

Chicano *Letrado*: The Native Informant as Writer in *Pocho*

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Abstract:

José Antonio Villarreal's novel *Pocho*, originally published in 1959 and arguably the first work of Chicano literature, captures in its protagonist, Richard Rubio, the dilemmas of an emerging culture's native informants. As a Chicano native informant specifically, Richard Rubio unwittingly aides in overturning his community's cultural silence by disclosing knowledge about what it is like to be silent – what it is like to be subaltern.. Such cultural knowledge is disclosed to both other characters within the story and, of course, to readers of the novel themselves. The native informant of *Pocho*, who is an aspiring writer himself, must negotiate between his culture's declining oral tradition and the more public and authoritative written tradition to which he is attracted. What is particularly noteworthy about *Pocho's* contemporary landmark status in Chicano literature is that it very much stands as a narrative – and thus, arguably, the first *künstlerroman* of contemporary Chicano literature – about the making of the Chicano writer.

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To be a native informant is to speak, after a fashion. The native informant's role in ethnography [. . .] is to provide information, to act as a source and an object of knowledge.
Mark Sanders, "Postcolonial Reading" (1999, 3)

Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* proposes what she calls "the native informant" (1999, xi) to address the paradox of minority representation, and which appears in discourses of resistance and holds out the critical possibility of an interventionist awareness of the complicities involved in producing and propagating such discourses. In his review of Spivak's text Ian Baucom clarifies that to speak of the native informant "is not to speak of a subject but of a subject position, or, more accurately, a serial positionality within a range of discourses, a repeated moment within those discourses" (2000, 421). Since the native informant's discursive presence is repeatedly momentary we must conclude that the cultural authority of the native informant character, of Richard Rubio, in *Pocho* will, likewise, be only momentary but nonetheless repeated throughout the narrative.

Aside from the author himself, José Antonio Villarreal, who as an empirical and *de facto* native informant in his own right directs his literary portrayals from *without*, we find that the semi-fictional native informant character emerges *within* the narrative of *Pocho* as a figurative fixture of the Chicano experience, as a conduit of information that facilitates the production of “creative structures of knowledge to allow its readers to see, feel, and to understand their social reality” (Saldívar 7). The reader identifies with the native informant in *Pocho* due to the native informant’s exhibited sensitivity to matters concerning the landscape of cultural politics it inhabits and navigates throughout the course of the narrative. These cultural politics, informed as they are by history and the habits of tradition, exert pressure on the native informant’s conscience and subsequent social behavior in the narrative.

The native informant character in *Pocho* exhibits cultural authority and knowledge within the narrative’s “distributed field of attention” (Woloch 2003, 17) by functioning as a featured source of cultural information. Given that history is the subtext of all Chicano literature, it is then imperative that in an examination of the native informant character in *Pocho* – an example of Chicano literature – there is an assumption from the outset that fiction and history are not understood as mutually exclusive. While the extent of its fictionalization may be impossible to gauge, the native informant character in *Pocho* – regardless of its fictional (in)accuracies – is still a product of history. The native informant character in *Pocho* occupies a dialectical site within the narrative in which its form as a fictional carrier of cultural knowledge necessarily references a historical reality – an index for both the writing and the reading of the text – outside of the narrative; a referential act without which the native informant character, its cultural knowledge, or the narrative itself could not even tentatively have the proper name “Chicano” affiliated with it. A focused tracking of the display, transmission, and acquisition of cultural knowledge associated with the native informant character in *Pocho*’s narrative uncovers curious scenes wherein that cultural knowledge is brought into critical relief by the relative narrative silence that accompanies unelaborated experience at the margins of the native informant’s narrative itinerary.

For example, in chapter 2 of *Pocho* we witness on display not only Richard’s cultural and linguistic leadership as a spokesperson for migrant workers; but we also see that the cultural authority exhibited by Richard in this instance is conditioned on the silence of the migrant workers whom Richard represents as he speaks on their behalf to figures of authority. We are told that “The year was 1931, and the people of the Santa Clara Valley were hungry” (Villarreal 1989, 47). Villarreal tells us that the pangs of hunger that inflicted all residents of the Santa Clara Valley at this time silenced the racially motivated jeers usually directed at Mexican children at Richard’s school.

