# New Chicano Literature
# Carlos von Son

Bruce Novoa*

Drawings by Rossana Bohórquez

United States literature is the product of immigrants. Even Native Americans came to the Americas at one time or another. And immigrant groups are thought to conform to a tidal-wave theory of acculturation, with each arriving over a period of time until reaching a high point of numbers, then decreasing as the impetus dies back. Similarly, immigrant cultural production supposedly follows a generational pattern of gradual adaptation to U.S. language and customs. In the process, they produce distinctively ethnic literature, music, drama, etc.; it starts with nostalgia for the old homeland and over time refocuses on the experience of becoming American until it eventually melds with the mainstream as the group's identity changes from immigrant to native born of second, third, fourth generation, etc. Allowing for minor variations, this pattern fits most U.S. immigrant groups.

Mexico, however, is a major exception. Less a tidal wave, Mexican immigration flows con-

* Professor of Mexican and U.S. Latino literature; novelist, poet, short story writer and translator.

tinuously like a steady stream, sometimes swelling flood-like, at others, shallow like an arroyo in midsummer. So no one should be surprised that the surge in immigration in the 1970s and 1980s produced writers who do not fit into the pattern of their more assimilated Chicano colleagues. Carlos von Son is a prime example.

Arriving in the U.S. in the mid-1980s, von Son received his university degree and a doctorate in Latin American literature, and now teaches at California State University San Marcos. So he brings to his writing a thorough grasp of written Spanish, as well as formal training in Mexican literature, elements often lacking in U.S.-educated Chicanos whose Spanish tends toward the oral and familial, and their exposure to Mexican literature is hardly more than what the general U.S. population is exposed to. As a result, von Son texts —written almost exclusively in Spanish— sound Mexican. Readers may assume that Chicano texts often give the appearance of Mexicanness in their use of language, characters and themes identifiable as Mexican. True, but in ways that betray their location within U.S. English dominance. For instance, in von Son we find little use of compound verbs common to Chicano speech where native Spanish speakers would use simply tenses. For example, "estoy escribiendo" versus "escribo"; or "estaba trabajando" versus "trabajaba." Also, the correct usage of "pero" and "sino" or the subjunctive that non-native speakers find so troublesome. Although in his stories he hardly ever identifies the location, when he does they tend to be Mexican; when none is given, readers assume the action takes place in Mexico, perhaps as a residual effect of

the language itself. His themes feature few of the concerns that typify more blatantly Chicano writing, such as social injustice, conflicts with Anglicized Americans, problems of ethnic identity, exploration of ethnic roots. He prefers to explore interpersonal relationships that could occur anywhere and between people in any contemporary Western country were it not for the language that roots them firmly in Mexican culture, so much so that the Argentine publishers of his story collection, *Qué de qué y otros cuentos* (What Do You Mean What? and Other Stories),[1] felt obliged to provide notes to explain Mexican terms to their readers. And when he does explore a rural setting, such as in "Mascarada," it is definitely a Mexican one in its play of social relationships, the plot's historical underpinnings, the rural speech patterns and the sense of humor; even the conflict between Christian and Indian religious practices develops in terms familiar to Mexicans, but unfamiliar to U.S. readers, even Hispanic or Native American ones. His play *Doña Criba*, which debuted in 2001, not only takes place in Mexico, but the social forces and structures that determine the action at all levels are thoroughly Mexican. Not once is there an appeal to any U.S. traditions —legal, moral, political— in moments of personal or public crisis. The pivotal metaphor of social organization, the telephone operator who manually connects individual lines, no longer speaks to U.S. residents who are more likely to have the problem of not being able to find a human voice when they need help with their calls. The change from the manual to a mechanized phone service marks the culmination in a series of disintegrating events through which the author conveys the crisis of modernization in rural Mexico; Mexican Americans, however, can relate to it only at a distance, like they would to films from the 1950s in which similar situations were used to typify U.S. modernization.

Von Son's writing is more that of adult immigrants than of Mexican Americans born and raised in the United States. His voyages into memory take him back to his homeland; his language embodies that same voyage in every nuance of usage. So when he does write about immigration we can expect a different take on the subject, and he does not disappoint us. His story "Matorrales" (Brambles) is a dialogue between two Mexican immigrants, one recent and the other with enough time in the country to act as a guide to the first. The guide's language has become Anglicized, making it unintelligible to the recent arrival. This scene is familiar in Chicano literature, but what is significantly different is that when the guide identifies the cultural gatekeeper who can determine the fate of the new arrival, that man is a Chicano. In other words, the recently immigrated author, like recent immigrants themselves, perceive Chicanos to be part of the Anglo-American power structure, the newest manifestation of what in the past were called Pochos or Mexican Americans. This critique of the Chicano presumption of Mexicanness is extremely significant. Von Son, like Gómez Peña in theater and Ilián Staváns in essay, speak as the new voice of recent arrivals going through a different process of acculturation, a process in which they see Chicanos as a specific generation that represents one type of mestization, but not the only or definitive one. Von Son's works demonstrate that there is no authoritative pattern to the blend of Mexican and U.S. culture, nor one benchmark generation; each wave of immigrants will produce different results and their cultural products will continue to evolve and change.

Von Son's translation and adaptation of his story "Tombs" represents his writing well. The tone, intimate, lyrical; the theme of immigration kept within personal experience. While nostalgia for the homeland may permeate every sentence, when dealing with

the Day of Dead —a cultural practice that Chicano art and literature have turned into a cliché— he refuses to indulge in its picturesque exoticism or commerce in its value as popular kitsch. He manages to weave it into the plot as a ritual of personal recuperation of the lost loved one and by extension the abandoned homeland. And never does his use of it, or other elements of Mexican culture, seem forced, as if he were searching for proof of his identity. His work bespeaks Mexicanness as still vital, inherent, present. It will be interesting to watch his work develop to see if at some point we will detect the subtle shift of perspective that accompanies assimilation. Yet, if his writing to this point is a reliable indication, those works will be well crafted, insightful, convincing and thoroughly satisfying experiences. Von Son would be a talented writer anywhere. The coincidence of his residence in the U.S. adds another level of significance: his work participates in the redefining of our idea of Mexican literature written in the United States, a literature I still prefer to call Chicano. VM

## Note

[1] Carlos von Son, *Qué de qué y otros cuentos* (Salta: Editorial Biblioteca de Textos Universitarios, 2001).