

CHICANOS: STEREOTYPES AND SEARCH FOR SELF-IDENTITY AS SEEN THROUGH LITERATURE

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RESUMEN

Este trabajo analiza, a través de textos literarios, los estereotipos atribuidos a los chicanos. Muchos escritores norteamericanos se acercan a este tema con nociones preconcebidas de los emigrantes mexicanos y perpetúan dicha caricaturización. Al chicano se le describe, por un lado, realizando trabajos como jornalero, boxeador, jefe de bandas, navajero y revolucionario; y por otro, como vago, ignorante, y analfabeto. El escritor chicano, sin embargo, hace una representación real de su cultura —una cultura alienada por ciertos sectores de la sociedad norteamericana—.

ABSTRACT

This paper will analyze the stereotype of Chicanos by examining some of the literature written about them by Anglo and Chicano writers. Many Anglo writers approach this subject with preconceived notions of Mexicans which perpetuate the already existing stereotypes. They portray Chicanos, on the one hand, as farm-workers, boxers, gang leaders, knife-fighters, and revolutionaries, and, on the other, as lazy, ignorant, and illiterate people. A counter image is illustrated by the Chicano writer. He delineates a true representation of their traditional culture —a culture alienated by some segments of American society—.

KEY WORDS

Chicanos, Chicano writer, Chicano literature, Mexicans, immigrants, minority.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce travail analyse, à travers de textes littéraires, les stéréotypes attribués aux chicanos. Beaucoup d'écrivains nord-américains s'approchent de ce sujet avec des idées préconçues sur des émigrants mexicains, en perpétuant la caricature en question. On décrit le chicano, d'un côté comme journalier, boxeur, chef de bandes, maquereau, et révolutionnaire; et d'autre côté, comme fainéant, ignorant, et analphabète. L'écrivain chicano, par contre, fait une représentation réelle de sa culture — une culture aliénée par certains secteurs de la société nord-américaine—.

Because of their heterogeneity, Mexican Americans (or Chicanos) are difficult for the Anglo society to understand, therefore, extremely susceptible to misrepresentation. Aguirre, in *The Meaning of the Chicano Movement* (Aguirre et al., 1972: 1-5), defines the Chicano in these terms:

No somos Mexicanos. We are citizens of the United States with cultural ties to Mexico and in some instances to Spain, but within our ties of language and culture, we have developed a culture that is neither Spanish nor Mexican. Entre nosotros habemos quien habla un español puro, pero también entre nosotros habemos los "batos" que no pueden conseguir "jale" por la razón que sea (p. 1).

The term "Chicano", born as a term of ethnic identification, probably from Nahuatl origin, has been applied by Mexican Americans in a derogatory sense to refer to another Mexican American of a lower class (Steinbeck et al., 1971: xii). Nowadays, however, it is being used as a term of self-esteem to identify the Mexican American as he is; that is "a product of a Spanish-Mexican-Indian heritage and an Anglo-Saxon (American, or, as they say, in Mexico, *Estado Unidense*) influence" (Aguirre et al., 1972:2). Chicanos are bilingual. They are doctors, university teachers, congressmen, lawyers, as well as farm laborers, housewives, plumbers, engineers and mailmen. But Chicanos have not had a true representation in mass media and literature. Their racial and cultural features have been exaggerated and stereotyped.

The portrayal of Mexican Americans, the second largest minority in the United States, in stereotypes has reinforced the ignorance of the dominant culture about this group. Furthermore, as Mario G. Obledo states in "Mexican Americans and the Media" (Aguirre et al., 1972: 6-16), it has contributed to maintaining Mexican Americans economically repressed by influencing social attitudes. It has also generated feelings of racial superiority by pointing to racial inferiority in others. The bombardment of stereotypes encourages Anglo feelings of superiority over the Mexicans depicted (pp. 8-10).

