

MESTIZAJE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS THE ANALEPTICS TO THE TRANSHISTORICAL BORDERLAND CRISES IN ALEJANDRO MORALES'S NOVEL *THE RAG DOLL PLAGUES* (1992)

Foteini Toliou
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece*

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Alejandro Morales's novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) and explores the transhistorical dimensions of the subordination indigenous and *mestizalo* identities experience against colonial and postcolonial authoritarian forces in the borderlands between Mexico and the United States. Spanish colonialism, US racism and eco-destruction, each transpiring in different moments of the New World history, are the diverse forms the borderland crises take up in the three Books comprising the novel. *Mestizaje* and intercultural communication, as well as the retrieval of the indigenous and Mexican cultural traditions, foster the ongoing creation of new hybrid racial, ethnic and cultural identities in all the three Books and, thus, emerge as the analeptics to the diachronically persistent plight of racism.

KEYWORDS: Borderland Crises, Transhistoricity, Transference, *mestizaje*, Intercultural Communication.

MESTIZAJE Y COMUNICACIÓN INTERCULTURAL COMO
ANALÉPTICOS FRENTE A LAS CRISIS FRONTERIZAS TRANSHISTÓRICAS
EN LA NOVELA *THE RAG DOLL PLAGUES* (1992) DE ALEJANDRO MORALES

RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en la novela *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) de Alejandro Morales e investiga las dimensiones transhistóricas de la subordinación de las identidades indígenas y mestizas bajo el dominio de las fuerzas autoritarias coloniales y postcoloniales en las zonas fronterizas entre México y los Estados Unidos. El colonialismo español, el racismo estadounidense y la eco-destrucción, que ocurren en diferentes momentos de la historia del Nuevo Mundo, constituyen distintas formas de crisis fronterizas en los tres Libros que componen la novela. El mestizaje y la comunicación intercultural, así como también la recuperación de las tradiciones culturales indígenas y mexicanas, fomentan la creación continua de nuevas identidades de hibridación racial, étnica y cultural en los tres Libros y, así, surgen como analépticos frente al problema diacrónicamente persistente del racismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: crisis fronterizas, transhistoricidad, transferencia, mestizaje, comunicación intercultural.

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In borderland spaces, different ethnic and cultural identities clash and, thus, they largely tend to be marked by intricate power relationships between antithetical narratives of existence. Fierce antagonisms are created due to the forceful imposition of hegemonic discourses on cultures and identities that are viewed as alien and subordinate on account of their racial, ethnic and cultural difference. The borderlands between Mexico and the United States is a locale where *mestizo/o* (racially mixed), *mexicana/o* and Chicana/o subjectivities constantly struggle against socio-political and cultural injustices established by imperialist and capitalist enterprises. According to Gloria E. Anzaldúa, “[t]he US-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds. And before a scab is formed it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (3). Conceiving of this border region as a site of conflict as well as intercultural communication, Anzaldúa also states that “[a] borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (3). Namely, the coalition of antagonistic modes of being-in-the-world that transpire in the borderlands and give rise to new hybrid subjectivities reveal the ever-changing and transitory dimensions of ethnic and cultural self-identification. In his novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992), Alejandro Morales offers a transhistorical perspective to the struggles indigenous, *mestizo/o* and *mexicana/o* subjectivities experience against colonial and postcolonial authoritarian forces in the borderlands between Mexico and the US and explores how the process of *mestizaje*¹ and cultural blending, a process that unfolds in frontier spaces, fosters the on-going regeneration of ethnic and cultural identities.