The hated, oft-repeated cries of his schoolmates – “Frijoley bomber!” “Tortilla strangler!” – now disappeared, as did the accompanying laughter, and he sometimes shared his lunch with them. He did this with a sense of triumph, because he felt he had defeated them by enduring their contempt and derision openly. For almost a year, he had purposely eaten where he could be easily observed, refusing

to be driven into hiding because they laughed about the food he ate. He did not suspect the real reason for his victory. (Villarreal 1989, 47)

The burden of the Great Depression had minimized the overt racism of Richard's peers in the Santa Clara Valley during this difficult time.

The valley's needy residents, or "the people" (Villarreal 1989, 48), began organizing so as to devise plans to petition aid from city and county government. Richard keenly observed as professional organizers routinely led meetings, spoke on behalf of the people in official capacities, and literally stood in the background as the people regularly marauded food and produce trucks that traveled through Santa Clara on the 101 highway. One Saturday morning Richard accompanied his father to the pear groves at the north end of the valley where Juan had worked every season since he brought his family to the valley in the 1920s. When Richard and Juan arrived they encountered two hundred men waiting for individual ranchers to draft the most able-bodied and seasoned workers. Richard was a close acquaintance of the eighteen-year-old daughter of the orchard owner, Mr. Jamison. On occasion, and as Juan worked in the groves, the owner's daughter took Richard to her library "where he lost himself in the books her father had bought for the son he never had" (Villarreal 1989, 52). On this particular Saturday, however, not even the owner's "old help," the most loyal and trusted of the available workforce, went to work in the groves as expected. Instead, they collectively demanded a raise in pay from fifteen to twenty-five cents. Upon hearing the urgent exchange between her father and the workers, the owner's daughter excused herself from Richard's company and came to the defense of her father. Speaking in front of the workers she reasoned with them that her father had fought with the Growers Association to get the pay to fifteen cents in the first place; and that most other orchard owners in the valley chose to keep their pay at twelve cents. Still, an anonymous voice from the rear of the crowd of workers continued to demand a pay raise beyond fifteen cents.

"Just who are you?" she asked the man who had spoken. "Step out so I can see you!" When the man did not come forward, she said, "All right! So this is a strike! *We* were warned that this might happen this year, but Dad wouldn't believe his friends would let him down. He's always been so good to you, and even now is doing the best he can. Do you think you're the only ones having a hard time?" She paused, then tried to reason with *them*; she appealed to their sense of fairness. "If that crop isn't picked, we'll be running the ranch for Giannini next year. If we pay you what you ask, we lose not only money but the ranch as well – but you don't care anything about that, do you? You forgot the things he's done for you." She was angry once more at their silence. (Villarreal 1989, 53-54, my emphasis)

The *we* and *them* in this passage are particularly telling in that they imply a clear class division between the owners and the workers from the perspective of the owner's daughter. Richard, however, found himself caught between the respective constituents represented by *we* and *them*. On

the one hand, he sympathized with what the owner's daughter was saying. He did not really understand what was happening, but was in immediate sympathy with her.

On the other hand, Richard belonged to *them*. That is, the financial interests of Richard and his family were at stake in the workers' demands for higher pay. Still, and unable to get the workers to see her side of the matter, the owner's daughter demanded that the workers leave the property. Not only did she call the sheriff, but she also threatened to shoot anyone who decided not to heed her demand to leave her father's property. Curiously, she did not include Richard among those who needed to vacate the property. He remained by her side as she awaited the sheriff's arrival. The workers did leave, but they stubbornly remained stationed along the dirt road located just beyond the perimeter of the owner's property. At one point during this wait she sent Richard to tell the workers they were welcome to water if they were thirsty. Richard had now become a messenger who could safely cross hostile class, ethnic, and linguistic lines.

Shortly after the sheriff's arrival the workers proceeded to maraud the contents of a fruit truck leaving the owner's property. Collectively, the workers believed that the contents of the truck were politically tainted as it represented the labor of strikebreakers who chose not to resist Jamison's fifteen cents wage. Still on the scene, the sheriff and his deputies attempted to control the situation by attacking the workers with nightsticks. During the melee Victor Morales, a recent acquaintance of Richard's, in self-defense struck a deputy with a rock and killed him. Richard was the only one to have actually seen Victor strike the deputy. The deputies proceeded to question everyone on the scene, including Victor and Richard. Victor denied any involvement in the killing of the deputy. The last person to be questioned by the police turned-out to be Richard Rubio.

