Dismemberment in the Chicana/o Body Politic: Fragmenting Nationness and Form in Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, and Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues*

Danizete Martinez

*University of New Mexico*

DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.21.04

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure

Part of the Latin American Languages and Societies Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License.

**Recommended Citation**


DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.21.04

Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol21/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Theory at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in disclosure: A Journal of Social Theory by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
Dismemberment in the Chicana/o Body Politic

Fragmenting Nationiness and Form in Oscar Zeta Acosta’s The Revolt of the Cockroach People, and Alejandro Morales’s The Rag Doll Plagues

- Danizete Martinez

Dismemberment tends to expose the social and political inscription of the human body and hence of the subject.

—Margaret E. Owens, Stages of Dismemberment

Twentieth century body studies have frequently centered on corporeal fragmentation and have attributed the phenomenon to the human psyche’s response to advancements in science, technology, and communication, and how these shifts have influenced our basic process of socialization. Jacques Lacan has referred to this as the "frailty of the ego" and ascribes it to an inevitable repercussion of entering the symbolic social order; hence, the fractured body has become a metaphor for the modern fissured psychological condition. Here, I consider how treatments of dismemberment center on the construction and deconstruction of Chicana/o nationalist discourse. I focus on the cracks of radical discourse in Acosta’s The Revolt of the Cockroach People (1973) and in the postmodern apocalyptic historiography of Morales’s The Rag Doll Plagues (1992) in order to illustrate the thematic resonance in two distinct historical moments and novelistic forms whose crises focus on violence directed towards the body and its relation to the Chicana/o body politic. These texts reveal that within each form of violence and within each instance of dismemberment there exists a differently encoded set of implications that account for the excision and extraction of the body within the larger framework of Chicana/o cultural discourse. This includes the obvious aberrations to the integrity of the physical body, as well as to discursive fragmentations that imply cracks in psychological, social, and political spheres in different moments in Chicana/o history. In these narratives, dismemberment is an enactment of violence that deconstructs pre-given notions regarding a fixed Chicana/o identity, and Acosta and Morales characterize what happens when the Mexican-American body politic.

Traditionally in twentieth-century body studies, threats to the integrity of the body begin as a threat towards individual dissolution. Helaine Posner suggests that this preponderance is the result of the cultural isolation of the individual and the following inevitability that leaves the subject vulnerable to social, political, and physical assaults that are aesthetically expressed through the dismemberment of limbs, internal organs, and bodily fluids that—when separated from their body proper—assume a subjective liminality. Oscar Zeta Acosta’s The Revolt of the Cockroach People and Alejandro Morales’s The Rag Doll Plagues demonstrate how these same threats of corporeal violence and dissolution are also present in Chicana/o literature, and point towards a shifting individual and collective cultural identity. Much as Lázaro Lima asserts in The Latino Body (2007), I also maintain that dismemberment in Chicana/o cultural production reveals critical social upheavals that indicates "a divide that fracture[s] alliances, elide[s] ethnic and racial identities, and disembodied[s] subjects from the protocols of citizenship." Two critical examples of this division in Chicana/o cultural production is evident in the nationalist and post-nationalist narratives of Acosta and Morales who treat dismemberment—resulting from autopsy and disease—as endemic of the fractured alliances that continue to suffuse the real and imagined corporeal integrity of the Chicana/o body politic.
Dismembered Ontology

The motif of dismemberment is present at the inception of Chicana/o cultural production, beginning with its pre-conquest mythology. The legend of Coyolxauhchi clearly demonstrates such violence as the Aztec Moon goddess was dismembered by her brother, the Sun god Huizilopochtli. Many Chicana feminists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga have approached the goddess’s dismemberment as an opportunity to discuss the issues of oppression and violence that have worked to repress women and sustain a patriarchal cultural dominance. In later folklore that emerged from the cultural conflicts between the United States and Mexico, the theme of bodily fragmentation is also portrayed as a powerful form of resistance, most explicitly in the legend of the California-Mexican bandit Joaquín Murieta that emerged when the first post-Mexican American War generation were becoming U.S. citizens (1848-1910). As Shelley Streety and Jesse Aleman have already successfully illustrated, The Legend of Joaquin Murieta (1854) critically engages issues of race and class in relation to American literature and national discourse. For Aleman, Murieta’s decapitation is a literal and metaphoric act that “severs the head of radical ideology from the racialized body politic and leaves it dismembered.”

The following examples enact multi-varied perspectives of a distinct Californian Chicana/o sensibility—during, and after the 1960s-1970s Chicano Movement—and reveal how dismemberment as a metaphor for cultural and individual fragmentation is key to understanding trends and fissures within this national discourse. Acosta’s and Morales’ texts demonstrate how the act of dismemberment positions Chicana/os within a tradition of resistance in Mexican-American identity politics, specifically in how Acosta looks for a revolution to reorganize the positioning of Chicanas/os within the dominant socio-economic American paradigm through protest and radical nationalism. Likewise, Morales invokes an apocalyptic vision of the future for Mexicans, Chicanas/os, and Anglo-Americans alike amidst impending ecological disaster. Through the metaphor of dismemberment, each text demonstrates the different ways racial ideology is radicalized, internalized, and rejected, and depicts a shifting national discourse that resists a static construction of collective and individual ethnic identity.

