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The Art of Literary *Trompe L'oeil* and the Craft of Literary Imagination: Patricia Chao's *Mambo Peligroso*.

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Chicano literary critics Francisco Lomelí, María Teresa Márquez, and María Herrera-Sobek maintain that Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, and other Latina/o writers "have forged what is considered to be a second Latina/o literary boom. This renaissance is now part of a multicultural forum in which Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, Chicanos/as, and other Latinos are creating a significant corpus of literary writings" (295). According to these scholars, Latina/o authors in the 1990s produced work which involved "greater interethnic cross-fertilization, a Latin Americanization or 'tropicalization' in themes, a definite diversity in terms of experiential perspectives,…an experimentation with forms…, thereby producing a vital unpredictability and a hybrid freshness never before witnessed" (295). In *Show and Tell* Karen Christian also marvels at "a 'boom' of U.S. Latina/o cultural production" in the last decades (4).

In the age of fluid identitites and multiple, hybridized selves, it is passé to apply homogenizing labels for the sake of monolithic landscapes of ethnicity. Patricia Chao's 2005 postethnic novel *Mambo Peligroso* features an American with Cuban and Japanese background, who acts on the one hand confused and indecisive. On the other hand, she is shyly experimenting with self-authoring and learning to map the new territories of her own multifaceted self, revealing ethnic identity to be a category prone to changes and influences. One of the main propositions of this article has been articulated by Lomelí, Márquez, and Herrera-Sobek:

> for some writers from the 1960s ethnicity figured as an end unto itself in literary production, contemporary writers examine this same ethnicity with regard to its evolving qualities. No longer conceptualized as static and essentialist in nature, ethnicity is appreciated for its inherent diversity and in particular for its hybridity. Ethnicities that are fluid, constantly changing, and eclectic allow for a more dynamic configuration. Ethnicity has consequently shed its exotic cloak – as perceived from the outside – and has become a human trait conditioned by historical and geographic factors (286).

Kevane asserts that one "can discover Latino communities and their culture across the United States by reading the literary production emerging from Latino communities" (1). Can one then discover cultural aspects and learn about language, history, religion, cultural mythology, traditions, geographical spaces, gender roles,

politics or food, dress, festivals, art, literature, and music in writing on Latino communities penned by an "outsider" of a writer? Hye Suh and Ji-Song Ku assert that in the aftermath of 1965 there is no longer a rigid expectation that an ethnic writer in America will write about his or her own community, nor is it granted that s/he will prioritize the theme of assimilating into a white Anglo-American society (320-321). In her second novel Chao ventures into distant territories, thus promoting highly debated and contested paradigms in literature and identity scholarship. *Mambo Peligroso* introduces what Olguín calls "a radical new paradigm of identity: the hybrid transnational citizen", whose emergence is possible due to migration "between former third world colonies and first world empires" (331). In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Gloria Anzaldúa articulates the stance of a hybrid transnational and transcultural individual, like herself:

> don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three cultures – white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture – *una cultura mestiza* – with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture (44).

In *Postethnic America* David Hollinger introduces the postethnic perspective which prioritizes "voluntary over involuntary affiliations, balances an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities, and promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds" (3). While multiculturalism busies itself assigning identities, postethnicity offers the agency to swap affiliations and pleads for access to new communities for individuals with multiple ethnic background. He uses "affiliations" rather than "identities", for the word "identity":

> implies fixity and givenness, while the word *affiliation* suggests a greater measure of flexibility consistent with a postethnic eagerness to promote communities of consent. Affiliation is more performative, while identity suggests something that simply is…we live in an age not of identities but of affiliations. This is not to say that people do not have identities, including ethno-racial identities; nor is it to deny that individual identities can exploit in highly distinctive patterns the cultural inventories presented by the available communities. It is, instead, to underscore the simple fact that identities people assume are acquired largely through affiliation, however prescribed or chosen (7).

