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Chicano Literary History:
Origin and Development

by

Luis Leal

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Chicano Literary History: Origin and Development

Introduction

In 1971 Tom-s Rivera published his groundbreaking novel ... y no se lo tragó la tierra (...and the Earth Did Not Part), which immediately became a metaphor for the life of the migrant workers and, by extension, for all Chicanos. The novel is structured around a series of encounters between migrant workers and the social, economic, and natural forces with which they have to contend and which they overcome. Rivera's young hero reminisces about a lost year, and is "at a loss for words" to explain what happened during that year. This sense of being lost and speechless can be considered as the central metaphor in Rivera's novel, whose theme is the search for identity. And it can also be interpreted as reflecting the author's sense of being lost in a world without a history of the literature written by his own people. In 1976 he wrote in his essay "Chicano Literature: Fiesta of the Living":

At twelve, I looked for books by my people, by my immediate people, and found very few. Very few accounts in fact existed. When I met Bartolo, our town's itinerant poet, and when on a visit to the Mexican side of the border, I also heard of him--for he would wander on both sides of the border to sell his poetry--I was engulfed with alegría. It was an exaltation brought on by the sudden sensation that my own life had relationships, that my own family had relationships, that the people I lived with had connections beyond those at the conscious level. It was Bartolo's poetry... that gave me this awareness. (439-440)

Are we to believe, as some do, that something like, for instance, Chicano literature, did not exist because no one had written about it? American critics and literary historians neglected Chicano literature published in Texas after 1836 and the Southwest after 1848. Before the 1950s, not a single article was dedicated to Chicano literary criticism, let alone literary history. No wonder Rivera had difficulty in finding books written by his own people. The literature was there, but it remained for the Chicano literary historians themselves to write about it.

A number of non-Chicano critics have characterized Chicanos as a people without a past, without a voice, an illiterate people unable to record their social history, let alone their cultural endeavor. As early as 1844, Thomas Jefferson

Farnham, a New England attorney visiting California, spoke of these people as being "incapable of reading or writing, and knowing nothing of science or literature" (Weber 1974: 18). In 1919 Robert Ernest Cowan, author of the book *A Bibliography of the Spanish Press in California*, affirmed in his Introduction: "The Spanish Californian had no particular education, nor was he a writer -- that is, of other than his official documents" (3). And yet, he contradicts himself, since he includes in his bibliography books in Spanish from before 1845 that are not official documents. In 1949 the muchlauded writer Carey McWilliams, in *North from Mexico* -- a very useful book considered the first that documents the history of the Chicano people -- stated the following in regard to the intellectual production of the Chicano: "In the past, Mexicans have been a more or less anonymous, voiceless, expressionless minority" (1968: 302).

The problem that arises is the following: Why is it that American literary historians have not dealt with literature written in the United States by Chicanos and other Latinos? The answer to this question comes from one of the most famous American literary historians, Robert Spiller, author of the important *Literary History of the United States* (1946), a required reference work for students of American history. He states, no doubt thinking about Cowan's observations and adding some of the characteristics with which the stereotype of the Californians and the Mexicans had been formulated:

The Spanish civilization of the Pacific Coast was too thin in population, too indolent, to make a concerted stand against the Anglo-Saxon. Within a short time it underwent absorption into the cultural complex of the New West...landed the mass some of the richness of its pigment. Spanish language newspapers, sermons in Spanish and a few quaint remains of liturgical drama, and the inflow of a modest quota of books from Mexico City and Spain, were persistent enclaves in the midst of a speedy English-speaking conquest. (1973: 659)

