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Americhicano

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AMERICHICANO

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing:
Poetry

by
Isaac Raymond Escalera
June 2014

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Approved by:

Juan Delgado, First Reader
Chad Sweeney, Second Reader

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ABSTRACT

The title of my manuscript, *Americhicano*, is a play on the words American, Americana, and Chicano. It was my goal to write poems that would capture the shared experiences of Chicanos, Latin Americans and the vast people group we identify as “American.”

In the first part of my Statement of Purpose, I go into the politics and social commentary of why I chose this as the focus of my project. “Why I Write” is a continuation of that conversation, but more focused on my own personal experience and journey as a writer. In the Section titled, “On Narrative Poetry” I explore the tradition of narrative in poetry and culture and how the two come together within my own poetry. “Uncertainty and Possibility” talks about the duality of creation and the writer. Do we view the unknown as something scary or as an opportunity to be seized? “On Experimental Form: Erasures and the Avante-Garde” discusses the tension of pushing the boundaries as an artist while negotiating cultural tradition.

The last section titled, “Imitation and True Voice” discusses the ways in which a writer grows and continues to grow. The idea here is that we do not have a “true” or “authentic” voice, but rather that we are the culmination of voices and identities that are constantly in flux. This last idea is an echo of all the other sections, and hopefully one that will resonate throughout my growth as a writer and as a person.

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

An Introduction: What is Americhicano?

Because so much of my poetry is rooted in ideas of identity and culture, it is important that the title of my manuscript, *Americhiano*, is addressed right away.

According to Bruce Nova, Chicano poetry is poetry written:

By authors of Mexican heritage residing permanently in the United States and is further identifiable as “Chicano” in that it coincides with the Civil Rights struggle by and for that group in the mid-1960’s.

(Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos, p.8)

Although I am by this definition a Chicano writer, I feel that my poetry is more complex than this. I was born in the Inland Empire, that sprawling area of San Bernardino smog. My poetry largely deals with the culture, which umbrellas over many different individual cultures and groups. We all coexist and learn to live and work together at work, school, church, ballparks and anywhere else we come together as a community. The civil rights struggle was not solely for the African American or the Mexican American. It was for the Latin American, the Native American, the Asian American, and a number of minorities living in poverty and without access to proper wages and education.

Yes, I am Chicano and proud. But I am also aware of the need to move forward together as Americans, living together and sharing our cultures and arts. I want to be Americhicano.

Why I Write

“Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother’s garden, I found my own.”
—Alice Walker, *“In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens”*

I can’t say I was a late bloomer when it came to writing. I was always making up stories and drawing pictures when I was younger. I wrote songs and poems but hid them away from anyone to read. These were the seeds of my life as a writer. It wasn’t until college that I finally gathered up the courage to take a chance and follow my passion unapologetically. I wanted to be as good as the authors we read in class and in some ways I felt that I already was, particularly in creating characters that were unique and yet familiar and universal.

I also felt I had something to prove when it came to writing. Coming from a family of hardworking blue collared people, the arts were something of a gamble for me. In Mexican culture, the man works and is the primary provider for his family, often times through hard labor. To go to college is already a large jump from this, but to go to college to get an art degree is flat out crazy. That’s not to say that minority groups don’t value art at all; after all, our lives are filled with it. However, art is not seen as a good way to make a living. Because of this, for many, art has found its way into other aspects of life.

In her essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" Alice Walker examines the creative lives of those, namely African American woman, who were not given the same creative outlets she and other artist have today. Because of this, their art and creativity were expressed through everyday life such as cooking, storytelling and quilting.

It is with great care and love that I choose to write about everyday people and everyday life. Though sometimes there is struggle and urban blight, it is the beauty to create art in all of this that takes precedence. I see the mechanic whipping out a guitar to play a song with greasy fingers and write the opening to my poem, "The Mechanics Song":

The mechanic's guitar is not
 Tuned to a car horn
As you might expect
 Or the sound of an engine
 Turning
No
Those nylon strings waltz beneath
 his fingernails
 Black as midnight
Smooth as a coyotes
Howl

I see the young girl at odds with her identity in the park, twirling her skirt in traditional folk dances. She is dealing the embarrassment and confusion of being between cultures. Yet, she is participating in a tradition that connects her and an old Veterano to an older way of life and art that has been preserved. This image dances in my head in the form of my poem "Folk Dancers in the Park":

Her dress is a swirl of hazy reds, greens
 blur in what could be her gripping wings

She dances beside
 three other girls
who too do not speak
 a lick of Spanish
 like her parents

She is only half
 embarrassed

looking out on
 the grass where
an old veterano in Locs & a tank top
 Stands by his familia
 griping his beer can
 pale knuckles
 Vida
He whistles the last
 five notes of each song

