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Postmodernism, Historical Materialism and Chicana/o Cultural Studies

Marcial González

*Today we are more fragmented than ever,
which is terrible, which is beautiful.* – Ruben
Martínez (1998, 22)

ABSTRACT: During the past two decades, critics have taken an interest in explaining the ideological ambivalence expressed in Chicana/o literature. Most critics correctly point out that Chicana/o ambivalence cannot be separated from the conflicted material realities historically experienced by Mexican Americans, but this view has not prevented some critics from tiptoeing into the idealist terrain of postmodernism. Postmodernist theory has provided Chicana/o criticism with conceptual tools for explaining the heterogeneity of culture, but its antagonism toward history and class analysis has limited the potential for Chicana/o studies to develop an effective social criticism. Two postmodernist terms used to describe ambivalence are "cultural schizophrenia" and "heterotopia." Historical materialism -- a method that makes truth-claims about social existence after a rigorous critique of the concepts and ideas that emerge from that existence -- stands as a viable alternative to postmodernist theory for the interpretation of Chicana/o literature.

In this essay, I examine the influence of postmodernist theory on Chicana/o cultural studies. But first, I shall state at the outset that I sympathize with José David Saldívar, who rightly complains that "we do not need yet another definition of what the postmodern or the postcolonial really is" (Saldívar, 1997, 20). Similarly, in the introduction to *Against Postmodernism*, Alex Callinicos exclaims rhetori-

cally: “Yet another book on postmodernism? What earthly justification could there be for contributing to the destruction of the world’s dwindling forests in order to engage in debates which should surely have exhausted themselves long ago?” (Callinicos, 1989, 1). Despite their reservations about further study of postmodernism, the large number of publications in the humanities in recent years that engage with some aspect of postmodernism or postmodernity (including Saldívar’s and Callinicos’ books) strongly suggests that scholarly interest in the postmodern has not declined; it has merely assumed new forms of expression. Granted, the fascination with postmodernism, which achieved near fad status in the 1980s and early 1990s, may have waned in mainstream academia, but the aftereffects of postmodernism’s two decades of dominance on the cultural scene remain firmly in place, having seeped into the methodological groundwater of various disciplines, including Chicana/o cultural studies.

In arguing that Chicana/o studies has been influenced by postmodernist theory, I am not declaring that all Chicana/o critics are postmodernists. Nor am I alleging that Chicana/o criticism has categorically rejected all approaches to the study of literature that are not postmodernist. Rather, I make two claims. First, the interpretive methods employed in Chicana/o studies have been substantially informed by postmodernist theory. Second, despite its status as a form of social critique, postmodernist theory mystifies social relations and, consequently, limits rather than enhances the possibility for critical class consciousness. Presumably, few cultural critics would disagree with my first claim. José Saldívar, for example, encourages readers to consider “the effects of shifting critical paradigms in American Studies away from linear narratives of immigration, assimilation, and nationhood. Is it possible,” he asks, “to imagine new cultural affiliations and negotiations in American studies more dialogically, in terms of multifaceted migrations across borders?” (J. Saldívar, 1997, 1). Similarly, as Renato Rosaldo explains, “a sea change in cultural studies has eroded once-dominant conceptions of truth and objectivity. The truth of objectivism -- absolute, universal, and timeless -- has lost its monopoly status. It now competes, on more nearly equal terms, with the truths . . . embedded in local contexts, shaped by local interests and colored by local perceptions” (Rosaldo, 1989, 21). Additionally, Rafael Pérez-Torres more pointedly exclaims, “postmodernism marks the end of teleological thinking in the secular sphere. The

ideas of Project and Progress give way to positions of locality and negotiation, issues we have seen inform the discussion of contemporary Chicano politics” (Pérez-Torres, 1995, 14). These comments substantiate my first assertion that a methodological change has taken place in Chicana/o cultural studies in the direction of the postmodern. Disagreement, however, will likely surface in response to my second claim -- that postmodernism mystifies rather than critiques social relations. In anticipation of this disagreement, the rest of this essay is divided into three parts. In the first part, after briefly discussing the emergence of postmodernism as a cultural condition, I review two relevant works on the relation between postmodernism and Chicana/o literature: Rosaura Sánchez’s essay, “Postmodernism and Chicano Literature,” and Ellen McCracken’s provocative study, *New Latina Narrative: the Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity*. In the second part of the essay, I analyze the limitations of two postmodernist-inspired concepts -- cultural schizophrenia and heterotopia -- that have been employed by critics to explain ideological ambivalence in Chicana/o literature. Throughout the section, I endeavor to put into practice a historical materialist criticism for the study of Chicana/o literature. In the final section, I outline some key aspects of this critical approach.

For the sake of clarity, it is important to distinguish postmodernism as a cultural condition from postmodernist theory. Far from being a mere illusion, postmodernism marks the emergence of an actual condition, characterized by extreme social fragmentation and differentiation, skepticism toward universal systems, a preference for localized politics as opposed to mass movements, and the depthlessness of aesthetic production. This condition, according to David Harvey, began to emerge around 1970 with the development of advanced manufacturing and marketing technologies, resulting in a more “flexible” system for managing financial services, markets and labor. These changes in turn produced new cultural values, beliefs and practices, consistent with the overall anarchy and irrationality of this new chaotic form of capitalist control. Harvey’s analysis of postmodernity offers a way to understand its emergence from within a traditional base-superstructure model, where ideas, values, and ideologies can be traced back to social class contradictions within the mode of production.

It must be pointed out, of course, that the shift to a “flexible” social mode has not affected all sectors of the working class equally.