The above brief reference to Mexican American literature is expanded somewhat in the chapter "The Mingling of Tongues," where German-American, French (of Louisiana), Spanish-American, Italian-American, Scandinavian, and Jewish-American literatures are surveyed. In the less than a page dedicated to Spanish-American literature, Spiller first explains that "the literature that survives today among the descendants of early Colonists is an oral literature of plays,

songs, ballads, and folk tales brought from Spain" (1973: 687). After mentioning the titles of a few works, among which he includes *Los Comanches*, which is definitely not of Spanish origin, as are not some of the other works mentioned, he states: "Of other writing there was little. The theocratic rule of the Mission period was hostile to profane knowledge. Scientific books were sometimes publicly burned, and not until 1833 was a printing press brought to California. Then it published almost exclusively official documents. The first volume printed in Texas, in 1829, was in English by an American immigrant" (1973: 687). The present century is dismissed in Spiller's *History* in three lines: "In the twentieth century," he says, "Spanish-American culture, both early and contemporary, furnished material to such Americanborn novelists as Gertrude Atherton, Willa Cather, Harvey Fergusson, and John Steinbeck" (1973: 687-688). This is not the place to mention all the inaccuracies and errors that have been accumulated in such a short (mis)evaluation of Latino literature. As late as 1969, the Chicano scholars Ernesto Galarza, Herman Gallegos, and Julián Samora, were bemoaning "the almost total lack of historical and literary treatment of the Mexican American in the United States" (56).

There are, however, numerous documents that confirm the existence of a rich Chicano literary tradition, both oral and written, beginning as early as the 1850s, not to mention the periods before the conquest of Texas and the Southwest in 1836 and 1848. What has happened is that those materials have been neglected by historians. It was necessary to wait until recently for Chicano scholars themselves to document their cultural heritage. They have gone back into the past, as Genaro Padilla has done in his recent book, *It Is My Story, Not Yours*, in which he analyzes numerous autobiographies by early Chicanos and Chicanas, documenting their lives and their works.

The first Chicanos who did research about writings by people of Mexican descent having lived in the United States were the folklorists Aurelio M. Espinosa, Arthur L. Campa, and Juan B. Rael. These early critics, however, had dedicated themselves only to the study of oral literary tradition, neglecting written literary works. Espinosa began by studying the folklore of New Mexico and then went on to include that of other regions in the Southwest, especially California. His study of *Los comanches*, a play dating from 1780, appeared in 1907; and those of the romances and the *décimas*, in 1909. He is also remembered for the study of a Nineteenth century play, *Los Tejanos* (1943), an important source of information for the history of the conflicts between Texas and New Mexico between 1836 and 1848. In the Introduction to his book, *Folktales of Mexico*, Américo Paredes states that Espinosa's study, "New Mexican Spanish Folk-lore," which appeared in the *Journal of American*

Folklore in 1910-1911, represents "the first truly scholarly work on Mexican folk-lore," as well as being "the first real collection of Mexican folk narrative" (1970: lxxiii).

Espinosa published his most important works during the first two decades of this century, which he dominated as a scholar. There were during the 1920s, however, other scholars that followed Espinosa's example. Among them, in Texas, Jovita González was active publishing in the *Annals of the Texas Folklore Society*. Dr. Paredes tells us that she was "one of the first Mexican Americans to write in English about her own culture" (1972: 8).

The work of Espinosa was continued by his own son, José Manuel, by Arthur Campa, and by Juan B. Rael. José Manuel's collection of 114 Mexican folktales from southwestern United States, which appeared in 1937, has been surpassed only by that of Juan B. Rael's *Cuentos españoles de Colorado y Nuevo México* (1957). Campa, on the other hand, can be considered a pioneer in bibliographical studies. His book, *A Bibliography of Spanish Folk-lore in New Mexico*, published in 1930, is important because it opened a new field in Chicano historiography.

