

Beyond Good and Evil

Utopian Dialectics in Tomás Rivera and Oscar Zeta Acosta

The magisterial work of Tomás Rivera (1935–84), . . . *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* / *And the Earth Did Not Part* (1971), takes to their limits the formal, thematic, and ideological issues raised by Paredes' and Villarreal's works. *Tierra* represents the first milestone in Mexican American literary history after the turbulent events of the 1960s and sets itself explicitly within the political and social contexts of the post-World War II agricultural worker's life. Winner in 1970 of the first Quinto Sol Prize for literature, the most prestigious literary award in the early years of Mexican American literature, Rivera's novel immediately established itself as a major document of Chicano social and literary history.

Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973), while differing formally and thematically from Rivera's work, represent with *Tierra* a shared desire, itself related to the historical moment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, to fashion out of the instability and fragmentation of social life a utopian vision of collective action. The works of both authors should be read within their common historical horizon of the politicization of Chicano labor struggles and the emergence of a broad-based Chicano movement. Each presents, in different ways, the Chicano response to the conditions and circumstances of existence of the late sixties.

. . . *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* / *And the Earth Did Not Part*

In the original South Texas Spanish, Rivera's prose is tight and lean, the vocabulary and syntax rigorously controlled and held deliber-

ately within the world of the Chicano migrant farmworker.¹ Like Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* and *As I Lay Dying*, or Juan Rulfo's *El Llano en llamas* and *Pedro Páramo*, Rivera's narrative is not expository; in documenting the life of the farmworker in the immediate post-World War II era and trying to keep its significance alive, *Tierra* does not give us historical depiction in the mode of more traditional realisms so much as a complex narrative of subjective impressions where strict chronological presentation, orderly compositional development, and linear plot progression have broken down. The twelve sections of Rivera's novel, preceded and concluded by a frame story, follow a stream-of-consciousness thread, bereft of traditional narrative causality, relating the seasonal events of an allegorical year in the life of an unnamed migrant child. The narrator-protagonist is not actually present as a main character in all of the sections of the novel but rather serves as what Bakhtin has termed a chronotopic point—a figural intersection of time and space (1981, 84)—around which the collective subjective experiences of Rivera's Texas-Mexican farmworkers coalesce, forming a communal oral history. Only in the very last section of the novel, where we find a child under a house reminiscing about the events that have formed the core of the story we have just read, do we begin to sense the novel's coherence. As Juan Bruce-Novoa has pointed out, however, what we have read is not the stream-of-consciousness itself in its amorphous flow (1980, 137). Even though the texture of the narrative is not at all that of an interior monologue but of the carefully crafted written word, *Tierra* retains a distinctly oral quality, as Rivera is able to capture the cadence and flow of his native people's speech.

In writing about the marginal people of the Texas-Mexican border, Rivera turns to a narrative form that shuns easy synthesis and easy unity, that shuns exactly those features of narrative that arbiters of narrative style from Aristotle to Wayne Booth have prescribed. Why should this be the case? What did real life in South Texas have to do with narrative experimentation and the violation of traditional narrative strictures? In dealing with the "real life" of the West and Southwest, Anglo-American writers have tended to favor a traditional, tough-minded style that one might call "realism." Larry McMurtry's novels, *Horseman*, *Pass By* and *Lonesome Dove*, for instance, offer

1. Bruce-Novoa, "Tomás Rivera" (1980, 137), discusses aspects of Rivera's style; see also, Ralph Grajeda, "Tomás Rivera's Appropriation of the Chicano Past" (1979), Daniel P. Testa, "Narrative Technique and Human Experience in Tomás Rivera" (1979), and Joseph Sommers, "Interpreting Tomás Rivera" (1979).

good examples of this preference. The idea of "realism," however, is a complex one. As an antidote to the romantic style and sentimental impulses that Western fiction has generally cultivated in its invention of the American West as a province of an exclusively white, male, individualist imagination, realism has its advantages. More powerfully, Lukács has argued that the literature of realism, "aiming at a truthful reflection of reality," can demonstrate "both the concrete and abstract potentialities of human beings" ([1955] 1972, 478). But what Rivera's novel attempts to remind us is that "realism" is not a style that gives us an undistorted reflection of the world. It simply represents the ideologically dominant way of conceiving and expressing our relationship to the natural and social worlds around us.

"Realism" functions ideologically: it offers itself as a neutral reflection of the world when it is but one way of *imagining* a world (Althusser 1969, 162-63). Echoing Lukács, what we might call "the ideology of realism" disguises the fact that what is natural in viewing the world tends to be defined by those who have the *authority* to define something as natural. Those without authority or legitimacy may or may not agree with this definition of what constitutes the natural. Without such authority or legitimacy, Mexican Americans have hardly been asked to help define the "reality" of the American western and southwestern experience or help create what Benedict Anderson in another context has termed its "imagined communities" ([1983] 1987, 15). On the contrary, American literature has tended to define the Mexican American without pausing to consider whether the images it offers of their reality are images that the Mexican American can recognize as "truthful reflections of reality."²

It is also the case that all of the notions of unity, coherence, and causality associated with realistic plot lines tend to beg the questions that the devices of style are supposed to answer: can one tell the story of the fragmenting effects of contemporary postmodern life in an uncomplicated reflectionist way? Rivera's answer is to turn to narrative experimentation.

Despite narrative experimentation, and as is the case in the major Chicano texts after Paredes' short fiction and Villarreal's *Pocho*, Rivera faithfully situates his story in the day-to-day life of postwar social reality. The poverty, hardship, and exploitation that his characters endure is no more than that which Rivera himself experienced

2. See Cecil Robinson, *Mexico and the Hispanic Southwest in American Literature* (revised from *With the Ears of Strangers*) for the definitive study of the racial and sexual stereotyping of the Mexican American in American literature.

as a farmworker in and around Crystal City, Texas, during the 1940s and 1950s.³

In an interview with Bruce-Novoa, Rivera situated his work squarely within the bounds of the Mexican American's struggle for social and political justice:

In . . . *tierra* . . . I wrote about [the life of] the migrant worker in [the] ten year period [between 1945 and 1955]. . . . I began to see that my role . . . would be to document that period of time, but giving it some kind of spiritual strength or spiritual history. . . . I felt that I had to document the migrant worker para siempre [forever], para que no se olvidara ese espíritu tan fuerte de resistir y continuar under the worst of conditions [so that their spirit of resistance and willingness to endure should not be forgotten], because they were worse than slaves. (Bruce-Novoa 1980, 148, 150-51)

Written during the period 1967-68, at the height of the politicization of the Chicano labor struggles and just prior to the takeover of political power by Mexican Americans of *La Raza Unida* political party in Crystal City, the novel is imbued with a sense of political urgency.⁴ But apart from the reality of economic exploitation and social injustice, Rivera's novel also presents the anguish of a transcendently spiritual exploitation. His anonymous narrator literalizes the "subjectlessness" of the corrido narrator, as he is born into a world of absence and loss, seeking to discover his identity, to inscribe his name in the text of history, and to recover what he calls "un año perdido [a lost year]."⁵ *Tierra* functions aesthetically and ideologically as a memorial to and partial reconstitution of the forgotten history of a people's oppression and struggles. Simultaneously, it signifies a determining instance of the repressed "political unconscious" of American political and literary history.

