

# explorations



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## Memorial mediations of border crossings: The Chicana/o self-identity in Ernesto Galarza's autobiography *Barrio Boy*

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**Abstract.** *Chicana/o self-identity relates to the spatial hermeneutics of the troublesome border between Mexico and the U.S. The borderlands signify the constant negotiation of Mexican American identity (both communal and individual) because the long history of territorial shifts and trespassing of the dividing line between the two countries has validated the mechanics of numerous self-manifestations. The intention of this paper is to reflect on the reciprocal notions of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, and explore how the complexities of migration intersect with the construction of selfhood. Ernesto Galarza's autobiography "Barrio Boy" (1971) unravels the political, social, cultural and linguistic endeavors of a young immigrant who oscillates between childhood memories of an abandoned homeland south of the border and the dubious knowledge he acquires as a non-White adolescent north of the border. "Barrio Boy" is the engaging testimonio of an accomplished researcher, academician and writer in the U.S., who pledges to reveal the odyssey of an immigrant's mindset.*

**Key words:** *Chicana/o autobiography, borderlands, transculturation, selfhood, migration, caló*

*Bi-lingual, Bi-cultural,  
able to slip from "How's life?"  
to "Me'stan volviendo loca",  
able to sit in a panelled office  
drafting memos in smooth English,  
able to order in fluent Spanish  
at a Mexican restaurant,  
American but hyphenated  
[...].*

*Pat Mora, "Legal Alien," Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature  
1993.*

*Hegemony has so constructed the ideas of method and theory that often we cannot recognize anything that is different from what the dominant discourse constructs. As a consequence, we have to look in non-traditional places for our theories: in the prefaces to anthologies, in the interstices of autobiographies, in our cultural*

*artifacts (the cuentos).*

*Sonia Saldívar-Hull, Feminism on the Border 2000.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE COSMOPOLITAN PURPORT OF CHICANISMO

In *Trans-Americania: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico* (2012), José David Saldívar revolutionizes the approach to Mexican American identity with the claim that the Chicana/o experience is a paradigmatic case study in which the history and culture of a specific ethnic group in the U.S. evinces universal elements of exploitation, disposition and political conflict. A leading theoretician in the geopolitics and semiotics of the borderlands, J.D. Saldívar (2012) offers a ground-breaking theoretical proposal that “investigates the enabling conditions of narrative by postcolonial, subaltern writers and the various ways in which their stories of global coloniality of power seek to create an epistemological ground on which coherent versions of the world may be produced” (xx). J.D. Saldívar (2012) underscores the transcontinental element in the examination of the borderlands and redefines this particular space as a figurative site, where power relations of a Global North versus a Global South are played out. He seeks the cosmopolitan value marker in Chicana/o Studies and transposes the political and cultural parameters in identity formation from the locally specific analysis to the universal perspective. Moreover, he reconfigures standardized approaches to border crossings by abandoning the realms of ethnicity, sociology and anthropology and by looking into border cultural practices as an international and putative object of political study. J.D. Saldívar (2012) introduces “a fully globalized study of the Americas” that would unfold “within a [...] world-system scale and unit of analysis” (184). His discussion of Chicanismo directs critical attention to a multinational theoretical perspective that can liberate Chicana/o Studies from the confines of ethnic particularity, and relocate the significance of Mexican American writings into a worldly and/or transcendent mode of research.

Drawing from J.D. Saldívar’s (2012) effective (re)contextualization of Chicana/o Studies into a globalized theoretical framework, this paper reflects on war, migration and identity formation as complementary notions that assess human experience across the globe and throughout historical time. In this paper, primary attention is given to the reciprocal notions of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, dominance and subordination, inclusion and exclusion around a porous borderline. Furthermore, this paper explores the war-related traumatic stressors and the multiple zones of impact that warfare has on self-formation.<sup>1</sup> The recurrent antecedents of war that this paper considers include the complexities of an exodus and the effects that a potential dislocation has on family, social and cultural infrastructures. Ernesto Galarza’s autobiographical narrative

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<sup>1</sup> David Montejano (1999) claims that the focus of Chicana/o Studies on the sense of unity among Mexican Americans highlights “the question of inclusion. [...] The notion of inclusion suggests that we have witnessed a qualitative transformation of race relations from some pattern or history of exclusion and control. In the case of the Chicana/o or Mexican American experience, any historical assessment must recognize its nineteenth-century origins in the Mexican War and the annexation of the northern half of Mexico. It must deal candidly with the sentiments and structures of exclusion that were triggered by conflict and war” (xv-xvi).

*Barrio Boy* (1971) unravels multiple sites of war-related hardship and the efforts at tackling the political, social, cultural and linguistic negotiations that a Mexican child and his family experience upon fleeing their homeland during the upheaval of the Mexican Revolution. Throughout his autobiographical narrative, Galarza oscillates between childhood memories of an abandoned homeland south of the border and the dubious knowledge he acquires as a non-white adolescent newcomer north of the border. *Barrio Boy* is a memoir which extensively explores the geographics of identity along with the narrator's steady transition from a rural locale in Mexico to the bustling cityscape of Sacramento. Finally, *Barrio Boy* is examined as the engaging *testimonio* of an accomplished writer and renowned thinker in the U.S., one who recorded his memories of migration not as a stagnant emotional attachment to Mexico, but as a personal pledge to reveal and defend the odyssey of immigrants across spatial and temporal boundaries.

