Lust in translation: the boom in Hispanic-American fiction

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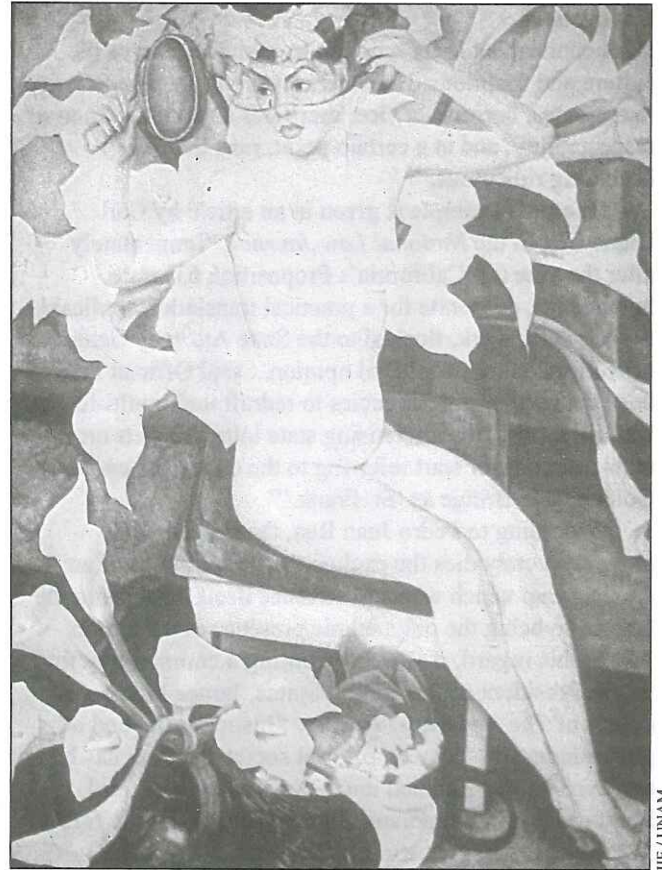

Diego Rivera, The lady of the veil (1946).

Whether the river is called the Río Bravo or the Rio Grande depends on who the observer is, his or her vantage point, and on which side of the topographical accident he or she is situated. This accident divides not only the cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, Brownsville and Matamoros, but also the United States and Mexico. By a synecdoche of Latin America, it is one river with two names —both of them, curiously enough, in Spanish.

As its name suggests, the river is both broad and aggressive, fearful and vast. But it is also something more: a scar, a wound that will not disappear, a bleeding gash.

In the final chapter (entitled "Hispanic U.S.A.") of his ambitious work, *The buried mirror: reflections on Spain and the New World* (Houghton Mifflin, 1992), Carlos Fuentes states: "The two thousand mile border between Mexico and the U.S.A. is the openly visible border between the developed and the developing worlds. It is also the border between Anglo-America and Latin America. But it is an unfinished border, made up of unfinished barriers, ditches, walls, barbed-wire fences —the so-called 'Tortilla Curtain'— which are hastily erected by North Americans to keep out this Hispanic immigrant, and then abandoned, unfinished."

Fuentes, the "intellectual *axólotl*" (salamander) par excellence —whose array of masks make him, depending on the situation, a diplomat, novelist, political advisor, professor, cultural commentator or Hollywood superstar— prides himself on being a bridge that spans the abyss, a connecting fiber between two cultures.

His skill with languages, his admirable ability to interpret both cultures from within and without, make him a necessary interpreter; a kind of cultural translator of the Ambrose Bierce variety. (It was Bierce, in *The devil's dictionary*, who gave the following definition: "*Interpreter*. One who enables two persons of different languages to understand each other by repeating to each what it would have been to the interpreter's advantage for the other to have said.")

Fuentes is an intellectual who, when he speaks to and from both sides, invents both the message and himself. However, there is a whole group in addition to Fuentes, less well-known perhaps, but even more necessary: the Hispanic-American writers. They too are bridges, connecting fibers. Their intellectual physiognomy is also that of the *axólotl*.

