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Horizons of Enchantment

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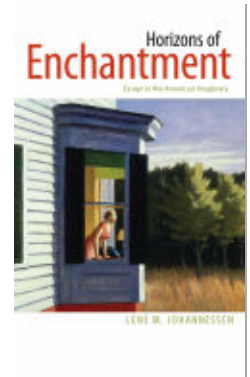
Published by Dartmouth College Press

Johannessen, M..

Horizons of Enchantment: Essays in the American Imaginary.

Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2011.

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SONGS OF DIFFERENT SELVES:
WHITMAN AND GONZALES

SOCIAL IMAGINARIES CARRY particular expectations to their participants. These are disseminated in various ways, commonly through customs and traditions, which teach members the necessary enabled and enabling filters. Founding cultural documents are among the pillars of such traditions, including literary canons that measure how a culture conceptualizes its provenance, genesis, purpose, and indeed, essence, not only for itself but, just as importantly, for others. Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a remarkable founding document in this respect: it is carried by and also carries forth the currents of the American imaginary in its most tropologically compelling form. It creates figures, forms, and images that to this day remain vital to the cultural grids according to which the imaginary's members interpret and perform their participation. As a founding document "Song of Myself" can furthermore be read as a scripted schema that in a sense choreographs other performances of its mythological template. Regarding the relationship between Walt Whitman and the American nation, Benjamin Barber thus observes that:

[Whitman] is an American emblematic as Voltaire and Sartre might be thought of as French emblematics, or Goethe and Kant as German emblematics, or Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as Russian emblematics. When we think about America, we think of Walt Whitman, and when we think about Walt Whitman we think of America—though this may also be to think about what America is not or about how other places are, in certain ways, also American.¹

While I personally do not always think about Whitman when I think about America, I see Barber's point, partly because there is an element here that closely resembles the assumption about *A Saloon-keeper's Daughter* as inherently American. More relevant, though, is the flip side that Barber points to, namely that to think about Whitman and America is just as often to think about what they are *not*, how the equation does not always work.

When we line up Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales's equally foundational and epic but lesser-known poem "I am Joaquín," which dates from 1967, alongside "Song of Myself," such alternative vistas certainly open up. "I am Joaquín" does not arrange itself according to the master imaginary and its institutions' figures. Instead, its restoration of Chicano history is firmly rooted in a different kind of "mode and a form of social-historical doing," in the words of Cornelius Castoriadis, as "creation and ontological genesis in and through individuals' doing and representing/saying," which are in turn "instituted historically."² In this sense, "institution," to briefly recapitulate Castoriadis's definition, is obviously not "social security or a mental health clinic. We are speaking, first and foremost, about language, religion, and power, and about what the individual is in a given society." Foundational documents, as fragments of the enabling filter, or as fragments of the institution, are immensely important in this respect: "[The] institution provides 'meaning' for socialized individuals, but it also supplies them with the resources for bringing this meaning into existence for themselves," Castoriadis says later on. Of more relevance to the context of canonical founding documents, he also states: "What [artists'] imagination sires acquires a 'real'—that is, social-historical—existence, and it does so by using an infinitude of means and elements—language, to begin with—that the artist could never have created 'all by herself.'"³ I do not argue that Gonzales's poem responds self-consciously to Whitman's "Song of Myself" in the same way that, say, Langston Hughes's "I, Too" engages directly with "I Sing America." However, "I am Joaquín" displays enough remarkable structural similarities to, and, indeed, what seem to be overt borrowings from, "Song of Myself" to allow a reading of the two as participants in, or fragments of, the same dialogue.

There is an additional incentive to comparatively gauging the imaginary's representation in the two works. Gonzales tends to be left out of the substantial intertextual company Whitman keeps and has been assigned to. For instance, Gonzales does not figure in Kirsten Griesz's interesting exploration of Whitman as a Latino poet, despite the fact that: "The list of contemporary U.S. Latino poets who address Whitman more or less directly in their writing is startlingly long and inclusive—from the *caribeños* Martín Espada, Victor Hernández Cruz, and Julia Alvarez to Jimmy Santiago Vaca, to the Colombian born pop songstress Shakira."⁴ Hopefully, the inclusion of Gonzales in this pantheon will add to our readings of both him and Whitman, this "kosmos, of Manhattan the son,"⁵ and illuminate how the social imaginary as it was scripted in Whitman's master template comes with oversights and blind spots predicated on its role in and as a "form of social-historical doing" that enables as much as it deters.

