

“THUNDERING OUT OF THE SHADOW”: MODERNISM
AND IDENTITY IN THE NOVELS OF FELIPE ALFAU

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“THUNDERING OUT OF THE SHADOW”: MODERNISM
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ABSTRACT

Felipe Alfau (1902-1999), a Spanish novelist who lived in the United States, was forgotten for many years. Critics writing on Alfau in the late 1980s and early 1990s argued for the literary value of his novels by comparing Alfau with postmodernist authors like Calvino and Nabokov. However, this work considers Alfau as an author of his time by tracing his similarities with such modernists as Luigi Pirandello and Ernest Hemingway and his differences from elements of postmodernism as described by theorists like Judith Butler and Homi K. Bhabha.

Alfau's novels offer a conception of individual and national identity which, despite its constructedness, is typically modernist. In Chapter 1, I argue that Alfau's characters construct a fluid individual identity which challenges imperial notions of hegemony, but which also institutes a meritocracy. In Chapter 2, I argue that Alfau's ironic manipulation of ethnic stereotypes simultaneously constructs and questions a Spanish national identity.

Introduction

Felipe Alfau and the Modernist Conception of Identity

Felipe Alfau (1902-1999), a Spanish author who spent his adult life in the United States and whose active career comprised the 1920s - 1940s, is an undeservedly forgotten modernist novelist. Alfau's works are a heady combination of the experimental and the cliché, the sentimental and the cynical, the reactionary and the revolutionary. There are many reasons to read Alfau, but among the strongest is that the few who have read him never forget him. His inventive novels provide a comic and often poignant record of the Spanish experience in Toledo, Madrid and New York City just before the middle of the twentieth century. Due to their formal inventiveness and to the ways in which they call attention to their own fictionality, they may also be read as precursors of the postmodern novel, and, as I point out below, many critics writing on Alfau have done so. In the present work, however, I will argue that Alfau may be more accurately understood by considering him as a writer of his own time, by situating him within the tradition (or traditions) of modernism. In order to do so, I will examine the ways in which his works describe identity, both personal and collective, as a constructed, not a natural, category.

My characterization of identity, and particularly of identity as constructed by the relations of power between the individual subject and his or her society, as a typically modernist concern may come as a surprise to many readers, since this is more commonly thought of as a postmodern concern. Thus, in this work I will attempt to differentiate between postmodernist and modernist conceptions of identity as constructed in order to show that Alfau has more in common with the latter. I will also find it useful at times to distinguish between competing modernist conceptions of identity. In this introduction, I will begin with a discussion of modernist and postmodernist conceptions of identity. Since Alfau is a comparatively unknown writer, I will also offer a brief biography and descriptions of his novels before discussing my methodology and other concerns.

I. Modernism and Identity

Through the greater part of the twentieth century, the tendency among critics was to consider modernism as a monolithic phenomenon. Within the last fifteen years, however, critics have begun to differentiate between what Peter Nicholls has called “modernisms”. In an attempt to understand the “various, often mutually conflicting, modernist paradigms”¹ which comprise the tradition of experimental or post-realist literature often called “modernism”, Ástráður Eysteinnsson offers realism as “a key term that in various ways highlights the social background against which modernism receives its significance as a ‘negative’ practice, or as a poetics of the nonorganic

¹ Ástráður Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 3.

text.”² Eysteinssen blurs the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism by pointing out the deconstructive aspects of modernism’s critique of bourgeois culture, which inhere in its paradoxical double movement of objectivity (removing the author’s personality from the text) and subjectivity (the interest in psychology demonstrated in surrealism and in the use of “stream of consciousness” techniques). Eysteinssen adds that “what the modernist poetics of impersonality and that of extreme subjectivity have in common (and this outweighs whatever may separate them) is a revolt against the traditional relation of the subject to the outside world.”³ Thus, the troubled interactions between the subject and his or her social environment provide one important nexus around which modernism formed.

Eysteinsson’s discussion of the modernist fusion of extreme subjectivity and extreme objectivity allows us to understand identity, one of Alfau’s central preoccupations, as a typically modernist concern. Though much writing on modernism has seen modernist writers as politically conservative, Eysteinsson, following Gabriel Josipovici, argues that many modernists were committed to “a deep questioning of the bourgeois self.”⁴ Thus, one important impetus of modernism was a revolt against bourgeois constructions of identity. Many modernist writers accomplished this by calling attention to the constructedness of identity itself, and I will argue that Alfau belongs to this camp.

² Ibid., p. 5.

³ Ibid., p. 28.

⁴ Ibid.

The competing claims of individual and collective identity, then, constitute the site which I will use to examine Alfau's relationship to the complex early-twentieth-century cultural phenomenon known as modernism. During Alfau's writing career, the accepted paradigm for the construction of identity shifted from the Romantic conception of individualism, which pits the free will of the solitary hero against conventional social imperatives, to the postmodern conception of the subject whose identity is constructed by society in ways that reinforce interests of power and are circumscribed by gender, race and class. Alfau's works point out the constructed nature of identity—in which, as I argue above, Alfau has much in common with other modernists. At the same time, they also recognize the ways in which collective identity is linked to individual identity. Furthermore, the conscious role-playing of Alfau's characters also suggests the ways in which humans construct identities for themselves by performing, or "citing," their socially constructed roles, as Judith Butler has suggested. However, I will argue that Alfau differs from postmodern identity theorists like Butler in that he allows for an individual identity distinct from socialization along lines of race, class and gender. Though Alfau satirizes the older tradition of Romantic individualism, in many ways he belongs to it, and as a result he is able to explore its internal contradictions. Thus, Alfau offers us a concept of identity which is neither an uncomplicated Romantic individualism nor a postmodern identity politics, but may be seen as an intermediate stage between them.

II. “To Live on a Pirandellian Stage”: Felipe Alfau, Modernist Novelist

A brief biography of Alfau, and a description of *Locos* and *Chromos*, the two novels with which I will be working, may be of some use to readers who are unfamiliar with him. He was born in Barcelona to a prominent literary and political family. His father was a lawyer and colonial official in the Philippines, and his older sister completed a novel before her twentieth birthday. For a time in his childhood his family lived in Guernica y Luno in the Basque country. When he was fourteen, his family emigrated to New York City. Alfau loved music and hoped to become an orchestra conductor. Instead, he became a music reviewer for the Spanish-language periodical *La Prensa*. In later years, he wrote journalism in English and finally became a translator for a bank. His first novel, *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*, was completed in 1928. It was published eight years later by Farrar & Rinehart and was distributed by means of subscriptions.⁵

Locos is a collection of interconnected short stories which, taken together, tell the story of the Bejerano family and their associates. The most important characters are Don Gil Bejerano; Don Gil's brother, Don Laureano, a wealthy beggar; his elder son Gaston who is also the *chulo*, or pimp, known as El Cogote; his younger son Pepe; his daughter Carmen who is also both the seductive Lunarito and the nun Sister Carmela; Garcia, a poet turned fingerprint expert; the eminently sensible Dr. José de los Rios; and Juan Chinelato, a Chinese adventurer and wrestler turned butterfly wrangler and theatrical

⁵ Ilan Stavans, “Felipe Alfau: Curriculum Vitae.” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (13:1), 143-145, pp. 143-144.

producer. This strange assortment of characters are *habitués* of the Café de los Locos (the Café of the Crazy) in Toledo, though most of the action happens in Madrid, with brief detours through China and Spain's colony in the Philippines. The characters apply to a narrator (named Felipe Alfau) because they wish to appear in his novel. The subsequent *tour de force*, in which these characters collide, define themselves in opposition to one another, and eventually come to hold names and traits in common and to blend into one another, examines (always with tongue at least half in cheek) the fluid nature of personal identity. The reviews of *Locos* at the time of its publication were intensely complimentary,⁶ though the favorable critical notice was not enough to rescue the book from obscurity.

In the years after he finished *Locos*, Alfau also wrote poetry, which he did not attempt to publish, and a second novel, *Chromos* (completed in 1948), which was rejected by several publishers. *Chromos* revives some of the characters from *Locos*, including García, Dr. de los Rios and Felipe Alfau, but it takes place in New York City. One important new character is Don Pedro, also called the Moor, who, along with the other characters, frequents the Spanish expatriate bar El Telescopio. *Chromos* uses its setting in New York's Spanish and Latin-American expatriate community to examine, not the identity of the individual subject, but the collective identity by means of which a group constructs itself—and, in Alfau's case, interrogates itself through irony. As in *Locos*, the structure is one of apparently unrelated narratives which comment obliquely on one another: in *Chromos*, two stories told by Garcia, one concerning the Sandoval

⁶ See Mary McCarthy, "Two Discoveries." *Nation*, 27 June 1936, p. 848 and Groff Conklin, review of *Locos*. *New Republic*, 22 April 1936, pp. 323-324.

family's Gothically grotesque rise and fall and the other following the life of John Ramos, a Spanish expatriate in New York who has the astonishing ability to jump forward over long periods of time, are interwoven with the present-day stories of El Telescopio's Spaniards in exile.

Alfau considered New York to be his home. He returned to Spain once after moving there at fourteen, and a friend reports that he felt "Spain was primitive, dirty, the streets dusty, the plumbing terrible, the meat tough, the wine rough, the milk watery, the villagers uninformed."⁷ He was naturally an interested, though geographically distant, observer of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). In an interview late in his life, Alfau speaks of that time:

I always thought Generalísimo Francisco Franco was a trustworthy ruler of Spain, and thus supported him. Since his death, the Iberian peninsula is in complete chaos. In fact, at the time of the Spanish Civil War, I championed Franco's cause in this country as much as I could.⁸

In an interview in Spanish for the magazine *Tiempo*, Alfau says, "In this world only anarchy and tyranny have a place. I prefer the latter."⁹ Alfau took his *Franquismo* to such lengths that he denied that the German air raids which destroyed Guernica, the subject of the Picasso painting, had ever taken place; one friend says Alfau "never

⁷ Toby Talbot, "The Return of the Native." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (13:1), 183-85, p. 185.

⁸ Ilan Stavans, "Anonymity: An Interview with Felipe Alfau." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (13:1), 146-153, p. 148.

⁹ Miguel Angel Del Arco, "Solo he escrito para burlarme de las novelas," *Tiempo*, 20 May 1991, 138-41, qtd. in Carmen Martín Gaité, "The Triumph of the Exception." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (13:1), 174-182, p. 177.

actually believed Guernica, the place in which he was raised, had been bombed—he thought it was just propaganda.”¹⁰

There can be little doubt that Alfau also followed the fascist governments he admired in their anti-Semitism.¹¹ In his interview with Ilan Stavans, Alfau evades the question:

IS: A couple of friends of yours, among them Chandler Brossard, say you are also an anti-Semite.

FA: I am not. In Spain, Jews have been seen as Christ-killers by the Church. Yet to me, they are wise and educated. I had many Jewish friends . . .

IS: So you are not an anti-Semite.

FA: I was taught to keep a distance from Jews, but I didn’t.¹²

Alfau displays hostility toward other minorities as well. In the same interview, Alfau complains that “so many immigrants have invaded [New York City’s] streets and

¹⁰ Chandler Brossard, “Two or Three Things I Know About Him.” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (13:1), 194-197, p. 196.