Cracks in Chicano Nationalism in Oscar Zeta Acosta’s The Revolt of the Cockroach People

The Revolt of the Cockroach People marks a significant rupture in Chicano nationalism when Acosta, a seminal figure in the Chicano Movement, finds himself actively participating in the dismemberment of his own people. Dismemberment and fragmentation are intrinsic themes in Acosta’s work and life and are vehicles for expressing his personal fissures in both Anglo-American and Chicana/o culture at large. In Lima’s discussion of politicized cultural production in the 1960s and 1970s, he points out that, “The Chicano Movement intervened in the national scene with symbolic representations of collective histories of dispossession during an age characterized by [...] scripted notions of American identity through fictions of equality, national allegiance, and the promise of political participation.” Yet, instead of supporting this idealization of collective identity (in assuming that collective histories lead to collective futures), Acosta subverts the ideology through dismemberment. His narrative contribution to the corpus delicti of Chicana/o cultural production is a discursive deconstruction of the collective idealization at the core of the Movement. By orchestrating the fictional young vato loco Robert Fernandez’s autopsy, Acosta realizes his complicity in the dismantling of the Chicana/o body and suffers a psychological dismemberment—or fragmentation—in the Lacanian sense of the word. This split ultimately leads him to reject the nationalism he was deeply committed to and forces him to reevaluate his construction of identity and his connection to the Chicana/o community.

Much has been said concerning the ambiguity of Acosta’s politics. Manuel Luis Martinez argues that while “the nationalist movimento opted for a militant and isolating separation because it no longer believed in the possibility of a transformative politics,” Acosta, who was not capable of eradicating his “Americanness,” and who sought to maintain his individuality within the larger Chicana/o community, was unable to give himself entirely over to Brown Pride and the concept of Aztlán, the mythic homeland place of the Aztecs that symbolized a hopeful Chicana/o utopia. As a discursive strategy that functioned as a counter-historical critique of U.S. master narratives, Aztlán became a unifying force for Chicano, Mexican, and recent immigrants. This singular vision allowed for a disparate community to unite and identify with a common struggle, thus constructing a monolithic ideology that was grounded in a collective identity. However, as Acosta’s narrative demonstrates, the differences among individuals and their ideas concerning constructions of the Chicano body politic were vast and subject to stresses ranging from person to person and state to state. As a result, the nationalist ideology that seduced Acosta in The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo (1972) is characterized in its dismembered form in Revolt to articulate cracks in 1960s and 1970s Chicano national discourse.

Acosta’s fragmented and scatological prose is another example of his opposition and substantiates the rascuache and the grotesque as transgressive characteristics in Chicana/o narrative. According to Tomás Ybarra-Frausto: “To be rascuache is to be down but not out [...] Very generally, rascuchismo is an underdog perspective—los de abajo—it presupposes a world view of the have nots, but it is a quality exemplified in objects and places and social comportment—it has evolved as a bicultural sensibility.” In this regard, to be rascuache is to be resourceful and successful in overcoming economic and social obstacles; it’s an attitude born out of a dignified humility of making the most with what you have and agitating the status quo. In Revolt, Acosta’s use of rascuchismo and dismemberment are written ways of linking him to his proto-Mexican self and are means of negotiating his identity. Acosta’s rascuchismo is transferred through his writing, which as Héctor Calderón notes has not always been well received for its digression, self-indulgence, and lack of structure. Indeed, Martinez has also pointed out that numerous Chicano/a scholars such as Juan Bruce-Novoa have criticized Acosta for his megalomaniacal beatnik aspirations and lack of direction. However, if we consider the radical implications his narrative style offers, his books, as Calderón suggests, can be considered a true reinvention of a new genre. His fragmented style and his reordering of his readers’ expectations is a radicalization of narrative form. Raymond A. Paredes also observes that Acosta’s hyperbolic and outrageous style is an extension of his personal excesses and paradoxes and is intended to push readers into a nihilistic and apocalyptic understanding of contemporary life. His narrative is another example of how his use of dismemberment and fragmentation reify the pluralities of Chicana/o experience, perspective, and cracks of Chicana/o nationalism.

