CULTURAL TWINS AND NATIONAL OTHERS: LITERACY ALLEGORIES OF INTERLATINO/A SUBJECTIVES

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To Gabriela and Camila, my most loving interlatina subjects

TOWARDS A LATINO/A DOMESTIC TRANSNATIONALISM:

In "Merging Borders: The Remapping of America", Edna Acosta Belén and Carlos E. Santiago (1998) identify three levels of transnationalism by which the Americas "are being bridged" and "that merit further examination" in scholarship: 1) "existing transnational connections between the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and their respective U.S. diasporas"; 2) "the collective forms of cultural affirmation, resistance, and hybridization taking place among Latino groups within U.S. society;" and 3) "overlapping issues of race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and class." (29) Indeed, studies on transnationalism that focus on migration, return migration, and the circulation of goods, monies, people, and cultural expressions between the economically disparate worlds of the United States and Latin America, have foregrounded the limitations of unidirectional paradigms of migration and of traditional notions of assimilation, citizenship, and national identities. Transnational approaches are also impacting the boundaries of area studies, as Latin American Studies, American Studies and Latino Studies question and begin to blur the domestic versus international divide, and the national and political ideologies that have delimited these fields of inquiry. As Manuel Pastor (1998) writes, "We are truly on the eve of defining a new agenda for research, one

that blends the international and the domestic into a fuller picture of the situation of Latino-origin individuals in the Americas." (17)

Transnationalism, however, cannot reside but in the interstices between national imaginaries of identity and their transnational articulations. Most recent publications on Latino/Latin America transnationalism foreground the "paradox of interdependence" (Morales 1998) that has ensued from globalization. If it is undeniably true that "the welfare of each country within the region affects that of others", as Rebecca Morales explains, this interdependence can actually go in various ways. "Will interdependence ultimately be accompanied by a decline in disparity, thereby leading to individual economic independence? Or will it instead lead to the disenfranchisement of whole segments of society, which will then become even more dependent on social intervention? " (2) Beyond policy-making, the transnational circulation of cultural expressions, texts, political ideologies, and social movements suggest a certain degree of optimism for progressive politics, as feminism, environmentalism, labor organizing, and various artistic interventions are also crossing borders for purposes of empowerment at the microlevel. Thus, transnational cultural studies attempts to provide a more multilayered and complex view of border crossings that transgresses the hegemonic networks of globalized capital by legitimizing the collective and individual agency of the popular sectors who resist the economic domination of such capital. In this light, the analysis of "transfronteriza feminisms" proposed by Sonia Saldívar-Hull (1999), which echoes the U.S. Third World Feminism from the 1980s but which emerges as a popular opposition to the egregious presence of maquiladoras at the border and to the "economic collusion between the U.S.

and Mexico on both sides of the border" (260), or mapping El Vez's performative Chicano identity in the context of globalized capital and its ensuing migration of labor, as Michelle Habell Pabán (1999) does, are but only two examples of the progressive politics that may ensue from transnational forces.

Yet, as Angie Chabram Dernersesian (1999) reminds us, we must also be critical of the gendered hegemonies behind certain transnational gestures and we "need to stop celebrating transnationalism just because it crosses borders." (283) In her own study about the transnational articulation between Chicano cultural nationalism and the Mexican intelligentsia, Chabram reveals how the masculinist national imaginary of Chicanismo was constructed on the basis of an already pre-existing Mexicano national imaginary that privileged the male and erased the female as cultural and social agent. Chabram calls for a practice of "critical transnationalism that 'connects' the progressive social movements of Chicanas, Mexicanas, women of colour, Chicanos and Mexicanos, hemispheric indígenas and other people of colour against oppression, exploitation and unequal access to social, political and cultural institutions and services." (283) Likewise, Pedro Cabán reminds us of the dangers of conflating Latin American Studies with Latino Studies at the institutional level, warning us of the homogenizing and politically neutralizing effects of such bureaucratic decisions. (1998) Thus, recent scholarship is teasing out the asymmetries of power at the various levels and contexts of border crossings as well as in the interdependent relations between the local and the so-called global, and between the national and the international. Transnational studies, then, foreground the tensions, on the one hand, between the potential for solidarity, alliances, and progressive social

movements that arise in transnational contexts and, on the other, the persistent need for reaffirming and invoking national identities and boundaries, whether for purposes of domination or resistance, or a combination of both.

