

BUILDING CULTURAL BRIDGES ACROSS GENERATIONAL CHASMS:
COMPARING CHICANO AND JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

BY

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

December 2010

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*In loving memory of Patricia Andrade,
Whose life and spirit shine bright in these thoughts,
For she planted seeds on each path she strayed.
Patty fertilized the soil that has brought
These different cultures' art together.
She welcomed all into her lush garden,
And each year we grow closer, forever,
For she tends her plants daily ... perfectly.*

*An immigrant's child with a story to tell,
Patty always had a viewpoint and voice
That, while not the norm, it would, well
Give all around a reason to rejoice.*

*In these pages her endless spirit lives on,
Where there is unity, love's never gone.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee Chair, Dr. William Arce, for his pragmatic and persistent involvement in this project. His comments, encouragement, and endless feedback provided not only the guidance necessary to bring this project to completion but also allowed me to enhance it and ensure that this thesis would provide the basis for a later dissertation. Furthermore, I graciously credit him with helping me bring together the phrase that ties this thesis together: “trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety.” I also would like to thank my additional committee members, Dr. Desiree Henderson and Dr. Tim Morris. Dr. Henderson’s comments helped keep this thesis grounded in the text and avoid the dangers of equating individual literary depictions with universal cultural applications. Dr. Morris’s extensive line level editing and theoretical comments allowed me to hone the argument into a more concise and cohesive study of American ethnic literature in the 1970s.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge some friends, colleagues, and professors who have been so supportive throughout my graduate studies. Drs. Luanne Frank and Bridgitte Barclay have offered encouragement when my own words failed to lift my spirit. Lucinda Channon, Trudi Beckman, and my good friend, Richard Breugger, also have provided invaluable moral support. Lastly, Dr. Debra Romanick Baldwin, my

mentor and colleague in Jewish American studies, deserves my appreciation, for without her this thesis would never have been conceived.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Joseph and Mary Ellen Rhea, for their support over the years as I have struggled to complete this project and advance my education. I know they understand my irregular phone calls and inability to see them directly relates to the countless hours dedicated to my academic studies, but I nonetheless wish to express my sincere regret for not being able to be as attentive to their needs as I should. However, I know that my academic success reflects the value of fortitude their example continues to instill upon me.

November 17, 2010

ABSTRACT

BUILDING CULTURAL BRIDGES ACROSS GENERATIONAL CHASMS: COMPARING CHICANO AND JEWISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

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This study compares Arturo Islas's novel, *The Rain God: A Desert Tale* with Cynthia Ozick's novella, "Envy; or Yiddish in America." Specifically, I argue that during the 1970s, these authors fictionalized the discourse concerning trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety. Islas and Ozick shared an anxiety about the future of their individual ethnic culture in America because the children born in America were moving away from the ethnic culture they inherited from their parents. Ozick and Islas's fictions question whether accepting a new American identity, as many of the youth in their stories do, may severely impact the continuation of their ethnic culture. Islas and Ozick voice their anxiety over these trans-generational changes quite differently, yet both recognize that bridges must be built across the generations to ensure the continuation of their ethnic culture in America.

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CHAPTER 1

TRAVERSING THE EDGES OF THE GENERATIONAL AND CULTURAL CHASMS

*For how else are civilizations ever formed
save by reconciliations that were once unimaginable,
save by syntheses that can be read as paradoxes?
(Lionel Trilling)*

1.1 Introduction

Comparing Jewish and Chicano American literature may seem unusual; however, Jewish American literature, like Chicano literature, has a long tradition of exploring issues of cultural inheritance in America through fiction. Authors from each of these literary traditions have much in common. In this thesis, I will compare Arturo Islas's novel, *The Rain God: A Desert Tale* with Cynthia Ozick's novella, "Envy; or Yiddish in America." Specifically, this cross culture literary study emphasizes the fluidity of the discourse concerning trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety. Islas and Ozick shared an anxiety about the future of their individual ethnic culture in America. In the 1970s, both Chicano and Jewish immigrants witnessed many of the children born in America moving away from the ethnic culture they inherited from their parents. The later generations began adopting American ideas of individuality, personal freedom, and

choice instead of following familial and cultural traditions that had previously helped ensure ethnic group cohesion. Ozick and Islas's fictions question whether accepting a new American identity, as many of the youth in their stories do, may severely impact the continuation of their ethnic culture. Islas and Ozick voice their anxiety over these trans-generational changes quite differently, yet both recognize that bridges must be built across the generations to ensure the continuation of their ethnic culture in America. Throughout this study, I return to this idea of trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety and show how these authors not only seek to narrow the gap between generations within their cultures but also to build bridges between different cultures in America.

At first glance, Islas and Ozick may appear to have little in common, but they are not as dissimilar as one may think. In 1969, when Arturo Islas was writing his first novel, an unpublished version of *The Rain God* called *Dia de la meurtos/Day of the Dead*, he was only thirty-one years old. He was a Chicano, homosexual male, and fluent in Spanish; conversely, Cynthia Ozick was a forty-two year old Jewish wife and mother. By 1969, she had already published translations of Yiddish poetry and her first novel when she wrote "Envy; or Yiddish in America." However, both of these authors were children of immigrants, and both inherited their parents' American Dream. Ozick's parents were part of the mass Jewish immigration between 1890 and 1920 when hundreds-of-thousands of Jews escaped Eastern European pogroms and anti-Semitism by fleeing to America's eastern shores; simultaneously, on the southern border, Islas's grandparents were among the many Mexicans that sought refuge in America from poverty and the Mexican Revolution. In Texas and New York, Islas and Ozick's immigrant parents

established their respective homes in America where both future artists would benefit from an American education. Both would experience the impacts of ethnic and cultural isolation and prejudice growing up, and, later, both would witness the cultural and ethnic turbulence of the late 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, both authors were educated well in English literature: Islas completed his Ph.D. from Stanford in 1971 (“Islas”), and nineteen years earlier Ozick had finished her M.A. at Ohio State (“Ozick”). Eventually, both would discover that new opportunities existed for ethnic scholars and writers to share aspects of their culture with a wider audience.

However, in the earlier twentieth-century, when Islas and Ozick were growing up, neither Chicanos nor Jews found acceptance in what Walter Benn Michaels calls the “national family.”

American defined itself in terms of a racialized family in this period, excluding those who were seen as not white. Much like African and Native Americans, Jews [...] were seen as a distinct nonwhite race (as Orientals, Semites, or Hebrews), inferior to Euro-Americans, and excluded from membership in the nation family. (Michaels qtd. in Kent 11-12)

Denied acceptance in the “national family,” most first generation immigrant Jews and Chicanos found themselves in identical circumstances: separated by appearance, language, and culture they were often excluded as the Other. However, their children could be adopted into the “national family” by assimilating into the American culture. In fact, as Ben Siegel points out, bringing immigrant children into the American family was the public schools’ primary goal: “they were expected to turn immigrant children (whether Jewish, Italian, Polish, [Mexican,] or German) into this idealized conception of an American citizen” (29). The schools performed their jobs admirably, and many of the

second and later generations assimilated not only the American language but also its culture. However, ethnic identity is not only a matter of cultural inheritance. As anthropologist Michael M. J. Fisher notes: “Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned, it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided” (qtd. in G. Sanchez 12). No matter how assimilated an ethnic person becomes, ethnicity is not erased; rather, in the avoidance or repression, new questions of ethnic identity arise amidst interfering cultural identities. Eventually, these new questions of ethnicity and cultural identity found their way into American literature.

Islas and Ozick’s texts are examples of a shift in the ethnic literary trajectory following World War II. As Dean Franco notes in his book, which compares Chicano, Jewish, and African American literature, before this war American ethnic literature focused principally on the immigrant and his efforts towards assimilation, but the literature after the war actively resists assimilation (11-12). Ben Siegal comments on the post-World War II Jewish writers and the Jewish cultural response.

[F]ollowing World War II, young Jews began recording in fiction and essay their efforts to escape not only the Jewish life of their parents but also Judaism itself. Religious leaders [...] began expressing their concern, persisting to the present, that assimilation, primarily intermarriage, was endangering the existence of the Jewish community as a discrete, identifiable cultural entity. (Siegel 36)

Much of older Jewish literature was historically oriented and united the past and present through genealogy; moreover, it attempted to transmit Jewish culture and its corresponding religious and moral messages. However, a new type of American ethnic

writer began depicting individuals in their daily lives, and many of their characters were much less concerned about Jewish culture. The writings of Jewish American authors like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Irving Howe, and Bernard Malamud reflect this shift toward realistic accounts of individuals separated from their ethnic upbringings.

A similar shift occurred in the Chicano literature during the same time period. Assimilationist narratives (e.g., the circa 1940 modernist novel, *George Washington Gomez* by Américo Paredes) gave way to a new type Chicano literature. As Ramón Saldívar comments, the goal of the postmodern Chicano novel is more than simply to “illustrate, represent, or translate a particular exotic reality[. . .] Instead, it will serve to realize the *agency* of thematic figures in the process of demystifying the old world and producing a new world [author’s emphasis] (Saldívar “Chicano Literature and Ideology” 36). As I argue in Chapter 2, one of Islas’s goals in *The Rain God* is to demystify the “old world” in favor a “new world.” Although Saldívar’s comments preceded *The Rain God* by three years, he recognized the literary shift that Islas embraced where characters in Chicano writing would become agents of thematic change.

Like Jewish American literature in the post-World War II period, Chicano literature also followed the shift toward postmodern realistic accounts of individuals in their daily lives. Saldívar continues by saying that the postmodern novel is “something more than a simple mirror of the life and folklore of a heretofore invisible segment of American society[. . . It] will turn increasingly to critical modes of representing contemporary life (*ibid.* 35). By the 1970s, many American authors freely explored the

day-by-day (often minute-by-minute) postmodern accounts of their protagonists: their memories, correspondence, and inner-thoughts were intermixed with first-person narration. Islas himself has said writers should focus on “telling stories that were faithful to their imaginative visions and everyday experiences” (qtd. in Padilla 16). Both Ozick and Islas were consistent with this literary shift, and they used these techniques in their respective works: Hersheleh Edelshtein’s role as protagonist and narrator in “Envy; or, Yiddish in America” transpose as seamlessly as Miguel Chico Angel’s multiple roles in *The Rain God*.

Ozick and Islas’s fictional accounts depict ethnic individuals in or around the late 1960s and early 1970s who struggle to define their ethnic identity when caught between the appeal of American individualism and the cultural expectations instilled by the family and community. Reflecting on this time period, Pearl Abraham recalls her attraction to this ideal of a fully assimilated American individual: “It didn’t seem to matter what family one came from: I as an individual could become anything or anyone, as if I’d sprung up from nowhere, or simply from within, a self-created self.” She expounds on the way many Jewish parents responded: the first generation immigrants witnessed a generation of children “born with no memory of the desert, heirs therefore to America” (33). In both Jewish and Chicano American literature, depictions where the younger generation attempts to assimilate at the expense of the older are found frequently (e.g., *Seize the Day* by Saul Bellow and *Pocho* by José Antonio Villarreal). Islas and Ozick’s texts both display similar trans-generational tensions. Islas’s novel approaches this problem from Miguel Chico’s perspective as an assimilated adult who reflects back on

his memories “of the desert,” and “what family [he] came from.” Conversely, Ozick depicts Hersheleh Edelshtein as witness and judge of the next generation; meanwhile, Hannah, his foil, claims her American inheritance and denies her Jewish heritage. Both Islas and Ozick navigate the spaces between the “desert” of a cultural identity and the “self-created self” of modernity.

In discussing *The Rain God: A Desert Tale*, I argue that Islas depicts trans-generational cultural dis-inheritance anxiety. Instead of being concerned that Chicano culture may be impacted because the second and later generations are more removed from their cultural heritage, Islas inverts the problem. He demonstrates that specific cultural inheritances that limit the individual ability to express or receive familial love unconditionally should not be perpetuated. Islas uses the human body as a trope to critique these cultural traditions that are enforced as well as proscribed by *la familia* (the family) and *el barrio* (the community).

In *The Rain God*, I show how Islas creates this complex metaphor from the tenor of different character’s bodies in disarray combined with the vehicle of several trans-generational cultural dis-inheritances. In this metaphor, the physical body suffers as a result of specific cultural inheritances including patriarchy/matriarchy; machismo; racial, caste, and class prejudices; gender roles; and, sexual norms. Each of these cultural traditions can affect *la familia* and limit the family member’s ability to love or be loved unconditionally. Islas represents his trans-generational cultural dis-inheritance anxiety by symbolizing the mangled, deformed, and dead bodies to depict specific failures in *la*

familia, which find their basis in cultural teachings. In each case, the more an individual removes his or herself from the prior generation's expectations – the more he or she occupies an untenable role within the family or community – the more decrepit and deplorable their physical condition becomes. Through the broken and dismembered bodies, the struggle for individuality in the second and third generation becomes apparent. Ultimately, only by accepting the failings of some of the cultural inheritance will a more genuine form of familial love be discovered. *Islas* focuses on the family and the first generation's central role in the transmission of cultural norms and values juxtaposed against the later generation's resistance or compliance with their parents' expectations; however, Ozick, while conscious of the family, chooses language itself as the means and symbol of cultural transmission.

In discussing Ozick's novella, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America," I argue she uses language both literally and symbolically to discuss trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety. Many of Hersheleh Edelshtein's observations and much of his rhetoric admonishes the "modern Jew"; meanwhile, he desperately wants to believe that, if translated into the "modern" American tongue, his old poetry could save Yiddish from extinction. However, his obsession for an English translator only serves to underscore my overall claim: Ozick's novella is an example of how language will continue to be a principle vehicle for cultural transmission between generations, but language (like history, ethnicity, and culture) is fluid and constantly changing. Ethnic writers must adapt and become, in Ozick's words, "cultural hermaphrodites." In the postmodern period,

Jewish American literary art cannot be confined to Yiddish (or Hebrew) if it is going to build new cultural bridges across generational chasms. Ozick created a Jewish novella in English, and it contained all the richness of the Jewish literary tradition she believed that at one time only Yiddish could convey. However, by writing in English she also created a cultural work of literary art that was understandable by the non-Jewish American audience, and future generations of Jewish Americans could appreciate it even though many of them might be illiterate in the mother tongue.

In “Envy; or, Yiddish in America,” Ozick uses hyperbole to depict a trans-generational chasm that becomes unbridgeable. Many of the second generation descendants of the Ashkenazi (European descent) Jewish immigrants have assimilated fully into American culture. For the youth in America, the old world and its millions of dead (and the few remaining survivors) offer no value in their new world. However, who is the ethnic individual when cultural heritage is denied in favor of a modern American identity? For the Jewish individual, this question is especially poignant, for much of Judaism defines itself by the history of its people. Jewish culture finds its legacy in the history written in the Torah, Talmud, Kabala, Midrash, and Yiddish poetry, drama, and literature. In the novella, Ozick begins a search for a language – a new, albeit symbolic, *mamaloshen* (mother tongue) – capable of bridging the generational and cultural chasms Judaism was experiencing in the late twentieth century. Yet, however vast the gap remains between the immigrant generations as well as within and between Jewish, Chicano, and the American cultures, both Islas and Ozick’s texts attempt to build bridges over these chasms.

In these works, readers discover more than simply a reflection on ethnic culture and the effects of assimilation in America in the 1970's, for the questions of cultural transmission – whether the messages are passed through the family, schools, art, or language – persist forty years later. American local, state, and national policy discussions still include the need for assimilation as seen in recent English only campaigns, radical immigration enforcement, and the inclusion or exclusion of ethnic history and art in public school curriculums. Finding commonalities between different ethnic texts may encourage readers to develop new perspectives on language and its limits and abilities to transmit culture.

1.2 Review of Scholarship

The scholarship in comparative ethnic American literary studies is surprisingly sparse; however, two recently published texts intersect closely with this thesis: Dean J. Franco wrote *Ethnic American Literature: Comparing Chicano, Jewish, and African American Writing* in 2006 and Alicia A. Kent in 2007 published *African, Native, and Jewish American Literature and the Reshaping of Modernism*. Franco examines the notion of group identity, and he argues that by comparing these ethnic literatures both the “external pressures and internal maneuvers of group identity [...] formation” may be observed (21). In the first part of the book, he looks at fictional responses to the Holocaust, and he closely examines texts by Philip Roth and Cynthia Ozick. Franco seeks to answer the question, how can these authors can construct authentic responses to the

Holocaust when the historical event is embedded in American culture? He then asks a similar question of Chicano literature, and he argues that Alejandro Morales's *The Rag Doll Plagues* is a similar response to a historical happening already embedded in the mindset of the Chicano people. Franco discusses Morales's depiction of the "cultural cataclysm wrought by colonialism and racism" in light of the American Anglo majority, whom remain blissfully unaware of Chicano history (24). He concludes that the role of memory and the authors' *mimesis* of memory intersect to perpetuate the historical event (albeit fictionalized) as part of future generations' cultural inheritance. In the second half of the book, Franco critiques the presumptions of reading and criticizing ethnic literature within the boundaries of ethnicity, and he examines the characteristics of ethnic diaspora (105). It is within the discussion of diaspora that Franco's study and this thesis most closely intersect. Franco discusses Islas's *The Rain God* in this section; however, he focuses on the border spaces different characters occupy. Franco argues that the Angel family itself can be seen as a border: "Family in *The Rain God* is bound by common, self-inflicted wounds. The family comprises a community for its members, but it is a community under siege, not a stable ground for participating in a broader culture" (Franco 134). Franco correctly points to the instability and "self-inflicted" wounds of the family, but I focus on the cultural inheritances which permanently separate immigrants from their children.

