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# The Latino Body: Crisis Identities in American Literary and Cultural Memory

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# **The Latino Body**

**Crisis Identities in American Literary and  
Cultural Memory**

**LÁZARO LIMA**



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## Introduction

### “The American Congo” and the National Symbolic

Through the centre of this unknown region, fully as large as New England, courses the Rio Grande, which can more correctly be compared to the Congo than the Nile the moment that the degraded, turbulent, ignorant, and superstitious character of its population comes under examination.

—JOHN G. BOURKE, “The American Congo,”  
*Scribner's Magazine* (1894)

U.S. Army Captain John Gregory Bourke (1846–1898) was one of the earliest ethnographers of the Mexican and Amerindian Southwest. His birth and death marked two of the most important years for U.S. continental and hemispheric expansion between the Mexican-American War (1846–1848) and the Spanish-American War (1898). Both his ethnographic work and his experience as an army officer allowed for close, though never disinterested, observation of the borderlands between Mexico and the United States. They represented for him a contact zone where Amerindian and Mexican cultures ceded to the “American” imperial designs of nation: westward migration, colonization, and the waves of violence that characterized continental expansion.<sup>1</sup> Published in the popular *Scribner's Magazine*, “The American Congo” captured an emerging national identity that could consider Mexican difference incommensurate with American reality by naturalizing the stigma that made “Mexican” a racial term rather than one of national, cultural, or ethnic identification.<sup>2</sup> That today we continue to view the West as a *tabula rasa* imbued with meaning through migration from the East is instructive of the degree to which national memory offers compelling but furtively incomplete ways to participate in a national symbolic order that excises as much as it claims to assimilate.

Public-sphere representations like Bourke's did not, as many would have it, suppress an inchoate Mexican American identity: they fabricated one for public consumption by giving visual and emotive texture to a people rendered foreign in their own cultural topography. Bourke's ethnographic work in the borderlands of the American imagination created what may perhaps be the first summative ontology of people under scrutiny by confounding the population's *being* with his disciplinary *knowing*. Their ontological status is displaced by his epistemological errancy; their being and his knowing position the Mexican population outside the nation's symbolic imaginary. Superimposing Africa in America, his "Congo" is both a space within the parameters of his America ("as large as New England") and a symbolic place rendered outside reason.

Bourke's explicit purpose in "The American Congo" was to present "the readers of *Scribner's* an outline description, both of the territory under consideration, and the manners, customs, and superstitions of Mexicans" along the U.S. side of the Rio Grande: "the waves of North American aggression have swept across this region, bearing down all in their path; but as the tempest abated the Mexican population placidly resumed its control of affairs and returned to its former habits of life as if the North American had never existed" (592).

For Bourke, the "Mexican population" is not part of the United States because its habits of life are incommensurate with his American reality. This American Congo connotes a site of racial and ethnic disjunctures that are devoid of nuance. The Mexicans returning to their "former habits" are incompatible with national ideations of comportment as evidenced by the continuous "waves of North American aggression" that attempt to order both *habitus* and habits to futile ends. Mexican resistance to North American aggression can also be read, however, as a strategic unwillingness to defer to the aggressor.

The Mexican resistance that Bourke notes without irony also shows the possibilities for agential transformations offered by Mexicans in the face of public contemplation, such as in the pages of *Scribner's*. Though Bourke's ethnographic work does not seek to render the native informants' voice, we are nonetheless given a clear awareness of their unwillingness to submit. Bourke's observations are ultimately bound to a broader cultural crisis about the nature of national identity occasioned by the Mexican-American War. That Mexicans were in their own cultural topography before the American colonization of Mexican territories is inconsequential to Bourke, not because genealogical lines of origin do little to address the nature of coexis-

tence but because they allow him to excise Mexicans from America's past and his own present in order to imagine a country free of a people rendered unfit for national civic life. This "degraded, turbulent, ignorant, and superstitious" population is effectively deracinated of historical and cultural specificity.

The discursive resonance of "The American Congo" resided in its ability to amortize and consolidate various nineteenth-century representations of Mexican, Amerindian, and, as I will later argue, Black corporealities as *prima facie* indices of difference and strangeness. At face value, the habits of Bourke's subjects become racially marked through a simple tautology, with disastrously complex consequences: these people are not American because they are racially different from "real" Americans, and they are racially different because they are not American. Bourke's presumption of a normative Americanness and its conflation with whiteness inscribed colored difference as a deviation from an American norm that did not exist outside the representational logic of the interests it served. His tautology ultimately deprived his *Scribner's* citizen-readers of part of their historical memory and aspirants to citizenship of the very promises of democratic participation and inclusion that underwrite the narratives of American democracy.