In *Dancing With the Devil*, José Limón explains that “industrialization and urbanization came to Texas” (Limón, 102) in the period that Harvey characterizes as the zenith of Fordism, specifically the post-World War II period. Yet, “Texas and its Mexican population experienced an ‘uneven development,’ a less than ideal version of the Fordist contract” (*ibid.*). In other words, Mexican immigrants in south Texas and other locations along the border working in agriculture and the service industries have never benefited from a “truce” between capital and labor nor from the kinds of concessions that may have been granted to workers in other industries. One might even consider the conditions for many immigrants and other unskilled minimum-wage (or lower) workers as pre-Fordist, and in some cases perhaps even pre-modern. For example, in a cultural anthropological study of Latino undocumented immigrants who enter the U. S. to work, Leo Chavez explains that

many undocumented immigrants are drawn to northern San Diego County by the demand for labor in the strawberry, tomato and avocado fields, as well as in large nurseries and flower farms. Scattered throughout this area, workers live in temporary camps near the fields that they tend. . . . Workers set up makeshift sleeping shelters of plastic, cardboard, tar paper, discarded wood, and anything else that is at hand. These encampments can be found on hillsides covered by dense brush, and in canyons with pleasant-sounding names. . . . Even though they are just moments away from middle and upper-middle class neighborhoods and communities, they stand in stark contrast to the growing affluence of north San Diego County. These camps resemble the living conditions I have seen in Third World countries. (Chavez, 1992, 63).

Of course, not all Latino workers live under such dire circumstances, but the effects of the super-exploitation of Latino immigrants (especially along the border) have left their mark on literary representations of Chicana/o social experiences historically. These experiences have been represented in part as ideological ambivalence -- as the characterization of human subjects that vacillate between different languages, cultures, countries and classes, caught up in a state of perpetual between-ness, articulated through such concepts as “borderlands thinking.” Postmodernist theory misinterprets literary ambivalence as a subversive force in itself, rather than analyzing this ambivalence as the product of capitalist exploitation.

Is Chicano Literature Postmodernist?

In one of the first published articles devoted to this topic, appropriately entitled "Postmodernism and Chicano Literature," Rosaura Sánchez questions whether Chicana/o literature can be considered postmodernist. She describes postmodernist theory's basic tenets as the rejection of "logocentric metaphysics, the death of the referent, and the loss of subjectivity" (R. Sánchez, 1987, 2), in addition to the "repudiation of representation" and "the dissolution of metanarratives." She adds that for postmodernist theory "truth-claims can no longer be asserted in any decisive way nor is there any fixed vantage point from which one can analyze and determine truth" (3). These features, she explains, must "be seen not only as aesthetic and philosophical but also as political" (4) inasmuch as they refute the idea that history can be approximated through literary representation. According to Sánchez, the postmodern critique of subjectivity poses a problem for the interpretation of Chicana/o literature, as well as for the literature of ethnic and working-class writers generally. She explains how postmodernists attack the notion of a "bourgeois individual subject" that serves the interests of liberalism: the individual no longer represents the source of knowledge and the center of history as in humanist interpretations of the subject. They replace the notion of the sovereign subject with a conception of multiple "subject positions," where individuals experience a schizophrenic consciousness as the result of being "interpellated" or named by various "discursive practices." The schizophrenic subject, Sánchez points out, remains "free from all metaphysical traps, free to simply desire, [and] no longer posits grand schemes of social change" (R. Sánchez, 1987, 5). She admits that even historical materialist critics cannot deny that the sovereign subject is indeed a bourgeois construction, but she argues (correctly, in my opinion) that the postmodernist alternative of multiple subject positions "always already" constituted by external discourses does not resolve the difficult problem of analyzing concretely the dialectical relation between individuals and history. In Sánchez's view, postmodernist theory cannot explain how human subjects are capable of making history under conditions not of their own choosing, that is, under "circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, *18th Brumaire*, as cited in Tucker, 1978, 595). Stated differently, postmodernism rejects the Marxist claim that subjects are at once historical agents and social constructs

Given this assessment, Sánchez asserts that for the most part Chicana/o literature does not construct a schizophrenic postmodernist subject, but an alienated modernist subject still constituted, oftentimes problematically, by “metanarratives.” She acknowledges that certain Chicana/o literary works, especially during the most recent decade of the 1980s (she is writing in 1989), have adopted stylistic practices that borrow from postmodernist strategies of representation,¹ such as “the fragmentation of time and space” and characterizations of individuals that are “schizoid and asocial” (R. Sánchez, 1987: 9). She points to the novels of Alejandro Morales and the poetry of Sergio Elizondo as examples of this stylistic trend, but holds that these examples are not sufficient to conclude that Chicana/o literature in general should be considered postmodernist. Chicana/o literature, Sánchez reasons, resists such a categorization, not only on the level of subjectivity but on that of history as well. The literature by and large continues to privilege -- indeed, to posit the necessity for -- a historical referent. “If postmodernism is ahistorical,” Sánchez reasons, “then clearly Chicano literature is far from postmodernist, as this is a literature marked by historicity” (10). Her comments anticipate R. Saldívar’s claim that “for Chicano narrative, *history* is the subtext that we must recover because history itself is the subject of its discourse” (5). Sánchez also puts forth the position that because this literature continues to be marginal within American literary studies generally, the extent to which it has incorporated postmodernism remains limited. It makes no sense, in other words, for a subordinated group whose history has been misrepresented, excluded or erased to adopt narrative strategies that are antagonistic toward history. Hence, Sánchez reasons that Chicano literature “is produced within the cultural dominant,² but is decentered, excentric,

1 The phrase “postmodernist strategies of representation” could be considered an oxymoron since postmodernists generally reject the possibility of representation, even as they “represent” their ideas about non-representation. Postmodernism hinges on a paradoxical logic: it rejects “theory” by theorizing an anti-theory argument; it makes a totalizing rejection of the concept of totality.

