

Tomasz J. Brenet
University of Bielsko-Biała

Condemnation of assimilation in the Chicano/a identity discourse

John Alba Cutler, *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 288.

The turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was the period in which international scholarship gained very valuable studies regarding the history and literature of the Mexican ethnic group in the United States. In a plethora of publications, special consideration was given to the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s inspired by political, social, and cultural mobilisation of the underprivileged group whose presence in the USA had been marked with economic exploitation and exclusion.¹ Among them, the monograph *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature*, authored by John Alba Cutler (2015), deserves special attention. It is one of very few studies which take an interdisciplinary approach exceeding the framework (methodological, conceptual) of one academic discipline only.

In terms of the internal structure of the monograph, *Ends of Assimilation* comprises the introduction, six chapters setting the scene for literary and historical reflections concerning the production of Chicano/a literature, and the conclusion section. Such an organisation of the research allows for undisturbed contemplation of the creative ideas served by Cutler throughout the book. Cutler organises a portion of historical and literary knowledge into several problems which he resolves gradually providing historical facts,

¹ "Chicano" is a term referring to a Mexican American community. Even though it has a long and complex etymology, it was readopted by Mexican Americans during the Civil Rights Movement in America to indicate its cultural provenance. The term, which is taken from Spanish, respects the gender distinctiveness. Thus, the variants "Chicano/s" and "Chicana/s" refer respectively to "man/men" and "woman/women."

his own interpretation of social processes, and coherent conclusions. All these elements (introduced logically in subsequent chapters) contribute to the creation of a comprehensive image of the group in question.

In the introductory part, the author states the research problem, which is the interrelation between the theory of assimilation sociology and the literary creation of Mexican Americans. Presenting briefly the main assumptions of this field of study, which started to consolidate in the 1920s due to efforts made by a group of sociologists set in Chicago, the author prepares the ground for a literary and critical analysis of both selected classic works and more contemporary ones. The main thesis of the book is that the inadequate ideology embraced to explain the race relations in the United States in the twentieth century provoked a specific activist mode of writing, which may have far-reaching consequences for the U.S. cultural politics. While the assertion may seem to be most daring at first glance, the author competently analyses the slightest nuances of the mid-century sociology, pointing out its drawbacks, which makes the reader understand and acknowledge the areas of social iniquity that need to be redressed.

In the first chapter, "Becoming Mexican-American Literature," Cutler elaborates on the major discrepancy observed between the classic models of assimilation developed by sociologists in the middle of the twentieth century and the distinctive features underlying the literary works produced by writers representing the Mexican American minority group.² To explain and prove a historical disjunction in the two separate fields of social and cultural life (i.e. literary activity and modern sociological thought), the author analyses three novels published in the period preceding the Chicano Movement, among which we can find: *George Washington Gómez: A Mexican-texan Novel* authored by Américo Paredes (1930s), *Caballero: A Historical Novel* by Jovita González and Margaret Eimer, who coauthored the novel under the pseudonym³ – (1930s–1940s),⁴ and *Pocho* written by José Antonio Villarreal (1959). The selected books are supposed to provide evidence that the sociological assumptions concerning the categories such as gender and race lacked coherence. As a consequence, they failed in explaining and depicting the processes of integrating Mexican Americans into the main-

² It is important to note that the denominations "Mexican Americans" and "Mexican-Americans" convey two different meanings. While "Mexican Americans" refer to the Mexican-origin people in general, the name "Mexican-Americans" pertain normally to those who followed the assimilation policy in the USA.

³ Andrea R. Purdy, "Jovita González de Mireles (1904–1983)," in: *American Women Writers, 1900–1945: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Laurie Champion (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 2000), pp. 142–143.

⁴ The both books were written over the course of several years. It is difficult to indicate any specific date.

stream culture. In this way, the author elucidates that what had seemed to be a natural path for immigrants to follow, at least for the then analysts of assimilation policies, scholars, and decision-makers, proved to be different in the case of Mexican-origin peoples. And this was also reflected in the shaping of Mexican American literature. Cutler's in-depth literary analysis also shows the vital regional differences in the compared novels. Additionally, the survey on the content-related intentions of the authors of the last of the aforementioned novels reveals how the literary work issues a challenge to the paradigm of masculinism. This observation, which has its direct confirmation in the theorisation of sociology of literature, is indeed highly important. The conclusions drawn by the author may to some extent explain how literature (which has predominantly a symbolic and imaginary dimension) operates in reality, signalling and inducing fundamental social changes.