Each of the three Books comprising *The Rag Doll Plagues* takes place in different temporal contexts of the post-conquest New World history, where collective social crises, allegorically manifested as lethal diseases, confront borderland subjectivities. The collective predicaments affecting indigenous, *mestizo/o* identities take up the diverse forms of Spanish colonialism, US racism, and eco-destruction, each being different moments of New World history, but all located and invariably transpiring in the borderlands. Thus, in Morales’s novel, “[b]order spaces are

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¹ The term *mestizaje* originally means miscegenation and it “refers to the biological, cultural and religious commixture between the indigenous populations of the Americas and the Spanish *conquistadores*” (Emmanouilidou, “Temporal Dynamics and Spatial Horizons” 138). The process of *mestizaje* that took place during the colonial encounter between the Spaniards and the Native Americans in the New World brought about the emergence of new hybrid racial and cultural subjectivities. The meaning of *mestizaje* has progressively been extended by scholars and today it connotes the blending of multiple diverse racial, ethnic and cultural identities (138). In this essay, the term *mestizaje* is used to refer both to the process of racial inter-breeding as well as to the intermingling of diverse cultural narratives.



explained as socio-political locales, markedly defined by turbulent and riotous human enactment throughout time” (Emmanouilidou, “Temporal Dynamics and Spatial Horizons” 135), and the self-identification of borderland subjectivities emerges as a process diachronically underscored by struggles against oppression and injustice. Interestingly, the ways through which borderland identities tackle the crises they experience in the face of various agents of authoritative power are slightly altered repetitions of the process of *mestizaje*, the coalition of antithetical cultural narratives that constantly leads to the creation of new ethnic and cultural identities. As Michel M.J. Fischer states, “the search or struggle for a sense of ethnic identity is a (re)-invention and discovery of a vision,” which is constructed through the “meaning abstracted from [the] past” (196).² Moreover, Fischer suggests that since “ethnicity is a deeply rooted emotional component of identity, it is often transmitted ... through processes analogous to the ... transference of psychoanalytic encounters” (195-96).³ More precisely, “[t]ransference, the return of the repressed in new forms, and repetitions with their distortions are all mechanisms through which ethnicity is regenerated” (207). In *The Rag Doll Plagues*, the oppression of *mestiza/o* identities by authoritative discourses, a plight transferred across diverse historical moments, is differently manifested as Spanish colonialism, US racism and ecocide, resulting to significant changes in the social structures, the racial relations and the cultural dynamics functioning in the borderlands. In fact, as the novel explores both the colonial encounter between the Spaniards and the Native Americans and the clash between Anglo Americans and Mexican Americans in the US-Mexico borderlands, it also highlights that these violent superimpositions have brought about a similar process of *mestizaje* between antithetical narratives of identity. Since racial and cultural blending is alternatively enacted between different ethnic groups and cultural traditions across the diverse historical interventions taking place in the New World, ethnic and cultural identities are constantly re-invented and renewed. This essay argues that in Alejandro Morales’s novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992), borderland identities manage to resist their transhistorical subordination, a struggle which relates to multifarious colonial and postcolonial discourses and to the interlinked threat of ecocide, through embracing the process of *mestizaje* and intercultural communication as well as through the retrieval of the indigenous and Mexican cultural traditions.

In “Book I: Mexico City,” which takes place in the capital of New Spain in the eighteenth century, Morales addresses the material abjection and the physical pain the indigenous inhabitants of the New World experienced during their

² In fact, Fischer’s view that the re-invention of ethnicity requires the recovery of the collective knowledge of the past is, grounded on “the Pythagorean arts of memory” (198), a notion suggesting that “[o]nly through memory ... could one purge the sins of past lives ... and escape meaningless repetitions” (197).

