

Toward a Borderlands Ethics

The Undocumented Migrant and Haunted Communities in Contemporary Chicana/o Fiction

Pablo A. Ramirez

ABSTRACT: *By reading Helena María Viramontes's "Cariboo Cafe" and Daniel Chacon's "Godoy Lives," this essay argues that Chicana/o fiction articulates what I call a "borderlands ethics." Both Viramontes and Chacon give the undocumented migrant the power to merge the United States and Latin America, self and other, citizen and noncitizen. These mergers demonstrate how a borderlands ethical stance can produce new unauthorized truths and relations outside the law and beyond national borders. However, these stories of ghostly kinship also produce a political imperative: to resurrect borderlands relations and experiences in the public sphere. Through the trope of haunting and an engagement with a borderlands ethics, "The Cariboo Cafe" and "Godoy Lives" help us understand that maintaining a Latina/o ethnic identity is not a simple act of preservation; it is an ethico-political project that challenges the United States to form new visions of democracy and new relations with Latin America in order to maintain transborder communities and families.*

I have zero sympathy for these people. . . . These people have a lot of nerve to break the law and then complain about how they are treated.

THEY ARE NOT VULNERABLE, THEY ARE ILLEGAL. THEY BROKE THE LAW . . . ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS ARE ILLEGAL.

Online reader comments on "300 Protest Immigration Raids in Lake County [Ohio]," posted on Cleveland.com, June 17, 2007

We are all God's children. . . . We all deserve respect and care.

Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, quoted in "Rallies across U.S. Call for Illegal Immigrant Rights," posted on CNN.com, April 10, 2006

How do you tell the children of undocumented workers who are fighting in Iraq that we're going to deport your parents and grandparents? I'm a fifth-generation Mexican American—there's no distinction between them and me. . . . The message [of this pro-immigration movement] is "Today we march, tomorrow we vote."

Hector Flores, then president of LULAC, quoted in "We Decided Not to Be Invisible Anymore," *Washington Post*, April 11, 2006

At the end of 2005 the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R. 4437, the Sensenbrenner Bill, which among other punitive provisions would have transformed undocumented workers into felons. Though it did not pass the Senate, the bill sparked pro-immigration rallies in dozens of American cities, with protestors sometimes numbering in the hundreds of thousands. In response, people on all sides of the immigration issue dialed up the volume and intensity of the debate. As reflected in the above epigraphs, responses to the criminalization of undocumented workers tended to engage either a legal or ethical mode of narrating the nation. In the first two epigraphs, online posters approach the issue from a strictly legalistic stance. They attempt to dismiss ethical considerations that they say have interrupted our ability to come to judgment. National borders, in their view, have effectively removed the undocumented from the sphere of benevolence and sympathy ("I have zero sympathy for these people" and "They are not vulnerable"). For these posters, the law constitutes an unimpeachable standard of right and wrong in relation to undocumented migrants. The second poster believes that a simple tautology ("Illegal immigrants are illegal") should suffice to end discussion, allowing the nation to promptly pass judgment and deport the offenders. Only legal residents are rights bearers; to be "illegal" means to have no public voice or presence. This seems self-evident to the exasperated first poster, who decries the audacity of undocumented migrants who "break the law and then complain about how they are being treated."

If a legal stance creates a divide that precludes any sympathy for the plight of the undocumented, the last two epigraphs show the opposite,

PABLO A. RAMIREZ received his PhD in American cultures from the University of Michigan. He is presently an associate professor in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph (Ontario, Canada). Dr. Ramirez has published essays on contemporary Chicana/o literature and nineteenth-century American literature. He is currently working on a book project tentatively titled "Consent of the Conquered: Mexican-Anglo Romances and Contractual Freedom in Nineteenth-Century America." He can be contacted at pramirez@uoguelph.ca.

an ethical stance in which sympathy abolishes distinctions between legal and undocumented residents. Cardinal Roger Mahony, the archbishop of Los Angeles, urges Americans to regard undocumented workers as fellow human beings who, regardless of citizenship status, “are all God’s children” and “deserve respect and care.” At first glance it appears that Hector Flores, then president of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), also embraces a universal humanism that disregards the politics of borders: “There’s no distinction between them and me.” However, when he claims that “Today we march, tomorrow we vote,” he makes clear that his ethical stance does not entail an evacuation from the political realm. On the contrary, by expanding the public sphere to include the voices of undocumented migrants, the pro-immigration rallies serve as reminders that ethico-political visions are born in what Michel de Certeau has called the “ethical gap,” which is “the distance between ‘what is’ and ‘what ought to be’” and which “designates a space where we have something to do” (1986, 199). The pro-immigration rallies of 2006 and 2007 transformed the U.S.-Mexico borderlands into just such an “ethical gap.” In doing so, they created an ethical force that disrupted political norms in order to propose new visions of democracy and incorporation.