In this study, I contend that what is understood today as the "Latino subject" surfaced along the literal and metaphorical divide between Mexico and the United States, a divide that fractured alliances, elided ethnic and racial identities, and disembodied subjects from the protocols of citizenship. The literal divide was a trope of nationalism, and its complicit metaphorical weight and accompanying truth claims were perpetuated in the public sphere through various print media.<sup>3</sup>

Bourke belonged to that first generation of Anglo-Americans who were able to naturalize a sense of belonging in a territory that extended from coast to coast. After the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, which put an end to the Mexican-American War, Mexico ceded modern-day California, Utah, Nevada, and parts of New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Wyoming, as well as Texas (which had claimed independence from Mexico in 1836 as the Lone Star Republic). For Bourke and his generation, the newly acquired territories represented a cultural landscape untranslatable to monological majoritarian interests. His *Scribner's* piece, replete with high-quality engravings, gave visual evidence of a people as inhospitable to reason as the region was to Anglo-American order. As a career soldier, his authority was institutional and emblematic of how language and images began to create subaltern bodies for literary and visual public

consumption after the war. As an ethnographer, he began the production of knowledge about what we today call Latinos by conflating space and race and making ethnically marked identities incompatible with national imaginings. That Latinos have appropriated similar mechanisms of identity construction for political gain is instructive of both the limits of American citizenship and the promise of democratic participation that this study charts.

*The Latino Body: Crisis Identities in American Literary and Cultural Memory* analyzes the conditions under which it becomes necessary to create a specific Latino subject of American cultural and literary history.<sup>4</sup> It tells the story of the U.S. Latino body politic and its relation to the state: how the state configures Latino subjects and how Latino subjects have in turn altered the state's appellative assertions of difference (the contemporary emphasis on "Latino" instead of "Hispanic," for example) to their own ends in the public sphere. This study accomplishes this by providing an analysis of Latino cultural, literary, visual, and popular texts that suggest that becoming historical has often been tantamount to becoming "American," and how this public metamorphosis of group ontology has almost always entailed a crisis in meaning for both Latinos and the broader culture.

The term "crisis" is meant to call attention to the cultural manifestations of historical conflict that have resulted in publicly rendered and redressed modes of being both American and Latino through narratives, images, and various other sign systems. A crisis is ultimately a narrative recapitulation that takes place either before or after the crisis event has occurred. The crisis itself eludes common locution and, in this sense, could be said to be inherently antinarrative. Narrative either precedes a crisis, as a justification or exoneration of an impending or perceived crisis, or follows it, as an explanation or attempt to make sense of a crisis moment *after* the fact.<sup>5</sup> Crisis identities are therefore always grounded in the recognition of a capitulation that seeks an explanation or resolution in and through narrative. Indeed, the term signals a philosophical inquiry into the structures of consciousness experienced from what could be understood as the narrative first-person point of view, the *cogito* before the *ergo sum*.

By studying a series of crisis moments, the book proposes that the current emphasis on and ostensible novelty associated with Latino identity is but a recent manifestation of a larger and unresolved cultural crisis that arose after the Mexican-American War. I contend that ever since the war the various conceits associated with American democratic participation and the unfulfilled promise of equality have created crisis moments where com-

peting forms of cultural citizenship have vied for legitimacy and access to cultural capital.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Latino cultural production currently in the forefront of the public sphere foregrounds the most recent Latino crisis as the national culture begins to contend, as never before, with the largest “minority” group in the nation. Having inherited the unresolved Mexican question—What is the country to do with Mexicans?—the national culture is faced anew with the contemporary renderings of that older question—What is the country to do with Latinos?—rather than the more logical, exacting, though infinitely more difficult, process of identifying why Latino subjectivity has been constructed as incommensurate with the American body politic.

The discrete crisis moments I propose for consideration in this study are therefore necessarily epochal and, as I will argue, represent significant transformations in the way both majority and minoritarian cultural actors have been imagined, rendered, and conceived within the national culture. These epochal shifts are necessarily diachronic and seek to capture the way in which changes over time have required representational strategies that in some way break with previous and often entrenched modes of understanding what today we understand to be “Latino” identity negotiations. The engagement requires not just understanding how and when do Latinos enter American literary and cultural history but, more specifically, why it becomes necessary to do so in the public sphere of national contemplation.

### **American Publics and the Subaltern Subject**

For Jürgen Habermas, the rise of the public sphere coincided with the development of literary culture as private bourgeois ideals found public expression through writing and various representational media.<sup>7</sup> The articulations of class-based ideologies and civic ideals that circulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through print media eventually universalized a public subject who was presumed to be representative of the broader culture. Habermas’s public sphere is, of course, problematic on several grounds.<sup>8</sup> The presumption of equal access to public articulation of group concerns belies the ostensible democratic imperative in his conception of Modernity, since bourgeois representational agency is not representative of anything except the interests bourgeois ideology serves. For subaltern groups this has resulted in a quandary, since the enabling condition for intervention and clout in the public sphere has often meant the uncritical acceptance of bourgeois inclusionary norms.

