

The myth of progress
in the works of John Nichols

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION AND PUBLISHING HISTORY	6
NICHOLS' DEFINITION OF PROGRESS	17
RADICAL CHICANOS: MAU-MAUING THE LAND-SNATCHERS	28
CONCLUSION	34
NOTES	39
SOURCES	41

Once, when I wandered in the woods alone,
An old man tottered up to me and said,
"Come, friend, and see the grave that I have made
For Amaryllis." There was in the tone
Of his complaint such quaver and such moan
That I took pity on him and obeyed,
And long stood looking where his hands had laid
An ancient woman, shrunk to skin and bone.

Far out beyond the forest I could hear
The calling of loud progress, and the bold
Incessant scream of commerce ringing clear;
But though the trumpets of the world were glad,
It made me lonely and it made me sad
To think that Amaryllis had grown old.¹

INTRODUCTION

Since I've chosen a very contemporary and relatively unexamined author as the subject of my thesis, I'd like to make a few comments here about why I think Nichols' work deserves attention. One of my minor reasons is what I've just stated--Nichols is a very contemporary, relatively unexamined author. Much of the criticism in current literary journals suggests that with a few exceptions--notably Updike, Cheever, and Bellow--American literature declined significantly after the late 1940s; these journals further suggest that many writers who are currently producing fiction are merely popular writers. I don't necessarily disagree with the standard conception of "modern" American literature's Holy Trinity (Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway), nor do I wish to wrestle with the question of what characteristics condemn a writer's works to the realm of mere popularity; I suggest only that one writer who is writing about important issues of concern at this very moment should get some attention before his case is assigned to the overcrowded, slow-moving court of posterity. It's not very comforting to think that thirty or forty years from now someone living in Taos, by then a suburb of Albuquerque with a population of one or two million, may come across Nichols' work and say, "You know, he's got something there."

The fact that few detailed critical analyses of Nichols' work exist suggests to me that Nichols is the victim of an ironic phenomenon once commented on by Vine Deloria in a book about native Americans. Deloria noted the curious fact that at a time when books about nineteenth

century Indian history enjoyed an immense popularity and college freshmen were routinely being inoculated with Chief Joseph's famous surrender speech, the immediate problems of many tribes were being largely ignored. Similarly, picturesque historical accounts of New Mexico and magazines devoted to things to see and do in the Land of Enchantment currently enjoy wide readership, while books which express alarm at how rapidly the people and resources which make New Mexico unique are being destroyed don't seem to be especially hot properties. I therefore consider my choice of subject matter viable on grounds that Nichols' analysis of the problems facing New Mexico makes his work both timely and important as a means of understanding what can be done to achieve real progress in the southwest and to avoid further destruction of New Mexico's physical and social environment.

My major reason for selecting Nichols' work as the subject of this thesis is based on my own experiences in the southwest. When I first read The Milagro Beanfield War, it had the same happy effect on me that a seven-course meal of Mexican food does when I've lived too long on meat and potatoes. As a circumstantially exiled New Mexican, I felt that Nichols had managed to capture the real flavor of New Mexico, not because he conjured up picturesque images of aspen and cottonwood gracefully framing the adobe walls of a southwestern Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant or provided other splashes of local color sure to warm the heart of a true native, but because he was able to examine unobtrusively and effectively the cultural ambiguity that exists in an area where three cultures live in an atmosphere of mutual hostility. I was also impressed

by Nichols' ability to walk the fine line between fact and fiction; the natural unfolding of his novels is not hindered by the urgency of his message, nor is this message blunted by the demands of his artistic purposes. When Nichols writes about the evolution and consequent revolution wrought in the community of Milagro by uncontrolled land development, he stops far short of the misanthropic ranting of writers like Edward Abbey, writers who admittedly work under the somewhat different constraints of nonfiction. At the same time, he writes with a sharper sense of immediacy than other contemporary novelists who deal more intellectually with cultural warfare, writers such as Thomas Pynchon whose Herero tribesmen in Gravity's Rainbow exist in the same unanchored cultural state as Nichols' Chicano and American Indian natives. In short, I think Nichols is much more than an amusing regionalist and deserves attention as an important social commentator. In this thesis I hope to dispute the remarks of reviewers like C. L. Sonnichsen who feel that Nichols' books about the gradually warming cultural cold war in northern New Mexico fail either as art or as responsible social commentary. In a review of Milagro done for the New Mexico Historical Review, Sonnichsen says:

One feels an even greater uneasiness about a certain sameness in the people. Arthur Campa, who lived and taught for many years in New Mexico, used to say that Anglos could not write well about Latins. "They always make them too quaint." Mr. Nichols' characters go beyond quaintness and even eccentricity. They are also violent, profane, and alcoholic. He includes no quiet Mexicans, no polite Mexicans, no gentle Mexicans. They exist, even in Rio Arriba County. By leaving them out, Mr. Nichols comes close to giving us a caricature, or even a parody, of these people whom he loves.²

While I agree with Mr. Sonnichsen's remarks about Nichols' admiration for his Chicano characters and the real-life people they represent, I strongly disagree with his statement that Nichols' characters are caricatures or approach parody. The native people described in Milagro, and later in The Magic Journey, are as diverse and representative as the Anglos he depicts, and I hope my discussion dealing with several of Nichols' Chicano heroes in the latter pages of this thesis will show that his books do include some quiet, dignified, and sensitive native characters.

Because both Milagro and Journey are lengthy and complex books, I should make it clear at the outset that my choice of "progress" as the topic for this thesis is only one possible choice out of many. Considering the breadth of Nichols' experience and knowledge, a comprehensive study of the symbols, characters, and major themes in Nichols' fiction would demand much more space than I have here; for this reason, my analysis is consciously intended to be a study of what I consider the most central concerns in Nichols' work: the myth of progress and the destructive effects of this progress as it fosters a rejection of cultural tradition. In the course of my examination, I hope it will become clear that Nichols is effective as both social commentator and creative artist and that his books about New Mexico warrant attention as creative works and cogent cultural analyses.

Though this thesis is concerned primarily with Nichols' works about New Mexico, I've chosen to begin with a chapter outlining essential biographical information and publishing history for those who might not

be intimately familiar with Nichols' life and work. This chapter is followed by an attempt to establish Nichols' definition of progress and a discussion of two major agents of that progress: the removal of native peoples from their lands and the breaking of the bond between these peoples and their cultural traditions. Finally, I discuss three of Nichols' native heroes and conclude with a chapter focusing on two major symbols he frequently uses--one to represent the pseudo-progress that developers foist off on native people and the other to represent what he considers true progress of the human spirit.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION AND PUBLISHING HISTORY

Considering Nichols' distinguished background, it's not surprising that he became a notable author, though it is ironic that his works center around mountains rather than the ocean. Born in Berkeley, California, on July 23, 1940, Nichols is descended on his father's side from New England Puritan stock which includes a revolutionary war general who signed the Declaration of Independence, and the noted biologist John Treadwell Nichols after whom he is named. His mother's family came from the northern coast of Brittany and includes a regional writer named Anatole Le Braz, Nichols' great-grandfather. Nichols' family moved around a great deal while he was growing up (wanderlust seems to be a family trait; since leaving home, Nichols has lived briefly in Spain, France, Mexico, and Guatemala, as well as several locations in the U.S.), but he was never far removed from his father's family home at Mastic, Long Island. Here Nichols tramped the countryside with his father, an amateur biologist and naturalist, developing the affinity for both land and animal life that plays such an important part in his fiction.

