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Chicano/a Reactions Against American Imperialism

Juan-Ignacio Oliva

In America, the literature of minorities is always being reinvented. We can speak about *transcultural* writers, the product of an international culture without limits, because of their own decisions and, or, social conditionings. Those writers live in that abstract space Marshall McLuhan called *global village*, that is, a no-man's land without a specific identity, or else, with an identity of its own, characterized by polysemy, by creativeness, and non-canonical approaches to the literature of the world¹.

It is well known that the recent history of the American continent has been produced by migrant forces which have been coming in different waves from all over the world. These waves of different people and races, coming to this promising *newfoundland* to find a new *El Dorado*, are a challenge to the people who came first (as it was and has always been in the history of the world since the very beginning), and consider the land as theirs. But, without entering in these broader concepts of possession and inheritance of the territory, what can be stated clearly is that the situation of modern North America, specifically, is that of a mosaic, a microcosm of ideas, races, religions . . . which clash many times against a conscious idea of Unity, of the United States – as alluded to in the very concept of this Nation.

The migrant condition is, therefore, a contradictory term in a land of possessors and dispossessed, because the former establish the rules of government and the others adjust and try to imitate (in order not to be discredited), but keep progressively losing, in a series of generations, their own identities and differences. It is a situation, that of the migrant, which is both frustrating and enriching, in a fascinating paradox that proves sometimes very creative, mainly in the hand of artists and intellectuals – let us forget about the social differences and restrict our attention to migrant

¹ To analyze the intersections of *Chicano literature* with Postcolonial and Postmodernist studies and theories, see Pérez-Torres: *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, Against Margins*. The feeling of displacement and dispossession leads to characterizing the Chicano cultural identity as postcolonial; contemporary Chicano multiculturalism and hybridity leads to the association with postmodernism.

writers and intellectuals. On the one hand, the recent migrant loses the power of roots and the knowledge of both the traditional and the imposed rules and language, that is, he/she lives in an unknown territory, with the fascination and vertigo of the discoverer of a new reality. On the other hand and after a while, both worlds begin to mix up, building slowly a new reality much richer than the one of a monochrome citizen but less safe and comfortable. It depends on the level of adjustment and the cultural power of the subject that it can result in a very rich and metaphoric literary force, leading to the creation of a hybrid. The possibility of watching and comparing the new with the old, after the first cultural shocks, transforms in the only privileged condition for the emigrant, and saves from schizophrenia. This is also a fascinating border condition because the eye watches from the ex-centric position (a terminology now in use for the study of differences in non-canonical literature), so that one can feel the reality from the outside, from the first non-implicated, innocent situation of the newcomer, mocked by the experts but mocking their certainty at the same time. Undoubtedly, the migrant condition leads to a paradoxical status in which one temporarily loses the solid grounds and education, like a new-born child starts learning the new language and rules, a little bit looking like a decent fool to the eye of the established, but being able to judge from that seemingly inferior position, like an old man who knows more than you but cannot express it.²

In the case of the Chicanos, the situation is different but responds to the same problematics, for the Chicanos, despite being the former occupants of the land, have been treated similarly to the other ethnic minorities that migrated or were taken to America during the nineteenth and the twentieth century, due to economic famines, religious oppression or slavery.³ Among the inhabitants of the immense territory of the United States, the Chicanos claim for the rights of a big region that spreads mainly through six

² Many items concerning the situation of migrants have been studied in the last years: questions like the experience of exile, the dislocation of space and place, the life in the new land, and, more recently, the gender specificities, the different experiences of female and male migrants, and the violence towards lonely women. Gina Buijs' *Migrant Women: Crossing Borders and Changing Identities* is a good example of these anthropological studies.

³ In 'A Note on Ethnic Labels', De la Torre-Pesquera state "*Chicana* and *Chicano* typically refer, respectively, to women and men of Mexican descent residing in the United States. *Chicano* is also a broad term that includes both males and females who claim Mexican heritage (e.g., the Chicano community). These labels offer an alternative to the more common ethnic identifiers *Mexican* and *Mexican American*. The term *Mexican* may also be used to refer specifically to immigrants from Mexico. *Mexicana* and *Mexicano* typically refer to immigrant women and men. Regional and historical differences also affect the use of ethnic labels. For example, *Hispana* and *Hispano* are terms used by the Mexican-origin populations of New Mexico" (xiii).

southwestern States: California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, and parts of Oklahoma and Kansas, that is, a land formerly called Aztlán by the primitive owners: "Our nearest Indian relatives are the Aztecs and the Mayas, but their ancestors, in turn, were the people of Aztlán. Some of the most ancient Aztlán people were the Anasazi (the ancient ones), the Hohokan, and the Cochise. . . ." (De León 13). Since then, Chicanos have been claiming for the possession of a territory that was originally theirs, and not the Spaniards', the Mexicans', or the Americans'. Their hybrid condition is another characteristic derived from the birth of a mixed-blood race, and it is precisely this condition that brings with it the Chicano identity vs. other populations of the nation; the *mestizo* quality has marked the Chicanos' fight against dominance ever since.