Whitman and "Everything"

One of the striking characteristics of Walt Whitman's poetry, for new as well as old readers, is the unremitting fusion of the self with any imaginable entity outside that self, into long, at times nearly endless catalogues of synecdochic orchestrations. Such constellations of parts and wholes are announced by the poet himself in "Starting from Paumanok": "I will not make poems with reference to parts, / But I will make poems, songs, thoughts, with reference to ensemble."⁶ There is, however, another kind of equalizing at work, a poetic, temporal orientation that persistently gravitates toward the futurizing present. When the poetic eye occasionally does gaze into the past, it is to collapse that past into the present moment and space of poetic utterance. A typical example of this is "Section 33" from "Song of Myself," which introduces the subsequent catalogue, nearly ten pages long, with an invocation precisely of temporal and spatial collapse and, indeed, absolution: "My ties and ballasts leave me." This liberation from the grids of time and space sets the poet "afoot with [his] vision," after which follow a slew of visitations to places "by the city's quadrangular houses—in log huts, camping /

with lumbermen,” and to a range of types (skipper, martyr, slave, fireman, artilleryist), all of whom the poet “is.” All this culminates in the line toward the end of the section: “I take part, I see and hear the whole.” The making uniform spatial as well as temporal multiplicities is sifted through a relationship of parts and whole that is the recurrent structure throughout. Interestingly, however, in the section that follows “Section 33,” we hear of the fall of the Alamo, or rather, of what the poet “knew in Texas” in his youth: “(I tell not the fall of Alamo, / Not one escaped to tell the fall of Alamo, / The hundred and fifty are dumb yet at Alamo).”⁷ One could conceivably connect this detail to Whitman’s stance on the war between the United States and Mexico that followed Texas’s independence in 1835 and its subsequent entry into the United States as the twenty-eighth state. As editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, he was an ardent supporter of this war, and the tone and outlook of his editorials to that effect are certainly radically different from those of his poetry:

Yes: Mexico must be thoroughly chastised! . . . We are justified in the face of the world, in having treated Mexico with more forbearance than we have ever treated an enemy—for Mexico, though contemptible in many respects, is an enemy deserving a rigorous “lesson.” . . .

Let our arms now be carried with a spirit which shall teach the world that, while we are not forward a quarrel, America knows how to crush, as well as how to expand!”⁸

The sentiments reflected here could account for the consignment of the battle of the Alamo in “Song of Myself” to a depository, not to be mentioned again, in a kind of interring of what the poet on behalf of national sentiment perceives as a historical injustice and tragedy that his otherwise all-encompassing log cannot accommodate.

This is the exception, however, and I now turn in more detail to the implications of the equalizing of each and every person, and more specifically to the invitation and, in some cases, the directive to the addressee to pursue his or her own version of America. As the poet announces in “One’s Self I Sing”: “Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power, / Cheerful, for freest action form’d under the laws divine, / The Modern Man I sing.”⁹ These lines are already the un-

heard articulation of a New World-view, a powerful instantiation of a new social arrangement, as an expression of what Castoriadis calls a new “mode and form of social-historical doing.”¹⁰ In other words, the compass for Whitman’s refracting of self and society may be linked to the progression of a new moral order. As outlined in chapter 1, what Taylor calls the new order rearranges individuals, out of their placements within embedded and enchanted hierarchies outside which no one can stand, into an increasingly expansive understanding of society as “that of individuals who come together to form a political entity against a certain preexisting moral background and with certain ends in view. The moral background is one of natural rights; these people already have certain moral obligations towards each other.” This radical shift from enchanted to disenchanted societal ordering does not mean, however, that God is dead: “rather, [the ideal order] was designed by God, an order in which everything coheres according to God’s purposes.”¹¹ The prerequisites that Taylor here delineates can be related to Whitman’s exultations in his call for the “freest action form’d under the laws divine,” for “divine” here must be understood not as divinity handed down and accepted mindlessly, “time out of mind,” but as divinity residing in and defined as the wellspring of human essence as God-inspired and good, in a spiritual sense but also, importantly, in a pragmatic and human sense. This variation on the divine is, after all, also connected to the various understandings and redactions of self-reliance.

The development of Taylor’s modern social imaginary and the spreading of a new arrangement into more and more niches of civil and political life could proceed more freely in the New World than in the old. The reason, as Taylor suggests, is that in Europe (and in other places), the dissemination of a new political and civic imaginary takes place “partly through the crystallization of a class imaginary of subordinate groups, particularly workers.”¹² The notion of class as a category of collective self-understanding refers to the classical European tradition of labor unions, and its absence as an anchor for ranking individuals within a larger system has tremendous implications for identity politics in the New World. With class eliminated as a category having the potential to transcend ethnicity, gender, and race, personal independence as socially beneficial is a logical out-

come. We already saw this transcendence powerfully demonstrated in Astrid Holm's two moments of crisis: empowered, or "enabled" to rid herself of past "crystallizations," Astrid freely pursues her own destiny in the drive for both personal and social happiness.

Moreover, Whitman's spatial collapse of American types and scenes, the synecdochic choreography of everyone into a single temporal and spatial moment—"ties and ballasts" left behind—at least in part accounts for why we may find here the richest and fullest expression of the American imaginary as it institutes itself at a relatively early point in the social history of the United States. The insistent, forward-looking gaze of "Song of Myself" contributes to the tropological sanctioning and blueprint for an enduring, specifically American imaginary torn loose from old hierarchies and embeddings. It may even serve as a bridgehead from the sociohistorical moment of writing (of social doing) to an aesthetic articulation of the nation. The register of forms and figures extends in gravitation and attraction well beyond the second half of the nineteenth century, and they all, ultimately, center on the promises of aspiration and futurity as ideals of personal and social adjustment and success in a specific performance of democracy.

