

El Otro Cachete

By Julio César Guerrero

I grew up in Monterrey about three hours south of the Texas border raised by my grandmother, while my mother was a U.S. born citizen resettled in Corpus Christi. Born in Laredo, her family -- like many others -- would come north to work at the turn of the last century, a pattern that was altered by the great depression of 1929.

During the following ten years, the US government saw Mexican labor as a burden on the economy and implemented a Repatriation program by which hundreds of thousands of families including their US born children ended up in Mexico. She grew up and got married in Mexico until she decided to return to Texas, claiming her U.S. citizenship, where coincidentally, she met and married another repatriado born in Chicago but raised in Guadalajara.

Despite inherent limitations in Monterrey, our standard of living would float up every other week when a ten dollar check arrived by certified mail from across the border. U.S. remittances after all are a key factor in the Mexican economy and our working class “colonia” wasn’t the exception. At least for a few days our grandmother turned our barrio life into a first-world quality existence. After paying off everything she had bought on credit, Guela Pepa would spend the rest on food only common in middle class tables or diets. I’m talking about steak, fresh fruit, salads, licuados, cake, ice cream and hot cakes, along with the customary northern Mexican dishes. We were poor, but we never went hungry.

I do not remember it being a specific time of the month when the check would arrive, but Guela would make it a special day. Just in case, she was ready with a tall, ice cold glass of lemonade and a big tip for the mailman when she was asked to sign for the certified mail. Thinking back, I bet the entire circle of her close friends would in one way or another find out or even benefit from the periodic stipend. It was customary in such a close-knit colonia for women to share food with their neighbors.

My grandmother was the kindest soul ever but just the same, she could display a terrifying temper that was as loud as a thunderstorm. This domestic psychosis I realized in time is common when a single parent plays both parental roles.

My friends would say “when Doña Pepita is angry, even

the sun hides behind the clouds.” She knew all the boys I hung out with, and although she had her favorites, she liked most of them.

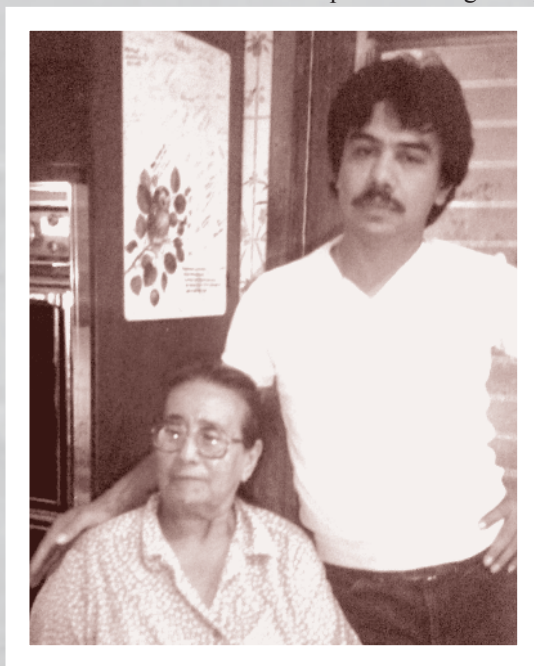
I can look back and recall more than twenty names and characters I knew in my early teens. We mostly hung out and spent time together, played soccer, baseball, went swimming, camping, and tried to entertain ourselves in any other way, such as going to house parties, school activities, and the like.

I would not characterize our group as a gang, if I were looking for a definition.

If my understanding of the gang culture is accurate, a gang provides its members with support, safety, and security they lack at home, so the gang becomes the family the members don’t feel they have at home. This was not the case in our barrio where everybody had a nuclear family and divorce was practically unknown.

In fact, I was the exception to the norm with mom being absent: me, and my best and closest friend Chuy, whose father was absent too and lived with his grandfather, mother, and sister.

Undoubtedly economics play a key role in social stability, and although we were at the lower working class level, every head of the household had a job. These were the good old days when the dad’s salary was enough to sustain a modest but decent lifestyle and the mothers were able to stay home. Such level of sustainability was possible then in Monterrey, being the industrial capital in the north of Latin America, rivaling only Sao Paulo in the south end of the cone.



