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# “A Little History Here, a Little Hollywood There”: (Counter-) Identifying with the Spanish Fantasy in Carlos Morton’s *Rancho Hollywood* and Theresa Chavez’s *L.A. Real*

COURTNEY ELKIN MOHLER

As the westernmost geographical location of the U.S. mainland, California holds special significance in the creation of American national identity and cannot be understood outside the context of its unique relationship with Manifest Destiny and narratives of American modernity. Since the development of the Spanish mission system in the eighteenth century, multiple shifts in national power have occurred within the region, accompanied by socio-political and cultural transformations of personal and collective identities. These transformations can be read as having particular importance to the region’s Spanish-speaking peoples, for whom the annexation of California ushered in a significant decline in cultural, economic, and socio-political power. Works of popular culture have romanticized various aspects of California’s social history, often depicting benevolent Spanish missionaries and an idyllic Spanish aristocracy, while generally ignoring the native populations altogether. Importantly, the presence of *mestizaje*, cultural or racial hybridity as ethnic experience, tends to be omitted in dominant narratives of California’s Spanish fantasy heritage.

The success of the Manifest Destiny project, as illustrated by California’s joining the Union, foregrounds these romantic myths. Depictions of the “Golden Age of California,” which include dancing *señoritas* and hedonistic *vaqueros*, construct the Spanish element of California’s history as exotic and obsolete, thereby establishing Euro-American cultural dominance as complete and inevitable. As these images glorify notions of European purity and laud Spanish aesthetic influence, they also gloss over the violence Natives suffered during Spanish conquest even as they omit the continuance of a non-European cultural presence today.

Many Chicana/o plays written and produced since the 1970s deal thematically with the subject of identity formation by working through the relationship between California's past and dominant "historical" narratives (Worthen 101); key, relevant examples of such revisionist plays range from Valdez's *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1964), which animates the historical spectres of both Pancho Villa and Joaquín Murrieta, through Culture Clash's *The Mission* (1990) and *Bowl of Beings* (1992), which both reference and parody moments of colonial encounter in the Americas, to Laura Esparza's one-woman show, *I Dismember the Alamo: A Long Poem for Performance* (1991). This essay examines Carlos Morton's *Rancho Hollywood* and Theresa Chavez's *L.A. Real*, two theatrical works that negotiate directly with key identifications popularized by the romantic narrative of early California's Spanish past. I compare these two specific plays because each explores the material and epistemological impact of historical representation on Chicana/o identity formation over time. Although stylistically dissimilar, both works stage how ethnicity, as lived experience, can counter the California myth.

Created and performed to Californian audiences in two different decades, these works explore the tensions between popular historical representations and personal and collective memory. A cultural product of the politically radical 1970s to early 1980s and corresponding U.S. ethnic activist theatre movements, *Rancho Hollywood* is an overtly political and presentational ensemble-based show that continually comments on itself as a piece of Chicano theatre. *L.A. Real* similarly reflects the theatrical and cultural moment of the 1990s in which Chavez first developed it. While *Rancho Hollywood* demonstrates the late 1970s' political concentration on defining and empowering the Chicano community, *L.A. Real* presents Theresa Chavez's personal narrative as an autobiographical one-woman show. The play reimagines her experience growing up mestiza in California as she ruminates on her own identity.

These plays reflect the legacy of the cultural ephemera attached to the Spanish fantasy as personally felt and significant in cultural identity formation by negotiating the process of racial ascription and its effects diachronically. Chavez explores her solo character's "blood," conveying her autobiography by way of family photographs and documents on the tracts of land her ancestors called home; but importantly, she also names the various racial designations of these ghostly family members, tying her own identity to all of the labels assigned to her ancestors since European contact in the region. *Rancho Hollywood* grapples with the issue of racial ascription as well, directly commenting on the rapid historical changes in political and social dominance in Southern California. As Morton's characters unfold layers of Hollywood representations of "Hispanic," counterpointed

with historical regional realities, they become increasingly confused as to which identity term should define them.

Anthony Appiah sheds light on such dilemmas, identifying racial ascription as wound up in labels. Drawing on DuBois's term, "the badge of color," Appiah writes, "if we follow the badge of color from 'African' to 'Negro' to 'Colored Race' to 'Black'. . . we are thus tracing the history not only of a signifier but also a history of its effects" (68). The trick of racial ascription is highly complex for Americans whose identificatory ascription itself includes the notion of ancestral and/or cultural mixture. Not only have the labels altered with each generation for Americans of Mexican ancestry but so have political uses of place and nation-based identity. Significantly, these various labels take on slippery notions of racial composition in terms of "blood" and cultural behaviour in relationship to shifting socio-economic and political realities. The manner in which *Rancho Hollywood* and *L.A. Real* deal with the changing national boundaries of the region and corresponding shifts in experiences of racial ascription over the past two centuries calls into question the naturalization of national borders and the discrete identities their maintenance produces, opening a space for alternative, productive identity construction.

As these two works address the psychic impact of racial ascription and the Spanish fantasy as Euro-American myth, they also offer counter-narratives that revise California's history. In his book *Anything but Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles*, historian Rodolfo Acuña describes the cultural milieu of the United States during the 1980s–1990s as an era of nativism and national mythologizing exemplified in the attention poured out on the bicentennials of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights and the quincentennial of Columbus's arrival. According to Acuña, this nativist rhetoric and memorializing created a necessity for Chicana/o scholars, artists, and activists to "struggle over the interpretation of history" (22). Their work provided an essential critical counter to hegemonic forces "manufacturing 'knowledge' to substantiate claims of moral authority and thus justify aggression, exploitation and repression" (22). *Rancho Hollywood* and *L.A. Real* counter, in this way, the prevailing white capitalist power structures that find the fantasy heritage more attractive and marketable than the myriad counter-histories that resonate within Southern California. This is one significant reason why the reconstruction of the past is a valuable political project and why negotiating with the impact of the fantasy on cultural and personal identity formation is crucial.