Mexican American historians began to diversify in the 1950s. Scholars interested in other fields besides folklore and bibliography began to appear, especially in the political sciences, anthropology, sociology, literature, and the arts. To this group belongs Américo Paredes, whose book, *With His Pistol in His Hand*, published in 1958, has served as a model for the type of history that takes into consideration a human approach. It was during the late fifties that the first literary history appeared. It is a brief survey in Spanish published in 1959 by José Timoteo López, Edgardo Núñez, and Roberto Lara Vialpando giving an account of the literature written by the contemporary writers of a region in New Mexico. At first it was said that Chicano literature was born that year, which coincides with the publication of *Pocho* by José Antonio Villarreal, considered by some critics as the first Chicano novel. This historical literary event led some critics to theorize that Chicano literature did not exist before 1959. And to confirm such a view, they claimed that the word Chicano, although it existed, was not applied specifically to designate those who were then called Mexican-Americans, or *pochos*, as they are called in Villarreal's novel. It was even said that Chicanos and Mexican residents in the United States were incapable of writing literary works.

Since Chicano letters were excluded from histories of American literature, it was necessary for Chicanos themselves to write their own. Thus it was necessary to train literary historians at universities. It was there that they produced the first comprehensive histories of Chicano literature in the form of doctoral dissertations.

Since the early 70s the space occupied by the history of Chicano literature has been expanding rapidly. Literary

historians were beginning to find the lost steps left by past writers. It was in 1971--an important year in the development of Chicano literary historiography-- that the first doctoral dissertations dealing with the history of Chicano literature were accepted at leading universities. That year Alba Irene Moesser wrote about "La literatura mejicoamericana del Suroeste de los Estados Unidos," and Philip D. Ortego presented for his doctorate a well-researched "Background of Mexican American Literature," in which for the first time an extraordinary amount of information on Chicano literature in the 19th century was collected. Both critics, however, place the birth of Chicano literature in 1848. In 1971 Herminio Ríos C. wrote in his Introduction to the first edition of Rivera's novel: "1848 is the beginning point of Mexican American literature. Literature written prior to this date by the Spanish speaking inhabitants of the Southwest must properly belong to the Mexican period, and thus to Mexican literature" (1971: xiv).

Nevertheless, he immediately adds:

The year 1848, however, is simply a capricious chronological device that does not take into consideration human experiences, human sentiments, and human loyalties. It reveals nothing of the myths, legends, archetypal experiences, and the rich oral tradition whose birth and development precede this date. It remains silent about the literary currents that came and went, but left their mark upon the writers that were present among the Mexican American population. Also, this date does not tell us at what point in history artistic sentiment revealed itself as being no longer totally Mexican, but rather as consciously reflecting a Mexican

American reality. Perhaps this particular point of a Mexican American consciousness reflected in literature will neither quickly nor easily be resolved, but certainly it will inspire considerable discussion as the Mexican American literary tradition is reconstructed and interpreted by literary historians, and enriched by such gifted writers as Tomás Rivera. (1971: xiv).

The literature written before 1848 by Mexicans in the Southwest was given an appropriate name by Ray Padilla, a critic associated with the group at the University of California, Berkeley, that in 1967 began to publish the pioneering periodical *El Grito*. In the number published during the Winter of 1971-1972 he wrote: "[A]ll works prior to 1848 can be treated as pre-Chicano Aztlanense materials" (19). Therefore, the problem to solve was: How could we justify including the

works of authors who wrote before 1848 in a history of Chicano literature? Calling them pre-chicano Aztlanense without explaining why, did not seem to me to be sufficient.