Alicia Kent's book, *African, Native, and Jewish American Literature and the Reshaping of Modernism*, examines ethnic responses and contributions to the Modernist literary movement and modernity, which she defines as the period between 1880 and

1940 (3). Her text provided valuable background for this study and assisted in extending the shared ethnic experience of exile in modernity to the postmodern period. Kent argues that following the mass immigration and migration that took place between 1890 and 1920, new ontological definitions arose where American identity for both Caucasians and Ethnic citizens increasingly became associated with the Other. She continues by saying that the sociologists at the time were aided by Darwinian Theory, so the dominant ethnic theories most often defined group characteristics as biological (racial) differences (9-10). These theories formed and justified continued racial discrimination in modernity, but by the postmodern period, these theories had been replaced with wider cultural definitions of ethnicity.

The arguments pursued in this thesis contribute a new dimension to the comparative analyses of ethnic/cultural literatures performed by Kent and Franco. Kent contributes much to the discussion of the pre-World War II writings of first generation immigrants and Native Americans in diaspora; however, her focus provides little insight into the post-war views on culture, ethnicity, and race. I specifically examine Chicano and Jewish texts written by the children of immigrants in the postmodern period. Furthermore, Franco's work proved helpful in establishing the framework of this comparative study, for he elaborated on the shared ethnic experiences of Chicano and Jews in the later-half of the twentieth century. However, his study pursues different questions of ethnic identity formation related to the role of memory in literature and historical literary representations. I focus on the authors' depictions of the relentless pull of tradition and the attraction and possible risks of assimilation depicted in the ethnic

American literature of the 1970s. It is within the historical context of this time period that Islas and Ozick construct their depictions of realistic ethnic individuals struggling with the internal and external pressures to conform. Moreover, their characters are part of a “national family,” a community, and both an ethnic and American culture.

Because this study relies upon close readings of Islas and Ozick’s work, I draw upon many scholars specializing in ethnicity, culture, Chicano literature, and Jewish American literature to support my argument. Some of the Chicano/a critics I reference include Frederick Luis Aldama, the premier Islas scholar, archivist, and biographer; Jose David Saldivar’s discussions of cultural hybridity; Ramon Saldivar’s extensive work with border theory; and Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and Yolanda Padilla’s discussions of Chicano/a sexuality and identity. The critical discussion on Ozick’s novella is very limited, so I draw upon several prominent Jewish critics including Ben Siegel, a well-known Jewish scholar; and, Miriam Sivan, who specializes in Ozick studies. I use these and other scholars and critics to support this comparative study where I position Islas and Ozick’s texts into the larger context of a shared ethnic discourses and experiences during the 1970s. This study distinguishes itself by focusing on Islas and Ozick’s depictions of trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety and its effects on the family, language, and culture.

CHAPTER 2

LA FAMILIA DISMEMBERED: BROKEN BODIES IN ARTURO ISLAS'S THE RAIN GOD: A DESERT TALE

2.1 Introduction

In 1960, Arturo Islas became the first Chicano to graduate from Stanford, and over the next ten years he would complete his dissertation and earn a Ph.D. at the same university. By 1970, Islas had completed his first novel *Dia de los muertos/Day of the Dead*, but, as Frederick Aldama points out, the novel begins: “‘Uncle Felix was murdered by an eighteen-year-old soldier from the South on a cold, dry day in February’ [. . .] and publishers were not ready for what would follow: a complex exploration of queer sexuality within a Chicano family that begins and ends with death” (“TRG in the Classroom” 142).¹ After ten disheartening years and over twenty attempts to find a publisher, Islas abandoned his focus on “queer sexuality” in favor of exploring the Chicano family, and in 1984 Alexandrian Press published Islas’s rewritten novel, *The Rain God: A Desert Tale*. The result was a postmodern pastiche with temporal fluidity that included a mixture poetry, letters, fiction, and fictionalized autobiography that tells the story of three generations of the Angel family.

¹ The opening sentence of *Dia de los muertos/Day of the Dead* appears at the beginning of “The Rain Dancer” chapter late in *The Rain God: A Desert Tale*.

In *The Rain God*, Islas turned his gaze away from the nationalistic themes of *la raza* (the race/people) and *el barrio* (the community); instead, he focused attention on the individual and his or her relation to *la familia* (the family). Islas comments, “[in *The Rain God*,] the organizing principle was the family - the Angel family. [. . .] I wanted the family to be the hero of the novel, or the idea of that family, and I think I succeeded” (“I Don't Like Labels and Categories” 69). Defining the “hero” as “the idea of that family” implies that while a particular family, the Angels, frames the novel, the characters’ experiences speak to a larger audience’s “idea” of *la familia* in the 1970s.

Islas’s focus on the “idea of that family” did not conform to the traditional Chicano models of subjecting individuality to *la familia*, *el barrio*, and *la raza*. Moreover, his novel did not comply with most publishers’ expectations about the form “ethnic” fiction should take. Chicano literature from the late nineteenth century until the 1960s could be grouped into two categories. According to Lazaro Lima: “they endeavor either to assimilate or to celebrate heritage traditions while asserting racial commonality with Anglo American culture in the broader hopes of eventual cultural inclusion” (56). However, Islas refused to conform to these expectations, for *The Rain God* neither boastfully celebrated Miguel Chico’s (the narrator) success as an assimilated Chicano writer and professor nor encouraged many of the cultural “heritage traditions” passed on by *la familia*.

I argue that in *The Rain God*, Islas creates a complex metaphor using his characters’ damaged and dying bodies as a means of discussing trans-generational

cultural dis-inheritance anxiety. Applying the prefix “dis” to “cultural inheritance” is appropriate because Islas’s novel does not question what will happen to Chicano culture if the second and later generations fail to inherit their parents’ cultural heritage. Instead, the anxiety takes the form of what will happen to the Chicano family and, in turn, the Chicano culture if some of the traditions passed on through cultural inheritance continue to persist. In this argument, I show how Islas creates this complex metaphor from the tenor of different character’s bodies in disarray combined with the vehicle of several trans-generational cultural dis-inheritances. In *The Rain God*, Islas critiques the Chicano traditions passed on through the generations that limit the members of *la familia* from engaging in unconditional familial love.

In this chapter, I examine Islas’s mangled, deformed, and dead bodies as a trope that symbolizes failures in *la familia*. The more an individual strays from a genuine loving role in the family – the more he or she occupies an untenable role within the family – the more decrepit and deplorable their physical or mental condition becomes. In this metaphor, the physical body suffers as a result of specific cultural inheritances including patriarchy/matriarchy; machismo; racial, caste, and class prejudices; gender roles; and, sexual norms. Each of these cultural traditions can affect familial love. However, amidst the broken bodies, readers discover Islas’s examples of family members capable of loving each other. Moreover, only by refusing some of the cultural inheritance passed on by *la familia* and *el barrio* can unconditional familial love emerge.

In *The Rain God*, Arturo Islas symbolizes many of the Angel family members with their bodies in a paradoxical relationship to the Angel family's values and traditions. Mamá Chona, the matriarch of the family and Miguel Chico's grandmother, expects her descendents to be good Angels and conform to the Spanish-Catholic traditions she teaches. Islas depicts the Angel family's members caught between the expectations of *la familia* and *el barrio* and the pressures of American conformity and assimilation. The paradox manifests in that either accepting the cultural inheritance taught by Mamá Chona and *el barrio* or rejecting it in favor of an individual American identity have the same crippling results on the individual. In other words, the more the second and third generation assimilates and gravitates toward American individualism the more desperate their physical condition becomes. Conversely, the harder individuals adhere to the traditions of the past and behave like good Angels, the more feeble and impotent their condition becomes. However, before exploring Islas's depiction of *la familia*, discussing the historical conditions under which Islas wrote this novel provides a framework for better understanding Islas's trans-generational cultural dis-inheritance anxiety.

Arturo Islas was born in the United States to immigrant parents; consequently, he, like many immigrant children, grew up caught between his grandparents and parents' old world culture and the new American culture. Born in 1938, he technically belongs to the third generation of immigrants since his grandparent(s) immigrated during the Mexican Revolution (c. 1920) along with their son, Arturo Islas Sr. Growing up in the border community of El Paso, Texas, Islas experienced pressures to conform to the traditions of

patriarchy/matriarchy, machismo, racial/caste/class prejudice, and Catholicism. However, many of these traditions were contentious with the idea of American individuality.

Werner Sollors argues, “American ethnic identity is caught between an emphasis on old world hierarchies and a vision of new and self-defining possibility.” In Islas’s novel, the Angel family’s descendents are not only affected by the strain between these worlds emotionally, but Islas also symbolizes the effects physically. Sollors differentiates “descent,” which emphasizes the liabilities and entitlements from heredity, and “consent,” which focuses on individuals with agency able to architect their own fates (qtd. in Royal 253-4). However, the choice is not necessarily binary.

The border between “consent” and “descent” continued to affect many ethnic writers of the later-half of twentieth century. Derek Royal comments, “For an ethnic writer, especially one who is an immigrant or an immigrant offspring, writing becomes a tug of war or a constant negotiation between the world of ancestral definition and the world of possibility” (254). Whether one calls it “world of possibility” or the appeal of American individuality, Islas created characters who negotiate and struggle between these worlds. Islas’s depiction of three generations of *la familia Angel* explores at length the often negative impacts of “descent” and the equally unexpected costs of “consent.” However, Islas’s novel more often criticizes “descent” than celebrates it. Consequently, *The Rain God* falls in line with a literary movement occurring after World War II. “Descent” found its voice in the pre-World War II immigrant literature, but individual “consent” drives much of the ethnic writing that follows the war.

The failures of nationalistic discourses that called for American unity laid the foundation for a shared ethnic discourse on the myth of assimilation and the need for an individual cultural identity. Chicano scholar George Mariscal notes: “The sentiment that ‘there is much that is good about our nation’ captured the basic approach of the [...] Mexican American or World War II generation.” However, after World War II the paradigm shifts. Mariscal continues, “For Chicanas and Chicanos, however, a new sense of urgency demanded a rethinking of traditional assimilationist narratives” (Mariscal 26). Certainly, the debate was not finished, for even as the Chicano movement continued into the 1980s, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* was published. Rodriguez’s autobiography became acclaimed for its depiction of a successfully assimilated Chicano and the author’s call for others to follow his example. However, many ethnic authors, including Islas, explored underlying aspects of their own cultural identity, which was not necessarily a binary choice between assimilating or not. For Islas, the question becomes not if Chicanos can ever be at home in America but whether one that has grown up in America can be at home in *el barrio* or *la familia*? However, the question of being at home has a long history in Chicano culture.

The origins of diaspora for Mexican Americans began not with immigration or assimilation but with annexation when countless thousands of Mexicans became American citizens following the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848; however, citizenship in America often led to a heightened sense of loss. M. Garcia notes that these new citizens “not only lost their family and communal lands but became subject to racial and political discrimination[. . .] Their eventual second-class status set

the pattern for later treatment of Mexican immigrants” (qtd. in Saldivar "Race, Class, and Gender" 18). While granted citizenship through annexation, acceptance into the American family and participation in the American Dream was frequently denied; consequently, many of these new Americans developed a separate ethnic identity.

After the Mexican War, however, the common experience of military defeat, widespread discrimination, and increasing poverty created conditions under which many Mexicans in the annexed territories began, in effect, to turn inward. Recognizing that they clearly were not accepted as Americans, many logically began to think of themselves as *Mexicanos* or members of a larger, pan-Hispanic community of *La Raza* (the race or the people). (Gutiérrez 35)

La Raza literally and figuratively began to see itself as living in a borderland – both a part of America and denied membership – these early Chicanos formed new ethnic groups that rapidly grew in size. During the same time period as the mass European immigration on the east coast, a new wave of Mexican immigration occurred across the southwest. M. Garcia indicates that between 1880 and 1920 [significantly increasing during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917)] an additional one million Mexicans immigrated (18). Newly arrived Mexican Americans had felt the attraction of the American Dream; however, many of these citizens discovered a dystopia rather than utopia. Those that could not assimilate were unable to be seen as Americans, but they were no long part of Mexico either. While most of the first generation of immigrants remained unable to assimilate easily, their children and grandchildren (including Islas) received an American education and began to enter into the national, American family.

However, in seeking membership in the national family, many immigrant children had begun dismissing their own family and culture. Assimilation meant “a denial of so-

called old world values that clashed with American gender, family, religious, and other social structures” (Kent 13). Islas’s novel highlights the clash between *becoming* an individual in the American family and *existing* in a traditional Chicano family. In Homi Bhabha’s words, the second and later generation family members become “unhomed.” In this displacement, “the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (Bhabha 13). The later generations experienced an ontological crisis as a result of assimilation where home and public cannot coexist. As Kent comments, assimilation was “the *de facto* price of admission to the United States;” however, the costs included a significant disruption in the social, psychological, and economic unity, which upsets both gender roles and family structures (117). The Chicano community relied heavily on strict definitions of both “gender roles and family structures” to maintain cultural cohesion, but assimilation threatened these institutions. Previously fixed identities became volatile.

Islas addresses this metaphysical crisis, which calls the inherited cultural definition of being into question, by creating a complex metaphor. In *The Rain God*, he shows the effects of cultural inheritance through the body. However, stating this symbolic relationship fails to convey properly the complexity of the connotation in which the individual is both an integral part yet, paradoxically, of little import in *la familia*, *el barrio*, and *la raza*.

Islas's depiction of the Angel family succeeds in part because he forgoes traditional notions of plot in favor of narrative techniques, which often place individuals in conflicting roles within the text and *la familia*. Miguel Chico Angel, for example, occupies three unique roles in the novel: he is a third generation Angel, an omniscient third person narrator, and a self-acknowledged creator of realistic individual fiction whose own body is afflicted in numerous ways. As many critics have noted, Islas leverages the close biographical proximity of the Angel family members with his own family and life creating a realistic depiction of a Chicano family. As Islas comments, "Chicano life has its own particular way of looking at the concept of family" (Aldama 41). Consequently, he drew upon his own family to depict this "peculiar way." Marta Sánchez makes a compelling argument for classifying this novel as autobiographical fiction, for, indeed, much of Islas's personal experience finds its way into Miguel Chico and the Angels. Both Islas and his narrator share a past that includes suffering from polio, which leaves them partially lame; additionally, they both battle colitis, which results in the removal of their colons and leaves them with a "shit bag" permanently attached (Aldama 112). In *The Rain God*, the lines between narrator and author blur frequently.²

² There are numerous autobiographical events from Islas's life that appear in fictionalized form. The following list is taken from Aldama's biography of Islas, *Dancing with Ghosts: A Critical Biography of Arturo Islas*. Readers can decide where the lines between fiction, fictional autobiography, and creative nonfiction blur.

- Arturo Islas Sr. was one of four Mexican Americans on an Anglo police force (3)
- His paternal grandmother, Crecenciana, had a son, Arturo Islas, who was also shot dead by a "Federalist bullet" (2).
- Crecenciana and her "very intelligent" sisters [...] internalized an assortment of ethnic prejudices based on a pure (Spanish)/impure (indio) duality. . . . Darkness was equated with dirt, impurity, and sin (3).

Yet, Islas's artistic rendering seamlessly transitions between the narrator's and, in turn, the author's multiple roles: Miguel Chico is both a writer and a subject, an individual and a member of *la familia*, a sinner and an Angel. Ever conscious of his role as a writer, Miguel reflects that he sees people as books, and when they tell him about their lives, he "found himself retelling what he had heard, arranging various facts, adding others, reordering time schemes [...]" (TRG 26). It is in the "retelling" and "arranging" that the author embeds the symbolism of the dismembered body as a means of addressing trans-generational cultural dis-inheritance anxiety.

However, before exploring the bodily crises that symbolize unconditional familial love, readers better understand Islas's complex representation where *la familia* is the "hero" by briefly reviewing the three generations of the Angel family originating with Jesus Miguel Angel and Encarnación Olmecca and their sons.

-
- Crecenciana's sister, Jesusita, gave birth "out of wedlock" to a son, Alberto, and she became a family outcast" (4).
 - Another sister, Virginia, discarded this pure/impure myth, living her life unwed with her partner in a house "filled with hundreds of cats" (4).
 - In his teens, one of his maids, Maria Ramirez, "converted to the Seventh Day Adventist faith" (10).
 - His middle brother became a priest in the church (19).
 - In 1967, Arturo discovered his father's love affair with his wife's close friend (83).
 - On February 19, 1967 his closeted uncle, Carlos, was murdered by a "straight" white soldier, and the murderer found not guilty (84).

