

Socialist Realism and the Success of *Famous All Over Town*

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The novel *Famous All Over Town*, first published in 1983, used to be a highly regarded contribution to Chicano literature.¹ The poignancy and realism of the coming-of-age story were heightened because it was told in the first person and by someone who had personally experienced life on the increasingly mean streets of East Los Angeles. Moreover, the author's own success served as a beacon for Hispanic youth looking for positive role models: Danny Santiago had overcome adversity, had risen from the ghetto of ethnicity and written a best-seller. If he could do it, so could they. A pop-rock song by Eryn Charles entitled "Famous All Over Town" echoed the book's message: "We're gonna be famous / All over town / Everyone will know / Your name and mine / I'm doing it for us."² Mainstream critics were equally impressed. The book won the Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award for fiction in 1984 from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the PEN President's Award a year later.³ Teachers and librarians added *Famous All Over Town* to lists of required and recommended reading for those seeking authentic documents of the minority experience. In an article entitled "The Diversity Connection: Taking Responsibility for What We Teach," Eileen I. Oliver pointed out that the book "helps students connect with life in the barrio."⁴

The reception turned negative and indeed hostile when John Gregory Dunne revealed "The Secret of Danny Santiago" in the *New York Review of Books* (16 August 1984).⁵ "Danny Santiago" was the pseudonym of Daniel Lewis James (1911–1988), scion of a well-to-do white American family. He was educated in Classics at Yale and already in his seventies when he wrote the book. In short, he was neither Chicano nor from a lower-class background nor uneducated nor young. The reaction ranged from consternation to anger. How could James have managed to dupe the publishers and the critics? How did an elderly affluent

¹ Danny Santiago (pseud. for Daniel L. James), *Famous All Over Town: A Novel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983). Subsequent references are to the 1984 paperback edition (New York: Penguin, 1984) and are cited parenthetically in the text.

² See <http://home.att.net/~ecsongs/alllyrics.html>, accessed 20 June 2006.

³ "James, Daniel (Lewis)," *Contemporary Authors: Volume 125*, ed. Hal May and Susan M. Trosky (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989) 229.

⁴ Eileen I. Oliver, "The Diversity Connection: Taking Responsibility for What We Teach," *Alan Review* 25.3 (Spring 1998), e-journal, no pagination [paragraph 16], accessed 30 October 2004. <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/spring98/diversity.html>

⁵ John Gregory Dunne, "The Secret of Danny Santiago," *New York Review of Books* 31.13 (16 August 1984): 17–18; 20; 22; 24–27.

white author dare to appropriate the voice as well as the topics of minority writing? The Before Columbus Foundation sponsored a symposium at the Modern Times Bookstore in San Francisco on the question "Danny Santiago: Art or Fraud," with the consensus opinion of those who participated leaning toward the accusation of fraud.⁶

The problem of how to respond to *Famous All Over Town* now that it can no longer be taken as a straightforward document of the Hispanic experience has become enmeshed with two ongoing controversies. Both are concerned with authenticity. One attempts to salvage works such as James's under the rubric of "literatura chicanesca," that is, as "a body of literature written about the Chicano/a experience by a non-Chicana/o writer."⁷ Even though they lack the key credential of membership in the other community, writers familiar with and sympathetic to the group might well be able to produce reliable accounts, much as anthropologists do in fieldwork. This would legitimate James's text, since he and his wife had acquired an extensive knowledge of the Hispanic community.⁸ There is some suggestion that James felt himself to be so close to the members of the Hispanic community that he felt that he could speak from their vantage point. Nevertheless, he remained uneasy about presuming to do so: "Verdugo, Rios and many other *Latinos* whom he had come to know well during those 25 years supported his work and his identity as Danny Santiago: they did not understand and thus could not appease Danny's apprehensions regarding disclosure of the James behind the Santiago."⁹

Another effort attempts to redeem James as an author from the charge of literary fraud by arguing that the novel is about his own life rather than that of the fictional narrator. *Famous All Over Town* would thus be a revealing, genuine document that reflects James's personal experience of political oppression. The plausibility of this suggestion rests upon the fact that James—who had developed strong communist sympathies during the 1930s despite his upper-class origins and who had collaborated on the script for Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*—saw his Hollywood career destroyed when he was blacklisted in 1951.¹⁰ For nearly two decades he withdrew from public life, writing screenplays under the name "Daniel Hyatt" and then emerging as "Danny Santiago" in 1965. Against this background, Laura Browder suggests that Danny Santiago was an alter ego through which James was able to forge a new, strong public identity and to avenge himself against the repressive America that had wrecked his life:

⁶ Alberto Huerta, SJ, "Daniel Lewis James (1911–1988): Socrates and Santiago in California," *The Californians* (November–December 1988) 51.

