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**Exiles, Migrants, Settlers, and Natives:  
Literary Representations of Chicano/as  
and Mexicans in the Midwest**

*by Theresa Delgadillo  
University of California - Los Angeles*

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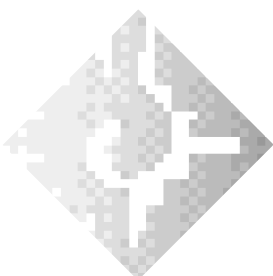
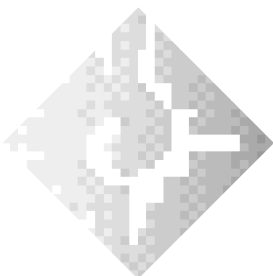
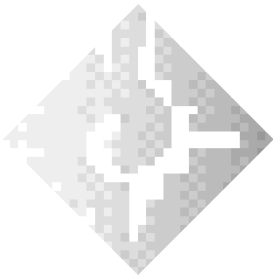
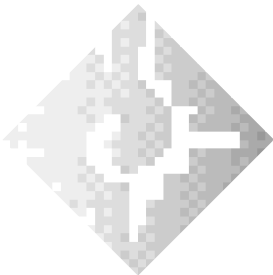
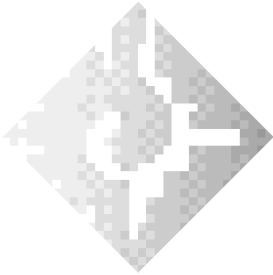
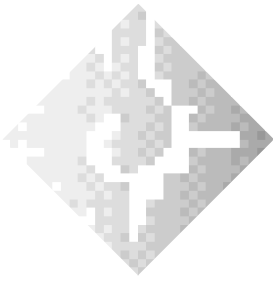


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# **Exiles, Migrants, Settlers, and Natives: Literary Representations of Chicano/as and Mexicans in the Midwest**

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**Abstract:** Since the Chicano/a cultural renaissance of the 1960's and 1970's, the Midwestern United States has emerged as a geographical reality in Chicano/a literature, sometimes merely as a common destination for Chicano/as seeking work, but more and more often as a site of vibrant Chicano/a communities. This paper examines the divergent perspectives and attitudes in this literature toward the Midwest, and toward Chicano/as and Mexicans who have made their homes there. The first section examines texts by Pat Mora, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and Wendell Mayo, focusing on the ways in which these texts offer the Southwest as the true Chicano/a homeland and suggest that the experience of Chicano/as in the Midwest is one of exile and isolation. The second part of this paper discusses texts by Tomás Rivera, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and Hugo Martínez-Serros, and explores representations of transnational and heterogenous communities of Chicano/as and Mexicans in the Midwest. This analysis reveals the limitations of a conception of Aztlán narrowly associated with the Southwest, and suggests that the complexities of Chicano/a identity demand greater attention to the diversity of regions in which Chicano/as live and work.

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Theresa Delgadillo is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. Familiar with both regions she discusses in this paper, Delgadillo grew up in Wisconsin and has lived in the Southwest for 10 years. She has published essays in *Studies in American Indian Literatures* and *Modern Fiction Studies*. She earned a M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Arizona State University. Her short stories appear in the collection *Southwestern Women: New Voices* and *VOCES: A Journal of Chicana/Latina Studies*. Currently she is working on her dissertation, titled "Hybrid Spiritualities: Resistance and Religious Faith in Contemporary Chicano/a Cultural Production."

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# Exiles, Migrants, Settlers, and Natives: Literary Representations of Chicano/as and Mexicans in the Midwest

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The Julian Samora Research Institute is the Midwest's premier policy research and outreach center to the Hispanic community. The Institute's mission includes:

- *Generation of a program of research and evaluation to examine the social, economic, educational, and political condition of Latino communities.*
- *Transmission of research findings to academic institutions, government officials, community leaders, and private sector executives through publications, public policy seminars, workshops, and consultations.*
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- *Development of Latino faculty, including support for the development of curriculum and scholarship for Chicano/Latino Studies.*

# Exiles, Migrants, Settlers, and Natives: Literary Representations of Chicano/as and Mexicans in the Midwest

## Introduction

Since the Chicano/a cultural renaissance of the 1960's and 1970's, the Midwestern United States has emerged as a geographical reality in Chicano/a literature, sometimes merely as a common destination for Chicano/as seeking work, but more and more often as a site of vibrant Chicano/a communities. This paper examines the divergent perspectives and attitudes in this literature toward the Midwest, and toward Chicano/as and Mexicans who have made their homes there. Literature often explores the intersection between place and identity, but the case of contemporary Chicano/a literature presents a unique situation because this body of work arises simultaneously with the articulation of a Chicano/a identity almost exclusively associated with the Southwest and often encapsulated in the term *Aztlán*.

