

## The Borderlands of the Chicano Bildungsroman:

Victor Martinez's *Parrot in the Oven*

Victor Martinez's *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*, winner of the 1996 National Book Award for Young People's Literature, brings the element of formal experimentation, which so widely characterizes Chicano and Chicana literature for adults, to the field of young adult literature. Exploding and challenging genre boundaries has become an inherent element in defining a literary tradition that historically has evolved from the Tex-Mex *corridos*, through the protest poetry of the Chicano Movement, to the experimental texts of today. Marketed as a young adult novel, *Parrot in the Oven* stands alongside, in terms of literary sophistication, other Chicano and Chicana works that have been adopted from the adult field for younger readers. Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*, (1984) having gained wide popularity in the academy, now finds its way onto the desks of middle and high school students, as does Rudolpho Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), now listed in anthologies for readers fourteen and up. In terms of quality and market recognition, Martinez's text makes an important contribution to the field of Chicano young adult literature; it stands as a measuring tool for understanding the shape and texture of the Chicano *Bildungsroman* and its difference from the Chicana *Bildungsroman* for adolescents, itself a rare commodity.

Historically, Chicano literature finds its roots in the form of the *Bildungsroman* as early writers articulated the new immigrant's efforts to survive in a foreign land. José Antonio Villareal's *Pocho* (1959), considered the first Chicano novel in English, documents this struggle. This assimilationist tale finds itself revised in later texts such as Tomás Rivera's . . . *Y no*

*se lo tragó la tierra* / . . . *And the Earth Did Not Part* (1971) and Arturo Islas's *The Rain God: A Desert Tale* (1984) in which protagonists resist adopting American ideals and principles. The texts instead critique the material conditions and ideological systems that oppress the central narrator, whether that be the class oppression of the migrant farm worker of Rivera's text or the racist and patriarchal domination of women in Islas's tale. Both later narratives assume a decentered subject, inflected through narratives of race, class, and gender.

Martinez's *Parrot in the Oven* falls within this tradition. His narrative, like other recent Chicano and Chicana texts, relies on a certain level of literary experimentation to highlight the discursive nature of identity. His background in poetry makes itself felt in his metaphorically rich prose. His episodic style mirrors that of other Chicano and Chicana writers for young adults such as Sandra Cisneros who likewise brings a certain level of literary experimentation to her work. For example, Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*, a series of poetic vignettes, layers images, as Diane Klein notes, "like an impressionist painting where the subject isn't clear until you step back and view the whole" (22). She describes it as a "story of growing awareness which comes in fits and starts"; likewise, Martinez's short chapters, virtual short stories in themselves, create a narrative view of Manny as a fluid subject. Like a series of photographs of separate scenes, the chapters evoke images that reveal the pain of Manny's life.

The novel, of course, falls also within the Western tradition of the *Bildungsroman* which Klein describes

as follows: “The protagonist comes of age by going through painful rites of passage, by performing heroic feats or passing tests with the help of mentors, by surviving symbolic descents into hell, and finally by reaching a new level of consciousness” (22). Francois Jost, in his comparative analysis of the genre in Germany, England, and France, defined the (European) *Bildungsroman* as a tale in which the young man “recognizes his place in the world; he begins to distinguish, to be able to define this man who is himself” (137). Randolph P. Shaffner, in *The Apprenticeship Novel*, describes it as the story of a young hero who “has usually already become [. . .] a man” (25).

This emphasis on attaining manhood and defining one’s “manliness” presumes a fixed notion of masculinity uninflected by issues of race, ethnicity, or class, so much a part of today’s poststructuralist reading strategies for interpreting the world. For Manny, becoming a man involves passing tests and exploring, in part, the sexual world; yet there is no final definitive “manhood” in terms of Western ideology. Barbara A. White summarizes the traditional events of the *Bildungsroman* as follows: “The hero rejects the constraints of home, sets out on a journey through the world, obtains guides who represent different world views [. . .] and meets with many set backs before choosing the proper philosophy, mate and vocation” (3).

