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Lost in Trans-Nation: Unearthing Chicano Identity in Daniel Venegas's Las Aventuras de Don Chipote o Cuando Los Pericos Mamen

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Reconciling Daniel Venegas:
Las Aventuras de Don Chipote in the Balance of History

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Professor Scott Saul and Professor Genaro Padilla



Abstract

Daniel Venegas's *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote o Cuando Los Pericos Mamen* is considered by some to be the first Chicano/a novel. It is praised for its depiction of a working class population and is seen as an important artifact of Chicano identity in Los Angeles at the turn of the twentieth century. A close examination of its author, however, presents a different reading of the novel. His work with the Mexican Consulate and various other cultural organizations in the burgeoning metropolis of L.A. disclose a socio-political interest behind the novel that may be in opposition to the Chicano identity that it attempts to portray. Elements within the novel as well as Venegas's own unearthed biographical history are crucial in understanding more deeply the complexities of the novel, of Venegas himself, and of the Chicano experience.

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Note

Waking up in someone else's house is always disorienting. I remember that when I was five, I woke up in Tijuana after a two day bus ride from Mexico City. To this day, that uneasy feeling I get whenever I stare at someone else's ceiling and immediately recognize its strangeness reminds me of that September morning in 1985 when I came to the United States. I've noticed that there's an odor to other people's homes. It often prompts me to wonder what others must smell when they come to my house. I woke up that morning in an unfamiliar living room. The only thing between me and the dusty floor was a red San Marcos blanket—the image of two lion cubs and their mother on a tattered fleece comforter keeping my underfed, *iztcuintli*, body from the cold ceramic floor. In the air, there was a mash-up



of aromas; the Mexican breakfast being noisily put together in the kitchen and the acrid sting of women's perfume on the covers my mother had used to wrap me up the night before.

As I stood up, I saw at the end of a long hallway laden with family portraits, a young woman brushing her hair in front of a mirror. Over and over she brushed it, carving fissures out of its golden landscape with the grating bristles of her princess brush. It wasn't until I met her big blue Mexican eyes looking right at me through the mirror, that I noticed my own image. Strange, isn't it, the things we remember?

Crossing the border that evening wasn't such a big deal. I came over legally after my mother had given the Mexican Consulate a not-quite-so-legal document stating that I had been in the U.S. years before. She, on the other hand, had a much more perilous crossing that night. I don't often get a chance to hear the story anymore except when one of my siblings or I achieve something semi-impressive and she begins to reflect on where we would all be if she hadn't come to America. She then tells us, in her broken English, the story of how some nameless, almost angelic Samaritan saved her life when she fell down trying to cross the 5 freeway. My mother's immigrant story is part of the Durán mythos. It has come to function as a sort of memorial cornerstone through which many of my family's experiences are interpreted.

Chicano literature is brimming with these kinds of stories, passed down from family members who have made that trek. I recognize in them a similar

essence even though the details vary. Also, I try to understand them for what they are—only the rudimentary pieces of a much more complex identity that we weave on our own. While my mother’s story may resonate with countless other people who have crossed those same dry San Diego mountains, it can’t communicate the whole of our family history and neither is it meant to define someone else’s. My father, for example, high on the Rolling Stones and Willie Colon, his plans to join Ché Guevara on Bolivian battle grounds, or my mother’s lovely way of undertaking monumental tasks in a foreign country with little more than reckless abandon, even my own developing appreciation for anything Motown, are the details of our lives that are very much our own—they are personal.

For me, the myth will always be there, set at the highest point of my family’s collective consciousness. I’m sure that subsequent generations will do with it what they like. It is beautiful for what it represents—the shared, semi-sweet prologue of the individual lives we all lead. It is there, kept alive only by the connections that we are able to forge from that point of departure to whatever place our lives will take us—hopefully always moving in a positive direction. I often present this tale to people, expecting them to see it as the origin-story of who I am becoming and not as the consummation of *what* I am. It is an invitation to share in a personal and progressive history, to become a part of my *family*. Perhaps these are reflections we can make when interpreting the migrant novel, taking into account the singular

narrative as part of an infinitely complex matrix that invites understanding and engagement—and not totalizing judgment.



“Es decir: que nuestra inferioridad solo puede existir en la imaginación de quienes nos desconocen absoluta y torpemente.”¹

-G. Durante de Cabarga



¹ *“That is to say: Our inferiority can only exist in the imagination of those to whom we are absolutely and torpidly unknown”* from G. Durante De Cabarga, “El Triunfo de la Raza,” *El Malcriado* (Los Angeles, CA), April 2, 1927, 2.

Daniel Venegas Outside of Tec-Art Studios, 1927²

The Telling Smirk

On October 5, 1927, a group of Angelino journalists met with Dolores Del Rio outside the Tec-Art Studios in Hollywood. The men were invited to lunch by the actress during the filming of her latest project, Edwin Carewe's *Ramona*: the Mexican-born Del Rio was set to play the fabled Anglo-Indian heroine.³ After enjoying a meal with Del Rio, the men proudly gathered around for a few still shots with the iconic actress, already considered one of Mexico's greatest contributions to the silver screen. She, an iconic representation of Hollywood myth making, is surrounded by immigrants who were most likely lured to America by a similar myth. Within the margins of this picture, obscured by the distortion that befalls images over time, is Daniel Venegas, the author of *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote o Cuando Los Pericos Mamen*, a book Nicolás Kanellos would discover in 1984 and hail as "the first Chicano novel."⁴ The novel follows the misadventures of Don Chipote, a rogue who abandons his idyllic and pastoral native home as well as his family in order to find work in America where he buys into the myth that the streets are paved with gold. A picaresque novel that is a comedic spin on Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* is a

² Image is from Rafael Ybarra, "Meca de Periodistas." *Prensa* (San Antonio, TX), March 3, 1940, 7.

³ "Lolita Del Rio Recibio Ayer A Los Periodistas Mexicanos." *El Herald de Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA), October 5, 1927, 6.

⁴ Daniel Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote or When Parrots Breast Feed* (Houston, Arte Público Press, 2000), 2.

cautionary tale for those attempting to cross the border into the United States. Don Chipote acts as the often mistreated, starved, and unfortunate subject through which Venegas's message is delivered.

Yet who was Daniel Venegas? A sideways glance and a mischievous smirk, the telltale signs of a biting wit, are all one can make out from the blurred image of the novelist standing amidst the well-dressed cohort above. He is at home with these other pioneering denizens of the Mexican community in Los Angeles, these immigrants who carry (as do so many others) a complex and bifurcated identity; with them, he is enjoying an astonishing level of cultural access.

I doubt Venegas, then a recent immigrant and former cobbler, could have imagined that only nine years after crossing the border, he would be hobnobbing with Hollywood starlets surrounded by some of the most influential people in the Mexican colony of Los Angeles. Perhaps even further from his mind was the thought that the following year he would publish a novel that, half a century later, would be considered one of the earliest attempts at articulating the Chicano/a experience. In his life and even posthumously, he appeared to live out "the American dream," experiencing a meteoric rise from humble origins in Mexico to professional success in America.

Likewise, it is easily understandable why Nicolas Kanellos's became so excited when he discovered *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, and saw that it

followed the exploits of the Mexican *bracero*⁵, in Mexico City archives: the novel appears to be, in Kanellos's words, a "socio-historic testimony on the labor conditions, culture and expressive forms of the braceros" composed by someone who underwent the same experiences and who wrote about the plight of the immigrant laborer.⁶ More remarkably, the novel was written more than thirty years before the Chicano movement of the 1960s. Thirty years before Cesar Chavez united farm workers and made their plight a subject of national concern. If *Don Chipote* then, is a "heroic effort to validate the life and experiences of Mexican immigrant workers in the United States" via the picaresque form; with its "incisive socio-political analysis of the precarious existence of Mexican laborers," it reads for Kanellos as a hopeful defense of the Chicano/a spirit.⁷

At the same time, when placed back in its original historical context, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* reads quite differently as a didactic attempt to dissuade Mexicans from further migration to the United States. While Venegas aligns some of his own personal experiences with those of his protagonist, Don Chipote, the novel often finds Don Chipote clubbed and cudgeled by the authorities, exploited by labor bosses, and mistreated by his own Mexican compatriots. Of course, the treatment of Don Chipote follows in part from the picaresque form, which traditionally features an insubstantial character at the mercy of chance, thus focusing the reader's attention not on

5 The word *bracero* refers to a Mexican laborer that is allowed temporary entry into the United States to work, usually in the Agricultural Industry.

6 *Ibid.*, 1.

7 *Ibid.*, 1.

the character but on the accidents that befall him or her. Yet with its romanticizing of Mexican life, and its depiction of the seemingly insurmountable precariousness of living in the United States, *Don Chipote* delivers a clear overarching message, that Mexicans will only be successful in the United States, “cuando los pericos mamen”⁸ –“when parrots breastfeed,”⁹ or never. It is difficult to see the novel, in this sense, as communicating Chicano/a sensibilities since it negates any possibility of a future in the United States—a prerequisite to the Chicano/a identity. While one may argue that the word Chicano in Venegas’s novel denotes someone whose stay in America is temporary and whose ultimate goal is realized in the act of returning to Mexico, the novel poses an intellectual puzzle: why, in a novel brimming with autobiographical comparisons between Don Chipote and the *implied author* (presumably Venegas), are there such drastic differences in ontological outcomes between Venegas’s life and the lives of the Mexican braceros he depicts in his novel? Why is Don Chipote unable to finesse what Venegas finesses so well—a viable and successful life in America? *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* stands in stark contrast to Venegas’s personal life, a life that approaches a more positive and modern conception of the Chicano/a identity in the sense that it reflects the trajectory of someone determined to make a life for himself in a foreign land.

The novel, seen from a particular angle, even seems to participate in the objectification of its characters, and by extension, of an entire immigrant

⁸ Daniel Venegas, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote o Cuando Los Pericos Mamen* (Mexico, D.F., Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo, 1984), 155.

⁹ Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 160.

population. Because of its subject matter and its place within a still contemporary social framework, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* carries a message about living within a foreign country that transcends the idiosyncrasies of its characters and author. Its message resonates with and is easily extrapolated into the real world. It is of utmost importance then, that as a reader, one realize that a knowledge of the author, his characters, and the historical framework within which they are positioned, is necessary to understanding the novel and the particular vision it offers of the immigrant's experience. Much like the Chicano identity, there are conflicting paradigms operating within and around Venegas's novel that must be understood concurrently, because it is only in the manifold nature of Don Chipote that Venegas's novel can accurately be called a Chicano/a novel.

Central to *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* are the lives of a working class immigrant population whose identities are wrapped up in the complex intermingling that takes place at the intersection of culture, politics, labor and race. Of course when the elements that create this complexity converge, conflict and opposition are bound to occur; the Chicano/a identity emerges as a reaction—a creatively subversive response to the pressures put upon the affected individual by the forces vying to limit and define the marginalized group. When approaching this work, one must parse through and peel back the layers of influence, to see who is speaking in order to determine how fault lines are drawn, how the image that is being proffered represents the group affected by that representation. For example, the

aforementioned image of Venegas with Dolores Del Rio for *Prensa*¹⁰ gestures to a cohesiveness between the Mexican American journalists, from *Prensa* and *El Heraldo de Mexico*,¹¹ that did not actually exist. Within a few years, the ideological divisions among these journalists would lead to the formation of a new newspaper, *La Opinión* and later, the decline of *El Heraldo de Mexico* itself.

In that ideological skirmish, Venegas aligned himself with *El Heraldo*—the newspaper that gave him work and published *Don Chipote*. In a retrospective account of the decline of *El Heraldo*, former *El Heraldo* journalist Rafael Ybarra suggested that the newspaper declined because of its political partiality which alienated its varied audience. Ybarra notes that in a time when “the public was yearning for news,”¹² *El Heraldo* was one of the few places where they could find them. The information reported by *El Heraldo*, however, needed to be scrutinized because it was often “impregnated with a marked prejudice against anything that smelled of revolution”¹³ since the periodical was “firstly, porfirist [referring to the controversial Mexican President/dictator Porfirio Diaz]; secondly, porfirist; and thirdly, porfirist.”¹⁴ According to Ybarra, the newspaper’s political leanings colored the information that it disseminated. *La Opinión*, (owned and started by Ignacio E. Lozano, Sr., who also started *Prensa*) whose “ample

10 A San Antonio based newspaper.

11 A Los Angeles based newspaper.

12 Rafael Ybarra. “Meca de Periodistas,” *La Prensa* (San Antonio, TX), March 3, 1940, 30.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

information” is described as “impartial and serene,”¹⁵ came on the Los Angeles scene in 1926 and quickly forged a strong readership. Its popularity was due mainly to “its constructive and healthy orientation”¹⁶ towards the complex and broad community of L.A. *La Opinión*, the most widely read Spanish newspaper to date, heralded the end of *El Heraldo* although the newspaper would continue to be published for years to come, though not as often and primarily as a “vehicle for commercial announcements,”¹⁷ eventually passing on into the pantheon of failed newspapers. Such was the nature of competing voices in Los Angeles during the turn of the century. The group pictured above, moreover, was only one element (albeit a key element) of a much more complex population, a single enterprising sub-set of a much larger patchwork of people with varied, though sometimes intersecting interests revolving around the life of the down trodden immigrant worker; and Daniel Venegas, the author of the “first Chicano novel,” was merely a single player within that group.



