

# MARVELLOUS SYNCRETISM IN KATHLEEN ALCALÁ'S TRILOGY ABOUT THE SONORAN DESERT

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## *Abstract*

This paper offers an approach to Kathleen Alcalá's trilogy about the Sonoran Desert, a series through which the author is able to explore and examine Porfirio Díaz's autocratic decades that eventually led to the Mexican Revolution in 1910. Alcalá uses in her novels a number of characters who belong to different racial and cultural backgrounds to emphasise the importance of Mexican *mestizaje*. Moreover, the author manages to create a marvellous world of magic through the three volumes of the trilogy where each group of characters corresponds to a different distinctive element of Mexican racial, cultural, religious and linguistic syncretism. Therefore, and despite the fact that each novel of the trilogy can be easily read independently, this paper will take into consideration the three volumes as a whole in order to analyse the way in which the author intermingles the characters' experiences during these tumultuous decades to highlight the importance of indigenous populations and their folklore in the conceptualisation of Mexican *mestizo*

## *Resumen*

Este artículo ofrece una aproximación a la trilogía de Kathleen Alcalá sobre el Desierto de Sonora, una serie a través de la cual la autora explora y examina las décadas autocráticas de Porfirio Díaz que dieron pie a la Revolución Mexicana de 1910. Alcalá utiliza en sus novelas un número de personajes provenientes de diferentes razas y culturas para enfatizar la importancia del mestizaje mexicano. Además, la autora logra crear un mundo maravilloso de magia en los tres volúmenes de la trilogía en los que cada grupo de personajes corresponde a un elemento distintivo diferente del sincretismo racial, cultural, religioso y lingüístico mexicano. Por lo tanto, a pesar de que cada novela de la trilogía puede leerse de manera independiente, este trabajo tendrá en cuenta los tres volúmenes en conjunto para analizar la forma en la que la autora entrelaza las experiencias de los personajes durante estas décadas tumultuosas para destacar la importancia de las poblaciones indígenas y su folklore en la conceptualización de la herencia

legacy.

*Key Words:* Chicana/o literature, marvellous realism, *mestizaje*, folklore, syncretism.

mestiza mexicana.

*Palabras clave:* Literatura chicana/o, realismo maravilloso, *mestizaje*, folklore, sincretismo.

## INTRODUCTION

When different cultures and traditions coincide in the same place and time, the result of it often implies a fusion and confusion of referents. In the case of the Sonoran Desert, where three traditions intermingle due to indigenous, Spanish and Anglo elements, it is almost utopian to represent a homogeneous and uniform view of the world. Accordingly, Kathleen Alcalá's trilogy aims to represent the ideal of Latin American roots stated by marvellous realistic authors like Alejo Carpentier. For him, marvellous realism "describe[d] a concept that could represent [...] the mixture of differing cultural systems and the variety of experiences that create an extraordinary atmosphere, alternative attitude and differing appreciation of reality of Latin America" (Bowers 2004:14-15). Hence, this paper starts from the premise that there is an important third element in Mexican and Chicana/o historical and folkloric heritage: the indigenous component. This assumption would question the simplification made by some scholars like Madsen (2000), when she talks about the dual heritage of Chicanas/os in reference to the Hispanic element in a North American context; or Barbosa-Carter (2000), who ignores the indigenous period in her study on the diversity of Chicana experience to put the onus on the Anglo and Spanish ages.

As a matter of fact, *mestizaje* in literature implies a chorus narrative where different voices are heard to stand out for their interests and in the case of Alcalá's trilogy the indigenous element is the key to understand Mexican and Chicana/o identity. Thanks to this *mestizaje*, past, present and future blend; something that seems to coincide with Menton's (1998) vision of history as circular through folklore. In Latin America –as in many other postcolonial territories– colonial oppression, the disenfranchisement of the native population and governmental brutality are represented in literature with clear political purposes in order to, as Zamora and Faris (1995) point out, subvert official discourse through "their inbetweenness, their all at oneness [which] encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures" (6).

