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CHICANOS

Negotiating Political and Cultural Boundaries

Above: César Chávez addressing United Farmworkers Union Members. (© Victor Aleman/2 Mun-Dos Communications)
Opposite: Cinco de Mayo Market, East Los Angeles. (Photograph: Melba Levick)
SETTING THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

In his poem “I am Joaquín,” Rodolfo González writes of the need to establish an identity within a collective experience:

My fathers
have lost the economic battle
and won
the struggle of cultural survival...
And now I must choose
between the paradox
of the victory of the spirit
and the sterilization of the soul
and a full stomach.

González depicts the Chicanos as struggling with irreconcilable, opposing goals: to enjoy economic success in the majority culture is to gain “a full stomach” but to lose one’s soul. For the speaker, the struggle to maintain cultural identity, to survive as a culture, requires a process of retreat and separation:

I withdraw to the safety
within the circle of life
MY OWN PEOPLE

In this withdrawal, Joaquín, the speaker, finds his own reason for being.

When it was first published in 1967, “I am Joaquín” was considered a very influential poem. Its author, Rodolfo “Corky” González, had led a movement of Chicanos to establish a collective identity within the majority culture. This has helped to dramatize the struggle for dignity and cultural awareness in poetry, which many Chicanos were engaged during the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Spanish explorers were attracted to this continent for several reasons. Explorers and adventurers, such as Hernán Cortés and Francisco Vásquez de Coronado, were interested in securing land and resources. Although the classic Mayan culture had disappeared by the time the conquistadors reached the continent in the 1500s, the Pueblo and Aztec civilizations were still flourishing.

Spanish explorers were attracted to this continent for several reasons. Explorers and adventurers such as Hernán Cortés and Francisco Vásquez de Coronado sought natural resources and the promise of the Seven Cities of Cibola. When he arrived in continental Yucatán in search of laborers, Cortés was treated well by the Mayans, whose legends taught them to be wary of “bearded strangers.” He was given Malinche, an Aztec noblewoman who had been sold into slavery, as a translator and mistress. Within two years, however, Cortés had conquered Montezuma’s Aztec Empire and had claimed its territory and minerals for the Spanish. In Chicanos culture, therefore, “la Malinche” has come to signify a betrayal. In many Chicano works, “la Malinche” represents one who sacrifices cultural affiliation for advancement within the larger society. Recently, Chicanos have reconsidered these views of Malinche, challenging them as prejudices of a traditional patriarchal culture.

The period of Spanish conquest and settlement was recorded in the journals and histories of Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Bartolomé de las Casas. Explorers and missionaries had strategic, economic, and cultural motives for settling the area. Strategists sought a protective barrier for Mexican territory farther south. Those looking for wealth, either for themselves or for the Spanish crown, were drawn by the area’s minerals and other natural resources. Missionaries who accompanied many expeditions wanted to convert the native population to Catholicism.

There has been much controversy about the role of the Spanish explorers and missionaries in the economic and cultural development of the Southwest. Some credit the missionaries with educating native peoples about new kinds of irrigation and planning and ascribing to the intermarriage of explorers and American Indians the formation of the mestizo (mixed) culture. Other historians view the Spanish expeditions as having primarily deleterious effects on the native population. They point to the large numbers of American Indians who perished after the arrival of the Spanish, both from diseases against which they had no immunity and from the encomienda system of forced labor sanctioned by the Catholic Church. Despite the protests of the missionary Bartolomé de las Casas, who chronicled the abuse of the native population in his letters of protest to the Spanish government, the conditions continued for some time afterward.

Spanish settlements extended throughout the area that now comprises Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Despite the success of the encomienda system in California, the rest of the viceroyalty of Nueva España remained sparsely populated by Novohispanos. The Spanish, and later the
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When the U.S. economy weakened, however, and the demand for jobs by the white population increased, restrictions against Mexican migrant workers are more rigorously enforced. During the early years of the Great Depression, for example, more than 500,000 Mexicans or people of Mexican descent—one third of the Chicanos population—were deported or repatriated to Mexico. Many of the deportees were United States citizens.

Migrant workers in the Southwest also suffered from substandard working conditions. This group of workers, responsible for much of the labor needed to build the railroads, work the mines, and cultivate the fields, has had very few of the safeguards to which Euro American workers are accustomed. Migrants have worked long hours without breaks, earning wages far below the minimum wage given to other workers. Frequently they have had to house their families in shacks, without electricity or indoor plumbing, for months on end while they did their seasonal labor. The economic power of landowners, combined with the workers’ frequent migrations and their marginal legal status, has discouraged unionizing and collective bargaining efforts.