Postethnicity projects a more inclusive perspective, building on consent rather than descent. The ideal of a postethnic America, of a civic American society promoting voluntary affiliations constitutes a challenge, as it demands a radical change of minds and behaviors (129). Neither Hollinger, nor the author of this article claim "postethnicity" to be the answer to all minority issues and global

conflicts, yet see it as a tool individuals with multiple subjectivities could take advantage of while finding out where they want to belong.

The protagonist of Chao's novel, Catalina Midori Ortiz hovers between ethnic groups and the mainstream society, performing her identity and affiliations on a daily basis. Chameleon-like, she invents herself depending on her surroundings, she assumes roles and masks, as if for theater plays. Does the novel portray ethnic or cultural transvestism as a form of entertainment performed by an American assuming a Latino face? As Catalina engages in performative acts, she modifies her physical appearance, mannerisms, behavior, and sexuality coding them hyperfemale and hyperethnic. Even the language becomes performative, sprinkled with Spanish words and expressions. Involving a good deal of political, as in the case of her cousin Guillermo, and cultural cross-dressing in order to determine one's own niche in the world, these performances prove the identity to be a dynamic construct. The performativity and plasticity of identity challenges the notion of Latino essence, probes the restrictive paradigms of a so-called Latino identity and questions the existence of collective fictions of *latinidad*. Hispanic literature resulted from "a fusion of Spanish, Native American, and African cultures" (Kevane 8), what happens when the fusion is modified to fit the contemporary context, when the hybrid individual, such as Catalina, straddles three worlds and three cultures and blends American with Japanese and Cuban elements? The novel spans three languages, different geographical locations, different life stories and experiences, exemplifying the diversity among Latino communities. Essentialism, or typological thinking, as pertaining to the politics of identity, is often synonymous with biological determinism claiming identity is static, given, consisting of certain essential characteristics, rather than socially or culturally constructed. The paradigm of a single prescribed identity does not hold water in the case of Catalina, as she is positioned at the intersection of multiple cultures and traditions. The articulation of a hybrid and transitory identity in *Mambo Peligroso* by an American writer of Chinese and Japanese background is a bold statement attempting to de-essentialize the Latino experience and identity.

Mambo Peligroso could be analyzed as an example of a *Bildungsroman.* In the context of contemporary Chicana novels, Eysturoy sees *Bildungsroman* as revolving around themes of female self-development portrayed as protagonist's coming of age, "or as the mature's woman's awakening to the reality of her social and cultural role as a woman and her subsequent attempts to reexamine her life and shape it in accordance with her new feminist consciousness"(3). *Bildungsroman* depicts therefore the quest for identity and personal development, involving an examination of the past and present along with soul-searching by way of literal or metaphorical journey, in order to shape the future interactions with the world people, and the self (4). *Bildungsroman* usually ends on a happy note, featuring either disillusioned or simply wiser and more wholesome protagonists. Often the process of self-invention goes hand-in-hand with artistic activity, therefore a *Bildungsroman* can turn into a *Künstlerroman* (4). These two modes are supposedly

intersecting with autobiographical accounts of their authors (4), and Patricia Chao has based the novel on her own dancing experience:

> I was a salsa dancer. A big-haired, miniskirted, stiletto-heeled, red-lipsticked practitioner of mambo, as we call the syncopated street-infused version of Latin we do here in New York City. I came to it as a hobby after the publication of my first novel and it became my life. From introverted Asian intellectual I was transformed into Latin mambo mama; I took classes, went clubbing, fell in and out of love with various partners, and finally was asked to join a performance group. We made our debut to an old Eddie Palmieri cut with choreography featuring mind-numbing multiple spins, dips, kicks, and fancy footwork. I'm not ashamed to say that I rode that high for weeks. Then I reached another crossroads: I sold my second novel, *Mambo Peligroso*, inspired by my seven years of Latin dance and accompanying adventures. My entire life-social and professional-revolved around mambo. I learned Spanish and traveled to the eastern part of Cuba, where the music originates. It was clear to me that in some way mambo was my destiny. And I was so entranced by the island of Cuba I ended up going back twice, spending a total of 4 months there. (www.patriciachao.com)