Until quite recently, the ethnic minority known in the United States as "Hispanic" was considered a mere statistical abstraction. Although the 25 million legal and

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undocumented residents of different origins scattered throughout the country may have had some political weight, they had no artistic presence, and even less so a literary one.

During the 1970's their homogeneity and ideological solvency were doubtful, but this is no longer the case. According to the 1990 census, Hispanics are now the second most rapidly growing ethnic group, after Asians. A minority of such size and strength will sooner or later stamp its world outlook on the social mosaic, and I am sure this process has already begun.

Nevertheless, let's take things one at a time, step by step. Perhaps the most pressing problem is one of nomenclature: Hispanic or Latino? In English, while the former is an adjective, people use it as a noun. This term is generally heard among conservatives, frequently appearing in legal documents and political discourse.

The latter term emerged from within the community; it reflects a liberal tendency, and is used particularly in artistic circles. Consequently, Edward James Olmos and Gloria Estefan are Latinos, while Congressman José Serrano is Hispanic.

Since the adjectival form does not necessarily reflect gender, feminists believe it is necessary to speak of "Latinos" and "Latinas," that is, men and women. There are also those who, like anthology editor Gloria Anzaldúa, suggest replacing both Hispanic and Latino with Mestizo... and Mestiza.

In Spanish, the categorical term used in both printed and television news reports is *hispano* and not *hispánico*.[1] Latino is only heard when there is an "Anglo" within earshot. There seems to be no way out from this linguistic labyrinth that can satisfy everyone.

As for myself, I prefer the term "Hispanic-American writer." Even though it is too long, it not only defines and designates, but places a hyphen between its letters, a dash which embodies the very image of the scar or wound.

If just a short time ago the different subgroups were spoken of separately —Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, etc.— the current trend is to catalogue them all under the same heading and brand them with the same seal. Yet this unifying urge is not new... it actually comes from Latin America, and the term is a broad one which, since the mid-nineteenth century, has covered the wide stretch of geography extending from Ciudad Juárez and Matamoros to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego.

Do we ever think of Leonardo Sciascia, Marie Serrault, and Camilo José Cela as European writers, as a whole, rather than as Italian, French and Spanish writers? Evidently, this way of thinking does not apply among Hispanic-North Americans. Today, it is fashionable not to separate them, but to gather them all together. And once they are gathered together, they must be referred to by a group name which includes and covers all.

The next topic for discussion is linguistic. Despite the anti-official status conferred on it by the "English Only" laws promoted in various states during the 1980's, after English, Spanish is the most important national language north of the Río Bravo.

James Crawford's book *Hold your tongue* (Addison-Wesley, 1992) discusses this topic in considerable detail. He points out that in large cities such as Los Angeles, Miami, Chicago, and New York, Spanish is an essential language, so much so that the Federal Government has to print its official publications in Spanish in order to reach Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Colombians, Mexicans, etc.

Telephone directories are published in English and Spanish for the people from the barrio. There are two cable television networks —Telemundo and Univisión— which broadcast programs in Spanish to several million viewers across the country, with barely a word of English.

Those who suspect that, in the twenty-first century, people in the United States who do not speak the language of Cervantes will become marginalized, might not be altogether wrong. Even though English will perhaps still be the language of commercial exchange, Spanish will spread everywhere over the vast expanse of the northern hemisphere.

Several Hispanic-American writers and poets have already made this syntactic and lexical dilemma their own. If Spanish symbolizes the past for this ethnic minority, then English is the language of the present and, above all, the future. When they choose the language of Shakespeare and reject that of Quevedo, the writers emerging from Hispanic communities desire, consciously or unconsciously, to get their names into the showcase of American literature. They look (and there is no reason why they shouldn't) for their audience and their market within the country and language where they live.

This linguistic dilemma obviously creates an existential struggle within the poet's psyche: by accepting one code, is the other violated? When seen from a sociological point of view, this is not really the choice they face, since most of these writers were educated in English, at least in terms of formal education. Their case is unlike that of Vladimir Nabokov or Joseph Conrad, who, close to the age of forty, decided to write in only one language.