2 Sánchez borrows the term “cultural dominant” from Jameson, who characterizes postmodernism as a “cultural dominant” because it is a pervasive force in late capitalism. But the term is slippery. On one hand, postmodernism cannot be considered “hegemonic” because it is associated with “counter-hegemonic” theories and marginal groups; on the other, “if we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable.” Thus the “cultural dominant” of postmodernism is a non-totalizing totality. See Jameson, 1991, 6.

that is, not centered within the cultural dominant [or] within it but not entirely of it” (7).

Sánchez points out that the “production and reproduction” of Chicana/o literature continues to be ignored by mainstream presses and thus depends largely on “funding available to the two major Chicano publishing enterprises (Arte Público Press and Bilingual Review Press) supported by university and other public funds” (6). The arbitrary exclusion of Chicana/o literature by mainstream presses and its marginality within literature departments, according to Sánchez, has produced a condition that forces Chicana/o authors to resist hegemonic trends of all kinds (including postmodernism) in both the literary and academic industries. But even though literary works by ethnic and working-class writers continue to be ignored by mainstream publishing houses as they were in 1989, a change in marketing strategies began in the mid- to late 1980s. Selected Chicana/o texts that fit a certain “postmodern” criterion, at least from the perspective of profit-motivated publishers and distributors, have now become marketable and therefore attractive to mainstream presses and booksellers.

In *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity*, Ellen McCracken documents this trend, focusing on the “flowering in the 1980s and 1990s of Latina women’s narrative . . . and its movement, after an initial marginalization, to the status of [a] desirable and profitable postmodern ethnic commodity” (McCracken, 1999, 4). McCracken asserts that even though the new Latina narratives function as cultural sites of counter-hegemonic discourse in response to a patriarchal and racially discriminating society, “a structure of reappropriation similar to that of Orientalism characterizes much of the mainstream incorporation of Latina writers” (5). These publishers have found the writing of Latinas to be profitable by marketing their works as “postmodern ethnicity.” McCracken’s book marks an important moment in the study of postmodernism and its relation to ethnic literatures because it draws a direct correlation between the fashionable status of post-modernism and the needs of a capitalist market. Economic factors alone do not explain the formation of ideological projects, but McCracken’s study reveals one of the material forces behind the emergence of postmodernist theory: simply stated, profit. McCracken, however, does not limit her analysis to economics alone; she shows how “postmodern ethnicity” also works as ideology.

Primarily because difference is more marketable than sameness, contemporary mainstream publishers in the United States -- along with critics, academics, and the press -- valorize writers such as [Sandra] Cisneros and [Cristina] Garcia for their presentations of what is perceived to be the exotic Other. In this version of multiculturalism articulated from above rather than below, the language of difference . . . is substituted for that of social antagonism. In the attempt to contain ruptural popular movements by winning the struggle for ideological closure, dominant groups [smooth] over fundamental social contradictions beneath the celebration of diversity. (McCracken, 1999, 13.)

McCracken makes clear that her critique targets publishers and others who promote U. S. Latina literature as postmodern ethnicity. She does not claim that Latina literature itself is inherently postmodernist. On the contrary, she stresses the fact that the literature emerges from a contradictory social reality experienced by writers: on one hand, Latina authors must work within the ideological confines of the publishing and academic industries to get their works published, distributed and read; on the other, “ruptural elements within the texts themselves . . . work against their smooth absorption into the discourse of multiculturalist difference and begin to reassert the discourse of social antagonism” (14). Taking into account the complexities of how Latina literature gets published, promoted and distributed, McCracken effectively links the discourse of postmodernism with ethnic identity politics.

Not all scholars will agree with my assessment of postmodernism as mystifying rather than demystifying social relations. Norma Alarcón argues that “historically racialized women were not heard until postmodernism in the 1980s invaded the 1970s liberal agenda of feminism” (Alarcón, 1994, 127). Postmodernism and poststructuralism, she argues, made it possible for women of color to negate discourses such as nationalism, Marxism and socialist feminism. Alarcón recognizes the seemingly incompatible relation between postmodernism and identity politics -- the former rejecting subjectivity, the latter embracing it -- but she nonetheless argues for a project that maintains the best of both political projects. She explains how “by working through the ‘identity-in-difference’ paradox, many racialized women theorists have implicitly worked in the interstice/interface of (existentialist) ‘identity politics’ and ‘postmodernism’ without a clear-cut postmodern agenda” (*ibid.*). But the view that marginalized indi-

viduals or groups can resist social domination by oscillating between postmodernism and identity politics can itself be characterized as a postmodernist assertion. I hesitate to register my agreement with Alarcón's assessment of the "interstice" as a site of resistance, but I support her implicit argument that postmodernism has been so pervasive in cultural studies that many women writers of color (and, for that matter, men writers too) do not realize the extent to which it has become ingrained in their writing.

Cultural Schizophrenia or Social Contradiction?

The postmodernist view of fragmentation contra totality can be summarized in the following passage from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari:

We live today in the age of partial objects, bricks that have been shattered to bits, and leftovers. We no longer believe in the myth of the existence of fragments that, like pieces of an antique statue, are merely waiting for the last one to be turned up, so that they may all be glued back together to create a unity that is precisely the same as the original unity." (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 42.)

Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge that capitalism produces social fragmentation and schizophrenics. But rather than seek a solution that would alter the conditions that give rise to schizophrenia, which would logically involve challenging capitalism itself, they argue for a remedy they call "schizoanalysis": the embracing of schizophrenia as a "revolutionary" process of "escape" from the normalizing and neurosis-producing subjectivities of modernism.³ Deleuze and Guattari criticize the "modernist" theories of Freud and Marx for their "fascisizing" attempts to unify the subject:

There is a whole world of difference between the schizo and the revolutionary: the difference between the one who escapes, and the one who knows how to make what he is escaping escape. . . . The schizo is not revolutionary, but the schizophrenic process -- in terms of which the schizo is merely the interruption, or the continuation in the void -- is the potential for revo-

3 By "modernism," Deleuze and Guattari are not referring to literary or artistic modernism but to totalizing systems of explanation, as in Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis.

lution. To those who say that escaping is not courageous, we answer: what is not escape *and social investment at the same time?* The choice is between one of the two poles, the paranoid counterescape that motivates all the conformist, reactionary, and fascisizing investments, and the schizophrenic escape convertible into a revolutionary investment. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983, 341, emphasis in original.)

Critics have made use of concepts similar to Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "schizoanalysis," such as "cultural schizophrenia," to explain the ideological ambivalence of Chicana/o literature, even when the comparison is not conscious or intentional. John Christie describes how the contemporary metaphors popularly used to analyze Latina/o literature reflect schizophrenic thought, pointing out that "modern Latino writers willingly inhabit and write about a border state, a liminal territory signaled by any number of catchy phrases from 'Life on the Hyphen' to 'Cultural Schizophrenia'" (Christie, 1998, 4). He also observes that "the phrase 'between worlds' recurs so frequently in Latino fiction and in post-colonial and Latino criticism as to nearly smack of cliché" (*ibid.*, 105). With the postmodern turn the concept of "cultural schizophrenia" has acquired a new importance for Chicana/o writers and critics. This holds true, as Alarcón implies, even when the writers do not have a "clear-cut postmodern agenda."

Consider, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa's ground-breaking literary-critical work, *Borderlands/la frontera: The New Meztiza*. With good reason, *Borderlands* has been considered both literature and cultural criticism. Indeed, the book reinforces the very concept of the "borderlands" through its own internal structure, consciously and boldly crossing the disciplinary division between literature and criticism. Here, I shall focus on the critical quality of *Borderlands* without losing sight of its literary features. Anzaldúa refers to cultural schizophrenia through her concept of "mental nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways" (Anzaldúa, 1987, 78). She argues that for mestizas "ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity" and "internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness." She adds that the mestiza's "dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness." In describing this "restlessness," Anzaldúa writes, "*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio. Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan simultáneamente.*" ["My head

spins from contradictoriness. I am disoriented from all the voices that speak to me simultaneously” (my translation).] Anzaldúa brilliantly exposes the deeply conflicted character of the mestiza psyche, but does not make clear how “mental nepantilism” will help change the conditions that cause ideological ambivalence. She finds that mestizas -- and, by implication, alienated subjects across racial and gender lines -- can potentially escape alienation by embracing and remaining within an ideologically ambivalent consciousness, stating that “the new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. . . . She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode -- nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned” (79). The language Anzaldúa uses to describe the mestiza’s consciousness resembles the language of inclusion and pluralism, but it also reflects the influence of cultural schizophrenia. This holds true despite the fact that Anzaldúa at times seems to be describing a dialectical process through which the sharpening of contradiction leads to a new qualitative condition. Speaking of how the mestiza comes to develop a “new consciousness,” Anzaldúa explains that the mestiza

can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence. I’m not sure exactly how. The work takes place underground -- subconsciously. . . . That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separate pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. (Anzaldúa, 1987, 77-80.)

In this passage, Anzaldúa describes how subjects achieve a peaceful state of mind by coping with ideological conflicts. The passage sounds dialectical, but as R. Saldívar points out, “a true dialectic necessarily involves us in negation. In a relationship between opposed terms, one annuls the other and lifts it up into a higher sphere of existence: development through opposition and conflict” (R. Saldívar, 8). Anzaldúa’s “mental nepantilism” has inspired critics and writers seeking to comprehend and explain alienation and ideological ambivalence, but the concept falls short of a “true dialectic”: the conflicting

aspects of consciousness have been neutralized and consolidated into a harmonious coexistence; there is no negation here, no elevation to a higher sphere of existence. Interestingly, critics who quote this passage tend to emphasize the mestiza's "tolerance for contradictions," her "tolerance for ambiguity," and her "pluralistic personality" (G. Sanchez, 1993, 9; Rosaldo, 1989, 216), phrases that reflect a conscious submission to cultural schizophrenia.

Similarly, Alicia Gaspar de Alba incorporates the concept of cultural schizophrenia in her autobiographical essay, "Literary Wetback," to interpret her own sense of ideological ambivalence. Gaspar de Alba writes: "As proud and grateful as I am about having grown up in La Frontera, I do recognize its problems, cultural schizophrenia being the one that most concerns me in my writing" (Gaspar de Alba, 1993, 288). For Gaspar de Alba, growing up "Mejicana" at home and "American" at school created a cultural schism that proved as problematic as the racist, anti-working-class attitudes she learned from her family when growing up. She reveals quite candidly that prior to her college years she believed that "Pochos"⁴ were "stupid," stating that "my family was under the delusion that, since our ancestors were made in Madrid, our fair coloring made us better than common Mexicans" (Gaspar de Alba, 1993, 289), ideas she rejected as she grew older. On one hand, Gaspar de Alba acknowledges that cultural schizophrenia is a "problem." On the other, she characterizes it as "a new legacy for those who have still to squeeze into legitimacy as human beings and American citizens" (291). She intimates that the very conflicted character of a culturally schizophrenic experience provides the potential for acquiring a subversive identity. "Naturally, imperceptibly," she explains, "this bilingual/bicultural identity became the controlling image of [her] life" (290). For Gaspar de Alba, the fact that Chicanas and Chicanos reside in the cultural borderlands between two national and socio-linguistic systems serves potentially to help the "community" establish political "legitimacy" precisely through the acceptance and promotion of its "schizophrenic" social situation.