³ To explicate, Fischer suggests that “the ‘transference’ mechanisms of ethnicity” relate to “the conquest of an anxiety that manifests itself through repetition of behavioral patterns and cannot be articulated in rational language” (204).



subordination by the violent forces of Spanish colonialism. Particularly, the narrator-protagonist Gregorio Revueltas, a Spanish physician and “Director of the Royal *Protomedicato*” (15), who arrives in New Spain in order to attend to “the medical needs of His Majesty’s colonies” (16), is challenged to combat a contaminating disease of unknown origin, a disease which ravages both the indigenous populace and the Spanish conquerors at an alarming rate. The plight first attacks the patients’ limbs, progressively weakens the body and causes brain damage at its last stages. This disease has been named La Mona by the native people as “[it] leaves a corpse that feels like a rag doll,” remaining soft after death (30). Despite the scientific medical knowledge the narrator possesses, he feels powerless against La Mona and the overall tragic state of the indigenous masses’ living conditions. Gregorio, who initially regards the natives as “immoral racial mixtures of humanity” (11), is indeed astonished and appalled by the atmosphere of “decadence and death” dominating the colonial center (19). In Mexico City, “people squatted along the draining canal, tending to their daily needs” (26), bodies of La Mona victims were constantly added to “a pile of dead” stretching on the street (27), “dying male and female prostitutes who suffered from the epidemic and/or venereal diseases” performed sexual acts in public places (28), while “the dungheaps and the garbage dumps” (29) contributed to the “filthy stench of the city” (26). Witnessing the grotesque reality of the indigenous people, which is sharply contrasted with the wealthy lifestyle of the Spanish colonists, Gregorio gradually comprehends that the luxuries the conquerors enjoy are grounded on the exploitation of the enslaved natives. During his attempts to fight *La Mona*, the narrator also develops a unique relationship with Father Jude, a Catholic priest and a *curandero*,⁴ appointed as his assistant, a character who communicates to Gregorio his critical stance towards the imperial power as well as his determination to heal the pain of the indigenous people. Therefore, the narrator gradually becomes able to acknowledge that the forceful subjugation of the Native Americans by the Spanish conquerors is an unethical master narrative that reproduces tremendous inequalities and immense human suffering.

The infectious plague ravaging New Spain in “Book I” and the urgent need to tackle it also reveal imperial Spain’s attempts to eradicate the cultural traditions of the indigenous people in order to sustain its hegemony. According to Marc Prieue,

⁴ *Curanderas/os* are healers that practice alternative ways of medicine by combining traditional Amerindian healing methods with elements of Catholicism. As Ana Castillo states in *Massacre of the Dreamers*, “the traditional practices of curanderas ... which may be traced back to the Nahuatl people (Aztecs) and certainly to various other Mexic Amerindian peoples ... also have similarities with European beliefs” (151). More specifically, “[t]he methods of curanderismo which apply the use of mental, spiritual, and material expertise descend from Native American, European, Eastern, and Middle Eastern philosophies and knowledge” (154). *Curanderismo*’s practices are mostly based on “Native American healing knowledge, which, in addition to herbal medicine, also has included baths, setting bones, and other remedies” (154). Castillo stresses that although “[t]he curandera ... is a specialized healer, learned in the knowledge of specifically healing the body ... in non-Western thinking, the body is never separate from the spirit or mind and all curative recommendations always consider the ailing person as a whole” (156).