Acosta’s cultural paradox—of admiring and resisting features of both Anglo-American and Chicana/o ideologies—motivated his political involvement and also quashed it. After realizing that he did not fit into either paradigm—neither with the Anglo-American counterculture, nor with the Chicana/o nationalists—Revolt consequently became an account of Acosta’s struggle between homogenous constructions of identity and cultural difference. As an incongruous, uneven, and protean figure, Acosta is also fragmented and dismembered from both Chicana/o and Anglo American bodies in the very same ways that his narrative
takes shape. Indeed, Acosta’s personal life reflected through his letters, poetry, college essays, unpublished manuscripts, and in the legal documents by and about him convey a fragmented life made up of many disparate parts held together by a self-consciously constructed narrative. Robert Lee comments on the various reinventions of Oscar Zeta Acosta:

There is the anarcho-libertarian Chicano raised in California’s Riverbank/Modesto and who makes his name as a Legal Aid lawyer in Oakland and Los Angeles after qualifying in San Francisco in 1966. There is the Airforce enlistee who, on being sent to Panama, becomes a Pentecostal convert and missionary there (1949-52) before opting for apostasy and a return to California. There is the jailer in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, in 1968, forced to argue in local court for his own interests in uncertain street Spanish (or calo) after a spat with a hotelkeeper. Finally, there is the Oscar of the barricades, the belligerent lawyer of the schools and St. Basil’s protest in 1968. This is the “buffalo” who becomes La Raza Unida independent candidate for Sheriff of Los Angeles in 1970, who regularly affirms his first allegiance by signing himself “Oscar Zeta Acosta, Chicano lawyer” and who finally leaves for Mexico in despair, madness even, at the internal divisions of Chicano politics. 17

The tension of trying to control, or rather repress parts of Acosta’s disparate personality erupts in the novel when he witnesses the autopsy of Robert Fernandez, who died under suspicious circumstances while being held in custody of the Los Angeles Sheriff’s department. Fernandez is a seventeen-year-old Chicano with a long history of drug addiction and trouble with the law. To Acosta, Fernandez signifies the historical consequences of sustained paradigmatic racism: “The nato leon has been fighting with the pig since the Anglos stole his land in the last century. He will continue to fight until he is exterminated.” 18 In this case, his body is dismembered to mirror divisions within the Chicana/o body politic and fissures fraying a unified national discourse, echoing social conditions that have a historical grounding with Joaquin Murieta, the Mexican folk hero who eluded the Texas Rangers. In addition to his dismemberment, fragmentation emerges in political implications in that Fernandez’s death alienates Acosta from the Movement.

Acosta’s association with Fernandez and his family is book-ended by the rise and fall of Acosta’s identification with a singular Chicana/o nationalism. Before Fernandez’s family approached Acosta for legal guidance, he and one hundred others had gathered to protest the arrest of twenty-one Chicanos and Chicanas at the St. Basil Church the day before. Acosta experienced Chicana/o nationalism at its height and embraced the spirit of community by collectively resisting racial, economic, and educational prejudice. Unlike in Brown Buffalo where Acosta is investigating his hyphenated identity and feeling outcast from both sides of the Anglo and Chicana/o culture, his initial involvement with the movement gestates in Revolt within a subversive space of protest that he has collaboratively created. Though the Fernandez family does not actively participate in Chicana/o militant politics, they identify Acosta as a fellow Mexican American willing to hear their story and help them face the Los Angeles Police Department. They believe that Fernandez did not commit suicide as the sheriff’s department claimed, but that he was murdered and that the crime was covered up by the authorities. Supported and held in high esteem by the Chicana/o community, Acosta is confident that the judicial system will crack under pressure, and requests for the exhumation of Fernandez’s body and for another autopsy to take place where Acosta himself will be present.

An autopsy is supposed to be a systematic procedure that must be performed without emotions, distaste, or sentimentality in order for the pathologist to discover the events and circumstances that led to his or her demise: “The dead body on the table is many things: a testimonial to a failure of the healing arts; a testimonial to the violence humans inflict upon one another or upon themselves; and concrete evidence of our mortality.” 19 However, the debacle of Fernandez’s autopsy does little to relate the circumstances of the victim’s death; rather, it becomes a symbolic psychological dissection of Acosta. As the most salient grotesque scene in the novel, the autopsy represents not only the dismembering of Fernandez’s body, but the severing of Acosta’s identity politics and the institutional dismembering of the Chicana/o body. The stress of the situation and his political disillusionment leads to Acosta’s political disassociation with Chicana/o nationalism and triggers an internal psychological split: he is unable to live up to the stereotype of the underdog hero that he has created for himself. Witnessing the heap of butchered bodies foreshadows the horror of Fernandez’s autopsy and Acosta’s own complicity in the violence: “I look around at these men in the room. Seven experts, Dr. Naguchi and a Chinese doctor from his staff, the orderly and a man from the Sheriff’s…they want me, a Chicano lawyer, to tell them where to begin. They want me to direct them. It is too fantastic to take seriously: ‘How about this? Can you look there?’ I point to the left cheek.” 20 Fernandez’s autopsy also represents Acosta’s personal and political dismemberment from a discourse that fails to include individuals on the fringe of society like Fernandez and Acosta:

Naked bodies are stretched out on [hospital carts]. Bodies of red and purple meat; bodies of men with white skin gone yellow; bodies of black men with blood over torn faces. This one has an arm missing. The stub is tied off with plastic string. The red-headed woman with full breasts? Someone has ripped the right ear from her head. The genitals of that spade are packed with towels. Look at it! The blood is still gurgling. There, an old wino, his legs crushed, mangled, gone to mere meat. 21