Without a name, initially without a sense of his specific geographical space or real time, and unable to decide whether he wakes or dreams, the child calls out and turns, not realizing that he himself has spoken. The novel opens abruptly with this disembodied voice:

Aquel año se le perdió. A veces trataba de recordar y ya para cuando creía que se estaba aclarando todo un poco se le perdían las palabras. Casi siempre

3. See Rivera's comments in an interview with Bruce-Novoa, (1980, 140, 148-49).

4. See Acuña (1981, 360-62) for details concerning the political struggle in Crystal City, Texas; see also Sommers (1979, 100-101).

5. Tomás Rivera, . . . *Y no se lo tragó la tierra / And the Earth Did Not Part* (Berkeley: Quinto Sol Publications, 1971; reissued by Justa Publications, 1976): 1. Textual citations are from the Quinto Sol, bilingual, first edition and refer to the Spanish and English language texts.

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empezaba con un sueño donde despertaba de pronto y luego se daba cuenta de que realmente estaba dormido. Luego ya no supo si lo que pensaba había pasado o no.

... [O]ía que alguien le llamaba por su nombre pero cuando volteaba la cabeza a ver quién era el que le llamaba, daba una vuelta entera y así quedaba donde mismo. Por eso nunca podía acertar ni quién le llamaba ni por qué, y luego hasta se le olvidaba el nombre que le habían llamado. Pero sabía que él era a quien llamaban.

(That year was lost to him. Sometimes he tried to remember, but then when things appeared to clarify somewhat his thoughts would elude him. It usually began with a dream in which suddenly he thought he was awake, and then he would realize that he was actually asleep. That was why he could not be sure whether or not what he had recalled was actually what had happened.

... [H]e would hear someone call him by name. He would turn around to see who was calling, always making a complete turn, always ending in the same position and facing the same way. And that was why he could never find out who it was that was calling him, nor the reason why he was being called. He would even forget the name that he had heard. But he knew that he was the one who was being called.) (*Tierra* 1, 3)

There is no clear beginning nor any motivated action in the first scene of this story. Rather, like Abraham called by the insubstantial voice of Yahweh to test his faith and confront his destiny, the child is called to bear witness to and compose the testament of his history. He is no patriarchal prophet, but he has apparently been chosen, and the subtle echoes of the Book of Genesis will soon turn out to be well-motivated foreshadowings of crucial later scenes. For the present, however, situated between madness and chaos, the child reacts to the chaos of his placeless, nameless isolation by beginning to construct a context for order:

Una vez se detuvo antes de dar la vuelta entera y le entró el miedo. Se dio cuenta de que él mismo se había llamado. Y así empezó el año perdido. ... Se dio cuenta de que siempre pensaba que pensaba y de allí no podía salir. ... Pero antes de dormirse veía y oía muchas cosas ...

(Once he stopped himself before completing the turn, and he became afraid. He found out that he had been calling himself. That was the way the lost year began. ... He discovered that he was always thinking that he was thinking, and that he was trapped in this cycle. ... But before falling asleep he would see and hear many things.) (1, 3)

What we have read on the first page of Rivera's novel is not a representation of insanity or of childhood confusion. Rather, he gives us

what we might liken to a phenomenological reduction to absolute consciousness, as the allegorical child undertakes a complex inner exploration in order that he might recover "a lost year," the absent history of his life. The "cycle" that the boy enters seems at this point a vicious circle of entrapment. In fact, the cycle turns out to be an entry into a hermeneutic circle of understanding that begins to parody and belie the certainty of the Cartesian cogito. In terms more grandly absolute than any imagined by Villarreal, Rivera thus sets the scene for his own portrayal of a radical revaluation of values. Through this stark reduction, Rivera's protagonist will experience the chaos of personal solitude in order to understand dialectically "thinking that he was thinking," how his life fits into a pattern of labor commodification and class and racial oppression.

Through a series of wire-taut chapters of interior monologue repeating snatches of half-heard conversations that begin to articulate the protagonist-narrator's lost history, Rivera portrays a community's indomitable will to survive and flourish. We see glimpses of a stark world of class and racial oppression: the death of a child, shot when he pauses from working to get a drink of water; a mother anxiously praying for her son who is away fighting in Korea; another child's first shocking encounter with adult sexuality; an agoraphobic woman painfully venturing out into the marketplace; a truckful of migrant farmworkers speeding northward in the night toward the agricultural fields of the Midwest.

Rivera has confirmed that as he was preparing to write *Tierra*, he was "wandering through the library and I came across *With His Pistol in His Hand* by Américo Paredes, and I was fascinated ... because ... it was about a Chicano, Gregorio Cortez. ... That book indicated to me that it was possible to talk about a Chicano as a complete figure. ... More importantly, *With His Pistol in His Hand* indicated to me a whole imaginative possibility for us to explore" (Bruce-Novoa 1980, 150). Rivera's confirmation of Paredes' influence situates his novel within the province of socially symbolic acts of resistance initiated by the corrido form and extended by Paredes into narrative fiction. The proletarian world represented in Rivera's novel is hence that of the corrido, but without the moment in the corrido when the common working man is transformed into an epic-heroic projection of his community. But like the corrido, Rivera's novel is an ideological expression of cultural and political resistance. With the two core episodes of the novel, "La noche estaba plateada" / "It Was a Silvery Night" and the title piece, Rivera chronicles the rise of an intractable will to power and what José Saldívar has correctly

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termed the "dawning sense of solidarity with other members of [his] class and race."⁶ But this dawning class consciousness must occur by degrees and first as a *personal* act of understanding the causes of his people's victimization and oppression by a common enemy. As José Saldívar has pointed out, this personalization of the political has occasioned decidedly existentialist readings of the novel, readings that go only part way in exploring the ideological implications of the characters' actions as they experience reification and the emergence of class consciousness (1985, 103).

One silvery night, the child awakens to walk through a nearby wood to summon the devil: "Lo del diablo le había fascinado desde cuando no se acordaba" ("The thought of the devil had fascinated him since he could remember") (*Tierra* 55, 61). Flashing back to another time, the child offers us a possible motive for this inexplicable desire to summon the devil and to violate one of the principal folk taboos of his culture when he recalls overhearing that

con el diablo ne se juega. Hay muchos que le han llamado y después les ha pesado. La mayoría casi se vuelve loca. . . . Hay unos que se mueren de susto, otros no, nomás empiezan a entristecer, y luego ni hablan. Como que se les va el alma del cuerpo.