the process of constructing the national identity that transpired during the eighteenth century both in Europe and its colonial settlements coincides with “the projected fear that alien elements infect and ultimately destroy the ostensible unity of the national body through racial and cultural difference” (397). In the first narrative of *The Rag Doll Plagues*, the Spanish colonists’ view of indigenous cultural traditions as a potential threat to the monolithic national and cultural narrative they ventured to impose in the New World is traced in the Spanish medical institutions’ refusal to co-operate with the *curanderas/os* in order to alleviate the effects of the devastating plague. Although La Mona quickly turns into a collective health crisis that needs to be tackled immediately and by all means, the Spanish conquerors designate the *curanderas/os*, who apply healing methods relating to indigenous cultural traditions, as “practitioners of witchcraft” (16) that ought to “be forced out of circulation” (16). Priewe states that agents of political power often seek to maintain their authority over collective national bodies through exercising what is termed “the ‘*bio-politics of the population*,’” that is, a set of “various measures of population control and discipline,” including the establishment of national health policies (399).⁵ In this light, *curanderas/os* are persecuted by the Spanish conquerors, since the indigenous traditional healing methods they apply challenge imperial Spain’s endeavors to establish European medicine as the sole repository of knowledge that can effectively treat illnesses and ensure the collective well-being of its subjects. However, as Emmanouilidou states, “[s]adly ... the loss of local-based knowledge exacerbates the suffering of the people, and eradicates medical information that can save people’s lives” (“Temporal Dynamics and Spatial Horizons” 136). Indeed, when Gregorio asks “the General Secretary of the Holy Office, Father Antonio” to suggest some possible treatment for La Mona (Morales 39), the indigenous Catholic priest answers that the Viceroy and the Spanish crown should “stop persecuting the *curanderos*, for they are an asset” to the confrontation of the plague (40). Gregorio recognizes that the intercultural exchange of medical information, namely the coalition of the scientific tenets of European medicine with the healing practices of *curanderismo*, seems to be the only possible way to improve the living conditions of the afflicted populations in New Spain. In this way, Morales signals that the colonial power needs to transcend its despotic attitude and depart from its exclusionary practices aimed at the indigenous people and their cultural traditions in order to ensure the survival and prosperity of Spanish Mexico.

In fact, in “Book I” of *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Morales highlights that the conjoined process of *mestizaje* and intercultural communication, which transpired

⁵ In fact, the “*bio-politics of the population*” (399) that Priewe analyses in his article is a notion presented in Michel Foucault’s book *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction* (1976). Priewe notes: “As Foucault has outlined, one of the primary elements in the exercise of power has been the state’s attempts to control and ensure the longevity of its people” (399). More particularly, Priewe utilizes the notion of the bio-politics throughout his analysis of Morales’s tripartite novel and stresses that “[t]he exertion of ... bio-politics entails discursive and material practices that seek to exclude impure elements that threaten to contaminate ... (the myth of) the healthy national body” (399).



between the Spaniards and the indigenous populations in eighteenth century Mesoamerica, gave rise to the emergence of the *mestizalo* ethnic and cultural identities that offered the hope of transcending the racial and cultural barriers the Spanish colonial forces have established. When Gregorio is challenged to cure the Viceroy's indigenous mistress, Marisela, and her *mestiza* child, who suffer from La Mona, he becomes immersed in the cultural values and the mindset of these indigenous female characters with whom he develops a relationship based on mutual understanding and respect. Marisela is presented as an indigenous woman who demonstrates a brave attitude towards illness. Despite witnessing her daughter's death and experiencing the amputation of her limbs, a part of the treatment implemented for La Mona that points to the patient's imminent death, Marisela retains her optimistic worldview and her faith that the continuation of life's circle will take its course through the *mestiza* child growing in her. In fact, Marisela's newborn *mestiza* child that Gregorio manages to save embodies the new *mestizalo* nation, which is already rising into existence and will prospectively break free from the yoke of Spanish colonialism. Bearing the blood and the cultural traditions of both the Spanish and the Native Americans, the new *mestizalo* identities arising in New Spain question the colonial power's attempts to efface cultural difference through the forceful imposition of a monolithic cultural narrative on the subordinated indigenous groupings. "Book I," then, suggests that the emergence of *mestizalo* identities can potentially alleviate the pain and enmity Spanish colonialism has introduced into the New World. The narrator states that "[i]t seemed as if with [the *mestiza* child's] birth, La Mona's attacks on the people had dwindled to nothing" (61), and that "[he] sensed a new attitude towards life grow within the people," people in the New World who gradually "conversed about freedom and equality" (61) and envisaged a future that would not be defined by rigid, unjust social and racial relations. Moreover, the process of intercultural communication in which Gregorio partakes throughout "Book I" brings about his own personal transformation. The Spanish physician, who initially espouses the discriminatory, superior attitude of the conquerors, transmutes into a new cultural identity, as he embraces the way of life and the cultural traditions of the indigenous people, and continues to work for the communal well-being of the new *mestizalo* nation.

