

Have We Arrived? Class, Museum Culture and Mexican-America
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In what follows I want to talk about three cultural texts and their Latino/Latina representations to make some disparate but hopefully also congruent points about representation, class, Latinos, Latinas, and the possibilities of what I am calling a Latino/Latina museum culture by which I mean a public culture that places some special emphasis and value on a patronage of artistic, historical, and scientific exhibits and thereby necessarily on museums. Such a Latino/Latina museum culture may be ethnically marked or not, meaning that it may be a culture that can as easily partake of Latino/Latina cultural exhibitions even as it also can reach comfortably beyond those boundaries.

Let me begin with a very well known text, a novel from 1972 written by the late Tom s Rivera. I realize I have to start getting the "very well known" out of this because I am now into incipient late middle age and I keep thinking everybody knows these things from the '60s and '70s. I hope you do so here we go.

Those of you familiar with Tom s Rivera's classic short novel *Y no se lo Trago la Tierra*, in English *And the Earth did not Devour Him*, will recall that it deals with Mexican-American farm workers. When it appeared in the early '70s Rivera's novel was both cause and symptom of a marked tendency in Mexican-American cultural discourse to imagine Mexican-Americans as farm workers, a tendency also obviously influenced by the predominant reality and imagery of Cesar Chavez in the farm worker movement. It is also a tendency, I must say, that continues even today replaced to some degree by the undocumented Mexican immigrant in the place of the farm worker and the two, of course, are often congruent.

Here, however, I add parenthetically that this dominant image of Mexican-American as farm worker competed with another image, which was the image of the Mexican-American as a socially marginalized urban dweller, for example, the pachuco and these days the homeboy, I suppose, as the central figure in this urban imagery. Think of the film, for example, *"American Me"* with Edward James Olmos.

But, returning to Tom s Rivera's novel, you might also recall that at the end of the novel the Mexican-American farm workers in the story are heard to speak with one collective voice as they offer a poignant refraining lament, "When we arrive, when we arrive," they say, speaking to their long journey to their labor sites and then back home to Texas but speaking also metaphorically and ironically to their deferred and delayed arrival as full citizens in American society.

Rivera's novel, then, offers a point of departure both to note the dominant image of the farm worker in the 1960s and '70s and '80s and I suggest even perhaps today and the way that the farm worker came to represent Mexican America. But the novel offers me also another point of departure which is to raise the question have Mexican-Americans and by implication other Latinos arrived? Have we arrived? It is this question and its implications for what I am calling Latino museum culture that I wish to engage this morning.

I turn now to my second cultural text. Rivera's novel marks an important moment in the cultural history of Mexican America; however, as this cultural history goes a rather remarkable thing happened in San Antonio, Texas, in the early morning hours of September 2, 2002, just a couple of months ago. A home was burglarized.

Now, it is fairly certain that Mexican-Americans have often both been burglarized and may on occasion have done a little burgling themselves in San Antonio and throughout the United States. But this was a burglary to surpass all previous burglaries in Mexican-American history. If we combine the dollar amount of the theft, the identity of the victim, and the items taken more than likely we will also have to add the identity of the perpetrators as well if and when they are ever caught.

The whole event was of such consequence as to be picked up by the BBC international news and the national Fox news program with Brit Hume. This is how Brit Hume reported the matter. "San Antonio, Texas. Works valued at more than \$700,000 by artists including Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and a Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo, were stolen from a physician's home." I'm reading from the text, by the way.

"Dr. Richard Garcia said he was asleep upstairs early morning and didn't hear a thing. A maid who was in the basement heard footsteps but thought it was Dr. Garcia walking around, according to the police report. A house alarm was set but failed to go off. No arrests have been made as of Tuesday morning. Dr. Garcia said he had not insured the works because the premiums would be too high.

"He said he wasn't sure if it was one person or a band of thieves who hauled the paintings out of a side door to his \$600,000 home. They passed over a lot of things, Garcia, age 68, told the San Antonio Express News, but they took the flagship of the collection. He said his lawyer told him not to identify the paintings. The police report listed a \$500,000 painting by Frida Kahlo as the most expensive item taken.

