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Chicano Ethnicity, Cultural Hybridity, and the Mestizo Voice

Author(s): Rafael Pérez-Torres

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*In the beginning and unto the end was and is the lung: divine afflatus, baby's first wowl, shaped air of speech, staccato gusts of laughter, exalted airs of song, happy lover's groan, unhappy lover's lament, miser's whine, crone's croak, illness's stench, dying whisper, and beyond and beyond the airless, silent void. A sigh isn't just a sigh. We inhale the world and breathe out meaning. While we can. While we can.*—Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*

In the United States, where ideas about race and identity politics emerge from the fine specificity of the one-drop rule, notions of hybridity, creolization, mongrelization, and *métissage* are difficult topics. Within a Mexican context, by contrast, *mestizaje* (racial mixture) helps form the core of a nationalist discourse. Indeed, one reason the Zapatista revolt has so taken the Mexican national imagination is that Mexican culture since the Revolution has sought staunchly to praise the working classes, the campesino, and the indio—the mixed heritages of race and class that form Mexican identity.

Of course United States society and culture has always been more creolized than the one-drop rule admits. *Mestizaje* in Mexico also proves much more complex than the official discourses valorizing the indigenous suggest. It is these multiple registers—simultaneous praise, celebration, and condemnation—with which writers and critics wrestle (Gabriel-like) when asserting the *mestizaje* of Chicano ethnic identity. In articulating notions of *mestizaje*, Chicano cultural

objects help trace the varied and vexed paths of racial identification. This identification engages the continuing dialogue among United States ethnic, social, and national discourses.

### Tracing History

Chicano *mestizaje* represents the trace of a historical material process, a violent racial/colonial encounter. Such encounters have characterized the socio-cultural dynamics of the Americas since first contact with Europe. Chicano *mestizaje* derives from a complex history involving a sense both of dispossession and empowerment, a simultaneous devaluing and honoring of indigenous ancestry. Needless to say, the formation of a mestizo Chicano consciousness is complicated and elaborate. At the risk of seeming to oversimplify, I suggest that three historical moments mark critical points in the conceptualization of Chicano cultural and racial *mestizaje*.

The first is the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire in 1521 and the subsequent enslavement, genocide, and oppression of indigenous populations. As with so much that is "American," the processes that wrought our mestizo conditions were (and are) forged in the heat and hatred of violence. Yet the sense of rebirth and renewal, and the interweaving of tradition and innovation that also characterizes *mestizaje* arose (and continue to arise) from these processes. Thus, the relationship between the invader Hernán Cortez and his translator and mistress Malintzin may be read as an index of this originary moment.<sup>1</sup>

The second event that informs Chicano *mestizaje* is the appropriation of Mexican lands by the United States. While the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo that closed the Mexican-American War in 1848 represents yet another moment of betrayal, it also marks the beginning of new subjects in history, men and women who have come to be called Chicanos and Chicanas.<sup>2</sup> Violence, fraud, manipulation, and intimidation were the means in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by which Mexicans in the new U.S. territories lost much of their land and became a large and largely landless labor pool forced to seek low-paying field and industrial work.

The third event is ongoing. The current controversies over immigration, employment, and border control in the Southwest are but the latest in a series of conflicts informing Chicano *mestizaje*. For a century and a half, the fluid movement of populations between

Mexico (and increasingly Central America) and the United States has complicated and enriched Chicano and mestizo identity formation.

These historical moments seem to value connection to the indigenous as the basis for mestizaje. An emphasis on a Mexican context in attempts to understand Chicano mestizaje leads to a kind of litmus test for ethnic identity. The somatic manifestation of “Indianness” becomes the marker of one’s identity. This perspective explains the emphasis on race in the famous “Plan Espiritual de Aztlán”: “We Declare the independence of our Mestizo Nation. We are a Bronze People with a Bronze Culture.”<sup>3</sup> Within an essentializing nationalist discourse, Chicano is measured by skin color and details of physiognomy. Clearly, this position can easily be translated into non-racialized areas: the test of ethnic identity can be tied to linguistic skills (fluency with code-switching, bilingualism, slang), clothes, taste in music, economic condition, place of domicile, nationality, and so on. Chicano ethnic identity becomes essentialized, premised on meeting specific physical or social criteria.

### **Strategic Mestizaje**

Outside racial discourses, in a cultural context, mestizaje foregrounds the aesthetic and formal hybridity of Chicano artistic formation. A brief glance at some examples of Chicano cultural production reveals a reliance upon creolization and border crossing as both technique and metaphor for aesthetic expression. Visual artist Barbara Carrasco paints canvases that simultaneously quote Aztec codices and the Flintstones; the pop-rock group Los Lobos records an ironic rhumba version of the Disney *Jungle Book* song “I Wanna Be Like You”; poet Evangelina Vigil plays English off Spanish in an explosively expressive form of code switching (“eres el tipo [you’re the type] / de motherfucker / bien chingón [real tough] / who likes to throw the weight around”); rapper Kid Frost busts rhymes that pun crosslingually (“You think you’re so cool / I’m gonna call you a culo [asshole]”). In these works, mestizaje seems central to the creation of Chicano culture. It represents a strategy by which audiences are gathered, fluid subjectivities enacted, political alliances forged, and ethnic identities affirmed.

This type of dynamism makes mestizaje durable as both cultural strategy and ethnic identification. Mestizaje allows for strategic move-

ments among distinct racial or ethnic groups (Indigenous, African, Hispanic, Asian, Caucasian) and strategic reconfigurations of cultural repertoires (mythic, postmodernist, nativist, Euro-American). These all form registers that resonate with contemporary Chicanismo. Unlike the typically binary notions of identity within a U.S. racial paradigm (choose black or white), a focus on *mestizaje* allows for other forms of ethnic self-identification, other types of cultural creation, other means of social struggle. So for Chicano ethnic identity, a reliance on *mestizaje* becomes a way to articulate subjectivity outside dominant paradigms.<sup>4</sup>

Within a Chicano context *mestizaje* thus represents a strategy by which counterhegemonic identities can be articulated and enacted. Simultaneously, it is a condition engendered through historical processes. *Mestizaje* embodies the struggle for power, place, and personhood arising from histories of violence and resistance. As competing social discourses have produced Chicano identities and cultural formations, they have given different meanings to the *mestizo*. In tracing these different meanings, a pattern of appropriation and misrepresentation emerges. In considering the historical and political exigencies of *mestizaje*, the voice of the *mestizo* emerges as the articulation of an empowered and empowering ethnic identity.

