

chapter one

Introduction: El Boom Latino

HOT SAUCE OVERTOOK CATSUP as the condiment of choice and McDonald's was serving breakfast burritos long before the media hype around Jennifer Lopez, Salma Hayek, Benicio del Toro, and Enrique Iglesias helped the mainstream United States define the "Latin Boom" in popular culture.¹ This salsa is also spicing up mainstream speech patterns. Nowadays, says John Lipski, "all Americans are immersed in a morass of what the anthropologist Jane Hill has called 'junk Spanish'—for example, the menu items at Tex-Mex restaurants . . . that juxtapose real and invented Spanish words with total disregard for grammatical concord and semantic coherence, linguistic niceties implied to be as optional as the little packages of salsa that come with our ready-made tacos" (1249). Nevertheless, the latest census statistics sparked widespread excitement and worry, as even the admitted undercount clearly indicated that the previously projected growth in the Latino/a population in the United States fell far short of the recorded numbers. Whether or not the Latin Boom is a mere marketing ploy, the demographics are real. The first draft of the 2000 census cites 35.3 million Latino/as in the United States, and we need to note that this number does not include the 3.8 million U.S. citizens who are residents of Puerto Rico. Later press releases have revised that figure up to 37 million, and these numbers only partially account for the estimated 7 million undocumented immigrants, who have good reason to evade government scrutiny. Thus, even by the most conservative estimate, there are now over 40 million Latino/as in U.S. territory.² These astonishingly high numbers ground arguments like those of Juan Gonzalez when he writes trenchantly, "this demographic shift is so massive it is transforming the ethnic composition of this country and challenging key aspects of its accepted national identity, language, culture, and official history, a seismic social change that caught the power structures and institutions of

U.S. society unprepared" (xi–xii). It is perhaps too easy to merely dismiss popular culture's celebration of *latinidad* with the same reflexive gesture we often use to decry reactionary warnings about the browning of America. Gonzalez's challenge, however, is to think differently—ultimately, to think biculturally.

Rey Chow summarizes the conundrum of cross-cultural dialogue in her elegant reading of Derrida's analogy to Chinese writing in his early book, *Of Grammatology*, which she finds productively symptomatic of many other less subtly argued scholarly positions. Chow notes that "Derrida's move to read across cultures . . . involves a moment in which representation becomes, wittingly or unwittingly, stereotyping, a moment in which the other is transformed into a recycled cliché." What is important to note, however, is that Chow, along with Derrida, not only acknowledges that stereotypes are simplistic—an all-too-obvious conclusion. She argues along with the French philosopher that they are also enabling fictions that allow theoretical formulations to take shape, that these clichés are always and everywhere absolutely essential to group relations and cannot be summarily dismissed: "The point, in other words, is not simply to repudiate stereotypes and pretend that we can get rid of them . . . , but also to recognize in the act of stereotyping . . . a fundamental signifying or representational process with real theoretical and political consequences" (70–71). Reading together Chow and Gonzalez offers us an important warning. The conjunction of these two thinkers suggests that the latter's implicit call for a positioned cultural critique, unless prudently and subtly tended with an eye to unavoidable consequences, could potentially devolve into a collision of each culture's worst stereotypes about the other rather than an encounter among various local knowledges with real transformatory effects in the nation's sense of itself. Along parallel lines, Chow's important caveat about the power and inevitability of stereotype could fall into the kind of simplistic reading she would deplore unless rigorous structures of critical exegesis are vigilantly tended.