⁷ Hector A. Torres, "The Ethnographic Component in Chicano/a Literary Discourse," *Aztlan* 25.1 (Spring 2000): 159.

⁸ Huerta 49–50.

⁹ Huerta 51.

¹⁰ "James, Daniel," *Contemporary Authors* 125: 229; Dunne 17.

“Just as Chato writes to get his revenge on those who have harmed him, so was Daniel James, though his translation into Danny Santiago, able to, trickster-style, escape from an identity that was imposed on him by the blacklist and gain his freedom.”¹¹ The main object to Browder’s analysis is its implicit assumption that James wrote himself into the novel without a full awareness of what he was doing. The lingering influence of New Criticism’s dismissal of authorial intention as a critical fallacy means that Browder must read *Famous All Over Town* as though it were a subtle allegory whose implications can only be decoded by cunning academics. For her, the novel is a sort of clever game played for private reasons.

I want to propose an alternative reading, namely that *Famous All Over Town* reveals that James never abandoned the socialist principles he had learned during the social and economic crises of the Depression. Although he was denied access to the public, he clung to his ideals and bided his time until he was able to publish an orthodox Marxist critique of capitalism in the U.S. What makes this event interesting is how, in the guise of an ethnic Bildungsroman, James was able to deploy the aesthetics of socialist realism so successfully when the received opinion is that politically engaged art must fail in the marketplace. Socialist realism is scorned as boring because predictable, irrelevant because political, forgettable because stereotyped, jejune because ideological.¹² Yet in this instance, where the overt directness of the narration and the simplicity of the style could be attributed to the deficiencies of a Chicano author, critics were captivated by the novel. Dunne, who first outed James/Santiago, specifically lauded the book’s lack of political themes: “There is no trace of the didacticism of *Winter Soldier*, no hint of the author’s history, either of his communism or his apostasy. This is not social realism, not a proletarian novel” (26). David Quammen wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*: “*Famous All Over Town* is an honest steady novel that presents some hard cultural realities while not for a paragraph failing to entertain. I am totally ignorant of the Chicano urban experience but I have to believe this book is, on that subject, a minor classic. And Danny Santiago is good news.”¹³ A reviewer in the *New Yorker* conflated the author and the narrator: “The ending is not really satisfactory—abrupt, inconclusive, and dangling—but Mr. Santiago (or, rather, Chato) seems to promise a sequel.”¹⁴ George Kearns in the *Hudson Review* stressed the novel’s realism: “Fiction could not be less pretentious, nor more confident in its mimetic power: there’s an amazing world

¹¹ Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) 268.

¹² See, for example, Philip Rahv’s “Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy [1939],” in his *Literature and the Sixth Sense* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970) 7–20; Lily Wiatrowski Phillips, “W.E.B. Du Bois and Soviet Communism: *The Black Flame* as Socialist Realism,” *Socialist Realism without Shores*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 277–78; and Nicholas V. Riasnovsky, *A History of Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) 586–87.

¹³ *New York Times Book Review*, 24 April 1983: 12.

¹⁴ *New Yorker* 59.11, 2 May 1983: 129.

out there, and words can do a lot to capture it.”¹⁵ Fortunately, the acquisition editors at Simon & Schuster were no better equipped to grasp the politics of *Famous All Over Town* than Dunne, for otherwise the novel would probably have been bluntly rejected as political hack work. James had craftily used the techniques of socialist realism, the aesthetic that to this day is considered by many in the U.S. to be inimical to all creative writing, and produced a best-seller.