The pro-immigration rallies are only one example of how Latina/os have long resisted citizenship’s requirement that they contain their identities within the boundaries of the nation. The state, as Kathleen Kirby explains, works to “capture the flows and snags of escaping movements,” thus “compressing mobile heterogeneities into arrested masses” (1996, 104). The point of forging these bounded identities is to render people’s histories and relationships intelligible solely through the solidification of national space. As a transnational community, Latina/os continuously derail the nation’s efforts to establish an immobilizing tie between citizens and national territory. Because of the proximity of Latin America and the role of migration in the formation of families and communities, the political becomes unethical when the nation’s claim to territory can only be accomplished by arresting the back-and-forth movement across borders. To end such movement would tear apart the relational fabric of Latina/o communities and families that maintain ties to Latin America.

To sustain its transborder relations, the Chicana/o community has adopted what I call a “borderlands ethics,” a term that articulates the “ethical core” of Gloria Anzaldúa’s seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). A borderlands ethical stance enables Latina/os to imagine and create new, unauthorized definitions of family and community

across national borders by (a) not allowing laws to determine their relationships with others; (b) contextualizing their interactions with others by going beyond authorized national narratives and addressing multiple cultural frames of reference (Mexican, Native American, Afro-Cuban, etc.); and (c) encompassing contradictions and differences in order to continually interrogate the status quo. However, a borderlands ethical stance also produces a political imperative for Chicana/o citizens and legal residents of the United States to legitimize these borderlands conceptions of community and justice in the public realm.

The Chicana/o community's transnational character is often misinterpreted as a threat to the U.S. nation. For example, politically conservative critics often decry the efforts of Chicana/o U.S. citizens to use their voting power to protect "illegal aliens" from the overzealous efforts of anti-immigration politicians. They find it shocking that Chicana/os would use the privileges of citizenship to undermine the nation's borders. These efforts are seen as proof that the Chicana/o community simply wishes to preserve its foreign character and resist assimilation. Instead of regarding the foreigner as a threat, however, the Chicana/o community asks Americans to consider "the foreign" as a constitutive element of any democratic project. As critics like Slavoj Žižek (2001), Drucilla Cornell (1991), and Simon Critchley (1999) point out, the way to sustain a democracy is to regard it as a never-finished project that allows itself to be restructured by what is foreign to its nature. This disruptive foreign element creates new norms and, more important, new universal criteria by which to judge such norms. When governments envision themselves as complete and immune to change, this provides an impulse toward totalitarianism.

Helena María Viramontes's "Cariboo Cafe" (1985a) and Daniel Chacon's "Godoy Lives" (2000) articulate a borderlands ethics by casting the haunted undocumented migrant as a disruptive foreign element that has the power to merge Latin America and the United States, self and other, citizen and noncitizen. These mergers demonstrate how a borderlands ethical stance can produce new unauthorized truths and relations outside the law and beyond national borders. Through the trope of haunting and an engagement with a borderlands ethics, "The Cariboo Cafe" and "Godoy Lives" help us understand that maintaining a Latina/o ethnic identity is not a simple act of preservation; it is an ethico-political project that challenges the United States to form new visions of democracy and new relations with Latin America in order to maintain transborder communities and families.

How the Discourse of Citizenship Haunts Chicana/o Fiction

The legally enforced divide between citizens and undocumented migrants has led Chicana/o writers like Viramontes and Chacon to write about the spectral byproducts of citizenship and national borders. Their stories question the common assumption that the law simply represents or reflects society. As critical legal scholars have made clear, the law imposes its own logic on the world and shapes it accordingly (Delgado 1995; Gutiérrez-Jones 1995, 2001; Williams 1991). The law's rigid knowledge categories render particular experiences, emotions, and histories mute because such a system cannot translate them. It is at these moments of imposition and mistranslation that certain subjects (both people and topics) are relegated to a zone of (legal) unintelligibility. Unauthorized experiences and knowledges that cannot be translated into the law's language of equivalence and neutrality may become "ghosts" in the sense that they become powerful forces in other cultural arenas. According to Avery Gordon, these ghosts produce structures of feeling that resist turning particular experiences into the abstract, fixed social forms that methodologies regard as "significant" (1997, 176). It is important to remember that these ghosts do not passively moan on the perimeters of interpretive edifices. Quite the contrary, they chip away at the structures of meaning that have excluded them, hoping for entry and resurrection.