Several of the recent discussions about Latino/a cultures in the United States worry about precisely this problem. Javier Campos, for instance, reflects that the so-called Latin Boom in the United States is deeply imbued with such clichéd and frequently erroneous understandings, which from both sides of the U.S./Latin America divide look like exoticized projections of expelled local desires. Campos traces the stereotypes to various sources: on the U.S. side, the 1920s fascination with Caribbean music on the East Coast, the reprocessing of that image in Hollywood films, the invention of the cowboy from disconnected bits of Mexican-Southwest U.S. vaquero culture, the partial knowledge brought back to the United States by artists, writers, and photographers who

roamed the exotic South in search of images and texts.³ From the South he cites a plethora of Mexican movies and the stereotypes that Latin American writers have promulgated about the United States after short stays in this country, generally as a land of abundant resources and absurdly inept inhabitants (81–82). By staying on only one side of the national borders, studies tend to be self-limiting and often misleadingly incomplete. There is certainly something interesting to be said about the relation, for example, among vaquero culture, Hollywood cowboy flicks, and Mexican movies from the 1950s, or Carmen Miranda, the salsa scene in New York, and Caribbean immigration; or alternatively, the United States and Latin American variations on the theme of the Ugly American. Campos's specific worry, however, is that uninflected stereotypes too often pass for complete knowledge about Latino cultures.

He is not alone in his concern; this is a critique raised in other contexts with respect, for example, to John Leguizamo's highly successful, controversial "Mambo Mouth," "Spicorama," and "Freak" performances. Leguizamo is widely recognized as a brilliant comedian by mainstream press, and his work is often celebrated in Latino/a circles as well. Yet, despite the recognition of his talent in alluding to and signifying on a variety of different Latino/a "types," his very use of these familiar figures raises a concern among some Latino/a scholars and journalists as well, one often articulated as a fear that his mordant satire would be misread by uninformed gringos as reflecting eternal verities of Latino culture. As Moya notes, "He clearly intends for his audience to identify him as 'Latino'" (248), yet the question remains of how "Latino" is deployed strategically in both mainstream and Latino/a cultures, and how well the putative audience understands and appreciates humor built upon stigmatized ethnic identities. In a more general sense, the question remains, as many scholars have already intuited, of how to frame a rigorous critique in the absence of ground on which to stand, or when the choice of a particular grounding discourse must always be taken in consciousness of its incompleteness, its flaws, and its unwelcome political and social consequences.

When we turn from popular to literary culture, there is also a long and deep history of looking at the South from a northern perspective and vice versa that might well serve as helpful points of departure to thinking through the further implications of this dilemma. Even ignoring colonial-period writings, there is an impressive corpus of works by recent and contemporary Anglo-American and European authors who have traveled to Latin America to seek objects of knowledge, exotic or mundane, as Paz-Soldán and Fuguet mention in the introduction to their recent volume of U.S.-based voices in Spanish (17). Paz-Soldán and Fuguet state tendentiously that "no se puede hablar de Latinoamérica sin incluir

a los Estados Unidos. Y no se puede concebir a los Estados Unidos sin necesariamente pensar en América Latina” [it is not possible to talk about Latin America without including the United States. And it is not possible to conceive of the United States without necessarily thinking about Latin America] (19). Néstor García Canclini agrees. In his *Latino-americanos buscando lugar en este siglo* he writes, “la condición actual de América latina desborda su territorio. . . . América latina no está completa en América Latina. Su imagen le llega de espejos diseminados en el archipiélago de las migraciones” [The current condition of Latin America overflows its territory. . . . Latin America is not complete in Latin America. Its image arrives back from mirrors disseminated in the archipelago of migration] (12, 19). To take just one instance from another scholarly work that reflects on this cross-fertilization: Dewey Wayne Gunn identifies more than 450 novels, plays, and narrative poems on Mexico published between 1805 and 1973 by British and U.S. writers in his book on that topic. Similarly, Mexican critic José Joaquín Blanco explores the famous obsession with indigenous Mexico in writers like Artaud or Bataille, who with a tourist’s Spanish, rudimentary and secondhand anthropological concepts, no knowledge of Mexican history, and no understanding of indigenous languages, imagine and create a Mexico that fits their preconceived notions (26). Likewise, there is a significant body of Latin American work looking at the North with a Southern perspective. Paz-Soldán and Fuguet list some of the most well-known names in their essay, “El monstruo come (y baila) salsa” [The Monster Eats (and Dances) Salsa]: Puig, Fuentes, Valenzuela, Donoso, Allende, Skármeta, and so on (17–18). Along more developed lines of analysis, scholars like Alberto Ledesma and Maria Herrera-Sobek have traced a prolific body of Mexican narratives about life in the United States, falling into at least two well-represented subgenres: the academic narrative (which would include writers like José Agustín and Gustavo Sainz) and the *bracero* novel (Spota, Becerra González, Topete, Oropeza). Such North-South dialogues (or parallel monologues) need to be read together, and read with the work by U.S.-based Latino writers from the many cultures and generations of *latinidad* in this country.

