

Critique

Among the most important observations made in the course of Joe Rodriguez' essay on the Chicano novel are that 1) an ethnic legacy must be recognized, described, and acknowledged in its complexity and contradictions before it can become a viable part of an individual's identity; 2) ethnic legacies and affiliations, as with all relationships into which individuals are born, can be burdensome liabilities as well as touchstones of sustenance and liberation; 3) an ethnic's unquestioning affiliation with the "group" often leads to a diminishment of personal worth. With his focus on dialectical forces within Chicano life and on ethnicity as a dynamic and problematical condition, Rodriguez supplements other recent efforts to reconsider prevailing assumptions regarding fictive statement and structure in Chicano writing.¹

Implicitly, of course, Rodriguez reminds us of the unique potential fiction has for rendering--in terms of time, place, and the circumstantial detail of individual lives--the insistent presence of both cultural context and the nagging demands of individuality. Further, we see here that fiction is perhaps uniquely useful for recording and explicating the paradoxes that constantly emerge not only from personal but also from inter- and intra-cultural conflicts (fiction thus helps us verify both the premise and the need for interdisciplinary ethnic study).

More specifically, though, Rodriguez' point is that an incomplete understanding of culture--one void of complexities and contradictions--is tantamount to an incomplete understanding of self; reductive vision from the ethnic perspective is as much to be regretted as myopia in the "outside" world. In fact, one's resolution of intra-cultural conflicts must precede coming to terms with conflicts on a larger scale. As Rodriguez perceptively observes, such resolution typically requires "a profound and strenuous rite of passage" in which the individual questions one or more premises of cultural identity--religion, for example. Particularly important, though, is the observation that the rite of passage is strenuous precisely when the individual has been taught to believe that any questioning of one's own community is a betrayal and that, deprived of membership in the dominant culture, the ethnic must stick uncritically with the comfortable and familiar.

But of course the viability of any group is merely a function of the vitality of individuals, and a key insight of Rodriguez' essay is that unquestioning loyalty to that which nurtures and protects involves the

most elementary of "sell-outs," self-betrayal. In fact, to Rodriguez' observations we might add the reminder that the willingness--from whatever quarter--to "accept" ethnicity and "understand" it quickly usually derives from patronizing, simplistic, and self-indulgent assumptions about both the group as a whole and the individuals that make it up. Rodriguez' rite-of-passage formulation, coupled with our awareness that paternalism often creates in the "child" a kind of permanent adolescence, should further remind us that simply "being" something is essentially a static condition and that the dynamics of "becoming" inevitably demand a challenge to what already is. In this context it is perhaps useful to recall that for two of the quintessential adolescents of modern literature, Stephen Dedalus and Huckleberry Finn, the achievement of selfhood is a direct result of what we might term an unorthodox religious experience--very much like those of the coming-into-being religious rebels in the Chicano novels discussed by Rodriguez. Echoing Lucifer, Stephen asserts that he "will not serve" the church; and Huck, rather than sell out his companion Jim, determines that he's willing to go to hell if that is the price of individual integrity. (W. H. Auden once referred to Huck's response as "a pure act of moral improvisation.") The point of these comparisons is, of course, that individual integrity may only be possible through the isolated individual's challenge to or rejection of that which has the immediate capacity to pacify and seduce, to offer and elicit consolation.

Finally, Rodriguez' essay helps us raise some interesting questions. What, for example, is the role of the *dominant culture* in the nourishment or manipulation of the seductive and subversive forces in ethnic life? What are the implications, for group solidarity and political action, of the observation that individual reconciliations must take place at the expense of received affiliations? To what extent can fiction serve as a tool in the quest for selfhood and the effort to establish a sense of integrity for individual ethnic groups?

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Note

¹Ramon Saldivar. "A Dialectic of Difference: Towards a Theory of the Chicano Novel." *Melus*. 6 (Fall 1979) 73-92.