GOD'S SILENCE AND THE SHRILL OF ETHNICITY IN THE CHICANO NOVEL

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Ethnic identity has to do with freely choosing a set of values, attitudes, and behavior from one's cultural legacy in order to affirm a unique sense of peoplehood. In the United States ethnic groups such as the Chicano or Mexican American are often stigmatized, and the psychological burden of ethnic awareness can weigh heavily. Yet a healthy sense of ethnic identity is absolutely necessary for a positive self-concept when a person is part of a group that is slighted because of race or appearance. The question then is: how do Chicanos come to terms with their cultural tradition in a society that discourages them from asking who they are?

Fortunately, Chicano novelists have looked hard at Chicano background and past in order to identify sources of self-affirmation and group unity. Their insights into various issues have shown that self-discovery and group solidarity are not isolated matters but parallel ventures. However, these writers have also asked unsettling questions about traditional institutions and accepted ideas and challenged assumptions that many people take for granted:

> "Ah, Mama! I do not want to be something--I am. I do not care 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."
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> "But that is wrong, Richard," she said. "That kind of thinking is wrong and unnatural--to have that kind of feeling against the family and custom. It is as if you were speaking against the Church."[1]

> At four o'clock the youngest became sick. He was only nine years old but since he was paid as an adult he tried to keep up with the others.
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> "Why my father and now my little brother. Why? He has to work like an animal tied to

EXPLORATIONS IN ETHNIC STUDIES
Vol. 4, No. 2 (July, 1981) 14-25.

the ground."
Each step that he took toward the house echoed the question "why?" And he didn't know when, but what he said he had been wanting to say for a long time. He cursed God.[2]

What is clear to me after this sojourn is that I am neither a Mexican nor an American. I am neither a Catholic nor a Protestant. I am a Chicano by ancestry and a Brown Buffalo by choice. That ladies and gentlemen is all I meant to say. That unless we band together, we brown buffalos will become extinct.[3]

The quotations from three Chicano novels reflect a relentless questioning of group membership and a preternatural vigilance for keys to the sense of the self. In order to come to terms with who they are, the above personae choose a profound and strenuous rite of passage. They call into question the underpinnings of their moral heritage--religion. Religion is but one avenue of self and group identification, but these excerpts offer dramatic evidence of the kinds of questions and dilemmas that confront a Chicano who asks where he stands in relationship to his ancestry and background. On one hand, pursuing the matter of ethnic identity in this society often involves hard thinking cunningly forged in silence and exile. A person must stand apart from culture and religious tradition in order to find an individual voice. Such arduous exercise of intelligence and will suggests why some individuals might shy away from ethnicity because standing alone is unnerving. On the other hand, asking "Who am I and who are my people?" makes it possible for a Chicano to come to grips with shadowy feelings and thoughts and makes a strong and sure connection with those who share a common legacy. By looking at how three Chicano novels present the quest for ethnic identity in terms of an interrogation of traditional Roman Catholicism, we can see the kinds of issues that confront Hispaños who would draw together as a people.

José Antonio Villareal's *Pocho*, Thomás Rivera's *Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra*, and Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* are vastly different works by distinct authors. *Pocho* is a pioneering novel that traces the acculturation of a Mexican family to life in the United States. The protagonist of this story, Richard, is born in the United States, but he is caught between two cultures, that of his parents and that of his "assimilated" peers. Rivera's short work is written in Spanish (it is published bilingually, translation by Herminio Rios) and reflects the hardships of migrant Chicano workers. The book is a series of

vignettes that expresses the inner life of a precocious Chicano youth rapidly moving toward self-awareness and adulthood. Acosta's *Autobiography* is a boisterous account of a lawyer without a sure sense of identity (ethnic or otherwise) who casts himself adrift on a voyage of self-discovery.

These three works offer sustained examinations of what it means to be Chicano. Through different episodes and characters one overriding concern surfaces--what ties unite the protagonists to other people from the same racial stock and cultural tradition? Coming to grips with their ethnicity causes the protagonists of these stories to look hard at Roman Catholicism. What happens to them may well prove disturbing to those who automatically think of religion as a source of ethnic unity or personal solace. But the questions they raise are a starting point for new and exciting ideas about being a Chicano.

When we first meet Richard Rubio in *Pocho*, he has just made his first confession and he is preoccupied with questions about God and Roman Catholic dogma. Richard's concern with religion is tied to his awareness that he is a member of a stigmatized group of people--the Mexican American. The young boy clearly recognizes that he is measured in terms of Anglo-Saxon protestant values, that his sense of identity is constantly referred to the customs and mores of white people who look down upon his ancestry and appearance. Richard's last name, "Rubio," means blonde or fair in Spanish and is ironic because of his dark mestizo features.

