

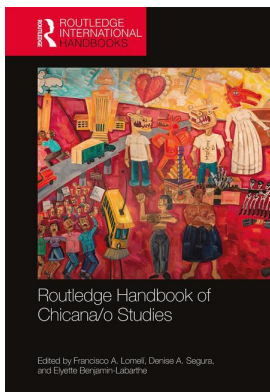
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“Aztlán es una fábula”

Navigating postnational spaces in Chicana/o culture¹

Marc Priewe

At the peak of the Chicano civil rights movement, students and activists convened in Denver, Colorado, to propose *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, the political and cultural manifesto that propagated a Chicano nationalism based on the collective history of subjugation, disempowerment, and cultural denigration of Mexicans in the United States. The plan, by demanding the separation of the Southwest from the United States, constituted a nationalist blueprint and declaration of independence by the “bronze people.”² During the heyday of Chicano cultural nationalism, “Aztlán” became the central signifier for conceptualizing a specific, exclusionary ethnic essence. By spatially and culturally linking the geographies of what are now the U.S. Southwest and Northern Mexico, Aztlán represented the place of pre-border origin and thus the spiritual and cultural unity between Mexicans on both sides of the border and Chicana/os. For the time being, the national and racial visions encapsulated in the concepts of Aztlán and *chicanismo* were important for Chicana/o identity formations, because contrary to the generally negative representation of Mexican Americans in U.S. mainstream discourse, the two concepts designated Chicanas/os as the original inhabitants of the contemporary Southwest and accentuated the positive aspects of the *mestizo* heritage.³ Seen from a critical perspective, however, the discourse of Aztlán nationalism merely reversed the Eurocentric binary oppositions of Us/Them, Mexico/USA and, by the same token, marked Anglo-America as Mexico’s negative, racialized Other. Contrary to more recent enunciations that foreground borderland hybridity and transculturation, the discourse of Chicano nationalism explicitly countered and excluded elements from Anglo American culture and thus denied the latter’s role in the constitution of contemporary Chicana/o subjects. In addition, Chicano nationalist ideology largely negated and suppressed the expressive voices of LGBT and/or women writers and artists until the mid-1970s.

Since then, the nationalist master narrative of Aztlán has largely lost its grip on Chicana/o politics and aesthetics, not least due to the demographic transformations in urban communities. Since the 1980s, migrations from Latin America and Asia have decisively transformed many American cities into conglomerations of “transnational suburbs” (Davis 2000, p. 80), especially in the Southwest. For instance, with the extension of Mexican families or even whole villages to the North, “transmigrants” are often no longer at home in one nation-state, and no longer necessarily shed their national allegiance upon arrival, but rather live in a state of physical and intercultural transit between (at least) two localities.⁴ Due to modern telecommunications

and low airfares, relatively frequent exchanges between communities of destination and origin are possible, thus enabling a continuous exchange of cultural norms and practices. Hence, the increasingly global phenomenon of a “portable nationality” (Anderson 1996, p. 9), in which people on the move retain major elements of their national identity and cultural practices, has, especially in Southern California, caused the growing erosion of the hyphen that historically yoked the nation and the state.

As a result of the arrival of Central American, Caribbean, Asian, and South American migrants since the 1980s, Los Angeles has been transformed into a postnational urban zone, one that is no longer solely aligned with the culture and politics of the United States but whose growing multiethnic population maintains significant ties to another nation–state. In addition, the Pacific Rim megalopolis contains old and produces new borderized spaces within its ever-expanding city limits (Leclerc & Dear 1999). That is, while borders between nation–states have become both increasingly permeable and fortified, other borders and border zones have been erected and disseminated between ethnic groups living in the globalized cityscape of Los Angeles. These borders often come in the shape of freeways, rivers, and gated communities or are constituted by surveillance, legislation (e.g., Propositions 187 and 209), and discursive practices such as anti-immigrant scapegoating in the U.S. media and public sphere (Davis 2000).⁵

These manifold border conditions, and the particular identity formations they induce, “post-nationalize” many (although certainly not all) Chicana/o cultural expressions, both in the realms of the everyday and high art. One of the characteristics of Chicana/o postnational narratives from Southern California is that they originate from, and represent spaces created by, collisions and interactions between Third World and First World cultures in urban space. Furthermore, postnational texts share a general epistemological and aesthetic itinerary that challenges the conflation of power centers and essentialist ideologies. Not only do they represent what Jürgen Habermas has called “postnational constellations” (Habermas 1998, p. 95), they also employ expressive strategies that transgress traditional conventions and tenets often used for narrating the nation. In doing so, postnational narratives seek to reveal and challenge the exclusionary practices of national discourses, and thus aim at subverting the nation’s patriarchal, racial, and heterosexual design (cf. Rowe 2000, p. 3; Pease 1997, pp. 3, 8).⁶