## 2. THE BORDERLANDS: CROSSINGS AND SELF-COGNIZANCE

The U.S.-Mexico border is a contentious dividing line between different cultural, political and racial identities. It is the ideological and political mapping of a natural locale which resists the signification of a rigid demarcating line between two countries, one that can be analyzed as "a transformative dislocation of labor" (Gómez-Quiñones and Maciel 1998, 36). The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 that aggressively annexed the Southwest States and its *mexicano* populations to the U.S., the Mexican Revolution that broke out in 1910 and lasted for a decade, and the Bracero Program, which legalized the flow of low-paid Mexicans to work under contract in the U.S. between 1947 and 1964, are only a few of the historical contexts which betray the fluidity of the borderline between the two countries.<sup>2</sup> These sequels in time have also ignited memorial processes of a national and/or communal selfhood, brewed an ongoing dialogic relationship between *mexicano* and Chicana/o communities, and sparked numerous attempts at identity-construction for both peripheral and dominant groupings. In short, the Chicana/o self-identity is indissolubly related to the spatial hermeneutics of the troublesome border between Mexico and the U.S. and the borderlands stand as a trope for the constant negotiation of Mexican American self-identity. Due to the long history of territorial shifts and crossings of the borderline, mechanisms of numerous self-manifestations have been activated and in turn channeled into Chicana/o literature. In fact, the Mexican American literary canon almost obsessively explores self-identities of *mexicano* ancestry in relation to the definition of a transcultural existence.<sup>3</sup> Chicana/o literature constantly draws from

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<sup>2</sup> According to Juan Gómez-Quiñones and David R. Maciel (1998), the continuous inflow of Mexican immigrants to the United States is the result of multivaried economic, political and social factors. Gómez-Quiñones and Maciel (1998) underscore the overall need of the U.S. economy for foreign labor and discuss the repercussions that emigration had on Mexico. In connection with the Mexican Revolution, which is the historical focus of this paper, Gómez-Quiñones and Maciel (1998) mention: "Several events stimulated emigration from Mexico between 1910 and 1920, such as the growth and expansion in the U.S. Southwest, the increased labor demands caused by World War I, the postwar economic expansion in the United States. In addition, the social and political upheavals in Mexico from 1910 through 1920 had a significant role in shaping the modern Mexican state and society and also had cultural and demographic consequences for the population" (36-37).

<sup>3</sup> Fernando Ortiz (1942) coined the term transculturation in the 1940s to avoid the binaries of acculturation and deculturation. Instead of focusing on the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, the notion of transculturation

the spatial imaginary of the borderlands because the specific locale between the two countries signifies “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition” (Anzaldúa 1999, 1). In this light, *mexicano* groupings from both sides of the border have grappled with contexts of alternating displacements and emplacements or the antithetical senses of belonging and disenfranchisement. And amidst the constant spatio-temporal redefinition of a communal identity, Chicanas/os recurrently seek the parameters and rationales in the elucidation of selfhood and engage in cultural practices that show a deep desire to retain their unique memorial mediations of a lost homeland.

Mexican American literature composed during the 1960s and 1970s exemplifies a profound need to quantify Chicana/o writings at a moment of canonization or institutionalization. During the social turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement, Chicana/o literature escaped its marginalization, began echoing itself in the literary circles of the U.S., and thus the rise of the Mexican American canon was under way. Foregrounding Chicanoism in the U.S. generated a manifest preference for the first-person narrative. Autobiographical fiction, testimonies, and life stories were widely composed in Spanish, English or Spanglish so that Chicanas/os could comprehend the convolutions and traumas of their migrant experience and use literary texts as identity navigators. In short, at the height of *El Movimiento*, literary writings posited a plethora of migration recollections, prescribed *la raza* self-identity, and employed the genre of autobiography as a strategic move for the affirmation of the truthfulness of the text. The themes undertaken by most Chicana/o writers in the fervor of the Chicano Movement were often oversimplifications of personal experiences, and the prevalent literary element was a faithful reproduction of reality, quite often though infused with mythical dimensions. Hence, during the heated Chicano Movement, any kind of literary text was appreciated if it aligned with the Chicano Movement’s ideological program and made clear reference to the grouping’s ties with the mythical land of *Aztlán* and the Amerindian past.

