

Ewelina Krok

Literary Representations of Folk Tradition  
in Contemporary Chicano/a Fiction

Hans-Jürgen Diller, Herbert Grabes, Kuno Schuhmann (Hg.)

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# Contents

I.	Introduction	1
1.	(Re)Constructing Chicano/a Traditions: Memory, Literature, Culture	1
2.	Cultural Context	8
3.	Goals of My Study	15
II.	Theoretical Framework	17
1.	A Semiotic Concept of Culture	17
2.	The Concept of Collective Memory and the Mexican American Folk Heritage	22
3.	Ethnic Semiosis in Chicano/a Literature	30
III.	Representations of Folk Traditions in Contemporary Chicano/a Literature: Methodological Framework	37
1.	Literary Texts and Their Cultural Context: Mimesis	38
2.	Narrative Techniques for the Representation of Cultural Traditions in Chicano/a Fiction	42
2.1.	Narrative Communication Model	43
2.2.	Narrative Mediation of Chicano/a Cultural Traditions	44
2.3.	Mediation and (Re)construction of Chicano/a Folk Traditions through Characters	48
2.4.	The Semantisation of Space as a Strategy to Illustrate and Reflect on the Ongoing Presence of Folk Traditions in Mexican American Society	54
2.5.	Feigned Orality as a Means of Representation of Chicano/a Oral Traditions in the Medium of Literature	57
IV.	Narrative Representations of Chicano/a Folk Traditions in Selected Novels by Contemporary Chicano/a Authors	62
1.	Weaving the Threads of Memory: The Representation of the Storytelling Tradition in Sandra Cisneros's <i>Caramelo</i> (2002)	62
1.1.	The Structure and Genre of the Novel	64
1.2.	Storytelling as an Ethnic Project in <i>Caramelo</i> (2002)	65
1.3.	The Weaving of the Textual <i>Rebozo</i> : The Construction of the Chicano Collective Cultural Memory in the Medium of Literature	82

2.	The Use of Traditional <i>Cuentos</i> and Folk Figures in Chicano/a Literature	90
2.1.	The Figure of La Llorona in Contemporary Chicano/a Literature	92
2.1.1.	The Figure of La Llorona as a Guiding Metaphor of the Hero's Search for Identity: Rudolfo Anaya's <i>Albuquerque</i> (1992)	94
2.1.2.	Negotiating of the 'Self' in Cultural Master Narratives: Graciela Limón's <i>The Memories of Ana Calderón</i> (1994)	103
2.2.	The Figure of La Malinche in the Chicano/a Literature and Culture	115
2.2.1.	Lucha Corpi's <i>Black Widow's Wardrobe</i> (1999): The Figure of La Malinche as a Means of Female Empowerment and Contribution to the Project of Chicano/a Community Building	118
2.2.2.	The Figure of La Malinche as the Conquered 'Other' in Benjamin Alire Sáenz's <i>The House of Forgetting</i> (1997)	132
3.	Ana Castillo's <i>So Far From God</i> (1993): Space as a Means of Representation of Folk Traditions in Contemporary Chicano/a Literature	144
3.1.	Esperanza – The Public Space of Chicana Experience, Political Idealism and Disillusionment	147
3.2.	Caridad – Criticism of Sexual Taboos and Spiritual Space of Chicana Experience	150
3.3.	Fe – The Space of the 'American Dream' Home and Environmental Critique	154
3.4.	Loca – The Natural Space and Supernatural Experiences	156
3.5.	Sofia – The Home Space, Female Emancipation and Renewal of the Communal Life	159
V.	Conclusion	165
VI.	Bibliography	170



# I. Introduction

## 1. (Re)Constructing Chicano/a Traditions: Memory, Literature, Culture

Many so-called multicultural, ethnic and/or minority literatures frequently display a continuing interest in exploring their cultural heritage, including both individual and collective memories, as well as the problems of identity construction.<sup>1</sup> Chicano/a literature also shares these characteristics, and representations of folk traditions are important in many Mexican American narratives. A number of contemporary Chicano/a works draw attention to the complex nexus of cultural traditions while also showing how individuals and groups use their ethnic heritage in creating memories and identities. They may show youngsters listening to their *abuelos* telling the traditional *cuentos* about La Llorona or Juan Oso, they may quote recipes or they may feature peculiar prayers to the patron-saints. They may also employ archetypal characters like La Malinche, refer to the famous image of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, describe magical healing practices, *santerismo*, the Day of the Dead celebrations, or the art of *rebozo*-weaving.