Mambo Peligroso resorts to ethnic pastiche and ethnic cross-dressing as legitimate ploys for claiming and performing one's ethnicity. Karen Christian, while asserting that Cuban American writers produce literature grappling with ethnic identity and "in this subject's attempt to (re)create his/her ethnicity he/she employs a variety of ethnic signs, including stereotypes" (171-172), invokes the concept of ethnic pastiche. It surfaces in Cuban American literature, which refers to inaccessible culture based on nostalgic memory and idealization, and can carve out a "simulacrum...forged from nostalgia and fantasy...a conglomeration of desired characteristics"(184). Christian analyzes three novels: Muñoz' *Crazy Love*, Súarez' *Latin Jazz*, Hijuelos' *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* and their negative, conflated and stereotypical depiction of male and female gender identities. In these novels women can be *la Virgen*-like, either docile and servile, motherly or literally devoted mothers, or sexualized to the point of ridiculousness (177-178), while men fall into one category only – the so-called Latino-lover macho, Mambo King César Castillo-like, equipped with attributes, such as an impressive member in permanent state of alertness, dark complexion, and insatiable sexual appetite. The ethnic pastiche is ridiculous, overdone and exoticized, commodified and commercialized to accomodate the stereotypical expectations of the mass audience. Christian invokes "the motif of ethnicity as ‚dress-up" as "appropriate to pastiche, for it conveys the superficiality of imitation based only on hazy memories of an absent original" (186).

In *Show and Tell* (ST) Christian elaborates on the anti-essentialist approach to Latina/o literature and ethnic identity, as it comprises various traditions stemming from "widely diverging historical, political, and economic contexts" (ST 4), e.g. Chicano, Nuyorican, U.S. Cuban and Dominican American. One should "avoid relying on generalizations, totalizing definitions, and/or essentialisms" (ST 7), and

shun seeking relevance and correspondence between the ethnic writer and his/her community, for it stifles the creativity of literary works and "can act as a sort of straitjacket for Latina/o writers who choose to avail themselves of ‚nonethnic' thematic material and forms" (ST 6). Just as Christian bases her study on the premise of identity as a performance, I would like to dwell on the imagined and invented identity as performance and mimicry of the reality in literary context of Chao's bold new novel.

Mambo Peligroso illustrates what Christian calls "prescribed performances of gender excess" e.g. of hypermasculinity or hyperfemininity (ST 21). In this article, dovetailing Christian's stance, I refuse a homogenizing approach, showing what a fascinating dynamic construct an identity can be, and intend to corroborate her view "of U.S. Latina/o identity as an ongoing process of invention involving cultural heritage, gender roles, and dynamic interaction with American dominant culture" (ST 24). Contesting "the concept of static cultural identity", she believes "all Latina/o literature occupies an ever-expanding space in which identity is perpetually under construction through performances that challenge the artificial boundaries separating cultures, genders, and races" (151). An analysis of the novel's structure and contents will help portray these opinions with images.

The book consists of three parts entitled danzón, danzón-cha and mambo, which are musical forms depicting the rhythm and tempo, from slow, through livelier, to fast, respectively. The structure mimics the organization of the anthology edited by Cristina García *¡Cubanísimo! The Vintage Book of Contemporary Cuban Literature*, which is divided into five *claves*, each bearing the name of a different musical form: danzón, rumba, son, mambo, salsa. According to García, the dance of mambo "is Cuba's fastest and most impassioned music. Only the most assured venture onto the dance floor when a *mambo* is in a full swing. Despite conflicting histories about its origins, most musicologists agree that the *mambo* developed in Havana during the late 1930s" (*Introduction*, xix). My contention is that Patricia Chao is a *mambo* writer, which in the words of García is synonymous to "confident, insistent, erotic"(xx). While portraying Catalina's mutliple identity, she is also a *salsa* writer, bearing in mind that it is "a music whose roots are in *son*, but which has been a product of multiple exiles, of combining the here and there into a fusion of *sabores*, or flavors"(xx).

