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“Views of the Barrio in Chicano and Puerto Rican Narrative.”

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Latinos/as in the United States are a deterritorialized¹ people. While chicanos/as were literally deprived of their native land as a consequence of US territorial expansion, Puerto Ricans are displaced people still searching for that place where they belong to. The Barrio represents a figurative borderland between the past and the future, a transitional space of internal transformations. U.S. barrios have been a source of cultural resistance; they have functioned as reterritorialized spaces where it is possible to maintain one's culture and to resist assimilation. At the same time, the barrios are social spaces where ethnic lower classes are segregated thus impairing their economic development and creating a subculture of violence and poverty.

This ambivalent relation with the Barrio is especially relevant in most narratives by Chicano and Puerto Rican authors who attempt to represent barrio life in all its complexity as a metaphor of Latino identity in constant movement. The barrio is a literary space many of the characters want to escape from and at the same time return to; but for most of them, the only way out left is to keep moving. The barrio is definitely a socially constructed public space. Along the history of the United States, ethnic neighbourhoods have become “little nations.” Life in the ghetto

¹ I use the term as it is used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

has also been a much debated issue with reference to its negative and positive effects on its inhabitants. The word itself, *ghetto*, has negative connotations related to isolation, self-segregation, poverty, crime, street gangs, etc. Most ethnic neighbourhoods look alike but Latino barrios have been recently coming centre-stage as the Latino population is becoming the biggest minority in the United States. The Latino barrio is usually the first space recent immigrants inhabit precisely because of this need to be close to those akin. Newcomers are supported and helped by those with a long residence in the United States as they struggle to find economic stability. As a space which is constantly renewed and refreshed by newcomers, the barrio also fulfils the needs and desires of Latinos in different ways: for newcomers, it is a territorialized space impregnated by the original culture which substitutes their longing for their homeland; for those with a long experience in the US, it is a safe space from outside racism and discrimination and it is their cultural heritage, as a fundamental part where their identity resides.

From the early stages of Latino literature, writers have been concerned about building a sense of community as they were trying to represent and understand the Latino experience in the United States. Therefore, they have never been blind to the barrio's significance in Latino identity as it is the place where the community is built. Ground-breaking works by Chicano authors such as *Pocho* by Jose Antonio Villarreal, *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* by Tomás Rivera, and by Puerto Rican authors such as *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas, *El Bronx Remembered* by Nicholasa Mohr already emphasized the barrio's significance in the developing of a Latino Identity in the U.S. For most of these writers the barrio is the segregated place where Latinos struggle to survive in poor conditions. The representation of these barrios responds to the developing idea of barrios as a consequence of the failure of assimilation on

the part of Latinos and the subsequent spatial and social segregation based on the one hand on racial inequality and on capitalist economic stratification. Most of the characters in these works depict the lives of Latinos as they daily fight under miserable conditions to survive in the places they have been assigned by the government to work (blue collar jobs) and to live (delimited barrios).

The 1960s saw the emergence of a literary trend which exploited the experience of life in the ghettos. Publishers realised that readers were morbidly interested in life in the ghettos told by real people and their experience with drugs, gangs, violence, prison, etc. Among the ground-breaking works on this theme we can mention *Manchild in the Promised Land* by Claude Brown from the Afro-American community and Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* among Latinos. *Down These Mean Streets* concentrates on the crisis of identity of a Puerto Rican black man trapped in the underworld of the Barrio. Not knowing who he is and where he belongs to, Piri does not feel fully accepted within his family because of his dark skin color though her mother insists he is not black: “‘You are not black,’ Momma said, ‘you’re brown, a nice color, a pretty color.’ ‘Not to them, Moms’” (135). Apart from being involved in interracial conflicts, Piri is an example of the clash between Puerto Rico's racial categorization and the United States'. He is being discriminated because of his culture as a *spik* and because of his skin color as *black*. Although at first he tries to identify with Puerto Rican cultural identity, his African-American friend Brew reminds him of the importance of skin color in American society: “‘Wha’youth mean, us Negroes? Aint’t yuh includin’ yourself? Hell, you ain’t but a coupla shades lighter’n me, and even if youh was even lighter’n that, you’d still be a Negro.’ I felt my chest get tighter and tighter. I said, “I ain’t no damn Negro and I ain’t no paddy. I’m Puerto Rican.’ ‘You think that means anything to them James

Crow paddies?’ brew said coolly” (124).