"Garcia, who often gives parties for visiting artists and musical stars in San Antonio, speculated that an admirer of the stolen pieces might have seen them at one of his parties and then hired professionals to steal them. 'I don't think I'll get them back,' he said. 'They will probably wind up in a private collection where nobody ever sees them.' He said, of course he will continue collecting.

"Of course I'm slightly depressed about it,' he said, 'but what can I do? I'll just get on with my life and make sure that I won't get hit again.'"

There is much that immediately meets the eye and ear here and yet other things that are subtextual. Consider first the identity of the victim, Dr. Richard Garcia, M.D. A little cross checking on my part confirmed that he is indeed Mexican-American. I didn't want to just pick the name at face value.

That he is Mexican-American is, of course, not surprising in San Antonio, Texas. That he is an M.D. surprises no longer, although it would still surprise even 10 years ago and certainly 30 years ago. We can just imagine what Tom s Rivera's farm workers might say on discovering the doctor's identity. Imagine that. He's a doctor. He's Mexican.

But back to the burglary. That Dr. Garcia was sleeping upstairs, ladies and gentlemen, therefore also no longer surprises although it might have surprised even 10 years ago. The good doctor, commensurate with his likely income as an M.D., is clearly in possession of a two-story, possibly a multi-story \$600,000 home that probably would translate into a couple of million in the Washington area, I have no doubt.

However, in the text, again from Brit Hume, we are also told that a maid heard a noise during the burglary and here perhaps we might indulge in a little surprise, although not too much. After all,

Mexican immigrant labor is readily available at low cost in San Antonio so close to the border and if one owns a \$600,000 house and a Frida Kahlo in San Antonio I'm sure one is not going to quibble about labor costs.

But, of course, I have been teasing you just bit, haven't I? The more central point and theme of this news account has to do, of course, with the items taken and their obvious value. And here, however, I think we are entitled to some surprise which I think is also why the story had news value for all of the national media. I quote again, "Works valued at more than \$700,000 by artists including Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Mexican painter Frida Kahlo with a \$500,000 painting by Kahlo as the most expensive item taken."

We now in the year 2002 have the interesting conjunction of (a) a historically marginalized ethnicity, and I refer you once again to farm workers, but now (b) obvious class mobility together with (c) the canonical arts, something quite new, I want to submit to you. This conjunction, indeed, is something quite new for Mexican America and, I want to suggest without really knowing so, for all of US Latinidad.

But please note here that I am not talking about Latino/Latina artists per se, who have been around a pretty long time, but rather about Latino/Latina patronage. To be sure, there has been some media controversy concerning Dr. Richard Garcia and this event, most pointedly whether the stolen paintings were genuine to begin with. I won't go into that little affair but notwithstanding the controversy I think that this is one of those moments when we can say that aside, meaning that aside whether genuine or not it is the very idea that a figure such as Dr. Richard Garcia, M.D., is even involved in the world of the arts that I wish to extract from this event.

Some apparently qualified Latinos, more specifically a Latina, took Dr. Garcia seriously on this matter, which leads to my third cultural text. Asked by a reporter to comment on the burglary, one Ms. Ana Montoya, owner of An Arte Gallery in San Antonio, said to the press that after attending a party at Dr. Garcia's home, "There was nothing there," she said, "but Picassos, Fridas, et cetera. It was just breathtaking," she offered. The same Ms. Ana Montoya just recently sent out, indeed literally yesterday I got it on my e-mail, an invitation to an evening festivity dedicated to "The love of art under the stars," an An Arte Gallery event co-sponsored by the fur salon at Saks Fifth Avenue in San Antonio. For \$40 a person one can enjoy the art in the gallery as well as sumptuous food and drink. One can also enjoy the fashions from the fur salon and jewelry from One of a Kind Jewelry in San Antonio which will be modeled at the event with a percentage of the entire proceeds going to San Antonio's Hispanic Heritage Society. I'm going. I don't know if you all are going to get invitations.

Have we Latinos and Latinas arrived? I think I may offer an equivocal yes. It is equivocal because while certainly Dr. Garcia, Ms. Montoya, and perhaps I, sitting up here or standing, more literally, in this camel hair coat, have arrived Latinos as a total group may not yet have fully arrived as American citizens with an equitable share of America's wealth and opportunity.