Chicanos' activism starts from the very moment of their achieving a new situation as citizens of a new State, after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, in 1848, in which Mexico gave up its rights for the land to the United States. But it will not be until the twentieth century, in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, that is, the moment of the big fight for equality of the main ethnic groups of America, when the Chicanos grouped together under the name of *La Raza* in active resistance against oppression of the white majority. Other guerrilla-names that appeared at that time were *the people*, *the community*, *carnalismo*, *la gente*, or, more commonly, *el barrio*.⁴ As Rose-Marie Roybal puts it, in favour of the first term,

LA RAZA is a convenient term, and it carries with it a great deal of charismatic power. Is it accurate to use it so freely, though? Is a Mexican American from San Diego, the same as a Mexican, or Chicano, from Salt Lake City, Chicago, San Antonio, or Racine, Wisconsin? How does one begin to discuss *LA RAZA* as a 'forgotten people' without the blanket generalizations about their social, political, or economic conditions? (. . .) Do these groups truly melt under a banner of *LA RAZA*? Perhaps, in issue-oriented situations (9).

⁴ De la Torre-Pesquera (see previous note) explain the meaning and origin of these names: "The term *Chicano* was popularized in the late 1960s during the Chicano movement to affix a political orientation that affirmed the need to struggle against the historical oppression of people of Mexican descent in the United States. *La Raza* was also popularized during the same period and underscores a shared cultural experience and a sense of unity among peoples of Mexican, Central American, and South American heritage. *Latino*, commonly associated with peoples of Latin American origin, has a similar use. *Hispanic* is a term coined by the U.S. Census to identify all Spanish-speaking and/or Spanish-origin populations in the United States. While it is commonly used in data sets, it is considered an imposed identifier" (xiii).

To create a unity in that diversity and be able to fight against dogma and canon, it is always necessary to use a certain epic language and to evoke heroes, leaders and martyrs. They were soon and easily found in the old historical nationalists, from Gregorio Cortéz to Reies Tijerina, and, more tragically, in the everyday victims of brutal repression and in the lack of understanding of two very different linguistic cultures, in the social injustices and the racist feelings that spread from ignorance of the other: Rubén Salazar or Ernesto Nérios – a young delinquent shot dead for stealing a car – became paradigms of a consciously united fight against the big *monster*. Obviously, the Chicano activism launches a covert anti-imperialist war against discrimination and gains strength progressively until the fulfillment of many goals and aims during the 1980s.

Among Chicano activism of the 1990s we can applaud the work of some Chicano writers and poets that – in spite of the difficulty of being published and even read by the majority of their fellows – use their creative power as a tool, wandering through the States reading their poems and writings, and diffusing Chicano culture to open-minded citizens.

One of the most important Chicano poets, who even reached a university position, died recently, in 1995. Ricardo Sánchez exemplifies the fight for cultural challenges without forgetting one's roots and origins. In his several books of poetry published right up until his death, the creative force of the Chicano life is depicted and a political engagement with *La Raza* stands as the main streamline of his ideology. The title of the 1994 book, *Amerikan Journeys::Jornadas Americanas*, is a clear example of his militancy; the spelling of the word *Amerikan* is explained in the poet's fondness for puns and games of words: the letter *k* is the symbol of ku-klux-klan, the triple *k*, the main symbol of American violent intolerance and racism.⁵

Perhaps the primary importance of Sánchez' poetry lies in his easy manipulation of the language, to clarify the essence and value of the words. A whole new, invented, and *mestizo* vocabulary appears in his works, and his ideas in promotion of the Chicano world do not collide with his love for life and humanity, his sense of universality, together with a taste for culture as the supreme wealth of the mind. In his "dirge chicaneaux", written to the memory of Chicano activist César Chávez, Sánchez states these principles:

⁵ In his preface to the book, Rob Lewis points out: "In labelling Ricardo Sánchez as a *Chicano* poet and his poetry as *Chicano poetry* we must be careful not to lose sight of the fact that Dr. Sánchez is a very accomplished *American* poet, writing in a specifically American idiom and out of a uniquely American experience."