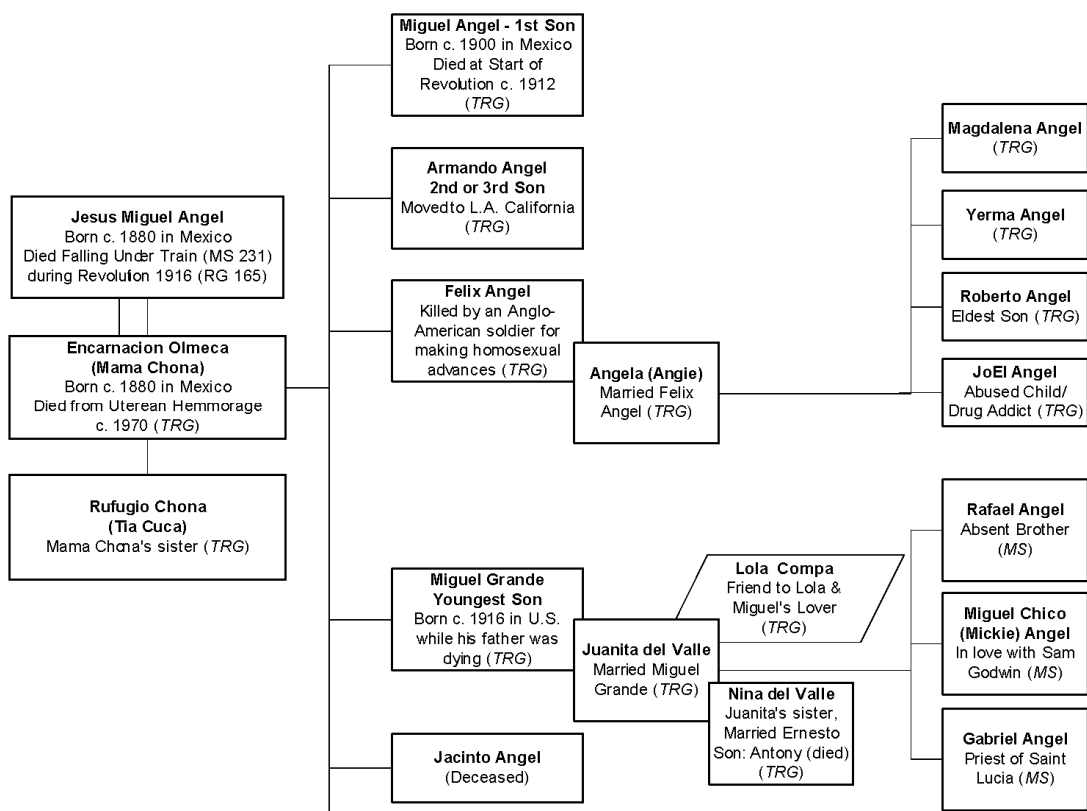


Figure 1 Angel male descendants

Very little information is revealed about Jesus Miguel Angel except that Encarnación Olmeca (Mamá Chona) and he were very much in love, and Jesus died in 1916 at the same time that Mamá Chona was giving birth to Miguel Grande. During the Mexican Revolution, the family was trying desperately to cross the border amidst a blaze of gunfire when a crowd of people accidently pushed Jose Miguel under the same train that had brought them from Juarez. The surviving matriarch, Mamá Chona, along with her sister, Rufugio (Tia Cuca), establish the Angel family home along the border in the desert of Del Sapo (an allusion to El Paso, Texas). In the desert of the southwest, they begin to

pass on their reinvented genealogy as purely Spanish-Catholic to the rest of the family: “Only the Spanish side was worth honoring and preserving; the Indian in them was Pagan ... and should be suppressed and its existence denied” (*TRG* 142). In what Lima calls “the myth of the Spanish Southwest,” those with hopes of fulfilling the middle class American Dream “often created a public identity that aligned their linguistic and ethnic particularisms with Spain, not with Mexico” (57). In *The Rain God*, accepting this theological/racial/caste/class distinction becomes one dividing line between not only a proper Chicano/a and an Indian but also a good Angel and a sinner or *malcarido* (one who has been poorly brought up). Islas employs multiple tropes to accentuate and denigrate the “Spanish” myth that survives through the first generation matriarchs.

Tia Cuca and Mamá Chona’s influence seemingly fails to take hold fully on her surviving sons, but both Felix and Miguel Grande suffer from the pressures applied from both within and outside *el barrio* and *la familia*. As I discuss later, Miguel Grande and Felix both suffer from debilitating familial disorders – the former is an adulterer and the latter is a semi-closeted homosexual with a wife and children – both fail as traditional Catholics in their familial responsibilities. Armando, Mama Chona’s other son, moves to Los Angeles and neither visits the family nor enters into the action. Jacinto only appears on the family tree on the cover of *Migrant Souls*, but her first son, Miguel, who died during the Revolution, continues to affect Mamá Chona deeply. After his death, she bore children from a sense of duty rather than love (*TRG* 164). However ineffectively she teaches her sons to be good Angels, two of her daughters learn these lessons well.

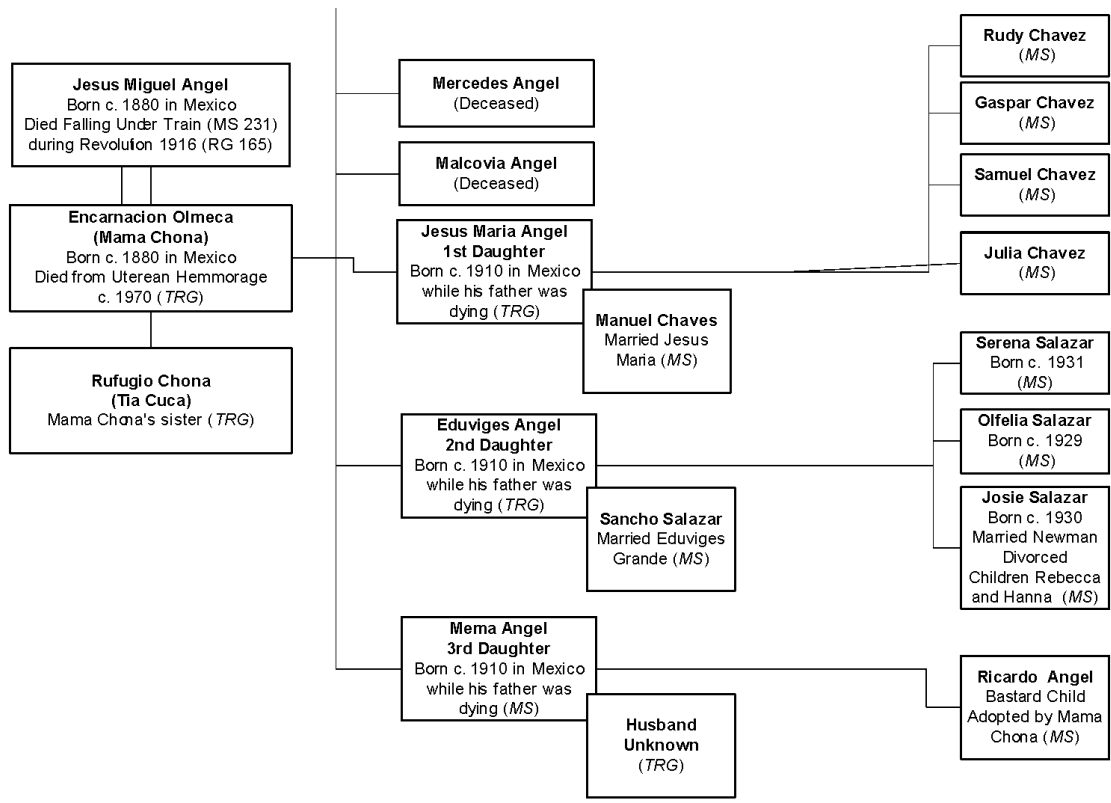


Figure 2 Angel female descendants

Like Jacinto, Mercedes and Malcovia appear on the dead limbs of the family tree, but Jesus Maria and Eduviges figure prominently in the novel as the second generation propagators of the traditions of racial and class prejudice; conversely, Mema joins the ranks of the bad Angels. Jesus Maria and Eduviges epitomize Mamá Chona’s aristocratic prejudice and her racially and theologically defined standards of acceptability. Even though Jesus Maria married against Mamá Chona’s wishes, she remains the “good and dutiful” daughter (*TRG* 167), and after Chona’s death, she becomes the family’s “spiritual leader and standard of moral conduct” (*MS* 141). Eduviges continues to promote the Spanish and subjugate the Indian, a myth denied by everyone in the third

generation. Meanwhile, Mema, the “whore” of the family, is reunited with her bastard son, Ricardo, who becomes one of Mamá Chona’s favored few along with Miguel Chico. In the novel’s frequently discussed ending, Mamá Chona reaches her dying hand out to Miguel Chico, but Miguel responds, “Mamá let go of my hand, I don’t want to die.” She says, “*la familia*,” and The Rain God, Uncle Felix’s ghost – the worst of the Angel sinners – ushers her into the afterlife.

In *The Rain God*, Islas arguably accomplishes a literary first, for he successfully creates a “hero” of “the idea” of a family that spans three generations and nearly a century. But what type of hero does he create? Perhaps anti-hero better describes the “idea” of the protagonists at work in Islas’s novel? At the end of the novel, Mamá Chona, with her dying breath, utters: “*la familia*.” However, I argue that Miguel Chico’s dismisses not the “idea of the family” but rather Mamá Chona’s definition of *la familia*. His “idea” of *la familia* must accept and love both good Angels and *malcaridos*. As I show below, Islas’s anti-hero becomes a voice of criticism for many of the cultural traditions perpetuated by *la familia* and *el barrio*. Islas attends carefully to the realism offered by an individual family’s experiences, yet the trans-generational cultural disinheritance anxiety speaks to wider, shared experience and discourse occurring in many Chicano families during the 1970s.

Throughout Chicano/a literature, many authors have tried to represent the Chicano/a people as a collective group by depicting a single individual or family;

however, Islas refused to be confined by the expectations of critics and publishers. Islas said, “[one] must be suspicious of any book hailed as representative of everything with particular reference to a group of people. It is impossible for any work to express the ‘totality’ of anyone’s human experience.” He continued saying that at best a work of art “can illuminate a corner of that experience [...] at worst, it can cause us to slip farther in darkness” (qtd. in Padilla 17). The darkness Islas feared comes from the claim that ethnic/cultural life is universal rather than individual. Jose Saldívar expounds on the ramifications of these attempts to depict Chicano culture. Jose Saldívar points out that until as recently as the last two or three decades, many east coast publishers required that a ethnic writer’s story principally fell within the “themes” editors deemed acceptable for their readers: “social maladjustment, the individual and his environment, the pathological character of the Chicano family, illegals, violence, and criminal behavior – that *dominant cultural practices* define as worthy and ‘universal’ [my emphasis]” (31). While one finds many of these themes portrayed in *The Rain God*, readers discover that the derogatory and artistically limiting “universal” themes critics and publishers often applied to Chicano/a literature become individualized through the character’s broken bodies. As an example, where one might expect to find “social maladjustment” instead Islas gives readers Miguel Grande, a respected member of the Del Sapo police force and hopeful candidate for Chief of Police. However, his trust in the “dominant cultural practices” of machismo, which continually fuels his on-going love affairs, brings him to the point of both a physical and psychological breakdown. While machismo may be a dominant ideology in Chicano culture, Islas reverses the expected “universal” theme by showing a

father emotionally dependent upon his son for support. Thus, he undermines the cultural inheritances of both machismo and patriarchy. Furthermore, rather than showing illegal immigrants in a negative light, Islas depicts Maria, the “illegal,” as a loving caregiver and friend to young Miguel Chico. According to Miguel Chico, her only crime was giving up Catholicism to become a Seventh Day Adventist and bringing her beliefs into the Angel’s home. Ultimately, the “criminal behavior” of an Anglo drunk driver will destroy her body and take her life. Attributing universal descriptions to an ethnic/cultural group denies the uniqueness of the individuals that comprise the group. Clearly, no single description satisfies the complexities of ethnicity or culture, and no mimetic art can successfully represent the entirety of an individual or a culture. Consequently, Islas depicts individuals in their familial relations to demonstrate the uniqueness of each person within the culture. However, understanding Islas’s insistence on the uniqueness of the individual requires further elaboration of the traditional role each person plays in a *la familia* and *el barrio*.

Before the emergence of the 1970s heightened sense of individuality and personal freedom, the roles individuals occupied in Chicano culture usually followed hierarchically structured social patterns. Traditionally, individual efforts – whether heroic or ordinary – were performed for and subsumed by the Chicano community. In the earliest art, the individual occupied the lowest run of the societal ladder. Ramón Saldívar in his landmark work, *Chicano Narrative*, defines the origins of the borderland’s *corrido* articulating the long standing tradition of the community’s precedence over the individual: “[...] in the *corrido*, a product of an integrated community sharing a working-

class world view and values, there is no place for the idiosyncratic, for an individual perspective that stands totally outside of communal concerns.” Saldívar notes that an individual hero, like Gregorio Cortez, becomes an “epic construction of the society that constitutes him” (36). Whether on the borderlands, in the agricultural regions, or somewhere between the desert of El Paso and Pacific Ocean, these “working class” communities placed no reliance on individuals. *El barrio* became a complex network where the myths, traditions, and communal values and mores worked their way into the family and became the expectations and models to which individuals must conform. In addition to social hierarchies, individuals also were expected to conform to cultural religious beliefs.

The Catholic faith was seen as the rope that held Chicanos together, and *el barrio* and *la familia* echoed the moral teachings of the Church. Individual, family, community, and Church were intertwined in an inescapable knot: “[...] a hierarchy of cultural values has firmly planted *la familia* (family and home life) and *el barrio* (communal life) as the historical foundations of Chicano/a culture and its literature” (Marquez 11). As Islas comments, “there was not a day that the Church and its teachings were not part of my conscious and unconscious life” (qtd. in Aldama 9). The communal values, which necessarily align with the Church, cannot be separated from those of the family, and within the family, any individual not conforming to both the values and prescribed hierarchies becomes an outcast. However, for the later generations faced with the reality of assimilation, individuality becomes the credo.

Traditionally, *la familia* bound individual bodies together, and *las familias* kept *el barrio* together; meanwhile, the unique individual took on his or her role as subject to the familial surname and community. However, in the 1970s, as society became more individualistic, the support structures of *la familia* and *el barrio* began to collapse. In earlier generations, the history, traditions, and mores of the community became ingrained as the dominant attitudes in *la familia*, and an ideology developed: “border communities developed a way of life based on [...] social interdependency, and *formal family ties*. Strict hierarchies of gender, kinship, caste, and class created a dynamic, internally complex world [my emphasis]” (R. Saldívar, “Memory” 29). The importance of *la familia* cannot be underscored sufficiently, for it is one of the principal transmission vehicles for trans-generational cultural inheritance. However, it is also the cause of cultural dis-inheritance anxiety for many immigrant children born in America. Consequently, the question in *The Rain God* becomes what happens to the individual when he or she refuses the cultural inheritance and transgresses familial or communal expectations or, worse yet, denies one’s own individuality in favor of following these cultural ideologies? Can the mind/body survive these oppositional forces?

Deeply rooted cultural ideologies curtail individuality. Marta Sanchez picks up on this theme as well: “Islas has foregrounded *la familia* as the main ideological apparatus of Chicano culture that shapes and conditions the individual’s cultural, sexual, racial, and ethnic attitudes” (301). As the border became more fluid and far reaching, these hierarchies were embedded throughout the Chicano communities and people. Ramon Saldívar comments on what he calls “communal hegemony.” In this system, “Ideology

functions best when the network of ideas through which the culture justifies itself is internalized rather than imposed, when it is embraced by society at large as a system of belief, a pattern of self-evident truths” (“Memory” 39). Once established as “self-evident,” these beliefs tie *el barrio* and the *la familia* together, but these ideologies also constrain individuality.

Islas depicts the Angel family members as Chicanos and Chicanas constrained by cultural ideologies, which propagate racial/class prejudices, insist on strict gender roles, mandate sexual norms, and restrict individuals within the family from engaging in loving familial relations. As John Cutler comments, “[Islas] does not move to recuperate ‘the family’ in any banal way, reinscribing traditional hierarchies, but rather to reenvision, to reshape the possibilities of *la familia*, to demand new forms of ethical relation within the networks of filial relation that transfix Chicana/o life” (9-10). In fact, rather than “reinscribing” Islas undermines many of the “traditional hierarchies.” As I show below, Islas uses the individual’s body as a trope to help “reenvision” and “reshape” the idea of *la familia*. Through this symbolism, he depicts the failings of both absolute dependence on tradition and total assimilation. Furthermore, I argue that he calls for a new paradigm that fights against cultural inheritances that limit one’s ability to express or receive familial love.

When the old models prove ineffective, paradigm shifts often occur, but changing the communal body proves nearly impossible without new examples to follow. Rosaura Sánchez expounds on this idea: “[...] ideological contradictions invariably give rise to

conflicts, struggles, and shifts, especially when cultural practices are perceived to be forms of exploitation and domination or when they are no longer deemed to be viable given the presence of alternative practices” (62). In *The Rain God*, Islas takes advantage of the broken bodies of individuals within a family to let loose the winds of cultural change through literature. Ultimately, he calls for an emergence of a new “ethnic theme” that raises the individual’s needs and desires above the traditional cultural limits.

