Exploring Chicano Literature

Sabbatical Project for
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Statement of Purpose

As the images of Latino and Mexican-American culture have increased in our popular culture (witness the Ricky Martin craze and the 'Yo quiero Taco Bell' campaign), so has the need for insightful and thought provoking images of these cultures. Certainly, a taco-craving, Spanish speaking chihuahua is a cartoonish picture and the stereotypical "hot" Latin playboy singing "La Vida Loca" does little to further our understanding of a culture that touches each and every one of us on a daily basis. Through studying the early and contemporary works of Chicano literature and film during my sabbatical, I explored deeper and more lasting depictions of the Chicano culture as well as considered the issues that face the writers and their works.

By reading some of the early works (Rain of Gold, Pocho) which shaped and inspired many contemporary Chicano authors, I was able to see the tiny roots and exploratory buds of a larger movement. The early works questioned the role of the Chicano in the larger culture and within his/her own. With more recent works, many of the themes and concerns have deepened (to feminism, racism, ethnic identity, socio-economic status, and religion) and the literary style matured. The film component of my study added another dimension-- be it gang-related film (of which I viewed four) or the moving stories of immigrants newly arrived in the country. The diversity of these images is impressive-- as rich as any choir with voices both distinct and different.

In reading the works on my sabbatical list, I viewed the texts as primary sources, highlighting significant quotations, key events, major plot and character

revelations as details worthy of study. I also sought the insights of secondary sources (reviews, criticism) as background to further illuminate the major issues isolated by the authors.

For the works of fiction, I include my notes with biographical information on each of the authors, summaries of the works and some analysis of what makes the work valuable or notable for classroom study. I also include questions for discussion, which look at the individual components of the work (sometimes noting a specific page number or quotation for reference) to stimulate critical thinking about the works presented.

The Film component differs slightly. Since many of the directors had little biographical information written about them, instead I provide background notes about the history of the genesis of the film and the filmmaker's role in that genesis. An analysis and summary follow, as do the questions for discussion. Instead of marking page numbers, I specify scenes by demarcating time code (in hours and minutes) to signal where the scene occurs in the film. Since film is a visual medium, I find that using a specific scene helps facilitate discussion and thought.

At a time when understanding a diversity of cultures is critical, the study of literature can be a useful tool. By providing the stories of characters as disparate as the migrant worker and the college professor, the mother of five and the young woman dreaming of a poet -- and the tensions they all face--we can see reality pop culture and stereotypes miss completely.

Victor Villaseñor
Rain of Gold

Background

Victor Villaseñor (1940-) is an unlikely a novelist as there is. As a child, he grew up in his Carlsbad, California home with no books. He dropped out of high school to work in the fields. It was his cousin who got him to attend the newly founded UC San Diego campus and even then he "flunked English" as he says because his reading skills were so poor. It was in Mexico when a friend introduced him to the classic works of literature ("The Iliad", "Tender is the Night") that he began to feel interested in books. And it was James Joyce's "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man" which inspired Villaseñor to take up writing professionally. As Villaseñor puts it:

> I found myself feeling like a bombshell-- ready to explode, prepared to kill anyone who made me feel ashamed. I was reading James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, given to me by the woman in Mexico, when it hit me: I would write. Instead of killing or bashing people's brains out, I would change their minds. I would write good books that reach out and touch people and I would influence the world. I got a dictionary and a high school English Grammar book and I built a desk and I began to read books eight months out of the year. I'd go to bookstore and buy ten books at a time, read them, dissect them and then reassemble them. Then for four months of the year, I'd support myself in construction.
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> (Hispanic Writers, 499)

Rain of Gold, Villaseñor's third novel, has it's own story which also testifies to Villaseñor's determination. The publisher G. P. Putnam had paid Villaseñor a $75,000 advance, then told him they wanted to cut the book by 100 pages and sell it as fiction (changing the title to Rio Grande). He was infuriated,

saying the proposed title sounded like a John Wayne movie, rather than the name of the village his mother grew up in. He bought back the book, taking a second mortgagee on his house and using his mother's life savings. (Los Angeles Times, Aug 16, 1992). Finally, a year later, Arte Publico Press agreed to publish the book to positive reviews. Dell Books then paid $250,000 for the paperback rights. (People, Sept. 28, 1992).

Not all reviews were positive, though. Villaseñor's style can be uneven and Tom Miller of the New York Times Book Review said, "repetitive cliches and telegraphed scenes diminish it somewhat. Mr. Villaseñor's style veers from engaging and moving to cornier than a hip-pocket novella." (Sept. 8, 1991, p 20). Unfortunately, I agree.

Analysis and Summary

Rain of Gold is a family saga of Lupe Gomez and Juan Salvador Villaseñor, the grandparents of the author, Victor Villaseñor. Set in the Mexican Revolution it is the story of bloody battles, poverty and escape and dreams, as well as familial endurance. The novel is told as a romance, with characteristic elements of the saga or romance style. There are also important commentaries about prison, prejudice, self-hatred, the nature of love and religion that give students serious themes to consider.

The novel opens with Lupe, a young girl, hiding from the latest battle of the Revolution in her backyard in Ullvia de Oro, Mexico. Times are desperate, her father having deserted the family, and she is hiding under a dung heap to prevent the notice of soldiers who might rape her. Her tight knit family bands together to survive in the harsh circumstances they find themselves in, living in a lean-to, subsisting on the meager income her mother makes serving meals to miners at the local gold mine. Here Lupe meets an American colonel and even

though she is only seven years old she falls madly in love with him. He is married, however, with twins on the way, and Lupe's hopes are ultimately dashed by his death. He does inspire in her, though, a love of learning-- and a desire to read and write. Lupe is aided by her teacher Señora Muñoz, who is so devoted to teaching that she is starving, as a result of teaching without pay, her pay having been cut by the local mayor. She eats by begging small tastes of goat cheese from Lupe, but then the town finds out and invites her to dinner.

Juan Salvador's family also endures starvation and betrayal as they head to the United States for a better life. As Juan and his sister and mother wait for his brother-in-law Domingo to work and gather enough money to pay their passage across the border, they starve, sometimes eating an occasional rattlesnake or a gift of tortillas and beans. It is his mother, whose faith never fails who keeps them together and hopeful that someday they will cross the border and succeed in the United States. She lives to see Juan, her last born, married.

Once in the United States Juan confesses to a murder he didn't commit (to say his brother) and is sentenced to six years in jail. He escapes and goes to live in Montana, where he is embraced by the Greek community and treated with respect. He also learns to gamble, and win at cards. Returning to Arizona, Juan fears that his mother is dying. However, she is well and has only sent him warning because she wants him to stay permanently with the family. He then goes to work at a mine and is horrified at the way *mejicanos* are treated. He tries to stage a protest, but the workers are so desperate to feed their families they break the strike. He becomes a bootlegger, after running into an acquaintance from his Montana days and swears to never work for *gringos* again.

In the final chapters of the novel Juan meets Lupe and it is love at first sight, but their courtship takes several years, since Juan, who now goes by the name of Salvador, is jailed for bootlegging, loses all his money and faces the

betrayal of his brother. But Lupe and Salvador are united, despite another suitor, Mark, vying for Lupe's hand, and the obstacles that present themselves. In his Moon convertible, Salvador is a dashing suitor and Lupe, a great beauty, who form a new Eden and dynasty together.

At 576 pages Rain of Gold is an ambitious work. It covers a volatile time in Mexican-American history and shows that the migration to the United States was in many cases, essential to the immigrants' survival, not just for curiosity's sake. It also chronicles the hypocrisy of the gringos and prejudice that the immigrants faced. It shows the mejicanos as survivors, with some pride in their customs and culture, despite the numerous hardships they faced. It is a tribute to their endurance.

Sadly, the work is marred by cliches in the writing; "They took off", and "There wasn't a dry eye in the *ramada*." are some examples. Some characters seem to give overlong speeches as well. However, given the scope and length of the work, this is to be expected. What makes the book notable are the insights the characters offer on a variety of topics.

To wit:

Page 514 :

> Like the Mexican expression always says, "I thought I'd died and gone to heaven until they told me I was in Jail."..."Hell, for us mejicanos being behind bars is like being on vacation.

Page 526:

> ...Women must realize that men are weak, both in body and mind, and cannot be entrusted to nurture the basic roots of life....After all wasn't it God, in His great wisdom, who chose women over men to carry the child here inside us? Eh, wasn't it? For just as the heavenly bodies of the sky are all female except for the sun, so is it true here on earth; we las mujeres,

are the power mi hijita; we are the strength of our species. We are the ones who know how to endure, how to survive especially in the darkest of times."

Page 434-5:

Marriage is the greatest journey any man and woman can ever undertake-- two strangers, not knowing each other, but yet (sic) still willing to join together in heart and soul-- hoping, guessing on which star that might land as they cross the heavens, like two clouds gliding on the winds of God's breath.

Page 437:

He was so excited and so much in love that he went with five different women that night. Oh, he was burning with desire. He now understood why it was traditional for the bridegroom to have a bachelor's party at a whorehouse the night before he got married. The way he felt, it would be dangerous for him to go to bed with a virgin. He needed an experienced woman to calm him down and make him civilized.

Page 440:

"Fists and guns are only the tools of children and fools."

Page 478:

This is the miracle of marriage. Each new marriage is like a whole new beginning-- a return to the Garden of Eden-- and each new couple is Adam and Eve, the first two people on Earth.

Page 364:

Rumors mean nothing, Lupe. My mother always says that no home can survive if a woman listens to rumors.

Page 127:

Blood is blood, but justice is justice. And Don Pio never let blood blind his eyes to justice."

Page 53:

> Then she gave her the heart of a dried cactus to chew. It was the same kind of cactus that the great Tarahumara runners used when they ran a race worthy of a man, meaning a hundred more miles. She told everyone to leave the lean-to-- except for the women who were going to assist her.
>
> All her life Lupe had been told men simply couldn't endure the pain a woman could.

Page 137:

> Our life on earth is good, if only we keep our faith and our hearts and souls open

Page 434:

> 'Of course,' she said, 'to start off praying each morning praying for God, smoking and drinking for myself and crapping for the devil is one of my greatest pleasures.'

Questions for Discussion:

1. Students should discuss the hardships their parents/grandparents endured in coming to this country. Learning these stories would be a good way to lead in to Villaseñor's own saga.

2. Pick one of the quotations from the quotation section. (page 437, for instance) Discuss what you think Villaseñor is trying to say and whether you agree with it. Villaseñor seems to be very candid with his opinions. Does he seem to care if they are potentially offensive?

3. Write a character analysis of Juan Salvador or Lupe. Discuss their major traits (pick at least three) and give examples from quotations, dialogue and behavior that support the three or four main qualities they possess.

4. Do we respect Juan Salvador for being a bootlegger or resent him? How does Villaseñor's portrayal of Juan Salvador shape our view? How do they other characters feel about his bootlegging? How does he convince Lupe's father he's a suitable husband?

5. The courtship of Juan Salvador and Lupe seems highly traditional (except for the meddling of her parents). What seem to be features of the traditional courtship as depicted in the book? Are there any modern touches?

6. Juan Salvador seems to bear a strong antipathy toward Mexicans, even though he himself is Mexican originally. Why do you think he feels this way? Is this a form of self-hatred as well? Why or why not?

7. What is the book's attitude towards women? Are women treated equally by men and respected by them or are they viewed as inferior? Why or why not?

8. Villaseñor fought to keep the novel intact, even buying back the rights to his book to avoid the 75 - 150 pages the publisher wanted to cut. After reading the novel, do you agree with Villaseñor's actions or do you think the story could be effectively told in a shorter length? Also, how much do the title and label "non-fiction" matter?

Jimmy Santiago Baca
Working in the Dark

Background

Having suffered abuse and hatred at the hands of prison guards, Jimmy Santiago Baca (1952-), did the best thing he could for revenge. He stole a book of poetry and read it in his cell late at night. He took his revenge a step further and wrote poetry about the Chicano people, giving his barrio a voice.
Baca has been criticized for his realistic depictions of barrio life and *la gente* ; some Chicanos have found his portraits to discuss unflattering aspects of the Chicano people. Baca answers them this way:

> When one of my books, Martin and Meditations on South Valley, was published several Hispanic scholars decried the honesty of my depiction of Hispanic life. They said in effect, that hispanic writers should present a purely positive image of our people. According to their view, Chicanos never have betrayed each other, we have never fought each other, never sold out; nor have we experienced poverty or suffering, wept, made mistakes. I have never responded to these absurdities; such narrowness and stupidity is its own curse. My answer is to go on telling the truth-- the whole truth- leaving these misguided critics to their illusions.
>
> Because I am a Chicano, it does not mean that I am immune from the flaws and sufferings that make all of us human; and first and last I am a human being. (page 86-87)

It is striking that after the difficult life Baca has had that he would have to face such charges. Baca's parents divorced when he was two and at some point, Baca went to live with is grandparents. By the age of five, he was placed in Saint

Anthony's Home for boys, where he stayed till he was eleven. He was jailed at the age of twenty after a life on the streets and suffered "lockdowns, solitary confinements, electroshock therapy sessions and beatings by prison guards." (Digest of Literary Biographies, 22). It is a wonder this self-termed " illiterate Chicano, who knew more of a plumber's wrench than a pencil, more of rebellion than submission, more of an inside of a cell than of a book," was able to write at all (DLB, 23). But inspired by other poet, like Neruda, Ferlinghetti, Federico Garcia Lorca, he became one of America's most important Chicano poets.

Analysis and Summary

Though much of Working in the Dark is devoted to the brutality of prison and Baca's awakening, the book also includes humor and irony when Baca describes his friend Victor, who is the first Chicano to own a boat. Baca has visions of lounging on Victor's yacht, but the reality of a boat which only has one speed, fast, and needs to have jumper cables held down during the entire hair-raising, water soaking ride is vastly different. Victor ends up paying more in fines to the lake patrol (for destroying buoys and government property) than the whole boat cost. It is ironic, according to Baca that anytime a Chicano attempts to experience the good life; it is somehow undercut:

> On the ride back to Albuquerque, Victor and I asked each other how it all could it have happened. I mean, the whole thing about having the boat, and not really being able to afford the boat, and getting into debt over one boat ride, was weird. It's kinda sad, this life of ours, kinda sad.
> ....Still, you'd have to call it a day to remember.... (page 124)

Baca owes a great debt to the English poet William Wordsworth, whose book, was the volume Baca stole to get even with his jailers. Wordsworth felt nature was a guide and nurturing force to him, and that life was a journey. Wordsworth's greatest work "The Prelude" is a poem about his growth as a poet and in Working in the Dark is such as *bildungsroman* at times, with Baca going into how and why he became a poet:

> While I was in prison there were contracts out to kill me because I stood up for what I believed, protesting the abuse of my Chicano brothers. I knew I would die without a doubt I would die young and no one would know that I had lived; that I would die without having uttered one word to tell the world that I had been, that I tried my best to live and love. But poetry lifted me to my feet and filled my heart with joy, and it was through the power of poetry, that I was able to prepare myself to die, but die fighting with courage and innocence, in defense of life." (page 60)
>
> Real poetry comes from and expresses the common energy of the people. Those who divorce poetry from life rob it of its redemptive power. (page 41)

Baca also paints portraits of the everyday people who influenced his life, much as Wordsworth does in "The Prelude". For instance, Baca talks about Lolita, a prostitute with whom he fell in love as a young boy. She is symbolic, according to Baca, a poet's love of poetry. She is both unattainable and desirable. Baca sees her as beautiful though the rest of the world might not:

> As I am with Lolita, so am I with poetry. I am poetry's dog. I sit in my chair while the whole world moves, and lives, and eats, and laughs and fucks in another room. I sit apart and rage as mad-eyed strangers pass me by. Now the whole world is Lolita; and the beauty is that chance breeze that lifts her dress for an instant, while I gaze upon what is forbidden to me, and desire it more than ever. (page 48)

Baca also discusses the pain of going back to jail to film some scenes from Blood in, Blood Out. He discusses the feeling of powerlessness he felt reentering the jail, even though he was no longer an inmate. He remembers being kicked and having urine thrown on him, beaten by guards and other inmates. These memories and the feeling of anger he feels back in San Quentin, is almost overwhelming:

> I said I hated being back and that no movie could begin to show the injustices practiced here. I said that fame was nothing weighed against the suffering and brutality of prison life. I told them that these cons should tear the fucking walls down and allow no one to dehumanize them in this way.... I said that I hated everyone and just wanted to be left alone, and fuck them all. Just leave me alone!... I felt helplessly encaged by powers I couldn't vanquish or control. I was ensnared in a net of memories.... I was disoriented, as if I smashed full force into some invisible barrier. (15)

> Prison did not rehabilitate me. Love for my people did. Love for my family (92)

Politically, Baca has a lot to say about Chicanismo:

> This is an exciting time for our Chicano community. After being crushed for centuries by contempt, we are finally getting to our feet and creating for ourselves opportunities for a better life. Among ourselves and in mainstream society, there is a growing recognition of our potential political and economic power. We no longer are tempted to deny the riches of our language, our arts and our culture. Nor should we deny the full spectrum of our experience, our light and our dark- both are precious because we lived them. ... No one has the right to terrorize another human being, to break his spirit, to debase him and strip him of hope and dignity. (92-3)

Finally, Baca writes extensively about the creative process. Throughout the book, he likens the writing process to that of giving birth, even to the point of saying writing exercises his 'female side."

Creativity is a reconciliation that breaks the borders of gender. It reunites the masculine and feminine, which have been set against each other in false enmity. (68)

Writing is my way of hearing and talking to God, of relinquishing my human faculties to the power that springs from human joy and suffering. I write suspended in hummingbird flight and dance with the darkness. I fall into a semi-consciousness in which my gut speaks to me and my blood cries out. I walk through fire. I hurt all over.
The writer must be free to go crazy, whether with ecstasy or pain, to explode the indifference of a world that accepts that home for some families is a nest of cardboard boxes, that accepts such abominations. The writer must be free to delve into the offensive and the vile, to rut in the mud as in the flowers, and to challenge the truth of his vision and experience the keepers of the lie and the wielders of oppression, no matter where they are found. (90)

When people ask me, "Where does your poetry come from", I want to answer, 'Where do babies come from" What is the ignition spark that startles breath into flesh and triggers the brain's first impulse? What is that spark, where does it come from? Who knows? Only let us celebrate that creation for this is a mystery we will never understand. The passion to analyze is just a futile braying of our mulish egos in a stubborn belief that we can know it all. So let us leave these unanswerable questions and celebrate the mystery." (57)

On Food:

When I visit a friend's house, where the porch is piled high with gunny sacks of red corn, and in the kitchen pinto beans steam and green chiles sizzle in an iron fry pan, I am strengthened and familiar with my heart. I know what I want in life, what I want to say and how I want to live. (page 102)

Being Chicano smells burnt. It is living from ashes to flame in life, not green-lined streets, but shadows and flame, dancers around the fire,

warring young meditative old ones, healing with their words and love. The old ones who sit in the park and talk are our cultural guardian angels. (153-4)

On Sexuality:

I had to overcome the shame of not knowing how to talk with women, the guilt of thinking of them, when in their presence, as merely sexual creatures. When I had relations with a woman, once my mechanical lovemaking was done, I felt almost revulsion.
I inherited these attitudes, in large part, from my culture which regarded everything to do with sex as bestial, degrading even evil. According to adults I knew growing up, those who enjoyed sex would reap the torments of everlasting hell. Believing this was torment I endured for many years. Every sexual act drove the stake of despair deeper into my heart. (69)

At times, Working in the Dark seems like a strangely metaphysical book, almost a manifesto on what it means to be a poet. At the same time I was reading Baca's book, a friend gave me Rilke's "Letters to a Young Poet". The comparisons were amazing. Both men seem to have committed themselves fully to the poets way of life, even though they were born decades and worlds apart. Working in the Dark is a document of such a way of life.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How is writing revenge for Baca?

2. How far should a writer go when writing about his people? Is it acceptable to show a race of people as less than perfect or even flawed?

3. Does incarceration discourage recidivism according to Baca? What purpose does it serve?

4. How do we feel about Baca's love for the prostitute, Lolita? What is he saying about being a writer? Does he suggest that he sees things as a poet in common people that normal people don't appreciate? Can he see beauty or find love where others miss it?

5. What does Baca mean when he says "being Chicano smells burnt."? How is food and the smell of food an integral part of a culture?

6. The boat incident with Baca's friend Victor is both tragic and hilarious. Is it a common truth that if you try to transcend your station in life you may find disappointment or unexpected consequences? Can you think of an event in your own life that turned out this way?

7. Baca discusses creativity as a way to express his "female side". How is creativity a female act? Is this a sexist viewpoint?

8. Baca dwells quite often in what we might call the "metaphysical" realm. Do his discussions of the world beyond the one we can see, of philosophy and the soul, make sense? Or is he asking us to trust him when he explains his creative impulses as "talking to God" and "relinquishing his human faculties"?

Lorna Dee Cervantes
Selected Poems and Criticism

Background

Lorna Dee Cervantes (1954-) was born to a Mexican father and Mexican-Native American mother in the Mission District of San Francisco. Her early life is what she describes as "welfare class". (DLB, 74) And, according to an unpublished 1982 interview, her class and color have been profound influences on her poetry. When her parents divorced in 1959, Cervantes, her brother and mother went to San Jose to live with her grandmother. There, in the houses her mother cleaned, she discovered literature. At a young age, she was reading from Shakespeare. And by twelve, she had discovered the works of Keats, Shelley and Byron. By the age of fifteen, she began publishing her poetry in the school paper, but her first poems were written at the age of eight. These are auspicious beginnings and are among the makings of what Occidental College professor Roberta Fernandez calls "one of the most intelligent poets currently on the American scene." (77) Despite the violent death of Cervantes' mother in 1986 which left her feeling like she "had no more poetry left", Cervantes continues to write.

Analysis and Summary

Years ago, on my first cursory reading of Lorna Dee Cervantes' poems, I felt more confused than enlightened. Granted, I had read them fast, perhaps too fast to get the intricacies of her craft and the true meaning of her works. Certainly, her "Poem for a Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, An

Intelligent Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between the Races" (1981) is impressive and political, but the contradictions often confused me. And her "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" (1977) does address some feminist issues; however, it seemed unclear at times whether she was discussing her grandmother, mother or self because the perspective seems to shift.

It takes a critic like Marta Ester Sanchez, willing to take time in discussing these poems to give them their full due. Sanchez's thorough and clear discussions of these poems and others in her book, Chicano Poetry: A Critical Approach to An Emerging Literature, brings Cervantes' intention and message into clear focus.

First, Sanchez tackles "Poem for a Young White Man". In the poem, Cervantes is speaking as an idealist poet when she says, "In my land / people write poems about love,/ full of nothing but contented childlike syllables/ Everyone reads Russian short stories and weeps."(6-9). Cervantes is showing how the ideal world she's constructed as a poet looks; however, reality soon encroaches on her ideal and visionary world. Cervantes goes on to describe the real horrors she experiences as a person of color: "I believe in revolution/ because everywhere the crosses are burning/ sharp shooting goose-steppers round every corner/ snipers in the schools" (21-24). She speaks of "bullets (that) bury deeper than logic" (37) which are actually the attitudes of the white majority making children from a young age feel inferior. Such bullets are: "my stumbling mind, my / "excuse me" tongue, and this/ nagging preoccupation/ with the feeling of not being good enough" (33-36). In short, she captures what every person of color has endured. As someone who considers herself not to be a political poet ("I don't even like political poems," she writes in line 14), she has taken a very personal stand and gotten under the skin of what might have been a rather abstract complaint. She makes prejudice and effects real. "I do not believe

in the war between the races", she says, skipping a line for dramatic emphasis at the end of the poem, "but in this country/ there is war" (55-7). Sanchez' patient and methodical explanations, helped me understand why the poem offers such seeming contradictions between the ideal world of the poet and the real world of the Chicana. It is her premise that all Chicana poets juggle the roles of "Chicana", "woman" and "poet" and various poems and poets makes choices about the dominant voice in the poem. In some poems, like "Beneath the Freeway", for instance, the writing my involve the poet's "woman" identity most, although, at times the "poet" identity is discussed. Another poem, like "Poem for a Young White Man" juggles the "poet" and "Chicana" identity.

"Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" starts with the "woman" identity. As a child raised in a father-less household, Cervantes, starts off discussing her upbringing by women. "We were a woman family:/ Grandma, our innocent Queen; / Mama, the Swift Knight , Fearless Warrior." (8-10) Cervantes, a few lines later interjects herself as "poet": "I became Scribe: Translator of Foreign Mail/ interpreting letters from the government, notices/ of dissolved Marriages and Welfare stipulations" (16-18). The word "Scribe" is clearly a reference to her a writer for the family. But after her stint as "Scribe" she goes on to describe the abuse suffered by both her grandmother and mother. First, her grandmother: "She built her house,/ cocky disheveled carpentry/ after living twenty-five years/ with a man who tried to kill her" (30-33). Cervantes' mother's abuse is less clear, but the threat is still present in:" stop it go home come inside/ mama if he comes here again/ I'll call the police" (52-4, *sic.*) Sanchez has difficulty identifying the abuser here since the lines are so abstract and expressionist (giving the sense of fear and anxiety) , but says he is clearly male and tormenting the mother. Finally, though, Cervantes breaks the cycle "I sleep with a gentle man/ to the hymn of mockingbirds."(74-75) She has escaped the pattern

of choosing an abusive mate. At the end of the poem, Cervantes goes back to her poet identity "(I) trust only what I have built/ with my own hands." (78-9) She is referring back to her grandmother, but also referring to her role as "scribe" in which she tells the story of the women who were her models for life.

After reading Sanchez' comments, my understanding and appreciation of Cervantes' work is greatly enhanced. I'd now use these poems in a class, because the value of them and the themes they address are much clearer now. Another notable poem not discussed in Sanchez' book are: "For Virginia Chavez" (in the Before Columbus Anthology), which is a wonderful feminist and "crazy young woman" poem. However, I do owe Sanchez a great deal of credit for making Cervantes' work, much clearer to me.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In a given day are you asked to play the separate roles of "student" , "Chicano/a" or "wo/man" (a little feminist terminology for you)? Do you make conscious choices about what role you are playing in a given situation? (Example: A student once told me, he only felt truly comfortable in a room in which there were other African-Americans)

2. Do you agree with Cervantes' description of "my stumbling mind/ my "excuse me" tongue and this/ nagging preoccupation/ with the feeling of not being good enough" (33-36) ? What does she mean by "my 'excuse me' tongue"? Why does her mind "stumbl(e)"? Have you ever felt like this?

3. Why does Cervantes' grandmother allow herself to live with a man who abuses her? Does her daughter tolerate such abuse by men? Why does Cervantes only trust "what (she has) built with/ (her) own hands"? (78-9) Is this somehow related to her grandmother building her own house?

4. How does the grandmother symbolize wisdom in the "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway" and the narrator's mother symbolize sarcastic street smarts? Find quotations that back up each.

5. Who does Cervantes eventually side with in the poem?

6. What does the title, "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway", mean?

7. It has been said that Cervantes describes the poet's ideal world in the opening of "Poem for the Young White Man" and then the harsh reality in the second half of the poem. What is the poet's ideal world like? The real world?

8. Is Cervantes right that oppression and prejudice exist in war-like proportions in this country? ("Poem for the Young White Man")

Jose Antonio Villarreal
Pocho

Background

Jose Antonio Villarreal was born in 1924 in Los Angeles, California. After migrating to the United States from Mexico, his parents worked as migrant farm workers during Villarreal's preschool years, then settled in Santa Clara where Villarreal learned to read in English from his first grade teacher. He attended UC Berkeley, receiving a Bachelors degree in English in 1950. Pocho, his first novel of three (and the first novel by a Chicano author to be released by a major publisher), is said to be modeled after James Joyce's coming of age work Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. He also notes Faulkner and Thomas Wolfe as influences, and claims most Chicano authors are more influenced by British and American authors than they would like to admit. For this, he is controversial, as well as for his views on race.

Analysis and Summary

Although Villarreal does not really identify himself as a Chicano, his coming of age story, Pocho, is considered the first Chicano novel. (Dictionary of Literary Biography, 284) Published in 1959 (and later reprinted in 1970), it tells the story of Richard, a young boy, who assimilates to life in Santa Clara, California. The novel starts during the Mexican revolution and follows his father, Juan Rubio, on his journey to the United States and the events which lead to his meeting his second wife, Richard's mother and their life together. The

novel explores themes of sexuality, religion, assimilation, women's liberation and the traditional Chicano household.

According to Juan Bruce-Nova, author of Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview , Pocho

> clearly prefigured the major works in the genre that were to appear ten to fifteen years later. Its category of *bildungsroman*, its pattern of veiled autobiography, and the treatment of such themes as immigration, Mexican and Chicano sexual and religious taboos , father-son parallelism, mother -son antagonism and the pressure of assimilation on the family are repeated in novels that follow."

Villarreal's novel is controversial because of its argument that Chicanos are American, first and foremost. Richard says towards the end of the novel:

> It bothered him that they should always try to find these things in his life that could make him a martyr of some sort, and it pained him when they insisted he dedicate his life to the Mexican cause, because it was the same old story, and he was quite sure he did not really believe there was a Mexican cause- at least not in the world with which he was familiar. (175)

Villarreal is even more explicit about this in his discussion with Bruce-Nova."...I have never and it seems I cannot become excited about Chicano writing as literature. I cannot as a majority of Chicano "critics" do, assess this work in a literary sense, based on socio-political or socio-economic terms. Quite simply, the work is not that good." (39)

Villarreal's condemnation of the literary merits of other writers seems ironic, because of his sometimes leaden style : "When a Mexican has stomach trouble , this man said, it is usually a serious illness and he dies, but he will never have boils in the intestines or any of that sort of trouble. That is because we eat chile and are a lachrymose race." (168) Dialogue like this begs the

question of when the last time you heard someone use the word "lachrymose" in conversation.

Granted some of stylistic choices might be present because the work was written in the 50's (yet Tomas Rivera's y no se lo trago la tierra holds up amazingly well). At times Villarreal seems to "tell rather than show" . When showing Richard's infiltration of the *pachuco* gang:" his deductions as to their character and make-up must come from close association." (151) This studied tone hardly seems the careful observation and detail novelists take pride in. Also, Villarreal introduces Mary, who tells Richard she will someday marry him and the plot is never resolved. In fact, many female characters seem two dimensional, from the fifteen year old whore, Delores, who is abandoned at the beginning of the novel because she gets pregnant.

Women who vary from the traditional roles also inspire Villarreal's ire. When Mama refuses to do the housework (in response perhaps to her husband's infidelity) , she becomes the villain in Richard's eyes. Richard and his gang of pals also use Zelda for sex if and when they see fit. And one *pachuca* "girl" he dates for some time, is called just that (the girl) and never even gets a name. Villarreal also supports the "macho' attitude towards infidelity:" Yet if the woman was willing and no one knew, it did not matter if the husband was a friend." (123)

Richard's gang also seems atypical to Chicano literature. Villarreal makes a point of saying that Richard's group included friends of Japanese, Italian and Spanish ancestry. By naming the ethnicities, Villarreal seems racist by modern standards.

Whether we agree with Villarreal or not, he does have a place in Chicano literature. His controversial attack of 'Chicano literature" and identity does have a place in the dialogue. Villarreal phrases it this way:

My wish and hope is that Chicano writers, and the probability here lies with young people, will one day transcend the idea of writing about the plight of the Chicano in purely explicit terms and encompass humanity. Then our talent, our artistic potential - which no one can deny our people have - will blossom to allow us to stand among the great writers regardless of language." (48)

Questions for Discussion:

1. Given Villarreal's abhorrence of the term, "Chicano literature", and his rejection of the Chicano cause, how do you feel about his stand? Is it a current idea or one which seems entirely dated?

2. Is there some truth to the idea that in order to assimilate, one needs to reject one's original culture? Or can one retain it? Consider this question in relation to your own life.

3. Pick a passage of writing from the novel you feel is particularly good or bad. Analyze what specifically you like/dislike about it.

4. How does Villarreal's portrayal of the relationships between men and women reinforce the "macho" stereotype?

5. What is a "pocho" (between cultures) (165)? How is it different from a "pachuco" (150)? Which is portrayed in a better light?

6. Reread the ham and eggs anecdote on page 133. Have you heard this story before? If so, where? What does the story teach us?

7. Reread the passage on assimilation on the bottom of page 132. How does assimilation tear the family apart? How else are these tensions handled? Is it true that there can never be "a coming back"(187)?

8. Some people feel Pocho and the ideas expressed in it is actually reflective of extreme self-loathing and denial of his Chicano heritage on Villarreal's part. Do you agree?

Yxta Maya Murray
Locas

Background

There is not much biographical information on Yxta Maya Murray, since she is new to the "club" of Mexican-American writers. What is known is that she is an associate professor at Loyola Marymount Law School and an important emerging voice. Her first book, Locas, came out in 1997, after she published several short stories in such magazines as Buzz. Reviews were mixed (in fact, the one I read at the time in the Los Angeles Times was so scathing, I dismissed the book entirely).

Murray was criticized for perpetuating the worst stereotypes of Chicanos and portraying the culture in a negative light. (Los Angeles Times, Nov 13, 1997). But the same reviewer noted Murray's poetic voice: "...The rhythms are so sweet, you're tempted to drive to the nearest poetry venue and recite aloud from any page and blow the audience away." (June 15, 1997) Still, since Murray is a law professor she had to imagine what gang life was like. This, too, is a sore point with reviewers:

> ...Her vision of gang life appears to be cobbled together from newscast hyperbole, snippets of other books, and our own worst fears. The gang members who populate this imagined world are, with few exceptions caricatures of cartoon villainy tricked out in inner-city garb (ibid.)

The reviewer even gave the book to two *veteranas* who said, "Nobody I know is like that." and "White people who read this will think we're a bunch of monsters" (ibid).

Still Murray is a powerful voice to be reckoned with. She began the book after watching a broadcast of an illegal worker being beaten in Riverside. One particular character voice stood out in her mind and so the book began. And her interest in law and writing are connected. "As a lawyer interested in Latino rights," she said," I spend a lot of time thinking about what it means to be Latino, female, legal." (Los Angeles Times, Nov 13, 1997) With such impressive talents and motives, I look forward to hearing more from Murray.

Analysis and Summary

Because of the mixed reviews, Locas was the book on my list I least looked forward to. This said, I found Locas compelling and had a difficult time putting it down (The fact that I was sick in bed with the flu probably helped a little). Still, the book told by two narrators, Lucia and Cecilia, is told in dialect and is a fascinating expose of how women are treated by gang members. Lucia says in her section that women are regarded by the men in the Lobos gang as "sheep".

Lucia explains the term on p 31:

> With all those boys came the women. Hustler girls like me with our sprayed -out hair and faces painted up glamour shiny, dark red and frosty brown on the eyes and cheeks, mouths like stoplights. The deal we made was to sex the boys hard, any time they wanted, and in turn, they would take care of us on the money end. They called us sheep, 'good for fucking', was what they said. The more the money came rolling in, the tougher the vatos got, and you had to make like you love begging or else you wouldn't get a

> dime. 'Hey, Manny, buy me a new dress, eh?' I'd say with this baby doll voice then touch him light on the hand. I knew how to play that sheepy game better than anybody else back then, giving him sugar kisses and back-seat jobs. I tried to tell myself it don't matter, even when he teases me with dollars. 'Gonna cost you girl,' he'd say sometimes, then grab at me too hard. Yah, so what, I'd think after. Better than where I came from, right?

The other narrator, Cecilia, talks about a young woman in *la vida loca,* as being valued only for her childbearing capabilities:

> This is what I thought: Babies are what make you a woman. Better than being a Princess, better than being Manny's. A baby makes you Somebody. And now that's what I'm going to be, a *mamacita.* In Echo Park, I see them, all the ladies with their *ninos,* talking to them in those low happy voices, spending their days feeding, laughing, singing to them, and the men, I thought, would look at them and think: There, I've made it. Brand new daddies hearts well up like the tide. They stick out their chins, their chests, and start looking at their women with new respect.' (69)

The perspectives of these two women is what makes Locas compelling and worthy of discussion (even though it might not be a hundred percent accurate). It does raise the question of the victims of the gang life, both and female. The issues of religion and gang life also come up, as well as the rift in so many families with absent fathers.

Murray's use of dialect seems flawless. After a day or two of reading this book, I wanted to call everyone "*ese*", "*vato*" or "*homes*". The language seems natural in her hands. And the plot is driven by the characters, in a believable and natural way.

The mention of specific streets in the Echo Park area-- Edgeware, Bellevue, and Douglas-- give a realistic note to the story. And from a colleague who lived in the area, there is actual gang activity. Murray, contrary to reports in

the media, seems to have done her homework. The Gangs, which she calls C-4 and Lobos, ring true.

The book Locas recalls a film Ma Vida Loca, directed and written by Allison Anders, which also details the lives of young gang women in Echo Park. This film, which deals with a love triangle primarily, was not a successful as this book is, although the book is somewhat flawed.

Lucia's ambition, at times, does seem unrealistic, and her drunk mother seems like a caricature-- as well as Manny's pious mother. But the poetry of the book-- even with its harsh circumstances, make it a memorable and affecting read.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How are women treated by the male gang members? How much of this treatment do the women allow and even encourage? Why would the women tolerate this treatment? Do they feel they have something to gain from it?

2. Why is motherhood so desirable for the young women in this book? How are *mamacitas* treated? Does Cecilia seem to glamorize the idea of motherhood at all?

3. Many books about gang life are criticized because they are said to glamorize gang life, or cast it in a positive light. Does Locas cast gang life or gang activity in a way that is to flattering or positive? Why do you feel this way? Pick a passage that you feel supports your point.

4. Who is the hero of this book? Lucia or Cecilia? Why? Could both of them possibly be heroes (or heroines)?

5. In one scene Cecilia tells us when a teenage girl becomes pregnant it's usually her father who beats her, as a form of punishment: "It's the daddies beat their *hijas* when they get knocked, sometimes they'll pull pregnant teenagers out on the street by their hair..." (74). This coincides with Luis Rodriguez' description of

a young woman who tells her parents she's pregnant and has all of her fingers broken (by her own father). What does this say about the role of young women, and the expectations placed upon them? This does seem as of there are some conflicting expectations from the young men and the fathers? How do young women resolve this?

6. Lucia does seem heartless in her dictum to the gang members to sell drugs to junior high students. Her idea is to get them addicted young to heroin and cocaine. How do we feel about her ambition? When she jumps in her *cholas,* do we admire her or feel she is cruel? Or is she a more complicated character? One we can feel both ways about?

7. Murray seems to want Cecilia to introduce the idea of homosexuality with her character 's fascination with Chucha. Does she achieve this or is the relationship unclear? Why would she be hesitant to make the nature of the love between these two women more defined?

Ana Castillo
Loverboys

Background

Ana Castillo (1953-) was born in Chicago, and never planned to become a writer. Her parents expected her to become a file clerk, even sending her to a high school for girls headed into the secretarial fieldbut Castillo loved drawing--and liked writing. She put herself through school, first in junior college and then at the University of Illinois. When she was graduating from college, the publication of several poems convinced Castillo she could be a writer. "Well, that's the way to go," she thought, given her success. (a Melus Interview, Fall 1997)

Her writing career began at the height of the Chicano Movement and she was actively involved giving voice to her views as a Chicana feminist. These themes inform her work, as well as some lesbian and gay themes. Her openly lesbian stand makes her controversial among Chicano writers, but her collection of short stories, entitled Loverboys, also delves into heterosexual themes as well. In Fall of 1997, soon after the book's release, I heard her read at the Claremont Colleges. While I enjoyed her writing, I had mixed feelings about how she addressed her audience. Yet, she is a brave and talented writer.

Analysis and Summary

Loverboys , one of several longer works, is a collection of short stories, exploiting the loves and losses of bi-sexual narrator. Often the stories focus on

the end of the affair between an older woman and a younger man. They offer a feminist perspective on such loss, which according to my research on Castillo, is a hallmark. There is no self-pity in the narrator; on the contrary, Castillo seems to embrace the image of the jilted diva, the "you'll-be-sorry-when-you-realize-how-fabulous-I-am" kind of attitude that squarely places the loss on the lover who left. In "Conversations with an Absent Lover on a Beachless Afternoon", she is clear about the relationship of love and writing:

> I have this friend who is a writer. She says her lovers hate the fact she fictionalizes everything that happens between them. Even in the throes of a heated argument, she will stop to take notes, telling herself remembering how he looked when he said this, what you were wearing and exactly how I felt to say such and such. She writes pretty tight stories, too. She doesn't give a hill of beans what they feel about it. There are always more lovers. There are always more stories to write. (143-4)

This seems, in part, what Castillo has done in this book, taken notes on the beginning, middle and the end of her various affairs and committed them to paper. The diva is apparent in Loverboys:

> "You think that he misses me a little bit?
> Probably the saddest boy in Mexico right now, you say?
> I hope so." (21)

There are, however, other stories in the collection which deal with other themes. One of them "Christmas Story of the Golden Cockroach", is a sort of Gift of the Magi story, in which a young couple are given a golden cockroach and with it, try to breed another, unsuccessfully breeding thousands of regular cockroaches instead. This has a fable-like feel, albeit one that doesn't end happily. "Vatolandia" is a comic story of Sara Santisevan, a middle aged school teacher, who must reject the advances of the men in a town where she is the

proverbial "new girl. " She divides her admirers into two camps--those over thirty five and those under thirty five:

> Sadly enough for Sara, all these vatos, the veterano vatos and the junior vatos rolled up altogether in a taco, wouldn't have served to fill one of Sara's molars.(57)

Again, though, the theme seems familiar, a woman spurning men because of their inferiority.

There are some moments of insight, though, in the book. Again in the story "Confessions to an Absent Lover on a Beachless Afternoon", Castillo intercuts comments to her former lover with an examination of the narrator's parents' relationship and her father's death. The narrator's father was caught in another woman's home by her mother and we learn that the narrator, too, is a victim of an errant husband.

The last story in the book, which Castillo wrote in one summer in an apartment with no air-conditioning in Chicago, is called "La Miss Rose." It, too, has a fairy tale feel. A fortune teller/ psychic woman in her later years, offers a free trip to Chicago to two younger women. La Miss Rose is a lesbian, who mourns the end of her marriage to another woman. She guides the two young women in the story, Carmen and Stormy, to riches and love respectively. At times, the relationship of the women doesn't seem real and it's never quite explained why a woman would offer a free trip and room and board to two much younger women without any expectations.

When I heard Castillo read at the Claremont Colleges, her art background was apparent. Her work is rich with literary and philosophical references, which make her impressive and rare in Chicano Literature. What was also apparent was her aloof and seemingly cold presence. The bemusement and vindictiveness of her narrators doesn't help dispel this image; it only corroborates it.

Questions for Discussion:

1. The theme of woman being admired by men, "Juan in a Million" and "Vatolandia", recurs throughout this collection of stories. What does Castillo seems to be saying about the way men treat women? Are they respectful in these stories? Do they use women? Do they women use the men?

2. In your opinion, is it okay to use the intimate details of a love affair in a short story (providing you change the lover's name)? Why or why not?

3. Who is the "loser" at the end of a love affair, the person who leaves or is left? In real life? In Castillo's stories?

4. Define the term "diva" in a three line or sentence definition. (You might also give some examples of famous modern-day divas). How are Castillo's narrators divas?

5. What is the theme of the "Christmas Story of the Golden Cockroach"? What is the message to the reader?

6. How is Castillo a feminist? Give three examples of feminist attitudes in her work.

7. Give an example of a literary or historical allusion that Castillo makes. What do these allusions say about her?

8. Does Castillo seem ashamed or proud of her lesbian inclinations? Why do you think she feels this way?

9. What does Castillo's title "Loverboys" suggest? Does she take her relationships seriously or view them as expendable? Who are the two loverboys in the opening story? What does she seem to be saying about them?

Corky Gonzales
"Yo Soy Joaquin"

Background

Rudolfo "Corky" Gonzales (1928-) was born in Denver, Colorado to a family of migrant farm workers. He was working in the fields during the spring and summer picking sugar beets by the age of ten, yet still managed to complete his high school degree by the age of sixteen (attending school in fall and winter). After becoming a Golden Gloves boxing champion, Gonzales turned to political activism and wrote "I am Joaquin" to foster pride in Mexican -American heritage. In the poem, he celebrates important Chicano figures to raise awareness of the Chicano identity . Even today, the poem is regarded as "the classic epic poem of the Chicano Movement" and an important social statement (Dictionary of Literary Biographies, p 114).

Analysis and Summary

"I am Joaquin" (1967) by Rudolfo "Corky" Gonzales is an epic poem about how history becomes a part of us. As the speaker Joaquin, Gonzales becomes Cortez, Pancho Villa, Zapata, Cuahtemoc (an Aztec emperor) and other key figures in Mexican history. Their legacy is ours, he seems to be saying , as he shifts identities from a priest to Hildago (a key revolutionary figure). By encouraging his reader to identify with such vastly different figures in the history of the Mexican people, he suggests, we have incorporated all of these figures and their roles in our lives into our selves.

It is remembering these figures who can help solve the confusion created by modern society, Gonzales describes at the beginning if the poem: "I am Joaquin/lost in a world of confusion/ Caught up in a whorl/ of gringo society." (1-3) The confusion stems not from his ancestry, but of trying to fit into the world of the gabachos (white men) . He goes on to clarify: "Confused by the rules/ Scorned by attitudes, /Suppressed by manipulation/ And destroyed by modern society/ My fathers/ have lost the economic battle/ and won/ the struggle of cultural survival."(4-11) Joaquin's crisis seems to be that of deciding whether to fit into a culture (the white culture) which seems to want him to deny his heritage:

"And now!/ I must choose/ Between the paradox of / Victory of the spirit,/ despite physical hunger/ Or/ to exist in the grasp/ of American social neurosis/ sterilization of the soul/ and a full stomach." (12-21)

Neither alternative, physical starvation and spiritual victory, or spiritual bankruptcy and a "full stomach, sounds appealing. But Joaquin's willingness to question, and not readily accept the sterilized American culture seems noble. It is this tension that drives him inward and makes him "withdraw to the safety of "'(HIS) OWN PEOPLE"' (33-35) and sets up the reader for the rest of the poem.

After listing the spirit and achievements of several key Mexican figures Gonzales identifies the oppressor: "In a country that has wiped out/ all my history,/stifled all my pride./ In a country that has placed a different weight of indignity upon/ my/ age/ old/ burdened back./inferiority / is the new load....."(page 215) Gonzales, too admits some complicity in denying his heritage as well , " I look at myself /and see a part of me / who rejects my father and my mother/ and dissolves into the melting pot/to disappear in shame./ I sometimes / sell my brother out / and reclaim him/ for my own , when society gives me token leadership/ in society's name." (page 216) The responsibility for the

spiritual bankruptcy of the "fat political coyote" and those who will sell out their own rests not only on the American culture, but on the Chicano himself.

How does one overcome the "Greed and Avarice" of conquistadors and strangers? (page 218) Gonzales finds the answer in the "cleansing fountain of/ nature and brotherhood" (218-9) as well as in art. He names famous muralists such as Diego Rivera, Orozco and Sisqueros, as well as mariachi musicians redemptive and curative. The "Gold Starved/ Strangers" overlooked these, the greatest markers of civilization and according to Gonzales "the real things of value" . (218)

Still, Joaquin does worry about the future and the next generation: I shed tears of anguish/ as I see my children disappear/ behind the shroud of mediocrity / never to look back to remember me./ I am Joaquin./ I must fight/ and win this struggle/ for my sons, and they/ must know from me/ Who I am." (220) This is the only way to stop the cultural destruction he sees among the Chicano people, by remembering the history of their people.

From Gonzales' point of view, the best way to survive intact is to "refuse to be absorbed" (222) and to fight the undertow of American culture that threatens to draw him under. He ends the poem with a fierce cry for cultural pride: "The odds are great/ but my spirit is strong/ My faith unbreakable/ My blood is pure/ I am Aztec Prince and Christian Christ/ I SHALL ENDURE!/ I WILL ENDURE!." (222) To consider oneself as a descendent of Christ or as an Aztec Prince gives the power one needs to remain firm in a world that threatens to destroy who you are and are meant to be.

This is a powerful political statement, but a powerful tool in Gonzales' eyes to keep his brothers strong in the face of prejudice and harm. Given the political climate of the time and the emerging "Brown Power" Movement, such war cries were necessary .

Questions for Discussion:

1. Have you ever heard a passage of the poem before (it is commonly read at political demonstrations and consciousness raising events)? Where and what was the passage?

2. In the 1972 edition of the work, Gonzales wrote: " Writing "I am Joaquin" was a journey back through history, a painful self-evaluation, a wandering search for my peoples, and most of all for my own identity...All the while, the truth about our own flaws-- the villains and the heroes had to ride together-- in order to draw an honest clear conclusion of who we were, who we are, and where we are going." How does Gonzales handle these "flaws" ? Can you give an example? Is it right to bring up flaws in a poem about ethnic pride?

3. Juan D. Bruce- Nova calls the poem a "journey" (that) is both historical and spiritual" (Dictionary of Literary Biographies 112). He also says, " Joaquin battles an enemy within himself in the form of socio-historical contradictions that must be resolved if the Chicano is to come to terms with his identity." How does Gonzales keep this sense of journey in the poem?

4. Though the poem is one of the most famous in all of Chicano Literature, critic Eliud Martin says it is possible to "take issue with the historical accuracy" of Gonzales' description of events. (DLB, 114) Are there any places in the poem where you notice any historical errors?

5. Gonzales hoped to teach and inspire young people with his poem. He wanted to see "the renewal of fierce pride and tribal unity " among Chicanos (DLB 113). Does the poem fulfill that purpose? Why or why not?

6. Are the lines "I SHALL ENDURE! I WILL ENDURE!" convincing? Are the reminiscent of any other famous political speech of the time?

7. Pick your favorite passage from the poem and explain it in detail for the class.

Victor Martinez
Parrot in the Oven

Background

After struggling for twenty years in obscurity, Victor Martinez recently earned the attention of the literary world by winning the National Book Award (1996) for his book Parrot in the Oven. Even though Martinez had published poetry and short stories before this award, a reading he gave in his hometown of San Francisco only days before his nomination was announced, drew only six people, three of whom were bookstore employees. (Los Angeles Times, Nov 27, 1996, Life and Style, p1). The National Book Award for Children's Literature changed all that. He now has agents calling him and the $10,000 prize that goes along with the award, is more money than he made in the previous year.

As one of twelve children in his family, Martinez had worked in the fields before becoming a writer. However, to escape his bleak existence, he read the works of Robert Louis Stevenson and Jules Verne. Despite his school counselor's advice to become a welder, Martinez decided to go to college, even though is father thought it was a waste of time. At Fresno State University, Martinez studied with poet Philip Levine (who also taught Gary Soto). From there he attended a graduate writing program at Stanford University for a year, before leaving because he felt uncomfortable there. While working as a truck driver and file clerk, Martinez saved his money, so he could devote himself full-time to writing. For years he supported himself by doing odd jobs and sharing his wife's

income. Well-meaning family members had been asking him for years when he was going to get a "real job". Yet, his efforts paid off.

At a recent reading of Martinez' at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, Martinez showed both a sense of humor and a wonderfully distinctive voice. He speaks in sort of a gravelly whisper, which I recently learned was due to polyps that formed in his throat as a 14 year old field worker (perhaps from pesticides) and rendered him unable to speak for a two years. (Los Angeles Times, Nov 27, 1996, Life and Style, 5) Yet, he regained his voice, and it is a remarkable one.

Analysis and Summary

Though Parrot in the Oven is a remarkable work, there was some concern about the category it won in: Children's Literature. Perhaps, because it is a relatively short work and clearly told- and is appropriate for adolescent readers, it falls into this category. But many of the themes - prejudice, alcoholism, teen miscarriage - are quite mature. Martinez' writing is, as well, in this compelling work. One explanation, perhaps, is that much of the publishing industry is based on marketing. Martinez had little success submitting the book to traditional adult publishers; it was a friend who suggested he try the children's division of Harper Collins. With the book accepted and a contract signed, Parrot in the Oven's fate was sealed.

Martinez' book opens with the saga of Nardo, the narrator's brother who has a knack for escaping danger at the last second as well as a colorful and spotty work history. The first chapter centers on Nardo's decision, while working at a country club as a busboy, to ask a *gavacha* (white girl) to dance. The scene effectively paints the tension of a Chicano dancing with a Caucasian girl and the resulting fallout (Nardo is fired). Nardo and Manuel (Martinez' alter

ego) then go to the fields to pick chilies and stand helplessly by as Immigration Services comes to deport the illegal workers, all for a baseball glove Manny wants and needs to earn money for.

The family, as we learn in later chapters has it's own difficulties. Manny's father is an alcoholic and his mother, in an attempt to stifle the critical voice of her husband, keeps the house as spotless as she can. Magda, Manny's sister, watches Pedi, the baby, while undergoing the painful yearnings of adolescence. In the most tense chapter of the book ("The Bullet", Chapter 4), Manny's mother goes to retrieve his father from a bar, so the family can eat dinner together. The father refuses to come with them, but later returns home and searches out his rifle in order to kill his wife. After pursuing her, the father retreats into the house after the police have been called. The mother denies the father's intent, but he is jailed nonetheless, for resisting the officers and owning an illegal firearm.

The rest of the novel details Manny's adolescent growing pains from being invited to a party of a girl he likes, trying to be jumped into a gang in order to win the right to make out with a girl who is promised as his reward, and the trials of watching his friends attempt to become champion boxers as a way of elevating their status in society. One of the most harrowing chapters in the book involves Magda's stillbirth (or late miscarriage) of a fetus, which is thrown into the toilet and the insensitive treatment she and her family receive at the hands of the medical clinic they go to via the bus for help. Here, too, prejudice is thrown into relief against the backdrop of the larger family saga. The father redeems himself at the end of the chapter, when he carries a feverish Magda to the bathtub, hurting his own back, to save her life because the family has no money for a visit to the hospital.

Manny's greatest pain occurs when he is left to watch Pedi alone and ends up firing the gun and nearly missing her; high drama and fear fill this chapter.

Superbly written, Parrot in the Oven won a National Book Award in the category of Children's' Literature. The similes and metaphors which Martinez (who is formerly a poet) uses are especially breathtaking. (i.e. 'Nardo' as we called him flipped through more jobs than a thumb through a deck of cards." p1, "She thought schooling could graduate me into places that could make her eyes gleam", p 38) One of the great issues about the novel, of course, is its award. Why is this book considered "Children's or Young Adult" Literature instead of just a novel? What about this work distinguishes it as one aimed at younger readers?

Questions for Discussion:

1. What makes the novel distinct? What about Martinez' voice as a storyteller makes this work different from other writers?

2. How is the Manny character like the parrot in the oven (perico, p 51-2)? Does he as his father says "trust everything too much"? Will he "go right into the oven trusting people all the way-- brains or no brains."?

3. What do you think of the father's desire to play croquet as a way of "favor(ing) the neighborhood with culture."(23) Is Martinez being ironic?

4. Manny's mother is a woman who wears a brown dress to her mother's funeral because she can't afford a new black one (while the father spends $150 dollars the family doesn't have on a lawyer to get his rifle back.). She also spends her life trying to please her husband. Why does she not turn him in when he threatens to kill her? What does this say about her role as a woman? Is there a double standard?

5. The mother tells Magda, "Your father and I ran off together when I was sixteen. You were already big in my belly. For a moment she looked to put her hand on Magda's shoulder, but held back rubbing her arms. Don't make the

same mistake I did. That's all I have to say." (p 104) What is she implying? What is her advice? (105) Does Magda listen? Why or why not?

6. With all of the adult themes --- domestic abuse, teen pregnancy, alcoholism-- Parrot in the Oven is very mature in its themes. What about the book makes it appropriate for younger readers? Is it Young Adult or Children's Literature?

7. Many Chicano writers like Daniel Cano purposely write very simply for their readers. His reasoning is that since Chicano audiences are new to reading literature that writers shouldn't use a vocabulary that might overwhelm them or write long, convoluted sentences that might lose them. This, however, may limit what a writer can say and the literary merit of his/her work. How do you feel about this? Where does Martinez seem to stand on this issue?

8. Looking at Manny's excitement about going to Dorothy's party (p 174) is very vivid: "For days I suffered the joy and terror of wanting to go to Dorothy's party and knowing that it would be a big mistake. It was like a loose tooth you keep wiggling with your tongue, slow and deliberate teasing the pain. The pain, however, wasn't in my mouth, but in my chest." What pain is he talking about? Why do the partygoers attack him? (179) Does this actually happen?

Additional Questions

1. Teenage pregnancy is shocking in any family, but in Martinez' conventional Chicano household, it is even worse. How does the family respond when Magda's miscarriage occurs? (156)

2. How does Manny respond when learning the identity of Magda's baby's father? (210)

3. How does the family cope with the father's alcoholism and resulting behavior? At one point Manny's father threatens his mother with a gun for dragging him out of a bar. Why doesn't she press charges? (55-70)

4. Examine how teachers are portrayed in the book. At one point Manny says, " I hoped in fact, that they'd transfer me over from Mr. Shatller's class, where all

we did was read magazines and play bingo games, to hers (Miss Van der Meer's , where students read detective books and stuff by that Shakespeare guy" p 125). What does this say about the type of education Chicanos received?