For Julia Kristeva, the corpse is a sign of abjection, and its defilement a rupture of primal repression. Abjection shares the same interstitial realm with the severely injured body in that both represent the improper, unclean, and disruptive moments in our dominant systems of order that are often signaled by haunting representations of the Other. They are both presences that avoid assimilation yet cannot be gotten rid of. She reminds us, as does Freud, that primitive societies sanctioned a space for the abject and taboo as a reminder of unknown universal forces: “The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animality, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder.” 22 As a rupture of primal repression, abjection takes on the negative qualities of psychological fragmentation that are sinister, scheming, shady, perverse, corruptive, lawless, and immoral. Kristeva maintains that the corpse, then, is the utmost manifestation of abjection: “It is death infecting life.” Likewise, in this scene Acosta wields the disembodied corpse of Fernandez to represent the subjugated institutionalized body of the Chicana/o subject.

With Acosta’s complicity in Fernandez’ autopsy—a literal dissection of the brown body—he is enacting this same search for truth about himself and his role in the Chicana/o community, and as they hack away at the corpse he feverishly gets caught up in the violence and with horror realizes his participation in the dismemberment of his own people:

And when it is done, there is no more Robert. Oh, sure, they put the head back in the place. They sew it up as best as they can. But there is no part of the body that I have not ordered chopped. I, who am so good and deserving of love. Yes, me, the
big choy! I, Mr. Buffalo Z. Brown. Me, I ordered those white men to cut up the brown body of that Chicano boy, just another expendable Cockroach. 23

Elizabeth Klaver points out that according to Western epistemology, the cutting up and literal and visual representation of the dead body is a culturally constructed act for self-knowledge. 24 This she likens to the act of autopsy that Michel Foucault has identified as seeking a “residence of truth in the dark centre of things.” 25 As a major figure in the Chicano Movement, Acosta finds himself actively participating in the dismemberment of his own people and he betrays the inefficacy of its political purpose. He recognizes his complicity with members of the group that symbolically represent the dominant order systematically oppressing Chicana/o civil rights. Furthermore, Acosta realizes that he will never be able to completely escape the cultural bifurcation—the splitting of Mexican and American identities—that has haunted him throughout his life.

In the novel, revolt is initially expressed in Acosta’s involvement with the Chicana/o rebellion against the dominant Anglo paradigm, but after Acosta’s psychological breakdown over his irrecconcilable hyphenated-self, Acosta revolts against narrow nationalist identity politics. Fernandez’s autopsy symbolically enacts a severing of the Chicana/o political body and illustrates Acosta’s psychological dismemberment. After Fernandez’s case is again ruled as a suicide and dismissed by the court, Acosta’s internal struggle comes to a head and he begins to demonstrate ruptures in Chicana/o nationalist ideology by pulling movidas and inciting rebellion. The first instance occurs when he and his militant friend, Gilbert, bomb a local Safeway in support of the United Farm Workers, and later when Acosta is alone and bombs the courthouse killing a fellow Chicano. His disillusionment with the Chicano Movement culminates in a massive cultural severing and his narrative demonstrates the limitations monolithic or one-dimensional identities impose on his sense of individuality. Dismemberment in Acosta’s novel signifies ruptures in monolithic identity politics, anticipated radical shifts in Chicana/o identity politics, and also forged new paths in Chicana/o cultural production that acknowledged and celebrated the erratic and incongruous driving forces punctuating a cultural schizophrenia. Acosta’s split from a rigid set of Chicana/o identity politics that marks the height of the Movement signals a trend in Chicana/o discourse and literary production that privileges essentialized, or stereotypical, depictions of ethnic identity. After he realizes that the inherent fragmentation within the movement is also consonant with individual Chicana/o identity, he cannot accept a national discourse that—to him—ignored these complexities and projected a singular image that was limited in scope and essentially negated the dynamism that predicated this ideology.

Apocalyptic Energies in The Rag Doll Plagues

In an interview with Frederick Luis Aldama, Morales states that his writing is not apocalyptic; rather that it contains two major apocalyptic energies of deconstruction and creation. 26 This statement underscores the same cultural tensions at play in Acosta’s story; yet in The Rag Doll Plagues, Morales uses dismemberment as a reaction to disease in order to demonstrate violence done to the brown body, whereas in Acosta’s case, it is a social disease that leads to a cultural severing. Morales shows us that the same social tensions that pervaded Acosta’s time and novel—perhaps slightly occluded by a more politically correct discourse—and the have-nots in New Spain renders the wealth in obscene decadence while the poor are diseased and living in filth. Dr. Gregorio Revueltas is sent from the majesty of Spain in 1788 to attend to an epidemic that is quickly infiltrating Mexico’s center from its periphery. The areas where death is highest are inhabited by the poor who are unable to afford and implement basic preventive measures that would stave off infection. As the disease progresses and adds to their squalor, it subsequently infects the judgment of its victims, and further alienates them from the ruling class:

As we passed the Palace of the Inquisition, men and women squatted facing each other and deposited excrement and urine into the canal that ran down the center of the street. As they met their human needs, they conversed with ease and cordiality. Upon finishing, they simply raised their garment and walked away. They had no paper nor cloth to practice anal hygiene. It was cleaner to defecate and stand than to employ your hand to wipe away the clinging or watery excess. Nonetheless, many adults and children did use their hands. The windows of the houses along this street were tightly closed in a desperate attempt to keep out the gases of decaying animal and human waste.