Habermas attempts to counter criticism regarding the implicitly uncritical rendering of the Enlightenment project's universal subject by making a distinction between the public sphere of the literary (*literarische Öffentlichkeit*) and the political (*politische Öffentlichkeit*), that is, the representation of group-specific imaginings through literature and the mechanisms by which representations are accorded legal limits by political systems (*Structural Transformation*, 51). The conditions under which inclusion in the public sphere is permitted, granted, or denied determine how civic problems can be publicly rendered through textual and visual sign systems by making identities historical and providing context in the national imaginary.

In the chapters that follow, I study how competing forms of *being* American appealed to the ontological status of citizens (the purportedly knowable core of their being) in the public sphere. I propose that the organizing principle of Latino public-sphere identities offered context-specific strategies for cultural enfranchisement and participation in the broader body politic. Specific crisis moments have given rise to particular forms of Latino cultural engagement that have involved assimilationist, patriotic, cultural nationalist, and more recently gendered modes of *being* American. These identity modalities have characterized Latino responses to cultural crisis, political conflict, and erasure at moments of profound cultural transformations. These transformations constitute subject positions that alter the way Latinos understand themselves in relation to the American body politic and the way they are imagined as a community by the culture writ large.

### **Citizenship in the Public Sphere: Appellative Strategies and the Language of Loss**

American calls to unity and a shared common vision arise at times of crisis, when it becomes difficult to apprehend what eludes common locution. That language leaves us at moments of culturally significant trauma comes as no surprise to anyone who has witnessed natural or human disaster, either in person or through representational media. That these calls to unity come at moments of profound national crisis and are ignored in times of relative stability make the calls disingenuous, if not outright manipulative, to scores of nationals otherwise excluded from the patriotic embrace.

This book charts the interrelated groups born out of the Spanish colonization of the Americas and the ways these groups have responded to monocultural calls to unity and nationally shared conceptions of American cultural identity. Those who were called "Mexican" in U.S. territories after the

Mexican-American War asserted a defined contestatory identity nearly a century after Bourke. Mexicans living in the United States eventually called themselves Chicanos, and a counteridentity was born out of the interstices where ethnic memory meets American cultural amnesia. This was not a memory of unmediated access to a truth about the past or some illusory ethnic coevalness, but one that conditioned the possibilities for national belonging through a conversation with the narratives, photographs, and artifacts of the past—the remnants of a cultural presence too long denied. Following the Chicano example, various communities that were heirs to Spanish and later U.S. colonialisms also engaged the dynamics of counter-majoritarian forms of citizenship and national belonging under the unifying aegis of “Latino,” remembering, recounting, and rediscovering stories and images left outside the narratives of nation.

Differences notwithstanding—and these are considerable—these identity labels had and continue to have an essential commonality that coalesces differences for strategic gain. I am interested here in invoking Gayatri Spivak’s well-known recourse to “strategy” and its necessary interests in praxis value over theoretical use value.<sup>9</sup> Strategy for Spivak acknowledges inequalities and how needs determine forms of address in context-specific forms of engagement. Strategic essentialism, then, could be said to cohere around function and agency, not theory and speculative reason. Latino identity is therefore strategic to the degree that it is a self-constituting identity practice, grounded in the knowledge that it is a necessary fiction. For Latinos, this strategic resistance to and subversion of what it means to be an “American” mediates public-sphere appeals to civic participation and the importance of civic identities in the state identity machine—the *deus ex machina* that seeks to render visible those subjects that maintain the machine.

Through a series of critical, and sometimes collusive, engagements with the politics of national participation, Latinos have reconfigured what Lauren Berlant has called the “National Symbolic,” the archive of images and language the nation depends on to represent Americanness.<sup>10</sup> My narrative offers a story of how the Latino body has been imagined, dismembered, and reimagined anew, and how it has reconstituted itself within the National Symbolic order. It answers the fundamental query, “Under what conditions does it become necessary to articulate a Latino-specific subject of American literary and cultural memory?” Well into the new millennium, Bourke’s representational dynamic continues, in ways too telling to ignore, to inform the National Symbolic’s repertoire of strategies associated with

both the image-making process by which Latinos come to be and the attendant "truth" claims accorded to these representations by the culture at large. In the process it will become necessary to tell a story about how and why the Latino body has been variously remembered and forgotten in the construction of the American body politic. By re-membering the Latino body in literary and popular print media, I seek to challenge the still-pervasive binaries of "black" and "white" that have, with varying degrees of success, elided and polarized race relations in the United States into rigid black and white identity scripts.

