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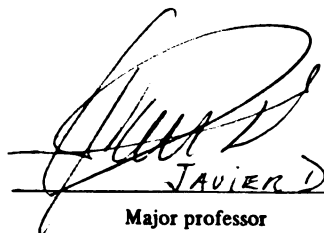


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IN THE NOVELS OF ALEJANDRO MORALES  
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THE PORTRAYAL OF THE CHICANO EXPERIENCE  
IN THE NOVELS OF ALEJANDRO MORALES

By

Juan Antonio Sánchez

A THESIS

Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
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## ABSTRACT

### THE PORTRAYAL OF THE CHICANO EXPERIENCE IN THE NOVELS OF ALEJANDRO MORALES

By

Juan Antonio Sánchez

One common characteristic to the novels by Alejandro Morales is their portrayal of Mexican American society. Morales' social and cultural commitment to his people consists of the recreation of the life and history of the Mexican Americans in the United States from a Mexican American point of view. The historical reformulation of the experience of the Chicanos stands out as one of the most basic techniques of this recreation.

As shown in his novels, there has been an evolution in Morales' commitment. In his first novels, the denouncement of marginalization and exploitation of the Chicanos by Anglo Americans and the preservation of Hispanic culture were the most noteworthy elements. In his most recent novels the Mexican American is increasingly seen as part of the American ethnic mosaic. Morales' recreation of present-day Mexican Americans intends to assist Chicanos to face the challenges they have to deal with in a post-industrial society where identity is a concept in constant process of reconstruction.

Alejandro Morales' social and cultural commitment and its evolution is studied in three of his novels: *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* (1975), *Reto en el Paraíso* (1983) and *The Brick People* (1988).

There is undeniable evidence that the 1970s will witness the emergence of many Mexican American novelists who will relate the experience of their people who are truly unknown men to the vast majority of the American people.

–Helena Monahan, 1972

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **THE PORTRAYAL OF THE CHICANO EXPERIENCE IN CHICANO LITERATURE**

#### **The reformulation of the Mexican American experience in Chicano literature**

Nowadays the themes and literary techniques that Mexican American<sup>1</sup> writers use are very diverse and each author has a different experience to tell. However, when Mexican Americans became more acutely aware of their identity in the sixties and seventies a common theme with these writers was the narration of the problems that the question of identity arose. A great part of the literature created in that period shows the need that Chicanos had to find the cultural parameters with which to define themselves as a social and political entity. Literary critics have grouped all the works of this period that responded to a search for identity under the name of "narrative of self identity": "En el caso de la literatura chicana de los setenta, la narrative of self-identity se establece como el nuevo género" (Hernández-Gutiérrez 39-40).<sup>2</sup>

One of the most usual ways that Chicano writers had to explore the question 'who am I?' was to portray themselves in their literature. Self-representation became a common technique and served also as a mirror for Mexican-Americans who wanted to learn more about themselves.

Self-representation for Mexican Americans was also a way to guarantee the survival of a culture and lifestyle peculiar to the Chicanos. Furthermore, it was also a way to oppose this lifestyle to the hegemonic culture that had ignored and had tried to suppress it for decades, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The historical marginalization suffered by the Mexican American communities in the Southwest was therefore portrayed in short stories, autobiographies and novels with an aim to preserve the life of the Chicanos, to reformulate their historical and present reality and to denounce the social injustices they had been subjected from mid-nineteenth century, when "the Mexican American people were created as a people" (Alvarez 37). Many of the Chicano writers that began publishing in the sixties and seventies were Mexican Americans born and raised in barrios or in rural Chicano communities who had shared a common experience of social discrimination, cultural confusion and identity crisis. As they grew up, their literary vocation and social consciousness developed jointly. By the time they began to publish, they felt the need to contribute to an explanation of the reality of the Mexican Americans to themselves and also to give a response to the conditions of poverty, exploitation and oblivion in which millions of Mexican Americans lived. Their own personal experiences and a feeling of social responsibility moved them to portray the social and historical condition of a marginalized minority, the Chicanos.

The literature of the Mexican Americans did not just follow the aesthetic doctrine of "l'art pour l'art." It manifested a social commitment: it was meant to establish a literary tradition that filled the Chicanos' need of a culture that reinforced their identity as a people. Ramón Saldivar has analyzed the ideological framework in which Chicano literature can be inserted. He states:

In the decades since its contemporary renaissance, Chicano narrative has contributed to a general reassessment of the cultural and historical situation of Mexican Americans in the American West and Southwest. It has provided a mediated truth about a culturally determinate people in a historically determinate context. (*Narrative 5*)

The crossroads many Americans of Mexican origin faced at the beginning of the seventies is well expressed by the poem “I, Too, America,” written by Leo Romero in 1971:

America  
blue eyes and blond hair  
America from England  
Protestant America  
pilgrims  
Dutch New York  
America of George Washington  
.....  
America I too  
live on this continent  
and in this country  
I too am an American  
and my eyes are brown and my hair  
obsidian black  
America from Spain. . . . (1-7, 97-103)

Up to the sixties and seventies being "American" in this country meant being white and speaking English. Life in the United States was dominated by the doctrine of "Americanism," an exclusivist model that denied the possibility of access to high culture, society and development to American citizens and residents with Mexican ancestors. Mexican Americans did not have an official existence since they were not part of mainstream culture. They were as invisible to the mass of the population (those with the trademark of "Americans") as the man in the novel *The Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison. If in need to identify this reality, Americans used denominations attached to Mexicans in a shallow attempt to define them: "immigrants," "foreigners" and others. The Mexican Americans were an unknown "silent minority."

It is precisely this exclusion and marginalization of the Mexican Americans in the context of American society that has forced such a response by the Chicano minority. This response has taken different forms. One has been a literature that attempts to "represent" Mexican Americans from their own point of view. The contents and the forms of this literature are different from one Chicano writer to another. What is common is a desire to portray a faithful image of Mexican Americans by Mexican Americans, their cultural peculiarities, their institutions, traditions and history. Some historical events seem to be a recurrent theme: the Korean War, the Mexican Revolution, the immigration to the United States, the Chicano movement of the sixties. This reassessment of the place of Mexican Americans in the United States takes history as a starting point and some Mexican American writers turn to history as a source of inspiration and foundation for their art: "For Chicano narrative, history is the subtext that we must recover because history itself is the subject of its discourse. History cannot be conceived as the mere



'background' or 'context' for this literature; rather, history turns out to be the decisive determinant of the form and content of the literature” (Saldívar, *Narrative* 5).

Thus, in order to understand the motivations that lead to Mexican Americans writers to create, one must study not only the way in which they document their society but also how they use history since "literary texts will show how aesthetic and cultural productions often turn out to be the ideological rewriting of that banished history" (*Narrative* 19). For some of these writers, history functions as one of the main point of reference to build up a reevaluation, a reinterpretation of the role and experience of the Mexican Americans. In many cases, history is the "subtext", the underlying support on which these writers' portrayal of Chicano society lies.

#### **Alejandro Morales' social and cultural commitment**

The literature of the Californian novelist Alejandro Morales participates of that self-representative ideological project characteristic of the Mexican American narrative of the seventies. Morales documents the Chicano experience both from a social and historical perspective. Rodríguez del Pino, in his book *La novela chicana escrita en español*, has pointed to the key concept of "commitment" to understand the literature of the Chicano writers that began to publish in the sixties and seventies: "Dentro de este compromiso, la preocupación ha sido documentar la condición social e histórica de un pueblo marginado económicamente e ignorado culturalmente" (*Cinco* 3). Alejandro Morales is one of the representatives of this kind of commitment, which consists of a written representation of the Mexican American society from within (that is, from the point of view of a Mexican American author) and a re-writing of their history in order to achieve what Saldívar calls a "retention o cultural integrity and an organic sense of unity"

(*Narrative 3*), both in the context of a racial discrimination in the United States. Morales' "self-representation" is both "synchronic" and "diacronic". On the one hand, he presents aspects of Chicano contemporary society, not frequently treated by other authors before him. For example, he portrays the youth in the barrio where he spent his childhood (*Caras viejas y vino nuevo*) or deals with the racism experimented by some Chicano middle-class professionals (Eutemio, el "Proferor Morenito," en *La verdad sin voz*, Dennis Berreyesa Coronel en *Reto en el Paraíso*). On the other hand, he reformulates the historical experience of the Mexican Americans in the Southwest<sup>3</sup> by rescuing the memory of the decline and disappearance of the Californios. The reformulation of the history of Chicanos is one of the basic characteristics of Morales' literature. In his study on the use of history in *The Brick People*, John Waldron comments on Morales' contribution to the study of the history of the Southwest: "Writing a historical novel, the marginated voice adds another text to the many texts which make up our memory of a past event" (105).

The Chicano movement represented the most forceful attempt in Mexican American history to get organized and fight for civil rights. The movement was also associated to a cultural nationalism that defended Mexican heritage and opposed to assimilation as the ultimate goal for Chicanos (a phenomenon that has been disdainfully referred to as *pochoization*<sup>4</sup>). In order to materialize the aspirations of the Mexican Americans and to hold demonstrations, strikes or walkouts, the movement had its own leaders, from César Chávez to José Angel Gutiérrez or Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales.<sup>5</sup> On an intellectual level, scholars and university professors pushed for protection and promotion of Spanish and the culture and traditions of the Chicanos and theorized from

different disciplines on the life and history of this minority. Some of the concepts introduced by these intellectuals, from the idea of *Aztlán* to the re-interpretation of the Mexican American war and its consequences, were used by Chicano politicians as arguments in their struggle for an improvement of the socio-economic circumstances of their people. The 'boom' in Mexican American literature in the seventies was clearly connected to the social claims of the Chicano movement and some of the authors that critics judge today as the most representative of this generation, such as Alejandro Morales, adopted a kind of political militancy during that period. It is understandable that Morales' literature, and especially his first books, like many by other writers,<sup>6</sup> reflect to an extent the influence of the thought that characterized the movement and the theories that some of the scholars associated to it used.

The young Alejandro Morales was aware of the ideas and concepts created in the political and intellectual circles of the Chicano movement. For example, the theories of the Conquest of the Southwest and internal colonization developed by Tomás Almaguer, Mario Barrera or Rodolfo Acuña,<sup>7</sup> the argument that Mexican American literature is born out of the encounter of the Mexican Americans with the Anglos, as seen by Americo Paredes,<sup>8</sup> or his concern with Mexican American identity.<sup>9</sup> The denunciation of American society in his Alejandro Morales' novels is connected to the denunciation of these scholars. Through a process of recreation of the historical and contemporary representation of Mexican Americans, his novels present the injustices, marginalization, and socioeconomic oppression from which Chicanos suffered throughout the years. Through the recreation of the life and history of Mexican Americans, Alejandro Morales

is able to portray Chicanos as one of the worst treated minority groups in the United States and also show their sociopolitical aspirations and claims.<sup>10</sup>

Morales' first books (*Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, *La verdad sin voz*) present Chicano characters living in the barrio in desperate circumstances. They are victims of an oppressed society that lies beyond the limits of the barrio. At the core of the narration is what Ramón Saldivar calls the *dialectic of difference*<sup>11</sup> between Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans: the Mexican American is the exploited, living as an outcast, and the Anglo is the exploiter. Not only the Chicano is segregated geographically but also condemned to be unemployed or to be given the least desirable jobs. In the class structure of American society, Mexican Americans occupy the bottom layer. From a historical point of view, this situation is the product of the arrival of Anglo Americans to the Southwest and the transition from an agriculture and ranching-based economy to full-blown capitalism.

Alejandro Morales also shows in his first books a cultural commitment. As it is the case with other novelists that published their works when Morales began his career as a writer (for example, Tomás Rivera with ... *y no se lo tragó la tierra*, Miguel Méndez with *Peregrinos de Aztlán* or Aristeo Brito with *El diablo en Texas*), he wrote in Spanish. The option of choosing Spanish over English had an ideological and symbolic intention: the need to go back to the Hispanic roots of the Chicano people. If the aim was to preserve and continue Chicano traditions, that preservation could not be carried out through the use of English, but of Spanish. From a symbolical and practical point of view, this commitment towards a language involves the decision on part of Mexican Americans not to give in to a culture foreign to them: the hegemonic American culture,

"implica cierta rebelión en contra del sistema social dominante, y en esto el autor chicano ha encontrado un arma poderosa de lucha cultural" (Rodríguez, *Cinco* 4).

Alejandro Morales' cultural commitment to the preservation of Mexican heritage and the rejection of assimilation to mainstream society was born out of the "renaissance in Mexican consciousness" (Acuña 320) promoted also by the Chicano movement. It can be stated therefore that the Chicano movement, and its radical attempt to "redefine the political, social, economic, and cultural status of millions of persons of Mexican descent" (Del Castillo 125), was the greatest single influence on Morales' first novels.

Nonetheless, the concept of "commitment" in Morales has evolved as the author has grown from a young to a mature writer. This evolution, as seen in Morales' latest novels, reflects a new way to perceive Chicano society and literature in the post-nationalistic scenario of the end of the twentieth century. His first books were influenced by the atmosphere surrounding the Chicano movement, with the idea of helping to form a collective identity, through the preservation of a common culture, and assisting Mexican Americans in gaining an improved socio-economic status in the all-dominating Anglo society. His most recent novels (*Reto en el paraíso*, *The Rag Doll Plagues*) are increasingly concerned with the new challenges that Chicanos face in a post-industrial society. They portray a society that breaks the simple dichotomy Mexican American (Mexican culture, Spanish) - Anglo American (American culture, English). Instead they reflect a multicultural, transnational scenario where the characters, in order to survive, have to reinvent themselves. Morales believes that Mexican Americans still need to learn about their Hispanic past. However, at the same time, they have to learn to adjust themselves to the contemporary conditions of United States' society.

Morales' first novels (*Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, *La verdad sin voz*) linked Mexican Americans with a fixed identity. To be Chicano, according to the ideology of the movement, was to speak Spanish and to fight to protect and preserve Mexican traditions against the incursions of the American way of life. In *Reto en el Paraíso*, *The Brick People* and *The Rag Doll Plagues*, the writer presents characters who question their identity, who develop in a world of constant changes. Those characters accept their "mexicanidad" but, at the same time, are open to a reconsideration of their cultural heritage to adapt it to new circumstances. Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez, in his analysis of *The Rag Doll Plagues*, presents this idea as a characteristic of Morales' latest fiction:

Roots and traditional culture are not invoked here in order to provide a safe anchor, but rather to emphasize change, transformation, and transculturation as it affects even those roots. . . . Indeed, Mexican culture and *mestizaje* are not presented here as the never-changing roots to which one could go back whenever in need of cultural affirmation. They are not a product, but a process; they are a hybrid in mutation, rather than a static essence. ("Global" 92-93)

Morales' latest novels reflect the interest of the writer in philosophical and aesthetic ideas developed by such intellectuals as Brian McHale, Gloria Anzaldúa or Michael Foucault. Significantly, in his critical works Morales has incorporated to his vocabulary such post-modern terms as "heterotopia"<sup>12</sup> and multiculturalism, and he is trying to describe a country where the crossing of borders is a daily phenomenon. Chicanos live in an environment characterized not for a single border that separates two cultures but for a multiplicity of them that run through race, language, class and

nationality. Rubén Medina wrote in a 1986 poem: "A donde quiera que vayas / este país es una frontera" (35-36). Alejandro Morales has applied this concept to Southern California: "Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia explains the border culture experienced daily in the urban zone between Santa Barbara, California, and Tijuana, México. We live in a time and space in which borders, both literal and figurative, exist everywhere" ("Heterotopia" 23). People living in Los Angeles or San Diego need to enter, re-enter and leave territories alien to their culture, language or religion. They have become permanent migrants in their own land. Although most of them need a refuge, an environment where to feel secure and understood, the daily process of trespassing borders repeats itself frequently. From Beverly Hills to Montebello, from Venice Beach to Santa Ana, from Newport to San Luis Obispo millions of Americans, Mexicans, Chinese, Guatemalans, Irish, Germans, Indians, Salvadorans, Native Americans and others learn to co-exist in a fragmented world that requires from its inhabitants a pioneering attitude to cross over to the other side and relate with individuals from different communities. These people show a geographical dynamism but also a spiritual one. The web of freeways that covers the region is symbolic of the net of connections that individuals have to establish in order to survive. The very pattern of the geographic profile of Southern California, a set of hundreds of small, medium-size and big urban nuclei without an established center helps to give an idea of the entropic scenario where citizens, residents, documented and undocumented immigrants have to work, live and interrelate. It is a place of permanent transformation, of unending movement, of constant dynamism, of a ceaseless flowing of cars, dreams, people, time, transactions, relationships, money, hopes and disappointments.

Mexican Americans, as any member from any of the communities that populate the area, struggle to assimilate the never-ending metamorphosis of his homeland and learn to move around jumping from one ethnic environment to another, from one language to the next. The identity of the Mexican American is dynamic. It is one that avoids the empty attempts at self-definition that intellectuals and artists have made in the last decades. That is precisely the kind of identity that Morales tries to portray in his latest books: not a fixed one like in his first novels but one that changes and develops constantly.<sup>13</sup>

Morales increasingly sees the Mexican American as an individual living in the context of American society, in a perpetual act of self-definition. He is part of the American mosaic. However, American society is becoming more and more diverse. As a Chicano writer his commitment is to document his society, in order to give the Mexican Americans a "cultural mooring:"

Chicanos/as need a cultural foundation, a recognizable cultural place composed of memory, nostalgia, history, mythology, spirituality, tierra, family, the elders' world. They must build and fortify a cultural base where change, if preventing it is impossible, might at least decelerate.

Chicano/a writers today are dedicated to recording, re-creating, and preserving this cultural mooring in literature. ("Heterotopia" 24)

The society he perceives has changed. He has changed alongside his perceptions of Mexican Americans. His portrayal of society cannot follow the aesthetics, ethics and ideas proposed by the Chicano movement of the sixties and seventies. Mexican American society, especially the middle class to which Alejandro Morales belongs, has integrated to



a great extent into mainstream society.<sup>14</sup> In order to survive in a post-industrial society, in a world where one of the main activities is to cross borders, the Mexican American needs a "new mode of thinking:"

a mode of thinking that is neither fixed nor stable, but is one that is open to the prospect of a continual return to events, to their re-elaboration and revision. This retelling, re-citing and re-siting of what passes for historical and cultural knowledge depend upon the recalling and re-membering of earlier fragments and traces that flare up and flash in our present. . . . These fragments that remain as fragments: splinters of light that illuminate our journey while simultaneously casting questioning shadows along the path. (Chambers 2)

Mexican Americans need a mode of thinking that helps them, for example, to combine their cultural background with the continuous metamorphosis that contemporary life demands from them. They need to re-elaborate their identity permanently, building up from a common past that goes back to their Mexican origin. This mode of thinking will re-consider the place of the Mexican American in society and its relationship with the other groups that make up the heterogeneity of the present-day United States. Alejandro Morales has looked for this "new mode of thinking" in some of the post-modernist thinkers and writers mentioned above. In the philosophy of Michael Foucault, the reflections about the border by Anzaldúa, and the writings of other contemporary scholars such as Deleuze and Guattari, Morales seems to have found useful concepts to analyze and portray the experience of Mexican Americans living in a post-capitalist, post-industrial world. In the writer's most recent novels there is a wider variety of

themes. For example, in *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Alejandro Morales introduces ecological criticism. There has been a shift from Spanish to English. His characters leave the barrio and show their experience in a contemporary setting (adding up a new dimension to their original Mexican culture). Alejandro Morales, as a Chicano writer, is still committed to the documentation of the experiences of Chicanos. However, in order to do that, he has to use "a new mode of thinking."

### **Aim of the thesis**

The aim of this thesis is to suggest that one of the key concepts to understand Alejandro Morales' literature is his "social commitment" to Chicanos and to establish that this commitment is achieved through the portrayal of Mexican American society and, especially, through a reformulation of Chicano history from a Mexican American perspective. The thesis also states that there has been an evolution in Morales' concept of "commitment:" from a more ideological stance in his first novels, characterized by an open denouncement of the marginalized situation of Mexican Americans and a purpose of preservation of Hispanic culture, to a more neutral recreation of Mexican American life and history in the context of American society.

In order to achieve its purpose and aim, the thesis carries out a critical study of three of Morales' novels analyzing specifically the way in which he recreates three characteristic experiences of the Mexican Americans. The thesis looks into Morales' picture of life in a barrio in *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, and the Mexican American reinterpretation of two historical process, the Conquest of the Southwest by the Anglo Americans in *Reto en el Paraíso*, and Mexican immigration and establishment in the United States in *The Brick People*.

In *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* Morales' portrayal of a Chicano barrio in the sixties is analyzed. The barrio can be considered a space subordinated economically and politically to another people, "los del otro lado." The inhabitants of the barrio belong to the lowest socio-economic layer in the labor market. The culture of the members of such community is underrated and in the process of being substituted by the culture of the dominant people. Alejandro Morales focuses his portrayal on the life of young people in the barrio. Youth live in a cultural no-man's land: without professional perspectives and rejected by the hegemonic power of "los del otro lado," fall back on drugs and marginal activities. They are only considered as potential cheap labor. *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* is a pessimistic document that denounces the life of Mexican Americans trapped in the barrios. History functions as a "subtext:" at the end of the story the reader learns that he has been reading the "intrahistory" of the second generation of Mexican Americans living in the United States. Written in Spanish, it is one of the most socially committed novels by Morales.

*Reto en el Paraíso* is a transitional novel. It marks a change in Alejandro Morales' perception of Mexican American society. This is symbolized by the bilingualism of the novel (it is written in English and Spanish) and the division of its plot in two parts: a historical half (from the second half of the 1840s to around 1930) and the portrayal of the life of two contemporary characters, Dennis Coronel Berreyesa and Rosario Revueltas. The historical part is a fictionalized reformulation of the story of the decline and fall of the Californios, narrated in the context of the occupation of the Southwest by American citizens (following the end of the Mexican-American war and the signing of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848). This occupation is presented as a Conquest in accordance

with the view of the history of Mexican Americans that the Chicano movement proposed. In fact, some of the passages of the book are inspired in chapters from Acuña's text, *Occupied America: The Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation*. This book, influenced by the writings of anti-colonialist intellectual of the sixties such as Frantz Fanon, faces the task of rewriting history to account for the suppressed Chicano point of view. That is precisely what Alejandro Morales attempts to do in *Reto en el Paraíso*: to give the Mexican American version of the historical facts. The second story-line of the book deals with the importance for Chicanos living at the end of the twentieth century, both to learn about their historical identity and to re-invent themselves adapting their lives to the demands of contemporary American society. For the first time, Morales creates a character, Rosario Revueltas, who lives happily outside of the barrio and is capable to successfully combine her Mexican heritage with her life and experience in the United States to become a true "Mexican American." She is an example of what the writer calls "dynamic identity."