Immediately before the carriage, a window suddenly opened. Without warning, a pile of excrement and urine was tossed out. At many points, the drainage ditch running down the middle of the street was clogged with the manure and urine from animals and human beings. Paddles formed in which to [Gregorio’s] absolute consternation [he] observed children playing happily. When a cart would roll through the puddles, its wheels stirred up an intolerable rankness. 28

In addition to their lack of hygiene, Gregorio witnesses adults and children giving themselves freely over to sexual degeneracy: young men are sodomizing young boys; a scantily clad woman is openly performing fellatio while others look on; a few men, women, and children are cleansing their genitalia with water from the dirty ditch; and children are offering to masturbate Gregorio. The people’s vulnerability to the disease is reiterated in the ways that they perform as a community. No one is safe from contamination, and the people of Mexico have taken to their own defenses. They refuse the established social paradigms and resort to...
carnival behavior, and by rejecting the social expectations of good conduct, the poor and diseased sever themselves from hegemonic control.

Dismemberment is also enacted through environmental racism and its relation to the body politic. *La Mona* is a result of pervasive race relations between the Spanish and indigenous populations that is perpetuated through empirical discourse and the exploitation of the native body. María Herrera-Sobek notes in “Epidemics, Epistemophilia, and Racism: Ecological Literary Criticism and The Rag Doll Plague” (1995) that the degenerative environment is a direct result of racial inequality and empirical discourse. The corporeal exploitation is twofold in the Spaniards’ greedy overdevelopment and urbanization of Mexican land, and in their treatment of the natives as beasts of burden who literally carry them across the river on their shoulders and bear the burden of their exploits. As an epidemic that originated in the periphery of Mexico City and soon made its way to the center, *La Mona* grows to become an apocalyptic force that is blind to race and class differences and destabilizes the oppressive ideology of the ruling class. The galvanizing remains of the colonized and colonizers—“stockings of skin, grotesquely swollen, reddish blood as is sausage”—are physical reminders of the pernicious consequences of ambiguous constructions of race and power.

Violence to bodily integrity is also enacted through aggressive and freakish amputation intended to stave off infection. This method, however, is only a temporary treatment and can only slow the deterioration. It gives patients—at most—nine months to a year more to live. All victims, Spanish and indigenous alike, are forced into an interstitial state where the uncertain conditions of their existence mirror the future of empire as well as the constructions of class and race that sustained its ruling power. And like Acosta who also internalizes an ambiguous national discourse, Gregorio becomes instrumental in the severing of the ethnic body:

> The pungent smell of vinegar made my eyes tear. I counted twenty-five cadavers on the tables in a room occupied by nine students. We moved closer to watch the two men perform the amputation of the left arm of the female cadaver. Carefully they severed through the *muscula pectoralis major* and sliced down to the humerus bone. The surgeons then cut around the bone and sawed the arm off. The procedure took about an hour. The *arteria* and the *nervae* were knotted and the wound dressed. Father Antonio congratulated his joyful apprentices for the precise surgery accomplished. The two men were excused. The younger one handed me his scalpel.

This scene represents how a fragmented nationalism is a cultural event in Mexican history: present is Father Jude, Gregorio’s personal assistant who represents the indigenous part of Mexican culture; Gregorio, who represents a European imperial presence; and Father Antonio and his cohorts who represent the assimilated aspect of Mexico that adheres to Western rather than traditional medicine. Here, three different facets of Mexican culture collectively participate in the mutilation of the Mexican body, and while Father Jude’s lacerated face testifies to how the dismemberment functioned in Mexico’s past, Father Antonio’s generation of mixed Mexican natives and Spanish émigrés signals the critical role of mestizaje in Mexico’s future.

Gregorio’s nationalistic sympathies begin to diminish after he begins performing amputations on his patients and comes to identify himself with Mexico rather than with Old Spain. Gregorio’s decision to align himself with Mexico is another implication of the crumbling of empire. Set at the brink of Mexico’s nationhood and within the historical context of the French Revolution, severing in the beginning of *The Rag Doll Plague* also marks Mexico’s separation from Spanish empire. Book One closes with a sense of optimism for the future of Mexico as Gregorio reflects:

> I labored for a better world, a better Mexico for Mónica Marisela. I sensed a new attitude toward life grow within the people. University and students conversed about freedom and equality, about rationalism and liberalism. Intellectuals declared that human beings should no longer be oppressed by the trinity of the king, the priest and the landed aristocrat. They proclaimed that governments should be based on the consent of the people, that religion should be a private matter, that society should no longer be divided into hereditary classes, that a person should rise as high as talent would carry him. These ideas soon circulated amongst folk. In the streets, in churches, in taverns, I heard the people discuss the future of their country.

