

# Heterotopia: Re-imagined Communities and Barrios Borderlands

*Elena Avilés*

Portland State University

Alejandro Morales. *Little Nation and Other Stories*. Trans. Adam Spires. Houston: Arte Público, 2014. Pp. 178. ISBN 978-1-55885-801-5.

*Little Nation and Other Stories* is a collection of five stories by Alejandro Morales that expands Benedict Anderson's work on "imagined communities" from Chicano perspectives. Translated from the Spanish by Adam Spires, the publication of the original text, *Pequeña nación. Tres novelas cortas* debuted in 2005 with the second publication in 2008. In its original language, the text is a composite of three tales: "Los jardines de Versailles," "La penca" and "Pequeña nación." In comparison, this new publication features two additional stories in the following order: "Quetzali," "Mama Concha," "The Gardens of Versailles," "Prickles," and "Little Nation." This English-language version includes an introductory essay by Adam Spires titled, "Alejandro Morales: Writing Chicano Space," which elaborates on the complexity of "Chicano national space within the United States" (vii).

As a leading Chicano writer, Morales offers a range of stories about Montebello, The Simons Barrio and East Los Angeles, urban geographical sites that show an intimate geographical relationship with the spaces that throughout the author's life he has called home. And while the scenario where the majority of his stories unfold is Southern California, two of the tales show the transnational and intersectional identity of connected events independent of geography. One tale focuses on the chaotic clash of cultures which defines the core principles of Chicano identity as a result of the discovery and conquest of the Americas. The rise of the nation-state during that time frame is as important in structuring the core principles of Chicano identity as is a second tale that traces the geospatial of Chicano identity to modern-day Northern California.

In the introduction, Spires expounds on Morales's examination of Chicano identity from the perspective of a "Southwestern heterotopia border zone" (ix). Drawing from an array of contemporary scholarship—Gloria Anzaldúa, Michel Foucault, Franz Kafka, and Francisco Lomelí—Spires cultivates awareness on the mastery of the author's ability to lead the reader through a journey across the "chaotic" terrain of writing a Chicano space in non-hegemonic circumstances. The influence of Foucault's notion of heterotopia, for example, enables one to understand Morales's turn to creative writing to map out

geospatial realities of Chicano identity in contexts previously ignored or made invisible by dominant history.

Spires elaborates on the spatial dynamics of Morales's work to reflect on the author's use of space, time, and place. Space, time and place, additionally function as a threefold method to bring justice to untold, disregarded or ignored tales that shape Chicano history. The critic understands Morales's conviction to tell the ethnographic history of communities displaced by law, order and "civilized" progress. The text explores an array of perspectives on the origins of nation building from the gazes of the colonized and the colonizer to inspire an assessment of human geography, the unraveling of social forces, and effects of geopolitical spaces across dimensions of intersectionality. The finesse in which the author strings different tales separated by time, space and place make for a read that is global; localized and at times intimate narratives become situational circumstances from which to understand the global connections that alter the view of Chicanos as a (dis)placed nation of peoples.

"Quetzali," a word in the Nahuatl-language meaning a quetzal feather or something precious, is the chosen title of the first story. Quetzali is also a popular female name in the Americas, which means *preciosa*. As such, this short story brings to the fore the shifting terrain of power from Aztec rule to the imposition of a new civic order upon the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors during the 16th century. Quetzali is a mother of two indigenous children, who is searching for her husband one year after the fall of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlán, now present-day Mexico City. In great despair, Quetzali steps out from the periphery of the ancient city into the city center with Xochitl and Cuicatl at her side. She witnesses the destruction of the Aztec civilization at the hands of the conquistadors, and fear sets in as she realizes she is standing, "in the middle of the world's ashes" (9). As she traverses into the city center, she becomes a silent eyewitness to "thousands of men and women waiting [...] prisoners destined to be labor slaves (6). When a conquistador finds her amidst the dense foliage of nature, which helps her evade captivity, the colonizer gazes not upon Quetzali but on her fifteen-year-old daughter. The family escapes this immediate danger only to come upon him again, where he takes Xochitl, but only after violently beating Quetzali. Defeated, she retreats into the forest where she discovers an old woman that informs her everyone is gone. This short story references the rise of the nation-state in the Americas and hints to the plotting of miscegenation. In this story, Morales peers back in time to spotlight the arrival of a new world order that structures the core philosophy of Chicano nationalism as a mestizo, mixed race people. This narrative also references the never ending search by Chicanos for their ancestral homeland, Aztlán, and the uncaptured tales of women like Quetzali in history.