Manny indeed leaves home and suffers a physical initiation; he joins a gang in hopes of gaining sexual favors from its girls. Yet instead of finding a “mate and vocation,” he returns home, a marker itself of the Chicano *Bildungsroman* I will explore later in the paper. His rite of passage, metaphorically experienced earlier in the text when Manny becomes a “trainer” for the Chicano-organized boxing team, La Raza, is threaded through the narratives of race in such a way that reveal the differences between a Chicano *Bildungsroman* and the so-called “universal” narratives of the “classic” *Bildungsroman*. Much like Antonio in Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* who must understand his identity through the indigenous and mythic narratives of his friends and guide Ultima or Esperanza of Cisneros’s *House* who rejects racist narratives of identity outsiders offer to her, the protagonist of this book must come to grips with racial ideology, an unexamined concern in European texts. In a poststructuralist move, Martinez explores how

even narratives of racial pride can contribute to racist oppression.

Manny finds himself lost within a vortex of racial animus when the local Chicano leader, Lencho, forms a boxing team to fight the school-sponsored black team. He tries to whip up local sentiment for La Raza by damning the whites, specifically by celebrating the origins of the Chicanos as grounded in (their) color. He adopts the language of the 1960s Chicano Movement that embraced a return to native origins as a mean of redefining identity. According to Manny’s first-person narrative,

[Lencho] believed that white people were our worst enemy, and if they had one purpose in mind, it was to keep brown people down. We, on the other hand, were descendants of Indians blessed with a color that was as necessary as dirt to the earth, as important as the sun to all the trees. We had treasures buried deep inside our blood, hidden treasures we hardly knew existed. (119)

The protest writers of the sixties such as “Corky” Gonzalez and Oscar Zeta Acosta celebrated their Indian “blood” after years of repressing such identifications. This vehicle for revolt carried with it a dichotomous structure of good/evil, Chicano/white that itself could be limiting in its insistence on essentialist binaries. Manny rejects any easy adoption of such narratives as a means for forming racial identity when he responds to Lencho’s wholesale adoption of the “power” rhetoric of the Chicano Movement. His presentation of Lencho’s speech makes clear his discomfort with what might serve as only a passing salve for healing historic injustices. Manny narrates,

[Lencho] spoke with braids of lightening in his voice, saying stuff he’d learned in the Berets about Mexicans and Chicanos being a special people, how power slept in our fists and we could awaken it with a single nod of our heroic will. He piled it on about being proud, about how marvelous it was going to be after we pulverized those other guys. Lencho could really swell the chest muscles. (122)

Manny’s recognition of the idealized nature of such narratives—“we could awaken [this ethnic power] with a single nod of *heroic* will”—suggests his distance from them. Lencho “pile[s]” the rhetoric on, just like a salesperson, leading to a passing experience of racial pride. The Chicano Movement symbol—the raised fist—stands as an empty gesture, raised high, yet meaningless in the face of systemic oppression.

The fight itself, organized between black and Chicano fighters, stands as a metaphor for the more widespread discrimination. The boxing coach, a white Golden Gloves boxer, makes sure the black fighters destroy the Chicano group, mimicking an age-old practice of pitting minorities against each other. The Berets recognize this after the fight, ostracizing Lencho for causing “a lack of unity between them and their black brothers” (139). Martinez’s narrative questions the “pulveriz[ing]” of others as a means of gaining power. His critique of such a text of racial pride stands alongside his uneasiness with traditional narratives of success, central to American identity and culture.

The author interrogates America’s “bootstrap” legacy through the image of a baseball glove and game, potent signifiers of our national history. The juxtaposition between Manny’s lived reality and American myths of class fluidity, of achievement through hard work, makes clear the entrenched patterns of discrimination that inform not only the marketplace but also border and environmental politics. As the story opens, the narrator longs for a baseball glove:

I wanted a baseball mitt so bad a sweet hurt blossomed in my stomach whenever I thought about it. . . . There was an outfielder’s glove in the window of Duran’s Department Store that kept me dreaming downright dangerous outfield catches. (7)

