

## The American borderlands novel

RAMÓN SALDÍVAR

Novels written from and about the borderlands go against the grain of the normative binary narrative of American race relations. While "race" in the American social and cultural context has traditionally referred to the social and legal patterns of hierarchy and domination characterizing the relations between groups of blacks and whites, the borderlands novel posits a different racial narrative. The multiracial realities characteristic of the borderlands create social structures and discourses articulating a dialogical narrative of American social life based on multiplicity, heterogeneity, and difference. Individual and national identity is created, as Charles Taylor argues, dialogically, in response to and against others.<sup>1</sup> In a multiracial context the effects of this dialogical pattern are correspondingly complex, far-reaching, and unpredictable. The formal implications of this thematic and discursive difference are not self-evident, nor have they been a part of the traditional history of the American novel. Thus, even in eras when race in American discourse meant only "black" and "white," the presence in the borderlands of Native, Latino, and Asian people required the development of different discourses to articulate the heterogeneous complexities of individual and national identity. One consequence of the disruption of binary racial thinking in the borderlands novel is a need for different hermeneutical procedures in our understanding of its themes and forms.

Another salient characteristic of American borderlands novels that follows from their discursive heterogeneity concerns the racial pattern of hierarchy and domination – evident and explicit in some texts, dispersed and implicit in others. Structures of hierarchy and domination are never represented in the borderlands novel as simply the effects of singular social, legal, or economic conditions. Instead, borderlands novels figure structures of hierarchy and domination as arising from multiple historical factors that intersect with and underwrite each other in complex ways.

Given these patterns of heterogeneity and difference in racial discourse, how do borderlands novels describe the unity of American personal and national identity? What happens if, in the attempt to define a unifying national character, we find only difference at every turn? Within difference, how can we conceive of democratic communities and shared national identities? These questions strongly affect the formation of the American borderlands novel.

In positing the unity of national identity as a process articulated by the national motto on the Great Seal of the United States, *e pluribus unum*, Americans have often misprized the relative status of the *unum* in relation to the *pluram*.<sup>2</sup> That is, the politics of national identity require the citizen's allegiance to the *one* common good, where the common good reflects the shared identity of a *plurality* of all citizens.<sup>3</sup> Consistently, however, the unique differences of individuals, compounded by their social and racial otherness, are left out of the dialogue of national identity. The borderlands novel repeatedly reminds us of the erasure of some identities within the idea of multiplicity and the instability of the relationship between the one and the many in American history. This perspective extends to how borderlands novels understand social justice. Unlike writings that assume a racial binary, borderlands novels do not posit the absence, or elimination, of any *one* kind of domination and hierarchy as the key to the creating of a just, democratic society. They require, instead, that we imagine what kind of collective dialogue would follow from the recognition and removal of multiple layers of injustice, and, more importantly, what kind of national unity would be required to encompass multiple layers of difference.

Taking these thematic features into consideration, a case can be made for defining borderlands novels in formal terms. Noting the focus on stories of human emergence as a common generic move on the part of borderlands novels, their shared interest in how history functions in relation to fiction, and how realism as a mode is often redefined in fantastic terms, I discuss how form functions as a defining characteristic of borderlands narratives. I take here the instances of three novels to show that while borderlands novels remain firmly tied to the realist tradition, the thematic issues associated with the multiracial history of the American borderlands force specific adjustments in the way that realism functions in these texts. Accordingly, Américo Paredes's *George Washington Gómez* (1935–40; 1990), Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) illustrate how the modes of the *Bildungsroman*, the historical novel, and magical realism are revised in borderlands novels to represent the processes at work in the creation of unifying national visions within the context of differential trans-American New World cultures.

Borderlands novels depict the relationships between knowledge and power, between utopian progress and dystopian dehumanization, between history and myth, and most importantly, between physical violence and the violence of language, all as involved in the process of creating a singular national identity out of a region where identities remain multiple, complex, and often contradictory. Ultimately, the formal qualities of borderlands novels deeply affect how we understand the world, raising questions about what constitutes American or any other national identity.

