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VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN CHICANO /A  
LITERATURE

Summary

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## 1. Argument

Chicano/a identity is a special type of postcolonial and inter-American identity forged in certain ethnic and geopolitical zones of the American southwest. ). I define the term inter-American identity as a *transcultural identity, essentially hybrid, produced in the Mexican-American borderlands* and receiving influences from multiple cultural crystallizations: Anglo-American, Mexican, Indian (Aztec), Spanish, etc. Inter-American studies emerged recently as a subdivision of American cultural studies, illustrating the continual interrogation of borders between and outside the American nations. They rely heavily on *the Americas paradigm*, which challenges the myth of U. S. exceptionalism and the idea of a distinct, Latin American identity. In addition, inter-American studies aim at building bridges between the so-called first and third worlds, underscoring the silent presence of multiple identities and cultural regions that give “America” its plural form.

Which are the ingredients of the American dream and how does it characterize the American identity? What kind of voice do Chicanos/as hold in immigrant America and how is the American dream concept thematically and ideologically reflected in their literary works? Can the Mexican border crossing be interpreted as a metaphorical translation to the American location of culture? How does the Chicano/a subject come to terms with the issues of assimilation/ acculturation, identity/ alterity, ethnic/ Anglo-American in the so-called New World culture? Is the Chicano/a vision of the American dream a fulfillment or a nightmare?

The aim of my doctoral paper is to explore the questions raised above from an inter-American perspective, starting from a corpus of texts which are either novels or autobiographies, and to provide a critical analysis of these works which, due to their ethnic or minority status, have been for a long time silenced outside the Euro-American canon. Moreover, I try to look at the means in which the American dream is constructed as a cultural

narrative in these texts and to analyze the factors which influence to a great extent the characters'/ authors' realization of the American dream: family relationships, education, acculturation, hybridity, ethnic and racial negotiations of identity, the Mexican-American borderland.

## 2. The American Dream as the Cultural Expression of North American Identity

Originally a creation of the European thought, the concept of *American dream* defies any coercive definition in the field of American cultural studies. According to Frederic Carpenter, the American dream “has never been defined exactly, and probably never can be. It is both too various and too vague”<sup>1</sup>. However vague and undefined it might prove to be, the dream has had an unconscious influence in American mentality, crystallizing a specific *forma mentis* and, at the same time, differentiating it from the European tradition. From the Puritan enterprise and their dream of religious freedom and a good life to present day American dreams of home ownership and attaining success, or the Hollywood fame and glory, the American dream, born in the collective imagination, lays the foundation of American culture and literature. Carpenter furthermore observes that “American literature has differed from English because of the constant and omnipresent influence of the American dream upon it.”<sup>2</sup>

The American dream is the cultural expression of North American identity and, even if it was occasionally transformed into the American nightmare, it remains one of the most motivating forces of American civilization and a viable token of American exceptionalism. The American dream cannot be interpreted as a myth in the traditional sense of the word, but as a *metaphor of translation* of the diasporic subject from an old cultural space to a new cultural space. This metaphorical translation can be considered at the individual's level (the immigrant) or, in a larger sense, at the collective level, as a sort of *translatio imperii*, that is the succession of power or the shift of meaning from Europe to America, the modification of the old European values and their distillation in order to found a new (perfectible) society, the American one. Moreover, it constitutes a *cultural narrative*, in , in the sense of Roger G. Betsworth, with manifold implications in the

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<sup>1</sup> Carpenter, Frederic, *American Literature and the Dream*, Books for Library Press, Freeport, New York, 1968, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

multiple and distinct immigrant stories that created America. According to Betsworth, a cultural narrative “informs people’s sense of the story in which they set the story of their own lives.”<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The Border Experience in Chicano/a Literature. The American Dream as a Metaphor of Translation to America’s Mixed “Location of Culture”

In Chicano/a literature, the border is no longer perceived as a fixed or monolithic phenomenon, but as a place of contact and mutual intercultural influences. Moreover, this 2000-mile frontier from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic Coast is peculiar because it is the only case in the world where a geopolitical line connects and excludes at the same time a third world from a first world country, revealing the inequality of power between them. As a result of the reciprocal cultural exchange, The Mexican-U.S. borderland is also a site where, due to Northward immigration, new ethnicities are invented and the hyphenation of one’s identity has become a very common case. As Robert Alvarez remarks, “‘border people’ are constantly shifting and renegotiating identities in ever increasing maneuvers of power, and submission, and often they adopt multiple identities.”<sup>4</sup>

Immigration, acculturation and the development of a Chicano/a identity which negotiates its limits between Mexico and the United States are the favourite subjects of Chicano/a literature. Richard Vásquez’s *Chicano*, Ernesto Galarza’s *Barrio Boy*, Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *Barrio Boy*, José Antonio Villarreal’s *Pocho*, Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, Mari Luci Jaramillo’s *Madame Ambassador*, etc. fall into this category. What distinguishes most Chicano/a authors is the inclusion of the act of writing itself as a necessary factor in the process of maturation.