Aside from the curiosity that one of his distant relatives was the outlaw Jesse James,¹⁶ nothing in Daniel James’s social origins indicated that he would develop a firm commitment to socialism. His family had made their fortune in Kansas City, Missouri, as manufacturers and distributors of fine china. A measure of their wealth was the splendid mansion built for them on a cliff in Carmel Highlands, California, between 1918 and 1923 by the distinguished architect Charles Greene.¹⁷ Carmel then as now was home to the very rich, but, much to their displeasure, it also attracted a number of left-wing intellectuals, including Langston Hughes, Ella Winter, and Charlie Chaplin.¹⁸ Chaplin stayed with the James’s and became familiar with Daniel, who was by then an active member, the “spark plug,” of the local John Reed Club.¹⁹ With chapters throughout the USA, John Reed Clubs were a forum where leftist writers and workers could meet, exchange ideas, present their works, and educate each other about socialism.²⁰ James referred obliquely to this period when he contrasted his life with that of the protagonist in *Famous All Over Town*: “Of course, he has none of the advantages that I had. He didn’t go to college, and didn’t study Marxism.... But Chato and I are also very much alike.... His ruined street became all the constructs of my past, including the Communist Party, which had collapsed for me.”²¹ The loss of faith in the Communist Party had been capped, as it was for many fellow-travellers, when the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany on 23 August 1939. However, James remained optimistic that literature could yet teach useful political lessons, as in his play *Winter Soldiers* (1942).

¹⁵ George Kearns, “World Well Lost,” *Hudson Review* 36.3 (1983): 559.

¹⁶ Huerta 52–53.

¹⁷ See <http://www.geocities.com/SiliconValley/Orchard/8642/cgreene.html>, accessed 20 June 2006.

¹⁸ Arnold Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume I, 1902–1914: I, Too, Sing America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 277–81.

¹⁹ Nancy Quam-Wickham, “In Search of Labor’s Culture,” *Labor History* 98.3 (August 1998): 328.

²⁰ Eberhard Brüning, “Progressive American Writers’ Organizations and Their Impact on Literature during the Nineteen Thirties,” *American Literature and the Contemporary Ideological Struggle: The Novel between the World Wars*, ed. Günther Klotz and Heinz Wüstenhagen (Potsdam: Wissenschaftlich-Technisches Zentrum der Pädagogischen Hochschule “Karl Liebknecht” Potsdam, 1986) 149–61.

²¹ Quoted by Torres 160; my ellipsis.

Socialist realism in literary production has varied over time and under different conditions,²² but the constant requirements have been that art should explore actual social and political issues so that readers can learn, discuss, and act, all under the aegis of Marxist philosophy. While James adheres to the agenda, he is by no means slavishly dogmatic. Instead, he has adapted the principles to the situation at hand. A quick insight into James's contempt for the mystifications perpetrated by apolitical writing and criticism is presented by the scene in *Famous All Over Town* where the teacher is trying to persuade her skeptical students that "we read for pleasure" (75). She openly advocates escapism: "A good book can whisk us off to India or deep into past ages, can it not? Reading takes us out of our little lives and opens whole worlds for us to roam in" (75). The students, however, insist that literature must be practical and address genuine problems, such as the need to get into college and to be able to read labels and street signs. Miss Bontempo unabashedly defends art that will inculcate political quietism: "For instance, from Pancho we can see how patience is rewarded when he proves himself. Isn't that the best way for us to deal with Discrimination?" (75).

By contrast, *Famous All Over Town* offers readers a stark appraisal of a world governed by material conditions. The needs of the body for food, shelter, and gentle touching are paramount. People must work in order to get food and shelter and in order to establish families. There is nothing romantic about the contemporary working environment: "It seemed that temporarily Armando was making the potato salad over at X-Cell Packing which he did in a cement mixer, feeding in the potatoes and hard-boiled eggs by shovel and the mayonnaise by hose" (108). Alert readers may recognize a gesture to *The Jungle* (1906), Upton Sinclair's exposé of conditions in Chicago meat-packing plants and a model for socialist-realist writers.

