

Introduction

How is the entity called the United States of America to be imagined? Cast another way, how is the U.S. base of the American Dream to be conceived? There are many possible responses to these questions. The United States may be regarded as a national monument to rugged, masculinist individualism, pioneer enterprise, and institutionalized consensus. It may be imagined as a place of ever expanding horizons, and as a space that links the ideal of unconstrained mobility to desires for individual self-fashioning and socioeconomic betterment. The U.S.A. may be designated an immigrant's paradise, figured in exclusive terms as a trans-Atlantic migrant trajectory that culminates in happy assimilation and "American" becoming. Inside and outside its borders, the United States may be upheld as the first-world's leader, the exporter of a dynamic capitalist ethos and purported democratic principles, a function reinforced by the country's worldwide policing service as accuser and destroyer of rogue regimes. It may be thought of as a geopolity racialized in white and black terms only. And the U.S.A. may be conceived of as a community cohered by a monocultural, monolingual, and locally generated "patrimony."

Shadowing these possible dreamscapes are two entwined epistemologies: that of the border, and that of immigration. U.S. border and migrant discourses are concerned with the production of and verifiable distinction between citizens and aliens, "legal" or "illegal." In turn, border and immigrant discourses suggest that U.S. citizenship is popularly regarded as a right to occupy national space, and to move freely through that space. This right underscores the national cult of the automobile and is written onto the landscape with roads, freeways, underpasses, and signs of distance to be covered. Unbounded mobility on the U.S.A.'s open roads is celebrated in cultural texts from film to literature and music, and enshrined in popular imaginations of

the U.S.A., both within that state's borders and beyond them. Literal freedom of movement represents a significant material manifestation of the American Dream, and provides a powerful and resilient metaphor of making good in the United States.

Cast in these terms, issues of "American" mobility, and the dreamscapes of national possibility that accrue to "America," are of direct concern to the U.S.A.'s Latino populations, a conglomerate of peoples with origins in or connections to the Latin Americas. *Latino Dreams* is also concerned with Latino relations to the U.S.A.'s conceptual and material coordinates, and to the epistemological problems posed by those "national" relations. In this book I respond to the question of Latino sector relations with the state that contains them by focusing on a range of narratives, published between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, by writers drawn from Puerto Rico and the three largest Latino sectors. By examining texts from Puerto Rican, Nuyorican, Cuban-American, and Chicano writers, my aim is to set up a cumulative dialogue between disparate experiences and understandings of "America," the locus for a range of myths and discourses of belonging. If this dialogue is enabled by the overarching Latino, it is also enabled by the overarching "America," understood as both an unremarked synonym for the U.S.A. and the name of a continent in which Anglo and Latin Americas co-exist in uneasy physical and signifying proximity. My selection of narratives includes texts by authors who have received little academic attention—Abraham Rodriguez, Achy Obejas, and Benjamin Alire Sáenz—along with underattended works from more renowned writers—Rosario Ferré, Coco Fusco, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. While there are great differences between the nations these writers fictionalize, their narratives may be said to traffic in the U.S.A.'s attendant myths and governing cultural logics. These writers deal with the material, historical, corporeal, and symbolic spaces in and on which various Americas meet, overlap, battle, and potentially transform each other.

My analytical interests in this study are best indicated by a string of questions. How do the selected texts stage the U.S.A.?

What sorts of national myths and discourses of belonging are apparent in the narratives, and what do they signify for the narratives' Latino players? What narrative tactics are mobilized against the U.S.A. and its dominant myths as fictionalized in these texts? What do the narratives say about specific and pan-ethnic Latino cultural typologies, as well as U.S. cultural typologies, in relation to questions of mobility? What sorts of cultural capital are valued and deployed in Latino texts that respond to a pervasive, if always multifaceted and contestable, U.S. imaginary? What extra-national factors interrupt the national concerns evident in the selected narratives? How, and with what political aspirations and risks, do these texts locate Latino cultures and subjects in relation to hegemonic processes? What is at stake for Latino cultural politics in the narration of alternatives to (or mobilities against) the "American" Dream? What constitutes a Latino narrative of "America"?

