angles of Latino U.S.A. instead of ruminating for the umpteenth time about illegal immigrants and their tough-as-tamales lives. More Sandra Cisneroses, fewer Dirty Girls Social Club rip-offs, por favor.

(98)

Arellano, in no uncertain terms, expresses the possibilities of Latino/a literature by showing how myopic publishers can be.

Along with this troubled genealogy of Latino/a literature, the relationship between narrative form and issues of audience has largely gone unexamined in this tradition. As a result, I contend that early in the publication history of Latino/a fiction, publishers insisted on Latino/a writers foregrounding what were thought to be narrative attributes and thematics endemic to Latinos themselves, while in more recent years publishers have placed more of a premium on immersive storytelling—on the telling of stories that have the power to capture, and retain, the imaginations of the broadest possible readership.

This is not to say that the publishing industry deliberately pressured Latinos to write in a prescribed fashion, as if it were all some vast conspiracy. Over time, however, it became evident that readers were interested in all manner of Latino/a literary production. One look at today’s Latino/a literature shows that it is not just about barrios and magical realism anymore. For example, Michael Nava’s bestselling Henry Rios mysteries focus on a gay public defender in San Francisco, while Eric Garcia has written everything from scifi (The Repossession Mambo [2009]—later adapted for the screen in a film called Repo Men) to a chick-lit spoof (Cassandra French’s Finishing School for Boys [2004]) to a novel about con artists (Matchstick Men [2002]). The very existence of such novels
indicates a greater degree of freedom when it comes to the stories Latinos write and publish. Also, the fact that these types of novels have only been able to appear in print in recent years and not, say, thirty or forty years ago, reflects the changes in the sociopolitical climate. In the 1960s, in the midst of the Chicano Movement, writings by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales and Tomás Rivera clearly spoke to injustices these men witnessed and experienced. Progress and the social advancement of Latinos has been an integral aspect of the broadening of the Latino literary imagination in print. This assertion is at the center of my study, where I explore the negotiation of various narrative devices and strategies leading to the growth of an actual reading audience whose attributes, for Latino/a authors, are more like those of an ideal audience.

Challenging Reading Situations in Latino/a Literature

In my study I foreground four kinds of narrative features—and discuss the ways in which those features pose challenges to readers of Latino literature vis-à-vis its ideal audience. I will provide a brief sketch of those features here, and will expand on each of them momentarily. The first feature is the ontological blurring that occurs when fiction purports to be reality. In Latino/a texts that use this narrative strategy, the author adopts an authorial counterself in pursuit of an understanding of self and as a method of exploring identity consciousness. The second narrative feature I explore is the use of more than one language by Latino/a authors that manifests as either code switching or bilingualism. Language usage is a narrative feature that highlights the difference in cultural representation as well as reading across culture in Latino/a narratives. The third narrative feature I investigate involves the time configuration of storyworlds in graphic
narratives and how that configuration bears on readers’ ability to remember events narrated across different serial installments. Finally, I will also consider paratextual playfulness within more recent works of Latino/a literature—specifically, their engagements with intertexts and footnotes. These four characteristics of Latino/a narrative, examined as challenging reading situations, will not only help us understand the development of Latino/a literature more clearly, but it will allow us to contemplate how the difference between the ideal audience and a willing readership affects the narratives Latino/a authors create.

My critical framework is built upon Latino/a literary history and culture, as well as developments in cognitive narratology. Two narratological concepts in particular lend a foundational structure to my study. The first of these is David Herman’s formulation of how storyworlds are created by authors (i.e., narrative worldmaking) and how readers take the narrated storyworld and reconstruct it in their minds. Herman’s analysis of how storyworlds are constructed and reconstructed provides a more rigorous understanding for what might be called reading comprehension. But, as I will show momentarily, comprehending a rhetorical communication and reconstructing a narrative storyworld are not exactly the same thing. From a common sense viewpoint, storyworld reconstruction requires a highly-engaged imagination in order to apprehend the level of nuance as inscribed in a storyworld. On the other hand, we may recognize reading comprehension as a process of understanding the plot of a narrative. The plot, as an analogue to the chronological sequence of cause and effect that Seymour Chatman calls “story,” can often be recapitulated by a reader without taxing his or her cognitive abilities. Herman
establishes this difference, and specifically the advantages of thinking in terms of a storyworld, in *Story Logic*:

For one thing, the term *storyworld* better captures what might be called the ecology of narrative interpretation. In trying to make sense of a narrative, interpreters attempt to reconstruct not just what happened—who did what to or with whom, for how long, how often and in what order—but also the surrounding context or environment embedding existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are more or less centrally involved. [...] More generally, *storyworld* points to the way interpreters of narrative reconstruct a sequence of states, events, and actions not just additively or incrementally but intergratively or “ecologically”; [...] Narrative understanding requires determining how the actions and events recounted relate to what might have happened in the past, what could be happening (alternatively) in the present, and what may yet happen as a result of what already has come about. The importance of such processing strategies in narrative contexts is part of what motivates my shift from story to *storyworld*. (14)

If, as Herman suggests, narrative storyworlds are mentally-projected, richly-textured environments along dimensions of space and time, then Latino/a narratives are much more than articulations of identity or explorations of themes. The storyworld, as a dynamic construct bound only by the limitations of the author’s imagination, ought to have the freedom to expand in ways its author sees fit. However, the creation of a storyworld is effectively limited by what an audience can recreate in its mind. Herman’s description of what goes into the creation of a storyworld (i.e., an ecology), is a highly-complex process. Further, any narrative device employed by the author that exacerbates the complexity of the storyworld and the reconstruction of its ecology in the audience’s mind will prove to be a significant challenge, if not a downright obstacle.

Thus, one impetus for my study is a reassessment of the concept of the storyworld as defined by Herman. Also, it is important to consider that the storyworld, while inert
when a book is resting upon a shelf in a bookcase, is on a figurative journey that reaches its culmination within the mind of its audience. The storyworld is a product of the process of narrative worldmaking motivated by the author’s imagination. But a storyworld does not reach its fulfillment until it is reconstructed within the mind of its audience. Unlike some theorists who proclaim that a narrative is co-created (by the author’s text and the reader’s reading), I tend to agree with Patrick Colm Hogan who states:

I do balk somewhat at the idea of readers being co-creators—though this view is widely accepted today. Like so much else, it depends on precisely what one means by the terms. On the one hand, it is certainly true that there is some sort of mental representation of the story in the reader’s mind. Since the reader typically has some interest in getting things roughly “right” about the narrative, this mental representation is not simply fantasy. It is, rather, a matter of the reader’s attempts to understand the narrative. We may use “co-creation” to refer to inference and imagination that try to accommodate themselves to some independent facts. If so, then it makes sense to refer to the reader’s mental representation of a narrative as “co-created.” But I would not refer to the narrative itself as co-created. Rather, the narrative itself is the complex of independent facts to which the reader is trying to accommodate his or her inference and imagination. (Conversations on Cognitive Cultural Studies, 7)

Hogan’s acceptance of the plausibility that there is a mental representation of a narrative (or specifically, a storyworld) which is co-created in the reader’s mind signals the point of reading narrative. When a reader discusses being enthralled when reading a particularly engrossing narrative, not only is that reader reconstructing the storyworld, he or she is both an active participant in its creation as well as the primary observer of the mental images he or she is co-creating (according to the textual cues). This process, as a vivid, imagined simulation of a narrative storyworld, can help explain how printed words on a page can evoke real emotions within a reader, even when a reader knows the
narrative is a work of fiction. The reconstructed storyworld is a simulation, but the felt emotions are real.

The second narratological concept concerns the issue of audience or reader. A significant aspect of my study, one that arises from my exploration of storyworlds in post-1960s Latino/a literature, is the idea that narratives can and do present challenges for their readerships. These challenges are linked directly to one’s ability to reconstruct a storyworld. If readers reconstruct or simulate narrative environments when reading, say, a novel, as Herman and Hogan suggest, then anything within the narrative’s design (as a blueprint for simulating the storyworld within a reader’s imagination) that impedes this process of reconstruction is a severe limitation. So, a challenging reading situation is one in which a reader is unable to easily or accurately reconstruct the storyworld according to the narrative blueprint. The narrative construct that facilitates my analysis of such challenging reading situations is that of the ideal audience.

Here I must defend my choice of using “ideal audience” over similar reader constructs that have been developed thus far. Narrative theory has richly theorized the receiving end of the text, from Gerald Prince’s positing of the “narratee,” to Jonathan Culler’s “competent reader,” to Umberto Eco’s “model reader,” to Wolfgang Iser’s influential “implied reader,” to Rabinowitz’s “authorial audience.” This sampling of

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3 David Herman and Frederick Luis Aldama often use the term “blueprint” in reference to the textual design of narrative. If the narrative can be said to encapsulate a storyworld, and if readers use the narrative to reconstruct the storyworld, then referring to the text as a blueprint is an apt choice. Herman states that “interpreters seeking to build a storyworld on the basis of a text will also take into account complexities in the design of the blueprint itself—complexities creating additional layers of mediation in the relationship between narrative and storyworld” (Basic Elements, 107). Aldama tends to use the phrase “narrative blueprint” to denote the same design quality of narrative that Herman identifies (A User’s Guide, 104; Your Brain, 29; Multicultural Comics, 19). My use of the term blueprint comports with both Herman’s and Aldama’s usage as it relates to design aspects of storyworlds.
reader constructs all have their particular nuances and do not suggest exactly the same thing. For instance, Prince’s “narratee” is the oft unseen interlocutor present within the storyworld who is the narrator’s direct addressee. On the other hand, Iser’s “implied reader” has a converse relationship to Wayne C. Booth’s “implied author.” Both concepts share the idea that the text in some way implies something about the entity responsible for and the entity best suited to read the narrative. Though I do not use these terms in my study, I am in favor of how Booth’s and Iser’s concepts signal that these constructs do not correspond with actual living human beings. Rather, they are both projections of the creator and consumer of the narrative that emanate from the inscribed text. In fact, all reader constructs are idealized understandings of whom the target reader or audience is based on textual cues.

Of all reader constructs theorized by narratologists, perhaps Rabinowitz’s “authorial audience” comes closest to how I use “ideal audience.” But Rabinowitz’s term is part of a larger rhetorical theory of narrative, and I dislike the idea of using only one part of his rhetorical model, one later revised by James Phelan, who defines the authorial audience as “[t]he hypothetical, ideal audience for whom the implied author constructs the text and who understands it perfectly. The authorial audience of fiction, unlike the narrative audience […], operates with the tacit knowledge that the characters and events are synthetic constructs rather than real people and historical happenings” (Living to Tell, 212). Phelan himself uses the term “ideal audience” as a means of defining “authorial audience,” but my use of ideal audience differs from Rabinowitz and Phelan’s authorial audience in one crucial way: my conception of the ideal audience is not dependent on
authorial intent. In other words, Phelan’s definition posits that the authorial audience is conceived of by the author when the author constructs the text. My argument is that the text itself calls for a particular ideal audience, one where authorial intent is superfluous. In addition, my use of ideal audience draws upon Hans Robert Jauss’s theorization of what he calls “the horizon of expectation,” which I will elaborate on below. At any rate, without the context of how the rhetorical model situates the term “authorial,” the term “authorial audience” yokes together the author and audience with the text as the implicit link between the two. Though I acknowledge the author as the creator of the narrative, and hence the audience the author has in mind, over time the text may suggest an ideal audience that is not what the author intended when constructing the narrative.

Thus, I am using “ideal audience” as an a posteriori method for understanding the design of a narrative—and particularly narratives written by Latinos. Further, my understanding of this reader construct might be called the “ideally-equipped audience,” meaning an audience ideally equipped (cognitively speaking) to simulate the storyworld within its mind. But this, to me, is an unwieldy term, and I would rather not add yet another entry to the roll call of reader constructs in narrative theory. Nevertheless, my use of ideal audience acts as a lens by which to investigate what types of knowledge and experiences an audience must have at its disposal in order to reconstruct the storyworld. And, as I will show in the chapters that follow, there are all sorts of loci that serve as sites of challenge to actual readerships. We can identify these by understanding how the ideal audience navigates these sites in Latino/a literature, and posit how this process of navigation impacts an actual readership, and in turn, the development of Latino/a
literature post-1960s. In other words, I am interested in identifying the disparity between how the ideal audience is equipped to deal with the challenges presented in the narrative and how the actual audience may fall short. The result may not be that there is a shortcoming in the narrative in question. Instead, it may be that the actual audience is either unwilling or unprepared to encounter the text on its own terms.

Further, while scholars often think of authors along such identity vectors as race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and so on, scholars of narrative tend to stay away from similar ascriptions to readers and audiences. In two notable exceptions, Brian Richardson and Peter Rabinowitz have examined multiple implied audiences and dual audiences, respectively.4 As with previous examinations of reader constructs, rather than attempt to understand how indeterminate numbers of readers (all from different backgrounds) engage with Latino/a literature, I examine the sort of ideal audience evoked by a given Latino/a storyworld, not by the implied author. In other words, though an implied author can have the same types of category designations as biological authors (e.g., Latino, gay, upper class education), the question arises as to whether or not the ideal audience can be similarly categorized. Can an ideal audience have a heterosexual Latino identity? Does the ideal audience have an identity at all? Can the ideal audience be said to have personhood? Does the ideal audience experience emotion? These questions, of course,

4 In “Singular Text, Multiple Implied Readers,” Richardson examines the plausibility that some narratives have multiple implied audiences. Though he does acknowledge that many works of postcolonial literature are written with multiple audiences in mind, Richardson’s analysis is mostly concerned with modernist literature’s capacity to address multiple implied audiences. Similarly, Rabinowitz looks at the possibility of dual implied audiences by using Nella Larsen’s Passing in his essay, “Betraying the Sender: The Rhetoric and Ethics of Fragile Texts.” I differ from both Richardson and Rabinowitz in what they see as some narratives that suggest multiple audiences. The ideal audience, in my configuration, is the audience that can reconstruct the storyworld perfectly.
can constitute their own study entirely. But the point I wish to raise now in this introduction is that readers’ conception of self as expressed through identity influences their ability to reconstruct the storyworlds inscribed in Latino/a narrative. If the ideal audience can be said to have a particular identity, say, a Chicana Feminist identity, the process of ideal storyworld reconstruction can only happen when the actual reader becomes more like a Chicana Feminist.

This is a provocative statement, one that I recognize would be refuted by Chicana Feminists. They might maintain that a man who has reaped the benefits of male privilege cannot possibly know what it is like to be a Chicana. And they would be right. But I am not arguing that reading a narrative that is suited for an ideal audience with the knowledge and experiences of a Chicana is the same as being a Chicana. Rather, I am proposing that when a reader makes the attempt to reconstruct a narrative as a certain ideal audience might, he or she is simulating a storyworld that is designed for a potentially different identity position than he or she normally inhabits. If so, the consequence of such a reading experience may help enrich Suzanne Keen’s theory of narrative empathy. After all, empathy, in its truest sense, means understanding the experiences of an individual distinct from oneself. What better way to achieve such a level of empathy, beyond actually experiencing the same sorts of life events as the person in question?

Immediately, several potential problems come to the fore. First, moving to take on the identity traits of an ideal audience does not always make a reader either more empathetic or better able to empathize with actual persons with those identity traits.
Second, increased empathy as a result of reading a fictional narrative, *prima facie*, seems idealistic and incapable of speaking to a material reality. Third, there is the problem of a reader believing that, having now read a certain work of fiction, his or her understanding of marginalized people is something close to complete. These are all valid concerns, and I will now take up each of them in their turn.

As to the first issue, I am not claiming that a readership will instantly become more like certain groups when reading a given narrative, at least not in a long-term, verifiable way. Individuals accumulate those aspects that yield their sense of identity over the course of a lifetime, and it would be difficult to argue that reading one or several types of narratives would significantly affect those salient traits of a reader’s identity. In effect, my assertion is not that reading narratives or reconstructing storyworlds will make a reader into a different person. Instead, I am suggesting that a willing readership that works to align itself with a narrative’s ideal audience will simulate certain identity traits—a process that may result in a greater sensitivity to issues surrounding these identity traits.

The second issue suggests that simulating an identity position is not the same as experiencing life events related to that identity position. A white male who reads Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) cannot claim to understand what it is like to be an African American man in the pre-Civil Rights era United States. On the other hand, reconstructing the storyworld Wright has created—the one in which Bigger Thomas rages against himself and society—makes these issues a part of the reader even if he or she has never had similar experiences in real life. Because the storyworld is a simulated
ecology in a reader’s imagination (Herman) and is co-constructed in the reader’s mind (Hogan), the storyworld, along with the social, psychological, and other questions raised by it, has now become a part of the reader’s experience. This process at the very least opens up the potential for the reader to experience empathy in a way that he or she may not have before participating in the reconstruction of the storyworld. Further, the fact that a narrative is fiction does not minimize the emotional engagement experienced by a reader. Not only are real emotions evoked and inculcated by fictional narratives; what is more, Hogan goes so far as to contend that “story structures are fundamentally shaped and oriented by our emotion systems”; that “[j]ust as emotion is at the root of the narrative patterns, it underlies the development of recurring properties into unique stories” (*Affective Narratology* 1, 9).

Finally, the possibility that a reader may essentialize a group of people after having read a certain narrative does not undermine the position I am putting forth. Some readers may have an essentialist understanding of certain groups of people even before reading a work of fiction. And ending up with an essentialist notion of “Othered” members of society is always a possibility for some readers. Still, the possibility of essentialism does not diminish the possibility that when a willing readership works to align itself with the ideal audience, a narrative’s potential to have an actual impact on the world is at its greatest.

These two concepts—the storyworld and the ideal audience—both have significant implications when understanding the development of Latino/a literature and its readership, especially the degree to which the ideal audience and the actual readership
may or may not align. Moreover, if an alignment of a willing readership with an ideal audience is a superordinate goal of the narrative, any aspect of the narrative that potentially prevents effective storyworld reconstruction is a challenging reading situation. And it is the challenge, I argue, that is necessary if simplistic understandings of identity are ever to be overcome. The challenging reading situation, much like Viktor Shklovsky’s ostranenie, or enstrangement, allows readers to understand Latino/a literature in a new way. With this in mind, my project uses these aspects of narrative theory to construct a new framework for the study of Latino/a literature, even as it suggests, more broadly, how textual and paratextual features of literary works must be investigated in parallel with their implications for specific, historically situated readerships.

**Overview of Chapters**

Overall, my dissertation chapters will highlight two significant issues. First, I emphasize that narrative experimentation is not a recent phenomenon in Latino/a literature; it is just that early examples of narrative innovation initially experienced a limited reception and many have only recently found an engaged audience. This is to say, early Latino/a authors who wanted to explore the complexities of narrative form were limited both by publishing and marketing expectations and by the lack of a receptive audience. Secondly, I emphasize that the wider reception and attention garnered

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5 Some narratively challenging Latino/a texts such as Isabella Ríos’s *Victuum* (1976) and Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) have suffered from a failed initial reception. But in a larger sense, Latino/a literature has often struggled with the issue of finding an audience. One has only to look Arte Público Press’s “Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Project”—an initiative to bring back into print works of Latino/a literature that have fallen out of print—as an example of the difficulty Latinos have in writing for readers who often have narrow expectations for Latino/a literature.
by more recently published Latino/a texts indicates a development or change in
readership since the year 1972—the year I claim marks the inception of a Latino/a
literature as such, with all of the devices and strategies of narrative worldmaking at its
disposal. In chapter 3, for instance, I show how Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets*,
published in 1967, was constrained by requirements from his publisher in ways that
removed certain narrative challenges. What ultimately marks Latino/a literature’s
maturation is not its successive narrative innovations but rather its creation and education
of a willing readership—fostering what Jorge Luis Borges called “the hospitable
imaginations of the readers” (485). For the purposes of my study, I assert that willing
readers do not opt out of engaging with a storyworld simply because the narrative does
not fit with prior expectations about how the text is likely to be structured or styled—a
prior expectation based, in this case, on the ethnic identity of an author. In short, a willing
readership strives to align neatly with the ideal audience.

At this point it is necessary to introduce Hans Robert Jauss’s notion of the
“horizon of expectations” to my project. In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1977),
Jauss lays out the horizon of expectations as a means of arguing for the fluidity of a text’s
interpretation over the course of time:

A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as
something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its
audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and
covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens
memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific
emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the
“middle and end,” which can then be maintained intact or altered,
reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of reading according to
specific rules of the genre or type of text. (23)
Thus, not only is the text’s historical context of significance, but the audience’s experience plays a crucial role in reading literature as well. Further, if, as Jauss maintains, readers must be within a text’s horizon of expectations in order to be in a position to interpret the text properly, then what I mentioned above regarding the disparity between the ideal audience and the actual audience rests on the horizon of expectations. Put another way, the ideal audience lies well within the horizon of expectations, while the actual audience that is unable or unwilling to meet the text on its own terms lies outside of the horizon of expectations. In *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1977), Jauss further articulates this phenomenon:

> In the analysis of the experience of the reader or the “community of readers” of a given historical period, both sides of the text-reader relation (i.e., effect as the element that is conditioned by the text and reception as the element of concretization of meaning that is conditioned by the addressee) must be distinguished, worked out, and mediated if one wishes to see how expectation and experience mesh and whether an element of new significance emerges. These two horizons are the literary one, the one the work brings with it on the one hand, and that of his everyday world which the reader of a given society brings with him on the other. Because it is derivable from the work itself, the construction of the literary horizon of expectation is less problematic than is that of the social one which, as the context of a historical life-world, is not being thematized. (xxxii)

This issue of reader experience, which manifests as reader expectation, has a direct effect on the Latino/a literary tradition. Jauss maintains that reader experience shapes reader expectation, which is another way of saying that reader experience helps shape a reader’s evaluative measure of narrative aesthetic. If Jauss’s contention is in fact the case, then it is easy to understand why authors of Latino/a literature have had such a difficult time in establishing the freedom to create works that differ in significant ways from audiences whose experience have shaped an understanding of what to expect from US literature.
In order to examine the relationship between the development of Latino/a literature, its ideal audience, and its readership, I will concentrate my analysis on aspects of narrative that have constituted challenging reading situations in this specific textual tradition. Each chapter will consider two works of Latino/a literature in light of concepts from cognitive narratology to explore how storyworld blueprints present notable challenges in a willing readership vis-à-vis an ideal audience. These challenges for readers, as they take shape within the various narratives themselves, are also very much located within specific moments in history. For example, Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) put itself in an indeterminate relationship with historical facts in a way that vexed many readers, including readers sympathetic to the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s. It demonstrates how a text may challenge readers of differing categorial identities through narrative aesthetic choices as well as through the historical political climate.

Chapter 2, “Brown Buffalos and New Mestizas: Consciousness and Audience in Chicano/a Literature” examines two works by Chicano/a authors: Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). This chapter takes a look at these two case studies that purport to seek a new consciousness, narratives that posed as Latino/a autobiographies published during the politically charged 1970s and 1980s (i.e., the Chicano Movement and Chicana Feminist Movement, respectively). Not only is my interest in uncovering how Acosta and Anzaldúa depict consciousness within their narratives, I am also concerned with how these particular works challenge the reader and how these challenges influenced the
development of Latino/a literature over the course of four decades. At the center of these works is the challenging nature of ontologies that arise when fiction poses as reality, particularly in its supposed representation of experience. I argue that *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* broke the mold for Latino/a narratives by creating an authorial counterself who uses history as a foundation for his satirical, self-serving mythopoesis. For a text so timely and relevant to the Chicano Movement, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* was largely ignored as it struggled to find a readership. Conversely, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a text that openly announces its aim to create a difficult reading experience, found an expansive readership, particularly in cultural studies. Like Acosta’s novel, Anzaldúa employs an authorial doppelgänger who takes up the task of achieving a new state of consciousness or identity. However, despite the many similarities between the two works, along with the significant challenges they pose in reading, they each achieved vastly different receptions.

Building on chapter 2, chapter 3, “Translingual Minds, Narrative Encounters: Reading Challenges in Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* and Giannina Braschi’s *Yo-Yo Boing!*” is concerned with how multiple languages create challenging reading situations. I explore not only how the English and Spanish languages (as well as their variants such as Spanglish) are combined in different ways via code-switching and bilingualism, but also how these languages are inextricably linked to race and culture in Latino/a literature. Thomas and Braschi serve as bookends of a thirty-year-period of Puerto Rican narrative. Not only are the two authors separated by three decades, their engagements with race are vastly different (Thomas struggles throughout his narrative to
understand his identity within the context of race and language, while Braschi’s work and personal experience does not reflect the same trepidation with her skin color or language). In addition, the two authors are further distinguished by their socioeconomic class and level of education. Thomas grew up in Spanish Harlem, code-switching his way to a “formal” education in the penitentiary, while Giannina took her PhD in Spanish literature from SUNY, Stony Brook.

The freedoms and constraints surrounding the usage of a code-switching technique of narrative by Thomas and Braschi has not only a direct effect on storyworld design but audience reception and formation of character as well. While Thomas was pressured to self-translate and contextualize his minimal use of Spanish and acquiesce to the insertion of a glossary, Braschi moves fluidly between Spanish, English, and Spanglish with little apparatus to aid a monolingual reader. More generally, Latino/a writers have increasingly opted to include Spanish-language material in their texts. This tendency appears to have a direct relation to Latino/a literature’s changing readership. I hope to demonstrate how Latino/a literature continues to be both constrained and enabled by its need to engage with many practical and categorial identities at any given moment. If actual audiences must rely on experience in order to move within these texts’ horizon of expectations, a part of that experience also includes experience with the Spanish language—experience the ideal audience already has.

Chapter 4, “In Graphic Detail: Challenges of Time and Memory in the Storyworlds of Los Bros Hernandez,” concentrates on serialization and memory to explore how the comics of Gilbert Hernandez and his brother, Jaime Hernandez, have
successfully grown a readership while continually presenting their readers with significant reading challenges. Comics, like so-called minority literatures, have been viewed rather myopically throughout their development. However, unlike minority literatures, comics have had wide latitude in terms of form and content, in part, because of underground and alternative modes of the comics genre. Further, unlike traditionally serialized narratives, Los Bros’s magnum opus *Love and Rockets* places severe demands on the long-term and working memory of readers due to the extravagantly detailed storyworlds. The comics of Los Bros, through the use of specific narrative devices, challenge reader memory in substantial ways that at once draw upon the rich history of Latino/a culture but also show how their works are more than just “Latino/a comics,” urging readers to work in ways that few texts have done.

Chapter 5, “Paratextual Play: Intertextual Interventions in Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo* and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*,” will focus on, among other paratextual features, the use of footnotes in fictional narratives—and how those footnotes function as a means of controverting or supporting the main text. This chapter concerns Junot Díaz’s and Sandra Cisneros’s profligate use of intertexts and paratexts within their novels, and in particular, intertexts whose use and presence extends the thematic architecture of the novel’s storyworld. Here again, a cognitive approach aids my analysis, for intertexts and footnotes require a deft reading protocol that necessitates “leaving” the narrative proper in order to engage with the texture specific intertexts lend to the storyworld. Indeed, a range of post-millennial Latino/a novels have employed techniques associated with postmodern literature, such as the use of intertexts
and the presence of footnotes. In using so many intertexts and footnotes in order to fully
texture their storyworlds, Cisneros and Díaz force the reader to traverse the textual
boundary and move in and out of other storyworlds and space-times, forcing us to ask the
question of whether or not we are at a technologically enabled turning point in our
society that makes searching for an obscure intertext as easy as logging onto the Internet.
Because Jauss claims that reader experience helps broaden their expectation, increasing
the likelihood of entering a text’s horizon of expectations, readers can now gain such
experiences more easily because of the Internet. Still, despite the relative ease of locating
an obscure intertext is much more convenient in 2012 than it was in, say 1972, it does not
mean that doing so is not a challenge. Not only would such a reader need to engage with
the text at hand, he or she would need to read other intertextual material. Thus, an
examination of these authors’ use of intertextuality and paratextuality helps Latino/a
literary scholarship take stock of narrative worldmaking practices by Latino/a authors.

The conclusion, “The Possibilities of Latino/a Literature” highlights the
significance of Latino/a authors and the cognitively-demanding challenges they pose for
their readerships. I suggest how my study provides a model for understanding how
storyworlds invite readers to take up the task of not just understanding Latino/a narratives
but actually participating in the creation of these richly-textured worlds. Of course,
publishers play a vitally important role in allowing Latino/a authors the opportunity to
stretch and tax their readerships in invigorating ways. That is to say, in order for works of
Latino/a or any minority literature to go beyond a localized readership and gain wider
exposure, they must cultivate their own readerships by continually seeking to challenge
publisher and reader expectations. Only then will Latino/a literature find a suitable place within the imaginations of the readers.
Chapter 2—Buffalos and New Mestizas: Consciousness and Audience in Chicano/a Literature

Some of the best known and most widely studied works of Latino/a literature feature narrators who adopt the position of memoirist or (auto)biographer. Pre- and early-twentieth-century Latinos helped establish this strong tradition of documentary writing, from the accounts of fifteenth-century witnesses to colonization and exploration such as Fray Bartolomé de las Casas and Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca; to the memoirs of Juan Seguín, who fought alongside the near-mythic founding fathers of Texas, Sam Houston and Stephen F. Austin; to Puerto Rican-born Arthur A. Schomburg and his tireless efforts to reconcile his Hispanic and African heritages. This drive of Latinos to document experience reached full bloom following WWII with the works of such figures as Bernardo Vega, Ernesto Galarza, Luis Leal, Américo Paredes, César Chavez, Piri Thomas, Richard Rodriguez, Esmeralda Santiago, Luis Alberto Urrea, and Luis J. Rodriguez, among others. And even works of fiction by Latino/a authors in the mid- to late-twentieth century continued to subscribe to a narrative style that emphasized the documentation of experience through the lens of identity in the US. Consider, for example, the acclaimed works of Rudolfo Anaya, Arturo Islas, Sandra Cisneros, and Cristina Garcia. All of these writers employ narrators, fictional or otherwise, that take on the project of filtering their life experiences through the sieve of narrative, often as a means of creating a record which documents particular experiences in an effort to relate
them for a reader’s (or listener’s) consumption. For better or worse, these narratives display a compulsion to document the experientiality of the self as a Latino/a.

In Chicana/o literature, such devotion to first-person narration arises, in part, from an oral tradition and folkloric forms such as the corrido and the testimonio. The fact that Chicano/a life writers structure their narratives around a framework of liminality allows them to cast their experience in terms of being a minority. Further, because these narrators allow readers significant access to their thoughts, feelings, and other intimations, a close examination of these highly personal narrations provides an excellent opportunity for understanding how these kinds of narratives have contributed to the creation of both a corpus of Latino/a works and a readership of Latino/a works. These authors, in designing their narrative blueprints, create storyworlds that are, in fact, carefully constructed representations of consciousness or mind. I am interested in this architecture of consciousness both from the stance of authorial designs and from the perspective of the reader’s reconstruction of those designs—via a process of experiencing literary texts known as Theory of Mind, a cognitive psychological term that Lisa Zunshine describes as “our ability to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires. Thus we engage in mind-reading when we ascribe to a person a certain mental state on the basis of her observable action. [...] Attributing states of mind is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment, incorrect though our attributions frequently are” (6). Zunshine’s definition suggests that

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6 For more on the oral literary of Mexican descended peoples, see Américo Paredes’s seminal study With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero (1958).
Theory of Mind is not simply a meeting of two minds, but also a cognitive process that allows us to make sense of inaccessible minds in a social environment. I believe this issue is crucial to my project, for the bulk of Latino/a literature arises out of the social dynamic within the US, relatively speaking. That is to say, because they have been a group that has struggled for equal treatment and civil rights, Latinos have tended to write about this liminal position within US society.

In considering the relationship between the text and reader, this chapter examines Latino/a texts whose narrators work to narrate their liminal position within society through their representations of consciousness. Specifically, the narrators selected as case studies in this chapter are uniquely positioned because they are authorial counterselves—shadows of the biographical author who are unambiguously enmeshed in the project of writing and documenting their own lives and the lives of others through the very books we hold in our hand when we read texts like Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo and Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. What is key here, however, is that while these texts purport to be examples of reportage, they are actually works of imagination that are only in part based on historical fact.

Within each of these texts, an imagined author is at work, communicating directly to an ideal audience. This reading situation creates a high degree of ambiguity; many readers often wish to conflate the biographical author with the fictional author who

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7 I am using the term “counterself” rather than the more standardized “implied author.” Counterself, in my opinion, reflects more accurately the affinity the inscribed persona has with the biological author. The authorial counterself is a near duplicate, obtrusive version of the biological author.
claims to be the person writing the text we read. Readers must hold a simultaneous
distinction when reading these works, a distinction which on the one hand reminds us that
the works are creative endeavors of fiction, while on the other hand they are non-fiction
from the perspective of the inscribed author. But at times this distinction threatens to
collapse, or it may be that readers see the text as one or the other—but not
simultaneously. Such a reading task does not often occur in the presence of a
heterodiegetic narrator. While it is possible to take a heterodiegetic narrator as a stand in
for the biological author, the ontological blurring that occurs in my case studies is
noticeably absent. In other words, in Acosta’s and Anzaldúa’s texts, the fictionality of the
narrator is often in doubt.

Ostensibly, at the heart of these texts is the compulsion to document experience
and represent a newly formulated state of consciousness or self awareness. However,
these texts are creative works, not sociological documents. Naturally, my argument
foregrounds issues that surround communication to an audience, and specifically, an
audience that seems to reside outside of the fictional author’s sphere of experience—
whether it be the experience of a Chicano in the years leading up to the Chicano
Movement of the late 1960s or the experience of a Tejana Chicana lesbian. Thus, when
the biological author cedes the storytelling to a character within the narrative, albeit a
counterself, the authorial decision is a reminder that the central consciousness within the
text controls the storyworld. The reader receives a re-creation of experience through the
consciousness of the fictional author. Because each text announces itself as a document

8 By “inscribed author,” I mean the protagonist who claims to have written the narrative, not the Boothian
implied author.
by a subjective (and fictional) author, issues related to unreliability, selectivity of narrated events, and the constructedness of the text tend to encroach upon the reader’s attempt to reconstruct the storyworld. The problem is that these two works are so like life writing readers have tended to treat them unproblematically as such.

This chapter takes up these two case studies in order to examine how consciousness is constructed in Latino/a narratives during the politically charged 1970s and 1980s (i.e., the Chicano Movement and Chicana Feminist Movement). Not only is my interest in uncovering how Acosta and Anzaldúa depict consciousness within their narratives, I am concerned with how these particular works challenge the reader and how these challenges may have influenced the development of Latino/a literature over the course of four decades. This, of course, necessitates situating readings not only in terms of the author-text-reader relationship but also as reading the text within the context of history, as Jauss maintains. In fact, one of the trends this chapter reveals is how certain texts were ill-considered based on erroneous expectations of Latino/a literature early in the post-Chicano Movement era. Later, in chapter 5, I demonstrate how more recent considerations of similar-styled works such as Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo* and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* seem to have found an audience that is willing to engage with it without the constraints of stereotypical expectations for what Latino/a literature ought to be.

**Acosta’s Search for the Brown Buffalo**

Oscar “Zeta” Acosta remains an enigmatic figure in Latino/a letters. Despite the concerted recovery of Acosta’s work by Frederick Luis Aldama, Ilan Stavans, Manuel
Luis Martinez, Ramón Saldívar and others, Acosta remains a phantom of the Latino/a imagination—more myth than actual person. Due in large measure to his notorious disappearance in June of 1974 (presumably in Mexico), his two novels *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (along with a handful of short stories) now speak for Acosta in his absence. Perhaps this is a fitting legacy to the self-knighted “Chicano lawyer” who was both a brown Gargantua as well as a countercultural Beat figure with a license to practice law. Indeed, his legacy in Latino/a letters is a curious one. For someone who was a participant in several of the key historical moments of the Chicano Movement, with relationships with the Movement’s central figures—one of the few writers who unabashedly incorporated these landmark events in Chicano history into his storyworlds⁹—his books were largely dismissed by Anglo readers, and perhaps most surprisingly, the Chicano community itself. Little has changed in the intervening forty years.

For instance, in Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez’s 2003 study, *Life in Search of Readers: Reading (in) Chicano/a Literature*, Acosta does not garner a single passing reference despite the study’s concern with the historical trajectory of Chicano/a literature and its interaction with readers. I am indebted to Martín-Rodríguez’s study, for it lays out much of the history surrounding the ways in which Chicano/a literature has evolved a readership over time—thus providing insights that are invaluable to my own study. Indeed, my point is not to unfairly criticize Martín-Rodriguez for not addressing the

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gaping lacunae where Acosta ought to be. That he omits Acosta in his study of how Chicano/a authors and their writings have shaped their readership is instead indicative of the little impact Acosta’s books had on contemporaneous and subsequent audiences. Acosta’s troubled relationship with his readership (or lack thereof) is an intriguing incongruity that I hope to bring to light in this chapter.

Stavans notes that Acosta wrote a novel when he was thirty-three “which no publisher accepted and only one or two acknowledged receiving” (Bandido 7), a manuscript that remains lost. Though he had much to say, Acosta struggled to find an audience throughout his brief career, even after the publication of his two irreverent, ideopolitically-charged novels. Further, if one views Autobiography as a social document of protest, one that speaks or “writes back” to power, Acosta’s books should have been runaway bestsellers. In both novels, Acosta makes a move to unite Chicanos via his narratives. There ought to have been a measure of pride within the Chicano community regarding Acosta’s efforts, as there was with the exaltation of Rudolfo “Corky” Gonzales’s epic poem “Yo Soy Joaquín.”10 While Gonzales’s poem was printed at a furious rate to keep up with a grassroots distribution and was performed widely in Luis Valdez’s Teatro Campesino, Acosta’s book languished, and his notoriety, according to Stavans, is nonexistent both in Mexico and the US (Bandido 10-11). Acosta, Stavans posits, “opted for literature as a redeeming act, the written word as a way of knowledge and salvation” (11). Undaunted by publishing rejects and a failed political campaign for

10 The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature claims that “Yo Soy Joaquín” “came to define the Movement; Latino historians consider it a Chicano epic. In the 1970s, I Am Joaquin sold over 100,000 copies, becoming the first Chicano best seller. While the book’s importance was mainly political, it also has influenced some contemporary writers” (787).
sheriff of Los Angeles County, Acosta was irreverent and defiant of the power structure that had taken so much from his people. As he states near the end of *Brown Buffalo*:

Ladies and gentleman…my name is Oscar Acosta. My father is an Indian from the mountains of Durango. Although I cannot speak his language…you see, Spanish is the language of our conquerors. English is the language of our conquerors….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. They destroyed our gods and made us bow down to a dead man who’s been strung up for 2000 years….Now what we need is, first to give ourselves a new name. We need a new identity. A name and a language all our own….So I propose that we call ourselves…what’s this you don’t what me to attack our own religion? Well, all right…I propose we call ourselves the Brown Buffalo people….No, it’s not an Indian name, for Christ sake…don’t you get it? The buffalo, see? 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…. (198)

This passage, an imagined speech of Oscar’s call to political action and solidarity, is what might be called in political parlance “red meat”—rhetoric designed to fuel the motivations and subsequent actions of a political base. Further, the speech is the culmination of Oscar’s meanderings within the narrative, one that gives him a purpose in life: “I merely want to do what is right,” he states (198). On face value, then, Acosta’s books seemed destined to be as widely distributed and read as Gonzales’s poem amongst Chicanos, if no one else. Instead, *Autobiography* reached publishing purgatory surprisingly fast, falling out of print by the late-1970s.

With a motivated and mobile Chicano base, fueled by unfair labor practices, discrimination, and the injustice of serving their country through military action only to

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11 Henceforth, I will designate the biological author as Acosta and the fictional counterself of the biological author as Oscar.
be treated as less than a citizen at home, the historical situation was primed to establish Acosta’s works as utter triumphs to the Chicano spirit and imagination. In fact, because of its overt political message and support of the Brown Power movement, *Autobiography* was arguably better positioned for success than another Chicano novel also published in 1972: Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*. However, the comparative reception of the two works is striking. Anaya’s novel is unequivocally proclaimed as the Chicano masterpiece that proved herald to the so-called Chicano Renaissance. It has never been out of print, and as of 2012 *Bless Me, Ultima* holds the distinction as perhaps the most widely-taught Chicano work in high schools and universities across the United States.

My purpose here is not to compare the inherent value of the two works, nor am I claiming that one is somehow superior or better suited to represent Chicano experience than the other. Rather, placing Anaya’s novel in historical context alongside Acosta’s helps us understand the sorts of challenges surrounding and raised by these works, and specifically, *Autobiography*. Though history is often disputed depending on who is recounting it, we can agree on several points regarding the year 1972. First, the year serves as a sort of midway point for the Vietnam War, four years after the turning point of the Tet Offensive in 1968 and three years prior to the end of the war. The Watergate scandal and the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Summer Olympics in Munich also mark 1972 with turbulence on both a national and global scale.12 Historian Ramón A. Gutiérrez recalls the sociopolitical climate surrounding 1972 this way:

12 “Nineteen seventy-two. Dare we forget?” Ramón A. Gutiérrez asks. “Thirty years earlier, in 1942,” he reflects, “Mexicans in the United States were still trying to prove their American identity, despite their citizenship. More than thirty years later, in 2007, Mexicans in the United States still struggle for their
Memory teaches the ethnic Mexican population in the United States that it has been in times of war that our lives, our liberty, and our property have been robbed as part of grand geopolitical power grabs. In these times our national identity has served as a communal tie of solidarity and opposition. At the end of the U.S.-Mexico War in 1848, Tejanos, Californios, and Nuevo Mexicanos united as Mexicanos to resist the capricious use of force that had despoiled them of their land, water, livelihood, and human dignity. During World War II, Mexicans marched into the fields of battle to prove their fealty to the United States as Americans. As citizen soldiers they expected that when they returned home, they too would enjoy the fullest benefits of equality. It was not to be. Despite the rhetoric of the American dream, which promised upward mobility, and despite the GI Bill, veterans were still relegated to segregated balconies at movie houses, still denied beds in white-owned hotels, still barred from eating in many restaurants or swimming in public pools during the heat of summer. Every day they were the victims of arbitrary state violence through police harassment and judicial neglect, if not contempt. ("Reflections" 188)

Gutiérrez’s recollection of 1972 is very much in the spirit of Oscar’s call to action at the end of Autobiography: “When I have the one million Brown Buffalos on my side,” he states, “I will present the demands for a new nation to both the U.S. Government and the United Nations…and then I’ll split and write the book” (198). Yet Acosta’s book, despite its pursuit of a civil rights-inflected sense of self-worth, fell by the wayside among readers, while Bless Me, Ultima, Anaya’s Bildungsroman that yearns for the preservation of curandismo and the accumulation of ancestral knowledge, rocketed to the top of Chicano/a letters—a position it has yet to relinquish. For reasons that no scholar has yet attempted to discern, a seemingly ready-made audience comprised of real individuals who were primed to engage with Autobiography failed to respond as Acosta’s ideal audience, and instead turned to Anaya’s folkloric coming-of-age story with zeal. Acosta’s text targets a radical, like-minded audience, while Anaya’s text invites a

rights and dispute those who would declare us felons for having crossed the border when indeed the border has long ago crossed us” ("Reflections” 189).
conservative readership that senses the slipping away of tradition and years to recoup it through nostalgic reminiscence. I argue that this apparent disjunction in audience reception has less to do with the historical sociopolitical moment than it does with the narrative design of Acosta’s novel, his representation of the inner workings of Oscar’s mind, and further, Oscar’s representation of the minds of those with whom he interacts. The constellation of these minds accounts for Oscar’s ascendance to the role of the Brown Buffalo, or more specifically, the identity of Buffalo Z. Brown.

**Formal Issues in Brown Buffalo**

*Autobiography* is one of the first Latino/a narratives to break with a linear narrative structure in a sustained way. Unlike earlier examples of ethnic American autobiographies such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) by Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) by Piri Thomas, *A Wake in Ybor City* (1963) by José Yglesias, and *Barrio Boy* (1971) by Ernesto Galarza that employ an account of the protagonist’s life from early childhood to young adult, *Autobiography* eschews linear temporality. If, as Frederick Luis Aldama notes, “[t]o be ‘recognized,’ the racial and ethnic Other has had to convince his or her audience of the reality of his or her experience and, thus, adhere to narrating codes that do not call attention to the gap between mimesis and reality” (*Postethnic Narrative Criticism* 64), it is unsurprising that such autobiographies seek to chronicle the protagonist’s life-as-experienced because it

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13 To be clear, I am not arguing that *Bless Me, Ultima* and *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* seek the same readership. They clearly do not. What I am arguing is that the readership each texts seeks was available in 1972. But for reasons that remain unknown, *Autobiography* essentially went unnoticed. Acosta’s novel seems to be an example of the Zen koan: If a tree falls in the woods and no one is around, does it make a sound? In this case, if there is no readership for *Autobiography*, does it make a sound? The evidence suggests that whatever sound *Autobiography* did make was slight at best.
has become a part of a larger tradition in Latino/a literature that chronicles the autobiographer’s life in chronological order, from childhood to adulthood. Thus, through the temporal instabilities presented in Acosta’s text, *Autobiography* breaks with this tradition, along with many other characteristics of this text that serve to distinguish it from other ethnic autobiographies, as Aldama has forcefully noted.

