

TWO

In the Borderlands of Chicano Identity, There Are Only Fragments

Benjamin Alire Sáenz

A bill is coming in that I fear America is not prepared to pay.
JAMES BALDWIN

The time for indiscriminating racial unity has passed.
TONI MORRISON

My wife and I go to an opening reception at the newly opened Barnes & Noble bookstore. We are disappointed because it looks like a mall. What did we expect? The store is full of people who gather around food tables and gawk through the aisles. People visit and chat with one another. My wife and I look at each other and finally whisper: "*There's no one here but white people.*" El Paso is 70 percent "Hispanic" (I hate that word). The West Side, where the bookstore was built, is the whitest part of El Paso. The clientele assembled here tonight is decidedly white. My wife and I become uncomfortable. We drink a cup of coffee. We leave. We drive to a book reception—Texas Western Press is celebrating the publication of its latest book. I feel obliged to attend because I am on the editorial board. My wife and I again notice that everyone there is white. "What is this?" I ask myself. "White Night?" I remembered living in Lafayette, Louisiana. There was a blues joint where Black people hung out, but on Tuesdays the "Blacks" would clear out and the place would fill up with "white" people. The locals referred to Tuesdays at that place as "White Night." I never knew if the term was used ironically or not. Tonight, I remember that place. We make small talk (there is no "big" talk at such events). My wife, Patricia, is an associate judge. I am used

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to attending events with her where many (if not most) of the people are "Hispanics." At the reception, my wife and I keep looking around, then nod at each other knowingly. We leave. Why do Patricia and I notice that we are the only Chicanos at these events when nobody else around us seems to notice—or care? Why do we notice? And them—why don't *they* notice?

The term Chicano is supposedly derived from Mexicano, which comes from Mexica (pronounced "meshica"), who are generally known as Aztecs. Unfortunately, the term began to be utilized in a pejorative sense. It was likened to the disparaging term greaser or wetback by some Anglos. In the 1960s it became popular as Chicanos began to seek political and social reforms. It is at this point where the term becomes problematic and a source of indifference to me.

First of all, I am a first-generation American citizen, whose parents both immigrated to the United States from Mexico in the 1960s. As a child I was compelled to appreciate the newly found freedoms and opportunities my parents were experiencing. I was provided with an education that up until recently I believed was more than adequate. Through history, literature, and government courses in high school, I was indoctrinated with patriotic American values that were basically devoid of any prominent Chicano influences. The term Chicano was used as a pejorative and referred to radical and reactionary individuals who were the antithesis of what I was taught that this country represented. Consequently, I became content on questioning the classification in which I was categorized. When asked about my ethnicity I simply replied that I was Mexican or Mexican American. I avoided the term Hispanic because it seemed extremely generic.

Although the civil rights movements of the 1960s are often looked upon as a favorable period for many minorities, it seems that in the area in which I grew up (Fabens, the Lower Valley), Mexican Americans who chanted "Brown Power" and "Viva La Raza" were a mere triviality.

It is nice knowing that Chicano was the name Mexican Americans chose for themselves. However, this term seems more applicable to people who grew up in the 1960s. As a child of the 1980s, I am comfortable with being classified as a Mexican American. "Mexican" does not negate my Native American ancestry and "American" reemphasizes the place of my birth.'

In response to one of my assignments, one of my undergraduate students casually announced, with no discernible rage in his voice, "I don't read gringo poets." His absolute separatist stance appalled me. I confess, I experienced a moment of complete outrage, and I reacted more

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out of spontaneous reflex than reflective intelligence. My anger was evident, and I made no attempt to hide it. "I'm not about to put up with racist discourse in this class, got that? You *will* read Anglo poets or you will drop my course." He looked at me quietly. Later, I tell myself that I overreacted. I know what lies behind his words: *I have been erased. Ergo, I will erase. I have been hated. I will hate.* There is a compelling logic here.

Later, he wrote me a poem in which my person was represented. I was not exactly the hero. I asked him to visit my office. We talked. But we came to no real solutions. The student (a very dark, Indian-looking Chicano) was disappointed by my response. He was completely disillusioned with me. *What kind of a role model was I, anyway?* Not that he said that, not outright, but his eyes accused. I told him I was not the enemy. But there he was—in my office, and he was staring at me and his eyes kept saying: very definitely not the real thing—not a *real Chicano*. I hate playing the game of "who is more Chicano than whom." (It's a variation on a game currently played in Washington between Newt Gingrich and Bill Clinton: Who is more middle-class than whom?) I detest pissing contests.

I think about this student. It is tempting to dismiss him. But his rage is very real and it is a dangerous thing to dismiss rage. Rage never just disappears—it boomerangs back, and if it doesn't hit me, it will hit someone else. I cannot allow myself to forget that I have felt what he feels. I am not free of hate. I am not free of rage with regard to the subject of identity, and I do not really believe anybody else in that classroom is free of rage either. Most of us merely carry our race-based mistrust in a more acceptable manner (especially those of us who are holding very serious dialogues with a "dominant culture" and have a great deal invested in those dialogues). Some of us deny the relevance of race- or ethnicity-based identities simply by invoking a democracy-based identity that is supposed to supersede all other arguments and discourses: "We are all Americans. We are all equal." This particular strategy is facile, lazy, and anti-intellectual, and has more to do with denial and erasure than with examining our material culture and how that material culture is decidedly built upon inequalities.

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I think about this “radical” student later in the day. His argument is decidedly unsubtle, unnuanced, superficial, reactionary. But the possibility exists that his attitude really offended me because I am embarrassed by the way he handles his rage (which has everything to do with his identity). Why do I find his position unacceptable? *Bad politics. Very bad politics. And the premises behind his politics? Well, those are bad, too.* I chew on this. I am not so unlike him. I too have been formed by racist discourse—and yet I have just demanded that he not engage in that discourse in my class because I find the way he talks about this disagreeable. Knowing, as I do, the very real reasons behind his rage and knowing, as I do, the way most of my colleagues ignore the material circumstances of our student population, why should he play the role of the accommodationist? Should I shoot the messenger because he has articulated an attitude we all know is just beneath the surface? He did not produce himself. He is a product. And the word *product* here should not be confused with *victim*. Though we may all occupy different positions in the material world, *we are all* the products of the cumulative discourses around us. None of us is as much an “active subject” as we’d like to imagine. We are all contained by these discourses—especially the discourse of capitalism—and few of us are able to break through to a “radical” talk that is outside of these discourses. All of us make feeble attempts. And isn’t this student trying?