5. Manny's father refuses to accept government assistance, even though his family is poor. What is it that prevents him? Is this a common response? (p 25)

Dagoberto Gilb
Magic of Blood

Background

Dagoberto Gilb (1950-) is the son of a Mexican-American mother and a father of German ancestry. Gilb's was not an idyllic childhood; his father never lived with him and Gilb lived a wild life in Boyle Heights: rolling drunks, joy riding, taking drugs and getting into fights. However, at the age of 18, Gilb became interested in education. He attended community college and then the University of California at Santa Barbara where he double majored in philosophy and religious studies. Next, he earned Master's degree in religious studies. During that time, he told stories of his adventures and one instructor suggested he write them down. So Gilb did, in a diary that to this day is private. Still, a writer was born.

Gilb tried for many years to enter the literary world: sending out stories and facing rejection after rejection. Since he was not a member of the literary establishment (and hadn't attended a writing program) and his stories were so different, it was hard to find an editor willing to take a chance on him. Still he worked six months of the year as a construction worker, then spent another three writing. But in 1991, after having a few of his stories published, Gilb won the Whiting Award and $30,000 with it. In 1994, Gilb also won the Jesse H. Jones Award and the prestigious PEN/Hemingway Award a month apart. Though success was long in coming, Gilb is still happy to have chosen his life as a writer: "I feel like I have the best job in the world," he says, "I feel really lucky." (Los Angeles Times Magazine, November 12, 1995, p. 50)

Analysis and Summary

What other writer than Dagoberto Gilb would deal with construction workers, tenants in disputes with their landlords, a family trying to rid its apartment of a rat and more construction workers in his stories and do it so effectively? In his collection of short stories, Magic of Blood, Gilb's subjects-- ranging from a man waiting for his car to be repaired to a writer awaiting the announcement of a literary award-- are hardly the typical "literary " or 'Chicano" themes. For this reason, before his receipt of several major writing awards (including the Hemingway/PEN Award), Gilb worked mainly outside the established literary circles. Working part of the year as a construction worker (surprise!), Gilb devoted the rest of his time to writing.

His stories deal with a little discussed segment of the population, those of modest or lower income and their fundamental efforts to get by. In light of the challenges faced by many of Gilb's protagonists, the political concerns and pronouncements of some Chicano authors seem almost peripheral or academic. Gilb's choices are interesting and often overlooked: the young couple who long for a night out -- away from their kids -- with a baby-sitter they can trust, a construction worker worried that he'll lose his job if he's sick too much, even though he might be dying. These concerns seem universal, concerns that any reader could understand and empathize with and, I think, this part of Gilb's point. Just because one is Chicano, the other stresses and strains of existence just don't disappear. Under the skin, we have more in common than we know. And Gilb also seems to be educating his predominantly upper middle class audience about the lives of their lesser known counterparts: folks who worry that they won't be able to pay the mechanic's bill, people who want the parking space the neighbor gets up early to claim. Gilb is a keen observer of real life, one whose

obviously seen his share of barroom brawls and things that make grown men cry.

To quote E. Annie Proulx:

> The nice thing about (Gilb's) writing is that it's not just here is 'Chicano slice of life'. It's humanist writing in the best way-- in its compassionate voice that comes to us. And it wouldn't matter if he were a seventh generation Yankee or a Norwegian immigrant or whatever as long as that voice or that compassion and that eye were still there. So the 'ethnic writer' label is less important to me than the quality of the writing of the stories, which transcend any of that sort of thing." (Los Angeles Times Magazine, 49)

Gilb, whose father was German and mother Mexican, is also uncomfortable with the label of "Chicano writer":

> "I wanted to be German and smart. As a kid you work out these stereotypes, and I was totally ashamed. Being smart was not being Mexican. I hate to admit it, but it was true. It 's what they do to your brain. It's total bulls------."
>
> I had a German philosopher phase: I wanted to be a half-breed Hegel. I used to read a lot of half-breed Indian novels. I loved those stories because that's how I felt all my life, not anything, not this, not that." (Los Angeles Times Magazine, 49)

Finally, Gilb answers the charge that he is not 'Chicano' enough in his themes:

> "Certainly Chicanos will say to me "Why don't you write more about politics? You're not really writing about *la causa* . The funny thing is that the laborers are very much aware even talking about the working class is extremely 'cause'--it's the oldest most radical cause in this country." (Los Angeles Times Magazine, 49)

Gilb seems a good antidote to some of the clichés of Chicano literature. Editors, according to Gilb, expect certain stock characters in the work of a Chicano author and ask when they don't see it in Gilb's:

"They don't expect Chicanos to be employed. They would look at my stories and say: Where are the*cholos* ? Where are the *curanderas* ? Where are the illegals? Where the Chicano world? Where do you live?" (Los Angeles Times Magazine, 46)

One of the nicest thing about Gilb's work is that you won't find such characters here and they don't always eat tacos. Gilb's realism transcends this; sometimes they just crack open a beer, or fall in love, or go to work and journey through their lives.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Given the criticism that Gilb's work is not "Chicano" enough, examine a Gilb story and discuss what is 'ethnic' or "Chicano". Also consider the question of whether an author must address a certain issue in a certain way with certain characters to be worthy of 'ethnic' status.

2. Consider Gilb's idea that it is "causa" to even discuss the working class. How does he present construction workers and laborer characters? Think of several specific examples he gives about their lives. What does his point seem to be?

3. One of my favorite stories in the collection is "The Prize." (127-138) What does Gilb seem to be saying about being a writer? The literary world? How are prizes awarded? Why might an aspiring or unknown writer become bitter?

4. Discuss the narrator in "The Prize" (p 127-138). Why does he renege on his deal with his hairdresser, Chino, to share the money if he wins? What type of character is the writer? What rationalizations does he offer? Would you do the same thing? Why or why not?

5. Gilb presents the "love 'em and leave 'em " stereotype in "I Danced with the Prettiest Girl"(51-62) and several other stories. Does he present these male characters in a way that leads us to be proud or ashamed of them? What is the point about such behavior he's trying to make?

6. In "Vic Damone's Music" (265-75) Gilb tells a story about a young boy who works in a laundry with his mother. His mother at one time had an affair with the married boss. The young boy also would like an affair with a co-worker, Mercedes. What do the events and characters in the story say about the way men

treat women? The way white men treat brown women? The way brown men treat brown women? Also, what does the story seem to say about race relations?

7. Does the narrator of "Vic Damone's Music" love the girl he seduces or not? What proof can you offer for your interpretation? Pretend the woman was a friend of your and had asked for your advice.

8. Consider the story "Ballad"(231-240) . "Cowboy" Mike Durran must make a choice whether to work when he is possibly fatally ill. What does Gilb seem to be saying about the working class?

9. "Getting a Job in Dell City "(277-288) has a fable -like quality about it. What elements of the story are fairy-tale like? (This can be a type of character or conflict).

10. In the story "Churchgoers" (101-118) discuss the character of Smooth. How does this story become more than a story about construction workers? How is construction work like church, according to Gilb?

11. "Al, in Phoenix" (75--93)) is a great story for anyone who has ever had major problems with a car. How does Gilb manage to make a story about something so mundane so interesting? What is he saying about class struggle? About rushing an "artist"?

12. Another notable story is "Nancy Flores" (27-51) about a young boy who falls in love for the first time with the girl across the street. Give some examples about how Gilb describes the boy's love for Nancy. Why and how does it die?

Tomas Rivera
y no se lo trago la tierra

Background

Tomas Rivera's story is a remarkable one. The son of migrant farm workers in Crystal City, Texas, Rivera went on to attend community college, university, earn a Ph.D. and finally, to become Chancellor of UC Riverside. It was his grandfather who instilled the love of writing in Rivera, and who told him that writing and art were the most important things in life. (DLB, 207)

As an administrator, Rivera was aware of students' problems and needs, but he was also a successful writer. Though his literary output was not as prolific as some other authors, Rivera's *...y no se lo trago la tierra* is considered a landmark work. Rivera experiments with style and shape of the novel and helped influence the shape of Chicano Literature in the 1960's and 70's. According to Luis Leal, the novel was praised for "its original structure, its terse style, and its faithful presentation of life among Chicano migrant workers." (DLB, 207)

The novel was originally written in Spanish, then translated into English. Rivera said knowing a publisher would accept a work in Spanish "liberated" him: "I knew that I could express myself as I wanted." (ibid.) And so, this remarkable book of short narratives, came into being.

Analysis and Summary

Rivera wrote ...y no se lo trago la tierra (...and the earth did not swallow him) mainly to document the lives of Mexican -American migrant workers in the

1940's and 1950's. He says of his discovery that Chicanos could be the topic of a novel, ten years before the Chicano movement: ""During that period, I became very conscious, in my own life of the suffering and the strength and the beauty of these people... I wanted to document somehow the strength of those people I had known." Rivera captures " suffering and strength and beauty" superbly in ...y no se lo trago la tierra. He describes the migrant life from the perspective of an eleven year-old boy, describing the traumatic events that occur in a year's time. The novel, which is broken into short sections (a post-modern technique) is sometimes narrated by the boy, sometimes in the third person, or by his mother and, at one point, a whole chorus of migrants. This gives the story an additional poignancy and immediacy. The various voices enable Rivera to go deeper into his characters and to explore the suffering they endure more directly.

In an interview, Rivera once said, "I felt that I had to document the migrant worker para siempre (forever)... so that their very strong spirit of endurance will to go on under the worst of conditions should not be forgotten, because they are worse than slaves. A slave is an investment so you protect him. A migrant worker? You owe him nothing. "

Rivera shows the appalling treatment and conditions the migrants endured in his novel. A young migrant is shot and killed by a foreman for drinking water instead of working; a husband and wife die of tuberculosis leaving behind their children. Three children burn to death because the parents cannot afford care for them while in the fields and must leave them unattended at home. The narrator's father nearly dies of heat exhaustion. A priest blesses cars of the migrants for five dollars apiece, then goes to Europe with the money and sends back pictures of cathedrals. These are some of the cruelties Rivera documents in an even-handed way.

What is interesting is that Rivera, who loved writing from the age of eleven, didn't set out to write about his experience:

> ...Back in 1958, we thought writing should be a money-making proposition. To make money there had to be a gimmick, we thought, so we went to people who were making it at the time, Mickey Spillane and people like that. We actually tried to imitate Spillane. We thought people would notice, that it would bring us fame and glory. We sent off the manuscripts y pues nada (and nothing) Los chicanos que metiamos alli (The Chicanos we stuck in there) were cooks and prostitutes, very stereotyped ones, as were the Anglo ones. I don't demean cooks or prostitutes, just the fact that we would stereotype them without benefit of dignity." (ibid.)

He credits Americo Paredes and his book With a Pistol in his Hand about Gregorio Cortez, with opening him up to write about Chicanos. "The book indicated to me that it was possible to talk about a Chicano as a complete figure."

Questions for Discussion

1. In the section "When We Arrive"(142-145), Rivera uses repetition of the line "When we arrive" (145). What is the effect of this repetition? What is the effect of having this section told by different narrators?

2. In the section " The Little Burnt Victims", three small children burn to death while their parents work in the field. Filmmaker Severo Perez left this section out of his film, based on the book, because he felt this scene would've been too depressing, in addition to the other injustices the workers suffer. How do we respond to Rivera's account of this scene?

3. The portrait salesman in "The Portrait" (136-8) preys on newly returned farm workers. After taking the money of the worker, he ditches the photograph and never intends to deliver the goods. How does the make the migrants look? Is this a negative portrayal of the Chicano people?

4. In "A Prayer" (90-1), the mother prays for her son at war, giving us a section narrated by an entirely different narrator. What do you think of this technique?

5. "First Communion" (115) presents a comic version of confession. How does Rivera feel about Catholicism? How does he want us to feel about it?

6. In "The Night the Lights Went Out"(124-7) is the relationship between Ramon and Juanita love or obsession? What makes the relationship go on the negative course it does? Who or what is to blame?

7. In describing Bartolo, the narrator tells us that 'the spoken word was the seed of love in the darkness". (147) How do you interpret this? How is the "word" the "seed of love"?

8. Severo Perez interprets the narrator's final wave as an acknowledgment of God. (152) How do you interpret it?

9. The narrator calls the year described in y no se lo trago la tierra as the year that was "lost to him". How was the year "lost"? Why?

10. What is the effect of having the narrator tell about himself in the third person (he)?

11. The narrator suffers from prejudice at the school he attends (92-6). What examples can you give of injustice and prejudice at the school? How would the situation be handled today?

12. The episode with Don Laito and Dona Bone (98-101) is one of the most chilling in the book. How do they take advantage of the narrator? What is Rivera's message in this story?

13. What does the title y no se lo trago la tierra mean?

14. Why does the narrator call the devil (104-6)? Is this related to the title?

Helena Viramontes
Under the Feet of Jesus

Background

Helena Viramontes (1954-) never had story books in her house In East Los Angeles as a child. There was an encyclopedia and a Bible, but aside from that, her family with its eleven children and open door to relatives trying to establish themselves in this country, was a poor one. Up until the time Viramontes attended Immaculate Heart College, she would pick grapes in the fields of Northern California with her family in the summers. Even after she began college, this tradition continued.

When Viramontes began to write as a student, she would sit down at her mother's kitchen table with a yellow legal pad, and sometimes between thoughts, stare off into space. Her mother, as Viramontes relates in her moving essay "Nopalitos: The Making of Fiction", who didn't quite understand this strange occupation would ask her to vacuum instead. However, after Viramontes won her first award, and signed the accompanying check ($25) over to her mother, there was a cup of coffee waiting for her each time she sat down to write and no more requests for housework.

Viramontes attended UC Irvine's prestigious Creative Writing Program in 1981, but encountered resistance from her professors to the Chicano characters she wrote about. So, she dropped out, then re-enrolled in 1990, because she refused to be beaten by small-minded professors. Fortunately, the intervening years, the climate for ethnic literature had turned and mentor Thomas Keneally was directing the program at the time. Viramontes currently teaches at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

Another remarkable trait of Viramontes' is her generosity to up-and-coming writers. She is a champion of Chicanas (in particular) learning to express themselves in writing. When she visited Mount Sac at the Writers' Day Festival in 1993, she sought out the winner of the Children's Literature prize, asked her what her plans were, and encouraged her to keep writing. She also volunteers her time to teach Chicana Writing Workshops and will critique manuscripts for emerging writers. Her main thrust as a writer is to give a voice to those who have been oppressed-- celebrating those people, who because of poverty or a low status in society often go unnoticed. For this reason, she is especially adept at and interested in children as narrators.

Having gone through a rough journey as a writer herself (detailed beautifully in the aforementioned essay "Nopalitos: The Making of Fiction", Viramontes knows the challenges presented to the aspiring writer. This makes her novel Under the Feet of Jesus feel like even more of a miracle. Juggling two children, a teaching load and her other efforts, Viramontes says writing Under the Feet of Jesus took ten years. This moving story of migrant farm workers, particularly Estrella, the young girl whose eyes through which this story is told. Viramontes has a gift for writing through the eyes of children and/or young adolescents. This is one of the skills she teaches to her students.

As a member of "Los Girlfriends", she also knows the value of networking. Other "Los Girlfriends" members include Sandra Cisneros and Lucha Corpi. They stuck by each other, offering support and encouragement, even before they became at least in Cisneros' case, household names. Viramontes also was recognized by Time Magazine in 1994 as one of the hundred most influential people in the United States. According to Sonia Saldivar-Hull:

> (Viramontes') groundbreaking narrative strategies, combined with her socio-political focus, situate her at the forefront of an emerging Chicana

literary tradition that redefines Chicano literature and feminist literature. (DLB, 325)

Analysis and Summary

Viramontes' book, Under the Feet of Jesus, is bold in its choice of protagonists-- migrant farm workers, far from the comfort of the middle class hearth. And to have a young woman tell the story also seems to be a bold choice. This is not a capricious or unearned choice on Viramontes' part; she picked cotton with her family in the summers, so she knows whereof she speaks.

The story begins with Estrella's family, her mother Petra and surrogate father Perfecto Flores and the children traveling to their latest picking job in Perfecto's beat up station wagon. In a moving description, Viramontes, tells the story of Petra, who left by her husband and stranded with four children, becomes the common law wife of Perfecto Flores. Viramontes' descriptions of loss are especially vivid. The story also contains a description of Estrella befriending the daughter of a white sharecropper family and the time spent by the two girls reading movie magazines. Their friendship ends when Maxine insults Estrella by saying that Petra is sexually involved with Perfecto, something which Estrella chooses not to believe. The two girls fight and Estrella emerges, her clothes ripped and nipples showing. Her family must move, as a result of the fight, since as Chicanos, they have less say than a poor white family.

At the next job, Estrella's family is threatened by Perfecto's desire to return home to Mexico. He contemplates abandoning them to go home, even though, as we learn later in the chapter, Petra is pregnant by him. Estrella also meets Alejo, a young boy with whom she falls in love. Viramontes describes their first kiss and hints at a sexual consummation. In later days, however, Alejo becomes sick with dysentery and Estrella's family takes him in. The following

pages show the painful decisions relating to illness among the very poor. Does the family sacrifice their last $9.07 for a visit to the clinic and after that, how do they begin to afford the hospital care Alejo needs to live? The dramatic moment when Estrella destroys the health care worker's desk with a crowbar for gas money, speaks eloquently of the desperation that fuels her desire. And the family's decision to leave Alejo at the entrance of the hospital, because they cannot afford to pay for his care and know he won't be turned away, further illustrates their desperation.

The novel ends on a positive note as Estrella goes into the barn she and Perfecto plan to demolish for money.
As she climbs, she heads upward toward the sky and calls home those she misses.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do Estrella and Alejo consummate their relationship?

2. Why does Petra stay with Perfecto? What is Viramontes saying about May/December romances?

3. Why does Petra put menstrual blood in Perfecto's coffee (page 23)?

4. The circle to guard against scorpions seems highly symbolic (p. 164). What does this symbol suggest?

5. Viramontes was especially proud of her title Under the Feet of Jesus. What does she say about the altar and the documents the family keeps underneath (birth certificates, social security cards p. 63)? How is the placement of the documents symbolic? What does this say about her world?

6. What do you think of Estrella's desperate action in the clinic? Do we admire Estrella for threatening the nurse and destroying the items on her desk? Why or why not? (page 150) Also, How does Estrella grow throughout the story?

7. What do you think of Perfecto dropping Alejo off at the steps of the hospital? Earlier in the chapter he wants to refuse Alejo help, because his illness threatens his make-shift family. Why does he finally agree to take him? What does this suggest about their lives and conditions?

8. How does Viramontes surprise us with her portrayal of migrant farm workers? Name five details that surprised you.

9. What does tearing down the barn symbolize?

10. Why is the upward movement of Estrella so satisfying in the end of the story? (Tomas Rivera uses it, too). Do you mind not knowing what happened to Alejo and Perfecto (or can we imply it)?

11. Why might Time magazine call Viramontes one of the 100 most influential people in the United States? Does it have anything to do with her choice of subject?

12. What do you like/dislike about her portrayal of the young girl?

Essay Questions:

1. Write a character analysis of Estrella. Discuss key turning points for her , as well as those constants of her personality. What do these turning points show about her.

2. Viramontes shows many of the trials endured by the very poor. Discuss the ways in which conflict is handled between the workers and white community, the access to health care, the situations the characters "settle" for because of their socio-economic status. (i.e. Petra and Perfecto p 13) What is she saying about the treatment suffered by the poor? (You can compare this with Victor Martinez' take).

3. Discuss the symbolism of the Jesucristo altar and the circle of scorpions. What other symbols does Viramontes include in the novel? (the house of language p. 70, Llorona ,maggots.) What does it mean that the Jesucristo is destroyed at the end of the novel?

Boulevard Nights

Background

While reading Luis Rodriguez' Always Running, a student of mine asked me "Have you seen Boulevard Nights?" Since Rodriguez writes about cruising the infamous Whittier Boulevard and his memoir takes place in the 1970's (as does the film), the comparison is an apt one. The film, like the book, also deals with early gang war, glue sniffing, PCP ingestion and the making of a hard-core gang member. Still, compared to Rodriguez' memoir (which was banned last year by the Oakland School District for its sexual candor and content) and the recent spate of Chicano gang/prison films, Boulevard Nights (1979) seems oddly tame and somewhat dated. Imagine the good brother from the film, Raymond, dressed as an ersatz John Travolta out of Saturday Night Fever, with his skintight polyester disco shirts, unbuttoned halfway down his chest and his hair feathered fashionably and the gang affiliated brother, Chuco, in a *cholo* Pendelton and Chinos, trying to look "baaad" (as opposed to "bad") as he struts down the Whittier Boulevard sidewalk with his homies, and you've got the picture. It might've worked in 1979, but it would be a stretch for today's more sophisticated and media savvy students.

Analysis and Summary

More a morality play, than a story of redemption, Boulevard Nights (written by Desmond Nakano, produced by Tony Bill and Bill Benenson) focuses on Raymond (Richard Yniguez), the older brother's, attempts to show Chuco

(Danny de La Paz) a way out of the V.G.V. gang life. They live in a modest home in East Los Angeles with their mother (Betty Carvalho), who has difficulty controlling Chuco and relies on Raymond (her husband seems to have died or abandoned the family) to keep Chuco on the right path. Raymond does his best, getting Chuco a job at the body shop where he works and even bringing him along on his (Raymond's) date with Shady (Marta Du Bois). Still, Chuco is drawn to the gang and Raymond admits, when push comes to shove, he'd have to back his brother, even if it meant getting re-involved with the gang. What the film downplays is the difficulty of shedding a gang affiliation. From Rodriguez' book, we learn that getting out of a gang requires relocation and a name change and if not done quickly and quietly, it can cost one's life. When gang members say "Por vida", this is no joke.

As the V.G.V. war with the 11th Street gang wages out of control, Raymond and Chuco's mother is caught accidentally in the crossfire. While dancing with Chuco at Raymond's wedding reception, she is killed by a sniper and this brings Raymond back into the war, he's worked so long to get out of. "This ain't barrio against bariio", he tells Big Happy (yeah, the screenwriters really named a gang leader this), "this is familia, understand?" (1:23) as he goes to get revenge.

The film does examine the chain-reaction nature of gang warfare; one small act of kicking an 11th Street tagger on VGV territory, leads to a rumble on Whittier Boulevard, which leads to the knifing of a 11th Street gang member which leads to roughing up of Raymond. That, in turn, requires the bashing of an 11th Street car, which ultimately exacts Raymond and Chuco's mother's death. It is tragic to see such wars escalate over such relatively mild infractions-- and such prices paid-- but this is the reality painted by similar films (Blood In, Blood Out). It all seems senseless and the attuned viewer would realize, that

even though Raymond does avenge his mother's killer (at a very high price), it's not over. He's just re-entered the war he's been denouncing for so long. As the final credits roll, to the tune of a George Benson track (another cool '70's throwback) called "Street Life", you realize Raymond isn't safe and never will be, even though the ending might lead you to believe otherwise.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Which do you believe more, Always Running or Boulevard Nights? Give at least five examples of behavior/claims you believe and why you believe them.

2. What points does Boulevard Nights make about gang life? Which is more important, family or gang? To Chuco? To Raymond?

3. Who is the hero of the film? Are we supposed to side with Raymond or Chuco? What clues does the filmmaker give us about who to respect? (Think about Chuco's all-important line "I ain't dumb.")

4. Some of the details of gang life (Chuco ironing his t-shirt for half an hour and the tattoo parlor scene) seem emblematic of gang films. Is there any other typical "gang film" behavior you spotted in the film? List three examples.

5. In what ways does Boulevard Nights seem false or outdated to you? Go ahead, list them and be honest!

6. Raymond seems to have issues to address before he can marry Shady and be a responsive and responsible spouse (look at the scene where he has a competition to show off his car's hydraulic lift 19:00) . Does the end of film show that he is ready to be a husband/adult or do we feel he's still not ready?

7. What do you see happening next, after the credits close? A year later? Two years later? Is the ending misleading?

8. This film predates Boyz in the Hood, Colors (some of the first African American gang films) and American Me (a landmark Chicano film). How does it seem in terms of violence and honesty in comparison?

9. Does the film glorify gang violence or denounce it? What are the examples that lead us to believe this?

10. Would you recommend this film to a friend? Why or why not?

Edward James Olmos
American Me

Background

Edward James Olmos (1947-) was so passionate about making American Me (1992), he lectured the prison warden at Folsom prison for 40 minutes and convinced him to let him stage three killings and one riot. He convinced the warden to allow crews in for three weeks, when two days is the norm. (Los Angeles Times, Calendar, Sept 6, 1991, F6) He also directed, rewrote (the original script was by Floyd Mutrux) and starred in the film, since he had a vision of how the film should educate youth to keep them out of jail. Long known as a Mexican-American activist (Olmos also led the clean-up after the Los Angeles Riots), Olmos is a third generation Angelino on his mother's side, whose great-grandparents fled Mexico after taking part in the Mexican Revolution. His parents married in 1945, after his father, a pharmacist from Mexico City, moved to the United States. Moving to Montebello in the 1950's, Olmos was so unhappy, he took up baseball. In fact, he became so good, he played for the Los Angeles Dodgers' off-season team. According to Olmos: "I attribute everything I learned to baseball...because it taught me discipline. It taught me that I would learn more by playing on days when I didn't feel like playing than on days when I did."(ibid. 76)

Olmos also sang professionally and studied Psychology and Criminology at East Los Angeles College, as well as Cal State Los Angeles. (1964-8) Somehow, he also found time to study theater and dance.

But it is his interest and involvement in the Mexican-American community that stands out. He often sponsors the Latino Book Festival at the LA Convention Center. Also, as a frequent guest speaker at detention centers and in juvenile halls, Olmos often tells young people:

> I am your worst nightmare, because I know all the excuses. I've had to learn the first rule: forgive yourself. It's a nightmare to think of all the things you do to hurt yourself. But you can't make excuses. You can't say, "If only things had been different. Not everyone can do it. But you must try not to use the excuse. (ibid. 7)

Olmos' life and work are a testimony to this.

Analysis and Summary

Much like Blood In, Blood Out , American Me is a film set in the penal system, which exposes the hierarchy of gang affiliations within prison and tells the moving story of Montoya Santana, a survivor, and later a victim of the system. Montoya, the narrator, tells us his story often in poetic voice-over narration raps, from the time he was a juvenile delinquent and founder of the gang, La Primera, to *el mero mero* (the leader) of the Mexican gang which runs Folsom Prison. He also gives a glimpse of a traumatic event in his parents' courtship that ends up shaping his life more than he knows. The script, written by Floyd Mutrux and Desmond Nanko, bears some striking resemblances to Blood In, Blood Out, which is, in part, not surprising given that Mutrux also served as a writer on that film and uses some of the same characters. The disclaimer at the beginning of the film, directed by and starring Edward James Olmos, states that the film is based on a true story (which may have been contained in an earlier book; it's not clear) and graphically depicts violent events much like those that occur each day.

In a certain way, viewing Blood In, Blood Out prepared me for the violent scenes in American Me, since knifings, rapes and brutal beatings seem par for the course in prison, but still there were scenes in which a character named Esperanza's rape is suggested, and an attacker is murdered by Santana, that had me turning away from the screen in squeamish horror. I literally had to leave the room, though less, I think , than in Blood In, Blood Out. Still, I think American Me is a better film, focusing less on prison politics and more on the character's battles and demons. Even as I write this, though, it seems like a tough call, since both have gritty realism; still, I think, the characters are fuller in American Me.

What makes American Me different is that we see Santana's early years as ones that were youthful mistakes leading to a near total life behind bars. His education continues in juvenile hall, where he is raped and stabs his assailant to death. While the killing earns him instant respect among the inmates, it earns him a longer sentence which extends to his adult life and Folsom Prison. By the time he enters Folsom, by means of a montage, Santana is the acknowledged leader of the Mexican prison gang. He orders "hits" or killings as a matter of course, to keep his members in line (namely Pie Face) and to have them (Little Puppet) prove their loyalty, as well as assert the gang's strength.

Still, Santana is moved by visits from his aging mother and younger brother, Pablito. He also seems hurt that his father drops out of visiting him with little more excuse that "something came up." This is intercut with scenes of drugs being smuggled into jail by J.D. (William Forsythe)'s girlfriend. The culmination of the drug smuggling scene is the killing of prisoner who steals a portion of the cocaine, while passing it on to its rightful owner.

Upon leaving prison, Santana falls in love with Julie (Evelina Fernandez) and his love for her makes him question his role in the gang both in and out of prison. Says Julie, in a moving speech,

You're like two people. One is like a kid. The one who doesn't know how to dance or make love. That's the one I care about. The other one I hate. He is the one who knows. The one who has his rap down. The one who runs drugs.

This war between the two selves ends when Santana chooses to counsel peace within the gang and ultimately pays the price of his life.

The film made in 1991, quotes a statistic at the end that three thousand gang-related deaths occurred in the United States that year, just to bring the point home.

Though the film received favorable reviews, it did not do well at the box office (Los Angeles Times, February 23, 1999, F6). Despite a review by Kenneth Turan calling American Me "earnest, unrelenting and violent, which notes that the film "packs a wallop" (Los Angeles Times, March 13, 1992, F2), it didn't draw the audiences the filmmakers hoped for. Still, Olmos' aim seems noble in light of his 18 year desire to bring the film to the screen.

Questions for Discussion :

1. The theme of education is one that Santana, of all people, introduces (1:01) on his date with Julie. She is so inspired she eventually does return to school. Given the other events that occur at this point in the film, does the message of education seem like an effective cure for the violence that afflicts the barrio?

2. Another major theme of the film is interracial hatred in prison. How realistic is the hatred between the racially segregated gangs? Why might such hatred flourish?

3. The religious medal of Esthmus, the patron saint of all prisoners is supposed to protect Santana. How is the medallion symbolic? Are there other symbolic medals?

4. Santana give a moving speech to Pedro, his father, about how he (Santana) waited for his father to return home from work with so much excitement, he pinched himself until he bled. (57:00) The speech, however, gets interrupted. What do you imagine Santana was trying to say or would've said? How does this weigh against or affect the information we later learn that Pedro is indeed not Santana's father?

5. Julie's speech that Santana is "two people" is so important to the film that the filmmakers use it twice, once at the beginning, once at the end. Is this true? If so, who are the two different Santana's? Which one wins in the end? Why?

6. In a related question to the preceding one, why must the gang kill Santana? The new leader claims Santana has "a lot of heart...maybe too much, man."(1:58) Then Santana claims, "You've just got to give it your best shot." Does Santana know he's going to be murdered? What gives you that impression? If you think he's aware, why does he go so quietly?

7. One of the most wrenching scenes in the film is when Puppet has to murder his younger brother, Little Puppet, minutes after they've been reunited. How is Puppet forced into the murder? Why does the gang make him commit such a crime? Does this seem inhuman to you in any way?

8. In much of the voice-over narration of the film, Santana speaks in rhyming couplets. What does this reveal about his character? Does this device work or does it seem corny? Later, Pablo also claims Santana's letters were like "poetry".

9. In the ending of the film, the cycle of gang violence seems to be born again with Nikko, Julie's son. Riding in a car, driven by Pablito, Nikko, high on some kind of fumes, yells "La Primera lives!" out the window as he shoots at some innocent bystanders. How does this make us feel about Santana's death? Did Santana's death make any kind of point? What was it?

10. The title, American Me, is an intriguing one. Giving it your best guess, what does the title mean?

Gregory Nava
El Norte

Background

El Norte (1983), directed by Gregory Nava (see My Family notes for more background) , is often discussed as an important film, significant because of its even-handed portrayal of illegal immigrants from Guatemala who reach and survive in the United States. It is difficult to find now, because of a moratorium placed on it and because most video stores have cleared it from their shelves to make room for those new releases like Stupid and Stupider (a made up title, but you get the idea).

Summary and Analysis

Though Nava's story centers around Enrique and his sister, Rosa, who flee their village in Guatemala after the assassination of their father, Nava still has much to say about the Mexican-American experience and the immigrant experience through this film. At first, I was hesitant about using this film for Chicano Literature, since it doesn't directly seem to address the second generation Chicano, but there are plenty of allusions to the marginal treatment the "other" receives in our culture and jokes about Chicanos and *mejicanos* lightly sprinkled throughout this moving tale. One of Enrique's friends tells him, if he wants to appear to be Mexican, all he needs to so is employ "*chingada*" frequently in his conversation. According to Don Ramon, "Those Mexicans use "*chigada*" as every other word" (31:00). Surprisingly, this ploy works better than one might

expect on some INS officials who can't figure out "where the hell (Enrique's) from" . After watching El Norte, one walks away from a greater understanding of what illegal immigrants go through to reach this country: the risks they take, their reasons for coming, and the substandard conditions and treatment they endure once here. In fact, this film addresses the difficulties of illegal immigrants so well, I'd recommend it for virtually any class. My only hesitation is its length (two and half hours) and, of course, the challenge of actually finding it to rent.

We first encounter Enrique Xuncax (Danny Villapando), in his picturesque village harvesting coffee beans with his father, Arturo, while *el jefe* fires a gun into the air to signal the end of the working day. The workers are planning to meet to discuss and overthrow of the ruling class and one worker informs on Arturo (Ernesto Gomez Cruz), one of the leaders. From there the brutal assassination takes place and Enrique's father is beheaded as if to send a message. Enrique's mother, Lupe, (Alicia del Lago) is also rounded up and taken away, while the soldiers compare their captives to a truckload of "shit." The mother is doomed, and Rosa (Zaide Silvia Gutierrez) and Enrique know they must flee.

Once in Mexico they are nearly robbed by a seemingly friendly coyote, Jaime (Mike Gomez) and finally locate Raimundo Guittierrez (Abel Franco), the coyote recommended by their friend in the village, after a week of near-starvation. The coyote shows them the abandoned sewer pipe they must crawl through for miles to reach the U.S. and the following scenes are excruciating. Enrique and Rosa are attacked by rats, nearly asphyxiated from the stench and exhausted from crawling on their hands and knees. However, they succeed and are taken to a filthy apartment in Los Angeles, where they must learn to cope as undocumented workers.

Enrique is lucky and gets a job as a busboy in a swank French restaurant, the Princess, when a desperate BMW driving owner (Gregory Enton) comes by. Rosa, too, escapes an INS raid at the sewing factory she first works in and befriends Nacha (Lupe Ontiveros). They form a team and clean homes together. Comic scenes of Rosa confronting her first washing machine and Nacha advising her, "Haven't you ever heard of Sears?"(1:29) add levity to this part of the film. Enrique's fellow dishwasher, Jorge (Enrique Castillo) also explains the term "pocho", another lighter moment. Unfortunately, Carlos (Tony Plana), a busboy jealous of Enrique's ascent up the ladder at the restaurant, calls the INS and Enrique loses his job. Rosa is hospitalized with a life-threatening disease and Enrique must choose between providing crucial information to her doctor and taking a job in Chicago, which guarantees his papers in a year or two. The ending is tragic, but plausible.

In a review of Nava's second film, Caryn James of the New York Times says that Nava "is so sincere and single minded here that he treats every scene in My Family with equal importance, flattening out the drama" (May 3, 1995). The same is true of El Norte. Nava is a fine storyteller, but each moment seems illuminated in the same way, with little collapsing of less essential information. I'd be interested to see Selena and his latest film Why Do Fools Fall in Love? to see if this is still the case. There is a staggering lack of critical information on El Norte; my trip to the PCC Library and resulting search turned up nothing. Still, it is a moving film, one that deepens our knowledge of what's it's like to be undocumented and without a voice.

Questions for Discussion

1. Does Enrique die at the end of the film? If not, what do the image of the peacock, flowers and Rosa mean?

2. Does Enrique do the right thing by choosing not to take the job in Chicago and going to see Rosa in the hospital? Why or why not?

3. The film makes some strong statements about the working class. Arturo Xuncax tells his son, "For the rich, the peasant is just a pair of arms. That's all- we're just arms to do their work. They treat their animals better than us. For many years we've been trying to make them understand that we have hearts and souls. That we feel. We are people, all the same. "Is the situation different in the Unites States? Why or why not?

4. Rosa sings a song at her father's funeral: (19:00) "It is not true/ that we come here to live/ We come only to sleep, to dream/things are only lent to us/ We are only on earth in passing/ Tomorrow or the next day/ as you desire giver of life/ we shall go home to you." How does her culture view death?

5. Rosa doesn't know Sears and seems inept when it comes to using her gringa boss' washing machine. Why does the boss seem adverse to having Rosa hand wash the clothes (Oh, I couldn't let her do all that work!", she exclaims)? Is the boss a hypocrite? Why? Is she somehow symbolic of a type of person who hires undocumented workers? What kind of a boss is Len, the restaurant supervisor?

6. Rosa and Enrique also encounter Monty (Trinidad Silva), their apartment slumlord, when they arrive in Los Angeles. How are they treated by him? When he first shows them their apartment? When he want Enrique to take the Chicago job? (1:48)

7. Rosa notices that the two cultures, Mexican and Caucasian, are kept separate, and asks Nacha in one scene: Where are all the gringos?" (1:27) Nacha explains that the gringos live in their own neighborhood. What does this division, which doesn't surprise us, symbolize or say about the separation of the two groups?

8. When Rosa dies, she has a moving speech(2:09): "Isn't it true we are not free?...In our own country we have no home. They want to kill us. There's no home for us there. In Mexico, there's only poverty. We can't make a home there either. And here in the north, we aren't accepted. When will we find a home?" Will undocumented immigrants ever be accepted by the mainstream American culture? Do you think they are more or less accepted today?

9. Do Enrique and Rosa have any other options in terms of what country they live in?

Gregory Nava
My Family (Mi Familia)

Background

Recently, Gregory Nava, director of My Family (1995) and Selena (1996), made film industry news. Signing a deal with New Line Cinema to produce, direct and or develop at least three feature films, Nava became the first Latino director to make such a deal with a mainstream studio (Los Angeles Times, February 23, 1999, F1). With his film Selena, which grossed 35 million dollars in the United States, Nava has proven his Latino-themed films have appeal for audiences across the cultural divide. New Line, it seems is banking on Nava to bring in the Latino market primarily, the largest growing movie ticket buying audience these days. If the statistics are right, movie ticket sales to Latino audiences increased 22% between 1996 and 1997. (ibid. F6)

Although Nava claims his next project will be to make Victor Villesenor's novel Rain of Gold into a film, I thought I read a rumor he was casting a multigenerational boxing film (ibid). Whatever his next film might be Nava does have strong convictions about being a director of Latino descent: "I'm very proud of being a Latino film director, but at the same time I do look forward to the day when we can take the Latino label off and the films could be seen as just wonderful stories about people." (ibid)

Analysis and Summary

I have to say, though, despite all the attention lavished on Nava, I love to bash his film in my class. The reason, of course, is not the film itself, but that the characters fall prey to the horrible stereotypes perpetuated in television and film today. Some member of a tv or film Chicano family is always a gang-banger, convict or Pachuco-- and two of the characters in this sweet and movingly told story happen to fall into that category. I know, as a former (aspiring) screenwriter myself, it is useless to complain about this; after all, that's where the conflict is. (And without conflict, ladies and gentlemen, you have no film) . But it is unnerving and frustrating that the characters sometimes feel more like caricatures than fully drawn characters. Perhaps the two hour-plus film attempts to do too much, covering sixty years of a family's life in that little time and the conclusion feels like a sappy coffee commercial rather than something two real people would say to each other.

Now that I've gotten my concerns out of the way, there still is much to like. The story begins with Jose Sanchez' (Jacob Vargas) walk from Michoacan, Mexico, to Los Angeles, California in the 1920's. There he meets a long, lost relative and his future wife, marries and has children. His wife, Maria (Jennifer Lopez), is deported in an INS raid, but makes her way back two years later bringing child number three, Chucho. The second section of the film deals with Chucho (short for Jesus), who is a Pachuco gang member. Esai Morales plays Chucho who he says is typical of the first generation of immigrant families. He insists on his separatism from his Mexican roots and according to his brother Paco (Edward James Olmos) who narrates the story is killed by his own "macho bullshit". Chucho kills an opposing gang member, Butch Mejia (Michael Delorenzo), and then when wanted by the police runs at the wrong moment. In

addition to focusing on Chucho's death, there are extended scenes from Irene's wedding to Gerardo. Paco calls this "the proudest day of my family's life".

The next section centers on Jimmy (Jimmy Smits), an ex-convict who tries to re-integrate into society after seeing Chucho's death and responding through crime. There is also the marriage of Toni (Constance Marie) , a former nun, to David (Scott Bakula), a fallen priest. In Toni's zeal to help a Salvadoran refugee, Isabel Magana (Gloria Elpdia) , she convinces Jimmy to marry her. When Isabel dies in childbirth with Jimmy's son, he returns, distraught, to his life of crime. He is finally reunited with his son, Carlitos, and the cycle of the family begins again.

What is delightful about this movie, is the wonderful score and beautiful cinematography-- as well as seeing the finest Chicano actors in various roles (Lupe Ontiveros from various films, Seidy Lopez from Mi Vida Loca, Jacob Vargas). The sets by artist Patssi Valdez are warm and striking as well. But the film feels hollow in places when the effects on the family of Chucho's death doesn't get explored enough and the other psychic wounds of the characters seem glossed over too easily. I guess this is why Nava is so successful in Hollywood, since he doesn't dwell on these things. The film is still a document on family pride and Nava says in a post-film interview, "To understand Latino culture you need to understand the family." I guess, I just want more.

Questions for Discussion

1. Think about the roles in television and film for Chicano characters. Do the characters in the film fulfill the stereotype of gang-banger/ convict so popular in the current media?

2. Consider the character of Memo (Enrique Castillo), the lawyer. (1:51-2:00)Why does he seem to be running from his heritage? Do you know anyone like this?

3. What is Chucho's role in the family? At one point, Paco says he was the one person who united the family. In what way did he? Maria, Chucho's mother, also felt that "Chucho's life was lived on borrowed time. The Spirit of the River had come to claim what was rightfully his" when he died. What does the white owl signify?

4. Scenes of Chucho's murder are intercut with shots of the family watching the "I Love Lucy" show. Why is this so effective? (1:05-1:09)

5. Paco the narrator tells us, Jimmy "carried the shit for all the rest of us. He let us achieve all we could." (1:50) How did Jimmy do this?

6. Is there anything that distinguishes Jose and Maria Sanchez as parents? Are they doing a good job as parents as the worry they might not (1:20)? What could account for Chucho's death and Jimmy's incarceration?

7. What is your favorite scene in the movie? Why?

8. Does the film have the feeling of a fairy tale or fable? What gives it that quality?

9. At Irene's wedding, Jose (Eduardo Lopez Rojas) declares that, "The greatest thing a man can have in his life is familia" (:39). Is this true? Make a list of the great things one can have in one's life.

10. What is the overall message of the film?

Severo Perez
"Soldierboy"

Background

Severo Perez (1941-) and his wife, Judith Schiffer Perez (1945-), are the co-authors of "Soldierboy". Severo, a filmmaker, has written several plays, among them, ...and the earth did not swallow him and "Speak Only of Cats" (previewed by the Mark Taper Forum last year), in addition to producing and directing films and documentaries (Seguin and "Los pinateros" for PBS. Judith, a teacher in the Los Angeles School District, has written an historical novel, El pueblo, for use in classrooms.

Severo Perez was born in Texas to migrant farm workers, attended community college and then was one of the first Chicano students at the University of Texas at Austin. When he spoke to my Chicano Literature students a few years ago, he told of being in a segregated dormitory with other non-white students and of segregation in general. His dream of becoming a filmmaker became a reality gradually. He was so poor he often spent summers as a migrant farm worker so he could afford college. As the filmmaker of ...and the earth did not swallow him, Perez was intimately connected with Tomas Rivera, meeting him several times before his (Rivera's) untimely death. He related a story about Rivera as a college student in which Rivera continually walked with his head down. Some people felt this was Rivera's humbleness, but Perez claims, "He was looking for quarters. So was I!" Among one of Perez' most important messages

to our students was to never give up. As a product of the community college system, he encouraged my students to know that anything was possible.

Analysis and Summary

In reading "Soldierboy", it is interesting to note the growth in Perez' dramatic style over time. "Soldierboy" is an early work, first produced by Teatro Campesino and later by USC. It centers around returning World War II veteran Frank de la Cruz and his family. In the opening scene, Frank's mother, Petra, father Beto, wife Esther, son Jr. and brother Willie all await Frank's arrival. He is six hours late, and finally comes by taxi. He is tired, experiencing post-traumatic stress and is a bit gruff with his family and wife. Intercut with scenes of Frank's reintegration into the family and society are scenes from the Battle of Rapido River, where Frank was saved by Watts, a fellow soldier, after a badly mismanaged battle in which only one American survived. The play also tells the story of Willie, who lost a lung following a serious accident and seems to want to keep society at a distance. Further complicating the plot is Esther's desire to work outside the home and Jr.'s preference for Willie over his own father.

Perez gives us realistic scenes of family tension, when we expect family celebration-- which is often the case in real life as well. The play, to some extent, seems to be a commentary on the Vietnam War, as well as drawn from Perez' own family. Some of the themes, wanting to work in radio and the returning veteran, also appear in ...and the earth didn't swallow him.

The play culminates in Willie's death as well as the revelation of what actually happened at the Battle of Rapido River.

Notes from Necessary Theater: Six Plays About the Chicano Experience indicate that the 1987 production of the play at USC was an emotional experience for the audience: "When Frank told Mrs. Watts that her son was dead,

thus finally releasing the poor mother's pent up tears, the audience members cried with her and for all the mothers who have lost their sons in combat." (Huerta, 15) The play was also produced in 1988 at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, Texas, where one reviewer called it a "watershed in the history of the San Antonio theater. It tells the previously untold story of the birth of the Mexican- American middle class." (Huerta 14) Yet another reviewer claimed: "For the majority of those present, "Soldierboy" brought memories so close to home that one could almost feel the entire audience holding its collective breath" (ibid).

Questions for Discussion

1. Why won't the mother let anyone eat the mole, till Frank comes home? Is it common in families not to eat until the guest of honor arrives? How long is too long to wait?

2. Why is Frank so distant from his family? Why isn't he more loving toward Esther and Jr.? Is this a reaction to his war-time experiences? Does he show signs of coming out of it? Why or why not? Why does he seem so offended by the noise of his family when he wants to study?

3. How does Willie's death seem symbolically linked to Watts'? Who is responsible for Willie's death (after a chemical accident) and Watts' death in the badly planned battle?

4. Who is more crippled, Willie or Frank? Physically and/or emotionally?

5. Why does Jr. prefer Willie to Frank? Does Jr.'s relationship with his father show any sign of mending? Do we know if Frank loves Jr.? How?

6. Beto, the father, pressures Frank to join the family business and seems offended when Frank refuses. Is this common in families? Why does it seem important to Beto for Frank to carry on the family tradition? Is Frank's boss, a gringo boss at the airfield, fair to him? Why or why not?

7. Does the government care for its soldiers of color in the same way it protects its white soldiers? Does anything in Perez' play hint that there may be prejudicial treatment of one group or another?

8. Is Petra at a disadvantage because of her limited ability to speak English?

9. How does Esther's desire to work outside the home fare with Frank? Petra? Do they see working outside the home as compatible with motherhood?

10. What do you foresee happening to the family now that Willie is gone? Was he "the glue" in some way that held the family together?

Luis Valdez
Zoot Suit

Background

Luis Valdez (1940-) first heard about the Sleepy Lagoon Murder case when he was three years old. As a young man, he read Carey McWilliams' North of Mexico , documenting the case and was "tremendously impressed by it." (Hispanic Literature Criticism, vol. 2, 1290). Though he didn't work on the play for ten more years, when the Mark Taper Forum commissioned a play Valdez in its Playwrights in Residence program, Valdez was drawn back to his subject. He read 6,000 pages of testimony from the case, interviewed the defense lawyer, George Shibley, tracked down Alice McGrath, Shibley's secretary and interviewed some of the original defendants in the case. He also read old newspaper accounts to further detail the case for his viewers. Valdez also included swing music in the play, from the era, modeled after Lalo Guerrero, whose songs were played at that time, and who also happens to be Valdez' father's cousin.

Such painstaking research makes the play full and well developed, but while the play was a grand success in Los Angeles, it flopped on Broadway. Still, Valdez made a movie of the play in 1981, in two weeks with a budget of three million dollars. (Hispanic Writers, 480) Unfortunately, critics dismissed it. But the play had a revival in 1998 in San Diego and Valdez was hopeful there'd be a 20 year revival in Los Angeles. Sadly, this didn't happen.

Valdez, son of migrant farm workers, has his roots in the theater from performing in the San Francisco Mime Troupe (which he joined after graduating from San Jose State in 1964) and the Teatro Campesino. At the Teatro

Campesino, Valdez worked with Cesar Chavez and striking farmworkers to produce political skits (or *actos*). Soon the company began to tour and perform some of Valdez' original plays. Valdez also directed films, among them "I am Joaquin" (based on Corky Gonzales' landmark poem) and La Bamba . For these contributions, Valdez is called the "father of modern Chicano theater" (HLC, v. 2, 1278). Currently, he directs the Film and Television program at CSU Monterey Bay.

Analysis and Summary

Zoot Suit (1981), directed and written by Luis Valdez, is considered one of the first and most important Chicano plays. It is amazingly well written, even by today's standards, and raises issues that seem significant, important and timely even now. Zoot Suit's narrator, El Pachuco, played by Edward James Olmos, tells us at the beginning that the play is a "a construct of fact and fantasy". "So relax," El Pachuco tells us, "Enjoy the pretense. Our Pachuco realities will only make sense if you grasp their stylization. It was the secret fantasy of every pachuco to put on the zoot suit and play the myth."

From the beginning, there is the question of how much of the Zoot Suit story, centering around Henry Reyna and the 38th Street Gang is true. Valdez does an excellent job of mythologizing the story through the Pachuco spirit, we come to believe Olmos represents. There is also intergenerational strife, something all students can probably relate to, when the younger generation longs to express itself through clothes and music and identity as the older generation objects. There is the press' handling of the so-called "Sleepy Lagoon" murder case, and their euphemistic use of the word, "Zoot Suiter" (and "Pachuco") to avoid employing the word "Mexican" in their reports. There is

mistreatment and prejudice by and from the police and court system, as well as an interracial love story.

Zoot Suit centers around Henry Reyna (Daniel Valdez), who is slated to join the Navy in a few days, but is planning one last Saturday night before he ships out. His family is proud of him but his mother (Lupe Ontiveros) is worried about his safety and tells him, "I almost wish you were going back to jail." Her words turn out to be prophetic. Henry leaves his parents' home accompanied by Rudy (a wanna-be zooter played by Tony Plana) and his sister. His father first warns him to be careful on his date with Della (Rose Portillo), since Della is his *compadre's* daughter. A fight breaks out at the dance where Henry and Della go and, in a moment of conscience, Henry doesn't harm his assailant. Afterward, he and Della go to Sleepy Lagoon, where Henry refuses her advances out of respect and chivalry (and some might say a double standard since he's more than willing to take advantage of Bertha). When the rival gang shows up, Henry is beaten. In retaliation, he rounds up his gang and a riot ensues. When a member of the rival gang is killed, Henry and his gang, Jose Castro (Marco Rodriguez), Ismael Torres (aka "Smiley") and Thomas Roberts, are arrested, beaten and tried for murder.

The ensuing court case is travesty with a prejudiced judge, racist testimony and kangaroo court antics (having each defendant rise when his name is spoken). The boys are found guilty despite the efforts of George Shearer (Charles Aidman), their public defender, and sentenced to life in San Quentin. An appeal is filed and Alice Bloomfield (Tyne Daly), a member of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), offers her support and organizing skills. She and Henry begin corresponding by mail and it is clear, that Henry falls in love with her and she with him. However, Alice discourages the romance, perhaps out of fear that it would never work.

After Henry is placed in solitary confinement, his spirit is challenged and Rudy is stripped by rioting Navy officers and left on the street. However, the ending is a qualified happy one; the appeal is successful and the boys are released. Valdez, in an effort to make Henry Reyna a universal symbol for the Chicano race, explores the various life-story endings Henry might face.

Though some have criticized Zoot Suit for having two-dimensional characters, the play, imaginatively interwoven with musical numbers, seems a fully realized work to me. Valdez, in an interview, said he wrote Zoot Suit as a tribute to "the people and history of Los Angeles". (Newsweek, September 4, 1978) According to the article Valdez, who was founding member of Teatro Campesino, researched the events and the trial of the Sleepy Lagoon case and tracked down the original gang members involved. He fictionalized the story, so that his interviewees were assured anonymity. And the play is not only intended for Chicano audiences: "I wrote Zoot Suit for an American audience of Anglos and Chicanos. The Anglos have to face reality, but I don't want to offend the Anglo community. I want the pachuco life to be part of the American experience, not just the Chicano experience." (ibid). The play has been criticized as a dramaturgical "mess" by Julius Novick of The Nation (July 22-29,1978, p. 88) with "Four or five nascent plays ...struggling like cats tied up in a bag, to emerge." Such mean spirited reviews seem off the mark, since the play was designed to tell an epic and stylized tale. Valdez, himself, felt such reviews were motivated by prejudice rather than the merits of the play. (HLC, Vol 2.,1279)

Questions for Discussion

1. To open the film, a lowrider (Robert Beltran) and his family drive up to the theater and take their seats in the audience. What is Valdez (who only had three days to shoot the film) trying to say?

2. Henry's father objects to Henry's zoot suit and use of the term "Chicano", stating that the family is "*Mejicano*" instead. (16:00) Why does he object to the term, "Chicano"?

3. Henry's treatment of Della at Sleepy Lagoon 46:00) is very different than his treatment of Bertha. What accounts for this difference? Is there a double standard (i.e. one code of behavior for Bertha and one for Della)? Why or why not?

4. At one point El Pachuco warns Henry Reyna about a beating he is about to receive: "Hang tough, ese. You don't deserve it, but you're gonna get it anyway." (11:30) What does this beating suggest about the police and their feelings towards the pachucos?

5. El Pachuco questions a reporter about the term "Zoot Suiter" (1:29) and some of the other ways the press discusses Chicanos. How does the reporter justify these terms? What does this suggest about racism in the press at this time?

6. During the testimony at the courtroom (43:00), a "authority" discusses the difference between Caucasian youths and Mexican youths when fighting. How do these generalizations sound today? What do you think of them? Also, the boys are asked to stand when their names are spoken (57:00). What is the effect of this scene? Is George right? Does it suggest his clients are guilty? Why are such outrageous instructions allowed?

7. The love story. (1:16)Why does Alice discourage Henry when she so obviously likes him? What are at the difficulties of an interracial relationship they'd have to face? At that time?

8. Rudy is denuded by the rioting Navy officers in what was called the Zoot Suit riots (1:33). Why is this so anguishing for him? Why does Valdez substitute El Pachuco for Rudy part of the time?

9. Why does Valdez offer so many possible endings for Henry Reyna at the end of the play? What is he trying to say here?

10. Are the characters two-dimensional? Is the play "four or five nascent plays, struggling like cats tied up in a sack to emerge"? Are there any problems you had with the play and its structure or characters?

Severo Perez
...and the earth didn't swallow him

Background

Filmmaker and playwright Severo Perez first read ...y no se lo trago la tierra by Tomas Rivera as a young man. (See also notes on "Soldier Boy" and y no lo se lo trago la tierra for additional biographical information on Perez and Rivera) When he became a filmmaker, after making "bumpers' for Saturday morning cartoons for ABC and numerous documentaries and eduational films, he knew Rivera's book was one he would like to turn into a film. He approached Rivera and his wife, but Rivera was reticent to let the rights go. After Rivera died from a heart attack in 1984, Perez approached Rivera's widow and she finally relented.

The resulting film was well received and won several prizes and good reviews (The Los Angeles Times called it "sincere and earnest"), though Perez estimates it took him over twenty years to bring it to the screen. Instead of following the structure of Rivera's novel exactly, Perez interweaves several of the narratives, to make a more involving and suspenseful. He also cut some episodes (i.e. "The Little Burnt Victims, "The Night Before Christmas") because he felt they would make the final film much too depressing. Surprisingly, though, Perez is faithful to much of Rivera's original dialogue. His casting of various characters in the book seems uncanny; they seem to be drawn directly from Rivera's imagination.

Interestingly, the scenes of the film which take place in Crystal City, Texas, were actually shot in Chino, as Perez told my students when he visited our campus a few years ago. The scenes in Minnesota were filmed there. Perez says he received a lot of criticism from various audiences. Some objected to the portrayal of white characters as too negative and others objected to the way the church was portrayed. The film, though it seems even and balanced (with some negative Chicano characters-- and several decent white characters (the young teacher), as well as true to Rivera's vision. And, Perez did his research, interviewing people about the singing poet, Rivera mentions in one section, to develop the character of Bartolo (played by Daniel Valdez in the film). Bartolo is the only character that gets expanded, but his role in the film is a symbolic one, emphasizing Marcos' future as a writer and recorder of stories. " Remember. Write it down so others will know," Bartolo tells him. Bartolo also offers an uplifting presence in this otherwise tragic, but redeeming story.

In another oddly coincidental twist of fate, the costume designer for the production, Yvonne Cervantes, had decided to return to school and had enrolled in my class. She said that the production required "a lot of ironing", since one of the trademarks of the protagonist's mother, was that she ironed the family's shirts even though they worked in the fields. Yvonne has gone on to CSU Monterey Bay's Television and Film production program, which is currently directed by Luis Valdez.