The theoretical logic of Gaspar de Alba's claims resembles Deleuze and Guattari's theory of schizoanalysis. Gaspar de Alba argues that a destructive schism develops when an individual constituted by multiple subjectivities attempts to identify with a single subjectivity. The

4 "Pocho" is a derogatory Spanish slang word referring to U. S.-born Mexicans.

attempt to unify what is irreparably fractured (subjectivity) produces neurosis and runs the risk of developing the harmful kinds of attitudes toward identity that Gaspar de Alba developed during her youth: racism against “common Mexicans” and the desire to become “American.” She proposes to break with notions of cultural authenticity and instead to accept a schizophrenic existence constituted by multiple subject positions, reflecting the fragmented condition of social reality. The cultural schizophrenic, for Gaspar de Alba, possesses a more critical outlook on the world than does the subject who lives in denial. Given her claims, Gaspar de Alba might be characterized as a postmodernist writer “without a clear-cut postmodern agenda.”

Let me clarify my position further. The problem with the concept of “cultural schizophrenia” does not lie in the description of social fragmentation or contradictory consciousness. These are symptoms of living in a country which has a long tradition of colonialism, imperialism, class exploitation and other forms of forced subordination that cause alienation. Stated differently, ambivalence and cultural schizophrenia have a material basis. Consider the example of Juan Seguín. Genaro Padilla writes that Seguín’s 1858 *Personal Memoirs* can be characterized by “self-division” and that Seguín’s divided loyalties to the United States and Mexico, despite his having been persecuted by both, “may be said to represent the kind of ambivalence, often outright cultural schizophrenia, that appears in many early accounts by Mexicans [Mexican Americans]” (Padilla, 1990, p. 1945). Seguín, a Tejano, fought against Mexico in 1836 for Texas independence. In 1842, Anglo-Texans accused him of being a spy for Mexico and forced him to flee Texas. He settled in Mexico, where President Antonio Santa Anna made him choose between fighting against the United States in the war of 1846-48 or be executed. After the war, he returned to Texas where he lived for several years, but in 1862 hostilities against Mexicans again forced him back to Mexico. For the next 30 years, Seguín vacillated from one side of the border to the other -- a Mexican American, considered a traitor by Mexico and a foreigner by U. S. Anglos. He died in 1890 in Mexico, where he was buried, but even in death the “schizophrenia” surrounding his national identity continued. In 1974 his remains were removed from Mexico and re-interred in Texas. Given Seguín’s dichotomized experiences, like those of other 19th-century Mexican Americans, it is no wonder his writings would come to be characterized as “cultur-

ally schizophrenic.” Padilla, however, does not claim that Seguin’s “schizophrenia” made him a revolutionary. Cultural schizophrenia becomes a problem only when the conditions of alienation and social fragmentation are misconstrued as politically progressive or as inherently revolutionary.

In its clinical sense, the term “schizophrenia” refers to a psychotic disorder, generally associated with symptoms such as paranoia, delusions, hallucinations and the inability to connect emotions with the intellect. In a less technical sense, “schizophrenia” conjures up the image of an individual with a split personality that is unable to deal with difficult situations and must therefore create a fantasy self. In this context, “cultural schizophrenia” implies that Chicanas and Chicanos are unable to cope with feelings of alienation produced by the fragmenting tendency of capitalist society and have therefore created a fantasy culture to avoid dealing with reality. Harvey correctly points out that “schizophrenia” in postmodernist usage should not be understood “in its narrow clinical sense” (Harvey, 1990, 53). Language, however, operates in such a manner that makes it impossible to completely separate the associations brought to mind by both the fantasizing and clinical definitions of this term. Even in a strictly postmodernist sense, the concept of schizophrenia stands in direct opposition to the kind of consciousness necessary to understand historical transformations and the important role that individuals and groups play in bringing about these transformations. In the following passage, Harvey lucidly and rightly explains that with postmodernism it is no longer possible to

conceive of the individual as alienated in the classical Marxist sense, because to be alienated presupposes a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of self from which to be alienated. It is only in terms of such a centered sense of personal identity that individuals can pursue projects over time, or think cogently about the production of a future significantly better than the present and time past. Modernism was very much about the pursuit of better futures, even if perpetual frustration of that aim was conducive to paranoia. But postmodernism typically strips away that possibility by concentration upon the schizophrenic circumstances induced by fragmentation and all those instabilities . . . that prevent us even picturing coherently, let alone devising strategies to produce, some radically different future. (Harvey, 1990, 53-54.)

From Harvey's perspective, "cultural schizophrenia" hinders rather than helps the efforts of those who seek social change because it mystifies the present and thus cannot imagine the future. Alienated subjects may understandably relate to the "mental nepantilism" that Anzaldúa describes so forcefully and eloquently, but "cultural schizophrenia" does not enable a viable response to social fragmentation because it encourages subjects to "cope" with alienation rather than figuring out ways of overcoming alienation.