Like the Chicano migrant worker—“illegal” or “legal”—hoping to earn a place in the American economy, Manny goes to the chili field to pick, a place as inimical to success as the pesticide-laden fields of his real-life counterparts. There the “sun would soon be the center of a boiling pot” (9), the air thick with dust, the leaves of the plants themselves “sparse and shriveled, dying for air [. . .] [with] a coat of white pesticide dust and exhaust fumes so thick you could smear your hands on the leaves and rub fingerprints with them” (10). While the sun “scald[s] the backs of [his] hands, leaving a pocket of heat crawling like a small animal inside [his] shirt,” he and his brother pick. They work alongside Mexican workers who Manny imagines becoming baseball players; he gazes at a picker: “The way he moved [. . .] made me think he’d make a terrific shortstop, what with the way he shifted from plant to plant, his knees like a triangle, tilting first one way then another” (14). Yet immigra-

tion service soon drives off this man, along with the others, leaving the boys to take the already picked bags. While separate from their counterparts, they still cannot steal into the American dream. Manny dreams of

the baseball glove, all clean and stiff and leather-smelling, and of myself in the cool green lawn of center field. I imagined already being on the baseball team at school, and people looking at me. Not these people picking chilies or those sent away in vans, but people I had yet to know, watching me as I stood mightily in centerfield. (20)

The image of “people [he] had yet to know” revering him speaks of a desire to leave behind his past, to rise into a glowing American whiteness, full of baseball fans. Yet even with the picked bags, all he can see is the dust in front of him, the “vans pulling away”: “[W]eariness [. . .] stretched as wide as the horizon” (20). The “clean and stiff” American dream stands alongside the “sparse and shriveled leaves.” The only time he does play, “fastballs kept squirting out [of the broken glove] and popping [him] in the face” (198). At one point, the glove becomes not a way of attaining success and glory, but rather a way of leaving the house. Living with an alcoholic father and perniciously clean mother, Manny uses the glove as a lie, claiming he is running off to play baseball, when in actuality, he is escaping to join his gang.

The lie of opportunity gives way to the reality of street life as Martinez questions the meaning of the American dream sequence for those left in the outfields of chili picking and migrant labor. Like Antonio’s brothers who will lose their relationship with their family while trying to acquire material wealth in vain in Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, or Esperanza’s friends who remain trapped in a cycle of poverty in Cisneros’s *House on Mango Street*, the Chicano and Chicana *Bildungsroman* critiques cultural ideologies that perpetuate the myth of opportunity and economic systems that deny such opportunities to their protagonists.

The unavailability of the dream to Manny measures itself throughout the text in ways that make clear the impossibility of any wholesale adoption of it. The inconsistencies of Manny’s life tread across the page, drawing attention to the absurdity of common American maxims about getting ahead through education and hard work. His mother longs to send him to another, better white school district and has

him personally transfer his records because she has “heard rumors that they [the school administration] didn’t like kids leaving [his] school and sometimes would mix things up for months” (37), yet the school rejects him because of “an imbalance in the student population” (110). In his own school, even though he is a strong student, Manny is excluded from the gifted classroom where a white teacher teaches white students and he can only look on. The twenty dollars a teacher slips him for school supplies and shoes becomes lost to his father’s drinking. The American aphorisms that his father repeats—“Start on the bottom and work your way up”—are given lie by the circumstances of those who surround him.

Manny writes the following about his father’s friends: “[M]ost of the people he knew started on the bottom and worked their way sideways” (38). And the girl Manny falls for—very white, with a dreaminess about her, reminiscent of Gatsby’s Daisy—becomes a shattered image when her white male friends harass him and exclude him from an all-white party by deploying a racist stereotype; they accuse him of being sexually aggressive. The onslaught of racism twists the American dream into a jaundiced pretzel, yet the narrative does not spiral towards an existential despair but rather makes meaning out of what often stands foundationally at the center of Chicano narratives—namely the family. The return to the family marks Manny’s escape from narratives of racism. The home, of course, also serves as a microcosm of internalized oppression, yet the narrative suggests that it can offer some means of escape or resistance to external oppression.

