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Mexican Migration to the United States: Belonging, Identities, and Uprootedness

A Literary Perspective¹

The reconfiguration of the U.S.-Mexico Border in 1848 after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo led to the creation of the first migratory networks between Mexico and the United States.² This, in turn, impacted the way Mexican literature constructed its own perspectives on migration.

To illustrate this point, we might highlight a then-incipient narrative form that addressed immigration in the United States: the *corrido*. This popular lyrical-narrative current emerged in both countries in the early nineteenth century. The genre reconstructed the precarious conditions in which Mexican immigrants found themselves upon being suddenly estranged and marginalized on their own turf after their land was annexed to the United States.

In the migratory context of these two countries, *corridos* pioneered the narration of migration and the condition of immigrants, casting light on injustice, tragedy, and persecution. Meanwhile, they also exalted the archetype of the migrant who not only avenges himself after being mistreated but also defends the weak in the United States: “I’ve gone into



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cantinas, punishing Americans. You must be the captain, the one who killed my brother. You caught him when he was unarmed, prideful American.”³

Mexicans’ literary writing in the United States during the nineteenth century was characterized by recurring

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nostalgia. The group of writers behind this literature had experienced social, cultural, political, and economic fragmentation after the United States' annexation of Mexican land. Later, from this period up until the early twentieth century, exiled and self-exiled Mexican intellectuals started moving to the United States in response to political instability in Mexico, as the armed conflict that sought to depose Porfirio Díaz led to the persecution of many Mexican citizens.⁴

El Sol de Texas (The Texas Sun), by Conrado Espinoza, is one of the first novels portraying migration to the United States during the Mexican Revolution. The novel was first printed in San Antonio, Texas, in 1926, amidst a thriving journalistic and literary Mexican migrant scene that had taken root in the United States.

Espinoza's novel tells the story of a family that arrives in the United States in the hope of improving their lives. However, they face labor exploitation in the Texan fields. The main character then considers going back to Mexico's countryside, noting that it's better to be exploited by one's own kin than by foreigners.⁵

In a similar tone, *Las aventuras de Don Chipote o cuando los pericos mamen* (The Adventures of Don Chipote, or When Parrots Learn to Suck) was published in the newspaper *El Heraldó de México*, recounting the abuses that Mexicans faced in the United States. This picaresque novel was published in Los Angeles in 1928 and wavers between comical satire and protest against the inhumane treatment migrant Mexican workers were subjected to. In the novel, Don Chipote and his friend Policarpio abandon their lives as farmworkers in Mexico in search of a more promising future in the United States, where they discover that Mexican workers are treated inhumanely and subjected to long workdays.

The literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tells the story of the then-incipient Mexican migration in the context of the new border, casting light on the disadvantageous working conditions that Mexicans faced, especially in the U.S. countryside.

Seeking Identities: Chicano Literature and the Latin American Boom

By the mid-twentieth century, in the 1960s and 1970s, the literary narrative around the subject of Mexico-U.S.

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migration gained new meanings with the surge of the Chicano movement, which re-signified migration from the identity perspective in the context of the Civil Rights Movement.

These Chicano writers, of Mexican origin, tended to write about their Mexican roots and “gringo” (U.S. American) everyday life. Their uncertainty about whether they belonged to one culture or the other led to several specific adaptations and proclamations.

The first Chicano novel in Spanish, *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* (And the Earth Did Not Devour Him), by Tomás Rivera, was published in 1971. The novel portrays the daily lives of Mexican fieldworkers in the United States. Indeed, the main characters of Chicano novels tend to be representative of marginalized social classes and trades, questioning the concept of citizenship while problematizing the implications of what it means to be a Chicano in an immigration-heavy environment. These characters showcase the complexity of outsider citizenship with respect to the United States and Mexico.

The simultaneous rootedness and uprootedness, along with a certain nostalgia and the idea of the crossroads at the crux of being Mexican-American, would come to characterize Chicano works as a whole. Gloria Anzaldúa notes that one of the main features of Chicano writing, inhabiting two tongues as a product of the interstitial nature of the Chicano, gives way to subjectivities forged by migratory movement across the complex cultural relationship between the two bordering countries.

