Kenneth Odle

Research Essay

Dr. Gwen Tarbox

April 24, 2009

Machismo vs. *Éxito*:

The Search for Male Identity in Mexican-American Young Adult Literature

Introduction

In two simple sentences, Victor Martinez sums up the dilemma of growing up in the white-dominated society of the United States for many young people of color: "The next day, Mom began thinking about the future. She wanted me to go a better school across town, where all the white kids got educated" (Martinez 37). Anything "better" is generally associated with "white[1]," and any attempt to better oneself is often views by others members of the ethnic group as "trying to be white," i.e., turning your back on your own ethnic group and identity.

This quest for identity is made even more difficult for young Hispanic-America males, because assimilation complicates the coming-of-age process by challenging the traditional views of masculinity and roles of men within both the family and community. As young Hispanic-American males come of age, they must decide which model of masculinity to choose, a Hispanic one that stays true to their origins, an American one which is true to the land they live in, or some combination of the two.

Three recent books about Mexican-American young men (one fiction and two non-

[1] Since all three of the texts in question take place primarily in the United States, the terms "white" and "Anglo" are used interchangeably.

fiction) examine closely how the main characters find models for their growth and development as they move into adulthood. Victor Martinez's *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*, which is a fictionalized account of a fourteen-year-old boy growing up in the barrios of southern California, which stands in contrast with the real-life experiences that Francisco Jiménez documents in his books *The Circuit* and *Breaking Through*.

Hispanic Culture and Literature

There is relatively little fiction that address directly the theme of masculinity in Hispanic culture. This may because authors attempting to write for a broader audience do not want to be seen as perpetuating stereotypes, or that a Hispanic audience is already familiar with the Hispanic concept of *machismo* ("manliness"), or simply that the concept is too broad to generalize. In any event, it therefore becomes necessary to approach these works at a tangent, working from author interviews and journal articles about Hispanic culture and literature in general.

As with any ethnic group in America, Hispanic identity is a somewhat fluid concept. One can be "Hispanic," "Chicano," or "Latino," and can additionally identify with one's country of origin, whether it be México, Cuba, Spain, Argentina, or even the United States. However, there are still themes that predominate Hispanic literature. For example, Rafael Pérez-Torres notes that "Chicano critics and writers have responded to the often-marginal conditions in which their sense of self has been configured in the United States," adding that "there is socially, economically, politically and culturally a profound awareness of displacement that underlies Chicano consciousness" (116-117).

Those "often-marginalized conditions" are contrasted by the strong role of the family

(and to a lesser degree, that of the Catholic church) in Hispanic culture. The Hispanic concept of family is more inclusive than the predominant Anglo concept of family, which tends to focus mostly on the nuclear family. As Manuel Villar Raso and María Herrera-Sobek observe, "in Chicano culture, the family is a most important entity with its endless series of godfathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, in laws (sic), and other extended family members" (27). In the three novels under discussion, it not just the immediately family that plays an important role in the characters' lives, but especially those "other extended family members" who may, or may not be, related by blood. This is especially important in understanding Jiménez's close relationship to his teachers, and the attraction that the gang has for Manuel in *Parrot in the Oven*.

The Quest for Identity

Victor Martinez begins his novel *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* discussing his older brother Bernardo ("Nardo"), who "flipped through more jobs than a thumb through a deck of cards" and then listing the jobs he has gone through so far: dishwasher, busboy, parking attendant, patty turner (1). Nardo refuses to identify with any of these jobs, and by beginning with this litany of failed attempts at identity, Martinez strongly foregrounds the lack of identification which runs through the novel.

The narrator, Manny, has his own identification problems. As Phillip Ruben Serrato points out, "Manuel habitually disidentifies from the males around him" (217) (a point which is in stark contrast to Francisco in *The Circuit* and *Breaking Through*). In fact, the only person Manny does identify strongly with is his dead grandfather, a point which Pérez-Torres indicates is often used in Chicano/a narratives "to embody a sense of connectivity between the present and the historical past" (118).

When Manny's mom wants to send him to Hawthorne school, the mostly white school described earlier, she sends him to get a copy of his grades himself, because she "had heard rumors that they didn't like kids leaving my school and sometimes would mix things up for months" (37). Manny's mother is distrustful of the white establishment, making it difficult for Manny to identify with his teachers, particularly Mr. Hart, whom he encounters that afternoon. Mr. Hart is encouraging however, telling him "[y]ou *have* the grades. You're a pretty smart boy" (38), unintentionally reinforcing the notion that "white" is equated with "quality.

Mr. Hart offers to give him a ride home, but Manny is reluctant, because Mr. Hart keeps staring at his dilapidated shoes. Eventually, Mr. Hart gives twenty dollars to Manny "for school supplies" although Martinez leads one to conclude that the money is for new shoes (40-43). The only emotion that Martinez employees throughout this passage is embarrassment. Manny is too embarrassed to admit that the idea of transferring schools is his mother's idea, not his, and Mr. Hart seems embarrassed to give him the money. This embarrassment creates a gulf between them that neither can bridge, leaving Manny unable to identify with a white teacher, and that teacher's estimation of his ability and potential.