Some would say that this young man’s rage was produced by an inflammatory separatist Chicano rhetoric that does nothing but produce a climate of hatred and mistrust—and this is partially true. *Partially true.* But this is too easy an answer—too easy because it masks more complex issues and protects a plethora of guilty parties. When faced with the “in your face” talk of some African Americans, Chicanos, “radical” feminists, or members of Queer Nation, we would do well to remember that one of the reasons this kind of talk bothers us has a great deal to do with the “talk” we have adopted. We are trained to use a certain discourse, have grown accustomed to using a different kind of grammar. Most of us who teach in universities have been reproduced by tamer, more genteel rhetorics, but it is disingenuous to pretend we are free of violence simply because we appear to have more control over our ac-

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tions. The pretense of civility in our places of employment (especially in universities) is just that — a pretense.

I cannot forget this one important thing: this man has something very real invested in his “identity politics.” This is serious business. He is fighting back. *Maybe I am the enemy.*

I have a curious relationship with the word Chicano. I don't mind being called a “Chicana,” but I have problems using the label to describe myself. It's not that I don't feel like a Chicana, or I'm embarrassed by my culture or even by the word itself. I usually end up calling myself a Mexican American. The word Chicana inevitably stumbles out of my mouth clumsily like I'm pronouncing a foreign word. I don't know why. I'm not offended by it, I just can't seem to get used to using that word.

The evening's conversation is easygoing, not too provocative, light, something you would expect from a dinner party held in honor of a visiting lecturer. Near the end of the evening, the woman seated next to me asks: “Why do you insist on calling yourself a Chicano writer? Why not simply call yourself a writer?” She does not ask the question belligerently, but there is a firm tone behind her question that demands an answer, a challenge perhaps. And yet I know that no answer I give will satisfy the questioner. I take a sip of wine. A series of answers run thorough my mind: “If I called myself a Jewish writer, would you ask me the same question? Would you ask why I insisted on my Jewishness? If I called myself an ‘American’ writer, would you ask why I insisted on my Americanness?” Too aggressive. Another possible answer — one more mysterious, subtle, more suggestive, more worthy of the writer she imagines me to be: “I don't want to call myself anything.” I see myself smiling at her. What would she do with *that* answer? But the answer doesn't suit me — I don't like being in the wisdom business. Far too many poets have bored me with their humanistic wisdom that under serious scrutiny turns out to be as thoughtful as *The Bridges of Madison County*. Another answer races through my mind. “Exactly what about the term *Chicano* bothers you? Clearly the label of *writer* (an identity label if there ever was one) doesn't bother you a bit. Why not? Isn't *writer* a problematic identity for you? Why not?” But I don't want to get into an argument, and *that* answer sounds too much like an ambush. “Well,” I say, “I'm comfortable with that identity. I choose it.” I say this partially

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because it's true and partially because people are comfortable when anything that is being discussed is framed in terms of "choice" — part of a democratic rhetoric we are all steeped in.

She doesn't skip a beat. "But doesn't calling yourself that limit you? Why would you want to be so limited?"

"Why does it limit me?" I ask. *Of course it limits me. It limits me because when many whites see that word, they won't pick up the book. Serious readers want to read "universal literature," "world literature."* "All writers have their limitations." I say. I'm angry now, and I know it. And I know why I am angry, but I also know that I will not go into any diatribes. I do speak passionately, though I am very bad at hiding my emotions. I suggest to her—and by now the entire table—that I have no wish to distance myself from the history of a people I consider to be my community. I tell her that I am unapologetically political. I tell her that this country has no right to demand historical amnesia from its citizens. I praise the memory of my parents, who were seasonal cotton pickers. I am romanticizing the image of the farmworker shamelessly. She nods her head. But I see she is not completely satisfied by my answer. I have, however, managed to silence her. Does this mean I have won the argument? She is suspicious of my "choice" — finds my "identity" false, though she does not say it. She feels *Chicano* is divisive, an unnecessary and inappropriate political intrusion. *Yes, yes, we all come from immigrant stock. Just be a writer and cut the crap.* Writer, now there's an identity. The conversation is lively, but she is not convinced of anything I have said. I assume that *Chicano* threatens her because it asserts — and insists upon — difference. Difference for difference's sake? Is that what she imagines? And I am equally suspicious of her assumptions. *She does not have to discuss her identity. She does not have to hold it up for public debate, for "intellectual" scrutiny. Doesn't she have an identity? Tell me, what is it like to be white?* What are the politics of her "chosen" identity? I imagine her answer would sound something like this: "Come, come, we are educated and civil. We are all the same. We all love, we all hate, we all dream, we all will die. We feel. We all feel." I imagine that she tells me this, and I imagine my response: "Yes. And some die sooner than others, and some live better than others, and some work harder than others, and some have a great deal

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more than others. *Work makes freedom.* Clearly work makes some freer than others.”

As I drive home with my wife, I tell her that “gringos” just don’t get it.

While I would consider myself a “Mexican American,” I will always call myself a “gentleman.” My parents instilled codes of honor and respect in me. I was taught the history of my culture and my family. My familial background and attitude centers on education, ambition, and demeanor. Some would call this elitism or even snobbery. I would say that I differentiate by class — not according to money or status, but by ambition and determination. . . . When I think of the term Chicano, I associate it with the Chicano movement. Chicano is a reference point to a time of advocating and protesting for civil rights and acknowledgment from the ruling classes. All right, where did I get this definition? I got it from my family. Each member seems to have their identity grounded in the experiences of their formative years.

My relation to the term Chicano is based on my literal relation to any Chicanos. . . . I would call my uncle a Chicano based on his student experiences at Cal-Berkeley and Texas-El Paso during the late 1960s and early 1970s. I know he can refer to himself as a Chicano because he “was there.”

Please understand that I am not chastising anyone who calls themselves a Chicano. I am merely associating them with a time period. . . . The Chicanos I know from outside the 60s/70s time frame are people who identify with the ideas and ideals of that time frame. It is their loyalty and sense of roots to that time that they wear the term Chicano like a badge. While it comes to finding an identity, there is always someone or some cause that gives a label, and eventually a person, identity and respect.

Again, I am not Chicano. Nor am I a Pachuco, Latino, Mexican, Pocho, Hispanic. I won’t use the term Chicano because I cannot use the term. If I call myself a Chicano, I am a liar. . . . Actually, I would be worse than a liar, I would be a hypocrite.

I may not be a Chicano, but I am related to some.

Catholicism. Marxism. Capitalism. Humanism. Chicanismo. I find it impossible to live without organizing principles. I need to organize my identity around certain narratives. I reject certain discourses, certain kinds of talks that do their work on me despite my protestations — which makes me resent those discourses even more (“nationalism” immediately comes to mind). For the good or for the bad, I find it impossible to live without an identity. *No one can live without an identity.* The day of the “posthuman” has not yet arrived, and anyone who thinks it has arrived had better get back and do some serious analysis of the discourses

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that have (de)formed and shaped our “selves.” The debate surrounding identity and identity formations cannot be reduced to obsessions “invented” by academic people of color and sympathetic white progressives who have no real interest in “knowledge” or “standards” or “academic discipline” or “scholarship.” The “identity wars” did not begin in 1968, did not begin with Gloria Steinem, did not begin with Malcolm X, did not begin with Langston Hughes, did not begin with Toni Morrison, did not begin with César Chávez, did not begin with Gloria Anzaldúa, did not begin with Rigoberta Menchú, did not begin with Maxine Hong Kingston, did not begin even with Harold Bloom. The West’s obsession with identity began with Plato and Aristotle and was extended by (among others) Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Heidegger, and Marx.