The second chapter, "Quinto Sol, Chicano/a Literature, and the Long March Through Institutions," presents a shift that has occurred in the institutional dimension in the United States. As observed rightly by the author, the demographic and political transformations continued since the 1960s have diversified higher education. Consequently, the university is no longer employed just in reproducing national culture. Instead, it is now a central site that mediates the production, distribution, and, more importantly, the reception of Chicano/a literature in society. Moreover, Cutler examines the route that was covered by the first fully independent publisher of Chicano/a literature established in the late 1960s – Quinto Sol Publications – from its rise to the fall in the mid-seventies. In an insightful analysis, Cutler discusses how academic and publishing institutions built the foundations of literature which successfully resisted the perpetuated forms of domination developed by the mainstream culture in an earlier era. In addition, the author points out that the production of critical knowledge as well as cultural capital in the body of literary works helped to countervail the assimilatory operations run by public authorities and services. I find this part extraordinarily interesting and crucial as there is still little research on how the cultural institutions and organizations founded by minority members translated into the cultural production intended to subjugate the system.

The prime focus of the next chapter, "Culture Capital and the Singularity of Literature in *Hunger of Memory* and *The Rain God*," is brought to the problem of how the notions of cultural capital are connected to some ideal of assimilation established and pursued within a monocultural

perspective. So as to provide a proof that any hope for ascending the ladder of social hierarchy rests on a particular concept of literature, Cutler makes a comparison between two books written in the 1980s – *Hunger of Memory* by Richard Rodriguez (1982) and *The Rain God* by Arturo Islas (1984). What is important here, in my opinion, is that the insights provided by the author are set in the context of culture wars, which have had far-reaching consequences for both the creation of literature curricula and education policy in the U.S. On the basis of his examination, Cutler advances a thesis that assimilation desired by Mexican Americans is not about joining the mainstream, but about entering the public sphere. And this is reflected in the change of the literary canon.

Cutler continues to focus on the legacy of the mid-century assimilation sociology and its critique in the fourth chapter, “Lyric Subjects, Cultures of Poverty, and Sandra Cisneros’s Wicked Wicked Ways.” In this part of the study, the author states that the assimilation discourse gave rise to the so-called “culture of poverty” hypothesis, which is to be blamed for making poor women of colour pathologised objects of a fallible sociological approach, and generating misrepresentations. The resistance is exemplified by means of poetry composed by Sandra Cisneros, an acknowledged Chicana author. The analysis made by Cutler shows that Cisneros’s poems attempt at transforming the underprivileged women into speaking subjects who can explicitly articulate their needs or goals and claim a space for their personal, familial, and professional development, among other things. In his analysis, he also alludes to one of the most meaningful dual characters of Mexican cultural mythology – La Malinche⁵ – who, on the one hand, represents maternal values, on the other, is an individual pursuing her own desires. Furthermore, Cutler challenges the general assumption that the 1970s were the most formative period for Chicano/a literature. In his view, it was the post-Movement era that specified the ideas of Chicano/a literariness.

The fifth chapter, “Segmented Assimilation and Jimmy Santiago Baca’s Prison Counterpublics,” is devoted to the examination of prison poetry written by Jimmy Santiago Baca in which he fights the detrimental forces of segmentation and stratification resorting to the imagined spaces created in his poems. The social order represented in the analysed works constitutes some counterpublic space in which the principles and standards of coexistence can be redefined to shape a convenient environment

⁵ According to historical accounts, La Malinche was a Nahuatl woman who acted as an interpreter and mistress for Hernán Cortés. Also, she is a symbol of betrayal of the Aztec Empire. See: Hugh Thomas, *Conquest: Montezuma, Cortes, and the Fall of Old Mexico* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 171–172.

for various segments of the general population. In this chapter, Cutler notes that Baca's early poetry is located on the borderland between two divergent models of assimilation, i.e. segmented assimilation (in which individuals are assimilated into other underclass groups that cannot gain upward economic mobility) and boundary-crossing assimilation (according to which, there is one boundary that must be crossed to enter the larger community). The reference to these two models helps the reader understand that assimilation as an ideology or doctrine is not something uniform. Instead, it can assume different forms, and sometimes just the combination of them is more consistent with the needs demonstrated by a given community.

