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Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

Reseñas

TWO CALIFORNIO AUTOBIOGRAPHIES: DON AGUSTÍN JANSSENS AND YGNACIO VILLEGAS

by Salvador Fernández

Life and Adventures in California of Don Agustín Janssens, 1834-1856. William H. Ellison and Francis Price, eds. Francis Price, trans. San Marino: Huntington Library, 1953.

Boyhood Days: Ygnacio Villegas' Reminiscences of California in the 1850s. Albert Shumate, ed. San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1983.

In recent years literary and cultural critics have begun to explore and open up new frontiers, particularly in the areas of what have previously been considered marginal literatures. This has included attempts to recuperate documents which have been ignored or simply considered non-literary, such as oral testimonies, diaries, and travel narratives. The importance of nineteenth-century Mexican American autobiographies, works which document the memory of a colonized community, is only now being recognized. My essay focuses on two Californio autobiographies, *The Life and Adventures in California of Don Agustín Janssens, 1834-1856* and *Boyhood Days: Ygnacio Villegas' Reminiscences of California in the 1850s* which have not been the subject of any literary study.

Life and Adventures in California of Don Agustín Janssens depicts the social order of a Southern Californio aristocrat who participated in the Mexican and American political government. *Boyhood Days: Ygnacio Villegas' Reminiscences of California in the 1850s* portrays the daily life of Northern California and shows the social and cultural transition of California from Mexican to Anglo-American and Mexican-American cultures. The first text was written in Spanish, but it is only available in its English translation. On the other hand, the second work was written in English, but it was not published until 1983. The first text is a historical and personal account originally edited by Thomas Savage, an assistant of noted businessman and history buff

Hubert H. Bancroft. It is based on Janssens' oral testimony as well as his unpublished autobiography entitled *Libro de lo que me ha pasado en mi vida* (Book of What Has Happened in My Life). The second work is a collection of autobiographical sketches written by Ignacio Pedro Villegas in 1895 but unpublished until 1927 when they appeared in the *Salinas Daily Journal* and the *Hollister Free Lance*. Villegas, raised on a ranch in northern California, was an avid reader with diversified interests, such as law and the study of environment. He attended Santa Clara College and later became a telegraph operator and train station agent in the Salinas Valley. After his retirement he served as a Notary Public and Justice of the Peace. *Life and Adventures in California* and *Boyhood Days* reconstruct the culture of Californios in order to show how their status was quickly transformed from the center to the margins of society in California after it became a U.S. territory.

In 1834 Janssens joined an expedition known as the Compañía Cosmopolita (Cosmopolitan Company), led by José María Padrés, in order to establish a colony in California. The northern frontier was perceived as a backwater and peripheral province to the rest of Mexico. Janssens states, "the people believed that we were going into exile because during those days to speak about California in Mexico was to say that it was the end of the world" (14). On the other hand, one of the organizers, José María Híjar, identified it as "the true promised land" (20). To describe California as "the promised land" in this period was a leap of the imagination. Yet others agreed: Villegas describes California in *Boyhood Days* as a Garden of Eden: "Game of all kinds could be killed in the pine woods back of town, and the swamps swarmed with ducks and water fowl, so eating was an easy matter" (15).

This typing of California as a marvelous possession also provided the idea of a utopia which could be used to solve Mexico's economic, political and social problems. The colonization movement north was seized upon as a way to bring wealth and stability: for instance, the Compañía Cosmopolita (Cosmopolitan Company) was sponsored by the

Mexican government which, in return, expected financial and material recompense. Individuals had similar expectations. For Janssens, the trip to California was successful since his knowledge of distilleries enabled him to establish himself as a wine entrepreneur. The Mexican frontier from California to Texas become a geographic and political utopia as well as a solution to the internal social problems of Mexico.