15 Ibid., 41.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

Chapter One

In Search of "The Naughty Brat"

It would be Venegas's voice that would resonate as a vestige of Chicano/a literary identity in the early 20th century. Who, then, was this mysterious author? While there exists no significant record of Venegas's personal life, what is recoverable from the bits of information printed in Los Angeles and San Antonio newspapers, as well as a few unearthed immigration documents, suggests that Venegas was a complex character who found an equally complex niche in the middle-class Mexican-American intelligentsia of 1920s L.A.

He was born Daniel Venegas¹⁸ on December 8, 1895.¹⁹ A Tapatio²⁰ from central Mexico, he migrated to the United States in 1915; crossing the border without filling out any immigration paperwork—a fact that suggests an “illegal” crossing. The twenty-year old son of a widowed mother (Porfiria Venegas), Daniel came to the United States during one of Mexico's most turbulent eras. Five years after the Mexican revolution led by Francisco I. Madero against long-standing President Porfirio Diaz. F. Arturo Rosales

¹⁸ Most of the information that follows is pieced together from three documents: A U.S. Department of Labor, Immigration Service (Mexican Border District) entry form and card serial number 18992, filled out on June 22, 1918 and a WWI Registration Card filled out September 12, 1918, number 42-1-22-C. A Daniel Venegas with a birthdate of December 8, 1895 from Jalisco is recorded to have crossed into the United States. This immigrants trek from Jalisco, to El Paso, to Los Angeles mirrors both *Don Chipote's* journey as well as Daniel Venegas's own autobiographically described journey and therefore I am considering it more than a coincidence which leads me to believe that these records are, in fact, referring to Daniel Venegas, the author of *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote o Cuando Los Pericos Mamen* and that the newspaper article from *El Heraldo de Mexico* may have misprinted the age of Daniel Venegas in 1924.

¹⁹ “El Onomástico de Daniel Venegas,” *El Heraldo de Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA), December 9, 1924, 8.

²⁰ Denotes a person born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico.

describes the migrations that took place during this time as occurring within the “context of mistrust and border violence.”²¹ Venegas made the trip to the United States during this time for reasons that remain obscure. His father may have been a victim of the revolution, forcing Daniel to head north in search of work to sustain his mother, or perhaps other causes prompted him to make the move; Venegas’s later criticism of his revolutionary countrymen suggests that his own political ideology was not in line with the men and women fighting for regime change in Mexico. What is certain, however, is that his initial venture into the United States ended almost as quickly as it began. Venegas returned to Mexico in 1916 after only one year of labor. In *Don Chipote* the narrator confesses that he himself—ie. Venegas—suffered injustices at the hands of the company that hired him “the whole time he had to work on the traque.”²² Daniel Venegas’s unpleasant experience in 1915 seems to have provided him with the insight necessary to produce works like *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, and “En El Vil Traque,” the latter appearing in the April 17, 1927 edition of a his own satirical newspaper *El Malcriado* (“The Naughty Brat”).²³ Both narratives deal with the disillusionment Mexican workers experienced when they came to the United States. Quite possibly unsuccessful and definitely disillusioned, Venegas returned to Mexico in 1916, though not to Jalisco. Instead he remained in the

21 F. Arturo Rosales, *iPobre Raza!: Violence, Justice, and Mobilization Among México Lindo Immigrants, 1900-1936* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1999), 21.

22 Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 79. I think that Venegas, when he writes “la temporada” he literally means *the season* that he worked on the “Traque.” He may have only worked in this sort of labor for one year, possibly 1915-1916—his first trip to the United States.

23 Daniel Venegas, “En El Vil Traque,” *El Malcriado* (Los Angeles, Ca.), April 17, 1927, 7.

northern part of the country—in Torreon, Coahuila Mexico—where he would remain until 1918. Perhaps he was already drawn to the border by the possibility of a better future in America, or perhaps he was pushed there by whatever he may have been escaping in central Mexico; in any case, Venegas chose to remain within arm's length of the United States.

In 1918, Venegas made his seemingly final trip across the border. What began as a haphazard search for work in 1915 at the age of twenty became, in 1918, a much more organized, legal and determined decision to try again. On June 22, 1918, Venegas crossed the border for the second time. Immigration records indicate that Daniel Venegas, single and traveling alone, was on his way to El Paso “in search of work.”²⁴ At 5’3”, with a dark complexion, black hair and brown eyes (which fellow journalists would later describe as “eyes like a lynx”), Venegas did not stand out among the number of Mexicans making their way into the States, although he was marked by a crucial difference from most of them: he knew how to read and write. With five dollars in his pocket, Venegas was determined to make this second trip work. When asked if he planned to ever return to Mexico, he answered “no”. When asked how long he predicted his stay in the United States would be, Venegas answered “permanent”. While he conceded to the idea of living permanently in the United States, he chose to hold onto his Mexican citizenship, asserting that he had no intention of ever going through the naturalization process. By mid-September of that same year, already

²⁴ U.S. Department of Labor Record *Serial Number: 18992*.

propelled forward by the pull of American life, Venegas filled out a WWI draft registration card where he disclosed that he had already secured a job in El Paso as a shoemaker working for a Charles R—²⁵. Twenty-three at the time, Venegas was racially categorized as white. Whether this was his intention or that of the officer who helped him fill out the registration form is unknown, but “white” may have been the only option available to Venegas since the card only distinguished between three racial categories: “white”, “negro”, and “oriental.”²⁶ Given America’s historical treatment of African-Americans, Venegas may have been among those who, like F. Arturo Rosales notes, “sought to distinguish themselves” from being “reduced” to the “level of blacks,”²⁷ and chose to distance himself from that association. After his border crossing, Venegas disappears from the record books for six years, presumably he was working his way west: he resurfaced in California in 1924, already established in the culture of Los Angeles as a journalist, playwright and community activist. Regardless of what transpired in those six years, it is safe to assume that Venegas’s own experience in Los Angeles diverged significantly from that of the humble Northern Mexican farmer he describes in his novel.

In 1924, Venegas began to gain notoriety amongst the cultural organizations in Los Angeles. In *El Heraldo de Mexico*, journalist Salvador

²⁵ This particular man’s last name, as it appears in the WWI registrar’s report #42-1-22-C, is illegible.

²⁶ WWI Registration Card #42-1-22-C, (El Paso Texas), June 22, 1918.

²⁷ Rosales, *iPobre Raza!*, 25.

Gonzalo Becerra,²⁸ a former associate with Venegas in a then-defunct newspaper titled *Pueblo*, described Venegas as a “young wolf,” with dark skin and lynx-like eyes that, according to Becerra, “do not reflect the big heart that he has.” Venegas was described as a “a true friend like few others,” one with “the soul of a child.” Praised for his honesty, wit and work ethic, Venegas was certainly beginning to make a name for himself in the burgeoning Mexican colony. *El Malcriado*, a small weekly newspaper in a sea of struggling periodicals that rose and fell during the early twentieth century, was a big hit with the general public to many people’s surprise.²⁹ The paper, begun in late 1924, was a project put together by Armando Flores and Daniel Venegas along with Arnaldo Rubio (illustrator), though Armando Flores would later abandon the project, leaving Venegas in charge.³⁰ Judging from the two issues that survive from 1927, *El Malcriado* offers a discordant and unorganized assemblage of stories dealing with various social topics.



28 Salvador Gonzalo Becerra, “Teatrales: El Cuento del Lobo Joven,” *El Heraldo de Mexico* (Los Angeles, Ca.), November 19, 1924, 7.

29 “El Malcriado Sigue Saliendo,” *El Heraldo de Mexico* (Los Angeles, Ca.), March 18, 1924, 8.

30 Rafael Ybarra, “Meca de Periodistas,” *Prensa* (San Antonio, TX), March 3, 1940, 35, 41.

Advertising dominated the issues, paid for by the many businesses within the community that were either run by or sympathetic to the Mexican community. Some, like the Japanese-American “Murayama Real Estate Co.,” even identified themselves as “friends of Mexicans.” The April 17, 1927 and April 2 issues, offer up a satirical and sardonic social commentary on issues ranging from cock fights and plastic surgery for convicts to sandal-wearing waitresses, and radio personalities who preen themselves for an audience that can’t even see them. Nicolás Kanellos notes that Venegas took aim, in his newspaper, at “the customs of and politics in the Mexican community of Los Angeles,”³¹ though it appears that, like a man firing buckshot, Venegas’s criticisms were sometimes scattered. Venegas was careful, though, to remind the reader that he was part of the working-class which he was poking fun at. He referred to the United States as “Estamos Sumidos,” playing on the sonic resemblance between Estados Unidos and Estamos Sumidos (“We Are Sunk”) while also taking advantage of the first person plural “Estamos” in order to include himself amongst those who are “sunk”.³² Venegas’s

³¹ Nicolás Kanellos, *Introduction*, 1.

³² Daniel Venegas, “A Paulino ya le Cantean la Tambora,” *El Malcriado* (Los Angeles, CA), April 17, 1927, 4.

satirical newspaper was critical of American society as oppressive, but his criticism always targeted toward the figure of the uneducated and uncultured Mexican, too. He comes down hard on characters whom he believes do not present the race in a dignified manner. An article, for example, on “peasant waitresses”³³ ridicules female food servers for their choice in cheap and smelly footwear. Although meant to be a source of comic relief, Venegas’s tone suggests that he oscillated between loyalty to his Mexican brethren and repulsion toward them because of the way their actions reflected poorly on more affluent Mexicans living in Los Angeles. He was critical of the lower classes but simultaneously he defended them; often times he took the stance that he was defending them from themselves as much as from the society that marginalized them. His approach could be almost paternalistic in its didacticism. Take, for instance, a short article from *El Malcriado*, a piece whose similarities with the novel show it to be a precursor to *Don Chipote*. The short piece most likely drew on Venegas’s experience as a worker in 1915 and utilizes the common vernacular of the working class to attack the oppressive forces that act on Mexican laborers.

“En El Vil Traque” shows Daniel Venegas experimenting with the picaresque form. Its title is a pun on the “traque” which refers to the railroad track. The half-page first person narrative follows the misadventures of a nameless protagonist who, after coming to America, finds nothing but

³³ Daniel Venegas, “Una Nueva Agrupación de Babucha y Vacilon,” *El Malcriado* (Los Angeles, CA), April 17, 1927, 3.

backbreaking work. His encounters with treacherous *pochos*³⁴ who treat migrants “as if they were dogs,” as well as the disdain of his own countrymen, are the source of the narrator’s woes. The protagonist longs for the humble life he led in Mexico. Romanticizing the homeland, he states that “when I remember my beautiful little house with all its Dianthus flowers, and my land where I only had to work twenty days a year, it makes me so angry”: the narrator contrasts the fecundity of his beautiful Mexican home with the drab tent that he sleeps in after a day of “working like a negro.”³⁵ This short piece of fiction is a cautionary tale to all those who, like the repentant worker, “believe that over here all you have to do is come and scoop up pesos with shovels as if they were dirt.” Venegas here deflates and ridicules the myth that America is a nation where the streets are paved with gold.

Interestingly, Venegas utilizes a dialect that is oddly self aware: the story points to the fact that it is not a humble uneducated laborer who is speaking, but Venegas himself who is mimicking a conception of what a laborer would sound like. Eye dialect like “draiver” (driver) and “jaigiiey” (highway) are placed within quotation marks that make it clear that the voice is consciously trying to sound colloquial. Instead of creating a linguistic connection between the author and the reader, it inadvertently distances itself from the common man. This distancing would go undetected if, as Nicolas Kanellos speculates, the *bracero*’s literate companions were most

34 A descriptive term used to identify fruit that has become rotten, Pocho is a derogatory term used by native-born Mexicans to describe someone who has left Mexico and forgotten their heritage.

35 Venegas, “En El Vil Traque”, 7.

likely the ones to read these short tales aloud for them.³⁶ The popularity of Venegas's blue-collar writing style would be understandably popular since it must have sounded familiar to the laborers who heard them being read. The comedic aspect of his writing would easily draw in those workers without them ever realizing, through his textual form, that Venegas, while able to replicate the dialect, stood apart from their own ranks at the time he vehemently argued that "journalists are also workers."³⁷ I am not, however, merely suggesting that Venegas's literacy separated him from, and therefore disqualified him from becoming a voice for the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles as if the being Chicano/a was marked by illiteracy or ignorance. There were certainly plenty of literate workers at the time. The historical framework of Venegas's involvement within the community aided him, after all, in becoming such a popular character in Los Angeles. The complexity of that involvement as well as the historical milieu of the time does, however, problematize the way one views Venegas's work, especially if one is to interpret it as representative of Chicano/a culture.

