

# Chicano Literature

## Mediator of Discordant Borders

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Statistical focuses are certainly illustrative and enriching, but we should insist more on adding the knowledge of alternative disciplines that bring us closer, even if only tangentially, to how Mexican-origin communities perceive themselves and the cultures with which they dialogue and share.

Cultural creation and literary production are not an outstanding part of, nor do they even figure in reports on these communities' behavior or in the analyses that scrutinize

them. Who better for bringing us close to the experiences and struggles of innumerable generations of Mexican origin than men and women writers: unique, privileged interpreters and mediators between the United States and Mexico.

Although somewhat late, but often in the vanguard of scholarship, the 1960s U.S. social movements kindled a marked interest in delving into and incorporating minority and marginal groups outside the mainstream discourse into cultural and other kinds of studies. Government-spearheaded affirmative action, together with the demands and militancy of feminist groups and Afro-American, native American Indian and Chicano communities, propitiated a more palpable representativeness of these minorities with regard to their function in the complex web of U.S. society.

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Drawings by Héctor Ponce de León.

With the opening up of new spaces, Chicano literary production expanded exponentially in the United States and, in the case of the Chicana women writers, above all starting in the 1980s. In Europe, a kind of academic curiosity followed this boom, mainly in Germany, France, Spain and England; not only have conferences been held there on Chicano literature, but several Chicano writers have even been interviewed, translated and published. It is difficult to know for certain what the root of this European interest in the topic was: whether curiosity about the exotic, an authentic interest in thinking about the complexity of U.S. society, including its links with Mexican society, from the vantage point of Chicano literature, or a combination of these factors.

In Mexico, in contrast, curiosity or interest in this literature has been less marked than in the United States or even Europe. As Ana Castillo pointed out in a 1993 interview about a colloquium she participated in in Mexico,

I was glad to see that in Mexico there is now an interest in Chicana literature, at least in academic circles, something that has been of interest to European scholars since the 1970s. In the United States, until this very moment, Chicana literature has been mostly relegated to Ethnic Studies.<sup>1</sup>

It should be noted that, even given affirmative action and the militant demands of minority groups for access to spaces in the dominant discourse, in the United States and its universities, Chicano literature is barely included in academia's ethnic studies programs, although it continues to be part of literature department programs.

For a long time, some English (or literature) departments or Spanish departments (under the heading of languages and foreign literature) refused to include Chicano literature in their curriculum. Some argued that it was not written in English; others, that the Chicano experience fit neither under the heading of what was Latin American or Spanish. Today, these —questionable— arguments can no longer be blandished

about, since there is an ever growing body of Chicano literature written in English and it is patently obvious that the Chicano experience is heir to and bearer of the Hispanic and U.S. tradition.

Today, the situation is changing and frequently U.S. literary anthologies include not only Chicano and Hispanic selections but even texts from pre-Columbian times, Spanish colonial times and others from the period of U.S. expansion that illustrate and explain the experience of settlements in the Southwest before and after the arrival of Anglo-Saxons.

In the case of Mexico, the counterpart of the Chicano experience is that of today's indigenous population and its cultural production, marginalized for so long; it is only now that they are beginning to be recognized, as seen in the General Law on Indigenous Peoples' Linguistic Rights, in effect since March 2003.<sup>2</sup> It is no surprise, then, that Chicano culture and literature has gone almost unnoticed in Mexico.

No other immigrant community in the United States has the characteristics of the Mexicans. Many were settled in the Southwest before secession and became third-class citizens of their new country. Others took refuge in the United States during the Mexican Revolution, and others —the vast majority— came to satisfy their own needs and the demand for labor born in the second half of the twentieth century. They have all managed to maintain a single cultural flow. This population (anywhere between 22 and 25 million people including U.S. citizens and legal and undocumented residents) has been both a stopgap and a scapegoat in the two countries for both labor and political matters at different points in time.