One of the most devastating conceptualizations of the *mestizo* fits within a pluralist paradigm of benign difference. The 1956 film *Giant* serves as a prime example of this conceptualization, enacting the subordination of *mestizo* and *mestiza* figures in a postwar racial hierarchy. While the manifest content of the film promotes a national vision in which racial difference is subsumed beneath the signifier "America," a white patriarchy nevertheless retains its privileged position as sole author of a new American history. Tino Villanueva's long poem *Scene from the Movie "Giant"* (1993) responds directly to the voicelessness imposed upon the *mestizo* by the film and so helps locate some of the liberating effects of voicing *mestizaje*.

Missing from Villanueva's rendering is a sense of the political and social struggles involved in the formation of Chicano identity that are the focus of Oscar Acosta's novels *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973). Acosta's Chicano nationalist version of *mestizaje* highlights the sense of collectivity and political purpose implicit in the development of *mestizo* consciousness. However, in giving voice to a masculinist *mestizo* dis-

course, his articulation devalues numerous voices seeking to broaden notions of mestizaje beyond a racial/national paradigm.

If Acosta's view of mestizaje erases variety, the work of poststructuralist critics, in asserting the deconstructive qualities of mestizaje, at times erases its historical material specificity. In response to the potential elisions and illusions involved in conceptualizing mestizaje as the apogee of *differance*, a feminist poetics of mestizaje can serve to reembody and rehistoricize mestizaje. The processes of mestizaje are often occluded by American pluralist, masculinist, nationalist, or poststructuralist valorizations of an all-too-evasive borderlands. The poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes helps crystallize the salient issues in a poetics of mestizaje. Her work reveals mestizaje to be a tactic that presents a mask to give voice to a subjectivity both inscribed by and resistant to dominant systems of power.

Extending a key point made by Chela Sandoval, this essay argues that the term *mestiza* is not a fixed signifier but serves as "a *tactical subjectivity* with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted."<sup>5</sup> The capacity to effect change through mestizaje is one perpetually renegotiated in response to the various systems of power—discursive, repressive, militarized, ideological—mestizos contest. The terrains crossed by mestizo and mestiza bodies form a topos shaped by strategies of survival and triumph. Mestizaje thus becomes a means of weaving together the traces of a historical material legacy and the vision of a potential subjectivity.

### The Subsumed Mestizo

Gayatri Spivak reminds us that in undertaking social transformation, it is imperative to ignore the fact that the starting point is shaky and the end will be inconclusive. Uncertainty must be placed in the margin. Simultaneously—and significantly—it is the margins, the spaces of uncertainty, of aporia, that "haunt what we start and get done, as curious guardians." An endless vigilance is necessary as we construct both relations with and challenges to the worlds of power around us. Responsibility lies in interrogating the uses to which we put notions like hybridity and mestizaje, for a lack of vigilance leads to a return of repression. Forgetting the critical function of the margin results in a conservative hailing of established practices and "a masquerade of the privileged as the disenfranchised, or their

liberator.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, throughout the contested histories of an Anglo-American United States and a mestizo Mexico, the privileged have felt themselves either disenfranchised from their sense of well-being by the presence of the oppressed or called upon to act as liberators of the oppressed. A reliance on well-scripted roles (rather than on their critical interrogation) leads again and again to a reinscription of asymmetrical power relations.

This asymmetry reveals itself most clearly in cultural objects produced by an anxiety about inequality. *Giant* represents such a case, recounting the triumphs and tribulations of the Benedict family—Jordan “Bick” Benedict, the native Texan played by Rock Hudson, whose fortune comes from raising cattle on vast Texas range lands; Leslie, the fey and spoiled Eastern girl played by Elizabeth Taylor, who valiantly adapts to the tough demands of life in the Wild West; and Jett Rink, played by James Dean, who parlays a small inherited plot of land into the vast oil fortune that ruins him. Bick and Leslie Benedict work through their differences, expand their ranch, and raise a family. *Giant* becomes a representation of postwar America as a (notably heterosexual) national giant whose virile West and refined East come together in a productive union of power and change. The film gives voice to a new America, one that struggles with discourses of inclusion and pluralistic liberalism. The film premiere of *Giant* came, after all, not long after the Supreme Court’s landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

A central conflict of the movie revolves around Bick Benedict’s behavior toward the Texan Other: Mexicans. As a white man whose ancestors built their fortune on Mexican dispossession, he views Mexicans as inscrutable minions who have their own mysterious ways and generally keep to themselves. Early in the film, Leslie earnestly but innocently reminds the stiff-backed Bick that Texas “stole” its land from Mexico. Despite her faux pas, Bick is taken with the girl. Though Leslie’s own childhood home is run by black servants who cook, clean, and care for her patrician family, she proves more accepting of the Mexican Other than her husband. A good liberal Easterner, she is ready to bestow some kindness on her humble mestizo servants. Indeed, real racial trouble arises only when their eldest son, Jordie, decides to marry a Mexican woman named, quite imaginatively, Juana. Bick is less than thrilled by his son’s choice.

His daughter Judy, by contrast, elopes with the humble—but white—ranch hand Bob Deitz. Each union produces a son. One is blonde and blue-eyed. It is, significantly, the other (or Other), the dark mestizo, who is destined to carry on the Benedict name.