Manny does not want to be seen getting out of Mr. Hart's car in front of his house, and the reasons Martinez gives provides insight into Manny's embarrassing encounter with Mr. Hart. Manny's mother would regard such an incident as an embarrassment, thinking that "somebody from the public housing works was coming to complain" or thinking that Mr. Hart's car was a police car "bringing her son home to psychologically torture her" (45). Her suspicions about white people do not lead Manny to be equally suspicious, but they do underscore his own reluctance to identify in any way with non-Hispanics.

His father's reaction to Mr. Hart is economic in nature, because he "had it in for white

guys like Mr. Hart who had good jobs and dressed in white shirts and black ties" (46). Clearly, Manny's father identifies his own inability to find or maintain a good job with the idea that white people have all the good jobs. In that case, there would be no point in transferring to a mostly-white school, no point in trying to better oneself, no point in seeking an identity other than one which equates non-whiteness with poverty. As Manny tersely sums up, "[w]hat mattered to my dad was…that he'd be beholden to some white man for giving his son a ride home" (46). In view of such strong parental reactions to a simple act from a white teacher, it is little wonder that Manny does not identify with Mr. Hart.

Manny does temporarily identify with a gang, which Serrato finds disturbing, and describes as a development that "seems inconsistent with the trajectory of the novel" (220). This is less problematic for Pérez-Torres, who notes that his ultimate lack of identification with the gang is a "moment of decision" that comes "when Manny realizes he does not want to be like Eddie…but instead wants to lecture him 'about how to treat people, how to be somebody who knows how to treat people'" (122). While noting that this epiphany is "perhaps overly neat," it also "leads Manny to see his house and his family with new eyes" (122), an essential step toward adulthood.

Jiménez covers similar themes, never failing to describe the clash of cultures he experienced as a young child. In his interview with Chris Carger, he talks about "attempting to reconcile my family's traditional Mexican culture with American culture" and how he "encountered obstacles within both my Mexican culture and my new American culture" (17). Even though Manny fails to identify with any Hispanic males over the course of the summer described in *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*, Jiménez, even as an adult, still identifies strongly with the values his Méxican father instilled in him, including the importance of strong parent-child

relations. As Deanna Day notes in "Perservering with Hope: Francisco Jiménez," "[h]e cringes" when he "hears teachers say to children, 'If you don't study hard, you're going to end up flipping burgers,' because it's possible that some of the parents of those children are flipping burgers. These comments could hurt the relationship between the parents and the child" (270).

This identification with his father is a part of Jiménez's identity from a very young age. As he describes in *The Circuit* (in the chapter entitled "Soledad") the young Francisco watches his family disappear into the cotton fields, telling himself " 'If I learn to pick cotton, Papá will let me go with him, Mamá, and Roberto, and I won't be left alone anymore!" (11). Ultimately, however, in order to become both an adult, and an adult in the American sense of the word, Francisco will ultimately have to leave his family and find himself alone.

Jiménez explores this idea in *Breaking Through* (in the chapter entitled, appropriately enough, "A Breakthrough"), when he has to get his father's blessing, rather than his permission, to go away to college. Francisco is reluctant to tell his teachers at school, which whom he has developed a positive, if tentative, identity, why he is afraid to go to college, because "Papá had taught us to keep our family life private" (166), an attitude fairly typical of Hispanics living in Anglo society. As his teachers and counselors help him to solve the problems his family will face when he goes away to college, Francisco is dimmed by his father's potential reaction. "My excitement slowly faded," he relates. "Who knew what Papá would say?" (166).

The eventual discussion leads to a showdown with his father, in which Francisco exclaims that the opportunity presented to him by his white teachers is his "only chance," to which his father exclaims "It's your chance to shut up. *Eres un malcriado*! [You're a crybaby!] Don't they teach you respect at school, ah?" (168). His father views Francisco's desire to leave his family to go away to college as a distinctly Anglo form of disrespect for his family and his

culture. As Francisco's mother explains to him "[y]our Papá wants the family to be together. He doesn't want his children to leave.…Now, if you go to college, you'll leave too" (169).

Even though his father had no intention of remaining in the United States (Jiménez ref?), he eventually makes peace with the American ideals he finds himself surrounded by. This comes through the work of the Spanish teacher at Francisco's school, Mr. Penney, who ventures to the family's hovel to explain the situation, but in Spanish. The connection of language is what breaks down the barriers of culture for Francisco's parents, who do not speak English. As Francisco's mother explains:

> *Es buenta gente* [He's a good person]. We couldn't believe that an important person like him would visit us. He and Papá talked about Mexico. His wife is from Oaxaca[2], you know, and he lived there for many years. He went on and on talking about college and you. *Habló como perico* [He talked like a parrot[3]].

Clearly, the idea that an American would take the time not only to speak to him, but to spend time in México and take a Méxican wife, makes an impression on Francisco's father. It is this realization that culture can go both ways, rather than one culture dominating another, which allows Francisco's father to make the break with his traditional Hispanic understanding of family; that the best way to keep his son close to him is to let him go.