Richard was brought forward. "Look sonny," said the sheriff, "did you see who hit that man? Come on, speak up!" The boy was frightened, and had difficulty phrasing his answer in English. He could not speak. "You must seen it," continued the sheriff, "or else you wouldn't be so scared!" (Villarreal 1989, 59)

At this juncture of the interrogation Richard found himself in a bind due to the silence he exhibited. Richard did not want to tell the sheriff what he actually knew about his friend while at the same time needing to make the sheriff believe that his silence was not an affect of fear. For the silence implied to the sheriff that Richard was fearful of disclosing that he in fact did witness Victor kill the deputy. Instead, Richard reasoned with the sheriff in accented English that his apprehension to speak resulted from an apprehension to speak the appropriate language.

"I don't talk English too good," answered Richard. "I almost answered you in Spanish." (Villarreal 1989, 59)

In effect, and prior to speaking to the sheriff, Richard rationalizes an alibi for his silence. He realizes that the police believe the predominantly Mexican workers at the Jamison orchard to be

illiterate and unable to speak English. So, Richard's apprehension to speak because of a presumed inability to speak English all that well made sense to the police. Of course, Richard spoke English just fine; in fact, he spoke it much better than all of the workers at the Jamison orchard. But by Richard's reasoning – that silence stemmed from linguistic challenges – such an apprehension on the part of Richard was, by logical extension, an apprehension inflicting all of the Mexican workers at the Jamison orchard. In the eyes of the police, the workers remained silent not because they were intentionally withholding something from the police, but rather because they lacked the proper linguistic aptitude to speak the language of the police. Richard used the police's logic of Mexican inaptitude to re-cast the collective silence of the workers as linguistic incompetence. To be sure, Richard was asked by the police to elaborate upon what he saw Victor do to the deputy. Yet, it was precisely the meaning of the unelaborated experience signaled by his silence (along with that of the workers) that hung in the balance during his interrogation by the police. While the police initially presumed that Richard's silence meant he resisted (along with the others) elaborating upon what he in fact did witness, Richard resignified for the police what his silence actually meant.

It is only fitting, then, that in a critical consideration of the paradoxical situation of the native informant – of the oscillation between its adjoining presences and absences in Chicano literature – that we look to a text that since the 1970s has incited so much discussion about the origin of Chicano literature. Germane to this critical discourse on *Pocho* has been a preoccupation with acknowledging (usually as an item of introduction or disclaimer) the tenuous origin of Chicano literature itself.

Since the early 1970s, it became a matter of literary routine to consider *Pocho* the first Chicano/a novel. While textual rediscovery of earlier texts and the reinterpretation of other texts written and/or published earlier than *Pocho* have shaken the tenability of that assertion, many still claim that *Pocho* is the first contemporary Chicano/a novel. This in itself is interesting, since the way *Pocho* has been read [usually as the inaugural text of Chicano literature] almost contradicts the poetics of reading that the novel contains [. . .]” (Martín-Rodríguez 2003, 43)

While *Pocho* is certainly a landmark text due to the historical timing of its publication just prior to the onset of the Chicano Movement in the 1960s, its contemporary stature as, more precisely, the first Chicano novel is due in large part to a certain post-World War II transition from the oral tradition of the *corrido* to the written form of the novel as a vehicle of cultural resistance for the Mexican American community. *Pocho* emerged at a time of great change within the Mexican American community, a postwar era when accelerated Americanization by the community meant, among many other things, greater access to major English language publication venues (Saldívar 1990, 48). Villarreal's *Pocho* by most accounts stands alone as pioneering the arrival of the post-*corrido*, pre-*movimiento*, and thus contemporary, Chicano literary voice upon the scene (albeit along the fringes) of American literature.