Analysis and Summary

The story, set in the 1940's and 50's, revolves around Marcos (Jose Alcala), a young boy who is the son of migrant farm workers. Though he should be in school, Marcos is hiding under a house recalling people and events from the

previous year. The voice over narrator tells us that Marcos is "lost. Lost in (his) thinking" (5:12). He remembers the events like a dream, in "pieces and fragments". The dreamlike quality of his memories make it hard for him to distinguish whether they were real or not, but his inability to remember seems to be a reaction to the traumatic nature of his life that any faulty of his faculties.

We first meet Marcos' mother, Florentina (Rose Portillo) who is deeply religious and desperately concerned about her other son, Julian (Frank Aragon), a 17 year old soldier in the Korean War. Marcos watches her and even aids in her superstitious belief that spirits drink the glass of water she leaves out each night. We learn rather quickly that the Gonzales household is a poor, but loving one as Joaquin (Marco Rodriguez), Marcos' father lines up for day work by Chatos' store. After enduring false promises made by a minister's wife and a carpenter, as well as the loss of a young boy in a Texas orange grower's field, the family migrates north to Minnesota for the only steady work any one of them knows. The plot is further compounded by the fact that Julian is missing in action, which seems yet another loss for the struggling family.

While picking sugar beets, potatoes and other crops in Minnesota, the family (along with several others) lives in a series of barns and chicken coops, barely habitable structures with leaking roofs and infested with lice. Marcos, who is left behind when the family moves on to go to school, is sent to live with Don Cleto (Sam Vlahos) and Dona Rosa (Lupe Ontiveros), who turn out to be the foster parents from hell (57:00). They lie, cheat, bootleg and worse, forcing Marcos to work, even though his family has paid for his board. Marcos is expelled from the school in Minnesota, after one of the Hogan boys picks a fight with him and then claims Marcos started it. To make matters worse, the priest, Father Joseph, who has said he'll look out for Marcos, is in Spain touring cathedrals with the migrants' money, when Marcos comes for help.

After returning home, Marcos' parents are bilked by a smooth talking salesman (Castulo Guerra), who hawks carved 3-D pictures of loved ones. He preys on their sentiments for the now presumed dead Julian and runs off with their only photograph and $25 (a steep sum in those days) with no intention of completing the work. Young Marcos, so frustrated by the life of poverty his family leads, calls the devil one night (1:10), but the devil never comes. So he returns home to make sense of the events he's witnessed and the losses his family has endured. He ends his reflections under the house with a sense of survival and hope, no small feat, given all he's witnessed.

A touching film, ...and the earth didn't swallow him , sheds light on the prejudice endured by the migrant workers, even by well-meaning white people (i.e. Mrs. McCreelis, Marcos' teacher). There are plenty of malevolent forces as well: the Texas ranch owner, who shoots a boy for allegedly stealing oranges, the ranchers who take advantage of the workers, letting them suffer with heat exhaustion and giving a 27 cent advance to feed a family of five. Still, there is camaraderie among the workers, love in the family and delight in the songs of Bartolo, the magical musician who says, "the voice is the seed of love in the darkness." (1:26)

He records the lives of those around him, selling his songs for five cents a copy, giving them a sense that their history matters, and a break from the tragedy that surrounds them. His song of the lovers, Ramon (Gregory Norman Cruz) and Juanita (Seidy Lopez) show how the circumstances conspire against relationships, even the most loving.

This is a particularly good film to show students because, it depicts the lives of migrant workers so clearly. It is one thing to discuss the difficulties they faced in a classroom, another to see it presented warts-and-all on the screen. Marcos is a wonderful hero for the students, too, since he takes in everything,

("You're always so silent, but as watchful as the moon," another character says of him) and though, he doesn't act out immediately, we have a sense, his reactions are heartfelt and, for us, they are indelible.

Questions for Discussion

1. What kind of a character is Marcos? We are told he is a "good boy" and "so silent but as watchful as the moon"? Why does he not respond when he sees his parents making mistakes (i.e. Little Sister, 23:00, and the picture salesman)? Why does he drink the water his mother leaves for the spirits? What does this say about him? Finally, why does he call the devil?

2. Is the film, as some viewers have charged Perez, prejudiced against white people? Are there any "good" white characters? On the other hand, are there any "less than good" Chicano characters?

3. Is the church portrayed in a negative way? Give several examples to support your point. What is your overall feeling about the church from the film?

4. What is Bartolo's role in the film? What power does he have as a writer of ballads? Does he provide comic relief or a sense of hope or importance to the community? How? How would you feel about a singer who wrote songs about you and your friends?

5. Cite five instances of prejudice in the film, ranking them in order of seriousness, starting with the worst. Who are the worst offenders? Why do the migrants tolerate such treatment?

6. Examine the school sequence. What instances of prejudice does Marcos encounter at the school? How is he treated by the school nurse? His teacher? The janitor? The principal?

7. Among the most revolting scenes in the whole movie is the steak scene with Dona Rosa (47:00). Why does Marcos eat the steak? Would you? What does this say about Marcos?

8. The love story between Ramon and Juanita ends with Ramon's suicide. Is he a victim of the circumstances? Or is he obsessed and jealous to begin with? Also, Juanita marries soon after Ramon's death. Did she ever love Ramon?

Allison Anders
Mi Vida Loca

Background

Certainly, Allison Anders has the right credentials to bring to a socially conscious film like Mi Vida Loca (1994). A single mother, a feminist, an Echo Park resident for ten years and a filmmaker of serious intent (her previous film was Gas Food and Lodging) Anders had distinguished herself as someone who eschewed the slick Hollywood scene for more realistic and dramatic films. In fact, a writer friend who knew her while they attended UCLA Film School had nothing but admiration for Anders' creativity and integrity. Certainly, her efforts to make the dialogue and characters realistic (she even consulted some of the young women in her neighborhood on music and style and included several in the film) were noble, but the plot-line, as critics and viewers alike have alleged, has its difficulties.

According to Rosalinda Fregoso writing for Cineaste Magazine, actual homegirls objected to the film for several reasons: "1) Homegirls don't get pregnant from the same guy, they have more respect than that; 2) A homeboy does not obsess over a lowrider truck at the expense of his kids; 3) Rival gangs fight over turf, never over a car ." (Volume 21, issue 3, 36+)

Fregoso also objects to Anders' oversight of the true heroes and champions of the homegirls in these neighborhoods:

"Untold is the story of the elaborate support network of mothers grandmothers, and aunts who visit them in jail, bail them out and help, deliver, feed and take care of babies. She also trivializes the warfare among Chicano

inner city youth. The battle between Chicano gangs is over the control of turf and scarce resources, not lowrider trucks" (ibid.)

Perhaps, Anders' desire to tell a certain kind of story got in the way. Fregoso notes that the "romantic realism" style Anders employs lets the camera follow the characters' emotions. And Anders' interest in high drama, and unrequited love take her too far away from what the true lives of her subjects are like.

Analysis and Summary

When I think about Mi Vida Loca , I remember a comment a professor of mine in college once made, calling a paper of mine with good intentions, but bad execution "a noble failure". It is a mystery that Anders' film with such honorable intentions, a sensitive and caring filmmaker and a compelling story, would turn off my students so much that the mere mention of the film would elicit groans and the word "Yuck. That was an awful film." I, too, remember sitting in the Coronet theater in West Los Angeles with six other people (and it was a big theater) when the film came out and being disappointed, even though I had eagerly anticipated the film for what seemed like months.

What could cause a film about girl gangs in Echo Park (or Echo Parque, as they call it) to be so bad? Anders had clearly worked to make the script believable, to make the story suspenseful and to include real homegirls and *vatos locos* in the film. She even got Los Lobos to perform in one of the scenes and featured the scenery of Echo Park and Sunset Boulevard (where she lives) prominently in the film. And, clearly, we like her two protagonists, Sad Girl and Mousie, two young women with children by the same young man, Ernesto. That they would become so angry with one another that they would attempt a

showdown at one point is believable, but somehow Anders offends her viewers without meaning to.

The first time I saw the film, I remember asking myself if the lives of these two women were so hopeless and empty that they'd kill each other over a man. Now, years later, that question seems beside the point. Certainly, from the proliferation of shows like Montel and Jerry Springer we know that this kind of thing happens (at least on tv, anyway). But it still seems odd that the feminist filmmaker who gave us Gas Food Lodging (1992) would show women so desperate for a man's love, they'd resort to killing each other. Yet another tragic heroine in the film "La Blue Eyes", a college girl, falls for a convict who writes her poetry, to the degree she becomes obsessed with him, even after her clearly forsakes her.

What Anders says she hoped to achieve in the film was to tell a story with "melodrama and high romantic tones" (McDonagh, 75). Oddly, enough some of the risks Anders takes as a filmmaker , and Maitland McDonagh, writing in Film Comment, seems to praise, may be just the things that undermine the film. Anders use of non-professional actors makes us wonder whether the characters" "lack of polish " is "inexperience" or are giving "a carefully calibrated performance". (75) The way the characters address the camera directly at times, "shattering" what McDonagh calls "fourth wall" can also be unsettling to modern viewers (though it is less obtrusive than it was with Ferris Bueller's Day Off) (76). Shifting narrators is also distracting, but taken together with it's "worn locations and ragged compositions" (76), this could put off those used to Hollywood productions.

It's not exactly clear what earned Mi Vida Loca it's bad reviews and poor reception. McDonagh points out that Taylor Hackford's Bound by Honor (also known as Blood In Blood Out) is "hopelessly conventional", compared to

Anders' honest and searching Vida Loca. (78) It would be interesting to ask students to watch Anders' film again in class-- and see what it is they object to, since it does raise the issues of poverty and entrapment for women in the gang culture. However, there's always that fear they'll hate it so much a second time (despite all the cool rap music and the love of a truck, Suavecito) that it'd be a lost cause. Fregoso's comments help understand what went wrong, but it would be unfortunate if Anders gave up completely after such a noble effort.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the rivalry between Mousie and Sad Girl. Is their love for Ernesto believable? Why or why not? Do we empathize with their plight?

2. The love scene between Giggles and Big Smokey (1:02) seems to be a feminist love scene. What makes this scene different from the typical Hollywood love scene?

3. The battle over Suavecito seems to galvanize the girls and pit them against the male gang. (59:00) What does this event suggest about male/female relationships in the barrio?

4. One of the most touching moments in the film is when Mousie and Sad Girl debate the merits of Burger King and McDonald's. (34:00) How does this scene solidify their friendship and *carnalisma* ?

5. Ernesto tells both Sad Girl and Mousie that he will protect them individually during the showdown (26:00-30:00). How does this make him look? Does he seem sincere or like a man practiced at using women?

6. What does "La Blue Eyes'" love for El Duran teach us? Is it that "Her heart was stronger for the love she gave"(1:30)? Or no one can resist Pablo Neruda?

7. When Ernesto explains his business practices to Whisper and his way of dealing with junkies (21:00) we see his true character. What do we learn about him?

8. When Giggles and her old homegirl reminisce, does it sound as if women were more innocent back in their day? (47:00) What kinds of behavior so they object to in the current homegirls?

9. The ending of the film seems to sum up what the homegirls need to focus on in the end (New skills for our future because by the time they're twenty one most of the "boys" are dead, incarcerated or disabled, according to Sad Girl). (1:31) Does this seem preachy or like a satisfying ending? Why or why not? Giggles has an earlier speech much to the same effect. Is it worth repeating? Why or why not? Is it true that "women use weapons for love"?

10. Did you feel the film was realistic? Why or why not? Were there things you hated about the film? Liked about the film?

Cast list

Sad Girl Angel Aviles
Mousie Seidy Lopez
Ernesto Jacob Vargas
Whisper Nelida Lopez (in her acting debut)
Giggles Marlo Marron
Rachel Bertilla Damas
El Duran Jesse Borrego
Alicia (La Blue Eyes) Magali Alvarado
Shadow Art Esquer
Sleepy Gabriel Gonzales
Big Sleepy Julian Reyes
Gata Salma Hayek
Dimples Desire Galvez
DJ Robert "El Vez" Lopez

Gary Soto
Novio Boy

Background

Gary Soto(1952-), considered one of the best Chicano writers working today, often deals with adolescence and growing pains in his work. Certainly, "The Jacket" from Living Up the Street as well as any number of his poems (like "Oranges", "The Box Fan") deal with the agonies and ecstasies of the teen years, in his unique and sensitive voice. Even though I currently teach the work of this Fresno-born author in many of my class, it was another student recommendation that brought me to Soto's play "Novio Boy". The play itself seems to be aimed at high school students and is charming (much like the book "Baseball in April") in bringing the early, youthful concerns of dating (how to ask for that first date and talk to the date once you actually are accepted) to light.

Analysis and Summary

The protagonist of the play is Rudy, "a ninth grader, sweet, small and funny", as noted in the stage directions. He and his friend, Alex, who is slightly bigger and more worldly, are discussing what Rudy should talk about on his upcoming date with Patricia, a (gasp!) eleventh grader. There is also a cash-flow problem; Rudy has selected Steak, Steak y Mas Steak as the swank restaurant they will dine in, even though it is as Alex says, "Those hamburgers cost twice as much as McDonald's" (Act I, page 4). From the price quoted at the end of the play, they actually seem to cost nine to ten times as much. So Rudy also needs some *feria,* which is despite Soto's tendency to write exclusively in English, is what he calls it. The play is also peppered with slang (characters routinely refer

to each other as "homes" and talk about underwear as "chones") so the dialogue might be realistic.

We are also introduced to dating from the female perspective as Patricia and her homegirl, Alicia, discuss men (albeit young men) in Act II. Alicia, too, seems more worldly than Patricia, when she imparts this wisdom, "Yeah but my mom says don't trust any guy with green eyes". (page 12) Then there is El Gato, the disc jockey , who takes song dedications and dispenses love advice (37-40). Among his most memorable advice: "Ahhh...when to fall in love... *Pues,* I think it's the first of the month, when the *cheque* comes in." (37). The play also breaks down a few stereotypes. Rudy's mother is lifting weights when we first see her. So much for the meek Chicano mother.

The scene of the date itself is a comedy of errors. It seems every character introduced in the play shows up at the restaurant for Patricia and Rudy's date: Rudy's mother and friend Estella, Uncle Juan, an unemployed singer, who just happens to get a gig at the restaurant, an Old Man who buys fruit from Rudy to subsidize his date and of course, Alex). Still the date is successful and Rudy becomes Patricia's "novio boy" (67) despite the corny and romantic lines Rudy has prepared for the date: "You have gorgeously mature and exciting hair. Your mouth is big like a fashion model's mouth. Your eyelashes blow in the wind. You smell good." (61)

While sweet, and funny, I think "Novio Boy" might be a little young for community college students. They might do better to look at some of Soto's more complex and exciting work on the same subject.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the most important dating advice you can take away from "Novio Boy"?

2. What does Estella's obsession with her hair color teach us?

3. What do you think of Rudy's "lines" about Patricia's hair and mouth during their date? Do such lines work? Why or why not?

4. Why do you think Soto has Rudy's mother lifting weights the first time we see her?

5. El Gato seems to be a spokesman for love. Do radio personalities sometimes fulfill this function? What does he have to say about love?

6. Would you recommend "Novio Boy" to others? Why or why not?

7. What audience do you think the play is aimed at? Why? I s it appropriate for community college students? Why or why not?

8. Both Rudy and Alex as well as Patricia and Alicia discuss the toys they had as children. What does this suggest about adolescence?

Gary Soto
Junior College

Background

One can appreciate Gary Soto's status as the most influential Chicano poet after reading Junior College (1997), a newer book of his work. Soto possesses a true gift as both a storyteller and creator of distinct images, which shines in this collection. Born in Fresno, California, Soto showed no early interest in writing or poetry. It was actually when a community college professor of his assigned a research paper, that Soto found himself in the library reading his first book of poems. He wrote his first few poems after that and then, the next year signed up for a poetry workshop with Phillip Levine, the Pulitzer Prize winning poet. By all accounts, Levine was (and still is) merciless about badly written poetry, reading aloud passages of student work and shredding them publicly. But it worked, and Gary Soto found his voice, a profound and wonderful voice.

Analysis and Summary

It has been said that Soto doesn't use any Spanish in his poetry, but this collection marks a departure; a few of the poems offer some slang, for, I think, poetic effect. The themes of this latest collection are early childhood, in which Soto's father died suddenly (and tragically) after a neck injury at work, and the pull Soto experiences between his family and the academic world. Any student at the community college level can relate to Part Two of the book, which relates stories of Soto's junior college experiences and the crackpot teachers, oddball lessons and general loneliness Soto suffered at this time.

What emerges in the book is a portrait of the alienation and isolation Soto felt at being the lone virgin in a class of his sexually active peers, the left- out brother who quotes Benjamin Franklin while his brothers get drunk, the guy who makes out with a girl who is more interested in passing cars. There is satire, too, on education, or what passes as education such as in "Everything Twice" when a biology professor says, "Man was never made equal" repeatedly, giving Soto courage that the prof is drunk and he can pass the class. There are also strange lessons about Freud ("Freud is My Friend"), Aristotle ("Our Five Senses") and English ("Rivers Inside the Blue Lines of Binder Paper"). Soto also satirizes extra-credit opportunities in "Starchy Clothes".

One of my favorite poems, though, is "Listening to Jets", a multi-layered poem about his abusive uncle. The images have a haunting quality and only at the end does the true meaning of the poem emerge.

Soto hates the label of "Mexican-American" poet; like Luis Valdez (the playwright of "Zoot Suit" and La Bamba), he'd simply like to be recognized for his achievements, rather than his ethnicity. His work does cut across all social and academic groups; for anyone who's ever had a bad teacher, a moment of loneliness, Soto's vision while distinct and original, is easy to relate to.

Questions for Discussion

1. In the poem "Listening to Jets" how are the jets like his uncle's rage?

2. The poem "Phone Calls" is a puzzling one with the caller saying "It'll hurt" and then Soto hanging up. What could this exchange be about? Be creative and try listing several situations where this conversation might take place. Which one do you think is most logical?

3. The "Tuba Player" paints Soto's world as a child. How would you describe the neighborhood he grew up in?

4. "You've Gone Too Far" shows Soto's alienation from his brothers as a result of his academic success. How has Soto "gone too far"? What behaviors and habits separate the academic from the traditional family? (You might list several examples from the poem). What is the great equalizer in the poem?

5. How do teachers come off in "Everything Twice" and "Dear Journal"? Does Soto respect them or make fun of them? What seems to be his message in this poem?

6. In "Statistics" Soto is the only virgin in a class of sexually experienced students. What does the point of the poll the teacher gives seem to be? How does it make Soto, the lone virgin, feel? What does this suggest about the classroom? Does the poll seem appropriate or worthwhile?

7. "Our Five Senses" is a comic version of Aristotle's advice about daily life. Why does Soto's date keep looking at the other cars? What do the other hickey's suggest? Is this a satisfying experience for Soto?

8. How does Soto feel about extra credit assignments in "Starchy Clothes"? Are extra credit opportunities valuable or are they all as worthless as Soto suggests? List five images of stiffness from the poem. (Just in case you wanted to know, he read this poem at a reading I sent some students to for extra credit)

9. In "Western Civilization" Soto is distracted by a view of his teacher's underwear. Similarly, Soto loses the point of a teacher's lecture in "Freud is My Friend". Is it human nature to let your attention wander in class or is the student or the teacher to blame?

10. One of the most interesting uses of imagery is in "Pompeii and the Uses of our Imagination". In it uses images of a molé-filled tamale when imagining a volcano and Anglo-American movie stars when imagining warriors. The sun is "a pink scar on the horizon". Does he have an overactive imagination or is the class exercise ineffective? Why or why not?

Alberto Alvaro Rios
Pig Cookies

Background

Alberto Alvaro Rios (1952-) grew up along the Arizona- Mexico border, the son of a Mexican father and a British mother. As a boy he spoke Spanish, but when he reached school, he was required to speak English. "We got swats on the playground for speaking Spanish,' he recalls (DLB 220). He had lost his ability to speak Spanish by the time he attended junior high school and as a result began writing in a third language with the qualities of both. This language appears in his work, and according to critic Jose Saldivar makes Rios "the most articulate poetic voice of the 1980's, the most technically sophisticated and complex poet from the borderlands." (DLB , 220) Saldivar also notes that Rios' short stories are "lyrically dazzling"(ibid.) It is not surprising given his education. Rios double majored in English and Creative Writing at the University of Arizona and then, still not satisfied, earned another Bachelors degree in psychology. After starting law school in 1975, Rios decided instead to earn an MFA in Creative Writing. Currently, he is an associate professor of Creative Writing at Arizona State University.

Analysis and Summary

Pig Cookies and Other Stories, relates the intertwined lives of characters in a Mexican village nearly an hundred years ago. The opening story involves a wrecked circus train and a disaster involving an elephant, which leave an

indelible mark on the two young boys who view the tragedy. Jose and Lazaro, the two boys, watch as Don Noe, the strong man is crushed by the elephant and have their beliefs shaken. The other stories in the book involve the two boys at later junctures of their lives, as well as the citizens of their town.

Rios, in his preface to the book, questions the notion of tradition. He writes: "...as a child, if you laughed just once, at someone dangling a pig cookie in front of you, then the whole family from then on thought they were your favorite. Because of that, they've been around for centuries. Ask anyone." (xi) Rios talks about the assumptions that people make based on tradition or custom. In one story, "Susto", a young boy is run out of town because he has kissed a girl and she has screamed. In "A Trick on the World", a Chinese man, Mr. Lee, must concoct an elaborate scheme to marry the woman he loves, Jesusita, because their union would be frowned upon.

The townspeople make assumptions when Lazaro, a friend of Mr. Lee, whispers to Jesusita: "Everybody would know what whispering meant, especially coming from a man to a young woman. Whispering was by itself already the act of making love, so that anything that might happen later under the sheets was already redundant." (144)

Yet these assumptions of the town don't feel restrictive. They are, instead, an almost magical set of beliefs binding the members of the town together:

"People said that at night old Don Lazaro the mayor did not simply put his false teeth into a glass of water. No sir, not Don Lazaro. While he was at it, he also unhooked his beard, and put it on the nightstand right next to the water. Then he took off his mouth to give it a rest as well." (87)

OR

"Rosa met Jose at the circus, and under those circumstances, who would not fall in love?...To think of the extraordinariness of the circus, and to believe

for a moment that a dream and sleep and love are even better, , that the circus is only the beginning, that on top of the circus anything is possible." (74)

Rios' town is one of magic and misfits: storytellers and lovers, lovelorn bakers and a butcher who longs to be a strong man in the circus, as well as a Chinese man in a Mexican village. His are stories of outsiders, who play with the assumptions of the town and are celebrated, misunderstood or ridiculed by them.

Rios' style as well seems courtly or old-fashioned in its formal constructions in keeping with the flavor of the town and time period. Sentences like : "Nothing is bigger in a small town than two people in love without the permission of everybody."(187), seems wordy and wonderful at the same time. The bulkiness of some of Rios' expressions make his prose seem like it is translated from Spanish into English.

In the final story Rios describes the love-sick Lazaro as turning into a boat when he visits Mariquita, the woman of his dreams. (187) Lazaro, in another story, "Champagne Regions", after seeing Mariquita's nipples sees nipples in everyday objects like hats and the nose of a dog. (I probably wouldn't teach this story!)

His characters are offbeat and lovable; Jose sneaks a photograph of his daughters out of the house in his shoe, so he might talk about them (168). Mr. Lee pronounces "love" as "a sound somewhere between love and laugh *lough*." (143), convincing another character it's a worthwhile enterprise. Two lovers, Jose and Rosa, trying to trick each other, are trapped by the townspeople into marriage in "Spiced Plums".

There are some stories which might not be wholly suitable for students, the aforementioned "Champagne Regions" and "The Great Gardens of Lamberto

Diaz" which involves Lazaro Luna urinating on Lamberto Diaz' garden and the legend of the size of his member circulating in the town. Even these stories are told with humor and sweetness, though, and after some initial giggling, have themes and ideas for valid discussion. Rios' dense, rich language also makes these stories a treat, fine and delicious as a *cochito* with coffee, milk and lots of sugar.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Rios claims that "...as a child, if you laughed, just once, at someone dangling a pig cookie in front of you then the whole family from then on thought they were your favorite. Because of that, they've been around for centuries. Ask anyone." (xi) Rios seems to be commenting on cultural traditions here. What does he seem to be saying? Do we keep traditions because they are meaningful or out of habit?

2. How characters in Rios' story "use' tradition to their advantage? Consider Lazaro and Mr. lee in "A Trick on the World" or Jose in "Mr. Todasbosas".

3. How are characters limited by tradition? Consider Noe in "Susto", Jose and Rosa in "Spiced Plums". Is Lazaro a victim of circumstance or storytelling in "The Great Garden of Lamberto Diaz"?

4. Pick a sentence from Alberto Rios' work. What do you like about the construction of the sentence? After careful examination what observations do you make about his sentence structure, word choice and order?

5. What does it say about the townspeople that they say Lazaro takes off his beard and mouth at night? Do they truly believe this? What does it say about the town that rumors like this are spread?

6. Why does Rios depict a Chinese character in Mexico around the turn of the century? What is his point in writing about Mr. Lee? What does it say about the

town that it is better for people to think Jesusita became pregnant out of wedlock by Lazaro, than in wedlock by Mr. Lee?

7. The townspeople, Mrs. Calderon and Lazaro, see body parts of other town members. How do you explain their responses? Why is Lazaro's anatomical description and later, his vision of Mariquita's nipples so significant? How might the era in which the stories are set play a role in this? Would such sights be viewed and thought of differently today? Why?

8. Pick on of Rios' philosophical statements about life (or aphorisms). (i.e. "In the eyes of many a walk like that by itself was an impregnation" (139), Rios' comments about the circus in "Spiced Plums"). Explain what he is saying and why you agree or disagree with it.

9. Which is your favorite story in the collection and why?

10. What is the overall message about villages or neighborhoods in book "Pig Cookies"?

Cheech Marin
Born In East L.A.

Background

After I confessed to my Mexican-American Literature students that I had been nervous passing through an Immigration checkpoint when returning home from San Diego (my husband's car is a beat up Mazda with 200, 000 miles on it and I look foreign to some people), they told me I should rent Born in East L.A. (1988, directed and written by Cheech Marin). This film capitalizes on that fear of being deported by mistake, a fear that I'm sure many Mexican -Americans have experienced, when going through customs or those dreaded Immigration checkpoints.

While this film is not viewed as a masterpiece by any stretch of the imagination, scholar Victor Alejandro Sorell did call it "brilliantly written and directed 'rasquache' film" in his essay "Telling Images Bracket the Promise(d) Land" (from Culture Across Borders edited by David R. Maciel and Maria Herrera- Sobek, p 129). David R. Maciel and Maria Rosa Garcia-Acevedo also call the film "the first narrative comedy of the Chicano cinema with an interesting theme and solid acting" in "The Celluloid Immigrant" (also from Culture Across Borders, 189). They note the film won a major award at the Havana film festival for its political and artistic qualities (ibid. 190) Additionally, A recent article in the Journal of Pop Film and Television (Spring 1993) discusses Cheech Marin as the Chicano Moses in the film.

Analysis and Summary

The story centers around Rudy Robles, played by Cheech Marin, who is a law abiding citizen and auto mechanic (with a penchant for following pretty girls), is picked up in an INS raid on the toy factory where his undocumented cousin, Javier Morales (played by Paul Rodriguez), works. He is deported because he, unfortunately, has left his wallet, containing his money and, of course, his identification, at home on the mantel. Despite his explanations to the INS officials that he is indeed an American citizen in clear, unbroken English, he is unable to correctly name the President of the United States ("That cowboy guy on tv, um, that guy that was on Death Valley Days. John Wayne.") He is bussed to the border, then confused with another Rudy Robles, who has illegally fled Mexico, nine previous times and is told he must stay in Tijuana till he can prove otherwise. He is jailed briefly for beating up a pay phone (this is, after all, a Cheech Marin movie) where he meets Feo (Tony Plana), who rescues him from an attempted rape for a price of $100. Rudy, upon his release, becomes a tattoo artist, night club hawker, orange seller, musician and teacher of Chicano street manners in a desperate attempt to scrounge together money for a coyote to smuggle him back to East L.A. His boss in most of these positions is Jimmy (Daniel Stern), who represents the shady, unscrupulous bosses so many poor Mexicans fall prey to, who works Rudy hard for a measly 10 cents a head (luring people into a nightclub) and then docks his pay for food and beer. Meanwhile, back at home, Javier is settled into Rudy's home, watching the Playboy channel, drinking beer and feeling unsettled every time the phone machine, which sits behind a winking holographic picture of Jesus, emits a message. He thinks it is Christ himself demanding beer and chastising him for his interest in images of women in lingerie.

Back in Mexico, Rudy is falling in love with Dolores (Kamala Lopez), a Salvadoran woman who, through a series of misunderstandings, spurns, then accepts his advances. When Rudy finally returns home, it is not in the relative security of the coyote's van (he gives his seat up to a woman who is distraught at the separation from her husband). Instead, he walks across the border with a cast of thousands including his girl and his wanna-be *cholo* students of Chinese/Indian extraction at his side.

Though Leonard Maltin called Born in East L.A. "a tiresome three hours, I disagree. There are some humorous and entertaining moments. Made in 1988, the film does seem dated at times, but the gags of the holographic Jesus and religious fanatics like Feo are send-ups of cultural icons and stereotypes. When Rudy teaches his motley students how to pimp-walk ("with your left hand behind you like you cut one"), wear a bandanna, and greet *cholos* on the street ("Waas Sappening"), it is a delightful, though stereotypical, moment. A comic look at some of the stock characters from prison films is especially refreshing.

Another notable thing about Born in East L.A. is its cast. Many of the actors in the film are recognizable from the handful of Chicano films produced in Hollywood. Actors like Lupe Ontiveros, Rudy's mother, (Dona Rosa from ...and the earth did not swallow me, Henry Reyna's mother in Zoot Suit), Tony Plana, Feo, (also in Zoot Suit), Daniel Valdez, a singer, (Henry Reyna in Zoot Suit, Bartolo in ...and the earth did not swallow me) appear in this film. This shows the versatility of these actors, as well as the infrequency of these roles. Seeing Paul Rodriguez, who is primarily known as the Pollo Loco pitching comedian, as an illiterate and undocumented worker in a sombrero and poncho is also surprising.

If made today, I think the film would offer more of an indictment of INS officials and red tape and not offer the easy fairy-tale ending it does. Also the

send-up of *cholos* would be minimized, since this cliché seems quite old and potentially offensive.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In the scene where Dolores and Rudy meet (28:00 -30:00), he seems surprised that she speaks English. She is surprised he doesn't speak Spanish. Who seems smarter at this moment?

2. Take a look at the "What's Happening" montage. (47:00 -51:00) Would such a scene stereotyping cholo mannerisms be made today? Why or why not?

3. Javier watching the Playboy Channel and then being interrupted by what he thinks is the voice of God, is a humorous an potentially insulting depiction of Mexicans. (52:00-54:00) Do you find it so? Why or why not?

4. How is the INS portrayed? (18:00-20:00). Rudy's deportation seems totally unjustified and impossible. Is Marin taking too much of a liberty with the events? Was the raid on the toy factory realistic? (10:50-12:00) Also look at the Gary Soto poem "Mexicans Begin Jogging".

5. Sexism seems alive and well in this film. Certainly, the girl in the red hair and green dress seems purely a sexual object ("Hello, Eye Candy", "Have you ever had your woofers blown?"). What about Dolores? How is she portrayed? Do these two female images keep the Madonna/Whore stereotype alive? Why does the girl in the green dress appear again in the end of the film?

6. How is religion viewed in the film? What do the holographic Jesus portrait and Feo's sermons (24:00) (which drive off unwanted sexual attacks) suggest about the seriousness and uses of religion?

7. How do we feel when Jimmy refers to Rudy as "a pet"? (1:14) Does the fact he fronts Rudy an extra $100 make up for his exploitation and dehumanization of him? To want to be immigrants in general is Jimmy a friend or foe?

8. How is the INS portrayed in the final scene (1:19)? Is this realistic? Why or why not?

9. How do you feel about Marin's comedic take on more serious issues (immigration, prejudice, exploitation)? Is it effective? Why or why not?

Taylor Hackford
Blood In Blood Out

Background

Blood In, Blood Out (1993, also called Bound by Honor), written by Jimmy Santiago Baca, Jeremy Jacone and Floyd Mutrux, and directed by Taylor Hackford (who directed Officer and a Gentleman) is a film several of my male students suggested I see while on sabbatical. "You gotta see it, " I remember Yemel saying with great enthusiasm, as if my education in Chicano Literature would be woefully incomplete until I had. From Yemel's tone (and the title), I knew Blood In, Blood Out wasn't typical of the films I'd previously shown in class. Somehow I knew the film, which covers the lives of three young men involved in a gang in East Los Angeles, was violent (I think Jesus, another student, had warned me), but I wasn't quite prepared for the violence in the film. Part jail drama, part gang and family saga, the film had me turning away from the screen at moments (I can be squeamish when I comes to violence) and left me picturing myself having to leave the classroom if I showed it to students. It isn't that Blood In, Blood Out is anymore violent that your average war picture; it's that the violence is so realistic. Scenes of gang warfare and prison murders give the viewer a sense of the brutality faced on the street and in la pinta by Miklo, Paco and Cruz, the heroes of the story.

There are other problems with Blood In, Blood Out as well. According to Vincent Canby of the New York Times: "The film is big and long (nearly three hours), passionate and flat. It's full of tragic incident, but skimpy about the details of quotidian lives. Though it's not the epic it means to be, it's not a failure." (April 30, 1993, C8) Yet another critic, David Sterrit of the Christian

Science Monitor, calls "the decision to let the picture to run nearly three hours ... disastrous." (April 30, 1993, p 13). He also criticizes the film's "ghetto-film clichÈs and clumsy dialogue" (ibid.) Canby, though, does note the film's "redeeming sincerity" (C8)

Analysis and Summary

As mentioned earlier, Jimmy Santiago Baca is listed as a co-writer of the film. In his autobiography, Working in the Dark (which I read earlier this year), Baca discusses the actual making of the film and how it felt to return to San Quentin (where he was once imprisoned) to make the film. Baca said he returned quickly to the prisoner mentality, just by stepping into the tiers and hated the memories of less than humane treatment by the guards. It is hard to watch the prison sequences without thinking of Baca (who appears in the film as, Gato, a member of Onda, the Mexican prison gang) and his pain at returning.

However, the film opens with the earlier innocence of the characters and colorful and loving shots of East Los Angeles. There are shots of Brooklyn Avenue (since renamed Cesar Chavez Boulevard) and 5 Puntos Market (which is still in existence) as well as the murals throughout East L.A. (or East Los, as the characters in the film call it). The Pinon Tree, north of Chavez Boulevard, also plays a central role in the film as a key symbol.

The film begins with Miklo (played by Damian Chapa) , a half Mexican, half White character, returning home to East Los Angeles. Miklo is often called "Milkweed" by his Chicano cousins, who continually taunt him about the whiteness of his skin. Yet, Miklo, who speaks Spanish and a bit of calo (or street language) desires acceptance in the barrio and his cousins' gang, the Vato Locos. He is willing to risk his life for the gang and eventually ends up in prison for

killing Smokey, a rival gang member, in retaliation for the maiming of his cousin, Cruz Candelaria (Jesse Boregos).

Cruz is the artist, who paints cars, murals and canvases with beautiful depictions of Quetzquotal and realistic pictures of his fellow vato locos. He is talented and a peacemaker, until he is brutally attacked by rival gang members who crush several of his vertebrae, by slamming him, back down, on a fire hydrant. He is miraculously able to walk, but in order to cope with the physical pain, becomes a drug addict.

The final main character is Paco Aguilar (Benjamin Bratt in his pre-television days), Cruz' step-brother, who after being virtually the gang's leader, becomes a Marine and, later, a Drug Enforcement Agency Officer. He and Miklo end up on opposite sides of the law, forever straining their sworn brotherhood of their Vato Loco days.

The film, which is three hours long, takes a turn when Miklo goes to San Quentin and tries to survive the racism and violence of jail. He joins Onda, a Mexican prison gang, by killing Big Al, the leader of the Aryan gang, sometimes called AV. Since Miklo is white-looking, he has a hard time convincing Onda leader, Montana, to let him join but in an impassioned speech convinces Montana that "Chicano's not a color. It's the way you think. The way you give up your life for a carnal." (52:00)

As Miklo becomes more active in Onda, Juanito, Cruz and Paco's little brother, discovers one of Cruz's discarded needles and accidentally kills himself. This creates a rift in the family, which leads both Paco and his parents to reject Cruz completely.

Paco and Miklo also have their moment of truth. While Miklo, who is out of jail and having difficulty leading and honest life, robs an armored truck, Paco

is called to the scene. They confront each other, Miklo runs and Paco shoots him in the leg to stop him. Miklo ends up losing his leg and returning to jail.

Once back in jail, Miklo serves as a leader of Onda and orders gang warfare. Seventeen inmates die and Miklo is established as a kingpin. In a final confrontation with Miklo, between the glass visiting window that separates inmates and visitors, Paco tells Miklo, " La Raza is about people surviving with pride and dignity, not lying and murdering." (2:43:00) This seems to be one of the main themes of the film.

The other main theme, that of family, is made clear by the end of the film. Cruz takes Paco to see an early mural of Miklo and Paco by the East Los Angeles River. "You've got the same blood pumping in your hearts. It's a bond you can't break. neither can Miklo." Family "Raza style" is everything to Cruz, and although Miklo has claimed Onda as his family, Paco knows they are all bound permanently.

The film is a true education about prison life, though the epilogue does suggest that the gang warfare in prison is now under control. It also gives a good sense of the East Los Angeles culture, with compelling shots of the Dia de Los Muertos Celebration making its way down Chavez Boulevard (as it still does each year.) It's the violence that gives me pause about showing it to a class.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Is what Cruz says true? Does Miklo "(have) it worse" than either Paco or Cruz because of his "fluorescent" skin and Mexican soul?

2. How important is "famila" in the film? Are Paco and Miklo forever bound or did their destinies separate them? Or are they brothers forever? Can an oath you swore in youth last your whole life?

3. How does Baca seem to feel about gang warfare and racism in prison? (Check out the "pork chop" scene, 46:00-49:00, if you're having trouble with this question).

4. What does "Blood in...blood out" mean? (Again, the one hour mark).

5. What is Montana's philosophy about gang warfare? How does he feel about Chicanos and Blacks killing each other? (51:00-54:00)

6. By the end of the film how do you feel about the "Win it all or lose it all" philosophy? (2:50:00)

7. Why does Paco shoot at Miklo during the robbery? Why does he let him go?

8. Why does Miklo order Montana's death? How is Montana his real father, Onda, his family? Why would Miklo want Montana, about to see his daughter for the first time in fourteen years, dead?

9. Is Paco ultimately responsible for Miklo's involvement in the gang, prison time and amputation? Cruz suggests this at the end of the film (2:43:00). Because Miklo looked up to Paco and wanted his approval, he took the first step of attacking the 5 Puntos. Is Paco at fault or not?

10. What does the East Los Angeles pine tree seem to symbolize?

11. Cruz, the artist, seems to be the conscience of the piece. Both his final speech (2:43) and his description of his paintings for the art patrons (57:00- 58:00) suggest he is the one with a vision of his raza. How is he as an artist symbolic of the artist's function? How is he a bridge between Miklo and Paco? What does this suggest? His speech on Queztlquotl (8:50-9:20) might also be instructive.

12. The tattooing scene seems an important rite of passage. (18:00) How is tattooing symbolic?

Sabbatical Summary

As someone once said, writing is a political act. While reading the works and viewing the films discussed in these pages, I have found this to be the case among many, if not all of, the works of Chicano Literature on my sabbatical list. Whether the works were older, from the early beginnings of the genre or more recent, contemporary works, there seems a shared commitment to presenting the worlds the writers and filmmakers knew with honesty and conviction, daring society to see what it might have missed, daring to look beyond the surface into the truth of race and gender.

While reading (and viewing) the works, I viewed the texts as primary sources, highlighting quotations, key events and major plot revelations as details worthy of study and question. I sometimes sought the insights of secondary sources (i.e. critical commentaries, reviews and interviews) to further illuminate the major issues isolated by the authors.

For the works of fiction, I include my notes with biographical information on each of the authors, summaries of the works and some analysis of what makes the work valuable or notable for classroom study. I also include questions for discussion, which look at individual components of the work (sometimes noting a specific page number or quotation for reference) to stimulate critical thinking about the works presented.

The Film Component differs slightly. Since many of the directors had little biographical information written about them, instead I provide background notes about the history or genesis of the film and the filmmaker's role in that

genesis. An analysis and summary follow, as do the questions for discussion. Instead of marking page numbers, I specify scenes by demarcating the time code (in hours and minutes) to signal where the scene occurs in the film. Since film is a visual medium, I find that using a specific scene helps facilitate discussion and thought.

As an instructor, I am certain all I have gleaned during this sabbatical with enhance my teaching in the classroom. Not only do I have a greater sense of the underpinnings of the genre from reading early works like Pocho (regarded by many as the first Chicano novel) and "I am Joaquin" (viewed as the seminal poem of the Chicano Movement), but I also have a sense of the innovations and styles which emerged later (Tomas Rivera's y no se lo trago la tierra is notable in this regard). To have read and researched the major works on my list will give me a deep and fuller context in which to place the works I do teach.

The benefits to my students include the more complete biographical and background research I've had the opportunity to perform. I found it particularly inspiring that many of the authors studied grew up as the children of migrant farm workers and came to writing late. Their purpose as writers, to help fight prejudice, oppression and inequality, comes from their own beginnings and passionate desire to help others. Having read of Victor Martinez' 20 year struggle for recognition, or the ten years it took for Helena Viramontes to write Under the Feet of Jesus, would inspire students who have felt discouraged by similar struggles. Add to this, my heightened awareness of this literature, which I use not only in the Mexican-American Literature course, but in courses like Freshman Composition and English 67, which will no doubt lead to more informative lectures and discussions of these writers and their stories.

Yet another benefit is to the college itself. Since I am sometimes asked to be on panels for campus-wide celebrations (Women's History Month, the Ceasar

Chavez Birthday celebration) , I feel my enhanced background will make me a more valuable contributor to such panels.

Finally, after this year of study, I can also be of greater value to my colleagues. By making this report available in my department and others, I hope to share what I've learned about this important and emerging genre. I also include photocopies of my research sources so interested instructors may have access to them. Already, (in fact, last semester) I provided a fellow teacher at Mount Sac with background information on the film Zoot Suit and some historical hand-outs on the Sleepy Lagoon Murder case. This perhaps was one of my greatest surprises: to be of use to a colleague, even while my sabbatical was underway, offering advice and information about the research I'd done. Yet another colleague, asked for suggestions for Chicano speakers for Writers' Day, a request I was more than happy to fulfill.

This year has given me many opportunities to deepen my knowledge of the authors (and filmmakers) of Chicano Literature and their works.
I am grateful to the Sabbatical Committee for the opportunity to immerse myself in these works, as the issues of Latino and Chicano cultures become more prominent in our society. Whether its listening to Ricky Martin sing "La Vida Loca" (he's actually of Puerto Rican descent, a third generation American) or reading that Gregory Nava has just made a three picture deal with New Line Cinema because the Latino market is the largest growing movie market in the United States, I am glad to have the heightened awareness and insight this year has afforded me.

Appendix A

Sabbatical Proposal for Cynthia Adam Prochaska

Background Information

The current trend in literary scholarship has been that of multi-ethnic literature, toward a diversity of voices and away from the predominantly white male authors who dominated literary history from what seems like time immemorial. For teachers at Mount San Antonio College, this has been a positive step, enabling professors of English, for instance, to assign students reading that directly pertain to their ethnic experience. To see the joy on a student's face when she reads about a Chinese mother and confirms her own perceptions or to discuss a poem by an author who lives in El Monte and have a student raise his hand and say, 'I know that street corner!," is to see students connecting with literature in a way that helps them make sense of their daily lives and sensitizes others to their cultural experience. Since the largest portion of our student body is Hispanic (37.5% as of July of 1997) --and a great percentage of those students Chicano-- the study of Chicano Literature has particular relevance to our campus. Additionally, the issues that Chicano Literature explores are relevant to many other ethnic groups (the issues of family, gender and racism). This makes the field an especially rich one for study.

Proposed Project

Given the workload of a full-time, tenured English professor, who in a typical semester might grade as many as 900 papers (I did the math once), attend meetings and

be actively involved in committee work, it is virtually impossible to pursue extensive academic research or active, critical reading while school is in session. It is heartbreaking to me, as a person with an interest in Mexican-American Literature, when a colleague of mine relates that Victor Villasenor's 500 page novel Rain of Gold moved him so much that it made him cry and when he asks if I've read it, I simply shake my head, "No." It is also frustrating when a student asks in disbelief, "You haven't read 'Yo Soy Joaquin'?" (Corky Gonzales' landmark poem) of declares, 'You've got to see Boulevard Nights" (a film about the East Los Angeles gang scene). Hence, to further my knowledge and understanding of Mexican-American literature and culture, I propose a two part sabbatical project (see attached timeline) in which I would, during the first semester, read major and recently released works by Chicano authors and do library research on the works and authors. Then, in the second semester, I would study films pertaining to the Mexican-American experience and read critical responses and scholarly research to and of those films. My resulting report would include thorough study notes on the works read (and films viewed), a list of critical analysis questions as well as a compilation of critical and autobiographical information on the authors and/or filmmakers.

Benefit to the Department and Students

As I read further into the works of Mexican American authors, I hope, first, to increase my awareness of the issues and frustrations facing all my students of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and specifically those facing our students of Mexican- American

descent. To benefit my students, I hope to have a wider selection of literature to draw on and to make my classroom lectures more informed and scholarly, as a result of my background research. For my department, I hope to serve as a resource person n the area of Mexican-American literature and help those interested select works by Chicano authors for classroom study. The notes and biographical information might also aid interested teachers in preparing classroom discussions. Finally, as a professor who has spoken on a recent Cesar Chavez panel discussion and has been asked to join the Cesar Chavez Day planning committee, I hope the project can benefit any campus celebration I aid in planning and/or participate in. Also, a Writers' Day Committee member, this project might help me establish contacts within the Mexican American literary community to help bring notable Chicano authors to campus. By being more aware of the issues in Mexican -American literature-- and becoming a greater resource for the campus, I hope to make a lasting contribution to our students and faculty.

Sabbatical Timeline

August 1998	Victor Villasenor Rain of Gold (novel) Jimmy Santiago Baca selections from Working in the Dark (autobiography) and Selected poems
September 1998	Lorna Dee Cervantes Selected poems and criticism Jose Antonio Villareal Pocho (novel)
October 1998	Yxta Maya Murray Locas (novel) Anna Castillo Loverboys (short story collection)
November 1998	Corky Gonzales "Yo Soy Joaquin" (30-page poem) Victor Martinez Parrot in the Oven (novel)
December 1998	Dagoberto Gilb Selected Stories (short story collection) Tomas Rivera yo no lo se trago la tierra (novel)

January 1999	Helena Maria Viramontes
	Under the Feet of Jesus (novel)
	Boulevard Nights (film)
	Blood In, Blood Out (film)
February 1999	American Me (film)
	El Norte (film)
	My Family (film)
	"Solider Boy" a play by Severo Perez
March 1999	Zoot Suit (film)
	... and the earth did not swallow him (film)
	Mi Vida Loca (film)
	Born in East L.A. (film)
April 1999	Gary Soto
	"Novio Boy" (play)
	Selected poems from Junior College
	(poetry collection)
	Alberto Alvaro Rios
	Selected stories from Pig Cookies
	(short story collection)
May 1999	Report Writing

I have always had a reverence for literature as a vehicle for truth, honesty, and fidelity. My work must reflect those values. For the above reasons, although I am still called a Chicano writer, I repudiate that classification. I am an American writer. My work falls into a sub-genre of American literature."

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VILLASEÑOR, Edmund
See VILLASEÑOR, Víctor E(dmundo)

* * *

VILLASEÑOR, Víctor
See VILLASEÑOR, Víctor E(dmundo)

* * *

VILLASEÑOR, Víctor E(dmundo) 1940-
(Edmund Villaseñor, Víctor Villaseñor)

PERSONAL: Born May 11, 1940, in Carlsbad, Calif.; son of Salvadore (in business) and Lupe (Gómez) Villaseñor; married Barbara Bloch, December 29, 1974; children: David Cuauhtemoc. *Education:* Attended University of San Diego and Santa Clara University.

ADDRESSES: Home—1302 Stewart St., Oceanside, Calif. 92054.

CAREER: Construction worker in California, 1965-70; writer, 1970—. *Military service:* U.S. Army.

WRITINGS:

(Under name Edmund Villaseñor) *Macho!* (novel), Bantam, 1973.
(Under name Víctor Villaseñor) *Jury: The People vs. Juan Corona* (nonfiction), Little, Brown, 1977.
Rio Grande, Putnam, 1989.

Contributor to *Aztlan.*

SIDELIGHTS: Chicano author Víctor E. Villaseñor has attained recognition well beyond the small and somewhat insular Chicano literary community. Villaseñor's first novel, *Macho!,* benefited from being published at the height of a powerful migrant farmworkers' organizing campaign in California in 1973. The novel recounts a year in the life of Roberto García, a young Tarascan Indian from the state of Michoacán, Mexico, who migrates illegally to California in 1963 to work in the fields. Villaseñor describes García's intense culture shock in abandoning his isolated, tradition-bound village for the rich but lonely and frightening land of the north. The victim of exploitation and discrimination in the United States, García finally decides to go back to his village and resume working his family's small farm. But he returns a changed man who can no longer accept without question the traditional Mexican social code, particularly the *machista* demand that he take blood vengeance against the villager who murdered his father. Thus, García's adventure reflects the Chicano's transcultural experience—the melding of features from both the Spanish-Mexican and North American societies.

Villaseñor's second book, *Jury: The People vs. Juan Corona,* is a nonfiction account of the trial of Juan Corona, a California labor contractor who was convicted in 1973 of murdering twenty-five derelicts and drifters. After covering the trial as a journalist, Villaseñor decided to write a book focusing on the jury's agonizing struggle to reach a fair verdict in one of the worst mass murder cases in U.S. history. By exhaustively interviewing all of the jurors over a period of months, Villaseñor was able to reconstruct the details of eight days of emotionally charged deliberations that led the jury from an original majority favoring acquittal to a unanimous verdict of guilty.

Villaseñor's examination of the highly complicated and controversial case offers provocative insights into the workings of the American jury system. The author questions the system, quoting a Corona juror agonizing over whether a man's life should rest in the hands of twelve ordinary people seemingly ill-equipped by education or training to sort out a tangled skein of law and evidence. Based on the Corona trial, Villaseñor determines that the system does indeed work: in the crucible of unrestricted deliberations, a jury will rise to the solemn challenge of judging and render its verdict with integrity and good faith. In light of the Corona jury members' obvious human frailties, Villaseñor nevertheless concludes in *Jury,* "In becoming close to all the jurors and their families, I regained a respect and admiration for my fellow man."

Villaseñor told *HW:* "I was born in the barrio of Carlsbad, California, and raised on a ranch four miles away in Oceanside. Both my parents are from Mexico, and I grew up in a house where there were no books. When I started school, I spoke more Spanish than English. I was a D student and every year of school made me feel more stupid and confused—many of these feelings had to do with being Chicano. In my junior year of high school, I told my parents I had to quit school or I would go crazy. Finally, they allowed me to quit. I was eighteen years old. I felt free, I felt wonderful, but I didn't know what to do with my freedom.

"I worked on the ranch, I worked in the fields—I was making money and it felt great. But then that fall when the other kids went back to school and the illegal workers went back to Mexico,

I didn't know what to do with my life. An older cousin got me into college on a temporary basis if I finished high school. It was the University of San Diego and it was just getting started and was not yet accredited. On this campus I found out that books were not punishment, and if I couldn't remember dates I wasn't necessarily stupid. I flunked English of course (because I only had the reading ability of a fifth grader) and every other course except for philosophy and theology.

"The shock of my life came that year when a teacher told me I was very bright. But still I felt like I was going crazy. I was beginning to realize that I was ashamed of being Mexican. So I boxed. I fought with such a rage of confusion that I was undefeated.

"The following summer for the first time in my life I began to drink and discover my sexuality and feel wonderful and yet terrible from guilt. My parents sent me to Mexico where I fell in with some hip people. I was introduced to Mexican art, Mexican history, and I read my first book, Homer's *Iliad,* as well as *Tender Is the Night* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *The Little Prince.* I began having all night talks with an older woman. I felt good about myself. I wanted to stay in Mexico and never return to the United States where I felt ashamed of being Mexican. But my parents came for me and after weeks of arguments I agreed to go back home for awhile.

"I found myself feeling like a bombshell—ready to explode, prepared to kill anyone who made me feel ashamed. I was reading a copy of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* given to me by the woman in Mexico, when it hit me: I would write. Instead of killing or bashing people's brains out, I would change their minds. I would write good books that reach out and touch people and I would influence the world. I got a dictionary and a high school English grammar book and I built a desk and I began to read books eight months out of the year. I'd go to bookstores and buy ten books at a time, read them, dissect them, and then reassemble them. Then for four months of the year I'd support myself in construction.

"Then I began to write. I wrote for ten years, completing nine novels and sixty-five short stories and receiving more than 260 rejections before I sold my first book, *Macho!* Then, while I waited for *Macho!* to be published, I read about Juan Corona being arrested for twenty-five murders. Immediately I thought, Another Mexican being arrested. Hell, no man could kill twenty-five people. He must be innocent. So I talked to my publisher and he told me to look into it and write a short letter about what kind of book I thought I could write. They commissioned me to do the book. I spent the next three years investigating and writing about the Corona case."

BIOGRAPHICAL/CRITICAL SOURCES:

BOOKS

Villaseñor, Víctor, *Jury: The People vs. Juan Corona,* Little, Brown, 1977.

PERIODICALS

Christian Science Monitor, October 13, 1977.
English Journal, January, 1974.
Examiner and Chronicle (San Francisco), November 6, 1973.
New York Times Book Review, May 1, 1977.

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VILLAURRUTIA, Xavier 1903-1950

PERSONAL: Born in 1903, in Mexico City, Mexico; died in 1950. *Education:* Studied drama at Yale University, 1935-36.

CAREER: Poet and dramatist; associated, with José Gorostiza, with the arts magazine *Contemporáneos,* 1928-31.

AWARDS, HONORS: Rockefeller Foundation grant, 1935.

WRITINGS:

POETRY

Reflejos, Editorial "Cvltvra," 1926.
Nocturnos (also see below) Fábula, 1933.
Nostalgia de la muerte (includes *Nocturnos, Nocturno de los ángeles, Nocturno mar,* and *Nocturno rosa*), Ediciones del Sur, 1938, 2nd edition, Ediciones Mictlan, 1946.
(Contributor) *Laurel, antología de la poesía moderna en lengua española,* Editorial Seneca, 1941.
Décima muerte y otros poemas no coleccionados, Nueva Voz, 1941.
Canto a la primavera y otros poemas, Editorial Stylo, 1948.

Also contributor to *Ocho poetas* (includes *Primeros poemas*), 1923.

PLAYS

¡En qué piensas! (also see below), Letras de México, 1938, published as *¿En qué piensas? Misterio en un acto,* Center for Curriculum Development (Philadelphia), 1971.
Sea usted breve: Farsa en un acto (also see below), Γ Nandino, 1940.
La hiedra: Pieza en tres actos, Editorial "Cvltvra," 1941.
La mujer legítima: Pieza en tres actos, R. Loera y Chávez, 1943.
Autos profanos (five sketches; includes "Parece mentira," ".En que piensas!," "Ha llegado el momento," "Sea usted breve," and "El ausente"), Ediciones Letras de México, 1943.
Invitación a la muerte: Drama en tres actos (first produced at Teatro del Palacio de Bellas Artes, July 27, 1947), Ediciones Letras de México, 1944.
El yerro candente, Ediciones Letras de México, 1945.
El pobre Barba Azul: Comedia en tres actos, Socidad General de Autores de México, 1947.
La tragedia de las equivocaciones, Gráficos Guanajuato, 1950.
El solterón: Obra en un acto, [Mexico], 1954.
(Contributor) *Teatro mexicano contemporáneo* (includes "Parece mentira," ".En que piensas!," and "Sea usted breve,"), Aguilar, 1959, 3rd edition, 1968.

Also author of "Juego peligroso."

OTHER

Textos y pretextos: Literatura—drama—pintura, La Casa de España en México, 1940.
Poesía y teatro completos, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1953.
Obras: Poesía, teatro, prosas varias, crítica, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1953, 2nd edition, 1966.
Cartas de Villaurrutia a Novo, 1935-1936, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, Departamento de Literatura, 1966.
Crítica cinematográfica (film criticism), compiled by Miguel Capistrán, Dirección General de Difusion Cultural, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1970.
(Compiler and author of prologue) Ramón López Velarde, *El león y la virgen* (poetry), 2nd edition, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1971.

* * *

VIÑAS, D.

See VIÑAS, David

Rain Maker

People Weekly; Chicago; Sep 28, 1992;

Volume: 38
Issue: 13
Start Page: 95
ISSN: 00937673
Subject Terms: Writers
Personal profiles
Hispanic Americans
Personal Names: **Villasenor, Victor**

Abstract:
Writer Victor Villasenor hopes his acclaimed family saga, "Rain of Gold," will give Mexican-Americans a sense of pride about their roots.

