

Contemporary Chicano literature

It's true that my poetry has a message: a Chicano wrote this poem; but it is also true that almost everything I read carries a message which announces the culture, gender and class of its author.

Benjamin Alire Sáenz

The definition of American literature has changed as a result of increasing publication of writing by so-called minority groups in the U.S. Afro-Americans, Asians, Latinos and Chicanos have used the pen as an instrument of subversion, of struggle against a nation which rejects cultural and ethnic diversity. Through their work, they demonstrate that many literary and cultural traditions coexist in North America; that there are many who — although they write in “English” — do not necessarily and by decree follow the Anglo-American literary tradition.

The literature written by Chicano men and women over the last twenty years reflects a clear consciousness of the aesthetic contribution they can make to Anglo society. With an increasingly pure technique, as well as a sophisticated use of language, they reveal the contrasts and conflicts between Anglos and Chicanos, with irony, humor, charm or desperation. They explore ever more deeply the mysteries that make up their protagonists' personalities. They open themselves to new experiences, producing a literature which is at once distinctive and universal.

Life and writing

The novels, stories and poetry produced during the 1960s and '70s illustrate the difficulties Chicanos face in surviving within the Anglo world. Steeped in the Chicano political movement, they display the reality of a country (the U.S.) in which Mexicans never cease to be foreigners. In their attempt to define a political identity, the act of writing constitutes a rejection of the tradition of waiting shared by many oppressed peoples, and declares their desire to intervene, to transform their reality and demonstrate the fragmentation and alienation prevalent in the Anglo world.

More than other genres, the novel seeks to relate fiction and reality. Fictional happenings are firmly rooted in historical events. In describing the lives of Mexican-Americans — especially those in the lowest socio-economic strata — they reveal a social reality in which poverty, exploitation and difficulties in understanding the Anglo world are elements of daily life.





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TO MEXICO WITH LOVE

Also revealed is the differential value structure to which they are submitted, which also has an impact on relations between the generations. The third generation confronts value systems which are in constant conflict: those of the mother country —reinforced by parents and grandparents— and those of Anglo society.

The authors resolve the conflict by using their characters as a weapon. Through them, they win the freedom to create their own history. When the characters become conscious of the forces ruling their lives, they turn critical of these forces. Thus both characters and real individuals perceive that the only viable solution is to gain control over their own destiny and on that basis strengthen their own ability to do and undo.¹

¹ Without seeking to provide an exhaustive list, we may cite such works as *Bless Me, Ultima*, by Rudolfo Anaya; *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* (And the Earth Did Not Part), by Tomás Rivera; *The Plum Plum Pickers*, by Raymond Barrio; *The Revolution of the Cockroach People*, by Oscar Zeta; and *Pocho*, by José Antonio Villareal. The latter, considered to be the first contemporary Chicano novel, has been criticized as “assimilationist” for not taking on such subjects as prejudice and racial discrimination.

“Speak Spanish?”

By Sandra Cisneros

The old proverb was true. Spanish was the language to speak to God and English the language to talk to dogs.

My father worked for the dogs and if they barked he had to know how to bark back. Father sent away for a home course in English. He practiced when speaking to his boss. “Good morning sir,” or when meeting a woman, “How du yu dul!” If asked how he was coming along with his English lessons, “Very guell thank you.”

Because Uncle Fat-Face had been in the States longer he gave Father advice: “Look, when speaking to police always begin with ‘Hello my friend.’”

In order to advance in society, Father thought it wise to memorize several passages from the “Polite Phrases” chapter.

“I congratulate you,” “Pass on sir,” “Pardon my English,” “I have no answer to give you,” “It gives me the greatest pleasure” and “I’m of the same opinion.”

But his English was odd to American ears. He worked at his pronunciation and tried his best to enunciate correctly: “Sir, kindly direct me to the watercloset,” “Please, what do you say?,” “May I trouble you to ask for what time it is?,” “Do me the kindest to tell me how is.”

When all else failed and Father couldn’t make himself understood he could resort to “Speak Spanish?”