It is, therefore, more than coincidental that given the aforementioned transition underway within the Mexican American community at the time of *Pocho's* publication – the transition from oral narratives to written ones – that the first notable example of contemporary Chicano literature preoccupies itself in many respects with this nascent form of written discourse. Again, we have this represented for us by Richard Rubio, the novel's principle native informant character, for whom writing emerges throughout the novel as something different, something new, but altogether something that has a very personal allegorical quality to it in that writing becomes symbolic of the very openness of his future. Writing will permit him to distinguish himself out of, and perhaps in spite of, the anonymity of the oral tradition of his Mexican parents. It will allow him to productively play with language in a way heretofore unexplored in the culturally-bound oral tradition of his parents; to participate in the uninhibited textualization of his own life experiences (in a way akin to what is denoted by the poststructuralist notion of *écriture*). So, for Richard, writing promises a future filled with a perpetual play of signs and meaning that, in his estimation (and as confirmation of his solipsistic disposition illustrated above) he alone can have a stake in directing. For Richard, writing is freedom. So it is precisely through Richard's character that *Pocho's* narrative exhibits a consciousness of the very discursive form that brings it into its written existence in 1959. In other words, *Pocho* as a novel cannot exist, cannot have been written, if not for not only the discursive transition underway at the time of its writing, but also if not for the courage of an individual Mexican American writer like Villarreal – partially represented by Richard Rubio in the novel – to appropriate a discursive means of expression that was pre-emergent at the time.

The historical tension embodied by Richard Rubio's character between oral and written discourse is very much represented in the novel as a cultural predicament. That is, for Richard the oral tradition becomes representative of the unfamiliar customs of Mexico that he could only imagine in his mind; whereas the oral tradition proved itself a much more tangible vehicle and visceral experience of cultural reconnection for Juan Rubio who immigrated from Mexico to the U.S. – and since longed to return – following the Mexican Revolution. As a young boy, for example, Richard accompanied Juan on his short trips around the Santa Clara Valley visiting migrant workers from Mexico upon their summer arrival to the area to work. While such reunions proved particularly significant for Juan as a way to vicariously reconnect with Mexico via these seasonal acquaintances, for Richard the stories that he heard told were entirely fictional in that, unlike Juan, he possessed no stable referent for what they disclosed.

With his father, Richard sat around campfires or in strange kitchens, with wood stoves burning strongly and the ever-present odor of a pot of pink beans boiling, freshly cooked tortillas filling the close, warm room, and listened to the tales of that strange place [Mexico] which seemed to him a land so distant, and the stories also seemed of long, long ago. It was then, listening and weaving a parallel fantasy in his mind, that he felt an enjoyment so great that he knew he could not possibly savor it all. He listened to the men [Mexican migrant workers] speak until he grew drowsy, and he climbed onto

his father's lap, and Juan Rubio held him easily against his body, close to his chest, and the boy associated the smell of the man with his happiness. (Villareal 1989, 43)

Here, within this isolated illustration of the importance of oral discourse for recent Mexican immigrants of the novel, we also see that the unnamed men that presumably tell the stories that Richard listens to serve, in their own right, as Mexican native informants of the oral tradition for both Richard and Juan.

But while they do indeed listen to the same men tell their stories, the significance of the stories – the value of their narrative transaction – is registered in entirely different ways by Juan and Richard, respectively. Whereas for Juan the stories elicit a “constative” effect in that for him the stories report on an empirical state of affairs in Mexico, for Richard the stories elicit a “performative” one in that they produce something in his imagination that only begins to exist at the moment that the utterances are issued (Iser 1986, 362). But it is precisely on account of their “preformative” effect that the oral stories that Richard hears are so important to his development as a future writer. It is not so much the content of the stories that serve to introduce Richard to the realm of fiction as much as it is the stories' effect. For he must rely solely on his imagination in order for the stories to achieve a meaningful narrative in his mind. Juan Rubio, on the other hand, is able to figure and recall an empirical landscape in his mind as the narratives told by the Mexican migrants unfold for him. For Juan, there is a real history, a real state of affairs, that the stories of the Mexican migrant native informants are reporting on. But for Richard, who was never a living subject of that history out of which the stories emerged, there is only the present utterance of the stories. There is no firm historical referent for Richard to refer to in the way that there is for Juan.

Despite the fact that Richard functions as the novel's protagonist, the oral stories he hears are implicit confirmation of his absence from the tumultuous history of the Mexican Revolution (known only too well by Juan) that preoccupies the first thirty plus pages of *Pocho* from which Richard is an absent subject. The first thirty pages of *Pocho* might be considered a representation of the very “absent cause” of Richard's formation as a writer precisely because he has no referent – a condition of the absent cause of history – for the history referenced in the oral stories. Since he was absent from the history in the first place, it is impossible for it to serve as referent for the stories in the way that it does for Juan Rubio. In *The Political Unconscious* Jameson discusses the notion of the “absent cause” thusly: “What Althusser's own insistence on history as an absent cause makes clear, but what is missing from the formula as it is canonically worded, is that he does not at all draw the fashionable conclusion that because history is a text, the “referent” does not exist” (1981, 35). To be sure, the referent of history most certainly exists for Juan in the oral stories of the Mexican migrants. Jameson continues: “We would therefore propose the following revised formulation: that history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious” (1981, 35).