As Lisa Lowe and Avery Gordon explain, fiction can serve as an alternative cultural arena or site that gives voice to what official legal discourse (Lowe) or formal methodologies (Gordon) cannot represent. For Gordon, fictions "enable other kinds of sociological information to emerge" because they are not confined to the methods and norms of the social sciences (1997, 25). Lowe sees literature and other cultural practices as the ground from which to launch a counternarrative to official discourse. Fiction, for example, can "propose [and] enact . . . subjects and practices not contained by the narrative of American citizenship" (1996, 176). The space of imagination and fiction can become a site from which to reimagine a democracy by subjecting it to interrogation and scrutiny. As Chicana/o cultural producers and political activists have shown, imaginary spaces (or places that are no-places) like Aztlán allow us to go beyond origin or national narratives in order to reimagine our relations with others (Gaspar de Alba 2005). Chicana/o literature, in particular, can help us with the task of mediating between two competing realities: a borderlands reality

and an authorized, legally legitimate reality. Through the trope of haunting, Viramontes and Chacon have chosen to eschew a realist strategy for representing the plight of undocumented migrants in order to create a different understanding that comes from occupying the space between realism and borders (“what is”), on one hand, and imagination and ethics (“what ought to be”), on the other.

The Fantastic Site of Justice in Helena María Viramontes’s “Cariboo Cafe”

It is in the liminal space between reality and imagination where Viramontes’s and Chacon’s ghosts—a little boy who was killed by a Latin American death squad and a gay Chicano who was disowned by his father, respectively—haunt entire communities and families. These ghosts do not materialize as individual apparitions. Instead they are resurrected through memories, substitutions, and new family formations. These resurrections can only be accomplished by calling the reader’s attention to a larger context of U.S.–Latin American relations that American nationalism ignores. As Latina/o studies scholars have pointed out, U.S. law consolidates political territory by “forgetting” a history of contact between Latin America and the United States, a history that continues to shape the present realities of borderlands communities (Anzaldúa 1987; Calderón and Saldívar 1991; Gutiérrez-Jones 1995, 2001; Saldívar 1991, 1997). Viramontes’s ghost story addresses this larger pan-American context by employing the fantastic in order to create a *choque*, or clash, of two political and historical contexts that national borders have made incompatible and seemingly unrelated. While the mode of narration in “Cariboo Cafe” cannot be called “fantastic” according to Tzvetan Todorov’s narrow definition, the story does employ an element of the fantastic in order to create a disruptive ethical force. The fantastic works to disrupt “reality” or realism, as Bliss Cua Lim explains, through the eruption of “competing contexts of experience [and] discontinuous epistemological paradigms [that] are concretely represented, figured, or made visible” (2001, 298). The fantastic in Viramontes’s story unsettles American reality by having the pain, violence, and political injustice of Central America erupt in an American city, thereby disturbing Americans’ complacent detachment from the violence the United States has helped create through its foreign policies. This eruption of a Latin American experience in an American context (or an ethical interruption of a bounded national identity) allows readers to address other cultural

frames of reference rather than relying solely on national narratives to shape their understanding.

In “Re-placing the Border in Ethnic Literature,” Dean Franco astutely notes that “the border crossing of the protagonists [in “Cariboo Cafe”] is matched, even instigated by, the border crossing of U.S. foreign policy” (2002, 120). Franco uses Viramontes’s story to redefine our notion of the borderlands. He proposes that “through its intervention in Nicaragua and Central America, U.S. foreign policy during the eighties (though not only then) could itself be termed a politics of the borderlands, acknowledging the porousness, even the interconnectedness, of the region” (120). Therefore, in “Cariboo Cafe,” only by transgressing the borders of the nation and reality can America’s complicity in the political violence of Latin America be brought to light. In fact, Viramontes’s short story demonstrates how justice can only be achieved through a departure from reality and entry into the haunted imagination of a grieving mother whose son has been kidnapped and murdered by a totalitarian Latin American government.