Manny’s return home occurs following a revelatory experience, itself a familiar turning point in the European *Bildungsroman*. He momentarily adopts the codes of a gang whose response to class and racial oppression is physical assaults on wealthy whites. One gang member, Eddie, son of a Chicana and a white man, robs a white woman by violently slamming her hand in her car door, then grabbing her purse. Manny tries to follow Eddie but slows down as the police arrive. A black newspaper man stands up for him when the police question Manny, commenting to Manny about the white-looking Eddie, “Let them [the police] deal with their own” (213). This cross minority solidarity forms a backdrop for Manny’s new recognition of self. Manny identifies himself as a caretaker of

victims, a protector of basic human rights. He recognizes Eddie as the man he once saw in the distance with his sister, a temporary boyfriend who got his sister pregnant. He narrates:

In that instant of trying to call out to Eddie, everything changed. It was like I’d finally seen my own face and recognized myself; recognized who I really should be. Then I didn’t feel like catching up to Eddie anymore. Instead, I wanted to grab him, and scold him about how to treat people: like my sister, like that lady. (210)

This self-referential moment of mirroring, of sight, so common to the genre in which the individual learns to separate himself from society, is followed by a trip home where everything takes on a different perspective.

When he walks into the house, the prize possessions of his mother shift in color from gray to light. Throughout the novel, the living room registers as a symbolic metaphor for the family unit, varying in color according to family mood. In an earlier scene, after the father has been carted away by police for chasing his wife with a rifle, Manny perceives the room’s contents with a clouded perspective: “The frame of the Last Supper, with its gold-colored flange and cherub angels, looked as gray as a plastic-model battleship. Even the glass-top table mirrored a reflection of gray” (68). The appropriate battleship—signature of battle and war, a toy ship tossed about in a larger sea of family discord and a disjunction between societal expectations and family needs—changes to a “flock of birds.” After Manny separates himself from his gang,

Shadows lifted from the floor like a flock of birds rising into the horizon, and light guttered throughout the room, slapping away the dark for good. A huge splash of light even bounced off the glass-top coffee table [. . .] a snake of it slithered on the painting of the Last Supper. (214)

The mother’s collection and token religious picture take on new meaning as he gazes affectionately at his two sisters:

The lumpy cherub angels on the frame of the painting, the glass-top coffee table, my mother’s animals, gleaming in the sunlight. This room was what my mother spent so much energy cleaning and keeping together, and what my father spent so much energy tearing apart. And it was wondrous, like a place I was meant to be. A place, I felt, that I had come back to after a long journey of being away. (215)

The shifting imagery suggests that familial bonds outweigh the importance of acceptance in Anglo

society. The devastating effects of poverty and racism can be partly counteracted through relational strength.

Manny's transformation—or return home—does not occur within a vacuum. The father makes changes, gaining employment and offering help and support for the oldest sister who suffers a miscarriage and then racist negligence at the local hospital. In the traditional *Bildungsroman*, according to Hegel, the protagonist's trip towards maturity involves accepting traditional norms (Swales 20); the protagonist may start a family, signature of conventional mores.

In the Chicano *Bildungsroman*, however, a return to the “family” serves as a vehicle of opposition to larger societal forces for the Chicano protagonist. When the traditional routes of success (education and work) fail Manny and the streets envelop him, he finds a model within the home that offers an alternative to the prescribed, normative place of minority adolescents, namely, the streets. And despite the difficulties of home—the ambivalence it presents in the form of a mother who feels less than strong, a father who is not beyond abusing his position of power—the family functions as a site of resistance. The chapter names—the first chapter titled “Baseball Glove” (the glove being the symbol and means of his earlier escape from the family) and the last chapter, titled, explicitly, “Going Home”—reflect this emphasis.

