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Undergraduate

Chican@ Poetry: From the Chican@ Movement to Today

By: Maricela Rocha

Abstract

During the Chican@ Movement in the 1960s, poetry written by and for Mexican Americans became known as Chican@ poetry. This kind of poetry played a huge influence in the Chican@ movement when the poem, "I am Joaquín", by Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales gave a different meaning to the term "Chican@". After this poem, Mexican Americans gained a new identity and their own form of poetry. Chican@ poetry is important because it empowered and influenced Chican@s to take action when they were oppressed. Today, Chican@s and Mexicans face some of the similar problems they did more than 50 years ago. Chican@s are still discriminated against, forced to assimilate, and are oppressed. Chicanos now have poetry where they can write and describe

the Chicano movement, their Mexican American struggle, and the injustices they faced. Chican@s in the United States can go years without receiving a sense of Chican@ poetry or history in school or life because of its controversy. Once they are exposed to Chicano poetry, it changes their perspective on their Mexican American identity. This essay will do what schools do not, and that is explain how Chican@/a poetry has evolved from the poem "I am Joaquin" that made the Chican@ movement popular, to the introduction of newer Chican@/a poets borrowing from earlier Chican@ poets. Also, I will explain how poetry has been a big factor in the fight for Chican@s'/Mexicans' rights.

When the Chicano Movement began in the 1960s, it had a weak start because it did not have much advertising nor support. Not that many Chicanos were aware of the movement, but when in 1967 Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales¹ wrote and published “I am Joaquín,” the movement gained a lot of attention. After being active in the Chicano movement, Gonzales writes “I am Joaquín,” which results in an epic poem that is like no other poem ever written before. It outlined 2000 years of Mexican-American history. Chicano poetry had been written before the movement, but it had never had such an impact on individuals as it did with the work of Gonzales and Chicano² poets to follow: Alberto Baltazar Urista Heredia or better known as Alurista: a Chicano poet and activist; Luis J. Rodriguez: major figure in contemporary Chicano literature, a poet, novelist, journalist, critic, and columnist; Gloria Anzaldúa: scholar, Chicana feminist, poet, writer, and cultural theorist; and Sandra Cisneros: author of books like *House on Mango Street*,

Caramelo, Loose Woman, and Have You seen Marie?

These writers and poets started using poetry to communicate a deeper meaning of what it means to be a Chicano and to bring an awareness to society about the racial discrimination they experienced, their urgency for change, and their history. Chicano poetry has been interpreted and compared to more recent Chicano poetry by writing Specialist at University of Kansas Medical Center: Andrés Rodriguez and Professor of Spanish and Portuguese School of Humanities at UC Irvine: Bruce Novoa (1944–2010), some of their analysis has been included in efforts to show how today’s Chicano poetry has evolved since the 1960s.

Writing specialists such as Andrés Rodriguez and Bruce Novoa agree that Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales’ “I am Joaquín” is one of the poems most known from the Chicano movement because, not only did it give Chicanos a good detailed account of their history, the form in which it was written and its content created a deep meaning to not only Chicanos, but also to other Mestizos and Mexicans from Mexico that no other poet or poem could match. Andrés Rodriguez in the journal “The Work of Michael Sierra, Juan Felipe Herrera and Luis J. Rodriguez” of the *Bilingual Review/ La Revista Bilingüe* states the following about “I am Joaquín”: “it spoke to the needs and feelings of the time”, “exalted the collective struggle against oppression”, and “attempted to synthesize or reconcile two opposing notions of a Chicano identity” (1996). The reason why Gonzales’ poem “spoke

¹ A boxer and voter registrar during John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign that joined the Chicano Movement in hopes to be a leader for his people after multiple fails of running for state representative and mayor in Denver and Colorado.

² “Chicano signals a politicized identity embraced by a man or a woman of Mexican descent who lives in the United States and who wants to forge a connection to a collective identity politics” (Sandra Soto, *Reading Chicano Like A Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire*)

to the needs and feelings of the time” was because it came out after *El Movimiento* (Chican@ Movement) had begun. The movement was young and small-scale, so not much attention was put upon it from the media, government, or people but when “I am Joaquín” was published—speaking of the struggles that Chican@s face in trying to achieve equal rights and economic justice, it changed the course of the movement. Minorities united because the poem as well as the Chican@ movement was a call for all the Spanish races being oppressed and humiliated by the white community. Gonzales cries out in “I am Joaquín”, “*La raza! / Mejicano! / Español! / Latino! / Chican@! / Or whatever I call myself, / I look the same/ I feel the same/ I cry/ And/ Sing the same*” (1967). When Gonzales expresses these sentiments, he is suggesting that these identities are very similar, so why are they divided instead of being united. They are all human, all minorities exploited, and so Gonzales uses Joaquin as a symbol of all these individuals and it’s not just one person in the “I” of “I am Joaquín” anymore but a collection of all the races Gonzales mentions.