These questions motivate my analysis. They, and my responses to them, focus on the complexities, contradictions, and surprises generated by the nexus of (selected) Latino narratives and the U.S. national imaginary. In plotting this nexus I work with one axiom: Latino texts are U.S. texts. To varying degrees they are also legible as transcultural scenarios in which multiple signifying systems and imaginations are messily entangled. My axiom, then, requires qualification, here borrowed from Alire Sáenz: Latino texts are texts that either cannot or refuse "to be completely contained by that homogenous, devouring word *American*" (1997b: 79). I investigate this dispute with U.S. containment by placing transculturation—a Latin American critical mode—in dialogic tension with questions of subaltern subordination and domination, the conjunction of rival bodily economies, and the resistant capacities of cultural production. This modified transcultural approach obliges me to attend to the hegemonic processes that make America the "devouring word" for an imagined nation, and to the fate of that nation when targeted in Latino cultural productions.

My contention is that each of these Latino texts deploys spe-

cific narrative tactics and cultural logics, and a range of literary and other cultural capital, in order to question and reform the U.S.A.'s imaginary coordinates. These ambitions do not mean that the texts are reducible to a neat hegemonic (pervasive power) versus counter-hegemonic (always already resistant ambition of the oppressed) logic. Indeed, their distinct transcultural tactics expose the fallacies underwriting such a logic. Moreover, the exposure of a simplistic hegemonic-resistant schema is also to some degree enabled because the texts' national disputes may be complicated by recourse to feminist, queer, panethnic, post-colonial, or transnational agendas. Yet while I am alert to the particular mobilities by which the narratives aim to dispense with a singular notion of the U.S.A. neatly contained by its southern terrestrial and maritime borders, I also recognize instances in which that imagined entity frustrates the counter-narrative will. That is, the narratives may provide signs of the U.S.A.'s hegemonic resilience in the face of imaginary disavowal. At times the narratives may depend on or replicate exclusionary, appropriative, and neocolonizing U.S. cultural logics. This is particularly evident when the authors presume to represent, champion, or identify with subaltern subjects without questioning their own authorial relation to the material preconditions of subalternity, or their intellectual complicity in the textual production of subalternity. My readings reveal that eruptions of U.S. imaginary power modulate both the transcultural politics at work in the selected texts and the resistant capacities that may be claimed of them as counter-narratives.

In this study I do not regard the authors and narratives I have selected as representative of the imagined communities to which they may belong. This book is not designed as a definitive map of Latino narratives, cultures, or responses to the U.S.A. However, it is intended as a contribution to the rapidly evolving field of Latino literary studies. As such, *Latino Dreams* is constructed in cognisance of Frances Aparicio's observation that "Latino Studies is an academic imaginary in a very literal sense of the word. It is still in the state of desire, it is still a potential rather

than fact, a field very much in its initial makings despite the three decades of scholarly production in Chicano Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, and the emerging Cuban-American, Central American and Dominican scholarship” (1999: 4).¹

The first chapter outlines my critical approach. Here I explain the ways by which Latino narratives are enmeshed in a web of border logics emanating from the southern terrestrial (U.S.-Mexican) border, as well as from the southern maritime (Florida Strait) frontier. I relate these logics to the myths and official discourses by and through which the U.S.A. has been imagined, often at the expense of its Latino sectors. This discussion informs my preference for a transcultural reading of Latino narratives modulated by subaltern studies debates. The dialogue I construct between these modes has two benefits. First, it permits me to dispense with the notion that Latino narrative engagements with the U.S.A.’s governing logics and myths are explicable in terms of an intransigent subordination versus domination schema. Second, it enables me to problematize the categories of elite and subaltern and their functions in literary production and textual representation. Thus, while I accept that literary texts are privileged cultural forms in which fictive subalterns are constructed at some risk, I concede that narrative stagings of such constructions may illuminate broader non-literary hegemonic processes and transcultural forces. The chapter concludes with a survey of Latino criticism concerned with issues of Latino mobility from inside the U.S.A., criticism that informs the analysis that follows.