However, very little attention, if any, has been paid to the ways in which Latino/a groups themselves cross national boundaries within the domestic arena of the United States. While Latino Studies scholarship examines cultural affirmation, resistance and hybridization, these processes have been largely studied within the confines of each specific national group (Zavella 1997; Vila 1999), leading to what is now a highly segmented, nationally-bound production of knowledge about U.S. Latino/as. As a result of the transnational movements of workers from south to north and of the demographic shifts that have ensued in major Latino urban centers and throughout many other regions of the U.S. (Flores 1996), interlatino dynamics, that is, the interactions and transcultural influences between and among Latino national groups and individuals, add a new layer to the definitions of transnationalism and new possibilities for identity constructions and formation of subjectivities. Indeed, the "paradox of interdependence" deployed to analyze the hemispheric relations among countries in the Americas, can also be used to frame a discussion about the domestic transnationalism enacted among U.S. Latino/as.

While references to pan-latino spaces are not necessarily new, the term "pan-latino" glosses over the transcultural and conflictive dynamics of these emerging identities and interactions. These still need to be teased out in order to understand the internal dynamics of what Chabram (1994) has already called our "local transnational plurality." This analysis should also shed light on new ways of defining transnationalism that will

bring it closer to the "local", which it has served to deflect (Kaplan 1994) and to the domestic arena of U.S. Latino/a cultures, which globalization trends have also tended to displace. Caren Kaplan has argued that "boundaries or asymmetrical differences continue to exist despite the celebration of contradiction or theoretical affirmations of hybridity." (149) and quotes Probyn and Alarcón in suggesting that boundaries should be deemed "sites of historicized struggles." (149) Chicano Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, and other Latino scholarship have traditionally --and justifiably so-- focused on the Anglo-Latino boundaries, as our colonized communities continue to confront racialization and subordination in the form of citizenship and language, in dominant representations of the body, and in the lingering invisibility in media and politics. As recent scholarship on comparative ethnicities and interethnic spaces has added to our historical understanding of national cultures, it is now time to pay attention to the transcultural dynamics and spaces created by the various Latino/a communities in the United States.

The interlatino dimensions of our social history have been rendered invisible by the strong legacy of cultural nationalism in both Chicano and Puerto Rican communities, social imaginaries that contested U.S. imperialism and (internal) colonialism, but whose historical documentation has glossed over the multicultural and inter-ethnic alliances and collaborations that also made possible the decolonizing struggles of the 60s and 70s. In addition, the myth of Cuban exceptionalism, which differentiated the Cuban exile community from Puerto Rican and Mexican immigrants, has also played a role in segmenting their history from those of other Latino groups. Yet the cultural, social, artistic and political interactions and collaborations between diverse national Latino

groups have had a long history in the United States. For instance, the political alliances and political mobilization of Cubans and Puerto Ricans in New York and other U.S. cities in the struggles of independence against Spain; the interethnic and pan-latino solidarity of the labor movement throughout the twentieth-century, and the interethnic activity that characterized the cultural nationalism of the 60s and 70s, articulated by the multicultural voices (black, native american) of Alurista's so-called nationalist poetry, Floricanto en Aztlán (1971) and other texts of the period. Early literary projects and anthologies that include various Latino/a writers and authors of other minority groups include This Bridge Called My Back (1981); Cuentos: Stories by Latinas (1983); Compañeras: Latina Lesbians (1987), and Breaking Boundaries (1989), all of which, coincidentally or not, are Latina feminist projects.1

This essay serves as a tentative literary mapping of this new analytical space, one that is not only theoretical or abstract, but that is reaffirmed by the very complex and interestingly novel ways in which Latino/as from specific national groups get to know, and interact with, their cultural twins and national others. There are, then, two levels of inquiry that need to be addressed: first, the interlatino interactions and dynamics between two latino/a subjects, and the implications for larger issues of interlatino solidarity, alliances, and cultural conflict; second, the analysis of an emerging interlatino subject and subjectivity, embodied in the children of interlatino marriages, and of the processes of negotiating their interstitial identities in their everyday lives. This domestic transnational plurality exhibits the tensions mentioned above in relation to traditional transnationalism, whereby acts of border crossings generate both utopian potentialities for alliance and

resistance as well as rearticulations of nationalism that should not be seen as exclusively hegemonic or politically progressive.