What, then, was the shape of the Mexican American community that Venegas wrote for in 1920s Los Angeles? The tumultuous nature of migrant experience during the revolution and its subsequent years gave rise to what can be described as a frenzied search for identity within a foreign country amongst those displaced by the violence and dangers of a revolutionary war.

Mexicans making their way to the United States, the majority of whom had

³⁶ Kanellos, *Introduction*, 2.

³⁷ Daniel Venegas, "La Nueva Asociación de La Prensa," *El Malcriado* (Los Angeles, CA), April 17, 1927, 2.

never been outside of their small farms and had little sense of sharing a patriotic communion with other Mexicans, found themselves in a country that was equally if not more hostile to them than the country they left behind. The need for a cohesive identity spurred the formation of countless associations, unions, and societies—organizations all vying for the opportunity to determine what that common identity should look like. As F. Arturo Rosales notes in his book *iPobre Raza!*, “the life span of most [of these] groups was short. Many times lack of cohesion, mismanagement, and the community’s poverty forced organizations to fold.”³⁸ A lack of cohesion suggests that there were conflicting viewpoints on what the social, cultural, and political responsibilities of Mexicans living in the United States should be. Daniel Venegas chose to align himself with organizations whose interpretation of Mexican identity often took shape along the lines of patriotic and nationalistic values. These organizations often saw any assimilative tendencies within the Mexican community of Los Angeles as disgraceful. Los Angeles’s diverse composition, however, made it difficult for any one ideology to become dominant.

Both multicultural and stratified by class and race, Los Angeles was in the process of becoming the burgeoning metropolis that, to this day, continues to resist any attempts at cultural determination. Home to the “largest population of any city in the United States”³⁹ during the 1920s, Los Angeles was a place of encounter where the strains of varied populations

³⁸ Rosales, *iPobre Raza!*, 28.

³⁹ Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 13. v

had the potential of synthesizing into a delicate harmony of sights and sounds or of erupting into a discordant and often violent clash of opposites. From within this tangled and dynamic metropolis an immigrant population⁴⁰ arose. George J. Sánchez notes that in the “aftermath of the Mexican Revolution” at the moment that “thousands of Mexicans were making their way north... ‘Mexico,’...was a national community that had to be ‘imagined’ to exist” and that it developed fervently along borderlands as a process of “trans-creation.”⁴¹ Cultural organizations emerged in response to this creation as a way to curb the efforts of Mexican nationals who saw the opportunity of coming to America as a means of creating “a world for themselves, shaped both by their memories of their past lives and by the reality of their present situation.”⁴²

One of the first organizations Daniel Venegas joined was the Union Mexicana de Periodistas (*Mexican Union of Journalists*),⁴³ whose first meeting was organized to discuss and determine a proper plan for the celebration of the Mexican Independence day in Los Angeles’s *Plazita*. The union’s manifest purpose was to preserve a spirit of true harmony amongst the people in the Mexican colony. Under the leadership of José N. Orozco, and with members in key positions like Esteban V. Escalante, Rafael Ibarra and Salvador Gonzalo Becerra, the union was comprised mostly of men, many of

40 The autochthonous nature of a people whose origin in America predates the establishing of an American government in the Southwest places tension on the term immigrant.

41 George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1993), 9.

42 *Ibid.*, 11.

43 “Celebro Sesión Antier La ‘Unión Mexicana de Periodistas,” *El Heraldo de Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA), June 27, 1924, 1.

them writers for *El Heraldo de Mexico*. Of key concern was the organization of patriotic festivities that were to take place later that year. Gabriel Navarro (another key member) advanced a proposition asking that the Unión should constitute the organizing committee for the patriotic celebrations. Navarro then asked that the organizing committee be placed under the presidency of the Mexican Consul in Los Angeles. Adding to an already impressive grouping of resources, Don Brigido Caro (then director of *El Heraldo de Mexico*) and Ricardo Cuevas (director of San Antonio's *La Prensa*) placed their respective newspapers at the service of the Unión. Venegas was, in a sense, fortunate that only six years after coming to America, he found himself as part of such an influential group. This was surely a cohort that looked out for one another. In an effort to integrate Venegas further into the community, for example, Salvador Becerra wrote, in November of 1924, an article for *El Heraldo* painting Venegas as a good-natured and valuable member of the Los Angeles community. All was not harmonious, though. In order to claim a spirit of harmony, the Union Mexicana de Periodistas deemed it necessary to exclude, from participation in the planning of the festivities, "many people, who quite often, are not even Mexican."⁴⁴ Whether this indictment referred to people of different races who saw the festivities as a way of exploiting the Mexican migrant population or if it also targeted those within the community whose views on the constitution of Chicano/a identity was in opposition to the nationalistic project of the Mexican Consul is unclear.

44 Ibid., 3.

What it is suggestive of, however, is what Arturo F. Rosales notes in *iPobre Raza!*—namely, that Mexican consuls in Los Angeles were infamous for appropriating “lo mexicano (‘Mexican-ness’) and denying this claim to exiled subversives.”⁴⁵ The consuls worked diligently to promote immigrant loyalty to Mexico, not merely as a patriotic endeavor, but also in order to secure political power over Mexican citizens living in exile in the United States. What does it mean, then, that Venegas, whose novel would be deemed a “heroic effort to validate the life and experiences of Mexican immigrant workers,”⁴⁶ would quickly come to form an integral member of this distinct faction of cultural actors?

For Venegas, it meant having access to a certain level of socio-economic mobility incomparable to that of his laboring compatriots. It was common to read, for example, within the pages of *El Herald* about the lunches, dinners, and birthday parties organized by members of Venegas’s social circle. Held in some of “the best restaurants on Broadway,”⁴⁷ these parties deliberately presented Venegas and his friends as men who were enjoying some of the luxuries Los Angeles had to offer. During Armando Vargas De La Maza’s birthday, for example, Venegas was one of the few acquaintances that was invited to the celebration where he gave the lead writer for *El Herald de Mexico* a golden pocket watch chain. The constant appearance of Venegas’s name in the society section of *El Herald* must

45 F. Arturo Rosales, *iPobre Raza!: Violence, Justice, and Mobilization Among México Lindo Immigrants, 1900-1936*, 34.

46 Nicolás Kanellos, “Introduction,” 1.

47 “Fiestas y Recepciones,” *El Herald de Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA), January 14, 1927, 6.

have provided the readers of his satirical work as well as the audience of his plays with the satisfaction of seeing one of their own countrymen enjoying an enviable level of success. The reports in *El Herald* of Venegas's community service as well as his cultural projects and civic involvement must have made him, in the eyes of Angelinos, worthy of that success.

Some of the clubs Venegas helped create targeted the needs of specific Mexican groups and served purely cultural interests. He and Juan Ruiz Castillo, for example, formed a club for "tapatíos y jaliscienses"⁴⁸ in 1927 drawing together people from Jalisco. As early as 1924, however, Daniel Venegas was responsible for putting together various conferences on behalf of the many cultural unions for which he held governing positions. Many, like the one held in the Capitol Theater on August 10, 1924, by the Unión Cultural Pro-Patria (Cultural Union Pro-Homeland), featured speakers like Juan A. Saenz, then Mexican Consul, who elaborated upon the "Duties of Mexicans living Abroad." These conferences were often organized for the working class Mexicans of Los Angeles. *El Herald* reported, for example, that on March 6, 1925 a conference by Daniel Venegas and Alvear Vélez on behalf of the "Unión Cultural Pro-México,"⁴⁹ gave a crowd of two to three hundred Mexicans the "placid satisfaction of hearing a speech about the fatherland in simple words." It is obvious from much of the union's language that the cultural project they were advancing was a didactic one. As *El*

48 "Por Las Sociedades y Clubs," *El Herald de Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA), February 13, 1927, 6.

49 An offshoot of the Cultural Union Pro-Homeland from "La Unión Cultural Pro-México' en el Pueblo de Rivera," *El Herald de Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA), March 6, 1925, 8. (italics mine)

Heraldo reported, the lectures given by these unions, not only served to “spread among our countrymen, vast knowledge of moral and material needs,” it also aimed to “place them in a position to define clearly and precisely the limits of their rights as well as their social and legal obligations; keeping in their hearts and those of their children, always a latent love for the fatherland, due respect and submission to the laws governing the host nation we are guests in and the noble trend of prosperity and well-being that is only achieved through hard work and energetic activity.”

The Mexican Consulate often backed the Cultural Union Pro-México and its group of thinkers in an effort to preserve a shared nationality and a shared language via a “racial solidarity” that was to organize itself “under the loving banner of the homeland.”⁵⁰ Venegas’s novel reflects a posture that is in keeping with the standard of the organizations he helped to create. His belief that Mexican journalists in Los Angeles were meant to serve as the “standard bearers for the ideals of betterment and mutualism,”⁵¹ suggests that Venegas, as a part of the educated elite, may have viewed himself as a qualified interpreter and disseminator of cultural standards. Some of Venegas’s contemporaries, though, were not so sure about his right to claim such a lofty position.

On September 6, 1925, Salvador Gonzalo Becerra, the same journalist who had previously praised Daniel Venegas for his childlike spirit and noble heart, published an article on the front page of *El Heraldo* indicting Venegas,

⁵⁰ “Interesante Conferencia de la Union Cultural Pro-Mexico en Santa Paula,” *El Heraldo de Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA), Jan. 26, 1926, 4.

⁵¹ Venegas. “La Nueva Asociación de La Prensa.” 2.

as well as Mexican Consul Aveleyra and the Unión Cultural Pro-México for unethical behavior. Becerra's article exposes the not-so-solid solidarity of Venegas's cultural organizations⁵². A member of both the Unión Cultural Pro-Mexico and the Official Committee for Patriotic Celebrations, Becerra set out to explain the events surrounding his disillusionment with, and separation from, both these groups. Apparently, Adolfo Moncada Villarreal and Daniel Venegas, who occupied the positions of president and vice president, knowing that many of the union's branches were intending to elect Becerra as president, denied union members the right to vote, thereby ensuring that they would retain their leadership roles in perpetuity. Moreover, Consul Aveleyra, after being appraised of the situation, did nothing about the alleged despotism that was plaguing the Unión. Becerra credited Aveleyra's indifference to Moncada who, he claimed, had "no other quality than knowing how to lobby all the consulates" and had generated antipathy between the consul and himself. While Becerra blasted Daniel Venegas for using *El Malcriado* to unduly justify "his vice-presidential position in the 'Cultural Union,'" it is unclear what Venegas's direct actions were during this whole debacle except for his integral role in the Cultural Union that was the focal point, along with the Mexican Consul, of Becerra's complaint. After Moncada and Venegas had barred the members of the union from voting on a new president, Becerra helped to establish "La Liga Cultural Mexicana," ("The Mexican Cultural League") an organization, along

⁵² Salvador Gonzalo Becerra, "La Verdad Sobre La Actuación de 'El Heraldo de Mexico' en el Comite Local de Festejos Patrios," *El Heraldo de Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA), September 6, 1925, 1,4.

with *El Herald* that was subsequently attacked by the Mexican Consul and by the Cultural Union Pro-Mexico.

A rift opened between *El Herald* and the Cultural Union, manifesting itself around the events planned for the community. At an *El Herald* organized pageant for the young women of the colony, the Mexican consul, became upset that he had not been invited to participate as an organizing member in the contest and sent Lic. Castellanos (then director of *El Herald*) a strongly worded letter “prohibiting him from using the consul’s name or making associations between him and the contest.” It was obvious that the consul had felt slighted, but what was more evident was that Aveleyra expected to be involved in all cultural projects having to do with the population in Los Angeles. If *El Herald* had not thought it necessary to offer the consul an organizing role in the contest, Aveleyra would, with the backing of the Unión Cultural Pro-Mexico, make sure that Mr. Castellanos and Salvador Becerra (who was to act as the representative of the newspaper) would be excluded from the Unión completely. Prior to leaving the Unión Cultural, *El Herald* had become, as Becerra describes, a “Fallen Angel,” because it had not participated in the “propagandizing labor” in ways that the Cultural Union had expected. The representative for *El Herald* made his final plea to the Unión that *El Herald* should be given “equal rights” along with many other organizations that had also been barred from representation within the Unión—his request was denied. There was, according to Becerra a “marked atmosphere of personalistic tyranny,” that denied other societies

that were also composed of Mexican nationals from participating in the Unión. This exclusivity, Becerra believed, was proof that the Unión did not have good intentions toward the actual immigrants in Los Angeles and that their “love of country” was limited to supporting the consul in the good and the bad decisions he was making. What Salvador Becerra may have been realizing was that the cultural project of the Mexican Consul, as it was being realized through the Cultural Union Pro-Mexico, was unable to contain the emerging sense of self-definition experienced by the city’s growing population of Chicano/a’s, independent of the community’s self-proclaimed leadership.