Through the voice of Miguel Chico Angel, Islas retells the Angel family’s often tragic history and pays homage to his own dead on this *Dia de los muertos*. While Miguel Chico narrates his tale from late in the twentieth century, the roots of this familial tragedy begin with the trans-generational cultural inheritance passed on by the first generation’s surviving matriarchs: Mama Chona and her sister, Tia Cuca.

2.2 The Physical Death of Tradition

The Rain God unquestionably lives up to its original title, *Dia de los muertos/Day of the Dead*; moreover, many of the eighteen deaths in the novel reflect Islas’s paradoxical body metaphor. The dead include Leonardo; Tony; Felix; Armando; Nina and Juanita’s mother, father, and sister; Sara and El Compa; Tia Cuca and Mr. Davies; Maria; as well as Jesus Miguel, Mamá Chona, and four of their children (Miguel, Jacinto, Mercedes, and Malcovia). Early in the novel, Miguel Chico remembers Leonardo’s “accident” [Islas’s quotation marks] when he hangs himself by a belt on the front porch

of his house. Although dead, his body remains relatively undamaged. At the funeral his mother says to Miguel Chico: “He looks just like he did when he was alive, doesn’t he Mickie?” (TRG 12). But this will be the last body that looks the same as when he or she was “alive.”

The influences and labels applied by *la familia* change a person over time. Mamá Chona ensured her “favorite grandchildren ... were brought up according to her standards. Censure from her came most often in a single word: ‘*malcarido*,’ for it meant that one was not only misbehaved, but that one had not been properly brought up” (TRG 160-1). However, depending on one’s perspective, *malcarido* is both a heroic and anti-heroic epithet, for as a race/class elitist, arguably, Mamá Chona herself carries the burden of both assigning the label and embodying it.

The snobbery Mamá Chona and Tia Cuca displayed in every way possible against the Indian and in favor of the Spanish in the Angel’s blood was a constant puzzlement to most of the grandchildren. In subtle, persistent ways, family members were taught that only the Spanish side of their heritage was worth honoring and preserving; the Indian in them was pagan, servile, instinctive rather than intellectual, and was to be suppressed, its existence denied. (TRG 142)

Mamá Chona and her sister, Tia Cuca, conform to these Eurocentric, socio-economic prejudices and pass them on as a cultural inheritance to their relatives.

Many of the Angels display traditional Chicano values that Islas symbolizes and critiques through their physical and mental condition. Miguel Grande relies upon the patriarchal tradition and his faith in machismo and expects the same from his brother, Felix, and son, Miguel Chico; furthermore, Nina inherits her father’s iron-fist of discipline and inflicts the same on her son, Antony. In each of these cases, failure to

comply with the traditions of the past warrants the label, *malcarido*, but Islas inverts the label and depicts a world where the continuation of gender, race, sexual, and class prejudice instead of open and accepting familial love damages both *la familia* and the individual. However, before exploring the symbolic bodily impacts resulting from adherence to or rejection of these deeply engrained cultural traditions, a closer examination of the Angel family's matriarch reveals much more than prejudicial failures.

Islas begins and ends *The Rain God* with Mamá Chona's death, and her dying words, "*la familia*," have spawned much critical debate. David Rice claims that her words reinforce and insist upon continued reliance on *la familia*: "[Miguel Chico's] survival as an ethnic individual depends upon his connection to his whole family, Angel and sinner alike" (184). However, I extend this argument by recognizing Miguel's reaction, "Let go of my hand, Mama Chona, I don't want to die" (*TRG* 180), as the necessary denial of the trans-generational cultural inheritances that limit familial love. Antonio Márquez agrees: "[his refusal of her grasp is] a rejection of the prejudice, snobbery, and ignorance that formed so much a part of Mama Chona's life [...]" (12). Regrettably, Mama Chona remains unable to envision the new family model until her death because she has spent her entire life – since crossing the border – denying love's existence. She was never to be called by a term of endearment, *abuelita*, instead "she instructed everyone in the family to call her 'Mamá Grande' or 'Mamá Chona'" (*TRG* 4). Perhaps it is precisely her inability to speak of love that makes JoEl proclaim, "Mamá

Chona never understood anything human.” His aunt Nina insists at one time, “[s]he did, JoEl, before she lost the people she loved very much. She just didn’t know what to do without them.” However, Mamá Chona long ago separated herself from *la familia* (TRG 155). Arguably, Islas wants readers to ask the question, what is *la familia* without love?

One can argue that the Mamá Chona’s ability to act as a loving mother ended when “Miguel Angel, Mamá Chona’s only child born of the love she felt for her husband, was killed” (TRG 162). The bullet that lodges in Miguel Angel’s heart, along with the deaths of her two girls, become the permanent failings of familial love inherent in Mamá Chona’s character: “After the death of her first three children, Mamá Chona resigned herself to Christ and His holy Mother with a fervor she would never have admitted was born of rage, and she accepted suffering in this life without question or any sense of rebellion” (TRG 164). However, in *Migrant Souls*, readers learn that the matriarch had lost her ability to love even before her children died. In the second novel, Mamá Chona tells her daughter, Jesus Maria, in confidence, how much her husband meant to her: “[Y]our father was my reason to go on living after I no longer cared to draw another breath ...” (MS 231). Her spirit vanished with his last breath as did her ability to love her family. Seemingly, before Jesus Miguel’s death, Mama Chona’s love was limitless, for *The Rain God* mentions her overlooking Jesus’s adulterous relationship with Josefina (TRG 172). However, after his death and the loss of her favorite child, Mamá Chona’s ability share in familial love vanishes along with her body.

After being disappointed by Felix's birth because she was convinced she was barren, Mamá Chona imagines herself without a body: "In her mind, she conceived him and the rest immaculately – an attitude which made some of her children think themselves divine – blotting out the act which caused her to become distended like a pig bladder full of air." The narrator continues, "later in her life [...] Mamá Chona denied the existence of all parts of the body below the neck, with the exception of her hands" (*TRG* 164). In the final chapter, Mamá Chona's illness destroys not only the parts below the neck but also those above.

Islas depicts both the matriarch's mind and body suffering. From the time of her eightieth birthday, her mind begins to deteriorate (*TRG* 170), and by the time she is eighty-five, her daughter Eduvigis must force her mother to take a bath (*TRG* 174). The narrator gives the background of Mama Chona's fatal illness: "She had not left the apartment or bathed for weeks, from the moment she had noticed something unnatural coming out of her womb. 'Another worthless creature,' she said ..." (*TRG* 174). Eduvigis visits her one day, and after forcing her to bathe, she discovers how ill Mama Chona has become. The "monster between her legs," the instrument of her duty to motherhood, "was almost out and Mama Chona was glad that it showed no signs of life" (*TRG* 177). While nearly every critic discusses the "monster" in relation to Miguel Chico's dream, both Rosaura Sanchez and John Honerkamp point to the larger symbolism of the failed traditions on which her definitions of *la familia* rest. The former finds "the monster symbolizes the family, the patriarchy; [...] the only way to destroy it is to destroy oneself" (R. Sanchez 69); meanwhile, the latter finds that her "repudiation of

her body is an imposition of class and race distinction” (Honerkamp 77-8). Rather than insisting on an either/or, arguably, Islas intends that both cultural inheritances be repudiated. Both patriarchy and prejudice are examples trans-generational cultural dis-inheritance anxiety.

However, Islas uses the matriarch’s deathbed scene to question what the definition of *la familia* really means. Does a bloodline bind *la familia* or does it exist because of the loving acceptance of each individual family member regardless of his or her faults? As Mama Chona’s soul prepares to depart her body for the heavenly paradise, which she believes the performance of her matriarchal duty to God has earned her, she turns to Ricardo, Mema’s son. Several years earlier Mema had an illegitimate child, and the family was going to force her to give it up, so she left with “her man” to live across the border. A few years pass, and Mema returns to the Del Sapo alone. But six years later, she goes back to Juarez to find her son. Felix convinces Mamá Chona to welcome Ricardo into the *la familia* despite Jesus Maria’s vehement objections (*TRG* 164). However, being welcome and being a part of *la familia* is not the same thing. While dying in the hospital, Mama Chona turns to Ricardo: “Ricardo, you are a good boy. But how can I leave the family to you, the bastard son?” Ricardo tells her that the entire family is there: “Your sons and daughters, your grandsons and granddaughters, all the family” (*TRG* 178). However, Mamá Chona’s family is long dead, her children have rejected her notions of class, race, and caste, and Ricardo, “the bastard,” cannot carry on the patriarchy. Mamá Chona cannot discover a connotation of *la familia* that extends beyond physical bloodlines. The bastard son of a *malcarida* cannot be an Angel.

Consequently, she turns to Miguel Chico, one of the few surviving male grandchildren, and her last hope for continuing the trans-generational cultural inheritance. She reaches out to him with feeble hands, but Miguel Chico rejects her: “Let go of my hand, Mamá Chona. I don’t want to die.” She responds, “*la familia*”, but the only family that remains are the bastard and disfigured.

Still, the loss of her body grants her mind a new freedom of thought, which was previously trapped by the deteriorating symbol. Her body is now gone, and it no longer impedes her ability to embrace the sinners of the family; consequently, Felix, the worst *malcarido*, ushers her into the afterlife. As Cutler comments, “In the last scene [...] *la familia* resonates differently, as unconditional love and acceptance coincident with Felix’s reappearance as the Rain God” (15). Early in the novel, Miguel Chico reflects after his operation that Mama Chona and the Catholic church had once taught him about becoming a “perfect astronaut” (*TRG* 8). In the conclusion, Mamá Chona takes on this role as a “pure bodiless intellect.” She finally is able to separate the body, the *sinner*, from the soul, the *Angel*. She recognizes that each individual, even the worst of the sinners, can be embraced with genuine familial love.

While Mama Chona’s life exemplifies the failures of love in *la familia*, Tia Cuca’s body depicts the crippling racial, class, and caste prejudice causes. Mamá Chona warned Miguel Chico “not to notice Tia Cuca’s lame leg,” but the symbolic meaning in the “grandeur” she employs while using the “black cane with the pewter handle” is clear

(TRG 146). The underlying tone of class and caste Islas embeds in the image cannot be ignored. Her cane is not the brown, overgrown top of the yucca plant. The image of “pewter handle” is much lighter than the “black cane.” Furthermore, the contrast reflects and accentuates Tia Cuca’s notions of race and class: “She was secretly proud of having lighter skin than Mamá Chona ...” Tia Cuca is one of “the old ladies [who] retained their aristocratic assumptions and remained señoras of the most pretentious sort” (TRG 146). The lameness of her racially based prejudice becomes further exemplified by her own “filthy” habits when she can no longer afford to have the “Indians” clean house. Meanwhile, the cats and the stench of their refuse in the house multiply as fast as the desert sand accumulates on the floor, but Tia Cuca is the “civilized human being” (TRG 147). In the end, Tia Cuca and Mr. Davies die separately, leaving nothing but the house in the desert filling up [with sand], and “animals and cockroaches everywhere. The sheets were filthy” (TRG 148). Tia Cuca comes to embody the very “filth” she despises as her body and house become the color of darkened earth and the Indian identity she refused to accept. She lived her life denying her own racial reality – *mestizaje* – but denial does not change the reality that she is both Spanish and Indian.

Felix also resides in an in-between status: he is both “*jefe*” and “*joto*,” human and animal (“coyote”), predator and prey, as well as loving husband/father and homosexual adulterer. He is trapped between the need to express his own desires and the expectations placed on him by *la familia* and *el barrio*. Felix, the most overtly homosexual character in the novel, works as a supervisor and hires illegal immigrants to work for the company.

When he first hires a male employee, he performs a “health inspection” where he pays particular attention to the genitals. Consequently, the employees snicker and call him “*Jefe-Joto*” (boss-submissive homosexual). Yolanda Padilla examines the “*Jefe-Joto*” dichotomy at length, and she concludes that Felix’s position as both is untenable: “one cannot be a *jefe*, or boss, and a *joto* simultaneously” (28). Felix, as a supervisor, remains in the authority position, and as seeker of the “young god” in the local bars, he remains in control; hence, *joto* fails to describe his role properly. *Jefe* also does not characterize him because he fails to display the masculinity insisted upon in Chicano culture.

Islas blurs Felix’s identity further by placing him in additional conflicting roles. He is a loving human being (even a caregiver and provider) but works as a “coyote,” a human trafficker. Furthermore, Felix’s ability to both care for others and neglect them continues in his home life. As Rice sees it, “Angie, silently ignored Felix’s disturbing closeness to their son, JoEl, . . . ‘As the three of them slept more frequently together, Felix lost his passion for Angie’ (*The Rain God* 122)” (179). Some readers and critics, like Rice, may be tempted to jump to conclusions about the Felix and JoEl’s “disturbing closeness,” but Islas’s underlying tone does not point to an abusive father. Certainly, Felix neglects his wife, but he deeply loves his son. While Islas leaves the specifics undisclosed, and critics too rest comfortably, or uncomfortably, in the ambiguity, JoEl only wants to strengthen his familial relationships: “I want to tell him that I understand and that I love him. [. . .] I want to tell him to his face. [. . .] I love my father, I love my mother,” he cries (*TRG* 155-6). Islas depicts a father willing to transcend the cultural

inheritance of machismo and be closer to his son than his wife, and JoEl is a son that loves his parents unconditionally.

Felix's attempts to transcend predefined roles of masculine sexuality and patriarchy prove impossible, and the coexistence of his conflicting bodily identities can only be resolved through disfigurement and death of either the cultural inheritance or the individual *malcarido*. Islas makes an interesting artistic choice when he depicts Felix killed by a white soldier for making unwanted homosexual advances. Not simply killed, no, he was egregiously beaten to death.

It was unrecognizable. There was no face, and what looked like a tooth was sticking out behind the left ear. Dried blood and pieces of gravel stuck to the skin. The eyes were swollen shut, bulbous and insectlike [sic]. The back of the head was mushy. The rest of the body was purple, bloated, and caved in at odd places. One of the testicles was missing. (TRG 81)

Islas uses the extreme disfigurement to draw attention to larger social problem not only within the Chicano community but outside of it as well.

Within *el barrio*, as David Ybarra discusses, the community's sense of integrated patriarchy oppose homosexuality.

[In these] communities in which traditional gender roles are taught and practiced, and in which patriarchal order strongly remains the cultural backbone of a highly valued social system ... homosexuality breaks the most basic of these rules, there can be no identity encouraged or accepted in the system. (Ybarra 107)

However, it is not only within the Chicano community that homosexuality finds no tolerance. Islas uses Magdalena's (Felix's daughter) discussion with the District Attorney to depict how many people in American society viewed homosexuality in the 1970s: "the evidence convincingly showed that her father was [...] a homosexual[. . . .] The young

soldier had acted in ‘self-defense and understandably,’ given the circumstances, and there was no reason to prosecute him” (TRG 87). The members of *la familia* (except Magdalena) remain more concerned about the family honor than justice for a *joto malcarido*. Furthermore, *el barrio* refuses to accept alternative lifestyles, and the law of the land chooses not to act because the victim’s response was *understandable*.

Felix’s distance from the acceptable cultural norms results in a body that is unrecognizable. Upon viewing the body, Miguel Grande exclaims, “That’s not my brother” (TRG 81). So far gone is Felix from the possibility of bodily life that Juanita, “looking at the paper bag in his hands, [...] had the eerie illusion that Felix was inside it” (TRG 83). As Cutler comments, “Not surprisingly, identity and sexuality become the primary sites of that *transformation-through-obliteration*, so that face and testicle are not simply disfigured, they are forcibly removed [my emphasis]” (14). Ultimately, Felix’s conflicting identities find no resolution in life.

Islas was not trying to make overt statements in this novel about homosexual identity or rights, but he did intend to critique those Chicano cultural inheritances that discourage familial love and unconditional acceptance. In 1979, Islas wrote the following in a letter about the novel: “I have no desire to make a case for or against Homo/heterosexuality. I want to show how far away we are from loving, or at least how far away the narrator because of what he has been taught is ‘masculine’ is from loving in any context” (qtd. in Padilla 14). Felix’s attempts to express love end in his death, yet, arguably, his death symbolizes Islas’s desire to change the traditions that limit

unconditional familial love. A “transformation-through-obliteration” of the cultural foundations and ideals that refuse love is required. Rosaura Sanchez rightly points out: “The principal resentment [in *The Rain God*] is thus against the patriarchy as constituted in traditional Western society with its gender roles, power relations, and values” (68). Felix’s character transcended all of these ideological expectations, but the family’s response demonstrates how deeply imbedded the trans-generational cultural inheritance of sexual normalcy remains. As his murderer goes free, Magdalena realizes there is no justice for a *joto malcarido* even if he was an Angel. Felix failed in his masculine patriarchal role, so his broken body becomes the symbol of Sanchez’s notion of resentment. However, Islas’s art does not limit itself to the physical effects of cultural inheritance, for he uses Miguel Grande, Nina, and JoEl to highlight the emotional ramifications.