MAPPING THE LITERARY INTERLATINO/A DISCOURSE:

In 1985, Juan Flores proposed four poetic moments in the structuring of Puerto Rican identity in the United States. Using literary texts as his sociological "data", Flores identified the fourth moment as that in which Puerto Rican subjects interact in solidarity with other marginalized groups. He argues that historically, Puerto Ricans in New York have been very close to Black Americans and other migrants from the Caribbean and Latin America "because of congruent cultural experience." (192) He argues that "given the basis of social parity among groups with a common cultural trajectory, the very relation between unity and diversity contrasts with that operative in the established scheme of ethnic pluralism." (192). Flores goes on to describe this interaction with other oppressed groups as "a fusion, at the popular level of shared working-class reality, and one expressive of recognized marginalization and exclusion." (192)

At the end of this essay, Flores confesses that these four stages of structuring Puerto Rican identity in the United States were inspired by his reading of Tato Laviera, whose three published poetry collections index each of the stages proposed by Flores. That a sociologist would deploy poetry as data for his argument is an indication of the power of symbolic discourse to imagine communities. Flores concludes the essay by quoting Laviera's "vaya carnal", a poem constituted by the very linguistic transculturation of both Chicano, pachuco slang and boricua male slang:

Vaya, carnal

Vaya, carnal
Sabes, pinche, que me visto
Estilo zoot suit marca de
Pachuco royal chicano air
Force montoyado en rojo
Azul verde marrón nuevo
Callejero chicano carnales
Eseándome como si el ese ese
Echón que se lanza en las
Avenidas del inglés con
Treinta millones de batos
Locos hablando en secreto
Con el chale-ese-no-la-chingues
Vacilón a los gringos americanos,
Sabes?, simón, el sonido del este
El vaya, clave, por la maceta
Que forma parte de un fuerte
Lingüismo, raza, pana, borinquen,
Azteca, macho, hombre, pulmones
De taíno, de indios, somos
Chicano-riqueños, qué curada,
Simón, qué quemada mi pana,
La esperanza de un futuro
Totalmente nuestro,
Tú sabes, tú hueles,
El sabor, el fervor del
Vaya, carnal.

The fact that Flores chose this particular poem by Laviera to conclude his article can be read as an idealization of the enunciation and announcement of a chicano-riqueño solidarity. Laviera's poem celebrates the masculinist codes of cultural reaffirmation whose functions of reaffirming power in the public space and of male bonding and community-building are shared by both our Chicano and Boricua male youth. Yet this solidarity, ironically, was at the time more "imagined" than socially experienced. It was built on the

exclusion of the female Other and on the hegemonic, political tenets of cultural nationalism. Thus, it constructs, through language, an "imagined", homosocial community of Chicanos and Boricuas within a quintessentially utopian discourse, at the level of symbolic imagining. Yet what neither Flores nor Laviera imagined then --although it is partly prefigured in the initial anecdote about Chicano poet Francisco Alarcón's first visit to New York City-- is that by the late 1990s it would not be Chicanos, but Mexicanos from Oaxaca and southern Mexico who would constitute yet another significant Latino cultural presence in New York City. These relatively newcomers to the Latino neighborhoods are destabilizing the Latino-Caribbean historical hegemony of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cubans and Colombianos together. (Flores 1996) They are, unfortunately, also being subordinated and racialized by a particular, local Puerto Rican hegemony.

In contrast to Laviera's homosocial articulation of interlatino imaginaries and Flores's celebration of the chicano-riqueño space, Latina scholars and writers have probed the power asymmetries, conflicts, and transgressions behind interlatino dynamics. Rather than argue for a pan-latino space that glosses over power differentials and assumes a "cultural parity" (Flores 1985) among colonized subalterns, Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, in her 1994 article "Chicana! Rican? No, Chicana-Riqueña!" Refashioning the Transnational Connection", which has become a foundational piece for inter/trans/latino studies, explores the complexities of her hybrid Chicana and Puerto Rican identities. She exhorts us to reconceptualize the traditional boundaries that inform the national definition of Chicano Studies by tracing the translatino interactions of her own family: the