Heterotopias as Sites of Contestation

Whereas "cultural schizophrenia" describes a conflicted consciousness -- as in Anzaldúa's "mental nepantilism" -- Foucault's concept of heterotopia refers to the coming together of incompatible "spaces" into a single space. The term has been used to describe the cohabitation of different social classes or cultural groups in such social spaces as the marketplace, the border, prisons, hospitals and places of employment. Kevin Hetherington explains that, for Foucault, heterotopias are "places of Otherness [or] spaces, whose existence sets up unsettling juxtapositions of incommensurate 'objects' which challenge the way we think, especially the way our thinking is ordered" (Hetherington, 1997, 42). From a critical perspective, Harvey characterizes heterotopias as "incommensurable spaces that are juxtaposed or superimposed upon each other" (Harvey, 1990, 48) in such a way that the very incommensurability of these spaces forms a site of contention or resistance. Or, as Foucault himself explains, "the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault, 1986, 25). By juxtaposing multiple incommensurable spaces within a single social space, Foucault's concept of heterotopia⁵ upholds one of the most basic tenets of postmodernist theory: the privileging of space over time, or, what amounts to the same thing, the antagonism toward historical consciousness. In a short essay entitled "Of Other Spaces," originally delivered as a lecture in 1967, Foucault

5 Citing the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Hetherington explains, "the term heterotopia originally comes from the study of anatomy. It is used to refer to parts of the body that are either out of place, missing, extra, or, like tumors, alien" (42).

introduced the concept of heterotopia to the humanities and social sciences. He argues that “the great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past” (Foucault, 1986, 22). This “great obsession” with history, temporality and development, Foucault argues, did not cease in the 19th century, but carried well into the 20th century and up to the present. Postmodernism in effect emerged historically as the product of philosophical critiques of historical consciousness.

Foucault’s description of a heterotopia -- as the sum of all “real” sites “within the culture,” as a place that is “outside of all places” (24), and as a space that functions as a “counter-site” capable of contesting and inverting its own undesirable aspects -- has appealed to critics and writers seeking to explain the ideological ambivalence expressed in Chicana/o literature. In an essay entitled “Dynamic Identities in Heterotopia,” Alejandro Morales writes: “Foucault’s ‘Heterotopia,’ an idea that attempts to bring order and understanding to a space accommodating a wealth of displacement of different entities, explains border culture” (Morales, 1996, 23). His definition of “border” refers not only to the geographical boundary that separates Mexico from the United States, but also, and perhaps primarily, to the social, cultural, linguistic, sexual, economic and psychological boundaries that people must cross every day, an issue I discuss in more detail elsewhere (see González, 2003). Morales argues that the border as an unstable and chaotic reality becomes a “counter-site” for Chicanas and Chicanos precisely because of its hybrid character, its condition of liminality, its mixing of cultural groups and social classes, and its overlapping of the traditional and the modern with the postmodern.

Morales explains how

life in the chaos of heterotopia is a perpetual act of self-definition gradually deterritorializing the individual. The individual becomes an ambiguity. Chicanos have become trapped in the process of self-definition and have splintered, shattered their identity, made themselves an ambiguity, strangers in their own land, constantly moving like migrants, not knowing who they are, where they come from, nor where they are going. (Morales, 1996, 24.)

Morales’ criticism of Chicanos “trapped in the process of self-definition” resembles Gaspar de Alba’s admonition that Chicanas and Chicanos

should steer clear of unified conceptions of the subject, and his Deleuzian “deterritorialization” of the individual echoes her assertion that cultural schizophrenia can help a cultural group establish “legitimacy.” Needless to say, there are problems with static conceptions of identity and ego-centered formulations of the subject, as Morales correctly points out, but his description of Mexican American “life” as a chaotic heterotopia overstates the level of “ambiguity” experienced by Chicanas and Chicanos in their attempts to define identity. In criticizing essentialist forms of identity, Morales comes close to demonizing *all* forms of identity, even if he does so unwittingly. Moreover, he risks being understood as dismissing the epistemological and political functions of identities in given social situations, including the important role that Chicana/o identities have played historically in helping to bring about institutional changes in the U. S. Southwest during the past 40 years. In effect what gets suppressed in his heterotopic explanation of cultural identity is a class-based conception of praxis as an effective means to challenge social fragmentation.

In *Telling Identities: The Californio Testimonios*,⁶ a meticulously researched study of the 19th-century Californio testimonials collected in the Hubert Howe Bancroft project, Rosaura Sánchez draws on the concept of “heterotopia” to investigate the social position of Californios -- not to tease out the potentially subversive situation of exploited subjects in a contradictory social space, but to comprehend the social predicament of privileged class subjects. Echoing Foucault, Sánchez describes heterotopia as “an area of multiple complex sites . . . linked to all the other sites and yet outside of all places” (R. Sanchez, 1995, 50). For the Californios, one such site “contained, countered, inverted, and represented all the other sites. . . . it was like Foucault’s mirror, a ‘sort of mixed, joint experience’ . . . but simultaneously a countersite. . . . This heterotopia was the mission” (51). Categorizing the mission as heterotopia enables Sánchez to explain how the Californios -- the social class that lost political control of California after its annexation by the United States -- in their testimonials “not only are venting their resentment against hegemonic historical accounts of their history but are also engaged in . . . justifying their collaboration with the missionaries” (63) and the exploita-

6 R. Sánchez, 1995. See especially the chapter entitled “The Mission as Heterotopia,” 50-95.

tion of Indian and mestizo workers. Sánchez argues that this political ambivalence can be understood as a critique of the social order, stating that the “multispatial dimensions -- cultural, political, and economic -- perhaps help to explain why intersecting and overlapping discourses on the missions in these testimonials are highly contradictory.” The testimonials “are thus sites of contention that represent competing discursive frameworks” (53). Sánchez does not claim a politically progressive status for the Californios and she aptly conveys the complexities of their social situation, but her characterization of the mission as heterotopia could nonetheless leave readers with the impression that the Californio aristocrats have been refigured as critics of the racist and exploitative social system that they themselves constructed and helped to maintain.