These Californio autobiographies identify historical and influential people of California as well its more unusual citizens, such as vaqueros, bandits, social dissenters, elegant and beautiful ladies, and religious and political figures, describing them like characters in a narrative. These characters simultaneously create interest in the story and provide the reader with a social and cultural reconstruction of the period and place. One of the most popular religious figures to appear in these and other Californio autobiographies is Friar José María Zalvidea. He is presented as a saintly man but he is also stated to have unusual powers such as supernatural capacities. Janssens says:

Many inconceivable things were attributed to him...if they were true, we would credit him of possessing the give of a dual vision...I was inclined to believe that many of these things were exaggerated or never occurred--but this does not reflect in the fact that Father Zalvidea was a great figure in the history of California. (31)

These observations reveal Janssens's ambivalence. Although he recognizes the friar's importance, he distances himself from the popular beliefs and magical powers attributed to the man. Janssens' depiction of Zalvidea as an ambivalent figure is important since Bancroft cites it word for word in his own historical work *California Pastoral: 1769-1849* so that he can portray Zalvidea as a psychologically unstable individual. Bancroft's *California Pastoral* as well as his *History of California (1884-1889)* became the authoritative histories for this period and narratives such as Janssens' and Villegas' were displaced. Thus, historical narratives as well as travel guides which represented the dominant point of view acquired a new authority. The reinterpretation of Father Zalvidea illustrates the shift in economic, political and cultural control in the Southwest from the Mexican to the United States government. It also shows how the new

dominant group uses Chicano heritage and cultural imagery, but through a negative portrayal which still holds today.

The representation of unique or atypical persons who acquired fame due to distinctive personal and/or social behavior is another narrative device utilized by these Californio autobiographers. Janssens identifies Don Carlos Castro, an eccentric Californio from San Juan Bautista who is portrayed as an amusing but dubious individual. Castro's actions swing from confrontation to hospitality -- just like status of California in its relationship to Mexico and the United States. Janssens recounts: *Castro began to insult us; the first thing he said to us was that we were running away; I told him that it was not true, and to prove it, I showed him my passport...Then he said that the General [José Castro] was not better than we were....I tried to calmly bear his actions, although we were annoyed by his insults which there were intolerable. He even called us Cholos. (46)*

Castro's observations mark the political and social differences between Californios and Mexicans. As Janssens implies, cholo is a pejorative word and he uses it to describe Manuel Milcheltorena's troops: "the Cholo epithet was used to name that California troop. It is true that those soldiers were sort of robbers, but they never took valuable things" (177-78).¹ This serio-comic encounter between Don Carlos Castro and Don Agustín Janssens is an example of two opposing views which clearly mark a center and the periphery, the dominant and the marginal.

Villegas chose to portray a different type of marginalized figure in *Boyhood Days*: the bandit Joaquín Murrieta. Murrieta has been the subject of many historical and literary works, including two by Pablo Neruda.² Villegas expresses great admiration for Murrieta and believes him to be the victim of racial and judicial injustice. He describes him as a "quiet, affable fellow, well-liked by everybody" and that "everything went well until his wife was outraged by some Americans and no attention was paid to the act as she was only a Mexican" (43-44). Villegas identifies hatred of Americans as the principal cause of the robber bandit's rebellious acts. Of course, given my previous conclusions I prefer to say that they were the heroic deeds of a social freedom fighter. As the migration to California increased, Mexicans became the victims of an anti-

foreign sentiment, especially when Spanish was spoken. Villegas recounts:

The anti-foreign agitation that started just as soon as foreigners came to the mines had much to do with men like Murrieta. The feeling at the mines was very bitter against anyone coming from south of the Rio Grande or, in other words, who spoke Spanish. They were run out of most of the mining camps, mistreated and oftentimes killed by self-appointed vigilance committees who took it upon themselves to see that no foreigner worked. Under these conditions many Mexicans became desperate and stole and killed to get money and food. (44)

The reactions of the North American frontiersman, hungry for his own share of the possessions and frustrated by the presence of the Mexicans, caused social dissenters such as Murrieta, Tiburcio Vásquez, and Gregorio Cortés to protest violently. Villegas' own memories of Murrieta dramatize these conflicts, which were rooted in deep racial, political and economic tensions.