Certainly, writing permits Richard to write about the experiences he is present to experience – personal or otherwise – within the historical epoch he inhabits. And certainly, the narratives told in the oral form by the Mexican migrants indicate a history, but a history from which he was absent. So, it is precisely the necessary fictionalization that must take place in his mind because of his absent presence in that past history that – and through the non-referential content of these stories – he is introduced to fiction writing.

As the embattled and embodied site of the historical confrontation of oral and written discourse, of Mexican culture and American culture, of reality and fiction, Richard Rubio as an inaugural literary figure for contemporary Chicano literature constitutes what the late Angel Rama referred to as the self-educated *letrado* (1986, 118-120); one who lacked contact with institutions of formal education, yet managed to develop a “less disciplined and systematic, but also more liberated, intellectual vision” (1986, 119). In response to his mother Consuelo’s assumption (during one of their pivotal exchanges in the novel) that he would be a doctor or a lawyer if he were to attend college upon the family’s hopeful return to Mexico, Richard states that he does not “intend to be a doctor or a lawyer or anything like that” (Villarreal 1989, 63). As we learn throughout the novel, Richard intends to be a writer. But the habit of reading that informed his future writing was initially undisciplined and unsystematic.

The world of Richard Rubio was becoming too much for him. [. . .] For the most part, he lost himself in dreams or spent hours reading everything he could find, indiscriminate in his choice through his persevering desire to learn. Now, after work, he was a familiar figure in the town library, and later, when the vacation ended, he continued the practice, for by then the meager library at school provided little for him. [. . .] His teachers encouraged his reading, but unfortunately did not direct it, and he became increasingly complex in his moods. (Villarreal 1989, 102-103)

He used such an approach to learning to liberate himself from what he deemed to be the constraints of cultural tradition; a cultural tradition that was not accustomed to reading to the degree that Richard read unless it resulted in undertaking an occupation that produced more income than either a field hand or a writer.

“But all this reading, my son,” [Consuelo] asked. “All this studying – surely it is for something. If you could go to the university, it would be to learn how you could make more money than you would make in the fields or the cannery.” (Villarreal 1989, 63)

He envisioned for himself a life without subscription to, or conscription by, the traditional Mexican culture of his parents. His intellectual vision consisted of simply wanting to *be* and to draw from his experiences so as to actualize his future as the informed writer he envisioned himself becoming. “I’m gonna write books when I grow up,” Richard says. (Villarreal 1989, 74). And he

learns with experience and time that in order to do so he must ask and pursue questions. He learns that he must ask the kinds of questions that regularly upset or silence his mother.

He had been asking her questions again, and she was a little angry. She always became quiet when he asked her things. (Villarreal 1989, 60)

Since an early age Richard inquired about small and large matters in an attempt to try and make the world around him more transparent.

Every bug he saw was green, and he idly wondered why. Such things worried him, always. The sky was his biggest problem these days. In the beginning there was darkness – nothing, he was told, and accepted, before God made the world. [. . .]

But if there was nothing in the beginning, what was there? Just a bunch of empty sky? But if it was even just empty sky, it was *something!* And the darkness! Was not the darkness *something!* (Villarreal 1989, 33, original emphasis)

But whereas early-on in the novel we see Richard, who is then still firmly within the sway of the Roman Catholic faith, expecting answers, or signs, to his questions to come to him unsolicited from the silent nothingness of being, later in the novel he learns that not only could he manipulate reality; but that in order to do so, sometimes he needed to refrain from speaking altogether in order to be heard – to not answer so as to answer the call. Richard, in effect, learned the art of dissimulation by silence.

By chapter 9 of *Pocho* Richard has become a teenager who is beginning to assert his role as the sole male figure within the Rubio household as his once unified family is on the brink of disintegration. Consuelo exhibits her impending feminist liberation by refusing the housekeeping duties that not too long before were almost exclusively hers alone. Juan has become disinterested in all family matters and has fallen into a slight depression. Thus, Richard arguably becomes the lone caretaker and disciplinarian of his siblings. But Richard becomes dissatisfied with this new role. He feels conscripted by cultural duty. Instead, Richard desires to find his true calling, which he believes lies beyond the cultural confines of his home life.

