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WANDERERS FROM AN AZTEC LAND:
CHICANO NAMING DEVICES USED BY MIGUEL MÉNDEZ

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Miguel Méndez is a contemporary Chicano (Mexican-American) author who was born in Arizona in 1930 and who also lived in the border-frontier region of Sonora, Mexico. Both of these locales have served as settings for his literary production of poems, stories and novels. His most highly praised novel of critical acclaim to date is Peregrinos de Aztlán (1974) - the title might be translated as "Pilgrims or wanderers from the legendary, mythic birthplace of the Aztec nation." In his works, Méndez combines literature and culture with his socio-political interests and a firm base in myth and folklore. He is keenly concerned with preserving the Hispanic traditions of the Southwest and particularly with recording the linguistic variations of the region.¹ Hispanic-Americans form the fastest-growing and soon-to-be largest ethnic minority in the United States, numbering some twenty million people. The Chicanos are the majority of this group, and Miguel Méndez intends to illustrate their influence on a changing America.²

The protagonist of the novel is Loreto Maldonado, an eighty-year-old Yaqui Indian whose life is revealed through a series of

flashbacks and stream-of-consciousness memories.³ We as readers witness his experiences from the struggles of a young soldier in the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to his journey into the United States to his miseries as an aged carwasher along the border. He comes into contact with an odd assortment of characters from many walks of life who reflect the variety of the Southwest. Méndez is particularly adept in his use of language; although he writes primarily in Spanish, he also includes the special admixture of English which is typical of Chicano vocabulary. Such conversations usually occurred among bar patrons or migrant workers in the fields, as seen in the novel.

Loreto Maldonado bears a name which indicates that he is an honest challenger in the face of life who has encountered misfortune. There is also a town in Lower California which is called Loreto. As a wanderer amidst the varied cultures of the Southwest (Indian, Hispanic, Chicano and Anglo), Loreto knows them all well but has really had no luck in any of them.

One of his friends is "el buen Chuco" or Pachuco - the good Mexican-American, who is also sometimes referred to by the diminutives of Pachuquito and Chuquito. The term "pachuco" was used for Mexican-Americans earlier in this century but has fallen into disfavor because of several negative connotations and has given way to "chicano." "Chicano" is probably a shortened form of "mexicano" influenced by Aztec/Nahua Indian pronunciation. Chuco is often

drunk; he makes fun of Anglo/Gringo society and at times pretends to be a living caricature of the stereotypical Mexican wearing poncho and sombrero while dozing near a cactus.⁴ He is later arrested for stealing wine, and we learn during the trial that his real name is Jorge Curiel. His surname suggests a tribunal, yet he has no luck with the Gringo judge who gives him a harsh sentence.

Méndez employs the use of diminutives, nicknames (apodos) and ethnic mixture in the naming of his characters. All three of these devices are common and popular in the Hispanic community. "La Malquerida" is an example; she is a prostitute whose name means "badly loved" yet whose real name is the much more elegant and hopeful Rosenda Pérez Sotolín, suggesting a rosy rock garden in a little woodland.

The Dávalos de Cocuch family has a name which combines all three cultures of Hispanic/Indian/Anglo. The husband is don Mario Miller de Cocuch, who made a small fortune in several criminal enterprises and who has become a "pillar" of the community. His wife, doña Reginalda Dávalos de Cocuch, rose from the ranks of the prostitutes to become a "grand dame" overly dressed and pampered. Her name in particular suggests someone of a ruling, stern nature who gave out what others wanted. (She did run a brothel for a while.) She is asked by her friends (who are nicknamed "Hunch" and "Honey"), members of the Samaritan Club, to donate money for the funeral of a Chicano boy who died because his family had no

means to pay for doctors or medicine. Behind her back, these women call her "Sra. Cocuruchi" or Mrs. Cockroach.⁵

Chalito is the little boy who died. His father Lencho García y del Valle is poor but proud; he still uses the double Hispanic surname (García being his father's last name and del Valle his mother's).

Several neighborhood (barrio) types weave in and out of the novel. "El Cometa" has a name which is really a pun on his eating habits (from comer, meaning to eat) and the word comet, from his preference for wearing multi-colored streamers. La loca Ruperta is a crazy woman whose mind has broken down and el viejo Ramagacha is an elderly wanderer whose name means "bending branch." Rosario Chayo Cuamea combines Hispanic and Indian cultures in his name; he is an old friend of Loreto, who fought with him in the Mexican Revolution. Choro, a street-vendor whose name suggests poverty and struggle, occasionally gets into fights.

Some of the most poetic sections of the novel describe Loreto's childhood memories, when he believed that "Jesusito de Belén" (little Jesus from Bethlehem) was an Indian boy from a nearby village who helped save the life of his friend Batepi. (Mexico's patron saint Guadalupe also bears an Indian image.)

Pedrito Sotolín is the brother of la Malquerida who eventually kills don Mario Miller de Cocuch for the corruption of his sister. Lorenzo Linares' alliterative name suggests linen and flax fields,

for a poetic wanderer who died amidst his friends Loreto and others during their trip across the desert to cross the border into the United States. (I might mention here the excellent film EL NORTE, which handles the theme of the plight of illegal aliens.)