In *Barrios and Borderlands* Heyck discerns concepts pivotal for Latino community and identity. Although I refuse to say they are the sole defining life markers and the true essence of Latina/o identity, I adapt the division (omitting religion as the references in the novel are very scarce) as a framework for discussing the contents of the plot: the performances of Catalina's ethnic identity and affiliations and portraits of other characters in the novel.

La Familia

Heyck asserts that the family is crucial to Latino culture as a site where one "develops a sense of individuality, identity, and a worldview"(18) and "it represents the most basic source of cultural values for Latinos in the United States

and their major source of strength"(19). Two processes are useful in understanding the development of ethnic identity: enculturation, "or ethnic socialization, which refers to the cultural teaching that parents, families, peers, and the rest of the ethnic community provide to children" and acculturation, "which refers to the adaptation of ethnic minority people to the dominant culture and its members" (Bernal and Knight 3). The reader never learns much about Catalina's enculturation and her family's life. After her Cuban father's suicide, Catalina and her Japanese mother leave Cuba for America. Due to the trauma of finding her father's corpse, Catalina "could no longer speak Spanish, the language between her and her mother was an odd mixture of Japanese and broken English" (124). Orphaned at 23, Catalina, an American with relatives in Cuba, Japan and the U.S., has to fend for herself. For holidays she goes to Miami to help her *tía* and *tío* in the *botánica* they own, or visits her cousin Guillermo. The year before going off to college, she starts having sex with him. Her consequent pregnancy and abortion become her secret.

La Comunidad

A sense of community accompanies the Latinos throughout their lives, it denotes "pride in the *barrio* and its ethnic heritage, and solidarity in tackling community issues and problems"(Heyck 163). Religious and family rituals practised together provide a sense of security, support and belonging in everyday context. Catalina Midori Ortiz has no sense of community in her life. When she takes up mambo dancing at the school of infamous owner, El Tuerto, in the late nineties in New York, most participants are of Latino background and Catalina, called Lina now: "the Spanish diminutive of her name…didn't feel Latina exactly, but she didn't feel like she stood out either, as she had for most of her life" (32). She cannot find a common language with the Latinas in her class, nor with "a couple of Japanese girls giggling in the corner" (18), aloof, "keeping notebooks with intricate diagrams of the turn patterns. They spoke little English but fluent Spanish" (33). Lina, resistant at first, finds herself drawn to El Tuerto, whose entrance, be it in the school or on the dancefloor, always attracts attention. He scores as easily as he dances: "He tried to catch her eye, but she looked away. *I know your type*" (26). Soon enough she has private classes with El Tuerto, and their affair begins: "finally she got it, about the Spanish. How all these years, without knowing, she had remembered, and now she was ready to speak again" (69). The novel is daubed with Spanish words, sentences, expressions for endearments, sex talk, expletives. El Tuerto's masculinity is asserted by the fact that he never wears underwear and by "his outsize cock, famous in the mambo world. Who could get enough of that?" (106). El Tuerto teaches Lina how to enjoy bedroom activities: "She was green in bed, and quiet. 'Spanish people talk," I said, and I made her talk. I made her tell me how it felt, I made her beg. When I got tired of that, I taught her how to be on top, how to fuck like a proper Latina"(191-192).

Las Artes

Artistic expression is vital for every culture and every nation, be it music or dance, or any other kind of performance. Arts can mean the world to one person, or in the

words of Chao: "All dances are a metaphor for life. For seven years I was not only writing *Mambo Peligroso*, I was living it--constantly moving, trying everything, discovering and working muscles I didn't even know I had. Mambo is aptly dubbed "the heroin of dances" (www.patriciachao.com). Catalina is not able to articulate what had drawn her to a dance studio to sign up for classes, "She wasn't a party girl, and although her background was Cuban she hadn't danced or really listened to Latin music since she was teenager in Calle Ocho with her relatives" (18). The choice is random, a coincidence really and yet once she starts, she cannot stop, be it mambo or El Tuerto.