A conception that grew out of the Chicano/a Movement, *Aztlán* has alternately been described as an actual place (the U.S. Southwest), a cultural umbrella uniting all Chicano/as, and a spiritual state or "something that is carried within the heart" (Leal, 1989). "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán," which was written in 1969 and became a founding document of the Chicano/a Movement, expresses all three positions. Its program of action asserts that "land rightfully ours will be fought for and defended" (Anaya and Lomelí, 2). The 60's and 70's claim to the Southwest as the original Chicano/a homeland, territory traditionally inhabited by Indian and Mexican peoples was, and remains, a key historical and political argument against efforts to relegate Chicano/as to the status of outsiders or unwelcome immigrants. Unfortunately, however, the Chicano/a nationalism that fueled and was fueled by the movement of resistance to marginalization often also tended to exaggerate cultural homogeneity and to enshrine the Southwest as the sole site of Chicano/a unity.

Several of the texts I will examine pursue a vision of Chicano/a identity inextricably linked to the Southwest. Obviously, such a perspective is rooted in the experience of the large portion of the Chicano/a population that makes its home in the Southwest. But in these texts, the recognition of a

Southwestern-based Chicano/a identity takes place against the backdrop of the Midwest. They suggest that Chicano/as and Mexicans in the Midwest are lost, not because they are no longer in Mexico – a condition that Chicano/as and Mexicans in both the Midwest and Southwest share – but because they live far from the Southwest. These texts thereby imply that Chicano/as have an authentic home only in the Southwest, often equating the Midwest with exile, isolation, alienation, and assimilation.

Daniel Cooper Alarcón argues in *The Aztec Palimpsest* (1997) that recent work by Chicano/a scholars has expanded and complicated our understanding of heterogeneity in Chicano/a cultural identity. In contrast to the unitary view of Chicano/a life and culture that the nationalism of the 60's and 70's offered, he urges a "critical paradigm for Chicano/a cultural identity that can accommodate *intracultural* differences." Cooper Alarcón analyzes the "construction and representation of cultural identity" by conceptualizing it as a palimpsest, that is:

*a site where texts have been superimposed onto others in an attempt to displace earlier or competing histories. Significantly, such displacement is never total; the suppressed material often remains legible, however faintly, challenging the dominant text with an alternate version of events (xiv).*

He addresses a number of issues related to Chicano/a identity that ideas of *Aztlán* have concealed rather than clarified. For example, Cooper Alarcón notes within the field of Chicano/a Studies, a "tendency to focus on the Southwest, minimizing the attention paid to Chicano/as who live in other geographic regions," as well as a lack of attention to "the ongoing dialectic between Chicano/a and Mexican culture(s) and the effects on those culture(s) of continued Mexican emigration to the United States." In the analysis that follows, I will examine the ways in which both of these issues surface in the representations offered by contemporary Chicano/a literature.

Texts that stress the primacy of the Southwest as Chicano/a homeland also tend toward a preoccupation with cultural objects rather than relations, and exhibit a nostalgia for an ideal and unified community. These representations, however, are increasingly challenged by Chicano/a texts that suggest that Chicano/as have multiple origins, forge transnational identities, and belong to heterogeneous communities. As Frederick Buell notes in his article “Nationalist Postnationalism: Globalist Discourse in Contemporary American Culture” (1998), this is not always a positive phenomenon. Midwestern Chicano/a and Mexican characters are both victims and agents in the globalization of capitalist economic mechanisms that spur migration, destroy and reconstitute communities, and create greater interethnic contact and exchange. As the literature demonstrates, this process has a long history. To the degree that they imaginatively challenge the boundaries of a fixed identity, these literary representations engage populations and cultures in motion and break down monolithic constructions of Chicano/a identity or community.

### The Midwest versus the Southwest

In the collection titled *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993), Pat Mora writes of her relocation to Ohio from Texas in 1989, her travels throughout the world, and her own sense of being between different cultures, experiences, and communities. Mora’s essays attempt to subvert the familiar notion of the Midwest as the center of the U.S. by insisting that her life in El Paso, her experience as a Latina, and her travels throughout the world place her at a truer center. It is a challenging argument that certainly rings truer than geographical explanations of center, but one that is partially undercut by her own investment in a sentimental view of the Southwest.

Two of her essays, “Bienvenidos” and “The Border,” contrast the Midwest and Southwest. In “The Border,” she stages a counter-invasion:

I brought cassettes of Mexican and Latin American music with us when we drove to Ohio. I’d roll the car window down and turn the volume up, taking a certain delight in sending such sounds like mischievous imps across fields and into trees (12).