While the first group of Chicano novels tended to emphasize preserving Spanish as the main language, the linguistic hybridity that characterizes this literature is undeniable. This is the first dissidence we can find in Chicano language: language itself. The writing is neither solely in English nor in Spanish, and it is impossible to textually transcribe. This feature has made an invaluable contribution to our way of addressing migration, the elements of the border, the mestizo, and bilingualism — but also gender and sexuality, as Gloria Anzaldúa would later prove.

Parallel to the Chicano literary movement, the Latin American Boom emerged as part of the project forging Latin America's identity. The boom materialized the process of reinterpreting the region's reality in contrast to that of other continents. It was mostly concerned with marking aesthetic, ideological, and discursive differences between Latin America, the European continent, and the United States, thus assuming a political and ideological position. Distance and specificity were set down in literature, highlighting certain features that Latin American countries shared in a continental effort to portray Latin America's self-awareness.

This literary current boasts certain features that are relevant to understanding how both belonging and rootedness in certain territories are constructed, as its characters seek out belonging and reaffirmation through land and tradition.

This writing operates through myth, aiming to explain and situate the qualities that make Latin America what it is. That is, we may glean certain efforts to lionize what it means to be Colombian, Mexican, Chilean, Argentinean, while also transcending these labels in order to highlight the features that nations share.

The boom was the cause and consequence of the political effervescence in the region following the Cuban Revolution of 1959, which unveiled a potentially different world order and the hope for political change, to which the writers of the movement subscribed. In its writing, the boom highlighted political positions and discursive and ideological contrasts to the United States.

Migratory Cartographies in New Latin American Literature

In the anthology *Sam no es mi tío. Veinticuatro crónicas migrantes y un sueño americano* (Sam Is Not My Uncle. Twenty-four Migrant Chronicles and an American Dream), published in 2012, Diego Fonseca and Aileen El-Kadi state,

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"There are no longer identities. Now there are identifications."⁶ That is, we may simultaneously identify with various situations and contexts, but these would prove elusive, short-lived. Identity processes are in constant flux:

"You speak really good English. Where are you from?"
"Bolivia (Chile, México, Argentina, Cuba, all of the above)."⁷

This is an example of how new Latin American literature addresses the configuration and presentation of identities in migratory contexts, one of its main subjects. Given the great migratory movements of the late twentieth century, the representation of nomadic identities does not come off as fixed or exclusive.

From this perspective, Latin American writers no longer circumscribe themselves to a Mexican, Colombian, or Argentinean tradition the way the boom did. In fact, the main motifs in these new narratives involve globalization and contemporary migratory movement.

In 2015, the United Nations reported the existence of 244 million international migrants, and, in 2017, 258 million. The United States remains one of the main destination countries. Some 49.8 million migrants chose the United States as their destination from 1970 to 2017,⁸ one-fifth of the world's migrants.

This change in global migration has led to a transformation of the U.S.-Mexico border and of the migration between the two countries. Migration has transcended the binational now that the United States stands among the top global destinations for all kinds of migration: labor, academic, qualified, and unqualified. Parallel to the shifts in Mexican migration, the country itself has also changed. Mexico is no longer a country that solely expels migrants toward the United States. Mexico is today also a destination and a transit country for migrants seeking the American Dream. Globalization has transformed migratory dynamics, and, in so doing, it has also altered our ways of narrating migration.

The writers that have followed the Latin American Boom all hold migration and mobility in common. Limiting literature to a national and regional project has stopped making sense, and instead literature has turned toward other concerns. Latin America fell out of fashion as a project that sought to define itself and to carve out a place for itself in the world; it fell out of fashion as a regional

or supranational project that aimed to configure a unique and specific identity.