Of course, Whitman did not emerge out of a void, and Ralph Waldo Emerson is generally credited with bringing Whitman to the fore. The lecture that eventually became known as "The Poet" affected Whitman the most significantly: "I was simmering, simmering; Emerson's words brought me to a boil," as he famously recalled. And it is easy to see the influence of the one man on the other; the monumental body of scholarly work on the relationship testifies to it. Next, I quickly place Emersonian transcendentalism in its context as a uniquely American ideological and philosophical expression of the modern social imaginary and briefly rehearse Emerson's call for an American, poetic voice. Both are crucial nodes in an evolving culturological schema of identification and reference against which Whitman and the imaginary may be fruitfully appreciated.

Many consider Emerson the first American philosopher proper, himself an author of founding documents. His rather idiosyncratic, transcendental outlook, which stressed self-reliance and a sense of spirituality inspired by the East, served as the center of American intellectual life from the 1830s to the Civil War, leaving behind

deep-seated influences well into our own time. In Emerson's own words, the main tenets of his ideological stance are as follows:

What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture.¹³

It is not hard to find the echoes of the privileging of transcendental idealism in Whitman's work, but neither are Emerson's words conceivable outside the new moral order and the path that it took in America: he too spoke from inside the budding imaginary. It rested precisely on the transcendentalist "power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture," which Whitman transformed into a schema for limitless cultural transference combined with praiseworthy individualism. The directive to "no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through / the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books," to "listen to all sides and filter them for your self," anticipates and resonates with Astrid Holms's turn of spirit and decision to go west in pursuit of her own dreams and future, and it continues to generate adaptations and derivations, across centuries and continents.¹⁴

In a thoroughly horizontal outlook and a narrative orientation that accommodated difference within the great fold, Whitman sounded marching orders for a national cultural narrative uniquely capable of transference. But more than that, he sang the self into the fabric without rifts, without seams, and the song was carried in a mold that sprouted from the American imaginary itself, as did the poet himself. Again, Emerson had something to do with this:

We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the

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barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer; then in the middle age; then in Calvinism. Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, methodism and unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy, and the temple of Delphos, and are as swiftly passing away. Our logrolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes, and Indians, our boasts, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.¹⁵

The enumerations that filled pages and pages in Whitman's project of writing the nation and all its constituent parts resound stylistically as well as ideologically with the passage above. "Song of Myself" and its lists of places, professions, beings, emotions, traditions, and creeds are all collapsed into the master trope of self as all-encompassing, predicated on miracle and will of thought. "Section 15" is one of the better illustrations of this. Whitman shows us glimpses and types from everyday American life in a catalogue that runs over two and one-half pages, ending with the lines: "And these tend inward to me and I tend outward to them, / And such as it is to be of these more or less I am, / And of these one and all I weave the song of myself."¹⁶ The distinction that Castoriadis makes between the image *of* something and the imaginary as unceasing production of "*figures/forms/images*, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question of something," is worth reconsidering here.¹⁷ Whitman represents both: His poetry is an image *of*, an emblem precisely in the sense of image, the ornamental, a likeness, but not the thing in itself. At the same time, out of this likeness is created and instituted a vast repertory of figures, which in turn have been re-created, adapted, and revisited as figures and forms intimately linked to the nation, to the nation's imagining of itself, and to its imaginary, which is continually developing yet in some ways unchanging. Moreover, in its presentation of both the image and the imaginary, Whitman's poetics can be linked meaningfully to what Taylor calls "new modes of narration":

[The] new collective subject, a people or a nation that can found its own state, that has no need for a previous action-transcendent foundation, needs new ways of telling its story. . . . The sense that the present, postfounding order is right has to be expressed in terms that consort with this [secular] understanding of time. We can no longer describe it as the emergence of a self-realizing order lodged in higher time. The category that is at home in secular time is rather that of growth, maturation, drawn from the organic realm. A potential within nature matures.¹⁸

The catalogues, the organicism, the enumerations that drove D. H. Lawrence mad, the collapse of constituent parts into an “ensemble” and of heterochronism into one single, future-oriented, expanding moment, are all constitutive of and constituted by the American imaginary at a very early historical-cultural stage. Whitman articulates this very moment in “ur-form,” precisely as a “potential within nature,” unstoppable, and all about the future. He almost says it in as many words:

Endless unfolding of words of ages!
 And mine a word of the modern, the word En-Masse.
 A word of the faith that never balks¹⁹

Sacvan Bercovitch has a particularly illuminating view of the potentiality of Whitman’s poetry, one that fits well into the framework of the present discussion. Referring to D. H. Lawrence’s complaints about the American poet’s collapsing his self with the Eskimo, the squaw, and the slave, Bercovitch notes, “On one level, poetic specification here works as a rhetorical question to mask discrepancy,” situated in historically circumscribed moments, and lingering in time “as a radical variation of symbolic identity. Whitman affirms the absolute, aesthetically, by particularizing it; and by particularizing it aesthetically, he invites us to question and challenge—and so potentially to decline or circumvent—the endgames of representative individualism.”²⁰ It is precisely these invitations of possibilities that “Song of Myself” as variation entices in other aestheticizations of self and symbolic identity; for now, however, it must be remarked that the singing of absolutes is not for everyone.