One cannot help but appreciate Mora’s gesture in releasing Mexican sounds into the Midwestern landscape. The text, however, does not acknowledge that they may already have been there. Sociologist Julian Samora and historian Zaragosa Vargas, among others, have described the many ways in which significant numbers of Mexicans and Chicano/as, who began settling in the Midwest in the early 20th Century, both brought a unique culture with them and were transformed by intercultural interactions in their new homes. Yet, this brief migration narrative suggests no recognition of the Mexicans and Chicano/as who for nearly 100 years have traveled to and settled in the Midwest, and continue to do so.<sup>1</sup>

Nor does the text describe encounters with this population in the writer’s daily life. One exception occurs in a Cincinnati restaurant where Mora overhears a conversation in Spanish that prompts a longing for return to Texas, where Spanish pervades daily life. Has the writer been privy to an exchange between fellow diners? Between restaurant employees? Are the speakers even Latina/os? The reader is not informed, but remains curious about the writer’s “consumption” of Spanish in this setting. If indeed the speakers are Latina/o, this incidental event provides the only mention of their presence in the Midwest; yet, it serves as pointed contrast to a description of a return visit to Texas:

I stopped to hear a group of *mari-achis* playing their instruments with proud gusto. I was surprised and probably embarrassed when my eyes filled with tears not only at the music, but at the sight of wonderful Mexican faces. The musicians were playing for some senior citizens. The sight of brown, knowing eyes that quickly accepted me with a smile, the stories in those eyes and in the wrinkled faces were more delicious than any *fajitas* or *flan* (13).

The emphasis on acceptance suggests that Mora has encountered some discriminatory rejection or exclusion in the Midwest, an injury which is healed by return to Texas. This scene reinscribes the Southwest as the site of Chicano/a unity – the brown-faced musicians playing for the elderly and offering smiles of acceptance present a harmonious picture.

These essays do, however, occasionally resist the temptation to idealize a place the writer understandably misses – her hometown. For example, “The Border” concludes with this observation:

The culture of the border illustrates this truth daily, glaringly. Children go to sleep hungry and stare at stores filled with toys they’ll never touch, with books they’ll never read. Oddly, I miss that clear view of the difference between my comfortable life and the lives of so many... between my insulated, economically privileged life and the life of most of my fellow humans (14).

Viewing the economic contrasts of the border reminds Mora of the condition of the world, a reminder she misses in the Midwest. Yet, by placing this “glaring truth” at the “border,” the text preserves “Texas” as the site of self-knowledge, while the Midwest remains a place of exile. This three part division of space – the Midwest, Texas, the border – corresponds well to Manuel Hernández-Gutiérrez’s critical framework for examining identity formation in some Chicano/a literature.<sup>2</sup>

The sense of isolation expressed in these pages is undoubtedly due in part, to the lack of opportunity for contact between a university-trained professional and the largely working-class population of Mexicans and Chicano/as in the Midwest. In this case, the text’s Southwestern perspective occludes a view of others and prevents an appreciation of the socio-economic factors that might impinge on this perception, although elsewhere these essays forthrightly acknowledge privilege. The title of at least one Midwestern literature anthology takes on the task of correcting the misconception that Mora’s text inadvertently perpetuates: a community-generated publication, Mireles’ *I Didn’t Know There Were Latinos in Wisconsin: An Anthology of Hispanic Poetry* (1989), includes the work of 19 poets.

In Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s *Mystery of Survival and Other Stories* (1993), two stories emphasize metaphoric and literal return to the Southwest to combat a Midwest-inspired alienation or identity crisis. In one of these, “The Piñata Dream,” the protagonist is Mary, a young Chicana enrolled in a writing

program at an Iowa university who experiences writer’s block. Through dream analysis, Mary remembers her childhood on the border, when Mexico was just over the bridge, and discovers that she must re-knit her connection to Mexico and her Mexican heritage. Her new sense of self, made manifest in her adoption of the name “Xochitl,” helps her to begin writing again. The Southwest therefore embodies the conception of cultural balance that Xochitl embraces, suggesting that the further north one is from the Mexican border, the further away one is from being Mexican.

The latter point is underscored by Mary’s observation of a Mexican Independence Day celebration in Iowa. The description of an event organized by a Chicano/a community in Iowa would seem to suggest an acceptance of a Chicano/a identity not linked exclusively to the Southwest. However, although Mary attends this event, she feels no connection to the people there. While Mary’s thoughts suggest that “Midwestern Mexican Americans” might be different from other Chicano/as, her description of the event suggests that the difference is not salutary:

I was more than a little surprised to see Old Glory hanging next to the Mexican flag there in the 4-H Club, and when they opened the festivities with the ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ instead of the Mexican national anthem (which they played *after* ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’), I knew it wasn’t the kind of Independencia fiesta that the people of Juárez would’ve understood (56).

Mary doesn’t identify with the people at this event, but she does connect to an object, a star-shaped *piñata*. As she tells it, such *piñatas* are no longer made in Juárez, but are known to her through her grandfather’s stories of his childhood. The *piñata*, therefore, becomes a “beautiful” and “special” object that links Mary to her Mexican past. As in this brief excerpt, the text repeatedly invokes Juárez as representative of an “authentic Mexicanness.” The sight of this *piñata*, coupled with Mary’s recurring *piñata* dream, eventually leads to Mary/Xochitl’s cultural awakening; however, that epiphany occurs not through identification or solidarity with Midwestern Chicano/as, but through the establishment of distance

from them. The newly liberated Xochitl remembers previously suppressed events from her Chicano/a childhood in El Paso, including the cruel methods by which she was forced to learn the Pledge of Allegiance. This memory markedly contrasts with the scene of Iowa Chicano/as voluntarily singing the anthem of the United States, and singing it before the anthem of Mexico. The text leads to the conclusion that the Iowa Chicano/as are not, like Xochitl, balanced and aware, but assimilated and unaware of their own indoctrination.