2.3 Self-Inflicted Pain

Miguel Grande’s dependency on Chicano patriarchy and machismo reduces his body and mind to an infantile state. The multiple-year affair Miguel Grande initiates with Lola on Juanita and his 25th wedding anniversary emotionally injures him. Miguel Grande “had told himself many times he could extricate himself from his involvement with Lola [... but] he had difficulty admitting that he found himself increasingly unable to control his emotions.” Furthermore, admitting he had no emotional control would “demean him before the very men who gossiped about his exploits with admiration”

(TRG 75). Loss of emotional control begins to have a deeper impact on Miguel Grande's psyche: "and so his heart, alternatively swelling and shriveling, began to humble him" (TRG 79). However humble he may be growing, the deeply ingrained macho traditions refuse to relent as he falls in love with both women. Eventually, his body begins to suffer: "A few months ago he broke out in hives." His condition worsens as he remains determined to be with both women, but eventually, he separates himself completely from his male role with his wife: "[he] rolled up the bedspread between them" (TRG 91). As his psychic and physical state continues to break down, he turns to his son – not as a patriarch – like a dependent child. Miguel knows the truth: "The one thing that's clear is that you're breaking down." But Miguel Grande arrogantly responds, "'Never happen,' he said, wiping his face and blowing his nose" (TRG 97). The macho patriarch of *la familia* has become an infant child dependent upon his own son for emotional support – an attitude contrary to both culturally inherited traditions. Miguel Chico realizes the truth: "There was no help for him" (TRG 97), for his marriage has been one long series of lies and affairs even before that fateful day he fell in love with Lola (TRG 61). Lola threw fuel on the already smoldering fire sustained by machismo, and it ignited into a blaze in his loins and heart. But at what cost to *la familia*? Padilla comments, "the emphasis on masculinity [is] one of the most serious threats to familial harmony and to Chicana/o culture" (24). Clinging to these masculine traditions reduces Miguel Grande to a helpless child in need of psychological nourishment, but the traditions of machismo and patriarchy fail to sustain the body or mind.

Nina also serves the patriarchal meals she learned to cook from her father, but the food she prepares cannot be ingested by the majority of her own family. Her nutritional choices create an unbridgeable chasm that separates her from her husband and the rest of *la familia*: “Only three people could eat it [her chile jalapeño]: their lifelong friend El Compa, her son, and herself. For the remainder of humanity, her green chile sauce was fire itself” (*TRG* 36). Her sister Juanita no longer makes attempts to taste it, and Ernesto, Nina’s husband, leaves the room and reads the afternoon paper rather than sharing in his wife’s culinary choices. Ultimately, the two other people that can eat her chile, El Compa and Antony, die and leave Nina dining alone in her kitchen.

Nina’s dietary habits depict a long standing familial isolation that begins with her father’s hatred of his own daughter: “[He was u]nable to accept the death of his wife, he had not forgiven Nina for destroying what he had loved most in the world.” Nina grows up to inflict the same abuse on her own children. Nina’s sister Juanita comments that she hits “them too much” because of their “father’s authoritarian ways” that never wore off (*TRG* 38-9). One can argue that whether Nina feeds her family excessive doses of discipline or prepares equally indigestible meals, she fails to provide her children with the love and nurturing *la familia* deserves from their mother. Eventually, the patriarchal, loveless, meals she serves will lead her son, Antony, to take his own life. After his death, Ernesto can no longer be near her chile (and presumably Nina as well): “Ernesto began to weep when he saw the chiles on the stove. Their smell filled the house and he went from

room to room opening all the windows” (*TRG* 50). Her husband is no longer content to simply leave the kitchen; the noxious fumes of Nina’s cooking must be evacuated from the home. Poignantly, JoEl, Felix and Angie’s son, too finds himself alone because of his dietary choices.

While JoEl apparently suffers from epilepsy, his physical condition proves of minor consequence in comparison to the pain that results from what he ingests. In the desert, JoEl continually looks “for the touchstones that might release him from the terrible feelings he could only keep at bay with drugs,” whether it is whiskey, a “forbidden cigarette,” or a hit of acid (*TRG* 149). Some readers might be tempted to share the opinion of JoEl’s friend’s parents: “He’s a worthless, drug-addicted Mexican, even though he has fair skin and goes to college. What a waste” (*TRG* 150). However, Islas depicts a family that is blind to JoEl’s emotional pain. His mother’s response is to lock him in his room and ignore him. One night, in a drug induced state, JoEl finds himself at his aunt Mema’s house. Mema tries to comfort him, but JoEl responds, “No one in the family [loves me] any more, not even my mother.” Mema blames the drugs he has taken, but JoEl knows, “It’s not the drugs. I don’t know what it is, but it’s not the drugs” (*TRG* 155). If it is not the narcotics, arguably a lack of unconditional familial love might actually be the cause. Once again, Islas shows how far “we are from love.”

Islas calls for a new model for *la familia* based on love regardless of one’s classification as Angel or *sinner*. As I have argued, and JoEl confirms, the problem

comes from the lack of unconditional love passed on through trans-generational cultural inheritance. Later, when Miguel Chico visits JoEl in a halfway house, JoEl describes the nutritional value he receives from *la familia*: “You hate the family and it loves you. I love the family and it hates me” (TRG 156). *La familia* can only love good Angels. The food supposedly offered to Miguel Chico but rejected becomes the nutrition JoEl desperately needs but cannot obtain.

2.4 The Partial Body

Islas uses the lame and injured body in varying degrees metaphorically linking bodily injury with aberrations of familial love resulting from acceptance or rejection of one’s cultural inheritance. Early in the novel, Islas depicts Miguel Chico suffering from patriarchal polio. As the young Miguel Chico grows weaker and weaker from polio, Miguel Grande intervenes in Juanita’s attempts to take him to the doctor: “I’m the head of this family, and you’re not calling anybody. I won’t have you spoil him anymore. You’ve already taken him away from me” (TRG 94-5). The patriarch exercises his authority, and the individual body suffers. However, his son’s damaged limb is a sign of weakness according to Miguel Grande’s distorted sense of machismo, so he must toughen up his son by getting him to “engage in fistfights” and by having swimming teachers “be harder on him than on the other boys” (TRG 96). His patriarchal, macho attitudes force his son away from the predefined cultural roles of maleness into his mother’s arms and

farther away from his lame body: “Miguel Chico ignored his body and became a good student” (TRG 96). Miguel must deny his own body in favor of his mind.

As I discussed earlier, the character/narrator, Miguel Chico, reflects much of Islas’s personal life, but the author weaves the imagery of his partial body into his complex metaphor. After the operation that saved Islas/Miguel Chico’s life but left him without a colon, Miguel realizes that, even if he wanted to, he cannot break his ties to *la familia*. As John Cutler notes, “The novel insists on the materiality of bodies, but always as bodies in relation to one another” (9). After the operation, Miguel Chico awakes and looks down: “he saw that his body was being held together by a network of tubes and syringes” (TRG 8). While Islas gives the reader a body literally in need of support for life, by way of metaphor, the “network of tubes” are also the familial support structures barely keeping him alive. However isolated Miguel Chico may be he still remains in constant contact with others. The familial “syringes” still inject life-sustaining fluids into the individual: “Your mother is waiting just outside,” the surgeon tells him just before the operation (TRG 6). No matter how much one might want to escape the body, and hence, contact with others and *la familia*, death proves the only way out. While lying on the operating table, the doctors tell Miguel Chico about the “plastic appliance” he will have to wear his entire life, and his initial thought, “Let me die,” gives way to the realization, “You cannot escape from your body, you cannot escape from your body” (TRG 7). The inability to escape from the body, both as character and author, becomes part of Islas’s narrative technique to emphasize the importance of the individual yet show his or her dependence on others’ love for survival. As Marta Sanchez notes, “The gap closes

between narrator and character [and author], and their identity becomes, ironically, the key to their difference. Thus, *The Rain God* is about the formation of the protagonist's 'I' with no 'I' overtly present at any time" (286). The "I" both highlights the individual, Miguel Chico, who flees *la familia* and the ignorance and inactivity of the desert for the ocean of education and experience in San Francisco, and it shows the "I," Mickie, that remains ever present as part of *la familia* – an Angel.

However, Miguel Chico's awareness that he is part of a family that does not love easily comes at a cost. The cost is pain: "Without this pain, he would have possessed for the first time in his life that consciousness his grandmother [...] had taught him was the highest form of existence: pure, bodiless intellect. No shit, no piss, no blood – a perfect astronaut" (*TRG* 8). However, bodiless consciousness becomes the site of inactivity and impossibility rather than of action or realization. While *la familia* and Mamá Chona had taught him these lessons, Miguel understands that an intellect without a body – incapable of teleological *techne* and *artifice* – is also unable to love. Quite symbolically, and not accidentally, the paper dolls young Miguel Chico and Maria play with (much to Miguel Grande's disapproval) are bodies without intellect and equally incapable of familial love: "He and Maria spent long afternoons cutting out dolls and dressing them" (*TRG* 15). The traditions of *la familia* cut out paper children and dress them up in clothes that mask individual identity.

Under the current familial conditions, only death provides an individual with an escape from the prison cultural inheritance. Until then, no external aid or support

provides an individual with a voice of his or her own: “All of his needs were being taken care of by plastic devices and he was nothing but eyes and ears and a constant, vague pain that connected him to his flesh” (*TRG* 8). Miguel Chico’s permanently injured body remains outside of his control, and *la familia* cannot cure his ills. He will live with this condition his entire life, but the Chicano culture does not have to suffer as he has.

2.5 Conclusion

The Rain God opens with the symbolic photograph of Mama Chona and Miguel Chico. Two generations separate the image of these characters, but they are walking “hand in hand” (*TRG* 3). In the novel, Islas recognizes that many of the old traditions of *la familia* no longer meet the needs of the Chicano/a community in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but trans-generational cultural dis-inheritance anxiety does not mean the end of Chicano culture. In fact, Islas hopes to strengthen the Chicano family and, in turn, the culture through unconditional love. When Miguel refuses Mama Chona’s embrace, his utterance, “let go of my hand [...] I don’t want to die,” rounds out the photograph’s symbolism. The child who once embraced the teachings of the matriarch is released from her grasp as a mature individual. Her plea to rejoin “*la familia*” comes after. Miguel offers no response, as Felix, the Rain God, comes to take Mama Chona away. However, Miguel’s lack of response speaks louder than words, for it is not *la familia* he dismisses but the cultural inheritance that denies the individual’s needs and curtails his or her ability to love the members of *la familia* unconditionally.

Miguel Chico's telling of the Angel's story is, as Erlinda Gonzales-Berry points out, "born from a need to make peace and a desire to pay homage to his dead" (19), but it is also a need to dis-inherit the traditions of the past so a new type of individual Chicano/a, and in turn, a new Chicano culture can arise. Mamá Chona's advice, "Just remember to have respect for your parents," still applies, but the cultural inheritances of patriarchy, class/caste/racial prejudice, and defined gender and sexual roles insisted upon by prior generations should not be respected or perpetuated. Mamá Chona told Miguel Chico and his cousins in her beautiful Spanish that 'no harm [...] could ever come from within one's own home and family" (*TRG* 163). However, Islas throughout *The Rain God* continuously depicts the mental and physical – albeit symbolic – harm that can come from "within one's own home and family" and community when cultural heritage supersedes love.

CHAPTER 3

DISCOVERING OF A NEW LANGUAGE IN CYNTHIA OZICK'S "ENVY; OR, YIDDISH IN AMERICA"

3.1 Introduction

Born in 1928, Cynthia Ozick grew up in New York during a time when Yiddish was more than her family's mother tongue, for it was also a common tongue. In the 1930s and 1940s, there were numerous Yiddish newspapers and literary publications as well as performances and lectures in Yiddish. Ozick's experience in New York was similar to many ethnic cultures that developed strong communities where first generation immigrants could easily participate in public life and converse in their mother tongue. However, Ozick was also part of the second generation of children born in the U.S., and like many immigrant children, she received a public education in English. After graduating from New York University with a Bachelor of Arts (*cum laude*) in 1949, Ozick completed her Masters of Arts at Ohio State University the following year. She began her writing career translating Yiddish poetry into English, an occupation that continued to find an outlet in later fiction. In 1971 *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories* was published, and this collection contained "Envy; or Yiddish in America."¹ In this novella, the protagonist, Hersheleh Edelshtein, seeks a translator for his four tomes of

¹ "Envy; or Yiddish in America" was first published in *Commentary* in November 1969.

Yiddish poetry. Edelshtein convinces himself that if translated he could be as famous as his rival Yankel Ostrover.

In America in the late 1960s when Ozick was writing her novella, not only was Yiddish becoming an endangered species but Judaism itself also appeared to teeter on edge of extinction. In 1988, Leonard Fein said that “a generation or so ago, it was generally assumed that American Jewry was rapidly approaching its end.” Fein did not imply that Jews would cease to exist in America, but most Jews thought “that the vast majority would fade away, whether through active assimilation – or, more likely, through indifference and apathy ...” (269). In “Envy; or, Yiddish in America,” Ozick uses the loss or preservation of Yiddish to depict the precarious state of American Judaism in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the novella, her characters fail to reconcile their generational and cultural differences, but Ozick creates an artistic language capable of bridging both. The search for this elusive linguistic art will occupy much of her future writing including her essay, “Toward a New Yiddish.”² However, in this novella she found ways to allow the Jewish literary tradition to flourish in twentieth century (and twenty-first century) America.

In this chapter, I argue that in “Envy; or, Yiddish in America” Ozick uses language both literally and symbolically to discuss trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety. Many of Hersheleh Edelshtein’s observations and much of his rhetoric

² The essay, “Toward a New Yiddish,” appears in Ozick’s 1983 book, *Art and Ardor*. While this essay remains outside the scope of this chapter, it is noteworthy that therein she argues for the creation of a German-English language to replace the German-Hebrew basis of Yiddish.

admonishes the “modern Jew”; meanwhile, he desperately wants to believe that, if translated into the “modern” American tongue, his old poetry could save Yiddish from extinction. However, his obsession for an English translator only serves to underscore my overall claim: Ozick’s novella is an example of how language will continue to be a principle vehicle for cultural transmission between generations, but language (like history, ethnicity, and culture) is fluid and constantly changing. Ethnic writers must adapt and become, in Ozick’s words, “cultural hermaphrodites.” In the postmodern period, Jewish American literary art cannot be confined to Yiddish (or Hebrew) if it is going to build new cultural bridges across generational chasms. Ozick created a Jewish novella in English, and it contained all the richness of the Jewish literary tradition she believed that at one time only Yiddish could convey. However, by writing in English she also created a cultural work of literary art that was understandable by the non-Jewish American audience, and future generations of Jewish Americans could appreciate it even though many of them might be illiterate in the mother tongue.

In “Envy; or, Yiddish in America,” Ozick uses hyperbole to depict a trans-generational chasm that becomes unbridgeable. Many of the second generation descendants of the Ashkenazi (European descent) Jewish immigrants have assimilated fully into American culture. For the youth in America, the old world and its millions of dead (and the few remaining survivors) offer no value in their new world. However, who is the ethnic individual when cultural heritage is denied in favor of a modern American identity? For the Jewish individual, this question is especially poignant, for much of Judaism defines itself by the history of its people. Jewish culture finds its legacy in the

history written in the Torah, Talmud, Kabala, Midrash, and Yiddish poetry, drama, and literature. In Ozick's novella, more is at stake than socio-economic assimilation, for the future of the Jewish culture in America may depend upon its people and their ability to integrate the old world's history within the new world's culture. In the novella, Ozick begins a search for a language – a new, albeit symbolic, *mamaloshen* (mother tongue) – capable of bridging the generational and cultural chasms Judaism was experiencing in the late twentieth century. However, before examining how Ozick elegizes Yiddish and depicts the problems associated with the second and later generation's refusal of their cultural inheritance, discussing the historical context in which Ozick wrote "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" provides a better understanding of the cultural milieu within the novella.

Arriving in New York City, William Ozick and his wife, Celia – like hundreds of thousands of other Jewish immigrants between 1890 and mid-1920s – were welcomed by the Lady Liberty and her poetic invitation. "The New Colossus," written by the Sephardic Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus, beckons: "Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand / A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame / Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name / Mother of Exiles" (3-6). A more fitting matriarch hardly could be imagined for the Eastern European Jew escaping persecution and anti-Semitism. America welcomed the "tired," "poor," "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" (10-11), and it promised "the golden door" shall be open wide. Moreover, the Ozicks, as first generation immigrants, believed in the American Dream and the promises of freedom and equality for all the

nation's citizens. Historically, Jewish exile began four millennia ago and persisted into the twentieth century. David Engel comments on the Jewish immigrant's homelessness: "Already living in exile, Jewish immigrants escaping the anti-Semitism of Eastern Europe had no home to return to, if indeed they had ever had a home, and they experienced a kind of 'homeless modernity'" (qtd. in Kent 115). The pogroms forced many Jews to abandon their European homes. Indeed, if these immigrants had any hopes of returning to Europe, World War II put an end to nearly all such dreams. The Nazis destroyed all traces of family and home for many Jewish immigrants. Later, Stalin devastated countless more. Consequently, many Jews turned toward the west. Could America offer the homeland so long sought by the Jew forced into diaspora?