*The Brick People* is the first novel by Alejandro Morales written entirely in English. It is a historical novel: it covers events going from the nineteenth century to the 1940s. The setting is the Simons brick factory which was built at the beginning of the century in Los Angeles and employed thousands of Mexican immigrants. Morales portrays the history of his parents migrating from Mexico and raising a family in the United States. The writers' approach to history has changed. Although he is still trying to give Mexican Americans their historical memory back (as his commitment to his people demands), he moves away from a militant presentation of facts that confronts kind and innocent Chicanos with perverse Anglos who rob the former of their land, language and

culture, as occurred in *Reto en el Paraíso*. *The Brick People* is the story of immigrants arriving in the United States and becoming Americans: Octavio, Malaquias, Nana and others. There still remains the element of condemnation of the exploitation and segregation of the Mexican American community. The Mexicans arriving in the factory are used by the owner of Simons as a cheap labor force. However, the way of presenting history has moved from sanctioned re-writing as encouraged by Chicano movement intellectuals (*Reto*) to a more impartial approach. The novel has different historical layers: Mexican history, Mexican American history, Chinese history, American history, Japanese history. All these layers superimpose on each other to form the novel. From the tragedy of the Conquest of the Southwest the mood changes to a poetic re-elaboration of what can be called the "reconquista."<sup>15</sup> From a twisted and fixed realism, characteristic of Morales first socially-committed novels, the book evolves to the use of some techniques that mix "lo real" with "lo maravilloso" (achieving what Morales has called "lo multiple maravilloso"). The focus of the writer is not only focused on his commitment. He is beginning to introduce new techniques, to experiment with other themes. Characters are also busy developing a new identity, reinventing themselves, crossing borders.

### **Methodology**

The basic assumptions on which the thesis rests have been drawn from Rodríguez del Pino's ideas on Chicano literature present in his book *La novela chicana escrita en español* (most especially his concept of "commitment"), and Ramón Saldivar's reflections on the importance of the ideological rewriting of history in Chicano authors in his book *Chicano narrative. The Dialectics of Difference*. Interviews and articles by Morales have been consulted to analyze the ideological evolution of Morales as a writer and an

intellectual. *La verdad sin voz* and *The Rag Doll Plagues*, the other two novels written by Alejandro Morales, and his short stories, were also read and studied in order to incorporate a global vision of his literature and confirm the shift in Morales' artistic influences and interests. The limited bibliography and criticism about Alejandro Morales served as an introduction to his literature and were taken into account as a background for the research (especially useful were Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez' ideas on *Reto en el Paraíso* and *The Rag Doll Plagues*). Works by historians of the Mexican American experience (such as Rodolfo Acuña, Leonard Pitt or George J. Sánchez) have also been used to study the process of historical reconstruction in his novels (that is, how Alejandro Morales incorporates history to his narrative and fictionalizes it: the way he chooses what facts and data to introduce, the presentation of specific historical episodes drawn faithfully from the books mentioned above, changes in the order of chronological events and so on).

## Chapter I

### ***CARAS VIEJAS Y VINO NUEVO: THE PORTRAIT OF THE BARRIO***

#### **Introduction**

Alejandro Morales presented a personal portrait of a Mexican American barrio in his first novel, *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, published in 1975.<sup>16</sup> Many Chicanos have shared the experience of living in barrios. In a section entitled "Los Barrios de Aztlán," the editors of *Literatura chicana: Texto y contexto*, comment on some inherent characteristics of the barrios: "A common denominator in the life of most Chicanos is the fact of having lived in a barrio, whether in a rural or urban locale. More than a geographic reality, barrios are spiritual zones where the dynamics and vitality of the Chicano experience are formed, defined, and distilled" (Castañeda, Ybarra-Frausto, and Sommers 151).

Most Chicanos lived in urban areas in the seventies, when Morales published his novel. Although barrios were found all over the geography of the United States (from Michigan to the State of Washington), the biggest barrios or urban villages were to be found in cities of the Midwest (Chicago, Kansas city), Southwest (San Antonio, El Paso), and the West Coast. Mexican population was so concentrated in barrios around Los Angeles that Stan Steiner wrote in *La Raza. The Mexican Americans*: "The barrios of Los Angeles are the third largest Mexican city in the world. Guadalajara and Mexico City

alone have greater populations" (141). The process of "barrioization" followed two main paths: some of the barrios are in the center of the city, right where the cities were founded by Mexican and Spaniards centuries ago (Santa Fe, New Mexico; San Antonio, Texas). Others have been created as a result of Chicano migration to big cities from rural areas (Seattle, Washington).

Each barrio has always had its own personality, its own design and aesthetics. However, they all had a characteristic trait: it was the urban home of people who shared a common experience of oppression. Many of the inhabitants of the barrio lived in Third-world conditions and developed a feeling of second-class citizenship. In these circumstances, some Chicanos instinctively saw themselves as living in a colony:

Life in the barrios is like living in "a colony" to Esteban Torres. . . . The streets may be poorly paved, or unpaved. Sewers do not always extend to the edges of the barrio. Even the mail deliveries do not always reach into the streets where people are so poor they cannot afford mailboxes. There is little native industry and few but menial and manual jobs. There is less local capital. If there are businessmen in the barrios with money to invest they must go outside of the barrios to invest it. (Steiner 155-156)

Many Chicanos have suffered from an experience of segregation living in the barrio and have also had the feeling that they were a conquered people. In these circumstances of poverty and marginality, phenomena like violence, criminality and the use of drugs increased. On the other hand, barrios were also a place where Chicanos developed a communal spirit and where a great part of Mexican American culture was born. As they saw themselves forced to move back to a familiar environment in order to



survive, they developed a communal consciousness of solidarity with other Chicanos as well as a spirit of resistance against those who lived beyond the limits of the safe zone of the barrio. The struggle to preserve the Spanish language, and the Mexican culture was an element that united Mexican Americans.

The creation of Mexican American culture and identity took place in these "urban villages." Second-generation young Chicanos, the Pachucos, invented in the 1940s "el caló," a personal dialectal version of Spanish (with English and Mexican terms and new slang) that has influenced Mexican American writers. Since many Chicano writers have had the experience of living in these communities, it can be stated that Chicano literature itself comes to a great extent from the barrios. The same can be said of other cultural manifestations, from Texano music to contemporary Latino hip-hop, from the special cholo calligraphy and graffiti to Chicano painting. When more and more Mexican Americans became ethnically conscious in the 1960s, the barrio joined the Chicano movement. Although the movement was born in rural areas, it developed in the barrios where young activists founded groups like the Brown Berets, MEChA and fought issues like the chronically high rates of educational failure and occupational discrimination. As it has been argued before, there has been a mutual influence between the Chicano movement and Chicano literature. One cannot understand Chicano literature without understanding the effect that the movement and life in the barrio had on its writers.

Morales grew up in Montebello, a barrio within the Chicano district of Los Angeles ("Eastlos"). Mexican American culture is visible throughout that section of the city. It was there that Alejandro Morales started to write *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* when he was in high school. He saved all the pieces and put them together in the mid-seventies

to create a story of life in the barrio in the sixties. Alejandro Morales had first-hand experience of the problems Chicanos had to face in their communities. Although, thanks to a positive family environment, Morales never had to suffer the hardships of poverty ("I lived a happy life, that is to say I was never abused, hungry, dirty, without clothes, books or love" ["Heterotopia" 17]), he witnessed the physical and moral degradation of some of the people living in the barrio.

*Caras viejas y vino nuevo* was one of the first Chicano novels to deal with life in the barrio (Morales calls it "one of the first barrio gang novels" ["Heterotopia" 17]). The same topic has also been treated by other Chicano writers.<sup>17</sup> However, the majority have dealt with the barrio only to exalt its positive qualities, considering it as a protective and safe environment where the Chicano could always take refuge from the outside world. Morales takes a different starting point in his portrayal of the barrio. While not ignoring the positive elements of living in the barrio, he does not leave aside the most sordid aspects of urban life existence. Violence, prostitution, drugs, alcoholism, death are essential parts of the plot of the novel. His image of the barrio reflects with accuracy the description offered by Luis Valdez:

A microcosm of a Chicano City, a place of dualities: a liberated zone and a prism: a place of hatred and violence, where most of la raza live out their lives. So it is a place of weddings, bautismos, tardeadas, bailes, velorios, and patriotic enchilada dinners. It is a place of poverty and self-reliance, of beloved ancianos, of familias, of compadres. (Valdez and Steiner 145)

In this analysis of Morales' portrayal of the barrio, the ambivalent meaning of the barrio for the Chicanos is discussed: the barrio means home but is also a trap for its

inhabitants. It is a place where one can address people in one's own language, where familiar food and music are found, where traditions are carefully preserved. On the other hand, it is an environment with no escape, a ghetto, a segregated community in search of a new identity. Morales pictures both sides of the same reality. Since one of his aims is the denunciation of the oppressed conditions in which the life of the Chicano barrio people have to develop, he concentrates specifically on the description of their marginalization by mainstream society and the dramatic consequences that marginalization has on their lives.

### **The barrio as home**

Mateo, whom Morales uses as narrator, is the central character in *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*. It is Mateo who reveals the barrio to us. Erlinda Gonzáles-Berry has even suggested that "the source of the novel has been Mateo's memory as he lies dying in a hospital bed" (70). We see the barrio through Mateo's realistic and critical eye. However, in spite of all the degradation that the barrio suffers, and the desintegration that constitutes its most evident feature, the novel still offers its positive side. The barrio means home. It is the place where Chicanos find their identities, their feeling of belonging to a community, their roots, their origins: "La vecindad lucía una belleza íntima: el barrio es un lugar bello si uno lo siente como lo sentía él" (41).<sup>18</sup>

Mateo describes Catholic rites that tie the community together in the barrio, even the most marginal people. In one of the celebrations of Christian tradition, Christmas, Mateo explains how the barrio lived it. "Navidad," or Christmas, has a more profound meaning for the Chicanos: "Para algunos la Navidad era solamente un viejo gordo, vestido de rojo con largas barbas blancas, muchas luces y regalos, pero para él era otra

expresión" (60). When Mateo makes a distinction between the Christmas celebrated by the Anglos and that celebrated by the Chicanos he is just underlining a feeling of pride in his culture and recording the peculiar identity of the raza in the barrio. Among all the difficulties and dark shades that characterizes the existence of most of the residents of the barrio. Christmas is a moment of beauty. It is a time to renew old family ties, a time of forgetting arguments and forgiving, a time of friendship. Christmas is presented as a period of the year when the community is most active: preparing dinner, visiting relatives and talking about common subjects like the Revolution. The occasion serves to reinforce values and reflect upon their plight. All of it creates a sense of solidarity and identity or "carnalismo":

Era el 24 de diciembre y toda la familia estaría allí. Las tías ya estaban para ayudarle a la madre. Cada tía tenía su plato especial que todo el mundo decía era el mejor hecho. Ya la casa sentía mucha gente en sus entrañas y las forzó afuera. Era la época de discusiones, algunas vehementes, y luego carcajadas. Los hombres y las mujeres se peleaban constantemente, era el día de fiesta y las discusiones, las bromas se inspiraban por el espíritu de felicidad navideña. (43)

These are the positive aspects of the barrio. They are too few to counterbalance its negative aspects: in actuality, the barrio is a trap for its inhabitants. In his portrayal of the barrio, the novel focuses on the psychological and social conflicts that the brutal segregation imposed by "Americans" on "Mexicans" creates on the Chicano youth.

## **The barrio as a trap**

Aside from the life and reflections of Mateo, *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* develops other two basic story lines: 1) the story of Julián, his family, and acquaintances, other "vatos locos"; 2) the marginal life of the barrio derelicts - war veterans who, on their return to the barrio, do not find a place in society and take up drinking.

It is the story of Julian what makes *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* a story of Chicano youth trapped in the barrio. Mateo is the narrator of the facts and he introduces the characters that bear the brunt of the narrative action: Julián, the Buenasuerte, Melon, uncle Tony, and the rest. The main focus is the story of Julián. Julián is a good representative of the disrupted youngsters Morales met in his childhood. Mateo is Julián's best friend. He loves him and feels deeply sorry about the path of life that Julián decides to follow. Julián, a young man who could have done well at school and apparently could have made a good professional baseball player, joins a gang and becomes a drug addict and alcoholic as a result of conflicts with his parents and the marginalization that Chicano adolescents suffered in the American society of the sixties. When Julián discovers that his father sleeps with a woman in his parent's own bed, he becomes desperate. He faces his father and his lover, argues with them in their own house and leaves. Immediately after that, Julián and the Buenasuerte brothers, the other members of the palomilla, die in a car accident.

Julian and his friends reflect the circumstances in which Chicano youth grew up in the sixties in the United States. Victims of a ghettoization, condemned to survive in a world that do not offer professional opportunities and lacking a sense of identity, youngsters in the barrio fell back on self-destructive activities. They did not have any

models to follow. Not even their parents, some of them born in Mexico in a very different social environment. The Anglo world was an alien culture that rejected them. As a consequence they may have seen themselves trapped in a situation with no way out. They determined their own future based on the circumstances in which they had been born.

Julián drops out of elementary school early because of the social rejection that he finds there. At school, kids from the barrio are the subject of ridicule and prejudice from the white population who consider them stupid (since they cannot even speak English) dirty and lazy, following the traditional stereotypes. Barrio kids do not find role models to follow there and many assimilate the idea that they are worth nothing. School officials only think of them as a way to improve their sports teams. Julián could have been a good baseball player but he resists the idea of living in such an adverse atmosphere. As a consequence, he has to revert to the barrio as a refuge where he can look for a self-definition and acquire a personality. However the barrio is a trap. There are no role models there either.

Julián is immersed in a family crisis since the relationship with his parents is a negative one. Don Edmundo, Julian's father and a product of the Mexican Revolution who now just makes a living selling the food that his wife prepares, has old fashioned, erroneous ideas about how to educate children:

Las reglas de la revolución influían lo que él creía que era el papel del buen padre: proveer un techo, ropa, comida para la familia; él como padre tenía el respeto completo de la familia, y podía decidir entre la vida y la muerte para un hijo desobediente o que había avergonzado al nombre de la

familia. Y los azotes eran el castigo y el tratamiento para los malvados.

(92-93)

This philosophy of education is manifested in other places of the book. Even Mateo's father is depicted as strict, easily angered and with a strong voice. However, Don Edmundo is too tough and authoritarian with his son. Julián, of a rebellious nature, clashes with him and life at home is a series of battles and physical and psychological aggressions. Julian's mother is weak and completely submissive to the patriarchal structure of the family.

Julián has also already received the negative evaluation that people from outside of the barrio have about it. His culture is rated low and that fact contributes to poor self-esteem. On the other hand, there are few elements that could contribute to self-definition and pride in his own cultural identity: he does not know the history of his people, his language is a marginal vehicle of communication, the Catholic church is a passive institution that preaches a heavenly reward from the hardships on earth and so on. In short, Julian suffers from a cultural crisis. Willy O. Muñoz sees the expulsion of Julian from his house as a symbol of this crisis:

Entonces don Edmundo echa a Julián definitivamente de su casa; así el hijo es excluido del mundo, de la tradición de sus padres y empujado a otro que no es más que un laberinto de confusión en el que nada tiene una fundación sólida ya que es simplemente el resultado del caos y de la crisis cultural. (172)

Julián preferred to spend his time with his friends, los *Buenasuerte*, rather than at home. One of the responses of adolescents to the social and familial disintegration they

suffered was to join gangs or *palomillas*. There they filled the lack of self-definition and family ties they needed. These gangs or "gangas" had become famous since the incidents in the '40s with the "pachucos" or "zoot suiters." They have their own set of rules that regulate their function and form an important kind of organization among young people in poor areas. In these "palomillas" youngsters find the escape and acceptance that not only the barrio but the Anglo world denies them.<sup>19</sup> In *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* there is a passage which explains what it means for this marginal youth to have a place where they can feel comfortable, as a defense from a world lacking in understanding for their behavior and reactions:

Vienen a nuestro mundo. ¿Qué no ves? Este es nuestro mundo privado y todos los que entran en él son extranjeros. No los queremos aquí; les decimos algo, nos contestan y tenemos opinión. Los ajenos cultivan una imagen preconcebida y lentamente todos ellos llegan a pensar lo mismo de nosotros y nuestro mundo. Los nativos también tienen prejuicio hacia ellos. Es un problema de comunicación y entendimiento. Todos los participantes no quieren dejar sus actitudes determinadas; están demasiado interesados en adquirir lo que nunca han tenido, o prohibiendo a alguien obtener lo que necesitan, o vengándose, o sencillamente siendo demasiado estúpidos para acercarse a las lacras de la realidad. (73)

Morales belonged to one of these gangas. He was involved in some of their activities and it was from his life experience with the members of these gangas that the writer drew most of the material for his novel *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*. He used the friends and neighbors in his barrio as models for some of the characters in the narrative.



That fact made him suffer from feelings of guilt: "Often I write with the guilt of knowing that I used as my literary guinea pigs the kids I grew up with and those alcoholic, drugged, abused neighbors. My observation and recording of their lives were my true guilt-ridden obsessions. In order to write about them, I experimented with them" ("Heterotopia" 17).

Maybe those feelings of guilt were what persuaded Morales to write the introductory dedication of *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* at the beginning of the text of the novel: "Para mi barrio, que estará conmigo siempre" (7). In this way, Alejandro Morales transforms the novel in a homage to the people that populated the barrio where he spent his early years.

As a way to escape reality, the members of the "palomilla" usually take refuge in drugs. There is no other way to tolerate the nightmare that they are living. In a state of insensitivity they can forget the pain. Their only ambition is to be "místico." In a way they substitute the solace with which religion traditionally provided the members of the raza with another kind of religion. In fact, Morales compares playfully the "misticismo" of the barrio with some of the rites and dogmas of the Catholic church. For example, in the next paragraph, Morales portrays a very peculiar consecration of the Mass:

sobre la mesa había, no le sorprendió, una lata del misticismo cuyos poderes estaban desparramados sobre un mantel angélico. ¿Qué chingados estás haciendo, Julián? Ese, pues, rollando unos toques para la salud. . . . El cuerpo se levantó, contó diez hostias, el resto del pan lo puso de nuevo en el copón que limpió con el mantel puro, lo dobló, lo colocó cuidadosamente sobre el copón; el cuerpo giró, dio unos pasos hacia la

pared, abrió y escondió el copón con las hostias, cubierto con el paño sacro en el sagrario. Se volvió, metió una hostia en la boca, comió. Orale, Mateo, esta sí es buena. Ten, ¿no quieres? Trucha, Julián, esa cosa me chinga el seso. (71)

Young Chicanos fall back on other consciousness-numbing activities like addiction to alcohol or sex. Throughout the novel, sex is described in a raw, dramatic way. The characters do not recur to sex as a path of fulfillment but as another escape from a too unbearable reality.

This is the reaction of Julian and his friends to an oppressive and adverse environment. They are not the masters of their own destiny but victims of the circumstances. That is one of the reasons why Morales structures the book in reverse order, showing in the first place the death of Julián and his fight with Don Edmundo (the novel is much better understood if read from the end to the beginning). His purpose is to state that behind that event (an event that can lead to misinterpretation, to prejudice for instance if one has not seen a reason why it should occur) there is an explanation for it.

Alejandro Morales reflects the puppet-like existence of the residents of the barrio in different ways, for example, through language. Objects act upon them: "El cuarto de él lo recibió" (51); "Ya la casa sentía mucha gente en sus entrañas y los forzó fuera" (43). As Maria Herrera-Sobek puts it "life, reality happens to them" (149). It is not the characters that act, move, drink and eat. Apparently they are not in control of their own movements: this symbolically refers the extent to what Mexican Americans are controlled by Anglo society in the context of an "internal colony." Morales uses the motion picture technique of close-ups and has parts of the body or things as subjects and actors of the

action: "Y los ojos vieron a las manos saludar. . . . sintió los zapatos bajar la escalera" (18).

Even Mateo, the only character who tries to fight his environment and not fall in the same trap as his friends, sometimes does not understand his own actions. For example, after his sexual encounter with Barbara, the prostitute, and despite enjoying it thoroughly, he asks himself: "¿por que chapeteé con esa puta? . . . Ay Dios, ¿por qué hice eso?" (90). In his love/hate relationship with the activities of those neighbors with whom he shares a common identity, sometimes he cannot help behaving like them, joining them in their groups rituals.

The second theme of the novel, the existence and activities of Vietnam ex-combatants, can also be explained in the same context as the youth represented by Julián. Melón, Lucio, Tío Tony and Benny are just a bunch of human spoils living in the barrio and submitted to the rules that govern it. Born and raised in the barrio, they were used by the government to fight in an alien war. Melón and Tío Tony were even decorated for their deeds. After the war was over, the only place they had to go was the same barrio. Forgotten by the government, lacking any other option but to live as parasites dependent on the money that they receive as, they just wait for death: a wait that consists of a slow degradation caused by the consumption and abuse of alcohol and drugs. They have also fallen victims of the barrio. In fact, they could be considered members of a past "palomilla" and represent the future of Julián and the Buenasuerte. Their way of life is transformed into a permanently conformist attitude. They drag through life, they do not care much whether to continue in this world or disappear forever. In this sense, they are similar to the group of criminals that constitute Chaparro, Tonqui and Gregorio (also a

foreseeable future for the members of the young gangs): they are not afraid to die: "Ellos no tenían miedo a nada; lo último que la sociedad les podía hacer sería matarlos y a eso no le tenían miedo" (67).

All these characters live a non-sensical existence, both young people, like Julián, and old men, like Tío Tony. They are products of certain socio-economic conditions and all their attempts to give meaning to their lives are bound to fail. They have taken refuge in the barrio only to find that is a closed atmosphere, a confined reality, a prison. The worst of it all is that, to a great extent, the control of that reality is not in the hands of their own people. It is controlled from the outside by those ones living outside its boundaries. Unable to defeat the constraints imposed on them, the characters of the barrio prefer continue their indolent, slow, evasive, addicted journey to nowhere.

### **El otro lado**

Morales presents a clear-cut division between the barrio and the Anglo world ("el mundo de aquellos"). This distance with "el otro lado" is more social, spiritual than physical. Although all of the action of the novel takes place in a Chicano environment and the words "Chicano" or "Anglo" never appear, the reader becomes aware of the constant presence of this other side and how it conditions the existence of the barrio. The segregation of races is more a product of the people outside of its limits. For a Chicano, to leave the barrio is to be exposed to their hatred, racism and control:

En el barrio lo respetaban, a él y a su familia; nadie los miraba con desdén.

Se sentía muy cómodo; pero en el mundo de aquellos sentía que sobraba, y sabía que lo jodían constantemente. Lo usaban, lo veían como un fenómeno, como algo muy inesperado, fuera de lo común. A veces él

mismo se chingaba, hacía el papel designado como un animal bien entrenado. (45)

They are second-class citizens if regarded as citizens at all: "Mi padre ni podía ir al otro lado para hacerse cortar el pelo, se podía quedar allí sentado por horas y siempre lo ignoraban, si él insistía en su turno llamaban a las lloronas y lo echaban" (116). The only way to improve one's social and economic status is to assimilate to the dominant society, adopting their language, their behavior and their culture. Therefore, the tragic existence led by people in the barrio is a direct consequence of the isolation and indifference imposed from outside. A way to represent the control of the barrio by external forces is the use of the police, "la pistola loca" (a character that Morales also portrays in his second novel, *La verdad sin voz*) and its vehicle, "la llorona," a name also applied to ambulances. The mythical wailing woman in search of her children becomes in the book the sirens of the police car and ambulances announcing the death of the members of the "estirpe" (this identification seems obvious, for example, at the beginning of the novel: the police car chases Julián and the Buenasuerte to their death).

The barrio residents feel all this social violence imposed on them and sometimes are ready to counter-attack. Even the boys that go to school for the first time perceive the racial tension and the spirit of animosity with their fellow students:

Sabían que iban a meterlos en clases con los del otro lado y tenían un poco de miedo de la reacción. Por supuesto, no sabían el por qué del cambio, pero sí sabían que iba a haber chingadazos con los de allá, y estaban preparados física y mentalmente. Si esos cabrones empiezan a buscar pedo conmigo los voy a brincar. Y si chingan a uno de nosotros todos brincan.