That the self-realization in secular time referred to by Taylor is not, in this case, at least partly grounded in “higher time,” is questionable, because the premises of “Song of Myself” as utterance of the American social imaginary and its place in modernity do not depend exclusively on the secularity of the modern social imaginary generally in order to allow for the unabashed singing of self. They also rely heavily on something resembling a mythological understanding of what America is and should be, and this is located above and beyond the American social imaginary as a structuring, cultural glue for bounded, national space. The powerful attraction of Whitman’s writing lies in the template he crafted for and out of an enduring and complex institution that sustains and nourishes the perpetuation of the American imaginary at its deepest level. This is what I suggest constitutes a master imaginary, a culturological meta-understanding that resides in symbolism and myth and underlies the perpetuation of practices and understandings of the political and social everyday. The mythological element coincides with the aforementioned faith in the idea of the American project, a sensibility that already moves into the realm of the religious and the symbolic. It is a kind of creation story that, because it is carried forward through fundamental and in some senses universal human desires for progress, extends into perpetuity. The kind of mythical quality embedded in it certainly belongs to what Taylor describes as “the story (or myth) of progress, one of the most important modes of narration in modernity.”²¹

I add that myth, or symbolism, is also at work on a different level, which very powerfully nourishes the disposition to pursue unfettered aspiration (Latin *aspirare* “to breathe upon,” “to seek to reach,” from *ad-* “to” + *spirare* “to breathe”) as not only individually but also socially beneficial. This is powerful stuff, and in the American imaginary the impulse is encouraged and given free reign, since, as Taylor observes, “independence is thus a social, and not just a personal, ideal. It was valued as a contribution to national well-being and greatness and was correspondingly admired and lauded.”²² In the American case, the new arrangement of agents in relation to the social whole is based on a shared commitment to this new project, a sacred-secular conviction not only in the justice of

the project's position in the world but in its goodness and universal application. *Enchantment* seems an appropriate designation for the embeddedness of such individual participation as social participation, performing its work along lines that are similar to norms obtaining in sacred time. "Time" is not quite "out of mind," as in Taylor's vocabulary, but perhaps closer to the time of mythos. It seems to stem from a combination that Bercovitch calls the "Winthrop variation," which gravitates around, on the one hand, the New World's answerability to the old world within the sacred parameters of the experiment, and the futurizing and seemingly inexhaustible possibilities this carries and, on the other, the historically coinciding temporal and spatial circumscription of a new (secular) way of being in the world. Out of this mesh proceeds a peculiarly ambiguous version of enchantment. The ambiguity is in part refracted in Whitman's "Song of Myself" as mediation between the transcendence of absolutes and the specificities of boundaries of identity that cannot be transgressed, between simultaneous exclusion and inclusion. The piece echoes a sacred-secular framework that is on a par with any archaic structural grid and that is resilient to questioning from the outside. The Latin *incantare*, meaning "to sing upon or against," is akin to the root of the word "enchantment," and "Song of Myself" may be heard as a chanting through the full register of the imaginary's range. Of course, when reading it alongside the "song" of a differently originated and originating imaginary that is borne forth from different routes, limitations also reveal themselves, and slightly different melodies are heard.

Song of Different Selves

In 1967 the Denver-born Chicano civil rights and political activist (and boxing champion) Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales published his epic "I am Joaquín/Yo soy Joaquín." The visual layout of this work, with the English and Spanish versions facing each other, already hinted at the different nature of this other kind of self. The poem delineates roughly five centuries of historical routes that lead up to the moment of the enunciation and actualization of the persona of Joaquín in the United States of the 1960s. The register of names,

events, and places is reminiscent of Whitman's catalogues, but with a crucial difference. Whereas Whitman's verbal constructions rarely depart from the present, future, or subjunctive tenses, audaciously looking ahead, Gonzales's lines are dominated by the past, past perfect, and present. This is not the most immediately noticeable difference: the retrospective gaze identifies a multitude of nodes that are all synecdochic representations of Mexican, American, and Mexican-American history and cultural traditions, each epitomizing different intersections and webs that reach into a maze of different directions and temporalities, as well as versions of America itself that are different from those found in Whitman's song.

The divergence of the temporal circumscriptions in "Song of Myself" and "I am Joaquín" is further accentuated by Gonzales's crisscrossing of sociohistorical and cultural paths without purporting to impose uniformity on them. This is a feature that "I am Joaquín" shares with a number of literary representations striving to locate a narrative and culturological space within the context of a larger, imposed one. On one level, one could include Whitman here. Surely, when writing *America the Poem*, he was doing exactly this, scripting into existence the shape of culturological nationhood. However, crucial differences remain. Whitman wrote for the future on a more or less blank slate. By contrast, Gonzales's epic has to be appreciated, not only against the backdrop of a particularly Mexican-American complex and the cultural and aesthetic *floreCIMIENTO* ("blossoming") that took place in tandem with the rise of the political Chicano movement in the 1960s and 1970s, but also against the much larger backdrop of global processes of colonization and their aftermaths involving a broader understanding of "America." As a narration of the cultural nation, "I am Joaquín" thus seeks the company of other far away songs such as the Ugandan poet Okot p'Bitek's "Song of Ocol" and "Song of Lawino," from 1966; Caribbean poet Derek Walcott's "Omeros"; and Pablo Neruda's "Canto General" (although this last is a slightly different case), to mention only a few. Even if Chicano literature does not originate in the same classical circumstances of colonization and decolonization as, for instance, African and West Indian literatures do, it has from its very beginning been infused with the urgent de-

mands and strivings of representation and negotiation of culture and identity that generally characterize postcolonial literatures. Some historical background may be needed for readers who are not acquainted with this part of American history, so I briefly review how Mexican America came to be.

