

Chicana/o Blasphemy: John Phillip Santos as Globalized Chicana/o Citizen

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RESUMEN

Hasta el momento, las teorías poscoloniales más profundas e intuitivas han permitido que los académicos reexaminen la cuestión de la identidad cultural desde perspectivas innovadoras. La más exigente de estas teorías, la Hibridez Cultural, le ofrece al campo de Estudios Chicanos posibilidades de auto-identificarse que no se entregan a limitaciones de identidad previamente establecidas.

*En mi estudio, yo le aplico las teorías más destacadas de la Hibridez Cultural a la memoria *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation* de John Phillip Santos para ofrecer una idea más inclusiva y compleja de una experiencia Chicana del Siglo XXI. A través de la lente de la blasfemia secular yo hago un bosquejo de cómo Santos desestabiliza conceptos tradicionales de una identidad chicana para darle validez a una experiencia cultural chicana que no se adhiere a tales obligaciones tradicionales de identidad. Este estudio es optimista en el grado que inicia una nueva lectura dialéctica de la literatura chicana en general y de la memoria de Santos en particular.*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE BLASPHEMY OF NOTHINGNESS

Renowned Chicana/o literary critic Juan Bruce-Novoa once wrote “Chicano literature is a response to chaos, but at its best it rejects limitations, perversely working from and returning to the space of nothingness, for *only from nothing are there infinite possibilities – all simultaneously possible. Only in nothing can you find everything*” (1990: 113). Indeed, Chicana/o literature in general has perpetually adhered to a discourse

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of limitation rejection in its response to the particular effects of the previous generation of writers' attempts to define a Chicana/o identity. Bruce-Novoa examines how Chicana/o writers during the 1960s and 1970s reacted to the limiting discourse of a pre-Movement generation of Chicana/o writers:

Identity was seen as a process of historical review carried out through an ideology of nation building which stressed several key points: retrieval of family and ethnic tradition, identification with the working class, struggle against assimilation, and the dire results if these efforts were not continued. Identity was not simply to be found, but to be forged, with careful attention to history and ideology. (1990: 134)

Holding fast to this identity discourse model of limitation rejection, such Chicana/o writers as Tomás Rivera and Luis Valdez gained popular support for returning to the space of nothingness in order to contest the assimilationist tendencies characteristic of such Pre-Movement works as Américo Paredes' *George Washington Gómez* and José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho*¹. Thus, Chicana/o nationalism prescribed cultural and linguistic preservation (patriarchy and bilingualism) as the definitive discourse of Chicana/o cultural identity. As a result, the hybrid figure of the *pachuco* was glorified, the *campesino* idealized, and the monological *vendido*/assimilationist condemned.

In the 1980s, Post-Movement authors like Sandra Cisneros and Richard Rodriguez initiated yet another return to Bruce-Novoa's notion of nothingness in order to explore possible responses to the nationalist ideological project, which, in attempting to destroy the identity prescriptions of the previous generation of writers ironically served to solidify their own. This new generation of writers specifically sought to destabilize the newly-crystallized patriarchal and nativist identity prescriptions through the act of remembering. In *The House on Mango Street*, we will recall, Sandra Cisneros gave a voice to Esperanza, an independent Chicana citizen who rejected the limitations that the patriarchal imperative imposed upon Chicana women. Richard Rodriguez, in his now infamous memoir *Hunger for Memory*, destabilized bilingualism's claim to authority within Chicana/o identity discourse by promoting the virtues of a monolingual/monocultural identity within the United States.

