Discussions about the nexus between race and modernity need to consider how notions of time and historical narratives form often unrecognized borders bounding how we think of ethnicity. Though much new scholarship is undertaken to counteract the trend, there has been a tendency in ethnic studies to view the period prior to the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s as a kind of prehistory to our current notions of the multirelational ethnic subjectivities living in the borderlands of postmodern America. Here I refer to America understood most broadly as a transnational circuit of physical, economic, and cultural exchange. Thus my current project focuses on how the nexus of race and modernity within a Chicana/o or Mexican-American context generates the consciousness of the contemporary and helps forge constituencies in the modern nation-state.

The study of this nexus between race and the modern is of course not new. From the transatlantic work of Paul Gilroy in The Black Atlantic (1993) to the hemispheric studies of José Saldívar in The Dialectics of Our America (1991) and the examination of Greater Mexico in José Limón’s American Encounters (1998), the powerful transformations wrought by modernity have formed a sharp critical lens for those critics interested in Latina/Latino and postcolonial constituencies whose lives are lived on the margins in North American society.

The present discussion is but a preliminary attempt to consider the relationship between the promises and contradictions of modernity and the memory of racial distinction that marks Chicana/o experiences in the United States. Modernity stands as a response to modernization characterized by increasing technologization and the rise of monopoly capitalism on an economic level as well as claims to equality and increased rights in the political realm. This response is at once ambiguous and alienating. Modernity corresponds to the dissolution of well-worn social networks due to the processes
of modernization. Yet modernity also considers the manner in which new constituencies seek to engage issues of justice and liberty.

Race—at least in the context of the United States—represents one formulation by which the demand for social justice may be enacted. Indeed, race is one instantiation of the colonial encounters that have formulated life in this hemisphere. Here I am thinking of Gilroy’s words in The Black Atlantic: “Where lived crisis and systemic crisis come together, Marxism allocates priority to the latter while the memory of slavery insists on the priority of the former” (1993, 40). The racial memory of colonial encounters marks the lived crisis that individuals and communities have endured. Modernity marks one such moment of crisis, a shift in the manner of producing and living. The memory of racial injustice and connection manifests that crisis in the flesh of the living. My discussion, then, emerges from between these double crises, the systemic and the lived, the modern and the racial, the haunted and the remembered, to trace how modernity haunts the racialized imagination of contemporary Chicana/o culture.

In considering the relationship between modernity and racial memory, I must acknowledge the important scholarly work already undertaken that interrogates the relationship between modernization and lived Chicana/o experiences. The historians David Montejano (1987), David Gutiérrez (1995), Emma Pérez (1999), and George Sánchez (1993) provide a clear understanding of how modernization helped foster the conditions for Chicana/o subjectivity. The cultural critics Ramón Saldívar (2006), José Limón (1992), and María Saldaña-Portillo (2004) offer us exceptional work on the intricacies of Chicana and Chicano cultural expression in its troubled relationship to the conditions of modernity.

What I seek to add to these discussions of modernity in the context of Mexican-American life is the element of racial memory, one that provides a lived memory of colonial encounters. To better illustrate the relationship between race and modernity, it is useful to turn to a few passages from two texts that have in their own ways become canonical within the corpus of Chicana/o literary production: George Washington Gómez (1990), by Américo Paredes, and The Rain God, by Arturo Islas (1991).

There are a number of reasons why these works are significant. Both novels locate the formation of an ethnic identity in South Texas, both involve the dissolution of patriarchal power, and both reveal the impact of modernity on the characters. As Limón says of Paredes’s novel, it is “an account of the dilemmas inherent in the search for identity in the face of modernity, as seen through the life of a young man in the context of Greater Mexico” (1998, 24). In both novels, this search is characterized by a systemic crisis, one that—at least in the case of Paredes’s work—is marked, as Limón has
noted, by “the coming of a rapidly advancing Anglo-American capitalist political economy and culture to the area” of south Texas between 1870 and 1930 (1994, 85). I take up this issue of systemic crisis below in this essay. What I turn to here is the central parallel that can be drawn between the disruption of male warrior heroes in Paredes’s and Islas’s books.

A large part of Paredes’s narrative focuses on the manner in which the eponymous protagonist seeks to carve out an identity for himself, not just in the face of modernity but in the face of the family patriarch, his Uncle Feliciano, who—against his better judgment—seeks to find a way to steer the youth to become (as his family had hoped) “a great man who will help his people” (1990, 16). In Islas’s novel, the narrative is driven by the way the family patriarch—Miguel Angel, called Miguel Grande—seeks to control the other members of the family, particularly his slightly fey young son, Miguel Chico. Miguel Grande struggles both to retain a sense of order in the family and to maintain his position of patriarchal privilege. This privilege is undone when the two women who form the core of his emotional life—his wife and his mistress—manage his life rather than him managing them.