Rendered spiritually homeless by her son’s death, the mother illegally crosses the border into the United States and becomes an undocumented worker. She wanders the streets of an unnamed U.S. city, where she encounters Macky and his sister, two undocumented children who are lost. In her imagination, space and time warp; Latin America and the United States blend, and Macky and her dead son become one. In her fantasy, she believes that her son has been resurrected and that she has been given a second chance to protect him. Happily, she resumes her role as mother and takes the children to the Cariboo Cafe for dinner. At this point, the story shifts from the third-person, omniscient narrator to the first-person voice of the Anglo cook. Like the undocumented woman, he too is haunted by the memory of a son who died in warfare. In the cook’s case, his son disappeared in Vietnam and is presumed dead. This loss drives the cook to seek out surrogate sons, like Paulie, a drug addict whose deadly overdose places the cook in trouble with the law. The police overrun the café and accuse him of dealing drugs out of his establishment. Although the cook lost his first son in war and the death of his surrogate son makes him a target of police threats, he promises himself that he will be extra scrupulous in following the law so as not to give the police any excuse to mistreat him again. After he has made this resolution, he meets the woman and the children for the first time. That night, before going to bed, the cook sees a news report about two missing children—Macky and his sister. He recognizes them and concludes that the woman is a kidnapper. When

they come to his café again the next day, the cook makes a decision. With the rationalization that a family should stay together, he calls the police. They arrive in a military-like procession and attempt to wrest the boy from the woman's grasp.

However, the woman has come to a decision of her own: she will not lose her son again, and she will fight the State. As the cook cowers behind the counter, she takes on the city police, which have merged in her mind with a Latin American death squad:

[The policemen's] faces become distorted and she doesn't see the huge hand that takes hold of Geraldo [her dead son/Macky] and she begins screaming all over again, screaming so that the walls shake, screaming enough for all the women of murdered children, screaming, pleading for help from people outside, and she pushes an open hand against an officer's nose, because no one will stop them. He pushes the gun barrel to her face . . .

As she fights the police/death squad, the psychic or aesthetic distance between the reader and the undocumented woman collapses, giving the woman a voice for the first time in the story:

I am laughing, howling at their stupidity . . . I will never let my son go and then I hear something crunching like broken glass against my forehead, and I am blinded by a liquid darkness. But I hold onto his hand . . . I'll never let go. Because we are going home. My son and I. (Viramontes 1985a, 75)

Whatever sympathy we might have had for the cook's decision is shattered by the woman's screams of pain and loss. If we had previously regarded her as a kidnapper, this passage effectively suspends the logic of the law in order to usher in the ethical impact of a mother's pain. In other words, as the undocumented woman fights with all her might, scratching, biting, even throwing hot coffee at the police, there is an ethical interruption of the law's power that transforms the grieving mother from a criminal to a force of righteousness. From her viewpoint, the police are not agents of good attempting to reunite a family—quite the opposite. They are brutal agents who are very similar to the death squads in Latin America. They are the wrongdoers.

Political forces have made it close to impossible to achieve legal redress for her son's murder in a court of law. No court will put both a Latin American government and the U.S. government on trial for murder. Only a fantastic site of justice allows this woman to put *all* the people responsible for her son's murder on trial. Rather than dismissing her point of view as

simple insanity, the story strives to represent the fusion of fantasy and reality as the most compelling narration of her son's death and the deaths of others like him. If the law and borders have made a legal translation from grief to grievance an impossibility, the realm of fantasy and fiction has created an understanding of death and resurrection that brings the "malignant" forces involved in the production of the borderlands into clear relief.

It is through the story's separation of "what is legal" from "what is just" that the narrative creates, to use Slavoj Žižek's words for my own purposes, an ethical "transgression of the legal norm—a transgression which, in contrast to a simple criminal violation, does not simply violate . . . but redefines what is a legal norm . . . [and] generates a new shape of what counts as 'Good'" (2001, 170). Through this reversal of right and wrong, the woman's fighting back is not presented as an act "that eludes all rational criteria"; on the contrary, the ethical vision put forward by the narrative asks us to "recreate the very criteria by which it should be judged" (170). In doing so, "Cariboo Cafe" creates an ethical narrative space in which a foreign element (the undocumented woman) creates an understanding of justice that cannot be presently articulated within the parameters of the law. If the law encourages us to regard the mother in "Cariboo Cafe" as a criminal, a borderlands ethical stance helps us attain a knowledge and understanding that the law cannot recognize and will not translate.