All the authors mentioned legitimize a claim to Chicana/o identity insofar as they emend traditional cultural texts in order to destabilize an outdated identity discourse and its claim to authority. This perpetual revisioning, this return to nothingness in order to explore something new, is the pursuit of what Homi K. Bhabha deems "blasphemy:"

To blaspheme is not simply to sully the ineffability of the sacred name. [...] Blasphemy goes beyond the severance of tradition and replaces its claim to a purity of origins with a poetics of relocation and reinscription. [...] Blasphemy is not merely a misrepresentation of the sacred by the secular; it is a moment when the subject-matter or the content of cultural tradition is being overwhelmed, or alienated, in the act of translation. Into the asserted authenticity or continuity of tradition, 'secular' blasphemy releases a temporality that reveals the contingencies, even the incommensurabilities, involved in the process of social transformation. (1994: 225-226)

Chicana/o literary discourse then, is blasphemous in nature in that it perpetually exists in the moment Bhabha describes as being overwhelmed because it always is striving to reorder the previous generation's claims to purity in its aim to express a more fully encompassing notion of what it means to be Chicana/o. Chicana/o blasphemy represents the discursive space of optimism from which Chicana/o writers simultaneously "build something from nothing" while contesting previously established, exclusionary claims of Chicana/o experience.

From within the "temporality that reveals the contingencies, even the incommensurabilities," the Chicana/o blasphemer is already engaged in the activity of reordering her world, carving out for herself a new space of cultural enunciation that she deems more legitimate than the previous. The astute reader will discover this world *in medias res* in the very moment he recognizes expressions of newness that previously established Chicana/o discourses have eclipsed, "a newness that is not part of the 'progressivist' division between past and present, or the archaic and the modern; nor is it a 'newness' that can be contained in the mimesis of 'original and copy'" (Bhabha 1994: 227). This reordering marks a clear break with traditional Chicana/o binarisms— *vendido/pachuco*, *campesino/cholo*, *mexicano/americano*, English/*español*, and most profoundly with Richard Rodriguez's ideas regarding his identity as "scholarship boy," who, he reminds us, "is a very bad student. He is the great mimic; a collector of thoughts, not a thinker" (1983: 67). Instead, blasphemous, *fin de siècle* expressions of newness look beyond binary divisions and mimetic actions by defying paradigmatic notions of time, space, and the institutionalized meaning of things. Thus, the activity of the Chicana/o artist evolves: "If hybridity is heresy, then to blaspheme is to dream. To dream not of the past or present, nor the continuous present; it is not the nostalgic dream of tradition, nor the Utopian dream of modern progress; it is the dream of translation as 'survival' [...] the act of living on borderlines" (Bhabha 1994: 226-27). Blasphemy, then, continues as the survival technique of a resilient Chicana/o identity discourse that seeks to dialectically translate traditional cultural claims of authenticity.

Chicana/o blasphemy has taken many literary forms. In the 1940s it allowed Bob Webster to deny his Americanness and self-identify as Mexican². In the 1950s, it permitted George Washington Gómez and Richard Rubio to abandon a Mexican identity and assimilate into the American “melting pot³.” In the decades following, it led to the glorification of the *pachuco* and *campesino* and the assassination of the *vendido*/assimilationist⁴. Coming full circle, in the 1980s the Chicana/o blasphemer Richard Rodriguez was able to assimilate linguistically and culturally into a mainstream Anglo society⁵. Esperanza, in the same vein, defied the patriarchal claim to authority and as a result was able to leave Mango Street, if only to return at a later point in time⁶.

John Phillip Santos, following the trail already blazed before him, further develops the blasphemous dream in his work *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation*. In his memoir he seeks to blaspheme a Western epistemology’s overwhelming claim to authority by rethinking, and reordering, a sense of Chicana/o identity that is unrestricted by the previously established binary imperatives of life/death, past/present, Mexico/United States, and most importantly, forgetting/remembering. In this way, he endeavors to reconcile the present with the past, life with death, memory with forgetting: “Did [los abuelos] leave anything behind? Was there anything of the memory of los abuelos left for us, their progeny, to share?” (1999: 31), thereby recognizing the need to rethink the temporal borders that serve to separate instead of unite. To this end, Santos identifies and makes use of certain epistemological traditions made affordable to him as a Chicana/o citizen at the end of the Twentieth Century. This study explores the extent to which Santos’ blasphemous dream employs the ancient Mayan concept of *el Inframundo* against the backdrop of an early European spirituality known as Rosicrucianism in his search to forge a globalized, 21st Century Chicana/o identity.