"Book II: Delhi," set in Delhi barrio in Southern California, explores how racism and the HIV-virus penetrate human relationships and affect social values in the multicultural landscape of the US-Mexico borderlands during the mid-1970s. Because of his job as a doctor the Chicano narrator-protagonist, named Gregory Revueltas, comes in contact with the Chicana/o inhabitants of Delhi that constitute the majority of his patients. Sadly, he realizes that the lives of his ethnic kin are marked by violence, criminality, substance abuse, marginalization and racism. Gregory detects that "[t]he results of drive-by shootings, usually gang related, unfortunately had become too common" (71) in the barrio clinic where he is constantly challenged to cure "bleeding barrio warriors" (72) or drug addict, pregnant teenage girls. Living segregated in the southwestern barrios, Chicanas/os also experience marginalization and racial discrimination by the dominant Anglo-American society, which views Mexican Americans as inferior, disposable existences



due to their *mestizalo* identity profile. In fact, since the Mexican American war (1846-1848), the supposedly racially pure Anglo-American populations held the belief that “Mexican inter-racial mixing was ... the key source for the overall racial inferiority and barbaric disposition” of Mexican Americans (Escobedo 184).⁶ In the second narrative of *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Morales demonstrates how white American racism aimed at Chicanas/o is reinforced by various US institutions. When the protagonist’s Jewish-American lover, Sandra Spears, experiences an excessive hemorrhage due her hemophiliac condition and the Chicana/o barrio homeboys help her get to the hospital, the fierce racism of the US medical institutions is revealed. Namely, once the barrio boys arrive at the hospital along with the bleeding Sandra, “the nurse straightaway [hits] the security bottom” (Morales 99) and reports a “stabbing victim in emergency” (99). White American society’s stereotypical view of Mexican Americans as violent criminals leads the hospital personnel to the misguided assumption that Sandra is a victim of a racially motivated knife crime. Thus, although the barrio homeboys try to import their hemophiliac friend to the hospital in order to help her receive medical treatment, they are “searched for guns” (99), undergo a police inquisition and are taken into custody.

“Book II” addresses AIDS as a collective health crisis afflicting US society, and juxtaposes the discriminatory attitude US culture displays towards HIV-positive patients with the humane approach to pain and disease indigenous and Mexican cultures take. Gregory’s beloved girlfriend Sandra is infected with the HIV-virus through one of the blood transfusions she receives as treatment for her hemophiliac condition. Suffering from this infectious disease, the previously successful actress, Sandra Spears, is blatantly excluded from social life in “narcissistic health-conscious Orange Country” (72), which now views her as a “contaminated animal” (108), as “a Pandora’s box filled with diseases capable of destroying humanity” (112). For instance, the director of the Orange Country theatre denies Sandra access to his auditions due her status as an AIDS patient and declares that “[n]obody wants to endanger their lives by working with [her]” (109). Moreover, Sandra experiences ruthless discrimination and acute indifference in the hands of the US medical institutions. The fear and repulsion the medical personnel demonstrate towards the contaminating malady ravaging Sandra is overt, as “nurses and doctors absolutely refused to be in the same room with her” (112), regarding this AIDS-afflicted woman as “a job risk” (112). Shockingly, the hospital janitors purposefully neglect their sanitary duties in the ward Sandra is consigned until this place “[transforms] into a waste bin” (112). Yet, when the lovers cross the US-Mexico border and visit

⁶ More specifically, “Mexico’s heterogeneous population [is] largely made up of an indigenous class, former African slave communities, and the Spanish populace,” diverse populations that intermingled during the Spanish colonial period (Escobedo 184). On the contrary, for the Anglo-Saxon myth of origin, “Americans claimed a direct line to the Anglo-Saxon Germanic tribes of the European continent ... [which] were thought of as racially pure and unmixed” (179). By extension, “[p]opular folklore claimed that the Anglo-Saxon trait of possessing pure bloodlines carried a biological inclination for higher moral values” (179).