It is difficult to talk about race outside the context of black and white when its most lucid theoreticians insist on this polarity if only to debunk it. Indeed, some cultural theoreticians have announced that the demise of race as a critical object of study is not something to be feared.<sup>11</sup> It would be disingenuous, however, to assume that because race is not a biological category, Americans do not continue to think, feel, and act as if it were a biological truth. Ultimately, public articulations of race scripts forestall any possibility for groups elsewhere on the black and white divide to participate in a conversation about race, even if race as a construct is categorically suspect and specious. The purpose, of course, is not to reify the category but to question, as David Roediger so brilliantly does, "why people think they are white and of whether they might quit thinking so."<sup>12</sup> To paraphrase Richard Dyer in his classic analysis of whiteness, *White* (1997), as long as race is something only applied to nonwhite peoples, whiteness will continue to function as the human norm.<sup>13</sup>

The term "Latino" reimagines itself as a signic space outside the bleachable and assimilable location of privilege in majoritarian culture, all the while asserting its referential locus of agency within those parameters. It recognizes difference as America's own creation and defamiliarizes its foreignness. If the term is to achieve its promise, it must be understood as a naming strategy originating in an American ethos of self-creation and reinvention. The occasional journalistic and, more recently, academic lapse that makes the term synonymous with various Latin American nationalities threatens to exile the very strength of its illocutionary force, for only in making the strange historical can this newest of Hispanism's long line of *convivencia* strategies—the strategic coexistence of culturally distinct groups—reach its political potential in the United States.<sup>14</sup> The tendency in the public sphere of signification to conflate Latino and Latin American cultural identities in the United States globalizes difference into an amalgam of transnational identities devoid of historical context. For Latinos seeking

to redress their relationship to the United States through enfranchisement and civic participation as U.S. citizens or citizens in the making, this tendency is counterproductive at best.

This is not to suggest that the term is not problematic on several grounds. Foremost, it elides the very differences that make it referentially useful (as will become evident in subsequent chapters). Indeed, one of the term's principal limitations is its collusive ability to unproblematically erase a past replete with the very Latino modalities of American identity construction and nation building that it seeks to affirm as contemporary phenomena (especially in its more staunchly cultural nationalist expressions of ethnic pride).

### A Different Love

The public-sphere articulations of national identity that I chart from the nineteenth century onward also borrow from and refashion the more well-known nation-building projects of Latin America in and through belles lettres, that is, the fictions that aesthetically attempted to resolve the nation's pressing crises at its founding or at moments of cultural transformation. The Venezuelan writer and intellectual Andrés Bello (1781–1865) called this process of “becoming historical” *el método narrativo*. For Bello, this “narrative method” would inscribe the nation into history through writing, by providing a cultural specificity where none had existed. Bello was concerned with history and writing as the inexorably linked progenitors of the nation. For him, language not only functioned to legitimate the nation but also constituted it through writing. He made this clear in his 1848 “Autonomía cultural de América” (“The Cultural Autonomy of America”) when he stated that, “cuando la historia de un país no existe, sino en documentos incompletos, esparciados, en tradiciones vagas, que es preciso compulсар y juzgar, el método narrativo es obligado” (“when the history of a country only exists in incomplete and sparse documents, in vague traditions, which make it necessary to compel and to judge, the narrative method is obligatory”).<sup>15</sup>

Bello's obligatory recourse to the narrative method for constituting the nation found its complement in the practice of “literature” as a form of historical writing. The narrative resolution of national conflict through narrative emplotment has, as Doris Sommer brilliantly observed, characterized the national literary traditions of Latin America. Sommer's significant book *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1991) grounds

Benedict Anderson's and Homi Bhabha's paradigm for national consolidations, or the links between "nation and narration" (Bhabha), squarely within a Latin Americanist contextual field of signification.<sup>16</sup>

Sommer's other significant rhetorical move entailed the recognition that the heteronormative couplings that aesthetically resolved national crises around questions of race, history, and economic disparity in the emplotments of "romance" also left too many citizens outside the national patriotic embrace. Sommer, of course, employs "romance" in both its contemporary sense and the nineteenth-century use that made it "more boldly allegorical than the novel" as Latin American authors "were preparing national projects through prose fiction" (*Foundational Fictions*, 5–7). A crucial distinction has to be made, however, between Latin American nation-building projects and their articulation in the United States in the nineteenth century. As Latin American nations were creating historical identity projects after achieving independence, Mexicans living in the United States as ersatz citizens were attempting to interpolate themselves into national historical processes *in medias res*—in the middle of a National Symbolic teleology where they fettered national dreams of unity because of their linguistic difference and their publicly constructed proximity to "blackness" and the attendant question of slavery.