2. ROSICRUCIANISM: THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF ALL THINGS

As Santos reconstructs his family’s collective saga, which revolves around the mysterious and untimely death of his grandfather, he writes from the supplemental space of contingency, where he notes the discursive potentialities of what Bhabha calls “history’s intermediacy:” “History’s intermediacy poses the future, once again, as an open question. It provides an agency of initiation that enables one to possess again and anew... the signs of survival, the terrain of other histories, the hybridity of cultures” (Bhabha 1994: 235). Santos ponders history’s intermediacy within his personal Chicana/o experience and poses his own particular question as follows: “We may be

latter-day Mexicanos, transplanted into another millennium in *El Norte*, but we are still connected to the old story, aren't we?" (1999: 4). Here, in assuming a connection with the past, the author engages dialectically in the same self-fashioning project of cultural identity characteristic of so many Chicana/o texts, perhaps the most notorious of which is still Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*. However, whereas Rodriguez's blasphemous dream sought to break with the past in order to survive in the present, thus legitimizing the finalizing effects of death and forgetting, Santos's memoir responds in kind by blaspheming the legitimacy of such an endeavor. Instead, Santos seeks to explore the other side of the argument, attempting to demonstrate the potential of history's intermediacy to reconnect him and his new-millennial Chicana/o family to an ancient, pre-Columbian identity that is not determined by the limits of Western epistemology.

Santos's presumption that he can reconnect with a long forgotten past evokes a notion of the innate interconnectedness of people, events, nature and time, thus mirroring a religious and epistemological movement begun in Germany during the early 17th Century known as the Rosicrucian Enlightenment. Rosicrucianism, as paraphrased by Frances A. Yates, is the belief that:

God has revealed to us in these latter days a more perfect knowledge, both of his Son, Jesus Christ, and of Nature. He has raised men endued with great wisdom who might renew all arts and reduce them all to perfection, so that man 'might understand his own nobleness, and why he is called Microcosmus, and how far his knowledge extendeth into Nature'. If the learned were united they might now collect out of the Book of Nature a perfect method of all arts. But the spread of this new light and truth is impeded by those who will not leave their old courses, being tied to the restricting authority of Aristotle and Galen. (1972: 42)

Santos, inasmuch as he locates within history's intermediacy a connection to an ancient, long-forgotten past, represents one of these enlightened men, a present-day Chicana/o blasphemer, who possesses the ability to express epistemological newness. His challenge is to express this newness effectively by blaspheming traditional claims to authority. This is quite a lofty endeavor, for in so doing, he may enlighten "those who will not leave their old courses" to the potential of history's intermediacy to shift the politics of Chicana/o identity from one of exclusion to one of inclusion. That is, Chicana/o cultural identity would be perceived in terms of its expression instead of its perception.

I do not trace the correlations between Santos' blasphemous discourse and Rosicrucian beliefs offhandedly. Indeed, in the chapter entitled "The Flowered Path,"

Santos admits that his grandmother and her sisters were Rosicrucians, living their lives

[...]with proper attention to the signs and visions by which the unknown meaning of things could be discerned. Since all creation was part of the same manifestation of God, everything the world presented was part of the story of something larger taking place, revealing the ultimate meaning of the world. It was each initiate's obligation to be able to discern the messages underlying whatever they saw.

A hawk seen in flight in fog was a warning: Your greatest efforts will be useless in the present web of circumstances.

A jug of wine with a drowned butterfly? The drunkenness of a loved one.

A silver halo doubled around the October moon was a sign of childbirth, probably twins.

Everything was connected. (1999: 101)

Santos goes on to acknowledge that the potential of history's intermediacy "to possess again and anew" finds agency within the Rosicrucian movement: "It was the women who kept vigil over all of the knowledge that had been gathered across generations. In their blood was the book of the past. In their visions, they could read the book of the future" (1999: 102). This juxtaposition of blood and visions within the epistemological experience of the family's matriarchs marks an understood connection between the past and the future, echoing a Rosicrucian epistemology that recognizes the interconnectedness of all things, all times. Thus, history's intermediacy provides Santos, the inheritor of the blood and visions of these women, with an agency of initiation that allows him to validate his blasphemous dream of simultaneously connecting his 21st Century, globalized Chicana/o cultural experience to that of previous and future generations.