In its most general sense, as Mike Davis argues, “the idea of the Latino is fertile precisely because it is problematic.” Here, Davis quite rightly makes a helpful distinction between the too-often essentializing discourse of identity, “the Latino,” and the intellectual construct of what he calls an “idea.” This “idea of the Latino” signals nodes where the discourse of culture is articulated in ways other than through the traditional dichotomy of center versus periphery, even as some of the most direct effects of the political structuration of nation-states play themselves out on the very material Latino/a body. Davis points out

how the crossover effect between nations and cultures works in both directions: “It complicates how Latin Americans think of themselves now that constant migration between American border zones makes it hard to demarcate between Latinos and Latin America. . . . Conversely, the influx of Latin Americans affects historical Latino groups, inching them closer to national roots and requiring greater levels of Spanish competence” (xv–xvi).

Doris Sommer explores a related issue in her lucid analysis of the title of Puerto Rican poet Tato Laviera’s collection *AmeRican*, where the poet’s sensibility to the slight variations between what is written and what is heard, in Spanish and in English, opens onto a powerful implicit indictment of narrowly nationalist cultural politics. Laviera, she writes, is an artist who succinctly condenses this impossibility of demarcation in a single word:

His genius is to skip a beat, to unravel a seamless label by reading the English sign for America with an eye for Spanish. In Spanish this country looks like “América,” because without an accent on the “e” to give the word an irregular stress, a default, unwritten stress falls on the “i.” Laviera’s hypercorrection displaces the logic of diacritical marks from one language to another and performs a time lag of translation. The alleged omission of an accent mark is an opportunity to read the country in syncopation as AmeRíca, a time-lagged sound whose sign reforms that country’s look too. (301)

For Sommer, as for Laviera, these subtle transformations speak to and within a bilingual context, where the stumble of the poet’s syncopated language, as well as the accent mark, capitalize on the interplay between the homey and the defamiliarized versions of the word, which in English typically refers to a country and in Spanish a continent. The stumble and catch of the hypercorrected awkwardness, says Sommer, playing between languages in her turn and shifting from homey English to très chic Français, transforms what “is just a word into a *mot juste* in Spanglish” (301). In this manner, the unauthorized mixture also hints at the way language politics submerge the dissonant and strange into a particular kind of valued order: here, the kind of privilege that is accorded alterity in some of the most dominant theoretical commentaries on a globalized, postmodern culture. And yet, of course, by writing English with an eye to Spanish, by writing AmeRíca as a syncopated, Spanglishized nation, Laviera also marks the primacy of the English-speaking dominant culture’s perspective that underlies his meaningful distortion of it.

This syncopation, that in the specific sense we can associate with interlingual poets like Laviera, in a broader sense hints at a troubling

dislocation, what we might see as an infinitesimal disturbance in the grammaticality of the literary-cultural enterprise as it currently exists. This disturbance, as Sommer hints, also evokes a specific kind of musical form, the measure of an interval between two sounds. "The interval between two simultaneously sounded tones," says Reingard Nethersole, "is perceived within the context of production as dissonance, and hence requires mediation" (53). Laviera's dislocation is so evocative in part because it reminds us of the fractures we see, or hope to create, in the institution's monolithic face, the fault lines that disturb its accepted verities, the institution's dissonances, and the potential for mediation. Indeed, in recent scholarship, metaphors such as "syncopation," "dislocation," "fractures," "dissonance," and "gaps" appear consistently and symptomatically in the discussion of such issues.