This paper attempts to shed some light on the complex exchange between individual and collective identity formation and the racialized images ascribed to Spanish, Mexican, Chicano, and Native Californian peoples via popular culture. *Rancho Hollywood* and *L.A. Real* illustrate the constructed nature of static racial and cultural representations, showing identity to be

amorphous, culturally mediated, and continually negotiated. But, at the same time, they dramatize the limits of identity deconstruction and reflect the nuanced relationship between constructed representations of identity, on the one hand, and personal, felt, lived experience, on the other; this tension offers a productive countering of the dominant historical narratives that concern Acuña. Satya P. Mohanty defends the critical importance of analysing lived experience and emotion in relationship to identity production: “All experience – and emotions offer the paradigm case here – is socially constructed, but the constructedness does not make it arbitrary or unstable in advance” (38). Clarifying what he calls a “realist view of experience and identity,” Mohanty argues that one’s feeling about one’s place in the world, however mediated by various social structures and operations, can help to craft politically useful identities that may be objectively regarded (55). By examining the making of Californian history and questioning by and for whom it is made, Morton and Chavez unsettle static notions of identity in the region; their works offer hybrid, dynamic alternative histories of Southern California that empower the Chicana/o as an active subject of her or his own history, present, and future. The anti-immigrant sentiment and rhetoric that continue to colour cultural interactions and prevalent historical narratives make such counter-perspectives on Southwestern identity relevant even today.

### **RANCHO HOLLYWOOD BY CARLOS MORTON**

In the late 1970s, Morton began to write plays about Chicano experience, spirituality, history, and community, rising as a major player in the then emergent Chicano *teatro*. Morton’s works are politically charged, historically informed, and slyly combine cultural research with a degree of cynicism, raising questions about authority over representation and about cultural ownership of systems of identification. *Rancho Hollywood*, published in 1983, re-presents Hollywood as a powerful culture factory, churning out lasting representations of history and identity of particular significance to the Chicana/o community. The production premiered at a Chicano community theatre, Teatro Gusto, in the largely Chicano and Latino Mission District of San Francisco in 1980. Over the next twenty years, the play was mainly performed in venues accessible to and frequented by local Chicano community members – an indication of his intended audience. The play was produced in multiple locations in California as well as in Minneapolis, Minnesota (1982) and Houston, Texas (1990). While the intended audience was Chicano community members, and particularly those living in California, the various locales in which the play was produced may imply the ubiquity of the racial stereotypes *Rancho Hollywood* satirizes. Morton’s play employs hyperbolic satire to bring attention to historical mythologies and is

self-reflectively presentational, demanding a critical response from its audience. The piece takes in tow some of the most insidious popular characters in California's mythical history, including the romanticized mestiza Ramona, made famous through Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 regional novel *Ramona*; Ramona's ill-fated Indian lover; Mexican Governor of California Pío Pico (here dramatized as Rio Rico); and trailblazer of the Western frontier, Jedediah Smith. The legendary references operate as loaded caricatures in "Ye Olde California Days," the movie within Morton's play.

The film's action takes place in "Rancho Madera Acebo," the home of the last Californio Governor, Rio Rico, his wife Victoria, his daughter Ramona, their Indian servant Tonta, and Ramona's forbidden "half-breed" love, Joaquín, who is a young Californio revolutionary type (10). Like the figure of Ramona, Morton's Joaquín is also a loaded reference in terms of Chicano historical and cultural identity. The outlaw bandit Joaquín Murieta is a key symbol of Chicano cultural survival and revolution against oppression, whose adventures have taken on mythic significance through frequent reference in novels, plays, poetry, and film (see, e.g., Leal lxviii–lxxvii). Revisiting and satirizing the Ramona Myth, the film begins as Rico forbids Ramona to marry Joaquín, whom he considers "practically a coyote" because "his people are barely *gente de razón*. They are but one generation removed from the savages" (7–8).<sup>1</sup> The love affair between Ramona, the romanticized and gendered archetype of a beautiful mixed-blood woman of inevitable tragedy and Joaquín, the masculine, borderland Californian Robin Hood, frames the film's treatment of loaded stereotypes, as each character increasingly typifies the qualities and myths with which they are associated.

Throughout the play, the Chicano actors pause the action of film, objecting to the historical misinformation and popular misconceptions presented by Hollywood. When Rico enters the set, the Director asks the Cameraman, "Has Central Casting gone color blind! I asked for a Spanish grandee and they give me a dark farmworker!" (7). To Director's disbelief, the actors playing Rico and Victoria point out that Ramona is a mestiza:

- VICTORIA      A mestiza. Half and half. If I, as her mother, am fair, and the father is dark, then the child is like café con leche . . . that's what the Mexican people are, a mixture of Spanish and Indian.
- RICO            And Arab, and Jewish and African . . . (7)

The audience is faced with an alternative to commonly held beliefs about the figure of Ramona, miscegenation, and "Spanish" Californio identity. Satirizing Hollywood's inclination to sanitize romantic depictions of California's past, the Director continues with a shallow bite: "That is very

quaint, that is very informative. But this film is supposed to be about Spanish Californios!" (7). Rico then sets his timeline straight, pointing to the historically inaccurate tendency to gloss over the Mexican period of California's past in favour of the Euro-Spanish myth: "I am afraid you have little conception of the Californio reality. The people of that time were Mexicans, not Spanish" (7–8). The exchange between Rico and the Director (who also casts himself to play Jedediah Smith in the film) exposes the lasting white privilege that favours the fictional concept of *pura sangre* [pure Spanish blood] over the social realities of mixed heritage. With his emotions high, the Director retaliates with a sharp threat that brings the issues of media representation and social power structures into stark relief, "All right! Have you all had your little says now? If you people ever want to work in this town again, you'll play your parts exactly the way I tell you to. Or you will never work anywhere in Hollywood again! Let's go!" (8). By setting the play squarely within the culture industry of Hollywood, Morton highlights meaningful connections among glamour, local mythology, and reductive notions of culture and race.