3. EL INFRAMUNDO: THE REDEMPTION OF MEMORY

In *Places Unfinished at the Time of Creation*, which he defines as a "conversation with the dead," Santos retraces the history of his family's migration from "the mountain pueblos of Mexico into the oldest precincts of San Antonio - then, finally, into the suburbs of the onetime colonial city, where the memory of our traditions has flickered like a votive flame, taken from the first fire" (1999: 4-5). Here, Santos first acknowledges the traditional allegation that through the recovery of a lost notion of history one is able to voice a claim to authenticity. However, 20 pages later, Santos severs with tradition and blasphemes the ideological prescription that equates Chicana/o identity with a recovery of history:

Mexico was always an empire of forgetting. [...] For better or worse, all the progeny of the conquest, Indios, Españoles, and mixed-blood Mestizos alike, shared the destiny of being irreversibly separated from their origins. That was the beginning of the Mexican Diaspora. To be Mexican American, Chicano, is to be further removed from those origins.

As a raza, a "nation," we are a Diaspora within a Diaspora. (1999: 25)

Thus, Santos rejects the effort to limit Chicana/o identity according to a discourse of historicity, but rather portrays it as a universally displaced consciousness – as an ancient epistemology dislocated from its roots as a result of the Encounter: “a part of old Mexico was dying in the lives of all those who were displaced” (Santos 1999: 19). In this way, Santos effectively shifts the discussion from one of perception to one of expression. It is no longer most important to trace a Chicana/o history in order to validate the agency of a Chicana/o identity discourse. Instead, he challenges his readers to understand that that discourse is part of a universally displaced consciousness, and therefore possesses an inherent agency that no act of forgetting and remembering can legitimize. In this way, Santos breaks with the traditional discussion of historic authenticity in favor of an exploration of the distinct potentialities of a 21st Century globalized Chicana/o identity,

In his quest to express new potentialities, Santos struggles to destabilize traditional notions of death and forgetting because these, insofar as they promote a notion of finite authority, serve to contradict his effort to erase the traditional distinctions between past, present, and future. For this reason, death is a constant preoccupation in Santos’s memoir. He often focuses his attention on the passing of his ancestors, obsessing over the potential to forget them simply because they have died. However, in juxtaposing the beliefs of the Rosicrucian Enlightenment with that of the ancient Aztec world called *el Inframundo*, Santos transcends traditional notions of death as the antithesis to life:

In dreams, ancestors who have passed on visit with me, in this world, and in a world that lies perhaps within, amidst, and still beyond this world - a mystical limbo dimension that the descendants of the Aztecs call *el Inframundo*. In the *Inframundo*, all that has been forgotten still lives. Nothing is lost. All remembrance is redeemed from oblivion. (1999: 9)

Here, Santos revises the conclusiveness of death and forgetting as he acknowledges a world in which the binary imperative holds no decisive authority over human epistemology. Indeed, the *Inframundo*, like Rosicrucianism, allows for the

interconnectedness of all things and all times: “It is more like a portal out of history and into eternity, encompassing all of the gradations of darkness and light, where all of the dead dwell, simultaneously beyond, and among us” (Santos 1999: 48). By invoking the ancient rhetoric and beliefs of a pre-Columbian past, Santos locates a discursive space that allows him a fuller understanding of his particular Chicana/o present and the potential to answer the questions of a Chicana/o future. In this way, Santos acknowledges an agency unique to Chicana/o discourse – an agency he locates in *el Inframundo* – that celebrates discursive flexibility and affords him the ability to destabilize the binary imperative’s claim to authority and thereby forge a new consideration of contemporary Chicana/o identity that is validated according to its expression instead of hindered by traditional perceptions.