Thus, for instance, Samuel Weber too addresses the question of mediation and the problem of a dissonance or dislocation in his recent work on the U.S. culture theory enterprise. He has pointed out that in the U.S. academic system, "global," disturbingly, has become "globular," in the sense of self-containment: not the planet, but a bubble. He discusses the irony in the reduction of foreign language instruction in U.S. universities precisely at the same time as globalization has become the new buzzword in scholarly work. "This suggests," he adds, "that from an American point of view, at least, 'globalization' is equivalent with 'monolingual'" (16). In the area of literary and cultural study, analogously, he argues that "though the glamour names of theory remain French, the mechanisms of mediation have increasingly become American" (5). For Samuel Weber, as for J. Hillis Miller and other scholars who worry about the current state of theoretical work in this country, high theory, those names to reckon with, seems foreign only in its originary dislocation from the United States, in the slight strangeness that still attains texts by and large read in English, commented upon in English, and treated as part of the U.S. monolingual enterprise. The globular becomes The Blob, reaching out to engulf its neighbors until it reaches a point of self-destruction.⁴ Throwing Spanish into this mix, as Laviera does, as Sommer does, reinforces another interval and a different mediation, hiccupping between two languages at home, strange to each other but neither of them foreign.

Scholars over the years have often commented on the very different nature of the privileges of the strong and the strategies of the weak that condition so many of the (non)exchanges between the United States and Latino/a America. Eduardo Mendieta, for example, talks about the often narrow and parochial perspectives of some of this country's most well-known and respected scholars; of one such individual, he notes: "his selection leaves the bitter impression that he only

reads his friends, and a small group of critics, or a very narrow spectrum of magazines and journals” (229). In contrast, like Laviera, like Sommer, no scholar or thinker from Latino/a America can ignore the U.S. dominant society or speak about an “Otherness” by way of the highly abstract discursive practice that is all too frequently deployed with respect to Latino/a America. For Latino/as and Latin Americans, their knowledge of the dominant culture’s Otherness can be incomplete, but it cannot be blank. In contrast, in the analogous context, U.S. dominant culture has, and feels no compunction about exercising, the privilege of ignorance. As Thomas Foster comments in his study of Gómez Peña, “the Chicano virtual reality machine makes visible the double experience of having a body that is too definitely marked, too easily read, but that for that reason does not register to (Anglo) others as needing any interpretive attention” (63). Curiously enough, and at the same time, as Pratt has noted, Anglo culture has a propensity not only to stereotype the Other’s outcast alterity, but to fetishize it as exotic and attractive in contrast with Anglo America’s own blankness: “asked to define or describe their culture . . . white American students often react with pain and anger, for they tend to know themselves as a people without culture” (“Daring to Dream” 13).

Between these two easily cast types emerge understandings of a U.S. imaginary seen differently, seen as the heterogeneous grouping of a multiplicity of national origins and ethnicities, of highly diverse peoples and identities. “What is different here (and a possible challenge to traditional American literary historiography),” say Moya and Saldívar in their elaboration of a similar project, “is our proposal to shift the tradition enough that it can respond to a transnational framework . . . that yokes together North and South America instead of New England and England” (2). Like J. Hillis Miller, who sees in the pedagogical challenge of studying U.S. literature and culture in its multilingual complexity a possibility for reinvigorating a moribund theory, Moya and Saldívar too ask us to rethink the national subject as postnational, transnational, as a displaced subject, always in process. Far from a utopian project, however, both Miller and Moya and Saldívar stress that their work aims in precisely the opposite direction: to deconstruct the uncritical and overly celebratory narrative of U.S. history and culture, and “open up the conversation to alternative worldviews and frameworks” (Moya and Saldívar 6). This conversation, it almost goes without saying, has a substantial theoretical as well as political and pedagogical edge. And yet, the question remains, how does one more adequately document the transnational subject in process?