So strange was English, rude and to the point; no one preceded a request with “Ah, would you not be so kind as to do me the favor of” as one ought; they just asked!

Where did they add “if God wills it” to their plans? As if they were in audacious control of their own destiny.

It was a barbarous language, curt as the commands of a dog trainer: “Sit!” “Speak up!”

And why did no one say “You are welcome?” Instead to be granted “Ajá” without looking him in the eye and without so much as “You are very kind, mister, and may things go well for you.”

Excerpt from *Caramelo* (work in progress), read during the Seminar on Literature Written by Chicana Women, UNAM, Mexico City, June 25, 1993.

In the mid-1970s, Chicano literature² took on a more universal character. Without losing the distinctive features of the literature of the political movement, social commentary became more subtle, appearing implicitly in the text. This allowed for a more personal and less communal artistic expression, where aesthetic considerations prevail over political demands—a trend most evident in poetry.³

Over the past decade there has been an increase in the number of Chicano and Chicana authors who have received prizes on the national level and whose work has drawn the attention of important publishing houses. These authors are also more frequently published in literary journals whose pages were previously closed to the work of minority-group writers, such as *The American Book Review*, *Antaeus*, *North American Review*, *American Literature Review*, *Poetry*, *Quarry West*, etc.⁴

American writers of Mexican origin are increasingly conscious of their legitimate right to take their place in American culture. However, a number of obsessions stand out as motor forces of their work, the result of their personal experience as Chicanos in the United States.

