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**Connecting September 11's: Hemispheric Historical
Ambiguity in Ariel Dorfman's *Americanos: Los pasos de
Murieta***

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In 2005 Andrés Neuman, the celebrated Argentine author and winner of the 2011 Alfaguara prize for best novel, published a beautiful book of aphorisms entitled, *El equilibrista*. In it, among many similar gems, he writes: “La postmodernidad es onanista”¹ (73). It is a short but scathing condemnation of postmodernism² as an endless series of

¹ [Postmodernity is onanistic.] All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

² Paula Moya's definition of postmodernism remains one of the clearest, most brilliantly accessible explanations I have thus far encountered. Rather than try to emulate as clear a definition, I will defer here to Moya and quote at length from her book *Learning from Experience*: “Most critics agree that [postmodernism] can be characterized in at least three (analytically separable) ways: (1) as an aesthetic practice; (2) as a historical stage in the development of late capitalism; and (3) as a theoretical and/or critical position...While I will describe the (often implicit) epistemological underpinnings of ‘postmodernist’ theoretical conceptions of identity, I am aware that postmodernist theory does not constitute a unified intellectual movement. Rather, it embodies a range of

intellectual games and queries meant for the private pleasure of the knowing few. That Neuman's assertion has teeth is due, no doubt, to the fact that the charge holds, to a degree. Like all good aphorisms, however, its strength as polemic lies in its overgeneralization. Like many of the brilliant new generation of young Latin American writers—many of whom, like Neuman, were named to the Hay Market Festival's list *Bogotá 39*, a list of the thirty-nine most influential writers in Latin America under the age of forty—Neuman's critique *could* be read as a salvo of sorts aimed at his literary forbearers, whom he charges with having played literary intellectual games at the expense of a concerted engagement with the world around them. I don't think this was the intention of his critique of postmodernism. Regardless, his aphoristic critique reveals, to a subtle degree, Neuman's own relative privilege as a writer of a generation freed from the particular constraints faced by the Generation of '72.

As Brantley Nicholson and Sophia McClennen have argued in the introduction to this volume, the Generation of '72 "is a generation that, for the first time in twentieth-century Latin America, experiences the roundly negative aspects of globalization and whose writers make less voluntary trips to the cosmopolitan center than enter into acquiesced global citizenship through political exile" (4). Moreover, as a generation of writers shaped by particular historical, social and economic forces, Nicholson and McClennen argue that they, as a group, have been "presented with the task of mourning while questioning the very limits of a literature that undergoes a double affront through the strict control of symbolic systems by authoritarian regimes and the influx of new cultural referents that the abrupt liberalization of Latin American economies causes" (5). Contrary to Neuman's assertion that postmodernism is about the playful scattering of one's intellectual seed, for this generation, the incessant questioning and suspicion at the center of postmodernism forms the very center of their

theoretical and political practices that emphasize the unstable and contingent nature of discursively produced meaning. Moreover, the arguments of many prominent figures in contemporary feminist, postcolonial, antiracist, and queer theory (some of whom reject the terms I am using to describe them) share important commonalities; they are characterized by a strong epistemological skepticism, a valorization of flux and mobility, and a general suspicion of, or hostility toward, all normative and/or universalist claims" (8).

efforts to contend with the crisis of interpretation wrought by authoritarian regimes. I would suggest that Ariel Dorfman's novel *Americanos: Los pasos de Murieta* functions as a poetic refutation to Neuman's entertaining, but perhaps heavy-handed, critique of postmodernism. Further, this essay will argue that *Americanos* foregrounds the postmodern sensibility of slipperiness and ambiguity in order to aggressively assert our inability to narrate history in any complete way and to underscore the senseless violence that stems from the construction of multiple, competing, heavily-mediated histories.

Americanos: Los pasos de Murieta, a deeply complex and layered novel that has not received the kind of critical attention it deserves, is the latest novel by the Chilean-American writer Ariel Dorfman.³ Released in 2009, *Americanos* is set in the wild west of the mid-1800s. The story takes place in California at the precise historical juncture of both the impending US Civil War and the transition of California from a Mexican territory to a possession of the United States. *Americanos* is narrated, primarily, by its hero, Harrison Lynch. Born in the early 1800s in England, Harrison is sent to Chile where he grows up under the tutelage of Bernardo O' Higgins the Chilean hero of the wars of independence. After a series of adventures and tragedies, Lynch assumes the name Harrison Solar and escapes to California where he is eventually employed by the Amador family to tutor the twins Rafael and Pablo Amador. Harrison's narrative recounts his biography as well as the story of the twins and their beloved cousin Marcadia Amador, the youngest of the Amador, born at the precise moment when California is illegally proclaimed a US possession only to revert back some hours later into a Mexican territory.

