

HOW TO BE A CHICANA ROLE MODEL, OR HOW TO BE A 21ST CENTURY CHICANA

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The Chicano Movement founded its origins on the basis of the existence of a clear-cut borderline between what was considered center/periphery. Nonetheless, said Movement, of an extremely inherent patriarchal character, promoted the maintenance of an internal hierarchical division based on gender and sexuality. The Literature produced by Chicanas, hence, fiercely fought to dismantle such breaking line, paving the way for the publication of the notion of “Chicana identity” from a completely Chicana feminist perspective, and consequently, created role models and categories that became central for the Chicana plight.

The main objective of this essay is to observe the way the new sociocultural situation of the US society in general, and the Chicano/a community in particular, have contributed to the inevitable revision of categories and labels which became central within the group during the previous decades and depict the revision of said categories in the work of a young, contemporary Chicana writer, Michele Serros.

The notion of identity as a cultural construct in a constant process of redefinition and redescription and the conceptual instability of categories such as gender, race or class are issues that are no longer debatable in contemporary thought. In a parallel way, the rigid center/periphery borderline and the stereotypical categorization of communities, individuals and social practices that said border encompasses, is no longer applicable to contemporary parameters of social organization. Notions such as “minority” groups, or literature written by “minority” groups are, at the same time, absolutely arguable, and the dividing line between what is “minor” and “mainstream” is blurred within its own boundaries.

The Chicano Movement that originated and emerged during the decade of the sixties, together with other human-right movements that occurred within and from a “too-stratified and center-bound” organized US society, founded its

origins, undoubtedly, on the basis of the existence of a clear-cut borderline between what was considered center/periphery and mainstream/margin. The social, economic and linguistic conditions in which the Chicano community had to survive within the extremely hierarchical US social organization, marked a clear target in the claims of the emergent Movimiento. The center/periphery line had to be dismantled, together with the enormous amount of myths, stereotypes and misconceptions that it supported its own existence with. Literature, among other means, was soon identified as an effective tool for the redescription of stereotypes, the adoption of an up-to-then negated voice, and in sum, for the questioning of the center and periphery positions.

Nonetheless, the concentric and infinite nature of said center/periphery condition provoked that the emergent and vindicative Movimiento Chicano, of an extremely inherent patriarchal character, promoted the maintenance of an internal hierarchical division based on gender and sexuality. Chicano men occupied a clear central, privileged position within a community that sustained the existence of an internal peripheral group, with the support of the same literature that tried to break the macro-boundaries that relegated the Chicano community to a marginalized position. Ironically, and in a parallel way, it maintained stereotypes that condemned Chicanas to the same marginalized space, in the name of tradition and the continuity of the group.

The situation of Chicana women has been widely described by different critics and sociologists in the last years as one that experienced a triple kind of oppression: firstly, Chicana women endured the same discriminatory practices that women worldwide did. Secondly, they were, as their male colleagues vindicated, part of an ethnic and economic “peripheric” group within the whole US social stratification, and lastly, the strong patriarchal tradition that their community supported, excluded them from having a centered position within the group. The first steps towards the vindication of the individual and social rights of these women, were taken together with the emergent white feminist movement. Nonetheless, the complex nature of Chicana identity, which comprises categories such as gender, ethnicity and class, made the alliance with the white feminists unfeasible. At the same time, the response of Chicano men was one of negation and rejection of the women’s vindications, which, for them, attacked directly the stability of the community and the maintenance of its cultural traditions.

Literature, once again, served as an effective means for the redescription of the myths and stereotypes that kept Chicana women trapped within the internal boundaries of the patriarchal order of their community, as well as to make these women visible in the eyes of the mainstream society. The new emergent Chicana voices gained control over the strongly gender-dividing myths and icons such as La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Llorona and/or La Malinche, paving

the way for a new description of Chicana reality from a feminine perspective. Edwina Barvosa-Carter describes the efforts and achievements of the literature produced by Chicanas up to present times in the following way:

I consider the publication of literature by Chicanas on two levels. First, I regard the struggle of Chicana creative writers to publish their work as an *act* of claiming voice, as a political phenomenon in which heretofore marginalized voices consciously circumvent a variety of obstacles to raise issues of personal, social, and political significance. Second, I view this literature in terms of its *content*, as an important literary development that has introduced new ideas and interpretations of social and political significance. Among the significant themes probed by Chicana writing is the transformation of subjectivity arising from cultural difference and complexity. Many Chicana writers have fought hard to bring their writing and perspectives to public view, and many of their voices are well situated to speak to issues of social and political urgency. (Barvosa-Carter 2000:262)

