LA GRINGA IN CHICANO LITERATURE

Annie Olivia Eysturoy

Literary studies have played a central role in the American Studies movement. The myth-symbol school of the early years used literary and intellectual thought in its analytical search for the "fundamental meaning of America," an American Mind or the American Self.(1) Although one might find shortcomings in the basic assumptions which gave direction to this school of thought, since it tended to "reinforce the dominant culture rather than critically analyze it," the movement nevertheless established an important tradition in using literature for analyzing American culture and society.(2) Symbolic constructions often capture otherwise barely discernible cultural undercurrents and reveal how psychological, ideological, and cultural characteristics of the United States have found their way into literary expression. Early on, the perception was that only one body of American literature contained significant symbolic meanings worthy of critical attention and only one cultural myth could reveal the fundamental meaning of America. This contention, however, has been amply refuted in recent years by ethnic and women's studies scholars who are uncovering ignored writers, past and present, and the symbolic significance of their work. This body of literature, coexistent with the traditional canon of American literature, reveals hitherto largely unrepresented cultural and social perspectives. When we examine the ethnic experience within American culture and society, we may turn to literature to analyze a variety of aspects which characterize and shape ethnic relations within the larger social and cultural context.

The symbolic constructions and images different ethnic groups create of each other reveal the principal assumptions and expectations that define intergroup relations. The image we make of the 'others' (those we perceive to be different from ourselves) and the stories we tell about them are ultimately, as Clifford Geertz points out, "stories people tell themselves about themselves."(3) By analyzing the mutual
images Anglo-Americans and Mexican-Americans have created of each other, we learn not only of the assumptions and attitudes characterizing the relationship between these two groups, but also how these portrayals function within the cultural context from which they have emerged and which they reflect. In order to fully understand this intergroup relationship it does therefore not suffice to examine only the Anglo-American depictions of the Mexican-American, however significant these may be; the images Chicanos have created of the Anglos are of no less importance. They reflect not only upon the Chicano context, but are what Clyde Kluckhohn describes as "cultural portraits of ourselves"; these portraits and their symbolic contents reveal a subordinate group's relationship to those who represent the principal structure of American culture and society. (4) The mutual symbolic constructions and images Anglos and Chicanos have created of each other are thus manifestations of what Michael Foucault would call discourses of power. (5)

The use of oppositional images to confirm and strengthen a national identity has a long history in American culture; from the notions of the menacing Indians in the early days of the nation to the more recent concept of the threatening evil empire, a host of other images have served the same ends. As literary critic Antonio Márquez points out, "The truism stands that in our personal lives and in the extensions which give shape and meaning to our sensibilities, the arts, all too often a real or imaginary adversary is projected to serve as necessary contrast to affirm our ideologies and values." (6) The predominantly negative representation of the Mexican and the Mexican-American in American literature served this purpose. In order to justify and rationalize social domination the Mexican or the Chicano-- the dominant culture making little or no distinctions between the two-- emerged as the devious, treacherous, dirty and lazy coward, a member of a "physically, mentally, and morally inferior and 'low flung' race," who by his very presence strengthened the myth of the superior and courageous, freedom-loving Anglo-American. (7) When the Mexicana and later the Chicana appeared in American literature they were defined almost exclusively in sexual terms. The predominant characterization is one of the sensuous, sultry and sexually tempting woman, often the prostitute, who recognizes the
superiority of the American male, but who can only be a momentary
distraction for the otherwise righteous Anglo. The images of men and
women of the Mexican heritage which emerge from Anglo-American
literature reflect and reinforce the social and cultural attitudes which
have characterized much of the relationship between these two
groups.

The rise of contemporary Chicano literature during the 1960's has
to be seen in the context of this interethnic relationship. With the rise
of Chicano ethnic consciousness and with the demands for civil rights
also came a demand for a rectification of the multiplicity of distorted
images which had been the predominant reflection Chicanos had
found of themselves within the American culture and society. It is
evident from the beginning of the Chicano literary movement that it
was the Chicano cultural and social identity and the creation of
authentic images reflecting that identity which was foremost in the
minds of the writers engaged in this literary endeavor. In the Preface
to the first Chicano anthology to be published, El Espejo, the editors
wrote: "To know themselves, to know who they are, some need
nothing more than to see their own reflection."(8) The creation of
literary reflections which could mirror authentic relations between the
Chicano inner being and the external reality was to become one of the
central concerns of contemporary Chicano literature.