Orale, tú sabes que sí. Nadie chinga con nosotros; si empiezan algo les vamos a contestar. (124)

There is a natural rejection of the world outside the barrio. It comes as no surprise that the inhabitants of the barrio have a negative view of "los del otro lado." The people in the barrio do not want to join a society where they know beforehand that they are going to be rejected. Their relationship with characters from outside is marked only by everyday life circumstances (boys going to school, men looking for a job). Mexicans prefer to stay in their barrio, a familiar, if degraded, place. The negative opinion about people "del otro lado" is symbolically represented by some of the "Anglo" characters that appear in the novel, for example, Barbara, the prostitute, is used as an instrument to satisfy the sexual desires of the vatos. Her "pelo rubio," "ojos azules," and "blanco carnal" is seen negatively and she ends up being the recipient of the violence and vengeance of the raza. At the same time, she is also used to affirm their masculinity. Matilde, the woman that assists (and maybe is sexually involved with) Don Edmundo after his wife dies, the focus of contention between Julian and his father, arrives appropriately from the other side.

There are only two characters presented in a positive light: Cohen (a busdriver) and "la maestra." Those two characters are also symbolic: they understand the Chicanos and know how to treat them. They respect them and teach them how to respect others. Cohen, a Jew, wears a Star of David, a positive image for the young Chicanos, somewhat related to father Carlos and their church. They see the star and feel there is something in common between the struggle of the Jewish and their own for survival and understanding. The teacher, on the other hand, has that rare ability to look through her

student's eyes and recognize their potential. These two characters empathize with them and show comprehension of their situation. They represent the claim for understanding that runs through the core of the novel. They are the only characters that do not hold prejudice against or reject them. As a result, people in the barrio accept and care for them.

But these Anglo characters are the exceptions in the novel. The image that remains in one's mind after having read the book is that "los del otro lado" are exerting an indirect violence on the people in the barrio by isolating them in a separate space and letting them cross their boundaries only when needed. Barrio people hardly participate of the advantages of the more technologically advanced society outside. From an economic point of view, Chicanos depend on Anglos to survive: they are the owners of the factories, of the land, of the businesses. Every important decision concerning the future of their community is taken by the Anglos (for example, the closing down of the brick factory). From a social, cultural and political point view, they are second-class citizens, barbarians in some of their customs and for some people they do not even have the capacity of becoming civilized. The book does not show any effort on part of the Anglos to understand their traditions, since they are considered far from the sophistication and refinement of a "superior" culture. The more acculturated the Chicanos become, the more civilized they are considered and the more they will be permitted to enter the world of the Anglos. Chicanos are not organized enough to break the dynamics of domination that the others have imposed on them. They submit to their control in exchange for some second-rate benefits: a job, a stable atmosphere where to raise a family and so on. The price to pay is too high: the degradation of human beings. Alejandro Morales reflects this power

relations in the description of the barrio where Julián and Mateo grow up. A bitter denunciation of this situation lends bitterness to the whole book.

***Parece que jamás cambiará***

Salvador Rodríguez del Pino considers the true starting point of *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* its second paragraph, where Mateo climbs to a place where he contemplates the whole panorama of the barrio. However, Mateo is not only an observer and critic of the reality of the barrio: his personality develops throughout the book. Julián and Mateo are the most powerful characters of the story. In a sense they are opposites. While Julián suffers a quick and continuous decadence that ends up in a disintegration, Mateo is the positive side of the coin: he tries to overcome the obstacles set up by the barrio and fights not to fall into Julián's trap.

In the novel, Mateo is ambitious; he is willing to change and even join the people "del otro lado" to fulfill his ambitions: "me gustaría hacerme uno de esos profesores famosos, o un escritor famoso, uno que gane premios, que lo respeten por lo que sabe" (68).

On the other hand, Julián belongs to the "conformist" type:

Y aquí vivo y aquí duermo, como, y aquí me siento sobre una silla hecha por animales que lo ignoran todo, porque reciben los servicios mirando a las madres que libremente se afligen. Estos son los pensamientos y los pilares de la libertad sufriendo sobre una colina y allí mueren en el sudor natural de la verdura creada por Dios. Todos estuvieron allí, mi abuelo, mi padre, mis hermanos, todos y todavía existe, ahora tal vez más intenso porque nos damos cuenta de lo actual y del pasado. (116)



Due to the segregation of the barrio from mainstream society and the lack of appropriate role models for its adolescents, old problems tend to subsist or worsen rather than disappear. An atmosphere of disillusion and apathy exists. The barrio creates a cycle difficult to escape. Kids imitate the destructive behavior of the elder in similar situations. If Melón, Miguelito and the other social spoils mock each other's sickness ("cuando están enfermos o espiritualmente decaídos, se hacen burla, se maltratan; son brutos, saben que a cada uno le tocará algún día" [334]), the most recent generations internalize that kind of brutality and exert it on their peers: "Constantemente usaban este humor negro siempre enfocando los temores de cada uno; siempre riéndose cuando uno estaba lastimado o tenía miedo" (125). There seems to be a generational gap between parents and children that parents try to breach increasing the level of violence. Parents do not seem to understand that the physical pain they cause their children translates into a psychological deformation of their behavior (Julián is just an example. The "acomodador" of the church where young Chicanos attend mass on Sundays, for example, also destroys the lives of their children with savage treatment.) It is not easy to break the dynamics of dehumanization created within the same structure.

Mateo understands that the only way to progress in the world he lives, in order not to fall in the permanent degradation to which people like Julián are subjected, is to be successful in "el otro lado." He has seen some of his brothers trying to make it on the other side and he makes an effort to do well at school so he could attend college. Unlike Julian, Mateo finds emotional support in his family and also, in the barrio, where he is respected and has some good friends like the "compadrito," who encourages him to overcome his fears to enter the world outside the barrio and compete on equal terms with

the people there. He is the most promising figure in the novel. Although he does not like the Anglo world, as any other barrio youth his age (and is continually aware of the risk of losing his identity), he seems decided to make someone of himself and probably help his people in the future. It is the only way to break the circle of degradation where the community lives: "Los camaradas ya no estudian; están en el ejercito por años. Vuelven y empiezan a andar el mismo círculo que antes repetían los otros. Se tendría que romper ese círculo; se encuentra en todas partes pero está más sucio en sitios de mayor concentración" (27). Mateo is not the rule but the exception. The others follow the law of destruction inherited from their parents, and from which they do not see a way to escape: "Julián criará a su hijo como su padre lo crió a él y tendrá el mismo resultado. Es un círculo vicioso y horrible pero qué se puede hacer" (30). Julián ends up dying in a violent way, drugged, after having exerted physical violence against Matilde. It seemed the anticipated, logical conclusion for a life with no direction or meaning

Even Mateo cannot escape the environment of the barrio completely. He feels a conflict within himself. Although, from an observer's point of view he rejects the perverse life that Julián and the Buenasuerte live, sometimes he cannot help participating in it, getting drunk, having violent sex, or masturbating (as he seems to be doing in the second passage of the novel). Critics like Willy O. Muñoz believe that, in spite of Morales affirmative intentions of succeeding, the novel records the decadence of Mateo. Muñoz thinks that Mateo does not manage to avoid the black hole in which other Chicano youngsters have been trapped and falls in the same spiral of alcohol and evasive sex that the others began years before him:

se somete voluntariamente a la presión de grupo: se emborracha, se endroga, se da cuenta de que es un sinvergüenza pero sigue adelante a pesar de su miedo. Por su afán de pertenecer y ser aceptado, esa misma noche participa en el asalto a dos transeúntes que son vejados sexualmente. Al amanecer estaba bastante ebrio y al regresar a su casa tropieza en su cuarto, cae a su cama y pierde el sentido, y a manera de comentario el narrador concluye, 'Sólo Dios sabe cuántoapestaba esa noche.' (171-2)

It is uncertain what happened to Mateo's life after Julián's death. Alejandro Morales leaves the conclusion open. However, what really matters is the piece of news the epilogue gives right at the end of the novel. In the first part, Mateo seems to be looking for the happiness that he once felt in the barrio. In the second, we are informed of his death in a hospital on the East Coast. Therefore, the only character with a certain degree of sensitivity and intelligence and with a chance to escape the circle of destruction of the barrio makes it to the East of the United States only to die from leukemia. The fact that he expired on the arms of a girl, "la Tenista", while he was also married and with two kids, apparently indicates that he had committed adultery. With the accidental demise of the only character that could have helped to improve life in this Mexican community, the barrio continues its permanent circle of hopelessness.

### **History in *Caras viejas y vino nuevo***

History functions in *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* as a subtext. All the episodes narrated in the novel are the consequence of historical events that Alejandro Morales describes in full in other books, especially *The Brick People*. Chronologically, *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* begins with the founding of the Simons Brick Company, and the

immigration of hundreds of families to the area in search of better living conditions and unaware that "en este lugar, como en los otros latían problemas viejos y nuevos, quizás mayores de los que dejaron allá" (126). Alejandro Morales describes how the factory worked day and night and how a barrio was born around it. It is the beginning of the Mexican community in Los Angeles called Montebello, where Morales was born in 1944. Although the owner of the Brick Company sold it in the fifties, the Mexicans who came to work for him stayed on.

*Caras viejas y vino nuevo* is a socio-historic document that focuses on the lives of a second generation of Mexicans, the children of those born and raised in Mexico, now living in the United States in a specific barrio, Montebello. Many of the parents came escaping the Mexican Revolution, an event that marked the lives of millions in Mexico. It comes as no surprise that the historical period is still fresh in the minds of those who suffered from it and is treated in family gatherings such as the *Nochebuena*: "La Revolución reciente era un tema predilecto, describían en detalle a los generales y sus personalidades, las batallas y los pueblos que habían ganado" (43). The story of their trip to the north also evokes memories: "Hablaban del viaje, lo describían en detalle, con cariño, los difuntos de ese viaje aparecían y llenaban el ruido con silencio. Los oían y seguían las aventuras del viaje" (45). Life in Mexico, and specifically the Mexican Revolution, seems to have had a definite influence on the behavior of those who crossed the border.

Parents also fail in their attempt to pass on to their children a feeling of pride and importance of their history and traditions, and the children end up internalizing the pejorative view that mainstream society has about everything that sounds Mexican.

Living as a marginal group, they are not able to participate in the historical process of the United States of America, other than as subordinate labor. The United States just makes nominal use of them, as when Mexicans are sent to wars in distant countries like Korea or Vietnam (a situation represented in the novel by Melón or Tío Tony). They never incorporate them, after their service, into society.

## **Conclusion**

*Caras viejas y vino nuevo* presents some years in the life of a barrio. Based on his life experience, Alejandro Morales' main goal is to give a portrait of the *intrahistoria* of some characters of Montebello. As we have seen, most characters succumb to the oppressive circumstances imposed by social segregation and cultural alienation. The book explores above all the negative effect of discrimination on Chicano youth, represented by Julián and his friends, who die at the end of the story, and Mateo. Mateo manages to leave the barrio, thanks to his sensitivity and intelligence, but also dies soon after. The novel begins and ends with the death of the two protagonists.

However, in spite of the pessimism of the novel, it was not created to instill in the souls of Mexican-Americans feelings of defeat. It does not teach the Chicano population to give up a spirit of fight and give in to docile conformity and nihilism. It is not written either as a touching tragedy with the sole intention of moving the reader to tears. The novel attempts to bring into relief the plight of the youth trapped in the barrios. Characteristic of Alejandro Morales' commitment to his people is the denunciation of the imposed suffocating circumstances imposed that do not let them develop naturally as individuals, as a people, and as a collectivity.

The story stresses on several occasions the ignorance of millions of people of the small tragedies of others: "Millones nacieron, millones murieron, mucho formaron hábitos horribles, otros se descubrían y así pasaban" (99). *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* gives some of the historical reasons that gave birth to the Mexican-American communities and tries to make visible to the population at large the social forces imposed on this marginal group and their destructive reaction to them. Those forms of segregation have to be eradicated. There has to be a greater understanding of the problems of the segregated communities. Mateo's aspiration to be loved, if only for an instant, can be translated into the barrio's need for love:

Cuántos son amados; ser amado por un instante es la recompensa de toda una vida; el músico al terminar su set que recibe una reacción tremenda del público. . . . los Beatles en medio de un estadio al sonar la última nota son amados. Un escritor al lograr una reacción a la obra, poesía, prosa, es también por un instante amado. Es un momento íntimo de amor; es una comunión total entre seres humanos. (29)

Alejandro Morales shows that it is possible to leave the barrio and start a new life outside its boundaries. Mateo manages to do it although in the end is victim of a fatal disease. Furthermore, with the example of Mateo, Morales gives a word of advice to the people living in the barrio: it is necessary to recover a feeling of pride in their culture. The Chicanos have to learn to take care of their traditions and study their history. That is the right way to find an adequate self-definition and to get rid of contemptuous evaluations by other ethnic groups: "Tú sabes lo que necesita esta gente, lo que necesitan es saber la historia de los antepasados, pero esa historia tiene que venir de los padres, los

de aquí, y también los de allá" (74). Mateo, the most perceptive character in *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, feels the power of the cultural ties with those millions and millions of the *filo de la estirpe* that came before him, and the strength of their culture. It is his great discovery in the novel. At one point, he feels sure that the future of the Chicanos depend on that effort of self-definition:

Y ya el manantial mental ha surgido a mostrarles la filente que rellenará el río con los globos de la estirpe. La vena está para brotar y la antigua pasión de todo hombre se presentará para declarar que no es lo que ellos dicen sino el antiguo filo de la estirpe que se hace agudo y más agudo. Es un abolengo especial, una canción antigua cantado por el oro y la cruz.  
(26)

This is another sample of the ties of the writer with the Chicano movement: he understands the need to re-educate the people, to make them aware of the value of their own culture and history. It is necessary to educate the Mexican Americans to give them enough strength to break free of the socio-economic oppression they have been submitted to and empower them to leave the ghetto, to compete with the same opportunities in the outside world, to make them feel proud of their traditions. Following the Chicano terminology of the sixties and the portrayal of the barrio in Morales' novel, one also might add that education is needed to create an America where the dichotomy Anglo/oppressor – Chicano/oppressed disappears into a multicultural environment with equality of rights for all its members.

Alejandro Morales received many negative responses when trying to get *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* published. The Chicano publishers rejected it. They considered that

the dark image of the barrio that the book presented would not help the Chicano movement at all. As Morales himself said: "It was written in a convoluted Spanish that offered a vision, de un mundo torcido, for which the Mexican American community was not ready" ("Heterotopia" 17). At that time, it was thought that what could really help the Chicano cause was to portray the barrio in a positive light. However, Morales shunned a false idealization and presented a realistic vision of the barrio. As a writer who felt the need to help his people in an improvement of their socio-economic and cultural conditions that was the appropriate line of action to take. Although it brought him problems at the time of publication of his first novel, it did not matter: it was his way of showing the truth to both societies, Mexican and American, and encouraging them to face their responsibilities together.



## Chapter II

### ***RETO EN EL PARAISO: THE CONQUEST OF THE SOUTHWEST***

#### **Introduction**

Alejandro Morales' third book, *Reto en el Paraíso*, released in 1983, was his first to be published in the United States. His previous two texts were written in Spanish but this time Morales took a step further in his attempt to portray the conflict of cultures in California by writing a bilingual novel. Seventy per cent of the novel is written in Spanish, the rest in English. The main narration is in Spanish and the characters use their native language. The result is, as Alejandro Morales points out, "an anxiety-provoking cultural object, a work of art that unites the readers by making them recognize linguistic challenges" ("Heterotopia" 20).<sup>20</sup>

As with *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, Morales breaks the chronological order of the events. He develops two story lines: 1) the story of the Coronel/Berreyesa family versus the Lifford lineage from the second half of the 1840s to around 1930, and 2) several months in the life of Dennis Berreyesa Coronel, the last descendant of the Californio family, in the 1960s. The text is divided into eight chapters or *Configuraciones*, meaning that every "configuration" presents a different situation that contributes to the whole structure of the book. The first plot (1) is narrated in the even *configuraciones* (II, IV, VI and VIII); Dennis' life (2) is told in the odd *configuraciones*. *Reto en el paraíso* can be

read following the printed order, from the first page to the last, or the reader can focus on the even *configuraciones* and after that follow the odd ones. In the second case, it is easier for the reader to assimilate the narration since he or she will be offered an approximately chronological succession of events. In the first kind of reading, the reader is presented with some circumstances (Dennis' existential difficulties) and then given, configuration by configuration, the historical background that leads to that situation (in a sense, it is the same technique Alejandro Morales used in his first work, *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*).

There is temporal fragmentation in the novel. This feature, that reveals an inner fragmentation of some of its characters, is underlined by the broken outline of every *configuración* into sections of unequal length (from a paragraph to several pages) and each with a title that summarizes, or relates in some way to, the content of its section.

### **The historical novel: The Decline of the Californios**

In his analysis of *Reto en el Paraíso*, George Mariscal indicates one of the basic goals of the novel: "Morales gives the Chicano his memory back. Put another way, the Chicano is resituated into his own history" (82). In *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* Mateo pointed out how important it was for the Chicanos to learn their own history. It was the first step to acquire an identity, take pride in their ancient cultural heritage and start a struggle to improve the degrading social conditions imposed by the marginalization of the mainstream population that saw the Mexicans in the barrio just as mere newcomers. Mateo was voicing the hunger of memory that characterized the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Alejandro Morales takes up Mateo's challenge of placing

Chicanos in the context of their own history in *Reto en el Paraíso*. Here the writer functions as the memory and voice of a people.

The writing process involved a great deal of research. In an address at Stanford University, the novelist said:

Para esta novela empecé con varios estudiantes a hacer varias investigaciones de la historia del Rancho Irvine. . . . *Reto en el Paraíso* es la historia de la familia James Irvine. Todo el texto lo escribí a través de mucha investigación que hice en la Biblioteca Bancroft, en la Huntington y en otras bibliotecas como la de Irvine, que contiene textos, fotos y documentación que yo presento en el texto en la familia de Dennis Berreyesa Coronel. ("Stanford" 8)

After his investigation, Morales translated the results of his research into a novel in order to bring to light some of the facts in the history of California, neglected by "official" history. It tells the history of a geographical space in Southern California: the lands that the ranchos Lomas de Santiago and San Joaquín occupied at the beginning of the XIX century and that is now Orange County. Alejandro Morales keeps faithful to his literary universe: his focus is the recreation of the world of the Los Angeles area. The novel opens in Orange County and ends in Simons. From a historical prospective the first narrative block covers the years from the 1840s to 1930 in the history of California.

The main focus of the historical narrative of the novel is what has been called since the 1960s the Conquest of the Southwest by the Anglos. The Chicano Movement granted great importance to the clash of cultures that began in the mid-nineteenth century, since it was considered that it was then that the Mexican Americans were created as

people. Following these lines, Alejandro Morales begins *Reto* at the point of the first encounters between Californios and Anglos immigrants. Mario García has affirmed: "While influenced by the Pre-Columbian themes, Morales sees Chicano history, like Acuña in *Occupied America*, as essentially commencing with the Anglo conquest" (190). The origin of conflicts between both cultures dates back to that point in history. The present difficulties in the coexistence of both races are hardly understood without a look back at the genesis of the historical controversy.

In California, the so-called Conquest had as a consequence the "Decline of the Californios", an expression taken from the book of the same name written by the historian Leonard Pitt, and the rise to positions of political and economic power of the new Anglo immigrants from the East. The Californios were the original inhabitants of California, of Mexican descent. Morales tells how, in spite of their efforts, they were denied their legitimate rights and pushed aside in the formation of a new society. In *Reto en el Paraíso*, the Californios are represented by the Coronel/Berreyesa family. The Anglo conqueror is portrayed by James Lifford and his family.

The first push in the immigration of Anglo Americans was due to the Gold Rush in California. Thousands of adventurers and families came to San Francisco in search of quick money. James Lifford, an Irish pioneer, functions in *Reto* as the representative of all those immigrants. The novel narrates his journey from New York to the promised land of California, through Central America. Morales portrays Lifford with some of the characteristics common to many of the newcomers. In the first place, he is highly racist (he calls the Central Americans, "monkey men" [82]).<sup>21</sup> He also has blind faith in progress. Progress is his bible and everything should be allowed in its name. When he

finally makes it to California, he exclaims: "At last I had made it to the land of my fortune. I was grateful, for it was God's will. On that day I swore that no one would stand in my way, in the way of progress of my plans" (87). Lifford is also a good example of the doctrine that pushed so many individuals to come to the west coast: Manifest Destiny. He feels that it is God's determination that he arrives in California and become rich. He has been chosen: "I believe God made my trip to California possible because He has a plan for me. I have been chosen by God to accomplish great feats and to do great works in California" (82).

It is people like Lifford that the Californios had to confront in their native land. The Californios led a comfortable life taking care of their ranches. Before the Mexican American war<sup>22</sup> their relationship with Anglos had not been traumatic. Some Anglos had even entered the Californio society and married women from prominent families. For the most part, although some of them favored an independent California, they sided with the Mexican government and fought the U.S. invasion. They even won the only memorable battle of the war in California, San Pascual. In the end, they could not hold against the better organized U.S. army. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that officially put an end to the war in 1848 consummated the military occupation, that they saw as a conquest, and the beginning of the end for them. The treaty granted rights of ownership over their lands to the native Mexicans that opted to stay in the Southwest. However, after the war some of them soon realized the difficulties to preserve their rights before a money-hungry new population. Antonio Coronel, the patriarch of the Coronel family, became rich in the Gold Rush but also witnessed the change in the legal status of the Californios: "Era nuestro derecho, claro, teníamos derecho, garantías, y todavía las tenemos, nos

corresponden bajo el tratado, bajo la constitución somos ciudadanos" (21). The treaty soon becomes "documentos de ningún mérito" (23). The Californios are subjected to the Foreign Miners's Tax Law of 1850, known as the Green's law, which treats them as mere foreigners. In the mining towns of California, Coronel looks for gold dreaming of the possibility of building schools to educate poor kids. The gringos just have the dream of accumulation of money (gold). At the end, after witnessing the lynching of some of his fellow miners and maybe fearing for his own life, he is forced to give up mining and go back to his ranch. Prophetically, Coronel reflects: "Tengo miedo de que lo que representa nuestra cultura terminará. Sufriremos una defunción forzada, acelerada por la avaricia de los invasores, nuestra cultura no se desarrollará hasta llegar a una órbita natural, y menos, ver la justicia, el infierno, y la gloria. Quizá esto sea el principio de la época infernal" (22). It was indeed the beginning of hell for the Californios. Coronel's intuition was destined to come true. The treatment that he and the other Californios had received as second-class citizens was only a premonition of what would happen to them in the near future.

The economic power of the Californios lay in the possession of huge land holdings granted to them by the Spanish crown. After the gold fever passed away in Northern California, the prospect of the newcomers was to establish themselves in the "empty" lands of both the North and South. Taking advantage of the legal vacuum regarding land ownership, many of these new individuals squatted in territories belonging to the Californios. The legitimate owners tried in vain to turn them away from their possessions. This is how Morales contemplates the dramatic situation:

Los conquistadores blancos agotaron el oro y ahora quedaban los ranchos. Sobre esa batalla se unificó un sentimiento en ambos campos, los anglos la explicaban desde un punto de vista de superioridad, con la cual se daban la razón y la autoridad para adueñarse de lo que no les pertenecía, y los mexicanos defendían su patrimonio con el conocimiento común, todo el mundo sabía que ellos eran los verdaderos dueños, que ellos habían trabajado mucho para ganar y mantener su propiedad. (120)

Ignorant of the legal system of Washington, the only way the Californios had to respond to the situation was to delegate the defense of their right to Anglo Americans lawyers, the "enemigo mismo". Many of these lawyers cared more for their own profit than for the welfare of their defendants:

¿De quién conseguir ayuda? De ningún mexicano, porque no había ninguno que conociera bien el sistema legal de Washington, sino del enemigo mismo, porque de repente surgió un sinfín de abogados de buenas conciencias que se atropellaban uno al otro para ayudar a los desamparados mexicanos. Y así gradualmente el mexicano se hizo dependiente del invasor y empezó a perder los derechos y el control que hubiera podido tener de su destino. (120)

In 1851 the United States introduced the Gwin law in order to establish the validity of the claims of the Californios to the land. This Land Law created a three man commission, the Board of Land Commissioners, to go through the proofs of the titleholders: "The board's function was to weed out the valid titles as defined by Spanish and Mexican law, the provisions of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the principles of

equity, and the precedents of the United States Supreme Court" (Pitt 86). However, the slowness of the procedures (when the number of squatters on the ranches increased by the day), together with the incompetency of the judges, who could not speak Spanish or did not know Mexican law, and the profit-making approach of the lawyers made the commission useless to the aspirations of justice of the Californios.