Mexico City, they find out that indigenous and Mexican *curanderas/os* demonstrate sincere compassion and respect towards the ailing Sandra and regard her disease as one part of life's circle. The *curanderas* teach Sandra to deal with her bodily pain and psychic anxiety optimistically, as they instruct her that she is experiencing as "transmutation" and that "[d]ecay is a natural process" (119). In fact, they help her embrace death suggesting that "God and the energies of the earth are calling [her] to join them in the metamorphosis of all of us" (119). The positive attitude to illness these *curanderas/os* communicate to Sandra during her sojourn in Mexico makes her feel empowered against her harrowing disease. Indeed, despite being a dying woman, dilapidated by AIDS, when Sandra returns to the Southwestern barrio she is revered by all her friends and relatives. The barrio homeboys, friends from Delhi, the couple's parents and Gregory tenderly attend to Sandra's needs and keep "guard against death" until her last moments (128). In this light, "Book II" reveals that unlike the scientifically developed US society, which excludes and dehumanizes ailing human beings, the values emanating from the indigenous and the Mexican cultural traditions, widely practiced in the borderlands between Mexico and the US, can offer possibilities to alleviate human pain.

In the futuristic scenario of "Book III: Lamex," the abuse of power by authoritarian discourses takes up the form of aggressive ecocide, which ravages the populations of the transnational, borderless confederation of Lamex. Particularly, "the region from the center of Mexico to the Pacific Coast is known as the Lamex Coastal Region of the Triple Alliance" (134) through which "two computer travelways" run connecting Mexico City and Los Angeles (133). Although Morales envisages that the US-Mexico border will have been abolished by 2079, the technologically advanced confederation of Lamex continues to implement a compartmentalized arrangement of space in order to categorize people according to their socio-economic conditions as well as their racial and ethnic identities. In fact, imaginary borders are drawn within Lamex to demarcate Higher Life Existence residential areas, Middle Life Existence settlements and Lower Life Existence zones where "the criminals and the dregs of ... society" are consigned (137). Interestingly, most of the Lower Life Existence (LLE) areas are "near what used to be the international border between Mexico and the United States" (137). These borderland spaces, cities such as "Chula Vista, or beautiful view in English" (137), are mainly inhabited by Spanish-speaking communities that have been formed by "long-time Mexican immigrants" (148). Thus, in the futuristic context of "Book III," the *mexicana/o*, *mestizalo* inhabitants of the borderlands are still downgraded and treated as inferior due to their racial and cultural difference, since they are restrained to the LLE zones of the borderlands and are, consequently, excluded from the social mainstream. Moreover, the Mexican *mestizas/os*, who live south of the former US-Mexico border, in "the Middle Life Existence Concentrations surrounding Mexico City" (144) enjoy socio-economic comforts "that about thirty years past most Mexicans lacked" (144), as most of them are recruited in the military. Still, they continue to face racial discrimination, marginalization and emotional estrangement in the transnational context of Lamex, which is permeated by "an attitude of apprehension, particularly toward Mexicans" (144).



Nevertheless, eco-destruction poses a serious, collective threat to the multi-ethnic citizenry of Lamex, as excessive environmental pollution creates new kinds of lethal diseases that attack and rapidly exterminate the people. The narrator-protagonist, a Mexican in origin “doctor of gene engineering” (134), once again named Gregory Revueltas, attempts to take control of these new epidemics along with his Asian colleague, Gabi, who has a robotic hand. Gregory communicates that “these spontaneous plagues ... [p]roduced by humanity’s harvest of waste ... traveled through the air, land and sea and penetrated populated areas, sometimes killing thousands” (138). Ecocide is identified as the outcome of the capitalist and imperialist politics of Lamex, which engage in rampant naval activity, creating huge amounts of organic waste in the ocean and establishing “garbage colonies” in areas where the less privileged indigenous populations reside and in economically deprived neighboring countries (164). In the speculative fictional context of “Book III,” the imprudent exploitation of natural resources by humans and the disruption of the earth’s ecology backfire on humanity and threaten it with extinction, since the different forms of life inhabiting the planet are co-dependent.⁷ And although the fierce consequences of environmental pollution take a greater impact on the racially different and the less powerful *mestiza/o* communities of the coalition, eco-destruction quickly transforms into an immense crisis, one which affects all the racial identities and social groups inhabiting Lamex.