The socio-political deployment of Chicano activism pervaded literary composition and was often uncouthly based on the assumption that “[i]dentity was [...] a process of historical review carried out through an ideology of nation building which stressed several key points: retrieval of family and ethnic tradition, identification with the working class, struggle against assimilation, and the dire results if these efforts were not continued. Identity was not simply to be found, but to be forged, with careful attention to history and ideology” (Bruce-Novoa 1990, 134). Juan Bruce-Novoa (1990) comments on the sweeping force of politics, and humorously encapsulates the normative and quite simplistic stylistic rules of the 1970s: “[T]he standard formula for a successful Chicano piece calls for five or six *carnales*, a dozen *eses* and *batos*, a sprinkle of Spanish and a well-placed ‘Chinga tu madre’” (16). Without devaluing attempts at a more experimental style, it is evident that the political fervor of the era oriented Chicana/o literature toward highlighting a collective identity marker, one which stood in sharp contrast to Anglo societal structures. Hence, “the literary critics of the movement surpassed their counterparts in history [...], by becoming the gatekeepers of Chicano/a culture and identity” (Aranda 2003, 23). Accordingly, didactic writing, autobiography and the

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expresses the different phases in the transition from one culture to another and signifies a complex process which involves more than simply acquiring another culture.

*bildungsroman* were pivotal and largely circulated among the Chicana/o community because these texts created the literary pretext of a homogenous Mexican American identity. Spawned by the heightened political stand taken against exploitation and marginalization, the thematic concerns of Chicana/o literature in the 1960s and 1970s intensified the homogenization of the brown people against the backdrop of white American dominance.<sup>4</sup>

During the Chicano Movement, political engagement, rebellion and collective awareness were popular themes in most Mexican American literature. Forty years later, however, the bulk of Chicana/o writings has been largely reconsidered through the enactment of “a model of ethnic scholarship that seeks historically sensitive methodologies for understanding culture as fluid with regard to race, class, gender, sexuality, and political affiliations” (Aranda 2003, 23). Furthermore, the introduction of the transculturation element in the study of border narratives can fully inform the theoretical turn taken in Chicana/o Studies. More precisely, Fernando Ortiz (1942) claims that the process of transition from a certain geographical point to another is not a linear process or a neat origin-to-destination route, but a series of occult interventions. In this light, migration can no longer be studied as an isolated historical moment of demographic interest, one that concerns massive population shifts. Instead, theories of migration and the borderlands look into the cultural, social and linguistic impact that adverse political conditions have on both marginal and dominant groups. If migration is non-linear, then it is an undulating process of binary or even multilateral oppositions which repeatedly fluctuate in the immigrant’s self-understanding. The case of Galarza’s autobiography discloses the evasive intricacies of migration, which ultimately create the hybrid Chicana/o self-identity. In tune with this, *Barrio Boy* outlines the results of warfare in conjunction with dislocation and the creation of a new identity profile. Galarza’s autobiography is initially read as an involuntary flight from the dangers of warfare in Mexico, but then it is complemented with a series of liminalities. *Barrio Boy* tackles migration as a virtual trip beyond the limitations of national borders. More to the point, border crossings are presented as a repeated procreation of impulses and behaviors, consonant though with specific historical circumstances, social necessities and political crises.

### 3. MEMORIAL MEDIATIONS OF MIGRATION: ERNESTO GALARZA’S SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC NEGOTIATIONS

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<sup>4</sup> In their thought-provoking analysis of the Chicano Movement, Rosa Linda Fregoso and Angie Chabram (1990) question the validity of the Chicana/o identity promoted during *El Movimiento* as it clearly contradicts the elusive nature of self-formation *per se*: “Chicano identity was a static, fixed, and one-dimensional formulation. It failed to acknowledge our historical differences in addition to the multiplicity of our cultural identities as a people. This representation of cultural identity postulated the notion of a transcendental Chicano subject at the same time it proposed that cultural identity existed outside of time that it was unaffected by changing historical processes. The notion of cultural relations that this concept of cultural identity subscribed to appealed to a cultural formulation composed of binaries: Anglos vs Chicanos. But more importantly, what this mimetic notion of representation obfuscated was the fact that the naming of cultural identity was not the same thing as cultural identity” (205).

In *Man of Fire: Selected Writings by Ernesto Galarza*, Armando Ibarra and Rodolfo D. Torres (2013) summarize Galarza's political activism and insightful scholarly research of five decades in the introductory paragraph of their co-edited book:

Ernesto Galarza (1905-1984) was the most significant and prolific Mexican American social critic and public intellectual of the twentieth century. He eludes classification: his passion, integrity, dignity, and grit as a labor organizer, a researcher, an expert witness, an educator, and the voice of the farm worker labor movement earned him the well-suited name of "man of fire" by admirers as well as critics. (Ibarra and Torres 2013, xiii)

Galarza was one of the first Mexican Americans who received a Ph.D. in 1944 and among the path-breaking intellectuals of Mexican ancestry who safeguarded the compatibility of "scholarship with political activism" (Ibarra and Torres 2013, xiv). In the course of his life, Galarza composed more than a hundred social, historical and political treatises and literary works. Finally, he gained worldwide recognition in 1979, when he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The Mexican Revolution and the impending hazards of war forced Little Ernie and three adult members of his family to abandon the haven of their humble adobe in Mexico and seek petty wages in odd jobs north of the border. *Barrio Boy* is an assertive recollection of the narrator's transformation from a Mexican boy to the cogito of an acculturated Chicano adolescent. Divided into five sections, the text lays bare the odd experience in the borderlands and endows the world of literature with memories of the peregrination from Mexico into Galarza's "adopted American home" ( Saldívar 1990, 163). Following a strictly historical line of events, the memoir is a painstaking effort to explain the oddities of Galarza's identity construction and then come to grips with the *pastiche* quality of Chicana/o identity.