* * *

Venegas’s Vision

How do these events factor into the production of *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, and can the novel itself be interpreted as representative of the Chicano experience in light of its author’s cultural leanings? If interpreted as part of the cultural shaping project that Venegas was embroiled in, *Don Chipote* can be understood as a Mexican novel utilizing Chicano identity though not necessarily a Chicano novel. *Don Chipote*, however, does have the potential of existing apart from Venegas’s socio-cultural influence. Its very fictionality outlasts the author’s aims. It has the potential to be re-appropriated by a Chicano/a population still struggling to forge a compound identity within the United States instead of—as the novel suggests—cultivating a nationalistic nostalgia for a country that, while the

novel was being written, was a lot more politically and socially divided than the romanticized conceptions of the cultural movers and shakers in Los Angeles would admit.

Chicano/a's are caught between two nations. The conscious straddling of identity that plagues those caught between an American future and a Mexican past makes for a plethora of cultural combinations. Octavio Paz, one of Mexico's most renowned writers asserts for example, that after visiting Los Angeles, he noticed that the Mexicanism imported to America never actually mixes with the world that is north of the border.⁵³ Fueled perhaps by an ardent nationalism, the writer refuses to see the hybrid identity that is distinctly developing from both the purely Mexican or the assimilating American. In, *Becoming Mexican American*, George Sánchez describes this creative process when he writes that:

Mexican immigrants played their own part in this drama. Constrained by their lack of economic and political stature, they drew strength from the networks of family members and fellow countrymen who lived nearby. Through the daily struggle to survive in an oftentimes hostile environment, these newcomers constructed a world for themselves, shaped both by their memories of their past lives and by the reality of their present situation.⁵⁴

The canon of Chicano literature, as varied as it is because each author's perspective integrates different combinations of Mexican/American socio-cultural values, stands as proof that Octavio Paz's assertion is mistaken. Recent literary attempts have been made, primarily as a result of

⁵³ Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de La Soledad* (Mexico, D.F., Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), 2.

⁵⁴ Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 11.

the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, to articulate the Chicano/a experience. Every attempt differs by degrees to others and offers a varied imaginative representation of the migrant experience. Any author's attempt at presenting a common voice, one that articulates the overall experience of those who come to America from Mexico is frustrated by the fact that any individual who undertakes the process of migration has a unique set of motives, a unique perspective, and a unique level of willingness to appropriate American values. These considerations are often neglected in a society that tends to view the Mexican migrant as a member of a homogenous group to be discussed in labor, economic, legal, and yes, even racial terms.

When analyzing *Don Chipote*, it is beneficial to have an understanding of Venegas's own perspective—his social and historical milieu—not to discredit his novel as nationalistic propaganda or to grant it an undeserved authenticity, but to understand that the novel itself can only be representative of the Chicano experience if all these considerations are taken together. This becomes especially necessary since, as Genaro Padilla has noted in "The Mexican Immigrant as *: The (de)Formation of Mexican Life Story," the Mexican immigrant in many of these narratives remains an "anonymous entity, a cipher to be assigned meaning in a sociological play of statements" mainly due to the manipulation that the immigrant, as subject, endures at the hands of the author.⁵⁵ The vision of immigrant experience

⁵⁵ Genaro Padilla, "The Mexican Immigrant as *: The (de)Formation of Mexican Life Story." In *The Culture of Autobiography*. (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993), 139.

that *Don Chipote* offers must be understood in relation to its component parts, even those that extend outside the pages of the novel.

My aspiration, in analyzing *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, is to understand the multiple and often conflicting elements that contribute to the construction of Don Chipote as representative of the working class immigrant. By understanding those elements, I believe it is possible to unravel the influences that turn the protagonist into a supernumerary character who is constantly set aside by the narrator in order for the latter to expound upon his own experience and knowledge with apparently didactic objectives. Because Don Chipote is objectified by the narrator/author, just as the Mexican laborer is objectified by the country that has forced him/her to migrate and the country that draws the immigrant in only to simultaneously rejected him/her, it becomes necessary for the analyst to unearth and liberate the migrant voice from under the novel's literary construct, recognizing always that the elements that attempt to direct that voice contribute to its very formation. In this sense, the novel can become—though perhaps not as a result of authorial intention—a Chicano novel. It can forge a new identity of its own, without the assistance or permission of the forces that created it.



Chapter Two

The Fungible Migrant, The Instrumental Migrant, and The Inimitable Narrator

I can picture Daniel Venegas sitting in his office on 202 North Main Street in downtown Los Angeles. I can imagine him looking out his window, upon the recently arrived and disoriented immigrants walking up and down the street, dumbfounded by the scale of the buildings towering over them. Main Street, home to the popular theaters where his plays were often featured, is just a few blocks away from the famous *Plazita* where numbers of Mexican immigrants congregated. This burgeoning population, drawn by the pull of a shared heritage and the push of a hostile society, provided Venegas with a constant supply of grist for his imaginative mill. Already a veteran of the Los Angeles scene at the height of his popularity in 1928, Venegas asserted, as a prominent member of the Mexican Press Association, that the role of the journalist was “sacred for its elevation:” the journalist needed to “think on behalf others, to work on behalf others.”⁵⁶ Ahead of all other societies, Venegas’s had to be at the forefront of cultural work, as a “guide” toward an effective solidarity and “true patriotism” in order to secure the dignity of any Mexican living in a foreign land.⁵⁷

If we follow Venegas’s own lofty sense of his role, we can quite easily, and mistakenly, take his writing too seriously. According to contemporary reviewers of his plays, there was a great gap between Venegas the author and Venegas the comedian. An article in *El Heraldo* judged that as a

⁵⁶ Venegas, “La Nueva Asociación de La Prensa,” April, 17, 1927, 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

humorist, Venegas knew exactly how to “flog human vanities.”⁵⁸ In his satirical newspaper *El Malcriado*, Venegas devoted an entire section to “Puntadas de la Semana,” witticisms that poked fun at various characters within the community. On the other hand, some said that, as an author, he had the ability to take “bodies and give them life” via a naturalist style that one journalist, reviewing his play, compared to the French novelist Émile Zola. Unfortunately, Venegas’s plays are considered lost to a modern readership; what we can learn about him and his work must be pieced together from articles, reviews, a few unearthed documents and his novel. A comparison, therefore, between his other artistic work and *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, is, for the moment, impossible. It would have been interesting, for example, to compare *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, a work celebrating the Mexican worker, with his first play “Nuestro Egoismo,” a play that defended women’s social position with “vigor, with soul,” and with “enthusiasm.”⁵⁹ Had it not been for the rediscovery of Venegas’s novel in 1984 by Nicolás Kanellos, this enigmatic author’s work may have gone completely unnoticed by modern scholars of Chicano/a literature. The novel’s initial appearance in 1920s Los Angeles as the country was experiencing a significant surge of immigration from Mexico gives it a historical, if not anthropological importance as a precursor to the Chicano renaissance of the 1960s. While I agree with Kanellos that *Don Chipote* is important in that it adopts a working class Chicano “language and rhetorical

58 “La Ultima Obra del Concurso es la de Daniel Venegas,” *El Herald de Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA), May 12, 1928, 2.

59 Ibid.

style” that most other authors of the time wanted to distance themselves from, I am not wholly convinced that Venegas’s work is a “heroic effort to *validate* the life and experiences of Mexican immigrant workers in the United States” as if through the novel Venegas aligned himself wholeheartedly with this working class population.⁶⁰

Kanellos’s belief that the work is a “celebration” of the “idiomatic and cultural expression of Chicanos, with whom he not only sympathized but most certainly identified”⁶¹ seems complicated by the fact of Venegas’s social position within the Chicano intelligentsia as well as his close involvement with organizations later accused of serving the interests of the Mexican Government with little regard for the people themselves. If, as Kanellos posits, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* is the first Chicano novel, I believe it deserves that title because of the peripheral elements outside of the novel’s thematic material, contextual elements that exist outside of the novel even, and not because Venegas offers a faithful representation of a “working-class literature.”⁶² If, on the other hand, one is to view the novel as a strictly humorous piece of literature, to be read and understood from within the social group it sometimes derides as ignorant and infantile, then some leniency can be granted to the work for its derisive tone. There exists, after all, a traceable tendency toward self-satire and self-degradation in Chicano folklore and comedy that functions, as José R. Reyna and María

60 Kanellos, “Introduction,” 1 (italics mine).

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

Herrera-Sobek state in their essay on the construction of the Mexican Immigrant, as a means of “objectifying particular experiences and sharing them in the stylized structure of the joke” providing a feeling of solidarity and serving to release “feelings of anxiety, which are great in the transplanted person.”⁶³ Comedy, especially as reflected back on the self and common within the picaresque novel, serves a specific and cathartic function in this sense. However, by interpreting something that is a result of in-joking within a specific context and for a specific audience as representative of an entire culture, misrepresentations and misunderstandings are bound to occur.

Elements within *Don Chipote* suggest that Daniel Venegas intended for his work to be more than just an entertaining piece of satirical fiction. Instead of merely providing a space wherein the narrator, author, and reader could laugh at their common plight, Venegas’s work often borders on objectification. Similarly to what Genaro Padilla suggests in his study of ethnographic attempts to capture the immigrant experience, *Don Chipote* as subject is often denied a voice and is meant to be understood through a carefully constructed matrix in which the author comes off as the sole possessor of knowledge and agency.⁶⁴

⁶³ Maria Herrera-Sobek, and José R. Reyna. “Jokelore, Cultural Differences, And Linguistic Dexterity the Construction of the Mexican Immigrant in Chicano Humor.” In *Culture Across Borders: Mexican Immigration & Popular Culture* (Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 1998), 202-226.

⁶⁴ Padilla, “The Mexican Immigrant as *: The (de)Formation of Mexican Life Story,” 125-148.

Objectification for the purpose of creating an insubstantial character on whom the shared experiences of a Chicano community can be projected for the sake of relieving social anxieties is not necessarily problematic—if, in fact, that is what Venegas is attempting to do. In that case it makes sense that Daniel Venegas has chosen the picaresque genre to present the often crude and comedic story of Don Chipote since the life of this *rascuache*⁶⁵ is plagued by a number of abuses, most of which many Mexican immigrants have had to endure and can easily identify with. Venegas deviates from the picaresque form, however. His complex socio-economic position in L.A. may disclose the reasons why. The treatment of his titular character as a fungible representation of a specific sub-set of immigrants is done for specific and, conceivably, self-serving purposes.

In order to trace the ways in which Venegas's characters are objectified, I have decided to draw from Martha C. Nussbaum's essay entitled "Objectification." In it, Nussbaum develops her idea that there are "seven features" involved in the treatment of something—and more problematically, someone—"as an object."⁶⁶ These features are, *instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership and denial of subjectivity*.⁶⁷ While these features are easily traceable throughout Venegas's novel, I have decided to focus on the ways he treats his characters as *fungible* and *instrumental*. I will examine how these features are

⁶⁵ This word is used to denote a character that is poor, wretched, ridiculous or of poor quality.

⁶⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Objectification," in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Autumn, 1995, vol. 24, no. 4, p. 257.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

expressly utilized in several passages of the novel as well as make the argument that while they are not intrinsically negative, they become so in a novel where the author aims to have a social impact on actual people outside of the fictional work he has created. I am suggesting that the impact of the novel's message extends outward, that it is not hermetically sealed within the pages of the book, in a fictional world, and that the author's own autobiographical interjections into the work both violate its fictionality and essentially open up the novel for ethical and social critique.

Nussbaum asserts that there is a "morality in representing" and that an ethical analysis of literature is possible if one is careful to distinguish—and for this Nussbaum cites Wayne Booth—between "(a) the narrator of a text (and/or its other characters); (b) the implied author that is, the sense of life embodied in the text taken as a whole; and (c) the real-life author."⁶⁸ In order to ethically critique a text, Booth suggests that one should focus on the *implied author*, and Nussbaum that one should look at context and circumstance in order to determine what sort of interaction the text, "as a whole," inspires in the reader, what kind of "desires and projects it awakens and constructs."⁶⁹ Since not very much is known about Daniel Venegas, the process of distinguishing the novel's *implied author* from the *actual author* can become a bit tricky. Commonalities between the *implied author* and the decisions that he makes in representing his characters and how they line up with Daniel Venegas's life, as represented by various other sources, will

⁶⁸ Ibid, 255.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

illuminate an ethical reading. Any apparent contradictions between the *implied author* and the *actual author* need not be dismissed or overlooked. They must, however, be dealt with and I argue that they are either intentional or a result of the nature of representing. The author, be he implied or actual, cannot have total control over the language that is used or the characters that move within the text, seeing as how they operate in a mimetic world that must offer them a level of mobility or risk becoming unbelievable and inauthentic.