1973 with grandmother, Josefa Villanueva, Corpus Christi, TX.



1957 in Monterrey, Mx, Colonia Fabriles

Monterrey's industrial complex has made it a magnet for regional migration where people come to find better means of employment and education. In fact, it was noted as the city with the nation's largest iron and steel foundry, which literally fed our barrio with jobs and derivative economy. It is also a center for a major cement producer, including a wide range of light manufacturing, such as glass and beverages. The city also attracts migrants that see Monterrey as a stepping stone before trekking into the U.S.

Social functionality was also evident in the form of a drug-free community. I do not remember seeing, witnessing, or even hearing activities related to drug use such as marijuana or cocaine. The only recreational substances were cigarettes and alcohol in the form of beer or cheap booze, mostly done by the older boys. In my case I didn't try either until I was 18 and at that age it was cultural and socially accepted.

These recreational substances were available to most of the older boys who were gainfully employed in a variety of fields as barbers, electricians, mechanics, white collar clerks, or retail.

I've noticed in some of the novels from the first half of the 1900's that chronicle or romanticize organized youth culture, they point to the systemic use of nicknames or pseudonyms as part of the group membership. Such representation or identification would point to geographical origin (nortefi), physical appearance (skinny), mannerism (pachuco), occupation (mechanic) and or animal references (cat, horse). I suppose an entire thesis can be written on the cause or reason for the use of pseudonyms, but the case is that we never or seldom used them in our own group. The closest were nicknames such as Chuy for Jesus, Lino

for Marcelino or Polan for Froilan.

If we had no use for pseudo-names, I would have to go back to our psychological stability as a social group.

Only that if you're left-handed, there's no way out of being called "zurdo" (lefty), especially because you're automatically associated to an innate sports skill or aptitude. Such was the case with El Zurdo, of whom I only knew his last name Llanas; indeed he had a great arm for baseball and his built made him a great defense in soccer.



1971 Quinto Sol radio studio, Lansing, MI

He was all muscle, big and husky, and to a small kid like me, he appeared like a gentle giant. He could be funny and witty, but I often thought I'd feel sorry for anyone who found himself opposite to him in a fist-fight. I always thought of El Zurdo as someone who would try to escape el barrio by reading, someone who tacitly looked for a way out as he carried a book in his back pocket. Ironically what eventually put him down was not any physical rivalry but, in trying to get away, he tried religion and booze and eventually succumbed to a lethal combination

of evangelization and alcohol.

Unlike El Zurdo, I didn't have a back pocket book but a long range plan to come north, knowing that eventually I would join my mother in Texas. This was reinforced by occasional visits to Corpus Christi. I also remember growing up with a love-hate image of the US and what it represents. It's like a schizophrenic reaction to the ever presence of the northern propaganda machine from the marketing of commercial products, the I Love Lucy type television programs to the top forty rock and roll filling our minds and senses along with the full awareness of being colonized politically, economically, and culturally.

I remember immersing in the sounds of rock but at the same time joining preparatory school students' protest marches to the US Consulate chanting "¡¡¡Yankis no, Gringas si ...!!!". Indeed, the US-Mexican War, an armed conflict by which the United States claimed ownership of half of the Mexican territory, left a permanent scar in the two countries' history. The signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848 that legalized the Rio Grande as the international border might have ended the war but not the conflict.

One could say that The Rio Grande is for Mexicans what Waterloo is for Napoleon. What for some is a border marker, for Mexicans is a scar deeply embedded in their ethos. It's no wonder some Mexicans refer going north to "ir al otro cachete," which literally translates into "going to the other cheek", turning the infamous river into a major asshole.

Bio: Julio César Guerrero earned a Master's degree in both social work and telecommunications at the University of Michigan. He recently worked nonstop as the national coordinator for Caravana43, an international support network for Ayotzinapa families of the 43 disappeared students in Guerrero, Mexico, when they made their tour through the U.S.

El Rio Grande