

**The Detroit Poets:
Cultural Pride and Social Condition**

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Abstract:

In this working paper Dr. Ruiz analyzes previously published selections of poetry written by Chicano and Puerto Rican poets from Detroit in the 1980's. The two major themes expressed and analyzed in this selection reflect two central concerns of the Latino community of this city. The first theme is that of retaining pride in their cultural heritage in spite of the pressures exerted by the dominant, hegemonic culture and society. The second theme deals with the social conditions and problems endured by Detroit's predominantly working class Latinos in their struggle for existence. The author is grateful to the poets and Casa de Unida for their kind permission to reproduce the poems included herein.

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Dr. Ruiz is an associate professor of Spanish Literature in the Department of Foreign Languages at Wayne State University. A native of New Mexico, Dr. Ruiz has degrees from Kent State University, the University of Michigan and his Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico. He has recently published his first novel, *Encuentro con Estanislao Eckermann*.

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The Detroit Poets: Cultural Pride and Social Condition

People of different regions are, at times, as different as the regions themselves. Although there may be many factors that bring this group of people together, there are differences that separate them. If the diversity in topography has shaped and molded the psyche of the *nuevomexicano*, and if the urban setting with its implacable noise and relentless social pressures have contributed to the Chicano and Latino psyche in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Antonio, and New York, the same set of assumptions could very well be applied to the Latinos in Detroit. The purpose of this article is not to prove that the Detroit poetry is different, and of better quality, but merely to bring to light and offer some observations regarding the nature of the creative spirit of the Chicano poets in Detroit. This short article will attempt to present the dynamic spirit of the people, the different hues of the Latino, the dissonant voices and tones, and the poetic expression of the Detroit *barrio*. It will also include pieces of poetry that exemplify this new Latino spirit. This paper is based on the poetry presented in Volume I and II of *La Onda Latina en Poesia-Detroit*, published in 1985 and 1987 respectively.¹ I have limited my comments to these two books for two primary reasons: 1) these books have been compiled as the result of a concerted effort to bring to light the rich literary tradition of the *barrio Latino* in Detroit; 2) these volumes contain a representative sampling of the poetry which is most convenient for a study of this type.

It is within this framework that I would like to pursue my analysis. Given the unique historical situation of the *barrio Latino* in Detroit, it is only reasonable to present a brief historical view of the Latino influence in Detroit.

In 1980 poets were not born in a vacuum and neither did they spring up overnight. The Latino influence in Detroit goes back many years and its contribution to the *barrio* has given spirit, strength, perseverance, and sustenance to the people. Historically, it has been the less fortunate or as we say in Spanish “*el desdichado*” -- the little guy, the underdog, the “*marginado*,” the unwanted, the autoworker, the migrant worker, the steelworker, and the dishwasher -- who has laid the groundwork for the Detroit poets of the 80’s. It is this same environment that will catapult the Detroit poets to greater successes in the 90’s. Regardless of the success of the 80’s and the ones to come, the common denominator remains the little guy or “*marginado*” who continues to impact and invigorate the *barrio*, an environment that is multifaceted, dynamic and yet with a lot of contradictions. It is through the use

of poetry that one can reach the collective unconsciousness of the people. By looking at the “*intrahistoria*” the poets have been able to provide images that will enable the reader and listener to understand the essence and genuine spirit of the people.²

The northward wave of Mexican (Latino) migration, in general, began with the industrial expansion in the Midwest in the 1880’s and 90’s. It was the railroads that opened up this northern area to the migration waves coming in from Mexico during the turn of the century. By the 1900’s, small groups of Mexicans began to penetrate the Detroit area. Most of these people worked in the fields, and later on in the factories. With the economic success of the region “*enganchistas*” came into play, and consequently, by the 1920’s there were about 15,000 Mexicans in the Detroit area.³