Before proceeding with a close reading of these passages, one must look at the picaresque form in order to understand how Venegas's deviations might be revealing something about his intentions. Traditionally written in the first person, the picaresque follows the life and actions of the *picaresco/a*, particularly in the ways that that character becomes a victim of the society the work is satirically attempting to critique. According to Edward Friedman⁷⁰, "not only is the teller in the tale, but he is the tale; the narrative act becomes both form and substance of message production."⁷¹ Furthermore, the aim of the picaresque, its message, according to Marina S. Brownlee, is one that is "as a rule mimetic, didactic, intended to convert the reader to the narrator's and/or implied author's point of view."⁷² As a permutation of the form, *Don Chipote* is interesting in the way that it

⁷⁰ Edward Friedman, "The Picaresque as Autobiography: Story and History," in *Autobiography in Early Modern Spain*, ed. Nicholas Sapaccini and Jenaro Taléns (Minneapolis: Prisma Institute, 1988), 119-129.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁷² Marina S. Brownlee, "Discursive Parameters of the Picaresque," in *The Picaresque: A Symposium on the Rogue's Tale*, 28.

deviates from the specific traits outlined in this general description of the picaresque form.

Las Aventuras de Don Chipote is the third person narrative of Don Chipote de Jesus Maria Dominguez's adventures as an immigrant worker in 1920s Los Angeles. While he is the focal point of the novel in that he is the one whose adventures are being described and he is the one being acted upon, the narrator often intentionally loses sight of Don Chipote as the character constantly fades into the background of the narrative. The narrator, presumably Daniel Venegas, or at least an *implied author* drawing upon Venegas's experiences, breaks the picaresque frame of the novel in order to inform the reader of what is important, what one needs to look at and what needs to be taken away from the picaró's experience, even going so far as to suggest what the reader's responsibilities are as he/she acts within the world the work is constantly presenting as real. What is primary to the literariness of the novel is transformed into just another tool for the author to advance the serious message his ubiquitous digressions are driving home—namely that his “veridical”⁷³ story is not solely a comedic fiction but that it should be taken seriously and that Mexican immigrants should abandon any hope of being happy in the United States and go home. It does not take long for the reader to become acquainted with Venegas's authoritative posture within the novel.

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⁷³ Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 18.

A Telling Start

In the brief introduction to *Don Chipote*, the titular character is in a dream-like state brought on by exhaustive work, and seems lulled by a pastoral and idyllic landscape, surreal in its romanticized portrayal of a simple agrarian life in Mexico. That simple life serves as a constant reminder to Don Chipote of the life he will leave behind; the novel will be bookended, in its final chapter, with a virtually identical passage. From the very beginning we are aware of the author's presence. "But before going any further, we have the pleasure of presenting our character,"⁷⁴ says the narrator, reminding the reader of the progression of a plot and of his role in presenting the characters that will act throughout the work's pages. This is an author whose narrative voice, while hovering outside the world the characters are trudging through, as if he is looking in on the actions of the characters, is corporeally unaffected by what is going on. His presence bears down on the reader as we are told where to look and what is important. The author never relinquishes control and the moments in which he breaks from descriptive and expository narration, taking an instructive tone, are by no means subtle. It does not take long, also, for the reader to become aware of Venegas's shift in tone from the narration in the first chapter to the dialogue that the author/narrator is attempting to have with the reader. Chapter two begins with the author speaking directly to the reader, upsetting the narrative flow in order to direct the reader's attention. The narrator instructs

⁷⁴ Ibid., 23.

the reader:⁷⁵ “Dejemos a don Chipote y familia durmiendo a calzón quitado, pierna suelta y roncando a todo vuelo y volvamos los ojos hasta algunas leguas distantes de su jaca”⁷⁶ (“*Let’s leave Don Chipote and family, sleeping naked as jaybirds, spread-eagle and snoring like there’s no tomorrow, and turn our attention to some distance from his shack*”). The narrator’s use of the words “dejemos” (“Let’s leave”) and “volvamos” (“turn our”) is an attempt to align himself with the reader, as if the narrator and reader were making a mutual decision to leave the characters in order to focus their attention elsewhere. Of course, one knows that this is not the case. It is Venegas that is controlling the flow of information: it is he that is turning our attention elsewhere.

His use of the vernacular and colloquial witticisms, the jokes that poke fun at the characters themselves, may be an effort to distract the reader from the fact that the narrator is acting on behalf of his characters, and on behalf of the reader as well. Venegas’s digression wrests our attention away from Don Chipote, who is yet to be fleshed out, in order to give us the life story of the prodigal Pitacio, a lazy character from Don Chipote’s hometown of Tepistlatitlán⁷⁷ who, after his parent’s death, was forced to find work and ended up in the U.S, and is now coming home. In the course of telling the story, Venegas again interrupts the narrative flow to write of Pitacio:

⁷⁵ For now, I will be using Nicolas Kanellos and Ethriam Cash Brammer’s translation of the text.

⁷⁶ Venegas, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, 18.

⁷⁷ *Tepistlatitlán*, like its neighboring *Nacatécuaro* are towns that exist only in the world of Venegas’s novel. Venegas’s use of false place names suggests that while these towns are in reality *no-place*, they are meant to be representative of all the places where these working class Mexican’s come from.

Pronto su Carrera se vio coronada por el éxito, y antes de que la cobija de los pobres se sumiera entraba con pasos de camello cansado a la que él, que no conocía más allá de su rancho, le parecía una populosa ciudad...

Para no darle más importancia de la que merece Pitacio, de golpe y porrazo lo plantaremos en los Estados Unidos, en un pueblo del estado de Texas, a donde había llegado después de miles de percances, pero en donde gracias a la condenada barriga se encontraba trabajando.⁷⁸

The ellipsis marks the moment that the narrative changes from exposition to an authoritative authorial interjection. We are told that Pitacio is not a character deserving of much importance, and again adopting the first person plural, we are made to believe that somehow we are making that determination along with the author as we move to “plant him in the United States.”⁷⁹ The author, admittedly because of his own “soberano capricho”⁸⁰ (“sovereign caprice”), glosses over wide swaths of Pitacio’s life, details like his border crossing, the “thousands of misfortunes”⁸¹ he undergoes, details that we are told are unimportant even though they presumably mirror Don Chipote’s subsequent adventure and ultimately his own return home. The author’s sovereignty is reflected in the ways in which he is able to place characters by pushing Pitacio to a certain point in the narrative timeline as well as his ability to “go forward in time.”⁸² Having situated the author’s

78 His race soon appeared to be crowned with victory; and, before the blanket of the poor submerged beneath the horizon, with belabored steps he entered the city, which to him, who knew nothing outside the rancho, looked like a great metropolis...Not to give Pitacio more importance than he’s worth, with a single stroke we will plant him in the United States, in a town in the state of Texas, where he had arrived after thousands of misfortunes, but where he, thanks to his damn gullet, could be found working.

Ibid., 19.

⁷⁹ Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 24.

⁸⁰ Venegas, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, 20.

⁸¹ Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 24.

⁸² Ibid., 25.

posture toward his character's and towards the reader, Martha C.

Nussbaum's essay, *Objectification*, will aid in an analysis of this passage to show how Venegas objectifies Don Chipote as well as Pitacio, and through subsequent passages, how he even objectifies the population of immigrants he is supposed to be identifying with.

The description of Pitacio coming home after a long day of working, his "carrera"⁸³ ("career"), having achieved some level of success because he had finally found a job, ends abruptly at the moment when we are to get a glimpse of how he views the city he finds himself in. The character within the novel, at the moment he is about to make the transition between being in a state of physical labor (working for someone else), to having some level of agency at least in the way he perceives things, is cut short by the author, brushed aside in order to meet the needs of the author and his narrative arch. Several, if not all, of the features that Nussbaum outlines are found in this passage. Venegas, as objectifier, is able to pick Pitacio up, move him along and place him. Issues of *instrumentality* and *fungibility* abound in this short passage, interwoven into the relationship between author, character, and reader.

Because Pitacio is a pre-cursor, a foreshadowing of Don Chipote's adventure, his objectification in this sense seems innocuous and necessary. The fact that Venegas (a fellow immigrant) is sovereign, however, determines the dynamic between character and author. Even in his travels,

⁸³ Venegas, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, 19.

it is the “condenada barriga”⁸⁴ (hunger) that is propelling him forward and not any other factor that would denote a greater purpose, let alone a sense of agency. It is never a desire to achieve something besides satiating a corporeal need. Pitacio’s is violable because Venegas can push him along, can pick him up and place him. This points to the ways in which the narrator takes physical ownership of the character’s body and also details Pitacio *instrumentality*—he goes where he is made to go. The moment Pitacio might exercise his own subjectivity, it is denied to him by Venegas and we are explicitly told that Pitacio’s feelings or perspective do not matter. As the narrative progresses, and Venegas’s description of Pitacio is wrapped up with the comment that the “United States is full of these Pitacios,”⁸⁵ the previous passage can be understood as making the statement that the novel’s character’s are *fungible* subjects. The narrator has to literally check himself lest he get carried away telling Pitacio’s story which, in the narrator (and presumably Venegas’s own words) is representative of the majority of Mexicans who “go to the United States only to waste all of their energy, get abused by the foremen and humiliated by that country’s citizens.”⁸⁶ Perhaps the similarities between Pitacio’s adventure and what we will eventually learn about Don Chipote—despite the narrator’s assurance that Don Chipote is “the real character of the story”⁸⁷—makes it easy to confound the two. Their experience, eventually becomes the “immigrant’s experience.” In this

84 Ibid.

85 Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 28.

86 Ibid., 28.

87 Ibid., 29.

sense they are interchangeable. The only distinction between Don Chipote and Pitacio is Don Chipote's role as father to his chipotitos and husband to Doña Chipota; factors that have more to do with responsibility and duty than with any particular characteristic of Don Chipote in the way he loves his wife and children.

* * *

Unknown and Unknowing

Convinced by Pitacio's stories about American streets paved with gold, impressed also by Pitacio's ability to "toquingles"⁸⁸ (speak English) Don Chipote sets out on his own adventure after receiving Doña Chipota's blessing, and is accompanied by his faithful dog Sufrelambre (Suffershunger⁸⁹)—a constant reminder to both the character and the reader of the driving force behind his move to the United States. It does not take long before Don Chipote is faced with the violence, abuse, misrepresentation, and objectification that will define most of his time in America. The intricacies of Don Chipote's border crossing, while perhaps only intended by Venegas to ridicule his character, can help to shed light on many of the transformative processes that migrant's undergo when crossing the trans-national border.

Arriving in Ciudad Juárez, the author describes the corrupting influence that a proximity with the United States produces as he notes that Juárez is

⁸⁸ Venegas, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, 22.

⁸⁹ My translation though Ethriam Brammer translates it to *Skinenbones*.

“one of the greatest centers of perversion.”⁹⁰ While the *implied author* hints at the fact that “drunkards from El Paso,” are the ones who are coming across the border in order to escape prohibitionist laws, and that most likely it is they who are the ones taking advantage of the “casinos, cantinas, and brothels”⁹¹ that are strewn across the city, he seems more concerned over the fact that because of the perversion in Juárez, “Americans, strangers to our country’s interior, have formed such a negative image of us.”⁹² Venegas places the blame on Mexicans for allowing themselves to become corrupted. There is an obvious concern, on the part of the author, for the image that Mexicans are developing abroad. For Daniel Venegas, who when this novel was being published, was part of an elite group of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles, this negative image of Mexicans affected the way he was perceived by the society he was attempting to successfully navigate. In that sense, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* is a way of chastising the lower classes for their ignorance, albeit through self-deprecating comedy, and Don Chipote is the exemplary ignorant stereotype on which Venegas will lay the full force of American oppression as a consequence of his ignorance.