Full Text:

It looked a writer's a Victor Villasenor's masterwork, the true saga of his family's migration to California during the Mexican Revolution, had been purchased by G.P. Putnam's Sons for a $75,000 advance and was scheduled for publication in the spring of 1989. It had already been selected as a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate. There were just a few little catches: Putnam wanted Villasenor to slash the 540-page manuscript by 75 pages, change the title from Rain of Gold to Rio Grande and call it fiction in hopes of boosting sales.

The Mexican-American author blew his top. At lunch in Manhattan with Putnam's CEO Phyllis Grann, he bent his fork out of shape and shouted, "I want a divorce! You've been an unfaithful mother to my book!" He got what he wanted--an agreement from Putnam that he could buy back his baby. It proved to be the right decision. Published at its original length last year by tiny Arte Publico Press of Houston, Rain of Gold received glowing reviews ("One of the best...books of this or any year," declared Alan Ryan of USA Today) and won Villasenor plenty of attention. NBC hired him to develop a miniseries about Mexican-Americans, and Dell Books reportedly paid $250,000 to put out a paperback edition of Rain of Gold, which reaches bookstores this month.

For Villasenor, 52, who remortgaged his Oceanside, Calif., home to rescue Rain of Gold from Putnam's clutches, all that success is mere gravy--what matters is that he did things his way. Rain of Gold simply couldn't be called Rio Grande. "They wanted a 'Mexican' title for a Mexican book, but Rio Grande is a John Wayne movie," he says. And the book had to be billed as nonfiction, he explains, because "I wanted my children to see examples of real Mexican heroes. I grew up thinking Mexicans could only wash dishes and work in the fields." (Putnam, for their part, claims that Villasenor sold them the book as fiction and agreed to all their suggestions before suddenly changing his mind.)

Villasenor's intense pride in his heritage developed late. The third of five children, he was raised in Oceanside, where his mother, Lupe Gomez, and his father, Juan Salvador Villasenor, had settled after separately fleeing their war-torn homeland--Juan in 1916 and Lupe in 1922. Juan Salvador amassed a fortune in the U.S. as a liquor-store magnate, and Victor grew up on the family's 166-acre ranch. But even for Mexican immigrants of means, discrimination was a fact of life. "On my first day of school," Victor remembers, "the teachers smacked me on the head when I spoke Spanish and said, 'None of that Mexican stuff.' "

The incident filled him with rage and self-loathing, feelings that intensified when his dyslexia made reading nearly impossible. He muddled through until the 11th grade, then headed for Mexico--and was reborn. "For the first time, I saw Mexicans who were doctors, lawyers--heroes," he says. He also began teaching himself to read, slowly and by sheer determination, and by the time he returned to the ranch at 20, he had a calling. "Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man made me realize a writer could

The Golden Gamble

Victor Villasenor Returned Big Advance, Hocked Home to Publish His Book His Way

By DOUGLAS P. SHUIT
TIMES STAFF WRITER

In most rags-to-riches stories about writers, the author toils for years on a "big" book, goes into debt, finally gets a contract from a top publisher, then enjoys huge success. But, in the case of Victor Villasenor, a hard working, well-regarded writer from Oceanside, it didn't quite work out that way.

The key elements of the story were there—the hard work, the debts and the big payoff.

It's just that when Villasenor was poised at the brink of success, with a contract for his book, "Rain of Gold," from a major publisher, the advance in the bank and a book club deal in the works, he decided to reverse the process.

His publisher, G. P. Putnam, wanted to shorten his 500-page family history, change the title and call it fiction.

Villasenor didn't. So he hocked his family home and agreed to pay back the $75,000 he'd received from the publisher, G. P. Putnam & Sons, for the book about three generations of his family and his parents' immigration to California from Mexico. He and Putnam parted amicably. A spokeswoman for the publisher had no comment on "Rain of Gold."

After months of looking, Villasenor found a small ethnic publisher in Texas that had never marketed a hardcover book and could come up with only a $1,500 advance.

Still, there is a happy ending.

Villasenor got "Rain of Gold" published to highly favorable reviews. Some critics have called the book a Mexican-American version of "Roots."

And now, a year after publication, he is reaping financial rewards. After the book was brought out by Arte Publico Press in Houston, Villasenor signed a six-figure contract with Dell/Dellacorte for the paperback rights. Negotiations are under way for a sequel, and NBC has hired him to create a television series about a family of Mexican immigrants.

"We had gambled everything on the book, and we were at the end of our ropes financially," Villasenor said recently.

Villasenor was a moderately successful writer. He had published a novel, "Macho!" in 1973, and three years later wrote "Jury," an account of the Juan Corona murder trial. In the early 1980s he wrote a screenplay, "The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez," that was made into a public television movie.

DON BOOMER / Los Angeles Times

Author Victor Villasenor with, from left, his wife, Barbara, sons David and Joseph and his mother, Lupe, at his Oceanside home.

But his successes had been spread out over a period of years, and Villasenor said he was broke when he finally sold "Rain of Gold" the first time. He'd spent 12 years writing his family's saga and had gone $65,000 in debt by the time he finished, he said.

"When we sold to Putnam and got the initial $75,000, we were so happy. I already owed all the money, so the Putnam check was gone instantly," he said.

Soon, the joy at seeing his book published under the imprint of a major publishing house was gone, too.

Villasenor said Putnam, worried about small sales orders, wanted to shorten the book by 150 pages, change the title and call it fiction. Even though the book reads like fiction, Villasenor said it is based on the experiences of his family.

"They wanted to call my parents fiction. They wanted to call it 'Rio Grande,' like an old John Wayne movie," said Villasenor, 52, recounting problems that developed during 1989 and 1990.

The author was adamant about keeping "Rain of Gold" as his title, since that is the English translation of the name of his mother's village in Mexico. And he said he didn't want anyone to think he was making up the real-life struggles his family faced in leaving Mexico.

"If a little girl reads this book and it's called fiction, what's she going to think, 'Oh, it's just fiction.' But when she reads it and sees a picture of my mother, then this little girl is going to say, 'Oh, my God, if a woman can do that, I can do that,' " he said.

Since Villasenor had already spent the money advanced to him by Putnam, in order to buy the book back he had to borrow his mother's life savings and get a second mortgage on his home.

"When I bought the book back, I was in absolute terror. I ended up in the hospital twice. At one point I couldn't eat, and I couldn't drink water. All I could do was suck on ice for about three days, because I was just so tense," Villasenor said.

He said it took him seven months to find Arte Publico Press, a small publisher that specializes in Latino writers and is affiliated with the University of Houston.

Then his fear was that his book would be lost without a major publisher's promotional machine. "This was their first hardback. We had to start from scratch to build up a sales force, a publicity department," Villasenor said.

Arte Publico Press has gone on to sell more than 20,000 hardcover copies of the book, a modest number by bestseller standards, but enough to satisfy Villasenor and his publisher, which has used the experience with "Rain of Gold" to publish additional hardcover books by Latino writers.

Dell/Dellacorte will publish the quality paperback edition of the book in October.

The head of Arte Publico Press, Nicolas Kanellos, said that in publishing Villasenor's book "we developed a great deal in a short period of time because of what we had to do to market Victor's book."

For many writers, signing books is a burdensome chore, something done to satisfy fans, publishers and bookstore owners. But not Villasenor. Villasenor doesn't just sign books. He uses an elaborate scroll to draw a picture, then insists on hugging everyone who gets a copy.

"In each book, I draw a long-stemmed flower and plant it in a sea of love. My grandmother always said we are like flowers and if we're planted in love, no matter what catastrophes happen—financial, loss of children, divorce, job—we'll never break, we'll never get bitter," he said.

IN BRIEF

New York Times Book Review

Children of Another Revolution

RAIN OF GOLD
By Victor Villaseñor.
Illustrated 551 pp. Houston: Arte Publico Press. $19.95.

By Tom Miller

ON Aug. 18, 1929, Juan Salvador Villaseñor married Lupe Gómez in a church in Santa Ana, Calif. Each came from a family that had fled the horrors of the Mexican Revolution. The life their families led before that cataclysm and their eventual settlement in the United States is one of survival and wonder. Now their son, Victor Villaseñor, has written "Rain of Gold," a grand and vivid history of both clans in an ambitious narrative that draws on the utter terror of those years and the intuitive wisdom of his people as they adapted to their new country.

An Irish priest who loves bootleg booze performs the joyful wedding, which is attended by a Jewish tailor, an Indian sheriff who protects bootleggers, and of course both families, including the groom's God-fearing mother, who often sits in the outhouse in blasphemous conversation with the Virgin Mary, "the Bible open on her lap, a cigarette hanging from her lips and a glass of whiskey in her left hand."

The immigrant experience has always been integral to the American adventure. What makes the Mexican ordeal different is that they arrived by foot rather than by airplane or in steerage. The Villaseñor and Gómez families came in the first wave of mass migration from Mexico, in the early 20th century. Victor Villaseñor had been hearing stories from his family's older generations about the arduous journey, descriptions of cruelty and hardship that strained credulity and obsessed him with the desire to squeeze every memory from his elders, and then visit the Mexican settlements where they grew up.

Mr. Villaseñor, author of two previous books, alternates between the two families, focusing on the volatile Juan Salvador and the thoughtful Lupe; eventually the book becomes their love story. His dialogue is convincing and the pace seldom falters. What "Rain of Gold" shows best, however, is how the Porfirio Diaz regime, and the revolution it provoked in 1910, affected day-to-day family life. American investment in Mexico, encouraged by both Governments, proved meddlesome, manipulative and eventually destructive to the workers toiling in American-owned mines. "These tricky *gringos*," Lupe's father says of a United States mining company, "they got it all planned out for us for the next two hundred years!"

THE Villaseñors, meanwhile, among the thousands camped at Juárez hoping to cross into the United States, witness daily degradations that extend into their own family. One day, out searching for firewood, Juan Salvador witnesses a dozen "wild men" ambush six horsemen, "hacking them with their machetes, and shooting their horses out from under them" for their clothes, shoes and surviving mounts. Flies, ants and vultures quickly attack, and, crazy with hunger for himself and his family, Juan bites a dead horse's "bloody hairy hide. . . . but he just didn't have big enough teeth, nor enough saliva to get at the piece of dirty, dry meat, and he began to choke." Another day in the streets Juan sees a disgusting and wrinkled old bag of bones wearing black, with gnarled hands, sick-looking, dirty, whining, crying, clawing, pitiful. Much to his horror he discovers it's his own mother, shamelessly begging.

Both families have a spiritual underpinning where God and nature are worshiped as one. Time is measured in fists — "the sun was five fists off the jagged horizon" — and the sun itself, "the right eye of God," is "the blanket of the poor."

Lupe's family, once in the States, follows the crops. She dreams of sufficient education to land an office job. "You dirty little Mexican," one teacher scolded the dignified girl, "You're too old to be in school!" Salvador — he had dropped his first name to throw police off his trail — had been eyeing Lupe from afar, and manipulated a chance meeting in the sweltering fields one day when he punched out a boorish Anglo foreman who refused her father a sip of water. " 'Thank you,' she said, 'but you didn't have to hit him so hard.' "

By this time the smooth-talking, impulsive Salvador, whose few years in the States had been filled with mining camps, jails, fights, brothels, gambling dens and cock pits, had settled into the bootlegging profession. He had plenty of street smarts, but often the street [illegible] of his smarts. He admired the solidarity [illegible] and vilified the spineless *vendidos*, the Mexican sellouts. Still, it "never failed to amaze him how different his people were from the Anglos. *Los mojados* never wasted anything. Instead of green grass in front of their homes, they had vegetable gardens. And they didn't fence in their livestock, but let them roam free so they could eat anything they could find. Instead, they fenced in their crops."

"Rain of Gold" captures well the odd formality of rural turn-of-the-century Mexican speech patterns, but repetitive clichés and telegraphed scenes diminish it somewhat. Mr. Villaseñor's style swerves from engaging and moving to cornier than a hip-pocket *novela*. His characters are keenly drawn, however, and the smells pungent. Often I felt like a family member quietly watching from a corner stool. Put "Rain of Gold" on the same shelf with Carey McWilliams's "North From Mexico" and "Bracero," by Eugene Nelson, to better understand how overwhelmingly the Mexican border renews life and fosters love. □

Tom Miller, author of "The Panama Hat Trail" and "On the Border," is writing a book about his recent [illegible]ls through Cuba.

Jimmy Santiago Baca

(2 January 1952 -)

A. Gabriel Meléndez
University of New Mexico

BOOKS: *Jimmy Santiago Baca* (Santa Barbara, Cal.: Rock Bottom, 1978);
Immigrants in Our Own Land (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); enlarged as *Immigrants in Our Own Land and Earlier Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1990);
Swords of Darkness, edited by Gary Soto (San Jose, Cal.: Mango, 1981);
What's Happening (Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone, 1982);
Poems Taken from My Yard (Fulton, Mo.: Timberline, 1986);
Martín and Meditations on the South Valley (New York: New Directions, 1987);
Black Mesa Poems (New York: New Directions, 1989).

PLAY PRODUCTION: *Los tres hijos de Julia*, Los Angeles Theatre Center, Spring 1991.

OTHER: "Ancestor" and "So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans," in *New Worlds of Literature*, edited by Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter (New York: Norton, 1989), pp. 176, 928;
"6:00 A.M. awake . . . , " in *The Pushcart Prize XIV*, edited by Bill Henderson (New York: Penguin, 1989), pp. 153-155;
"An Ear to the Ground," "Ese Chicano," "I Pass La Iglesia," and "Small Farmer," in *An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), pp. 25-27.

Poetry and personal circumstance, each inextricably linked to the other in a complete and unbroken cycle, are indispensable elements in coming to know and understand the poetic voice and the artistic development of Jimmy Santiago Baca, an award-winning poet who is the author of two chapbooks and five larger collections of poems. Baca's work has been widely anthologized and has appeared in such respected literary publications as *Ironwood, Bilingual Review, Harbor Review,*

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Confluencia, Las Américas, New Kauri, Quarterly West, Puerto del Sol, and several others. In 1987 he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant for poetry, and in 1988 he was the recipient of the Before Columbus American Book Award in poetry for his book *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* (1987). He has been a poet in residence at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Yale University, having received the Berkeley Regents' Fellowship in 1989 and the Wallace Stevens Fellowship from Yale University in 1990. Recently he was awarded a prestigious Ludwig Vogelstien award in poetry. Baca has served on the poetry selection committee for the

National Endowment for the Arts and has been invited to judge various poetry competitions, including the 1990 San Francisco State University Poetry Contest. With the publication of his 1987 book by New Directions, a press noted for having promoted the work of some of the most respected and enduring poets in world literature, including William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Octavio Paz, and Denise Levertov, Baca has come to the forefront as one of the most widely read and recognized Chicano poets working today. Not the least of Baca's contribution to Chicano literature has been to widen the critical attention directed by mainstream critics and publishers toward his own work and that of other Chicano writers.

Baca first began to write poetry while incarcerated on drug charges in an Arizona prison. At the behest of publisher-friend Will Inman and with the encouragement of fellow inmates, Baca sent three poems to *Mother Jones* magazine. He was rewarded a couple of weeks later with a check for his efforts. The poems caught the attention of Levertov, the magazine's poetry editor, who began corresponding with Baca, eventually helping to locate a publisher for his first full-length book of poems, *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (1979). In her introduction to *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*, Levertov describes Baca's poetry as work that "perceives the mythic and archetypal significance of life-events."

The biographical file on Jimmy Santiago Baca might well be read as the working sketch or preliminary study for much of the autobiographical elements that infuse his poetry and in particular the long narrative poem *Martín*. Baca was born on 2 January 1952 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, an event he records in his poem "Bells," from *Black Mesa Poems* (1989):

> Bells. The word gongs my skull bone. . . .
> Mamá carried me out, just born,
> swaddled in hospital blanket,
> from St. Vincent's in Santa Fe.
> Into the evening, still drowsed
> with uterine darkness,
> my fingertips purple with new life,
> cathedral bells splashed
> into my blood, plunging iron hulls
> into my pulse waves. Cathedral steeples,
> amplified brooding, sonorous bells,
> through narrow cobbled streets, bricked patios,
> rose trellis'd windows,
> red-tiled Spanish rooftops, bells
> beat my name, "Santiago! Santiago!"

Despite the joyous tone of celebration in "Bells," Baca's early childhood was not easy. His parents, a Chicano mother and an Apache father, divorced when he was two. He was abandoned to a grandparent and later shuttled between relatives and orphanages. His mother died tragically at the hands of her second husband, and his father, with whom he had little contact, eventually died of alcoholism. When he was five, Baca was placed in St. Anthony's Home for Boys in Albuquerque, where he lived until he was eleven. During his teenage years Baca was in and out of detention centers and spent much of his time learning to survive on the streets of Albuquerque's urban barrios. After a couple of years on the road, wandering first to the southeastern states and then back west to Arizona, Baca at twenty was given a five-year federal sentence for possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute. He refutes the charge made against him, explaining that his arrest was made on the basis of association, because he was present during a drug sale. Baca's sentence in Florence, Arizona, one of the toughest maximum security prisons in the state, was eventually extended to over six years.

Baca's experience in federal prison was marked by a succession of lockdowns, solitary confinements, electroshock therapy sessions, and beatings by prison guards, all of which would push him to the lowest ebb of his life. These experiences, he says, "reduced me, and whoever I thought I was, disintegrated and I fell into an incredible pit of humiliation where I began to disintegrate. . . . Nothing was being nourished to discover and create, and I finally destroyed myself in this huge cemetery called the prisons of America. When I went to prison I no longer existed. I was a non-entity." However, Baca began a prolonged process of self-discovery and education, which showed him that language could become a vehicle for bringing order to the chaos that surrounded him. In prison he eventually obtained his GED (General Equivalency [high-school] Diploma) and became fully literate, immersing himself in the world of books.

Initially drawn to poetry, Baca began to read the work of diverse poets. While teaching himself Spanish, he read the works of Pablo Neruda, Juan Ramón Jiménez, and Federico García Lorca; in English he read William Wordsworth, Mary Baker, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman, Levertov, and Ginsberg. Baca began to exercise a natural and gifted

National Endowment for the Arts and has been invited to judge various poetry competitions, including the 1990 San Francisco State University Poetry Contest. With the publication of his 1987 book by New Directions, a press noted for having promoted the work of some of the most respected and enduring poets in world literature, including William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Octavio Paz, and Denise Levertov, Baca has come to the forefront as one of the most widely read and recognized Chicano poets working today. Not the least of Baca's contribution to Chicano literature has been to widen the critical attention directed by mainstream critics and publishers toward his own work and that of other Chicano writers.

Baca first began to write poetry while incarcerated on drug charges in an Arizona prison. At the behest of publisher-friend Will Inman and with the encouragement of fellow inmates, Baca sent three poems to *Mother Jones* magazine. He was rewarded a couple of weeks later with a check for his efforts. The poems caught the attention of Levertov, the magazine's poetry editor, who began corresponding with Baca, eventually helping to locate a publisher for his first full-length book of poems, *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (1979). In her introduction to *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*, Levertov describes Baca's poetry as work that "perceives the mythic and archetypal significance of life-events."

The biographical file on Jimmy Santiago Baca might well be read as the working sketch or preliminary study for much of the autobiographical elements that infuse his poetry and in particular the long narrative poem *Martín*. Baca was born on 2 January 1952 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, an event he records in his poem "Bells," from *Black Mesa Poems* (1989):

> Bells. The word gongs my skull bone. . . .
> Mamá carried me out, just born,
> swaddled in hospital blanket,
> from St. Vincent's in Santa Fe.
> Into the evening, still drowsed
> with uterine darkness,
> my fingertips purple with new life,
> cathedral bells splashed
> into my blood, plunging iron hulls
> into my pulse waves. Cathedral steeples,
> amplified brooding, sonorous bells,
> through narrow cobbled streets, bricked patios,
> rose trellis'd windows,
> red-tiled Spanish rooftops, bells
> beat my name, "Santiago! Santiago!"

Despite the joyous tone of celebration in "Bells," Baca's early childhood was not easy. His parents, a Chicano mother and an Apache father, divorced when he was two. He was abandoned to a grandparent and later shuttled between relatives and orphanages. His mother died tragically at the hands of her second husband, and his father, with whom he had little contact, eventually died of alcoholism. When he was five, Baca was placed in St. Anthony's Home for Boys in Albuquerque, where he lived until he was eleven. During his teenage years Baca was in and out of detention centers and spent much of his time learning to survive on the streets of Albuquerque's urban barrios. After a couple of years on the road, wandering first to the southeastern states and then back west to Arizona, Baca at twenty was given a five-year federal sentence for possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute. He refutes the charge made against him, explaining that his arrest was made on the basis of association, because he was present during a drug sale. Baca's sentence in Florence, Arizona, one of the toughest maximum security prisons in the state, was eventually extended to over six years.

Baca's experience in federal prison was marked by a succession of lockdowns, solitary confinements, electroshock therapy sessions, and beatings by prison guards, all of which would push him to the lowest ebb of his life. These experiences, he says, "reduced me, and whoever I thought I was, disintegrated and I fell into an incredible pit of humiliation where I began to disintegrate. . . . Nothing was being nourished to discover and create, and I finally destroyed myself in this huge cemetery called the prisons of America. When I went to prison I no longer existed. I was a non-entity." However, Baca began a prolonged process of self-discovery and education, which showed him that language could become a vehicle for bringing order to the chaos that surrounded him. In prison he eventually obtained his GED (General Equivalency [high-school] Diploma) and became fully literate, immersing himself in the world of books.

Initially drawn to poetry, Baca began to read the work of diverse poets. While teaching himself Spanish, he read the works of Pablo Neruda, Juan Ramón Jiménez, and Federico García Lorca; in English he read William Wordsworth, Mary Baker, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman, Levertov, and Ginsberg. Baca began to exercise a natural and gifted

ability to arch his circumstance into metaphor and sling forth his poems as personal responses to the lived experience of his early years. His first real triumph in poetry came as a short, powerful stanza that would sound out in his mind with the force of a mantra:

> Did you tell them
> hell is not a dream
> and that you've been there?
> Did you tell them?

As Baca recalls, the emotions emerged from deep within a wellspring of harnessed feelings: "And that was some sort of voice in me talking to another voice in me, saying, you've lived this: Did you tell them? Did you tell them? . . . That was the most powerful five or six lines that got me going." Baca also became aware of a tremendous obligation, of a sense of responsibility and urgency that accompanied his newfound ability to write and to express his experience for others who could not do so.

Baca's poetry is to a large degree infused with elements drawn from his experiences, and the reader is struck by the recurrent themes of transformation, metamorphosis, and self-actualization that have accompanied the poet's own trajectory as an individual and a writer. The most significant turning point in Baca's life was his discovery of language and poetry as a means of expression. Prior to this revelation Baca describes himself as "an illiterate Chicano, who knew more of a plumber's wrench than a pencil, more of rebellion than submission, more of the inside of a cell than of a book."

Shortly after his release from prison in 1979 Baca went to visit his sister and was awestruck by a picture she had kept of him at sixteen. His reaction was one of disbelief as he viewed the photograph, and the moment caused him to reflect on how he had changed. Recalling that visit and the photograph he says, "I knew it was me, but my mind had taken such cosmic leaps through language, and consequently those leaps entailed a sort of immolation, a sort of ritual burning of the past . . . and language, the vowels, the consonants, the syllables all became a sort of pyre which the past was placed on, and burned in the flames of language."

Attuned to real-life circumstances, each of Baca's books represents a concrete step in the process of rebuilding his life from the point of nonexistence that he associates with the years spent in prison. Thus each book in turn marks a step in Baca's determination to move his personal and poetic endeavor toward full realization. His first published material is to be found in scattered anthologies, his chapbooks *Jimmy Santiago Baca* (1978) and *Swords of Darkness* (1981), and his two collections *Immigrants in Our Own Land* and *What's Happening* (1982). All contain poems centered on his experience in prison, which triggered Baca's often bitter and direct poetic introspection.

Baca's first chapbook, *Jimmy Santiago Baca*, consists of nine poems and a short essay on his thoughts on leaving prison. In a very telling way, these early poems became an essential scaffolding from which Baca began to address several key, recurring themes that he fully fleshed out in his subsequent works. His concerns are clear. He writes of the brutal harshness of prison, of regaining his own humanity, and of his personal and unbroken desire to reconnect to the world beyond the walls of his cell. The poetic style is terse but reveals the raw power of Baca's uncanny ability to create bold and forceful images, as in the poem "Just Before Dawn," which draws a clear bead on the desperation that inhabits the prison's world:

> And young prisoners hug their blankets
> like frozen carcasses strewn across
> timeless blizzard plains, and a few
> gnaw their hearts off
> caught in the steel jaws of prison.

Baca followed this slight and seminal collection of poems with the publication the next year of a major work entitled *Immigrants in Our Own Land*. This group of thirty-seven poems established Baca's potential as a serious and prolific new voice on the poetry scene. The publication of *Immigrants* coincided with Baca's release from prison, and its central focus is a series of reflections spanning the years of his incarceration. The title of the book and of a central poem in the collection alludes to the alienation of prison for newly arrived inmates, as they become divested of any human capacity to respond to the institution's vindictive nature. This underlying theme, along with Baca's chronological look at his years in prison, draws the poems in the book together and structures a unity of intent. In a review, the *Virginia Quarterly* stressed that the work is "a book rather than a collection of poems," an opinion shared by Joseph F. Vélez, who in *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* points out that in the work there

is "a detectable progression, [a] development of character."

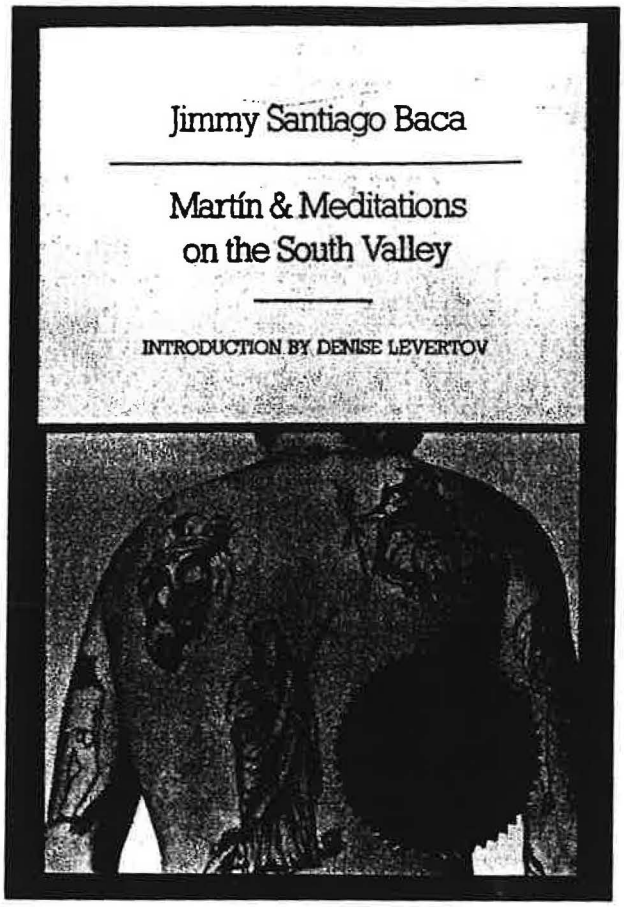
Baca's chief concern in *Immigrants* is regaining a sense of self, which is obscured by the prison system's ability to strip the individual of dignity and self-worth. While the collection is centered on lucid and sustained images and metaphors, the work is ultimately more strongly conditioned by visceral and passionate impulses than by poetry as formalistic craft or incidental pastime. The sense of urgency that emanates from Baca's struggle to release a passionate and desperate cry for recognition, above all else, lends a deeply moving and enduring quality to the collection.

Baca's efforts to reconstruct his own psyche and sense of identity immediately move him to reflect upon his connection to family and community. Present in *Immigrants* is Baca for the first time rekindling a connection to the collective meaning and past of his ancestors. His search for personal meaning emerges in *Immigrants* as an ever-widening series of concentric connections that lead him to an individual and collective examination of his incarceration. Each poem in the work to some degree answers the question "Who am I?" in the context of present and past circumstances.

Baca's second chapbook, *Swords of Darkness*, was edited by fellow Chicano poet Gary Soto. The poems were written during August and September 1977 and are about prison and about experiences—real or imagined—set in the outside world. Among these latter poems are vivid descriptions of a gaudy street atmosphere in which restless youths are caught in a surreal world of cruising, music, and weekend nightlife. The most inspired and intriguing poem of the collection is "Walking Down to Town and Back," in which the speaker walks along old and familiar rural roads that he remembers from his childhood. He recalls a visit he made with his father to the former home of an old widow. The incident, narrated in dreamlike fashion, includes the fantastic tale of how, after her husband's funeral, the old woman's small adobe house was beset by hoards of snakes and how she set fire to her adobe to rid herself of that plague, tossing gunpowder along with all her furniture and belongings into the fire. In the flames miraculously appeared an image of the Virgin Mary, which is held in reverence by all who come to know of it. The young man and his father visit the charred remains of the old woman's home, where they find people kneeling and praying. As the speaker passes by, the people begin to cry out "miracle, miracle," for they have seen a light surrounding him. The impression left by the incident is indelible, and the poem concludes with the speaker years later revisiting the scene of the apparent miracle, only to find that it is now a hangout where people come to drink. Despite its open-ended conclusion, the poem is pivotal in Baca's poetic discourse in many ways. From a stylistic point of view, it signals his ability to create well-structured and engaging narrative poems that suspend the reader in narrative time. The poem also clearly places the protagonist in a kind of literal search for meaning among the ashes and debris of familial and communal identity, and it forges elements of oral tradition into the poet's world of visions and dreams. As evident in subsequent works, Baca uses each of these constructs to shape and give form to his wider poetic vision.

The title of Baca's second book, *What's Happening*, should be taken as a declarative statement to the reader that what lies ahead is a chronicle of the poet's most immediate experiences. The first five poems in the book return to Baca's continuing need to explore the psychological wounds left by his years in prison. The remainder of the collection centers on his experiences after having left prison.

The recovery of a sense of self, which Baca began with his first incursions into poetry, continues to infuse much of *What's Happening*. The collection in many ways figures as a bridge that explores Baca's transition back into society at large. Just as Baca, now several years after his release from prison, returns to the world he literally left as a juvenile, his poetry, too, begins to reestablish meaning with familiar places of his childhood and adolescence. Thus the second half of *What's Happening* begins to map out his search for identity and reintegration into a wider community. In the latter half of this collection Baca begins to inscribe several key concerns into his work, themes he will ultimately come to embrace fully in his life and in his poetry. Drawing upon his mestizo roots in New Mexico, he discovers his connection to the earth. He traces his search for love through unfulfilled relationships and the bitter pain of breakups. In other poems he evokes the sensuous and enticing spirit of the city at night that compels him to live vicariously. And, in one of Baca's purest lyrical poems, foreshadowing his own fatherhood, he evokes the magical world of children and registers his deep compassion and



Cover for Baca's 1987 collection of poems that chronicle his troubled early life, his subsequent happy marriage, and a fire that destroyed his home

sensitivity toward them. In "I think of little people" he expresses his awe and inspiration as "This enchantment they tuck in twenty folds / like a special coin, laid in cloth."

The eight-year hiatus between the publication of *Immigrants* and that of *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* in many ways reflects a long period of transition and uncertainty for Baca. These years were filled with restless, unresolved dilemmas and ongoing struggles in his personal life. Baca explains that, although he continued to publish minor works, he all but abandoned poetry and writing: "I was trying to figure out whether I was going to live in prison forever or whether I could live in this world. I wanted to go back to prison, 'cause I couldn't live in this world and I was bored and I couldn't deal with the world out here."

After having left prison, Baca spent some time in North Carolina before returning to New Mexico, where he then spent some years living in Albuquerque working as a night watchman, janitor, and laborer, and at other odd jobs, as he redirected his life through what was to be a sustained period of bittersweet events. During these years Baca fought and eventually overcame bouts of drug addiction and alcoholism. He would eventually view marriage and family as vital and central in providing meaning to his life. Indeed he attributes much of his success to the love and support of his wife, Beatrice, and his children.

After the birth of their first child, Jimmy and Beatrice moved to Albuquerque's South Valley, a rural, Chicano barrio where they decided to gut and rebuild a small adobe home that came to symbolize the aspirations of many long-held dreams and promises. Baca fully embraced his past and found a personal affinity with the predominantly Chicano community. *Poems Taken from My Yard*, published in 1986, chronicles in deeply moving poems the winter of the year that saw the birth of his first son and the rebuilding of his adobe home. These two acts of creation are paralleled by the poems in the collection, of which Baca writes, in "Poem XVII,"

> These are January poems—
> dollar down payments
> on an acre of sand dunes—
> . . . . . .
> What do they mean?
> a song of a man on the run,
> who uses each poem
> to break the shackles on his legs.

In the years that followed, Baca realized personal as well as artistic endeavors. His most critically acclaimed book, *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*, was published in 1987, for example. But the late 1980s were also marred by a personal setback when the Baca family home was razed by fire. Consumed by the fire were ten years' worth of Baca's poems.

On the heels of the publication of *Poems Taken from My Yard*, Baca completed the manuscript for the long narrative poem *Martín*, decidedly his most autobiographical work. *Martín* was published along with a second grouping of poems titled *Meditations on the South Valley*. Together each half forms a complementary volume spanning several years of new work. Inspired by Baca's own experiences, the *Martín* narrative employs certain liberties in its recanting and recasting of Baca's own life story. He uses fictive names, adding or omitting events from his own life in an effort to distill the plot to those essential elements that reproduce a journey of one

man's ascent from personal devastation and through the bitter searching that leads to an eventual triumph of the spirit.

The long narrative poem tells the story of the tribulations of Martín, a young Chicano. After his birth at Pinos Wells, a decaying ranching community, Martín is abandoned by his mother at a very early age. He lives first with his grandmother and then is placed in an orphanage, where he remains until he runs away at age ten. He is witness to the chaos and the hardening of the spirit that permeates the street life of the urban barrios of Sante Fe and Albuquerque. Through news relayed to him by relatives and friends, Martín learns of his mother's life and tragic death at the hands of her second husband and of his father's decay due to alcoholism. As Martín reaches manhood he leaves New Mexico to travel. Trauma and turmoil take their toll on his psyche: "I gave myself to the highway / Like a bellrope in the wind / searching for a hand."

Martín's disaffection leads to wandering through Arizona, the Texas Panhandle, the southeastern coast, the Midwest, and finally back to New Mexico. Fully three-quarters of the poem recreates and explains the cause of Martín's discontent and of his inner sense of reflection and desire to understand the shattered fragments of his broken life. The last part of the poem narrates Martín's final return to Albuquerque, the scene of earlier misfortunes and the obvious locus of his intense need to rebuild his life. The catalyst for change in Martín's life is Gabriela, the woman with whom he falls in love. Through Gabriela's love and the birth of their child, Martín salvages his humanity and finds purpose and a reason to live. The poem draws to a close enthusiastically as Martín works to refurbish an old adobe home on a half-acre lot in the South Valley that will house the dreams of his new family. Martín's search and quest for the validation of his spirit and its connectedness to "all living things" moves him, in the last verse of the poem, to vow never to abandon his son.

Although complementary to the *Martín* narrative, *Meditations on the South Valley* should also be viewed as a self-sustaining work framed by two events drawn from Baca's life: the destruction by fire of the family home and the raising of a second house, an act deeply imbued with a phoenixlike promise of rebirth from the ashes of past tragedies. Julián Olivares, in his article "Two Contemporary Chicano Verse Chronicles," views these events as having the metaphorical function of marking the beginning of a new phase in Baca's poetry: "loosely structured around the loss of the family home and ten years of poetry, which is to be perceived as a mythic rite of passage or 'trial by fire.' "

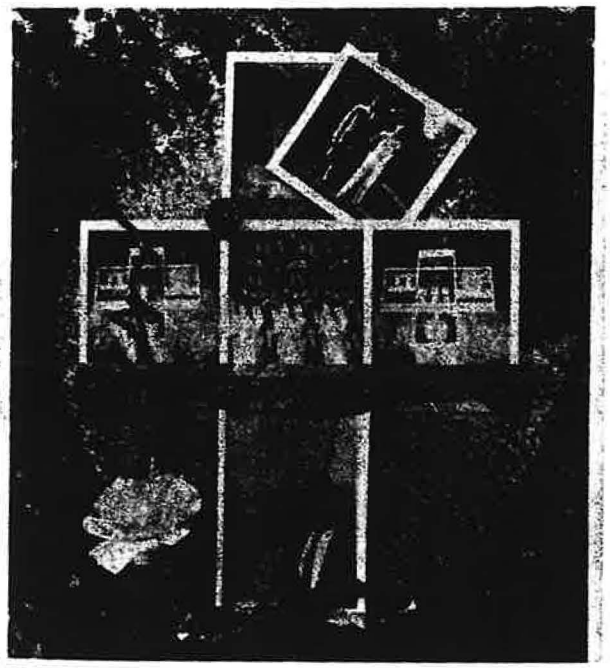
The remaining poems in *Meditations* chronicle the time during which Martín's family is temporarily uprooted from the South Valley neighborhood and from the people they have come to know and love. Because of the fire, they are forced into the crowded and impersonal world of a suburban apartment complex for a while. The occasion is a time of reflection for Martín, who reaches back for the images of his neighbors and friends in the South Valley that will sustain his spirit in the sterile and anonymous surroundings: "To the South Valley / the white dove of my mind flies, / searching for news of life." Each poem in *Meditations* becomes a tribute and offering to the love and friendship that inspired Martín's return to the barrio. Present in the poems is the gallery of friends, neighbors, and acquaintances that populate the rich human landscape of Martín's South Valley. Baca paints with sharp and lucid details the *ancianos* (old folks), midwives, field hands, construction workers, "low riders," *cholos* (barrio men), longtime residents, village fools, and community activists, each of whom he weaves into a tapestry that reveals a people and a community living out the human saga of pain, joy, promise, and adversity.

With *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*, Baca brings to closure that phase of his poetry that deals with loss, dejection, a searching for identity, and a sense of belonging. Baca deliberately chooses to omit any reference to a prison past for Martín and, in doing so, puts to rest the rage of some of his early poetry. Likewise absent are the self-destructive tendencies that typified Baca's earlier years of searching and wandering. In contrast, Martín's senses and aspirations are attuned to keeping the solemn pact he has made with life. The bond Martín has established with his community sustains itself through his period of alienation, and, as expected, *Meditations* ends with a return to the barrio, an act made easier since it includes the wisdom and inspiration Martín/Baca has found in his community.

Baca's 1989 book, *Black Mesa Poems*, can be seen as his ultimate and most complete recuperation and revindication of his barrio, of its Chicano, working-class ethos, and of the life that he has formed around his South Valley home. Baca has always acknowledged the tremendous signifi-

Jimmy Santiago Baca

Black Mesa Poems



Cover for Baca's 1989 book, which focuses on his family's second home and their involvement in the surrounding Chicano community

cance of his return to the South Valley: "the human being that I was found a total and wholesome and fulfilling relationship to the people of the barrio and now I had language. I was a language person and I listened to people and I looked at their lives and I saw how they suffered and how they loved, my gift to them was to use who I was, interpreting them on the page, and their gift to me was to love me and let me live next to them."

Black Mesa Poems is by far Baca's most ambitious work to date. It essentially becomes the final staging for a new phase of his poetry, as suggested by the theme of rededication to life and community with which *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* ends. Viewed in the context of a poetic ascent toward self-definition that began with Baca's first chapbook, *Black Mesa Poems* represents the culmination of a long process of recovery and vindication through language and poetry.

Black Mesa Poems becomes in effect his manifesto of complete reintegration and strengthened sense of identity with the Chicano community and its geospiritual homeland that is the Southwest. As the work chronicles the acquisition of Baca's second home, a hundred-year-old adobe atop the ancient volcanic tablelands south of Albuquerque, it derives much of its mythic and archetypal significance from the ancestral presence of his mestizo forebears—Indian, Spanish, and Mexican—whose spirits still echo in the land and the traditions of New Mexico. Baca focuses on the vivid, detailed descriptions of people, geography, and events that surround his new home on Black Mesa. He explores such themes as reconciling his broken past, the sacredness of the earth (figured in Black Mesa), the courage and dignity he is witness to in the ordinary lives of his neighbors and friends, his abiding commitment to family and home, the birth of a second child, and an exploration of the historical confluence of cultures—Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo-American—that form the human landscape of the Southwest. The book is underpinned by Baca's vision of a man moving from violence to peace and from personal turmoil to spiritual harmony.

The collection encases Baca's most complex poetic vision of life, for he at once explodes the narrative and autobiographical elements of his other poetry. Thematically connected to the reconstruction of a second house, *Black Mesa* opens with a poem that describes how the poet and his family came upon and eventually were fortunate enough to acquire the adobe house atop Black Mesa. The significance of the poem conceptually is that Martín is no longer identified as the poetic speaker. This disappearance of the fictive persona Martín implicitly signals a dismantling of Baca's use of autobiographical narrative as poetic scaffolding upon which life is staged by example and depiction; what remains is a freestanding synthesis of his inner and outer realities. With *Black Mesa Poems*, poetic discourse and life merge, and poetry and personal circumstance in metaphorical relationship redeem not only the individual but his people and culture.

Baca's works have gained both acceptance and praise beginning with an early note by critic Juan Rodríguez (*Carta Abierta*, 1978): "The man's poetry is worth reading más de una vez [more than once]." Rodríguez's recommendation was followed by more generous estimations of Baca's talents in such noted journals as the *American Book Re-*

view, Virginia Quarterly Review, Lamar Journal of the Humanities, Revista Chicano-Riqueña, and others. Noted Chicano novelist Ron Arias, in a review of Baca's *Immigrants,* was one of the first to point out the powerful appeal of Baca's style and imagery by comparing it to the art of the jazz musician: "when he finds it [a melody] he takes it wherever it might lead": Arias observed that a mainstay in Baca's poetry is a dynamic quality that "continually surprises by squeezing meaning out of ordinary sights" (*American Book Review,* September-October 1981). The latter is most apparent in Baca's lyrical voice; Arias laments that the weakest parts of the book are the "essay pieces" in which Baca employs a literal style. Levertov's interest in Baca's early work rings prophetic in her afterword to *What's Happening*: "I look on Jimmy Santiago Baca as one of the most naturally gifted poets I've ever known. . . ." Most reviewers have been of one mind when considering his work as far beyond anything that might be labeled as jailhouse ranting and frustration; in the estimation of Joseph F. Vélez, Baca's work "is not poetry of prison, but poetry of life" (*Revista Chicano-Riqueña,* 1980).

Martín and Meditations on the South Valley represents a pinnacle in the progressive development of Baca's *ars poetica* and is to date the work that has drawn the greatest acclaim and review. The value of the book goes beyond the simple plot that tells the story of Martín/Baca's worst years and the realization of a personal quest; as with all inspired literature its value lies precisely in the manner in which the events are told—in the intensity of its language and in the transcendent, metaphorical significance of the events it depicts. Gary Soto, in a review for the *San Francisco Chronicle* (24 January 1988), wrote: "What makes the story succeed is its honesty, brutal honesty, as well as Baca's original imagery and the passion in his writing. Moreover, a history is being written, of a culture of poverty which except for a few poets like Phillip Levine, Thomas McGrath and the late James Wright, is absent in American poetry." As Levertov suggests in the book's introduction, Baca "writes with unconcealed passion: detachment is not a quality he cultivates." Critics and reviewers generally are in agreement regarding this aspect of Baca's work; their accolades resemble Liam Rector's. In the *Hudson Review* (Summer 1989) he noted that *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* is "also a powerful orchestration and revision of narrative and lyrical admixture—both constructivist and expressionist in its execution—with an utterly compelling dramatic form fueling the entire vivisection and the pilgrim's progress which makes it so much more than another 'collection' of poems. Baca's book is a page turner, almost a novel in verse. . . ."

The volume has also inspired debate and controversy. Olivares has suggested that the work is flawed by the facts that it is not the poem of epic stature that Baca seemingly intended to create, its publication reflects political opportunism on the part of a publisher intent on cashing in on a stereotyped, criminally prone minority experience, and Baca's writing depicts and promotes "a world of social misfits."

It is fair to say that by any measure *Martín* is not a poem of epic proportions that addresses an all-encompassing reality of the Southwest. What is clearly present is the story of a personal kind of redemption, but the redemptive act implies an interaction with the social forces that have shaped the individual. Any epic or definitive treatment of the Southwest as a geographical space that includes the confluence of many peoples and their histories may not be reducible to any one manuscript or any one voice. Taken as a new poetic agenda, Baca's suggestion "that the entire Southwest needed a long poem that could describe what has happened here in the last twenty years" makes ready sense if one considers that the evolution of his poetry in his last three collections does in fact begin the work of inscribing an epic, mythic, and archetypal significance to the confluence of the peoples and histories of the Southwest.

Those detractors who argue that Baca's work promotes the image of Chicano culture as a world of "social misfits" seem to have misread the work and to deny its intent by engaging in social typecasting that reduces the possibility of human potential to a predetermined and self-fulfilling prophecy of behavioral norms. As Baca registers the social world of his personal past, he is asking the reader, both Anglo-American and Chicano, to question his conditioned response, as Levertov suggests, by ascribing to the apparent social delinquency of Martín—the down-and-out wanderer—a complexity of impulse far beyond the surface reality that shapes his life: "Martín is a poet (and the reader—though not deliberately—is challenged: next time you see such a figure, remember that though his head may be filled only with quotidian banalities, and with crude and trivial wishes, it is also very possible that he is living an inner life at least as vivid as your own)."

At present Baca lives and writes at his Black Mesa farmhouse. He is at work on his first novel, "In the Way of the Sun," which he envisions as the first part of a trilogy on the peoples of the Southwest. His first play, *Los tres hijos de Julia*, was staged at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in 1991. Baca has recently completed a new collection of poems, titled "Healing Earthquake," which is forthcoming from New Directions Press, which has also published a retrospective of his poetry, *Immigrants in Our Own Land and Earlier Poems* (1990). He has been invited to write the screenplays for two upcoming movies and is producing a documentary about Hispanic culture that will be filmed in eight states. Between writing projects, Baca dedicates himself to sharing the responsibility of raising his two young sons, Antonio and Gabriel, and running the small family farm atop Black Mesa.

Interview:

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Julián Olivares, "Two Contemporary Chicano Verse Chronicles," *Americas Review*, 16 (Fall-Winter 1988): 214-231;

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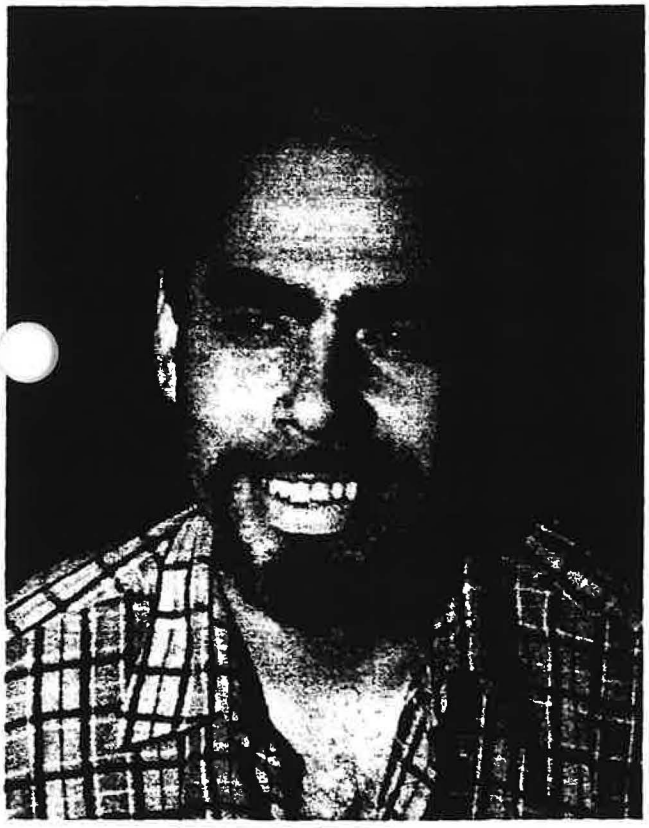
Jimmy Santiago Baca

1952–



(Born José Santiago Baca) Mestizo poet.

INTRODUCTION

Baca is recognized as a leading figure in contemporary Hispanic literature and has been praised for the rich imagery and lyricism of his poetry. An ex-convict who taught himself to read while in prison, he writes of spiritual rebirth and triumph over tragedy—unlike many "prison writers" whose works teem with rage and desolation. "You really don't have time to be angry," Baca has asserted. "If you compare a life to daytime photography, my life has been more like nighttime photography. My life as a background has had darkness; the only way to survive the darkness is to have my soul flash." Baca's poetry has also garnered praise for the insight it offers into the experience of Hispanic and Amerindian peoples.

A Mestizo of Chicano and Apache descent, Baca was abandoned by his parents at the age of two and, after a brief stay with a grandparent, was placed in a New Mexico orphanage. He fled at age eleven, spending most of his teen years on the streets of Albuquerque. In 1972, Baca was convicted on a narcotics charge and sentenced to five years in an Arizona maximum security prison. Recalcitrant behavior earned him additional time on his sentence, as well as electric shock treatments and nearly four years in solitary confinement. Baca took advantage of his incarceration, however, teaching himself to read and write. He has explained: "[In prison], I saw all these Chicanos going out to the fields and being treated like animals. I was tired of being treated like an animal. I wanted to learn how to read and to write and to understand. . . . The only way of transcending was through language and understanding." Baca began writing poetry and, encouraged by a fellow inmate, sent a sample of his work to *Mother Jones* magazine. Not only were these poems accepted for publication, but the journal's poetry editor, Denise Levertov, assisted Baca in finding a publisher for his

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one of learning how to endure, the mastery of which can be a genuinely liberating experience, the poet suggests not only that poetry can be restorative, but also that human life if given a chance is resilient.

In **"It Started"** Baca describes his first encounter with the state-funded poetry workshop and the timid, suspicious first days that finally gave way to communication and friendship. He writes:

> . . . But you didn't treat me like a wild ape
> or an elephant. You treated me like Jimmy.
> And who was Jimmy?
> A mass of molten fury in this furnace of steel,
> and yet, my thoughts became ladles, sifting carefully
> through my life, the pain and endurance,
> to the essence of my being. . .

But beyond the human qualities abundantly present, the real strength of these poems derive from the fact that Baca writes so well. He has a fine, superb, lyrical gift and a firm command of the resources of language. There are no rough edges and the poems move forward with utmost economy. This is a book determined to bear witness to the truths of the human heart in adversity and it does it with wisdom, courage, beauty and above all, hope.

Marion Taylor, in a review of *Immigrants in Our Own Land,* in *Kliatt Young Adult Paperback Book Guide,* Vol. 14, Spring, 1980, p. 20.

RON ARIAS

(review date 1982)

[Chicano journalist and author Arias is best known for his 1975 novel *The Road to Tamazunchale,* a work of "magic realism" in the style of Gabriel García Márquez that was nominated for the National Book Award. In this review, Arias distinguishes a variety of moods and styles in the poems comprising *Immigrants in Our Own Land.*]

A poet named Jimmy Santiago Baca is running around a prison track field when he stops to look at a chain gang pulling weeds by the prison preacher's house. It's hot and in the distance away from the prison is a nearby town courthouse. In the shade, a hard-eyed preacher, sipping tea, watches the men work.

Suddenly Baca's thoughts explode. Why don't the men tear down the courthouse? Why don't they burn the preacher's house? Why don't they eliminate him, that "lazy glob of pulpish meat"?

Of course, nothing happens, Baca's eyes and thoughts clear, and he ends his poem—**"On a September Day"**—by running another lap, his fist clenched, "trying to run the ache out of my heart."

Typical jailhouse rage and frustration, you might say. However, for Baca such an obvious peek into the furnace of his anger is quite rare. Most of the 37 poems in ***Immigrants In Our Own Land***, his first published collection, focus on other emotions, other visi ns. The comfort of a routine workday, for example, leads Baca to list all the image details of a road gang's chores except memories and "things we never talk about."

Or in the poem **"In My Land,"** which is a portrait of his rural New Mexican origins, Baca speaks of age, of howls, of wind, of time lost, of solitude, and of ignorance and the city-bound. But most of all he speaks of rebirth amid the "courage of love."

Or in another poem, **"Unity of Hearts,"** Baca reveals a deep sympathy for workers of the fields. It is a sympathy that evokes these bitter yet tender lines:

> In your old shoes and hats and clothes,
> durable and desertlike,
> cactus-spun lizard-fingered wing-souls,
> your sighs like feathers dropping lightly,

For a man who spent ten years in prison, such sentiments and their delicate expression may seem too mild, too tame, for the subject at hand. Yet Baca frequently transcends the obvious. Even his style surprises. At times he can be terse, narrowly focused, directly to the point, as in **"Stony, Fifteen Years in the Joint,"** a short-lined profile of a tough, veteran con. Other times he can resemble an exuberant Walt Whitman in the long-line rhythm and sweep of his emotions— expansive, wordy, even conversational.

Whatever his approach, however, my favorite moments occur when Baca springs into a dream or remembered scene. In **"I'm Sure of It,"** he looks down from his cell window and sees some convicts in the prison yard. Then he gazes at trees beyond the outer fence. Eventually, as night comes, his mind settles on distant headlights, car sounds, freeways, people:

> construction workers coming and going

first collection of poetry, *Immigrants in Our Own Land* (1979). *Immigrants* was followed by two more collections, *Swords of Darkness* (1981) and *What's Happening* (1982). Baca's fourth book, *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* (1987), a semi-autobiographical work that critics termed a novel in verse, won the prestigious American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation in 1988. The following year he published *Black Mesa Poems*, for which he earned the Wallace Stevens Poetry Award and the National Hispanic Heritage Award. He has also published a collection of autobiographical essays entitled *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet in the Barrio* (1992). Baca has been poet in residence at both Yale University and the University of California at Berkeley, but has rejected many further offers to lecture and teach, remaining primarily on his farm in Albuquerque with his wife and children.

While Baca's poetry expresses much concerning the Chicano-Mestizo experience in the American southwest, it also explores the more universal theme of an individual's painful search for identity and meaning. The bold poetic images for which he is noted are not the collected perceptions of a large ethnic group, but the sharp vision of a single Mestizo struggling to find himself. Scott Slovic has written, "to read Jimmy Santiago Baca's poetry is to tramp across the uneven terrain of human experience, sometimes lulled by the everydayness of work or relationships, and then dazzled by a flood of emotion or vibrant observation." In *Immigrants*, Baca vividly conveys the physical and mental barriers of prison life; in the poems comprising *What's Happening*, he relates his struggle to re-enter a world and culture which has brought him much pain and suffering. Within these accounts, however, there resonate the broader elements of Baca's Mestizo heritage. *Martín and Meditations* explicitly links the success of the hero's self-exploration with the discovery of his ancestry. "I wanted Martín to be a real human being and let him live in this world and have a mythology that was his as well as the people's," Baca has written. "I was trying to take images and, without compromising their mythology, bring them into contemporaneity."

Critics have repeatedly applauded Baca's forthright style and the passion he generates in his poetry. Denise Levertov, in her introduction to *Martín and Meditations*, has stated: "[Baca] writes with unconcealed passion: detachment is not a quality he cultivates." His work has been likened to both that of Alan Ginsberg, whose poems were among the first he read in prison, and of Walt Whitman. But beyond his direct approach, it is the lyric quality of his verse that has received the most praise. Marion Taylor called the poems in Baca's first collection "astonishingly beautiful," and Levertov added, "his work is rich in image and music, full of abundant energy and love of life even when describing the brutal and tragic." Renowned Hispanic novelist Ron Arias has also expressed admiration for Baca's impassioned writings, commenting: "Baca reminds me of a jazz musician searching for a melody, and when he finds it he takes it wherever it may lead him. Whether or not the melody or train of images works as a unified piece with a clear theme is of secondary importance to the journey itself, a journey of discovery unbound by prison walls and fences."

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

MARION TAYLOR
(review date 1980)

[In the following favorable review of *Immigrants in Our Own Land,* Taylor comments on the lyricism of Baca's poetry, calling it "astonishingly beautiful."]

Immigrants in Our Own Land is a very disturbing book of poems because it's so astonishingly beautiful, one does not expect such to come from the pen of a man serving a long prison sentence, as is the case with this poet. These poems go against the current trend of so-called "prison poetry." While these poems do not neglect the bleak realities of prison life what is absent entirely is the strident voice and the ascerbic vision. What these poems discover is a center of freedom and humaneness beyond the bleak realities; they are in their way a hymn and a celebration of the human spirit in extreme situations.

In a world which offers virtually no concrete means of rebuilding a broken life, these poems propose just such a means: By defining the prison experience as primarily

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For a man who spent ten years in prison, such sentiments and their delicate expression may seem too mild, too tame, for the subject at hand. Yet Baca frequently transcends the obvious. Even his style surprises. At times he can be terse, narrowly focused, directly to the point, as in **"Stony, Fifteen Years in the Joint,"** a short-lined profile of a tough, veteran con. Other times he can resemble an exuberant Walt Whitman in the long-line rhythm and sweep of his emotion- versational.