At the age of sixteen, Nichols received \$100 from his father to finance a summer trip to the southwest. The seeds of Nichols' love for the southwest were sown during this first trip, but his father may well have wondered if the immediate change in his son was for the better:

That summer, as Richard Starkey might say, has loomed forever large in my legend. What happened out there changed my life. I left Washington, D.C., as a sixteen-year-old crewcut, white-bucks-wearing, all-American boy; I returned two months later

sporting long hair swept back into a DA, a dusty old Levi's jacket, scuffed fruit boots, and a Spanish accent. When I departed our nation's capital I carried forty dollars in cash, a picture of my prep school girl friend, and a lucky rabbit's foot in my pockets: I returned toting two hundred and fifty bucks earned as a volunteer smoke chaser in the Chiricahua Mountains, and a number of switchblade knives purchased in Agua Prieta, Old Mexico.³

After a summer devoted to fire fighting, assorted odd jobs, and a hundred minor adventures, Nichols returned to the east coast where he later graduated from Hamilton College in New York.

In 1965, at the age of twenty-four, Nichols published The Sterile Cuckoo, a book about which most people can at least say, "No, but I saw the movie." In this work Nichols chronicles the birth, decline, and ultimate dissolution of a love affair between two college students, Pookie Adams and Jerry Payne. Pookie, whose name is her most normal asset, is a dizzy Liza Minnelli type (Minnelli played Pookie in the 1968 film based on Cuckoo) who compensates for rather meager natural endowments with an imagination rivaled only by Nichols' own. She meets Jerry at a bus depot, verbally overwhelms him, and later, having gotten deeper under his relatively thick skin with a few follow-up letters, hooks him. Nichols parallels his tale of the couple's up-and-down romance with a description of Jerry's transformation from a painfully straight adolescent interested only in entomology and classical guitar to a beer-drinking, electric guitar playing fraternity slob. In short, Cuckoo is a sort of poor man's Love Story concerned with two young people who aren't burdened with the handicaps of disease, wealth, or good looks.

In his first published work, Nichols begins to deal with themes and techniques he later handles more fully. His ability as a comic writer

is everywhere apparent, though many of the humorous scenes in the book are a bit too reminiscent of the university tavern and fraternity trophy room for most readers over twenty. More important, Nichols paints a moving picture of two young people clinging together in an effort to halt the rapid change which threatens their relationship but which they are powerless to arrest. This theme of change is elemental in Nichols' subsequent novels, and his maturing as a writer is clearly illustrated by the increasing deftness with which he handles it.

In 1966, almost on the heels of Cuckoo, Nichols published The Wizard of Loneliness. This second novel is a sharply-etched study of a family that exists in a state of suspended animation. In fact, for most of the novel's three hundred and seventeen pages the only character who moves steadily forward is Wendall Oler, a young boy around whom the novel centers. During the years of World War II, Wendall, whose mother is dead and whose father is serving overseas, travels to Stebbensville, Vermont, to stay with his grandparents until his father returns. As he nears his destination, Wendall reflects on how much he will hate living with his relatives and plots a quick and painless escape. However, as the story unfolds the reader not only watches Wendall grow up, but literally witnesses the process whereby he becomes human. Initially Wendall is the "wizard," a hard-shelled, detached loner who in his daydreams dispels everything threatening with incantations and a wave of his magic wand. Gradually his defenses are broken down by the actions of his eccentric but loving new family, and Wendall moves through successive stages of tolerance, friendship, and, finally, compassion for those around him. The one malignant force in an otherwise placid picture is Duffy Kahler,

a native son of Stebbensville who is the town's only bona fide war hero. Duffy, who has incorrectly been reported killed in action, returns to town on the same train that carries Wendall and hides out unnoticed in an unused baggage room of the town's station. An all-American boy when he leaves for the war, Duffy returns a physically wounded, mentally unhinged human ghost who stalks through the pages of the novel as a representative of both past and present or, more specifically, the town's past and the present as it is represented by the war. Though no one knows about it, Duffy is the former lover of Wendall's Aunt Sybil and the father of her child, Tom. In addition, Duffy is responsible for a childhood accident involving Wendall's uncle, John T., an accident which renders John T. unfit for future military service. The fact that his friends are dying overseas while he must stay home among children, women, and men who are too old for active duty tortures John T., and his anger, when not directed at others, is spent on mental self-mutilation. The head of the beset Oler family, Doc Oler, is also plagued by demons from the past and an uncertain future. Facing a retirement of certain poverty, Doc Oler reflects on a past characterized by unstinted giving of both time and money. As he tries to work his way out of a financial corner, Doc Oler discovers that the investment of his lifetime--advice, money, free medical service--has made no impression on his fellow townspeople and that he must face the future aided only by his family. In the novel's denouement, Doc Oler, ruminating over his troubles while driving down the street, runs into and kills Duffy Kahler. Kahler has just escaped from a mental institution, and the accident takes place moments after the armistice

has been announced. In one moment, two ghosts--Duffy and the war--are laid to rest, and a number of the living are set free. The final pages of Wizard detail the new relationship between Wendall and his father, a relationship Wendall views from an entirely new perspective.

The late sixties were a time of intense political activity for Nichols, as they were for many others who felt outraged by American involvement in southeast Asia and burgeoning domestic problems. Debilitated by the national events of 1968, Nichols decided to go to the southwest once more, purportedly to gather material for a novel, but actually to unwind and to reassess his political stance. As Nichols himself put it:

My brief southwestern journey, then, took place under the guise of gathering material, checking out landscape and landmarks, and in general reacquainting myself with the territory in which my characters would act out their drama.

More truthfully, I don't really know why I went. I was scared, nervous, uptight. I thought if I had to spend another minute in the guerrilla-warfare tension of New York City, I would either commit suicide or hit the streets with an indiscriminately blazing rifle. So to save my soul and my ass, I did what we Yankee North Americans always ineffectually do, and jumped into a moving vehicle. I hit the road, looking for solace in motion, searching for answers and a little peace through travel and a change of scene--one of the most over-rated and underproductive panaceas ever to come down the Great American Pike.⁴

After an extensive trip through several southwestern states, Nichols returned to Hamilton College where his first novel was being filmed. Shortly thereafter, Nichols and his wife, Ruby, decided to move to New Mexico for two principal reasons. First, the move would get them out of the New York environment they could no longer tolerate; second, the political tension among Anglos, Chicanos, and Indians in northern

New Mexico would enable them to remain politically active in a cause they considered worthwhile. Nichols was familiar with the situation in northern New Mexico through his exposure to El Grito del Norte, a radical Chicano publication he was able to acquire in New York. Because he didn't want to dislocate a native family by moving into a delicately balanced subsistence community, Nichols consciously selected and purchased an adobe house being vacated by an Anglo telephone lineman in a small community west of Taos named Upper Ranchitos, and so became an authentic Taoséño in July of 1969.