Rafael and Pablo, who grow up as close as is physically and emotionally possible, are eventually cleaved apart by the alleged death of

³ As he describes in his memoir *Heading South, Looking North*, Dorfman was born in Chile, lived in the US as a child, was forced to flee back to Chile because of the virulent McCarthyism of the 1950s, and then later forced back into US exile with the violently repressive ascension to power of General Augusto Pinochet in 1973. He has been a professor of Literature at Duke University for over twenty-five years and, although he has written works in every major literary genre including opera, he is most widely recognized for his classic Marxist study of US imperialism, *Para leer al pato Donald* [*How to Read Donald Duck*] and his play *Death and the Maiden*.

the *bandido* Joaquín Murieta, a local, mythical figure who in his day was seen as either a plague on the lives of “honest” western businessmen, or a Robin-hood type folk-hero standing up against the Yankee incursions into Mexican California. One of the defining features of both Dorfman and the other writers of the Generation of ‘72 is their contention that, as Nicholson has put it, “no grand political discourse or stabilizing cultural frame is complete without its negative and antithetical undercurrent.” Seen in this light my reading will demonstrate that Dorfman’s *Americanos* is both a reflection on the history which divided these two twins and an effort to imagine, against all odds, the reconciliation of America’s complex, profoundly bifurcated legacy of hope *and* hypocrisy.

Incredibly, Dorfman’s novel was a full thirty-five years in the making. It begins with Dorfman’s attendance, in 1975, of a play by Neruda entitled *El fulgor de Joaquín Murieta*. The play features a life-size headless marionette that represents Murieta and that Dorfman reads as an emblem of exile. At the time, the image was particularly powerful to Dorfman because he read the decapitated figure of Murieta as an intriguing metaphor for exile: “pensé que atrás de eso había una novela interesante, una manera de hablar del destierro, de la pérdida de lo familiar en el mundo. Y eso era lo que estábamos viviendo nosotros ahí, en ese momento.”⁴ The image of the headless Murieta from the mid-nineteenth century nags at Dorfman for years and sets him on the path to *Americanos*. In the intervening years between his viewing of Neruda’s play and the publication of *Americanos*, Dorfman would, of course, become one of most successful, exiled Southern Cone writers. His work, *Death and the Maiden*, is a classic of exile literature and reflects Dorfman’s continuing interest in exile as both a sense of geographic displacement (a byproduct of forced physical movement) and an emotional displacement that stems from “the loss of the familiar.” Murieta’s transformation, in Dorfman’s literary mind, from a symbol of headless exile to a figure of historical ambiguity that functions to symbolically connect the Americas, embodies Dorfman’s long trajectory as an intellectual, essayist and novelist. What began as a period

⁴ [it occurred to me that behind this there was an interesting novel, a way of talking about exile, of the loss of the familiar in the world. And that this was what we were living there, in that very moment.]

novel or a contemplation of exile, morphs into a work that actively seeks to juxtapose 19th century California with contemporary, post 9/11 US society in order to explore larger issues regarding history, identity and the right to interpretive power.

On the surface *Americanos*, written in Spanish, is a novel about the 19th century Mexican territory of California. It tells the stories of the struggles for independence in Chile and the subsequent efforts by the Spaniards to retain their colonies under imperial control. It also, however, tells the story of the rampant US imperialism that would, in the span of a few decades, transform California from a largely quiet Mexican territory into the pulsing center of the United States' hemispheric expansionist efforts. As the novel makes clear, the struggle for California would set the pattern for US incursions throughout the Americas while simultaneously establishing the long-standing antagonism between Mexico and the US. *Americanos* tells these stories peripherally while focusing the novel on three generations of the Amador family and their efforts to secure and retain land.

In linking their story of success and eventual decline with the fortunes of Mexico and its territory, Dorfman reengages the long tradition of the Latin American Romance novels of the 19th century. Building on what Doris Sommer has described as “the inextricability of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building” (5-6) Dorfman's novel is an updated version of the Romance novels that Sommer has signaled as intimately connected to the flurry of Latin American nations born in the 19th century⁵. *Americanos* uses the Romance genre as scaffolding upon which to narrate the nation-building of 19th century United States in order to elucidate the process of nation-building he sees taking place, now, in the 21st century. Linking these two principle narratives—the fury and insistence of US 19th century imperialism and the rise and fall of the Mexican land-owning class in the territory of California—is the long-

⁵ Sommer's larger argument with regards to the connection between romance novels and 19th century nation-building centers around the idea that the novels played out and performed the supposed “natural” relationships of heterosexual love and their allegorical connections to the presumed natural relationships between creoles and the variegated civil societies of the burgeoning nation-states.

disputed figure of Joaquín Murieta. A well-documented historical subject, Murieta's life and death, however, have been intriguingly hard to confirm. Debates regarding his place of birth—Mexico versus Chile—as well as his death, or not, at the hands of a Texas Ranger, make Murieta a fascinating symbolic axis for Dorfman's sustained examination of post 9/11 US identity.