Gonzales then “attempted to synthesize or reconcile two opposing notions of a Chican@ identity” by writing the poem through two different identities that of the oppressed and the oppressor (Rodriguez, 1996). An example of this fusion can be seen when Gonzales takes the identity of Emiliano Zapata: “I am Emiliano Zapata. / This land, this earth is ours. / The villages, the mountains, the streams / belong to Zapatistas” (1967). Gonzales embodies Emiliano Zapata because Zapata was a

Mexican hero and military leader in the Mexican Revolution. He is an essential part to the Chican@s identity and history because he, along with Zapatistas (members from the revolutionary guerilla movement), fought for agrarian reform in Mexico and for the lost Mexican land of California, Texas, and other states to wealthy Europeans at their time of settling in America.

Throughout the poem, Gonzales continues identifying himself as important Mexican figures such as: Benito Juárez, Pancho Villa, Guadalupe Hidalgo, Félix Díaz, Victoriano Huerta, and so many more adding to the uniqueness of “I am Joaquín”. By Gonzales speaking on behalf of many different individuals both relevant and irrelevant to the Chican@, he is attempting to find the identity that fits him best and that is him. With Gonzales’ poem, the reader gets a sense that Gonzales was confused on where he stood in the world or what he should call himself just like other Chican@s struggle to find the right identity. Chican@ as a term of empowerment did not exist before “I am Joaquín”, but rather the term was not popular because it was used as an insult for lower status and culture immigrants. However, Gonzales uses it as a positive way of identifying oneself and the term starts to be used for *El Movimiento*. Gloria Anzaldúa discusses this in her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, “Chican@s did not know we were people until 1965 when Cesar Chavez and the farmworkers united and *I Am Joaquín* was published and *la Raza Unida* party was formed in Texas” (1987). “I am Joaquin”

brought forth Chicana@ literature, film, history into existence. There was no previous Chicana@ literature, films, or art, so “I am Joaquín” had a really important part in being the first form of history record for the Chicana@ population and most notably, “I am Joaquín” along with other poems can be accounted for being the mechanism that united the people for the Chicana@ revolution.

Chicana@ poetry during *El Movimiento* served as a tool to unify the people and bring the awareness of things that not everyone knew. Andrés Rodríguez expands on the subject, “To those who ask why talk about this poetry as “Chicana@” and not simply as another manifestation of other “American” poetry concerned with languages and culture rather than politics. The answer is that Chicana@ identity is the subject with all the details of that Chicana@ identity being what any poet or artist has to work with” (1996). Chicana@ poetry is about Chicana@s, so it should not be called by any other name than exactly that. It is a part of their identity and history. 2,000 years of history alone is difficult to write into any poem and more when it addresses 2,000 years of oppression of a race who, because they were born from non-American citizens, do not know anything about their other identity’s half. “I am Joaquín” attempted to tell the story of the other half of the Chicana@, the Mexican indigenous half.

From the moment that Chicana@s integrated poetry into the fight for rights, it became the voice of other people in other movements as well. The Chicana Movement had ties to the Chicana@

Movement and the Feminist Movement but it was not necessarily part of either one. Chicanas used poetry as well to have a voice in the male dominant society and to forward their movement among other women. Sandra Cisneros voices her opinion about being Chicana in “Loose Woman” when she declares “They say I’m a *macha*, hell on wheels, *viva-la-vulva*, fire and brimstone, man-hating, devastating, boogey-woman lesbian” (1994). Women were considered so many things; a *macha* which is not heard that much, is the female equivalent of a male *macho*, so by saying “*macha*” the speaker is referring to a woman as being very proud almost in an aggressive way. “Hell on wheels” stands for the “man hating” feminists calling for change that men attribute as crazy for wanting equal rights, work positions, and freedom. “Viva la vulva” implies a women’s right to have and enjoy sex just like a man does, and “fire and brimstone” represents a witch. This is due to women in the 1960s being considered witches for being *curanderas* (natural healers). Cisneros also says that individuals call her a “boogey-woman lesbian” because people associated lesbians with feminists, so if a woman was a feminist, she was assumed to be a lesbian and the opposite likewise. Cisneros continues to list the labels she and other Chicanas are called in the lines, “They say I’m a bitch. / Or witch. I’ve claimed / the same and never winced” (1994). Both of these are misconceptions that arose from men trying to retaliate with whatever verbal weapons they could think of against women but Cisneros uses those misconceptions in her poetry as a form

of feminism, Chicana agency, to fortify the woman more precisely the Chicana, by writing what the people really wanted to read but at the same time hear their struggle of being a Chicana and a woman, two minorities in one. She used these misconceptions as a form of feminism.