An important task of socialist realism is to make the functioning of economic systems tangible, so that readers can transfer the analyses to their own situation and develop valid critiques. In *Famous All Over Town*, Chato observes how otherwise invisible economic forces exert control. One night, "when everybody was asleep" (120), signs appear in the neighborhood to announce that the land on which the community stands is to be rezoned by the railroad company. The land is needed for a new truck-staging yard. Chato and his father make an appeal to the zoning commission, where Mr. O'Gara puts the logic of capitalism into plain language: "It was the S.P. railroad built that little street. Very convenient to have a pool of cheap labor so handy to the tracks... Oh very convenient, but alas, gentlemen, times have changed. S.P. must modernize its operations to compete with the trucking industry" (139). The upshot is that the families on Shamrock Street must be displaced. Since they are not organized, the

²² On the variations, see Michael Scriven and Dennis Tate, *European Socialist Realism* (Oxford: Berg, 1988).

residents lack solidarity and, one by one, yield to the lure of money. The abstract forces of capital become brutally evident as the bulldozers erase all vestiges of community: "The first day they ripped out Chuchu's house and Don Tiburcio's that was Espie's father. They tore out his lemon tree that generously used to feed the street" (276). The episode concludes with Chato's apostrophe in which he bluntly challenges readers to draw conclusions and apply them to their own situation: "How would you feel, man, if they came onto your street and tore it down? What would you do?" (276). Without a political context, these are merely rhetorical questions filled with pathos. What Chato and most readers need are historical information in order to hear in "What would you do?" the echo of the famous "Chto delat'?" (*What Is To Be Done?*) raised by Nikolai Chernyshevsky.²³

The absence of an organized Communist Party in Chato's world means that issues about the individual's party-mindedness (*partiinnost'*) that usually play a significant role in socialist-realist writing do not arise. The closest analogy is in Chato's attempts to assemble his friends into a cohesive group so that they can protect themselves from a hostile gang. Whereas the theme of the party is subdued, another staple of socialist realism, one's connection with one's people (*narodnost'*), does dominate. Drawn by the lure of "America," Chato must discover the reservoirs of cultural knowledge, practical wisdom, and hope that are sustained by the Mexican culture of his family and community. The father-son complex that Katerina Clark has shown to be central in the development of the hero in socialist-realist novels is projected here onto the domain of immigration and acculturation.²⁴ Chato's father reminds him of his filial and communal obligations: "But who kept you alive all those other nights and days of your fourteen years? Who gave you to eat? Who put the roof over your head? Shoes on your feet? Some dumb Mexican, that's who" (53). As Chato explores Mexican culture and history, he begins to realize that his own Spanish name is an emblem of endurance and has the potential to be a voice of resistance. Chato's decision to paint his name "all over town" in vivid graffiti marks a culmination in the development of the positive hero, as expected in socialist realism. The wavering between succumbing to the temptations of American capitalism and asserting his allegiance to his community is finally over. The world may not be a perfect place, but there will be time for struggle and enough reason to hope.

The case of *Famous All Over Town* illuminates the difference between two contending concepts of authenticity. On one hand, socialist realism sees authenticity as the outcome of choices made on behalf of a vision—utopian, to be sure—of a future society in which human beings live with dignity and mutual respect. Chato's conscious decision is a necessary step if he is ever to achieve his

²³ Victor Terras, *A History of Russian Literature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991) 334.

²⁴ Katerina Clark, "Socialist Realism *with* Shores: The Conventions for the Positive Hero," *Socialist Realism without Shores*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997) 27–50.

authenticity. Had he remained in his station or simply let others plan his life for him, he would have remained an alienated individual. On the other hand, since the Romantic era the prevailing view sees authenticity as a quality granted to individuals, events, and entities by their respective positions, rather than something inherent in them.²⁵ From that perspective, all self-fashioning is tantamount to “faking it.”²⁶ One acquires essential, defining qualities via accidents of birth and circumstance. Hence Daniel James could not be an authentic author of this novel because he was not born into the Hispanic community he depicts. Such essentialism invalidates human choice and nullifies the possibility of changing history through conscious effort. Everyone must remain who they are and where they have been placed. Neither Daniel James nor Chato would ever be permitted to remake themselves into Danny Santiago. Authenticity understood in this way as an immutable quality is profoundly at odds with the needs and desires of real people. It is small wonder then that readers responded so enthusiastically to *Famous All Over Town* and its affirmation, drawn from socialist realism, that they and the world can change.

²⁵ See Jeff Karem, *The Romance of Authenticity: The Cultural Politics of Regional and Ethnic Literatures* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).

²⁶ William Ian Miller, *Faking It* (2003; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).