For both Carpentier and Alcalá alike, it seems that America is a continent of symbiosis and mutations and that is the reason that it is marvellous; because it amazes the reader with its juxtapositions and implausibility. Therefore, this paper will make reference to the marvellous syncretism of the Sonoran Desert during Porfirio Díaz's regime and relate it to the constant opposition that we find in the narration between the cultural cosmology of the Indians<sup>1</sup> and the European scepticism brought to the territory by the Spaniards, English, French and Irish colonisers. Moreover, the concept of marvellous syncretism will also be used to follow Carpentier's ideal that fiction does not only serve the purpose of pleasing the reader but it also aims to research and investigate the pasts of different communities, as will be illustrated in the later sections of this paper. In the particular case of Alcalá's trilogy about the Sonoran Desert, the term 'marvellous syncretism' does not question Carpentier's marvellous realism but appears to go one step further by focussing on the importance of historical assimilation as an aesthetic literary tool as well as an instrument of research into the racial and cultural implications of a group of people, which in the case of Latin America in general –and Mexico in particular– is represented through its *mestizaje*. Hence, Alcalá's trilogy represents to a high degree the ideas of those writers who were able to conceive Latin American folkloric inheritance as the result of an everlasting process that started before the first Spanish colonisers arrived in those territories. Consequently, cultural identity is syncretised in the case of the Sonoran Desert because, as will be seen, it implies a blending of opposing principles that gave as a result a marvellous dimension of Chicana/o *mestizaje* that is explored in the trilogy through the use of concepts such as race, culture, religion and language that will be carefully analysed in this paper. Thus, this analysis will illustrate that the construction or reconstruction of history and identity is in the case of Alcalá's trilogy –as it was for Carpentier– primarily motivated by the need to bring back to the present the process that has as a result a given situation. In this respect, individual evocation acquires a symbolical dimension where historical perspective highlights mythical consciousness that will be unavoidably linked to most processes of searching for origins. Finally and before focusing in earnest on the study of Alcalá's trilogy about the Sonoran Desert, it is important to point out that the incursion of elements of magical realism is also characteristic of Latin American writing, even though in the particular case of Chicana/o writers this label is usually considered extremely contentious since it has been rejected by many authors as a marketing tool that homogenizes their work. For this reason, a new approach is needed for the treatment of magical elements in the narration and that is why

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<sup>1</sup> Even though the term 'Indian' is no longer used in postcolonial theory to refer to Latin American indigenous populations, this article will include it since it is the name given in the novels by the author.

this paper will suggest the use of the term marvellous syncretism to highlight the fact that Alcalá's conception of Chicana/o *mestizaje* is openly inclusive, rather than exclusive.

## AN OVERVIEW OF ALCALÁ'S TRILOGY

Alcalá's trilogy about the Sonoran Desert has its origin in "La Esmeralda", the last story of *Mrs. Vargas and the Dead Naturalist* (1992), which is her first collection of short stories. There, the author starts exploring the implications of the intangible inheritance of Mexican culture. In this first publication, Alcalá does not distil Mexican folkloric tradition into a list of stereotypical images; instead, she is able to create a world of spirits, superstitions and customs that represents the marvellous syncretism that, in her view, stands for Mexico.

Even though *Mrs. Vargas and the Dead Naturalist* could be considered a first draft where Alcalá conceives her literary style as a tool to research and question some of the most characteristic features of Chicana/o writing through folklore, it is not until the publication of *Spirits of the Ordinary* (1997), the novel that starts the trilogy, that she delves into Mexican racial, cultural, religious and linguistic connotations in earnest. It is important to draw the attention to the subtitle of this novel, which offers one of the main locative referents of the trilogy: *Spirits of the Ordinary, a tale of Casas Grandes*. Casas Grandes is considered to be the most sacred emplacement of the *Paquimé* culture, as well as one of the most emblematic places of the Sonoran Desert. The story is set approximately at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and follows the disconcerting existence of the Caraval family in a small village in the North of Mexico. They keep their Jewish faith in secret from the rest of their neighbours in order to avoid possible discrimination or lack of understanding of their religious tradition. In short, the novel introduces the first protagonists whose lives will intertwine with those of the characters in the next two novels that give form to this trilogy. Julio, the head of the Caraval family, spends his days secretly studying the Kabala and practising alchemy fostered by Mariana, his dumb wife. The timing of the narration coincides with the moment when Zacarías, their only son, abandons his wife and children following his obsession for gold prospecting in the Sonoran Desert. Zacarías eventually settles down in Casas Grandes with a group of Indians that had been accompanying him. In this magical place, he is inspired to abandon his quest for the precious mineral and

to devote himself to the spiritual life which had been provided by the Indians. During Zacarías's spiritual awakening, Estela, his wife, decides to start her life as an independent woman and raise her children without a male figure in the house. Notwithstanding her determination to take control over her own existence, she gets involved in a turbulent relationship and finds herself being the mistress of a married military doctor that works for the Mexican government and who will be part of the battalion that will participate in the massacre of the settlers at Casas Grandes. This first volume introduces two of the most characteristic and distinctive elements of this trilogy in relation to Chicana/o literary tradition: Judaism and Indian cultures as part of Mexican inheritance. As will be seen, these two elements have usually been relegated to a secondary position in Chicana/o literature, which has primarily focused on exploring the dichotomy and anxieties experienced by those Mexicans living in the U.S.

