

Schooling and Self-image in Chicano Autobiography

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Resumen

El trabajo describe someramente las actitudes de Ernesto Galarza, Richard Rodriguez y Gloria Anzaldúa para con los procesos de escolarización según se deduce de sus obras *Barrio Boy. The Story of a Boy's Acculturation*, *Hunger for Memory, The Education of Richard Rodriguez. An Autobiography* y *Borderlands/La frontera. The New Mestiza*, respectivamente. Muestra además el modo en que dicho proceso ha afectado la construcción de sus respectivas imágenes autobiográficas. La escolarización les ha permitido acceder no sólo a los discursos sociales sino también a la docencia universitaria cuya función se basa en mantener o modificar dichos discursos. Puede alegarse que la elección de dicha profesión influye también en el uso de la autobiografía, género didáctico por excelencia, para hacer públicas sus distintas experiencias educativas y sus propuestas de pedagogías fundadas en dichas trayectorias.

Palabras clave: Estudios étnicos – Autobiografía – Escolarización
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Personal identity... is an achievement, never an inevitability.

Albert Stone 1981: *The American Autobiography.*
A Collection of Critical Essays.

Education is the instrument whereby every individual can gain access to any kind of discourse.

Francisco Vázquez 1997: '*Chicanology: A Postmodern Analysis of Meshicano Discourse*'

Tender or harsh, highly romanticized or blurred amid the remembrances of a past childhood, the institutional life provided by schooling stands as one of the first principles upon which the structure of an identity is built. In the borderline between an inner private conflict and an outer public process, the educational experience also constitutes a tool to appropriate socially valuable discourses and the power that they carry with them (Vázquez 1992: 34).

Construed by narrative intentions generally seeking historical self-
ded as inventions and projections of identities. Thus, they are conceived as not only pedagogical but also political personal narratives in which lives, are, on the one hand, habitually retold as stories about *educations* about society and, on the other, frequently "used to advance a critical attitude towards social institutions" (Saldivar 1990: 154), among them the educational ones.

In this latter trend are particularly inscribed the autobiographies of members of ethnic minorities whose schooling experiences have had a strong impact on both their self-images and their public roles. These subjectivities and these "objective" social positions in society condition, in turn, the specific political and pedagogical stances their holders adopt and the specific modes in which they choose to write their lives.

Along these lines, the well-known works of Ernesto Galarza, Richard Rodriguez and Gloria Anzaldúa can be described. Galarza's *Barrio Boy. The Story of a Boy's Acculturation* is the "true" story of a Mexican boy who, with his family, made his journey from his mountain village in Mexico

to the *barrio* of Sacramento in the United States of America and the relation of the impact that the contact with American life and education has on "Little Ernie". Rodriguez's self-autonomous "Aria" and "The Achievement of Desire" from *Hunger for Memory. The Education of Richard Rodriguez. An Autobiography* retells, in a highly argumentative style, the story of a "minority student" who "pays the cost" of his social assimilation and his academic success with a painful sense of alienation from his culture. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera. The New Mestiza* is also a journey but, in this case, not only personal but also historical and mythic as it encompasses, in prose and poetry, its author's childhood along the Texas-Mexico border, a sketch-like history of the migrations of pre-Aztec Indians, *mestizos*, Spanish *conquistadores* and illegal immigrants, and a description of the ancient gods and goddesses of these people. Even though the generic type in which these three texts are truly inscribed can be discussed almost *ad-infinitum*, just for the sake of this work they are taken to be autobiographical.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly outline the attitude of the above-mentioned authors towards schooling and to show the way in which it has affected their different self-images. They have not only gained access to social discourse through it but they have also chosen as their profession one of the public roles that functions as a political means of maintaining or of modifying this discourse. All of them have become teachers, which, alternatively, influences their choice of one of the didactic genres *par excellence* to make public the dissimilar educational experiences they have undergone.² Furthermore, it may be posited that it

is the use of the autobiographical mode what enables them to propose specific pedagogies founded on these distinct trajectories.