This inclusion of outlaws in a personal narrative accompanies a similar transformation in the representation of California. As new cultural values invert the social and political order, the vision of California as an edenic and fertile place goes through a macabre transformation to become an upside down world. Villegas' description of the Las Aromas Rancho illustrates this:

In the hills southwest of Aromas, which are thickly wooded, were many human skeletons and corpses with dismembered limbs, thighs, legs, arms, and heads detached from the bodies, many partly gnawed over by the wild animals. It was a veritable charnel house and a ghastly sight to view the corpses in the secluded spots--especially when one had known some of them and realized that the killing was a thirst for blood. (19)

These autobiographical works are also important because they document the intellectual reformation and cultural deformation of Californios which anticipates similar cultural transformations that have occurred in Chicano culture. Villegas is a precursor of Richard Rodríguez. He provides early testimony of the change in the dominant language from Spanish to English. Although fluent in both and familiar with their literary traditions, he preferred to read literature written in English. Villegas states:

"I was always hungry for reading matter and was thankful that I had learned English along with Spanish, because one seldom ever saw a publication of any kind in Spanish that was worthwhile" (67).

Villegas was also aware of the social prejudices inherent in the English language. He preferred to read British newspapers, procurable in Monterey, and English classics, such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Villegas' appreciation for these and other books is heightened by the difficulty of obtaining reading material in the frontier. He states:

I was by nature hungry for reading, but had no chance to get books. I used to hover around the caravans as they camped by father's store to see if they had anything to read, but none ever had any. The space on their pack animals was too valuable to carry books. (35-36)

In conclusion, these Californio autobiographies are cultural tools that must be recovered and examined by scholars who wish to reconstruct the history of Chicanos and their literature. As Genaro Padilla has noted in his article, "The Recovery of Chicano Nineteenth-Century Autobiography," these narratives are "enunciations by individuals whose voices have not been merely forgotten, but, like the people themselves, suppressed." The voices of the Californios became mere echoing references and footnotes in Hubert H. Bancroft's works. This is especially evident in his *History of California* and *Pastoral California*, books which present romanticized and racist views of Native Americans, Mexicans, and Californios. Janssens' and Villegas' works portray distinctive social classes and geopolitical spaces which actively contributed to borderlands identity in the nineteenth century. Janssens and Villegas serve as writers, observers and narrators of the political, socio-cultural and historical transformations of this period. It is my belief that the recuperation and analysis of these autobiographies is essential since they represent the diverse literary history and formation of Chicano cultural expression and identity. These writings represent a resistance to a monocultural, dominant society which is defined exclusively by Anglo economic, political and cultural interests. Moreover, these two Californio autobiographies and others like them, provide a necessary background for understanding cultural issues inherent in the existence of our multicultural society.

NOTES

1. According to Francisco J. Santamaría in his *Diccionario de Mejicanismos*, cholo is a "casta que resulta del cruzamiento de la raza blanca con la indígena y en general, mestizo, criollo, etc., por extensión, gente baja, de índole ruda, soez, tosca" (416). It is important to note the historical significance of the word cholo in the context of Chicano culture. In *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz provides an analysis of Mexican-American Zoot Suiters. This group of young Mexican-Americans, also called pachucos, represented an alternative to the dominant Anglo culture. The pachucos are the precursors of the cholos, the young Mexican-Americans prominent during the 1970s. For Anglo society

as well as many older Mexican-Americans, the word cholo is associated with negative attributes, but for these particular Chicano youths, it is a word that denotes an identity and a social prominence.

2. One work is an extended poem entitled *Fulgor y Muerte de Joaquín Murrieta* (Buenos Aires: Zig-Zag, 1966). This poem was later adapted into a play, translated as *Splendor and Death of Joaquín Murrieta*, trans. Ben Belitt (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1972).

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