Chapter two inaugurates the book’s literary/critical trajectory. It begins not in mainland U.S.A. but in Puerto Rico, and in Rosario Ferré’s *Sweet Diamond Dust* (first published in 1988). This is Ferré’s English-language translation and revision of *Maldito amor* (first published in 1986). Intended for Anglophone U.S. audiences, the narrative—like its Spanish-language predecessor—is comprised of a short novel and three related short stories, and explores questions of myth and national place raised by the takeover of the island by the U.S.A. in 1898. I dis-

cuss *Sweet Diamond Dust* in relation to what I call Ferré's self-subalternizing agenda, that is, the rhetorical bid to jettison class privilege and to ally the white oligarchic Puerto Rican woman with the mixed race or black female subaltern against patriarchal hegemonies, whether Creole elite or U.S. imperial. This agenda—apparent throughout Ferré's writing—is upset by a doubled metastasis: of the class and racialized antagonisms that trouble “woman” as a meaningful universal category; and of the reluctance by, indeed socioeconomic inability of, Puerto Rican subaltern sectors to ally themselves with oligarchic or cosmopolitan representatives, such as Ferré herself, against U.S. interests. Significant in these respects is the narrative's complex intertextual traffic in literary and musical forms. I argue that the messages transmitted by these cultural references—from romanticist mythologizations of nation to testimonial, Anglophone feminism, and the Puerto Rican *danza*—undermine the premise of viable anti-U.S. transracial and transclass affiliations between women. They also confirm the cosmopolitan credentials of Ferré's stated ability to fantasize herself and her writing as the interstitial solutions to a colonial predicament. As legible in *Sweet Diamond Dust*, Ferré's self-subalternizing agenda depicts the U.S.A. and Puerto Rico as safely discontinuous entities rather than as mutually transculturated geopolities whose imaginary frontiers cannot be easily disentangled.

Chapter three relocates from Puerto Rico to Nuyorico, and to Abraham Rodriguez's novel *Spidertown* (1993), a text that has been largely overlooked in Latino studies, perhaps due to its uncompromising, or unfashionable, depictions of a mainland Puerto Rican predicament. This portrait of life in the South Bronx (El Bronx) is told from the perspective of Miguel, a young drug runner and purported exemplar of Nuyorican subalternity. Immobilized by a dense array of institutional and discursive impediments, Miguel is unable to identify himself as of Puerto Rico or the United States, let alone as a neocultural embodiment of the two. My interest lies in assessing the tensions between Miguel's management of barrio materialities and his

imaginative departures into worlds beyond El Bronx. Those worlds are not simply located in a U.S. dreamscape, but are also accessed through the literary texts and films at his disposal. I argue that the novel's fictive subalterns, like the novel itself, find no sustenance in a Nuyorican critical discourse that celebrates the transcultural continuities between Puerto Rican island and mainland populations. This dispute helps to explain why *Spidertown* is explicable as a romance that seeks out literary imaginations other than those provided by either the United States or Puerto Rico. The romance is also cast as an entrepreneurial American Dream adapted to street-level conditions, and, for Miguel, as a romance against-all-odds, with Miguel and his girlfriend portrayed as the young lovers fighting their way from barrioized criminality to U.S. respectability. This two-edged quest into romance, however, has two consequences. First, despite attempting to rescue Miguel from the crack culture's violent androcentric logics, the novel consistently recuperates those logics. Second, by acceding to the myth that oppressive material limits can and must be transcended imaginatively, the novel's escape leaves unquestioned the institutional and discursive powers responsible for manufacturing *barrio* subalternity. Rodriguez's dispute with U.S. power thus refuses to countenance the transcultural entanglement of Puerto Rican mainland and U.S. imaginations; the difference between this refusal and the stance adopted by Ferré is that Rodriguez withholds from historicizing the *barrio* in terms of the unresolved U.S.-Puerto Rican relationship.

The fourth chapter discusses a novel, *Memory Mambo* (1996), and a number of short stories, by the Cuban-American Achy Obejas. Set in Chicago, *Memory Mambo* announces a queer engagement with Cuban-exile notions of national belonging. *Memory Mambo*'s disturbed protagonist, Juani, desires a viable place in relation to multiple familial and national imaginaries. In plotting her desires, the novel rejects the mythologization or romanticization of island origins. This rejection means that the narrative's figurations of transcultural kinship networks