In mainstream social science research, there is a widespread agreement that all identity, including ethnic identity, is instrumental in

nature—that is, it is a means to certain ends whether those ends can be defined as state-sponsored or as social-situational (Jones-Correa 110). For Jones-Correa, nevertheless, this instrumental theory of identity, while it serves both political and social purposes, does not fully capture the past constraints and present anxieties of the felt in-betweenness and lack of belonging that often becomes the most salient complaint of new Latino/as caught among multiple and conflicting identities, locked in a kind of double differentiation from whatever the home culture is described to be at a given moment (11). Strategic choices, internalized constraints, and historical and cultural factors all affect the degree to which individuals reinforce or resist identity claims made on their behalf. The result is often a recurrence of simplistic, unreflective stereotypes without a counterbalancing critique of knowledge.

In the case of the new Latino/as, that first-generation immigrant population, the potentiality for misunderstanding multiplies vertiginously. Not only does the new Latino/a have to take into account stereotypes by and about Latino/as in the United States, and stereotypes by and about non-Latino/a U.S. residents, s/he also has to deal with the baggage carried from Latin America, and the implications of that baggage in terms of U.S. cultural politics around issues of ethnicity, race, assimilation, bilingualism, international hemispheric relations, and so on. This is not a trivial problem, nor is it a hidden one. Demographically, just under one half of all Latino/as in the United States are first-generation immigrants (Jones-Correa 2). This fact, numerous social scientists suggest, has deep implications for the study of Latino/as in this country, who have traditionally been seen only from the perspective of a U.S. minoritized population. Equally important, argue scholars like Gonzalez and Jones-Correa, a corrective to traditional U.S. understandings of old and new Latino/as would include a perspective derived from Latin America. Unfortunately, says Gonzalez, too often, recognized Latino/a writers take on the task of explaining their stories and their cultures solely within a U.S. context, and solely to a dominant-culture reader, with the result that these narratives “fall into what I call the safari approach, geared strictly to an Anglo audience, with the author as guide and interpreter to the natives to be encountered along the way. . . . Few attempt to understand our hemisphere *as one New World, north and south*” (xvii–xviii). Gonzalez, like Jones-Correa and other prominent Latino social scientists, argues for a nuanced approach that would provide an important corrective to the exoticized Latino/a image too often promulgated and even self-promoted. This more balanced approach, in their view, has to include a wider hemispheric component.

Literary historian Kirsten Silva Gruesz would agree. In her analysis of Latino/a writers from the nineteenth century, she notes that not

only are the authors bicultural, but also their tools of analysis are extranational rather than indigenous. Thus, analyses of their work that derive from a single perspective are not only insufficient but actually distorting. The writers that most interest her are those who move fluidly between cultural systems: “the writers most aware of this paradox, most creative and conscientious in their responses to it, are often those who resist identification by nationality” (15). The critic, she argues, must be similarly fluid. Her observations about the complex relations of Latin American immigrant writers to the U.S. contact zones they inhabit provide one of the most important recent analyses of the continuing contributions of Latino/as to shaping the U.S. national imaginary.

While the specific cultural and geographical sites in the United States’ contact zones provide one of the most richly mined areas for study, a second look at these sites would also pay closer attention to the language communities and discourse flows independently of political borders. Influential Mexican culture critic Carlos Monsiváis has for years been tracking the Mexican middle-class phenomenon of what he calls the “Chicanization” of Mexican popular culture under influence from CNN and U.S. movies, U.S. rock and hip-hop musical forms, and the pressures of the English language. In a recent conference presentation, quoted by the online news service Notimex, Monsiváis developed this discussion in what is for him unusually negatively valenced terms. In a panoramic overview of contemporary Mexican letters titled “Cultura y globalización en América del Norte: Desafíos para el siglo XXI,” Monsiváis worries that “la introducción del espanglish inevitable y avasallante, obliga a que se desvanezca en las nuevas generaciones el sonido prestigioso y clásico del idioma” [the inevitable and overwhelming introduction of Spanish will cause the wearing away for the younger generations of the prestigious and classic sound of the language], and he expresses his deep concern that “jóvenes incapaces de memorizar un soneto, se saben al detalle la letra de las canciones de los Backstreet Boys, y por supuesto, de los Beatles y The Rolling Stones” [young people are unable to memorize a sonnet but they know by heart the lyrics to songs by the Backstreet Boys, and of course the Beatles and the Rolling Stones] (Notimex, June 10, 2001).