The climax of the rather long film occurs in a roadside hamburger joint called Sarge's Place. Bick and Leslie, their youngest daughter Lutz, their daughter-in-law Juana, and their mestizo grandchild—"little" Jordie Benedict—are on their way home after attending the unfortunate grand opening of Jett Rink's resort hotel. The hostility toward Juana and little Jordie, whose bodies mark them as "Mexican," is immediately palpable as the plump blonde waitress first stares at them and then grudgingly serves the Benedicts water. Sarge is also unhappy, but he backs down from confronting the Benedicts after insulting Juana and little Jordie, who wants ice cream ("Ice cream?" Sarge asks. "I thought he'd want a tamale").

The conflict comes to a head when an elderly Mexican man and woman and their daughter take a table by the door. This proves too much for Sarge, who unceremoniously attempts to eject the unwelcome customers. The old man futilely holds out to Sarge a wad of dollar bills proving his ability to pay, that is to say, proving his worth. Bick intervenes, suggesting that Sarge treat these people with more respect and reminding him, "The name Benedict has meant something to people around here for a considerable time." Sarge jerks a thumb at little Jordie and asks, "that little papoose back there, he a Benedict too?" As if for the first time, it dawns on Bick that a mestizo child is indeed the bearer of both his Christian and family names: Jordan Benedict III. When Bick acknowledges his mestizo grandson, Sarge tells him to forget the question. Nevertheless, he proceeds to eject the Mexican family. At this point Bick throws the first punch, stuns Sarge, and assumes his position as liberator of the oppressed.

The fight scene that follows suggests a battle of epic proportions. As Richard Meyer observes, in all Rock Hudson's movies, his body assumes a great significance. Hudson represents largeness and strength; even his name, taken from the Rock of Gibraltar and the Hudson River, provides an "expansive landscape of the masculine."<sup>7</sup> (This name later proved ironic, given Hudson's vexed position as a gay man called upon to represent idealized heterosexual masculinity.) In the fight scene, Hudson plays the great white father. The low



camera angles accentuate the vastness of the titanic combatants. The militaristic drum beat of “The Yellow Rose of Texas” playing in the background adds to the sense of an epic struggle.<sup>8</sup>

Bick loses the fight. The battle is significant, however, as a representation of the battles Americans were waging at the time over the role of race in a new pluralistic and inclusive vision of the nation. As a representative of this greater America, Bick is forced to accept a different relationship to racial identity. The catalyst for this epic battle is, after all, Bick’s acknowledgment of his grandson. In a sense he offers a patriarchal blessing by finally admitting familial links to “that little papoose.” The mestizo body is claimed in the film, admitted into the national family, and simultaneously erased.<sup>9</sup>

In *Giant* mestizaje does not provide an empowered subjectivity, does not offer agency in the epic battle over racial/national redefinitions. The titanic white father stands up for the Mexicans, represented as they are by an ineffectual old man, helpless youngsters, and sobbing women. It is the white father who must claim his (grand)son, bestow legitimacy, and defend the family name—even if it belongs to a mestizo child he would under other circumstances scorn. The film thus provides an image of the privileged as savior. A benign, pluralistic vision incorporates difference within its own grand discourse of sameness. The subaltern is left voiceless, his inclusion within a discourse of equality again ensuring erasure.

The final scene of *Giant* underscores this subaltern status. Following the fight, domestic calm returns. Bick recovers from his battle wounds; Leslie affirms her love, support, and respect for her man. The two grandparents speak as they watch over the two grandchildren—one racially “pure,” one multiracial—and reminisce over the years they have spent together. The film asserts a form of triumph, a sense of arrival, of progress in human rights. As Leslie tells Bick, until the moment when he stood up for the downtrodden and the excluded, she had been thinking, “Jordan and I and all the others behind us have been failures.” The moment in which Bick fights for the inclusion and rights of the dispossessed represents for Leslie a culmination of the hundred-year Benedict family history. Yet that inclusion does not prevent Bick from complaining, “my own grandson don’t even look like one of us. I swear, honey, he looks like a little wetback.” Though difference in *Giant* becomes part of a discourse of liberal humanism and pluralistic democracy, difference still marks alterity and inferi-

ority. That is, there is still an “us” at the center of discourse, agent and subject of history, and a second constituency comprising “them,” the Others who are not yet (and may never be) “us.”

Moreover, the discourse of inclusion and equality suggested by the film is belied by the details of the closing shot. The grandchildren stand side by side in their crib, cousins, fruits of the same family tree. Behind the white child stands a white lamb; behind the brown child stands a brown calf. The dialogue between Bick and Leslie bespeaks equality; the *mise-en-scène* underscores difference. While one might be tempted to view this scene as a vision of pastoral peace—a representation of a world where the calf lies down with the lamb—it is difficult not to see in it a more sinister suggestion. The closing moments of *Giant* suggest that different races are different species, thus evoking one strain of nineteenth-century racial theory. The mestizo “species” is acceptable only insofar as it fits within an overarching authoritative discourse, in this case that of benign pluralism and liberal democracy. Yet the difference in the mestizo body, that which is devalued and undesirable, is simultaneously maintained and erased in a double movement of acceptance and repugnance. While ostensibly serving as the guarantor of postwar American equality, the mestizo remains the “little wetback” so long an object of repression and racism. Though upheld as an equal within the postwar American family, the mestizo sinks beneath the weight of prejudice, derision, and disgust.