Alejandro Morales describes the Land Law of 1851 in embittered terms: "La Ley Gwin de 1851 fue una declaración de robo legalizado que permitía a los gringos, por medio de procedimientos legales y en nombre de un sistema democrático, despojar al californio de sus bienes y su propiedad" (151). *Reto en el Paraíso* illustrates the dispossession of land of the Californios with the story of the loss of several *ranchos*: the Milpitas, the ranch of the Berrreyesas, the Rancho San Joaquín, belonging to José Andrés Sepúlveda, and the Rancho Lomas de Santiago, of the Yorba family. The most detailed description of the loss of a ranch concerns the holdings of the Yorba. Morales explains how Teodosio Yorba considered surprising the fact that he had to legally document the borders of his ranch, going against the tradition of drawing its limits with rivers or trees. The novelist creates an allegorical scene where Antonio Coronel declares in favor of Bernardo Yorba to save the ranch Santiago de Santa Ana before a commission of three officials: a bear (symbol of California) and two eagles (symbols of the United States and Mexico). The Californios are referred to as goats (an animal that in the Bible is used as victim of a sacrifice). In spite of the allegations of Coronel, the judges declare against the Yorba. The scene shows the lack of seriousness and faith in the government of Washington to respect the rights of the Mexican that only tried to cooperate with the new legal system:



El oso cubierto de saliva, las águilas llenas de sangre salieron fuera del salón, no se llevaron los pergaminos, los testimonios, los recibos, las cartas. Todos los documentos que costó tanto tiempo y dinero encontrar, juntar y organizar para la presentación fueron desechados. La última águila que salió se detuvo ante Coronel.

- Tell the goats to leave these worthless documents. They will not need them anymore. (154)

Morales does not hold the *gringos* as the only party responsible for the loss of economic power of the Californios. He also puts the blame on the owners themselves who do not know how to react to the new socio-economic situation. Some, as in the case of José Andrés Sepúlveda, who were accustomed to the luxuries of a wealthy life, could not stop betting on his new horse until he drowned in a "sea of debts" (145). Morales also criticizes the disunion of some families in adversity. For example, instead of presenting a single front against the enemy, the members of the Yorba family were just interested in protecting their individual interests and so they fell not together but one by one.

As a consequence of all of these factors, many Californios lost all political and economic clout in the social life of the new California. As Morales puts it: "El Mexicano vivía bajo un ataque legal, mental y físico gradual y constante que lo mató espiritualmente, y quedó convertido en un cadáver zombi existiendo en un estado colonizado" (151).

Unlike the Californios, the Anglo Americans kept prospering. James Lifford acquires all the land of the Ranchos Lomas de Santiago, San Joaquín and Santiago de Santa Ana. Again Lifford symbolizes the transfer of power from the dominant class of

the Californios to the new ruling class formed by the newly rich that arrived in California only years after the signing of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

Antonio Coronel becomes aware of the historical change and makes an effort to adapt to the new circumstances. Conscious that the Californios are losing their lands to the *gringos*, Coronel enters the capitalist game to minimize his own losses: "la realidad es que los capitalistas más astutos saldrán adelante. Los que hacen la competencia, no los que siguen, son los que lo ganarán todo" (123). He also keeps the family united to defend their land. After the death of Ignacio Coronel, his sons and daughter, Antonio, Manuel Damián and Refugio agree to remain united to protect their ranch La Perlita: "los tres nos encargaremos de la administración de nuestras tierras, tenemos que mantenernos unidos porque si no somos fuertes los gringos nos las quitarán. Unidos, fuertes y listos para pisar a cualquiera que trate de robarnos el rancho. Así lo quiere nuestro padre" (158).

However, the Coronel family cannot escape the destiny of the rest of the other Californios. They fall into the same mistakes that their fellow Californios and lose their lands. The fortune of the components of the family are representative of the destiny of many of the Californios. Manuel Damián becomes a labor hand in a nearby ranch, San Fernando. There he works bagging wheat. Devoid of all his political rights, he is no more or less than one of the Mexicans who crossed the border. His wife Rafaela Coronel changes her name to Fae Crown and transforms herself into an entrepreneur. She adopts the manners and behaviors of an Anglo American woman and saves her family from complete bankruptcy. However, the cost is losing her identity. The *gringos* run the rumor that the Crowns are a European family, from France or England. The Californio heritage dies with her.<sup>23</sup>

Refugio, Antonio's sister, keeps faithful to her heritage: she retreats into herself and becomes a living legend of the Californios society. Refugio disconnects herself from an exterior reality, loses contact with the historical process and turns into a "black ball", the widow of a past race. She is just a distorted image of what the Californios once were: "En tí reside el pasado vivo, en tí vive Nicolás y su historia. Tú lo preservas, lo celebras, lo amas. Y nosotros te vemos como loca. Pero queremos que alguien preserve nuestra memoria" (204-5). Refugio's logical end is to die suffocated by the clothes that she wore to symbolically protect herself from any influence from the outside. Her refusal to participate in the new socio-historical circumstances led her to a premature death. People help her die by covering her body with more and more clothes. After she is gone, the hypocritical memory of the Los Angeles inhabitants intends to make of her an "homenaje y testimonio a la inteligencia y poderes creativos y organizadores del pueblo mexicano" (207).

Antonio Coronel also keeps faithful to his heritage and tries to preserve it. However, his memory is distorted and he is used as a symbol of the so-called "Spanish fantasy heritage:"

the Spanish Fantasy ignored the Mexican contribution to California history and instead suggested an authentic and quaint Spanish or other European cultural presence in California which Anglo tourists could enjoy upon visiting the Golden State. Instead of Indians, mestizos, mulattos, friars, soldiers, peasants, and landowners all living in relationship to each other in a harsh frontier environment, the Spanish Fantasy romanticized their experiences by references only to handsome Spanish Dons and

beautiful Spanish Señoritas, always dancing, singing, and making merry.

Into such a bucolic society, Anglos entered and easily resettled. (García 190)

When Coronel dies, the media echoes the fact that the last "Don" has died. Coronel's wife, Marina Rodilla y Herrero, believes that she is direct descendant of a Spanish family and supports the Spanish fantasy by going to parties and ceremonies as a sample of the first Spaniards that settled California. She becomes a "payaso de la historia" (268) by giving the Los Angeles population what they demanded: the illusion the Californios had not been a mestizo race but that their blood was purely Spanish. This provided the Americans with a double benefit: a feeling of pride in the past of California and an excuse to continue to subject to racist measures the most recent Mexican immigrants to the state (since the link between them and their "Spanish" ancestors had been erased):

Doña Marina acabó en el hipérbole completo en que llegó a bailar el flamenco sobre una mesa en medio de la sala de su casa; no sabía nada del flamenco pero revelaba mucho seno, nalga y pierna, lo cual animaba gritos de "olé" y "bravo" de los turistas que entraban a reírse y beber una cerveza o refresco. Toda la historia de la cultura mexicana fue reducida en la forma de una mujer demente vestida en trajes de alegres colores, quien bailaba el flamenco sobre una antigua mesa de madera, quien recibía como salario las monedas que tiraban los turistas. (267)

This Spanish Fantasy was invented by the media, historians and fiction writers. Doña Marina is the creator of a lie. In *Reto en el Paraíso*, she gives herself the title of

novelist just because she makes up something new. She distorts history in order to profit from it. What is more, with her vision she eclipses the real memory of the Californios. By giving the denomination of novelist to Doña Marina, Alejandro Morales accuses the fiction writers who have given a biased, unauthentic image of the Mexican Americans, their culture and history. "No permitiré que se reconozcan los verdaderos artistas" (265), she says. Who are for Doña Marina, and for Morales, these true artists?

Morales compares the practice of Doña Marina to that of his husband, Antonio Coronel. Coronel writes a novel with a clear intention: to narrate the true history of those who lost California.<sup>24</sup> In the novel, Coronel is supposed to explain the reasons for the decline and disappearance of the Californios and to correct or eliminate all the erroneous interpretations created by American authors. At Antonio Coronel's death, a critic evaluates his main work of art: "Don Antonio empezó a sintetizar y recuperar la historia de una enajenación cultural que se inició hace más de veinticinco años y que continuará. El nos enseñó que la literatura es fuego y arma de combate" (270). A novelist is not one who writes something new (Doña Marina). Antonio Coronel shows that the writer works in order to achieve something.

What Antonio Coronel does is what Ramón Saldívar thinks is the main characteristic of Chicano fiction: an ideological rewriting of the past. The parallelism is even more obvious when we learn that Antonio Coronel's novel is called *Reto en el Paraíso*, which is the same name that Alejandro Morales gives to his. That is, Alejandro Morales, as a Chicano author, assumes the task of rewriting the past of the Californios in *Reto en el Paraíso*, something that Antonio Coronel could have done in the nineteenth

century. Morales' social and cultural (even political) commitment to the Mexican Americans is implicit in the same parallelism.

Why is so important for Alejandro Morales to rewrite the history of the Chicanos in California? As mentioned above, Morales attempts to resituate the Chicanos in their past. The Chicano have lacked for decades a historical identity or have been subject to a false account of their past. The Chicano writer feels the need to cover that vacuum and undertakes the task of rewriting the lost memories of his people. The history of the Californios is one of hardship and sorrow:

the vast majority went to their graves embittered. . . . they were a ruling class militarily conquered, bereft of national sovereignty and a constitutional framework, and alienated from their land, homes, civil rights, and honor. They had retained little else besides their religion and a thin residue of honorary political influence. (Pitt 278)

However, without the narration of the decline of the first Mexican settlers in California from a Mexican perspective that history is incomplete. With this account Mexicans grasp a better understanding of themselves and their past and Americans hear a different version of the same historical facts.

### **Guilt in *Reto en el Paraíso***

One of the recurrent themes in *Reto en el Paraíso* is that of guilt. It runs through all the novels by Alejandro Morales. In *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, for example, one of the open questions was who was to blame for the self-destructive activities of Julián, the Buenasuertes and the ex-combatants. While Mateo is set on the idea that only they are to blame for their acts and confesses these ideas to his mother, one is led to believe that the

social conditions in which the character grows bear the brunt of the blame. Jose Monleón affirms that the true protagonist of the novel "es una especie de supraconciencia que va arropando a todos los personajes . . . y que se va replegando poco a poco en busca de un feto libre de culpas. Es una empresa, de antemano, destinada al fracaso, porque la culpa no habita sólo en uno" (7).

It is in *Reto en el Paraíso* where the theme of guilt is more amply treated. Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez has shown how this theme touches many of the characters in the novel and how the guilty feelings are made to disappear:

El sentimiento de culpa es producto de una etnicidad alterada; en el conflicto con una segunda cultura opresora, lo que resulta en la alienación del individuo y su pérdida de identidad. Sólo mediante una comprensión del pasado y una aceptación de la propia realidad llegan los personajes a darse cuenta del origen de la situación. ("Culpa" 89)

In *Reto* Mexicans are nullified, "ninguneados,"<sup>25</sup> by an oppressive culture. As it has been stated, different people adopt a different response to the Anglo oppression. Those who try to adapt to the new circumstances without losing their identity are the less conflictive ones, as is the case of Antonio Coronel. The others become misfits in their own land. Refugio, for example, reverts to her culture but cuts off any possible contact with her surroundings. She understands the past of her people and carries it with her but she feels out of place in a new, multiracial society. Refugio becomes a Mexican relic and dies happy and lonely. Others, like Rafaela Crown, deny their roots and, although she acquires wealth in the Anglo society for a period in her life, loses her identity. The result is sorrow and guilt:

La vida traicionera, Rafaela y Manuel Damián deberían ser felices, eran una pareja de poder económico, dueños de Crown Tailors and Clothiers, mas en el momento en que se encontraban solos, desnudos ante sí, en que se quitaban las máscaras, revelaban uno al otro un rostro cansado por la tristeza, por cargar lo que ellos consideraban un pecado familiar. (250)

The concept of guilt is related to the idea of paradise. Alejandro Morales refuses the idea of *paraíso*. Reality is dynamic, not static. The Paradise is a static idea that serves to oppress, not to liberate. In the novel, Morales does not portray any Eden. Both the Anglo and the Mexican worlds live an eternal conflict. From that conflict a new reality grows. The concept of paradise is associated an acritical acceptance of the traditions (hoping that way to return to a mythical state in the past where there nothing existed but continuous happiness). The characters that are able to understand their past also realize that its idealization is as harmful as its distortion: there was never a moment in their history when life was paradise. Living involves conflict, change. Therefore, identity cannot be associated to a utopic past where traditions guaranteed happiness.

When dealing with the second and third generations of Californios after the Mexican American war, Alejandro Morales presents the theme of guilt related to paradise in allegorical terms with two couples: Antonio and Beatriz, and Antonio and María.

Antonio, the son of Refugio and Nicolas Berreyesa, and Beatriz, the daughter of Fae Crown and Manuel Damián, are pictured as a sort of Adam and Eve that discover sex in Fae Crown's clothing shop. They experiment with each other's bodies. They kiss, hug and masturbate. One day they naturally make love: "Pelo contra pelo, testículos y pene contra vagina y matriz, se vieron por primera vez y de nuevo el hombre y la mujer se



expulsaron del paraíso" (257). They are instinctively aware that they are committing a sin. On the one hand they consider it just as a game. On the other, since it is a new thing they cannot help considering it may be something prohibited: "Por tanta precaución, a los jóvenes, por primera vez, de lo profundo de su mentalidad, les nació la idea de que cometían un mal, que el comportamiento del cuerpo para gozar y sentirse felices era un pecado" (258). Although they are just cousins, when Beatriz's parents discover what they consider to be incestuous love, they expel them from paradise. Manuel Damián wants them out of sight because he would not be able to put up with the shame of having to confront his neighbours when Beatriz's womb began to grow. The couple accept their parents' decision and abandon the ranch. They do not stop for a minute to contemplate their behavior, to wonder whether their conduct was sinful or as bad as to deserve the punishment. The tradition, the God of their parents, even condemn them not to have more children.

Antonio and María behave in a different way. Antonio is the son of the former couple, Antonio and Beatriz. María is a cousin of his (she is the daughter of Jaime Coronel and Diana Ángela Martínez and shares grandparents with Antonio, Fae Crown and Manuel Damián). However, from the beginning, Antonio is presented as a character with high awareness of himself. He knows that he is a bastard and that his parents are cousins. But he does not feel the burden of guilt because he accepts the situation. Donna Russell initiates him sexually and he regards sex as an instinctive force, not as the sin that has destroyed the life of his parents:

No me importa pero sí me daña mucho saber que ellos se sienten culpables, que siempre han vivido con ese peso sobre el corazón y la

mente, el pecado, la vergüenza, la culpa. . . . Me siento libre pero ellos siempre serán esclavos. A través de la sabiduría de Donna entendí la vida. Soy un hombre totalmente libre, no puedo pecar, no hay ley que pueda violar. Desde ese despertar, ese reconocimiento de identidad, he vivido feliz. (349)

The same self-awareness is shown with the sentence: "Por primera vez la visión estaba clara: por primera vez Antonio Berreyesa Coronel sabía quién era" (362). Therefore, Antonio liberates himself from any guilt when he accepts his past critically in order to find his own identity. He does what his parents should have done before: question the validity of some ideas imposed upon them:

Por medio de los estudios [Antonio y María] habían cuestionado varias tradiciones y creencias religiosas. El resultado de cada interrogación fue que los dos se alejaron de la religión. Por lo tanto no accedían al concepto de que cometían un pecado contra la iglesia ni contra la naturaleza. . . . Antonio y María se consideraban libres de las ideas que esclavizaban a sus padres. (367)

The main difference between Antonio-Beatriz and Antonio-Maria is that the first couple accepts without criticism an external judgement that condemns them and they live in guilt until their death. The second couple questions the same conventional values and rejects them in order to affirm their identity. Antonio reaches that wisdom through the knowledge of history (which is what helps him to question the tradition):

El pasado perdura, nunca se pierde todo. Descubrí que como seres humanos pensamos con una pequeñísima parte de nuestro pasado, mas es

con la totalidad de nuestro pasado que deseamos, ordenamos y actuamos. Solamente conocemos de nuestra acumulación histórica. Para saber nuestra totalidad, quiénes somos, ésa es la meta sagrada. Somos acumulación del tiempo, entendía, así que el futuro nunca puede ser igual al pasado porque una nueva acumulación se crea a cada paso. (353-354)

Antonio becomes aware of himself and his identity after he learns his past and approaches it with a critical perspective. Once he is given to know the culture of his parents and other cultures, he feels free to choose what he wants to be. Antonio is intelligent enough to realize that identity is a complex reality, constantly in movement. Therefore, he moves away from the restricting idea of paradise, a concept that creates a monolithic view of reality, and is more comfortable with the idea of a fragmented, everchanging idea of identity and the being. That is what he learns in the light tunnel where he works: "Estoy libre de las ideologías, los discursos, del marxismo, del cristianismo, psicoanálisis, soy un ser sin unidad, con una pluralidad de entendimientos, que va agregando imágenes nuevas, innovadoras, en la frontera del lenguaje" (357).

At the end of the book, Antonio undergoes a peculiar evolution. Once he discovers that his identity is a continuum that renovates itself everyday, he believes he can get rid of his cultural and historical background. He becomes a man without roots. This comes as a "revelación gravemente perjudicial... No tengo orgullo de mi familia, sí lo tengo de Maria y de mí, y no quiero saber nada de su historia" (378). Antonio presents the opposite evolution to a character like Refugio, the character most representative of a static view of identity. He manages to understand that identity is a concept submitted to a permanent recreation. However, he fails to comprehend that the identity of an individual

has to have necessary social, historical and cultural foundations. What is more, he creates the idea of a new paradise, Simons, a miraculous city where everything is possible. Antonio dies devoured by the machine he was operating (a metaphor) and all that is left of him is an empty urn.

Morales rewrites the history of California to give the Chicanos a historical background that makes it possible for them to discover their links to members of another culture and become more knowledgeable about their identity. This knowledge enables them to drop a feeling of guilt that has been imposed by the members of the dominant social group. However, the individual that discovers a new historical background should not change an absolute (the ideas received so far) for another absolute (the new learned concepts). Morales' works tend to support a dialectical vision of identity since, as Antonio said, "somos acumulación del tiempo" and "una nueva acumulación se crea a cada paso" (354).

### **Being Chicano in the eighties**

George Mariscal has stated that *Reto en el Paraíso* is "above all else about being a Chicano in Southern California in 1984" (78). In the second story line of the book, Morales narrates the identity crisis of Dennis Berreyesa Coronel, a young professional Chicano and last descendant of the Berreyesa/Coronel family, in the sixties.

Dennis is an architect. Although his ancestors are important figures of the Californio society, he has lost all links with the history of his family. His father (Antonio) died when he was young and his mother (María) became a prostitute. Dennis has grown up in a gringo environment. His only contact with the Chicano reality seems to have been his grandmother, Beatriz. Morales introduces the character of Dennis when he is in his

thirties and working for Jean Lifford, the descendant of James Lifford, in the territories that once belonged to Dennis' family. Although educated in the Anglo American system and having mostly non-Chicano friends, he cannot escape his Mexican heritage ("I feel pain in my head, my brain is split by a Mexican past, a gringo education, which creates a Frankenstein" [278]). It is his Chicano background that he tries to avoid. Alienated by education, he abounds in his alienation by consciously buying into the American way of life and rejecting his Chicano identity: "I'm not like them, not in any way am I like them. I've got an education, I'm an alienated genius and I love it" (278). He feels guilty of his ancestry and, at the same time, realizes that he cannot run away from himself and what makes him different from others. So he builds in his apartment an artificial paradise where he takes refuge from the outside world that reminds him constantly of his cultural background, and from the conflicts that spring from himself. Instead of confronting his reality he escapes from it to an unreal world. He spends days in his apartment avoiding thinking, crawling naked on the carpet, only moving to defecate and piss in a receptacle in his bathroom.

His escapism proves to be useless, since he still is confused by the impossibility of fitting into a totally white population and losing all differential characteristics. When he meets Rosario, a young Chicana proud of her heritage, he falls in love with her. Suddenly his Mexican dimension comes to the surface and Dennis identifies with Rosario, the girl that his grandmother described for him as the ideal woman. Encouraged by Rosario to look for his roots, he makes a feeble attempt to find them in Mexico. Before that he goes to visit his grandmother, Beatriz. She suggests that he look into himself for his roots: "Siempre las has llevado, en cualquier lugar que pises estarán contigo. Nunca

las perderás, si no están forjadas en tu cara, en tu piel, las tienes guardadas en las arrugas de tu mente. Presta atención dentro de ti" (306). His grandmother also advises him of the importance of transformation, of change.

However, his understanding of both Anglo and Mexican traditions is a unidimensional, monolithic one (for example, he spoils his relationship with Rosario because he cannot accept his open sexuality that contradicts the closed view of the sexual role for women in the most pure Mexican tradition).<sup>26</sup> Rather than accepting his own reality, he embarks upon a futile trip to Mexico, more as a tourist than as a man looking for an identity. He substitutes his responsibility of coming to terms with himself for a journey throughout the land where his ancient ancestors were born (his closest ancestors he could find without moving from Los Angeles).

At the end of his story, Dennis has not changed at all. He remains the same character as in the beginning and "constitutes in itself a closed, poetic whole. . . . It is cut off from a historical whole" (Bakhtin 114). He still denies the Chicano component of his personality: "Ahora me doy cuenta de que [Chicano] contienen la palabra ano. No solamente se niegan pero también se denigran, se embarran con mierda" (323). However, he is unable to live as any other non-Chicano person. As Dennis refuses to learn about himself and to accept his reality, he ends up existing outside of both cultures. Mariscal says: "This uncanny creature, both inside and outside the system, is in reality nowhere at all. . . . He is neither the negation of opposites nor even the synthesis of opposites; rather, he occupies the space of potentiality, of the always unrealized" (81). In these circumstances, the only place Dennis can come in search of solace is the loneliness of his apartment, his "Jardín del Edén" (334). So when he feels that the outside worlds is

threatening, he runs to his place to submerge in a feeling of nothingness and escape reality.

The last image we have of Dennis is that of a crippled figure, naked on the floor of his apartment: "formaba una enorme bola cilíndrica, sin miembros, con un ano pulsante, un pene enorme y una cabeza ciega, con la boca grotescamente abierta. Constituía una máquina del deseo que esperaba ser satisfecha" (334).<sup>27</sup> Dennis remembers the teachings of his grandmother about the importance of change, of transformation. However, his dream is once again not of internal metamorphosis by the embrace of a racial reality, or the fight for the change of social conditions of his Chicano brothers, it is an image of turning into a butterfly and flying free in *paraíso*: the dream of escaping from himself forever.<sup>28</sup> Rather than becoming conscious of the problems that worry him and making an attempt to solve them, Dennis Berreyesa Coronel prefers not to have any consciousness at all.