---

[2] A state in México.

[3] Parrots play an important role in Méxican culture, and are a common pet. For example, the title of Martinez's novel *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*, is based on a Méxican proverb about a parrot who is sitting in the oven and complaining about how hot it is the shade, a reference to people who are too ignorant to realize the situation they are in (Martinez 51-52). Jiménez also has a chapter in *The Circuit* ("Death Forgiven") relating his experience with his pet parrot, named "El Perico" (57-60.

Conclusions

The main difference between the works of Martinez and Jiménez is that Martinez is writing fiction while Jiménez is writing nonfiction. Structurally, they are similar, each book consisting primarily of a series of vignettes that are able to stand alone[4]. More importantly, the sources each author relies upon are incredibly similar. As Martinez notes about his work, "some of [the stories] happened to me. Others happened to my brothers or sisters—they told me about them" (Martinez interview). Jiménez uses a similar approach, in that "he researches his family's history by interviewing his family, reviewing documents, and visiting the many places his family lived," while noting that "he can't remember all of the details of his past, [believing] that 90% of the material in his books is factual and 10% is fictional" (Day 268).

Yet each book comes to remarkably different ends. Manny comes home to a vision of his sisters sleeping on together on the sofa, noting that the living room "was wondrous, like a place I was meant to be" (Martinez 215). In other words, Manny is identifying with his family, and the traditional Hispanic importance of family. Martinez dilutes this identification somewhat, however, for as Manny continues, he finds the room "dissolving and sifting through my eyelashes in thin, filtered streams, and then there was only the dull blood under my eyelids, then dark, then sleep" (216). Martinez is suggesting that the Hispanic concept of family is still tremendously important to Manny, but that is but a dream from which he will someday awake. He does not discuss what Manny might encounter upon awakening, however, as he has not written a sequel.

Jiménez, on the other hand, suggests something entirely different at the end of *Breaking Through*. "I…crossed the bridge, and headed north to Santa Clara" he relates. "I was going to

[4] As indeed, three of the stories from *The Circuit*, namely "The Circuit," "Moving Still," and "Learning the Game" have been previously published as independent stories.

college. After so many years, I was still moving" (Jiménez 193). He literally crosses a bridge, but this also is a convenient metaphor for the journey he is making, for he is the first member of his family to move far away and to attend college. His words are concrete, based on a solid reality, rather than a dreamy vision of what his family and his heritage *might* mean to him. He has managed to integrate his innate work ethic, which had previously been associated only with manual labor, with the American emphasis on education, which was not available to him in his native México. His ability not just to survive but to thrive within the American educational system stems from his father, a person he identifies strongly with. As he notes, "[m]y father used to say that all work was valuable. It didn't matter what kind of work it was" (Carger 18). His father's acceptance of his educational goals indicates that the Hispanic idea of work has expanded to include the American concept of education.

A strength of Jiménez's work is that it spans most of his formative years, whereas a weakness of *Parrot in the Oven* is that it only spans a single summer. In that single summer, Manny comes to the realization that he has to find a different model for his adult sense of self, but he fails to do so by the book's conclusion By examining his life over a number of years, Jiménez shows us how he does manage to find a successful model for himself by combining the Mexican work ethic and family ethic with the American opportunity for higher education. What this dichotomy shows us, therefore, is that the process of identification cannot be captured in a snapshot of a single experience or even an entire summer, but rather, it is a process that must be viewed and evaluated over the course of years. Both books suggest that such individuals must "raise tensions" and "begin to live and dream outside the boundaries determined" by a strictly Hispanic viewpoint (Sutton 772). Only then can the question of identity be fully answered.

Works Cited

Carger, Chris Liska. "Multicultural Literature: Talking with Francisco Jiménez." *Book Links*. Dec. 2001/Jan. 2002: 14-19.

Day, Deanna. "Persevering with Hope: Francisco Jiménez." *Language Arts* 83.3 (2006): 266-270.

Jiménez, Francisco. *Breaking Through*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

Jiménez, Francisco. *The Circuit: Stories From the Life of a Migrant Child*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1997.

Martinez, Victor. Interview. *Newshour*. 7 November 1996. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/november96/martinez_11-7.html>

Martinez, Victor. *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*. New York: Joanna Cotler-HarperCollins, 1996.

Pérez-Torres, Rafael. "Placing Loss in a Chicano/a Narrative." *Literature and Psychology* 49.1 (2003): 110-127.

Raso, Manuel Villar, and María Herrera-Sobek. "A Spanish Novelist's Perspective on Chicano/a Literature." *Journal of Modern Literature* 21.1 (2001): 17-34.

Serrato, Phillip Ruben. "'It Doesn't Have to Be This Way': Re/presentations of Chicano Masculinity in Chicano and Chicana Literature, Film, and Performance." Diss. University of California Riverside.

Sutton, Roger. Rev. of *Breaking Through*, by Francisco Jiménez. *The Horn Book Magazine* Nov/Dec 2001: 772.