### The *Bildungsroman* in the borderlands: Américo Paredes, *George Washington Gómez* (1935–1940; 1990)

Américo Paredes's boy-hero, George Washington Gómez (dubbed "Guálinto" by his Spanish-speaking grandmother), represents the contradictions and limitations of the non-heroic historical position in his attempted construction of an authentic identity beyond ethnicity in the novel that bears his name.<sup>4</sup> Written between 1935 and 1940 but not published until 1990, *George Washington Gómez* addresses the central social issue of the modern era in the borderlands: the fate of the individual in relation to his communities in the process of modernization during the interwar years. The hero's story, however, emphasizes less the achievement of personal fulfillment than a representation of a nation's historical becoming. Concerned with the racialized subject's emergence into history (as the title suggests), *George Washington Gómez* is, therefore, what we might call a quintessential ethnic *Bildungsroman*, a category that Mikhail Bakhtin describes as "the novel of human emergence."<sup>5</sup>

One way in which a human being may emerge is in the complete integration of the social process with the development of the person.<sup>6</sup> In *George Washington Gómez*, Paredes gathers the historical raw material of popular memory concerning the integration of former Mexican territories into the United States after the Mexican–American War (1846–1848). This historical recollection lies at the core of Guálinto's life, and his story of emergence. Like the traditional *Bildungsroman* hero, Guálinto undergoes an education in moral choice. The narrative shows him evolving from within as he negotiates those choices that simultaneously shape his destiny and control his fictional biography.

In Paredes's ethnic version of the *Bildungsroman*, Guálinto's choice between existing norms and self-determined aesthetic ideals is ironized. Guálinto expresses his choice by embracing social practices that include the English

language, his dress, speech, eating habits, religious and cultural practices as well as the intellectual protocols of the American middle class that he hopes will define him as an assimilated American. Operating in the context of early twentieth-century American racism, however, as a racialized subject he can do so only inconclusively.<sup>7</sup> Taken together, the social practices associated with an assimilated American identity constitute a set of powerful but highly unstable conditions that give meanings to the possibility of “moral choice” that are different from what they would be in times and places not shaped by conditions of race and ethnicity. In contrast to the traditional bourgeois novel of development, Guálinto’s story of ethnic education and character formation is shaped not only by his premeditated acts of individual will but also by larger structures of race and geopolitical power. Composed earlier but published later than other borderlands novels that also focus on the hero’s moral formation, such as José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho* (1970), Tomás Rivera’s . . . *And the Earth Did Not Part* (1971), and Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Última* (1972), Paredes’s novel of emergence retrospectively sets the conditions for an understanding of ethnic and racial character formation in the borderlands novel as emergence into racial and social inequality.

In his daily interaction with Anglos, in blending into the world of American business, defense, and national security, and in his marriage with an Anglo woman, Guálinto makes what appears to be a set of reasonable moral choices in desiring to assimilate. Certainly, many middle-class Mexican Americans of the generation that came to personal and political maturity in the years of the Great Depression did choose to assimilate. Guálinto thus exemplifies how American society operates, allowing individuals to imagine broadly a spectrum of possibilities for subjective self-verification.

And yet, in narrating the parallel but ultimately different fates of Guálinto’s sisters, Carmen and Maruca, who do not have even Guálinto’s range of choices, Paredes also reflects on the limitations of self-determination for women of color in the borderlands. In the concluding sections of the novel, the sisters’ Americanization as wives, mothers, and sisters occurs in both racial and gender-specific ways. Maruca marries “a middle-aged Anglo widower” and completely disappears from family history, while Carmen settles into the anonymity of Mexican American married life. These women’s lack of alternatives render the category of “choice” problematic. May one choose to belong to a community? Who crosses its borders? In what directions may crossings proceed? Are there no mediators capable of moving across the symbolic and real borders of community, capable of creating a new hybrid, an assimilated nation of modern citizens in the transnational contact zone of

the US–Mexico borderlands? What might a fully emancipated imagination unshackled from its binding limitations and capable of resolving these formidable questions look like?

Guálinto embraces the values of the American middle class, with insidious results. He does so at the cost of a cultural, political, and historical narrative that names him as a future “leader of his people” by putting into doubt who “his people” are. His birth name, “George Washington,” becomes relevant here. How are we to imagine a new reality and articulate a new paradigm for conceiving of the multicultural politics that Guálinto intends to experience as he leaves behind his Mexican American upbringing and assimilates into white America? In what political language might our hero speak? What do the terms of political language mean in the context of subalternity and racial oppression within which his life must take shape? *George Washington Gómez* concludes with that additional set of open questions and a horizon of unresolved contradictions.