¹¹ Alfau’s anti-Semitism did not escape the notice of his acquaintances. Another friend, Charles Simmons, included a fictionalized portrait of Alfau in the character of Jose Llano in his novel, *Powdered Eggs* (1964). Llano is a brilliant, inventive and irreverent talker who constantly invents fables and who is in love with a nun. But there is a darker side to Llano’s entertaining conversation:

I thought you had eluded them, he said. Eluded who? The Jews, he said, I thought that unlike the rest of your countrymen you had seen through their devices . . . I thought you understood that psychoanalysis was at the center of the Jewish conspiracy to strip us of our manhood . . . You have told me many times about your Catholic background, you even entertained a priest in this room, but really you are a Jew, aren’t you? Is that another metaphorical rendering? No, you are a Jew, aren’t you?

(Charles Simmons, “From *Powdered Eggs*.” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (13:1), 186-193, p. 193.)

¹² Stavans, “Anonymity,” p. 152.

neighborhoods, making it a violent jungle.”¹³ Alfau’s open support of fascist governments, his denial of the bombing of Guernica (which adopts the same favoring of ideology over historical evidence seen in denials of the Holocaust) and his use of the familiar racist disclaimer that “I have lots of Jewish friends” compound the present-day reader’s difficulties with his works. They also place him in stark contrast to the prevailing current of proletarian literature in Depression-era America. In the conclusion I return briefly to this contrast between Alfau’s novels and the proletarian literature of his time.

After the Civil War and the failure of his novels to gain public acceptance, Alfau seems to have begun to separate himself from his literary friends, and indeed, from all his acquaintances. Doris Shapiro, a friend of Alfau’s, writes with regret of his retreat from any hope of a literary life into a solitary and disappointed old age: “for some sad reason, he spent the next thirty years of his life travailing at a desk in the basement of a bank, reached by subway, where he translated commercial papers of no interest to him.”¹⁴ Ilan Stavans, Alfau’s greatest critical champion during the late 1980s and early 1990s, recalls his efforts to reach the old hermit by telephone in 1988:

Somebody with a peculiar, matured voice responded. Alfau was out of the country, he claimed, perhaps in Europe. He had sublet his apartment and was not expected back for several months. The man said *su apellido*, his own last name, was García, by profession a taxidermist. The joke was

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Doris Shapiro, “Hidalgo Redeemed.” *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (13:1), 198-202, p. 199.

clear. A protagonist, along with Dr. José de los Ríos, in his fictionalized universe, he had become a real entity to protect the writer's privacy . . . I finally decided to play the game—to unveil Alfau's identity, to live on a Pirandellian stage . . . after I rang the bell and he inquired who the visitor was, I answered, Felipe Alfau.¹⁵

After being out of print for more than fifty years, *Locos* was re-released in 1988 by Dalkey Archive Press, with a new and intensely complimentary afterword by Mary McCarthy. The consensus of critical opinion following the novel's return to print after fifty-two years was that it had failed to attract attention on its initial release only because the public was not prepared to accept it. Indeed, Paul Nathan's review in *Publishers Weekly* is entitled "Ahead of His Time."¹⁶

The new edition of *Locos* generated such a degree of favorable attention and excitement that *Chromos* was finally published in 1990, forty-two years after it was written. In a startling honor for a work published so far outside the time in which it was written, it was nominated for the National Book Award. The critical reception of *Chromos* was somewhat less enthusiastic than that of *Locos*. While Paul Nathan considered it, together with the earlier novel, to be an anticipation of postmodernism,¹⁷

¹⁵ Stavans, "Vitae", pp. 144-145.

¹⁶ See Mary McCarthy, afterword to *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*. New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1988, 201-204, p. 201, and Paul Nathan, "Ahead of His Time." *Publishers Weekly*. (237:3) 19 January 1990, p. 57. While not specifically claiming that Alfau is ahead of his time or that he prefigures postmodernism, Abigail Lee Six argues that *Locos* is "as much a work about fiction's creation of places outside time as about the antics of madmen." Abigail Lee Six, "Stepping Past the Edge of the Paper." *The Times Literary Supplement*. No. 4,530, p. 86.

¹⁷ Paul Nathan, op. cit.

Michael H. Begnal's more equivocal praise was: "Though this novel does have its longueurs, it is well worth pushing on through."¹⁸ Similarly, John Brenkman writes that "Mr. Alfau's experiments with pastiche end up obscuring rather than linking his central concerns."¹⁹ Carol Iannone flatly states that *Chromos* "deserve[s] publication as a literary curiosity and not much else."²⁰

Alfau's "rediscovery", which began with the re-release of *Locos*, saw an intense burst of critical writing on his works. In 1993 it truly must have seemed that Alfau, whose novels had sat for nearly fifty years gathering dust on the shelves of the "Library of Forgotten Masters," was indeed "finally thundering out of the shadow."²¹ Ilan Stavans and the other critics who wrote on Alfau in the late eighties and early nineties often argued for the literary value of his novels by comparing them with the works of Calvino and Nabokov, Garcia Marquez and Borges. They spoke in terms of his place in the tradition of magic realism and claimed that his works could be said to presage the self-referentiality of the postmodern novel. Stavans, for example, says, "the issue is not really to contrast and compare Alfau with those who came before him, but to finally place him among the living, his contemporaries and successors."²² In another piece, Stavans asks, "Since very few read him between the end of the Second World War and the late eighties,

¹⁸ Michael H. Begnal, review of *Chromos*. *Choice: Current Literary Reviews for College Libraries*. (27:10) June 1990, p. 1674.

¹⁹ John Brenkman, Review of *Chromos*. *New York Times Book Review*, 13 May 1990, p. 25.

²⁰ Carol Iannone, "Literature by Quota." *Commentary*. (91:3) March 1991, 50-53, p. 53.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

how could we recognize his style in, say, John Barth, Robert Coover, or Thomas Pynchon?

And yet, how could we not?"²³

This fierce burst of attention proved to be short-lived, and little has been written on Alfau in the past ten years. It is certain that Alfau's reactionary politics pose, as I suggested above, complications for the politically-conscious criticism of today. In the conclusion of the present work, I will argue that this may be one reason for the critical neglect he has suffered in recent years, and will suggest some reasons why Alfau deserves the attention of literary theory despite the distaste his politics are likely to arouse.

In the present work, I will argue that making claims for Alfau's prescience is not the best way to assess his potential value to American literature. The difficulty with these claims lies not only in the ahistoricity of the attempt to make Alfau a postmodernist, but also in the eagerness to place him in the camp of magic realism, which makes one wary of totalizing, stereotypical cultural assumptions (all writers who are native Spanish-speakers write magic realism, don't they?). In the present work I make no attempt to compare Alfau with authors belonging to the second half of the twentieth century. Rather, I prefer to position him in the literary context of his own time by exploring the links between his novels and the work of Luigi Pirandello, Ernest Hemingway, Wyndham Lewis, and other high modernists whom Alfau may have read and whose zeitgeist he certainly shared. This has seemed to me to offer the best way to differentiate Alfau from some strands of modernism and to connect him with others.

²³ Ilan Stavans, "Felipe Alfau." *Art and Anger: Essays on Politics and the Imagination*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996, p. 150.

III. Methodology

I intend to focus in this work only on Alfau's two novels. *La poesía cursi* and *Old Tales from Spain* are beyond the scope of the present inquiry. It was an easy decision to omit any extended examination of the poetry, as it, unlike the novels, was originally written in Spanish. The *Tales* may attract critical attention in the future, but at present, discourse on Alfau revolves almost entirely around the novels; since they are a rich, and hardly exhausted, source for discussion, I have resolved to continue in the same vein.

In Chapter 1, I discuss Alfau's novels as a site for the working-out of a conception of individual identity which, though it stresses the performative nature of identity, differs from the model of performativity offered by Judith Butler in that it does not completely collapse the distinction between individual and collective identity. Rather, Alfau's model offers a hierarchy of characters based on merit. Chapter 2 centers on Alfau's theorization of collective identity, focusing specifically on his ironic deployment of racial stereotypes and imagery borrowed from the nineteenth-century sentimental novel. Here I argue that Alfau's ironic subversion of the sentimental, as expressed in his frequent use of the Spanish word *cursi*, problematizes his apparent racial essentialism. In the conclusion, I will attempt to determine the extent to which Alfau's works may be useful to the twenty-first century literary theorist. I will also argue that the act of reading is also an act of identity construction on the part of the reader, and will caution the politically conscious postmodern critic who reads Alfau's work to consider the effects of the identity constructed by this act of reading.

The distinction I have set up between individual and collective identity is far from unproblematic. Much recent critical theory argues for the inseparability of individual identity from such collective categories as race, class, gender and nationality; on the one hand, individuals are granted subjectivity on the basis of gendered, raced, classed and national identities, and on the other, the same subjects are often complicit in the perpetuation of these collective categories. I will argue that Alfau is aware both of the ways in which individuals perpetuate collective categories, and of the large part played in the formation of individual identity by cultural forces which impose collective identity. However, the distinction between the two is useful in that it allows me to break this study into two chapters, the first of which deals with individual identity and, for the most part, takes its texts from *Locos*, and the second of which deals with collective identity and takes most of its texts from *Chromos*.

In the present work, I will use a wide range of critical tools, ranging from close reading to biographical criticism to literary theory. While in a discussion of the works of a better-known author this might seem to indicate a certain loss of focus, I would argue that for a more obscure author like Alfau this eclectic methodology is quite appropriate; it seems to me that in order to bring him “thundering out of the shadow,” one should be willing to throw light on him from any direction one can. One approach I have attempted to avoid is the emotive critical appreciation so favored by the small but vocal group of critics who have written on Alfau. Alfau has not made it easy to do this. His works elicit strong responses (in anyone who *has* read them, that is). However, I have been wary of taking up these critics’ laudatory tone. Alfau has enchanted me as surely as he has

enchanted them. His restless inventiveness and ruthless cynicism ensure that he is as much my “fatal type[:] the modernist novel as detective story” (in Mary McCarthy’s words from her 1988 afterword to *Locos*)²⁴ as he is theirs. But what is required in order to understand the full significance of Alfau’s project is a critical inspection of his texts, and of their cultural and political context. In the following chapters, this is the project I will undertake.

²⁴ Mary McCarthy, op. cit., p. 201.

Chapter 1

“Fingerprints Never Fail”: Insubordination, Performative Subjectivity and Meritocracy in Locos

One of the most striking features of *Locos* is its insistence on the instability and constructedness of individual identity. Mary McCarthy offers an incomplete summary of the difficulties involved in any attempt to trace the convoluted genealogy of the Bejerano family in *Locos*:

Lunarito is Carmen, who is going to be Sister Carmela; at one point we find her married to El Cogote, none other than her brother Gaston, who cannot, of course, *be* her brother if she is the daughter of the beggar, Don Laureano Baez. And yet Don Laureano’s wife, when we are introduced to him as the bartender of the Café de los Locos, is Felisa, which is the name of Carmen’s mother, the sister of Don Benito, the Prefect of Police.¹

The potential for failure inherent in this lack of stable subjectivity is illustrated by the case of Fulano, who is unable to construct an identity and commits suicide as a result.