established in exile, and of a Cuba that exceeds the Cuban-state's borders, render the "lesbian" herself as one of the novel's U.S.-identity stakes. The transcultural meeting of Cuban and middle-class U.S. bodily economies complicates this scenario. While both of these economies enforce particular patriarchal interests, their mutual neoculturation in a U.S. setting also permits a range of unmanned opportunities for women. I also explore how the presence of a politicized *independentista* Puerto Rican character provides Obejas's novel with a colonized "American" imagination—one that diverges from Ferré's and Rodríguez's novels—that counterpoints and challenges certain Cuban exile imaginations. The resultant dialectic of antipathy between the two women highlights how Cuban histories of exile diverge from other Latino sectors' U.S. histories, thus generating a range of ideological impediments to *latinidad*. This dialectic is further exacerbated by the taken-for-granted *petit-bourgeois* ambit of Juani's family, which is clearly at odds with the subaltern predicaments staged in Ferré's and Rodríguez's narratives. Thus, notwithstanding Obejas's nuanced critiques of Cuban-American privilege, decidedly non-subaltern mobilities are evident in the novel and in some of Obejas's stories. At times these mobilities sit uneasily with Obejas's desimplification of the cultural logics and ideological pressures that maintain Cuba as the U.S.A.'s national antithesis, while also preventing Cuban exile subjects from embracing a pan-Latino imaginary of U.S. belonging.

Chapter five moves to the El Paso/Juárez section of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, the physical and symbolic centre of the Chicano Benjamin Alire Sáenz's utopian quest narrative, *Carry Me Like Water* (1995). My analysis counterpoints the conditions endured by El Paso's Chicano subalterns with the middle-class aspirations of the novel's Chicano and Anglo Californians. This distinction allows me to explore a regulative but epistemologically fraught conjunction of border "door" and broadly applicable closet logics. I argue that *Carry Me Like Water* knowingly obliges its protagonists to come out into a border place of cross-

ing that guarantees neither national and identity security, nor liberty from oppression. At the same time, however, the libertarian drive is both announced and assisted by the narrative's neocultural guise as an updated fusion of the *telenovela* and the Victorian sensation narrative, here made partly magical. In Alire Sáenz's novel, as in its intertextual references, liberty is presaged by disclosed secrets and decoded signs. Nonetheless, the novel's intertextual coordinates do not seamlessly resolve the epistemological conundrums faced by its characters as they come out against a range of constraints. Specific geopolitical and transcultural materialities inevitably restrain transcendent desires. In this chapter, then, I investigate the paradox of a dream text that gathers its main players at a disciplinary border site while asking them to "disrespect" the borders of the U.S.A.

Departing from previous chapters in which I focus on a single author and text, the sixth and final chapter compares performance texts, dating from the 1990s, from the Cuban-American Coco Fusco and the Mexican-cum-Chicano Guillermo Gómez-Peña. My analysis proceeds by identifying the operations of a particular political and aesthetic mode in each artist's praxis—cultural cannibalism—understood as the rhetorical consumption of the colonizer's/oppressor's culture for subaltern ends. In *Stuff* (first performed in 1996, and published as a script in 1997) Fusco and her collaborator Nao Bustamante parodically cannibalize transnational tourist economies in which Latinas are commodified. In Fusco's video *Pochonovela* (released in 1995), she and her co-actors pose as Chicano subalterns with the aim of disrupting the circulations of damaging stereotypes. Fusco's performance criticism is notable for attempting to confront the political risks and interpretative ambivalences inherent to counter-narrative projects conducted as parody. Nonetheless, those projects at times veer close to replicating an intellectual-subaltern power differential whenever the Latino and Latina subject is represented as the base material for, and ostensible stake in, the transcultural politics Fusco espouses and the cultural mobilities she enjoys. Like Fusco, Gómez-Peña also aims to disarm dam-

aging stereotypes. However, in ‘Califas’ (a performance poem that underwent a number of generic shifts in the 1990s) and ‘The New World Border’ (a collaboration originally conceived with Fusco, but here produced with Roberto Sifuentes in the early 1990s), cannibal consumption analogizes the ever expanding, and always already gendered masculine, platform from which Gómez-Peña represents subaltern Others and remaps the American continent. As a consequence, his texts remain dependent on the cultural logics that Gómez-Peña attempts to supersede in his particular New World of transcendent promise. This chapter, then, highlights the transcultural trouble confronting Latino cultural politics when centred on the freely mobile artist or intellectual, and posed from a position within the U.S. state as a subaltern-friendly and radical counter-narrative praxis.

