

EXPLORATIONS IN ETHNIC STUDIES



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**EXPLORATIONS
IN
ETHNIC STUDIES**

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a.k.a. Pablo:
Mexican American Images for Television
Norman L. Friedman

The study of "minority group images in mass media" has been of considerable interest both to humanities and social science writers in the ethnic and media fields. Most investigations have focused upon the descriptive content of the minority portrayals, though a few have also dealt with related aspects of minority group reactions to images. Among the large volume of varied writings have been those which have considered minority group images in films,¹ images of Asian Americans in print and electronic media,² dissections of single television shows about minorities,³ and responses of minority audiences and media critics to television portrayals of their group.⁴ In general, studies have tended to find minority media images inaccurate, inadequate, and too infrequent. Explanations for these tendencies have usually emphasized how mass media reflect prejudices existing in the culture of the larger society, the faulty perceptions or decisions of the image-makers (writers, producers, directors, executive programmers), and the underrepresentation of minority persons in important and powerful image-shaping mass media positions.

Media images of minorities have often reflected the changing societal status of a given group. Such was the case in the spring of 1984 when an important media event came and went. A new Norman Lear television situation comedy about Mexican Americans—*a.k.a. Pablo*—aired six episodes from March 6 through April 10, but subsequently was not renewed by the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) network for the following season. Nonetheless, *a.k.a. Pablo* was the first major prime-time show since *Chico and the Man* in 1974 to convey images of Mexican Americans to television's prime-time millions, and at a time when growth and influence of Hispanics in the United States were being increasingly noted and publicized.

This essay presents an overview of the *a.k.a. Pablo* series' content and

discusses its significance. Information was obtained through the author's systematic viewing and content analysis of the six episodes. In addition, some of the at-the-time press reactions, as well as two published interviews with the show's star, comedian Paul Rodriguez, are used in this analysis.

The Road to *a.k.a. Pablo*

More general overviews of television entertainment portrayals of Hispanics and Mexican Americans, from the 1950s to 1984, have revealed, first, an absence of images, an invisibility; too few Hispanics have been shown. When shown, they have been greatly underrepresented. Also, they have been portrayed in mostly stereotyped ways when shown: as comic buffoons, macho peacocks, the downtrodden, the delinquent and criminal, and as police.⁵

For television prime-time situation comedy, the major recent pre-*a.k.a. Pablo* Hispanic show was the James Komack Company's *Chico and the Man*, which was introduced by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), in 1974 and ran until 1978. It was the story of the ongoing relationship between a young, ambitious East Los Angeles Chicano, Chico Rodriguez, and his elderly, cranky Anglo employer, Ed Brown.

Although the show initially met with negative reactions from organized Latino groups, this problem was gradually overcome. Indeed, *Chico and the Man* was the third highest Nielsen-rated prime-time show of the 1974-1975 television season.⁶

Strictly speaking, between *Chico and the Man* in 1974 and *a.k.a. Pablo* in 1984, there were two other brief Hispanic-related situation comedy series, though both were less visible and received far less fanfare and audience response than either *Chico* or *Pablo*. *Viva Valdez* appeared May-September 1976 on the ABC network. It was about a close-knit East Los Angeles Mexican American family. Luis and Sophia Valdez owned a plumbing business, and had four children and a cousin from Mexico living in their home. *Condo* appeared on ABC for several episodes in the spring of 1983. It dealt with two related-by-marriage families who moved into a condominium. One was a downwardly mobile upper-middle-class WASP family, and the other was an upwardly mobile Hispanic family that was becoming middle class. Both *Viva Valdez* and *Condo* quietly ended after their brief airings in their respective seasons and years.

The Episodes of *a.k.a. Pablo*

a.k.a. Pablo in spring 1984 was the story of Chicano stand-up comedian Paul (Pablo) Rivera (played by Chicano stand-up comedian Paul Rodriguez) and his family—father, mother, sisters, brothers-in-law, nieces and nephew. The following is a brief summary of each episode:

Episode Number One. Paul made his big bow as a stand-up comedian at the Comedy Store in Hollywood. He returned to his family's home afterwards in East Los Angeles where he lives, and slept in. His family and agent were shown and introduced. His father objected to what he felt were ethnic slurs in Paul's jokes.

Episode Number Two. Paul, growing in popularity, appeared on the Merv Griffith Show, both stand-up and chatting with Merv. He jokingly described to Merv the characteristics of each of his family members. They in turn resented this negative intrusion into their privacy. The show ended with family tension about whether or not Pablo should use them for his humor

Episode Number Three. Paul found out that he might star in a new television series. He reluctantly met with an image consultant, who wanted to change his image for television (clothing, name, and so forth). She visited his home where his young nephew asserted he did not want to be a (disadvantaged) Mexican, but a non-Mexican, "like Uncle Pablo." Paul ended up stressing to his nephew how proud he was of his Mexican identity and heritage.

Episode Number Four. Paul was selected to entertain at a fancy dinner across town for President Reagan. His traditional and conservative father wanted him to wear a tuxedo; his liberal unmarried sister urged "street clothes." Dressed in street clothes and carrying a prop knife, he and his agent were arrested en route for speeding and jailed. Against father's wishes, several family members obtained his release and Paul expressed his love for them and for his father, who eventually (though reluctantly) showed up at jail too in the end.

Episode Number Five. While Paul anxiously awaited news about his possible television series, the whole family concentrated on preparations for his niece's *quincenera*, a church ceremonial celebration for a young girl who turns fifteen years of age. The entire family dressed up for it and was excited and proud. Meanwhile, two Mexican American activists visited Paul, having heard that his possible series might be offensive in concept to Hispanics. Paul was torn between his new-found media celebrity status and ethnic visibility to the public on the one hand, and the more immediate private joys of the traditional family celebration on the other.

Episode Number Six. The family was at home, the men of the family absorbed in television spectator sports. Paul “sweet talked” a female guest of his unmarried sister; the guest was economically successful and owned franchises. The men felt the guest was leading their women astray from such ideas as “the man is the boss.” The men and the women argued and then stopped talking to each other. The guest finally left, deliberately kissing Paul to make him look good (manly, seductive) in the eyes of the other men. The men, and then the women of the family too, subsequently returned to being in a pleasant mood.

Themes and Lessons

At least five themes are discernible from the episodes: One was Paul's attempt to get ahead and succeed in the largely non-Hispanic world of big-time show business. Another was the ongoing generation and attitudinal conflict between son and father, the father doubting the worth and dignity of the son's occupation and efforts. Another was the liberal activist daughter confronting the traditional and conservative father. A fourth was the warmth and unity of the large Rivera family, which was capable of smoothing over internal disputes and being a source of loyalty and joy: the family's love conquers all. Finally, the importance of and pride in being Chicano and Hispanic was a strong and recurrent theme.

The themes were played out in relation to Rodriguez's comedy skills and the special personality characteristics of each family member: serious and conservative blue collar papa, warm and loving mama, liberal activist unmarried sister, romantic married sister number one and her somewhat intellectual husband, and hard-working married sister number two (a domestic in Beverly Hills), her macho big belly husband, and their children. The idea seemed to be that had the show continued, audiences would both follow Paul's career in the outside world, as well as share the internal life of his large and warm family, getting to know and like each unique member.

As television situation comedy goes, *a.k.a. Pablo* was a generally quite “instructive” show about Mexican Americans for the prime-time millions. Its episodic content contained several important messages or “lessons” for television audiences, such as: (1) Perhaps ethnic groups reach a point where they are secure enough to poke fun at themselves (through jokes), though some members still see such humor as “offensive.” (Interestingly, the show seemed to want to “have it both ways”: First, get the laughs out of a joke, but then also dissect what is objectionable about it to some!). (2)

Even though you try to get ahead in the mainstream, you should still remember your ethnic roots and family. (3) Chicanos have a very strong family-orientation.⁷ (4) Even so, there are often differences between individual Chicanos within families, concerning politics, lifestyles, and goals. (5) Chicano families are also influenced by such external societal developments as sports mania and changing sex roles. (As to the latter, for instance, mama taught her daughters that “the man commands but the woman decides.”)

Rodriguez Was Rivera/Rivera Was Rodriguez

a.k.a. Pablo was, of course, like many other television situation comedies, especially designed to fit the talents of a rising young stand-up comedian, Paul Rodriguez in this case. Both as to much of its content, and as evidenced in personal interviews with him, apparently much about Rodriguez was Rivera and Rivera was Rodriguez, perhaps more so than with most other shows and their stars. Like Rodriguez, Rivera was also a barrio boy who has become a successful stand-up comedian, who also went on talk shows, and also was considered for a series. Rodriguez on *a.k.a. Pablo* told some of his own nightclub jokes, such as (roughly told here) suggesting that a Mexcian with a knife in his mouth is flashing his “Mexican Express Card,” or, you can always tell a Mexican on the freeway: twenty or more people packed into an old car going twenty-five miles an hour in the inside lane.

Like *a.k.a. Pablo* Rivera’s father, Rodriguez’s father also was not happy with or impressed by his son’s choice of comedian as an occupation, or with his son’s “success”:

...he wasn’t supportive. He believes that this is a part-time job that I’ll return to college and be a lawyer and bail him out of jail. He feels that this is a phase I’m going through...He frankly doesn’t think that show business is an honorable profession...He sees it as a problem, a problem with me.⁸

Like *a.k.a. Pablo* Rivera, Rodriguez was pulled over and questioned by police (in his new Porsche),⁹ and has had a new wardrobe selected for him for his new image.¹⁰ Like *a.k.a. Pablo*, Rodriguez has grappled with both the rewards and pressures of new celebrity status: He has wondered if young women were attracted to him for his personal qualities, or for his fame,¹¹ and has experienced contradictory expectations from other Chicanos:

Tremendous pressure on me...imagine this. To mess up. Whether it is in my personal life or my public or artistic life; to make bad movidas. I’m their example right now. I know that some Latinos will look at me as the white man’s ideal Mexican. From both sides I get it. Some Hispanics say that I don’t go far enough. The *gavachos* say that I go too far. The liberals say that I don’t go as far as I should. So I walk an invisible tightrope.¹²

Critical Reaction

Critical reaction to *a.k.a. Pablo* in the Hispanic media, on the whole, was favorable. It was generally seen as a positive image show and a step forward in television portrayals of Hispanics (as well as in increased employment for Hispanic actors). Most saw the most controversial aspect of the show—the jokes Paul tells about Mexican Americans in his act—as either poking fun, or as so exaggerated as to be unbelievable, or as humor used to show stereotypes in order to break them.¹³

One major exception was Antonio Mejias-Rentas, the entertainment critic for *Hispanic Link*, a news service reaching more than 200 Latin-oriented newspapers and magazines in the United States, in English and Spanish. He saw the first episode (which revolved around the joke of the knife as Mexican Express Card) as a big and offensive ethnic slur, and added:

I have a notion that Hispanics should be portrayed on television as they are in real life. If this is the first opportunity to be on prime-time national television, I think they did it wrong. If there were 20 other shows about Latinos on television and this was just one, it would still not make the stereotype acceptable.¹⁴

And William Zamora, the president of *Nosotros*, an alliance of entertainment professionals dedicated to opening up opportunities for Hispanics, by the summer of 1984 complained that despite the opportunities the show had provided for Hispanic actors, it was not continued because:

...people didn't identify with it. There was too much yelling and screaming, too many characters running around. It was the Anglo writers' idea of Mexican-American family life, not what it's really like.¹⁵

The reactions were unusual though since most responses were favorable, particularly in comparison with the initial responses to the James Komack Company's *Chico and the Man* show a decade earlier.

As the current writer observed a few years ago:

When *Chico and the Man* began in the Fall of 1974, the only series featuring a Chicano lead character, it set off a storm of protest by Chicano media commentators, especially in its first few weeks. Chicano commentators associated with such groups as Tenaz, *Nosotros*, Justicia Para Chicanos in the Media, Hispanic Urban Center, Brown Berets and East Los Angeles Health Task Force were alarmed by such things as offensive dialogue (The Man to Chico: "take your flies and go"), the subservient position of Chico, the casting of a Puerto Rican to play a Chicano, and the lack of the Chicano writers...Both *Chico and the Man* and *Bridget Loves Bernie* in part experienced such comparatively high levels of vocal and visible protest because they had to shoulder the burdens of being "the one and only" shows about their groups on television in an ethnically aware and sensitive era.¹⁶

Eventually, in response to critics, *Chico* was made more acceptable with less offensive dialogue and a close father/son-like relationship between Chico and his employer, Ed "The Man" Brown. But it appears that by

1984, a decade later, at least with *a.k.a. Pablo*, the Norman Lear company *was* ethnically aware and sensitive enough, and experienced enough with such types of shows, to be able initially to avoid the more offensive elements of content (and without being overly bland or non-ethnic either).

Conclusion

The record of *a.k.a. Pablo* in audience measurement ratings and popular demand was not sufficiently strong for the ABC network to renew the show for the 1984-1985 season. It was, after all, in competition in its time slot on Tuesday nights with NBC's *The A-Team*, a show usually in the top ten in Nielsen audience rankings. Lear has observed:

...ABC was looking for a miracle. Long-term reality means hanging in with a show like *a.k.a. Pablo*, developing an audience. I feel six shows are too little, especially when you're seeing the first Mexican American family on TV. That's an acquired taste.¹⁷

But ABC apparently did not wish to "hang in"; ratings and reactions overall fell below its anticipations and expectations. After the show was officially cancelled, Lear sent Rodriguez a note that read, "Dearest Darling Paul, America was not ready for us, but I wouldn't have traded this for anything."¹⁸

Was "America was not ready for us" the truth? The assertion was probably *not* correct. The mid-1980s is a time of heightened Hispanic growth, visibility, and dynamism, the right time for *a.k.a. Pablo* or a show like it. Hispanics by now number approximately twenty million and will probably surpass blacks as the largest American minority group by the year 2000. In spite of the show's particular experiences, the prime-time millions *were* probably ready for such a show, and the Hispanic audience was definitely ready and eager and overdue for it. While network decision-makers claim their cancellation decisions are mainly based on objective audience numbers, because theirs is a business whose primary goal is to attract advertisers with those numbers, final decisions are sometimes delayed because of "hunches" or other subjective considerations.¹⁹ So if there was any group "not ready" for *a.k.a. Pablo*, it was the network decision-makers themselves. In their haste to cancel the show without further exploration of alternate night and time slots, it was *they* who were "*behind the times.*" America no doubt was not ready for the Valdez family of *Viva Valdez* in 1976, a show truly ahead of its time, but by 1984 the Rivera family should have been able to become a television fixture.