What these works share is that they emphasise the fluidity and flexibility inherent in cultural transmission (*tradere*), and explore the complex functional potential of traditions represented in literature. These representations are neither superficial markers of Chicano/a ethnicity, nor a timeless and unchangeable part of Mexican American cultural heritage. On the contrary, they are complex cultural constructs, which reflect on how contemporary Chicanos/as continue to imagine their collective memories and identities – how they remember, affirm, neglect, deny, forget, transform, reinvent, reinterpret and renegotiate their cultural heritage. As these works demonstrate, Chicano folk traditions are continuously changed, transformed and renegotiated. It is my main goal to explore these processes, and examine both how and why traditions are constantly used and reused in forming memories and identities. For example, what criteria decide how particular traditions are either affirmed, challenged or neglected? How may traditions be reconstructed through literature, and what role do contemporary Chicano/a narratives play in perpetuating traditions?

These questions demonstrate the complex interdependencies among literature, culture and memory; to answer them I draw on research in the field of combined cultural and literary studies. I understand the terms ‘folk’ and ‘folklore’ – as in ‘Chicano/a folk traditions’ and ‘Chicano/a folklore’ – as “the unofficial heritage of a people” (Paredes 1982, 1-11) and “the informal knowledge of a culture that circulates within and among families, groups, towns, and regions” (Castro 2001: xiv). Given the insights in Rafaela Castro’s *Chicano Folklore: A Guide to the Folktales, Traditions, Rituals and Religious Practices of Mexican Americans* (2001), I apply these terms to those terms, genres or concepts that “represent or describe a folk speech, folk narra-

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Krupat (1989), Vizenor (1988), Singh (1996), Lee (2003).

tive, folk artifact, cultural tradition, or ritual occurring in the United States that pertains to the Chicano, or Mexican American, population”<sup>2</sup> (ibid.: xi). In particular my study relies on Castro’s notion of folk heritage, which combines the concepts of folklore and tradition:

[Folklore] is passed on from generation to generation, through word of mouth, through stories, songs, family histories, and humorous tales. But it is also passed on through nonverbal gestures, unwritten habits and customs, favorite foods, and religious and family beliefs that sometimes appear to have no historical basis yet have persisted for many generations. (ibid.: xiv)

The concept of ‘tradition’ I adopt follows Aleida Assmann’s (1999b) ‘emphatic concept of tradition’ (*der emphatische Traditionsbegriff*), which refers to the forms in which continuity is actively produced, as seen from the perspective of those perpetuating traditions. The process of *tradere* is understood as a transmission of messages over time – a very specific form of communication, in which messages are not exchanged reciprocally and horizontally, but rather are passed vertically along a generation line.<sup>3</sup> This process functions as a kind of cultural institution which ensures that texts, thoughts, forms of behaviour, values etc., will be passed on (cf. 63). Thus, tradition can be defined as an ongoing construction of cultural identity. It is a means of establishing collective memory spaces, in which trans-generational communication takes place:

Tradition can be defined as an ongoing cultural construction of identity. We must remember however that this ongoing construction is marked by breaks, forgetting, change and relativising. What is true for cultural memory in general is also true for particular traditions: they constitute and institutionalise collective memory spaces, in which it is possible to negotiate and communicate over a life-time. (1999b: 63; my translation)<sup>4</sup>

Aleida Assmann rightly points out that the continuity embodied in a tradition is only ostensible: the process of *tradere* is marked by constant change, break, relativization and forgetting. Indeed, this is precisely what contemporary Chicano/a literature narratively represents: traditions are challenged, renegotiated and transformed, and even denied, neglected and forgotten, only to be rediscovered later.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Castro’s (2001: xi) reference to the standard classifications of folklore and folklore genres such as “oral narrative, literature, material culture, folk custom and beliefs, and folk arts.”

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. Assmann (1999b: 64): “Tradition läßt sich [...] als ein Sonderfall von Kommunikation auffassen, bei der Nachrichten nicht wechselseitig und horizontal ausgetauscht, sondern vertikal entlang einer Generationenlinie weitergeben werden.”

<sup>4</sup> Cf.: “Tradition kann definiert werden als eine auf Dauer gestellte kulturelle Konstruktion von Identität. Diese Dauer jedoch muß permanent der Zeit als Dimension des Abbruchs, des Vergessens, der Veränderung, der Relativierung abgerungen werden. Was für das kulturelle Gedächtnis im allgemeinen gilt, gilt exemplarisch für Traditionen: sie konstruieren und institutionalisieren kollektive Erinnerungsräume, in denen über(lebens-)zeitlich gehandelt und kommuniziert werden kann.”

To understand this process as it informs contemporary Chicano/a novels, I will primarily work with semiotic and ethnic semiotic approaches to culture and memory. My purpose is to provide a broader background against which to explore particular folk traditions in contemporary Chicano/a fiction. To do justice to the visions of change, renegotiation and reconstruction of Chicano/a cultural heritage, we must first take into account many complex cultural processes. Semiotic and ethnic semiotic perspectives help us to understand these processes, and thus prepare the ground for a more systematic analysis. This particular combination of cultural theories with models of cultural and literary analysis may also help us to describe the dialogue between literature and the wider world. It highlights the unique characteristics of the symbolic system of Chicano/a literature and its role within Mexican American memory culture, namely, giving access to the past, and to an innovative space in which to explore alternative versions of present or future.