Undoubtedly, the social, cultural and personal accomplishments that Chicana women in general, and Chicana writers in particular achieved were many and their impact in the understanding of the relationships within the community, indisputable. However, the newly-arrived 21st century and a new organization of social and personal ways of interaction as a consequence of a more globalized, technologized, dehumanized society, has carried with it a different set of problems and life situations and the discriminatory practices that many peripheral communities endured in previous times have acquired new, more subtle forms. Consequently, the strong political vindicative movement that contributed to the emergence and development of a Chicano body of literature has attenuated as such, and even though the voices that reclaim the full rights of the Chicano community within the US social organization are still present, the most contemporary forms of literature portray this new, more veiled situation of marginalization. The main objective of this essay is, accordingly, to observe the way this new sociocultural situation of the US society in general, and the Chicano/a community in particular, have contributed to the inevitable revision of categories and labels which became central and in some way “mainstream” within the group during the previous decades, such as “Chicana writer”, and even the concept of “Chicana identity”, specially among Chicana intellectuals and artists, and observe how this phenomenon is portrayed in the work of a young, contemporary Chicana writer, Michele Serros.

Michele Serros, a young Californian poet, novelist and essay writer, is a member of a new generation of Chicano/a writers, who, as their predecessors did, use their work to portray the contemporary situation of Chicanos/as, in an attempt to redescribe the new center/periphery relationship within the 21st century Chicano community. Serro’s fresh and young literature, however, portrays the center/periphery axis not only outside the group of Chicana women

writers, but places it within the boundaries of this same group, or thus to say, Serros's literature identifies the borderline that it exists among the generation of second wave, "Movimiento Chicana feminists" and contemporary Chicana young women and feminists in her highly acclaimed novel, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model*, first published in the year 2000.

A partly fictional, partly autobiographical piece of literature, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* exposes, in an extremely ironic and humorous way, the life and thoughts of a young Chicana who aims to be a writer, but feels in the periphery of the normative roles and models that her antecedent Chicana writers described and proposed. The author examines different life situations and concerns of the young woman and her means of negotiating the way towards her "centerization" and normalization. The young protagonist dreams of once becoming a "Chicana writer", a category that she understands as a culturally and socially fixed label, which she naturally and inherently deserves, because she has been born a Chicana and has written three poems. However, the novel portrays the process through which the protagonist understands that being a "Chicana writer" includes issues of ethnicity, a marked cultural identity, as well as a given social and political stance, which she somehow lacks, as a result of a more natural, intrinsic understanding of what it is to be a Chicana and the aforementioned change in the discriminatory practices exerted upon the Chicano community, which are less identifiable, and thus, demand a less overt political positioning.

The recognition of the accomplishments of the Chicana writers and thinkers during the decades of the eighties and nineties for the revision of the stereotypes that had provoked the obvious marginalization and "peripherization" of the female Chicano community is noticeable in Serros's work. However, concomitantly, in a highly comical, thus respectful and revisionist way, the author and protagonist of the text criticises the fact that, in her understanding, the Movimiento and its achievements favoured an inevitable move of Chicano intellectuals to a new, "canonized" center position. The author proposes through the presentation of certain episodes that she personally experienced, that the Movement that eagerly and fiercely fought for the revision of discriminatory practices, created itself a hierarchical and an strongly marked understanding of issues such as Chicano identity, the importance of the creative processes for the general publication of said identity as well as the placement of a more veiled center/periphery axis within the community. Serros's novel, in this respect, calls the attention on this issue and proposes the continuous revision of said axis, as she depicts a very contemporary, young and fresh understanding of Chicana identity.

Her first encounter with the difficulty of becoming not only a writer, but a "Chicana writer", is presented when she is invited to participate at a Chicana

Writer's Conference, even though she has only written three poems that she keeps in a folder. Her first moment of disillusionment and acknowledgement of the fact that she lacks some of the "basic" ingredients of what it takes to be a "Chicana writer" arises when she finds out she has been invited to serve lunch at the conference, rather than to read her poetry. The woman who informs her of the fact clearly states that "We've had our writers, our *Chicana* writers, selected for months" (Serros 2000:7), giving a special emphasis to the word *Chicana*, and thus, excluding her not only from the community of writers in general, but of that of the *Chicana* writer's community in particular. This moment of exclusion is further developed at the conference, when she faces other "Chicana writers."

The woman behind her then asked me something in Spanish. I answered her back and continued to scoop fruit salad onto her paper plate. She didn't move forward but instead looked at her friend in the shoulder scarf, rolled her eyes, and remarked in Spanish, "I thought this as a *Chicana* writers' conference and this one here can't even speak Spanish!"