Nichols totally immersed himself in the Taos culture during his first few years there. In addition to chopping wood and caring for his house and livestock, he worked on irrigation ditch crews, attended numerous meetings pertaining to land and water use, and read countless books on local history. Between the years 1970 and 1972 he furnished numerous articles and cartoons to the now defunct New Mexico Review and even served as editor for a brief period. Though he received little or no financial remuneration for all of this activity, he was rewarded personally by his acceptance into the native community and artistically by the material he was able to gather for future books, both fictional and non-fictional, about the northern New Mexico area.

In 1974, Nichols' New Mexico experiences crystallized in his third novel, The Milagro Beanfield War. This work details an undeclared but very real war in the small northern New Mexico village of Milagro between the good guys, played by native farmers and ranchers who have lived in or near Milagro for generations, and the bad guys, played by wealthy land

developers and their predominantly Anglo henchmen who are relative newcomers to the area. When a member of the native faction decides he wants to grow some real down-home frijoles and diverts water from an irrigation ditch into a field on Milagro's west side--a part of town that has lain fallow for years because the people who lived there were denied water rights by laws they failed to understand--the stage is set for World War III. Joe Mondragón's act of defiance--in essence, the production of food for his own use--"was an act as irrevocable as Hitler's invasion of Poland, Castro's voyage on the Granma, or the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, because it was certain to catalyze tensions which had been building for years, certain to precipitate a war."⁵ One ancient citizen of Milagro, Amarante Córdova, promptly straps on an antiquated Colt Peacemaker left to him by his father and heads for the local store to buy ammunition with food stamps. Though not all of Milagro's native population are so poor that they must forego food in order to afford ammo, no one is unaffected by Joe's "revolutionary" gesture. The bad guys hastily assemble to find a subtle but effective means of nipping what the local sheriff refers to as "The World Series of Darkness" in the bud. As the "haves" cautiously move to restore a feudal stability to the Miracle Valley, the "have-nots" discover they can, if united, fight the exploitation that has become a standard part of their lives. Though an all-out confrontation never occurs, the natives gradually win a temporary reprieve; the cycle of growth that has transformed Milagro from a small, subsistence community into a playground for opportunists is arrested, though admittedly not broken forever, and the reader sees that the war to retain a way

of life and at least part of a vanishing cultural heritage will go on.

In Milagro, Nichols established his own sort of southwestern Yoknapatawpha county, for his next novel, The Magic Journey, takes place just miles away from Milagro in the fictional community of Chamisaville. Published in 1978, Journey is basically Milagro seen through a darker glass, as it again details the conflict between people on one hand and progress on the other. Also, Journey is reminiscent of Milagro in that it deals with a chain of events set in motion by one catalytic episode and examines the same cultural animosity that is of central concern in Milagro. When a school bus carrying contraband dynamite breaks down near Chamisaville, its driver, a Texas hustler named Rodey McQueen, has the bus hauled away for repairs and goes into town to relax during the wait. The dynamite later mysteriously explodes, opening a crater from whence flows an underground spring, and leaving a nearby spectator, Cipi Garcia, unharmed but naked, save for the boots on his feet and a rose in his hand. McQueen, sensing the possibilities of the incident, immediately establishes the "Our Lady of the Dynamite Shrine," confident that pilgrims will be willing to part with hard-earned nickels and dimes in order to view the shrine, bask in the springs, and kiss the toes of Cipi's blessed cowboy boots. McQueen's vision is the foundation for a corporation dedicated to what Nichols ironically calls the "Betterment of Chamisaville." What the corporation actually does is launch a systematic campaign to break the back of the community by begging, borrowing, or stealing every square inch of valuable land in or around Chamisaville by whatever means possible. Opposition to this "Anglo-Axis" is firm,

most notably in the characters of Virgil Leyba, a lawyer who took his training as a Mexican revolutionary, and April McQueen, Rodey McQueen's daughter, a sort of local wonder woman with talent, brains, and beauty to spare.

The primary difference between Milagro and Journey is the relative severity of the struggle between native and newcomer in each work. In Milagro the characters who represent "progress" have at least a glimmer of humanity, but such is not the case in Journey. As I earlier mentioned, Nichols' vision in Journey is considerably darker than it is in Milagro; from the opening pages of Journey the reader senses that native people are fighting a losing battle against the forces of progress. However, if the revolutionary lawyer, Virgil Leyba, is the author's mouthpiece, as I think he is, Nichols' message is still one of carefully qualified optimism:

As to where it will end with me, personally, or with you, or with all of us--that's no problem. It ends in death, of that be assured. But as to where, in the larger sense, our society will wind up, I'm afraid I can't tell you. Someday, of course, a billion years from now, the sun will sputter and die. Maybe tomorrow a hundred hydrogen bombs will take care of this curious business we have dubbed the Affairs of Humankind. As for myself, I am grateful that, in a not very wise old age, I am still an idealist clothed in shreds of hope, who wakes up every morning wanting to kick the living shit out of you and out of all those vultures touching their cattle prods to your buttocks and testicles making you hop around this town like a grasshopper off of which little children have pinched the wings.⁶

Nichols' credo in both his life and fiction seems to be that if one is on the right historical side, any battle, no matter how lopsided, is worthwhile.

Between the years 1977 and 1979, Nichols continued to be extremely active both politically and artistically. He gradually became an

unofficial spokesman for native people living in towns or on farms in the northern New Mexico mountain country. At the same time, he became an active member of the Rio Grande Writers Association and did one stint as president of this organization. In 1978, he was the subject of an interview by Antonio Marquez published in New America along with two stories again based in Chamisaville. Finally, in 1979 he published a non-fiction work, If Mountains Die, and his fifth and most recent novel, A Ghost in the Music.

If Mountains Die, subtitled "A New Mexico Memoir," consists of a text written by John Nichols and sixty-five color photographs of New Mexico scenes taken by William Davis, a photographer who, like Nichols, has lived in Taos since 1969. The text does not provide a definitive, comprehensive biography of Nichols, but it does discuss his background, the circumstances that brought him to New Mexico, and the changes he has witnessed in Taos from the late sixties to the late seventies. Surprisingly, this work is less polemical, if anything, than some of Nichols' fictional works, though one might expect him to use this opportunity to vehemently address the concerns and political questions that are crucial in all of his written work. Mountains is most valuable to readers interested in Nichols' work in its descriptions of the actual people and events on which many of Nichols' fictional characters and events are based.

Compared to Milagro and Journey, A Ghost in the Music is a rather disappointing work. Although it is an entertaining book, displaying Nichols' active imagination, keen eye for detail, and sense of humor,

Ghost ultimately fails to engage the reader. Most of the novel's action takes place in or near Chamisaville, but any resemblance to Nichols' other New Mexico based books ends there. Ghost is the story of Bart Darling, a forty-seven year old superman who is beginning to be consumed by his own energy, and his illegitimate son, Marcel Thompson, who comes to Chamisaville to help his father through a bad time and winds up learning to love and accept him. Curiously, Nichols' fifth novel resembles his first in some respects; all of the ingredients are there, but overall the work is often entertaining rather than moving. At his best, Nichols is capable of describing human struggle and the strength of the individualist as well as the best of writers; at his worst, he occasionally creates an unconvincing, larger-than-life character such as Bart Darling.

NICHOLS' DEFINITION OF PROGRESS

Nichols' definition of what we normally consider economic and social progress might come as a surprise to some readers. In everyday useage, progress usually is associated with improvement, but Nichols carefully points out that the two are seldom handmaidens; in fact, by Nichols' definition they could more accurately be described as antonyms. He considers progress a pejorative--a double four-letter word--and is concerned equally with the end result of progress and the observable means whereby progress is achieved. Initially, progress seems to benefit all concerned because action is taken, money is made, and the standard of living temporarily improves; however, the process whereby progress is made is ultimately one of division. Progress becomes, in the end, the reductio ad absurdum of capitalism with every man for himself. Whether we call the division imposed by progress alienation or separation, the effects are the same: in Nichols' corner of the world progress is achieved when corporate considerations take precedence over human considerations with a resultant dislocation of people and destruction of cultural traditions.

One of the most succinct expressions of progress in action in Nichols' work is a discussion, in Journey, that takes place among Rodey McQueen and several other enterprising newcomers as they stand on a hill overlooking Chamisaville:

You people know what's in the works, let's not be coy. Thanks to Denzil here and the Forest Service, we've already got special-use permits to develop the Mosquito Valley, and I can

predict twenty-five, thirty summer homes up there in five years, no problem. Look at that sagebrush land between La Ciénega and Cañoncito, six miles wide--you know what I paid Atiliano Montoya for that last month? Two dollars an acre, because it's worthless, it has no water. But we get that highway paved, and the land sextuples in value overnight. This county's due for a land reassessment anyway, and with the industry and people we've already brought in around the shrine and the baths, property taxes are going to zoom. And when folks don't have enough cash to pay those taxes, they'll have to sell pieces of what they do own in order to meet the debt on the rest. Moe here is a real-estate wizard, he'll have half the county on the auction block inside ten years, you mark my words. That's all it takes, just an initial boost, and once you've got it moving, once you create that little bit of instability, once you get these people out of subsistence farming into a cash economy, land will start changing hands like bad news at a church social.

One of the magic journeys alluded to in the title of this book is the progression from a point when the small subsistence community of Chamisaville begins to grow and experiences its first exposure to cash flow to a point where native people can no longer afford the taxes on land that has supported them for hundreds of years. The childlike happiness of Chamisaville's citizens when the magic begins is grim counterpoint to the bitter struggle they face at the book's end.

Milagro, perhaps more than Journey, is a detailed study of what happens when native people are pried off of their lands. The bean plants "illegally" planted and grown by Joe Mondragón are certainly the book's central symbol, and the fact that Joe has broken the law by growing food with his own hands for his own consumption is certainly the book's central irony. The roots of the bean plants represent the deep cultural roots of the Chicano and native American people of northern New Mexico. The water Joe cuts into his field comes from a delicate system of irrigation veins that literally carries the lifeblood of the community "body."

The green leaves of the plants represent the reappearance of life in an area that has been killed by a legal system with no concern for the self-sufficient culture it is supposedly bound to protect. In short, Joe's act, even if he is not wholly aware of its significance, is an attempt to stem outright theft of land that is his only hope for survival, theft that is thinly disguised by several legal means.

The simplest way for the government or developers to steal land from native people is to play on the ignorance or cultural disadvantages of these people. In both Milagro and Journey, poor Chicano farmers who speak only Spanish and cannot even write their own names in their native language are asked to mark their x's on quitclaims and deeds written in English that an Oxford don might have trouble deciphering. Luckily, the forces of progress are often guilty of underestimating their opposition and don't always get what they seek. In Journey, Rodey McQueen gets a surprise when he offers Cipi Garcia a ridiculous sum for Cipi's share in the Dynamite Shrine:

At the sight of all those crackling dollars, Cipi Garcia protested vehemently. "Oh, hey man, oh no, that's too much, man. Gee whiz. Pues, entonces, alli, ahora. All that for me? Who you kidding, man, I can't even get half of it into my bolsillos. Not all that, sir, really, that's too much. I don't need such riches, I'm just a humble peasant chaval, you know that, here, take this back, and this, this, and this, here, take all of it except just this one little packet, this is so much and my needs are so simple it could last a lifetime. I mean, I'm so humble, man, I can't even read or write. So what am I gonna do with all that mazuma? Here, if this is what Mr. McQueen wants, well, by gosh, he sure been good to me, you just give me that papelito and I'll sign my X wherever you want me to." But when the attorney, pointing to where Cipi should make his X, daintily pushed over the contract, the ex-smith turned carnival huckster wrote: Shame on you, Mr. McQueen, for trying to take advantage of a pestiferous analphabetic little country bumpkin like me!⁸

A second type of land theft takes place under the auspices of presidential or congressional decree. In Mountains Nichols says:

In 1854 Congress passed laws declaring communal lands to be public domain, and in 1906 Teddy Roosevelt incorporated much of that land into national forests. A new legal system, carried on in a language people did not understand, had been working overtime to separate indigenous people from their holdings. An incomprehensible tax system had aided the process. To hold on to land people had to pay for surveys and legal expenses, but they had no cash. Lawyers, known as black vultures, became rich taking payment in land for fighting land battles. Infamous groups, like the Catron-Elkin ring of Santa Fe, acquired millions of private and communally held lands during the late 1800s. A U.S. Court of Private Land Claims set up in 1891, composed solely of Anglos, further abetted the robbery.⁹

Small-time farmers and ranchers who raise cattle and sheep are especially hard hit by this transformation of communal land into public domain as they must then rely on government-issued grazing permits to keep their animals alive, and these permits can easily be reduced or eliminated by the government. It is small wonder, then, that the local citizens in Milagro and Journey hate the Forest Service more than any other government agency. Consequently, their opinion of Smokey the Bear is somewhat different than that of most Americans:

As everyone knows, Smokey the Bear is a symbol of the United States Forest Service. And for almost a hundred years the United States Forest Service had been the greatest landholder in Chamisa County, although most of the land it held had once not so very long ago belonged to the people of Milagro. And since the Forest Service's management of its recently acquired property tended to benefit Ladd Devine the Third [a wealthy land developer in Milagro], big timber and mining companies, and out-of-state hunters and tourists before it benefited the poor people of Milagro, the poor people of Milagro tended to look upon Smokey the Bear as a kind of ursine Daddy Warbucks, Adolf Hitler, colonialist Uncle Sam, and Ladd Devine all rolled into one.¹⁰

In Milagro, Forest Service officials hire a local woodcarver, Snuffy Ledoux, to carve miniature Smokey the Bear statues for sale to tourists. These officials are amazed at how fast the statues sell and are further shocked by the fact that poverty-stricken local citizens, rather than tourists, are buying them hand over fist. Further investigation uncovers the answer to the mystery:

The question, of course, was: Why were these statuettes so popular with the local folk? And the answer was: People were treating those pudgy, diminutive Floresta santos the way one might treat a voodoo doll. In short, they kicked the little Smokeys around their houses; they poured kerosene on the little Smokeys and lit them; they hammered nails into the little Smokeys; and in a great many other imaginative and bestial ways they desecrated Snuffy Ledoux's carvings in hopes of either destroying the United States Forest Service or at least driving that Forest Service away from Chamisa County, and, in particular, away from Milagro.¹¹

When Snuffy sees what a going concern the statues are, he breaks his contract and begins selling directly to the people. The Forest Service tries to force him into honoring their agreement, and what occurs thereafter is known as the "Smokey the Bear Santo Riot," a subversive attack on Forest Service headquarters in which the Service loses several buildings, a number of horses, and ultimately, the battle.

Another "legal" method of instigating progress at the expense of people is simply the introduction of cash into the delicate communal economic system of a subsistence community. If one vital person can be pulled out of the interlocking circle of contributors to a subsistence group, a domino effect is set in motion that soon renders economic independence obsolete. As the forces behind the "Betterment of Chamisaville" discuss their plans for community growth in Journey, the interdependency and, consequently, vulnerability of the area's indigenous

people is clearly described:

"This valley's full of people that barely earn two-fifty cash a year," said the mayor. "Ranching, farming, you don't need many dollars. Taxes are nonexistent, people grow their own feed and seed. You want flour ground at the Rio Puerco mill, you can have it done in exchange for goods--I guess just about everything happens that way. Been a subsistence valley for centuries; there's not much cash flow at all."

"And everybody owns their own land, their own house, their own animals--is that right?"

"For the past four hundred years," Bob Moose affirmed lazily. "You could count the mortgages in this valley on one hand."

Moe Stryzpk squinted through his Coke bottles at the picturesque patchwork landscape below, the arable portion so limited and enclosed. "To develop means shaking it loose, getting a turn-over started."

"These people won't mortgage," Rudy LeDoux said quietly. "You might as well pray for rain in April."

"The new hotel can provide eight, ten new cash jobs," McQueen said. "Already I've got twelve of them who were farmers yesterday working as carpenters for me today. With cash, they'll be able to buy cars, electricity, indoor plumbing, radios. That's a beginning. They ain't no different from anybody else, they'll take to hard cash like honeysuckle to a front porch. We'll lure them in. Mechanics at the new gas station, waiters at the Dynamite Shrine Dining Salon, attendants at the baths. And when the highway is paved over, that's jobs which will get them off the farm, especially the young ones. They'll come piling out of those dirt houses like red ants out of a burning log."¹²

To oil the wheels of progress, developers often propose the establishment of conservancy districts, supposedly to ensure bountiful supplies of water in areas where water is the most crucial element for life. When a conservancy district becomes a reality--often because native residents are ill-informed about the benefits the district will provide--the taxes necessary to support the project must be collected almost exclusively from local farmers and ranchers. These taxes often amount to more than the district land itself is worth, and poor families must sell their own valuable farming land to stay one step ahead of bankruptcy. The water accumulated by conservancy projects and dams is then diverted to

large farms elsewhere or used for recreational boating and fishing, and people who need land and water to live must ultimately move out, sadder, wiser, and poorer.

The cycle of dissolution begun when native people are separated from their lands makes itself felt at several levels. If the removal of land and water rights breaks the community back at a macrocosmic level, the ensuing breakup of cultural unity and the family structure is certainly a like phenomenon at a microcosmic level. Talking about the inextricable bonds between family, culture, and community, Nichols says:

For centuries, in an area where commerce has been based almost entirely on agriculture, land without water rights has been next to useless. Hence the acequia system and its attendant politics have been at the structural heart of all aspects of life. Today, as more and more land is removed from farm production because of urban expansion, housing developments, and the destruction of an agrarian-based culture, the irrigation systems are breaking down. Many newcomers have little knowledge of the importance acequia politics hold in keeping land, community, and culture together: they ignore their water rights, build houses in the middle of former alfalfa fields, and have little interest in learning about or supporting the old-fashioned lifeblood structures. Developers constantly buy up the water rights of destitute old-timers, transferring them to municipal or commercial endeavors. Other long-time users, tired of fighting against the overwhelming odds presented by this changing society, and demoralized by the collapse of venerated structures and families, lose interest In due course, an ancient organization which lies at the heart of communal control of the valley's destiny is corrupted, and begins to die. As it collapses, people lose touch with each other, families become more private and alienated, the subsistence infrastructure unravels, and communities flounder, their political power lost as a different system takes over.¹³

In short, the economic growth introduced by outside interests encourages alienation on three levels: from an area, from a culture, and from other people. As native people are introduced to American-style progress, they fall victim to a perverse melting pot phenomenon whereby

people with strong cultural ties become acultural. All of Nichols' minority characters are forced into a corner by an overwhelming Anglo culture, and each of these characters must meet the enemy on his or her own terms. Some, like Marshall Kickingbird, a young Indian lawyer in Journey, can't face the pressure and opt out as quickly and quietly as possible by committing suicide. Others choose a slower variation of the same theme and become hopelessly addicted to drugs and alcohol. Members of a third group would rather switch than fight and so become cultural eunuchs, living tenuous lives between two cultures. Like the cliché half-breeds in countless TV westerns, these characters can't find acceptance in any cultural group and so live in cultural limbo; consumed by guilt and shame, they usually wind up facing the alternatives taken by the first two groups mentioned above. Junior Leyba, son of the revolutionary lawyer Virgil Leyba, is the best example of this type because the obstacles he faces and sometimes manages to overcome clearly illustrate what some minority members are up against when they are cut off from their own people and from a newly supplanted culture as well.

The first obstacle faced by Junior and other young Chicanos and Indians like him is a school system set up for whites. The racist policies of the American educational establishment are of deep concern to Nichols, and one of his articles for the New Mexico Review deals with educational injustices in Taos and Española, New Mexico. In Mountains, Nichols quotes some interesting statistics about the average Chicano's educational background:

Too, because of racist, monolingual school policies, the Hispanic people averaged only 7.1 years of schooling (as opposed to 9.0 nationwide for blacks, and 12.1 for Anglos). Chicanos twenty-five or older averaged only five years of schooling: Taos High School was not so humorously dubbed a "prep school for the Army."¹⁴

Against formidable odds, Junior Leyba graduates from high school and enters phase two--the military. A disproportionate number of minority members have fought and died in all of America's twentieth century conflicts, and those who return are often crippled by wounds, drug addiction, or general apathy. Nichols grimly sums up one such character in his description of Benny LeDoux, the son of Chamisaville's mayor:

Finally he dropped out of high school, left home to join the army, did Vietnam, and on his return started living among all the disgraceful bums at the Dynamite Shrine Motor Court, with no other interests in life, apparently, except scoring and dealing and pulling off a kinky sex life when not on the nod or driving aimlessly around with his pal Alfredo GeeGee in a souped-up Camaro with the tape deck blasting and his sleepy eyes inspecting Chamisaville the way a dying shark, its guts slowly unraveling out a long belly wound, might canvass the feathery gams of a meal that might have been.

An American story: very banal.¹⁵

Junior, however, successfully completes his tour of duty in Korea and returns to Chamisaville a hero. The seeds of his guilt have already sprouted, though, and his unarticulated shame is obvious in his feelings as he makes a speech to the townspeople of Chamisaville:

When asked to say a few words, Junior panicked. Awkwardly fingering the microphone, his fierce eyes burning uncomfortably, he was unable to speak for long, embarrassing seconds. Finally, dropping his eyes and toeing stupidly at the floor, Junior mumbled what everyone had come to hear: "I only did what any man would have done. I was proud to serve my country. I'm very thankful to God that I came out of it alive" When he left the platform,

ashamed of his cowardice, his inability to articulate his hatred of them all, Junior was almost in tears. The Medal of Honor, a Bronze Star with oak-leaf clusters, and several Purple Hearts meant nothing. Encapsulated at the center of an official beaming crowd, Junior hurried past Virgil and did not even catch his father's eye.¹⁶

Junior's brilliant career at Harvard, his successful marriage, and the offer he receives from a prestigious east coast law firm all lead the reader to believe that he has been absorbed into the American mainstream. Then he makes the surprising decision to return to Chamisaville and work for the Anglo Axis that has been squeezing his people dry for years. The reader assumes that he intends to work from within the system in order to right the wrongs that have been done in the name of economic progress. Instead Junior becomes, if anything, worse than those for whom he works:

Surrounded by Randolph Bonney, Moe Stryzpk, Bob Moose, and Rodey McQueen, Junior understood exactly why they wanted his bilingual ability and native roots in their firm The worst in them was kin to the evil in himself. But among them, using them, Junior might also achieve revenge for being brown in a racist nation; for losing April McQueen; for being drafted to die in Korea while boys like George Parker obtained questionable deferments; for having roots into a history of poverty, madness, and stupid peasant endurance. If he adored his father, and had always prayed for that man's love, Junior also could use the Anglo Axis as a forum for destroying the old revolutionary. Junior had only scorn for anybody who could dedicate himself with such hopeless idealism to defending a bunch of illiterate peasants who ought to be culled from the face of the earth. Survival of the fittest being the name of the game. And Junior had plans, however unconscious, to gain some kind of salvation, maybe, by eradicating his own traces.¹⁷

Angry at the plodding mentality of his native people and the fact that his father gave all of his energy to a revolutionary cause rather than his own family, Junior becomes a ruthless automaton second only to Moe Stryzpk. Moe is physically impotent because of a gunshot wound he receives

in the novel's early pages, and he strives for power and control over Chamisaville's citizens to compensate for his loss of power in other areas of life. Similarly, Junior is culturally impotent because he detests both his native people and the Anglo culture that threatens them. The things he does to realize his grand scheme of unlimited power are actually steps toward the construction of a trap he cannot escape; he does not become aware that severing all cultural ties leaves his plan anchored to thin air until it is too late. At Journey's end, his mind, marriage, and overall life in a shambles, Junior leaps off a bridge into the Rio Grande gorge. His death seems perfect justice: if the walls of the gorge represent the two cultures Junior has consciously rejected and tried to live between, the air through which he falls to his death is the empty space left after he throws away his history, his past. Unlike the survivors among Nichols' native characters, Junior doesn't realize that looking back rather than ahead is his only hope for salvation. He bids good riddance to the old way of life and thus becomes acultural and ahistorical; he spends his life trying to become an island entire of itself and is, in the end, easy prey for the forces of progress.

RADICAL CHICANOS: MAU-MAUING THE LAND-SNATCHERS

The survivors among the native people depicted in Nichols' work are those who cling all the more obstinately to their land and cultural traditions when these roots are threatened. The two central heroes of Milagro, Joe Mondragón and Ruby Archuleta, are both fiercely independent people who are proud of their Chicano heritage in spite of the fact that being brown in a white culture grows more difficult day by day. Further, both Ruby and Joe are believable, fully realized characters because Nichols portrays them as proponents of an age-old cultural unity as the only way to halt the ruination of Milagro by agents of progress, not as militant Brown Berets leading a crusade. When Joe first plants the field which his people eventually rally to protect, he is an apolitical being. Only much later does he become an active rebel working to topple a specific political enemy, and it is crucial to an accurate understanding of Milagro to realize that the coming together of native people in support of a common cause is effected only after action is taken on the individual level by people of courage and cultural integrity such as Joe and Ruby.

The unarticulated need that drives Joe to break the law by irrigating his field stems, in part, from his unresolved memories of his father. Esequiel Mondragón embodies the old, vanishing order, and his stubborn refusal to bend--a refusal which allows the white culture to break him--troubles his son Joe more than Joe cares to admit:

"Most of his life my old man was a sheepherder," Joe said. "He rented his borregas from the Zopilote, from old

man Devine, he did his credit business at the Zopilote's store"

Yet naturally--because of coyotes, bears, bad weather, you name it--Esequiel Mondragón had never been able to return the lambs per rented ewes the company required, and then when the capital began to enforce the termination of west side water rights, which eliminated the garden that at least fed them, he almost collapsed. He was sixty-three years old then, as Joe remembered, and dying. Joe's mother, Sylvia, had tuberculosis; suddenly she died, leaving the old man heart-broken on top of everything else. Pride made Esequiel hit the road for a while instead of taking welfare. He did seasonal work in the lettuce and potato fields up north for a few years, then he stayed home, with the family, trying to keep up the west side house. But the family soon broke up, moving to jobs in other towns and cities, to the army, and Esequiel was alone. Heavy rains washed the outside mud plaster off their house, and he was too feeble now to mix up fresh plaster. All his neighbors were leaving then, sadly pulling up stakes, moving on. But Esequiel stayed put. He refused to travel down to Chamisaville to fill out the government forms for welfare, for food stamps.¹⁸

Joe's act, then, is at first merely an affirmation of his father's values. Only much later when one of his cows strays through a broken fence onto National Forest land and is impounded does Joe become aware of the political power a culturally unified people can wield. To get this cow back, Joe must pay a \$20 fine he can ill afford, and he stands to lose one of his two remaining grazing permits as well. His first reaction is to load his 30.06 and go after Seferino Pacheco because a hole in Pacheco's fence enabled his cow to trespass on forbidden land in the first place. However, comments made by Joe's wife and a neighbor about the relative advantages and disadvantages of this solution give Joe pause:

"Oh, you are so stupid, Jose," she said. "The Floresta is kicking you in the butt, so what do you do, you go and kick Pacheco in the butt. Then maybe Pacheco will go and kick Onofre Martinez in the butt, and to get back at him Onofre will charge Ray Gusdorf three times what he should charge him for a load of wood, and in retaliation Ray Gusdorf will tell Pete Apodaca to take his cows out of Ray's field, and Pete Apodaca will

give his wife Betty a black eye or a broken arm in payment for that, and meanwhile Floyd Cowlie and Carl Abeyta will be rolling around on the Floresta office floor laughing about what a lot of dumbbells we all are."

.....
 Onofre said, "What's the point of that? All of us are always paying each other back when the Floresta arrests one of our animals. So then instead of just one person suffering, two people or three people or four people or twenty people all suffer, and the Floresta just sits in their wood-paneled office having a good laugh about what a bunch of lamebrained idiots the lot of us are."

"Yeah, I know," Joe said. "Nancy was just telling me."

Onofre's eyes narrowed, growing a little sleepy-looking as he suggested casually: "You'd think that someday somebody in this town would have the intelligence to lay the blame where the blame deserves to be laid, que no?"¹⁹

Consequently, with the help of a group of heavily armed friends and neighbors, Joe marches down to Forest Service headquarters and forcibly takes repossession of his cow. This first conscious, deliberate act of rebellion is the rolling snowball that grows, by book's end, into an avalanche of resistance.

As Joe is the active catalyst for anti-progressive forces in Milagro, Ruby Archuleta is the philosophical mover. She urges her people to become like the Vietnamese, meaning that they should try by every means possible to bring the threatening giant of Anglo imperialism to its knees by whatever means necessary. She organizes the first meeting of local citizens in order to muster force against rampant development; she also founds the Milagro Land and Water Protection Association and circulates a petition to halt the building of useless dams and the removal of land from agricultural use. In short, Ruby is a woman of determination, courage, and cultural integrity equal to Joe Mondragón's, and the two characters complement each other in an alliance of brain and

brown that is the only hope for local natives and a way of life that has sustained them for four hundred years.

In Journey, Nichols combines the traits of Joe Mondragón and Ruby Archuleta in his first totally revolutionary hero, Virgil Leyba. Virgil literally grew up in the midst of revolution, and the toughness and patience instilled in him by this experience make him more than a match for the members of the Anglo Axis:

Born at the century's turn in the small Morelos town of Cuachitlan, Virgil was, by age thirteen, a confirmed Zapatista, the only survivor in a large peasant family, half of whom had been executed by Juvencio Robles's federal troops while the other half were being deported to Quintana Roo. During the revolution, Virgil was first a courier, then a soldier, finally a lawyer. He had seen half the Morelos small towns and almost all its arable land burned over, and he had helped bury a thousand comrades. Eventually, exhausted by the killing, he had traveled to Mexico City during that lull when the official carnage ceased, obtained a degree, and returned home determined to legally assert the Plan de Ayala, securing for his people their permanent rights to long-held and oft-lost ejido lands.²⁰

Throughout Journey, Virgil functions as a constant amidst overwhelming change in Chamisaville. When other characters such as April McQueen and Juan Ortega become embittered by struggle and demoralized by the hopelessness of their cause, Virgil rekindles the revolutionary spirit in them with a few direct words. When Juan Ortega's war experiences threaten to ruin him as a journalist and activist, Virgil gives him a rhetorical punch in the mouth, followed soon after by the real thing:

One evening, in the El Gaucho Bar, the rapidly sinking newspaperman wearily referred to his dying interest in life. "I don't really care anymore," he moaned. "It's all hopeless. This earth is a gruesome place."

"It was always hopeless, it was always gruesome."

"I don't pity myself," Juan said. "I got in my licks, I had my fun. I just don't give a shit. Three of my sons died in that

war."

Maybe you need a little more time to purge the war from your blood. But you can't mourn forever, primo. Life goes on."

"What keeps you going, Virgil?"

"Instincts. And I became used to the carnage early. And I want the dignity of going down fighting. And I don't want to give them the satisfaction of ever seeing me give up."

"Dignity," Juan said miserably. "Jesus, Maria, and Jose!"

Virgil's dark eyes drilled into his pal's softening head: Juan stared back cheerlessly.

"I love you with all my heart, but I don't admire you for giving up," Virgil said.²¹

Virgil is also as much a symbol of the sustaining power of land as the bean plants in Milagro. As he recounts to Rodey McQueen his return to his hometown after years of fighting, Virgil describes what it was his townspeople fought to protect:

"When I arrived at my hometown," he told Rodey McQueen, "there was nothing but graves, char, ruins. . . . A group of crippled old folks limped around a corner and approached me, carrying a tin-plated wooden box caked with dirt, warped from water, burnt by fire. Five old men, several women, all that remained of our town. We squatted together in the plaza; they opened their box. Inside were all our town's papers to every ejido, the legal lifeblood of each person who had ever inhabited our village. The papers had been protected all during the revolution--hidden, buried, guarded with lives. Blood discolored the wood, it stained the legal papers, which were also burnt and splotted from rain water, in many places illegible." ²²

Virgil represents both a tie to the land and an historical link to a culturally unified people whose existence is fraught with struggle. Journey is a book of vast scope concerned with monumental change over a long period of time, but the thirty-year-old Virgil described on the book's first page is not very different from the Virgil in his late seventies who utters the book's final lines. In a moving final scene, the remnants of Chamisaville's native populace gather to mourn the death

of April McQueen, and, in so doing, absorb the spirits of all who have died to protect the subsistence way of life:

And as Virgil and the living people turned to leave, there was a gentle sigh in the air, a strange hot breath of wind that came from an antique place, and the misshapen, gritty ghosts of all the dead gathered on that hilltop seemed at once to dissolve together, becoming a rich spiritual smoke that merged and swirled for a second. And then, suddenly, poignant streams of ethereal filaments seemed to flow directly into the wan bodies of Virgil and Juan Ortega and Pat GeeGee, and the others gathered in April's name. For a second, a wonderful foamy glow hovered at their stooped shoulders. Then only stray wisps of a mysterious mist played lightly against their necks and thinned-out hair. And the air around the summit sparkled invisibly with sensational clarity: Jesus Etcetera and his army had been absorbed.

Virgil said, "All right. Amen. Let us descend."
They had work to do.²³

CONCLUSION

I began my discussion of progress in Nichols' work by looking at a central symbol in Milagro, Joe Mondragón's bean plants; I would like to conclude with a discussion of two other important symbols. The first is dynamite--a major symbol of both Anglo culture and progress in Nichols' work. As bean plants represent the bond between man and the land embodied by the subsistence farmer, dynamite represents the means by which progress is effected. In Milagro, Joe Mondragón stands in the way of progress, so government agents commit acts of sabotage using dynamite and then plant more dynamite in Joe's workshop in order to frame him. In Journey, the chain of events Nichols euphemistically calls the "Betterment of Chamisaville" is initiated by the explosion of the dynamite Rodey McQueen brings to town. In an outrageous stroke of irony, residents of the pueblo near Chamisaville are put to work manufacturing dynamite fetishes for sale to incoming tourists. All traces of April McQueen's murder are erased when federal agents blow her body and car to bits with dynamite. To implicate Virgil and Juan Ortega, these same agents plant dynamite at April's house, hoping to make her death seem the result of in-fighting amongst Chamisaville's radicals. Between the explosions that pepper Journey's pages, there can be heard the slow, even cadence of the blasts heralding the ongoing construction of Anglo Axis projects. Each new development--the ski resort, the dam, the shrine--requires that the existing order be torn asunder. The symbol of indigenous people is one of unity, of a circle of interdependence; in contrast, the symbol of Anglo culture and progress is ultimately one of

disunity and chaos. In the telling scene where Rodey McQueen ponders the death of his daughter, the effect of dynamite on both people and the environment is clearly outlined:

Mesmerized by that last dynamite blast in his life, ending his vital connection to the Old Crap Game even as the first dynamite blast had liberated his undisciplined imagination, accumulating for him immense power and wealth, at this moment the former Muleshoe conman found it impossible to recall with even a little fondness any details of his past four decades.

.
 At the railing, eyes glazed, without an appetite for life, McQueen made no moves to fight his spreading coma. Much had happened in his lifetime and it was almost over. A few months ago his life-experience, politics, social attitudes had rested on a granite foundation: when he looked at the stars they had made perfect sense. But today only an insignificant, ridiculous scrabble existed up there. . . . "Null and void," McQueen said weakly. Life was a poor player, full of sound and fury--a tale told by a real idiot. Christ, what a terrible, almost evil sky: the sea was so obnoxiously tranquil and blue. . . . The ocean was so damnably placid. The universe was as clear and as unruffled and as blank as a pretty postcard. McQueen felt close enough to hell to smell the smoke.²⁴

In forcing progress down the throat of Chamisaville, McQueen has managed to blow the supports out from under his own life. Although dynamite is certainly an effective agent for change, it is also random, uncontrollable, volatile.