Despite this dangerous instability of the subject, or rather in a desperate effort to fix it,

¹ Mary McCarthy, afterword to *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*. New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1988, p. 203. (Emphasis in the original.)

some of the novel's characters make repeated claims for a fixed and self-consistent individual identity. This tendency is most clearly seen in Don Gil Bejerano's obsession with his father's discovery of the uniqueness of fingerprints.

In this chapter, I will explore several related questions concerning Alfau's conception of subjectivity. To what extent are Alfau's characters allowed to "creat[e] their own life and standards," as he assures us they can?² What are Don Gil's motives for his interest in fingerprints? And why is Fulano unable to construct his own subjectivity, while other characters are able to do so? I will argue that Alfau's conception of subjectivity constitutes a move, which Alfau has in common with other modernists, away from the colonialist and bourgeois policing of identity represented by Don Gil's theory of fingerprints and toward a performative theory of subjectivity. I will also argue that Alfau's performative subjectivity is differentiated from postmodern conceptions of performativity by its typically modernist emphasis on merit as the criterion for subjecthood.

In the first section, I will argue that the theory of fingerprints set forth by Don Gil and his father is a reaction against the fluid subjectivity represented by some of the other characters, particularly by Juan Chinelato, and that its failure suggests a crisis within bourgeois imperialism's attempt to police identity by rendering it fixed and self-consistent. In the second section, I will argue that this fluid subjectivity represents a theory of performativity similar in many ways to that described by Judith Butler, but modernist in its emphasis on theatricality and intentionality; I will do this by exploring the links between Alfau's rebellious characters and those of Luigi Pirandello's *Six*

² Felipe Alfau, *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*. New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1988, p. xii.

Characters in Search of an Author. In the third section, I will argue that Alfau links subjectivity to merit, and will consider the ways in which this threatens established colonialist patterns of subjectivity, while setting up new forms of hegemony.

I. “The Man from China”: Fingerprints and the Colonial Subject

In “Chinelato”, the longest story in *Locos*, the protagonist, Juan Chinelato, a professional wrestler, criminal and entrepreneur, visits Don Esteban Bejerano y Ulloa, a minor colonial official residing in Manila in the last years before Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States. Chinelato was raised by Jesuits in China, but his parentage is uncertain. Though the story’s characters usually presume him to be Chinese, there are hints that his father and mother were Europeans. The purpose of his visit to Don Esteban is to ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage. Don Esteban refuses. For Don Esteban, despite the fact that Chinelato is wealthier and more influential than he, and despite the fact that Chinelato is more accustomed to receiving colonial officials’ visits than to paying calls on them, Chinelato’s status as a person of color is enough to disqualify him from marrying his daughter.

Thus, the meeting between Don Esteban and Chinelato is also a meeting between two competing conceptions of individual identity. For Don Esteban, identity is immutably bounded by the categories of race, class and gender. It is significant that Don Esteban is both a representative of empire and the discoverer of the uniqueness of fingerprints, a technology which enabled colonial governments to police the subject populations of empire. Chinelato, however, is surprised by Don Esteban’s rejection.

From his perspective, the exceptional intelligence and physical strength which have allowed him to amass his wealth and influence render him Don Esteban's social superior. In Chinelato's conception, then, individual identity, though inevitably raced, classed and gendered, is not entirely circumscribed by social constructions of race, class and gender. Chinelato possesses other socially valued characteristics which allow him to construct his own identity in defiance of the categories which Don Esteban attempts to police.

Ronald R. Thomas has argued, in the context of the British colonial project in India, that fingerprints are a technology of policing which allows the surveillance of the colonial subject. Writing on Francis Galton, the figure who first popularized the criminological use of fingerprints, Thomas argues that "the grand significance of this data rested on its power to confer a unique identity upon every human subject and to provide a method to prove that uniqueness beyond a shadow of a doubt."³ This marker of unique identity becomes for Galton a means to attempt to identify, and thus to police and control, not only criminals at home, but also colonized peoples abroad. Paradoxically, one significant feature of Galton's project was his attempt to discern patterns which would allow the observer to distinguish the subject's race from fingerprints alone, thus linking a move toward unique identity with a simultaneous move toward the generalization of racial difference.⁴ Don Esteban, as the inventor of fingerprints and a colonial official, thus embodies this link between identity and the policing of the colonial subject.

³ Ronald R. Thomas, "The Fingerprint of the Foreigner: Colonizing the Criminal Body in 1890s Detective Fiction and Criminal Anthropology." *ELH* (61:3), 1994, 655-683, p. 666.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 667-668.

It is typical of Alfau's indirection that he does not criticize imperialism openly. The confrontation between Don Esteban and Chinelato ends in a draw, for Don Esteban's quick withdrawal to Spain for the sake of his health prevents Chinelato from taking revenge. However, Alfau's critique of imperialism becomes apparent when Chinelato's later life is contrasted with that of Don Esteban and his descendants. Despite the fact that Chinelato is cheated of his revenge on Don Esteban, he goes on to a series of colorful adventures which end in an old age of comfortable, quiet wealth.

On the other hand, Don Esteban's return to Spain sentences his family to what Alfau calls the "hateful average" of life in the middle class, "a term which in Spain has a far sadder meaning than anywhere else, because of the fatal, everlasting qualities of classes there. It is difficult for a name to rise in Spain."⁵ Gil, Don Esteban's son, blends "[p]atriotism and fingerprint mania" with hopes that his father's discovery of the uniqueness of fingerprints will elevate the family from its middle-class anonymity to a higher status.⁶ The two points of pride which Don Gil feels in looking back on his father's career are Don Esteban's theory of fingerprints and the fact that Don Esteban drew a portrait of the king for use on postage stamps.⁷ Thus, Don Esteban becomes to his son a figure for the replication of both the display of imperial power—"the image of the King"—and the imposition of a unique, yet racialized, identity upon which the policing of empire depends.

⁵ Alfau, *Locos*, p. 57-58.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

Don Gil takes his father's theory of fingerprints to its logical conclusion when he tells his brother-in-law, Don Benito the Prefect of Police, that

“If a man were in China—” for Don Gil, as most Spaniards, China was the best example of remoteness—“and while he was there—not before or after—his fingerprints appeared on a given spot here in Madrid, he and no one else must have made those prints, and I would say to him: ‘You are the author of those fingerprints.’ ”⁸

At the end of “Fingerprints”, Don Esteban's colonial past is visited upon Don Gil, who is implicated by his father's own policing technology, the technology of fingerprints, in a crime he did not commit. Though Don Gil was not present at the scene of the murder, he is forced by his own adherence to his father's theory to confess to the crime. In a moment of metaphysical irony, Don Gil says, “I am the man from China . . . Fingerprints never fail.” Thus Don Gil becomes Chinelato, the colonial subject from whom his theory of fingerprints had been intended to differentiate him.

Alfau's critique of imperialism moves along similar lines as that of some other traditions of modernism. For example, Peter Nicholls describes the German Expressionists as “tend[ing] to value a radical aesthetic for its capacity to bring release from a claustrophobic social environment.”⁹ Alfau makes no claim for the rights of the colonial subject. Instead, his critique takes the form of a radical aesthetic of the mutable subject which suggests the ways in which imperialism defines both colonizer and

⁸ Ibid., p. 59.

⁹ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 138.

colonized too narrowly. In other words, the problem with imperialism, for Alfau, is that it attempts to fix a subjectivity which is and should always be so fluid and mutable that it can be rendered self-consistent only through repetition. The next section will attempt to understand this mutable, constantly repeated Alfauian subject through its similarities and differences with the theory of performative gender put forward by Judith Butler.

II. The Theatrical Subject: Alfau, Performativity and the Self-Constructing Character

In the Prologue to *Locos*, Alfau claims that his characters all possess the ability to construct themselves. Alfau suggests that his characters have gotten away from him, that they have broken his control over them; he charges them with “rebell[ing] against their creator’s will and command, of mock[ing] their author, toy[ing] with him, dragg[ing] him through some unsuspected and grotesque path all their own, often entirely contrary to that which the author has planned for them.”¹⁰ Through this fiction of the self-constructing character, the character who assumes his or her own identity through playing the role of himself or herself, Alfau appears to be granting them agency and subjectivity independent of the author. To what extent is the rhetorical stance of the Prologue borne out by the remainder of the text?

Alfau’s playful conceit of fictional characters seizing a life independent of the writer’s control not only accurately represents many writers’ descriptions of the evolution of their characters, but is also strongly reminiscent of Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1922).

¹⁰ Alfau, *Locos*, p. ix.

THE FATHER: . . . When the characters are really alive before their author, the latter does nothing but follow them in their action, in their words, in the situations which they suggest to him; and he has to will them the way they will themselves—for there's trouble if he doesn't. When a character is born, he acquires at once such an independence, even of his own author, that he can be imagined by everybody even in many other situations where the author never dreamed of placing him; and so he acquires for himself a meaning which the author never thought of giving him.¹¹

Since *Locos* was written six years after the first New York performance of *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and four years after the publication of the first Spanish translation,¹² it is likely that Alfau had the play in mind as he wrote. Certainly, the intensity with which Pirandello's characters insist on being heard is strongly echoed at some points in *Locos*.¹³

One could argue, as Mary McCarthy has, that this conceit of the characters who have a life independent of their author is a weakness in *Locos*. McCarthy objects to Alfau's use of the Pirandellian device on the grounds that, on her rereading of the work in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century, it seems dated and contrived:

¹¹ Luigi Pirandello, *Six Characters in Search of an Author. Sixteen Famous European Plays*, Bennett A. Cerf and Van H. Cartmell, eds. Edward Storer, trans. The Modern Library. New York: Random House, 1943, p. 660.

¹² Franco Zangrilli, "Pirandello and Alfau." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. (13:1): Spring, 1993, pp. 215-217.

¹³ The tendency to rebellion of Alfau's characters has also caused some writers to compare *Locos* to Miguel de Unamuno's *Niebla*, but Alfau claimed in a 1928 interview never to have read *Niebla* and to have "only heard of Unamuno as a philosopher." See Carmen Martín Gaité, "The Triumph of the Exception." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* (13:1), 174-182, p. 177.

In the Prologue, and occasionally thereafter, the author makes a great point of the uncontrollability of his characters, but this familiar notion (as in “Falstaff got away from Shakespeare”) is the least interesting feature. The changing and interchanging of the people, resembling “shot” silk, has no need of the whimsy of a loss of auctorial control. If any aspect of the book has aged, it is this whimsicality.¹⁴

I would suggest, however, that what may be read as an overused device is also an apt metaphor for the process of identity construction. As with a writer’s creation of a character, the process by which the subject constructs himself or herself is likely to lead in unexpected directions, because the only way in which such a mutable identity may be fixed is through repetition.

By invoking performativity as an important element in the construction of identity, I do not mean to suggest that Alfau understands performativity in the postmodern sense in which the term is used by Judith Butler. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler argues that the performance of gender roles is a response to a social imperative, without which society refuses to accord the individual the rights it awards to the sexed subject. Gender roles are thus “*compelled* by a regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality, one which reiterates itself through the forcible production of ‘sex.’ ”¹⁵ For Butler, then, individual identity is inextricably bound up with collective identity; though her primary concern is to demonstrate the links between the individual’s identity and the individual’s gender and

¹⁴ McCarthy, op. cit., p. 203.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 12.

sexual orientation, she also casts individual identity in terms of race and class. Butler also argues that performativity “is not primarily theatrical; indeed, its apparent theatricality is produced to the extent that its historicity remains dissimulated (and, conversely, its theatricality gains a certain inevitability given the impossibility of a full disclosure of its historicity).”¹⁶ Butler differentiates between performativity and theatricality in order to consider the performative nature of gender in terms of speech act theory rather than in theatrical terms,¹⁷ but this differentiation also allows her to emphasize the unintentional nature of her definition of performance.

