

# Towards a Dialogical Theory of Cultural Liminality. Contemporary Writing and Cultural Identity in Mexico

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This essay contributes to the current discussion of otherness from a non-European point of view and to the study of cultural identity in general. It is part of a larger ongoing project of reading Bakhtinian concepts such as doublevoicedness, carnivalization and heteroglossia to create a dialogical theory of cultural liminality.

By liminality I mean the paradoxical and potentially productive condition of being situated between two locations. These locations may be physical locations, languages, literary genres, cultural traditions, or stages of development. The concept of liminality erases hierarchical separations. This paper concentrates on cultural liminality, as it is expressed in literary discourse.

I will refer to the contemporary debate about cultural identity in Mexico as it is expressed in some recent literary works and the essays of critical social scientists in Mexico. This debate exemplifies a growing need to create a dialogical theory of liminality in literary criticism and contemporary Cultural Studies. What is said here about

Mexican cultural debates could be applied, in general terms, to the debates over cultural identity in most contemporary cultures, including most European, Chicano, Spanish American and many other cultural and linguistic communities. They are symptoms of a growing tendency towards international multiculturalism and different types of cultural liminality.

#### Bakhtin and Liminality

For Mikhail Bakhtin, parody is “a dialogically engaged understanding of a living heteroglossia” (308). In accordance with his ideas I am convinced that metafiction and parody are signs of historical, geographical, linguistic, and cultural liminality in the contemporary world. Their presence is symptomatic of the historical tendency toward the hybridization of cultures, literary genres and languages. All of this is an indirect consequence of multiculturalism. Heteroglossia is a specific kind of double-voiced speech. In parody, heteroglossia expresses two simultaneous intentions: the characters’ or narrator’s (directly), and the author’s (indirectly) (Bakhtin 324).

Comic, ironic and parodic writing are forms of hybrid construction, and they lend themselves very well to the expression of liminal, hybrid, transitional and paradoxical historical conditions, as they are expressed by the writers who use them. All these writing strategies express the cultural need for new languages not yet created, especially those of emerging communities. These multiple communities, with their multiple voices, express the need to distance themselves from the tradition inherited from their predecessors while encoding that preceding discourse in an ironical, double-voiced way.

Liminal cultures, because of their self-conscious historical condition, tend to make carnivalistic use of traditions and of traditional boundaries, be it in geographical terms, in historical, cultural, or political terms, or in strictly linguistic or literary terms. The comic style also questions the boundaries of separate discursive fields.

Style is grounded on the diversity of types of speech, not on the unity of a normative shared language (Bakhtin 308). Therefore, parodic and self-conscious writing, as a kind of extreme stylization and polyphonic writing, is a result of the existence of different styles and voices in a cultural context.

The liminal nature of contemporary multiculturalism gives way to complex strategies of writing, such as “islands of scattered direct speech and purely authorial speech, washed by heteroglot waves from

all sides" (Bakhtin 307). This is the case in most contemporary Chicano writing, the product of a liminal, borderland community. This cultural community, very close to the Mexican tradition, is also very similar to other liminal communities around the world. Europe provides an interesting example of liminality because of its increasingly multicultural profile.

### Humor and Irony

A few comments about a general theory of humor forming a liminal theory of culture are in order, since irony is the main feature of the literature written on the borders and in zones of cultural uncertainty.

According to Jorge Portilla and other Mexican phenomenologists of the late 50s, humor is a gesture of freedom, whereas irony is an act of simultaneous destruction and recreation, of simultaneous uncertainty and complicity, of simultaneous ambiguity and commitment (1966). While certain kinds of humor (not laughter) may sometimes appear as a monologic ritual with sexual overtones (*albures*), irony can only exist in a permanent openness, questioning our conventional perception of the world and questioning our use and perception of language itself.

The study of humor, therefore, may be an ethnographic endeavor, assuming humor is a distorted mirror of the values of a community. The study of irony, on the other hand, may have an ethical and aesthetic dimension. Moreover, irony is a tool that makes it possible to doubt the permanence of those very values that the humorous glance addresses. Humor seems to confirm the existence of the world. Irony questions its own nature. Both humor and irony are important elements of a culture. Their study should be part of any theory of cultural identity.

Irony has a long tradition in Mexican fiction. It is found in the precolumbian parodies, such as that of the women in Chalco, who sang war anthems in the fashion of erotic chants, and in the historical chronicles of the conquest, such as that of the so-called War of the Fat Women. According to this chronicle, the women with big breasts attacked the enemy by spreading their milk on the soldiers, causing strategical confusion. Similar elements of a carnivalesque and parodic nature can be found in every cultural and literary tradition (Don L. Nilsen).