Chican@ poetry is different than other poetry because poets have written in both their native tongue and in English to satisfy both sides of the Chican@, and today poets have started to use different types of just one language. Rodriguez states, "In truth, recent Chican@ poets have written in not one but many Englishes: that of the home, of the streets, of the universities, of all they have absorbed in reading" (1996). In other words, one language can have many dialects. For example, language can be formal, informal, focused on a field like scientific, business, football, slang, or mixed like Spanglish. Chicana poet, Gloria Anzaldúa writes a large quantity of her poetry in her book *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* using both English and Spanish. She writes not just as an American or Mexican using one language but as both, which Anzaldúa refers to it as "a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages" (1987). This patois can be seen when Anzaldúa interprets the U.S and Mexico Border as being a "1,950 mile-long open wound / dividing a *pueblo*, a culture, / running down the length of my body, / staking fence rods in my flesh, / splits me splits me / *me raja me raja*" (1987). Now in this quote, Anzaldúa gives you the exact length of the U.S. at that time and describes it to you like an open wound because of its effect

of tearing and dividing people. Her body then becomes the land in which this border is on and just like it splits the people on both sides of the border, it splits Anzaldúa too. Even though Anzaldúa came years after the Chican@ movement, when she published *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, filled with essays and poetry, she caused much controversy among young Chican@s for writing direct and honestly about her opinions.

After Gloria Anzaldúa published her book in 1987, the effect of her strong essays and poetry was seen quickly among Chican@s. This rapid recognition of her work came about because Anzaldúa invoked pride in the Chican@ for being mixed and presented him/her with a different view of the Anglo world and the borderland. Take as example, "*El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua*. Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (Anzaldúa, 1987). Here Anzaldúa is saying that the Anglo has ripped the Chican@ from his/her natural language by forcing him/her to learn English and to abandon completely the other language but then she says that the only way the Anglo can make the Mexican/Chican@ abandon their natural tongue is by cutting it out so they don't talk at all. Mexicans' lands were stolen, taken away by the Anglos for the Mexicans had no legal proof in the new American government that it was their land and so they were regarded as illegal immigrants with no land--only their culture. That however was also soon taken. Mexicans were forced to assimilate to live poor American lives.

Sometimes, Chican@ poetry was so

harsh and controversial that it was banned for the sake of the white population. Anglo Americans did not want Chicana@s learning history the “wrong” way and to develop resentment against them for what happened in the past. Anzaldúa’s book is an example of this because of how she wrote about the Anglo, queer life, culture, and feminism. Her book was banned in Tucson, Arizona schools, according to HB 2281³. However, in response to the ban, many Chicana@s protested and demanded for her book, getting it only through *Librotraficantes*⁴. Yet, Anzaldúa did not mind the controversy that her Chicana@ poetry caused because she was just writing about what bothered her and how life was for the Chicana@. Take Anzaldúa’s poem, “To live in the Borderlands means you”, where she vividly describes, “To live in the Borderlands means the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off your olive red skin” and also “To survive the Borderlands you must live *sin fronteras* be a crossroads” (1987). Anzaldúa conveys to the reader what it means to live in the borderlands like she did. She describes the Anglo as a “mill with razor white teeth” that just attacks any Chicana@/Mexican that he/she sees. They strip the Chicana@s/Mexicans of their skin, culture, language, of their identity and so to survive in the borderlands one must be a mix of both, a new “in between” gender which a Chicana@ or Mestizo most often feels when he/she doesn’t completely belong on either side of

³ a law banning Mexican-American Ethnic studies in Texas

⁴ book smugglers

the border.

One of the important themes of Chicana@ poetry has been about Chicana@s taking action about injustices, discrimination, and also bringing awareness to others about their struggles. Alurista can be seen calling for action in his poem “When Raza” when he says, “*la gente que espera no verá mañana, our tomorrow es hoy, horita, que viva la raza*”. He communicates, in this poem, that the people who wait to do something or take action don’t see tomorrow, one has to take action today to be able to see tomorrow. Even the title “When Raza” suggests a call to action but Alurista was not the only one to do this. Other Chicana@ poets would give people the encouragement they needed to join the Chicana@ movement and fight for their rights. Andrés Rodríguez explores more on this subject in *Contemporary Chicana@ Poetry: The Work of Michael Sierra, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Luis J. Rodriguez*. He states, “It seems to me that Chicana@ poetry, in particular, has concerned itself from the start with renovation, renewal, rebirth” which could be interpreted for referring to many different things (1996). It could be the renovation, renewal, and rebirth of oneself, one’s identity, the Chicana@ movement, or something much greater. This quote also could be proof that recent Chicana@ poetry is a sort of renovation and renewal of older Chicana@ poetry with just minor differences that have developed through time. Chicana@ poets were just trying to make connections with individuals in order to cause change.