Mexican Americans are especially susceptible to such characterization. An example is the wide-spread misconception that they are mostly engaged in farm labor, however, 80 percent of Chicanos live in densely populated barrios (p. 7). Other stereotypes are the depicting of this minority group as boxers, school drop-outs, gang leaders, revolutionaries and knife-fighters. From different points of view, both Anglo and Chicano literature reflect this conscious or unconscious process of stereotyping.

Examples of this Anglo literature are Steinbeck's "Flight", published in 1938, and Scott O'Dell's *Child of Fire* (1974). Both pieces of literature delineate a sympathetic portrait of teenagers facing a powerful Anglo order. "Flight", tells the story of a Mexican family, a mother and three children, who live on a small farm close to the California Coast. Pepe, the oldest boy, is sent by his mother to Monterey to buy a few things she needs. Pepe kills a man there with his knife

and has to escape to the mountains. Some unknown men chase him and finally kill him (Steinbeck et al., 1971: 139-156).

Pepe is described as a very lazy boy whose only worry in life is playing with his knife:

“All day you do foolish things with your knife, like a toy-baby”, she stormed. “Get up on thy huge feet that eat up shoes. Get up!” She took him by one loose shoulder and hoisted at him. Pepe grinned sheepishly and came half-heartedly to his feet. “Look!” Mama cried. “Big lazy, you must catch the horse and put thy father’s saddle. You must go to Monterey” (p. 141).

A further stereotype concerns the Chicano’s moral values. After killing the man, Pepe says to his mother: “I am a man now, Mama. The man said names to me I could not allow” (p. 144). Killing a man makes him go from adolescence to “maturity”. Machismo is here confused with manhood.

In addition, the language of “Flight” is full of descriptions, metaphors, and symbolism. These elements hinder the psychological development of the characters and mask the real anguish experienced by Pepe in his flight.

Child of Fire is narrated in the first person by Delaney, a parole officer, who, in contrast with other police officers, sees in this minority group certain valued qualities. Through him, we contemplate the Chicanos who live near the Mexican border, their fights for survival and the police control to which they are subjected. But the novel particularly deals with Manuel and his struggles to vindicate his *raza*’s rights.

In the beginning, Manuel’s actions, when he jumps into the bull-ring and faces the bull, seem to be directed by his machismo and his love for Ivonne; but later on, his actions are controlled by the defence of his ideals. He finally dies facing the mechanical grape harvester that would leave many Chicanos unemployed. This strong idealism propels the novel from beginning to end.

In contrast with “Flight”, machismo is not here confused with maturity. Both works, however, share the violence of the Anglo social order. This is evident in Manuel’s attempt to stop the grape harvester:

The red machine has reached the end of the row. Manuel was still on his knees, his hands stiff at his sides and his face lifted defiantly. I don’t know whether the driver sitting under his yellow canopy saw him or not. I don’t think it would have made any difference one way or the other.

The machine came lumbering on and the boy knelt there defying it. He didn’t move. Then the steel fingers reached out and, as if it was harvesting grapes, picked flesh from the bone and gathered him in (p. 172).

This novel also poses a further stereotype Chicanos have to face from people who live in Mexico. This is seen when officer Delaney shows the picture of Ernie Sierra, another gang leader like Manuel Castillo, to Lieutenant Morales:

Lieutenant Morales glanced at the picture, then shook his head. "They all look alike, these Chicanos", Morales said. "Up there in the U. S. A. you must possess a factory. Some place you stamp them out like automobile fenders. One after the other. All the same size and shape. You are very clever, you Anglos!" (pp. 10-1).

By means of these racial clichés and distorted caricatures both Steinbeck and O'Dell present a sentimental but damaging image of the Chicano adolescent.

Nevertheless, from the sixties, with the awakening of Chicano literature, there is an attempt to counteract these racial clichés. Besides, this literature differs from Anglo literature in its continuous references to Mexico as the mother country, the place where their culture began, and in its mixture of the Spanish and English languages (Schwartz, 1979:85).