These are matters that novelists such as Helena María Viramontes in *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996), Sandra Cisneros in *Caramelo* (2003), Karen Tei Yamashita in *Tropic of Orange* (1997), and Leslie Marmon Silko in *Almanac of the Dead* would later represent more sharply. At this early moment in the history of the borderlands novel, Paredes dramatizes these open-ended questions. In doing so he reveals the constructed quality of both universal and ethnocentric consciousnesses and shows, moreover, how personal identity can bolster repressive and limiting ideologies. In his fantasies and recurring dream, Guálinto imagines a history in which, under his leadership, “Texas and the Southwest . . . remain forever Mexican.” For Guálinto in this instance, however, the possibilities of alternative histories remain only latent and repressed, situated within the anxiety resulting from the clash between history and the utopian imaginary.

Guálinto’s dreams lead to the question in the novel whether in the aftermath of the American occupation of former Mexican territory post-1848, it was possible for Mexicans to claim membership in US society, claim political and social rights, and become recognized as active citizen-agents in the labor market and the public sphere while at the same time retaining the multiple differences of their original identity. Could one imagine a *transnational* state of mind and be both Mexican and American? And what would such a state of personal affairs implied by an achieved multicultural identity have to do with the creation of a just multiracial nation and polity? Writing during the crisis of national identity occasioned by the rise of the Cold War and its ruthless choices imposed in the name of national security, by the shattering conditions

that have come to be known as postmodernity and at the time of the emergence of the late stages of post-industrial capital, Paredes looks back to mid nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history as he deliberates upon the features of the real and the imaginary in the borderlands, and leaves their resolution, signaled in the attenuated forms of daydream and fantasy, suspended in the narrative mode of contradictory emergence.

Ungessed kinships and optical democracy: Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, or *The Evening Redness in the West* (1985)

Paredes's concerns with the critical possibilities of the ethnic *Bildungsroman* are paralleled by Cormac McCarthy's explorations of the formal possibilities of the historical novel in *Blood Meridian*. McCarthy's novel follows the story of "the kid," born in Tennessee in 1833, in his experiences with Captain John Joel Glanton's gang, a historical group of scalp hunters who massacred Indians and others in the US–Mexico borderlands in 1849–1850. Paired against him is Judge Holden, a massive, hairless, powerfully demonic man, apparently also drawn from the historical record. Much of the novel is based on Glanton gang member Samuel Chamberlain's late nineteenth-century memoir, *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue*, chronicling events of mayhem on the border.<sup>8</sup> Generally true to its sources, McCarthy's novel follows the kid across the nineteenth century, from his arrival in Nacogdoches, Texas to his participation in scalp-hunting expeditions in 1849 on the newly established US–Mexico border, culminating in his apparent brutal death at the hands of the Judge in an outhouse in Griffin, Texas in 1878.

McCarthy's novel acknowledges the conflict, discord, and violence that lie at the heart of American national identity. I focus on the force of violence and of the relationship between history and fiction in *Blood Meridian* to account for McCarthy's engagement with the American Southwest as a polyglot region where history and mythology merged symbolically to justify the interests of Manifest Destiny over the claims of indigenous peoples on both sides of the border. Reading *Blood Meridian*, with its uncompromising representations of brutality and carnage, is a difficult task. In numerous scenes of ruthless atrocity, McCarthy forces the reader away from human consciousness and toward the mindless materiality of violence. McCarthy makes us ponder whether in portraying the violence committed for the sake of nation-formation in the American borderlands, he is interested in debasing all human subjectivity or only particular forms of it. Ultimately, he would have

us consider what kind of nation and democratic polity emerges from the brutal reduction of human consciousness to base materiality.

In its concern with the materiality of violence and its negation of human subjectivity, *Blood Meridian* also addresses questions of national identity. To be a citizen of a nation, an "American" or a "Mexican," for instance, is to know something about who you are and where you are but also about how, or if, you belong. National identity is thus knowledge about one's place in a community. National identity is more than just a social, legal, or psychological category, then; it is also a hermeneutic, an analytical category. As such it deeply affects how one understands the world. Life in the borderlands forces one to ask what kinds of knowledge qualify anyone as American, or any other nationality for that matter.

