

Chicano Ethnicity and Aging

Marvin A. Lewis

In an insightful article published a decade ago, "The Chicano Aged," David Maldonado offers some comments that are germane to this presentation. In summing up the dilemma of the Chicano elderly, he asserts:

The aged person in the extended family holds high status and commands the respect and obedience of the younger family members. Within the extended family structure, the aging person grows in prestige and respect. The individual holds high rank and has influence in the life of the group.¹

This is the position afforded the aged in many societies as long as the elderly are able to function and contribute in a meaningful way. Prestige, respect, and influence are important parts of their role so long as the aged are not perceived as being a burden. There is, however, a stigma attached to aging in the United States because of the emphasis upon youth and a mind set which does not view aging as a positive process.

Maldonado continues his discussion of the Chicano aged by focusing upon a very real problem occurring throughout many Chicano communities in the United States because of differences in generational aspirations. Young people increasingly join the push for more material acquisition in society and devote less time to family harmony:

Thus aged Chicanos are increasingly without a role. They find also that since their children have moved upward socially and educationally, their own status and respect have relatively decreased. The values of the aged are related to an agrarian society; their children are living today in an urban industrial setting. The expectations of the aging Chicano do not always coincide with those of the younger generation. (215)

This particular conflict of values between generations has been a constant topic in Chicano fiction. Conflicting values tear apart the families in *Pocho*, *Chicano*, *Heart of Aztlán*, and *Famous All Over Town*. However, traditional agrarian values and respect for the elderly are sources of strength for the characters in *Nambe Year One*, *Bless Me Ultima*, ...*And the Earth Did Not Part* and other important works of Chicano literature.

This brief study examines aged Chicanos in literature, and shows points of contact between the findings of social scientists and the interpretations of creative writers. The focus here is upon two important figures in Chicano culture, the *curandero/curandera* and the *abuelo/abuela*, both representative of the Chicano elderly.

In a co-authored article entitled "Curanderismo in the Metropolis: The Diminished Role of Folk Psychiatry Among Los Angeles Mexican Americans," Robert Edgerton, Marvin Karno, and Irma Fernández, refer to "four separable sources of treatment from which Mexican Americans seek help for psychiatric disorders." They are:

- (1) ordinary housewives who possess knowledge of folk remedies;
- (2) more specialized and renowned women who are thought to be unusually skilled in the use of such remedies;
- (3) curanderos; and
- (4) physicians.²

The authors' thesis is that the practice of folk psychiatry (*curanderismo*) and folk healing are on the decline in Los Angeles. They do, however, acknowledge how numerous women "employ a great many remedies, often herbal in nature, to combat the minor ills of the members of their families," and that "some are known to be particularly skilled in prescribing combinations of food or herbs, and these women are frequently sought out." The authors further maintain that "there is little evidence from our research that such women are seen as treatment sources for psychologic disturbance or even for persistence psychosomatic complaints" (126). These illnesses are the domain of the *curandero*.

Most researchers, and those cited above, agree that people turn to *curanderos* when "the illness is folk defined as involving psychologic or emotional components." They command respect and often reverence and cure by means of elaborate ritual, as well as herbal decoction, massage, and ventriloquism. They heal by virtue of a "Gift of God" (126-127).

Perhaps there is a decline in the "authentic" practice of folk medicine in Los Angeles, but this is not the case however in the thematic preference for *curandero* types by creative writers. In contemporary Chicano fiction the portrayal of the venerated folk healer ranges from the presentation of those skilled in the use of remedies to the full blown *curandera*. Their activities vary from the resolving of physical everyday problems to psychological disturbances. The folk healer in Chicano fiction is always portrayed as an elderly person who, through the wisdom of years and a meaningful apprenticeship, has mastered many of the secrets of humans and nature. These tendencies are evident in two radically different novels: The Chicano classic, *Bless Me Ultima* (1972), by Rudolfo A. Anaya and the *Chicanesca* work, *Famous All Over Town*

(1983) by a person who calls himself Danny Santiago.