Nonetheless, the inexorably linked processes of nation and narration provide a window through which we can better understand the strategic identity negotiations we have inherited from inter-American nation-building projects. As Juan De Castro reminds us about these early Latin American nation-building projects, "Even for those opposed to the undeniably totalizing and totalitarian aspects of the nation, these early constructions of identity serve as cautionary examples or—in the frequent paradox—as that which by being resisted ends up defining its putative opposite."<sup>17</sup> If the Latin American historical romance served national interests by giving public examples of how ideal couplings could sustain national contradictions through romantic pairing for the love of nation, in this study I propose a different reading of the national allegory of love in the United States. I do this in order to understand the National Symbolic outside the passion plays of romance by which it has been articulated in much of the research and literature on inter-American nation-building projects.<sup>18</sup>

The conceits associated with Latin American nation-building projects through the emplotments of romance also warrant an investigation into their relevance as Latino groups have jockeyed the privileged category of "the literary" for the public articulation of ethnically and linguistically

marked expressions of group identity from the end of the Mexican-American War onward. Read this way, this book is also a metaphorical national love story about the limits of historical romance, about not being loved enough, about sometimes being loved too much, and about the national spoils and excesses inherent to these two extremes. Like all potential love stories, it asks the question valiant lovers must eventually ask if they want to spend the rest of their lives with each other, or at least learn to ask if they even plan on cohabiting for any substantial period of time: Do you love me? And if so, and this is one big if, at what cost such love?

Even with a “prenuptial agreement,” as was the case with the relationship the United States established with Mexicans and, later, Mexican Americans after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, these are difficult questions indeed. Some lovers regrettably never ask them out of convenience, others because they are afraid of the answer. The relationship the treaty established between the two countries provided a series of strategies of coexistence characterized by desires, expectations, and unmet needs that have kept the relationship alive through mutual codependence. After the war of wills, the metaphorical love between the two countries began to follow a pattern of embraces and rejections, lies and deceptions, and unthinkable collusions that created necessities too comfortable to abandon even after the expression of love’s desire abated.

### Terms of Engagement

As will become evident, the terms *Latina* and *Latino* would be difficult to understand outside the context of their relation to the United States were it not for the unifying memory of nonbelonging. As Suzanne Oboler reminds us, “Latinos have been racialized such that they experience the effects of invisibility in social and political institutions,”<sup>19</sup> unless, I would add, they are needed for labor or war, in which case they are welcomed into the national fold through the elusive embrace of an exhausted American dream.<sup>20</sup> The texts I study demonstrate that not being loved enough is just as bad as being suffocated by love in the throes of patriotic national passions.

This brings me to America. The social symbolic functions of the terms “America” and “American”—in their ability to conjure the nation-state as an imagined community—alienate Latinos, and others disenfranchised from the National Symbolic, by virtue of the myth of an American cultural history that emerges fully formed after the establishment in 1607 of the first permanent English settlement in Jamestown, Virginia. That the

immigrant status of these settlers has been erased while other immigrants continue to be posited as “foreign” is a pervasive national fantasy about American cultural identity that this project seeks to redress. I do not mean to engage in a reconstruction of the myth of American origins; the Native American presence would make such a proposition moot. I do intend to interrogate the facile assumptions about cultural interaction that continue to inform our epistemic grounding with regard to a usable and abusable cultural past. Consequently, my use of the terms “America” and “American” is meant to recall a certain irony in nationalistic popular use—the terms’ ability to conjure the United States as an imagined community, often by relegating interactions with Atlantic and Amerindian cultures to symbolic oblivion.

The conceptual recourse to memory throughout the study is not meant to invoke a past nostalgic longing for “truth” as it was or was not imagined. Anderson has noted that the profound cultural transformations that create national “amnesias” through historical crises also engender narrative remembering that structure memory’s relation to state identity and loss.<sup>21</sup> What is excised from cultural imaginings at the time of national consolidation haunts the nation in the form of countertexts that emerge from memories of loss. Anderson is referring not just to monuments or the state’s memory apparatus (archives and legal record systems) but rather to the traces of loss that inhere in lived experience and manifest themselves publicly in what Cherríe Moraga calls “the memory of the body.”<sup>22</sup> Moraga notes how the imperiled Latina body foregrounds a corporeally grounded aesthetics of memory in *A Xicanadyke Codex of Changing Consciousness* (2005):

We are despised when we speak up; we are despised when we act out. . . . Whether we are lesbian or heterosexual, as self-proclaimed desirers, we become bodies of revolt, bodies in dissent against oblivion. I am reminded here of Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s depiction of Malintzín, in her short story, “Los derechos de Malinche.” In it, an imprisoned Malinche in anticipation of Cortez’ arrival to her cell, places a *nopal con espinas* (a thorny prickly pear) inside her vagina. She awaits her rapist. She is a body in dissent against oblivion. (11)