A little more than two decades after winning a hard-fought struggle for independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico lost half its territory to an ambitious newcomer to the north. The United States, a product of England's colonization of the New World, was driven by an unflinching conviction of its Manifest Destiny to rule from sea to shining sea, and, not entirely surprisingly, considered northern Mexico insufficiently populated and poorly enough "handled" to merit invasion and annexation. In Whitman's editorials in support of the war, he saw no reason why Mexico should not have to yield to his nation's progress. Most of his countrymen at the time felt the same. Including Texas, which had already been lost and after a short stint as the Lone Star republic joined the United States in 1845, Mexico lost half its territory. Mexican citizens became American citizens overnight and found themselves "an ethnic minority in a conquered land," or, as it has been more frequently suggested, internally colonized.²³ Until the 1960s and the rise of the civil rights movements, the Mexican-American minority existed in a kind of void, invisible, unaccounted for. This changed once and for all with the emergence of the Chicano movement and the artistic flowering that brought a whole army of writers and poets to attention, among them Gonzales. The first lines of "I am Joaquín" read as follows, and I quote them at length:

I am Joaquín
 lost in a world of confusion,
 caught up in a whirl of a
 gringo society
 confused by the rules,
 scorned by attitudes,
 suppressed by manipulation,
 and destroyed by modern society.
 My fathers

Hoping to cease not till death.”²⁶ Right here is one of the more grave contrasts between the songs: “born here from parents the same” rings hollow in the context of Joaquín’s loss of land and of routes in the American Southwest reaching back centuries before Whitman’s moment.

The name “Joaquín” itself evokes several associations. To many readers, the legendary Mexican gold miner Joaquín Murieta immediately comes to mind. According to folklore he was a “peaceful Mexican miner whose claim was jumped by gold-greedy Anglos, who whipped him, hanged his brother, and raped his wife in his presence.”²⁷ Murieta swore revenge, and in the narratives and songs that flourished in the mid-nineteenth century, he rose to a stature similar to that of Robin Hood. *The Robin Hood of El Dorado*, Walter Noble Burns’s book from 1932, was indeed devoted to Murieta’s story. Some readers may recall that Joaquín Murieta also figures as Zorro’s younger brother in *The Mask of Zorro* (1998), a minor character to those not aware of the name and figure’s semantic depths.

But “Joaquín” perhaps more meaningfully designates what Juan Bruce-Novoa calls a kind of “Chicano Everyman,” not particularly better or worse than most.²⁸ This is underscored throughout the poem by the persona’s arduous passage through the strata of history, as he identifies with high as well as low, poor as well as rich, white as well as brown. Joaquín traces the histories and trails constituting his complex self, starting with Cuauhtémoc of the Aztecs, “Proud and Noble/leader of men”; Nezahualcoyotl of the Acolhua, “Great leader of the Chichimecas”; and Cortés, “the despot”—admitting in the same breath that “I owned the land as far as the eye / could see under the crown of Spain, / and I gave my Indian sweat and blood / for the Spanish master / . . . I was both tyrant and slave.”²⁹ The complex interlacing of heritages is repeated throughout, vacillating between heroes and villains, male and female, young and old:

I have been the bloody revolution,
The victor,
The vanquished,

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I have killed
and been killed.
I am despots Díaz
and Huerta
and the apostle of democracy,
Francisco Madero.

I am
the black-shawled
faithful women
who die with me
or live
depending on the time and place.

I am
faithful
humble
Juan Diego
the Virgin of Guadalupe
Tonantzin, Aztec Goddess too.³⁰

This catalogue of types and of real events and persons may seem to echo Whitman exactly, but here we come to what is perhaps the most harrowing difference between the two works, to “I am Joaquín” as an utterance that profoundly locates itself on the outside of the grids of the master imaginary. The manner in which it does so can be related to human geographer Doreen Massey’s suggestion of how to conceptualize space, namely as always under construction, as the product of interrelations and of co-constitutive multiplicities, “as a simultaneity of stories-so-far.”³¹ As the passages from “I am Joaquín” reflect, the poem is both constituted by and constitutive of a space of precisely such “stories-so-far,” which are brought into the persona’s narrative as synecdochic references. They point to fragments of different historical spaces and trails and are brought under the simultaneity of the poetic utterance, but not in a single temporality. Whereas Whitman creates the “En-Masse” out of multiple trails (not always his own), which are subsumed into the present and a forward-gazing perspective that is unhampered and undeterred, Gonzales crafts what may be described as a