During this time Richard begins to reflect on his individual identity. Everywhere he encounters Mexican migrant families that he cannot help but think are similar to his own. But he is curious to find out if, in fact, his suspicions are accurate. He begins to detect a difference among the “Mexican” migrants observed: some were distinctly of “old-country ways” (Villarreal 1989, 149) not unlike that of his parents; but a more contemporary segment of the migrants, Richard finds, deliberately seek to distinguish themselves from this Mexican tradition. Richard becomes intrigued by the ways and means of this latter group, the *pachucos*.

The newcomers became the object of his explorations. He was avidly hungry to learn the ways of these people. It was not easy for him to approach them at first, because his clothes labeled him as an outsider, and, too, he had trouble understanding their speech. He must not ask questions, for fear of offending them; his deductions as to their character and makeup must come from close association. He was careful not to be patronizing or in any way act superior. And, most important, they must never suspect what he was doing. The most difficult moments for him were when he was doing the talking, for he was conscious that his Spanish was better than theirs. He learned enough of their vernacular to get along; he did not learn more, because he was always in a hurry about knowledge. (Villarreal 1989, 151)

From a safe distance at first Richard undertakes a certain silent ethnographic assessment of the cultural disposition of the *pachucos*. His avid hunger to learn their ways leads him to take stock of their dress, speech, and overall observances of respect. But in doing so he perhaps becomes more conscious of his own cultural make-up. He calculates his difference from the *pachucos* so as to anticipate the most effective ways to eventually fit-in with them; and thus to identify with them. He is in a hurry to obtain knowledge about how the *pachucos* manage to distinguish themselves from both Mexican and Americanized ways of life and create a cultural niche all their own.

After a while however, and a bit later in chapter 9, the uniqueness of the *pachucos*' resistance to both Mexican and American culture begins to lose its appeal for Richard. He begins to sense that in his haste to learn the ways of the *pachucos* he has, to a certain uncomfortable extent for him, begun to compromise his most valued quality: his individuality. "Now the time came to withdraw a little," we are told (Villarreal 1989, 152). At once, Richard is compelled to preserve his individuality while not completely sacrificing the comradeship of the *pachucos* that he now enjoyed. Richard began to sense what amounts to the metonymic aspect of all naming in what he observed as the "incongruous nicknames" (Villarreal 1989, 154) of the *pachucos*.

In this group, there was Tuerto, who was not blind; Cacarizo, who was not pockmarked; Zurdo, who was not left-handed; and a drab little fellow who was called Slick. (Villarreal 1989, 154)

In other words, Richard sensed a certain betrayal of individuality by precisely the function of classification that naming entails.

I can be a part of everything, he thought, because I am the only one capable of controlling my destiny. . . . No – no, never – will I allow myself to become a part of a group – to become classified, to lose my individuality. (Villarreal 1989, 152)

Richard implies that classification limits one's individuality. Thus, if naming is a means of classification and Richard wishes not to be classified, then in the end Richard desires to be nameless; since naming for him always proves incomplete. Richard distrusts metaphysics, and prefers the silent

benefits of remaining nameless. It is through this silence that Richard believes he can preserve his own individuality.

But like the good future writer that he wanted to become, Richard believes that he should experience life. We are told in chapter 6 “Richard recalled reading somewhere that a writer should try to live a full life in order to write about it” (Villarreal 1989, 114). So, before he parted ways with the *pachucos* Richard wanted to absorb as much experience as possible. Following an event one evening at a local dancehall, Richard rode along with the *pachucos* to a nearby orchard where the *pachucos* planned to fight with a rival gang from Ontario, California. The rival gang had recently beat-up the brother of Rooster, the *pachucos*’ leader. To be sure, Richard was petrified by the idea of his participation in a gang fight. Despite his fear of the impending fight, “He remained *silent*, afraid that they might discover the growing terror inside him” (Villarreal 1989, 154, my emphasis). Richard’s fear of the fight itself was trumped only by his fear of letting on to the *pachucos* that he was, in fact, fearful of the impending fight. But Richard also wanted to not compromise the opportunity to actually experience a gang fight.

