

## A *Mestiza* in the Borderlands: Margarita Cota-Cárdenas' *Puppet*

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The article explores the formal and conceptual complexities of a novella that has so far escaped wide critical attention even though it tackles similar issues to Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*. Like Anzaldúa's *mestiza*, Cota-Cárdenas' narrator finds herself floundering in uncertain territory, for she has also discovered that she cannot hold concepts or ideas within rigid boundaries. That state of dissolution of traditional formations is what Cota-Cárdenas situates at the center of the narrative. *Mestizaje* in *Puppet* does not appear as a comfortable and privileged locus, but as a painful ideological repositioning, a third space or element that works against totalizing narratives. The article illustrates how Cota-Cárdenas foregrounds the powerful identity revision Anzaldúa would carry out in *Borderlands*, and contributes to the understanding of the self, of culture and the nation from the point of view of borderland subjectivities.

Keywords: *mestizaje*; hybridity; Chicano literature; borderlands; nomad

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## Una *mestiza* en la frontera: *Puppet*, de Margarita Cota-Cárdenas

El artículo explora la complejidad formal y conceptual de una novela breve que en gran medida ha pasado inadvertida para la crítica a pesar de centrarse en aspectos similares a los que Anzaldúa aborda en *Borderlands*. Como la *mestiza* que describe Anzaldúa, la narradora de Cota-Cárdenas está situada en un territorio incierto, puesto que ha descubierto que no puede encorsetar ni conceptos ni ideas. Ése es el estado de disolución que Cota-Cárdenas sitúa en el centro de la narración. El *mestizaje* que ilustra *Puppet* no se presenta como un lugar cómodo o privilegiado, sino como un reposicionamiento ideológico, como un tercer espacio que se enfrenta a las narrativas totalizadoras. El artículo ejemplifica cómo Cota-Cárdenas anticipa la revisión identitaria que Anzaldúa lleva a cabo en *Borderlands* y contribuye, así, a la exploración del yo y de la nación desde el punto de vista de una subjetividad de frontera.

Palabras clave: *mestizaje*; hibridismo; literatura chicana; frontera; nómada

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bastard and mixed-blood are the true names of race.

GILLES DELEUZE AND FELIX GUATTARI, *A Thousand Plateaus*

What changes, for example, when culture is understood in terms of material hybridity, not purity? How is the imagined community of the nation —to use Benedict Anderson's (1983) term— disrupted and customized by materially hybrid US-Mexico borderland subjectivities?

JOSÉ DAVID SALDÍVAR, *Border Matters*

Saldívar's words in *Border Matters* (1997) posit a radical invitation to consider national and, implicitly, personal identities as inevitably relational. Saldívar, like Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands: La Frontera* (1987), moves beyond nationalist positions that seek to secure and define an identity untainted by Anglo influence to articulate an impure and *mestiza* consciousness that arises from various cultural traditions and in cross-cultural exchange (Hames-García 2000: 109). The process has been previously addressed, among others, by Arjun Appadurai in *Modernity at Large* (1996), where he focuses on the setting into motion of images and viewers, now in constant and simultaneous circulation and transformation in the midst of mass-migrations, migratory flows, and the crossing of borders. As a result of the changes produced by these processes, "ethnicity, once a genie contained in the bottle of some sort of locality (however large), has now become a global force, forever slipping in and through the cracks between states and borders" (Appadurai 1996: 41). The questions I would like to tackle are what kind of self emerges through these cracks and borders, and what kind of identitary repositioning becomes involved in the process. It is well known in Chicano criticism that Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* addresses these issues as the writer fashions the widely discussed *mestiza* consciousness. However, as this article suggests, it is possible to identify very similar concerns in Margarita Cota-Cárdenas' underground classic *Puppet*, a novella published in 1985. The writer articulates a half-breed consciousness across multiple cracks and fault lines to create a highly experimental narrative that comprises a multiplicity of voices, excerpts, conversations and accounts. This is the slippery ground upon which Cota-Cárdenas resituates the articulation of the self and its location. Anchors, referents and ties constantly shift in this collection of micronarratives that fashion a nomadic consciousness akin to Deleuze and Guattari's formulation in *A Thousand Plateaus*; a consciousness based on becoming and heterogeneity (1987: 361). This formally fragmented and constantly interrupted discourse foregrounds what Pérez Torres calls "the aesthetic and formal hybridity of Chicano artistic formation" (2002: 165). The multilingual prose or half-breed writing becomes a way "to articulate subjectivity outside dominant paradigms of identity" (Torres 2002: 166). As she fashions this self in motion, Petra, the protagonist, finds out that she has to shift out