But I reiterate here that, despite its title and use of the autobiographical narrative trope, *Autobiography* is a work of fiction. Aldama makes this point quite clearly in *Postethnic Narrative Criticism* (2003), mostly by distinguishing the biological Acosta from the character Acosta that is depicted within the storyworld and by identifying “Acosta’s use of magicorealism to reform the genre of autobiography” (64). This subversion of the autobiographical genre and its conventions is a risk that Acosta takes, one whose potential payoff is based entirely in the reader’s ability to recognize the conventions of autobiography, and more importantly, to recognize that Acosta is manipulating these conventions to his own narrative ends in an ironic way. I will return to the implications of a reader’s inability to recognize *Autobiography* as an ironic work of fiction. But first, I wish to lay out the salient formal features of Acosta’s text.

Rather than begin his “autobiography” with his childhood as is conventional of autobiographies, Oscar delays revealing this moment in his life until the second paragraph of Chapter 2: “Although I was born in El Paso, Texas, I am actually a small town kid” (71). Instead, he begins his narrative on July 1, 1967, gazing at his naked body in the mirror, establishing his body as a central image in the rest of his autobiography.
The opening passage presents Oscar in a vulnerable position—not one of childhood but rather of self-doubt and depression.

At first it appears that Oscar is confiding in someone as he inventories his body:

“I should lay off those Snicker bars, those liverwurst sandwiches with gobs of mayonnaise and those Goddamned caramel sundaes. But look, if I suck it in just a wee bit more, push that bellybutton up against the back; can you see what will surely come to pass if you but rid yourself of this extra flesh?” (11). The first part of the second sentence quoted here seems to invite the reader to match Oscar’s gaze—to see what he sees. Yet, as the second part of the sentence reveals, Oscar is rebuking himself for his poor body image and how he has the power to change it if he is only motivated enough to do so. Already in this opening, Oscar is signaling multiple audiences. When he narrates in first-person his observations are directed to an unacknowledged narratee, as in the passage, “Every morning of my life I have seen that brown belly from every angle. It has not changed that I can remember. I was always a fat kid” (11), Oscar is in traditional autobiographical mode. But as I have already indicated, there are moments when at least two separate audiences are acknowledged. The first of these is the reader of his autobiography, whom Oscar often calls upon to consider certain actions or consequences in his own life. These readers are indicated in invitations such as “See that man with the insignificant eyes drawn back, lips thinned down tight?” (12). This question is not simply rhetorical; Oscar is, I argue, addressing the reader of his autobiography. There also come moments when Oscar addresses himself. When he says, “Just think of all the broads you’ll get if you trim down to a comfortable 200” (11), he is clearly talking to himself.
Folk psychology tends to ascribe mental defect to individuals who have a penchant for talking to themselves. Though I do not argue that Oscar suffers from mental illness, he is highly aware of his own consciousness and activity of mind. Further, as Autobiography progresses, the reader discovers that Oscar is prone to imagining (or hallucinating) certain figures in his daily routine. There is a blurring of what he considers the real world and the world in his mind, motivated by frequent alcohol and drug abuse. The consistent appearance of Oscar’s “Jewish shrink” Dr. Serbin, mostly as a hallucination, reinforces Oscar’s mental instabilities, highlighting his struggle to find a normative center within his world. Moreover, Oscar is not only highly aware of his own mental functioning, he consistently attempts to discern what often prove to be the inscrutable minds of the people in his life.

In one poignant moment, Oscar recounts the powerful attraction he once had for a girl named Jane Addison in his elementary class. Jane is disturbed to find that Oscar has announced his feelings for her by carving her initials into the knuckles of his left hand. When he proudly displays his hand with the letters “J-A” scrawled into his flesh, Jane retreats into silence. “She squinted, gave me a queer look and just shook her head over and over again as she walked away in a daze,” he laments (90). Oscar is incapable of meeting people, and women especially, on their own terms. Immediately after describing Jane’s response to his “tattoo,” Oscar confesses, “Even at that age, I knew that women never tell you what they really think of you” (90). He is constantly frustrated by women who, perhaps out of embarrassment, are not completely up front and honest with him. His formative experiences with women dictate much of his distrust of women in his later
years, something that has caused many readers and critics to rail against this apparent misogyny or, at the least, Oscar’s less-than-admirable attitude towards women.

For example, Marci L. Carrasquillo has highlighted Acosta’s problematic attempt at self-actualization, stating that his “significant epiphany about the nature and complexity of identity does not lead Acosta to an understanding of the gendered aspects of his ‘choice’” (78). Here Carrasquillo cites Oscar’s revelation that he is “a Chicano by ancestry and a Brown Buffalo by choice” (Autobiography 199). In her essay, Carrasquillo argues that Acosta does not go far enough in constructing “the larger, radical identity project” (80) his protagonist works to achieve, indeed that Acosta fails by not overtly breaking from the grip of patriarchy both in Chicano culture and more generally in white male America. While Carrasquillo is correct in targeting the male-as-master-of-his-own-destiny sentiment in Autobiography, I argue that this is not necessarily as severe a短coming as Carrasquillo makes it out to be for at least several reasons. First, if Autobiography is seen as a social document and historical artifact written by someone with immediate dealings with the Chicano and Brown Power Movements, then Oscar’s attitude towards women is historically accurate, albeit problematic. But Autobiography is not a social document; it is a work of fiction. Indeed, this issue highlights Aldama’s contention that Acosta uses a willful blend of realist and non-realist narrative techniques by employing “jumps in time and space, [...] distinguishing between author and narrator who is ‘designing’ his past as a story that is governed by fictive, rather than factually based, mimetic codes” (Postethnic Narrative Criticism 66). When Carrasquillo complains that Acosta “does not mitigate the larger problem of gender in his narratives”
(80), she unfortunately foists a retrograde constraint on *Autobiography* that ultimately fails to enlighten our understanding of Acosta’s novel. Put another way, simply because Acosta (or any author) does not take his narrative in one direction or another does not affirm that the larger project (in this case, identity formation) is undermined; it does not uphold the notion that the project is fatally flawed. Instead of arriving at an interpretation of the novel that takes Oscar for the limited, ironic character that he is, Carrasquillo concentrates on what he lacks. Acosta, who has demonstrated his ability to stretch beyond the bounds of realism even within a genre form (autobiography) that has a serious affinity to realism, could easily have recast Oscar as a valiant defender of the emergent rise of feminism in the Chicano community (a fact that feminist theorists would undoubtedly have trouble with in its own right [i.e., a male champion of feminism] especially with Gloria Anzaldúa just around the figurative corner). But instead, Acosta ironizes Oscar’s experiences through moments of self-deprecation, depictions of hallucinatory experiences, and delusions of grandeur.

On the other hand, Carrasquillo’s complaint with Acosta (that he did not go far enough to undermine entrenched patriarchy) speaks to my larger point about challenging reading situations. For readers with an affinity for feminist thinking, or even those who simply advocate for a gentler treatment in Acosta’s text of the equality and respect that should be afforded to all peoples regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, and so on, Oscar is an inscribed author with suspect norms and values. Yet this characteristic (some would say flaw) is complicated by moments in the text when he becomes a sympathetic figure, as for example, when he recalls his humiliation at the hands of Junior Ellis. The ideal
audience recognizes the imperfection of Oscar’s character, noticing that tongue is often squarely in cheek when Oscar narrates. I contend that Acosta renders Oscar in exactly this fashion in order to demonstrate the complexity of the self to begin with. In other words, one of the strengths of Autobiography is its ability to allow the reader within the space of Oscar’s mind, troubled though it may be. The result is the ever present ebb and flow of the potential for empathy for Oscar—there is the urge to help Oscar, while at the same time we recoil from his attitudes and treatment of women and race.

When Aldama proclaims that reading Autobiography “re-form[s] its reader’s expectations by providing a multidimensional self-narration that superimposes, combines, and critically amplifies traditionally segregated genres and repressive ideological structures” (Postethnic Narrative Criticism 75), he indicates the response of an ideal audience—one that is willing and able to recognize the fictional nature of the narrative as well as the collision of conflicting emotions at work when one reads this difficult text, not a reader who is content with highlighting what Acosta might have done otherwise to satisfy a different, say, feminist readership. The challenge here is to have one type of actual reader, perhaps a feminist, willingly work to step into the position of Acosta’s ideal audience. This is not to say that the ideal audience is invested in the problematic norms and values that Oscar embraces. Instead, Oscar’s imperfection reflects not only upon Latinos but also upon all of the US as well. Rather than outlining the feminist limitations in Acosta’s work, it is far more productive to posit why these omissions exist in the text to begin with. Ultimately, Autobiography is as limited as it is groundbreaking, and it challenges readers to recognize this.
Acosta’s books have been examined from a multitude of approaches: identity, political, counterculture, and so on. What is interesting is Acosta’s (and later, Anzaldúa’s) desire to achieve a new consciousness through a singular force of will. I examine Anzaldúa’s exploration of the New Mestiza consciousness at length in the second half of this chapter, but for now I will focus on *Autobiography*, for Oscar, too, longs to reach a higher state of understanding of both himself and his relation to his environment (i.e., the external). In addition, Oscar’s proclamation of assuming this higher state of being, what he calls the Brown Buffalo, predates Anzaldúa’s New Mestiza by at least a decade, though most likely it is closer to twenty years if we consider that Acosta’s experiences in the 1960s played an integral part in his adoption of this worldview. In essence, Oscar takes readers with him on a mental road trip as he escapes the constraints of the world that seek to hold him back, ultimately leading his reader to the Brown Buffalo promised land. This fact makes the novel’s open ending all the more impressive and, at the least, better understood. Oscar's is not a literal action that changes the world. Rather, the movement toward an articulated resistance to these hegemonic forces (e.g., capitalism, religion, an oppressive majority) is a manifestation of his mind. By experiencing his visions along with him throughout the text, the reader, too, is invited to enter into Oscar’s group and become a Brown Buffalo Person as well. Here again Oscar’s attainment of an enlightened consciousness prefigures Anzaldúa’s New Mestiza in that it is something which arises from within and is maintained within the

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14 I am indebted to Samuel Saldivar III for raising the possibility that the New Mestiza already had a precursor in the Brown Buffalo.
mind. Acosta’s and Anzaldúa’s argument, in turn, is that the power of their internalized and newly adopted consciousness has the force of will to have a palpable effect on real-world structures of oppression and constraint. What is worth examination is how differently these two texts, so similar in their desire for a new consciousness, have been received by their actual audiences.

Indeed, much of ethnic literature and ethnic studies is concerned with the matter of consciousness. Mostly, however, consciousness as it appears in ethnic studies is often synonymous with self-consciousness, that is, a personal awareness of one’s place in the world. As Latinos (and Chicanos in particular) occupied a marginalized space for most of the twentieth century, their hyperawareness of their position relative to the world, and especially the US, consciousness was always central to their ideological and political discourse. Interestingly, in 1972, the same year Acosta published *Autobiography*, George Rivera, Jr. published an article titled “Nosotros Venceremos: Chicano Consciousness and Change Strategies.” An important move, according to Rivera, was that Anglo scholars on Mexican American life were being replaced by young Chicano scholars. “Things are as they should be,” he wrote. “Chicanos are speaking for themselves” (57). Rivera expertly laid out the Chicano history in the US and noted the concept of the Chicano consciousness by invoking none other than W. E. B. Du Bois, for whom the notion of consciousness was centrally important. “Why is there no Mexican American W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, or James Baldwin?” Rivera wonders, as he proceeds to answer

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15 Perhaps no other scholarly work serves as the headwaters of this trend than W. E. B. Du Bois’s highly influential text, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Taking Du Bois’s lead, subsequent ethnic writers and scholars have worked to frame their own existentialism and subjectivity in terms of consciousness.
his own ostensibly rhetorical question: “Because Chicanos had been systematically
deprived of higher education. However, limited but increasing opportunities in education
are now giving rise to a Chicano consciousness that is being felt throughout the
Southwest” (57). While Rivera never actually defines what he and others mean by
Chicano consciousness (instead he posits strategies for changing the Chicano
consciousness), based on context, inference, and the invocation of Du Bois, we can take
him to be using consciousness in the same way Du Bois uses the term. In defining
double consciousness as it applies to African Americans, Du Bois states, “It is a peculiar
sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through
the eyes of others” (11). Thus, Chicano consciousness can be understood as looking at
one’s (Chicano) self through the eyes of non-Chicanos.

It is imperative that the notion of a Chicano consciousness be made as transparent
and concrete as possible, for all too often in ethnic studies forms of minority
consciousness tend to become nebulous and abstract. Chicano consciousness is akin to
an acute awareness of one’s self as a Chicano/a. Such an understanding is fraught with
the difficulty of defining what it means to be a Chicano/a, which foregrounds the pursuit
of identity formation. Thus, when Rivera decries the lack of writers and thinkers like Du
Bois, Ellison, and Baldwin in the Chicano/a community, it appears quite ironic in
retrospect that one such writer and thinker for Chicanos was already in his midst. In
Acosta, Rivera had a Chicano who was speaking for himself in pursuit of clarifying the
somewhat vague notion of a Chicano consciousness. Though the word consciousness
never appears in Autobiography in the Du Boisian sense, Oscar’s realization of his
Chicano identity—what Juan Bruce-Novoa describes as “a new stage in Chicano literature, a new consciousness” (qtd. in Aldama, Postethnic Narrative Criticism 65)—reaches its apex in the final chapter of Autobiography, with an invitation to the reader to experience what Oscar calls a “bad trip.” In what is an effective metaphor for Oscar’s mental frustration in placing himself within an identity category that makes sense to him, he explains: “There isn’t much sense in trying to explain what a ‘bad trip’ is. You simply lose your marbles. You go crazy. There is no bottom, no top. The devil sits on your head and warns you of your commitment. You see for the first time what the bottomless pit is all about. And you hang on for dear life” (Autobiography 183). As Oscar has made his entire narrative precisely about explaining the bad trip that has been his life, in a sense he is highlighting the futility of his project. Throughout the entire book the reader has been mentally engaged with Oscar—sitting with him as he resists losing his virginity in the brothel for as long as he can, gazing with him as he describes his vomit art in what might be called a gastronomic ekphrasis, listening to the ubiquitous Procol Harum with him as he recounts the hallucinatory-styled lyrics of their song “Whiter Shade of Pale.” Oscar himself is reminiscent of the Emersonian Transparent Eyeball as Autobiography draws to a close: “I have no desire to be a politician. I don’t want to lead anyone. I have no practical ego. I am not ambitious. I merely want to do what is right” (198). It is clear that he believes that he has achieved something akin to a Chicano consciousness.

In the case of Acosta’s book and his constructed, fictional counterself, the fictional mind he creates challenged real minds of readers, both in the time near Autobiography’s publication in 1972 and as recently as 2010 as well, if we consider
Carrasquillo’s critique of what she perceives to be a limitation or undermining of Acosta’s book. Contemporaneous readers who longed for a Chicano voice to unite Chicanos and infuse the community with pride, as Rivera did, were not swayed by Acosta’s narrative creation depicting his real-life struggles with achieving a sustainable identity, despite Oscar’s self-aggrandizing statement: “[o]nce in every century there comes a man who is chosen to speak for his people. Moses, Mao and Martin are examples. Who’s to say that I am not such a man? In this day and age the man for all seasons needs many voices. […] Perhaps that is why I’ve been taught so many trades. Who will deny that I am unique?” (198). No one will deny that Oscar is unique, for it is this uniqueness that often affronts readers of *Autobiography*.

Ultimately, Acosta’s manipulation of the autobiography genre works when recognized as such. Readers, then and now, have often engaged with *Autobiography* along the same lines as they have other works of actual autobiography. The back cover of the 1989 Vintage edition of *Autobiography* prominently displays a quotation from a *Publishers Weekly* review that describes Acosta’s book as “A Chicano *Manchild in the Promised Land*.” In fact, *Autobiography* has more in common with Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) than it does Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965). And this commonality rests at the level of narrative discourse, its use of biographical material that is worked upon by the imagination to yield a narrative marked by what Dorrit Cohn terms signposts of
fictionality. And the most glaring sign that Acosta’s text is a work of fiction is that his book purports to be the autobiography of a Brown Buffalo rather than the autobiography of Acosta. The Brown Buffalo is a way for Oscar to situate himself within society—an effort to reunite with the Chicano people from whom he found himself estranged, mostly by his own making.

In reality, despite Oscar’s narrative attempt at reunification with his people, with the exception of a few luminaries such as Juan Bruce-Novoa and Rolando Hinojosa Smith, who were among the first to laud Acosta’s efforts, Chicanos have generally disregarded Acosta’s writings. Despite his passion for Chicanos and Chicano/a causes, Acosta was never able to find the readership he so desired. In this connection, Ilan Stavans recounts two separate conversations he had with Sandra Cisneros and Rudolfo Anaya regarding Acosta’s writings. What Stavans recounts is a painful indictment of the pervasive disregard for Acosta’s narratives:

[Cisneros] was washing her hair when I asked her about Zeta. “What am I going to tell you, Ilan? Tu sabes, I really have nothing to say. I have his books, sure. But I’ve never read them, not entirely. His writings never spoke to me. I never found anything to identify with in them.” I inquired about Zeta’s feminine fetishism. “I don’t know,” she replied. “That’s an ongoing problem in Chicano letters. I guess I would only read him if I was in jail!” (Bandido 116)

16 In her influential article “Signposts of Fictionality: A Narratological Perspective,” Cohn argues that it is the level of narrative discourse that demarcates history from fiction: “These exceptions to the onomastic distinction between narrator and author, no less than this distinction itself, prove the rule: homodiegetic fiction is determined by the presence of an imaginary speaker incarnated as a character within the fictional world. This ‘embodied self,’ as Stanzel calls it (1984: 90), is brought to life by a discourse that mimics the language of a real speaker telling of his past experiences. It is therefore easy to visualize the structure of a fictional autobiography as an imaginary discourse directly quoted by the author, implicitly preceded by an inquit-phrase” (794).
That Cisneros, an ambassador for Chicana Feminism, would so nonchalantly disregard Acosta’s writing as not having “anything to identify with in them” despite her admission of not having carefully read Acosta’s texts is stunning. Nevertheless, Cisneros’s remarks reflect in miniature the Chicano community’s general reception to Acosta’s work. But it is Rudolfo Anaya’s comments to Stavans that best encapsulate Acosta’s inability to find a zealous readership to align with his ideal audience. Stavans writes:

Anaya, another classic Chicano writer, never met [Acosta]. “I read his work when it first came out,” he writes in his correspondence, “and even taught it in my Chicano literature classes. The students like The Revolt of the Cockroach People, but had a harder time with his other book [Autobiography] even though it spoke to the problem of lost identity. Zeta put a different slant, a zing, to our literature, and the tragedy of his disappearance is that it cut short his development. He had a lot to share, and it was cut short.” (Bandido 116).

Unlike Cisneros, Anaya at least recognized that Acosta had “put a different slant” on Chicano/a literature. He intuited that Acosta was on a trajectory to continue his development as a writer and saw in his work something of value. It seems, in the end, these two writers, Anaya and Acosta, who published two vastly different but equally important novels in 1972, recognized Autobiography as having something significant to say while failing to find the readership it so desperately sought.

**Borderlands and Its Critics**

The success and influence of Gloria Anzaldúa’s 1987 book Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza cannot be overstated. Its minority-within-minority viewpoint was viewed as a watershed moment, particularly for women’s studies and the rising Chicana Feminist movement. Additionally, Anzaldúa interjected the traditionally conservative and male-dominated Chicano Movement with the voice of the empowered
and highly self-aware lesbian. The result was a book that was met with overwhelming praise, its metaphor of the borderland being its most transportable concept.\textsuperscript{17} Entering into its third printing in 2007, \textit{Borderlands} has personally impacted readers in ways not often seen in academia. For instance, María Herrera-Sobek, writing in a 2006 article in \textit{PMLA}, speaks of Anzaldúa and her work with what can only be described as reverence, seeing her not only as a champion for the various liminal positions from which she spoke but also as someone with martyr-like qualities:

\begin{quote}
The price Anzaldúa paid for her political stance was dear. Her writing advocating a new morality and a new set of ethical standards for Chicanos/as extracted a heavy toll in feelings of guilt, betrayal, inadequacy, ostracism, rejection, and more. To take up arms against popular opinion, established morality, and tradition is not easy. To veer away from the traditional path of obedience, loyalty, purity, self—abnegation, and self-effacement the average Chicana is taught in her formative years is to unleash tornado-like forces of self-flagellation and bitter invectives from relatives, friends, and society. The mere attempt at writing—an act of self-disclosure—becomes a dangerous psychological and political undertaking. (269)
\end{quote}

Here Herrera-Sobek notes the liberating effects as well as the dangers of writing against power. She also conflates Anzaldúa’s book with her life, seeing them as irrevocably linked. Yet despite the dangers of Anzaldúa’s “psychological and political undertaking,” her work met with more acclaim than vitriol. If there were indeed negative consequences which personally affected Anzaldúa as a result of \textit{Borderlands}, one could scarcely recognize this based on how widely the book and its message have been embraced.

\textsuperscript{17} Anzaldúa’s book helped give rise to borderland theory as a widespread approach to cultural and literary studies. But what is more, her notion of the borderland has, ironically, migrated from the highly localized and actual geographic border that separates Texas from Mexico to geographic borders from China to Poland and beyond. When adopted as a metaphor for all physical and metaphysical sites—a violent site where binaries and oppositions meet—Anzaldúa’s work has proven to be both highly popular and surprisingly durable.
Herrera-Sobek’s acute veneration of Anzaldúa and her work (“We are grateful to the Magic Valley for giving magic words to Anzaldúa; magic words that continue to live and inspire us in her poetry and prose” [271]) is not an exception, but rather tends to represent the majority assessment of *Borderlands* and its author. For example, María Lugones begins her interpretive essay of *Borderlands* by citing her personal investment in *Borderlands*, and seemingly, the book’s investment in Lugones when she writes:

> *Borderlands* has been a very important text for me. I have found company in it. *Desde el primer momento pensé que éramos hermanas en pensamiento.*¹⁸ I have carried Anzaldúa’s insights and metaphors with me for several years in my daily ruminations and in my daily exercise of triple vision. I could say that I have lost perspective on this thought text in making it mine, or I could say that I have gained perspective in finding borderdwelling friendship in it. I find her thinking intertwined with my own. (31)

Suffice it to say that reactions such as Herrera-Sobek’s and Lugones’s have become a sort of commonplace (or at least default position) whenever discussions of *Borderlands* arise. Readers often speak of *Borderlands* with a personal conviction and readily admit the book’s influence on their lives. This fact has created a challenging situation in its own right. It often proves difficult to critique or criticize something that is so cherished by so many people because it is sometimes deemed as a personal challenge or affront to the author. Moreover, a male critic must often tread lightly when engaging with a feminist text, as Ramón Saldívar does in *Chicano Narrative* when he claims “a self-conscious analysis of our own interpretive methods becomes even more important for the male critic as he tries to read texts by women authors” (173). Though male critics may take heed of Saldívar’s recommendation, male critics must likewise be allowed to critique

¹⁸ “From the first moment, I sensed that we were sisters in thought.”
feminist texts. Indeed, a text such as *Borderlands* exists as an overt challenge to male patriarchy and dominant forms of discourse. It is only natural that Anzaldúa herself would welcome the criticism and that her text would be all the stronger for it.

However, readers have placed such high personal stakes in Anzaldúa’s book that any harsh criticism of her writings is often met with a robust defense. Thus, when Frederick Luis Aldama proclaimed in the introduction to his book *A User’s Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderlands Fiction* (2009) that “authors who rest heavily on clichés of identity—the mystically inclined, ‘authentic,’ ancestral-rooted, borderland lesbian mestiza described in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, for instance—create Kleenex narratives: once we finish (if we finish), we find the nearest garbage can” (7), critics heavily invested in Anzaldúa and her work defended her vociferously. For example, Raphael Dalleo’s review of Aldama’s book takes specific exception to the notion that *Borderlands* is a “Kleenex narrative,” calling it Aldama’s “most mean-spirited comment of all” in which “Gloria Anzaldúa is mocked” (“Review” 176). Dalleo cannot resist taking Aldama’s bait and surprisingly conflates Anzaldúa the person with the text of *Borderlands* itself. As a scholar of narrative, Aldama is clearly more interested in the text than he is in identity politics, as he states in Chapter One of *A User’s Guide* (15). His criticism is with the text of *Borderlands* itself and those that make similar identity claims, and as I have indicated above, Aldama’s deadpan critique of Anzaldúa’s text is a rarity in discussions of *Borderlands*.

This state of criticism is understandable, as *Borderlands* itself is seen as giving voice to a collective identity of women who have been violated and silenced over the
course of centuries, if not throughout history. Leveling harsh criticisms at Anzaldúa’s work, then, might seem like a tacit attempt to silence someone like Anzaldúa, echoing Ramón Saldívar’s warning cited above. On the contrary, the response of *Borderlands* by readers and their staunch defenses of both the author and her work are at the core of my examination. And, as narrative theory has convincingly demonstrated, we can discern the difference between the text and the biographical author—that stern criticism (fair or otherwise) of the text does not necessarily equate to a condemnation of the actual person who created the text. However, some supporters of Anzaldúa’s work often take such criticism as an *ad hominem* attack on Anzaldúa herself.

Anzaldúa, however, sets up exactly this type of contestatory relationship between herself, her text, and her critics. She unambiguously invites her would-be detractors to enter the fray—to dare to contradict her. Time and again she unifies the act of writing with the political, the inscribed text as a stand in for the silencing of women. The reason that her text exists in the first place, one would assume, indicates the marginalization of similar voices. She has broken through where others have not.

Two factors are at work here that must be identified before continuing on with an examination of *Borderlands*. The first of these is the holistic approach to Anzaldúa’s work that most critics take. By this I mean a focus on the larger, metaphorical ideas Anzaldúa puts forth that relegates the particulars to the background. Such examinations of *Borderlands* tend to gloss over many challenging moments within the text, such as Anzaldúa’s use of essentialist rhetoric to make her claims, as when she says, “White anthropologists claim that Indians have ‘primitive’ and therefore deficient minds, that we
cannot think in the higher modes of consciousness—rationality” (37). She views all “white anthropologists” has having an essentialist view of Indians, but her own views on white anthropologists are equally essentialist. The second of these has to do with a relationship with the text itself. As Deborah L. Madsen puts it:

These [Chicana] writers subvert conventional forms of literary expression to make them express colored women’s experiences. […] Chicana writers insist that the reader work hard to understand the specialized racial or ethnic references included in the text, such as references to Mexican mythology and cross-cultural references. In important ways the subject of Chicana writing is the Chicana subject: feminine subjectivity in a Mexican American context is the primary subject matter of Chicana literature. This is a literature that embodies the quest for self-definition, and so voice is a matter if [sic] both form and content. (4-5)

If Chicana writing is the Chicana subject in some metonymic way, then it follows that criticism of one is criticism of the other. However, if we agree that Chicana writing employs recognizable forms of narrative worldmaking, even if they are unconventional, then we should be able to explore how these narrative worlds are constructed as well. Thus, despite Anzaldúa’s claim to the contrary, a fractured narrative form does not necessarily equate to a Chicana tejana lesbian-feminist identity. In other words, because the narrative form Anzaldúa uses is not inherent to any identity whatsoever (i.e., anyone can use her hybrid literary form, albeit the response to such forms might differ), a critical exploration of Borderlands’ s form is not a denunciation of Chicana identity. As much as some Chicana feminists would have it, identity cannot be reduced to a narrative form. Nor should it be. Again, the (mis)use of magical realism referenced in the introduction suggests the problems that arise when identity and narrative form are linked. Anzaldúa uses an unconventional narrative form only in reaction to the conventional, dominant
forms of discourse, particularly in Chicana writing. Hypothetically speaking, if fractured narratives were conventional, Anzaldúa would have needed to use a linear narrative to write against the dominant discourse. My point, ultimately, is that narrative form is not inherently linked to an identity, and vice versa.

Though many readers consider *Borderlands* to be a work of non-fiction, while others see it as a theoretical/metaphysical work, I would like to consider it as a creative work, if not outright fiction. Just as Acosta’s *Autobiography* reimagines autobiography as a creative manifestation of the quest for identity, Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* also uses autobiographical material in order to construct her particular storyworld. In fact, each book seeks an ideal audience but must often settle for a less-than-ideal reader. However, Acosta’s book is much more novelistic in form, which results in a more clearly defined storyworld. Anzaldúa’s book, in contrast, adopts a critical stance. So, while both texts engage in creatively using autobiographical elements, the two texts reach out to audiences in different ways.

In an interview with Ann E. Reuman, Anzaldúa describes her target audience as follows in response to the question, “Do you have particular audiences in mind when you write?”:

My most particular audience, I think, are women—are feminists, are lesbians, are Chicanas, are….So that’s my primary audience. But I also am looking to talking with some of the gentler, less masculinity-oriented guys. And just people who are opening their minds up, who are exploring things. My audience is always expanding. Some poems if they’re entirely in Spanish, like in *Borderlands* where there are about eleven poems that I didn’t translate, that I just left in Spanish—those have particular audiences: you know, Mexican and Chicano, Spanish-speakers, white people who can read Spanish. And the theoretical stuff that I talk about in
the universities, that’s more of a scholarly audience. (“Coming Into Play” 10)

Anzaldúa’s account of her audience is altogether consistent with the form of her text, which, as she suggests, opens itself to specific readers while at the same time thwarts access to others without a shibboleth, a key of sorts that allows reconstruction of the storyworld inscribed in her text. Particularly fascinating is Anzaldúa’s admission that her book is not intended for certain readers (i.e., heterosexual, “masculinity-oriented” males). It is an admission that Oscar Acosta would surely not have made for his own book, especially in light of what Carrasquillo describes as Autobiography’s revelry in patriarchy and machismo. 19 Despite Anzaldúa’s contention that her book was not for all audiences, scholars still tend to assert that the very thing that makes it a challenging text is the thing that allows a multitudinous readership. As Sheila Contreras states in Blood Myth: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicano/a Literature (2008):

Whatever its unstated, unrecognized, and, indeed, even unconscious ideological and discursive debts, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza presented its audiences with unfamiliar generic forms as it transgressed, merged, and shifted the borders of academic and popular speech, scholarly and creative presentations, the conventions of masculinity, femininity, and erotic or sexual orientation. […] It remains

19 There is an apparent double standard at work here. While a full exploration is outside the scope of my project, I think the differing receptions of Acosta’s and Anzaldúa’s works speak more to the identity-based approaches to which Aldama’s scholarship provides significant perspective. In other words, because Autobiography features a figure who embraces hyper-masculine ideology, the work is fatally flawed; because Borderlands embraces a feminist discourse, the work is radically empowering. The positioning of each text vis-à-vis identity power structures is often the platform on which critical inquiry of Autobiography and Borderlands occurs. Yet at the level of text and audience, each text necessitates similar cognitive functions and reading protocols; indeed they are strikingly similar. If we momentarily remove ideological valences readers bring with them to the text, one could argue that Autobiography and Borderlands take correspondingly multifaceted approaches in narrative design which yield severe limitations to the reading experience and storyworld reconstruction. Readers, however, tend to bring personal ideology (among other things) with them as they read. This fact highlights the importance of investigating how the minds of actual readers engage with those fictional minds inscribed within a given text, especially texts whose protagonists claim to move toward a higher consciousness.
one of the most popular texts to be read outside of a Chicana/o Studies curriculum. (114)

The popularity of *Borderlands* among its audience presents an interesting conundrum that is often not accounted for within scholarship—a conundrum scholars have yet to examine. A commonsense evaluation of the situation raises the following question: How could a text that yielded such a challenging reading experience become so popular among readers? This goes against what usually happens in such situations. Readers who are frustrated too much by a text will rarely become that text’s champion. The more specific knowledge required for complete storyworld reconstruction, the smaller the actual audience (one that most reflects the ideal audience) becomes. Yet, instead of falling by the wayside as *Autobiography* did, *Borderlands* found a vast audience. Much of the positive and emotional response to Anzaldúa’s work, I argue, is rooted in *Borderlands*’s ability to move readers from its textual designs to an imagined space (or storyworld) where readers with certain identity characteristics heretofore marginalized—that is, the identity characteristics of the ideal audience—may co-habit this space of the mind, activating “dormant areas of consciousness” (vi) wherein resides what Anzaldúa names “The New Mestiza.”

**The New Mestiza Consciousness**

Despite its wide support, *Borderlands* remains a surprisingly rough text. Anzaldúa herself lamented the rush to publication that significantly impacted her book:

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> Every time I read passages from *Borderlands* I see typos and spelling mistakes. My other concern [regarding publication] was that Chapter Six, on writing and art, was put together really fast. In fact, all seven chapters were written after the book had already gone into production and I was trying to write an introduction. [Aunt Lute Press was] already typesetting
the poetry, and the introduction became the seven essays. And [Chapters] Five and Six, the one on language and the one on art and writing, were the last to go in, and they were the roughest of all. And especially Chapter Six I felt like I was still regurgitating and sitting on some of the ideas and I hadn’t done enough revisions and I didn’t have enough time to unravel the ideas fully. (“Coming Into Play” 4)

Here Anzaldúa reveals that the formation of the most cited aspect of Borderlands—the first seven chapters—was something of an afterthought, or at the very least it was not part of her initial plan for the book. Although Anzaldúa notes her sensitivity to what she sees as the roughness of parts of her writing, the text itself gives a sense of her mind at work. Through less careful editing, Gloria’s mind remains provocatively unfiltered. Infelicities in her prose heighten the sense of a real mind at work, just as Acosta’s prose does in Autobiography. Indeed, just as Oscar nods to his abilities as a writer time and again in Autobiography, Gloria, too, takes stock of the book she is writing:

In looking at this book that I’m almost finished writing, I see a mosaic pattern (Aztec-like) emerging, a weaving pattern, thin here, thick there. I see a preoccupation with the deep structure, the underlying structure, with the gesso underpainting that is red earth, black earth. I can see the deep structure, the scaffolding. If I can get the bone structure right, then putting flesh on it proceeds without too many hitches. (66)

In her musing, she echoes Oscar’s ekphrastic evaluation of his vomit art in Autobiography: “The designs of curdled milk and scrambled eggs with ketchup are a sight, a work of genius. I ponder the fluid patterns of my rejections and consider the potential for art. Dali could do something with this, I’m sure” (25). Both are enraptured by the creative processes of their work as readers glimpse the workings of their minds, and the sense that we are receiving their thoughts unfiltered speaks to the convictions of their journey and beliefs.
Gloria’s observation of the deep structure of her book is an invitation for the reader to do likewise. Beth Berila posits that *Borderlands*’s experimental form and politics challenge readers to make meaning in ways that reveal the constant work that goes into constructing national identities. […] Calling attention to people’s participation in this process—whether that participation is about contesting or upholding dominant narratives,—Anzaldúa highlights the costs of validating dominant national narratives in ways that do violence to other narratives, and urges readers to hold multiple, contestatory accounts simultaneously. (121-22)

Berila’s announcement of *Borderlands*’s form as a willful challenge to the reader is neither groundbreaking or novel; Anzaldúa herself identifies this as one of her central motivations for her writing style: “Let the reader beware—I here and now issue a caveat perusor: s/he must do the work of piecing this text together….As the perspective and focus shift, as the topics shift, the listener is forced to connect the dots, to connect the fragments” (*Making Faces/Haciendo Caras* xvii-xviii). Anzaldúa alludes to the oft-cited characteristic used to describe *Borderlands*: its fragmented quality. Yet this quality of her narrative is hardly as radical a process as Anzaldúa and proponents of her work would have it. Indeed, one of the aspects that allows the reader to make sense of the world inscribed in the text, that is, any text, is the reader’s ability (or inability) to take the textual cues provided by the author in order to reconstruct the text. So, while Anzaldúa highlights political valences as a means of defamiliarizing entrenched notions of nation, patriarchy, sexuality, and so on, the narrative structure she employs can hardly be said to be radical at all. Not only are fractured narratives a hallmark of modernism and postmodernism across the board; what is more, we can note defamiliarized reading strategies inculcated by texts going as far back as 1759 with the publication of the first
 installment of Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman.* Berila and others tend to conflate the text as a challenge to the reader with the text as a “radical form” (Berila 123), but here the two terms must be disambiguated. A text may present a significant challenge to its reader while eschewing recalcitrant, experimental narrative form. For instance, Richard Rodriguez’s *The Hunger of Memory*, told as a series of journalistic essays, is a case in point. Rodriguez’s challenge to his audience lies not in his narrative design but rather in his attitude towards such controversial policies as Affirmative Action and bilingual education. On the other hand, formally innovative texts may not necessarily be considered radical in a political sense. In short, *Borderlands* uses an unconventional narrative structure while it engages in overtly political issues, but its form itself is not radical.

The title of the seven collective chapters of *Borderlands* is “Atravesando Fronteras/Crossing Borders.” Yet the borders have only occurred in Gloria’s mind, experienced vicariously within the mind of the willing reader. Thus, the scaffolding to which Gloria refers has been established first within her own mind, supported by her arrangement of the prose and poetry in her book. This is a crucial aspect of reading Anzaldúa’s book that should not be missed, for the very idea of identity and identity formation is inextricably linked to the concept of crossing borders. The site of differentiation between the self and other may be viewed as a border, and these sites are acutely involved in the process of identity formation.

Patrick Colm Hogan articulates how identity formation operates in terms of what he labels “practical identity” and “categorial identity.” Practical identity, according to
Hogan, “comprises what we do or can do. It is the total of our capacities, propensities, interests, routines—most important, those that bear on our interactions with others” or “[m]ore technically, […] the complex of representations and procedural competences that enable […] thought and action” (Understanding Nationalism 8, 26-27). By way of example, Hogan cites the ability to speak a language as an exemplar of practical identity. On the other hand, categorial identity “is our inclusion of ourselves in particular sets of people, our location of ourselves in terms of in-group/out-group divisions” (8). In other words, categorial identity manifests when one locates him or herself within a social group (29).

Hogan’s typology helps us understand Borderlands as it operates at the reading (cognitive) level. More so than Acosta’s, Anzaldúa’s project appropriates the powerful metaphor of the border and underscores both its functionality and its historical influence on marginalized people generally, and herself specifically. Ingrained in her exploration of the border, necessarily, is the process and consequences of identity formation, manifested in a blending of language, history and consciousness. Above all, the willing reader is invited to journey with Gloria via her thought processes, reflections, descriptions of emotion and philosophical musings. While the geographic location of the borderland is the most prominent and concrete image in Borderlands, Gloria renders it as an imaginative, and thereby transportable, space of the mind. As there are invariably readers who belong to some marginal group (as Hogan's account of both practical and categorial identities suggests), there is an openness to Anzaldúa’s work that is not found in Autobiography, at least not to the same degree. In other words, it is easier for readers
to identify with Anzaldúa’s target audience than it is with Acosta’s. Though Oscar at times invokes empathy even as he repulses, as well as advocating for a likeminded collective of “Brown Buffalo people,” his concept of identity is less transportable (among social groups) than is Gloria’s. Therefore, despite the surface recalcitrance of Gloria’s text, its use of a near-universal metaphor (the border) for a way of rethinking identity and (re)claiming power is not surprising, but rhetorically effective.²⁰

Indeed, I attribute the wide adoption and utility of *Borderlands* not so much in its narrative form, but rather its heavily reliance and articulation of metaphor. As noted above, Gloria opens the book with an explanation of her use of the border:

The actual physical borderland that I’m dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (Preface)

Again I note the universal scope of the borderland metaphor as articulated by Gloria herself. As she broadly defines it and in light of Hogan's concept of categorial identity, where identity has to do with group memberships rather than traits or abilities, this metaphor is readily adopted and becomes relevant to nearly anyone who reads *Borderlands*. Despite Anzaldúa’s identification of her ideal audience with the categorial identities of woman, Chicana, and lesbian, in a broader sense, so long as a reader can

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²⁰ Here it is important to disentangle concepts of universality from notions of essentialism. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, there are identifiable universals which apply to all of humanity. As borders of all types exist in the world (otherwise everything would be a conglomerate of undifferentiated stuff), the border as a metaphor works well in imagining the demarcation point between two distinct units or properties. For more on the concept of universals and their usefulness for literary study, see Hogan, “Literary Universals.”
claim membership in a marginalized group which rests on the liminal side of a division (or border), that reader can inhabit the larger consciousness to which Gloria consistently alludes.

Further, the border as metaphor itself is a powerful one. Hogan’s exploration of metaphors, as they apply to the self in terms of the nation, shows how certain metaphors can “cultivate a sense of belonging to the nation and its culture,” and further, that metaphors are “crucial, both conceptually and emotionally” (Understanding Nationalism 10-11). Put another way, certain metaphors provide something akin to a scaffold upon which people are able to attach thoughts and emotions. With the driving metaphor of the borderland, Gloria invites readers to engage with her thought processes, traversing border after border—borders of geography, borders of time, borders of history—as she steadily builds the architecture of her storyworld, resulting in the New Mestiza consciousness. Though not often discussed in this fashion, the New Mestiza consciousness can be adopted by anyone who assumes a categorial identity that occupies a marginalized position in any given society. As unlikely as it sounds, the New Mestiza consciousness could theoretically be espoused by heterosexual males given the right social conditions—namely, so long as the heterosexual males are in an underprivileged and potentially oppressed position. Because of the wide and readily accessible adoption of this way of thinking, the reading process whereby the reader’s mind is able to assume Gloria’s mind makes such a position possible. However, ideological structures would most likely make such identity formations problematic because heterosexual males tend to be far less oppressed than other groups in US society.
Minding the New Mestiza

Though section two, “Un Agitado Viento/Ehécatl, The Wind,” is the most overtly traditional part of *Borderlands*, with its usage of several recognizable formal attributes of poetry, scholars devote most of their attention to section one. Based on essays, reviews, and interviews, it is hardly controversial to call section one the most popular section of *Borderlands*. What is surprising about this fact is Anzaldúa’s own admission that the first seven chapters were intended to introduce, at the time before publication, what she felt to be the more substantive aspect of her work: the section containing the poetry. Indeed, one wonders what motivated this serendipitous turn of events for Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa’s co-editor of *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherríe Moraga, had already published her own multiform text, *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios* in 1983. Yet while the model and inspiration for this hybrid form was readily available to Anzaldúa, her text differs with Moraga’s in several key aspects. First, *Borderlands* readily incorporates works by others, resulting in a pastiche-like structure to the chapters. Second, there is a shifting perspective that lends *Borderlands* a sense of motion and mobility. This is mostly accomplished by the narrating presence that recedes and approaches at its own will. Third, there is an acute relationship to history. The narrator often adopts historical discourse as she works to expose certain relevant moments within history, moments which serve the larger design of the narrative. Fourth, though *Loving in the War Years* contains what are clear works of creative verse, the prose never presents itself as anything other than nonfiction. If we set aside Moraga’s poetry and consider only her prose in *Loving*, there would be no real controversy in calling it
creative non-fiction—it does not purport to be historically accurate, while at the same time it is clearly rooted in Moraga’s experiences. On the other hand, Anzaldúa’s prose, at times, makes the leap from creative non-fiction to the nethercategory of philosophical musing.

It is instructive here to attend to the narrating presence in *Borderlands*. Before going very far in this investigation, we already have a significant question that requires answering: Is the narrating presence consistent throughout the text? The answer would seem to be yes, particularly in light of Gloria’s self-reflexive consideration of her project in Chapter 6, “Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink.” Thus, as the unifying consciousness of the text, we can trace her movement of thought throughout the work as Gloria herself becomes a metaphor which directly interacts with the dominant metaphor of the border: the bridge. We may think of this image as a narrative bridge, facilitating the reader in moving from poem to prose, epoch to epoch.\(^1\) Indeed, Anzaldúa’s own consideration of “the ‘I’ who writes, the ‘I’ who is in the text, the ‘I’ who reads what is in the text and reflects on it and even puts that reflection into the text” in *Borderlands* (“Coming Into Play” 5) is particularly telling in its admission of the distinction between the various selves of Anzaldúa. Unlike Oscar in *Autobiography* who is essentially the same narrating consciousness throughout (though one who adapts to narrating conventions such as recounting a past experience versus narrating the present moment), there is more than one Gloria. At times there is the arranger of the text, inserting a quote

\(^1\) Of course, one cannot help but connect the metaphor of the bridge with the title of Moraga and Anzaldúa’s feminist collection, *This Bridge Called My Back*—a title stemming from another metaphor that highlights the woman as a structure which is trod upon to allow movement and mobility of the oppressor. Thus, one might say Anzaldúa reappropriates the image of the bridge in *Borderlands*. 81
here, a poem there. There are speakers within the poetry whom the reader can take as Gloria, but this conclusion is arrived at merely because it is inserted between prose that is narrated by Gloria. We can note the presence of several distinct permutations of Gloria’s self (which may be considered a permutation of Anzaldúa’s actual self).

