

✦ Separating vs. Uniting Distance in Chicano Speech*

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1. Introduction

This paper conjugates two types of analysis. There is a contextualization that tries to illuminate the „border condition“ from the perspective of Argumentation Theory, Rhetoric and Poetics, followed by a textual examination, through Bakhtinian tools, of Chicano literary works illustrative of the interaction between three different communities. The entire paper is the result of a work in dialogue, but we prefer to maintain each part, with its own author, separately, R. Jiménez Cataño the first (n.2), I. García Martínez the second (n.3).

2. Uniting Distance and Border Condition [1]

Argumentation Theory, Rhetoric and Poetics are united here by means of an anthropological criterion. [2] I would say that the topic is the dialogic management of sameness and otherness in the perspective of the growth of a person, growth as essential note of the philosophical concept of *persona*. Many argumentation schemes (all, in the final analysis [3]) consist of identifying a sameness or an otherness, and often the core of an argument is the contraposition „—It's the same!, —It is not the same!“

How difficult it is to say what is the same and what is not! Only a small number of fields allow unquestionable checks of identities, and these fields don't cover the most meaningful aspects of our lives. [4] Often the sameness is an analogy, that is, not an absolute identity. If we don't want to recognize something, we can always have recourse to this expedient – „it is not the same.“ Sometimes the word „same“ is not present, but there is the acknowledgement (or not) of a knowledge or an understanding („You do understand“, „You don't know“, „You cannot understand“). In such acknowledgements one needs more than pure reason. We can speak here of hermeneutical rules, but, to remain in a rhetorical field, I find *ethos* useful. What such acknowledgements require is something like the *return way* of virtue, common sense and good will – a receptive version of *ethos*.

Mere expedients like the above mentioned are usually very weak, and, on the other hand, from the opposite behaviour a statement receives an enormous force. For example, if a person with experience in trials and prison told another without that personal experience „How well you understand our situation...“, that would be quite strong. Another strong case is when one acknowledges his or her own inability to understand. Octavio Paz, in an interview, speaking about the Christian conception of time and eternity, said to the interviewer: „This is something you and I cannot clearly understand, as we lost the religious dimension of life“ (Paz 1970: 95).

This is an important topic for Argumentation Theory, for Fallacies, and I think a pragmatist context is needed, in a very large sense, with an anthropological basis. The formalization of such argumentation schemes is extremely difficult, and at the same time, we spontaneously have a great ability to manage otherness. How do we learn this? Otherness seems more problematic in speculative reflection than in life. It seems that real failure in communication is less frequent (relatively) than failure in the analysis of success and failure. The case might be that mystery's elusiveness were more congenial for a human being than analysis clarity.

I am thinking of two decisive elements in learning otherness and recognizing sameness. First of all, the otherness that lives in each person (i.e., as *persona*), our growing, our becoming *other*. Another element is love. Not in the sense that we need to fall in love with our interlocutors to understand them, but rather that, without the experience of love, we aren't able to see the world from a conscience other

than ours. Octavio Paz offers an insight into our inner self: „Eroticism is an infinite multiplication of finite bodies. Love is the discovery of an infinite in only one person“ (Paz 1963: 100).

A very special field to consider the significance of love relationships is found in those cases where there is not a complete command of the choice, for example siblings and, in many different modalities, all family relationships. As an example of this, we only have to think about the connection between mother and baby, and of their sameness and otherness.

Maybe one of the sources of some harmony myths is exactly the tendency to interpret the difficulties of dialogue analysis as difficulties of dialogue in itself. One of those myths is an isomorphic mindset of human relations, a too direct mirroring of personal communion in its contingent manifestations and grounds – being united means being near, speaking, sharing visibly...; being separated means being far, not speaking, not sharing visibly...

In Chicano speech we find many utterances which, from the viewpoint of that mindset, are obstacles for the dialogue. However, we think that many of those utterances are often identity indicators (identity in the sense of „who I am“). Emphasizing one's own identity as *different* means putting in the dialogue a part of its content (if the difference is real). For patterns of unity at any cost this identity appears as a lack of cooperation. Actually it offers a truth element, and a unity at any cost can lead the person to a falsity about him or her. Our own otherness is part of the dialogue, of that we are interested in. [\[5\]](#)

In a parallel way to these conceptions of unity there are two conceptions of assimilation for immigrants. According to one of them, the one who lives like the people of the country is assimilated (what does „people of the country“ mean is quite a good question). According to the other, one can be assimilated without having lost one's own way of life. In this there are quick changes. The behaviour of Mexican immigrants is right now quite different if compared with that of only ten years ago. And we can say the same about the acceptance they find.