Some, as we well know, have not arrived at all. But it is now undoubtedly also the case and I think can no longer be set aside that many have arrived in some sense of that word, Dr. Garcia certainly and perhaps Ms. Montoya, owner of An Arte Gallery, perhaps myself and no doubt many of those who will attend the party at An Arte Gallery, and perhaps, dare I say, several of you here already represent a kind of

Latino/ Latina middle and upper middle class marked by disposable income.

But there is growing evidence that many more of, dare I say, us have clearly begun to arrive and this arrival started some time ago. Indeed such a middle and upper middle class has been in formation for some time, indeed specifically in San Antonio, Texas, at least since the 1920s. As historian, Richard Garcia -- sheer coincidence, ladies and gentlemen; Richard Garcias abound in this world -- tells us in his book, which is called with a very telling title -- this Dr. Garcia doesn't fool around with post-structuralist titles -- it's called literally *The Rise of the Mexican-American Middle Class in San Antonio, Texas, 1929-1945*.

Then there is my colleague David Montejanos' now classic *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, an historical study, to be sure, but one written by a sociologist, which is no small matter, right, Dr. Cardenas? Yes, okay. For my contemporaneous purpose I am particularly interested in his closing chapter where he offers a relatively optimistic rendering of the future of Mexican-Americans in Texas, an assessment based in part on a reading of economic census data from 1930 to 1980. Montejanos suggests that even in 1930 some nearly 30 percent of the Mexican-origin labor force in Texas was arrayed along an occupational spectrum ranging from "white collar" to "skilled" labor.

Such an array of occupational data might generally be therefore isomorphic with a parallel distribution from upper middle, more or less, to lower lower middle class. By 1980, Montejanos further suggests, this parallel distribution now encompasses 52.9 percent of this population, that is to say, skilled labor up, as it were.

Dr. Montejanos summarizes his findings by saying the following: "The importance of these occupational changes for Mexican-Americans cannot be overstated. The general effect of an expanding white collar and skilled strata within the Mexican-American community," he continues, "has been the attainment of a measure of economic stability." It is no doubt from this matrix that Mexican-Americans in Texas, especially folks such as the other Dr. Garcia and Ms. Montoya take the origin.

Last year the authoritative Tom s Rivera Policy Center issued a quantitative study of 1990 census data called *"The Latino Middle Class: Myth, Reality, and Potential"* in which they conclude that it is less myth and much more reality and has a great deal of potential. Their conclusions attest far more to a reality based on a close examination of income, education, and housing variables but primarily resting its case on incomes of \$40,000 or more, regionally adjusted, I must quickly add.

These authors conclude that, "Frequent depictions of Latinos as predominantly foreign born, uneducated, and poor have caused many observers to overlook appreciable gains in Latino economic status in recent years. In fact a substantial and prosperous Latino middle class has emerged." Again, that is from the Tom s Rivera policy report.

If such a class formation continues to hold up and, like any US economic formation, it is dependent, of course, on multiple variables, the stock market, employment, everybody paying their credit cards on time, et cetera, but if it does continue to hold up and to expand then it does so with a number of social and cultural implications, for example, political representation. But for the purpose for which we have gathered here this morning and today and in this conference such a middle-class formation points to the possibility of an expanded

development of what I have termed "museum culture" by which I mean not simply obviously the physical structures of museums, although that is very important, but the whole set of artistic, exhibitiv, and supportive practices associated with museums.

For example, it may now be far more incumbent on museums such as this one to reach this population not simply because the population is out there, so to speak, and because it happens to be Latino or Latina but because their growing disposable income now makes it possible for them to access the culture of museums in ways that they could not do before. Based on this disposable income in growing numbers Latinos are also becoming tourists to a diversity of places and tourism, as we well know, often clearly implies museum patronage. The data on tourism for Latinos is quite interesting on this point.

But to the degree that Latinos may be experiencing increasing rates of education there is also the implication that they are also developing an aesthetic cognitive affinity for museum cultural arts and developing such an affinity upon the basis of their education, first of all, in a much smaller, dare I say, universal vein.