Though accounting for the various guises and functions of the “Gloria” inscribed and implied within the text may seem an unnecessary complication, it is absolutely necessary if we are to understand how readers engage with the text at a cognitive level. Such an analysis, in turn, may help make clear the emotional connection many readers have with *Borderlands*. In other words, there is more at work in Anzaldúa’s text than powerful metaphors—though her metaphors are highly transportable. To be sure, so many differing voices within a single text will create a different reading experience than reading a narrative with a stable narrator. So, how do so many vantage points suggest an ideal audience and also potentially impact willing readers?

First of all, David Herman reminds us that though “narrative can be seen as a prototype for all perspective-taking, version-making activities,” it is important to remember that “stories not only facilitate but also formally encode ways of seeing. […] Thus, to say that an event or object or participant is focalized in a certain manner is to say that it is perspectivally indexed, structured so that it has to be interpreted as refracted through a specific viewpoint and anchored in a particular set of contextual coordinates” (*Story Logic* 302). Indeed, one of the salient features of Anzaldúa’s text is its penchant for shifting focalization. This, of course, complicates the structure of *Borderlands*, for not only do we have a variety of guises under which the narrator operates, we have a
variety of narrators who focalize their narrative through other consciousnesses and often move back and forth between them, sometimes from paragraph to paragraph. Certainly, even beyond the different narrators and narrating states, the shifting focalization imbues the relatively short book with the sense of an expansive canvas of space-time. As Anzaldúa’s very project is to argue for a new way of engaging with and understanding the world—her New Mestiza consciousness—she uses a multiplicity of refractory perspectives and vantage points throughout history as a means of recreating this mindscape for the reader. While scholars have given abundant critical attention to Anzaldúa’s recuperation of pre-Colombian myths as the primary vehicles that allow her argument for the New Mestiza to carry so much weight, I contend that the shifting narrating consciousness and varying focalization also embody a bridge to the realm of consciousness that she titles the “New Consciousness.” A closer look at how each narrative consciousness operates in Borderlands reveals the strategies that Anzaldúa uses to break away from traditional forms of life writing.

In the early sections where history is narrated, there is already the presence of code-switching from the multiple languages Gloria employs (Standard English, Standard Spanish, Chicano Spanish, Slang English) throughout the book. Thus, even in what readers recognize what is known as written history (via prototypes of authoritative historical discourses found in history textbooks), the narrator is already shaping the reader’s prior knowledge of the history of Chicanos, if not creating it altogether. For instance, the narrator opens the first prose section of chapter 1, “The Homeland Aztlán/El otro México,” with a metaphor of her own creation, one that will serve as the building
block of her overarching metaphor that comprises the book’s title: “The U.S.-Mexico border es una herida abierta”\textsuperscript{22} where the Third World grates against the first [World] and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (3). Here the narrator establishes the current state of the border noting the irony of how something as verifiable as a geographic line or border, one that can be easily mapped out with the most basic of tools, creates the “vague and undetermined place” (3) that we call a borderland. She further provides a very limited representation of the residents of this geographic space, individuals she calls los atravesados,\textsuperscript{23} whom she describes as “the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (3). The narrator’s explication of the borderlands vis-à-vis los atravesados is significant to her entire project and helps us understand the orientation of her mind.

Based on her knowledge and experience of the borderland, it is site of social outcasts. However, a more comprehensive examination reveals that the residents of the borderlands are not the homogeneous outsiders the narrator describes. The actual US-Mexican border is populated with individuals who do not necessarily fall under Gloria’s categorization of the “prohibited and forbidden” (3). In addition, she stereotypes all “[g]ringos in the U.S. Southwest” as people who see “the inhabitants of the borderlands [as] transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they’re

\textsuperscript{22} “…is an open wound.”

\textsuperscript{23} Literally, those who have crossed over.
Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot” (3). As we read this, we are confronted with the challenge of not simply interpreting what is being said (the narrator uses very straightforward language; indeed this lends such gravity to the statement in the first place) but with understanding this situation from the narrator’s vantage point. From a factual point of view, the narrator cannot possibly be correct. Surely there are some “gringos” in the US Southwest that do not view residents of the borderlands as transgressors or aliens; finding even one undercuts the power of the narrator’s accusation. If, then, readers take the narration as factually accurate, as one might when reading non-fiction, then Anzaldúa has problematized her project before it has even started.

Yet if we recognize that we are reading the mind of an individual who has occupied a liminal space in society (on many levels), then we begin to understand more accurately the import of the narrator’s words. This same narrative voice appears later in the chapter, stating: “The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it” (7). By using the same type of essentialist rhetoric often employed by oppressors regarding the oppressed, Anzaldúa creates a challenging reading situation. It ought to be uncomfortable to read, and it is. What makes it even more of a challenge is that the narrator is clearly invested in (one could say biased toward) the Chicana position.

24 It should be noted that although Anzaldúa often refers to the “U.S.-Mexican border” in *Borderlands*, it is more accurate to say she means the Mexico-Texas border. I insist on this clarification because many other Chicano/a writings address issues of the Mexico-Arizona border, the Mexico-New Mexico border, and the Mexico-California border. Each of these has its own dynamic, and conflating them into a homogeneous area is inaccurate. In fact, issues that impact one Texas city on the border, such as El Paso, may not necessarily be of concern in another Texas city such as Brownsville. But as Anzaldúa often seeks the transcendent metaphor with wide appeal, her homogenization of the border is not surprising.
Again, this rhetoric does not pose a problem if it emanates from what appears to be a subjective position such as a homodiegetic-intradiegetic narrator, because it would then appear relative and particular to the viewpoint of one individual. However, these statements that purport to depict certain actions, attitudes, and thought processes of a group she has homogenized (i.e., Gringos) appear within authoritative statements which sound very much like the very essentialist thinking Anzaldúa would rail against as applied to those who share her categorial identities (e.g., Chicana, feminist, lesbian, Tejana). How would we read uncontextualized statements that essentialized the actions of “the feminist” and “the Chicana”?

There are several ways we can account for this narrator’s attitude. One might say that, in fact, what Anzaldúa is doing here is akin to Audre Lorde’s metaphor of using the master’s tools to dismantle his house.25 In other words, Anzaldúa, using her satirical historian narrator, highlights the dangers of this form of rhetoric. It is difficult to disentangle whether or not these moments in the narration are ironic, especially if we read it from a non-fictional perspective. If, on the other hand, we see these moments as being narrated by a fictional narrator, the challenge in reading is mediated. We see the device come to the fore and recognize that Anzaldúa has conjured a fictional counterself, a narrator with the same powers of historical authority (and essentialism) as we find in some historical or sociological accounts of Chicanos. That is to say, the fictionality of the narrator gives us a clue of how the reader is to take what are otherwise troubling

25 In “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Lorde vehemently argues that when women of color stay within the structures developed by privilege and patriarchy as a means of educating “male ignorance,” they unwittingly use the “old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concern’s” (113). By comparison, Anzaldúa uses the same sorts of rhetorical strategies used by the hegemony she excoriates in order to make her point.
statements about “gringos” in the US Southwest. To be sure, this narrator does not revel in these essentialist statements; they are deployed sporadically and with care. Often they are used to illuminate certain experiences common to particular categorial identity groups. Yet a thorough examination of the text reveals a narrator who has a penchant for discussing “the Chicana,” “the Negro,” “the Gringo,” “the Catholic,” “the white,” “the queer,” and so forth. It is perplexing how Borderlands, hailed as a triumph against hegemony, a breathtaking show of defiance and resistance to patriarchy, so readily deploys problematic rhetoric and thinking.

Near the end of chapter 1, the narrator moves into a third-person plural position with the statement, “We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing la migración de los pueblos mexicanos, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlán” (11). Here the narrator aligns herself with Chicanos with a pronominal shift to a collective identity. This shift is a key moment in Borderlands, for it aligns the narrative consciousness with a collective consciousness of a specific categorial identity group. It is the opposite of what occurs in Autobiography; Oscar waits until the close of the narrative until he mentions his call for the greater collective consciousness he calls the “Brown Buffalo people,” while Gloria incorporates the struggles of Chicanos with her own sense of self. Unlike Autobiography, the narration in Borderlands moves from a large collective categorial identity group (i.e., Mexican Americans) to a more exclusive group (i.e., Chicanas) until the key identity group is hyperexclusive (i.e., Chicana feminist lesbian). It should be noted that the more restricted the identity group with which the narrator affiliates herself, the more
metaphysical the narration becomes as the narrator reaches for a realization of the new mestiza. By chapter 7, “La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness,” Anzaldúa has finally reached not only the subtitle of her book but also the target audience that she mentions in her interview in *MELUS*. Again invoking the we-narrator, Gloria unifies her ideal audience in light of her project—a project that has been unambiguous from the beginning, despite its unconventional form:

> We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we’ve made some kind of evolutionary step forward. *Nuestra alma el trabajo*, the opus, the great alchemical work; spiritual *mestizaje*, a “morphogenesis,” an inevitable unfolding. We have become the quickening serpent movement. *(Borderlands 81)*

In 1990, Ramón Saldívar concluded his book *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* by holding up Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* as a high-water mark for Chicano/a narrative. Despite the lack of a sustained and critical engagement of Anzaldúa’s text, Saldívar nonetheless heralds *Borderlands* as a paragon of excellence in Latino/a letters. Regarding the opening of *Borderlands* and the image of the border as an “open wound,” he writes:

> With their special ties to the borderlines demarcating the differential structures of contemporary American life, Chicano narrative texts might well serve as the patterns of that dialogical model of a new American literary history. […] What it means to construct a life in the liminal chronotopes defined by the cognitive mappings imposed on the subject by the imaginary political lines drawn between Mexico and the United States is the substance of [Anzaldúa’s] autobiography. […] We might well thus extend Anzaldúa’s guiding figure of the border as the *primary metaphor* of the particularly dialectical subject position articulated by each of the texts that we have discussed. The trajectories of the lives of these subjects take them across borderlines precisely into the prohibited and forbidden zones that contain the residue of the unnatural boundaries forged by the
unfulfilled potentialities of contemporary American culture. (218, emphasis mine)

Anzaldúa herself states the guiding principle of her book in chapter 6, “Tlilli, Tlapalli/The Path of the Red and Black Ink”: “[The Aztecs] believed that through metaphor and symbol, by means of poetry and truth, communication with the Divine could be attained” (69). Seen in this light, Borderlands’s successful reception with audiences has much to do with the metaphorical transportability upon which Anzaldúa relies so heavily, one that often mediates many of the overt challenges in reading the text. Ultimately, the new mestiza consciousness, like Anzaldúa’s own professed ideal audience, is highly exclusive. It is exclusive of heterosexual males (White, Chicano, or otherwise) and binary oppositions. This exclusivity ought to have created a challenge within readers’ minds, particularly when Gloria explains that “La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, 26 characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than exclude” (79). Thus, Anzaldúa is deliberately willful in the text as a means of modeling how the new mestiza operates—one that reaches out as it pushes away, disarmingly inviting and abruptly recalcitrant at the same moment.

26 “In part, I derive my definitions for ‘convergent’ and ‘divergent’ thinking from Rothenberg, 12-13” (Anzaldúa 97). Anzaldúa here references Albert Rothenberg’s The Creative Process in Art, Science, and Other Fields (1979), and specifically Arthur Koestler’s work on “bisociative thinking,” which essentially describes the process of combing the rational with the irrational during the creative process.
In closing, I return to the respective audiences that took up *Autobiography* and *Borderlands* after their publication. Anzaldúa produces a defiant, stentorian voice that ostensibly emanates from a liminal position within society: the socially, culturally disenfranchised peoples who have suffered from patriarchy, colonialism, racism, and sexism. Her book, despite using an unconventional structure, unambiguously denotes the audience it seeks. *Borderlands* is an example of a text with a challenging structure that ultimately doesn’t challenge its audience; it is a book whose thematic content challenged ideas and assumptions. Acosta, on the other hand, was writing for an audience that did not yet exist. In a personal interview, I posed a straightforward question regarding *Autobiography* to Ilan Stavans: “Who is Acosta’s audience?” Stavans replied, “Who is Acosta’s audience?” Stavans’s question to me suggests the audacity of *Autobiography* as well as the difficulty in discerning what type of audience Acosta had in mind. Acosta’s text is mocking, self-hating, existential, vitriolic, and yet, hopeful. But it came at a time when his narrative playfulness seemed frivolous in light of the very real political struggles of Chicanos in the US in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For her part, Anzaldúa envisions the borderlands as an open wound, noting that actual people had been and were currently being brutalized because of their identities. Conversely, Acosta continually finds new ways in his text to open the wound even further. In the end, Acosta’s and Anzaldúa’s text undoubtedly frustrate, disturb, and confound readers to varying degrees and results. In the next chapter, I explore an issue that is among the most pressing in Latino/a culture: the use of Spanish in the US.
In the previous chapter I examined how Oscar “Zeta” Acosta and Gloria Anzaldúa use carefully designed fictions that pose as life narratives as a means of working towards the expression of a Chicano/Chicana consciousness. One of the strategies used by both Acosta and Anzaldúa to expand readers’ understanding of Chicano/a literary production and use of narrative form is to employ several languages and dialects within their respective narratives, what has been termed “code-switching,” which John J. Gumperz defines as “the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or sub-systems” (59). This chapter presents two works that also employ a code-switching strategy: Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* and Giannina Braschi’s *Yo-Yo Boing!* These two works, published over thirty years apart, in working to shape their storyworlds, make language a salient feature of their narratives. To different degrees, they use language and code-switching as the primary means to challenge the reader. Thomas infuses his narrative with sporadic Puerto Rican Spanish and English slang, while Braschi writes full sections of her narrative in either Spanish or English. And, because language is inextricably bound to identity, the authors’ use of language and code-switching at once enables the reader to apprehend character more completely (as in Thomas) and at the same time puts more distance between the character and reader (as in Braschi). In short, this interaction of
minds and understandings of identity at the site of the storyworld has the potential to complicate notions of identity within the minds of the audience.

Of course, the bilingualism\textsuperscript{27} of Latino/a writers is ever at the forefront of examinations of their writings. Beyond matters of phenotypology, differences in language tend to signify cultural and ethnic positioning in the US. Language is undeniably a political issue in the US, one that is often deployed in attempts in nation-defining. The English language is overwhelmingly the dominant language in the US, despite the fact that a large concentration of citizens is descended from peoples whose primary language was something other than English. Thus, the history of immigration reveals a transition of language often occurring in families who emigrate to the US, typically resulting in a loss of the mother tongue in favor of English. The loss of one’s ancestral language is a common byproduct of assimilatory processes in the US. Examining how the English and Spanish languages (as well as their variants) are combined in different ways in the two selected novels, this chapter extrapolates from case studies to consider how these languages are tied to issues of race, class, and culture in Latino/a literature.

Beyond political implications of language acquisition and loss, the generation of Latinos that tends to grow up with other-than-English speaking parents is comprised of individuals who develop the ability to code-switch between English and Spanish. The

\textsuperscript{27}There is a difference between bilingualism and code-switching, both in how narratives are constructed and what is required to decode the narrative. One of the major differences is that code-switching can often be understood due to context even if the reader or listener is unfamiliar with the second language. Bilingualism, however, suggests that equal mastery of two languages is in evidence. Another way of viewing the difference between code-switching and bilingualism is that code-switching is an aspect of bilingualism. See Lesley Milroy and Pieter Muysken’s edited collection of essays \textit{One Speaker, Two Languages: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Code-Switching}.
difficulties of this experience have been explored by Gloria Anzaldúa, Richard
Rodriguez, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, among others, who often show what they see as the
deleterious effects of the two languages as they abrade against one another. Further, these
writers’ experiences arise out of their respective historical and geographical situations.
Anzaldúa and Rodriguez speak of growing up during the 1960s in Texas and California,
respectively. Conversely, Pérez Firmat was born in Cuba in 1949 before emigrating to the
US in 1960. The experience as Latinos in the US for these authors highlights the
complexity of being Latino/a, as well as the complexities of language usage in the US.
Their experiences emphasize how Latino/a experience in the US is not homogenous, and
I include them here briefly as a reminder that though my case studies are texts written
through the lens of the Puerto Rican experience, they are not representative of all
Latino/a experience in the US.

**Three Latino/a Perspectives on Bilingualism**

For instance, Anzaldúa recounts the oppressive restrictions of speaking Spanish in
public school, a decision which often resulted in corporal punishment and humiliation at
the hands of school teachers and administrators. In chapter 5 of *Borderlands/La
Frontera: The New Mestiza*, entitled “How To Tame a Wild Tongue,” Anzaldúa writes:

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for
three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to
the corner of the classroom for “talking back” to the Anglo teacher when
all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. If you want
to be American, speak “American.” If you don’t like it, go back to
Mexico where you belong (53).

Such moments help provide the formative experiences that Anzaldúa ruminates upon in
her book, and indeed her text is often seen as a declaration of linguistic freedom.
Anzaldúa’s own mother, “mortified that [Gloria] spoke English like a Mexican” (54), viewed speaking English very differently from her daughter: “‘I want you to speak English. *Pa’ hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar en ingles bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas ingles con un ‘accent’’” (54).28 Anzaldúa sees her desire to use language freely as inherent to the First Amendment to the US Constitution and accuses Anglos of figuratively ripping away the tongues of Spanish-speaking Chicanos. “Wild tongues can’t be tamed,” she laments, “they can only be cut out” (54). Forcing individuals to cease the use of one language in favor of another is thus tantamount to dismemberment for Anzaldúa.

Yet Anzaldúa’s anecdote of her mother’s rebuke suggests the matter of language as viewed and practiced at home, though it is something that Anzaldúa does go into much detail about in her text despite her evident disdain for her mother’s alignment (albeit for different reasons) with the Anglo purveyors of linguistic discipline at school. Her mother sees speaking English flawlessly as a measure of success, a skill set that will enable her daughter to find an excellent job (which most likely means one less reliant on physical toil and labor). Further, speaking English well enough for communication is not good enough. For her mother, it must be spoken without an accent. Her view, in hindsight, is naïve and ill-informed, though well meant, even as it reflects the specificity of sociohistorical context for Latinos, especially across generations. Anzaldúa’s mother perhaps does not realize that there are a variety of accents which flavor American

28 “To find good work, you have to know how to speak English well. What good is all of your education if you still speak English with an accent.”
English, nor does she intuit the other factors (such as xenophobia and racism) that work to keep Chicanos from gaining higher social and economic status.\textsuperscript{29}

On another side of this issue of language is the essayist and cultural critic Richard Rodriguez. Five years before the publication of \textit{Borderlands}, Rodriguez published \textit{The Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez} (1982) to both acclaim and criticism. Rodriguez, a Chicano born of working-class Mexican immigrants, raised as a Catholic in Sacramento, California, argues that bilingual education is a destructive force on those who speak Spanish at home and English in school. Rodriguez’s troubled relationship with language began when he initiated his education and culminated in his position as an essayist who has railed against Affirmative Action and bilingual education. He sees the two languages as mutually incompatible: Spanish is the language of the family, of intimacy, of privacy, while English is the language of the public sphere. As a result, Rodriguez has been the target of sustained criticism for his conservative views on language and the Chicano/a experience.\textsuperscript{30}

Central to Rodriguez’s views on language is his advocacy of a sort of dualism between the two languages; that there are, in fact, two spheres for which one language or

\textsuperscript{29} One cannot help but sympathize with Anzaldúa’s mother. In \textit{Borderlands} Gloria renders her not only as naïve but dangerously oblivious to the patriarchal and homophobic structures that Gloria identifies within Chicano culture. However, as is the case with many parents, Anzaldúa’s mother sees the value of education and linguistic sophistication as a key to her daughter’s future success. Ironically, despite the apparent angst towards her mother, Anzaldúa’s contribution to feminist theory and ethnic studies proves the validity of her mother’s attitude about English. Though there is a frequent code-switching in \textit{Borderlands}, the text is predominantly written in English and has contributed most to English-language scholarship.

\textsuperscript{30} As with the case of Anzaldúa, Rodriguez places himself in the untenable position of critiquing a system which has enabled him to criticize it. Yet he acknowledges this fact when he opens \textit{The Hunger of Memory} by invoking Shakespeare’s most infamous native: “I have taken Caliban’s advice. I have stolen their books. I will have some run of this isle” (2).
the other must be readily deployed: Spanish as the language of the family; English as a public language. Essentially, Rodriguez is more concerned with issues of privacy and publicness than with advocating for one language over the other. He is very much in support of keeping the family discourse away from educational contexts, and this belief in linguistic dualism has been the defining feature of Rodriguez’s contribution to Latino/a and American letters.

Rodriguez makes very clear assertions regarding Latinos and their use of both English and Spanish: “I worry these days that Latinos in California speak neither Spanish nor English very well,” he states in an interview with Scott London. “They are in a kind of linguistic limbo between the two,” he argues. “They don’t really have a language, and are, in some deep sense, homeless” (“Birth Pains”). Rodriguez has the unyielding conviction that the two languages must never be allowed to mix, which in reality is an untenable position to adopt, especially when one considers the growing number of Latinos in the US. In order to fully participate in the US, one must be able to handle English fluently by reading, writing, and conversing in English. Without this fluidity of participating in English discourse, Spanish-only speakers limit their ability to interact with large swaths of society at a socioeconomic level.

For one of the defining traits of language is that it is transmuted over time and space. What we call Standard English today little resembles the tongue of the Anglo-Saxons who recounted the epic of Beowulf. The fact is that languages are shaped by the interactions of cultures. However, the transformation of language often occurs at a geologic rate of speed, as it is shaped over the course of great stretches of time and as a
result of conquests. Thus, Rodriguez’s fantasy of a dual-track bilingualism can never be achieved in a nation where languages crash one upon the other with little regard for essayists or novelists, much less in a society that now has the technological means through social media such as Facebook and Twitter to integrate private and public discourses.

Ostensibly, Rodriguez’s lament at the lackluster uses of language among Latinos (in one language or the other or both) does not acknowledge the possibilities of code-switching as a viable and valid means of expression. Indeed, his description of “a kind of linguistic limbo between the two” could readily be applied to a person’s blending of Spanish and English to produce speech heavily reliant upon the technique of code-switching. He does not conceive of (or at the very least he disdains entertaining the possibility of) hybridized discourse resulting from the process of code-switching—a process that may someday yield a true bilingualism where Spanish and English are used together, equally. Instead, he views the blending of these two languages as a metaphor for homelessness, for not having a linguistic tether to a heritage or legacy. Indeed, Rodriguez’s own path through the process of language acquisition is as atypical as his

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31 Despite the apparent arbitrary nature of which words appear in English and which appear in Spanish, research by Joshua Fishman, John J. Gumperz, Jan-Petter Blom, Peter Auer, and others suggests that code-switching is a highly technical (though often innate or instinctive) skill that often depends on connotations and nuance which accompany one word that may not apply to its corresponding translation. This fact has a significant bearing on narrative worldmaking and storyworld reconstruction.

32 Tacit in his position on language is the hard truth that speaking English—and speaking it well—has very real consequences from a socioeconomic perspective. As English is dominant in the US, an inability to fully participate in English discourse limits one’s potential. But the ability to master English and then have the power to choose when to deploy a second language such as Spanish is an empowering move that Rodriguez does not acknowledge.
His Spanish, lost to him at the insistence of his parents who mandated that he speak English to them at home, reminiscent of Anzaldúa’s mother’s admonition to her daughter to speak without an accent, remains elusive until Rodriguez returns to it as an adult. Yet the Spanish he acquires, much like the English he masters, is the Spanish language of academia and professionalism, not the caló spoken in the streets of his native California. Thus, because Rodriguez intuited Spanish and English as residing in separate domains, he never allowed the possibility that the two languages might be blended to yield something distinct from either one taken alone. Where Anzaldúa sees a model for empowerment, Rodriguez identifies a severe limitation.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat provides yet another perspective on the issue of English/Spanish usage. In his significant work, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (1994), Pérez Firmat examines the plausibility of those immigrants who left their nation of birth as a child—what he calls a “one and a half generation”—to live “within the hyphen.” For Pérez Firmat, it is possible to participate in both English- and Spanish-language contexts in the US with ease. But as I noted earlier, not all Latino/a experiences are homogenous. Cuba’s political relationship with the US has had a profound impact on Cuban Americans, and specifically because of the ability of Cubans to become US citizens more easily than, say, Mexicans. Further, the experiences of Pérez Firmat, as a light-skinned Cuban American, are distinctly different from an Afro Latino such as Piri

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33 This is to say, Chicanos with the talent and ability to perform successfully throughout their college careers only to turn down a professorship at Yale University are a rare occurrence.

34 The Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966 enabled that Cubans who fled to the US would be allowed one year of residency where they would be expedited for legal US citizenship. Though it has been slightly revised (since 1995 a Cuban must now actually make it to US soil), this US policy has clearly had a significant impact on how Cuban Americans view issues of immigration, citizenship, and language.
Thomas. Thus, I wish to emphasize that Pérez Firmat’s experiences, along with those of Anzaldúa and Rodriguez, demonstrate the complexity of using Spanish and English, and how that complexity is made manifest through the disparate Latino/a experiences shaped by a variety of sociohistorical and geopolitical contexts.

Perhaps the most illustrative example is to consider how these three Latino/a authors recount their grade school experiences in the US: Anzaldúa was literally punished for speaking Spanish at school (Borderlands 53); Rodriguez was silent in class because he felt that English was not his to use, until the Catholic nuns who were his teachers visited his home and urged Richard’s parents to speak English at home (Hunger 18-20); Pérez Firmat had taken an English class while still in Cuba, so that his first experience in a US classroom was not “the typical experience that many immigrants have of walking into an American classroom and not understanding anything” (Interview). Hence these authors’ relationships with English and Spanish are widely divergent.

The Constraints on Using Two Languages in Narrative

Related to these issues of language is also the materialistic reality that publishers work to enhance sales of their books rather than hinder them. This last fact, especially during the middle of the twentieth century, has resulted in Latino/a authors who were highly aware of their use of Spanish. Some of the early novels of what has come to be known as the Latino renaissance, such as Villarreal’s Pocho and John Rechy’s City of

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35 One readily notes this discomfort of using Spanish when reading José Antonio Villarreal’s 1959 Pocho. One of the striking features of this novel is Villarreal’s decision to not only translate conversation and dialogue within the narrative that take place in Spanish within the storyworld, but to render these moments into translations of literal English. The result is an odd, markedly stilted English that gives the impression that the novel’s characters are speaking in antiquated idioms.
Night, use only the slightest amount of Spanish. Yet as Latino/a literature progressed through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, Latino/a authors continued to press the boundaries for the use of Spanish and a heightened level of code-switching in the creation of their storyworld. As a consequence, readers required access to Spanish signifiers in order to fully reconstruct the inscribed storyworld. In short, there has been a shifting obligation from the author to the reader that has steadily occurred throughout the development of Latino/a literature. That is to say, where authors were once obliged by audiences and publishers to exercise narrative restraint, authors are more and more leaving it to readers to do the work of going outside of the text to gather the information needed to reconstruct storyworlds.

Alfred Arteaga, in his essay “An Other Language,” carefully measures the dimensions of the tension between Spanish and English in Chicano/a poetics, identifying the source of that tension in what he calls a “border discourse” (11). By this, Arteaga urges that the very real border which exists between two nations provides a source of political and economic struggle—one that takes precedence above all other critical lenses when considering Chicano/a poetry. While Arteaga locates his essay in Chicano/a poetry, because he extrapolates his investigation from the nexus of Spanish and English textual features of poetry, I can only assume Arteaga would insist on the same distinctions when

36 While City of Night was viewed as a major work of LGBT literature, it did not significantly engage in issues of Latinidad. Rechy was not truly considered a writer of Latino/a literature until he wrote The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gomez in 1991.

37 Though Latino/a literature is predominantly written in English, there are early examples of Latinos writing mostly, if not entirely in Spanish. Some examples are Aristeo Britó’s El diablo en Texas (1976), Miguel Mendez’s Peregrinos de Aztlan (1974), and Rolando Hinojosa-Smith’s Klail City Death Trip series (1973-2006).
it comes to Chicano/a prose narratives. Undoubtedly, the conflicts generated in the
sociopolitical realm, particularly when it comes to matters of language (i.e., the
discussion of making English the official language of the US), are often echoed within
the whole of Latino/a literature. Arteaga writes:

In poem and in daily speech, English and Spanish bestow different levels
of authority on text and speaker. The relative imbalance in authority grows
daily in the present era in increasing legislative suppression of languages
other than English. English carries with it the status of authorization by the
hegemony. It is the language of Anglo America and of linguistic Anglo
Americans, whether or not they be ethnic Anglos. Further, it is the
language of the greatest military and economic power in the world.
Spanish is a language of Latin Americans, south of the border and north.
Across the border, Spanish is a Third World language; here it is the
language of the poor. (12)

The prescience of Arteaga’s words, originally written in 1994, rings true into the second
decade of the twenty-first century, as issues related to the uses of Spanish within US
society become more salient as the Latino/a demographic grows. There is little debate
that the friction between these two languages and among their regional dialects is
inherently political.

However, I argue that the interplay between Spanish and English, especially
within Latino/a literature, is not nearly as neat as Arteaga argues. That said, when
Arteaga states, “The authoritative discourse is, after all, a prescribed monologue
structured to inhibit dialogue with the natives. Who would read these lines I now write, if
they were written in caló?” (16), he brings up an excellent point. If we were to briefly
outline the factors we must consider in attempting to answer Arteaga’s question, we
would have to take note of the authorial decision to write in English and not caló; we
would consider the publisher’s aim of reaching the largest buying audience possible; we
would need to acknowledge audience expectation, and so on. Arteaga implies that for him to reach the reading audience he seeks, he is constrained to write in the colonizer’s language. Thus, Arteaga and other like-minded scholars view code-switching as an act of resistance or defiance.

Momentarily setting aside the claim that code-switching is an act of resistance, other scholars such as Steve Kellman see code-switching as an “urge towards verisimilitude” (xv) where writers such as Sandra Cisneros are, in fact, emulating a particular linguistic world, a world, as Rodriguez would agree, that is situated within the Latino/a family dynamic. For example, Kellman sees the code-switching found in Rolando Hinojosa-Smith’s writings as “echoing actual speech, not patenting a new language” (xvii). Kellman’s take is not inconsistent with Arteaga’s.

Yet here we may address the central concern of this chapter, which is the function of code-switching and bilingualism as it affects both narrative worldmaking as well as the reader’s reconstruction of the storyworld. I take it as a given that an author has mastery of the storyworld that he or she creates, though they are not in control of the meanings that can be ascribed to their texts.38 However, rather than see an author’s use of code-switching as an act of resistance, I see it as an invitation for the reader to take up the challenge of rearticulating the storyworld from the blueprint provided by the author.

While I recognize the writing of certain narratives and poetry as highly political acts, it is not a given that those printed texts have any political clout without a measurable

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38 This is not an absolute by any measure. Authors are ultimately urged to revise, redact, and otherwise adjust their narratives at the behest of their publishers. However, even if authors are compelled to alter their manuscripts before publication, the adjustments made are ones that they create. Thus, my contention that authors are masters of their storyworlds.
readership. Further, though I agree that an author may write a narrative (or any
document) as a sign of protest or resistance, the text itself cannot “resist.” Instead, what
must be considered is the successful engagement with the author’s storyworld as manifest
in a stable mental model on the part of the reader. In question, then, are those identifiable
attributes of a narrative that work to thwart readers’ efforts by the use of certain
enstranging devices such as code-switching, self-translation, and so on.

Further examination of the phenomenon of code-switching reveals the process
and its product to be a complex issue. For many Latinos bilingual in Spanish and
English, certain thoughts, ideas, and concepts may carry more nuance and complexity in
one language than the other. As creators of narrative worlds, Latino/a authors have more
materials (i.e., words) and devices (i.e., how to employ Spanish words at the level of
narrative form) upon which to draw when deciding how best to inscribe the storyworld
via the narrative blueprint. The availability of a larger lexicon does not necessitate or
yield a higher (or lower) quality of narrative product any more than a painter with twice
the available hues will produce a greater number of masterpieces than one who has only a
few colors on the artist’s palette. However, the freedoms and constraints surrounding the

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39 The idea of a resisting text is found throughout postcolonial and ethnic-as-Other scholarship. On its
face, this idea purports to empower the text, its subject, and its author. However, a truly resisting text is
one that is hard to imagine. The power of any text lies in its engagement with its readership. A text may
resist an ideology or hegemony only via those individuals who are prompted to collective action. In short,
the resisting text is an imagined text. For an excellent exploration of the ability of ethnic literature to
resist, see Patrick L. Hamilton’s Of Space and Mind: Cognitive Mappings of Contemporary Chicano/a
Fiction (2011).

40 Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of ostranienie is often translated as “defamiliarization” or “estrangement.”
However, a more recent translation of this word by Benjamin Sher is “enstrangement,” which seems to be
a better fit for this concept of de-habituating things that have become so commonplace that they go
unnoticed.
usage of a code-switching technique of narrative has a direct effect on storyworld design and audience reception.

**Reading Resistance in Piri Thomas’s Down These Mean Streets**

Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* (hereafter *Streets*) works to challenge its audience on many levels. One of these is the level of racial politics in the US. In a 1996 interview in the *Massachusetts Review*, Thomas recounted to Ilan Stavans the first time he took a bus trip to the American South as a young man. The quotidian ride proceeded without incident until he reached the Mason-Dixon Line, whereupon another driver relieved the bus driver in something akin to a shift change. This new driver promptly ordered “all colored to the back.” Aghast, Thomas watched as all of the African American passengers did as the driver ordered. Thomas, however, refused to relinquish his seat near the front, saying to the driver, “Look, I’m puertorriqueño.” Incensed at Thomas’s insolence, the bus driver menaced him and said, “I don’t care what kind of nigger you are” (351). Eventually, Thomas acquiesced, urged by his friend Billy to move to the back of the bus.

Thomas’s anecdote, which appears in a slightly different form in *Streets*, is instructive for conceiving of how race intersects with nationalism and Latinidad in the US. He narrativizes the pervasive and rampant racism of the pre-Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the American South, while displaying his own struggles to self-identify as an Afro Latino. In addition, it is useful to examine the impetus for Thomas’s anecdote: Ilan Stavans (Thomas’s interviewer) provocatively stated that, “Race is an issue ubiquitous in your [Thomas’s] work. In fact, very few Latino writers today are brave enough to
discuss it in such plain, uninhibited ways as you do” (350). In effect, Stavans boldly equated an unflinching engagement with race in Latino/a fictional discourse with the bravery of challenging hegemony so unequivocally.

Yet Stavans’s assumption is problematic; just because a Latino/a writer does not engage overtly with a given thematic element (i.e., race) within his or her narrative does not mean that such a writer is not “brave enough” to do so. On the other hand, Stavans is unfortunately correct in noting the lack of frank, direct engagement with issues of race, or as I argue, pertinent challenges to reader expectation and ideology, in the narratives of many US Latino writers. But what Stavans and others recognize as “brave” or “bold” within Thomas’s narrative is his use of language and dialect, which are bound to his struggles to come to terms with his own problems with self-identification.

Indeed, the historical context here is important in understanding my argument. When Piri Thomas published his hard-hitting autobiography *Streets*, it put Afro Latino experiences in America on raw display for the world’s consumption. Thomas’s book relentlessly portrays an American trapped in the sulcus of identity, tantalizingly, frustratingly, a part of any number of groups without ever gaining full acceptance by any of them. Released less than three years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, *Streets* was poised to serve as a clarion call for Afro Latinos, an ever-growing section of the American population. Instead, Thomas’s account of his life was, has been, and continues to be, one of the most banned books in American literature. As Dawn B. Sova notes, *Streets* was first challenged in 1971 by the Community School Board 1250 in Queens, New York. Thomas himself appeared during the trial, not in defense of the book’s
depiction of his life but rather for the right “of the truth to be said” (116). Leaving aside matters of truth for the moment, Thomas’s book was banned for its narrative discourse—its manner of depicting the events of his life via the language used to give texture to that experience and world.

Nearly five years later, in 1976, Streets “was among nine books that school board members in Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 in New York identified as being ‘objectionable.’ After a review committee examined the books, Streets was placed on a restricted list because it was judged by the committee to be ‘pornographic and filthy’” (Sova 117). It took a ruling by the United States Supreme Court to remove the ban on Thomas’s book. Problematically or not, Thomas’s book was assuredly a part of a larger movement towards recognition—Afro Latinos such as Arthur Schomburg had already initiated momentum in bringing attention to the cultural relevance and artistic endeavors of this segment of the population to which he himself belonged. Thus, the literary significance of Afrolatinidad, which promised to be a bonfire ignited by Streets, proved to be a guttering flame.

One contributing factor in the book’s reception may have been that Thomas’s experiences were so far from prior, widely available representations of Latinos. Though the Nuyorican Movement was already making its mark on American letters by 1967, Streets, in seeking to explore the sociopolitical, racial, and linguistic interstices in which Piri⁴¹ continually finds himself, used several key attributes of US Latino prose narrative—namely, code-switching and Afro Latinidad. So, not only did Thomas

⁴¹ As has become standard in scholarship where the biological author and protagonist are similarly identified, I will refer to the author as Thomas and the protagonist as Piri.
challenge racial struggles based on his experiences in a pre-Civil Rights Act US, he challenged the very notion of how one defines a Latino/a. These challenges are made palpable through his use of language and dialect.

*Streets* is significant for being one of the first Latino/a narratives that extensively integrated Spanish into what is basically an English text. As Eugene V. Mohr explains:

> Despite obvious limitations in style and structure and in the range of experiences described, Thomas's were the first books by a Nuyorican to gain a national reading. And Thomas, because of the insistent moral commentary which runs through his work, remains the most serious and interesting spokesman for second-generation Puerto Ricans in New York, even for those who deplore the image he projects and the willingness of readers and reviewers to accept that image as an accurate generalized description of “what it’s like” in El Barrio. (61)

So, while *Streets* reached a national audience, it presented readers with significant challenges of language and content. When first published, *Streets* provided a glossary that explained “all Spanish and slang terms in the text” (ix). This glossary has become inextricably linked to the novel itself, even appearing in the thirtieth-anniversary edition published in 1997. Further, this glossary is a paratexual element insisted upon by the publisher, not Thomas.

I initiate my analysis of Thomas’s text by jumping to the end, for the glossary can indicate how Spanish is used to create the storyworld blueprint. To begin with, the glossary is two pages long (339-40) and glosses 135 words and phrases for the convenience of the reader. More specifically, eight of the glossed terms are not derived from the Spanish language, but rather are English colloquialisms such as “bread” (money), “fuzz” (cops), “stud” (any hip male), and “turf” (home street). The glossary of *Streets* betrays the publisher’s concern that buying audiences will be thwarted by the
languages and dialectal variants Thomas uses. This publishing decision also reveals a
very material concern that publishers have when imagining audiences who will purchase
works of Latino/a literature. While the glossary is clearly an attempt at making
storyworld reconstruction less taxing for the reader, the intrusion of a glossary within the
covers of Thomas’s book nullifies a significant challenge his text presents to readers.
Therefore, one way of looking at how Streets challenges readers is to locate the
publisher’s effort to alleviate those challenges in the first place. We then might consider
how the text functions without the glossary, as Thomas originally intended.

I move now from the glossary at the end of Streets to the beginning of the text and
the prologue. Thomas’s initial use of Spanish appears on the first page of the prologue
when he uses the word “mundo” or world (ix). Next to the word “mundo” appears an
asterisk with a footnote at the bottom of the page that says, “All Spanish and slang terms
in the text are explained in the glossary that begins on page 332” (ix). With this footnote,
the monolingual English reader is immediately set at ease; all Spanish that appears in the
text has been stripped of its ability to destabilize the reader. While I will examine how
paratexts function within a Latino/a work of literature in greater detail in chapter 5, I
must mention here that the presence of the glossary as a reference work within Thomas’s
book undermines the narrative world Thomas creates, as well as subordinating Thomas
all the while. Unlike the paratextual material that appears in Junot Díaz’s The Brief
Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and Sandra Cisneros’s Caramelo—paratexts created by
their respective authors that serve as a structural ingredient of the storyworld—the
footnote and glossary in Streets were created by someone other than Piri Thomas. And,
since the glossary serves as reference material for the reader, that is to say, because it functions as an authority that hovers above Thomas’s text, there is the sense that Thomas’s text requires a corrective, that it is unable to stand on its own.

The insertion of reference materials within a text, of course, is an important feature of scholarly editions intended for use by students seeking to make sense of difficult material within a work of literature—such as the Norton Critical Editions. Though a scholarly edition’s defining and contextualizing of materials is expected because the scholarly apparatus (e.g., footnote) is presented as an authority, such apparatuses are rarely take up the straightforward issue of translation. In other words, scholarly editions work to enrich a student’s understanding of issues that may be missed by the student due to a lack of historical context, for example. The glossary in Streets, however, is insultingly didactic, for it robs Thomas of the import of his words as well as denys readers the opportunity to learn new words by attending to how they are used in context.

Another way of looking at the presence of the glossary in Streets is to understand its superfluous nature. For example, the use of the word “mundo” cited above becomes intelligible when read in its context: “This is a bright mundo, my streets, my barrio de noche./With its thousand lights, hundreds of millions of colors/Mingling with noises, swinging street sounds of cars and curses,/Sounds of joys and sobs that make music./If anyone listens real close, he can hear its heart beat—” (ix). Mundo is the noun that is further described and enriched by the phrases “my streets” and “my barrio de noche.” Even a reader who does not know that “mundo” translates as “world” can understand, by
the context in which the word appears, that Piri is speaking of his immediate environs and surroundings—the space in which he inhabits and the rich texture created by the “noises,” “sounds,” and “heart beat” that partially forms his mundo.

Further, the prologue is itself both an announcement to the reader as well as an invitation into Thomas’s world. The prologue opens in direct address: “YEE-AH!! Wanna know how many times I’ve stood on a rooftop and yelled out to anybody: ‘Hey, World—here I am. Hallo, World—this is Piri. That’s me. ’I wanna tell ya I’m here—you bunch of mother-jumpers—/I’m here, and I want recognition, whatever that mudder-fuckin word means’” (ix). In this opening, Thomas establishes that Piri has longed to reach out to an audience, even a faceless audience in the dark Harlem night—that he yearns to make his presence known by explaining that “this is Piri,” even though it takes him the entire length of the narrative to come close to understanding who he is. Three times he vehemently states that he is “here,” an emphatic declaration that puts his resiliency and capacity for survival on full display. His opening salvo is a direct challenge to those who have heretofore ignored him or his story, calling them “mother-jumpers.” Piri’s demands are frank and indicate what lies ahead in the rest of the book: “I want recognition.” And finally, he expresses his frustration with his inability to satisfactorily define what the word “recognition” means. The opening to the prologue, then, establishes issues of character formation vis-à-vis his world as well as the difficulty of understanding what is meant when certain words are used. Because this is the overriding impetus for Streets, the glossary diminishes the dynamic of the author-text-
reader relationship, as it removes one of the prominent linguistic challenges Thomas presents to the reader.

**Code-Switching in *Down These Mean Streets***

But if the glossary was not an original part of the authorial blueprint in *Streets*, a consideration of the text sans the publisher’s insertion of reference material can help us see the sorts of challenges Thomas intended audiences to encounter and negotiate. Indeed, *Streets* is a linear narrative that takes Piri from pre-adolescence to adulthood with only intermittent analepses and prolepses. This adherence to linearity and chronology removes any sort of complexities that may arise from deviations from chronological telling. Instead, challenges to readers manifest in the form of thematic content and the use of language. Yet what is clear is that Thomas is not using language as a means of confounding the reader for purely aesthetic reasons, as we will see later in this chapter in Giannina Braschi’s *Yo-Yo Boing!* For instance, Thomas has designed his storyworld with a monolingual English reader in mind, for with the exception of 127 different words and phrases in Spanish, the 300-plus page book is predominantly written in English. While the very thought of using a lexicon of just over a hundred Spanish words was perceived as challenging enough for the publisher to insert a glossary, Thomas’s technique of suffusing his narrative with Spanish actually nurtures the reader, and by degrees, makes the need for a glossary mostly superfluous.

For example, Piri often expresses himself in Spanish only to immediately translate what he just said into English. Early on in *Streets* Piri is roaming his neighborhood after

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42 The majority of works of Latino/a literature are unequivocally targeted at an English-speaking audience.
being struck by his father for making too much noise while his father slept. He soon happens upon two junkies in his building who are about to shoot themselves up with heroin. When Piri makes the decision to leave the area, he startles the junkies: “I got up, and the scraping of my shoes started a panic. The two junkies jumped up and made it. They thought I was la hara—a cop. Their running feet down the stairs made me feel sorry for them. But, Jesus, I was hong-ree” (5). Piri immediately translates his use of la hara, an indication that while he wants to be faithful to certain lexical markers and signifiers that he is comfortable in uttering, he also wants his narrative to be understood by an English speaker.