These two conceptions of communication and assimilation are linked with two ways of conceiving what reason means. Marcelo Dascal names them *Hard* and *Soft* Reason. „Hard Reason shuns from all forms of figurative language, which it considers as violating its standards of rigor and as appealing to emotive rather than to cognitive factors. Soft Reason, on the contrary, acknowledges the cognitive role of figurative language, and sees in it an important tool for developing the flexible concepts and models needed for the exploration of new areas of knowledge, for dealing with inherently fuzzy situations, and for reconciling conflicting positions“ (Dascal, forthcoming). The linking between soft reason and the human condition as constituted by otherness seems to me very clear. It's neither „second class“ reason nor does it lead to relativism. It's a non-reductive reason, which knows that man is not only reason.

If *border* is defined by *otherness*, then the border condition is an essential aspect of the human condition. And thus a crucial resource in this uniting distance is the light that our own border can offer to see other borders (cf. Jiménez Cataño 2000: 36), since it is in our own border „where, like in all borders, we learn to forgive and to ask for forgiveness, in other words, we learn to understand“ (Reyes 1933: 171).

3. Aesthetic Dialogue Between Communities

The examination of voices in *The Moths and Other Stories* by Helena Viramontes, *Emplumada* by Lorna Dee Cervantes, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* by Ana Castillo, writers of the last quarter century, will attempt to reveal an aesthetically constructed dialogue between the Chicano, Mexican, and Euro-American communities. The textual examination through Bakhtinian tools can show how characters interact with others in their search for dialogue. This examination involves identifying the dominant voice as well as significant other voices in connection to perspectives of time and space known as chronotopes. [\[6\]](#)

In the aesthetic dialogues of Chicana/o works there is a struggle to redefine the concept of otherness as applied to them. Otherness as inferior term to oneness was historically imposed on Chicanas/os by the dominant Euro-American culture, but they did not consider themselves as others in the negative. It all

depends, then, on who defines the term „other“. For that reason, what they seek is not a defence of otherness but an acknowledgement of their legitimacy. Until recently, United States' history concerning Latinos, Chicanos and Mexicans in what is now the „American Southwest“ has simply wiped them out or footnoted their existence. For Chicanos to merely fight for otherness would have meant to fall into a polarity that was imposed by Euro-Americans, which defined Chicanos „out“. It also meant denying one or the other of their two-fold heritage, Mexican on the one hand, Northamerican on the other. In their redefinition of otherness they have turned the term into something positive, e.g., „brown is beautiful“. Chicanos have grouped themselves as belonging to another race, a „raza cósmica“, [7] in-between USA and Mexico . And for that reason, since all civilizations need a mythology to back them up, they have built theirs in response to the dominant Euro-American myths, as part of their struggle for legitimacy. An example of this counter-mythological space is the place of origin, Aztlán. [8] It is precisely in their struggle for legitimacy where possibilities of dialogue are found. Besides, that common struggle serves to unite the Chicano community in their common end.

In the interaction among Chicanos within their own community, one feels the weight of authoritarian patriarchal voices in works like Helena Viramontes' *The Moths and Other Stories*, as the narrator, a young girl, talks about her situation in English and switches into Spanish to show that the authority of the father is also associated with the Catholic church „That if I didn't go to Mass every Sunday to save my goddam sinning soul, then I had no reason to go out of the house, period. Punto final [...]. Did he make himself clear?“ (Viramontes 1995: 29) This one word is like the tip of an iceberg. Beneath it there is a whole ideological structure which represents a history and class perspective, or chronotope, that privileges men. This connects with another sentence, also in Spanish, supported by the typographical convention of capital letters, and by metaphors related to God and the law, meaning patriarchal authority. The narrator reports a statement which accuses the protagonist of being a woman and, consequently, because she is a woman she is under male authority. „It was Apá who refused to trust her. TÚ ERES MUJER, he thundered like a great voice above the heavens, because he said those words not as truth, but as a verdict, and she could almost see the clouds parting, the thunderbolts breaking the tranquility of her sex“ (Viramontes 1995: 36) Once again, this statement delegitimizes women and marginalizes them. We must bear in mind how code-switching is used in literature as a textual resource in order to strike an idea and to emphasize it for the reading audience. In this case, the struggle for dialogue is presented as the failure of a conversation which turned one-sided. This lack of dialogue is bridged by the grandmother who reconciles the young girl with her Mexican heritage and with God. The female narrator says „I always felt her (the grandmother's) gray eye on me. It made me feel, in a strange sort of way, safe and guarded and not alone. Like God was supposed to make you feel“ (Viramontes 1995: 28). Dialogue claims legitimacy in a dynamic, not static, process as part of a continuous interaction with the dominant forces represented by the patriarchal authority and by the Spanish language.

