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Acts of Naming in Chicana/Chicano Fiction

Américo Paredes began writing *George Washington Gómez* in 1936 and finished it in 1940. It was not published until 1990. Jovita González wrote *Caballero* from 1934 to 1939 and her novel was not published until 1996. The best known novel written by a Chicano is *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya published in 1972 and the first novel written by a Chicana Estella Portillo Trambley, *Rain of Scorpions* was published in 1975. Denise Chavez began publishing with a short story collection titled *The Last of the Menu Girls* in 1986. Sandra Cisneros followed with *The House on Mango Street* published in 1989 perhaps the most anthologized novel. The last Big "C" is Ana Castillo who published *Sapogonia* in 1990. I begin my listing with the most famous scholar and teacher, Don Paredes and end the listing with the only three Chicanas who have been hired and publish with large nationally known publishing firms, Cisneros and Castillo with Norton and Chavez with Time Warner. I begin here in order to make the point that Chicanos and Chicanas, Texasmejicanos y mejicanas have been writing in English since the early decades of the 20th century. Yet, my challenge is to persuade readers to increase their knowledge of the literary works that I chose to use as explanatory examples of the theory I wish to propose.

I began this project expecting to show that the names in Chicana/Chicano works are rhetorical. Doing research I soon discovered that all naming conventions are rhetorical, so my question became are Chicana conventions for naming characters in literary works similar to English/American social and literary conventions for naming. Do Chicanas agree with Juliet Capulet's plea:

Tis but thy name that is my enemy; thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face nor any other part
belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What's in a name? That which we
call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet; so Romeo would, were he not
Romeo call'd, retain that dear perfection which he owns without that title. Romeo,
doff thy name, and for that name which is no part of thee take all myself.

In standard Sophistic fashion, Shakespeare has Juliet claim that the rose cannot change its essential characteristic of smell, so Romeo cannot change his essence even if he changes his name. In her anguish, she hopes that roseness and romeoness follows the "thing" and that a name is not part of the man. Yet by the end of the play, we all come to realize that the name "rose" is far more than its smell and that the name Romeo Montague is far more than the man.

Literary works whose title signify a protagonist's name are described by Michael Ragussis in *Acts of Naming* who claims that naming reveals the novel's deepest level of plot, and he calls them plots of naming in which the name designates character. There are

"speaking names," such as Hector, "the shielder" in the *Iliad*, the Old Testament belief of "As his name is, so is he" and there is the more modern notion of names that have a natural meaning, such as Peter. After a sustained search of several bibliographies, I was unable to locate one Chicano or Chicana novel that followed the plots of naming in which the name speaks the character. Paredes' novel, *George Washington Gómez* may be a secondary application because the protagonist must carry a name that has already been filled. Since national publication of multiethnic fiction was scarce before the late 1950s, these first series of novels represent the community in all its historical, sociological and political paradigms. There are many strong and memorable protagonists in the body of work, but none carry the name of any one individual in the novel's title.

The purpose of this short analysis is to jump ahead many, many, centuries of naming theory and concentrate on commonalities of acquiring an ethnic identity (let's be clear that we will have an ethnic identity) through names to answer my question: do Chicana literary naming conventions mirror the mainstream's or canonical author's conventions? My hypothesis was that they did not, but I was wrong. I was wrong because in any literary work each "name" is a rhetorical device insofar as it communicates a "particular story." Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm proposes that every person has life experiences that become her own "story." These experiences are biographical, cultural, historical, and moral, and they set the perimeters that reasoning and valuing beings will use to conduct their lives. If ethnic identity is adaptive and evolving and it adjusts to the institutional and structural forces of the dominant culture as sociologist, Felix Padilla, in *Latino Ethnic Consciousness*, argues then this ethnic identity performs a narrative of its life that resonates to symbolic themes, such as language and ritual, to historical consciousness, such as events and struggles, to social consciousness, such as, seeking group validation and finally as ethnic identity, a way of gaining political voice. Padilla does not include the moral characteristic that Fisher's narrative paradigm suggests, but then Fisher does not include the symbolic aspect of identity formation. Together their propositions point to the rhetorical impact of names placed on individuals and groups by themselves and by others. This is so because names are not solely a dilemma of self-identity, they also identify the dilemma of the self-in-group identity.

Other commonalities of ethnic identity acquisition through names and naming consist of: narrative incantation; they can perform magic, such as Anaya's curandera, Ultima, they can call forth an entity, such as having a name like George Washington in Paredes' *George Washington Gómez*; they can influence a way of being, such as Esperanza's search for her very own home in *The House on Mango Street* and they provide a place or identity within a community, such as Soveida Dosamante's Book of Service in Chavez's *Face of an Angel*.