“Identity” cannot exist without attendant politics—and everybody engages in identity politics. *Everybody*. We all privilege certain categories or discourses over others and organize ourselves around these discourses: some of us organize our identities around the vague term *human*. Some of us organize our identities around our sexuality. Some of us organize our identities around the countries of our origins. Some of us organize our identities around our genders. I am often enraged when Chicanos (and other “colorful” people) are accused of playing “identity politics.” It is like accusing someone of breathing.

It is fair to say that many people (inside academia as well as outside it) resent *the way* people who call themselves Chicanos (and Indians and African Americans and Asian Americans) have played identity politics (at white people’s expense, no doubt—at *everybody* else’s expense). I recall a passage in Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory*:

“Damn!” he said, and his chair rasped the floor as he pushed himself back. Suddenly it was to *me* that he was complaining. “It’s just not right, Richard. None of this is fair. You’ve done some good work, but so have I. I’ll bet our records are just about even. But when we go looking for jobs this year, it’s a very different story. You’re the one who gets all the breaks.”

To evade his criticism, I wanted to side with him. I was about to admit the injustice of affirmative action. “Oh, it’s all very simple this year. You’re a Chicano. And I am a Jew. That’s really the only difference between us.”

His words stung anger alive. In a voice deceptively calm I replied that he oversimplified the whole issue. Phrases came quickly: the importance

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of cultural diversity; new blood; the goal of racial integration. They were all the old arguments I had proposed years before—long since abandoned. After a minute or two, as I heard myself talking, I felt self-disgust. The job offers I was receiving were indeed unjustified. I knew that. All I was saying amounted to a frantic self-defense. It all was a lie. I tried to find an end to my sentence; my voice faltered to a stop.

"Yeah, yeah sure," he said. "I've heard all that stuff before. Nothing you can say, though, really changes the fact that affirmative action is unfair. You can see that, can't you? There isn't any way for me to compete with you. Once there were quotas to keep my parents out of schools like Yale. Now there are quotas to get you in. And the effect on me is the same as it was for them. . . ."

At the edge of hearing, I listened to every word he spoke. But behind my eyes my mind reared—spooked and turning—then broke toward a reckless idea: Leave the university. Leave. Immediately the idea sprang again in my bowels and began to climb. Rent money. I pictured myself having to borrow. Get a job as a waiter somewhere? I had come to depend on the intellectual companionship of students—bright students—to relieve the scholar's loneliness. I remembered the British Museum, a year in silence. I wanted to teach; I wanted to read; I wanted this life. But I had to protest. How? Disqualify myself from the profession as long as affirmative action continued? Romantic exile? But I had to. Yes. I found the horizon again. It was calm.

The graduate student across the room had stopped talking; he was staring out the window. I said nothing. My decision was final. No, I would say to them all. Finally, simply, no.

I wrote a note to all the chairmen of English departments who had offered me jobs. I left a note for the professor in my own department at Berkeley who was in charge of helping graduate students look for teaching positions. (The contradictions of affirmative action have finally caught up with me. Please remove my name from the list of teaching job applicants.)

I telephoned my mother and father. My mother did not seem to hear exactly what I was trying to tell her. She let the subject pass without comment. (Was I still planning on coming for dinner this Sunday?) My father, however, clearly understood. Silent for a moment, he seemed uncertain of what I expected to hear. Finally, troubled, he said hesitantly, "I don't know why you feel this way. We have never had any of the chances before."

We, he said. But he was wrong. It was *he* who had never had any chance before.³

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As I recall this passage, I open the book to that page and reread it. Ahh, Richard, I sometimes wonder what your friend would have said to *you* if *you* had said: "You're a Jew. And I am a Chicano. That's really the only difference between us." It was only *you* who was playing the affirmative action identity politics game, not him. Not him. He was just a talented individual. And you, you were a member of a group. And he (unlike you) lived in the best of all possible worlds—where there were nothing but "individuals" who always got jobs according to objective criteria and merit. So there was nothing left for you to do but divorce yourself from the "We." "Romantic exile." Isn't that how you self-consciously referred to it? In the face of "contradictions" you simply take yourself out of the game. And yet you insert yourself back into it by writing a book—a "public" book, about what?—*about identity*. And you admit that your writing is political (though you fail to scrutinize the politics of your own writing): "My book is necessarily political, in the conventional sense, for public issues . . . have bisected my life. And, in some broad sense, my writing is political because it concerns my movement away from the company of family and into the city. This was my coming of age: I became a man by becoming a public man" (7). Why, I wonder, is a "public" identity privileged over a "private" one? These terms you use, *public* and *private*—what are they about? If I were to tell you that I became a "man" by becoming a private man, wouldn't you wonder what the hell I was talking about? You seem to imply that the only identity worth having is the identity that privileges a public identity completely immersed in a middle-class discourse. Like you, I too have mastered a middle-class discourse. Unlike you, I find it disingenuous to separate my "life" into the categories of "public" and "private." Is the discourse of family—Chicano or otherwise—a "private discourse"? Since when? You seem not to be at all aware of the fact that the very notion of "family" has been "publicly" produced. And so you have moved away from family. Should I assume that because your family members' lives have not entered into the public domain that their identities are less authentic? And why is it that you assume that a farmworker's life is not "public"? Capitalism—a public discourse if there ever was one—depends on labor. In what sense are the workers' lives

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that you speak about in “Complexion” private? Is it because they have not mastered English? You say you have become a public man—self-made in a public language—English. But isn’t Spanish a public language? All languages are public, Richard. But the talented “individual” wants only to be an “individual”—insists on it. You have become middle-class without so much as analyzing and critiquing that powerful and complex word: “But I write of one life only. My own. If my story is true, I trust it will resonate with significance for other lives. Finally, my history deserves public notice as no more than this: a parable for the life of its reader. Here is the life of a middle class man” (7). The romance of it is too much for me to bear. You have exchanged one identity for another and cloaked yourself in a rhetoric that denies the complex and unequal positions we occupy in this very complicated material world. Escape is not possible. But you are enamored of the image of escape and you embrace the long literary traditions in which you base your aesthetic: “The world is too much with us,” the world is only the place where “ignorant armies clash by night” (especially the ignorant armies that battle for bilingual education and affirmative action). There is no community possible for you. There is only exile. There is only that aesthetic gesture that valorizes the alienation of the enlightened individual. This is an old story, Richard. It will not save you. It will not save anyone.