of the habitual formations, those parameters safely (b)ordering the self. The result of this repositioning is not a comfortable and privileged locus, but a third space or element that works against different manifestations of totalizing narratives, be they political or religious. In forging this nomadic consciousness, the article argues that Cota-Cárdenas anticipates the powerful revision of *mestizaje* Anzaldúa would carry out in *Borderlands*. Like Anzaldúa, Cota-Cárdenas fleshes out the cultural collisions, the discomfort and the struggle that characterize the borderlands (Hames-García 2000: 119). It is this constant shifting that, to answer José David Saldívar's question, contributes to changing the way we understand culture, as well as the self and the imagined community of the nation. The article responds to Saldívar's query in another way, for in analyzing Cota-Cárdenas' novella from voices outside Chicano criticism, it performatively hybridizes this critical discourse and makes it more dialectical.

## 2. PUPPET: A HYBRID VOICE

The polylingual voices of the multi-located subjects of the global nomadic, diasporic, hybrid diversity are producing concretely grounded micro-narratives that call for a joyful kind of dissonance.

ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *Transpositions*

Originally published in Spanish in 1985, *Puppet* was reprinted in a bilingual edition by the University of New Mexico Press in 2000.<sup>1</sup> Both Spanish and English versions, however, are constantly contaminated by the two languages, thus underscoring the impossibility of a pure language and culture. Instead, Cota-Cárdenas offers a multilingual text that includes formal Spanish and English, Mexican Spanish, Chicano/a Spanish slang and Spanglish (Martín 2008: 93).<sup>2</sup> Even if published in the mid-eighties, however, this polylingual narrative makes *Puppet* read more like a post-*Borderlands* novella than as a narrative that predates Anzaldúa's text by two years. For the issues Cota-Cárdenas tackles in *Puppet* strongly remind the reader of that in-between space, always sliding, always in motion, where *la mestiza* is located. The issues of fragmentation, of discontinuity and of a nomad consciousness poised between self and other, past and present, which Anzaldúa will refashion in *Borderlands*, take center stage in *Puppet*. This discontinuous consciousness is formally articulated through a multiplicity of voices, excerpts, conversations, micronarratives and accounts that create a postmodern tapestry without one focal, univocal narrative axis. As Rebolledo writes in the introduction to the 2000 edition,

<sup>1</sup> All references to the novel will appear parenthetically in the text. I am using the English translation since this article is written in English.

<sup>2</sup> Martín's is the only published critical article devoted to *Puppet* so far. The critic is successful in extricating the novella from the pattern of bilingualism and situating it in a multilingual arena.

“the different registers that are present in the novel combine to create a cacophony of narration” (xviii) or dissonance, to use Braidotti’s term, that is constantly interrupted by the “BRINGGG” of the phone. Together with the phone, the vision of Puppet on the night news, lying in a pool of blood, “A BODY THAT LOOKED LIKE A DOLL, ONE OF THOSE ONES WITH STRINGS AND WOOD, ALL ANGULAR, ONE LEG HERE, ONE THERE” (15), constitutes the recurrent image that punctuates the fifteen sketches of the novella. The portrait of Puppet as a divided self or persona with one leg here, one leg there becomes a permanent afterimage that aptly describes both the narrative object and the narrative subject, the self and the other. But the image of the puppet is central in other ways as well. Cota-Cárdenas moves from the body of the puppet, disjointed and a-centred, to a text which bears similar features, and to an ideological terrain which is always in transit. If the first person narrative could give the impression of a hierarchical organization of the multiple vectors which circulate through the narration, Cota-Cárdenas dispels such a dream of order, for she has split the first person narrative into two personas, the I and the you, which constantly collide in the telling of events. The traditional binary self/other is thus complicated by a third element, the you, thus upsetting the idea of a unified self and its relationship with the other. The I is ‘narrativized’ through another voice that addresses her as “you” and constantly curtails her fictional —read romantic— excesses with phrases such as “YOU WERE ALWAYS SUCH A DAYDREAMER/PANIC BUTTON ROMANTICACA” (9).

These ideological and narrative splits make *Puppet* an apt example of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of hybridity, as developed in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1992).<sup>3</sup> For Bakhtin, hybridity is ever-present in language, especially in novelistic discourse, but also within a single sentence or even a term. In Bakhtin’s theory, hybridization is used to describe the ability of one voice to ironize and unmask the other within the same utterance. The hybrid in language implies a double-voiced, double-styled speech, by definition irreducible to one or the other voice. Bakhtin states that “[i]t frequently happens that even one and the same word will belong simultaneously to two languages, two belief systems that intersect in a hybrid construction —and consequently, the word has two contradictory meanings, two accents” (1992: 305). This is the linguistic and ideological dissonance we find in *Puppet*. The hybrid text becomes the site of contacts, encounters and collisions between and among different discourses, as Bakhtin explains in his definition of hybridization:

What is hybridization? It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor. (1992: 358)

<sup>3</sup> See Ana María Manzanás and Jesús Benito’s *Intercultural Mediations: Hybridity and Mimesis in American Literatures* (2003: 66-74) for a reading of hybridity in ethnic American literature.