Martinez's novel, of course, falls within a long line of coming-of-age stories that stress the importance of family for survival in a hostile environment. In Ernest Galarza's *Barrio Boy* (1971), the young protagonist, with his mother and brothers, makes it to the United States where only the combined efforts of all family members allow them to succeed economically. In Victor Villedeseñor's *Walking Stars* (1994), the family provides a folkloric heritage that counteracts Western concepts of rationality that deny and ignore the protagonist's understanding of alternative realities. In Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, the book's protagonist must work to combine the opposing forces of his father's line of descent, grounded in the narratives of the Spanish conquistadores, and his mother's heritage, based upon indigenous folklore and Catholicism. This internal suture is preferable to the path of the brothers who leave the family, only to become alienated through participation in the war and later in the capitalist Anglo economy. While there may seem to be a tendency to ameliorate or mythologize what the

“home” has to offer, it remains a better place to survive subjectively intact, in contrast to the vagaries of racism, capitalism, and warfare.

Such a return home, however, must be contextualized within the masculine nature of Martinez's narrative (and those other masculine texts that celebrate the home). Many of the Chicano texts appropriate or written for young adults feature males coming of age. This gender bias is not surprising, perhaps, in light of the rather late arrival of Chicana authors to the literary scene, following the male-authored, male-oriented literature of the 1960s Chicano Movement. Chicana feminists of the eighties railed against the confining nature of the home, pointing to the weight of patriarchal beliefs in Chicano culture and religion, and the attendant virgin/whore dichotomies that pervades Chicano fiction (works like Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* being no exception).

For adolescents, Cisneros offers one of the few narratives featuring female protagonists, although certainly several more have been published in recent years. Even her text alone points to the masculinist nature of Martinez's text (and the others like it). In *The House on Mango Street*, the narrator Esperanza must escape the oppressive conditions of home and the limited options it affords her, including marriage. Her friend Minerva struggles with babies and an ever-returning, abusive husband; another woman, married before the eighth grade, is locked by her husband inside a house. A third female wears the black and blue marks of her father. Esperanza doesn't want to be like others who leave home for babies, “who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (82). Her mother left school early and resents the consequences: making cookies and sewing, instead of seeing a ballet or a play. Reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's “room of one's own,” Esperanza plans to find “A House of My Own,” “a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (100). Here she plans to write her own narratives on paper wiped clean of oppression. This Chicana writer offers then not a return to home but a way out—through writing, through revision. Yet, as mentioned earlier, her book does share some characteristics with Chicano coming-of-age stories. Like Martinez's *Parrot in the Oven*, her text draws attention to the economic inequities and racial discrimination suffered by Chicanas and Chicanos. She also suggests

that Chicanas have a certain responsibility to the community. When Esperanza leaves, she plans to return; the narrator writes, referring to the women of her youth, "They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind" (102). Community replaces home, a point that reinforces the underlining emphasis on relationships and connection, part and parcel of both female and male traditions.

The rejection of such narratives of home by Cisneros suggests that young adult Chicano and Chicana narratives, like their adult counterparts, are inflected with issues of gender that influence ethnic identity. Manny's "home," with its patriarchal violence, becomes amenable only through a return to what Gloria Anzaldúa marks as traditional concepts of *machismo*: "For men like my father, being 'macho' meant being strong enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love" (83). Anzaldúa suggests that contemporary concepts of *machismo* as aggressive and dominating are a response to the shame and humiliation of racism and poverty and the accompanying feelings of inadequacy.

Martinez's book documents this in part, allowing the father some measure of esteem only once he enters the work force. Martinez's *Bildungsroman* suggests that home, to be a site of strength, must offer a certain space of recovery from Western narratives of racism and oppression, attainable in part, however, through insertion into Western narratives of achievement. The text itself remains forever a hybrid, partaking in a tradition that rejects the genre's emphasis on departure from the family, for men at least, for reaching maturity, yet emphasizing, in part, the need to survive in a capitalist economy. The Chicano family is inseparable from the American contexts that contain it. The hybrid nature of Martinez's text—based in part of the Western *Bildungsroman*, yet a revision of it—points to the border position of Chicano and Chicana texts. The emphasis on border crossings, so endemic to the adult tradition, finds its voice in the young adult arena that more fully attends to issues of development and the difficult entrance of the subject into an adulthood marked by the experience of marginalization and difference.

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