Basically modern apparatuses of moral and social regulation that are continually created and recreated (Giroux 1997: 228), schools are the key contexts in which the members of ethnic minorities are bound to forge their self-images. These students, early imbued with the love of writing, feel almost compelled to develop the need to learn, to meet the educational standards required to dominate a common national culture, an impressive desire which is shared by Galarza, Rodriguez and Anzaldúa in their most tender childhood.

If not as overwhelming as in *Hunger of Memory*, the presence of writing in *Barrio Boy*, at least, incessantly prevails in opposition to the disability to carry out the literate act. Songs and tales about men and women earning a living writing letters for people who don't know how (48, 88, 109) and Galarza's amazement at his mother's and at his own ability to write (117, 159, 234) engender a feeling of awe which is later translated into the schooling situation. Little Ernie considers learning "remarkable", "surprising", "formidable" (94) and he wishes, he desires, he feels proud about learning and about speaking English publicly (105, 125, 144).

Gradually, imperceptibly, Ernesto enrolls in a process not so different—as Ramon and Jose David Saldivar (1990: 154-170, 1991: 125-153) want us to think—from that undergone by Richard Rodriguez. He attends an elementary school with all-American teachers and all-American heroes (200), a success-oriented school where "all instances of learning are considered in the light of what you would be when you grew up" (37), an educational institution where "no one was ever scolded or

punished for speaking in his native tongue *on the playground* (Italics mine). Nothing is said about speaking Spanish in the classroom and where interrupting to tell teachers how some words were said in Spanish simply 'didn't work' (211). Successively, undiscernibly, Galarza's family becomes much more alike to the Rodriguez than we generally believe. "They celebrated success" (210) and they categorically become culturally separated from their younger sibling. Even though the author posits that "ours remains a Mexican family" (237), the statement slowly fades into a wish in "La Leen-Con, as *my family called it*, became a benchmark in our lives" (214, Italics mine). It is clearly his family, not him, for whom it is not easy to reach the standard American pronunciation but it is also his family who first values the social significance of schooling.

No wonder Richard Rodriguez also perceives that "it is education that has altered my life" (5). He remains "eager", "fascinated", and "enthralled" when he decides to idolize his grammar school teachers (41). As his mother and Ernesto Galarza, he recognizes in schooling "the key to job advancement" (53). Furthermore, at school he even "came to believe what had been technically true since my birth: I was an American citizen" (22), a student who fulfills "the achievement of desire" and for whom education becomes a never-ending tirade of ambitions (44,130), successes (45, 46, 51, 62) and benefits (49). His family, moreover, not only accepts but also encourages "the dramatic Americanization of their children" through his acquisition of what, for him, is "the public language of *los gringos*": English (19).

Much less reluctant to accept these facts, Gloria Anzaldúa also passes her hours "studying, reading, painting, writing" (16) as well, and

she selects the fourth choice for women in her culture: "entering the world by way of education and becoming self-autonomous persons" (17). She is also taught "how to tame a wild tongue" (53-64) —"I remember how the white teachers used to punish us for being Mexican" (89)— and, through her half-taming it, she obtains her master's degree (21). In this case, her family, however, seems not to be alienated by her choice but they neither encourage nor openly accept it. Deeply rooted in a working-class culture, "a rural, peasant, isolated *mexicanism*" (21), they remain faithful to their Chicano-Mexican culture and even Gloria herself usually abides to the use of Chicano Spanish, her "illegitimate", her "bastard" language, even though usually only as a literary strategy.³

Basically, none of the three writers rejects the "the Puritan ethic of self-improvement above all else" (Macias 1969: 42). However, some differences among their stances towards this attitude in relationship with schools and schooling have to be stressed.

It is unmistakably true that Rodriguez, from a Mexican-American middle-class perspective, gets directly involved "in a political service to the right" (Saldivar 1990: 159). He is, above all, the one whose schooling experience seems to be modeled after an objective merit system and a logic of losses and gains whose only aim is to assign subjects their public identities (19). His conclusive belief in the objectivity of the educational system makes him energetically reject bilingual education and affirmative action and, consequently, fall into what McLaren (1994: 29) calls "dead pluralism", an ideological stance by which the fact that difference is a social construct forged amid asymmetrical power relationships is systematically denied.