Despite a long history of political and labor activism, therefore, conditions changed only slowly. During the 1960s and 1970s, César Chávez and his followers drew the country’s attention to the farmworkers’ struggle by leading huertas, or strikes, against the growers. The group also organized a nationwide boycott of California grapes, the largest such boycott in American history. These combined actions led to the recognition of the United Farm Workers Union and contracts for its members. By fasting and using boycotts and strikes, the group continues to work for the rights of farmworkers despite declining membership. Recently the union has protested the exposure of field workers to potentially carcinogenic pesticides. The migrant workers in industry have fared worse: despite recent efforts at immigration reform, many people still work long hours in the modern equivalent of the nineteenth-century sweatshop.

Several of the selections in this chapter either directly address or gain their inspiration from the migrant worker. César Chávez’s essay provides us with a firsthand account of the struggle to organize the farmworkers. The situation of the migrant worker is presented from a different perspective in the Tomás Rivera excerpt, “Christmas Eve.” Rivera, who was raised in a family of migrant workers who traveled from South Texas to the Midwest as farm laborers, considers the psychological effects of this lifestyle on the wife of a migrant worker. The migrant worker and the Mexican immigrant also appear in the work of Ana Castillo and Pat Mora. Castillo’s “Napa, California” pays tribute to the farmworkers and reflects on the cycle of their lives—on one day following the other while “the land...in turn waits for us,” Mora’s poems, “Illegal Alien” and “Legal Alien,” consider the situation of the undocumented worker from a personal, rather than a legal or political perspective.

The recent history of the Southwest suggests that it is not only the mi-
grant workers whose rights have been ignored. Despite the rights guaranteed by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the Constitution of the United States, Chicanos have suffered discrimination and sometimes violence at the hands of the dominant culture. The Texas Rangers, the state’s principal law-enforcement officers, became notorious for their cruel and arbitrary treatment of people of Mexican descent; indeed, some historians claim that there were more lynchings of Mexicans in the Southwest than of African Americans in the South. Despite guarantees of freedom of language, Chicano children in California were routinely segregated from Anglo children during the nineteenth century; even twenty years ago they were still subject to punishment for speaking Spanish.

Beginning in the 1950s and intensifying during the 1960s and 1970s, Chicanos more forcefully asserted their rights as citizens. Organizations such as the Mexican American Political Association and MECHA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) were founded to represent the interests of Chicano constituencies. Striking students in cities such as Los Angeles demanded that Chicanos be given more say in their education; students and other activists organized the Chicano Moratorium to protest the war in Vietnam. The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund was established to provide legal assistance for people who felt their civil rights were being violated.

Along with this political activism there emerged a heightened cultural awareness. The term “Chicano,” which became popular during this time, dramatized the sense of self-definition that was critical to the movement. The word embodied an attempt to move beyond the hyphenated appellation “Mexican-American” to a term that more strongly suggested ethnic identity and pride. The Chicano Renaissance, as this movement was often called, used literature, music, and art to signal a rebirth of cultural identity.

Much of the writing of that cultural movement has addressed the issue of the border. As Héctor Calderón explains in the essay that closes this chapter, “Whenever Chicanas or Chicanos write on behalf of their community, the border has always loomed in the background.” Much Chicano literature explores the border as an image and with it accompanying issues of ownership, entitlement, loyalty, and identity. In the chapter from Arturo Islas’s Migrant Souls, the act of border crossing prompts the characters to address issues related to identity and affiliation. The selection from Graciela Limón’s novel In Search of Bernabé presents the border from another perspective; here the main character is a Chicana at ease on both sides of the border who uses her knowledge to act as a coyote, one who helps others—in this case refugees from the repression of El Salvador—enter the country secretly and without legal sanction. Sandra Cisneros’s story, “Woman Hollering Creek,” illustrates how the border image has been extended beyond legal and political constructs to embrace cultural and personal values as well.

Héctor Calderón’s essay, “Reinventing the Border,” explores the image of the border and the act of border crossing in both personal and analytical terms. For Calderón, the importance of preserving heritage goes beyond writing the cultural history. In an essay that acts out a kind of disciplinary and stylistic border crossing, Calderón calls attention to “a centuries-old border culture with new social and economic realities . . . reasserting itself on the U.S. national scene” and invites his readers to consider the implications of mestiza presence and its reassertion of self in economic, political, and cultural terms.

Today the Chicano community continues to confront economic, political, and other cultural borders. It has participated in the national debates over bilingualism, affirmative action, and the status of the undocumented worker. Yet in negotiating those borders, there is the ability to assert some control: In the words of Joaquin, “The odds are great but my spirit is strong . . . [and] I shall endure.”

BEGINNING: Pre-reading/Writing

Imagine that the place where you are living suddenly becomes part of another country and culture. What aspects of your life might change? How hard do you think it will be to make those changes? Write a journal entry expressing your feelings about the situation and your plans for the future. Share your entries with the class.