By working with such ideas, McCarthy forces us in *Blood Meridian* to examine the ideology of nation building. How are we to conceive democratic communities of shared provenance and common cause? What happens if, instead of a unified citizenry manifesting the destiny of a democratic organic nation we get only difference, or worse, *indifference*? What kind of democracy might the history that McCarthy displays as originary to the founding of a continental nation display? We get disquieting answers to these questions throughout *Blood Meridian* but perhaps nowhere more clearly than in this passage, concerning what the narrator refers to as the "optical democracy" of the landscape of the west:

In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships.

How, when, and why is a man like a rock? If metaphorical identities emerge from a shared proper ground between the literal and figural aspects of the metaphor (the shared qualities that make Achilles into a lion in *The Iliad*, for example), in the case of *Blood Meridian*, what is the proper ground between the figural and literal aspects of the trope that allows men and rocks to occupy "with unguessed kinships" a shared identity? It turns out to be the act of violence itself, represented by the abstracting of forged similarities of "unguessed kinship" from out of the "neuter austerity" of the differential landscapes of the southwestern borderlands. Unlike other novels of the

frontier, McCarthy's does not long for domesticity and repose.<sup>a</sup> Instead, it leaves us only with the dead weight of the past, and, in the Judge's words, the forlorn desire to build in stone "to alter the structure of the universe."

McCarthy's characters in *Blood Meridian*, in stark allusion to Psalm 91:6, rendered in the Authorized Version of the Bible (1611) as "the destruction that wasteth at noonday," wander the borderland satanically: "Spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenellated heat." The borderlands they traverse divide the very structures of human order, "leaving what had been and what would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them . . . Above all else they appeared wholly at venture, primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock . . . of Gondwanaland in a time before nomenclature was and each was all." Following these characters through the day's meridian toward the red demise of the evening lands, we are no longer with the American Adam, setting out to create order in the garden, but in a more primal epoch, one without order and "in a time before nomenclature was." This linguistic homelessness signals the desolate nature of the "optical democracy" that McCarthy envisions as the substance of the borderlands and that hints at his novel's formal innovation in its revision of the historical novel. Not content with simply capturing the contradictions and fractures of its historical sources, in *Blood Meridian* McCarthy veers toward the neutered austerity of national narratives forged in sublime brutality and predicated as a whole from nothing more than the strange equality "of a man and a rock . . . endowed with unguessed kinships." In doing so, McCarthy brings the historical novel to its limits as a form capable of capturing the economic and imaginary productive modes of its time.

Democratic landscapes: Leslie Marmon Silko,  
*Almanac of the Dead: A Novel* (1991)

*Almanac of the Dead*, like the other borderland novels discussed here, is also about the relation between history and fiction. But while those novels use the revised forms of the *Bildungsroman* and historical novel respectively to represent the borderlands, *Almanac of the Dead* does so in the different mode of magical realism in order to imagine a revolution of "the indigenous peoples of

a In her essay in this volume, chapter 31, "Imagining the frontier," Stephanie Le Menager notes that frontier novels increasingly situate violence away from the confrontation between "savagery and civilization" and "into the domestic space of the family," 525. Here and throughout her chapter, Le Menager emphasizes the violence of history-making and its role in the history-making of the American novel.

the Americas" against the European conquerors. "The Fifth World" imagined in *Almanac* is a reference to the pre-Columbian Indian belief that theirs, and ours, was a transitional time which had been preceded by four previous cosmic orders, "Suns," or world-creations. All had ended cataclysmically, as would one day the present Fifth, and last, world-creation as well.<sup>9</sup> However obscured from human perceptions the great patterns of history might be, for pre-contact Mesoamericans, "Within each Sun, time was understood as multi-dimensional and eternally recurrent," notes historian Inga Clendinnen.<sup>10</sup> Silko uses the metaphor of the "Fifth World" with its complex infolding of sequential and repeating temporalities to underscore the finite character of our own "Fifth World" and to structure the complex bundle of magical stories that will signal its demise. The utopian hope expressed in Silko's novel is that our "Fifth World" will be followed by the creation of another, "One World, Many Tribes," from the detritus of all previous universal calamities, even if the events of a new era remain problematic in their experiencing. If not entirely about the "end of history," *Almanac of the Dead* clearly contemplates the possible beginning of a new history. One of the novel's numerous characters, Angelita La Escapia, a Mexican Indian, is thus able at novel's end to muse that: "Poor Engels and Marx . . . had waited and waited, year after year, for the successful revolution until their time ran out." "Now," she proclaims, "it was up to the poorest tribal people and survivors of European genocide to show the remaining humans how all could share and live together on earth, ravished as she was."