(You can't fool around with the devil. There have been many who have summoned him and they've regretted it later. Most have been on the verge of going insane. . . . There are some who die of fright; there are others who are overcome with sadness and eventually stop talking altogether, as if the soul had left their bodies.) (55, 61)

But the child is of a mind to summon the devil: "Nomás quisiera saber si hay o no hay" ("All I want to know is whether or not the devil actually exists") (56, 62), he says in innocent simplicity. Alone in the middle of the dark woods, he calls repeatedly but nothing happens: "No se apareció nada ni nadie ni cambió nada" ("Absolutely nothing

6. José D. Saldívar, "The Ideological and the Utopian in Tomás Rivera's *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* and Ron Arias' *The Road to Tamazunchale*" (1985, 103). Rivera's work has had the good fortune of having been treated by exceptionally fine critics. In addition to the essay just cited, see Juan Rodríguez, "The Problematic in Tomás Rivera" (1967, 42-50), and "La búsqueda de identidad y sus motivos en la literatura chicana" (1979a, 170-78). In addition, readers may now refer to the useful collection, *International Studies in Honor of Tomás Rivera*, ed. by Julián Olivares (1985), for recent reinterpretations of this important author. See especially, Sylvia S. Lizárraga, "The Patriarchal Ideology in 'La noche que se apagaron las luces,'" Patricia de la Fuente, "Invisible Women in the Narrative of Tomás Rivera," Lauro Flores, "The Discourse of Silence in the Narrative of Tomás Rivera," and Erlinda González-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo, "Growing Up Chicano: Tomás Rivera and Sandra Cisneros."

appeared and absolutely nothing changed") (56, 62). Returning home, relieved and proud of his daring, it occurs to him that the devil has not appeared because "no había diablo" ("The devil did not exist") (56, 62). And since in the rhetoric of the child's Catholic doctrine evil is inseparable from good, the thought that the devil does not exist leads him to the partial conclusion that: "si no hay diablo tampoco hay . . . No, más vale no decirlo." ("and if there is no devil, there must be no . . . no, I'd better not say it") (56, 62). Such logic would not be foreign to Richard Rubio of *Pocho*.

The binary structure of what I have termed the "differential structure" of Chicano narrative necessarily brings into question the complement of evil and the supreme origin of value, God Himself. At this point, however, the child's inability to separate himself from the ultimate expression of imposed value systems, especially from an apparently beneficent one, is designated by the inconclusive ellipse and the conscious decision not to speak the words of denial. It is curious, moreover, that his intimation of the world as a place without devils or gods, "*No hay diablo, no hay nada*" ("There is no devil. There is nothing") (56, 63), does not lead him into existential despair. On the contrary, the boy unconsciously senses the possibility of freedom in the absence of devils and gods. He now understands that "los que le llamaban al diablo y se volvían locos, no se volvían locos porque se les aparecía sino al contrario, porque no se les aparecía" ("those who summoned the devil and later went insane did not do so because they had seen the devil. On the contrary, it was because the devil had not appeared") (56, 63). In an impressive rhetorical move, the narrator signals the sublimity of this partial recognition by transferring metaphorically the joyful serenity of the child's insight about the human constructions of ethical value to the moon hovering overhead, "contentísima de algo" ("extremely happy about something") (56, 63).

The protagonist's reticence before the annihilation of traditional value schemes in "La noche estaba plateada / It Was a Silvery Night," is overcome in the climax to the titular chapter. There, haunted by his inability to understand why a beneficent God would allow disaster to strike unremittingly a good and innocent people, the boy finally brings himself to do what he could not do earlier: deny and curse God. This rejection of the traditional ideology of acceptance and submission that his Catholic faith has taught him allows him now to elevate his own creative will to a higher sphere of existence and thus to produce his own history. Here too, as in *Pocho*, the act of rejection isolates a systematic distrust of any preexistent, transcen-

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dental rule of value because such systems contribute to the enslavement of the individual will. From the boy's precritical perspective, only in the context of present historical conditions and under the influence of its own productive intellect can the individual create a personal and cultural identity. The initial movement toward liberation is thus explicitly located immanently within the consciousness of the individual subject. In ". . . Y no se lo tragó la tierra" / "And the Earth Did Not Part," the existential dialectic that will eventuate in a full deconstruction of the sovereignty of individual subjectivity continues but is taken one step further away from individual being toward the context of social being.

Rivera's titular story places the reader in the full misery of a South Texas cotton field, parched by the noonday sun, as a small group of Chicanos weed a crop. The previous day, the child's father, working under these same conditions, has suffered a sunstroke. And earlier still, his aunt and uncle had also been struck. Trapped as much by his mother's passive faith that the meek shall inherit the earth as by the exploitative capitalist agricultural system that demands their cheap piece-rate wage labor, the child cries:

"¿Qué se gana, mamá, con andar [clamando la misericordia de Dios]? ¿Apoco cree que le ayudó mucho a mi tío y a mi tía? ¿Por qué es que nosotros estamos aquí como enterrados en la tierra? O los microbios nos comen o el sol nos asolea. Y todos los días trabaje y trabaje. ¿Para qué? . . . Tanto darle de comer a la tierra y al sol y luego, saz, un día cuando menos lo piensa cae asoleado. . . . Y luego ellos rogándole a Dios . . . si Dios no se acuerda de uno. . . . N'ombre a Dios le importa poco de uno de los pobres. . . . Dígame usted ¿por qué? ¿Por qué nosotros nomás enterrados en la tierra como animales sin ningunas esperanzas de nada?

(What do you gain by [praying to God], mother? Don't tell me that you believe that sort of thing helped my uncle and aunt? Why is it that we are here on earth as though buried alive? Either the germs eat us from the inside or the sun from the outside. And work, work, day in and day out. And for what? . . . After feeding the earth and the sun for such a long time, . . . one day unexpectedly he is felled by the sun. . . . And to top it off, praying to God. God doesn't remember us. . . . God doesn't give a damn about us poor people. . . . Why should we always be tied to the dirt, half buried in the earth like animals without any hope of any kind?) (67-68, 75-76)

His hapless mother is the innocent target of his anger since he cannot as yet see the source of his oppression. The despair and sense of helplessness that he felt earlier in the face of their victimization by those who would bind them to the earth are nothing compared to this day's rage, as his youngest brother now also falls from the sun's

devouring rays: "¿Por qué a papá y luego a mi hermanito? . . . ¿Por qué?" ("Why my father, and now my little brother? . . . Why?") (70, 78).

Rushing home with his brother in his arms, the protagonist brings himself to do what he had done previously by indirection: "Maldijo a Dios" ("He cursed God") (70, 78). At this instant, he imagines that the earth is about to part and swallow him alive; but the earth did not part. Instead, he continues homeward carrying his brother, feeling the solidity of the material earth beneath his feet. With his acceptance of his own universal isolation comes "un paz que nunca había sentido antes" ("a peace that he had never known before") (70, 78).

This almost Nietzschean serenity, a liberating joyful wisdom, is the direct result of his appropriation of the site of God's former existence as the place for his own self-determined presence: "por primera vez se sentía capaz de hacer y deshacer cualquier cosa que él quisiera" ("for the first time he felt himself capable of doing and undoing whatever he chose") (70, 78). The religion of Job reconciled or of Christ crucified here has not diminished but rather added to man's burden of suffering to the extent that it has been used as a justification for the historical crimes that people commit against other people. By rejecting that religion and its idealist metaphysics and moving as it were beyond good and evil, the protagonist implies that in this life understanding, the source of collective power, is the first step toward historical materialist salvation.