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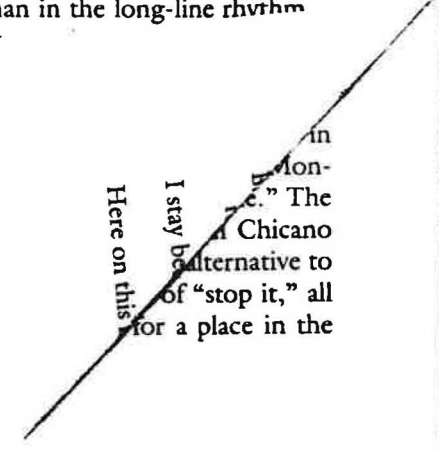

into homey bars,
greasy caps cocked to one side, smoking
cigarettes,
stroking pool cues through gritty thick
fingers,
suck their unbrushed teeth watching
intently,
as Tammy Wynette wails out her country
hits
to dimes and quarters plunked in the
jukebox,
among the bearish beer-drinking, smoke-
swirling workers,
coughing and cursing and smiling,
while their fathers push on screen doors,
enter yellowed kitchens and drink coffee
with married daughters,
as night darkens over the city
and porch lights collect bugs in their
nets. . . .

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Aside from these moments of discovery, Baca continually surprises by squeezing meaning out of ordinary sights, such as in this inventive description of the prison entrance.

> The sun on those green palm trees, lining the entry road to prison. Stiff rows of husky-scaled bark, with a tuft of green looping blades on top, sword twirling in wind, always erect and disciplined, legallike.

For my taste, the weakest poems are the several "essay" pieces in the collection. These state, in obvious, flat language, the poet's position toward a person or a situation. The most message-laden pieces—and there are very few—are **"So Mexicans Are Taking Jobs from Americans"** and **"The New Warden."** But even in these poems of some protest, what is said needs to be said. Fine, and we read on for more of those surprises, those chances taken, in the more lyrical pieces.

Baca, who is now out of prison and lives in North Carolina, can be tight-lined, expansive, gentle, quick-paced or unrushed, quite sober or quite funny. He is a freshly aggressive poet of many abilities, and he tries them all. His is a gifted, young vision, and judging from this collection, I get the feeling he is just warming up. I look forward to more. (pp. 11–12)

Ron Arias, in a review of *Immigrants in Our Own Land*, in *The American Book Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, January–February, 1982, pp. 11–12.

JOHN ADDIEGO

(review date 1983)

[In the following excerpt, Addiego reviews *Immigrants in Our Own Land*, praising Baca's style and comparing him favorably to Walt Whitman.]

[Jimmy Santiago Baca's] ***Immigrants in Our Own Land*** is a howl, a growling wail, a "trip through the mind jail" (as Raul Salinas' poem by that title described the agonizing process of remembering from inside the confines of oppression 15 years ago). This is the jail for real: most of Baca's poetry was written while he was in prison, and I think it's valuable for two reasons: because it addresses a constituency in desperate need of articulate voices (a 1979 study [for Ricardo Chavira's "West Coast Story," *Nuestro*, May, 1980] showed a rising death rate of over 250 Latino gang members per year in the Los Angeles area alone), and because Baca's uneven, unschooled style achieves some exceptionally exciting moments in these poems.

Concerned with his Chicano heritage (the book's title is a reference to the recent acquisition of that part of northern Mexico, or Aztlan, by the U.S., and the creation of a second–class citizenry supposedly protected by the unrecognized Treaty of Hidalgo) and wrestling with imprisonment and poverty, Baca's howl has a slight flavor of Ginsberg, and much more of Ginsberg's spiritual mentor, Whitman. His self-explorations are at times so heartbreakingly honest that the reader cannot help but be disturbed. At other times his singing and cataloguing have such visual power that the reader is taken back to Whitman's spear of grass (with the succinct impression that, in our times, the police are likely to arrest for vagrancy somebody lying on the grass):

Ah, how lovely, how happy I am just to be me.
I raise my pink gums like a wild chimpanzee, tilt my head back,
chortling white-toothed, at this amazing zoo and its visitors,
pockets filled with popcorn, and crunching candy apples.

and later, in the same poem,

> I see it all; the glare of chrome and glaze of windows, the suspense and ambition of young boys playing baseball in parks, and sidewalks splattered with the night's blood, and the policeman sleeping with his wife and farting in the bathroom, and then after, so groomed and polished, passing shops along the street, hello he says to one, hello to another. I sleep in the grass thinking of this, and can be arrested for sleeping on the

grass, and I laugh looking at the sky, filling the sky with my laughter. (pp. 154–55)

John Addiego, in a review of *Immigrants in Our Own Land*, in *Northwest Review*, Vol. XXI, No. 1, 1983, pp. 154–55.

MICHAEL HOGAN

(review date 1983)

[American poet and critic Hogan, like Baca, began his career as a writer while still in prison. In the following review of *What's Happening*, Hogan identifies Baca as a writer with "superb natural gifts," but contends that the collection is of a lesser quality than his earlier work.]

Jimmy Santiago Baca first sent poems to me when I was working as an editor of an anthology of prison poetry in 1974. I noticed then two strengths which contained within them a strong potential for weakness if his craft were not carefully controlled or if he became too impressed by academia's wooing of the imprisoned or alienated minorities. The first strength was that he wrote primarily from an emotional rather than a rational language. This, while offering a passion and a color to his language, offered as well the possibility that his work could become didactic or self-indulgent.

His second strength was that, while his poems were unruly and moved more rapidly by an appeal to the senses than by lucid exposition, they were powerfully evocative when not overwritten. Hence the need for a good editor. William Stafford once said that he had been "saved" by his editors. Unfortunately, Baca has not been so lucky in this volume.

He is, without a doubt, a writer with superb natural gifts. His first volume ***Immigrants in Our Own Land*** (Louisiana State University Press, 1979) was well-received by critics and contained within its narrow limits the voice of a young Neruda without any debt to the South American poet's style. His poems were rich with imagery and passionate, although showing a tendency toward looseness and the prosaic which, unfortunately, finds its bottom in this recent collection.

While his subject matter is powerful: the oppression of a race by a dominant culture, the exploitation of casual or transient labor, the atrocities in state prisons, there is entirely too much telling and too little showing. For example in the poem **"Overcrowding"**:

Prison is a dead man's zone.
Look into the eyes of men here,
There is something more
than cautiousness,
A sense of complete,
cold barren knowledge,
Of being abused too long and too far,
Coerced into indignities that
pile up on them,
In conditions that make them reckless and savage. . .

Baca would have done better in poems such as this one to have given us the narrative account of one man, or let us into *his* emotional state, or distanced, and thus given his observation the force of understatement. It is unfortunate that no editor made these or similar suggestions because the subject matter of the poems in this collection is powerful, the writing passionate (if uncontrolled), and the sense of poetic commitment strong.

Poetry, whether written out of a prison experience, a war, a personal tragedy, does not become poetry simply because it is a description of injustice, random terror, personal loss or abandonment. It becomes poetry, William Wantling once said, if it can speak of these things with "style, concrete, sensory detail, stark outlines of emotionally charged events, extreme economy. . . " Unfortunately, these qualities are largely lacking in Baca's new collection.

That said, there is still praise due some of the pieces in this small volume. Baca has a natural gift for the dramatic monologue. The voice is usually that of a street-wise chicano who is trying just for his own personal satisfaction to figure out who gives the police their orders, who runs the "whole bunch of things in the world/like boat companies and oil companies and things like that." And the man with the computer, "Now where'd he get them numbers?" (**"There's Me"**).

There is a wry humor in poems like this and a disarming ingenuousness which makes the *persona* of the young, alienated chicano attractive. He is not telling us anything directly, merely trying to find out for himself. And this device of the naive narrator, this distancing from the poet's natural inclination to preach at us, is precisely why this poem and one or two others succeed while the remainder fall flat.

One is tempted to compare this volume to his first book and wonder if—in his haste to have a new volume out since his release from prison—he merely went back to old manuscript material rejected in the first look. There is that feel about the poems. There is also no sense of progression from the first volume of poems and this one; no sense, either, of development and growth.

Baca is a gifted poet and has a natural lyricism in the best of his work. This small slip should not affect that reputation; other poets have made such slips without disastrous consequences. One hopes to see his new work in magazines, testing the limits of his art. One hopes to see the promise of his first book realized (after that testing)

in a future, better crafted volume. (pp. 19–20)

Michael Hogan, in a review of *What's Happening*, in *The American Book Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, November–December, 1983, pp. 19–20.

DENISE LEVERTOV

(essay date 1987)

[An English-born American, Levertov is a renowned poet, essayist, translator, and editor. She was acting poetry editor at *Mother Jones* when Baca submitted his first work to that journal for publication, and she also found a publisher for his first collection of poems. Here, Levertov introduces *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*.]

Novels in verse, poetic autobiographies, epics—none of these genres is encountered very frequently, though perhaps each generation produces a few examples of the first two (the genuine epic is obviously far rarer) and there has been a distinct interest in narrative poetry in general in the last few years. Notable examples of the novel in verse to appear in recent years have been Vikram Seth's witty (and often moving) *The Golden Gate,* modeled on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, and the English translation (by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk) of Nazim Hikmet's *Human Landscapes,* that amazing work which borders on epic, and is more closely related to Kazantzakis's continuation of The Odyssey (and to its inspiration) than to Pushkin or, let's say, Crabbe. Jimmy Santiago Baca, in **"Martín"** and its sequel, **"Meditations on the South Valley,"** clearly has more affinity with Hikmet than with Seth's "new formalism." He draws directly upon personal and documentary material rather than on more distanced fictive constructions; and he writes with unconcealed passion: detachment is not a quality he cultivates. But he is far from being a naïve realist; what makes his work so exciting to me is the way in which it manifests both an intense lyricism and that transformative vision which perceives the mythic and archetypal significance of life-events.

The story told in **"Martín"** draws upon elements of Baca's own history, but does not duplicate them. Fictive names are employed, events telescoped, and whole epochs of experience eliminated, so that the core significance not be obscured or cluttered. The tale may be outlined: A boy abandoned by his parents lives first with a grandmother, then is placed in an orphanage. Relatives from both sides—the rural poor ones and the town bourgeois—take him out to visit occasionally. At ten he runs away. He lives from hand to mouth and becomes, outwardly, just another example of that familiar figure, a young man with "nothing to do, nowhere to go," hanging out on the corner of any Main Street—often a Black, Native American or Hispanic, and in this case a mestizo, Mejicano, "detribalized Apache." But Martín has the mind of a poet (and the reader—though not deliberately—is challenged: next time you see such a figure, remember that though his head *may* be filled only with quotidian banalities and with crude and trivial wishes, it is also very possible that he is living an inner life at least as vivid as your own). His imagination is engaged; in poverty, and witness to much brutality and degradation, he retains an innocent eye—a wild creature's eye—and a deep and loving respect for the earth. As a child he had dreamed an Indian spirit-dream, and sung "all earth is holy" over and over to his heart's drum beat. The street-wise youth holds secretly to that wisdom.

After some personal disasters he takes to the road and for some years wanders from state to state. While he is far from home the need to seek out his origins, to know his parents' stories, becomes strong in him. He calls to mind those who had known them, is haunted by their voices telling him of the tragic lives from which he sprang. He returns, and explores those lives, and experiences their bitter deaths.

Then Martín again goes wandering, from state to state, city to city: searching now for a point of rest, dreaming of a bit of land, and a house, and a woman who will be his wife. He searches, searches, in and out of trouble, discontented, broke, "thin with addiction," drifting. At last he is drawn back once more to "Burque," to his own New Mexican reality, and at last finds the woman he has dreamed of.

To make a home for her and himself and their coming child he guts and rebuilds an old shack and clears decades of scrap from the half-acre of land behind it. At the poem's end he has received the newborn into his own hands and sworn to his son that he will never abandon him.

Reduced to outline, it is a simple story, with barely a "plot." But in its poetic richness it is so much more—a Hero Tale, an archetypal journey, not only through a personal desolation but into, and out of, the desolated, benighted lives of his parents. Passing through the desert he emerges into a green and fertile valley of love and birth, but he has learned that the valley will be his to keep only if he cherishes it. The vow never to abandon his child as he had been abandoned (and as his father had abandoned *himself*—to drink; or as his mother had been essentially abandoned by *her* father, who exchanged responsible fatherhood for incestuous rape) extends beyond the child to "all living things." And this of necessity includes Martín's self; the vow implies that he will respect the holiness of his own life too, henceforth. Thus the poem is essentially a myth of redemption.

The second half of this volume, **"Meditations on the South Valley,"** can be recognized a sequel to

"Martín" even though it is told in the first, not the third, person; but it is also an autonomous self-contained work. And within its totality, which forms a narrative, its parts can each be read as discrete entities, some of them meditative lyrics such as XVII or XIII for example, some of them stories within the framing story.

The *myth recognized in reality* in this poem is parallel to that told in **"Martín."** **"Meditations"** opens with the destruction by fire of the hard-won house, the secure locus, the nest whose construction, along with the birth of a child, brought **"Martín"** to completion. The fire necessitates a period of residence in a neighborhood whose alien character, combined with the shock of that disaster, impels the writer to take stock of all that his own South Valley signifies to him: the warmth, passion, tragedy, *reality* of the barrio thrown into sharp relief by the suburban blandness of "the Heights." The resulting poems portray and evoke the values embodied in the barrio, despite—and in certain ways even because of—all its poverty and racial oppression. Cherished *old* things mended to serve anew are perceived in their beauty, compared to the glare and glitz of things shiny with newness.

> Ah, those lovely bricks
> and sticks I found in fields
> and took home with me
> to make flower boxes!
> The old cars I've worked on
> endlessly giving them tune-ups,
> changing tires, tracing
> electrical shorts. . .
> . . . the process of making-do,
> of the life I've lived between
> breakdowns and break-ups. . .
> I could not bear a life
> with everything perfect.

In contrast, the rented **"Heights"** apartment "reflects a faceless person . . . an emptiness" with its "white walls/thin orange carpet" all "strangely clean and new" where there are no homely chores for him to do. On the groomed suburban street people with "ceramic faces" are walking their elegant clipped poodles, and "the air is blistered with glaze/of new cars and new homes." As he longs for the barrio, an organic *neighborhood*, he tells stories of its people, stories at once typical and unique: "bad little Eddie," who cried out against injustice, cared for his old grandmother, was illiterate, generous, a delinquent piece of rubbish in the eyes of society, and died playing "chicken"; Pablo the powerful gang-leader, now a janitor, "still proud," still "cool to the bone," who leads "a new gang of neighborhood parents" to fight against water pollution; Feliz the *curandera*, who bewitches Caspar the Ghost, who used to pick fights all the time and now stands on the Río Grande bridge each day muttering religious curses, his shack papered with images of the Sacred Heart; Maria the young witch; Pancho "the barrio idiot," who identifies with the animals and lives his harmless life, rich with fantasies, unmolested; Benny whom the Rio Grande takes to itself. . . . All these are seen within the society of which they are a part, and thus the autonomy of each story, each poem within the poem (including those which are most lyrical and personal) is never detached from that wholeness of view which results from an artist's dedicated engagement with experience.

Social criticism is implicit, not abstracted, throughout Baca's work—most obviously in the prison poems of an earlier volume, ***Immigrants in Our Own Land***, though even there not divorced from a prevailing lyricism. In the present book it is felt as the underlying theme: the tragedy of waste, deprivation, disinheritance. The illiterate youths "lean[ing] on haunches in the sun/back[s] against a wall," "entangled in the rusty barbed wire of a society [they] do not understand" are brothers and comrades of Martín/Baca. He is aware, with Blakean vision, studying "the faces of boys/playing in dirt yards," of Cuauhtémoc; in men who, "eyes sleek with dreams,/lounge on porches/reading the flight of geese/above the Río Grande," he perceives Netzahualcoyotl. But all of this could not engage one, the reader could not really hear and feel it, if Baca's language itself did not engage the ear. It is not only his responsive sensibility that, at the very opening of **"Martín"** enters presences that linger in the air of an abandoned pueblo like the former presence of a picture on a wall; it is the donative articulation with which he can transmit experience. How rich the spare, mostly monosyllabic cadences can be! He evokes his childhood:

> On *that* field
> I hand swept smooth
> top crust dirt and duned a fort.
> Idling sounds of Villa's horse
> I reared my body and neighed at weeds.

Or the childhood of his mother, after the school bus has dropped her off at the edge of the field track she must follow home:

> The lonely afternoon in the vast expanse of llano
> was a blue knife
> sharpening its hot, silver edge on the distant
> horizon of mountains, the wind blew over
> chipping red grit, carving a prehistoric scar-scaled
> winged reptile of the mountain. . . .

His imagery often has the Gongoresque character (which in Neruda is called "surreal" but has little to do with cerebral French-style surrealism) common to much Hispanic writing (traceable, perhaps, to Arabic influences in Spain, and to Native American influences in the New World?). Such images surprise, but are rooted in actual observation. "Laughter rough as brocaded cloth . . . teeth brilliant as church tiles"—the comparisons are fresh and real, and give a kind of beauty to the roughness, a dignity to the sensual gleam of teeth.

The young, homeless Martín makes friends with old women who hang out by the bars, "blue teardrops tattooed on their cheeks,/initials of ex-lovers on their hands." They are perceived as

drawn out from the dark piss-stinking rooms
they lived in,
by the powerful force of the moon,
whose yellow teeth tore the alfalfa out of their hearts
and left them stubbled,
parched grounds old goats of Tecatos and winos
nibbled

—a metaphor that beautifully balances both its terms; they have equal, virtually interchangeable validity.

By the time we return, in the "**Meditations,**" to the narrator's own story, the containing frame, we can perceive that what makes it so imperative to rebuild the burned house is not only the obvious practical and psychological need anyone, anywhere, might have after a fire, but the need once more to reenter the history and struggle of his own people.

The actual reconstruction (aided by friends whose character, once again, might seem highly dubious to the world at large, but who, in solidarity, rise to the occasion with honor) is a miniature epic, Homeric in its condensed enumeration of the details the herculean labor involved.

The felling of an ancient elm which precedes the clearing of the house-site before the building begins is a particularly powerful passage, which once more demonstrates Baca's unforced feeling for symbolic significance. The death of the great elephantine tree is a necessary ritual of mythic character; the author, although now "where the tree had stood/a silver waterfall of sky poured down," feels as if he had "just killed an old man." But myth is entered through the graphic, sonic, and kinesthetic evocation of an actual, strenuous event, in which human effort and the last "leaf-heave" breath of a shuddering, cracking, down-crashing tree become part of the reader's own experience.

At last the work of construction is done, and a new house much better than the first has come into being. It is a birth, to parallel the birth of the little son in "**Martín.**" Ten years of poems had been burned in the fire—new ones are born in meditation and action. Not the house nor the poems only, and not even the return to the South Valley and what is symbolizes, but—parallel to the vow of commitment at the end of "**Martín**"— new levels of awareness, dedication, purpose, and personal freedom, emerge as phoenix from these ashes. (pp. xiii-xviii)

Denise Levertov, in an introduction to *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley* by Jimmy Santiago Baca, New Directions, 1987, pp. xiii–xviii.

LIAM RECTOR

(essay date 1988)

[In the following excerpt, Rector comments on the loss of innocence and coming of age of the protagonist in *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley.*]

[***Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*** is] a powerful orchestration and revision of a narrative and lyrical admixture—both constructivist and expressionist in its execution—with an utterly compelling dramatic form fueling the entire vivisection and the pilgrim's progress which makes it so much more than another "collection" of poems.

Baca's book is a page-turner, almost a novel in verse, though its narrative is primarily elliptical (prodded structurally forth by the sectioning, the juxtaposition of poems, and the jump-cuts of time both presuppose). Its basic unit of construction is the sequence, poem by poem. I don't want to rehearse here the entire story and ruin its unfolding for the reader, but suffice to say that it is the story's masterful arc of dramatic form that commands both our emotional and our formal attentions. Martín, the orphaned protagonist, sets off on a journey that is studded with the particulars of his mestizo or "detribalized Apache" background, one which finally enacts a mythical rite which speaks to us all.

For many of the poets now in their thirties the word *memory* has become a kind of poetic buzzword, and memory is often the route travelled, the road deified, in their voyage towards meaning in poems. A romantic nostalgia (forever pumping the fog machine) weakens the decorative, essentially descriptive poems of many in this generation, where memory is no more than a whining, not a keening, about the passage into adulthood, the passage into complicity. But in poems such as Baca's. . . the loss of innocence is made specific, personal, grounded in tribe, class, and finally myth—*made* into a kind of depersonalized self-dramatization which, if it is romantic and betrays deep sentiment, is also very hard-boiled and without any *poseur* sentimentality. One innocence often remembered by this generation is the political/social innocence of coming to age amidst the Vietnam War and all it embodied of a civil war wherein family member was pitted against family member. Another most remembered (or most longed for) is characteristically the existence of the family itself, the mother and the father of it, before the "broken home" of the fifties became the "single-parent dwelling" of the eighties or no home, no family at all.

Your departure uprooted me mother,
hallowed core of a child

An excerpt from *Working in the Dark*

With a stub pencil I whittled sharp with my teeth, I propped a Red Chief notebook on my knees and wrote my first words. From that moment, a hunger for poetry possessed me.

Until then, I had felt as if I had been born into a raging ocean where I swam relentlessly, flailing my arms in hope of rescue, of reaching a shoreline I never sighted. Never solid ground beneath me, never a resting place. I had lived with only the desperate hope to stay afloat; that and nothing more.

But when at least I wrote my first words on the page, I felt an island rising beneath my feet like the back of a whale. As more and more words emerged, I could finally rest: I had a place to stand for the first time in my life. The island grew, with each page, into a continent inhabited by people I knew and mapped with the life I lived.

I wrote about it all—about people I had loved or hated, about the brutalities and ecstasies of my life. And, for the first time, the child in me who had witnessed and endured unspeakable terrors cried out not just in impotent despair, but with the power of language. Suddenly, through language, through writing, my grief and my joy could be shared with anyone who would listen. And I could do this all alone; I could do it anywhere. I was no longer a captive of demons eating away at me, no longer a victim of other people's mockery and loathing, that had made me clench my fist white with rage and grit my teeth to silence. Words now pleaded back with the bleak lucidity of hurt. They were wrong, those others, and now I could say it.

Through language I was free. I could respond, escape, indulge; embrace or reject earth or the cosmos. I was launched on an endless journey without boundaries or rules, in which I could salvage the floating fragments of my past, or be born anew in the spontaneous ignition of understanding some heretofore concealed aspect of myself. Each word steamed with the hot lava juices of my primordial making, and I crawled out of stanzas dripping with birth-blood, reborn and freed from the chaos of my life. The child in the dark room of my heart, that had never been albe to find or reach the light switch, flicked it on now; and I found in the room a stranger, myself, who had waited so many years to speak again. My words struck in me lightning crackles of elation and thunderhead storms of grief.

Jimmy Santiago Baca, in his *Working in the Dark: Reflections of a Poet of the Barrio*, Red Crane Books 1992.

your absence whittled down
to a broken doll
in a barn loft. The small burned area of memory,
where your face is supposed to be,
moons' rings pass through
in broken chain of events
in my dreams.

Martin's loss is an extreme one, and he travels to seek out friends of his parents to tell him who and how his parents were. In Martín's sojourn across the country we're made to feel that even within the genocidal colonization that established America it is now an America of emigres who have all in effect orphaned themselves, moving in radical disjunction away from their parent/precursors. Martín's own history is poised within the roughage, the barely digestible:

I was caught in the middle—
between white skinned, English speaking altar boy
at the communion railing,
and brown skinned, Spanish speaking plains nomadic
child
with buffalo heart groaning underworld earth powers,
between Sunday brunch at a restaurant
and burritos eaten in a tin-roofed barn,
between John Wayne on the afternoon movie
rifle butting young Braves,
and the Apache whose red dripping arrow
was the altar candle in praise of the buck
just killed.

Out of the collisions of these histories and absences Baca fashions the first movement of the book, **"Martín,"** where a child passes from "field prey" to form eventually his own family and house, persons and a place he promises never to abandon.

"Meditations on the South Valley," the second movement in the book, is a further tale of breakdown and rebuilding, one in which Baca draws portraits of barrio life with great telescopic accuracy and poignance. This section meanders a bit and loses some of the compression that drove so convincingly the arc of the first section, but if there is a loss of through-line tension it is also an interlude before the books' triumphant climax. This is a book of abandonment and what people abandon themselves to—drink, the irresponsibility of incest, their own youths, and passivity—and it is also a book of great complicity, maturity, and finally responsibility. As Levertov says, it is a contemporary hero tale . . . . The skills brought to the writing are likewise heroic, combining as they do both narrative and startling lyric talents, forging a form which supersedes any discussion of the craft brought to bear. (pp. 394–96)

Liam Rector, "The Documentary of What Is," in *The Hudson Review*, Vol. XLI, No. 2, Summer, 1988, pp. 393–400.

BRUCE-NOVOA

(essay date 1989)

[Bruce-Novoa is a Costa Rican born American poet

and critic who has written extensively on Chicano literature. In the following excerpt, he examines the style and content of Baca's poetry, concluding that it "remains essentially self-centered, personal in an egotistical way."]

[Both Baca and Leo Romero (with his *Celso*, 1985)] begin in a personal search that channels itself into a character, in Baca's case Martín. The significance of that evolution is, nevertheless, different. Whereas Romero relinquishes the personal voice to a folkloric character, the pícaro outsider, Baca's personal *I* coincides with the figure of the outlaw and he moves away from it in his search for deeper personal understanding. Ironically, to do so he seems compelled to open a distance between himself and his persona by creating a character, Martín, who will take on an epic quality of historical searcher, although restricting himself to the immediate family. Martín recuperates, as Baca recreates, a reason for his situation, and then transcends it by finding a new common spirit and purpose. The poems of the second book **"Meditations on the South Valley"** are the record of his pilgrimage.

Immigrants in Our Own Land contains prison poems with almost no references to Baca's ethnicity. Clues can be found, but they are so subtle as to be more the reader's invention than the author's intention. The mention of "piñon trees" stands out in its uniqueness among the many images that bear no ethnic specificity. The few references to Chicanos are not tied to the persona's identity, and in **"So Mexicans are Taking Jobs from Americans,"** a pro-Mexican poem, the persona does not assume the identity of the accused, preferring to remain an ambiguous defender. Even the title poem, which one might expect to allude to Chicanos, is actually about how prisoners are treated. The essence of the collection lies not in ethnicity, but in individual self-knowledge and affirmation. **"I Will Remain"** offers the key.

I am after a path you cannot find by looking at green fields,
smelling high mountain air that is clear and sweetly
Odorous as when you fall in love again and again and again.
I am looking for a path that weaves through rock
and swims through despair with fins of wisdom.
A wisdom to see me through this nightmare,
. . . .
I will take the strength I need from me,
not from field or new friends. With my old friends fighting!
Bleeding! Calling me crazy! And never getting the respect I desire
. . . .
I stay because I believe I will find something,
. . . .
Here on this island of death and violence,
I must find peace and love in myself, eventually freedom
And if I am blessed, then perhaps a little wisdom.

Prison here fits into the ancient motif of the voyage into the wilderness, the descent into hell, from which the pilgrim emerges illuminated with truth. But it is not a voyage into a community, rather into the self. The book ends with no sign of the freedom he seeks and not much of the wisdom either.

While ***Swords of Darkness*** was published after ***Immigrants***, the poems are dated two years earlier and are stylistically similar. Long verses dangerously close to prose, express the outsider's perspective, the prisoner's isolation from society. The last poem, **"Walking Down to Town and Back,"** contains, however, childhood memories among which appear typical New Mexican motifs, to say nothing of specific place names like Belén and Sandía mountains. A horse-riding father takes the son to see a woman "who had seen our Virgin Mary." Suddenly the poem turns into a new Mexican folktale, with death, strange events involving malicious animals, the spirit of the deceased attempting to kill the spouse and causing a fire (a similar story appears in Romero's "His Sister" *Agua Negra*), and salvation coming in the form of divine intervention. The persona then claims to have also seen the Virgin and is marked for life by the apparition. The community treats him like a crazy drunk, resembling the pícaro. The poem is an origin myth of the outsider figure, an explanation of the category in which Baca finds himself in **"Immigrants."** And that situation is attributed to his father's intervention—in traditional guise of horse rider—-a version of the cycle-of-history motif in which one generation inherits its destiny from the elders. Somehow that destiny is to speak of the dark unknown side of existence, to be the voice of "rude life" as the last poem states. In this context, ***Immigrants*** becomes a voyage into a wilderness to garner the wisdom necessary to live up to the destiny with which the young persona was marked.

Baca's recent book ***Martín and Meditations on the South Valley*** is a personal voyage into a dark personal past. Martín, the central character, orphaned—actually abandoned by his parents—in early childhood like a classic pícaro, goes in search of his parents' history. He begins with his memories—"My mind circles warm ashes of memories,/the dark edged images of my history," adds what he can learn from others—"For some years I wandered cross country,/and those who had known my parents / came back to me again," which in turn further provokes his own. He manages to reconstruct his parents' unhappy life and pathetic death. His arrival at the conclusion of their story releases him to begin his own search for a future, one with set goals that contrast sharply with his parents' experience: "I left Burque [Alburquerque] again, to buy a house,/a small piece of land, and marry a woman." His mistake, however, is that he actually is repeating his parents' pattern of running away from a

difficult home situation, and the result is equally unsettling: "Each city was filled/with children/like the child I had once been." This encounter with his own past image sends him back to his origins where he discovers an identity even more basic than family ties: he is the "grit and sediment. . . mineral de Nuevo Mexico," and specifically of the rural Manzano Mountain area. From this self-knowledge he draws strength and direction. Utilizing his mestizo heritage—"Apache words" plus "Spanish names of things"— he will work a plan that sounds simple.

> I am ready to work
> all I ask is that I don't starve,
> that I don't fail at being a good man,
> that things go good for me,
> that I meet a woman who will love me deeply,
> that I meet strong spiritual brothers and sisters,
> and that I have healthy children.

This commitment to region and basic values culminates in the rewards of revelation in the form of a vision of belonging, significantly stated in terms of New Mexican imagery: mountains, rocks, arrowheads, piñon nuts, pine cones, a red sun, and the brightly illuminated ruins of the Quaraí mission. Against this typical landscape, the poet projects archetypal images of a traditional mestizo family heritage:

> I thought I saw the dark skinned ghost
> of my grandfather, on his horse, with sombrero
> waving to me from QUARAI,
> and the gray haired ghost of my grandmother,
> carding sheep fur
> beneath the green teepee of a pine tree,
> by the arroyo.

Hispano male and Indian female set in a traditional ranching scene seen against the backdrop of the mission in the midst of nature; this is Baca's most nostalgic and idealistic moment.

The first half of the book culminates in an affirmation of success. Martín finds a mate, buys land, remodels a house, and has a child. Within this model of the nuclear family, the last poem ends on an apparently positive note.

> I went inside
> took Pablito from Gabriela
> to let her sleep and rest,
> then circled my arm around your body Pablo,
> as we slept in the bed next to mama,
> I promised you and all living things,
> I would never abandon you.

Martín declares a new life diametrically opposed to his experience of having been abandoned, left to live without home or parents.

In that context of fulfillment, the second half is remarkable. It opens with the burning of the house and with it, ten years worth of poems. Martín will eventually build another house on the same spot, thus transcending his set-back, but the ending, quite expected and anticlimactic, is less significant than the transformation Martín undergoes in the process.

The poems now become echoes of Chicano literature through the New Mexican motifs seen above. First, we have the threat of disappearance in the house burning, given particular significance of personal death of a sort by the loss of the poems. The wife then extends the circle of destruction to the family by stating, "'Oh, Martín, it's all gone.'" Then Martín goes into a form of exile, a stranger in a middle-class neighborhood, appropriately called the Heights to contrast with the South Valley where he lived before. The symbolic division of society into upper and lower, alienated and those still in touch with real life, is clichéd, but it is also Baca's entré into Chicano literature's superficial code. In this situation of impending loss of meaning, Martín begins recuperating the images of his source of orientation in the world. From his exile he recalls the barrio in which he has lived for an unspecified number of years—the ten years of writing is one hint, while later he mentions another son, now old enough to play on his own—and where he had become one of the people.

The poems enumerate characters, environments, and events, filling in that gap of years, bridging it as well as the new distance of exile. These memories are simultaneously an enumeration of New Mexican characters and motifs. Characters include outsider figures—drunks, lowriders, gang members, the barrio fool—the *curandera*, the witch, the elders, the veteran, and two figures evoked through allusion: Doña Sebastíana, death in the form of a woman, and the *santero* statue carver. The dominant motif is the closeness to the natural order in which trees are personified. Yet there is also a Chicano updating here noticeable in the inclusion of lowriders and gang members among the outsiders. In a distancing move, reminiscent of Montoya's breaking off of his nostalic memory with a *Chale* from the contemporary barrio idiom, Baca turns back to his own romantic image of the grandfather and rejects it in the form of a scene from a Western movie. Apparently he recognizes that his nostalgic ideals are no longer fit for the present. "My heart is an old post / dreams I tied to it years ago / yank against / to get free." Martín turns off the television and immediately a contemporary form of the image appears to replace the old one: "A chavalo riding his bicycle / at dawn down Barcelona road, / clenching roses in his teeth, / in the handlebar basket / are apples he took from random trees on the road." Note that the boy is a picaresque character involved in petty theft, but with a flare for the beauty of nature, a worthy successor of Romero's Celso, but urbanized.

It is this urbanizing up-dating Baca undertakes in the poems that follow, beginning with a parody of Montoya's famous elegy to a dead pachuco, "El Louie." The elegy to Eddie allows Baca to evoke common Chicano motifs of police oppression, gang graffiti as alternative to illiteracy, barrio slang, and the bitter cry of "stop it," all of which culminates in a typical plea for a place in the

communal memory. "Your voiced whispered/in the dust and weeds,/a terrible silence/not to forget your death." Martín's renewed pilgrimage takes him not back to the family past, a question he resolved in the first section of the book, but into the community. Perhaps more significantly, it takes him, for the first time, into an open intertextual dialogue with the specific code of contemporary Chicano literature. The second poem shifts focus, but continues this endeavor by first repeating the cycles-of-history motif, and then using another stock Chicano strategy: overlaying pre-Columbian figures onto contemporary barrio people, ending in an evocation of Alurista through citation when he calls a Chicano "a distant relative/of Aztec warriors." His wind-through-the-barrio poem also reminds one of Alurista. His bad-dude-turned-political-activist rings with an echo of Ricardo Sánchez, while another set of verses contain so many key references to Gary Soto that it is difficult not to read them as a tribute. The specifics of the intertextualities, however interesting, are less important than the general effect of weaving this poetry into the fabric of established Chicano literature that readers knowledgeable in that canon will recognize or at least sense.

Within this context Martín builds his new house, which we cannot avoid reading as a more authentic expression of his soul and art than the first. It is through this last image that we must reread the first section's culminating images to understand the meaning of the book. Martín portrays the new house as his child, and inversely, he is born from it. The symbol is of a self-generating circular flow of energy. Compared to the image of shared childbirth in section one, Baca here offers a disturbingly self-centered and even egotistical birthing, to say nothing of it being strictly male. When we recall that Pablo's birth, at which Martín was present as an assistant, was called a "Fertility dance of women," we can read the building of the house as the fertility dance of men. What is disturbing . . . is that when Baca describes the ultimate act of creating origins—as opposed to tracing biological roots—women are conspicuously absent. If we extend the circle of that act, we find Martín in the company of men, who, in turn, are characterized as social loners and outsiders united in their willingness to help Martín. They are, in fact, representatives of the community that Martín had been recalling during his exile in the Heights, as if once beckoned from silence, the barrio community reciprocates by coming to Martín's rescue. At no point after the fire, however, does the wife or the first son reappear. Martín ventured into this new life alone and remains essentially solitary at the end, even among his peers.

Perhaps history is a cycle of repetitions in which fathers seal their son's fate. While Martín seems quite different from his self-destructive, alcoholic father, in the end he also has abandoned his family, preferring to live among men in a loose community of mavericks. His first son has been erased from his father's contexts, and another, Antonio, is recalled to allow Martín to fix him into a repetition of the motif of the macho horse rider escaping into the distance. Gone is the tight heterosexual intimacy of the closing of the first section. Gabriela, named repeatedly in the verses where she appears to love and reproduce for Martín, becomes the nameless "wife" in section two. The idyllic passion of first love has faded, replaced by the comradery of the all-male work crew. This should not be seen as progress, however, because Baca has Martín define his state before meeting Gabriela as "drifting" and then has him return to it after the burning of the house and the last appearance of his wife. Her role, that of companion and collaborator in the project of home creation, is assumed by men friends. It is as though Martín, or Baca, has replanted a parody of the prison experience in the middle of his self-created utopia, an all-male bastion, but free of society's dictates. Perhaps we are to interpret this to mean that marriage and family are too restrictive. Tied as they are to the image of the first house, we could see them as a forced fitting of Martín's will to live outside the norms into an old mold. Despite the remolding, the shell still imposed conformity, as wife, marriage, and child apparently did also. He breaks with them to free himself from preestablished norms of living, just as he throws away the building plans and improvises the new house with the help of his friends. At the end we are expected to read this as an improvement: "create a better world, a better me,/ out of love. I became a child of the house,/ and it showed me/ the freedom of a new beginning."

The pattern is so traditional as to be archetypal: after the initial euphoria of love, come children, and the lover becomes just mother and wife. Nothing new here, just an old story in populist macho rhetoric. Even Baca's affirmation of freedom from social norms in the self-creating act among buddies is actually another, more insidious norm, that of the macho loner fleeing into his own world. In the end, Baca has replaced the grandfather's horse with Martín's lowrider, the mountain background with the vaulted livingroom, the great expanse of nature with his backyard: a Chicano version of the sublimated American Dream. Updated of course, because, although relegated to a static position, the grandmother was at least remembered.

In the end, Baca's poetry, while seeming to merge with the concerns of the groups discussed above, remains essentially self-centered, personal in an egotistical way. The community, women included, is there for his gratification, as almost everything else in the poetry we have reviewed here. The poetry is personal in that he focuses clearly on his intimate self, caring truly for almost no one else. (pp. 280–86)

Bruce-Novoa, "New Mexican Chicano Poetry: The Contemporary Tradition," in *Pasó por Aquí: Critical Essays on the New Mexican Literary Tradition, 1542–1988*, edited by Erlinda Gonzales-Berry, University of New Mexico Press, 1989, pp. 267–96.

CORDELIA CANDELARIA

(review date 1990)

[In the following excerpt, Chicana essayist and poet Candelaria discusses the presentation of Hispanic culture as well as the treatment of gender in *Martín and Meditations on the South Valley.*]

[***Martín & Meditations*** is] strikingly like other Chicano works in concept, theme, and motivation. Like them, it configures America in thoroughly Chicano/a (Latino/a) terms to reach, in this case, a poetic subjectivity that can only, ultimately, be private and self-revealing. *In being so,* however, it makes itself accessible to the reader outside. Just as we encounter, say, Ginsberg or Plath through the stark subjectivity of their words, so too do we apprehend Baca through the directness of his persona, raw, inside his culture.

> Each night I could hear the silver whittling blade
> of La Llorona,
> carving a small child on the muddy river
> bottom. . .
> A voice in me soft as linen
> unfolded on midnight air
> to wipe my loneliness away—the voice blew open
> like a white handkerchief in the night
> embroidered with red roses. . .

The overt reference to the Weeping Woman of Mexican folklore and the embedded allusion to the Virgen de Guadalupe with her mantle of roses—both aching with a child's hurt—locate Martín's self, rebuilding after parental abandonment, within the solid "adobe" reality of "Burque barrios" and the "rock-pit" truth of Quarai, the seventeenth-century mission church ruins now an official state monument of New Mexico. Like the anthology, the poems express their ideas and themes without a concern to translate or dilute them for dominant-culture consumption.

Baca refuses to treat gender thoughtlessly as a category of received meanings and known terms. Intelligent in his approach, he understands gender as a condition that requires fresh contemplation and painstaking treatment if its rendering of men and women is to be as authentic and full as possible. He tries to comprehend the "misery" that made his parents abandon him, leaving him vulnerable as "field prey," and he succeeds in capturing the abject pathos of their self-destructions. In imagining experience from inside their skins and inside those of Caspar the Ghost, *la curandera Feliz,* Grandma Lucero, the *cholos* and *vatos locos* who are his peers, and all the other "real lives in the South Valley," Baca seeks a compelling honesty that means he cannot rely on conventional norms of sex and gender for his language and metaphor. He mostly succeeds, and often brilliantly. Where he doesn't, it is usually in a momentary lapse of diction, not at the profounder level of conceptualization. For example, the word "afterglow" is absolutely wrong to use in description of a girl's sexual molestation, and in the crucial "Quarai" epiphany scene, it struck me as incomplete for Martín not to explicitly express his desire to love others, only his need to be loved, although his desire is implicit in the scene.

All in all, ***Martín & Meditations*** works superbly:

> I wished I had had a chance to be a little boy. . .
> and wished I had had a family—but these
> were silver inlaid pieces of another man's life
> whose destiny fountained over stones and ivy. . .
>
> Eddie blew his head off
> playing chicken
> with his brother. Para proof
> he was man. . .
> Don't toll the bell brother,
> 'cus he was not religious. . .
> [but] he saw injustice hanging out en las calles
> sunrise 'til sunset with the bros and sisters.
> [until] you picked up God's blue metal face
> and scattered the seed of your heart
> across the afternoon air. . .

Lines like these etch indelibly in the mind because they have first struck the nerve of feeling. And, like the ruins of Quarai—emblem of Martín's shattered boyhood and, later, of the fire-destroyed house he lovingly rebuilt with his friends—the poems promise to "linger in the air/like a picture/removed/leaves its former presence on the wall," to live in the "warm ashes of memories." (p. 15)

Cordelia Candelaria, "Nerve of Feeling," in *The American Book Review*, Vol. 11, January, 1990, pp. 1, 13, 15.

SESSHU FOSTER

(review date 1990)

[Here, Foster praises Baca for his "heart-rending narrative" of the hero's maturation in *Martín.*]

Martín & Meditations on the South Valley is a solid achievement, a Chicano landmark on the North American literary landscape. Justifiably, this book has been widely praised and its author has received a warm response from readers, audiences and critics alike. Baca was previously known in certain circles as a strong, passionate poet, and this work delivers his tales before even wider audiences. It's about time that a respected literary press such as New

Directions picks up and promotes one of the multitude of fine Latino poets in the U.S., many of whom are currently ignored, unpublished or unpaid because they are not as exotic or famous as Latin American writers who rode the Boom into the offices of corporate publishing in NYC.

Baca himself could have sat on his "laurels" and been satisfied to be known as a contender for the popular and critical admiration which follows, however distantly or detached, poets such as Luis Omar Salinas. But this book shows that Baca is willing to go an extra length, willing to press all his strengths to their limit, willing to risk aesthetic failure and leave the safety of poems that he has already proven that he can write.

Baca could have followed up his ***Immigrants in Our Own Land*** or ***What's Happening*** with a similar book of shorter poems, but instead, prompted by an ambitious feeling "that the entire Southwest needed a long poem that could describe what was happening here in the last twenty years," Baca attempted the two epic poems here in this book. With ample space to fail, Baca is actually largely successful in the undertaking; he gives us a full Whitmanesque "democratic vista" of this human landscape. These extended treatments of Baca's themes of oppression and struggle show qualitative advancement, bravely confirming Baca's potent poetics.

"Martín" is a fictionalized autobiography along the lines of Woody Guthrie's *Bound For Glory.* It recounts a hard-won coming of age, human survival against long odds, arriving at a new consciousness. Martín is a "de-tribalized Apache" with a mestizo background, left to raise himself (into/out of) the barrios of New Mexico. Glossaries in the back of the book provide translations of New Mexican caló woven organically throughout the text. Linguistically, then, Martín's environment is brought home in direct and concrete colloquialisms of his people:

> The religious voice of blind Estela Gomez
> Blackened the air one day.
> "92 years mijito. ¿Qué pasó? There were no more
> beans to pick, no crops to load on trains.
> Pinos Wells dried up, como mis manos.
> Everyone moved away to work. I went to Estancia,
> con mi hijo Reynaldo.
> Gavachos de Tejas, we worked for them. Loading
> alfalfa, picking cotton for fifty cents a row.
> yDanny? La borrachera. Y Sheria? La envidia.
> That's what happened, Martín, to your familia."

Martín's father dies like Ira Hayes, frozen stiff in a drunken ditch. Later, Martín is the one who sits at his mother's hospital deathbed, her lifelong absence terminated only by her murder. The account is not merely a superb depiction of life on the New Mexican land, but a vibrant, complete synthesis of popular voices from his past, descriptions of the poor side of the tracks, as well as Martín's inner world. A child, orphaned in real hard times, he serves as allegorical symbol for all those shattered peoples who are aliens in their own land. His recollections and deliverance from his past is at once a discovery of his own identity and an identification with his own people.

> de-tribalized Apache
> entangled in the barbwire of a society I do not
> understand,
> Mejicano blood in me splattering like runoff water
> from a roof canal, glistening over the lives
> who lived before me, like the rain over mounds of
> broken pottery,
> each day backfills with the brown dirt of my dreams.
> I lived in the streets,
> slept at friends' houses, spooned
> pozole and wiped up the last frijoles with tortilla
> from my plate. Each day
> my hands hurt for something to have,
> and a voice in me yearned to sing,
> and my body wanted to shed the gray skin of streets,
> like a snake that grew wings. . .
> I wished I had a chance to be a little boy,
> and wished a girl loved me,
> and wished I had a family—but these
> were silver inlaid pieces of another man's life. . .

And in similar lines that deliver moving detail after detail, a heart-rending narrative for anyone with the least sense of what it's like for broken families strung out across America's migrant highways since long before *The Grapes of Wrath,* Martín achieves his self-understanding by embracing the experience of his people as a class:

> There were children like me
> all across the world. In the yellowed pages
> of afternoons, while back-yard trash smoldered in
> barrels,
> and greasy motors hanging on welded tripod pipes
> dripped oil and penned black letters
> on driveway cement,
> about Johny who married
> Lorenzo killed in Nam,
> Eddie in la Pinta,
> Roman who OD'd in Califas,
> these children once with a dream,
> now grown into adults, let their dream
> dull against the iron hour-files
> of minimum wage jobs,
> emptied their dream
> with each bottle of Tequila drained,
> 'til eventually it lost its cosmic luster.

The triumph of Martín the character as well as **"Martín"** as a poem is that Baca is able to produce from his own experience of deprivation, imprisonment and oppression, both a true and faithful evocation of the world which shatters the dreams of such young people, as well as a recreation of the rough road and hard struggle taken by someone from that world who never surrenders his dreams, and who in the struggle is able to build himself a life.

"Meditations on the South Valley" pales somewhat in comparison. It is more fragmentary, its poems

forming a cycle of briefer duration, and it lacks the intense agony of Martín's childhood. Each of the sections is less integrated in a linear narrative than the sections which make up **"Martín."** Rather than dealing with life or death questions, the balance of moment-by-moment survival and the arrival at a decisive understanding of one's world, **"Meditations on the South Valley"** deals more with the also substantial achievement of learning to live in and love such world. The chracter has come to terms with himself and in **"Meditations on the South Valley"** is building a life with a wife and child, even as (in the first stanzas of the poem) he copes with his home burning down, destroying "10 years of poems/cocooned in pages/unfolding their flaming wings/ in silky smoke/ and fluttered past blackened rafters." While lacking the raw power of the preceding work, **"Meditations on the South Valley"** retains its confirmed evocation of important beginnings. (pp. 114–16)

Sesshu Foster, in a review of *Martín & Meditations on the South Valley*, in *The Americas Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Summer, 1990, pp. 114–16.

Mariposa on Baca's first collection:

Throughout ***Immigrants in Our Own Land***, Jimmy Santiago Baca speaks from the dual stance of an historically disenfranchised people and a young man abruptly uprooted from life. He has compiled a stirring chronicle in galloping free verse of a spiritual pilgrimage as eternal and timeless as the Southwestern terrains he depicts with the scrupulous care of a tribal sandpainting and as tempestous and terror riddled as the penal complex which was the physical cradle for this distinguished collection.

With a shattering force akin to Whitman's "barbaric yelp" alloyed to a swiftly blossoming imagery reminiscent of the early Nahautl singers Baca storms through the reader's consciousness with the sweeping might of an unleashed whirlwind or an aroused earthquake. His momentum is, however, tempered with an open tenderness and undisguised joy which gains a magnified clarity of tone.

. . . . .

In freeing himself from the subjective shackles of oppression and prejudice, by shaking off the cumbersome bondage of a guarded heart, by instinctively shunning the artificial glitter of superficially sophisticated language, Baca has proven anew what we often tend to forget, that poetry is an elemental fire, the light we carry within ourselves, a gift intended to be shared, respected and refined.

Mariposa, in his "A Stirring Chronicle," *Pembroke Magazine*, 1980.

JIMMY BACA WITH JOHN CRAWFORD AND ANNIE O. EYSTUROY

(interview date 1990)

[Here, Baca discusses his approach to writing and comments on Chicano culture and his experiences as a Mestizo.]

[Crawford]: *How do you feel about the Southwest?*

[Baca]: Our history was so fragmented by colonialism that I have felt mythology was needed, a putting together of everything in a modern sense. If you have a mythology then you have a place; if you don't have a mythology, you ain't got nothing. When I came back from prison, I decided to start writing about things I thought were as old as the earth; and so I started writing **"Martín"** keeping in mind that I wanted to describe my existence in New Mexico. Whether those things are "true" or not is another question. A lot of them are not, but they are true in the sense that I needed something to explain my existence, and I did it best by going through the land and asking it its secrets.

[J.C.]: *At that time in your work it was important?*

It was important because my values are not money or strength; I am not trying to be the strongest person around. My values are pretty much trying to find meaning, why I do something and why I am here. So I started looking into the land and the experience of the people, and trying to write in such a way that it didn't deny the humanity of Martín. I wanted Martín to be a real human being and let him live in this world and have a mythology that was his as well as the people's. I was trying to take images and, without compromising their mythology, bring them into contemporaneity.

[J.C.]: *But it seems to me you never lost contact with your own origins. They are still here, and you are still here.*

I believe there was a violent, violent attempt by the authorities to bleed the Chicanos and the Indios and the Mestizos of any identity, any cultural remnants. There was a really strong effort at that, a most sophisticated effort. It was not outright "Let's go out and shoot them"; it was, "Let's do it through education, let's do it through religion, let's bleed these people so they haven't got nothing left, so their only alternative is to become who we want them to become," right? And they accomplished that to a certain degree.

[J.C.]: *Did you have this in mind when you started to write about Martín?*

I didn't know anything about Martín at all. I didn't have any premeditated thinking about how it was all to come out, or what the metaphors meant, even really simple metaphors like bell-ropes, for example.

As a child one of the big images you got was bell-

ropes swinging all the time in the wind; the pueblos were so lonely that growing up you noticed bell-ropes swinging by themselves. Now, thirty-some years old, I write something and the image comes of the bell-rope swinging in the wind searching for a hand, and it is the searching for a hand that brings the whole mythology together. I find out later that the Pueblo Indians used to have games where they would swing ropes, and it would constitute the image of a song, and whoever grabbed the rope had to sing the song. I learned that only after I had written all this out.

These things are buried in the subconscious; as I was writing a book about a place, I realized that the more you go into your subconscious, the more these things are alive, and all you have to do is bring them forward and have the faith that what you are saying makes sense. My self is a recipient of the Mestizo culture, and that culture is so much embedded in the earth, and the earth is so much embedded in the subconscious, that you can't pull them apart; we are part of the earth, it is part of us.

[Eysturoy]: *So you see the physical landscape and the mythology as very closely connected in the subconscious?*

I think there is an intermarriage such that if it is ever broken then you will be broken. You can have all the mythology you want to learn in your English classes and not have the earth. You have got to find the beating heart of that which is you, and if you are able to find that then you are in business.

[A.E]: *What has sustained the people of the Southwest, do you think?*

Visions. . . I think that Chicano or Mestizo literature from the Southwest is going to become very powerful in the next decade, and it is because there are certain Chicanos and Chicanas who are going through the dark area where those things have been lost; and they ask, "What is Chicano culture?" because they don't know. The challenge is that they have to jump into the abyss, and once they jump, then they become the creators, they become the people who receive what has always been there, what has been lost.

It is not a static thing; you cannot lose something so that it is gone forever. It comes to you in dreams, and that's why I say visions. Visions are probably the biggest impetus toward leaping into the darkness to retrieve the mythology that has been buried by violence and injustice.

[J.C.]: *Has everything been damaged by this other culture that has come in?*

Yes. You know, when universities and foundations fund organizations to go out and accumulate sayings and folklore, you have a folklore that is really superficial and thin. You have fairytales, and if you ask the old people, the majority will say that there is nothing to tell other than "I came from there and nothing was happening." In fact, the destruction was right before their eyes, but they weren't able to see it as destruction. All they were concerned about was having their sons speak English, so they could go to the city and go to school.

Now with this generation, we see a huge empty space that has got to have something in it. It is those people who go into that massive empty space that come back with something. Each writer is doing that in his or her own way, putting the whole thing together and making a literature immensely strong and important for the kids of tomorrow. That is the most essential thing, that the kids are able to read something and say in their blood, "Ah, this is me!"

It is like an epiphany. As a young child, you have a really beautiful experience reading something that you are familiar with, you know. Reading a story about your father and making your father into a figure, a very big figure, as opposed to a sleepy Mexican, the whole thing changes, all the rules change and the authoritarian, colonial way of thinking becomes rubbish, and you become a human being full of pride and integrity.

Visions are very important. I am not talking about visions in a prophetical sense. I am talking about having a beautiful relationship with hummingbirds as a child, you know, and studying them and putting enough faith into that experience to pursue it.

What has been really hard and destructive is that we haven't taken ourselves seriously. We grew up thinking of ourselves as wards. If you are in a mental institution, people put their hands up for pills. You know what I am saying? If you grow up thinking that you are very important, then everything changes.

[J.C.]: *You mentioned the educational system, and one thing I see as a college teacher is that students come into it with a pretty good feeling about themselves, but it is stripped from them in a couple of years unless they are very careful. The institution keeps telling them they are not competent according to its rules. How would you deal with the education of somebody who is in their teens, and not do that to them?*

I think you have to take the person's experience seriously. You have a big responsibility to be open enough to encourage the students first of all—if they are in an English class—to use the language that best describes their experience, and not the experiences of Wordsworth in England; and to have each student reciprocate by giving as much effort as he or she can give to it.

[J.C.]: Then *the problem is going to be that you are going to "marginalize" kids and they are going to stay out of the mainstream culture. It becomes a question of economics, more than anything else.*

It all comes down to the bucks, that's right. I don't give a damn how good you write; if you are starving you are not going to write. So if someone is writing good stuff, the best thing you can do to help them is to find them some money.

[J.C.]: *But if you take them out of the community and stick them in a research place somewhere, you have made them into institutional wards again. You have to enable them to do what they want to do where they are.*

Exactly; you have to "give" them their own environment. But that's a problem not only with Chicanos, but whites and blacks as well. Unfortunately the more you lose yourself, the more accessible you are to the people with the bucks, and the more you are able to compromise, the more they are willing to set you up and give you loads of distinctions. The more you remain who you are, the deeper you stay in your work and your writing, the more they are inclined to ostracize you from their little funds and foundations.

[A.E.]: *Has that been a big problem for you? You have a lot of poems about the economics of writing.*

My experience is that the most essential and important thing in my life is writing, but while I am writing I have to work at different jobs, right? And all these other people are writing, not working, but what they write, in my opinion, is not going to stand up to the sun. It is a speck and it glows for a second and goes out, but they are getting all this money, and I wonder how they do it.

A couple of years ago I found this book on funding, and realized that these people had been spending 95 percent of their time sending off for money while I have been working on poems. So it comes down to access to information. A lot of writers spend their time in libraries getting access to information that will enable them to survive, and that hurts their writing.

[A.E.]: *Where I come from the fisherman is a poet, or the poet is a fisherman. Don't you think it is a fruitful combination to be a worker and a poet?*

I think that's beautiful and extremely important. A lot of writers today have to ask themselves, "How much time am I going to give to writing and how much to living with people or to the antinuclear movement, for example, and how much am I going to subject myself to what's happening in the world?" You can't have your ivory tower and be a good writer; you have got to have your writing hours and your struggle hours. If you begin to sacrifice one or the other, then you're going to really suffer.

I wouldn't be worth a piss if I let my family starve and they suffered because of my writing too much. I have to write, I have to close the door and go out and work, and then come home and be a father and love them and kiss them. You have got to put all that into one day, which makes it really hard.

[A.E.]: *But you also participate in a reality that other people can relate to and are able to put that into your creativity.*

It is very hard, you know. What makes it so difficult is that you go out, like I have done the last couple of days, spend a good many hours planting trees, and then write a tree-planting poem. That's okay, but the experience of actually sweating and straining and having your back hurt and feeling the earth and watering it and looking at the leaves, that's really life, as the Beatles were saying in that song; life is what you live while you are thinking about what life is.

The thing is not *just* to write a poem, you know. I call it commercial thinking; our minds are accustomed to commercials. We see something for seven minutes, then a commercial comes on; we write a poem for seven minutes and then we stop. A lot of poets and novelists and writers are doing it; their thinking is sequenced to commercials. So I have to go in and write the poem down and then I have to give that poem a day or two or a week, to really get the same heavy experience I got out of actually digging the hole and planting the tree. I want the same sort of depth and breadth in that poem as when I planted the tree. That's what is hard, to slow yourself down. . .

When you begin to deal with language you have to be loyal to the language that speaks for the "we" of the people. I say "we," because I don't take all the credit for it; I simply bring in the information, I bring it all together like a big puzzle, and there it is.