In Wendell Mayo's collection of stories *Centaur of the North* (1996), the issue of belonging resonates on many levels – from the broad subject of social and familial configurations to the particular proposition that a Chicana may feel especially alien in the Midwestern United States. The textual emphasis on the latter often, though not always, obscures the larger issues, including the role of patriarchy and gender paradigms in creating a character's estrangement.

In Mayo's "The Stone Kitchen," the son of an Anglo father and a Chicana mother reflects on his childhood memories of his mother, Silvia. When he was 10, the family moved from Corpus Christi, Texas, a place of "warmth within warmth that felt like family," to a suburb north of Chicago. In Illinois, Silvia grows distant. While she talks with her mother in Corpus Christi for hours on the phone, in Spanish, she has few words for her son. When he asks her about who she is, she makes up stories about growing up in Guatemala, Italy, Vermont, and China. In an apparent attempt to recreate home, Silvia crams her kitchen with stone pots shipped to her from Texas. She adorns her windows with garlic and *jalapeños* and collects so many tins of beans so that the boy comes to see the kitchen as "something strange and fantastic," a feeling heightened by the kinds of food Silvia cooks in that kitchen: "tortillas, heart, tongue, *tripas*, *huevos* – and other combinations – heart and pintos, tongue and pintos, *tripas* and pintos." This description suggests that both the place of the kitchen and the figure of his mother embody the family's heart, language, and soul; yet that intimate center remains inaccessible to the narrator/son. Silvia has retreated from her family into her own personal sanctuary. The relocation to Chicago has strained family relations. Although Silvia tries hard to recreate her Texas environment, she fails to accomplish this to the degree necessary for her also to be able to speak her history and her life.<sup>3</sup> She becomes stone.

While the above texts construe the Midwest as inherently alienating and emotionally damaging for Chicano/as and Mexicans, they shy away from addressing the dynamics of class that separate their protagonists from Chicano/a and Latina/o communities. Instead, they ascribe the isolation and alienation of their characters to their separation from the Southwest. It is not surprising to turn to another set of literary representations of Chicano/as in the Midwest featuring primarily working-class characters and find a radically different view of both the Southwest and the Midwest. In contrast to representations of the Southwest as more authentically Mexican or Chicano/a in comparison to the Midwest, Tomás Rivera's *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971) claims both regions as Chicano/a homelands. The novel is set in the Midwest – Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin – as well as the Southwest, primarily Texas.

Rivera's text takes exception to the myth of the Midwest as a pastoral, idyllic space in the chapter, "Es que duele." In this story, the protagonist/narrator, a young boy attending school in an Anglo-dominated Midwestern town, faces first the racial insults, then the racist violence of an Anglo student. The narrator is so shaken by these events that he cannot clearly remember what happened: "*Ya no recuerdo cómo ni cuando le pegué pero sé que sí porque le avisaron a la principal que nos estábamos peleando en el escusado.*" Despite the fact that he was there, he tells us that he only knows he hit the other boy because the janitor had reported it to the principal.

Expelled from school and fearful of admitting this to his family, the boy stops in a cemetery on the way home. Unlike the Texas cemetery he knows, he thinks the Midwestern one is "*puro zacatito y árboles*," so pretty that he imagines people don't even cry when they bury their loved ones here. The site is perhaps symbolic of the fertile promise of the U.S. heartland, but in this case, the fecundity is fed by death. The cemetery becomes a bucolic refuge for the protagonist/narrator, but a false one – for to remain in the cemetery, to want the ideal escape, signals death. This text presents a complicated challenge to the view that pervades much American literature – that one can remake oneself in a new land – by contrasting that desire with the limitations imposed on the boy because of his race and class. The cemetery scene suggests both the problem of upward mobility and the danger of idealizing any place.



The latter point emerges more sharply if we consider chapters of *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* set in the Southwest, a region which does not necessarily provide safety and refuge for Chicano/as, either, despite our numbers and longstanding presence there. Chicano/as also face racism, discrimination, and poor working conditions in the Southwest. In “La noche buena,” *doña María*, who suffers from agoraphobia, ventures out into the small Texas town to purchase Christmas toys for her children. Once in a store, *doña María* panics and inadvertently leaves without paying for the merchandise. She is accosted by a store security guard, who complains “these damn people, always stealing something,” and then she is either thrown or falls to the ground, sobbing uncontrollably at the sight of the guard’s gun before being taken to jail. Afterwards, *doña María*, like the boy of “Es que duele,” cannot clearly recall the sequence of events.