heterochronistic moment, a space of momentousness that does not forget and whose exclusion from the central tenets of the imaginary, along with its own “routedness” in other kinds of “social-historical doing,” forces the coexistence of multiple stories within his cultural moment of remembering. It poignantly allegorizes a wider context, as Mieke Bal has observed: “Migration is the situation of our time. But it is also an experience of time; as multiple, heterogeneous. The time of haste and waiting, the time of movement and stagnation; the time of memory and of an unsettling, provisional present, with its pleasures and its violence.” In Bal’s discussion, heterochronism takes on a deeper meaning, namely as the *experience* of multitemporality, and it carries momentous, narrative weight: “[heterochrony] disrupts the traditional linear narratives onto which routine responses and images are grafted, it offers temporal shelter to memories.”³² Throughout the multiple listings of culturological nodes of identification and routes, “Joaquín” engages heterochrony as a strategy of redemption through retrieval. In so doing, Gonzales writes a history of the American Southwest that, when it was first published, was rarely heard or recognized as having any legitimacy in a predominantly westward-looking historical and narrative imagination in which time is homogeneous, a single movement spreading over the continent in one direction only.

The contrasts between the two songs of different selves are everywhere at odds, in tension with each other, vying for representation. Discord is, however, perhaps nowhere more evident than in the evocation of the one work by the other in these few lines toward the end of “I am Joaquín”:

whatever I call myself,
 I look the same
 I feel the same
 I cry
 and
 sing the same.³³

In these words reverberate the echo of the very first lines of “Song of Myself”:

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I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.³⁴

By superimposing “I cry and sing the same” onto “I celebrate myself,” Gonzales shifts Whitman’s song from unbridled optimism and all-embracing, future-oriented energy to a response that gazes backward and points toward the future with both reproach and defiance. The dialogue sets up “cry” against “celebrate,” and the singing of a coherent self as metaphor for nation is countered with a self constituted along the principles of metonymic stubbornness that defies the kind of transference metaphor allows. It is the will to reconcile and persevere with and in conflict and difference, rather than the confidence in its resolution and dissolution, that propels Gonzales’s song of self.

Moreover, Gonzales’s overwriting here echoes another well-known response to Whitman, namely Langston Hughes’s far more explicitly intertextual poem “I, Too,” from 1925. From a perspective constituted by other and different routes within the American imaginary, Hughes’s poem begins:

I, too, sing America
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.³⁵

Hughes here responds to Whitman’s “I Hear America Singing” from 1860, rather than to “Song of Myself,” but the self that the response addresses is not essentially different. In that poem, too, Whitman offers an inclusive metaphor of national coherence that Hughes then undermines by delineating exclusion and incoherence in its stead. However, while the persona points toward a future when he shall be on equal terms, Hughes does not leave the canvas of the Whitmanesque democracy that he engages. The axis of advancement and hence the expectation of progress according to the

premises of the master imaginary are not fundamentally questioned. Again, Gonzales lays out a different route and forces his way out from underneath the imaginary's mantle: "I am Aztec Prince and Christian Christ / I SHALL ENDURE! / I WILL ENDURE!"³⁶ Rather than accepting the validity of Whitman's story-so-far as a point of orientation to be pursued, Gonzales locates alternative routes and alternative stories on whose rationale his persona proceeds to project different stories and different understandings of progress.

The main challenge to the master imaginary in Whitman's song thus resides in Joaquín's adamant insistence on the effect and perseverance of past routes and roots and on a framework anchored in the heterochronistic experience of contemporary cultural space. This challenge is also forcefully carried out in the generic framework itself. Whitman wrote in a free verse form that would carry the unique American experiment, a democracy of "counterpart of on the same terms," a form that could adequately reflect his enunciation of the imaginary, the "Endless unfolding of words of ages! / And mine a word of the modern, the word En-Masse."³⁷ Gonzales's poem follows in this nonmetrical and all-inclusive tradition, for "I am Joaquín" is first and foremost an American poem, insisting on its place in the American experience. As with the designation "Hispanic," the term "Chicano," meaning the politicized flank of the Mexican-American community, does not exist outside the United States: both coinages are native to American soil. This is not, however, the only reason why "I am Joaquín" is an American poem. A perhaps more profound reason is that the combination of influences that carries this text as a poem is inconceivable outside the cultural complex of the American Southwest.

In order to refract its American experience, "I am Joaquín" not only builds on the Whitmanesque catalogue and free verse but also draws heavily on a very different tradition of very different origins, namely the *corrido*, which is also native to the land and contemporary with Whitman's poetry. The heroic border *corrido* crystallized as a genre out of a particular set of sociopolitical circumstances and represented a revision of the already existing ballad tradition in greater Mexico. This form was related to the Spanish romance ballad, brought to New Spain with the conquistadores, continued in a

somewhat scattered fashion in Mexico, and then surfacing as a dominant form of oral narrative in the latter half of the nineteenth century in what are today the Mexican-American border areas. According to José Limón's authoritative work on the history of the genre, the border *corrido*'s main revisions of the romance ballad can be summarized as follows: It moves from a nonstrophic, metrically diverse origin to strophic, metrically regular, complex rhyme schemes; it moves from serious and restrained to overflowing, as though, as Limón notes, "its wider melodic range were musically equipping the *corrido* to respond to a socially energetic moment." The narrator shifts from a detached, silent position delineating a dialogue between two principals to the first or third person, acting as witness to the events described, as a kind of news source.³⁸

