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## The Past and Present Struggle for Identity of the Latina/o Writings\*

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**A**s the cultural clash of ideas continue to permeate through the intricacies of the now seemingly fad of Cultural Studies, many similar concepts are said about the current Latina/o Studies. Some of these ideologies resonate to those European Schools of Thought, which have not been characterized in understanding or appreciating much of the critical analysis developed through multiculturalism in the United States. Although I'd like to be cautious in using the term multiculturalism, because even though we may understand what the background of multiculturalism is, not many people, even well known critics, understand this concept to be different in the United States than in Europe. I used the word "fad" earlier to describe the so called state of the current fields of studies bombarded by what some may call the "nightmare" of the academic world, namely the "old school" studies. Some critics insist in calling this type of analysis, this —what some would think to be— a new academic challenge for the academia, a "trend" in studies. I am referring here to what some critics insisted on in the XXIII conference held by LASA (Latin American Studies Association) in Washington and which since then, I have seen in some articles and heard mention in some conferences and on some academic group discussions. The fact is that Cultural Studies have always been present in all fields of thought. Those that interest us for today's purpose, at least for my presentation, are the ones referring to the Latina/o Studies and consequently to the thought behind the cultural production particularly in the United States of Latinos in general. But keeping our focus in the Latina/o Studies I would like to concentrate on the Theories more common on the studies level for the non-expert and not so much

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on the academic level that some experts may follow, since here we would be dealing with certain fields of specialization and a less general type of study. It is important, as part perhaps of a future study, to understand why certain authors and critics are more popular with some students and why other critics are not. I mention this because I will include certain critics and ignore, at least for this presentation other theorists and authors. Although I am more interested in dealing with critics than in authors since it has been really the critics that have set the tone in much of the studies being done and in much of the fictional writing found in today's bookshelves. There is no denying the political agenda in most of the novels and short-stories circulating around especially in the Latina/o world.

It is my intention to deal briefly on the question of identity as it is studied or analyzed by some authors, where the subject, though treated as an individual, is still exposed as the representative figure of the Latina/o population and forms part of what I call "the conscious subaltern" of the dominant society and at the same time it is that same individual that struggles to find it's own place in the spheres where he/she obviously has less power. The readings in many narratives place the subject as the individual without any power or control in the place where he/she is. The dominant space is always controlled by the central figures opposite of the Latina/o, which in most instances is male and white; whereas the figure of the Latina/o is relegated to the outskirts finding it's way to the center of the dominant spaces only in preconceived notions of those with power. A culture of performance is thus established in the Latina/o mind: once in the center of power, she/he will perform as she/he is "expected." Indeed, this reality if true, is what is being pointed out in most readings. It denies the subjectivity to the individual and it "pushes" him or her, if I may use the term, to the outskirts or to so called "desired spaces." In Theoretical studies, we have seen even the physical change of appearance psychologically and/or geographically. Such is the case that we are now even talking of gender construction or the construction of the self, and in the marginalized places the construction of space and the division of more and more "collected" spaces; in other terms, a reaffirmation of "collectivism." Something important to point out is that this same concept of identity formation and identity understanding, has been the primordial question not only for the Latina/o in the United States but it also finds its parallel in the concept of national construction, as is the case with Mexico itself. We could go back to the classical thinkers and their writings about their definition on the Mexican and on Mexico as a nation, from Samuel Ramos to Alfonso Reyes to Octavio Paz, just to name a few, but also on more contemporary thinkers and authors. The never ending game of the Mask for the Mexican has led him to find in the Axolote, for example, this half reptile half fish animal, the symbol for the one without a true conscious of an identity. In trying to understand this true problem, Roger Bartra has stepped away from the collected self and seen not the image but the collected concern of who the Mexican is. His now classic book, *La jaula de la melancolía*, goes deep into the subconscious of the individual reaffirming the overall found theory of the modern thought of Multiculturalism, Feminism, and Postmodern Thought and most importantly, of Latina/o Studies, which tries to focus on individualism and collectivism and not on

Personalism and Community, I am introducing here this concept which I had not mentioned before, because I want to build up explaining it and talk about it at the end, it is after all, the most important idea I want to mention, since this is what has escaped many, if not most, current thinkers.

Now to see this idea expressed on paper, we can refer first to the somewhat new Mexican literature, called Border Literature, Nueva Literatura or Literatura de la Frontera, which I will not expand much on because I am more interested in dealing with the Latina/o writings, but it does serve for an introduction to the concept. The preoccupation on the individual first for his own survival, leads him to imagine new constructions of the self. On the following poem, written by the Mexican poet Raúl Acevedo, the concern for the silent voices, those who belong to the sector of society forced to labor for the minimum welfare of living conditions, sets the mood for the following poems which will deal with those that are forgotten by the dominant society.