[J.C.]: *It has always struck me in your written work and when you talk that for someone who has been through such hardships you are very optimistic. Not that you don't know there are bad things out there, but the way you deal with it is always at the level of opportunity.*

Let me tell you something about that: I once came out of my cell in the dungeon; I was teaching these guys how to write, and they happened to be "soldiers" of this particular gang. The leaders came down and said that they were going to kill me if I didn't stop teaching their people how to read and write, and I said, "Well, what the heck. . . " So I come up from my shower and there are these two guys walking towards me and both of them have knives. Speaking of being opportunistic, having a bright outlook on life? . . . I look at these two guys and I think, "Holy shit, these two guys are going to kill me," right? So what am I going to do? I look around and there is a wash bucket and I pick it up and run at them with a wash bucket, just like the Apaches would do, my ancestors. I went "Wha. . . " and they took off running. It was not that I was courageous or brave, it was just that you cannot just sit there and let it happen. I was lucky in so many instances, but that's the way I approach life, you know; you do what you do and hope for the best.

But I have fallen through some deep holes, and I am not as disciplined as I should be. What you do is that you try to submit yourself, your humanity, to the very, very edge of the cliff where you think you may be able to fly, but you don't actually jump. And you kind of go there and put yourself there; it is that instinct of wanting to do it and not doing it, purposely reversing it—that is

where your humanity is able to be creative. You begin to write knowing that you would love to pick up a gun and go down to the police department and blow some of them executioners away, right? And you carry that with you when you write creatively about peace and love and so forth; you have that in you.

[J.C.]: *I see how "Martín" as a poem fills up creative space for you. What about some of the other work you have been doing in the last few years? How does it satisfy you creatively?*

I don't know. I am not being facetious here or humble, but honestly I don't think I will know how to write until I am forty-five. ***Immigrants in Our Own Land*** was a passionate try to bring life into a really barren, dead place. It was a weapon against sterility, mental and spiritual and emotional sterility. In some of the other things I write, I run the spectrum of the emotions. ***Poems Taken From My Yard*** was written in a week; I just sat down because I was tired, I sat down in the kitchen and wrote all these poems out. And it was fun, I enjoyed it, and people enjoy them. **"Martín"** was different. One of the big issues there was that the Chicano experience has been described so much in rural terms. I grew up in a city, a hot, slick kid, and there were millions of people like me who did not have anything to refer to that reflected their experience. So I wanted to write a book that was partly rural, but for the most part incorporated the city experiences, and gave them an element of dignity. You're hanging out by the railroad tracks, but you can have the same dignity as if you were hanging out by the ruins. I wanted to give that dignity back to the people. That is how I approached that.

[A.E.]: *You say somewhere that you write to lure yourself to your inner self, "to the very edge of my eye." Is that still so?*

You know what I do as a habit? I go to my office, I turn on the typewriter, and before I start working on this book I am writing, *The Three Sons of Julia*, I will type five or six poems as a warm-up, pretty much like you warm up your engine. I will look out the window and just start. I can see a leaf and start writing about it; then I'll put it away and start writing about my son's expression last night; and I'll put that away and write about fish. And when I think I am sufficiently past the stage of being *crudo* from sleep, I drop all these poems into a big hole in my desk, and then I start on my *Three Sons of Julia*. It would be interesting if I were to show all these warm-up poems to somebody what they would think of them.

[A.E.]: *When you started writing, was there more a search for yourself, while now you have moved into a different stage?*

Yes, I have found that I work best in book-length poems, as opposed to a single page poem. I don't think you can imagine Whitman working best in a sonnet. A single poem does not fully describe your poetic temperament as opposed to a book. The book may actually be one poem, but you're like a wild pony and need that much space to say it. And it is those poets out in the wilderness, who have to work and who know a woman's cry of birth and so forth, who know that you have to have a lot of space to write a real poem if you want it to reflect who you are or what you are writing about. So it is really difficult to write those small poems.

It all goes back to what your vision is. If your vision is a very small one of making thirty-five thousand a year, teaching three classes a semester, and having enough time to go to the Caribbean, then your writing is going to reflect that; and if your vision is to reach all these people and have them read your book, crying and weeping, then your vision is going to reflect a much deeper, broader sort of book. So it is who you are. And we are in an age where single poems win ten-thousand-dollar awards.

[A.E.]: *Maybe a reflection of the fragmentation of reality that we see in all areas of life?*

I think so. . . I was in Mexico a couple of weeks ago and I was sitting next to this novelist and he tells me, "I have fifty-two books." And I look at him wondering what I should say, and realize that nothing I have been taught or have experienced has enabled me to answer someone who tells me that he has written fifty-two books. Somehow I cannot see how those people can take their lives seriously; there has to be something missing. They fall into a syndrome where they produce a book a year. It is really destructive, too, because your words become ticker tapes and your mind a computer, and all emotions become ideology; you just send it through the computer and it puts it out on the page.

[J.C.]: *You are very prolific, but you are not thinking in terms of product.*

Yes, I am extremely prolific. Everything I do seems like a rockchip in an Indian ruin, with a question of where it belongs. There is a bigger figure to this; something big is looming in the darkness and these are all the clues. So if I can put all these together, I'll find the great God and He'll show me all the secrets.

[A.E.]: *In your most recent collection of poems, you end by saying that you use every poem to break the shackles on your legs. What are your shackles now?*

What I meant by shackles are those things that hinder creativity, and there are so many things that hinder my creativity it is incredible. I love drinking whiskey with friends until all hours of the night. I love it, you know, and I should be writing, but I am not. I sometimes find that life is too good to write. I mean, why sit around writing? It is the worst thing anybody could do while you are on earth; there are so many other things to do, you can sing, dance, fight. . .

[A.E.]: *But without one you cannot do the other. . .*

That's why writing for me has become a really lonely type of occupation now. It wasn't like that before.

[J.C.]: *When you were in prison, writing would be a way of saving yourself, defining a new identity?*

If I hadn't written in prison, I would still be in prison. . . I had to go back to my tablet and write in order to find a deeper understanding than the immediate satisfaction or gratification.

[A.E.]: *Would you have become a writer if you hadn't gone to prison? Was that experience the catalyst for your creativity?*

Probably.

[J.C.]: *There is also this sense of growth, that this is a new page—I am starting afresh, and I can do what I want.*

You know what I have been experiencing in the last eight, nine years? Learning. I have learned that I didn't know how to be a loving person. I am learning how to get up in the morning and listen to my son. It becomes really sweet when you realize that you have learned what you didn't know. So the process, even as a man, is one of continuous learning.

That's why I have survived, and why the Native Americans and the Chicanos have survived, because we have learned, we haven't stopped learning; even when we don't want to, we learn.

[J.C.]: *You taught yourself a lot about poetry and writing, right?*

Yes, I taught myself everything in writing, and I don't say that arrogantly. Nobody is going to teach you how to write what you see, you know; the only way to learn is to write and write until you are able to come really close to the way you see life.

[J.C.]: *You have a way of saying "seeing" that is unlike ours.*

The way the Indians say "seeing" is how close you can come to the way things really are, the way a deer sees a rock, or the way a frog sees water; we call that "seeing." Every human being has that seeing in them, and someone who gets up and writes every day, all he or she is trying to do is to get close to his or her seeing capabilities; that's where the good poems come, when you are able to see. No class is going to teach you that. Lucy Tapahonso is a good example. Her poetry could not have been written by anyone but her. She sees things and she has to use her Navajo culture and this other culture and the English language. She has to put them together in such a way that is Lucy Tapahonso and only her. She can of course read all the books she likes to, but nothing is going to teach her her own voice.

[J.C.]: *I sometimes think that the best a writing teacher can do is to give you some space and encouragement.*

Encouragement is important, but not *that* important. It's a funny thing, and I have to live with it, but I don't encourage anybody. I say that is good, yes, but I'll say that it is good to a lot of people. But if it is someone I think is really born to be a writer, I won't tell that person whether it is good or bad; I won't say anything to that person, because I think the most valuable experience comes from when the person is left in doubt all the time about his or her work and has to struggle that much harder to prove that what he or she is writing says something.

The minute you tell someone that it is good or bad, it is no good. It's like when you go out there and fast for three days, and whatever you find is yours, and that's real. The same rule should be applied to a writer: go out there and find what you are going to find and then develop it.

What it all boils down to is that anybody can write. You can pick up any magazine in the country and find that the writing is very bland. Everything falls into the same pool. It is like the forest rangers who breed fish to stock the streams. The schools do the same thing; they stock the streams of the literary magazines around the country, you know.

As a reader, almost anything I catch is going to be a simple trout. It is not going to be the beautiful experience of seeing the golden carp flash by your eyes. But that's what a poet wants to see. And when you see that in a poem, then you know that all the effort you put into a poem is worth it. As long as from the unconscious will come that beautiful surge of golden liquid that will make a good poem glow, that's what you want.

The grading system fosters the other kind of fish. All those poems about eight inches, right? They all have certain words like *brown*; and you get really tired of catching eight-inch trout. Creative writing programs are fish hatcheries.

[J.C.]: *You have mentioned the Mestizo a couple of time. How would you define Mestizo culture?*

Half of my family are Apaches, on my father's side; and on my mother's side everybody is Hispanic, European. I haven't read much, but I have heard from friends as I was growing up that a large number of the Mexicans that were living here, or Hispanics—whatever you wish to call them—*really* intermingled with the Indians to a great degree. In the dances they played all their music. The Indians would have their corn dances and it would be the Mexicans playing their accordions and their trumpets. That's the way it was. You couldn't have an event without having both people coming together, and that's who I am.

But if you listen to the historians, you get the idea that these two people really never intermingled. I know for a fact that there are pictures of Mexicans carrying La Virgen of Guadalupe through Indian pueblos, and all the Indians are behind her, and they all go around the pueblo

blessing the homes. But they are not willing to accept the fact that we came extremely close to being one people. They do studies to set us really far apart, when all I have heard, and my own memory and so forth, tells me that we really were together.

When the Indians ran from another Apache tribe, they would run to a village that was all Mexicanos, and then when those Apaches came, the Mexicanos and the Indians both ran to another village. Everybody was marrying everybody, and the Indians hate the Mexicans more than they do the whites because we were sleeping in their beds, and they were sleeping in our beds; hatred runs highest in the family, you know. So I think that Mestizo means that we are *deeply* mixed bloods.

[A.E.]: *And you identify with both groups, not saying that you are Chicano or Indian, but both?*

Yes, I am Mestizo. I go up there to the Black Mesa behind us; the Indians go up there, that's their holy mountain—the Isletas—and I go up there with the Isletas; we sit up there and we talk. They tell me what they think of the yucca blossom—there are a lot of yucca blossoms up there—and I tell them what I think about it, and we find out that we both talk about it in the same way, we both see it in the same way. And it comes from that, you know, that we are really close to each other. That is not to say that we are more spiritual than any other ethnic group; that is just to say that that is the way things are.

[J.C.]: *But a lot of your creative work comes out of the ways those cultures are intermingling.*

Very difficult, John, because I cannot ignore the city experience and I can't ignore my Indian ancestry; somehow I have to pull it all together, the ruins and the holy Red Rock there together with the hamburger stand in the barrio.

The English have a way of saying, "Find your voice," and that represents the egotistical sense of the English people. The Native American way is "to see." It does not entail a voice; someone like Black Elk, his seeing was very strong, nothing could boggle it. But the Anglo people always have this aggressive voice thing—"Your voice is very strong in this piece," right?—while the Indians say, "Your seeing is very strong in this piece."

So, right away, if you send an Indian piece to Harper and Row, they are going to say that his voice is not that good, and that's because it is his seeing that's strong and not his voice. How many times have you heard an Indian scream, except on the warpath? They do a lot of their anger through seeing. They look at you, and you know that you'd better get out of here. It's funny. I think that the seeing is a lot stronger than the voice. I know that when my brother got mad at me, I would look at his eyes, and his voice could have been Mary Poppins', but those eyes. . . ! I'd better get out of that room fast. . .

[A.E.]: *So you see your creative process as incorporating all these different aspects of your background, all the ways of seeing that you do—Chicano, Indian, urban—in your search for your own identity.*

Yes. But you know, I think I lost it sometime when I was around eighteen years old. (Laughs) I don't have one personality; I depend so much on writing that whatever I am writing, I go into that personality and I adopt it as my personality. Now I am writing about Julia and I have a lot of feminine thoughts in me now, you know, so that's really who I am.

I know that if I always acted like a father around my kids, my kids would grow up to be monsters. I have to be a kid with them, and sometimes I have to be wrong, and sometimes I have to be stupid. If I was always *the* father, father knows best, I would be crazy and they would be crazy. And my writing is like that. I don't see how I can approach my writing with really hard-core laws; it doesn't work.

[A.E.]: *But that also brings a vitality to your writing in that you are searching all the time. . .*

Yes. If there is anything true, Annie, about me, it is that I am always searching, and that is from a really deepseated insecurity. I am always searching.

It was a survival mechanism for years and years, and a very deep one, too. I knew that without my writing I would not survive. I will never forget when I was in prison, there was a workshop conducted by Richard Shelton and Michael Hogan, who was the poet laureate of all prisoners in America, right? I remember the writing that came out of their workshop was really structured. They were pursuing poetical craft while I in my cell was pursuing survival. And I will never forget when they got hold of one of my poems I had sent to my friend within the prison population who went to the workshop. When it got back to me, the criticism was that it was too romantic, too farfetched, too dreamy. And, really, that's the only thing you have to survive with when you are put in the dungeon, to dream. But I stuck with it and said dreams *do* mean something, and to be romantic and think that you can go across the sea on a canoe does mean something. It says something about the human spirit, that without it is devastating.

[A.E.]: *What do you think you are searching for in* The Three Sons of Julia?

Well, I have an idea that violence and drug addiction is wrong, and I am finding out that these old pieces I wrote fit together really well, but that I need to add a piece about someone who overcomes violence and drug addiction. That is not a search, that's more the *benefit* of searching; you learn how to put things *together* when you are searching for something. I think my searching has taught me to recognize things in their order.

Every barrio, every neighborhood and village has a family of sons. Every neighborhood has a mother without a man who has these three or four sons to nurture, and those sons acquire a reputation of mythological status. "Flaco shot the cops last night," you know, and don't mess with *him*, because Benito below him is another bad

dude. It's the Domingo family, or the Redfeather family, or whatever, right? So you have this family, headed by a woman with all these strong kids; and I realize that these pieces that I had written ten years ago, and one that I wrote five years ago, and one I am writing now, all fit together as *The Three Sons of Julia.*

One goes to prison and stays in prison forever; one becomes a drug addict and roams on his motorcycle across the country; and the other one goes to the university, graduates, and becomes a writer. He breaks the violence and the drug addiction, and he does it with integrity and love. And you see, when it is published and goes back to the children and they read it, they don't have to say, "Hey, well, I'm gonna go to prison, you know, like Octavio went to prison," they'll say, "No, Esteban over here, look at what Esteban did, he broke the cycle." So you give them something.

[J.C.]: *This is a book that has had a long gestation, about thirteen years.*

Yes, and I have never been more uncertain about any book in my life than I am about this one. It is very strange after ***Martín*** going on to get some acclaim, right, that I would try another book and feel so frail in its presence, not knowing what it is. I had thought I would have more confidence . . . but that's how life works.

[J.C.]: *Is there anything else you can think of?*

I'd just say, take the leap into the abyss and uncover some of the mythological artifacts that float around in the mind. The more you fall into that abyss, whether you are a painter or writer or whatever, and the more you are able to come back like a messenger from the land of death, the more you are able to come back with *something*, the more it helps writers like myself to say, "Wow, yeah," and it pushes me forward. (pp. 183–93)

Jimmy Baca, John Crawford, and Annie O. Eysturoy, in an interview in *This Is About Vision: Interviews with Southwestern Writers,* William Balassi, John F. Crawford, Annie O. Eysturoy, eds., University of New Mexico Press, 1990, pp. 181–93.

SCOTT SLOVIC

(review date 1991)

[In the following favorable review of *Black Mesa Poems,* Slovic praises Baca's style, commenting that reading the collection "is an experience at once stirring and soothing."]

Black Mesa Poems is an impressive achievement, at once universal and thoroughly regional, even private. To read Jimmy Santiago Baca's poetry is to tramp across the uneven terrain of human experience, sometimes lulled by the everydayness of work or relationships, and then dazzled by a flood of emotion or vibrant observation.

Baca has a compelling fondness for contrasts. The moods and imagery of entire poems resonate against each other, like a medley of voices echoing in a canyon. One of my favorite pieces in this book is the brief, melancholy sketch called **"Hitchhiker."** Other poems, however, consider life with a mixture of humor and tenderness. **"Since You've Come,"** which was selected for the *Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses 1989*, opens with the exaggerated complaint of an unappreciated parent. But the final couplet, sixteen lines later, expresses the inevitable truth: "We have never loved anyone more than you/ my child."

Poems about friends and family abound in this collection. But the presence of the landscape of Northern New Mexico is equally strong. Details of the natural world are, for the poet, either invigorating or stabilizing, sometimes both. In the poem **"Spring"** he recalls watching new life "swell" above and beside a community irrigation ditch; in **"Picking Piñons"** he receives "murmur[s]" of a "stable world" from a tree. Many of the pieces in ***Black Mesa Poems*** suggest a fine line between dream and reality; in **"What's Real and What's Not,"** Baca regains contact with the elemental landscape during a two-day camping trip with an "ex-vet Nam grunt": "My singleness glimmers bright,/and my first time from home in months/makes the land glow, the sky bluer,/and the asphalt road/winding to the foothills ignites each nerve into a sacred torch."

"Black Mesa," the penultimate poem of the book, ties together many of the collection's prominent motifs, tracing the congruence between the "northern most U-tip/of Chihuahua desert" and the poet's mind. Baca's poetry itself, like the land which inspires it, is life-sustaining, life-vivifying—it makes life seem "real." Reading ***Black Mesa Poems*** is an experience at once stirring and soothing. (pp. 180–81)

Scott Slovic, in a review of *Black Mesa Poems*, in *Western American Literature,* Vol. XXVI, No. 2, August, 1991, pp. 180–81.

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—Sketch by Sandra Márquez

Lorna Dee Cervantes
(1954-)
Poet

Lorna Dee Cervantes has the distinction of being one of only a few Mexican American poets to have been published by a major publishing company. Her work, according to Marta Ester Sánchez in *Contemporary Chicana Poetry: A Critical Approach to an Emerging Literature,* is characterized by "two conflicting but central positions." In Cervantes's poetry, the critic finds both a "desire for an idealized, utopian world" and "a realistic perspective that sees a world fraught with social problems." The tension created between these two perspectives is a central element in understanding Cervantes's work.

Cervantes was born on August 6, 1954, in San Francisco, California, but grew up in San Jose. She began writing poetry when she was eight years old and published some of her earliest poems in her high school's newspaper. In 1974, she gave her first poetry reading at the Quinto Festival de los Teatros Chicanos in Mexico City, Mexico. The poem she read that day, "Barco de refugiados" ("Refugee Ship"), was published in *El Heraldo,* a Mexico City newspaper. The following year, several of her poems appeared in the *Revista Chicano-Riqueña,* and she began contributing verse to other periodicals as well.

By the end of the 1970s, Cervantes had gained a reputation both as a poet and as the editor and publisher of *Mango,* a small literary review. In addition to her work on the magazine, she edited chapbooks composed by other Chicanos that were published through the Centro Cultural de la Gente of San Jose and Mango Publications. Her efforts soon garnered critical attention, and in 1978 she received a National Endowment for the Arts grant. While on a poetry fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in 1979, she completed the poems that make up her 1981 collection, *Emplumada.*

Poetry Depicts Alienation in Anglo Society

Emplumada is divided into three sections containing several poems. While the poetry of the first two portions deals with social conflicts, the verse in remaining third is perceived by critics as being more lyrical. Some commentators note that the alienation Cervantes feels as a Chicana in an Anglo society is evident in pieces such as "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, An Intelligent Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War Between Races" and "Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington." Sánchez notes that in the first poem, Cervantes explains her feelings at having a "subordinate place in society as Chicana, as woman, and as poet." In the second, which deals with the theme of migration and opposing societal values, Roberta Fernández concludes in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that Cervantes "comes to terms with herself, finding resolution for the many conflicts in her life and in her role as poet."

Emplumada also contains "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," which Fernández describes as "Cervantes's most celebrated poem." The work depicts a young Chicana who must formulate her own world view after learning about male-female relationships and life in general from an idealistic grandmother and a cynical mother. Sánchez maintains that the poem "not only confronts the question of Cervantes' existential voice as a woman and as a Chicana, but it also brings out the conflict between her two literary voices: a discursive one and a lyrical one. By juxtaposing these two poetic voices, 'Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway' combines the principal elements of Cervantes' style, thus suggesting that it also confronts the question of her literary voice."

Since publication of *Emplumada,* Cervantes has obtained a bachelor of arts degree in creative arts from San Jose State University. She has also taken graduate courses at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In addition, she gives readings from an unpublished poetry collection entitled *Bird Ave.*

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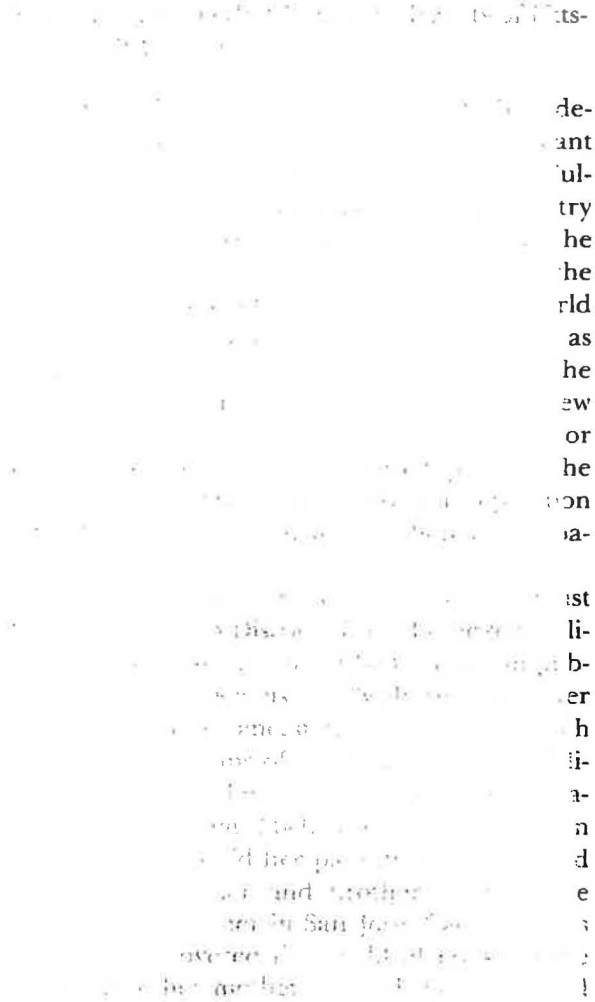
—Sketch by Marian C. Gonsior

Dee Cervantes

August 1954-)

erta Fernández
cidental College



Emplumada

Lorna Dee Cervantes

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH PRESS

Title page for Cervantes's 1981 poetry collection

Cervantes's introduction to poetry reading was auspicious and truly dramatic. In 1974 she went to Mexico City to the Quinto Festival de los Teatros Chicanos, accompanying her brother, who played with the Teatro de la Gente (Theater of the People) of San Jose. Realizing that they needed to add to their repertoire, the group asked Lorna Cervantes to read some of her poetry as part of their performance. "Barco de refugiados" / "Refugee Ship" (the only poem which she has published both in a Spanish and an English version), which renders the Chicano dilemma of not belonging to either the American

or the Mexican culture, was her selection to read before thousands in the open-air venue.

> Mama raised me without language.
> I'm orphaned from my Spanish name.
> The words are foreign, stumbling
> on my tongue. I see in the mirror
> my reflection: bronzed skin, black hair.
> I feel I am a captive
> aboard the refugee ship.
> The ship that will never dock.
> El barco que nunca atraca.

The poem was picked up by *El Heraldo*, a Mexico City newspaper. Soon after, her poetry appeared in *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* and, subsequently, in many journals and reviews.

That same year, 1974, Cervantes began to devote her full attention to writing and to helping other writers. She learned the trade of printing and with her savings bought herself an offset printing press. One of her projects was *Mango*, a literary review which she edited. Through her association with the Centro Cultural de la Gente (People's Cultural Center) of San Jose and through Mango Publications she soon began to publish chapbooks of the work of Chicano writers. By 1978 she was beginning to gain national recognition. That year she received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The following year she spent nine months at the Fine Arts Workshop in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where she completed the manuscript for *Emplumada* (1981).

Emplumada is a created word which testifies to the personal and cultural nature of the poems. It is an amalgam of the participle *emplumado* (feathered; in plumage, as after moulting) and the noun *plumada* (a pen flourish). The title furthermore has allusions to Quetzalcóatl, the Mexican god of creativity, in his guise as the plumed serpent–symbol of nature's balance and the full potential of human experience. Bird imagery appears frequently throughout the book. *Emplumada* is divided into three sections, each depending on the other two for their full context. The first section deals with the social environment that has been given to Cervantes and with the choices that she and others make about the pattern of their lives, and is introduced by the epigraph: "Consider the power of wrestling your ally. His will is to kill you. He has nothing against you." Bárbara Brinson-Curiel (1982) says that "the ally is the person's childhood, family and early-life friends. The wrestling is a coming to terms with experiences of loss, separation and grief, and with the mixed joy of formation into adulthood."

The opening poem of the first section, "Uncle's First Rabbit," is a feminist poem about the social determination of sex and class roles and focuses on how these prescribed roles affected a male relative. The narrative traces an individual, presumably the poet's uncle, through fifty years of male aggression and the male rituals of hunting and war. He associates a dying rabbit's scream with the violence which he has already witnessed–that of his father kicking his pregnant mother, resulting in the death of his baby sister.

> . . . She had a voice
> like that, growing faint
> at its end; his mother rocking,
> softly, keening.

Committed to being a gentler man than his father, ironically he winds up taking the "man's vow" and goes to war. Much later he has nightmares about that experience, and in fighting them off he "pounds their voices out of his head" only to find himself "Slugging the bloodied / face of his wife." By the end of the poem the reader can infer that this man will not escape but will stay where he is, continuing the momentum of misery in his life. Thus, the poem is about the inability of one individual to break out of the sex and class roles into which he has been born. "Cannery Town in August" continues with the description of a deterministic social milieu, capturing the moment when the female cannery workers leave their job at the end of the day. Describing the bleakness of their situation, the poet spotlights the silent, anonymous line of workers with the headlights of the trucks that await them.

> . . . I listen, while bodyless
> uniforms and spinach specked shoes
> drift in monochrome down the dark
> moon-possessed streets. Women
> who smell of whiskey and tomatoes
> peach fuzz reddening their lips and eyes[.]

The class status of the women condemns them to the deadening life at the cannery, and the harshness of their situation is first underlined by the silent ghostlike qualities of their presence; then the quiet is contrasted with the earlier noise of the clamor of the cans which by day's end has "dumbed" them. Like "Uncle's First Rabbit" this

poem presents the realities of class and gender, which form the background of the poet.

For Cervantes escape is to be found in nature. "The Anthill," the third poem in the first section, balances the burden of ancestry and milieu by presenting the poet as a child frolicking with another child in fields of wild mustard, "[the] friend's throat / ringed with daisies." Together they explore the dank recesses of an anthill, observing the "array of soldiers" and kicking in the nests to find the queen and "the soft white packets / of her young." Exuberance, curiosity, and a sense of self characterize the child as she romps in broad daylight, not in alienation but with a friend, in open spaces of fields of flowers.

"Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," another poem in the first section of *Emplumada*, is Cervantes's most celebrated poem. It describes her grandmother and her mother–the progenitors of her female self–and acknowledges the directions which each offers the poet in her quest for selfhood. The grandmother becomes a symbol of traditional female wisdom, and the mother becomes a symbol of an unhappy struggle with threatening urban forces. The grandmother's wisdom is expressed through her strong sense of self: "She believes in myths and birds. / She trusts only what she builds / with her own hands." Rejecting her mother's sardonic urban advice, the poet turns to the heritage steeped in folk culture which her grandmother offers and in the final lines of the poem turns the grandmother's actions into symbols of rituals which the poet will incorporate into her own life: "and in time, I plant geraniums. / I tie up my hair into loose braids, / and trust only what I have built / with my own hands."

"For Virginia Chávez" is a poem about reclaimed female friendship. Its main focus is on the writer's awareness of the opposing paths which she and the friend with whom she shared exploits in adolescent sexual awakening have chosen. Books, leading to Cervantes's diploma, made the difference in their lives. The author as an adolescent reads to her friend "the poems of Lord Byron, Donne, / the Brownings; all about love." Having already chosen for herself an identity as writer, Cervantes let "the child in [her] die that summer." Virginia Chávez, on the other hand, "was proud of the woman blooming out of [her] fourteen lonely years." Chávez chose her path and kept her child only to have the poet find her years later battered and bloodied by the man with whom she had chosen to live.

> He did this.
> When I woke, the kids
> were gone. They told me
> I'd never get them back.

The poet reestablishes her friendship with Chávez, "ignoring what / the years had brought between us: / my diploma and the bare bulb / that always lit your bookless room."

The first six poems of section 2 of *Emplumada* show the poet's harmonious relationship with the world of nature. The next seven poems focus on deprivation and contrast. In "An Interpretation of Dinner by the Uninvited Guest" Cervantes contrasts "the feast," on which a family dines every night, with the meager "voting booth room" from which the uninvited guest, alone and hungry, observes them. What is a routine dinner for a middle-class family is seen as a "Punch and Judy farce" by the person who does not have what they have.

In "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, An Intelligent, Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races" the poet reacts and becomes a participant in the world through the act of writing. Although she feels wounded with a "stumbling mind, [an] 'excuse me' tongue, and [a] nagging preoccupation / with the feeling of not being good enough," she confronts the world with her poetry albeit not with the romantic poetry she would prefer to write about if she did not think that a race war were going on in the United States. Thus, the poem contains Cervantes's *Ars Poetica* which binds the social poems of the first two sections to the lyrical poems of the third section. The poems "Barco de Refugiados" (Refugee Ship) and "Oaxaca, 1974" deal with her loss of the Spanish language: "I'm orphaned from my Spanish name. / The words are foreign, stumbling / on my tongue." Her loss of cultural continuity is lamented in "Poemas para los Californios Muertos" (Poems for the Dead Californios): "In this place I see nothing but strangers. / On the shelves there are bitter antiques, / yanqui remnants / y estos no de los Californios" (and these not pertaining to the Californios).

Resolution for the various losses the poet has articulated is finally achieved in the eighth and last poem of section 2, "Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington." Cervantes divides the poem into two parts, "Mexico" and "Washington." In

Mexico she is no longer threatened with the feeling of not belonging but rather is fascinated with her observations of the people and their subtle connections to ancient cultures. She is aware of who she is–a Chicana–and is comfortable with her identity. Thus, she acknowledges the oral culture which has connected her to her past:

> I don't want to pretend I know more
> and can speak all the names. I can't.
> My sense of this land can only ripple through my veins
> like the chant of an epic corrido.
> I come from a long line of eloquent illiterates
> whose history reveals what words don't say.

From Mexico and her newly found sense of cultural identity Cervantes goes to the writing symposium in the state of Washington. "I don't belong this far north," she begins, once again feeling out of place. In this section she combines both her concern with her identity as a Chicana and her concern with her identity as a woman by describing how in a painting, which hangs above a bar in a tavern where she finds herself, "dark-skinned men [. . .] were drooling in a caricature of machismo." Even as she is disturbed at the racist portrayal of the men in the painting she sees the reenactment of the portrait in the scene below where some Chicano men "fiddled with [the] asses, absently" of two Chicanas at the bar. But instead of getting upset at what she sees, the author recedes to her identity as poet and tells the reader that she can control her world with her songs. In Washington, as in Mexico, she comes to terms with herself, finding resolution for the many conflicts in her life and in her role as poet: "as pain sends seabirds south from the cold / I come north / to gather my feathers / for quills."

Section 3 is entitled "Emplumada." Cervantes is no longer concerned with what she does not have; instead, she enters a harmonious state of being in which dreams, love, and nature abound, for she is now in a completely new cycle of life. The first poem of section 3 is called "This Morning," a clear reference to a beginning. The poet is still observing, but now she is admiring a hundred robins playing in the winter light and rain. No longer is she a captive in a refugee ship; instead, she dares to dream "all I could ever be / all I would dare describe."

In the last poem in the volume, the title poem, Cervantes witnesses the passing of time from one season into another, and although she hates to see the flowers go, she is accepting of the cycles of nature. In place of the flowers will later be peaches. Life prevails: "two hummingbirds, hovering, stuck to each other, / arcing their bodies in grim determination / to find what is good, what is / given them to find." Like the hummingbirds, Cervantes has found what is good in her life. Like them, whom she sees as "warriors distancing themselves from history," she finds peace and harmony for herself. She accepts the dimensions of her life, immerses herself in her various realities, and comes of age as a woman, as a Chicana, and as a poet.

The poems in *Emplumada* form a tightly knit unit which shows readers the environment into which the poet was born, the social realities against which she must struggle, and the resolutions she finds for these conflicts. Written in a controlled language and with brilliant imagery, *Emplumada* is the work of a poet who is on her way to becoming a major voice in American literature.

A new collection titled "Bird Ave," from which Cervantes has been reading since 1985, promises a more mature voice. Since the publication of *Emplumada* Cervantes has undergone major transformations in her life. In 1982 her mother was brutally killed in San Jose. In a 1986 interview she said, "I had no more poetry left. I thought I had given it up forever." However, after a long period of grief and introspection, she resumed control of her life. She finished her B.A. from California State University at San Jose and began a Ph.D. program in the History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she is concentrating on philosophy and aesthetics. Her dissertation will be on the aesthetics of black music.

"Bird Ave" will continue with the issues of identity found in *Emplumada*. Binding them all together is Cervantes's preoccupation with her role as poet. As in *Emplumada* she has refused to be limited in her thematic possibilities, and she goes back and forth, weaving together her conflicting experiences spanning all the voices we all have. She refuses to distance one world from another–the world of the barrio and the world of the mind–for she has lived in both and has been shaped by both. It is this synthesis of the private and the public voice which gives Cervantes's poetry a depth in thematic expression and a scope in imagery that have made her one of the most intelligent poets currently on the American scene.

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Eusebio Chacón

(16 December 1869-3 April 1948)

Francisco A. Lomelí
University of California, Santa Barbara

BOOK: *El hijo de la tempestad; Tras la tormenta la calma: Dos novelitas originales* (Santa Fe, N.M.: *El Boletín Popular*, 1892).

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PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS: "Descubrimiento y conquista de Nuevo México en 1540 por los españoles," *Las Dos Repúblicas* (Denver, Colo.), 7 March 1896-23 May 1896;

"Los hispano-americanos y la sangre de Cuauhtémoc," *El Progreso* (Trinidad, Colo.), 30 July 1898, p. 2;

"El pueblo hispano-americano," *El Progreso* (Trinidad, Colo.), 27 August 1898, p. 2;

"Elocuente discurso," *La Voz Del Pueblo* (Las Vegas, N.M.), 12 November 1901, p. 2.

Eusebio Chacón, Miguel A. Otero Collection, Special Collections, General Library, University of New Mexico, Neg. No. 000-021-0168)

Eusebio Chacón represents an important link in the development of early Hispanic literary tradition, particularly with respect to the novel and the essay. As a person of multiple talents, he was also fully conscious of contributing to the preservation of written literature from the Southwest. Not only was he a writer of certain distinction; his reputation was greatly enhanced by his keen interest in bibliographical listings of original works, collections of manuscripts on cultural history, and the dissemination of old texts relevant to the region. He is generally credited for publish-

From Juan Bruce-Nova Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview

José Antonio Villarreal

Within contemporary Chicano literature, the position occupied by José Villarreal is highly significant on several counts. Though it predated the Chicano Movement by some years, his first novel, *Pocho* (1959), clearly prefigured the major works in the genre that were to appear ten to fifteen years later. Its category of *Bildungsroman*, its pattern of veiled autobiography, and the treatment of such themes as immigration, Mexican and Chicano sexual and religious taboos, father-son parallelism, mother-son antagonism, and the pressures of assimilation on the family are repeated in novels that follow. Moreover, *Pocho*, having been modeled on Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, narrates a writer's apprenticeship, a theme that lies at the heart of such Chicano landmarks as *Bless Me, Ultima*, *. . . y no se lo tragó la tierra*, *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*, and even Miguel Méndez's narrative poem *Los criaderos humanos*. *Pocho*'s historical frame of reference, a period beginning with the Mexican Revolution and extending to the contemporary period, is also that of the first dozen or so Chicano novels. The Mexican Revolution became the zero degree for early Chicano prose; no author attempted, at least in the novel, to probe the historical period prior to that point. In these elements, *Pocho* is obviously the first Chicano novel.

The Fifth Horseman (1974), Villarreal's second novel, broke the temporal frame established by *Pocho* by focusing on Mexico just prior to the 1910 Revolution. The novel creates the mythological, heroic ancestor of the modern Chicano. It is highly significant that, at the end of the novel, its protagonist, an authentic hero of the Revolution, must choose between betraying the revolutionary ideals or becoming an outlaw in the eyes of the victors; he must choose, that is, to remain in the army and reap the benefits plundered from the people, or to remain on the side of the Mexican people and break with the military. He is true to the

ideals of the people's revolution, and so must flee Mexico, becoming one of the thousands of refugees who sought temporary asylum in the United States, and who eventually stayed on to become the grandparents of the Chicanos of today. This positive portrayal of the refugee directly responds to the negative image common in Mexico, and thus constitutes a Chicano redefinition of a Mexican stereotype, not just an Anglo-American one. And Villarreal accomplishes it by writing a novel that can only be categorized within the subgenre of novel recognized as the most typically Mexican: the novel of the Revolution. With respect to the Chicano novel, *The Fifth Horseman* effectively expands its time-space, while exploring the Chicano's Mexican roots. As *Pocho* had done previously, Villarreal's second novel opened new possibilities in Chicano fiction.

As important as he is to Chicano literature, Villarreal is still a controversial figure. He openly questions the validity of the term "Chicano literature" itself. Having suffered at the hands of nonliterary critics, he is rightfully skeptical of criticism based on social, political, or racial criteria. He would prefer that his work be judged solely on its merit as literature, and recently *Pocho* has begun to be studied in that light. Yet whatever his opinion about the validity of the term Chicano, and in spite of his refusal to call himself Chicano, it would be difficult to understand Chicano literature without taking into account the work of José Antonio Villarreal.

A first draft of Villarreal's responses to the questionnaire appeared in *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1976). The final, revised interview was completed in writing in August 1979.

When and where were you born?

July 30, 1924, in Los Angeles, California. Although I was born in the United States, I am now a Mexican citizen.

Describe your family background and your present situation.

My father, José Heladio Villarreal, was born in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico, in 1882. My mother, Felícitaz Ramírez, was born on the same hacienda as my father. My father was a Villista for seven years. They came to this country in 1921 after the Revolution, bringing three children, one of whom died in Texas shortly after their arrival. They came to California in 1922. The

early years through the 1920's were spent in migrating throughout the state, following the seasonal crops. They settled in Santa Clara in 1930, the year that I started school. This is a very important milestone in my life. The fact that my parents decided on Santa Clara to end their odyssey was an important factor in my development as a human being; in short, my posture with respect to Chicano politics, which is important here when talking of the literature, was established during my formative years growing up in the San Francisco Bay region, which was at that time perhaps the most democratic portion of America. It also had to do with my idea of literature—art, because San Francisco was and is a cultural center, and it was difficult to not be aware of this. For that reason, I suppose, I have never and it seems I cannot become excited about Chicano writing as literature. I cannot, as the great majority of Chicano "critics" do, assess this work in a literary sense based on socio-political or socio-economic terms. Quite simply, the work is not that good.

My father and mother had seventeen children, three boys and fourteen girls. Twelve of us survived. My early life was spent strictly within the Mexican peasant culture, speaking Spanish, living in enclaves with our own people. However, after 1930, the situation changed and my life style became one where both Mexican and American cultures were present. My mother died in 1955. My father now lives in Mexico after having spent forty-two years in the United States.

At present I am a resident of Mexico, having been repatriated six years ago. When we did the first interview, in 1975, I was in residence and lecturing in the English Department at the University of Santa Clara. Since then, I have taught at the University of the Americas here in Mexico and at UNAM [Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México]. I have taught English literature and creative writing at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and at the University of Texas at El Paso. I currently teach at the Preparatoria Americana of the American School Foundation in Mexico City. My wife and three children live here in Mexico, where my children attend school.

When did you first begin to write?

I began to write short tales and some poems at about age eight when my vocabulary in English built up to a point where I felt I could communicate.

What kind of books did you read in your formative years?

I read everything that I had access to. It was very difficult in those years to find reading material until I began using the town library. I had no direction whatsoever and the only specific direction my reading took was fiction. To this day nonfiction interests me very little.

I read simplified stories from Greek and Roman mythology, fairy tales, adventure stories such as *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Bobbsey Twins*, *The Rover Boys*, and such series. I also stumbled on and read such things as *Candide*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Tom Jones*, and later, through the town library, I read a great deal of historical fiction, Western novels and Civil War stories. My favorite book in those days was *Toby Tyler, or Ten Weeks with the Circus*, and I'm ashamed I can't remember the name of the author, since I must have read the book at least ten times. At about age eight I discovered that I could read in Spanish, but we had few books. Until then my mother had read to us every night or older Mexican people would tell stories about their tierra [homeland]—the oral tradition has always been very strong in me. But now I began to read *La Opinión*, a Mexican newspaper from Los Angeles, to my parents in the evenings. On Sunday, which we received on Monday, the paper ran cuentos [short stories] and features which kept me quite busy.

What is the extent of your studies?

My formal education consists of a B.A. in English literature at the University of California at Berkeley. In addition I have done graduate work both at UCLA and at Berkeley. Informally, of course, I have gained an immeasurable amount of education through self study, that is, reading.

Has formal education helped or hindered you as a writer?

Formal education has, of course, aided me a great deal because it gave me some direction and through the acquired knowledge of critical analysis, I was able to take a more objective view of my own work. Without my formal education I doubt that I would have been able to write what I have written. For one thing, my work is full of historical reference. For another, I have been influenced very strongly by those authors I have studied.

Which was the predominant language in your home as a child? Which do you speak more fluently now?

As I stated earlier, during the early years we spoke nothing but Spanish. I did not really learn English until I was in school for at least a year. For a long time after that we still spoke Spanish at home because my parents insisted upon it. Gradually, however, although my mother and father did not know English and would not attempt to learn, we did begin to speak both languages in the house.

Although Spanish can be considered my native idiom, English is my language. I have had my entire education in English and I have been, of course, influenced very much by the English and American writers. Although I have read extensively in Spanish, to this day I find myself much more comfortable reading in English. This holds true also in conversation.

Does Chicano literature have a particular language or idiom?

Here, I think I must qualify my answer, the reason being that to this day I have not seen accepted criteria for what Chicano literature is. I must add also that the term "Chicano" itself is somewhat nebulous in my mind. As for the question, "Has this literature we call Chicano literature a particular language or idiom?" the answer must be *yes*, if only because of the cultural overtones within the narrative or the dialogue and in some cases, of course, the use of Spanish words as well as Mexican philosophy. Pochismos and caló* lend a very specific flavor to the idiom in terms of the culture, but certainly not in any artistic sense. There is nothing new about the use of dialect. It is traditional in letters.

How do you perceive your role as a writer vis-à-vis: (a) the Chicano community or Movement; (b) U.S. society; (c) literature itself?

*Pochismos are the words and grammatical changes present in Spanish when English has exercised a strong influence. Caló is slang in Spanish. The frontier between the two usages is not clear among Chicanos.

I believe that as a writer I have contributed much more toward the Chicano community and the Chicano Movement than I would have as a political activist.

As an American writer I find that my role within the American society is a very important one. This is not to indicate that I specifically write for America as I certainly do not write for the Chicano community. What I mean is, my idea, my intent, goes far beyond barriers or limits imposed upon a writer by any social or political movement, or by any chauvinistic design. Yet, although I do not call myself a Chicano writer and I do not think of myself as one, mainly because the name alone implicitly brings out restrictions and inhibitions detrimental to my achieving the aesthetic level I seek, I am not disturbed by being classified as such. This is because I write of my pueblo [people], I share an experience with Chicano writers, and I make every effort to re-create it.

As for literature itself, I think that this is closest to what my role in the artistic community is. Again however, I must say that it is not in the nature of art for art's sake with complete and total disregard for social-economic conditions in the world about us but again more in a universal sense.

What is the place of Chicano literature within U.S. literature?

As I stated above, I think there is a great need for guidelines with respect to what constitutes Chicano literature. Nevertheless, whether Chicano literature is based on the Platonic concept which calls for political and social significance in literature, or whether it is based on the fact that we have Spanish names, or on the fact that we write about Americans or a particular ethnic heritage, it still will remain a part of American literature, or U.S. literature as you call it. It is, as I mentioned, a part of American literature, as the southern writers, as the western writers, and as any regional writers are a part of American literature. In short, I do not believe that there ever will be a Chicano literature that can be separate from American literature; and that makes it directly traceable to English literature. I say this because we write in English for the most part, and when we do not, we translate it into English. We have been educated in English, the major part of our reading history is in English, and despite the fact that we do experiment to a slight degree in bilingual writing, experimentation with language is not new. It has been done. And we

are by style, form, and technique extremely traditional and adhere very strongly to the tradition of American letters.

What is the relationship of Chicano literature to Mexican literature?

The relationship here is, of course, much stronger than would be indicated in the answer to the last question. Certainly many of us do read in Spanish or are familiar with Mexican works as well as Latin American works in translation. Because that culture is really so close to ours, we identify and sympathize and retain, which is most important, some facets of that literature. However, Mexican literature is not that different from American literature, excepting for the idiom, because in the development of literature in the western world, Spain contributed to the development of the English novel. Therefore, we cannot deny that Mexican literature is a strong influence on what we create.

Do you perceive yourself and your work as political?

My work is extremely revolutionary in the strictest interpretation of the term. In a sense it is political because it can be used for political purposes, but intrinsically it is not political mainly because the intent is not political. Actually I perceive myself as an artist who does not deny the fact that the artist can be political. Certainly a great many of the Mexican writers are and also, of course, Latin American writers. I make every effort, however, to remove the political side of me from my creative side.

Does the Chicano author have anything in common with the majority group writers? Differences?

I think I answered that already. Chicano writers have everything in common with the majority group writers in America in terms of craft, style, and, as I said, literary tradition. They also have protest or revolutionary tendencies in common. Outside of ethnicity, I find nothing singular to Chicano writing. Certainly it has been thought that because this literature is a literature of protest it makes it unique, and certainly we have a great tradition in America of protest literature.

The only real difference seems to be the difference in ethnic background, the difference in life styles, the difference in the mores of particular groups of people.

Does Chicano literature share common ground with Black literature? Differences?

Here I believe that the most obvious common characteristic would be that they are both literature of minorities. They both, of course, are protest literature also. Nevertheless we must understand that some of Steinbeck's work was protest literature, that some of James T. Farrell's work was protest literature, and certainly Howard Fast spoke of the same problems in universal terms.

The main difference as I see it is that Black literature has had many, many more years to develop and certainly for a long time Black writers have been classified as American writers. Langston Hughes, for example, was assessed and looked upon as an American writer and his work was in keeping with the writers of today's Black literature.

Is there any relationship with the literature of other Spanish-speaking groups?

If we are speaking of Puerto Rican writers, I am sorry I cannot answer this because I do not know their literature. Nevertheless, it seems logical that the problems and the goals would be the same regardless of geographical location and the difference in situations, that is, the ghetto as against agrarian-type living (although we also have Mexican ghettos).

Does Chicano literature have a distinctive perspective on life? What effect does it have on the literature?

Despite the fact that Chicano activists insist that this is true, I have seen no evidence of it. There is, of course, the perspective on life that comes from cultural patterns that have survived through the transition of life in Mexico to life in America, such as, for example, the Mexican idea of death or the matriarchal versus the patriarchal family unit. The difference does not have any effect on the literature other than subject matter, and the universality of literature allows for such differences.

Does Chicano literature improve communication between Chicanos and Anglo-Americans?

During the early years of the Movement, when Chicano literature emerged almost as a political necessity, it did nothing to improve communication between Chicanos and Anglo-Americans—in fact it was detrimental to such improvement. In this, what I call the first phase of what can well be a subgenre in America, it was obvious that the intent was not only to create an awareness of inequities, an awareness of our Mexican heritage, and motivate our young people to stand up and be heard, but also to generate hatred and incite racism, a combination that very quickly discouraged the Anglo-American community from reading through our work, much less sympathizing. We have, by my way of thinking, now entered a second phase of the "artistic" effort of the Movement with such works as Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, some poetry, and even going back to Galarza's *Barrio Boy*, assimilationistic as it may be, and that is not entirely bad. The literature is taking on a degree of respect and credibility. Indications are that political rhetoric and harangue, used to great advantage in the early years, is no longer necessary and out of fashion, and I see the day when our young people will develop and create a literature with universal overtones. A case in point is Ron Arias and his novel *The Road to Tamazunchale*, a little jewel of a novel about Mexicans—a fantasy, and again in the tradition of American letters. The book, in Mr. Arias's words, deals with "an old Mexican bookseller who is dying and bravely assaults death in a humorous way." That, by the way, is the only thing Mexican in it. It is a work that can very well appeal to English-language readers regardless of where they might be. This to me is very encouraging, since I have been waiting many years for us to begin to make a real contribution to literature, expressly because we are capable of creating art. Dr. Ralph Guzmán said to me once that we could not afford the luxury of attempting to create art and to this I say it is not a luxury, it is an obligation, and more importantly, a responsibility for our raza.

In short, these latter works (and I will include *Pocho*) can improve communication and understanding between the Mexican-American community and other ethnic groups, including the dominant portion of American society. Intelligent readers will much more easily empathize through the acquisition of information and education with respect to our pueblo through intelligent and artistic presentation of who and what we are. The insulting, blatant, cursi [bad-taste] propaganda which is unfortunately expounded in most of our writings, be it poetry or

prose, will largely remain unread except by our people, who already know about our situation.

Does Chicano literature reevaluate, attack, or subvert the value system of the majority society? Is it a revolutionary literature? Thematically? Technically?

Chicano literature thus far has attacked the value system of the majority society. To a certain extent it has reevaluated it, but in no way has it subverted it.

Yes, it is revolutionary; in every sense of the word it is revolutionary, but only thematically. Technically there is nothing new with the slight exceptions I mentioned above.

What problems have you encountered in publishing? Were they racially founded?

I have encountered every problem a beginning writer faces during my early years. Even today, with two novels in print and with a number of credits in national magazines, I am not sure that I will be published. I have recently finished a novel which is beginning to make the rounds of the publishing houses and at this point I can only hope for the best.

As to whether these problems are racially founded I must answer absolutely not. We must understand that publishing is a business—there are no ideals involved, and to a publisher the writer, regardless of race or creed, is a producer of, hopefully, a saleable product. Publishers operate on the law of supply and demand and if they can make money it does not matter to them what your color is, what you believe in or do not believe in.

Are Chicanos at a disadvantage in trying to practice the art of writing?

Only if they do not have a commitment to the art. All writers are at a certain disadvantage, and the greatest disadvantage is an economic one. The only disadvantage that a Chicano writer would have outside of the economic one mentioned is one that *any* writer would have—perhaps not enough talent. The problems of the writer are really the same no matter what his ethnic background is. Writing is a lonely life, and through modern history, a writer before he achieves success is by definition outside of his society—at odds with his society simply because he wants

to be a writer. Therefore, unless he makes a lot of money, for success is measured by that yardstick in our day, he is considered weird.

What are the most outstanding qualities of Chicano literature? Weaknesses?

There is really only one outstanding quality of Chicano literature and that is that it is informing the vast majority of Americans that there are Americans who look different, live differently, and who have been lost to the rest of America, except the great agrarian corporations. Other than that there is very little outstanding. Much of our prose is little better than mediocre. Much of our poetry is even worse, and the only area where the output is first rate, because there is so little of it, is drama. We are very new and have a long way to go, and I think it disastrous if we do not admit this.

One of the greatest weaknesses comes from the fact that until now we have had no real criticism. Until now the word "literature" has been abused and for that reason I do not use it, preferring the term "Chicano writing." This comes from the fact mentioned earlier that the quality of a work has been assessed almost strictly for political expediency. I am not saying that this was not necessary at one time but merely that if we are to have a literature the time has come for a redefining of Chicano literature as literature, and, as literature, still important in enhancing the political arm of the Movement.

What are the milestones so far in Chicano literature?

The moment of awareness that we write about ourselves must be a milestone, because it was not the beginning. The only other milestone is today when we are on the threshold, both in literature and in criticism, of transcending the commonplace and going on to more honest creativity.

What is the future of Chicano literature: distinctiveness, or the deemphasis of the distinctive characteristics?

It should or, rather, must be understood that a literature is not created overnight, and that is what we contend we did. Anything written by a Spanish-surnamed person is considered literature

no matter how incompetent the writer or how bad the work. I know of no "Chicano critic" who has undertaken a comprehensive study of this genre and repudiated a major portion of it as pure nonsense. This is partly due to the familia [family] concept, but also because if it should turn out that there is no such thing as Chicano Literature, many people would be out of employment; university departments in Chicano Studies and degrees up to the doctoral in this literature would not exist. And we all know how many of us find a soft billet and a particular amount of income from this—we have many reasons for propagating this activity. This is not to say that a number of good works have not come of it, yet the literature is no different from the rest of American literature in that we seem to be in an extremely low phase in American literature. I see nothing in American prose that I consider great since Faulkner. Of course, time, the ultimate measure, will tell. To answer your question, I do not see one piece of Chicano work that will be read fifty years from now except in college courses. Its philosophy, socioeconomic, makes it a temporal phenomenon. Its cultural subject matter will make it valuable to historians and sociologists. I see it falling into the category of folklore, costumbrismo, if you will, very much like Western Americana. My wish and hope is that Chicano writers, and the probability here lies with the young people, will one day transcend the idea of writing about the plight of the Chicano in purely explicit terms and encompass humanity. Then our talent, our artistic potential—which no one can deny our people have—will blossom to allow us to stand among the great writers, regardless of language.

Who are the leaders among Chicano writers, and why?

Writers have no leaders. As I said earlier, writing is a very intimate and a very lonely thing and a writer, if he is a writer and retains his integrity, does not think in those terms.

Rolando Hinojosa

In 1972 Rolando Hinojosa was awarded the Quinto Sol Prize, the most prestigious literary prize in the field of Chicano letters at that time, for his book of short prose pieces *Estampas del Valle y otras obras.* Before that, he had published under the pseudonym P. Galindo, his "Mexican American Devil's Dictionary" (*El Grito* 6, no.3 [Spring 1973]: 41–53), an excellent example of his satirical wit. However, it was *Estampas* that converted him into one of the most important writers among Chicano authors, and his eloquence made him one of the most sought-after speakers. A few years after *Estampas* was published, portions of a new work in progress began to appear in different literary journals. At first glance they seemed to be continuations of *Estampas* both in form and in content, but no one expected that the next book would bring even higher honors to Hinojosa. Then, in 1976, La Casa de las Américas, the Cuban publishing house, announced the awarding of its prestigious prize for the best novel of the year to Rolando Hinojosa for *Klail City y sus alrededores*, focusing international attention on the author and on Chicano literature in general.

His style—precise, clean, with not a word of excess; his ironic and subtle humor, so well within the Hispanic tradition; his undeniably popular and regional themes, incarnating universal verities while portraying faithfully his South Texas neighbors; and a persistent, welcome understatement—all blend to make Hinojosa's work unmistakable, and a joy to read. Not so clear as yet to many readers is that through the brief episodes, the short stories, and even the poetry into which his works are structured, he is slowly and unconventionally creating a novel on a grand scale. The pieces obviously interrelate, in the manner of a mosaic; eventually they will reveal the vast pattern of a tightly interlocked whole.

Hinojosa the man is the reflection of his work: eloquent, lucid, intelligent, sure of his origins and goals, ironic, sometimes

José Antonio Villarreal

(31 July 1924-)

Tomás Vallejos
University of Houston–Downtown

BOOKS: *Pocho* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959);
The Fifth Horseman (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974);
Clemente Chacón (Binghamton: Bilingual/Editorial Bilingüe, 1984).

OTHER: "Chicano Literature: Art and Politics from the Perspective of the Artist," in *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*, edited by Francisco Jiménez (New York: Bilingual/Editorial Bilingüe, 1979), pp. 161-168.

PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS: "The Odor of Pink Beans Boiling," *San Francisco Review*, 1 (Spring 1959): 5-9;
"The Fires of Revolution," *Holiday Magazine*, 32 (October 1962): 82-83.

José Antonio Villarreal

José Antonio Villarreal occupies a distinct position among Chicano writers. His first novel, *Pocho* (1959), the first known Chicano novel published by a major publishing company in the United States, has been widely recognized as an important work of Chicano literature. Villarreal was born in Los Angeles, California, in the wake of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. His parents, José Heladio Villarreal and Felícitaz Ramírez, were born and raised as peons on an hacienda in the state of Zacatecas, Mexico. During the revolution his father fought in Pancho Villa's army for seven years. The family moved to the United States in 1921, migrating throughout California as seasonal farm workers.