Both novels—written in very different historical eras but published within a few years of each other—are haunted by the manner in which clearly demarcated modalities of behavior associated with a regulated and patriarchal society are ruptured by the incursion of the modern. To put it another way, as Paredes writes in With His Pistol in His Hand, in the Mexico-Texan world before modernity, “social conduct was regulated and formal, and men lived under a patriarchal system . . . [in which] decisions were made, arguments were settled, and sanctions were decided by the old men of the group, with the leader usually being a patriarch” (1971, 11–12). In the worlds of the novels, this patriarchal system is broken down by the incursion of modernity—the dissolution of traditional social networks and the assertion of new forms of equality that cut cross lines of gender, race, and even sexual identification. The break the modern brings disrupts a patriarchal order that contains both a measure of moral surety and a reliance on inherent social inequalities.5

From one perspective, articulated by Renato Rosaldo among others, this disruption leads to a quest for greater equality and justice—we might recall Rosaldo’s reading of Paredes’s With His Pistol in His Hand and its valorization of the male warrior hero against the mock-epic tone found in Ernesto Galarza’s Barrio Boy (1971). “In Galarza’s autobiography,” Rosaldo writes, “both the warrior hero and the Edenic myth occupy central places, but they are mocked rather than treated with poetic reverence” (1989, 156). While Paredes’s work traces the struggle between a patriarchal society in confrontation with an encroaching Anglo-American world, Galarza’s text focuses on the movement into that world—based on his own experiences as a “bar-
rio boy” struggling to formulate a new, empowered identity that does not (indeed, cannot) rely on the model of the warrior for survival. Yet, as Limón and both José Saldívar (1997) and Ramón Saldívar (2006) argue, the disruption of a patriarchal and heroic model—one in which a sense of moral stability ostensibly exists—leads inexorably to a sense of anxiety, alienation, and irony. These are conditions of the modern.

I must confess that my present interest in modernity arises from my long-time interest in postmodernity. I still believe that modernity exists within postmodernity, just as colonialist thought exists in postcolonialist critique. Here, those of you who may have skimmed my first book on poetry (1995) will recognize a central tenet of my argument: Chicana and Chicano culture emerges from a space of rupture. Chicana/o critical discourse forms part of a contemporary strategy for self-definition and self-determination even as it reveals the discontinuities, tensions, and disjunctures evident in the construction of a relevant cultural identity. These ruptures reveal the difficult position marked by the term “Chicano.” This term, after all, emerges from an extraordinarily violent and exploitative history. One element of this history, and one central rupture, is the passage from the premodern to the modern. Therefore modernity is a key moment in the development of Chicano and Chicana consciousness. At the same time, I argue that though modernity represents a moment of rupture in Chicana/o culture, the movement into postmodernity does not fully erase modernity as a relevant condition for Chicana/o critical consciousness or study.

Part of my intellectual interest has to do with the definition of Latino and Latina studies in the United States: that is, the study of movements involving both culture and labor across sometimes capricious national borders. I have argued that Chicana/o culture moves both through the gaps and across the bridges of numerous cultural practices that are associated with particular geographies: the United States, Mexico, Texas, California, the rural, and the urban. The geographies are also associated with particular cultural practices: the folkloric, the postmodern, the popular, the elite, the traditional, the tendentious, and the avant-garde. Chicana/o culture moves against and with these diverse sites. It variously participates in the practices inherent in the sites while simultaneously positing a critique of their practices.

Chicana and Chicano cultural practices are, in short, adept at transformation and adaptation. They assume a self-identity that knows itself as simultaneously self and other. This consciousness allows for an ability to move through numerous realms without becoming a part of or fully submitting to them. On a theoretical plane, Chela Sandoval’s notion of the methodology of the oppressed forms a key node of critical intervention: “people of color in the United States, familiar with historical, subjective, and political dislocation
since the founding of the colonies, have created a set of inner and outer technologies to enable survival within the developing state apparatus, technologies that will be of great value during the cultural and economic changes to come” (2000, 79). These technologies enable a subtle shifting and differential movement that matches the transformations of late capitalist consumption.