Jameson has suggested that "the vocation of the dialectic lies in the transcendence of this opposition toward some collective logic 'beyond good and evil'" (1981, 286). In this case, understanding, the product of the dialectic, survives and replaces the decay of faith in the divine and its transcendental strictures and works to create the preconditions of that collective logic. To be sure, this act of understanding is still an individual one affecting an isolated subject and cannot readily be appropriated unproblematically as a model for the full reconstruction of a collective process of meaning. But it does foreshadow a mode of thinking that might prefigure an alternative social formation, one that does not tie men, women, and children in bondage to the earth through myths of transcendental peace. The proleptic quality of this dialectical resolution is not particularly surprising, especially "if we take dialectical thought to be the anticipation of the logic of the collectivity which has not yet come into being."⁷

7. J. Saldívar (1985, 100), citing Jameson (1981, 286).

Freed now of those myths that have been used to underwrite and perpetuate the specific historical formation of postwar capitalist agribusiness, the child protagonist of "... y no se lo tragó la tierra" knows that the earth cannot "swallow" and the sun cannot "devour." He saves himself to act within the bounds of history by realizing that those anthropomorphic projections of human will onto unfeeling nature are, like the myth of God Himself, only the fraudulent means by which the force of individual will and collective action can be diminished and misdirected. His analysis is less a demand to abandon religion than a plea to give up a condition that requires illusions. Authentic life is now to be constituted by the will's interpretive act, the determination of its own fate. To paraphrase Paul Ricoeur, Rivera's child protagonist begins to do away with idols when he begins to listen to the symbols by which his world is ordered.⁸ His iconoclastic act, cursing God, speaking the unspeakable, is motivated by a double urgency: to liquidate oppressive idols and to articulate the power of self-determination. He may now truly do and undo whatever he chooses. Having attained this necessary protopolitical level of Feuerbachian dialectical insight through the reduction of his illusions, the child's full attainment of a political understanding of his place in a system of class oppression, of seeing the world as a product of socially interactive labor, of recognizing the need for collective action, and the subsequent recovery of his "lost year" cannot be far off.

With this reassertion of the active subject's—the proletariat's—creation of the historical world as part of the dialectic of subject and object, comes the possibility of the articulation of an authentic class consciousness. Rivera does not offer us so much a story of personal redemption as an allegory of historical crisis. The categories of individuality and personal subjectivity, under suspicion from the initial scenes of the novel where even the most basic markers of the traditional notion of the sovereign subject are absent, begin now to be attenuated even further as the boy's former intuitions concerning his "subjectlessness" undergo an even more drastic reconceptualization with his emergence from the isolation of his ego-centered alienation into the "collective utopian world of the human community" (J. Saldivar 1985, 105).

The two central episodes of the novel amount to critiques of religious idealism and ego psychology and show how tenacious and debilitating a precritical metaphysic can be. They dramatize that the

8. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (1970, 27).

making of a working-class consciousness is at least in part a reaction to a pacifying combination of imaginary, psychological, religious, and economic formations working to protect the status quo. The tropological deconstruction of the ethics of "good and evil" reveals how effective ideological manipulation, the work of hegemony, may be as it enforces the interests of the oppressors by having the victims internalize and embrace the system of beliefs that justify their oppression. At this moment, however, the child protagonist experiences the existential resolve not to believe and hence not to be bought and sold like an animal or like the fields that he works. In effect he begins to resist the literal commodification of his labor. Taking the part of a human individual possessed of a will as well as of working power, resisting the commodification of his labor, Rivera's protagonist signals, if not the integration of his formerly fragmented identity, at least the possibility of his future liberation. Representing crises that initially seemed expressions of a universal existential homelessness, Rivera identifies the specific historical factors of the workings of capitalist social and ideological life as the sources of alienation.

The essentially negative demystifying work of ideological analysis that characterizes crucial scenes of the novel and reveals the debilitating contradictions inherent in the developing capitalist agribusiness economic world of the 1940s and 1950s are counterpoised by equally crucial scenes that seek to identify an affirmative ground for a collective cultural unity beyond the realm of the individual subject. The utopian possibility of transcending the logic of good and evil toward some collective logic free of the limits imposed on language and thinking now becomes the very substance of the concluding sections of Rivera's novel.

The closing sections of *Tierra* emphasize formally the thematic concern with the dispersal of the subject that has been one of the novel's basic themes and return us to the issue of narrative experimentation. While the temporal and compositional elements of the narrative, short, episodic, nonsequential narrative frames that may or may not develop into a string of causal sequences, have from the beginning of the novel made a traditional reading of character difficult, the various sections of the text do tend to focus on the experiences of single individuals. This narrative strategem has a double purpose: it allows the representation of personal alienation while simultaneously putting into question the very category of an unproblematic individual identity. The final two sections of the novel, however, alter the former configurations of subjectivity dramatically.

IDEOLOGICAL
ANALYSIS
OF LAND
CHARACTERISTICS
MOVES ALONG
W/ COLLECTIVE
IDENTITY
↓
THE AFFIRMATIVE
POSSIBILITY
OF
OVERCOMING
LAMP
CARLETON

THIS IS
THE
"DOUBLE
BOND"
I MEAN IT!!

CITE!

→

In the penultimate section, "Cuando lleguemos" / "When We Arrive," the single narrative voice and individual narrative focus give way to a complex choir of intermingling voices. The narrative form itself repeats the thematic move away from the singular subject as it calls for a responsive understanding on the part of the reader, encouraging that we listen to the voices that now become the subject of the story. And while we will return to the child protagonist's perspective in the final section of the novel, even there the point of view is no longer an inwardly directed one but is now explicitly focused on the place of the protagonist's life within the larger social world as he scans the scenes, people, and events that have formed the substance of his narrative and achieves an almost utopian lucidity of insight and transparency of identity.

The mood of "Cuando lleguemos" / "When We Arrive" is like the tense of the verb in Spanish, a conditional one: the completion of the action has been deferred. We hear the thoughts and voices of at least nine individuals packed into the van of a large truck with perhaps forty other migrant workers, men, women, and children, who are being transported from Texas to the farms of Minnesota. It is four o'clock in the morning, and after nearly twenty-four hours on the road the truck has broken down along a deserted stretch of Iowa highway "cerca de Dimoins" ("near Des Moines") (149, 157). People had stirred when the truck stopped but now silence reigns again as "unos estaban dormidos otros estaban pensando" ("some were asleep, others were thinking") (148, 156).

The separate voices speak their concerns: one is glad that the truck has broken down because he can hurry off into the bushes to relieve himself; a second commiserates with the children, who like the adults have had to stand for these past twenty-four hours; another hopes for a successful onion harvest so that next year he and his family might not have to travel "como vacas" ("like cattle") (150, 158). Yet a fourth hopes for a good beet harvest so that he might repay to "el señor tomson" (150) the two hundred dollars at 100% interest that he has borrowed to make the vegetable harvest trip, while another worries about his wife's kidney condition and hopes for her sake that "cuando lleguemos" they don't have to live in a chicken coop as they did the prior season.