Even though Galarza also sometimes adheres, through his "hacerle la lucha" (134), to the individualistic logic of Clint Eastwoodian clichés, popularized mottoes which reproduce national images of citizenship, he undeniably recovers the barrio as "the root and regenerative source of Chicano communal consciousness" (Jiménez 1974: 14). "The barrio was providing me with an education out of school as well as in" (224). From this manifold place, a huge amount of social roles and practices alien to the educational system springs up and is revealed to Little Ernie in order to help him build his sense of identity, politics and culture. The site of socially legitimized learning is displaced towards an ongoing, never-ending mass of informal communal knowledge that the boy continually appropriates, good manners (45-47), the cooking lessons of his mother (33-37) and the history and traditions of Mexico (42-45), which lets him fashion himself as a cooker, an *Administrador*, a *vanillero*, a Mexican gentleman.

"If Richard Rodriguez is completely mortgaged to an ideology that privileges the category of 'individual', Gloria Anzaldúa is on the other end of the pole: she is the champion of communitarian thinking.' (Alire Sáez 1997: 84). Her thoughts, nevertheless, do not aim at recovering barrio consciousness but at recreating the history of the colonization and oppression of the indigenous people from the Americas both by Spanish and Anglo-American imperialists. As a consequence and in a move radically different from those of both Galarza and Rodriguez, she tries to rescue neither her Mexican-ness nor her American-ness but her "*Chicana* positionality on the border" (Saldívar-Hull 2000: 71. Italics mine). From the site of the *atravesados* (19), she raises the issue of resistance not only

against the educational system, whose *reglas de academia* she interprets as linguistic terrorism (53-64) but also against a generalized intolerant attitude towards the "other", "the Chicano, *indio*, American Indian, *mojado*, *mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working-class Anglo, Black, Asian" (87).

All in all, it seems to be social status and class consciousness, both somehow construed by their institutional experiences at school, what primarily influences Rodriguez's, Galarza's and Anzaldúa's self-images. The early social integration of Galarza as a voluntary translator, the overwhelming pressure for success in Rodriguez and the strong political commitment of Anzaldúa in defense of her sexual behavior positively proves that the context of our identities does not determine the way in which they are represented, but it plays a vital role in their rhetorical inscriptions (McLaren 1994: 59).

As it has already been stated, Rodriguez never denies his being 'an assimilated middle-class American' who celebrates the day he acquires his new name: *Rich-heard Road-ree-guess* (3, 27, 4). Galarza and Anzaldúa, nevertheless, enter into more complex, more conflictive relationships with their social self-images. The former acknowledges, first, that there is "a rumor that Mexicans ... have lost their 'self-images'" and then, he conclusively denies it: "I, for one Mexican, never had any doubts on this score." (2). Later, however, he tries to exclude himself from the Mexican group. He refers to them as "the people", "the *jalcocotecano*" (50), "the chicanos" (50-207). Particularly interesting is the case of a paragraph beginning "Once we had work", whose concluding sentence starts "Barrio people, when *they* first came to town" (203, *Italics mine.*), which clearly shows his precarious wandering between both worlds, the Mexican and the American. Anzaldúa

bounds together the Chicano population by its shared history of struggle, suffering and oppression, which she equates with the conditions of the laboring underclass. She, however, clearly states that she has only got working-class origins and that now she is a university teacher with a mission to carry out: teaching the history of her community (20-21, 87).

However rooted on either the Mexican or Chicano traditions as they are, the three authors found their self-images on an American consciousness modeled by the schooling experience, an event in which writing and the Puritan logic of self-improvement are praised above all. This lets them gain access to social discourse and become part of the institutions that have traditionally fixed "the procedures of control of Meshicano discourse" (Vázquez 1992: 28).