Thematically, we should note, the form shifts from celebrating fiestas, love affairs, and tournaments to celebrating the heroic deed, with an emphasis on male confrontations, until the core theme hardens, and, as the common definition goes, the border *corrido* comes to place "a common, peaceful workingman into an uncommon situation by the power of cultural and historical forces beyond his control. . . . In the process of this attempt to win social justice, his concern for his own personal life and his solitary fate must be put aside for the good of the collective life of his social group."³⁹ The hero's struggle invariably takes place, as the title of Américo Paredes's seminal work declares, "With His Pistol in His Hand."⁴⁰

The border *corrido* therefore approximates folklore in terms of its typical themes and modes of dissemination. We tend to think of oral traditions as vehicles for expressing a given cultural group's shared way of life. As Richard Bauman puts it in his Introduction to Paredes's other important work, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, the scholarly emphasis falls on "the role of folklore in sustaining group equilibrium and the maintenance of the social system." Bauman further emphasizes the important rerouting that Américo Paredes brought to this tradition and proposes a revisionist emphasis: "Certain elements of the Texas-Mexican repertoire (in folklore) . . . are part of the shared traditions of Greater Mexico, but this is only half the picture, for a significant portion of

the repertoire, the most distinctive portion, is generated by the stark social oppositions of the border region, a response to differential—*not* shared—identity.”⁴¹ The relationship of Gonzales’s poem to its generic ancestor is perhaps most evident on this latter point: “I am Joaquín” originates in and with conflict, a border strife where borders are multiple, and within which there are just as many identities and differences.

There is another way in which “I am Joaquín” draws on the *corrido* tradition, namely as a source of news. As noted earlier, if traditionally these were reports and stories from war or border struggles, the *corrido* has come to encompass almost anything that the singer and the audience consider newsworthy—and the realization of a Chicano cultural awareness and awakening would certainly count as news.⁴² Consider also how Gonzales’s poem was disseminated: only three months after its initial publication, “I am Joaquín” was picked up by Luis Valdez’s traveling troupe *Teatro Campesino*, which created a collage of images, music, and voice-over readings of the poem that have been easy to present in communities.⁴³ The reproduction of “I am Joaquín” by means of mimeograph for cheap and effective distribution and readings in conferences and gatherings throughout the country adds to its function as a news source and witness. Finally, the thematic core that crystallized in the border *corrido* persists in “I am Joaquín,” but instead of the traditional *corrido* hero, the narrator inserts himself in the story and then expands upon his own figure until the initial “I” has morphed into a collectivity of the multiple voices that the singer records and chronicles.

Joaquín’s song draws on two coterminously emerging, generic ways of seeing the world, and they combine to carry this song of a different self. If social imaginaries trust the chronicles of cultural selfhood as a vehicle to instruct their participants as enabled members, then we should bear in mind that those very chronicles also organize themselves according to appropriate expectations and forms. Literary genres provide certain molds for refracting cultures’ institutions and imaginaries, casts to shape their stories for the future. Bakhtin even argues that genres “are of a special significance,” observing that “Genres (of literature and speech) throughout the centuries of their life accumulate ways of seeing and interpreting

particular aspects of the world. For the writer-craftsman the genre serves as an external template, but the great artist awakens the semantic possibilities that lie within it.”⁴⁴ Just as the imaginary as enabling filter is sustained by enabled practice, genres are sustained by their constant visitations and performances. In the case of “I am Joaquín,” the particular combination of templates is a revisitation of its constitutive components, which in their traces replicate the fundamental ideas that on an ideological and epistemological level inform it, namely the necessary but uneasy amalgamations of individually and communally based outlooks. Observing how genres do their work is helpful for comprehending these confluences and their effects. As Hayden White observes:

Cultural and social genres belong to culture and not to nature. . . . cultural genres do not represent genetically related classes of phenomena. . . . they are constructed for identifiable reasons and to serve specific purposes, and . . . genre systems can be used for destructive as well as for constructive purposes. So, genre is both “unnatural” and dangerous.⁴⁵

None of this is to say, however, that distinctions between reasons and purposes in the case of Whitman and Gonzales can be neatly outlined, nor is this the primary concern here. Of greater relevance is the fact that (to modify my earlier distinction between underlying individually and communally based grids) *both* “I am Joaquín” and “Song of Myself” draw on the communal, but in wildly different ways. The *corrido* tradition demands the communally circumscribed and sanctioned hero, whereas Whitman’s free verse assumes that role on the poet’s own premises.⁴⁶ Consequently, in the generic amalgamation of “I am Joaquín,” there occurs a combination of the two modes of enunciation, which appropriately reflects the in-between status of the Mexican-American tradition and community. A fusion of Whitman’s ur-American free verse with the traditional border *corrido* thus materializes as a wholly new event in order to carry a different kind of imaginary, as the following lines make evident:

Yes,
I have come a long way to nowhere,

Unwillingly dragged by that
 monstrous, technical
 industrial giant called
 Progress
 and Anglo success . . .
 I look at myself.
 I watch my brothers.
 I shed tears of sorrow.
 I sow seeds of hate.
 I withdraw to the safety within the
 Circle of life—
 MY OWN PEOPLE⁴⁷