For Alfau, however, performativity is intentional, and his characters’ determination to play the role to the hilt, to be the origin of the self-authored script, calls into question the boundaries between “fiction” and “reality.” In the story “A Character,” Gaston Bejerano, a character in a story recently begun by *Locos*’s narrator (who happens to be called Felipe Alfau) enters the real world and falls in love with a real woman named Lunarito, thus problematizing the boundaries between “fiction” and “reality.” Gaston’s first act upon entering reality is to exult at his new freedom:

Now that my author has set me on paper and given me a body and a start, I shall proceed with the story and tell it in my own words. Now that I am free from his attention I am able to do as I please. He thinks that by forgetting about me I shall cease to exist, but I love reality too much and I

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

intend to continue to move and think even after my author has shifted his attention from me.¹⁸

Many of Alfau's characters display this intentionality, the willfulness with which he charges them in the Prologue, most notably by their willful tendency to become one another. In addition to Mary McCarthy's list, with which I began this chapter, of characters who are in some sense interchangeable, the extent to which apparently individuated characters may be identified and confused with one another in *Locos* is further emphasized by the work's many cases of mistaken identity. In "The Wallet," Pepe holds up his uncle, Don Benito, because he mistakes Don Benito for a mugger who has just taken his wallet. The mugger, of course, is no common thief: he is Pepe's brother, Gaston.¹⁹ In "Chinelato," the secretary Cendreras is murdered because Don Laureano and his daughter Lunarito mistake him for Olózaga.²⁰

In many ways, Chinelato/Olózaga himself is the clearest figure for the unstable subject in *Locos*. He has multiple names (he is also often called "The Chink"), multiple wives and mistresses, and multiple careers which range from galley slave to professional wrestler to butterfly wrangler to theatrical producer. Don Esteban's refusal to allow his daughter to marry Chinelato is only one example of the persistent racism he faces. Even in his respectable old age the children of his quiet neighborhood sing a racially insulting song to him: "Alto, gordo y chato, / Juan Chinelato; / tira los garbanzos y se come al

¹⁸ Alfau, op. cit., p. 20.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 96-97.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 140.

gato.”²¹ Chinelato is bankrupted several times through various adversities and through his own profligacy, and is able to embark on a new career every time. Chinelato’s repeated refashioning of himself, his embodiment of the willful, self-constructing character, thus suggests a subjectivity which, as in Butler, is constructed and performative. This conception of performativity differs from Butler’s, however, in its conception of the relationship between the individual and society. For Butler, social forces infiltrate the individual to such a great extent that individual identity is inextricably bound up with socially-constructed categories of gender and sexuality, while for Alfau, these social forces are seen as opposed to, and external to, the individual.

One feature that Alfau’s mutable subjectivity shares with Butler’s is that it must be repeated in order to stabilize it. In Chinelato’s recollections of his childhood in China, for example, the language is simple and childlike, with the pointillistic, repeated images of the burning of his mother’s house and the concrete, visual phrase “thick beards” used to name the priests who raised him.²² As Chinelato grows, his language attains adult complexity, but the images of his childhood are always a part of his character, and the image of the burning house reappears several times in his story, culminating in the bonfire which burns in front of Don Laureano’s house to accompany the death of his secretary, Cenderas.²³ The repeated images of fire serve to link the disparate stages of

²¹ “Tall, fat and flat-nosed, / Juan Chinelato; / throws away the garbanzos and eats the cat.” Alfau, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 104-105.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Chinelato's life when there is little else which can link together this figure of many careers and names.

However, not every character in *Locos* is allowed the agency necessary for self-construction. In the first story/chapter of *Locos*, aptly titled "Identity," we meet Fulano,²⁴ the man whose identity is so nearly nonexistent that no one realizes when he is gone and he is nearly invisible. Fulano stages his own suicide at the instigation of Dr. José de los Rios.²⁵ Susan Elizabeth Sweeney argues that "Fulano's 'official' suicide is a would-be solution to the problem of 'being' to begin with. That is, it would solve the problem of being Fulano."²⁶ As a result of Fulano's sham suicide, however, an escaped criminal assumes Fulano's identity. The escaped criminal becomes "enormously famous, mind you, one of the best known politicians and businessmen, and accumulating a tremendous fortune. And I am nothing, I am absolutely lost, looking for some loose identity in order to find myself."²⁷ As a consequence of this "identity theft," Fulano is reduced to committing actual suicide.²⁸ Thus, the unfortunate end of Fulano's story points out the distinction between official identity (the criminal has appropriated Fulano's name) and some sort of personality (the criminal becomes successful in ways in which Fulano was not) which goes beyond the identity accorded to the individual by society.

²⁴ William Mooney points out that Fulano is "slang Spanish meaning any John Doe." See William Mooney, "Missing Persons." *American Book Review*. (11:4) September-October 1989, p. 15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

²⁶ Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "Aliens, Aliases, and Alibis: Alfau's *Locos* as a Metaphysical Detective Story." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. (13:1): Spring, 1993, p. 210.

²⁷ Alfau, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

The solution de los Rios offers to Fulano's dilemma is explicitly theatrical: he offers Fulano the chance to intentionally seek out a noteworthy death, a part in a clever, convoluted and melodramatic story. Alfau's characters and the situations in which they find themselves are stock characters and situations drawn from nineteenth-century melodrama; the playing of roles in Alfau's work is thus interrelated with stepping into a story, becoming part of a story. The self-consciousness with which Alfau draws attention to the theatricality of Fulano's double suicide suggests, then, that identity is so fluid that it must be repeated. Fulano's identity is a blank slate which, for Alfau, must be inscribed, not, as much critical theory would suggest, by hegemonic discourses of gender, race and class, but by a different kind of self-constructing discourse, that of the theater.

It is difficult to see Fulano's attempt to construct his own identity as anything but a failure. Why, then, is Fulano denied the degree of agency which Alfau accords to Chinelato? This question will be taken up in the final section, in which I will argue that Alfau's conception of individual identity is a meritocracy which accords subjectivity and agency to some exceptional individuals while refusing to grant it to others. I will also argue that this meritocracy, though it subverts bourgeois and imperialist distinctions of class and race, could itself set up a new hegemony, much as misconstructions of Nietzsche's theory of the *Übermensch* were used to support fascism.

III. Alfau, Meritocracy and Nietzsche's Übermensch

The fact that Chinelato succeeds in constructing his own subjectivity where Fulano fails is one illustration of Alfau's tendency to privilege some characters over

others on the basis of merit. The clearest difference between Butler's performativity, in which the subject is always bounded by gender, race and class, and Alfau's theatrical performativity is that Alfau leaves room for inborn, inherent differences in intelligence, strength, and other characteristics which enable some subjects to demonstrate their superiority over others. Though Chinelato is engaged, as is the Butlerian subject, in a repetitive citation of a script, the difference is that for Chinelato the script is self-authored. The fact that Chinelato is performing gender and race, for example, is made clear by his gleeful appropriation of both the physical strength conventionally associated with masculinity and the exotic stereotypes placed on him by Don Esteban and many of the other European characters. Ultimately, however, Chinelato's indomitability and entrepreneurial skill suggest that he is always performing himself.

For Alfau, the difference between Chinelato and Fulano which allows for the success of the former and the anonymous failure of the latter lies in Chinelato's strength and intelligence. In other words, Chinelato is able to play out his self-authored script because he deserves to, while Fulano lacks the merit which would allow him to do so. Chinelato's physical strength, for example, enables him to gain notoriety and to amass a fortune as a professional wrestler.²⁹ Alfau also cites as factors in Chinelato's success his unusual facility with languages, his energy, his quick wit, his "elastic conscience," his showmanship, and a certain amount of good luck.³⁰ His exceptional talent carries him through a series of bankruptcies, murder attempts, and other adversities.

²⁹ Alfau, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Chinelato's inclusion in this meritocracy of characters indicates Alfau's break from Don Esteban's bourgeois and imperialistic vision of hegemony, since it demonstrates that for Alfau merit is not determined by race or class. As I have argued above, Don Esteban and his son, Don Gil, represent conceptions of identity which are implicated both in colonialist hegemony and in the hegemony of the middle class. Thus, Don Esteban's rejection of Chinelato's offer to marry his daughter Felisa demonstrates his inflexible adherence to these nineteenth-century patterns of hegemony. When compared with Chinelato's success, the eventual failure of Don Esteban's family implies Alfau's critique of their outdated views on what constitutes merit. Alfau's meritocracy also differs greatly from the postmodern egalitarianism of Judith Butler, since, as discussed above, Butler allows all subjects an equal opportunity to subvert hegemony.

Because it resists both nineteenth-century and postmodern conceptions of identity, Alfau's deliberate construction of a meritocracy may be seen as modernist. Though meritocracy subverts existing patterns of hegemony, it fails to interrogate the concept of hegemony itself. As a result, instead of putting an end to hegemony, it inevitably sets up a new hegemonic paradigm in place of the old. One example of this effect of meritocracy may be seen in the modernist insistence on the superiority of the artist to his or her society. Peter Nicholls attributes to modernism, even as early as Baudelaire, a sense of the artist's superiority, which is an inevitable result of the artist's ironic detachment from that society.³¹ As I will demonstrate in Chapter 2, Alfau's use of irony is central to his project, which may be described as a literature of exile. Thus, Alfau's sense of his own

³¹ Nicholls, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

superiority leads to a merit-based solipsism which paradoxically links the detached, objective modernist artist with the Asian adventurer.

The potential political consequences of Alfau's meritocracy are similarly problematic. While Alfau does not participate in, and even critiques, the imperialist/bourgeois logic which claims that merit is inevitably linked to race and class, his meritocracy indirectly reinforces class distinctions. The suggestion that the subject writes his or her own script, and as a result bears full responsibility for his or her success or failure, has often been used as an excuse to limit welfare and other social programs which aid the poor. In this sense, then, the criteria by which merit is defined constitute the only difference between Don Esteban and Chinelato, for the beliefs of both reinforce a mentality which blames the victim of poverty and oppression. The ways in which Chinelato suggests the Nietzschean *Übermensch* are a reminder of the links between modernism and the fascist project of identifying the weak and the strong in order to separate the two.

Advocates of Nietzsche have often argued that fascism's adoption of his concept of the *Übermensch* willfully misconstrues his ideas. Walter Kaufmann argues that "Nietzsche was misunderstood as a Darwinist who expected the improvement of the human race in the course of evolution . . . Nietzsche himself rejected the evolutionary misinterpretation as the fabrication of 'scholarly oxen.'"³² Marshall Berman admits that Nietzsche is "another type of modern" from Marx, but breezily overcomes this objection in order to point out affinities of tone between the two:

³² Walter Kaufman, translator's preface to Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Trans. Walter Kaufman. New York: Penguin, 1966, p. xxii.