Using this common ground for rhetorical naming, Chicana Chicano characters reveal these multiplicities of naming, yet the Mexican names in a predominantly Anglo/American society emphasize and perpetuate the "both/and" mentality that results from the simultaneity of being both American and ethnic. The Janus head of American ethnicity does not only glance to favor either the American or the ethnic identity, but it can also stare straight ahead in both directions creating not a hybrid identity but a chameleon identity. This is so because the metatext of names and naming fulfill three literary and

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retorical functions; they are metaphoric, metonymic, and allegorical. I am Chicana, I am American, I am Professor, I am Woman.

Debra Walker King's work, *Deep Talk, Reading African-American Literary Names* introduces the idea of names as subversive narrative strategy, as a strategy of covert writing. She claims that names define a "condition of the spirit" through which a name bearer gains ground for locating self and elucidating his or her reason for existing. The character will have a purpose to address, a dream to fulfill. There are two ways to accomplish this. The character will come to understand the magic of her name or she will create the magic of her name. The name becomes the stories they call forth what Ragussis terms "naming plots" (16). In African American literary works she identifies three patterns of naming: battles for dominance, liberation of subject positions and obscuring of names by hostile forces.

Chicana literary works also use names and naming as King suggests for African American fiction. Her method of reading literary names includes discovering how a name identifies, defines, describes, or acts within a narrative text. In African American fiction, she identifies a strategy of covert writing that she calls onomastic desires that describe what a name wants to say, what it desires to communicate. This type of analysis holds true of Chicana works with one important exception, an exception that I believe deconstructs or neutralizes any subversive attempt the author may have sought. I'll return to this idea later.

I begin with the "onomastic desire" that develops in Paredes' novel. George Washington Gómez, is set in the border city of Jonesville-on-the-Grande and it begins in the year that The Duke of Austria was shot, 1914. Gumersindo Gómez is riding with a doctor who will assist his wife in childbirth. At that time, the Texas Rangers were fighting Mexican revolutionaries who believed they could regain the land taken from them during the war between the U.S. and Mexico. The doctor delivers a boy to María and Gumersindo who live with María's mother, their two little girls and María's brother, Feliciano. Seven months later they are arguing what to name the boy. The father wants an American name of a famous man and the grandmother says, "Gumersindo ought to be his name. That's the way you tell families apart. When he grows up people will say, Oh, you're Gumersindo Gómez, the son of Gumersino Gómez and María García and old Gumersindo Gómez, he was your grandfather. That's the way to keep track of people and no need to put it down in writing" (115). The mother of the boy says, "I would like my son to have a great man's name. Because he's going to grow up to be a great man who will help his people" (115). Gumerisindo remembers only one great man, George Washington and names his son. No matter what happens the youngster in the course of the novel, he is reminded of his mother's prophesy. The grandmother unable to pronounce George Washington begins calling the boy Gaulinto, the sounds she can reproduce. Soon afterwards, Gumersindo, the father, is murdered by the Texas Rangers and when Feliciano finds him on the road, Gumersino makes him promise never to tell his son. He does not want him to seek vengeance, and Feliciano promises.

After the brother-in-law's death, Feliciano moves the orphaned family to a predominantly Mexican town, Jonesville and takes a job as a bartender through the help of Judge Norris, an unscrupulous, Anglo judge who uses him to get the Mexicans to buy their poll tax and vote for his party. The novel goes on to reveal the story of Guálinto's life in

Jonesville, his schooling and his development to be a great man and help his people. The narrative voice reveals that:

it would be several years before he fully realized that there was not one single Guálinto Gómez. That in fact there were many Guálinto Gómezes, each of them double like the images reflected on two glass surfaces of a show window. The eternal conflict between two clashing forces within him produced a divided personality, made up of tight little cells independent and almost entirely ignorant of each other, spread out all over his consciousness, mixed with one another like squares on a checkerboard. (147)

Clearly, Paredes presents both sides as subversive forces, yet even if Guálinto is not known as George Washington in grade school, as he later would be in high school, that name begins to describe him. By the end of the novel, he repudiates the Guálinto persona, becomes a lawyer, marries an Anglo woman, and works for the Army. He returns to the barrio where he lived and visits with his uncle who recognizes him as a military person. After meeting with his high school friends who scorned him for "betraying" his "race," he visits with Feliciano, his uncle, who has been his surrogate father. George and his uncle have the following conversation:

"Then you see no future for us."

"I'm afraid not. Mexicans will always be Mexicans. A few of them, like some of those would-be politicians, could make something of themselves if they would just do like I did. Get out of this filthy Delta, as far away as they can, and get rid of their Mexican Greaser attitudes."