*Barrio Boy* commences almost conversationally and directly involves the reader in the decoding of the text. Galarza invites the reader to revive memories in a communal session of textual analysis, thus achieving an ongoing interaction between the narrative, the author and the reader. Historical time channels textual flow as Galarza faithfully directs his thoughts along with a carefully outlined chronology. Yet, historical reality is not Galarza's primary aim in the memoir. Although *Barrio Boy* shows a preoccupation with recording the minutest details of Little Ernie's early experiences in Jalcocotán and then in the barrio of Sacramento, the interpretive quandary of migration is what alienates and at the same time induces the reader. In other words, Galarza records the facts of his migratory experience, but also adds psychological traits, which free the text from the suspicion of "an unabashedly subjective memoir" (Wallach 2006, 447). According to Terry Eagleton (1996), "[l]iterary discourse estranges or alienates ordinary speech, but in doing so, paradoxically, brings us into a fuller, more intimate possession of experience" (4).<sup>5</sup> Galarza achieves this paradoxical nature of literature and reconstructs past events in order to create a sense of collectivization with strong political undertones. Similarly,

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<sup>5</sup> Terry Eagleton (1996) compares language to the air and how unaware we are of breathing it. However, "if the air is suddenly thickened or infected we are forced to attend to our breathing with new vigilance, and the effect of this may be a heightened experience of our bodily life" (4). Quite similarly, the re-examination of Chicana/o literature that adheres to factual experience can reveal fundamental connections between philosophical intricacies of self-identity and the act of writing *per se*.

Ramón Saldívar (1990) approaches *Barrio Boy* as part of “an organic human collective, in what [Galarza] calls *la raza*.” (169). Indeed, *Barrio Boy* is not a personal account that is quaintly camouflaged as historical fact, but an act of communal self-identification. Galarza fulfils the role of “a memoirist [who] finds ways to capture the relationship between purpose, affect, and perceptions, and to present his or her own thoughts and feelings about a historical moment in relation to other persons in the same social scene” (Wallach 2006, 448).

*Barrio Boy* opens a window into the life stories of four Mexicans: Little Ernie, his mother and two uncles. The thirteen years that the text covers are framed by the family’s flight from Mexico and their relocation in the U.S. Part One “In a Mountain Village” is a detailed array of vivid childhood memories. The narrator reconstructs his life in “a pueblo [...] too high up the mountain, the connecting trails were too steep and narrow to allow ox carts and wagons to reach it. Like the forest, our only street belonged to everybody—a place to sort out your friends and your bearings if you were going anywhere” (8). Galarza attributes a primordial quality to Jalcoctán. The village becomes a mystic point of origin that allows the reconstruction of the past by differing and deferring: “Unlike people who are born in hospitals, in an ambulance, or in a taxicab I showed up in an adobe cottage with a thatched roof that stood at one end of the only street of Jalcoctán which everybody called Jalco for short. Like many other small villages in the wild, majestic mountains of the Sierra Madre de Nayarit, my pueblo was a hideout. Even though you lived there, arriving in Jalco was always a surprise” (3). Jalcoctán is a communal sanctuary, positively defined by a striking lack of privacy and a disposition to social transparency among Jalcoctecanos. The only street in the isolated mountain village, where Galarza was born, becomes a vibrant space for the circulation of knowledge: “Whatever happened in Jalcoctán had to happen on our street because there was no other place for it to happen” (9). The communal element of Jalcoctán is also evident in the education of the young, which was limited to streetwise learning since “school was the corral, the main street of Jalco, the arroyo and the kitchen” (34). Yet, at the end of Part One, the village of Jalcoctán ceases to represent a safe hideout for the Galarza family. The Mexican Revolution and the invasion of “the troop of some twenty *rurales* [...] taking over [the] pueblo” infects Jalcoctán with political rivalry and the animosity of an organized society’s affairs (68). And the rumors of *maderistas* and *porfiristas* fighting in the north flood the marketplace of Jalcoctán and the Revolution is highlighted as a life-threatening historical moment.