Marginal political practices parry the logic of all-consuming late capitalism. The very movement of laboring bodies contests the notion that globalizing capitalism has contained all its subjects. Roger Rouse has famously provided an exemplary moment of late capitalist consumption and community in his essay “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism” (1991), which addresses the practices of a migrant community from Aguililla, Michoacán, taking up residence in Redwood City, California. Rouse describes a type of transnational social organization and personal identification—based on the simultaneous occupation of two distinct geocultural sites—that disrupts received notions of nationalism and cultural identity.

Chicana/o culture has long developed through and against the various economic and cultural transformations undergone by the United States. As an integral part of the labor force that has driven North American production, Chicanas/os know all too intimately the reality of decentered subjectivity and the violence that results from the pursuit of master narratives—progress, expansion, and modernization. Chicanas/os have lived through and survived (which can be a form of triumph over some times) the disparities wrought by modernity. Yet, as we will see at the close of this essay, survival is not always triumphant and can, indeed, be based on denial and delusion.

One manner in which Chicana and Chicano critical discourse has sought to thematize its struggle with social disparity has been, at least since the political movements of the 1960s, the assertion of a new racial consciousness. The affirmation of a mestiza/o identity served a pointed political and cultural end. It was a way to affirm difference and to stake that difference on inclusion in the very body of the United States.

While the idea of mestizaje emerges from a history of essentialized and biologized racial discussions, the term has come to be used in Chicana/o discourse as a way to move beyond binary constructions of racial identity and identity politics. Consequently, mestizaje has come to occupy a highly valued—though not unproblematic—position in our critical discourse because it embodies the idea of multiple subjectivities. It opens our understanding of racial/ethnic identity to greater complexity and nuance. Critical mestizaje helps indicate how people live their lives in and through their bodies as well as in and through ideology. A disjuncture (or rupture) in ideology becomes apparent through the dislocations experienced by mestiza/o bodies. This dislocation means that ideological constructs of subjectivity
cannot always hail Chicana or Chicano subjects successfully. *Mestizaje* in a Chicana/o context has sought to articulate the critical nature of this failure.

Chicana/o *mestizaje* represents the double nature of Chicano identity. It allows for the forging of new multivalent identities and it imbeds identity in already constraining social relations. To better understand this point, we might look back at one cultural response to how the racial nature of Mexican identity serves the contradictory purposes of national identification.

Let us direct our attention to the opening scene of Paredes’s *George Washington Gómez*. The novel, written between 1936 and 1940, is a fascinating creative narrative by a restless young writer who, after drafting the novel, set it aside for nearly half a century.

The novel presents the story of a family forced from the llano of the Mexican-American border region into the town of Jonesville-on-the-Grande. The conflicts between the Sediciosos—seditionists stirring up a plot to secede from the United States—and the Texas Rangers make for violent and unstable conditions. These conditions lead to the death of a young father, Gumersindo Gómez, at the hands of the Texas Rangers. His dying wish is that his brother-in-law, Feliciano Garcia, never reveal to Gumersindo’s newly born son the manner in which his father died. Gumersindo’s dying words are: “‘My son. Mustn’t know. Ever. No hate, no hate’” (1990, 21). Feliciano takes the family to Jonesville, where—as a part of the political machine run by the Anglo Texan Judge Bob Norris—he grows in wealth and status. There he raises Gumersindo’s family as his own, becoming the patriarch whose position and power forms at first a source of pride and later a target of scorn for the sole boy of the family, George Washington Gómez.

Saldaña-Portillo (2004) and Ramón Saldívar (2006), among others, have written about the novel and focus, quite rightly, on the complex and contradictory interpellation of the main character. My interest here has less to do with the main characters and more to do with the interstices of the narrative, those moments when the narrative focuses on setting and context. It is these moments that are telling about the relationship between race and modernity.

As the book opens, Gumersindo is with Doc Berry, racing in the doctor’s Model T Ford across the open plain to get to Gumersindo’s wife, who is having a baby. Gumersindo is described as “a stocky, red-haired man of about thirty” (Paredes 1990, 11).

Gumersindo and Doc are stopped by a quartet of Texas Rangers keeping an eye out for seditionists and smugglers. Two of the Rangers stare at Gumersindo, as if trying to place him. The man fidgeted in his seat and avoided their eyes. Finally one of the Rangers spoke, “What’s your name, feller?”

“He doesn’t speak much English,” Doc Berry said.
“Mexican, eh?” said MacDougal. “For a minute there I thought he was a white man.” He looked steadily at the man, who began to show signs of nervousness.

“He’s a good Mexican,” Doc said. “I can vouch for him.”

“He’s okay if you say so, Doc,” MacDougal answered. “But it’s getting kinda hard these days to tell the good ones from the bad ones. Can’t take any chances these days. But he’s all right if you say so.” (ibid.)