The revolutionary history envisioned in *Almanac of the Dead* is intimately connected to particular ideas of space and social relations. Figured by the "Five Hundred Year Map" in the front pages of the novel, the new history first admits the plurality of American social relations since before Columbus. Silko's map then offers this heterogeneity as an opportunity for the remaking of history. Utopian America will not be simply a pluralist society. Silko imagines instead a "Fifth World" founded on Native American forms and motivated by a return to pre-Columbian systems of community, polity, and justice: "Native Americans acknowledge no borders; they seek nothing less than the return of all tribal lands."

Moreover, Silko's "Five Hundred Year Map" is the space of Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands, where "you are the battleground / where enemies are kin to each other; / you are at home, a stranger."<sup>11</sup> To negotiate this fabulous space will require what Walter Dignolo has called "border thinking," one of the consequences of European colonial expansion, bringing European languages, new ways of thinking about knowledge and power, into Asia,

Africa, and the Americas.<sup>12</sup> Silko's novel aspires to illustrate how the mapping of American space and the narrating of its vital social relations can generate an almanac of liberating political fantasy.

By beginning her novel with space and social relations and moving to border thinking, Silko considers the ways that material practices (of property distribution and ownership) and social relations (how ownership determines who you are and how you are regarded) are defined and limited by the very society they help create. Altering the social relations we create, Silko suggests, will also alter our relations to the physical surroundings within which we live, next to and amongst each other. In this way, the modern capitalist, liberal democratic nation-state – and its related vision of identity as autonomous, self-directed, and independent – is not the end of history but only one (deeply flawed) alternative. To undo the distortions of five hundred years of injustice and create a new conception of American identity will require an altogether different way of thinking and a wholly revised social geography.

The version of American identity that Silko imagines in *Almanac* is not, contrary to what Walter Benn Michaels suggests, simply an “ethnonationalism” founded on racial difference, which turns out to be “an ideology, not a source of identity at all.”<sup>13</sup> In his chapter in this volume, Michaels characterizes the view of the American racial system as a binary mechanism “for taking people (Slavs, Jews, Asians, whoever) and mak[ing] them white” as obviously “not true if you think of Asian Americans, not to mention Jews, as minorities.” Michaels dismisses identity factors as “neoliberal expressions” of “indifference to . . . economic inequality,” in American society, arguing instead that “What you want . . . is not to value difference but to eliminate those differences that constitute inequality.”<sup>b</sup> Who would disagree with that? But even while allowing for the post-racial framework he calls for, in which economic factors outweigh cultural ones in measuring assimilation to middle-class American life, Michaels's conception of race is too reductive to account for what happens in borderland fiction. Instead of indiscriminately and dismissively lumping all racial groups, “Slavs, Jews, Asians, whoever,” together, Silko in *Almanac* attempts something far more difficult than simply pointing out racism in America. By concentrating precisely on the differences that constitute economic inequality, such as inequalities based on land ownership and wealth distribution, she shows how racial and cultural difference work inextricably

b See Walter Benn Michaels, “Model minorities and the minority model – the neoliberal novel,” chapter 61, 1019, 1029. In the diagram that opens his chapter as elsewhere in his discussion, Michaels tends to blur the historical correlation between poverty, race, and ethnicity in American history.

with economic inequality to produce an unjust America. She thus assumes the task of imagining, in an American multiracial context, the possibility of creating equality within difference that goes beyond ethnonationalisms toward real justice and true democracy. In *Almanac* this utopian possibility is figured as a space of belonging and way of living together, that would serve as bases for the retaking of the land by the “ghost armies of the Americas leading armies of living warriors, armies of indigenous people.”