And with that
 She never twirls her dress again

The buildings tell stories and boast beautiful murals and I explore in my poem “Sign Language” (a sort of homage to Poet Juan Delgado’s *Vital Signs*):

It’s best to learn how to read the signs

So you will know that the old
brick bowling alley
with it’s midcentury letters
and atomic allure,
 is actually now a Baptist church

Or that the charbroiled burger place
is now a taco spot, but unlike the Mexican food spot—
across the street with the countryside mural facing the sidewalk
—it don’t serve pancakes

I see these things and immediately feel the need to evaluate how I define an artist. In this way I don’t believe in high art, I believe in art. I believe in the

human spirit to create something beautiful and to share that with the world. And I believe with all my heart that this is what will bring us together as a people.

On Narrative Poetry

I often tell people that the best story teller I know is my own father. No matter how hard I try, he always seems to tell the punch line better or to pace the story, picking out the perfect nuances and details in a way that I could never match. I think this form or oral storytelling is definitely associated with Chicano culture, but it is not exclusive to it as I could imagine a group of minorities working a blue collar labor setting would exchange stories and music with one another. As I mentioned before, I started out writing prose. When I began writing poetry, I still held many of my narrative values I held from fiction. As Jane Hirschfield puts it:

Storytelling, like rhetoric, pulls us in through the cognitive mind as much as through the emotions. It answers both our curiosity and our longing for shapely forms: our profound desire to know what happens, and our persistent hope that what happens will somehow make sense.

(Nine Gates 26)

Yet as I began writing my poems, I quickly realized that I was able to explore ideas that were more personal to me, much more than my fiction. I believe this was so because more than ideas, I was hoping to convey a feeling and as he so masterfully puts in his essay, "Reflections on Narrative Poetry,"

poet Louis Simpson writes, "But feeling is more urgent, and [Poets'] feelings are expressed by the movement of lines. In poetry the form, more than the idea, creates the emotion we feel when we read the poem" (*Claims* 407).

In this way, I see the goal of my poetry as having a narrative strong enough to pull the reader in, and yet have the lyrical lines of verse in a form that resonates emotionally for the reader. A poem of mine that does this is "CinderElla" printed here in its entirety:

I can still see the paint chipped house in Pico
And the little girl who lived there,
Teetering her weight on one foot,
As she traces it with a dull pencil.

I see her cut the cardboard and hold up
The foot print, blocking the last pale light of dusk
Then slip that shape into the emptiness
Of her shoe, a size too small.

She prays it doesn't rain tonight
That the pot holes in town do not puddle
And fill, that the cold water not seep
Into her shoes

She runs her fingers against the rough fabric of her dress
Hand-me-down blue, but the lace is
Not completely missing
Her mother scolds her, "stop picking."

When they arrive at the VFW
She joins the other children in line
A girl with mismatched socks tells her she looks pretty
And she blushes like a Christmas tree

One by one the children race away
Clutching gifts and ripping paper
She hopes for a doll she can call her own,
But what she gets is a pencil box of school supplies

At home, she's told to use it only for school
But she sneaks it out, when every one is asleep
She draws the face of a boy and two girls and says to them

*You are my son
And you my daughters*

This poem also reimagines the European fairytale of “Cinderella” as a Hispanic poem. This can be seen within the title as the “E” is capitalized drawing attention to the embedded Spanish word Ella. She is also evaluating her identity and even her history and path as she examines her own footprint. And despite her embarrassment and struggle, she continues to make her own future and her own path.

This poem has a lot of the elements of a story. There are characters, a setting and essentially a plot. However, this exists as a poem because of the lyrical lines and the form which calls emphasis to certain moments, heightening the “feeling” in a way that is urgent. That is one of the goals many of my poems in my manuscript.

Death and Memory

I started out with prose. I wanted to be a fiction writer. As many writers will tell you, their early stuff wasn't that great, though at the time they may have felt as though they were writing the next great American novel. Nevertheless, I learned a great deal from those early workshops. Perhaps one of the greatest trends I noticed as a writer was the constant urge for budding authors to write

about death. What was fascinating to me was that no one ever told us to write about death, we just did. For years I dismissed this as a cheap and easy way to make the narrative melodramatic. However, when I reflect on this idea I have two glaring realizations, that Death is a mystery and that death is ubiquitous.

In another instance, I once raised the question why it felt like the only time some people feel compelled to write and share poems are at funerals. My astute friend and MFA cohort, Larry Eby, replied by recognizing the human need to recreate something that is lost, as a means for recovery.