This collision within the same utterance is obvious in the way Cota-Cárdenas alternates Spanish, English and Spanglish, among other variants; in the way the writer splits the narrative voice into the first and the second person narrators; in the way she brings into the text the received and prescribed versions of reality with her own explorations and experiences. The sets of contacts, interactions and collisions emerging from these encounters on the written page go beyond what Bakhtin terms “organic hybridity”, which is unconscious, unintentional and a by-product of linguistic contacts (1992: 358), illustrating what Bakhtin conceptualizes as “intentional hybridity”, which is deliberately self-reflexive, contestatory and politicized. This kind of hybridity implies a dialectical articulation, instead of gradually blending into a new form. In the consciously hybrid discourse, “two points of view are not mixed, but set against each other dialogically” (1992: 360). Against the homogenizing move towards assimilation, intentional hybridity requires that two linguistic consciousnesses and two voices remain present but distinct, “fight[ing] it out within the territory of the utterance” (1992: 360) or the text. The emphasis, as Bakhtin himself indicates, is placed not so much on the activity of mixing as in “the collision between different points of view on the world” (1992: 360). The two elements integrated in the hybrid utterance are dialogically confronted, thus refusing closure and stasis. Hybridity encourages the disarticulation of authority, in the form of a refusal of the monologue of power and its capacity to fix and perpetuate categories or false syntheses. The real ideological work of hybridization is done in this political, intentional version, when one voice, such as the voice of the you in Cota-Cárdenas’ text, is used to unmask the other, the I or when the voice of authority and its multiple forms (political, religious, personal) is undermined by the other. This is the narrative and ideological dynamics the writer unfolds in the novella as Pat (Petra), the protagonist, sees herself split between blending her experiences into an organic whole and the constant collision of a dialectical articulation. This is the ideological and narrative doubleness that Petra will bring into her writing of Puppet’s life.

### 3. CONFLICTING TEXTUALIZATIONS

But what is *Puppet*? As Rebolledo has pointed out, *Puppet* is a detective novel, a social novel and a historical narrative; also, I would add, a confessional novel or pseudo-autobiography. Based on the actual killing of a nineteen-year-old Chicano youngster (who Cota-Cárdenas immortalizes in the poem ‘Lápida para Puppet’), *Puppet* unravels the youngster’s fate in an unfair world. It is Memo, one of the workers at the contractor’s company, who calls Petra to tell her that Puppet has been killed by the police in obscure circumstances. In an attempt to clarify Puppet’s death, Petra starts to write his story as she collects her own memories as well as the bits of information Memo —significantly an abbreviation for memory— tells her over the phone. Yet the writing of Puppet’s life, as well as the unraveling of the strings of his existence, is intricately connected to, and interwoven with, the writing of the self. If the narrative of Puppet’s murder that Petra

sends to the papers soon reveals itself as potentially dangerous to her safety, the other fragmentary pieces Petra scatters and intersperses throughout the narrative prove even more destabilizing, for they entail the constant exploration of the self, its anchors, its ellipses, as well as the borders which delimit it. Petra becomes transposed, as she finds herself in the midst of an intertextual and cross-boundary transfer.<sup>4</sup> Despite these crossings, the writing itself—in English—has a conventional start: “PUPPET was born seventeen years ago in the barrio, in Southwest City. His father supported what became a family of six children on and off again by odd-jobbing it around town, and eventually they all became wards of the State” (20). Cota-Cárdenas situates the reader in the writing process as the narrator questions the very terms used in the passage: “Qué es eso, ‘wards of the Steit?’” (20). The constant queries interrupt the narrative, thus dispelling the possibility of a conventionally linear narration, for they weigh and ponder on the very vocabulary that needs to be translated.