In the following I trace the current transformations of Aztlán – as national symbol and narrative – by focusing on two of its rewritings within the context of Chicana/o Los Angeles’ cultural landscapes. In *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (1991), John Rechy depicts the journey of a subaltern Mexican American woman through the urban “*transfrontera* contact zone” (Saldívar 1997, p. 13).⁷ Utterly suffused by multinational capitalism and the erection of new borders, this contact space determines the protagonist’s struggles for psychological, cultural, and economic survival in the *barrios* of East Los Angeles and Hollywood. What is more, Amalia Gómez’s navigation through the border zones of Los Angeles concurs with her psychological rite of passage, at the end of which she develops a postnational sense of self.

Musician/performer Robert López, a.k.a. El Vez, a Mexican American Elvis impersonator, undertakes a different project of debunking and redefining national narratives. Covering the music of Elvis Presley, hybridizing it with a global *mélange* of musical citations, and rewriting the lyrics from a specifically Chicana/o perspective, El Vez textualizes postnational spaces by transgressing the thematic, stylistic, and aesthetic norms that have previously defined a “genuine” Chicana/o text. Taken together, the voices of López and Rechy refuse to function as cultural disseminators for the nationalist project epitomized by the notion of Aztlán; instead, they intervene in the national imaginary by construing previously marginalized positions marked by gender, sexual preference, and ethnic allegiance as vital components of contemporary Chicana/o communities in Southern California. Furthermore, Rechy’s and López’s visual, textual, and auidal

narratives question essentialist affiliations and aesthetic tenets embedded in both Chicana/o and Anglo American national discourses and, in doing so, attempt to offer new cultural routes through the ever-shifting, hybrid, and postnational spaces of Southern California.

John Rechy's fabulation of nationality

John Rechy's ninth novel, *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, narrates the tribulations and miraculous recovery of a Mexican American protagonist who has been exploited and repeatedly abused by men and society at large. The heroine, a simple, yet self-assured and proud character, has moved from El Paso, Texas to Los Angeles, California during the late 1980s and, at the time of narration, resides in a decaying multiethnic neighborhood in Hollywood with her two adolescent children (of whom one turns out to be a male prostitute) and her partner (who sexually assaults her daughter). Early in the text, the narrator juxtaposes Amalia's arrival in Los Angeles with an apocalyptic vision of the global city:

In the distant horizon a fierce fire raged and coated the sun with a veil of smoke. The red, yellow, and green of traffic lights glowed strangely out of the film of ashes. Hot, shrieking wind whipped into the city as Amalia stood outside the Los Angeles bus depot.

(Rechy 1993, p. 38)

Amalia is about to enter a Pynchonesque space of entropy in which gloomy decay and lack of human communication loom large in an urban setting heading for cultural inertia and heat-death. Beginning with her first day in Los Angeles, Amalia's perception of the city also evokes what Mike Davis terms "a Book of the Apocalypse theme park" (1998, p. 7). In other words, the protagonist has moved to the real-life city of doom marked by natural and social disasters – floods, earthquakes, riots, suburbanization, urban wild fires, gang violence, high winds, and plagues – as well as by manifold private disasters that threaten the protagonist's worldview, faith in religion, and sense of self.

Using flashbacks and anticipations to depict the plight of the 40-something protagonist, the novel represents those socioeconomic conditions in Los Angeles that prove especially hostile to Mexican American single mothers. The economic logic and spatial apartheid of Amalia's environment demand the constant willingness and ability to move from one section of the city to another in order to survive in the informal economy. This means accepting long hours on buses and knowing the public transit system of the global city by heart; it also forces her to cope with chronic uncertainty about future employment, especially in light of the intra-Latina/o competition in the menial job market. After Amalia's arrival a distant relative offers her access to the social networks of the East Los Angeles *barrio*, but soon she moves from a national (Mexican, Catholic) space to a postnational topos in multiethnic Hollywood with "pockets of other groups – Armenians, Asians, a smattering of black people" (Rechy 1993, p. 74).

The protagonist's transition from gang-infested East Los Angeles to glamorous Hollywood marks a decisive change in her perception of social and national space. Although she feels content and proud living in Hollywood, Amalia is unable to make sense of the contradictions between the imagined worlds of movie production and the real-time experience of gang violence, police brutality, and poverty. The text shows that Hollywood's consensual, largely WASP, and nation-centered dream machine has not only turned into a nightmare for many, especially members of minority groups; it has also been, from its inception, a simulacrum that could easily be displaced and relocated to more affluent and safer parts of the city, the nation, and even the globe. The novel depicts a remaining Third World-like Hollywood district that has undergone

significant social transformations that include the proliferation of a racialized underclass comprised of multiethnic nationals mostly from Latin America and Asia.