My argument, moreover, is that Dorfman uses the notion of historical ambiguity—our inability to *know* or even *tell* history in any concrete, culturally neutral way—in order to decry the endless, mobius-like cycles of violence that emerge out of culturally constructed, narrative histories. He sees in this historical ambiguity, a conditioned obsession with narrating history as if it were Truth and then utilizing this “truth” to perpetuate and justify violence and repression⁶. *Americanos* emphasizes Dorfman's point by constructing a subtle rhetorical line that spans generations and geographies in order to connect historical moments throughout the Americas that *seem* isolated both chronologically and geographically. His novel interrogates these connections in order to offer storytelling and narrative as a means to constructing alternate worlds capable of standing in opposition to the consistent, historical perpetuation of violence. Further, I contend that *Americanos* is a novel that intentionally seeks to straddle historical periods in order to explore the profound feelings of disconnect, of emotional and cognitive disembodiedness, which marked the September 11's of both 1973 and 2001.

My argument, that *Americanos: Los Pasos de Murieta*—which ends 110 years before Chile's September 11th and 138 years before our own—is at heart a novel about 9/11, is not a reading that is patently obvious upon first blush. On the surface *Americanos* seems to be more concretely focused on revising and updating the romance novels of 19th century Latin America. It is Dorfman's effort, however, at writing a 19th century Latin American Romance novel with a distinctly postmodern aesthetic sensibility that marks the crux of the matter. Understanding *Americanos* as a postmodern

⁶ Although my focus in this essay is on the novel *Americanos*, Dorfman's concern with the instability of truth and its consistent, material effects on people's lives is a hallmark of his entire *oeuvre* spanning such dramatically different works as *Death and the Maiden* and *Konfidenz*.

19th century Latin American Romance hinges upon understanding two key interventions that Dorfman makes in the genre. Building upon Sommer's assessment that the "continent seemed to invite inscriptions" (7) and that this "invitation" remains equally true today as it did 150 years ago, *Americanos* updates the romance genre through the introduction of: 1) postmodernism's penchant for formalistic experimentation—in this case by having several of the novel's chapters narrated by a miraculous bar of soap crafted by indigenous hands—and 2) the postmodern propensity towards ambiguity as an organizing trope.

Historical Ambiguity: The Blunt Force of Doubt

Dorfman himself asserts that his original intention had been to write a traditional, epic Latin American novel that would move chronologically through the upheaval that spanned generations of families across the Americas. He then confesses, however, that the 30+ years that it took him to complete this novel, were decades marked intensely by the influence of postmodernism and what Dorfman describes as the "relativizing of knowledge." He explains that: "la persona que escribe *Americanos* es la misma que escribió *La muerte y la doncella*, donde no se sabe si el doctor es torturador o no, o si la mujer es loca o no. Me atrajo esta idea de trabajar la incertidumbre de la historia, mirarla con ironía y distancia, en paralelo con el heroísmo y la epopeya" (*Página/12*).⁷ The postmodernist irony at the center of Dorfman's novel is that his sincere belief in the power of narrative to construct imagined, more productive worlds is aligned with the task of undermining our collective efforts to narrate histories in any concrete, satisfactory way.

Dorfman places his goal of "[working uncertainty]" at the center of his novel by quietly undermining the notion of narrative and asking implicitly: who bears the right to tell a story? *Americanos* opens with a note from the translator that sets out to detail the difficulty of working with

⁷ [the person who writes *Americanos* is the same who wrote *Death and the Maiden*, in which we don't know if the doctor is a torturer or not, if the woman is crazy or not. I was attracted to the idea of working the uncertainty of history, observing it at a distance and with irony but also paralleled by heroism and epic storytelling].

the author, Ariel Dorfman. The translator, Eduardo Vladimiroff, explains the enthusiasm with which he began this project motivated, in part, by the privileged opportunity to discuss, in detail, the content and character of a novel of epic scope with a living author. He is assured by the editor that Dorfman is “[a model of courtesy]” and accepts the job. The sad reality, according to Vladimiroff, is that his repeated letters and intellectual queries go summarily unanswered and that the “famous” Dorfman never bothers to make an appearance.

Vladimiroff utilizes the translator’s note to chastise Dorfman for being, “much too busy” to reply to questions about historical events described in the novel, or to suggestions regarding a time-line of historical events or a chart delineating the Amador family genealogy. Vladimiroff’s note, dripping with disdain, paints Dorfman as a prima donna of sorts who robs the translator of an opportunity to produce the best possible translation of a difficult novel. The joke, and this would not be immediately apparent to a first-time reader of Dorfman’s work or even to the occasional reader not familiar with Dorfman’s memoir, is that Eduardo Vladimiroff is actually a play on Dorfman’s birth name Vladimiro Ariel Dorfman. In reality the two—author and translator, Dorfman and Vladimiroff,—are one and the same, and the footnotes that riddle the novel exposing the author’s missteps, the liberties taken with both history and fiction, are pointed out by the same man who originally wrote them. The process of undermining narrative accuracy begins on page one.