Through Petra, Cota-Cárdenas directly addresses the disappearing of Spanish as a written language. As Memo acknowledges, “yo no sé leyer I don’t know how to read in Spanish” (20); writing in Spanish, as the narrator admits to herself, is difficult for her as well “for... many reasons” (21) that she reveals as she describes a school system where Spanish is prohibited during school hours: “And if they caught you, pos zas! A slap wherever the ticher gottya... No, not real hard, pero pues, we didn’t like it all the same although I’ll tell you it was very democratic because they hit all of us the same” (23). Without transition, without warning, the narrator starts her own fragmented autobiography, her past, her present, her fears and her (lack of) political commitment, thus hybridizing Puppet’s story with her own. However, Cota-Cárdenas does not allow the narration to crystallize in a bifurcated text that reveals Puppet and Petra’s lives, but allows us glimpses into an interpersonal story. Some of the stories she tells, like Wimpy’s *velorio* and her first intimation of death, are swiftly unwritten by the narrator with a blunt: “That wasn’t you, I know you already and it just couldn’t have been you... Where’d ya get that story from, you romanticizing liar” (31). And the narrator has to acquiesce: “From a magazine, one of those that they say is from the Left” (31). What makes up, then, the narrative texture? The writing of Puppet’s life involves the telling of Petra’s story. Cota-Cárdenas creates a narrative space in which categories and meanings exceed their original limits. Writing about the other implies writing about the self, just as writing about the self takes on a collective and interpersonal valence. The pre-existing definitions of the self and the other are therefore interrogated in order to be exceeded.

If self and other constantly shift on this uncertain ground, so do temporal categories. Puppet’s death is echoed and amplified as the narrator reads through the headlines:

<sup>4</sup> I am adapting the term from Rosi Braidotti’s *Transpositions*: “The term ‘transpositions’ has a double source of inspiration: from music and from genetics. It indicates an intertextual, cross-boundary or transversal transfer, in the sense of a leap from one code, field or axis into another, not merely in the quantitative mode of plural multiplications, but rather in the qualitative sense of complex multiplicities” (2006: 5).

MEXICAN NATIONALS SUFFOCATE IN BUTANE TRANK/TRUCK. ARREST MADE IN TRAGIC DEATHS OF ILLEGAL ALIENS BEING TRANSPORTED BY U.S.

TRAIN HITS TRUCK TRANSPORTING BRACEROS TO FIELDS.

MEXICAN AMERICAN RESIDENT OF FARM LABOR CAMP DIES IN AUTO ACCIDENT. TRAGEDY BLAMED ON DEFECTIVE BRAKES. (28-29)

The private and the public, the present and the past collapse their tenuous borders as Puppet's life/death is refracted in a series of instances and in Petra's classes at the university. As one of her students remarks, there is, indeed, a "preoccupation" with death in Mexican and Chicano and Spanish literature (37). Beyond the literary answer Petra offers the student, the presence of death as a universal theme that goes back to the medieval dance with death, the narrator delves into the myriad of circumstances that explain the omnipresence of the theme. These constant transpositions or refractions complicate the narrativizing of Puppet's death into a monological and authoritative utterance.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, when the narrator ponders on what kind of form would be suitable to chronicle Puppet's death, she rejects chronological order. The fact that linearity is not an option is significant. As Hayden White argues in *The Content of the Form*, among other works, narrativity presupposes the existence of a legal system against which or on behalf of which the typical agents of a narrative account militate (1987: 13). There is, therefore, a system of law in relation to which an account is constructed. What Petra faces is precisely the narration of a historical sequence which represents and chronicles the collapse of that very system for the Chicano. Small wonder, then, that as a narrator, Petra is at a loss for the proper form. Petra's —and the community's— reservations about the authoritative police report do determine the shape of the narration itself, for, as White indicates, "[w] here there is ambiguity or ambivalence regarding the status of the legal system, which is the form in which the subject encounters most immediately the social system in which he is enjoined to achieve a full humanity, the ground on which any closure of a story one might wish to tell about a past, whether it be a public or a private past, is lacking" (1987: 14). This lack of closure is evident as the narrator starts another version of Puppet's life to confirm her uncertainties: "You start but you don't finish because you don't know where" (37). The issue, then, is to establish where the past stops. Significantly, when the narrator discards the chronological sequence, she looks at the calendar: "[I]t is November 2..." (37), she notices, as she starts writing. The suspension points, however, are not followed by a journal or chronicle entry about Puppet's or the narrator's life, but by a reference to the colonial city of Guanajuato and its cemetery of mummies. Although the narrative is discontinued through this leap into colonial times, Petra is able to integrate these flashbacks as part of

<sup>5</sup> I am using the term in Bakhtin's sense as described in *The Dialogic Imagination*: "authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it. It centers our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its authority —with political power, an institution, a person— and it stands and falls together with that authority" (1992: 243).

an intersectional continuum, the trace of blood from colonial times to the present. This intersectionality is key, for it allows Petra to deal with different occurrences simultaneously and to analyze them interactively.