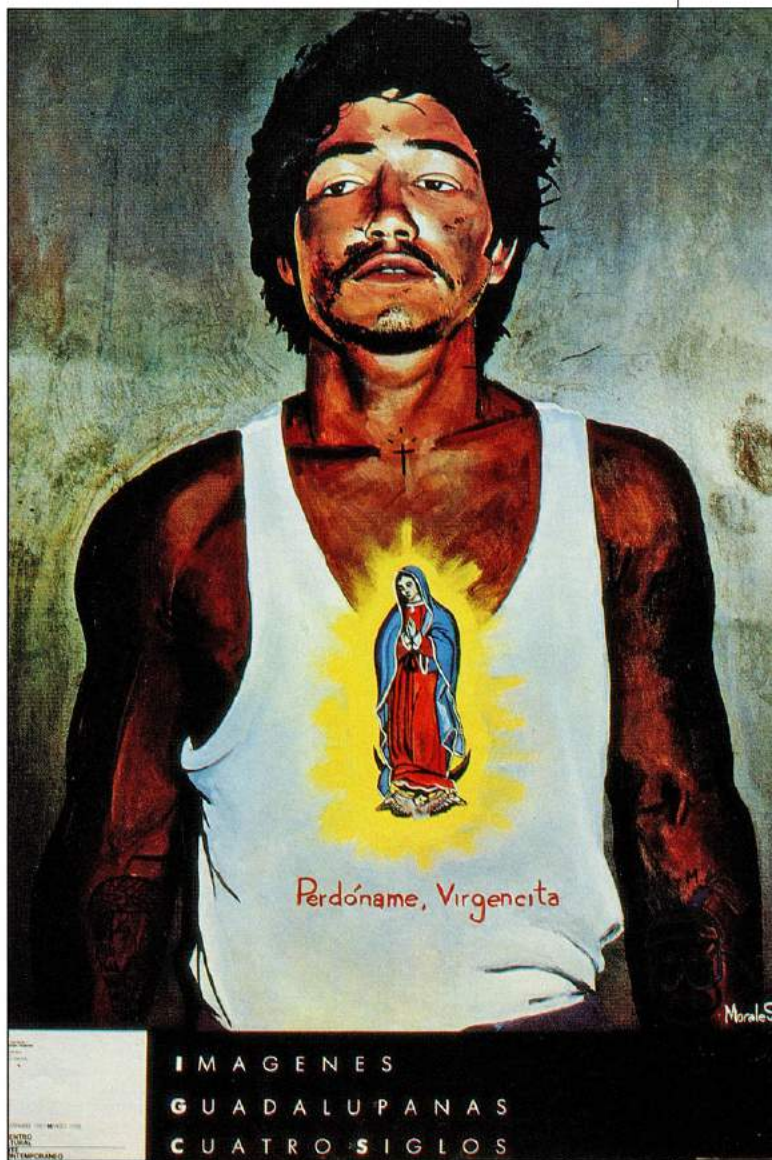
Identity and bilingualism

The generations of Chicanos born in the post-war period faced serious difficulties in establishing their identity. In their writing they express their need to recover their identity, maintaining a relation with the Mexican as well as American contexts. “The dialogue between cultures”—states the artist Guillermo Gómez Peña—“unchains the demons of history. Genuine communication with cultural otherness is an extremely painful experience, which causes terror. The territory of cultural dialogue is rugged and labyrinthine, full of chasms and geysers, of intolerable phantoms, surrounded by invisible walls.”⁵

The process of recovering and encountering one’s identity passes through the reconstruction of the past. This has meant reconstructing the facts which led to their oppression, taking into account economic alienation, forced dependency, the lack of power, defense and protection in the face of the demands of Anglo society. For this society, the terms *Hispanic* and *Mexican* both denote inferiority. Material success does not save them from discrimination

and prejudice. Even obtaining a respectable socio-economic status does not do away with the pressure caused by belonging to a minority group.

The generations born between the ’30s and ’50s lived suspended between two cultures. Maintaining the values of the mother country or opting for assimilation to the so-called “American way of life” seemed to be mutually exclusive options. The third generation returns to its roots seeking to demolish the role assigned to “Mexicans” by the socio-economic patterns of North America, emancipating themselves from the stereotypes of ethnicity which underlie this role. At the same time, they seek to combine the old values with the new, freeing themselves from enslaving myths and absolute truths.



² Authors such as Carl R. Shirley and Paula W. Shirley (*Understanding Chicano Literature*, University of South Carolina Press, 1988) characterize the Chicano writing of the past twenty years as “post-movement” literature.

³ *Understanding Chicano Literature*, p. 29.

⁴ Introduction to *New Chicana/Chicano Writing I*, Charles M. Tatum (editor). The University of Arizona Press, Tucson and London, 1992.

⁵ “Cultura chicana: un arte sin fronteras” (Chicano Culture: An Art without Borders), in *Memoria de Papel*, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Mexico City, No. 3, April 1992, pp. 87-88.

The use of symbols derived from Mexican culture is a reminder of these writers' rich historical, poetic and cultural heritage. It is a means of understanding their past and its relation to the present. Chicano writers, both male and female, in recognizing their Amerindian heritage, are impressive not only because of the richness of their metaphors and the particular angle of vision which this gives them, but also because they appeal to the collective memory of Chicanos, pointing them towards the sources of their own cultural wealth.

As part of this effort, language stands out as an important cultural signifier. In this case, having one's own language represents escape from an insensitive world's lack of understanding. It is a positive artifact with which to sustain the cultural struggle. Referring to poetic work, José Antonio Burciaga states: "Despite the difficulties in finding adequate means of expression, Chicano poets, in this last decade of the century, are spearheading an aesthetic revolution based on the cultural rebirth of that which is Chicano and Latin American. We struggle to maintain our way of expressing ourselves without being manipulated."⁶

Linguistic variety is the trademark of Chicano literature. Written in Spanish, in English, in a combination of the two languages, or mixing *caló* (slang) with both, it shows the multiple possibilities inherent in their writing, and explains why their skill and art enrich the entire body of North American literature. One of the main examples of linguistic experimentation is the work of the poet Alurista (Alberto Baltazar Urista), who mixes English, Spanish and



caló so skillfully that his writing has been called "interlingualism."⁷

Bilingualism is essential to the perception and expression of experience. This experience is felt, conceptualized and recreated within the synthesis of two cultures and languages. At the same time, bilingual expression provides these writers with a much larger stock of linguistic resources.