The Chicano writer has also pictured the existing stereotypes but from a different perspective to that of his Anglo counterpart. An ironic approach is offered in "Los Vendidos" by Luis Valdés, first performed in California in 1967. This short play outlines many of the clichés attributed to Chicanos (González et al., 1975; 28-41). The characters are Honest Sancho, Miss Jiménez, Johnny Pachuco, Revolucionario and Mexican-American.

Honest Sancho sells Chicanos. Miss Jiménez is a secretary from the state office building who is looking for a Mexican for the administration. Honest Sancho shows her the mannequins along with an explanation of their more remarkable features. All of them, except for the Mexican American are extremely cheap. Finally, the secretary chooses the Mexican-American for whom Sancho asks fifteen thousand dollars. At the end, the four models rise up against the secretary and Sancho and keep the money. In the stage directions, three stereotypes are described according to the way they dress:

SCENE Honest Sancho's Used Mexican Lot and Mexican Curio Shop. Three models are on display in Honest Sancho's Shop. To the right there is a Revolucionario, complete with sombrero, carrilleras, and carabina. 30-. 30. At center, on the floor, there is the Farmworker, under a broad straw sombrero. At stage left is the Pachuco, filero in hand. Honest Sancho is moving among his models, dusting them off and preparing for another day of business (p. 28).

The Mexican-American is omitted because he does not differ from an Anglo in the way he dresses.

A further description of each of the characters follows. About the farmworker Honest Sancho says:

"This is our standard farmworker model. Take special notice of this four-ply Goodyear huarachas, made from the rain tire. This widebrimmed sombrero is an extra added feature —keeps off the sun, rain, and dust (...) He loves his patrones! But his most attractive feature is that he's hardworking (...) You can also put him in old barns, old cars, riverbanks. You can even leave him out in the field overnight with no worry!" (pp. 30-31).

Johnny is the second model shown:

“Introducing our new Johnny Pachuco model (...) Built for speed, low-riding city life. Take a look at some of these features. Mag shoes, dual exhausts, jet black paint-job, dark-tint windshield (...) He knife fights (...) he gets arrested, but not without resisting (...) he steals” (pp. 32-34).

The Revolucionario is the third model pictured:

‘He ride horses, stays in the mountains, crosses deserts, plains, rivers, leads revolutions, follows revolutions, kills, can be killed, serves a martyr, hero, movie star (...)’ (pp. 34-35).

The Mexican American is the fourth model describe:

“This model represents the apex of American engineering! He is bilingual, college-educated, ambitious! Say the word «acculturated» and accelerates. He is intelligent, well-mannered, clean (...) he makes speeches”. (pp. 36-37).

In contrast to the stereotypes portrayed by many Anglo writers, these models are aware of their roles as exploited people in American society. This is seen in the words in Spanish pronounced by the Mexican-American: “*RAZA QUERIDA, VAMOS LEVANTANDO ARMAS PARA LIBERARNOS DE ESTOS DESGRACIADOS GABACHOS QUE NOS EXPLOTAN! VAMOS*” (p. 40). In addition, this play shows Chicanos such as Honest Sancho and Miss Jiménez who deny their cultural heritage in order to be accepted by American society. They represent the Mexican Americans who disappear in the mainstream of the American middle class culture.

The Chicano as a boxer is portrayed in “The World of Richard Rubio” by José Antonio Villareal (González et al., 1975: 136-141), published in 1959. Richard Rubio, a thirteen-year old, forced to fight by one of his friends, exhibits tremendous courage in the ring. This impels a fight manager to offer him a job as a boxer;

“How about it, kid? asked the man”. I’m giving ya the chance of your life--it’s the only way people of your nationality can get ahead.

“I’m an American”, said Richard.

“All right, you know what I mean. Mexicans don’t get too much chance to amount too much. You wanna pick prunes the rest of you life?”