Other characters who appear briefly are "el Chapulín," nicknamed the grasshopper because he is so skinny - a name taken from Nahuatl (chapul = grasshopper + the diminutive "-ín"); a comparison would be Chapultepec Park in Mexico City, named for the Aztec "Grasshopper Hill." Doña Candelita (little candle) is one of the overtly religious village women. Valente el Envaselinado is one of the bold, slick-haired dandies who frequent the local brothels. Espíndola Fernoch is a rather suspect local lawyer whose name suggests that his clients should not mishandle any of his legal documents. His Germanic surname could indicate WWII refugee origins.

The Pérez family has a common Hispanic name and suffers some of the problems typical of their ethnic group. Pánfilo is a kind-hearted man who tries to love or like everyone while struggling to support his family. His wife, la Magui has taken on an Anglo nickname for Margarita. Their son Frankie was a young man unsure of what to do with his life. He eventually died in the Viet Nam War. When Loreto first met him by chance on a street corner, Frankie recognized Loreto as a fellow Chicano. Loreto was troubled because Frankie could barely speak any Spanish and because Loreto could

sense the shadow of death around the boy. The figure of death also appeared to Rosario Chayo Cuamea in the form of "La Flaca" (the thin woman) whom he pursued until she caught up with him. His religious/rosary name did not save him.

The Chicano characters do not fare very well in the novel, although many of them are treated sympathetically by the author. The Anglo or Gringo characters are almost all negative. Tony Baby is a flashy character who inherited a chain of hot dog stands in the barrio from his grandmother; he credits himself with inventing the chili dog, a new way to sell fast food to the Chicanos.⁶ The Foxye family consists of two upwardly mobile parents who pay more attention to their dog Angel than to their son Bobby. Bobby becomes a hippie who likes to sit around the barrio with Loreto and some of his oldtimer friends. Rudolph H. Smith is the judge whose name combines the unusual with the common; he is the bigoted decision maker who gave Chuco such a hard sentence. His wife Gloria and son Rudolph Jr. share his prejudices and praise him for punishing the Chicanos while giving lighter sentences to Gringos who commit more serious crimes. The MacCane family is a hypocritical group which employs Pánfilo Pérez and which claims to help him, yet they virtually ignore the death of his son. Their name could imply "son of the dog." The somewhat cryptic name of Mr. More Sany appears only once in the novel, in reference to an associate of the MacCanes. It seems to be a Hispanic pun on an unclear Gringo name

such as Moresania, Morrison or Morris Zany.

Place names also play a role in the novel. We have already seen Aztlán as the mythic origin of the Aztecs from which their Chicano descendants come wandering. Several Arizona and California locales are mentioned in the vicinity of Yuma, Sonora and Tijuana. Los Angeles is seemingly a new Aztlán from which the Chicano future may grow. But the border towns are generally given the reputation of centers of evil which corrupt the Chicanos who wander into them. Loreto, Chuco and their friends spend hours in the "Happy Day" bar (an ironic name if ever there was one), talking endlessly about nothing in particular, criticizing their lot in life, alternating between Spanish and English. They are concerned with "la migra," the Immigration Office which might try to find and deport them. They dislike Gringolandia but think it offers more work, at least, than Mexico. The brothels in the novel have intriguing names like "La Píldora" = "The Pill" / "Molino Rosa" = "Rosy Mill" / "Serrallo Olímpico" = "Olympic Seraglio."

We have seen that Méndez uses the devices of nicknames (apodos), Spanglish and code-switching (between English, Spanish and sometimes Nahuatl) in his novel. He also makes occasional humorous references to food in a bilingual/bicultural mode. When Loreto Maldonado is found dead at the end of the novel, in his hut near a garbage dump on the border, he is surrounded with litter, the discarded packages for the meager diet he maintained: Spam, hot cakes and Winies

Oscar Molla. The latter is the Chicano version of "Oscar Mayer Wieners." Despite Loreto Maldonado's tragic death after a difficult life, Méndez concludes his novel on a note of hope that future generations of young Chicanos will not meet the same fate. There is encouragement in numbers, in political clout, in bilingualism and biculturalism. The growing interest in Hispanic writers living in the United States (particularly Chicano, Cuban-American and Puerto Rican) is evidence of a vibrant culture. I think that it is fair to say that the average Hispanic reader takes delight in names; virtually everyone in the barrio has a diminutive or nickname. From Cervantes to Galdós to García Márquez, Miguel Méndez follows in the Hispanic onomastic tradition.

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NOTES

¹Francisco Jiménez, Mosaico de la vida: prosa chicana, cubana y puertorriqueña (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1981), p. 160.

²Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, Modern Chicano Writers (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), p. 28.

³Francisco Jiménez, The Identification and Analysis of Chicano Literature (New York: Bilingual Press, 1979), p. 325-328: Guillermo Rojas on Chicano Prose.

⁴Miguel Méndez, Peregrinos de Aztlán, (Berkeley, California: Editorial Justa, 1974 & 1979), p. 33.

⁵Ibid., p. 84.

⁶Ibid., p. 35.