The notion that History and Narrative are slippery and culturally constructed is not new of course⁸, yet Dorfman’s interest is in showing how our ideological commitments to particular historical narratives enable and even encourage us to participate in endless cycles of violence. Dorfman uses the figure of Joaquín Murieta to indicate the long history of an intertwined Americas—the case that is being made by scholars of inter-American and Hemispheric Latin@ studies—but also as a means to make a case for the impossibility of narrating history in any complete way.

⁸ One text that immediately comes to mind is Hayden White’s *Metahistory*.

Murieta is a fascinating character through which to focus on these arguments precisely because his biography not only highlights the concept of an Americas as a unified object of study, but also foregrounds the issue of historical ambiguity. Robert McKee Irwin writes that Murieta is “in many ways a typical borderlands icon, representing no one group, signifying in multiple directions to multiple audiences” (40). For the principle characters of the Amador family, the twins Pablo and Rafael and their cousin Marcadia, Murieta’s legend, at least initially, does symbolize in a single direction. For the Amador children, Murieta represents the evocative image of a single, solitary Mexican standing in opposition to Yankee aggression.

Their profound reverence for Murieta signals to the reader the depth of connection between Marcadia and the twins but especially between the two brothers, Rafael and Pablo, who begin the novel as closely allied as is physically and emotionally possible for two separate beings. Jaboncito, the miraculous bar of soap that narrates several of the novel’s chapters, describes the moment of bathing the twins for the very first time: “[In the impossible fraternal unanimity of their breath I couldn’t detect any variation, so inseparable was the one from the other...each one spoke for the other and for both, the very notion of “I”, “mine”, “my eyes”, did not hold for those twins I bathed]” (127). For Jaboncito, whose magical ability allows him to see the innermost thoughts and experiences of those he bathes and touches, Rafael and Pablo exist as a single entity. This idyllic unity, however, doesn’t last and it is Murieta’s alleged beheading that eventually separates Rafael and Pablo with the former assuring the latter that Murieta is indeed a hero while Pablo insists that Murieta is emblematic of the lawlessness of a less civilized land.

This divergence of opinion over the legacy of Murieta would come to define the split between Rafael and Pablo and becomes the symbolic center of the novel’s efforts to understand the burgeoning identity of the United States. I will examine this notion further in a later section of this essay, however, for the moment the key point is that Murieta, in addition to becoming the root of the twins’ untimely and unfortunate separation, perfectly embodies the ambiguity that Dorfman finds both troubling and

evocative. Dorfman's interest in Murieta is not simply *how* Murieta is represented to, and signified by, multiple cultural constituencies but also the fact that Murieta has, for decades, remained a figure marked deeply by ambiguity. McKee Irwin writes:

from the early newspaper reports and the first literary representations of Murrieta [sic] to the hundreds of reformulations of the legend in novels, plays, *corridos*, poems, histories, movies, and the like over the past century and a half in California and the United States, France, Spain, Chile, and Mexico by *gringo*, Native American, Chicano, Sonoran, Latin American, and even Russian writers, it seems that no one can agree on the many details of the case. (38)

To Dorfman, the unverifiable truth of Murieta's biography becomes as important as the way in which his story shines light on the ascertainable experiences of ethnic Mexicans whose lives were, and are, *undeniably* dictated by hemispheric events and protagonists and by processes that emerge out of efforts to narrate those lives as historical characters and events.

The Untenable Ambiguity of Murieta's Life, Death and Legacy

Pablo and Rafael—each convinced of their version of the events regarding Murieta's death, or survival—undertake a fevered quest to find out “the truth” about Murieta. As the narrative progresses and they journey further and further from home, they find that the truth remains no less accessible than the rumors they entertained on their own doorstep. After weeks of travel, the only apparent truth is the way in which historical truth frustrates their efforts at certainty. This revelation leads to the following dialog between the two exasperated twins:

[—Let's say we find him. —His voice was calm, genuinely interested.
—I'm sure you won't be able to, but let's suppose it happens. Then what?
—We listen to him. We hear his story, what really happened, directly from the lips of Murieta.
—And how can you know that it's really him? What was your name in the States, son? Johnson or Thompson or Bates. That song by Eamons. People invent whatever tall tale, construct a fictitious history about themselves, especially if they are far from home, from those who watched them grow. The only thing I am going to believe in, from now on, is that which I've submitted to my own reason.]
(285)

Whereas under distinct circumstances Pablo would likely have praised the US for being a place where people can constantly reinvent themselves, in this case, Pablo's discourse belies a growing cynicism with regards to the possibility not only of Murieta's existence but also more deeply with the possibility of truth. Pablo, in this way, begins to sense that historical narrative is a seriously flawed mechanism for conveying historical truth, the reality of people and events⁹.