In the interaction between Chicanos and Euro-Americans, one finds in the analyzed works by Lorna Dee Cervantes not a rebellious girl but a literary persona who is an adult , cultivated, and a scholar. In „Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races“, the female persona uses education as her main weapon, and as a means of acquiring legitimacy, turning her statements into a bridge of understanding. In the process, there is rage, expressed by the literary persona, an educated Chicana and a poet. Rhetorical relationships in the poem reveal the tensions between individuals, between communities. Here words like „bullets“ (as in „the bullets are discrete and designed to kill slowly“, Cervantes 1981: 36) and „war“ are used as metaphors to indicate the war-like relationship that the struggle for legitimacy of race and gender is part of. It is clear that the young white man sees the persona and her community as the „other“. The speaker's ironic main voice answers the embedded questions of the young man. One does not actually hear them but they are inferred from the utterances of the female persona. In Bakhtinian terms every utterance is always answering to someone; it is always involved in dialogue. [9] The persona's answers in that attempted dialogue must be understood as part of the struggle for legitimacy. It can be said that the persona has used literature, a poem, as a platform from which to be heard, when she explains about her situation as a woman and as a Chicana. Likewise, in „Visions of Mexico While At A Writing Symposium in Port Townsend , Washington “ the persona of this poem is again using the power of words, and of her education. This time a symposium is the backdrop from which her words spring forth with authority. By dividing the poem in two blocks, Mexico and Washington , the poet/persona sets Chicanos in a cross-

cultural arena that epitomizes their situation. On the one hand, the poet constructs an aesthetic dialogue with the Euro-American community by first deconstructing their stereotyped images of Mexico as „a stumbling comedy / A loose-legged Cantinflas woman / acting with Pancho Villa's drunkenness“ (Cervantes 1981: 46). On the other hand, the persona constructs another aesthetic dialogue with a Mexican community whose voice is not heard but inferred, in a Bakhtinian way, from the poet persona's utterances when she says, „I don't pretend I know more and can speak all the names“ (a reference to geographic points and their communities, such as Michoacán, Veracruz, Tenochtitlán, Oaxaca; Cervantes 1981: 45). This reveals the persona's in-between state and her claim to a cultural heritage that demands dialogue.

In the interaction between Chicanos and Mexicans, the works analyzed show mainly gender barriers. There is a clear difficulty of interaction between Chicanas and Mexican males, illustrating this way the triple jeopardy (gender, race and class), Chicanas are subjected to. Writer Ana Castillo, winner of the American Book Award in 1987 with the epistolary novel *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, gives voice to two women. Although the reader is offered, following Cortázar, three different ways to read the novel, there is a fourth that I followed: the traditional approach, which implies reading all the letters in chronological order. Through this reading, one uncovers the evolving tensions in the voices, and is given a basis of comparison with the other alternative readings of the novel.

