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## Multiculturalism, Telenovelas and Ideology in *Woman Hollering Creek*

Gustavo Segura Chávez<sup>1</sup>

The following paper discusses the notion of multiculturalism as a violent process in which immigrants, specifically Mexican, have to live without showing their conflicts because they might be considered 'fundamentalist.' Žižek's notion of the arbitrariness of multiculturalism and McCracken's theory of commodities as forms of cultural insertion are confronted in relation to two short stories that appear in Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek*. I will finally support the idea that multiculturalism (accepting other cultures) is a form of hegemony because U.S. society 'selects' those who can belong to it.

Cisneros' stories which are analyzed in this essay are "Remember the Alamo" and "Woman Hollering Creek," which present two characters, Tristán and Cleófilas, respectively, who give up every possibility of defending their rights as a gay man and an abused wife, because this defense might be seen by U.S. society as a subversive discourse. Then, Tristán prefers to live as a transvestite who is loved by his audience and Cleófilas lives in silence, watching soap operas in order not to bother anyone, not even her husband who beats her. If they defended their rights as a homosexual and woman, they would have an 'ideology' according to the U.S. society, so they would never be heard as they are 'unfaithful' to those who have accepted them in their country; Tristán and Cleófilas remain quiet to be accepted.

KEYWORDS: SANDRA CISNEROS, CHICANO, MULTICULTURALISM, COMMODITIES,  
CONSUMER SOCIETY

Assimilation, or the gradual loss of one's culture for another, cannot be generalized as a homogeneous or guaranteed process for every immigrant, as the experiences change in each context. For example, in some parts of the United States in the 1960s following Civil Rights Movements, discourses of multiculturalism promised non-Anglo immigrants and non-immigrants in the U.S. the possibility to preserve their cultural independence. However, for many immigrants, multiculturalism

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means something else. In Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek*, we are able to find many different Mexican immigrant experiences in the U.S. There are two experiences set in the state of Texas – Cleófilas' in "Woman Hollering Creek," and Tristán's in "Remember the Alamo" – that support the notion that multiculturalism becomes intertwined with consumer society and this leads to a process of violence; the consumer does not accept any form of ideology as such apart from the established one, so multiculturalism is violent because society selects those who can be part of it, concealing arbitrary ways of selection, such as race and sexuality.

For philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who discusses the ways in which racism is present in the capitalist society, multiculturalism is a form of hegemony because it conveys a particular ideology as the predominant one and denies others. The Other should not make their culture explicit because it would be seen as a form of fundamentalism, since for multiculturalism other cultures are seen as, for example, radical or extremist for not living in a secular, liberal society. Žižek exemplifies this notion when explaining the meaning of the Muslim veil in France, and claims that it is accepted only as an expression of the Muslims' idiosyncratic individuality: "even if they are allowed to maintain their belief, this belief is 'tolerated' as their idiosyncratic personal choice/opinion; the moment they present it publicly as what it is for them (a matter of substantial belonging), they are accused of 'fundamentalism.'" In this sense, characters such as Tristán and Cleófilas can exist in the U.S. as 'ideological-less' forms; Cleófilas is the 'tamed' woman who watches *telenovelas* and is beaten by her husband, and Tristán is a figure of entertainment, but they never speak out their realities or defend themselves or their rights, so they are not seen as fundamentalists, and are thus, 'harmless'.

Žižek's notion of multiculturalism as hegemony is opposed to Ellen McCracken's concept of commodities which she sees as a form of insertion in the consumer society. The latter discusses the possibility of Chicano literature (or any text from a minority) could be part of consumer society as a commodity that eventually creates new discourses; readers choose these books because they are exotic and mysterious, but they are presented with unexpected situations, like the dramas of living in a society that does not listen to the ones with less power, so these texts might be able to change the way in which U.S. society sees immigrants. However, McCracken's theory might be considered too 'naïve' for believing such realities could actually change US society.