However, in the early twentieth century, America was not the politically correct, racial/cultural accepting society that would develop in the late decades. Ozick recalls her childhood: "She found it 'brutally difficult to be a Jew' there [the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx]. She remembers having stones thrown at her and being called a Christ-killer as she ran past the two churches in her neighborhood" (qtd. in Lowin 188). Ozick's childhood experiences with anti-Semitism were common, and they often contributed to later questions of identity. Jewish American identity had to account for a vast array of factors comprising the label. Whether it was self-asserted or assigned, Jews were often seen as the Other. Cultural norms of dress and facial hair/hair style, and religious differences (e.g., diet and work practices) often served as easily recognizable indicators of Jewish Otherness. Moreover, Jewish identity already struggled with the differences in

“the categories of race, religion, ethnicity, and culture” (Grauer 272), but now a new national dimension was becoming problematic as well.

After World War II, it appeared that for many Jewish Americans the dream of a homeland was fast becoming reality. Professional and educational opportunities greatly improved for Jewish Americans after this war. As Calvin Goldscheider points out, at the end of World War II, fifty-five percent of Jewish males performed manual labor or service work, but by 1970 sixty-nine percent occupied professional or managerial positions. Furthermore, forty-six percent of Jewish working women changed from clerical to managerial roles during this twenty-five year period (Goldscheider 273). Additionally, Jews rapidly became the most educated ethnic group in America. Rael Meyerowitz points out: “Jewish access to the platform of the academy did indeed become easier and smoother, and Jewish writers and critics were thereby invited [...] to participate in and contribute to mainstream American culture within institutions of higher learning” (27). Increased access to education engendered a new generation of literary Jewish Americans.

The success of the New York Intellectuals in the post-war era and their involvement with the *Partisan Review* served as fertile ground for a new generation of Jewish American writers (e.g., Phillip Roth and Saul Bellow). These authors and their novels delivered a new type of individual realism, but their characters reflected American life not Jewish culture. Ben Siegal comments that following World War II: “young Jews

began recording in fiction and essays their efforts to escape not only the Jewish life of their parents but also Judaism itself” (Siegel 36). Many of these new Jewish American authors sought to escape from the “Jewish life of their parents.”

Much of the post-war Jewish American fiction reflects this retreat from Judaism. Bellow’s first character, Augie March, and his adventures hardly reflect those of a Jew struggling to decipher the meaning of the Torah; instead he tries to define the “axial lines” that divide his world. Moreover, as Sanford Pinsker comments, “Roth's characters, like Roth himself, often seem cut off from the well-springs of Jewish identity. [. . .] They are, for the most part, thoroughly assimilated Americans who could explain the infield fly rule but not a page of Talmud” (216). Both Bellow and Roth saw themselves more as American writers than writers of Jewish American fiction.

However, the majority of Ozick’s characters are distinctly Jewish. Many of Bellow and Roth’s novels may not have reflected their Jewish upbringing, but Ozick remained devout: “Ozick, unlike [Bellow and] Roth, is the product of a background in which Jewishness meant religious study and observance, community affiliation and work on behalf of Israel. All these elements were in the very air she breathed growing up [...]” (Pinsker 216). “Jewishness” is not only in the air she breathed in but also in the words she later exhaled onto the page. Ozick’s writing regularly traversed the edge of the cultural chasm between being Jewish and being American. It well may have been the intrusion of the Jewish traditions, history, and culture that prevented Ozick’s first novel, *Trust*, from granting her immediate admission into the emerging canon of Jewish American literature.

However, it seems more likely the inexperienced author simply was not ready to write long fiction. *Trust*, according to Pinsker, was a nearly “unreadable texture” partially due to the ironic nature of the title, but mostly due to the uninteresting, flat, characters (219). However, rather than giving up on writing, Ozick abandoned the novel and turned to shorter fiction, and in 1971 she completed *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Short Stories*. Moreover, in 1972 this collection earned her the B'nai Brith Jewish Heritage Award, the Edward Lewis Wallant Memorial Award, a National Book Award nomination, and the Epstein Award from the Jewish Book Council, and it secured her eminent literary position as a Jewish American writer. “Envy; or Yiddish in America” is the second short story in this famed collection appearing after the title story, “The Pagan Rabbi.”

Unlike “The Pagan Rabbi,” which examines the individual’s philosophical/theological struggle with the aesthetic experience, “Envy; or Yiddish in America” addresses a vast cultural theme: the loss or preservation of *mamaloshen* is at stake. Suzanne Klingenstein comments on Ozick’s early work translating Yiddish poetry: “Yiddish was too intimately connected with Ozick’s personal and cultural identity to allow her to sit still. And while she could not revive the language, she might at least rescue what it once conveyed” (57). In the novella, Ozick uses the loss of Yiddish to depict trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety. The Yiddish language may be lost not only in America but for all of humankind, and with its disappearance a key linguistic form of Jewish cultural transmission may vanish as well. Throughout the novella, the characters both proclaim and disclaim language’s import in cultural transmission, and Ozick gives readers many viewpoints on the meaning of being Jewish and American in

not only a post-Holocaust world but also during a time when the realization of a Jewish homeland seems imminent.

During the 1970s, significant changes in the discourse of diaspora took place among Jews in America. The Jewish diaspora that began four millennia ago regularly had worked its way into the culture's rhetoric and art. However in the 1970s, the question of diaspora in America comes up frequently not only in literature but also in daily conversation. The questions of diaspora were taking on new forms: If Israel and Jerusalem are the Jewish homeland and the answer to exile, what does this mean for the American Jew who speaks more Yiddish than Hebrew and more English than either? Is the Promised Land America where the dreams of immigrants may be realized through education and hard work, or is it Israel where Jerusalem was retaken during the Six Day War and must be secured by military force? Many Jewish Americans were considering immigrating (and a considerable number did) to Israel. However, for those who stayed in America, making this country their home would also mean that many of their children would adopt the American culture.

Ozick's novella depicts "modern" Jewish Americans who are losing touch with their Jewish faith, cultural heritage, and language in favor of a new American identity. The Yiddish language is understood by some of the second generation, but few can speak it, and almost none are able to write in it. Yet for the first generation Jewish immigrant, Yiddish was a principle means of Jewish cultural transmission and continuation. Martha

Banta comments: “to retain one’s Yiddish heritage is to remember. To replace Yiddish altogether with English is to forget, thereby erasing one’s past – the entirety of one’s racial and cultural consciousness” (53). However, Ozick does not write a novella where the characters have replaced “Yiddish altogether with English.” Contrarily, the author asks readers (to use Coleridge’s term) to suspend disbelief and imagine they are listening to conversations in Yiddish, attending lectures given in Yiddish, and reading letters written in Yiddish. Additionally, readers must ponder Yiddish phrases that remain unexplained or translated. Furthermore, all of her characters, to varying degrees of proficiency, appear to be bi-lingual in Yiddish and English. Contrary to Edelshtein’s claims, Yiddish is not yet “dead, vanished. Perished” (“Envy” 30).

3.2 Background on the Novella and Plot Summary

After “Envy; or Yiddish in America” was published, there were some accusatory critiques over the novella’s possible allegorical representation of I. B. Singer and Jacob Gladstein. Singer, a writer of short stories, had received much acclaim from the literary community; meanwhile, Gladstein’s poetry was criticized by Singer. Ozick’s intention behind this 1969 novella has been discussed by critics, but it seems unlikely that her aim was to characterize Jacob Gladstein as Edelshtein and I. B. Singer as Ostrover in an extended allegory. Rather these authors’ quarrel appears to act as mere literary inspiration. Ozick says, “I wrote it as an elegy, a lamentation, a celebration [...]” (qtd. in

Lowin 23). However as I argue below, this “lamentation” over the loss of Yiddish extends into the larger discussion of trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety.

Ozick used various narrative techniques to construct the novella including first person narration, temporal shifting, multiple literary forms (poetry, letters, overt allegory, and fiction), dreams, and imagined conversations. The postmodern narrative pastiche also highlights one of the novella’s principle anxieties over trans-generational cultural inheritance of Jewish history. Kerry Powers comments: “Ozick deploys postmodern techniques to create a rupture in the surface of the postmodern present, a rupture which emphasizes the absence of the past as a critical problem with the present” (“Disruptive Memories” 88). Edelshtein’s constant recollections of the past juxtaposed against his foils’ continual pleas to “forget the past” serves to amplify this “critical problem.” Furthermore, Edelshtein’s role as a protagonist slips seamlessly between character and first person narrator, and Ozick’s subtle art leaves readers forgetting that the omniscience portended by the narrator exists between the title/epithet of “Envy.” Edelshtein often begins his imagined conversations and un-sent letters, but he quickly recants his thoughts and words as lies. These unusual narrative techniques enhance the tension between the protagonist’s roles as envious poet and literary idealist whose verse can save the Yiddish language.

In “Envy; or Yiddish in America,” Hersheleh Edelshtein is a *Yiddishist* (a Yiddish poet). As a younger man before World War II, he had written four tomes of Yiddish poetry. Edelshtein desperately clings to the belief that, if translated, he could be more

famous than his rival, Yankel Ostrover. Ostrover is a Yiddish author whose translated short-stories earn him critical success and public acclaim: “Though he [Ostrover] wrote only Yiddish, his fame was American, national, international. They considered him a ‘modern.’ [. . .] he was in the world of reality” (“Envy” 34). Edelshtein occasionally has a poem published by Baumzweig – his sometimes friend, sometimes enemy, and editor of a small Yiddish publication called *Bitter Yam* (Bitter Sea). However, throughout the novella, readers sense Edelshtein covets not only Ostrover’s success but also his ability to become “modern.”

Ozick complicates Edelshtein’s role by juxtaposing a seemingly more noble purpose behind his desire for translation. He sees himself as the savior of “Yiddish in America.” In his mind, only his verse can resurrect the dead language and the cultural heritage its utterances carried.

The language – a museum. Of what other language can it be said that it died a sudden and definite death, in a given decade, on a given piece of soil? [. . .] Yiddish, a littleness, a tiny light – oh little holy light! – dead, vanished. Perished. Sent into darkness. (“Envy” 30)

He believes that his volumes of poetry contain the verses necessary to bring Yiddish back into the light, but his communiqués with the Ostrover’s publishing firm, Kimmel and Segal, force him to seek a translator if the aesthetic of Yiddish literary art is to survive in America.

Edelshtein first turns to one of Ostrover’s unnamed translators: “Expecting little, he wrote to the spinster hack.” While he receives no satisfaction from her refusal and boasting that it is *her* translation that makes Ostrover a “so-called modern,” readers

discover a key trope to unpacking Ozick's novella ("Envy" 39-40). As the translator praises herself for Ostrover's fame, she reveals herself as the first of three "cultural hermaphrodites" caught between the old world and the new.

I'm fifty-three years old. I wasn't born back in Hlusk for nothing, I didn't go to Vassar for nothing – do you understand me? I got caught in between, so I got squeezed. Between two organisms. *A cultural hermaphrodite*, neither one nor the other. I have *forked tongue* [my emphasis]. ("Envy" 41)

Some first generation Jewish immigrants discovered themselves caught between "Hlusk" and "Vassar," but many more of the second generation negotiated this "in between" space. The immigrant child, although educated in the new world, remains partially in his or her parents' world. His or her language becomes split between the public language and the language of the home. Ironically, someone who intimately knows both cultures, a true "cultural hermaphrodite," should be able to construct a bridge between the old and new world; however, the old world's language no longer reaches an audience. She insists that, "Nobody's Yiddish matters. Whatever's in Yiddish doesn't matter" ("Envy" 41).

Edelshtein refuses to listen, so, he continues his search for a translator.

Eventually, Chaim Vorovsky introduces Edelshtein to his niece, Hannah, and Edelshtein becomes fixated on convincing Hannah to translate his poetry into English. In the end, Hannah refuses to be his translator, and the novel abruptly ends with Edelshtein having a telephone conversation with an unknown anti-Semite.

Throughout the novella, Ozick depicts trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety through her characters' observations and conversations. Edelshtein reflects on the past, writes unsent letters, and imagines conversations in a postmodern pastiche that

highlights both familial and individual impacts when American assimilation displaces cultural heritage.

3.3 The Family Inheritance

Within the Jewish tradition, families serve as the cornerstone for Jewish cultural memory and distinctiveness. Irving Howe comments on the use of families in Jewish American literature: “[families as tropes invoke] a spectrum of styles and symbols, a range of cultural memories, no longer as ordered or weighty as once they were yet still able to affect experience.” Howe continues by indicating that “the centrality of the family in Jewish life” proves problematic for individuality in so much that it provided “an agency of discipline and coherence,” but “also a mess of psychic troubles” for the individual. “The family is an institution unbreakable and inviolable, the one bulwark against the chaos of the world, [but also it proves] the one barrier to tasting its delights” (qtd. in Siegel 34). By the late 1960s, many of the second generation youth began “tasting” America’s “delights” rather than dining at the family table. Ozick, like many ethnic writers, realized that assimilation, especially the adoption of the English language by the second generation, often separated the family. As was true with many American ethnic cultures, the language spoken at home and in public no longer coincided, so communication within the family frequently broke down. In “Envy; or, Yiddish in America” the “unbreakable” institution that once sustained Jewish culture collapses.

In the novella, family names become the first symbol of the changes occurring in Jewish culture. Ozick depicts one type of trans-generation cultural inheritance anxiety beginning with immigration rather than assimilation. At the beginning of the novella, Edelshtein recalls his childhood trip to Kiev with his father, a *melamed* (teacher), who had taken a position as tutor to the Katz's young child, Avremeleh. The Katzes were wealthy Jewish immigrants to Russia, and they had bribed a government official to change their name to Kirilov. As his instructor, the senior Edelshtein is to address Avremeleh by his modern Russian name, Alexei, and young Alexie studies Latin instead of Yiddish. He takes on his new assimilated name and identity. Edelshtein's memory of the Katzes in Russia reflects the experience of many Jewish immigrants in America. Name changes occurred frequently among early immigrants.

However, familial names and the connections they form create an identity capable of spanning both history and geography; conversely, denying these connections complicates cultural identity formation. The Kirilovs' story of immigration alludes to the fairytale told to so many first generation American Jewish immigrants: The American Dream. One must only forget their names and adopt new ones to reap the benefits. After writing a letter to Alexei Yosifovitch (Kirilov), Edelshtein reflects, "Among the Kirilovs with their lying name money was the best overseer. Money saw to everything" ("Envy" 61). As other critics have noted, Edelshtein's reflections show his envy of the Kirilovs' success, but the Kirilovs also receive the rewards promised by assimilation (Budick 85).

The Kirilovs are also Ozick's first example of Judaism going awry after immigration. One need not be a *melamed* to recognize the Kirilovs' conflict with the

Torah's first commandment: "[I am Ja]hwe thy God that [brought] thee out of the land of E[gypt:] / [thou shalt not hav]e other gods be[fore] me" (Burkitt 395).³ For the Kirilovs, money has replaced "Jahwe." The new "overseer" will force you to lie about your name, family, and past, but success is the reward. Furthermore, Edelshtein remembers how the dietary laws were observed at the Kirilovs: "the elder Kirilov one day brought home with him the *mashgiach*⁴ from the Jewish poorhouse to testify to the purity of the servants' kitchen, but to Edelshtein's father the whole house was *treyf*,⁵ the *mashgiach* himself a hired imposter" ("Envy" 61). Edelshtein, in his reflections, goes as far as to call the Kirilovs "an apostate family." In Russia, the Kirilovs forsake their Jewish religious traditions, their names, and, presumably, Yiddish eventually gives way to Russian. The Kirilovs' tale of Russian immigration lays the foundation for Ozick's depiction of trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety in America.

Early in the novella, Ozick portrays the familial breakdown resulting from the adoption of English by second generation. The Baumzweig's two sons, Josh and Mickey, from early childhood begin distancing themselves from their parents. Josh and Mickey soon will be gone, for the parents "could not imagine the lives of their children. Nor could the children imagine their lives." Parents and children no longer had shared

³ The quotation was chosen as the most accurate representation of the original text I could locate even though it is edited by the Burkitt for readability.

⁴ An inspector appointed by a board of Orthodox rabbis to guard against any violation of the Jewish dietary laws in food processing plants, meat markets, etc., where food presumed to be kosher is prepared or served for public consumption (dictionary.com).

⁵ Food that is not kosher is commonly referred to as *treyf* (lit. torn, from the commandment not to eat animals that have been torn by other animals) (jewishvirtuallibrary.org).

experiences, and each day of public education moved the young further away from the mother tongue and closer to the common language. Every day the gap between the generations widens: “The parents were too helpless to explain, the sons were too impatient to explain. So they had given each other up to a common muteness” (“Envy” 32). Even their apartment in New York symbolizes the eventual familial decay: “dirty mirrors and rusting crystal, a hazard and invitation to cracks, an abandoned exhausted corridor. Lives had passed through it and were gone” (“Envy” 32). The loss of *mamaloshen* by so many second generation immigrants, not only Jewish but of all immigrant cultures, comes from the need to assimilate to be accepted: “Josh and Mickey had grown up answering in English the Yiddish of their parents” (“Envy” 32).