we knew you, carnal César,
 within Texas turnrows
 and Arizona cottonfields,
 along valleys in California
 and outposts in the Midwest,

knew you in the plenitude
 of Chicano Movement outcries,
 in the felicity of culture
 dancing/poeticizing the moment,
 felt the potent songs
 (. . .)

that justice might become
 the song of human realization,
 you taught a pueblo
 to demand their rights, to thrive
 within simplicity,
 (*Amerikan Journeys* 51-52)

Another instance of Chicano poet within the active militant Chicano movement is "Lalo" Delgado. I happened to meet Abelardo "Lalo" Delgado in a conference about "Bodies, Boundaries and Borders in American Movement Cultures" that took place in Washington State University in June, 1996. I was personally impressed by the force and power of the strong voice of this aged Chicano that embodied the qualities of the chicano male cliché: courage, virility, physical resistance and, above all, a bitter sense of humour employing irony but also, many times, open laughter – something that should probably be defined as charisma. The language of that Chicano was the more impressive, because it was not a double-tongue capacity, but instead a tremendous powerful torrent of a creole language formed by the indiscriminate use of both Spanish and English. It had the right of being called a new language: it was Chicano language and it was theirs alone. From the booklets by "Lalo" Delgado sold there (a photocopied and numbered edition of 200), one could notice the peeping-eye of the poet exploring their neighbours from *el barrio*, his own experiences as activist, his taste for life and the family: the pillars of the Chicano conscience. Many Chicano myths were also linked to a collective Chicano mind depicted by Delgado: *la llorona*, *la Malinche*, a feminine symbol of ambivalent meanings: *la Virgen de Guadalupe* vs. *la vendida*.

In "La llorona", a poem in two parts, Delgado takes advantage of the myth to explore the historical and legendary aspect in the first part, and an

extrapolation for activist purposes in the second. *La llorona* transforms from a virgin *dolorosa* with a dead Chicano Christ in her hands, to a priestess of a pagan religion that kills her own *mestizo* son in order not to lose him, and thirdly, to the Chicana mother who cries for her children because of the racist repression of American society:

La Malinche

and [Cortez] had a son,
one of the first Mestizos,
one of the first Chicanos.
When the child grew up
Cortez wanted to send him to Europe
to be educated as a white man.
La Malinche rather than giving her son
to such a fate

sacrificed him to the sun.

La llorona, the wailing one,
keeps crying for her lost son.

Tenochtitlan

is now Mexico city
and many are those who swear
that in the dead of night
when the wind blows cold,
La Malinche, symbol of all mothers
who have lost a son,
gives out her deafening wails.
ay, ay, ay, her crying is a warning
to the descendants of the Aztecs
to stay away from technological monsters
from dangers that materialism fosters.

(Part II)

(...)

a loud cry.

la llorona's deafening wail
send those students
running home.

They shiver just talking about it.

Can it be she suffers
the bad education Chicanos
receive in many U.S. schools.

(...)

—She cries in las barracas

of industry, her children
 devoured by computers.—
 Ay, ay, ay, I want mi hijo.
 A silence louder than her cry
 makes goose pimples multiply. (*La llorona* 3-4)

The myth of *La malinche* is a powerful subversive *motif* in the Chicano literature. Here, in this poem, Delgado uses it in a positive way: *la llorona* is a woman of courage who fights with her own blood, killing her son, against the white's oppression represented by the conquerer Cortez, the invader of the land. But this story has many different interpretations and has become the main example of the fight between Chicanos and Chicanas as another battleground for the defence of human rights.⁶ It will not be until the birth of the first feminist Chicana movement in the 1970s that the male-centered Chicano society starts to reinterpret its main elements. Chicana feminists will go against the myth of *La Malinche* and question the submissiveness and tamed heroic spirit of the Chicana mother and wife.

At the same time that Chicanos were calling for the rekindling of ethnic pride and identity, Chicanas who pointed to the rich legacy of feminism and female participation in *raza* revolutionary movements were discounted as *vendidas* or as women's libbers. Feminism was seen not as something organic to the culture but as an Anglo trick to divide the Chicano movement. (Mirandé 235)

Little by little, the Chicana begins acquiring a conscience of her own margins, more powerful than the Chicano's, because of her own inferior condition as woman in a male-centered society. And a big clash within Chicano society leads to the division of *La Raza* into the *Barrio* concerns with primary needs, and the Chicana feminist (*las compañeras*) concerns for their own civil rights. That is the reason why the feminist Chicanas group themselves into other *tribes*, other issue-oriented unities, that are not properly placed inside the Chicanas' movement alone. Another important fact is that the Chicanas commit themselves to the task of finding and creating a new and less sexist language to express a different world. They