In any event, *a.k.a. Pablo* has now become a part of television and

ethnic history. Perhaps it will eventually be followed by more new shows about Chicanos and other Hispanics (as well as other groups), that will even more effectively and successfully convey their ethnic images to television's prime-time millions, though this was not the case during the year immediately following the show's appearance and demise.²⁰ But this is not enough.

Hispanics and others will need to be prepared and united to take a stand and work for the non-cancellation and continuation of the next show they deem worthy enough. Such an effort will need to be a grass-roots, mass audience-type campaign (that suggests "numbers"), not just an endeavor of the more organized Hispanic interest groups. Fortunately, a precedent for such a successful campaign exists in the case of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) show about two policewomen, *Cagney and Lacey*.

Cagney and Lacey was cancelled in the spring of 1983. In a previously unheard of action, CBS executives changed their minds and decided to bring the show back to life in the spring of 1984. This was partly because of a deluge of grass-roots protest mail from rank-and-file viewers (not just feminist interest groups), urging that the show be reinstated. Regardless of whether or not *a.k.a. Pablo* deserved a similar effort, Hispanics and others might well study the *Cagney and Lacey* precedent in preparation for the future.²¹

Notes

¹Randall M. Miller, ed. *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups*. (Englewood: Ozer, 1980).

²Particia Iiyama and Harry H. L. Kitano. "Asian Americans and the Media." *Television and the Socialization of the Minority Child*. G. Berry and C. Mitchell-Kerman, eds. (New York: Academic Press, 1982) 151-186.

³Jack Slater. "The Amos 'N Andy Show." *Emmy*. Vol. 6 (November/December, 1984) 46-49.

⁴Norman L. Friedman. "Responses of Blacks and Other Minorities to Television Shows of the 1970s About Their Groups." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. Vol. 7 (1978) 85-102.

⁵See B.S. Greenberg, M. Burgeon, J. K. Burgeon, and F. Korzenny. *Mexican Americans and the Mass Media*. (Norwood: Ablex, 1983) 30-31; and Lewis Beale. "Que Pasa? Not Much, At Least for the Hispanic Image." *Emmy*. Vol. 6 (September/October, 1984) 36-39.

⁶Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh. *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network T.V. Shows: 1946-Present*. (New York: Ballantine, 1979) 809.

⁷Research shows Chicanos, on the whole, *are* quite family-oriented. For a good discussion of the particularities and complexities of measuring Chicano "familism," see Maxine Baca Zinn. "Familism among Chicanos: A Theoretical Review." *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*. Vol. 10 (Fall/Winter, 1982/1983) 224-238.

⁸Jorge Luis Rodriguez. "An Interview with Paul Rodriguez." *Avance: The Latin Entertainment Magazine*. Vol. 2 (April/May, 1984) 50.

⁹Penthouse Interview. "Paul Rodriguez." *Penthouse*. Vol. 15 (July, 1984) 151.

¹⁰Rodriguez, 19.

¹¹Penthouse Interview, 100, 148.

¹²Rodriguez, 50. Paul Rodriguez has frequently commented that he was uncomfortable being asked "political" questions about Latinos, as if he were a Latino "spokesman." He was asked such questions, though, because in March and April of 1984, through his television prime-time visibility, he suddenly became one of the most known and recognized Latinos in the United States.

¹³Rick Sherwood. "Pablo: An Acquired Taste for Viewers?" *Daily News*. (Los Angeles Life section, March 27, 1984) 20.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Bruce Cook. "Latino Actors Want Piece of Movie Pie." *Daily News*. (Los Angeles Life section, July 20, 1984) 4.

¹⁶Friedman, 99.

¹⁷Beale, 38.

¹⁸Bruce Cook. "For Rodriguez, 'Pablo' was a.k.a. Opportunity." *Daily News*. (Los Angeles Life section, July 20, 1984) 5.

¹⁹Todd Gitlin. *Inside Prime Time*. (New York: Pantheon, 1983) 19-63.

²⁰In this regard, the 1984-1985 season was not promising. Only one new series could have been called an ethnic one—"The Cosby Show"—and

though it was highly popular with viewers, it was about an already more-televised group (blacks) and featured a veteran star with already established popularity (Bill Cosby). The degree of popularity of "The Cosby Show" though, especially for a new show—third in the Nielsen ratings for the entire 1984-1985 season—seems to have facilitated the future prime-time selection and scheduling of some additional new ethnic shows about blacks, as reflected in preliminary network announcements about the 1985-1986 season: NBC has the comedy "227," about Chicago black neighbors, ABC has "He's the Mayor," a comedy about a black mayor, and CBS has "Charlie and Company," a comedy about a black middle-class family in Chicago. No ethnic shows about groups other than blacks are on the preliminary 1985-1986 network schedules.

²¹Joyce Sunila. "Cagney and Lacey." *Emmy*. Vol. 7 (March/April, 1985) 23.

Critique

There is no question that the television show *a.k.a. Pablo* was an important media event for the Mexican American community. All such prime time shows which deal with ethnic groups highlight minority problems and give visibility to peoples otherwise not dealt with in the mass media. Whether or not such shows create as many stereotypes as they dispel is another matter altogether.

Even not very good shows such as *The Jeffersons*, *Sanford and Son*, and *Good Times* provided air time for black actors and made more positive portrayals possible in such shows as *Benson*, *Webster*, or even *The Cosby Show*, the highest rated show of the current season. One can argue whether or not the integration of the latter examples signals progress or retrogression. The point is that with sufficient media exposure, blacks are now staple figures on prime time television shows whether those shows are black-oriented or not.

As Friedman points out, such opportunities have been lacking for Chicanos and even those shows which have appeared have been short-lived with the exception of the ill-fated *Chico and the Man*. *a.k.a. Pablo* followed in its predecessor's wake. There is little to quarrel with in

Friedman's article: he outlines the episodes of the show clearly and concisely; he enumerates the various themes the shows illustrated; and he outlines the general reaction to the show from the Hispanic community. However, what he does not do is what he announces is the purpose of his study, namely, to discuss the significance of the series' content or to provide adequate analysis of the individual shows. Too much of what is presented, therefore, is simply unsupported by specific information gleaned from the shows. We do not see the process by which the author arrived at the conclusions he is presenting.

More detailed discussion of the individual episodes and less information about how much Pablo resembled the star of the show, Paul Rodriguez, would be useful in further analysis. More resource information is also needed about Hispanic reaction to the show. Readers need more detailed references upon which to form an opinion. One final point: more should have been done with a comparison of *a.k.a. Pablo* to *Chico and the Man*, tracing any similarities, progress in ethnic images since 1974, and the like.

I would have found helpful a close analysis of at least one episode of the series, complete with a discussion of the relationship between visuals and dialogue, and some in-depth reflections on the show with adequate details to serve as reference points. As is, I find the paper interesting, even provocative. Further research in analysis, in content discussion, and in background information is necessary to evaluate the impact and influence of television on a viewing public which often cannot fairly evaluate the portrayal of ethnic peoples or situations. Friedman's essay provides a model of how to begin this effort.

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Critique

Norman Friedman's analysis of the short-lived sitcom, *a.k.a. Pablo*, raises many issues about the role of television in social life and the limited access of minorities to representation on television and to the decision-making processes of television programming. As his content

analysis implicitly shows, the “situations” and the comedy of this sitcom were defined, set in motion, and revolved around various positions of Mexican Americans in relation to white culture and society. Pablo’s Mexican jokes and flagrant stereotypical traits allowed him access to the world of show business and at the same time disturbed the self-perceptions and cultural pride of his family; his sister’s liberal activism and feminism was placed in opposition to more conservative views of how to progress in America and awareness of the constraints of mainstream white society. The program thus positioned the Rivera family along several axes which showcased the heterogeneity of Mexican Americans as it addressed the socially constructed conventions of cultural stereotypes.

Norman Lear, producer of *a.k.a. Pablo*, occupies a position in television history associated with liberal programs which straddled the far edges of social commentary. Like *All in the Family*, *Maude*, *Good Times*, *The Jefferson*, and *Sanford and Son*, *a.k.a. Pablo* would presumably do for Mexican Americans what the other programs did for blacks and the working class: explicitly expose fundamental prejudices and generational differences in social life through antagonisms within the family. Yet, as Friedman’s discussion of the reaction of some of the Hispanic press to *a.k.a. Pablo* shows, the question of how “liberating” the narrative structures and humor are is a vexing problem. Is simply having representation on television enough? Although the goal may be to reinforce pride in being Mexican American and to stress the strength of family ties through adversity, the Hispanic press argued that the price is too high. The Lear sitcom format this time stretched the limits of “bad taste” too far and the controversial aspects of the program negated any possible value for the Hispanic community.

Friedman’s analysis of critical reaction and interviews is an aspect of television which should be pursued as this is a valuable entry into understanding how audiences for television are addressed by other media. In addition to criticizing and evaluating programming, the press also sets out the terms for popular understanding of television. Comparing the reactions of mass media, trade journals, and the Hispanic press would show the differences in their responses to the program as well as the issues which each type of press considers important for its readers. As Friedman implies, the Hispanic press, speaking to and for a group, found *a.k.a. Pablo* the most problematic and most offensive. Yet this negative appraisal was undoubtedly less significant to the program’s cancellation than its ratings.

With the adopting of overnight ratings in the mid-1970s, the necessity of programs finding an “instant” audience reinforced competition

among the networks. The placement of *a.k.a. Pablo* against *The A-Team*'s strength and the now typical six-episode run of new series worked at cross purposes for *a.k.a. Pablo*'s renewal. Friedman asks Hispanics to articulate their viability as an audience for television by writing the networks as did the fans of *Cagney and Lacey*. This organized voice needs to constitute itself as a demographic group attractive to advertisers. What CBS recognized in the *Cagney and Lacey* letters was an audience to which advertisers of the program could be sold—women in an age group and with an income level attractive to advertisers. Finding the “best” audience for certain programs is the most critical variable.

A basic issue here is that television is unadaptable to the heterogeneity of American social life because television formats such as the sitcom and producers' perceptions of the harmony among audiences, formats and advertisers work toward homogenous and unified representations. The constraints of the sitcom format itself may have been a problem for *a.k.a. Pablo*. Was the convention of the large Mexican American family impossible for the format to adequately handle? Did the central character of Pablo have “too many” other characters with which to interact thus creating “too many” oppositions for a half-hour? *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* effectively de-centered Mary to allow the other characters to assume identities separate from her. An ensemble structure such as that of *WKRP in Cincinnati* might have allowed *a.k.a. Pablo* to focus on the heterogeneity of Mexican Americans. Yet this would have limited the self-reflection fundamental to the concept of the program, that of the position of Paul Rodriguez/Pablo Rivera as he tries to negotiate access to mass media.

Presumably though, in order to attain representation on television today, Hispanics would have to adopt the traits of already acculturated *yuppie* upward mobility as in *The Bill Cosby Show*. The situations and the comedy would have to circulate around the characters as “persons” first and identifiable cultural minorities second. The ethnicity and heterogeneity of social life would have to be effectively masked and placed into the “melting pot” of Euroamerican ideologies. Thus the conventions of Mexican American ethnicity and the issues of cultural progress for Mexican Americans would have to be relegated to past achievements and to history. Or Mexican Americans will have to, as Friedman strongly argues, establish themselves as a target demographic group for advertisers. Yet this, too, will exact a price.

Hispanics already provide another alternative to “free” television in exclusively Spanish-language television such as the SIN cable network and the UHF stations in large metropolitan areas such as Chicago.

These stations have programming which including the broad range of television such as music video, news, sitcoms, and variety shows. Although language is a barrier to non-Spanish speakers seeking exposure to programming speaking to and for a diversified culture, the development of the alternative programming is evidence of both the size and complexity of America's Hispanic population as well as their ability to summon the technology, capital, and personnel necessary to its distribution.

— Mary Beth Haralovich
Iowa State University

Depictions of Elderly Blacks in American Literature

Alice A. Deck

Portraits of elderly Afroamerican men and women abound in American literature and vary from stories which present a mythic primordial character who symbolizes emotional stability, experiential wisdom and a community's cultural and historical heritage, to works in slice-of-life realistic style which dramatize the social and psychological conditions of aged blacks. Included in this second category are works which show the confrontation between old and new social standards. Coupled with this range of portraits is a variety of attitudes toward elderly blacks.

The writers who believe that with age comes wisdom usually write with an air of reverence for the elders' ability to endure and to remain altruistic in their attitudes toward family and community. Those writers who portray the darker side of life for the elderly in America—the poverty, the depression, and the low self-esteem—convey anger over the situation and pity for their characters. Stories dramatizing a confrontation between old and young come closest to presenting multi-dimensional elders, highlighting their mistakes and weaknesses in dealing with the younger generation.

A popular literary image of elderly blacks among black and white American authors is that of the primordial man or woman who functions as an advisor/storyteller and as a source of altruistic affection and experiential wisdom. Their specific role is to guide younger blacks and whites, many of whom are suffering from a sense of alienation from either their immediate physical environment or their community and family. Although there is some truth in this image of elderly blacks, it is a revered American myth.