In fact, a handful of novelists, including Rolando Hinojosa, the Chicano author of *Klail City* (Arte Público Press, 1981), and the Guatemalan Victor Perera, author of *Rites: a Guatemalan childhood* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), have —as part of a desire to return to

[1] Translator's note: In Mexican Spanish, *hispano* is generally used to refer to people, while *hispánico* is the adjective used to refer to anything of Spanish origin.

the womb— re-learned or simply re-adopted Spanish and are now almost perfectly bilingual.

Plagued by contradictions, this struggle is both comical and painful. Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, a Cuban poet and academic critic who teaches at Duke University, has written a poem which, in view of this dilemma within the new wave of Hispanic-American writing, holds an astonishing meaning and force. The poem is entitled "Dedication" and appears in the *Los atrevidos* anthology (Ellas/Linden Lane, 1988), edited by Carolina Hospital:

The fact that I
am writing to you
in English,
already falsifies
what I wanted to tell you.
My subject
how to explain to you
that I
don't belong to English
though I belong nowhere else,
if not here,
in English.

However, I will limit my comments to the topic I originally embarked upon: Hispanic-American fiction *per se* and not the vehicle through which it is expressed. For decades, Chicano, Cuban-American, and "NewYoRican" literature has been growing, but its widespread publication by companies such as Arte Público Press (APP) in Texas and The Bilingual Press in Arizona is a recent phenomenon. These two publishing ventures are managed, respectively, by Nicolás Kanellos and Garik Keller (famed as "the dynamic duo" or "the Two K's").

But things are changing. For the first time ever, big New York publishing houses are paying attention to a number of Hispanic-American authors and have agreed to group them together, with a certain amount of splashy publicity, in a literary "boom," similar to that which accompanied the rise to fame of Latin Americans such as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa.

For the first time ever, a handful of Mexicans, Caribbean islanders, Central and South Americans have to be translated into Spanish, so they may be read south of the Río Bravo, in cities such as Montevideo, Bogotá and San José... and the translations are full of candor and passion. The roles are reversed; yesterday, it was from Spanish to English, today, it is the other way around.

One must start by differentiating: Cubans in Florida respond to certain influences and stimuli which are different from those affecting their Chicano counterparts in California. The life experiences of the so-called *gusanos* ("worms" —a term for anti-Castro Cubans) in Little Havana, the circumstances which led to their arrival in the United States, and their social mobility, are all very different from their *pocho* counterparts in East L.A. who crossed the Río Bravo one or two generations ago and who, somehow or other, have adapted to the specific reality of the West Coast. Similarly, the Puerto Ricans in New York who arrived during the fifties and sixties, who hold U.S. passports and live in a very particular socioeconomic and cultural milieu, can hardly be compared to Nicaraguans living in Washington, D.C. Thus, to speak of a Hispanic-American boom is to speak of a heterogeneous conglomerate, an unequal amalgam, united only by an ancestral tongue.

In 1989, the *Biographical dictionary of Hispanic literature in the United States - The literature of Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and other Hispanic writers* (Greenwood) appeared. It is a somewhat anachronistic and even chaotic volume which, for editorial reasons, excluded Chicanos. In this work, Nicolás Kanellos includes Herberto Padilla and Matías Montes-Huidobro alongside Hijuelos, and Piri Thomas next to René Marqués, leading one to ask: Is there really no distinction between a Hispanic-American writer and a Spanish or Caribbean exile living in the United States?

Padilla, author of *En mi jardín pastan los héroes* (In my garden graze the heroes; Arcos-Vergara, 1981), is a Cuban dissident living in Princeton, New Jersey, while Marqués, the playwright to whom we owe *Los soles truncos* (Truncated suns) and other works, lived in New York —as José Martí did in Florida— and later returned to his native land. Montes-Huidobro teaches in Hawaii, while Thomas is a nomad who travels from Connecticut to San Francisco and back again, on a schedule and for reasons which no one has been able to fathom.

