WRITING CULTURAL IDENTITY: STRATEGIES FOR AUTHORIZING DIFFERENCE

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In his essay on "Ideology," James H. Kavanaugh foregrounds the importance of ideological analysis in literary or cultural study. He is interested in "the institutional and/or textual apparatuses that work on the reader's . . . imaginary conceptions of self and social order in order to call or *solicit* him/her into a specific form of social 'reality' and social subjectivity" (310). I am particularly interested in the forms of social reality and subjectivity where notions of identity and difference are construeted and reproduced. Considered from this perspective, *Oficio de tinieblas*, published in 1962 by the Mexican author Rosario Castellanos not only refleets how difference is constituted, but also shapes the reader's images of cultural identity.[1] To produce these responses, the novel interacts with literary eodes, expectations and contracts shared by the author and the readers. It also reproduees, through the medium of those contracts, social positions for the reader within the arena of cultural identity and difference. After reviewing how *Oficio de tinieblas* establishes and defines identity and difference, and how these decisions might affect a reader, I then reevaluate these activities in the light of concerns about truth and fiction, orality and literacy, and the literary production of difference.

In broadest terms, *Oficio de tinieblas* tells the story of an uprising of the Tzotzil Indians of southern Mexico against the non-Indian landowning population, the Ladinos.[2] The story combines two different historical periods. An Indian uprising that took place in 1869-1870 in Chiapas is transplanted to the postrevolutionary period of the Cárdenas presidency when the Mexican government was initiating efforts at land reform (Sommers, "Forma" 80). By setting the conflict between Indian and Ladino within the context of government sponsored land reform efforts, *Oficio de tinieblas* discusses the relations between three different cultural or ideological groupings. The binary opposition between Indian and mestizo that traditionally characterizes *indigenista* fiction develops into a triadic relationship that includes cultural ideologies belonging to the Indian, the Ladino and the pro-land-reform mestizo represented by the government functionary. In the novel, it is the promised land reform that upsets the stable relationship of subordination between Indians and Ladinos and inspires Indian leaders

to seek redress of the oppressive conditions under which they live and work. Their efforts intertwine with a myriad of unforeseen circumstances, resulting in an armed rebellion and military defeat at the hands of the Ladino leaders.

In the represented world of the text, *Oficio de tinieblas* names identity in terms of place of origin, skin color, lifestyle and language. The indigenous characters speak Tzotzil, and work with their hands; the Ladinos speak Spanish, work with their minds, and have faces the color of the sun. The construction of identity that most interests me, however, depends on the contrast between an oral culture and a writing culture. In the novel, the indigenous characters rely almost exclusively on their own oral histories and myths for their notions of truth about religion, justice, and social order. Writing, for the Tzotzil characters, is the "papel que habla," the alphabetic representation of speech that serves to separate them from the Ladino.

There is, however, an extended discussion in the novel revolving around the education and consequent acculturation of one of the Tzotzil protagonists, Pedro González Winikton. A willing convert to the education process, Pedro learns how to speak, read and write enough Spanish to serve as a kind of interpretive bridge between the Ladino community and his own. The text emphasizes the connection between writing and authority as it follows Pedro's gradual acculturation to Ladino ways. He is removed from field work to serve as a sort of squire to the landowner, and accompanies him to farms and cities that would otherwise have remained unknown to the Indian. More importantly, when the President of the Republic arrives to announce the land reform goals, Pedro, of all the assembled Indian workers, is the only one who comprehends any of the speech. Ironically, the now-acculturated Pedro, believing the dream, becomes politically active and eventually participates in the indigenous rebellion where he dies.

The entire literacy episode directly connects writing and the Spanish language with power. The Ladino landowners believe that a literate, Spanish-speaking Indian threatens their cultural and economic domination. Pedro's path from literacy to expectations of justice to revolt would seem to support their position. Although Pedro's death at the end of the novel contradicts the idea of acculturation as a just solution to conflict, his role as a literate Indian highlights the narrating agency's cultural assumptions about writing both within the context of the novelistic world and in relation to the broader social issue of

assimilation of the indigenous population. The death of the only literate indigenous character may reflect an inability, or at least, an unwillingness, on the part of the narrative ageney to coneeive of a future for an assimilated Indian. In a nation where cultural identity relates closely to lifestyle, assimilation will involve at least the eultural death, at most the complete annihilation, of the indigenous members of a culture.