The unquestioned domination of Anglos in both the Midwest and Texas leads to uncertainty, doubt, shame, and humiliation for these Mexican characters. In another chapter set in the Southwest, “Los niños no se aguantaron,” a young boy is murdered by an Anglo boss on a very hot day for making too many trips to the water tank at the edge of the fields. The refusal to idealize the Southwest or Chicano/a communities in the Southwest is further underscored in “El retrato,” where returning migrant workers are swindled out of their money and family photos by home-grown con artists from San Antonio.

In Rivera’s novel, Chicano/a characters in both the Midwest and Southwest struggle, often unsuccessfully, against hegemonic ideologies. Sometimes their “home” points of reference are Texas, but sometimes, as in “La noche buena,” they are Mexico or the Midwest. At least one speaker in the chapter titled “Cuando lleguemos” insists he will join his uncle in Minneapolis and work in a hotel rather than return to Texas. This assertion reminds us of the history of Chicano/as and Mexicans in the Midwest; as Zaragosa Vargas notes in *Proletarians of the North*, St. Paul, Chicago, Gary, and Detroit were sites of Chicano/a settlement during the first quarter of the century.

While the struggles of Chicano/as across geographic regions may be more alike than different, the canonized version of *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* suggests that the resolution of those struggles can occur only in the Southwest. Many of the chapters in which the protagonist/narrator gains insights about himself

in relation to a broader community or prevailing knowledge take place in the Southwest, including the final, unifying chapter. The emphasis on a Southwestern homeland contained in the established version of Rivera’s novel, however, appears to diverge from the author’s original vision. Julian Olivares notes that four stories were omitted from the published version of *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, but by whose decision remains unclear. Olivares suggests that the decision rested with Rivera, but he also quotes Rivera expressing the view that he “conceded” to the editors’ desire to exclude “El Pete Fonseca,” one of the four stories in question, against his own preferred inclusion of it. Olivares further suggests that one reason for this particular exclusion was Rivera’s departure from the norm in creating the character of Pete Fonseca:

This representation of Pete Fonseca did not conform to the romanticized portrayal of the pachuco as the rebellious Chicano hero that was appearing in this formative period of Chicano literature (75).

Another of the excluded stories suggests that Chicano/as might have a homeland outside of the Southwest and that they may succeed in knowing and asserting themselves in the struggle against domination in places other than the Southwest. I refer to “Zoo Island,” currently included in *The Harvest*, a collection of Rivera’s posthumously published stories. In “Zoo Island,” Chicano/a and Mexicano migrant workers and families take a census and erect a town sign, establishing a community in the Iowa migrant camp where they live. As Olivares explains:

It is important to note that “Zoo Island” is not a self-disparaging name; it is a transparent sign through which two societies look at each other. From their perspective outside this new town, the Anglo onlookers will perceive the sign as marking the town’s inhabitants as monkeys; but they will fail to note that, with the sign, the Chicanos have ironically marked the Anglos. From within the town, the inhabitants see the spectators as inhumane. “Zoo Island” is a sign both of community and protest (“Introduction” 79-80).

Rivera's intention that "Zoo Island" forms part of the novel *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* is not unimportant. Without it, as Eliud Martínez notes, the novel's characters are often "victims of circumstances... helpless." "Zoo Island" is the only story of the original novel that portrays community members acting in unison to define themselves against Anglo attempts to dehumanize them, and it occurs in the Midwest. Its inclusion in the novel would significantly alter the textual emphasis on the powerlessness and confusion of migrant workers, endowing them with greater agency – which in the current published version emerges only among a few characters and only in the Southwest. "Zoo Island" situates a Chicano/a and Mexican community coming to consciousness outside of the Southwest.

Several texts that address or include the Midwest in the range of Chicano/a experience present Mexico not the Southwest as homeland, while others make no reference to any place other than the Midwest itself. Longstanding patterns of migration from Mexico directly to the Midwest, bypassing the Southwest, or via brief stays in Texas, have undoubtedly given rise to representations of Chicano/as in the Midwest. During the 1920's, "Mexico was the primary source of foreign immigration to the United States" (Vargas, 1993). Northern industries employed labor agents throughout Texas to recruit Mexican workers, and family or village networks soon became informal avenues for facilitating migration and securing employment (Vargas, 1993). Most importantly, Vargas argues that incorporation into the industrial working class and urbanization profoundly transformed Mexican and Chicano/a workers in the Midwest by creating an "industrial lifestyle," and bringing them into greater contact with Blacks and ethnic Whites. These features of life for Mexican and Chicano/a populations in the Midwest appear not only in the fiction of Rivera, but in the work of Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, and Hugo Martínez-Serros.

Historian F. Arturo Rosales notes that in the early 20th Century many Mexicans arriving at the border from places such as Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacán, Aguascalientes, and Zacatecas readily accepted employment offers in cities like Chicago and Kansas City. The demands of the First World War and industrialization brought greater numbers of Mexicans to the Midwest. Rosales maintains that this generation's allegiance to Mexico led them to see themselves as *el México de afuera*.