Moraga’s corporeally rendered mnemonics of history, the “body in dissent against oblivion,” is an aestheticized meditation on communal memory as a publicly rendered personal antidote to cultural forgetting, a coun-

tertext to historical elision. This is precisely what Toni Morrison in the African American context has called “rememory”: memory as a countertext for the re-presentation of a past in need of national reevaluation.<sup>23</sup> In performances of loss like those of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who silently protested the “disappearances” of their children by Argentina’s military dictatorship during the “dirty war,” the countertext could be a photograph, a diaper worn as a headscarf, a memory of loss evoked through a publicly enacted code. Our ability to think through the limits of the National Symbolic emerges from these countertextual forms of recording and the literal body’s material relationship to the symbolic orders that constitute the body as a subject of history.

Though the body and memory are two of my principal tropes, I also invoke the juridical notion of *corpus delicti* (literally, body of crime)<sup>24</sup> with regard to the national body politic. This is useful because the National Symbolic categories of citizenship and the discourses of national belonging are plagued with metaphors with juridical meaning and historical weight (alien, citizen, legal, illegal, foreigner, national, immigrant, migrant). The body’s legality is bound to both law and symbolic citizenship. The categorization of “illegal” bodies as they pertain to “aliens” is still meant to conjure fear in the public imagination by positing the immigrant body as a national pathogen.<sup>25</sup> Anthropologist Jonathan Xavier Inda has gone so far as to say that the national fear of immigrants has made the United States a “pathological nation”: “nativist rhetoric implicitly figures the immigrant, the Mexican immigrant in particular, as a parasite intruding on the body of the host nation, drawing nutrients from it, while providing nothing to its survival and even threatening its well-being.”<sup>26</sup> That defining “legal” and “illegal” bodies in the National Symbolic requires a series of hesitations should alert us to the prior motivations and actions that imbue the body’s materiality with meanings that are never disinterested.

### Organizing the Latino Body

This book is divided into two parts. The first, “Longing History,” attempts to recover a literary and cultural historiography of Latino intervention in American cultural history from the mid-nineteenth century to the rise of the equality-rights movement of the 1960s and early 1970s. The texts I study are unified by a concerted attempt at inflecting American notions of ideal citizenship with “Latino” ethnic, linguistic, and cultural markers that are often seen as recent phenomena. These texts foreground how Latino

identities responded to the crisis of symbolic and literal annihilation by becoming historical during two pivotal periods in American cultural history: the territorial consolidation of the United States after the Mexican-American War and the rise of the equality movements of the 1960s. The chapters themselves chart various couplings and modes of living together as well as the costs associated with convivial strategies born out of historical disjunctures. The epochal focus related to these disjunctures seeks to make visible significant shifts in the way people who today we would consider Latinos have reimagined themselves or been reimagined in the public sphere of the national. As such, these literary and cultural realignments tell the story of representational realignments and ruptures with previous identity modalities but not the marked continuity that has characterized the significant and steady outpour of Latino literary and cultural production in the United States.

Chapter 1, "Negotiating Cultural Memory in the Aftermath of the Mexican-American War: Nineteenth-Century Mexican American Testimonials and *The Squatter and the Don*," focuses on Mexican Americans' responses to the founding crisis that resulted when former Mexicans became "American" after the end of the war. The chapter analyzes Mexican American negotiations of citizenship, national belonging, and the strategic uses of cultural memory and amnesia in two nineteenth-century testimonials that contest the idea of a stable Mexican subject of American cultural history as propagated in much of the writing of California history: Eulalia Pérez's *An Old Woman and Her Recollections* (1877) and Catarina Ávila de Ríos's *Memoirs of Doña Catarina Ávila de Ríos* (1877). The texts are counterpoised with María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's historical romance, *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), whose author is credited with writing the first Latina novel written in English.<sup>27</sup> This chapter proposes that in the aftermath of the Mexican-American War, a highly symbolic public language was cultivated through print culture that rendered Mexicans as interlopers on the American landscape and cultural imagination. Focusing on broadsides, testimonials, and literary texts in the nineteenth century, I demonstrate that the publicly constructed nature of American identity through print culture made visible a public American ideal that left Mexicans outside the National Symbolic. By showing how the Mexican body ultimately became conflated with "blackness" in the public sphere, I demonstrate how "whiteness" became the organizing principle for the construction of American citizenship and identity for Mexicans in the nineteenth century. Mexican American racial passing, I argue, attempted to trump linguistic difference to create a logic

of solidarity with Anglo-American culture through racialized associations. This strategy of accommodation and collusion created one of the first viable and most enduring strategic crisis identities still operative today.