Some of the voices are distinct enough that we can identify them when they speak again, as is the case for one angry voice: "Nomás que lleguemos al rancho y me voy a ir a la chingada. Me voy a ir a buscar un jale a mineapolis" ("Just as soon as we get to the ranch I'll get the hell out of here. I'm going to look for a job in Minneapo-

lis") (149, 157). A few paragraphs later we hear again: "pinche vida, pinche vida, pinche vida, pinche vida, por pendejos, por pendejos. Esta es la última vez que vengo así como una pinche bestia parado todo el camino. Nomás que lleguemos me voy a mineapolis." ("This goddamn fuckin' life. This goddamn son-of-a-bitch's life. This is the last time I travel like a goddamn animal standing all the way. Just as soon as we arrive I'm going to Minneapolis") (150-51, 158-59). Similarly, the person in the bushes now speaks again, commenting on the beauty of the stars and wondering "¿Cuántos más estarán viendo la misma estrella? ¿Cuántos más estarán pensando que cuántos estarán viendo la misma estrella?" ("I wonder how many others are looking at the same star. I wonder how many others are wondering how many others are looking at the same star") (151, 159). The truck driver too is identifiable as he looks forward to their arrival when he might abandon his passengers and return to Texas: "Cada quien para su santo" ("Let each one look out for his own skin") (152, 160). And yet, the identity of the speakers is not the concern of the narrative at all. The separate voices meld beyond their individuality in their common refrain "cuando lleguemos":

—cuando lleguemos, cuando lleguemos, ya, la mera verdad estoy cansado de llegar. Es la misma cosa llegar que partir porque apenas llegamos y . . . Mejor debería decir, cuando no lleguemos porque es la mera verdad. Nunca llegamos.

(When we arrive, when we arrive. At this point, to tell the truth, I'm tired of always arriving someplace. Arriving is the same as leaving because as soon as we arrive . . . Maybe I should say when we don't arrive because that's the plain truth. We never really arrive anywhere.) (152, 160)

The economic life of the migrant farmworker bound to the seemingly endless cycle of arrival and departure here becomes itself the subject of the analysis. It offers us one more version of the differential structure that we have identified as basic to the ideological critique of contemporary life performed by Chicano narrative. The dynamics of this structure undermine fixed ethical conclusions and fixed categorical definitions, particularly of polar oppositions put forth as irreconcilable and insoluble in favor of what we might call a unity within difference. In this instance, arriving and departing are shown to be not absolute oppositions of one another but rather mutual differentials, differing from and deferring to the other sequentially, continuously. As there is no definitive origin to their journey, neither is there an absolute endpoint. The geographical space between Texas and Minnesota is thus collapsed into the temporal cycle lived in the

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modes of human suffering and frustration that makes each place both an origin and an end but neither one nor the other exclusively.

The political consequences of this deconstruction are significant indeed. Read one way, the refrain "cuando lleguemos" serves a decidedly hegemonic end: it manipulates with the false hope that there is a definitive end to the migratory cycle, that the new cars, the comfortable rooms, and the good wages are there at journey's end awaiting their arrival. Defusing and rechanneling the workers' dangerous angers and frustrations by promising them the rewards of their labor at a constantly postponed journey's end, the cycle performs a powerful ideological function. Read dialectically, however, with the recognition that, as the one voice puts it, "es la misma cosa llegar que partir," the phrase carries quite another valence: when we arrive we are no better off than we were when we departed. At this point we are at a protopolitical level, one step away from the recognition that the cycle of arriving and departing is itself part of the corrosive system for guaranteeing the availability of cheap and plentiful agricultural labor.

The possibility of this recognition is signalled both by the grammatical subject of the first-person plural ("cuando lleguemos") and by the narrative form that has blurred the conventional boundaries between the various speaking voices to form a harmonious ensemble of thoughts, has dramatized the impossibility of plots with stable beginnings, middles, and ends, and has problematized linear narrative itself as a dependable recorder of reality. In both the cases of characterization and narrative form, individual experience is gradually replaced by conditional solidarity with others who also suffer an inarticulated victimization. The utopian hope for a better future that does emerge from Rivera's narrative is based less on the characters' expectations of attaining some personal dream than on the narrator's confidence that the characters' metonymic ensemble of consciousnesses can express, even if only allegorically, the possible unity of a collectivity. While working within the general paradigms of traditional narrative realism with its direct ties to the socioeconomic framework of the real world, *Tierra* thus constructs a more complex realism than do the texts that we have previously discussed.

In the last section of the novel, "Debajo de la casa" ("Under the House"), the protagonist reappears but in significantly different form. Underneath a house, looking for a quiet place to think, the child focuses now not on "his lost year," but on the people, places, and events that have constituted that year. One by one, communal voices invade his story even more forcefully than before, affirming in their

presence the historical unity of the heterogeneous crowds that pass through his mind. He now says: "Quisiera ver a toda ese gente junta. Y luego si tuviera unos brazos bien grandes los podría abrazar a todos" ("I would like to see all those people together. And if I had long enough arms, I could hug them all at the same time") (168, 176). Having discovered himself as the creative documentor of South Texas migrant life in the process of telling his nonsequential, disseminated story, the child triumphantly reemerges from the flow of voices:

Se sintió contento de pronto porque . . . se dio cuenta de que en realidad no había perdido nada. Había encontrado. Encontrar y reencontrar y juntar. Relacionar esto con esto, eso con aquello, todo con todo. Eso era. Eso era todo. Y le dio más gusto.

(Suddenly he felt very happy because . . . he realized that he hadn't lost anything. He had discovered something. To discover and to rediscover and synthesize. To relate this entity with that entity, and that entity with still another, and finally relating everything with everything else. That was what he had to do, that was all. And he became even happier.) (169, 177)

The narrator here describes the very process of dialectical analysis that has motivated his entire story: abstraction from specific real conditions, followed by systematic analysis, and then by successive reapproximations to the real, all made necessary because everyday experience catches only the delusive appearance of things. If we continue to use the category of the subject in referring to the narrative procedures of Rivera's text, we do so now "under erasure," with the understanding that the term designates an as yet untheorized object—the collective folk self-identified as *la raza* (the people). Lauro Flores is surely correct when he observes that "Rivera's characters . . . predate the Chicano Movement . . . [and] inhabit a world in which exploitation and denial are still the fundamental traits of their existence" (1985, 106). But while granting the fact of an unachieved class consciousness in the story that Rivera tells, we cannot ignore the strength of the imperfect allusions to collectivity throughout the narrative. Rivera accomplishes his portrait of the real working-class experience of *la raza* not by attempting to transcend the historical terrain of repression but by working at the radical level of historical and cultural specificity, attempting to show the working class as what Lukács has called the self-emancipating subject of history (1968, 199). "Thinking that he was thinking," Rivera's narrator-protagonist refers the question of knowledge to its concrete situation

9. See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, for a full discussion.

in social reality and to the class affiliation of the subject. In their very alienation and their sense of themselves as commodities to be sold, Rivera's characters come to apprehend reality as a process and as a reification into separate and unrelated things. Unable to raise themselves above the role of object, their consciousness is what Lukács has termed "the self-consciousness of the commodity; . . . the self-revelation of the capitalist society founded upon the production and exchange of commodities" (1968, 168). Rivera's figures are thus not the pragmatic subjects who populate the myth of American individualism, nor are they romanticized symbols of the Worker engaged in a world-wide class struggle. Rather, his characters are fundamentally rooted in the stuff of South Texas social and economic history, lived out as the community of *la raza*. As a fluid and nonsubjectified character, *la raza* itself becomes an element in the larger ideological struggle between agricultural capital and social democracy. In Rivera's narrative, this fluidity is not a sign of its social and political elusiveness but the ground of its historicity and political force. It signifies, as Joseph Sommers claims, "the beginning of recuperation of historical experience" (1979, 105).