*The Flower in the Skull* (1998), the second volume of the trilogy, is probably the most fascinating of the three novels which will be analysed. The text is divided into three parts that correspond to three female protagonists belonging to different generations and whose lives are unavoidably connected. During the 1870s, a young Opatá girl called Shark's Tooth, who will later be renamed Concha, is forced to move North with her family. After finding herself abandoned in the desert, she manages to arrive in Tucson where she works at the Moreno's house as a maid. In the next section, Rosa, Concha's daughter, continues the narration to show the internal struggle that she suffers from when she finds herself in the middle of three racial and cultural referents that no longer fully represent her. Finally, in contemporary times, a Chicana secretary who works at a publishing house in the U.S. is sent to Tucson to interview an old lady who is supposed to have some photographs that might correspond with the last members of the ancient indigenous Opatá inhabiting the Sonoran Desert before the annexation of the Northern Mexican provinces by the U.S., which started with the first Mexican-American War in 1848. In this novel, the magical traditions of the Indians are presented to prove the way in which firstly the Spanish colonisers, later the Mexican hegemony, and finally the U.S. interventionism participated in the disappearance of the Opatá by means of extermination in some cases, and of racial and cultural assimilation in others. Moreover, the figure of Zacarías appears transformed into the mythical Tecolote who is considered to be the spiritual guide of those that decided to stay in Casas Grandes. The reader later finds out that he is really Concha's daughter's father-in-law after she marries Gabriel, an Evangelical minister who thinks that his father probably died after abandoning his family to prospect for gold.

Finally, *Treasures in Heaven* (2003) loosely tries to close this trilogy about the Sonoran Desert by narrating the destiny of Estela after she leaves her village

and moves to Mexico City to escape from the scandal of her relationship with a married man. She unexpectedly starts working as a teacher at the almost-utopian school that La Señorita opens in the city to educate prostitutes and to look after their children. There, women are taught to read and cook, as well as other disciplines that might assist them in leaving the streets. In this last volume the magical elements of the desert vanish to focus the attention on the revolutionary atmosphere that surrounded Mexico City in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, the trilogy about the marvellous syncretism of the Sonoran Desert does not end with magic but with a series of well documented historical and political testimonies, leaving the reader highly disconcerted with the novel's open ending that can hardly be connected to the other two parts of the trilogy.

## SYNCRETISM IN ALCALÁ'S TRILOGY

In spite of the lax conjunctions of characters and story plots, Alcalá's trilogy about the Sonoran Desert offers a number of parallelisms and also some distinctive characteristics that differentiate these works from other Chicana/o narratives. Therefore, after the previous brief overview of the three novels, this article will examine the way in which Alcalá's trilogy about the Sonoran Desert contributes to Chicana/o writing by exploring the marvellous syncretism of Mexican legacy through its racial, cultural, religious and linguistic implications.

### 1.- RACIAL SYNCRETISM

This first section aims to show that Alcalá's perception of Mexican racial syncretism is similar to what Lipschütz stated in his study entitled *Indoamericanismo y raza india* (qtd. in Rojas Mix 1992), published in 1937. Lipschütz argues that the notion of 'Indian race' cannot be biologically understood as such since it is rather a social idea. For Lipschütz, *Indoamérica* is neither a geographical nor an ethnic concept but a political project to claim for the economic and cultural enfranchisement of the indigenous communities in the Americas.

Appropriately, Alcalá chose the Sonoran Desert as the main locative allusion of her trilogy to illustrate the geographical and historical subjectivity of referents. In this case, the Sonoran Desert represents at an imaginary level those territories annexed by the United States that have been claimed by Chicana/o community as their homeland. These territories, also known as *Aztlán*, have a special significance in Mexican collective memory as the landmark for the Aztec, Inca and Toltec peoples that inhabited Central America before the Spanish colonisers arrived. As pointed out by Madsen (2000), *Aztlán* represents to a high degree the “mixed Indian, Spanish, and, later, Anglo bloodlines” (13) of Mexico before the loss of these mythical territories. But nowadays, *Aztlán*, apart from still being this mythical space, also represents the political project headed by the Chicana/o movement in the United States as one of the country's most important communities.

Colonisation first, and the Mexican-American conflict later, are carefully explored in the trilogy as evidence of the incongruity that the term ‘race’ implies. *The Flower in the Skull*, the second volume of the trilogy, is probably the novel that better illustrates racial syncretism in the Sonoran Desert. From the beginning, the Sonoran Desert is portrayed as a place where different tribes coexist, as Concha notices when she remembers her mother's story telling: “I learned about my own people, and about the Pimas, and the Mayo, the Yaquis to the south and the Papago at the northern edge of the Opataría” (Alcalá 1998:8). Interestingly, the first person narrator at the beginning of the novel portrays the Mexicans as allies of the Opata, the community from which the first person narrator is original, due to the assistance that they offered to fight the Apache. Therefore Mexico was not regarded at a first moment as a hegemonic nation but as a community with which alliances could be made in order to prevent the attacks of the bellicose Apache. Still, Mexican greed for territorial expansion brought a new national consciousness to the indigenous communities. It was then that, as highlighted at the beginning of this section, race stopped being a biological referent to become a political project, as indicated by Concha's father when he affirmed that “[u]ntil the Spaniards came, nobody owned anything like a country [...]. But after the Spaniards came [...] we came to believe that we could have our own country too. Una república de indios. The Country of Sonora” (Alcalá 1998:24). But unfortunately for the Opata as well as for many of the other native tribes, they lacked the most important component of national prosperity: arms and weapons.