Though Mexican Americans and other U.S. Latinos were producing and developing collective social identities inflected with regional themes and concerns, I contend that it was not until the Chicano renaissance of the late 1960s that a discernable political agenda emerged and manifested itself for national reflection.<sup>28</sup> Chapter 2, "Reading the *Corpus Delicti*: Tomás Rivera's *Earth* and the Chicano Body in the Public Sphere," analyzes one of the most important texts to come out of the Chicano civil rights movement, Tomás Rivera's . . . *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971).<sup>29</sup> Rivera's *Earth* marked a critical turn away from the assimilative grounding in the majority of texts written and recovered before the civil rights apogee of the 1960s and early 1970s. As Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez noted in *Life in Search of Readers: Reading (in) Chicano/a Literature* (2003), Rivera's *Earth* and the novels written by his contemporaries that followed his landmark text allowed, "for the first time in the history of Chicano/a letters, the possibility of conceiving of a Chicano/a readership at the national level."<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, it was the paucity of narrative models that made the Chicano movement find a public identity centered on Mexico's indigenous heritage and the greatness of Aztec civilization through the invocation of Aztlán, the mythic homeland of the Aztec in the southwestern United States. Aztlán created a logic of presence that grounded Chicano experience and being *in* the United States, thereby making Chicanos heirs to an indigenous historical tradition that antedated the Anglo-American presence in the country. Emerging out of this cultural nationalist assault on American cultural amnesia, *Earth* served as a novelized reenactment of the historical and metaphorical exclusion of the Mexican body from the American body politic. From the vantage point of the early 1970s, Rivera's novel re-created and critiqued the Cold War patriotic rhetoric of the 1950s and how the forging of America often meant both literal and symbolic annihilation for Mexicans. In order to analyze the conditions under which Latino counterpatriotic crisis identities could register in the public sphere as viable political interventions, the chapter necessarily focuses on mid-twentieth-century popular culture and the Cold War hysteria the text implicitly alludes to.

Part II, "Postmodern Genealogies: The Latino Body, in Theory," focuses on two recent crisis moments for Latino cultural identity projects born of the cultural nationalism and equality-rights movements of the 1960s. First, the institutionalization of Latino literature created the need to establish the

theoretical basis for a field of inquiry that seemingly lacked the methodological apparatus to understand its modes of production, diffusion, silences, and apparent lack of temporal contiguity. If a Chicano and more broadly Latino presence existed in the United States before the Latino identity projects of 1960s, then how to explain the apparent absence of cultural and textual foremothers and forefathers? Second, this section analyzes how political inclusion and enfranchisement created the concomitant need to render visible how sexuality and sexual identity inform national conceptions of citizenship and personhood.

Chapter 3, "The Institutionalization of Latino Literature in the Academy: Cabeza de Vaca's *Castaways* and the Crisis of Legitimation," is devoted to a critique of Latino criticism's genealogical search for a Latino-specific subject of American literary history, as Latino cultural recovery projects focus on Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Castaways* (1542)<sup>31</sup> as a strategic starting point for articulating a foundational Latino subjectivity. I focus on *Castaways* because—aside from having been anthologized and considered a foundational precursor of U.S. Latino literature in the more inclusive domains of academic curricula—the text raises a series of questions about the theoretical and methodological problems inherent to "identity recovery projects," as well as our critical and ethical investment in these projects. Although *Castaways* has been traditionally considered one of the founding texts of the colonial Latin American literature canon, the research I cite about Cabeza de Vaca's chronicle is quite recent. One motive for this is to show how *Castaways* has been reread and reinterpreted during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as an exemplary and founding account of a very recent phenomenon: the rise of Latino literature and the discourse of multicultural inclusion in the academy.

That this curricular inclusion came at the height of 1980s multiculturalism, and the era of the Reagan-Bush "culture wars," shows the degree to which texts like *Castaways* were presumed to do the transformative cultural work that so many in the Latino community craved. Indeed, while the curriculum was diversifying, the country experienced the first major backlash against affirmative action and the first assault on so-called political correctness. Having inherited this Latino forefather, it now becomes imperative to assess critically what *Castaways* does and for whom.