Amalia's partial adherence to the American Dream is reinforced in chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5, which begin with, and thus highlight, her stucco bungalow in Hollywood as a sign of economic achievement. The decaying house and the desire for material comfort indicate her internalization of Anglo American cultural norms of social mobility and, at the same time, the crisis experienced by the protagonist and her surrounding social space. Amalia attempts to cope with the deterioration and violence she has experienced since her youth by temporarily merging several discursive and cultural practices from Anglo America, the Chicano movement, religion, and *telenovelas*. However, as the novel shows, her efforts to surmount her tribulations and her endeavors to create improvement in her life can only be successful by means of a phantasmic intervention.

While strolling through her postnational neighborhood, Amalia encounters social borders and contradictions in her immediate environment, where "a well-tended private park" contrasts starkly with the "declining houses, windows smashed, shells of cars left on dirty lawns" (Rechy 1993, p. 111). Through Amalia's eyes, the reader witnesses the other Hollywood, the invisible and silenced part of the American Dream. As an ethnic *flâneuse* through the city, Amalia becomes lost in a surplus of culturally coded signs. The polyglot sights and sounds she perceives on her urban odyssey represent the "tropical" and hybrid makeup of her neighborhood. For instance, she frequently visits "El Bar & Grill," encounters images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and JFK juxtaposed on home altars, witnesses how "Rock music and Mexican ballads wage . . . battle" in the streets, and considers ordering an (oxymoronic) "Crisp Burrito" at Carl's Jr. (Rechy 1993, p. 4, 5, 111). The spaces on and off Sunset Blvd. through which Amalia Gómez strolls in the transit sections of the novel (chapters 6 through 10) are depicted as thoroughly suffused by multinational capitalism. The boulevard itself represents the main artery of urban desire, attraction, commodification, and crisis; it also functions as a metaphor of the overall cultural hybridization and economic decline in urban Latina/o communities.

The novel's postnational stance is further evinced by its critical commentaries on the bygone days of Chicano nationalism and political activism. On her rite of passage, the heroine – who throughout the novel chooses the ethnic referent "Mexican American" over "Chicana" – is repeatedly intrigued by mural art that portrays historical scenes of the colonial subjugation and resistance of Chicanas/os and their ancestors. While noticing a particular expression of public art for the first time, an old Mexican *veterano* (old timer) interprets the mural, explaining that the scene depicts the oppression of Native inhabitants by the Spanish *conquistadors* and the future reclamation of Aztlán. The old *pachuco* historicizes ethnic insurgencies in East Los Angeles after the Sleepy Lagoon case in 1942 and during the heyday of Chicana/o civil rights activities. He informs the protagonist of the marching "cockroaches": a poignant metaphor for the (cultural) extermination of Chicanas/os by the United States and for their ability to survive in hostile environments through adaptation:

"We rioted," the man said. "I threw something, a rock, I can't even remember what, I just wanted them to know that I was there, too." "No more!" he echoed his words from that time. Then he looked about him. His voice was quiet. "But nothing's changed."

(Rechy 1993, p. 46)

Meeting the old Mexican man in front of the mural is important for Amalia, because he introduces her to a collective past of subjugation based on markers of difference. The resistive rhetoric of the mural and its interpretation by the *veterano* triggers in Amalia an awareness of the physical and psychological violence inflicted upon her in an environment determined by patriarchal and

racial power interests that often leave members of non-hegemonic groups with few choices (Gutiérrez-Jones 1995, p. 106). In addition to her awareness of cultural inertia since the Chicano movement – "nothing's changed" – Amalia briefly intervenes into the narrative of the mural and the old Mexican's interpretation thereof by questioning the absence of women. Furthermore, the echoes of the Chicano rallying cry "No más! No more abuse. No more!" (Rechy 1993, p. 46) are implanted into Amalia's psyche and will reverberate until the end of the narrative.