What is distinctive and remarkable about the voice that Marx and Nietzsche share is not only its breathless pace, its vibrant energy, its imaginative richness, but also its fast and drastic shifts in tone and inflection, its readiness to turn on itself, to question and negate all it has said.³³

However, it seems clear that, though the blame for fascism's misuse of Nietzsche's beliefs cannot be laid directly at his door, Nietzsche's meritocracy makes it dangerously easy to slide into fascism's abuses of that meritocracy. Furthermore, Berman's argument that the nineteenth century's political left and right had more to unite than to divide them could have the effect of obscuring this fact.

Alfau's meritocracy, too, seems to blame the victims of oppression. In "The Beggar," Don Esteban's older son, Don Laureano, is a beggar. Yet Don Laureano's off-duty manners and dress are urbane, he drinks good wine, and he is able to give charity to the poor poet Garcia.³⁴ Don Laureano is the only Bejarano who seems to escape the family's melodramatic fall into poverty and obscurity, and he does so by making a highly visible—and apparently quite comfortable—living as a beggar. Beneath the humor of the situation (it is an immensely funny scene) is Alfau's suggestion that a beggar can earn more money than a poet. From here it is only a short step, that desperately short fascist step, to the conclusion that any beggar who cannot afford to give away gold pieces must not be worth the government's expense in social programs that would keep him or her alive.

³³ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. New York: Penguin, 1988, pp. 22-23.

³⁴ Alfau, op. cit., pp. 45-48.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the typically modernist ways in which Alfau's characters performatively construct their individual identities within, or in opposition to, social roles associated with bourgeois identity and imperialism. In the next chapter, I will discuss the ways in which his novels theorize the formation of a social or cultural collective identity by examining the strategies Alfau's characters employ in defining and redefining collective identity, with particular attention to Alfau's ironic use of stereotype and cliché. This movement away from the individual and toward the collective is suggested by the texts for, though both of Alfau's novels deal with questions of both individual and collective identity, *Locos* is Alfau's clearer statement on the former, and *Chromos* his more extended exploration of the latter. Yet the links between the two concepts are clear: both novels participate in modernist discourses of exile, both set up racial distinctions and offer a discussion of them which at some points appears to reinforce racial essentialism and at some points to trouble it, and both novels complicate these distinctions with Alfau's characteristic irony, the irony of exile, the irony of the isolated modernist artist who is never at home, least of all in his or her homeland.

Chapter 2.

“Complications Set In”: National Identity and the Ironic Deployment of Cliché in Chromos

One reason why late-twentieth-century critics have so persistently seen Alfau as a proto-postmodernist is that he seems to be doing something different with the category of race than other modernists. In *Our America*, Walter Benn Michaels argues that “newly revised categories of collective identity—and, in particular, of collective *national* identity—began in the 1920s to occupy . . . a central position in American culture.”¹ In Michaels’s account, American modernist writers began, during this period, to develop a nativist discourse which constructed American identity by attributing essential racial differences to members of those internal minorities who were seen as being fundamentally not American (in Michaels’s account, particularly Jews and recent European immigrants). Indeed, for Michaels, these “nativist modernists” saw identity as an object of desire in ways which were new in their time. Furthermore, the nativist modernist tradition reinforced this belief in essential difference by means of an insistence on a fiction of incest by which generation could be kept, so to speak, in the family, and

¹ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, p. 6.

on an onomatopoetic correspondence between the word and the thing, the signifier and the signified.² Many of the canonical American modernists, then, were nativists for whom pluralism was the most suitable response to difference because it reinscribed that difference. It is not within the scope of this paper to critique or defend Michaels's controversial use of this assertion to argue against pluralism and identity politics and for assimilation; rather, I have adopted Michaels's concept of "nativist modernism" as a useful means for distinguishing Alfau from some strands of the modernist tradition and affiliating him with others.

Where, then, would Alfau fit into Michaels's narrative of nativist modernism? Given Alfau's well-known fascist sympathies, one might expect him to agree with the modernists Michaels identifies (Faulkner, Hemingway and Cather, for example) that assimilation is problematic and ultimately undesirable. Yet I will argue that Alfau is playing with discourses of race in a way which distinguishes him from the nativist/essentialist tradition of Faulkner and the other writers mentioned above. Though Alfau deploys a racial discourse which appears to suggest a belief in essential differences, his position as an immigrant, himself in a liminal state between American and not-American, complicates his stance. Significantly, Michaels's account of American literary modernism devotes no appreciable space to immigrant authors. Perhaps more importantly, Alfau's irony renders suspect any statement he makes concerning the category of race. Rather than the insistence on the signifier's equivalence with the signified which Michaels finds in the high modernist tradition, Alfau's ironic use of

² Ibid., pp. 2-3.

stereotype and cliché separate signifier word from signified, multiplying references to race in ways which question the category of race itself. In this, I will argue, Alfau agrees not with the nativist modernist tradition Michaels has described, but with an alternative modernist tradition, a modernism of exile typified by Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis, which engages in a similar ironic manipulation of clichés.

In the first section of this chapter, I will set out the ways in which Alfau appears to make essentialist statements on the difference between, in his words, the “Latin” and the “Anglo-Saxon” ethnicities. I will also attempt to expand Michaels’s model in order to allow space in it for Alfau’s experience as a first-generation immigrant. In the second section, I will discuss Alfau’s ironic manipulation of clichés, a technique which he associates with the Spanish word *cursi*. In the third section, I will compare Alfau’s use of irony, particularly as it relates to racial stereotypes, to similar uses of cliché by Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis. In the fourth section, I will read *Chromos* in light of this discussion of *cursi*, in order to see the ways in which Alfau’s irony throws into question his apparent essentialism.

I. “The National System”: The Literature of Exile and Alfau’s Apparent Essentialism

Chromos begins with the assertion that “When one learns English, complications set in.” The narrator is quoting, apparently with some approval, the infamous Don Pedro, who by various Spanish-speaking expatriates in New York is called “Don Pedro el Cruel” or “the Moor.” The Moor’s insistence on the distinction between “Latin” and “Anglo-Saxon” identity, and his claim that the Spanish character is comprised of equal parts

Visigoth and Moor (represented in the novel by Dr. de los Rios and himself, respectively), appears to be an argument for essential racial differences. In this section I will discuss the ways in which Alfau appears to be reinforcing racial essentialism, while in the remainder of the chapter I will interrogate this view.

In this chapter, I use the term “race” to describe the distinction between Hispanic and Northern European ethnicities. This is consistent with Alfau’s own use of the word. In the first paragraph of *Chromos*, for example, the narrator claims that when native speakers of Spanish learn English, “they lose that racial characteristic of taking things for granted.”³ I use the term in this way primarily because Alfau does so, though it is also worth noting that a reappropriation of the term has been seen by many Latinos as liberatory, in part because it allows them to see their struggle against oppression as parallel with the struggle of African-Americans.⁴ I do not use the term from a wish to suggest any biological differences between Hispanics and other Europeans, or any monolithic racial category into which all native speakers of Spanish may be combined.

The “Americaniards” in *Chromos* inhabit a liminal space between the United States and Spain and belonging properly to neither. The resulting cultural dislocation leads to the drunkenness, aimlessness and depression of Alfau’s Spanish expatriates in New York, a state of exile which mirrors in many respects the exile of Hemingway’s American expatriates in Spain in *The Sun Also Rises*. For both Hemingway and Alfau, this state of exile inevitably raises the question of the relationship between the expatriate

³ Felipe Alfau, *Chromos*. New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990, p. 7.

⁴ William Luis, *Dance Between Two Cultures: Latino Caribbean Culture Written in the United States*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997, pp. 280-281.

and the host culture. In light of Michaels' situation of Hemingway with Faulkner in the nativist modernist tradition, however, it is interesting to note that for Hemingway's Americans the way to be a good expatriate is to adopt, at least temporarily, the customs and to interact with the people of the host culture, while for Alfau's Americaniards the central problem is how to maintain the cultural identity which provides the expatriate's tenuous link to home.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, two very different kinds of expatriate are represented by Jake Barnes and Robert Cohn. Barnes speaks Spanish well and repeatedly shows himself willing to adapt to Spanish culture. Cohn, on the other hand, is unable, even temporarily, to immerse himself in Spanish culture. Cohn is conspicuously absent from the Barnes's fishing trip to Burguete with Bill Gorton. On the bus to Burguete, Gorton and Barnes drink from wineskins with Basques while riding on top of the bus.⁵ During the running of the bulls at Pamplona, Brett Ashley and her lover Mike wear Basque berets, while Cohn is bare-headed.⁶ For Barnes, Cohn's reluctance to fall in with the mood of the festival compares unfavorably with the others' willingness to do so. More important than these rather superficial engagements with the host culture, however, is Barnes's appreciation and understanding of bullfighting. He calls this appreciation by its Spanish name, *afición*. Bullfighting aficionados who meet Barnes for the first time are invariably skeptical of him, because it is "taken for granted that an American could not have *afición*," but he takes pride in pointing out that he always convinces them

⁵ Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Macmillan, 1986, p. 104-105.

⁶ Ibid., p. 134.

eventually.⁷ For Hemingway, Barnes's possession of *afición* for the consummately Spanish art of bullfighting makes him a successful expatriate, an example of the merit-based model of identity I discuss in Chapter 1. By way of contrast, it is precisely Cohn's lack of *afición*, concretized in his fight with Pedro Romero, the bullfighter, which serves as the novel's strongest critique of Cohn as an inept traveler.

For Alfau, however, immigration represents a threat to the distinction between "Latin" and "Anglo-Saxon" to which his characters cling. Spaniards who spend time abroad begin to lose some of the more obvious cultural characteristics which the Moor calls "the National System,"⁸ but there seem to be some features of Spanish identity which can never be abandoned. Thus, in the chapter of *Locos* entitled "The Wallet," Pepe begins his conversation with his uncle as a foreigner, reserved, cool, and unable to react appropriately to his uncle's cultural cues. When Don Benito calls him "*sinvergüenza*" (shameless), Pepe, much to Don Benito's surprise, reacts calmly.⁹ When Pepe hears that his brother has become a "*chulo*" (pimp), however, his Spanish upbringing comes out and he acts much as his uncle would have expected.¹⁰ The stereotype of the Latin man who is fiercely defensive of family honor is a part of Don Pedro's "National System."

⁷ Ibid., p. 132.

⁸ Ibid., 126.

⁹ Felipe Alfau, *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*. New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1988, pp. 82-83.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

In *Chromos*, the Moor describes a type of Spanish expatriate who gives up Spanish customs in an attempt at assimilation by the scornful coined term “Americaniards.” The term is rather elastic:

[Don Pedro] had begun originally to employ [it] when referring to Spaniards in the Americas and at one time might have included Latin Americans, but . . . at present it applied to Spaniards in New York and . . . by association to other foreigners, especially of Latin origin.¹¹

The clearest example of Don Pedro’s use of the term in its pejorative sense is its application to the “green man,” the *antipático* Spaniard who “could stand nothing Spanish since he took out his first papers.”¹² The Moor contemptuously dismisses the green man’s acceptance of the American concept of the equality of the sexes,¹³ in a rhetorical move which opposes Spanish machismo to American effeminacy. The narrator further feminizes the green man by describing him as “shrieking” and “fanning himself with his handkerchief.”¹⁴ It is to such repentant expatriates as the green man that Don Pedro refers in his complaint that “when they leave Spain, they begin to think.”¹⁵ Don Pedro’s sense that living in an English-speaking culture causes Spanish immigrants to overanalyze experiences which in Spain they had understood solely through their emotions is echoed in the words which begin *Chromos*: “The moment one learns English,

¹¹ Alfau, *Chromos*, p. 13.