Gruesz's suggestion about Walt Whitman's writing, that it tends "to spatialize history and temporalize space," is no less true of Gonzales's work, but because the former tends toward a uniform moment of One, the spatial and temporal orientations in the two songs take rather different forms. Whitman's singing of self and nation runs along an axis of accommodation whereby difference is in *principle* erased (Whitman "is" the slave, he "is" the Indian, and so forth). In Gonzales's work, the relationships of the parts to the whole establish difference as the point of orientation. One could suggest that this is also the main point of contention between the two songs and their refractions of and relations to the American imaginary. Whitman sings the enchantment, he scripts the idealized as it should be, not as it is, hammering down the pillars of the imaginary in mythological time. "I am Joaquín" cannot perform like this, its reference points lie elsewhere, beyond myth and excluded from myth by history. This leads to a final observation regarding the function of these two songs in the context of bounded space as it coexists with the extended attraction of promise and advancement. The rendering, epic or otherwise, of a group's cultural or national space, tends to emphasize the proud lineage of one story only, a claim to a certain heritage and hence to a right of uncontested presence. On its deepest level this emotion informs what Orm Øverland, in his *Immigrant Minds, American Identities*, terms the creation of "homemaking myths," a strategy of storytelling that

for a given ethnic group justifies, in his analyses, the United States as its “natural” home. Such myths, Øverland writes, are

closely related to the kind of amateurish history writing that has been called “filiopietistic” because it invariably tells of the past excellence or greatness of a particular nation. . . . They have been the vehicles for a vision of an imagined America where a privileged immigrant group had an exclusive right to belong. . . . Each group created the stories anew and based them on myths and traditions of the old home country or on the real or imagined group experience in the new one.⁴⁸

In Øverland’s discussion, the American ethnic groups that figure in illustrations of such mythologized homes are mostly European: “[In] many foundation stories the history of the United States begins with the first arrival in the western hemisphere of a German, a Scandinavian, a Greek, a Jew or the ‘representative’ of some other nineteenth-century immigrant group.”⁴⁹ “I am Joaquín” differs from these accounts in at least two critical ways. First, if homemaking myths tend toward the unidirectional and the monologic, and circumscribe place so that it is what Doreen Massey calls “closed, coherent, integrated as authentic; as ‘home’, a secure retreat; of space as somehow originarily regionalized, as always-already divided up,” then “I am Joaquín” fulfils the homemaking function rather poorly. Instead of creating a proud lineage of one narrative, which would accomplish what Massey calls the “attempt to stabilize the meaning of particular envelopes of space-time,”⁵⁰ “I am Joaquín” admits and presents the full, and at times shameful and painful, register of trails:

I look at myself
And see part of me
Who rejects my father and my mother
And dissolves into the melting pot
To disappear in shame.⁵¹

In contrast, for all its multifarious, all-encompassing, and diverse addresses and the trails it stakes out, “Song of Myself” resounds convincingly and precisely as a strategy of homemaking, and this is ultimately a structural rather than thematic accomplish-

ment. The poetics of the temporal and the spatial become one, and the expanding moment underscores the legitimacy and authenticity of its simultaneous claim to place. The song frames and institutes the imaginary's (inherently future-oriented) promise safely within the myth of progress.

This is not to say that "I am Joaquín" lays no claim to the space it occupies, narratively or culturally. The space of the Mexican-American is, however, densely sedimented, a palimpsest of over-writings and erasures within Massey's "always-already divided up." The oldest layer of known human history in the present context is of course the Native American and the native Mexican, preceding all other presences by centuries. More recently, but still long before Anglos settled in the West, while the American Southwest was still New Spain and later northeastern Mexico, the land was crisscrossed with Spanish place-names in a web of roads, towns, and missions. Out of this complexity a different conceptualization of space necessarily follows. If, according to Sacvan Bercovitch's previously cited argument, Whitman, in his aesthetic particularizing of the absolute, invites us to question and challenge the endgames of representative individualism, then "I am Joaquín's" invitation extends farther, to challenge the endgame of representative "culturalism." Gonzales's particularization of those points on the culturological itinerary that he delineates at the very outset serves to destabilize all notions of absolutes and instead carves out a rejoinder to the imaginary of Whitman's song by speaking compellingly to the imagination of space as the product of interrelations in continuous flux. Myth and idealism suffuse both poems, but Gonzales's song charts trails that, as Massey reminds us, mark how "the spatial is social relations stretched out. The fact is . . . that social relations are never still; they are inherently dynamic."⁵² They are indeed, and there is something deeply ironic about the situation of the imaginary today: not only has the Mexican-American minority by some accounts spread over the original location of the mythical homeland of Aztlán, thereby rerouting the momentum that once propelled the United States' expansion from East to West, but that minority also includes descendants of the original inhabitants, Mesoamerican Indians who do not necessarily even

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speak Spanish, and they, too, announce their entry. I return to these movements and their implications in chapter 6, but first I turn to a very different response to and refraction of the American imaginary, in which the notion of institution takes a slightly different form.