In his study of mutual aid societies among Mexicans in the U.S., Jose Amaro Hernandez records the extent to which these groups participated in political battles in this country, attempting to protect and advance their interests and civil rights. Hernandez sees the numerous mutual aid societies that appeared in the Chicago-Gary area and in California as groups that provided valuable services and became the forerunners of the Chicano/a struggle for civil rights. In the 60's and 70's, Rosales argues, the Chicano/a Movement benefited from both perspectives – identifying with Mexico culturally while retaining a commitment to U.S. citizenship and rights. This history reveals diverse Chicano/a communities, some who more readily identify with Mexico than with the Southwestern U.S. Patterns of migration from Mexico directly to the Midwest continue. A 1997 article by Marc Cooper in *The Nation* reports that, in what has become an industry pattern, Mexican and Central American workers now make up a third of the workforce at Iowa Beef Processors in Storm Lake, Iowa.

A rich vein of Chicano/a literature has emerged from this transnational experience in the Midwest. Ana Castillo's short story collection, *Loverboys* (1996), contains several stories that explore in unique ways the experiences of Chicano/as in the Midwest. In "Christmas Story of the Golden Cockroach," Rosa, Paco, and their children live in a brick house that Paco's father left him "as legacy of the thirty-some-odd years he spent in Chicago working to support his family 'back home.'" The house, as the narrator describes it, sits "in the middle of what now looks like the vestiges of a once-thriving area before the steel mills closed down and left the majority of its residents without means for a livelihood." This description suggests East Chicago, where a World War I bachelor community of Chicano/as and Mexicans in the steel industry soon grew to include women and children (Samora and Lamanna, 1967).

Though Paco inherits the house from his father, Paco and Rosa "grew up, fell in love, and were married" in the small Mexican coastal village to which they plan to return for a Christmas break. Their vacation travel consists of a three-day drive in a "pickup-turned-camper" loaded with four children, several other relatives, clothes, and appliances. Not everyone returns to Mexico for the holidays. The text mentions the neighborhood *posadas* that will occur while Paco and Rosa are away, suggesting that they belong to a community with a claim to both places.

This brief sketch of the family's history reveals that while Paco's father labored in industrial Chicago, his children and wife largely (though not necessarily completely) remained in Mexico. The father retires to Mexico when the steel mill closes, but Paco replaces him in Chicago. Paco brings his family, but the employment available to the previous generation is no longer available to him. Instead, along with the narrator's husband, Paco is a laid-off welder, trying to provide for himself and his family with a small, at-home auto body shop.

Paco, like his father before him, travels readily if not always comfortably between the United States and Mexico. That makes him part of a transnational community forced to relocate, like the characters in Rivera's novel, wherever there is work – except in this case traveling between two countries. The golden cockroach Paco's father brings with him to the U.S. and the appliances and other items both he and Paco take back to Mexico represent a process of transculturation engendered by economic shifts.<sup>4</sup> Castillo's story cleverly rewrites the myth of American streets of gold, turning acculturation into transculturation: Paco's father did not *find* gold in the U.S., but brought it with him in the form of his labor. Paco's father engaged in a complex transcultural process whereby he both left his mark on U.S. industrial society and was, in turn, marked by it. Unlike previous generations of immigrants who succeeded in fighting for decent jobs and sometimes provided each other with mutual assistance, in the new and harsher economy nobody knows the true worth of the golden cockroach, which signals the devaluation of the Mexican laborer's role in the industrial economy.

Although economic opportunity is of paramount importance in determining their family's choices, Paco's and Rosa's decisions are also influenced by family and community networks of support in Mexico and Chicago. Like Rivera's novel, this text, as well as those by Cisneros and Martínez-Serros, presents mobile and fluid communities that change and are changed by the economies, ideologies, and geographies with which they come in contact. Though their characters are often poor and always working-class (not sectors of the population usually perceived as trendsetters,) these stories show us Chicano/as and Mexicans engendering and participating in ideological and cultural change, often simply through their efforts to survive labor conditions under capitalism.

*House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros is a novel profoundly concerned with home – the lack of home, the search for home, and finally the construction of home. The novel ultimately claims Chicago as home. It opens: “We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, and before that I can't remember.” The invocation of multiple streets conveys the narrator's longing for stability rather than mobility, but the naming also functions to claim the space. The opening and closing phrases, “we didn't always live... I can't remember” evoke a search for origins or a lost connection – maybe to the Southwest, maybe to Mexico. However, like the characters in “Zoo Island,” the narrator quickly lays claim to the Midwest: “The house on Mango Street is ours.” Chicago is now home and it, too, will become a part of memory, especially because it is “a place where new cultures are born” out of urban interactions (Heredia 1993/1994).