"I have taken Caliban's advice. I have stolen their books. I will have some run of this isle." (Rodriguez 1982: 3). Mastering the English language, however, has not been the only priority in the life of these authors. They also seem to have taken over the role of the alienated Ariel and one of them complied with Prospero's thoughts. Education has altered their lives and, through it, they have reached "the institutional sites that lend legitimacy to their statements" (Vázquez 1992: 31): "I wanted to be like my teachers,...., even to assume a teacher's persona" states Rodriguez (55) while Galarza confesses that, among his family, his "thumbnail sketches became best-sellers" (4) and Anzaldúa profusely describes her own writing strategies, the making of her book and her position in the American academy (65-75).

Academics, writers, intellectuals, they all assume the narrative authority of their own lives whose experiences they take the decision of making public through their writing. Now they have their own books: their respective.

autobiographies. Their choice of this specific genre, a naïve act at first sight, becomes, in turn, a strong not only pedagogical but also political move. Relying on the normative and pedagogical character of the autobiography (Bajtin, 1989: 289) and on the powerful double articulation of their selves as both writers and teachers, ethnographers and native informants, they choose to produce didactic manifestoes, an equation to autobiography used by Stone (1981: 2), in order to propose specific pedagogies founded on their different trajectories in a similar environment, the United States of America.

The three authors have learnt how to be Americans, Mexican-Americans or Chicanos in the land of opportunity and they want to teach it. They take the decision of making the road to self-achievement public, the goals, the ends and the means of each showing, however, the differences among them in the articulation of both their self-images and their pedagogical projects.

A first basic distinction has to be drawn between Rodríguez, on the one hand, and Anzaldúa and Galarza, on the other. The former, as it has already been stated, seems to be guided by the ethics of material gains and academic success, his conscious search for acculturation and his explicit commitment to the American cause, sharply opposing him to the latter's proposals. These include "a self-awareness or self-respect and a personal commitment" to both the Chicano *and* the American communities (Macías 1969: 41, Galarza 183-197, Anzaldúa 87), whose tenets, even though sometimes rejected, are recognized as part of the whole lot of either inherited or acquired communal values. Both Anzaldúa and Galarza, for example, denounce the patriarchal aspect of Mexican-ness, but this does not lead them to an absolute rejection of the Mexican culture altogether but to the

voicing of the necessity of looking for new patterns within the community (Anzaldúa 16-18).

The difference in attitude towards the communal places they are involved in posits another, a second, line to be drawn among these authors. The three of them conceive the places from where to build their national, cultural and moral identities differently. Whereas Rodriguez sees himself as completely assimilated to the American urban landscape —overhearing two English speakers at a South American airport, he would say “I will hear it [English] with pleasure, for it is now the sound of my society.” (14)—, Anzaldúa and Galarza choose to construe their public identities giving an utmost prominence to their paradigmatic geopolitical location, the very titles of their autobiographies —*Borderlands/La frontera* and *Barrio Boy*— being the most salient proof of this point.

Nevertheless, it is in their specific educational programs founded on their distinct trajectories, where the main contrast among Rodriguez, Galarza and Anzaldúa lies.

On the basis of a strong pamphlet against both bilingual education and affirmative action, Rodriguez’s proposal, heavily grounded on his own experience and on Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), aims at the standardization of American values through and all-American education. To be successful, he posits, a public language has to be learnt and, through it, a public identity has to be acquired and this should be the sole purpose of the education of a Mexican-American in the United States (Alire Sáez 1997: 77).⁴ This stance implies that “education” and “society” stand against each other undialectically with education standing as the valuative term (Saldivar

1990: 169), which makes him fall into the American middle-class myth of individuality and, moreover, makes him derive from his experience "that Mexican-Americans must either 'assimilate' completely or remain 'alien', powerless and silent on the fringes of the United States society" (Staten 1998: 104).