Of course this encounter is necessary for the exposition of the story, revealing the tension between the different populations living in the region around the border. What is interesting to me is the manner in which racially encoded identities in this passage are undone. Gumersindo does not look like a Mexican but is mistaken, even if only for a minute, for a white man. The mistake is immediately corrected, and with his racial category determined, the Ranger and Doc can go on to discuss whether Gumersindo is a good Mexican or a bad one—evidently, the only two categories by which a Mexican can be understood. Even that distinction, the Ranger laments, is getting harder and harder to ascertain.

From the beginning of the book, an anxiety over racial categorization becomes a central form of social ordering. Just before encountering Gumersindo and Doc, the Rangers had come across the smuggler Lupe García and his driver, El Negro. The Rangers remark on the man driving the carriage, a big man with “Negroid features” (ibid., 10): “‘A nigger,’ one of them said, ‘a nigger-greaser. What do you think of that?’” (ibid., 11). The Rangers in these passages speak from a racial paradigm prevalent in the United States that assumes there is a clear distinction between racial identities. Yet here, in the Texan borderlands of Paredes’s novel, this distinction seems undone at every point: a white man who turns out to be Mexican, a Mexican who appears black.

In part, the undoing of racial distinction may be the result of two different racial paradigms coming into contact as a result of the US colonization of territories that had once been Spanish or Mexican. In the United States, the one-drop rule and its ideology of racial binarism predominated in the period of Paredes’s narrative (I would argue that this binarity remains at the heart of US racial ideology). In Mexico, a more fluid system of racial categorization emerged. In Recovering History, Constructing Race, Martha Menchaca traces the development of nineteenth-century racial formation in what is now the US Southwest. Her book takes note of the racial diversity and fluidity in Mexico under colonial Spanish rule. The famous casta (caste) system—though meant to discursively contain the myriad combinations of racial couplings—underscored the porousness of racial identity
and identification. The categories were basically limited to Spanish, black, Indian, mestizo, castizo, mulatto, morisco, lobo, coyote, and occasionally chino (Katzew 2004, 44). This does not mean that race did not matter under Spanish colonialism. Rather, as Menchaca notes, by the time of Mexican independence in 1821, the caste system had been collapsed for the purposes of the census categorization into two groups: gente de razón (those people who accepted Spanish rule, language, and culture) and indo (those who maintained their own governing systems) (Menchaca 2002, 167). Members of both groups belonged to the empire culturally, legally, and legislatively, and race played a less important role in identity and identification.

However, Menchaca clearly points out that in the US context, racial stratification and identification were inexorably part of the civil social order. By the end of 1849, “Congress [had] racialized the Indians of the Southwest and determined they were distinct from Mexicans” (ibid., 218). Legally, Mexican Americans were considered white. The historian Ernesto Chávez explains that when the United States annexed Mexican lands and citizens after 1848, “the U.S. government, owing to the provisions of the 1790 naturalization act, made ethnic Mexicans legally white. However, socially, they were not given the privileges of whiteness and faced de facto segregation” (2002, 2). Despite the legal standing of Mexican Americans, the racial ideology of the frontier held more powerful sway than structures of legal protection. Indeed, the force of the law would soon be used to ensure the subaltern position of the Mexican-descended American. Tomás Almaguer reminds us that working-class people of Mexican origin in the United States were “often denied their legal rights by being categorized as Indians” (1994, 57). The racial categorizations of nineteenth-century America on an ideological level served to constrain the mestiza/o body on the social and economic levels.

The mestiza/o body came to occupy an ambiguous position in US society. In Paredes’s novel, this ambiguity is produced as a result of modernization. We are told that, after its founding in 1846 as Jonesville, Texas, “for more than half a century Jonesville remained a Mexican town, though officially part of the United States” (1990, 36). Then “came the railroad early in the 20th century, and with it arrived the first real-estate men and the land-and-title companies, and a Chamber of Commerce, of course, which renamed the little town ‘Jonesville-on-the-Grande’ and advertised it to suckers from up north as a paradise on earth: California and Florida rolled up into one” (ibid.).

The incursion of the railroad leads to land speculation and housing development. The process of advertising—implying mass production and mass media—generates consumer capitalism along with those “suckers” who end up victims of capitalism’s duplicity. But, of course, those suckers are not the only victims caught in the shell game of consumer capitalism: “Mexicans
labored with axe and spade to clear away the brush where the cattle of their ancestors once had roamed. To make room for truck farming and citrus groves. And the settlers poured in from the U.S. heartland, while Mexicans were pushed out of cattle raising into hard manual labor. It was then also that Jonesville-on-the-Grande came to have a Mexican section of town” (ibid.).