Nevertheless, there is not a systematic theory of ironic discourse that in more specific terms, is shared by many hybridized cultures and liminal communities, such as those of the immigrants, the inhabitants of the borderlands, or the inhabitants of multilinguistic and multicultural centers. Bakhtin himself was raised in one of these.

When this ironic double-voicedness creates its own tradition, readers of such literary works may become aware that they are able to create their own maze, their own rules and their own ways of creating meaning out of playing with traditional conventions.

#### Metafiction and Parody

A general map of the presence of metafiction and parody in contemporary writing during the last 25 years offers an instructive point of departure for discussing contemporary writing. Metafiction and parody are the result of the expression of a dialogic relationship between text and social context and are an expression of a specific chronotope. They are the result of a carnivalization of modern European literary conventions and coincide with writers's search for a specific and contradictory cultural identity.

One point of departure for the discussion of cultural identity as it is expressed through literary texts is to observe the main trend in the literary production of a specific literary community. Mexican narrative production—novels and short stories alike—as most of contemporary Spanish American writing after the so-called “boom” in the 1960s, is characterized by its keen self-consciousness. Self-conscious writing—that is to say, metafictional writing that questions the relationship between reality and its representation through literary language—is an expression of ironic literary devices.

Among the many possible ways to study literary irony (parody and metafiction constituting its more complex expressions) the Bakhtinian approach seems to be the most complete and pertinent to establishing its relationship to the field of Cultural Studies. This is so because dialogical thought addresses the more useful of the main current theoretical approaches of the study of literary irony. [For an overview of these trends, see Clive Thomson and Lauro Zavala (*Guía bibliográfica*).] The main trends in the study of irony are the structural approach (Wayne Booth and Gérard Genette); the pragmatic approach (Linda Hutcheon and Jonathan Culler), and the historical approach (Margaret A. Rose).

In more general terms, precisely because of the Bakhtinian emphasis on heteroglossia —understood as the simultaneous presence of opposing voices in a single discourse—a dialogical literary theory would be very useful for understanding the paradoxes of contemporary writing. It also helps in the study of contemporary tendencies toward liminality in everyday life.

Today it is commonly accepted by most social scientists in different fields of knowledge that parody and self-reflexive writing arise wherever a cultural tradition achieves a canonical status, and, therefore, when this tradition ceases to have an immediate meaning to its readers. More specifically, parody can be read as a symptom of generic or stylistic maturity in a cultural tradition, and as evidence of the new voices that will seek to establish a new dialogue with that very tradition.

Consequently, the dominance of parody and metafiction in a literary corpus in a given time and space (a chronotope) implies the existence of simultaneous dialogues among different cultural systems. Parody seems to evoke cultural change, and therefore, it is an indicator of the probable trends in a given cultural milieu. By observing carefully what is being parodied and what is being ironized in metafiction, it is possible to understand what might come to change in a cultural tradition, in relation to its specific historical context. In what follows, I will address the specific chronotope in which Mexican parody and metafiction arise.

#### Literary History

Metafiction in the European and American literary tradition is an expression of the belief in the noninterpretability of reality. At least this is so in the more radical and skeptical stances of European writing, especially in the modern tradition between both World Wars in authors like Beckett and Joyce.

During the last 25 years, European literature has been characterized by its tendency to propose different strategies of historiographical metafiction, in a similar way to what is clearly the case in some of the contemporary Spanish American novels. By historiographical metafiction I mean an ironic reading of the cultural past of a given community, and a relatively skeptical way to express uncertainty about a closed meaning for history and literary language. The roots of historiographic metafiction are mainly in the carnivalesque tradition found

in the modern novel—Cervantes, Diderot, Sterne—and the anti-realistic tradition of modern literature in general.

Contemporary metafiction in Spanish America was born as a relatively autonomous tradition in the early 1940s with the parodic carnivalization of European literary conventions. The *Quijote* represents its Spanish-language antecedent. Jorge Luis Borges's stories best exemplify this trend. Twenty years after the publication of his most widely-read collection of short stories, *Ficciones* (1942), the Spanish American neo-baroque novel attracted the attention of European and American writers, critics, and readers alike, precisely because of its use of a most postmodern strategy of writing, that is, historiographical metafiction. Nevertheless, important differences between European and Spanish American writing are a result of the fact that postmodern writing in Europe and Spanish America respond to different chronotopes where the postmodern writing was born.