The first three of these authors never considered themselves Americans and the very suggestion would certainly offend them. Thomas, on the other hand, is as American as Toni Morrison or Saul Bellow. How, then, are we to establish a dividing line? Who belongs to this literary new wave and who doesn't? Nowadays, it is logical and even necessary to refer to the various writers belonging to this ethnic minority —each with his or her own cultural peculiarities— as part of a whole.

The zero hour, the convergence, occurred in 1989 when Cuban-American Oscar Hijuelos, who in 1983 had published an autobiographical novel of little interest entitled *Our house in the last world* (Persea, 1983), came out with *The mambo kings play songs of love* (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux).

Critical acceptance was not just enthusiastic; it was explosive. Both domestic and international sales were remarkably high. And the following year, the book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize —the first for a Hispanic-American author.

Since then, agents have been on the look-out, trying to land another novel which matches this pattern, and the interest of the mass media is also high. Hijuelos opened

the floodgates of another boom. Other successes have begun to appear, including Cristina García and Julia Alvarez (*How the García girls lost their accents*, Algonquin Books, 1991).

Chicano writers were on American soil long before the pilgrims of the Mayflower. Texas, New Mexico, parts of California and other territories in the Southwest were sold to the United States towards the middle of the last century, when, in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Antonio López de Santa Anna ceded those lands for 15 million dollars.

Chicano literature is as old as its people's history. It was not until the end of the 1950's, however, that an important publisher came out with a Mexican-American novel in English: *Pocho*, by José Antonio Villarreal (Doubleday, 1959). The novel centers on a rural farm worker whose implied identity conflicts remain to some extent unstated. "Published in English" is perhaps the operative phrase here, because a rich oral tradition, which found its highest expression in the folk ballads of the Mexican Revolution, existed long before.

In fact, many books —such as *With a pistol in his hand: a border ballad and its hero* (University of Texas, 1958) by Américo Paredes, which narrates the story of desperado Gregorio Cortés and his problems with the law stemming from an unintentional crime committed due to a verbal misunderstanding— have their roots in that same oral tradition, which they codify and adapt in written form. But most of the *corridos* —descendants of medieval troubadours' ballads— were written in Spanish or Spanglish, also known as *pachuco* slang.

Villarreal chose the language of Milton because, in his own words, "I received all of my education in English." Whether consciously or not, the change in language, from Yiddish to Spanish, by the Argentine Alberto Gerchunoff —who in 1910 wrote *Los gauchos judíos de la Pampa* (The Jewish gauchos of the Pampa)— set the tone and provided the model for later generations of writers, from César Tiempo to Marcos Aguinis, Mario Szichman and Gerardo Mario Goloboff. After Villarreal, as after Gerchunoff, there is no turning back.

Aside from those already mentioned, any list of well-known Chicano writers must include Tomás Rivera (*...Y no se lo tragó la tierra*, [And the earth did not swallow him], APP, 1987), Rudolfo Anaya (*Bless me, Ultima*, Quinto Sol, 1972), Victor Villaseñor (*Rain of gold*, 1991), Gary Soto (*Living up the street*, Strawberry Press, 1986), Arturo Islas (*The rain god*, Alexandria Press, 1984), Raymond Barrio (*The plum plum pickers*, Bilingual Review Press [BRP], 1969), John Rechy (*City of night*, Grove Press, 1984), Ron Arias (*The road to Tamazunchale*, BRP, 1987), Ana Castillo (*The Maxquiahuala letters*, BRP, 1986), Aristeo Brito (*The devil in Texas*, BRP, 1991), and Denise Chávez (*The last of the menu girls*, APP, 1986).

I would like to discuss three of the most controversial of these authors: essayist Richard Rodríguez, lawyer Oscar "Zeta" Acosta, and "The Masked Man," Danny Santiago.

In his controversial and moving autobiography *Hunger of memory* (David R. Godine, 1982), Richard Rodríguez attacks the problem of bilingual education as it has been instituted in the United States since the 1970's. He considers it a fiasco of unequaled proportions. Rodríguez says that to allow Spanish-speaking children to take math, chemistry or anthropology in Spanish until their English improves enough to digest these subjects in English, does not foster a more rapid education, but rather produces a linguistic duel, a deep inner confusion in the student, who ends up not knowing if he or she should communicate in Spanish or in English, or in Spanish *and* English. The child does not know which is the public language and which the private.