*Rancho Hollywood* exposes the pervasive element of invention within the parameters of what is considered the history of California. Perhaps due to the fact that the acting capital of the culture industry is located in Southern California, spectacle becomes dangerously intertwined with notions of California's history, and invention becomes necessary to satiate the consumers of popular culture. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes of tourist interest in human exhibitions and folk festivals, "The irreducibility of strangeness, a feature of tourist discourse more generally, inscribes on the geography of the exotic a history of receding thresholds of wonder: as exposure exhausts novelty, new ways to raise the threshold of wonder must be found" (72). In other words, the object of spectacle, which all too often extends to subordinate "exotic" cultures or people, must be reinvented to stress its "strangeness" to those observing. The excessive cultural investment in California's Spanish mythology that took root in the late 1800s has functioned, in part, to establish Anglo-American cultural superiority and justify Manifest Destiny; the emphasis on the mythologized golden yester-years of Spanish California often heightens the difference between today's Spanish-speaking demographic and the contemporary hegemony and, at the same time, underscores the notion that the Spanish element of California's history is contained within the past (see, e.g., McWilliams; Starr; Venegas).

Morton's characters echo stereotypical impressions of Californios as frivolous hedonists, who welcomed their own ruination by choosing hospitality over practicality and shrewdness. Here, and throughout the work, Morton uses satire that borders on absurdity to artfully bring key misconceptions and lasting interracial social issues into relief; the film within the play presents lazy, romantic Californios who enjoy entertaining *Americanos*; the

family's rancho relies on the exploitation of Indigenous people; anxieties over racial purity, phenotype, and status play out within the plot of the film. As Yolanda Venegas points out, the obsession over bloodlines has particular cultural relevance within the region. She writes, "[T]he opposition between *gente de razón* and local Indians became an important means through which the new landed elite forged a collective Californio identity" (66; italics in the original), and one that favoured Spanish linguistic and cultural presence while disavowing Indigenous culture and people. At the start of the play, the prospect of Hollywood fame (and "selling out") is more alluring than cultural integrity. These issues and stereotypes are presented in an exaggerated fashion, and then the caricatures evolve as the plot develops, allowing key character reversals, which both deconstruct harmful historical inaccuracies and lay the foundation for contemporary Chicano cultural empowerment. Morton's activist strategy includes presenting over-the-top versions of Californio stereotypes in order to highlight their absurdity, thereby encouraging the audience to recognize that these images have been constructed and to evaluate in what manner such stereotypes operate socially.

Correcting monolithic notions of Mexican American identity, Morton illustrates the slippery process of racial and class identification during the Rancho Period. Rico is angered by Ramona's intention to marry Joaquín because he "looks like an indio" (14). Despite his own mixed lineage, Rico demeans Joaquín as "indio," labelling him with a term still used in much of Latin America to denigrate Indigenous people. Similarly to the way in which the label "Indian" is used to homogenize, exoticize, and belittle Native Americans in the United States, "indio" ties to racist and classist notions of difference in Central and South America; those designated as *Indios* are associated with darker skin, poverty, and lower levels of education (Gabbert 112–13). Concerned with changing social mores, Rico begins a heated argument with Victoria and Ramona about the courtship between the two star-crossed lovers:

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| RAMONA   | Why don't you admit the real reason you dislike him is because he is in the forefront of steering a new and independent course for us Californios! |
| RICO     | There she goes, using that word again – Californio! . . . Not good enough to call themselves Mexicanos como sus padres.                            |
| VICTORIA | Don't you remember we used to call ourselves "Criollos" to distinguish from the Españoles?   |
| RICO     | That was yesterday. Today we are Mexican. And we shall always remain Mexican. To call ourselves anything else is treason. (9)                      |

Confusion over identification becomes fodder for prejudice, distinction, and segregation. This passage also reveals confusion about identification



over time; yesterday's term of cultural pride must be replaced with today's term of national loyalty or one might be charged with treason. The film within a play format relates the prejudices between social groups within Spanish California to those of the contemporary time in which *Rancho Hollywood* was written and first produced. Members of the play's early 1980s audiences may connect Rico's admonishment – "There she goes, using that word again – Californio!" – with their own experience of parental disapproval of the political term Chicano. The character Joaquín, who references the famed (and mythologized) revolutionary outlaw Joaquín Murrieta, embraces the term "Californio" as a political identity formed, in part, as a response to the lack of aid sent north from Mexico after the Mexican War of Independence and, in part, as a revolutionary cultural identity calling for solidarity against the American take-over. By naming his revolutionary character Joaquín, Morton also situates his play within a history of Chicano self-representation. For example, Luis Valdez names his outlaw mestizo character Joaquín in his important play *The Shrunken Head of Poncha Villa*; and Rodolfo Gonzáles's widely circulated 1967 poem, "I Am Joaquín," can be seen as an unofficial anthem for the 1960s Chicano movement. Morton links the identities "Californio" and "Chicano" through their political uses and, at the same time, conveys the limitations of such terms, which can exclude even as they unite. Rosaura Sánchez describes how the construction of Californio identity relied heavily on the perception of difference between Indian and non-Indian peoples, especially in terms of social and personal alignment with Spanish culture. "The othering of Indians," she writes, "serves therefore not only to mask the fact that a large percentage of the original colonists . . . shared the same Indian blood but more significantly to legitimize the conquest and exploitation of the Indians on the basis of a racial and cultural superiority" (57–58). Morton's parallel between the terms "Californio" and "Chicano" indicates that the processes involved in the production of collective consciousness as attached to racialized labels are altered by fluid social and historical circumstances.