Josh and Mickey journey down the road to assimilation through the academy of English letters – not Yiddish or even Hebraic – each earning Ph.D. degrees and writing theses not about literature of their culture or heritage but about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Carson McCullers. Ozick’s depiction of Josh and Mickey’s embracement of English literature – as hyperbolic as it may be – clearly highlights the novella’s trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety. What happens to Jewish culture when the Jewish scholars all become English academics? Rather than praising their literary success, Edelshtein chastises them: “Mutes. Mutations. What right had these boys to spit out the Yiddish that had bred them, and only for the sake of Western Civilization?” (“Envy” 32). However, the double entendre, “to spit out,” complicates Edelshtein’s response. Is he asking what right they had to throw away Yiddish; or, is he questioning whether these American boys ever had a right to speak Yiddish? Regardless, it is clear

that Josh and Mickey have embraced the American culture and its language, and like many of the second generation youths, they are ready to abandon Yiddish. However, it is not only in America that Yiddish appears endangered.

Yiddish is part of the cultural inheritance of the Ashkenazi Jew not the Sephardic Jew, so even in the Jewish homeland, Yiddish finds few voices. Edelshtein recalls the affair Ostrover initiated with his wife thirty years ago after he fled Palestine during the 1939 Arab riots. It was his words of condemnation of the past that seduced her: “Yiddish was inhabited by the past, the new Jews did not want it.” As Edelshtein remembers it, “Mireleh liked to hear these anecdotes of how rotten it was in Israel for Yiddish and Yiddishists” (“Envy” 35). In both Israel and America the hope for Yiddish seems desperate. Yiddish is a trans-generational cultural inheritance passed on by families; however, the familial structures have deteriorated, and the “new Jews” refuse their birth right.

3.4 Searching for a New Language

Language serves as one of the strongest binding forces that maintain group cohesion, but it also divides a people over time. Ozick comments on the role of language in Jewish culture.

We call ourselves Jews, we think of ourselves as one people, but not because of culture. After a while – and not a very long while, either – culture divides. Language especially divides, because language is the preeminent vessel and vehicle of culture. (qtd. in Siegel 24)

A group's ability to maintain a distinctive cultural identity when language fails to provide a permanent and stable source of cultural transmission proves highly difficult. More importantly, Ozick's comments point to the inherent separation between the first generation immigrant, intimately tied to *mamaloshen*, and the second generation transformed by their new language. Tresa Grauer points out, "critics today generally argue that identity is formed in specific historical and cultural circumstances, dependent on the social and discursive factors that bring it into being" (271). Language can transmit the cultural inheritance necessary to form a unified cultural identity. However, when the prior language no longer serves as the basis for cultural cohesion, the circumstances require using a new language to reunite the culture. In "Envy; or Yiddish in America," Ozick uses her characters' failing verses, voices, and mouths as tropes to explore the different forms this new language might take.

Ozick explores the arts of mathematics, literature (including translated fiction and poetry,) and film as possible solutions for trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety. Chaim Vorovsky supports mathematics and philosophy, Ostrover uses translated short stories and film, and Edelshtein, of course, believes in his own translated poetry. Ultimately, Ozick dismisses all of these forms. Vorovsky suffers from a linguistic, albeit laughable, infantilism, which leaves him unable to utter a coherent sentence in any language. Edelshtein finds Ostrover's Yiddish deplorable, and his literary success is arguably the work of his translators. Furthermore, Edelshtein's demonic pursuit for Hannah's lifeblood, her language, and his obsession over the products of her mouth

proves tragic as she refuses his pleas. Ultimately, her blood serves as the symbolic death of the possibility of Yiddish surviving through translation.

Edelshtein and Baumzweig pay to attend a lecture at the YMCA that Ostrover is giving. Both Baumzweig and Edelshtein despise this *modern* “Yankee Doodle” as they like to call him; moreover, Edelshtein and Ostrover’s hatred appears mutual. During the lecture, Ostrover tells a story that allegorizes Edelshtein and his bad poetry as forever confined to the unread oblivion of hell, so he abruptly leaves. However, on the way out he encounters Chaim Vorovsky, a former mathematician and translator who suffered a nervous breakdown over a failed publication of a German-English mathematical dictionary. Vorovsky introduces Edelshtein to his niece, Hannah, a “golden head” and gifted young woman, who bolsters Edelshtein’s ego by reciting in Yiddish the first lines of one of his poems. Edelshtein is ecstatic to learn that Hannah has been educated in America, and she reads Yiddish and English well, even though she writes only in English. With his hopes for a translator revived, Edelshtein becomes obsessed: “He was in pursuit of her, she was his destination. Why?” (“Envy” 59). However, before elaborating on the youthful Hannah, her elder uncle’s claim for the universal language of mathematics deserves consideration.

Chaim Vorovsky symbolizes the impossibility of cultural inheritance through the language of mathematics. Ozick remains committed to the literary arts to transmit cultural heritage, so she places the man who believes “mathematics [is] the final and only

poetry possible,” in an ontological and epistemological crisis. Outside Ostrover’s lecture Vorovsky tells Edelshtein that he left the lecture because he hates “the young.”

Edelshtein tells him that he was young once too, but Chaim replies, “Not like these. I never laughed” (“Envy” 47). Of course, those incapable of laughter miss out on a large part of living. However, as a German Jew educated at the University of Berlin in 1924, now living in a post-Holocaust modern America, he can neither embrace his history nor forget his past. For most surviving Jews, a German past no longer exists. His disassociation of the past is so explicit that childhood cannot be remembered with laughter; consequently, it must be reinvented and reimagined as a void. Whether Chaim really chose to “reach [for] the empire of the universe” by focusing on mathematics rather than allowing levity to fill his soul, Ozick symbolizes the results of purely rational/logical approaches to life.

Did I reach the empire of the universe? Hersheleh, if I could tell you about reaching, I would tell you this: reaching is impossible. Why? Because when you get where you wanted to reach to, that’s when you realize that’s not what you want to reach to. (“Envy” 49)

Vorovsky seeks to construct and define an “empire” around the infinitude of the universe – to create boundaries and borders enclosing the unlimited – where numbers and equations yield definite answers to unknowable questions spawned from human inquiry. He recognizes the futility of his own reaching for these universal truths as a mathematician and translator of Yiddish and German. However, his rationalism dismisses all poetry to the same uselessness as his own failed publication: both are good for nothing but “toilet paper.” Luckily, Vorovsky has 2000 copies of his dictionary.

The narrator tells of Vorovsky's previous psychic breakdown after working for seventeen years to complete the compilation and translation of his German-English mathematical dictionary: "one afternoon, [he] suddenly began to laugh, and continued laughing for six month. [. . .] His wife died, and then his father, and he went on laughing. He lost control of his bladder" ("Envy" 48). Eventually he discovers a temporary, but unreliable, cure through drinking; still, any humorous occasion might cause a relapse and leave him with "a large dark patch near his fly." Outside the lecture, Edelshtein notices that Ostrover's stories have left their mark on Vorovsky.

Later, at the apartment, he discovers Vorovsky has been affected seriously by his debilitating psychosis.

He was spitting, crying, burbling, he gasped, wept, spat. His eyes were bloodshot[. . .] He laughed, he was still laughing. His pants were wet, the fly open, now and then seeping. He dropped the pillow for tea and ventured a sip [...] vomit rolled up with the third swallow. ("Envy" 69)

Ozick humorously depicts Vorovsky's epistemological crisis. The man who believes in the rationality of the universal language of mathematics has been reduced to a quivering, helpless child unable to utter a comprehensible or coherent thought or control his bodily functions. Clearly, Vorovsky's laughable choice for a poetics of mathematics cannot assist in the search a new the language capable of transmitting Jewish culture in America.

Edelshtein acts as the proponent for trans-generational cultural inheritance, but, ironically, he has no family to name in the will. Mireleh had seven miscarriages and died

of uterine cancer leaving him without children. However, his lamentations over Mireleh are about more than losing her. Edelshtein seeks to make his mark on history and to be remembered. Children traditionally ensured one's legacy, but for Edelshtein, his children remain trapped in the pages of unreadable poetry written in a quickly disappearing language.

In a narrow bed he missed his wife. How much longer could he expect to live? An unmarked grave. Who would know he had ever been alive? He had no descendants, his grandchildren were imaginary. *O my unborn grandson . . . Hackneyed. Ungrandfathered ghost . . . Too baroque. Simplicity, purity, truthfulness. ("Envy" 59)*

Edelshtein's four grandchildren are indeed imaginary – produced from the poet's mind in continual search for the correct image – they are only words placed onto the pages in four tomes, which have but one hope for corporality: a translator. Edelshtein hopes that a translator will help him answer some of his deepest philosophical questions: "What does a man look for, what does he need? What can a man retrieve? Can the future retrieve the past? And if retrieve, how redeem?" ("Envy" 59). If the past is caught in his poetry, perhaps it is worthy of redemption. But can his meager four volumes contain the vast cultural heritage that Yiddish carried for a thousand years?

Language, like the literary art it produces, cannot be a fixed source of trans-generational cultural inheritance. Language too is a mimetic tool, and like all representative mechanisms its meaning is dependent upon both the subject and object. Language does carry elements of the cultural heritage trans-generationally, but successful transmission depends upon the next generation understanding the words, phrases, tropes, cultural milieu, and historical context. These requirements become especially evident

when poetry becomes the vehicle of cultural inheritance. Yiddish may be slipping into the past; still, it carries a literary and cultural heritage worthy of retrieval and redemption. Moreover, Edelshtein believes that translating Yiddish poetry into English could continue the cultural heritage.

According to Edelshtein, Yiddish must be translated if the younger Jews are to understand anything about their cultural through these, now, foreign texts. The elder artist, who only writes well in the mother tongue, finds the new language an inept tool for expression. Turning to English to convey the aesthetic meaning of a Yiddish word, as Ostrover's "cultural hermaphrodite" translator indicates is nearly impossible. A single Yiddish word or phrase can carry a rich array of cultural references, symbolism, allusion, or irony. The younger generation, if they are able to understand the words, can comprehend little to none of meaning without the historical and literary context. Cultural heritage remains lost in translation. However, perhaps the "modern" form of film can become a new means of trans-generational cultural inheritance.

Ozick critiques Ostrover's so-called "modern" ideas and art by using language that symbolizes imitation and artificiality. Rarely do readers see Ostrover except through Edelshtein's envy clouded vision and imaginings, but late in the novella Edelshtein accidentally reaches him on the telephone while trying to call Vorovsky. During the conversation, Ostrover boasts about his realism: "Yesterday, I heard from Hollywood, they're making a movie from one of my stories. So now tell me again who's dead."

Commenting on the “realism” of Hollywood is as redundant as discussing the reality of “reality television.” However, Edelshtein knows the truth. Ostrover’s words are those of his translators: “The puppet the ventriloquist holds in his lap. A piece of log. It’s somebody else’s language and the dead doll sits there” (“Envy” 63). Ironically, the metaphor applies equally to the translator Edelshtein so desperately seeks for his tomes of Yiddish poetry. In translation, he too would be a “dead doll.” Hannah comments at their first meeting: “But it’s not possible. [. . .] That you’re still alive.” Edelshtein replies, “You’re right, you’re right [...] We’re all ghosts here” (“Envy” 52). No, not dead, but clearly he remains caught between the living and dead, so he turns to Hannah to breathe new life into him and Yiddish.

Edelshtein almost convinces himself that Hanna, with sufficient tutelage, and he can procreate Yiddish: “Hannah, you have a strong mouth, made to carry the future – But he knew he lied, lied, lied. [. . .] He wanted someone to read his poems, no one could read his poems” (“Envy” 56). Of course, the desire for “someone” capable of reading Yiddish in no way allows Yiddish to survive. The paradox that finds no resolution is that poetry (among other arts) describes the culture, but the meaning language conveys is lost through time. But Edelshtein refuses to abandon hope.

Ozick certainly believes in literature and language’s power to transmit cultural heritage; however, the hyperbolic Edelshtein grants poetry (and his own bad poetry) too much affecting influence. He turns to Hannah: “You’ll save Yiddish, [...] you’ll be like a Messiah to a whole generation, a whole literature [...]” (“Envy” 71). Clearly, as Janet

Cooper points out, translation of Yiddish into English cannot save the Yiddish language anymore than Hannah can be the Messiah, “but it will, he believes, rescue him from obscurity” (190). However, Hanna has no desire to rescue Edelshtein or any of these “old men” trapped in the ghetto of the past (“Envy” 71). The younger generation does not define themselves through history because they feel free from the shackles of the past and are able to create their own American identities.

Edelshtein imagines Ostrover advising him to “stop believing in Yiddish;” meanwhile, Edelshtein insists, “But I don’t believe in it.” However, Ostrover (Edelshtein) knows the truth, “It’s no use talking to you, you won’t let go [of the past].” Edelshtein proclaims to Ostrover, “I want to be a Gentile like you!” But the imaginary Ostrover tells him, “I’m only a make-believe Gentile. This means that I play at being a Jew to satisfy them” (“Envy” 51). Ostrover writes only in Yiddish, and what remains of his Jewish words reach no one until translated into the language of the Gentile. A language that only plays at being a “Jew” cannot be the vehicle for Jewish cultural inheritance. Ostrover’s “modern” works are no better than those “novels by writers of [...] ‘Jewish extraction,’” which Edelshtein reads ravenously but despises: “Spawned in America, pogroms a rumour [sic.], *mamaloshen* a stranger, history a vacuum” (“Envy 29). Judaism is history and Yiddish carried the cultural inheritance for one thousand years, but many “modern” Jewish Americans are forgetting the meaning of being Jewish.

3.5 The Modern Jew

Ozick depicts modern Judaism in America as amplifying the present rather than reflecting the past. Ozick comments on history and literature's central role Jewish culture: "To be a Jew is to be old in history, but not only that; to be a Jew is to be a member of a distinct civilization expressed through an oceanic culture in possession of a group of essential concepts and a multitude of texts and attitudes elucidating those concepts" (qtd. in Powers "Disruptive Memories" 82). Being "old in history" is not a passive condition, for the "possession" of history requires active engagement with the "texts and attitudes." The task of the Jewish American writer becomes "elucidating those concepts" in such ways that history remains present. Ozick draws attention to the need for "being old in history" through Edelshtein's reflections on the modernization of the Jewish faith and his insistence on "the past" juxtaposed against Hannah's claim: "History's a waste." Hannah possesses the knowledge of the historical "texts," but she refuses to inherit the "attitudes." However, theological "texts and attitudes" are among the most critical Jewish trans-generational cultural inheritances.

Throughout the novella, Ozick depicts how Americanization affects Jewish family and language, but now its influence can be seen in the Temple too. The new Temples seem unholy to Edelshtein.

The new Temples scared Edelshtein. He was afraid to use the word *shul* [synagogue] in these places – inside, vast mock-bronze Tablets, mobiles of outstretched hands rotating on a motor, gigantic dangling Tetragrammatons⁶ in transparent plastic like chandeliers, platforms, altars,

⁶ Tetragrammatons are representations of the "quadrilateral" name of God, **יהוה** (jewishencyclopedia.com).

daises, pulpits, aisles, pews, polished-oak bins for prayerbooks printed in English with made-up new prayers in them. Everything smelled of wet plaster. Everything was new. (“Envy” 30)

Artificiality comprises the modern, “new Temples” from the mechanized “hands” to the “mock-bronze.” Nothing resembles the sacred, and even God’s name appears in “transparent plastic.” Edelshtein smells the noxious fumes released as Judaism dons a new coat of “plaster” that only conceals the cracks without providing structural support.

However, Edelshtein may be hypercritical of the “prayerbooks printed in English.” In order to ensure Jewish trans-generational cultural inheritance in America, the Jewish faith must be able to be spread in the common tongue. And the common tongue in America is English. Earlier I quoted Ozick: “We call ourselves Jews, we think of ourselves as one people, but not because of culture.” The Jews are one people not because of culture, nationality, or language but because of their religion and shared history. The Jewish faith spoken in either Yiddish or English can unify the people, but either language also can destabilize the institution and Jewish unity. Edelshtein can smell the stench from the refuse in Ostrover’s “modern” ideas of Judaism.

Ostrover articulates his notions of traditional Jewish beliefs during the question/answer period following his lecture: “Q. Can you tell me please if you believe in hell?” “A. Not since I got rich.” “Q. How about God? Do you believe in God?” “A. Exactly the way I believe in pneumonia. If you have pneumonia, you have it. If you don’t, you don’t” (“Envy” 46). In modern America, the only hell is poverty, and those who believe in God suffer from a potentially fatal disease. His quips continue.

Q. “Do you keep the Sabbath?” A. “Of course, didn’t you notice it’s gone? I keep it hidden.” Q. “And the dietary laws? Do you observe them?” A. “Because of the moral situation of the world I have to. I was heartbroken to learn that the minute an oyster enters my stomach, he becomes an anti-Semite. A bowl of shrimp once started a pogrom against my intestines.” (“Envy” 46)

The Sabbath remains “hidden” for the “modern” American Jew, but the Torah commands it be kept “hollow”.⁷ “Modern” Jews, like Ostrover, observe Jewish law only when, like pneumonia, the disease requires belief and compliance. Ostrover’s seafood allergy appears to be the only thing keeping him from eating the prohibited shellfish.⁸ Clearly, something is diseased about Ostrover’s “modern” view of Jewish beliefs. Moreover, Ozick depicts these “modern” views as seriously affecting women as well as men.