migration of her Puerto Rican father to El Paso, his marriage to her Mexican-American mother, and the dual national heritage of the children. In this context, Chabram critiques the unitary paradigm of Chicano Studies, which reconstructed Aztlán and the indigenous past, but did not map relations to other underrepresented groups. By foregrounding how the space of Chicano Studies is itself a representation, an imagined community, she reclaims the "repressed" Puerto Rican part of her identity, one that exemplifies how local transnational connections in everyday life are not integrated into the epic narratives of Chicano discourse. Chabram reclaims the Puerto Rican in her as "an absented presence" (275) by narrating her own experiences at UCLA, where a colleague questioned her Puerto Rican identity: "Chicana! Riqueña? You are not Puerto Rican, you are Chicana." This reaction implies that one cannot be both equally, but one or the other, and that hybrid interlatino subjects cannot fit within the rigid boundaries of each imagined community. Thus, a national latino identity is inevitably subordinated to a dominant one. In her case, the Chicana-Riqueña critic explains how she grew up in California without representing, or performing her Puerto Rican identity, yet she recognizes the value of her Chicana-fied Puerto Ricanness, an identity that was, ironically, transmitted through her Chicana mother after her parents' divorce but simultaneously shadowed by the Chicano icons of cultural identity that prevail in the Southwest and in California, icons that mark a Mexican territorialization of that geocultural space.

Like Chabram-Dernersesian,. Eliana Rivero, a Cuban professor of Spanish at the University of Arizona, writes in "Fronterisleña" (1994) about her own dislocated identity as a Cuban in the Southwest, foregrounding the ironies behind her own empowerment as a

Latina scholar. It was precisely her cultural dislocation to the Chicano territory of Aztlán and the southwest that allowed her to enter the world of Chicano and Chicana literature, a literary corpus that facilitated her own self-exploration as a Cuban-American (rather than a Cuban exile) and the formation of her own scholarly identity as a Latina feminist. She mentions how Chicana poet Angela de Hoyos, introduced her to the works of Cuban novelist, Mireya Robles. Like Chabram's Mexican mother who transmitted her father's Puerto Rican identity and cultural traditions to her children, Chicana writers served as conduits to Rivero's own redefinition as Cuban ethnic and Latina scholar. This veiled process of identity construction through a national other, what could be deemed as an *interlatino mediation of identity*, suggests that nationness, as a social construction, is built upon partly by individuals who reside outside one's own national borders, those very others that are excluded in the relational process of subjectification.

Rivero's essay proposes la margen, the feminine version of el margen, as a metaphor for her own geocultural and geophysical dislocation in the diaspora of the diaspora, outside of the hegemony of Miami. La margen is very much the feminist version of Gustavo Pérez Firmat's the edge effect, which he proposed many years ago in "Spic Chic" (1987), and which refers to the geographical space where one ecosystem meets another, that is, a shore or a faultline. In the case of Rivero, to be sure, the metaphor is based on an imagined geophysical space since Rivero has been a Cuban islander, an isleña, living on the southwest Sonoran desert for more than twenty five years. As an islander, the ocean of her past is reimagined on the desert sand, the ancient ocean bottom now devoid of water. As her cubanidad influences the Mexican cultural and

humanscape around her, it was on Mexican geocultural territory that she rediscovered her Cuban ethnicity as well as her feminismo latino.

Yet Rivero also acknowledges the "subtle demographic clashes" that she experienced as a Cuban woman in the midst of "the Mexican American communities of Southern Arizona", (672) who are strongly rooted in their local and regional identities despite the demographic diversification in the area. She was deemed "cute" by her Chicano colleagues who also "made fun of [her] Caribbean variety of Spanish." (672) She could not serve as the prototype of the Latina minority scholar because of her racial, class, and ethnic identities, all of which did not fit the local, Chicano authenticity paradigms necessary for inclusion in the community. These very strong boundaries erected by the local Chicano community in Tucson remind us of the historical persistence of national borders, be they at the local, regional, or state levels. This suggests that transnational, interlatino crossings cannot be naturalized or celebrated as a result of demographic diversification, as Flores and Laviera suggest, but rather need to be reconstructed through the very painful, exclusionary, and conflictive elements through which they are constituted and lived. These interlatino dynamics also question the idea that difference is exhausted, for in Rivero's case local difference --that is, Chicano authenticity-- was continuously triggered and reenacted as an expression of anxiety over the possibility of an interlatino contamination.