¹² Ibid., p. 131.

¹³ Ibid., p. 132.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 131.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 127.

complications set in.”¹⁶ Don Pedro’s words appear to argue for an essential Spanishness which is threatened when Spanish-speaking immigrants set foot on English soil.

[I]n the case of Latins, they lose that racial characteristic of taking things for granted and leaving them to their own devices without inquiring into causes, motives or ends, to meddle indiscreetly into reasons which are none of one’s own affair and to become not only self-conscious, but conscious of other things which never gave a damn for one’s existence.¹⁷

In contrast to the green man, the other Spanish characters in *Chromos* retain many of their stereotypically Spanish traits. For example, the Moor defends Bejerano’s habit of getting his girlfriends to clean for him by making it a point of national character,¹⁸ a point to which I return in the conclusion. Alfau’s Spaniards complain that there is “no space or time, which is what one has plenty of in Spain”¹⁹ and are suspicious of America’s “ease” and convenience.²⁰

The weight of personal memory for Alfau’s Spanish characters is intensified and overdetermined by the weight of history, which follows them across the Atlantic. In “Identity”, the first story/chapter in *Locos*, Fulano’s walk through Toledo immediately after he has faked his suicide allows the city’s medieval character to show through in an almost palimpsestic manner:

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 170.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 124.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 151.

each step he took was like dropping a century into the past, until he emerged in the midst of a posthumous life. Toledo . . . is a city of silence, but not a city of peace; at night it multiplies its interests, it becomes a city of horror, of fearful dreams of the past, of dreadful historical nightmares . . . He could sense the heavy atmosphere charged with the deadly breath of the Inquisition . . . Fulano knew he had been swallowed by this maelstrom of the past, that he had sunk back centuries in history, and had already lost his identity of present existence. He was choking from this overwhelming feeling of condensed time, he was hopelessly lost in this darkness of thousands of superimposed past nights, in this labyrinth of streets that tossed him to and fro, threatening to drag him in their ominous stream and thrust him down into the Tajo, into oblivion.²¹

Now that Fulano has been divested of his personal identity, Spain's long centuries of history intrude upon him so strongly that they threaten, in imagery of drowning, to overwhelm him. It is appropriate that, though most of the novel's characters live in Madrid, Fulano's walk takes place not in the capital, but in Toledo, which retains many of its old buildings and much of its medieval street plan. For Alfau, the people of Spain, a land with a great past and a faded glory, will feel the weight of history more keenly than natives of other countries. Spain's imperial past has collapsed and left Spaniards with cultural memory, and little else.

²¹ Alfau, *Locos*, pp. 10-11.

Alfau's emphasis on a Spanish cultural memory seems in some ways to parallel Michaels's account of the construction of an American collective identity. However, the narrative of Michaels's American nativists is one of progress, of unbounded possibility, while that of Alfau's Spanish expatriates is inevitably one of a fall from former colonial hegemony to present-day powerlessness. In order to situate Alfau in his place as an American modernist, then, we must expand Michaels's model to accommodate Alfau's difference as a recent European immigrant. While the writers of Michaels's modernist canon attempt to form an American identity by excluding those seen as being not essentially American, Alfau's characters attempt to maintain their own Spanish identity, which they characterize as racially separate from that of Anglo-Americans. Thus, each group forms its own identity by excluding the other, and nativist modernism on the one hand is opposed to a modernist literature of exile on the other.

In this section, I have examined the Moor's distinction between an "Anglo-Saxon" character, which is feminized and overly accustomed to ease, and a "Latin" character which is marked by patriarchy and overdetermined by history. To what extent is this the author's distinction? Can we take Alfau at his word? In the next section, I will turn from my discussion of race and national identity to an exploration of Alfau's technique of the ironic manipulation of cliché, a technique which he describes with the Spanish word *cursi*. In sections three and four, I will return to Alfau's use of racial stereotypes in order to demonstrate that he consciously employs them in *cursi* ways in order to call them into question.

II. “*This Season That Never Fails*”: Ironic Deployment of the *Cursi* in the Works of Garcia

The final chapter of *Locos*, “A Romance of Dogs,” unexpectedly shifts the novel’s focus away from Madrid and the Bejarano family to explore the formative period in the poet Garcia’s childhood during which his family moves to a village in the Pyrenees called Viscaitia. The story is strange and beautiful, framed by the ominous figures of the two bloodthirsty dogs and the contrasting image of Garcia’s mother riding a horse with light streaming down upon her. However, as with much of Alfau’s work, “A Romance of Dogs” is constructed from stock situations and outworn literary devices, which call attention to themselves so forcefully that the reader is oppressed by the weight of seemingly endless layers of convention and cliché. In the case of “Identity,” for example, Alfau employs the convention of mistaken identity, while in the case of “A Romance of Dogs,” he makes similar use of the form of the *bildungsroman*.

What prevents Alfau’s use of these clichés from being itself a cliché is the cynical self-consciousness with which he summons and parodies them. The word Alfau uses to describe the body of conventions which he employs and deploys in his works is *cursi*. In this section I will argue that Alfau’s work is defined by a tension between *cursi* and anti-*cursi*, between a love of and respect for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic and sentimental novel on the one hand and an ironic distance from it on the other, represented by Garcia and the narrator of *Chromos* respectively. I will also argue that Alfau uses this fund of Gothic and sentimental imagery in order to renew it, in much the same way that Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* draws on and expands the tradition of

Hollywood gangster films. In both cases, the clichés are employed consciously and revised in order to lend them an ironic, contemporary tone.

It is only in “A Romance of Dogs” that we begin to recognize the central place which Garcia occupies in Alfau’s cycle of mythology. Garcia, who in “A Romance of Dogs” is associated with spring, the “season that never fails,” hates spring in New York.²² Alfau never explains this change in Garcia, but it may be simply the result of his homesickness. What Garcia loves, in other words, is not spring, but spring in Spain. It would make sense that Garcia, of all Alfau’s Americaniards, would harbor this conventional sentiment, because he is the mouthpiece in Alfau’s works of the conventional sensibility. Garcia’s writing is utterly dependent on convention. His works make extensive use of stock literary devices drawn from nineteenth-century romances. The clearest example, Garcia’s novel in progress, the history of the Sandoval and Serrano families which takes up much of the body of *Chromos*, is reminiscent in some passages of the historical romance of Victor Hugo and Walter Scott, in others of the complex family histories of Tolstoy, in others of Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic melodrama. When the irascible narrator objects to Garcia’s material and his treatment of it, Garcia replies that he has attempted to give his writing a feel that is “old-fashioned” and “stilted . . . to fit the period,”²³ an effect which he calls in Spanish “*cursi*.”

In *Chromos*, Alfau translates *cursi* as “corny.” However, the word also carries the meaning of “sentimental.” Thus, the title of Alfau’s book of poems, *La poesía cursi*, has

²² Ibid., p. 74.

²³ Alfau, *Chromos*, p. 56.

been translated into English as *Sentimental Songs*. Antonio Candau gives a brief etymology of *cursi*:

it defies definition and everybody seems to have his or her own opinion about what is and what is not *cursi*. The etymological origin of *cursi* is under dispute but it is certain that the word was born in the nineteenth century in Spain and its history is closely tied to that of the bourgeoisie, a class that in Spain does not start to appear with its modern face until the 1800s and whose role is not a prominent one until the next century . . . *Cursi* does not appear until the 1900s [*sic*] because until then there was not a real bourgeoisie in Spain and the *cursi* is a quality of bourgeois behavior. The bourgeois is a person satisfied with what he has but not with what he is.²⁴

Furthermore, Candau links the *cursi* qualities of Garcia's novel in *Chromos* to its basis in Garcia's memories, "not because of some inherent defect in that kind of literature but rather because memory, and furthermore, literature, shares some of the traits of something or somebody *cursi*."²⁵ Memory does haunt both *Locos* and *Chromos*, and they are built from blocks of memory as they are built from literary conventions, "built on the debris of others' stories, of others' experiences and thoughts, and of others' language."²⁶

²⁴ Antonio Candau, "Literature Is Corny: The *cursi* and Felipe Alfau's *Chromos*." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. (13:1): Spring, 1993, pp. 226-227.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 226.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 227.

Alfau's ironic stance toward the *cursi* is, at least in part, precisely a stance, a pose which allows him to critique bourgeois literary conventions on the one hand while on the other he is clearly fascinated by them. The reader is almost startled to realize that, for all the narrator's justified complaints about Garcia's novel, it is one of *Chromos*'s more compelling strands. Alfau bitterly complains about the *cursi* at the same time that he unabashedly revels in it, and this ambivalence toward it is the result of his complicity in it. As Candau argues, "Whoever feels ironic towards the *cursi* in the other also feels his own weakness, his community with the other, his own part in the *cursi* about which he is laughing."²⁷

There is no shortage of examples of the *cursi* sensibility in *Locos* and *Chromos*. One of the most striking, and obsessively repeated, is the theme of incest. In "Fingerprints" from *Locos*, Gaston and Carmen's illicit love serves as a backdrop for the conversation of their parents, Don Benito, and Padre Innocencio. In a footnote, Alfau ironically presents their interruption of the adults' discussion of fingerprints as "forcing themselves into this narrative against my orders."²⁸ The parents quarrel about how to deal with Gaston and Carmen while Padre Innocencio (the name is, of course, ironic as well) comments loudly on the quality of his hosts' hot chocolate. The scene is played not for horror, but for savage humor. Similarly, in *Chromos*, the implied incest between Paco and his half-sister Laura adds Gothic detail to the downfall of the Serrano and Sandoval families.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 227.

²⁸ Alfau, *Locos*, p. 65f.

Alfau's ironic use of the trope of incest differs strongly from the treatment of the theme which Michaels finds in *The Sound and the Fury*, to which I refer in the introduction to this chapter. Incest is not used by Alfau as a fantasy of endogamy which serves to promote national unity. Rather, the use of incest in Alfau's work is a Gothic flourish, a conscious deployment of melodrama which allows the reader to simultaneously react emotionally to and maintain an objective distance from the Bejerano family's fall. As with other *cursi* elements in *Locos* and *Chromos*, it is used as part of an uneasy, but consciously maintained, balance between sincerity and ironic detachment.

Alfau's ironic appropriation of culturally loaded images does not end with clichés borrowed from the Gothic and romantic novel. The repeated use of stereotypes which is a central feature of both *Locos* and *Chromos* may be seen as ironic in the same way. Thus, the essentialism apparent in the exoticized, Orientalized depiction of Juan Chinelato, in the "complications set in" passage which opens *Chromos* and elsewhere, may be seen as subversive, as an ironic revision of the stereotypes which points out their learned and arbitrary nature and their foundations in the discourse of race.