I looked up at her. What was *that* about? What had I said wrong? Did I use "muy" instead of "mucho"? *Rs* not rolled out longed enough? Oooh, I can get so sloppy with those. Should I have asked her? A *Chicana* help another *Chicana* with her Spanish? I don't think so. (Serros 2000:8)

The episode at the conference marks an extremely disappointing starting point in Serros' development as a *Chicana* writer, and concomitantly, makes her aware that she lacks another basic ingredient to be a proper "Chicana writer": language. As Gloria Anzaldúa clearly posited in her seminal work *Borderlands/La Frontera*, "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity- I am my language" (1987:59), language and the lack of it and its eventual reappropriation become one of the most important issues of the plight of the first *Chicana* feminists in general, and *Chicana* writers in particular. Thus, several of the novels that were published in the first two decades of the emergence and subsequent development of *Chicana* literature, devoted to the publication and portrayal of the life stories of several protagonists, who became role models themselves for the general public, and presented a clear need of speaking up and shaping their own identity. Thus, "Many *Chicana* narratives belong to the *Bildungsroman* genre, the literary form traditionally used to portray the process of self-development "(Eysturoy 1996:3), and furthermore, to that of the *Künstlerromane*, where "the concept of creativity as a catalyst for self-discovery is the basic theme" (Eysturoy 1996:21). In this respect, Serros' novel does not move away from the tendency of the works of her predecessors.

Her experience at the *Chicana* writer's conference, hence, contributes to the awakening of her identity consciousness, which she had never doubted about to that moment. Once again, Serros' work presents a more natural, less

socially and politically charged way of experiencing one's own ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity, a way that the novelist presents in opposition to that of the first Chicana writers, which, as a consequence of the obvious social and cultural discrimination they experienced, they had to make explicit continuously. Young Michele feels in the periphery of the group she longs to belong to, for her linguistic identity does not contribute to the achievement of her desired identity. Thus, she writes a "poem" in which she portrays her frustration and disillusionment, and portrays this episode in the following way:

After Angela left my room, I worked on a new poem. A poem 'bout how Latinos treat other Latinos who don't speak Spanish well.

*My skin is brown,
Just like theirs,
But I'm unworthy of the color
'cause I don't speak Spanish
the way I should.*

Great idea huh? The next morning I gathered my three "old" poems and my brand spankin' new one and stuck them in the new Pee-Chee. I was armed. I was ready. (Serros 2000:9-10)

The last two sentences of the previous quotation portray, in an ironic way, the power literature and words had in the development of a Chicana consciousness, and as a consequence, of the Chicana writer's community she wants to belong to. Her development as a writer will be present all through the novel, which depicts her struggle to achieve her dream, and her trip to Mexico to learn or as she says, "improve", her Spanish (Serros 2000:102). Once again, and differently to what happened in previous Chicana novels, the connection to Mexico and the way the protagonist relates her trip, is presented as absolutely instrumental and moves away from any spiritual connotation that the last generations of writers may have provided it with. Among other things, she decides to travel to Mexico to learn Spanish, a language she describes as a foreign language for completely rational and practical reasons, as she herself explains: "the main reason I wanted to learn more Spanish was for credit. The foreign-language credit. I couldn't graduate without it" (Serros 2000:101). This sentence portrays the absolute personal detachment she experiences from the language of her supposedly "mother-country", which, she also describes as foreign and exotic, reproducing the view of mainstream US society that describes Mexico as an exotic, "natural" place. She says:

In the catalog there were pictures of students (white) lounging around the school's swimming pool (aqua blue) being served piña coladas by waiters (brown). Another photo had two female students (white) buying jewelry (silver) from native artisans (brown). I looked at the photos and wondered how I'd fit in. (Serros 2000:103)

The last words imply subtly another key issue which is essential in the process of raising the protagonist's identity consciousness: ethnicity. The previous words portray her understanding of the importance of ethnicity and, in this case, skin color, in the establishment of clear-cut dividing lines, as in the pictures of her school in Mexico. However, her different and somehow less politically and natural approach to her own identity and ethnicity contributes to her doubts about where in the color-line should she position herself, as well as on how she fits in such marked dividing line. Once again, the novel portrays a very natural, positive and normal approach to ethnic identity and what it connotes. Michele, the protagonist, is aware of her skin color and cultural Mexican heritage and thus, of her ethnic identity, but she is not really conscious of the fact that it is the others who see her different and mark and label her as "ethnic." Michele becomes brown in the gaze of those who assume they occupy a central, thus, "normal", privileged position in the ethnic configuration of society. The episode with her friend Terri, who uses the nickname G.G (golden girl) when sending messages in her father's Cell Broadcast to meet boys, is representative of this situation.