The figure of Dennis is counterbalanced with that of Rosario Revueltas. As her own name indicates,<sup>29</sup> she represents active transformation, struggle for ideals. Rosario is an architect, the same as Dennis, and she is also a product of the Anglo American system of education. She shares with Dennis the same split identity. However, instead of scurrying away from herself as Dennis does, she joins the Chicano social movement with the intention of cultivating the Mexican side of her personality and making a change in the still conservative Anglo Saxon society of the sixties to improve the conditions of the Chicanos that did not have the chance to have an education and to enjoy her social status. Unlike Dennis, always full of guilt, she confronts guilt by learning about her roots, taking pride in her heritage and understanding her bi-cultural identity:

Most Mexicans are poor, uneducated and down. I made it because I look gringo, act gringo, and used to think gringo. But not anymore, my mind is my own, I'm free from your oppressive educational brainwashing. It's happening at all levels, there are little internal, personal revolutions going on in every Mexican in this country. Everybody has to deal with this new force, everyone must react, pro or con, no matter, but they must. My response is aggressive, I ally myself with the militant Chicanos who have a deep and intense understanding of themselves and their historical and present situations. . . . I have liberated my mind from inferiority feelings, controlled brainwashing, oppressive educational thought and the colonized mentality you, the gringo oppressor, have forced upon me and my people.

We're no longer waiting for the institutions to decide, we will act. (281)

Rosario is in the novel the representative of the Chicano Movement of the sixties, a movement that does not think, like Dennis, that "change happens only when a cultural accident breaks the societal wall" (280), but encourages crisis and calls on the Mexican Americans to participate in it. The ideology of the movement spreads to other characters in the novel. Nat Martínez,<sup>30</sup> one of Dennis's tennis partners, explains his goals with these words: "The Chicano movement will cause a reaction, a crisis in all of us, and we're going to have to be strong enough, individually and collectively, to overcome this crisis. That's the whole idea, collectively, someday we're going to be strong and together" (329). Dennis cannot understand the idea of a collective fight. Rosario is intelligent enough to develop a professional career as an individual, to transform herself into a more authentic and conscious woman and, at the same time, to share a collective struggle.



Influenced by her militant position she also questions the role of women in society and shows a disinhibited social behavior that contrasts with the traditional role that Dennis envisions for women. She takes pride in the word "Chicano" and does not avoid it. But more important, with her healthy attitudes, she breaks the negative stereotypes that had been imposed on the Mexicans of California. Rosario represents the future of the Chicanos, a person that is capable of confronting the past to gain a complete identity.

One of the goals of the Chicano Movement was to recover a history that had been intentionally forgotten. Rosario, as the representative of the movement, is the connecting line that goes from the past to the present in Chicano history. Antonio Coronel had the hope that some day, the Mexicans would be capable of repairing the damage that the Americans had caused them: "Algún día mexicanos, miles de mexicanos, tomarán de nuevo lo que nos pertenece. Tendremos nuestro turno, siempre sermos una estaca en las costillas" (68-69). That was one of the motivations that encouraged him to narrate the true history of the Californios so that Rosario, and people like her, could one day go back to the books and understand what really happened. The Chicano Movement is the dream come true of the Californios.

## **Conclusion**

As we have seen in the introduction, Alejandro Morales wrote, in an essay entitled *Dynamic identities in heterotopia*: "Chicano/a writers today are dedicated to recording, re-creating and preserving this cultural mooring in literature" (24). The kind of literary activity that Morales is referring to is born originally as a response to the traditional American representation of the Chicano in literature. The only representation that the Mexican Americans had of themselves was that one the Anglo Americans

presented. This portrayal was usually a highly romanticized version of what these writers thought were the most notable characteristics of the Mexican living in the Southwest. Those features used to be negative; for example, their violence and their outlandish, unexpected behavior.<sup>31</sup>

The interest of Chicano writers to re-create, as Morales states, the experience of their people also reflects the omission in American history texts of their contribution to the historical formation and growth of the United States. Mexicans only appear in history to remind them of their failure to retain Texas from American pioneers, with the catch phrase "Remember the Alamo," or when the cameras capture the farm workers protest-marching in the fields of Delano, California. Stereotypes still hide the true face of the Mexican Americans. As Jesús Rosales comments: "En la mente de los angloamericanos el rebelde, cobarde y pasivo mexicano del Alamo se convierte en el rebelde, cobarde y caricaturesco *Frito Bandito* de los años 1960" (64).

In order for the Chicanos to grasp an authentic image of themselves, they needed to find a real self-representation. That was the objective not only of Morales but of many of the Chicano writers that began their literary careers in the seventies. *Reto en el Paraíso* could be included in the group of works that tried to document a more positive portrait of the Chicanos and provide a fairer treatment of their historical evolution and contribution to California (amending in this way the distortions produced by their absence in traditional American history and reference books). The book serves as a tool for Chicanos to learn about themselves and reconstruct their cultural and historical identities.

Morales' introduction of history in *Reto en el paraíso* is still close to Chicano historiography: the history written by such intellectuals as Rodolfo Acuña, with a heavy

political orientation (see, for example, Acuña's opening words to the *Preface* to the third edition of *Occupied America*: "The political consciousness of North America has changed since *Occupied America* was first published in 1972. . . . Its purpose [of the third edition] is to dispel the myths that are manufactured by scholars who take refuge in patriotism" [ix]). Morales borrows concepts such as "Conquest," "occupation" or "invasion" from these scholars. He also follows the same purpose in his literature: "to dispel the myths" about Mexican Americans and their place and intervention in history. Morales' explanation of the decline of the Californios fits adequately with the goals of the Chicano movement and its theoreticians. They still constitute an important influence in his literature. A more diversified, plural approach to history has not been adopted yet: the history of the Chicanos in the Southwest has a unequivocal version: that of their confrontation and humiliation by the Anglos, their fight to win lost rights to the land and preserve cultural integrity.

However, if his historicism is in debt with the Chicano movement's scholars, something has begun to change in Morales' thought. There has been a change in his perception of American society and the role of the Mexican Americans in it. As a sample of the transition in Morales' thought, the second story-line of the book moves away from some of the movement's principles on what a Chicano should be. The novelist abandons the idea of Chicano identity as a static formula. The confrontation is still between Anglos and Mexican Americans. But the most successful character in the book do not claim a simple return to Mexican culture and traditions and a refusal to "sell out" to Anglo civilization. They become more sophisticated than that: they recover from oblivion all their Mexican background and combine it with the most positive aspects of modern

American society to become more complete individuals, proud of their historical past and conscious of their responsibility as members of today's society. Identity seems to become a negotiation for Morales.

Alejandro Morales knows that identity is "a perpetual act of self-definition" ("Heterotopia" 24). Every new generation of Chicanos has to look for a new identity, according to the circumstances that they had the chance to live. He states: "However, it is a visionary effort to ask children to live and plan their future by the ways of the viejitos when society demands that they survive and succeed in a world that is radically unlike that of their granparents, great grandparents, an in many cases their parents" (24).

While having as a reference the tradition of their elders, the younger Mexican Americans have to learn to deal with the challenges that their historical period poses. That is why Morales not only rewrites the historical experience of Chicanos but he also presents as the most attractive characters those who are flexible, who are able to adapt to new environments and times and evolve with them. Antonio Coronel and Rosario are two good examples of Chicanos who are happy to preserve tradition, in so much as tradition helps them to learn about themselves. However, they are not ready to be crushed by it. The message that Morales communicates to the reader is that history is important for the self-definition of the Chicanos as long as it is a factor of growth and not a burden to bear.

Morales' contribution to the welfare and progress of Chicanos is not only that of recording their experience and recreating it in order to spread the knowledge of a specific historical background. The purpose of the Chicano writer is also to encourage Chicanos to re-define themselves freely. He challenges us to understand that "identity is not fixed, that nothing is certain in the Southwestern heterotopia border zone" ("Heterotopia" 24).

Therefore, it could be stated that *Reto en el paraíso* is a transitional novel. Alejandro Morales is still influenced by the Chicano movement and its particular way of understanding history. However, the writer has begun to formulate an original theory about how present day Mexican Americans should face the challenges of their lives in the United States. At this point, he has found useful some ideas by contemporary thinkers. He goes from an essentialist, rigid interpretation of history (characteristic of a doctrine with fixed principles: the Chicano movement) to a very flexible conception of what the individual is or should be. The human being becomes multidimensional, not unidimensional. His personality needs to be ever-changing, dynamic. To some extent Alejandro Morales has “deconstructed” the Chicano and pictured him in his “postmodern condition.”<sup>32</sup>

## **Chapter III**

### ***THE BRICK PEOPLE: THE BUILDING OF CALIFORNIA***

#### **Introduction**

Alejandro Morales published his fourth book, *The Brick People*, in 1988. Based on his parent's life (Juana Contreras Ramírez and Delfino Morales Martínez, to whom the novel is dedicated), the story focuses mainly on the experience of two characters, Octavio and Nana, their migration from Guanajuato, Mexico to the United States and their settlement in Simons, California. Their story represents that of thousands of Mexicans migrating to its richer neighbor at the beginning of the century. It is also the story of the Simons Brick Company: from its foundation in 1906 until the late 1940s and the creation of the barrio where Morales was born. Also, by extension, it is an account of the contribution of Mexican labor to the growth of California since 1892.

#### **Mexican immigration**

Approximately one and a half million Mexicans crossed the border to the United States and established themselves in the Southwest from 1900 to 1930. It has been estimated that Mexico lost ten per cent of its population this way (G. Sánchez 18). Although some of those immigrants relocated in the mining areas of New Mexico or Arizona or in the farms of south Texas, for most of them their final destination was

California. Many chose Los Angeles as the end of their journey, a burgeoning city whose population increased from 50,000 to 1.2 million between 1890 and 1930.

Morales' mother, Juana Contreras, came to the United States in 1912, whereas his father, Delfino Morales, arrived in 1918. In *The Brick People*, Octavio and Nana, literary personas representing Morales' parents, stand out as examples of the big migration of Mexicans at the beginning of the century from states such as Chihuahua, Sonora or Jalisco. Morales' parents departed from Guanajuato, the same as so many workers that ended up in Simons. Migration for some families of the impoverished working classes was not a free choice. The picture of Octavio and his relatives roaming Mexico, depending on any job to survive and fighting not only social but natural elements, shows that it was more a matter of life or death. The profile of their journey made of them real pilgrims, suffering from serious hardships. Octavio's brother, Julio, dies on the way to California, a place that becomes the "promised land." It is precisely the rage and outrage towards an invisible power that Octavio suffers when they bury eight-year-old Julio that makes him determined to carry his family to Simons: "In those moments I hated but I did not know at whom my hatred was directed. I crawled shivering underneath the railroad car until I finally fell asleep and in my dreams I swore to Julio that all the family would make it to Simons. I knew that was what Julio wanted the most - to reach Simons" (294).<sup>33</sup>

The reasons for the migration to the United States are historical. The land policy followed by the Porfiriato, the reign of dictator Porfirio Diaz, supporting a feudal system of haciendas added to the population boom of the late nineteenth century, created a period of poverty and a labor surplus throughout Mexico. This situation became worse

due to the Mexican Revolution. The economic and political instability (unemployment and inflation grew) encouraged many *campesinos* to flee the country for personal safety or just to look for a better life. As Octavio explains in the last chapter of *The Brick People*, his family migration to Simons is a product of the Mexican Revolution. He illustrates the sociopolitical state of disruption with some historical episodes: Pancho Villa's rebellion and the particular war that General Francisco Murgía waged against the villistas, the killing of Zapata or the execution of Felipe Angeles in Chihuahua. Octavio, for example, witnesses how Murgía threatens to kill the railway workers if they do not repair a bridge in time: "I swear to you, that if I cannot pass by two in the morning, I will execute every one of you" (296). The Mexican Revolution had both an indirect and direct influence on the lives of millions of families.

What Alejandro Morales does is to describe the trajectory of the Revueltas family in their search for a better economic and social environment. The Revueltas leave Guanajuato and pass through Quiseo de Abasolo, Irapuato, Torreón and Chihuahua until they arrive in El Paso. Typically, they walk the path taken by travellers to the north first by the Spaniards and their Camino Real, and later by Mexicans, following the recently established railroad tracks. The creation of a railway system was one of the most innovative policies of the Díaz' government in an attempt to unify the country and modernize its economy. Although most of the monetary investment for the construction of the railway came from American businessmen, making Mexico more dependent on its neighbor, Mexican labor was used on both sides of the border. It gave many families a temporary relief from the financial crisis in which the whole country was involved. At



one point Octavio, determined to go to the north, helps his family dig up "tracks that the water had buried" (296).

El Paso-Ciudad Juárez was the major entry point of those on their way to Los Angeles in this period. Labor agencies located in El Paso sent Mexican citizens to work all over the United States.<sup>34</sup> Although the Revueltas attempt to cross the border as wet-backs with the help of a coyote, they soon realize the lack of serious restrictions on border crossing. They arrange their documents and enter the United States through El Paso on the same day. In spite of the procedure instituted by the immigration act passed by Congress in 1917 (a literacy test, a medical examination, a head tax, and an investigation about the likelihood of the individual to occupy a public charge) - which Alejandro Morales does not portray in the narrative -, crossing the border to the United States was fairly easy for Mexicans. Octavio's father signs up with a labor contracting office. There he discovers why so many of his compatriots made their way to this country: "There were plenty of contracts for everywhere" (299).

From El Paso, Octavio and his father, Damian, manage to arrive in Simons and begin working at the brickyard. Then, in another usual feature of Mexican migration, they save enough money to send for their family to join them. This is the end of the pilgrimage and the beginning of their identity as Mexican-Americans: "We received a second telegram indicating the time and date of arrival of the train. My papa and I went to meet them in Los Angeles. When they got off the train we all embraced and I thought of Julio. We had finally made it to Simons" (300).

Despite all the suffering and disgrace the Revueltas family suffers on their way north, their arrival brings a new beginning: the promise of a new life, a new home and a

new cultural configuration, the future of an American family with a Mexican background: “The novel portrays the Mexican as a builder and highlights the unsung contributions of the Mexican population to the economic and cultural development of California. It is a novel that offers the reader positive images and hope” (Morales, “Heterotopia” 21).

### **Mexican labor in Southern California**

The expansion of agriculture in California created a need for labor that was increasingly filled by Mexicans. Irrigation revolutionized California farming, transforming arid lands into new farms, and the state served as a sponge absorbing hand workers that found it rather profitable to live and work in the Golden State. Although wages were inferior to those of Anglo American workers, Mexicans noticed a rise in living standards: from twelve cents a day in their native land they could make 50 a day clearing land in the Southwest (G. Sánchez 19). Apart from farming and other traditional jobs as railroad/railway section-gang members, and construction day laborers, Mexicans began to find new jobs in other sectors of the job market. The beginning of the twentieth century also brought a new industrial expansion to California. The expansion of industry called for cheap labor. This demand for labor rose in a period of political curtailment of Asian and European immigration: The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the 1907-8 Gentlemen's Agreement with Japan, and finally, the Immigration Acts of 1917, 1921 and 1924 restricted the sources for inexpensive labor. This made employers look to Mexico as the main source for workers.

*The Brick People* narrates the foundation and development of the Simons Brick Company, one of the factories that employed Mexican labor from the very beginning.

The company was run almost exclusively by Mexicans from Michoacán or Guanajuato.

Morales himself gave the date of birth and death of the company:

Simons, una ladrillera en el Este de Los Angeles y también en Montebello, California, fue fundada en 1906 después del terremoto en San Francisco y existió hasta 1952-53. Para esos años el dueño, Walter B. Simons estaba de edad avanzada y nadie en su familia quería seguir con la administración del negocio; además, el ladrillo ya no se reconocía como material importante para la construcción. Después del terremoto de Long Beach, en 1933, el uso del ladrillo empezó a decaer. ("Stanford" 12)

Part of the success of the Simons factory was product of the construction boom that took place in the growing economy of the state of California. But it was the use of cheap labor from Mexico and its organization as a highly productive working group that allowed the Simons to amass their fortune. Walter Robey Simons applied the most modern industrial techniques to the making of bricks. By the 1920's, a Los Angeles photographer stated that the Simons Brick Company was the world's largest, producing over half a million bricks per day.

At the same time, Simons transplanted the semi-feudal social system supported by Porfirio Díaz in Mexico, represented by the hacienda, to his factory. He imported the dictator's vision of law and order and translated it into a patronizing relationship with the worker. In the novel, Morales describes Walter R. Simons' journey throughout Mexico in his attempt to understand the living conditions and psychology of his workers: "Walter had studied the Mexicans in an attempt to identify what made them happy and angry and

what their limits of endurance were. He wanted to know how far he could push them" (29).

Simons introduces new technology in his plant in order to make it more competitive. However, his benefits come largely from the measures taken as a result of an analytical approach over nineteenth-century Mexican society. Walter R. Simons attempts to build a utopian society. However, his models are not those of utopian socialism but Anglo-Saxon capitalism. Simons is not at the service of its inhabitants but of the company productivity. It is just an adaptation of classical capitalist doctrine to some specific circumstances: Mexican labor. It is the idea of transplanting the exploitation of the working class in England to a new American reality that marks Simons' actions:

The peasants' faces reminded Walter of his father's description of the hollow, hungry faces of enslaved British miners, factory workers young and old, men women and children denied their humanity and forced to live like beasts. Walter found similarities in the effects produced by the enclosure of the English commons and the Mexican hacienda. (35)

The Mexico that Simons discovers in his journey is paradise for the wealthy and purgatory for the peasants. The hacienda is the basic model of working organization. As opposed to the demands imposed by a free market society, the hacienda enjoyed a non-risk status: its success did not depend on the whims of the market. It had secure labor and the backing of the government. This allowed the owners to live a leisurely life and not worry about improvements in the productivity of its lands. Some of these wealthy landowners did not even live on their properties but delegated on their *capataces* the

running of their business while they traveled through the most glamorous capitals in Europe: París, London or Madrid.

The haciendas recall the plantations of the Southern states since the status of the *peones* in Mexico were very similar to that one of the African Americans in Virginia or Alabama. Not only did they depend on the benevolence of the *patrón* to get a job, but they were forced to buy their basic commodities in the *tienda de raya* of the hacienda. The *tienda de raya* was an enslaving mechanism since the administrators could charge anything they wanted for the products. That forced the workers to go in permanent debt with the *hacendados*. In some cases the workers were even born into debt because they inherited their parents' obligations or had to pay their own baptism with money borrowed from the *tienda*. Walter finds it amazing that that kind of social structure could be happening so close to his brick factory. However, in that system he sees the demise of Mexican civilization and a promising future for his own business. In an acute remark, Walter finds that "the hacienda was a metaphor for Mexico" and, also, that "what he saw of peasant life was the destiny of just about all of Mexico's population" (37).

In the best of cases, the owners of the hacienda exerted a more fair treatment of their employees. The magnate William Randolph Hearst takes Walter to an hacienda that left a deep mark on him: the Amor family hacienda, in the state of Morelos. The Amor, a family with a strongly ironic name, exerted a paternalistic approach in their relationship with their employees. Believing themselves semi-gods, with a power of life or death over their *peones*, they treated them a little bit better than other *hacendados* their own *peones*. A nun came periodically to give education to the workers' children and a priest arrived to

celebrate Mass and other Catholic rites. The Amor family even had a doctor on their staff. They also lent some lands to the *peones* for private use.

It is on this hacienda that Walter Simons discovers the key elements to be applied in his plant in California. Simons seems to be modeled on the Amor hacienda. The enslavement the workers had suffered in Mexico becomes capitalist exploitation. The company store substitutes the *tienda de raya*. Gonzalo and Rosendo play the role of *capataces*. In their hands is the responsibility of running the plant successfully (sometimes they behave as Rurales - Porfirio Diaz's strict rural police -, as when they control the employees with arms on pay day). Walter becomes the owner of the labor and destiny of his workers: "Walter was completely involved in the expansion of the yard and the town he founded in Simons. He considered the Simons project his personal toy yard and the town and people who worked and lived there his dolls who existed only for his enjoyment and waited for his bidding" (52).

Simons reflected faithfully the Mexican environment of the less cruel haciendas. A grade school educated the children (and intended to Americanize them), a hospital maintained by the patron, with a company doctor and a visiting nurse, took care of the sick, and there was even a Simons band that participated in the Rose Parade.<sup>35</sup> However, all these attractive benefits for the workers were only an attempt to keep the employees fit for their jobs and happy to increase productivity. Walter's aim was always to "inculcate a spirit of loyalty among his Mexican employees" (142) to avoid any talk of trade unions.

To Americans eyes, Simons had become a dream, the realization of the impossible. The Eastern businessmen that Walter invites to his plant for Christmas

congratulates him for his achievements: "Many in the group considered the social unit of Simons a utopian achievement. Everyone affiliated with Simons seemed happy and content. The newspaper reporters and observers from the East were amazed at how well the workers were served for their toil" (140). But from a purely Mexican perspective the utopian experiment was nothing more than a sample of the American way of doing business in the Southwest: "Simons was a showcase town, an example of the success of Walter's benevolent exploitation and control of Mexican labor" (140).

The novel does not simply describe the situation of virtual enslavement the Mexicans are submitted to, but it also portrays the reaction to the new scenario the workers find in Simons as an indication of the active attitude that Mexican American workers took in Southern California in defense of their interests. The first one to fight the system imposed by Walter R Simons and his subordinates is Malaquias, Nana's father. He refuses to live on the deceptive credit with which the store provides the inhabitants of Simons and purchases all his clothes, food and basic necessities in the neighboring towns. When the *capataces* in the plant attempt to curtail his mobility, he responds by buying a third horse. He even encourages his fellow workers to be independent and autonomous. Gonzalo Pedroza, one of the *capataces*, sees all these movements suspiciously and puts pressure on him. For example, Gonzalo gives Malaquias the less desirable posts. But "Malaquias represented an option opposed to the Walter Robey Simons philosophy of the Mexican worker, and thus he was not tolerated in Simons" (104). At the end, in a final act of liberation, he abandons Simons with his family and takes up farming. In that way Malaquias escapes the semi-feudal system of the plant and becomes a self-sufficient individual.