It is in Juárez (a border town) that Don Chipote, because he has fallen asleep on the street, has his first brush with violence at the hands (actually boots) of a traitorous police officer who even while in Mexico, yells at Don Chipote in English after having given him a swift kick in the head. Led by a

90 Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 34.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

false vision of America, by hunger, as well as by a fear for this man's authority, Don Chipote proceeds to walk into the border station without really knowing the "formalities"⁹³ involved in the process of entering the United States. This leads to an unknowing subjection of himself to American authority. In their hands, he undergoes a humiliating sterilization whereby he is stripped naked, bathed and "disinfect[ed]."⁹⁴ His clothes, the vestments that would otherwise cover his naked body, are finally returned to him—though he notices that they have been shrunk by the disinfecting process. They are described as appearing small enough "for one of his little Chipotito children."⁹⁵ Is it possible that Venegas is making a symbolic on behalf of Don Chipote by making an indictment against the treatment of Mexicans as they cross the border; what he could easily criticize as a sort of paternalistic posture toward immigrants that violates their identity through an obvious infantilization? What subsequently follows makes that possibility doubtful. Don Chipote is not even allowed to cross the border after all this humiliation. Again, though, Venegas seems to ridicule his subject instead of making any charges against the American officials. He describes Don Chipote as "taking pleasure in the first humiliation that the gringo forces on Mexican immigrants!"⁹⁶ Don Chipote's willing ignorance grants the narrator and Venegas an opportunity to appear detached from the abuse the character is suffering. This detachment is not impartial since it is equally paternalistic because it situates Don Chipote as a character that will remain "desconocido"⁹⁷ ("unknown") and is perpetually "desconocedor" ("unknowing") who must continue in his folly in order for Venegas's cautionary message to be carried to its ultimate end. The narrator, on the other hand, is delineated as someone that is able to recognize this treatment as humiliating but will do nothing to grant the

93 Ibid., 35.

94 Ibid., 36.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid., 35.

97 Venegas, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, 31.

character any agency to escape or resist it. The immigrant's violability is heavy handed in this passage and an apt reader can easily map the objectifying elements that Nussbaum outlines in her essay onto the treatment that Don Chipote is receiving here. One may argue that it is necessary to sacrifice his character in order for Venegas's novel to expose the ill-treatment of Mexican's in America by making him extremely ignorant and easily taken advantage of, Venegas's interjected assertion that it is "esta cortedad de nuestros paisanos es la que los hace sufrir lo indecible all llegar a esta ciudad o a cualquier otra de los Estados Unidos"⁹⁸ ("Our countrymen's naiveté causes them to suffer the unspeakable upon coming to this city or any other in the United States") suggests a witlessness that plagues a whole population of paisanos. Interesting, also, that Ethriam Brammer (the novel's translator) decides to use the word "naiveté" for "cortedad" which can more appropriately be translated to mean ignorance or dullness. Daniel Venegas, in his own personal life and through the interjections he makes in the novel, has claimed a phenomenological allegiance with the immigrant workers in Los Angeles. Where then, does someone like Venegas fit into this world where success for immigrant workers is made nearly impossible?

* * *

The Phenomenological Friend

Don Chipote's *fungibility* is continually reiterated throughout Venegas's novel. For example, Pitacio takes over Don Chipote's responsibilities at home while Don Chipote travels to America—they essentially just switch places. In El Paso, Don Chipote meets Policarpo, one of the men who crossed the river with him and who will also become a faithful companion, along with Sufrelambre, in his misadventures. As a testament to Don Chipote's *fungibility*, after the titular character accidentally drives a pick axe through his foot and is taken to a hospital in Los Angeles, Venegas abandons his protagonist in order to narrate Policarpo's search for work. Since Don Chipote is hospitalized, he is no longer struggling to

98 Ibid., 88.

find food or a place to sleep and may no longer be *instrumental* to the novel's argument. Luckily Venegas provides Policarpo as a stand in for Don Chipote while he is recovering in the hospital. Not until he is released and has to wrestle with hunger and chance again, does he reclaim his position as the main character.

Venegas's conception of the immigrant rogue is fixed. Any ontological variant, even if it is made possible by the care Don Chipote receives at the hospital, is not worth elaborating upon. Everything in the novel must tend toward displaying the precariousness of a life in America and the ultimate goal of returning Don Chipote to Mexico. Even when Don Chipote and Policarpo encounter someone, like Venegas, who is literate and willing to help them out, the literate character operates as a nameless *instrument* that is used only to aid the overarching theme of the novel and not as an example of someone able to lead a sustained life in America. The encounter with the literate worker happens when Don Chipote runs out of food and has to send a request to the supply office of the labor company he and Policarpo had started working for in El Paso. The narrator asks, "¿como, si no sabia leer ni escribir?"⁹⁹ ("How, if he didn't know how to read or write"), highlighting Don Chipote's ignorance once again. Don Chipote had already decided to "search for someone among his fellow workers who could do him the favor"¹⁰⁰ of writing a letter to his wife, but it was ultimately hunger that made him actively search for a capable *compañero*¹⁰¹. The exchange that takes place between this good Samaritan and Don Chipote is interesting because it simultaneously proves that there are workers who are able to navigate the day to day life of working in America, while also covering up that ontological possibility by keeping the character nameless and separated—a mere contributor, like Venegas, to the ridiculing of Don Chipote and his friend.

With paper and pencil in hand the willing compatriot patiently waits for Don Chipote and Policarpo to dictate their order. All these two characters can do is stare at him blankly. Even though they are given the opportunity to express their needs and wants—even if only

99 Ibid., 63.

100 Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 70.

101 Fellow workers.

verbally—Venegas makes it so that they still require a literate proxy to tell them what they should want. The dialogue between these two parties proceeds as follows:

“You want flour?”

“Yessir, if you don’t mind,” replied Don Chipote.

“What else?” asked the scribe.

“Well, hmmm, what else do you think would be good, mister?” asked Policarpo.

“Do you have any beans?” he asked in return.

“Yessir, but they’re the last ones, an’ we awready put’ em in the pot. We even added a dash of salt. But since we were awready so hungry, well, we ate the tortillas all by themselves...”

“You folks like ta smoke?” the one with the list asked them.

“You betchya,” they replied.

“Okay, I’ll put ya down fer some tobacco, an’ meches, an’ papers. What else”

“Well, the truth is, sir,” explained Don Chipote, “we don’t know nothin’ ‘bout what folks eat’ round here. An’ if’n they send it to us... Aw, shucks, if’n you’d be so kind, jus’ put down whatever you’d git.”¹⁰²

Don Chipote’s deferment to this nameless scribe displays a high level of ineptitude and serves only to belittle Don Chipote and Policarpo. The scribe, on the other hand, is able to make “use of all his willing faculties”¹⁰³ compiling a list of things he imagines he would need if he were in their situation. Ultimately, he is praised for his “intelligence” since he seems to have “hit the nail on the head,”¹⁰⁴ with his list. Somehow he is capable of interpreting, for our two immigrant workers, exactly what they want and, unlike them, is able to express it in writing. It is possible that Venegas, who through his narrator interjects his own voice into the novel in order to elaborate on social issues that are taking place in his real world, introduces a character into the novel that resembles himself. Having, earlier in the chapter, reminded the reader that “the author of this novel, not too long ago, had to join up with the infamous traque, like the majority of those who come from Mexico, and he took perfect account of the abuses which foremen commit against the worker,”¹⁰⁵ Venegas also positions himself, like this fellow literate scribe, as someone who knows the plight of the worker. He has taken a “perfect account” of what it is to work the traque and is capable of

102 Ibid., 74.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid., 70.

communicating that experience, on behalf of the worker, through his novel. Here, Venegas may be referring to the work he did during the period of 1915-1916 when he first came to America.

Earlier in this thesis I attempted to present the complexities of Daniel Venegas's social and historical milieu. I believe that Venegas, the *actual author* of *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, endorsed the philosophy of many of the organizations he was a part of. The idea that his role as an intellectual elite was to "think on behalf of others,"¹⁰⁶ is evidently present in this passage. It is as though Venegas could not even conceive of Don Chipote and Policarpo, two illiterate and naïve immigrant workers, being able to communicate verbally for themselves. Even in the world of the novel Venegas had to create a character, like himself, who would act in his fictive universe—a character who was the author incarnate. Subsequent to this passage is another, in which the scribe takes down a letter for Don Chipote addressed to his wife, Doña Chipota. While we are told that Don Chipote is the one "dictating like a chatterbox" and that the scribe is ready to do "as Don Chipote pleased"¹⁰⁷ there are elements that suggest the overwhelming presence of the author and the scribe he employs to transcribe Don Chipote's words.

Grammatical determination is proof enough that this letter has a literate author—proper spacing, capitalization, and punctuation would not be possible otherwise. However, there are other hints within the letter that point to a more pronounced authorial presence. "I wish I was this piece of paper,"¹⁰⁸ Don Chipote writes¹⁰⁹:

Te noticio que ya estoy trabajando en un trabajo que llaman traque y sirve para componer los rieles por donde camina el tren. ¡Si vieras que demonios son los gringos! Por acá hay unas cosas que hasta Sufrelambre se queda con la boca abierta.

Aquí el administrador del trabajo, no se llama así; se llama bos y cuando no esta frente se llama Viejo, pero es tan aguzao que ihasta ahí nomás!...Como no puede decir mi nombre me dice Chipoto y a Policarpo le dice Polocarpo, pero esto de vez en cuando pues desde

106 Venegas, "La Nueva Asociación de La Prensa," April, 17, 1927, 2.

107 Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 75.

108 Ibid.

109 I have chosen to cite Don Chipote's letter in Spanish in order to point to the deliberate choices Venegas makes in this passage before Nicolás Kanellos's translation.

que entramos al trabajo hasta que salimos nos habla por un apodo muy chistoso que yo no entiendo bien, creo que es “gaideme” “sanabagan”.¹¹⁰

With one sweeping stroke the scribe both allows certain idiomatic expressions like “nomás” and “aguzao”—written approximations to the dialect Don Chipote is using—to pass through him unto the paper without bothering to correct their spelling, while also making sure to italicize the “bos” (boss) and placing the “Chipoto” and “Polocarlo” in parentheses. In this sense, the letter that is being sent contains the mark of Don Chipote—his working class vernacular—as well as the mark of the writer who interprets subjectively Don Chipote’s words and communicates them for the reader. He makes a deliberate choice about what to communicate and how. Moreover, Don Chipote is allowed to speak in tandem with this scribe only because the letter he dictates is an instrumental factor to his ultimate return to Mexico. The letter is addressed to Doña Chipota, an ever looming figure in the mind of Don Chipote. She is a constant reminder of the duty to family and country that he is failing to honor by coming to the United States. It is in that capacity that Venegas mobilizes Doña Chipota.

* * *

Wholly Patrimony

Doña Chipota is an interesting character. She operates with a greater level of prudence and restraint than do Don Chipote or his friend’s Pitacio and Policarpo. Though at times she is equally as naïve as her husband, Doña Chipota is contrasted with her male counterpart because she is the one that is back in Mexico saddled with her little Chipote brood, the farm and all the other things that Don Chipote should be taking responsibility for.

¹¹⁰ *I wanted to let you know that I’m now working at a job called the traque which goes fixing the rails that the train passes over. If you could just see how sharp those gringos are! Because there are some things out here that even make Skinbones gawk with his mouth wide open. Here, the work administrator, that’s not what he’s called, he’s called “boss,” and when he’s not around we call him the “old man,” but he’s so keen that, wow!...Since he can’t pronounce my name, he calls me “Chipoto,” and he calls Policarpo “Polocarlo.” But this is just every once in a while, because from the time we go to the work till the time we get off, he calls us by a very funny nickname that I don’t understand too well. I think it’s something like “Godam Sonovagun.”*

In the novel she becomes symbolic of the culture and heritage that Don Chipote has literally abandoned. Because she is determined to be reunited to her husband she is more deliberate in her actions. Where Don Chipote is led primarily by the day to day exigencies of his body—hunger and pleasure—Doña Chipota is driven by the task of retrieving her husband. Unlike Don Chipote who devoured all the food that he was fortunate enough to earn on any given day, his wife is often seen keeping rations, forecasting the need to have food at a later time. Though Don Chipote often falls asleep after a long day of work and a meal, she, though equally as tired, is unable to sleep because she is thinking about how she ought to proceed in her search of a husband who, by the time she reaches Los Angeles, is already espoused to the corrupting influence of the burgeoning metropolis via the coquetry of a waitress. The reader may see in Doña Chipota a character that is less oblivious than Don Chipote. This possibility may point to a welcomed break in Venegas's overall view of the Mexican immigrant. However, a look at the ways that Doña Chipota is depicted and the reasons why she may be a factor in the novel, will show that she is more of an *instrument* for Don Chipote's continued objectification—primarily meant to affect Don Chipote rather than be a self-determined character.

In response to the letter that Don Chipote sent home, Doña Chipota sends another. This is the first sustained moment where Doña Chipota's voice is articulated. The letter reaches Don Chipote as he is finishing up another day of exhausting work. The person who helped her write the letter is never revealed. "Choked up with emotion"¹¹¹ over the letter, Don Chipote rushes to find his literate friend in order to find out who it's from and what it says. The letter aims to inform Don Chipote about how things are going back home, and a section of the letter is very telling in the way that Doña Chipota unwittingly emasculates and ridicules her husband:

Pitacio se ha portado así...medio bueno, medio malo, pues si para el trabajo es casi flojo, mientras esta en la casa no deja de trajinar de un lado para otro ayudándome. Afigúrate que ya me tiene bomba en la cocina para que no vaya tan lejos por agua, y no solo eso, sino que él mismo me bombea y no me deja que me bombíe yo, dizque

111 Ibid., 79.

para que no me canse. Con eso has de ver si te quiere a ti, pues me hace cuanto puede a mí; lo que no me gusta es que no atiende bien la siembra, pues todo el día se lo quiere pasar en la casa; de modo que la milpa no creció mucho, porque no le dio la segunda escardada.