What about children. Do you plan to have any?"

"There's one on the way. And I suppose we'll have others. But if you mean whether they will learn Spanish, no. There's no reason for them to do so. They will grow up far away from here." (300)

After some comments about Feliciano's beautiful farm, George says, "I don't want any of the land. I am not a farmer and I won't be coming down here often. I have a good income besides" (301).

Paredes plays the novel out to its logical conclusion for 1943, and he never revised it. Guálinto Gómez, the Mexican completes the transformation into George Washington Gómez, the American by the end of the novel, and the reader believes that he will never look back. Paredes may be revealing the situation for Texans of mixed ancestry during the 1930s on through to the 1980s when some Chicanos were beginning to find avenues for publishing their work. Today, the novel emphasizes the ambiguities of being an American of Mexican ancestry in Texas. The many confusions about ethnic identity in the 1980s and 1990s are resolved differently in the true-real of contemporary novels. The true-real of modern and contemporary novels by Chicanas and Chicanos grows out of a name's sustained accumulation of historical contents, and its interpretation reveals an ideology that either supports or revises the surface text. It is on this level that the exception that

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deconstructs the subversive attempt of the author occurs. The Chicanas Chicanos with mixed name signifiers, American and Mexican resolve the ethnic identity complication by becoming "both/and."

For example, Gary Soto has an "American" and Mexican name, and the main characters in his short stories and in his poems resolve the identity conflict by accepting the "both/and" Chicano identity. In "Looking for Work," the protagonist is a pre adolescence boy who watches *Father Knows Best* and tries to get his mother, brother and sister to dress, talk, and eat like the TV family. He decides to "become wealthy" picks up a rake and starts going house to house. Then he tries to live like *Leave It to Beaver* and his Mom and siblings laugh at him. He continues to make comparisons. The story ends on a happy note when "Gary" takes off down the street looking for work, accepting who he is and who he wants to be. The reader knows that he is happy being an American of Mexican heritage.

Denise Chávez's hero in *The Last of the Menu Girls* is named Rocío Esquivel, and she resolves the identity conflict by accepting the "both/and" identity. Chávez's characters are quintessential Chicanas and Chicanos, and her novels and short stories are special because the issues in her novels are universal issues seen from the perspective of the characters who adapt to life as Mexican Americans with their prejudices, superstitions, and confused personalities. In her work, "each name implies a narrative of experiences gained in responding to circumstance, time, and place and motivated by a need to belong" (Tanno 32). As such the American or Mexican name in Chicana-Chicano fiction can present a dualistic nature of ethnicity that becomes a storehouse of poetic meaning and rhetorical action.

Sandra Cisneros tells readers how she feels about Mexican names. She has an American and Mexican name, but the female protagonist in *The House on Mango Street* is named Esperanza Cordero. Esperanza explains her name in this manner:

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too man letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. [. . .] At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tine and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name—Magdalena—which is uglier than mine. [. . .] I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or ZEZE the X.

Like Soto and Chávez, Cisneros names her characters using Mexican names, yet these authors have an English name and a Mexican surname.

Alfredo Véa, another contemporary Chicano writer, also uses Mexican names for his characters in *La Maravilla*. He does not mix the ethnic signifier in the names he chooses. Alberto Castillo is the hero who learns to value ethnic diversity in the town of Buckeye, Arizona. He accepts and understands his Chicano identity and his grandfather's Yaqui Indian identity. He only tolerates his mother's search for the American dream by marrying Anglo men. The hero, as a grown man, resolves the identity issue. An American soldier who fought in Viet Nam, he returns to honor his Yaqui grandfather's grave and to give himself over to his heritage. Véa resolves the identity issue by reflecting his

generation and history: Alberto remains a Mexican Yaqui in America unlike George who becomes an American who wants to erase his Mexican memories.

This brief analysis suggests that Chicanas and Chicanos also use naming conventions for rhetorical impact. However, it is the author's name, whether both Spanish or one English and one Spanish that determines whether the protagonist of their literary works will develop a "both/and" identity or decide to maintain a primarily American orientation with minor or no influence of their culture or a primarily Mexican orientation with minor or little influence of American cultural conventions.

More research is needed to determine if and how the "both/and" ethnicity of the writer manifests in their work. Finally, I agree with King that understanding cultural context is essential when reading names. The reader needs to understand cultural boundaries and their violations in order to uncover the development and struggles that arise from ethnic identity. And one of the ways to identify the struggle is to consider if the character has an "American" name, a Mexican name, or a combination of the two because those of us who are "both/and" became a different American, an ethnic American who has to be gracious when someone asks, "What are you?"

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