While the words Chicano and Chicana have lost many of the militant connotations they used to hold for me, I still think the terms signify a person who is unhappy and angry with life here and prone to extremism. I know I’m wrong; even my 1974 copy of the Merriam Webster Dictionary describes Chicano as an American of Mexican descent. That describes me, but my sixties baggage says it doesn’t.

Prejudice and discrimination will always exist: gender, ethnicity, height and weight, level of education, your alma mater, etc. etc. ad nauseam. People like to hate anyone different from them; ethnocentrism insists that “my way” is the only way. At the ripe old age of forty-three, I realize what can and cannot be accomplished in my life or in my country. The best way for me to help my fellow Mexicans to partake of their fair share in this country is to convince them of the power of education. I can encourage them to stay in school, help them fill out forms for financial aid, enroll in college, teach Chicano literature and history, be proud of their heritage and stand up for it, but realize that realistically more can be accomplished with the system than without it. My husband and I have led a good life, in part because we

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are both well-educated college graduates, and we try to avoid the idiots of all colors who discriminate. I honestly feel that if I share my life experiences and those of my many Mexican friends with my students and let them know that higher education will open the doors that are shut by ethnicity, then I will have succeeded in helping my people, much more than the angry rhetoric of the 60s Chicanos ever did. Actions speak louder than words.

Like Rodriguez, many Chicanos have come to the conclusion that identity politics is the only game in town. (The conservatives who have appropriated Rodriguez's writing must be reminded at every turn that Mr. Rodriguez has built a career around identity politics.) Why is identity politics inescapable? Because we live in a shitty, disgusting world that produces and reproduces appalling inequalities, a society that helps to create suspicions of "others." The politics of identity cannot be separated from these inequalities. Identity politics in the workplace, for all its disturbing problematics, is at least a recognition that we live in a racist society and a demonstration of a willingness to meet and confront that racist society with solutions. I cannot take opponents of affirmative action seriously, not because affirmative action is so delightfully free of "prejudice" and "discrimination," and not because I seriously believe that affirmative action is going to usher in the just world order we have all been awaiting since the day Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden, but because opponents of affirmative action offer no real solutions to those inequalities (which are undeniably, but not exclusively, race and gender based). We ought to have at least learned by now that an objective merit system does not exist. Trying to hire the best person for the job is like judging a literary contest: for every judge, there is a different deserving winner, and each judge will insist that his or her only criterion is "good writing."

Chicano identity is only in part based on the material culture that is formed by the meeting of Mexico and the United States. Chicano identity is ultimately about politics. I do not consider myself a radical (though in the age of Proposition 187 and Newt Gingrich, I certainly qualify as one), but a Chicano identity is radical in this one sense: it refuses to be completely contained by that homogeneous, devouring word *American*. People who are overinvested in a nationalistic identity are right to be suspicious of Chicanos.

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What about the word Chicano? I have always had a problem with this word. I think because it used to have a negative connotation that involved the Chicano movement of the 60s and 70s. I have always called myself a Mexican American and clearly deny any association with the word Chicana. Until recently I have started to have a problem calling myself a Mexican American. I am at a point in my life where I want to desperately find an identity and call myself accordingly. I have searched within, and asked myself why the word Chicano bothers me. I cannot come up with a valid reason to justify my prejudice. . . . I enrolled this semester in a cultural identity class hoping to find my true identity. We have had to read many books written by Chicano authors. . . . I remember the first day of class we were asked to present ourselves to the class. The professor had placed many words on the blackboard that referred to Mexican Americans. He instructed us to use some of those words in our presentations of ourselves. As we neared the end of the presentations, I noted that not everyone used the word Chicano(a) to describe themselves. This perplexed me even further.

. . . As the weeks go by and I continue to read the struggles that my people, the Mexican people that live in the United States, have struggled, I myself have stirred my heart and my soul. Slowly I find myself admitting to myself that calling myself a Chicana would not be so bad. On the contrary, I am starting to feel great pride in my Chicano Culture.

When I call myself a Chicano, I do not do so unproblematically. Do I privilege the culture to which I was born? Yes. Do I do so out of nostalgia? No. Do I overprivilege my culture? Sometimes. Do I resent gringos? Sometimes. Do I *hate* gringos? No. Do I realize that white or light skin is overprivileged in the country in which I live? Yes. Am I enraged by people who refuse to acknowledge that fact? Absolutely. Am I an essentialist? No.

I live on a border between Mexico and the United States. I sometimes sneer (perhaps unfairly) at Latinos who think the border is only a metaphor. What is so radical about using a very material culture as a literary device to describe an individual's psychological state? I know border culture intimately, the anxieties and mistrust that the very fact of living here raises in people. But I refuse to romanticize my culture. I am fond of saying that I don't do hat dances. In my writings, there is no nostalgia—the people represented there are not poor but happy and they do not lean on cacti. I am not ignorant of other cultures, other traditions, other ways of talking. I am neither provincial nor insulated

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nor blind to the other discourses that have formed me. I am not a separatist. I am not an extremist. If I wear *Chicano* as if it were a badge, I do so because “to live is to take sides” and it does not seem an unreasonable thing to side with the class and the ethnic group that produced me. On the other hand, Chicano identity has nothing to do with particular cultural characteristics that an individual must have (or attain) in order to be that thing called Chicano. *I am not a neo-Platonist, I am not an essentialist, I am not a cultural purist.* I realize the pitfalls of identity labels (though I reject such easy metaphors that imply an identity — any identity — is something that is facile, put on like a shirt and just as easily exchanged depending on the weather, the mood, or the occasion).

I am Mexican American and until recently, Chicano conjured images of cholos, tattooed, with thick, black mustaches; low riders; brown skin and dark hair. This prejudice is rooted in an ill-fated first encounter with Chicano and my subsequent actions.

My first encounter happened when I was eight and the year was 1974. My father was stationed in Hawaii and we lived in base housing. In hindsight, the military is an integrated society. I blended among the black, yellow, red, and brown children of the military housing. Thus, I didn't need a category to put myself into. However, I was unprepared for the first encounter.

Of all things, the encounter centers around a T-shirt. The T-shirt showed a clenched, brown fist and the words “Chicano Power!” encircling the fist. Where this shirt came from I don't remember. Nonetheless, I had it and wore it . . . once.

On that day, oblivious to any implications this shirt might have, me and a group of friends were walking down a street of our neighborhood, heading toward a ditch that was our playground of choice. We approached four men gathered by a car.

“Chicano power!” one of them blared at us, or I thought us, but realized it was at me. All four men were looking at only me. I noticed they were Mexican Americans. I didn't know exactly what Mexican American, or for that matter Chicano, meant at the time. But because they had dark skin and hair like me, and I was told that I was Mexican American, I deduced they were Mexican Americans, too. One of the men pointed at my shirt. “Chicano power,” he said. I looked down and saw the upside-down fist and words.