When we were in her room, I told her I had decided on Cali Girl as my handle.

"You mean, like California?" she asked.

"Yeah, sorta":

"But you're Mexican."

"So?"

"So, you look like you're more from Mexico than California":

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, California is like, blond girls, you know":

"Yeah, but I *am* Californian. I mean, real Californian. Even my great-grandma was born here."

"It's just that you don't look like you're from California."

"And you're not exactly golden", I snapped. (Serros 2000:17)

Her natural acceptance of her color and ethnic heritage collides with the way the rest of the people see her and make her part of a periphery she does not think she belongs to. However, as the novel evolves and the protagonist learns her way within intricate ethnic and cultural modes of relationship and behaviour, she learns to take advantage of the apparent discrimination that her skin color, and mainly her too-Indian-looking nose provoke, and learns how to use the "objectification", "exotization" that her and her community have

experienced for ages. Thus, she recounts the following episode when she is asked to model for an artist,

“Well, we pick people for different reasons,” she said. “A certain look, a particular feature. One of the first things that really attracted me to you was your nose.”

“My nose?”

“Yeah, it’s not one of those typical small, little, upturned things. You know everyone and their mother has a nose like that, or I should say, everyone who reads *Marie Claire* and then goes out to get a nose jog. Your nose looks very-how should I say? Indian?”

“Indian?”

“Yes. Is there a problem with that?”

I slowly squeezed the sides of my nose and thought about her question. Well, yes, there was a problem with that. This woman was totally exoticizing me. It was plain and simple. I read about this type of behaviour, this particular form of racism in that book *Making Face, Making Soul* and actually in an episode of *What’s Happening* when Shirley is hired for a job ‘cause she made the work environment more “interesting.” Last thing I wanted was to be some exploited subject and be put on display for this woman’s little art show. Yes, there was definitely a problem. But how do I go about making my point?

(...)

This nose would never be caught dead in a *Marie Claire* spread, but was able to negotiate supply and demand. And so my little Indian nose went all the way to the bank after having made four hundred bucks in just two afternoons during the month of May.” (Serros 2000:82-83)

The comic way she presents this act of appropriation and internal recognition of her difference, as well as of the personal use she is able to do of this difference, provides the issue of ethnic identity with absolutely fresh and new connotations, leaving aside any biased, political meaning. In this regard, Serros implies the idea that “the question of identity and who needs it forms part of an ongoing critique of “totalizing” essentialist/nationalist conceptions. This critique raises the issue of who is the centered author/beneficiary of a social practice and who is excluded and disenfranchised. (That is, who bears the burden of naming social, political and economic, geographic, and systemic differences, and who bears the burden of producing and alternative social and representational landscape” (Chabram-Dernersesian 161).”

The continuation and end of the novel present the development of Michele as a writer and the reader witness the fact that she ends up touring with Lollapalooza reading her poetry, and being a Chicana writer who is invited to

universities and schools to talk about her experience, even though she still sometimes experiences hilarious situations when signing her work:

And then Xavier, who spells his name with an X, started to walk away. But then he turned around. What was this? One last comment? One last look into my eyes before his long lonely drive back home?

“Oh, by the way,” he said, “I just loved your first book.”

“My first book?” I asked, confused.

“Yeah, *The House on Mango Street*.” (Serros 2000:204)

To sum up, *How to Be a Chicana Role Model* presents a contemporary, young and fresh document which serves the reader to understand the issues that concern contemporary Chicanas as the protagonist and to present a new portrayal of Chicana identity, an identity which has adapted to contemporary times and needs. On the other hand, the novel presents a clear revision of the probably inevitable center/periphery division and categorization of identities that emerged as a consequence of the achievements of the Chicano/a Movement, because

Cultural forces, such as stereotypic representations of women of Mexican descent in popular culture, including film, literature, television, music, and the visual arts, produce other forms of disempowerment. Just as such renderings can work to homogenize and codify the experiences of Chicanas, they can also flatten and erase the multiplicity and complexity of Chicana lives. (Arredondo 2003:4)

On the other hand, the novel presents a vindication of the need of a continuous revision of categories such as “Chicana identity” and “Chicana writer”, among others, and definitely, of a personal identity that escapes the stable “particular imagined community” (Klahn 2003:116), for, as Michelle Habell-Pallan describes Rosa Linda Fregoso’s understanding of cultural identity, “the production of cultural identity is dynamic and subject to historical, geographical, and political change. Thus, what was once considered to constitute Chicana and Chicano identity is not completely lost in the past but does in some way inform the construction of a future identity, though it does not necessarily determine it” (2005:6). Serros’ novel is thus a clear example of the fact that to be a Chicana, one first needs to be herself.

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