

Reviews

Mito, identidad y rito

Mexicanos y Chicanos en California

(Myth, Identity and Rites. Mexicans and Chicanos in California)

Mariángela Rodríguez

CIESAS/Porrúa

Mexico City, 1998, 277 pp.



The ideal reader of *Mito, identidad y rito. Mexicanos y Chicanos en California* could well be a Mexican interested in the variety and innovative nature of Chicano reritualization as a means of accounting for “the contradictory process of identity, as far as what is altered and what is maintained, within the process of going from being Mexican to being Chicano.” (All the quotes from this book are my translation). That is to say, claims to identity that, as Chicano critic Rafael Pérez-Torres has put it, are “involved in an endless project of becoming, rather than being, Chicana/o.”

This book is an attempt to describe from an anthropological perspective the rites—as anthropologist and author Mariángela Rodríguez calls them—Chicanos have appropriated, recreated through an imperative need to establish their identity in what she refers to as “a search for symbolic reunification when confronted with the fact of the fragmented nature of the life experience offered by the United States.”

Rodríguez uses reference material that goes from graphics and interviews to poetry, lyrics, performance, folk art and a variety of everyday expressions, including program contents and newspaper

ads, thereby underscoring how personal and collective experiences, popular and mass culture and their creative expressions are closely interconnected within a continuous process of deliberate (re)creation.

The book offers Mexican readers a perspective rarely found outside academic bookshelves. Despite its academic nature—it is quite obviously a doctoral thesis—there is an additional slant, since it targets a Mexican readership, a readership interested in knowing more about Mexicans *del otro lado*, “on the other side,” an aim suggested by the joint distribution policy of CIESAS and well-known publishing house Miguel Angel Porrúa to reach beyond academic circles.

The author introduces an interesting personal perspective at the beginning: what it’s like to be a Colombian-born Mexican citizen, a female anthropologist working on her doctoral thesis in the U.S., who finds herself placed on the sidelines, since she cannot claim her identity either as a Colombian, a Mexican, a Chicana or a Latina. To the repeated question of why she, a non-Chicana and non-native-born Mexican has embarked on research focused on Chicano identity, she responds emotionally, “I remember the lump in my throat when I thought that my 22 years in Mexico, all my studies and life as an adult woman, including a Mexican child and Mexican nationality were worthless,” to which she adds that “the feeling of not belonging anywhere was devastating.” By situating her multiple selves and the site of her discourse, she identifies with a broader project of *chicanidad* that in turn accounts for her own project, perspective and writing.

The text is supplemented by a series of color photographs of a number of murals and other Chicano expressions in Los Angeles. The conclusion inserts a useful summary of the central issues raised and ends with a bibliography. The six main sections help contextualize the three epicenters of her thesis: the Cinco de Mayo celebration, *La Quebradita* and the *Calpulli*, which she sustains are all a synthesis of civil/political, popular culture/mass media and rural religious/urban secular expressions, that is, ritualistic needs that find an outlet in new forms in new social formations.