Villarreal recalls his preschool years with delight. In those days his family was still traveling in California, living mostly in tents pitched in the fields. He and his family knew only Spanish and, as he puts it, "lived always in a Mexican enclave." (This and other direct quotes from Villarreal, unless otherwise noted, are taken from "An Interview with José Antonio Villarreal" by Francisco Jiménez in *Bilingual Review*, Spring 1976.) He remembers these years of isolation from North America's mainstream as a time of warmth and security. Because of their closeness and poverty the migrants entertained themselves through story telling. He recalls:

> And so they talked and told tales of their region, and I listened. Long into the night I listened until I dropped off to sleep and my father would pick me up onto his lap as he continued to talk about the Revolution. . . . And every camp was different, none existing for more than six or seven weeks, then off we would go to the next harvest, where new people would gather and there would be new tales to be told and heard. I knew when I was six years old that the one thing I most wanted from life was to be a storyteller.

Villarreal was able to begin acquiring the necessary tools to be a writer when he reached the age of six. Upon securing steady, year-round employment in Santa Clara, California, his family settled there in 1930, the year he started school. Villarreal relishes the memory of his first year in school. His first-grade teacher, Miss Uriell, did not speak Spanish and he knew no English, but somehow they communicated. By the end of the first year she had him reading English. By the time he was in the third grade he was reading so avidly that he was taken out of class by the principal and promoted to the fourth grade. He taught himself to read in Spanish, which he says made him "the happiest of persons." Villarreal says that he still thinks fondly of his first-grade teacher, who introduced him to the world of the written word and encouraged his interest in reading by giving him books for Christmas up to the time he graduated from high school and left Santa Clara.

Although Villarreal recollects his early years with pleasure, certainly they were not without their measure of pain. His experiences growing up *pocho* (between cultures) in Santa Clara are at the heart of his first novel, which describes, among other experiences, cultural confusion and painful encounters with racism. As Villarreal has related in interviews, being pocho involves linguistic conflict and incongruity. For many years after he began to master English at school, he was forbidden to speak English at home by his parents, who did not know the language and made no attempt to learn it. The acceptance of English into the Villarreal household came only gradually. Nevertheless, the author informs his interviewers that although Spanish is his native language, English is his preferred language. This linguistic conflict is indicative of much deeper cultural, social, psychological, and philosophical conflicts in Richard Rubio, Villarreal's young protagonist in *Pocho*.

Villarreal's experience, as well as Richard Rubio's, is not unlike that of an entire generation of Mexican-Americans, children of immigrants struggling to adapt to life in the United States during the unsettling years of the Depression and World War II. This conflict, which in many ways repeats itself in each generation of American children born to immigrants from Mexico, has given *Pocho* lasting significance as a novel of the Mexican-American "identity crisis."

Besides *Pocho*, Villarreal wrote only two other novels, not a large body of work considering the number of years it spans. He submitted the first version of *Pocho* for publication in 1952. *The Fifth Horseman* was published in 1974, and his third novel, *Clemente Chacón*, in 1984. Villarreal attributes the large gaps between his novels to the difficulties of finding a publisher as well as the circumstances of his life. He received a B.A. in English from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1950. After that he did graduate study at the same university but decided that he had to choose between literary scholarship and writing, and chose the latter. He married Barbara Gentles in 1953 and became the father of three children between the years 1954 and 1958. Villarreal explains that the first priority in his life has been his wife and children, followed by his novel writing. To provide for his family, he has held a variety of jobs, including public-relations work for an insurance company, driving a delivery truck, and working as a technical editor and writer for defense and aerospace industries such as Ball Brothers in Colorado and Lockheed in southern California.

Providing for his family also necessitated moving back and forth between jobs in Mexico and the United States. While in Mexico in 1956, he completed the version of *Pocho* that was finally published in 1959. At that time he also researched his second novel, an undertaking which included returning to the hacienda where his parents grew up and interviewing people who had experienced the Mexican Revolution firsthand. In 1963, eight years after the death of Villarreal's mother, his father returned to Mexico. Ten years later Villarreal became a Mexican citizen, more as a matter of economic convenience than because of any disenchantment with the United States or nostalgia for his father's homeland. Villarreal maintains that he is equally at home in both countries.

The publication of the Anchor paperback edition of *Pocho* in 1970 brought Villarreal recognition as a writer and thus led to a series of jobs more closely related to literature. These included editorial positions, guest lectureships, teaching positions at such institutions as the Stanford Research Institute, the University of Santa Clara, the University of Colorado, the University of Texas at El Paso, the Preparatoria Americana of the American School in Mexico, Pan American University, and California State University, Los Angeles. Five years after he finished his first draft of *The Fifth Horseman* it was published by

Dust jacket for Villarreal's 1974 novel about the Mexican Revolution

Doubleday. However, it was largely ignored and subsequently went out of print. In 1974, the same year in which *The Fifth Horseman* was published, Villarreal completed his first draft of *Clemente Chacón*; but because his second novel was not commercially successful, he had to find another publisher. Bilingual Press published his third novel in 1984, several years after it was completed. Villarreal's last novel has received little attention, leaving *Pocho* his most successful work to date and his most important contribution to Chicano letters.

The success of *Pocho* is due in large part to its autobiographical nature. Villarreal's own experiences growing up as the son of Mexican immigrants are depicted through the character Richard Rubio with candor, sensitivity, and realism. The pressures Richard experiences as a result of being caught between two cultures, generations, and societies are undoubtedly those Villarreal himself lived through in his formative years. *Pocho*, however, is more than the story of cultural conflict. It is also a bildungsroman, a novel about self-discovery and maturation. Modeled upon James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), it is about the artist's struggle for freedom and individuality against the forces of tradition, conformity, and materialism that surround him. Villarreal says that he was especially conscious of Joyce, Thomas Wolfe, and William Faulkner.

Pocho begins in Mexico at the close of the revolution, focusing upon Juan Rubio, Richard's father, who throughout the work represents the ideals of the revolution and a stubborn refusal to part with Mexican traditions, especially *machismo*. At odds with his insistence upon male domination and patriarchy is his wife, Consuelo, who eventually rebels, although in pathetically counterproductive ways, for she has no clear understanding of her goals or how to achieve them. Embroiled in this conflict are the Rubio children, who represent the generation in transition between rural Mexican culture and that of the urban United States. Perhaps in even greater opposition to his father's Mexican ideals is Richard's ideal of individualism. The novel realistically concludes on a note of uncertainty and alienation. The Rubio family disintegrates and Richard sets out for military service in World War II, knowing that "for him there would never be a coming back."

While *Pocho* has earned Villarreal widespread recognition, in-depth literary criticism of his work is relatively scarce. Instead *Pocho* has prompted controversy and criticism surrounding its stated and implied socioeconomic and political views. At the center of this controversy is the author himself, who maintains a most precarious status as a Chicano writer. To begin with, he has repeatedly stated that he does not really identify himself as a Chicano, although he does not object strenuously to this term or its application to him. He also openly questions whether there is such a thing as "Chicano" literature, asserting that most Chicano novelists are primarily influenced by the British and American literary tradition and write in English, not Spanish. Of greater importance is the fact that Villarreal found himself at odds with the ideology, rhetoric, and methodology of the Chicano Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yet he is aware that the movement was responsible for *Pocho*'s resuscitation after a

decade of neglect following its publication in 1959. More than 160,000 copies of the 1970 Anchor edition have been sold, making it one of the most widely read works of Chicano literature.

The marketing of the 1970 edition was partially responsible for the misguided emphasis placed on its socioeconomic and political content. Ramón Eduardo Ruiz's introduction diverted attention from the work as literature and analyzed it primarily as "a historical piece" reflecting "Mexican American thinking of the time . . . the 'assimilitionist' phase that prevailed then." This oversimplification and the subsequent criticism it invited from Chicano activists bounded Villarreal for several years. While teaching at the University of Colorado during this period, he found himself the object of strong criticism from student activists. Villarreal did not approve of the Ruiz introduction, but because of the trend in the marketplace, he acquiesced to Doubleday's decision to include it. The third printing of the book, which appeared in the 1980s, no longer includes the introduction; Villarreal welcomed this change as a vindication of his viewpoint.

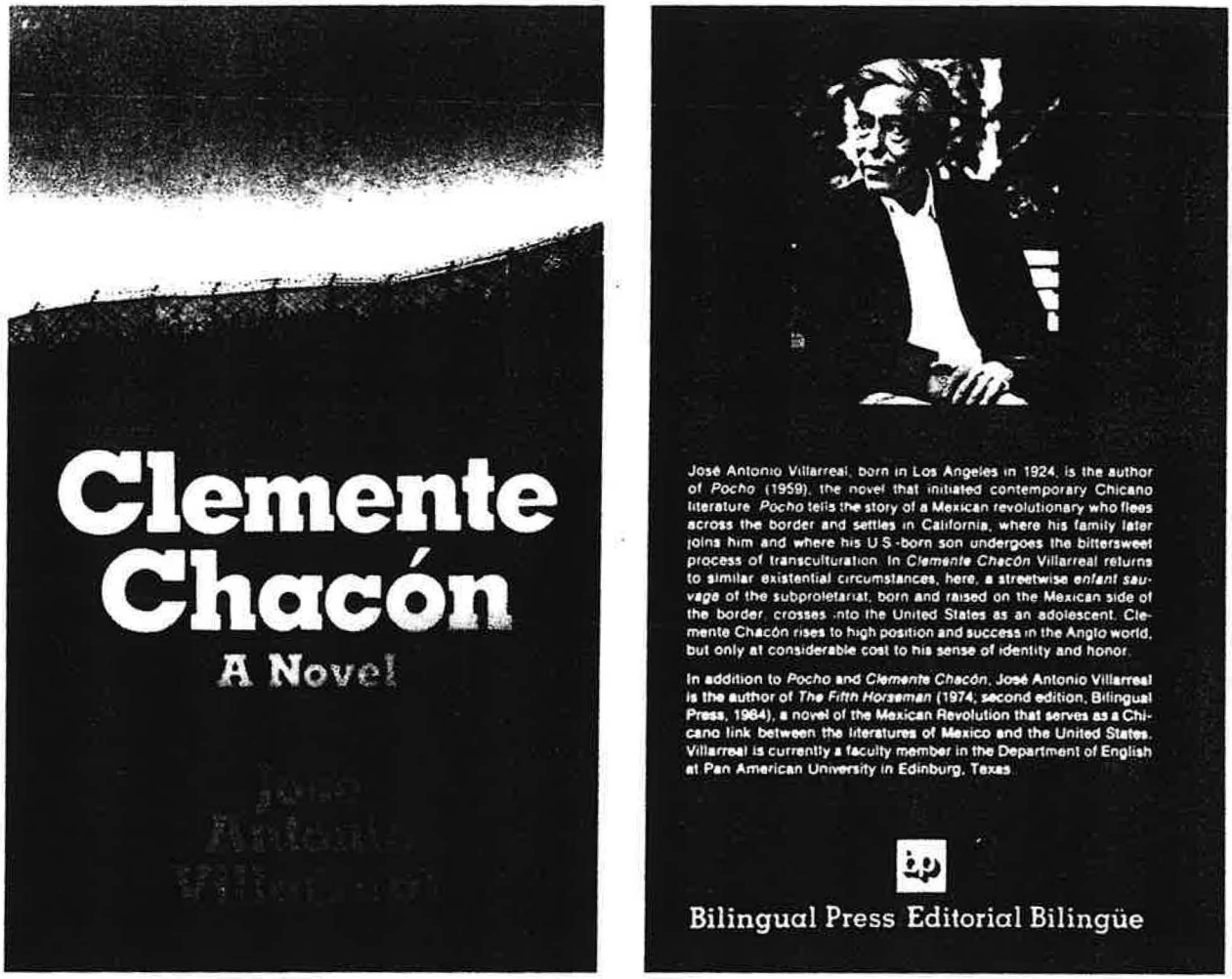
As critics have indicated, *Pocho* is not without literary shortcomings. A common criticism of the novel is that Villarreal's attempt to impart a feeling of Spanish speech patterns by applying Spanish syntactical structures to English dialogue results in awkwardness and artificiality. Another frequently voiced criticism is that the protagonist's level of intellectual maturity is inconsistent with his age; that is, Richard is far too precocious to be credible. Critics have also said the work lacks focus. Villarreal concedes in an interview that the novel is flawed as a result of his inexperience and "the fact that I was trying to do something I perhaps lacked the technical ability to handle."

Nevertheless, Villarreal maintains that he is not completely dissatisfied with the book. Neither are his critics. Therein, perhaps, lies the difficulty in assessing *Pocho*. With the furor of the movement era more than a decade past, critics can examine the work with greater detachment. Recent critics observe that the novel's most serious shortcomings are not so much its social or political messages, but contradictions between the author's stated intentions and their execution within the work. This critical approach dismisses the earlier simplistic judgment that the novel advocates the rejection of Mexican culture in order to achieve upward mobility in American society. To this effect, Richard is more accurately perceived not as an American "rugged individualist" but a literary kinsman of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, who maintains his artistic individuality through exile.

However, the author's stated purpose in writing *Pocho* was "to share my experiences of growing up in an old country traditional way, breaking away from that culture and going on to a new way of life, yet still holding on to the traditional ways that were good and adding to them the new things I liked in the Anglo-American society." Unfortunately, this cultural syncretism presupposes a resolution of conflicts in which the protagonist creates his own identity through cultural eclecticism. This, however, is not the way *Pocho* ends, as critics have observed. Instead, Richard Rubio has been characterized by most critics as lost, confused, and alienated at the end of the novel.

Some critics contend that Richard's confusion is a manifestation of Villarreal's own misconceptions. Rafael F. Grajeda faults Villarreal for promulgating American myths such as the idea that anyone can succeed in this society because the individual is free to control his own destiny and the notion that racial discrimination is "due more to the character of a handful of men than to the wide, almost organized attitude of a society." Grajeda especially takes issue with Villarreal's statements about the novel because the actual experiences he presents contradict such conclusions. These and other contradictions within *Pocho* are observed as problematic in assessing it as literature. Despite the negative criticism *Pocho* has received, it is still considered important by literary scholars and sociologists. Ironically, however, despite Villarreal's insistence that it be appreciated for its artistic merit, it is still more often read for its historical, psychological, and sociological value. Its chief merit, critics agree, is its sensitive, realistic, and honest representation of the conflicts faced by the Mexican-American in transition between cultures.

Villarreal's second novel, *The Fifth Horseman*, has, for the most part, suffered more from neglect than from criticism. It begins on a Mexican hacienda during the regime of President Porfirio Díaz before the revolution. A well structured novel, it is divided into a prologue and three "books": "Hacienda de la Flor," "The Campaign," and "Los Desgraciados" (The Downtrodden). The prologue pulls the reader into the horror and brutality of the revolution, thus clearly establishing the novel's theme. The first book of the novel provides the background of the revolu-



Covers for Villarreal's third novel, set in El Paso during one September day in 1972

tion, presenting the protagonist, Heraclio Inés, as a *jinete* (horseman) working as a peon with his father and four older brothers on the hacienda of Don Aurelio Becerra. The second section recounts the idealistic protagonist's adventures as a cavalryman in the army of Villa. In the final section, Heraclio becomes disillusioned with the senseless carnage and perfidiousness of the revolutionaries. The novel ends with Heraclio realizing that he must leave Mexico, but vowing to return someday in order to "help rebuild his homeland" rather than "to take a part in its destruction."

Villarreal believes that *The Fifth Horseman* is artistically superior to *Pocho*. The critics agree. Reviews outside the circle of Chicano scholarship have been generally favorable, citing the richness of characterization, strong story line, and even the use of Spanish syntactical structures to create the impression that characters are speaking Spanish. One reviewer naively praises the novel as clever and action-packed, comparing it to a soap opera with its endless series of crises; others describe it as mature and realistic. Judith M. Dimicelli praises its sensitivity in exposing the tyranny of Porfirio Díaz, the ideals of the revolution, and the revolution's failure to find direction and ideological consistency. She applauds the meticulous balance of the plot's events, the symbolic use of clothing, and the allusion to Greek mythology in the protagonist's name.

Chicano critics too have praised the novel's structure and strong story line, as well as its rich descriptions. They have also recognized its historical and mythical allusions to the romantic Mexican bandit Heraclio Bernal, the Greek demigod Heracles, the biblical Book of Revelations, and even the pre-Cortésian Mexican myth of the fifth sun. However, Chicano scholars are less liberal with praise and more negative in their critical assessment of the novel as a whole. What is seen by

non-Chicano critics as a clever accommodation of English to a Spanish sentence structure to create the impression of Spanish speech patterns is viewed by Chicano scholars as artificial. More important, while other critics praise Villarreal's characterizations, Chicano critics have found them overly idealized and exaggerated. The emphasis on Heraclio's *machismo* is viewed as excessive and his extraordinary heroism is seen as unconvincing. Heraclio is not considered to be a realistic peon of prerevolutionary times, but an unrealistic super-macho who fails to engage the reader's sympathies.

Furthermore, while some critics accept unquestioningly the historical veracity of *The Fifth Horseman* and Villarreal's handling of Mexican traditions of destiny and manhood, Chicano critics do not. Rather, they conclude that the novel lacks significance on the grounds that it distorts the historical realities it attempts to describe by failing to capture the true essence of the peon. Roberto Cantú says the novel is ahistorical because it creates a hero who is a man of destiny, a man of ominous birth, not a true man of history. He explains frankly that the novel has been overlooked not so much because its return to the theme of the revolution has become trite by now, but because Villarreal's handling of the theme appears trite. Whatever reasons may explain its neglect, *The Fifth Horseman* slipped in and out of the public eye with little fanfare. Although it was republished by the Bilingual Press in 1984, it remains, for the most part, obscure.

With the publication of *The Fifth Horseman*, Villarreal completed half of what he has planned to be a "loose tetralogy." He said that "*Pocho* is an extension of *The Fifth Horseman*. . . . Heraclio Inés becomes Juan Manuel Rubio." The third book, half written in 1975, according to the author, and tentatively called "The Houyhnhnms," was to "have Richard Rubio become Mike de la O." The fourth book is "very far away" and is to be "about Richard. Mike's son. . . ." The last two books have yet to appear in print, although the author has recently repeated that the third book is still in progress and he still plans to write the fourth. When he was interviewed in 1975, Villarreal reported that he had put aside "The Houyhnhnms" to complete another novel, "a change of pace, a short story that got away from me and became a short novel" (*Clemente Chacón*).

While teaching at the University of Texas at El Paso, Villarreal made observations of life on the streets of Juárez, Mexico, just across the border, and El Paso, noting especially a hard-boiled, cynical Mexican boy whose basic philosophy was, as it is put tersely in the novel, "Anything to survive." Villarreal was intrigued by this little street hustler and began to write a story about him. However, upon realizing that the boy was so adamant in his cynicism that he was not likely to change, except perhaps to harden by slow degrees, Villarreal decided to have him "killed" in his novel. He then shifted his emphasis to another young hustler whose feelings were ambivalent, giving him more potential as a protagonist. Thus was born the character of Ramón Alvarez, who in the novel rises to success in the United States under the assumed name of Clemente Chacón.

An oversimplified summary of *Clemente Chacón* would call it a Chicano variation on the Horatio Alger story, as Villarreal himself blatantly suggests at the beginning: "He, Clemente Chacón, was Horatio Alger, even it he was Catholic and brown." It is the story of a boy who begins life as the illegitimate son of a poor rural Mexican woman forced by circumstances into prostitution. Ramón Alvarez learns survival on the streets of Juárez as a shoe shine boy, pimp, and drug dealer. Later he crosses the border into the United States, where he becomes a successful insurance executive, but at the expense of denying his former identity until the end of the novel. In the process of presenting the rags-to-riches life of Ramón/Clemente, Villarreal provides much insight into the cultural, psychological, societal, and ethical conflicts of an upwardly mobile Mexican-American. Thus the author takes what might otherwise be a trite theme and enriches it with vivid, sometimes startling, descriptions of life in a poor Mexican village and the underworld of prostitution, drug dealing, and survival on the streets of a Mexican border town.

Clemente Chacón is indeed a change of pace for Villarreal. For the first time he employs Spanish liberally in his dialogue and descriptions, giving them more authenticity than they had in his first two novels. Structurally, his third novel is more complex than his other books, the work of a more experienced writer. This novel is not arranged chronologically; it is set in El Paso and occurs, except for the epilogue, within the span of one September day in 1972. It is a momentous day in which Clemente experiences several changes. Interspersed masterfully throughout the developments of the day are flashbacks to his past, which provide the reader with an understanding of Clemente and people from a similar

background. The flashbacks also serve to impress upon the reader the futility of trying to forget one's past, and to convey Villarreal's message that while upward mobility is desirable, it need not occur at the expense of one's Mexican identity. Clemente proclaims this discovery near the end: "I am a Mexican and I am an American, and there is no reason in the world why I can't be both."

Villarreal states with pride that *Clemente Chacón* is his best work. To support his contention he cites the fact that it was among the American novels of 1984 selected for exhibition in both the Frankfurt book fair and the Madrid book fair. Certainly it is artistically his most sophisticated work. In addition, some of its minor characters are among the most memorable Villarreal has created. Most notable of these are the cynical street urchin Mario Carbajal and the seedy but almost quixotic Charlie Morgan, Clemente's surrogate father, who is killed for trying to rescue Chacón's mother from prostitution. However, *Clemente Chacón* also contains some of the same flaws as Villarreal's previous novels. The protagonist is a bit too wholesome (he never uses alcohol, drugs, or women throughout his life on the streets) to be credible as a representative of his social class. Some of the characters and plot developments also lack clear focus and purpose in the novel. Villarreal's description of the work as "a short story that got away from me" may ironically ring true, for the plot seems to become overly complicated at the end and at other times it seems bogged down with events and propagandistic dialogue that serve no purpose but to criticize those Chicano militants who gave Villarreal such grief in the early 1970s. As in *Pocho*, seemingly intelligent and progressive characters who are supposed to have arrived at self-understanding may instead be regarded by critics as purveyors of conservative social and political opinions.

Villarreal continues to work on the two remaining books of his proposed tetralogy. His children are grown now, which leaves him more time to write. However, the desultory nature of Villarreal's work history has not changed. His employment status in 1985 was still temporary. Thus the financial stability that is conducive, if not vital, to the production of creative literature is still missing from his life. It remains to be seen whether Villarreal will produce a work that will gain him greater recognition than *Pocho* or whether he will remain an important Chicano literary figure for being, as Ruiz stated in the introduction to the 1970 edition of *Pocho*, "the first man of Mexican parents to produce a novel about the millions of Mexicans who left their fatherland to settle in the United States."

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José Antonio Villarreal

1924–

American-born Mexican novelist.

INTRODUCTION

Villarreal is best known as the author of *Pocho* (1959), one of the most widely read works of Chicano literature. An exploration of how a Chicano family's traditional values change in their American social environment, *Pocho* was the first novel by a Mexican-American author to be issued by a major publisher. The work became the focus of controversy following its rerelease in 1970 during the height of the Chicano Movement: some Chicano critics alleged that the novel was in conflict with the aims of the Movement and charged Villarreal with advocating the assimilation of Chicanos into American society. In response, Villarreal objected to being categorized according to his ethnicity and insisted that his work be judged purely on its literary merit.

Villarreal was born in Los Angeles, California, to migrant farm workers who had emigrated from Mexico in 1922. For the first six years of his life, as his family followed the harvests throughout California, Villarreal grew up in an enclave of poor Mexican immigrants who spoke only Spanish. In 1930, his parents settled in Santa Clara, California, where Villarreal entered school. By the time he was in the third grade, he had begun to write stories and poems and knew that he wanted to be a novelist. Upon graduating from high school in 1942, Villarreal entered the Navy and served three years in the Pacific during World War II; after his discharge, he attended the University of California at Berkeley, earning a bachelor's degree in English in 1950. Over the next decade Villarreal worked at a variety of jobs in the United States and Mexico while writing and revising *Pocho*. After its publication, he worked as an editor and writer for an aircraft manufacturer in California throughout much of the 1960s. The Chicano Movement brought about a revival of interest in *Pocho*, and since that time Villarreal has worked as an educator at universities in

the southwest United States and in Mexico, where he became a naturalized citizen in 1973.

Much of the narrative of *Pocho* centers on young Richard Rubio, whose parents had emigrated to America at the time of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. As his family adjusts to life in America, Richard's mother begins to reject the traditionally submissive role of a Mexican wife, becoming more demanding and jealous of her husband, Juan; Juan subsequently leaves his family to live with a younger and more conventional Mexican woman. Richard, obsessed with establishing an identity independent of social or cultural norms, rejects the traditions of his ethnic heritage, refusing to accept the role of breadwinner for the family that his father abandoned; the novel ends with his joining the United States Navy.

With the advent of the Chicano Movement, *Pocho* was censured by many Chicano critics for its lack of emphasis on the cultural differences between Mexicans and Anglo Americans and the resulting intolerance that immigrants must often contend with. These commentators also objected to the novel's sympathetic depiction of a young Chicano who willfully abandons his cultural heritage, citing this as evidence that its author is an advocate of assimilation. More recent commentators have considered this an unfair assessment of the novel, agreeing with Villarreal's contention that his work should not be evaluated on the basis of how closely it reflects a sociopolitical agenda. In the opinion of Juan D. Bruce-Novoa, "the novel has been treated usually as a sociological, anthropological or historical document; or even as a psychological case study, and hardly ever as literature." Bruce-Novoa has contended that within the context of the novel, Richard Rubio's efforts to dissociate himself from his family's cultural traditions is both logical and consistent with his character. Other critics have acknowledged the literary shortcomings of the work, such as its awkward attempt to reproduce Spanish speech patterns in English and the unnatural precocity of its young protagonist. Many scholars have compared the novel to the traditional bildungsroman, or novel of self-discovery, and others have praised it as an effective portrayal of one man's search for individuality and as a realistic depiction of the conflict experienced by Mexican Americans who find themselves caught between two cultures.

Villarreal's second and third novels have not proven as critically or popularly successful as *Pocho*. *The Fifth Horseman* (1974), set during the Mexican Revolution, depicts the adventures of Heraclio Inés, who leaves the hacienda where his family works and joins the revolutionary army of Pancho Villa. Erlinda Gonzales-Berry has claimed that the novel echoes *Pocho* by focusing on "the battle between Heraclio's keen bent toward individuality and cultural tradition." *The Fifth Horseman* has been praised by some critics for its strong characterizations and storyline, but others have asserted that it overemphasizes the machismo of its protagonist and brings nothing new to its treatment of a common historical theme. Villarreal has compared his third novel, *Clemente Chacón* (1984), to a Horatio Alger story, since its title character is a successful Mexican-American businessman who has risen from his background as a young criminal in the slums of Juárez, Mexico. Structurally more complex than Villarreal's first two novels, *Clemente Chacón* is a non-chronological account of the events of a single day interspersed with flashbacks. The novel has been praised for providing sensitive psychological insight into the life of a materially successful Chicano, though some critics have charged that its secondary characters remain largely undeveloped. Villarreal has stated that he regards it as his finest work.

Angered by unfavorable criticism of *Pocho* in the 1970s, Villarreal has since maintained that, in Chicano literature as in any other, aesthetic values must take precedence over sociological concerns. In his view, the creativity of young Chicano writers would be stifled were their work to be judged solely by the rigid political standards of the Chicano Movement. In a presentation before the Modern Language Association in 1977, he stated: "As artists we must, through our pride and arrogance, and perhaps even insolence, ignore the warnings from the gods and, although it be a grievous sin, transcend the codes of the Movement as we create. Then, and only then, will we have a literature. Then, we will truly contribute to the Cause. What we create may not be called Chicano Literature . . . but it will belong to us and it will express our singular experience and lay bare, for the world to see, the soul of our people."

CRITICAL COMMENTARY

JOSÉ ANTONIO VILLARREAL

(lecture date 1975)

[In the following essay, which was originally read before the 1975 convention of the Modern Language Association, Villarreal maintains that Chicano literature must reflect aesthetic as well as political values.]

As is so often necessary, before we can discuss Chicano Literature in any context, there is need to define the term. We must consider, if only briefly, the genesis of the phenomenon, its development, its causes and effects. We cannot begin to define the word "Chicano" in other than a generic sense. The word means many things to most of us—those of us so categorized, as well as those outside the sphere of its influence. Certainly, the current definition is one that was not true in my day, in my father's day, in my grandfather's day. Yet, it is a word that has been used for generations, very much as the word *raza* has been used, meaning not a race, but a people—*el pueblo mexicano*, not necessarily mestizo, but Mexican, no matter where born, no matter where reared. Today, of course, it has become a slogan, a political term of utmost validity. And it has come to mean "el pueblo mexicano en el extranjero, inclusive en Norteamérica." Whatever we choose to call ourselves—Mexican-American, Latin-American, sometimes even Spanish-American—we *are* Chicanos because we were born in America or came here at an early age. Yet it must be understood that for the majority of our people, our people here being those of our ethnic and cultural background, the term can never mean other than what it meant to us when we were growing up as second-or third-generation Americans. To us it was a term of endearment, very much like the word *pocho*, a term our parents used in those days when we were alone in a new country—alien, striving, expending our every energy merely to keep ourselves alive. This means, of course, that we who call ourselves Chicanos are a minority within a minority, and we as writers or scholars form an even smaller minority which pretends to speak for all our people. Nevertheless, the word "Chicano," because it has become a term implying freedom and equality, a symbol for an end to inequities against *all* our people, whether they are with us or not, is dynamic and important.

As for the word "Literature," definition should not be necessary. Suffice it to say that we have several distinctions in the meaning of the term in its purest sense. We can mention the theory of art-for-art's sake. In fact, we have seen it in the literary movement called Aestheticism in the latter half of the nineteenth century. That movement, which spanned a half century stemming from the advent of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood of painters headed by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1848, rejected Renaissance and post-Renaissance art. Its culmination was brought to the point of absurdity by Oscar Wilde who insisted that aesthetic considerations were absolutely independent of morality. We can also mention the Platonian idea of literature and politics to show that the argument between the two is as old as art itself.

In the course of my dissertation, I speak of literature as art, and as a novelist I speak of the novel. In his preface to *Mexico in its Novel*, John S. Brushwood states: "The novel is particularly capable of expressing the reality of a nation, because of its ability to encompass both visible reality and the elements of reality not seen." For the moment we can accept the fact that art expresses the reality of an individual or individuals and, hence, of a people. We can apply this to Chicano Literature because regardless of definition, we are a people, a very singular people even though most of us are American, live in the United States, and live according to the customs, mores, and traditions of America. We can, in fact, be called a nation within a nation. Our external or visual reality can be expressed by craftsmen, but our innermost reality, the nuances of human life, human situations, human circumstances— our *corazón*—can be exposed only by the artist. Because this is the ideal function of art, the ideal role of the artist is to perform this function. Whether the artist succeeds or not is to a great extent dependent upon his talents and his perception, his awareness and his sensibilities, but most importantly his susceptibility to outside pressures and traditions that would inhibit him from attaining his goal. The question here is: *¿O somos fieles a nuestra dedicación como artistas, o nos convertimos en títeres?* Either we maintain our commitment to art, or dance to whatever tune is prepared for us. I speak now of the artist, or one whose intent is to create in any particular form.

We often speak of gifted writers, painters, composers, or perhaps sometimes we speak of particular gifts, yet what I have just mentioned is the most singular gift of all. I use the term "intent," which we can substitute for "goal," but the fact remains that the greatest gift is the opportunity to make a decision as to whether one should pursue art or be content with something less. Very few

Principal Works

Pocho (novel) 1959
The Fifth Horseman (novel) 1974
Clemente Chacón (novel) 1984

people ever have the opportunity to make such a decision and, unfortunately, some of our young people are not allowed to make it.

Not long before he died, Pablo Neruda said: "The poet who does not share in the struggles of the oppressed and humiliated is not a poet but merely a mannikin for the shop window of elegant stores for the rich." Neruda's view may seem similar to Plato's when considered in a literal sense, but a close look reveals that Neruda does not speak specifically of the work, nor does he, even by implication, state how the work should be created. Yet statements such as Neruda's are used by influential spokesmen on our literature within the political community of our movement to impose restrictions and dictate subject matter to our work. They forget that Neruda has also said that he does not encourage young writers to work with political themes until they learn to write. This last point can also be construed in a number of ways.

At the time it was formulating, we knew that Chicano Literature was evolving because of a need for expression, a need for a means to teach our young people that we, nor unlike other forgotten Americans, also had a fight on our hands. We had a frantic need to tell our story, a need to produce so desperate that we were willing to settle for anything. We did not stop to think that the gestation period of a literature could perhaps be measured in decades. Moreover, only a few of us recognized the fact that we had to teach not only our people but also the dominant peoples in America that we too had a heritage, that we too had dignity. And very few of us knew that if we were to use such a term as "literature," we should strive to live up to its artistic implications, that we should strive to create *literature*. What resulted then is that an unwritten set of standards began to take form. Codes for Chicano Literature were explicit. First and foremost was the fact that we could never criticize ourselves as long as we followed the developing pattern. Whatever was Chicano was good; what was for the Movement was good because the Movement was for all Chicanos.

Another characteristic of this new literature was that it must perpetuate the idea that the Chicano was the most impoverished person in America, that our plight was the direct result of racism, and that we, like the demagogues in our political forefront, must expound our answers to this situation. We should fight racism with racism, hatred with hatred. Political rhetoric no different from harangue, appealing to emotion at the expense of reason, was expected from us. The fact that those of us with artistic temperament could not interpret the function of art in this manner was not considered. Our Spanish or European heritage was repudiated out of hand; our indigenous beginnings were heralded. And in reviving ancient Indian myths, we created a new mythology which gave a picture of an Aztec Arcadia, which spoke of a civilization so advanced that the Spaniard—the White European—was forced to destroy it. According to this new legend, tens of thousands of volumes representing indigenous literature and, thus, the Chicano literary heritage were burned by the Church. The facts that the Aztec Confederation was comprised of slave states, that society was dominated by a small elite group, that the State and Religion were one, dedicated to the task of keeping the masses subjugated exactly as they were before the Mexican Revolution, were not mentioned. This attitude became so widespread that it is surprising that we did not begin to take on Indian names, build temples, and search for virgins to sacrifice.

This development had a number of harmful effects. The first was, of course, that it made for a confusion between the work and its results. By making what the work *did* more important than what it *was*, the work itself lost its identity as an artistic object. This meant also that the artist allowed himself to be pressured into discarding his most important characteristics—integrity, honesty, fidelity. And with this, there now appeared a number of persons, committed to the movement and even sincere, who criticized us on these very terms. Until recently, perhaps two years, almost every critic of our work came from the field of sociology, political science, history, anthropology, or related sciences. With rare exceptions, most were totally lacking in sensibility, never having developed an emotional and intellectual apprehension or responsiveness to aesthetic phenomena. In short, we reversed Wilde's posture in an equally absurd manner by insisting that ideological and political considerations were totally independent from aesthetic values. And the term "Chicano Literature" was fast becoming valid only within a political context.

The result, then, was that we now wrote specifically for the Chicano. We had a captive audience which already believed and knew our situation well. And he who might perhaps want to know of us, of our social and economic conditions, our aspirations, our dreams, our humanness was driven off by the outright propagandistic elements or by the third rate quality of most of our literature. For by now there was a proliferation of writings called Chicano Literature and, as long as a work fit the mold created by the activists, it was not only considered good but was exorbitantly lauded. This led to statements by people who knew better such as, "*The Plum, Plum Pickers* is the greatest Chicano novel," or to favorable comparisons of *I Am Joaquín* to *Martín Fierro*. In the former case,

such criticism precluded a statement of the real worth of Raymond Barrio's work—the author's experimentation with form and structure in an effort to create an artistic entity. In this way, we performed a great disservice to the Movement as well as to the idea of literature. It came about because we refused or could not understand that we could be didactic without sacrificing our artistic qualities, that even though the primary aim or intent of our work might be to propound an ideology, a political teaching, or a moral truth, we need not rule out an aesthetic presence. We know of the many literary works that have been didactic, from *The Inferno* to the *Faerie Queen*, *Gulliver*, and *Quijote*; in recent years the works of Orwell have been prime examples. Then there are the Mexicans such as Rulfo, Yáñez, Fuentes, and even Spota, and the contemporary South and Central Americans. I mention the Mexicans specifically because they are visual evidence of our potential, since we not only share a similar experience, but carry the identical blood line. In every case here, however, the didactic elements do not dominate, but form a part of the artistic experience.

Despite my anger, all this has had little adverse effect on my writing primarily because I began writing long before the emergence of the current wave of social protest. The movement, in fact, helped me tremendously if only by the fact that it gave new life to my published work. Yet, the very people who forced the renascence of my work immediately criticized me because I had not written a militant book. Such criticism is disturbing, whether it is about my work or someone else's. It is disturbing mainly because I know what it can do to our young, potentially unfulfilled writers. And all writers who have a Spanish surname will carry the ethnic label, whether by design or not, and will be subject to Movement criticism. It is, unfortunately, the nature of that particular criticism to subvert rather than to encourage the artist. A case in point is John Rechy, who not only because his name does not sound Chicano but also because he does not write exclusively of the Chicano experience—a term which needs definition also—has gradually been excluded from the ranks of Chicano writers. Another is the late Amado Muro, more Mexican than many of us, who lived the Chicano experience, but has been repudiated by the pundits because his name was really Charles Seltzer.

To me the ethnic label has been detrimental only in that it retarded the development of my writing skills. The fact that Chicano criticism has dealt chiefly in sociopolitical terms has precluded critical activity with respect to our work from outside the Chicano sphere. Contrary to common belief, artists need qualified criticism. It is necessary so that we can improve. More importantly, it is necessary because we have an embryonic genre on our hands, and it is only the competent critic who will define it. It has been only recently with the advent of the Chicano scholar, usually from the field of Latin American literature or even classic Spanish literature, that we are receiving the type of assessment needed for so long. Outside of the aforementioned John Rechy, who is now considered to be outside our circle, we are not compared with first rate American or British contemporary writers. We need a National Book Award or even a Pulitzer, someday perhaps even a Nobel. Not because we want to be *güeros*, nor for false status, but as an indication that we are taken seriously. The criticism we have had up until now has prohibited the development of form, of structure, and of a style we can call our own. We are traditional to the extreme. We write in English most of the time and, even when we do not, we are obliged to translate. Some of us read Spanish, Mexican, and Latin American writers in the original, but the majority of us know this literature only in translation. And although we do not want to accept this fact, much of our influence comes primarily from English letters, British and American.

Although Mexico is a relatively new nation, our roots are very old both in America and in Europe. Our people in this country have been a lonely and isolated people. True, we have also been an abused and exploited people. And a part of our emergence has been through our art. To date it has been apparent that our heritage and our social and economic condition are the only characteristics that bind our literature into some form. This is what Philip Ortego calls our commonality of experience. This aspect is evident in much of our most serious work. Yet it is not enough. We have had but little time in which to create a literature. In his essay, "Chicano Literature: Sources and Themes" [in *The Bilingual Review/La revista bilingüe*, I, 1 (January-April 1974)], Francisco Jiménez quotes Eliú Carranza who in turn uses Octavio Paz' terminology to describe the phenomenon of Chicano writing in this fashion:

> . . . the essence of the Chicano Cultural revolution. A confrontation and a realization of worth and value through a brutally honest self-examination has occurred and has revealed to Chicanos a link with the past and a leap into the future. . . . This is self-determination . . . for the Chicano has shown his face at last! He has removed the mask and seen himself for what he is: a human being! He dares now to show himself as he really is—publicly.

This is sheer bombast, of course, and in keeping with the accepted language of Chicano criticism and political rhetoric. Yet it is not difficult to relate such a statement to our literature, despite the fact that the right to examine ourselves in a brutally honest fashion has been denied us and because the very realization that we are human is what has enabled us to produce the few pieces of literature we can call our own. The essence of the statement is true, however, for there is no doubt that our literature is an intrinsic part of our Movement. And although we have not yet produced a writer that is artistically great in the universal sense, we must accept the fact that our potential is now in evidence. Eventually men of letters will see our

work, because eventually we will not be denied.

Recently I was told by an old friend, a scholar, a sincere man intensely involved in the Cause, that we cannot afford the luxury of attempting to create art. It is not a luxury, of course. It is an obligation, a responsibility we dare not shirk. As artists we must, through our pride and arrogance, and perhaps even insolence, ignore the warnings from the gods and, although it be a grievous sin, transcend the codes of the Movement as we create. Then, and only then, will we have a literature. Then, we will truly contribute to the Cause. What we create may not be called Chicano Literature—most probably it will be a sub-genre of American literature because it is in English, no matter how many *pochismos* we use—but it will belong to us and it will express our singular experience and lay bare, for the world to see, the soul of our people. (pp. 161–67)

José Antonio Villarreal, "Chicano Literature: Art and Politics from the Perspective of the Artist," in *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*, edited by Francisco Jiménez, Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1979, pp. 161–68.

JUAN BRUCE-NOVOA

(essay date 1976)

[Bruce-Novoa is a distinguished Hispanic poet and critic. In the following essay, he explores the plot structure of *Pocho*, contending that Juan Rubio and his son Richard seek self-liberation in diametrically opposed ways.]

In 1959, José Antonio Villarreal published the novel ***Pocho*** and sixteen years later it has become one of the best known Chicano novels. There are many reasons why it is so widely read and why Chicanos have given it such importance. The obvious is that it was the first novel by a Chicano released by a major publisher. It deals explicitly with the migration of a Mexican family to the U.S. after the Mexican revolution, assimilation and the appearance of a first generation Mexican American, prior to World War II. Less obvious, but certainly true, is that it anticipates, if only in segments as small as one sentence, almost every major fictional prose work in Chicano literature to date. These qualities, coupled with an interesting plot and generally clear, readable and enjoyable prose, have made it a natural choice for Chicanos; and it must be observed that the success of the book is directly attributable to the new Chicano cultural awareness. However, this interest, that has sold so many copies of ***Pocho***, has had disadvantages. The novel has been treated usually as a sociological, anthropological or historical document; or even as a psychological case study, and hardly ever as literature. It is no wonder that Villarreal has reacted against such treatment and has raised serious questions about the study and criticism of Chicano literature. In an essay, "Freedom of Expression and the Chicano Movement" (*La Luz*, Oct. 1973), I too, decried the judging of our literature according to pre-established values, usually sociopolitical, which have little relevance to literature. A book must be read first as literature with its own reality, not as a document by which to study a reality, especially a sociopolitical one outside and prior to it. Villarreal states it differently, yet says the same thing. "We say our literature is good because it's about us, but literature must be assessed on an absolute scale. Works by Mexican Americans are always assigned for criticism to persons who don't understand literature, to sociologists or anthropologists. I don't know of one Mexican American author who has been judged [by] a first-rate critic" (*San José Mercury*, Nov. 21, 1974). The difficulty is compounded when we consider that, unfortunately, most literary training in universities should more accurately be classified under the rubric of sociology or anthropology, and that relatively few literary critics deal with literature as literature. Villarreal's comments are, in the main, accurate and deserved.

However, in the case of ***Pocho***, Villarreal's own publisher, Doubleday, is the greatest culprit, having entrusted the introduction to the paperback edition to Ramón Eduardo Ruiz, a historian. Ruiz' introduction, a historical view of the meaning of ***Pocho***, prejudices the reader, especially the Chicano, against a clear reading of the novel. It deserves little attention except that Villarreal complains of just such commentary. It does not consider the novel as a novel with interior coherence, nor does it touch the truly fundamental themes: individuality, the struggle for personal fulfillment in a world of mediocrity and compromise, or the difficult moral and social independence involved in the making of the writer. Instead, Ruiz implicitly accuses Villarreal of not being a Chicano prophet, and of not being able to bring himself to make "the almost inevitable clash between 'Mexicans' and 'prejudiced Anglos,'" the central theme of ***Pocho***, as if the other themes treated were not as important. In short, Ruiz criticizes Villarreal for views inconsistent with what he sees as the Chicano Movement. The failure to deal with ***Pocho*** as literature is an inexcusable omission, when we consider that literature not only is what ***Pocho*** is, but in a real sense, what it is about. Let me try to deal with it in a fashion more consistent with its nature.

The plot seems simple or so the introduction and other sources would have us believe. The Rubio family migrates from México, works the agricultural circuit, finally settles in Northern California, begins to assimilate and falls apart under the pressure of acculturation. This is especially noticeable in Consuelo, the mother, who becomes a nagging, jealous wife. Juan Rubio works hard to establish his home, but finally must abandon his family, taking up with a recently immigrated, young woman who

still knows her traditional place. Richard Rubio, his U.S. born son, seems to reject his Mexican heritage in favor of assimilation, symbolized by his enlistment in World War II. These are circumstances, not true thematic content.

Pocho is the story of two men: Juan Rubio, who had been a colonel in Villa's army, and his son Richard. Their lives form parallel movements towards a break with their family and surroundings; a separation marking personal liberation and fulfillment. Yet, though the general flow of the movement of both men seems similar, fundamentally they travel in opposite directions to reach the same, yet diametrically opposed ends. The novel interrelates the two movements, and they are interdependent; but, for the sake of analysis, we can describe them separately.

Juan Rubio emerges from the Mexican Revolution in chapter one a hero, well acquainted with death and not afraid of it. He takes what he wants openly, a young prostitute, coldly killing a man who stands in his way. He is sure of himself and his absolutes, especially that of personal honor. His conflict in the novel is forecast by an old friend, whom he has chided for accepting a bribe: "It is a terrible thing to grow old in the midst of great futility. . . . A man should grow old strongly—old age should be a positive sort of thing, not anything like this. And yet, believe me, Juan Manuel, you too, will grow old. . . . You will be me someday." Juan replies, "I will never forget that which I believe is right. There must be a sense of honor or a man will have no dignity, and without the dignity a man is incomplete. I will always be a man." Will he be able to grow old without compromising his personal code of honor? This is the theme of Juan's story, a universal theme.

When he is joined by his wife in California, Juan comes to respect and love her, and eventually even gives up extramarital affairs. This new beginning coincides with Richard's birth, and in a sense the novel gives them a shared point zero. Juan's new life really begins with that birth, and Consuelo, his wife, also attributes the positive change in their relationship to having borne him a son. However, this happy beginning is shaded by extended exile in the U.S.

From chapter two on, the novel concentrates more on Richard. Through his son Juan is glimpsed; their dialogues are significant. Not until chapter five, when Richard is twelve years old, do we directly see the effects of creeping acculturation. Juan shouts at Consuelo for the first time in their marriage and the words are significant: "You are thinking yourself an American woman—well, you are not one and you should know your place." His extreme reaction reflects a change in her. The scene is significant because instead of beating her, as he would have in Mexico, he verbalizes his objection. There has been a softening in his expression. He, in turn, will initiate the next landmark change: he decides to buy a house, a permanent residence tying him to the U.S. Moreover, he discusses the plan with Consuelo, and the significance of that does not escape her, though she fatally misjudges his reasoning. "It did not escape her that he was discussing a big move with her. He was changing. He would not have done that a year ago—six months ago. Perhaps her conduct of late was beginning to show results." She will accentuate her freedom into neglect, choosing Richard over Juan; and he will abandon his family to seek out a young Mexican girl.

The process is slow and Juan realizes what is happening. At one point, when Richard rejects tradition and doubts God, Juan's retort sounds like that of his friend in chapter one, and the scenes parallel and reflect each other. He says: "as you are I once saw myself, and as you see me you will be. I learned long ago that one cannot fight destiny, and stopped fighting. I gave up. I know you must fight also, but in the end you will understand." Richard's maturity accentuates Juan's aging and his loss of dignity. When Juan seeks a new woman, significantly she is Richard's age and she has admired him. When he leaves he regains his dignity, and just before he departs he advises Richard to seek whatever he truly believes in, letting nothing stand in his way. "Promise me—that you will be true unto yourself, unto what you honestly believe is right. And if it does not stand in your way, do not ever forget that you are Mexican." He restates the guiding principles of his life, which will be those of Richard's life as well.

Let us examine what seems to be the stereotypical americanized-woman-leads-to-family-destruction motif, and at the essence of Juan's freedom. Juan cannot tolerate Consuelo's nagging and her neglect of him, the house and the family. The change in her revolves around one thing: sex. She turns into a jealous woman when she discovers the joys of sexual climax, becoming an active participant in intercourse. The commentary on Mexican sexual mores is negative. If she had not been brought up within a "puritanical" tradition, her fate might have been happier. (Villarreal develops this theme in ***The Fifth Horseman***.) Juan is equally to blame, for as a man he cannot communicate with a woman. He "knew that he could have set her fears at ease by merely explaining that he had not been unfaithful for years, but he could not do that, for he should not explain, should not admit, should not deny. In his mind, he would have been as right if he had done the things she had accused him of doing." The *vice* of manhood eliminates the possibility of a reconciliation. Tradition holds them both in their roles and dictates the separation. If they could revolt against tradition as Richard does, they might avoid destruction, but they cannot, and Juan leaves.

What Juan really does, however, is return to Consuelo; to what she was in the figure of Pilar, a girl that reminds Richard of his mother when she was young. Just as a friend of Juan builds a Mexican-style house to return to México in California, Juan finds a substitute for Consuelo to do likewise. His break for freedom is reac-

tionary, the evolution actually being a devolution to old absolutes lost in the compromise with age and a foreign ambient. He reestablishes the lost world that he has constantly looked back upon. A note of irony is that in his paradise regained there are the seeds of destruction, for though he will live with Pilar in the coutryside, far from the Anglo influences, he himself has begun that evolution by having slept with the girl's aunt in the home built to be México in California and to keep that woman from straying. Be that as it may, Juan regains his dignity in a return to an old system of values.

Richard breaks from the family also, but his freedom is not reactionary, rather, radically revolutionary. The difference is in Richard from the beginning. Richard does not change in the novel; his character develops in the direction established at age nine. The first scene dedicated to Richard takes on great significance in this context, and we should read it carefully.

It is spring. "A child walked through an empty lot, not looking back, for the wake of trampled grass he created made him sad." He will never look back, unlike his father, and his progress will trample others. "His every sense responded to life around him. He thought the robin and the rabbit were God's favorites because they were endowed with the ability to make play out of life. And as young as he was, things were too complex for him." He is totally open to life as it concentrates in him as the center of the world. Life should be play, and Richard will refuse the utilitarian justifications of life. He is blessed and condemned to be unable to accept false simplifications of the world. He returns from his first confession, the ritual that marks the entry into the age of reason within a socioreligious context. His conflict with society will be a moral struggle against traditions couched in religious rationales; rationales to which his own reasoning processes are not attuned. He carries in one hand a new cap and in the other a picture of the Virgin, together representing, again, the value systems that will try to control him. His attitude is clear. He has won the picture for being the first to learn the catechism. He accepts the honor but does not value the reward itself. According to his father, the cap is essential to a man, but the boy forgot it once, and he does not wear it. He cannot be bought or threatened. He is more interested in asking questions about nature, like why bugs are green. His intellect favors useless themes. He is perverse as an artist is perverse; he deals with reality for pleasure, organizing his own value system with and around a solipsistic encounter with nature. He is like God's favorites: turning life into play. He will not change.

Yet, nature takes him to the problem of how nothing could have existed before God created the world. He can only conceive of nothing as something and senses the paradox. He is struggling with the fundamental, philosophical problems of the origin of being, and even more significantly, he is questioning words and their meaning, as we see below.

> *Who made the world?*
> *God made the world.*
> *Who is God?*
> *God is the Creator of Heaven and Earth and of all Things.*
>
> It had occurred to him once that the answer to the second question was nothing more than the answer to the first. That he still did not know who God was. But upon reflection he remembered that one does not question God, and was satisfied.

He will not always be satisfied so easily. At age nine he questions the order of the world and realizes that it is supported by a tautology that is mere language, that creates an order unto itself. He is on the road to knowing that language is humanity's response to the void left by reason's inability to comprehend the totality of existence. But lest we think that Richard is strictly an intellectual, it should be remembered that nature led him to these considerations. He has entered the mystery of the relationship of the word and the world; of humanity.

His first family conflict stems from confession. The priest asked if Richard plays with himself or his sister, introducing the sexual taboos, while tying them to religion and God. Richard tells his mother that he used to play with some girls, and she responds to this childish innocence by calling him a shameless pig. Family, society and religion are a unit. The break with one will be the break with all. His mother displays here the puritanism that will eventually destroy her. Richard, frightened, ponders the coexistence of good and evil and why God created darkness if night is frightening. He intuits that the world is unity in spite of fear, and that his reason divides the unity into apparently separate categories. "Night was the scariest time of the day, because a day is twenty-four hours and night is a day. But not daytime. He was scared at night because he could not see, and he was frightened now because he could not know, and somehow God was in the middle of the whole thing. To do 'bad' things had something to do with being alive, but really what were 'bad' things?" He is rejecting the rationalized God of Christianity in favor of a more general feeling of the sacred that would include good and evil and especially the intensity created by the transgression of one by the other, the breaking of the taboo. He wants to understand the unknown order of things in which discontinuous categories are transcended.

What spurred these last thoughts was sex, and it will be closely tied to his discoveries, recurring again, for example, when he teases his confessor with titillating talk of masturbation, consciously linking it to religious taboo; and this just before he rejects the sacred host in communion, like confession, a social ritual.

In section two of chapter two, yet another constant is introduced: "Richard could not accept the idea of death even with the knowledge that he would go to heaven. To die was easy, but to give up life was no easy thing even to

think about, and yet it was obvious to him that it could not be too difficult a thing, for even cowards somehow managed to die." Death will always frighten him, and he cannot be bought off with promises of an eternity which makes no sense to him. Yet, he accepts death as a part of life. In another place he compares it to darkness, which is night, and night is day, as we have seen. Death negates life, because it is the "scary," the unknown, the unintelligible side of life. Again, it is a transcendent order he seeks, an ineffable sacred, and it is the thought of death that is difficult, not the dying.

In the last section, Richard comes into direct contact with death in a most revealing scene. He witnesses a murder of a policeman during a fruit-pickers' strike and refuses to betray the murderer, a Chicano, explicitly lying to the sheriff. Right and wrong are significantly omitted completely from Richard's consideration of his dilemma. He is frightened but not concerned, and what decides his reaction is the confidence he derives from his own voice as he speaks. It is language, again, that determines the situation: one more step towards the writer's trade. The strike "kept Richard in a state of constant excitement. Always, however, there was a part of his mind that carefully observed from a detached point of view, and he was aware that he was learning something." This attitude will persist to the end. He states that he wants to be a writer, eventually declaring it his only goal. The careful reader already knows his disposition for it by the end of chapter two.

As chapter one laid the framework and the elements for Juan's life, so chapter two does for Richard. Both men will have to meet life from the base of what they are. Structurally, Villarreal has used a series of events that constantly reflect those of the first two chapters, thus demonstrating the evolution of the two as their participation in those situations vary.

Richard slowly affirms the characteristics present from the beginning, within the structures of conflict already outlined. He carries out a series of rebellions against everything that would dictate to his life. He rejects the accepted norms of society, he rejects studying for social prestige or money, rejects "machismo" as unjust, rejects honor codes as ridiculous dependence on social acceptance, rejects family obligations, marriage and children as a God-given natural order of life, rejects tradition as a rationale for accepting any of the above, rejects simplistic, racist explanations for human behavior, rejects personal sacrifice for his family as a meaningful life or as the justification for a mediocre one and rejects God. Throughout this process there are three central constants: the moral and intellectual perversity of his behavior, the search for the unknown sacredness of the world, and the fear of death. The three channel him towards one goal: writing.

The perversity is the sense of doing something not for its social purpose, but for itself or for himself. It is especially notable in his relationship to knowledge. "I want to learn, and that is all. I don't want to be something—I *am*. I do not care about making a lot of money and about what people think and about the family in the way you speak, I have to learn as much as I can, so that I can live . . . learn for *me*, for *myself*." At the end of the novel he refuses to go to officers training school with his socially conscious friend, showing that the attitude persists. His perversity extends to God in that he believes in him, though he knows he is cruel and evil, and heaven does not mean anything to him. Eventually, he will renounce God, but he still behaves in a Christian way. "And if my behavior can be called Christian, it is because I agree with most of the Decalogue and not because it is a Christian thing to do so."

Chapter four is essential to understand the meaning of Richard's perversity. He meets Joe Pete, a Portuguese aristocrat who lives as a cowherd in California. An agnostic and latent homosexual, he gets a young girl pregnant, and eventually goes insane. He is a perverse character in every way. To him Richard directs a question about the Immaculate Conception, that, if analyzed without Catholic prejudice, is itself a perversion of natural law. (The question takes on special irony with the impregnated girl, another in an age-old series of "virgin" births.) Joe Pete does not answer Richard, explaining that he must find his own answers "because to you it should only be important what you *feel*." This reinforces Richard's solipsism. Then, Joe Pete gives him a perverse use for faith: he should believe so as to arrive safely at a point where he will no longer need it, then use doubt to abandon faith. The man also teaches Richard the relativity of words and that no man has the absolute definitions, an important discovery for a would-be author. In all, what Richard learns through all this perversity is, ironically, human tolerance to accept people, even misfits, on the basis of their individual worth, and the rejection of systems of pre-established absolutes. Or perhaps it is not so ironic, for tolerance is itself a social perversity, as Richard learns in his life.