But language is also a source of pressure; the inability to express oneself in the language of the powerful (English) prevents one's voice from being heard and one's sacrifices and dedication from being recognized. This dilemma, which was particularly acute in the experience of the first generations, is clearly felt by their children when they gain access to formal education. Sandra Cisnerós, a Chicana writer whose work—according to Gary Soto—"has awakened a major renaissance in Chicano literature,"⁸ describes, with marvelous irony and humor, the confusion and difficulties confronted by the generations whose mother tongue was Spanish.

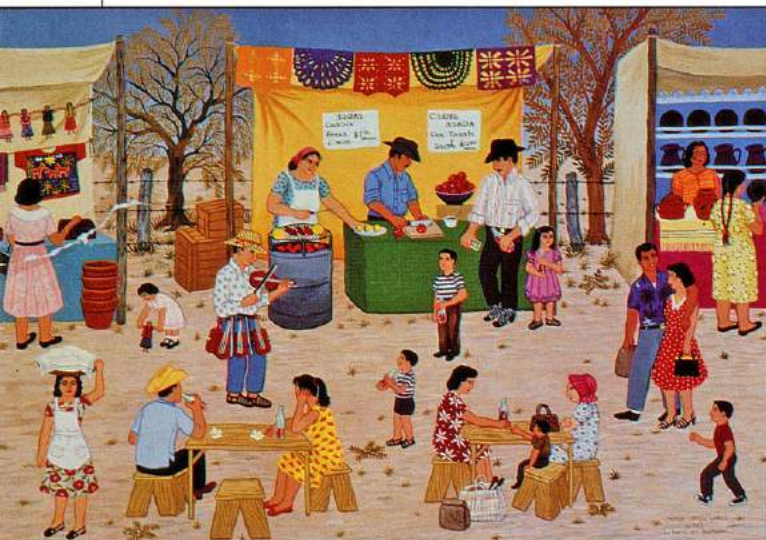
School, that assimilating institution par excellence, clearly shows the power associated with knowledge of the language. As the Chicano poet Benjamín Alire Sáenz explains: "The language I was educated in is English; it was the language of power—the one which gave power—and of intelligence. Speaking Spanish was 'stupid' in every sense of the word.... My task as a student was to receive the word and, having done so, to forget the language of my home."⁹

⁶ "Cultura chicana: un arte sin fronteras," p. 92.

⁷ *Understanding Chicano Literature*, p. 31.

⁸ Introduction to *Pieces of the Heart, New Chicano Fiction*, Gary Soto (editor), San Francisco, Chronicle Books, p. x.

⁹ "Quiero escribir un poema americano" (I Want to Write an American Poem), in *Plural*, No. 256, Vol. XXII-IV, January 1993.



San Diego Museum of Art
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Se me enchina el cuerpo al oír tu cuento...
(*My body curls up when I hear your story*)

By Norma Cantú

How the day after graduating as valedictorian from the high school in the Rio Grande Valley you helped your family board up the door and windows of the frame house and pack the old pick-up truck to make your annual trek north. After three days on the road arriving at the turkey farm and being led to your quarters. The family, tired, looks to you. "What's this?" you ask, for you, the favored son, speak English, you can communicate with the bosses

"This is where you're gonna live."

Perplexed, you say, "But it looks like a chicken coop."

"It is, but it's not good enough for the chickens," the Anglo responds with a sneer.

And you take it, and you suffer as your mother and your sisters make the best of the chicken coop.

They hang curtains and sweep the floor and burn candles to the Virgen.

Then the work, arduous and demeaning, begins. Working night shifts after long days...plucking feathers, forcibly breeding the toms and the hens, and your Dad ages from day to day before your very eyes.

Until one day you've been working hard, and you look for your Dad, and barely see his head in one of the buried barrels full of feathers, working away. Suddenly he's gone, and you think you're imagining things: how could he disappear? and you remove your gloves and risk the foreman's wrath. You run to your father; jump in; he is almost smothered by feathers, and you say, "Enough!"

You take control and pack the family off. "No pay for all your work if you leave."

And you say, "We're leaving." The favored son, who speaks to the bosses, has spoken. And driving the Midwest farm road almost crossing the state line you spy a sign "Labor Relations," and you stop. And, yes, you are owed your wages, and the bosses pay reluctantly. No one had ever done that before. But you read the language of the bosses. You move on with your family, and your father is pleased; your mother beams but is afraid in her heart for her son who speaks the language of the bosses.