These are part of the narrator's transgressions; for if the fear of the *migra* constantly surfaces in the narration, Petra constantly crosses the borders between the past and the present, between the self and the other, to create a borderless narrative that cuts across geographical and ideological delimitations. Hence the impossibility of creating a chronologically ordered sequence, for once the barriers between the past and the present have been collapsed, the question is: where does the sequence start? Formulated in such terms, the query seeks a foundation —a beginning— which is not amenable to the vision of constant movement, of interbeing or *intermezzo*, to use Deleuze and Guattari's terms (1992: 25), the novel deploys. Those who disappeared in the past, like those who disappear in the present, are just part of that trace of violence (of "Blood, Like It Was Just Yesterday", as the title chapter reads), which constitutes the nightmare of history, the only historical continuity Petra is able to construct in the midst of fragmentation, as she explains to Memo: "Oh... Todo esto pasó entre nosotros, this is what happened to us, Memo... Todo esto lo vimos... we saw it all happen... gone... Puppet, Félix, Nacho, todos... a thread of... charcos pools of... hundreds of ages, Memo" (80). The narrator implicitly and explicitly mixes the past, the missing Native Americans —absences at the ancient ruins— and the missing Mexicans, Argentinians, Nicaraguans, or Chicanos, either due to police brutality, as in Puppet's case, or to the bloodless killings perpetrated by drug pushers, as in Félix's case.

This exceeding of categories is possible because Petra does not "border patrol" the spatial and temporal demarcations of the narration; hence her "confusing, agitated thoughts" (80). They are (con)fusing inasmuch as they blend past and present, the violence within and the violence without into a discursive collision course that refuses closure. But the narrator goes a step further as her agitated thoughts link the *desaparecidos* or missing in Argentina or Mexico with the victims of police brutality, such as Puppet, and with those sought out by the *migra*:

TODOS EVERYONE you're coming down from the hills the road becomes long quién es who is it they're following you vienen they come at night in the morning but I believe in the police it was two cops but the immigration has a job to do LA MIGRA AI VIENE ITS COMING AY AY AY eyes full of confusion sparksflecksofhopecanpriestsgetmarried nononononono. (81)

The implications for the narrator, as this quote exemplifies, are clear: just as there are no safe grounds from the *migra*, there is no sanctuary from violence in this constant state of fear that goes from colonial times to the present. For Petra, Puppet's story is just another version of the "conquered perspective" (119), even if the connection goes misunderstood by the student in his class. Cota-Cárdenas thus equates the colonization of the Mexican under Spanish rule with the neocolonization of the Chicano in the United States. In this nonsynchronous and transversal vision of oppression, identity markers such as "American-born", as flaunted by the very same student, reveal themselves to be empty and vacuous. The border in *Puppet* is not



restricted to a geographical location, or a declaration of citizenship, but is deterritorialized to mark the “color line”, as Du Bois would put it, that crisscrosses the Americas.

The quasi historical narrative Petra puts together thus reveals a world that is infinitely unfinished, ready to be revised, open to reconsideration and intervention. For Petra, reality does not wear the mask of an integral and closed meaning. As opposed to the narrative closure the police impose on Puppet's death, one which, we can assume, asserts the parameters of a very definite social system, Petra's story has no end. Not in vain, when the narrator finally constructs “What It Was That Night”, in Chapter 13, she writes a poetic account of Puppet's end as if he were followed and caught by the *migra*:

YOU THERE STOP! Pos we didn't know who  
It was and we ran ay ay it was when  
I turned 'round and saw many little lights there  
Were lights and then we realized  
What they were AYYYYYYY. (124-25)

There is, however, a kind of closure as the police and Puppet's uncle reach a settlement; the uncle is paid off to avoid any future legal dealings, and the police, in turn, admit that “perhaps” it was a mistake, to conclude with a definitive “[y] se acabó, that was it, it was all over” (138). It is not all over. Petra's story cannot end like a well-rounded story, one which, according to Hayden White's reasoning, would reflect the coherence, integrity, and fullness of an ideal, imaginary life. Puppet, caught by the *migra*-police, does not stop, and together with his story, he becomes the ever-present furtive border-crosser. The narrator does not let Puppet stop either, but his death is repeated in different manners and with a diversity of manifestations. The lines reinforced by the *migra* are thus textually, thematically and ideologically crossed in the hybrid text.

#### 4. A RESOLUTION FOR THE SELF? THE TÍTERE-HALF-BREED-MALINCHE DISCOURSE

Philosophical nomadism addresses in both a critical and creative manner the role of the former ‘centre’ in redefining power relations. Margins and centre shift and destabilize each other in parallel, albeit dissymmetrical, movements.