Two recent novels by Latina writers, Mothertongue by Demetria Martínez (1994), and Memory Mambo by Achy Obejas (1996), read together, serve as literary allegories of the two opposite semantic poles of interlatino relations: the progressive

possibilities of forging a utopian, interlatino dynamics, on the one hand and, on the other, its equally significant potential, the failure of an interlatino relationship. To be sure, interlatino dynamics are much more complex than any either/or proposition. Both Martínez and Obejas explore such nuanced dynamics and the desire to achieve an utopian space of solidarity between two Latino/a subjects without eliding the inevitable power differentials, conflicts, and the national and historical specificities that constitute local, individual Latino/a experiences. Mary, a Chicana, and José Luis, a Salvadorean refugee, and Juani, a Cuban-American woman from Chicago, and Gina, a Puerto Rican independentista, allegorize the potential analogies that can be drawn from the historical memory of each Latino national group, as well as the relative asymmetries of power and the specific historical experiences that inform each. While in Memory Mambo Gina's and Juani's relationship ends up in a tragic moment of mutual violence and physical struggle, Mary and José Luis in Mothertongue also eventually separate, but not without producing a male child who serves as an utopian icon of interlatinismo and of progressive global social movements.

Memory, discourse, and gender converge in both novels. If in Mothertongue both Mary and José Luis --and the intertextual texture of the narrative-- voice a strong critique against the dominant discourse of U.S. journalism and of the government, which rendered invisible the U.S.-led atrocities during the Civil Wars in El Salvador, in Memory Mambo Achy Obejas explores the blurred boundaries between fiction and history in the Cuban exile community's constructions of the past and the role of discourse in erasing the truth as well as in inventing a past. As the title suggests, "memory mambo" dances around the

truth, one step forward, two steps back, allowing readers a postmodern rendering of the fragility of finding the truth.

Yet Memory Mambo's failed romance between Juani and Gina has to do with a different historical amnesia than that posited by Martínez in the context of the Salvadorean Civil War. Obejas explores the egregious effects of silencing the homoerotic relationship, of remaining "in the closet." She explores how a lesbian subject such as Gina could contradictorily engage in the masculinist Puerto Rican nationalist movement while simultaneously remaining a closeted lesbian. The fissure between nationalism and sexuality is thus explored as Obejas critiques the utopian constructions of lesbian relations as egalitarian and democratic, an analogous myth to the "cultural parity" proposed by Flores, as well as deconstructs the masculinist and heterosexist ideologies of Puerto Rican nationalism.

Memory Mambo is about the interlatino relations between Juani, the narrator protagonist, a Cuban-American from Chicago who does not ascribe to any partisan politics, and Gina, a militant, Puerto Rican nationalist who separates her lesbian politics from the Puerto Rican anticolonial struggles in which she is engaged. The central chapters of the novel deal with their encounter, with homoerotic desire and sexuality. They also narrate an important event that forms the axis of the narrative: the evening when Juani and Gina attack each other physically and separate, thus allegorically rendering impossible any potential for union between Cuban and Puerto Rican subjects.

That evening at Gina's apartment Juani is confronted with her own colonization as a Cuban-American and as a Latina. She interacts with Gina and her friends, all of

whom share Gina's political line and all of whom had been to Cuba to participate in Castro's socialist regime. They call Juani a gusana, and Gina "put her arms around" her and said softly, stroking her, "mi gusanita", not realizing how insulted Juani felt and how this confrontation about her family's exile destabilized all of Juani's socialization. "Would you have left?" asks Gina of Juani, triggering old, blurred memories of her early childhood years in Cuba that made her realize that she did not know much about her own country's history. "What did I really know? And who did I believe? Who could I believe?", asks Juani. (132) She then articulates a critical difference between Gina and herself:

> And I realized, sitting there on Gina's couch, that, among all the dizzying feelings bloating my brain, I was jealous that she and her friends knew so much about my country, and I knew so little, really, not just about Cuba, but about Puerto Rico and everywhere else. I was pissed that, while they'd been to Cuba, I had spent all my time working in a laundromat folding other people's clothes and emptying quarters from the pinball machines in the back. I hated their independence movement, not for political reasons, but because it seemed to give them direction. And hope. Suddenly, I hated that I was just sitting there like a big black hole, like the mouth of one of those industrial washers into which everybody just throws all their dirty clothes. (133)

After this, Juani attacks Gina physically and they both end up in the hospital. It is not insignificant that at the hospital it is Jimmy, her brother in law, who is there to give her support and take care of the situation. He, whose own violence against his wife is partly mirrored in the violent lesbian relationship, is also the one who hides the truth of this

incident to the family by making up another story. Thus, once again, fiction and history are blurred in order to protect the heterosexist fiction of the family, just like the Cuban exile sector has attempted to do with Cuban history and with the narrative of exile.