In its stead, now there's a need for polyphony as a way to make visible the multiple identities and identifications stemming from migration. This has awakened the need for a new Latin American narrative canon. New anthologies, such as *McOndo*, have emerged, with a myriad of authors engaging in dialogue in order to create a corpus and grant coherence to various texts with no apparent relationship among themselves. *Cuentos con walkman* (Stories with Walkman, 1993) also stands among the most relevant anthologies, as it contains certain principles regarding the new literature that has subverted the mestizo, global Latin America, born of television, fashion, music, film, and journalism — with writers no longer pressured to represent specific ideologies or countries. Similarly, we may look to the manifesto of the “Crack Generation.”⁹

The literary anthologies *Se habla español: voces latinas en USA* (Spanish Spoken: Latino Voices in the U.S.) and *Sam no es mi tío* (Sam Is Not My Uncle) both illustrate this new migratory reality with respect to the cultural paradigm that the United States has come to embody. They build uprooted characters who seem constantly displaced as they seek out the American Dream at all costs. These characters come off as critical of their origins and of the nationalism they've been raised with, but they also draw from memories and nostalgia as anchors that allow them to unfold within their own contexts.

Within these anthologies, a certain narrative shines through, describing various urban spaces without a coherent national line that would distinguish the author's biography from what she writes. Thus, the narrated spaces and the ways of addressing the notions of place, belonging, and their articulation with the national acquire new ways of being told, and this, in turn, can be gleaned through a specific kind of writing.¹⁰

If we reflect upon how this narrative literature speaks to the migratory relationship between Mexico and the United States, we may note that it showcases the complexity of building identities as well as of the negotiations that migrant subjects carry out in relation to their countries of origin. Meanwhile, this cultural baggage allows one to adapt, to a greater or lesser extent, to one's new context. That is, it adds complexity to what it means to be Mexican, expanding it beyond national belonging. The new narrative seeks to construct and represent heterogeneous, frag-

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mented, and specific identities. It answers questions like what it means to be a Mexican from Puebla, or a student in New York, or a lesbian, indigenous, and undocumented Oaxacan woman in San Diego.

Thus, the recent literature on migration to the United States has inherited an extraterritorial tradition that has left a cultural and political mark. Literature is no longer foreign to globalizing processes, and these issues include the reassessment of identity categories that have put people's sense of belonging in crisis mode, affecting narrative tradition but also political or literary national projects. ■■■

Notes

- 1 This article is a product of the author's master's thesis, *Migratory Culture in Twenty-First Century Honduran and Mexican Literature*, and PhD thesis, *The Cartography of Arrival in New Latin American Literature*. Both are available at <https://tesiunam.dgb.unam.mx/>.
- 2 In 1836, Texas declared its Independence to become part of the United States. Then, in 1848, after the U.S. army defeated the Mexican army, Mexico signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that officially ceded approximately half of its national territory to the United States, establishing the Rio Grande as the natural border.
- 3 Anonymous, “Corrido de Joaquín Murrieta.”
- 4 Ricardo Flores Magón, Mariano Azuela, Martín Luis Guzmán, and José Vasconcelos are among the most well-known authors of the “México de afuera” or “Outside of Mexico” generation.
- 5 Conrado Espinosa, *El sol de Texas*, in Kanellos, et. al. *En Otra Voz: Antología de la Literatura Hispana de los Estados Unidos* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2002), p. 235-236.
- 6 Diego Fonseca and Aileen El-Kadi, eds. (2012), *Sam no es mi tío. Veinticuatro crónicas migrantes y un sueño americano* (Florida: Alfaguara, 2012), p. 6 (e-book).
- 7 Edmundo Paz Soldán and Alberto Fuguet, eds. *Se habla español: voces latinas en USA*. (Miami: Alfaguara, 2000), p. 10.
- 8 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, “Twenty Countries or Areas Hosting the Largest Numbers of International Migrants (millions),” <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimatesgraphs.asp?0g0>.
- 9 Jorge Fornet and Francisca Noguero, “Narrar sin fronteras,” in Jesús Montoya and Ángel Esteban, eds., *Entre lo local y lo global. La narrativa latinoamericana en el cambio de siglo (1990-2006)* (Spain: Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2008).
- 10 Gilda Waldman, “Desterritorializaciones (y reterritorializaciones) literarias. Apuntes sobre la literatura sin residencia fija en la actual narrativa latinoamericana: tensiones entre lo global y lo local,” in *Verbum et lingua*, no. 9, 2017, pp. 56-70.