Chapter 4, "Practices of Freedom: The Body Re-membered in Contemporary Latino Writing," examines how constructions of postmodern identity projects at the end of the twentieth century began to reconfigure Latino subjectivity at the intersections of gender, ethnic, and national identities in

Luz María Umpierre's *Margarita Poems* (1987), Elías Miguel Muñoz's *The Greatest Performance* (1991), and Rafael Campo's *What the Body Told* (1996).<sup>32</sup> The texts in this chapter, wittingly or not, all attempt to come to terms with the contradictions inherent to Latino ethnic identities and the possibility of loving openly as well as *being* who one is "veinte y cuatro horas al día, siete días por semana," twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, as Boricua writer Víctor Fragoso so poignantly observed shortly before his death from AIDS. The specter of loss vis-à-vis s/exile and AIDS prompted a literal re-membering of the Latino body in cultural theory and social texts. Social and representational death ceded way to an accounting of the literal death of Latinos as Latino literature entered the twenty-first century. The inclusion of these Cuban American and Puerto Rican interventions in this chapter also seeks to redress and call attention to the importance of placing Latino Atlantic communities in conversation with the important work undertaken by Chicana theoretical and cultural producers who have challenged ethnic, gender, and sexual orthodoxies in significant ways.

The conclusion, "Democracy's Graveyard: Dead Citizenship and the Latino Body," engages Alicia Gaspar de Alba's detective thriller, *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005),<sup>33</sup> as a novelized testament to the latest Latino crisis moment and the possibilities it offers for rethinking human agency outside the strictures of the globalized commodification of bodies. Gaspar de Alba's novel focuses on the silence surrounding the "disappeared" and murdered women of Ciudad Juárez from the early 1990s to the present in the context of the transnational flow of capital. The globalized body of commodity capital finds a gross literalization in Ciudad Juárez, where predominantly female factory workers in *maquiladoras*, border factories, continue to be murdered and "disappeared" at an alarming rate while their Anglo-American managers cross the border into El Paso, Texas, to the safety of depoliticized homes. As a model for twenty-first-century Latino identity negotiations, the bodies of the disappeared, and the aesthetic responses to violence about the disappeared, position us within the knowable limits of the most recent Latino crisis moment and alert us to Moraga's call for a Chicana memory conceived as a living memorial to processes of continued colonization. In the process, the conclusion surveys the rhetorical repertoire of Latino identitarian strategies studied in the previous chapters and their implications for our present. I conclude with Cherríe Moraga's ethical call for understanding the Chicana body as mnemonic history, a living and remembering body of knowledge as articulated in her most recent work, *A Xicanadyke Codex of Changing Consciousness*.

The texts included in this study illuminate different aspects of my concerns surrounding corporeality and citizenship that have arisen in response to specific crisis moments in American cultural history. They tell a story about how unfinished historical business both founds and limits Latino demands for social and political parity. Their modes of address and redress have formulated the terms of Latino engagement with majority culture in the public sphere in order to constitute what they demand or envision as legitimate during moments of significant historical disjunctures. In the process, I risk temporal rifts in order to build bridges across times and spaces that have burdened the backs of many through historical waves of majoritarian subjection, waves of institutionalized aggression against Latinos that have sometimes barely registered in the national culture. In so doing, I hope to call attention to the dynamic, creative, and at times courageous responses to majoritarian subjection that have secured the staying power of peoples born out of the colonization of the Americas. This move requires, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, continuous historical “illumination” in order to safeguard the memory of these disjunctures from the inimical master narratives that would efface historical accountability were it not for the ongoing accounting these texts demand.

The texts in question, like the Latino bodies that haunt them, are representative of historical moments that required collective responses to national and historical crises that, in turn, determined their mode of address and forms of diffusion in the public sphere. As such, these texts and cultural artifacts cannot transcend the history into which they are interpolated, nor can we demand that they do so. That responsibility falls on us after we read stories like the ones they are dying to tell and finally, in moving from imagining to doing, we lay our books down long enough to enact what we envision in their wake.

### **Coda: Red Dead Revolver, or Playing American**

*Reperire pax*, “find peace,” is a noble enough call to justice and the *raison d’être* of Red, the protagonist of the video game *Red Dead Revolver* (2004). But Red—pictured with this imperative call literally crowning one of his revolvers in one of the video game’s scenes—attempts to find it through the pursuit and annihilation of Mexican General Diego and those of similar ilk who killed his family when he was a boy. Armed with his father’s revolver as a literal and metonymic emblem of forced penetrations, Red’s quest—and that of anyone playing the video game *Red Dead Revolver*—partakes of

a cultural repertoire of images that have infused the American popular imagination with murderous Mexicans from the nineteenth century on.

But playing American in this context is about being played. From the serial western novel, to the *Lone Ranger* radio show of the 1940s and, later, the television show of the 1950s, and its heirs in the Hollywood and spaghetti westerns, all the way to *Walker, Texas Ranger*, *Red Dead Revolver* continues an investment in American national identity through a folk mythology that is neither historically factual nor ethically accountable. As an exemplar of the processes by which American cultural memory and amnesia find public expression, Red—like Bourke before him—evinces the continued investment in an American national fantasy that requires continuous interrogation, resistance, and illumination. *Reperire pax*, indeed.