The Ladino preparations for war demonstrate even more explicitly the authority and power associated with writing. The landowner in eharge of the Ladino defense, Leonardo Cifuentes, produces a text ealled the *ordenanzas militares*, military ordinanees for the town's defense. This strategic text, with a history all its own, emphasizes the undeniable supremaey of writing over orality. Leonardo creates the text out of a need to establish discipline among the panicky Ladinos, who are preparing to abandon the town to the approaching Tzotzil rebels. In their nervousness, the guards posted on the town's outskirts accidentally kill each other, although their deaths are attributed to the rebelling Indians (334). Leonardo wants to diminish Ladino fears, and provide them with the eneouragement, motivation and justification necessary to take the offensive against the Indian rebellion because, as he puts it, "El mejor indio, dice el refrán, es el indio muerto" (341).

The *ordenanzas militares* text later appears in what is left of the Tzotzil eommunity after its destruction by the Ladinos. The few surviving Tzotzil have left their homes and possessions behind, escaping to the highlands where they attempt to reeonstruct their eommunal patterns. This time, however, the object of worship is the very text that the Ladinos used to defeat the Tzotzil, the military ordinance written by Leonardo. The text was found on the battlefield, rescued by an unnamed Tzotzil hero, and brought to the reunion. Focalized from the perspective of the Tzotzil worshippers, the text takes on sacred attributes:

> . . . en el arca está depositada la palabra divina. Allí se guarda el testamento de los que se fueron y la profecía de los que vendrán. Allí consta lo que dictaron las potencias oseuras a sus siervos. Allí resplandeee la promesa que conforta en los días de la incertidumbre y de la adversidad. Allí está la sustancia que come el alma para vivir. El pacto . . . Unas cuantas páginas y sin embargo el puente entre lo divino y la

> humanidad. Existe, para que la esperanza no desfallezca. (363-4)

No explanation appears in the novel to account for the transformation of the text of the military ordinances into a sacred object. The meaning of the event depends on whether the Tzotzil worshippers can interpret the text's written signs, on whether they can read. The focalization from the Tzotzil's view suggests that they comprehend the meaning of the text. They know it was dictated by the "dark forces" (Leonardo), and that it mentions previous and possibly future rebellions ("los que se fueron . . . y los que vendrán"). The text brings comfort and hope to the worshippers by means of an unexplained promise, a possible reference to the military organization that led to victory on the battlefield. In addition, the leader of the worshippers is known to his companions not as a priest or holy man, but as the "escrutador de signos" (363), a name that emphasizes his ability to read signs unfamiliar to the community at large.

The issue of the interpretation of the sacred text strongly influences the characterization of the Tzotzil. If the worshippers read and understand the text of the *ordenanzas militares*, if their comfort and hope stems from newly acquired tactics of armed rebellion, then *Oficio de tinieblas* points to a future of increasingly successful rebellions by the Tzotzil group. The rebellion portrayed in the novel, characterized as spontaneous and disorganized, as "un gran animal torpe, desarticulado y acéfalo" (326), fails precisely because it has no strategy. If the survivors of that rebellion have access to military tactics via the "sacred text," then the Ladino community will no longer be able to dismiss Tzotzil demands for reform. Access to the text will have brought the Tzotzil new kinds of power with unanticipated results, enabling them, perhaps, to step out of the cyclic nature of oppression, rebellion and defeat.[3]

This optimistic speculation evaporates in the face of the traditional interpretation of the ritual that excludes literacy as a component.[4] This view maintains the focus on literacy and power, but with inverted consequences for the Tzotzil, who appear foolish, without the capacity to recognize--in fact worshipping--the means of their own destruction.

These two episodes--Pedro's acculturation, and the story of the military ordenanzas text--reveal the importance the narrating agency in *Oficio de tinieblas* gives to issues of literacy. While writing is not

necessarily culture specific, only writing cultures survive and endure in the novel. The consequences for the exclusively oral culture include military defeat, distorted written histories, and ridicule.