The reader's understanding of postnational Los Angeles is not only triggered and shaped by the narrated observations of the protagonist but also by the cultural representations of urban spatiality inside and outside the text. At one point in the novel, the protagonist sees another East Los Angeles mural, this time portraying an Aztec prince who carries "a bleeding, dying city boy in his arms" (Rechy 1993, p. 56). The mural scene in the text echoes the novel's cover design, which is based on a reworked version of "Homeboy," a mural by Manuel Cruz.⁸ The visual adaptation of the East Los Angeles mural on the cover of *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* already points to central icons, symbols, and themes that appear in the text, such as the silver cross in the sky, the Hollywood sign, a house, or the slogan "Aztlán es una fábula" (Aztlán is a fable). The original mural by Cruz also depicts an Aztec warrior holding a dying child; however, the textual message reads quite differently: "To ace out a homeboy from another barrio is to kill *la raza*. Viva la Raza." The implication of this statement differs significantly from the novel's cover: while the "Homeboy" mural reproaches intra-Latina/o gang warfare and demands national allegiance ("Viva la Raza"), the reworked cover version dialogically counters the nationalist rhetoric and emphasizes the fictionality of Aztlán as national space. The message of the original mural is thus purposefully changed by the cover design to suit and underline the postnational stance in the subsequent narration. In addition, the highlighted word "fábula," along with the word "miraculous" in the title, anticipate a reading of the text and the national community of Aztlán as magical or fantastic.

In terms of narrative structure, the final chapter replicates Amalia's navigation through her urban surroundings in the preceding text. Offering a condensed version of the main plot, chapter 12 begins in the protagonist's decaying home from where her movement through the conflicting Hollywood myths and realities begins. Then, without transition, the narrative shifts to inside a Catholic church on Sunset Blvd., where the reader receives access to the protagonist's inner landscape through her invocatory address to the icon of the Blessed Mother. The second transition in narrative and urban setting moves from the church to a Beverly Hills shopping mall. The description of the novel's final setting resonates with Fredric Jameson's (1991, pp. 38–45) famous analysis of postmodern hyperspace in Los Angeles:

It [the mall] zigzagged with bolts of red-and-blue neon lightning, a purplish block-long structure held together by a network of chromic escalators that floated within plastic tunnels lit ice-blue.

(Rechy 1993, p. 199)

Amalia's journey through the Los Angeles borderlands comes to a close in a temple of consumer capitalism. Sucked up into the performative space of global capitalism, she begins to understand her alienation from the products of her labor: the garments that she and her sweatshop colleagues have been manufacturing wind up on sale at extravagant prices that the workers could not afford to pay.

After this realization Amalia is held hostage by a robber and reacts contrary to her earlier, passive responses to violence and subjugation. This time, she opts for self-empowerment and refuses to play the role of victim, the ostensibly natural position of a person with her social and ethnic background. Instead, she finds herself echoing the rebellious Chicana/o cry for liberation

(*No más/No more*), which she has learned from the Mexican *veterano* and her colleague Rosario. At the end of the novel, the protagonist is able to free herself from the man's grip and thus metaphorically from male violence and confinement. After the robber is shot and dies in her arms, Amalia is surrounded by police, an ambulance, and the press. While staring into the bright light of the camera, she encounters "a dazzling white radiance enclosed in a gleam of blue and within it on a gathering of red roses stood. . . . *The Blessed Mother, with her arms outstretched to her*" (Rechy 1993, p. 206; emphasis original). What Amalia has sensed after the opening vision of the silver cross in the morning sky over East Los Angeles comes true: she does receive her miracle. Through the cathartic vision of the Virgin, during the moment she becomes a true heroine, Amalia ultimately reconfirms her faith and regains her optimism for the future. Ironically, she is saved by an icon of the same ideology which has previously victimized her. It is, however, through her personal connection to a divine figure, detached from religious institutions and dogma, that Amalia is able to rise and affirm her renewed faith and energy.

With this positive ending, the novel aims to convince its reader that the protagonist has indeed received the miracle she has demanded and deserved from the outset. However, despite its moral exhortation to keep the faith, the text ultimately negates both Hollywood and social realist aesthetics by extending the plot into the realm of the fantastic. It employs narrative techniques reminiscent of earlier Chicana/o novels but also incorporates postmodern stylistic elements (e.g., intertextuality, destabilized meaning(s) of signs, cultural hybridity, and self-reflexivity) to delineate the plight of a subaltern Mexican American woman in urban space. In addition, Rechy's telenovelistic border narrative subverts the artistic tenets of Chicano cultural nationalism by focusing on male prostitution and violence, both in Latina/o homes and on the streets. Hence, *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* does not seem to be consistent with the characteristics of a subversive literary project; however, it does address the fundamental problematic of what constitutes a political novel from a minority perspective in the 1990s.