At the time of the work’s inception, Santos lived in New York City, a metropolis of Anglo/European tradition that he recognizes as being “very far from the land [his ancestors] knew well.” Though he implies a personal sense of geographic displacement from the lived experience of his older family members, he quickly reaffirms: “I have been to places they never imagined, like England, Europe, Turkey, Peru, and the Sudan. Yet, wherever I go, there is a ribbon of primordial Mexican night, the color of obsidian, snaking in a dream through the skies high over my head.” (1999: 17-18) Here again, Santos metaphorically evokes an ancient sense of ‘Mexicanness,’ a cultural awareness that he recognizes as a “snaking ribbon” capable of perpetually spanning the political borders of nation-states and the temporal borders separating the ancient from the modern. This revision of cultural consciousness once again blasphemes binarism’s claim to finite authority, which traditionally prescribes political, social, temporal, and geographic limitations regarding a sense of cultural identity. Thus the Chicana/o blasphemer finds freedom from traditional epistemological boundaries that served to limit – politically, socially, temporally, and geographically – Chicana/o identity discourse.

As a new millennial Chicana/o citizen, capable of expressing a world unhindered by epistemological tradition, Santos revisits the traditional juxtaposition of death and forgetting. In a dream-like setting, Santo’s Uncle Raul, *postmortem*, comes to visit the author at his home in New York City:

As we stand in my new study, it grows quiet. The room is still empty, freshly painted the color of sand. I am speechless, still amazed to see my uncle, who had never visited New York City while he was alive. Time slows to a murmur as we sit down across from each other in the unchanging light. When I ask him first what he remembers of his life, his eyes close, his lips move in a whisper, and he reaches over to touch the back of my hand.

Then together, we remember. (1999: 47)

Here the author comes to understand more fully the interconnectedness of all things – that his life is an extension of that of his ancestors. The blasphemer reveals that actively establishing a connection with the past, an endeavor that has characterized Chicana/o literature since its inception, is not necessary, as that bond is inherent, already set in place. His responsibility lies not within the activity of remembrance *per se*, but rather in acknowledging his life and that of his ancestors as an elemental part of the same whole – the Chicana/o story.

It is significant here to note that much in the same way Santos's life is connected to all those who have gone before him, his blasphemous act of remembering is also an extension of that initiated by the late Tomás Rivera in *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*. Where Rivera expresses a collective Chicana/o identity by (re)membering “el año perdido / the lost year” out of the many and varied experiences of the Chicana/o community, Santos, as a millennial Chicana/o citizen, develops the argument further. For Santos, the act of remembering does not signify the present recovery of what was previously lost, but rather the potential to forge ahead into the limitless future, bringing along all ancestors and all knowledge, past and present.

My body, my brothers' bodies, the bodies of parents, cousins, uncles, aunts, great-uncles and -aunts, grandparents, are all vessels of the same ancient dust, exquisitely charged, polarized along the meridians of lands in the New World and the Old, destined always for some unnamable target further on in future time. For the Spanish, the Conquest of Mexico was another triumph on the irreversible path to the eventual reign of Christ on earth. For the Aztecs, whose voices are preserved in the Florentine Codex, time was circular [...]

Mestizos carry both of these stories in those Mexican chromosomes that are inscribed on tightly braided corn husks, painted in vivid cochineal inks by the ancestors who handed these bodies down through an unimaginably vast cascada of time. (1999: 69)

This existential understanding of the interconnectedness of all people and things is echoed once again in the Rosicrucian Manifestos:

[Brother Christian Rosencreutz] found still more better grounds for his faith, altogether agreeable with the harmony of the whole world, and wonderfully impressed in all periods of times. And thence proceedeth that fair concord, that, as in every several kernel is contained a whole good tree or fruit, so likewise is included in the little body of man the whole great world, whose religion, policy, health, members, nature, language, words and works, are agreeing, sympathizing, and in equal tune and melody with God, heaven, and earth. (Yates 1972: 242)

Thus, Santos reveals that he, a Chicana/o blasphemer, a globalized Chicana/o citizen, is the perpetual antithesis to forgetting – his identity discourse does not mandate the *recovery* of memory because he *is* memory.