Moreover, the indigenous communities that inhabited the Sonoran Desert represented by the Opata offer the author the appropriate environment to exemplify what Mexican racial background seems to be for her. Hence, even though racial syncretism is evident after the colonisation of Mexican territories by the European settlers, the novel succeeds in showing this amalgamation of

racés. This happens in the case of Rosa, who considered herself “part Irish, because of [her] father, and [...] part Indian, because of [her] mother. But [who] felt more Mexican than either of them, like the Morenos” (Alcalá 1998:92). Consequently, by the end of the novel the Chicana narrator of *The Flower in the Skull* tells that after spending weeks looking for the Opata, she realised that the concept of race as she understood it was pointless because from the very beginning of times “the Apaches stole children, and the villagers kept and raised the Apache children as their own after they caught and killed adult Apaches” (Alcalá 1998:158). Therefore, Mexican racial syncretism started even before Mexico existed as a nation, even before the Spaniards arrived to colonise those territories. Racial syncretism is actually an intrinsic part of the marvellous cosmology of the Indians in the Americas.

It is due to this amalgamation of racial components that characterise what has been previously referred to as *Aztlán*, that this territory is represented from the first volume of the trilogy under a marvellous dimension, as the narrator points out in reference to the American photographer that is amazed to realise that Texas is a place where:

the cultures and even the races had been missing for some time, and Corey found herself looking into dark faces with blue eyes, blond, green-eyed children speaking Spanish together with darker siblings, a pale, refined-looking woman holding a child Corey would have taken for pure Indian. (Alcalá 1997:109)

This marvellous racial syncretism, which is probably one of the main motifs that inspired the trilogy, finds its climax in *The Flower in the Skull*, when the last Chicana narrator of the novel realises that her quest to find a pure Opata race was misled from the outset. Accordingly and in line with Lipschütz’s thesis, Gilroy goes one step further to affirm that race should be considered as “an analytical category not because it corresponds to any biological or epistemological absolutes, but because of the power that collective identities acquire by means of their roots in tradition” (qtd in Darder 1998:8). Therefore, it seems that the term ‘race’ is questioned since its purity is no longer acceptable as such. ‘Race’, then, acquires a symbolic dimension to express the latency of a community that, in the case of the Opata, is physically concealed as it appears to happen by the end of *The Flower in the Skull*. There, the racial syncretism of the Sonoran Desert is finally understood as such by the Chicana narrator who affirms that she eventually “had found the Opata, alive and well in the place they had always lived, since the time of their ancestors” (Alcalá 1998:153). The Opata, like many other native populations had lost their racial referent due to the implicit syncretism that Latin America entails. They were to some degree all those who inhabited the Sonoran Desert and who were to be found not only in physical features but also in cultural referents.

Thus, the marvellous dimension of the racial syncretism represented in Alcalá's trilogy lies in the fact that race is a term no longer acceptable for a specific community. This is exactly why it is marvellous, because not even the Opata knew they were Opata anymore. Their racial purity was lost after coexisting with other communities and after enriching their culture and traditions, as well as their biological characteristics, with those of their neighbours. Positively, the Opata –as Latin America– are nothing but the result of the natural process of racial integration which elevates them to a marvellous dimension.

## 2.- CULTURAL SYNCRETISM

As pointed out by Ribeiro (1992), indigenous cultures are important sources of inspiration for literary production. In Alcalá's trilogy this is made clear throughout the three volumes of the collection, where Indian mythology seems to be latent at every moment during the time of the narration. First of all, the author succeeds in conjuring up a favourable literary atmosphere for spirits to appear. This is created in many cases through elaborated descriptions of the landscape, where the desert manifests itself as a marvellous place that echoes its powerful symbolism:

Zacarías tried to describe to Tomás what he had seen in the desert that day: thousands of tiny creatures swarming in the hollow of a boulder, prehistoric creatures such as he had never seen before, with long, jointed legs and antennae. The air boomed all around him, even the ground at his feet giving off a strange, repetitive noise. The desert, so familiar to him, had of a sudden become an alien place, as though inhabited by spirits that had remained silent all of this time, only to manifest themselves in a wild chorus. (Alcalá 1997:53)

As can be noticed in this paragraph, the description of the desert offered by Zacarías has many reminiscences of those Chronicles of the Indies that the first Spanish colonisers sent to the kings trying to describe the opulence of the American continent. Like those first colonisers, Zacarías seems to be completely overwhelmed by the baroque landscape he has just discovered, which is inhabited by haunting creatures and ghosts that beat him spiritually.