While Rodriguez labels his experience *assimilation* and he uncritically clings to it, Galarza calls his *acculturation* and he defines it as the double process of becoming both urban and American (207-211) but, at the same time, remaining faithful to his Mexican tradition. Galarza proposes as a truly valid pedagogy what has been generally called the "societal curriculum", all "the socializing factors [out of school] which 'educate' us throughout our entire lives" (Cortéz quoted by Vázquez 1992: 19).

Even though his move towards a communal-based form of education positions Galarza as an organic intellectual involved in the political work of social change, it seems, however, somehow hyperbolic to say that his political consciousness is "an ideology of cultural resistance to power of every kind" (Saldivar 1991: 140). Even though the American school does not allow his Mexican culture enter the classroom, as it has already been shown, he never resists to it. On the contrary, the educational institution and the school curriculum become, as the last lines of the book implicitly states, the centre and the core of his life as an adolescent. He says, "I unhooked the bicycle, mounted it and headed for the main high school... I wondered about the debating team and the other things Mrs. Everett had mentioned" (266).

Nevertheless, both Galarza and Anzaldúa offer their views on education as modifications of social discourse, which Rodriguez does not. They never aim at the infinite maintenance of the status quo as the latter

does. Thus, their autobiographies can be read as political projects on the grounds of which social change may be not only desirable but also possible.

Through a move that constitutes one of the strongest blows that a pedagogical discourse aiming at ideological and cultural homogenization—like Rodriguez's— can receive, Anzaldúa goes a step further than Galarza and in the last chapter of her book "*La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness*" (77-91) she proposes the possibility of an education working for the formation of subjects who are the products of a cultural crossroads (McLaren 1994: 12). Even quoted by reputed educational researchers (Giroux 1997: 282), her project, strongly grounded on a tolerance for ambiguity (79-80), tries to gather all the people of the globe under a new cosmic race, "*la primera raza síntesis del globo, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world*" (77). She firmly decrees the need for everybody to appropriate the narrative authority of his or her own life and her own will to assume it without begging entrance to the Anglo (IV). From a collective subject position, she summons the world to

hallar los caminos para incidir en las formaciones culturales y políticas, de modo tal que podamos prestar atención a la diferencia a la vez que compartimos un "ethos común" de solidaridad, lucha y liberación (Giroux 1994: 94)

a call and a path we all, as teachers and students, would like to share.

Notas

¹ The first version of this paper was written as part of the Seminar *Literatura étnica de los Estados Unidos* taught by Dr. David William Foster at the Escuela de Post-Graduación. Facultad de Ciencias Humanas. Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto in August 2000 and read at the Decimoquintas Jornadas de Investigación de la

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² Ernesto Galarza attended Columbia University where he received a Ph.D in History and Political Science. He became a teacher at the University of Southern California, and made his name as a poet and prose writer. Galarza served as a member of the US House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, and as a consultant to the National Farmers Union. Richard Rodriguez earned degrees in English at Stanford and in Philosophy at Columbia University and he pursued his doctorate in Renaissance Literature at Berkely. He taught at Berkely as a graduate student for about two years. Gloria Anzaldúa received her B.A. in English, Art, and Secondary Education from Pan American University. She then earned an M.A. in English and Education from the University of Texas. As a teacher, Anzaldúa has instructed a wide variety of students. She first taught in a bilingual preschool program and in a special education program for mentally and emotionally handicapped students. Later she worked in college classrooms to teach Feminism, Chicano Studies, and Creative Writing at a number of Universities including the University of Texas at Austin, Vermont College of Norwich University, and San Francisco State University.

³ I have already tackled Gloria Anzaldúa's particular use of Spanish in "La lengua de la frontera: fracturas y reconciliaciones en *Atravesando fronteras/Crossing Borders* de Gloria Anzaldúa" *Las relaciones interculturales entre Estados Unidos y Latinoamérica. II Jornadas de Estudios Americanos*. Universidad Nacional de Río Cuarto. (1997): 52-61.

⁴ With this assertion Rodriguez shows an almost explicit adherence to the somehow erroneous belief by which the only language worth learning is English and the only public identity worth having is an American one.

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