“Que pasa, amigo?” another one said.

“Are you a little Chicano?” a third asked with a big grin on his face.

I noticed they all had on tan pants and white T-shirts. I figured they were G.I.s because of their close-to-the-scalp haircuts. Their white heads looked

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odd atop brown faces. The silent one stepped toward me and I saw a large tattoo on the inside of his forearm. I couldn't make out what it was, but it was black. He didn't say anything at first, just stared at me. Then he asked, "¿Como te llamas?" I didn't understand, so I stayed quiet. He shrugged his shoulders and stepped back to his group. The other three men laughed and one of them said something in Spanish. It became apparent that they had forgotten about me and continued their conversation. My friends and I hurriedly walked off.

My friends nicknamed me "Chicano" and I hated it. The rest of the day, and days following, I heard "Chicano this" and "Chicano that." "Hey, Chicano!" greeted me as I walked to school the next morning. In my mind I seethed with anger and it grew into hate. I didn't want anything to do with those men, their tattoos and their strange language. I took that terrible shirt and threw it into the backyard storage closet. It disappeared among the other rags.

But the fist and words of that cursed shirt became unseen tatoos across my chest. While my nickname disappeared in a few days, these invisible blemishes bore into my body. They were part of my psyche. My mind muddled with questions I never asked.

In so many class discussions, many of my students predictably arrive at the hugely overstated humanistic democratic dictum, "We are all human beings." No need for Chicanos in their world.

It's a curious thing that I don't consider myself "white." I'm clearly some kind of Caucasian — to look at me. I don't look like an Indian. Where is my *mestizaje*? Does my *mestizaje* reside on my skin? In my blood? In my heart? In the way that I think? In the way that I speak? I have a brother who is darker. I have another brother who has blue eyes and light-brown hair. I have European blood. Is there such a thing as European blood? And if there is, is it pure? I never asked these questions when I was a boy. In southern New Mexico, the world where I grew up, my ethnic/racial identity was not questioned. We were *Mexicanos*. The gringos were *Americanos*. Ours was a rural, insular, poor community. Food on the table was more important than arguing identities. All we knew was the world did not belong to us. It belonged to someone else.

I became a cholo when I was thirteen years old. Now, while for many people this seems to be too young of an age to become anything but a seventh grader, anyone who has lived in the varrio will recognize the fact that

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thirteen seems to be the age that most young Mexicanos "come of age." Entering La Cholada meant entering into a lifestyle that for many varrio youths is inevitable. But don't get me wrong. La Cholada, while holding true to many myths, can also become a valuable learning experience for the raza youth that grow up within it. One can come to think of it as a sort of summer camp for the young urban Mexicanos that can't afford or don't fit into regular summer camps. An urban Boy Scouts of sorts, where patches are replaced with scars and tattoos. And just as in the Boy Scouts, La Cholada teaches its young members to survive in a world that seems wild to them; a world that will eat them up and destroy them if they are not properly trained to handle it. . . . It is this urban lifestyle that has created the beautiful murals that adorn the walls all over the nation and it is this lifestyle that has formed such powerful organizations as the Brown Berets. But most important, it is this lifestyle that has helped to create an identity for its youth. An identity that the raza can grab on to and take pride in. La Cholada has helped to advance the identity of the Chicano and thus has created a pride in a people. A pride that encouraged them to struggle for their self-determination and well-being.

A graduate student (white) asked me one day how my seminar on Chicano literature was going. "Are you making good little Chicanos?" A joke. A bad joke. I said nothing. He noticed I wasn't laughing. He changed the subject. He is an intelligent man, serious, well-read, thoughtful about many things.

My Chicano literature class that semester was full: twelve Mexican Americans, two non-Mexican Americans (both women, one of whom was British and had grown up in Africa and had immigrated to the United States and the other of whom had grown up in Latin America), no white males. The title of the class was "Chicano Literature, Culture and Identity." I was frustrated by the ethnic and racial makeup of the class. Don't "white" people who live quite literally on the border and who live in a city where 70 percent of the population is Mexican American and attend a university whose Mexican American student population is greater than 60 percent read Chicano literature? Don't they need to know anything about Chicano culture? Chicano identity? *I don't read gringo poets. You will read gringo poets or you will drop the course.*

As the years went by, I learned to love my culture, my people, my color. It did not happen overnight. But to accept being a CHICANA took great pains. My only consolation was found in the stories of those who shared my pain,

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who had lived my sorrow, who had lived my disillusionment. Somehow, their stories strengthened me, everywhere I went and in everything I did. It reminded me of how much others had suffered and of how I was in a way indebted to them. I knew I could not let it go just at that. If those before could not then I had too. And all the anger that I felt, at one time, served to empower me. I found my strength and I knew my name. . . . CHICANA.

CHICANA is the name of the person who questions, who challenges, who dares, who risks. The name of the person who will not assimilate, who will not conform. This is what my father tried to teach me when I was a little girl. And this is what I learned. It is the name that says I am and will be. The word recognizes the power in the people. It embodies the anger of being discriminated against. It reminds us of how far we have to go, but does not let us forget how far others have brought us. It is the history of our people in one word.

I often thumb through Gloria Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands/La Frontera*.³ Ever since I first read this book, I have had a running battle with Anzaldúa. I applaud her political agenda. Unlike that of Richard Rodriguez, her writing cannot be easily appropriated by the Right. She comprehends that identity is formed by a multiplicity of discourses that conflict with one another. That conflict takes root in our bodies. Like W. E. B. Du Bois, Anzaldúa intuits a split consciousness, and she scrutinizes that (self) consciousness. She confronts her sexuality, she confronts a male-dominated world, she confronts a racist society. She challenges an academic discourse by insisting on a more personal-poetic discourse. She speaks unapologetically with the voice of a woman, and it is not surprising that so many women (though her audience is not exclusively female) have championed her work. Hers is the voice of a strong feminist who seeks to empower, but her voice is not the voice of a separatist. I have no quarrels with Anzaldúa's politics. We are on the same side—she is an ally. If Richard Rodriguez is completely mortgaged to an ideology that privileges the category of "individual," than Gloria Anzaldúa is on the other end of the pole: she is the champion of communitarian thinking—something I am reticent to criticize. But ultimately, the basis for the formation of that "community" is unsettling. I find her book engaging, unsatisfying, overly optimistic, and mired in contradictions that cannot easily be overlooked.