His words bring to mind what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, in a different context, points to as the unwitting, "authoritative" arrogance of the ethnographer. Rosaldo, writing of the complexity inherent in ethnographic fieldwork writes that "all interpretations are provisional; they are made by positioned subjects who are prepared to know certain things and not others" (8). What strikes me as important here is the way in which our faith in reason often makes it difficult for us to consider the ways in which our social location influences the wielding of that reason. Like the ethnographers that Rosaldo warns his readers about, Pablo doesn't realize that even his vaunted reason is a culturally constructed artifact of a *particular* social context.

Perhaps the most climactic of moments in regards to the ambiguity of Murieta's story comes two-thirds of the way through the novel. The twins meet a cowboy named Henderson who narrates, with stunning detail, the last minutes of Murieta's life. Henderson lays claim to having killed Murieta and condemns the Texas Ranger, Harry Love, for having cheated him out of his part of the reward money. The twins leave the saloon with Pablo convinced of his triumph over his brother. Minutes later, however, they are chased down by the saloon's dishwasher, a Chilean named Ramón Sandoval who refutes Henderson's story by explaining that Love and his group would kill anyone who resembled Murieta, and had the unfortunate name of Joaquín, and then would sell off their horses as a way to make the

⁹ Like many of the other writers of the Generation of '72, Dorfman underscores the fact that established narrative truths, like national narratives, are consistently eroded by the public voice or, to use a phrase suggested to me by Nicholson, the "orality of everyday life." Dorfman's novel, like much of his work, does not seek to hierarchize public voice over national narratives, but he is deeply interested in considering the almost constant ebb and flow that exists between them.

venture profitable. Sandoval offers two pieces of evidence as proof. 1) Murieta himself appeared at a local saloon in order to look at his own head; 2) shortly thereafter Murieta sent a letter to the local paper asserting that he could assure that it was not his head being exhibited in the glass bottle because “[I have mine, firmly-placed, on my shoulders and these are my hands which are writing this letter of protest]” (298). Sandoval’s refutation, however, rests on two shaky foundations: 1) he never actually witnesses Murieta come to see his own head and 2) he never sees Murieta’s signature at the bottom of the letter. Both of these acts were witnessed by Sandoval’s friend Heraldo Rosales. Pablo, unconvinced by the story, asks Sandoval about his friend Rosales:

- And where is this Heraldo Rosales?
- The dummy went back home, to Quillota, you know, in Chile.
- In other words, if we want to verify if this Rosales is telling the truth, we would have to go to Chile to confirm it, right?
- Why would my friend lie?
- Asked Pablo exasperated—. Why does every person we come across seem to be telling us another lie? (298-299)

Every narrative that seems to confirm or deny Murieta’s death is followed closely by an equally (im)plausible narrative that effectively counters the preceding one. Bearing in mind McKee Irwin’s assertion vis-à-vis the tendency of multiple audiences to signify Murieta in particular ways, we come to understand the twins’ impasse as being one of signification. For the various communities Murieta represents the larger divisions that have marked both America and the Americas. The divisions among Americans and Americanos is focalized through Murieta in such a way that his biography, whether one believes that he was born in Chile or in Sonora, attests to the legacy of a 19th century America that from the outset was a hemispheric destination.

Put another way, while the amnesia with which we’ve tended to discuss, interpret and understand Latino/a history in the US places their arrival and impact within the last few decades, the figure of Murieta highlights the reality of a burgeoning United States marked by the arrival of Mexican but also waves of South and Central Americans as well as Asians from the “Far East” spanning more than a century. Murieta thus speaks to the centuries-long *hemispheric* history of the United States, one that is, in

part, addressed by the US's long history of incursions into Latin America, but that is also marked by the constant immigration of Chileans and Peruvians to the West Coast in search of gold. Given the rampant historical amnesia that marks our educational system¹⁰ we might then suggest that Murieta's history in this novel acts to dispel the notion that the US has always been sharply distinct from the rest of Latin America.