In Viramontes's stories, adopting a legal stance wreaks more violence and produces further misunderstandings that sunder, rather than mend, relationships with others. The cook's decision to call the police, for example, is clearly represented as a tragic mistake. Unlike the undocumented woman, he can only reunite his family symbolically through the mediation of the police. However, it would be a mistake to see him as simply an Anglo agent of the state, as some critics have done. Ellen McCracken, for instance, states that whereas "the Central American woman heroically gives her life to save her surrogate son from what she believes will be capture by a military regime, the cook works together with the repressive force, informing the police about his surrogate son Paulie just as he tells them about other undocumented restaurant customers" (1999, 51–52). However, in her attempt to align the cook with the authorities, she flattens the complicated manner in which Viramontes addresses issues of community, family, and the state. Sonia Saldívar-Hull, on the other hand, recognizes the cook's vulnerability in the face of the law. She points out that the "great irony here is that this man is almost as much a victim of the capitalist system as are the undocumented workers. . . . This Anglo-American man has been

similarly victimized by the imperialistic urges of a U.S. government that led the country into a war in Southeast Asia" (Saldívar-Hull 1991, 218). Despite this acknowledgement of the cook's victimization at the hands of the police, Saldívar-Hull, like McCracken, regards his cooperation with the authorities as a sign of his complicity.

Carl Gutiérrez-Jones and Dean Franco, however, argue that the cook, like the undocumented workers he serves, is also part of this borderlands/liminal space, despite his U.S. citizenship. What McCracken and Saldívar-Hull see as collaboration with the state, Franco sees as an act of coercion. Referring to the passage in which the cook tells immigration agents where the undocumented workers are hiding, Franco proposes that "pointing to the bathroom points him out as a subject of police surveillance and coercion and underscores his status as a liminal figure" (2002, 124). Critical legal studies scholar Gutiérrez-Jones takes this issue of coercion to pose a more provocative interpretation. For him, when the cook calls the police to reunite another family in order to reunite his own, "his recourse to the police are undercut by . . . a recognition of the law's hegemonic control over his decisions" (1995, 120). By focusing on this issue of "hegemonic control," "Cariboo Cafe" dramatizes two kinds of decisions. One decision involves adopting a borderlands ethical stance and going beyond the parameters of the law in order to properly contextualize one's relationships with others. The second decision involves submitting to the authority of the state and allowing its laws to regulate one's exchanges with others.

If we compare "Cariboo Cafe" with "Neighbors," another story in the collection that involves the second decision (calling the police), we see that Viramontes avoids simplistic binary representations of the Anglo as state agent and the Latina as state resistor. In "Neighbors," it is Aura, an elderly Chicana, who calls the police to intervene on her behalf and make a Chicano gang stop playing their loud music on the sidewalk (Viramontes 1985b). At first she asks the gang members to go home and play their music there, but they laugh at her and tell her they are home. They disregard Aura's feelings, and Aura disregards the fact that they have no public spaces available to them in a barrio half destroyed by the construction of a freeway. When she sees the police arrive in military fashion and violently arrest the boys, she immediately realizes her error in calling the authorities to mediate her relations with her neighbors. As in "Cariboo Cafe," calling the police creates a war zone.

Both stories deal with characters whose pain has been caused by the state. While the cook's grief over the loss of his son is the result of

U.S. foreign involvement in Vietnam, Aura's alienation is caused by city development that has further fragmented and isolated the Chicano barrio. In both cases, individuals may call on the power of the law but if they do they will soon find that the state carries out its own will. In other words, individual intent may mobilize the police, but the legal machinery operates above and beyond interpersonal relations. The adoption of a legal stance, in fact, encourages the cook and Aura to approach the undocumented and the gang members, respectively, as criminals and therefore perpetuate the disenfranchisement of the entire community. Moreover, by calling the police, the cook and Aura show themselves to be trapped by and blind to the larger context of their suffering. The tragedy in each of these stories is that these characters call on the police to regulate communal relations that the state itself has put in jeopardy.

