THE PROBLEM OF IDENTIFYING CHICANO LITERATURE

The simplest but also the narrowest way of defining Chicano literature is to say that it is the literature written by Chicanos. This definition, although neat and precise, presents us with at least two problems. It is difficult to identify a particular author as being Chicano, and it focuses the attention of the critic on the origin of the writer rather than on the work itself. The reader must be familiar with the author's life, especially if he has a non-Spanish name as in the case of John Rechy. There may be such Chicano writers publishing literary works whose origins we are not aware of. It may be equally difficult to identify as Chicanos those writers with Spanish names, as, for instance, Amado Muro and Silvio Villavicencio. Muro was an American named Chester Seltzer married to a Mexican woman and using her maiden name, Amado Muro, as a pseudonym. Villavicencio, on the other hand, is a young writer from Central America now living in Guadalajara, Mexico, who, as far as we know, has never been to the United States. Two of his stories appeared in the anthology El Espejo (The Mirror), considered as representative of Chicano writing.

No less important is the fact that there is no consensus of opinion as to who is a Chicano. To show how rapidly the meaning of Chicano has changed, I shall quote the two definitions given by Edward Simmen and published a year apart. In 1971, he defined the Chicano as "a dissat-

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isfied American of Mexican descent whose ideas regarding his position in the social and economic order are, in general, considered to be liberal or radical and whose statements and actions are often extreme and sometimes violent.” One year later he defined as Chicano “an American of Mexican descent who attempts through peaceful, reasonable, and responsible means to correct the image of the Mexican-American and to improve the position of this minority in the American social structure.” Other definitions of the Chicano are extremely limited, as to both time and social philosophy.

If we define the Chicano as this socially oriented person, then only that literature written by him, but especially that in support of the social movement called *in causa*, initiated during the early 1960s, is Chicano literature. The best example of this would be the plays of Luis Valdez, performed by El Teatro Campesino. Are we to say, then, that such works as Rudolfo Anaya’s novel *Bless Me, Ultima*, Estela Portillo’s drama *The Day of the Swallows*, and others not dealing with social protest do not belong to Chicano literature? A broader definition is definitely in order, so that we may be able to include all aspects of that literature. The definition should be broad enough to cover not only the plays of Luis Valdez but also other works not dealing with social themes.

Those critics who are aware of the difficulty of reaching agreement as to who is a Chicano have turned to a different approach, the identification of Chicano literature by its intrinsic characteristics. This approach is more satisfying to the humanist, since he feels that defining the Chicano is a task for the social scientist and not for the literary critic. As we said before, this approach has the advantage of focusing the critic’s attention upon itself. But, here again, the characteristics of Chicano literature most often mentioned by critics give us an extremely narrow concept of that literature. Most of them apply to what is considered to be realistic literature. For instance, subject matter, it is said, must reflect the Chicano experience and deal with Chicano themes. It is for this reason that some critics exclude Floyd Salas’s novel *Tattoo the Wicked Cross* from being classified purely as a Chicano novel. Why should the Chicano experience be limited to the campesino struggle, the description of life in the barrio, or the social confrontation with the
majority culture? Why can it not go beyond to include the universal nature of man?

Another often-mentioned characteristic of Chicano literature is its sympathetic attitude toward Chicanismo. One of the accomplishments of Chicano literature has indeed been the creation of a new image for the Mexican American. The Chicano, as revealed by that literature, is not the stereotyped creature portrayed by the mass media. The danger here is that, in order to avoid a negative presentation of the Chicano, the writer often falls into the trap of Manichaeism and the lack of ambiguity. What Carlos Fuentes said about the Spanish American novel written before 1940 can very well be applied to Chicano literature. For him that novel was "caught in the net of the reality close at hand and can only reflect it. That surrounding reality demands a struggle in order to be changed, and that struggle demands an epic simplification: the exploited man, because he is exploited, is good; the exploiter, also intrinsically, is evil. This primitive gallery of heroes and villains, what literature has not had it?" Manichaeism, of course, can be avoided. Corky Gonzales does it by identifying the hero of his poem not only with Cuauhtémoc, Juárez, and Madero, but also with Cortés, Maximiliano, and Huerta. "Writing I Am Joaquin," he says in the introduction to the poem,

was a journey back through history, a painful self-evaluation, a wandering search for the people and, most of all, for my own identity. The totality of all social inequities and injustices had to come to the surface. 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 what we were, who we are, and where we are going. I Am Joaquin became a historical essay, a social statement, a conclusion of our mestizaje, a welding of the oppressor (e.g., Spaniard) and the oppressed (e.g., Indian).

Chicano literature, like all other literatures, can give expression to the universal through the regional. Over and above the social problems with which he is at present preoccupied, the Chicano is a human being
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facing the concerns of all humanity. And he is giving expression to this in an original style. By writing in a combination of English and Spanish he is creating new images. And the creation of a new image is precisely the problem that confronts the Chicano writer, for it is not easy to give universality to the regional or particular if the writer does not go beyond his immediate circumstance. The Chicano has to create a new synthesis out of history, tradition, and his everyday confrontation with the ever-changing culture in which he lives. But he cannot do so unless he creates mythical images. And that is just what the Chicano writer has been doing, as we can see in Rivera’s ... *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* (...*And the Earth Did Not Part*), Méndez’s *Peregrinos de Aztlan*, Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, and other representative Chicano creations. Méndez’s pilgrims inhabit a mythical Aztlan. With Aztlan, Alurista, Méndez, and others have created a mythical place as important as the descriptions of the barrios that we find in Mario Suárez’s short stories. The Chicano can identify as easily with Aztlan as he can with Señor Garza’s barbershop or Hinojosa-Smith’s Klail City. This can be so because the myth of Aztlan was born out of history, having been the place where the Aztecs originated. And since the Chicano identifies readily with the pre-Hispanic cultures of Mexico, the myth took hold of the people’s imagination.

For these reasons, the new definitions of Chicano literature, which are not restricted only to social, realistic works, are much more satisfying and can account not only for Chicano literature as it exists today, but also for what is to be written in the future. A broad definition is necessary even to account for socially oriented Chicano literature where mythical and legendary elements are frequent. Otherwise, how can we analyze, in their totality, such poems as Alurista’s “La Llorona” and Omar Sálinas’s “Aztec Angel,” or even poems of the barrio, such as Raul Sálinas’s “A Trip Through the Mind Jail,” where we find this stanza:

Neighborhood of Zaragoza Park
where scary stories interspersed with
inherited superstitions were exchanged
waiting for midnight and the haunting
lament of La Llorona—the weeping lady
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of our myth and folklore, who wept nightly,
along the banks of Boggy Creek . . .

In a very brief article published in *Mestor* in 1973, Gustavo Segade says, "Chicano literature, then, refers to the historical, cultural, and mythical dialectic of the Chicano people. In its historical and cultural sense, Chicano literature is specific and unique; in its mythical sense, it's general and universal." And Bruce-Novoa, with his original and challenging theory about the spatial nature of Chicano literature, has presented us with a significant definition worthy of consideration.

We can see then, that in a relatively short time, Chicano literature not only has established itself as a significant part of minority literatures in the United States, and, at the same time, of literature in general, but also has produced a criticism that has kept up with the rapid change taking place. In a few years, the identification of Chicano literature has progressed from the narrow, sociological definition to the broad, humanistic, and universal approach. Chicano literature, by lifting the regional to a universal level, has emerged from the barrio to take its place alongside the literatures of the world.