The narrative strategies in *Oficio de tinieblas* also reflect the complexity involved in representing identity and difference. Throughout the novel, the narrating agency reveals its authority to choose and textualize "other" cultures, to translate unfamiliar languages for the reader, and to write oral discourse. The novel begins, for example, with a Tzotzil origin legend. Although supposedly oral, and in the Tzotzil language, this legend appears in written form and in Spanish. Writing thus becomes a medium through which to salvage a culture portrayed as weaker because of its reliance on orality. The narrating agency salvages the Tzotzil in *Oficio de tinieblas*, both speaking / writing for them, and providing material lessons in the power of written discourse.

This belief in the power of writing corresponds neatly with the values of cultural assimilation dominant in Mexico since the end of the Revolution. Certainly the Mexican government's goal to educate its Indian population bears witness to a belief that writing bridges the gap of cultural difference. *Oficio de tinieblas* expresses a similar notion of cultural membership where textual authority is the overriding determinant of cultural survival. Like the fearful Ladino landowners, a writing culture may consider education and literacy a means to equality, a way to achieve a level of cultural assimilation where difference diminishes.

Defining cultural survival as dependent on writing creates a paradoxical situation for a community characterized as oral. By following the lessons of the narrating agency, the primary indicator of cultural identity as defined by that textual authority will disappear. From the perspective of the writing culture, at least, difference will have been erased.

Kavanaugh exemplifies the kind of question to ask when considering the paradox inherent in representing this and other kinds of difference:

> It is less "Does a given ideological discourse or practice accurately represent Thebes, or New York, or Managua?"; it is more: "What is the effect on social subjects of a given ideological practice . . . transformatively (mis)representing Thebes, or New York, or Managua, in precisely the way it does?" (314)

In *Oficio de tinieblas*, the transformation of oral discourse into written narrative, is a (mis)representation that conceals, to a greater or lesser degree, the impact of the writing authority on the text. Hiding the writing agency in oral discourse conceals not only the authority to write, but also the cultural authority and consequences involved in representing a culture "foreign" to the reader.

The unacknowledged cultural prerogative to portray difference is at the root of an important critical response to the particular (mis)-representation of orality in writing. For some critics, this amounts to a form of "treachery," the kind which "takes place in the shift from the community bound by orally transmitted culture to the nation" (Franco 132).[5] The "treachery" appears to lie in the unauthentic portrayal of the oral community for the purpose of communicating with the cultural elite of readers and writers. Debra Castillo, referring to Castellanos's Balún-Canán and Puga's *Las posibilidades del odio*, states the problem even more explicitly:

> To write the oral tale is to betray the very nature of that tale, and by extension, to betray the community itself--in Castellanos's and Puga's cases, by a recognizably incomplete knowledge and by an acknowledged inability to translate accurately from one language to another, from one culture to another. (220)

From this perspective, the "betrayal" effected by the transformation of the oral into writing appears to stem from the consequent lack of accuracy or "truth" created by changing the medium of expression.

In my opinion, the source of the "treachery" and "betrayal" may have more to do with reader expectations and habits than with any "violation" of communities and individuals engaging in exclusively oral discourse. The criticisms leveled by Franco and Castillo might be more relevant to the anthropology contract than the fiction contract, which makes no claim, and precisely negates a claim, to portraying "truth." As James Clifford puts it: "We need not ask how Flaubert knows what Emma Bovary is thinking, but the ability of the fieldworker to inhabit indigenous minds is always in doubt" (47). To sense betrayal in the representation of the oral community in writing implies that the authors--of fiction or anthropology--have an obligation to an imagined cultural "accuracy," as if marginated communities could be represented

in dominant forms of discourse in some "true" way, without mediation. The faulty conclusion rests in the belief that there is an unmediated form of representation that will bridge the gap between boundaries of difference in society, that will allow a reader to gain an "accurate" picture of a non-literate community represented in a written text.

Undoubtedly, one of the challenges fiction writers face is that of eluding the fact/fiction dichotomy. To the extent they are successful, readers will believe their constructed worlds. To the extent that the reader accepts the appearance of "truth," or rebels against a seemingly false representation of a particular community, the texts are successfully reproducing in the reader the culturally-based constraint separating fact from fiction, a dichotomy which must hide its mediating presence in order to be effective.