The Haunted Green Card in Daniel Chacon's "Godoy Lives"

While the law assumes that individuals function as "self-determined subjects, expressing consistent, unambivalent, and unexceptional desires," the ghosts in both "Cariboo Cafe" and Daniel Chacon's "Godoy Lives" thwart the attainment of a self-enclosed legal subjectivity in order to build a Chicana/o ethnic unity among citizens and noncitizens through loss, grief, and sympathy (Gutiérrez-Jones 1995, 171). In both Viramontes's and Chacon's stories, ethical obligations make it close to impossible for people to use their citizenship status to create a clean break between themselves and undocumented migrants. Chacon's story, however, clearly demonstrates that a borderlands ethics does not simply address relations between the United States and Latin America. It also helps us interrogate any suppression of difference in the creation of self-enclosed ethnic or family spaces. By merging an undocumented migrant with the ghost of a gay Chicano, Chacon's short story shows how policing the borders of the family is not unlike policing the borders of the nation. The nation, in other words, is not the only entity capable of producing ghosts. In "Godoy Lives," it is an ethical break in a Chicana/o family, caused by a father's homophobia, that transforms a simple green card into a haunted space that is capable of being occupied by complete strangers.

As Chacon's story reminds us, the Chicana/o community has a long history of erecting borders and rejecting difference. Between 1930 and 1960, Mexican American activists attempted to resist their status as alien

citizens by making a clear distinction between themselves and Mexican nationals (García 1989). With the constant influx of Mexican immigrants into the United States, Anglo Americans tended to conflate the two groups, thus regarding Mexican Americans as foreigners. Hoping to avoid such conflation and secure the civil rights of Mexican Americans, political organizations like LULAC adopted a model of assimilation that stressed Mexican Americans' status as U.S. citizens. But in the 1960s and 1970s, the Chicano movement abolished the divide between citizens and noncitizens when it transformed Chicana/os from U.S. citizens to descendents of Aztlán, an indigenous nation that traversed the U.S.-Mexico border. For Chicana/os, the American nation and its borders no longer determined the contours of their community or their ethico-political commitments. As Chicano movement activist Albert Armendariz explains, "We realized that we needed to include non-citizens—both legal and illegal—in our [civil rights] efforts" (Gutiérrez 1995, 196). By creating the transborder community of Aztlán, the Chicano movement planted the seeds of a borderlands ethical praxis.

Unfortunately, despite the creation of new ethical and political relations, Chicano nationalism's claim to land soon created other borders. By promoting a masculinist and heteronormative conception of community, the movement gave rise to the idea of an "authentic" Chicano, which in turn created its own legal and illegal subjects. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* proved instrumental in giving Chicana/o scholars and activists a borderlands paradigm that helped them address and avoid the pitfalls of Chicano nationalism. For Anzaldúa, submerging difference for the sake of ethnic unity could never address the borderlands experience of the Chicana/o community. To achieve a new mestiza consciousness, she urged people to reject nationalism's "counterstance," which encourages us to react and define ourselves in contrast to another group. A counterstance is a self-defeating political stance that simply "locks [us] into a duel of oppressor and oppressed," when we should strive to stand "on both shores at once" (Anzaldúa 1987, 78). Written by a queer mestiza, *Borderlands/La Frontera* is clearly a response to Chicano nationalism's often prescriptive and heteronormative conceptions of community and identity. Therefore, when Anzaldúa urges us to embrace difference, she is encouraging us to form alliances not only with people of color but also with other groups such as queers, women, the poor, and the elderly. While nationalism encourages us to situate ourselves in a determinate manner (citizen versus illegal, insider versus outsider, authentic versus inauthentic), an ethical stance does away

with the firm ground of position and transforms an encounter with an Other into a moment of critique and interrogation. As the above evolution of a borderlands ethical praxis illustrates, we cannot address racial difference in isolation from other forms of difference. To do so only installs a politics of authenticity that proposes a correct model of ethnicity. By excluding difference, nations, communities, and families create borders where the rules are applied unquestioningly and automatically in order to distinguish between insiders and outsiders.

The acceptance of difference, however, gives a borderlands ethical stance the ability to transform borders into sites of ethico-political deliberation. Rather than being a mere divider, a border can become a site “where some prepositional or situational Other is encountered and where internal difficulties within ethics itself are thereby exposed” (Harpham 1992, 34–35). Borders can, as Thomas Keenan asserts in *Fables of Responsibility*, force one to question “the most canonical and well-established definition of the political, the distinction between friend and enemy” (1997, 11). In “Godoy Lives,” the exclusion of difference causes the borders of the family and the nation to converge. However, by turning a gay family member into an outsider, the Godoy family members created an ethical gap that makes it impossible for them to create a homogenous, self-enclosed family circle.