Theoretically, the concept of heterotopia comes from structuralism. As with all structuralisms, it tends to privilege spatial relations over temporality. Foucault argues that structuralism “is the effort to establish, between elements that could have been connected on a temporal axis, an ensemble of relations that makes them appear as juxtaposed, set off against one another, implicated by each other -- that makes them appear, in short, as a sort of configuration” (Foucault, 1986, 22). Foucault’s heterotopic model illuminates the manner in which social meaning radiates from the discord between the various components of a structural complexity but gives less importance to explaining the historicized character of structures. Chicanas and Chicanos undeniably live and work in social realities where social classes and cultural groups come into contact on a daily basis. It remains difficult, however, to conceive of subjects that establish a place of contention by merely existing in these contradictory social locations or by freely traversing incommensurable discursive spaces. In contrast to a heterotopic model, a dialectical interpretation would emphasize the social constraints placed on subjects who cannot move so easily from one material space to another, from country to country, job to job, jail cell to jail cell, or social class to social class.

In recent decades social and cultural theorists have come to understand contemporary society in terms of “time-space compression,” according to Harvey, or a collapsing of time into space so that the present, which is knowable only in its appearances, becomes the only meaningful temporal concept, while the past and future remain unknowable and therefore meaningless. He describes this condition as

having “had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon cultural and social life,” and he suggests that a correlation exists between the compression of time and space and a “postmodern sensibility” attracted to the effects of fragmentation, chaos, confusion, discontinuity and indeterminacy. Further, for philosophy, social theory and cultural studies, this development has led to an increased “interest in geopolitical theory . . . and the aesthetics of place” (Harvey, 1990, 284), in efforts to construct a conception of spatial fragmentation (such as heterotopia) in a positive light, perhaps even with a subversive quality. Like Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizoanalysis,” Foucault’s “heterotopia” problematically perceives the symptoms of capitalist reification -- contradictory social spaces -- as sites of potential subversion in themselves. To be clear, I am not arguing against the idea that incompatible groups, social classes, ideologies, discourses and histories come together within social spaces; indeed, one could characterize just about any place in society, public or private, as such. I argue rather against the idea that the social groups inhabiting these deeply conflicted spaces can somehow contest or resist the forces of domination simply by inhabiting heterotopias.

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s theories of space, Hetherington explains that in a capitalist society “spatial practice is rendered invisible as abstract space by the dominant representations of space, obscuring the social relations of power by which that space is produced. Space, in this account, can therefore be said to be fetishized in the same way Marx argues that the commodity is fetishized in capitalist societies” (Hetherington, 1997, 22). From this perspective, space is not a “thing,” any more than a commodity is a “thing”; space is conceivable only as a social process continuously evolving along the temporal axis of history, determined by the relations (and the antagonisms!) among social groups and classes. Rather than characterizing social spaces as sites of subversion, we could explain them in the way Marx understood commodities -- indeed, in the way Marxists read literary texts -- as abstractions of social relations.

Historical Materialism as a Methodological Postulate

I shall draw this essay to a close by proposing a historical materialist criticism for the study of Chicana/o literature. But to attempt a

comprehensive description of historical materialism in these short pages would be futile. I shall therefore briefly discuss six issues related to historical materialism that will serve as a starting point for better understanding the method I am proposing.

First, historical materialism attempts to understand the dialectical relation between the particularities of existence and the larger social frameworks that give them meaning. R. Saldívar, for example, puts this dialectical procedure in motion when he reads Chicana/o narratives not as the transparent replication of events, but as texts that imagine the “ways in which historical men and women live out their lives as class subjects,” a project that involves “attaining a true knowledge of society as a whole” (R. Saldívar, 19xx, 6). Dialectical criticism enables a comprehension of “society as a whole” through the “abstraction from specific real conditions, followed by systematic analysis, and then by successive reapproximations to the real, all made necessary because everyday experience catches only the delusive appearance of things” (89).

Second, as a dialectical system historical materialism comes into conflict with postmodernist theory. As Steven Best and Douglas Kellner point out, postmodernism not only promotes a skeptical view of history and subjectivity, it “aggressively rejects dialectics” (Best and Kellner, 1991, 222). They offer a lucid analysis of the tension between dialectics and postmodernism, arguing that dialectics “attempts to describe how concrete particulars are constituted by more general and abstract social forces, undertaking an analysis of particulars to illuminate these broader social forces [but] postmodern theory rejects dialectics in principle . . . and thus is unable to conceptualize the dialectic of totalization and fragmentation” (223). Deleuze aptly encapsulates the postmodernist attitude toward dialectics when he declares: “What I detested more than anything else was Hegelianism and the Dialectic” (Deleuze, 1977, 112). Without an understanding of the relation between universal processes and their local manifestations, postmodernism ends up producing a fetish of social fragmentation by privileging concepts such as “schizophrenia” to describe the ideal postmodern (non)-subject.

Third, historical materialism affords avenues for understanding the complex categories of identity based on race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender, not as autonomous formations but as interconnected processes within the larger dynamics of social relations. This is what

Stuart Hall has in mind when he characterizes the category of race as “the modality in which class is lived” (Hall, 1996, 55). Hall theorizes the thorny relation between these categories, recognizing the particularity and relative autonomy of race without jettisoning the causal character of class relations. From a similar perspective, Teresa Ebert argues “for a revolutionary reunderstanding and engagement with historical materialism for feminism in postmodernity,” and she does so “at a time when feminism, for the most part, has lost the revolutionary knowledges of historical materialism so necessary to understand the exploitative relations of labor and production and to transform them” (Ebert, 1996, xi). In adopting a theoretical model and argumentative approach similar to Ebert’s, I would characterize my own method as an engagement with historical materialism for U. S. ethnic literary studies generally, and for Chicana/o literary studies in particular, and I propose this method at a time when literary and cultural studies in race and ethnicity “for the most part, [have] lost the revolutionary knowledges of historical materialism,” succumbing instead to the epistemological and political limitations of methodologies emerging from what Best and Kellner call “the postmodern turn.”