Richard's feelings of being stigmatized as a pariah who has been branded unclean, and his sense of himself as a member of a referred group of people work a strange alchemy upon his understanding of Roman Catholicism. On one hand, the dogma and power of the Church leave a bitter taste in his mouth. They remind him of his position in society and the cruel forces of bigotry and Anglo authority that make him withdrawn and unhappy. On the other hand, he is deeply affected by his mother's reverence for the "suffering" Virgin Mother and Christ who are sources of comfort and security for her. Indeed, Richard is to battle with these two conceptions of Roman Catholicism throughout the novel until he finally repudiates religion.

What seems to spur Richard's rejection of Catholicism is his widening identification of the Church with the social forces that rob him of the opportunity to make his own way in the world. The Church, through the voice of his mother, tells him to endure injustice

and accept his lot in life. But Richard cannot stomach his feelings of disjunction, his sense of inferiority and his rage against the established social order that robs him of the opportunity to define his own identity and better himself.

Richard's disavowal of faith has also to do with a deeply rooted conflict that is part of his cultural legacy. Mexicans are a mixed or mestizo people, the product of the Spanish conquest of the indigenous people in what we now call Mexico. Richard's father tells stories of priests who used the confessional in the service of the rapacious Conquistador--the hated gachupín. There is little doubt that Richard is influenced by his father's railings against these "traitors." Furthermore, Juan Rubio is proud of his heritage as an Indio. He has a high regard for the pleasures of the flesh and he has a mystical reverence for the soil and the rhythms of nature. Richard's Indian heritage runs counter to Catholicism in many ways.

In *Pocho*, faith healing or curanderismo is a clear expression of the conflict between indigenous folkways and Catholicism, the epitome of Spanish culture. Curanderismo is the ritualized use of herbs and certain animals as a healing art and can be traced to native people. The curandero uses prayer, Catholic paraphernalia, and folk remedies to restore health; there is a strange ambience of mystery and magic. The Catholic Church is made uneasy by the Manichean overtones of the proceedings and the "usurpation" of the priest's role. Richard is very sensitive to conflict and he undoubtedly realizes that curanderismo is an expression of his opposed cultural legacy--the Indian and Spanish.

Richard's quest to determine his ethnic identity causes him to examine his religious faith with two remarkable consequences. First, he identifies Catholicism with the oppressive ethos of Anglo society. Secondly, the schism between his Spanish and Indian legacies is brought home to him by his father and the practice of curanderismo. The upshot is that he renounces belief and leaves home to join the service. Richard has a clearer idea of who he is at the end of the story. He knows that he wants an education and that he wants to escape poverty, but he is cut off from his past. It is impossible not to admire Richard's fierce will to be his own man, but the question that haunts the novel's conclusion is how will he come to terms with the people and tradition that have shaped his consciousness.

Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra by Tomás Rivera is

about "a lost year," a span of events that the young and unnamed central figure of the novella must comprehend in order to know who he is. The young man is keenly aware that he is Chicano in terms of the dynamics of in and out groups. Like Richard in *Pocho*, his language (Spanish) and the economic position of his family and acquaintances set him apart from Anglo society. The hero shares feelings of group solidarity with those others like him who are down-trodden. But his anger at Anglo injustice is not the same as an assertion of ethnic ties.

The young man's pursuit of selfhood pivots upon religion. Indeed the translated title of the work *And the Earth Did Not Swallow Him Up* refers to the crucial episode quoted in which the youth who has seen so much tragedy and waste of human life intuits that suffering is part of the order of the universe and therefore curses God because he holds Him responsible. The boy's curse has an unexpectedly liberating effect, as does Richard's renunciation of God in *Pocho*. The boy's feelings of relief and his intuition that he now has his feet more firmly on the ground puts religion in a bad light. It is as if religion symbolizes the cruel burden of fate, the weight of economic necessity, and social practice that keeps migrant workers laboring in the fields like brute animals.

Richard's repudiation of religion sets him apart from his family and tradition, but the youth's curse against God in *Tierra* has the opposite effect: it serves to anchor his sense of ethnic identity, although how this happens is very complex. When God remains silent and does not punish the boy, when the earth does not part and swallow him up because of his blasphemy, he is free to cope with life on his own terms. Instead of being caged by religious dogma, the boy is able to feel a part of the surrounding landscape, at home in the natural order. Implicitly, the youth reaches back to his Indian heritage, a tradition connected with the rhythms of the material universe.

Sexuality is, of course, an important aspect of human nature which Roman Catholicism attempts to regulate severely. The youth is indoctrinated by nuns and priests about the danger of the "sins of the flesh." But because his respect for religious dogma has been challenged, he is not able to accept meekly what is drummed into him. On the day of his first communion, he comes upon lovers in *flagrante delicto* and in a superbly rendered epiphany he realizes that sexuality is the token of every person's humanity.