“Godoy Lives” is a story about a man who dies but whose green card lives on. Juan, a Mexican living in Mexico, is given the dead man’s green card, which allows legal entry into the United States. All he knows about Miguel Godoy, the deceased, is that his father caught him having sex with another man and disowned him. Juan takes the green card and goes to the border, where he discovers that it is the Chicano border guards, not the Anglos, who most diligently guard the nation. Juan picks a line where a bored white officer barely looks at the IDs held before him. The line moves quickly until a Chicano replaces him. The Chicano takes his job seriously and closely examines the cards presented to him. When it is Juan’s turn, he asks him to repeat his last name three times. Juan is sure that this man has somehow guessed that he is not Godoy. Suddenly the guard exclaims, “Cousin! It’s me!” (Chacon 2000, 7). The interrogation, this questioning of Juan’s name and his right to enter, suddenly becomes a family reunion between Pancho, the Chicano border guard, and Juan, an undocumented Mexican migrant. Not only does Pancho allow Juan to enter the United States, he invites him to enter his home.

What is laughable about the Godoy family members is that they rely on a government document, a green card, to tell them who is family and who

is not. Instead of bridging the ethical gap between what is (the expulsion of the gay son) and what should be (the gay son's reincorporation into the family), the family attempts to collapse the distance between itself and the government in order to close the family circle. As Ralph Cintron points out, identification cards and government documents are "signs of distance . . . that came into being precisely because of a lack of face-to-face interactions" (1997, 56–57). Cintron further suggests that

being a member of a state is not the same thing as being a member of a community, a people, or a tribe. Membership in one of the latter does not necessarily entail a writing act that declares a relationship between an individual and the abstraction the individual belongs to. In contrast the state cannot exist without these recorded relationships. (52)

Because government documents are meant to replace face-to-face interactions, family membership should not be the same thing as national membership. Unfortunately, by transforming Miguel Godoy into a stranger, the family—like the U.S. government—now needs documents to authenticate family relations. Not surprisingly, the Godoy family's attempt to use a green card to create a closed family space is doomed to fail. Although legal documents are supposed to close the gap between the individual and the state and authenticate their relationship with each other, these documents actually create a type of vacuum—an empty slot, so to speak. The undocumented have a long history of inserting their own set of representations into this gap between the individual and the state. Chacon dramatizes the emptiness of this legal space by representing it as a phantom space whose legal purposes can be derailed and overridden by a borderlands reality.

The story mocks the fact that Pancho and his family never achieve an ethical epiphany. That is, they accept difference without ever realizing that they are doing so. Pancho is so blind that he reassures Juan/Miguel that he never believed the rumors that he was gay. Moreover, financial incentives, rather than sentimental attachments, are the primary reason that Pancho is so happy to be reunited with his estranged cousin. With Miguel Godoy's return, Godoy's mother can now stop grieving and can give her son—Juan/Godoy—the inheritance that she has been holding for him. This money can then be channeled back into the rest of the family through Juan/Godoy's business partnership with Pancho.

While Pancho and his family remain oblivious to the very end, the family reunion at the border has a transformative effect on Juan. As he hears more and more family stories of Miguel Godoy's life, the line between his

identity and the dead man's becomes blurred. The name "Miguel Godoy" changes from a legal identity to a name that comes attached with a life story and a set of relations. When Juan sees photos of Godoy and Pancho as children on a horse ranch, "the similarities between that child and how [Juan] remembered looking as a child were so great that it spooked him, as if he had had two lives that went on simultaneously. He almost remembered that day playing cowboys" (Chacon 2000, 11). At the dinner table, Pancho begins to tell tales of Godoy as a great man who would fight with the bigger boys and who was admired by all the girls. Juan, a timid man who lacks Miguel Godoy's self-confidence, develops a desire to insert himself in these stories: "Juan relished the stories, picturing it all and almost believing that he had done those things" (14). As he begins to acquire more and more of Miguel Godoy's memories, the lines between self and other, legal resident and undocumented immigrant, Mexico and the United States begin to blur. The story ends with Juan about to be introduced to the mother. He is certain that he will be exposed as a fraud, but it turns out that the mother is senile; she can no longer distinguish between family and strangers. The family banished one kind of difference (homosexuality), only to replace it with another (undocumented migrant). Whether the family knows it or not, it can only mend its relational fabric by incorporating difference. Only the union of ghost and imposter can render this family complete.