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In foraging for a usable past, she fetishizes Aztec and Indian culture. Finding solutions (and identities) by appropriating indigenous mythologies is disturbing and very problematic—but even if this were not so, Anzaldúa's project offers very little to Chicanos and Chicanas who live in mostly urban settings. At the very least, her "solutions" are inappropriate for a late-twentieth-century audience. Added to that, appropriating Aztec and/or any Indian culture in order to create a new identity is not so different from Englishmen appropriating the "classical" culture of the ancient Greeks as their own. To be sure, Anzaldúa is more closely related to indigenous culture and history than any Englishman ever was to the culture and history of the ancient Greeks. I, like Anzaldúa, have a mixed ancestry. My great-grandmother was a Taurumaran Indian from Mexico. But for me to claim her material culture as mine rings hollow. I was raised in a far different environment, and I was formed by that environment. It is too late for me to forge a return to my great-grandmother's culture. This does not mean that I am unconcerned about the deforestation that is destroying the Taurumaran people of northern Mexico, but I cannot mistake myself for them. I occupy a different position from indigenous peoples and I cannot borrow their identities. In wanting to distance herself from dominant European discourses, which she views as dualistic, oppressive, and racist, Anzaldúa gestures toward mythologies and cultures that I cannot believe are truly her own. Acknowledgment of mixed ancestry is not in itself problematic; it is far better to acknowledge the competing cultures we literally inherit than to base our identities on ridiculous (and dangerous) notions of "purity" and "pedigree" such as those that gave rise to Nazi Germany and the current wars of ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe. I sympathize with Anzaldúa and I understand very well the impulse that lies behind Anzaldúa's strategy. The subtitle of her book is *The New Mestiza*. By calling herself a mestiza, she takes herself out of a European mind-set. She refuses to refer to herself as "Hispanic"—to do so would be to embrace an identity that admits no competing discourses, that admits only a European history and erases any indigenous consciousness. Her impulse is to defy that her "Indianness" has been destroyed. But her "Indianness" has been destroyed—just as mine has.

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I do not find it productive to build a politics and an identity centered on “loss.”

Anzaldúa, unfortunately, falls into the dualistic thinking she so eloquently critiques. To categorize the world into “European” and “indigenous” and try to bridge those two worlds under *mestizaje* is to fall squarely into “dualistic” thinking that does not do justice to the complex society in which we live.

“Consciousness” is ultimately what Anzaldúa’s project is all about. If we but immerse ourselves in a particular mythology (a non-European, nonlinear discourse), then our sick body politic will be healed (*healing* is a totem word for Anzaldúa).

It begins where it ends.
 I descend into black earth,
 dark primordial slime,
 no longer repellent to me,
 nor confining.
 The four winds
 fire welds splinter with splinter.
 I find my kindred spirits.

The moon eclipses the sun.
La diosa lifts us.
 We don the feathered mantle
 and change our fate. (198–99)

This is how Anzaldúa ends her book, her final solution. I can hardly disagree with Anzaldúa that we live in a society desperately in need of healing—though I would not choose to use that language. She firmly believes that *La diosa*, her goddess figure (whose identity remains vague but is based on the Aztec goddess Coatlicue), will “lift us.” She suggests that a return to indigenous ways of thinking will “change our fate.” But I find it impossible to appreciate this solution even while I understand the gesture. This is no solution. This is an escape, *not a confrontation*. To return to the “traditional” spiritualities that were in place before the arrival of Cortés and company makes very little sense. The material conditions that gave rise to the Aztec’s religion no longer exist. Anzaldúa’s language, her grammar, her talk are ultimately completely mortgaged

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to a nostalgia that I find unacceptable. The resurrection of the old gods (be they “white” or “indigenous”) is a futile and impossible task. To invoke old gods as a tool against oppression and capitalism is to choose the wrong weapon.

Yes, the Chicano and the Chicana have always taken care of growing things and the land. Again I see the four of us kids getting off the school bus, changing into our work clothes, walking into the field with Papi and Mami, all six of us bending to the ground. Below our feet, under the earth lie the watermelon seeds. We cover them with paper plates, putting *terremotes* on top of the plates to keep them from being blown away. Next day or the next, we remove the plates, bare the tiny green shoots to the elements. They survive and grow, give fruit hundreds of times the size of the seed. We water them and hoe them. We harvest them. The vines dry, rot, are plowed under. Growth, decay, birth. The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, *renacimientos de la tierra madre*.

This land was Mexican once
was Indian always
and is.
And will be again. (91)

This passage, which ends a section in Anzaldúa’s book titled “La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness,” is deeply disturbing to me. The pastoral tradition that she reproduces is overstated, reductive, and offensive. Like Anzaldúa, I, too, worked the land while I was growing up. Alongside my family, I picked cotton and onions, and I have no wish to represent that particular part of my life romantically in the way Anzaldúa does. The politics of “picking seasons” in this country is disgusting, and the entire system it is based on is certainly indecent, and almost entirely corrupt. The phrase “the Chicano and Chicana have always taken care of growing things” turns us into rural peasants with a deep consciousness with regard to our relationship to Mother Earth. The statement needn’t be deconstructed because it deconstructs itself. More disturbingly, Anzaldúa engages in an imperialist discourse of ownership over the land with her ending “poem.” The “land,” whatever it was, was never “Indian,” was never “Mexican.” And in terms of ownership, the land will never be returned to the indigenous peoples who

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lived on it before the conquest. It will *never* be again. The conquest was cruel, harsh, and irrevocable. Whatever the future looks like, it will not resemble the past.

As a Chicano artist I became concerned with how, in search for my Chicano origin, I would re-create or re-present the image of Mexico. Then after surveying my fiction, I learned that I have treated Mexico's image in my Chicano writings into three categories: (a) the pre-Columbian Indian, (b) the Mestizo, and (c) Paradise lost.

My maternal Abuela, a Zapoteca, told me that Chicano must have come from the Aztec's original name, Meschicano. These Indians she told me had come from the mythical Aztlan. Abuela hated Spaniards. Her Spanish husband, my grandfather, made her sleep on the floor next to his bed. And on the day he brought home a white woman, Abuela had to sleep on the kitchen floor so that the white woman could occupy Abuelo's bed. To Abuela, the Spaniard, the Frenchman, the Englishman, and later the gringo represent foreign powers that have violated the indigenous peoples. European culture is synonymous with capitalism, imperialism, and blatant oppression. Although she married my grandfather, she has never absolved him for being white.

To Abuela, Mexico was the cradle of a new race. Her daughter, my mother, represented the mestizaje process. And for me, the Chicano artist, mi Mama is a racial symbol. After my Spanish abuelo had exiled my abuela, Mother was reared by her Spanish grandmother and Spanish aunts. It wasn't until Mom had turned sixteen that she discovered that her grandmother was not her mother. A jealous cousin made it known to her; in fact, Mom was the only one of her sisters and brothers who was brown. Afterward, Mom crossed the river where the Indios lived. She was never allowed to go there. Now she knew why. She went into the village and found her Indian grandmother and grandfather. They embraced her and cried because she looked so much like their daughter. They showed their grandchild a yellow photograph of her mother for the first time. My mother makes my Chicano mestizaje undeniable.

