

HIDDEN IDENTITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN
HISTORICAL NOVEL: THE CONQUEST SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF
DOUBLE AGENT CHARACTERS

By

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PREVIEW

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DISSERTATION TITLE

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through the Eyes of Double Agent Characters

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HIDDEN IDENTITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN
HISTORICAL NOVEL: THE CONQUEST SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF
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University of Nebraska, 2007

Advisor: Catherine Nickel

Many contemporary Latin American authors explore identity and re-write the past through narrative fiction, often looking to the violent beginnings of the Conquest and Colonization as a logical point of departure. This dissertation examines identity formation through fictional characters living with two identities in the following historical novels: *El naranjo* by Carlos Fuentes, *Gonzalo Guerrero* by Eugenio Aguirre, *Duerme* by Carmen Boullosa, *Invasores del paraíso* by Herminio Martínez, *Memorias del Nuevo Mundo* by Homero Aridjis, and *Los perros del paraíso* by Abel Posse.

Chapter One situates this study among the substantial critical corpus dedicated to Latin American novels of the Conquest and introduces a theoretical framework for analyzing double agent characters and identity formation in Latin American literature. Chapter Two contrasts the characterizations of Gonzalo Guerrero and Jerónimo de

Aguilar in novels by Carlos Fuentes and Eugenio Aguirre with previous representations and analyzes the significance of the more complex, dual identity view of these two historical personages. Chapter Three examines dual identity as it relates to gender and sexuality. In *Duerme* a French woman cross-dresses as a Spanish soldier while in *Invasores del paraíso*, a young man with repressed homoerotic desires negotiates an identity between the typical machismo found among most members of his expedition and a group of openly practicing homosexuals. Chapter Four explores the complex identity of the Crypto-Jews, or secret Jews, and their persecution by the Inquisition in fifteenth century Spain and in the New World. Two characterizations of Christopher Columbus as a converso and possible Crypto-Jew in *Los perros del paraíso* and *Memorias del Nuevo Mundo* inform the examination of this phenomenon. Chapter Five looks at the broader issues related to identity formation in contemporary Latin America such as globalization and the creation of new types of readers.

Essentialist views of identity are challenged through the double agent characters in these texts who are forced to alternate between a public persona and a socially marginalized identity.

For my father

PREVIEW

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Hidden Identity in the Contemporary Latin American Historical Novel: The Conquest Seen through the Eyes of Double Agent Characters

Chapter One Introduction

Fictionalizing the Colonial Past in Latin America

Many Latin American writers have an obsession with rewriting the past as a means of defining their current identity. Even as early as the nineteenth century, when the Latin American countries had barely gained their independence, fictional texts such as Ricardo Palma's *Tradiciones peruanas*, Eduardo Acevedo Díaz' *Ismael*, Manuel de Jesus Gálvan's *Enriquillo*, and Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda's *Guatimozín*, to name a few, both fictionalized and romanticized, the rewriting of the colonial past and the exploration of an identity that was uniquely American. Jean Franco writes of the historical novel that:

To Spanish-American intellectuals there seemed no better instrument for creating a sense of national

identity, since in this way the author could expose the evils of Spanish colonial rule and celebrate the deeds of national heroes. (62)

Contemporary Latin American historical fiction says as much about current views of identity as it does about notions of identity during the time period it represents. Fernando Aínsa claims that, "the genuine roots of identity are preserved in the hidden interior of America and in the archaic past that is remembered with nostalgia." He adds that:

Visions of the future in this centripetal movement are inevitably conditioned by values of the past, creating the impression that Latin America has difficulty with imagining a future that is not a re-actualization of the past that probably never existed as imagined. (9)