Rodríguez also criticizes the current attitude of commiseration toward minority groups as embodied in Affirmative Action programs which offer scholarships and aid for self-improvement —in fact, Rodríguez calls himself the "Scholarship Boy"— while at the same time distancing these groups from their original culture. Assimilation into the dominant culture, he assures us, is only achieved after a long process involving guilt and remorse. On the first page of his book, he writes:

> *I have taken Caliban's advice. I have stolen their books. I will have some run of this island.*
> *Once upon a time, I was a "socially-disadvantaged" child. An enchantedly happy child. Mine was a childhood of intense family closeness. And extreme public alienation.*
> *Thirty years later I write this book as a middle-class American man. Assimilated.*

Rodríguez's case is fascinating because he seems to attack the root of Hispanic-American culture, although a more thorough reading of *Hunger of memory* proves the contrary. The fact that the author has been the target of continuous attacks makes the loyalty of a minority group to its own culture somewhat clearer.

Due to his almost mythical characteristics and fable-like contributions, Oscar "Zeta" Acosta is another important example. He was born in 1936 in El Paso, Texas, to a father who commanded the family "like a ship," forcing the young Acosta to learn English "quickly" and to socialize with Anglos. As a result, his Spanish disappeared almost completely, something that as a mature writer he could never forgive.

Moreover, his childhood contact with the Caucasian population made him feel like a *vato vendido* (a sell-out), a traitor, a Doctor Faustus. In order to heal this emotional

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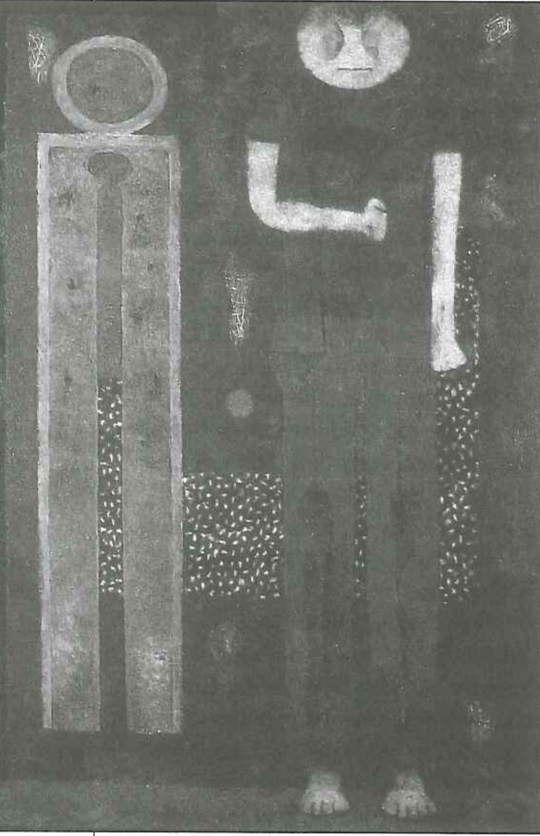

This linguistic dilemma obviously creates an existential struggle within the poet's psyche: by accepting one code, is the other violated? (Rufino Tamayo, Ghost and man.)

pain, he enlisted in the Air Force. It did him little good. Later, he graduated from law school, and worked with leaders of the 1960's Chicano movement, especially Cesar Chavez and Rodolfo "Corky" González.

His only two books, *The revolt of the cockroach people* and *The autobiography of a brown buffalo* (Straight Arrow Press, both reprinted by Vintage in 1991), are true literary gems which describe his search for an individual and collective identity. His explosive style is openly rebellious: he constantly attacks himself and others, laughs at his surroundings, and uses animal images to refer to the people of his race ("cockroaches," "buffaloes," etc.).