Two concepts are particularly important for this study: collective memory and ethnic semiosis. I analyse the theme complex of Chicano folk traditions against a broader context of collective memory research. In particular, German *Kulturwissenschaft* explores the problems of collective remembering and forgetting – its forms, functional potential and media – as well as the concept of memory cultures.<sup>5</sup> In my study I draw upon the research of Maurice Halbwachs, Pierre Nora and Jan and Aleida Assmann (especially, their investigation into cultural and collective memory). I also use insights from Birgit Neumann's comprehensive study of memory, narrative and identity (2005), which applies the findings of collective memory research to the study of literature. This cultural and literary research on memory is crucial to this study: I believe that from such a broader perspective, we will be better able to capture the constructed nature of tradition, as well as its numerous possible interpretations, and the various functions it may fulfil in contemporary Chicano/a society.

While the concepts of collective memory and memory cultures constitute a more general framework and bring to the fore the problematics of group identity, ethnic semiosis lets us investigate the particularities of literary representations of traditions directly, at the level of individual ethno-semiotic performance and reproduction of particular folk traditions. As a dynamic process in which the meaning of an ethnic sign is produced, ethnic semiosis provides insight into the perspective of the individual encoding and decoding ethnic signs (and folk traditions) to articulate himself or herself within his or her cultural space. Such ethno-semiotic dynamics of making and unmaking, interpreting and reinterpreting, challenging and changing the meaning of ethnic signs in a literary discourse helps to explain the equivalent processes of recon-

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Erll, Gymnich and A. Nünning (eds.) *Literatur – Erinnerung – Identität. Theoriekonzeptionen und Fallstudien* (2003); Erll *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen: Eine Einführung* (2005); Neumann *Erinnerung, Identität, Narration. Gattungstypologie und Funktionen kanadischer "Fictions of Memory"* (2005); Gymnich, A. Nünning, and Sommer (eds.) *Literature and Memory: Theoretical Paradigms, Genres, Functions* (2006).

struction, reinvention, and renegotiation of Chicano folk traditions by contemporary Chicano/a authors. It lets us explore how an individual performs and perpetuates his or her cultural traditions and how he or she forms attitudes towards them.

A number of recent critical studies focus on how this heterogeneity, fluidity and negotiability of cultural identity informs contemporary Chicano/a literature and culture. A particular milestone is Gloria Anzaldúa's work *Borderlands/La frontera* (1987). Combining critical and creative writing, it explores the concept of borderlands as a metaphor for the plurality, heterogeneity and hybridity of voices and identities on the actual Mexican American frontier – the in-between space and contact zone of different cultures. Anzaldúa's notion of borderlands is among the most influential concepts in contemporary discourses of gender, sexuality, identity politics and post-colonialism, as well as Chicano Cultural and Literary Studies.<sup>6</sup> A closely related notion is that of the new *mestiza* consciousness,<sup>7</sup> which Anzaldúa proposes to describe the borderlands consciousness. These two concepts are of the greatest importance for my subject of study, as they stress the ongoing processes of cultural change and exchange, as well as the continuing merging of different traditions taking place wherever different cultures, spaces and times meet.<sup>8</sup>

These complex cultural processes are also explored by younger critics who draw on a variety of cultural and literary theories, often beyond Chicano/a studies. For example, Marc Prieue's *Writing Transit: Refiguring National Imaginaries in Chicana/o Narratives* (2007) focuses on unsettling cultural positions 'beyond the nation' in Chicano/a literature, film, music and performance art, and revises border and resistance paradigms in literary and cultural studies. Similarly, Gabriele Pizarz-Ramírez's

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<sup>6</sup> See for example José David Saldívar's *Border Matters* (1997), in which the concept of diaspora and the borderlands theory are applied to the study of contemporary Chicano/a cultural production. Saldívar defies national (and nationalistic) paradigms of culture and describes the culture of borderlands as trans-national space in which new relations, hybrid cultures, and multi-voiced aesthetics are negotiated. Monika Kaup in *Rewriting North American Borders in Chicano and Chicana Narrative* (2001) applies the borderlands theory to the reading of Chicano/a narrative works, while Debra A. Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba in *Border Women: Writing from La Frontera* (2002) review various theoretical approaches to the idea of borderlands, while paying particular attention to the issues of gender identity politics and feminism.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Anzaldúa (1999 [1987]: 101): "The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else."

<sup>8</sup> A very influential study for my thinking about these issues was also Néstor García Canclini's *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (1995). This now classic work explores theoretical and practical challenges facing the hybrid state of Latin American cultures in which traditions and modernity coexist in the increasingly globalised, transcultural marketplace.