Perhaps the most surprising element in this comment is its source. While *ubi sunt* laments for past literary and linguistic glories are a well-established part of the academic mode, Carlos Monsiváis has more typically been celebrated for his sympathetic and amusing commentaries on the foibles of Mexican popular culture, as a defender of the vitality of cultural mixing rather than its retrograde opponent. This shift in Monsiváis from describing Chicanization to decrying Spanglish seems to me symptomatic of a significant body of commentary from highly

educated, polylingual representatives of Latin America's most exclusive cultural circles, often reflecting an unproblematized age and social-class bias that is so obvious as to require no further commentary.

This bias is not worth critiquing on its own grounds, except insofar as it offers a clear point of entry into the procedures of a specific storytelling discourse that has consequences for theoretical elaborations and that offers us insights into institutional practices and investments with respect not only to Backstreet Boys fans in Mexico but also to the young urban writers of the current generation in Latin America, where identity expresses itself in a hyperinternational cosmopolitan awareness, and who often, like the transnational nineteenth-century writers in Gruesz's study, move with intellectual and creative fluidity between the United States and their countries of origin. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a significant number of these up-and-coming writers are rejecting as stale the localized modalities of the Latin Boom, and finding inspiration in U.S./international popular culture, a knowledge anchored in their own first-generation experience in the United States—writers like Jaime Bayly (Peru), Alberto Fuguet (Chile), Ilan Stavans (Mexico), and Mayra Santos-Febres (Puerto Rico), to name just a few.

Culturally, the new Latino/as, suggests Ricardo Armijo in an unpublished manuscript, are currently caught between the expectations arising from the much-hyped Latino boom in the U.S. media on the one hand, and the well-established Latin American literary boom of the 1960s on the other. Armijo considers the key question to be “¿Cómo los escritores hispanoparlantes de los Estados Unidos podemos abordar nuestra realidad estadounidense si no tenemos una limitación nacional? ¿Cómo podemos imaginar la realidad que nos rodea cuando nuestro argumento básico es aquél que dice que venimos de otro lugar, de otra realidad?” [How can Spanish-speaking writers of the United States take account of our U.S. reality if we do not have a national boundary? How can we imagine the reality that surrounds us when our basic narrative is that which tells us that we come from another place, another reality?] (1). In raising this question, Armijo signals the unavoidable crisis arising whenever we put “politics” and “knowledge” together in the same theoretical structure: knowledge claims are inevitably embedded in a complex web of contested meanings and can only be verified through complicity with an exclusionary system that defines an inside and an outside, a really real and an “other” reality that lies outside the established boundaries.

Armijo also points to a more knotty problem, one that is fraught in the United States because of the long-standing historical minefields of social disturbance around ethnic identity issues. Who is a Latino/a? Who or what defines “real” *latinidad*? Or, as Palumbo-Liu perceptively

asks with respect to Asian Americans, “what kinds of historical memory enables certain claims and disables others?” (218), and later, “What is the nature of the various ‘collectivities’ that might vie for primacy in our recollective processes? How does recourse to such collectivities inevitably bracket out other modes of identification? . . . [W]hat is the nature of memory in a transnational or cross-cultural situation?” (298). Variants of these questions have been asked and answered in charged language by scholars and activists of many persuasions, and seem more urgent in certain circles due both to expanding first-generation populations, and, for other reasons, to the extensive mixed-ethnicity second-plus-generation cohort. Such identitarian claims are often expressed in tense exchanges between established Latino/as and newer arrivals, who have sometimes found themselves accused of being usurpers, frauds, not “real.” In one of his studies, Bruce-Novoa ponders the provocative question, “At what point can an immigrant Mexican writer be considered a Chicano?” (“Chicano Literary Space” 174), and Hector Calderón asks the similar question, “Are Mexican writers and expatriates traveling through or living in Texas and California to be included as Chicano writers?” (103). Similar questions are frequently posed about every conceivable national-origin individual. Should undocumented workers be included? Cubans who still consider themselves as “in exile” after forty years in the United States? How to resolve the tensions about Puerto Rico? If an *indio* from Guatemala qualifies as Latino, how about a Jew from Argentina?