(Im)migration and Exile

Heyck estimates that by 2010 the Latinos will make up 13% of U.S. population. The proximity of South America, Mexico and the Caribbean and a history of colonialization accounts for the figure. For Lina, Cuba, the place of her birth, is a distant memory: "Cuba was a dream, a history to which her mother had reffered occasionally and vaguely…She'd never considered going back" (35). When she and her mother leave Cuba for the U.S., her mother Jun whispers "Un día regresaremos" (122), just like many exiles and émigrés. Her cousin gets married and becomes a family man. Guillermo's father-in-law has plans for him and Guillermo finds himself "at the heart of a Miami *exilio* plot to overthrow Castro" (126). He joins U.S. Cuban organizations, e.g. Cubans for Free Americas (CFA), and although "he knew the right things to say,…he didn't really believe them. If truth be told, he had always found the *exilios* to be overzealous" (131). He becomes caught up in gun trafficking, through no fault of his own, save for ignorance, and indirectly contributes to terrorist attacks in Cuba. He, Lina and Wendy take a cruise on his boat into the Caribbean. Lina is oblivious of the real purpose, although suspicious, she does not inquire and prefers to be ignorant.

La Identidad Cultural

The question of cultural identity, this "awareness of who we are and where we belong" (Heyck 372) is problematic, especially in relation to dual or multiple identity. Postethnic perspective encourages selective, conscious synthesis by assimilating certain affiliations and discarding others. Dubbed *China Latina*, Catalina always feels "uncomfortable when people asked about her background. People in the salsa world, however, seemed excessively interested, would nod sagely when they found out she was Cuban. *That's why you dance like that*" (41). As soon as somebody asks her THE question, she becomes alert:

> *"De donde eres?"*
> "New York," she said in her best Smith accent.
> "I mean really."
> She raised her eyebrows at him, and he shuts up.
> Maybe she did have some Latina attitude after all (46).

Hollinger maintains that postethnic perspective "denies neither history nor biology, nor the need for affiliations, but it does deny that history and biology provide a set of clear orders for the affiliations we are to make" (13). He would like

to see "a *post*ethnic future in which affiliation on the basis of shared descent would be more voluntary than prescribed" (19). However, swapping of affiliations can only occur when a particular entry-gaining ethnic element is a part of the individual heritage. While Lina is an American, she was born in Cuba and had a Japanese mother – upon these fragments she can base her affiliations. And yet, she floats in her life, confused and opportunistic, not sure about her objectives and loyalties. Phinney quotes Erik Erikson's 1964 *Insight and Responsibility* and 1968 *Identity: Youth and Crisis* research on identity formation, defining identity as:

> a subjective sense of wholeness that is achieved during adolescence through the experience of an identity crisis. The process of identity achievement involves an exploration of one's abilities, interests, and options, leading to a commitment to a personal identity that will serve as a guide to future action…Those who fail to achieve a secure identity are faced with identity confusion, a lack of clarity about who they are and what their role is in life (Phinney 62).