Currently in Mexico and other Spanish American countries we find many novels, short stories, and dramas that deal with the past, especially the Conquest and Colonization of the Americas. Fictionalized accounts of the Conquest increased substantially in the 1970s and 1980s as the five-hundred year anniversary of Columbus's first appearance in the Caribbean approached. Continued interest in the colonial period on the part of creative writers in Latin America has

manifold reasons. Seymour Menton asserts that the varied reactions, interpretations, and ramifications to the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas, led to the explosion in fiction set in the colonial period. He states that: "Probably the single most important factor in stimulating the publication of so many historical novels in the past fifteen years or so has been the awareness of the approaching quinentennial of the discovery of America" (27). However, interest has not abated since 1992 as novelists and dramatists continue to examine, interpret, fictionalize, and parody the colonial period that was and, still is, so critical to Spanish American identity. Some authors examine the Conquest using a more conventional and traditional narration, resembling a memoir or historical chronicle, while others employ fantastical elements, anachronisms, and other postmodern techniques. Regardless of the narrative techniques, contemporary fictionalizations of the Conquest inform current political thought and issues relevant to the present and reflect the effects of globalization in Latin America. Menton points out that, "The official Cuban cultural journal *Casa de las Américas*, without taking a strong position on the merits of the Conquest, related it to current political conflicts" (29). Since historical

fiction reveals as much about the time it was written as it does about the time it portrays, any analysis of contemporary historical fiction in Latin America will illuminate key issues in the current dialogue between the present and the violent colonial past. Kathy Taylor writes that:

Modern writers continue to invent and discover new adventures through language. Included in these new ventures is an exploring of the past in search of revised interpretations of the surrounding reality. By discovering the secrets of the past we can understand better the mysteries of the present. (135)

The surge in interest in the period of the Conquest has also been attributed to the increased literary attention the chronicles, histories, relations, letters and other colonial writings have received in the past few decades. Such writing had not previously been considered 'literature' in the classic sense. Postmodern sensibilities such as the blurring of genres and the idea that fiction and history are not mutually exclusive categories, and that fictionalized accounts of the past can reshape a society's view of its history, clearly contribute to the increase in historical novels. Linda Hutcheon comments that:

We only have access to the past today through its traces—its documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials. In other words, we only have representations of the past from which to construct our narratives or explanations. (58 *Politics*)

Spurring interest in the colonial period among the population at large was the release of several full-length feature films dealing with prominent Latin American colonial figures and themes, such as *Cabeza de Vaca* and *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, which chronicles Christopher Columbus' trek to the New World. Popular interest in the myths and figures of Conquest and Colonization of Mexico continues up to the present time, evidenced by the Mexican novelist Laura Esquivel's latest work. The author of the popular novel *Como agua para chocolate* released the historical novel *Malinche* in 2006. Malinche was an indigenous woman who served as a companion and translator to Hernán Cortés. In *Malinche*, Esquivel tells the story of the Conquest of Mexico from Malinche's point of view rather than through the eyes of the Conquistador, the most frequently employed perspective in historical accounts. This type of re-viewing of the Conquest and Colonization of the Americas through fiction, often narrated by characters

from marginalized groups, is increasingly common in Latin America. Santiago Juan-Navarro and Theodore Robert Young observe that:

The past two decades have seen the rise of postcolonial criticism, cultural studies, and the New Historicism, allowing for a reconsideration of this subject matter from the point of view of the colonized subject, rather than from that of the colonizing metropolis. (11)

Similarly, Viviana Plotnick affirms that: "this type of novel signals a shift in perspective as well as a lack of belief in master narratives characteristic of the postmodern sensibility" (36). While all these positions are valid, it is clear that the Conquest and Colonization of Latin America, along with the predominant myths and figures of that time, are still very much present in the mindset of modern day Latin Americans in terms of identity.

Many notable writers, thinkers, and critics have commented on the changes that the genre of historical fiction in Spanish America has undergone in the last thirty years. According to Menton and others, the 'new' historical fiction has many traits associated with postmodernism and multiculturalism, and often subverts and rewrites traditionally accepted views of Latin American

history through parody, pastiche, anachronisms, and other postmodern modes. Even in literary works written in a more traditional narrative style, voices which were often marginalized, or altogether absent from canonical texts, have been resurrected. Examples of these voices include the indigenous population of the New World, lower-class Spaniards (such as crew members on ships), women, homosexuals, female-to-male transvestites, *conversos* (Christians of Jewish heritage), and Crypto-Jews (persons secretly practicing Judaism).

