bitig Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi
Cilt 2 Sayı 4 / 2022

Araştırma makalesi/Research article

Ethnic Identity Perception and Identity Formation in Gary Soto's Selected Short Stories

Gary Soto'nun Seçilmiş Kısa Öykülerinde Etnik Kimlik Algısı ve Kimlik Oluşumu

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Gönderim Tarihi: 08.11.2022 - Kabul Tarihi: 05.12.2022

Öz Bir göçmenler ülkesi olarak ortaya çıkan Amerika Birleşik Devletlerinde, çeşitli etnik grupların yeni kimliklerinin inşası sürecinde bireysel ve toplumsal çatışmalar kaçınılmaz olmuştur. Bu göçmenler bir taraftan kendi kültürlerini korumak isterken diğer taraftan Amerikan kültürüne ve toplumuna da uyum sağlamaya çalışırlar. Söz konusu uyuma koşut ilerleyen kültürleşme ve asimilasyon süreçlerinin düzeyi; kendilerini tanımlama biçimlerini ve mensubu oldukları etnik grubun üyeleri veya diğer Amerikalılar tarafından nasıl tanımlandıklarını da belirler. Amerikan toplumundaki diğer etnik gruplar gibi Meksikalı Amerikalılar da zikredilen çatışma olgusunun dışında kalamazlar. Meksikalı, Amerikalı ya da her ikisi olmak günlük yaşamlarını akla gelebilecek her yönden etkiler. Bu durum şüphesiz Meksikalı Amerikalıların edebiyatına da yansımakta, Meksika kökenli pek çok yazar ve şairin eserinde tanıklanmaktadır. Meksikalı Amerikalı (veya Chicano/a) edebiyatının önde gelen edebî şahsiyetlerinden biri olan Gary Soto'nun eserleri de anılan içsel ve toplumsal çatışmanın yoğun izlerini barındırmaktadır. Öyle ki yazar eserlerinin büyük kısmında kendisini kimlik mücadelesi içine iten deneyimlerini aktarmaktadır. Genellikle bir şair olarak kabul edilen fakat anılarını düz yazı biçiminde yazmış olan Soto'nun "Looking for Work", "The Jacket" ve "The Savings Book" adlı kısa öyküleri, kendisinin sırasıyla çocukluk, ergenlik ve gençlik-yetişkinlik yıllarındaki kimlik dönüşümünü anlatan eserler olarak dikkat çekmektedirler. Bu çalışmada Soto'nun söz konusu üç kısa öyküsü örneğinde, çok kültürlü Amerikan toplumunun bir üyesi olan yazarın öykülerine yansıyan etnik kimlik algısı ve kimlik oluşumunun incelenmesi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: kimlik, Meksikalı-Amerikalı, etnik edebiyat, Gary Soto, anı (hatıra) türü

Abstract In the United States, which emerged as a country of immigrants, individual and social conflicts have been inevitable in the process of constructing new identities of various ethnic groups. While these immigrants want to preserve their culture, they also try to adapt to American culture and society. The level of acculturation and assimilation processes that progress parallel to their adaptation also determine the way the immigrants define themselves and how they are defined by their ethnic group members or other Americans. Mexican Americans, similar to other ethnic groups in American society, cannot stay out of this phenomenon of conflict. Being Mexican, American, or both influence their daily lives in every conceivable way. This situation is undoubtedly reflected in the literature of Mexican Americans, and it is observed in the works of many writers and poets of Mexican origin. The works of Gary Soto, one of the leading literary figures of Mexican American (or Chicano/a) literature, also contain intense traces of the aforementioned internal and social conflicts. In most of his works, the author conveys the experiences that push him into an identity struggle. Soto, who is

generally regarded as a poet, also writes his memoirs in prose and the short stories titled "Looking for Work", "The Jacket", and "The Savings Book" are noteworthy works that describe his ethnic identity perception and formation during his childhood, adolescence, and youth-adulthood, respectively. The aim of this study is to examine the perception of ethnic identity and identity formation in the selected short stories by Soto, who is a member of the multicultural American society.

