JOSÉ LIMÓN'S "THE FOLK PERFORMANCE OF CHICANO AND THE CULTURAL LIMITS OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY"

COMMENTARY

by Robert T. Trotter, II

In the introduction to his work, Dr. Limón proposes to expound on three themes in his paper. He states that he will document the failure of the term "Chicano" to act as a unifying symbol for the U.S.-Mexican community, that he will demonstrate that this failure may be attributed, at least in part, to the violation of folkloric performance rules of nicknaming and ethnic slurs by the members of the student movement who popularized the term, and that he will fashion "a critical consideration of the relationship between mass cultural forms, such as folklore and social movements led by political elites." It will be the purpose in this brief commentary to show that he is clearly successful in achieving his first goal, partially successful in achieving his second, and somewhat less than successful in achieving his third goal.

It is also important to point out two positive contributions that Dr. Limón has made to the study of "Chicano" and all other folklore, quite aside from the specific goals he set for himself. First, he clearly demonstrates that self and other labeling (e.g., nicknames and slurs) follows specific cultural rules and that these rules can be elicited from contextual,

and probably only from contextual studies of folkloric performance. Second, while he supports the need for contextual studies of folklore, Dr. Limón goes an important step beyond most theorists by proposing and supporting the idea that the context of "performing for the interviewer" may change the performance and may also cause the nonperformance of certain folkloric items due to the restrictions (rules) associated with "noncausal utterances" in any cultural system.

The segment of the paper that deals with the origins and evolution of the term "Chicano" as a public ideological group referent is a valuable social document. It illustrates a number of key elements of the social, political, and emotional environments of an important transitional period for the U.S.-Mexican community as a whole and for "Chicano" intellectuals in particular. The discussion of the factors that led the students to the choice of "Chicano" as an ideological self-referent is particularly cogent to the first theme of the article and helps support his later contentions on the subsequent failure of the term to become widely used by the mass community.

Limón successfully documents the rejection of "Chicano" as a public mass referent. In addition to the studies cited, it is worthwhile to note that his statements are supported by my own research on alcohol use by Pan American University students. Amongst a sample of over 500 Spanish-surnamed students, who as a group can be considered somewhat more ideologically liberal than the community they come from, less than five percent

chose "Chicano" as a self-identifier. The overwhelming majority chose the term "Mexican American," with a small number of students choosing "American," and a few others "Native American" as write-in choices. In South Texas, the ethnographic evidence suggests that the term "Chicano" is rejected as a public self-identifier due to the perception on the part of the informants that the term, as a public self-identifier, indicates an individual with a strong liberal or even radical political ideology. The majority of the informants do not identify with that particular ideological posture, especially where and when the term was associated with the membership or activities of the Raza Unida Party. The identification of an individual as having a former association with the Raza Unida Party nearly guarantees that candidate's failure to gain elective office in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, at least to the present. Although there is as yet no statistical data to support the idea, it appears that the popularity of the use of "Chicano" as a public self-referent increases with distance from the border, with the user's educational level, and with the success of the individual in dealing with the bureaucratic systems of the dominant society. At least in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the frequency of the use of the term as a public self-referent is not necessarily affected by age or by economic status or by political clout. The individuals who appear to favor "Chicano" as a public self-referent in the lower Rio Grande Valley tend to be ethnic nationalists, idelogically radical, activist, and

either concerned with or involved in sociopolitical events beyond the confines of their immediate community. Although Limón briefly mentions these factors in his discussion of the rejection of the term as an ideological referent, he gives them little, perhaps too little, weight.

The key to Dr. Limón's analysis is his identification of the rejection of "Chicano" as a public self-referent, coupled with its retention as an intragroup slur and as a "nickname." The ethnographic basis for this argument is well developed both historically and from current data, with one possible exception. Limón rejects Arthur Rubel's ethnographic report on the use of "Chicano" as synonymous with "Mexicano," based on the cogent arguments put forward by Dr. Paredes on Rubel's possible misunderstanding of the use of humor in certain contexts. Yet, rather than follow Dr. Paredes' example of applying specific analytical examples of how Rubel may have erred, Limón rejects Rubel's statements on what is perilously close to an ad-hominem basis. This does not mean that Rubel's data are to be accepted categorically, merely that they need to be subjected to appropriate analysis. This need is especially critical in this case, since Limón himself has clearly demonstrated that the term "Chicano" does not now have the same meaning it did in the late fifties and early sixties, when Rubel's work was done, due to the effects of the student movement of the late sixties.

The sections of Dr. Limón's paper that deal with the folkloric status of "Chicano" and its sociocultural significance

are extremely well presented and argued, with the exception of the above digression. The significance of these sections is enhanced by the confluence of three themes. First, there is a nicely balanced collection of historical and ethnographic data that illustrates the time depth and the current usage of the term within specifically defined social contexts. Second, there is a clear demonstration of the value of contextual data in interpreting the performance of a folkloric item. And, third, there is the speculative use of theoretical positions to interpret the data presented. The last theme is far too often missing in the analysis of folklore materials.