In 1973, at Indiana University, Luis Dávila and Nicolás Kanellos were preparing to publish the *Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, and they asked me to write an article for the first number. It was then that I began to think about establishing a chronology of Chicano literature. Inspired by Ríos's words, I began to do research about pre-Chicano writers, not only during the Mexican period, but also since the first explorers and settlers came to the Southwest during the sixteenth century, writers who had contributed to the literature of the region. I titled my study "Mexican American Literature: A Historical Perspective," and it appeared in the first number of the *Revista* in the Spring of 1973. During my second year at UCSB, that is, in 1977, the late Joseph Sommers, of UC San Diego, asked me for permission to reproduce my article. Since the materials available here in the *Colección* were more abundant than those at the University of Illinois, I decided to enlarge the study, which appeared in the book *Modern Chicano Writers*, published in 1979. The first part of this book, titled "A Conceptual Framework," includes four other studies, by Américo Paredes, Joseph Sommers, Rosaura Sánchez, and Juan Gómez Quiñonez. Paredes studies "The Folk Base of Chicano Literature"; Sommers examines several "Critical Approaches to Chicano Literature"; Sánchez deals with "Spanish Codes in the Southwest," and Gómez Quiñonez contributes with an article titled "Towards a Concept of Culture." In the "Introduction," Sommers states: "While many of the critical studies we present focus on modern works, we have tried to show that a perspective indispensable to full critical understanding is the historic process of cultural continuity and change" (2).

In my 1973 study I did not make an attempt to delve deeply into the nature of Chicano literature, but I did include some of the topics suggested by Ríos, such as literary currents, the fact that artistic sentiment was no longer totally Mexican but consciously reflecting a Mexican American reality, and the presence of a rich oral tradition, the only aspect of that literature that had been previously studied by early Chicano historians, as we have seen. Conscious of the fact that these critics had dedicated themselves only to the study of the oral literary tradition, and had neglected earlier written literary works, I decided to see if their inclusion in a history of Chicano literature was justified.

I found that in the literature produced by the Mexican people living in the *provincias internas* (Spanish Borderlands) we can find the roots of Chicano literature, as well as the nature of the culture of the people who wrote it. Most of this literature, to be sure, was neglected by literary historians, and was never published.

Fortunately, sufficient manuscripts remain in public libraries. In my 1973 article I wrote:

We can consider Chicano literature to include that literature written by Mexicans and their descendants living or having lived in what is now the United States. We will also consider those works, especially those before 1821, written by the inhabitants of this region having a Spanish background, as forming part of an early stage of Mexican American literature. We are not overlooking the fact that before 1848 Mexican Americans legally did not exist as a group; however, they have a long uninterrupted literary tradition.

The year 1848 is a political point in time, and it is important in the literary field since English then became the official language of the Mexican territory that became part of the United States, and for this reason it affected the development of the literature of the region, but did not interrupt it. By accepting this definition of Chicano, we can say, then, that Mexican American literature had its origin when the Southwest was settled by the inhabitants of Mexico during Colonial times and continues uninterrupted to the present. (1973: 35).

In a subsequent article, not published until 1985 but written earlier, I argued that the literature of the Mexican people living in the northern provinces, that is, north of the border set in 1848 by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, is somewhat different from that of central Mexico. In this literature we already find a new sensibility, due mainly to the presence of different environmental factors, such as a new landscape and a different climate, as well as the nature of the cultures of the native people, unlike those of central Mexico. Not less important is the fact that during this colonial period the settlers who came from central Mexico established the bases upon which Chicano culture was to develop. The institutions and the cultural elements brought to the Southwest from Mexico are the ones that shaped Chicano culture, and therefore its literature.

This new sensibility can be observed in most cronistas. In the *Relación de los naufragios* (1542) of Alvar N'òez Cabeza de Vaca--an account of his trip across the continent in 1528 and 1536--we find the first description of the landscape of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, as well as an account of the life and customs among the native inhabitants; he speaks of the great praires and rivers, the native villages, the bison, the prickly pear, the tlacuache (opossum) and other flora and fauna. His description of the buffalo, the

first to appear in literature, is of interest, since this animal would later become an obligatory motif in "Western" and Southwest folklore as well.