The earliest example of an advisor/storyteller is the highly controversial Uncle Remus, a character created by the white writer Joel Chandler Harris in 1879. Harris's Uncle Remus lived alone in a small log

cabin on a Georgia plantation and was the only former slave to have remained there after the Civil War. He is portrayed as a dark-skinned, weatherbeaten old man with a ring of white hair surrounding his bald patch, spending the best part of his day telling stories about Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox to the plantation owner's young seven-year-old boy. Uncle Remus speaks in Southern black dialect and punctuates his stories with affectionate terms such as "honey" and affectionate gestures. As a character Uncle Remus reflected Joel Chandler Harris's view of the 19th century ex-slave who is loving and willing to forgive and forget all the atrocities committed against black people during slavery.

White readers of the *Atlanta Constitution*, the newspaper in which Uncle Remus first appeared, enjoyed him as a reminder of the antebellum days of black submissiveness and devotion to whites. He harbors no resentment. He does not express a desire to leave his plantation. He does not wish to learn to read and write. Uncle Remus was a welcomed alternative to the reality of the many ex-slaves who were entering training schools, southern politics, and small towns by the droves.

A discussion of Uncle Remus must make a distinction between the outer frame of the legends in which we see him interacting with the young white child and the legends themselves as authentic Afroamerican folklore. Harris spent four years, 1862-1866, living on the Turnwold plantation in Putnam County, Georgia, learning the printer's trade. He befriended the slaves there, especially one named "Uncle" George Terrell who was a master of telling tales. After he left the plantation, Harris held a series of newspaper jobs and swapped stories with black Americans he met in his travels or in the local towns where he lived.¹

The legends Uncle Remus tells are the same ones Harris heard from blacks and reflect a black view of the world. The weaker Br'er Rabbit (with whom the slaves identified) usually overcame his stronger adversaries the fox or the bear (who represented the white master or the overseer) by virtue of his quick wit and keen insight into human psychology. Br'er Rabbit bears no resemblance to Uncle Remus, but he does resemble Uncle Julius McAdoo, another 19th century elderly storyteller created by Charles Chesnutt and presented in his collection *The Conjure Woman*, first published in 1899.

Uncle Julius represents one Afroamerican writer's response to Harris's creation. He is a "venerable looking colored man...tall and though slightly bowed by the weight of years, apparently quite vigorous. There was a shrewdness in his eyes which was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character."² Although he is also the only former slave still living on an old plantation when it is purchased by John, a wealthy young white northerner, Uncle Julius does not tell his stories just to entertain. His ulterior motives in telling folktales to John and his wife

are gaining something for himself such as a new suit of clothes (in "The Conjuror's Revenge"), or something for the other black people in the immediate area such as an abandoned schoolhouse on John's property to be used as a black church (in "Po Sandy").

In terms of structure the stories in *The Conjure Woman* parallel *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* in that there is an outer frame story narrated in standard English showing the interaction between John, his wife, and Julius. Then there are the inner legends Julius tells in dialect. Julius's stories are far more complex in terms of characterization and plot. They involve animism and conjuration as it was believed and practiced among blacks at that time, but Julius's act of telling these tales is his own way of working magic on his white boss.

There is no open hostility between John and Julius, but there is a strong conflict between their points of view on the nature of reality and truth. By virtue of his education, John represents scientific rationality and reason. He takes Julius and his stories as merely Southern rural amusements: "That is a very ingenious fairy tale, Julius, and we are much obliged to you" (159). Julius, however, represents a secular faith in magic and feels that root work (conjure) can explain more than white man's science: "W'ite folks say he die'er de fevuh, but de niggers knowed it wuz de goopher." His belief in the supernatural is a function of his black communal identity, and by adhering to his beliefs in spite of white laws forbidding them (or John's skepticism), Julius is asserting his pride in a black culture based on a long standing tradition. He asserts: "My mammy tol' me dat tale w'en I wa'nt mo' d'n kneehigh ter a hopper'-grass" (101) and "I ben hearn de tale for twenty-five yeahs en I ain't got no 'casion fer ter spute it" (128). Clearly, Charles Chesnut was forcing his readers to see the elderly former slave not as forgiving and self-effacing but as one determined to look out for his own interests.

Two important literary images of elderly Afroamerican women by white southerners who inherited a culture based on assumed white superiority are Dilsey, the house servant in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Phoenix Jackson, the central character in Eudora Welty's short story "A Worn Path" (1941). Both Faulkner and Welty lived to see the beginnings of Afroamerican demands for social equality. They exhibited complex and ambiguous feelings about blacks in their fiction. Dilsey and Phoenix, nonetheless, have one clearly discernible trait—a self-sacrificing capacity to love and to endure any number of trials and tribulations in their dealings with white America.

Faulkner's Dilsey is a controversial character among Afroamerican critics like Harris's Uncle Remus. She is based on a southern white image of black people, especially elderly blacks who are devoted to the white

families for whom they work. Within *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel portraying the moral decay of a southern family, Dilsey is a gem. She is the only one who has compassion for each member of the Compson family even though they have taken her and her family for granted for years. Dilsey, the humble servant, criticizes the Compsons' inhumanity toward each other, and treats the idiot son, Benjy, with tender affection. Dilsey is the only one who can stand up to the vindictive son, Jason.

Dilsey represents Christian belief in salvation through unquestioning faith, humility, and love despite the persecution (one member of the family actually strikes Dilsey at one point), which has taken its toll on her physique:

She had been a big woman once but now her skeleton rose, draped loosely in unpadding skin that tightened again upon a paunch almost dropsical, as though muscle and tissue had been courage or fortitude which the days or the years had consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left like a ruin or a landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts...³

Faulkner's reverence for Dilsey is undermined by this description, which is not a flattering portrait. She seems more like a spectre of a woman rather than anyone whom another Afroamerican would recognize.

Dilsey and Uncle Remus are embedded in the American consciousness to such an extent that versions of them appear on commercial products (Aunt Jemima pancakes and Uncle Ben's rice), on commercial television (Rochester on the Jack Benny Show, or Nell on *Gimme a Break*), and in the movies (Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*). White American popular culture reveres these characters for their devotion to humanitarian ideals; however, a sense of the total black community never emerges. Moreover, Dilsey and Uncle Remus exhibit not one sign of divided loyalty regarding the history of racial antagonism between blacks and whites in the United States. Their creators were obviously not familiar with Paul Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" which says in part:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—
We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.⁴

Uncle Remus and Dilsey represent what two white American writers want to see and not what elderly blacks really are.

Eudora Welty's Phoenix Jackson is another version of Faulkner's Dilsey dressed in the stereotypical long dress, long white apron, and head rag. She is not shown serving a white family but is described as taking a slow walk into town on a winter day to pick up some medicine for her grandson who is at home ill. Phoenix has made the trip so many times that even though she is partially blind knows every twist and turn of the road and can move along at a steady pace. Similar to Uncle Remus, Uncle Julius and Dilsey, Phoenix is part of the natural southern

landscape and like the earth, she has endured and nurtured all those who were in her care.

To reinforce the Phoenix name, Welty uses red, yellow and blue imagery throughout the story to suggest flames, and included bird metaphors to describe the old black woman:

Her eyes were blue with age. Her skin had a pattern all its own of numberless branching wrinkles and as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead, but a golden color ran underneath, and two knobs of her cheeks were illuminated by a yellow burning under the dark. Under the red rag her hair came down on her neck in the frailest wringlets, still black, and with an odor like copper...She carried a thin, small cane made from an umbrella, and with this she kept tapping the frozen earth in front of her. This made the grave and persistent noise in the still air, that seemed meditative like the chirping of a solitary bird.⁵

This is a much more flattering description than Faulkner's description of Dilsey. The positive image, however, is undermined by two incidents.

First of all, everything about Phoenix's behavior suggests that she is senile. Although she never loses her way along the road, she mutters to herself constantly. At one point she stops to rest and thinks she sees a small boy come up to her and offer her a piece of cake. Once she arrives at the doctor's office, Phoenix sits staring at the nurse for a while trying to remember why she came to town. Secondly, Phoenix is very poor, as Welty shows when she depicts Phoenix grubbing to pick up a nickel that a white hunter let fall along the side of the road. She has to tolerate the condescending remarks of the nurses, who refer to her a charity case when they speak as though she were not even in the room. One nurse finally says: "It's Christmas time, Grandma. Could I give you a few pennies out of my purse?" (294). In response, Phoenix asks for five pennies and with her other nickel she purchases a paper windmill for her grandson. Welty's platitudinous implications are that the simplest thing can bring joy when given out of love, and Phoenix and her grandson are presumed to be content to subsist on the small handouts they can get from white society.

Welty once explained the origins of this story and what she wanted to emphasize.⁶ She once saw "a solitary old woman like Phoenix" walking at a distance, across a wintry Southern landscape and was immediately intrigued with the question as to what would make her take a journey on such a day. She never got close enough to the woman to speak with her to judge her mental state, or to discover the woman's mission. Welty simply imagined the woman taking the trip out of love and made this the focal point of her story: "The habit of love cuts through confusion and stumbles or contrives its way out of difficulty, it remembers the way even when it forgets, for a dumbfounded moment, its reason for being" (161-162). She created a highly romantic picture of the black woman she saw that day. By not knowing who she was, nor meeting her a close range,

Welty was absolved of the responsibility to give an accurate portrait, and used the handy stereotype of aged blacks as poor, senile, and tottering.

Nikki Giovanni's "Alabama Poem" (1970) and Alice Walker's short story "To Hell with Dying" (1968) are two examples of works by black women writers which do not romanticize the characters. The basic metaphor in the Giovanni poem sets up a parallel between trees and elderly blacks based on a comparison of the length of time they have experienced living in the rural south which affords them a higher knowledge of life than anything taught at school. Giovanni is building on the type of primordial image of elderly blacks presented by Harris, Chesnutt, Faulkner, and Welty, but the two characters in the poem are neither infirmed nor senile. The speaker is a black college student who one day meets an old woman and man on her way to class. The old man said: "Girl! My hands seen more than all them books they got at Tuskegee," while the woman called out: "Sista...let me tell you—my feet seen more than yo eyes ever gonna read."⁷ Every callous, bunion, wrinkle, and scar on their bodies represents a lesson learned and the speaker (as well as the poet) accepted and respected the two people for that.

Mr. Sweet, the old alcoholic blues singer and diabetic in Alice Walker's story "To Hell With Dying," is wrinkled, white-haired, and subject to bouts of depression, but he is cherished all the more by the black family whom he regularly visits. The narrator is also a college educated black woman who, in retrospect, explains just how important old Mr. Sweet was to her family while she was growing up. When he periodically fell ill from an attack brought on by depression and seemed to give up on life, her entire family would gather around his bed, and when her father nodded ascent, all the children would climb on the bed and proceed to revive Mr. Sweet: "...whoever was the smallest at the time would kiss him all over his wrinkled brown face and begin to tickle him so that he would laugh all down in his stomach...."⁸ This would suffice in bringing Mr. Sweet back to life and he would resume his visits with the family—playing his guitar and singing the blues. The children took Mr. Sweet as a playmate, but the narrator recalls that he made her feel especially good about herself: "Mr. Sweet used to call me princess, and I believed it. He made me feel pretty at five and six, and simply outrageously devastating at the blazing age of eight and a half" (131-132). As a blues singer, Mr. Sweet entertained the family with "Sweet Georgia Brown" and taught several of the children how to play his steel-stringed guitar. Hence, even though he was usually drunk most of the time from drinking his own home brew, even the narrator's mother accepted and welcomed him into the house. The narrator's biggest disappointment came on the day when

she was called home from graduate school at age twenty-four, to participate in reviving the then ninety year old Mr. Sweet. There were no other young children in her family by that time so she as the youngest tried to work her old magic to no avail. "Like a piece of rare and delicate china which was always being saved from breaking and which had finally fell" (137)—Mr. Sweet died, giving her cause to think about her aging parents and her own maturity.

Mr. Sweet represented genuine affection given and received between the old and the young. He was not interested in any material gain he might make from his visits; he benefitted emotionally from being part of another family, especially after his wife and son died. Like Uncle Julius, Mr. Sweet functioned as a cultural resource by way of his blues music which he taught to the children. Like Welty, Walker has so much awe for her character that she endows him with near celestial qualities—his white hair suggesting angelic purity of heart. Yet an important difference is in the way Walker gives a full treatment of an adopted family's role in Mr. Sweet's life. The familial closeness, the belonging, nurtured the man so he could live until he was ninety. Unlike Phoenix Jackson's, Mr. Sweet's behavior is not a mindless habit. He remains clear and lucid in his thinking until his death.

A major elderly black female in recent American fiction is Miss Jane Pittman, the focal point of Ernest Gaines novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). She is sought out by a young black history teacher who is certain that Miss Jane's life story can help him explain things to his students. She is not idealized in the novel. The fact that she is 110 years old, has been both a slave and a witness to the black militancy of the 1960s make her as revered by Gaines as Mr. Sweet was by Walker. There are no conflicts between Miss Jane, the centenarian and the younger generations represented in the novel.

The linking between generations is one of Old Jack Crawley's functions in David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981). Charged with the responsibility of initiating his best friend's youngest son, John Washington, into manhood, Old Jack taught him to fish and hunt, and to become an expert woodsman. Most of all he told John stories about his father, Moses Washington. Like Uncle Remus's situation, Old Jack lived by himself in a small cabin in a remote corner of the woods. When the young boy John came to visit Old Jack would prepare two hot toddies, light a candle, place it on a table in a pool of hardening wax, and "spin out an endless web of tales that were either true or so blatantly false as to seem true."⁹ Old Jack was able to give John clues to his black ancestry and to the history of racial struggles in his rural Western Pennsylvania town. Old Jack had an intense compassion for his black male friends,

especially John's father, Moses, matched only by his resentment for whites: "Me, why I'd been knowed to make fun a white folks right to their faces, which was ornery. I'd been knowed to come right out an' tell 'em to buy their ticket on the express train to hell, which was surely ornery" (79). Old Jack resembles Uncle Julius in that he asserts his loyalty and belief in black culture and black people. However, Jack has his disagreements with John as he grows up. When John wins a scholarship to college, Old Jack, who is unable to read, is furious. He tells John one day when he returned to visit him years later: "Goddamnit, Johnny, you may a been to college, but you don't know nothin', you don't know where you growed up at." The old man and woman in Giovanni's "Alabama Poem" would concur with Old Jack that, for young blacks, the wisdom gained from lived experiences with whites is the key to black survival.