The theoretical orientations that Dr. Limón has chosen are a combination of a strongly structural-functional (Malinowski) approach that emphasizes the psychological performance of "Chicano" to reduce stress, and a Neo-Marxist analysis of the effects of class on folkloric performance. The structural-functional argument is the more convincingly presented and supported, while the Marxist analysis occasionally degenerates into rhetoric. This was a disappointment because it appeared that the data might have supported the weight of both theoretical positions. This would have established a starting point for amalgamating a synchronic theoretical position with one that was diachronic, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of both (or, possibly multiplying the weaknesses of each).

The major weakness of Limón's use of class to analyze folkloric performance is that he occasionally forces the data

to fit the theory. In his discussion of "Chicano" as an intra-group slur, he states: "that class is the major determinant of its definition as a slur seems to be without question." Yet, in his examples he clearly indicated that while the slur is sometimes aimed at those of lower socioeconomic status, it is equally used against those whose only social difference is a more recent entry into the U.S. social system and against those whose socioeconomic status may be equal to or above those doing the slurring. The relevance of "class" as a determinant is especially difficult to support in those areas where the differentials in the socioeconomic status of Mexicanos may be relatively minor for a significant segment of the population--especially in those areas where there has been artificially or deliberately limited access to the available resources. The result of pushing such an argument to its logical conclusion would be to consider each individual as a member of his or her own class, which reduces the total theoretical position to a tautology.

Forcing the data to fit a "class" analysis of the reason for the failure of the term "Chicano" to become a group self-referent may have produced the greatest single weakness in Dr. Limón's analysis of the data. He suggests very clearly that the failure of the term is primarily due to violations of the rules for nicknaming and slurring. And there is little doubt in my mind that he is correct, as far as he goes. The error is in not following the line of reasoning as far as it

could be successfully taken. Rather than restricting the analysis to nicknames and slurs, Dr. Limón could have profitably expanded to labeling in general. It appears that he has established an analytical category, "rules for labeling," that contains two domains: (1) public, and (2) private. Within each of these domains there are two foci: (a) self-labeling, and (b) labeling others. In each focus there are at least two separate categories that can be loosely classified as "labeling the individual" and "labeling the group." The analysis could be outlined as follows:

Rules for Labeling							
Public Labeling				Private Labeling			
Public self labeling		Public other labeling		Private self labeling		Private other labeling	
Group labels	Individual labels	Group labels	Individual labels	Group labels	Individual labels	Group labels	Individual labels

Within this scheme, the rules for nicknaming and for slurring can be placed within their appropriate categories, and the rules for other categories equally clearly defined. It could then be hypothesized that if an attempt were made to take a label that was in popular use in one category and transfer its use to another category in the paradigm, that label would have to be accepted or rejected according to the rules of the new category, not the old. While Dr. Limón does not delineate all of the rules of nicknaming and slurring, he does demonstrate

that "Chicano" fits the rules of both, and does not fit the rules of being a mass public group self-referent, even though the rules for that category remain undefined. However, what his more narrow focus causes him to miss is the point that the term has become a public individual self-referent for a particular segment of the U.S.-Mexican population. It does fit the rules of labeling for that category. This usage is clearly demonstrated, in relation to students and politically active individuals by Limón's own analysis and by the data I presented earlier.

Using a broader scheme of analysis would allow Dr. Limón to solve one of the problems mentioned earlier. The problem is how to cope with the fact that one reason for the rejection of the term "Chicano", as he states, "may be quite simply that the movement, as presented to the mass media, has added meanings to the term . . ." as compared with the contention that " another added source of disharmony may lie in differing contexts for the performance of the term . . . This latter view becomes Limón's central theme throughout the text, and, as I see it, the overall tone of the text is that Limón sees these as competing explanations. My contention is that this apparent competition is due to his narrow focus on nicknaming and slurring, rather than a general focus on labeling. The latter focus would have eliminated this seeming contradiction and would have demonstrated that, not only are both factors operant, but their presence would predict the failure of the term as a public group

self-referent and its success as a public individual self-referent (for a specific segment of the population). Nevertheless, Dr. Limón has certainly gone a long way in making explicit the rules for part of the paradigm, and it is to be hoped that he and others will continue along this line of research.

In the final section of the paper, Dr. Limón makes what I feel to be a major critical point about the study of folklore. He indicates that the so-called "minor" genres have been sadly neglected for the more elaborate, but not necessarily more culturally important, major genres. The potential importance of the minor genres is clearly demonstrated by the social, historical, and theoretical contribution present in or generated by Dr. Limón's paper. In addition, he reiterates a key theme, that there is little information available on the attitudes of the folk who are the sources of the folklore material. The fact that Dr. Limón covers both of these concerns in an interesting, sound, and scholarly fashion makes his article internally consistent and a very worthwhile contribution to knowledge. If there is a weakness in the final section, that weakness is his failure to meet the objective of clearly demonstrating "the relationship between cultural forms such as folklore and social movements led by political elites." However, since I feel this is somewhat due to the limited focus of the analysis, I hope that Dr. Limón will continue to pursue his current objectives and will provide us with additional information and speculation on this subject in his future works.