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ANOTHER AMERICAN LITERATURE: TWO CHICANO NOVELS

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The Mexicans living in the USA have been struggling with a wide range of negative stereotypes and clichés deeply embedded in mainstream American literature and public thinking since times long before the treaty of Guadelupe-Hidalgo. Literature has been added to social protest and political movements as a means of fighting the negative ideas concerning their community. For constraints of space, the present paper focuses on Chicano novel, and does not deal with poetry or the Campesino Theatre. As Leal and Barrón assert, "The most effective form for the literature of social protest has been the novel." (23)

One of the first classic novels of Chicano literature is Bless Me, Ultima by Rudolfo Anaya. The novel is summed up briefly by Shirley and Shirley in the following way: [it] is concerned with the maturation of a young boy [...l and his relationship with his spiritual guide, the Última of the title. She is a curandera, a wise woman, a dispenser of curing herbs and potions who also heals with spiritual advice and some '"magic."' (105)

The world of Última is the closed, a relatively well-protected world of the family, where people know their place and the community takes care of them. Nobody is left alone when too old or ill to take care of himself or herself: '"Gabriel, we cannot let her live her last days in loneliness. .. No,"' my father agreed. 'It is not the way of our people."' (3) The mother, whose ages-old task is keeping up the family and preserving its integrity at all times, initiates steps to receive somebody in need, and the father agrees. After all, that is "the way of our people." The importance of family ties as a central point in the value system of the Chicanos is made clear in the very first pages of the book. It is in this environment that young Antonio grows up. In addition to family bonds, religion is also a central part in the life of the community. Antonio even finds it difficult to accept Christian faith and Última's alleged powers as a witch at the same time. Finally he finds satisfaction in believing that both religion and Última's witchcraft serve good purposes.

The outside world is a distant place, the characters of the novel are rarely exposed to it. Such an is when the boys go to school. They expect a lot from it, but when they realize that not much attention is paid to the specific needs of Chicanos, and therefore education was not the same thing to them as to Anglos, they are no longer really interested– Anaya's published in 1972 to become one of the most widely known and best selling Chicano literary works. Another novel that rapidly received great acclain is *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in Los Angeles*

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by Luis Rodriguez. His work was published two decades after Anaya's work. This is also the story of a young boy's way to maturity, but the differences between the two novels are greater than the similarities. Rodriguez's novel is based upon his own life, and he received prizes for non-fiction. In his novel there is no wise magician to assist the hero on his way — he has to run his own race, and there are in fact very few who help him. There are many more of those who work against him directly or indirectly.

One of the characters who always support young Luis without reservations is his mother. The mother in Rodriguez's novel matches the traditional Chicana mother who, against all difficulties, financial and other, keeps the family together. She is, however, not the romantic beauty with the raven-black hair, often found in stereotypical images of Mexican women:

> Mama always seemed to be sick. t...] she was overweight and suffered from [...]diabetes. She had thyroid problems, bad nerves and high blood pressure. She was still young then l...] in her thirties, but she had all the ailments. She didn't even have teeth; [...] Despite this she worked all the time, and held up the family when almost everything else came apart. (23)

The last sentence is particularly important, as Mama, with her ability to keep the family together, shall be one of the cyclically returning images throughout the whole novel, until Rodriguez shall at the end be able to offer his own positive experience to his son. Another regularly recurrent image is the barrio, which acts like a trap — several times, whenever somebody appears to have a chance of breaking out, the barrio with is misery, deprivation, prejudice and petty crime prevents him or her from succeeding. But the first thing — and one of the most important — that we learn about the barrio is that it is not exclusively a Spanish-speaking community. There are other nationalities there as well, because poverty is just as important a fact in bringing people to the barrio as nationality:

"large numbers of Asians from Japan, Korea and Taiwan also moved into the area. Sections of Monterey Park and even San Gabriel became known as Little Japans or Chinatowns. The barrios which were not incorporated became selfcontained and forbidden, incubators of rebellion" (40-41). "Incorporated" means that a town has its own public services and utilities and normal housing conditions — middle-class, as opposed to the slums of the immigrants.