By the 1930’s, there was a sizeable “*colonia*” of Mexicans in Detroit, and a small minority of these had some economic success working in the factories. Although the city of Detroit was enjoying much economic prosperity after World War II, the Mexican “*colonia*” was experiencing difficult times due to many factors that were impacting on its growth. Relocation efforts by the Public Welfare Office and the Immigration Services repeatedly harmed the growth and harmony in the Latino Community. Discrimination by city and state officials, as well as by the larger community, was rampant. Roads and highways destroyed a large part of the *barrio* and the Latino community in Detroit began to disappear. However, the spirit of the people and pride in their Mexican tradition and culture gave them strength to continue with their lives. Some kept their language and most practiced their ethnicity. The 1960’s brought new ideas into the struggle. Throughout the country there was an awareness of the Latino presence. The political tactics used by other minority groups contributed to the “*lucha*” in Detroit. People started to organize and several social and political organizations came into existence. State, federal, and city programs were implemented only after efforts by the community leaders changed the disposition of city and state political organizations. The 1970’s were similar to the efforts of the 60’s. A few federal programs were in place; social organizations like LASED, New Detroit Inc., Community Health and Social Services, Latinos en Marcha, the Coalition of Chicanos and Boricuas, La Raza Unida, and other social groups had an impact on the political machinery. These organizations maintained unity and kept the Latino spirit in the community alive. In spite

of these efforts, the Latino community continued to be dealt serious blows. The freeways — Fisher Highway and the Lodge Freeway — split the Latino community and further disintegration of the barrio continued. The economic success of some families contributed to the break down of the community. People moved out and became assimilated into other communities. Many forgot the traditions of their rich heritage. Although the Latino community in Detroit historically had never had a closeness as a community there has always been a core of people who have continued to live in the area and who have managed to keep their traditions, customs, and language intact. It is this small group of Latino citizens who have fostered a sense of the Latino community and a sense of pride in the Latino culture and language, and furthermore, have influenced the writings of the Detroit poets.⁴

It is within this historical framework that the Detroit Poets of the 80's were born. I do not mean to suggest that there was no creative work going on prior to the 80's. Even a cursory look will reveal that there were some poets and other artists that contributed their talents and artistic expressions prior to this time. However, documenting and bringing these artistic manifestation to light remains to be done. It is fertile ground that has to be studied and documented.

Now, how about the Detroit poetry? What is it like? Is it any different from Chicano or Latino poetry written in Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, Chicago, Miami or New York? To answer these questions is quite difficult and beyond the scope of this article. It is our intent to present some common and salient characteristics of the Detroit poetry of the 80's. I have chosen to include the two major themes that appear in both volumes of poetry.

One of these themes deals with the notion of cultural identity and cultural pride. In the Detroit area there are two major groups of Latinos — the Mexican American and the Puerto Rican. Although there are quite a few Centro Americanos, and other Latinos from other countries, their poetic voice has not been heard to any great extent. Cultural identity is presented in many tones and forms. The cry of the Native American is silent and clear. Their interpretation of history and the treatment of their people at the hands of the White European settlers is well documented in a soft but firm rhythmic sound that accentuates the warmth of the Native American. In contrast, the reader will sense the materialistic and egocentric White man taking advantage of a situation. Marcelle Douglas writes:

The Villanelle of Conquest

Though they were met with outstretched hand
Their hate and ferocity inspired by greed and fear
They came to take away our land

Piece by piece they wrested the land
That they had traveled far and near
Though they were met with outstretched hand

They had no guile to match the man
Searching for a new frontier
They came to take away our land

There was no peace within the clan
Deprived we were of all that was dear
Though they were met with outstretched hand
To reservations and anonymity they did ban
Thus to our death and silent tear
They came to take away our land

They have weakened; it is time to plan
The future now for us is clear
Though they were met with outstretched hand
They came to take away our land

The influence of the Indian or the Mestizo comes up in a more tenuous form. "Bedhopper Blinded" by Jacqueline Sanchez presents the Mestizo and the effects that White society has had on him. The coming together of the two races is presented in a positive light. Its acceptance and pride are part of the message. However, the poet's plea to the warriors and to the Chicanos to exert their place and role in society appears to go unheard.