Years later a lover will wonder why you refuse to sleep on feather-filled pillows, and you want to tell, to spill your guts, but you can't, you refuse. You hold your words like caged birds.

Memory's wound is too fresh.

And more years later when you tell the story, I cringe and get goosebumps; you tell your story and are healed, but there's still a scar and like an old war wound or surgical scar it hurts when the weather changes or the memory intersects with this time and place.

Read during the Seminar on Literature Written by Chicana Women, UNAM, Mexico City, June 25, 1993. (Published in *New Chicana/Chicano Writing I*, Charles M. Tatum [editor]. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson & London, 1992.)

But to erase a language is to erase a culture. Chicanos and Chicanas responded with the representation of that culture which others sought to ignore by converting it into the essence of their work, without necessarily disdaining what they had learned. To write in English is not automatically proof of assimilation; it is a way to be recognized, to leave the imprint of their triumphs and difficulties in the dominant language of the country where they live.¹⁰

On the other hand, the use of two cultural legacies, expressed in their respective languages, is a source of pride as well as a necessity, as the poet and novelist Sandra Cisneros states: "As a writer I need to hear the two languages. I can't live in Mexico, because I need English, and the other way around. I live in San Antonio because Spanish is public there; it goes side by side with English, they're interacting, changing and shaping each other."¹¹

¹⁰ See Ilán Stavans, "Lust in Translation: The Boom in Hispanic-American Fiction," *Voices of Mexico* No. 24, July-September 1993, pp. 23-27.

¹¹ These words were part of Cisneros' presentation at the Seminar on Literature Written by Chicana Women, UNAM, Mexico City, June 25, 1993.

Toni Morrison, 1993 Nobel laureate for literature



APRO.

Toni Morrison, author of six novels, translated into fourteen languages, as well as numerous essays, is the eighth woman and the first black woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. On hearing the news, she said that the most wonderful thing was that the Nobel prize had finally been awarded to an Afro-American.

Her books—which she defines as small-town writing aimed at a black audience—revolve around racial discrimination and the oppression of women in a world dominated by white men. Death is a constant theme in Morrison's work, since all Afro-Americans know that if they have a son, he is unlikely to reach old age. "I have two sons and the possibility of either of them reaching forty, I mean of not being killed, is one in thirty, because the Ku Klux Klan is still around."

One of Toni Morrison's aims as a writer is to restore the original power of black language. "Standard English is sterile.

Black English has been ridiculed as a sign of stupidity, as though it were a low-class thing, but I find it very powerful. The metaphors are great. They use wonderful images. Black English doesn't get its power from subject-verb agreement or pronunciation. It comes from rhythm and stress, where there's a set sound. If you use adverbs all the time, the prose gets diluted somehow. But if you can portray cruelty, humor, threats or ambivalence in a sentence, you don't need anything else. Black English is extraordinary; it's a really theatrical language."

Education and subversion

Memory recovers, for the present, the reality of a childhood in which bronze-colored skin and the use of the Spanish language automatically marginalized the children of Mexican immigrants.

The consciousness of inequality and lower status were reinforced by the hostility and oppression suffered in institutions such as the schools, which take on the task of teaching how to function in society. Criticism and mockery for not speaking English, on top of such humiliations as the so-called sanitary inspections, were a source of pain and anguish.

The obsession of mothers and grandmothers for their children's "cleanliness" was useless when faced with a society which looked down at them and declared them to be "dirty." "We really lived in two worlds: the safe *barrio* which encouraged and accepted us, and the other world of institutions such as school which were there to transform us through cultural assimilation, to disinfect and Americanize us. And also to delouse us once a year...."¹²

¹² Mary Helen Ponce, excerpt from "Los piojos" (The Lice), a story read at the Seminar on Literature Written by Chicana Women, UNAM, June 25, 1993.