John's reverence for Old Jack is evident in his caring for the old man on his death bed and in his returning to live by himself in Jack's cabin after Jack dies. Even though John had left home to teach in a university, and fell in love with Judith, a white psychiatrist, he was never completely satisfied with his life until he returned to Jack's shack in the woods to meditate. Old Jack held the key to his emotional, ethnic, and familial origins.

The characters discussed above resemble one another in that they are closely associated with the earth. They are all nurturers of the younger generation, who hold them in high esteem. The authors respect them for their wisdom based on lived experiences and superhuman capacity to survive on meagre clothing, little food, and almost no money. Their simple faith in black people, mankind, God or the supernatural has and will continue to sustain them through life.

Other literary portraits of elderly Afroamericans include works which stress the social reality behind the myth of resiliency and wisdom. Short stories such as Arna Bontemps' "A Summer Tragedy" (1933), and Alice Walker's "The Welcome Table" (1972) reveal just how devastating rural poverty, racism, and isolation can be to the mental and physical health of the elderly. In these works the authors' pity rather than awe is demonstrated.

Bontemps's "A Summer Tragedy" takes place on the day an elderly couple, who had lived as sharecroppers on the same land for twenty-five years, deliberately climbed into their old T-model Ford and drove it over the cliff into the river. Jeff and Jennie's suicide seems inevitable because of their physical frailty (Jeff suffers from severe arthritis, Jennie is totally blind), and their emotional depression over their poverty. They live in perpetual debt to the landowner. All five of their adult children had died within the last two years, so they had no younger family

members to help them with the work or the debts. Unlike Chesnutt's Uncle Julius who believed in conjuration, and Faulkner's Dilsey who believed in Christian humility, Jeff and Jennie professed no belief in the supernatural nor in God. With nothing to serve as a buffer between their emotional stability and their grim situation in old age, Jeff and Jennie were finally defeated by hopelessness. The story coincides with a quotation from a national study on the mental health status of older black Americans: "As an oppressed minority, many of their mental health problems are as much (if not more) a function of environmental factors than the outcome of intra-psychic conflict."¹⁰ Jeff and Jennie never wavered in their determination to end their lives—this sort of debate had taken place long before that fatal day. In fact, their suicide was for them a celebration; they decided to dress themselves up in the same moth-eaten, patched, and worn clothing that they had reserved for special occasions over the years. This last pitiful sign of their self-esteem makes the tragedy all the more lamentable, and understandable. They were too proud to ask for charity.

A death occurs in Alice Walker's "The Welcome Table" but here it is viewed as an elderly woman's just reward for having maintained her belief in Christ despite her grim social situation. The story focuses on the Sunday when an old black woman tried to enter and worship in a white church and her removal by two burly members of the congregation: "Under the old woman's arms they placed their hard fists, flexed their muscular shoulders and out she flew through the door...."¹¹ Once on the outside again, the old woman looked down the country road near the church and saw Jesus Christ coming towards her. When they met, she heard him say: "Follow me," and she did. When she was found dead along the side of the road the next day, several black people who had seen her pass said that she had been all alone on the road, "sometimes jabbering in a low insistent voice sometimes singing, sometimes merely gesturing excitedly with her hands" (87). Hence to other people the old woman appeared to be mentally unbalanced. (The white congregation thought that explained her daring act of entering their church.) Since no one in the black community had known her nor where she was from, no one had stopped her to ask if she needed help. Like the couple in Bontemps's story, this character was all alone in her old age. She does not, however, succumb to an emotional depression, but is enlivened by her belief in Christ.

Unlike Eudora Welty's depiction of Phoenix, Alice Walker does not revere her character. Instead, Walker's annoyance over the hypocritical white congregation's treatment of the old woman occupies most of the narrative space. Walker's old woman inherits a place in heaven not some

coins or a free bottle of medicine. The situation in "The Welcome Table" echoes Dilsey's situation in *The Sound and the Fury* without the empty reverence.

Some of the stories which attempt to convey the social reality behind the mythic images of elderly Afroamericans focus on the confrontation between the older and younger generation. In works such as Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Jean Toomer's "Kabnis," and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* the older grandparent, or simply an elder member of the black community, attempts to impose values and beliefs upon the young protagonist who, in the process of maturing, thinks he or she must live by different standards.

Lena Younger and her children Walter Lee and Beneatha have a series of arguments in *A Raisin in the Sun* over just what it takes for them to get ahead in America. Beneatha for example is aspiring to be a doctor, and is very adamant in her dislike for the way the family has to live in a small, over-crowded apartment. Throughout the play she loses patience with her mother's insistence that faith in God will see them all through. One of the most poignant moments in the play is when Lena must slap Beneatha and make her repeat: "In my mother's house there is still God."¹² The conflict between Richard Wright and his Seventh Day Adventist grandmother in *Black Boy* stems from a similar grandchild's disbelief in his grandmother's religion. He is forced to watch his family suffer with poverty. Yet he is forbidden to take a part-time job because it would require work on Saturdays, the Sabbath Day in his grandmother's church. In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie at first accepts her grandmother's advice to marry a man who is financially secure. Janie later decides that she wants to have a truly loving relationship with a man and leaves her first husband to go off in search of it. Janie's grandmother wanted her to belong to the black middle class while Janie wanted to live among the folk and enjoy life. In each of these situations, the elder represents the protagonist's heritage and the ethos of the Afroamerican community and tries to teach the young person lessons she has learned from experiences living as a minority in a white world. Unlike the situation with Old Jack Crawley, Uncle Remus or Mr. Sweet, these elders find that their ideas are not well received by the young. The younger generation (e.g., Beneatha, Richard and Janie) view their elders as living by rules which will keep black people in a subservient, bondage-type position. After several trials at following their own ideas, the younger people usually must accept the wisdom of the elder or become reconciled with it. The elder represents ethnic roots and

identity.

Jean Toomer's "Kabnis" and Toni Morrison's *Sula* are two characters who not only have a serious disagreement with their elders but who violently reject them and refuse to acknowledge the slightest relationship. Kabnis, the central character in section three of *Cane* (1922) is a southern-born, but northern-bred and educated black who returns to Georgia to teach school. He hates the southern environment—its atmosphere, landscape, black and white people—because he cannot accept the beauty and the pain that seem to coexist in it. Father John is an old black man ("Grey-haired, Prophetic, Immobile"),¹³ who lives in the basement of a black-owned dry goods store. While other characters in the story revere John, Kabnis curses him continuously because he cannot accept the southern heritage that he represents: "Master, slave, soil, and Christianity" (107). As a middle class Afroamerican, Kabnis wants to look elsewhere for his identity: "My ancestors were Southern blue-bloods" (107).

The blood ties between the matriarch Eva Peace and her granddaughter Sula had never been enough to make them love one another. Consequently, the first thing Sula did upon returning to the bottom after a ten year absence was to have Eva put away in a rest home. Sula's act was viewed as akin to putting Eva "outdoors" by the rest of the black community, and "outdoors" as Morrison has explained elsewhere, "was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact...the concreteness of being outdoors was like the difference between the concept of death and being in fact dead."¹⁴ Sula's symbolic murdering of her grandmother could be seen as an act of desperation because she was so afraid of Eva Peace. She told her best friend Nell in explanation: "All I know is I'm scared...I didn't know what elseto do...what *should* I do Nellie? Take her back and sleep with my door locked again?"¹⁵ Sula thought of her grandmother as a threat to her very own existence. Later in the novel, when Nell goes to visit Eva after Sula had died, Nell is pained to see that the once fiesty, vigorous matriarch is nearly insane. Her granddaughter's rejection coupled with the sterile environment at the rest home contributed to Eva's break down.

In "Kabnis" and *Sula* there is no reconciliation between the old and young, no reuniting on a higher plane of awareness and mutual understanding like that in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The young protagonist in both cases is ineffectual in dealing with life after the rift. Kabnis continues to rant and rave against the south and lives in a constant state of terror. Sula dies pining away for the only man she ever loved. If she had been on better terms with her grandmother, she might have learned how to rise above such a disappointment just as Eva had survived her

husband's (Sula's grandfather) abandonment of her and her three small children many years earlier. Of course Eva did not embrace Sula and tell her stories of her past experiences either, so the fault lies with both the matriarch and her grandchild.

Morrison, Hansberry, and Hurston each point out the mistakes their elder characters make in dealing with the younger generation. They also show how shortsighted young people can be in openly confronting their elders. None of these writers (including Toomer and Wright) created the elderly characters mentioned above out of a romantic reverence for their supposed superior wisdom. The writers explored the dramatic tensions in the relationships between old and young. Social conditions are sometimes shown as contributing factors, but, for the most part, the authors examine a set of personalities.

The elderly Afroamerican appears in American literature as a character in several contexts. The important point is that no consistent image of this character dominates, rather, it varies depending on the writer's attitude towards black people as a whole, and the elderly black in particular. Although the Uncle Remus and Dilsey character images still haunt, recent writers like Ernest Gaines in *A Gathering of Old Men* and Toni Cade Bambara in *The Salt Eaters* are ready to exorcise those two demons of the American imagination.

Notes

¹For a thorough elaboration of Harris's life and his views on Uncle Remus, see Robert Hemenway's introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) 7-35.

²Charles Chesnutt. *The Conjure Woman*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969) 10. Subsequent references to *The Conjure Woman* are from this edition, page numbers will be given in the course of the discussion.

³William Faulkner. *The Sound and the Fury*. (New York: Random House, 1954) 330.

⁴Paul Lawrence Dunbar. "We Wear the Mask." *I am the Darker Brother*. Arnold Adoff, ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1970) 86.

⁵Eudora Welty. "The Worn Path." *The Short Story: 25 Masterpieces* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1975) 287. Subsequent references to the "The Worn Path" are from this edition, page numbers will be given in the course of the discussion.

⁶Eudora Welty. "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?" *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*. (New York: Random House, 1977) 161. Subsequent references to this essay are from this printing.

⁷Nikki Giovanni. "Alabama Poem." *Re-creation*. (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971) 33.

⁸Alice Walker. "To Hell With Dying." *In Love and Trouble*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973) 129. Subsequent references to this story are from this printing.

⁹David Bradley. *The Chaneyville Incident*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 27. Subsequent references to this story are from this printing.

¹⁰James Jackson, Linda M. Chatters, and Harold N. Neighbors. "The Mental Health Status of Older Black Americans: A National Study." *The Black Scholar* Vol. 13, No. 1 (1982) 22.

¹¹Alice Walker. "The Welcome Table." *In Love and Trouble* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973) 84.

¹²Lorraine Hansberry. *A Raisin in the Sun* in *Afro-American Literature Drama*. Williams Adams, Peter Conn, and Barry Slepian, eds. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970) 27.

¹³Jean Toomer. *Cane* (New York: Liveright, 1975) 104.

¹⁴Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1970) 18.

¹⁵Toni Morrison. *Sula*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1975) 87.

Critique

"Depictions of Elderly Blacks in American Literature" is more suggestive than satisfying. It offers a useful introduction to its topic, but could have attempted either a more extensive catalog of elderly blacks in a wider range of American literature or a deeper and more thorough reading of a specific period or group of writers.

The basic categories of Deck's discussion are acceptable, though a much fuller gathering of elderly black figures might reveal some limitations in this taxonomy. In discussing the "primordial" black advisor/storyteller, the friend and aider who conveys affection and wisdom, Deck properly identifies an established literary type that has become a problematical myth. A particularly relevant observation here is that the Uncle Remus figure has been widely accepted among whites because of his passive nature and submissive manner and because his contact with white society is affectionate and avuncular interaction with a child. In short, Uncle Remus is embraced only because his voice is soft, his message supposedly frivolous and transitory (because oral), his presence nonthreatening; he is domesticated. The point that the Uncle Remus type provides a protective and comforting (and deceptive) buffer between black culture and white readers is reinforced by Deck's observation that we should distinguish on a structural level between literary frames and the tales they enclose. In the case of Joel Chandler Harris, the frame should remind us of both his cooption and his transmogrification of black culture.

Deck's discussion of *The Conjure Woman* is perceptive, but too brief. In particular, the theme of apparent vulnerability as a mask for the shifty and subversive might have been pursued more fully—and tied more precisely to Julius's tale-telling as a "way of working magic on his white boss." Further development might concentrate more on oral folklore as rhetorical ruse and psychological tool. Even more crucially, Deck might have pursued further the relationship between rationality, reason, and formal learning on one hand and ethnicity, folklore, and magic on the other. More can and should be developed about the complex interaction in ethnic experience between the formal and imposed (whether literary or experiential) and the informal and intuitive.

The section of the article on characters in Faulkner and Welty is too limited and rhetorical to give an adequate sense of the way they present elderly blacks; the limited sampling really does not allow us to justify conclusions concerning the work of these writers and their possible roles as promoters of stereotypes and platitudes. In addition, to juxtapose the work of Faulkner and Welty to that of writers such as Walker and

Giovanni is to compare and contrast the attitudes and approaches of different generations, and this (specific questions of race and culture notwithstanding) is always a problematical undertaking. Finally, Deck's criticism that Welty "simply imagined" Phoenix in order to create a "highly romantic" picture—rather than actually speak with the old black woman who inspired her—suggests a much more empirical and sociological approach to fiction than most writers find comfortable.

