

**Constructing Chicano Identity:  
Resistance, Celebration, and Hybridity in Sergio Troncoso's**

***From This Wicked Patch of Dust***

**By James M Cochran**

“I have often called for Latinos, particularly Chicanos, to define themselves, and not let others, even the well-intentioned media, define who we are.”

—Sergio Troncoso, “Latinos Find an American on the Border of Acceptance” (78)

Since the 1960s, Chicano literature, art, and politics have worked to resist dominant social norms, value-systems, and stereotypes. Sergio Troncoso's 2011 novel *From This Wicked Patch of Dust* follows this same path of resistance. His novel traces the Martínez family as its members move from Ysleta, a Mexican-United States border town, to various parts of the world, including New York City, Jerusalem, and Tehran. Troncoso uses form, language, and indigenous myths and symbols to resist dominant American linguistic authority and popular imagination and to embrace his mestizo and Chicano heritage. However, Troncoso does not advocate a return to old Mexico, which is plagued with androcentrism. He constructs a Chicano identity that is neither stable nor rooted in place. Troncoso resists the idea of a homogenous Latino identity and constructs a Chicano identity that is defined by hybridity, ambiguity and fluidity.

*Chicano Resistance*

*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* is a resistance novel because it calls into question the validity of dominant truth claims. Troncoso does not call for a radical rejection of Western culture and a complete return to Aztlán, the symbolic home of the Aztecs. Similarly, for Troncoso, resistance is not a call to arms. In an essay, he writes, “I didn't become a bomb-thrower, nor did I grow to resent groups in power, even after I learned what they had once done to the downtrodden and the weak. I did vow never to forget where I was from” (“The Distance to Tucson”). Troncoso's novel is a resistance text because it destabilizes Western notions of American and Mexican identities. The text is also a resistance text because it puts forth Chicano heritage as a legitimate and alternative culture to Anglo-American culture.

Troncoso's resistance is neither radical nor a harsh critique of American capitalism; yet, it is politically resistant. Describing Native American literature and expanding on Simon J. Ortiz's study of “cultural genocide,” Alesia García argues, “As Ortiz suggests, the very existence of Native American language and storytelling in this sense becomes political because it defies the idea of an homogenous America or an ‘American’ language and literature. Native American literature need not express an overt political statement or position to be counter-hegemonic and counter-discursive” (García 5). Similarly, Chicano literature, specifically Troncoso's novel, need not be political, in a radical sense, because its publication is political by destabilizing the idea of a homogenous America.

*Resistance through Spanish*

One way that Troncoso resists dominant American literary authority is through his mixture of Spanish and English. Troncoso explains that, early in his career, his editors wanted him to italicize the Spanish words in his stories, but he resisted them: “I did not allow my publisher to italicize the Spanish whenever I used it, because in these border stories Spanish and English were often interchangeable, a unique hybrid language misunderstood not only by the purists in Washington, D.C. but also by those in Mexico City” (“Literature and Migration” 6). To capture the hybridity of the border language, Troncoso does not italicize his Spanish words and often transitions seamlessly between English and Spanish.

Tronco’s rejection of italicized Spanish is not merely an attempt to capture border language; it is an act of resistance against American literary authority. In *Borderlands / La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa argues that language is a central tool for cultural domination: “In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self...and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (Anzaldúa 58-9). By rejecting the linguistic sign that marks the Spanish language as a part of the “Other,” Troncoso establishes his hybrid border tongue as a legitimate language and mode of expression.

Furthermore, Troncoso reestablishes his language’s legitimacy by forcing English-speaking readers to accommodate him. Like Anzaldúa’s seminal text, Troncoso’s *From This Wicked Patch of Dust* includes Spanish passages without footnotes that offer English translations. Sometimes, the Spanish words or phrases are short and simple. For example, Pilar, the mother of the Martínez family, announces, “This is our house, niños” (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 6). Even non-Latino Americans unfamiliar with Spanish likely know that “niños” means “children.” At the end of the novel, however, Troncoso includes Marcos’s letter, which fills nearly half a page (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 216). Troncoso offers no footnotes or translation; he forces non-Latino readers to either stop and translate the passage or skip the letter and sacrifice the novel’s details. Thus, Troncoso, in Anzaldúa’s language, makes his tongue legitimate by not accommodating English-speaking readers and instead forcing them to accommodate him.

*Resistance through Indigenous Myths*

In addition to using Spanish as a form of resistance and to celebrate his heritage, Troncoso also incorporates indigenous symbols, myths, and figures into his fiction. García notes the popularity of indigenous myths in the Chicano movement: “Since the turn of the century, and specifically within the last thirty years, these [indigenous] myths have been rediscovered, reappropriated, and recontextualized by many Chicano poets, writers, and scholars in an effort to reclaim an indigenous, Native American link between all Chicanos” (García 14). Indigenous myths serve as political inspiration, representing a desire to learn about the roots of Chicano culture.

One indigenous figure that Troncoso uses is La Llorona, the weeping woman who searches for her drowned offspring. Traditionally, the La Llorona legend has Mexican and Aztec origins. Danizete Martínez explains,

Legend has it that La Llorona was a mestiza woman who was jilted by her Spanish lover, and in an act of revenge, drowned their children. As a result of God’s

punishment, she forever roams the earth's waterways looking for her children while wailing in the night. A Native American version relates her to the Aztec Goddess Cihuacótl who steals babies from their cribs and leaves behind an obsidian knife; another version dates back to pre-conquest and has her appearing before men, covered with chalk and wailing, while wearing obsidian earplugs. (Martínez 220)

La Llorona, then, is a symbol of hybridity. On a basic level, she is the mestiza woman who was sexually involved with a European lover, or in many versions, raped by a European colonialist, resulting in "mixed" or hybrid offspring. On another level, La Llorona represents hybridity because she has mixed origins, neither fully Aztec nor European. Within the past forty years, the Chicano movement has embraced La Llorona as a figure of resistance. According to Tey Diana Rebolledo, "La Llorona is also symbolic of Chicano culture, whose children are lost because of their assimilation into the dominant culture or because of violence and prejudice" (Rebolledo 77). For contemporary Chicanos, La Llorona serves as a symbol of resistance, critiquing the violence of American colonialism and imperialism.

In Troncoso's novel, La Llorona is only directly mentioned once when Pilar hears "moaning in the canal," imagines "La Llorona, and sends Cuauhtémoc to investigate, finding an intoxicated teenager (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 27-8). Still, Troncoso aligns La Llorona with Pilar when she mourns over Marcos's death. The imagery of water haunts the funeral scene, invoking La Llorona's searching near water: "The wind whipped up small twisters among the tombstones and the irrigation canals beyond the chain-link fence....The sky was overcast and claustrophobic, threatening to unleash a few raindrops" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 225). Even Pilar's sobs, which are themselves allusions to La Llorona's crying, invoke the dangerous water: "Pilar gasped for air as if underwater, her face uplifted to the sky. Tears poured down her cheeks" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 226). Through the water imagery and the intense crying, Troncoso links Pilar and La Llorona.

The new La Llorona cries out against the violence of oppressive governments. Pilar rebukes the United States as the source of Marcos's death. She cries, "Mataron a Marcos....They killed him! They killed him! ... Because they left him in pieces....they slaughtered him! ... They left my Marcos in pieces!" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 221-24) Pilar's admonishments are towards an ambiguous "they," and we could initially think that the "they" refers only to enemy militants; however, Pilar clarifies with a severe indictment of the United States: "It is the fault of this government who sends its citizens to the ends of this earth to die for no reason" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 226). In this manner, La Llorona's purpose is to critique the United States and its violence that often results in senseless deaths.

Another indigenous symbol that Troncoso uses to critique the United States is the Martínez father's name, Cuauhtémoc, referring to the sixteenth-century ruler, the last Aztec emperor, often considered a Chicano nationalistic symbol. If readers miss the allusion to the Aztec ruler, Troncoso gives other clues to connect Cuauhtémoc Martínez with Aztlán and old Mexico. For example, one of the first images of Cuauhtémoc is him drinking atole: "Cuauhtémoc trudged to the kitchen and poured himself a cup of atole....He stirred the hot thick brown elixir with a spoon and lost himself for a moment in the clouds of steam" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 2). According to Tomás Atencio, atole is an "indigenous food derived from corn, significantly rooted in the Indian creation myth" (Atencio 38). The atole links the present day Cuauhtémoc to the historical Cuauhtémoc—

or at least to old Mexico. Through the traditional indigenous drink and the allusion to the Aztec ruler, Troncoso inserts old Mexico into the text as a counterculture to the United States.

Troncoso's allusion to Cuauhtémoc is a celebration of his cultural roots but it is also a critique of violent Western imperialism and colonialism. Guisela Latorre describes Cuauhtémoc's role in the Chicano movement:

Cuauhtémoc thus stands not only for the fallen Aztec hero but also as a personification of the contemporary Chicano, whose own subjugation began with the European colonization of the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and continued with the U.S. domination of Mexican territory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Latorre 78)

Similarly, in a recent email, Troncoso reveals that his allusion to Cuauhtémoc "is meant to represent (or point to) old Mexico, the Mexico defending itself against invaders....that Aztec ruler [who] led the resistance against Cortez, and was tortured by the Spaniards for his resistance." More than just pointing to old Mexico, Troncoso explicitly mentions the invasion of Mexico and the Spanish torture of the Aztec leader. Cuauhtémoc represents old Mexico, but his name also invokes the Spanish torture of indigenous Aztecs, pointing to violent Western colonialism.

Along with the historical Cuauhtémoc, Pancho Villa, who was an important figure of the Mexican Revolution and is now a popular hero of the Chicano movement, is one of Cuauhtémoc Martínez's heroes. Describing Villa's role in the Chicano movement, F. Arturo Rosales asserts, "Heroes of the Revolution, such as Emiliano Zapata and Francisco 'Pancho' Villa, became icons for Chicano Movement activists. These activists called on the Mexican Revolution's legacies to remind Chicanos that theirs was a revolutionary heritage" (Rosales 294). Early in the novel, Doña Pepita often recalls stories of the Mexican Revolution. Cuauhtémoc intently listens as she recalls "how she survived the Mexican Revolution when Villa rode triumphantly into Chihuahua's El Charco and electrified the countryside with his spectacular victories and charisma" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 16). Later, when Cuauhtémoc and Pilar discuss their heritage, Cuauhtémoc says, "Your own mother lived to see Villa. Aren't you proud of who you are?" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 24) For Cuauhtémoc, revolutionary figures, like Pancho Villa, are inspirational, and his revolutionary heritage is a source of pride.

### *Problems of Old Mexico*

While Cuauhtémoc serves as a figure of resistance and points back to traditional Mexico, Troncoso certainly does not advocate a return to old Mexico and a complete rejection of Anglo-American culture. Many Chicano and Chicana writers use indigenous symbols, myths, and figures to recall the past but not necessarily to call for a return of past ways. Danizete Martínez clarifies, "In Chicana literary production, the presence of Mexican folklore demonstrates a symbolic remembering... This return signals an ideological rebirth of Chicana/o cultural identity that is neither androcentric nor nostalgic for 'old Mexico'; instead, it marks a resurgence that foregrounds the potential for cultural empowerment in Chicana discourse" (Martínez 217). For many Chicana writers and activists, the re-appropriation does not represent a desire to return to patriarchal old Mexico; rather, Chicana writers recast traditional symbols to legitimize their empowerment.

Like Chicana writers who use traditional Mexican folklore but do not want to return to traditional Mexico, Troncoso rejects a return to Aztlán. Throughout the novel, Troncoso highlights the androcentrism and patriarchy that plagues old Mexico. Nearly all of Cuauhtémoc's heroes are masculine figures who use violence to achieve their nationalistic goals. The Aztec Cuauhtémoc led his warriors in violent battle against Cortes, and Pancho Villa and his Mexican guerillas killed seventeen Americans in Columbus, New Mexico. In addition to Cuauhtémoc and Villa, Julio César Chávez, the boxing legend of Mexico, is another one of Cuauhtémoc's heroes. Troncoso captures Cuauhtémoc's excitement over Chávez's violence and physical strength: "Chávez punished him [Mayweather] with body blows for a round....Cuauhtémoc shouted, 'It's over! Chávez wins!' and stared giddily at the TV screen, on the edge of the sofa" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 143). This passage demonstrates Cuauhtémoc's celebration of the Mexican boxing legend, but the passage also demonstrates how Mexican nationalism, like many forms of nationalism, is tied deeply to androcentric power and violence.

Troncoso does not invent the connection between masculine violence and old Mexico. Pancho McFarland explains that this alignment is a part of traditional Mexican culture and the twentieth-century Chicano movement: "In relating colorful tales of our relatives who rode with Villa and Zapata, boxing-club exploits...older men teach younger men that being...a Mexican or Chicano man, requires strength, toughness, and violence...By the 1960s the Chicano Movement further emphasized the ideal of the Chicano male fighting against oppression" (McFarland 17, 19). The masculine Chicano became the dominant image of the Chicano movement, and, as a result, the movement often silenced or rejected feminine heroes who offered other forms of resistance.

Troncoso rejects Cuauhtémoc's masculine celebration of his heritage by presenting Cuauhtémoc's patriarchal pride as outdated for the contemporary world. For example, when Marcos and Cuauhtémoc watch boxing, Marcos feels distant from his father: "Cuauhtémoc commented excitedly that Chávez was wearing the colors of Mexico, red, white, and green....Why did his father care so much about Chávez and Mexico? Why Mexican boxers? ... In some ways, Marcos thought, he was, and was not anymore, his father's son" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 143). Cuauhtémoc's nationalistic fervor that celebrates masculine violence was a crucial part of the twentieth-century Chicano movement, but Marcos rejects the fervor because it ignores the complexities of the contemporary Chicano identity.

Troncoso also resists the dominant narrative of the violent masculine hero by providing examples of heroic females who were or are central to the Chicano and Chicana movements. The first example is Doña Josefina, who tells the stories about Villa. She recalls that she "survived the Mexican Revolution," inserting herself into the revolutionary narrative that is typically male-dominated. Out of the Martínez children, only Julia participates mostly directly in the Chicano and Chicana movements. In contrast, Pancho, the son likely named after the historical Pancho Villa, lacks the Chicano spirit of activism. Julia enrolls in a class titled "History of the Chicano Movement," works with the "Sisters of the Holy Trinity," and travels to Nicaragua to help those impacted by "the imperialistic American government" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 62, 82). By presenting Julia rather than Pancho as a Chicana activist, Troncoso casts aside the androcentric nationalism of the early Chicano movement and calls for an acknowledgment of voices typically outside the dominant narrative.

*Resistance through La Mestiza*

In the same way that Troncoso points to the Chicano movement's gender diversity, he and other Chicano writers emphasize the diversity of the Latino community by critiquing the supposed homogeneity of Latinos. As Jorge J.E. Gracia points out, "Non-Latino Americans think of Latinos as a homogenous group, a group whose members have the same characteristics" (Gracia x). In response to the depictions of Latinos as homogenous, Chicano literature relies on the notion of hybridity. Sánchez argues that the "concept of centering subjectivity in collectivities is an important cultural and political construct in Chicano literature" (Sánchez 77). That is, Chicano subjects position themselves among different, often competing, collectivities or group identities, rather than aligning themselves with one stable and concrete identity. The Chicano experience cannot be reduced to one particular set of traits or characteristics.

Troncoso centers "subjectivity in collectivities" by writing about the diverse Martínez family rather than focusing on one single character. Ismael, describing his novel, which is likely, or at least similar to, *From This Wicked Patch of Dust*, says, "Mamá, I wrote a story. It's about our family, Mamá" and again, "Mamá, it's not about me, it's about our family. It's about Ysleta" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 227-28). Ismael is clear that his novel is about a family, a group with multiple perspectives and experiences. Similarly, Troncoso, in a 2011 interview, emphasizes the novel's group focus: "Well, it is a novel...in which the group, this Mexican-American family, is the protagonist. It is not a novel with an individual protagonist, but something quite different...I also wanted to focus on the variety in the Latino experience, a variety that too often is overlooked...I wanted to write about that type of multifaceted family" ("Interview with Sergio Troncoso"). By writing about a diverse family with multiple experiences and points of view, Troncoso resists the non-Latino practice of homogenizing Latinos.

As Ken R. Crane and Ann V. Millard observe, many non-Latino Americans believe in the "stereotype that all Hispanics are Catholic," but, in reality, there exists a "great diversity of Latino religious expression" (Crane and Millard 178). Troncoso, too, fights this assumption of Latino religious homogeneity by featuring Latinos with diverse spiritual beliefs and experiences. Troncoso asserts, "There are Latinos who are Muslim; Latinos who are Jewish, or at least have close ties to Jewish culture and religion" ("Interview with Sergio Troncoso"). In the conventional "Mexican Catholic" role is Pilar, whose name translates to "Peter," the "rock" on which the Catholic Church is founded. By the end of the novel, however, even Pilar's faith shifts from faithful obedience to skepticism, and she cries, "Nothing matters anymore. Father Ortega is coming tomorrow, but I don't want to see him. I don't want to hear his lies. I don't ever want to believe anymore" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 227). Pilar's anger is a response to Marcos's death rather than a complete rejection of Catholicism. Still, her anger toward Father Ortega and the Church resist the image of the faithful Mexican Catholic.

The Martínez children demonstrate the religious diversity of the Latino community, as well. When Pilar and Cuauhtémoc travel to Jerusalem, a woman describes the family's diversity, stating, "Your familia is recreating the wonders of Al-Andalus, Muslims and Christians and Jews together" (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 154). The woman invokes Al-Andalus or Moorish Spain, a region that experienced relatively peaceful relations between Muslims, Christians, and Jews for seven centuries. The woman links the family to a common Spanish past, but the defining feature is diversity rather than homogeneity.

Ismael's attitudes toward religion sharply contrast Mexican Catholic homogeneity. Unlike the Catholic Pilar, Ismael becomes an atheist or agnostic: "Despite his mother and father's ideas,

Ismael believed God probably did not exist. After attending years of church services at Mount Carmel, he thought God was something you created to help you when you were weak or vulnerable” (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 96). Additionally, Troncoso, drawing on his own marriage, emphasizes Latino religious diversity through Ismael’s marriage to a Jewish American woman. The wedding features “Spanish and English, Ysleta and Wellesley, the Martínezes and the Kantors, the priest and the rabbi, emphasizing the religious diversity of the union” (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 164). The wedding serves as a site of linguistic, geographical, cultural, and religious hybridity.

Like Ismael, Julia’s religious experiences sharply contrast the idea of the Mexican Catholic. Julia initially finds spiritual meaning in her progressive Catholicism that celebrates social activism. Later, Julia, like Troncoso’s sister, converts to Islam. She tells her parents, “I want to be a Muslim. I’ve even chosen a new Muslim name, Aliyah....They [Muslims] pray every day, they follow the Koran, they love their families...They want to create a life here on earth that follows the word of God” (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 113-14). By casting Julia as a Muslim, often the religion of the “Other” in contemporary Western thought, Troncoso radically departs from and rejects Latino homogeneity.

Finally, Troncoso challenges the assumption that all Latinos are comic or stupid figures lacking rationality. Talking about *The Nature of Truth*, Troncoso argues about the need for intellectual Chicano figures:

I wanted to write a book in which Chicanos discuss philosophical ideas, a book that was not typically Chicano literature, that perhaps expanded the notion of what Chicanos could write and what they could be. Too often I saw caricatures of Chicanos in literature, visual beings who do not think, who do not contribute anything intellectual to literary discourse, or the debate of ideas in America. I wanted to challenge that stereotype. (“Author Spotlight”)

Like *The Nature of Truth*, Troncoso’s *From This Wicked Patch of Dust* also challenges the stereotype of the unintellectual Latino through Ismael, the character most closely modeled after Troncoso. Ismael is, in many ways, the antithesis of the physical Mexican: “Mayello only wanted to be left alone with his thoughts” (*From This Wicked Patch of Dust* 56). Ismael not only show that Latinos have intellectual lives but that they are capable of intellectual and academic success.

As the United States immigration debate garners intense political and media attention, the question of American and Chicano identities is ever more important. In *From This Wicked Patch of Dust*, Sergio Troncoso resists dominant American practices that mark Latinos as others. He achieves this resistance through his language, indigenous symbols, and examples of hybridity. Troncoso is clear that a complete rejection of Anglo-American society is not a solution because old Mexico suffers from patriarchal and androcentric problems. Troncoso’s solution, then, is to celebrate his cultural heritage but also to remember that identities are fluid and ambiguous rather than concrete and stable. Troncoso’s novel ends with the hope that Anglo-Americans and Chicanos alike will cherish their heterogeneity instead of reducing particular groups into homogenous stereotypes.

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