Octavio considers Malaquias as an example and the very moment he watches him leaving the plant, he promises that he would never allow anybody to step on him. He makes a conscious analysis of the relations of power in Simons and, when he realizes how Walter Simons had managed to have the Mexican workers trade their freedom for work and lodging, he makes vows not to submit himself to those rules: "Like Malaquias, Octavio would rather face the consequences than live enslaved by fear" (104). The bravest example of an attempt to subvert the power relationships in Simons takes place during the Depression in the 1930's, when Octavio and others leaders organize their fellow workers and hold a strike in order to improve working conditions. Under a new capitalist framework to which the Mexicans were not used, they become members of the proletarian class. Assuming a socialist ideology, Octavio joins a trade union and becomes one of its most active members in the plant:

Octavio became annoyed at the suggestion that the Mexican workers, who had been working hard all along, should work harder for no additional compensation to maintain a flame of hope for a better society in the future. He disliked the word hope. Hope, he believed, was a concept of oppression used by the dominant society to rule the mass of people. Hope represented non movement, never advancing forward, never bettering the worker's economic state. Hope was a void, a holding zone used to control. Octavio would not be controlled. He rejected hope and searched for a plan of action against Walter. (188-9)

Mexican-Americans become more politically conscious of their identity during the Depression and *The Brick People* echoes the birth of that political consciousness. One



of the first attempts to unify the efforts of all Latinos in a Civil Rights organization took place in 1939 with the first meeting of the "El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Espanola" (Congress of Spanish Speaking People) held in Los Angeles under the leadership of Luisa Moreno (in an anachronism, Morales has Octavio attending this meeting years before). Mexican Americans also started to unionize. Organizations like the Confederación de Uniones de Campesinos y Obreros Mexicanos (CUCOM), the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) became more and more influential among the Mexican population. The Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) was born in 1931 as a reorganization of a former union. CAWIU directed most of the thirty-seven major strikes called in 1933, a year of intense labor activity in the state of California. Morales refers in the novel to the El Monte berry strike, and links the wages increases achieved in this Chicano movement with the desire of the Simons workers to improve their conditions. CAWIU was involved in this strike that mobilized seven thousand men and their families.<sup>36</sup>

CAWIU is also the union that instructs the Mexicans on the measures to be taken in a strike. Three fictitious leaders from that union, a Japanese Mexican, Armando Takahashi Subia, Caroline Decker and Carlo Lanzetti (whose last name quickly recalls Vanzetti, the Italian anarchist), none of pure Mexican ancestry, help to organize the strike. However, Morales pictures these characters as unionists in search only of their own benefit. As opposed to them, the Simons Mexican leaders are honest and sincerely believe they could effect a change in the system established in the plant. They are the best example of Mexicans in the United States fighting for their rights.

Octavio, perhaps the more capable leader, is also one of the first to develop a class consciousness: "we need a workers' union to protect the workers and their jobs" (154). At the risk of losing his job, he begins a campaign against the measures taken by Walter R. Simons, not to drop productivity during the Depression. He sees him as an "enemy," living the same leisurely life as the *hacendados*:

'And Mr. Simons always on his trip,' Nana said. 'why doesn't he do something?' she added angrily. What concerns him is profit and if he concludes that it is necessary to fire workers he tells Gonzalo and William and they decide who to fire.' Octavio pushed the door and from outside he waved good-bye. (178)

In the strike, he shows up as one of the firmest defendants of the rights of workers. Against all odds, he manages to make some improvements in their lives. He raises the wages by several cents per hour, for example. In an attempt to free the Mexicans of the enslavement that the credit at the store puts on them, he tries to organize an independent store, run by the employees. However, he becomes disappointed with the results of all his efforts: the strike is a failure, partly due to the lack of solidarity of African-American workers, his idealism clashes with the greedy-for-money union representatives and the Mexican Americans are not ready for a store run by their fellow workers: they make its success impossible through an excessive buy-on-credit policy. His only benefit for having led the strike is to be "blackballed" by the Simons foremen: "The administration had warned him, black-balled him, and identified him as a union supporter and as a man not willing to cooperate" (270).

Unable to break the structure of power created by Simons and supported by his *capataces*, Octavio turns more and more to himself and his family. His goal changes into becoming independent from the brick factory since he "did not possess the power to overcome the gringo adversaries" (271). The only viable alternative is to save his income and increase gambling profits to buy some land where he can construct a house and start again not depending on Simons to survive: "Octavio gambled and won obsessively. It was one way he took revenge on the decadent, obscene, diseased world which had infected and murdered his brother Maximiliano" (214). Octavio is representative of many Mexican Americans turned into "proletarians" who arrived to the United States. As a "proletarian" he contributes to the expansion of the industry in the Southwest and, as a consequence, to the wealth of the area. He was one of many Mexican immigrants that built up the prosperity of California. Although exploited in most of the cases, they did not remain always passive. Those immigrants showed a capacity for organization and solidarity in a fight for their own rights as their participation in trade unions (CUCOM, CAWIU) and protest movements demonstrates. Alejandro Morales denounces in *The Brick People* the exploitation of the Mexican factory workers in California but he also portrays those same Mexican workers as hard-working and with a dynamic role in political organizations and the taking up of active measures. In a sense, the novel could be considered as a homage to the lives of all those dedicated Mexican immigrants (the "brick people" of the photographs of the book)<sup>37</sup> and its contribution to the history of the Southwest.

On the other hand, Octavio is at the same time a good example of an independent Mexican able to break free from the abusive conditions of a job, become self-sufficient,

start over again and make himself a place to live and grow a family in an adverse foreign society. Octavio's life is very similar to that of millions of other resourceful immigrants who came to United States and hoped finally to make their home in it. Mario T. García sees in Octavio the traditional American Dream: "He possesses not the Mexican Dream of the immigrant - the hope of return to a better life in Mexico - but the mythical American Dream of individual success and a good life for himself and his family in the United States" (195). In *The Brick People* Alejandro Morales has changed his literary tone of voice: he does not present, symbolically, the Mexican imprisoned in his world (the barrio) or being colonized by the Anglo: a loser. The portrayal of Octavio is more realistic. The character appears with his positive and negative points. He also possesses a dynamic personality able to assimilate to new situations and to build up from there (see other cases in Morales' literature, for example Rosario in *Reto en el paraíso*). He crosses over from Mexico to the United States to work in Simons. Once there he tries to grow economically and personally. When he finds obstacles to this growth, he leaves Simons and starts again. It is the story of a motivated immigrant from Mexico to the United States who does not settle for a mere job to survive but grants also due importance to freedom, dignity and independence. As a hardworking, strong-willed, charismatic individual he breaks many of the characteristics of the distorted archetype of the Mexican American, created by mainstream society. Octavio's portrayal is closer to the resourceful immigrant with the clear goal of settling successfully in a new land than to the Chicano character defending himself from the assault of the Anglo. That is the most important characteristic in *The Brick People*, which shows Morales' change of focus in his self-representative technique: Octavio and his family are not victims of history but creators of

history. With the example of Octavio and other characters in *The Brick People*, Morales does not show the Chicanos as a marginal group relegated by a historical process but as the contributors to the history of the United States. The story of the settling of the Revueltas in the new country is considered part of the Mexican American history, which is part of the history of the United States.

### **History and wonder in *The Brick People***

In *The Brick People* Alejandro Morales is aware that he is primarily dealing with what Miguel de Unamuno defined as "intrahistoria."<sup>38</sup> The writer has agreed with the term as applied to his fiction. In an interview, he said: "Oh, I agree with your analysis, *The Brick People* is intrahistory. It's popular history. It is the history that gets ignored by historians. It is the domain of novelists. Yes, my books deal a lot with intrahistory" ("Chicano Writer" 111-112).

Morales narrates the particular history of his family: their disappointments, their happiness, their arguments, their dreams. The innovation is to frame the particular, day-by-day happenings of his relatives with the most relevant events of world, American and Chicano history. In this way, the novelist shows how History (in capital letters) has a visible influence on the daily life of people and how both kinds of "history" (the history of big events and the history of a family's everyday life) are interconnected. Sometimes Morales achieves this effect in a subtle way. In other instances, he falls short of that subtlety, as, for example, when he limits himself to state, one after the other, a list of historical facts. As Antonio C. Márquez comments, in some points of the novel "Morales seems impervious to the caveat that an engaging historical fiction is not a simple enumeration of names and dates" (81):

The war in Europe was ending; Hitler and the German armies suffered defeats on all fronts. On May 8 the war ended in Europe. By late July the Japanese were brought to the brink of surrender but the Japanese Emperor would not capitulate to the United States. . . . The Pacific war came to an end on August 14, 1945. On the next day the United States began to celebrate. The news traveled slowly throughout the Pacific until finally, weeks later, on September 2 it was hoped that nowhere in the world were American boys dying. And along with the rest, the Mexican boys from Simons were coming home. (250-1)

The *Brick People* is a historical novel that covers part of the nineteenth and twentieth century from the French invasion of Mexico to the post-World War II. There has been a change in the way Alejandro Morales deals with history. In *Reto en el paraíso* the writer followed Chicano historiography closely: one of his aims was to reveal to society the history of the Southwest from a Chicano point of view. The book gave an account of how Anglos conquered the lands of defenseless Mexicans and colonized them. There was a marked line that separated culturally, economically and socially Anglos from Mexicans. Chicano history opposed Anglo history. They were mutually exclusive. The portrayal of history seemed to be filled with moral outrage against the Anglo population. The characters in the novel became symbols of their respective people in the context of an epic confrontation. Alejandro Morales offered a historical discourse intended to correct another: that of the "official" American history created by Anglo historians. As we have seen in the previous chapter, with the introduction of history in the novel Morales tried to achieve Acuña's stated purpose in *Occupied America*: "to dispel the

myths that are manufactured by [Anglo] scholars who take refuge in patriotism" (ix). In *The Brick People*, there is a different, more contemporary approach. The characters may be representatives of other Mexican Americans but not symbols of people. The story is part of Mexican American history (which at the same time is one of the layers that form part of American history).

There have been several interpretations on the use of history by Morales in *The Brick People*. Gutiérrez-Jones, for example, in *Rethinking the Borderlands* analyzes the relationship of the novelist with Foucault's philosophical concepts (80-89). The most detailed analysis of the presentation of history in *The Brick People* was developed by John Waldron in his article "Uncovering History in the 'Postmodern Condition': '(Re)Writing the Past, (Re)Righting Ourselves in Alejandro Morales' *The Brick People*." Waldron refers to the novel as an example of the contemporary (postmodernist) rejection of a totalitarian vision of history as proposed by scholars like Hayden White or Linda Hutcheon. The shift here goes from a static vision that follows the teachings of the Chicano movement on how history should be written to a portrayal by a Mexican American of the history of his own family coming and establishing in the United States. In the second case Morales' perspective is more relaxed, more realistic and more contemporary, introducing some postmodernist features like, for example, multiculturalism (the history of other racial groups).

More and more studies agree that history cannot be contemplated as a monolithic discipline in the hands of a hegemonic group. This is especially true in the United States, where people from different cultures have arrived, each one with a different historical experience and a unique way of interpreting their past, sometimes in conflict with the

traditional writing of the events. This can be interpreted as the break-up of national identity or as a way of enriching the unity of the country through the appreciation and approximation to other ways of being and living.

Historical novels by minorities have contributed in the transmission of past events to those individuals belonging to their ethnicity and have helped to reconstruct the memory of themselves. As Waldron puts it: "Writing a historical novel, the marginated voice adds another text to the many texts which make up our memory of a past event. In this way the marginated voice, slowly (re)writes its way back into history and the society from which s/he has been excluded" (105). That is the case with such works of fiction as *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* by Oscar Zeta Acosta, and Morales' *The Brick People*.

From the beginning, Morales is set to recover those layers of forgotten history that are necessary to redesign the content of the past. The emphasis now is not just to introduce Chicano history in a novel to oppose it to Anglo history but to create a story with different historical discourses. Taking as the starting point the discovery of a great number of Asian corpses buried where the Simons yard is to be located, Morales literally unearths an old a love story concerning two Chinese youngsters that ended in tragedy and violent riots (where all the Chinese found were killed). Alejandro Morales also brings to light the drama of thousands of Japanese farmers who lost their lands and were forced to migrate as a result of the racism of the American population that resulted in the Immigration Act of 1921. The writer unveils fragments of history suppressed by a discourse of those in power willing to impose a unique model for American culture and history.



Naturally, the interest of Alejandro Morales lies in the history of the Mexican Americans. *The Brick People* is introduced on its first page by a quote from *Terra Nostra* (the novel by Carlos Fuentes that had so much influence on Morales' latest work, *The Rag Doll Plagues*): "The world dissolves when someone ceases to dream, to remember, to write" (5). Alejandro Morales writes, remembers and dreams in *The Brick People*. He writes and remembers the history of the Mexican Americans. Another of the layers in the complex history of Southern California is that of the presence of the individuals from Hispanic origin. Alejandro Morales not only recreates the history of the people with Mexican roots in the USA but also shows the consequences of ignoring their past.

From the beginning, we are shown that there is a connection between the precarious working force of Simons and the land. The history of the decline of the Californios is represented by Doña Eulalia Perez de Guillen (an actual historical figure), owner of El Rincon de San Pascal, and the tragic story of her family, "based on an actual memoir dating from the period of U.S. colonization," according to Gutiérrez-Jones (86). She identifies Mexicans with the land when, after planting a tree she comments to her husband: "Juan, I am this oak. It will grow as certain as my love for you and the land. The day they chop it down I will die and I'll become an insect of the land" (9). As we will see, the prophecy comes true. The other character that represents the legitimate right of the Mexicans to the earth is Doña Bartolo. When she comes out of the room where she has signed the deed letters that grant Walter and Joseph Simons the ownership of her land, they notice how on the bottom of her dress she had two brown insects. The Simons family has some intuition of the ties of the Mexicans with the earth. Walter keeps telling to himself, when alone, that the Mexicans were the earth. But they prefer to ignore the

past. This willful ignorance of the past is best illustrated with the episode of the discovery of the Chinese bodies. The first reaction of the Mexicans that find the bodies is to stop working on that part of the brickyard. They think that what they have come across is an Indian burial ground and they respect its sacredness. The reaction of Joseph Simons and the authorities is quite the opposite:

Joseph notified the authorities of the discovery. The reply was a simple "Burn the remains," a statement made by an unidentified messenger who rode off as suddenly as he had arrived. . . . Joseph was prepared to eliminate anything from the past that might halt the successful progress of the plant . . . By the late afternoon Joseph Simons got his wish. The only physical evidence left of the dead were five mounds of ash, blown away that evening by a strong warm wind that came from the east and flew to the east. (21)

Morales uses at the end of "Chapter One" the same metaphor with which he begins the chapter. The novel starts with the sentence, "From the east where time begin, the wind blew" (7). The purpose of the Americans, like a new wind coming from the east, is to erase from the land any trace of the previous past. Time begins with their arrival. They impose their own culture without taking into account the survival of the ways and traditions of those who were there before them. Morales warns Anglos about the consequences that the willful ignorance of history may bring. Furthermore, as capitalists, Americans' only goal is to exploit the earth. They do not possess that special relationship with the land that Mexicans like Doña Eulalia (or Malaquias, always wanting to return to farming) have. They only want to extract wealth from it.

Alejandro Morales makes use of magical realism to denounce the Anglo's taking over of the land of Simons and their conscious attempt to extirpate the historical background that belongs to it. When alien individuals profane the land, insects appear and take revenge on them. The Simons pay for their refusal to accept the past with their lives. The first one to suffer from this curse is Orin Elmer, over whom crawl the same brown insects that filled the pit where the owner of El Rincon de San Pascual fell. The insects penetrate the body of Orin Elmer and ultimately cover him in a "cocoon." Continuing with the magical element, and given that modern medicine proves unable to cure him, Rosendo informs the Simons family that Orin Elmer is under the effects of an *hechizo* and suggests to bring a *curandero* home to take care of him. Again Joseph shows his disdain of Mexican American's culture and hinders the salvation of his brother: "Joseph considered curanderos quacks who thrived on the superstitions of the Mexicans" (80). Orin Elmer dies in a matter of hours.

Joseph becomes aware of his own mistakes but it is too late. Since 1929 (the year of the New York stock exchange crash), when he observes millions of insects coming from a pit near his house, he suffers from a peculiar kind of madness. When Walter encouraged his brother to sleep "Joseph answered that he did not understand what sleep meant and if he did before, he had now forgotten the concept. He would die from being wide awake forever" (185). In other words, he has woken up to reality and realized all the destruction he has caused. As if recognizing that the insects represents life more than himself, he starts to eat them. Walter finds him with his skull split by the oak tree. It may be the same one that Doña Eulalia planted.

Walter also falls victim of the ubiquitous insects in a hotel in Paris. Even Rosendo, the Mexican that had betrayed his land and his fellow countrymen, dies enigmatically in what seems to be an Indian sacred sacrifice. The reader realizes that the magical use of the insects in the book is in actuality allegorical when he/she understands that the millions of bugs that put an end to the lives of the greedy Simons brothers represent the millions of Mexicans who return to California to recover in a symbolic *reconquista* the land that was always theirs. Alejandro Morales introduces a symbol already used by Zeta Acosta in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* and compares the existence of the Mexicans in the Southwest and that of the cockroaches. The parallelism is supported by the Mexican themselves (Octavio condemns himself for making his family live like "cockroaches of the earth"). However, it is the Anglo population of Los Angeles that develops the idea. Edit Simons, Walter's wife, expressed the similarity spontaneously: "Mexicans, like cockroaches, are extremely adaptable. They will survive anything. Many might perish but there will always be survivors to propagate the race. They're just like cockroaches" (126). A doctor, an American scientist, persuades the Los Angeles city council of the fact that "the Mexicans were subhuman creatures, cockroaches equipped by nature to be unconsumed in such horrible living conditions" (258).

Another example of the introduction of magical elements is a dream of one of the daughters of a Simons worker. She describes the great San Francisco earthquake in 1906 in mythological terms. The dream presents the theme of *la reconquista* employing pre-Columbian religious symbols, especially the figure of Quetzalcoatl - the Plumed Serpent and symbol of greatness and humanity in the Pre-Columbian world:

She saw the city destroyed before her eyes. She suffered great pain which caused her to see everything clearly. Her vision penetrated the earth itself. She witnessed fire consuming the city and she heard the screams of children who burned. The earth moved, El Eco [the daughter] told us, the earth shook. And then she stared at the earth and told us of a plumed serpent so large, so great, that it could not fit in our mind but she saw it all. That serpent was an energy twisted and turned within the earth, causing great tremors. El Eco said that a part of the great serpent ran throughout the state, north and south. . . . before she slept peacefully she told us that the great serpent would twist and turn until we as a people would have the necessary children to reconstruct a homeland here in this place. (55)

Therefore, in the presentation of the different historical experiences of different ethnic groups and the response of Mexican Americans to those events, Alejandro Morales introduces some "fantastic" elements that some critics consider as inherited from "magical realism." Mario T. García, for example, defines the novel as "a combination of the exhaustive historical novels of James Michener with their casts of hundreds and the Latin American Boom Novel with its stress on magical realism" (189). Morales' magical realism would be similar to that of writers like García Márquez or Juan Rulfo. However, the techniques employed (the metaphor of insects or the plumed serpent for the Mexicans or the Chicano struggle) are, in the first place, limited and, on the other hand, just refer to historical realities: the increasing population of immigrants from Mexico in the Southwest of the United States. Therefore these elements work in the novel more as symbols than as a disruption of the faithfulness to history (or intrahistory). For example,

the death of the Simons family caused by millions of insects symbolizes the decline of the brick business that submitted its *obreros* to virtual enslavement and the final triumph of the Mexicans who arrived by thousands to California to found and settle a barrio where the plant had once been. In this sense, Morales introduction of wonderful elements may be said to be closer to the sphere of Alejo Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso* than to magical realism. Carpentier believed that *lo maravilloso* (with the meaning of "extraordinary") was ordinary in the history of Latin America: "¿Pero qué es la historia de América toda sino una crónica de lo real-maravilloso?" (5). There is a dimension of wonder in the daily life and history of Latin Americans. The fact that, due to economic necessity, millions of Mexicans are going back to work the land that belonged to their ancestors (and may well return to their hands) is a "historical-extraordinary" fact: something real and wonderful at the same time, as defined by Carpentier in his introduction to *El reino de este mundo*.<sup>39</sup> While there is a decline in power of the Anglos, the Mexicans are increasing in number in the Southwest. It is wonderful that history turns around and in a kind of poetic justice honors the people who were mistreated in the past. This combination of the real and the wonderful is expressed by means of the fantastic elements analyzed above (the cockroaches, the serpent). It is interesting to notice that the connection that one sees between Carpentier's *lo real maravilloso* and *The Brick people* is extended by Morales himself to the literature of others Mexican American writers:

Alejo Carpentier recognized the fusion of European, African, and Latin American cultural influences as a magical and marvelous dimension of Latin American daily reality. To capture in his novels the magical and the marvelous condition, he introduced the term and technique of "lo real

maravilloso.” Similarly, Chicano/a writers are attempting to describe the daily life, the alluring sense of strangeness in the southwestern heterotopian region. Here in the borderlands of heterotopia Carpentier’s vision may well apply, although “the multidimensional real” might be a more appropriate term for the phenomenon. (“Heterotopia” 26)

What is important to notice is that Morales is increasingly moving away from a rigid Chicano historiography to a more contemporary concept of history. The denunciation still exists. However, the historical approach is different. The introduction of several layers of history (the history of the Chinese or Japanese) contradicts former historical representations by Morales that opposed two totalitarian historical interpretations: that of the Anglos to that of the Chicanos. From the simple introduction of the dichotomy Chicano history/Anglo history, he goes on to narrate realistically the life of a Mexican American family settling in the United. On the other hand, techniques like the use of *lo real maravilloso* or intertextual elements indicate the increasing interest on part of the writer to explore new narrative strategies. Some of them he used in *Reto en el paraíso*. Some others he will use in his subsequent novel, *The Rag Doll Plagues*. That is an important evolution from his first, more openly “Chicano-committed” novels, *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* and *La verdad sin voz*, where the characters were the victims of a historical process not the creators, the builders of that history.

## **Conclusion**

Antonio Francisco Coronel, the protagonist of *Reto en el Paraíso*, discovered:

que el escribir memorias, historias verdaderas o ficciones es permanecer en una soledad personal, que un escritor llega a sentirse abandonado, que

se convierte en amante de la soledad. En ella va recreando los acontecimientos del pasado e imaginando una interpretación de la vida. De esa manera el artista crea una visión original y auténtica del mundo. (191)

Alejandro Morales begins in *Reto* his wish to "recreate the events of the past" in his novels: the authentic history of a barrio in Los Angeles. It is a history that without his contribution would have been lost, forgotten: "Para mí era esencial salvar una historia totalmente perdida y olvidada por los historiadores anglo-americanos; una historia que jamás fue reconocida" ("Stanford" 12). However, if the main source for the novelistic history of *Reto* is pure research, in *The Brick People* predominates memory: not the memory of ancestors, like Coronel, but that of his family arriving and settling in the barrio Simons. The main source of inspiration for the book is his own experience of the facts and the memory of the great numbers of people, mostly of the generation of his parents, that Morales interviewed to write it. Morales says: "Sus padres [de Dennis and the youth in his generation], que trabajaban en los campos, o en las ladrilleras, así como en *The Brick People*, no desarrollan una capacidad económica y política como la que se les presenta a sus hijos" ("Stanford" 9).

Although on the last page of the book one reads the classical warning that protects the author against a hypothetical legal suit (affirming that the novel is just a book of fiction and all the characters in it are fictitious), the reader identifies many historical and real figures. The text is the memory of the beginning of a new life for Morales' parents in the south of California, in Simons. However, the novel is not just the story of the life of the Revueltas family. Through the story of his family immigrating and joining the working force in the Simons Brick factory, Morales retells part of the history of the



immigration from Mexico. "*The Brick People* is a text that narrates how Mexican labor contributed to the capitalistic development of California," the novelist has written ("Heterotopia" 21). Morales makes us relive the experience of destitute Mexican farmers on their long way north and how in a new capitalist environment in the U.S. they undergo what Caramillo in his study of Santa Barbara's Mexican community calls "proletarianization."<sup>40</sup> It also shows how the immigrants learn to fight (in a movement that serves as a direct precedent for the Chicano mobilization in the 1960s).

*The Brick People* teaches how the arrival of millions of Mexicans to the Southwest of the United States was not just a new phenomenon, as the Americans seemed to try to demonstrate, but had a link with the first Mexicans that established themselves in the states of Arizona, New Mexico or Texas, who, like Doña Eulalia, "understood the earth in a special way and possessed powers of the earth" (11). Moreover, those millions of Mexicans are here to stay. At the end of the book, Octavio looks at his son Arturo and the father recognized himself in the son thirty years earlier. A tradition has been created. The Mexican-Americans are not only part of the heterogeneous history of this country ("Histories such as *The Brick People* slowly changes our perception of our past and makes us recognize our multicultural identity," says John Waldron [102]) but a socio-political force able to reconfigure it. Those cockroaches that crawl the pages of the novel are part of a prophecy, or a *hechizo* like the one which fell on the Simons family, that warns the Americans against any abuse of power. With the introduction of the metaphor of the cockroaches he seems to be giving a warning: it may come the time when those cockroaches take all those lands from where they once were expelled, in a new *reconquista*.