In this way I think memory is in many ways far more interesting and tragic than death itself. It pains us as a constant reminder of what was lost. However, there is much redemption in memory as well. Poet Tess Gallagher writes:

Every time we remember some forgotten moment in a way that illuminates the present or causes the present to mediate some past, then the boundaries we thought were there between past, present, and future dissolve, if only for the time that is the poem. (*Claims* 111)

This works almost the same way an old photograph or painting does. There is a return to an exact moment and your senses are triggered to recall the sounds, smells and look of everything from that moment. Perhaps the best way I can describe this is by looking at my own poem “Drift,” which deals with my grandmother’s Alzheimer’s condition in conjunction with the time my parents were bombarded with phone calls about how much I looked like my dad in his senior picture.

In the months of my grandmother's fading memory
I lived many lives
Today I was my father

She asked me why I cut my hair
If I wanted to look older
More adult

I shrug
sure

She tells me that I drive too fast
That I stay out too late
And

*When will you settle down ...
I want grandbabies Mijo ...
Raymond is a very good name ...*

And I agree

She looks over at my tia and gives her a dirty look

(She's been doing that today we don't know why)

She looks out her window and hollers

Pinche Chongo! Get down from that tree!

She turns back to me

Ay! Your brother ...

But I don't tell her I have no brother
Or that my uncle is a grown man in a different city
I just agree and ask her to relax

When we are alone she stares at me

Do I embarrass you?

And even though I know my Dad was teased
For taking tortillas for lunch
For speaking Spanish at school
For living in the poorest barrio with all those dirty children

I knew how he would answer

No

In the months of my grandmother's fading memory
I lived several lives
Doctors, old friends, strangers and nobodies

Some days she asks me what I want
And I tell her I don't know
Then say to myself

I want my juggernaut soul to tear through the ether

But what I think I mean is

I want to outlive my body

This poem once again deals with identity, but in a way that spans multiple generations. One of the most beautiful aspects of this poem is that my grandmother is still able to see my father and my culture inside of me. In this way culture is preserved and that culture, even despite our finite existence, will continue on and even outlive us.

It was also my goal to show what's just outside of the frame. I wanted to show that the moment was not forgotten at all, only buried beneath the noise of the present, and the poem becomes a tool of excavation first for the poet and then for the reader. Furthermore, those uncovered moments shine a new light on this present life.

In "Drift", death and memory are also explored in context to culture. In his introduction to *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos*, Bruce Nova writes, "Assimilation into another culture is a form of death for those who fear losing their

own culture” (*Chicano* 8). Although there are some positive aspects of assimilation, there is always that lingering fear of what one may become and what one may lose. Though my assimilation into middle class American culture has afforded me many benefits, mainly access to education, it has not come without its costs. For example, my parents were vehemently discouraged from speaking Spanish in the classroom. As a result, I was never taught the language and so it was lost to me. It truly feels like a part of me dies as I very embarrassingly have to shy away from conversations I so desperately want to have with others.

With this in mind, I am constantly trying to remember the Spanish that I do know and to learn more so I can incorporate it into my poetry as a means to mediate the past with the present and dissolve the boundaries of the future. I’ve made it my goal to guide the future generation not to shy away from their native language so that the damage done to myself, my parents, and many other cultures will be undone.

I want the next generation of young writers to be proud of their language. My desire is for them to read Federico Garcia Lorca and Pablo Neruda as well as T.S. Eliot and Allen Ginsberg and to create their own poetry. In many ways, this is what I am hoping my poetry is doing now in its embedding of Spanish within English.

Uncertainty and Possibility

“Poems are excursions into belief and doubt, often simultaneously”
—Tess Gallagher, “The Poem as Time Machine”

Perhaps one of the scariest aspect of the writer’s life is to stare at is the blank page, whether those clean sheets of notebook paper, or the blinking cursor on the computer screen. Or maybe it is the most exciting thing to be in front of a blank canvas awaiting your genius. Charles Simic writes, “To be ‘capable of being in uncertainties’ is to be literally in the midst. The poet is in the midst. The poem, too, is in the midst” (*Claims* 399).

However there is a cost, as he continues:

There are serious consequences to being “in the midst”. For instance, one is subject to influence. One experiences a crises of identity. One suffers from self-consciousness. One longs for the self-knowledge while realizing at the same time that under the circumstances self-knowledge can never be complete (*Claims* 399).

To say that it is a mere lack of words to put on paper is the cause of the poet’s anxiety would be grossly untrue. In a way, writers’ block has been come to be a sort of misunderstanding of awaiting a muse. Surely anyone can put nonsense to paper and call it creative. What haunts the poet is the ability to create something that is *good*; a work that represents us and makes us proud to be associated with it. The problem before us though is that life is so immense and complex, and all we have are the words. Sometimes they seem as if they are not enough. Tess Gallagher writes,

[W]e stand at the point of all possibilities yet feel helpless before the collapse of the future-sustaining emblems of our lives. This has reduced us to an instantaneous *now*. (*Claims* 113)

It is the *now* that I feel is binding and problematic, especially when writing poetry that is socially conscious. I feel that I am balancing representing the current life of a culture, while simultaneously desiring to show where I want to go and where I hope my culture will some day be in the future. I think sometimes that can be skewed into selling out or abandonment of the *present* when really, it is the embracing of the possibilities of the *present*.