Bedhoppers Blinded

Mexinjun
you speak with forked tongue
your cup runneth over
with contradictions
crazy?

You lap-up luxury
as time passes rapidly
whilest artistic creativeness
waits on the sidelines
crazy?

Bedhoppers numb warriors
grandfathers turn their backs
and elders stand mute

crazy?
The winged eagle headed
your way,
returned
deed undone
crazy?

Blinded by external
ungutted lies
the warrior has disappeared
the warrior
has disappeared
crazy!

Another variant of the Latino pride and identity can be heard in a more forceful manner. It suggests the use of the term "Chicanismo" as opposed to the use of the term Mexican American. Jose Leyva Garza's poem "Soy Tex Mex" exemplifies a conscious desire to announce to society that there is nothing wrong with being Tex Mex or Chicano.

Furthermore, the poet addresses the Latino and reminds him/her of the migrant experience--that many have lived and endured here, and should not be forgotten.

Soy Tex Mex

Soy Tex Mex
thoughts that drink
the cathedral-like prayer chatter
of brown skinned people massed
before the endless walking
row after row

earth wave upon earth wave
of short hoe stooping
cutting
collecting
carrying
and sweating
watching
the owners pause to wipe red taco sauce
from their hands
pausing to call for more work
more bodies
more taco sauce
bodies from Texas Mexico Ohio
Illinois
Indiana
and Michigan
making the yearly slave trips
to summer water wonderland vacation places

Traverse City Ludington Hart Shelby
Mears
Monroe

te acuerdas de las piscas ese?
those bone tiring
hot july days
suspended in cherry trees
carrying water
climbing ladders
and dreaming of better days
dreaming of your relatives
dreaming of the mother country

te acuerdas de tu gente compadre?

Now let us consider how a Puerto Rican addresses the question of cultural identity. This poem is by Anibal Bourdon and although it follows a traditional rhyme scheme, the message is unequivocal. Bourdon not only mentions his knowledge and understanding of his country's contributions, but also underscores his cultural pride.

Mi Puerto Rico

No sé nada de cultura,
ni de ciencias, ni de artes
Pero de mi Puerto Rico
Digo, que sí sé bastante.

Sé de los grandes poetas,
De grandes compositores
Como fue Don Rafael
Igual que Don Pedro Flores

El Señor Albizu Campos
Tambien Luis Muñoz Marín

Yo se de el Grito de Lares
Cuando se formó el motín.

Se de las grandes leyendas,
Que tiene mi Puerto Rico
Parece no tener nada
Pero es sabroso, bonito.

Si... yo les puedo cantar,
Y ahora, se lo contaré
Que a Puerto Rico Señores
Jamás yo lo negaré.

Y cuando sale la luna,

Las noches se ven mas bellas
Y las estrellas, brillantes
Siempre están al lado de ella.

A very interesting variant is one that presents the assimilated Latinos who are consciously aware of their monolingualism but whose cultural baggage continues to influence them in subtle ways. The use of Spanish, in this next poem by Delfin Munoz, indicates the true spirit of the Latino's unconscious expression of cultural pride.

The Shade of Steam Heat

We travel from day
to night
Yet the shadows
all surround us
We ask for the ham
We ask for the cheese
but mondongo is on
our breath
We ask for disco
We ask for the rock
but listen to Willie y Celia
The shadows
continue from day to night
We walk quite proudly
then shout quite loudly,
"Que pasa, mamita?"
We dress quite prissily
but dance one only
to a salsa in the wind
And it is the shadows

of the night and day
the shade of steam heat
that are the good part
the very best part

The second most prevalent theme is one that deals with the social conditions in which the Latino finds him/herself. These conditions appear in different degrees and are expressed in different modes. Some present, for example, the exasperation of families regarding crime, drugs, and other social ills in the barrio. The following poem by Ana Cardona, which has no title, concretizes the sad state of affairs regarding the disintegration of the family and community. The lack of a title in the poem suggests the coldness and distance that permeates a society that has been influenced by the indifference of the White social structure.