Unlike Jackson's novel *Ramona*, *Rancho Hollywood* reveals the gross inequities between *Indios*, *gente de razón*, and the various people of mixed lineage in Spanish California, through intensified representations of race relations. The play confronts the tendency of American, romanticized, representational works to omit acts of violence and oppression within U.S. history. Morton fills his play world with complex, layered identities that cause friction with representations of early California that have been popularized by Hollywood and internalized by consumers, including the people such representations supposedly betoken. Morton's inclusion of Tonta, the Rico family's miserable Indian servant, counters most quixotic representations of the Spanish Californian rancho lifestyle. Tonta, a name given by the Rico family, which means "stupid girl" in Spanish, dispels the popular

belief that the Rancho Period was one of great fortune for Native Americans. The name also references Tonto, the dim-witted side-kick of the Lone Ranger, and consequently, a legacy of representations of Indian side-kicks, who appear to bolster the strength, intelligence, and superiority of the white heroes they serve. When Cameraman/Rufus explains the next scene from offstage, "Back at the Rancho. The gay Californios are preparing for the night's festivities," Tonta exclaims, "Californios didn't prepare anything. We servants did it al[l] . . . *Pinche gente! Puras Parrandas!* They have to have a  *fandango* every night" (14).<sup>2</sup> Her anger and attitude attack the countless depictions of the romantic Spanish Golden Era, which portray endless feasts and dances as if the food and arrangements appeared magically and without labour. Tonta reminds us whose story is omitted in this idealistic portrayal of Spanish Californian life. Her character makes clear that the life of leisure associated with the Spanish-fantasy past did not extend to everyone living in Spanish or Mexican California.

Rico and Victoria, who begin the film with a racist, classist, and exclusive mind-set, undergo a transformation at an accelerated pace. Although Rico forbids Ramona to marry Joaquín at the play's start, as the plot unfolds and Mexico loses the war to America, loyalties must shift, and class distinctions deflate in the face of cultural and economic destruction. Faced with the reality of his economic misfortune and newly subaltern social position, Rico abandons his prejudices and agrees to their marriage, arriving at a developed understanding of his own identity. Rico's reversal is epitomized when he rejects Jed's proposition to capitalize on his family's romanticized image and past. He realizes that feeding into the image of aristocratic *gente de razón* ("pure" Spanish "blood") has damaging effects on his own people, and often, such gentrified representations only profit the Euro-American hegemony. He finally proclaims, with pride, "[W]e Californios were . . . We were everything, white, black, brown . . . Yes, that's what we've been trying to tell him [Jed/Director] all along. But he insists upon saying that we're Spanish!" (34).

All of the characters, save the protagonist Joaquín and the antagonist Jed/Director, undergo a significant transformation toward the end of the play. With the recognition of their own mutating subjectivities, all of the characters, except Jed, assume Joaquín's revolutionary stance. Perhaps the most significant moment of dramatic reversal occurs when Joaquín, the "half-breed," and Native American actress, Sinmuhow, enter the Director's film set. Jed asks Sinmuhow if she can play "a silent sexy Latina" in his pornographic movie. Disrupting the play's hyperbolic satire, she says, "But I am a real person, my spirit is real. I cannot play a wooden Indian" (36). Her statement breaks the mood of the piece and symbolizes the turn in the dramatic action. The hodgepodge of distorted caricatures now stands in high relief against Sinmuhow's sincere response that her material, lived experience

makes the task of playing the harmful stereotype of a “wooden Indian” impossible for her. At this point, Joaquín beats Jed at his own game and gives the racist director an award for “the creation of such memorable stereotypes, for the advancement of collective inferiority complexes, for the maligning and desecration of our cultures and for the loss, theft and distortion of our history” (38).

As a final act of defiance, in solidarity with all of those oppressed in America, Joaquín places a pig mask over Jed’s face. The action of the revolutionary, mestizo character, Joaquín, in placing the pig mask on the exploitative character, Jed/Director, has two significant dramatic effects: (1) this action disrupts the power structures existing within the play, as the film’s cast thwarts the money-grubbing Director’s racist vision; and (2) it destabilizes the power structures existing within “Ye Olde Spanish Days,” as the caricatures Jed has been manipulating reject his exploitative measures. The placing of the mask also references Teatro Campesino’s *acto* [short political play], *Las Dos Caras del Patroncito*, in which the abusive, opportunistic Patroncito dons a “yellow pig mask face” (Valdez, *Las Dos Caras* 18). To those familiar with Chicano *teatro*, this reference illustrates that Chicanos have a history of meaningfully representing themselves, rejecting racism and stereotyping. Structurally, the form of the film-within-the-play collapses here, as the characters’ and caricatures’ actions coincide. This conflation of the play’s characters and the film’s caricatures argues that contemporary oppressed peoples must renegotiate historical misrepresentations as a first step toward cultural empowerment.

Morton’s *Rancho Hollywood* presents an interesting commentary on the power of performance to correct naturalized historical and ideological misconceptions. Morton honours the mythologized mestizo figure Joaquín Murrieta in his character Joaquín, who stands up to Jed, the Director, and to the myriad stereotypes and historical inaccuracies promoted by Hollywood. It is significant that Murrieta was mythologized by both Euro-Americans, as a dangerous outlaw, and in the Chicano community, as a revolutionary hero, a figure in whom generations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans have felt cultural pride. Morton offers a new perspective by emphasizing Joaquín’s mixed Indigenous and Spanish ancestry, which was historically ignored in accounts of Murrieta’s heroism but often emphasized in accounts of his villainy. The shadow of Joaquín Murrieta, here, illustrates how the slippages between identity, as felt in personal and communal experience, and identity that has been presented by popular culture, are at the crux of the dramatic conflict in Morton’s play. Like the multi-identified characters of *Rancho Hollywood*, Chavez’s *L.A. Real* works through multi-layered figurations of personal identity but dramatizes these pluralities in a sole character. Both plays (counter-)identify with the images ascribed through popular representation, grappling with the interstices between history as naturalized in

books, television shows, and movies, and history as one's own *past*, cultural identity, and lived and inherited memory.