*House on Mango Street* reveals a heterogeneous community that includes at least three categories of Chicano/as – those native to the city, including Esperanza and her mother; those native to Texas, like Esperanza's friend Lucy; and those recently arrived from Mexico, like Geraldo – as well as Puerto Ricans, Blacks, and Whites. The young narrator of this novel, though attune to the diversity of experience within Chicano/a communities, is also aware of what unifies her complex community – in her words, “all brown all around, we are safe.” The chapter in which Esperanza makes this observation highlights both difficulty of bridging the misperceptions between differing communities and strong influence of place and community in shaping individual identities.

The exchanges among Esperanza, Rachel, and Lucy in “Our Good Day” furthers this connection as well. Rachel introduces herself as Lucy's sister and asks Esperanza, “Who are you?” Her comment and question suggest the centrality of relationships rather than names. Esperanza is surprised that they don't poke fun at her name. Instead Lucy immediately identifies herself as a Texan, linking her acceptance of her new friend with her own Texan background, where names like Esperanza's would not be uncommon. While Lucy asserts a common ground between herself and Esperanza, she also notes a difference when she emphasizes that Rachel has a different point of origin, each place exerting influence on the

sisters. The bicycle that the three new friends share in common is emblematic of their unity, but their community is not free of conflict, as the girls' fight over who will ride the bike first reveals.

Several characters in *House on Mango Street* have two names – a given name and a nickname, a Spanish name and an English name, a married name and a single name. The inscription of multiple names suggests that similarity and heterogeneity go hand-in-hand in this novel's language, setting and characters. Even the multiple names for clouds and homes are evocative of variety in a community.

Yet the contradiction of belonging and not belonging remains. In "Four Skinny Trees" Esperanza identifies with the "four who do not belong here but are here" and describes the trees as fiercely taking hold of the earth, angrily asserting their right to be – if not "they'd all droop like tulips in a glass." In order to be at all, the trees must forcefully assert their right to be. *House on Mango Street* evokes an urban Midwest that is hard, beautiful, and Chicano/a.

The heavily working-class character of Midwestern Chicano/a communities and the work experience itself become the focal point of Hugo Martínez-Serros' collection *The Last Laugh and Other Stories*. The Mexican men in these stories labor in steel mills and railroad yards in the Chicago area. None of his characters yearns for a return to either the Southwest or Mexico. They are either too young to have known any other place or older and therefore too busy working to support their families. Their investment in the Midwest and their experience there leads to the creation of "new cultural phenomena" (Ortiz, 1995).

Both "Killdeer" and "Jitomates" address José María Rivera's efforts to manage a full-time laboring job, and with the help of his sons, to tend the family's *milpa* on weekends and evenings. These stories carefully detail work tasks. They convey the importance of work to survival, the skill involved, pride in a job well done, and discipline and innovation in accomplishing tasks despite lack of resources or other difficulties. These stories suggest a convergence of agricultural and industrial experiences in José María's labor. They also reveal the harshness of the industrial pace spilling over into the family *milpa*, altering José María's attempts to maintain a foot in the industrial

present and the traditional, and economically necessary, *milpa*. These stories provide a glimpse of how industrial labor transformed Chicano/a workers.<sup>5</sup> Martínez-Serros' attention to the details of work recreates the effort, frustration, and triumph of Chicano/a workers, and the sheer demands of labor that limit and alter personal relationships.

In "The Last Laugh," José María Rivera convinces the owner of a run-down flat above a tavern to allow his family to fix it up and live there:

The whole family labored for weeks to repair the place, as if their very lives had depended on it. Soap, brushes, paint, varnish, wallpaper, windowpanes, and so much more had forced José María to buy on credit. It was worth it. They made the spacious flat attractive and, in the end, José María was ahead since Dr. Stern had felt confused and guilty about how much the rent would be, and he wound up setting it at a pittance (5-6).

Through their labor and investment, the family improves the building. Their action parallels their participation, and that of others like them, in an industrial economy. Yet, the tension of the word "forced" cannot be ignored, for it indicates that the Riveras are also acted upon in this transaction – the benefit they derive also fetters them. The labor of the two younger Rivera boys, who are assigned to tend the furnace at home, mirrors their father's labor: "Big as their furnace was, Lázaro and Jaime knew it was a toy to their father, a blast furnace keeper in the steel mill." Lázaro and Jaime face the prejudice of two older White men who feel displaced by the boys in the tavern's upkeep, but the young boys successfully defend themselves against the older men's attacks. Their story presents a microcosmic view of the interactions and battles that we assume their father also encounters in the steel mill. Mexican workers forced to negotiate the hierarchies of race in the ethnically mixed Midwest often laid to rest the familiar stereotype of willing and acquiescent Mexican workers in the course of their struggles, sometimes violent, against the injustices of the industrial workplace (Vargas, 1993).

The story “Learn! Learn!” chronicles José María’s battle with the local priest over grammar in the church bulletin, an argument that provides an opportunity to satisfy his longing for a life outside of the steel mill. José María does not want the priest or his family to see him as simply a body or a pair of hands, but also as a thinker, writer, and fighter – a human being whose fullness is denied by the nature of the economy in which he is forced to function. However, the story also reveals his homophobia and sexism, making problematic his desire to be accepted as a “man.” In some ways, this collection of stories chronicles José María’s efforts to deal with this central limitation. His efforts to survive by keeping *mil-pas*, collecting garbage, and managing part-time jobs are not only about making money, but also about making use of multiple talents that often appear meaningless in an industrial economy.