The streets become for Piri the refuge where he can find a people and a place where he belongs to, his great obsession. However the streets trap him in a chain of unfortunate incidents which lead him to the underworld of drugs, crime, gangs until he realizes that is not the right way to belong anywhere: “I sniffed and thought how I wasn’t gonna get hooked. How I was gonna control it. Why the hell did I have to start playing with stuff? Who wants to be a man at that rate? Hell! All for the feeling of belonging, for the price of being called ‘one of us.’ Isn’t there a better way to make the scene and be accepted on the street without having to go through hell? (204)”

Chicano works that deal with the same theme are J. L. Navarro’s *Blue Day on Main Street* a collection of short stories on drug abuse, prostitution and promiscuity that suggests society’s responsibility on Latino youth degradation; Luis J. Rodríguez’ *Always Running, La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.* and Ronald L. Ruiz’s *Happy Birthday Jesus* where a Chicano convict suffers isolation from society, his community and even family. Rodríguez is especially good at portraying how city life and its racialized spaces lead Chicano young people to crime and violence as a reaction to their situation. Rodríguez is very direct when he blames North American society and politics for the racial and social conflict where Latinos are involved. At the end of the book, once he has told his tragedy and escape from hell, Rodríguez discusses the problem of gangs and racial conflict as a problem that affects everybody but which only the society is responsible for:

What to do with those whom society cannot accommodate? Criminalize them. Outlaw their actions and creations. Declare them the enemy, the wage war. Emphasize the differences – the shade of skin, the accent in the speech or manner of clothes. Like the scapegoat of the Bible, place society’s ills on them,

then “stone them” in absolution. It’s convenient. It’s logical. It doesn’t work.
(250)

Rodríguez does not merely narrate criminal life in the barrios and his experience of poverty, racism, suicide attempts and imprisonment, he also engages in an spiritual quest in a similar way to that of Piri Thomas and Richard Wright. As the end of the autobiography reveals, he has been able to overcome that tragic period of his life but he has come back to write about it and alert the younger generation.

However, we can find slightly different kinds of literary barrios as we move to more recent narratives once Latino scholars realise that it is necessary to instill a resistant attitude in the working people to avoid the internalisation of stereotypes about Latinos and of a colonized mentality. This attitude could only be developed by assigning every component of Latino life its right significance in the individual’s evolution.

Scarce in number but still interesting are some works which emphasize the possibility of assimilation and which portray life in the barrios as something that inevitably hinders the individual’s advancement in society and subsequently his/her assimilation into mainstream society. The desire to move upwards in the social ladder and to get a better standard of living encourages characters to escape the barrio in works by Chicano authors such as Richard Rodríguez (*Days of Obligation*, 1992) and Ruben Navarrete (*A Darker Shade of Crimson, Odyssey of a Harvard Chicano*, 1993) and by Puerto Rican authors like Richard Ruiz (*The Hungry American*, 1978).

Sandra Cisneros is another author who supports an ambivalent but necessary relationship with the barrio and therefore with the community as a cultural source. Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* is deeply concerned with living conditions in the barrios especially for Latina women. Although life in the Chicano barrio means

segregation, poverty and ostracism for its inhabitants, the character Esperanza manages to find a balance between her desire to escape this kind of life and the need to keep a connection with her cultural past and her community. The barrio, represented by Mango Street is inevitably a fundamental part of her identity even though she knows she needs to get away from it to be herself. This connection to the barrio is represented by the three comadres she comes across in “The Three Sisters”: “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can’t erase what you know. You can’t forget who you are. . . It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish. (105)

At the end Esperanza realizes the barrio lives in her, it’s part of her identity though she knows she has to escape from it as a social space and its traps to discover her true self. The barrio and Mango Street become symbols of the heritage that she has acquired within the community and of the cultural resistance she needs to survive in her future life. She has had to come back to give voice especially to those women who until now were unheard in literary accounts about the Latino community in order to understand who she really is. The women in the barrio are the source from which she needs to gather strength to keep moving ahead. Esperanza’s vocation as a writer is the necessary way out to rediscover the significance of the barrio as a metaphor of Chicano community in her life. The negative aspects are revised and transformed and the positive elements are recovered as powerful tools:

I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me

with both arms. She sets me free.

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me forever. One day I will go away.

Friends and neighbors will say, What happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?

They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out. (110)

Puerto Rican writer Nicholasa Mohr also collaborates in the depiction of Latino barrios in a different way from Piri Thomas and Luis J. Rodríguez. Instead of presenting the traditional account on the miseries of the Barrio, its violence, drug-dealing and poverty, Nicholasa Mohr prefers to tell the stories that were never told and which are not necessarily negative and public but life-giving and positive. These stories are frequently those of Puerto Rican women living in the Barrio or Spanish Harlem. In *Nilda*, the character is a girl who is witness to all the violence which was present in Piri Thomas' neighborhood, but as Mohr comments, when asked by a publisher to change her manuscript into a female version of *Down These Mean Streets*:

This, of course, was completely unacceptable for me . . . I have never been in jail, nor have I ever been a prostitute or been raped . . . Puerto Rican women in El Barrio have had to cope with other situations . . . In my works I have tried to capture the everyday richness and variety of a warm and vital community and my characters always try to overcome no matter what the circumstances.” (Acosta-Belén 38-9)

However, the book's central theme is slightly different from Thomas' since the barrio is also seen as the source of nurturing and resistance. This is specially true in the emphasis on familial relationships which are more easily and freely described through the eyes of a young girl like Nilda. The tragedy that awaits her in the outside world of the barrio is counteracted by the support she finds in her mother and stepfather. They represent the will to survive under unfavourable conditions, the warmth that such a threatened youth needs and the resilience they need to acquire to advance in their future lives among racism and institutional attempts at social stratification and segregation. The warmth and resilience we find in the Latino Barrio contrasts with the lack of affection that is found among other ethnic groups including white Anglos. That is the case of Sophie, a polish girl rejected by her mother after getting pregnant by a Puerto Rican boy. Mohr seems to give us an example of the positive human qualities that can also be found in the Latino Barrio; qualities and values that may be missing in American society and which constitute a precious part of a Latino's cultural baggage.