Keywords: identity, Mexican American, ethnic literature, Gary Soto, memoir

Introduction

Identity formation is a challenging and long journey for most people; all struggle to find their true selves and adapt to the needs of their environments. Yet, this journey becomes more difficult for some than others, especially in the United States. In this country, which is a cradle of many different ethnicities, people from different backgrounds try to decide where they belong within their hyphenated selves. In this regard, as one of the most significant Mexican American writers, Gary Soto stands out with his body of works, including poetry, prose, memoirs, and children's literature, which create a colorful and intimate account of his life as a Chicano in the U.S. In the article "About Gary Soto", Don Lee describes his literature as follows: "the prose collections, which were almost strictly autobiographical, also presented something else that was different: a more mature, ironic, and humorous view of his childhood, finding celebrations of joy amid the hardships of growing up in the barrio" (1995: 191). From this perspective, empathizing with a Chicano boy becomes a rather easy task for the readers as Soto's past, family, memories, ideals, and dreams are narrated very vividly. In this empathy, one can understand his conflicts in forming his identity, the struggle in adapting himself to the ways of American life, and the transformation he experiences during this journey. That is why these autobiographical writings of Soto are very valuable and worth examination in terms of his ethnic identity perception and formation in the multicultural American society. In this context, three short stories of Gary Soto, "Looking for Work", "The Jacket", and "The Savings Book", selected from his collections titled *Living up the Street* (1985) and *The Effects of Knut Hamsun on a Fresno Boy* (2001), will be the focus of analysis to examine Soto's ethnic identity perception and formation by means of his life experiences through the years of childhood to adulthood.

Gary Soto and His Literary Style

Before examining the stories, it may be helpful to provide a brief biography of Soto, as the stories are autobiographical, as well as to have a brief discussion about his literary style. Gary Soto was born on April 12, 1952, and was raised in Fresno, California. He had Mexican American parents who worked in the fields of the San Joaquin Valley, California. When his father died in 1957, the family went through more troubling times than usual. When his mother remarried, they moved to a neighborhood in the industrial part of Fresno, and the family had to work hard to survive. Soto and his siblings, Rick and Debra, also worked in factories and fields, joining the working class of the Mexican American community. The barrio life was very hard for the family. The urban and Spanish-speaking barrios provided a sense of community for immigrant families. However, these neighborhoods also stood ". . . in the shadows of factories that wore down and dehumanized the Chicana/o families . . ." (Tatum 2006: 98). Nonetheless, such conditions did not prevent Soto from finding an interest in literature even though he had poor grades in school. Dennis Abrahams also elaborates on the degree of adversity in actualizing this interest in the biography book about Soto: "It is truly extraordinary that Gary Soto ever became a writer in the first place. He grew up in an older Chicano neighborhood of Fresno, California. His family was poor, and everyone in the family had to work hard just to keep a roof over their heads, food on the table, and clothes on their backs. In such a household, no one has time to read for fun,

to write, or even to dream" (2008: 16). Even though he was not encouraged to pursue a degree at home, Soto decided to continue with his college education and earned a B.A. degree in English from California State University in 1976. He also gained an M.F.A. degree in 1976 from the University of California, where he was the first Mexican American to get one. In the meantime, he held the position of Young People's Ambassador for the United Farm Workers of America, which is the largest organization of farm workers in the U.S. His active years in writing began in 1977, and he continues writing to this day. He also won many awards, including the United States Award of the International Poetry Forum (1976), the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award (1985), and the Hispanic Heritage Award for Literature (1999).

Coming from a humble life, Soto has created a prolific career that made him one of the most prominent and well-known Chicano authors. While he is mostly known as a poet, his prose writing is equally praiseworthy. The short stories chosen for this article fall into the memoir genre, as Soto tells his life story in fragments in these works. In the article "Literary Acculturation: What Makes Ethnic Literature 'Ethnic'", Berndt Ostendorf divides ethnic literature into three categories.

> The forms of ethnic literature are bound to their use:
>
> 1) Literature about immigrants and ethnics written from the point of view (actual or implied) of the dominant culture. The implied audience is the dominant Anglo-bourgeois culture.
>
> 2) Literature for immigrant and ethnic groups written from the point of view of the old culture, often produced in the old country.
>
> 3) Literature evolving out of the ethnic group experience in America written for the group in question and for the larger market.
>
> The shift from outside description to inside vision, from being the object of history to being the subject of one's own history-making, charts the historic development of these literatures and their odyssey of self-determination. (1985: 583)

When the quotation above is considered, Soto's writing belongs to the third category. Soto writes his experiences and memories, placing himself as the subject of identification with his ethnic and American identities. However, he is sometimes criticized for his literary style, which aims for a larger range of readers. He faces such criticisms mostly because his works are deprived of an agenda of identity politics. Soto writes his works, whether poetry or prose, primarily in English. As a third-generation author, he is educated in English, whereas he spoke his native language Spanish only in his ethnic circles. In this regard, the lack of Chicano politics or identity claim in his works mostly stems from his difficult relationship with his ethnic background and American culture. Particularly in the time of *El Movimento*, namely The Chicano Movement in the 1940s and 1950s, ". . . Chicano artists were being pressured to adopt the Zeitgeist of cultural nationalism and anti-establishment rhetoric" (Lee 1995: 190). However, this rhetoric was not something that Soto actively embraces in his works, and therefore he is harshly criticized for that. For instance, Godina and McCoy compare his works to Rudolfo Anaya's and state that Soto