### The Freed Mestizo

The mestizo body in *Giant* functions within a larger discourse that remains deaf to the particularities of how that body gives voice to its experiences. The old Mexican man silently holding his money up to Sarge, attempting to assure his legitimacy as an agent in economic exchange, becomes an image of the voiceless mestizo body, an inarticulate symbol within a system of meaning in which only Sarge and Bick can speak. It is the voicelessness of *mestizaje* that drives Tino Villanueva to respond to the film in *Scene from the Movie “Giant.”*

This autobiographical poem examines the effect of the film on the poet’s sense of self and voice. As a sixteen-year-old boy in a darkened movie theater, the poet felt himself trapped in the margin as the fight scene between Bick and Sarge unfolds, and “a small dimension of a

film . . . became the feature of the whole.”<sup>10</sup> His experience of the movie is one of objectification and marginalization, as embodied by Juana, the mestiza figure who becomes the object of the plump blonde waitress’s gaze. More important, the waitress’s gaze also objectifies little Jordie, the “child, half-Anglo, who in Juana’s womb / Became all Mexican just the same” (18). Interpellated by the ideology of race, the poet too feels subordinated as he remembers himself “Locked into a back-row seat” (12). The sense of impotence and voicelessness makes itself sharply felt to the poet, as he sits “shy of speech, in a stammer / Of light, and breathe[s] a breath not fully breathed” (19). Mestizaje becomes a site of disempowerment within *Giant*—a cultural object that seeks to affirm new racial attitudes in the United States. Villanueva’s poem helps reveal the contradictions within a mestizaje that is both the subject of and subject to discursive inclusion. The poet makes clear that these contradictions produce a position of disempowerment: “I am on the side / Of Rock Hudson, but carry nothing to the fight” (36).

Empty-handed, the poet seeks a voice with which to articulate his sense of outrage and silence. The poem becomes a means of contestation, an empowering counterdiscourse that asserts a hitherto silent voice:

Now I am because I write: I know it in my heart  
and know it in the sound iambics of my fist that  
mark across the paper with the sun’s exacting rays. (50)

Through the poet’s words and rhythms, the pale flickering light of the movie house is transformed into the exacting rays of the sun. The power of Sarge’s fist is transformed into the fist of the poet writing his verses. In this assertion of voice, the poet asserts his own sense of subjectivity:

At this moment of being human  
  
(when the teller is the tale being told),  
the ash of memory rises that I might speak. (52)

Thus the teller and the tale, the writer and the writing, the speaker and his voice emerge as one out of the ashes of memory. A fiery future is created in which a new voice and a new subject arise. The voice is mestizo, one that speaks in English as well as Spanish:

“O life, this body that speaks, this  
 repetitious self drawn out from *la vida revivida*,  
*vida sacada de cada clamor.*” (52)<sup>11</sup>

The poem affirms another self, one that formally interweaves English and Spanish to represent linguistically the sense of *mestizaje* as a site of conflict that it addresses thematically. This blending envisions *mestizaje* as a means of speaking, an affirmation of voice.

However, a nagging silence persists. Whatever it is that enables the speaker to leap from silent observer to speaking subject remains unspoken. No explanation is given of how the speaker moves from standing “on the side / Of Rock Hudson, but [carrying] nothing to the fight” (36) to being an agent in the battles that affect his life. The *mestizo* poet seems to arise as a new subject, speaking and making up for what could not be previously spoken. The self that emerges from the poem stands alone, dissociated from history and seemingly free of those historical and political racialized constituencies that sought to intervene against the silencing enacted in *Giant*. The poem does reject dominant forms of thought, does reject the silence imposed upon the disempowered and dispossessed. But a very significant material history is absent.

*Scene from the Movie “Giant”* seems to be premised on the grandeur of individual achievement, seems to represent a story of personal rather than collective growth. Ironically, the poem offers a vision of the poet rising majestically above adversity as a giant finally able to speak. The poet’s assertion of an articulate Chicano ethnicity—an assertion manifest in the bilingualism of the poem’s closing lines—is dissociated from the political and historical engagements of the 1960s and 1970s, which did indeed give the *mestizo* a voice.<sup>12</sup> Historically, the construction of Chicano ethnicity functions as both an instrument of political engagement and a product of political activity. There is a double movement in which ethnicity becomes an agent of and subject to social forces. That is to say, *mestizaje* interpellates new subjects in history. Villanueva’s poem obscures this process of identification.

### Indian Nations/Emancipations

In contrast to Villanueva’s poem, the work of Oscar “Zeta” Acosta is intensely concerned with the political processes swirling around

the mestizo. Part of Acosta's interest centers on the strongly racialized quality of Chicano ethnic identity. Though there is within both Mexican and Chicano nationalist discourses a clear affirmation of the indigenous, one need not search hard to encounter social values that reject the autochthonous. Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*—a memoir that treats his coming of age during and coming to terms with the counterculture of the 1960s, the antiwar movement, and (most centrally) the rise of Chicano nationalism—dwells at length on the devaluation of his indigenous identity. Reminiscing about his childhood in the San Joaquin Valley, Acosta argues for the importance of race within his community: “Everyone in the Valley considers skin color to be of ultimate importance. The tone of one’s pigmentation is the fastest and surest way of determining exactly who one is” (86).<sup>13</sup> He goes on to illustrate this point:

My mother, for example, always referred to my father as *indio* when he’d get drunk. . . . If our neighbors got drunk at the baptismal parties and danced all night to *norteno* music, they were “acting just like Indians.” Once I stuck my tongue in my sister Annie’s mouth—I was practicing how to French kiss—and my ma wouldn’t let me back in the house until I learned to “quit behaving like an Indian.” (86)

Because Acosta has been taught that promiscuity, licentiousness, and drunkenness are Indian traits, he learns to desire those somatic qualities most unlike his own. In the fourth grade, for example, he develops a crush on Jane Addison, the shy, blonde, pig-tailed “American” girl with red acne “all over her beautiful face” (89). His infatuation with Jane arises from a desire for white bodies that extends to even his grade-school teacher, Miss Rollins. She reads *Robinson Crusoe* to the class while Acosta sits in the front row: “from this frontline position I could stare as long as I wanted at the long, creamy legs of the most beautiful teacher I ever had” (89). These desires for Jane Addison and Miss Rollins (who most appropriately reads the classic work of colonization, *Robinson Crusoe*) represent the conflicted condition of the colonized mestizo subject.