For the twins, Rafael and Pablo, the debate over Murieta's death and his legacy transcends the question of historical veracity and instead points to the fact that Murieta's legacy is, at heart, a living manifestation of Sommer's notion of "writing America." For Rafael and Pablo, establishing the narrative surrounding Murieta is an act of active, engaged construction: what kind of "America" do they want to believe in? Is it Rafael's vision of an Americas united by dreams of revolutionary struggle against imperialism and colonialism, or is it Pablo's vision of an America inspired, but also dictated, by the emerging and overwhelming power of the United States' version of the American Dream? Ultimately, both the history and legacy of Murieta reveal themselves as an inaccessible tangle of fact and fiction, constructs meant to enable preexisting versions of the social world foregrounded by each of the varying social groups invested in Murieta. For his victims and his beneficiaries alike, Murieta becomes simultaneously everything and nothing. In the social context of 19th century California (and beyond) he is *both* a bandit and a hero, and he is *neither*. Murieta's legacy is as ambiguous as his actual history and as such comes to embody the ambiguousness of History *writ large*.

Historical Ambiguity or Birth on the Hyphen

Dorfman furthers the connection between ambiguity and History by introducing the symbolic opposite of Murieta's unverifiable death, the seemingly concrete and verifiable birth of Marcadia Amador, Rafael and Pablo's beloved cousin. Marcadia's birth, unlike Murieta's death, seems

¹⁰ For two decidedly distinct, but perhaps equally brilliant, ways of addressing the issue of the US's propensity for historical amnesia see Ali Behdad's *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* and Jon Stewart's handling of the 2010 Texas textbook controversy: <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-march-17-2010/don-t-mess-with-textbooks>

patently straightforward to confirm. Debate, however, arises because of the possible symbolism attached to her birth. In this scene, Pedro Amador (the eldest son of the patriarch Álvaro Amador), is trying to determine if Harrison knows anything about the moment in which California passed over, momentarily, into the hands of the US:

I thought that you, having been there, might inform us of the exact hour at which the North American flag was raised over Monterrey on the 19th of October, something that is more transcendent than might otherwise seem. Isn't that right, Father?

—My granddaughter Marcadia—he explained in a voice that was louder and definitely less courteous than that of his son—was born, mind you, the 19th of October at 9:47am. Therefore, what matters is to know if she was born *after* the Yankees raised that piece of shit flag. My son Pedro says yes, I say no. You will tell us who is right. (142)

Verifying Marcadia's birth appears to be a simple matter; however, again like Murieta's death, Marcadia's birth is laden with symbolic import in that the Amador family sits within a territory in transition, at a historical moment of profound crisis and reflection.

As Rosaura Sanchez has noted “this sense of being ‘social exiles’ and decentered, the outrage, resentment, and disillusionment at being displaced by others within their own terrain, constitutes the sociospatial dominant mapped in the nineteenth-century Californio testimonials” (3). For Álvaro, Marcadia's birth is inescapably connected to the growing sense of “outrage” and “disillusionment,” but also condenses symbolically the question of citizenship and belonging inherent in the experiences of *californianos*. To accept Marcadia as an “American” would be in some way to accept the reality of California's transition, its conquest, by the US, what Sanchez has called the “liminal point of passage from market to monopoly capital” (2). Álvaro Amador's cognitive struggle is, therefore, the struggle to hold at bay the military might of the US, but also the insistent temptation of the American Dream that had begun to propagate itself far and wide.

Harrison Solar's rebuttal, however, is instructive in its repudiation of the very terms of the debate. For, although Álvaro Amador has made his wealth and his reputation by always fighting, by always resisting, Harrison's insight is into the futility now inherent in that struggle.

—I don't see why the hour should matter, sir. The North American flag was taken down two days later, but it remains there, perhaps for the moment invisible to some, but I assure you that it continues to fly. And tomorrow, or the next day, or perhaps in three years, that flag will once again be raised and when that happens, I assure you, it will never again be taken down...What matters, then, if you'll excuse me, isn't knowing the precise hour of anything. What matters is preparing for that inescapable day. (144)

In the moment of sharp, historical disjunct wrought by the growth of the US in the Americas, Marcadia's birth signals that the terms of the debate have shifted. The inclination and the faith, in concrete historical narratives (i.e. she was born under the Mexican flag and is, as such, Mexican) no longer hold and instead give way to the realities which those (hi)stories occlude. In the case of California and the Amador family, the question becomes not whether California remains Mexican, but for how long and at what cost? The question of Marcadia's birth, like the question of Murieta's death, is therefore more revealing of the way in which ambiguity hinders our attempts to understand the world around us, particularly in turbulent times like the transition of the territory of California or like the intervening months and years after September 11, 2001.

For Dorfman, our understanding of categories of thought, like progress and modernity, are as critically suspect as our understanding of historical events and figures in the sense that they are necessarily confined to an ambiguous telling and retelling that serves only to reflect the particular biases of our own time and place. As the dying Harrison recounts his life to the twins, he tells the story of his complicated loyalty to the rebels' struggle for independence and the battle that ended the life of his mortal enemy Ignacio Ibarra. Speaking in regards to Ibarra's dying assertion that the conflict between the Spanish Empire and the Rebels was pointless, Harrison says "Of course he was right. Of course he was wrong" (338). Our efforts to delineate sharply our distinct histories and cultures, like the twins' efforts to trace the solid lines of Murieta's life, are hopelessly ambiguous; neither side is correct, neither side is wrong.