I asked you to recall that among his losses Dr. Garcia also counted an Henri Matisse but, as Ms. Montoya also carefully pointed out, Dr. Garcia's prized possession was indeed his Frida Kahlo, which I take as possibly symptomatic of what the anthropological and literary evidence on Mexican-Americans also suggests, and it is the following, and it is crucial, the following, namely, that this expanding Latino/Latina middle class has not, I say again, has not traded in their ethnic loyalty and affiliation for middle-class status. Rather, they seem to be wanting to have their culture and their new class status, tortilla soup and crŠme brul,e, if you will.

Recall, for example, the Sandra Cisneros short story "Never Marry a Mexican" and it's wonderful Latina protagonist, Clemencia, an upper middle-class young woman, an artist, very upscale, and Mexicana, Mexicana, one might say, de aca de Estee Lauder. I'm glad somebody remembered the old song.

American museum culture, therefore, will also have to be responsive to the representation of Latino cultures not only in their exhibitions but in their personnel, although, again, as witness Ms. Montoya and An Arte Gallery, we can also begin to anticipate growing Latino/Latina ownership or direct sponsorship of their own museums. Indeed, as I mentioned, Sandra Cisneros, her character Clemencia, and the real life Ana Montoya, indeed one wants to underscore also the Latina aspect of this growth, for, as I say Latina we add another fascinating variable to this mix, namely, the growing educational evidence of an emerging gender disparity in Latino/Latina access to middle-class status and beyond.

Put simply, Latinas are doing much better educationally than Latinos. Witness, for example, the majority of Latino/Latina students at the University of Texas at Austin is now female. I predict that it will be there for Latinas, underscoring the feminine here, who will be in the forefront of developing this emerging Latino/Latina museum culture.

The social formation of a Mexican- American middle and even an upper class clearly implies that it and probably other Latino groups may now be positioned to become patrons of what I am calling museum culture in all of its dimensions. Increasing cultural literacies will continue to gradually connect Latinos and Latinas to all manner of artistic expression. However, this middle-upper class expansion also offers an unprecedented opportunity for the expansion of a

Latino/Latina public culture of museums and exhibits keyed on such a culture with ultimately profound implications for how Latinos and Latinas are represented and how they now increasingly choose to represent themselves.

Clearly in the foregoing I have rhetorically weighted my argument with my opening examples of Tom s Rivera and his farm workers and now the new reality of people like Dr. Richard Garcia, indeed, and Ms. Ana Montoya, owner of An Arte Gallery. And clearly I have underscored their particular influence in this discussion and we can think of other examples as well, especially from Texas.

Witness, for example, Henry Cisneros and witness yet more recently Tony Sanchez. But witness also, by the way, as long as we're witnessing success of a kind here, late Tom s Rivera's own spectacular career, he who authored the novel about farm workers, his own spectacular career which climaxed as chancellor of the University of California at Riverside, where he died, of course. By the way, Dr. Rivera once told me and others that he was contemplating entering the corporate world after he left the chancellorship at UC Riverside.

I clearly have weighted my argument by putting on the one hand farm workers and then these highly successful people. But in between such individuals, in between farm workers and the Dr. Garcias of this world and the Dr. Riveras of this world and the, indeed, Dr. Limçns of this world, in between such individuals there is now a whole spectrum of Latinos and Latinas now historically positioned as what I am calling an activist middle and upper class who are already exerting their influence in a myriad of social activities.

The culture of museums and the consequential participation and representation of Latinos and Latinas is one of those activities but one which greatly needs to be expanded, one historically overdue, and now very, very welcome in my opinion.

I believe that we are indeed arriving. In our arrival we are arriving with profound consequences for what I have been calling museum culture and in my examples of Dr. Garcia, M.D., and Ms. Montoya I try to at least give you some real world illustrations of what that arrival literally might mean with all of its implications for what I have been calling museum culture.

I believe we are arriving but in arriving let us be sure that we always remember our historical point of departure, the farm workers and folks like the farm workers, and let us be sure that in arriving we transform that destination that we are starting to reach.

Thank you very much.