### **L.A. REAL BY THERESA CHAVEZ**

Director/playwright/producer Theresa Chavez and respected Chicana performer Rose Portillo, continue to rework and produce Chavez's autobiographical play *L.A. Real* with their Los Angeles-based company, About Productions.<sup>3</sup> With themes and characterizations highly specific to the region of Southern California, the play has toured extensively throughout Los Angeles and surrounding areas, playing to heavily Chicana/o and mixed community, high school, and junior college audiences. *L.A. Real* presents issues with identity that are relevant to Los Angeles's Chicana/o community specifically, as well as to the multi-ethnic community to which the play was presented.

In an e-mail correspondence, Chavez shared with me her reasons for the play's development, remarking on the tension between California history and memory:

The piece was motivated by my own explorations of L.A./California history and my own personal relationship to that. But also by my reaction to the general notion that "L.A. has no history" and the relative lack of knowledge by most people – whatever their ethnicity – of L.A./California/West Coast living and written history.

The play sifts through Chavez's incomplete and variegated memories, those stories of Spanish California passed down by her mother and grandmother as well as those told in history books and sold by the popular media. She recons with the slippages, grappling with the emotional investment she has in the range of identifications that leave "traces" on her body. Mestiza, the only character performed live, articulates this confounding journey:

Why should I remember a past that only complicates my living, my understanding of who I am? I could simply selectively edit my own history. Give my own face a new meaning. Be an American mongrel. Or define myself according to any given historical moment. (93–94)

Against a simple, hand-drawn map of Los Angeles and its surrounding areas, criss-crossed by borders made and changed over the past four centuries, Portillo steps sideways along the nearly bare stage as she names these various identifications: "Californio, Mexicana, Mexican-American, Chicana, Hispanic, Latina, Mestiza, Californio . . . CALIFORNIANA . . ." (*L.A. Real*

2006). She changes her vocal quality, accent, and posture according to her impression of belonging to each group within each historical moment. “California,” “Mexicana,” are spoken with thick, proud accents – Spanish, and then Mexican – and are delivered with a straight, confident posture. Her “Hispanic” is timid and spoken in a noticeably standard American dialect, and its apologetic tone elicits laughter from the audience. The last of this list, “CALIFORNIANA” expresses Chavez’s attempt to work through her specific, personal experience as a Californian mestiza woman. The meaningful identification “CALIFORNIANA” foreshadows the tremendous impact of her female ancestors’ memories and self-definitions. She envisions old California through *las bisabuelas de las bisabuelas* [her great-grandmothers’ great-grandmothers], a “landscape dotted with women” (*L.A. Real* 2006).

Portillo, as the character Mestiza, is preoccupied with her mother’s emotional attachment to a “Hollywood version of Old California” that includes a homogenized and sanitized image of their ancestry (96). Yet, at the same time, she feels the psychic impact of her mother’s desire to meet those standards and expectations: “She was born into that myth. There was almost nothing left of that past, so why not begin to make it up. A little history here, a little Hollywood there” (96). Chavez’s character is pulled in many directions at once, conveying a commitment to controlled research, an investment in knowing herself better. She is a teacher giving a lesson to the audience she addresses directly. Slides, video clips, and old photographs are projected onto a screen behind her. Her carriage and tone evoke a combination of excitement and confusion, as if she is also teaching herself while trying to make sense of all these materials.

Interestingly, this raw footage – the “real” photographs of the original Lugo Rancho, a portrait of her “great, great, great grandfather” and the litany of disembodied, historical facts she has been told over and over again: “that house stood in the center of 29,000 acres,” with a “menagerie of 2,500 sheep, 3,000 horses and mules, and 43,000 head of cattle – ” reveal no answers but seem only to confuse Mestiza further (94). Mestiza’s journey includes specific numbers, facts, and events that have occurred in Los Angeles over time, such as the construction of paved roads over ranchos or the transformation of Chinatown into the Mexican American tourist site of Olvera Street. *L.A. Real* can be read as a personal narrative that complicates positivist approaches to history because Chavez relates historical facts only to explore their psychic impact on Mestiza. Mestiza’s interwoven experience of time, of memory, and of the narratives attached to her through the myth of the Spanish fantasy constitute her identity-confusion. Continuing along her uneasy journey to discover the truth about her “own history,” she locates a distant cousin who lives on the remnants of her family’s property. Like visions of a traceless Chinese restaurant that has been replaced by a fantasy, “Spanishified” tourist market, she recalls the encounter with her

cousin, a woman she defines by her distance from contemporary Los Angeles's reality. She says,

I think this is the first time in quite awhile that she has even stuck her head out the front door. Inside it is 1901. Outside it is the present. Outside it is English. Inside it is español . . . Outside there is time. Inside there is space. Inside her is resolve. Inside me is conflict. (96)

Mestiza articulates a longing for answers, for a place in which she feels she belongs. But standing in front of her cousin's house, she observes only the shifting of communities over time in a space: the rise and fall of the California Lugo household, the rise and fall of Los Angeles's Chinatown, the rise of Olvera Street (first in Anglo control, now predominately Chicano/Mexicano). Her search will produce more ambiguities, more questions. Feeling a complicated mestiza heritage, she tastes none of her cousin's "resolve" to shut out the present or ignore the shifts that have occurred in this land she has "personally . . . been walking around . . . for more than 200 years" (94).