An important part of this external reality is that the Chicano
relationship to the Anglo-American and the images of the Anglo-
American which emerged from Chicano literature have to be seen as
an outcome of a social and cultural atmosphere which have ultimately
conditioned these images. Americo Paredes describes the relationship
between the Chicano and the Anglo as one in which the Chicano has
been "observed by the Anglo, while the Anglo has been experienced
by the Chicano," an experience in which Americans were apt to feel
superior and Chicanos were apt to feel abused."(9) This is the basis for
the psychological relationship existing between these two groups and
it is within the context of this relationship that emerging literary images
of the Anglo-American have to be examined; as Ozzie Simmons points
out, "Their images of Anglo-Americans are not derived wholly
independently, but to some extent must reflect their own subordinate
status."(10)
In these intergroup relations, largely depicted as those of the "stoic, white American in contention with the morally inferior, lesser and darker breed of natives," the question of color, and the social and cultural division along the color line has had its impact. In the essay "La güera" (The Fair-Skinned) Cherie Moraga explores how she, through her fair-skinned features alone, was supposed to have been successful in color-conscious Anglo-American society: "No one ever told me this (that light was right), but I knew that being light was something valued in my family (who were all Chicano...). In fact, everything about my upbringing (at least what occurred on a conscious level) attempted to bleach me of what color I did have." Another Chicano writer, Richard Rodriguez, explores in his autobiography Hunger of Memory the importance given the question of color in his family: "It was the woman's spoken concern: the fear of having a dark-skinned son or daughter." He is admonished by a concerned mother to stay out of the sun to prevent the inevitable darkening of the skin that would follow: "You know how important looks are in this country. With los gringos looks are all that they judge on." Fascinated with the Anglo-American woman whom he perceived to be "glamorous (because they were) blonds," he also wonders about the connection between dark skin and poverty. It is this connection between physical features and social status which to a large extent shapes the images of the Anglo-American in Chicano literature, the physical features representing and symbolizing the dominant social structure and by extension also the subordinate status of the Chicano community.

The Anglo-American woman, la Gringa, plays only a minor role in Chicano literature as a whole. However, when she does appear she is perceived to be part of the dominant social structure and the images which appear of la Gringa are characterized by this association. If the images we create of others, those we perceive to be different from ourselves, ultimately are, as Clifford Geertz contends, stories people tell themselves about themselves, then the image of la Gringa in Chicano literature reflect back on the central concerns of the Chicano community and its relationship with the larger dominant culture.

The novel which marks the beginning of contemporary Chicano literature, Pocho by José Antonio Villarreal, is a novel mainly
concerned with the changes and loss of traditions shaping the lives of an immigrant Mexican family. Juan Rubio, the patriarch of the family, perceives la Gringa to be domineering and shameless, and as such she sets a dangerous precedent for his own wife: "You are thinking yourself an American— well you are not one and you should know your place." (16) The absent Gringa here represents all that threatens to erode traditions, including the traditional power structure within the family. She is thus held up as the negative 'other' to define what the Chicana is and should be, according to Juan Rubio and the patriarchal traditions he upholds.

The image of la Gringa takes on more definite characteristics in two later works, Chicano by Richard Vásquez and The Plum Plum Pickers by Raymond Barrio, the former reflecting the accommodative mood prior to the Chicano movement as opposed to the more confrontational stance of the latter. In Chicano the possibility of a Chicana daughter-in-law triggers the following dialogue between an Anglo-American mother and son:

"David, I really would love to meet your little Spanish girl...." "She's not little. What makes you think she's little? She's five feet six. Taller than you... And she is Mexican. Not Spanish." Mrs. Stiver thought for a moment. "I was just being kind when I said 'Spanish', David. I'm sure she is a lovely girl and she wouldn't appreciate being called Mexican..." (17)

Here racism is presented as polite ignorance rather than hostile disparagement; yet, the image of the Chicana in this novel is not developed much beyond these stereotypes. An example of this is Mariana, who is bright and promising, yet ends up humbly accepting that she, as a Chicana, would be an impediment to David's social ambitions; she dies from an illegal abortion, but only after forgiving him for abandoning her.