Richard didn’t say anything, and he said, “look, I’ll go talk it over with your old man, and I’ll bet he’ll agree with me. I’ll bet he knows what’s good for you” (p. 139).

These words reflect Anglos’ attitude about this minority’s qualifications for jobs. Because of their ignorance, boxing seems to be the only way for Chicanos to become rich. They also refer to a long tradition of exploited farmworkers.

Moreover, a common stereotype, the Chicano as knife-fighter, is mentioned in Richard's refusal to fight:

"You better not do that, mister. You don't know my ol man. He's already been to jail for knifing three guys".

Richard could tell he was dumb and, like a lot of people, believed that Mexicans and knives went together. He thought he had finished with him, but the man said, "All right, we won't tell'im anything, he'll come and see me". (p. 140).

However, Richard does not listen to the man. He does not want anybody to tell him what he should do. He thinks of the old lady that told him that

"He should work hard to be a gardener and some day he could work on a rich person's estate. She was sure he would be successful at that, because she had known of some Mexicans who held very fine places like that" (p. 140).

This short story also mirrors Anglos' attitude about Chicano's school achievement. The Chicano child is less intelligent than the Anglo one and, therefore, unable to be successful at school and attain the same type of careers:

And the adviser in the high school, who had insisted he take auto mechanics or welding or some shop course, so that he could have a trade and be in a position to be good citizen because he was a Mexican, and when he had insisted on preparing for college, she had smiled knowingly and said he could try those courses for a week or so (...) (p. 141).

But the author highlights Richard's pride for being a Mexican:

"What makes people like that, anyway. Always worried about his being Mexican and he never even thought about it, except sometimes, when he was alone, he got kinda funny proud about it".

He had the feeling that being was important, and he was--so he knew that he would never succumb to foolish social pressure again (p. 141).

The Chicano as a farm laborer as well as a member of an urban *barrio* is depicted in "On the Edge of the Barrio" (González et al., 1975: 44-55). Ernesto Garlaza, the author and main character of this short story, tells how his mother dies, and how he has to go from Mexico to live with an uncle in a Sacramento barrio. The author's experience in the barrio is far from being negative. There, he goes to High School while working in different positions such as clerk in a drugstores, and a delivery boy. According to Marta Sotomayor in "Mexican-American interaction with Social Systems" (Aguirre et al., 1972: 148-160), the barrio offers a sense of belonging and cohesion to a group of people consistently rejected by the environment (p. 157).

But Ernesto, still being an adolescent, has to work on a farm, picking fruits. His experience there is one of suffering and frustration:

There was never any doubt the contractor and his power over us. He could fire a man and his family on the spot and make them wait days for their wages. A man could be forced to quit by assigning him regularly to the thinnest picking in the field. The worst thing one could do was to ask for fresh water on the job, regardless of the heat of the day; instead of iced water, given freely, the crews were expected to buy sodas at twice the price in town, sold by the contractor himself. He usually had a pistol--to protect the payroll, so it was said" (González et al., 1975: 52).

Furthermore, because of the poor living conditions and contamination of the water supply, there is an epidemic in which many people, including children, die. Ernesto goes to Sacramento to bring a health officer back to the farm. As a consequence of this, he is fired.

A similar type of farm-working experience is described in Villanueva's "Day-Long Day" (González et al., 1975: 148-149). This poem focuses on a family of farm laborers under the suffocating intensity of the Texas sun:

Third-generation timetable.
Sweat day-long dripping into open space;
sun blocks out the sky, suffocates the only breeze,
From el amo desgraciado, a sentence:
"I wanna a bale a day, and the boy here
don't hafta go to school".
(...) In time-binding motion--
a family of sinews and backs,
row-trapped,
zigzagging through summer-long rows
of cotton: Lubbock by way of Wharton.
"Está como si escupieran fuego", a mother moans
in sweat-patched jeans,
stopping
with unbending dreams.
"Estudia para que no seas burro como nosotros",
our elders warn, their gloves and cuffs
leaf-stained by seasons (...)