Chavez's autobiographical character embodies a feeling of time that is at once fluid and grounded in the space she inhabits, the space of her ancestors. The conflict is that she feels pressed, forced into thinking through a specifically western, American ideology that does not make room for confluences, cultural memory, or multiple realities at one time. In his article "Indigenous Knowledge in the Decolonial Era," Michael G. Doxtater discusses how western constructions of power and knowledge ignore all other forms of knowledge, dismissing them as "irrational," – economically and politically negligible within American modernity (621). Doxtater terms the ideology that accompanied and allowed for the Euro-American conquest over Indigenous people and their ways of life "colonial-power-knowledge" (618). An essential element of western colonial-power-knowledge is its adherence to linear time and a definition of progress that justifies the decimation and oppression of Indigenous cultures as victims of a kind of socio-political Darwinism. Through her highly personalized character, Chavez takes on western notions that define "human and world development as a static, immobile, and fixed paradigm" (Doxtater 620). Mestiza feels pressure to find the single beginning point of her own identity, but something about the way her history has been told to her, the manner in which the "land has been cemented over" and the "paths have become . . . boulevards," leaves an unsatisfying *feeling* inside of her body (93).

The struggle Chavez illustrates in *L.A. Real* serves as an example of the unique potential of performance to explore the reflexive relationship of the personal and the political. As articulated by Mohanty, personal feeling and lived experience are both socially and theoretically constructed. He argues that it is precisely because they are mediated by "values that are 'political'

in nature that refer outward to the world beyond the individual” that emotion and experience must not be rejected as theoretically useless when we consider identity (34). Mestiza rummages through her mother’s stories of a pure Spanish lineage, communicates the frustration of trying to live up to her place in the romantic mythology of California’s history, and articulates an undeniable “subconscious remembering, or a conscious longing to recognize [her] own complexity . . . own mixed blood and the desire to figure out just what that blood is” (98). “Blood” – and here, the murky idea of part Indian, part Spanish, part unknown blood – becomes something else, something intangible, but ideationally indispensable to her life. “Blood” is a feeling of history that cannot be found solely in text-books, tourist pamphlets, Hollywood myths, or even her own mother’s recollections. Imagining a conversation between herself as “Mestiza – mixed blood” and “her own Indian” Mestiza says,

“I can’t deny what I feel, what I hear. Listen. There is a pulse inside of me . . . A voice whispered and I heard it. It had no name. It needs no name. But that voice spoke.” And with those sounds, those words, I saw things around me I had never “seen” before. Trees spoke back to me. I looked up to them and said, ‘I will honor you all of my lifetime . . .’ This pulse, this voice is my Indian-ness. Once I heard it, I could never, ever forget. I had merged with the earth and nothing would ever be the same and it would never change. (98–99)

That pulse, that nameless voice, speaks through a genealogy that shifts shape, camouflages itself, and alters according to the names and definitions given and taken over time; it is the blood/pulse/voice/feeling of a survival maintained through constant struggle. Indigenous scholars remind us that struggle, conflict, and even battle are necessary life processes that connect us to the balance of life and death in the universe. Yolanda Broyles-González writes, “human liberation . . . [can] be accomplished only through a process of extended struggle, motivated by love rather than hatred” (94–95). Chavez dramatizes the struggle as Mestiza’s quest to see things she “had never ‘seen’ before” reckoning with the intangible presence that her “mother would never recognize” because of her attachment to a static popularized version of the past (98). Where her mother is unable to do so, Mestiza (counter-) identifies with Eurocentric regional mythologies by recognizing their seductive quality, assessing their political motivations and impact, and shaking their dominance with personal memories that disrupt the normalized historical narrative.

Memory appears in *L.A. Real* in many forms. There are memories retained by lines drawn and then moved, ranchos granted under the Mexican government then taxed into foreclosure two years later by the United States government, fences built and then torn down; “land that is baby-sat by

fifty-three families is to become divided, subdivided ad infinitum into bits and pieces of real estate that are now called by hundreds of different names" (99). On her quest for truth, for a sense of place and belonging, Mestiza seems energized by the cartography of the city, roads like wrinkles that come with time and do not succeed in altering the face completely, but add to it. They retain the memory of shifts of cultural and political power, of language and economic systems. "The ranchos are the blueprints. Our boulevards retain this memory . . . Formally footpaths, they recall their birth as they slash and burn through hundreds of neighborhoods" (99).

While the region's shifting borders over time offer Mestiza material evidence of political and cultural change, her bank of memories also contains images coloured by popular representations of *Nueva España*. Her "mother" does not ever physically appear onstage, but her notions of selfhood and history seem to haunt Mestiza's journey throughout the play. She cannot separate her impression of her mother from those stories of dashing *vaqueros*, dignified Spanish *dons* and fiery *señoritas*. Exploring the complexities of identity formation in pre-1848 Southern California, anthropologists Brian Haley and Larry Wilcoxon examine the Rancho Period in California, when Alta California was under Mexican rule. Although Haley and Wilcoxon focus specifically on the southern California city of Santa Barbara, their examination of the "normalcy of identity change as politically motivated and socially contextualized action" applies broadly within the region (433). At this time *la gente de razón* were often *mestizo* but largely registered as Mexicano or Californio and enjoyed white status as property owners with servants at their disposal. Retaining white status became increasingly more difficult with the influx of Euro-American emigration and sudden economic and political transformation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the same group began to assert "Spanish identity to avoid prejudice against rising numbers of Mexican immigrants with whom they could be confused" (Haley 433). Although she dismisses her mother's claims to "Royal Connections," "pure" Spanish blood, as improbable, since her family "came from what is now Northern Mexico – Sonora – and had lived there for possibly two or three generations," Mestiza understands that the less desirable, less European history was not passed down to her (Chavez 97).