Despite some apparently critical views of Anglo ethnocentrism and contemptuous attitudes towards Mexicans, however stereotypical these might be, Chicano is not a novel which critically analyzes ethnic relations, but rather reinforces existing ethnic stereotypes, particularly
in respect to the female characters, revealing the author's ambivalence about his subject matter. Thus Vásquez portrays a Gringa mother as the model of efficiency, competence and benevolence, who does "everything exactly right" as opposed to the Chicana mother who is characterized as her diametrical opposite and depicted in a "black taffeta dress with frills and lace,...heavy lipstick and volumes of eyeshade and rouge..." (18) The Gringa here represents all that which the Chicana is not, and becomes the model which this upwardly mobile, but rather sloppy and incompetent chicana should strive for. The Chicano characters, without much questioning, have internalized these perceptions and the need for imitating the American way of life; assimilation is presented as an inevitable process, one highly approved of by the author.

Another image of la Gringa which appears in this novel is that of the young liberal who perceives herself to be taking on the so-called "white woman's burden" in her relationship with her Chicana friend because of the latter's incompetence and helplessness. Thus the Gringa describes her Chicana friend in the following terms: "She's sort of my special project...Everybody in East L.A. falls into the culturally deprived category. I've tried like hell to give Mariana some realistic values." This same Gringa goes on to characterize aspects of Chicano cultural traditions as stemming from "deep-rooted feelings of inferiority." (19) The Gringa becomes the mouthpiece for ethnocentric notions about Chicanos, yet there is not much in this novel to gainsay the Gringa's attitudes and assertions about the Chicano community; rather, the Chicano characters reinforce these impressions. The novel reveals the author's internalization of messages from the dominant culture in respect to Chicanos, and the apparent cultural ambivalence he seems to have about his own Chicano community and its relationship to the larger Anglo-American society.

The novel The Plum Plum Pickers by Raymond Barrio reflects the more confrontational mood of the seventies. Mainly a novel about farmworkers and their plight within the Anglo-American socio-economic system, the image of the Gringa which appears is that of one who participates in and reinforces the oppression shaping every aspect of the farmworkers lives. La Gringa in this novel, Mrs. Turner, is the wife of a large agricultural business man who has gained his power
through trapping the migrant workers in a vicious cycle of exploitation. As an outstanding member of the Anglo-American community, she devotes her time to charity work, dreaming of becoming the great benefactress of the community, yet she is oblivious to the oppression and exploitation upon which the family business is based. Her perception of the workers is that of "a bunch of lazy undeodorized do-nothing sleeping mañana migrants...Bunch of basically lazy slobs."(20) Finding numerous justifications for their exploitation of the workers, she sees any demands from the pickers for higher wages as pure socialism; in her eyes the workers have not gained the fruits of hard labor because they have simply not worked hard enough, echoing past and present social sentiments of Anglo-America blaming poverty on the poor. This Gringa both symbolizes and is a mouthpiece for dominant socio-economic structures which relegate Chicanos to subordinate status; her image emerges from the context of Chicano opposition to that status within Anglo-American society.

Her diametrical opposite is the hard working Lupe Gutierrez. Physically and economically trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of extreme poverty she asks herself: "Maybe they really did want her to become a prostitute. Maybe that was all there was to it. Mother, prostitute, and wife.", echoing the stereotyped roles and images of the Chicana.(21) Lupe's image of herself does not go beyond that of mother and wife, and her speculations are for the most part centered around the well-being of her family, reflecting the stereotypical role of the suffering Chicana mother. La Gringa and the Chicana thus become the mouthpiece for their respective social positions within the American economic system, as perceived from a male perspective.

The most prevalent image of la Gringa in Chicano literature, however, is sexual in character. Much as the Anglo-American writers described Mexicanas and Chicanas almost exclusively through derogatory sexual terms, so many Chicano writers, who are predominantly male, characterize la Gringa in sexual terms. She is often portrayed as licentious and lewd, offering herself to the Chicano at every opportunity, and therefore only found worthy of contempt. In Pocho a young Gringa is used for the communal sexual exploits of the neighborhood's adolescent boys and in The Plum Plum Pickers
Phyllis Ferguson, an aging prostitute, does what could be characterized as sexual charity work among the poorest of the poor.