The railroad not only brought land speculators, it also generated modern agribusiness—whose development was aided by the technology of the railroad as a means of mass transportation. By the mid-1920s, for example, Texas produced twenty to thirty percent of the world’s cotton crop (Gutiérrez 1995, 42). And the railroad provided the means of getting that cotton to the world. More important here, the technology that brings corporate capitalism to south Texas pushes the Mexican away from independence and instead subjects him to a new regime as laborer and segregated citizen. Even more compelling in Paredes’s narrative is the sense that there is a pathos, an inevitability, to the Mexican’s subjugation: “It was the lot of the Mexicotexan that the Anglosaxon should use him as a tool for the Mexican’s undoing. The chaparral had been the Mexicotexan’s guarantee of freedom. While it existed, it served as a refuge to the ranchero fleeing from alien law. The chaparral and the flats had made cattle-raising possible; and even the small farmers—their little parcels of land tucked deep in the brush—had been comparatively independent” (Paredes 1990, 42).

The disruption wrought by modernization is underscored narratively by the sentence fragment that stands at the center of this passage: “To make room for truck farming and citrus groves.” This formal fragmentation parallels the disruption experienced by the Mexicotexans. Their independence is lost, casting them in the ironic position of performing their own undoing. The undoing of independence is coupled, again ironically, within the narrative with a kind of revealing, an emergence from the chaparral into the clear light of history and the exploitative system of agribusiness. With the arrival of American settlers—with what Ramón Saldívar calls “the limitless power of Americanization and modernization” (2006, 155)—the Mexican moves from subject to subjugation. And in this process, the Mexican becomes just a tool:

But the American had begun to “develop” the land. He had it cleared and made it into cotton fields, into citrus orchards and towns. And it was the Mexicotexan’s brown muscular arms that felled the trees. He wielded the machete against the smaller brush and strained his back pulling tree stumps out of the ground. For this he got enough to eat for the day and the promise of more of the same tomorrow. As day laborer clearing chaparral, as cotton and fruit picker for as few cents a day as he could subsist on. Every stroke of the ax, every swing of the mattock clinched his own misfortune. (Paredes 1990, 42)
Again, on a formal level the fragmentation of social life is underscored, here with the sentence fragment, “As day laborer clearing chaparral, as cotton and fruit picker for as few cents a day as he could subsist on.” Of more significance is the position of the Americans as agents in history, the planners and commanders of modernization. By contrast, the Mexicans act as the unwitting means of modernization. In the narrative, this role of the Mexican laborer is embodied and racialized—it is “brown muscular arms” that clear the land for development. Once again, the systemic rupture represented by modernity is incarnated via racial allusion. The tone of this passage strikes exactly the sense of pathos that imbibes the novel, as Ramón Saldívar notes: “Paredes’s subjects for the substance of his narrative are not warrior heroes but the nonheroic innocents who dwell darkly in the shadows of history and live its internal contradictions and hierarchical complexities in the mode of irony” (2006, 156). Although there is much to admire in Saldívar’s work, his observation is not entirely correct. In large part, the novel traces precisely how George Gómez’s life is haunted by the dream of the warrior hero. From his family’s hope that he will be a leader of his people to his uncle’s reluctant secret about Gumersindo’s death and his own recurring dream of battling over Houston on the Mexican side of the US-Mexico War, the novel is infused with the dream of a heroic subjectivity. It is true, however, that by the end of the novel, the protagonist has become precisely the type of nonheroic character Saldívar describes.

George Washington Gómez is, finally, an individual bound by modernity to fail to attain an integral identity. Moreover, he is bound by the racial logic that his own somatic presence would seem to deny. He is forever a Mexican, and consequently always racialized. As his future father-in-law comments in the last section of the novel: “‘They sure screwed you up, didn’t they, boy? . . . . You look white but you’re a goddam Meskin. And what does your mother do but give you a nigger name. George Washington Go-maize’” (Paredes 1990, 284). His identity is shot through with the racial discourses he cannot escape. Significantly, the fact of his Mexican character is underscored by the name he chooses for himself by narrative’s end: George G. Gómez, “the middle G for García, his mother’s maiden name” (ibid.). Intentionally or not, he incorporates a matrilineal genealogy that, of course, does nothing to liberate his own sense of identity or place him in a position that would empower an ethnic consciousness.