Catalina has never acquired this sense of integrity and wholeness. Her development, disrupted by her father's suicide and the move to the U.S., is marked with traumas that were never properly articulated and healed. Her life is reigned with coincidences and decisions the fate seems to be making for her. Having never attained a secure, autonomous identity, she leads a chaotic life, until the mambo gives her a reason to live and love. She grew up in a white suburb and attended a Seven Sisters college. She had a six-year relationship with "Richard the *über*-WASP – all that had bleached her to the point where she could hardly call herself Latina at all. *I am an American*" (18). She lost her Spanish, after three years of not talking at all, she adopted English and mastered it fluently. After her mother died, Catalina went into advertising as a means of having a practical career. Upon meeting Richard, she was fascinated with "his extreme Americanness: sunburn-prone skin, sandy hair and freckles, nasal Massachusetts accent, the family who lived in a town with a street named for his great-grandfather" (30). After break-up with Richard, she continued floating in her life. Accidentally, she subbed as an English teacher, and "to her surprise she loved teaching ESL, had a flair for it" (31). She realized how crucial her classes were to her foreign students in the process of becoming an American and she "was teaching in memory of her mother, who had never learned English well enough to get a job worthy of her talents and education in the United States. She herself felt a kinship with her students, who no matter how long they lived here, would probably never feel at home" (31). She does not date, nor does she truly live her life. Suddenly, she dances mambo, expands her cd collection and dance wardrobe, becomes a part of the Salsa nation, going out to dance every night: "[w]as it because, like teaching ESL, she had a knack for it?" (32) or maybe she was getting back to her roots? She finds hersefl puzzled with this newly discovered passion: "*Why do I love this so much? Why do I feel so at home on the dance floor*" (43). She enacts the hyperfeminity expected of Latina dancers, starts dressing up, wearing more make-up and attracting more male attention at clubs: "there was nothing like it. It made her understand why men dressed in drag" (64).

While defining ethnic identity Bernal and Knight view the question, 'Who am I?' as pivotal for self-identification consisting of: ethnic labels people use in identifying themselves (1), knowledge about the ethnic traditions, values, and behaviors, and preferences people have about their ethnic group membership and ethnic culture (2). Despite the fact that she is of Japanese descent, El Tuerto sees Lina as *chinita*, the girl with "sexy *china* face and a body to stop traffic and her rhythm wasn't bad, but when she opened her mouth she sounded so white it made you cringe" (79). He exoticizes her in order to fulfill his own fantasies: "you're such a delicate tropical flower" (146), he tells her in a rare moment of tenderness. When is cross with her, he quizzes her on her music education and when she does not know the names he mentions, he comments with self-assured malice, knowing she is fickle with her affiliations:

> "And you call yourself *cubana*? This ex of yours was white, wasn't he?"
> "What of it?"
> "What did you expect?"
> 'Why are you being so racist?"
> "What would have happened if you'd had children? Would you have taught them their heritage?"
> "I suppose so."
> "*Suppose*." He snorted. "It's a good thing you *don't* have children."
> "Prick."
> (…) "And you love it, Lina" (146).

Wendy, her mambo teacher sees Lina as a white Cuban devoid of any views and convictions:

> white Cubans – they had too much attitude; and what was their problem anyway, bitching about a country they had chosen to desert when the going got rough? Meanwhile they had turned South Florida into North Cuba…Unlike every other Cuban Wendy had ever met, however, Catalina had no politics, no opinion; in all their conversations she had never once mentioned Fidel Castro (109).

Various models of ethnic identity formation have been suggested and Phinney distills her own paradigm "applicable across ethnic groups" (63) consisting of three stages:

1. unexamined ethnic identity "characterized by the lack of exploration of ethnicity,…accept[ance of] the values and attitudes of the majority culture" (66).
2. ethnic identity search triggered by an important event (69).
3. ethnic identity achievement, "characterized by a clear, confident sense of one's own ethnicity" (71) and "a positive orientation toward the mainstream culture" (75).

In Lina's case, these stages apply from the moment on when she comes to America: she becomes Americanized, starts dancing mambo and is dedicated to exploring the Cuban part of her, and finally accepts and explores her multiple heritage, "*I am awake*" she says of herself (272). When Guillermo is arrested by the Cuban guards

and put into jail, Catalina starts searching for him, engaging American diplomats and government. She even manages to see him in prison. She returns to the U.S. and feels the difference "*I brought Cuba back with me*" (272). She will not give up: "Every couple of months Lina goes down to Washington to testify before some Senate committee, schmooze with this or that lobby group. She does radio interviews whenever she can" (280). She gives birth to Guillermo's child, little Javier. She continues to dance and Tuerto "sometimes overhear[s] her talking with Chisako and Masako in *Japanese*. Where did *that* come from? The *chinita* is taking this roots thing too far" (281).