A special subchapter is dedicated to the autobiographical novel *Barrio Boy: The Story of a Boy’s Acculturation*, by Ernesto Galarza, in which we demonstrate the option of the diasporic subject for “an additive identity” (Rainer Baubcock) and the successful assimilation in the mainstream society. Another subchapter analyzes the novel *Pocho* by Jose Antonio Villarreal and the truncated American dream, caused by the effects of acculturation within the same family; the next one is dedicated to Sandra Cisneros, who adds a Chicana feminist

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<sup>3</sup> Betsworth, Roger G., *Social Ethics. An Examination of American Moral Traditions*, John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1990, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Alvarez Jr, Robert R., “Toward an anthropology of borderlands: The Mexican-U.S. border and the crossing of the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” in *Frontiers and Borderlands. Anthropological Perspectives*, Michael Rösler and Tobias Wendl (eds.), Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 1999, p. 228.

touch to the dream, articulating in *The House on Mango Street* a complex poetics of space, centered on the image of the house as a symbol of American wealth and of a personal place for the flourishing of a feminist creativity.

We conclude stating that in Chicano/a culture, the American dream has created a borderland consciousness which influenced in different ways the process of integration in the American society.

#### 4. Richard Rodriguez: The Dream of a Brown Culture, Language and Race

As a Chicano in the United States of America, Richard Rodriguez oscillates permanently between two opposite worlds: the traditional Mexican family and the public space of the American society. In his autobiographical trilogy (*Hunger for Memory*, *Days of Obligation* and *Brown*), Rodriguez exercises choices of history, culture, language, and identity, exploring the boundaries of pre-established categories and systems by questioning and re-defining elements traditionally viewed as oppositional and thus never simultaneously possible.

In his textual reinvention, Rodriguez is constantly undoing and redoing the so-called American self, on the one hand by denying his ethnicity in pursuit of the American dream, and on the other hand by pledging allegiance to U.S. cultural values, including the possibilities of acculturation and assimilation into the melting pot. Rodriguez writes from the conjunction of North- American and Latin- American cultures, from an “in-betweenness” where different languages and ideologies of self overlap. From this inter-American space, a hybrid identity emerges, as a compromise negotiated between an old self and a new self.

Rodriguez’s American dream of the *brown meltdown* is the promotion and the insertion of the ethnic groups into the hegemonic order. In this context, Rodriguez decides for himself what it means to be a (brown) Chicano. Being brown and thinking brown is, actually, being tolerant, open, on the move, in - between. Richard is neither black and white racially, neither Mexican nor American ethnically, neither man nor woman sexually, so he defines himself as brown. Moreover, the author considers that it is not any *a priori* cultural feature that makes ethnicity, when he emphasizes his polyethnic Spanish-Indian-American background. Far from claiming any racial “purity,” Rodriguez’s version of Chicano identity and of immigrationist theories may be seen as the forerunner of a future

American melting pot identity, which he calls brown, that is, a necessary conceptual tool with which to understand hybridity in the Americas.

##### 5. Nash Candelaria: The Dream of a White Cultural Heritage

Published in 1977, in the peak of Chicanismo, the social, cultural, and political movements that brought *raza consciousness* and profoundly influenced the creation of a modern Chicano/a identity, Nash Candelaria's novel, *Memories of the Alhambra*, reflects a complex vision of the American dream. For the two generations of Chicanos depicted in the novel, America does not offer glittering riches. They achieve, indeed, the American dream of upward mobility, but the story betrays a failed national belonging and an unfulfilled dream of racial equality, which triggers Jose Rafa's quest for a white cultural heritage in Spain.