Apart from the political significance of the Mexican War *per se*, there is a series of antecedent and overlapping impacts of warfare that *Barrio Boy* touches upon. The war introduces the family to a number of perilous conditions, including a prolonged cognition process, spatial perturbation, social-cultural adjustments and linguistic alterations. *Barrio Boy* reveals the various stages of Galarza’s acculturation into a Mexican American identity through an examination of the necessities, circumstances and hostilities that characterize this rite of passage from a Jalcoctecano to a *mexicano* immigrant and finally a Chicano. *Barrio Boy* does not construe migration as an orderly induction into a new cultural *mise en scène*, but as a perilous struggle for survival. Julian Samora insightfully alludes to the hazards of migration in the prologue to *Barrio Boy*: “Chicanos who have lived through and survived the acculturative process will appreciate the numerous obstacles to, and the struggle for, self-identity in a strange culture, while resisting complete ‘Americanization.’” Indeed, Little Ernie’s transition from Jalcoctán

to an inner city barrio of the U.S. entails profound changes in his identity profile. The young narrator exits the state of protected early childhood and enters the perils of extended social enactment. For instance, the communal lifestyle in Jalcocotán informs Little Ernie of his role as a minor in a rural Mexican society: “[T]he [...] seven-year-olds who were growing into manhood lost no time in making clear to the rest of us that we were nothing but stay-at-homes” (56). However, the cloistered life that Galarza cherishes is violently eradicated in the symbolic exodus the family makes to the North, and then complemented by the anxiety syndrome evident in most of Little Ernie’s soliloquies.

If we mark Little Ernie’s journey to the North on a map, the topographies that *Barrio Boy* sketches out are Sierra Madre, Tepic and Mazatlan south of the border, Tuscon and Sacramento north of the border. Concerning the figurative shift in Ernie’s identity from a Mexican to a Chicano, the focal geographical point is Nogales, where the border crossing takes place. *Barrio Boy* refers to this experience in Nogales as an instantaneous and quite incomprehensible transition from Mexican territory to American terrain. With heavy symbolic undertones of being introduced to an estranging condition, young Ernie and his mother enter the north surrounded by sheer darkness as newborns infused into contextually unknown terrain.

At dusk of the last day of our long trip from Mazatlan we finally approached the North. [...] It was night. The train stopped. Out of the darkness a man in uniform with a rubber cape over his shoulders climbed our flat. He picked his way down the platform, swinging his lantern and holding it high, looking over us. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “This is Nogales. All passengers will debark immediately and assemble in the waiting room of the station.” (181)

Little Ernie’s co-travellers to the North are described as “rainsoaked refugees,” who disembark the train and form a “shivering crowd” in the waiting room of a border patrol office, and the first night is reconstructed as an uncomfortable stay in a room filled with army cots and wet clothes “arranged near the stove to dry” (182-183).<sup>6</sup> Although the border crossing is not fully invested with the emotional impact it has on the young narrator, the scene diffuses a sense of ambivalence and a covert anticipation of the new condition that Little Ernie has entered. Thus, the gloomy darkness upon his arrival is shortly coupled with an allegorical enlightenment in “the sunny morning of the next day” (183). As an instructive mother figure, Doña Herniqueta reinforces the validity of the border crossing, and directs Little Ernie’s attention to the American flag on a building: “Look, the American flag. [...] We are in the United States. Mexico is over there” (183).

In the U.S., Little Ernie is repeatedly faced with the challenges of maturity. This transition hints at a personal crisis as the narrator is introduced to the notion of an ideological state apparatus espoused by Althusser (1974). The cultural collision between Mexico and the U.S. brings about a subtle immersion into a new lifestyle and the

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<sup>6</sup> It is of critical interest to juxtapose Anzaldúa’s image of the border crosser and the emotional investment she makes in her recreation of pain and despair: “Faceless, nameless, invisible, taunted with ‘Hey cucaracho’ (cockroach). Trembling with fear, yet filled with courage, a courage born of desperation. Barefoot and uneducated, Mexicans with hands like boot soles gather at night by the river where two worlds merge creating what Reagan calls a frontline, a war zone. The convergence has created a shock culture, a border culture, a third country, a closed country” (Anzaldúa 1999, 11).

formation of complex cognitive mechanisms that change Little Ernie. In fact, the boy's journey from Mexico into the U.S. coincides with pacing through the liminal passage from childhood into adolescence and then into adulthood.<sup>7</sup> The middle stage of this rite is hastily completed in a foreign land. And the crystallization of Little Ernie's identity is a process that includes the activation of a series of codifications and formulas in order to comprehend the new world order. Little Ernie's border crossing introduces him to a multicultural social network, as "he encounters representatives of virtually all social classes, religions, ages and many nationalities" (Saldívar 1990, 163). This heterogeneity is definitive in the transformation of a little boy from rural Mexico into a knowledgeable adolescent within a transcultural chronotope.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, abandoning a homeland in search of a safe environment north of the border entails a succession of inimical social situations: the family suffers the negative experiences of economic exploitation, the inability to handle the linguistic barrier, marginalization and of course the looming threat of repeated uprooting. When the family crosses over to the North, José, the younger of the two uncles, has to leave Doña Henriqueta and Little Ernie "to work his way on the railroad to a place called Sacramento" (183). The disenfranchisement of the family is again an immediate peril aggravated by Little Ernie's abrupt push into adult responsibilities. Before departing for Sacramento, and in an ominous tone, José assigns Little Ernie the role of the family's protector: "Now, Ernesto, you are the man of the family. You will take care of your mother until we are together in Sacramento" (184).