Faced with the hopeless ambiguity of history and narration, Marcadia and the twins, rather than slip into the dead-end of cultural relativism, fall into an equally lamentable state of perpetual conflict. It is

through this conflict that we see manifest the consequences of the US's September 11th on our national consciousness. *Americanos* ends with an amorous tryst between Marcadia and her two cousins, one she designs to be purposefully ambiguous. Demanding total darkness and silence, Marcadia makes love to both twins simultaneously, willfully ignorant of which is which, a decision that relieves her, and denies us, of the knowledge of which of the two twins is the father of the child she bears. Marcadia is ambiguously American or *americana*, and the child she bears is either the son of Pablo (and the child of American exceptionalism and progress) or the son of Rafael (and the inheritor of Latin American independence, of revolution and resistance both physical and philosophical). Marcadia is transformed into a revised Malinche figure who bears the future child of cultural and nationalist *mestizaje* (he/she will be both American and Mexican), yet the legacy of that child's conception goes unresolved. Was this child conceived with Pablo turning him/her (and Marcadia) into race "traitors" the way Malinche has been unfairly interpreted by traditional Mexican culture, or is he/she Rafael's child and therefore "true" to the spirit of Latin American independence and autonomy? Dorfman refuses to answer the question and in doing so highlights the profound anxiety of two nations split—*rajados* to use Gloria Anzaldúa's term—by their shared inheritance.

Leaping Across Centuries: Historical and Geographical Continuity

For Dorfman, nowhere is the question of historical ambiguity more salient than in the months and years following the events of September 11, 2001. Although Dorfman's dedication to a literature of compassion, humanity and quiet rage has been a trademark of his entire career, *Americanos* represents the continuation of one of the literary and philosophical projects at the center of his moving collection of essays, *Other Septembers*. As one reads through the essays in *Other Septembers* one is struck by the fact that many of the essays written in the late 80s and early 90s remain relevant even now, *especially* now. In the essay, "The Last September 11" Dorfman talks about the haunting need he feels "to understand and extract the hidden meaning of the juxtaposition and

coincidence of these two September 11s” (39). Dorfman goes on to argue about the paradoxical opportunity which the pain of the US’s September 11 held for its citizens:

One of the ways for Americans to overcome their trauma and survive the fear and continue to live and thrive in the midst of the insecurity which has suddenly swallowed them is to admit that their suffering is neither unique nor exclusive, that they are connected, as long as they are willing to look at themselves in the vast mirror of our common humanity, to so many other beings who, in apparent faraway zones, have suffered similar situations of unanticipated and often protracted injury and fury. (41)

The opportunity, which Dorfman sees as central to the hope of redemption and healing, is the idea that the US is, indeed, a part of the larger world, that contrary to the outsized notion of exceptionalism, the US too suffers, has suffered, and might well suffer again. Just like the rest of the world. Dorfman is fascinated with these two September 11s for their rhetorical potential, the possibility that inheres in them to tell a story that will join the US to Chile—and the hemisphere—in what is clearly a story of loss, but also of hope. This central paradox of lingering hope braided movingly with aching loss is one that resonates deeply with the Generation of ‘72. What, then, makes *Americanos* in particular a novel about the trans-American and transhistorical importance of 9/11, both 1973 and 2001?

Early in the novel, Dorfman writes that “History loves certain dates; she repeats them incessantly, intent on finding in them some order hidden amidst the chaos” (43). A short while later in the novel—seven pages later in fact—Dorfman suggests that certain historical moments are more chaotic than others, that History’s desire for order, manifest in the curious repetition of dates, is crucial in these moments of total and complete disorder: “When war arrives at the very doorstep of the city, and the population has no idea who will triumph, if the victors of today will be in power tomorrow, and no one knows who the hell is really in charge, something strange tends to happen... In these moments, it feels as if there is no solid ground upon which to tread, everything solid seems to melt before our eyes, anything can happen” (50). The historical setting for the above passage is not New York post 9/11, but it could be. It is not the Chile of 1973, but it could be. Instead it is the Chile of the early 1800s, and

although Dorfman is describing the climate of war surrounding the battles for Chile's independence, his discourse emphasizes the idea that during moments of chaos and disillusionment we are ultimately informed and guided by the fact of historical continuity. As Dorfman himself has said in reference to the most recent 9/11, "I have been through this before."