The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo

If in Rivera's view life can be stabilized only after we have experienced its instability and dreamed its integration in a utopian vision, in Oscar Zeta Acosta's narratives life is constituted only as instability, as chaos. Around the chaos, order can be momentarily constructed, but precisely because this order is a human construct, it cannot be made permanent. In the tragicomic antics of his fictional persona, Buffalo Zeta Brown, lawyer, writer, and would-be revolutionary, Acosta attempts to transform the debilitating effects of psychic doubt into political action, to fashion out of the absence of absolute value a new hypothetical order. In the process, he creates two of the most outrageous and iconoclastic satirical narratives in Chicano literature.

The first of these books, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), tells of the transformation of Dr. Gonzo, "the 300-pound, pill-popping Samoan attorney immortalized in Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*," into Oscar Zeta Acosta, a new-left, psychedelic, radical Chicano lawyer.¹⁰ The first view we are offered of

10. Oscar Zeta Acosta, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (New York: Popular Library, 1972), publisher's information, p. 1. Héctor Calderón argues persuasively that

the Brown Buffalo is a revealing one, as he stands tableau-like before the mirror of introspection:

I stand naked before the mirror. Every morning of my life I have seen that brown belly from every angle. It has not changed that I can remember. I was always a fat kid. I suck it in and expand an enormous chest of two large hunks of brown tit. . . . I enter into the toilet. With my large, peasant hands carefully on the rim of white, I descend to my knocked knees. I stare into the repository of all that is unacceptable and wait for the green bile, my sunbaked face where my big, brown ass will soon sit. (11-12)

It is July 1, 1967, and as he will now explain, Acosta, in the guise of his fictional persona Buffalo Zeta Brown, has been brought to this expiatory position (his "sunbaked face" and "big brown ass" sharing a joint excremental function) in the thirty-third year of a life of wasted potential by the accident of being born poor and Mexican American. Racked by pain from an ulcerated stomach brought on by alcohol, tranquilizers, poor nutrition, and the frustrations of his job as a Legal Aid attorney, Acosta is desperate, burned out, and in the phrase of the day about "to turn on, tune in and drop out," seeking for himself that elusive oneness with the cosmos that the burgeoning love generation seems to have found. He leaves behind a very different world. The unending stream of poor blacks and Chicanos seeking temporary restraining orders against eviction notices, repossession claims, or querulous spouses, seeking declarations of bankruptcy, the restitution of wages, or child support payments, seeking in other words whatever meager justice is afforded to impoverished minority men and women attempting to allay the domestic tragedies of mid-century American life, has driven Acosta to the very edge of sanity:

For twelve months now all I have done is stuffed myself, puked wretched collages in the toilet bowl, swallowed 1000 tranquilizers without water, stared at the idiot-box, coddled myself, and watched the snakes grow larger inside my head while waiting for the clockhand to turn. For twelve months now, since I first became an attorney, a man who speaks for others . . . time has been nothing but a never-ending experience that meets me in the morning just like it left me off the night before. . . . I used to have the answers. . . . (28-29)

On this day, the "angst" (28) will not stop. He can speak for no one as he feels that no answers are available, and only the road beckons as a possible way out. The rest of Acosta's *Autobiography* tells of his

Brown Buffalo and *Revolt* should be read as satires (1982, 6-7). On satire, see also Guillermo E. Hernández, *Chicano Satire*, forthcoming.

search for answers in the altered states of consciousness brought on by excesses of sex, booze, LSD, mescaline, peyote, hashish, cocaine, amphetamines, and anything else that he can encounter on the road, as if in an attempt to make his very physical being the experimental canvas of an excremental artform, the fashioning of a self. In the course of this restless, near suicidal trip through the counterculture scene of the late 1960s, we learn by way of a series of flashbacks that Acosta's crisis has been developing since childhood in the 1940s and early 1950s, through a stint as a Baptist missionary in Panama in the early 1960s, and through two nervous breakdowns and ten years of psychoanalysis. Yet, whatever answers might exist for him are not to be found solely in personal terms. On the contrary, Acosta's satire reasserts what Jameson has termed "the specificity of the political content of everyday life and of individual fantasy-experience" (1981, 22). His descent into the nightmarish underworld of the American dream will reclaim the force of individual experience, restore it to the status of psychological projection, and will lead him by a roundabout path back to the active struggles of the beginnings of the Chicano Movement in East Los Angeles and the beginnings of a wholesale critique of the assimilationist, consensual American ideological hegemony. In the process, he will produce an identity for himself. But first he must confront himself.

Interspersed with the series of drug- and alcohol-induced binges that form the core of the satire are a series of flashbacks to Acosta's childhood as a "peach-picker's boy" (66) in Riverbank, California. Acosta's sense of himself as an "outlaw," an "outsider," and an "outcast" (94, 95) comes from the first days of his family's arrival in Riverbank from El Paso, Texas, his birthplace:

California, then, was a land of *Pochos*. . . . when we left *El Segundo Barrio* across the street from the international border [in El Paso], we didn't expect the Mexicans in California to act like gringos. But they did. We were outsiders because of geography and outcasts because we didn't speak English. . . . And so we had to fight every single day. (95)

Apart from fighting the other Mexicans who didn't consider him and his brother "real Mexicans" (95), Oscar also finds that "we had to fight the Oakies because we were Mexicans!" (96). In a town where "there were only three kinds of people: Mexicans, Oakies and Americans. Catholics, Holy Rollers and Protestants. Peach pickers, cannery workers and clerks" (96), Acosta must accept his contradictory niche as "a fat, dark Mexican—a Brown Buffalo" (107), even while the California *pochos* never quite acknowledge him "as part of their

tribe" (96). His fantasy of being accepted by his "American" schoolmates and especially by a "pig-tailed American girl" (109) who has been friendly to him, is exploded one day when she tells the teacher that Oscar "stinks" (117). He is forced to recognize that "I am the nigger after all. . . . I am nothing but an Indian with sweating body and faltering tits that sag at the sight of a young girl's blue eyes" (118). As will continue to be the case throughout the remainder of the story, Acosta's sense of his own being as man of color in a white supremacist society is focused sharply on his sensual being and on how he imagines it to be perceived by blue-eyed, pony-tailed American women.

Back in the present through Idaho, Montana, and Colorado, with an assorted company of hippies, bikers, hitchhikers, druggies, and an outlaw journalist modeled after Hunter Thompson, Acosta pushes his alcohol- and drug-consuming capacities to the limits, often unconsciously flirting with death, while coming no closer to a resolution of the doubts with which he began. The romantic collectivism of the Timothy Leary, flower child, love-in generation has turned him into "a recorder of the past with a sour stomach" (18): "I was thirty-three years old . . . and I had no idea where I was" (180). From the chaotic ruins of his life, he now makes one last effort to salvage some sense: "I decided to go to El Paso, the place of my birth, to see if I could find the object of my quest. I still wanted to find out just who in the hell I really was" (234).