The discussion of interactions between black generations should be deeper and more extensive in future analyses—whether those interactions involve conflict or harmony. For example, if there are no conflicts between Miss Jane Pittman and the black generations that follow hers, why is this so? In *The Chaneyville Incident*, what, precisely, is the justification for Old Jack Crawley's animus toward formal education, and what, for a younger generation, is its relationship to "the wisdom gained from lived experiences"? What, more generally, is the relationship in black experience between formal knowledge and such matters as meditation and a return to ethnic roots? Is formal education merely another version of domestication? This seems to be a fundamental—and vexing—question in ethnic writing generally (one thinks, for example, of Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, 1982) as well as black literature specifically. With what new consciousness does *Invisible Man* emerge from his illuminated hibernation? What of the perjorative image of the older, "preacher" figure in Gaines's "The Sky is Gray," in confrontation with the educated young activist in the dentist's office? Or, consider the simultaneously enabling and compromising role of "white" education in Walker's "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring." Such questions become even more complex when the matter of sex roles is introduced, as in the fiction of Hurston and Morrison. The educative roles and functions of older black women constitute a rich subject in their own right, one with many more ambiguities and dilemmas than suggested.

Deck has introduced a number of critical questions regarding depictions of elderly blacks in American literature. These questions should be pursued by Deck and others.

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Critique

Although Deck concludes that no consistent image of elderly Afroamericans dominates in American literature, she has clearly demonstrated a dichotomy between black and white authors in its portrayal. This dichotomy might well be termed white myth versus black experience, and it is illustrated by the contrast between Uncle Remus and Uncle Julius. In her discussion of both characters, Deck has pointed out that critical distinction between structure, i.e., the "outer frame," and content, i.e., authentic Afroamerican folklore. Deck states that the legends told by Uncle Remus reflect a black world view. They were not, however, perceived as such until recently by most whites, who preferred the superficial and amusing interpretation suggested by an innocuous context and reinforced by productions like Walt Disney's *Song of the South*.

Br'er Rabbit is a trickster figure. Uncle Remus and Uncle Julius represent what Joseph Boskin has described as Sambo, "a figure which existed mainly in the inner reaches of the white mind as a put-on by the black man."¹ Boskin argues that there were in fact two Sambos: the white conception of the black man as Sambo, and the black utilization of Sambo, a complex role involving a conscious manipulation of his relationships with his white adversary. This style of confrontation resulted from "a folk tradition of incredible power and latitude."² While Faulkner's Dilsey and Welty's Phoenix are shown as helpless to alter an inexorable outcome, Uncle Julius exercises power through, in the words of Gilbert Osofsky, "puttin' on ole massa."³ So, too, do Bontemp's Jeff and Jenny give witness to a kind of personal empowerment. Rather than passively waiting to die, they seize control of their deaths and transform them into a positive celebration.

An even more pervasive theme in Deck's analysis, to which she draws attention, at several levels, is that of reconciliation. Using Giovanni's "Alabama Poem" and Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* as examples, Deck shows the conflict between formal knowledge as acquired by the young and experiential wisdom as represented by the old. Other works cited discuss differences in generational standards and religious values. In all instances, the process of reconciliation with the heritage embodied in the old is critical to the development of identity and wholeness. The young do not incorporate without change the values of the old but come to terms with them positively. Those, like Morrison's Sula and Toomer's Kabnis, who are unable to engage in this process remain crippled and incomplete.

In *Praisesong for the Widow*,⁴ Paule Marshall describes the transforma-

tion, strength, and development of an authentic identity in the character of Avey Johnson. Marshall has given us a powerful and moving portrait of an older Afroamerican woman that is truly, in Deck's term, multi-dimensional. May she be a model for many others.

— Helen MacLam
Middletown, CT

Notes

¹Joseph Boskin. "The Life and Death of Sambo: Overview of an Historical Hang-Up." *Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter 1971) 648.

²Ibid., 650-651, 655.

³Gilbert Osofsky, comp. *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northrup*. (N. Y.: Harper & Row, 1969).

⁴Paule Marshall. *Praisesong for the Widow*. (N.Y.: Putnam, 1983).

Critique

Deck's critical essay is a thoughtful and welcome commentary on the interrelationship between age, generational conflict and changing social standards as portrayed in literature about or by American blacks. The author discusses several important ways in which elderly are represented as mythic figures who embody personal experiential wisdom and a community's cultural and historical heritage; as advisors, story tellers or sages who have acquired an air of reverence, the ability to endure and the means to impart the wisdom of the ages, and as the sometimes difficult, infirm or hostile representatives of another generation who would impose different, if not conflicting, social or moral standards upon the young. While these characteristics are attributed commonly, if not

universally, to the elderly in North American society, Deck's analysis of elderly blacks in literature seems to be equally concerned with the status of the total black community, both within itself, and as it interacts with or is perceived by whites.

Deck is uncomfortable and has a self-conscious concern with the ways in which elderly blacks are perceived by whites. This is highlighted by the division in the essay between mythical, unrealistic figures, such as Uncle Remus and Dilsey, and the more realistic slice of life characters, as described in modern black literature. Certainly, Uncle Remus and Dilsey represent what Joel Chandler Harris and William Faulkner wanted to portray and not what elderly blacks really are. A more comprehensive view of elderly black personalities and of whole black communities would be welcome. (Indeed, these past omissions present opportunities for contemporary black authors writing from within and about black personalities and communities.) Although the characters are incomplete and despite being reminded of unpleasant relationships between blacks and whites or of outdated social behavior, Harris and Faulkner have made important and permanent contributions to American literature as a whole. This literature, as part of the accumulative cultural baggage in North America, may be criticized, reinterpreted or forgotten; but it cannot be revised.

What began as black literature or folklore, by or about blacks, has become the wider property of American popular culture as Deck points out. The role of this black literature will vary depending upon the context of its use, nonetheless. For example: The bushes had no thorns during my first visit to the briepatch. Uncle Remus and Br'er Rabbit were American folklore characters from the rural antebellum South associated more with pleasant, humorous and slightly moralistic stories in the trickster tradition than they were identified with slavery, black submissiveness or devotion to whites, or with Southern white nostalgia during the Reconstruction Period. The stories I heard were told by Walt Disney, not Joel Chandler Harris. Growing up in rural California, where the antebellum and postbellum South and the American Civil War were temporally and spatially remote, and where no personal contacts with blacks existed, I could not have and did not respond to Harris's stories as Alice Deck does or as the white readers of the "Atlanta Constitution" did. If I had grown up black in rural Georgia, then Walt Disney's version of Br'er Rabbit and the original folktales might have been viewed with the racial connotations that the author suggests. Instead, Uncle Remus was an American story teller whose age and race were unimportant or unnoticed.

Years later, of course, I have a more sophisticated and comprehensive

understanding of American history and of ethnic relations. Nevertheless, my primary image of Uncle Remus has not changed; again, black adults in rural Georgia are welcome to disagree. I understand better now how and why they might.

Uncle Remus, Aunt Jemima, and the loyal house servant, Mammy in "Gone with the Wind" have passed into a wider American cultural milieu without mandatory racial or historical connotations. I can eat pancakes without guilt. The humane, effective and loyal servant, Mammy, is superior in many ways to her master as many English servants in literature are also; she is clearly a more worthy human being than Scarlett O'Hara. Nothing in black American literature or history is necessarily diminished or misinterpreted by this transformation.

At the same time, this general transformation from a black to a more universal North American context does not necessarily negate Deck's analysis of the depiction of elderly blacks in American literature. The question remains, however, when or if the more realistic, slice of life black literature described in her article will make a similar transformation to become more widely read throughout the United States.

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Chicano Ethnicity and Aging

Marvin A. Lewis

In an insightful article published a decade ago, "The Chicano Aged," David Maldonado offers some comments that are germane to this presentation. In summing up the dilemma of the Chicano elderly, he asserts:

The aged person in the extended family holds high status and commands the respect and obedience of the younger family members. Within the extended family structure, the aging person grows in prestige and respect. The individual holds high rank and has influence in the life of the group.¹

This is the position afforded the aged in many societies as long as the elderly are able to function and contribute in a meaningful way. Prestige, respect, and influence are important parts of their role so long as the aged are not perceived as being a burden. There is, however, a stigma attached to aging in the United States because of the emphasis upon youth and a mind set which does not view aging as a positive process.

Maldonado continues his discussion of the Chicano aged by focusing upon a very real problem occurring throughout many Chicano communities in the United States because of differences in generational aspirations. Young people increasingly join the push for more material acquisition in society and devote less time to family harmony:

Thus aged Chicanos are increasingly without a role. They find also that since their children have moved upward socially and educationally, their own status and respect have relatively decreased. The values of the aged are related to an agrarian society; their children are living today in an urban industrial setting. The expectations of the aging Chicano do not always coincide with those of the younger generation. (215)

This particular conflict of values between generations has been a constant topic in Chicano fiction. Conflicting values tear apart the families in *Pocho*, *Chicano*, *Heart of Aztlán*, and *Famous All Over Town*. However, traditional agrarian values and respect for the elderly are sources of strength for the characters in *Nambe Year One*, *Bless Me Ultima*, ...*And the Earth Did Not Part* and other important works of Chicano literature.

This brief study examines aged Chicanos in literature, and shows points of contact between the findings of social scientists and the interpretations of creative writers. The focus here is upon two important figures in Chicano culture, the *curandero/curandera* and the *abuelo/abuela*, both representative of the Chicano elderly.

In a co-authored article entitled "Curanderismo in the Metropolis: The Diminished Role of Folk Psychiatry Among Los Angeles Mexican Americans," Robert Edgerton, Marvin Karno, and Irma Fernández, refer to "four separable sources of treatment from which Mexican Americans seek help for psychiatric disorders." They are:

- (1) ordinary housewives who possess knowledge of folk remedies;
- (2) more specialized and renowned women who are thought to be unusually skilled in the use of such remedies;
- (3) curanderos; and
- (4) physicians.²

The authors' thesis is that the practice of folk psychiatry (*curanderismo*) and folk healing are on the decline in Los Angeles. They do, however, acknowledge how numerous women "employ a great many remedies, often herbal in nature, to combat the minor ills of the members of their families," and that "some are known to be particularly skilled in prescribing combinations of food or herbs, and these women are frequently sought out." The authors further maintain that "there is little evidence from our research that such women are seen as treatment sources for psychologic disturbance or even for persistence psychosomatic complaints" (126). These illnesses are the domain of the *curandero*.

Most researchers, and those cited above, agree that people turn to *curanderos* when "the illness is folk defined as involving psychologic or emotional components." They command respect and often reverence and cure by means of elaborate ritual, as well as herbal decoction, massage, and ventriloquism. They heal by virtue of a "Gift of God" (126-127).

Perhaps there is a decline in the "authentic" practice of folk medicine in Los Angeles, but this is not the case however in the thematic preference for *curandero* types by creative writers. In contemporary Chicano fiction the portrayal of the venerated folk healer ranges from the presentation of those skilled in the use of remedies to the full blown *curandera*. Their activities vary from the resolving of physical everyday problems to psychological disturbances. The folk healer in Chicano fiction is always portrayed as an elderly person who, through the wisdom of years and a meaningful apprenticeship, has mastered many of the secrets of humans and nature. These tendencies are evident in two radically different novels: The Chicano classic, *Bless Me Ultima* (1972), by Rudolfo A. Anaya and the *Chicanesca* work, *Famous All Over Town*

(1983) by a person who calls himself Danny Santiago.

Famous All Over Town is a novel concerned with a search for values and authenticity in the dehumanizing environment of East Los Angeles. This *barrio* and rural Tlatlán, Mexico, are the geographic poles which define the limits of the Medina family. The Mexican grandmother is the character of concern here. She is the Tlatlán village *partera* (a witch to her son-in-law), a midwife who brings babies into the world as well as takes them out. She aids her daughter in aborting an unwanted pregnancy during a family visit from Los Angeles.

The woman is first presented from the perspective of her grandson, Rudy Medina, Jr., the central narrator:

Now a tiny little old lady came walking, with people falling back to make room. Her face was black and wrinkled like a prune with white braids wrapped around it. Could this be my grandma? Our old picture showed her round and fat but now she was all shrunk in against her bones.³

Her curative powers are made evident as she heals Lena, the granddaughter, of a bodily ailment with a combination of cigarettes, tortillas, and a herbal potion. The effectiveness of the cure resides not so much in the method but in the fact that Lena *believes* in her grandmother.

In the struggle for respect and family unity, the grandmother wins out over a son-in-law, Rudy Medina, Sr., who physically and mentally abuses his family. At the end of *Famous All Over Town*, Mrs. Medina returns home to Mexico with her youngest daughter, leaving Rudy, Jr., in limbo, Lena happily married, and her husband in sin with his concubine. One of the elements which leads to the decline of the Medina family is precisely the inability of the father to adjust in the urban Los Angeles setting. He feels threatened because his wife and children require more freedom while he adheres to many negative tendencies associated with *machismo*, patterns he learned in rural Mexico.

Although she resides thousands of miles away, this self-styled *curandera* exercises a great deal of power over the destiny of her family. She is wise enough not to let her son-in-law inherit her money—revealing his hypocrisy in the process—and persuasive enough to convince her daughter that Mexico holds the future for both of them. Although she would fit neatly into the category described by Edgerton, Karno, and Fernández as “more specialized and renowned women who are thought to be unusually skilled in the use of such remedies,” this woman’s impact is both physical and psychological. This is evident in the respect for her powers demonstrated in her native Mexico as well as her astute resolution of problems encountered in the modern United States.

The best full blown portrait of a *curandera* is found in *Bless Me Ultima*. Ultima, the venerated *curandera* represents Good in the world plagued by Evil. Antonio, the young protagonist through whose eyes the novel is

narrated, serves an apprenticeship which greatly facilitates his maturation in the present world. Ultima's teaching that "the tragic consequences of life can be overcome by the magical strength that resides in the human heart" remains with the mature Antonio who retrospectively reflects upon a crucial period in his life.