*Barrio Boy* is convincing proof that Galarza retained strong links to his cultural past and resisted complete Americanization. Instead of fully assimilating into the new socio-cultural scene north of the border, Little Ernie proceeds in the welding of past niches and present experiences in order to carve the hybrid future of his Chicano selfhood. The fundamental pillars of Galarza's adult identity lie in the engagement he cultivates with familial ties. In the text, *la familia* represents "a useful abstraction of personal and group identity by creating the image we wish to be" (Lomelí 1980, 142). In fact, the salience of matriarchy channels Little Ernie's life decisions when confronted with "a series of dichotomies that suggest a synthesis" (Lomelí 1980, 143). At the outset of the book, Galarza's mother is depicted as a powerful and decisive personality: "Doña Henriqueta knew about people in deep trouble because she was one of them. But unlike most of them, she believed in rebelling against it, in resisting those who caused it" (18). Influenced by his mother, Little Ernie collects "by-the-way comments that began to shape themselves into [his] future" (257). Moreover, the narrator observes his mother and two uncles sweating for some scraps of income, and thus decides to enter the work industry at a young age: "By a lucky break I found a job myself that put me on a par with José and my mother as breadwinners. An elderly woman who lived two blocks down Rosales from our street needed a boy to help on Friday afternoons. The woman was a *pozolera* and her business a sidewalk restaurant [...]. My job consisted of throwing buckets of water on the street to settle the dust, helping to put the table and bench in place, carrying the big *ollas* outdoors, and filling the charcoal basket that she kept handy under the table." (136).

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<sup>7</sup> For more on liminalities and the threshold stage a subject undergoes *en route* to full social immersion, see Turner (1982) and Emmanouilidou (2013).

<sup>8</sup> The use of the term *chronotope* is applied in accordance with the Bakhtinian sense of the generic dialogue between space and time, which underlies literary composition and by extension self-formation (see, Bakhtin 1981).

Laying train tracks, sewing, animal tending and harvesting crops are among the numerous odd jobs that the narrative mentions and which testify to Little Ernie's becoming a breadwinner along with the elder members of his family

Throughout Little Ernie's personal odyssey, he successfully balances between the vigor of enculturation and the enticing call for acculturation. Galarza is caught in a figurative war zone between his strong Mexican past and the realities of the Anglo mainstream. Apart from a series of practical problems, migration shoves Little Ernie into the combat field of differing cultural practices. Ramón Saldívar (1990) has inventively encapsulated the strength of *Barrio Boy* in the claim that the text opts for an "experimental ethnography of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands [that] requires the new narrative fragmentariness [...] of the 'videoclip,' of hybrid cultures, and of our labyrinthine freeways" (30). Indeed, the autobiography commences with Galarza's introductory comment that *Barrio Boy* "is a true story of the acculturation of Little Ernie," which promptly attests to the negotiations the narrator underwent as a *mexicano* immigrant (2). At the same time, the text is a book-length delineation of ethnic role behaviors. This narrative technique establishes *Barrio Boy* as a literary treasure of memorial agency with specific ethnic undertones. Accordingly, Part Three "North from Mexico" and Part Four "Life in the Lower Part of Town" comprise thorough and comprehensive recordings of the antithetical lifestyles Little Ernie has to come to terms with. This cognitive challenge is of a vast span, ranging from becoming "acquainted with the bathtub, located in [a] closet next to the toilet" to facing racism when he "was chased [...] by three American boys who yelled something [he] could not understand but which didn't sound friendly" (186-187).

In "Part Five: On the Edge of the Barrio," Little Ernie settles in Sacramento, California, and turns to education as a means to handle power relations in the U.S. Guided by his mother's determination and persistence to educate her son, Ernesto attends an American school which he describes as "not so much a melting pot as a griddle where Miss Hopley and her helpers warmed knowledge into us and roasted racial hatreds out of us" (211). Proper education aids Ernie to capture the immigrant's dilemma between *trabajo* (work) and *chanza* (opportunity). His first encounters with the American educational system suggest a tendency among foreign pupils for separatism and the narrator's constant effort to integrate into an alien environment. Yet, the feelings of uneasiness and discomfort that Ernie experiences at school are easily diffused in the safe haven of his family home, where different "rules were laid down to keep [him], as far as possible, *un muchacho bien educado*" (236). For most of Part Five, and especially after his mother's death, Ernie is in a liminal phase of existence: being "on his own" and yet dependent on his uncle José "for food and a place to live;" looking for *chanzas* (opportunities) in town and in labor camps; doing "more work than a child but less than a man, neither the head or the tail of the family" (259-263). Nevertheless, at the end of the text Ernie endorses the instrumental value of education. In a symbolic exit from being-in-limbo, the narrator "unhooked the bicycle, mounted it and headed for the main high school, twenty blocks away where [he] would be going in a week. Pumping slowly, [he] wondered about the debating team and the other things Mr Everett [the Civics class teacher] had mentioned" (266). Although Ernie pumps the bicycle with a hint of indecision, he still follows the route to school and enters a phase of emancipation, one that is bindingly related to the world of education.