As such, the author now understands more fully the discursive potential of his blasphemous dream. Santos succeeds in disputing the binary imperative and thereby destabilizing the traditional prescription of finality equated with death and forgetting, reinscribing them instead as continuous extensions of life and remembering, respectively. Thus, the Chicana/o blasphemer recognizes the potential of history's intermediacy to possess again and anew the story of his family. As a new millennial Chicana/o citizen, writing from the supplemental space of contingency that he calls *el Inframundo*, Santos exercises his ability to express his people's Mexican history in the Chicana/o present through the blasphemous activity:

Yet, at Lerma's on Zarzamora Street, you can still do the Aztec two-step to unadulterated live *conjunto* bands. The ancient aqueduct behind Mission Espada will still carry you back in time to the days when these lands were first written into the script of the conquest. Drive the elevated expressways into town and there's a bank office the shape of a Teotihuacán pyramid in your rearview mirror. The Tower of the Americas lies ahead, looking like a UFO hovering over downtown. Floating above the cicada songs and the dense canopy of trees in the barrio are the yellow poblano tile cupolas of Little Flower Church. This place casts a spell that makes the alien its own, that saturates the present and the future in the past, as if it were inescapable, as if the real and imaginary were meant to be swirled in the same timeless south Texas vortex. (1999: 150-51)

Here, Santos blasphemes traditional distinctions between past, present, and future, thereby exercising his ability to reposition present-day San Antonio as an evolved, futuristic Aztec city still in existence.

Insofar as he explores history's intermediacy via Rosicrucian beliefs and the ancient concept of *el Inframundo*, Santos does more than simply link the past with the present; he poses, once again, the future as an open question – the answer to which only he, as a new millennial Chicana/o citizen, possesses the ability to craft: “But I am not the singer in the family. Uela had told me: *I was to be a poet – the teller*. [...] I would be the teller in the family. What would I tell? What was worth telling? Could you tell a story about centuries of forgetting?” (1999: 253). By asking this rhetorical question, Santos comes to understand that his role as storyteller is not to uncover factual truths of what a mainstream epistemology deems ‘forgotten historical events,’ such as the mysterious death of his grandfather. Rather, as a globalized Chicana/o citizen, he is to forge a literary space in which the binary constructs of remembering

and forgetting, life and death, past, present and future, are not closed texts, but rather parts of the same whole, the Chicana/o story.

Lucía Suárez understands the need for such a discursive space, recognizing it as a paradoxical effort: “we must accept loss as part of our history. In order for this to occur, we need to cultivate a space of investigation, invention, and evolution that both recovers our lost history and allows for it to be lost” (2002: 477). Santos does indeed cultivate this space of evolution in his work:

And perhaps my father was right. It is okay to let go of the stories. In the end, they don't really tell you anything. It is okay to move on and to forget, to seek the blessing of forgetting. Through the century, the family had kept moving, from the countryside of Mexico and south Texas to San Antonio, from the barrio to the suburbs, and from Texas outward to a myriad of places, around the world. I had already lived for more than ten years far from the bones of the ancestors. (1999: 271)

The point of departure of his family's journey, Santos implies, is not the finalized past, but rather the perpetual present, *el Inframundo*, where remembering and forgetting, life and death, beginning and end, intersect: “Eventually, for the Santos, there were no more places of origin, just the setting out, just the going forth into new territory, new time” (1999: 210). Thus, Santos revises the traditional act of remembering – of recovering what was forgotten – as a futile attempt to understand the present and delineate a future. Instead, he offers a less exclusive celebration, a Chicana/o story that blasphemes the authority of finality prescribed by such historicity.

4. CONCLUSIONS: THE PRICE OF BLASPHEMY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation*, Santos has crafted a Chicana/o story that contradicts the nationalist precepts of historical consciousness and thereby allows for what the late Gloria Anzaldúa called a tolerance of ambiguity. As a an agent of Chicana/o blasphemy, Santos concludes his *zeitromanesque* memoir, understanding the importance of telling the story over the perceived factuality of the events told - something his father had understood before him:

My father finished his concert with his “Corrido de Múzquiz” [...] In that song, he sings of the town's local waterfall, the renowned beautiful women of Múzquiz, and how, of all places in the world, he would choose to die there... “That's it!” he said, switching off the amp and the microphone, gathering his cords up into neat loops. And when I ask him why he says in the song he'd like to die in Múzquiz, and not San Antonio, where he has lived his entire life, he replies, “that's just the story, John Phillip. That's just the story in the song.” (1999: 274)

Recalling the flexibility of performance within the *corrido* performance tradition, Santos implicitly reaffirms the blasphemous discourse characteristic of a Chicana/o experience, whose (his)story, according to its teller, may be told through infinite variations.