It is helpful to note the context of this first example of self-translation in Streets. Besides his quest for understanding his identity and place within both his family and society, Piri’s interaction with the various languages and dialects is the hallmark of his ability to express himself. Piri continually misreads situations, forcing him to account for them in the best way he can. In this case, Piri misunderstands two situations involving adults, which is only natural for the twelve-year-old boy that he is at the time. First, he cannot understand why his father has reacted so violently upon being awakened. Piri cannot make himself understood to his father, and so he is frustrated in his inability to express himself to his father—a theme that arises numerous times within the narrative: “He didn’t give me a chance. Even before the first burning slap of his belt awakened tears of pain, I was still trying to get words out that would make everything all right again” (4). Piri assumes that if only he could use certain words to communicate what he is feeling, his life would then be devoid of hardship and emotional duress. Accordingly, so much of
Piri’s *Bildung* is centered on learning the uses and abuses of language. This brief but powerful opening scene establishes the larger issues that play out in *Streets*. Piri constantly finds himself in situations of heightened emotionality, which dampen his ability to communicate, resulting in a dynamic relationship between language and emotion.

When Piri decides to return home lest his mother worry, he encounters the two heroin junkies beneath the stairwell of his apartment complex. He misunderstands one of the junkies who says to the other, “Coño, man, cook this shit up” (5). While the junkie is referencing the preparation of heroin, Piri interprets the word “cook” literally. “My mouth began to water. I wondered what they were going to cook,” he says (5). So, the inability to express himself to his father, as well as his misunderstanding of what the two junkies were doing, both precede his self-translation of the noun *la hara*. Here one of the dominant themes of Thomas’s text—the struggle to understand and the need to be understood—manifests in how Piri uses Spanish throughout the text.

In particular, Piri’s use of Spanish is often aligned with his tender relationship with his mother. Of all the members of Piri’s family, his mother is the one who unambiguously uses Spanish throughout the text. In fact, Piri’s mother code-switches consistently in her reported speech, and her speech most resembles Piri’s own use of language. Though Marta Sánchez and others have examined how issues of masculinity and machismo are depicted in Thomas’s text, there is reverence to the powers of the maternal figures in Piri’s life. He often expresses his notions of salvation and recuperation in terms of his relationship to his mother and his idealistic romance with
Trina, the girl with whom he betroths himself midway through Streets. In fact, Piri’s language shifts when he speaks to these two women, or when he reports dialogue or conversations with them.

An early scene reveals Piri’s maternal connection to Spanish. One morning after Piri’s father loses his job with the WPA, Piri’s mother keeps him home from school. “Hijo, today you no go to school. I want you to go to the Home Relief Office and help me explain about your father losing his job with the WPA,” she tells him (41). In effect, Piri’s mother requires his facility with both English and Spanish. This fact reveals much about the Thomas family’s material reality and how language factors into the very economics of the household and the ability of the caregivers to provide basic sustenance to the children. The scene that depicts Piri’s efforts at translation is a masterful depiction of how power is located within language.

“It seemed that every mother had brought a kid to interpret for her,” (42) Piri remarks when he observes how many families have come to apply for assistance at Home Relief. As he and his mother await their turn, Piri cannot help but attend to the various snatches of conversation he hears. He identifies a man named Mr. King as the “most understanding investigator” (42), to whom so many women are pleading their cases in turn. At one point, Mr. King remarks to one woman of her husband’s tirades, “He says things like that because he’s just overwrought” (42). Piri’s mind dwells on the word “overwrought”: “It sounded like a word you’d use when somebody had split his wig” (43). Piri’s instincts as to what overwrought means are not far from the mark; the
woman’s husband is clearly under mental duress, and Piri’s precocity shows his penchant for linguistic autodidacticism.

Often in this remarkable scene, Piri listens to the various mothers reduced to begging, and it both tires him and triggers memories of all of the times he himself has been to the Home Relief office with his mother. He is brought out of his reverie when it is his turn to interpret and translate for his mother. Of the investigator’s questions, Piri states, “I broke down all his words into Spanish for Momma, all the time thinking about the stiff, cardboard Home Relief checks and how they brought life to many” (44). What remains implicit in Piri’s remark is that his bilingualism is what gives his mother the ability to plead her case to the investigator at all. Further, Piri fulfills several functions as narrator in this scene. Not only does he report his mother’s dialogue in its original Spanish twice, he manages to complete the dual task of translating his mother’s words to the investigator while simultaneously translating for his audience. This is an example of James Phelan’s theory of disclosure functions that follow a dual-track wherein the narrator conveys one message to the narratee while the implied author uses the narrator to convey a message to the audience, and specifically, what he describes as “redundant telling, necessary disclosure” (12). Yet it is slightly different in the scene where Piri speaks to the Home Relief investigator, for his redundant telling is inextricably linked to his act of translation. In this case, Piri translation of his mother’s words comprises a salient aspect of the scene that allows us to examine the constraints on Thomas’s uses of Spanish throughout the text.
It is easy to see that Piri’s translation of his mother’s words to his interlocutor is a device which allows a monolingual English reader to understand what Piri’s mother says when she states: “Déle [sic] que tu padre perdió su trabajo, porque el boss le tenía antipatía,” and later, “Piri, déle sábanas, frizas, un matre, zapatos para los nene, abrigos y unos pantalones para ti” (44-45).\footnote{“Tell him that your father lost his job because the boss didn’t like him...Piri, tell him [we need] sheets, blankets, a mattress, shoes for the kids, coats and some pants for you.”} When Piri then translates his mother’s statements into English for the investigator, the monolingual English reader is then aligned with the investigator as Piri speaks to both at the same moment; both are awaiting Piri’s translation. The result is that, in such moments when Piri must translate or interpret Spanish into English within his storyworld, it is because he is compelled to do so. In this scene with his mother and the investigator, Piri acts as the intermediary between two entities who, in other contexts, wield greater power than he does. Yet here, Piri is in the middle of the power dynamic: he is still subordinate to the investigator while having at least as much authority as his mother, if not more.

To press this point further, this scene is illuminating in how it depicts the issue of translation, and especially how it treats the subject of audience. We can identify at least three receivers of Piri’s translation of his mother’s words: the investigator, the narratee, and the ideal audience. Piri assumes the investigator to be a monolingual English speaker, and so, he accordingly translates his mother’s first statement with a clear, unadulterated rendering of her Spanish into English. But immediately the investigator replies, “I gathered that, son.” And more specifically, he clarifies for Piri, “My Spanish is not that great, but I catch a little here and there” (44). In this moment, Thomas puts on full display
how linguistic assumptions are often tethered to phenotype. Piri cannot grasp the potentiality that the investigator can mostly understand what Piri’s mother is saying. For him, the investigator is associated not only with English, but a specific kind of English: “[the investigator] started to read a stack of papers that had all our personal life put down in good English for all to dig” (45). Piri’s recognition that his family’s life story has been rendered into government legalese is, in miniature, not unlike the effort Piri takes in telling his own life story to his audience. But rather than the supposed authoritative account found in the investigator’s stack of papers, Piri assumes the authority to narrate his own story in the manner of English that best suits his purpose of the telling. Moreover, Piri is best positioned to narrate when he has the ability to code-switch when it suits his storytelling purposes.

**Unnecessary Translations**

Still, the matter of unnecessary self-translation bears further examination. For example, at the end of chapter 5, Piri recounts how much more enjoyable it is to go to the market with his father than his mother: “Poppa discounted the vendors’ friendly ‘Cómo estás?’ He said that ‘How are you?’ were the first Spanish words the vendors learned so they could win the people’s confidence and gyp them in their own language. I wondered if Poppa didn’t like Jews the way I didn’t like Italians” (46). Piri’s translation of “Cómo estás?” is redundant to both himself and bilingual readers. Unlike the scene when Piri translates his mother’s words to another character, Piri translates his father’s words to his narratee, who apparently can understand other moments of Piri’s narrative that are given in untranslated Spanish but cannot do so here. This moment in Piri’s narrative forces us
to scrutinize and understand why Piri translates his father’s words, words that must be offered in Spanish because they are bound to Piri’s reflection of the wisdom given to him by his father.

As “Cómo estás?” are literally the first words the market vendors learn, it is understandable why Piri reports the exact words his father has marked as a ploy by the vendors—Spanish words suited for a specific rhetorical occasion. Yet the second sentence reveals the awkwardness of superfluous translation that arises outside of the storyworld. One question that may help get at the underlying impetus for this moment of translation is to ask to whom Piri translates his father’s words. When Piri says “He said that ‘How are you?’ were the first Spanish words,” his translation has caused him to be inaccurate. Clearly “How are you?” is not in Spanish within Piri’s narrative. If Thomas were striving for verisimilitude, as Kellman argues of many bilingual writers, Piri would repeat the Spanish words uttered by the vendors, the words his father was quick to point out with disdain as a confidence-gaining trick. For it is not that the vendors say “How are you?” in the effort to complete a sales transaction, but rather, the vendors blithely mimic a standard greeting in Spanish: “Cómo estás?” The vendors’ disingenuous use of a customer’s native tongue gives them a certain duplicity and falseness as far as Piri’s father, and therefore Piri, are concerned. And yet, Piri falsely translates the Spanish greeting in his own narrative. Why is this?

As Pérez Firmat says, “Of all the varieties of translation, perhaps none is more faithless than self-translation. Although the technical challenges are the same, it adds a dimension of personal and creative reassessment missing from second-party translations.
The author who translates his or her own work knows it too well, rather than well enough” (*Tongue Ties* 105). Pérez Firmat’s contention with self-translation is the endeavor of translating one’s own writing completely into another, as in an author who writes a novel in Spanish and then translates the same novel into English—a writer such as Rolando Hinojosa-Smith. What level of disdain, then, would Pérez Firmat have for a writer who checks his own use of Spanish by supplanting it with an English translation needlessly? Again, Pérez Firmat’s experiences as a light-skinned Cuban émigré informs his take on the use of language, which is rooted in specific historical contexts.

This moment of self-translation in *Streets* is indicative of the historical context of the book’s publication (1967), the publisher’s insistence that the text not alienate monolingual English readers, and the imposition a monolingual English audience places on a bilingual author. In addition, Thomas’s book cannot, as Giannina Braschi’s *Yo-Yo Boing!* does, challenge the monolingual English reader to the point that at least half of the narrative is in untranslated, unglossed Spanish. Thomas’s book, banned for its frank depictions of sex, racism, and drug use, works hard to naturalize its use of Spanish for the English reader. Especially in the first half of the novel, language looms large in the narrative progression. In chapter 10 Piri discusses moving to Long Island from Harlem—the first time in his life that he has been away from home:

>This Long Island was a foreign country. It looked so pretty and clean but it spoke a language you couldn’t dig. The paddy boys talked about things you couldn’t dig, or maybe better, they couldn’t dig you. Yeah, that was it; they didn’t dig your smooth talk, and you always felt like on the rim of belonging. No matter how much you busted your hump trying to be one of them, you’d never belong, they wouldn’t let you. Maybe they couldn’t. Maybe they didn’t belong themselves. (88)
Piri’s simile that describes his feeling “like on the rim of belonging,” is an apt characterization of the bilingual Latino/a writer in the early contemporary period of Latino/a literature in the US. Indeed, as Pérez Firmat notes:

Given the number and size of the Spanish-speaking communities of the United States, it is perhaps surprising that what has come to be known as ‘Latino literature,’ the imaginative writing by and about Hispanics in this country, exists almost entirely in English. As the monolingual expression of a largely bilingual population, Latino literature detaches culture from language, celebrating the former even as it silences the latter. Even the English of Latino writers, with some exceptions, bears little resemblance to the hybrid sounds and rhythms of the barrios where many of them grew up. What happened to the Garcia girls has also happened to the writers: They have lost their accents (137).

No matter how hard he tries, Piri can’t “dig” the language spoken outside of his home.

Thus, it is easy to assert that Latino writers have lost their accent, as Pérez Firmat claims.

On the other hand, Streets, despite its penchant for removing linguistic obstacles from its monolingual English readers, maintains a recognizable devotion to its Spanish accent, its mother tongue. We can see the tension that arises in the narration, especially when Piri reports his mother’s speech, for it is his mother that is the predominant Spanish speaker (other than Piri) in the book. The end of chapter 10 is perhaps the most prominent example of this tension. Piri is frustrated at how his phenotypically dark skin makes him “some nigger” in the eyes of strangers who cannot keep from making racist comments within Piri’s earshot—comments exacerbated because Piri is with Betty, a white girl. When Piri makes his decision to return to Harlem, he tells his mother: “I can’t get along with anything, no matter what I do. Nothing falls right. I don’t like Long Island and los blancos, and this world full of shits. I can’t put my hand on it, but there is something wrong with all of us—Pops, José, James, Sis, me, and the whole world.
Moms, I think the only ones got the right to be happy is dead” (90-91). Though she disagrees with his decision, Piri’s mother acquiesces to his resolve, saying, “Take care of yourself. Que Dios te bendiga y te guarde. God bless you and protect you” (91). It is a tender moment that will affect Piri for the remainder of the narrative.

Yet if we are to understand his mother’s dialogue, she gives him a blessing in Spanish, then she redundantly gives him the exact blessing in English. Clearly, Piri is bilingual and does not need to hear his mother’s blessing translated for him. Rather, the translation is, again, for the benefit of the reader. Now, it may be that Piri’s mother is redundant in her speech and that she continually translates her own Spanish into English for the benefit of her son, but this is highly unlikely. Remember that Piri’s mother cannot effectively communicate in English to begin with, as demonstrated in the scene with the Home Relief investigator. Thus, we have a clash between disclosure functions and narrator functions, as described by Phelan.

When Thomas (as implied author) provides an English translation of the blessing spoken in Spanish, we see it as a device that benefits the monolingual English reader and aids in storyworld reconstruction. Even without the help of the glossary as a reference, Thomas renders this moment as lucidly as possible. However, when considering Piri as narrator, this device of self-translation compromises his reliability as a narrator, even if it is in the service of a lucid narrative. In essence, Piri puts words in his mother’s mouth—English words at that. This is a significant compromise at the level of narrative design, one that illuminates how issues of audience and storyworld reconstruction supersede mimetic functions in a code-switching text. In other words, the reader’s ability to make
sense of the text overrides Piri’s act of reporting exactly what his mother said without having to translate it.

Interestingly, Phelan has argued that readers have an instinctive impulse to “preserve the mimetic.” In this case, an interpretation that desires to preserve the mimetic would argue that Piri’s mother wished to make herself completely understood to her son by emphatically stating her blessing in the two languages spoken in their home. Phelan gives the example from Robert Browning’s dramatic monologue “My Last Duchess,” where the Duke redundantly makes a statement already known to himself and his addressee, the envoy. When the Duke proclaims “The Count your master’s known munificence,” Phelan sees it as an example of an “uncharacteristically gratuitous” reiteration that is seemingly superfluous (Living to Tell 2). Similarly, Piri’s mother’s translation of her Spanish blessing to her son is equally superfluous. Like the Duke in Browning’s poem, the blessing is redundant as far as Piri is concerned. Thus, the unnecessary translation of Piri’s mother’s blessing is for the reader’s benefit, reminding us that Thomas has a monolingual English reader in mind.

In early examples of Latino/a literature, such as Streets, adherence to the mimetic is a salient feature only insofar as it does not override the needs of a monolingual English reader. That is to say, if a Latino/a author from this time period in US history (i.e., 1967) wished to create a storyworld that truly reflected his bilingual experience, limits to the level of bilingualism in their narratives would be manifest and imposed externally—by editors, publishing houses, and readers. The further such authors pushed the use of Spanish in their mostly English texts, the more concessions (e.g., self-translation) and
devices (i.e., glossaries) would need to be adopted to ameliorate the distancing effects of a bilingual blueprint for their storyworld.

The rather shocking result of this sort of \textit{a priori} constraint is that, to a large degree, and because of necessary self-translations to accommodate a monolingual English reader, Latino/a narratives that purport to be autobiographical and drawn from the author’s experience are necessarily a fictionalized account. In the case of \textit{Streets}, it is evident from the text that Piri’s mother cannot converse comfortably in English. And yet, her direct discourse is often rendered in English. This is a fascinating point that raises questions of fictionality. In other words, if Piri reports that his mother said words that she actually did not say, can this be considered what Dorrit Cohn’s “signpost of fictionality”? If so, this move to fictionalize certain elements of autobiographical material leads to at least one provocative conclusion: Latino/a authors are compelled at times, if not often, to conjure moments of fiction within their narrative blueprints, not because it suits the design of their projected storyworlds, but because audiences and publishers demand it. As Pérez Firmat reminds us, “Perhaps more than other types of serious writing, Latino literature caters to the limitations of its audience, which expects that the author and her stand-ins will act as cultural tour guides. […] Like other ethnic writing, Latino literature is bound to a pedagogical imperative that requires it not only to distract, entertain, elevate, but also to teach” (140). While I agree with Pérez Firmat, I would also add that, in rendering some of the narrative in Spanish, the publishers and audiences have been challenged to accept this issue of narrative design—even if publishers still have the power to insert a glossary between the covers of a book like \textit{Streets}. Thomas’s text opens
a space for the code-switching Latino/a writers who would follow him, and whose level of bilingual mastery would arguably culminate in Giannina Braschi’s *Yo-Yo Boing!*

In the end, Piri challenges the reader by making the attempt to design an unfiltered narrative that moves to express his life experiences in ways that are true to his lived experience, experiences that are generally not shared by his readership. However, that Thomas is compelled to acquiesce to moments of superfluous self-translation and a specifically-targeted glossary speaks of the publisher’s conception of what might be viewed as too onerous a challenge for the book’s readership. That Thomas’s frank depictions of drug use, violence, and sex ended up being more of a challenge to readers’ sensibilities, as opposed to his use of Spanish, underscores how Thomas’s publisher treats the Spanish as a foreign aspect of Piri’s experience rather than trusting the readership to acknowledge this aspect of Piri’s narrative. Rather than allow readers to accept Thomas’s challenges presented to them by his narrative, the publisher’s intrusion signals the historical context of how otherness is handled in the late 1960s.

**Bilingualism in Giannina Braschi’s *Yo-Yo Boing!***

If *Streets* was an opening salvo for a code-switching aesthetic in Latino/a literature that initiated a challenging reading situation for monolingual English readers, *Yo-Yo Boing!* (hereafter *Yo-Yo*) is an unabashed assault, thanks in large part to fact that Giannina Braschi is writing in the 1990s rather than the late 1960s. Braschi’s text presents many challenges in storyworld reconstruction. Initial reviewers lauded Braschi’s virtuoso performance and the deft manner she works with both English and Spanish. Indeed, unlike the majority of Latino/a narratives in the US that are predominately
written in English with only sparse usage of Spanish, *Yo-Yo* goes to great lengths to use both languages, and some have identified a third language in Braschi’s text: Spanglish.

Some guiding questions will help to orient my examination of Braschi’s novel. First, under what assumptions of audience does Braschi design the storyworld blueprint? Second, what authorial decisions present significant challenges in storyworld reconstruction? Indeed, these two questions are undoubtedly related, as Braschi’s notion of an ideal audience allows her the freedom to select devices within the purview of that ideal audience. On the other hand, any given reader unequipped with the decoding and reading abilities of Braschi’s ideal audience will experience difficult, if not insuperable, impediments when working to co-construct a mental model of Braschi’s storyworld. Although the most prominent difficulty readers will encounter when reading *Yo-Yo* is likely to be its use of language, the structure of the narrative discourse itself presents further challenges in reading Braschi’s text. In effect, Braschi unites two sets of reading challenges for her audience to negotiate. In fact, *Yo-Yo* is arguably the most challenging Latino/a novel ever written for a monolingual English audience.

The subject of translation has been a significant issue in this chapter, and here the topic of translation truly comes to the fore. In considering a novel such as *Yo-Yo* at the level of language barriers, we might also speak of the translator as a kind of ideal audience. That is to say, in order to even begin to attempt to face the challenges embedded within the narrative discourse of the novel, a basic level of mastery of both English and Spanish is needed on the part of the reader. It goes without saying that a monolingual English reader will find his or her own inability to read Spanish to be a
serious impediment to reading the short stories of, say, Jorge Luis Borges in the original Spanish. But even someone who can read Spanish fluently will invariably be presented with certain challenges in reconstructing Borges’s labyrinthine storyworlds. Thus, there is the challenge of language comprehension, as well as the challenge of decoding the narrative discourse so that a representative mental model might be constructed. For his or her part, the translator can help alleviate the problem of storyworld reconstruction at the level of language. Thus, what a translator has to say about translating a work can tell us much about the challenges of language.

Tess O’Dwyer, the translator of Yo-Yo into English, has spoken of the seemingly intractable difficulty of translating a novel that is already, in essence, half translated:

After translating Giannina Braschi’s collected poetry into English, I figured her new bilingual novel Yo-Yo Boing! would be a piece of cake. After all, Empire of Dreams is poetry and Yo-Yo Boing! is fiction. Shouldn’t prose be easier? And, wouldn’t it stand to reason that a bilingual book would take half the time to translate since the author already did half the job? I thought so, but it didn’t take long to change my mind. (34)

O’Dwyer, herself confident in translating the source language Spanish into the target language English, was apparently put off by Braschi’s bilingual novel. Yet, O’Dwyer’s comment regarding the novel’s audience, written while she was in the midst of her translation project, is particularly illuminative: “The ideal audience for Yo-Yo Boing! is obviously a savvy bilingual reader who can enjoy the novel hot off the shelf ‘as is.’ Others will have to wait until I can figure out how to translate all the code-switching bilingual dialogues, without losing all their humor and gusto” (35). Here we have a professional translator who admits to her own difficulties while working with a code-switching text, a somewhat stunning statement.
**Yo-Yo Boing! and Its Critical Reception**

The critical reception and scholarly examinations of *Yo-Yo* are at once laudatory and hesitant. It is clear that Braschi’s text causes critics discomfort when they speak of it. An anonymous reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* called the novel “a literary liberation and a frustrating challenge” (49). For the reviewer, the source of frustration is not merely the predominance of Spanish within the text, but also the narrative discourse:

Dispensing with a traditional story line, the work takes the form of an exuberant discussion involving an indeterminate number of speakers. Confusingly, these interlocutors are indicated only by a dash, not by name, while they yo-yo between languages and from subject to subject: writers, films, sex, childhood, family and, ultimately, Puerto Rican artistic expression in New York City. (49)

Even this reviewer betrays the expectation readers have for a “traditional story line” with clearly delineated characters, and because Braschi owns every aspect of her storyworld blueprint due to her equal mastery and fluency in Spanish and English, the reviewer sees this as an aesthetic affront to his or her effort in reading. In conclusion, the reviewer states, “Braschi’s mélange of prose and poetry, English and Spanish, is admirable for its energy, its experimental format and its insistence on a Spanglish as a literary language, but those very qualities will render it of interest only to the most literary-minded of bilingualists” (49). This is faint praise from a reviewer whose prior expectations of Latino/a narrative (to say nothing of narrative in general) could only have yielded a lukewarm response.

By contrast, David William Foster’s review of *Yo-Yo* engages with Braschi’s project on its own terms rather than seeking to make it fit certain expectations of what a
Foster’s review reflects his expertise on matters of Latin American and US Latino/a literary and cultural production:

Code switching is a discourse modality usually associated with Chicano writing. However, one of the most notable characteristics of Braschi’s novel is the agile and productive use of an interlingua poised between English and Spanish. […] Her novel is a superb exploration of the lived experiences of urban life for Hispanics, in this case New York City, and her principal interest is in representing how individuals move in and out of different cultural coordinates, including one so crucial as language. (202)

Foster, who like Braschi can move from Spanish to English with ease, is able to see beyond the in-your-face presentation of a language other than English. Whereas so many postcolonial critics from Homi Bhabha to Guyatri Spivak have articulated a theory of resistance to hegemony at the level of discourse, seeing the introduction of languages other than English as a means of challenging ideopolitical structures, Foster’s review does not concentrate on this supposed function of language. Instead of seeing Spanish as a means of undermining English-language hegemony, Foster considers Braschi’s text as reflecting Spanish- and English-speaking worlds as coeval, even in the heart of New York City at the cusp of the twenty-first century—what he identifies as an “interlingua” and “a synergetic fusion” (203). Rather than see the Spanish infusion in an English text as resistant or disruptive, Foster sees Braschi’s equal use and treatment of both languages as something new, as an “interlingua.”

However, José Torres-Padilla, in his essay “When Hybridity Doesn’t Resist,” takes issue with Braschi’s decision to foreground the aesthetic of her novel. Torres-Padilla states, “By not taking a firm stance of resistance against imperialism and hegemony, by actually obscuring this power relationship behind an argument over
aesthetics, Braschi’s novel in fact supports the continuing colonial status of Puerto Rico and undermines any desire for self-determination that might effect real change” (292). While in other parts of this project I have noted issues of authorial constraint which originate from publishers, producers, and audiences, Torres-Padilla’s essay is an example of the critical pressure from scholars that is often applied to ethnic writers. For Torres-Padilla, Braschi’s project fails to press the issue that he sees as the central concern of Puerto Rican writers—the island’s relationship with the US. In other words, Braschi’s novel is so concerned with aesthetics (both in content and form), according to Torres-Padilla, that the text loses its potential to impact the material reality of Puerto Ricans as well as the consequences of colonialism that still affect Puerto Rico today.

Unfortunately, this is the same sort of criticism that was leveled at both critics and producers of literature since the time of the Russian Formalists and perhaps to Plato, and even more recently with Latin American Boom authors. The Russian Formalists such as Viktor Shklovsky and Boris Tomasevsky desired to delve deeply into observable phenomena within a text. While their work continues to resonate within literary criticism, opponents of their method argued that the Russian Formalists were unconcerned with issues that lay outside of the text. This is true, but their specialization ought not be considered as a failure. Similarly, the Latin American Boom authors such as Carlos Fuentes, Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, and Gabriel García Márquez, while praised for their exploration of narrative form, were nevertheless criticized for being too concerned with the formal design of their narratives. Torres-Padilla’s take on Yo-Yo echoes these attacks on literature that engages with social, ideopolitical struggles in a different way.
Narratives that introduce non-hegemonic languages amidst hegemonic ones are seen as resistant. Interestingly, however, Torres-Padilla’s argument is that *Yo-Yo* “intentionally merges various registers in the two languages but not in any way that could be typified as resistant or oppositional” (293). Using Bhabha’s articulation of what resistance means in terms of language and language within a text, i.e., hybridity, even Torres-Padilla is critical of Bhabha’s flimsy explanation of how hybridity can have a material impact on our reality and not simply in academic conversations:

> Bhabha has been taken to task for this position, which seems to neglect questions of power that go beyond the abstract or the discursive. I mention it here, however, because even this rather feeble resistance eludes Braschi’s text. *Yo-Yo Boing!* certainly does not present any outright political opposition to the United States and its power as a colonizer over Puerto Rico. The hybridity in the text consists of an overlaying and interweaving of varying registers in both languages, a consistent deft dialogic playing of one language with and against the other. (294)

So, even by Bhabha’s standards, Torres-Padilla sees Braschi’s text as a failure at the level of resistance.

**Authorial Control of the Narrative Blueprint**

This brings me to a somewhat obvious question. Why should it be in Giannina Braschi’s agenda to create a narrative world that is strategically designed to resist hegemony in ways that fit with other people’s expectations? There should be no mandate that any author identified as a member of a marginalized group must write one type of novel, poem, play, film, and so on. In fact, this is the very issue at the heart of my dissertation—the notion that a Latino/a author is compelled, a priori, to create works of literature that do a specific kind of political and ideological work within society. Now, I recognize that certain works of literature may have the power to mobilize individuals
towards a collective action, and certainly authors may take this view in creating their narrative worlds. But this surely is not the only thing so-called multicultural literatures can do.

The moment we begin to impose a kind of essentialist agenda on our creators of literature, we immediately restrict and constrain what authors may or may not do. Torres-Padilla rails against the overt aestheticism in *Yo-Yo*, claiming it to be “rife with bourgeois fetishes, frivolous talk about material things and a cloying concern with name-dropping” (299). He cannot conceive of the possibility that Braschi can make masterful use of bilingualism and hybridity, while not blatantly furthering a particular political agenda. What’s more, he cannot acknowledge that Braschi’s novel can still pursue ideological and political agendas even with its concern with matters of aesthetics.

Here we can turn back to the claim that undergirds this dissertation, that is, my claim that Latino/a authors are able to design, create, and publish texts that are blueprints for all manner of storyworlds. It is also worthwhile here to remember the historical context Piri Thomas and Giannina Braschi, both Puerto Rican, are writing within. And not only that, the life experiences of both of these writers tell us much about their approach to writing. Thomas, having garnered much of his education through his experiences on the streets as well as in prison, writes a *Bildungsroman* in much the same pattern. Because he experienced racism, exploitative violence, drug use, and prison in particular ways, his narrative similarly exposes the socioeconomic factors that worked to bring his experiences to fruition in the first place. Though there is artistry and craft in Thomas’s narrative, the fact that his “based on actual events” narrative and his lived
experience are very nearly superimposed contrasts greatly with Braschi’s narrative methods.

As her bionote states in the Norton Anthology of Latino Literature, Braschi was born into the upper class in Puerto Rico […]. Before she went to college, she had become the youngest female tennis champion in the history of Puerto Rico. She studied comparative literature in Madrid, Rome, and Paris, and the experimental and cosmopolitan nature of her creative writing partly reflects these European intellectual influences (1971).

Barring differences in innate talent and ability, the accident of Thomas’s and Braschi’s births allowed each of them to have not only vastly different life experiences that significantly influenced how they learned the craft of writing (Braschi in Madrid; Thomas in Sing Sing Prison), but also how they self-identified. Add to this each author’s respective relationship with English and Spanish, and we begin to see how a more than thirty year gap of time between Streets and Yo-Yo tells us much about Latino/a authorial concerns and constraints when designing narrative worlds for a reading audience. Consider for example Thomas’s notable but halting use of Spanish, together with the ex post facto glossary appended to his novel by his publisher. Conversely, Braschi wields her multilingualism with confidence and defiance.

For there is no glossary in Yo-Yo Boing! to aid a monolingual reader, and that is an important fact that is not to be missed. While nearly every Latino/a work of literature is targeted at a monolingual reader, Braschi’s ideal audience is clearly bilingual. And when I say bilingual, I do not mean a monolingual English reader who can recognize Spanish words in context such as “tortilla” or “policía.” I mean a reader who can read entire chapters of literary Spanish as easily as literary English. Braschi’s equal treatment
and use of both English and Spanish is, in part, what Torres-Padilla finds so
disconcerting. The Spanish present within *Yo-Yo Boing!* does not merely appear as a
method of destabilizing English; the Spanish is as predominant as the English within her
novel. Unlike Torres-Padilla, who sees this as a failed experiment of hybridity, I see
Braschi’s novel as a successful manifestation of how challenging a Latino/a work of
literature can be—not only at the level of language, but at the level of narrative discourse
as well. In short, Braschi’s use of bilingualism in *Yo-Yo* is a crucial aspect of the narrative
blueprint, even more so than any other code-switching novel written by a Latino/a.

**Braschi and Bilingualism**

As Braschi describes in “Pelos en la lengua”:

> El bilingüismo es una estética bound to double business. O, ‘tis most
> sweet when in one line two crafts directly meet. To be and not to be.
> Habla con la boca llena and from both sides of its mouth. Está con Dios y
> con el Diablo. Con el punto y con la coma. Es un purgatorio, un signo
> grammatical intermedio, entre heaven and earth, un semicolon entre la
> independencia y la estadidad, un estado libre asociado, un mamarracho
> multicultural. (1977)

Bilingualism, for Braschi, is this wonderful nether region balanced between two poles.

But for Braschi, a master of both Spanish and English, bilingualism is also the crux of a
fulcrum, a sight of tremendous potential energy.

Another way of thinking of bilingualism as it relates to narrative worldmaking is
simply to ask: is the mental model that is created by a truly bilingual text somehow
different if the same storyworld were blueprinted using one language? I argue that the

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44 “Bilingualism is an aesthetic bound to double business. O’ tis most sweet when in one line two crafts
directly meet. To be and not to be. It speaks with its mouth full and from the sides of its mouth. It is with
God and the Devil. With the period and with the comma. It is a purgatory, an intermediate grammatical
sign, between heaven and earth, a semicolon between independence and statehood, a state of free
association, multicultural bullshit.
answer is yes, and much of my answer owes a great debt to Richard Rodriguez, who, as I noted at the opening of this chapter, resolutely insists that Spanish and English in the US must not be allowed to collide with one another. Spanish, the language of the home and hearth, as it were, cannot coexist with the English language of legal and government discourse. I do not agree with Rodriguez’s vehement position that the two must be kept apart, but I wholeheartedly agree that the two languages, as manifest in the US, are situated within two separate worlds of discourse. It has only been recently that we can turn on the television to see a Presidential debate moderated by the respected bilingual journalist Jorge Ramos. Latinos often experience Spanish only among family and friends, while English delivered with the coveted “Broadcaster English” dominates the airwaves. Braschi envisions and puts into practice an aesthetic where the two languages are equal partners in the dance of narrative worldmaking.

*Yo-Yo* draws much of its energy from this separation of the two languages in the US by juxtaposing them with equal enthusiasm. Unlike Braschi’s earlier poetry, *Yo-Yo* is an amalgam of forms, voices, language, and subject. The novel is divided into three chapters: 1) Close-Up, 2) Blow-Up, and 3) Black-Out, as well as an Epilogue; the first and last parts are written entirely in Spanish, while the lengthy middle part moves with ease between the two languages. An examination of each part will elucidate how Braschi’s brand of bilingualism helps structure the architecture of her storyworld rather than merely supplement or enrich what is essentially an English-based narrative blueprint, as most examples of Latino/a literature are apt to exemplify. For example, not only is the opening chapter written entirely in Spanish, it is essentially one long
paragraph told by an authorial narrator and focalized through a woman in her bathroom.

There is a surreal quality to the narration, as the opening passage establishes:

> Comienza por ponerse en cuatro patas, gatea como una niña, pero es un animal con trompa feroz, un elefante. Y poco a poco, se le va desencajando el cuello, y poco a poco, le crece el cuello, una pulgada, luego dos pulgadas, luego cinco pulgadas, hasta que su cabeza se aleja tanto y tanto del suelo, casi diría que toca el techo de la casa donde habita, casi diría que da golpes contra el techo, ya no cabe su cabeza en esta casa, ha crecido tanto y tanto. Y de repente descubre que lo que ha crecido no es su cabeza sino su cuello. Es, entonces, definitivamente, una jirafa. (3)

The unnamed woman, doing what women usually do in bathrooms in the morning, undergoes spectacular transformations through the use of metaphor. The novel opens with the woman on all fours, imagining herself as an elephant, growing beyond the limits of the room not unlike Lewis Carroll's Alice, until at last she realizes that she has become a giraffe. This scene, however, is not an example of magical realism, where we might expect a woman who transforms into an elephant and then a giraffe while completing her morning toilette. Instead, the narrator provides a window into the woman’s mind, and we see her as she imagines herself. The opening chapter is an indication of the sorts of fictional minds we encounter as we progress through the novel. In this text, the ordinary and commonplace are consistently renewed in the manner described by Viktor Shklovsky as ostraniene.

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45 “She begins by getting on all fours, crawling like a little girl, but she is an animal with a fierce trunk, an elephant. And bit by bit, her neck becomes unhinged, and bit by bit, her neck grows, an inch, then two inches, then five inches, until little by little her head moves away from the floor, she could almost say that it touches the ceiling of her home, she could almost say that it hits against the ceiling, now her head no longer fits in this house, it’s grown so. And suddenly she learns that what has grown was not her head but rather her neck. She is, then, definitely, a giraffe.”
In fact, Julia Carroll describes the opening chapter as Braschi’s fashioning of “a womb-like space in which the narrator’s private acts of autoeroticism leave her feeling ‘tranquila y feliz’ and also confident about going public” (98). Though I agree that the opening chapter can be seen as a moment of emergence for the protagonist with its language of growth and renewal, I disagree that this initial section of the novel is told via interior monologue, as Carroll maintains (94). Interior monologue reveals the thoughts of a character as though unfiltered by a narrator, as though readers have bypassed the narrator in order to peer into the character’s mind. The example *par excellence* is James Joyce’s final chapter of *Ulysses*, where we get Molly Bloom’s unmediated thoughts as she lies in bed:

> Yes because he never did a thing like that before as ask to get his breakfast in bed with a couple of eggs since the City Arms hotel when he used to be pretending to be laid up with a sick voice doing his highness to make himself interesting for that old faggot Mrs Riordan that he thought he had a great leg of and she never left us a farthing for all for masses for herself and her soul greatest miser ever was actually afraid to lay out 4d for her methylated spirit telling me all her ailments […] (608)

In this example of interior monologue, readers are swept up in Molly’s musings, placed in the midst of her thoughts.

What we have in the opening chapter of *Yo-Yo* is significantly different, I contend. Someone is reporting the thoughts and experiences of the woman in the bathroom. If Carroll is to be believed, we are reading the woman’s interior monologue as she views herself in the third person. The Spanish verbs unambiguously denote that a woman is being spoken of and not that a woman is speaking of herself. While it is
plausible that the woman is speaking of herself in third-person, Occam’s Razor disfavors this possibility.

This may seem like a relatively minor narratological quibble, but I believe the distinction tells us something about the narrative blueprint Braschi creates. In Latino/a literature, character narrators dominate. Following in a close second are third-person limited narrators. Less frequent in Latino/a literature are narrators that focalize through a specific character, and moreover, report the mental activity of characters in an unbiased, unfiltered way. I argue that Braschi’s use of this technique is a crucial development in the Latino/a literary tradition. Character narrators (as well as autobiographers/memoirists) consistently narrate from a subjective position. They are continually fighting the battle of reliability. As I argued in chapter 2, Oscar Acosta’s veneer of verifiable autobiography is suddenly exposed when his narrative is held to the light of historical record. Character narration is complicated by its being, as Phelan argues, “an art of indirection” (Living to Tell 7). To make matters worse, character narrators and life writers of so-called minority fiction can oftentimes be seen as representatives for the whole of the group which they represent, as if somehow their narrativized experiences authenticate the experiences of millions of people.

On the other hand, third-person limited narrators purport to relate events as they occur within the storyworld. These narrators are limited because they are emotionally and personally removed from the characters within the story. Even when the third-person narrators are seemingly omniscient, the narrator appears to dip into the characters' minds
only rarely, as in this example from Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991):

Yolanda gazes at the cake. Below her blazes the route she has worked out on the map for herself, north of the city through the mountains to the coast. As the singing draws to a close, the cousins urge her to make a wish. She leans forward and shuts her eyes. There is so much she wants, it is hard to single out one wish. There have been too many stops on the road of the last twenty-nine years since her family left this island behind. She and her sisters have led such turbulent lives—so many husbands, homes, jobs, wrong turns among them. But look at her cousins, women with households and authority in their voices. Let this turn out to be my home, Yolanda wishes. She pictures the maids in their quiet, mysterious cluster at the end of the patio, Altagracia with her hands in her lap. (11)

Here the narrator moves closer to her thoughts, until at last the narrator reports Yolanda’s direct thoughts: “Let this turn out to be my home.” And soon, the narrator has withdrawn once more to reporting events in the larger storyworld.

Such use of third-person narration, I argue, is quite common in Latino/a literature.

Thus, when we consider the opening of *Yo-Yo*, we see a narrator that maintains distinction from the consciousness of the woman in the bathroom while simultaneously acting as a conduit which allows the interaction of minds among author, narrator, character, and reader. The effect is that what we get is not the constructed words of the character but rather an account of events that provides partial, intermittent access to her conscious experiences. By maintaining distance with Spanish grammatical constructions that indicate “she,” the nearly invisible narrator lends the authority of a third-person narrator to the woman’s existential musings. The consequence of this mode of narration raises the issue of authentication explored by Lubomír Doležel. In “Truth and Authenticity in Narrative,” Doležel describes the authentication function as “a necessary,
maybe a central, concept of the theory of fictional existence in narrative worlds. What exists in a narrative world is determined by the authentication function. The authentic motifs and only these motifs represent *narrative facts*, the elementary constituents of narrative worlds” (12). As it pertains to the opening of *Yo-Yo*, the authentication function is unambiguously in question, for the reader cannot discern what to take as authentic in the storyworld. Doležel’s proposed “three value function of authentication” sheds light on the opening of Braschi’s novel:

In this theoretical framework, it is possible to say that the narrator constructs a narrative world by introducing a set of narrative motifs, but he fails to authenticate it since his authentication authority is undermined. We are presented with fictional worlds whose existence is ambiguous, problematic, indefinite. These worlds are neither authentic, nor non-authentic, but create an indeterminate space between fictional existence and fictional non-existence. (23)

In the opening chapter of *Yo-Yo*, we have a narrator that lacks authentication authority. Doležel himself sees instances of narrators without authentication authority as “a very important factor in many modern narratives” (22), and I would make a similar claim for the importance of such a narrator in the development of Latino/a literature.

Further, Braschi’s decision to render this scene in Spanish rather than English has a profound difference in maintaining this distinction between focalized character and third-person narrator. Simply put, were this scene written in English, the replacement of the pronouns “she/her” with “I/me” can easily accommodate a shift from first- to third-person narration. Conversely, in Spanish one can indicate another woman in ways that do not overtly invoke the Spanish pronoun for “her”: “ella.” Because every verb must be conjugated to indicate another person, in this case a female, the text must undergo
significant changes to indicate interior monologue. In the case of *Yo-Yo*’s opening chapter, the Spanish works to maintain the authority of the narrator while foregrounding the presence of the narrator despite the fact that we are reading the thoughts of the woman in the bathroom. Because the presence of the narrator is more pronounced in Spanish than it is in English, the authentication function is further compromised, as Doležel’s work suggests. In other words, the narrator is not reporting the woman’s physical transformation but rather the woman’s thoughts as she explores her self and her environment. The result is an ambiguous storyworld that destabilizes the reader.

The third chapter bookends the first chapter by exploring other permutations of the character-narrator dyad. Chapter 3 titled “Black-Out,” is divided into two parts: “Perro Realengo” and “Sardina en Lata.” “Perro Realengo,” or “Stray Dog,” is narrated in the first person present by an unidentified person. Yet by this point in the narrative it is safe to assume that all of the major protagonists of each chapter and section are all a fictional version of Giannina Braschi. She begins this first section of chapter 3 on the move and with a sense of the unilateral movement which informs her art:

Camino con botas, boteando el piso, golpeándolo, y mientras más rápido voy, más pierdo de perspectiva, porque dejo atrás, y nunca viro la cabeza para ver lo que dejé detrás. Digo que voy para el sur—y voy para el Sur—ya estoy llegando a mi destino. Pero mi afán, que triunfa sobre mi destino, me induce a darle otra vuelta a la manzana del norte, a llegar por el oeste, a admirar la punta infinita de la orilla de las aguas, a quedarme embelesada contemplando un maniquí, y los zapatos que lleva puestos—a desear ser yo misma el maniquí—a ver que el viento hace que vuelen periódicos—a ver un ratón entrar en un acueducto. (231)

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46 “I walk in boots, putting boots to ground, beating it, and the faster I go, the more I lose perspective because I’m leaving behind, and I never turn my head in order to see what I’ve left behind. I say I’m going south—and I’m going south—I’m already arriving at my destination. But my quest that triumphs over my destiny, makes me do another turn to the apple of the north, in order to arrive from the west, to admire the infinite point of the edge of the waters, to stay enraptured, contemplating a mannequin and the
Importantly, the “I” in this section notes how she loses perspective the faster she moves, and that she never looks back to see what she has left in her wake. It is truly a bold statement of aesthetic creation, one that moves without having the past serve as a sort of constraint on the art of the present and the future.

In “Sardina en Lata,” or “Canned Sardines,” the narrative employs second-person narration in which the narrator directly addresses her narratee regarding the subject of following your own will or following the will of another, what she terms “el boss.” The metaphor of the can of sardines directly points to the issue of being defined and constrained, and it too can be seen as a statement of artistic conviction:

Es tan fácil decir: no lo voy a hacer, que estás desempleada—todo lo que se desempeña se desenvuelve—se quita el envolvimiento que no te deja desenvolveerte. Si te deprimen, te bajan, te están oprimiendo en una lata de sardina—mi pregunta es la siguiente: por qué te dejaste empaquetar en una lata de sardina—si tú no eres una sardina—y tu boss—y las otras sardinas que si son sardinas—no se dan cuenta que tú no eres una sardina. De tanto estar condicionada a ser sardina, te crees que para existir tienes que estar ensardinada en lata—y oprimida por las otras sardinas que casi son tú misma—porque se te pegan tanto—rinde más quién más trabaja en menos tiempo, quién bajo la presión del enlatamiento y la compresión se comprime más en la lata, posee mayor talento para ser comprimido, mientras te comprimen más tú te dejas comprimir—y mayor la tensión entre las ratas enlatadas en sardinas, que pican y muerden de feas, saladas y frías—más muertas que vivas. (242)

shoes it wears—I wish I could be that mannequin—to see what the wind that blows newspapers does—to see a mouse enter into a sewer.”