Alejandro Morales portrays the dramatic events in the history of the Mexican Americans but finishes with hope. Like Miguel Méndez suggests at the end of *Peregrinos de Aztlán*, tomorrow more and more Mexican Americans will be proud of their heritage:

Regresad más allá de la cruz de caminos, romped el silencio de las centurias con la agonía de vuestros gritos. . . . El destino es la historia y la historia es el camino tendido ante los pasos que han sido. ¿Quién les ha hecho creer que sois corderos y bestias para el yugo?

¡Caballeros tigres, caballeros águilas, luchad por el destino de vuestros hijos! Sabed los inmolados, que en esta región, seréis alborada y también seréis río. (184)

Although the narration follows the style of traditional realism,<sup>41</sup> the shift to English, the different approach to historical writing and the introduction of postmodernist elements<sup>42</sup> shows how Alejandro Morales is moving away from the influence of the ideas of the Chicano movement to a more innovative thought, portraying now the Mexican American experience from a more contemporary point of view: that of a middle class Mexican American Californian writer who teaches at university, whose parents came as immigrants to the United States but who sees himself as part of the multicultural mosaic of races that live in the country.

## CONCLUSION

For many years, the knowledge about Mexican Americans and their culture was distorted by ignorance and their image in literature was based on established stereotypes. The portrait of the Mexican American by writers like, for example, John Steinbeck, was that of corrupted or degraded human beings.<sup>43</sup> In the sixties and seventies, the Mexican American self-awareness grew intensely. Contradicting the official version that eliminated the Mexican presence in the Southwest by ignoring it in the media or in academia, this minority affirmed its reality and defined it in correlation and opposition to Mexico and the United States.<sup>44</sup> The Chicano Movement channeled all the restlessness of a people, anxious to appear as a singular group with peculiar characteristics in American society. The final goal of the Chicano Movement was, through the affirmation of a culture, to win certain civil and human rights denied to it. The first step leading to the creation, or unveiling, of an identity was to adopt a term to name the members of the new nation. The Mexican Americans of the sixties adopted proudly the term Chicano. The adoption of that self-denomination was a way to say, as Leo Romero stated: "America I too / live on this continent / and in this country" (1-3). However, in order to explain to themselves and to others what it was to be a Chicano and to eradicate the mangled portrait that Anglo Americans have created of the Mexican Americans through the media and the arts, Chicanos needed a group of artists and intellectuals capable of faithfully representing the Mexican American experience.

Many of the writers that began their careers in the seventies embraced the Chicano Movement and set about recreating that experience. They identified themselves with the sociopolitical struggle of the Mexican Americans in the United States and did not mind calling themselves "Chicano". Bruce-Novoa points out this connection between Chicano art and politics in his collection of interviews *Chicano Authors. Inquiry by Interview*: "That the early Chicano literary production was closely intertwined with the sociopolitical Movement is clear" (9).

When the Chicano Movement began, Alejandro Morales was still a student. Nevertheless, as other writers in his generation, he became influenced by the cultural and political proposals and claims of the Movement.<sup>45</sup> When he began writing, the young author joined them in their efforts to represent the Mexican Americans. Morales accepted the term Chicano: "I have never denied that I am a Chicano or Latino or mexicano or Mexican American or Hispanic, spick, greaser, mojado . . . I am all those names; I don't have a problem with them" ("Interview" 7).<sup>46</sup> His characters also reflect the experience of being Chicano: "The character I work with are all those words and represent all those experiences" (7).

Alejandro Morales, and other writers such as Miguel Méndez or Rolando Hinojosa, share the same self-representative technique. It is an ideological self-representation intended to make the American (both Mexican and mainstream Americans) more aware of the Chicano experience: to preserve their reality in writing (and to explain it to the bulk of society) and claim certain rights for the Chicanos. Morales' representation of the Chicanos concentrates on a geographical space (Southern California) and draws its material from two sources:

1) "Southern California, the area from Santa Barbara to Tijuana, Mexico, is a place that for the past one hundred years my ancestors helped to build," the novelist has written ("Heterotopia" 22). Apart from *La verdad sin voz*, set in Mathis, Texas, the South of California, and more specifically the Los Angeles area, is the stage where the characters of his novels evolve. As a writer, he uses his own experience as a Chicano to portray the experience of this minority: his life in the Barrio, the migration of his parents to Simons, his work as a teacher of literature in a University in the Los Angeles area. He creates a personal cosmology based on places that left a mark on him from his childhood and creates a series of intertextual elements that cover most of his novels. For example, in *Caras nuevas y vino viejo* Morales recreates the life of the barrio created with the families of the Simons workers. In *The Brick People*, he tells the history of the Simons factory. Dennis Berreyesa Coronel is also born in Simons and apparently goes to live to Mathis (setting of *La verdad sin voz*) with his grandmother Beatriz.

2) Sometimes personal experience is not enough. In order to recreate the whole experience of the Chicanos in Southern California the author needs to portray a historical background. There is a period of historical research previous to the actual writing of the story. Therefore, it could be said that the main sources of material for Morales' fiction are historical research and his own experience of Mexican American life:

I guess I always interject events or things that I've heard that are based on reality. I guess all my books in one way or another reflect that, my particular experience or somebody that I knew; so there is the interjection of autobiographical elements, of biographical elements, of history, of

community history, family history, state history, national history.

("Interview" 10)

This thesis has analyzed the importance of the concepts "social" and "cultural commitments" in Morales' novels through an ideological self-representation of Mexican American society and a reformulation of Chicano history. Especial attention has been granted to the study of the use of history by Alejandro Morales since his commitment depends to a great extent on his writing and re-writing of the history of Mexican Americans in the Southwest from a Mexican American point of view, and most of his novels present historical elements. Morales carries out a "revision" of the Chicano evolution in history that falls into what Ramón has described as ideological rewriting of the past.<sup>47</sup> However, his novelistic vision is increasingly moving from Chicano historiography to a more fragmented, disrupted and cyclical approach. He is becoming closer to what Hayden White demanded in his book *Tropics of Discourse*: "We require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption and chaos is our lot" (50). Morales' commitment to Chicano history has followed the author's personal evolution.

Morales commitment evolves from an attitude of more open criticism of social injustices towards Mexican Americans and a desire to preserve Spanish and Mexican heritage (seen both as the backbone of a Chicano identity) to portray Mexican Americans as part of American society and in a continuous process of self-definition. The role of the writer in his last novels is to resituate the Chicano in a tradition, in a culture and history so that he can succesfully live in an environment of permanent change. The thesis has

pointed out that the two main influences in Morales' literature have been: 1) the Chicano movement; 2) post-modernist artists and thinkers.

These ideas have been studied in three novels by Morales, that reflect three different experiences characteristic of the Mexican American population in the United States: *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, *Reto en el Paraíso* and *The Brick People*.

If we take into consideration the three stages into which Tomás Rivera included the evolution of Chicano literature (preservation, struggle and invention)<sup>48</sup> the conclusion is that most of Morales' novels fit into the category of "struggle" (novels asking for "el reconocimiento a la vez de sus [de los Chicanos] derechos humanos y políticos y de su derecho a preservar la herencia y cultura chicanas" [Rodríguez, "Setenta" 243]). Some passages are merely written to preserve ("recrear la historia pasada del pueblo Chicano, para preservar las tradiciones y los valores culturales que lo identifican" ["Setenta" 242]). In Alejandro Morales' novels, and most notably in his first novels, there is an element of recreation of the past in order to recover it from oblivion, and there is also a need to denounce the marginalization (and its consequences) of Mexican Americans in the United States: that was the author's commitment in the seventies. A change of approach to that commitment took place in the novels published in the eighties, beginning with *Reto en el Paraíso*, and ending with *The Rag Doll Plagues*.

Morales' fiction is in constant evolution. American society has become more and more pluralistic and mainstream culture accepts the reality of the Mexican Americans. Many Chicanos have risen in socio-economic status and some of the social and political claims of the sixties or seventies have been accomplished. As society changes, the role of the writers, the recorders of the experience of society, also have to change. In Morales'

latest creations the element of denunciation does not appear as intensely as in his first novel. His characters have traveled from the geographical, cultural and spiritual segregation of the barrio to the heart of American society, becoming influential members in it. It is in the context of American society that Alejandro Morales places Mexican Americans. If in *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, Julián and Mateo were still more Mexicans than Americans, Octavio Revueltas symbolically "becomes American" in *The Brick People* and in the second part of *The Rag Doll Plagues* Gregorio Revueltas is more American than Mexican.

As Morales states in an interview with José Antonio Gurpegui, Mexican Americans "should not completely assimilate":

JAG: The characters in your novels seem to be more and more assimilated, or at least they progressively seem to admit the Anglo culture. In later novels we don't find the "fighters" of *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* or *La verdad sin voz*. Why is this so?

AM: This is another tough question. I can't think of a response to that, what could I say? I don't know, I think you're right. That has evolved in the novels; maybe it's because it is my own personal experience. Not that I say we should completely assimilate. I don't think that we should; we should maintain language, certain traditions... But I think that my education has affected me and will affect many many people. ("Interview"

11)

The Mexican American still needs to preserve a degree of cultural integrity and care for their traditions. In this sense, Alejandro Morales has referred in several



interviews to his intention to go on writing in Spanish. However, Mexican Americans have also to incorporate their American lifestyle to their Mexican cultural heritage and learn to live in an environment maybe different to that of their ancestors, but to which they belong by birth and education. The United States is their country, and they should graciously accept it. Their success as individuals depend to a great extent on their ability to integrate in themselves both heritages and give birth to a new concept: not "Mexican but American," but "Mexican and American." The acceptance of a double culture is a personal enrichment (the same as the rejection of one of them leads to spiritual impoverishment).

Morales' personal evolution has had an influence on his literature. His latest books seem to be advancing more and more to that stage that Rivera denominates as "invention." The change from Spanish to English, the introduction of postmodernist or magical realist elements, the flexibility in the treatment of the subject of identity,<sup>49</sup> the creation of futuristic scenarios or the introduction of new, contemporary themes (for example, ecological criticism) can be used to prove this shift. A novel like *The Rag Doll Plagues*, for example, might have not been possible in the seventies at the peak of the struggle of the Chicano Movement, when the pressure on the Chicano writers was to denounce the marginalized situation of the Mexican Americans and fight for rights.<sup>50</sup> In the same way, one reads with a different perspective in the nineties his first books (Morales himself possibly reads now his books from a very different point of view).

Be it as it may, the Californian writer's fiction has preserved the same self-representative quality. The writer has found in concepts, like derridean deconstructionism, Foucault's conception of time and space, or Gloria Anzaldúa's

reflections on "the border" a new way to record reality in his literature. Contemporary historians (like Hayden White), scholars (like Brian McHale or Linda Hutcheon) and artists are supplying him with the tools to analyze and recreate the experience of the Mexican Americans. From a literary point of view, he continues to read the most innovative American and Latin American writers (the fact that the epigraph to *The Brick People* comes from Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra* is significative of Morales' new approach to historical treatment). From an intellectual point of view, he enjoys discovering new ways of interpreting reality presented by Chicano and non-Chicano fellow scholars, and continues to take up creative challenges that will lead his literature in new directions (for example, he is writing now a biographical novel about Paul Jean Goulet, a Frenchman who became famous in doing Japanese wood block prints).<sup>51</sup>

What makes of Alejandro Morales a Chicano writer is that he still represents faithfully in his literature the changing experience of the Chicanos in Southern California. His portrayal of Mexican American life and history assists Chicanos to build a cultural base with which they can face the continuous change and need for re-invention of identity of a region characterized by its border culture. Southern California is part of the *herida abierta* that the U.S.-Mexico border is:

The U.S.-Mexico border is *una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country - a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. . . . A borderland is a vague and

undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 3)

Southern California: a border, and a border region and culture for which Alejandro Morales still feels fascination. It is the source and setting of most of his literature. It may well be since, as he has written, "fantasy is reality, and reality is fantasy in Southern California" ("Heterotopia" 26). To help his fellow Mexican Americans in learning to live in a region where identity is always reformulating and individuals become perpetual border crossers through language, culture, music, dress, religion, architecture, etc is his commitment.

## **APPENDIX**

## **APPENDIX**

### **ALEJANDRO MORALES: BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Alejandro Morales is part of a group of writers that constituted the so-called Chicano Literature "boom." Many of these writers began publishing at the end of the sixties or beginning of the seventies and they are still considered by the critics as the most influential Chicano authors. Their writing is usually connected in some way with the political and social claims of the Chicano movement of that period. Some of them took a public stand on issues affecting Mexican Americans. Apart from Tomás Rivera (who died in 1984), most of these writers<sup>52</sup> are still alive and working. Alejandro Morales is probably the best known Californian Chicano writer of a group that also includes Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Miguel Méndez, Ron Arias and Rudolfo Anaya.

Morales was born on the 14th of October, 1944 in Montebello, California. Montebello is a barrio in Los Angeles, within the Mexican American area of the city, East Los Angeles (or Eastlos, as some Chicanos refer to it). East Los Angeles also comprehends other barrios, such as Boyle Heights or Maravilla. This section of Los Angeles has been the traditional destination of migrant Mexicans arriving in the city. Mexicans, pushed by the socio-economic conditions established to a great extent by the Anglo population, created a semi-independent urban space where they could survive in a familiar atmosphere. The experience of living in the barrio left a deep imprint in Morales'

memory and the portrayal of this microcosm would become a recurrent theme in his fiction.

Alejandro Morales spent most of his early youth in East Los Angeles. In 1963, he graduated from Montebello High School. From 1963 to 1965, he attended East Los Angeles College. As an adolescent, Morales belonged to the "palomillas" or "gangas" characteristic of the disillusioned Mexican American youngsters in the barrios of big cities. Out of his desire to help the Chicano community and as a means to avoid the obscure future of many of his friends, already involved in drugs and marginal activities, the future writer continued his academic education. In 1965 he began working towards a B.A. in Spanish at California State University at Los Angeles. He graduated in 1967.

At the university Alejandro Morales came in contact with the Chicano movement of the sixties and found in it a way to focus his disposition to fight for an improvement in the socioeconomic conditions of Mexican-Americans and the recognition by the rest of society of the cultural peculiarities of the Chicano population. He continued his commitment to the Chicano movement at Rutgers University, an institution he attended as a graduate student after he had spent a year as a teacher of Spanish at Claremont High School in Claremont, California. Morales worked as a Teaching Assistant while studying for his M.A. (completed in 1971) and received a fellowship for the completion of his Ph.D. in Latin American Literature in 1975. One of the goals of his Ph.D. dissertation was to reaffirm the existence of a Mexican-American identity through the creation of the first history of Mexican American literature. After completing his Ph.D., the writer began his academic career at the University of California-Irvine in 1974. He is now Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the same University.

In addition to his critical work, Alejandro Morales has written five novels and he is currently working on another. Two of his short stories, "Cara de Caballo" and "The Curing Woman" were included in an anthology of short fiction by Hispanic writers in the U.S., published by Arte Público Press. In most of his literary production, Morales shows an interest in contributing to a better understanding of Mexican American history, eliminating historical inaccuracies created by misinterpretation (such as the extended idea that portrays the founding of the main cities of California by just pure race Spaniards), and giving Chicano history a status that helps the Mexican Americans in the difficult task of consolidating a cultural identity.

Morales' first three novels are in some respects linked among themselves, forming a trilogy. The first two were written in Spanish and published in Mexico. *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* (1975, the first Chicano novel published in Mexico and translated in a polemic version - since it was published with a different structure - as *Old Faces and New Wine* in 1981), records the problematic world of a Mexican American barrio through the experience of two teenagers, Mateo and Julián, living in the '50s and '60s. The dedication "a mi barrio, que estará conmigo siempre," indicates Morales' celebration and love for the place that forged his character and the people he grew up with. At the same time, the book adopts a pessimistic tone when none of the characters (not even the promising protagonist, Mateo) can escape the fate of life in the barrio.

*La Verdad sin voz* (1979), translated as *Death of an Anglo* in 1988, deals mainly with the difficulties of a medical doctor, Logan, of establishing and running a medical clinic in the Mexican American section of Mathis, Texas. The humane idealism of the doctor meets the strong racist opposition of the community, and the book ends with the

murder of Logan. *La Verdad sin voz* also contains two other story lines: the life and activities of the "Señor Presidente" and of the U.S. government, and the difficulties experienced by "Profesor Morenito," a Mexican American professor attempting to get tenure at a university in Texas. This last story-line seems to be autobiographical to some extent and denounces racism in the United States academic world.

In 1983, Alejandro Morales published *Reto en el Paraíso*, his longest novel to date and the first to be published in the United States. The book follows historical events closely to give an account of what happened to a land grant<sup>53</sup> from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present. Although the book is dense and many characters run through its pages, it focuses on the declining history of the Coronel-Berreyesa family, originally "Californios," owners of the Santa Ana ranch, and the rise of the Irish immigrant Lifford family, beginning when James Lifford becomes rich in the gold rush of 1849. *Reto en el Paraíso* is a truly bilingual novel since it is written part in Spanish and part in English.

*The Brick People* (1988) is the first novel by Morales written entirely in English. In this work Alejandro Morales also portrays the history of two families to examine the establishment and development of the Simons Brick Factory and its influence on the life of thousands of Mexican immigrants to Los Angeles. The "Simons Brick Factory" was real. It was a company founded in 1906 that existed until 1952-3. It was located very close to where Alejandro Morales spent his childhood and youth. The portrait of the family of Mexican Americans in the novel is based on Morales' own family.

Morales' latest novel, *The Rag Doll Plagues*, was published in 1991. This text follows another historical outline. In this case, the action takes place, in three different



episodes, in the past, present and future. A doctor faces a battle with a plague in colonial Mexico, present day southern California and, finally, in an imagined country, LAMEX (consisting of Mexico plus California).

Many of the writings by Alejandro Morales have a historical background. His novels are the product of mixing history with fiction and he usually researches historical documentation as part of his writing process. This also applies to his short stories. "Cara de Caballo" portrays Arcadia Bandini's marriage to Abel Stearns, two nineteenth century Californios. "The Curing Woman" traces the life-story of Concepción Martínez from Spain to Simons, California. Alejandro Morales may be one of the Mexican-American writers who makes the most detailed use of history in his narratives.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, he reflects in his novels the conflicts and challenges that Mexican Americans have been facing more recently, from the sixties to the nineties. Therefore, his fiction documents the life of this minority from a historical and a contemporary point of view. This portrayal of Mexican Americans is more than an evasive artistic endeavour. All Morales' narrative efforts are charged with a social and cultural commitment towards the people he knew, his barrio and Mexican Americans in general.

## **NOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> For many years there has been a debate about the diverse adjectives that should be attributed to the population of people with a Mexican origin living in the United States. “Chicano,” “Mexican,” “Hispanic,” “Mexican American,” are some of the names given to the members of this minority (not to mention some more despicable ones like “spic” or “mojado”). Some authors have pointed out the difficulty to choose among these terms (see for example George J. Sánchez in his Introduction to *Becoming Mexican American. Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*). Others do not even refer to this minority as an isolated group but prefer to include them in a larger group, that of “latinos” or of people of “Spanish origin” (Carey McWilliams’ groundbreaking text was called *North from Mexico. The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States*). It seems to be a hard task to find a term able to accurately define (and at the same time please all the members of) such a heterogeneous group of people. This thesis works with the (apparently) most widely accepted terms, “Chicano” and “Mexican American,” and uses them indistinctively to designate Mexican-origin people in the U.S, their culture and art. The word “Mexican” refers to immigrants from Mexico born in that country. One is aware of the subtle differences between “Chicano” and “Mexican American.” The term “Chicano,” for example, has especial social and political connotations, associated with the sixties and the fight for civil rights, that the more neutral “Mexican American” lacks (like analogous hyphenated words - “African American,” “Native American,” and so on- created in the eighties in an effort to come up with purely denotative expressions). In consequence, a distinction will be used for methodological reasons in the sections dedicated to the criticism of Alejandro Morales’ novels: the word “Chicano” will be more recurrently employed in the first part of the

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thesis to indicate the important influence of the ideas of the Chicano movement on Alejandro Morales' first novels (*Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, *La verdad sin voz*). "Mexican American" will be more frequently used in the second half of the thesis to underline Morales' increasing view of the Mexican Americans as part of the United States society (on equal terms with such minorities as, for example, "Asian Americans"). With that change from "Chicano" to "Mexican American" the thesis intends to mark the evolution in Morales' literature and ideas: from a more militant and ethnically committed stand to a more integrative view of the Mexican American as part of present-day America.

<sup>2</sup> In the prologue to *The Road to Tamanzunchale*, by Ron Arias, Tomás Rivera wrote: "I think it is imperative that those Chicanos who need it, immerse themselves in the profound and satisfying of finding their identity" (9).

<sup>3</sup> As Luis Leal says: "En su narrativa, Alejandro Morales con gran pericia ha sabido enmendar desde una perspectiva chicana, la historia de California" (31).

<sup>4</sup> Rodolfo Acuña uses the word in his history of the Chicanos. He also explains there the term *pochó* as "used by Mexicans, applied to U.S.-born Mexicans who speak no Spanish or speak it poorly. In a broader sense, a *pochó* is neither Mexican nor American" (320).

<sup>5</sup> César Chávez became a national hero among Chicanos in the sixties. Born in Yuma, Arizona, he spent his childhood as a migrant worker. He mobilized thousands of farm workers in the San Joaquín Valley and through strikes and boycotts managed to raise their living standards. José Angel Gutiérrez was a founder of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) and a leader in the student movement. He became famous when he successfully campaigned to gain political power for Chicanos in his hometown

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Crystal City. Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales was the most dynamic Chicano leader in Colorado during the sixties. Based in Denver, he entered young the world of politics and founded the Crusade for Justice, an organization intended to protect and defend the rights of his people. He called the First Annual Chicano Youth Conference and helped to establish *La Raza Unida* party in Colorado. He also wrote one of the most famous poem associated to the movement: *I Am Joaquín*.

<sup>6</sup> Ramón Saldívar considers this attitude as characteristic of most Chicano fiction: "Chicano narratives, individually as texts and together as a genre, confronts and circumscribe the limiting ideologies imposed upon them (and sometimes created from within Mexican American culture itself) and . . . have in complex ways determined the horizons within which their history has emerged" (*Narrative* 6).

<sup>7</sup> See Tomás Almaguer. "Toward the Study of Chicano Colonialism;" Mario Barrera, Carlos Muñiz and Charles Ornelas. "The Barrio as an Internal Colony;" and Rodolfo Acuña. *Occupied America*.

<sup>8</sup> See Americo Paredes. "The Folk Base of Chicano Literature."

<sup>9</sup> In a series of interviews with Chicano writers conducted by Salvador Rodríguez del Pino during the Spring of 1977 (*Encuentro*), Tomás Rivera, Miguel Méndez, Aristeo Brito, Alejandro Morales and others agreed that the subject matter "búsqueda de identidad" dominated over others in the literature written by this minority (Rodríguez, "Setenta" 242). In his Ph. D. dissertation Morales states as one of the goals of his study, to establish "the approximate date of when the Mexicans began to identify or feel themselves not as Mexicans nor Americans but as a different group living in the United States" ("Visión" II).