The third recurrent image — or rather event — is the drop-out of school. The drop— out is usually the end of a hopeless, or sometimes not completely hopeless, effort to catch up with the mainstream society. A similarly hindering factor is police harassment — Chicanos are often subject to arbitrary and excessively rude police action. Police action is, however, a highly contraversial issue in the novel. Young Luis's life is spent in a way a natural part of which is petty crime — burglary, mugging, theft and street fighting. Still, police action is not regarded by the pachucos as an act of law enforcement and a retaliation for something that is not right — It

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always remains harassment, the sole reason for which is racial. This is the case on page 95, when they-mug a group of youngsters, and the police appears on the scene:

> They started to run, but we surrounded them and forced them to fork over some bills. As they ran off, Lencho kicked one of them in the ass. [...] We turned and walked down Hellman Avenue. Suddenly a Monterey Park police car drove by and stopped. Two uniformed officers rushed out.
> 'Hold it right there,' one of them ordered.
> This became routine with us. Whenever the people from the Hill made it down to Monterey the police departments made a habit to roust us out.

Rodriguez does not explain what he thinks about interrelation between poverty and petty crime, but he described the risks of this way of life, as he tells several stories when, as a child, he was very close to committing a murder, thus becoming a serious offender. Explanation comes later in the novel:

> 'You stole from me. You have to pay for it.'
> 'I don't mind that. The problem is we end up paying more for the same thing than other people do. On this side of town, the cops don't beat up people. On this side of town, the cops don't stop you for no reason. They don't be hitting you in the head, trying to make you mad so you do something you regret later. (144)

At school most Chicano boys and girls do not have an adequate preliminary education, they very often struggle with the language, and even when they are juvenile criminals, they are offended that they are treated as juvenile criminals. At these passages Rodriguez does not make any comments and does not suggest any solution, apart from the fully justified complaint that the educational authorities did not provide for proper Spanish-language education. On top of page 120 Luis is glad that he is fired from school — at the bottom of the page he regrets that he has to do a dirty and humiliating job.

Those of us still in school were expelled. This was fine with me. I hated school. And I loved fighting.

> I worked as a bus boy in a Mexican restaurant in San Gabriel when I was 15 years old. [...] It was kicking, hard work. [...l We carried thick plastic trays heaped with dirty dishes, cleaned up tables, poured water into glasses, provided extra coffee — and took abuse from the well-to-do people who came there. 'Hey boy, clean up this mess.' 'Hey boy, how about some more water.' Hey Boy became my new name.

At similar scenes Rodriguez does not provide his own comments or explanations — when he was 15, it was "fine with him" to be expelled from school, and did not understand that lack of education was equal to getting nothing but dirty jobs. What

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made it especially difficult for him to understand this was the generally hostile sphere, the Prejudice that deprived them of equal opportunities at schools. It seems that for decades (Anglo-)American school boards and police departments behaved as if they had believed that the presence of "foreigners" in their country was a transitory phenomenon. They believed that all they had to do was wait, and these people would disappear, and all the social, educational and other problems with them, relieving the majority society of all obligation to do something for them.

The barrio was a place that distorted many of the basic values of the Chicanos. Such was mcíchismo. Masculine pride for grown-up men usually meant that they had many children from many different women, but they did not care much about the children or the women. For a man, identification with a gang often replaced identification with a family. A barrio is not rural or small-town America, where the betrayal of the family was the gravest crime, the punishment for which was contempt or even death. Here one could easily desert his family, and survive.

For young people the lack of any sexual education meant that introduction into sexual life was often a painful and frustrating experience. The naturalistic description of such scenes in the book indicate that this experience was very often not very romantic, what is more, often disappointing for many young people, who were frequently barely older than a young child.