47 “It’s so easy to say: I’m not going to do it, that you’re unemployed—everything that unemployed is easygoing—it removes the surrounding that doesn’t allow you to relax. If they bring you down, put you down, pressing you into a sardine tin—my question is the following: why did you allow yourself to be packed into a sardine tin—if you are not a sardine—and your boss—and the other sardines that truly are sardines—they don’t realize that you are not a sardine. Because you’ve been conditioned to be a sardine, you believe that in order to exist you must be sardined in a tin—and pressed with the other sardines that are almost you—because they stick to you so—the one who does more work in less time gets more, the one beneath the pressure of being canned tends to get canned, having more talent to be compressed,
What she calls the can of sardines, I argue, can also be seen as the neat box Latino/a literature is often placed into, much like the one or two bookshelves at the large chain bookstores that keep books segregated from one another. From the perspective of those Latino/a writers who feel constrained by those who would box them in, Braschi’s narrator urges the listener to resist it as she has. As she states, “Why did you allow yourself to be packed into a sardine tin—if you are not a sardine?” With the first and third chapters, *Yo-Yo* opens with a woman whose consciousness and self-image is metamorphosing into something than cannot be contained, and it closes with the image of a woman moving forward while urging others to resist categorization and constraints. These chapters literally frame the middle chapter titled “Blow-Up.”

This lengthy second chapter is a tour de force, not only because of its linguistic sophistication but also because of the cognitive demands it presents the reader. There are long passages in Spanish, in English, and in code-switching Spanglish. Adding to the difficulty is the use (or non-use) of a narrator in this chapter. While the narrator is clearly present in the first chapter, there is a definitive lack of narrator in “Blow-Up.” In its structure, it somewhat resembles Philip Roth’s *Deception* (1990), a narrative that dispenses with an overt narrator and allows the development and movement between characters and their dialogue to provide impetus to the narrative progression. “Blow-Up” also owes a large debt to Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* (1971), the celebrated novel that features two nameless prisoners talking to one another in their cell with no

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while they compress you the more you allow yourself to be compressed—and so the tension rises among the canned sardine rats that prick and bite from ugliness, salted and cold—more dead than alive.”
narrator to mediate the characters’ interior emotional and mental states. In each of these examples, readers are unable to rely on a narrator to orchestrate the narrative. The result is that readers must take the words of the characters and use them to fill in salient aspects of the narrative that may go unmentioned. The characters speak to one another, ostensibly without the awareness that readers are reading their words, jumping from story to memory to dream and so forth without any cues to the reader.

One more aspect of “Blow-Up” must be introduced before I begin a more detailed exploration of this weighty chapter of Yo-Yo. One cannot help notice Braschi’s use and appropriation of the title “Blow-Up,” which is also the exact title of a translation of Julio Cortazár short story “Las babas del diablo.” Cortazár’s story famously grapples with issues of how a story ought to be told, which seems to be of even more importance than the story itself. The story opens:

It’ll never be known how this has to be told, in the first person or in the second, using the third person plural or continually inventing modes that will serve nothing. If one might say: I will see the moon rose, or : we hurt me at the back of my eyes, and especially: you the blond woman was the clouds that race before my you’re his our yours their faces. What the hell. (114)

Braschi’s use of Cortazár’s story as an intertext helps contextualize the middle chapter of her novel, for it is very much about how the narrative is to be told, as well as narratives in general. The protagonist, what appears to be an alter-ego of Braschi herself, constantly refers to her writing struggles. Indeed, Braschi seems to be playing with the notion of “continually inventing modes” in this section of her novel.

The middle section is structured as multiple vignettes that occur over a span of time and in multiple locations. Without the centering presence of a narrator, markers of
time and space rarely surface in the narrative. In addition, while the competing dialogues provide the materials for characterization, readers are left wondering more obvious aspects of identity, such as name, familial ties, racial, ethnic, and national markers, as well as spatializing devices within the narrative. Things often taken for granted in a narrative are now conspicuously absent. Again, I take this to be another instance of Shklovsky’s call to make the stone feel stony. The enstranging structure of this narrative presents the audience with frustrating challenges in reconstructing the storyworld. For example, the chapter opens in medias res with two people engaged in a quickly escalating argument:

–Abrela tú.
–¿Por qué yo? Tú tienes las keys. Yo te las entregué a ti. Además, I left mine adentro.
–¿Por qué las dejaste adentro?
–Porque I knew you had yours.
–¿Por qué dependes de mí?
–Just open it, and make it fast. Y lo peor de todo es cuando te levantas por las mañanas y te vas de la casa y dejas la puerta abierta. Y todo el dinero ahí, desperdigado encima de una gaveta en la cocina, al lado de la entrada. Y ni te das cuenta que me pones en peligro. Yo duermo hasta las diez. Y entonces me levanto y me visto rápidamente y cuando voy a abrir la puerta me doy cuenta que está abierta. Es un descuido de tu parte. Dejar la puerta abierta. Alguien puede entrar y robarme y violarme. Y tú tan Pancho, Sancho, ni te importa.
–Claro que me importa. Eso sí fue un descuido.” (21).

48 --You open it.
--Why me? You have the keys. I gave them to you. Moreover, I left mine inside.
--Why did you leave them inside?
--Because I knew you had yours.
--Why do you depend on me?
--Just open it, and make it fast. And worst of all is when you get up mornings and you leave the house with the door open. And all the money there, lying on the kitchen drawer near the entrance. And you don’t even realize that you put me in danger. I sleep until ten. And then I get up and dress quickly, and when I go to open the door I notice that it’s open. It’s neglect on your part. Leaving the door open. Someone could come in and rob and violate me. And you, so willy-nilly, don’t even care.
--Of course I care. That truly was an oversight.
The argument is over the opening of the locked door to the apartment. The man has a set of keys, but he cannot understand why he must use the keys if the woman (presumably his paramour) can open the door for him. It is the sort of heated conversation typical of frustrated lovers, but it is significant that the chapter opens with a discussion concerning locks and keys. If we take this to be a metaphor for the larger project of writing and reading *Yo-Yo*, we might see the narrative as a locked door. Along the same lines, if the woman is a stand-in for Braschi herself (as it appears she is), then she is frustrated that she must open the door to let someone in who has the keys readily available. This metaphor can be read as a preemptive strike at criticisms such as that of Torres-Padilla, who criticizes Braschi for her overinvestment in formal and aesthetic issues. Why should she open the door if she has already provided the key?

Braschi is aware of her audience, just as her protagonist is aware of matters of narrative structure. “I read so much,” the woman complains. “I’m bored to death by Ibsen. Do I act upon the reading? Act upon the character? What fills my brain?” (87). Further, she places herself within the context of other ethnic writers, saying:

–Those were the puritan fanatics that England rejected. The harmless ones stayed home. We said, go fanatics, go to the wilderness of monkeys. And look at the mess they created. You call that Multiculturalism. They obliviated the Indians. And they continue to do so in the name of Big Mac. Eighty, ninety languages a day. Poof. Gone. Look at Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan–writing about their lost culture—long dead. No wonder the bloody Americans celebrate them—because now they are no longer black or Chinese, they’re all GAP. Fifty years ago this was unheard of. American soccer players on the Brazilian team. French players on the British team. They sell themselves to the highest bidder. Is that diversity? No, now all the teams are the same! (135).
Indeed, Morrison, Kingston, and Tan do write about their lost culture, to the plaudits of critics and audiences. Yet the protagonist accuses these writers of no longer being a part of their “lost culture” but rather another part of the capitalist machine that drives the US and world economies. It is a worldview critical of exploitation and capitalism that innocently passes as diversification. Braschi’s project supports this worldview, as it refuses to pursue a reclamation project of something lost either through colonization or assimilation. Despite her protagonist’s misgivings regarding the creative process (she struggles with both a lack of self-confidence as well as writer’s block), Braschi owns the tools and devices of her trade. Whereas Latino/a authors have consistently acquiesced to audiences or to publishers’ prescriptions concerning who their audiences are and should be, Braschi considers her audiences’ needs and limitations as secondary to her own as a creator of poetry and narrative. This very issue comes up in one of the discussions in “Blow-Up”:

–Who have you read?
–I don’t read any of them.
–It shows. You must realize you’re limiting your audience by writing in both languages. To know a language is to know a culture. You neither respect one nor the other.
–If I respected languages like you do, I wouldn’t write at all. El muro de Berlín fue derribado. Why can’t I do the same? Desde la torre de Babel, las lenguas han sido siempre una forma de divorciarnos del resto de la humanidad. Poetry must find ways of breaking distance. I’m not reducing my audience. On the contrary, I’m going to have a bigger audience with the common markets— in Europe— in America. And besides, all languages are dialects that are made to break new grounds. I feel like Dante, Petrarca and Boccaccio, and I even feel like Garcilaso forging a new language. Saludo al nuevo siglo, el siglo del nuevo lenguaje de América, y le digo adiós a la retórica separatista y a los atavismos. (162-63).49

49—Who have you read?
–I don’t read any of them.
Braschi’s fictional counterself understands the importance of book-buying audiences and markets, as does Braschi herself. That is to say, while she may acknowledge the difficulties her bilingualism may present to audiences, audiences will nevertheless adapt to these challenges, or rather, will make the effort to align with the ideal audience.

Throughout “Blow-Up,” Braschi weaves a storyworld that is multi-layered, intertextual, and cross-cultural, much like the New York City of the late-twentieth century in which her story is set. Her novel is not located near the US-Mexico border of Anzaldúa’s imagination or the demarcated neighborhood of Spanish Harlem where Piri Thomas received so many life lessons. Rather, it is a highbrow work of Latino/a literature that situates itself amongst other examples of high art across nations, cultures, history, and language. The ideal audience in the case of Yo-Yo Boing! is capable of moving fluidly throughout the various challenges of the text, but those actual readers who are able to align themselves with the ideal reader becomes a smaller group as the various challenges presented by a text are piled higher and higher.

It is fitting, then, that the epilogue of Braschi’s novel depicts what looks like a scene from a script or drama wherein a character named Giannina meets Hamlet and Zarathustra at a crossroads. Hamlet and Zarathustra are each carrying a dead body when

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It shows. You must realize you’re limiting your audience by writing in both languages. To know a language is to know a culture. You neither respect one nor the other.

—If I respected languages like you do, I wouldn’t write at all. The Berlin Wall was demolished. Why can’t I do the same?— Ever since the Tower of Babel, languages have always served as a way of divorcing ourselves from the rest of humanity. Poetry must find ways of breaking distance. I’m not reducing my audience. On the contrary, I’m going to have a bigger audience with the common markets— in Europe— in America. And besides, all languages are dialects that are made to break new grounds. I feel like Dante, Petrarcha and Boccaccio, and I even feel like Garcilaso forging a new language. Greetings to the new century, the century of the new language of America, and I say farewell to separatist rhetoric and atavisms.
they are joined by Giannina, who declares that she is going to bury the twentieth century. It is a stunning moment of self reflexivity and evaluation of just how far Giannina has come. If we read Giannina as a Latino/a artist at the brink of a new century, looking back to the past while considering the important issues of aesthetics and representation, it is clear that in burying the twentieth century, Braschi, through her fictional self Giannina, has moved beyond the limitations of identity-bound aesthetics—of the atavisms of Latino/a literature. By seeing the potential of audience to expand Latino/a literary form rather than constrain it, Braschi has set a new standard for how code-switching and bilingualism can be used to open up new avenues of expression not only in Latino/a literature, but in other literatures of the United States as well.

To be sure, Piri Thomas and Giannina Braschi arose out of vastly different cultural, educational, and historical contexts. Their use of English and Spanish in their works is indicative of publishing constraints when it comes to the degree of bilingualism and code switching in the works they market. Thomas is very careful in his use of code-switching, always with the understanding that his audience is uninitiated in the social and cultural experiences that have shaped his worldview and means of expression. Therefore, Thomas is continually working to balance his unique sense of self with his desire to reveal his narrative in the language and codes that best articulate his vision. Braschi, meanwhile, has very few constraints on the linguistic choices that help shape her storyworld. Her equal prowess with both English and Spanish become a crucial aspect of her novel, and her narrative design suggests that she anticipates readers who can easily decode both languages in order to co-construct the storyworld. Nevertheless, even though
Braschi writes with the benefit of over three decades of social change and altered expectations for Latino/a writers, her novel still results in a much smaller audience than Thomas’s novel. But the key result here is that Braschi is empowered to write the type of narrative of her imagination, irrespective of sales figures and bestseller status. She has made a significant step in how Latino/a authors can design narrative blueprints with which only a small audience may contend. Braschi places her faith in her writing with the understanding that an audience will find it. In the following chapter, I investigate how the comics form of storytelling has allowed authors such as Los Bros Hernandez to trust in their ability to design storyworlds that make fewer and fewer concessions to audiences.
Chapter 4— In Graphic Detail: Challenges of Time and Memory in the Storyworlds of Los Bros Hernandez

If Latino/a authors have had a trying time of reaching a larger audience, the same might be said of comics. Thanks in large part to its pulp form and storylines that delved into fantastical worlds of their authors’ imaginations, comics has been viewed, until the 1990s, with little regard as a literary genre. 50 Indeed, the dominance of superhero comics and the younger target audience of comics has cast this type of narrative as juvenile and not worthy of rigorous inquiry—something that comics artists and comics scholars have been resisting for decades. As Rocco Versaci makes clear:

This misapprehension persists today. One of the clearest recent examples comes in rhetoric surrounding the August 2006 release of Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon’s The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation. This comic book adaptation of The 9/11 Commission Report (2004)—a book that details the events leading up to and including the attacks on September 11, 2001—was profiled in the Washington Post by Bravetta Hassell, who asks at one point, “can a topic as massive and sobering as Sept. 11 be dealt with effectively in the pages of a comic book?” (D1). The assumption here is that the weight of the topic is simply too much for the medium to bear. In response to her question, one reader—a pilot for a major airline—writes that he is “outraged by the attempt to depict the horrific events of Sept. 11 in a comic book format” and that “while shielding children from the details of this horrific tragedy is appropriate, telling the rest of society about it in a comic book isn’t” (Villani A14). The fact that the letter-writer has only seen the book through the limited scope of Hassell’s article (and has probably not picked up a comic book in the last twenty years) is

50 Perhaps the key text for the reconsideration of comics as a significant literary genre came in 1991 with Art Spiegelman’s Maus: A Survivor’s Tale, which won the Pulitzer Prize. In terms of critical scholarship, comics artists initiated the rise in comics critical scholarship with Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics (1993) and Will Eisner’s Comics and Sequential Art (1985). Other pathbreaking studies in comics are Les Daniels’s Comix: A History of Comic Books in America (1971), Thomas M. Inge’s Comics as Culture (1990), and Coulton Waugh’s The Comics (1991).
largely beside the point. What is important to note here is the assumption he makes that comic books are a juvenile medium that can only trivialize serious matters. (8-9)

Works of scholarship like Versaci’s and others continue to make compelling arguments for the consideration of comics as a sophisticated, literary mode of storytelling. Embedded within this endeavor is the quest for respect, which is all well and good. However, one of the strengths of the comics genre is that, because of the younger audiences for which comics have traditionally been marketed, there are fewer restraints on the possibilities of what comics can be. This younger audience, according to Bradford W. Wright, can be seen in how comic strips and comic books are marketed:

Whereas comic strips are a syndicated feature in newspapers sold to a mass and mostly adult audience, comic books are created, distributed, and sold on their own merits to a paying and overwhelmingly young audience. […] The content and themes explored in comic books have diverged drastically from those of comic strips. […] They have explored virtually every genre of popular entertainment, including adventure, horror, mystery, crime, romance, the western, and humor. (xiii-xiv)

With such diverse options for storytelling in the comics genre, authors, including Latino/a authors, seemingly had the freedom to tell stories that were limited only by the bounds of their imaginations.

As Frederick Luis Aldama argues in the opening of his introduction to *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (2010), “All walks of life are on display in today’s alternative and mainstream comic book worlds. […] With author-artists at the helm like Los Bros. Hernandez, [Wilfred] Santiago, [Robert] Kirkman, and [Judd] Winick, to name a few, we see a multiplicity of shades, colors, and sexual orientations expressed in comic book storyworlds” (1). Notably, the relative openness of the comics
narrative form has given comics authors the power to shape their storyworlds with little of the publishing constraints often experienced by ethnically-identified authors who write novels and non-fiction. Given the freedom to create a wide array of storyworlds, such authors have reveled in exploring the possibilities of graphic storytelling. Regarding this result, Aldama writes:

This isn’t too surprising, given that author-artists of color have the capacity to imagine and feel outside of themselves. While categories used by academics and the media like Latino, Asian American, or African American, and so on, might be useful at first to make these author-artists’ work visible, at the end of the day, they want not only to have their work judged by the standard of the great comic book author-artists, but also not to have their talent and imagination squeezed into only one identity-politics box. *(Multicultural Comics 2)*

So, while comics have generally lacked the distinction of other literary forms, authors of multicultural comics have had the chance to write beyond expectations that are identity based. This is not to say that comics do not often fall back to those deeply-ingrained stereotypes that pervade popular culture; large comics publishers such as DC have revealed in one-dimensional caricatures of Latinos, as Aldama has demonstrated in *Your Brain on Latino Comics* (2009). However, thanks in large measure to the boom in alternative comics, authors continually pushed the boundaries of innovation and experimentation in graphic narrative: “Latino author-artists have radically extended the alternative-comic-book storytelling mode in various ways while they detail the everyday firmly located within a larger society and world. Finally, working within the alternative tradition doesn’t preclude the use of more conventional modes of storytelling, such as melodrama or noir” *(Your Brain 66).*
But even comics publishers place identity-based expectations and constraints on Latino/a comics artists such as Frank Espinosa, author of Rocketo, who tells Aldama in Your Brain on Latino Comics:

Years ago, before Rocketo, when I was trying to break into children’s books, I went to a couple of publishers with this idea for a line of children’s books based on a little African American girl who has all these fantastic adventures. They didn’t want it. They said, “No, no, no. This kid doesn’t look like an African American character.” And I said, “What are you talking about?” And they said, “Well her father is an airplane pilot. And her mother is a graphic designer.” And I said, “Yeah?” And they were like, “No, no. You want to write it so the people can relate to this. How about if her mother lives in the ghetto.” So I responded, “Have you ever lived in the ghetto? Because if you lived on 145th Street, that’s the last place you want to think about when you’re there.”

Some assume that because we’re Hispanics, and because we’re African American, that’s all we can write about. I took a trip to the bookstore when I was doing research for my children’s books, and I was amazed to see that almost all books with African American children were colored in sepia tones. We are some of the brightest, most colorful people, and we’ve been reduced to sepia tones.

We as Hispanics, as African Americans, as any minority, can write the new Lord of the Rings, the new Star Wars, the new Harry Potters, but if all we do is just talk about one experience in our lives, we will remain trapped. (164-65)

Espinosa’s experience is an example of the types of publisher-based constraints Latino/a authors must often contend with, even in a medium as demonstratively diverse as comics.

Yet is the ever-expanding storyworlds of Los Bros Hernandez that continually challenge readers at both the level of form and content to reveal the diverse directions Latino/a comics may take.

**The Comics of Los Bros Hernandez**

In the previous two chapters, I examined specific works of Latino/a literature as a means of exploring both the cognitive challenges of representing consciousness and
bilingualism in text-only narrative. In this chapter I turn to one of the most significant and voluminous works of contemporary comics: *Love and Rockets* by Los Bros Hernandez. As a collaborative team known as Los Bros, Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario (some of the time) have steadily worked to create a Yoknapatawpha-like storyworld with a dizzying array of characters, each with their own, oftentimes recondite, histories that cumulatively enrich Gilbert’s Palomar and Jaime’s Hoppers. One of the factors in this continual unfolding of the *Love and Rockets* storyworld is the sheer span of time in which Los Bros have been publishing their comics, nearly thirty years and counting. Characters have died, gained weight, grown old, and expanded the bounds of the alternative comics form and the storyworlds they present. Specifically, reading the comics of Los Bros places audiences in a position of tracking time (in the form of character developments and narrative events) as well as mapping and revising models of the ever-expanding and shifting storyworld space. What might these reading challenges tell us about how Latino/a comics engage audiences and their reading practices?

In their sometimes overlapping storyworlds that comprise *Love and Rockets*, Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez have created such an intricate network of relationships among their characters and locations that the result is nothing less than a cognitively challenging graphic narrative which immediately presents readers with significant interpretive obstacles, no matter where they enter into the storyworld. Although it is relatively easy to enter into *Love and Rockets*, with each episode being readable on its own, each episode is nonetheless highly intratextual, or connected with other installments of the series. The result is that to reconstruct the storyworld according to its overarching
blueprint, readers are necessarily compelled to read (or perhaps reread) more episodes of *Love and Rockets*.

To make matters more challenging for readers, with few exceptions, the installments of *Love and Rockets* are not truly serialized—or at least not presented chronologically. Instead, each installment of *Love and Rockets* may occur at any moment within the storyworld chronology or may focus on any one of its plethora of characters. To add to the difficulty of narrative comprehension, Jaime has revealed that he and his brothers work independently, so that any given issue of *Love and Rockets* does not have a designed holistic cohesion to it. Compound this free-flowing design to the span of time between publication of installments and the result is that there are at least two types of readers: those that read the installments as published over the years, and those who are able to read *Love and Rockets* in its entirety as reprinted in one tome.

Memory is a crucial interpretive aspect for narrative comprehension. In understanding how memory works, psychologists view memory as a storage system that encompasses both short term storage (or working memory) and long term storage. This two-part model for memory storage has become commonplace in cognitive science and neuroscience. Both short- and long-term memory are engaged in the reading process. With regard to reading, the long-term memory system is crucial for creating and comprehending narrative. As Geoffrey R. Loftus states in *Human Memory: The Processing of Information* (1976), “Without long-term store there would be nothing: no books, no television, no learning, no communication—for it is our ability to recall the past that allows us to interact with our environment in a dynamic way” (56). In order to
parse the story and hold its components in critical understanding so that the story makes sense in its fullest and most expansive sense, we need our working memory and especially our long term memory function.

Research by Jeffrey M. Zacks and his colleagues has led them to develop a model termed “Event Segmentation Theory” or EST, which “proposes that working memory representations of events exist because they improve perception and prediction.” In other words, certain events (viewed as segmented units of perception) lead us to predict subsequent events. Further, Zacks points out that “[e]vents presented in narrative texts are segmented in much the same way as events presented in videos,” and that event segmentation, if as important a factor in working memory as neuroscience suggests, “should affect how information is encoded into long term memory” (“How We Organize”). Not only does memory have an obvious impact on how audiences can comprehend narrative, EST may help us understand why certain narratives, based on where their event boundaries lie, may present more difficulties in reading comprehension than others. Time (both in the storyworld and in the reader’s world), as represented in an audience’s engagement with the event boundaries within the narrative, becomes a salient issue in reading *Love and Rockets*. Consequently, this has a significant bearing on the ideal audience and its ability to use memory in order to reconstruct a fractured storyworld as the fragments of narrative are collated over time.

In addition, various spaces are engaged when reading the comics of Los Bros. From the actual panel configuration on the page, to the spaces within the storyworld, to the cognitive modeling or mapping of space in the reader’s mind, the spatialization of
comics becomes something the reader must manage when engaging with *Love and Rockets*. Los Bros Hernandez manipulate time and space in ways that enrich their comics, ways that thwart simplistic notions that reading comics is mere child’s play. Indeed, the ideal audience is not one comprised of children, one-time readers, or even notoriously loyal comics readers of the past. The ideal audience for *Love and Rockets*, rather, has a much more prodigious memory, suggesting an audience that must be significantly more engaged with the storyworld at a cognitive level.

This cognitive requirement, as it were, has revealed itself in the actual audience’s frustration at the narrative design of *Love and Rockets*. Los Bros’s experimentation with the comics form has, at times, pushed even loyal audiences of many years to take to websites and blogs in order to complain about how it was becoming more and more difficult to read the comics. Such reader discontent came to its height with Gilbert’s *Poison River*, causing notable consternation from Gilbert himself. Los Bros have continually pushed their readership to expect a challenging experience when reading their comics, and their efforts are reflected in other Latino comics that have taken up the call to create complex graphic narratives, such as Wilfred Santiago’s *In My Darkest Hour* (2004).

In this chapter I wish to concentrate on the cognitive mechanisms that enable narrative comprehension, and especially as they pertain to graphic storytelling. The present chapter provides me the opportunity to trace how narrative design motivates not only observable reading protocols such as rereading but also mental operations such as the ability to access particular areas of memory which play out during reading. Arguably,
the ideal audience has at the ready everything that is necessary to comprehend a narrative and reconstruct the storyworld in the manner indicated by the narrative blueprint. Another way of thinking of this issue is to imagine that the ideal audience may have something like eidetic memory, with the ability to recall even the most minor details and events within a narrative. In reality, there are several operations that are ongoing in the complex process of memory storage. For example, working memory functions by segmenting and chunking discrete units, filling in gaps, determining what is most relevant to comprehension, and recognizing recursive features. All of this allows encoding in short-term storage and facilitates long-term storage.

**Narrative and Memory Function**

Certainly, there exist in the world individuals who are endowed with prodigious recall. One is reminded of Jorge Luis Borges’s Ireneo Funes, who was “able to reconstruct every dream, every daydream he had ever had. Two or three times he had reconstructed an entire day; he had never once erred or faltered, but each reconstruction had itself taken an entire day” (135). Funes, whose capacity for memory is so prodigious, suffers from a lack of the delimiting functions of imagination. He recalls every detail, but he is unable to see his world and experience as a gestalt. Funes reminds us that to imagine is to select out and to exercise counterfactual thinking to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract, and so on. Of course, Funes is Borges’s fictional creation. But as is his tendency, Borges again proves to be a lens of human perception and cognition. And in this case, he shows us the faculty of memory gone awry, not because it cannot store memories, but because it stores them all too well.
People, however, are not like Funes. For those whose memory function might be called typical, successful comprehension of narratives is largely dependent on their ability to recall and make use of details encountered in earlier portions of the narrative. But that is not all. As neuroscience and cognitive science has shown, there are different types of memory storage and retrieval systems. These systems of memory are engaged in different degrees depending on the type of narrative being read. Short stories, particularly those that can be read in one sitting, may draw heavily upon working memory in order to establish a mental model of the narrative, while also drawing upon long-term memories in order to provide other enriching aspects of storyworld reconstruction, such as historical context, allusions, or comparisons to the reader’s own lived experience. On the other hand, consider how memory operations might be different when one is reading a lengthy novel that must be read over the course of several days, perhaps weeks, with significant gaps of time between reading sessions. And there are also those types of narratives that are serialized or that appear in installments (regular or otherwise) over the course of years. In short, different forms of narrative engage reader memory systems in different ways—ways that in turn impact how successfully readers can create mental models of the narrative.

Scholars of literary narrative have begun to explore somewhat the issue of memory insofar as it relates to reliability, especially in the study of autobiography and non-fiction. When discrepancies arise between the factual record and the autobiographical narrative, the point of debate centers on matters of reliability and memory. When the autobiographer’s memory is seemingly inadequate and discrepancies
arise between the textual and extratextual world, audiences must account for this incongruity in some fashion, with the shadow of unreliability now looming over the narrative as a result. As Dan Shen and Dejin Xu have argued in their essay “Intratextuality, Extratextuality, Intertextuality: Unreliability in Autobiography versus Fiction,” readers at times grant some leeway in the creative rendering of fact.

In fictional narrative, this same distinction is also manifest. Narrators who evince clear duplicity are deemed unreliable, and scholars have labored to parse out when unreliable equals untrustworthiness and when it equals a deficient memory. For instance, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) employs two narrators who can easily carry the label of unreliable, but Benjy and Quentin Compson are unreliable for different reasons. The two chapters narrated by these Compson brothers reveal their cognitive processes, including their ability to wrangle with their own respective memories. Though much has been written of Faulkner’s use of the “stream of consciousness” technique as well as the representation of consciousness of two antipodal minds (Benjy is cognitively impaired; Quentin is extremely intelligent), their engagement with memory, and specifically certain memories of their sister, Caddie, provides a major impetus for the narrative progression, or what Phelan calls a “global instability” in *The Sound and the Fury*.

What has not been sufficiently explored in literary studies is how different kinds of narrative blueprints can place different demands on readers’ memories. For example, what sorts of challenges on a reader’s memory can a narrative present? In turn, how do readers manage such impositions of memory? These are questions that have begun to be
investigated by researchers of neuroscience and the cognitive sciences. Such experiments have illuminated how reading comprehension of individuals with mental cognitive impairment (MCI) and Alzheimer’s disease deviates from control groups. Many of these important investigations of how cognitive deficiencies impact narrative reconstruction when compared to control subjects have yielded important insights into how higher brain function interacts with narrative, which tells researchers something about how individuals with MCI may struggle with such activities as reading an important letter or understanding the directions on a prescription bottle. However, the narratives that are used in these cognitive studies are generally uncomplicated with little difficulties presented to the control group. What then might more complex narratives reveal about cognition and the human brain?

Indeed, I assert that *Love and Rockets* by Los Bros Hernandez is a complex and challenging work of narrative fiction. Though I acknowledge that the thematic material found in *Love and Rockets* may provide certain challenges to reader sensibility, morality, and taste, at time provoking outrage from audiences, these sorts of challenges lie within the purview of this chapter only insofar as the indelibility of certain images is a manifestation of memory function. Indeed, we can stomach more when the depiction is close to the dream-state, such as when the violence is rendered in animation in the films *Natural Born Killers* and *Kill Bill, Vol. 1*. So, while events within the storyworld such as rape, murder, suicide, as well as visual renderings of eroticized women, full frontal nudity and so on, may disturb certain audiences, it is the persistence of these visual icons within reader memory that I pursue in this chapter.
**Reading and Cognition**

It does not take experiments in cognition and neuroscience to confirm that we rely heavily upon our brain’s capacity for encoding, storing, and retrieving memories of our experiences. Our brain is not modular, but rather reticular—a series of concentrations of neural activity, such as Broca’s area for language function. However, conclusions derived from cognitive research have helped us better understand how the complex memory system operates, yielding an explanatory model that has delineated different types of memory: long-term and working memory, episodic, semantic, and procedural memories, and so on. Our capacity for memory is what enables our interaction with narrative. Indeed, our system for establishing expectations is motivated by memories of prior experience. Thus, when we prepare to read a given comic for the first time, we experience a specific expectation for the narrative with which we are about to engage that is based on our prior knowledge and encounters with similar narratives. Someone who picks up *Love and Rockets Vol. 5* after reading earlier volumes is primed in ways that someone who picks up the same volume with no prior experience with reading comics, let alone comics by Los Bros Hernandez, is not.

In *Your Brain on Latino Comics*, Frederick Luis Aldama explores how Latino/a comics artists, through careful design of storyworld, can “create pleasing and even shocking effects in the brain” of the reader (82), engaging a reader’s “cognitive and emotive architecture” (84). While Aldama is motivated to uncover how comics can alter and manipulate readers’ affect in *Your Brain on Latino Comics*, I am interested in the cognitive mechanism than can enable the triggering of powerful emotions in the first
I argue that memory can be the trip switch for the engagement of the “emotive architecture” Aldama mentions. In fact, discussions of universals and prototypes by Aldama, Patrick Colm Hogan, and others hinge on the brain’s capacity for memory. That is to say, the reader’s ability to recognize a prototype narrative, even innately, suggests that he or she has encountered it sometime in a past experience, perhaps without realizing it. Hogan has discussed how personal memories are triggered by prototypical narratives in *The Mind and Its Stories*.

Yet we must remember that memories are triggered by a multitude of elements within any given narrative, not just the type of narrative. Further, not only are personal memories of concern in how narratives engage emotions within a reader, but memories as they relate to the experience of reading a narrative are consequential as well. While in no way do I discount Hogan’s and Aldama’s employment of prototypes as a means for understanding how narratives can trigger very real emotions within a reader, I simply wish to complicate their model by offering up the cognitive operations of memory as an additional, related means by which narratives can impact readers’ emotive architecture.

But this brings me to the issue of why graphic storytelling can so powerfully engage the memory functions of readers. There is a permanence associated with the visual, so much so that people often speak about not being able to forget certain images to which they have been exposed. Quite often, verbal narration of a sexual act—even one that is explicitly rendered—does not raise the same level of controversy among audiences as a comic that visually depicts the same sexual act. Much of this has to do with the fact that images are relatively unmediated; there is less the viewer can do in co-creating the
image than, say, when reading a narrated passage. Or, as Zacks suggests, the brain’s segmentivity function, coupled with the recursive nature of a particular segmented event, may cause us to habituate to this state and lessen the degree of encoding. In such cases we have become “desensitized” to certain segmented events. Alternative comics and their storyworlds work with this aspect of reader memory in mind.

Los Bros make full use of the visual power of comics in order to design a complex narrative blueprint. Indeed, one of my assertions is that Los Bros’s craftsmanship, in a medium that has historically been viewed as lowbrow pulp art in society (i.e., underground comics), evidences what Aldama terms “will to style,” a commitment to designing a narrative in ways that move audiences and break conventions or simplistic stereotypes (*A User’s Guide* 138-40). In other words, though *Love and Rockets* looks like an Archie-like comic for adolescents, it is actually doing very sophisticated work at the level of narrative form as it asks its audience to perform cognitively demanding work. Unlike many graphic novels that may ultimately be printed in one or two volumes, such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus, Love and Rockets* is so vast that its publisher Fantagraphics Books has continually found new ways of collecting and marketing the stories. For example, *High Soft Lisp* (2010) is a collection featuring the character Rosalba “Fritz” Martinez. Her stories appeared sporadically throughout *Love and Rockets*, as she is a tertiary character in the Palomar storyworld. Yet Fantagraphics, with Gilbert’s collaboration,51 packaged this single volume into what looks like a graphic

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51 I do not mean to suggest that Fantagraphics produces “new” collections of *Love and Rockets* without the involvement of Los Bros. In this case, the author and publisher are very much unified in such a collection, as is evident from the copyright statement in *High Soft Lisp*: “Most of this material was
novel. In point of fact, *High Soft Lisp* is more akin to a short-story cycle, as all of the collected stories are interconnected.

The composite nature of *Love and Rockets*, its sprawl of time and space, make it a rare work of literature. If we consider *Love and Rockets* as a single text broken into smaller parts, as I argue it is, one begins to identify the challenges in reconstructing the overarching storyworld Los Bros have rendered on the page over the course of thirty-plus years. The challenging nature of *Love and Rockets* is revealed in how difficult it is to provide an effective summary for it. There are so many divergent storylines throughout a multitude of timespaces that providing a plot summary of *Love and Rockets* is nearly futile. Thus, rather than attempt to encapsulate this vast storyworld, I will concentrate on a handful of major characters and storylines within *Love and Rockets*, using relevant parts of the narrative as demonstration texts for different challenges related to the time and space of the storyworld. In particular, I will examine the long-suffering Palomarian character Jesús Angel as well as Luba’s origin story *Poison River*.

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52 In attempting to identify texts with similar scopes of space and time, both the Bible and *The Simpsons* come to mind. The Bible ostensibly spans the initial creation story in “Genesis” to “The Revelation.” *The Simpsons*, on the other hand, is the longest-running scripted show in television history at twenty-three seasons as of 2012. However, *The Simpsons*, unlike *Love and Rockets*, does not have a chronological progression over its history. Each episode is mostly independent from the others, with only the rare moment of continuity. An example here would be the death of Ned Flanders’s wife, Maud in “Alone Again, Natura-Diddly.” Her death in this episode impacted subsequent episodes, particularly the character of Ned Flanders. So, while *The Simpsons* continues to develop stories that are unaffected by long-term continuity, its overarching narrative progression is unlike what we find in *Love and Rockets*, where we find characters growing old, fat, or dying. In that sense, *Love and Rockets* displays a continuing and ever-growing storyworld without a discernible teleology—much like our own lives.
The Devil of Serialization

My chief claim in this dissertation is that Latino/a authors have steadily expanded audience expectations of what Latino/a literary and cultural production can look like. Along the same lines, Los Bros Hernandez have created their comics by breaking from *a priori* adherence to narrative form and content that ascribes a certain aesthetic or mode of storytelling to Latino/a authors.\(^{53}\) Additionally, the comics form itself imposes its own constraints on authors even if we do not consider specific audience expectations. Indeed, the business of creating comics is both a time-consuming and labor-intensive endeavor. This fact has forced the majority of graphic artists to adopt a specific business model: the model of serialization.\(^{54}\) As Charles Hatfield and others have noted, most of the handsome, book-like objects that are described as graphic novels are created serially over a length of time. With the book length project as the perceived goal of the graphic artist, the necessity of serialization becomes a necessary evil—what Hatfield calls the “devil of serialization” (*Alternative Comics* 153). Regarding the 2003 definitive collection of the Palomar stories into one volume, Hatfield notes:

Yet the collected *Palomar* in effect denies its own origins, for it hides the way serialization both enabled and constrained Hernandez's creative process. The growth and eventual contraction of *Heartbreak Soup*, the

\(^{53}\) Gilbert’s work is an excellent example of how Latino/a authors can and do write narratives that do not foreground issues of Latino/a identity. His recent standalone graphic novels such as *Chance in Hell* (2007) have non-Latino protagonists.

\(^{54}\) I recognize that many comics are not true serials in the sense that they do not present a continuing narrative that is broken into contiguous parts. For instance, the *Love and Rockets* comics are not serial, but are rather episodic. While serialization may not be the most accurate term for this, I will continue the tradition of other scholars such as Hatfield and Royal who use the term to indicate the publishing of shorter comic narratives over a given length of time rather than the publishing of a graphic novel that may take many years to bring to fruition.
series, epitomize the challenges faced by long-form comics. Though Hernandez successfully exploited serial publication to give his stories a broader canvas, and in the process developed radical new ways of evoking space and time in comics, serialization also curbed and directed his work, forcing him to confront, in the novel *Poison River* and subsequent efforts, the limits of periodical publishing. The story of *Heartbreak Soup*, in short, is the richest, also one of the most complex and problematic, examples of alternative comics in the long form. (*Alternative Comics* 69)

For Hatfield, the process of serialization is an inescapable consequence of what he terms “long-form comics”—one that benefits an artist such as Gilbert because he is able to steadily grow his storyworld while seeing his work published periodically. Yet there are limitations to the process of serialization, limitations that I argue are linked to the audience’s memory capacity.\(^5^5\)

I indicated above two types of audiences that must be considered when reading comics. The first are those readers who read each new installment as they appear, suffering through weeks, months or perhaps years as they loyally wait for the next issue to appear in print. The second are *ex post facto* readers who are able to read the serialized installments as a collection, perhaps even in one sitting. Readers of the first kind perhaps bear their “original reader” status as a sort of badge of honor, a loyalty rooted in the fact that these readers have patiently followed each issue of a particular comic. Yet this raises an intriguing question. Are there advantages or disadvantages to

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\(^5^5\) Hatfield does an excellent job of identifying the sorts of challenges presented to loyal readers of *Love and Rockets*: “this loyalty was sorely tested by the brothers’ innovative approach to long-form narrative. As it evolved, *Love & Rockets* demanded much of its audience, as its storylines were often serialized over many issues, creating long, sometimes novel-length, narratives of unprecedented depth and scope. In fact the stories grew in length and complexity throughout the eighties, climaxing between 1990 and 1993 as *Love & Rockets* ran no less than three serialized graphic novels at once—a period Gilbert has described in hindsight as ‘crazy’” (*Alternative Comics* 70).
reading serials upon publication versus waiting until they have all been collected? Are the reading experiences different is some significant way?

While many scholars of serialized literature recognize this issue of how reading practices may differ, a preponderance of the scholarship focuses on the production side of the text. In other words, these studies address the author’s potential gain or loss from serializing his or her work. By contrast, the effect of serialization on readers has only been hinted at. Derek Parker Royal has acknowledged how serialized graphic novels, and specifically the comics of Gilbert Hernandez, “impact reader affect” (263). For example, Royal notes that readers of self-contained or collected graphic novels (or the ex post facto readers mentioned above) have a greater sense of control over “the means of narrative acquisition” (265). I agree with Royal’s take, for it is certainly less challenging to read a long work when all installments are available in one space and time. Conversely, because of the rich intratextuality of the Love and Rockets storyworld, there can be the tendency for information overload as the multi-layered interconnectivity of these comics potentially overwhelms readers. And both Royal and Hatfield have noted how Gilbert’s narratively complex graphic novel Poison River frustrated readers when it originally appeared in serialized installments. Hatfield’s characterization of Poison River is that it “represents the apogee of Hernandez's art to date, a dense, aggressive, and disturbing novel that weds formal complexity to thematic ambition. (Collected in 1994, it remains notorious among fans as his most tangled and difficult work.)” (Alternative Comics 88). Though Poison River is a notably complex text by any measure, its serialized nature tells
us something about the limits of serialized graphic narrative in terms of its creation and its readership.

As scholars have noted, serialized literature has particular implications on reading practices that differ from novels, though I recognize some novels, such as many nineteenth-century novels, were published serially. The reading of serialized literature, at least at the time of its creation, is a much more dynamic reading process. Not only is there a lack of closure (the “tune in next time” phenomenon), there can be a substantial measure of time between the publication of installments. This is especially critical in comics such as *Love and Rockets*, where there was not always a regular publication schedule of the sort that one might expect from, say, Marvel or DC superhero comics. In fact, though it ran in a serialized publication format, the various storylines in *Love and Rockets* (which comprises both Jaime’s, Gilbert’s, and sometimes Mario’s work) are by and large episodic in nature. Additionally, the process of serialization gives the Palomar stories, despite their Latin-American hamlet setting, a panoramic quality due to their breadth of time and space. Further, in large measure, it is the ensemble cast is what lends this sense of sprawl and immensity to the Palomar stories. There are so many characters that Gilbert often provides a page of dramatis personae allowing the reader to see how characters relate to one another. Third, as a result of the dozens of characters that inhabit the Palomar storyworld, some characters are necessarily foregrounded (such as Luba) while others remain mostly in the background and only occasionally enter into the narrative, such as the character of Jesús Angel. However, there are times when a background character carries the weight of the narrative, as in Fritz’s coming to the fore...
in *High Soft Lisp*. These moments of enriching a tertiary character are particularly insightful in understanding how Gilbert quickly and efficiently takes a backdrop character and makes it the narrative focus—something of vital importance for the serial reader.

I am interested in how both types of readers I have identified above (*ex post facto* and serial readers) reconstruct the storyworld, that is, the global mental model of the situations and events within the text. However, this ability is not only dependent on how an author constructs the narrative blueprint with the reader in mind; furthermore, it is time sensitive, for the reconstruction of storyworlds, as a cognitive function tied with memory, has the capacity to degrade over time. Further complicating the reconstruction of the mental model of the storyworld, many of the competing Palomar storylines overlap. Due to the nature of serialized and episodic stories, the reader must reconstruct and maintain a mental model of the overarching storyworld. This places an extreme cognitive demand on both types of readers, but particularly the serial reader, and thus Gilbert must conduct his narrative worldmaking with this in mind. Here I turn to an examination of Jesús Angel, a character who usually inhabits the background in the Palomar stories.

**Consequences of Foregrounding a Tertiary Character**

A typical Hernandez tertiary character, Jesús Angel (hereafter Jesús) features in two stories and provides the impetus for a third in *Love and Rockets*. The first of these stories comes in two parts and is titled “The Laughing Sun,” and the events of this story have implications for Jesús’s second story, published over a year later, similarly titled
“Holidays in the Sun.” “The Laughing Sun” concerns an altercation between Jesús and his wife Laura that culminates in Jesús’s inadvertent harming of his infant daughter. Fearing the consequences of what he has done, Jesús flees to a local mountain range, and his childhood friends (Heraclio, Israel, Satch, and Vicente) attempt to bring him back unharmed. Further, “The Laughing Sun” is, in truth, a serialized narrative; its plot continues into a second installment.

But as with all other aspects of Love and Rockets, in order to reconstruct the storyworld for “The Laughing Sun,” a reader must already have some familiarity with the overarching Palomarian storyworld. Indeed, Gilbert does not provide the setting; nor does he give overviews of the over twenty characters with speaking parts in the twenty pages of text. He does not provide moments of orientation for the reader, even readers who may be familiar with Palomar. “The Laughing Sun,” though not specifically anchored to another storyline, is understood best if the reader has a preexisting mental model of the overarching Palomar storyworld. With it, a reader understands the significance of the character Diana Villaseñor, or recognizes Jesús’s relation to both Diana and Luba, or sees why Heraclio is willing to risk his life and reputation to help his childhood friend at all. In other words, Gilbert does not seem to be concerned with whether or not a reader will understand the intricate interconnectivity that gives Palomar its vitality. Here we have an example of a constraint of the serial form that Hatfield identifies. Part One of “The Laughing Sun” is only eight pages long. The form itself is a constraint, and that constraint has a consequence on a reader’s ability to comprehend and reconstruct the storyworld. Gilbert must then rely on the resourcefulness of the reader to consult earlier...
issues of *Love and Rockets*, for even serial readers would be challenged to remember every salient issue that arises in “The Laughing Sun.” This is a significant risk when it comes to the ultimate reception of Gilbert’s comics, as the reception of *Poison River* demonstrates.