Famous All Over Town is a novel concerned with a search for values and authenticity in the dehumanizing environment of East Los Angeles. This *barrio* and rural Tlatlán, Mexico, are the geographic poles which define the limits of the Medina family. The Mexican grandmother is the character of concern here. She is the Tlatlán village *partera* (a witch to her son-in-law), a midwife who brings babies into the world as well as takes them out. She aids her daughter in aborting an unwanted pregnancy during a family visit from Los Angeles.

The woman is first presented from the perspective of her grandson, Rudy Medina, Jr., the central narrator:

Now a tiny little old lady came walking, with people falling back to make room. Her face was black and wrinkled like a prune with white braids wrapped around it. Could this be my grandma? Our old picture showed her round and fat but now she was all shrunk in against her bones.³

Her curative powers are made evident as she heals Lena, the granddaughter, of a bodily ailment with a combination of cigarettes, tortillas, and a herbal potion. The effectiveness of the cure resides not so much in the method but in the fact that Lena *believes* in her grandmother.

In the struggle for respect and family unity, the grandmother wins out over a son-in-law, Rudy Medina, Sr., who physically and mentally abuses his family. At the end of *Famous All Over Town*, Mrs. Medina returns home to Mexico with her youngest daughter, leaving Rudy, Jr., in limbo, Lena happily married, and her husband in sin with his concubine. One of the elements which leads to the decline of the Medina family is precisely the inability of the father to adjust in the urban Los Angeles setting. He feels threatened because his wife and children require more freedom while he adheres to many negative tendencies associated with *machismo*, patterns he learned in rural Mexico.

Although she resides thousands of miles away, this self-styled *curandera* exercises a great deal of power over the destiny of her family. She is wise enough not to let her son-in-law inherit her money—revealing his hypocrisy in the process—and persuasive enough to convince her daughter that Mexico holds the future for both of them. Although she would fit neatly into the category described by Edgerton, Karno, and Fernández as “more specialized and renowned women who are thought to be unusually skilled in the use of such remedies,” this woman’s impact is both physical and psychological. This is evident in the respect for her powers demonstrated in her native Mexico as well as her astute resolution of problems encountered in the modern United States.

The best full blown portrait of a *curandera* is found in *Bless Me Ultima*. Ultima, the venerated *curandera* represents Good in the world plagued by Evil. Antonio, the young protagonist through whose eyes the novel is

narrated, serves an apprenticeship which greatly facilitates his maturation in the present world. Ultima's teaching that "the tragic consequences of life can be overcome by the magical strength that resides in the human heart" remains with the mature Antonio who retrospectively reflects upon a crucial period in his life.

The greatest test of Ultima's powers comes when she intercedes to rid Antonio's uncle of the curse which has been placed upon him by the Trementina sisters. The dilemma is a difficult one: "The power of the doctors and the power of the church had failed to cure my uncle. Now everyone depended on Ultima's magic. Was it possible that there was more power in Ultima's magic than in the priest?" (92) Ultima exorcises the demon from Antonio's uncle's body using the boy as intercessor: "Green bile poured from his mouth, and finally he vomited a huge ball of hair. It fell to the floor, hot and steaming and wiggling like live snakes" (95). Ultima incorporates magic, religiosity, and psychiatry into her practice. Her triumphs are always perceived in an ambivalent manner. This cure is the most important act in *Bless Me Ultima* and reflects the general perception of her powers:

"La curandera!" someone exclaimed. Some women bowed their heads, others made the sign of a cross. "Es una mujer que no ha pecado" another whispered. "Hechicera." "Bruja." (96)

In the fictional interpretation of the *curandera*, there is always the ambiguity associated with folk psychiatry and witchcraft. Ultima's success is based upon her religious faith and her knowledge of remedies which has been passed down through the ages. Her mission, explains Ultima on her death bed, was to do good. "I was to heal the sick and show them the path of goodness. But I was not to interfere with the destiny of man. Those who wallow in evil and bruja cannot understand this. They create a disharmony that in the end reaches out and destroys life—" (247). Ultima, who represents the culminating point in the development of the *curandera* in Chicano literature incarnates moral values that are essential to the community. In addition to this case of exorcism, Ultima also solves a case of *ánimas en pena*. Both illnesses are folk defined and involve "psychologic and emotional components" which she cures through a combination of ritual and medicine. The conclusion to be drawn here is that while both Santiago and Anaya treat thematically the *curandera* type, the former demonstrates a surface knowledge of remedies and cures only while the latter is able to integrate cultural awareness into the novelistic fabric in a convincing manner.