Abuela didn't plan to remain in the United States. But with each passing year she found herself working in the canneries of Nebraska and Illinois, dreaming of returning to Mexico. In her dreams and nostalgia, Mexico became the longed-for past. She remembered her village where she ran freely. Her memories of Mexico were beautiful, but to me they were imaginary since as a boy I had never been there. I recall the arguments that Mom and Abuela had. Mother argued that Abuela's village as she remembered it no longer existed. Mom would grow angry with Abuela for fostering the traditional values and images of Mexico that had disappeared long ago. In contrast, Mom had known Mexico as a land of oppression, racism, poverty, and

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immorality. To Abuela, Mexico was Paradise calling her back. To her daughter, Mexico was a Paradise lost.

The idealization of the "Paradise lost" prepared the way for my encounter with Mexico. Growing up with Abuela, I heard the tales of a Mexico that falls farther and farther from the border. Nonetheless, it is where my races are. It is where my Chicaneness originated. It is the land of pre-Columbian Indians and where the birth of a new race took hold, a place that was once a paradise, a paradise perhaps lost forever. Mexico calls for my encounter with it.

Like Richard Rodriguez, I have become "middle-class." I do not wear that identity with honor. I am almost ashamed of it—given my background, it would be surprising if I wore that label without wincing. I was recently speaking to a reading club about my novel. I mentioned something about my ambivalence toward money—I am sometimes ashamed of having some. "Is that a Hispanic thing?" a woman asked. "No," I said, "it's a class thing." But there is no denying the way I live my material existence. I do not live a peasant's lifestyle—nor do I wish to. I do not believe anybody should live *that* lifestyle. But when I admit to being middle-class, I do not mean that I am middle-class in the same way as someone who was born into it—or someone who stepped "down" into it. And I certainly do not privilege that particular identity over others. *Chicano*, for some, is a class label—and because they associate that word with an "underclass," they cannot flee fast enough from it. But I refuse to associate *Chicano* with a particular class (though I must confess, I know no rich persons who refer to themselves as Chicanos).

What makes the label of Chicano particularly powerful in contrast to other labels is that the movement gained a voice in the wake of the civil rights movement. Chicanismo gave expression to the oppression and alienation of their lives. On the heels of the civil rights movement the label became to refer to a political conscience which proclaimed identity, pride, self-esteem, and they now wanted a slice of the American pie, they wanted pan con su cafesito. Their struggle was against the establishment; their acceptance was to be achieved either through peaceful or violent means. Chicanos were striving to assert their rights as individuals and human beings, such as the case of Cesar Chavez and the Delano strikes, in which they tried to assert humane working conditions, fair wages, and political recognition. . . .

. . . In the 80s people were more open to accepting the values of the system of capitalism, free enterprise, and political structures. . . . Americans from Mex-

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ican descent are now found in engineering, business, medicine, and science; the idea is to stay away from art, philosophy, all those liberal arts degrees. Now we have people labeling themselves Mexican American and rejecting the label Chicano. They want a piece of the pie but by playing within the rules. Now it is bagel with an espresso.

I think the term Chicano is now an option employed by educated and cultivated Americans of Mexican descent, who are still willing to give the illusion that they still believe in La Causa. At best we are an ineffective group. Most feel that they are just plain ol' Americans, not Chicanos, not Mexican Americans. This generic label justifies whatever gains they have made and separates them from the roots which still remain underground and oppressed.

Patricia and I learned to make tamales this year. My mother and my aunt came over to our house, and they passed on their learning, their art. We gathered some friends and made a day of it. We laughed, we talked, we enjoyed the entire production. We made an altar for *el día de los muertos*, lighting candles to our dead relatives, and it was a ritual we were comfortable with. We keep *santos* in our house, we go to Mass. Patricia and I were both raised in the generation when the word *Chicano* was something powerful and sacred — something to be whispered, something to be shouted. My group of friends threw a party when Nixon resigned. We thought we had won a great war. We celebrated too early — he resurrected before he died.

Patricia and I, we were raised in a particular time, in a particular place. In some ways, we are completely different people from who we were in those days. In other ways, we have remained close to the culture that gave us our names. We extend the rituals we were raised in, reproduce them, but reproduce them differently from the way these rituals were handed to us. The material culture we were raised in helps to center us. It is not surprising we wear *Chicano/a* with ease.

We live in the same area where we were raised. I live forty-two miles from my hometown of Las Cruces, New Mexico. Patricia has returned to her hometown of El Paso. But it would be a lie to say we returned home the same as when we left, and it would be an even bigger lie to say we returned to the same place. We cannot wear our cultural identity in the same way as our grandparents, in the same way as our parents — nor do we want to. We live in a vastly different world from that

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of my parents, and we want to be a part of that world. And we both know that being a Chicano is not just a neutral description of the cultural borderlands created by the meeting of two countries. *Chicano* implies a politics, and neither of us wishes to run from our politics. We want to struggle with our lives, we want to understand them. We don't want to run. We know that nothing is simple — not even the art of making tamales. That art will not save us. It is, nevertheless, a necessary ritual. A material reminder of a material history.

I was listening to the evening news when Tom Brokaw announced the death of César Chávez. Even now, I can hardly express what that man meant to me, what he means for me still. As I sat in front of the television set that day, I was surprised to find that I was weeping. Perhaps I was remembering the journey that has been my life, and the place César Chávez had played in my coming to political consciousness. So much of his life's work was exposing the ugly way we go about doing business in this country. I am sorely tempted to romanticize his life, but such a romanticization would do him, and his cause, a great disservice. It is an easy thing to admire César Chávez. It is not an easy thing to continue to struggle with hard questions. Too often, we soften our own experiences, react to them, and forget to *think* about them. Maybe that day, listening to the news of César Chávez's death, I was weeping not for the loss of that man's life, but because I wondered where the struggles of the civil rights movement have taken us. For me, it has been a painful journey, no less for me than for Anzaldúa, Rodríguez, and the students whose voices I have interwoven into this essay. But examining my own identity, my own relationship to the word *Chicano*, I must refuse to fetishize my own cultural background. Chicano cannot, must not, be simply a marketing label. I detest "radical chic." In fairness to Richard Rodríguez, I too have been accused of benefiting from affirmative action. I criticize him for running away. I have entered the site of struggle. I was born to it. I am one of the combatants. I cannot pretend I am neutral. I cannot pretend that I am above the identity and culture wars of the late twentieth century. I am, at times, a happy warrior — at other times, a reluctant participant. I am sometimes perfectly at ease discussing the

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harsh topics of race and ethnicity. At other times, I am full of rage. And sometimes, I just want to take a hot shower, have a drink, and think of nothing at all. But I always come back to the questions.

What Was It All For, Anyway, César, César Chávez?

It was as if you were born already
Knowing you belonged to the kingdom
Of the working damned, the lost land
Of bent backs where short hoes and pesticides
Were worshipped, adored as if they were
Images of La Reina de los Cielos.