As Kathleen Brogan observes in her study of ghost stories in American ethnic literature, "ghostly kinship replaces biological descent as the basis for ethnic affiliations" (1998, 12). While both "Cariboo Cafe" and "Godoy Lives" replace biological families with ghostly ones, they do so because the discourse of citizenship and the enforcement of borders have cast certain Latina/o relations and experiences out of the public sphere and into a liminal and ghostly space. The fact that these ghostly families are based on a misrecognition indicates the need for a second political articulation of borderlands relations. While these works of fiction do not define or posit new political norms or legal definitions, they do become sites of ethical deliberation that interrupt the power and logic of the law in order to begin the process of legitimizing borderlands truths and relations that the law renders criminal, threatening, or simply untenable. In the end, these stories provide us with a cautionary tale and a mission: until borderlands truths and relationships are resurrected in the political and legal sphere, the Latina/o communities and families will have to exist partially in a realm of criminalized relations.

Conclusion

Conservative critics often invoke the universal in order to call for the eradication of identity politics. One of the most sophisticated of these critics is Walter Benn Michaels, who accuses identity politics of fixing people to a particular subject position with a singular perspective. According to Michaels, such positioning makes debate an impossibility because there can be no right or wrong. It is, after all, simply a matter of where one stands in society, so to speak. In his article, "The Shape of the Signifier," Michaels gives the following example: Suppose you are traveling on foot, and you see indentations on the ground. Up close, they have no apparent meaning. However, once you are in an airplane one thousand feet above the ground, you realize that these indentations form a line from a poem. You cannot say which interpretation is correct because it is all a matter of perspective: it all depends on where you stand. This, he explains, is how identity politics prevents debate: it all becomes a matter of a localized (and therefore limited) perspective (2001, 275). Walter Benn Michaels claims that groups preserve their ethnic identities and their particular histories because of a perversity of ownership in which the answer to the question "What am I?" determines the answer to "Who am I?" According to Michaels, we must abolish these particular histories, and the subject positions that produce them, in order to disarticulate difference from disagreement. In other words, Michaels's suggestion is a simple one: ignore difference. Once we ignore difference, everyone will be able to engage in a debate about what is true and what is false—with no recourse to relativism. Questions of identity, therefore, would no longer be conflated with questions of political beliefs. By making identity irrelevant, what matters would not be "who you were but what side you were on" (2000, 640).

Contrary to conservatives' assertion that identity politics leads to the formation of a fixed and singular viewpoint, the stories by Viramontes and Chacon depend on the abolishment of rigid subject positions in order to advance a political agenda through narrative. These works of fiction narrate and imaginatively theorize a community based not only on porous borders between nations, but on porous borders between people. In both "Godoy Lives" and "The Cariboo Cafe," grief gives the undocumented the fantastic power to merge people and places, thus weakening the borders of the self and the nation. Both stories enact these mergers through the fusion of the dead and the living and the subsequent transformation from stranger to family member. It is the weakening of self-boundaries in the

face of another's grief that creates an allegory of Chicano/Latino community formation. In fact, the political commentary of these stories reaches its full strength through the merging of a series of dichotomies: reality and fantasy, self and other, legal and illegal, the United States and Latin America. These Chicana/o writers employ the undocumented migrant to render both personal and national boundaries unstable, thus creating an entry in the armor of the legal edifice. They take this tiny opening and consistently widen it until, by the end of the narrative, the divide between Latin America and the United States seems not only surmountable but also patently illusory and false.

Consequently, when it comes to applying Michaels's arguments to the U.S. Latina/o community, his well-articulated distinction between identity and ideology collapses. To characterize Latina/o identity politics as solely concerned with questions of "What is my heritage?" or "What am I?" ignores the more widespread, radical impact of Latina/o culture and politics in the United States. Latina/o ethics and politics is not about maintaining identity for identity's sake but about creating new conceptions of democracy and new sets of relationships that will allow Latina/os to maintain family and cultural ties. The Latina/o community in the United States, through its activism and its fiction, can be seen as attempting to persuade Americans to establish new relations with Latin America that would abolish, rather than preserve, unequal distinctions between citizen and noncitizen, Latin American and American, Anglo and Latina/o. Latina/os are not resisting complete assimilation simply because they wish to preserve their "foreign character" or their identity-given culture. This "foreign" identity is actually a borderlands ideology. Since there is presently no place in the law to hear the ethical call of U.S. Latina/os, Chicana/o and Latina/o fiction provides one space in which an ethnic community and a nation can begin to imagine a democracy that laws and borders have made unthinkable.

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