It is possible to go on at length with a discussion of the numerous racial memories imbedded in Paredes’s novel—from the perception that George Washington Gómez’s mispronounced name, Guálinto, is an Indian one to his ejection from the nightclub La Casa Mexicana because he is Mexican and his doting on the photos of his sister’s children and remarking “more
than once on their blue eyes and light-colored hair” (ibid., 290). Such a discussion can be set aside for the moment to refocus on the conjoining of race and modernity that is evident in the interstices of the book and that emerges, finally, at the close of the novel where, much to George’s dismay, his former classmates have decided to organize for political rights.

While the critic Hector Pérez finds hope in this element of the narrative, he admits that the overall tone of the novel is one of despair: “The clash of cultures is powerful and pervasive. The task is an impossible one and therein lies the root of the oppressive frustration for Guálinto and his community” (1998, 42). More specifically, I would argue, the cultures in contestation that Pérez cites are themselves the embodied practices of modernity’s contradictions. These contradictions are certainly evident in the manner in which Mexicans of all races were unequally incorporated into the expanded United States following the War with Mexico in 1848. “Enfranchisement,” Saldaña-Portillo observes insightfully, “required disavowal of a rich, racial logic of inclusion. It required the abandonment of the very terms of sovereign Mexican character, its mestizo and Indian heritage” (2004, 158). By the close of the novel, the minor characters reject the contradictions of modernity embodied, as John Cutler observes, by “Guálinto’s incomplete psychic repression of his Mexicanness” (2015, 44) in favor of social equality and incorporation that are also a part of modernity. George’s classmates at the novel’s close are claiming for themselves “the rights of our people” (Paredes 1990, 292). The enfranchisement that George’s old friends envision for themselves is one that does not reject a racial logic of inclusion—on the contrary, this sense of enfranchisement demands that inclusion be premised on a racial logic of self-identification and self-assertion. They seek to become racialized agents in history, not merely “brown muscular arms” clearing the way for their own misfortune.

The twin elements of modernity—alienation and enfranchisement—manifest themselves quite clearly in George Washington Gómez. Given that Paredes wrote the novel at a time when modernization was still a process at work in south Texas, it makes sense that his narrative would incorporate the divisions and promises wrought by modernity. But my assertion is that the problems and promises of modernity haunt Chicana/o cultural and critical production past the moment of the modern.

The Rain God, a novel by another son of Texas, tells the story of three generations of the Angel family and their struggles with each other and with their border lives in the United States. The novel, written and rewritten over a number of years from the 1970s to early 1980s was the first published book by Stanford University Professor Arturo Islas. Originally published by the small Alexandrine Press of Palo Alto in 1984, it has become a
standard—perhaps classic—text in Chicana/o literature. Though admired, it has also generated a good deal of criticism, primarily because it does not more overtly champion the queer sexuality of the central character, Miguel Chico, an accusation that is at once unfair and problematic.6

My focus here is on how the novel manifests the connection between race and modernity. It is valuable because it helps connect the world of Texas, where most of the action takes place, with the world of California, where the protagonist goes to study and write and, conveniently, escape the judgments of his family. The Rain God is a novel that, like Paredes’s work, examines the manner in which patriarchy forms a significant but lost model of male behavior. Most important, the book insists that modernity generates the complex context that drives the action. The Angel family aspires to social and economic enfranchisement, pursuing the American Dream with varying success. The family also finds it is continually haunted by racial disavowal and, almost literally, the ghost of modernity. That is, the family lives the central contradictions of the modern.

Critics have noted the manner in which the novel relies on literary modernism to formulate its narrative. Marta Sánchez informs us that “Islas has appropriated specific modernistic techniques (especially self-conscious narration, but also non-linear spatial and temporal sequences) and those of psychoanalysis from the dominant culture and has ‘grafted’ them onto Mexican-Chicano culture” (1990, 295). Just as Limón has argued that Paredes’s creative work joins other emerging literatures that “represent a strong continuation of a critical modernism” (1992, 165), Sánchez views Islas’s use of modernist techniques as a critical reinvigoration. José Saldívar also traces the literary influences on Islas to Wallace Stevens and Willa Cather, as well as to Octavio Paz, Juan Rulfo, and Gabriel García Márquez (1991, 18). In the very form of Islas’s novel, modernity continues to spawn a critical response.