young boy of 14, son of man i know through
generous happy sharing
shoots himself, is shot, by nickel-plated
handgun

i am touched by the loss of a boy i know only
in death

a community is brought close through this
death-for-no-good-reason.

i loose[sic] myself in thought of the mothers,
fathers,
children, lovers,

feeling, losing, having stolen from them the
presence,
the being, the life of their baby, their baby,
their love,
their other, their self
the sobs and cries and

pain
the hollow loss
the mother's empty stare, carried, walked
down the aisle past her now dead baby son

y padre, aguantando, apretando, gritando su dolor
en forma de nina de 4 anos
nina, imagen de nuestro amor.

amen.

Victoria Gonzalez states that our social predicament is due to the many years of enslavement and exploitation. She is convinced that the Latino's being and essence is and has been a product of the materialistic paws of capitalism.

Y me pongo a pensar
que las cosas que recuerdo
de cuando era chiquitita
no vienen de ser Latina
sino de ser pobre.

In other words,
how much of my culture
is a direct result
of being exploited?
Y pienso
en tortillas recién-hechas
calientitas
y sopa de frijoles
con queso frito.

Recuerdo tambien
el patio de mi casa
y el palo de mango
el de aguacate
y las quinceañears
serenatas
pinatas
posadas
purisimas

Y en nuestro idioma
el Espanol
herencia de los conquistadores
verdura
frescura.

Y me doy cuenta que no fuimos hechos
para vivir en ghetos
favelas
o reservaciones.

In her poem "And This the 20th Century", Rosa Maria Muñoz synthesizes in a clever manner the hypocrisy and insensitivity of our leaders, politicians, government, and society. It appears to be very light in nature and it seems that she is laughing at the deplorable conditions, but the totality of the poem reveals just the opposite. She is very serious. Her sarcasm and cutting criticism reaches us in a very poignant manner.

AND THIS THE 20th CENTURY

And this the 20th century
where they can rape you
with a fictional smile
where all the talks on streets
of crack and crime are as natural
as cornflakes, hot dogs, and hamburgers
and buns,
where all the prostitutes on
Michigan Avenue are unemployed
because they failed to give a piece
of flesh to the I.R.S.
where people freeze to death
in line for a food basket and
satisfy their hunger for a while
yet still we have a peace of mind
for there are no talks on nuclear
wars
and this the 20th century my friend
where everybody rapes you with a
fictional smile.

Another of Rosa Maria Muñoz' poems utilizes an unusual approach. The structure of the poem is based on the "Our Father" and its content integrates contemporary problems that have affected the Latino community in a negative manner. The poem reads like a prayer and the reader and listener are left with a succinct image of a world that is at the hands of some potentially dangerous individuals. Its sharp criticism is enhanced by the poet's plea to God to intervene and keep humanity from going through a nuclear war.

Padre Nuestro, que estás
en algun lugar del Universo
Santificados sean aquellos
que no tienen de comer

Líbranos del tirano, imperialista
y opresor
Perdónanos nuestras deudas y
haz que el imperialista perdone
a sus embrollones, y a todos
sus deudores.

No nos dejes caer en la garras
del opresor, mas líbranos de todo
mal como la guerra nuclear.

In conclusion, an attempt has been made to share with the reader the creative and artistic world of the Detroit poets. It is evident that this short article does not offer a balanced view of the poetic expression of our Latino poets. This is not because of our lack of interest or concern, but because of the constraints that have been placed on works of this nature. We have presented the two major themes that appear in the two volumes of poetry--cultural pride and social conditions. Today, the barrio Latino in Detroit is alive and well. The Latino people continue to influence society while they reinforce their way of life by actively practicing their cultural and traditional customs. Poetry is one of those traditional mechanisms through which the community has always expressed itself. It is a vibrant and artistic medium through which the reader and listener can begin to understand and appreciate the idiosyncrasies, aspirations, values, and voice of the people.

Endnotes

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4. Ibid., pp.17.