> . . . presently writes stories that reflect a mostly white perspective. Despite Soto's gratuitous integration of colloquial Spanish language and Mexican cultural artifacts, the Mexican American students he portrays in the majority of his novels are English-speaking, assimilated, and unaware of their sociohistorical origin. Soto's interpretations of Mexican culture are adumbrated recollections of a stereotyped Mexican origin. . . . He also favors a more normalizing discourse that remains comforting to white mainstream teachers and publishers, as well as Hispanics attempting to assimilate and distance themselves from more problematic social discourse. (2000: 174 -175)

Such criticisms of Soto's writing come hand in hand with appreciation though. Julián Olivares, for instance, accepts the fact that Soto has a voice that is less political in comparison to other Chicano authors. However, he also admits that this nonpolitical tone of his writing becomes more attractive to a wider range of readers; yet, this attraction is not a negative attribute for him. "Furthermore, through markers and icons that refer to his own cultural context, Soto is not only able to express himself both as an individual and member of an ethnic group, but to simultaneously redirect the Anglo American reader so as to see, for example, an existential theme in the context of a Chicano point-of view" (Olivares 1990: 32-33). That being the case, it is undeniable that Soto chooses a milder and less belligerent tone of writing that reflects his memories, hardships, and experiences as a Mexican American in American society. "'There were a lot of people who couldn't quite understand what I was doing,' Soto recalls. 'They'd say, 'Hey, man, how come you're not talking about things that are political?' I was really groping at the time, and if I had gotten lost in that, I don't think I would have recovered'" (Lee 1995: 91). His sincere reply to such a captious question might make the readers more appreciative of his works, as he offers a chance to understand his position and experiences. Consequently, his approach leaves a space for the reader to make up their minds about the realities of his life in historical, political, and cultural terms.

Another aspect of Soto's prose is that his works carry the characteristics of the *bildungsroman* genre. Also referred to as "formation novel" or "coming-of-age" novel, the term is defined by J. A. Cuddon as such: "Widely used by German critics, it refers to a novel which is an account of the youthful development of a hero or heroine (usually the former). It describes the processes by which maturity is achieved through the various ups and downs of life" (2013: 77). Soto's works, particularly short stories, function in the same way depicted in this definition: they start from an early age, narrate his teenage years, and finally conclude in his adult years. In these stories, chosen to exemplify the bildungsroman aspect and therefore his identity formation, Soto colorfully and vividly tells memories from his childhood or teen years that have formed his Chicano identity. Joseph Campbell sees such journey of a literary character as an archetypal one and states:

> The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth." *A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man*. (2004: 28)

This monomyth can also be observed within Soto's stories in a rudimentary way. His protagonist, whether the child, teen or adult Soto, faces a struggle that creates a conflict within his perception of identity. He questions his existence and place in American society, his family's way of living, the Mexican American community, and their traditions by contrasting them with other ethnic groups or Americans. In each story, a separation/conflict creates an initiation, in other words, a dream that he pursues to level up on the social ladder. However, in the end, after all the adventures he goes through, he returns to his true self and finds a reconciliation to the struggles between his two identities. Tatiana Golban comments on this monomyth journey:

> We perceive the hero's journey as a powerful and recurring archetype which is deeply enrooted in human psyche and therefore fundamental to human existence. This hero's journey corresponds to a process of individual development from a disjointed sense of identity to a consolidated identity, when the individual acquires a clear sense of aspiration in life. In other words, the monomyth reveals human experience, in particular the process of maturation of an individual, the reaching and acknowledgment of the adult self. (2014: 34)

As understood from both Campbell and Golban's suggestions, revealing a character's journey is essential to capture his/her transformation as an individual. While such is an archetypal approach to bildungsroman, it should also be noted that Soto's writing also includes a Marxist aspect. While the stories depict the archetypal journey of Soto in terms of his ethnic identity, they also reveal his journey in terms of class, which plays an indisputable role in Soto's ethnic identity perception and formation. As a member of the working class, Soto and his family struggled and worked a lot to survive. Being immigrants, they did not have access to white-collar occupations; they worked in low-paid and (sometimes) seasonal jobs. In the barrio life of Fresno, Soto always felt the effects of the class struggle of the US in his bones, as a result of this Marxist *Bildung*, he was traumatized as a child, teen, and adult, and this trauma is witnessed throughout his stories. As stated by Paredes, "Soto's characters are not only migrant workers but also the urban poor who go about their profitable business unnoticed by the affluent and the powerful" (1981: 77). While Soto was one of these people back then, today he is noticed by the world thanks to his candid writing.