In order to unpack this observation a bit more, I would like to focus our attention on the opening of Islas’s novel. It begins by considering a photograph:

A photograph of Mama Chona and her grandson Miguel Angel—Miguel Chico or Mickey to his family—hovers above his head on the study wall beside the glass doors that open out into the garden. When Miguel Chico sits at his desk, he glances up at it occasionally without noticing it, looking through it rather than at it. It was taken in the early years of World War II by an old Mexican photographer who wandered up and down the border town’s main street on the American side. . . . Because of the look on his face, the child seems as old as the woman. The camera has captured them in flight from this world to the next. (1991, 3–4)
This passage, recounted from the vantage point of Miguel Chico, demonstrates the manner in which the narrative uses this photograph to draw attention to the process of representation, or the question of presentation and self-reflexivity, a hallmark of postmodern literature as well as of modernist aesthetics. The photograph becomes a metonym for the novel itself. In particular, the peculiar line about the boy and the old woman captured “in flight from this world to the next” can be interpreted in a variety of ways—in flight from the world of mortals to the world of eternity, or from the world of the past to the world of the present. This evocation of time and its passage reflects a central concern in the novel: the movement through modernity into the present. Miguel Chico’s meditation on the photograph takes place some thirty years after it was taken, at the cusp in US history between modernity and postmodernity. The evocation of time and the movement through time collapse into the narration itself. For the passage can also suggest a flight by the characters from “this world” of the fiction to “the next” of the real—cleverly evoking the vexed relationship between art and life, and between signifier and signified. While Rosemary King argues that the book is a “journey of self-discovery” (2004, 95), I consider it a meditation on self-construction and self-critique. After all, if this is about Miguel’s process of self-discovery, that process is one in which the distracted observer glances up at the representation “without noticing it.” The self-discovery would be almost accidental. Rather, the novel revolves around the effects that historical time has on the book’s characters.

One more element in this passage is worth noting. Photography itself is a technology of the modern, as Walter Benjamin reminds us in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin observes: “Photographic reproduction, with the aid of certain processes . . . can capture images which escape natural vision” (1988, 218). Though of course Benjamin is discussing photography as a means of removing the auratic from the work of art, his point about the role of photography in the modern age is salient. The moment of this border experience, fleeting in reality, here is forever captured via the technology of the photograph. It is a small but nevertheless significant point that the technology of the modern opens the narrative. It is significant because, by the end of the narrative, we realize that Mama Chona—Miguel Chico’s grandmother—has become the agent through which the lives of the characters are informed by the disavowal of racial memory and haunted by the rumblings of modernity in Mexico. Though Mama Chona is a powerful figure throughout the novel, it is not until the last chapter of the book that the reader learns about her tragic past. As the family matriarch, she has much to do with teaching the contradictory family values related to class and race that reflect a kind of colonial con-
sciousness. She associates ignorance and poverty with the Indian heritage of Mexican identity, a heritage she continually disavows despite the presence of the Indian in her somatic features: “As much as she protected herself from it, the sun still darkened her complexion and no surgery could efface the Indian cheekbones, those small very dark eyes and aquiline nose” (Islas 1991, 27). As Antonio Márquez argues, “the novel brims with tragic irony when Mama Chona denies her Indian heritage. . . . Denying the Indian blood that courses through her veins, Mama Chona personifies a not uncommon willfulness and a pathetic self-deception” (1994, 13). Her act is, of course, the enacting of a colonizing ideology. Cutler illustrates how the novel “attends to a longer racial legacy associated with the doubling of the coloniality of power in the Southwest” under the rule of both the Spanish empire and the US nation-state (2015, 98). Mama Chona’s denial of her racial connection to a people and a culture is not the “pathetic self-deception” that Márquez sees. Rather, narratively, it is a means by which a rich and troubling history of white supremacy becomes evoked. For the diegesis of the novel, her racial denial is part of a complex survival strategy that, no matter how damaging, proves to be more than self-delusion.

Toward the end of the narrative, we learn through Miguel Chico the tragic history of Mama Chona’s first son, Miguel Angel—in whose memory both Miguel Chico and his father, Miguel Grande, had been named. The first Miguel Angel was “Mama Chona’s only child born of the love she had felt for her husband” (ibid., 162). At the beginning of the Mexican Revolution—the convulsive event that was Mexico’s own manifestation of modernity—Miguel Angel was gunned down while walking home from the university in San Miguel de Allende. It is unclear whether government troops or revolutionary guerrillas fired the shot that cut down the only son born to Mama Chona out of love. This ambiguity is significant in that the revolution as an event, not the actions of individual men or political positions, bears responsibility for the death of the promising young student.

This death haunts Mama Chona her entire life, and it is what causes her to deny the country and history from which she proceeds. She has, in a very real sense, become a victim of modernity. Islas tells us: “She renounced all joy on the day they buried Miguel. She was thirty-two” (ibid., 164). Her children born subsequently become a trial to her, and she lives her life in denial of her race, her sexuality, and her past. The denial represents a deluded but not a pathetic response to an accidental loss occasioned by Mexico’s own painful grappling with the modern.