Code switching and the use of Spanglish is also a hotly debated issue in U.S. Latino/a circles, but I would argue that the perspective goes beyond narrow concerns about the decline of the poetic range of the language in the mouths of undereducated adolescents that exercises Carlos Monsiváis. Rather than bemoaning the impoverishment of fine classical Spanish, many of the new Latino/a writers find in the rhythms of the two languages rubbing against each other an exciting and vital potentiality for new poetic expression. Tato Laviera’s poetry provides one such index of vitality. Similarly, the contributors to the recent post-McOndo Alfaguara volume *Se habla español*,⁵ while consistently functioning within the South to North view of first-generation Latinos in their encounters with the United States, often punctuate their narratives with loan blends or English words and phrases that more accurately capture the rich in-betweenness of their characters’ experiences. Some of the writers in the collection go farther than others: Gustavo Escanlar’s entertaining “Pequeño diccionario Spanglish ilustrado” [Brief Illustrated Spanglish Dictionary] in the opening pages of the volume offers perceptive, and often bitterly estranging, insights on the intersection of various new and established Latino communities

punctuated by key words in Spanglish: *bacunclínear*, *chatear*, *flipar*. The volume closes with the aggressive Spanglish of Giannina Braschi's "Blow-Up," and the jangling discords of her code-switching narrator perfectly match the exasperated exchanges between two people whose dysfunctional relationship is dissolving in a flood of petty accusations: "¿dónde está el tapón de mi botella de agua? Tú no sabes que le entran germs, pierde el fizz, y no me gusta que el agua huela como tu chicken curry sandwich, ésta ya no sirve. . . ." (37).⁶

The push and pull of the interlingual voice is at the very heart of these texts, as, in a more general sense, the punctuation of one language by another serves as a political and poetic device. Such texts defy translation into either of their constituent parts in a particularly strong sense, for to translate such performative utterances into either Spanish or English would be to distort them into meaninglessness, to subject them to a kind of linguistic assimilation and erasure. Such translations could speak to the reader only in a very limited sense, since they would inextricably dislocate the doubleness of the language into an unacceptable version of the monolingualism against which these writers are defining their entire poetics.

This book has opened with reference to some of the familiar myths and stories we tell each other about Others. Of these tales, the story of immigration is itself one of the principal among U.S. national myths (we're all immigrants in this country), but in the most familiar (Anglo) versions of this story, immigration is celebrated in the abstract rather than explored in the particular. Also, of course, it is worth underlining that while—stereotypically—we're all immigrants (except for the Native Americans, it goes without saying, runs the PC footnote), some immigrants are clearly more "American" than others (and, strangely enough, Native Americans seem the most "foreign" of all). Nevertheless, for many Americans of whatever national origin, their relation to the United States, whether it is a story of arrival or a story of conquest, is a traumatic one, certainly not the smooth transition into American Dream narrative that too many elementary school history books still describe as a fundamental sequel to the equally problematic myth of a melting pot initiation.