Kim López claims that the historical fiction set in the colonial period and published in the years leading up to 1992 and beyond still focused on the so-called "great men of history" such as Columbus, Carlos V, Cortés and other conquerors. While this may be true in terms of the volume of works published, many successful contemporary authors have created marginalized voices within fictional texts that take place in the colonial period. Some examples include Mexican novels such as: Ignacio Solares' *Nen, la inútil*, Carmen Boullosa's *Llanto: Novelas imposibles*; and Herminio Martínez' *Diario maldito de Nuño de Guzmán*. Argentine works such as Marcos Aguinis' *El gesto del marrano*, and Alicia Dujovne Ortiz' *El árbol de la gitana* explore the colonial period from a subaltern perspective,

characterized by dual-identity, double agent personages of Jewish extraction. These texts work within the well-established and recognizable genre of historical fiction but offer a new point of view. Through the fictional representation of the subaltern experience in a historical context, the official histories begin to be debunked; missing voices are now included to some degree. Terry Cochran theorizes that:

if one wishes to put forth a history to 'unmask' the representational (or, if one prefers, the 'official') history that by definition is oppressive to those whose point of view is not represented, then one unfortunately must duplicate the representational mode of the history that is rejected (xi-xii).

Identity Formation

The question of identity has been of particular interest to Latin American intellectuals in the twentieth century. Starting with works like José Martí's *Nuestra América*, Vasconcelos' *La raza cósmica* and Rodo's *Ariel*, the identity conundrum was examined as well by internationally known creative writers like Carlos Fuentes in such well-

known novels as *Terra Nostra* and *Cristóbal Nonato*. Poetry, short stories, and in particular the essays of Octavio Paz, such as *El laberinto de la soledad* also address the topic of Mexican and Latin American identity. Intellectuals like Roberto Fernández Retamar and Angel Rama more recently have contributed to the debate over the definition or essence of their identities. Octavio Paz's notion of the "máscara" is particularly relevant to my study of dual identity or double agents. Paz states that: "A mí me intrigaba (me intriga) no tanto el 'carácter nacional' como lo que oculta ese carácter: aquello que está detrás de la máscara" (1970: 10). While Paz writes mostly about Mexican identity and "national character", he also claims that his thoughts can be applied to identity questions in all of Latin America. Paz writes: "La pregunta sobre México es inseparable de la pregunta sobre el porvenir de América Latina y a su vez se inserta en otra: la del futuro de las relaciones entre ella y los Estados Unidos" (1970: 14). Paz mentions the role of the United States in the formation of Latin American identity, the idea of defining oneself against the other, and this relates directly to globalization and the homogenization of culture. As the cultural and economic presence of the United States and other world powers continue to permeate Mexico and the rest of Latin America,

Latin Americans look to their problematic and violent origins in the colonial period to shape their identity.

Nestor García Canclini notes that:

Subject to fewer restrictions and greater speedup, the circulation of people, capital and messages brings us into daily contact with many cultures; consequently, our identity can no longer be defined by an exclusive belonging to a national community. (91)

Contemporary identity questions in Latin American nations have their origin in the colonial period. The Spanish conquistadors and colonists arrived in the New World in the fifteenth century with an array of identity issues of their own. Having finally defeated the Moors after seven hundred years and simultaneously attempting to rid the peninsula of the Jewish presence as well, the Spanish explorers came upon a whole new "race" to conquer and to assimilate in their nascent empire in the New World. In *Latin American Identity and Constructions of Difference*, Amaryll Chandy points this out referencing the Argentine novelist Ernesto Sábato's remarks on identity:

Not only does Sábato emphasize the cultural plurality and hybridity of the continent today, but he also problematizes the 'Spanish' identity

of the colonizers, reminding us of the importance of the Jewish element in Spain, as well as the Arabic presence. (xviii)

The subsequent miscegenation between Europeans and indigenous people created an even greater hybrid group whose complex cultural progenitors raised further questions as to what it means to be an American (a citizen of the Americas). After gaining independence from Spain, the question of national and regional identities also became the topic of debate among the new nations: What is a Mexican, a Peruvian, or an Argentine? And further, what is a Latin American?

Mestizaje and Dual Identities in Latin America

The colonial period also plays a crucial role in identity formation in Latin America due to the violent nature of the initial contact between the Spaniards and the indigenous populations and the mestizo race that was created by the miscegenation practiced between Spanish males and indigenous females at the outset of the colonization. The *mestizaje*, or indigenous character, present throughout most of Latin America today, especially in countries like Mexico, discourages any unitary sense of

identity. One only needs a cursory knowledge of the conquest of the Aztecs by the Spaniards, and the resultant mestizo nature of the vast majority of Mexico's population, to understand that the identity of most Mexicans today stems from this dual indigenous/European heritage. Octavio Paz claims that:

Confusamente el criollo se sentía heredero de dos Imperios: el español y el indio. Con el mismo fervor contradictorio con que exaltaba al Imperio hispánico y aborrecía a los españoles, glorificaba el pasado indio y despreciaba a los indios. (1982: 33)

Today, many Mexicans and other Latin Americans from countries with large indigenous populations, simultaneously reject and praise their native American lineage. For example, the word 'indio' is used simply as an insult in many Latin American countries. At the same time, Aztec, Mayan and Incan figures and images are regularly used in patriotic displays. Hernán Cortés is portrayed as a villain whereas Cuauhtemoc has become a national hero worthy of statues throughout Mexico City. There are no statues of Cortés in Mexico City. Malinche's assistance to the Spaniards earned her the eternal reputation as a traitor, whereas the Spaniard Gonzalo Guerrero, who rejected his

opportunity to rejoin his countrymen after living eight years among the Mayas, has had several statues erected in his honor since the 1970s.

Yet despite this supposed allegiance to their indigenous heritage, the white, foreign, and European is often times highly prized in Latin America. There is even a widely recognized term for this attitude called 'malinchismo', generally defined as one who prefers foreign, rather than indigenous, things. Sandra Cypress explains it as "the pattern of behavior whereby Mexicans prefer foreign elements to the detriment of their own nation" (168). Despite the widely recognized phenomenon of malinchismo, children of all social classes in Mexico are often named after indigenous (colonial) figures such as Cuauhtemoc or Tenoch. The internationally successful and critically acclaimed Mexican film *Y tu mamá también* (2002), featured an upper-class adolescent named Tenoch as one of the two main protagonists.

Double Agents in Contemporary Novels of the Conquest

Examining contemporary texts set in the colonial period which feature characters struggling (or simply choosing) to live with two or more identities—such as women who dressed

as men, men who engaged furtively in sex with other men, Spaniards who rejected their own culture in favor of living among the indigenous societies, and Jews (conversos or 'Crypto') who hid their true identities in the New World—will illuminate and reflect current identity issues and debates in contemporary Latin American society. Coping techniques like impersonation and imposture that such individuals in the colonial period were forced to use (either consciously or unconsciously) in negotiating a functional identity, reflect similar struggles that subaltern groups experience in Latin America today. Tina Chen asserts in her study of double agent characters in Asian American fiction that: "I see impersonation and its nature as a performance of dual allegiance as an extremely effective vehicle for articulating such double aims and thus an invaluable site for critical investigation" (13). Impersonation is a technique that many of the mentioned "double agents" were forced to engage in. In exposing and analyzing the textual development of these "double agent" characters in contemporary historical fiction texts I will show how these writers are questioning and subverting the traditionally accepted versions of history, which largely help to inform notions of identity. Such characters are inevitably marginalized in one way or another. Victoria E.

Campos comments that, "late twentieth-century writers animate figures both omitted from colonial writings and marginalized from the new Hispanic society" (51). Careful consideration of the subaltern voices in the Colonial period--voices of groups who clearly existed at that time but were given no representation in the textual record--brought to life by these contemporary writers reveal parallels between the experiences of these marginalized individuals in the Colonial period and similar individuals in the 21st century. Antonio Benitez Rojo recognizes the dual and problematic nature of identity in the Caribbean region and how it is reflected in literary texts. He states that:

Whatever the skin color might be, it is a color in conflict with itself and with others, irritated in its very instability and resented for its uprootedness. The literature of the Caribbean...refers itself generally, in one way or another, to this double conflict of the skin.

(201)

Other countries in Latin America, such as Mexico and Peru, experience similar internal struggles stemming from the dual identities present in these societies.