Dismemberment through amputation in “Mexico City” is depicted as a conduit of growth, a manifestation of what Mikhail Bakhtin identifies as the essence of principal growth, “a catalyst for radical change. This is also an example of what Morales himself has termed an apocalyptic energy of creation that is necessary in the process of moving forward.” Indeed, we do see that as internal political relations in Mexico improve, so do the social and environmental conditions, but not until after *La Mona* takes full course. In its manifestation of our basic primal fears of otherness and death, *The Rag Doll Plague* illustrates how the dismemberment and destruction is an integral part of the life cycle.

Book Two: Delhi takes place in the present, and similar to the preceding and final sections of the novel, it also intertwines issues of disease, plague, racism, and class conflict throughout the narrative. Here, however, ecological concerns are expressed through the threat of the AIDS virus and its effects on Gregorio’s girlfriend as well as on the relations between the Anglo and Chicana/o communities. In his discussion of AIDS in Elias Miguel Muñoz’s *The Greatest Performance*, Lima acutely observes, “the issue of writing is a contestatory and transgressive practice in the age of AIDS, and the forms of cultural amnesia it attempts to destroy.” In this middle section of the novel, the infected individual is not only brown and poor—but rather Gregorio’s Anglo and privileged girlfriend who experiences social stigmatization from the disease and turns to the Chicana/o body for support and sense of community. Disease and dismemberment in this section operates as a precursor for the destructive outcomes in the books conclusion.

While “Mexico City” ends with some semblance of hope, the aggressiveness of disease and racism in “Delhi” foreshadows deteriorating race relations for the rest of the novel where dismemberment is a future projection of unresolved tensions between national and post-national identity politics within the Chicana/o body. Set approximately in 2000, race relations, class divisions, and border identity in “LAMEX” have grown more complicated since “Mexico”; it concludes with deteriorating race relations between Anglos, Mexicans, and Mexican-Americans in the U.S. The fragmented Chicana/o body, manifested in themes of mutability and life on the desert border, underscores fears about a future humanity that privileges hyper-capitalism and homogeneity over traditional values and subjective identity.

Doctor Gregory Revuelta, a third incarnation of the two central characters in the previous chapters, is involved with a bio-political regime that is trying to control raging epidemics that are plaguing the LAMEX region and are the results of the ecological damage done to the earth. Just as AIDS and cancer threatened earlier populations, an entirely new set of environmental concerns has also brought about a new threat of mutable and spontaneous diseases. Gregory and his partner/lover Gabi Chung are assigned to the LLE region to
investigate a spontaneous virus that has killed over 500 individuals. While race and class divisions are pronounced in "LAMEX," Gregory finds a cure that transcends race, class, gender, and age and is inherent in the Mexicans whose blood has been genetically mutated to survive the devastating ecological effects that have transpired in the last hundred years. Gregory's discovery has deleterious effects on his community: Mexicans are commodified for their blood and become a status symbol for middle and upper-class Anglos, inflaming the notion of Mexicans as objects of desire, hatred, exploitation, and subjugation. In the end, Morales renders a pessimistic view of race relations between Anglos, Mexicans, and Mexican-Americans in the U.S. and reconsiders how issues of alterity in the future are subject to the abuses of mankind and the loss of humanity.  

This is clearly expressed in the hybrid robotic-human form that Gregory's colleagues—like Gabi—are assuming. The body in this hybridized state depicts the diversity of Chicana/o identity and stresses the threat that an over-reliance on technology and mechanization has on a global level. Gabi willingly has her arm amputated and replaced with an artificial one to increase her work production, advance in her field, and gain job security. While her productivity initially increases, her body eventually rejects the "new" arm as Gabi succumbs to greed and corruption. The correlation between Gabi's decaying body and her moral degeneracy connects her to the destructive forces of La Mora. In this regard, Morales is doing something unique with dismemberment in that his narrative posits disease and disability as a consequence of failing humanism, namely due to the main characters' greed and ambition. Gabi sacrifices part of her body and her humanity to fulfill personal ambition. In her willingness to sacrifice her humanity she negates her authentic self and selfishly comes to symbolize the dangers of capitalism and the erasure of the subjective identity in an exploitive labor system. Gabi becomes a broken and subjugated body not only because of what she has lost, but more importantly because of what she has become—an apparatus to a bigger machine intent on controlling humanity, or more fittingly, an apotheosis of a Big Brother and postmodern crisis.