ROSI BRAIDOTTI, *Transpositions*

Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle.

GILLES DELEUZE AND FELIX GUATTARI, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Like the furtive Puppet who refuses to stop, Petra settles on the self-in-motion, or on a restless discontinuity akin to Braidotti's concept of philosophical nomadism. Moreover, Puppet and his recurrent description, "LIKE A MARIONETTE ONE LEG HERE AND ONE LEG THERE THEY WERE POOLS OF BLOOD" (113), provide Petra with the vivid image of division and conflictive identity. Significantly, this representation of the split self, astride between both sides of a dividing line, anticipates the description of the *mestiza* which is at the heart of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*:

Because I, a *mestiza*  
Continually walk out of one culture  
And into another,  
Because I am in all cultures at the same time,  
*Alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*  
*Me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.*  
*Estoy norteeda por todas las voces que me hablan*  
*Simultáneamente.* (77)

Yet what for Anzaldúa seems fruitful movement (the walking out of one culture into another), for Puppet feels like painful stasis. In contrast to the celebratory tone of Anzaldúa's *mestiza*, Cota-Cárdenas introduces the importance of class as a defining element in the configuration of *Puppet*. As Petra explains in her written version of the youngster's life, he and his brothers suffered from a bone disease that crippled them and resulted in a "bobbing rhythm to their walk" (25), making them look like puppets. To be between cultures, a position that crystallizes in the image of the puppet, is inextricably linked to poverty and deprivation. Like Du Bois, Cota-Cárdenas tackles the issue of the bifurcation of the self and its crippling effects for the individual. For, as Du Bois argues, "This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand people . . . and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves" (1989: 4). Cota-Cárdenas thus anticipates the powerful corrections that later critics would bestow on Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the borderlands.

Critical voices such as David E. Johnson and Scott Michaelsen in *Border Theory*, for example, explain how borderlands tend to be celebrated as a place "of politically exciting hybridity" (1997: 3). In a similar vein, Russ Castronovo indicates that, supposedly, voices and identities situated in the in-between of a hybrid land carve out spaces laden with possibilities of liberation (1997: 198). Yet hybridity cannot be taken as a stable, unquestionable syncretic liberal locus, but rather as a contested ground. For Walter Mignolo this middle ground cannot be understood as a new form of syncretism, but rather as an "intense battlefield" (2000: 12). Interestingly, Mignolo transforms Marie Louise Pratt's "contact zone" (1992: 373) into what can be renamed as a "battle zone" of splits, cuttings and divisions where pain reigns supreme. As María, Petra's daughter, writes in a poem, to

be a “half-breed” is to experience the distressing feeling of a split self. “To be half-breed . . . is dolor” (64), she declares as she expresses her linguistic and cultural doubleness. And yet, as if to temper the pain of division implicit in her question “quién soy... who am I?,” María is able to offer an inclusive answer: “Soy las dos I’m the two of them... I’m neither the one... nor the other... soy yo... HALF-BREED... and only under stress I accept... /this mind-split imposed on me” (64). The half-breed incorporates the previous elements as part of an unfinished, hyphenated state. The poem might be corny, as the narrator comments, but it is also a refashioning of the double consciousness Du Bois enunciated in *The Souls of Black Folk*, which also anticipates the *mestiza* consciousness Anzaldúa articulates in *Borderlands*.

The half-breed who emerges out of this process of self-creation, like Anzaldúa’s *mestiza*, exchanges the certainties of a well-defined past and reality, as well as the borders of the self, for the ambiguities and contradictions that are concomitant to the re-construction of a self in process. The narrator of *Puppet*, already bifurcated between the I/you, seems skeptical of closure in narrative and ideological terms, and has been inoculated against the construction of a self-complacent, unified and unquestionable I. Like Anzaldúa’s *mestiza*, Cota-Cárdenas’ narrator finds herself floundering in uncertain territory, for she has also discovered that she cannot hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries (Anzaldúa 1987:79). Petra finds out that she has to shift out of the habitual formations, those parameters (b) ordering the self: “Romanticism. Idealism. Believing in ARGR... or Alguien, Someone, written in big capital letters. Escapism? Extremism? Fuckism? Pa’llá vamos, we’re getting there, I’m getting there (ha, ha, eeeepaaaa... ha, ha)” (45). Like Anzaldúa’s *mestiza*, Cota-Cárdenas’ half-breed experiences what Anzaldúa calls “homophobia,” which she redefines as “the fear of going home” (1987: 20). Homes, like ideologies and like self-complacent selves, have been painfully cast off like a mass of dead tissue, for they also respond to the divisive logic of the border.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the writing of *Puppet*’s life, the narrator questions not only the props and mainstays of law and legality as represented by the police, but also explores the lines within the community —as represented by the pushers who ended up murdering Félix. More importantly, as the narrator writes towards the end of the novella, she has also interrogated her cultural and ideological safeguards as Chicana: “Every time I deal with the case again I get scared OF DEATH DE LA CHOTA DE LA CIA DE MOVIMIENTO DE MIS ‘AMIGOS’ and most of all I’m afraid of those fake comprometido friends because in them I was able to begin seeing something good, something new, a possibility and they turned around” (138). Cota-Cárdenas’ revisionary project is skeptical of closure and of fixed signifiers, and crosses the sacrosanct boundaries of *el Movimiento* to expose some of its inner workings and to question traditional nationalist categories such as authentic/inauthentic. The imaginary of an officially secure land, safely patrolled by the police and the *migra* collapses in Cota-Cárdenas’ narration, but so does the official imaginary of an impeccable *raza* and of an ideal Aztlán.