Rechy's "postnational fable" (Saldívar 1997, p. 111) can be seen as an example of the narrative appropriation of some thematic and stylistic conventions of the Chicana/o novel, yet, by casting the protagonist's fate into the escapist realm of the fabulous, the text both probes and parodies the limitations of cultural nationalism and its narrative formulas. On the other hand, Rechy's novel may actually appear quite conservative: It affirms faith in a religious icon and capitalizes on the hardships of a Mexican American woman within a sociocultural environment increasingly yearning for multicultural experiences. However, while the novel does seem to cater to current mainstream longings for texts from the margin, Rechy constructs an anti-essentialist and anti-chauvinist narrative that transgresses stylistic and thematic borders of nation-based aesthetics.

Staging intercultural transit: El Vez's *Transfrontera* performance

The stage persona of El Vez was born in transit, on a plane from Los Angeles to Memphis in 1987, when musician/performer Robert López traveled to the Deep South to attend and perform at the annual celebration of U.S. music legend Elvis Presley's birthday. Since his acceptance by die-hard Elvis fans at Graceland for his rendition of "Suspicious Minds" (now called "Immigration Time"), El Vez, the "Mexican Elvis," has extended the act of mere Elvis impersonator by appropriating and merging a wide variety of musical, textual, and conceptual citations from different cultural repositories and practices. López's overall performance, which centers on covering and rewriting one of the most glamorous icon of late-capitalist American pop music, serves as an important example of transnational cultural (re)appropriation.

The Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque seems especially pertinent to an understanding of El Vez's performance because it marks an interventionist thrust in literature, art, and culture

that, by strategically employing semiotic signs, temporarily disrupts or at least problematizes the sociocultural and political status quo. However problematic the appropriation of Bakhtin's analysis of medieval carnival practices by recent cultural studies critics may be, it serves as a fitting frame to grasp counterhegemonic tactics designed to subvert social and national authorities. The carnival constitutes a useful analytic concept for contemporary cultural expressions, such as those by El Vez, because it encompasses diverse practices of opposition to the established order and, at the same time, contains this opposition through a safety valve by which dissidence can be dispersed and hegemony retained. As a form of postmodern aesthetic, carnival consciousness may temporarily undermine and reverse traditional hierarchies by dethroning cultural power centers and by elevating jesters from the margins to regal status (Bakhtin 1994, pp. 194–226).

El Vez's carnivalesque practice of sampling, parody, and appropriation is a main trait of his visual and audial performance. His musical guerilla tactic is carried over into the realm of visual expression, as can be evinced by one of the images in the booklet of his 1998 CD *G.I. Ay, Ay! Blues* (Image 19.1). In this visual representation, which is diametrically opposed to the mimicry of the young U.S. Army Elvis portrayed on the front cover, El Vez epitomizes the fusion of Che Guevara and Presley. The hybrid merger connects with folk-singer Phil Ochs's quotation, also included in the CD booklet, that "if there is any hope for a Revolution it lies in Elvis Presley becoming Che Guevara." El Vez takes up Ochs's utopian prophecy and presents his Chicano-inflected vision for ethnic relations at the turn of the millennium. His head slightly bent to the left and his right index finger pointing at the viewer, El Vez not only conveys a certain Chicano cool, his dialogic ensemble of cultural emblems also continuously oscillates between humor, irony, seriousness, and sincerity. The image suggests that the coming revolution is preceded and accompanied by expressive practices that incorporate a variety of intercultural signs, styles, and images. Based on icons that point to the Mexican Revolution, Third World freedom struggles, the farm workers movement, or Zapatista resistance in Chiapas, the parodic and carnivalesque



Image 19.1 El Vez

image promises a cultural upheaval against, or at least a resistance to, nationally dominated discourses and practices in the United States, Mexico, and globally.

A musical example of El Vez's performance as a cultural tagger, one who invades hostile territory and leaves his temporary markers as signs of claiming space and presence, is the song "Aztlán" from his 1994 CD *Graciasland*. The song covers and plays on Paul Simon's title song from his 1986 album *Graceland*, which, after his collaboration with South African musicians, propelled Simon to the vanguard of what became known as World Music. Certainly not the first intercultural music project, Simon's album became a debated example of appropriating and commodifying global musical styles and elements. The title song "Graceland" evokes at once the home of Elvis in Memphis, which has become a national shrine second only perhaps to the White House in Washington. At a deeper level, the "Graceland" in Paul Simon's song refers to the United States as the mythical "land of grace" for immigrants and also configures it as an imaginary place where the broken-hearted may find solace. However, in El Vez's reworking, the imaginary land of grace that is being searched for is neither the home of Elvis nor the United States (even though both resonate throughout the song) but the Chicana/o homeland of Aztlán:

The river Rio Grande is carving like a national scar
 I am following the river making wetbacks
 Where my parents crossed to be now where they are

I'm going to Aztlán, where I wanna be,
 I'm going to Aztlán
 Homeboys, Chicanos, Latinas and we are going to Aztlán
 My traveling companions, La Virgen, Miss Liberty,
 A map and my MEChA books
 Well I've reason to believe, we all have been deceived, there still is Aztlán

Miss Liberty tells me Aztlán's gone, as if I didn't know that
 As if I didn't know my own back yard,
 As if I didn't know to get in you need a card
 And she said losing home is like a bullet in your heart
 I am looking for a place, a myth of my people
 That won't get torn apart,

.....
 And I say who has ever ever seen this place
 I am looking for a land that belonged to Mexico
 But now holds no time or space
 In Aztlán, Aztlán, I'm going to Aztlán
 For reasons I have explained I'm not a part of Spain,
 I'm part of Aztlán, and I'm trying to get back to a place I've
 never been, I'm trying to cross over,
 Well I've reason to believe, We all have been deceived,
 There is an Aztlán⁹

The introductory setting of López's rendition is not the Mississippi Delta, as in Simon's song, but the Río Grande. The narrative voice calls this part of the U.S.-Mexico border a national scar and thus seems to echo Gloria Anzaldúa's often-cited description of the border as an open

wound "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (1987, p. 3). Furthermore, the atmosphere of ElVez's rewriting accentuates the crossing of the border by employing movement as a *leitmotif*, both textually and musically. The drumbeat mirrors the rhythm of a train in motion, the bass line is distinctly borrowed from country and Western music, and also in the lyrics, movement is the guiding motif. The narrator is a second-generation Mexican American traveling through the Southwest, along the border of the nation, in search of Aztlán. However, López's version of the homeland counters the essentialist tenets that Chicano nationalists had propagated earlier. His vision is more dynamic in that it explicitly welcomes and includes multiethnic urban youths (homeboys), women from different Latin and U.S.-American national backgrounds (Latinas), Mexican nationals (La Virgen de Guadalupe) and Anglo Americans (Miss Liberty). It is this combination of ethnic signifiers and the social populations they refer to that departs from nationalist visions of community and, instead, highlights ElVez's construction of cross-cultural, postnational, and transitory subject positions (Saldívar 1997).

The main problematic of the song is how a contemporary Chicana/o can return to a land, recover, and make sense of a tradition that has been embedded in myth. Contrary to Rechy, ElVez does not relegate the homeland to the realm of the fable, but rather uses the signifier Aztlán to narrate a joyous but ultimately unsuccessful road trip to imagined cultural origins. The central difficulty of the desired return-to-roots is addressed towards the end of the song in the lines, "And I say who has ever ever seen this place/ I am looking for a land that belonged to Mexico/ but now holds no time or space/ . . . and I'm trying to get back to a place I've never been" (ElVez 1994b).

There simply is no physical space, no material reality for or of Aztlán to which one could resort and the contradiction of returning to a place where one has never been remains insoluble. If Aztlán exists, it can only do so as a utopia in the imagination, in the minds of people. And while this is not much different from the times of Chicano nationalism, it is a far cry from the separatist demands voiced by activists at the time. López also refrains from an essentialist rhetoric directed at Anglo American culture; instead, he performs an ironic critique of nationalist discourses *per se*. For instance, the seemingly affirmative statement, repeated throughout the song, "We all have been deceived,/ there is an Aztlán" remains ambivalent because it can easily be re-read as "we all have been deceived THAT there is an Aztlán." This unstable inversion of meaning debunks the return to cultural authenticity, the Chicana/o land of grace, as a simulation similar to Elvis's cultural survival after his physical death in commercials, comic strips, videos, movies, songs, the yellow press, or in the form of Elvis impersonators.

Furthermore, the intertextual references to ElVez's cover version of "Never Been to Spain" at the end of the song "Aztlán" – "for reasons I've explained I am not a part of Spain" – repudiate the imposed label Hispanic, which was introduced as a generic umbrella term for U.S. Latina/os by the Reagan administration. ElVez's version of "Never Been to Spain," which was released on his 1994 CD *How Great Thou Art*, ironizes and politicizes Elvis's rather naïve song about a tourist who has never visited Europe. In addition, López's musical narrative, by re-writing the historical narrative of the colonial encounters between Europe and the Americas, highlights the Indigenous heritages of the contemporary collective Chicana/o "we." The simplicity of ElVez's argument in the song is as captivating as it is convincing: "Well I've never been to Spain, so don't call me a Hispanic" (ElVez 1994a). Towards the end, the song suggests that nationally bounded cultures pose limiting conditions for Chicana/os living in a space where home and identity are not to be located in a far-away aristocratic country, in Mexico, in the United States, but instead in the urban *transfrontera* of Los Angeles: "I'm not Hispanic from across the Atlantic/ . . . /I'm a mechanic from across the Atlantic . . . Blvd" (ElVez 1994a).