The incredible thing is that uncertainty and possibility never really go away. Because of this, we must learn to live in uncertainty and possibility, to write in them and to create art in them. This means exploring our hopes and dreams, but it can also mean exploring our fears and doubts. It is the poet's choice which avenue to follow, but he must be prepared to find doubt and fear when he is looking for hope and to find hope and love when he is looking at doubt and fear. This isn't the unpredictability of poetry; it's the unpredictability of life. This is the unpredictability I speak of in my poem "We Built an Empire" as the speaker surprised when he faces a mother with black eyes, but he chooses to move beyond his doubt and help her out. In that moment there is hope.

On Experimental Form: Erasures and the Avant-Garde

"Poetry is an echo, asking a shadow to dance"
—Carl Sandburg

To be ~~on the margin of~~
The ocean

Chasing the spin of a tireless
Globe hinged on a dog's crooked tooth

Soon

██████████ has always ~~alluded~~-eluded me

Soon	passes
the	hours
careless	drift of your lift
lips	██████████

I admit that I wasn't sure what to do with these poems at first. I wasn't sure how to fit them into my manuscript, so centered on culture and tradition. However, I have made peace with these strange poems because they represent the artistic spirit: to take a chance and even challenge what it means to be "Chicano" writer. We are the gate keepers of our own identities and our futures. As Richard Kostelanetz writes, "The term avant-garde refers to those out front, forging a path that others will take" (*Claims* 238). With this in mind, why not put ourselves out front and lead the way. Why not stretch the scope of Chicano poets, American poets or simply Poets.

Imitation and True Voice

"Bad poets imitate, great poets steal"
—T.S. Eliot

If I had a nickel for every line I ever stole, I could probably pay off my student loans. Of course I am kidding, but nevertheless, I am at odds with the

term *stealing* and yet I can't help but agree with T.S. Elliot that great poets steal. But stealing in and of itself is not enough.

Perhaps one of the greatest advantages about being in a creative writing program is exposure to other writers. Whether reading works of poets who have been canonized or those who are more contemporary and obscure, or simply the poetry of others who are sitting across from one in the classroom; there is no shortage of inspirational writing. So with this in mind, it should come as no surprise to want to expand on ideas, or adapt and work with quotations. I do not see this as stealing, but if we must call it that, then we need to learn to become clever thieves in order to better our writing.

Of course, this is not limited to the classroom. Inspiration can strike at any moment. A song, a news report, a funny quip by a friend, nearly anything at any moment can embed itself in your head until the only thing to do is write it down. Once written down, it might stay in your journal or it may sleep soundless in some forgotten file on your computer, but it never quite goes away, that is until you find the rest of the words to say and create your poem or story.

Like a good athlete, a good writer learns from those who are better than him. Good writers break down their moves and try the new ones or even the better moves, themselves. They learn to combine these with others, and they modify them just enough. They claim them until the theft is complete.

Perhaps sports is a bad analogy. Perhaps cooking is a better one. Learning in the kitchen what flavors go together and modifying a dish so it comes

out just right. You learn to make the enchiladas first by following your mom's recipe. But then, you start to transform it. Jane Hirshfield writes, "Before the invention of photography, copying was an integral part of every visual artist's training" (*Nine Gates* 46).

In all actualization, we are an accumulation of different process and techniques we learn from others. We absorb them and they become a part of us. So why is it then that writers fret over the idea of finding an authentic voice? For years I worried about this. I often thought about it as I wrote my poems, asking myself, "Does this sound like me?" even before I had any clue what that meant. My voice was still, and is still, developing.

My point is that I don't have an "authentic voice," because like lasagna, there is no one and only. My voice is a mixture of family, of San Bernardino, of college, of American culture and Chicano culture. So do I exist as something separate within this list? No. I am San Bernardino. I am American. I am Chicano. I am every poet and author I read and without any one of these, I could not exist.

Conclusion

If my manuscript has one theme, it is one of plurality. It is how to be an individual within streams of various cultures. It is to show that an authentic self is a unique self made up of many influences.

Through the poetry in my manuscript I am able to explore who I am within the forces of art, masculinity, and the working class. I am able to negotiate being

a Chicano and an American. Like my experimental poems, I too am a palimpsest, rewriting myself while carrying traces of my heritage and my past.

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Appendix: Americhicano