<sup>6</sup> See Rosemary Maragoly George in *The Politics of Home* when she claims that the notion of the home is built as “a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions. Home is a way of establishing difference” (1999: 2).

The self that emerges in the novella is aptly described in Norma Alarcón's words about Anzaldúa's *mestiza* as "[a] self that becomes a crossroads, a collision course, a clearinghouse, an endless alterity who . . . appears as a tireless peregrine collecting all the parts that will never make her whole" (2001: 53). And yet Cota-Cárdenas illustrates through Petra a more radical revisionary project that reveals the constant discursive and ideological clashes within the self. Self-idealization, self-complacency and victimization are immediately dismissed as "romantic-crap". The bifurcation of the narrative voice allows the writer to reveal the silences of the narration, those ellipses that are the basis of the autobiographical account. Petra, as I mentioned earlier, is a victim of a fully undemocratic school system which declared Spanish an "illegal" language, but is also responsible for not teaching it to María, for not passing on key rites of passage such as the "quinceañera party", and for concealing her ambivalent position during historical events such as César Chavez's march, which her daughter now studies at the university. The passiveness and the silences are revealed in the recriminating remarks of the narrator, who addresses Petra in terms such as: "Sí, so loving of 'mi raza' here, and 'mi raza' there, as if it was a samba, samba . . . Pero you have never done anything" (35).

This double consciousness that Cota-Cárdenas situates at the core of the narrative voice explains why Petra intercalates her life and her name with those of La Malinche as the paradigmatic figure who embodies duality and existence between worlds. As Anzaldúa would do in *Borderlands*, Cota-Cárdenas revises the myth of La Malinche in an effort to repossess one of the bad words which, as Anzaldúa says, passes a dozen times a day from the lips of Chicanos (1987: 22). Like Anzaldúa, the narrator also puts mythology through a sieve in order to reappropriate La Malinche as the paradigmatic figure of in-betweenness who inevitably redraws the boundaries between the authentic and the spurious, or between "the chinga-doer and el/la chinga-dee" (96). Cota-Cárdenas' revision presents Malinchismo as another protective shield, as another -ism that has been successfully bought and sold throughout time. Malinche cautions:

You know what, you know a lot about -isms and -acies but I advise you, my children, to look for the answers inside and to look further than the labels implanted and thrown out in reaction hate violence.... What's wrong is that we're very smart, very bright, and we learn certain things very well that frankly keep on being the same pyramidal funeral hierarchical structure. (95)

Petra does not let the stigmatization of La Malinche rest in colonial times, but contextualizes the process in the present. Not in vain, Petra places La Malinche's discourse in the midst of those movements which imply the revision and rupture of the pervading pyramid. The feminist movement, as the narrator learns from one student, is felt as another instance of betrayal and Malinchismo, and is consequently offered as a latter day propitiatory victim. One of Petra's students comments: "I think... that all this stuff about women's liberation is just bourgeois women's junk, those women that have idle time to write and to draw and to . . . discombulate themselves" (97). Petra does appear as one of

those women who have idle time to write, to draw and “discombulate” themselves. As her psychologist concludes, she also feels she might have sold out at some point. Further, as a divorced woman, she is considered by some as an aberration to her tribe. Petra, like Anzaldúa's *mestiza*, “surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar” (1987: 83), as she acts according to La Malinche's discourse and her admonitions: “BREAK THE TIES TO YOUR MYTHS”; “MAKE SHREDS OF THE CORDONS TO YOUR” (96). What Cota-Cárdenas explores through Petra is precisely the arena that opens as she cuts the ties to beginnings and ends; Petra moves into that inter-being after she makes shreds of her cordons to culture, to the movement, and/or to the religion which have fashioned her life. In short, after she stops being everybody's puppet.