Taken together, then, ElVez's cover versions of "Graceland" and "Never Been to Spain" function as multiple echo chambers that resonate different readings and revisions of ethnic identity

formations. In doing so, they tie in with López's overall performance in which signs, icons, and phrases from a global hodge-podge of popular cultures, from Mexican *mariachi* music to 1990s Brit Pop, constantly ascend to and vanish from the surface of perception. Within his overall carnivalesque performance, tongue-in-cheek sense of humor plays a crucial role in subverting and revising national-cultural norms and practices not only locally but on a universal scale. Michelle Habell-Pallán explains that "it is through the humorous reworking of the signifiers of the nation, both American and Chicano, that ElVez can speak to multiple marginalized communities affected by shifts in the global economy" (1999, p. 208). As a tactic of temporary cultural subversion, López mimics and mocks Elvis as a pop cultural sovereign and thus de-nationalizes one of the main icons of U.S. culture; that is, ElVez belatedly and post-mortem suggests that Elvis was originally a Chicano, while at the same time refuting the rigid aesthetic of Chicano cultural nationalism (Berressem 2001, p. 433). His musical, textual, and visual performance thus posits and enacts a postnational cultural project that incorporates previously rejected subject positions and narratives.

El Vez's practice of appropriation, intercultural transit, and claiming of performative spaces constitutes a strategy of cultural resistance against mainstream conventions. At the same time, El Vez, similar to John Rechy, capitalizes on the current craze for the Latina/o element in U.S. popular culture. His (re)appropriation of transnational pop citations, although still part of the underground music scene in North America and Europe, thus represents and enacts the historical appropriation of minoritized cultures under colonial and imperial rule. In short, ElVez instigates a resistive project; however, the act of carnivalesque subversion of Elvis Presley is immediately co-opted by the global culture industry and himself: López commodifies ElVez by marketing his intrusive cultural take-over as thoroughly as possible (e.g., by selling authentic ElVez locks of hair on the Internet). Ultimately though, the humorous and ironic play with various modes of appropriation gives voice to the cannibalizing and exploitive patterns of EuroAmerican cultural theft on a global scale. Cultural cannibalism, or in bell hooks's words "Eating the Other" (1992), becomes a self-reflexive act of devouring and thus safely incorporating cultural elements and practices that are both feared and desired. As is exemplified in the songs "Aztlán" and "Never Been to Spain," López's performance highlights the histories and different modes of cultural cannibalism by "eating" figures, practices, and tropes of the cultural dominant. The objects of ElVez's musical cannibalization (i.e., Elvis and Paul Simon) have in turn devoured and partially digested elements from other cultures, and have thereby transformed their artistic appropriations into marketable commodities.

Conclusion

Since the mid-1970s the nationalist ideology of *chicanismo* and Aztlán, crystallized by *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (see R. Gutiérrez in this *Handbook*), has by and large lost its hegemonic grip on identity formations and cultural articulations in Mexican American communities. More often than not, feminist, same-sex preference, and post-movement Chicana/o voices have challenged the nationalist cultural agendas, dominated by heterosexual, essentialist men, without necessarily aligning themselves and their cultural expressions with the tenets of the U.S.-American mainstream. Rather, a number of cultural articulations after the movement, especially those which might be classified as postnational, have sought to reveal the exclusionary construction of belonging in both Chicana/o and Anglo American national discourses and identity formations.

Adding to the internal changes within Chicana/o cultural politics, the arrival of new immigrants and refugees since the 1980s, and the concomitant loss of demographic hegemony of non-Hispanic Whites in some parts of the country have caused the emergence of a number of

postnational constellations. Especially in Southern California, we have been witnessing political and cultural formations that no longer unequivocally adhere to the “American belief in a utopian national destiny” (Davis 1998, p. 354). Radical separatist discourses have in many cases ceased to dominate political decisions and cultural productions in many ethnic minority communities, notwithstanding the recent resurgences of nationalist and essentialist tendencies as a response to globalization. As a result, in the contemporary “diasporic switching point[s]” (Appadurai 1993, p. 803) of urban Southern California, transnational interactions and postnational identifications are induced along and across a number of cultural, economic, social, and political demarcation lines.