The effects of Chicana/o blasphemy should be far-reaching, especially within the community of Chicana/o Studies scholars, since it allows for the reconsideration and reexamination of certain works excluded to some measure for their assimilationist tendencies. Examined from the blasphemous point of view of cultural identity as expression and not perception, works like Richard Rodríguez's *Hunger of Memory* or José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* will find a legitimate, celebrated discursive space within the canon of Chicana/o literature.

Additionally, works renowned for their anti-assimilationist tendencies like Luis Valdez's play "Los vendidos" or Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* would warrant further study under the scope of Chicana/o blasphemy. Insofar as these works attempt to divorce a Chicana/o identity from a perceived discourse of assimilation instead of striving for a more inclusive expression of identity, they would seem paradoxically to participate in the same activity of identity prescription against which they are struggling.

Though I perceive Chicana/o blasphemy optimistically for all that it may offer, I also understand its potential disadvantages. It may be feasible now that anyone (even a *gringo!*) lay claim to the label Chicana/o arguing that an historical consciousness has been deemed irrelevant in the 21st Century, that present expression of identity now trumps all other arguments. Oddly enough, the nation's academic institutions and government surveys already understand this to be true. Indeed, when I checked the box in graduate school, identifying myself as Chicana/o citizen, no one called into question the legitimacy of my identity expression. No one disputed the University's decision to award me scholarships as a minority student. When marking Hispanic on the United States Census card, I am not made to pass an exam measuring my understanding of Chicana/o cultural norms, history, or language. Likewise, no one contradicts nor validates my identity claim according to my skin color.

The idea that someone other than traditionally-defined Chicana/os might appropriate a Chicana/o identity is a very real possibility, and probably quite upsetting to most of us who claim that identity and the historical consciousness that has traditionally come with it. This, to me, seems to be the price of Chicana/o blasphemy. However, we must take care not to take a step backward in the name of cultural preservation and/or exclusivity, for the blasphemous discourse that Santos brings to life pioneers a revolutionary dialogue regarding an envisioning of a 21st century globalized Chicana/o subject unhindered by the limiting perceptions of those around him/her.

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NOTES

¹ It should be noted that the pre-Movement generation of Chicana/o writers were also attempting to surpass the identity limitations prescribed by the social norms of the day, which classified Mexican-American citizens as the exotic Other. In this way, these writers crafted their narratives of assimilation to equate Mexican-American citizens with the dominant Anglo culture.

² *Mexican Village* (1945) was written by Josephina Niggli, a Mexican born novelist who is widely considered to be an early Chicana/o writer. Bob Webster, the protagonist of Niggli's novel, initially favors a stereotypical Anglo American identity only to opt for a more stereotypical Mexican cultural identity by the end of the novel, thus adhering to the precepts of assimilation.

³ George Washington Gómez is the protagonist of the novel with the same name, written by Américo Paredes between the years 1936 and 1940. Gómez initially rejects Anglo American culture only to embrace it by the novel's end. Richard Rubio is the protagonist of *Pocho*, a bindingsroman autobiographical novel that also adheres to an assimilationist tendency.

⁴ The *pachuco* figure was glorified in many works of Luis Valdez, whose plays "Zoot Suit," "The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa" and "Los vendidos" also voiced opposition to the assimilationist tendencies of previous generations. Tomás Rivera's *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* also served to exalt the figure of the *campesino* farmworkers and *pachuco* youth.

⁵ Rodriguez is perhaps the most notorious and publicly denounced representative of the assimilationism within the Chicana/o community. However, I argue that his assimilationist discourse is afforded legitimate space within the theories of Chicana/o blasphemy.

⁶ Esperanza is, of course, the protagonist of Sandra Cisneros' celebrated novel *The House on Mango Street*. By rejecting the patriarchal claim to authority within Chicana/o culture and literary discourse, she initiated a movement away from a Chicana/o identity that served to subjugate feminine bodies and voices.