The greatest test of Ultima's powers comes when she intercedes to rid Antonio's uncle of the curse which has been placed upon him by the Trementina sisters. The dilemma is a difficult one: "The power of the doctors and the power of the church had failed to cure my uncle. Now everyone depended on Ultima's magic. Was it possible that there was more power in Ultima's magic than in the priest?" (92) Ultima exorcises the demon from Antonio's uncle's body using the boy as intercessor: "Green bile poured from his mouth, and finally he vomited a huge ball of hair. It fell to the floor, hot and steaming and wiggling like live snakes" (95). Ultima incorporates magic, religiosity, and psychiatry into her practice. Her triumphs are always perceived in an ambivalent manner. This cure is the most important act in *Bless Me Ultima* and reflects the general perception of her powers:

"La curandera!" someone exclaimed. Some women bowed their heads, others made the sign of a cross. "Es una mujer que no ha pecado" another whispered. "Hechicera." "Bruja." (96)

In the fictional interpretation of the *curandera*, there is always the ambiguity associated with folk psychiatry and witchcraft. Ultima's success is based upon her religious faith and her knowledge of remedies which has been passed down through the ages. Her mission, explains Ultima on her death bed, was to do good. "I was to heal the sick and show them the path of goodness. But I was not to interfere with the destiny of man. Those who wallow in evil and bruja cannot understand this. They create a disharmony that in the end reaches out and destroys life—" (247). Ultima, who represents the culminating point in the development of the *curandera* in Chicano literature incarnates moral values that are essential to the community. In addition to this case of exorcism, Ultima also solves a case of *ánimas en pena*. Both illnesses are folk defined and involve "psychologic and emotional components" which she cures through a combination of ritual and medicine. The conclusion to be drawn here is that while both Santiago and Anaya treat thematically the *curandera* type, the former demonstrates a surface knowledge of remedies and cures only while the latter is able to integrate cultural awareness into the novelistic fabric in a convincing manner.

In a recent study of how the aging process is viewed by Anglos and Mexican Americans, Kyriakos S. Markides observes:

...it is possible that Chicanos are less likely to engage in denial of old age than Anglos because they are more insulated from the values of the greater society that, by and large, define old age as an undesirable stage in the life cycle...Older Mexican Americans are less likely than older Anglos of similar social class to deny old age.⁵

The positive attitude of Chicanos toward old age is more a reflection of respect for their own cultural values than an acceptance of negative Anglo perceptions of aging. For the most part elderly Chicanos are the repositories of wisdom and values. Two literary texts which interpret the figure of the grandparents, *abuelita/ abuelito* is the basis for this part of the discussion. They are: *Nambe Year One* (1976) a novel by Orlando Romero and "Song of the Self: The Grandmother," a poem, from the collection *Life Span* (1985) by Alma Villanueva.

The archetypal substructure of *Nambe Year One* assesses the cycles of human existence and the inseparable relationship between humans and nature in the Sangre de Cristo mountains of New Mexico. Harmony and continuity in the universe is the novel's basic thematic thrust. Mateo, the central narrator surmises:

Here in Nambe everything evolves in and around cycles. When I have completed my turn, I shall be buried under the apricot tree. My rot shall enrich its roots. But tomorrow, I must water all the trees, the garden, and also the thirst of ancestral memories that go down one thousand feet below Nambe.⁶

Figuratively, the ancestral memories that Mateo waters provide the substance of *Nambe Year One*. Mateo recollects instances and people who have left an impression upon his life. Among the old ones are his grandfather, who raises Mateo and instills everlasting values and appreciation for life, his aunt, and Don Agustín.

Mateo maintains that his aunt "is not yet seventy and she knows more than many lean scholars at the universities....She is one of the links in a primal chain of recollection and undeniable memory" (143). Mateo's respect for Don Agustín is just as great. In "Wisdom" a pivotal chapter of *Nambe Year One*, Mateo, the protagonist, visits the home of Don Agustín, who is 150 years of age. A respected man of wisdom, Mateo describes him in the following manner:

Don Agustín, the old one, still had that dignity of the land that refused to give up its virginity and innocence no matter how many plows had turned over its topsoil. This was evident by observing the physical characteristics of this weathered body: he knew the realities of living, but he stubbornly clung to the force and mystery of living. He had outlived governments, politicians and promises, and with every sunrise it was said he still chanted to the earth and God the traditional alabado that he had learned as a child when he was promised to the Penitente Brotherhood. He was full of life and dreams, and his aura was a reflection of the man who was born within the green fertile womb of Nambe. (96)

Mateo affords Don Agustín the same degree of respect he holds for his grandfather whom he views as a part of the desire to maintain harmony and continuity in the universe. In the New Mexico context, aging is treated in a positive light. The aged, in this instance the grandfather and

his projections—the aunt and Don Agustín—are those who embody wisdom, dignity, history, and tradition. Even more important is how the young do not allow travel, education, and participation in Anglo society to drive a schism between them and traditional cultural values personified in their elders.

In her earlier publication, *Bloodroot* (1977), Alma Villanueva extols the virtues of womanhood and stresses the relationship between humans and nature with woman at center stage in her creation. This emphasis continues in *Life Span*. Villanueva's poetry dedicated to the feminine mystique belongs to a generation of Chicana poets of the past two decades who were determined to overcome *macho* supremacy by stressing self worth and for whom the grandmother was a source of inspiration. *La mujeres la tierra: La tierra da vida/Woman is Earth: The Earth Gives Life* (1975) by Dorinda Moreno is perhaps the most well known of these works which affirm both feminine ideals and cultural values through several generations. The same outlook is prevalent in *Con razón corazón/ With Reason Heart* (1977) by Inez Hernández Tovar.

One of the most poignant tributes to the grandmother figure found in this early literature, however, is "Mama Toña" by Marina Rivera from *Sobra* (1977). This is a narrative piece written to evoke the memory of the old woman's death and the subsequent guilt felt by the narrator who did not arrive before her demise. The grandmother is an unselfish person whose image is recalled through a piece of quilt work she leaves behind. "Mama Toña" is synonymous with her creation:

Death caused the rent in the middle.
It is not the flower, not the horse,
it is the house unraveling,
stitch by stitch.

The dough, the small tight map,
is spreading, Islands break off.

Death rips you out,
the one the rest depends on.⁷

Death is personified as a totally disruptive force which dismantles both the art object and life. "Mama Toña's" importance as a sustaining force, however, is not overlooked.

Alma Villanueva's "Song of the Self: The Grandmother" is an exaltation of the joys of grandmotherhood:

Surrounded by my shields, am I:
Surrounded by my children, am I:
Surrounded by the void, am I:
I am the void.
I am the womb of remembrance.
I am the flowering darkness.
I am the flower, first flesh.⁸

This is a poem of strength and affirmation, an ode to being which uses female archetypes to reinforce life. "Am I/I am" is a dialectical statement which exemplifies death, "the void," and life "first flesh" within the womb metaphor. This initial presentation of the grandmother is as a repository of cultural values, as the generator of all life. The poem is an examination of the primal function of woman and her importance in the perpetuation of the species:

Utter darkness I inhabit—
There, I watch creation unfold—
There, I know we begin and end—
Only to begin, again, and again—
Again. In this darkness, I am
Turning, turning toward a birth:
My own—a newborn grandmother
Am I, suckling light. Rainbow
Serpent covers me, head to foot,
In endless circles—covers me,
That I may live forever, in this
Form or another. The skin she
Leaves behind glitters with
The question, with the answer,
With the promise:
"Do you remember yourself?"
"I am always woman."
"Flesh is flower, forever." (80)

The poetic perspective is that of the womb of creation, expounding the idea of an archetypal creative matrix from which all life emanates and is in perpetual renewal. At the center is the Grandmother as giver of life. The flower/flesh metaphors address the questions of regeneration, cycles, and the underlying archetypal structure of the poem. Villanueva concludes:

I enter darkness, to enter birth,
To wear the Rainbow, to hear her
Hissing loudly, clearly, in my
Inner ear: love.

I am spiralling, I am spinning,
I am singing this Grandmother's Song.
I am remembering forever, where we
Belong. (80)

She belongs at the center of life itself.

The particular examples chosen here to illustrate some of the points of contact between social scientist and literary interpretations of the phenomenon of Chicano aging are but a few of the interdisciplinary possibilities for further study. Throughout the creative literature there are many elderly characters, the majority of whom are presented in a positive light. Those who receive the most unsympathetic treatment are usually at odds with society or their families in the transition from

Mexican to United States society. The *curandera* and the *abeulita*, though, are revered because they face the aging process with wisdom and dignity.

Notes

¹David Maldonado, Jr. "The Chicano Aged." *Social Casework*. Vol. 20, No. 3 (May, 1975) 213-216.

²Robert Edgerton, Marvin Karno, and Irma Fernández. "Curanderismo in the Metropolis: The Diminished Role of Folk Psychiatry Among Los Angeles Mexican Americans." *American Journal of Psychotherapy*. Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 1970) 124-133.

³Danny Santiago. *Famous All Over Town*. (New York: Plume Books, 1983) 221. Daniel James is the name of the Anglo author.

⁴Rudolfo Anaya. *Bless Me Ultima*. (Berkeley: Tonatiuh, 1972) 237.

⁵Kyriakos S. Markides. "Ethnic Differences in Age Identification: A Study of Older Mexican Americans and Anglos." *Social Science Quarterly*. Vol. 60, No. 4 (March, 1980) 665.

⁶Orlando Romero. *Nambe Year One*. (Berkeley: Tonatiuh, 1976) 14.

⁷Marina Rivera. *Sobra*. (San Francisco: CASA Editorial, 1977) 30.

⁸Alma Villanueva. *Life Span*. (Austin: Place of Herons, 1985) 80.

Critique

Art serves the societal functions of recording, interpreting and predicting. Here, analysis of popular archetypes in Chicano fiction and poetry are used to illustrate cultural values toward the elderly and conflicts of values between generations of Chicanos. This leads to an examination of how Chicano values differ from Anglo-American values toward the elderly. The author demonstrates the problems of acculturation, blending into and enriching another culture while retaining a sense of one's own culture, versus assimilation, abandoning one's own heritage and taking on the values of another culture. In the latter, upward mobility striving by younger Chicanos creates a chasm between generations.

Lewis has presented, through the use of creative literature, a stimulating illustration of the complex conflicts one faces when attempting to blend cultures with deep-rooted value differences, here, the value of the elderly.

The Mexican American culture has been well established in the southwestern United States for 350 years, far longer than the now dominant Anglo American culture which has been established in the region for approximately 125 years. Mexican Americans native to the southwest are, nevertheless, treated as immigrants and are expected to undertake the task of acculturation. Identifying neither with Mexico nor the United States, they are isolated from both.

The Anglo American culture sees the elderly as a burden on society and discriminates against them socially, politically and economically. In contrast, the Mexican American culture innately respects the elderly and recognizes their value and their role in the society. One of the roles of the elderly in any culture is the continuation of the rituals that demonstrate the emotional strengths of the people of that culture. The non-recognition of cultural status positions such as the curandero/curandera by Anglo American health care and legal professionals puts an ultimatum before the Chicano whose choice between cultures may affect future advancement within the society or interfere with a cultural source of strength for that individual. It may also have health effects if the individual makes an inappropriate treatment choice based on cultural pressures rather than health rationale. Further, it may deprive the individual of the attainment of a cultural position which equates age with wisdom and serves as a positive motivating influence.

Lewis utilizes the Chicano classic, *Bless Me Ultima* (1972), by Rudolfo A. Anaya to demonstrate the integrity of the cultural morality by presenting the concept of harmony between mind and body, a concept

which is inherently understood by the curandera. He shows that the curandera performs rituals to allow acceptance of loss in the context of the cultural reality. While the curandera is a powerful healer, healing power does not interfere with destiny. If the curandera is unsuccessful at healing, then it is destiny.

Elderly Chicanos are described by Kergler and Goldstein (1983) as the "repositories of wisdom and values." They proposed a biological theory which states that the elderly perform the function of biologically and culturally preparing the children for the transmission of information. Biologically, they carry low levels of bacteria that allow the children to develop natural immunities against disease. Culturally, the elderly change neurophysiologically, allowing them to better tell stories and transmit cultural information to children. Lewis's literary examples demonstrate the second part of this concept. In the Chicano creative literature, the Chicano elderly, called abuelita/abuelito, the figure of the grandparents, are depicted as "those who embody wisdom, dignity, history and tradition" and are deserving of great respect. They are seen in the stories as role models and sources of information with special communicative skills.

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Professional Psychology, Fresno

Critique

Lewis's article presents a creative and exciting approach for understanding the importance elderly people have not only in the family but in the community as well. He blends literary personification, cultural integration, and social science strategies for illustrating Chicano traditions and their relationships to the aging process. Literary works involving curandero/curandera and abuelo/abuela folk traditions depict reverence, honor, power, and prestige as engaging qualities inherited by the elderly. Lewis's analysis of Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima* and Santiago's *Famous All Over Town* illustrate the congruence folk traditions have with the positive aspects of the aging process. By using literature to illustrate how cultural traditions are transmitted, Lewis shows social scientists the importance of creative fiction in rendering accurate, realistic portraits of people.

Too many social scientists ignore the positive and enlightening aspects folk literature brings to bear on cultural and psychological perceptions concerning the aging process. Richard Luevano's "Attitudes of Elderly Mexican Americans Towards Nursing Homes in Stanislaus County" is an example of narrowly focused perceptions concerning Chicano/Mexican families and the elderly. Although Luevano shows how most Mexican/Chicano elderly experience familial dislocation in nursing homes, his contribution would make a greater impact if he had included Mexican/Chicano folk traditions as a means for clearly articulating reasons why the elderly are not culturally suited for the nursing home lifestyle.

Curanderismo, the belief in ritual and faith healing of physical and psychological disorders, is a function reserved for the elderly. The honor and prestige accorded the elderly in this service to the Mexican/Chicano community provides for the healthy integration of cultural values and beliefs within a social structure. The positive aspects concerning the Chicano elderly is clearly illustrated in Lewis's analysis of *Famous All Over Town* and *Bless Me Ultima*, where curanderas exercise control over their families and individuals within the Mexican/Chicano community. Here the elderly have access to powerful positions within the social structure.