There are two factors in the novel that finally pushed Rodriguez towards the first efforts at finding some sort of a solution to his apparently hopeless life. One is the absolutely senseless violence of the gang warfare. We find abundant descriptions of violence and destruction in the novel: "Things soon exploded. More cops came but they too were pelted. A major confrontation erupted [...]. Soon the police pulled out. The ambulance took Carlitos and sped off, but not before receiving a barrage of rocks, bottles and debris. We assumed that more police and firepower were coming." (96).

In order to become a member of a gang, one has to undergo a similarly cruel "inauguration" ritual. The ritual has its own choreography, the players know their parts, and the preparations have, in their own grotesque and bizarre way, some dignity. But the reader will soon forget that, when he reads lines like these:

> Topo swung a calloused fist at my face. I went down fast. Then an onslaught of steeltipped shoes and heels rained on my body. I thought I would be able to swing and at least hit one or two — but no way! Then I [...J pulled my arms over my head, covered it the best I could while the kicks seemed to stuff me beneath a parked car.
> Finally the barrage stopped. [...J Hands came at me to congratulate. There were pats on the back. (110)

Violence, which occured in the form of rare and tragic events in Anaya's novel, is close to becoming a way of life in Rodriguez's barrio.

In addition to being increasingly nauseated by the violence and destruction, Luis received another impetus that helped him continue his own personal *Bildungsroman*.

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As a result of the gang wars and the increasing crime rate, the authorities finally realized that there was something wrong, and paid more attention to the problems of the Chicanos; The process was hampered by several setbacks, but community and educational programmes were launched and to those who were ready and willing to accept it, help was offered. It happened at the time when the Chicano Movement first appeared. America began to learn new abbreviations: UMAS for United Mexican American Students, MEChA for Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán and many more. Several of these organizations exist today.

Luis discovers for himself that art and literature may be a point of breakout of his miserable situation. First he paints murals, a common activity among barrio boys. It was recognized by social organizations, and they soon made efforts to organize the painters by selecting walls, agreeing with the owners of the property, and providing paint and brushes to the participants in the programme.

A real revelation for Luis was literature. He went to the library, and under the suspicious and contemptuous eyes of the librarian, he selected books for himself:

> And then there was Piri Thomas, a Puerto Rican brother, un camarada de aquellas: His book Down These Mean Streets became a living Bible for me. I dog-eared it, wrote in it, copied whole passages so I wouldn't forget their texture, the passion, this searing work of a street dude and hype in Spanish Harlem — a barrio boy like me, on the other side of America. (138)

Here, and at other parts of the novel, we also find code-switching that is used here to create an atmosphere. At the end of the book the Spanish terms are explained in alphabetical order. Code-switching is also characteristic in Anaya's novel.

Luis Rodriguez was lucky as he came of age together, in fact hand in hand with the Chicano Movement. Still, the Movement in itself was not sufficient. He needed his own will, his own determination to change things for the better. His efforts to catch up with the mainstream of American society seem to refute what Octavio Paz says about the pachuco not wanting to become a part of American life. Rodriguez makes it clear when he says, "It's about time we become part of America." (212). Integration does not necessarily mean assimilation.

It is possible to sum up the similarities and difference between the two novels in the form of a chart:

Novel Feature	Bless me, Ultima!	Always Running
Mother as central figure	******	*******
Code switching	******	*******
Violence	**	*******
Rude language	*	****
Dreams	******	–
Religion	******	–

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The Chicanos do long for America and all the positive things American way of life has to offer and it does not mean that they want to give up their identity. On the contrary: finding their own identity, creating literature and arts based on their own traditions help them in fighting for their rights and due place in American society more effectively. Chicano poetry, Campesino Theatre and Chicano prose all call for action — and as Leal and Barrón put it, "Action is much more effective, when backed by knowledge of one's roots" (13).

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