No single identity suffices for Ostrover’s wife as he or she navigates the space between cultures and gender roles. Ozick depicts Pesha Ostrover as the second “cultural hermaphrodite” in the novella. Ostrover is asked: “Is it true your wife is a Countess? Some people say she’s really only Jewish.” He answers: “In religion she’s a transvestite, and in actuality she’s a Count” (“Envy” 46). Neither gender nor religion provides a clear identity for this “modern” Jewish American woman. The questioner accuses his wife of

⁷ “Remember the day of the Sabbath [to hallow it:] [six days thou shalt work and do all thy business, and on the [seventh day,] a Sabbath for Jahwe] thy God, thou shalt not do therein any business, [thou] [and thy son and thy daughter,] thy slave and thy handmaid, thy ox and thy ass and all thy [cattle,] [and thy stranger that is] in thy gates. For six days did Ja[hwe make] [the heaven]s and the earth, the sea and all th[at is therein,] and he rested [on the] seventh day; therefore Jahwe blessed [the] seventh day and hallowed it [Burkitt’s edits].” (Burkitt 396)

⁸ The forbidden fish in a kosher diet include “catfish, eel, porpoise, shark, whale, clam, crab, frog, lobster, octopus, oyster, scallop, shrimp, and snail” (Jewish Outreach Institute).

being “only Jewish,” but according to Ostrover, she merely dresses up and plays the part. Moreover, the “modern” Jewish wife’s traditional role in the family changes. Her title changes from “Countess” to “Count,” and she becomes the patriarch. She transforms into a “cultural hermaphrodite.” However, this is not the type of “cultural hermaphrodite” capable of perpetuating the Yiddish literary tradition in America. Her religious attitudes are for appearances only, she presumably speaks no English, and her Yiddish, according to Edelshtein, is deplorable.

Jewish culture has survived exile, wars, pogroms, and even the Holocaust, but in 1970s America trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety escalates because the “modern” Jew is ignoring their history. I have argued that, along with a common religion, embracing Jewish history is a principle mechanism for unifying the cultural. However, Hannah, as spokesperson for her generation, declares: “History’s a waste.” Her generation defines its interests based on distinction between the “Old and New” (“Envy” 70-1). The crowds that gather to hear Ostrover’s lectures confirm that many American Jewish youth believe as Hannah does. The old world is gone: the *shtetls* were destroyed; the ghettos were torn down; and, their families died long ago. Consequently, history has no value. The non-historical view proves appealing for many Jewish American youths.

The end of history is a longing born out of suffering and uncertainty; but for all that, it is seductive, dangerous, as are all absolute claims. [. . .] The way of history evades both complete destructions and complete fulfillments. In its courses, identities are never final, indeed never identical [...] commentary itself renews, brings to new life to the text it engages, in ever-changing ways. (Wolosky 163)

History, like language and culture, continues to change, but it is through continuous “commentary” that history “renews” and becomes a trans-generational cultural inheritance. Hannah refuses to bring new “commentary” to past events, but Ozick’s novella successfully “engages” history in the same way *midrash* brings “new life to the [sacred] text.” Ozick positions Hannah and Edelshtein in an either/or logical fallacy that “engages” readers in their own “commentary.” Hannah’s hyperbolic refusal of history is at the opposite end of the spectrum compared to Edelshtein’s commitment to the past.

Edelshtein knows that he is not only a product of history but also that his reality is the past. Hannah insists that Ostrover is in the real world: “He knows a reality beyond realism[. . . .] A contemporary. He speaks for everybody[. . . For] Humanity.” Her modern notions of reality elicit metaphysical reflections by Edelshtein: “[He] fell into a chaos, a trance, of truth,” and he realizes that for him, “the ghetto was the real world, and the outside world only a ghetto.” He knows that “New York [is] with all its terrible intelligence, all fictions, fantasies. Unreality.” (“Envy” 73). Shira Wolosky comments on the paradoxical nature of identity in America, which becomes especially problematic for the Jew: “In America, identity is in the future, not in the past. Identity is to be constructed, accomplished, attained; not preserved, cherished, and guarded.” However, she continues: “If Jewishness is anything at all, it surely must be connected in some way to a past identity, a history, being carried in some way forward” (Wolosky 154).

Edelshtein covets both Western Civilization and Hannah’s ability to embrace American culture, but he knows that, for him, the present cannot be reality: “Babi Yar is maybe the

real world, and Kiev” when he was a child with Alexei, and the “ghetto” of his past, these are the real world. Edelshtein makes his home in history.

I’m at home only in a prison, history is my prison, the ravine my house, only listen – suppose it turns out that the destiny of the Jews is vast, open, eternal, and that Western Civilization is meant to dwindle, shrivel, shrink into the ghetto of the world – what of history then? (“Envy” 73).

History is a home from the exile of continual diaspora, but it also can be a prison that traps one in the past where pogroms and the *shoah* inscribe the pages of history with literal annihilation.

Ozick juxtaposes the Hannah and Edelshtein’s extreme views in order to highlight the need for a balance between the old and the new world, between Jewish and American cultures, and between Yiddish and English. Edelshtein says to Hannah: “All right! So let it be old and new, fine, a reasonable beginning. Let old work with new[. . . .] I need a translator” (“Envy” 71). However translation ultimately cannot be the vehicle for trans-generational cultural inheritance. Neither Edelshtein’s poetry nor Ostrover’s stories can properly transmit Jewish cultural heritage in America, for they write only in Yiddish and not in English. David Fine argues, “Writing fiction in English was [...] an affirmation of one’s commitment to the New World, a demonstration [...]” (qtd. in Kent 128-9). Neither can be the “modern” Jewish American writer if their creativity remains confined to the old world. Creating new literary works that must be translated shows detachment from rather than “commitment” to the “New World.” Throughout the novella, Ozick has asked readers to suspend disbelief and enter into the old world of Yiddish, but in the final two scenes, the new world’s English replaces Yiddish.

Hannah's poetic gifts in English reflect the type of literary art a "cultural hermaphrodite" could create, but she lacks the historical perspective necessary to propagate Jewish cultural inheritance. Evidently, her talent for constructing cross cultural metaphors far surpasses any lyric ability Edelshtein displays. As Leah Garrett points out, his poetry, filled with "hackneyed, overwrought symbols and metaphors," reflects the type of poetry "a gifted fifth grader" would produce: "The village is so little it fits in my nostril. / The roofs shimmer tar, / the sun licks thick as cow [(“Envy” 53)]” (67). While he may not recognize how bad his poetry is, Edelshtein knows he cannot escape the ghetto of the past without help, so he pleads with Hannah: “[L]ift me out of the ghetto, it’s my life that’s hanging on you!” However, Hannah knows the metaphorical truth.

Her voice was a whip. “*Bloodsuckers*,” she said. “It isn’t a translator you’re after, it’s someone’s soul. Too much history’s drained your blood, you want someone to take you over, a dybbuk.⁹ [. . .] But I have my own life, you said it yourself, I don’t have to throw it out. So pay attention, *Mr Vampire*: even in Yiddish Ostrover’s not in the ghetto. Even in Yiddish he’s not like you people” [my emphasis]. (“Envy” 72).

Edelshtein, as the undead “Mr Vampire,” must live the shadow of history, for he cannot survive in what Hannah sees as the light of modernity. He remains forever dependent on someone else’s life force for survival. He does not require translation; he needs a transfusion. However, Hannah’s blood is no longer compatible.

Hannah’s distinction between us and “you people” demonstrates the new blood-type she and Ostrover exhibit. Ultimately, discontent with the semi-human status of vampire, Hannah moves him further down the food-chain: “‘Die,’ she told him. ‘Die

⁹ “In Jewish folk-lore, the malevolent spirit of a dead person that enters and controls the body of a living person until exorcized” (OED).

now, all you old men, what are you waiting for? Hanging on my neck, him [Vorovsky] and now you, the whole bunch of you, *parasites*, hurry up and die' [my emphasis]" ("Envy" 74). The separation between the generations completes fully only when the prior passes into the grave and become ghosts easily dismissed as imaginings and non-affective, but, until then, the parasite only serves itself as it consumes the host.

In her quest for assimilated modernity, for "reality," Hannah denies her critical role in cultural inheritance as she comes to embody another distortion of Ozick's "cultural hermaphrodite" metaphor. Acts of remembering and retelling propagate ethnic cultures, and traditionally women played a central role in transferring cultural knowledge to their children. Kent quotes Hyman noting that "Jewish women came to embody 'tradition' and were seen as [one of] 'the primary transmitters of Jewish culture' (128). Arguably, Hannah's youth and unmarried status relieves her of this responsibility. But can one "embody" the culture if he or she does not embrace the cultural heritage and history when young? Ozick's young "cultural hermaphrodite" understands Yiddish and can read the words, but she refuses to embrace its history. Janet Cooper notes: "[Hannah] has turned her back on the history and anguish of her people, and [she] wants only 'universalism' or assimilation into the American mainstream" (192). Hannah insists that Ostrover "speaks for everybody," but it is precisely the quest for the universal "everybody" that denies the individuality of both the Jewish person and the uniqueness of Jewish cultural heritage.

Ironically, Hannah prefers “devils” to “humans” because “they don’t think only about themselves and they don’t suffer,” but a devil, who finds his or her home in hell, undoubtedly does nothing but suffer. Moreover, as she denies history, she becomes one of the humans she despises because she thinks only of herself rather than the others that suffered and the countless millions who died needlessly. Hannah wants ethnicity to be a choice. Edelshtein asks her, “And you’re not a Jew, *meydeleh*?” Hannah curtly replies, “Not your kind” (“Envy” 71). Still, she does not deny her Jewishness completely. Apparently, in Ozick’s novella ethnicity is not a choice.

Edelshtein’s believes that one neither chooses ethnicity nor should it be spurned. He tells Hannah: “‘I didn’t ask to be born into Yiddish. It came on me.’ He meant he was blessed.” But Hannah rejects his cultural inheritance: “‘So keep it,’ she said, ‘and don’t complain.’” However, her response is too much for Edelshtein: “With the whole ferocity of his delight in it he hit her mouth. [. . .] He felt like a father. Her mouth lay back naked on her face. [. . .] He had put a bulge on her lip.” Yiddish defines Edelshtein’s ethnicity, his culture, and his art. Hannah’s refuses to embrace her cultural heritage, which forces Edelshtein’s response – one born as much from frustration as rage. Still, he knows that however freely his Messiah’s blood flows, the Jewish culture of the past transmitted through Yiddish will not be born again through this “modern,” young woman. Exasperated by the youth, he exclaims, “you have no ideas, what are you?” (“Envy” 74). Edelshtein insists that both reason and self-knowledge begin with understanding one’s cultural heritage and history. Refraining from his earlier unproductive violence, he exclaims, “‘Forget Yiddish! [...] Wipe it out of your brain! Extirpate it! Go get a memory

operation! You have no right to it, you have no right to an uncle, a grandfather! No one ever came before you, you were never born! A vacuum!” (“Envy” 74). Yiddish defines Jewish culture for Edelshtein, so his edict denies Hannah not only the language but Judaism itself. American becomes Hannah’s cultural inheritance, an estate that comes to fruition through the death of history.

3.6 Conclusion

Ozick called “Envy; or, Yiddish in America” an elegy because “translation would never, never engender the splendor and richness and dearness and idiosyncrasy of Yiddish” (qtd. in Lowin 23). In “Envy; or, Yiddish in America, Ozick created a Jewish cultural milieu in 1970s New York where any reader can enter into “Yiddish culture” through English. Her artistic rendering in English, through the voices, thoughts, and actions of her Jewish characters, continues the Jewish literary traditions regardless of the language used to transmit culture. Her depiction includes themes consistent with the Jewish literary tradition including providing social critiques and religious instruction, depicting individuals in ethical/moral struggles, discussing Jewish law and writing literary *midrash*, and, incorporating Jewish humor. “Her fiction works according to the same narrative principle that Ozick attributes to the Kabbalah: it ‘revises scripture by making it up again through the expansion of its language’ (Art, 182)” (Ozick qtd. in Parrish 441). Ultimately, “Envy; or Yiddish in America” allows readers to discover a new language capable of depicting aspects of Jewish culture in America. Ozick transformed

her cultural transmission anxiety into a new form of trans-generational, trans-cultural Jewish inheritance.

For Ozick, the assimilated ethnic individual that denies his or her *mamaloshen*, history, and family perpetuates cultural erasure. However, a new language can both inscribe and re-inscribe the Jewish culture in America. Ozick knows that Yiddish will not survive in translation, and Judaism in America cannot withstand total assimilation. In her fiction, she seeks to write as a fertile “cultural hermaphrodite” capable of engendering a new language to carry the Jewish cultural message. Martha Banta comments: “[For Ozick t]he American experience has to be ‘Yiddish’ – made up of fertile acts of language and consciousness taking place within heterogeneous communities, whereby the remembered past joins with the active present and the multilayered future” (57). She depicts “the American experience” through her new literary language by carefully attending to Jewish history, religion, and cultural heritage. The Jewish American author capable of writing in this “New Yiddish” may allow the Jewish literary culture to thrive in America even if the Yiddish language does not. Ozick has said, “History is the ground of our being, and together with imagination, that is what makes writing” (Bolick 7). For Ozick, “writing” coalesces the past and present through “imagination” into a depiction of aspects of Jewish culture and life in America. Ultimately, readers receive, retransmit, and continue the Jewish culture by discovering this new language.

In “Envy; or, Yiddish in America,” Ozick uses the unusual metaphor, “cultural hermaphrodite,” to highlight the need for people that can both read and write the Jewish

American language. However, Ozick's idea of the "modern" "cultural hermaphrodite" includes the strong sense of history integral to Jewish culture. Throughout the novella, Ozick encourages "modern" Jews (and Gentiles) to become "cultural hermaphrodites" who embrace both the American and Jewish culture as well as the "old" and "new" world. Those who metaphorically transform may discover a new language of trans-generational trans-cultural inheritance. Ultimately, the new Jewish American language that Ozick creates is capable of building cultural bridges across generational chasms.

AFTERWORD

I began this thesis with the epigraph from Lionel Trilling: “For how else are civilizations ever formed save by reconciliations that were once unimaginable, save by syntheses that can be read as paradoxes?” As I reflect on this question, I find myself contemplating the paradoxes that began this inquiry. I was reading Arturo Islas’s *The Rain God* for the first time, and I was struck by how this brilliant Chicano author so beautifully captured the emotions I so often felt growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. I was raised as a “White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant” in a small Midwest town by loving parents, but somehow I never felt at home. In the late twentieth century, everyday brought a new world, a new language, a new culture that was completely foreign to my parents’ generation. The paradox I could not resolve was how a Chicano from El Paso and I could have shared this trans-generational cultural (dis-)inheritance anxiety. We both seemed to want to cast off the weight of our parents antiquated ideals and mores in favor of a new civilization where lines were no longer drawn based on ethnicity, language, religion, or gender/sexual norms. In his seminal work on post-colonialism, Homi Bhabha asks, “Where do you draw the line between languages? between cultures? between disciplines? between peoples?” (85). I began this thesis with similar questions.

The cross cultural paradox continued to drive my inquiry, and it led me to wonder if other ethnic literature during this time period expressed a similar trans-generational

cultural inheritance anxiety. I had already performed significant scholarship on Jewish American literature, specifically Saul Bellow, so I turned to this genre and began investigating the theme further. After reading several Jewish American texts, I found Cynthia Ozick's *Collected Stories*. After reading *The Pagan Rabbi* I knew I had found a Jewish American author who expressed similar anxieties. This story expressed aesthetic anxiety in light of traditional religious beliefs, but the next story specifically addressed cultural inheritance between generations. However, I was no closer to reconciling the paradox.

Ultimately, it was not until the final revisioning of this thesis that I was able to articulate the “syntheses” that formed from the “paradox.” Perhaps the 1970s represented nothing new in the history of civilizations. Trans-generational cultural inheritance anxiety undoubtedly has existed in every culture throughout history. However, Americans (ethnic or not) growing up in the late twentieth century would inherit “modern” ideas of ethnic and sexual equality as well as a sense of personal freedom and choice not necessarily aligned with the previous generations’ cultural traditions. These factors raised cultural inheritance anxiety to new levels. During the 1970s, fiction writers imagined new “civilizations” being “formed” by creating “reconciliations that were once unimaginable.” It is up to readers to find the “syntheses” out of what can be mistakenly “read as paradoxes.” Fiction writers provide the artistic tools necessary to build new “civilizations”, but readers must take the text in their own hands to build cultural bridges across generational chasms.

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Mr. Thomas Rhea graduated *cum laude* from the University of Dallas with a Bachelor's of Arts degree in English Literature. Mr. Rhea is a published critic and contributor to the *Saul Bellow Journal*. His publications include "The Dual Nature of Duty in Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*" and "The Metaphysics of Fear in Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*." In 2010, he completed the requirements for a Master of Arts degree from the University of Texas at Arlington. Mr. Rhea currently holds an appointment as a Adjunct Professor of English at the University of Texas at Arlington, and teaches multiple sections of First-Year English. Mr. Rhea continues to be an active member of the South Central MLA and the Saul Bellow Society, and he is actively pursuing Chicano and Jewish American fiction studies.