Given this panorama of marginalization, from its inception, Chicano literature has been very good at maintaining communication with its roots and traditions, be they indigenous, mestizo or even with Spain —this is the case for parts of New Mexico. In this sense, the Chicano discourse is foundational in that since the 1960s, it has appropriated a term that defines it, making it its own to identify itself with regard to and against those

who disavow Chicanos or recriminate them both in the United States and in Mexico.

It does not matter that the term “Chicano” appeared in print for the first time in Mario Suárez’s stories in 1947,<sup>3</sup> or that what is considered the first novel about the Mexican-American community, *El hijo de la tempestad* (Child of the Tempest) by Eugenio Chacón, appeared in 1892—although for others the first novel was *Las aventuras de don Chipote o Cuando los pericos mamen* (The Adventures of Don Chipote, or When Parrots Suckle) by Daniel Venegas, published in 1928 by *El Heraldo de México* in Los Angeles. It does not matter that literary production in Spanish and by people of Hispanic or Hispanic-Mexican origin can be traced in what is now the United States for almost five centuries. None of this matters since Chicano literature has proposed maintaining dialogue with its different cultural sources.

This means that, as Américo Paredes, Nicolás Kanellos and Ilan Stavans, among many others, have said, the Hispanic tradition in what is today the south of the United States, which makes it a foundational and essential part of the nation, has followed an uninterrupted line of literary and publishing production and creation.<sup>4</sup> It began with the chronicles of the shipwreck of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca,<sup>5</sup> followed by the traditions of letter writing, prose and poetry that subjects of the Spanish Crown would continue during the colonial period in New Spain.

After independence, Mexicans would continue to use this imposed language and later, as “citizens” of the territory annexed by the United States, whether in California, New Mexico or Texas, they printed and circulated newspapers and other publications in their native language. Some of our forebears, as exiles, wrote and published about the political situation in their respective countries, such as the Cubans José María Heredia or José Martí,<sup>6</sup> or the Mexican brothers Flores Magón and Mariano Azuela, the novelist of the Mexican Revolution. They were all writers of enormous value, both for their own countries and for the United States.

In *El laberinto de la soledad* (The Labyrinth of Solitude), Octavio Paz emphasized the importance

and inevitability of Mexicans’ seeking their identity and self-definition, and, by extension, that of all human beings. This essay, published in the 1950s, presented “pachucos” disapprovingly and antagonistically; from then on the Mexican-American community tried to define its essence even if it originated in greater solitude than that of the labyrinth Paz described.

In the 1960s, a series of essays or discourses began to appear that were both original and provocative and that criticized and questioned the paternalistic, condescending and alien attitude toward Mexico and the United States. Suffice it to read Américo Paredes’s folk study, “With His Pistol in His Hand” (1958); Rodolfo “Corky” González’s poem of reflection on identity, “Yo soy Joaquín” (1967); Tony Castro’s essay of social criticism “Chicano Power” (1974); Juan Gómez Quiñónez’s essay on ethnicity and resistance, “On Culture” (1977); the essays on gender, machismo and racism, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa; or Richard Rodríguez’s essay against affirmative action and individual achievement, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodríguez* (1982).<sup>7</sup>

Very little has yet been written in Mexico by academics with genuine interest in looking at and dialoguing with Chicano reality and creativity. Publications like CISAN researcher Claire Joysmith’s 1995 *Las formas de nuestras voces: Chicana and Mexicana Writers in Mexico*, a compilation of lectures and talks at a women’s writer’s colloquium in 1993, stand out among what has been published.<sup>8</sup> It is even more difficult to find studies, reviews or critiques of Chicano short stories, novels, poetry or theater. This is understandable if we take into account the fact that in Mexico, people do not read much. How could reading material so seemingly alien be imposed?

It is suggestive that as a counterweight to so many arid statistics that are published, literary approximations to other experiences could be attempted that would also be relevant for Mexico. We could think that Chicano literary discourse might come on its own and fight for a place in the

market and in the minds of Mexicans before academia or the universities make much effort for opening up the way.