In the portrayal of marginated individuals, a representation of orality, which is often equivalent to illiteracy, provides readers with a comfortable position from which to view the differences narrated. We are, after all, *reading* stories about non-literate characters. The cultural bias favoring literacy (within the realm of the literate, at least) affects readers subject to this position, making it easier for us to imagine closing the gaps that our own cultural identity poses for us.

Approaching marginated or nonliterate communities through the medium of a text creates an inherent authority imbalance between the characters and the reader, who engages in obvious literary complicity with the author. The "treachery" or "betrayal" associated with this imbalance arises when the nature of the assumed reading contract is thought to include authenticity or truth in the represented world. Regardless of the authors intentions in this regard, the contract can instead be thought of as the literary elite discussing among ourselves our imaginings about communities excluded from literacy.[6] The latter approach produces knowledge not about the marginated communities, but about our (literary) strategies for (mis)representing them, strategies defining our exclusionary practices, not necessarily theirs.

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NOTES

[1] There are many other Mexican novels by women writers that also portray cultural differences at work in Mexican society. As examples of the variety of difference portrayed, I mention Ethel Krauze's portrayal of the U.S./Mexico border in *Donde las cosas vuelan* (1985); Barbara Jacobs's *Las hojas muertas* (1987) deals with a family of Lebanese immigrants to Mexico; Sabina Berman writes about the Jewish community in Mexico City in *La bobe* (1990). The novels discussed in this study were selected for no more deliberate reason than that they serve as a starting point from which to explore issues of cultural identity and difference.

[2] According to the *Diccionario de Mejicanismos*, "Ladino" is a term used in southeastern Mexico to refer to a "mestizo o blanco en general, que no desciende de padre y madre indígenas y cuya lengua nativa es el español u otra no indígena; por contraposición al indio, que habla su lengua aborigen y desciende de padre y madre indígenas" (Santamaría 651). I use the term "Ladino" when speaking about the mestizo population in Chiapas, both land-owning and poor, and "mestizo" when referring to non-indigenous people from other areas of Mexico who, in this novel, function as agents of the modernizing urban culture and natinal political system.

[3] As I write this, the indigenous community in southern Mexico is engaged in the armed occupation of Chiapas resulting from a rebellion begun in January 1994. A literate, Spanish-speaking individual of unknown but apparently non-indigenous origins functions as the public representative and primary negotiator of the rebelling indigenous forces. Reality, at this point in time, seems to confirm the reading of the "sacred text" by the indigenous "escrutador de signos" in the novel. Although perhaps peripheral to the discussion at hand, this is not the first uprising of *chiapaneco* Indians involving Ladino leadership. Bricker discusses the leadership role of Ignacio Fernández de Galino, a native of Mexico City, in the Chamulan rebellion of 1869 (123-124).

[4] Critics uniformly consider the Tzotzil worshippers illiterate, and interpret the ritual pessimistically. Sommers considers "amargamente pesimista en su ironía" the fact that the Indians are worshipping "un libro mágico como si contuviera un mensaje o narración posiblemente liberadora." He also notes the consequent implicit characterization of the Tzotzil as incapable of understanding history ("Forma" 86-87). Stacey Schlau sees the Indians as "enclosed in an alienating linguistic code that dominates them," exiling them from language and power,

with their continued misery assured (55). O'Connell, who also believes the Indians cannot read the book, sees their illiteracy perpetuating their persecution and yet paradoxically providing hope since "Orality is the means of preservation and cultural survival" (253).

[5] Franco sees this form of treachery occurring in *Oficio de tinieblas*, and describes it as treachery that takes place "not so much between reader and writer as on the level of the enunciated--that is, in the space where plot, character and novelistic time are interwoven (132).

[6] The discussion about literacy as a differentiating practice is not meant to suggest that there is a definitive boundary between literate and illiterate, but rather a sliding scale of literary practices. At one end signs of writing are not even recognized as such; at the other, reading and writing are activities that consume significant amounts of time and energy.

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