However, Gilbert is not oblivious to the challenges of a compressed serial narrative on the reader. By allowing the reader to see the thoughts of Jesús’s childhood friends, Gilbert allows serial readers to construct a basic apparatus in order to allow for the emotional component of the narrative to have its greatest impact on the reader. Even so, with only an adequate mental model of the storyworld, emotional engagement with the narrative is difficult at best. Indeed, this is one of the hallmarks of postmodern and avant-garde literature. Such texts are so difficult for readers that they often stop reading, if they pick them up at all. Generally speaking, if the cognitive demands of a text are too high, the predominant emotion will be one of frustration. This sort of reaction, of course, is reader-specific.

Though he is essentially absent from the story, “The Laughing Sun, Part One” cannot take place without Jesús. He has become mentally unhinged, and the thought of having inadvertently killed his infant daughter literally drives him to the hills. While we are aware of his state of mind (his blank stare in Diana’s house, the threatening manner in which he holds his dagger in Figure 1), the visual narration never objectively shows what happened between Jesús and his wife. We see Chelo holding the baby with “a nasty bruise on its head,” and in the next panel, the reader gets a view of the devastated home (Figure 2). A close up of Laura gives us her account of Jesús: “He’s crazy, that’s
all…tried to kill me…I swear, he tried to kill—wrecked the whole house…grabbed a steak knife and ran…” (Heartbreak 111). Now readers have a context for Jesús’s blank stare at the story’s opening. He wandered, as if in a fugue state, to Diana’s house (Figure 3). Thus, “The Laughing Sun, Part One” opens after Jesús and Laura’s altercation, but in medias res.
Gilbert creates a mystery in the opening page of “The Laughing Sun,” and the reader, along with the rest of the characters in the story, must attempt to solve this mystery. Yet despite the clarity of the aftermath, there are no clues to lend insight into what might have forced Jesús to act so violently. His childhood friends are left with nothing but their own recollections and memories to draw upon to find some reasonable answer. Gilbert uses thought bubbles to represent memories, but also entire panels have “bubbled corners,” to represent cognitive function. And it is not simply memories, for dreams and hallucinations are rendered similarly in both parts of “The Laughing Sun.” In one panel featuring Vicente, the reader is privy to his memory of himself and Jesús as children, both of whom are having a shared vision of what they imagine hell to be like. This panel is an example of Gilbert’s ability to collapse time efficiently from one panel to the next. However, although the serial form at times compels Gilbert to perform such
contextualizing moves in his storyworld design, he does it only when it suits the narrative, not as a device to make things easier on the reader (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Jesús’s Fugue State

While Vicente is in the narrating now, he is recollecting his childhood. In that memory of his childhood, he and Jesús are contemplating “where little boys and girls go when they die,” that is to say, their future (Heartbreak 114). And in another sense, there is the specter of what Jesús has just done, as well as what his future holds. Gilbert accomplishes all of this without the use of one written word. Though a greater familiarity
with Jesús enriches this story, Gilbert’s design allows for the serial reading experience without acquiescing to the desire of (some) readers for contextualization. By having Jesús vacate the story, Gilbert allows the rest of the cast to provide textual cues that allow for the reconstruction of the storyworld. What is more, Gilbert has the dramatis personae use their own memories in order to either refresh the memories of serial readers or to provide details about events that a reader may lack (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Vicente Reminisces

Having the cast collectively sift through their memories of Jesús for some indication or rationale that explains Jesús’s actions mirrors what readers must do in order to make sense of Jesús’s actions, which is a deft demonstration of the importance of memory for understanding narrative. As the various characters reach into their memories
of Jesús, the reader is invited to do the same. The reader has become a de facto member of the Palomar cast, and he or she is invited to use their own store of memories to account for why Jesús has gone temporarily mad. The ability to do so allows an emotional response from the reader, mostly because Jesús’s history in the Palomar storyworld is relatively bland. His one life-changing incident is that he once offered to carry Luba across a river when he was younger, but dropped her when he began to get an erection. That moment of humiliation and sexual frustration haunts Jesús throughout the remainder of the Palomar stories. And in Part Two of “The Laughing Sun,” Gilbert depicts this
significant event in Jesús’s life through Heraclio’s memories of the incident. Again, it is

telling that Gilbert, rather than use unambiguous analepses to fill in the gaps for readers,

instead uses the memories of Jesús’s four childhood friends to help account how Jesús
could have fallen so low. Moreover, the character memories are not narrated by the

characters themselves. Rather, the memories are depicted first as thought bubbles, until

the bubbles themselves essentially become the panels. And it is not until the penultimate

page of “The Laughing Sun, Part Two” that we hear Jesús’s version of the events that led

up to the altercation with Laura. Unlike the various memories that are visually depicted

throughout “The Laughing Sun,” this final panel is overburdened with text. Jesús’s final

words in the panel underscore the preoccupation with memory in this two-

part series:

“Don’t remember much after that…not ‘till I hear Israel yelling at me like always”

(Heartbreak 127). Gilbert’s use of depicted memories as well as his economical use of
textual space yields a wonderfully rich albeit fragmented character sketch of Jesús, one

that not only challenges his characters but his audience to piece together the narrative.

On the other hand, “Holidays in the Sun” takes place many years after “The

Laughing Sun” and was published over a year later. “Holidays in the Sun” shows Jesús

on an Alcatraz-like prison-island where his only respite from his daily misery comes

from his memory and his imagination (Figure 6). Though clearly connected to “The

Laughing Sun,” “Holidays in the Sun” is simply another episode in the multitude of

Palomar stories. In this story there are no thought bubbles to designate characters

accessing memory as they do in “The Laughing Sun.” Instead, Jesús must contend with

his horrible reality on an island prison while tempering his mind’s desire to conjure the
women Jesús has always desired: Luba. He indulges in these escapist fantasies in order to keep his mind from contemplating Laura and his child. Yet his mind comes back to the

![Image](image.png)

Figure 6: Jesús Confronts His Tortured Mind

night of his fight with Laura, and in a sequence of eighteen panels the reader is thrust back to that moment as well, and for the first time actually sees the events that have only heretofore been hinted at. While in “The Laughing Sun” the reader must construct the scene via the character narration of both Laura and Jesús, and the varying speculations of
the rest of the characters, in this sequence a series of images corresponding to Jesús’s memories and unaccompanied by words takes the reader through the entire timeline from the argument to the narrating now, where Jesús sits on his prison bunk (Figure 7).

In effect, Gilbert’s eighteen-panel spread is a strategy that cues the serial reader. “Holidays in the Sun” is a meditation on memory and imagination as both a means of escape and as a means of torture. Jesús can master his imagination only so much before the unconscious force of memory imposes itself on him. When two fellow inmates invite Jesús to participate in a ménage a trois, he declines, saying, “Naw…not tonight…Got things on my mind” (202). This is the only preview that Jesús’s mind in is a contest with itself. Two panels later, it appears that someone calls to Jesús from within a room. “Hey there, boy. I think you’d better have a look at this…” a voice says. The adjacent panel reveals the voice to be that of Luba, who is sexily dressed in a corset and fishnet hose.

This moment of disorientation that Jesús experiences is shared by the reader. The shock of seeing Luba in an island-prison for men destabilizes the reader, even if only momentarily (Figure 8). Luba’s appearance is not immediately cued as a figment of Jesús’s imagination. The two panels at the bottom of the page first show Jesús in a sexual act with Luba as he vows to marry Luba, and next reveal that Luba has transformed into Laura, his wife. What intensifies reader disorientation is that the reader believes he or she is seeing actual events within the storyworld. But from the moment Jesús hears Luba speak from within the room, the reader is experiencing the world of Jesús’s mind. Yet Gilbert does not cue the reader to make this shift beforehand, and instead allows the reader the opportunity to tease out what is being depicted. But just in case readers linger
Figure 7: Gilbert’s Eighteen-panel Strategy continued
in their confusion, Gilbert has an overt narrator stabilize the storyworld (Figure 9):

“Though Jesús Angel has never had relations with Luba, he has indeed indulged in over fifteen thousand different sexual fantasies of the woman from the moment he first set his

eyes on her some twelve years ago in Palomar… /Now, to Jesús’s confusion, his estranged wife Laura is replacing Luba midway through these imaginary interludes./ But why? Laura is the last person he wants to think about…” (204). This intrusive narrator is superfluous for a reader that has read any of the prior Palomar stories that concern Jesús.
Yet the shift between the represented storyworld and the world of Jesús’s creation is so seamless that it threatened to confuse readers. The result is that Gilbert allows a small moment of narration to clear up any confusion.

Figure 9: Intrusive Narration

A similar situation occurs only a few panels later, when Jesús again has a fantasy concerning Luba. Here he forces himself to think of another woman, for he realizes that his mind links Luba to Laura (Figure 10). Gilbert uses this device in order to account for gaps in reader knowledge or memory of the Palomarian storyworld. Without the binding strip of narration, Gilbert’s ideal audience instantly recognizes that the woman is Tonantzín as well as her complex history in Love and Rockets. But as Sperber and Wilson’s Principle of Relevance suggests, Gilbert assumes his ideal audience will be able to fill in gaps for what is relevant to the narrative at hand. However, it is the type of concession that Gilbert makes at times in his work of the early 1980s, and the type that
begins to disappear from his later comics. As the series goes on, Gilbert’s later work leaves out important contextualizing material, despite its relevance. Gilbert delegates more responsibility to the reader to discern the relevance of a given panel relative to the panels that come before and after it. However, in much of Gilbert’s later work, the gaps

![Figure 10: Alternatives to Luba](image_url)
in information are large enough that relevance is quite hindered. Indeed, Gilbert’s aim of creating formally complex narratives coincides with the development of similarly complex Latino/a literature in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Despite a reader’s ability to concentrate on the relevant material from a panel or a particular issue of Gilbert’s work, the accumulation of narrative events, character arcs, and story interconnectivity demands that readers track an ever-growing number of significant aspects of Palomar. As each of these stories is only a part of an even larger story, the text necessitates that a reader move fluidly between Jesús’s stories in order to reconstruct a fully-realized storyworld. Jesús’s story requires an overarching perspective. Gilbert only partially overcomes the difficulties in reading these seemingly closed stories that are published irregularly. And in even more recalcitrant texts such as *Poison River*, his movement toward a more experimental and challenging narrative structure essentially repulsed attempts at reading it in serialized form.

There is a high cognitive demand on the reader who reconstructs the Palomar storyworld. For a reader to establish the stable storyworld required by the narrative, there must be a sustained engagement with an overarching storyworld that gradually becomes more complex the further one reads into the Palomar stories. However, I assert that this cognitive scaffolding is networked to a reader’s capacity to remember and recall significant narrative elements. Just like any function of memory and recall, this intricate latticework of narrative is finite and tends to decay over time. Royal is correct in noting the difficulties in rereading and cross checking the various issues of a serialized graphic novel when compared to having the stories collected in a handful of volumes (264). As a
result, though serialization may be a profitable means for a graphic artist to be able to do the work he or she needs to do, as Hatfield has shown, readers stand the best chance of recreating a mental model of the Palomarian storyworld with the entire set of stories at their disposal.

It goes without saying that the only way for readers to engage with the narrative on an emotional level is if they can successfully reconstruct the global mental representation encoded within the text. Memory function plays a large role in the mental scaffolding of a storyworld in the reader’s imagination. Gilbert, through the medium of comics, accounts for both serial and ex post facto readers. This is not to say that serial readers will always have fewer challenges than other types of readers. Indeed, everything seems to suggest these cognitive demands might simply be insuperable for some readers. In the case of serialized literature, it would seem that time is the crucial issue. Building an overarching storyworld at the snail’s pace of serialized publication is near impossible for readers, mostly because of the degradation of working memory of the reader. This necessitates reading and re-reading as new installments are released. Waiting until all of the stories are collected into a “graphic novel” format has the least amount of short-term memory degradation, allowing for a more stable mental model of the storyworld. In the end, it seems that the ideal reading experience of the graphic novel comes at the culmination of the project.

Time is at the crux of the debate on the saliency of the graphic novel enterprise: if you have to wait until the end of the artist’s project in order to achieve the sort of storyworld that allows for an emotional connection to the work, who will be around to
purchase the individual installments as they are released and thereby financially keep the artist in business? On the other hand, if serialized literature is so experimental and avant-garde that readers become frustrated and annoyed, the artist may be unable to finish the project due to financial constraints. Thus, some graphic artists who adopt the serial model can only take narrative technique and experimentation only so far, as demonstrated by Gilbert’s tour de force, *Poison River*.

**The Limits of Nurturing a Readership**

Many of the challenges that *Poison River* presents to readers are manifest even when all of the serial installments are assembled in one volume. Thus, these challenges are only intensified when the novel is read serially. As scholars have noted, *Poison River* eschewed specific orienting devices for readers, devices later added when the serials were collected. For example, the chapter openings that appear in the collected version feature a specific character depicted in various stages of his or her life, complete with their name and chapter number. These chapter title pages were notably absent in *Poison River*’s original serial run. The utility of these chapter openings, however, is somewhat misleading. As each chapter is advertised with a specific character, readers might expect the chapter to be concentrated on that character. But the reality is that *Poison River* uses such a sprawling cast that the chapter titles are ultimately a bit misleading, which is understandable, for Gilbert added them much later.

I dwell on this issue as a sign of the frustration experienced by both readers and Gilbert during the publication of *Poison River*’s serial run. In short, Los Bros had cultivated a readership by that point which had specific expectations when picking up an
issue of *Love and Rockets*. Though the respective storyworlds of Los Bros are contiguous, as noted above, many of the issues are short and self-contained. Gilbert’s handling of the Jesús Angel storyline, which is similar to Jaime’s handling of Speedy Ortiz, represents the default method of narration in *Love and Rockets*. Los Bros have mastered the art of expansive storytelling that is told within compressed space on the page. Again, I point to Gilbert’s ability to move through great stretches of time in only a handful of panels. This technique is motivated in large degree by the richness of the *Love and Rockets* storyworld, especially as the series grew larger and larger. Los Bros could rely on the resourcefulness of the audience to fill in gaps either by consultation of previous issues or through sheer force of memory recall from prior readings of *Love and Rockets*. As a result, in situations such as the Jesús Angel storyline where there are moments where the reader may be thwarted, Gilbert makes use of a device (such as an intrusive narrator) or instead the visual narrator blasts through years within the space of two pages (as in Figure 7). These devices are evidence that Gilbert is acutely aware of the challenges his comics present to his audience. Thus, *Poison River* can be seen as the result of Gilbert’s removal of these orienting devices that make the reading experience easier for the reader.

Before the publication of *Poison River*, Gilbert presented readers with his singular creation, Luba—a woman who is a force of will in Palomar—as a Latin American version of Athena, sprung fully-formed upon the unsuspecting village to irrevocably alter the lives of its inhabitants. But as a result of the episodic and serial comics form used by Los Bros, there is rarely closure within the *Love and Rockets* storyworlds. That is to say,
the story is never definitively “over.” Unlike a self-contained novel that may provide closure without revealing subsequent events within the lives of the characters, Los Bros have the habit of taking up bits of the *Love and Rockets* narrative at any point, irrespective of what has happened to a character in an earlier episode. This working method distinguishes the work of Los Bros from something that utilizes prequels such as *Star Wars*, which unfolds chronologically from earliest events to more recent. The prequels (Episodes I, II, and III), despite occurring before the events of the original trilogy of films, also follow a chronological structure, which provides George Lucas’s saga a significant dimension of tension as the audience awaits the outcome. *Love and Rockets*, by contrast, has never had a devotion to a chronological unfolding of events, precisely because there is no superordinate plot (or Phelan’s global instability) that motivates the narrative. Instead, the major locales (e.g., Palomar, Hoppers) anchor these patches of narrative that are woven together to create the larger fabric of the storyworld.

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56 Gilbert’s character Tonantzín Villaseñor is an excellent example of the fluidity of the *Love and Rockets* timeline. Though she publicly immolates herself as a demonstration of her political convictions in “Human Diastrophism,” Tonantzín appears in a later issue of *Love and Rockets* that depicts the lead-up to her self-sacrifice.

57 In *The Limits of Interpretation*, Umberto Eco describes this type of narrative as a “loop”: “Usually the loop series comes to be devised for commercial reasons: it is a matter of considering how to keep the series alive, of obviating the natural problem of the aging character. Instead of having characters put up with new adventures (that would imply their inexorable march toward death), they are made continually to relive their past. The loop solution produces paradoxes that were already the target of innumerable parodies. Characters have a little future but an enormous past, and in any case, nothing of their past will ever have to change the mythological present in which they have been presented to the reader from the beginning” (86). While I mostly agree with Eco here, I do wish to point out that while delving into Luba’s past is ostensibly a commercial move on Gilbert’s part, his execution of the narrative suggests that his desire to push himself and his art in *Poison River* superseded his motivation to sell many issues of his comics.
Complexities in *Poison River*

*Poison River*, at its core, is Luba’s origin story that takes the reader from her early childhood (Luba is a newborn on the first page) to her arrival at Palomar on the final page. As Luba is arguably the central figure in Gilbert’s comics, her origin story was poised to be of great interest to readers. This fact helps us understand the risks in storytelling that Gilbert takes in creating *Poison River*. In effect, he has a captive audience that will stay with him to the end because they want to see how this very popular character, Luba, came to be in Palomar. Heretofore, Luba’s past had been an utter mystery to both readers and most of the inhabitants of Palomar. Because Gilbert had cultivated such a following amongst his readers, he had essentially earned the ability to push his art into areas he would not have early in his career.

Gilbert’s opportunity to create such a complex serial comic tells us much about constraints and affordances that originate from the reader and how they impact an author’s craft or will to style. Here it would seem that we have an excellent example of an audience with hospitable imaginations, a loyal readership that is, at least at the outset, willing to engage with a narrative on its own terms. But a closer inspection reveals not that Gilbert’s readership was willingly receptive of his complex narrative, but rather that his own readership had *a priori* expectations for his comics that Gilbert himself had established. Thus, I argue that, in the case of *Poison River*, Gilbert had nurtured his audience too well, and they had become too accustomed to the narrative methods that he had already established. When he deviated from that form, his readership balked.
Interestingly, as Poison River entirely predates Luba’s arrival to Palomar, reader memory is engaged differently than in Gilbert’s other, highly intratextual Palomarian comics. In other words, one requires no prior knowledge of Palomar in order to read Poison River, though there are moments when detailed knowledge of Gilbert’s prior work enriches Luba’s origin story. For example, in Palomarian comics published before Poison River it is never explained why Luba’s cousin, Ofelia, suffers from such awful back pain. Indeed, Ofelia’s back pain seems to function as a characterizing device that enriches her as a personality. In Poison River, the reader who is familiar with Ofelia’s back problems now comes to terms with the origins of this chronic, debilitating condition: a roadside attack that also results in the rapes and murders of her two friends, Gina and Ruben (Figure 11).

In this sequence, Gina and Ruben, late for Ruben’s niece’s baptism, offer to give Ofelia and the toddler Luba a ride to the movie theater. What happens next is no less horrific than the similarly-styled violence that appears in both the novel version and film adaptation of James Dickey’s Deliverance. Ofelia’s back pain looms so large in Gilbert’s comics, that, now that readers understand the violence imbued within the lingering pain Ofelia must bear for the rest of her life, Gilbert retroactively casts this shadow of violation on Ofelia’s (and by extension, Luba’s) story. Thus, although readers do not have to draw on their memories to supply gapped-out details, Poison River does provide that supply further information about the Palomar with which he or she is already familiar.

Hatfield calls this event in Poison River a “terrorist attack.” While technically he is correct, I dislike the connotation that term carries in contemporary discussions, for it often suggests the US’s so-called War on Terror. Incidentally, this attack sequence in Poison River may well be the most disturbing moment in the series for its shocking and senseless violence.
familiar. Gilbert demonstrates how his storyworld continually accretes and must be consistently revised by serial readers as more comics are introduced. Charles Hatfield is correct when he says, “Everything is connected in Poison River, though not one single character realizes this: to movers and shakers like Garza, Salas, and Peter, the identities of such victims as Gina, Ruben, and Ofelia are beneath notice” (Alternative Comics 91).

But I go further when I state that everything in Poison River is connected to Palomar,

Figure 11: The Rapes and Murders of Gina and Ruben
even though everything in in predates what readers know about it. This shift in how readers view what they have already read, this revision of the memories of what they think they know, highlights the ever-evolving Palomarian storyworld and how reader experience shapes that world.

However, if a lack of prior reader experiences with Gilbert’s work is not the source of the challenging nature of Poison River, whence does the recalcitrance originate? I argue that Poison River taxes readers’ capacity for working memory and its ability to manage an overabundance of discrete bits of information. Working memory, as cognitive research has shown, is a crucial aspect of our ability to recall information. Specifically, episodic and semantic memory operations are in play to a large degree in reading a text such as Poison River. According to John J. Ratey, episodic memory “is the capacity to place facts and events in time and to refer to them freely” (201), and semantic memory as “detached from personal experience. […] allow[ing] for the retention of facts and everyday functions, including categories of events, objects, spatial knowledge, and symbolic description” (202). The two types of memory are related, and what seems to be one important difference is the emotional connections (or lack thereof) to the memories in question. Further, episodic memory appears to be tied to the creation of narrative, especially in weaving discrete events into a story. The two types of memory, it would seem, are responsible for our ability to recall our connection to personal experiences (episodic) as well as the ability to categorize and generalize information gathered by rote exposure.
In *Narrative Comprehension: A Discourse Perspective* (1997), Catherine Emmott articulates the two memory categories as general knowledge (semantic) and text-specific knowledge (episodic). Both types of knowledge are crucial if a reader is to comprehend a text, and Emmott’s study shows how research on text-specific knowledge helps shed light on the substantial body of work on general knowledge. In short, there is knowledge that is used by the reader “not only to ‘fill in’ missing parts of a script or to show the links between objects, but to deduce connections such as cause and effect” (Emmott 27), and a text “may also encourage the reader to draw on his/her general knowledge to create certain special effects or to contribute to the overall plot or themes of a book” (29). But there is also text-specific knowledge that the reader gains through the experience of reading a text, “information which applies only within a particular text (or related group of texts),” such as accumulated knowledge about specific characters, about which characters are related to each other, and about which characters live in a particular place, as well as a record of the events that have occurred” (Emmott 35). Because the store of text-specific knowledge that is accumulated when reading *Love and Rockets* is ever-growing, storylines by Los Bros Hernandez which rely heavily on text-specific knowledge present formidable challenges to readers. With these two types of memory function and knowledge in mind, we can further understand why *Poison River* is such a challenge to serial readers who must wait for long stretches of time between published issues.

There are nearly forty named characters who play significant roles in *Poison River*. Of these characters, only a few appear in earlier issues of *Love and Rockets*. As a
result, even loyal readers are presented with a great deal of new materials to encode and track. And though Poison River is ostensibly Luba’s story, she quite often recedes to the background. There is a palpable lack of an intrusive narrator, and unlike earlier episodes of Palomarian comics, characters do not convey crucial orienting material to the reader via dialogue with another character. The visual/verbal narrator goes to great pains to show the interconnections among the characters without making said interconnections unambiguous. More importantly, it is the introduction of Peter Río that pushes Poison River to its frustrating level of complexity.59

Before Peter is introduced, the storyline takes Luba from a newborn to a young girl of around eight years old, with several global instabilities that motivate the narrative progression: the discovery that María and Eduardo are Luba’s parents (Beyond 8); Eduardo leaving Luba with his sister Hilda and niece Ofelia (30); and the attack on Ofelia, Gina, and Ruben that forces Ofelia to leave (48). These events follow in chronological order, and are very much in line with the mode of storytelling Gilbert has established heretofore; the storytelling is very much what readers expect to find in a Palomar-related narrative. Thus, if Peter Río can be seen as a complicating, fracturing force in Luba’s life, it is evident that he does the same for the narrative form in Poison River. In essence Peter Río is poison within the storyworld, and his disruptive nature manages to bleed into the very design of Gilbert’s comic.

59 It is clear that Peter Río (whose last name means “river” in Spanish, and whose initials he shares with the title) is the poison river to which the title alludes. Hatfield has pointed to this fact, but no one has yet argued that the novel’s complexity originates with Peter Río, nor why Río places such a strain on readers.
Peter Rio makes his entrance into the narrative in chapter five as the conga player and manager to Los Fritos, a third-rate musical act (*Beyond 52*). With the introduction of Peter into Luba’s world, Gilbert by default introduces all of Peter’s salient relationships that will carry great weight in the remainder of *Poison River*. He proves to be a catalyst for Luba’s discontent, and soon after Peter fetishizes Luba’s bellybutton, Luba instantly gains a heightened sense of self worth. Luba breaks off her relationship with her first boyfriend, Pino, and then assaults Omo with a hammer when he makes sexual advances on her (57). Peter destabilizes Luba’s world, and obliquely, his own. For at the end of chapter five, when we see Peter and Luba leaving town together in his car, the last two frames introduce Isobel, the mother of Peter’s child, Arjelia (62).

Peter’s dealings as a small-time gangster quickly expand the cast in *Poison River* as he ascends to the top of the criminal underworld. Peter’s grab for power comes to a head in chapter ten (108-14), a chapter that also provides an excellent example of the complexity of *Poison River*. Gilbert deploys several simultaneous storylines that depict differing events whose consequences will result in Peter’s unchecked power. However, there is a great deal of temporal compression in the last few pages of chapter ten (Figures

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60 Peter’s sexual fetish of choice is to masturbate while gazing into a woman’s bellybutton.

61 Readers familiar with Gilbert’s Palomar comics will immediately see the significance of this moment. Throughout *Love and Rockets*, Luba is often depicted holding a claw hammer, an object that becomes a metonym for her strength and stubbornness. Thus, the moment she defends herself from Omo with a hammer, we have another origin story.

62 This scene in *Poison River* owes a great deal to a similar scene in Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*, wherein Michael Corleone orchestrates the murders of the heads of the Five Families at the exact moment he literally becomes godfather to his nephew in a Christening ceremony in a church. Just as those separate murders (and the child’s Christening) all occur simultaneously, Peter is in the presence of Capitan Ortiz and thus has an unassailable alibi.
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12, 13, and 14). Capitan Ortíz forces himself on Luba, and five panels later there is an image of a tiny fetus—the product of Luba’s rape. Garza and Salas have a meeting, and Blas is sent along to see if he is a spy. At the same time, Peter’s father, Fermin, moves to strangle Isobel, while Luba is raped by Ricky, the organist for Los Fritos. Gorgo, a hitman long associated with Luba’s family, is beset by thugs sent by enemies at the same moment everything else occurs. Panels flash between events, and readers must work to keep track of all of the various relationships between the characters and the separate yet simultaneous events. Peter’s ascension to power is realized as he is conspicuously absent from the final page of chapter ten, with the exception of the ubiquitous blackfaced cartoon character Pedro Pacotilla, whom, despite Peter’s protests, is associated with him (114). The close up of Pedro smiling subsequent to the rape and carnage that closes the chapter serves as a stand-in for Peter himself (Figure 14).

Peter’s world crashes upon the Palomarian storyworld that readers have come to expect in ways that ratchet up the complexity of the narrative discourse. Often Gilbert moves freely amidst the chronology as it suits his narrative, as in chapter twelve, when we see Luba’s mother María in the heyday of her youth. But even here, we see the connections to Peter and Fermin Río, and so the narrative complexity is not lessened (Beyond 129). This analeptic chapter, appearing in the second half of Poison River, only indirectly impacts Luba. Instead, the chapter reveals something heretofore hidden regarding both Fermin and Peter Río—that they both had a sexual relationship with María, and that both of them have known full well who Luba is for quite some time. Gilbert then takes the reader back to the moment Peter and Luba are introduced in
chapter five and reveals the first actual meeting between the two, now in the context of not only his gangster ties but his ties to Luba’s mother as well. Gilbert then, as he did in comics such as “Holidays in the Sun,” leaps forward many years in the space of one page.

Figure 12: Temporal Compression
Figure 13: Multiple and Simultaneous Narrative Threads
In this case, he opens the page with a top-left panel that shows Luba and Peter’s marriage and efficiently moves to the moment after the birth of Luba’s son as they both lie in bed,
when it is revealed that Peter has had a stroke during the night. The moment Luba wakes up is the moment just subsequent to the extended analepsis that comprises chapter eleven and most of chapter twelve (Beyond 125, 152).

Again, it is important to remember that Gilbert does not provide clear signposts during these temporal shifts, but rather, allows the reader to make clear sense of the intricate connections of time and character. At the height of Poison River’s complexity, Peter has a stroke. Accordingly, as he begins a slow deterioration, the cognitive challenges to the reader begin to recede. Similarly, Luba is forcibly extricated from Peter’s world, and her character comes to full circle as she reconciles with Pino and Omo. Ofelia’s attackers encounter mob justice, providing some semblance of closure for her. As both Luba and her daughter, along with Ofelia, see Palomar in the distance, the serial reader is once more in familiar territory (Beyond 189).

Unlike previous Palomar stories, Poison River is rigorously complex, which is fitting for its most complex character. Even without her origin story, a reader has many indications that Luba has been through hell and back even before she set one foot in Palomar. Hatfield characterizes Poison River as a “supreme test of readers’ loyalty” (Alternative Comics 102) because of its experimental storytelling style. As with all of the examples I have raised in my project, the attempt at challenging audiences, even loyal ones, through the design of storyworlds may be even more important that whether or not such challenges are accepted. It is the challenge that opens audiences to the possibilities that Latino/a authors have a wealth of narrative devices at their behest when creating storyworlds.
Though comics have been disparaged and derided as unimportant, juvenile, and even dangerous, the comics form has also proven to be a highly imaginative and unrestrained mode of storytelling. And while there have been similar constraints placed on comics authors by publishers, there has also been a greater opportunity to publish work in the comics genre, thanks in large part to underground and alternative comics. Within this tradition, Latino/a authors such as Gus Arreola, Frank Espinosa, Lalo Alcaraz, and Los Bros Hernandez have made the most of this visual and verbal medium of storytelling. These and other Latino/a comics artists have cultivated large audiences who follow their often serialized works with passion and zeal. Yet even with such a devoted audience, authors such as Gilbert Hernandez have found that narrative design is still highly influenced by audience reception. Gilbert’s work, and specifically *Poison River*, shows the relationship between an audience’s ability to work through a cognitively-challenging text, but it also suggests how serial publication can intensify such reading challenges due to the burden of remembering salient features of the narrative. Still, the rise of Los Bros Hernandez and the ever-growing complexity of their craft parallel the development of Latino/a literature in general and the ability of Latino/a authors to make use of any and all tools of narrative worldmaking. The next chapter examines two works of post-millennial Latino/a literature that feature complex narrative structures that force readers to move beyond the text in order to see the interconnectedness of history, literature, and popular culture not just within the US, but within a global context.
As the twenty-first century opened, two novels by Latino writers received high acclaim and significant critical praise. Sandra Cisneros, long admired for her contribution to Chicana feminism with her book *The House on Mango Street* (1984), and Junot Díaz, a Dominican American writer whose first collection of short stories, *Drown* (1996), created noteworthy anticipation for his first major work, each wrote a novel whose respective scope aligns itself with the epic, spanning both time (as evidenced through generational links within the narrative) and geographic space.

While their heavy use of autobiographical material and genealogical narrative continues this tradition in Latino/a literature, both Cisneros and Díaz inflect this tradition with a postmodern spin, creating fictional, self-reflexive writers who are distinct from the autobiographers such as Richard Rodriguez, Oscar Acosta, and Gloria Anzaldúa in several ways. This turn in Latino/a letters signals a changing readership, which has provided Cisneros and Díaz with the affordances to write in this postmodern mode with

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63 Again, the anomalous nature of Acosta’s books in Latino letters comes to the fore. As Frederick Luis Aldama has argued in *Postethnic Narrative Criticism*, and as I have argued in chapter 2, Acosta’s books are mostly based on historical fact. Because of this dominance of Acosta’s life history within his books, I am here including his works as very much entrenched in the autobiographical arc traced by most Latino fiction. Despite my claim that Cisneros and Díaz move towards a different type of writing than Latinos who have come before them, they—along with others such as Salvador Plascencia and Daniel Alarcón—continue to make use of personal life history within their fiction. Arguably all writers of fiction do this to some degree, following the ubiquitous dictum to “write what they know”; minority writers are often compelled to talk about this characteristic of their writing in interviews. It is as if ethnic writers are only able to write fiction rooted in life events, which is clearly not the case.
such confidence and success—affordances Latino/a writers of the twentieth century did not have to such a degree.

Unlike Acosta and Anzaldúa, who both create textual doppelgängers in order to use narrative as a means of understanding the self and the self-within-community, as I showed in chapter 2, in *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (hereafter *Oscar Wao*) Cisneros and Díaz each create a writer-as-protagonist who chronicles the lives of others as a means of indirectly (or vicariously) understanding the self. This inventing of a writer-as-protagonist who shapes the narrative world is momentous in Latino literature. It allows the reader to see more transparently how these sorts of narratives have been constructed and received by their contemporaneous audiences. In short, while Acosta and Anzaldúa project themselves into their storyworlds, Cisneros and Díaz create fictional protagonists who claim to have written the books *Caramelo* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Writing, which is often seen as an act of empowerment, is not used here under the guise of documenting but rather as an act of creation posing as documentation. It is a postmodern masquerade of the highest order.

If we consider the two types of narrators in question here, that is, a narrator who purports to write autobiography and a narrator as a chronicler of other lives, we can see how the demands of creating worlds with a particular ontological structure place constraints on the devices available to these narrators. These ontological structures, in turn, are embedded within audience expectations for the literature in question. For example, an author of an autobiography or memoir has a certain burden of truth when creating his or her narrative world. This standard of veracity nearly derailed the writing
career of the infamous James Frey, when his contortion of the facts came to light regarding his supposedly factual account of his struggles with addiction in *A Million Little Pieces* (2003). Subsequent to the Frey scandal, John D’Agata has also been accused of bending fact to his own narrative devices, particularly in his *About a Mountain* (2010). And finally, there is the case of Greg Mortenson’s *Three Cups of Tea* (2006), an arguably fictionalized account of the aftermath of his failed attempt to summit K2.

A *60 Minutes* expose revealed Mortenson’s narrative as a marketing tactic with the aim of moving readers beyond an emotional threshold that would make them donate their own money to Mortenson’s charity—a charity which, as Jon Krakauer maintains, functions as Mortenson’s personal bank account that pays his travel arrangements for his paid speaking engagements. In the cases of Frey and D’Agata, and especially Mortenson, a desire to move creatively beyond the sheer facts (ostensibly to render a more compelling narrative and thus reading experience, and some would argue, to increase personal wealth) has been met with vociferous challenges from readers who feel they have been fooled.\(^{64}\)

But what happens when we have fiction that poses as a true account—as autobiography or biography? How do audiences engage with creations that claim to chronicle things that never happened? This metafictional ploy goes back as far as Cervantes, who in *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (1605) features a narrator posing as Cervantes who claims to translate an account of Don Quixote written by the Moor Cide...

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\(^{64}\) Each of these cases demonstrates *in extremis* just how certain narratives can powerfully move readers. Thus, when readers discover that their emotions have been falsely engaged in the cases of Frey, Mortenson, and to some degree D’Agata, other powerful emotions are then directed at the authors who seem like purveyors of cheap tricks and manipulators of readers’ trust.
Hamete Benengeli. *Don Quixote*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) are all works of fiction that operate under the aegis of non-fiction. This mode of fictional storytelling that assumes a mask of truth is apparently as old as the novel itself. Why then have Latinos only recently written narratives using this well-established form?

Part of the answer, I argue, has much to do with the fact that minority literature is often burdened with the task of educating audiences. Insofar as Piri Thomas worked to give an account of how difficult life on the streets is, the argument runs, he must therefore adhere strictly to the events as they happened. Realism in this case is a snapshot of the gritty realities of life, and so anything that undermines the factuality of this representation is to be avoided. Latino/a literature has grown out of a need to document the social contexts from its authors’ experiences. The use of social realism can give a voice for those whose stories are often unheard, and this narrative mode is one that often lends a sense of power to groups of disenfranchised people living in the liminal spaces of our society. Putting it another way, it is difficult to communicate a social commentary if an author decides to design formally complex narrative structure.

This is not to say that Cisneros and Díaz are unconcerned with the sociopolitical valences of their novels. History, as something to be unearthed and examined, is at the center of their texts. In addition, *Caramelo* and *Oscar Wao* are concerned with movement, with social, cultural, and national boundaries that are invariably crossed again and again. Each novel features a narrator who is the purported writer of the text we encounter, writers who use the process of narrative worldmaking in order to make sense
of something very personal—something which remains hidden from them. However, in order to make sense of their experience and history, each narrator feels moved to invoke a multitude of intertexts in order to express his or herself fully. It is as if they can only indirectly recreate the narratives they have experienced by implying a sense of what it’s like—through allusion and analogy. Yet the heavy use of analogies and intertextual material presents significant challenges to audiences, for it assumes a shared base of knowledge. Without that shared base, the use of intertextual material is ineffectual at best, alienating at worst.

In addition to creating a dense network of intertextual references, Cisneros and Díaz make heavy use of footnotes. Primarily used in works of scholarship to provide extraneous, albeit helpful contextualizing material for the reader, authors have relied on footnotes to shape their narrative worlds in a manner that rises above what may be called typical paratextual material. In this chapter, I want to examine how readers must cognitively move through these issues of intertextuality and paratextuality and negotiate the particular challenges these narrative issues raise. I also consider how these features of Cisneros's and Díaz's texts contribute meaningfully to their narrative designs.

While many authors have used this device, David Foster Wallace is generally acknowledged as having made particularly rich use of the footnote within his fiction. His massive *Infinite Jest* includes over one hundred footnotes, and several of these footnotes have footnotes themselves. But unlike many scholarly footnotes that may be superfluous depending on the reader’s knowledge of the material, the footnotes in *Infinite Jest* are an integral part of the narrative architecture and cannot be disregarded by the reader, no matter how tempting it may be to do so. Similarly, Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* presents a fractured narrative that is only reconstructed, in part, by the reader’s stitching together of the small pieces—including the many footnotes—that lay strewn throughout the text. These purveyors of the fictional footnote all bear a great debt to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*, which is essentially a compendium of footnotes to a 999-line poem written by the fictional poet John Shade. In all of these works, the reader must oscillate between the primary narrative and the secondary footnote. However, in each of these works the footnotes rise above being secondary material, especially in *Pale Fire*. In fact, one might easily argue that the 999-line poem in *Pale Fire* is the secondary material, not the notes that follow it.
Along with the authorial decision to make use of intertexts and paratexts within my case studies, the narrators themselves play a part in this narrative design, for they purport to be the ones writing the text that comprises the respective novels of Cisneros and Díaz. In other words, the fact that these narrators so readily move to intertexts and use footnotes denotes something very particular about them and their assumptions of audience. These narrators have information, often arcane bits of knowledge and history, readily at their disposal. It is as if they have encyclopedic memory as they casually refer to esoteric facts. The result is that these narrators express themselves and their narrative in expansive ways—ways for which actual readers may not be prepared.

Cisneros and Díaz make few concessions to their audiences. In designing their storyworlds, these authors constantly reach beyond the text in order to “borrow” from other works of literature, moments in history, popular culture, and so on. In turn, these moments force the readers to engage with intertextual and paratextual materials by moving externally from the text proper to what appears to be secondary material. What happens, cognitively speaking, when a reader must engage with such "external" material? What occurs when a reader is presented with an intertext with which he or she is unfamiliar? What happens when the narrator has encyclopedic recall (seemingly) of a wealth of intertexts that readers do not? In pursuit of answers to these questions, I will first articulate how I am using the term intertextuality, then I will turn to examine these issues in Cisneros’s *Caramelo* and Díaz’s *Oscar Wao*.

While I argue that the high degree of intertextuality and use of footnotes in Cisneros’s and Díaz’s novels are significant moments in the arc of Latino/a literature, I
also maintain that these novels make unequal use of these narrative devices. Indeed, Cisneros’s intertexts and footnotes are not as tightly integrated within the narrative proper as are Díaz’s. Both novels use intertexts and footnotes as a means of granting a global and historic feel to what is, in both cases, a narrative about one Latino/a family. At issue in this chapter is the degree to which the intertexts and footnotes in each respective novel contribute to storyworld design. Without question, the external material is meaningful to each novel. However, for reasons I will articulate below, Cisneros’s intertexts and footnotes function more as ancillary material, while Diaz’s are grafted in such a way that the narrative cannot be what it is without them.

**Intertextuality and the Reader**

Julia Kristeva is credited with coining the term “intertextuality” in her essay “Word, Dialogue and Novel.” Other scholars such as Graham Allen have further expanded the issue of intertextuality, to the point that it may effectively be argued that any and all texts are inherently intertextual, as T.S. Eliot claimed. At a base level, I also take this to be the case. That is to say, I agree that all writers are bound to the writers who have come before them; all writings are bound to the writings that have preceded them. Without a discernible lineage of forms and language among texts, certain texts would be devoid of meaning. Again, as Eliot maintained, all texts are born within a tradition of other writings. Further, it is the experiences of readers with these forms that “lend” meaning to any text we encounter for the first time. Simply put, a reader relies on his or her memory to help give context and shape to the newly encountered text; the reader does not encounter a text *de novo.*
Of course, Roland Barthes famously seized upon this rather self-evident notion and declared that the author was not the master of the text, but rather, that the author was subservient to these other texts which preceded him or her. Thus, Barthes proclaimed the “death of the author.” However, whether or not an author cannot truly create something deemed *ex nihilo* does not impinge on whether the author can rely on these prior forms or intertexts to create the semblance of something new when readers encounter it, as Barthes suggests with his concept of the scriptor. In fact, the newness of a text or its subject is hardly the point, as Shklovsky admirably demonstrated. Instead, the author enstranges the reader by presenting the familiar in new ways.

But if Kristeva, and Bakhtin before her, are correct in maintaining that a given text is intelligible based on a conglomeration of other texts which lend nuance and meaning and thus becomes something greater than the text at hand, what are we to make of a readership and its access to these conglomerate texts? For example, it seems to me that an author, conceived of as Barthes’s scriptor, is fully aware of his or her use of intertexts. I agree that Cisneros may use Rita Hayworth or Raquel Welch, or Diaz may use the *Fantastic Four* or *Akira* as intertexts, as literary and/or cultural markers that provide further texture and nuance to the narrative world they create, and in deliberate ways.66

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66 It may seem odd to refer to human beings as intertexts, but here it is useful to note that “Rita Hayworth” was the Hollywood persona of Margarita Carmen Cansino, who also functions as a major intertext in the Argentinian author Manuel Puig’s novel, *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*. Regarding Welch, Cisneros writes in a footnote: “According to the *Star*, Raquel Welch’s real name is Raquel Tejada, and she’s Latina. We would’ve cheered if we’d known this back then, except no one knew it except Raquel Tejada. Maybe not even Raquel Welch” (317). In both instances, Hayworth and Welch provide visual embodiments of the concept of passing.
In other words, Cisneros introduces Hayworth and Welch into her novel as a means of conveying Hollywood’s desire to whiten actresses of Latino ancestry as well as these actresses’ willingness to erase their Spanish surnames in order to gain entry into the Hollywood system. The use of Hayworth and Welch as intertexts are in alignment with Cisneros’s will to style. Yet what happens when a reader encounters the name Rita Hayworth without the knowledge of her racial passing in Hollywood? In the case of Welch, Cisneros provides a sarcastic footnote that provides the reader with this biased take on Welch’s name change. But Cisneros introduces Rita Hayworth ever so briefly with no context whatsoever. So, while the author here has a particular intent in introducing Hayworth as an intertext, there is the possibility that some of Cisneros’s readership may be unaware of the significance of Rita Hayworth.

This potential unawareness of intertexts on the part of the reader is important, for it tells us something about the intelligibility and degree of difficulty of certain narratives. The saliency of a given intertext may vary, and the author may ameliorate the distancing effect of intertextual material through the narrative itself or through the use of footnotes. For instance, the Fantastic Four series of comics, for Díaz, is a crucial intertext in understanding Oscar Wao. Not only does the novel open with a quote from Galactus, an important antagonist in the Fantastic Four; what is more, the Fantastic Four storyworld is referred to again and again throughout the narrative and in footnotes. Díaz intuits that his audience may not have the specialized knowledge of the Fantastic Four. Thus, Díaz at times provides the barest reference material regarding this type of intertext so as to not “lose” his readership. On the other hand, there are many occasions where Díaz does not
contextualize his intertext. It is an important example of the author’s awareness of particular challenges his or her created narrative may present to readers, as well as his or her decision to force the reader to fill their gap of knowledge without relying on the author to do it for him or her.