When the American dream of racial equality is refused to them, Jose starts looking for a Spanish ethnic legacy that would represent a proof of his noble origins. His idealized quest illustrates the tension between the traditional meaning of "home" and its postcolonial relocation. The character's "European odyssey" is a reversed American dream, distorting the pattern of the transatlantic journey from Europe to the Americas. To Jose's surprise, Spain is not the hearth of conquistadors and noblemen, as he has previously assumed, but a postmodernist "location of culture,"<sup>5</sup> a hybrid space in which people of various origins mingle and interact. His travel is an up-turned American dream through which he fails to remember the European elements of his mestizo identity.

Conversely, Theresa Rafa is the embodiment of the feminist ideology of the Chicana movement. In the house of fiction, she manages to develop a "mestiza consciousness"<sup>6</sup> and to create a room of her own by adopting an American individualist ideology. For Theresa, the American dream is inherently assimilative because she is no longer mentally secluded in the Mexican tradition which devalued the female status and finds new means of representation for herself as a Chicana.

Joe Rafa's development portrays a different phase of Chicanismo. Struggling with his Mexicanness and Angloness, living in the hyphen, Joe is easily assimilated in the

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<sup>5</sup> Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Anzaldúa, Gloria, *op. cit.*



dominant culture, risking to be regarded as the inevitable “other” by the Mexican relatives who call him “Judas.”

The versions of the American dream which Nash Candelaria weaves in *Memories of the Alhambra* are tokens of the hybrid culture of the American Southwest, of the mestizo identity which the Chicano people forged in the borderlands and of their difficulty or impossibility of coming to terms, as American citizens, with the two sides of the hyphen. These facts have been anthropological constants in Chicano culture and they have considerably influenced the Southern culture of the United States.

#### 6. Chicana Self-Fashioning Narratives: The American Dream of a “Barefoot Heart”

Elva Treviño Hart’s autobiography, *Barefoot Heart: Stories of a Migrant Child*, abandons the militant feminist tone which writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa or Cherríe Moraga displayed in their writings. However, the narrative, like most of Chicana literary discourses, and like most feminist discourses in general, is a troubled one. Behind the narrative thread, the author is always searching, questioning and attempting to come to terms with tensions and contradictions, in the spirit of the creative writing arising from the same U. S. immigrant or borderland context.

Hart critically points at the racial discrimination of the Mexican-American ethnic group and to the life of misery and oppression they had to endure as people of color. Following the feminist wave instituted by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, she rejects the traditional cultural impositions which view women as either good or bad ( La Malinche, La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Llorona, etc.) and unfolds her identity formation from being “nobody” in a large, poor family who worked in the fields to “a Mexican-American woman writer.”

Most of her autobiographical journey is constructed within the dichotomy self vs. other: the narrator sees herself in a sort of Lacanian mirror which establishes her as the brown, poor, ethnic other as opposed to the white, accepted self. In Julia Kristeva’s sense, Elva develops a consciousness of abjection which opens an “open wound” (Anzaldúa) between the autobiographical “eye” and the surrounding world. The narrator displays three masks of identity which can be interpreted as variations upon the theme of ethnicity or as stages in her development of her mestiza consciousness: the mask of the migrant girl, the American corporate persona and the artist. Towards the end of the story, the mask of the artist manages to sublimate the consciousness of abjection through writing, a form of female

creativity with a cathartic role, which enables her to find her own room and to reconcile the two sides of the hyphen.

Elva Treviño's fulfillment of the American dream reflects the sheer principles that laid the bases of the American dream ideology: "the belief in progress," "the belief in the general attainability of success,"<sup>7</sup> the idea of the self-made (wo)-man, the belief that everyone should be "recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."<sup>8</sup>

## 7. General Conclusions

Redefining the American dream from a Chicano/a perspective, I contend that the literary space has been a site for the test of the viability of this concept. The dream of abundance, equality, freedom and democracy pervades the writings of many Chicano/a authors, but its achievement is rarely a story of fulminating success. Bearing a history of social and cultural dichotomies which defined the rapport between the two border cultures (oppression and resistance, assimilation and insularity, Spanish and English, Third World and First World), Chicano/a novels and autobiographies highlight the American cultural narrative from an alternative perspective, that is, with the consciousness of the ethnic Other in opposition with the white Self. Embedding the American dream as success or the American dream as nightmare, the text becomes an "ideoscape" (Arjun Appadurai) where the Chicano/a writer finds the necessary imaginative force to reinvent the notions of ethnicity, race, gender, etc., exposing a personal vision and a personal aesthetics of a Chicano/a identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Freese, Peter, loc. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Adams, James Truslow, loc. cit.