A Child's Dreams: "Looking for Work"

In Soto's childhood memories, the dilemma of a Mexican American boy about his hyphenated identity is reflected in its purest form through the eyes of an innocent child. "Looking for Work", published in *Living up the Street* (1985), exemplifies the state of Soto when he was nine years old, provides insights about his understanding of ethnic identity, and reveals his self-perception. The themes of ethnicity and social status as well as the symbols he uses become the main aspects of analysis to reveal this understanding and his ethnic identity perception and formation. At the beginning of this story, Soto writes about his attempt to imitate the Anglo families he sees on television and his other endeavor to find work in his neighborhood as a child. What makes these attempts interesting is the motives behind them. The setting of the story is his house and neighborhood in Fresno and it is the summer of 1961. The story opens with those lines: "One July, while killing ants on the kitchen sink with a rolled newspaper, I had a nine-year-old's vision of wealth that would save us from ourselves" (Soto 1992a: 26). As inferred from the quotation, Soto, as a child, is not happy with the way he is, and seeks a way to gain money to "save them from themselves." These lines explain his frustration with the poverty of the family and their social situation. Calling them as "ethnic markers", Olivares comments on the meaning of such incidents: "Within the elements of chaos that Soto selects, there are ethnic markers, which point to the Chicano experience where poverty, violence, desolation and disorientation are facts of barrio existence" (Olivares 1990: 35). These ethnic markers are the most vital aspects of Soto's ethnic identity formation as well; he particularly associates the condition of poverty and desolation with being Chicano.

While he tries to escape from this existence described above, his envy of Anglo families is noticeably observed. Soto creates objects of envy, and television becomes the principal source of the desire for the American dream he yearns for: "For weeks I had drunk Kool-Aid and watched morning reruns of Father Knows Best, whose family was so uncomplicated in its routine that I very much wanted to imitate it. The first step was to get my brother and sister to wear shoes at dinner" (Soto 1992a: 26). As a Mexican American, wearing shoes at dinner is not a cultural item of his daily life, yet in his attempt to be "American", Soto tries to change this habit of his family. After he becomes unsuccessful in this initial action, next morning he decides ". . . to become wealthy, and right away!" (Soto 1992a: 26). After grabbing a rake to clean leaves on a summer day (when there are no leaves), he starts his quest for finding work in the neighborhood. In his childish innocence, he goes from door to door and ultimately his first job becomes to get a Coke for a neighbor and earns a nickel. Then he weeds a flowerbed for another neighbor and earns a quarter and two peaches this time.

Such instances of Soto's acts of envy toward the Anglos can be observed in several parts of the story. As R. Erben and U. Erben suggest, ". . . members of minority groups can either accept the dominant culture's messages or they can reject them. Or they can appropriate cultural symbols of the dominant group and merge them with elements of their own culture, thus turning them into their own culture" (1991-1992: 43). Therefore, Soto stands in the middle of this cultural struggle, a state which Gloria E. Anzaldúa in her famous *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) describes as follows:

> Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision. (1987: 78)

In the cultural collision Soto is in, he becomes rather inclined to accept the mainstream culture in this early childhood period. For example, he asks his mother whether they can have turtle soup like the one he sees on TV, or whether they can dress up for dinner as his friend David King and his family do. As he describes, "David King was the only person we knew who resembled the middle class, called from over the fence. David was Catholic, of Armenian and French descent, and his closet was filled with toys" (Soto 1992a: 31). In that regard, David becomes the symbol of the higher status of ethnic lives in that neighborhood. Soto later sees the "real" dream on TV once again in the program *Leave It to Beaver*:

> This was the summer when I spent the mornings in front of the television that showed the comfortable lives of white kids. There were no beatings, no rifts in the family. They wore bright clothes; toys tumbled from their closets. They hopped into bed with kisses and woke to glasses of fresh orange juice, and to a father sitting before his morning coffee while the mother buttered his toast. They hurried through the day making friends and gobs of money, returning home to a warmly lit living room, and then dinner. (Soto 1992a: 30)

This small paragraph summarizes the lifestyle Soto seeks as a child. The common lifestyle of the 1960s middle class and the American dream he sees on TV constantly remind him of his ethnicity, social status, poverty, and all the other things he does not have. He continues comparing two families, saying: "Whereas Beaver family enjoyed dessert in the dishes at the table, our mom sent us outside and more often than not I went into the alley to peek over the neighbor's fences and spy out fruit, apricot, peaches" (Soto 1992a: 30). These differences between the two family meals, their lack of "American" table etiquette, the fact that Soto's family is without a father figure, and a mother always in the kitchen, thus not being able to spare time for her children, make the other family life more desirable for young Soto. "As might be expected, the two families contrast sharply. Gary's parents are overworked, poor, and live on a diet consisting mainly of tortillas and beans. The Cleaver family, by contrast, combines obvious material wealth with harmony among the family members. But most of all, its polite manners and conversation appeal to Gary" (Erben & Erben 1991-1992: 46). After seeing these images on TV and experiencing them with other people, young Soto says that he ". . . tried to convince them that if we improved the way we looked we might get along better in life." He continues by saying, "White people would like us more. They might even invite us to places, like their homes or front yards. They might not hate us so much" (Soto 1992a: 31). The answer he gets from his sister snaps the reality to his face: "They'll never like us" (Soto 1992a: 31). This dispute of "us vs. them" deeply influences Soto in terms of his origins and identity. While Debra realizes the position of her ethnicity and its meaning in American society, Soto is more of a dreamer who inspires acceptance. "Culture forms our beliefs" says Anzaldúa and continues, "We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture" (1987:

16). In these terms, Soto and Debra constitute different segments of Mexican American community. As a child in the process of constructing his identity, Soto naturally becomes immensely influenced by the society he lives in and sometimes is not happy that he is Mexican American. He yearns for the approval of mainstream society and tries to gain acceptance by imitating their lives. Debra, on the other hand, is aware of the realities of her society even at her young age, and constructs her identity and expectations accordingly.