Arguably, there are at least three types of readers of narrative as far as intertexts are concerned: those that are intimately aware of the intertextual reference, those that are obliquely aware of the intertext, and those who are mostly unaware of the intertext. For each of these readers, the reconstruction of the storyworld yields a different result, leading to a difference in engagement with the narrative. If narrative comprehension is an aspect of storyworld reconstruction, and if storyworld reconstruction is a significant goal for the reader, the reader will then make certain attempts at understanding allusory intertexts. In either case, the reader must leave the narrative text proper in order to consult an external source, whether that source be a footnote, an online source, or experiential memory.

Consultation of these external sources presents a significant challenge for readers, especially if they are the kind of reader with no experience of a specific intertext. I argue that if the intertext is of the minor variety (i.e., a reader can comprehend the narrative without knowledge of the intertext), the reader can move through the narrative only slightly hindered by this lack of knowledge. On the other hand, if the intertext is crucial to narrative comprehension, the author will either provide the reader with the requisite textual support or will demand that the reader make the effort to uncover the value of the
intertext in question. Intertexts, then, play varying roles within a narrative and are not equal.

I rely on Gérard Genette’s definitions for intertextuality and paratextuality, which essentially come in the form of allusion and quotation, and texts that lie beyond the text proper, respectively. At issue, then, are the relationships between the various text as they form a contiguous network that contributes to a reader’s narrative comprehension. As many, if not all, narrative texts are intertextual in some form, I am concerned with those narratives by Latino/a authors whose narrative structure relies on a high level of intertextuality.

Cisneros’s novel often uses historical intertexts in order to uncover the personal histories of the characters within Caramelo. Díaz, conversely, makes use of a wide array of intertexts (both actual and fabricated) in a pastiche of pop culture and the historical record. Moreover, what is important here is the deliberate use of intertexts within the fiction of Latino/a-identified authors. What does it tell us that two major works of Latino/a literature with a greater degree of intertextuality than previous texts in this tradition appeared only after the turn of the twenty-first century? Or rather, are they novels within the Latino/a tradition that make conscious, deliberate use of intertexts in their narrative designs? What does it tell us that these two novels were not only well received by audiences and critics, but that each won highly prestigious literary awards?\(^67\)

Finally, what does it say that these two novels, whose thematic focus is on how genealogical history can provide new ways of understanding the present, must extend

\(^{67}\) Cisneros won the American Book Award for Caramelo. Díaz won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature for The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.
into historical and popular intertexts with a vigor and intensity not hitherto seen in Latino/a letters?

**Cisneros’s *Caramelo* in Context**

In a work that is at once expansive and faithful to Cisneros’s vignette-style of narrative, one that purports to simultaneously document the lives of the sundry cast of Chicanos in the narrator’s life while confessing to being “*puro cuento,*” a term that can also be likewise translated as “only story” or “pure fabrication,” *Caramelo* foregrounds the epistemic issues involved in attempts to write or document the lives of family. The narrator Celaya “Lala” Reyes begins with an annual trip south from Chicago to Mexico as the impetus for her recovery project that concerns her father’s mother (whom she calls the “Awful Grandmother”), her father’s father (“Little Grandfather”) and the events in their lives that inform the moment that ends part one when Celaya’s father must choose between his love for his wife and his loyalty to his mother. The rest of the novel is Celaya’s coming to terms with her hidden family history, a history that spans many generations and nations. In divining the past and reconstructing the significant moments in the histories of her family members as well as the nations of the US and Mexico, Cisneros often relies on the footnote as a contextualizing and historicizing apparatus in her narrative.

I argue that the many footnotes that appear in *Caramelo* help distinguish it from prior works of Latino/a literature. In spite of my claim, the footnotes in *Caramelo* have also had a mixed reception amongst critics, as Eva Paulina Bueno has noted, appropriately enough, in a footnote (47-48). The general thrust of the reviewers Bueno
cites is that, while they recognize the effort that must have gone into accumulating and
documenting the sundry material contained in the footnotes, they are ultimately too
cumbersome and add to Caramelo’s unwieldy bulk. Ilan Stavans, too, is perplexed at
Cisneros’s use of footnotes (A Critic’s Journey 58). Such reviewers are of interest
because of their expectations that are rooted in the Latino/a literary tradition as well as
Cisneros’s own prior narrative excursions.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section, Cisneros characteristically writes
vignettes, and as Stavans maintains, is quite accomplished in this brief narrative form.
Her novella The House on Mango Street is essentially a series of interconnected
vignettes, as is Caramelo. Also, her narrative prose prior to Caramelo is often
straightforward and localized within the narrator’s immediate experience; only rarely
does the narrator reach into intertextual material during the narrative. But that is not all.
The expansiveness that is created with the significant usage of footnotes is rare in
Latino/a letters, and the only major novel by a Latino that uses footnotes prior to
Caramelo is Oscar Hijuelos’s The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love (1989), which
incidentally, also won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature.68

Jordana Finnegan views the footnotes in Caramelo in this way:

Moreover, the novel often locates these “epic” figures and events in
footnotes at the end of chapters, which minimizes their importance in
relation to the Reyes family history. Caramelo’s unconventional footnotes,
marked by conversational language and references to popular culture,
subvert the traditional use of footnotes to substantiate academic claims.
Yet even as Cisneros revises the function of the footnote in scholarly

68 I must make it clear that in no way do I assert that the use of footnotes or other paratextual material
somehow elevates the literariness (or at least prizeworthiness) of Latino/a literature. It just so happens
that several of the notable novels written by Latinos have made use of footnotes in interesting ways.
studies, the very presence of footnotes in the novel positions *Caramelo* as an alternative kind of history. (131)

While I agree that the footnotes are unconventional in a general sense, they do have precedent in US fiction written at around the same time—novels that I have mentioned in an earlier footnote. But the footnotes in *Caramelo* are even more unconventional if we only consider Latino/a literature. Perhaps this is what Finnegan means when she says that Cisneros uses footnotes to subvert the ways in which academic claims are often made.

I maintain, however, that this is a rather limited view of how the footnotes in *Caramelo* enrich the reading experience. Clearly, many reviewers found the footnotes to be challenging, if not superfluous. Further, we do not need the footnotes to view *Caramelo* as an “alternative kind of history” as Finnegan argues. The fact that Celaya reconstructs her family history under the auspices of the spirit of Awful Grandmother lets us know that we are not getting a so-called accurate reconstruction of historical events, footnotes or no. In other words, the footnotes are not in the novel to simply provide the semblance of historical heft to the narrative, and they do not function only to minimize historical figures while exalting Celaya’s family. The significance of the footnotes in *Caramelo* is rooted firmly in the imaginations of the reader.

**The Significance of Footnotes in *Caramelo***

In a seminal essay that appeared in *PMLA* in 1983, Shari Benstock grapples with the issue of the footnote in the fictional text:

[F]ootnotes in fictional texts do not necessarily follow the rules that govern annotation in critical texts: they may or may not provide citation, explication, elaboration, or definition for an aspect of the text; they may or may not follow “standard form”; they may or may not be subordinate to the text to which they are affixed. Most significant, they belong to a
fictional universe, stem from a creative act rather than a critical one, and
direct themselves toward the fiction and never toward an external
construct, even when they cite “real” works in the world outside the
particular fiction. (204-205)

For Benstock, the issue of authority within the work of fiction is of particular interest,
and specifically, the ways readers account for the varied voices that often appear in
footnotes—voices that are often not the same as the narrative proper. If this is a matter of
authority and consequently subversion of authority, as Finnegan asserts, then we have a
case of an author using these prior expectations of readers in support of specific effects in
the narratives in which footnotes appear.

In essence, an author such as Cisneros is acutely aware that readers have been
conditioned to recognize footnotes as being authoritative, as being the external
verification apparatus upon which the reader can rely when texts become difficult or
present unfamiliar material that must be glossed. The question then becomes whether
Cisneros uses her footnotes in an authoritative way, or does she use them to subvert
academic claims? Also, does Cisneros employ a different voice from the narrative
proper? Another way of thinking of this issue is to ask how the footnotes change the
reading experience of *Caramelo*.

There are forty-one footnotes in *Caramelo*. The first two footnotes appear as a
footnote within a footnote, and already they display how Cisneros will deploy the
footnotes throughout her novel. The first footnote gives the reader an explication of the
Maxwell Street flea market Celaya invokes on page seven. When reading the first
footnote, one can see why it is not a part of the main narrative; it is a tangential aside that
gives a nostalgic opinion of the flea market on Maxwell Street in Chicago: “It was a
filthy, pungent, wonderful place filled with astonishing people, good music, and goods from don’t-ask-where” (9). The writer of the footnotes remarks on how the flea market (the actual flea market) no longer exists in the manner recalled in the narrative.

There is a dislocation of space and time, and the reader experiences this firsthand when reading the footnote. Though the first mention of the Maxwell Street flea market in the novel occurs when Celaya is eight years old, the footnote is written well after the flea market has moved to a different street. Like the photograph of the family that hangs above Celaya’s father’s bed in the novel’s opening, the allusion to the Maxwell Street flea market is preserved in the amber of memory. The author of the footnote accuses the University of Illinois of forcing the relocation of the flea market, making obvious how the gentrification and eminent domain of the educational elite conflicted with the purveyors of modest goods at a flea market.

Yet the second footnote is significant for several reasons. First, it provides further commentary on something mentioned in the first footnote: Jim’s Original Hot Dogs, “founded in 1939, stands where it always has, a memorial to Maxwell Street’s funky past” (9). Second, it suggests that the author of the footnotes is Sandra Cisneros, with the text reading: “Alas! While I was busy writing this book, Jim’s Original Hot Dogs was gobbled up by the University of Illinois […].” This self-reflexive moment announces the generally tacit fact regarding novels that they are lengthy projects that take time to complete. During the completion of Caramelo, the University of Illinois had basically swallowed up another icon of this early period of Chicago’s history, and this second footnote confirms what was hinted at in the preceding one: “tidy parks and tidy houses
for the very very wealthy, while the poor, as always, get swept under the rug, out of sight and out of mind” (9). Having Cisneros at the helm of the footnotes is a significant authorial intrusion within the text. Could Celaya, the ostensible writer and narrator of *Caramelo*, also have written the footnotes? I think there is reason to believe that Celaya could have written the footnotes, but instead Cisneros comes to the fore as the true author of the footnotes.

To press this point further, if Cisneros is indeed the author of the footnotes, why does she employ the first person except when she is clearly referencing herself, as in the thirteenth footnote: “This song was actually written by the author’s great-grandfather, Enrique Cisneros Vásquez” (123)? Why does Cisneros use the third-person in this case? Why not simply say that the song “was written by my great-grandfather”? It is a curious moment that shows the sort of ambiguous narrative situation created by the introduction of footnotes in a fictional narrative.

Perhaps it is here that we should examine the different ways Cisneros uses footnotes in her novel. Already I have demonstrated how the footnotes serve to provide texture to specific intertexts with which readers may be unfamiliar. This characteristic of Cisneros’s footnotes can be arguably described as superfluous. It is not vital to narrative comprehension or storyworld reconstruction that the reader be aware of the specific history of the Maxwell Street flea market, for instance. If the footnotes are voiced by Cisneros, then it is interesting that Celaya does not give the flea market the same sort of attention that Cisneros does. While Celaya casually mentions the flea market in her narrative, Cisneros uses the flea market as an occasion to raise a particular political issue,
invoking the name of Chicago’s Mayor Daley and paring it with the University of Illinois’s gentrification of the city. Here, Cisneros appears to press the issue of gentrification in her city of Chicago—an issue that is not addressed by the novel’s narrator Celaya. In the case of the first two footnotes, the information regarding the Maxwell Street flea market provides texture to Celaya’s storyworld and her remembered Chicago, but the notes overtly force the reader outside of Celaya’s specific storyworld and into the personal musings of Sandra Cisneros regarding Chicago.

Cisneros makes other digressions at the prompting of certain intertexts. For instance, in characterizing her father, Celaya recounts how at times, while suffering from migraines, her father would sit “on his La-Z-Boy watching Mexican telenovelas.—¿Qué intentas ocultar, Juan Sebastián? ¿Qué intentas ocultar?” (15). At the prompting of the quoted telenovela, a footnote provides further examples of similar melodramatic statements typical of the telenovela format of storytelling: “--¿Qué intentas ocultar?/--¿Por qué eres tan cruel conmigo?/--Te encanta hacerme sufrir./¿Por qué me mortificas?/Say any of the above, or say anything twice, slower and more dramatic the second time ‘round, and it will sound like the dialogue of any telenovela” (15). The purpose of footnoting the quoted lines from a typical telenovela would appear to be an explication of this genre of Spanish-language television for a reader unfamiliar with these examples of over-the-top dialogue. In reality, the footnote provides three more examples of untranslated lines of dialogue that encapsulate telenovelas, but it also provides sarcastic commentary on the telenovela form itself. The footnoted comment, in turn,
renders the example lines of dialogue moot by claiming that anything said slowly and more dramatically the second time actually sounds like *telenovela* dialogue.

This particular footnote regarding the type of dialogue found in a *telenovela* does not contribute in any meaningful way to the characterization of Celaya’s father. Instead, this footnote appears to be the author indulging herself in a moment of humor at the expense of a television serial form of narrative that is wildly popular in many places around the world. The tone of the footnote is mocking and sarcastic, and it indirectly mocks Celaya’s father—the man who is watching this melodramatic television genre. Here, the reader leaves Celaya’s reminiscence of her father’s fondness for a favorite chair—his place of refuge when he suffered from migraines—only to have the footnote mock *telenovela* dialogue. Thus, the footnote disrupts this picture of Celaya’s father at his most vulnerable only to offer a glib comment on something that only tangentially concerns the primary narrative.

Footnotes of this type—those that comment so obliquely with regard to the narrative as to be nearly *non sequiturs*—occur in only a few instances in the novel. For instance, there is the sarcastic comment regarding the Reyes family’s delusion that they are high cultured: “The truth was they had only recently learned to eat with knives, spoons, forks, and napkins” (163); or the pithy discussion on “the Mexican obsession with cleaning” (298). There are only a few such footnotes that leave the reader wondering at the impetus of these authorial intrusions and disruptions within *Caramelo*. In these instances, Cisneros seems to indulge her own sense of humor as she displays a backbiting wit that strips any grandiose illusions the Reyes family may have about themselves. More
importantly, these intrusions destabilize the author as an authority figure and instead present her as someone who is opinionated and struggles with the frustrations she grapples with in the narrative. It is as if Cisneros cannot help herself from articulating her disgust and the changes on Market Street, or her feeling that the Reyes family’s haughty attitude dishonors the realities of their personal history, or that Mexicans can go too far in their devotion to cleaning. Rather than provide texture to the storyworld proper, this type of footnote provide texture to the implied Cisneros, so much so that we may think of her as explicit rather than implied.

Yet not all of the footnotes in *Caramelo* are so indicative of Cisneros’s overt attitudes towards the narrative. The vast majority of the footnotes, and ostensibly all of the footnotes to some degree, are concerned with history. That is to say, the footnotes reach into the recesses of history and bring little-known events or personages to light. From events significant to major events in world history to minor figures that had only limited local impacts on their immediate surroundings, the footnotes include an expansive repertoire of historical and popular cultural moments that allows the Reyes story to be situated alongside historically important figures such as Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, Emperor Maximiliano and Empress Carlota. In doing so, the footnotes consistently yoke the fictional world with the ontologically-distinct actual world of the reader. Unlike the footnotes in *Oscar Wao* that are at times unreliable if not factually inaccurate, the footnotes in *Caramelo* have been carefully and painstakingly researched.69

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69 In her Acknowledgments page at the end of *Caramelo*, Cisneros thanks several individuals for “research assistance,” as she puts it. In particular she thanks: “Mr. Eddie López for sharing his personal papers on World War II, and to his wife, la Sra. María Luisa Camacho de López, for her invaluable knowledge on
The result is that the historical accuracy of the footnotes is occasionally undone by Cisneros’s idiosyncratic musings on Celaya’s narrative. Despite this, the footnotes anchor Celaya’s story within the historical record. Indeed, the entire novel turns on the long tradition and historical import of the rebozo or shawl that is a symbol of Mexico itself. In a concise but informative footnote, Cisneros makes the history of the rebozo a global history:

*The rebozo was born in Mexico, but like all meztizos, it came from everywhere. It evolved from the cloths Indian women used to carry their babies, borrowed its knotted fringe from Spanish shawls, and was influenced by the silk embroideries from the imperial court of China exported to Manila, then Acapulco, via the Spanish galleons. During the colonial period, mestizo women were prohibited by statutes dictated by the Spanish Crown to dress like Indians, and since they had no means to buy clothing like the Spaniards’, they began to weave cloth on the indigenous looms creating a long and narrow shawl that slowly was shaped by foreign influences. The quintessential Mexican rebozo is the rebozo de bolita, whose spotted design imitates a snakeskin, an animal venerated by the Indians in pre-Columbian times.* (96)

This footnote functions as a historical mini-lesson that has a different objective than does Celaya’s narrative. Celaya, as an American-born Latina, uses the writing process of the narrative to uncover her genealogical history as a means of understanding herself. Using the actual movements across geographical terrain as well as through family history, Celaya herself does not understand the import of the unfinished caramel-colored rebozo she first sees as a child in Awful Grandmother’s home in Mexico.

*rebozos.* Mario and Alejandro Sánchez assisted on library research. The historian Steven Rodríguez reviewed my historical references. [...] Thanks to María Herrera Sobek for song research” (443). This paratextual material confirms the degree to which Cisneros wishes her fictive narrative to abrade against historically accurate events. The result of these overt acknowledgments reassures the readers as to the validity of the historical record as represented in the novel. In effect, the statements provide tacit reassurance to the reader that Cisneros’s “facts” can be trusted, which is another means of establishing the authority of the footnotes.
This particular unfinished *rebozo* is the dominant symbol in *Caramelo*, and part of Celaya’s purpose of uncovering her family history is linked to this specific Mexican shawl, and for several reasons. First, Celaya reveals that Awful Grandmother was orphaned as a child and, consequently, her own mother was unable to pass down the specific knowledge of *rebozo*-making to her. Thus, this one memento, or *recuerdo*, as Little Grandfather calls it, is both a reminder of the past while simultaneously signifying an interruption of family history. There can be little doubt that the process of making *rebozos* is not unlike the process of storytelling for Celaya, whose Awful Grandmother, now dead, continually influences Celaya as the novel progresses.

This brings me to the purpose of the *rebozo* footnote I cited above, and I approach it with a few questions. Does Celaya herself understand the rich, global history of the *rebozo*? Perhaps more importantly, why is this history worthy of a footnote but not worthy of inclusion in the narrative proper? Again, we are confronted with the uses of footnotes to begin with. The information revealed in the footnote regarding the *rebozo* is exactly the type of information one would expect to find in an academic text.

Edith Grossman, one of the preeminent contemporary translators of Spanish language literature into English, has an interesting take on the use of footnotes in translations. In her translator’s note to her lauded translation of *Don Quixote*, Grossman states: “I debated the question of footnotes with myself and decided I was obliged to put some in, though I had never used them before in a translation (I did not want the reader to be put off by references that may now be obscure, or to miss layers of intention and meaning those allusions create)” (xviii). Grossman’s apprehension at using footnotes in
her translations tells us something about her understanding of the apparatus of the footnote in the process of reading. Is it that the footnotes, obtrusive and unavoidable, somehow disrupt or distract from the reading process? As a translator, Grossman does not want anything bound to the text to disrupt the reader of the translation if a similar device is not encountered by the reader in the source language. However, understanding the potential obscurity of certain references and how they might undesirably thwart readers of her translation, Grossman intervenes with a carefully measured footnote.

It would seem that Cisneros uses historical footnotes in a similar manner. However, upon further examination, the mini-lessons of history really are superfluous. Ostensibly, Cisneros includes this footnote regarding the rebozo as a way of enriching our understanding of this specific article of clothing that is a symbol of the Mexican nation and reflects its history. Yet if we identify the impetus for the footnote, we see that Celaya (with the constant interruptions of Awful Grandmother’s spirit) narrates her grandmother’s childhood—how Soledad descends from a family of famed rebozo makers.

Along with the craft of making rebozos, Celaya give other examples of Mexican items that were as black as the black rebozos made by her family: “as black as Coyotepec pottery, as black as huitlacoche, the corn mushroom, as true-black as an olla of fresh-cooked black beans” (92), leading her to meditate on the art of “las empuntadoras” or the women who complete the rebozos by knotting the intricately patterned fringe at their ends. Celaya claims that this technique for knotting the silk strands of a rebozo may have Arabic or Asian origins: “Perhaps, as is often the case with things Mexican, it comes
from neither and both” (93). The footnote regarding the *rebozo* corresponds to Celaya’s untenable claim of belonging simultaneously to both and to neither. Thus, the footnote is not a recitation of the origins of the *rebozo* but rather an opportunity to highlight the *mestizo* nature of the Mexican people and how this is made manifest in this symbolic garment.

Further, the timing and placement of this footnote is curious.\(^\text{70}\) For a contextualizing history of the *rebozo*, it appears nearly a hundred pages into the novel. Its placement begs the question: if the history of the *rebozo* is footnote worthy, why not deploy the footnote when the *rebozo* is first mentioned on page twenty-six? If we turn to the academic uses of footnotes, we would expect the footnote to appear when the reference to the *rebozo* is first made. Cisneros, as Finnegan suggests, is determined to upend this academic convention by balancing the historical legitimacy and authority of the footnote with a rather quixotic and arbitrary use of it. Further, the *rebozo* footnote is a clear example of what critical reviews mention when discussing *Caramelo*. We can imagine the text without footnotes quite easily with little lost from beginning to end.

I argue that the excess quality of the footnotes in *Caramelo* is rooted in the uncoordinated purposes of Celaya the narrator, and Cisneros the author. What’s more, the footnotes do not appear to be part of the organic whole of the novel but rather an *ex post facto* device that ultimately does not work. Unlike Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, where

\(^\text{70}\) Ilan Stavans, commenting on the general placement of the footnotes in *Caramelo*, cannot see the logic in having the footnotes placed at the end of the chapter (*A Critic’s Journey* 58). The result of this is that the footnotes often appear several pages after they are indicated in the novel. While reading, a reader must either wait until the end of the chapter is reached to read the footnote, or the reader must leap forward to the end when the symbol for the designated footnote is reached. If nothing else, the footnote contributes to a disruption of the reading process.
the footnotes are required in order to piece together the fragmented narrative, or unlike Nabakov’s *Pale Fire* where the secondary footnotes are inextricable from narrative comprehension, all of the footnotes of *Caramelo* can be excised without disruption to storyworld reconstruction. At best, the footnotes in *Caramelo* will yield a more nuanced storyworld within the reader’s imagination. But as an integral aspect of the narrative proper, the footnotes in Cisneros’s novel can easily be jettisoned. By anchoring her novel to historical footnotes, Cisneros attempts to provide her family drama with historical heft. But the historical heft from which Cisneros borrows is only tangentially of import to Celaya’s narrative. One final example will illustrate this point.

In what may be the most superfluous footnote in all of *Caramelo*, Cisneros provides a brief history of the dance known as the Charleston. Celaya, in the narrative proper, states:

> The condition of Prince Narciso’s feet did not improve during the seven years he lived with his Uncle Old. They were as abused at the end of his U.S. stay as they were in the beginning, not from the labor by then, but from pleasure. Narciso danced all weekend at the black-and-tan clubs on South State Street. This was during the time the Charleston was outlawed in some U.S. cities. (140)

The corresponding footnote reads:

> The Charleston was named ‘the Dance of Death’ after a Boston tragedy that claimed 147 lives when a Charleston-throbbing dance floor collapsed in a heap, causing the building to do the Charleston too. Variety reported: “The offbeat rhythm of the Charleston, reinforced by the indulgence in things alcoholic is said to have caused the Hotel Pickwick to sway so violently that it fell apart.” (142)

If Cisneros is subverting the academic convention of the footnote here, then there is no better, unequivocal example in all of *Caramelo*. 228
It is as if the footnotes in *Caramelo* insist on a different reader than the reader of the primary narrative. While the footnote regarding the Charleston may help readers understand more about this allusion, it is clear from Celaya’s narration that the Charleston was a dance that was outlawed in certain US cities. What *Variety* reported on the dance is only peripherally related to Celaya’s narrative, and because there are dozens of allusions that would better serve the reader were they contextualized, one cannot help but notice the apparent arbitrariness of the footnotes.

As an attempt to introduce the footnote apparatus to her fiction, Cisneros’s strategy ultimately falls short. Nonetheless Cisneros's decision to introduce a narrative device in her fiction is a significant move within Latino/a letters. Though she is manacled to the traditional Latino/a narrative in US fiction that is genealogically based, as Stavans complains, she also is one of the first Latino/a authors to move towards the use of narrative devices that complicate a conventional reading experience. By introducing footnotes within her fiction, as well as inserting a myriad of historical and cultural intertexts, Cisneros expands what readers may expect from Latino/a literature.

Her use of footnotes, though flawed in execution, nevertheless opened the door for paratextual playfulness within Latino/a literature—something that must be explored further if Latino/a literature is ever to be considered as having all of the devices for narrative worldmaking at its disposal. Further, Cisneros makes the attempt in *Caramelo* to put the reader in a position of having to work at understanding the narrative she is creating. It is a difficult cognitive move to read the primary narrative only to have to cross an ontological border and inhabit an entirely different rhetorical style and narrative
objective. I maintain that readers and critics would not have reacted so negatively if Cisneros’s footnotes were clearly bound to Celaya’s ontology and put to the service of texturing her storyworld. By contrast, the footnotes in Caramelo are often condescending and pedantic.

But the footnotes are but one part of a larger postmodernist move on Cisneros’s part. Celaya’s metafictional and self-reflexive narration, her narrative collaboration with Awful Grandmother’s spirit, her extensive use of intertexts, and her interweaving of her narrative with Cisneros’s footnotes all bespeak of an expansive rather than constrained presentation of narrative design and will to style of Latino/a authors. This bold move would help provide Junot Díaz with the opportunity to make full use of these postmodernist devices while challenging notions of Latinidad his breakthrough novel, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao.

The Significance of Díaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

Amidst a growing body of scholarship on Junot Díaz’s fiction, several recent articles have examined a number of critical aspects regarding the narration in his work—particularly his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. For instance, Monica Hanna describes the interweaving of genres as a means by which Díaz’s novel aims for “resistance history” (500), the result of which she calls a “historiographic battle royal” (504) between historical events and the narrator’s (and the reader’s) attempt to reconstruct history, making Oscar Wao a clear example of Linda Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction. Indeed, it often does appear that Díaz’s project is to void a biased historical record while simultaneously supplanting it with his own. Daniel
Bautista has investigated Díaz’s use of what Bautista terms “comic book realism”—an irreverent mix of realism and popular culture (“Comic Book” 42) as a salient feature of Díaz’s novel. For her part, Anne Garland Mahler makes the important argument that in Yunior, Díaz has constructed a superhero who creates the zafa – or counterspell – to the evil forces of the fukú, as a writer who uses the pen to shed light on the existence of the violent structures of power that have been concealed […] that Díaz promotes a writing that does not repress its own inherent violence but rather exposes it in order to disarm tyrannical power of perhaps its most effective weapon: the written word. (120)

All of these takes on Díaz’s narrative style help elucidate the richness and complexity of his novel. Yet two issues have yet to be examined in light of Díaz’s novel: his use of intertexts and footnotes, and his empowerment of a narrator to highlight issues of race. These two issues arise out the multifarious use of texts to fill gaps in understanding or to give rise to the architecture of Díaz’s storyworld.

Díaz’s contribution of a virtuosic narrative worldmaker to Latino/a letters, a linguistically unrestrained author who unabashedly foregrounds the African ancestry of his panoply of characters—an ancestry that has traditionally been under erasure throughout Dominican history, to say nothing of this legacy’s effect upon the Dominican émigré population in the US—remains a significant aspect of Diaz’s novel. Rather than simply writing against hegemony, Diaz, through Yunior, etches the African legacy of Dominicans by speaking for the many artists, scholars, journalists, and mythmakers who are silenced repeatedly in Oscar Wao. Moreover, Yunior reaches beyond his localized experiential self and into the narrative worlds created by other authors. It is as if he is unable to narrate Oscar’s story without the aid of these other possible worlds. Reading
this novel necessitates specific knowledge of these intertexts, for unlike Cisneros, Díaz goes to great lengths to keep from assuming an authoritative historical voice in his novel. What is more, Díaz draws upon the intertexts in ways that are crucial for the execution of his novel.

In this section, I address Díaz’s deft use of intertextuality in *Oscar Wao*. Due to its highly intertextual nature, Díaz’s novel is wide-ranging in its subject matter, seamlessly interweaving world history, languages, comic book lore, literary knowledge, and science fiction and fantasy in order to construct his own narrative worlds. Yet what strikes me as more significant, and indeed what provides the impetus for these issues I am set to explore, is how Yunior as an author sets about the business of narrative worldmaking in order to render his story. Indeed, Díaz’s characters and narrators all strive to actuate their differing (and at times competing) agendas as Afro Latinos in both the US and the Dominican Republic. In doing so, Díaz creates fictional Afro Latinos (as opposed to Piri Thomas’s representation of himself in his autobiography, *Down These Mean Streets*) who are written into existence by another Afro Latino (i.e., Yunior).

Attending to Díaz’s creation of an author/narrator, with his particularized renditions of Afro Latinidad, illuminates how Díaz seeks to inscribe the African *página en blanco*71 of Dominican culture with a significant instance of Afro Latinos in US fiction. What is interesting, however, is that Díaz uses both historical accounts related to the African

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71 Literally, “blank page.” The term tends to represent an omission or erasure in the historic record. In Díaz’s novel, there are several such gaps in the narrative, as well as lost manuscripts and letters that purport to have significant answers—such as the manuscript Oscar promises to send Yunior, which never arrives. Díaz’s novel itself can thus serve as an attempt to redress, however imperfectly, an omission in the historical record.
ancestry of Dominican Americans as well as fictional works in order to tell the story of his tragic hero, Oscar de León.

Besides the history of the slave trade in the Americas, two specific intertexts loom large in the structure of Oscar Wao: J. R. R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings and Stan Lee and Jack Kirby’s Fantastic Four. Without the historical record that reveals the depths of African and dictatorial enslavement, and the completely imagined storyworlds of comics and speculative literature, recounting Oscar’s narrative is impossible for Yunior. I argue that Díaz’s manufacture of Afro Latino characters with the power to inscribe the many páginas en blanco of both global and local history with the story of other Afro Latinos, as well as to reach into an array of intertexts in aid of narrative worldmaking, affirms the power of an author, and fiction more generally, to bring to light what the restrictive historical record omits. If Cisneros’s Caramelo shows the limits of using history in an attempt to rectify history, Díaz’s novel suggests that plumbing the depths of history is ultimately untenable, in part, because it is often the case that truth is stranger than fiction. Hence his extraordinary use of both historical and speculative intertexts.

“The página is still blanca”

Central to my argument is Díaz’s use of the página en blanco. This phrase, which Díaz invokes several times in Oscar Wao, works as a double entendre. In a literal sense, página en blanco refers to a page that is either blank or white, which suggests at least two things: the page is blank because the text that was inscribed has now been erased, or the page is blank because the page has yet to be written. Thus, the blank page can indicate a violation or a promise yet to be fulfilled. However, in a more provocative sense, Díaz
views the white page as a direct reflection of the history of the Dominican Republic to insist upon a whitened citizenry—the government going to such lengths as to “import” individuals from Europe with a distinctly Anglo phenotype. For Díaz, inscribing the white page with the African legacy of all Dominicans is a necessary move.

Díaz often uses the motif of blankness or erasure as a recurring feature in his fiction. In *Drown* the character Ysrael is forced to wear a dingy mask in order to hide his facial disfigurement, and his mask serves as a source of both curiosity and poignancy in the stories “Ysrael” and “No Face.” In *Oscar Wao* Oscar’s mother, Beli, often gazes at a man without a face during the most traumatic events of her life, and later dreams that her foster father, who scarred her back with a skillet of hot oil when she was a child, had a face that “turned blank at the moment he picked up the skillet” (261). Indeed, there is an evident link between a personified blankness and trauma throughout *Oscar Wao*.

Also in the same novel, Yunior, in a lengthy footnote, recounts the events surrounding a Columbia graduate student named Jesús de Galíndez, who writes a doctoral dissertation on the dictatorial era of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina. Subsequently, Galíndez disappears, and Yunior intimates that Galíndez was presumably murdered by the Dominican dictator himself. Perhaps not surprisingly, Galíndez’s dissertation vanishes as well. Abelard Cabral, Oscar’s maternal grandfather, is tortured and later erased out of existence because of a book he was supposedly writing on Trujillo, along with the only extant copy of Abelard’s exposé that Yunior hints revealed Trujillo’s supernatural origins. Near the end of the novel, Oscar writes a manuscript that purports to explain “everything” to Yunior only to have it go missing after Oscar is murdered,
never having reached Yunior. Finally, Yunior has dreams years after Oscar’s death in which Oscar wears “a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the eyeholes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes” and has hands that “are seamless” as he invites Yunior to examine a book he is holding for him to see, until Yunior realizes “the book’s pages are blank” (325). Thus, Díaz’s continual allusions to these and other instances of erasure, these examples of páginas en blanco, remind the reader that there is always some aspect of Díaz’s fiction (and consequently, Dominican history) that keeps full knowledge just out of a reader’s reach. As a result, Yunior consistently struggles to supply narrative material to fill these lacunae.

One of the methods that Díaz, through Yunior, uses to address these blank pages is to rely on external sources to provide a precedent for his attempt to narrate what has either been forgotten, erased, or ignored. Yunior consistently works to invoke analogues for the often improbable moments in his narration, and it does not seem to matter from where these intertexts originate. He is just as apt to draw upon an iconic Japanese animation film such as Akira as he is rumor and hearsay many times removed. In fact, one of the significant achievements of Oscar Wao is the patent disregarding of narrative convention and constraints. Yunior’s account of what befalls Oscar, were this an attempt at biography or nonfiction, is so based on speculation and speculative intertexts that it would most likely be disregarded, if it ever even found its way into print. Yunior writes Oscar’s story as a means for his own therapy that endeavors to get to the truth of the matter. Though Yunior often unambiguously invokes an unseen narratee, I maintain the
distinct possibility that Yunior is actually writing for himself. In short, Yunior is his own ideal audience.

Additionally, Yunior is fascinated by both writers and writing. This is unsurprising, as he himself has taken on the craft of creating narrative, and his self-reflexive musings on the process of writing provide him with an additional dimension for critical analysis. In other words, Yunior is not just a narrator who recounts events he’s witnessed or stories he’s heard. It is clear that he is constructing a narrative by putting words onto the page—often a figurative blank page—a fact of which he is acutely aware. This fact becomes especially significant as he provides repeated examples of the silencing of writers related to Oscar’s story. Despite the frustrating inability of these articulate personages and characters to write a final product, there is one writer who does manage to write, and write prolifically—a writer whom Yunior discusses at length in footnote nine, namely, Dominican Republic President Joaquín Balaguer:

Although not essential to our tale, per se, Balaguer is essential to the Dominican one, so therefore we must mention him, even though I’d rather piss in his face. […] In the days of the Trujillato, Balaguer was just one of El Jefe’s more efficient ringwraiths. Much is made of his intelligence (he certainly impressed the Failed Cattle Thief) and of his asceticism (when he raped his little girls he kept it real quiet). […] It was he who oversaw/initiated the thing we call Diaspora. Considered our national “genius,” Joaquín Balaguer was a Negrophobe, an apologist to genocide, an election thief, and a killer of people who wrote better than himself, famously ordering the death of journalist Orlando Martínez. Later, when he wrote his memoirs, he claimed he knew who had done the foul deed (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a página en blanco, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death. (Can you say impunity?) Balaguer died in 2002. The página is still blanca. (90)

Several key points in Yunior’s footnote regarding Balaguer can help focus our understanding of the dynamic between power, writing, text, and race in *Oscar Wao*. The
historical record shows Balaguer was a productive writer who wrote in many genres, including poetry, narrative fiction, biography, and autobiography. In short, unlike Trujillo, who carefully crafted a persona that gave the impression of cerebral prowess, Balaguer was a true intellectual. Yet, because of his close affiliation to Trujillo and his own rise to Dominican power, Balaguer represents, for Yunior, the powers of writing at their worst. According to Yunior, Balaguer, insecure in his own writing, ordered the murder of other writers. Further, Balaguer provided the impetus for Dominican Diaspora, which of course has a direct bearing on Oscar’s family, specifically his mother Beli, who was forced to flee the Dominican Republic so that her life might be spared. And, hypocritically in Yunior’s eyes, Balaguer self-censures his own memoir by silencing himself in order to appear as a more sympathetic figure. The deliberate act of leaving a blank page in his memoir signals how those in power have the ability to reveal facts but choose not to do so. The blank page here is more than Balaguer covering misdeeds, so to speak. When Yunior decries the cowardice of leaving the page blank, he reveals his own aim to inscribe such pages whenever and wherever he can. Balaguer’s blank page denotes the hegemony of power as an inherent aspect of writing itself, simultaneously denying access to information while challenging others to inscribe the page with information if they can.

As a result, the two great antagonists in Oscar Wao are not the local bullies that Oscar encounters throughout his brief wondrous life, but rather Trujillo and Balaguer. Additionally, these two powerful men, like Sauron in The Lord of the Rings, hover above the narrative without ever explicitly engaging in the events of the narrative. Despite
already being dead when Yunior begins the narrative, Trujillo and Balaguer are depicted as evil incarnate, with the ultimate power to make living bodies disappear without a trace, and to act, as Yunior says, with impunity. The result is that the two brutal dictators described in *Oscar Wao* silence writers while promoting their own Negrophobic agendas. Within the novel, the dictators’ ability to obliterate lives and texts equally coincides with expunging the Dominican record of its African roots. Indeed, one of Yunior’s charges is to substantiate the African legacy of Dominicans as well as to create the narrative of Oscar’s family by proxy.

According to Yunior, Abelard, Oscar’s maternal grandfather, initiates the fukú curse that will plague his progeny. Yunior attributes Trujillo’s violence against Abelard to one of two things: 1) Abelard did not readily offer up his beautiful daughters when Trujillo desired it, or 2) Abelard had written a book that claimed Trujillo’s supernaturalism. That Trujillo would go to such lengths in order to punish a rebuke was a commonly held belief among the Dominican community. On this subject, Yunior states: “There’s one of these bellaco tales in almost everybody’s hometown. It’s one of those easy stories because in essence *it explains it all*. Trujillo took your houses, your properties, put your pops and your moms in jail? Well, it was because he wanted to fuck the beautiful daughter of the house! And your family wouldn’t let him!” (244).

Yet Yunior is not interested in “easy stories.” He, like his “compañero” Oscar, is attracted to the “speculative genres” (43). For Yunior, the sheer might and vigor of the Cabral/de León fukú curse suggests that it is the result of more than simply another “bellaco” tale. Rather, Abelard’s “grimoire” (as Yunior describes it) was set to expose
Trujillo’s other-worldliness. Thus, just as Balaguer ordered the death of Orlando Martínez, Trujillo imposes a fukú upon Abelard and his family because of a book:

Sometime in 1944 (so the story goes), while Abelard was still worried about whether he was in trouble with Trujillo, he started writing a book about—what else?—Trujillo. By 1945 there was already a tradition of ex-officials writing tell-all books about the Trujillo regime. But that apparently was not the kind of book Abelard was writing. His shit, if we are to believe the whispers, was an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime! A book about the Dark Powers of the President, a book in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the president—that he was supernatural, that he was not human—may in some ways have been true. That it was possible that Trujillo was, if not in fact, then in principle, a creature from another world! (245)

Thus, “The Lost Final Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral” (246), along with Cabral’s entire library and every bit of his handwriting, vanishes, leaving Yunior and Oscar wishing they could have read Cabral’s grimoire. Instead, Yunior sets about to create his own book that bridges Abelard’s project with Oscar’s longing to be the “Dominican Tolkien.” Despite the many writers who have been silenced, Yunior strives to have his story fill the void created by dictators and curses alike. By incorporating the redacted legacy of Africa, along with the speculative genres, Yunior is now empowered to tell Oscar’s story.

**Afro Latinidad in Oscar Wao**

Perhaps because Chicano/a literature dominates Latino/a literature in the US, relatively few of these texts deal directly with issues of race. In fact, the majority of texts which engage in issues of race in Latino/a literature tend to have a connection to the Caribbean. This is understandable, as the Caribbean was a significant geographical location during the history of slave trade. The history of Spanish-speaking peoples of the
Caribbean is heavily influenced by the history of slavery in the Americas. Despite this fact, however, these peoples—and Dominicans in particular—tend to efface the African-ness of their history. This fact, coupled with the near absence of African ancestry in Latino/a literature in the US, makes Díaz’s decision to feature an Afro Latino writer/narrator who tells the story of an Afro Latino family all the more striking. The lack of acknowledgement of African ancestry is a great void in the Dominican historical narrative.

Díaz’s depictions of blackness within his fiction indicate a crucial authorial decision that acknowledges a long-ignored fact which affects the vast majority of Dominicans and Dominican Americans: namely, that a large number of them are undeniably children of Africa. Díaz, however, goes one step further and has an Afro Latino author/narrator choose the lives of other Afro Latinos as his narrative subject. What makes this narrative decision so powerful is that Dominicans tend not to dwell on their African legacy, generally speaking.

Regarding this quandary, Antonio Olliz Boyd observes, “The world of the Afro Latin is always unstable when it comes to questions of color and race. Hence, for the creative artist, emphasis on pigmentation and physical features becomes a ready-made device to express subjective imagery of race or ethnicity, especially for the individual that understands the aesthetics of the Afro Latin space” (25). Thus the fictional narratives of Afro Latinos in the US (relatively few as there are) provide a crucial locus not only for conceiving of how conceptions and representations of blackness permeate writing practices situated within both their Dominican and American culture, but also for
exploring how these fictional representations have helped change the conversation on Afro Latinidad itself.

Díaz centralizes an Afro Dominican family within the narrative, simultaneously foregrounding their African heritage while vilifying Negrophobia, which links to political and ideological power structures in the Dominican Republic, the nexus of which is the Trujillato. As Juanita Heredia notes, “Díaz focuses on the stories of the people in the community, especially the memory of Oscar’s family across transnational borders” as opposed to relying on “official sources” to provide an alternative to the historical record (209-10). If we see Díaz’s novel as an opportunity to bring to light issues of African heritage amongst Dominicans, then Silvio Torres-Saillant's suggestion of a potential way forward for the Dominican people illuminates *Oscar Wao* significantly:

The African-descended majority of the Dominican population will benefit greatly from a model that allows them to perceive their ancestors as the real protagonist of the epic of the Dominican experience. Seeing their progenitors shaping the course that the country's history took, getting in touch with themselves as a social force that never played the minutely marginal role ascribed to it by plantocratic historiography, will induce in African-descended Dominicans a vital degree of historical self-recognition. With that weapon, even if they hold on to their open concept of race, they will at least feel the wish to put a stop to notions of Dominicaness that detract from their own massive presence in the society. (1107, emphasis mine)

The creation of a protagonist of the epic of the Dominican experience, I would argue, is exactly what Díaz does in his novel. By placing an Afro Dominican family at the heart of Yunior’s story, empowering the fictional author with the force of narrative and slave history itself, Díaz figuratively takes the spyglass from Dominicans who look
longingly to Spain and points it squarely at Africa, accomplishing this deft move by prominently situating Afro Latinos in Yunior’s narrative.

In order to incorporate Africa into his narrative, Díaz devises an impetus for narrative progression that comes out of Africa. Díaz’s metonym for Africa in his novel is located in what Dominican’s call *fukú*—a curse of the highest order, one that, by and large, has its origins in Africa. Thus, not only does Yunior hold Trujillo responsible for the specific familial fukú that dominates Oscar’s story, he metonymically tethers Africa to what would later become the Dominican Republic in the opening page of *Oscar Wao*:

“They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles” (1).

Díaz’s direct, frank manner is exemplified with this opening salvo that already sets the speculative-generic tone of the novel. In a story ostensibly about Dominicans and their history, the seventh word is “Africa,” the fourteenth is “enslaved.” It is clear that *Oscar Wao* is as much about inscribing the blank page where Africa and the legacy of slavery ought to be as it is about the Dominican Republic or the US, for that matter.