Along with the numerous socio-cultural arbitrations, *Barrio Boy* discusses the hybrid lingo of the barrio. As Little Ernie emerges with a new identity, he acquaints himself with several barrio cultural expressions and picks up the lingo of *caló*. In fact, language plays an important role in Ernie's coming-to-being as a Mexican American. In the barrio, he realizes that language is anything but a unified whole. Rather than a clearly defined and unchallenged means of communication, Ernie construes language as a reflection of material experience. His prolonged encounters with border crossings and multicultural barrios allow him to conclude that language both reflects and adapts to everyday life. For Ernie, just as races and cultures mix, languages conflate, and the linguistic playfulness of the barrio is a manifestation of hybridity:

[P]roblems with the Americans were the same [...] especially their language. To begin with, we didn't hear one but many sorts of English. [...] There was no authority [...] who could tell us the one proper way to pronounce a word and it would not have done much good if there had been. Try as they did the adults in my family could see no difference between "wood" and "boor." Words spelled the same way or nearly so in Spanish and English and whose meanings we could guess accurately--words like *principal* and *tomato*--were too few to help us in daily usage. The grown-ups adapted the most necessary words and managed to make themselves understood. [...] Miss Campbell [the schoolteacher] and her colleagues lost no time in scrubbing out the spots in my pronunciation. Partly to show off, partly to do my duty to the family, I tried their methods at home. It was hopeless. They listened hard but they couldn't hear me. Besides, *Boor-lan* was *Boorlan* all over the barrio. Everyone knew what you meant even though you didn't say Woodland. (243-244)

The quote reveals the varied linguistic and cultural practices of the barrio, and evinces the ongoing dialogic relationship between hegemonic white America and subordinated ethnic groupings. With reference to language, the American schooling system claims the primacy of Standard English over any of its variations or ethnic appropriations. However, Ernie empowers the barrio by presenting it as a dynamic space of social enactment, where the diverse cultures it hosts can undo dogmatic attitudes to language supremacy. In *Barrio Boy*, communal understanding is based on the dual processes of deconstruction and reconstruction: barrio inhabitants create an alternative code of communication, adapt various words, like "*Boor-lan*" instead of "Woodland," and embrace their unique lingo. In this way, barrio inhabitants defy the preeminence of Standard English and stand firm against the forcefulness of assimilation.

Spanish, English, and the combination of the two in *caló* dominate Galarza's acoustic experience. With mixed feelings, young Galarza learns a new vocabulary and gradually apprehends his difference from Anglos:

The barrio invented its own version of American talk. And my family, to my disgust, adopted it with no little delight. My mother could tell someone at the door asking for an absent one: "Ess gon." When some American tried to rush her into conversation she stopped him with: "Yo non pick een-glees." [...] Prowling the alleys and gleaning along the waterfront I learned how *chicano* workingmen hammered the English language to their ways. On the docks I heard them bark over a slip or a spill: "Oh, Chet," imitating the American crew bosses with the familiar "Gar-demme-yoo." José

and I privately compared notes in the matter of “San Afabeechee,” who, he said, was what Americans called each other in a fist fight. (235-236)

Ernie matures in the barrio and the use of a different idiom cements the realization that *mexicanas/os* and Chicanas/os are two distinct identities. Despite the fact that white American society has projected the fallacy that Latinos represent an identical cultural background, Galarza refutes such overgeneralizations. Contrary to the Anglo haphazard homogenization of Hispanic cultures, Galarza maintains the difference between *mexicanas/os* and Chicanas/os, who however converge in the numerous barrios of the U.S. and correlate in a subconscious resistance to cultural superiority.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

*Barrio Boy* is a seminal publication of the pilgrimage a young boy and his family make from a remote, isolated village in Mexico to the barrio of Sacramento, California. The autobiography commences in the early twentieth century in the *pueblo* of Jalcoctán in Mexico, and traces a tight-knit family’s migratory route to the U.S. Ignited by the turmoil and dangers of the Mexican Revolution, the text recounts Little Ernie’s experiences of spatial relocation and becomes a tentative understanding of how the narrator attained the self-identity of a Chicano. Galarza’s detailed recollections coincide with a geographical transition and the rough components in the development of ethnic identity. These components can be briefly listed as “affirmation and belonging (i.e., the sense of group membership and attitudes toward the group, including attachment and pride), ethnic identity achievement (i.e., the extent to which a person has achieved a secure and confident sense of his or her ethnicity, including knowledge and understanding of the ethnic group), and ethnic behaviors (i.e., activities associated with group membership such as customs, traditions and social interactions)” (Pizarro and Vera 2011, 100). *Barrio Boy* affirms Little Ernie’s dedication to the Mexican American community and articulates his profile by practicing all three components of a cultured subjectivity. Concerning the first two, the detailed descriptions of *mexicano* chores and odd jobs throughout the autobiography show Ernie’s sense of pride in Chicanismo, a degree of attachment to his borderland identity and an overwhelming sense of confidence in retaining the minutest detail of cultural practice. As for the third component of selfhood, Galarza certainly exemplifies a high degree of ethnic behavior. In fact, the