In this sense, the Chicana and Chicano subjectivities in the novel are shot through with the harsh contradictions and violent eruptions occasioned by modernity. Those eruptions certainly disrupt the patriarchal order Miguel
Grande is so determined to maintain. But they also allow for queer sexual identities to name themselves and enable female characters to assert power. Moreover, the eruptions of modernity allow for a critical interrogation of the underpinnings of the ideology—racial, familial, religious, cultural—that Mama Chona has sought so diligently to instill in members of her family but that they eventually alter or abandon. Modernity makes it possible to acknowledge and engage differences within identity.

This is one compelling issue in tracing what remains of both the dreams and the disruptions wrought by modernity. The location of race in this equation offers a productive way to consider how the systemic crisis that modernity represents is experienced and lived. Race becomes a key, within Chicana and Chicano critical discourse, to the extremely contradictory and complex ways the remnants of modernity are lived today and to the manner in which it is possible to acknowledge difference within sameness.

This difference (in one register represented by the racial/ethnic others that are becoming the majority populations in many parts of the United States) within sameness represented by the imagined community of the nation-state is one challenge that, it could be argued, is represented by the ascension of Barack Obama to the presidency. More specific to my own work, the call for racial equality, the insistence on social justice for communities historically aggrieved, the demand for sexual and gender equality across a variety of lines, and the hope for a community of like selves (which itself implies a kind of exclusivity) are all issues that are linked to modernity and that remain at the core of what Chicana/o activism seeks.

We all inherit a vexed legacy as a result of modernization that simultaneously promises both enfranchisement and empowerment and actualizes alienation and exclusion. It is in the flesh that those contradictions are felt and through which the hope for new lived experiences can be sensed. For this reason, it rewards us to interrogate memories of race so we may better understand the qualities of modernity that still haunt our postmodern existence and help formulate new and more empowered relationships to a still emerging nation-state.

Notes

1. For examples of current work that presents a countervailing perspective on the relationship between present and past configurations of race and ethnicity, see Alemán and Streeby 2007; Bost 2003; López 2011; Streeby 2002. In a related manner, the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project at the University of Houston has been working to recover a literary heritage fully engaged with issues of class privilege, racial construction, and ethnic identification and disidentification.
2. We might keep in mind the proposal Gilroy makes regarding his notion of the Black Atlantic: “The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through desire[s] to transcend both the structures of the nation-state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. These desires are relevant to understanding political organizing and cultural criticism. They have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national and political cultures and nation-states in America, the Caribbean, and Europe” (1993, 19). The interconnectivity and, in many instances, mutual denial between the constructions of ethnicity and of national identities forms a primal dynamic in the formation of the modern nation-state.

3. The present discussion takes up several issues I explore in my book Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture (2006). There I take up the vexed relationship between racial self-identification and disidentification that is involved in the affirmation of a mestizo/a racial consciousness.

4. The novels are united by more than their status in the field of Chicano/o letters. They also share a highly vexed publication history. In Dancing with Ghosts (2005), Frederick Aldama recounts the terrible time Islas had in finding a publisher for his book, revising his manuscript each time he received a rejection notice from one of the publishing houses that considered the novel. Alexandrian Press—a small publisher in Palo Alto, California—eventually published the first edition of the book in 1984. In 1991, it was republished by Avon, now an imprint of HarperCollins. In the case of Paredes, as a young man in the late 1930s, he put aside the manuscript for George Washington Gómez. It was not until 1989, after much convincing by friends, that he agreed to try to publish the book, which appeared in 1990. However, the publication was a printing of the original manuscript without any revision or rewriting.

5. The uniformity and completeness of the patriarchal world of the vaquero is itself illusory, of course, as the work of Jovita González suggests. See José Limón’s introduction to her collection of stories Dew on the Thorn (1997) for a discussion of the antipatriarchal slant to her writing.

6. For intelligent and illuminating discussions of homosexuality in Isla’s life and his work, see Ricardo Ortiz’s argument that Isla’s corporeal life in terms of both sexuality and disability inform the shape and function of his literary texts (2007, 399 and 420) and Cutler’s observation that The Rain God foregrounds the experience of what Eve Sedgwick terms the “epistemology of the closet” (quoted in 2015, 100).

Works Cited


Alemán, Jesse, and Shelley Streeby, eds. 2007. Empire and the Literature of Sensation:


