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Chicano Literature and Ideology: Prospectus for the '80s

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Source: *MELUS*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Ethnic Literature and Cultural Nationalism (Summer, 1981), pp. 35-39

Published by: The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/467146>

Accessed: 20/05/2009 12:36

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## PART II: THE PRESENT

# Chicano Literature and Ideology: Prospectus for the '80s

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In the decades since its contemporary renaissance, the Chicano novel has contributed to a general reassessment of the cultural-historical creativity of Mexicans in the American Southwest. Generally speaking, the Chicano novel has provided a mediated truth about a culturally determinate people in a historically determined context. The truth of the real world that Chicanos experience has thus been made to inhabit literature. Readers and critics of the literature have assumed that to know this cultural truth one has simply to read the literature of that experience. In reading, we can experience the superficialities which both separate us from the truth of experience and keep us from bringing it to light. The contemporary Chicano novel, in effect, calls upon its readers to dissipate its external features, its formal patterns, to eradicate them in order that we might attain the substantial ground upon which ideological representations of truth itself are built.

Today, twenty-two years after the publication of José Antonio Villarreal's seminal novel, *Pocho* (1959), it is necessary to evaluate fully, for the first time, the course of the contemporary Chicano novel. We can no longer continue to read this body of major works as it has been read in the past two decades, that is, as a literature naively tied to the notion of mere representational fidelity. It is time to see the Chicano novel as something more than a simple mirror of the life and folklore of a heretofore invisible segment of American society. In the coming decade, the Chicano novel will turn increasingly to critical modes of representing contemporary life.

While active prediction of the course of any living literature is always a risky undertaking, I believe that critics of Chicano literature, and especially of the Chicano novel, can foresee with reasonable accuracy the possible course of the literature in the 1980s. The reasons for this are twofold and do not depend on the particular clairvoyance of literary critics: first, since the Chicano novel has staked out as its ground the exploration of what I termed the "dialectics of difference," (in *MELUS* 6:3 [1979]73–92) the very possibility of a *tradition* promises that future texts will be affected by

*MELUS*, Volume 8, No. 2, Summer 1981

present ones. Critics do distinguish themselves by the quality of their retrospective vision; but authors too read what has been written. The influence of one text upon another can be traced out in systematic terms. Second, since all concepts, including the concept of literature, as Louis Althusser and Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst have argued, are abstract in the specific sense that they are defined by the place which they occupy and the function they perform within a determinate field of concepts, concepts are never simply reducible to any set of "given" or "real" conditions. The "given" or "real" may vary without a prior variation in the fundamental structure of the conditions of literary production. In addition, the concept of Chicano literature, existing within a specifiable set of social and literary conditions, is the product of theoretical work, work performed both by authors and by readers. Thus, the theoretical status of future Chicano works can be determined by examining the present field of concepts which specify the general conditions of all literary production.

I wish to argue that the traditional view of the Chicano novel, one tied to representational fidelity, to "reflectionism," is an illegitimate view for at least four reasons. "Reflectionism" reduces the acts of reading and writing into non-dialectical, isolated experiences. It decomposes the laws of composition. It presupposes that readers will find in the work of art only what authors have put there. And it limits our understanding of a work (and therefore of the historical world it represents) to the investigation of only one of its aspects.

In elaborating on these objections, I think that it can also be shown that the functions of the Chicano novel in the 1980s will be predominantly *critical* and *ideological*. This does not mean that the Chicano novel should simply represent a given set of doctrines. Rather, it means that as an ideological apparatus the Chicano novel signifies the imaginary ways in which historical men and women experience the real world. Its primary function, therefore, will be to show how men and women live out their lives in a class society, and how the value, concepts, and ideas which tie them to their social functions prevent them from attaining a true knowledge of society as a whole. The Chicano novel, individually and as a genre, will continue to confront and eliminate the limiting ideologies which have in many cases determined its course.

The task of the Chicano novel over the coming decade will not be simply to illustrate, represent, or translate a particular exotic reality nor even a certain conception of reality—this epistemological theory of reflection is theoretically sterile. Instead, it will serve to realize the *agency* of thematic figures in the process of demystifying the old world and producing a new world. The developments in literary form represented in the works of such

authors as Villarreal, Tomás Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Rudolfo Anaya, Miguel Méndez, and Ron Arias already begin to show the Chicano novel's response to the collective psychological and cultural needs of the Mexican people of the southwestern United States. New works by these and other authors will continue to show what happens to individuals who live in a determinate representation of the world whose imaginary distortion depends on their imaginary relations to their conditions of existence. Their task will be to show that it is in ideology, generally conceived, that we "live, move, and have our being."

As literature, the Chicano novel will continue to embody new ways of perceiving social reality and significant changes in ideology. As ideological force itself, its function will be to help shape its readers' modes of perception in order to effect new ways of interpreting social reality which might contribute to a general social, spiritual, and literary re-valuation of values. Literature in this sense must serve not only an aesthetic function, but an epistemological one as well. It is actively speculative.