From within his desire for creamy thighs, blonde pigtails, and blue eyes, Acosta recognizes his own self: “I grew up a fat, dark Mexican—A Brown Buffalo” (86). His mestizo body is a source of torment

and disgust, a site of disdain and emotional torture. When the blonde Jane Addison ridicules Acosta before the entire fourth grade class, he realizes:

My mother was right. I am nothing but an Indian with sweating body and faltering tits that sag at the sight of a young girl's blue eyes. I shall never be able to undress in front of a woman's stare. I shall refuse to play basketball for fear that some day I might have my jersey ripped from me in front of those thousands of pigtailed, blue-eyed girls from America. (95)

The mestizo body signifies all that embarrasses the young Acosta and diminishes him before the American girls he imagines as the source of a pervasive scopical power. Desire for the (white/colonizing/female) other leads to an identification in which his own (mestizo/colonized/male) body becomes wholly Other. Acosta's desire demarcates a colonized subject experiencing desire *against* his devalued self rather than *for* another.<sup>14</sup>

Within the various Chicano and Mexicano communities from which ethnic identities emerge, the devaluation of the indigenous, of the racial Other, carries with it a potent charge. The struggle against this devaluation represents one of the sources of Chicano antiauthoritarian contestation. To a degree, the anti-indigenous trajectory of Mexicano/Chicano practice is dismissed as so much false consciousness in Acosta's second book, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973).

At a central point in this novel, Acosta participates in a three-day fast protesting the arrest of twenty-one Chicano demonstrators in Los Angeles. During the fast, Acosta is approached by three teenage Chicanas who crawl into his tent and under his blanket. Soon political solidarity turns to something else:

I caress a leg and it holds still, waiting for my hand. It is firm and soft and warm. I reach for a soft arm. It comes into mine easily. There is no hesitation. And then a moist lip to my ear. . . I reach for a breast. It is small. Wonderfully small and firm. It fits into my palm. A brown pear in my hand. God Almighty! *This* is the revolution.<sup>15</sup>

The reclamation of the mestizo (more significantly, *mestiza*) body initiates a simultaneous process of liberation and containment. This is the revolution because Acosta's exclamations of appreciation for the

mestiza body represent a transformation of sexual desire. The mestiza body returns not as a site of repugnance but of longing. At the same time, the reclamation of the mestiza body enacts simple objectification. The narrative highlights the dissembled body parts that are Acosta's objects of desire: a leg, an arm, a lip, a breast.

Reasserting ties to the mestizo represents not just an objectification of the body but also a reinscription of impoverished social roles. As the night with the three girls wears on, Acosta's thoughts turn from the revolutionary to the domestic. All he wants to know about these Chicana protesters is whether they can cook and clean. After the fast the three join him in setting up house in his small apartment on Sixth Street. Acosta remains the revolutionary fighting the battles for Chicano nationalism and the three teenagers become Adelitas, cooking for their revolutionary warrior and providing physical solace.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout Acosta's books there is an incessant, anxious assertion of masculinity, misogyny, and homophobia. So if Chicano identity is to be premised on an embrace of mestiza and mestizo bodies, some critical questions arise. Can the body become a locus for liberation? For whom and under what circumstances does the embrace of the mestizo self serve as liberation? Is the embrace of the mestizo or mestiza body always a gesture of liberation? That is to say, is it enough to argue that Chicano ethnic identity should be premised on an affirmation of racial hybridity?

In Chicano cultural production, the mestizo body stands as a text, a site of ideological contestation. There is often an easy elision of the body with culture, with political practice, or with an affirmation of alterity and resistance. As Acosta's narratives reveal, the affirmation of mestizo bodies too easily becomes the whole of the revolution, a revolution where long-rehearsed and repressive social scripts return, unexamined. Mestizaje guarantees contestation on neither a cultural nor racial level. Only a critical and constantly questioning deployment of mestizaje can enable a move beyond Acosta's uncritical embrace of the mestiza body.

### **Resurrection**

The limitations of Acosta's narrative strategy are not confined to issues of gender. The mestizo as well as the mestiza body is sub-

sumed by his adherence to a nationalist discourse. In a rather intricate middle section of his book, Acosta recounts the trials of the Fernandez family, whose son Robert has been found dead in his Los Angeles County jail cell. The sheriffs claim his death was a suicide; the family claims Robert was murdered. They contact Acosta, who persuades the county coroner, Thomas Noguchi (“Coroner to the Stars”) to conduct an inquest into the death.

As the family’s representative, Acosta is present at the autopsy of the exhumed body. Wherever discoloration appears, a portion of tissue must be removed for microscopic examination to determine whether the trauma occurred before or after death (the body again a signifier). Because the corpse has already begun to decompose, there are a number of discolored sites requiring sampling. Acosta acts as supervisor:

I cannot believe what is happening. I lean over the body and look at the ears. Can they get a notch from the left one?

Slit-slit-slice blut! . . . into a jar. . . .

“Would you please try the legs? . . . Those big splotches on the left.”

“How about the chin?”

“Here, on the left side of the face.”

“What’s this on the neck?”

“Try this little spot here.”

“We’re this far into it. . . . Get a piece from the stomach there.”

Cut here. Slice there. Here. There. Cut, cut, cut! Slice slice slice! And into a jar. Soon we have a whole row of jars with little pieces of meat. (101–2)

The body is disintegrating. One narrative—Robert as a mestizo man, an outlaw, a member of a caring family—gives way to another—Robert as a series of specimens, a murder victim, an object of oppression. The body as signifier shifts dramatically from one context to the next. The narrator exclaims: “*There is no face!* . . . The face is hanging down the back of the head. The face is a mask. The mouth is where the brain. . . . [T]he nose is at the back of the neck. The hair is the ears. The brown nose is hanging where the neck” (103). The elliptical narrative recounts the loss of identity, a dismemberment of the body so complete that no body remains, just jars of specimens and separate



parts hanging in macabre juxtaposition. The disjointed narrative at this point in the book joins with Robert's dissembled body to tell a story of simultaneous destruction and creation.