#### VIDA

Mi silencio destruye al grito.  
Camino pensando en mi pensamiento  
si tan sólo fuera una verdad  
mi muerte.  
Estas toscas huellas  
no volverán a ser pasos.  
Comprendí que la vida es un callar  
de miradas...  
sobre la mesa algún pañuelo olvidado. (Acevedo 19)

One by one each narrative deals with the life and the melancholy and the “going away” of others. The knowledge or certitude of “becoming” the Other, immediately, perhaps out of self survival at first, leads to the construction of the self, to performance, and to the reaffirmation of an individualistic ideology which, if carried through, will lead to the new society’s collectivism. In another Mexican writer’s collection of short stories, Eduardo Antonio Parra’s *Tierra de nadie*, the reader is confronted at every story with what is now considered the typical person living at the border who has a relative living legally or illegally in the United States. The author describes in detail all the surroundings of the main characters, placing the reader in the same world of the stories and making him live just as all the characters, the same desperation and desire to escape. At the beginning of one of the stories, “El escaparate de los sueños,” the main character starts to imagine his life in the desired new world. His desire to leave behind his present reality, the fight for his survival, takes him to imagine himself in another space; he envisions himself performing a new role which will keep him away from being once more the Other, subverting his present condition. We find these ideas in the following quotations. The first quotation describes openly the desire not only to leave the place he and his friends live in, becoming part of the diasporic movement, but also of the need to cease being the Other and becoming that which forms part of the center of power and control.

“Con lo que gane allá voy a poder llevármelos a todos y entonces sí van a saber lo que es vivir en el país de los gringos, hijos, y a lo mejor hasta se consiguen una gabacha, digo, para blanquear un poquito la raza, ¿no?” (Parra 63)

The other two quotations describe part of the gaze which idolizes the figure of the white, male world, seen first by the brief description of the space imagined and of those that would form part in it. The objects seen, tall buildings, color-lighted bulleting boards, and especially the light which the sun makes shine perfectly on all the buildings, homes and streets, reflect part of the necessity to leave behind his current living, characterized by darkness, noise, disorder, etc.

“Lo imaginó entrando a una colonia residencial, de calles anchas y extensos parques donde jugaban los niños, hasta llegar al garaje de una casa pintada con colores de pastel. Tal como había creído que su familia viviría cuando acompañaran al viejo a El Paso.” (Parra 64)

“Entonces Reyes volvió mirar los edificios de El Paso: con esa iluminación parecían pintados con tonos distintos de un mismo color, como si el tiempo también transcurriera diferente en esa ciudad, desvaneciendo la pintura tan sólo en la mitad de ellos.” (Parra 66)

For the Latina/o writers the same concern for identity exists. Among the most popular critics Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherie Moraga seem to find more followers for the research bibliographies. Nonetheless, they also find themselves in this maze trying to find meaning to their present state and condition. Over and over the ambivalence in their writing establishes the clash of mental perplexity. Their desire to run out of the “Otridad” has led them to run into a circle of no definite answers for identity and a continuous construction of spaces; ironically, each space formed creates it’s own border, which like the same idea of running away from their collected selves, brings them back to the same questioning. Here is an excerpt from *La conciencia de la mestiza / Toward a New Consciousness* from Anzaldúa.

Una lucha de fronteras / A Struggle of Borders.

Because I, a *mestiza*,  
continually walk out of one culture  
and into another,  
because I am in all cultures at the same time,  
*alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*  
*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.*  
*Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan*  
*simultáneamente.* (Other 266)

Once again, it is this uncertainty of the self which ironically feeds the idea of the construction of the self. There is no definitive logic in the bases of these thoughts. In philosophical and anthropological studies we find that the structure of all actions and thoughts is based on two principles: intellect and will. Both have to be employed in order to advance in accordance to the benefit of the Person and the Community, the structure fails when the thoughts are pondered only for



right and wrong, undermining the human community. This concept continues to go back to trying to understand oneself without the presence of any other. I believe the “Otriedad” continues to exist in part, because those that form part in it, at least in more economically-developed countries, continue to get from it those necessary ideas for individualistic desires. The struggle for a true identity continues, the fight between our own ideas of Ariel and Calibán will also be present. Those that form part of the struggle for true reform and understanding, which after all are the called “stands” of the new critics, will be part of those that consider a philosophy centered on the human person and not just the individual.



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