Analyses such as Lewis's are important for dealing with issues surrounding Chicano/Mexican perception of the aging process. Chicano literature is an excellent resource for all researchers who pursue cross cultural understanding and would understand ethnic conflict with western models of behavior.

— Barbara L. Hiura
Sacramento City Unified School District

Note

¹Richard L. Luevano. "Attitudes of Elderly Mexican Americans Toward Nursing Homes in Stanislaus County." *Campo Libre*. Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer, 1981) 213-228.

Abstracts from the Thirteenth Annual Conference on Ethnic and Minority Studies “Ethnic Identity: Aging, Mental Health, and Sexism”

In an attempt to record a sense of the formal sessions at the 1985 Conference, the registration director asked Chairs to assemble abstracts and respondent comments from their sessions. Although the objective was full-coverage, it remains a goal for 1986.

SESSION I: Images in Literature

Chair: Luis Pinto, Bronx College, CUNY

Lee Hadley and Ann Irwin, Iowa State University. “Hidden Messages in Young Adult Literature: From Alpha to Omega”

... pinpoints the subtle and not so subtle ways sexism, aging, and racism appear in novels teenagers are reading. Particular attention is given to the latest means of luring young readers: the teenage romance, patterned after the adult Harlequin novel, a trend that echoes the 50s with its emphasis on white, middle-class characters, the necessity of snaring a boy friend, the importance of being beautiful, and the stereotyping of minorities, women, and older characters. The paper includes specific examples of this stereotyping and suggests alternatives which both readers and writers may wish to examine.

Walter Shear, Pittsburg State University. “Saroyan’s Study of Ethnicity”

Of his many works dealing with the situation of the ethnic, Armenian American writer William Saroyan’s *My Name Is Aram* is the most systematic in its focus on the dual allegiance of the ethnic—to the values of an old order and to the creation of new possibilities. Using the boy Aram as his central figure, Saroyan dramatizes the pathos and the comedy of the ethnic predicament. In his analysis, characters are operating in two arenas, an official world of social roles and a personal world which can be characterized as a community of feelings. In most of the stories in this collection these two arenas are paralleled and given public enhancement by the social divisions between the American mainstream culture and the Armenian ethnic society.

Barbara Hiura, University of California, Berkeley. “The Woman Warrior and Hunger of Memory: Two Different Voices of Ethnic Identity”

Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* are two autobiographical accounts which reflect two very different voices concerning their respective life experiences and their ethnic identities. The focus of this paper is on how Kingston and Rodriguez perceive their ethnic identity in light of

their own cultures and the white institutional and social environment. A discussion of Kingston and Rodriguez provides depth and sheds light on the impact literature has on the power of self definition in a white controlled/English dominant culture. Perceptions of ethnicity, sexism, racism, and cultural oppression are not new themes; however, in light of these two autobiographies, the external and internal forces that determine one's social, psychic and ego self provide insights into the colonized mind and the culturally liberated self.

Respondent: Stewart Rodnon, Rider College.

To synthesize the three papers in this section, the adage, "Follow the dollar," is an enticing possibility. This injunction is simply the common-sense answer to most of our ethnic problems in this capitalist, acquisitive society, a society which needs an exploitable laboring class. Historically this class was composed largely of slaves—first and briefly Native Americans and then for an extended period, Afroamericans; however, after a cruel and bloody civil war this emphasis shifted to "free" blacks, Southern and Eastern Europeans and Asian Americans, and still later to Hispanic Americans. Further, the society has traditionally exerted heavy pressure to Americanize, i.e., to perpetuate its own hegemony on these groups simply, if tacitly, in order to continue its economic dominance. This pattern leads to Barbara Hiura's brilliant analysis of how two ethnic writers—Maxine Hong Kingston and Richard Rodriguez—define themselves. By choosing three linked criteria—primary cultural retention, language retention, and control over the function of language—she demonstrates that Kingston acted courageously, even heroically, while Rodriguez basically sold out his Chicano heritage. The psychological insult which that process engenders is clearly seen in both writers.

Walter Shear's perceptive essay on Saroyan's study of ethnicity points out this distinction between the official world (the mainstream) and the ethnic community ("a free and innocently irresponsible activity of the human spirit") and the struggle—exactly Rodriguez's—of balancing these two opposing cultures. He discusses sensitively, too, Saroyan's depiction of the ethnic's "persistent concern for one another's personhood," the extended-family motif, the need for these strong emotional ties in an alien world, and, in addition, notes the denigration of the patriarch, frequently caused by his reduced status in a racist world. I would argue that these phenomena are rooted in the economic system, one that virtually assures, given our history, that racism will continue.

Lee Hadley and Ann Irwin's lively and clever presentation of the young-adult paperback book segment of the American publishing scene (a scene difficult to parody for it seems itself a parody) surely shows the "follow the dollar" adage, too. For if anywhere that the absolute dollar has corrupted absolutely, it is here. The silly pap of contemporary young-adult, mass-produced paperbacks with their shelf life of fifteen to twenty days at our friendly neighborhood supermarket is swallowed wholesale by their readers. This simply reinforces the idea that today's teens have obtained a near-monopoly on "non-think." I say "near-monopoly" because devotees of trivial pursuit games run a close second. Anyway, I loved the creativity, satire, and wit of the paper.

[Editor's Note: Hadley Irwin's paper will appear, without the antics of the authors, in the fall issue of the *Newsletter*.]

SESSION III: Ethnicity and Aging: A Minority Literary Perspective

Carol Hunter, University of Oklahoma. "Ethnicity and Tribal Elders in American Indian Literature"

In Osage Indian customs the elderly maintained the tribe's mythology that supports the social structure. The grandfather motif symbolizes the tribes' relation to nature represented in the clan's naming ceremonies. In N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* the alienated protagonist's self respect is restored through his grandfather's Tewa cosmic view that reveals pueblo land ethics. James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* focuses on Blackfeet identity as it relates to "sense of place" as seen through the

grandparent's oral history. These novels and fiction by other American Indian writers reveal that the grandparent's role represents tribal ethnicity and symbolizes a voice for authors to address contemporary ecological issues.

Alice A. Deck, University of Illinois-Urbana. "Depictions of the Elderly Black in American Literature"

This paper discussed the various ways in which Afroamerican elderly are represented in American literature as falling into one of three categories. First, there are those works which present a near mythic, primordial character who symbolizes emotional stability, experiential wisdom, and a people's cultural heritage. Second, there are those works written in the vein of slice-of-life realism which dramatize the social and psychological conditions unique to the aged Afroamerican. Third, there are works which depict a confrontation between old and young; a confrontation intended as symbolic of the confrontation between old and new social standards.

Marvin A. Lewis, University of Illinois-Urbana. "Ethnicity and Aging: A Dual Chicano Perspective"

A generally held assumption is that Mexican American aged occupy a position of respect in the extended family structure. Social scientists have studied this group and have concluded that traditional values are very much intact but facing a tremendous amount of stress because of a shift from an agrarian to an urban society with the aged not exempt from generational shifts and changes. Creative writers, too, have been preoccupied with the position of the elderly in society. Figures such as the *jefita*, the *abuelita*, and the *curandera* are held in high esteem in popular culture. This study examines briefly the presentation of the aged in three novels and a book of poetry.

SESSION IV: Community Services and the Elderly

Chair: Proshanta K. Nandi, Sangamon State University

Irene Hill, Iowa State University. "Elderly Russian Migrants in Adelaide, Australia"

After W. W. II, the Australian government actively sought migrants and "displaced persons" as workers in factories, the mining and building industries, and to help in the development of the transport infrastructure. Many studies relating to health services, accommodation, and the effect on the elderly of changing family structures, have made reference to the particular situation in which elderly migrants in Australia have found themselves. This research, within a cultural geographical and sociological framework, aimed to establish the number of Russian migrants in Adelaide beyond the age of sixty, where and how they lived, and their migration routes into Australia. The study also aimed to establish their use and knowledge of community facilities, their relationship to the wider community, their involvement in activities within their own ethnic community, and any changing family patterns.

Respondent: Keith Parker, Mississippi State University.

Irene Hill's thought provoking discussion of "Elderly Russian Migrants in Adelaide, Australia," is a notable contribution to our understanding of the polymorphous and mutable nature of ethnicity and community studies. The author provides both laymen and scientists with an understanding of how the practical difficulties of accommodation and adjustment can arise when individuals from different backgrounds decide to construct a life in a foreign land. Moreover, the author provides us with the precise meaning of ethnic identity in contemporary Australia, and of the ways non-economic factors such as traditions and culture are of importance in maintaining "a quality of life" for Russian migrants over sixty years of age.

Hill weaves the feelings of personal satisfaction and welfare needs of the elderly Russian migrants into a heartwarming story of how ethnic identification emerges within the confines of shared territories. More important, the author recognizes the importance of background factors and the roles they play in the development and delivery of community services.

A description of the population of interest shows it to be diverse in terms of education, occupation, and previous experiences. In addition, she describes and

analyzes the "lack of usage" of community services available to Russian migrants of sixty years and above.

Hill notes two emerging social groups among community residents. One group, associated with the St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, is comprised of members of the community who originally came from both Europe and China. The second group, associated with the Pentecostal and Seven Day Adventist Faith, consists of members of the community who were later arrivals. As a speaker of the sampled group's language, the author had opportunities to communicate and observe the continuing needs of the community residents. She observed that few migrants took advantage of community services such as "Meals on Wheels" and "Domiciliary" or health care.

Although the author writes in an enthusiastic, flowing, and easy-to-read style, the major portions of the paper contain a "minimum" of methodology. Hill's writing skills are a credit to academia in that the paper can be enjoyed and used by both laymen and professionals.

Hill's presentation reflects a growing concern for community studies. It also raises questions. For example, what specific difficulties do migrants with severe health problems face as mobility decreases? Do factors such as education, occupation, and background experiences influence adjustment in later years? If so, how? What role(s) does/do community residents play in determining the types of service available to community residents?

SESSION V: Media

Charles C. Irby, Iowa State University. "The Celluloid Black"

... is a twelve-minute slide-tape program, the completed version of a presentation made at the Twelfth Annual Conference on Ethnic and Minority Studies. The program is an introduction to the early history of blacks in films in one sense and looks at roles and images used by black filmmakers to combat "Hollywood's" images. The Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame, Lincoln Motion Picture Company, Oscar Micheaux are highlighted. The program is intended for use with students from high school through college classes and for interested community groups—at all levels. Finally, the program is designed to be both educational and entertaining.

John L. Weinkein, Iowa State University. "Multiculturalism Integrated into an Art Education Curriculum."

Ward Goodenough's conceptualization of "multiculturalism as the normal human experience" is the premise for the pre-service teaching program in art education at Iowa State University. The commitment is to integrate, at all stages of preparation for vertical continuity, multicultural and cross-cultural content.

The outcome has been the successful implementation of teaching strategies by student teachers in the field. Visual examples of these strategies are shared through a slide presentation. Examples cover a range of grade levels for individual and group production and types of strategies: motivational, in-process, art historical, and values-revealing in art, including areas of content, media, skills, and affective behavior.

Gina Webster, Cal Poly University, Pomona. "The Black Aged: A Diverse Population"

... is a twelve-minute videotape of people who live beyond the margins of traditional sociological and media stereotypes of blacks as the perpetual underclass in U.S. society. A first production.

David M. Gradwohl and Nancy M. Osborn, Iowa State University. "Blacks and Whites in Buxton: A Site Explored, A Town Remembered."

Early in this century more than 5,000 people, most of whom were black, lived in a company-owned, coal-mining town called Buxton, Iowa. Today, former residents remember the good life there. Excavations at the abandoned townsite reveal buried artifacts of the well-planned and relatively prosperous community.

Silvester J. Brito, University of Wyoming. **"Curanderos in South Texas."**

This presentation visually illustrates the socio-political role of curanderos in the Nino Fidencio cult. Not only does the curandero manipulate the behavior of followers at the local level but in so doing attempts to gain a greater following when operating within the socio-religious yearly retreat of curanderos at Espinazo, Neuvo Leon, Mexico. This form of latent competition between curanderos is the result of cult leaders seeking to achieve both political status and prestige within their local communities as well as acquiring personal wealth in the form of material culture.

SESSION VI: Ideology and Self Esteem

Chair: Linda M. C. Abbott, Calif. School of Professional Psychology

David Castellanos, Northern Illinois University. **"Schooling and Mexican Americans: Power, Policy and Ideology in an Internal Colonial Context"**

In an internal colonial relationship, the economic exploitation of one group by another develops a unique power relationship—a third dimensional one. This relationship relies on both the oppressed and the oppressor accepting the same norms, values, ideals, symbols, rituals, institutions, and so forth, which developed to maintain, enhance, and perpetuate the existing power relationship.

This paper investigates how this unjust relationship was formed and how it is being perpetuated. It also examines the process which policy and ideology take in maintaining the relationship as well as the role played by educational institutions in maintaining the policy and perpetuating the ideology.

Delo E. Washington. **"Folk and Formal References to Self Esteem in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*"**

Washington views Walker's subjective portrayal of a series of events in the lives of Georgian black family as a case study in developmental cycles within the context of folk culture. Using theoretical models drawn from Erickson and Sharpley, she discusses the factors impacting upon the development of self esteem in an oppressive context. Issues of integrity vs. despair, nature vs. nurture, and class vs. caste are illuminated by the author's special sensitivity to and use of a womanist perspective.

Elizabeth Branch. **"Private Black Colleges: Sleeping Giants for Black Americans"**

In this overview of the current position of black colleges, Branch addresses issues of origin, purpose, stability, and cultural context of these distinctive educational institutions. Founded to soothe white conscience, these colleges continue to play a remedial role, both in skill development and in enhancing self esteem through developing awareness of black cultural heritage. Branch argues persuasively for continued support of these institutions and for an expansion of their role, capitalizing upon their position of creative potential as private institutions responsive to a distinctive population.