In this sense, my interpretation of Gabi's roboticism is similar to Donna Haraway's approximation of the cyborg that represents "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive peoples might explore as one part of needed political work." And yet, while cyborg imagery can, as Haraway suggests, show us "a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves," it fails to do this in Morales' narrative. Instead of symbolically representing a synthesis of cultured, gendered, and political hybridities, Gabi stands as a composite of our psychological and cultural monsters—America's perception/projection of Otherness in the form of what the performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Peña identifies as the "ethno-cyborg." Gabi's faith in an artificial value system is in direct opposition to Gregory's traditional values. Gregory, unwilling to undergo dismemberment for fear of how it will haunt him, is a proponent of basic humanism. His self-awareness and appreciation of his ancestry are extensions of his holistic attitude that literally and metaphorically saves him from dismemberment as medical director of the Los Angeles Mexico City Health Corridor: "I would not allow myself to be carved up and shaped into what the Directorate considered a model optimum efficient doctor. Voices from the past and present warned me not to allow them to deconstruct my humanity." Unlike Gabi, he views the elective amputation as a direct threat to his identity and considers it an explicit method of oppression by the dominant ruling class. While the methods for dismemberment have changed with technological advancement, the act retains the same metaphoric degree of violence done to the body and places the amputee in a liminal position. Morales likens this ambiguous bearing to what Foucault terms as "Heterotopia": "disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the heteroclite...in such a state, things are laid, placed, arranged in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to find a place of residence for them." For Morales, this interstitial—or bordered—positioning becomes an opportunity to explore a deterritorialized consciousness within the Chicana/o identity; it is simultaneously a negation and investigation of essentialist ideologies that have shaped Chicana/o post-nationalism, as well as a consideration of how these tensions will take shape in the future. This ambiguous positioning also helps us understand Morales' narration of the ethnic body. Manuel Martín-Rodriguez suggests that "Chicanas/os are a hybrid in mutation, rather than a static essence" and that racial survival in The Rag Doll Plagues is portrayed in the coming together of different worlds and not in the preservation of unchanged traditions and customs, but rather in transformation and adaptation. While dismemberment in The Rag Doll Plagues is enacted through the metaphor of dismemberment to demonstrate fissured race relations, it also functions as a paradigm for re-evaluating a more flexible understanding of Chicana/o identity politics—one that avoids positing Chicanas/os as a finished cultural product, and rather strives to implement a new radical consciousness that embraces the idea of internal differences and constant growth.

Crisis and Capitulation

In Body Work, Peter Brooks investigates the ways in which natural bodies are marked, organized, and produced as cultural artifacts. He considers how the body is constructed in modern narratives and, in turn, comes to signify the totality of the mind and language: "the body furnishes the building blocks of civilization, and eventually of language itself, which then takes us away from the body, but always in a tension that reminds us that the mind and language need to recover the body, as an otherness that is somehow primary to their very definition." He notes that while earlier narrative views of the body demonstrate a more unified sensibility about the body and its functions—particularly in the world-turned-upside-down Renaissance carnival traditions captured by Rabelais—the body in modern literature has become problematic. Fragmented representations of the body in Chicana/o cultural production exemplify this.

In an ironic rendering, the disorganization of the representative bodies in The Result of the Cockroach People and The Rag Doll Plagues illustrates Homi Bhabha's conception of nation and nationlessness as "the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity." The fragmented body in these texts that deal with Chicana/o nationalism echo Bhabha's and Edward Said's assertions that modern social cohesion is a myth and that there is "no single explanation sending one back immediately to a single origin [...] just as there are no simple discrete formations or social processes." Indeed, the discursive implications of dismemberment in Chicana/o cultural production appear to be fragmented from its inception as pre-contact mythology demonstrates. In The Latino Body, Lima asserts that the narrative treatment of the "Latino subject" is conditioned by circumstances resulting from a sense of crisis and "call attention to the cultural manifestations of historical conflict that have resulted in publicly rendered and redressed modes of being both American and Latino [...] Crisis identities are therefore always grounded in the recognition of a capitulation that seeks an explanation or resolution in and through narrative." In Acosta's and Morales's stories, their crises of dismemberment both succeed and fail in explaining and resolving violence done to the Chicana/o body. They successfully illustrate the tensions leading up to their moments of crises and demonstrate the necessity of considering their cultural implications, but it is only through the narrative, the act of telling the story, that they hint at a discursive resolution.
And yet, there is no clear resolution in either novels; however, great possibility resounds within these narrative cracks and overall theme of fragmentation. In the larger sense, to dismember refers to partitioning or dividing something, and to disembowel means to “separate or “free” something from its concrete form. While these sundered forms perform as allegorical fissured representations of the Chicana/o body politic, these disembodiments more importantly document the discursive evolution from a rigid set of identity politics to a more heterogeneous, flexible, and thus creative understanding and acceptance of the contemporary Chicana/o identity and cultural production. If we consider the root resolver to mean “loosen,” or “release,” Acosta’s and Morales’s disembemment and disembowel signify the cathartic and constructive possibilities of fragmentation in political, cultural, and social discourse.