The kind of democracy that Silko offers as an alternative to Michaels's ethnonationalism and McCarthy's optical democracy emerges most clearly in the chapter titled “Mistaken Identity.” Explaining why the hunt for the fugitive Apache rebel Geronimo produced multiple Geronimos captured or killed, Old Mahawala claims that “the Apache warrior called Geronimo had been three, even four different men.” “Of course the real man they called Geronimo, they never did catch. The real Geronimo got away.” And the reason for this was that

the tribal people here were all aware that the whites put great store in names. But once the whites had a name for a thing, they seemed unable to ever again recognize the thing itself . . . To them, a “rock” was just a “rock” wherever they found it, despite obvious differences in shape, density, color, or the position of the rock relative to all things around it.

Mahawala's concern with “the thing itself,” before it has been adjusted to fit Euro-American requirements of reason and discourse, points to the particular kind of knowledge that operates in borderlands novels, forcing the issue of our basic understanding of the world and asking what kinds of knowledge qualify anyone as American or not.

McCarthy's “unguessed kinships” between a rock and a man had alluded to the violence of abstracted identities. Mahawala's concern with the relative self-identity of things (a rock is *not* just a rock but is also something uniquely situated relative to all things around it) leads in the opposite direction from McCarthy by drawing attention to the complexity that is suppressed when we look at things (and people) only in their general, abstractive qualities that can be appropriated and used. In contrast to the abstracting way of viewing the world, there is another, admittedly more difficult, way of seeing “the thing itself,” as an independent existence, all the while maintaining its portion of shared identity with kindred things. Elsewhere, another character, old Calabazas, explains: “I get mad when I hear the word *identical* . . . There is no such thing. Nowhere. At no time. All you have to do is to stop and think.” No standardization, no privileging of similarity over difference, no abstraction



of metaphor over the thing itself. In imagining the possibility for a new era beyond the conditions of domination and injustice, Silko's characters begin by asking about the conditions necessary for the creation of identity within difference, equality within strangeness.

The complex plot movements in *Almanac of the Dead* ultimately converge in an uprising led by a coalition of native people, blacks, Mexicans and Mexican Americans, homeless men, Vietnam veterans, and a Korean hacker. In representing this group, Silko emphasizes their status as outsiders and refugees. But she also suggests how contemporary global capitalism misses the potentially significant differences that survive within (and at the margins of) the transformations created by 500 years of conquest in the Americas. *Almanac of the Dead* focuses on the shared fates of the subordinate subjects and disenfranchised social groups of American modernity. Linking multiple forms of homelessness, the novel represents this outsider status as a general attribution of subordination rather than as an identity politics. The point of identity politics in *Almanac* is not, as Michaels represents it, simply to glorify difference as difference. The point is precisely to understand and counter the ways that the ruling classes maintain material structures of inequality by manipulating relations of "race, space, gender and sexuality" to enforce the difference between subalterns and elites.<sup>c</sup> Here, the marvelous quality of an imagined new reality beyond inequality requires a magical form of realism as the novel muses about what differences in our conceptions of the world emerge if we see reality itself as a relational term. In this instance, then, as Fredric Jameson has argued, magical realism is not a literary trope, but a reality which is already fantastical and represents "the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality."<sup>14</sup>

Constructing relational identity within difference leads Silko in *Almanac* to a payoff in the form of a state of affairs where multiple identities, national political cultures, and plural national collectivities may integrate into communities of shared fates without sacrificing their particularity. This way of thinking both counters the notion that "a 'rock' was just a 'rock' . . . despite obvious differences in shape, density, color, or the position of the rock relative to all things around it" and also allows for the abstraction of shared features among different things without ignoring their differences.

<sup>c</sup> Michaels, chapter 61, 1029. In the history of the novel, "magical realism" is the aesthetic innovation created precisely to represent and analyze the ideological confusions that structure the kinds of distortions in liberal and neoliberal narratives that Michaels here decries.