The second story, "Mama Concha" is a memetic snapshot of the author's grandmother and her influence upon the main character. The voice of marginalized peoples through the re-telling of memories by a young boy living on the outskirts of Los Angeles underscores the strong oral traditions dominant in South Californian barrios. The young boy recounts the strong connection he has to his grandmother and details her intimate relationship with nature and with other female protagonists. Reminiscent of coming of age stories that characterize Chicano literary production as seen in Tomás Rivera's ... *y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971) this tender story examines the spiritual connection and non-Western

European sensibilities related to marginalized peoples and the natural world. Set in the Simmons barrio, this tale ends with a young boy learning about the limits of human nature as he comes to understand the beauty of barrio life and its nature in literal and metaphorical terms.

Like the young boy, who in “Mama Concha” achieves a deep sense of awareness and courage when he accepts the coming of the death of his beloved grandmother, the third tale, “The Gardens of Versailles,” takes the reader to another time zone within the same geographic area. Set in the L.A. brickyards of the early 1920s, near present-day Montebello, this first-person narrative offers an ardent critique of urbanization, modernity and progress at the hands of the culturally diverse and often immigrant Southern California communities. Focusing on the life of Plácido Beaugival, a man of French-Spanish heritage, the reader is witness to the life time effort of a man who bought property and made a home in the barrio. Adding a room when money and time permitted, the Beaugival property transforms into the barrio gardens of Versailles.

As the property grows, Anglo investors take note of his accumulated wealth and bring development into Montebello. While using his education to help the unschooled inhabitants of the barrio, mainly Mexican and Japanese, Mr. Beaugival is displaced when city officials betray him and cite “eminent domain” to take over his cultural, social and economic capital. When he is unwilling to leave his home, city officials slowly bulldoze the home. The story ends with a loud explosion. The home engulfed in flames, with Madame and Monsieur Beaugival never to be heard or seen from again. Morales informs the reader of the 1995 discovery in Montebello of an underground construction resembling a catacomb with two people in full embrace. Could this be the Beaugivals, or is it this a case of *puro cuento*?

Told from the perspective of the main protagonist’s mother, “Prickles,” is a story about a supernatural being. The tradition of oral storytelling frames a narrative that spans from Southern to Northern California. Gloria, a single mother, and exploited garment worker earns a living by quilting to provide for her son David. David is a genius, who learns to quilt at a very young age. Unfortunately, as he grows, David is diagnosed with a rare disorder: the uncontrollable growth of tumors on his bones, each reminiscent of a prickle. After transferring to Catholic school because of verbal and physical harassment, David channels his energy into art. When staff and faculty from a prestigious private university in Palo Alto discover his artistry, Prickles opens a gallery complete with a “secret space” (57). With the encouragement of a priest, Prickles begins a series on The Virgin of Guadalupe, but upon learning that the love of his life is with another man, he ruptures the tumors on his face and body to deal with the pain. In a cathartic act, he throws himself and the Virgin paintings to the floor, painting all the while asking the Virgin why he has to suffer so much.

*Little Nation* is a classic novella: equally arguable as a short novel or long short story. In the title story, Morales does not shy away from examining the legacy of race politics in America that is systematically tied to dominant ideas about nationalism, questions about power and access, and who has the authority to decide on the state of affairs for a given community. Morales comments on the history of systemic violence in East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights, but offsets dominant stereotypes of the barrio by narrating

about the everyday life struggle against hegemonic assumptions of barrio citizens. He also creates agency for women, such as Micaela, who upon the death of her parents is educated by nuns and trained to become a teacher. Through the influence of liberation theology, Micaela becomes an activist.

As the author complicates notions of the dimensions of imagined communities, he creates a new realm of thought that makes intelligible what is often misunderstood, unknown and disregarded. He offers timeless tales of events that range from point of contact between the Old World and the New World—narrowing his gaze to the immediate aftermath of colonization—to reframe the nature of the timeless of events that appear to be disparate and disconnected. Instead, through a Chicano interpretation of heterotopia, what is more commonly understood as the chaotic space of Chicano identity, transforms into a borderlands that intersect across dimensions of time, space, and place. The multiple time dimensions ignite critical inquiry, an imperative in the shifting dimensions of the contemporary and future notions of what is a nation and of the state of mind made possible through re-imagined communities.