Notes:


3. Margaret E. Owens, Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 12. Margaret Owens argues, “A fascination with corporeal disintegration may very well constitute one of the few foundational and cross-cultural features of humanity. Fears about bodily integrity, after all, are metonymic for a fear of death, an undeniable universality” (12).

4. Implicit in Ridge’s description of Murieta’s life and death is an inherent fragmentation in his personal and cultural assumptions, and also among his own people, who, after he is killed, are left leaderless and displaced. In effect, Murieta is an embodiment of all of the U.S. Southwest that was severed from Mexico, and his sundered form parallels the way people of Mexican descent were generally received by the dominant Anglo-American culture.


6. Jesse Aleman further argues that Murieta’s decapitation is still very present in current Chicana/o literature. While Murieta is heroicized for his defiance towards dominant Anglo-American law and society and signifies early Mexican-American protest, his decapitation also shows how Murieta is a relevant embodiment of Chicana/o history. In addition, he is also a projection of future cultural fragmentation within the Chicana/o community. Jesse Aleman, “Assimilation and the Decapitated Body Politic in The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta,” Arizona Quarterly 60, no.1 (2004): 74.


8. Ibid., 63.

9. In “Reading the Corpus Delicti” in The Latino Body, Lima analyzes Tomás Rivera’s...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him (1971) as one of “the most important texts written and recovered before the civil rights apogee of the 1960s and 1970s” (17). In my view, Acosta’s Result is connected—and indeed indebted—to this body.

10. Manuel Luis Martinez, Countering the Counterstereotype: Rereading postwar Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 173.


12. As Ilan Stavans outs it, “He is, was, and will always be considered by the Anglo bourgeoisie as vulgar, inferior, undeserving, tasteless, of low quality. Mexico and without hope. Rascuache is a sine qua non term to describe his idiosyncratic attitude [...] Zeta is muy pero muy rascuache: the limit, an extreme. Ilan Stavans, Bandito: The Death and Resurrection of Oscar “Zeta” Acosta (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 5-6.

13. Stavans writes: “Read attentively, every single piece of fiction and autobiography by Zeta has him as the sole protagonist. Both his published books are about his heroic adventures, and the last book he was drafting before his death also deals with his own ego. He used literature to investigate his duality, his hyphenated self” (Ibid, 60).

14. Manuel Luis Martinez, Countering the Counterstereotype: Rereading postwar Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 150.


19. Ibid., 3.


29. Ibid., 28.


32. Ibid., 38.


38. Ibid., 107.

39. This same metaphor of pervasive hyper-mechanization can also be applied to the U.S. policies aimed towards Mexican immigrants and border policies. See Priewe (405).


41. Ibid., 181.

42. Alejandro Morales, The Rag Doll Plague (Houston: Arte Público, 1992),143.


Works Cited:


Wild minds searching
earlier scholars groping in the gap

- Joy Denise Scott and Jane Grellier

JOY
This paper builds on an earlier co-constructed narrative (Grellier and Scott 2009), in which Jane and I articulate our struggle as beginning researchers seeking to become authentic, ethical auto-ethnographers. A year later, we find ourselves as ‘in-betweeners’ groping in the gap between self and other, and seeking to understand its nature and our positionalities in this space.

JANE
The two of us wrote Anti-Oedipus together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3)

The writings of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), particularly their concept of rhizomes, provide strong frames for the work that Joy and I do, both together and separately. We each choose to speak in a range of voices – the voice of the academic, the student, the teacher, the art curator, the wild explorer, the reflector, the life story writer, and so on – which we see as equally valid and valuable. We also evoke other people’s voices, both verbal and visual, interweaving them all in our exploration. For these reasons we choose to label our own voices throughout this piece, rather than to try to create a disembodied voice that speaks for both of us – both and neither. Sometimes we engage in dialogue; at others a series of interweaved monologues.

In this paper Joy and I refer from time to time to our separate, ongoing auto-ethnographic projects, as we grope our way to a deeper, richer understanding of the self-other relationship. My research involves working with first-year student participants at Curtin University, listening to their voices as they reflect on their learning experiences in their early months in the institution. I also coordinate the first-year Communications Program in the Faculty of Humanities at Curtin, which provides credit-bearing compulsory units in communications (labelled in other universities as Composition, Rhetoric or Academic Literacy programs) to a range of first-year students outside the school to which I belong. While much of the writing I am currently doing centres on the students’ voices, my own voices as teacher, researcher, student and member of the institution are more central in this co-written paper.

The image that underpins my auto-ethnographic writing is that of a choral cacophony, blending with and cutting across my own voices.

JOY
For me the image is one of undertaking embroidery as a form of ritual. Ritual as the craft of writing – to word stitch the multiple threads of lived experience to create new ways of thinking and being and challenging the binary constructs of eastern and western.

Ritual as a solitary pursuit – embroidering a space for self-reflection.
Ritual as cultural learning – a novice involved in a performance of intercultural translation.