Rotheram-Borus sees adolescence as crucial in ethnic identity formation triggering the decision "whether to be closely identified with mainstream culture, strongly identified with one's own ethnic group, or [to have] bicultural orientation" (82). A multiple hybridized self functioning in three cultures, Catalina grapples with three options, is torn and misperceived. Rotheram-Borus quotes Ramírez' findings outlined in 1983 *Psychology of the Americas: Mestizo Perspectives on Personality and Mental Health,* where Ramírez discerned four types of bicultural or multicultural identities among Latino Americans (Rotheram-Borus 83), and as much as I am apprehensive of essentializing groupings, these types could be true for any ethnic identity:

- synthesized multicultural: holds positive attitudes toward several cultures; functions competently in more than one culture; feels accepted by members of more than one group
- functional multicultural/mainstream orientation: functions competently in both Latino and mainstream cultures; feels more comfortable and self-assured in mainstream culture;
- functional multicultural/Latino orientation: functions competently in both Latino and mainstream cultures; feels more comfortable and self-assured in Latino culture;
- monocultural: functions competently in Latino culture (84).

When the reader meets Lina, she is undecided whether she is mainstream, bicultural, or ethnically identified, although we realize she has trained herself to function in the mainstream American culture. From monocultural (her life in Cuba), she turns to functional multicultural/mainstream orientation, and ends as a synthesized multicultural apparently reconciled with her multiple heritage.

Mambo Peligroso presents us with the spectacle of ethnicity where cultural memory plays a significant role as the protagonist struggles to define herself by recovering and performing it. This postmodern ethnicity can never be ultimately determined or harbored, perhaps due to its multiple hybridity. The narrative strategies and literary ploys assert the postmodern quality of the text even further: linguistic hybridity manifests itself when the characters intermingle languages, sometimes ending up in wordplay and puns. In terms of genre, Chao experiments with different styles and forms, interweaving autobiographical experience. By listing bibliography and discography for her novel, Chao mingles techniques of

scholarly documentation with fiction, thus blurring the borders between the genre, truth and invention challenging the concept of (auto-) ethnographic authority. Intermingling fact and fiction, she disorients the reader whose expectations are not met, but toyed with. Introducing four narrators, various settings and non-linear narrative, she creates confusion over time and space, thus juggling the past/present categories. The distinction between high art and popular culture is vague, as these two terms are vague and subjective. Is reality real in *Mambo Peligroso*? Is this a mimetic representation or an ethnic pastiche woven out of bits and pieces derived from first-hand observation? Or in other words, can a non-Latina faithfully represent a Latino reality?

The *Bildungsroman* has an objective: to teach. What is the lesson learned here? The society, its demographics and structure change and literature attempts to mirror the modifications. The genre of *Bildungsroman* is adapted by new authors featuring new characters grappling with universal as well as new problems. Catalina negotiates the pressures of the nation, culture and gender at the level of the intangible and the visible. The narrative of *Mambo Peligroso* cannot be said to adopt the autoethnographic framework within which ethnic American literature is often expected to function. And yet, do the hybridity and subjectivity-shuttling save us from the restraints of cultural essentialism and typological thinking?

Trompe l'oeil, French for "fool the eye", is a term used to depict a two-dimensional painting on a flat canvas or any other surface, designed to look three-dimensional, actual and real. Utilizing different techniques, it creates an illusion and deceives the viewer stunned with a simulated exactitude and realistic rendition, thus tricking the eye. Chao fools the readers insofar as she assigns her protagonist Catalina with the task of an elaborate, multiple ethnic performance. In her novel, turning to an aesthetic mimicry resembling a *trompe l'oeil*, Chao harnesses her literary imagination and writing skills, employs language, cultural traditions and other ethnic markers to imitate and to echo ethnicity she does not share, and attempts to convince the readers that her protagonist could be a credible, real, flesh-and-blood person living in the contemporary American society.

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