European and American postmodern fiction is skeptical towards history—as is the case in the novels in Bartheleme, Barth, Rushdie, Eco, and others. Spanish American fiction, on the other hand, is aware of the regional need to have a future at least partially based on utopian projects. But this literature is also supported by ironic, carnivalesque and liminal readings of local myths, be they literary, ethnographic or products of the mass media.

In Spanish America, the richness and contemporaneity of this mythical tradition can be seen chiefly in the vitality of the precolumbian heritage, in the tendency to ritualize everyday interaction and in the strength of institutional languages. There is, nevertheless, a common need to believe in utopian projects that can be shared by different communities across the continent.

What may be termed neo-baroque writing in Spanish America since the late sixties uses these mythical elements in the construction of utopias of language. This and the carnivalization of the modern European traditions, as well as the acknowledgment of the plural nature of the area are some of the elements that make this literature one of the most ludic searches for a new language, as Fuentes calls it, a cultural strategy “to invent the past and to remember the future” (*Valiente mundo nuevo* 23). The situation of Mexico in this cultural context is a complex example of this condition, one Mexico shares with most third-world countries.

## The Mexican Chronotope

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) fostered hope in a return to the cultural roots of the peasants. This hope was later betrayed by the government party through recourse to an institutional language created to justify the existence of the institutions holding political power.

Today, the Revolution is thought of as unfinished. In the early sixties, this historically frustrated project was still the main source of concern for most writers, even though many of them were also increasingly concerned with the inner conflicts of individual characters, those unseen victims of a culture that isolated them.

By the late sixties and early seventies, as was the case in many literary traditions all over the world, a new generation of writers subverted this hierarchical tradition through recourse to humor, irony and parody. They also displayed a concern for everyday language, mass media images, rock culture, and a keen concern for the political and cultural consequences of the killing of students in Mexico City in 1968 ten days before the opening of the Olympic Games. They employed parody to undermine the power strategies based in the control of language games, be it the language of politicians or the language of intellectuals, or the misogynist "common sense" that confines women to certain specific roles in society. Some of the writers who employ this strategy are José Agustín, Elena Poniatowska, Carlos Monsiváis, Carlos Fuentes, Augusto Monterroso, Gustavo Sáinz and José Emilio Pacheco. In the 1980s parodic writing became more experimental. Authors shifted their attention to very specific idiolects that were familiar to their middle class readers. They parodied discourses such as the scholarly dissertation, the philosophical treatise, the chivalric novel and the newspaper chronicle in order to deliver compelling ideas through a seemingly trivial subject. The main targets of parodic language were political jargon and clichés, no longer popular among the middle class.

The texts of these ironists are usually published in the journals that are read by the writers themselves, where literary criticism and creation is combined with political and cultural reflection, such as *Vuelta*, *Nexos*, *La Jornada Semanal*, *Casa del Tiempo* and *Revista de la Universidad*.

Mexican authors have cultivated metafiction intensely during the seventies and eighties. In fact, John Brushwood asserts that



metafiction might be considered the main narrative trend during this period. Most of these works were historiographical metafiction, directing an ironic glance at both history and literary language.

Pacheco's *Morirás lejos* (1967) is a metafictional reading of European history. Del Pasos's *Noticias del imperio* (1987) metafictionalizes nineteenth-century Mexican history. Fuentes's *Cristóbal nonato* (1987) offers an imaginary picture of the immediate future. In general terms, all of them could also be considered as neobaroque works, with their excessive erudition, hyperbolic allegories, and ironic understatements.

These writers also demythify commonly-held formulas about national identity. They subvert myths about national identity, national language, and national literature that have been taken for granted. For them, the only possible identity is one that emerges from pluralism and dialogical writing and from subverting myths about cultural identity. The condition of contemporary history is transitional and multicultural.

#### Postmodern Metaparody

Metaparody and neobaroque metafiction in contemporary Mexican writing are examples of the liminal writing that announces a new attitude towards the commonsensical and mythical assumptions about national identity.

My first example of parody in contemporary writing is also an example of a liminary use of cultural myths. Roger Bartra's *La jaula de la melancolía* was originally published in 1987, and a version in English has recently been published by Rutgers University Press. The title is a parody of Octavio Paz's canonical book on Mexican cultural identity, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950).

Even in the choice of the book's title, Bartra accomplishes his goal of deconstructing the canonical writings about so-called national identity. Bartra confronts Paz and many other thinkers who have written on this subject. He argues that the identity they propose is a myth created by their own writing.

*La jaula* is a liminal book in many ways. It is deliberately written in a half-serious, half-ironic style, using elements of both literature and contemporary social science. Actually, half the book (eleven of its twenty-two chapters) is a series of parodies of one major myth about the Mexican, the axolotl. This amphibian, used as a mythical symbol of Mexican identity, is not only halfway between land and



water, it is also halfway between the fetal stage and adulthood, having fetal features when it reaches the reproductive stage. According to the myth of the axolotl, the typical Mexican is halfway between the urban and the rural world, neither completely modern nor with the Edenic innocence of premodern life.

Most contemporary political language in Mexico is unconsciously steeped in this myth, as is much of everyday common knowledge. No wonder all political language in Mexican history during this century has been ambiguous, as has also been public morality. Similarly, the image of Mexico in the international community has always been halfway between different stages: between development and underdevelopment, and between the first and the third worlds. This is why Mexico has always been host to difficult diplomatic encounters between its Northern and Southern neighbors, especially between the United States—with its strong military and economic power—and the isolated and oppressed neighbour countries of Spanish America like Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. This version of Mexican reality supports official foreign policy towards Mexico and portrays an image of a very stable country, with a strong identity.

It also inspires much of Mexico's self-image as it has been created and reproduced by popular film, television, and other mass media. This is especially true since the 1940s, when the country was beginning its urbanization and costly modernization, centered in Mexico City. What Bartra accomplishes, in a most postmodern fashion, is a parody of a parody—a metaparody—similar to Dostoevsky's writing about writing in his *Diary of a Writer* (Morson 83).

Bartra parodies writers who have played with the myth of the axolotl, such as Cortázar, Reyes, and Elizondo. He is also writing in a liminal space of contemporary thought, halfway between sociology and literature. He writes in the space of postmodern sociology, using the tools usually identified with literary fiction such as irony, metaphor, and multiple voices. His writing is an example of what Richard Harvey Brown calls the contemporary "poetics of sociology."

The exhaustive erudition of Bartra's work makes a political *enjeux*: by naming the myth, its mythical nature becomes apparent to the reader, especially as this myth appears in contemporary Mexican writers (Revueltas, Yáñez, Rulfo, Azuela) who address the issue of national identity. It is obvious why this book received so little attention when it first appeared in Mexico. Any kind of dialogue with a dialogic work is difficult for those concerned with maintaining a monologic view of culture and with cultural prestige as a transitional tool for achieving power.

## Neobaroque Metafiction

A novel published by Gustavo Sáinz, *La salud de la serpiente* (1991) is an example of neobaroque metafiction. Here, the narrator-as-editor reconstructs the polemics created by one of the most famous novels of the late sixties, Sáinz's own *Gazapo*, one of the first novels created by the group of young novelists who were revolutionizing the idea of urban literature in the late sixties.

In *La salud*, Sáinz reconstructs the moral and intellectual climate in Mexico in 1968. His novel makes extensive use of personal letters—real or invented by the narrator—written by and to himself when his second novel was in press. He also employs diaries, literary magazines, newspaper drafts, literary quotes, and other written materials to make ironic commentaries about every kind of Mexican myth, ranging from the precolumbian to the contemporary, the religious to the political, the intimate to the collective.

This novel is a rereading of the cultural history of the past 30 years of the literary scene. It is also a complex way to portray as many different voices as a baroque novel can, all of them detailing the history of Mexico and the history of literature, always in relation to and seen through the eyes of the narrator, who is aware of his role as editor of a polyphonic concert of voices. Sáinz's novel portrays cultural identity as a giant pastiche: a patchwork where every style, every tone, and every voice has a place and where no one voice is ever more important than any other.

The paradox of Bartra's artistic project is that while it seems to advocate the disappearance of authorship, there is, nevertheless, an author who remains the final source of interpretation, the organizing principle underlying what would otherwise seem random and hazardous. The novel is organized as if every piece of it were a beginning, starting with a critic's quote. Yet the text must nevertheless keep its own pace in order to have a voice as such, having many things to say about myths and Mexican cultural identity during the late sixties.

Before publishing this novel, Sáinz had written two other metafictional novels, *Fantasmas aztecas* (1982) and *Muchacho en llamas* (1988). In these works he experimented with a kind of writing that is becoming the most common vehicle employed by Mexican writers to express critically what they think about myths created by the mass media, myths about literary figures and historical myths such as those dealing with the Aztecs. There is, no doubt, something of the serpent that bites its own literary tail, in search of a new language.

## Other Forms of Parody

Since the mid-1970s, at least a dozen Mexican writers have been writing in a strongly parodic, satiric or ironic style: that is, in what Bakhtin might call a stylization of a popular literary form.

Their work displays different mechanisms for having their texts read in ways other than at face value, acknowledging that the author is writing tongue-in-cheek. Some of these mechanisms include: the exaggeration of common knowledge, contradictory textual fragments, generic references to the reader's factual knowledge and specific allusions to the stylistic context of the text, such as historic, cultural or linguistic allusions that the readers must be able to recognize during their reading.

One of the most widely read among these writers is the Guatemalan-born Augusto Monterroso, who has published all of his literary work in Mexico during the last 35 years. His parodies of animal fables with political or metafictional overtones are very popular, particularly *La oveja negra y demás fábulas* (1967).

Salvador Elizondo is a well-known experimental fiction writer and author of many important metafictional short stories in the sixties and seventies. In 1984 he published *Miscast*, a self-parody of a writer who writes a mock theater script.

The whodunnit has been a common parodic target since its literary birth. Mexican writing is no exception. Pepe Martínez de la Vega wrote a series of short stories with an unemployed antihero, in his *Aventuras del detective Peter Pérez* (1987). In this series, popular urban culture is seen through a double voiced narrator, who quotes the Greek classics in the vernacular while parodying the conventions of the genre.

Women writers also cultivate this parodic turning inside-out of the convention of detective writing. This is the case in the explicit and funny black parodies contained in Malú Huacuja's first novel, *Crimen sin faltas de ortografía* (1986). Here eroticism, violence, and a criticism of those in power for over half a century, are combined in a self-referential story.

The first collective detective novel written in Mexico was the work of a group of twelve well-known writers. *El hombre equivocado* (1988) is a deliberate parody of generic conventions. In fact, one of the authors, Vicente Leñero, twenty years earlier had written his own metafictional parody of the genre, "¿Quién mató a Agatha Christie?" (1968, 1986).

Other authors have written sarcastic versions of the works they themselves had written before. Such is the brilliant case of Sergio Pitol, who starts his *Domar la divina garza* (1990) by quoting a novelist's voice, who writes a program of work for himself in his personal file: "To study Bakhtin's work on the popular culture in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance. Focus on some elements, such as the Feast, as a primary and indestructible category of human civilization... Without the feast, which liberates and redeems, man gestures in a simulacrum of life..." (14) [translation mine]. Pitol's novel is, actually, a combination of all the conventions created by Pitol himself as a writer. It also feasts satirically on the myths created by a whole generation of families on Mexico's East Coast.

The parodic impulse essayed above also finds its way into border writing. Luis Humberto Crosthwaite's *La luna siempre será un amor difícil* (1994) exemplifies this tendency. In this novel many styles, genres of writing and moral attitudes of and about men and women are the object of a continuous parodic impulse, as well as the object of many forms of self-consciousness. This kind of postmodern fiction, different from the historiographical metafiction written in Europe, has already received the name of *wandering writing* or "escritura itinerante" (Vaquera 1996), a category also pertinent to the short story writing of liminal authors in the Northern regions of Mexico, such as Jesús Gardea, Ricardo Elizondo and Daniel Sada, whose writing is covertly metafictional.

These and other works demonstrate a very active tradition of metafiction and parody in contemporary writing in Mexico during the last 25 years. They also exemplify a growing tendency towards liminal writing elsewhere as a result of a re-reading of the literary, moral, and political myths that have served to construct and uphold cultural identity.

If we accept, as I have tried to show, that the study of irony is a useful strategy for understanding the liminality of the transitional identities that are characteristic of contemporary culture, then it is clear that we all need to question our own myths in order to start a dialogue with our own historical experience, and that of others.

By writing and reading this way, by assuming this critical dialogue with our own cultural texts and with those of different traditions, the liminal cultures won't be "contemporary to all men," as Octavio Paz said almost 50 years ago. Instead, all cultures will be

contemporary to each other, precisely because the marginal, the exiles, and the multi-polar are multiplying. In this way, by means of simultaneous dialogues among different languages and traditions, and between different historical stages within each of these traditions, contemporary cultures might start becoming contemporary to their historical possibilities.

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