Moreover, the novels succeed in showing the cultural blend that exists between the native and Hispanic heritage due to the amalgamation of characters

and storylines. This is the case of the ‘Día de los Muertos’, when this pre-hispanic tradition appears so intrinsic to Mexican culture that its pagan origin has almost been forgotten to consider it “as more particularly Mexican than any of the other religious customs that were observed” (Alcalá 1997:52). Indeed, Alcalá herself wrote in *The Desert Remembers My Name* (2007) about her experience in Tepotzlán when she celebrated with the locals the ‘Día de los Muertos’ that takes place the first and second of November. In the episode where she talks about this pagan tradition, her disconnection from Mexican cultural referents appears more than evident since she keeps establishing constant parallels between the ‘Día de los Muertos’ in Tepotzlán and Halloween in the United States.

In addition to this, cultural syncretism also seems apparent in the references to Mexican mythological figures that deeply condition female experience in the metropolis, where indigenous and Hispanic heritage are more than evident. Anzaldúa (1998) considers the three most characteristic female mythological figures as follows:

[the Virgin] *Guadalupe* has been used by the church to meet out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and *mexicanos* and Chicanos. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted – *Guadalupe* to make us docile, and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people. (164)

As in many Chicana/o works, Alcalá’s trilogy includes references to these powerful elements by the use of Mexican imagery. This is evident in the case of La Paciencia, the school where Estela starts working in *Treasures in Heaven*. By the middle of the narration, La Señorita makes clear the purpose of the school, and “[t]hat is why it is named after the Virgin, that she might serve as an example to all [women]” (Alcalá 2003:92). The Virgin, especially the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe, is one of the most iconic female referents in Mexican arts generally. It is frequently used in Chicana literature to emphasise the dichotomy between *virgen/puta* to which Anzaldúa makes reference in the previously quoted study, and that Alarcón (2004) carefully explores in her thought-provoking article about these paradigmatic figures, as she calls them. This division which is directly connected to the image of *Chingada*, also known as Malinche, goes back to the time of the colonisation of the American continent. As in other Chicana/o works, Alcalá reinterprets the representation of this female figure in Mexican imagery in order to relate it to the political project that the women at La Paciencia attempt to organise. The parallels between Malinche and the women at La Paciencia are more than evident as is stated in one of the many oral manifestos made by the people that used to gather to discuss the actual situation of the Republic. In this case, Gloria, one of the

women living at La Paciencia, considers that the real female revolution is to be found in ancient times, when women were the receptacle of human knowledge. This female ideal, she says, is represented by what she calls "the new Malinche" with the aim to "speak those things that have been forbidden to women [since] women need to acquire knowledge and learn to think for themselves" (Alcalá 2003:100). Therefore, women at La Paciencia reinterpret the symbolism that Malinche has in a Mexican context to turn around her negative connotations<sup>2</sup> and transform her into an element to combat female oppression during Díaz's regime. Finally, an interesting indirect reference to Malinche in *Spirits of the Ordinary* should also be noted since it could be considered that there are certain connections between Magdalena and Malinche. Both seem to bridge the gap between the natives and the colonisers since they were sold when they were just children to a Scottish tyrant trader in the case of Magdalena, and to Cortés in the case of Malinche.

In addition to this, all the cases of children abandoned by prostitutes in *Treasures in Heaven*, as well as the case of Magdalena who is sold by her parents in *Spirits of the Ordinary* and that of Concha in *The Flower in the Skull*, seem to emphasise the importance of *La Llorona*, who is considered to be "not a real person as much as just someone the adults talked about to scare us into obeying them" (Alcalá 1998:89). Despite this, *La Llorona* seems consistent enough to be taken into consideration in this section as an intrinsic part of female consciousness in this respect. In general, the Mexican folkloric figure of *La Llorona* is seen in a negative light, as she is said to have killed her children after being abandoned by her husband. However, some other legends suggest that she abandoned her children to follow her lover, who subsequently abandoned her. But at a symbolic level, *La Llorona* also "offers a powerful image that speaks to all the dispossessed people of the Americas as well as the Chicanas who find that the lives they lead cost them their children" (Madsen 2000:34). In the case of Alcalá's trilogy, the Indians are the ones that suffered these horrid conditions when they were forced to escape from persecution, and Indian mothers were the ones that had to sell their daughters or to abandon them to their fate.