A few years before his death, Michel de Certeau proposed, for the purpose of debate, that all theory rests inescapably upon a bedrock of story, that, in fact, storytelling necessarily defines the shape of all theoretical work:

1. Procedures are not merely the objects of a theory. They organize the very construction of theory itself. . . .
2. In order to clarify the relationship of theory with those procedures that produce it as well as those that are its

objects of study, the most relevant way would be a *storytelling discourse*. . . . Stories appear slowly as the work of displacements, relating to a logic of metonymy. Is it not then time to recognize the theoretical legitimacy of narrative, which is then to be looked upon not as some ineradicable remnant (or remnant still to be eradicated) but rather as a necessary form for a theory of practices? (192)

I would like to propose that not only does theory rest upon a body of narrative, but that storytelling offers us a particularly valuable theoretical methodology for exploring some of the dilemmas that have engaged us here. Story and stereotype become, then, my two most important tools, and I deploy them throughout this text gingerly, and I hope respectfully, with full knowledge of their seductive and simplifying potential, trying to parse out the enabling fictions and wrest them from a more unwitting tropic(alized) deployment.⁷

Thus, I have organized this book as something like a story about immigration. It begins with “Origins,” a chapter in which I look at early struggles with how to define an American (as opposed to European) self in two writers who use the conquest of Mexico as a metaphorical scaffolding: Robert Montgomery Bird (the only gringo in this study), and the anonymously published *Jicoténcal*, whose author was one of two Cuban writers living in Philadelphia in the early decades of the nineteenth century. This story continues with an alternative encounter with cultural otherness through the image of “crossing,” in a chapter where I explore the stories of coming into contact with the United States in Ana Lydia Vega (Puerto Rico), Eduardo González Viaña (Peru), Carlos Fuentes, and Margarita Oropeza (Mexico). Crossing, of course, is followed by arrival, and in the stories of arrival I focus particularly on the strategic feminization of the Other culture as a way of dealing with cultural dissonance. The authors that help me think through this issue are Ariel Dorfman (Chile), Boris Salazar (Colombia), Gustavo Sainz (Mexico), and Sonia Rivera-Valdés (Cuba). In the final stage of this journey, I focus on the language games played by established Latino/as, exploring their self-conscious appeals to a cultural and linguistic doubleness—Rolando Hinojosa Smith (Texas), Dolores Prida (Cuba), and Giannina Braschi (Puerto Rico)—before closing the book with some thoughts on U.S. curricular practice.

The basic intent of this project is to take pursue an inquiry into the cultural and linguistic dissonances that Spanish in the United States creates. I focus primarily on the first-generation new Latino/as who choose to write in Spanish as a particularly understudied group of authors, in contrast with the more established second-plus-generation cohort, who often choose to write in English and whose literary and

theoretical work has been more assimilated into the U.S. academy. My contention is that the new Latino/as serve as important markers to help understand how the topography of literary study has come to its current state of uneasy disruption. In this respect, my project echoes a discussion that has been occurring in U.S. American studies in the United States at the theoretical level for twenty years concerning the shape of what we understand to be U.S. literature, that is: what would U.S. literature look like if we included literature from the United States in languages other than English? The study inevitably also entails a parallel question that is only beginning to be asked in U.S. Spanish departments, and has only nervously been hinted at in Latin America: what would Latin American literature look like if we understood the United States to be a Latin American country and took seriously the work by U.S. Latino/as with respect to what our departments consider the generally accepted hemispheric canon in Spanish? Most important, what are the challenges this shift of perspective poses to our institutional and curricular projects, to our projects of reading and thinking about culture? If we think from the United States as the second largest country in the Hispanic world, we are indeed entering the territory described by Walter D. Mignolo when he calls for the “reordering of the geopolitics of knowledge” from an unexpected place (93). This meditation seems to me particularly pertinent for those countries with the longest and most intensely intertwined relationship with the United States—Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico—and thus writers from these cultural backgrounds are highlighted in this study. I complement these analyses with commentaries on authors from a sampling of other Latin American heritages (Peru, Colombia, Chile), not to be exhaustive, but merely to suggest some of the richesses of this literary field.

This is the point to take a step forward into this journey, to parse out this conundrum in more detail, focusing particularly on a few aspects in the counterposing discourses that give shape to the theoretical dilemma of the new Latino/a in the United States.