“I am Joaquin” was the greatest Chicana@ poem to cause change and the

most successful within *la raza*. This is because unlike any poetry before, Gonzales organized the Arhymmatic poem in a unique style: traveling from the past to the present and addressing several topics like Chican@ heroes, the Anglo American Invasion, and resistance to assimilation. The birth and rebirth of Chican@ poetry can be seen when in 1994 Sandra Cisneros published “Loose Woman”. Following Gonzales style of not having a rhyme pattern but containing a powerful message, one of her lines reads, “I’m Pancho Villa. / I break laws, / upset the natural order, / anguish the Pope and make fathers cry” (Cisneros, 1994). Just like Gonzales in “I am Joaquin”, she took the identity of an important Mexican figure to identify herself. Pancho Villa⁵ was a very famous Mexican Revolutionary general and previously a bandit, which Cisneros writes about when she says that he breaks laws and disturbs natural order. This similarity in form between the poems suggests the idea that young Chican@ poetry is written with the intention to retouch upon old material so people do not forget about it. Sandra Cisneros’ poem might have been an inspiration from Gonzales’ poem; it’s obvious that something had stood out to her in his poem, and she wanted to contribute more to the idea. It can be said that young poets do not just borrow from earlier poets, they make it into something newer and different which is what Cisneros did in this particular poem.

Today’s Chican@ poetry focuses more

⁵José Doroteo Arango Arámbula better known by his nickname Pancho Villa

on discrimination, farm working, and losing one’s native language; whereas, during the Chican@ movement, Chican@ poets wrote about what was happening with *El Movimiento*, Chican@ folklore (legends, stories, tales), and political poetry. Political poetry as described by Rodriguez in his analysis is “one’s immediate social environmental as well as the presence of history” (1996). So, it is both emotional and historic. Rodriguez presents this different kind of Chican@ poetry that was part of the Chican@ Movement, but which many people don’t know about, with work from Luis J. Rodríguez, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Michael Sierra. He considers these poets to be a good sample of political poets because their work contains political themes tied with self-expression that creates emotion in the reader. Take as example, Luis J. Rodríguez’s “Music of the Mill” where he describes a leader of a local Ku Klux Klan group, “His blue eyes glazed like the electric spark of an arc weld. He said little, but he watched everything” (1996). Rodriguez’ description of this man sounds so different than what many Chican@s would expect from a Chican@ poet. It sounds like an innocent human being that watches silently over other people much like an angel, but instead of being an angel, he is a killer of African Americans and other minorities. However, that aspect, according to Andrés Rodriguez, is what makes Luis J. Rodriguez a political poet, the idea that he can be political and poetic in describing such a person without letting his race, feelings, or opinion describe this man for the actions people like him have done. Thus, for a

young poet to become a political poet like these men now, they would be subjected to scrutiny because today people are resistant to different types of thinking.

Overall, what Chican@ poetry did previously and still continues to do is call for action and communicate messages deep to the Chican@ *corazón*. With Chican@ poets like Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, Alurista, Luis J. Rodriguez, Gloria Anzaldúa and Sandra Cisneros, whom all contributed to creating and renewing the Chican@ identity through their poetry, their work served as a tool to unify the people in the Chican@ movement and today to bring awareness about other struggles Chican@s face. Today’s Chican@ poetry is not the clone of the Chican@ poetry that arose from the movement but it is very similar to it. Young Chican@ poets have been able to create new poetry by borrowing from earlier Chican@ poets. Often, Chican@s go through many years with never getting a sense of Chican@ poetry in school or life but once they are exposed to it, they think different about what it means to be Chican@. Poetry to the Chican@ may not be the same poetry or be significant to non-Chican@s, but to the Chican@s,

it is the source of their youth, a memory of the past, and a sign that change is coming within poetry or within the world. Chican@ poetry is not another branch of American poetry, but its own. It is the kind of poetry where two cultures clash together and tongues intermix that simply cannot be silenced.

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Maricela Rocha comes from a small agriculture town called Watsonville, Ca. She is the first in her family to attend college. Maricela is attending her first year at UC Merced and is pursuing a major in English. Her passion for writing encouraged her to become part of The Prodigy (A school publication) for a while where she got some of her poems and articles published. With her writing, she hopes to help others become informed about how children face hunger, how minorities are still discriminated in society, how it is growing up in a small town like, and especially about Chicano poetry.