Chapter six does not mark the end of my analysis. Discussing some of the tensions between local and global prospects highlighted in that chapter, I present an afterword addressed from my place across *el charco pacífico*, the Pacific pond. Here I examine the 1992 Sydney Biennale, a key moment in the introduction of Latino cultural forms and debates to Australian audiences. I analyze the Biennale’s problematic use of the Australian-derived boundary rider to account for contact zones in Australia, the U.S.-Mexican Borderlands, and elsewhere. I also look at the fate of Australia in a number of equally problematic Latino uses of transcultural paradigms. The afterword highlights some of the intersectional dangers and possibilities for transcultural Latino studies—conducted in and outside the U.S.A.—generated by the worldly circulations of Latino cultural products and debates.

This book springboards from a text produced in Puerto Rico, an island with the dubious distinction of the longest formal colonial status of any territory in the world: four hundred years under Spain, one hundred odd under the United States of America. My investigation thus begins in a geopolitical space whose colonized status, demographic dispersal, and split cultural imaginations, highlight an intractable and far from straightfor-

ward problem: how is the U.S.A. to be imagined? This question is approached from different perspectives in texts set in New York, Chicago, El Paso/Juárez, California, and in trans- and post-national metaphoric spaces not necessarily detached from the U.S.A.'s governing cultural logics. The narrative trajectory enabled by these distinct settings reveals how the selected texts traffic in—reject, unsettle, reconfigure, reaffirm—the myths of U.S. sanctity, the values of U.S. cultural capital, and the pervasiveness of “American” dreams.

Inevitably, such traffic locates this study in a world of discursive circuits, risks, and disputes. Built into traffic is an evocative and unstable array of connotations: one-way, two-way, and multiple trajectories; continual shifts in speed; the stases of jams and collisions; known, familiar, and defamiliarizing ways; free-flow, intersection, and regulation; official and clandestine routes; fleeting glimpses; danger, security, and flight; driver, passenger, and pedestrian perspectives and disagreements; privileged comfort and the discomforts of the less privileged; and, different modes and means. More specifically, traffic in this book implies two entwined trajectories. First, the movements of critical modes, gendered and racialized bodies, desires, identifications, and commodities as they appear in Latino texts. And second, the transnational mechanisms of commerce, barter, and exchange in which the just-noted traffics, the narratives that explore them, and my study, are embroiled. In the light of these im/mobilities, I regard the selected Latino narratives as transcultural sites in which Latino counter-discursive ambitions and speculations are at once impelled by the U.S.A.'s conflict-ridden material realities, and modulated by its persistent dream properties.

Notes

1. Confirming Aparicio's opinion, monographs that adopted a comparative approach to Latino literary and cultural studies only began to appear in the 1990s. These include: Zimmerman (1992) and Luis (1997), two survey approaches; Sandoval-Sánchez (1999) and Arrizón (1999), both on theatre; McCracken (1999) on Latina fiction writers; Christian (1997) on fiction

drawn from many Latino sectors; and Juan Flores (2000), a study of mainland Puerto Ricans and broader Latino issues and identifications. These welcome studies take different critical positions from that pursued in this book. That said, while *Latino Dreams* joins and is indebted to the welcome trend to compare literature from multiple communities, there are still few book-length analyses that deal with narratives drawn from the largest Latino sectors. A growing number of critical monographs and anthologies also reveal a trend toward comparison in Latino literary studies. This is especially evident in feminist, queer, and performance criticism. It is manifested, as well, in discussions of Latino texts in relation to Latin American literary and critical traditions, particularly those of Mexico and the Antilles, or in relation to cultural productions from other U.S. minorities. Notable monographs include: José Saldívar (1991; 1997); Román (1998); José Esteban Muñoz (1999); and Quiroga (2001). Notable Latino-specific anthologies include: Horno-Delgado et al (1989), perhaps the first anthology of Latina cultural criticism; Ray Gonzalez (1994), Heyck (1994), and Delgado and Stefancic (1998), three surveys of fiction and criticism; Noriega and López (1996), on film and video; Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (1997), an anthology of transcultural approaches; and, Arrizón and Manzor (2000) and Fusco (2000), which combine performance texts and criticism. Three particularly useful interdisciplinary collections include: Bonilla et al (1998); Darder and Torres (1998a); and, Romero, Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Ortiz (1997). The 1990s also saw a significant number of Latino titles published in such disciplines as sociology, history, political science, economics, demography, and U.S. race, minority and ethnicity studies. To this list must be added Latino-focused journalism. This publishing record would seem to support Aparicio's observation that, in its broadest sense, the academic imaginary of Latino studies is characterized by an inevitable multidisciplinaryity.