This section closes with Acosta addressing directly "the cut up brown body of that Chicano boy": "Forgive me, Robert, for the sake of the living brown. Forgive me and forgive me and forgive me. I am no worse off than you. For the rest of my born days, I will suffer the knowledge of your death and your second death and your ashes to my ashes, your dust to my dust. . . . Goodbye, *ese*. Viva la Raza!" (104). Acosta imagines a communion with the dead boy where ash mixes with ash, dust with dust. The individual body dissolves in order to forge a political body of "the living brown." The mestizo body experiences a simultaneous destruction and simultaneous resurrection, a resurrection in a political form. This, finally, is the great Chicano nationalist dream: to forge a socio-political body out of overdetermined brown bodies, bodies situated in so many different positions of subalternity. There is no resolution of the unavoidable contradiction suggested by the close of Acosta's text. The narrative simply imagines resurrection: the mortal finality of "Goodbye, *ese*" juxtaposed with the war cry "Viva la Raza!" The resurrection is purely rhetorical. Acosta seeks to give voice again to the mestizo body—dead, exhumed, disassembled. This voice can be heard only within the register of a Chicano nationalist discourse. Yet beyond death—despite Acosta's most fervent wish—there is nothing but an "airless, silent void."

### **Difference and *Différance***

The desire to move beyond oppression thus leads to a type of delusion, an impossible resurrection. Acosta's narrative gives voice to the mestizo body only through preestablished oppositional politics. The individual mestizo is buried in history, becoming the voice of a resistant but nevertheless contained revolutionary actor. More recent discourses on the mestizo open onto other vistas. Within a poststructuralist-inflected cultural criticism, the mestizo represents alterity and liberation. From this perspective, the mestizo risks becoming a mark of absolute transformation, a figure of discursive dislocation, a free-floating signifier. In the attempt to uncouple ethnic identity from biological essentialism, the idea of mestizaje is often

cut free from its historical and social moorings. Mestizaje becomes a radical means of undoing meaning itself; ethnic identity becomes only a means of escaping prescribed identity formations.

The French critic Jean-Luc Nancy, for example, discusses mestizaje as a supreme strategy of discursive disruption:

Singular existences, points of *mestizaje*, identities are made/cut of singularities, places, moments, languages, passions, skins, accents, laws, prayers, cries, steps, bursts. They are in turn the singular events of these compositions and cuts. Like any proper name, *Chicano* does not appropriate any meaning: it exposes an event, a singular sense. As soon as such a name arises—cut—it exposes all of us to it, to the cut of sense that it is, that it makes, far beyond all signifying. “Chicano” breaks into my identity as a “gringo.” It cuts into and re-composes it. It makes us all *mestizo*. (121)<sup>17</sup>

By recasting the mestizo as a perpetually new subject, Nancy, as Norma Alarcón points out, constructs “a reobjectification of the ‘new subject,’ a reification or a denial of the historical meaning posited by the differential signifier.”<sup>18</sup> A mestizo identity ceases to be an agent in history and becomes instead pure signifier, endlessly transgressive, ever unstable. Detached from the historically bound discourses that both form and delimit Chicanismo, mestizaje emerges as a sign of absolute *différance*.

Neither wholly bound by the repeated drone of prescriptive discourses nor asserting an absolute emancipation, the poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes offers a different vision of mestizaje. In her work mestizaje represents a complicated cultural condition that both explores interstitiality and asserts historical connection. Her work, then, does more than merely attempt to move toward a borderlands identity. The poetic imagination envisions a self already present. Mestizaje becomes something more than a movement away from or a movement toward, something other than an interstitial hanging that marks the desire to become but yet represents not-being. The poetry affirms something that already is, is other but not purely Other. That is, it asserts a self that has a sense of self and a sense of language neither fully foreign nor yet wholly familiar.

Cervantes’s poem “Crow” articulates one aspect of this complex vision. The speaker identifies, in a moment of poetic flight, with a crow startled from a field by a rifle shot:

She started and shot from the pine,  
 then brilliantly settled in the west field  
 and sunned herself purple.

I saw myself: twig and rasp, dry  
 in breath and ammonia smelling.  
 Women taught me to clean

and then build my own house.  
 Before men came they whispered,  
 Know good polished oak.

Learn hammer and Phillips.  
 Learn socket and rivet. I ran  
 over rocks and gravel they placed  
 by hand, leaving burly arguments  
 to fester the bedrooms. With my best jeans,  
 a twenty and a shepherd pup, I ran

flushed and shadowed by no one  
 alone I settled stiff in mouth  
 with the words women gave me.<sup>19</sup>

The poem asserts a subject self-sufficient and articulate. The speaker identifies herself with another (an Other), here represented by the crow. Simultaneously, she proclaims her mastery of both the feminized task of cleaning a house and the masculinized role of building it. Not mute before worlds of exclusion (neither Spanish nor English, neither male nor female), the poetic voice affirms an articulate self premised on the assertion of women as the givers of speech. (We have come quite a distance from Acosta's representation of women solely as sexual mates, food makers, and care takers.) The poem offers an affirmation of a hybrid identity within and without preestablished discursive orders.

As this and other poems by Cervantes suggest, the mestizo body is not a hybrid entity signifying a possible future. Such prophetic power cannot be claimed by bodies already heavily overwritten by historical discourses. Instead, the mestizo body offers a vision of cultural development unfolding in—and so constrained by—a contradictory and complicated present. It would be unwise to cathect on that body as a locus of social transformation. Yet one is in danger of doing just

that by arguing that the contestatory powers of cultural *mestizaje* are somehow the result of racial hybridity. Rather, the mestizo body must be seen as a signifier to be continually discovered and recovered.