As the story ends, Soto's journey through his identity struggle ends as he returns to his work search interrupted by these thoughts and experiences. This action signifies his reconciliation with his situation and identity, and thus, it can be seen as an improvement in his self-perception. Soto concludes the story saying, "I felt suddenly alive as I skipped down the block in search of an overgrown flower bed and the dime that would end the day right" (Soto 1992a: 32). Doing what he does in his natural self gives young Soto joy and he feels comfortable in his skin, at least for a brief moment.

An Object of Disappointment: "The Jacket"

The second story to be examined in this article, "The Jacket", is more symbolic than the previous one. Published in *The Effects of Knut Hamsun on a Fresno Boy* (2001), the jacket, the title of the story, becomes the symbol of Soto's ethnicity and social conditions, which he rejects to get along. As a child, the new jacket he asks for from his mother becomes the object of envy this time, and it becomes the embodiment of his frustration with his life. In this short story, he is nearly eleven years old, and it is witnessed that he still struggles in his search for identity and has a poor self-perception that ultimately affects his identity formation. Rodolfo Cartina explains how the perception of ethnicity and identity alters in children as exemplified by Soto himself:

> Within the sphere of influence of the mother and the father, whose authority, genes, and ethnicity push and pull the child this way and that, an innocent child develops his or her identity. With little understanding of what is "normal" or what is acceptable in the adult world, children have no prejudices regarding race or class or gender. Nor have they yet developed an appreciation of the collective story of their people. . . . Then as experience broadens and innocence is diminished, a child may question and reject values or lifestyle of his or her family. Innocence and acceptance may give way to shame or rebellion. (1988: 97)

Cartina's explanation is similar to Soto's experiences. Compared to the first story, he is older now, yet still a child, and therefore he is unable to appreciate or understand his ethnic identity. Growing older, Soto becomes more critical of their lifestyle and feels ashamed due to standing out as a Chicano in American society. This feeling is reinforced by the jacket, which is a loud and clear manifestation of being a Chicano for Soto. "My clothes have failed me," writes Soto right at the beginning of the story (Soto 2000: 6). He is frustrated with how he is dressed at his young age, and as a boy who inspires to be more "American." This situation becomes problematic for him, creates a poor perception of his ethnic identity, and leaves a mark on his identity formation. In his goal of bettering himself, he asks for a black leather jacket similar to the ones that bikers wear: "black leather and silver studs with enough belts to hold down a small town" (Soto 2000: 6). While he is certain that his mother understands his specific request, he becomes crushed when he sees what he gets. Instead of the biker jacket, he gets a "day-old guacamole" color jacket that he despises.

He describes his first encounter with the jacket: "I threw my books on the bed and approached the jacket slowly, as if it were a stranger whose hand I had to shake" (Soto 2000: 6). The quintessence of the jacket creates frustration for him, and he hopes it was not meant for him, but for his brother. Yet, this jacket seems to be the only one he can acquire in their economic conditions. Soto explains his feelings about this situation in a

rather sad mood: "I wanted to cry because it was so ugly and so big that I knew I have to wear it a long time. I was a small kid, thin as a young tree and it would be years before I'd have a new one. I stared at the jacket, like an enemy, thinking bad things before I took off my old jacket whose sleeves climbed halfway through my elbow" (Soto 2000: 6). The jacket, as his Chicano identity, is something that he unwillingly owns, and as a child, he cannot make choices, because he is dependent on his mother, and the life she offers him. The symbolic connotation of this jacket as "the enemy" becomes an identity marker that gives out his Chicano existence and this condition bothers young Soto deeply. That being the case, the jacket also harms his self-esteem greatly. At an age when a child seeks to be accepted by his/her peers, clothes become more important for social approval. Unfortunately, this is something Soto cannot achieve as witnessed in this story, not because of the jacket, but the insecurity and low self-esteem it employs on him.