In many ways, the distinction Alfau sets up between Spain and the United States rests on rather conventional and stereotyped images of the two nations. Perhaps the most noticeable is Don Pedro's repeated assertions, described above, that Spaniards should not rely too heavily on the intellect. Here Don Pedro plays into the common Anglo stereotype which suggests that Hispanics are less rational and more emotional than Anglos. Often, however, the lines Alfau draws tend to trouble the traditional boundaries. After the paella dinner with the Bejaranos, the Moor speaks slightly of

America's "ease." Everything is too easy in America, he believes. However, he also equates after-dinner conversation and wine,²⁹ surely a stereotypically Spanish, and more generally, an Old World custom, with "ease." As with individual characters, Alfau's collective identity is so mutable and fluid that, after two novels in which national identity is a central theme, one is uncertain which characteristics belong to the American characters and which belong to the Spanish-speaking ones.

Again Don Pedro troubles the boundaries by questioning the stereotype of the "Latin lover" when he says that "the Spaniard is fundamentally ascetic, almost frigid,"³⁰ that the Spaniard is never in a hurry for food, wine or sex. At the same time, the stereotype of the impatient, energetic American is interrogated in *Chromos*, in which impatience is the defining trait of two Spanish characters, Don Sandoval and Ramos.

In this section I have demonstrated that Alfau's irony complicates the apparent essentialism of his distinction between "Latin" and "Anglo-Saxon." In the next section, I will trace the connections between Alfau's ironic use of racial stereotypes and that found in what I will call a modernist tradition of exile literature, exemplified by Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis. The conscious use and refashioning of stereotypes seen in the works of Stein, Lewis and Alfau will allow me to differentiate this modernism of exile from the nativist modernist tradition exemplified for Michaels by Hemingway and Faulkner.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 152-153.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 170.

III. Vitriol and the Cursi: Racial Discourse in Gertrude Stein and Wyndham Lewis

Michael North has argued that the fascination African masks held for Gertrude Stein and Picasso was one which reinforced racial stereotypes, even while it pointed out their artificiality. “To feel oneself in two places at once, at home and abroad, is almost to feel as two persons and thus to acquire a skepticism about the possibility of ever having an identity, if that means being just one thing. Seen in this light, a mask is the embodiment of the variability and indeterminacy of human identity.”³¹ The mask is both concrete and abstract at once; it remains a sign of the exoticism of the colonized even as it becomes a part of the rebellion of the modernists against a Eurocentric colonial culture.³² Thus discourses of race and the trope of the exiled artist are linked both to aesthetic form and to a rebellion against hegemonic national identity.

In the final section of Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914), called “Rooms,” the impressionistic images of other objects become interwoven with images of “A little lingering lion and a Chinese chair.”³³ Later, the Chinese chair becomes “Alike and a snail, this means Chinamen, it does there is no doubt that to be right is more than perfect there is no doubt.”³⁴ Stein deploys racial discourse in such a way that it slips into and out of focus, so that a Chinese chair becomes Chinamen, which mean the same thing as a

³¹ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 67.

³² Ibid., p. 66.

³³ Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*. Mineola: Dover, 1997, p. 44.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 45.

snail. Michaels's nativist modernism, which insists on the identity of signifier and signified, has become, for Stein as well as for Alfau, a modernism of exile which separates signifier and signified, which plays with signifiers until they are virtually meaningless.

An apparently different example of the high modernists' deployment of discourses of race may be found in Wyndham Lewis's vitriolic *Paleface*, which appeared a year after *Locos* was written but seven years before its publication. Lewis presents his project as a critique of fashionable liberalism, in which he detects a hint of Puritanism: "it is *conscience* that makes cowards, or saints, or just sentimental pinky-pinky little *Palefaces* of us . . . When a person as it were *selfishly* immolates himself, in response to some very tawdry emotional appeal, we call it a sentimentality."³⁵ This passage demonstrates that Lewis shares several traits with Alfau: first, the immediate juxtaposition of incongruous images in Lewis's prose is similar to that found in Alfau. In the passage quoted above, for example, the quotation from Shakespeare collides with the "pinky-pinky" slur on Communism and the reactionary appropriation of the cultural marker "paleface", all in a single sentence. Here Lewis's technique of unexpected juxtapositions is not entirely unlike Stein's.

More importantly, however, Lewis shares with both Stein and Alfau a dependence on irony which is inseparable from the content and which is perhaps one of the central aspects of the content. In this passage, Lewis's irony creates an inversion of the cultural prohibition against miscegenation which acts to reinforce that prohibition:

³⁵ Wyndham Lewis, *Paleface: The Philosophy of the "Melting-Pot"*. New York: Haskell House, 1969, p. 6.

My sense of what is just suffers when I observe some poor honest little pale-faced three-pound-a-week clerk or mechanic being bullied by the literary Borzoi big-guns of Mr. Knopf, and told to go and kiss the toe of the nearest Negress, and ask her *humbly* (as befits the pallid and unpigmented) to be his bride.³⁶

While it is true that Alfau's and Stein's irony tends to be gentler and more playful, Lewis's far more acerbic, I would suggest that, for all three authors, the use of irony troubles the racial distinctions on which they insist. For example, Lewis states, on the first page of *Paleface*, that "it will of course be difficult to prove that the Paleface is *better* than his Black or Yellow brother, not only because it is not true, but also because it is so unpopular a notion."³⁷ It would be difficult to demonstrate that Lewis is disavowing essentialism with a straight face here, but it would be equally difficult to demonstrate that he is using irony to reaffirm it. In *Fables of Aggression*, Fredric Jameson argues, in discussing Lewis's sexism, that

Lewis' expression of this particular *idée fixe* is so extreme as to be virtually beyond sexism. Misogyny in Lewis no longer exists at the level of mere personal opinion, as is the case, for example, with the various attitudes and 'ideas' of a Balzac or a Faulkner, whose narratives so often function as vehicles for some irrepressible authorial intervention. Indeed, the stable subject or ego which could alone 'entertain' such opinions has

³⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

in Lewis been dissolved, so that they come before us in a virtually free-floating state, as unbound impulses released from the rationalizing censorship of a respectable consciousness intent on keeping up appearances.³⁸

Lewis's racism in *Paleface* reaches a similar extreme, an extreme which dissolves the ego of the racist, which interrogates the very possibility of such a subject. It is in this that Lewis's similarity with Alfau lies. Alfau's insistence on national identity thus becomes a sign of the dissolution of that identity.

Though Stein and Lewis differ from Alfau in that the discourses of race they employ center on stereotypes of Africans and Asians, all three authors use these discourses with an irony which destabilizes the stereotypes to such an extent that they are almost meaningless. In the final section of this chapter, I will turn to readings of Alfau, particularly of the characterizations of Dr. José de los Rios and of Don Pedro the Moor, in order to explore the ways in which Alfau's ironic deployment of the *cursi* sensibility complicates his apparent essentialism. I will also differentiate his rendering of the meeting between Anglo and Hispanic cultures from Homi K. Bhabha's postmodern celebration of hybridity.

IV. The Visigoth and the Moor: Dissolution of National Identity in Alfau

The figures in Alfau's novels who exemplify this ironic dissolution of identity are Dr. José de los Rios and Don Pedro, also known as the Moor. It is typical of Alfau's

³⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979, pp. 20-21.

irony that the character who most clearly makes this division between Spain and the United States is Don Pedro, the Moor. Don Pedro Guzman O'Moore Algoracid, who himself "boasted of pure unadulterated Irish and Moorish blood and ancestry which, according to his genealogical chemistry, made him the most castizo Spaniard,"³⁹ is the champion of essential difference between men and women, and between "Spaniard" and "Anglo-Saxon." It is Don Pedro who satirizes under the name "Americaniard" Spanish immigrants who give up their Spanish cultural identity and adopt American customs.⁴⁰

The "European" side of the Spanish character which Alfau sets up to oppose the Moor is Dr. José de los Rios. Don Pedro is associated repeatedly with Mephistophelean imagery. At one point, the narrator describes "the dark sleeve of the Moor clos[ing] over my shoulders like the cloak of Satan, propelling me along to my doom."⁴¹ By way of contrast, Dr. de los Rios is sarcastically called "Jesucristo" by Don Pedro, and indeed Don Pedro claims that "Every day he looks more like Jesus Christ, with that clean air about him, those blue eyes and light hair and that well-kept beard."⁴² The narrator suggests that the division between the two "was part of the national history and structure. It was ethnological and racial within the same country, one showing the Visigoth and the other the Moorish influences."⁴³ In keeping with this concept of a national character with two poles, the Moor describes himself and de los Rios as the foci

³⁹ Alfau, *Chromos*, p. 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴² Ibid., p. 249.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 11.

of an ellipse which contains all the characters in *Chromos*, and claims that these two foci are brought together only through an impromptu concert of Spanish guitar music at the party at El Telescopio which ends the novel.⁴⁴

Thus, if one reads *Chromos* with the view that the Moor is Alfau's mouthpiece, as Alfau's irreligious bent might lead one to do (it would satisfy Alfau's sense of irony to use a character whom he has associated with Satan in order to express his own ideas), one will read Alfau as reinforcing essentialism. Don Pedro is such a striking character that it is easy to see him as voicing Alfau's own ideas, and to read his defense of Spanish "racial" identity as sincere. Yet to do so is to miss the irony which leads Alfau to make an expatriate of Irish and Moorish ancestry the mouthpiece of "castizo" (pure) Spanish culture, particularly when he emphasizes his pronouncements by waving a shillelagh and earns his living as a bandleader who is "often referred to as the Emperor of Latin American music and the Svengali of Swing"⁴⁵—hardly qualities which would normally make one a castizo Spaniard.

Furthermore, Don Pedro's foil, Dr. de los Rios, naturally disagrees with Don Pedro's claims for essential difference. De los Rios responds to the Moor's argument that learning English creates complications for people of Latin ancestry by suggesting that "complications generally set in whenever one learns anything." The narrator responds, with Alfauian irony, "I want to believe that this argument is churlish, eclectic

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 295.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

and inconvenient to the purpose of my reasoning.”⁴⁶ The fact that the narrator *wants* to doubt de los Rios suggests that he has some difficulty in doing so. That is, de los Rios wants to deny the existence of essential differences, and since the narrator’s stated purpose is to explore the cultural differences between Spain and the United States, he cannot agree with de los Rios. Or perhaps he cannot agree with him yet.

So perhaps it is most accurate to see Alfau’s conception of the difference of the Spanish expatriate as neither essentialist nor anti-essentialist, but as suspended between the two foci of the ellipse. At a glance, this conflict in *Chromos* between the Moorish and the Visigothic antecedents of Spanish culture, and between Spanish expatriates and their American surroundings, may remind the postmodern reader of Homi K. Bhabha’s interest in the hybridity that results from the meeting of cultures, a transitional state exemplified in the following passage by the stairwell as an image of freedom.

The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.⁴⁷

Though both Alfau and Bhabha examine the effects of confrontations between cultures, for Bhabha the interest is in the interstices. His emphasis on the liberatory potential of

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

⁴⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 4.

the “stairwell,” of the lacunae between cultures, is the result of his attempt to escape the “assumed or imposed hierarchy” of centuries of colonial control.