Afterwards, the youth sees everyone around him in

a new light. He looks at his family, neighbors, friends, and realizes that their human desires make them just like him. He feels a strong sense of being united with them not only because of the life they suffer together but also because their lives complement and enhance his sense of being a person. He says, "I would like to see all of those people together. And if I had arms long enough, I should hug them all at once. I wish that I could talk with everybody one more time, all of us one."[4]

Acosta's *Autobiography* is the frenzied musing of a person desperate to make sense of who he is:

> Ladies and gentlemen. . .my name is Oscar Acosta. My father is an Indian from the mountains of Durango [in Mexico]. Although I cannot speak his language. . .you see, Spanish is the language of our conquerors. English is the language of our conquerors. . . they stole our land and made us half-slaves. They destroyed our gods and made us bow down to a dead man who's been strung up for 2000 years. We need a new identity. A name and language all our own.[5]

Acosta's reference to Jesus is very important because he compares his age to that of the crucified Nazarene and finds his own life wanting--fragmented, without purpose. Admittedly, fiercely, Acosta longs to be a Messiah.

The *Autobiography* asks if ethnic identity is the basis for a unified self-concept. Defining his ethnic identity is a difficult task for Acosta because he has been so badly lacerated by racial slurs that he has tried to expunge this matter from his thinking. Acosta, however, comes of age in the late Sixties when Chicanos were demanding that they be heard, and he is swept up in this movement.

As Acosta looks at his roots, he must take stock of Catholicism. And when he does so, he is virtually driven out of his mind because he sees so many perspectives all at once. From the viewpoint of his Indian heritage, Catholicism is an abomination of the Spanish oppressor. However, from the scope of his Hispanic tradition, Catholicism integrates many levels of experience and thus brings peace of mind.

Above all else, Acosta wants to be at peace with himself, but this is impossible because any view that he takes of religion only causes him more grief. He attempts to turn his back on Spaniard and Aztec alike

and becomes a proselytizing Baptist in Panama. But he is unfulfilled in his ministry, and when he studies the Bible in order to determine what he believes, he finds that he has lost his faith.

One of Acosta's many dilemmas is that when he tries to determine who he is in religious terms, he works himself into corners. The credo of the Spanish has destroyed his Indian forebears. Because of his racial ancestry and appearance, he is held in low regard by white Baptists. And finally, he cannot embrace the religion of indigenous Americans because he knows little of their culture. He would have to create himself all over again.

Therefore, Acosta's struggle with religion is a war between multiple outlooks that all make claims upon him which he cannot reconcile. The grinding day-to-day clash of these opposed value systems is highlighted in the *Autobiography* by the many references to drugs. It often seems as if Acosta gets no real pleasure from being under the influence of various substances. Taking drugs does not help him "escape" reality. Instead, drugs appear to make Acosta a mental chameleon better able to deal with the opposed outlooks that switch on his thoughts. But divided as he seems to be, Acosta is sure of one thing: Chicanos must identify their common ground or risk survival.

Whether we agree or disagree with the opinions about religion expressed in Villareal's *Pocho*, Rivera's *Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra*, and Acosta's *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* is not at issue. The point is that by concentrating in these upon the search for self and group identity in light of religion, we can see how the quest for selfhood experienced by the characters can help Chicanos in their own odyssey for themselves. First of all, Chicanos are a blend of cultures and traditions and in a vital way choose who they want to be. There is no monolithic abstraction called Tradition, Culture, or Religion that each must acknowledge in the same way. A Chicano has the latitude to choose between multiple outlooks that are the products of a mestizo (Spanish/Indian) heritage and a history in the United States. Whether Spanish is the primary language or not, whether Chicanos feel more at home with a Roman Catholic or an indigenous view of the world has to do with how the individual Chicano decides upon which aspects of tradition are valuable. What is most important is that a Chicano who raises these questions realizes that personal interests are aligned with those of others who share a common history.

Another important truth that we discover from these three works is that Chicanos must openly come to terms with what it means to be members of a stigmatized and referred group of people. The characters in the novels face certain dilemmas about self-respect and caring for other people that have to be considered in light of the fact that they become jarringly aware of how society denigrates them. If these figures felt more secure about their sense of self and had confidence in their cultural background, they would be better able to explore and develop their full potential without so much pain. The lesson is clear. Chicanos must not let any group tell them who they should be; no group can afford to let others impose standards of beauty or other measures of worth that are degrading. Furthermore, it is good that Chicanos become angry about being stigmatized or forced to feel badly about appearance or roots. This anger can work to change society so that all people are valued for their unique qualities.

The novels powerfully demonstrate how defining one's ethnic identity can be a wrenching experience which some individuals would rather put out of mind. However, the issue of ethnic identity is of the utmost importance because it affects the quality of everyday life.

Notes

[1]José Antonio Villareal. *Pocho.* (Garden City: Anchor, 1970) 64.

[2]Tomás Rivera. *Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra.* (Berkeley: Justa, 1977) 55.

[3]Oscar Zeta Acosta. *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo.* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972) 199.

[4]Rivera. Op. cit., 126.

[5]Acosta. Op. cit., 198.