In a recent study of how the aging process is viewed by Anglo and Mexican Americans, Kyriakos S. Markides observes:

...it is possible that Chicanos are less likely to engage in denial of old age than Anglos because they are more insulated from the values of the greater society that, by and large, define old age as an undesirable stage in the life cycle...Older Mexican Americans are less likely than older Anglos of similar social class to deny old age.⁵

The positive attitude of Chicanos toward old age is more a reflection of respect for their own cultural values than an acceptance of negative Anglo perceptions of aging. For the most part elderly Chicanos are the repositories of wisdom and values. Two literary texts which interpret the figure of the grandparents, *abuelita/ abuelito* is the basis for this part of the discussion. They are: *Nambe Year One* (1976) a novel by Orlando Romero and "Song of the Self: The Grandmother," a poem, from the collection *Life Span* (1985) by Alma Villanueva.

The archetypal substructure of *Nambe Year One* assesses the cycles of human existence and the inseparable relationship between humans and nature in the Sangre de Cristo mountains of New Mexico. Harmony and continuity in the universe is the novel's basic thematic thrust. Mateo, the central narrator surmises:

Here in Nambe everything evolves in and around cycles. When I have completed my turn, I shall be buried under the apricot tree. My rot shall enrich its roots. But tomorrow, I must water all the trees, the garden, and also the thirst of ancestral memories that go down one thousand feet below Nambe.⁶

Figuratively, the ancestral memories that Mateo waters provide the substance of *Nambe Year One*. Mateo recalls instances and people who have left an impression upon his life. Among the old ones are his grandfather, who raises Mateo and instills everlasting values and appreciation for life, his aunt, and Don Agustín.

Mateo maintains that his aunt "is not yet seventy and she knows more than many lean scholars at the universities....She is one of the links in a primal chain of recollection and undeniable memory" (143). Mateo's respect for Don Agustín is just as great. In "Wisdom" a pivotal chapter of *Nambe Year One*, Mateo, the protagonist, visits the home of Don Agustín, who is 150 years of age. A respected man of wisdom, Mateo describes him in the following manner:

Don Agustín, the old one, still had that dignity of the land that refused to give up its virginity and innocence no matter how many plows had turned over its topsoil. This was evident by observing the physical characteristics of this weathered body: he knew the realities of living, but he stubbornly clung to the force and mystery of living. He had outlived governments, politicians and promises, and with every sunrise it was said he still chanted to the earth and God the traditional alabado that he had learned as a child when he was promised to the Penitente Brotherhood. He was full of life and dreams, and his aura was a reflection of the man who was born within the green fertile womb of Nambe. (96)

Mateo affords Don Agustín the same degree of respect he holds for his grandfather whom he views as a part of the desire to maintain harmony and continuity in the universe. In the New Mexico context, aging is treated in a positive light. The aged, in this instance the grandfather and

his projections—the aunt and Don Agustín—are those who embody wisdom, dignity, history, and tradition. Even more important is how the young do not allow travel, education, and participation in Anglo society to drive a schism between them and traditional cultural values personified in their elders.

In her earlier publication, *Bloodroot* (1977), Alma Villanueva extols the virtues of womanhood and stresses the relationship between humans and nature with woman at center stage in her creation. This emphasis continues in *Life Span*. Villanueva's poetry dedicated to the feminine mystique belongs to a generation of Chicana poets of the past two decades who were determined to overcome *macho* supremacy by stressing self worth and for whom the grandmother was a source of inspiration. *La mujeres la tierra: La tierra da vida/ Woman is Earth: The Earth Gives Life* (1975) by Dorinda Moreno is perhaps the most well known of these works which affirm both feminine ideals and cultural values through several generations. The same outlook is prevalent in *Con razón corazón/ With Reason Heart* (1977) by Inez Hernández Tovar.