En cuanto al chile, ése si lo ha cuidado, como que es el que le gusta más. El otro día fui al sembradío y me lo enseñó, por cierto que lo tiene muy Colorado. También te digo que el otro día llevó chile y cominos, me picó tanto que hasta me hizo sacar la lengua...¹¹²

Brammer's translation fails to capture the more obvious double entendres that are engendered by Doña Chipota's narration. What this passage suggests is that while Don Chipote is busy working, another man is "bombea[ndo]" ("pumping") his wife. The fact that Pitacio showed Doña Chipota his "chile" (referring to either a pepper or a male penis) and that his chile "me picó tanto" (was so spicy that it burned her or that it pricked her so much) inflames Don Chipote's jealousy and shame. It is clear that Doña Chipota's virtue or reputation is not at stake here. In fact, she is never described as someone with sexual agency or an object of sexual desire to her husband. When, for example, Don Chipote saunters in to a variety show where a scantily clad woman is dancing, the narrator states that Don Chipote covered "his face, which turned red from the embarrassment of seeing a woman in such regalia. And don't go thinking that this was false modesty on

112 Venegas, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, 73.

Pitacio has behaved like this...half good, half bad. Because if you're talking about work, he's more or less lazy. But, when inside the house, he doesn't stop going back and forth to help me. And, guess what else, he's already put in a pump for me in the kitchen so I don't have to go so far for water. And that's not all neither. Because he pumps it for me and won't let me pump it myself, he says, so I don't wear myself out. So, with all this, you can just see how much he really cares about you, because he does as much as he can for me. But what I don't like is that he doesn't look after the farming, because he wants to spend the whole day inside the house. So the cornfield didn't turn up too much, because he didn't give it the second weeding.

As for the chili, yes, indeed, he's sure taken care of that, because that's what he likes best. Just the other day, I went to the field ready for sowing, and he showed it to me, and my word, was it ever hot. And I tell you that just the other day, when he brung over his chili, and we ate, it burned me so much I was even panting... (Brammer's Translation).

the part of our compatriot, for as you well know, in his homeland, he had never seen the body of any woman—dare we say, not even his wife—higher up than the ankle.”¹¹³ What is being attacked here is Don Chipote’s manhood. His wife is symbolic of something that belongs to him and the fact that Pitacio has supplanted his role in Mexico, is spending all day in his house instead of tending to his crops, and is now suggested to have taken over Don Chipote’s conjugal responsibilities, adds to Don Chipote’s woes and is presented as a consequence of him leaving his own country. The degeneration of family ties becomes a single aspect in a string of corruptive elements that slowly plague Don Chipote as he is becoming “contagiado por los demás”¹¹⁴ (“contaminated by others”) in the United States.

* * *

Doña Chipote(e)

While Daniel Venegas has no qualms about portraying his characters as comedic simpletons who are better off in their Mexican farms than in a city like Los Angeles and though Don Chipote seems oblivious to that objectification, it is interesting to note how Don Chipote reacts to Venegas’s check on his masculinity. I believe that Don Chipote’s indignation over his wife and Pitacio is necessary in order to make Venegas’s ridiculing of him more biting. Venegas’s novel goes so far as to attempt an attack at the level of his character’s sexual orientation. While this adds another comedic dimension to the novel—homosexual jokes highlight the centrality of

¹¹³ Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 115.

¹¹⁴ Venegas, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, 110.

machismo—it also functions as another way to prove that Don Chipote and people like him are ill equipped to thrive in America because they are easily corrupted by its society. This corruption affects Don Chipote’s marriage, it modifies his nationalistic identity, his use of language, and even his sexual identity. Throughout the course of the narrative, Venegas drops hints that the bond between Policarpo and Don Chipote is beginning to resemble a homosexual relationship. When Policarpo visits Don Chipote at the hospital, for example, Venegas describes him as approaching Don Chipote “como pollo que esta enamorado y no ha visto a su gallina por algunas dias”¹¹⁵ (“Like a lovesick rooster who hasn’t seen his hen for days”¹¹⁶). The longer Don Chipote stays in America, the more the loss of traditional values becomes pronounced.

Ultimately, Don Chipote becomes a ridiculous figure who has awkwardly attempted to assimilate to American society. Months after their arrival in Los Angeles, Don Chipote, Policarpo and even Sufrelambre have settled into their day to day lives. Things have changed for these three dramatically. Sufrelambre is fat; Don Chipote and Policarpo are decked out in “aquamarine suit[s] with lots of buttons, yellow shoes and a cowboy hat. And since bell-shaped slacks and tail coats are so fashionable, of course they have bought those too.”¹¹⁷ One can only imagine how ridiculous our protagonist looks in this mish mash of trendy apparel worn all at once and

115 Ibid., 94.

116 Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 101.

117 Ibid., 124.

every day. Policarpo's job pays him more than Don Chipote, who is a dishwasher. Don Chipote, however, taking the role his wife played for him back home, provides Policarpo and Sufrelambre with food on a daily basis. Do they not almost resemble a happy family? Don Chipote, no longer concerned for his own wife and children back home, spends most of his time going to shows and trying to romance a disinterested waitress who only talks to him so long as he keeps buying her things. Of course this does not last because the purpose of the novel is to show that Mexicans are better off staying in their own country. Don Chipote must go back home where he belongs. Doña Chipota finally drags her husband back home where he settles back into the pastoral life he left behind though he still fantasizes about his fancy clothes and the waitress he leaves in America. As a result of everything he has gone through, the abuse at the hands of countless characters in the novel within the ontological parameters set out by Venegas, Don Chipote determines that it is impossible for a Mexican to be successful in the United States, at least not until "parrots breast-feed."¹¹⁸

* * *

Young Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

Don Chipote is enjoyable to read. It is comical because Don Chipote acts as a proxy on whom immigrant anxieties are cast in order to laugh about them even if, as Reyna and Herrera Sobek suggest in their essay "Jokelore," that "it is the immigrant who is portrayed as the butt of these

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 160.

jokes.”¹¹⁹ The language of Don Chipote’s world, sans the narrator’s social commentary, is simple and its deft use of working class vernacular, along with Daniel Venegas’s already established social position in Los Angeles, may grant the novel acceptance by the community of working class Mexicans for whom it was written, though only within the context of in-joking. As a private and cultural artifact, the novel’s message may strictly play to Chicano/a sensibilities because it resonates with a romantic vision of the homeland through a self-deprecating humor that functions as catharsis. Daniel Venegas’s manipulation of the picaresque form, however, in the sense that he utilizes a third person narrator instead of the traditional first person account in order to speak directly to the reader via social commentaries on the actual condition of Mexican immigrants in LA, suggests that Venegas meant to use his novel as a vehicle for the ideologies of the many organizations he was a part of. While the implied author suggests that, “It would be a very difficult task to present the life of Mexicans in the United States, and more importantly, we don’t want to dig too deeply, so we leave that work to wordsmiths who are more ingenious and long-winded than are we,”¹²⁰ thereby pointing to the novel’s fictionality, we are simultaneously told that this is a “veridical”¹²¹ story.

What may be authentic in the novel is Venegas’s attitude toward his compatriots evidenced through the objectification of his characters and the

119 Reyna and Herrera-Sobek, “Jokelore”, 214.

120 Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 28.

121 *Ibid.*, 18.

not-so-subtle interjections which uncover the fact that Venegas did not see all Mexicans in the same light. When, within the pages of the novel, the narrator offers a commentary on the Mexicans that come to Los Angeles, he notes that:

It isn't that the city doesn't have the resources to offer its inhabitants, rather it is precisely due to its size that there are so many people, because the majority of Chicanos pack their bags for Los Angeles to make a better life for themselves. The result of this multitude of braceros immigrating to Los Angeles is that they do little more than pluck the goose bare and raise the height of the tortilla basket; because those who have jobs to offer, upon seeing this horde, steel themselves and pay the braceros as little as they can. Because we workers never have much cash to begin with, necessity forces us to work for whatever they are willing to pay us. Thus, we are never able to get our heads above water.¹²²

How is the *narrator*, the *implied author*, and Daniel Venegas positioned in light of a passage like this, found within the pages of this immigrant narrative, written by someone with Daniel Venegas's apparent political leanings? The passage may reflect the anxieties of someone who aims to "make a better life" for himself in Los Angeles, but is frustrated by the "hordes" of *bracero*'s who make it difficult for those like him who are, perhaps, better established. The fact that Venegas (in a privileged capacity) is part of that same population points to the conflicting paradigms at work in the mind of the Chicano/a. Daniel Venegas makes a distinction between himself and his immigrant compatriots through the elevated conception he has of himself as a cultural authority and the novel may simply be a way of influencing the working class to buy into the idea that returning to Mexico ought to be their ultimate goal. He pretends to be included in their number

122 *Ibid.*, 103.

by framing Don Chipote as a locus of self-deprecating catharsis wherein he and his readers can converge. However, his elevated notions, his social positioning, and deliberate details in the novel reveal no such allegiance and turn what might otherwise function as an authentic Chicano/a novel into an objectifying work. Of course, this assertion is only credible if one is to take into account the contextual evidence an examination of Daniel Venegas's social and political position has brought to light.



Coda

The Immigrants Left Behind

One cannot deny, regardless of his socio-political leanings, that Daniel Venegas was a pioneering member of the Chicano/a community in Los Angeles. F. Arturo Rosales writes about him that, as a “crusading journalist,” Venegas, “a Los Angeles columnist, businessman, and novelist—launched, as president of La Confederación de Sociedades Mexicanas, a number of campaigns to defend Mexicans, whom he believed were unjustly treated by the legal system.”¹²³ Of notable mention, for example, were his efforts to help four Mexican men sentenced to death at Folsom and San Quentin. Amongst them were Guillermo Adams, Alfonso Rincón, Mauricio Trinidad and Jose Sandoval. Venegas would organize plays and other fund-raising events, even going so far as to track down a possible witness in a murder, working “intensely to save those four compatriots from the scaffold.”¹²⁴ These campaigns were most always backed by the Mexican consulate or its allied organizations with the aim of cultivating a sense of solidarity amongst the Mexican population of Los Angeles. Rarely, however, were they successful in swaying American authorities. In this case, Adams, Rincón, Trinidad and Sandoval were all executed.

In May and June of 1933 Venegas took part in an agricultural strike that would mark one of the most historic moments for immigrant workers in California history. The end of the El Monte Berry Strike was celebrated as a

¹²³ Rosales, *iPobre Raza!*, 32.

¹²⁴ “Campaña Pro-Reos,” *El Heraldo de Mexico* (Los Angeles, CA), September 30, 1926. 1, 8.

victory of immigrant rights wherein higher wages and improved working conditions were thought to have been won for the many Mexican immigrants working the fields in California. Initially organized by the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU)—an offshoot of the Communist Party—the strike pitted “Japanese growers against Mexican pickers”¹²⁵ in what would become one of the most historic strikes in California history. Originally drawn along labor lines, the strike grew to include a lot of members from the Mexican community of Southern California. Seizing upon the opportunity to turn the strike into a nationalistic endeavor, Armando Flores, a Los Angeles printer, formed the *Comite Pro-Huelga* (Pro-Strike Committee). Charles Wollenberg’s article in *California Historical Quarterly* notes that “Flores and his fellow Comite members had close ties with the Mexican Consulate in Los Angeles.”¹²⁶ Daniel Venegas was a part of that committee. Pulling all of its nationalistic resources, both in the United States and in Mexico, the Comite soon enlisted the help of the most powerful man in Mexico, ex-President General Plutarco Elias Calles, who met with them at his *El Sauzal* estate near Tijuana. Simultaneously, Flores had sent an appeal to President Roosevelt asking for his aid. Ronald W. Lopez alleges that “Flores was unquestionably capitalizing on the fact that labor groups in Mexico were disenchanted with Calles and his puppet president, Abelardo Rodríguez.”¹²⁷ This gave Flores the opening to present the strike to Calles as

¹²⁵ Charles Wollenberg, “Class in Rural California: The El Monte Berry Strike of 1933.” In *California Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (Summer 1972), 156.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹²⁷ Ronald W. López, “The El Monte Berry Strike of 1933.” In *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1970), 106.

an opportunity for the ex-President to display an “undeniable sympathy”¹²⁸ for the Mexican laborer. Calles replied with thousands of dollars of support.

As part of this group, Venegas would often distribute “flour, beans, butter and canned milk”¹²⁹ to the striker’s and their families. He was also there when Flores met with Calles in *El Sauzal*. It was definitely significant that Venegas, only after leaving his country in 1918, and after he had become a significant part of the Los Angeles Mexican-American colony, had the opportunity to meet face to face with that Mexico’s most powerful man and be part of the political play that was going on around the plight of the Mexican worker.