Ada Savin, in her analysis of Cervantes's poetry, argues that Bakhtin's notion of dialogized discourse allows one to explore more fully the "whole field of bi- or interlingual (Chicano) literature." In bilingual Chicano poetry, Savin asserts, "The alternate use of Spanish and English . . . is indicative of a process of identity search through a dialogization of the two cultures." Thus the multilingualism of Chicano literature "is necessarily of the existential kind; their poetry acts out the living contact between the cultures in contact and their respective languages." Because of this "contact" between the Mexican and the American, Cervantes "is confronted day after day with an ambivalent reality which throws her identity into permanent question. The historico-political context is burdensome, the cultural conflict is painfully alive." The devaluation of the Mexican by the American, the rejection of one by the other, creates a sense of loss; therefore, Savin suggests, Cervantes's poetry can only mark an endlessly interstitial condition of estrangement from self and other.<sup>20</sup>

The equation of the mestizo body with cultural *mestizaje* is premised upon a lack: the mestizo is neither Mexican nor American, neither Spanish nor English, neither Indian nor European, neither foreign nor familiar. The diminishment in this model is obvious. The point that needs emphasis is that the mestizo body is not a site of absence. On the contrary, it is a place of overdetermination. Too many discourses engage in a contested dialogue seeking to claim the significance, meaning, and function of the mestizo.

Cervantes's poem "Refugee Ship" exemplifies this overdetermination:

Mama raised me without language.  
I'm orphaned from my Spanish name.  
The words are foreign, stumbling  
on my tongue. I see in the mirror  
my reflection: bronzed skin, black hair.<sup>21</sup>

The bronzed body and dark hair should signal a connection to the mestizo name and the Spanish language. In her analysis of Cervantes's poetry, Savin suggests that the lack of linguistic ability marks an estrangement between the signifier (the mestiza body) and the

signified (mestizo culture). Significantly, “Refugee Ship” is the only poem in the collection *Emplumada* that Cervantes has translated into Spanish. Thus, while Savin suggests that the English poem marks a feeling of “overwhelming estrangement from one’s essential identity markers [of] name, physical appearance, and language” (218), the two poems—English and Spanish—taken together suggest something else. While not necessarily a manifestation of socio-cultural wholeness and completion, they represent something more dynamic, more empowered, and more deliberate than estrangement. The poems mark the body as a site where linguistic, familial, racial, and cultural vectors cross. These crossings do not serve as essential identity markers. Instead, they form signs—sites of discourse—that charge the mestizo body with a number of meanings.

Just as the body is an overdetermined signifier, the cultural text needs to be understood as a multidimensional system of signification. The double-voiced text does more than undermine, as Savin suggests, “the official authoritative discourse, whether mainstream American or Mexican.”<sup>22</sup>

It is not simply suspended between two worlds to which it does not belong and into which it cannot dissolve. It moves between those worlds. Chicano culture as a form of mestizaje does not mark a paradigmatic quest for self-definition: it enacts that self-definition in multiple ways.

### **The Mestizo Voice**

This continual remolding of the mestizo body—this recasting of the mestizo voice—is perforce delimited. History traces the ways in which discourses about race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender bring together language and power. Both circumscribe the social and physical worlds in which historical subjects move. In this sense, mestizaje represents a subjectivity no different from any other.

As the mestizo is given voice, as meaning is ascribed to notions of mestizaje, one can trace numerous transformations in the significance of the term. Meaning moves from the racial to the cultural, from the body to the text. In this circulation of significance, patterns emerge that reveal limitations in the way mestizaje has been employed. It has been situated within a pluralist vision of participatory politics, within an androcentric ethnic-nationalist discourse, and within a radically

disengaged project of poststructural liberation. Each position charges the mestizo body with a different significance; each also ultimately leaves the mestizo body voiceless.

The mestizo body, transformed and transmogrified, yet speaks. Mestizo bodies signify precisely as they are bound in and bounded by the social and historical conditions in which they act. The mestizo body serves as signifier but is not fully free-floating, not endlessly regressive, not fully transgressive.

The face of the mestizo is a mask that appears simultaneously real and unreal. The body of the mestizo is constantly being created and dissolved, changing function and significance as it moves through different systems of exchange. The voice of the mestizo speaks another language, a language in creation, a language suspended (yes) between English and Spanish. But the voice of the mestizo also tests the limits of social configurations and articulates the formation of a culture in transition. It changes register and pitch depending on where, why, and to whom it speaks, on which systems of power it seeks to address. The voice of the mestizo, finally, speaks an agency otherwise silenced.

University of California, Santa Barbara

## Notes

- 1 Within a Mexican nationalist discourse, Malintzin is known as La Malinche, and she represents betrayal. Octavio Paz discusses the sense of violation inherent in Mexican identity in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, trans. Lysander Kemp, Yara Milos, and Rachel Phillips Belash (1950, rev. ed. 1959; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1985). Paz writes: "The *Chingada* is the Mother forcibly opened, violated or deceived. The *hijo de la Chingada* is the offspring of violation, of abduction or deceit. If we compare this expression with the Spanish *hijo de puta* (son of a whore), the difference is immediately obvious. To the Spaniard, dishonor consists in being the son of a woman who voluntarily surrenders herself: a prostitute. To the Mexican it consists in being the fruit of violation" (79–80). For a discussion of rape as a trope in the articulation of Chicano (and particularly Chicana) cultural identity, see María Herrera-Sobek, "The Politics of Rape: Sexual Transgression in Chicana Fiction," in *Chicana Creativity and Criticism: Charting New Frontiers in American Literature*, ed. María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1988), 171–81; and Norma Alarcón, "Traddutora, Traditora: A Para-

- digmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism," *Cultural Critique* 13 (fall 1989): 57–87. Mary Louise Pratt discusses the important role Chicana writers have played in reclaiming the figure of La Malinche as “a vital, resonant site through which to respond to androcentric ethnonationalism and to claim a gendered oppositional identity and history” (“‘Yo Soy La Malinche’: Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism,” *Callaloo* 16 (fall 1993): 861.
- 2 According to historian John Chávez, “We can date to 1848 the modern Chicano image of the Southwest as a lost land” (*The Lost Land: The Chicano Image of the Southwest* [Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1991], 43). From a cultural perspective, Raymund Paredes argues that “[t]he great divide in Chicano history is the year 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended twenty-one months of warfare between Mexico and the United States” (“The Evolution of Chicano Literature,” in *Three American Literatures*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. [New York: Modern Language Association, 1982], 36). Luís Leal and Pepe Barrón note that the period between 1848 and 1910 was “the time during which Chicano literature laid the basis on which it was later to develop” (“Chicano Literature: An Overview,” in *Three American Literatures*, 18).
  - 3 “Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” in *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature*, ed. Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner (New York: Knopf, 1973), 403. “Aztlán” names, according to Aztec legend, the utopian homeland from which the Mexica migrated southward toward the central plateau of Mexico in 820 A.D. The term was redeployed during the Chicano Movement in order to signify the history of dispossession shared by Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos. Angie Chabram and Rosa Linda Fregoso critique the elision of Chicanismo with the types of racial essentialism found in Chicano nationalist discourses. These critics rightly reject the essentialism often invoked in the name of Aztlán; see “Chicana/o Cultural Representations: Reframing Alternative Critical Discourses,” *Cultural Studies* 4 (October 1990): 203–12. Rather than abandon Aztlán altogether, Daniel Alarcón argues, one should consider its multidimensional textuality—Aztlán as palimpsest—in order to make it more than an empty symbol. Agreeing with Chabram and Fregoso that Aztlán as a monolithic narrative requires deconstruction, Alarcón observes that “a fluid, continuously changing narrative or model is needed” (“The Aztec Palimpsest: Toward a New Understanding of Aztlán, Cultural Identity and History,” *Aztlán* 19 [fall 1992]: 39).
  - 4 Alfred Arteaga notes, for example, that the language of the borderlands “is the site of confluence in the way the Chicano body is mestizo and the homeland is international. And like the body and home, the language is hybrid and thus more than merely a sum of its parts. . . . Chicano speech is like the mestizo body and the borderlands home: it simultaneously re-

- flects multiple forces at play and asserts its hybridity" (*Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities* [New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997], 16).
- 5 See Chela N. J. Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," *Genders* 10 (spring 1991): 14.
  - 6 Gayatri Spivak, "Theory in the Margin," in *Consequences of Theory*, ed. Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991), 158, 159.
  - 7 Richard Meyer, "Rock Hudson's Body," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 260.
  - 8 The song, a top-ten hit in its day, celebrates the beauty of a multiracial African American woman—not the "white" but the "yellow" Rose of Texas. As a cultural text, the music serves to underscore the national political battle being waged over the role of race in postwar America.
  - 9 Two other mestizos appear in the movie, the young Mexican Angel, played by Sal Mineo, and Dr. Guerra. Angel proves himself the cowboy that Bick's own son never wants to be. Unfortunately, he is killed fighting for the United States during World War II. At Angel's funeral, Bick, in a gesture of national reconciliation, carries the flag of Texas to offer Angel's family. Dr. Guerra, at the behest of Leslie, sets up a clinic in the Mexican shantytown where the workers on Bick's ranch live. He serves as the inspiration for Jordie Jr. to become a doctor. Significantly, once Jordan makes this decision, Dr. Guerra never again appears in the film. In both cases, the mestizo disappears behind a white presence.
  - 10 Tino Villanueva, *Scene from the Movie "Giant"* (Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 1993), 11. All further citations of this poem will be made parenthetically.
  - 11 "O life, this body that speaks, this / repetitious self drawn out from renewed life /life extracted from each uproar."
  - 12 This remark is not meant as a critique of Tino Villanueva as a poet, as a subject, or as an agent in the development of Chicanismo. Anybody familiar with the history of Chicano culture will know that Villanueva was one of the first and most valiant writers to articulate Chicano identity through his poetry. His commitment and sincerity cannot be questioned. Rather, the focus here is on sharpening the critique of mestizo agency manifested within *Scene*.
  - 13 Oscar "Zeta" Acosta, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (New York: Vintage, 1989). All further citations of this volume will be made parenthetically.
  - 14 Acosta enacts the kind of dysfunctional desire required by colonization. As Homi K. Bhabha asserts in his analysis of Frantz Fanon's writing, "the black man wants the objectifying confrontation with otherness; in the colonial psyche there is an unconscious disavowal of the negating, split-



- ting moment of desire" ("Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative," in *The Location of Culture* [New York: Routledge, 1994], 51). See also Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Position," in *Remaking History*, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 131-48.
- 15 Oscar "Zeta" Acosta, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 89. All further citations of this work will be made parenthetically.
  - 16 Adelitas were the women of the Mexican Revolution who helped feed and care for their male counterparts. Elizabeth Salas notes that, while these women were in fact active insurrectionary agents, they are often portrayed as victims of the Revolution and of the patriarchal order; see Salas, "Soldaderas: New Questions, New Sources," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 23 (fall-winter 1995): 112-16.
  - 17 Jean-Luc Nancy, "Cut Throat Sun," trans. Lydie Moudileno, in *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*, ed. Alfred Arteaga (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1994), 113-23.
  - 18 Norma Alarcón, "Conjugating Subjects: The Heteroglossia of Essence and Resistance," in *An Other Tongue*, 131.
  - 19 Lorna Dee Cervantes, "Crow," in *Emplumada* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 19.
  - 20 See Ada Savin, "Bilingualism and Dialogism: Another Reading of Lorna Dee Cervantes's Poetry," in *An Other Tongue*, 215, 217, 217, 218.
  - 21 Cervantes, "Refugee Ship," in *Emplumada*, 41.
  - 22 Savin, "Bilingualism and Dialogism," 217.