Apart from cultural syncretism, colonisation brought with it a new imperialistic consciousness. Culture then was considered by the new settlers a tool for domination and repression. Still, culture and identity, as stated by Klor de Alba (1998), are "always changing, reflecting the transformations of the material base and the accompanying alterations resulting from the struggles between the classes" (65). Alcalá's trilogy successfully shows this changing

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<sup>2</sup> As Alarcón points out, "among people of Mexican descent [...] anyone who has transgressed the boundaries of perceived group interests and values often has been called a *malinche*" (279).

quality of Mexican cultural heritage by juxtaposing a third element to the classical dichotomy explored by Chicana/o writing. Culturally speaking, the first two novels under analysis dig into the process of assimilation and annihilation of indigenous customs. The native or Indian element is in the three volumes an important component to understand the marvellous syncretism of the Mexican basis. Notwithstanding this, and as stated before, this intrinsic element of Latin American consciousness is still latent through the amalgamation of myths in present-day folklore. That is why the three novels bring back to the present this Indian cultural basis, which is so incredibly subliminal that sometimes it even disappears from Mexican cultural awareness.

### 3.- RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

The previously mentioned conflict between racial and cultural syncretism that takes place in the Sonoran Desert –as well as in many other places of the American continent– can also be observed in religious terms. In the case of Alcalá's trilogy, the dichotomy between the indigenous and Christian beliefs is widely explored throughout the three volumes, especially in the first one through the figures of the Tecolote<sup>3</sup> and Father Newman. First of all, it is important to note that in anthropological terms, and as Varela Bran (1996) emphasises in her thesis dissertation focused on the aesthetic features of 'magical realism' in the Latin American novel, the violation of the sacred indigenous code causes a magical disequilibrium that determines and conditions the relation that will be established between two codes in confrontation. Even after the Spanish colonisation and the subsequent forced conversion of the native population into Catholicism, it is unavoidable to find indigenous religious strata in the very base of Mexican imagery. This is probably the reason why a number of emblematic places such as Casas Grandes very frequently acquire a symbolic dimension as locative referents for religious syncretism to appear. Indeed, Casas Grandes is the right place to inspire Zacarías to abandon his senseless quest for gold in the mountains. After his pagan awakening and once induced into the mythical figure of the Tecolote, he heads what would become the Indian revolution of the Sonoran Desert. Once again, the author succeeds in creating the appropriate magical atmosphere through detailed descriptions where the landscape creates a marvellous symbiosis with the rituals

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<sup>3</sup> Tecolote is the name given to Zacarías by those who live at Casas Grades after considering him to be their spiritual figure and guide.

that take place in there. Zacarías's transformation into the Tecolote is the catalyst for indigenous ancient religion to manifest itself as an amalgamation of different customs and beliefs:

Most of all, people brought their faith –in the old ways, the new ways, the Virgin Mary, Christ the King, Father Sun, Mother Moon, healing signs, heavenly bodies and potions. For faith without works is dear, but works were witnessed every day at Casas Grandes. (Alcalá 1997:184)

Casas Grandes became a place out of time and space, where nothing happened but ritual prayers. It was then that Zacarías started to have the visions that gave him fame as the Tecolote. Unfortunately for those who decided to live peacefully at Casas Grandes no matter which religion they practiced, authorities regarded this harmonic spiritual reconciliation as a threat to Porfirio Díaz's interests due to the desertion of mine workers employed at the construction of the railroad and other infrastructures that aimed to bring "Mexico onto an equal footing with the rest of the modern world" (Alcalá 1997:186). That was the reason why the army was ordered to attack and dissolve the commune by violent ways. At that point, as had happened centuries before, during the Spanish colonisation, the military superiority of Díaz's battalions showed no mercy with those that seemed to revolt against the system as the narrator describes by using Zacarías as the focaliser:

Turning, he found himself high upon the cliff face looking down at a scene of carnage below. Soldiers knelt and fired while others fought hand to hand, bayonet to knife with the indigenes, both men and women. Zacarías watched a soldier bayonet a baby to the ground before a red wave of nausea obscured his sight. (Alcalá 1997:203)

Harmonic religious syncretism, therefore, appears to be a threat to the established order, where there is no place for anything that might question the authority of Catholicism. Actually, since the arrival of the Spaniards, conversion to Catholicism was not an option but an imposition as seems to be clear when it is taken for granted that Shark's Tooth has to change her name into Concha to be able to work at the Moreno's house because Shark's Tooth "[n]o es nombre cristiano" (Alcalá 1998:45). In the case of *Spirits of the Ordinary*, Father Newman is the character that best represents hypocritical Christian discourse, above all during the discussion that he maintains with Magdalena on slavery. While Father Newman reproduces an official mainstream discourse affirming that "[t]he Blacks are child-like, wild" and that "[b]y virtue of our Christianity, they have been entrusted to us", adding that "[t]hose who were brought as slaves are the luckier ones" (Alcalá 1997:74); Magdalena, an Indian who was sold to and raped by a Scottish immigrant, questions Catholic rhetoric adding that she considers slavery as "an instrument of Chaos [...] of the Devil" (Alcalá 1997:74). In addition to this dual vision of

slavery and of the exploitation of the indigenous population by the Europeans, Magdalena uncovers Father Newman's deceptive thesis when she asks his opinion "about mestizos, mixed race? Mulattos?" (Alcalá 1997:75). He answers that he considers them "unnatural", something that seems curious enough bearing in mind that everyone takes him to be the illegitimate father of an indeterminate number of children that were born all over the parishes he is in charge of.