> I put the big jacket on. I zipped it up and down several times, and rolled the cuffs up so they didn't cover my hands. I put my hands in the pockets and flapped the jacket like a bird's wings. I stood in front of the mirror, full face, then profile, and then looked over my shoulder as if someone had called me. I sat on the bed, stood against the bed, and combed my hair to see what I would look like doing something natural. I looked ugly. (Soto 2000: 6-7)

This lack of self-esteem negatively influences his identity perception, as he begins accusing his mother of such a choice. Such strife with the jacket and the "Latina" taste of his mother in clothes make him attribute many meanings to the item.

He begins getting poor grades, as he has to wear it to school every day and worries so much about his "ugly" look in it. Though not really experiencing, he feels that he is ridiculed even by his teachers: "The teachers were no help: they looked my way and talked about how foolish I looked in my new jacket. I saw their heads bob with laughter, their hands half-covering their mouths" (Soto 2000: 7). The reaction that he gets from the authority figures such as his teachers results in the loss of his confidence more than ever. His friends also put on a similar attitude. One incident that he feels rather embarrassed about occurs when he has to walk the entire path to school, passing other students: "We paraded out into the yard where we, the fifth graders, walked past all the other grades to stand against the back fence. Everybody saw me. Although they didn't say out loud, 'Man, that's ugly,' I heard the buzzbuzz of gossip and even laughter that I knew was meant for me" (Soto 2000: 8). Such heartbreak of humiliation further increases when he loses the interest of his female friends: "Even the girls who had been friendly blew away like loose flowers to follow the boys in neat jackets" (Soto 2000: 8).

Such disappointment and worry he carried for three years traumatize Soto. While wanting to be American, he is hindered by his family, his appearance and even his clothes. "I blame that jacket for those bad years," he says and continues, "I blame my mother for her bad taste and her cheap ways. It was a sad time for the heart" (Soto 2000: 8). The jacket is what his mother could afford in the poor conditions they live in. Yet, in his childish incapability of understanding such matters, Soto becomes deeply frustrated and wears the jacket for three years until he outgrows it. In the meantime, the jacket peels off, and the tear his dog had caused on the very first day he wore it gradually grows bigger. Even though he tapes the tear, the tape keeps falling off, aggravating the heartbreak he feels because of the existence of the jacket. The tear becomes analogous to his Chicano identity, which continually bothers him but it stays apparent no matter how hard he tries to cover it. This tear recalls a term defined by Ruben G. Rumbaut. He calls the experiences of immigrant children the "crucible within" (1994: 752). This term includes,

> . . . their modes of ethnic or national self-identification, perceptions of discrimination, aspirations for their adult futures, cultural preferences, forms of intergenerational cohesion or conflict within their families, self-esteem and psychological well-being, and how these may be related to more objective indices of their experience, such as their

> school and work performance and language shifts from the mother tongue to English, given in social context. (1994: 752)

In this context, the "crucible within", which these children experience, is the core of their identities along with all its connotations mentioned above. The jacket for that matter becomes one of Soto's crucibles that he carries during these childhood years and influences his ethnic identity perception and formation. Like the tear, his frustration also grows bigger. When the jacket begins to be worn out, he confronts his mother about it:

> That winter the elbows began to crack and whole chunks of green began to fall off. I showed the cracks to my mother, who always seemed to be at the stove with steamed up glasses, and she said there were children in Mexico who would love that jacket. I told her that this was America and yelled that Debbie, my sister, didn't have a jacket like mine. I ran outside, ready to cry, and climb the tree by the alley to think bad thoughts, and breathe puff white and disappear. (Soto 2000: 9)

Soto's mother, a second-generation Mexican American woman, still carries her Mexican cultural traits more than American cultural impositions. On the other hand, Soto is more immersed in the practices of the country they live in, and the conflict between him and his family, therefore, reaches a climax with this confrontation. Reminding her that they live in America, not in Mexico, Soto feels frustrated standing at the very intersection of his identities. "The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza's dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness," says Anzaldúa, perhaps depicting Soto's situation in the best possible way (1987: 78). His restlessness results in the need to get rid of the jacket, in other words, Chicano part of his identity: "When it became so spotted that my brother began to call me 'camouflage,' I flung it over the fence into the alley. Later, however; I swiped the jacket off the ground and went inside to drape it across my lap and mope" (Soto 2000: 9).

Similar to the story "Looking for Work", Soto again rejects his ethnic self, has poor self-reception, and struggles to find his identity. While trying to be American, his Mexican side follows him one way or the other. Yet, as in the previous story, he accepts the presence of the jacket after a long conflict in the end: "I started up the alley and soon slipped into my jacket, that green ugly brother who breathed over my shoulder that day and ever since" (Soto 2000: 9). As these are the last lines of the story, the start of his actual reconciliation with himself and his roots becomes more apparent. This reconciliation becomes a defining moment in his identity formation; he makes up his peace with being both Mexican and American.