Dorfman's novel takes us back to the precise moment when the notion of what it means to be American vs. *americano* is born and is deeply connected to Dorfman's desire to think through *an* identity for the United States. *Americanos* places us at a crossroads, at the juncture where the twins Pablo and Rafael, the US and Mexico, are at great risk of losing each other, perhaps forever. For me, what is crucial to grasp in order to understand this moving and complex novel is the convergence of two dynamics: 1) the incessant repetition of history, particularly of certain dates and 2) the need to return to a historical crossroads in order to better understand the path we have collectively chosen. *Americanos* emphasizes the fact of historical continuity by repeating "as often as possible" the repetition of dates and events such that the superficial connection of dates emphasizes, more significantly, the connectedness of the *consequences* of each historical moment (September 11, 2001 thus retains the profound *echoes* of September 11, 1973). Linking *Americanos* to *Other Septembers* we can appreciate how, for Dorfman, the two most notorious September 11s are connected because they reveal the US's deeply bifurcated legacy. Literary scholar Teresa Longo makes the following assertion about Dorfman's "Letter to America": "The hole where the Twin Towers previously stood is not merely an empty space. It is a space that contains the specter of US hegemony in the hemisphere and the globe. Dorfman's work is mindful of this. His "Love Letter" does not ignore the specter in the center of the Manhattan landscape. It unmask it. And in the unmasking, it envisions another more humane, more peaceful America."

The effort to unmask both the harm and the hope of the US's hemispheric legacy is representative of Dorfman's larger interest in symbols, specifically the fact that they can be read in multiple ways. And yet, as a literary critic, Dorfman would argue that some interpretations are simply better than others. *Americanos* signals Dorfman's intention to

address, through the power of narrative, precisely these sorts of struggles over representation. The moment of California's absorption into the US becomes *the* moment of irredeemable fracture for the Amador family in that Pablo comes to believe in the hope of US exceptionalism while Rafael can see nothing but the racist egoism of US capitalism and its constant need for acquisition and gain.

Taking this further, if Rafael and Pablo were to stand at the edge of ground zero and look deep into the gaping wound left by the events of 9/11, if, in other words, his twins were to gaze upon the space left by another set of twins, Pablo would see nothing more than the pain of human suffering, the pain inflicted upon a civilized nation by a jealous, spiteful act of terrorism. Rafael, on the other hand, would see in the crater a reflection of the US's cavernous appetite for wealth and expansion in the Middle East and in the Americas. Dorfman's argument in "Love Letter" and in *Americanos* is that to see one and not the other is to not see at all. *Americanos* goes beyond simply pointing out the ways in which historical events can produce radically different interpretations and instead tries to shape our understanding of those radically divergent positions. As Sophia McClennen argues in her recent book on Dorfman's work, "For Dorfman, the aesthetics of engaged literature offer the reader an opportunity to see the world from a new angle, one that has been lost or forgotten, repressed or silenced, censored or ignored by mainstream worldviews" (x). Moreover; Dorfman's *Americanos* takes us back to Neuman's critique of the self-involved trap of postmodernism by asking us to think about the role that global compassion might play in deciding for ourselves, as Marcadia must, which twin is right, or rather, which twin is more right.

The historical moment where the US absorbs California and splits irrevocably from Mexico functions to divide the world into Americans and *Americanos*, *ellos y nosotros*; it is a moment echoed sharply in the events of 9/11 when the world, similarly was divided into us versus them. This dynamic, the reduction of complex historical processes to overly simplistic binaries, is one of the sad realities of our present historical moment. One only needs to tune in to any number of "news" programs to see the

reduction of issues like immigration, poverty, and terrorism into social dynamics existing only in their present form.

Dorfman's effort in *Americanos* is to resist the type of historical amnesia that produces knee-jerk reactions to events like terrorist attacks. Because Dorfman understands narrative as a powerful tool for unearthing silenced histories, he relies on literature as a means to open up and reveal the historical connections that arc across centuries. Stories, like the myth of Joaquín Murieta, force us to engage the world around us in order to redefine it. Here the act of literary creation is nothing if not the creation of new worlds, worlds functioning in opposition to the realities of oppression and violence. But these are not artifacts of escapism, these are not alternate realities within which we can close our eyes and drift off to a better place. By using the contested figure of Murieta *Americanos* parallels the contested reading of ground zero such that this story about 19th century California seems to reach out and grasp the present in order to highlight the presence of those rare historical moments when we find ourselves clearly being asked to choose, this path or that one. They oblige us, as the Generation of '72 would, to refuse simplified realities in order to seek solutions that are more honest, more real. In fact, as Ariel Dorfman's work has been telling us all along: in these, our deepest, most troubling moments (and aren't they always such) it is our ability to tell stories—to imagine worlds through our words—that will set us on the right path, one that, rather than divide us into small, hostile factions of "us" versus "them" will turn "us" *towards* "them" and vice versa, not in conflict but in hope, always in hope.

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