⁶ M. Borrego analyzes the deconstruction of *La Malinche* in Cherrie Moraga's work: *Loving in the War Years* (Borrego 43-46). This legendary woman is seen as a victim of Chicano macho attitudes against Chicanas. *La Malinche* betrays the Chicano coloured-men with her love to the white Hernán Cortez; thus, the first *mestizos* are born. Also, she embodies the sin of Eve, and stands as a prostitute, a *Vendida*, against the greatest myth for the Chicano race, that is, the Virgin of Guadalupe "who embodies the most virtuous feminine attributes: piety, virginity, forgiveness, succor and saintly submissiveness" (Mirandé 28).

become postmodern *womanist* writers, active on many fronts: now, the enemies will not only be the whites, the machos, the social injustices, but also the white women, and the white feminists, because they show themselves far from the Chicana goals as *coloured* people, and a whole chain of intersections of class, race and gender provoke a very powerful postmodern intellectual debate.⁷

In the re-invention of the world, Chicana writers see themselves forced to speak against their own cultural breed and formation, and in doing so they become nearer most of the other marginal women of the American landscape. This ideal, unreal, world is by definition decentralized and peripheral, that is, its borders are imaginary or self-invented and imposed. It creates a magic world of memories and subjectively chosen frontiers, which are the product of the power of physical and mental dislocation.

And something even more attractive to the modern critics is that these notions of *unity in diversity* bring about other intersections and coincidences which are stronger than the national ones. They form a shocking movement, grouping together different races and ethnic origins under different names. One of the best examples can be seen in the activist group of *radical women of colour* that appeared some years ago along the Pacific Coast. They find the quality of being *marginal* women of different racial and gender origins as their only point of contact: a new and risky classification that is working very well with the Chicana movement and the Afro-American in the U.S. border and with the Asian-Indian immigrants in Canada, for example.

The proof of the strength of these women is shown by the existence of publishing houses both in Canada and the United States, like Aunt Lute in California, or Little Sisters in British Columbia, to embody the power of the word to end long-time silence. In this sense, a book which became the epitome of the metaphor of borders and breaking boundaries is Gloria Anzaldúa's famous *Borderlands: la frontera*. The title is in itself a metaphor of the marginal quality of their poetry as outcast and coloured people in this society. They live in at least three borders or *nations* (inner-scapes) that marginalize them: that is the racial, the gendered, and for some of them the sexual option (their lesbian condition). All this is proved to be stronger than their ethnicity, however powerful this may be. They find themselves nearer each other than identifying themselves as Chicana, American, Canadian, Mexican or Indian. And indeed they produce together a corpus of what can

⁷ A very important book about these is *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race, and Gender*. Also, see *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings*, and *Beyond Stereotypes: The Critical Analysis of Chicana Literature*.

be included in the canon of postcolonial literature, because it shares the same attributes as the *colonized* literature of orthodox origins brought to the comparison with the colonizer body of thought.

That is the reason why the spatial factor stresses the feelings of exile. We live in a world in which colonial exploitation, cultural imperialism, ideological domination and racism are still present, although hidden by a subtle mask of hypocrisy. So, after picking up and elaborating the collective history of their own countries and their colonial past, they notice they are part of the third world and understand they are capable of defending their roots and affirming themselves. In the case of the *radical women of colour*, they also call themselves *third-world women* inside the first world culture, to stress their feeling of isolation from the mainstream and their outcast condition. In this way, they lose their anonymity, their vulnerability, and can try to give solutions not only to the colonial knowledge of the past, but also to the new colonialism of the present.

Therefore, acting against another kind of imperialism, the colonization of the mind, new generations of radical women writers appear nowadays, with enormous success, passing over the hermetic borderlines of literary canons. One must applaud their courage in marginality, because only a peripheral perspective can offer a new discourse. These diversities and paradoxes build a picture, vivid and multicoloured at the same time, of the American cultures movement. The complexity of these writers is caused by the coexistence of different cultures without an acknowledged supremacy of one over the others. In such circumstances ethnicity does not lead to isolation, but, on the contrary, to a fertile plurality, to a rich hybridity.

To summarize, in the brief study made about Chicano/a reactions against American imperialism, the new Chicana fight proves much richer and more politically radical activism than the previous *carnalismo* taken by the Chicanos. Nevertheless, the success of both, although still incomplete, has permitted the spread and the coming into light of a very rich American minority culture that has, undoubtedly, the inalienable right to shine by itself.

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