In his *relacion* about the "Descubrimiento de las Siete Ciudades" (1539), Fray Marcos de Niza fosters the myths of Cibola and the seven cities, which he claimed to have found in New Mexico, and at the same time provides us with the first description of the homes of the New Mexico natives, whose structures we still consider today as appearing somewhat magical. Years later Antonio de Espejo, in his *Relación* (1586), spoke of rich mines in Arizona. This awakened the interest of Juan de Oñate, who led in 1598 an expedition into New Mexico. He was accompanied by Gaspar Pèrez de Villagr-, the author of the first epic poem, *Historia de la Nueva Mèxico* (1610), considered as the first State history of the United States, since the general history of Virginia by John Smith was not published until fourteen years later. He begins his long poem by recounting the pilgrimage of the Aztecs, who left Aztl-n in search of Tenochtitlan, the promised land. Villagr- is also the first writer to describe the vaquero, a character that much later, as a result of the influence of Mexican culture, became one of the most popular prototypes of the North American "West," but with the name of cowboy (the translation of vaquero).

It is interesting to point out, since it reveals the mestizo origin of border culture, that Villagr- gave the name of vaquero to the Indians who helped with the cattle roundup. On the plains, Oñate and his group found, as Villagr- tells us, "gran n'ero de vaqueros que a pie matan aquestas mismas vacas que decimos, y dellas se sustentan y mantienen" (a great number of cowboys who on foot kill those same cows of which we speak, and from them feed and sustain themselves, XVII: 93v). He also describes, in anecdotal discourse, the activity known as *aventada*, which much later was encompassed by the popular word *rodeo*. It is in Villagr-'s poem that we find also the origin of the now famous river that divides Mexico from the United States. He observes: "del caudaloso r'lo que del norte descende manso, tanto se embravece que tambiÈn R'lo Bravo le llamamos" (of the mighty river which from the North flows quietly, so much does it rage, that we called it Wild River, XI: 56v). It has been said of this epic poem that it is more history than poetry, and indeed it carefully documents Oñate's entrada into New Mexico. Other cronistas, among them Fray Alonso de Benavides, Isidro Fèlix de Espinoza and others have left important documents necessary to reconstruct the early history of the Mexican people in the Southwest. These and other early writers left us a history of the founding of the social institutions upon which Chicano culture was to develop. These institutions and the cultural elements brought to the Southwest from Mexico helped to shape Chicano culture, and therefore its literature.

This literary tradition was strengthened after 1821, when Mexico received its independence from Spain. During this short period the printing presses were introduced, important in the production of books and the development of periodical literature. In California, in 1835, Governor Jos  Figuer a published his *Manifiesto a la naci n mexicana*, and in Texas Juan N. Segu n published his *Personal Memoirs* covering the years 1834-1842.

All these political and cultural changes, however, did not affect the writing of popular literature, whose uninterrupted existence from colonial days to the present attests to its enduring nature.

After reading these early works, I reached the conclusion that the history of Chicano literature should include everything written before 1848 (published and in manuscript form) as it rightfully forms part of the Chicano cultural inheritance. As far as we know, no one has rejected its literary inheritance. The history of American literature does not begin in 1776; it includes all works in existence since the arrival of the Pilgrims in the seventeenth century. The literary history of Mexico does not begin in 1821; nor do we say that Sor Juana's poetry belongs to the history of Spanish literature. And the same can be said of other countries, such as India and the African nations.

After 1836 in Texas and 1848 in the Southwest, there is no problem about the history of Chicano literature. Most literary historians have accepted those years as marking the beginning of Chicano literature, and not 1959 or 1964, as previously stated. This early period has been better documented by Chicano literary historians, among them Philip Ortego and Ray Paredes.

The indices of the literary contents of nineteenth century Spanish language newspapers are now almost complete. Recently, novels in English by Amparo Ruiz de Burton, published in San Francisco in 1872 and 1885, have been reedited.

This theory, that Chicano literature had its beginning during the sixteenth century, was influential in the establishment in 1990 at the University of Houston, with a generous grant from several foundations, of the ambitious project called "Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage." In general, the broad scope of the project includes recovery not only of the Chicano literary heritage, but all the conventional literary genres of Latinos. When completed, we will be able to say that we are no longer lost, no longer a people without a literature, without a literary history, as Rivera wrote only two decades ago.

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