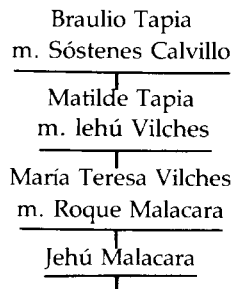
Perhaps the best example that I can offer of this speculative tendency of the Chicano novel is Rolando Hinojosa-Smith's *Estampas del Valle/Sketches of the Valley* (1973). Hinojosa's novel is a rich phantasmagoria of fleeting scenes, thoughts, images, dreams, and actions which fuse to create a mosaic of South Texas life. As the narrative cuts from one character to another, without apparent logic or motivation, it intends to instantiate places and times alluded to in two prefatory maps which open the first section of the novel.

The first of these maps is open to the world at large, as it places Tokyo and Kobe, Japan; Panmunjon, Korea; Fort Ord, California; and Fort Sill, Oklahoma, before the reader. Below this pattern of sites appear the names of Texas, Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri, Indiana, and Michigan. The narrative thus begins pictorially, presenting in a single visual moment the linear trajectory which the novel's prospective chronology may follow. The second of the maps restricts its represented space to Hinojosa's fictional "Belken County, Texas," with its equally fictional cities and towns of Jonesville-on-the-river, Klail City, Flora, Bascom, and the rest. But now, instead of establishing a privileged beginning which could be displaced along a temporal axis following out the linear geographical axes promised in the maps, the narrative unhinges time as it stretches out according to the rhythms of associative similarities. Tied as it is to the realistic details of life in South Texas, the novel proceeds to narrate that reality in decidedly unrealistic ways.

The first and third parts of Hinojosa's novel refer to well over a hundred characters by name in separate vignettes of varying length. The links

among these characters, however, are established gradually by reiteration, by allusion, and by simple juxtaposition, for the narrative rarely names these links directly. The two axes which the novel has been subtly developing, then, the metonymical linear one of time and geography, and the metaphorical one of associative substitutions, form the narrative loom upon which Hinojosa's unnamed narrator weaves his tale. And as the narrative proper begins, it turns again to pictorial script to instantiate past and present time, absent and existent characters within the narrative "now."

The first sketch of the novel, entitled "Braulio Tapia," is not a privileged beginning or a necessary origin for the tales which are now to unfold before us. It is simply an arbitrary moment in the history of the lives of these characters. As we enter their world, watching with the anonymous narrator who watches his prospective son-in-law, Roque Malacara, approaching to ask for the narrator's daughter's hand in marriage and recalling the day that he too approached his prospective father-in-law, don Braulio Tapia, we enter a world where the past is starkly visible, as in broad panorama. That past too serves as window to other past moments. In this one single moment, the broad context of time which the novel is to dramatize is flashed before our eyes. The outline of this context can be traced out as a genealogical chart, proceeding backwards in time from the unnamed speaker (soon to be identified as Jehú Vilches), and forward toward his grandson, Jehú Malacara, one of the novel's central characters. In tree diagram, their genealogy reads:



The tree diagram, extended along syntactic lines in the narrative proper, seems to establish in the narrative a unity through the analogy of biological identity. "My son [Jehú Malacara] and his granddad [Jehú Vilches] are the same person" (p. 57), says Roque Malacara at one point. But it is just such identities and certainties which the narrative proceeds to put in question.

The simplest of all narrative patterns, the genealogical, takes the principle of succession literally: one can know who one is because he knows what his past was. Hinojosa's narrative, however, immediately begins to

undo this certainty as it investigates the *transformations* which occur within and acquire predominance over succession in the search to know who one is. *Estampas del Valle* thus virtually collapses the metaphorical and metonymical axes of narration, leaving the figurative possibility of identity undistinguishable from the literal one of difference within the narrative line. With the introduction in succeeding episodes of this section of the novel of a whole community of intersecting lives and histories, Hinojosa's narrative begins to create less a history of individual lives than a history of community life.

In the second section of the novel, entitled "Por Esas Cosas Que Pasan, One of Those Things," Hinojosa continues the narrative complications. This section includes six documents that recount the events leading up to the fatal stabbing of Ernesto Tamez in a local bar. But the six versions distort, belie, and contradict one another so that, by the end of the final text, the reader must either reject the allure of sequential narrative as a source of truth, or accept the possibility that all versions, in their very distortion of the killing, are in their own way true. Absent from this portion of the novel is the article of faith that substantiates historical and scientific pursuits of knowledge: the confidence that individual, discrete elements add up to a larger, knowable, total order. The lives of these characters reveal that in Belken County, at least, reasoning does not always lead to effective generalizations, facts do not necessarily achieve the status of evidence. Time and narrative do not establish a general law or process against which to measure with dependable faith the forces affecting the here and now.

Rolando Hinojosa-Smith's *Estampas del Valle* and novels like it may well serve as paradigms for the Chicano novel in the coming decade. During the period, rather than passively reproducing images of reality, the task of the Chicano novel will be to deflect, to deform, and perhaps even transform reality by revealing the differential structure which forms the base of human experience. In opting for open over closed forms, for conflict over resolution or synthesis, in proclaiming its very difference, the function of the Chicano novel is to produce creative structures of knowledge to allow its readers to see, to feel, and to understand their social reality in a revolutionary light.