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<sup>10</sup> In this sense, some critics and scholars have related Chicano literature to the narratives and poetic works of the colonized or oppressed people of countries fighting for emancipations. "It allows us justifiably to think of Chicano narrative as a 'resistance literature' and, thus a coparticipant in the broader struggles of national liberation and resistance movements in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East" (Saldívar, *Narrative* 24).

<sup>11</sup> See Ramón Saldívar. *Chicano. The Dialectics of Difference*.

<sup>12</sup> "Heterotopia: a disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the heteroclite... in such a state, things are laid, placed, arranged in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them" (Foucault xviii).

<sup>13</sup> According to Morales:

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, now knowing who they are, where they come from, nor where they are going. They fail to understand that identity is not fixed, that nothing is certain in the Southwestern heterotopia border zone. ("Heterotopia" 24)

<sup>14</sup> It is representative of this way of thinking, Morales' opinion about Chicano literature: "I consider it to be part of American literature. . . . It is a part of American literature the same way as Irish American literature, German American literature, Italian American literature, Afro-American literature are different expressions of it. All these voices contribute to the American literary mosaic" ("Interview" 5).

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<sup>15</sup> Given that for many Chicanos the territories of the Southwest of the United States were won in a "Conquest," the concept that some day they would "reconquer" what John Chávez called "the lost land" (in his book *The Lost Land: The Chicano Image of the Southwest*) was created. It is an idea that has inspired some authors (see for example Gloria Anzaldúa's verses:

This land was Mexican once,  
Was Indian always  
And is.  
And will be again. (55-58)

Alejandro Morales re-elaborates the idea from a symbolic and poetic point of view.

<sup>16</sup> He had recently graduated from Rutgers University with a Ph. D., and this would be the first step of his writing career. After looking some time for a publisher within the United States, he took his new work to a publishing company in Mexico, Joaquín Mortiz. Mortiz read the text and called Morales to sign the contracts that made of him the first contemporary Chicano writer to publish in Mexico. Alejandro Morales referred to this fact in a declaration before the body of the novel: "espero que pronto llegue el día en que no me vea obligado a salir de mi propio país para publicar una novela escrita en español" (7). However, Morales' next work, *La verdad sin voz*, also appeared in Mexico, published by the same company, and it would not be until his third novel, *Reto en el Paraíso*, that Morales' desires would be fulfilled.

<sup>17</sup> Mario Suárez writes in the late 1940s the story "El Hoyo", about life in a Tucson barrio. More contemporary is Richard Vásquez's *Chicano* (1970), the story of a family of Mexicans that come to live in the barrio of East Los Angeles. Sandra Cisneros

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portrays the experience of a young Chicana in a barrio in Chicago in *The House of Mango Street* (1984). Many other writers have treated this subject, including John Rechy ("El Paso del Norte"), Ernesto Galarza (*Barrio Boy*) or poets like Alberto Urista "Alurista" ("Nuestro barrio").

<sup>18</sup> All the quotes from *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* in this chapter have been taken from the original edition of the novel (Mexico: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1975).

<sup>19</sup> Celia S. Heller, in her book *Mexican-American Youth: Forgotten Youth at the Crossroads*, makes the following remarks about this peculiarity of the Chicano "palomilla:" "The conditions that have been attested as conducive to gang formation - such as sharp cultural differences, distance between youth and parents, living in the slums- are operating in the case of Mexican Americans, and some of them to a greater degree than among other lower class groups" (62).

Joseph Spielberg also discusses the "palomilla" in similar terms:

Only in the palomilla could a young man display the full personality of an adult male, untrammelled by the inhibitions of family authority and proscriptions; nor by the equalizing tendencies of the dominant anglo society's authority and institutions. In this limbo the palomilla represented one of the few viable social units possible; a microscopic version of the larger, essentially hostile and impersonal world, but one wherein a man could make a place for himself among and even above his fellows. (49)

<sup>20</sup> Morales has recorded some of the negative consequences of such an experimental measure:



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Perhaps if I had written the text in English readers would have received it more enthusiastically. Although it is one of my more engaging novels, critics have ignored it. . . . The third concern is economic. Writing a bilingual novel can mean a loss of readers, those people who do not read one or the other language. This will affect the sales of the novel. ("Heterotopia" 20)

<sup>21</sup> See *Reto en el paraíso* (Ypsilanti, MI: Bilingual Press, 1983) for all the quotes from the novel.

<sup>22</sup> In the Mexican American war (1846-1848) the United States annexed the whole Southwest (half of the extension of the former Mexico) to the Federal Government. The Mexican troops commanded by general Santa Ana were defeated by the U.S. army, whose soldiers occupied Mexico City at the end of the war. The peace was signed in Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848. The treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo gave Mexico \$15 million in exchange for the loss of land (that included the present-day states of California, New Mexico, Nevada, and parts of Colorado, Arizona and Utah). Mexico accepted the Río Grande as the Texas frontier. According to the treaty, Mexicans living in the Southwest could go back to Mexico or stay in the new nation. In the latter case, they would be considered American citizens and their rights, land titles and religion would be protected.

<sup>23</sup> Leonard Pitt, author of *The Decline of the Californios*, gives a historical background to Rafaela's transformation: the transfer of power from one ethnic group to another: "If in the olden days the dominant Mexican culture had transformed some Yankees into 'Mexicanized gringos,' now the new culture created a class of 'gringoized Mexicans.' This did not, however represent a true blending of two cultures but rather a

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triumph of the most aggressive and a defeat of the most recessive cultural characteristics" (269).

<sup>24</sup> This is a task that real Californios saw as a necessity. Some of them, after the first thrust of Anglo settlement had taken place, felt the need to preserve their history: "Not to romanticize but to debunk Yankee myths and lies became the task of the moment. Mariano Vallejo . . . started writing a multivolume history 'a true history of the country' - to tell the Americans that the early Californians 'were not indigents or a band of beasts,' but an 'illustrious' race of people" (Pitt 280).

<sup>25</sup> Dennis Berreyesa Coronel expresses very well in the *Reto* how Californios and their descendants are "ninguneados," made into a *no-one* (or "un don nadie") by people from the hegemonic culture: "me doy cuenta de que soy un nada. Me desprecia la gente que trabaja y que sabe menos que yo, esa gente me considera un ninguno" (48). The marginalization of Californios involves ignoring any value or merit that the individuals from this social group, their accomplishments or their culture may have.

<sup>26</sup> Martín-Rodríguez sees in Dennis' failed relationship with Rosario an "edipical projection" that points the connections mother/virgen/whore ("Culpa" 97). He refers to Dennis' own words: "I refused because I thought she was perfect, my virgin. ¿Mi virgen? ¡Mi virgen es una puta! Abuelita, mi amor me ha traicionado. Abuelita, ¡mi virgen es una puta" (334).

<sup>27</sup> In his interview with José Monleón, Alejandro Morales said:

Se me viene a la mente la imagen -que estoy usando en mi nueva novela- de la 'máquina del deseo:' un hombre, en este siglo, desnudo en la alfombra de su apartamento, con la boca abierta y lo único que quiere es

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que le den. Ese hombre es una máquina de deseos, pero no tiene miembros ya. Quizás, siguiendo esta imagen de la separación de las partes del cuerpo, termine esta novela con este hombre con una enorme boca abierta que hay que satisfacer. Es la enajenación máxima del ser humano. ("Entrevista" 16)

<sup>28</sup> There is another occasion when Dennis aspires to become a entity without consciousness: "I will someday be a butterfly or a hummingbird. I'm sure of it now. If Kafka did it I can too" (325). As George Mariscal recalls, Gregor Samsa "was transformed not into a butterfly or a hummingbird but into a cockroach" (81). Dennis almost ends up accomplishing his dream of metamorphosis.

<sup>29</sup> The last name "Revueltas" is intertextual and ever-present in the novels of Morales. It shows in *The Brick People* (Octavio Revueltas, for example), *Reto en el Paraíso* (Rosario Revueltas) and *The Rag Doll Plagues* (Gregorio Revueltas). It comes from the Mexican writer and political activist José Revueltas (1914-1976), one of the originators of the new Mexican novel. The importance of the Revueltas family in the cultural development of the twentieth century Mexico is extremely important. The recurrent use of the "Revueltas" last name in Morales' novels is one of the ways with which the Mexican American writer pays homage to and shows his admiration for the Mexican author. The epigraph at the beginning of *La Verdad sin Voz* is a quote from one of Revueltas' books, *El luto humano*. José Revueltas is also one of the "eruditos y artistas" Alejandro Morales thanks for his "excellent works" in the section "Reconocimientos" of *Reto en el Paraíso*.

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<sup>30</sup> Nat Martínez or Pato is also one of Michael Logan's friends in *La verdad sin voz*.

<sup>31</sup> Raymund Paredes, in his Ph.D. dissertation, concludes:

A fundamental distrust of the Mexican racial characteristics has been the most compelling factor in shaping American literary views of the Mexican. As a *mestizo*, the Mexican was thought to be heir to the twin savagery of the Spaniard and the American aborigines, and as a *mestizo*, he was a new racial combination and breed, unsettled and susceptible to fits of eccentric behavior. These two qualities - simultaneous inclinations to violence and unpredictable, eccentric behaviour - are common denominations of American literary depictions of Mexican character from the earliest days to the present. (327-8)

<sup>32</sup> Rosaura Sánchez researched into the impact of postmodernism on Chicano literature and found that *Reto en el paraíso* was one of the first Chicano novels where postmodernist elements were introduced "at the level of subjectivity." Considering anti-essentialism as one of the features of the postmodernistic credo (the resistance of postmodernism to accept "essences" such as Anglo or Chicano as truths), she sees Dennis as a character: "unwilling to accept any ethnic essentialist characterization of himself . . . he despises the word Chicano, but he is not free of humanist discourses or a priori illusions, since he sees himself as an intellectual able to go beyond ethnic surfaces to the real essence, the individual" (9). From this critic's point of view, Dennis ends up with a modernist/postmodernist contradiction:

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schizoid and asocial, he is unable to communicate with anyone, preferring the company of a text, the narrative left by his great-granduncle, the Californio Antonio Francisco Coronel. When social mobility and professional status prove to be failed desires, he finds refuge in what is a pastiche of utopia, a living room filled with potted plants, in which he reenacts the forest primeval of pastoral California, the lost paradise. In a society marked by commodification, wherein desires are ruled by sex and the consumption of consumer goods, Dennis creates a new metaphysics, textualized history, which he devours onanistically while lying naked under the potted foliage. (9)

According to the author, the novel is characterized thus by a mixture of modernist and postmodernist elements,.

<sup>33</sup> The page numbers included in all the quotes from *The Brick People* correspond to the first edition of the novel (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> George Sánchez acknowledges the importance of labor agencies for Mexican immigrants at the beginning of the century:

The importance of these labor agencies in distributing Mexican labor in the United States is confirmed by the fact that in 1910 some 43,548 alien Mexicans were shipped from El Paso alone to points throughout the Southwest and Midwest. This compares with a total Mexican-born population of 221,915 in the United States, according to the 1910 census - little more than five times the number shipped in one year! (52)

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<sup>35</sup> "Simons even had a band that marched in the Rose Parade and won first prize in 1925" (Morales, "Heterotopia" 21).

<sup>36</sup> More information about labor organizations and Chicanos in the thirties can be found in Caramillo, Albert. *Chicanos in California. A History of Mexican Americans in California*.

<sup>37</sup> The novel includes two photographs of the Simons factory at the beginning of the century: one is a panoramic view of the brick factory, with all its buildings, such as it really was when it was open. The other one portrays some of the workers of Simons. Both photographs are referred to in the body of the text. Talking about the second one, Milagros criticizes the exploitation of the Mexicans in the brickyard: "It is a photograph filled with repression. The men are stiff, tense, as if they were dead, all with hats on. The serious faces are faces of fear or hate. Very few of the men are smiling. It is a photograph of sad prisoners, of tired slaves. Of men angered for being where they are at" (119). Morales also referred to this one in his address at Stanford: "Ustedes se dan cuenta de que en la portada del texto está la foto de mi papá, el señor Delfino Morales. En el texto se encuentra el nombre de Nana, que es mi mamá; también el señor Revueltas, que está retratado con mi padre" (12).

<sup>38</sup> In *En torno al casticismo* Miguel de Unamuno distinguishes between history ("historia") and what he calls "intrahistoria" or "tradición eterna de los pueblos." "Intrahistoria" refers to the real, daily, sometimes monotonous, life of people, with its customs and traditions, as opposed to the big historical events portrayed in books or told in newspapers. For Unamuno, the foundations of history are to be found in this eternal tradition:

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Los periódicos nada dicen de la vida silenciosa de los millones de hombres sin historia que a todas horas del día y en todos los países del globo se levantan a una orden del sol y van a sus campos a proseguir la oscura y silenciosa labor cotidiana y eterna, esa labor que como la de las madréporas y suboceánicas echa las bases sobre que se alzan los islotes de la historia. (110)

<sup>39</sup> *Lo real maravilloso* is, for Carpentier, a basic concept to explain the history of Latin America:

Lo real maravilloso se encuentra a cada paso en las vidas de hombres que inscribieron fechas en la historia del Continente y dejaron apellidos aún llevados: desde los buscadores de la Fuente de la Eterna Juventud, de la áurea ciudad de Manoa, hasta ciertos rebeldes de la primera hora o ciertos héroes modernos de nuestras guerras de independencia de tan mitológica traza como la coronela Juana de Azurduy. (4)

<sup>40</sup> See Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930*.

<sup>41</sup> "The Brick People had to be told in a more traditional style of storytelling. I deal with a biography and generational family experience. I wanted to tell the particular history of my mom and dad. I wanted to be very clear; I wanted to be easier to understand, easier to follow" (Morales, "Heterotopia" 12).

<sup>42</sup> Martín-Rodríguez has postulated the influence of the ideas of authors such as Brian McHale (*Postmodernist Fiction*) on Alejandro Morales in the 1990s. Referring to the use of postmodernist techniques on *The Brick People*, he says:

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As one example of Morales' playful intertextual dialogue with Latin American authors see *Brick People* (175), where the protagonist plays cards with Pierre Menard (a title character from a story by Borges) and Federico Robles (a character in *La región más transparente* by Carlos Fuentes), among others. This episode is also a wink to McHale, who calls this borrowing of characters "transworld identity," and to Fuentes, once again, because he had used a similar technique in *Terra Nostra*. ("Global" 96)

<sup>43</sup> Manuel de Jesús Hernández-Gutiérrez has recorded the basic stereotypes created by mainstream America writers:

En su inicio, los narradores anglosajones de la postconquista, cuyas obras publican y distribuyen las casas editoriales de Nueva York y de Filadelfia, reducen al mexicanoestadounidense a un mestizo cruel, matón, un conquistado acobardado, inferior, un ser lleno de odio, el víbora, el grasoso, un perro medio indio. En las últimas editoriales, los narradores anglosajones partidarios del romanticismo decimonónico moderan un poco el discurso normativo pero no dejan de presentarle al lector un ser estereotipado: el grasoso angelical, el aristócrata peninsular, la bella castellana de ojos azules, un ser apasionado pero violento, la beata inflexible y arrogante, el hombre natural, un bárbaro. . . . Sólo con la aparición de los narradores liberales, aunque éstos heredan el discurso normativo, se humaniza un poco la imagen del mexicanoestadounidense, pero todavía persiste la inclinación a esterotipar. Tenemos ahora al



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mestizo del espíritu indomable, un ser exótico y extraño pero todavía violento - aunque algo paciente -, en fin, un ser de determinación pero primitivo, el marginado. (29-30)

It is also interesting to notice some Mexican Americans' reactions to these Anglo Americans archetypes:

I don't know if he [Steinbeck] was talking about early California or what, but to me he was talking about raza and really putting them down. These were animals that used to screw in the mud, and forever drinking and fighting. To me no eran raza, yet they were. Los conocí, I knew what he was talking about, but I didn't like the way he was writing about them. (Montoya 49)

<sup>44</sup> Ramón Saldivar explains the achievement of the Mexican American identity in dialectical terms. The *differance* in literature is what results from the the new Mexican American self-definition:

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 - neither Mexican, nor American, nor yet a naive Mexican American, but something else. This something else is the *differance* of contemporary Chicano literature, which allows it to retain its special relation to both its Mexican and American contexts, while also letting it be marked by its relation to its own still unconditioned future. ("Theory" 27)

<sup>45</sup> Salvador Rodríguez del Pino remembers the political consciousness of the young Morales: "La dirección político-social del movimiento [chicano] abrió nuevas

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vistas para el joven Morales. . . . Morales participó en los 'walkouts' y 'sit-ins', muy populares en los sesenta como forma de protesta en los planeles educativos" ("Cinco" 68).

<sup>46</sup> It is interesting to note how Alejandro Morales mocks, in *Reto en el Paraíso*, the attitude of José Antonio Villarreal, author of *Pocho*, towards the Chicano Movement and the word Chicano. In an attempt to denounce the contradiction into which Villarreal falls by rejecting the term, admitting at the same time that he writes about "his people" (and also pointing out his intentional omission of the benefits of being included in Chicano literature manuals), Morales effects an ironical rewriting of the interview that Bruce-Novoa conducted with José Antonio Villarreal:

The term Chicano, I cannot grasp its meaning. I am truly uncomfortable. It restricts me from attaining the universal aesthetic level I seek. But I guess I'm not really disturbed by being classified as a Chicano writer. I guess you wouldn't be here interviewing me if it wasn't for that word Chicano. But I do write about my pueblo. I share an experience with the Chicano people and I try like hell to recreate it. (322)

See Villarreal's words in his interview with Bruce Novoa:

Yet, although I do not call myself a Chicano writer and I do not think of myself as one, mainly because the name alone implicitly brings out restrictions and inhibitions detrimental to my achieving the aesthetic level I seek, I am not disturbed by being classified as such. This is because I write of my pueblo [people], I share an experience with Chicano writers, and I make every effort to re-create it. (42)

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<sup>47</sup> Because of their "revision" of history, Luis Leal considers Alejandro Morales' historical novels to be part of the New Historical Novel: "son representativas de la llamada 'nueva novela histórica,' que se caracteriza no por producir los hechos históricos de acuerdo como ocurrieron, sino por su función revisionista" (31). For a study of the New Historical Novel in Central and South America see Menton, Seymour. *Latin America's New Historical Novel*.

<sup>48</sup> Idea presented by Tomás Rivera in "La novela chicana: forma en busca de vida," a lecture offered in the class "The Chicano Novel" (Santa Barbara, 31 May 1977). Rodríguez del Pino discusses it in his article "La novela chicana de los setenta comentada por sus escritores y críticos" (242-3).

<sup>49</sup> In Morales' words:

To certain people it's an important issue because the so-called dominant culture has made all the efforts to break down others' identity. To me the whole question of identity could be a trap. We can spend the rest of our lives trying to define and answer the question Who are we? and go nowhere; and find at the very end that we are still asking the same question. It could be a dangerous question to be caught up in and hung up, bound by identity. ("Interview" 8)

<sup>50</sup> Martín-Rodríguez sees in this novel a change in Morales' attitude towards literature and society: "I would like to explore the possibility of the language [from Spanish to English, in the novel] switch being related to a different perception of Chicano/a literature and society on the part of Morales, a perception that better reflects the realities of the postnationalistic 1990s" ("Global" 88). A few pages later, the critic

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continues: "*Plague* is one of several recent Chicano/a novels whose focus has shifted from epistemology (what the truth is about the Chicano/a experience, how history can be rewritten to account for the suppressed Chicano/a point of view, etc) to ontology (how to create a world or world)" (91).

<sup>51</sup> The writer has discussed the project in an unpublished interview:

Mi proyecto es escribir una novela biográfica de Paul Jean Goullet. De nuevo, ésta es una novela que trata fronteras, fronteras culturales, un francés en Japón. He hecho bastante investigación. Fui a Japón, tuve uno de los mejores viajes de investigación que pudiera haber tenido ya que me ayudaron varios profesores japoneses. Hice muchas entrevistas con personas que conocieron a Jean Goullet. Fui a la casa donde vivió, a sus estudios... Y quiero escribir una novela de este señor porque me ha fascinado. ("Barrio" 7)

<sup>52</sup> The generation of writers of the 1960s and 1970s, a group of men of letters self-conscious about their ethnicity and the oppressed status of their people, included poets like Tino Villanueva, Alurista or Ricardo Sánchez. Critics have considered the poem *I am Joaquin* (1968), by Rodolfo "Corky" González, as one of the first-published poems linked to the Chicano movement. The Chicano novelists had a greater impact. The most widely read may be Rudolfo Anaya. His book, *Bless me, Ultima*, became a best-selling novel. Other notable novels published during the explosion of the Chicano movement were "... y no se lo tragó la tierra," by Tomás Rivera, *Peregrinos de Aztlán*, by Miguel Méndez and the books by Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and *The Revolt of the Cockroach people*. This explosion of creative writing has been called

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"Chicano Renaissance" by some intellectuals. See, for example Chapter IV ("Mid-Century and the Chicano Renaissance") of Philip D. Ortego's dissertation. For an introduction to the writers belonging to this "generation" see Charles Tatum, *Chicano literature*. For more information about Chicano fiction of the sixties and seventies see Salvador Rodríguez del Pino's *La novela chicana escrita en español: Cinco autores comprometidos*, Hernández-Gutiérrez's *El Colonialismo interno en la narrativa chicana: El Barrio, el Anti-Barrio y el Exterior* and Ramón Saldívar's *Chicano Narrative. The Dialectics of Difference*. Juan Bruce-Novoa published a book of interviews of Chicano writers called *Chicano Authors, Inquiry by Interview*.

<sup>53</sup> Ramón A. Gutiérrez, in his book *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away*, explains the customary granting of lands to colonists by the Spanish crown:

So that the 'land becomes their mother and as sons they love, honor, and defend her,' the crown ceded *mercedes*, grants of land, to the colonists. *Mercedes* usually encompassed terrain of various sorts: a well-watered plot for crops and household gardening, wooded areas for building posts and firewood, and meadows for livestock grazing. Seventeenth-century *mercedes* were primarily given to individuals, but as time passed (particularly during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) grants to communities and groups of landless and land-poor households became more common. (105-106)

In many occasions the Courts constituted by the newcomers to the Southwest rejected or gave no credit to these *mercedes*, an actual proof of the legitimate ownership of the lands by the descendants of the first colonists. It was not until the sixties that leaders from the

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Chicano movement brought to light the rights of the Chicanos over the land of the Southwest that dated back to the seventeenth century. See for example such episodes as the Reies López Tijerina's occupation of the national forest campgrounds known as the Echo Amphitheatre to give back their *ejido* (originally, a "land grant") to the people of *Pueblo de San Joaquín de Chama*.

<sup>54</sup> The portrayal of historical events in Mexican American literature dates back to the "corridos" that reflect the cultural clash that took place in the Southwest after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Americo Paredes' studies of such corridos as "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortez" in *With His Pistol in His Hand* are very instructive in this sense. Other historical events have been recollected in "corridos" (such as the immigration to the United States). In the nineteenth century, there already were some historical novels, for example, *The Squatter and the Don* (1885) by Amparo Ruiz de Burton. Chicano writers have continued the tradition in the twentieth century, mixing fiction with history in his novels, for instance, Aristeo Brito in *El diablo en Texas* or Nash Candelaria in *Memories of the Alhambra*. Ramón Saldivar has studied the use of history as "sub-text" in books as different as José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* or Rolando Hinojosa's *Korean Love Songs*. However, out of all the novelists of the 1960s and 1970s, Alejandro Morales seems to be the most concerned with a rewriting of history from a Chicano point of view.

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