The demise of Juani's and Gina's homoerotic romance speaks to a number of issues: first, it is a critique of dominant/subordinate hierarchies of power within lesbian relationships, hierarchies that partly duplicate the masculinist hegemony in heterosexual couples (represented in the physical abuse of Jimmy against his wife, Rosa, and in the constant references to Juani's ironic identification with Jimmy). Mostly, it suggests that closeted relationships are bound to fail. In contrast, it is through efforts to remember and "accept" the violence of the relationship that Juani and Gina can eventually come to terms with the meaning of their failed relationship. In contrast to Juani who reiterates the fictional versions of their own instance of domestic violence (234), Gina reminds her past lover: "we can be sorry but I can't forget what happened, I can't--trust is permanently broken for me." (232)

Yet in the context of interlatino dynamics, the violence and separation of Juani and Gina also speak to the tactical use of historical memory among U.S. Latino/as. It is significant that while Juani and Gina's relationship failed, Gina is able to draw on the real history of the duct tape through Bernie's technological collaboration. Bernie is the son of a Jewish literature professor and an Afro-Puerto Rican female poet, rendering his relationship with Nena, Juani's sister, another example of an interlatino relationship, yet one further complicated by the multiple levels of a silenced racial, cultural and religious hybridity. In their case, the obstacle to Nena's truth is Bernie's skin color and Jewish

identity that could not be revealed to the family, thus constituting another instance of the erasure of truth. Yet it is through Bernie's decolonizing politics that Juani is able to "know what really happened" to her father in Cuba before the revolution.

The failure in the homoerotic relationship is strategically employed, as Juani's words revealed, to explore the disturbing lack of interlatino knowledge that is part and parcel of a colonial education in the United States as well as the silencing of homoerotic desire. Obejas' novel serves precisely to demythify and critique the Cuban exile imaginary, the construction of a Cuban exceptionalism that has separated and differentiated Cubans from other U.S. Latino histories, but which has recently been transformed by shifts in U.S. policy. Juani's search for the truth, as impossible and inevitably failed as she knows it is, still moves her to question and dismantle the myths of the Cuban exile as told by her family. She questions these myths, although she knows that these invented fictions have become, in fact, the stuff of historical memory: "I remember all this, but I don't know if I remember it for real or because I heard the story a million times." (25) Gina's presence in Juani's life, then, reinforces the latter's need to struggle for the truth, to hope for an alternative paradigm and decolonizing tool that is the collective myth of nationness, albeit its imperfections.

The role of historical memory in the articulation of new, Latino/a subjectivities is central also to Mothertongue, a love story narrated by Mary, a Chicana young woman from Albuquerque who remembers, through her writing, her relationship with José Luis, a Salvadorean refugee. Mary is forty years old when she writes, and the novel itself is directed to her son, José Luis. The novel is a documentation and a denouncement of the

horrors of the civil wars in El Salvador and of the risks that people who participated in the Sanctuary Movement in the United States took as they sheltered and helped refugees. Through various intertexts --poems by Claribel Alegría, Roque Dalton, passages from the Bible, and newspaper articles-- the author documents the number of deaths and disappeared, the complicity of the U.S. and Salvadorean governments in the genocide effected by the death squads, the distorted and biased U.S. media coverage of the war, and the mechanisms and strategies that the activists used in order to protect the refugees. The novel is about love and war, about romantic passion and about the destructive passion of state violence, about the impossibility of erasing the past and the bodily inscriptions of torture and human abuse. Unlike Obejas's novel, Mothertongue proposes a potential bridge between Chicanos and Central Americans through the figure of the child, José Luis, who was conceived in a moment of both love and unity followed by an instance of physical violence triggered by the post-traumatic stress created by war. The simultaneous articulation of erotic communion and arbitrary violence suggests that interlatino relations are not naturalized moments of unity or solidarity, but indeed reproduce at the personal level the colonizing structures that inform the histories of, in this case, El Salvador and of Mexicans in the United States.