The narratives of John Rechy and Robert “El Vez” López investigated here represent these ongoing processes towards postnationalization in Southern California. As both artists convey in their fictionalizations of urban *transfrontera* experiences, the homeland is no longer necessarily defined on the basis of a common racial, linguistic, and historical heritage but rather on cultural hybridizations, coalescences, and border phenomena. While Rechy takes his reader from social realism to the borders of the “postnational fable,” where he simultaneously echoes and parodies the aesthetic tenets of Chicano nationalism, López’s performance simulates and stimulates a collectivity that does not yet exist as a sociopolitical reality but that can only be imagined culturally. El Vez’s vision of the nation is not based on an essentialist and exclusionary community but on groups of people who strategically interact and form political as well as cultural coalitions across borders. Hence, both *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* and El Vez’s songs are not only shaped by their environment but also produce significant additions to recent navigations of postnational spaces in Chicana/o literatures and cultures.

Notes

- 1 “‘Aztlán es una fábula’: Navigating postnational spaces in Chicana/o culture” originally appeared in *Borderline Identities of Chicano Culture*, Bottalico, M & el Moncef bin Khalifa, S (ed.), Mazzanti Editori, Venice, Italy, pp. 45–63. This press is now defunct with copyright reverting to the author. This chapter is reprinted with permission from the author. It has been slightly updated and edited consistent with Routledge guidelines.
- 2 The main passage from the “Spiritual Plan of Aztlán” reads as follows: “we declare the independence of our *mestizo* nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are Aztlán” (*El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*). The exact geographical location of Aztlán remains unknown. According to legend, “Aztlán names the Mexican homeland – the land of seven caves (Chicomostoc), the place of the Twisted Hill (Colhuacán), the place of whiteness (Aztlán) – from which the Mexica [people] migrated south toward the central plateau in A.D. 820” (Pérez-Torres 1995, p. 229).
- 3 The concept of *chicanismo* is based on the nineteenth-century philosophy of *mexicanidad*, elaborated by José Vasconcelos, whose glorification of *mestizos* as the cosmic race, as superior to pure races, became central to Mexican and later Chicano nationalist ideologies and tropes. (Cf. Vigil 1980, p. 202.)
- 4 Today, the theoretical paradigm of push/pull factors no longer suffices to account for current Latin America–United States migratory patterns, which can more accurately be grasped by a combination of chain and circular migrations. In short, the former points to a string of migrations beginning with one individual, followed by others, often to the same area in the United States; the latter represents the frequent back-and-forth migrations between the communities of origin and destination (Cf. Ruiz 1998, 163n18; Sánchez 1993, pp. 41, 132–33.). For a critique of the push/pull model, see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1996, p. 6. As Ludger Pries has argued, transnational social spaces are the results of migratory movements that produce pluri-local “living spaces and projects of the ‘transmigrants,’ i.e., their ‘social spaces,’ span a number of different residences of geographic spaces” (1999, p. 3).
- 5 The U.S.–Mexican demarcation line is a particularly striking embodiment of the paradox of border openness and closure: on the one hand, it allows capital and (most) goods to pass almost unchecked; on the other hand, U.S. federal and state authorities have replicated some Iron Curtain border practices

- (e.g., severe surveillance and militarization) in order to prevent migrants from crossing. As a result, for human beings, the passage from North to South is certainly a much more convenient and trouble-free undertaking than *vice versa*.
- 6 In sketching postnational scenarios, both in material and fictional spaces, I am not suggesting that nationalism, or the nation, have withered away. Indeed, nationalisms are both on the decline *and* on the rise throughout many regions of the world and also within U.S.–Latina/o communities. While parts of nationalist ideologies of *chicanismo*, *mexicanidad*, and American exceptionalism have gone through certain crises due to sociopolitical fragmentation and various forms of cultural hybridity, certain nationalist tendencies are resurging on virtually all sides of the ethno-racial divides in Southern California and in other parts of the globe.
 - 7 Mary Louise Pratt has introduced the term “contact zone” in order to “refer to the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (1992, p. 6). In this physical and semiotic contact zone, the meetings and engagements between colonizer and colonized are not marked by separation but by coexistence and interaction within sociocultural spaces constructed in systems of asymmetrical power relations.
 - 8 Painted in 1974, “Homeboy” is located at Ramona Gardens Housing Project in East Los Angeles. Sponsored by the Mechanico Art Center, the artists who were also involved in this mural project included Willie Herrón, Wayne Alaniz Healy, and Carlos Almaraz, among others.
 - 9 ElVez 1994b. The author and co-editors thank Robert “ElVez” López for his permission to quote from his song lyrics from “Graceland” and “Never Been to Spain.”

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