Nevertheless, the prohibition against speaking Spanish in school also became an instrument of consciousness-raising and subversion. The children—educated in the English language—gained the control provided by the ability to read, write and speak the language of those who sought to rule their destiny. The story "Se me enchina el cuerpo al oír tu cuento" (My Body Curls Up When I Hear Your Story), by Norma Cantú, is an excellent example of the importance the English language acquires as a means of demanding the right to equality.

Knowledge—a source of power—gives the new generations a weapon for developing their own intellect, under the influence of which they are able to create, for their cause, a personal and cultural identity.

As children they discover that books are a priceless treasure. Nothing is more important than reading, since it allows one to travel without moving, to emancipate oneself, to build a bridge between individual fantasies and collective realities.

As the Chicana writer Helena María Viramontes explains, "Writing is a tool for building, for repairing, for recreating, a subversive and powerful weapon." When they write, Chicanos are not narrating an individual episode, but

the experience of a generation. Making use of their possession of the word, they knock down and clear away obstacles, building their own history, gaining a legitimate place in the archives of the multiple versions of the history of the United States.

Literature written by Chicanas

A minority within a minority, Chicanas began to publish their work after male Chicano writers did. Few have received the sort of family, social or editorial support which would help them dedicate themselves to their work. Nevertheless, the circulation of their work which began in the mid-'70s shows their intention of participating in the recovery, definition and forms of their culture.

Writers such as Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Lucha Corpi, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Pat Mora, Mary Helen Ponce, Evangelina Vigil and Alma Villanueva, among others, represent a challenge to the male domination of literature. Women's participation shows their concern for the life that surrounds them, their integral connection to their environment.

Domestic violence, social oppression, assigned roles, family traditions, identity, time, death, are all explored



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from the standpoint of being women, writers and Chicanas. Through a brilliant use of language they convey conflict, ambiguity, irony and power relations —elements common to the Chicano cause— with the particularity imparted by a feminine view of things and events.

Redefining themselves, they explore new territory and topics that men have not covered. They use their Mexican cultural heritage in a subversive and provocative way. They relocate female mythical figures like La Malinche, the Virgin of Guadalupe and La Llorona in contemporary contexts different from those recounted in history, myth and legend.¹³

The modern Chicana woman criticizes not only the Anglo world but also some of the traditions and social structures which are present in the Chicano world, such as *machismo*, dependence on men, and the repression of

¹³ See, for example, "Tears On My Pillow," by Helena María Viramontes, in *New Chicano/Chicana Writing 1*, pp. 110-115.

women's sexuality. In expressing their desire to reinvent themselves while still holding on to their Mexican culture, they confront the subversion of their own family traditions.

As writers, their characters and their work seek authenticity and identity. They bear witness to having suffered racism and discrimination because of their peasant and working-class origins. They manifest their vulnerability *vis à vis* the opposite sex, but also their desire to struggle against the double oppression they suffer as women and Chicanas.¹⁴

Nevertheless, even if their work may be a secondary extension of their own history, it is not valid to assume that everything they write is autobiographical. Sandra Cisneros explains this in the following way: "People assume that our characters speak for us, that we only write autobiographical novels, that this is all we can do as writers, women, Chicanas. But that's not accurate; as a writer I like to



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separate myself from my characters, to move events around, to take things from various histories and put them together, cut them up and give them form."¹⁵

The difference in ways of living and recreating experiences as men and women in the Chicano world constitute a proof that Chicanos do not speak with one voice; rather, there are many voices of Chicanos and Chicanas who seek to be witnesses to a history which has been unrepresented or under-represented in U.S. literature.

These men and women have shown the value of language in the struggle against ethnic determinisms and stereotypes, articulating language through experiences and values both new and old. Their readers—Anglo, Chicano or Mexican—can never be indifferent to the results ❧

Elsie L. Montiel
Assistant Editor.

¹⁴ Ana Castillo's book *The Mixquiahuala Letters* sheds light on a number of very important aspects of the relations between men and women, both in Mexico and the United States, in an attractive, captivating and innovative way. (*Understanding Chicano Literature*, p. 139.)

¹⁵ Seminar on Literature Written by Chicana Women, cited above.