The poem, a mixture of the English and Spanish languages, presents both the eternal cycle of the same job ("third generation timetable") and the lack of schooling of the laborer's children, who have to start working early in life. Ignorance and illiteracy are consciously maintained by bosses to continue with their profitable business. Sotomayor says that the Mexican American family should be understood from the historical perspective of a colonized people in its native country and in the United States. From this point of view, the Mexican shares many characteristics with other colonized people. She asserts that:

The inferior status of the colonized people results in damage to self-esteem, destruction of native cultural traits and adoption of foreign cultural traits, desintegration of the family unit with particular disparagement of the male, and finally, loss of social cohesion among so-called inferior groups because of their inability to retain their own culture (Aguirre et al., 1972: 152).

Furthermore, the use of the Spanish language at home and in the barrios, which explains the use of this language in Chicano literature, “has served to maintain and emphasize satisfying close human relationships that have helped to provide emotional stability for many Mexican Americans” (p. 158).

Anglo society denies the Chicano his identity and gives him the feeling of alienation and anonymity. This explains the nausea felt by the main character of Nick C. Vacas’s “The Week in the Life of Manuel Hernández” (Steinbeck et al., 1971: 299-307):

“I walked out of the conference room wound so tightly that I felt I would burst. It is times like this when I come to the sea to speak to the waves, to blind my eyes by looking at the sun reflecting off the waves before they crash into the sea. I am afraid there is no escape from this animal that plagues me. It has many masks, boredom, depression”. (p. 307).

The depression felt by Manuel since he was a child, and which finally drives him to commit suicide, is caused by his having to adapt to an Anglo society while still belonging to a Hispanic one. Gloria López Mcknight, says in “Communication: the Key to Social Change” (Aguirre et al., 1972: 192-210):

So many of our parents in a honest effort to make a living have urged us to assimilate and have therefore deprived us of our history and *cuento* (folktales) of the past. The phrases are familiar: “Don’t learn Spanish; don’t let them know you’re a Mexican; just tell them you have a good tan; get lost in the crowd”. (...) Our lost brothers and sisters have been leading double lives trying to pretend to be what they are not. Denying one’s true identity can have deleterious psychological effects (Aguirre et al., 1972: 194).

The Chicano’s struggle for cultural survival is also shown in “I am Joaquín” by Rodolfo González (González et al., 1975: 26-27):

I am Joaquín,
lost in a world of confusion,
caught up in the whirl of a
gringo society,
confused by the rules,
scorned by attitudes,
suppressed by modern society.
My fathers

have lost the economical battle
and wont
the struggle of cultural survival.
And now!
I must choose
between
the paradox of
victory of the spirit,
despite physical hunger,
or
to exist in the grasp
of American neurosis,
sterilization of the soul
and a full stomach.
Yes,
I have come a long way nowhere,
unwilling dragged by that
monstrous, technical,
industrial giant called
progress
and Anglo success (...)
I look at myself.
I watch my brothers.
I shed tears of sorrow.
I sow seeds of hate.
I withdraw to the safety within the
circle of life--.

MY OWN PEOPLE

The last verse, "MY OWN PEOPLE", affirms Joaquín's desire to remain within his own cultural heritage and within a non alineating, non disintegrating, "circle of life".

In conclusion, Anglo writers' misrepresentations and stereotypes of Chicano culture reinforces the ignorance about this group by the dominant culture. In addition, it contributes to preserve Anglo's racial superiority and thus Chicano's alienation by influencing social attitudes.

Furthermore, Chicano writers' counteration of these clichés has not carried out a positive influence on Anglo society. The trouble facing Mexican Americans are intrinsic to the nature of people who are doomed to live as a minority, without much hope for change. Chicanos are therefore excluded from the established "melting pot", since it is based on competitive achievement.

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