The last, sixth, chapter, "Disappeared Men: Chicano/a Authenticity and the American War in Viet Nam," is devoted to the analysis of selected literary works of narrative fiction in which the central motif of the plot is the war in Vietnam, among them: *Gods Go Begging* by Alfredo Véa (1999), *Motorcycle Ride on the Sea of Tranquility* by Patricia Santana (2002), and *Their Dogs Came with Them* written by Helena María Viramontes (2007). As Cutler observes, war as such occupies a special position in the history of the Chicano Movement. It was the disappointment and disillusionment with World War II that contributed to the anti-systemic attitudes among Mexican Americans – their expectations resulting from their perception that loyal military service entailed no significant political decisions that would change the plight of the neglected minority. Such protest literature, as further scrutinised by the author, emerged especially in the 1980s, and it had a twofold objective. First, it emphasised the gravity of transnational affiliations of marginalised communities that would provide an alternative to the authoritative and prevailing model of society understood as a one-nation culture. Second, the literature intended to eradicate a deeply embedded idea of American exceptionalism through highlighting that there is nothing "exceptional" about the country if the internal divisions in the population structure are still vibrant. The assertion seems to touch on a sore point of American society, which on the one hand believes in the nation's global role in establishing cordial relations and, on the other, deals with openly hostile forces inside the country.

Having analysed the novels and their development over time, Cutler turns to final conclusions. In the first place, he states that the Chicano/a literature, which proliferated in the 1970s, has not lost its political orientation developed in the activist movement. Some changes concerning the intrinsic properties of textual representations are, obviously, discerned –

which results, according to Cutler, from the necessity to adapt some literary constituents to the new era. However, the essence of goal-reaching through literature is still maintained. Moreover, he notices that the one-sidedness characterising the assumptions of the mid-century sociology recedes in favour of immigrants to the United States. Even though the change is not revolutionary or groundbreaking, it allows for some multiplicity of cultures and perspectives in numerous areas of life. Both the academia and ordinary citizens seem to appreciate more the contributions made by non-white newcomers, which, hopefully, will ensure them an equal representation and participation in the mainstream.

The reading of the study stimulates a comprehensive reflection on the motivations of Chicano/a authors who have engaged in the process of writing for the sake of the group's common objectives. Confronting this kind of activism with the scholarly and political assumptions of assimilation sociology opens up new interpretative fields for acknowledged literary works of different genres. Such an original analysis may lead to the reevaluation of the mainstream culture as well as reveal complex dynamics of the literary dimension in cultural dialogue with the theory of sociology. Simultaneously, Cutler challenges a long-lived general conviction that literary works by Chicanos/as keep the antiassimilationist stance. Thanks to his discussion, it becomes clearly evident that the minority's efforts are dependent on its willingness to function within the structure of American society – not beyond it. The chronological approach, which Cutler follows consistently, makes it possible to indicate the factors which have been historically responsible for the formation of Chicano/a literature. All of these elements contribute to the recommendation of *Ends of Assimilation* as a treatise worthy of a greater audience.

Tomasz J. Brenet

Condemnation of assimilation in the Chicano/a identity discourse

The aim of this review is to familiarise a potential reader with a particularly interesting monograph written in English that has been available on the reading market since 2015 – *Ends of Assimilation: The Formation of Chicano Literature* authored by John Alba Cutler. The presented study is devoted to the literature produced by the representatives of the Mexican ethnic group in the United States – literature that owes its prime to the civil rights movement launched in the latter half of the twentieth century. As the author has noted, activism accompanying the participants and observers of this social impulse translated itself into the political orientation of literary works. What, however, distinguishes Cutler's study, when compared to similar monographs published continuously since the 1980s, is the interdisciplinary approach of the conducted research. The author not only concentrates on a typical analysis of selected works (preserving simultaneously their chronological order), but juxtaposes their subject matter and specificity with the assumptions of the theory of assimilation developed within the discipline of sociology in the 1920s. Based on this perspective, Cutler indicates the way in which the literature produced by Mexican-origin prose writers and poets was shaped. Moreover, he proves that it does not manifest any antiassimilationist attitude, as it was commonly considered so far, but rather shows the group's aspiration to function together within one society – not beyond it.

Key words: American literature, identity discourse, assimilation, Mexican ethnic group, narrative fiction