The fukú curse is a type of original sin of the New World that derives its power from the outrage of slavery, and fukú drives the novel to its bittersweet end. Curses are usually engendered by a transgression and function as a means of retribution, if not atonement. It may also be argued that fukú originates from a Eurocentrism that has historically disregarded Africa as an equal in the Dominican Republic and has sought to
obliterate all vestiges of Africa throughout the society. As Yunior proclaims in footnote twenty-nine, “the Europeans were the original fukú, no stopping them” (244). In a larger sense, then, this curse may be a part of present-day Dominicans who also disregard their Africanness.

As an intertext, the fukú legend is strictly a matter of folklore and hearsay—an oral story that is passed down from generation to generation. It does not concern Yunior that the fukú curse is not a matter of verifiable fact, though he does make an attempt to provide the proof in the novel’s prologue:

> You want a final conclusive answer to the Warren Commission’s question, Who killed JFK? Let me, your humble Watcher, reveal once and for all the God’s Honest Truth: It wasn’t the mob or LBJ or the ghost of Marilyn Fucking Monroe. It wasn’t aliens or the KGB or a lone gunman. It wasn’t the Hunt Brothers of Texas or Lee Harvey or the Trilateral Commission. It was Trujillo; it was the fukú. Where in coñazo do you think the so-called Curse of the Kennedys comes from? How about Vietnam? Why do you think the greatest power in the world lost its first war to a Third World country like Vietnam? I mean, Negro, please. (4)

Of course, as so much of Yunior’s narrative is founded on speculation, it only makes sense that he can only give speculative evidence of the fukú curse. He bases so much of the unexplainable aspects of his narrative on fukú that the curse, and Yunior’s belief in it, suffuses every aspect of Oscar’s story. In other words, Yunior cannot begin to narrate Oscar’s story without this important intertextual, folkloric belief. It is not enough for him to dredge up the forgotten moments in Dominican history in “historiographic battle royal,” as Hanna argues. And, because belief in the fukú is a matter of faith, Yunior consistently calls upon two exemplars of speculative literature to aid his narrative
worldmaking: The *Fantastic Four* and *The Lord of the Rings*. And it is his narration that allows Yunior to accomplish this.

**Narration in *Oscar Wao***

As I discussed in chapter 1, post-1972 Latino literature is dominated by the presence of homodiegetic narrators who narrate autobiographically, often in the *Bildungsroman* mode. Next in order of frequency, we find the use of heterodiegetic narrators who remain, as Gérard Genette would describe it, extradiegetically positioned with respect to the narrative situation. What appear less often in Latino/a literature are homodiegetic narrators who purport to have written the text one holds when reading the novel— in the modes specific to fictional autobiographies as well as fictionalized biographies. This, I argue, is a significant narrating stance adopted by narrators of Latino/a literature, for it highlights the recognition of worth (at least in narrative value) of another Latino, a Latino who is not the narrator.

These narrators document the life experiences of another person as an epistemic venue for the exploration of the self. Thus, it is a kind of self-exploration by narrative proxy. Throughout much of Latino/a literature, narrators often weave their narratives around their personal experiences. Rare are the narrators in Latino/a literature that narrate the lives of other Latinos. Despite their few numbers in Latino/a literature, this kind of narrator features prominently in other world traditions of literature, such the fiction of twentieth-century authors Philip Roth and J. M. Coetzee, to name but two. If we set about identifying trends in the development of Latino/a literature, the use of specific
narrators, their narrating functions, and their narrative subject all allow us to recognize how authors and their fictive authors set about creating narrative worlds.

For instance, Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* uses a narrator named Antonio who tells the story of his youth while using the eponymous Ultima as a foil for the undesirable position he finds himself in: whether he should embrace the indigenous folk practices of his people or leave them to wither on the vine upon Ultima’s death. However, the narrator essentially shuts out the world beyond the text throughout the novel. Though his brothers go off to fight in World War II, this seismic world event seems somehow false to the world of Ultima’s making. A close examination of the novel reveals that the narrative is located in a very specific space-time, and the text never urges the reader to move beyond that inscribed storyworld. Antonio’s narration always seeks an internal movement, staying away from the calamitous events on the European or Pacific fronts, or the contemporaneous and volatile political civil rights and labor issues that energized the Chicano Movement set within a nation fighting (and losing) the war in Vietnam.

Anaya’s novel seeks to block these issues out of the text. As a result, there is an almost timeless quality to *Bless Me, Ultima*, as if a reader is observing an artifact of nature captured beneath a bell jar. Though there are identifiable deictic shifts within Anaya’s novel, there is little if any use of intertexts throughout the narrative. Not only does *Bless Me, Ultima*, along with Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, help locate the post-1972 period of Latino/a literature, it remains an exemplar of this type of narrative in Latino literature. In terms of apocalypse, *Bless Me, Ultima* seems
to work towards a homeostatic resolution, one in which actual apocalyptic world events such as World War II are pushed to the limits of the textual boundary. The reader is also urged to set these moments of terror to the side while considering the storyworld. Indeed, Díaz’s *Oscar Wao* consistently seeks to move the reader beyond the narrative proper and into marginalia, both in the form of footnotes as well as intertextual allusions.

Yunior de las Casas, the narrator of Díaz’s novel, is a Dominican American who teaches creative writing and has set about to detail the events surrounding the life (and death) of his friend Oscar de León. As he reveals near the novel’s conclusion, Yunior is compelled to write the book because he continues to be tormented by dreams of Oscar, dreams in which Oscar shows Yunior a book that is comprised of pristinely blank pages. In order to stop the dreams, or perhaps to symbolically allow Oscar to rest in peace, Yunior writes his book. Indeed, *Oscar Wao* is a work of metafiction par excellence, with Yunior constantly reflecting on his creation of his book. Yet his book is a testament to an apocalyptic view of the world, and further, his book reveals that there is not one apocalypse but rather a series or cycle of apocalypses going all the way back to the transportation of Africans as slaves to the Caribbean and tracing that line of endings to the moment when Yunior writes his book. Within the pages of his writing, Yunior hopes to find a positive outcome to all of the tragedy that he has purportedly documented.

In *Oscar Wao*, Yunior—who is quickly becoming Díaz’s narrator of choice[^72]—narrates the tragic events that surround the family of Oscar de León, the Oscar “Wao” of

[^72]: Yunior is the narrator of several stories in *Drown*, the majority of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, and most of Díaz’s uncollected stories.
the novel’s title. Oscar is the ultimate outcast figure, an outsider even among his Dominican compatriots. Yunior, who, despite his penchant for womanizing, is in love with Oscar’s sister Lola and recounts the various circumstances that lead to Oscar’s demise. Yunior is unable to do so coherently, however, without piecing together the personal history of Oscar’s mother, Beli, which in turn necessitates an exploration of Beli’s parents, Abelard and Socorro Cabral, a prominent couple in Dominican society during the dictatorship of Raphael Trujillo. Beli appropriately links the Dominican Republic at the height of Trujillo’s power to her son Oscar, the lowly American-born Dominican outcast who fancies himself to be a self-appointed Dominican mythmaker like J. R. R. Tolkien, a master of genre fiction like Stephen King.

Among Yunior’s few desirable traits is his yearning to construct narrative worlds. Throughout Díaz’s many stories which concentrate on Yunior in some significant way, the one activity that seems to make Yunior a more palatable person is his desire to tell stories, and specifically, to become what Oscar calls a “real writer” (30). While Drown features stories that either recount Yunior’s childhood or the experiences of his young adulthood, in Oscar Wao readers discover that Yunior’s project is to bring Oscar’s life and genealogy into a larger, perhaps less transient, existence through the careful scaffolding of the book he has written—the book we hold in our hands when we read Oscar Wao.

Though charming, Yunior is, to a large extent, unlikable. While he is often a sympathetic character in short stories such as “Fiesta, 1980,” “Nilda,” “Edison, New Jersey,” and “The Pura Principle,” one gets the sense that he would have nothing to do with Oscar were it not for Yunior’s desire for Lola. His decision to document Oscar’s story, then, is stunning. Ironically, Yunior is more like Oscar than he would care to openly admit.
Yunior is a character narrator, but unambiguously, he is a narrator actively engaged in the writing process. In other words, Yunior claims to be the author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Yet for Yunior, his book is not a novel; it is more of a testimonial or tribute in hagiographic support of another personage. The result is that Yunior belongs to a relatively small group of similar characters in American fiction—a group that most famously includes F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway, Ken Kesey’s Chief Bromden, and Philip Roth’s Nathan Zuckerman, as Ben Railton has noted. Each of these character narrators desires to tell someone else’s story, and each of them has a different reason for doing so. Nick believes that he alone understands Gatsby, and he certainly cannot understand how Gatsby’s greatness went ignored by so many people. There is a certain mystery that leads Nick to narrate the events surrounding Gatsby’s final days. Similarly, Randall Patrick McMurphy is a mystery to Bromden as well, but for Bromden, McMurphy stands as a testament to the power of resisting institutional authority. Thus, Bromden’s narrative is both a memorial and a narrative monument for the sacrificial McMurphy.

74 Yunior’s claim that he has written the book makes for an interesting narrative situation. Depending on the reader’s perspective, one might read *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a novel by Junot Díaz or as a work of non-fiction by Yunior de las Casas.

75 Specifically, Railton concentrates his investigation of what he terms “meta-realism” on four such narrators: Carraway, Zuckerman, Willa Cather’s Jim Burden, and Yunior. However, Railton casts Yunior as a “novelist-narrator,” when Yunior has clearly written a work that, if he were an actual person, we would call non-fiction—a significant detail that makes Yunior’s document stand out in American fiction. Within US Latino literature, the narrative style in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* has a progenitor in Oscar “Zeta” Acosta’s two novels, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*. Both Díaz’s and Acosta’s texts feature unfettered narrators who set about the task of documenting historical events. One crucial difference, however, is subject: Acosta testifies to the “Brown Buffalo,” (i.e., himself) while Díaz (through Yunior) testifies to Oscar and his family.
However, while both Nick and Bromden have in common with Yunior the need to memorialize through narration, it is with Nathan Zuckerman that Yunior has the strongest affinity. Both Zuckerman and Yunior are writers devoted to the craft of narrative worldmaking (Zuckerman, like his creator Philip Roth, is a successful novelist; Yunior is a creative writing teacher), and in both *American Pastoral* (1997) and *The Human Stain* (2000), Zuckerman cannot resist weaving a narrative around a certain charismatic figure (Seymour “Swede” Levov and Coleman Silk, respectively) in an effort to understand how these great men fell from such lofty heights. Zuckerman uses narrative in order to plausibly fill in the gaps created by the historical record surrounding both Levov and Silk.

Yet there is a key difference between Zuckerman’s desire to explore a great man’s fall from grace and Yunior’s compulsion to write the story of an utterly unremarkable person. Levov and Silk are near-mystic figures, and even after their personal downfalls their story continues on in the stories of their respective communities. But one gets the sense that no one is going to continue telling Oscar’s story. Both Zuckerman and Yunior want to reconstruct the events of particular lives, but it is Yunior who apotheosizes Oscar. Like any good writer of speculative fiction, Yunior casts Oscar as his hero from humble origins who is pitted against dark forces that are almost unimaginable in scope, just as Tolkien does with Bilbo Baggins, and later, Frodo Baggins.

As a result of his significant use of intertexts, part of Yunior’s repertoire in creating his narrative is to digress beyond the primary narrative into footnotes. But unlike Cisneros’s *Caramelo* where the footnotes appear to originate from the author’s position
(as opposed to the narrator’s), Yunior also narrates the thirty-three footnotes in *Oscar Wao*. The distinction between the two novels’ use of footnotes is key, for the distinction rests in the presumed authority of the footnote itself. Whereas Cisneros assumes the footnotes as a sort of quality control within her novel, Yunior maintains the same level of authority whether he narrates in the primary narrative or from the position of the footnote. In *Caramelo*, the difference in narrators of the primary text and the secondary footnote compels the reader to wonder at the authorial intrusions of the footnotes. The result of this double voicing of Cisneros’s novel is that the device is exposed and bereft of the organic and holistic nature of the primary narrative/secondary footnote dynamic we find in *Oscar Wao*. Rather than use the footnote as a device simply to clarify or expand upon material originating from the primary narrative, Yunior often introduces intertexts that enriches Oscar’s narrative in a meaningful way that is an ingrained aspect of the narrative progression. The reader, in turn, must be willing and able to make sense of the intertextual allusion when it is deployed within the narrative. It is a significant challenge, one that is not found in the initial rise of Latino/a literature.

For instance, in his prologue wherein Yunior establishes the import and significant of the fukú curse, he introduces his two most important intertexts from speculative fiction: “It’s doom-ish in that way, makes it harder to put a finger on, to brace yourself against. But be assured: like Darkseid’s Omega Effect, like Morgoth’s bane, no matter how many turns and digressions this shit might take, it always—and I mean always—gets its man” (5). I will explore these two intertexts in the next two subsections, but for now I would like to note that the character Darkseid is Jack Kirby’s creation, an
overarching villain of Kirby’s Fourth World. Darkseid is, as Charles Hatfield describes, “the über-fascist [...] whose plans to enslave all life were opposed by a motley group of demigods and heroes” (*Hand of Fire* 10). Yet there is no indication of who or what Darkseid is in Oscar Wao’s prologue; no context or footnote is provided. Also, Jack Kirby’s created comic worlds become a dominant intertext in Diaz’s novel. As for Morgoth’s bane, a footnote is provided:

> I am the Elder King: Melkor, first and mightiest of all the Valar, who was before the world and made it. The shadow of my purpose lies upon Arda, and all that is in it bends slowly and surely to my will. But upon all whom you love my thought shall weigh as a cloud of Doom, and it shall bring them down into darkness and despair. Wherever they go, evil shall arise. Whenever they speak, their words shall bring ill counsel. Whatsoever they do shall turn against them. They shall die without hope, cursing both life and death. (5)

The footnote is comprised of a single, uncontextualized, uncited quotation. From a reader’s perspective, this footnote is extremely recalcitrant, refusing to provide the reader with further explanation as to the relevance of the quote to Morgoth’s bane.

In fact, the quote actually provides more material that might also beg a footnote: “Melkor,” “Valar,” “Arda,” and so on. Neither does Yunior cite the narrator of this bit of quoted speech nor the author of the text. It is a challenging reading situation of the first order for several reasons. First, while Morgoth is a character in the Tolkien legendarium, Morgoth is only a referential character in *The Lord of the Rings*. Morgoth’s quoted speech is found in Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*, a paratext that is essentially the mythology that operates in *The Lord of the Rings*. Second, the footnote is Morgoth’s quoted speech,
but it does not reveal what Yunior means by “Morgoth’s bane.” This third difficulty that arises in this footnote, the identification of what Morgoth’s bane actually is, encapsulates how the footnotes generally function in *Oscar Wao*. That is to say, while they provide insight into the primary narrative, they don’t always provide said insight in an easy manner.

Because Yunior is such a free-flowing narrator who is unconcerned with making storyworld reconstruction easy for readers, he is freed to intersperse a wide array of allusions and intertexts—references that can only be grappled with, as the previous footnote demonstrates—with serious research that wields the power of Google. In fact, it may be that *Oscar Wao* is the first true Latino/a novel of the Internet generation, and that its design anticipates the usage of computer algorithms to aid in storyworld reconstruction and narrative comprehension. Not only must the reader move from primary narrative to secondary footnote, but he or she may often be forced to leave the confines of the material book altogether and forage through the cyberworld for reference material.

I now move to conclude this chapter with a close examination of the two key intertexts of speculative fiction that I have previously mentioned—the rich and vast storyworlds of Jack Kirby and J. R. R. Tolkien.

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76 Several websites have taken up the challenge of accounting for this particular footnote in *Oscar Wao*. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull’s website, “Too Many Books and Never Enough,” has an entry on the use of “Morgoth’s bane” in *Oscar Wao*. Hammond maintains that what Yunior means is that “Morgoth was the bane of Arda, but ‘Morgoth’s bane’ = ‘the bane (or doom) of Morgoth’, just as the balrog of Moria was ‘Durin’s bane’.” I disagree that Yunior intends to say that Morgoth is the bane of Arda. Clearly, “bane” belongs to Morgoth. If “bane” refers to something that results from Morgoth, and based on Yunior’s constant references to him, I maintain that Morgoth’s bane is the dark lord Sauron himself, the chief antagonist and source of ubiquitous evil in *The Lord of the Rings*. 

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Kirby and Tolkien Intertexts

Though many comics are cited or obliquely referenced in Oscar Wao, few dominate like those of Jack Kirby. Kirby, instrumental in creating some of the most iconic superheroes in comic book lore—The Avengers, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, the Hulk, and the rich Fourth World universe—is clearly an inspirational figure within Oscar Wao. Yunior himself unabashedly calls himself “the Watcher,” a character from Kirby’s Fantastic Four comics. In footnote ten, Yunior proclaims, “My shout-out to Jack Kirby aside, it’s hard as a Third Worlder not to feel a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher; he resides in the hidden Blue Area of the Moon and we DarkZoners reside (to quote Glissant) on ‘la face cache de la Terre’ (Earth’s hidden face)” (92). Many times throughout the narrative, Yunior explicitly refers to himself as the Watcher. Kirby’s storyworlds thus hold great sway on Yunior’s own worldview.

Consider the novel’s opening epigraph: “Of what import are brief, nameless lives...to Galactus??” Here, unlike many of the other invocations of intertextual material in Oscar Wao, the reader is provided with a very specific citation, “Fantastic Four/Stan Lee and Jack Kirby/(Vol. I, No. 49, April 1966).” However, a reader who is unfamiliar with Galactus will miss entirely the significance of this epigraph. It is interesting that such exact citation material is provided to the reader, and it suggests that Díaz is prompting the reader to refer to this specific issue of the Fantastic Four.

This particular issue is the middle part of what Hatfield refers to as the “Galactus trilogy” # 48-50 which “first introduced the seminal characters Galactus and the Silver Surfer” (Hand of Fire 132). Hatfield encapsulates Galactus as “not so much a villain as
an amoral, impersonal force” (132). Indeed, Galactus is a god-like entity that devours entire worlds with the inability to conceive of “brief, nameless lives” that inhabit the worlds he consumes. That, Hatfield maintains, is the very turning point or at least point of conflict in the trilogy—“forcing Galactus, through the Silver Surfer, to take notice” (Hand of Fire 133).

The Watcher himself is an extraterrestrial being with god-like powers (though not to the extent of Galactus), and his role in Kirby’s storyworlds is to intercede on behalf of humanity. He, unlike Galactus, can recognize the inherent worth of Earth’s inhabitants. By aligning himself with the Watcher, and echoing his title with Galactus’s quote regarding the brevity of insignificant lives, Yunior establishes himself as an advocate for the voiceless throughout the narrative—Oscar in particular. Yet Yunior is not simply watching. Instead, he adopts the god-like power of creating a world through narrative.

In the introduction of his superb critical study on Jack Kirby, Hand of Fire (2012), Charles Hatfield invokes an image from Kirby’s The New Gods:

A wall of white stone stands alone in a barren, wind-whipped field. Rugged yet ageless—unadorned, enigmatic, and still—the wall is a slab higher than any man is tall. A silent sentinel, this slab stands as if waiting. For what?

A man approaches, in the aspect of a pilgrim: frayed, war-weary, staff in hand, and stripped to the waist. He stops before the wall. Inside himself this man is bearing a heavy weight.

The wall stands as if in expectation, as if waiting for the man to reach out, to speak out. The man suddenly shouts, shaking his staff toward the wall, flinging his name and his terrible burden outward as if in challenge. Abruptly the wall answers with a deafening WABOOOMMM!!—and a hand of fire sweeps across the slab, writing on its obdurate white surface, in flaming characters, a message of grace, inspiration, and counsel.
Across the wall, the pyrographic hand inscribes its meaning, transforming blank whiteness into a signifying surface. Its index finger—pointing, writing—is a stylus of fire. The message is so much cosmic calligraphy. (3)

Hatfield’s creative ekphrasis of Kirby’s panel resonates with Yunior’s task of inscribing the página en blanco in Oscar Wao. Hatfield argues that the pilgrim in Kirby’s panel “is obviously confronting God, it takes but a little critical nerve to see the wall’s provoking whiteness as also the (to a cartoonist) ever-challenging white blankness of the uninscribed page” (3); I would make a very similar point regarding Kirby’s influence on Díaz and his narrator. Yunior, like Kirby, cannot abide a blank page.

But perhaps Kirby’s most important influence on Yunior is his “apocalyptic imagination” (Hatfield, Hand of Fire 12). Again, Hatfield’s remarks about this aspect of Kirby’s oeuvre are key for my own take on Yunior’s engagement with apocalypse in Oscar Wao:

With its outsized approach to superheroes, the Fourth World gave free reign to Kirby’s apocalyptic leanings. Here I have in mind two meanings of apocalypse. First is the original sense of the word derived from the Greek apokalypsis (revelation), meaning an act of revealing or uncovering. Second is the more popular sense—though a misnomer—meaning a cataclysm, more specifically the end of the world, that is, an eschatological vision of the end of history. (Hand of Fire, 16)

In both senses of the word as outlined by Hatfield, Oscar Wao is apocalyptic. Yunior both attempts to reveal or uncover specific erasures or omissions through the histories that run throughout his narrative, but he also continually emphasizes the idea of cataclysm. Again, Yunior begins his narration by identifying the fukú curse as “uttered just as one world perished and another began” (1). The various tragedies that befall the
Cabral/De León family can also be seen as a series of micro apocalypses that contribute to this larger understanding of the end of history without ever reaching post-apocalypse. And citing Alan Moore’s *Watchmen*, Oscar confidently maintains that nothing ever ends. This assertion, it would seem, also applies to Yunior’s understanding of apocalypse. The more he reveals in attempting to understand the past, the more he understands that apocalypse is a constant unfolding of world-ending events. But can the accumulation of apocalypses contribute to something we can recognize as good? I suggest that Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* provides the answer.

When asked to explain the decade of years between the publications of *Drown* and *Oscar Wao*, Díaz demurred, “I’m a very slow writer.” Yet in another post-Pulitzer Prize interview Díaz revealed that he had, in fact, been writing during the interim of years. “I wrote four books,” he explained. In one of these failed projects, Díaz recalls, I was writing a novel about a slightly futuristic American version of what we’re living now. In ’94, I started writing a novel about an enormous terrorist act that destroyed the United States. The novel takes place twenty years after this destruction, with all the stuff that we’re dealing with now—a dirty war, the disappeared, the concept of terrorism. Anyway, 9/11 happened some years into the process, and I was like, OK, I don’t have a novel. The U.S. that I had imagined was nowhere near as crazy and as incredibly damaging and brutal and indifferent as the U.S. that we’re currently living in. I thought I was being transgressive, apocalyptic, an out-there person. And then reality lapped me, it just lapped me. (“Pulitzer-Prize”)

In the wake of 9/11, Díaz’s project would not see the light of day. But, like any great fantasist, Díaz was still allured by the concept of a post-apocalyptic world. If he wanted to take up post-apocalyptic themes in his novel, he would have to retreat from anything remotely connected to the terrorist attacks of 9/11. While many writers in the
subsequent post-9/11 years made the attempt to incorporate the surrealism of those days within their storyworlds (with mixed results at best), Díaz infused *Oscar Wao* with an apocalyptic sensibility by grafting his story onto some of the most memorable end-of-the-world narratives available to him. The result was that Díaz penned one of the best reviewed and highly acclaimed novels in the post-9/11 era.

Díaz’s approach to rendering his own apocalyptic novel is to create a scaffold of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic intertexts on which he can elevate his novel about an outcast youth to the level of epic—Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien, in particular, theorized an aspect of narrating stories that accounts for a sudden turn of events at the story’s climax which, borrowing from his own Catholic faith, he termed “eucatastrophe.”77 While Tolkien’s coinage is sometimes mistaken for the concept of a happy ending, or pejoratively, the *deus ex machina*, his concept of eucatastrophe in the fairystory may best be understood as a “deep structure of hope,” as Susan Johnston has argued (69). Tolkien further defines eucatastrophe as “a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur” (“On Fairy Stories” 68).

Eucatastrophe is Tolkien’s account of the ending of *Lord of the Rings*. The quest to destroy the One Ring is taken up by the hobbit, Frodo Baggins and his eight companions. After three volumes and approximately a thousand pages, the reader finds Frodo at the precipice of Orodruin, also known as Mount Doom. Like Isildur before him

77 “But the ‘consolation’ of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. Almost I would venture to assert that all complete fairy-stories must have it. At least I would say that Tragedy is the true form of Drama, its highest function; but the opposite is true of Fairystory. Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite—I will call it Eucatastrophe. The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function. (Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories” 22)
nearly three millennia prior, Frodo cannot bring himself to destroy the One Ring: “‘I have come,’ he said. ‘But I do not choose now to do what I came to do. I will not do this deed. The Ring is mine!’” (924). Frodo’s failure here would most certainly have culminated in a true apocalypse within Middle Earth, were it not for a fortuitous intervention by Gollum—the long-tortured creature who forcibly removes the Ring from Frodo’s possession by biting off his finger.

In his subsequent moment of ecstasy and elation at having regained possession of the Ring, Gollum “stepped too far, toppled, wavered for a moment on the brink, and then with a shriek he fell. Out of the depths came his last wail Precious, and he was gone” (925). The “grace” of having Gollum accomplish the task that Frodo cannot is certainly “sudden and miraculous”; we can expect such an event to never happen again. For some readers, this resolution to such a lengthy saga is somewhat too convenient.

Yet I am interested in the concept of eucatastrophe as a potential alternative to ostensibly catastrophic events within a narrative. Tolkien’s explication of his concept of eucatastrophe as it functions in a fairystory (or “otherworld”), especially as it operates within The Lord of the Rings, contributes to an examination of Oscar Wao in a way that other apocalyptic intertexts within Díaz’s novel do not. In short, eucatastrophe suggests an inherent good arising out of what initially appears to be a catastrophic outcome. Above all, it allows us to excavate the deep structure of hope that may be embedded within Oscar Wao in spite of the fukú curse which dominates the narrative.

Understanding how Yunior and Oscar view Tolkien’s work will aid in the excavation of this deep structure of hope in Oscar Wao. While Yunior analogizes the
ubiquitous threat of pure evil that dominates both Middle Earth and the Dominican Republic in the form of a dictatorial power, Oscar places great value on Tolkien’s storyworld but also Tolkien’s more fundamental project of creating Middle Earth.

Whereas Yunior cannot escape the looming shadow of Sauron or Trujillo and the long reach of evil, Oscar’s vision of triumph is to one day be known as “the Dominican Tolkien.”

It is interesting that both of these Dominican males not only admire the sheer craftsmanship of writing and narrative worldmaking, but they engage in this very process. Yunior, for his part, claims not to be interested in the “nerdy” things that drive Oscar, but his own writing tells otherwise. Further, though on the surface Yunior’s interests lie with apocalypse—at one point even Oscar compares Yunior to the Jack Kirby creation aptly named Apokalips—we must remember that he claims to want to tell Oscar’s story. Yunior is indignant at the prospect that he might change his narrative in order to suit the narrative: “I know I’ve thrown a lot of fantasy and sci-fi in the mix but this is supposed to be a true account of the Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao” (285). Bearing this fact in mind—that is, that this is Oscar’s story—Oscar’s take on Tolkien is vital to my examination of the novel.

Yunior’s conception of evil can only be imagined as being on par with Darkseid and Sauron. For him, the evil with which he is familiar—that of Trujillo—has a parallel only in the most outrageous villains of speculative fiction. In The Lord of the Rings, Sauron has been incorporeal ever since Isildur cut the One Ring from the Dark Lord’s hand. Rendered impotent and with the One Ring thought lost, the fear that preoccupies
the wise of Middle Earth is that Sauron will be reunited once more with the One Ring.
Such a result would be seen not only as catastrophic, but as apocalyptic as well.

Indeed, in Tolkien’s storyworld, the Four Ages coincide with what might be considered apocalyptic events—events in which the world is forever altered. Sauron’s final defeat when the One Ring is destroyed in Orodruin initiates the Fourth Age of Middle Earth, for example. Yunior’s appropriation of Tolkien’s text is to delineate clearly good from evil. Tolkien invents characters that are uncomplicatedly evil (e.g., Morgoth, Sauron) or good (e.g., Tom Bombadil), so his storyworld works well if one is attempting to find analogues of pure good or unadulterated evil. Of course, this type of intertextual knowledge is the inherent challenge for the reader, lest we lose sight of that. A reader without intimate familiarity of *Lord of the Rings* is destined to miss many of these parallels that Yunior draws.

But it is Oscar’s affinity for Tolkien that makes the most of this particular intertext. It is safe to say that of all the speculative authors admired by Oscar, Tolkien and his world consume Oscar most. Not only does he wish to be the Dominican Tolkien, Oscar consistently works to find analogues between Middle Earth and his own. When Oscar moves into Yunior’s apartment after Oscar’s attempted suicide, Yunior says “*Mellon*” (200), the Sindarin\(^78\) word for “friend,” though Yunior claims that this was only the way Oscar remembered that moment. And when Oscar convalesces after a beating that nearly kills him, Yunior narrates:

> He read *The Lord of the Rings* for what I’m estimating the millionth time, one of his greatest loves and greatest comforts since he’d first discovered

\(^{78}\)Sindarin is one of Tolkien’s invented elvish languages.
it, back when he was nine and lost and lonely and his favorite librarian had said, Here, try this, and with one suggestion changed his life. Got through almost the whole trilogy, but then the line “and out of Far Harad black men like half-trolls” and he had to stop, his head and heart hurting too much. (307)

To say something is one of Oscar’s greatest loves is no understatement; Oscar proves he is willing to die for love. In the end, there is something about Tolkien’s world that comforts Oscar, and that comfort has been with him for most of his life. Is it any wonder that he wished to follow in Tolkien’s footsteps?

If we see Oscar and Tolkien’s magnum opus as working together as one unit in *Oscar Wao*, we come to understand Oscar’s life and therefore Yunior’s narrative in the light of eucatastrophe. The deep structure of hope that runs throughout *The Lord of the Rings* may also be found in *Oscar Wao*. In the footnote regarding Morgoth’s bane, the final sentence reads: “They shall die without hope, cursing both life and death.” Though a curse is the undercurrent of Yunior’s entire narrative, he is bound and determined to not let the forces of evil—those very forces resulted in Oscar’s death—be victorious by crushing all semblance of hope. Despite Yunior’s contention that Trujillo’s evil was somehow more potent than Sauron’s, he nevertheless quotes Tolkien a second time in an uncontextualized footnote (footnote twenty). Yunior selects the passage that describes the moment of Sauron’s final defeat:

> And as the Captains gazed south to the Land of Mordor, it seemed to them that, black against the pall of cloud, there rose a huge shape of shadow, impenetrable, lighting-crowned, filling all the sky. Enormous it reared above the world, and stretched out towards them a vast threatening hand, terrible but impotent; for even as it leaned over them, a great wind took it, and it was blown away, and passed; and then a hush fell. (*Oscar Wao* 156)

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In the end, Yunior’s penchant for apocalyptic texts also values the inherent hope or eucatastrophe that lay within those intertexts. Reading Oscar Wao in this light makes us consider the deep structure of hope in the novel’s resolution—hope that rests not only in the happiness Oscar experiences in his final hours with Ybon, but also the hope that is the promise of Oscar’s niece, Isis. Yunior’s hope, admittedly a hope he barely manages to cling to, is that Isis will be able to put the fukú curse—her family’s curse—behind her. Imagining that one day she will seek him out to find out more about her Uncle Oscar, Yunior muses, “And maybe, just maybe, if she’s smart and as brave as I’m expecting she’ll be, she’ll take all we’ve done and all we’ve learned and add her own insights and she’ll put an end to it./That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream” (332). As the Watcher, Yunior has seen enough to make him doubt that he will ever see his hopes and dreams come to fruition. But he nevertheless recognizes the deep structure of hope within Oscar’s narrative.

The intertexts of African slaves’ history, along with the speculative works of fiction by Jack Kirby and J. R. R. Tolkien, significantly enrich Oscar Wao. Diaz’s first novel suggests how intertexts can be used not merely as a postmodernist device that self-reflexively calls attention to itself, but also, as a means of providing significant layers of meaning to the narrative proper. While Cisneros’s Caramelo makes a stunning move to make use of such postmodernist techniques such as multitudinous intertexts and use of footnotes in fiction, it is not until Diaz’s Oscar Wao that we see organic use of these devices in Latino/a fiction. Both Cisneros and Diaz make little concession to their readerships, and by placing the onus of working through intertextual material (some often
obscure) they reflect the developing nature of Latino/a literature. After many decades of consistently shaping their narratives to conform to a particular structure with a readership unwilling to deal with narrative challenges of language, structure, or content, Cisneros and Díaz have made it clear that their works are highly interconnected to other aspects of human cultural production. If a reader does not understand a specific intertext, it is now up to the reader to make sense of it. Again, I maintain that it is certainly possible that Díaz and Cisneros envision writing their respective novels for their own tastes rather than a particular readership. If so, this is a sign of empowerment for the author’s desire to construct narratives that are shaped in ways that comport with their own imaginations rather than those of a supposed audience. Latino/a authors are now poised to write not what others such as publishers and audiences would have them write, but instead what they feel compelled to write based on their own imaginings of their storyworld design and will to style. The challenge has now been presented to readers. It remains to be seen whether such narratives, as Jorge Luis Borges hoped for his own fiction, “will continue to ramify within the hospitable imaginations of the readers” (485).
Chapter 6—Conclusion: The Possibilities of Narrative in Latino/a Literature

In my initial curiosity on the topic that would later become this project, I wondered why it was that Latino/a literature seemed to come to complexly designed and challenging narratives relatively late when compared to, say, Anglo American literature. Why was it that novels such as Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* or Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper*, with their postmodernist tendencies and unconventional narrative structures, had not appeared earlier in the development of Latino/a literature? In my initial musings, I erroneously ascribed the possibility of a new aesthetic as far as Latino/a literature was concerned. At the turn of the twenty-first century, I thought, Latino/a authors had broken away from the dominance of the realistic narrative structures rooted in cultural tradition and history. Latino/a authors could now create any type of narrative that tickled their fancies—from scifi to melodrama, from postmodernism to formulaic thrillers.

While my initial hypothesis about the wide-open formal and generic possibilities now being embraced by Latino/a authors has remained intact, I realize that I had failed to consider the possibility that even the earliest Latino/a authors were already attempting to break from *a priori* expectations of what types of narratives they could create. Barring idiosyncratic tendencies among cultures and nations when creating narratives, the human mind has the capacity to take aspects of our reality and use them as foundational pieces of imagined storyworlds. That certain narrative structures or devices “belong” to one nation,
one culture, or one religion is untenable and does not hold up under close examination. While some narrative devices may or may not be used to different ends amongst disparate peoples, the devices themselves are available for all.

In my previous chapters, I argue that narrative innovation is not a recent development in Latino/a literature—an argument that depends on how Latino/a narratives were (and are) received by both ideal and real audiences. Though my examination concentrates on the textual phenomena as it suggests an ideal audience, I acknowledge that publishers’ expectations do operate as an unseen but omnipresent intermediary between the author and the reader. Indeed, it may be that the primary constraint placed upon Latino/a authors regarding the design of their narratives originates from editors and publishers. As I mentioned in my introduction to this project, Arturo Islas and the tortuous publication of *The Rain God* is an example of this phenomenon of Latino/a authors acquiescing to a publisher’s demands, particularly in the early years of the development of Latino/a literature.

This is not to say that all publishers conspire to keep Latino/a authors in a tidy box. To be sure, smaller presses such as Arte Público Press, Bilingual Review Press, Quinto Del Sol, and Aunt Lute Books have published the bulk of the corpus of Latino/a literature. Without the efforts of these relatively smaller presses, there would be a dearth of Latino/a works available to the public, and their efforts ought to be lauded. However, despite the mission of these specialized publishers to bring Latino/a works to the public, they themselves have constraints for the types of literature they publish.
For example, Arte Público Press’s submission policy states: “Please take time to familiarize yourself with our current and previous titles, as well as specialized fields, and send only the material relevant to our publishing needs” (“Manuscript Submissions”). As Arte Público Press “specializes in publishing contemporary novels, short stories, poetry, and drama based on U.S. Hispanic (Cuban American, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and others) cultural issues and themes,” a writer such as Michael Nava who writes legal thrillers or John Rechy’s famous *City of Night* might not be published by Arte Público Press. This is perfectly fine; I’m not indicting Arte Público or other specialty presses for the types of books they publish. Rather, I am highlighting the issue that publishers have specific tastes in terms of what they will publish—even presses that work to market Latino/a literature.

Thus my aim is not to excoriate publishers and presses for limiting the development of Latino/a literature. Far from it. Publishers, until recently, have been a necessary part of allowing an author’s creative work to reach a real audience. Nevertheless, publishers have played a significant role in the failed reception of Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, as well as the soaring reception of Díaz’s *Oscar Wao*. Indeed, part of Arte Público Press’s most significant legacy, under the direction of Nicolás Kanellos, is its series “Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage”—a series that has brought forgotten works such as *The Adventures of Don Chipotle, or, When Parrots Breast-Feed* by Daniël Venegas, *Dew on the Thorn* by Jovita González, and *The

79 Most notably, the online bookseller Amazon has enabled authors to sell their books directly to a buying audience without the need for a traditional publisher. Though there has been the option of so-called “vanity presses” that will publish anyone’s manuscript sans the traditional marketing and editing infrastructure of large presses, many authors who are selling their books electronically through Amazon are making larger profits than they might even with traditional publishers.
Squatter and the Don by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton. But even here, Kanellos’s stewardship of a series that seeks to bring to the fore works that have somehow fallen out of print or have been otherwise lost is a potent reminder that Latino/a authors in particular have not always benefitted from a committed publisher that would vigorously market Latino/a works or from purchasing audiences that keep such works in print. The role of the publisher in the development in Latino/a literature specifically, and US ethnic literature generally, remains a rich topic yet to be fully explored.

In my project, I argue that innovative narrative design in Latino/a literature is not a recent phenomenon but instead has been evident for decades. I use the term innovative with caution, and I am not suggesting that Latino/a authors were designing storyworlds in a manner altogether unseen up to that moment. That would be an extraordinary claim, for narrative necessarily is rooted in forms that are in some way recognizable as narrative. What I am positing, rather, is that Latino/a literature has posed significant challenges to its audiences—challenges which reside both in the narrative blueprint of specific works of Latino/a literature as well as the imaginations of the audience. Imagination, as I define it within the scope of my project, is the process of co-creating the narrative storyworld in the reader’s mind. Moreover, the ideal audience/actual audience distinction is crucial for understanding the sorts of challenges manifest in Latino/a narrative storyworlds, and this potential difference between ideal and actual audience provides the impetus for my previous chapters.

As my study reveals, the types of challenging reading situations presented by Latino/a literature suggest the inherent complexity of this body of works. Additionally,
these challenges arise out of historical, political, and national contexts. Latino/a literature interposes itself between reader expectations and the larger Anglo American tradition of literature. This interposition, while bearing these specific contexts in mind, engages audiences at the level of narrative design. I stress that Latino/a literature presents a multitudinous set of challenges to audiences rather than one monolithic act of resistance, as some scholars in the field of Latino/a cultural studies have argued in the past. Further, these challenges are not simply a matter of presenting thematics that problematize a hegemonic articulation of, say, patriarchy or nationalism. Rather, the challenges have the potential to resonate most powerfully within the mind of a novel’s audience. I have attempted to demonstrate that it is the cognitive and emotional processes of audiences that are the specific sites where reductive assumptions of Latinos may be redressed.

So many of the challenges that I have identified in “Hospitable Imaginations: Contemporary Latino/a Literature and the Pursuit of a Readership” all force the audience to contend with them. How the audience contends with these specific challenges tells us much about the development of Latino/a literature over the last fifty plus years. Though audiences vary in how they respond to challenges in reading comprehension, we can begin to identify an actual audience’s response by noting the challenging reading situation vis-à-vis an ideal audience. For example, one of the most overt challenges in my case studies from chapter 2, Acosta’s Autobiography and Anzaldúa’s Borderlands remains the ontology of the text. That is to say, each respective text asks its ideal audience to recognize it for a fictional reality that in many ways reflects the actual world. Much of the complexity of each of these texts is rooted in this blurred ontological
distinction. Yet in each case actual audiences have tended to unproblematically cast Acosta’s and Anzaldúa’s texts as reflections and representations of their selves. These texts, despite their fictional status, have been received by audiences as documentary evidence at the expense of their more creative aspects as works of literature. The minimization of Acosta’s work and the overdetermination of Anzaldúa’s signal the inability of actual audiences to align with the ideal audiences for each text.

Not only is the very ontology of Latino/a literature a salient concern for audience reading comprehension, language, time, space, and intertexts all pose certain problems for actual audiences to some degree or another. Ostensibly, an ideal audience will not see these issues as challenges at all, which is precisely the point of my study. Latino/a authors, like other authors, work with a specific ideal audience in mind when designing their storyworlds. Piri Thomas’s ideal audience for *Down These Mean Streets* does not need a glossary and does not really need to be proficient in Spanish, while Giannina Braschi’s ideal audience for *Yo-Yo Boing!* is equally literate in both English and Spanish.

Though the challenge of bilingualism and code-switching I explored in chapter 3 arises out of a cultural context, Los Bros Hernandez demonstrate that challenging reading situations can arise from a purely narrative design perspective. The comics medium, despite its characterization as an illegitimate literary form for most of its history, has been a venue for diverse representations of culture and social concerns. Alternative comics have given artists such as Los Bros Hernandez a canvas on which to push their storytelling techniques in ways satisfying to themselves first and foremost. Gilbert’s use of time in challenging works such as *Poison River* suggests not an ideal audience that
recognizes certain markers of cultural signification but rather an ideal audience that can itemize and reconstruct highly-fragmented storyworlds that continue to expand both on the page and within the minds of the audience. Most importantly, Gilbert took the opportunity to purposefully design a challenging reading experience irrespective of whether his work would be well received by his loyal readership. And Sandra Cisneros and Junot Díaz both make significant use of intertextual material so as to suggest an ideal audience that either has an encyclopedic type of knowledge or has access to a knowledge database in order to make sense of their intertextual storyworlds. In short, Cisneros and Díaz create a narrative blueprint that views the invocation of intertexts (some often quite abstruse) as a non-impediment, as a device that enriches and provides specific texture to their narrative storyworlds.

This issue of the ideal audience as an orienting concept around which Latino/a authors design their storyworld blueprint is at the crux of my study. What is more, though the ideal audiences of my case studies can recognize a host of signifiers and referents within the narrative, the ideal audience may or may not be Latino/a. Unlike other ethnic groups in the US, Latinos have multinational origins (Cuba, Dominican Republic, Mexico, and so on) and they span racial difference according to phenotype. Latinos are Spanish speaking and they are not. Latinos have African, European, Asian, and indigenous American ancestry. In sum, Latinos have a wide-ranging set of experiences, traditions, and histories. So if we suggest that an author such as Piri Thomas has a “Latino” audience in mind, we must be quick to ask what a Latino audience expects. Instead, the concept of the ideal audience allows us to examine works of Latino/a
literature without an *a priori* expectation, which is, in effect, a liberating move in literary studies because we are no longer attempting to place Latino/a literature in a box, but instead take it on the terms it establishes for itself.

If actual audiences are asked to step into the position of the ideal audience, if this is the heart of the challenging reading situation, then such a move is only done via stringent cognitive effort. The actual audience is often asked to participate in knowledge and codes outside of their purview—an often potentially alienating aspect of reading to which reader’s comments on Amazon’s website often attest. Indeed, if the ideal audience is capable of comprehending all sorts of cognitively challenging narratives, then Latino/a literature ought to be limited only by an ideal audience rather than publishers or actual audiences’ demands for certain types of narratives. The ideal audience necessarily dwells within the imagination of the author and illuminates the possibility of the storyworld design. Ultimately, it is the goal of the author to get actual audiences to move into the position of the ideal audience. In reality, this shaping of the actual audience takes place over many years.

Over the course of more than fifty years, Latino/a literature has steadily worked to grow its readership. It is a process that can only occur when Latino/a authors engage in storyworld design across a multitude of genres and articulated for low-, middle-, and high-brow tastes. In order for Latino/a literature to achieve full consideration as a “Literature,” it must be allowed to express itself using all of the devices available in the

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80 For instance, concerning Díaz’s novel, most readers are confounded by his narrator’s use of untranslated, uncontextualized Spanish, not his arcane citations of comic book lore. The general sentiment of such comments that deride his use of Spanish is one of frustration and distraction.
endeavor of narrative worldmaking. For this to occur, Latino/a authors must move beyond the dominant tropes that have become so inextricably linked to Latino/a literature, such as magical realism, family epics, and barrio Bildungsromane. They must also continue to venture into all forms of genre fiction, from chick-lit to fantasy to scifi and beyond. They must continue to work in graphic narrative forms and animation. There must be no form of storytelling that is beyond reach for Latinos, for there is no form of storytelling that is beyond the reach of the human imagination. Storyworlds, those rendered by Latinos or otherwise, must shape their audiences and not the reverse.
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---. Personal interview. 17 Apr. 2012.