He finds El Paso to be nothing like the town that he remembers having left as a child twenty-five years earlier. But he is struck by the people and their language: "All the faces are brown, tinged with brown, lightly brown, the feeling of brown. . . . And they are all speaking in that language of my youth . . . a language perfect in every detail for people who are serious about life and preoccupied with death only as it refers to that last day of one's sojourn on this particular spot" (236–37). The unusual feeling of being an insider rather than an outcast intensifies as he crosses the bridge into Juarez, but so too does his fear that he is only "impersonating a *mexicano*":

All my life someone or another had made such accusations. The kids from the West Side fought Bob and me because we were from the East. . . . The Oakies spit on my prick because I was a nigger faking it as a Mexican. And the Americans wanted me to forget I was ever a savage with secret codes. (238)

When a Mexican prostitute approaches him in a bar and he is unable to flirt with her in Spanish or respond to her question of whether he

is Mexican or not, Acosta realizes that his old joking response that he is "Samoan" (242) is no longer very funny. The consequences of his search for his "fucked-up identity" (242) get even more serious when he is arrested and thrown into the Juarez jail, where he is humiliated by the Mexican police and terrorized by the Mexican prisoners. The ultimate humiliation occurs, however, when even though he is a lawyer he is unable to plead his case before the Mexican magistrate because his Spanish is too weak. He must meekly speak his apologies in English. As he is being led out from the courtroom after having been found guilty of a misdemeanor offense, the Mexican magistrate, a dark-skinned woman, calls out to him in perfect English: "Why don't you go home and learn to speak your father's language?" (247). His homelessness is made all the more vivid when, as he crosses the bridge back to El Paso, the U.S. Immigration officer admits him into the country but with the comment that he should carry identification papers since "You don't look like an American, you know" (249). It is January 1968 and Acosta has descended as far into hell as he will go.

Acosta's story ends as it began: he stands naked before a mirror, wallowing in self-pity, and completely lost to himself: "I am a brown buffalo lonely and afraid in a world I never made" (249). He is forced to admit that he has "failed to find the answer to my search. One son-of-a-bitch tells me I'm not a Mexican and the other one says I'm not an American" (250). In the midst of his inability to resolve his schizoid identity, neither Mexican nor American, and as he is planning to leave the country for Guatemala to write about the Sandinista revolution, Acosta learns from his brother about "some group called the Brown Berets [who] are going to have a school strike [in East L.A.]" (250-51). His brother suggests that Acosta go to East L.A. and write about that revolution. The narrative ends none too optimistically as we find our hero factitiously dreaming about the rousing speeches by which he will stir the coming Chicano revolution:

No one ever asked me or my brother if we wanted to be American citizens. We are all citizens by default. They stole our land and made us half-slaves. . . . Now what we need is to give ourselves a new name. We need a new identity. A name and a language all our own. . . . I propose that we call ourselves the Brown Buffalo people. (253)

His search for personal identity has led him uneasily to the possibility of a transpersonal solution to his questions. But, in fact, as he readily admits, what he really wants is "to speak for his people" as "Moses, Mao, and Martin" did for theirs (253). The patent inau-

thenticity of his resolve to join in a collective enterprise is revealed in his grandiosely overblown self-denial in the name of *la raza*, a community he does not yet really understand.

The Revolt of the Cockroach People

The next chapter of Acosta's life finds him back in East Los Angeles in 1968, working again as an attorney for the Public Defender's office, caught up in the newly politicized Chicano movement, and sporting a new name, "Buffalo Zeta Brown."¹¹ *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* is, as the stinging irony of its double-edged title suggests, a profane, ambiguous attempt to reconstruct the mood of the heady days of the Los Angeles Chicano high school blow-outs (walkouts) in 1968, the founding of the militant Brown Berets, the protests of the Católicos Por La Raza (CPLR) in 1969, and the general politicization of the Chicano community by the farmworkers' labor struggles and the alliance of the Chicano Movement with the anti-Vietnam War movement in the Chicano National Moratoriums of 1970.¹² The consolidation of the feminist movement, protests against academic regimentation, racial discrimination, workers' exploitation, religious alienation, dehumanization, sexual repression, environmental destruction—the entire panoply of seemingly unrelated "disorders" that formed the core of the social crisis of the 1960s and early 1970s are exposed in confusing array as the substance of Acosta's novel.

The Revolt of the Cockroach People places us in the midst of the turbulent scenes of the demonstrations by the CPLR on Christmas Eve of 1969 at St. Basil's Cathedral, protesting the Church's refusal to involve itself in the cause of social justice for Mexican Americans. It follows with trial scenes where Brown serves as the defense attorney first for the Chicanos accused of conspiracy in the school blow-out case, and then for those arrested at the St. Basil's Cathedral demonstration. The climactic scene of the novel dramatizes Brown's role as defense lawyer in the trial of the Chicanos tried for conspiracy and inciting to riot at the National Chicano Moratorium antiwar demonstration at Laguna Park in East Los Angeles on August 29, 1970. In each of these cases, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* uses the

11. Acosta, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973; New York: Bantam Books, 1974), 30.

12. See Acuña, "New Nationalism—Youth Movement" and "Major Demonstrations" (1981, 355-60, 366-71) for discussion of the early days of the Chicano movement in Los Angeles.

historical events of the day as the context for the construction of a Chicano identity and the realization of a revolutionary class consciousness. In the role of Buffalo Zeta Brown, Acosta remains outrageously, even arrogantly, self-oriented in the course of his story, but finds that despite himself the answers to his personal questions continue to lead him in an extrapersonal direction.

"While the novel may hold up a mirror to life," notes Héctor Calderón, "the satirist uses the mirror to distort" (1982, 7). Despite Brown's overt sexism, his blatant anticlericism, and his heavy-handed egoism, no single feature of his satire is likely to offend the common reader more than his assessment of the American legal system as an arbitrary weave of semantic threads created to hide the empty forms of notions such as "justice" and "natural rights." Whereas we would expect Law, at least in its ideal form, to permit us an approximation to the state of transcendental right, Buffalo Zeta Brown shows us, in a series of increasingly allegorical trial scenes, that the truth of justice is intimately tied to its differential opposite, the lie of justice: "All of them," he tells us in the climactic scene of the novel's closing trial:

every single witness, both prosecution and defense . . . is lying. Or not telling the whole truth. The bastards know exactly what we have done and what we have not done. . . . But they have all told their own version of things as they would like them to be. (272)

Brown's version of the law as he has come to understand it in the course of the various trials in which he participates offers us two correlative qualities: Law is *arbitrary* because it is constituted by a systematic difference between truth and lies and not by its own individual, *de jure*, fullness. It is *differential* because law does not function from the compact force of meaning at the core of "truth" and "lies" but by the *de facto* network of oppositions that distinguish them and relate them to one another. The major consequence to be drawn from this double recognition, as Brown realizes, is that an objective truth, sufficient unto itself and available for all to see, can never be made present, either in the courtroom or elsewhere. Brown does not mean that there are not statements that we can judge "true" or "false." He does suggest, however, that every attempt to specify "truth" forces us to define it in terms of an abstract entity that is only a cultural convention: All speak "their own version of things as they would like them to be." From Brown's point of view, truth and falsehood are not by-products of the direct adhesion between a word and some actual state of the world but are instead functions of co-

incidences or discrepancies between multiple versions of the same event. This recognition is at once frightening and exhilarating for Brown, for it allows him to fashion, if only crudely and temporarily, the answers to his earlier schizophrenic questions, and to meld his double desires both to counsel at law and to write "THE BOOK" of his life (14). He now sees the former antithesis between his private desires and his public responsibilities to be as factitious and as reductive as his former sense of *law* as simply an instrument of class domination. Law may well serve as a tool of repression but it may also be used to project a radically new form of legality that cannot be achieved within present institutions. The result of this realization is that Brown's overly facile resolutions of his personal identity crisis by subsuming it to ethical politics of "right" and "wrong" is totally negated. He now finds that ideological commitment to a cause or to an identity is not a matter of moral choices tied to absolute standards of "truth" and "falsehood." The matter resolves to the more fundamental issue of taking sides in a struggle between embattled groups (Jameson 1981, 290).