Fourth, the categories and concepts of historical materialism are not pre-established truths set in stone. To argue that dialectical criticism represents an absolute truth would amount to a contradiction in terms since such an argument would tend to reify the methodological approach. In a much cited passage, George Lukács argues, “orthodox Marxism . . . does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx’s investigations. It is not the ‘belief’ in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a ‘sacred’ book. . . . It refers exclusively to method” (Lukács, 1971, 1). Similarly, Peter Knapp and Alan Spector explain, “dialectics is a way of looking at reality, not as a complex of ready-made ‘things’ but as a set of processes. The dialectical approach examines the ways that everything changes. A dialectical approach asks . . . How do [these changes] connect to the rest of the world? This concern with change and interrelation implies that dialectical analyses are usually historical” (Knapp and Spector, 1991, 264). Additionally, Alfred Sohn-Rethel argues that historical materialism should not be considered a “world view” or an empirical science about how the world operates; nor should it be assumed that historical materialism possesses a predetermined set of laws requiring only that

an astute practitioner impose those laws from the outside on the object of study (Sohn-Rethel, 1978), 189-204.

Fifth, the goal of Marxism is not to correct faulty ideas but to negate them – to critique them, to transform them qualitatively. As Ebert argues, for instance, “ludic” postmodernism must be “critiqued” not simply because its theories about society and culture are faulty (even if they are in fact faulty), but because they function as ideology that correlates to real social contradictions. For a theory to be faulty implies that it can be corrected. The Marxist critique of postmodernism does not serve as an analytical corrective, but as an engagement that leads to a demystification of real contradictions. In a similar vein, Sohn-Rethel explains that the superiority of historical materialism over other methods of interpretation does not rest in the claim that it is capable of arriving at better or more correct analyses. The difference between Marxism and other methods cannot be measured on a quantitative scale, where the various methods measure up as more or less correct.

Finally (to synthesize the five points just outlined), let me clarify that historical materialism should be considered a “methodological postulate” (Sohn-Rethel, 1978, 189-204) that makes truth-claims about social existence, but only after a thorough critique of the concepts and ideas associated with that existence. As a “methodological postulate,” historical materialism stands opposed to unmediated reflection theory, which can be considered a pseudo-materialist approach based on the premise that, because social existence determines consciousness, consciousness logically must reflect social existence. Historical materialism agrees that social existence determines consciousness, but it holds that consciousness does not “reflect” social existence transparently. On the contrary, consciousness necessarily mystifies the social world because it functions not independently from social reality, as in unmediated reflection theory, but as an integral part of reality. In the same way that Marx showed how “capital is not a thing, but a social relation established by the instrumentality of things” (Marx, 1974, 766). Sohn-Rethel argues that the intellect is not “pure thought,” but rather an abstraction of universal social relations, established concretely by the instrumentality of cognition. Further, the abstractions that take place in both commodity exchange and cognition operate, at one level, to conceal social relations and, on another,

as a “social synthesis” to maintain cohesion and stability within the mode of production out of which they emerge.

Thus, for Sohn-Rethel, although existence produces “necessarily false consciousness,” it is only through a critical study of this consciousness that the historical materialist arrives at a greater knowledge of social existence, as if attempting to solve a mystery entirely with clues that are intentionally designed to lead the investigator down a false trail. But even if the clues are false, the truth may be approximated from the formal logic and content of the distortions themselves. “Roughly,” Sohn-Rethel argues, “the Marxist approach to historical reality can be understood as answering the question: what must the existential reality of society be like to necessitate such and such a form of consciousness?” (197). He adds:

Thus, methodologically the subject-matter of Marx’s critique is not the historical reality of this or that form of social existence but, in the first instance, a particular mode of consciousness – namely, that of political economy; it is thoughts, not things. It is the concepts of “value,” “capital,” “profit,” “rent,” etc., as he found them defined and discussed in the writings of economists. He does not deal directly with realities, does not elaborate concepts of his own which, as “correct” ones, he would oppose to the “false” ones of the economists. His approach is characteristically different. It is an approach to reality, but by way of the “critique” of the historically given consciousness. (Sohn-Rethel, 1978, 195.)

Following Sohn-Rethel’s argument, a historical materialist critique of postmodernism and its influences on Chicana/o cultural studies should not be understood as a critique of social existence as such -- even if the goal is to arrive at a better understanding of social existence in order to develop more effective strategies for changing society. A Marxist critique of postmodernism should be viewed rather as a critique of ideas and theories that emerge from a particular historical reality, which we can now hypothesize as a politically unstable, economically chaotic, contradiction-ridden capitalist mode of production that must increasingly give the appearance of being stable in order to maintain cohesion -- or, when the deception of instability no longer remains feasible, must make the instability and chaos appear natural and perhaps even progressive, as in the case of postmodernist thought. Historical materialism, then, does not begin with

the premise that it possesses a more truthful account of social reality than does postmodernism; it claims only that the critique of the latter by the former initiates a dialectical process through which social contradictions and other previously concealed truths about social existence become evident.

In this essay I have argued that Chicana/o writers and critics hold much interest in explaining ideological ambivalence in both creative and critical works. Postmodernism, however, hinders rather than helps in these efforts because it celebrates the appearances and effects of fragmentation, rather than engaging in a critique of its causes -- or rather than theorizing a viable response to alienation. From a Marxist perspective, ideological ambivalence reflects the symptoms of reification resulting from the individualizing and divisive needs of a capitalist mode of production. Thus, the ambivalence of Chicana/o literature represents real social contradictions, mediated in the complex nexus of author, reader, text and history. From this perspective, postmodernism's celebration of fragmentation coupled with its vicious attacks against the concept of totality reproduces its own reified condition. Despite this apparent paradox, Chicana/o cultural criticism nonetheless has turned in the direction of the postmodern. Postmodernist theory might be considered one of the most popular forms of "ideology critique" on the cultural studies market today, but to my mind postmodernism has become the ideology, not the critique.

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