During the mid-seventies, Acosta mysteriously disappeared in Mazatlán, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, and some kind of criminal CIA action has always been suspected. This and other shocking elements in his life story, and his artistic legacy, have placed him in the ideological and aesthetic vanguard of Chicano literature.

Finally, it is worth devoting a paragraph to Danny Santiago. When his first and only novel, *Famous all over town* (Simon and Schuster), appeared in 1983, the critical reaction was one of immediate adulation. The book was considered a masterpiece and an astonishing debut.

Chato Medina, the hero, is a courageous resident of a violent, almost uninhabitable East L.A. neighborhood. As his family disintegrates, his friends introduce him to the underworld and crime. The book —which received the Richard and Hilda Rosenthal Foundation Award from the American Institute of Arts and Letters— had, on the overleaf, a micro-biography of the author, without a photograph. The biography stated that the author was born in California and that his short stories had been printed in highly acclaimed national magazines.

A young star was born. However, success had a sadly bitter aftertaste. A journalist and former friend of Santiago, perhaps spurred by revenge, made Santiago's real identity known to the *New York Times*. His real name was Daniel James, and he was not a Chicano writer but an Anglo educated at Andover and Yale, sixty-some years old, who had written librettos for Broadway musicals as well as scripts of dubious quality for Hollywood, most of which were about monsters and other aberrations.

James joined the Communist Party in the 1930's and was investigated during the McCarthy era; he was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee because of his leftist affiliations. Out of work, James looked for another identity to protect himself, and a Chicano identity seemed free from all suspicion. (In fact, James' case brings to mind other American writers who, for one reason or another, wrote in English on Hispanic topics: John Syles —*Los gusanos*, Harper Collins, 1991, Thomas Sánchez —*Mile zero*, Knopf, 1989, and Mike Nichols —*The Milagro beanfield war*, Holt and Reinehart, 1974, as well as Stephen Crane and Ernest Hemingway. None of these writers, however, invented a new identity for themselves.) Beyond the stylistic value of his work, in a nation immersed in bloody racial conflict, Danny Santiago is the antithesis of a model that points to the authenticity of artistic creation.

Before and after Oscar Hijuelos, the Cuban-American community has produced Virgil Suárez *(Latin jazz*, Ballantine, 1989), Roberto Fernández *(Raining backwards*, APP, 1988), Elías Miguel Muñoz (*The greatest performance*, APP, 1991) and, most recently, Cristina García (*Dreaming in Cuban*, Knopf, 1992).

All of these writers have devoted their efforts to creating a literature-in-exile, a counterpart to the literature created by José Lezama Lima or Alejo Carpentier in Cuba. The difference between the two strains is almost always obvious: one is baroque, the other is not; one is historical and the other, autobiographical.

As regards Puerto Ricans and NewYoRicans, I would like to mention one of the founders of Puerto Rican literature in the United States: Jesús Colón, author of *A Puerto Rican in New York and other sketches* (1965).

Perhaps the most representative voices, the precursors, those which have had the widest range and scope, belong to Nickolasa Mohr (*The Bronx remembered*, APP, 1986) and Piri Tomas, author of innumerable volumes, among them *Down these mean streets* (Knopf, 1967), a sort of autobiographical narrative which discusses and analyzes the vicious circle of poverty

in Puerto Rican communities, his own experience with addiction, Anglo stereotypes, and more.

Among the successors to Nickolasa Mohr and Piri Tomas are Edward Rivera (*Family installments*, Penguin, 1984), Ed Vega (*Mendoza's dreams*, APP, 1991), Carole Fernández (*Sleep of the innocents*, APP, 1991), Judith Ortiz-Cofer (*The line of the sun*, University of Georgia, 1989), and Edwin Torres (*Carlito's way,* Dutton, 1975).

The list is long. The fact that most of the titles are autobiographical is easily explained. In the showcase of American literature, when each new wave of immigrants starts out on the road to adaptation, it dreams of leaving a record of its triumphs and miseries. The Germans, the Irish, the Italians, the Jews, the Asians all did it, and now the Hispanics are following the same path.