The threat of ecocide and the health crisis transpiring in “Book III” are tackled through the narrator’s groundbreaking medical discovery that the hybrid genetic makeup of the Mexican people has become resilient to adverse environmental conditions. Gregory finds out that the inhabitants of the “hyperbolically contaminated” Mexico City (168), people who have been exposed to “the worst polluted air in the Americas” (164), have undergone a genetic mutation and their *mestiza/o* blood has become able to cure the lethal pulmonary diseases constantly caused by eco-destruction. Notably, the narrator decodes the healing powers of *mestizaje* through studying the historical, fictional and medical writings of his grandfather Gregory, the protagonist of “Book II,” writings that bring him in contact with his Mexican cultural traditions and enable him to unearth the illuminating potential arising from the healing practices of *curanderismo*. Gregory’s revolutionary medical findings subvert the long-standing belief that the *mestiza/o* biological profile

⁷ In her article “Waging War on Nature: Ecospaces, Ethnoecologies and Chicana/o Writings,” Emmanouilidou notes that “Paul J. Crutzen’s groundbreaking findings on the detrimental impact human activity has had on the ecosphere established the geological chronology of the Anthropocene Epoch” (28). By extension, since “there are fundamental ties that attach the human to the non-human, which reveal a ‘dense network of relations’ and the delicate balance of the ecological framework” (29), the disastrous repercussions the Anthropocene has had on nature take their toll on humanity’s living conditions as well. Particularly, the relentless economic and technological progress that Western societies aspire to results both to eco-destruction and to “the unfair treatment of local communities (most often non-white)” that are usually “disproportionately exposed to” the detrimental effects of environmental pollution (33-34).



of the Mexican people is degenerate, since they present *mestiza/o* blood as the antidote to eco-destruction and human extinction. On an allegorical level, Morales suggests that the coalition of different ethnic and cultural identities can also be the panacea to the socio-cultural and racial inequalities troubling humanity.⁸ Indeed, when a disastrous epidemic resulting from the concentration of toxic waste in the ocean strikes Los Angeles, the members of Lamex's elitist medical institutions are urged to "overcome psychologically structured prejudices" towards Mexicans (Morales 183), as they acknowledge the healing powers of *mestizaje* and appoint Gregory to transfuse Mexican blood in the afflicted Anglo-American populace of the city. Since the diachronically subordinated *mestizas/os* turn out to be the saviors of humanity in the fictional context of "Book III," it becomes apparent that "the delineation of intended repetition or reproduction of cultural forms [leads] to unintended distortion, inversion, and change" (Fischer 209).⁹ Namely, the view of *mestizas/os* as subordinate, a view that has been reinforced by the Spanish conquerors and the Anglo Americans in the socio-historical contexts of Books I and II respectively, is radically altered when it is transferred in the futuristic context of "Book III," where the resilience of *mestizalo* blood to environmental pollution offers the promise of humanity's survival.