Angelita La Escapía can thus imagine at novel's end that "No human, individuals or corporations, no cartel of nations, could 'own' the earth; it was the earth who possessed the humans and it was the earth who disposed of them." In place of old local and national self-sufficiency and self-possession of the personal or corporate kind, we might have intercourse in every transpersonal and transnational direction with communities that do not "own" the earth but inhabit it as the provenance of their shared responsibilities to one another. *Almanac of the Dead* envisions oppositional practices and struggles that do not depend on simplistic identities, unities, or monologic representation. The novel asks us to consider instead whether it is possible to conceive of other models of identity and cultural struggle that are inclusive and expansive, and that allow for the accomplishment of a transnational "American" subject, *e pluribus unum*, without privileging the one over the many or resorting to the power of strange equalities. Such a model of relationality might hold us together in difference even as we share one another's fate in common. Silko's nonlinear, magical assembly of stories in *Almanac of the Dead* converges on forms that deliver her characters from the anxieties of 500 years of colonization while still containing that reality as a source of liberation. Only thus, she suggests, may we conceive of meaningful democratic participation in the determination of the political and cultural life of the nation and mutual deliberation about how to respond collectively to the challenges facing the communities of the Americas. By turning to a representation of the marvelous reality figured by a rejection of the unitary "identical" in favor of the "differences in shape, density, color, or the position" of a thing relative to all things around it, Silko brings the realistic mode of the borderlands novel to a climactic end.

In conclusion, what can we say are the features of the American borderlands novel? American borderlands novels are transnational; they respond to geopolitical influences outside the borders of the nation. They have as their central concern racial and economic structures of hierarchy and domination. These structures are multiple, contradictory, and cross-cutting. Borderlands novels are concerned with the place of the one (*unum*) in relation to the many (*pluram*) in multiple forms, with the individual in relation to the minority collective, or the minority person in relation to the hegemonic culture. They are not limited to one specific genre but can take shape as *Bildungsromane*, historical novels, and romances of different kinds, particularly as fantasy narratives in a modified form of magical realism.

Whatever shapes they do take, however, they respond to the tropes of difference seen in their thematics. Borderlands novels do not offer singular

answers to the questions they pose, but they do propose alternative possibilities for social and personal life, in constructing visions of collectivity, beyond ideologies of race and nation. They are concerned with a sense of belonging, with the construction of individual, family, and domestic spaces that might constitute a national homeland, distinct from narrowly circumscribed nationalisms. They are concerned with the possibilities of a future emerging from the past that is nonetheless not determined by that past. Their heroes are non-heroic – they are the children, the homeless, the outsiders of the normative world who, in striving to belong to that world, confirm its impoverishment and stake out its alternatives. And lastly, perhaps most encompassingly, American borderlands novels are concerned with identity as a product of all of the multiple processes of relationality involved in the fashioning of identity. All of these factors necessarily alter the traditional conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, the historical novel, and magical realism. Ultimately, the formal qualities of borderlands novels affect deeply how we understand the world and, more importantly, how we can change it.

## Notes

1. On Taylor's dialogic method, see Amy Guttman, "Introduction," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 7.
2. This misprision is the topic of David Foster Wallace's "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993): 151–194.
3. Guttman, "Introduction," 6.
4. On the non-heroic position, see Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 37.
5. M. M. Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman* (1934–38)," in *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 21.
6. This is the definition of the *Bildungsroman* that Walter Benjamin offers in the essay "The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," trans. Howard Eiland and Edmund Jephcott, and others, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 146–147.
7. For a fuller discussion of the contradictions of assimilation, see Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 11. Guálinto's is a classic instance of the experience of the assimilated middle classes under racist colonialism, as described by Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1998).
8. See Samuel Chamberlain, *My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1997).
9. Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortés, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993). Thomas notes that the pre-Columbian Mexico, following the calendar of the earlier Toltec civilization, had "constructed their history on a myth of eventual cataclysm": "This myth suggested that the world had already been through four eras, lit by four separate suns. The existing time, that of the Fifth Sun, would one day come to an end" (28).
10. Inga Clendinnen, *Aztecs: An Interpretation* (1993; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 36.
11. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: spinsters/aunt lute, 1987), 194.
12. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 10–11.
13. See, Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 24, 25.
14. Fredric Jameson, "Magical Narratives," in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 110. Jameson is here citing Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 193. The italics are Jameson's.