They wish to be recognized, to feel they have their own place in a land which opens its doors to the newcomer. In Piri Thomas' work, this demand appears in the form of curses and oaths:

> *Vee-ah! Wanna know how many times I've stood on a roof-top and yelled out to anybody: "Hey, World —here I am. Hallo, World —this is Piri. That's me. I wanna tell ya I'm here —you bunch of mother-jumpers - I'm here, and I want recognition, whatever that mother-fuckin' word means."*

Anthologies of short stories and excerpts from novels have proliferated as a response to the Chicano movement of the 1960's. The most important of those dedicated to Mexican-Americans are: *The Chicanos: Mexican-American voices* (Penguin, 1971) by Ed Ludwig and James Santibáñez, and *Aztlán: an anthology of Mexican-American literature* (Knopf, 1972), edited by Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner.

After these, the anthology of poet Tino Villanueva, *Chicanos —Antología histórica y literaria* (Chicanos —an historical and literary anthology; Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980), appeared —the only one, as far as I know, to be published in Spanish. There is also Edward Simmen's *North of the Rio Grande: the Mexican-American experience in short fiction* (Penguin, 1992). The most recent work is Ray Gonzalez's compilation, *Mirrors beneath the earth* (Curbstone, 1992).

As regards Cuban writers, there is *Los atrevidos: Cuban-American writers* (selection and introduction by Carolina Hospital), while Puerto Rican literature is represented in Faythe Turner's *Puerto Ricans at home in the U.S.A.* (Open Hand Publishing, 1991).

But it was only after Hijuelos' success in 1989 that anthologies began to multiply at a rapid pace. Among those covering the entire spectrum are *Broadsides: literature of the United States Hispanos* (Bilingual, 1990), edited by Gary Keller, and *Short fiction by Hispanic writers in the United States* (APP, 1992), edited by Nicolás Kanellos, which, though not the first, are certainly the most representative. In addition, Virgil Suárez compiled *Iguana dreams: new Latino writing* (Harper Collins, 1992) and Harold Augenbraum and I have done the same in *Growing up Latino: memoirs and stories* (Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

An impressive amount is being produced in this field, and bibliographical works have also been multiplying. In 1976 Francisco A. Lomelí and Donaldo W. Urioste had already compiled their *Chicano perspectives in literature: a critical and annotated bibliography* (Pajarito Publications). In 1990, Marc Zimmermann's research for the Chicago Public Library resulted in the first version of *U.S.-Latino literature: an essay and annotated bibliography* (Macho/Abrazo, 1991).

If today a Hispanic-American writer exists, then one would have to speak also of a reader (who does not necessarily belong to that ethnic group) who follows and judges him or her, as well as a critic.

Up until now, criticism has almost always come from academic circles. For some time now, John Bruce-Novoa has studied Chicano literature, and his book *La literatura chicana a través de sus autores* (Chicano literature through its authors; Siglo XXI, 1983), which employs the personal interview technique, is a literary mural of voices which explain, analyze, contextualize and make pronouncements.

Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar edited *Criticism in the borderland —Studies of Chicano literature, culture and ideology* (Duke University, 1991), which includes a series of important essays on Tomás Rivera, Ana Castillo, and Arturo Islas.

The burning, pressing need at this point is for a voice from within, yet at the same time apart from the university environment, a voice that will be close to the average reader and far from worn-out academic phraseology. This voice would be more or less equivalent to an Edmund Wilson, who could ponder the issue and draw a map of the intellectual topography of the new literary boom, not only for specialists, but for all readers.

Río Bravo and Rio Grande... an abyss, a scar, a wound that doesn't disappear, a bleeding gash. The bridge, the connecting fiber is the Hispanic-American writer, an *axólotl* like Carlos Fuentes who is, at the same time, an average, common and legitimate citizen of the United States, as well as an extension or a tendril of Latin America.

These writers and their concerns, their vision of the world, will profoundly and definitively influence the way in which we understand the Hispanic culture of tomorrow, especially on the U.S. side of the border. Thanks to their literature, we will be transformed —and perhaps someday, thanks to this new boom, the Río Bravo and the Rio Grande will come to be known by the same name