One of the most poignant tributes to the grandmother figure found in this early literature, however, is "Mama Toña" by Marina Rivera from *Sobra* (1977). This is a narrative piece written to evoke the memory of the old woman's death and the subsequent guilt felt by the narrator who did not arrive before her demise. The grandmother is an unselfish person whose image is recalled through a piece of quilt work she leaves behind. "Mama Toña" is synonymous with her creation:

Death caused the rent in the middle.
It is not the flower, not the horse,
it is the house unraveling,
stitch by stitch.

The dough, the small tight map,
is spreading, Islands break off.

Death rips you out,
the one the rest depends on.⁷

Death is personified as a totally disruptive force which dismantles both the art object and life. "Mama Toña's" importance as a sustaining force, however, is not overlooked.

Alma Villanueva's "Song of the Self: The Grandmother" is an exaltation of the joys of grandmotherhood:

Surrounded by my shields, am I:
Surrounded by my children, am I:
Surrounded by the void, am I:
I am the void.
I am the womb of remembrance.
I am the flowering darkness.
I am the flower, first flesh.⁸

This is a poem of strength and affirmation, an ode to being which uses female archetypes to reinforce life. "Am I/I am" is a dialectical statement which exemplifies death, "the void," and life "first flesh" within the womb metaphor. This initial presentation of the grandmother is as a repository of cultural values, as the generator of all life. The poem is an examination of the primal function of woman and her importance in the perpetuation of the species:

Utter darkness I inhabit—
There, I watch creation unfold—
There, I know we begin and end—
Only to begin, again, and again—
Again. In this darkness, I am
Turning, turning toward a birth:
My own—a newborn grandmother
Am I, suckling light. Rainbow
Serpent covers me, head to foot,
In endless circles—covers me,
That I may live forever, in this
Form or another. The skin she
Leaves behind glitters with
The question, with the answer,
With the promise:
"Do you remember yourself?"
"I am always woman."
"Flesh is flower, forever." (80)

The poetic perspective is that of the womb of creation, expounding the idea of an archetypal creative matrix from which all life emanates and is in perpetual renewal. At the center is the Grandmother as giver of life. The flower/flesh metaphors address the questions of regeneration, cycles, and the underlying archetypal structure of the poem. Villanueva concludes:

I enter darkness, to enter birth,
To wear the Rainbow, to hear her
Hissing loudly, clearly, in my
Inner ear: love.

I am spiralling, I am spinning,
I am singing this Grandmother's Song.
I am remembering forever, where we
Belong. (80)

She belongs at the center of life itself.

The particular examples chosen here to illustrate some of the points of contact between social scientist and literary interpretations of the phenomenon of Chicano aging are but a few of the interdisciplinary possibilities for further study. Throughout the creative literature there are many elderly characters, the majority of whom are presented in a positive light. Those who receive the most unsympathetic treatment are usually at odds with society or their families in the transition from

Mexican to United States society. The *curandera* and the *abeulita*, though, are revered because they face the aging process with wisdom and dignity.

Notes

¹David Maldonado, Jr. "The Chicano Aged." *Social Casework*. Vol. 20, No. 3 (May, 1975) 213-216.

²Robert Edgerton, Marvin Karno, and Irma Fernández. "Curanderismo in the Metropolis: The Diminished Role of Folk Psychiatry Among Los Angeles Mexican Americans." *American Journal of Psychotherapy*. Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 1970) 124-133.

³Danny Santiago. *Famous All Over Town*. (New York: Plume Books, 1983) 221. Daniel James is the name of the Anglo author.

⁴Rudolfo Anaya. *Bless Me Ultima*. (Berkeley: Tonatiuh, 1972) 237.

⁵Kyriakos S. Markides. "Ethnic Differences in Age Identification: A Study of Older Mexican Americans and Anglos." *Social Science Quarterly*. Vol. 60, No. 4 (March, 1980) 665.

⁶Orlando Romero. *Nambe Year One*. (Berkeley: Tonatiuh, 1976) 14.

⁷Marina Rivera. *Sobra*. (San Francisco: CASA Editorial, 1977) 30.

⁸Alma Villanueva. *Life Span*. (Austin: Place of Herons, 1985) 80.