A scene from the 1936 film *Ramona* illustrates what was passed down: images that lived inside fictions, legends in the popular imagination of California (see, e.g., DeLyser). Mestiza faces the screen, points her finger, and says passionately, "I know her" (Performance Script 7). *Ramona* is a substitute, an ideal image of a beautiful weeping woman, standing in for a past of violent conquest, obscuring similar racial and gender inequities of today. And like the incorrectly pronounced Spanish names of Southern Californian boulevards – Sepulveda, San Vicente, Los Feliz – the power of *Ramona*'s myth is generated through the act of forgetting. On the one hand, the



populace remembers its Latin past with Spanish surnames for its thoroughfares; but on the other, as the names are now commonly pronounced with Californian-English accents, the 'past-ness' of Spanish rule is emphasized. When Mestiza exclaims, "I know her," she implies that thousands, maybe millions, of tourists, immigrants, emigrants, and Southern California residents feel that they "know" Ramona. Chavez comments on the peculiar relationship of "knowledge" and tourism, an industry that intrinsically links "Ramona" to the imaginary of Southern California. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has argued, there is a sense that once one has visited an exotic land or visually consumed a foreign culture, one holds some knowledge, some ownership over the landscape and all its lore (30–33). Mestiza "knows" what Ramona has come to mean, of course, because there was no "real" Ramona, only that "½ Indian, ½ Scot . . . then Mexican . . . then Spanish" woman who lived in Jackson's novel and whose name still graces towns, storefronts, and pageants in the southland (*L.A. Real* 2006). Like her mother's tales of "rich fiesta making Spaniards," Ramona and the allure of her myth are threads in Mestiza's memory-mapping of Southern California, history, and her home (Chavez 96).

Her memories amble past the legends and representations of Southern Californian popular culture and meander through her own past personal experiences, like playing dress-up in borrowed clothes as a child. They dip into her mother's tales of purity and aristocracy and negotiates the facts, dates, and statistics written in history books and town records. But there is another source of memory, that indescribable but unrelenting pulse that seems to lift Mestiza up and over this contested landscape. With a slide titled "L.A. River Flood c. 1861" behind her, Mestiza describes the vast devastation caused by the severe rains and especially the drought that followed. She viscerally describes the destroyed property, the thousands of animals left to die, and the sudden reappearance of animals "that have not been seen for hundreds of years" (100). To describe the scene of the vicious natural cycle, Portillo drops to her knees with her arms by her side; she straightens her spine, and purses her lips. At once, she narrates the snake's actions and becomes the snake herself, speaking with an exaggerated "s" sound and sliding in and out of vowel sounds. She describes the wreckage:

The snake with no fangs crawls up to survey what is left. Dead cows everywhere . . . It is not necessary to untwist the remains . . . The snake turns to herself and converses with her tail. The tail speaks: "What you see unearthed will be built upon and upon and upon. But your serpent eyelids which never close will forever imprint this moment. You will not forget. Your serpent spine is connected to the most vital body signals that electrify all circuits so that nothing stops, nothing is forgotten." (100)

This is the one moment within the play when Portillo becomes another character. She delivers the line as straddling her roles as storyteller and as the ancient crawling animal. Mestiza channels the serpent, connecting herself to animal life and an Indigenous capacity for survival. According to Paredes, the serpent is an ancient creature considered sacred to Indigenous people throughout the Americas, and specifically in the Southwest (also known as Atzlán) (qtd. in Broyles-González 172–73). The serpent symbolizes life cycles in Aztec mythology; it is forever changing its coat, shedding its skin, and growing one anew. Chavez recalls not the Christian-Judeo snake of the Garden of Eden but an ancestral visitor, who turns to and converses with her own tail creating a sacred circle. Appropriately, the serpent-circle observes the devastation from the flood and drought; she is the vehicle Chavez uses to describe the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth that occurs in a place through time.

The snake functions as a mythical memory that comes to Mestiza to help her remember those things that she could not witness in a way that history books cannot. This scene is an example of Indigenous cultural memory, an inherent connection to one's past and tribal traditions that exists despite colonial and imperial influences that have worked to erase Indigenous culture. Here Mohanty's argument that the creation and continuance of community must be reached through "moral and imaginative expansion of oneself" applies (44). Mestiza finds her own sense of belonging, an affirmation of the land as her home, as she links her individual experience to a collective memory. This sense of belonging and place connects her physical body and her life's experiences to her ancestors, her community, and the cosmos. Her communing intimately with the ancient serpent could also be seen as an example of becoming a "complete human being," the key goal set forth in the theatre- and life-training program practised by members of El Teatro Campesino in the 1970s called Theater of the Sphere. This Indigenous process involves "learning to evolve or move in harmony with life, with the people in one's immediate environment, and with the cosmic movement" (Broyles-González 95). Mestiza gains strength as the snake's tail hisses, "[N]othing is forgotten" (Chavez, Performance Script 11). And through this strength of memory, Mestiza later casts off the tangles of history that have impeded her sense of self and personal past.

Chavez rejects the notion that other people can own her past, despite how often their romanticized ideas circulate. The 2006 production at the Ford Amphitheatre included a scene where a voice-over asks Mestiza to imagine the "mythical Spaniard," an image who "still rides in parades" – perhaps down Olvera Street or in Santa Barbara's "Old Spanish Days" Parade – "and waves in complete silence" (102). Mestiza imagines a mythical Spanish *señorita* riding beside him, also waving, but in defiance. Mestiza breaks with the lull of the voice-over: "[S]he's waving them off" (102).

Portillo stands and faces the audience directly, with the screen of old parade footage, like ghosts dancing in black and white behind her. Forcefully, loudly, and clearly, she warns them, as if speaking for the silenced mythical Spaniards and on behalf of the real people erased by the romanticized representations created for another's gain:

Do not come here. Do not want this place. Do not marry my sisters . . . Do not make deals with my brothers. Do not learn my language, just to abandon it when another language replaces my tongue . . . Do not reinvent me on your salsa bottles, your wine labels, your track home logos. (102)

She calls out against the parts of history that have trampled upon her land and ancestry like the act of border drawing and erasing, changes of nation, the advent of commercialism and capitalism. Responding to her outburst, the screen shows images of a "group of women, c. 1890 Grandmothers" (*L.A. Real* 2006). Contrasting her live body with the myth, she offers herself as a vessel through which her mixed, Indigenous ancestors can "touch down." She offers her voice, her body, her life as a performer and as a storyteller, to un-ghost the past; with her face turned toward the theatre's ceiling she says, "I want to make a place for you to touch down" (103).