In spite of his fear, his mind was alert. He strained every sense, in order not to miss any part of this experience. He wanted to retain everything that was about to happen. (Villarreal 1989, 155)

The *pachucos*, along with Richard, were detained by authorities shortly after the fight in the orchards. Two night watchmen had no idea that the *pachucos* and Richard had just recently been involved in a gang fight. Still, the watchmen’s suspicions of inevitable illegal activity compelled them to detain the *pachucos* and Richard.

The men really had nothing to hold them on, because they had not done anything yet, but Richard knew they did not need a reason. (Villarreal 1989, 157)

In effect, in knowing that the watchmen did not need a reason to detain the *pachucos* Richard was conscious of their subaltern standing in society. As Gyan Prakash maintains, the subaltern signifies “a pure externality beyond the realm of reason” (2001, 287). Richard later proves that he is keen to the subalternity of the *pachucos* when he manipulates the police’s expectation for subaltern silence.

Upon the *pachucos*’ arrival to the police station, Richard wishes to know where he can file a complaint on the grounds of police brutality. His inquiry is interpreted by a police officer as “resisting arrest” (Villarreal 1989, 158). In other words, Richard’s inquiry reveals that the police’s assumption that a subaltern *pachuco* like Richard is incapable of voicing a reasonable request. As a presumed subaltern (by the police) Richard is always already an unreasonable social element who cannot voice reasonable requests – like wanting to file a complaint about police brutality – because all acts by such a subaltern subject are always already presumed to be tainted by unreasonable

motives. Observing all of this Richard concluded that he must exploit the very thing that the police expect of subaltern subjects like Richard and the *pachucos*: silence.

The *pachucos* remained silent as the police detectives proceeded with the interrogation. The police, in fact, assumed that the *pachucos* had something to do with the recent abduction and rape of two local white girls. The *pachucos* had no knowledge of the abductions and rapes, but they did understand that the police were attempting to pin the crimes on them by forcibly compelling them to say anything about the crimes. Whereas the detectives did not expect the *pachucos* to speak on their own without being solicited to do so, now that questions were being asked of them that were race-related Richard sensed that something needed urgently to be said on behalf of the *pachucos* to preclude further police brutality. In other words, Richard sensed that their collective silence had now become incriminating.

He knew then that the detectives would not waste time with the others, because while they had been silent, he had at least answered some of the questions. But he did not really know what to expect.

“Sit down, kid.” The detective’s approach was different this time. “Tell me all about it.” Richard almost laughed, because now he was being conned; and he suddenly realized that this was the last of it and the detective would not hold them, because he had nothing to keep them on.

“There isn’t anything to tell,” he said, and the office made a little joke about how Richard was the only one who would speak up, and how that showed he was not afraid, like the others – though he knew all along it was just the opposite. And Richard knew that he knew this, but now he was over his fear and talked to him calmly [. . .].

[. . .] You tell me what you were doing, and I’ll see that you get a break.”

“Nothing, I told you.”

“All right, then, don’t tell me about tonight. But how about on other nights?

What have you guys been up to? A little stealing, maybe? Where do you get your marihuana? You been maybe jumping a nice little gringa out in Willow Glen? [. . .]”

“So you’re going to be a college boy?”

“I guess so.” [. . .]

“Drop in and see me sometime. We can use someone like you when you get older. There are a lot of your people around now, and someone like you would be good to have on the side of law and order.”

(Villarreal 1989, 159-162)

Richard was, in effect, singled-out from the rest of the *pachucos* because of his recognized ability to ask questions and reason with the police. His demonstrated articulateness was recognized by the detective as an opportunity to exploit the silence of the *pachucos* by having Richard speak on their behalf, to have Richard conspire with the police against the *pachucos*, and to essentially have Richard become a native informant of the police at the silence expense of the *pachucos*.

Let us close by examining perhaps *Pocho*’s clearest illustration of Richard Rubio’s reluctant arrival as a Chicano native informant. In the following we see what amounts to Richard wanting to vacate the identity that at one time he sought and assumed.

Then, one day, [Richard] thought, What the hell am I doing? And he began once again to spend time in the library, and enrolled in a course in Creative Writing at night school.