Thus, Bhabha’s celebration of liminality, of in-betweenness, theorizes the meeting of cultures very differently from Alfau’s description of a Spanishness which struggles to reconcile the two foci of the ellipse. Rather than seeing hybridity as a solution, Alfau sees it as a difficulty. As the Moor ruefully says, “We are living contradictions.”⁴⁸ And these contradictions—between the Visigoth and the Moorish, between Spain’s conquistadoric past and its Bejeric present—can be understood and overcome only by means of irony. This, finally, is the significance of Alfau’s *cursi*. It occupies the place in his work that hybridity occupies in Bhabha’s. The bad poet and novelist Garcia represents the only liberation which Alfau is able to offer his reader: the liberation of the cynical—but shared—laugh at the impossibly sad joke of exile.

V. Conclusion: Alfau and Liminality

Though biographical criticism is in many ways so speculative as to be tentative at best, I find it difficult to resist the temptation to engage in a brief moment of speculation on the relationship between Alfau’s conception of identity and his own identity as a Spanish-American. It is hardly surprising that the issue of identity should be at the center of an immigrant’s work. The necessity, thrust upon Alfau at the age of fourteen, of constructing an American identity distinct from that which he owed to his upper-middle-class Spanish roots may have contributed to his idiosyncratic formulation of identity,

⁴⁸ Alfau, *Chromos*, p. 346.

which, as I have argued in this work, is at once colored by considerations of race, class and gender and marked by an attempt to be independent of them.

It is a decidedly Alfauian irony that this act of self-construction should lead an immigrant to deplore more recent waves of immigration, as Alfau does in the interview with Ilan Stavans quoted in the introduction. It is similarly Alfauian that Alfau, whose works simultaneously praise and call into question Spanish immigrants' attempts to maintain their own culture, should owe his rescue from obscurity, at least in part, to late twentieth-century efforts to recover the works of Spanish-speaking immigrants. In the conclusion, I will further explore the complications attendant on Alfau's recovery by postmodern critics, and will argue that the difficulties presented us by his politics should not prevent us from giving his work the consideration it deserves.

Conclusion

Alfau, Modernist Politics and Postmodern Critical Identity

In the chapters that make up the body of this work, I have argued that Felipe Alfau's novels call attention to the constructed nature of his characters' personal and national identities, but that their methods of doing so mean that Alfau has more in common with modernist writers of his time than with the later postmodern writers with whom he has often been compared. In the conclusion, I will turn to another moment of identity formation which is inevitably linked with the reading of Alfau, namely the creation of the critic. Since the act of reading also necessarily involves the construction of a critical identity, in my final thoughts on Alfau's work I would like to draw attention to the ways in which Alfau's politics, though I find them personally distasteful, may allow us to better understand my own identity as a contemporary leftist, politically-conscious literary critic. I will begin with a discussion of the difficulties Alfau's modernist politics cause for the postmodern critic, which will lead into a related discussion of his potential uses for contemporary literary theory.

I. Alfau's Modernist Politics

Alfau's conservatism unavoidably causes difficulties for any project which attempts to recover his work for early twenty-first century readers. Given the current leftward-leaning climate of literary criticism, of which I openly confess myself to be a part, Alfau's avowed support of Francisco Franco's regime is nearly certain to force any scholar who studies him into one of two positions: either one must critique Alfau's politics, or one must attempt to demonstrate that he does not seriously hold them. My discussion of the *cursi* in Chapter 2 could easily provide a basis from which one could make the latter move. Furthermore, one could reiterate Eysteinsson's reminder that modernism, despite the links between certain individual modernists and the extreme right, may in some ways be seen as a form of aesthetic radicalism.¹ Even the racist comments Alfau's friends have recorded, exemplified by the passage from Charles Summers quoted in the introduction, could be seen as representative, not of Alfau's own firmly-held beliefs, but of his self-construction as a contrarian, his situating of himself in the "devil's advocate" position which I have shown to be occupied in *Chromos* by Don Pedro the Moor.

But to apologize for Alfau by separating him completely from the politics he avowed may be disingenuous in more ways than one. On the one hand, arguments like the one I have outlined above may have the unintended effects of serving to excuse the numerous and well-documented acts of cruelty committed by fascist regimes, and of

¹ Ástráður Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 28.

failing to consider the power of ideology's internally consistent logic to replace sensory experience. Alfau's repudiation of the bombing of Guernica, alluded to in the introduction, in which he persisted even after he returned there in the 1950s, attests to this epistemological supremacy of ideology, and to ignore this aspect of Alfau's life and work obviates the powerful warning which could be derived from it. On the other hand, such arguments also give free rein to the literary critic's tendency to use whatever means necessary to shore up the reputation of a favorite writer at the expense of others. This sort of favoritism could allow the critic who studies Alfau to see, for example, Wyndham Lewis as hopelessly right-wing while excusing Alfau, on the basis of his irony, from the same charge.

Now that I have established Alfau's links with other modernist authors in order to see him as a writer of his time, I would like to position him in regards to the two politically defined options available to writers in the 1930s. The first of these, of course, was the proletarian literature of John Steinbeck, John Dos Passos, and numerous other leftist writers of the 30s, and the second was the right-leaning intellectuals who comprised a range from the formalists who later became or influenced the New Critics to fascist apologists like Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound.² In her discussion of the proletarian literature of the 1930s, Barbara Foley has pointed out the culpability of the New Critics' "mandarin distaste" for leftist literature in the lack of critical attention paid

² The literature on the relationship between modernism and fascism is extensive. For a discussion of the fascism of Pound and T. S. Eliot, see Paul Morrison's *The Poetics of Fascism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. For Lewis's fascism, see Fredric Jameson's *Fables of Aggression*, to which I refer in Chapter 2.

to such literature during much of the twentieth century.³ Foley argues that the hegemony of the New Critics' socially conservative aesthetics succeeded in excluding much of this proletarian literature from the canon, and that "continuing Cold War assumptions detract from a scholarship that is otherwise expanding and deepening our understanding of the 1930s cultural left."⁴ Alfau's work, with its ironic manipulation of cliché, its fascination with the theme of exile and its insistence on the fluidity of individual identity, responds well to New Critical methods. Thus, it is easy to see the ways in which Alfau's explicit anti-Communism implicates his works in this exclusion of leftist writing from the canon.

Alfau may be further seen as opposed to proletarian literature by his very different attitude toward immigration. Daniel Shiffman has argued that the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932-1935), by Irish-American proletarian author James Farrell, illustrates the presence of tension between Irish-Americans and other minorities, particularly Jews and African-Americans, which resulted from competition for work.⁵ Alfau's indifference to the economic realities with which Spanish-speaking immigrants had to contend may appear surprising, since he himself would have been faced with the same realities. The fact of this indifference, however, serves to underscore Alfau's apolitical notion of art and his resulting opposition to proletarian writing. Alfau's stance on immigration also serves to differentiate him from the celebration of diversity characteristic of much contemporary

³ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 3.

⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵ David Shiffman, "Ethnic Competitors in *Studs Lonigan*." *MELUS*. (24:3), Fall 1999, pp. 67-79.

discussion of the immigrant experience (though ironically, as I noted at the end of Chapter 2, Alfau's identity as an immigrant played a role in his recent brief recovery).

In this section I have explored the connections between Alfau's modernist aesthetics and his conservative politics, and I have briefly discussed the difficulties presented to the postmodern critic by this political dimension of his works. I will argue in the next section, however, that this fact does not limit the potential usefulness of Alfau for the contemporary critic. I will finish by offering some reasons why Alfau's works deserve the project of recovery I have undertaken on their behalf.

II. Alfau and the Postmodern Critic

Why, then, should we read Alfau today? Ultimately, this is the question every project of recovery must answer, and for the politically conscious critic, the answer cannot, in Alfau's case, be an uncomplicated process of recovering an author with whose politics we agree, as it was in the case of, for example, the recovery of Richard Wright. However, there may be reasons for engaging in recovery projects that would lead us to explore the works of writers with whose politics we feel the most profound unease. In Alfau's case, despite his rightist beliefs, his work offers several rich veins of inquiry for the politically conscious theorist. As I have demonstrated in this work, Alfau deals with subjects, such as liminality, subjectivity, agency and social construction, which are of great interest to literary theory.

Another interesting feature of Alfau's work for the contemporary critic is that it offers us a chance to explore the complications produced by the collision of oppressed

groups with conflicting interests. Postmodern criticism has tended to see gender and nationality or ethnicity as parallel identity categories, but Alfau's understanding of gender and nationality as sometimes competing and contradictory claims on the subject is a concern which seems far more modernist than postmodernist, and which allows us to theorize these claims in a more complex and comprehensive way. For example, the interests of immigrants and women come into conflict when, in *Chromos*, Bejerano describes his habit of persuading his girlfriends to clean his apartment for him during their assignations. Don Pedro defends Bejerano by making this version of the "gallant occasion" a point of Latin character: "It is the national system. The assignation is a ritual, a formality, a tribute of good manners to masculinity."⁶ This use of machismo to simultaneously reinforce Hispanic cultural unity and withhold political authority from women, then, not only differentiates Alfau's conception of gender politics from that of contemporary literature, but also allows us to understand the ways in which patriarchy may be used to reinforce nationalism in many traditional societies, not just those of Spanish-speaking peoples.

Furthermore, the critical neglect Alfau has experienced may serve as a warning that the contemporary critic is not above showing the partiality of which the New Critics were guilty. Jean Marsden, writing in the context of feminist projects of recovery, is intensely conscious of the value of such projects. Nonetheless, she warns that the value judgments of the critic may "lead us to study or even recover only those writers who

⁶ Felipe Alfau, *Chromos*. New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990, p. 170.

prefigure our own concerns.”⁷ Marsden cites the examples of Hannah More and Mary Pix, both of whom have received comparatively little critical attention in recent years, and links this “almost complete dearth of feminist scholarship”⁸ to More’s and Pix’s conservatism on social issues. By applying to Latin-American studies Marsden’s observation that feminist critical attention has tended to avoid authors who lean a bit too far to the right for our comfort, we can see the possible dangers inherent in not studying Alfau or in trying to gloss over the more distasteful of his political opinions. If we ignore Marsden’s warning, we are in danger of replicating the New Critics’ mistake of writing only on authors whose views coincide with our own.

But perhaps a still more important reason for the postmodern critic to read Alfau is for the pleasure. Though I have attempted in this work to avoid the emotive responses so typical of the critics who championed Alfau’s partial revival in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I find myself on this score in complete agreement with them. The reader may derive this pleasure from an appreciation of Alfau’s playfulness and skill at reworking the clichés of the nineteenth-century novel, as I have done in Chapter 2. On the other hand, he or she may derive it from that sense that Alfau was ahead of his time which led Mary McCarthy to characterize Alfau as a postmodern critic’s “fatal type, which I would meet again in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* and more than once in Italo

⁷ Jean I. Marsden, “Beyond Recovery: Feminism and the Future of Eighteenth-Century Literary Studies.” *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 3 (fall 2002), p. 659.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 659.

Calvino.”⁹ But whether we figure Alfau as ironically looking back to the nineteenth century or as prefiguring, with striking prescience, the second half of the twentieth, the pleasure of reading his works may serve as a reminder of why we liked books in the first place—a reminder of which the critic, who is unavoidably a jaded professional reader, is sometimes in severe need.

⁹ Mary McCarthy, afterword to *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*. New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1988, p. 201.

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