Respondent: Alice A. Deck

Each of these papers can be linked by their overriding concern with self esteem, a basic concept in the literature on mental health. Fundamental to self esteem, particularly for minorities, are the availability of satisfactory physical and economic circumstances, and the continuing presence of others who provide positive feedback regarding one's worth.

Branch is supportive of America's private black colleges as an important means through which young blacks can build pride in their ethnic heritage while learning basic skills for responsible adult functioning. Given the threat posed to the future of these institutions by financial instability, Branch's plea that alumni take responsibility for regular support is understandable.

The Washington and Castellanos papers demonstrate that low self esteem among minorities results in part from myths of inferiority perpetuated by the dominant white middle class. Washington's discussion of Alice Walker's novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* finds the lack of integrity and stability of one family to result from a lengthy pattern of abuse, self hatred, mistrust, and shame. Grange Copeland's tragedy, from the slave ancestors to his murderous son Brownfield, reflects the family's absorption of white society's view of blacks as less than human. The novel, as a case study in low self esteem within one family unit, is a useful supplement to social and psychological work focusing on the topic.

Castellanos's point is to identify the role of the American educational system in perpetuating low self esteem among Mexican Americans. This internal colonial relationship forces those subjugated to accept the ideals, values, rituals, and institutions which perpetuate existing power relationships. This perpetuation frequently takes the form of restricting Mexican American youth from college entrance tracks in school. While Branch argues that private and public black colleges have addressed this issue for blacks, Castellanos finds slight prospect for occupational enhancement in community based education for Mexican Americans. Frustration in educational aspiration, repeated generation after generation, serves to perpetuate myths about ethnic heritage and to maintain low self esteem for this group much in the manner outlined from the fictional character, George Copeland.

The papers allude to the range of self esteem levels within ethnic groups, but focus on the limiting influence of other peoples' opinions, as well as of economic and physical condition. Ethnic heritage can be a source of shame or of pride, depending on individual experiences and perspectives developed within these contexts.

SESSION VIII: Conflicting Views

Chair: Lynn E. Buquo, University of Cincinnati

Foster Brown, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. **"Invisible Ethnicity"**

The majority of human service workers in southern Illinois are white as are the majority of their clientele. It is this whiteness which leads them to see a commonality with their clients yet blinds them to the ethnic factors involved. This perception can lead to false interpretations of data and inappropriate strategies of intervention.

In order to be more effective service providers, workers must understand the ethnic factors. Toward this end the paper briefly explores the history of southern Illinois over the last eighty years in an attempt to determine significant events that have socialized the residents into a "southern Illinois" perspective and affected services and the delivery of services.

D. John Lee, Tabor College. **"Strategies of Identity"**

This paper reviews the search for identity in a modern pluralistic culture. Identity is defined as one's sense of worth and belonging which provides meaning and direction to life; it is how one defines oneself in order to know how to act and what to value. Strategies of identity in modern society can be summarized into five categories: (1) identity through profession, (2) identity through ethnicity or gender, (3) identity through reason and beliefs, (4) identity through free will or choice, and (5) identity through transcendence. These five strategies are reviewed and the concept of identity is criticized.

Bruce Perry, Philadelphia. **"The Quest for 'Identity': Health or Sickness?"**

The quest for "identity" has traditionally been assumed to be a healthy one. The following article, which questions that assumption, stresses the terrible price the human race continues to pay for each ethnic, racial, religious, and political group's insistence on its own separate, artificial identity.

Robert Warshawsky, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. "Hermeneutics and Identity: Methodology for Ethnic-Sensitive Practice"

A hermeneutically informed practice is suggested that would further sensitize practitioners to the unique meanings of their client's ethnic experience. Hermeneutical rules of interpretation are given that would guide practice. Clients' past history and present social circumstances are interpreted in light of their total experience giving substance to their unique identity formation. The practitioner's own prejudice is examined within the client/worker relationship. The practitioner is required to suspend initial judgment toward the client in order to free-up his/her feeling, attitudes, and behavior. Using this perspective, a "fusion" of experience between practitioner and client is sought whereby mutual understanding may be enhanced.

SESSION IX: Education

Chair: Meredith Reinhart, California State University, Sacramento.

Jacqueline Ulmen Zbaracki, Des Moines Area College. "Behavioral or Developmental: Psychosocial Development of Southeast Asian Preschool Children"

Most Child Development research is based on middle class American children. Association with Southeast Asian parents and children suggests rethinking and adjustment of some commonly held developmental phenomena in psychosocial development is in order. The paper considers aspects of Erik Erickson's theory of Child Development, the American assumptions operating with each, and observed Southeast Asian phenomena. While growth and development are common to all children, behavioral differences need to be examined in light of society and maturation. This paper is not intended to provide answers but rather to raise questions suggested by close observation of Southeast Asian families with preschool children.

Norman L. Friedman, California State University, Los Angeles. "Teaching about the Holocaust in the Racial and Ethnic Relations Course"

Some consideration of the Holocaust can provide valuable historical and comparative perspectives for the largely American society-oriented course in the sociology of racial and ethnic relations. Teaching about the Holocaust can help to illustrate and further analyze the topics of (1) the patterns and causes of discrimination and prejudice, especially a "political/bureaucratic" explanation, and (2) minority reactions to prejudice and discrimination, especially through the response of "spiritual resistance."

Dorena M. Lee, San Francisco. "Implementing Bilingual Instruction in a Chinamerican Preschool"

This presentation looks at cultural sensitivity in the materials presented to Amerasian children in San Francisco. An important aspect of the project focuses on parental involvement—coming into the classroom, bringing materials from the home, working with the children at home, and general parental participation in educating their children. An example of teacher and parent involvement includes activities such as making "rock soup" to demonstrate sharing, nutrition, and socialization. A bilingual parent handbook encourages and maintains communication between the home and school.

SESSION XI: Indochinese Americans: Gender and Community

Chair: Gretchen M. Bataille, Iowa State University

Foster Brown, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. "Self-Identity of a Vietnamese Refugee"

This paper analyzes the adaptation of Southeast Asian women refugees in the United States through the experiences of a Vietnamese woman and her family. Viewed from a social system's perspective, the experiences serve to illustrate the stages through which most people pass when they move from one culture to another as well as the effects this has on self-identity and puts them in human terms and perspective. Thus, it is a case study that integrates social science theory and social work practice which can be utilized by agencies and practitioners to assist other Asian women who are going through similar experiences.

Charles C. Irby, Iowa State University, and Ernest Pon, Sacramento City Unified School District. "Mental Health Considerations of Male Hmong and Mien in the United States"

Male Hmong and Mien in the United States suffer severely as displaced persons. They are not only physically separated from their homeland but also suffer psychological trauma resulting from that displacement. This paper investigates: (1) life in America for male Hmong and Mien, (2) the role of Hmong and Mien women in the U.S. economy in lessening the male's traditional role in the clan, (3) the impact of youth in creating trauma for male elders, (4) how "idle time" (no job) functions to diminish self-esteem, and (5) what methods can be used to re-orient those who have lost their traditional role within the clan.

Joan Randall and Clair Christensen, University of California, Davis. "Old Information in a New Setting: A Case for the Establishment of Settlement Houses in the Hmong Community"

This paper is a description of aspects of the Hmong (Highland Lao) community in Fresno and Merced Counties in California. It draws on the experiences gained through an Office of Refugee Resettlement grant to University of California Cooperative Extension. The Hmong are a tribal mountain people, preliterate and, in general, believers in animism. The normative immigrant/refugee system in the United States was ill-equipped to respond to their acculturation needs; therefore, numerous communities are faced with citizens who know little of the basic knowledge we use in modern American life. For well over the majority of these tribal refugees in the Central Valley, alienation and subsequent isolation are their realities. Building upon their special strengths and the uniqueness of their problems, a specific strategy is described and suggested. The focus and main purpose of the discussion is addressing the need to increase shared interactions among the refugees as well as with the dominant society. This is a community developer's view of this new Asian imprint on California and the U.S.

Respondent: Peter Kranz, Lock Haven State University

As the respondent for this session, I was moved by the presenters' sensitivity and commitment to their subject. The papers themselves were extremely informational, well written, and documented. However, when presented, these papers breathed an excitement of real involvement with crucial human issues rather than mere vocalizations of statistics and rhetoric. This energy given off by the participants in the form of understanding and caring moved the audience to become as deeply involved as the presenters with the subject.

Randall's and Christensen's paper was a moving experience of how two educators in extension education created an ingenious neighborhood activity center to provide a bridge between the dominant culture and the Hmong refugees. The authors' compassion for the struggles of the Hmong was compelling particularly when viewing the human dilemma faced between their own identity and culture and acculturation within the majority culture. The problems of maintaining this delicate balance were clearly stated along with possible solutions. The success of the project to date suggests a sociological and psychological expertise rarely seen, heard, or felt.

Brown's paper was an in-depth look from a social system perspective at the

adaptation struggles of Southeast Asian women refugees. The author discussed four phases of adjustment (Phase 1—predeparture, Phase 2—the spectator phase, Phase 3—the adaptive phase, and Phase 4—the “coming to terms” phase) that these women go through emigrating from their country to a successful relocation within the United States. The presentation was not only informative but also gave to the audience a sociological framework to better understand the struggle. Brown presented recollections from the women themselves about the hardships in readjustment. These comments brought a personal touch and added meaning to the entire presentation. Overall, Brown integrated the theoretical with the personal, resulting in a truly educational experience.

Irby's and Pon's paper was an in-depth portrayal of the psychological hardships suffered by Southeast Asian refugees in the United States. Their uprootedness was not voluntary but rather as a direct consequence of America's involvement in the Vietnam conflict. The psychological trauma that resulted was pervasive, affecting all areas of their adjustment. In this regard, difficulties were reported in such areas as culture shock, language, religion, family structure, status, racism, and employment. The results of this psychological scarring were traumatic: reports of severe depression and suicide, feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, family discord, anxiety, fear, anger, and substance abuse are well documented. The presenters emphasized that solutions to these problems are not easy. However, one thing is very clear: the United States has a moral obligation and responsibility to assist both the Hmong and Mien in their new adjustment. This assistance may be a variety of forms: mental health intervention, job training, or education. The important issue is that the United States severely disrupted the entire Hmong and Mien society of Southeast Asia and thus should initiate an active commitment of assistance.

SESSION XII: Identity and Community

Chair: Margaret Laughlin, University of Wisconsin, Green Bay

Dorothy Balancio, Mercy College. “The Making and Unmaking of a Myth: The Italian American Women and Their Community

This research addresses how Italian American Women see themselves and their community. Input from three generations of women: the immigrant grandmothers, their children, and grandchildren is investigated. The biographies of these women from the three cohorts suggest a wide range of differences, but also spotlight intra-generational similarities. The first generation grandmothers were the ruptured group between two cultures: the rural, peasant Southern Italian culture and the Urban American culture. The study begins with a description of the images of Italian American women as presented in novels, films, and on television, and ends by showing them as achievers.

Gloria Eive, Italian American Historical Society/WCR. “Italians in the West: Music, Culture and the Role of Women”

Field studies among Italian Americans in California indicate the maintenance of living oral traditions in their lives contributes significantly to their feelings of ethnic identity. Of these oral traditions, music (specifically, “Musica Popolare”) is particularly important. There is a distinction between “men's” and “women's” repertoires in content and function. The men's repertoire is more “public” and “popular” and the women's more “private,” although they share a “neutral” repertoire of songs identified today as “traditional.” Women bear the responsibility for maintaining the culture. Music functions in this context to impart moral, ethical and social values and also to provide continuity between generations and between the “old” and “new” cultures.

Respondent: Norman L. Friedman, California State University, Los Angeles.

Balancio and Eive have quite a bit in common, of course—Italian-American women—especially in regard to earlier generation ones. What I like about Eive's paper is that her research on folk and popular music provides a sound foundation for more sound interpretations about ethnicity than just what one can obtain from customary interviewee comments. Songs and dances recalled from over many years are real and concrete indicators of ethnicity, not fuzzy ones. The cautious interpretations she does make about their functions in festivals, socialization, definitions of propriety (in the bawdy songs), mate choice, and subcommunity ties, seem well grounded in relation to the music.

Balancio's total research project, apparently still ongoing, involving 38 family groups, 3 generations, and 255 people in oral histories and interviews, will probably when completed be a major contribution to our knowledge about the history and sociology of Italian American women. It is difficult to react to, however, in its current written form. Nevertheless, many of the ideas suggested are fascinating, such as the notion that Italian American women preserve and outwardly project a mythical ideal family image to outsiders (of service, powerlessness, passivity) that is often not the reality of their internal family lives.

Of course, we can also see and draw some linkages between Balancio and Eive's early generation women, even though they came from different parts of Italy and went to different places in the United States. Both maintained ethnic community and culture (including music) while also dealing with two diverse cultures (the old and new worlds) and subsequent sibling-bonded family life. How their women and music might connect in the more recent generations, though, is less clear. Moreover, are the younger women, now and into the future, undergoing a genuine and deep "resurgence of ethnicity," or mainly continuing a more-or-less "straight-line assimilation" of their group?

Contributors

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NEW from **CMS**

Italian Americans

New Perspectives

in Italian Immigration and

Ethnicity

The '80s has been called "The Decade of the Italian American". Increasingly, Italian Americans are coming to the forefront in politics, business, education and the arts and the growing literature on Italian Americans reflects these various aspects of the Italian experience in the U.S.

Today, however, the state of Italian American research and new dimensions in the Italian American experience must be examined more systematically. A national profile of Americans of Italian descent must now be sketched within the social history of the United States and within the cultural and political consequences for the national and international relations of the United States, particularly with Italy. These needs were the aims of the International Conference on the Italian Experience in the United States held at Columbia University in 1983.

Speakers at the Conference and, consequently, the authors presented in this volume, offer a comprehensive cross-section of more than fifty of those scholars most critical to the development of Italian American studies.

ITALIAN AMERICANS: NEW PERSPECTIVES IN ITALIAN IMMIGRATION AND ETHNICITY represents the proceedings of that cultural event.

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