As outlined by Mohanty, the practice of re-evaluating "the accepted cultural meanings and values, the given definition of [one's] personal and political interests" in relation to one's own personal and shared experiences is the method by which "collective identity" is formed (56). Chavez's intensely personal, one-woman show takes a nuanced approach to identity, binding Mestiza both to her mother's memories and to a collective, ancestral memory, and at the same time, performing her negotiations with popular identificatory images. Memory, as an analytic term, is unhinged from history, moving into a political sphere where alliances are made and re-made; memory enables concepts of an otherwise erased subject so that its "past" may emerge. Mohanty writes, "[T]he distinctly postcolonial challenge lies in leaving part of the past behind, in working through it to imagine agency and selfhood in positive terms, inventing new dimensions of cultural possibility" while understanding that ownership over one's freedom "cannot be a purely individual affair," for the colonized and oppressed "need access to the buried memories and experiences of others who might have shared experience" (47).

Projects that aim to reconstruct the historical memory of contested spaces, which have "been diluted or denied by Eurocentric forces," are paramount to the survival of Chicana/o culture (Acuña, Preface x–xi). History must be negotiated, particularly in regions such as Southern California, where national, socio-economic, and political power structures shifted multiple times, in a matter of decades, and where current immigration

patterns continue to challenge how regional identity is configured. "This requires retelling what happened and redefining the causes of what happened. In this way the reconstruction of history and affirmation of identity go hand in hand" (xi). Morton's and Chavez's plays exemplify a nuanced perception of identity that wrestles with the genealogy of the Spanish fantasy and its associated racial ascriptions. This approach to identity construction requires the inclusion and exploration of memories that counter the dominant narratives of the region and reveal deep-seated, racialized power dynamics.

### **NEW DIRECTIONS: FEET GROUNDED IN OUR PAST, HEADS HELD HIGH AND LOOKING FORWARD**

*Rancho Hollywood* and *L.A. Real* articulate collective, ancestral, and personal memory, creating new definitions and possibilities for an inclusive Chicana/o identity. Routinely iterated notions of static identity obscure historical and contemporary power relations and have very real consequences for the individuals such identificatory markers hail. Chavez utilizes her personal narrative to confront naturalized categories of identification. She negotiates with Hollywood representations of history and her ancestors' confusion as their lands were taken and renamed, insisting that these myths cannot tell her whole story. Her story is still unfolding; identity is unfixed, dynamic, mixed (*mestiza*), and transformative. Speaking within a different cultural moment, Morton's ensemble-based satire also revisits romanticized and narrow concepts of identity. His presentational play is a call to action for those in the audience to reject stereotyping and historical amnesia. He proposes a wider definition of what it means and has meant to be Chicana/o by forcefully navigating through and counter-identifying with a variety of images the dominant culture places upon Spanish-speaking and/or mestiza peoples. The process of (counter-)identifying involves recognizing the hegemonic agenda behind the propagation of the Spanish fantasy and its representations and reasserting lived experiences and collective memories as central to productive identity construction.

*Rancho Hollywood* and *L.A. Real* investigate how regional history has been marketed and how these representations influence the process of ethnic identification in Southern California. Recognizing that the Mexican American communities have internalized divisive colonial notions of difference, Morton and Chavez work through this ideational baggage by counter-identifying with the Spanish fantasy and present a new type of identity that is historically mediated, personally felt, and politically motivated. *Rancho Hollywood* and *L.A. Real* give voice to alternative versions of history, including personal and cultural memory, in order to articulate a hybrid, inclusive identity. This transformative identity is a political category developed

through individual and collective agency over the memory of Southern California.

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## NOTES

- 1 The term "*la gente de razón*," literally 'the people of reason' came to mean 'people of quality.' *La gente de razón* were members of the Spanish aristocracy and their descendants; high ranking presidio officers, Franciscan friars, and land grantees belonged to Spanish California's first class, *la gente de razón*. The term was used in part to differentiate those in power from those who were not: *la gente sin razón*.
- 2 "Pinche gente! Puras Parrandas!" translates here as "Fucking rich people (*gente de razón*)! Constant partying!"
- 3 Because Chavez developed this work over time, there are changes between the script published in *Urban Latino Culture (La vida latina en LA)* in 1999 and the 2006 production script. Unless otherwise specified, page numbers provided for the reader's convenience are from the 1999 version, although the exact wording may be that of the production script. My analysis draws from a digital video disk recording of the 2006 performance of *L.A. Real* at the Ford Amphitheater in Los Angeles, CA (cited as *L.A. Real 2006*) and accompanying performance script generously given to me by Theresa Chavez: "L.A. Real – Draft 4" 15 Feb. 2006 (cited as Performance Script).

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ABSTRACT: Often considered the final conquest and ultimate summation of Manifest Destiny, California holds a unique place in the American imaginary. While the popular mythology of the Spanish fantasy has served to obscure the use of violence and racialized oppression throughout the colonization of the American Southwest, traces of such struggle remain in memories of the colonized as they continue to occupy this contested space. This paper examines Carlos Morton's ensemble-based political satire, *Rancho Hollywood*, and Theresa Chavez's one-woman show, *L.A. Real*, to navigate the dynamic experience of contemporary Southern Californian racialized identity. These two pieces diverge stylistically but share an inclusive, nuanced approach to making sense of history, exploring the material and epistemological impact of historical representation on Chicana/o identity over time. *Rancho Hollywood* and *L.A. Real* counter-identify with the Spanish-fantasy heritage by rejecting stereotyping, questioning sanitized versions of Californian history, and voicing personal narratives that resist dominant regional myths and their associated racial ascriptions. Each play stages alternative versions of history that include personal experience and cultural memory; this transformative, productive approach to identity formation articulates agency over the memory of California.

Keywords: Theresa Chavez, *L.A. Real*, Carlos Morton, *Rancho Hollywood*, Spanish-fantasy heritage in literature, dramatic criticism

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