The Proof of Poorness: "The Savings Book"

The last short story chosen for this study is "The Savings Book", published in *Living up the Street* (1985), and this time narrator Soto is an adult. In the story, the author provides a double consciousness, a teenage one and an adult one. He remembers the first time he opened a bank account on May 27, 1969, and the hardships he endured during his teenage years. The story begins with these lines: "My wife, Carolyn, married me for my savings: Not the double digit figures but the strange three or four dollar withdrawals and deposits. The first time she saw my passbook she laughed until her eyes became moist and then hugged me as she called 'Poor baby.' And there was truth to what she was saying: Poor" (Soto 1992b: 138). The savings book in question, which he opened for the first time when he was seventeen, demonstrates his economic troubles. In the previous short stories, Soto has chosen specific envy objects or situations, which designated his acculturation process, ethnic identity perception and formation. This time, the troubles he has suffered as a child somehow transform into a fear of being poor in Soto's adulthood. The savings book becomes the fundamental symbol of his past and hardships as a Chicano member of American society.

In the previous stories, Soto shows an effort to be active in American economic and cultural life to better his position in society. The poorness of Soto's family has led them to work in various jobs. Before opening the account, Soto works in a cotton field in Fresno with his brother and he earns fourteen dollars. He and his brother do not spend this hard-earned money like the other workers. The poor conditions they live in lead Soto to spare as much money as possible, leaving him with a fear that greatly influences his identity formation. Remembering the day he earned fourteen dollars for eight hours of work, Soto narrates:

> We returned home in the back of a pickup with fourteen dollars each . . . . That day my brother and I wouldn't spring for Cokes or sandwiches, as most everyone else on our crew did when a vending machine truck drove up at lunch time, tooting a loud horn. . . . We looked on from the shade of the bus, sullen and most certainly sensible. Why pay forth cents when you could have slapped together your own sandwich. That was what our mother had done for us. (Soto 1992b: 138)

Such prudence to keep his money leads Soto to withdraw his money dollar by dollar: he first took four dollars for a belt, then three dollars and twenty-five cents to buy a shirt, all of which is to look more professional in his new job, which is encyclopedia selling. This job demonstrates the harsh realities of American society, as he is only able to sell these books to poor families by raising their hopes of bettering themselves. "But in reality," he says, "few welcomed my presence on their doorsteps and the only encyclopedias I sold that summer were to families on welfare who so desperately wanted to rise from their soiled lives. Buy a set, I told them, and your problems will disappear. Knowledge is power. Education is the key to the future, and so on. The contracts, however, were rescinded and my commission with them" (Soto 1992b: 139). For these people, the possibility of stepping up the ladder in society and achieving the American Dream becomes an ideal that might come true by buying encyclopedias.

> . . . the modern world was fashioned on the promise that one could change one's own circumstances of birth and become whatever one would like to become. And that is basis for most advertising campaigns: buy this product and change who you are—whether this product is an automobile, an exercise machine, or a program to buy real estate with no money down—and you will become a sex symbol or a millionaire. And people buy the products because they want to believe they can change, but most do not. (Cortina 1988: IM-51)

Within this context, even though these people dream that they may change themselves and their circumstances by buying the encyclopedias, the stern reality is that being poor precedes being cultured. As stated by Paredes, "Soto's harshest truth is that we live in a zero-sum world, that the rich are rich only because others are poor and that while some have realized the American Dream, others are invisibly living the American Nightmare" (1981: 77). As this is the case, Soto's attempt of being a salesperson ends in failure and frustration. "Finally I was fired, my briefcase taken away, and the company tie undone from my neck. I walked home in the summer heat despairing at the consequence: No new clothes for the fall" (Soto 1992b: 139).

Even though he could not buy new clothes that fall, at the end of the next summer, he earns more money than before by working in a tire factory. As a senior in high school, Soto spends that money, of course, on clothes but ". . . never for food, record albums, or concerts" (Soto 1992b: 140). Compared to the previous story, "The Jacket", and the frustration Soto had with his clothes as a child, it is seen that this emotion hauled itself to his teenage years; he spends his money always on clothing: "On September 15, for instance, I withdrew fifteen dollars for a shirt and jeans. On September 24 I again stood before the teller to ask for six dollars. I bought a sweater at the Varsity Shop at Coffee's" (Soto 1992b: 140). He continues listing how much money he withdrew and points out that he used this account for almost five years. What is noteworthy is that the account stands

for Soto as the manifestation of his ethnic existence that is associated with being poor: "By the time I finally closed my account, it had fluctuated for five years, rising and falling as a barometer to my financial quandary. . . . My savings book [which he kept for all these years] is a testimony to my fear of poverty – that by saving a dollar here, another there, it would kept me at bay" (Soto 1992b: 140). All his experiences as a Mexican American individual growing up in poverty shape his identity and came out as a fear leading him to keep track of his money in a meticulous way.