In *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Alejandro Morales presents the oppression of *mestiza/o*, borderland identities by authoritative power structures as an ordeal tantalizing humanity throughout time, since he transfers the persistent pattern of subordination across different moments of New World history in each narrative of the novel. The borderland crises affecting *mestizalo* subjectivities take up the multifarious forms of Spanish colonialism, US racism and ecocide in each distinct time frame they transpire. Yet, they are all resolved through the regenerative potential of *mestizaje*, a process that Morales foregrounds as the analeptic to the pain caused by forceful superimpositions and racial inequalities in all the three Books.¹⁰ Moreover, it is

⁸ The redemptive and regenerative potential of *mestizaje* that Morales delineates in "Book III" also lies at the heart of José Vasconcelos' theory of *La Raza Cósmica* (1925). Vasconcelos, a cultural philosopher and politician of Mexican descent, suggested that inter-racial mixing will bring about "the union of all men into a fifth universal race, the fruit of all the previous ones and amelioration of everything past" (405). Vasconcelos envisaged that the new 'superior' cosmic race, which will emerge "[i]n Spanish America", will be "the synthetic race, the integral race, made up of the blood and the genius of all peoples and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and of a truly universal vision" (408). The notion of *La Raza Cósmica*, then, embraces *mestizaje* as a process that fosters humanity's progress through the creation of new, hybrid racial identities and challenges the discourse of white supremacy, which is based on an essentialist view of race.

⁹ In his discussion of the notion of transference, Fischer suggests that the repetition of certain behavioral patterns brings about "the indirection of cultural dynamics" (207). This repetition can be traced in *The Rag Doll Plagues* as the pattern of oppression directed at *mestizas/os*, but it is also exposed and subverted during its transference in different historical contexts.

¹⁰ In his essay, "Place and Culture: Analeptic for Individuality and the World's Indifference," Yi-Fu Tuan suggests that "place and culture ... [can be] a salve or analeptic for our ineluctable separateness ... and the world's indifference" (28). More specifically, Tuan notes that "attempts to overcome this indifference ... constitute the crucial meaning of human struggle with fate, and that



the three narrator-protagonists' quest for knowledge and their attempts to regain contact with the Mexican and indigenous cultural traditions that put forward the fruitful exchange of cultural information and the regeneration of racial and cultural identities throughout the novel. Therefore, a theme that emerges in *The Rag Doll Plagues* is that ethnic and cultural self-identification is approached as a process of "retrospection to gain a vision for the future" (Fischer 198).¹¹ Morales's tripartite novel explores the unfolding of self-identification in the borderlands across New World history's trajectory and conjoins past, present and future, constructing an optimistic vision of the world. As the author states in his interview with Maja Neff: "I think there is always some view of the future in my books ... Even if I write about the past, it is moving, it is viewing towards the future" (175). In *The Rag Doll Plagues*, Morales envisages "[a] future based perhaps on the idea of miscegenation, that there will be more and more of this miscegenation" and that it will hopefully lead to the indictment of the diachronically persistent plight of racism (Neff 177). The author speculates that "[s]lowly, once people look at each other as human beings, race ... [is] not important, it is really a social structure, a construction that people used to identify one another" (Neff 177-78). Indeed, the projection of *mestizaje* as the antidote to transhistorical borderland crises and the illuminating possibilities arising from the retrieval of indigenous and Mexican cultural traditions throughout *The Rag Doll Plagues* evince that Morales's imaginative novel points towards a future where racial and cultural differences will no longer be the grounds for the classification and the subordination of human beings.

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the measure of success in this struggle lies in the creation of human culture in all its myriad forms" (41). In this light, in *The Rag Doll Plagues*, *mestizaje*, which leads to the creation of new hybrid racial and cultural identities allowing differences to co-exist, alleviates the acute human suffering resulting from the indifference, exclusion and discrimination against racially and culturally different groups of people.

¹¹ In *The Rag Doll Plagues*, the protagonists' constant quest for the knowledge embedded in ethnic cultural heritage aligns with Fischer's view that self-identification and the re-invention of ethnic identities require the unearthing of past traditions. In fact, Fischer states that during the process of ethnic-identification "[w]hat ... seem initially to be individualistic ... searchings turn out to be revelations of traditions, re-collections of disseminated identities," and "[i]n so becoming, the searches also turn out to be powerful critiques of several contemporary rhetorics of domination" (198).



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