July 6th marked the end of the strike. When the dust settled, after internal struggles between the various groups that wanted to take ownership of the campaign and between the political power dynamics that played themselves out to achieve a settlement, the workers were not much better off than they were at the beginning of the strike. In fact, the settlement agreement was not as good as was the first and second offers that were made by the Central Japanese Association of Southern California. Mexican newspapers however, presented the story as a great success for Mexican laborers. *La Opinión* even went so far as to emblazon their front page on July 7th with the words “Concluye La Huelga Al Rendirse Los Japoneses”¹³⁰ (*End of Strike as the Japanese Surrender*). The article also presents one of the last

128 Ibid.

129 Nicolas Avila, “Una Huelga Histórica,” *Prensa* (San Antonio, TX), May 20, 1951. 29.

130 “Concluye La Huelga Al Rendirse Los Japoneses,” *La Opinión* (Los Angeles, CA), July 7, 1933. 1.

photos of Daniel Venegas. The article, however, does not list the names of the people in the photograph, and some of the faces are blurred. Venegas most likely fades away into the mass of people gathered around Armando Flores, who is pictured in the center.



Comite Pro-Huelga at the end of The El Monte Berry Strike, July 6th, 1933. La Crisis

Of course the three thousand agricultural workers represented by the delegation are not pictured. After the settlement, with little time left of the picking season, they were left alone to deal with work shortages and the scab workers (often family members of Japanese growers who stepped in to fill the labor gap) who had taken their jobs. Flores and Calles had gotten what they wanted though, for them, the strike was over and they were the victors. The support of the Comite Pro-Cultural and of Calles's puppet government were gone and the workers were left to fend for themselves,

albeit with the realization that they had access to power through solidarity and organization. Something that would be integral to worker's rights activism decades later.

Venegas seems to fade away after the strike. His newspaper *El Malcriado* sees its final publication in 1929 and after 1933 no more mention is made of him either in *El Herald*, *Prensa*, or *La Opinión*, except in articles that take a retrospective look at historical moments in Angelino history. While Venegas may have worked diligently to keep a hold on the pulse of Mexican-American cultural development through his work with migrant workers, the cultural creation that was taking place at the level of the community may have proved to be too difficult to control, either for the Mexican organizations that wanted to cultivate loyalty to Mexico or the American authorities that wanted to completely assimilate this new lower-class working population. Surely, Los Angeles opened its arms to Daniel Venegas as another member of its developing cultural milieu. *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* would remain, thanks to Kanellos, as a historical testimony to his presence and his complex character.

* * *

Lost in Trans-nation

Nicolás Kanellos's 1984 discovery of *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* in a Mexico City library was significant because it provided a picaresque novel about an illegal immigrant whose narrator transgresses unto the page that could be interpreted as a vestigial part of the Chicano/a identity that was

thought to have been initially explored in the Chicano renaissance of the 1960s. The novel warns against the process of Americanization and the loss of traditional values—concerns that are still prevalent today. Daniel Venegas criticizes those that have undergone the acculturation process for providing the fodder for negative stereotypes. After its rediscovery, publication and subsequent translation, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote* becomes a work that is itself transformed by the process of translation. It exemplifies the perils of translation, though with much graver consequence because the issues that are being treated are contemporary ones that affect an entire group of people. *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, through its crossover into the English Language can be misunderstood, as elements crucial to the novel are lost in translation. One can only hope that subsequent translations of the novel, much like subsequent generations of Mexican Americans can help to clear up any misunderstandings.

The novel, in its original Spanish, was written for a Mexican readership and has a conversational quality that, instead of striving to be high-art, speaks directly to a people undergoing the trials that the Don Chipote and the Venegas had also experienced. The Northern Mexican vernacular, elaborated through the narrator's comedic tropes, witticisms and slang, lends to the novel a genuine appeal and no doubt resonated with Mexican *braceros* working in California at the time. Aside from being an obvious take on Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Venegas's novel deviates from the form in ways that give the narrative socio-historical value. Venegas

continuously interjects social commentary and interrupts the linear narrative of the novel in order to weigh in on the important issues plaguing his fellow immigrants. Venegas's voice trespasses onto his own novel transforming it into something between novel and accusatory journalism. His critique of American society, tempered by the way he treats his characters is also transformed through the process of translation. In preparing the novel for an English-speaking readership, elements crucial to the novel have been lost and a very different reading of the novel has emerged. The reception adds history to the novel's complexity and further mirrors the experience of migrants as they cross the Mexican/American border and whose attempts at communicating Mexican sensibilities in a Eurocentric society lend themselves to misinterpretation.

One example where these varying factors intersect in a complex manner occurs on chapter six of the novel where Don Chipote and his friend Policarpo find themselves washing dishes in order to pay for food they had already eaten. Upon leaving the restaurant, Policarpo ventures to ask someone who, based "on the color of his skin," looked Mexican, whether he knew where he and Don Chipote "kin git a lil' work."¹³¹ The man's reaction to the question sparks one of Venegas's critiques as we are told that the man responds to Policarpo's request by saying, "What did you say? I don't speak Spanish."¹³² Though the story of Don Chipote is a fictional one, Venegas

¹³¹ Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 50.

¹³² Ibid.

ensures that the reader is aware of its veridical applications when he constantly interjects his own personal experiences. He writes:

I don't want to go any further without first providing a brief analysis of the weakness of some Mexicans who, like the guy approached by Policarpo, cross the border and forget how to speak their language...these people abound. And they, who have come to the United States with one hand covering the holes in their seats and the other looking for a handout...Can there be any greater wickedness than that of these bastards who, passing themselves off as gringos, refuse to speak their own language, denying even the country in which they were born? I think not... From these renegades—who are neither fish nor fowl, who speak neither Spanish nor English, who are, in a word, ignorant—is where the harshest epithets about us have come.¹³³

Let's begin by analyzing the question itself. The dialect that is utilized by the editor and the translator in the English version of *Don Chipote* is reminiscent of the dialect used by workers from Oklahoma (Okies) who migrated west during the early 20th century.¹³⁴ To view as interchangeable the slang utilized by the Mexican farm worker with that of the Southern, often considered uneducated, white migrant worker, is significant in a few ways. It provides the Mexican *braceros* in the novel with an already developed English dialect and does not take the time to develop one based on their own unique experience. It also presupposes a level of communicative ignorance that is reflected in the ill use the English language, regardless of the fact that that misuse of language is not as pronounced in the original Spanish version of the novel. In this sense the novel provides a vivid portrayal of the Chicano experience and the transformation that takes place at the level of language

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 51 (italics mine).

¹³⁴ Nicolás Kanellos. Personal communication. November 21, 2012

and culture for many of the people that come to America from Mexico. The novel becomes one of those transformations of the text that the author could have never foreseen. One would never know the discrepancy between the Spanish version of the novel and the English version unless they were read side by side. Interestingly enough, the response by the Mexican looking character, in perfect English, highlights the migrant workers ignorance even further. The reader might mock Policarpo, and even Venegas himself, for assuming that a person's ethnicity could be determined solely by their skin color.

The Spanish version, however, complicates this reading by turning the interaction between Policarpo and the monolingual character on its head. In Spanish, Policarpo's question reads, "Oiga, jefecito; dispense su mercé; ¿no quiere decirnos donde podemos jayar trabajo?"¹³⁵ Though the Spanish version also incorporates some misspellings—*mercé* instead of *merced* and *jayar* instead of *hallar*—in order to mimic the dialect of Northern Mexicans, Policarpo's rural slang is not as pronounced as in the English version. In addition, the translation of "*mercé*" to "Mac," robs Policarpo's question of its respectful tone. *Mercéd* is a vocative expression that denotes a high level of respect and is definitely a more formal mode of address than the "Mac" used in the English version. Though Policarpo's question does show a lower level of education, it is the Mexican-looking character's response in the Spanish version that is ridiculed. Ethriam Brammer's translation is unable to

135 Venegas, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, 44.

communicate that fact. The Spanish response reads, “Juat du yu sei? Ai du no tok Spanish.”¹³⁶ In light of this response, it becomes apparent that Policarpo’s presumption that this was in fact a Mexican posing as an American is not so far-fetched. The dynamic of this conversation also changes as it shows that it is not Policarpo who comes off as ignorant in the exchange but the Mexican who is obviously pretending not to speak his native tongue.

Venegas may be seizing the opportunity to provide a critique of American society and its influence on the immigrant, and while his message is pointedly aimed at those who forget their heritage, Brammer’s translation gives an alternate reading that overshadows that by adding a critique of immigrants themselves. The mistranslation of the Spanish also criticizes the Mexican immigrant for “looking for a handout”¹³⁷—a stereotype often associated with poor immigrant groups—one that is not present in the original Spanish version of *Don Chipote*. In Spanish the reference is to those who have nothing, who are figuratively naked and require one hand to cover the “holes in their seats” and the other to cover their private parts in front, and does not mean that they are looking for a “hand out.” In fact, Venegas continually shows that what *Don Chipote* is most concerned with, at least before American values entice and infect him, is the search for work—albeit only in order to satisfy his own hunger. Sometimes, however, he dreams of being able to find work that will give him the opportunity to provide for his

136 Ibid.

137 Ibid., 51.

family back home. The translation proffers a stereotypical representation of the immigrant that is not present in the Spanish version and misunderstands the cliché that is intended to show some immigrant's forgetfulness about their humble origins. The comedic image of someone escaping their own country, covering up their nakedness with both hands, is replaced by what can be seen as a negative social critique about the intentions of an entire group of people. Interestingly, Venegas saw that it is in the cultural and idiomatic transformation of the native Mexican, through the *gringofication* of values, of language itself, that "the harshest epithets about us have come."¹³⁸ Here—though surely not the intention of the translator—the reader can have insight into the very process of misrecognition. Venegas saw American culture as a negative transformative force that processed Mexicans, turning them into something very different than what they were, through a shift in cultural values as well as through language.

Again, this can only be derived from the passage given above if one were to look at the Spanish version of Venegas's text. Brammer's translation states that those who deny "even the country in which they were born...are neither fish nor fowl."¹³⁹ Though this English cliché is applicable in this sense, the possible connotation in the Spanish version where Venegas writes that those very same renegades are "ni agua ni pescados,"¹⁴⁰ meaning that they are neither fish nor water, is lost. Fish are living things, much like Don

138 Ibid.

139 Ibid.

140 Venegas, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, 45.

Chipote and Policarpo, and anyone else who is, or once was, Mexican in the novel. Rarely does one encounter any Anglo-American people in the text. This supports the idea that Venegas saw America and its Anglo inhabitants as more of a negative force acting on his protagonist. Most of the characters in the novel that reject Don Chipote, that try to take advantage of him, are other Mexicans who are further along in the process of being transformed by this force. They are, in essence, becoming part of the water, part of the system that is being tangentially critiqued. The comparison between fish and water, one living organism against an undefined and faceless force, and fish and fowl minimizes Venegas's critique of American society and in a way limits blame to those pretending to be what they are not—other Mexicans. More importantly, however, it also elevates the level of objectification that the immigrant character has already undergone at the hands of *Don Chipote's* author.

Daniel Venegas has contributed to the construction of Chicano identity in America through his various projects and works. We receive, from him, *Las Aventuras de Don Chipote*, as a vestige of his historical experience that, along with the details we are able to recover about his life, paint the picture of a fellow compatriot who attempted to navigate a new and exciting life in America. His particular experience is distinct because of his key role within the powers that were attempting to draw cultural lines for countless other citizens of L.A.

My mother used to say that “cada quién hace de su vida un cucurucho” (meaning that *everyone will do with their lives what they please*). Venegas definitely did that, an immigrant cobbler turned columnist, businessman, playwright, community activist, and cultural actor must have some fascinating stories to tell. His novel is only a fragmentary part of a much more complex experience. It must be understood as such. For those of us who read the novel and see in it a semblance to our own past, we can laugh at the bumbling foolishness of its protagonist and know that our identities are much more complex than the image the novel presents. *Don Chipote* is an amusing story, though it is not the Chicano’s story. It is the politically driven brainchild of a man, who unlike his protagonist, made the United States his home and navigated its cultural parameters with great finesse. A study of Daniel Venegas and his social context appropriately situates the novel as part of Daniel Venegas’s Chicano experience and not as a faithful representation of the whole. Interpreting the novel as a work that captures that experience has its own complications. For those outside of the population that is depicted in the novel, the work can become an inadequate way of understanding Mexican American culture. In that sense, it becomes the responsibility of those that interpret these works, and the task of those that endeavor to translate them, to ensure that the image that is being offered is one that is creatively accompanied by the appropriate context which will shed light on the complexities of Chicano culture.



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