The women are the central characters in Mohr's work as the main cultural agents that had been previously almost absent in the literature about the Barrio. The perspective of a young girl is equally useful for Mohr to explore new possibilities to represent the wide Latino experience as in this passage where the Barrio can even be a source of artistic creativity and a literary vocation:

It was a warm night, and Nilda began to play the sidewalk game. She loved to play that game, especially on different streets where the side walks were new to her. It was a game of discovery in which she uncovered many worlds of wonder. The diagonal, horizontal and vertical cracks in the sidewalks became dividing regions stimulating her imagination. The different shapes

of the worn-out surfaces of concrete and asphalt developed before her eyes into dragons, animals, oceans and planets of the universe. And . . . she continued looking for new and wonderful worlds that lay hidden underneath the concrete (35-36).

A more contemporary example of Puerto Rican literature on the urban experience is Judith Ortiz Cofer’s work. Her collection *The Latin Deli* portrays through a mixture of poetry, fiction and autobiography the experience of a Puerto Rican woman growing up in a Puerto Rican barrio in the United States. In the first pages of the collection, the barrio is introduced and represented by “the Building”:

The Puerto Rican tenement known as El Building was one block up from Straight. It was, in fact, the corner of Straight . . . At almost any hour of the day, El Building was like a monstrous jukebox, blasting out salsas from open windows as the residents, mostly new immigrants just up from the island, tried to drown whatever they were currently enduring with loud music” (7)

The Building is brilliantly portrayed as a microcosm where Latinos struggle to survive the hardships, climate and cultural isolation and where the immigrant experience of being a Puerto Rican in New Jersey is interpreted from the perspective of a young Puerto Rican girl and other inhabitants like Doña Ernestina, Marina, Manuel, Corazón, etc. The whole book is like a literary Latin Deli, an interesting space where Latino life impregnates an American territory and where cultures and experience coalesce. This space becomes a refuge for all the hardships they have to endure but it is also an ethnic enclave where Puerto Rican identity finds its bases in the cultural life that is maintained within the community.

Ortiz Cofer’s aim is clearly to portray barrio life from the inside in an attempt to undo the stereotypes traditionally assigned to the ghetto representing the real

lives of Latinos, not only those related to drugs and crime. In the novel *The Line of the Sun*, this representation covers a wider space from the origins in Puerto Rico of Marisol to the barrio in the United States. In the second part of the novel, Ortiz Cofer attempts to give a critical view of life in the barrio from the perspective of a Puerto Rican girl. While The Building is again a refuge for the difficulties encountered outside the barrio for people like Marisol’s mother, it is also impregnated by a suffocating atmosphere where ethnic isolation prevents social advancement for her father Rafael. As the story evolves, Marisol becomes aware of the dangers of staying tied to a cultural past. This can be observed in the santeria rituals that are frequently carried out within the Building but which may have tragic consequences. As a metaphor for cultural isolation, the failed spiritist ceremony makes clear that it is necessary to find a balance between one’s cultural heritage and the need to get out in search for new possibilities. The scene’s atmosphere is suffocating and distorting:

Even at the top of the landing we smelled the smoke, heavily perfumed with incense . . . The oxygen in the room was thinning out as people puffed madly on their cigars. I was feeling dizzy and disoriented . . . Did they really believe there were spirits and demons out there in the dark who helped or hindered them? Or was this all just a fantasy-making, an escape from the dreary cycle of factory work, tenement living, second-class citizenship? (260-2)

Finally, it is Guzman, Marisol’s uncle, who prevents the tragedy by breaking a class window, but the fire provoked by the rituals almost literally devours the people gathered there. Marisol is fully aware of her role as a bridge between the past and the future and her need to become a part of the American world to be a whole person. She becomes an interpreter and a translator of her cultural heritage: “I learned something during those days: though I would always carry my island

heritage on my back as a snail, I belonged to the world of phones, offices, concrete buildings, and the English language. (273)” This is not an assimilationist approach but a realistic view of how to achieve a better future for Latinos without forgetting that past carried inside.

The barrios in the United States prove to be complex spaces where a crisis of identity and the development of a transcultural identity takes place. This space is transformed by Latinos as they try to make it their space. However, as a socially constructed space, it is not always comfortable and secure but it creates an interesting love-hate relationship.

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