Still, and in spite of the factual assimilation of the indigenous religious traditions to Catholic standards, the sacred world of the Indians is still present at every moment. In *The Flower in the Skull* for instance, this marvellous dimension of indigenous beliefs is manifested through the importance of oral tradition and storytelling. This is the case of the episode in which Concha remembers one of the stories that her mother told her about the creation of the world according to the Opata. As del Gorge (2001) analyses in relation to the connection between the Popol Vuh and the Bible, there seems to be a similar parallelism between the description offered by the narrator of Alcalá's second volume and Catholic precepts. These parallelisms and assimilations are possibly induced in order to submit what del Gorge calls "the law of authority" (42) that will obviously correspond to the religion followed by the hegemonic power.

Moreover, one of the things that disconcert the readers when they start *Spirits of the Ordinary* after reading the last short story in *Mrs. Vargas and the Dead Naturalist* is the difference noted between two well known Jewish names for prophets in the protagonist's name. Esaías in the first case and Zacarías in the second immediately put the onus on the importance that Judaism will have in the novels. Without any doubt, this Jewish component in the trilogy contributes to the marvellous religious syncretism that is being analysed in this section by adding a third element to the dichotomy between native and Christian beliefs. Judaism in this case is used to emphasise even more if possible the degree of intransigence and intolerance that the first settlers had towards other religious traditions. In the case of Judaism, persecution was the strategy used by the Roman Catholic Church to "eradicate an outbreak of heresy in this remote outpost" (Alcalá 1997:22) and that was the reason why "[a] special branch of the Inquisition had been imported directly from Spain" (Alcalá 1997:22). Jews since then had to practice their faith in secret and pretend that they followed the official religion of the country. Julio, Zacarías's father, is a good example of the abovementioned process since he studied the Kabala clandestinely in order to avoid religious persecution. Accordingly, the Jewish tradition is represented in the novels, above all in the first volume, through magic. Religious ostracism has probably favoured this marvellous aspect of Judaism. It is marvellous because Julio and Mariana need to keep their faith hidden from the rest of their neighbours who would not understand it. This

secrecy bestows mystery, darkness and fantasy upon Judaism, and this is probably the reason why a world of magical visions appear as an intrinsic feature of Jewish customs and beliefs.

Therefore, religious syncretism in Alcalá's trilogy is constructed through the coexistence of different codes: the indigenous, Catholicism, and a third element represented in this case by Judaism. Besides, there is a conciliating figure that seems to bridge the apparent gap existing between these different beliefs: the Tecolote. Zacarías contributes to the reconciliation of opposites since his religion of origin is Jewish, but he later had to become a Catholic to marry Estela, and ended up practicing indigenous rituals in Casas Grandes. The Tecolote, then, illustrates the marvellous religious syncretism existing in the Sonoran Desert where different codes coexist with difficulties.

#### 4.- LINGUISTIC SYNCRETISM

The use of a hybrid literary form is one of the most noticeable features of Chicana/o writing. In the three novels under study, apart from a first person narrator at times and an omniscient one at others, the text is sometimes enriched with the incursion of poetry under the form of prayers in *Spirits of the Ordinary*. Moreover, in the case of *Trasures in Heaven*, the author decides to include a number of letters that allow the reader to know more details about the relationship between Estela and her lover. Another obvious characteristic of Alcalá's trilogy, as well as of many Chicana/o works, is the use of 'interlingualism', also known as 'code switching.' This literary technique implies the use of two languages in the same text to express the ambivalence of different languages in a specific territory. The fluctuation between one language and another is sometimes determined by the environment where communication is established. Thus, even though the narration is predominantly in English, the narrator includes some words and expressions in Spanish through direct or indirect speech, as in the case of Estela, when she tells her daughter: "Abre la puerta [...] It's me, your mother" (Alcalá 1997:35).