José Luis, whose name Mary assigned to him in order to protect his real identity, arrived at Albuquerque on July 4, 1982, the day of U.S. Independence. The history of both countries, interwoven by the penetration of U.S. capitalism in the Salvadorean economy and by U.S. political intervention, becomes ironic as the two bodies of Mary and José Luis merge in order to erase the pain and violence of the war, and in order to fill

the spiritual and emotional void that Mary was experiencing. She felt without a center, without an axis in her life, until she met and fell in love with José Luis:

Yet in her efforts to "save" or redeem José Luis from his past, Mary tries to construct him, to rewrite him, to recreate him, the way she would like him to be. The text, then, is structured around a series of recurring metaphors about writing, memory, and language. Mary rewrites José Luis by imposing a certain oblivion that she deemed necessary for his survival: he gets a new name, his hair is cut, new clothes, and he has to forget the past and the war. In this context, Mary could very well embody the ideology of oblivion that is "so American" as José Luis observes. It is a systematic forgetting, parallel to the historical erasure established by the U.S. government during the 1980s through which it hid its complicity and agency in the deaths of more than 75,000 Salvadoreans. Mary's gesture of re-creating a new José Luis can thus be interpreted as the dominant ideology of assimilation. José Luis writes thus in his journal:

> She is trying to separate me in her own mind from my history. She thinks by loving the "real" me, the me before the war, she can make my memories of the war end. It is so American. The belief that people can be remade from scratch in the promised land, leaving the old self behind. I really think she believes if she loves me enough the scars inside me will disappear. (52-53)

The erasure of memory, in this context, remits us to the national and monologic hegemony of U.S. culture, values that Mary partially represents for José Luis as a Chicana although, ironically, she has also been victimized by them. She speaks English, he speaks Spanish. She was born in the United States and is a U.S. citizen, José Luis is a

refugee and does not have a public, legal, or official identity in the U.S. In fact, he is not supposed to exist. New Mexico is Mary's home, while José Luis does not know if he can ever return to his country and, if he does, whether he will survive there. Mary recognizes that she simultaneously represents the solidarity of a compatriot as much as an enemy in her U.S. citizenship. When José Luis and Mary discuss the assassination of two U.S. nuns in El Salvador, Mary tries to comfort him by saying "it will be all right." She realizes then her multiple and contradictory subject position in his eyes:

> He saw in me an image of a gringa whose pale skin and tax dollars are putting his compatriots to death. My credentials, the fact that I am Mexican American, don't count now; in fact, they make things worse. In his anger he looks at me and sees not a woman but a beast, a Sphinx. Earlier in the morning, he had made love to a Chicana. But after telling him the news of the nuns' death, I am transfigured. For a terrible, disfigured moment, I am a yanqui, a murderess, a whore. (75)

These negative identities cannot be literally read as a self-accusation against Mexican Americans, but as a profound self-reflection by a Chicana writer who recognizes the complicity of her country in the Salvadorean wars and the privileges that she has enjoyed as a Latina with U.S. citizenship, an act of self-reflection that is crucial to the understanding of power differences among U.S. Latino/as.2 But Demetria Martínez strategically projects herself unto the ideal reader, as she follows this quote with additional information and documentation on the violence enacted in El Salvador, concrete evidence of the complicity of the U.S. government and, concomitantly, of its citizens, including U.S. Latino/as.

Despite these vast differences in privilege, identity, and power, Mary and José Luis also transcend national, political and linguistic borders. The daily exchanges between them serve as cultural bridges. She drives him around the city and he teaches her Spanish grammar. He writes poems in Spanish and she translates them as her homework. Mary says: " Dodging from word to word for hours at a sitting, we made our way across borders of language without passports or permits," thus describing the latino transculturation and the utopian space that they forge temporarily. (43) But language serves to reaffirm boundaries as well as to open up borders. When José Luis asks Mary if he can call her María, she says yes, of course, since that is the Spanish translation of Mary. He responds that, instead, Mary is the English version of María, reminding her that they each possess very different and specific cultural, linguistic, and epistemological axes of reference. (45)

Their son, José Luis, is born after the father leaves. The child embodies an emerging interlatino, hybrid subject in the United States. As Suzanne Oboler has commented, there is a generation of new Latino protagonists in the U.S. that emerges as a result of the great immigration and demographic diversification of the 1980s:

> ..these new generations of Latinos were born in the post-1970 period together with the label Hispanic, its connotations, and the invented but now traditional celebrations of a homogenized "Hispanic Heritage" in the United States. They are the first generation to grow up officially identified as Hispanics in the United States, rather than by their national origins or legacy. (167)

For hybrid latino subjects such as José Luis, issues of identity are rendered even more complex not only because of the new paradigms of identity posed by rubrics such as Hispanic and Latino, but also because they may not identify totally with one particular national heritage or country of origin, but with multiple Latino national cultures.