Elena Poniatowska has said that Mexican women writers seem to trail half a century behind their Chicana sisters.<sup>9</sup> This is, of course, debatable, but it is also true that the Chicanas dealt much earlier with issues that were taboo in Mexico like lesbianism or AIDS, and they speak more freely about topics like gender, ethnicity or racism.

I do not doubt that Mexico has readers curious and interested in reading about these issues or others like the participation of young Mexicans in the Vietnam or Korean Wars, as illustrated in narratives by Rafael Hinojosa or Paredes,<sup>10</sup> or something anthropologically inclined à la Carlos Castaneda, like Rudolfo Anaya's novel *Bless Me, Última*, according to Stavans, the heir of a discourse like William Faulkner's or Juan Rulfo's.<sup>11</sup> The list of writers is considerable and growing.

English-speaking students in the United States have come to prefer the study of Spanish as a foreign language to French, German or Italian, languages whose literature is still considered—condescendingly so—the bearer of “authentic cultural traditions.” In general, however, Spanish is seen as a language that contributes little because it is the language of illegal, Third World immigrants, brown people, the language of servants and the noise of Hispanics shouting at each other, and therefore “easy” to learn compared to the others. More than a foreign language, it is actually the second language after English, the language Samuel Huntington fears will contaminate the “purity” of the dominant language. This is not to mention the fact that English has proudly been the *lingua franca* of commerce, technology and communication for some time now.

Latin American writers of the stature of Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Carlos Onetti, José Lezama Lima, Juan Rulfo or Miguel Ángel Asturias, before the Latin American boom, showed that the subtle handling and combination of the American and European traditions, of which the Latin Americans are the heirs, contributed to enriching universal literature. For this reason, it is possible to think that the contribution of Chicano literature

attempts to integrate as recreations and new proposals what by tradition and legacy belongs to it. It does not matter if, in the view of Harold Bloom, “Chicano poetry, more even than the Mexican-American novel, is still in a very early phase, and merits considerable encouragement,” and that “The Chicano Movement, admirable from the perspective of any striving for social justice, is no more an inevitable source of poetic strength than is any other protest against injustice.”<sup>12</sup>

While Bloom's opinion may offend some, it is also true that it opens up the door to debate. It would be ideal if Mexican thinking about this were to be in the tone of criticism and proposals, not in a propagandistic way, to baselessly heap praise or scorn upon or vituperate the proposals of Chicano discourse, but rather to propitiate dialogue, a coming together, and getting to know each other better. This, not because of globalization or the “non-free trade agreement,” but simply because Mexico today seems to look more to the North than to the South, although ironically, its dialogue with its neighbor overlooks the Chicano experience, the step-daughter of both cultures but equally scorned by both.

I also think it is possible that the “foundational” attitude of the Chicano discourse that begins by appropriating its becoming may impose itself in Mexico sooner or later. It would be better if this happened by consensus, acceptance and mutual knowledge. The numbers of those arriving from Latin America are constantly growing after the collapse of their economies. For that reason, from a consumer society like that of the United States, what the most economically and politically participatory Hispanic populations conquer will probably end up imposing itself on the South in accordance with the rules of the market.

It is no accident that before Frida-mania, the “Grupera” music boom and the recovery of Mexican traditions that had all but been lost, one finds that these proposals arrived in Mexico from the North. It is no surprise that, as Carlos Monsiváis humorously said, “The reconversion of Mexico abroad is comparable to the reconversion of Mexico in Mexico.”<sup>13</sup>

In summary, we can debate the contribution and artistic value of Chicano literary efforts per se. And that, I think is part of the proposal and invitation of a good number of Chicano writers seeking space and access to a wider public, not only in the United States or in Europe. I believe that reading, criticism and thinking from Mexico and by Mexicans about that production will enrich the dialogue and knowledge of what has been happening in these communities. Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes is very clear about the seriousness of the effort undertaken in the founding moments in the 1960s when she says,