He did not learn a thing about writing, but was thrown into contact with people with whom he could talk. His new friends were older and thought him a very interesting subject, and he was happy listening to them, because they were educated and liberals and introduced him to new adventures in reading. But then he began to understand them and did not agree with some of their ideas, because they constituted a threat to his individuality, and his individuality was already in jeopardy. And it bothered him that they should always try to find things in his life that could make him a martyr of some sort, and it pained him when they insisted he dedicate his life to the Mexican cause, because it was the same old story, and he was quite sure he did not really believe there was a Mexican cause – at least not in the world with which he was familiar. They thought him very interesting some more, and showed him off, but they made the mistake of thinking him a child, and in the end it turned out badly, because one of them, a Marxist, became very middle-class when he found Richard in bed with his extremely pretty wife. They dropped him [. . .]. (Villarreal 1989, 175-176)

Richard chooses to remain silent on that which his contemporaries inaccurately assume he must want to talk about as much as they expect him to talk about it. That is, he does not want to talk about the so-called “Mexican cause” that his contemporaries want him to talk about. Inevitably, and not solely because he failed to espouse the “Mexican cause,” his fellow writers silence him – and presumably move-on to recruit someone who will conform to their demands for an authentic Mexican voice – for not meeting their expectations. Richard senses a fundamental contradiction between what he wants to write and the writing expected of him by his contemporaries. The contradiction is not as simple as merely his loss of individuality by assuming the “Mexican cause.” Rather, the crux of the contradiction lies in the fact that what he would be expected to write by assuming the “Mexican cause” would mean that he would be writing something that would have already been anticipated, would have already been expected; what, in essence, would have already been read previously elsewhere and only merely confirmed – rather than created anew – in Richard’s writing. His writing would be judged not on its nuance or creativity, but rather on the repetition of a message that would ultimately be expected to confirm (and in a way conform to) the “Mexican cause” envisioned by his non-Mexican contemporaries. The very play, the very textuality, of his writing would be short-circuited by the conformity he was expected to exhibit. Richard anticipates that the kind of writing he would be expected to perform would manage to silence him more that it would facilitate his creative expression. Ultimately, and ironically, by dropping him his contemporaries do him more favor than harm. By doing so they have, in effect, preserved his individuality for him – something he has been trying to do all by himself throughout the novel. The harmful silencing that they intend by their dismissal – by dropping him – serves only to free Richard from the constraints of expectation that the “Mexican cause” and the “Mexican” label would impose on his writing.

Given these pivotal illustrations in *Pocho* of the formation of the native informant as writer, one could rightly still wonder what exactly it is that makes *Pocho* the story of the maturation of a “Chicano” *letrado*, a “Chicano” native informant? How is it that we can claim *Pocho* as the story of the maturation of a “Chicano” native informant if nowhere in the novel there is an explicit statement confirming that Richard is “Chicano?” What might the novel’s silence on this very significant matter mean? To be sure, Richard is constantly exhibiting in the novel an awareness of his bi-cultural existence. Even though he does not appropriate a name for it, he senses the condition. “[Richard] was” Villarreal narrates, “a product of two cultures” (1989, 129). Richard, then, does know that he is, at once, a Mexican and an American. But such an interstitial existence between categories, between “Mexican” and “American,” would more than likely have struck Richard during the historical time of his development as a native informant as an existence free of labels altogether: neither Mexican nor American. And being free of labels, of categories, is precisely what constituted “individuality” for Richard. While “Chicano” is, in fact, rarely mentioned explicitly in the novel, when it is mentioned it is meant to describe a condition of poverty rather than refer to a cultural identity. At this time in history there is no name, no category, to identify Richard’s bi-cultural existence. It is precisely because “Chicano” remains an as-yet articulated, pre-emergent identity of the historical time period inhabited by Richard’s character that he constitutes, in effect, an as-yet named “Chicano.” Perhaps if there had been a label to assign to his bi-cultural existence, Richard would have resisted it just as well. We can only imagine that Richard eventually became recognized as distinctly “Chicano” regardless of whether or not he identified with the term and what it came to signify during and after the Chicano Movement. Thus, the irony of the “Mexican cause” illustration discussed above is that despite Richard’s reluctance to become a spokesperson, a “martyr of some sort,” the descriptive insights the reader is given of Richard’s sensibilities on the matter defy his reluctance and by default make him into the novel’s principle “Chicano” native informant character. His appearance or representation to us as such – as a character of the novel who functions as a conduit of cultural knowledge in spite of himself – necessarily cancels his represented reluctance to assume such responsibility. Despite his reluctance, Richard Rubio’s story in *Pocho* is destined to become that of the formation of the “Chicano” native informant precisely because it is a story of the pre-Chicano Chicano experience.

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