##### 5. ‘ONE AND ONE ARE THREE’

Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers.

GILLES DELEUZE and FELIX GUATTARI, *A Thousand Plateaus*

Hybridity is itself an example of hybridity, of a doubleness that both brings together, fuses, but also maintains separation.

ROBERT YOUNG, *Colonial Desire*

What today is border culture, tomorrow is institutional art.

GUILLERMO GÓMEZ-PEÑA, *Warrior for Gringostroika*

As she dwells in this intermezzo, already untethered from a variety of puppeteers, the protagonist opens another logic symbolically expressed in the title of the penultimate sketch, ‘One and One Are Three’. The sentence may be interpreted as the formula that captures the chaos and dissolution of the protagonist's life, but also as another way of seeing and perceiving that ruptures a given logic. The resulting third element might be arithmetically incorrect, but can be viewed as consistent with the third step of the dialectical movement. Seen from this perspective, the three breaks down the subject-object duality, for it opens a new space, the nomad terrain of the *mestiza*. This third element is also akin to Homi Bhabha's formulation of the third space. In Bhabha's words, the third space “displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (1998: 211). As Petra breaks the ties to beginnings and ends, we can say that she does away with received identities and wisdom to create her own structures of authority and meaning. The new Petra Cota-Cárdenas introduces at the end of *Puppet* seems to be over that anxiety which, as her *rubio* psychiatrist diagnoses, “can make one lose awareness of who one is” (21). Unlike the opening of the narration, it is Petra that calls Memo to

express her confidence in only one line of action: “only with the force of our writing and our words can we change anything and do much more... and maybe better” (144). As in other contemporary semi-autobiographical texts, such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, words become actions and actions become words; words are the tools to set up new political initiatives which escape the boundaries of received reason and wisdom. The new Petra who looks at her self in the mirror —also in the mirror of her writing— sees herself as something other:

you see yourself in the mirror your eyes LOS OJOS THEIR EYES OTRO MODO ANOTHER WAY TO BE IN THEIR EYES and it’s no longer your face in the espejo it’s PUPPET’s face the face of a young girl and now there’s no need to over explain it, you have to go on seguir adelante con valor con humor with balls-ovaries with all you’ve got which was you and with determination. (145)

The constant code-switching from English to Spanish echoes the intercalation of Petra and Puppet; for Petra’s face in the mirror is Puppet’s. It is a vivid image of how the self has incorporated the other —or is, in fact, the other. Through *Puppet* the writer constructs a powerful *mestizaje* which is dominated by the flat logic of conjunction; it is a *nos/otros*, where, to quote from Anzaldúa’s words, “the nos is us/we/me/the subject; the otras is them/they/the object, and in nos/otras we are them and they are us and we’re contaminated by each other” (2002: 111). *Puppet* thus evolves from a “romanticaca” to a hybrid consciousness. Cota-Cárdenas articulates a powerful *mestizaje* that not only breaks apart the idea of a univocal self, but also threads together fragmentary lives and narratives. The writer thus anticipates Anzaldúa’s concept of the borderlands and the *mestiza* consciousness in a number of ways. *Puppet* offers an ideological repositioning, a third space or element, which works against a Western and nationalistic consciousness based on totality —what the fractured narrator would rename “romanticaca/romanticrap”.

What happens, then, when as José David Saldívar questions, we understand culture in terms of material hybridity, not purity, and the nation is customized by borderlands subjectivity? The location of culture, to use Homi Bhabha’s phrase, radically shifts not to claim a different arena of stable ideological parameters, but to undo the ties that tether the individual to prescribed versions of reality. If we assume Walter Mignolo’s definition of “border thinking” as “the moments when the imaginary of the modern world systematically cracks” (2000: 23), it is possible to argue that in *Puppet* Cota-Cárdenas offers border thinking, an inter-being that refuses to settle onto a single dominant meaning, and severs the ties that hold the puppet together. However, if one reads Bakhtin’s concept of intentional hybridity into this final state of Petra’s development, we do find that the protagonist’s personae seem to coalesce into a threeness. This kind of resolution, however, runs the risk of congealing into another stable demarcation that may stop movement. The nerve fibers of the puppet, to return to Deleuze and Guattari, need to be fully activated; otherwise, hybridity may become another prescriptive form, another puppeteer that tethers the individual to new stable ideological formations. Hybridity, to echo Robert

Young's words, requires hybridizing itself or it becomes another manifestation of what Gómez-Peña calls institutional art.

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