But without any doubt, what determines the trilogy's linguistic syncretism is the way in which the indigenous protagonists use their native language. Curiously enough, the process that seems to be taking place in the novels (which, we must remember are set in the decades corresponding to Porfirio Díaz's rule) appears to have some similarities in linguistic terms to what

Barbosa-Carter (2000) highlights in relation with the actual situation of Chicana/o community living in the United States nowadays. She suggests that the racial and ethnic discrimination against Mexican Americans during the 1950s and 1960s forced the linguistic assimilation of Chicanas/os to the white American mainstream since “they were consistently identified as culturally distinct from and inferior to the Anglo population” (264). That is the reason why, as Barbosa-Carter adds, “Mexican American families attempted to assimilate into Anglo culture by suppressing their Spanish language” (264). In the case of the Sonoran Desert, it seems that something identical happened with the indigenous languages in that territory, like Concha who “never used the old language in front of la Señora, but waited until [she and her daughter] were alone. She did not want Mrs. Moreno to think that she was una india cruda” (Alcalá 1998:80). Language is a racial marker in this case and, therefore, something to feel ashamed of. That is why Concha decided to adopt the official language of the nation, which in her case was Spanish. Since she could not hide the physical signs that identified her as Indian, she tried to cover that fact by ceasing to use the language that would mark her as a member of a specific community.

Finally, the marvellous syncretism of the Sonoran Desert is perceived as extraordinary from the outside by Corey, the photographer who portrayed the faces of those that inhabited those territories by the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The omniscient narrator of *Spirits of the Ordinary* describes this American young lady’s astonishment when she arrived at different villages where:

[s]he was continually startled by types she expected to speak the King’s English opening their mouths to use Indian and Spanish dialects, or some combination of all three that Corey came to think of as a sort of trade language, a lingua franca of the Southwest. (Alcalá 1997:109)

And the narrator offers as an example another case of code switching such as: “Te voy a mandar unas tunas [...] one dollar, un buen price” (Alcalá 1997:109).

The mixture of languages, races and cultures is regarded by outsiders with surprise and perplexity although for the locals it is the most ordinary part of their daily reality. Corey’s perspective is a perfect example of the marvellous dimension of Latin America for those who do not share the same syncretised code. It is then that those communities appear as marvellous for foreign eyes, as happened with Carpentier after he spent a period in Europe. Once he went back to the Caribbean, Carpentier regarded everything around him with amazement and bewilderment, and this assisted him to develop his marvellous realistic literary technique through which he attempted to explore the different racial, cultural, religious and linguistic shades of Latin America. After all, what is America but “una crónica de lo real-maravilloso?” (Carpentier 2003 [1949]:14).

## CONCLUSION

After exploring and analysing the four main aspects of Mexican marvellous syncretism in Alcalá's trilogy about the Sonoran Desert, it seems plausible that, as Torres claimed, "mestizaje is radically inclusive [and] it takes the form of a deliberate transgression of political borders" (qtd. in Darder 1998:5). Throughout the three novels, the author demonstrates that the marvellous dimension of the Sonoran Desert disregards the frontier that separates Mexico from the United States to further represent a unique place linked by historical, cultural and racial connotations. For Alcalá, the desert seems to represent what in Nahuatl is known as *Nepantla*, that is, the idea of being in-between one place and another. In this case, as in many other Chicana/o writings, *Nepantla* is also a term that goes one step further to symbolise the marvellous racial, cultural, religious and linguistic syncretism that has been presented here. The constant juxtapositions that can be found in the texts, together with the baroque descriptions, as well as the intermingling of story plots seem to aim to search for origins, which in the case of the Sonoran Desert unavoidably leads to the indigenous cultures that used to inhabit those territories and disappeared with time due to racial and cultural assimilation.

Moreover, what appears conclusive is that Alcalá's novels wanted to recover a specific period in Mexican history that implied the foundation of a nationalistic feeling specially developed during Porfirio Díaz's regime. The chorus narration in the trilogy consciously gives voice to the indigenous population of the Americas in order to fill in the historical gaps that relegated them to an almost invisible position. The author fulfils her intention of searching for the fate of a specific social group, the Opata, and their quest for survival which eventually led them to establish a series of unconscious racial and cultural reconciliation with the hegemonic culture that threatened their endurance.

In conclusion, Alcalá's trilogy about the Sonoran Desert illustrates in a high degree the circularity of history by drawing attention to the exploitation that the indigenous populations suffered at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the dominance of Mexican army on native land. It is circular because it reminds us of what happened when the Spanish arrived in the American continent and started its colonisation, which has inspired a great number of Latin American writers, as well as many other postcolonial authors. But in addition to this, the Mexican abuse of the natives during its territorial expansion is deeply connected with those Chicana/o writings in which the authors describe the present situation of Mexican immigrants in the United

States, where they are abused, discriminated against and exploited due to their race and culture, regarded in many cases as inferior.

Finally, this paper started from the premise that Alcalá's trilogy about the Sonoran Desert represents the marvellous syncretism of Mexican *mestizaje* by constructing a world of magic where different races, cultures, religions and languages coexist in the same territory. These alliances, far from being regarded with concern, are positively explored in the novels to show the way in which the native populations were able to survive their extermination by being syncretised with their neighbours. This assimilation at different levels added an element to understand Mexican racial, cultural, religious and linguistic legacy.

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