[w]e take the written word as seriously as any religion, know it to be a transformative power, believe it to heal, and do not waste words. Because of who and what we are, we can't afford silences by any means, and we write with a certain urgency, as if life depended on it....The weapon is our pen; our enemy, a blank sheet of paper.<sup>14</sup>

Stanford University English literature professor Ramón Saldivar agrees when speaking of the writing process and Chicano literature, saying,

to write is preeminently a political act seeking to fulfill the potentialities of contemporary life. It is also, ultimately, an attempt to recall the originary myths of life on the borders of power in order to fashion triumphantly a new heterogeneous American consciousness, within the dialectics of difference.<sup>15</sup>

Mexico should take advantage of the specific dynamic it establishes with the Mexican-American communities to bring down old borders and be a co-participant in the creation of a new discourse in which it could dialogue more frequently and familiarly with its compatriots from the North. Then only imaginary borders will remain to be crossed by the fiction re-generated on both sides of it. ■■■

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ana Castillo, "Entrevistas postcoloquio," Claire Joysmith, ed., *Las formas de nuestras voces: Chicana and mexicana writers in Mexico* (Mexico City: CISAN-UNAM, 1995), p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cddhcu.gob.mx/leyinfo/pdf/257.pdf> [Editor's Note.]

<sup>3</sup> See Mario Suárez, "Señor Garza," Edward Simmen, ed., *The Chicano: From Caricature to Self-portrait* (New York: New American Library, 1971), pp. 268-273, and "El hoyo," Antonia Castañeda Shular et al., *Literatura chicana: Texto y contexto/Chicano Literature. Text and Context* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Américo Paredes, "The Folk Base of Chicano Literature," Joseph Sommers and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, eds., *Modern Chicano Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1979); Nicolás Kanellos, "A Socio-Historic Study of Hispanic Newspapers in the United States," Ramón Gutiérrez and Genaro Padilla, eds., *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993); Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America* (New York: Harper, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca was born in Spain in 1490 and lived until 1557. In 1527, he was part of an expedition to Florida, but the boat was shipwrecked near the Mississippi River, with only four survivors. For a year, they wandered from Texas to Sinaloa, Mexico, and in 1536 were found by Spanish troops stationed in Culiacán, and sent to Mexico City. Cabeza de Vaca tells the story of his travels in *Naufragio de Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca y relación a la jornada que hizo a la Florida con el adelantado Pánfilo de Narváez*, published in 1542, a work known simply as *Naufragios*. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>6</sup> For example, José María Heredia, "Himno del desterrado," *Poesías completas* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1970); and José Martí, "Two Views of Coney Island," Phillip S. Foner, ed., Elinor Randall, trans., *Major Poems: A Bilingual Edition* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982).

<sup>7</sup> Respectively, Américo Paredes, *A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas, 1958); Rodolfo "Corky" González, *I am Joaquín/Yo soy Joaquín* (New York: Bantam, 1972); Tony Castro, *Chicano Power* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974); Juan Gómez Quiñónez, *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* 5, no. 2 (1977), pp. 29-42; Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone, 1981); and Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Joysmith, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Elena Poniatowska, "Escritoras chicanas y mexicanas" (pp. 45-49) and "Entrevistas postcoloquio" (pp. 270-271), Joysmith, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Rafael Hinojosa, *Mi querido Rafa* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1985); Américo Paredes, *Between Two Worlds* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Rudolfo A. Anaya, *Bless Me, Última* (Berkeley: Tonatiuh/Quinto Sol Int., 1972); Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition*, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Bloom, ed., *Hispanic-American Writers* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, "De los aportes de los migrantes," *La compañía de los libros* no. 2 (Mexico City), March-April 2002, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Helena María Viramontes, "Entrevistas postcoloquio," Claire Joysmith, op. cit., p. 271.

<sup>15</sup> Ramón Saldivar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), p. 218.