The reconciliation between his contradictory impulses is possible because Brown comes to see living, like lawyering and authoring, as a play of stylistics. The play allows the fashioning of a formal context into a thematic content. And all three activities finally entail a play with "lies" so that "truth" might be revealed. But all also entail the possibility that in the play with form, the form itself can become an end and seduce one away from the hard-won recognition of its foundation upon arbitrary *difference*. The flow of judicial, as well as fictional, language points to no meaning other than its own pleasurable self-reproduction. Legal and artistic truth depend not on a direct relation between a linguistic expression and a real object or state of affairs, but rather on the process of continuously displaced sign functions that attempt to name the truth.¹³ His understanding of the arbitrariness of truth statements, however, does not lead Brown either to his former "angst" nor to a sense of powerlessness. On the contrary, his understanding of the arbitrary difference of truth statements permits him to establish meanings as cultural units *materially* accessible to the individual will itself.

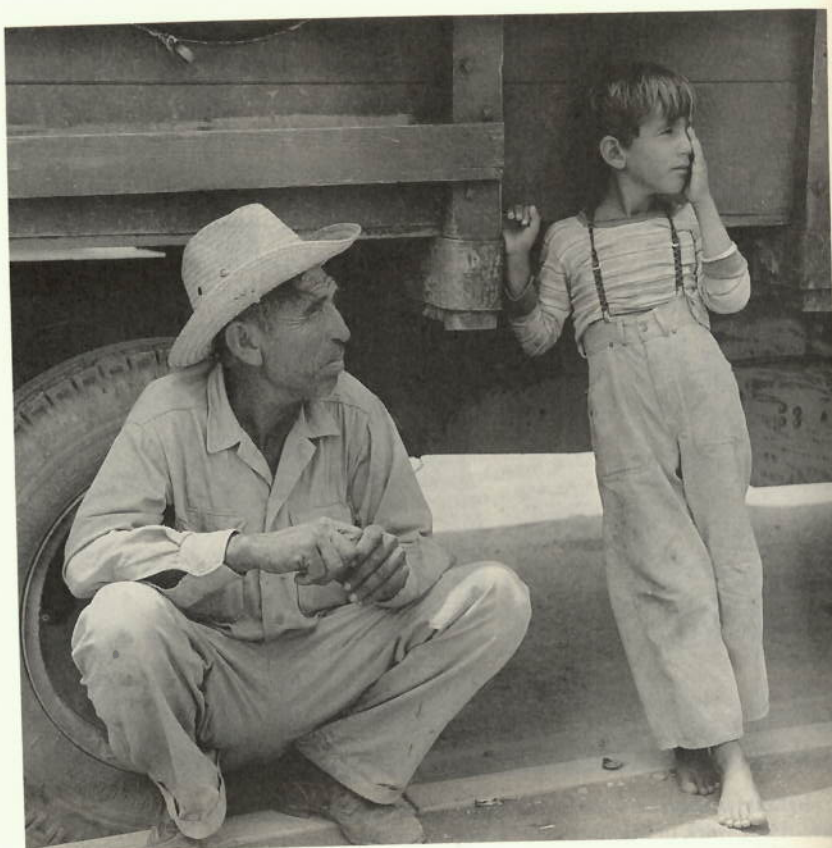
The hallucinatory dream of romantic collectivism he pursues in his satiric *Autobiography* bursts into full political consciousness in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*. Brown there comes to realize

13. On the relationship between legal and literary discourses, see the excellent essay by Susan Heinzelman (1988).

that forms of law, and of political, philosophical, religious, or artistic ideology are products of the concrete social relations into which people enter at a particular time and place. As products, they can also be reproduced. His aesthetic creation of "the Book" of his life is just one such cultural production. Stéphane Mallarmé had dreamed of a universal "*Livre*" to serve as the "spiritual instrument" in which all earthly existence might ultimately be contained. In a manner quite unanticipated by Mallarmé, Buffalo Zeta Brown's "Book" functions as a material instrument, attempting not to contain existence but rather to forge a symbolic or imaginary solution to the unresolvable social contradictions of our times (Jameson 1981, 79). For Acosta, too, reality remains a shocking montage of dissimilar qualities, but one that the revolutionary artist can nonetheless help transform. Through the fictional mask of Buffalo Zeta Brown, Acosta accepts this possibility and uses it to convert chaos into a utopian anarchy of both forensic and poetic form.



5. Migrant farmworkers and hiring agents gathering at an informal employment agency advertising work in Michigan for "beet pickers" in Corpus Christi, Texas, April 1949. (Russell Lee Collection, courtesy of the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas at Austin)



6. Farm laborer and his grandchild pausing near San Angelo, Texas, on the migrant path from the border town of Laredo, Texas, to the sugarbeet fields of Wyoming, May 1949. (Russell Lee Collection, courtesy of the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas at Austin)



7. Migrant farm-laboring families of the era depicted in Rivera's *Tierra*, San Angelo, Texas, May 1949. (Russell Lee Collection, courtesy of the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas at Austin)



8. Sign of the times: enforcing the Jim Crow laws and the segregation of "Mexicans" and "Spanish" in San Antonio, Texas, June 1949. (Russell Lee Collection, courtesy of the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas at Austin)

5

Romance, the Fantastic, and the Representation of History in Rudolfo A. Anaya and Ron Arias

While Rivera's novel retains vestiges of the corrido tradition, Acosta's satirical narratives irreverently explode the myth of the reticent, humble hero and deflate what by the 1960s has become an empty stereotype. Rudolfo Anaya and Ron Arias offer further variations on heroic identity and the formation of the Chicano subject in its position of resistance to the dominant American culture. Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, for example, rejects the symbolic social force of the corrido and its celebration of direct, confrontational resistance in favor of a romantic, mystical celebration of a racial collective unconscious unity with the world spirit. He presents this choice of romantic coalescence as an alternative sanctioned by the indigenous myths of his beloved New Mexico. Nowhere are the regional differences among Chicanos and their cultural productions highlighted more clearly than in Anaya's and Arias' different narrative choices and representations of history.

In Anaya's text, the radical tendency of Chicano narrative to explore the material conditions of psychological and cultural production appears surreptitiously, working against the unpolitical "conscious" levels of the narrative. Arias' fantastic narrative, similarly, seems to depart from the high realism of the corrido tradition represented in Paredes, Villarreal, and even in the formally experimental Rivera. Unlike Anaya's romance, however, Arias' fantasy invests the world of the imagination with the stuff of history and the imagined reality of urban *barrio* life. In its concern with the pathos of the imaginative life and the ideological formations within which the subject recognizes itself, *The Road to Tamazunchale* extends the critique of American cultural hegemony expressed in the corrido to the realm of the symbolic. Here I follow Jameson's suggestions about