Richard's enthusiasm for the unknown leads him to associate with Pachucos, but as an observer more than an active participant, though he participates in a gang fight which makes for "a most happy night." Too much has been made of this as a sign of Richard's feeling a cultural identity which he later rejects. Prior to that night he has rejected the simplistic dichotomies of racism, Anglo or Pachuco. He identifies with the Pachucos because they are Mexican, yes, but also because they reject a social structure he also rejects. He is fascinated by another perverse stand that negates, seemingly, just to negate. The intensity of the gang fight is from fear which has always moved him, and the excitement of a lived-observed experience bordering on death, which mirrors the fight in chapter two. "He strained every sense, in order not to miss any part of this experience. He wanted to retain everything that was about to happen." This time it is Richard who is struck on the head. After the fight he is thrilled, but not moved to join the group. Nor should he be, in that,

within the options presented by the text, it would require an acceptance of social simplifications and impose obligations and even moral codes that would limit him, and he has declared his freedom as the observer and artist. One may disagree with this stand *outside* the book, but with respect to the character, whose only world is the book, this decision is totally logical, if not consistent.

The same can be said for his apparent renunciation of his "people" when confronted by the police. It parallels the incident with the sheriff after the murder in chapter two, in that he takes strength from his own voice. The renunciation is not of his people but of a policeman's attempt to compromise him by making him into a representative for them, and in so doing, turn him into a pawn between two value systems, neither of which he believes in. It would be personally immoral to accept such a compromise, and worse, it would be out of character, illogical within the novel and an inexcusable flaw in the narrative.

In the last chapter, Richard buries himself in a non-life of meaningless, habitual work to support his now fatherless family. The absurdity of his situation is brought home to him when his peer group repeats an action he had observed as a child in a group of older boys whom he did not respect. He realizes that he is stagnant and rebels, first joining a group of writers, then the navy. He moves towards death in the last segment, not having accepted it, but knowing that when it comes it will be unavoidable. He moves into the realm of fear, into night, cutting all ties. His enlistment means freedom, though some, like Ruiz, have called it the acceptance of the conformity to a cold, impersonal organization, implying assimilation. However, it is not a patriotic act, but a perverse escape into life. All his experiences have prepared him to be able to take the menace of death and turn it into an escape from a state worse than death, the non-life of less-than-intense mediocrity. Fear is at least an intensity, and death is a part of life. What Richard has never been able to accept is giving up life, which within his unifying logic means neither life nor death, but exactly the nothing existence of mediocrity. He is perverse enough to turn even war into the possibility of life.

Only superficial reading can call this process assimilation, for assimilation demands the acceptance of the norms of the group into which one moves, and Richard consistently rejects the majority values of social mores, financial success, and peer group standards. This is seen in the criticism he receives from his social-climbing, Italian friend who is explicitly characterized as an assimilator. This friend worries that Richard is not conforming and that he is straying from the socioreligious norms. He is right. Of course, he rejects the social values of his own family also, because though apparently different, they are still the values of Occidental culture, different only in nuance. Any outside value system is inimical to the moral independence necessary to the artist. If it be claimed that he accepts the Anglo-American nihilism as a new cultural value, the text would not support such a stand. Richard seeks "that unknown; that substantiality that had eluded men from the beginning of time." Like most artists since Nietzsche, Richard cannot accept absolutes which have become irrelevant in the world.

Richard differs from his father whose break was reactionary. Richard is a radical in the sense that the true artist is radical. He breaks with society because he senses the need to seek that transcendent order he intuited at age nine. The avenue he has found for seeking that order is literature. Before he even understands what he is saying, he tells his mother: "everything does not necessarily have to be real." The space where another reality can exist, where the apparent reality of the world, with all its repression and chaotic divisions of reason, time, space, and even the fear of death, disappear, is literature.

> Mamá, do you know what happens to me when I read? . . . I travel Mamá. I travel all over the world, and sometimes out of this whole universe, and I go back in time and again forward. I do not know I am here, and I do not care. I am always thinking of you and my father except when I read. Nothing is important to me then, and I even forget that I am going to die sometime.

Early in his life, Richard intuited the power of the word to structure the universe and even create God. Here he declares that faith openly. As a writer he will go to the point of ordering the language that creates reality. Death does not disappear completely, however, but through his perverse rejection of the rational division of reality into opposing forces, he learns to perceive death as a part of life, a confirmation of the intuited unity of the world. Literature will not be a substitute for the world, but, rather, for the arbitrary structuralization of it by socioreligious traditions and by divisive reason.

Richard becomes a writer because to be a writer is to perversely do nothing, in the social scale of labor. It is a socially superfluous act. It makes work into play, as rabbits and robins do. It allows one to observe and experience the observation through the creation of it; and taken a step further, it is the creation of experience which can be then lived and observed. Also, it establishes a sense of the sacred, in that it takes living beings or objects that usually disappear in consecutive time, as all living things must, and fixes them outside of time, in a sense, killing them by making them permanent, instead of temporal beings. The detemporalization of beings is the violation of life as commonly perceived in time, and, thus, it is the breaking of a taboo, which in turn is the ritual of sacrifice, giving rise to the sacred. Writing also establishes a sense of meaning, order and substantiality. Richard becomes a writer, following the inclinations of his childhood, and he has the courage and fortune to perversely persist in the childlike belief that reality does not have to be only one way. It can be another. It can be literature.

Juan and Richard, thus, break with their family and situation for their own liberation. Both opt for the same basic principle: self-determination in spite of all restrictions. However, Juan's liberation is a return, a reactionary reestablishment of an order based on socioreligious traditions, which, despite his painful experience, he still cannot perceive as the underlying causes for his broken marriage. Richard's liberation is the break with those traditions, and thus, revolutionary, diametrically opposed to Juan's, albeit within their sameness. It should also be noted that the narrrative interlaces the two movements. Juan's influence on Richard is fundamental, and Richard is an unwitting aid in his father's unhappiness. Yet, Richard breaks with his father's world, and as he goes off to war at the end, he thinks back: "His father had won his battle, and for him life was worthwhile, but he had never been unaware of what his fight was. ***But what about me?*** . . . Because he did not know, he would strive to live." Richard moves towards the nothingness of reality that always fascinated him, a realm where preestablished value systems have no function. He does not ***know***, and that is his fight, a struggle with the meaning of life in which he takes the negative; the void that established systems restrict with taboo and where they, thus, divide life, and he turns its presence into the affirmation of life. It is not an escape, but a commitment to life as discovery, movement and intensity, and to reality as a total, harmonious unity. The only ones who would question the fundamental significance of this theme would be those who want others to accept the absoluteness of their own established order. Villarreal's message here is dangerous, yes, as all literature is perversely liberating and, thus, dangerous to those who demand conformity. Juan reclaims his place in an established, limited and limiting order. Richard claims the right to explore the unlimited, unlimiting, unknown life of movement without a fixed place. He ***thinks*** the vehicle is literature, not knowing, yet for him, it is the space of that life.

What book does Richard write? ***Pocho***, of course. He is the unseen narrator, or if you insist on a name, he goes by the pseudonym of José Antonio Villarreal, a creation of Richard Rubio to justify a third person narrative. He writes it to explore the question on the last page. After an enumeration of the main characters of the novel, whom he calls beautiful people, Richard asks: "What of them—and why? Of what worth was it all?" ***Pocho*** is the search for the answers, and in so doing, Richard creates the space he is searching for. Within the novel the dark and light, the good and evil, the obvious and the hidden, all things, come into relationship and unity. Literary space is not the vehicle, but the transcendent unity of Richard's reality. He creates it to find it, and in the end disappears in it so as to reveal himself through it, as a part of that unity. Literature has become Richard Rubio's answer to the nothingness: the recuperation of all the beautiful images of his youth in a space where he can observe them, as he always did, and participate in them. For, really, Richard exists in the novel, and, of course, in the essential reading us. Thus, in a very fundamental sense, the novel is ab literature as a response to the nothingness that threa and troubles man. (pp. 65–77)

Juan Bruce-Novoa, "'Pocho' as Literature," in *AZTL* Vol. 7, No. 1, Spring, 1976, pp. 65–77.

CHARLES M. TATUM

(essay date 1982)

[In the following excerpt, Tatum discusses *Pocho* a a "novel of initiation" that depicts Richard Rubio' passage into adulthood against a background of so ciocultural and historical themes. Tatum also briefl assesses Villarreal's second novel, *The Fifth Horse man.*]

Although, ironically, José Antonio Villarreal does consider himself to be a Chicano writer, his work *Po* published in 1959, is, in the opinion of most critics, first Chicano novel. It is structured around the live Juan Manuel Rubio, a Mexican immigrant, and Ric Rubio, his son, the *pocho* identified in the book's In the first chapter, we see the elder Rubio, a c proud colonel who fought valiantly with Villa d the 1910 Mexican Revolution, arriving in Ciuded J from Mexico City. Discouraged with the turn the ing has taken, he comes north to join a new offe Instead he is arrested in a barroom brawl and fin way across the border to El Paso with the help of family friend. Juan migrates to California, where joined by his wife, Consuelo. For awhile they kee the dream of someday returning to Mexico, but ally it becomes clear that they are destined to liv life of disillusionment characteristic of thousands Mexican immigrant families. The Rubios' values a enced by the new culture: Consuelo becomes re a subservient wife and demands greater sexual ex in the relationship. Threatened by this challen traditional patriarchal authority, Juan abandon a young woman recently arrived from Mexico, who has not yet been acculturated.

While ***Pocho*** can be seen as a fictionalized a the sociological phenomenon of the Mexican i experience, the novel offers much more. From t chapter on, the focus shifts to Richard's perso opment through which we see the changes th the entire family. His development through hi teen years is skillfully linked with broader his cultural themes such as the immigrant family's tion, the unrest of American workers during

the arrival in California of thousands of refugees from the Dust Bowl, the emergence of the *pachucos* in Los Angeles, and the relocation of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Pocho can best be described as a novel of initiation, a kind of Chicano *Bildungsroman*, in which we follow Richard's spiritual awakening into an often baffling alien setting. This passage from boyhood to manhood is heightened by his perception and sensitivity to the world around him, an unusual introspection that has led one critic [Luther S. Luedtke in *Minority Voices*, Fall, 1977] to compare his awakening to that of Stephen Dedalus of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Like Dedalus, Richard, at the tender age of nine, begins agonizing over such questions as the existence and immensity of God, suffers the guilt of childhood sexuality, reacts like a victim to his teacher's laughter, fears the dark, and strives to answer the unanswerable questions of the cosmos. He turns from these unfathomable and horrible thoughts to take refuge in the natural world of bugs and plants available to his inquisitive mind.

As his family disintegrates and he is thrust between two cultures—the Chicano and the Anglo—neither of which he completely accepts, Richard's suffering becomes more intense. While he cannot accept his mother's Catholic fatalism or his father's newly acquired materialism, he finds some solace in Mary, his young Anglo-Protestant friend, with whom he shares his innermost doubts. Having rejected the stricture of his own Mexican cultural traditions, Richard seeks his answers in new models including an agnostic Portuguese expatriate, Joe Pete, who fuels the boy's curiosity and quest for meaningful answers. As Richard matures and undergoes several waves of questioning and doubt, the world around him changes rapidly: his family buys a house, thus cutting off further links with Mexico; Juan takes up with the young Mexican woman and abandons the family; and Richard, as the eldest son, suddenly becomes the head of the household. Meanwhile his social awareness becomes more acute when he is mistaken for a *pachuco* hoodlum and beaten by the police. Richard also is a witness to the social turmoil in northern California during the years prior to World War II. Unable to respond to his new familial responsibilities and eager to strike out on his own, he leaves the family for good and joins the navy, an ambiguous act that has been variously interpreted as his final break with his heritage and his capitulation to Anglo values or his declaration of freedom.

As a novel, *Pocho* has both glaring weaknesses and favorable traits. On the negative side, one critic [Rafael F. Grajeda in *The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature*, 1979] has observed that it fails to penetrate very deeply into the full complexity of the experience which it purports to treat: the cultural identity of the Chicano people. Other technical failures are its overexplicitness, sentimentality, a flaccid journalistic style, and a tendency to assert rather than to render. Richard is not an altogether convincing character, especially in his boyhood philosophical musings—he has an intellectual maturity that is well beyond his years. On a more positive note, the novel has been judged successful in dealing effectively with several universal themes, including individuality, the struggle for personal fulfillment in a world of mediocrity and compromise, and the development of a new writer. Given that Villarreal did not have the advantage of a Chicano novelistic tradition and that it is his first novel in the balance, ***Pocho*** is a significant literary achievement.

Villarreal's second novel, ***The Fifth Horseman*** (1974) is important as the only Chicano novel to treat the period prior to the Mexican Revolution. While of historical interest, it suffers for its Manichean division of pre-and postrevolutionary Mexican society into good and evil men—men because the novelist has relegated women to an inferior status as fictional characters. Villarreal also tends to overdraw his characters; for example, Heraclio Inés, the novel's protagonist, is depicted as a "super-macho," the incarnation of the Mexican male's virile traits. He is also unconvincingly honest, just, and kind besides being a legendary ferocious fighter. More successful than his characterization of Inés and others are Villarreal's realistic descriptions of revolutionary battles, his brief portraits of its principal actors, and especially his meticulous reconstruction of the social order that existed in Mexico prior to 1910. (pp. 103–06)

Charles M. Tatum, "Contemporary Chicano Novel," in his *Chicano Literature*, Twayne Publishers, 1982, pp. 102–37.

ERLINDA GONZALES-BERRY

(eassy date 1985)

[In the following review, Gonzales-Berry discusses the themes in Villarreal's second and third novels, *The Fifth Horseman* and *Clemente Chacón*.]

While many are the Chicano novelists who touch upon the Mexican Revolution as a thematic backdrop, José Antonio Villarreal is the first to make this historical event the primary focus of his narrative action. Published in 1974 by Doubleday Press, ***The Fifth Horseman*** had little impact on Chicano letters. Bilingual Press reissued the novel as the first of its Chicano Classics, a series designed to "insure the accessibility . . . of deserving works of Chicano literature and culture that have become unavailable and are in imminent danger of becoming inaccessible." Of special interest in this edition is a bibliography on Villarreal by Ernestine Eger and an introductory article by Luis Leal.

The Fifth Horseman could well be the story of the *villista*, Juan Rubio, of Villarreal's first novel, *Pocho* (1959), who in the first chapter of that work crosses the border as he flees from the chaos of the Mexican Revolution. However, in the final chapter of *The Fifth Horseman*, it is not Rubio but rather Heraclio Inez who crosses the border intending to return to Mexico once the destruction abates and the period of reconstruction begins. What precedes this last chapter is the story of this young revolutionary, and it is with him, but through the eyes of an omniscient narrator, that the reader rides the deserts of Northern Mexico alongside the great heroes, villains, and traitors of the Revolution: Pancho Villa, Rodolfo Fierro, Celestino Gámez, Tomás Urbina, Pánfilo Natera, Felipe Angeles.

The prologue places us in the center of the pivotal epic battle of Zacatecas. There, we are introduced to young Major Inez as he bids farewell to his young *soldadera* and prepares for a suicidal mission ordered by General Villa. This scene reveals, at a glance, the stuff of which Heraclio Inez is made: raw valor and an arrogant disdain for death. The identity of this gutsy Dorado begins to unfold in the flashback that constitutes the 201 pages of the first book. It is in this section that the major conflict of the novel—thus its second intertextual tie to *Pocho*—emerges: the battle between Heraclio's keen bent toward individuality and cultural tradition, the latter imposed by family and community and manipulated by an economic system that profits by keeping the hacienda peons in their place. In the first book, Heraclio matures into a proud horseman in the Inez tradition and a super-virile ladies' man who at a very early age seduces his patron/godfather's saucy young daughter, only to scorn her when she begs him to marry her. When it comes to women, Heraclio, conveniently embracing tradition, admits to himself that the woman he will choose one day must be not only virtuous but also humble before her man.

Ever resentful of his older brother who, with a horse whip, attempts to beat courage, fear, and respect for authority into his young body, Heraclio eventually refuses to abide by the rules of primogeniture and the fortuitous whims of *destiny* and singlemindedly begins to forge his own future. The book draws to an end with Heraclio crossing the last threshold to manhood as he kills the hacienda's administrator when the latter discovers his clandestine affair with the patron's daughter. The fugitive joins a group of outlaws, and from there he is but one step removed from the ranks of Villa's army. He is a cocky sixteen-year-old when he arrives before the general, inspiring, through his innocent bravado, amusement and deep affection in his future mentor, Villa.

Books Two, "The Campaign," and Three, "Los desgraciados," depict the rise and decline of Villa's army. The battles of Juárez, Torreón, Zacatecas, and Celaya are painted with bold yet detailed brush-strokes, and the personalities of the revolutionaries are given shape and form, but only as complementary material to the development of the main protagonist. In these two sections of the novel Villarreal, like other creators of this subgenre, sheds light on the ideals and contradictions of the Revolution. One might ask, at this point, why Villarreal chose to revive this overworked theme, for while his portrayal of the historical and epic action is vigorously narrated, no new information is added. Moreover, at the aesthetic level the novel is as traditional as the earlier works of the subgenre. What is new, the creation of a new fictitious actor in this old drama, is the least successful part of the novel. Whatever positive characteristics Heraclio Inez possesses—honesty, idealism, and loyalty to the cause, for example—are overshadowed by an exaggerated sense of manhood that goes beyond traditional Mexican honor, and a precociousness that the reader simply cannot accept as believable. On the positive side, credit is due Villarreal for his creation of several female characters who stand in sharp contrast to the shrouded women who move in the background of a stage upon which men act as men in the drama of life, while they, the faceless women, obey socially determined gender limitations. However, Carmen, secure in her sexuality, Otilia Inez, open in the expression of her needs and desires, and Xochil, brave in her contributions to the Revolution, continue, in the masculine tradition of female images, to function as mirrors which edify the reflection of the male protagonist.

There are other elements which mar this novel. The author's insistence on making his characters sound as if they were speaking Spanish by artificially injecting English language dialog and narrative with Spanish syntax makes for awkward and stilted language. This is, at best, an anachronistic technique which interferes with the reading process. Fortunately, Villarreal abandons this style in his third work to give us a novel that, though less ambitious than *The Fifth Horseman* is certainly more readable.

One of the two epigraphs which appear at the beginning of *Clemente Chacón* alludes to the economic and social relations which affect Mexican immigrants. On the one hand there is the push factor, poverty and dehumanization; on the other, there is the pull factor, opportunity—and dehumanization. History tells us that the sought-after trappings of the pull factor have more often than not eluded the Mexican immigrant. In *Clemente Chacón*, Villarreal tells another story—the story of the *indocumentado* who "does good," or to give significance to the second epigraph, becomes a boy scout. Whereas Abelardo, the author of the lines of the second epigraph, may well have felt betrayed when his son became a boy scout, Villarreal attempts to show that entrance into the brotherhood of scouts need not bear the price of cultural loss.

The work is structured on the "day-in-the-life-of" model, and the play between present and past—the latter depicted by flashbacks and the content of tapes bearing

Clemente's own voice recalling his past—advances the narrative plot. Thus, a broad array of interesting characters and events, taking place in such varied places as San Diego, Tijuana, Mexico City, Juárez and El Paso, are introduced. Unfortunately, given the temporal constraint of the twenty-four-hour mode, many of these remain sketchy and underdeveloped.

Via the techniques mentioned above, we learn of a young boy who enters the United States illegally, quickly accepts his adopted country's success myth and by the age of twenty-eight has a hand in the American dream. Perseverance and a sharply honed survival instinct, plus a few tricks learned on the street of Juárez, make up for his lack of formal education. Running dope for barrio thugs, a fake high school diploma, a few favors from a well-placed mentor are waystations on his road to nirvana: a nice home, two cars, one child, an ambitious wife, and a banquet to be held that very night honoring him for having sold one million dollars worth of insurance. Musing upon his trajectory, Clemente concludes that "He, C.C., was Horatio Alger, even if he was Catholic and brown."

Two incidents which force him to take stock of his life occur on that action-packed day. First he is roughed-up by some radical Chicano students from MACHO when he refuses to support publicly their demands on local university officials. Later, he surprises his wife as she is having sex with his decrepit boss. Admitting that she did it to advance his career, she expects him to accept it for what it is—a rung on the ladder to success. Deeply shaken by this event, Chacón realizes that on his way up he has been stripped of his honor, his cultural value has been assaulted, and his wife has become dehumanized. The conflict he must now resolve is whether to absolve his wife or to uphold his honor. Visits to his abandoned mother in Juárez, to the man who was once his mentor, and to the mother of the man who rescued his own mother from prostitution and paid with his life help him integrate the shattered pieces of his life.

In the epilogue we witness a new Clemente Chacón. He now lives in Los Angeles with a new wife and is on his way to fetch a ***curandera*** for his ill child. It is left to the reader to conclude that Clemente Chacón, who continues to be economically successful, has salvaged his honor ***and*** rescued his cultural values. And he did so by abandoning the woman who led him astray. Passionless Calixta (Queli) thus becomes the Malinche figure in this novel, much as Dolores Rubio plays that role in ***Pocho***. Clemente Chacón is redeemed by his ex-secretary, Miss Gray, who bears the children Queli refused to have because she considered one child the middle-class American norm. Villarreal's obsession with honor and manhood prevails once more.

Without doubt, Villarreal has created in ***Clemente Chacón*** the Chicano Horatio Alger story. The message implicit in the novel is that Chicanos indeed have access to the system, that the fruits of the system are, in fact, worth pursuing, and that one need not cease to be Chicano because one joins the scouts. (pp. 791–93)

Erlinda Gonzales-Berry, in a review of "The Fifth Horseman: A Novel" and "Clemente Chacón: A Novel" in *Hispania*, Vol. 68, No. 4, December, 1985, pp. 791–93.

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Additional coverage of Villarreal's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Research: *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 133; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 82; and *Hispanic Writers*.

Tingles Up and Down Their Spines; Even in this era of blockbuster books, a few unproven talents get first novels published. But will there be a second?

The Los Angeles Times; Los Angeles, Calif.; Nov 13, 1997; DAVID L. ULIN

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Abstract:

Ison is one of several Southern California authors to publish a first novel in 1997, which is interesting given the current anxiety in the book business, whose emphasis has turned increasingly to the financial, not the literary, bottom line. In such a climate, industry insiders bemoan the shift toward blockbuster publishing, since large advances paid to celebrity authors are making midlist fiction an endangered species. But while it's tempting to read the $4.5-million Marcia Clark received for her account of the Simpson trial--or even the $3 million paid to Paula Barbieri for her O.J. book--as symbols of the decline of literary culture, plenty of novels, and even first novels, continue to appear.

In the seven months since "A Child Out of Alcatraz" was published, there have been Yxta Maya Murray's "Locas" (Grove), Michelle Huneven's "Round Rock" (Alfred A. Knopf), Sandra Tsing Loh's "If You Lived Here, You'd Be Home by Now" (Riverhead), Lisa See's "Flower Net" (HarperCollins) and Joy Nicholson's "The Tribes of Palos Verdes" (St. Martin's), to name just a few. "Certainly, it's difficult to break out a first novel," says Bob Miller, vice president and group publisher of Disney Book Publishing, "but it always has been. Each year, there are successes in which new brand names emerge."

Ison, for instance, is a former screenwriter who spent seven years in the trenches of Hollywood before deciding to write a novel instead. See turned to fiction only after her nonfiction book, "On Gold Mountain," came out in 1995; prior to that, she worked for 13 years as West Coast correspondent for Publishers Weekly, where she witnessed firsthand the vagaries of a publishing industry in flux. Huneven also spent more than a decade as a journalist, freelancing for publications such as the Los Angeles Times, California and Buzz, while Loh, longtime Buzz "Valley" columnist, published an essay collection and a performance monologue before her novel was issued this fall. And Murray, an associate professor at Loyola Marymount Law School, used her spare time to work on "Locas," which explores East L.A. gang life from a female point of view.

Full Text:

Ask most writers and they'll tell you that there's something special about the novel, a certain weight and texture to the insights it bestows. Perhaps this has to do with the form's encompassing psychological framework, the way it can bring readers inside its characters' very hearts and minds. Or maybe what's at stake is the novel's lingering prestige as the single achievement to which so many authors aspire.

"I always wanted to write a novel," says Tara Ison, whose "A Child Out of Alcatraz" (Faber and Faber) was published in April. "It just took me awhile to get it done."

Ison is one of several Southern California authors to publish a first novel in 1997, which is interesting given the current anxiety in the book business, whose emphasis has turned increasingly to the financial, not the literary, bottom line. In such a climate, industry insiders bemoan the shift toward blockbuster publishing, since large advances paid to celebrity authors are making midlist fiction an endangered species. But while it's tempting to read the $4.5-million Marcia Clark received for her account of the Simpson trial--or even the $3 million paid to Paula Barbieri for her O.J. book--as symbols of the decline of literary culture, plenty of novels, and even first novels, continue to appear.

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Miller's point is an important one, for publishing, perhaps more than other industries, requires fresh voices to survive. "There's a definite awareness that you have to replenish," says Los Angeles literary agent Betsy Amster. "Publishers are always looking for new talent; this business is about the thrill of the hunt." What's telling about Ison, Murray, Huneven, Loh and See, however, is the odd paths they've taken to become novelists, the ways they operate outside the classic mold.

*

Ison, for instance, is a former screenwriter who spent seven years in the trenches of Hollywood before deciding to write a novel instead. See turned to fiction only after her nonfiction book, "On Gold Mountain," came out in 1995; prior to that, she worked for 13 years as West Coast correspondent for Publishers Weekly, where she witnessed firsthand the vagaries of a publishing industry in flux. Huneven also spent more than a decade as a journalist, freelancing for publications such as the Los Angeles Times, California and Buzz, while Loh, longtime Buzz "Valley" columnist, published an essay collection and a performance monologue before her novel was issued this fall. And Murray, an associate professor at Loyola Marymount Law School, used her spare time to work on "Locas," which explores East L.A. gang life from a female point of view.

Of these writers, only Nicholson fits the image of a first novelist. Now 31, the Silver Lake resident drifted through her 20s holding down a succession of jobs and traveling, while publishing poetry and short prose pieces in local zines. She began to work on "The Tribes of Palos Verdes" only after her story "Palos Verdes" was discovered by agent Amster, who encouraged her to try a book. The result is a fairly traditional coming-of-age saga inspired by her less-than-happy experience growing up in Palos Verdes. Nicholson stresses that the narrative is "not purely autobiographical," even as she admits that its central relationship, between 14-year-old narrator Medina Mason and her twin brother, Jim, reflects her feelings for her own brother Jay, who committed suicide two years ago. "I had pictures of him all around in the room where I work, and it felt like he was there," she recalls. "I don't know if writing the book resolved anything, but it helped me relive something and move on."

Nicholson's connection to her material is the hook her publisher, St. Martin's Press, has used to market the book, billing Medina as a female Holden Caulfield and the novel as an updated "Catcher in the Rye." While that may seem cynical, it's pretty standard; the idea, says See, is to "establish a foothold," something that makes your book stand out from the thousands of titles.

In See's case, it is the fact that "On Gold Mountain," a history of her father's Chinese American family, gave her an aura of expertise about Chinese subjects, which, in turn, has bestowed a certain authority on "Flower Net," a thriller in which an American prosecutor and a Chinese security official team up to investigate a series of murders in Beijing.

"Every review of 'Flower Net,' " she notes, "has talked about 'On Gold Mountain.' Although I didn't consciously plan it that way, it does give the book a bit of a step up." Still, she says, "It's not part of an overall career plan. Even now, I'm not thinking that way. It's just that if you feel you have something to say, you can reach more people through fiction."

Whether blockbuster publishing is destroying literature in America or the furor is, as Miller puts it, "overblown," the reality is that presses are no longer inclined to nurture first novelists with the hope that their second or third book might pay off. "It used to be that publishers would build writers book by book, slowly increasing sales," says Morgan Entrekin, who as publisher of Grove / Atlantic shepherded the year's most astonishing literary success story, Charles Frazier's debut novel, "Cold Mountain," into print. "Now, they want those authors to explode." The paradox, Entrekin believes, is that in an industry in which sales are tracked by computer, this trend actually helps first novelists because "it's easier to to sell a first novel than a second or third novel (by a writer who) hasn't done well."

This sentiment is echoed by Amster, who calls it "the tyranny of the track record."

"If a writer doesn't do well on the first novel," she says, "a promising career can be made a lot more difficult." Of course, Entrekin notes, "It helps if an author is mediagenic--young, beautiful and multicultural--since the media is obsessed with what is new."

*

That's something See has accessed by taking on her Asian heritage, which is also true of Loh. "I think I've benefited," Loh says of her ethnicity, "even though I haven't exactly been embraced by the Asian American community and I don't write about Asian American themes."

This is not to suggest that, in the current climate, only the most market-savvy novelists can survive. Even See, who earned a substantial advance for her novel, notes that the key to fiction is "following your instincts."

Murray started the stories that inspired "Locas" because she literally heard her characters talking; as she recalls, "I was watching a news report on the beating of undocumented immigrants in Riverside, and somehow I tripped up on this one voice." For her, the key connection is between her legal work and her fiction, since, "as a lawyer interested in Latino rights, I spend a lot of time thinking about what it means to be Latino, female, legal." In "Locas," those questions converge in one character, who explores them through the filter of a gang.

The gang issue can be touchy; Murray was sharply criticized by journalist Celeste Fremon in the Los Angeles Times Book Review for having bought into the worst stereotypes about Latinos and ¸resenting the culture in a negative light. Murray, however, sees it differently. "Gangs are an icon we use to encapsulate Latino identity," she points out. "I wanted to tip that on its head. The invisible hand of the marketplace does not help you write."

*

The notion that the marketplace--or even the idea of the marketplace--is a negative influence is echoed by Huneven, whose passage from fiction writer to journalist and back to fiction writer is something of a metaphor for the journey of self-discovery any serious writer must go through. A graduate of the Iowa Writers Workshop and a recipient of a 1984 General Electric Younger Writers Award, Huneven says she began writing fiction for the wrong reasons. "I wanted to be famous," she admits. "I was writing to be published, to build a career, but where I ended up was on a route of self-deprivation leading nowhere."

For Huneven, working as a journalist helped to "desacralize writing. Always in the holy hall of fiction, everything had to be so perfect, so precious, so self-conscious, but with journalism, I wasn't so impossibly hard on myself." Equally significant were the two years she spent in the early 1990s as a student at the Claremont School of Theology, where she was urged by a psychologist to stop skating on the surface of life and go deeply into one thing. "No one had ever said that to me before," Huneven remembers. "And it made me decide to do a novel, after all." The key was to give up all thoughts of publishing and to write, as she says, "for the reason of doing it. It was a real shift away from how I used to write, when the goal was publication, money, fame."

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The same could be said of Ison, who walked away from a lucrative, if not entirely fulfilling, career as a screenwriter to pursue literary fiction instead. Ison's decision is made more astonishing by the ease with which she moved through Hollywood; two months after graduating from UCLA, she and her writing partner sold a script that was eventually released as "Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead." "It was fun, and sort of glitzy," Ison says. "But I hated the industry, the games, the futility. I always got emotionally attached to even the stupidest projects, and it was hard for me to let go."

Then, on a trip to San Francisco, Ison took a tour of Alcatraz and learned that in the 1940s and '50s, prison guards, with their wives and children, had lived in a small community on the island. This sparked

the idea for a story about the emotional isolation of a single family, cast adrift in the sullen stillness of the prison world. "Alcatraz," she says, "is a powerful metaphor, and I wanted to exploit that. To tell the story the way I wanted to tell it, I had to do a novel. It terrified me, but I wanted total control."

Considering what she's given up to become a novelist, Ison is philosophical about her choice. "The scale is so different," she marvels. "What I've been paid for my novel is about one-twenty-fifth of what I used to get for a draft of a screenplay. Still, it's amazing how simply you can live if you don't have any money. It's liberating."

Nicholson agrees. "It's a trade-off," she notes. "You don't get to have nice things, but you have the time to do your work. There's so much pressure to buy things in the consumer culture, but if you drop out and forget about all that, you can develop the kind of fearlessness you need to write." Actually, such fearlessness may be the most important element of the entire enterprise, especially if, as Huneven believes, the concerns of literary fiction and the marketplace are inherently at odds.

Thus the decision to pursue a career as a literary novelist remains, as it has always been, a matter of faith. "A person who really wants to write," argues Murray, "will just write for the joy of it and stop worrying about the other stuff. Although it's not great for writers to toil in obscurity, it can open a space for creativity and free up the imagination."

For Loh, it's all about activism. "Basically, since I rolled into this," she says, "I've taken a ninja warrior approach. Book publishing is just one of many forms I do. It's a big fight, the whole thing is a big fight, and whatever form seems to be making it into people's heads, I'll do it."

For all that, though, there is still nothing like the lure of fiction, which, more than any other kind of writing, promises, and occasionally delivers, the world. "With fiction," See explains, "unlike nonfiction, you can sometimes go into people's souls--not just your characters', but your readers' as well."

PHOTO: Among the year's first-time novelists are Southern Californians Yxta Maya Murray, left, Lisa See, Michelle Huneven, Sandra Tsing Loh and Joy Nicholson.; PHOTOGRAPHER: GENARO MOLINA / Los Angeles Times

Credit: SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

HELP ?

Book review: Locas

Library Journal; New York; Apr 1, 1997; Lawrence Rungren;

Volume: 122
Issue: 6
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Subject Terms: Novels

Abstract:
*"Locas" by **Yxta Maya Murray** is reviewed.*

Full Text:

Murray, Yxta Maya. Locas. Grove/Atlantic. May 1997. c.256p. LC 96-44826. ISBN 0-8021-1605-1. $22. F

The ways in which two similar lives parallel and diverge is the subject of this gritty tale of Hispanic gangs in Los Angeles. Cecilia and Lucia may be united by their love for Manny, Cecilia's brother and leader of the Lobos gang. Yet each takes a different path toward success in a cultural landscape that offers few choices for women. For Cecilia, it means getting pregnant at a tender age in the hope of gaining some small sense of belonging from the mamacitas in the park. For Lucia, it's attempting to become something forbidden for a woman-a gang leader in her own right. While the social and economic realities of the urban poor play a major role here, Murray never sacrifices character development to blind determinism. A gripping, if grim, work; for public libraries. [Previewed in Prepub Alert, IJ 12/96]Lawrence Rungren, Merrimack Valley Lib. Consortium, Andover, Mass.

HELP ?

Homegirls; LOCAS. By Yxta Maya Murray . Grove Press: 256 pp., $22

The Los Angeles Times; Los Angeles, Calif.; Jun 15, 1997; CELESTE FREMON;

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Edition: Record edition
Start Page: BR, 10:4
ISSN: 04583035
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Books-authors
Novels
Personal Names: Murray, Yxta Maya

Abstract:
When I first wrote about the gangs of the Pico-Aliso housing projects of East Los Angeles, I also fell victim to the follow-the-violence syndrome. It's easy to become mesmerized by the extravagantly tragic young men and to miss the finely tuned dramas of the women. Consequently, Yxta Maya Murray's debut novel, "Locas," arrived like the welcome voice of a girlfriend on an otherwise guy-filled day.

Murray and I recently participated in a discussion about L.A. gang life, and I found her remarks to be gutsy and articulate. Asked about "Locas," she explained that she had attempted to explore the notion of the homegirl as mythical outlaw using gang membership as a symbolic path to self-hood and empowerment. Cool idea, I thought. Thelma and Louise in the barrio.

It is this emancipation Murray has in mind for her protagonists, Lucia and Cecilia, the young women from whose point of view the story is alternately told. A third character is Manny, the head of an Echo Park gang called the Lobos. Lucia is Manny's girlfriend, his "sheep"--Murray's jargon for the passive girls who, in this particular gang world, exist only to flatter and service the guys. Cecilia is Manny's adoring younger sister and is willing to do anything just to stay in his favor. As the book begins, both girls find meaning and radiance through his reflected glory; by the end, Lucia and Cecilia have become locas.

Full Text:

When street gangs and literature intersect, it's the guys who get the attention. Because male gang members are the ones whose actions routinely make the nightly TV news, most books about gangs--whether they're fiction or nonfiction--tend to be similarly gender-skewed.

When I first wrote about the gangs of the Pico-Aliso housing projects of East Los Angeles, I also fell victim to the follow-the-violence syndrome. It's easy to become mesmerized by the extravagantly tragic young men and to miss the finely tuned dramas of the women. Consequently, Yxta Maya Murray's debut novel, "Locas," arrived like the welcome voice of a girlfriend on an otherwise guy-filled day.

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Murray, a 28-year-old associate law professor at Loyola Law School, seemed like the perfect writer to take such an urban transformation tale and really run with it. She had written an impressive string of short stories and essays that promised even better things to come once she threw her engine into high gear within the longer fictional form of the novel. Now that "Locas" has arrived, however, the news is both good and bad.

In terms of its central metaphor, Murray's work is fierce and persuasive. The core of her plot is suggested by her title. Locas literally translates as "crazy females." Yet in gang parlance, loco--or loca in the feminine gender--means another kind of crazy. It's the craziness of someone with nothing left to lose. So crazy you don't blink in the face of danger; so crazy you'll do whatever has to be done. Taken to its furthest extremes, it's the craziness of the outlaw unfettered by the rules and conventions of the dominant class. So crazy, that you're free.

It is this emancipation Murray has in mind for her protagonists, Lucia and Cecilia, the young women

from whose point of view the story is alternately told. A third character is Manny, the head of an Echo Park gang called the Lobos. Lucia is Manny's girlfriend, his "sheep"--Murray's jargon for the passive girls who, in this particular gang world, exist only to flatter and service the guys. Cecilia is Manny's adoring younger sister and is willing to do anything just to stay in his favor. As the book begins, both girls find meaning and radiance through his reflected glory; by the end, Lucia and Cecilia have become locas.

Lucia's route to liberation is to become badder than all the guys in order to displace Manny as the Lobos' leader. Her more-hardass-than-thou transformation takes some doing because Murray's homeboys are an unsympathetic and predatory bunch whose raison d'e^tre doesn't extend beyond selling guns, dealing drugs and jockeying for position within the gang hierarchy. Lucia's moment of Darwinian dominance comes when she finds the Lobos huddled in a paralyzed clump after having fatally beaten an enemy's 10-year-old brother. She praises them for a job well done, then shoos them away from the crime scene, congratulating herself for her unflinching ferocity. "I knew it for sure then. Nobody, nobody can tough it out like this chica can."

Cecilia's freedom comes at the other end of the continuum, when she finally recoils from the unbridled aggression around her. After suffering the blows of a miscarriage and a lost love, she finds solace in her role as a faceless, egoless housekeeper riding the bus to clean the homes of white women who always call her by the wrong name. Cecilia placidly suffers these indignities and surrenders her heart and soul to God. Hers is not the wrathful, bossy deity presented by the local priest (it seems all the men in this book, the priest included, are brutes or fools or both), but a personal creator who perceives her deepest needs. "Maybe I got my own God sitting right here, waiting till I bloom like that flower I once had turning inside me. Then he'll show me my good thing, waiting so patient behind the dark trees in the park."

Murray is a stunningly original prose stylist capable of fashioning exhilarating twirls and dips of dialogue that ring as authentic. In fact, these dialogues are an intriguing pastiche of jargon boasting a multi-stranded provenance. Some phrases are retooled from the cholo slang of the early '60s. Others are shiny beads of vernacular that Murray has faceted from colloquial Spanish and her own imagination. Even the rhythms of the girls' speech recall a different time and place. These locas speak at the speed of rancheras music, not at the speed of hip-hop. Yet the rhythms are so sweet and seductive that you're tempted to drive to the nearest poetry venue and recite aloud from any page and blow the audience away.

The delight one feels in Murray's obvious talent makes the flaw of the book all the more unnerving: "Locas" is presented as a fictional, but accurate, slice of inner-city life. This is unfortunate. Although Murray's book has value as metaphor, it is sure to do harm if viewed as ethnographic reality.

The blurb on the jacket of "Locas" calls the book " . . . a pirate radio broadcast straight from the urban core." The uninitiated reader will have no cause to dispute this and will assume that Murray has provided an armchair-safe but genuine visit to the hidden and dangerous world of gangs. Yet her vision of gang life appears to be cobbled together from newscast hyperbole, snippets of other books and our own worst fears. The gang members who populate this imagined world are, with few exceptions, caricatures of cartoon villainy tricked out in inner-city garb.

Child gangsters are the modern bogeymen of the American middle class. Our current "punish, don't rehabilitate" public policy toward law-breaking adolescents is the result of hysteria that sees most urban youth as inhuman creatures, whose motivations and desires are beyond the ken of civilized folk. That a writer of Murray's talent mistakenly perpetuates these demonizing stereotypes cannot help but be heartbreaking to those who work to help provide alternatives for the kids who join gangs for tragic, but all too human, reasons.

While preparing to review "Locas," I gave copies to two young women--Erica Parra and Grace Campos, 22 and 21, respectively--both Latinas, both veteranas of the milieu that Murray purports to describe. Parra and Campos were completely undone by Murray's representation of the world they know intimately. "Nobody I know is like that," said Erica. "White people who read this will think we're a bunch of monsters," Grace added.

I suspect Murray's objective was artistic and honorable: She wanted to provide a compelling backdrop

HELP ?

Locas

Publishers Weekly; New York; Mar 3, 1997; Sybil S Steinberg;

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Issue: 9
Start Page: 62
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Subject Terms: Novels
Abstract:
*"Locas" by **Yxta Maya Murray** is reviewed.*

Full Text:

LOCAS

Yxta Maya Murray. Grove/Atlantic, $22 (256p) ISBN 0-8021-1605-1

Rather than simmer beneath the surface, anger boils over on the pages of this first novel. Murray perfectly captures the patois and fury of the Mexican women of the East L.A. neighborhood of Echo Park. Here, the gang hierarchy is set in stone. There are jefes, right hands, taggers, third raters and sheep, the last being the girls who shut up, pose prettily at rumblas and carry babies for the men. Narrators Lucia and Cecelia, however, do not fit this role: Lucia wants to be a grandola; Cecelia sees herself as ugly, a "dirt dark Indian" who can't hold on to a pregnancy or a girlfriend. At the outset, the gun-dealing Lobos gang prevails, led by Manny, who is Cecelia's brother and Lucia's lover. As cocaine supersedes guns and upstart rival G4s challenge the Lobos, the two women struggle, exhibiting a depth of character that sets them apart from other women in Echo Park. In portraying Lucia's unrelenting criminal meanness and hunger for power and Cecelia's ultimate resignation to a life of praying and cleaning rich rubias' houses, Murray gives readers inner-city gang life from the eyes of women. Both narrators' voices are insistent, unvarnished, in-your-face tough. The reader equipped with a Spanish-English dictionary has the best chance to grasp all the nuances of this convincing, under-the-skin work. (May)

FYI: Murray is an associate professor of law at Loyola Law School in Los Angeles. A chapter of this book appeared in Buzz.

Advance copy

Los Angeles Magazine; Los Angeles; May 1997; Mark Horowitz;

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Children & youth
Photography
Novels
Urban development
Biographies
Poets
Politics
Geographic Names: Los Angeles California
Personal Names: Chandler, Raymond

Abstract:
Horowitz reviews "Fast Forward: Growing Up in the Shadow of Hollywood," by Lauren Greenfield; "Locas," by **Yxta Maya Murray**; *"The Reluctant Metropolis: The Politics of Urban Growth in Los Angeles," by William Fulton; and "Raymond Chandler: A Biography," by Tom Hiney.*

Full Text:

[Headnote]
What L.A. Will Be Reading in May

The piercingly honest Fast Forward: Growing Up in the Shadow of Hollywood (Knopf), by 30-year-old photographer Lauren Greenfield, is shocking and unforgettable. From a Harvard-Westlake prom to a Memorial Day barbecue in Compton, Greenfield captures LAs spoiled and neglected kids with the cold, clear eye of a Technicolor Diane Arbus.

More essential truths about LA's youth can be found in Yxta Maya Murray's impressive debut novel, Locas (Grove Press). The author, who teaches criminal law at Loyola, gives voice to the hopes and fears of two teenage girls enmeshed in the feudal world of todays East LA gangs.

To city planner and local historian William Fulton, the entire history of Los Angeles is just a sordid tale of money and real estate interrupted by the occasional natural disaster. But even though The Reluctant Metropolis: The Politics of Urban Growth in Los Ange

les (Solano Press) is fashionably bleak, LA's rapid rise to world prominence remains one of the greatest stories ever sold.

Another LA story that's always worth retelling is the one about the alcoholic British-educated accountant who writes his first novel at the age of SO and winds up the undisputed poet laureate of Southern California noir. Tom Hiney's Raymond Chandler: A Biography (Atlantic Monthly Press) portrays the author of The Big Sleep and The Long Goodbye as a lonely, vulnerable genius.

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Ms. Magazine

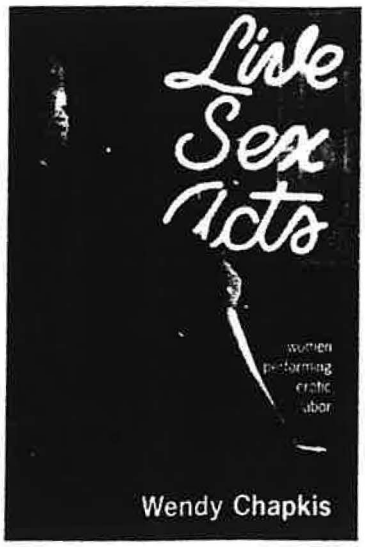
ditions—not as moral degenerates, or as helpless victims who must be "saved."

Her objective is not merely to give voice to sex workers, who have done that themselves in books like *Sex Work: Writings By Women in the Sex Industry* (edited by Frederique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander; Cleis Press). She aims to change the tone of the feminist sex debates, bridging the daunting gaps between such self-identified feminists as Kathleen Barry, Andrea Dworkin, Pat Califia, and Camille Paglia.

Concerns that radical feminists have brought to the forefront of the prostitution debate—forced prostitution, the abuse of women within the sex trade—are not ignored. But Chapkis believes these to be problems due to poor working conditions, stigmatization of sex workers, and (in the case of California) criminalization of the trade, rather than qualities innate to commercial sex. Other feminist concerns, such as the degradation that comes from selling one's "self," she sees as patronizing and moralistic.

This book should not be taken as a definitive statement, but as one piece of the larger dialogue surrounding sex work. As Gloria Lockett, director of the California Prostitutes' Education Project, says in the closing pages, "We need everybody: street prostitutes and call girls, lesbians and feminists, everybody. We've got to figure out how to support each other in this."

—Nomy Lamm



Down By the River

By Edna O'Brien
Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $23

This story of young Mary MacNamara's being badly used, raped, and made pregnant by her father reels out in swift, cinematic scenes. Yet it's not the minimalist screenplay a fair number of novels seem to be these days. O'Brien provides beguiling colors and locations with prose as lushly visual as the film *Daughters of the Dust*, but she also spellbinds us to an enthralling narrative through intricate characterization and extraordinary writerly discipline.

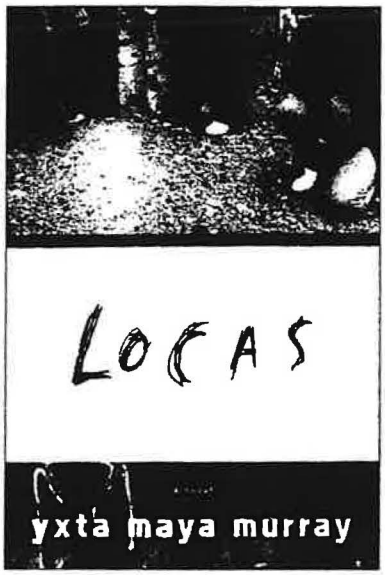
This vivid work of fiction delivers a plausible and engrossing version of private lives similar, perhaps, to those snarled in the actual 1992 "X" case, when Ireland's judiciary initially blocked a 14-year-old rape victim's choice to seek an abortion abroad. All the wearisome, oppressive, conflicting issues around women's subjugation and children's vulnerability are present in this novel, but O'Brien deftly avoids sentimental titillation and cant. Her gift—like Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer's awesome talent—is to quicken passionately held principle into appealing, exasperating, heartbreaking, mercurial flesh: Mary's battered, subversive mother, Bridget; the loathsomely self-righteous Noni; caring, resourceless Lizzie; worn Dr. Tommy Fogarty; the loyal, empathic dog Shep.

The cumulative effect of O'Brien's courageous, economical metaphors—brilliant evocations of pain, fear, horror, betrayal, entrapment, and amoral solipsism—is a razor's edge of dread and devastation scraping our volunteered yet flinching throats. There's no resisting the imagination that can sum up an agonizing rape with: "In the morning what the sun caught were the score marks of her teeth, and the little pink pulpings of sawdust on the rosewood rungs of the chaise." Like *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *Down By the River* is a definitive depiction, a keeper, probably a classic.

—Judy Dothard Simmons

Locas

By Yxta Maya Murray
Grove Press; $22



Gangs are mostly a man's business," explains Cecilia, one of the narrators of Yxta Maya Murray's stunning debut novel, *Locas*. "The *cholos* don't want no sheep to ever get a taste of their action." But Cecilia and Lucía, the book's other narrator, do get a taste when they move some guns for Manny, the head of the East L.A. Lobos; and although Cecilia "only got a little hungry" for gang life after that, Lucía got "starved for it." Lucía sets out to build up her own girl gang and to wrest power and respect away from the men around her, shunning women's clothes, duties, and privileges in order to succeed in that "man's business." Cecilia, on the other hand, tries desperately to become a girlfriend and a mother.

But nothing is ever that simple, certainly not for Murray's characters. Though Cecilia desperately wants to be a *mamacita* and Lucía is plotting her rise to leader of the Lobos, they both harbor secret wishes that betray what, on the surface, seems to be an oversimplified presentation of sex roles. Cecilia confesses to her best girlfriend—whom she's maybe a little in love with—that her greatest wish is to be a man, while Lucía bemoans the loss of the old rules that kept women out of gang violence and gang life. In the end neither is really sure of what she wants, but they both know that what's being offered to them isn't enough.

Unsatisfied with what is available to them as "women" or as "men," Lucía and Cecilia struggle to redefine their roles as young women in their East L.A. neighborhood, only to find that gender traps can be as stifling as the traps of gang life, poverty, and violence. —Ann Marie Dobosz

FICTION

LIKELY TO DIE
By Linda Fairstein.
Scribner, $24.

In murder, as in real estate, location is everything. So when a prominent doctor is found raped and stabbed in her office at a prestigious New York hospital, she gets a final accolade: the murder makes page 1 of the newspapers. "Likely to Die," Linda Fairstein's second novel, takes its title from police slang for a crime victim whose death is inevitable. As in her previous novel, "Final Jeopardy," the author (who works a day job as head of the Manhattan District Attorney's sex crimes unit) places a smart and driven Manhattan prosecutor named Alexandra Cooper at the center of the action. Since Dr. Gemma Dugen was a "single, professional woman, no children, no pets, no one to depend on her for contact," Alex is left to discover the victim through her work — which makes a suspect out of everyone at the hospital, staff and patients alike, not to mention all the vagrants who hang out in the tunnels beneath the building. Such a wide net might daunt some investigators, but not Fairstein's fearless heroine, whose portraits of her boss and fellow prosecutors are as engaging as her asides about history and neurology. Throw in a little romance, a hurried trip to England and a valentine to Martha's Vineyard, and the result is a stylish and oddly antic book, despite the gruesome nature of its subject.

MADELEINE BLAIS

LOCAS
By Yxta Maya Murray.
Grove, $22.

Yxta Maya Murray's debut novel provides a convincing depiction of Mexican-American gangs in East Los Angeles, focusing on two teen-age girls who are born into a world of despair and devastation. Determined not to surrender her independence, Lucia hooks up with Manny, a fierce gang leader who supplies her with power and prestige — until she tires of her behind-the-scenes role and decides to create her own girl gang, mimicking and even elaborating on the cruel practices of Manny and his comrades. Manny's sister, Cecilia, is less glamorous, gutsy and ghastly than Lucia, and she's even less equipped to sort out her life, floundering around her blighted neighborhood and grasping desperately for any chance of salvation. In "Locas," Murray details these two girls' grim histories with little sentimentality and much skill.

RACHEL STOLL

THE TENTH JUSTICE
By Brad Meltzer.
Rob Weisbach/Morrow, $23.

The hero of Brad Meltzer's thriller is a familiar figure: a sharp young lawyer with glittering career prospects who is serving as a clerk to a Supreme Court Justice. Something just has to go wrong — and it does when Ben Addison naïvely leaks the decision in a sensitive case to a con man who turns the information into a stock market gold mine. Of course, the leak sparks an investigation, which is fanned into a full-scale scandal. As Ben struggles to right his wrong and redeem himself, he is helped by his roommates, who hatch plan after plan with decidedly mixed results, especially when they begin to suspect one another of treachery. Meltzer's dialogue is snappy, but his unlikely plot — a madcap mix of intrigue, romance and legal trivia — eventually sags under its own weight.

ERIK BURNS

THE LAST GOOD NIGHT
By Emily Listfield.
Little, Brown, $22.95.

Emily Listfield's latest novel is a taut and disturbing inquiry into the many layers of identity that lie beneath the glossy surface of a television newswoman. Laura Garrett seems to have a great life, having moved up through the ranks to take a highly visible network anchoring job in New York. Happily married and the mother of a 5-month-old daughter, she appears secure in both her career and her family life. What she thinks she's put well behind her is the disturbing traces of her childhood in south Florida, where she was raised as Marta Clark by her German mother and American stepfather. In "The Last Good Night," Listfield effectively depicts the humiliation and abuse Laura endured as a teen-ager at the hands of her stepfather and other men who stayed at the Breezeway Motel, the dive owned by her family. Almost as disturbing as this abuse is Listfield's incisive portrait of Marta's doomed first love, Jack Pierce, who will come back to stalk her 20 years later. Unfortunately, despite the nightmarish events that Marta/Laura must endure, her ability to so thoroughly (if temporarily) reconstruct herself into a slick media personality ultimately makes her a less interesting character than the creepily steadfast Jack.

PAULA FRIEDMAN

THE REST OF THE EARTH
By William Haywood Henderson.
Dutton, $22.95.

Young Walker Avary has had his fill of the sea, and so he takes to the land. Setting off from San Francisco shortly after the end of the Civil War, he heads into the Wyoming territory, aimed for the Wind River Valley. An orphan who borrowed his last name from a sea captain with whom he sailed, Avary is a man of few words. When asked "Why'd you come into this territory, anyway?" by a curious neighbor, he replies simply, "I got a map. This country looked empty." In his second novel, William Haywood Henderson chronicles Avary's journey as he meanders the countryside he chooses to call home. Along the way, the laconic lad seems to have little trouble meeting women who are instantly attracted to him — or perhaps to the sturdy American pioneerism he represents. There's a young woman on a train, a Circassian singer who performs in a tent, a mysterious Indian maiden he calls the Sheepeater Girl and, finally, Eugenia, a lost traveler he picks up on the road. Avary may be a man of few words, but Henderson has plenty. Every action, every situation, every nuance is painstakingly, almost numbingly, described. "In the meat," we are informed at one point, "he tasted the grass and pollen from a richer plain. In the water he tasted a buried sea bed, the tiny husks of the creatures that glow at the sea's surface in waves of luminescence." It seems a shame to waste a palate like that in the woods.

CHARLES SALZBERG

DOG PEOPLE
By Cris Mazza.
Coffee House Press, paper, $13.95.

There is little joy in Cris Mazza's explicit and disturbing novel, whose characters interact listlessly somewhere in California. Funny, the inert heroine, "wasn't really a waitress, she was a would-be interior designer who . . . hadn't done any work in years." Content to "stand there and wait," Fanny nonetheless inspires passion in dogs; in her catering boss, Scott; and in a ballerina named Renee. Only Fanny's husband, Morgan, "an aging corps dancer who'd been mediocre at best in the first place," remains unmoved. Morgan futilely desires Renee. Meanwhile, a curt dog trainer named Doreen desires Fanny's dog, whom she would like to mate with a wolf. The grim mechanics of this encounter set the tone for the book's presentation of sex, dance, dog training — anything that might represent joy but degenerates into graphic and pleasureless maneuvering.

NINA SONENBERG

ARENDT THEIS

Lesbians In Wonderland

Change is the one constant in Blanche McCrary Boyd's provocative new novel about sexual identity and the search for the self. Set in the early 1970's, **TERMINAL VELOCITY** (*Knopf, $23*) is the story of a grim book editor who works in Boston and the changes that ensue after she tangles with a band of radical lesbians who live in a California commune. Drawn together by their shared affinity for Artemis Foote, an insouciant artist with a convenient trust fund, the denizens of Red Moon Rising are a volatile group, particularly when they're performing their musical feminist version of "Alice in Wonderland." Their ranks include a dentist, a political fugitive, a columnist for Ramparts magazine, an art historian, a drug-peddling witch — and the unlikely Ellen Burns, seemingly a happily married lesbian mother who finds herself a lover and a new name. As it crisscrosses the country, Boyd's story moves from comic high jinks through seduction, betrayal and finally violence with a speed that at times feels dizzying. Indeed, before Ellen's reinvention is over, she will have lived the life of a fugitive on the run, witnessed a suicide attempt, received electroshock therapy in a mental ward, tried her hand at skydiving, attended Alcoholics Anonymous and worked on a late-night soap opera about "a 'Gone With the Wind'-type family and their friendly, happy slaves." "Terminal Velocity" is not a novel for the squeamish. Despite its excesses, Boyd succeeds in closing the book on a redemptive note that is neither trivial nor saccharine. Hers is a voice that never wavers in its authority or its fierce sexual politics.

ANDREA BARNET