A second symbol that pervades Nichols' work--more than does any other--is the mountain. Mountains, in Nichols' view, mirror the native people who live among them. The ruggedness of northern New Mexico's mountains mirrors the ruggedness of a people who have learned to eke out an existence on a small number of arable acres without upsetting the delicate balance between man and nature. The beauty and the strength of mountains are also prominent in Nichols' portrayal of native people.

Further, the mountains are both a physical and a spiritual sanctuary for

the characters who people Nichols' books. Icarus Suazo's one-man crusade to regain forest land stolen from his tribe is, in essence, an attempt to recover hallowed ground. When it is time for him to die, he goes to the mountains; his thoughts as he surveys his tribe's regained holy ground show that with this tie to the divine intact his people will prevail.

Icarus had never seen this meadow and the mountains towering above it so beautiful. No warriors guarded the sacred tree; no need for that anymore. The land had been returned to the tribe for safekeeping; the tree stood at the heart of a vast and lonesome area whose secret soul had reverted to the native people. An invisible magic wall now protected the source of their spiritual well-being; he believed that despite electrification of the Pueblo, their survival as a viable nation within imperial America was assured. To hell with the racetrack, the development, the motels and hotels, the artificial lake; if the Pueblo had lost in the end, it had also gained. The bones, mysteries, and rituals of their forefathers had sanctified this forest land, these mountains, and this simple tree at the sacred river's source. And no matter how exploited the natives might be in a future already permeated by capital despair, each man, woman, and child could now strip naked and melt back into the earth. And the souls of all the drunks and all the wasted lives could be reenergized in this land that outsiders would never control again. With such profoundly rooted claims, the people would somehow survive.²⁵

Mountains also nurture many of Nichols' non-Indian characters. When Virgil Leyba needs to regroup or order his thoughts, he travels into the mountains to look down on Chamisaville. When Joe Mondragón shoots Seferino Pacheco, the posse formed to hunt him down automatically assumes that he will head for the mountains he knows like the back of his hand to avoid capture. One of Nichols' most direct statements about the symbolic effect of mountains on the human spirit is the change he describes in Ray Gusdorf after Ray goes into the mountains in winter. Ray comes to Milagro a ne'er-do-well wanderer with no roots

whatsoever. After several days in the mountains:

. . . Ray Gusdorf quietly emerged from the Midnight Mountains a different human being--mature, introspective, curiously subdued. He quit work at the Dancing Trout, fell in love with and married Jeanine Juniors, started his own small spread as close to those mountains as he could, had one kid, and then a whole bunch of children in rapid succession, learned Spanish and became a respectable citizen, a silent man, but understood and well liked. Ray had arrived, as few people have the good luck to arrive, at home.

Since then, all through the subsequent years, Ray had carried those three days in his heart; they were constantly being pumped anew with his blood throughout his veins and arteries; and although he had never since returned to the winter country, it was as if he had somehow remained up there forever.

"For three hundred years, maybe longer," Ray said to Joe Mondragón one evening while they were both sitting on Rael's porch, the one killing a Pepsi, the other working on a beer, "the people around here have starved to death, but somehow they always survived. Now comes a ski area, probably motorcycles, winter snowmobiles, a subdivision, and so forth, jobs for everybody say Bud Gleason and Ladd Devine, money in the bank . . . and in five years we'll all be gone."

He paused thoughtfully, watching diners move about in the cafe across the plaza area. Then he turned his head sideways, focusing on the mountains that loomed over the town, the same mountains that were nestled in his heart.

"I figure I can live with hunger," he said gently, "a hell of a lot better than I could ever live with fat."²⁶

I am fairly certain that Ray's experience grows directly out of Nichols' own relation to Taos Mountain. For Nichols, the mountain is ultimately a symbol of unity and of roots. The mountain is antithetical to the forces Nichols so vehemently attacks in both his fiction and non-fiction--the destruction of the natural environment, the dislocation of native people, the melting pot mentality that threatens to make the American continent one big piece of real estate. A mountain is pure in its existence and should be seen and felt, but not treated as a commodity; mountains serve men primarily

by sparking the human imagination and spirit. They stand, finally, at the center of a unified circle of life :

My eyes, and the eyes of all Taosēños, are forever attracted to the mountain. Nobody can travel the valley without centering off its bold presence. It is the central symbol in our lives to which the eye is always drawn. Some of us may take it for granted, yet in our subconscious it breathes heavily, an exclusively solid shape in the otherwise ever-changing, sometimes ugly, often beautiful, and too often unfortunate landscape through which we travel.

.....
 As distinct, and as lovely, and as constant as Hokusai's Fuji, Taos Mountain is always a historical, emotional, visual starting point. If I feel sad, angry, euphoric, or insulted, the mountain always provides a relevant reference point, soothing, enhancing, or poignantly stabilizing my mood.

It holds together all the convoluted phenomena, patterns, and people of my home terrain.

Sometimes I feel that it directly keeps me from falling apart.

They say it draws back folks who have strayed.

They say it casts spells and prevents people from leaving.

Because of its significant shape, and because of its position in the valley, the mountain is the symbol for all that has ever happened or ever will happen here.

Its weight and shape always at least momentarily forge in me a calm heart.²⁷

NOTES

- ¹ Edwin Arlington Robinson, "Amaryllis," in Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 85.
- ² C. L. Sonnichsen, rev. of The Milagro Beanfield War, by John Nichols, New Mexico Historical Review, 50, No. 3 (July 1975), 270.
- ³ John Nichols and William Davis, If Mountains Die: A New Mexico Memoir (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 20.
- ⁴ Nichols and Davis, Mountains, pp. 32-33.
- ⁵ John Nichols, The Milagro Beanfield War (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), p. 22.
- ⁶ John Nichols, The Magic Journey (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), p. 315.
- ⁷ Nichols, Journey, p. 28.
- ⁸ Nichols, Journey, p. 17.
- ⁹ Nichols and Davis, Mountains, p. 37.
- ¹⁰ Nichols, Milagro, pp. 192-93.
- ¹¹ Nichols, Milagro, p. 193.
- ¹² Nichols, Journey, pp. 27-28.
- ¹³ Nichols and Davis, Mountains, pp. 97-98.
- ¹⁴ Nichols and Davis, Mountains, p. 37.
- ¹⁵ Nichols, Journey, p. 179.
- ¹⁶ Nichols, Journey, p. 113.
- ¹⁷ Nichols, Journey, p. 135.

- 18 Nichols, Milagro, pp. 375-76.
- 19 Nichols, Milagro, pp. 187-89.
- 20 Nichols, Journey, p. 4.
- 21 Nichols, Journey, pp. 90-91.
- 22 Nichols, Journey, p. 4.
- 23 Nichols, Journey, p. 529.
- 24 Nichols, Journey, p. 523,525.
- 25 Nichols, Journey, p. 518.
- 26 Nichols, Milagro, p. 125-26.
- 27 Nichols and Davis, Mountains, pp. 8-9.

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