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<sup>9</sup> My argument here points to a capitalist society characterized by a crude distinction between the ruling class and peripheral subjectivities. According to Henri Lefebvre (1991), the dominant class exercises its hegemonic privileges on many levels, apart from the apparent distribution of capital and the social relations of production. According to Lefebvre (1991), “[h]egemony implies more than an influence, more even than the permanent use of repressive violence. It is exercised over society as a whole, culture and knowledge included, and generally via human mediation: policies, political leaders, parties, as also a good many intellectuals and experts. It is exercised therefore over both institutions and ideas. The ruling class seeks to maintain its hegemony by all available means, and knowledge is one such means. The connection between knowledge (*savoir*) and power is thus manifest, although this in no way interdicts a critical subversive form of knowledge (*connaissance*); on the contrary, it points up the antagonism between a knowledge which serves power and a form of knowing which refuses to acknowledge power” (10). For Galarza, the bliss of knowing coincides with self-identification, and the use of language serves as an indicator of self-affirmation.

composition of his autobiography reinforces his ethnic ego-identity and diffuses his strong self-esteem to the broader Chicana/o community.

*Barrio Boy* endows the Mexican American literary canon with a wholehearted testimony of the experiences, reversals and mishaps commensurate with migration. The notions of displacement, hegemony, assimilation, identity politics and hybridity form a theoretical continuum that channel Galarza's memories. Although *Barrio Boy* often tricks the reader into focusing on the truthfulness and innocence of the narration, the text strongly exemplifies a concern over the philosophical parameter of identity construction. *Barrio Boy* follows several mental paths mapped out by a boy, starting at the age of seven in Mexico and concluding at puberty in the U.S. This mapping brings about a series of insightful observations related to warfare, dislocation, familial ties, *mestizaje*, communal being and linguistic arbitration. Galarza's salient undertaking is to thoroughly record his immediate experience and be extraordinarily careful in not omitting any of the peculiarities in the environments he enters throughout his migratory experience. This plethora of detail largely resembles an anthropological treatise, but it is in essence Galarza's resourceful technique of autobiographical writing, which is purported with the incentive of communal identification. *Barrio Boy* adamantly refrains from revealing the young narrator's complex emotional and psychological detours, not because Galarza coldly detaches himself from the diversity of his encounters and experiences, but because he wishes to bequeath his autobiography to a large public and invite readers to grasp the complexity of their own emotions upon reading the narrative. In the theatrical fashion of audience-participation performance, the text is a *testimonio* that opens up to the public and allows them to react both individually and collectively on the experience of migration, whether it is involuntary or voluntary.

Galarza places *Barrio Boy* in the realm of public interest, instead of claiming the status of a personal reflection. In the foreword, the autobiographer explains that the vignettes he gladly recounted to his family had the potential to be turned into a book-length publication. However, in order to escape the confines of a "family affair," Galarza "needed more weighty excuses" (1). So, he traced the motives of his memoir to the dimensions of historicity and psychology. The first excuse was his dedication to Chicana/o political struggles and the desire to relay his memories for the purposes of collective awareness. The second weighty excuse Galarza boldly mentions is "the psychological, and here Galarza's reservations about writing a memoir became incentives. He wanted to prove that *el complejo de inferioridad*, the inferiority complex from which Mexicans in the United States suffer is nonsense" (Stavans c2011, xi). To conclude, Ernesto Galarza's overall scholarly and public work consistently sought the fuzzy links between politics and identity formation, and focused on the existential quandaries embedded in the study of migration. According to Galarza, the pledge for ethnic identification is based on the cultural attributes of memorial mediation and the sense of communal belonging. In order to grasp the thematic depth of *Barrio Boy*, one needs to explore the narrative as a paradigmatic approach to migration that explains the multilayered processes of identity construction. *Barrio Boy* is not simply a vivid description of places, people and linguistic codifications that Mexican Americans can identify with in order to enhance the community's efforts to ethnic constancy. Instead, it presents survival for those faced with the perils of multiple war confrontations, both literal and figurative ones. The text handles the real hazards of warfare and makes the reader intimate with the numerous inner conflicts and negotiations an immigrant

withstands. In tune with Galarza's prominence as a public intellectual, a renowned social critic of capitalist accumulation, a labor organizer and a Chicano activist, *Barrio Boy* shows his commitment to the struggles carried out by subordinated groupings. And although he published his memoir later on in his life, he did so with the earnest belief that the personal ought to transform into a public affair. Indeed, *Barrio Boy* is an autobiographical text that highlights the instrumental value of a communal memory repository relayed to the disenfranchised across temporal and spatial boundaries.

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