César, genetic memory
Is fine (if you go for that sort
Of thing. So California). But you never knew
When to quit, just never learned how to give up
The brittle bones of the dead. Like some obsessed
Archaeologist, you were always digging up
Another anonymous worker: González. Herrera.
García. Hernández. They only exist now as names
On hieroglyphics, untranslatable into pedestrian
English. And, César, they were all
The same, all from a tribe with a particular
Genealogy, all from a long line of drones
Bred for service, bodies destined for picking,
Bodies with instincts for bending.
Descartes's dictum did not apply.
Not to them. They were not meant for thinking.
They knew only the language of work. And they were
Lucky to have jobs, no? What did they have
Without the labor this fertile country gave?

They died
Of natural causes. You say they died of work.
But work *is* a natural cause, César. Even writers
Die of work. Work. I can hear you laughing.
Nothing personal, I know. Go ahead and
Laugh. And anyway, who taught you how to spell
The word *injustice*? People hate it when you use
A word like that. Such a big word, César.
Too big for you. You, who loved the fight, who
Shoved back when you were shoved, you, César,

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Should have known better, should have used a more
 Flattering strategy. You wore that word out *Injustice*.
 It made you sound accusing and superior. Not smart,
 César, people got nervous. People hated you
 Because you spelled it out — one lettuce
 At a time. You told them what it meant.
 Literate people don't like to be corrected.
 People like food, César. They don't want
 To know where it comes from. Don't politicize
 Picking seasons. Already, They've politicized
 Sex and sexual attractions. And now our Food?

* * * *

You. More popular in death than in life (though
 Some confuse you with that other Latin fighter
 Who fights opponents he can beat. There's a lesson
 There, César). You. Large as the California sun.
 In death. You. Heroes are better manipulated when
 They no longer have a voice to intervene in
 The making of their own mythologies. Listen, César,
 People are lining up just to say they touched you,
 Wiped the sweat off your brow in the days when you
 Were battling Goliath with a sling. *I was there. I
 Marched with him. He was my hero* — and the rest
 Of us listen, nod seriously. Some of us even
 Weep. The ritual is all such good theater.

You're an icon, now,
 Sabes? And nobody gives one damned minimum-wage
 Dollar that you broke your fasts by going
 To communion at your local Catholic Church.
 The Body of Christ did not save your causes.

I have a picture.
 Of you. I ripped it from a glossy, New York
 Mag. The man who took it, more famous than you.
 You don't look like a saint or a prophet. You
 Look like an ordinary mestizo who is fashionably
 Unfashionable. A star, César. Now, no one
 Knows why you fought.

In the Lone Star State, *Hopwood v. the University of Texas* threatens to
 end any "race"-based scholarships in the state of Texas. Reverse discrim-

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ination—that's what they call it. If people without jobs resent people who are rich, is that reverse discrimination? If the worker resents the landowner, is that reverse discrimination? If a woman who is raped detests the man who raped her, is that reverse discrimination? Why is it we refuse to acknowledge that the "affirmative action" debate is based on position and entitlements? Who exactly is entitled to what—and who is positioned (regardless of merit) to receive those entitlements? There is a group of people (mostly white and always upper- and middle-class) who firmly believe that they are the true heirs—that they are entitled to the riches of America. When the entitled are threatened, they fight back. They call the rest of us racists because we, too, want a piece of the inheritance.

I did not grow up with that sense of entitlement. I was one of the barbarians at the gate. I have to laugh at the anxiety caused by affirmative action, refuse this hateful accusation that I hold a job only because I am a Chicano: in the fall of 1992, I became the second "Chicano" to be hired in the English Department at the University of Texas at El Paso—this in a university where more than 60 percent of the students are "Hispanic." Call me cynical, but if our M.F.A. program in creative writing had not had a bilingual dimension attached, I doubt very seriously that I would have landed this job. I have nothing to base this on *except our past hiring practices*.

Once, after a reading, a young woman gave me a note in which she pleaded with me to stop "criticizing" the United States. "Criticize Mexico instead—criticize your own country." The young woman must have been confused as to the country of my genesis. Mexico is not my place—the United States is *my* place (and I resent having to make that point). It is perhaps too easy for me to criticize the country in which I was born and in which I live, easy because I detest "nationalisms" (though I will not pretend to be free of all nationalist discourses and influences). But isn't it true that it is a nationalist discourse that is most offended by the name *Chicano*? A nationalist discourse demands complete acquiescence. You are allowed only one name: American. We are all so sure we know what that label means. To some it means erasure.

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No one is born with an “essential” identity. Identities are produced, and they make sense, they have meaning, only in the cultural context of their production. I spent the summer of 1985 in Tanzania. Tanzanians referred to me as *Mzungu* (the word in Swahili for European). I was not differentiated from the other *Mzungus*. To them, I was as white as my “white” friends from Oklahoma and Kansas. And, living there for a summer, I felt “white.” I felt European. *I was European*. It was a painful and difficult thing to admit to myself. I studied for four years at the University of Louvain in Belgium. I never felt very “American” when I was growing up in southern New Mexico, but in Belgium, I felt American. *I was American*. That, too, was a painful and difficult thing to admit to myself. *Chicano* in those years meant nothing. There was no context, no social or political necessity for that identity. But it was my time in Europe and my summer in Africa that taught me that I did not belong in those places. I was a foreigner there—and would always be a foreigner. I came to the conclusion that I had a people—that I belonged to a people, a community. When I returned to the United States, *Chicano* became important again because in the place to which I had returned, the inequalities of my society were everywhere to be found. My aim as a person, as a citizen, as a writer, as a teacher, as a Chicano, as a critic, has had, at least for the past ten years, a political project: to help create a “radical democracy.” Like my students, I would like to live in a world where “we are all equal,” a world where fragmentation isn’t the operative *modus operandi*. I know this is utopian thinking (but I was one of those people who loved Karl Marx precisely because he was a utopian thinker—in 1996 are we allowed to invoke his name?). If I were to let go of my “Chicano” identity, then I would be complicit in the lie that we have arrived at the day of equality. Chicano—the word echoes with a particular history, but that word also exists to condemn our social and political failures. Chicano—it is an identity that waits for the day that it is no longer necessary.

Notes

1. This and other italicized portions of this narrative are excerpts taken from students’ responses to an assignment in a “Chicano Literature, Culture, and Identity” graduate seminar that I taught in the spring of 1994 at the University of Texas

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at El Paso. I asked each of the participants in the class to address in writing the following topic: "My relationship to the word *Chicano*." I informed my students that I was working on an essay exploring Chicano identity and asked their permission to publish some of their responses. Each student was more than willing to participate in such a project.

2. Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (New York: Bantam, 1983), 170–72. Page numbers for further quotations from this work appear in parentheses in the text.

3. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987). Page numbers for further quotations from this work appear in parentheses in the text.