José Luis, the son, reconciles, in some ways, the gaps and fissures between the Salvadorean refugee and the Chicana experience. It is after his birth that Mary acknowledges the type of solidarity that she can forge with salvadoreños. When her son is in the incubator, Soledad, her friend, suggests that she offer her experience to the disappeared children of Salvadorean mothers. More than helping them to forget and erase the trauma of the war, Mary realizes that collective memory is much more productive in establishing a sense of community with them. This becomes much more concrete upon her return from El Salvador as she hangs a poster on her wall with the image of the Mother of the Disappeared, a visual text that reaffirms the need for collective memory against imperialism and that connects Mary to the political and transnational work of Latin American mothers, including the Mothers of la Plaza de Mayo. Rather than José Luis, the father, it is Mary's son who helps her to challenge her initial emptiness. Mary becomes politically active when her son is growing up and he, in turn, continues the activism of the disappeared father by participating in global, ecological movements and movements towards social justice. In his trip to El Salvador José Luis discovers his Salvadorean identity by inserting himself in the history of his father's country:

> Later, on the flight home, I noticed my son's face had changed, had traded in its hard edges for a more porous expression, something bordering on wonder. It was

> as if after having seen so many people who looked like him, he no longer had to bear the burden of his heritage by himself.

In El Salvador, José Luis meets Angela, to whom he writes in Spanish, his father's tongue and his mother's heritage language silenced by U.S. colonialism. Spanish re-emerges in the midst of English, as a suppressed presence that begins to articulate itself, to represent itself, to incorporate itself, into the public sphere. The inverse migration from North to South represents for José Luis the reconciliation with his origins, with the Salvadorean identity that was there, but submerged under the solitude of his cultural heritage. Like Angie Chabram's repressed Puerto Ricanness, José Luis's Salvadorean identity had been subordinate to the Mexican geocultural territorialization in New Mexico. Through his transnational activism, José Luis recovers his hybrid identity, opening up a space for the articulation of both identities. In this respect, <u>Mothertongue</u> reminds us that the recovery of a collective memory is indispensable to the construction of new identities for young Latinos, as Suzanne Oboler has already suggested. (168) The novel itself is an artifact of memory, it is remembrance through writing and discourse, a memory that fights the institutional silencing of the civil wars as much as the silencing of Chicano/a voices through linguistic, educational and social policy.

CONCLUSION:

Latino/a intellectuals have produced knowledge that, ironically, continues to perpetuate the tenets of hegemony through the duplication of national boundaries. While this knowledge has been oppositional vis a vis the tenets of U.S. colonial hegemony, it remains problematic in its lack of potential as a mutual, collective decolonizing tool. The

lack of intercultural knowledge among U.S. Latino/as, in this light, is not only the result of the U.S. colonialist education, but also of the segmented production of knowledge in Latino/a Studies. The literary texts analyzed above serve, then, as textual articulations and literary allegories of the very tensions, contradictions, and power differentials that emerge in the local spaces of interlatino dynamics. While these texts destabilize the homogenizing effects of dominant ethnic labels such as Hispanic and even Latino, they also remind us that we must begin to look at each other and partly shift the vertical axis of our gaze to a horizontal one in order to begin to produce a domestic transnational historical memory that serves as a tool of collective decolonization without eliding the historical specificities of each group. These texts also suggest that the "paradox of interdependence", like theories of transnationalism, can be redefined locally in terms of its potential for reflecting on the differences and convergences underlying the subaltern status of the diverse Latino/a groups within the domestic boundaries of the United States. However, while literary narratives perform culture through symbolic discourse, we still need to engage in ethnographic studies that will elucidate the interlatino negotiations and dynamics that U.S. Latino/as engage in everyday life.

ENDNOTES

1 Coco Fusco (1995) and María de los Angeles Torres (1998) have foregrounded the central role of women artists and writers in the forging of Cuban, transnational identities. A similar argument could be made for other U.S. Latinas in the context of interlatino relations, although the transgressive border-crossing and the interlatino

identities in the performative work of John Leguízamo constitute a significant instance of this domestic transnationalism.

2 The privilege of U.S. citizenship among U.S. Latino/as has been a source of conflict and resentment for non-citizens and it has led to power hierarchies based on residence and even nativism. However, the Puerto Rican case is significant in that citizenship itself was imposed as an act of colonialism on the Puerto Rican peoples. While it has offered Puerto Ricans a high degree of mobility between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, it has nonetheless continued to be defined as a second-class citizenship by the dominant sector and used for purposes of recruitment of cheap labor. The fact that political figures such as Juan Mari Bras have renounced their U.S. citizenship reveals the very contested nature of this so-called privilege.

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