## Conclusions

The experience of Chicano/as and Mexicans in the U.S. extends far beyond the region of the Southwest.<sup>6</sup> As I hope this discussion has revealed, Chicano/a literature has often claimed the space of the Midwest as its own, creating characters who firmly plant themselves, their hoes, flags, families, and town signs on its landscape. Yet, the tendency persists to overlook or dismiss Chicano/a or Mexican communities in the Midwest in favor of the Southwest, as the true or ideal Chicano/a homeland. In some cases, that tendency leads to the disclosure of competing histories. In texts that interrogate the experience of Chicano/as and Mexicans in the Midwest, the focus on working, planting, growing, constructing – in short, staying, but on terms acceptable to the dignity of human beings – creates an alternative view of homeland. In these texts, the Midwest is not background, but battleground.

Like Paco and Rosa in Castillo’s “Christmas Story of the Golden Cockroach,” Mexican immigrants often maintain ties both to their hometowns in Mexico and to the urban centers of the U. S. where they live and work. This is one way that the proximity between Mexico and the United States has shaped, and continues to shape a distinct Mexican and Chicano/a experience. Mexicans can and do return to their homeland more frequently than most other immigrant groups. Chicano/as and Mexicans living in the U.S. continue to experience life in both

nations through family and economic connections that are continually reinforced by ongoing large-scale immigration from Mexico. This history and present have contributed to the bi-national awareness and diasporic sensibility of many of the above texts.

The continued migration of Mexicans to the major urban centers of the United States has expanded already existing Mexican and Chicano/a communities. It has also led to the growth of new communities in cities and towns throughout the nation – in the Pacific Northwest, the Southwest, the Midwest, the South, and the East Coast. The reorganization of Mexican labor and residential patterns in recent years has also prompted the Mexican government to offer dual nationality not only to Mexican citizens living in the U.S., but also to the U.S.-born children of those citizens. People we are accustomed to considering Chicano/a may also soon become Mexicana/o.

These new realities suggest yet another period of creative tension and negotiation between Chicano/a and Mexican identities throughout the United States. While the Southwest remains an important site in the development of Chicano/a literature, creative and critical, both our literature and history demonstrate that Chicano/a and Mexican communities have long histories beyond the borders of the Southwest. Despite attempts to write over them, these histories emerge – in the overheard conversation in Spanish, the small town Mexican celebration, the Spanish language radio in the background. In fact, what contemporary Chicano/a literature demonstrates is that the palimpsest grows thicker with new versions of Aztlán.

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## Endnotes

1. While literary essay, sociological analysis, and historical account respond to very different conventions in conveying their "truths," my juxtaposition here of these distinct texts aims to uncover competing versions of Chicana/o identity rather than to posit one authentic identity.
2. In his critical analysis of Chicano/a literature, Manuel Hernández-Gutiérrez suggests that the search for identity is marked by the negotiation among what he terms the Barrio, or space of self-affirmation, self-determination and cultural pride; the Anti-Barrio, the site of discrimination and denigration of Chicano/as; and the Exterior,

or space of death and exile. Hernández -Gutiérrez suggests that the Barrio is most often associated with Texas or the Southwest, the physical territory of the internal colony of Chicano/as. He sees the Anti-Barrio as most often associated with the Midwest, but also present in the Southwest as Anglo domination, while the Exterior is linked to Mexico or other countries.

3. Like the Tomás Rivera story, “Es que duele,” Mayo’s text explores the impact of loss of community on the individual psyche, linking collective and individual memory. However, Rivera does not limit this phenomenon to Midwestern locations.
4. As Fernando Ortiz argued in 1940, acculturation and deculturation, terms frequently used to discuss shifts from one culture to another, do not adequately capture the social and historical complexity of intercultural processes. Ortiz’s term, transculturation, conveys the intertwined acquisition and loss of culture that occur in such processes, but also the generative capacity of such processes to create “new cultural phenomena” (97-98, 102-103).
5. This insight derives from Zaragosa Vargas’ excellent history of Mexican automobile workers in the Midwest. *Proletarians of the North* documents the changes in residency, lifestyle, work habits, and attitudes prompted by labor in this industry for Mexicans in the 1920’s. Vargas records the transformations that industrial work brought for Mexican workers, their employers, Midwestern urban centers and the industrial working class.
6. In the introduction to the inaugural issue of *Third Woman* in 1981 on “Latinas in the Midwest,” Norma Alarcón says that Midwestern Latina writers and artists “are laying down the foundation of our self-definition as well as our self-invention.” This strong position in recognition of Latina populations outside the Southwest led to other issues of *Third Woman* devoted to Latinas in the Midwest and East.