The most traumatizing aspect of these stories, aside from Soto's residing anxiety of being poor, is perhaps the fear of starving: "I admit as a kid I worried about starving, although there we probably no reason. . . . But when I was older the remembrance of difficult times stayed with me: The time Mother was picking grapes and my brother ate our entire lunch while my sister and I played under the vines. For us there was nothing to eat that day. . . . I had not been born to be scared out of my wits, but that is what happened" (Soto 1992b: 141). The way his identity is formed, thus, is extremely dependent on the struggles and traumatic experiences he had when he was a child and a teenager. While he hopes for a better life promised by the American Dream, he gets a childhood and youth full of frustrations and worries. He writes about an instance that particularly demonstrates this situation in a more obvious way: "Through a set of experiences early in my life, I grew up fearful that some financial tragedy would strike at any moment. . . . During the recession [of 1973] I roomed with my brother and I suggested that we try to become vegetarians. My brother looked up from his drawing board and replied: 'Aren't we already?'" (Soto 1992b: 141).

These experiences make him even more anxious about the recession and the lack of food he might face. For Soto, as it may be guessed, even such a possibility is something he should be prepared for. He remembers the time he bought more than enough peanut butter and beans to stock:

> At that time Carolyn put up with my antics, so when I suggested that we buy fifty dollars of peanut butter and pinto beans to store under her bed, she happily wrote out a check because she was in love and didn't know any better. I was certain that in 1974 the country would slide into depression and those who were not prepared would be lost. We hid the rations in the house and sat at the front window to wait something to happen. (Soto 1992b: 141-142)

This anxiety of Soto and the scars it left in his soul do not entirely go away; they become key aspects of his ethnic identity perception and formation. However, he admits that he becomes more relaxed after his marriage to Carolyn. At the end of the story, similar to the previous stories, Soto again makes his peace with his position in life and says, "I still fear the worst, but the worst is not what it was once. Today I bought a pair of shoes; tomorrow I may splurge to see a movie, with a box of popcorn and a large soda that will wash it all down. It's time to live, I tell myself, and if a five dollar bill flutters from my hands, no harm will result. I laugh at the funny scenes that aren't funny, and I can't think of any better life" (Soto 1992b: 142).

Conclusion

These three short stories by Gary Soto brilliantly exemplify the life of a Mexican American child, teen, and adult in American society. By providing his memories and experiences, Soto depicts the hardships and struggles of ethnicity in addition to how these accumulate to form distinct ethnic identities. As R. Erben and U. Erben state: "From early childhood on, television and other socializing forces inundated him with images of mainstream America. He grew up in a multicultural environment, participated in both Anglo and Chicano culture . . ." (1991-1992: 51). Thus, Soto narrates memories from his life that reflect his struggle with ethnicity as well as the social and economic conditions that shape his identity. In fact, as Paredes states,

> In all his work, Soto establishes his acute sense of ethnicity and, simultaneously his belief that certain emotions, values, and experiences transcend ethnic boundaries and allegiances. . . . Together, Soto's ethnic and class consciousness constitute an essential part of his literary sensibility. His recollections, from childhood to his current position as a Berkeley professor, are punctuated by flashes of endured bigotry and his awareness that in the United States to be "Mexican" generally means to be poor. (1981: 125-126)

In the first story, "Looking for Work", Soto dreams of getting rich and having a life similar to Americans. However, the harsh realities of his life take his dreams away as he gets older. In the second story, "The Jacket", Soto creates a symbol and an envy object, which scars his childhood aspirations. The frustration he experiences in these two stories definitely displays the mind of a child who lives through constant identity struggles resulting from the conflicts of his Chicano and American identities. In the last story, "The Savings Book", Soto tells how the first savings account he opened and the book of that account become a manifestation of his poorness. By providing flashbacks to his teenage years, adult Soto narrates how these instances shape his identity.

> As can be seen, the formation of the self is not a given. It is process that begins well before our birth—when our parents pick out names and dream of who we are going to be when we grow up—and continues well after our death, when friend and loved ones remember only the best times with us, and our enemies recall only the bitter moments. The self is, therefore, who we are, who we think we are, who we would like to be, and who others we are, all of it over time. (Cortina 1988: IM-53)

In this context, the stories examined in this article reflect the conditions that lay down the grounds for Soto's ethnic identity perception and formation. Being ethnic in America and choosing to preserve or give up the traits of ethnic identity become very intricate issues regarding identity formation. As Anzaldúa claims, ". . . we don't identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness" (1987: 63). In this context, these stories provide a glance at the state of Soto and ultimately other Mexican Americans. Nevertheless, even though Soto experiences a negative or poor perception of his ethnicity at the beginning of these stories, he figures out a reconciliation, an acceptance of his identity as the stories end. Accepting his ethnicity and releasing the anxiety about his identity in the end of these stories give the reader a hopeful view, an affirmation of Soto's acceptance of his identities. In this respect, Soto stands as one of the most significant Mexican American writers who articulate Chicano experiences and struggles in the US in the most salient way possible.

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