The sexist attitudes towards women in general, pervading many works by Chicano authors, take on a particular significance when it comes to the Gringa. The conquest of a Gringa is often portrayed as a challenge or a vicarious victory or revenge over the all-dominating Anglo male; the Gringa thus becomes a mere pawn in an interethnic male rivalry between Chicanos and Anglo-Americans. The average Gringa is depicted, as Americo Paredes points out, as "an object both of rejection and desire": desirable and easily available for sexual exploits, yet, as a negative 'other' representing that which is beyond the Chicano culture, not a woman who should be taken seriously or worthy of marriage.(22) The main character in Clemente Chacón sees a possible sexual conquest in every passing Gringa, and observes that "The Mexican likes a güerita (a fair skinned) now and then, especially a young one, just as the gringo likes our young beauties," manifesting a kind of male understanding across ethnic lines for the mutual sexual exploitation of the other's female compatriots.(23)

Similar attitudes can be found in The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo by Oscar Zeta Acosta. The protagonist of this novel is at a loss in respect to his own cultural identity and the images he has of the Chicana and the Gringa, respectively, become symbolic of his alienation from his own culture. He dislikes Mexican women, but is in awe of the passing attention of a Gringa hitchiker he picks up: "Levi's and long blond hair,...long legs, a perfect ass and a smile to melt your heart out....Twenty years of driving and I have never been so lucky."(24) These are echoes of the Anglo-American standards of beauty, projected through the mass media with an obstinate persistency, and obviously internalized by the alienated Chicano. Through this internalization he embraces not only the mass culture's standards of beauty in respect to the Gringa, but also its perceptions of the Chicana.

The response of the Chicana writer to the Gringa is quite different to that of the Chicano male, yet it echoes and reacts against the image of la Gringa and all it symbolizes both within the context of American society and the Chicano community. So writes Ana Castillo in her novel The Mixquiahuala Letters:
Alicia, why I hated white women and sometimes didn’t like you: Society had made them above all possessions the most desired. And they believed it. My husband admitted feeling inferior to them. The conquest would break matters even permit him with his head up arm in arm with his dough colored I hated white women who took black pimps everyone knows savages have bestial members I hated white women who preferred Latins and Mediterraneans because of the fusion of hot and cold blood running through the very core of their erections and nineteenth century romanticism that makes going to bed with them much more challenging than with WASP men who are only good for making money and marrying. (25)

Here Castillo reacts against the Chicano fascination for la Gringa as an object of conquest, not for the sake of the woman, but as evidence of male power. Castillo castigates Chicanos and white women, respectively, for having bought into the myth of an ethnic hierarchy in which sexuality becomes the means for the exertion of power. One finds echoes of these sentiments in Chicana writings, in that Chicanas not only react to la Gringa as a cultural symbol of the dominant culture, but that they also to a great extent react to the perception Chicanos have of la Gringa, a perception which reinforces the subordinate status Chicanas hold not only within the Anglo-American society but within the Chicano community as well.

La Gringa plays only a minor role in Chicano literature as a whole, yet the images which do appear are significant manifestations of the ongoing intercultural dialogues, or discourses of power, between the Chicanos and the Anglo-Americans. The characterizations of la Gringa which emerge are predominantly negative, but rather than justifying Anglo-American domination and socio-economic oppression of the Chicano, these depictions seem more defensive in character, revealing Chicano reactions against both Anglo-American racist attitudes towards Chicanos and the social and cultural positions Chicanos hold within the context of American culture and society; as such, the Gringa functions as a negative ‘other’, a contrast to affirm Chicano cultural values. Wheras many Chicano writers expose the racism present in the relations between Chicanos and Anglo-Americans,
revealing in the process through their portrayal of la Gringa their own sexist attitudes towards women, the Chicana approaches these interethnic racial and sexual dynamics from a quite different perspective. The images of la Gringa in Chicana literature are scarce, but when she appears it is in the context of Chicana opposition to sexism both within the Chicano community and the Anglo-American society in general.

Since our awareness of other groups beside our own is intimately related to our consciousness about ourselves as a group, images of la Gringa in Chicano literature are 'stories people tell themselves about themselves', reflecting back on the Chicano context from which they have emerged. They are also 'cultural portraits' of Anglo-America from a Chicano perspective, revealing the interethnic atmosphere which has given shape to these portraits and its effect on the Chicano culture itself. As such they reveal aspects of the cultural, ideological and psychological dynamics which shape the interethnic relationship between Chicanos and Anglo-Americans.
NOTES


(9) Cecil Robinson, Mexico and the Hispanic Southwest in American Literature (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), 166.


(14) Rodriguez, Hunger, 113.

(15) Rodríguez, Hunger, 114.


(18) Vásquez, Chicano, 205.

(19) Vásquez, Chicano, 263.


(21) Barrio, Plum Pickers, 11.


(23) José Antonio Villarreal, Clemente Chacón (Binghamton, New York: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1984), 110.