The main voice in this Castillo novel belongs to a Chicana, Teresa, who summarizes and transcribes the answering letters of the other woman, a Euro-American, Alicia, of now forgotten Spanish cultural heritage. Their journey to Mexico illustrates a cultural-gender shock. Their encounters with men are metaphors for the lack of dialogue between three different communities. A certain Mexican male is given a voice which constructs and imposes a relationship on the women in this story. Males dominate what are defined as easy women. The term „liberal woman“ is applied to Teresa by that Mexican male in letter 22. This reveals two different world views – that of the United States and that of a machista sphere in Mexico. Teresa is forced to struggle over the term „liberal“ which is defining her relationship to others. She hears the Mexican say, „i think you are a liberal woman. Am i correct?“ Teresa's voice at this point explains, „it didn't matter what I replied. In the end, he would win... and end up in bed with me“ (Castillo 1989: 73). In the United States ' context, „liberal“ was in general connected to the achievement in women's rights and equality with men, and not to the exploited female. That particular Mexican male attempts to establish a relationship with Teresa that defines her as a woman who is not equal to him, who is not considered as intelligent as him, and who does not have the power to say „no“ to his advances. But Teresa, in her reply, uses the term to establish a different relationship, completely opposite to the one the Mexican male was looking for. She says, „What you perceive as ‚liberal‘ is my independence to choose what i do, with whom, and when. Moreover, it also means that i may choose not to do it, with anyone, ever“ (Castillo 1989: 73).

The aesthetically constructed conversations in the text are not monologic voices of closure. They reveal a Teresa in constant change of constructing/dismantling relationships, not just with her Mexican heritage but with her female friend, Alicia, who represents Euro-American values, and, in Teresa's words, the privileges of white skin. Teresa makes continuous transgressions in order to emphasize struggle, rebellion, growth. One reads letters without greetings, greetings which range from „dear“, to „sister“, to „hermana“, letters without farewells, time-shifts, deconstruction of the epistolary polarities „here and there“, „now and then“, „you and I“. These voice markers in general present the struggle for the creation of a voice and of dialogical relationships. An opportunity for dialogue is left open when Teresa decides (in one of the readings) to return to Mexico „where copper-colored flesh was the norm“ and where, as she says, her children would have a sense of belonging (Castillo 1989: 61-62).

As seen in these examples of Chicana writings, literature has offered its own way of reflecting Chicana/o reality by making use of textual resources like code-switching, transgression of grammar conventions, metaphors, first person narratives, in an open, dynamic and dialogic process as it corresponds to a community in search of legitimacy, of belonging to a land which was theirs, and of roots that would justify their existence. The works are part of a process that demands now different and legitimate relationships.

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[1] I develop more extensively the topic of this part in Jiménez Cataño 2001.

[2] Something particular in my treatment is the presence of Octavio Paz, whose Poetic is quite an Anthropology – an account of the Poetry as well as an account of human condition. I treated this issue in my book about him (Jiménez Cataño 1992). As far as Argumentation Theory is concerned, the sources are of course numerous. However I would mention, as particularly enlightening, the writings of Adelino Cattani (Università di Padova). Especially relevant in this context is Cattani 2001.

[3] As we can see in Aristotle's *On Sophistical Refutations*.

[4] It's the Heideggerian distinction between *fraglich* and *fragwürdig* (cf. Heidegger 1953). George Steiner (1978: 68) illustrates these two types of questions. On the one hand, the question about the distance between the Moon and the Earth, or the formula of the Acid Chloride. On the other hand, the question about the meaning of human existence, of a Mozart's sonata or of the contrast between individual conscience and constriction from society.

[5] Paz affirms: „Although I don't deny that our ways of being and thinking are determined in a large measure by our way of speaking, I think that, rather than prisons, languages are windows – from them and through them we can see and speak with other human beings and with other civilizations. They are bridges we cross incessantly – to say language is to say translation“ (Paz 1980: 305).

[6] For an analysis of the architectonics of artistic dialogue in these writers, see García Martínez 2000.

[7] The concept of „Cosmic Race“ has been adapted by Chicanos from José Vasconcelos' theory about Latinamerican *mestizaje* to mean an in-between space in the middle of another in-betweenness (Vasconcelos 1925). In the Chicano world, the concept of cosmic race should be understood in terms of ethnicity and not race, for *mestizaje* makes it impossible to base this identity on the latter concept.

[8] Reference to Aztec myth of origin that the Chicano movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s took and used because of their Native American heritage as their myth of origin and legitimacy, saying „we also belong here“ and meaning by this that Chicanos, through Aztlán, belong within the political bounds of the United States. Aztlán serves Chicanos to counteract the Euro-American myth of the New Adam. For an expanded analysis of this myth, see Anaya/Lomelí 1989.

[9] „Every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates“ (Bakhtin 1981: 280).