Tristán, as a transvestite, is immersed in an identity he builds in order to be part of the mainstream. From a liberal, tolerant perspective, the reader empathizes with him because he is proud of being gay and does not care about the ones who treat him as a *maricón*. Žižek's position on multiculturalism explains the contradictory nature of empathy which takes the form of 'tolerance' in some spheres of the U.S.: "this kind of 'respect' for the other is the very form of appearance of its opposite, of patronizing disrespect. The very term 'tolerance' is here indicative: one 'tolerates' something one doesn't approve of, but cannot abolish..." Tolerance becomes a form of hegemony as it is selective regarding whom to include. In this sense, the story itself functions as a form of commodity, but not in the same sense McCracken uses it; the reader perceives the story from his

own perspective, without assimilating the ideology in them, so it does not provoke any change in the way the reader sees immigrants, therefore there is no possibility of creating new discourses.

Multicultural experiences become part of the mainstream, but assimilated into American consumer culture: “[t]he creation of “minority commodities” attempts to reabsorb writers and texts into mainstream ideology as desirable elements of postmodernity that can be purchased and, to some degree, possessed” (McCracken 2). Tristán’s experience can be seen as a comment about the production of minorities as commodities because it supports the view that multiculturalism – the possibility of accepting every culture or belief, such as accepting Tristán as a transvestite – also conceals a form of racism and homophobia; an example of this is that Tristán is accepted by everyone: “[l]ots of people love Tristán like that. Because he dares to be different. To stand out in a crowd” (Cisneros 66). However, he is not really loved because he goes against the established structures of his society, but because he is entertaining as a celebrity, and generates capital for his family. Tristán loves his life because he is like a celebrity. His life is his audience: “*Te quiero, mi querido público*” (Cisneros 67). However, he cannot live as Rudy – his real name and his identity when he does not dress as a transvestite – because it involves a political statement. Tristán prefers, then, to live performing behind the Alamo, which involves no ideology at all. He is assimilated as a show – a cartoon – rather than a real person. Accepting him like a man with ideas would be accepting an ideology of disruption against the expected genders. As a show, Tristán is harmless; but seen as a Mexican gay man, he would be what Žižek describes as a ‘fundamentalist’ from a liberal perspective in the U.S.

Cleófilas’ story also has two sides: the story as part of the book and her story alone. Her life is mainly affected by the constraints of being a woman in the Mexican society of her times: she is almost delivered like a package to Juan Pedro. From this position, there is very little that she can do to change her role as the wife who is beaten. In Cleófilas’ story, domestic violence is portrayed as a process which every Mexican woman has to go through, which is why she does not feel anything at all when it first happens: “[s]he has always said she would strike back if a man, any man, were to strike her... [b]ut when the moment came... she didn’t fight back” (Cisneros 47). This episode only alienates her more from reality; she immerses herself in the world of the *telenovelas* because they make days more bearable.

The limitations of her life clearly show that ideology is not only overcome by consumer society in the U.S., but also by the same society she comes from; her husband makes her more aware of her inferior role as his wife, so there are abusive practices in her home that also limit her life. With this episode, the image of the beaten wife becomes a clear sign of discomfort for the consumer/reader. It also becomes a sign of how she is alone because there is no intention from the consumer to change the structures of this “other” society; in other words, U.S. citizens do not tend to get involved in Mexican immigrants’ lives, unless problems of the latter clash with their lives. Then, Cleófilas’ drama becomes part of the mainstream without ideology; the beaten wife’s story

might be sad and discomfoting, but will probably not make the readers be part of a structural change in the other cultures of the U.S.

Finally, we can see that Žižek's notion of multiculturalism is much more negative than McCracken's; it is a process of assimilation which involves racism, violence and control. From McCracken's view, multiculturalism, although it becomes a product of consumerism, uses the attraction of Latin America as a mystic place as a strategy. In Žižek, every possibility of disruption is lost in the assimilation process. Consumerism involves a form of hegemony, so, in a sense, Chicano texts make Chicanos part of society by taking away their ideology. Although Tristán's life seems much happier than Cleófilas', there are still traces of a diminished image; he is just the gay man of the town who makes everybody have a good time.

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