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# HISPANIC AMERICAN LITERATURE: DIVERGENCE & COMMONALITY

BY VIRGIL SUAREZ



In an autobiographical sketch written in 1986, the respected Chicano American novelist Rudolfo Anaya observed that “if I am to be a writer, it is the ancestral voices of...[my]... people who will form a part of my quest, my search.”

Ancestral voices are very much a part of Hispanic American literature today, a tradition harking back more than three centuries that has witnessed a dramatic renaissance in the past generation. As the Hispanic experience in the United States continues to confront issues of identity, assimilation, cultural heritage and artistic expression, the works of Hispanic American writers are read with a great deal of interest and passion.

In a sense, the literature functions as a mirror, a reflection of the way Hispanic Americans are viewed by the mainstream culture -- but not always the majority. Readers and critics alike tend to celebrate this literature. It is rich, diverse, constantly growing, blending the history that infuses it with a impassioned feeling of contemporaneity.

In essence, the boom in the literature today is being forged in English, by people who live and work in the United States -- not in Spanish, as was the case with writers of generations and centuries past. This is a key difference, and a point of departure.

True, there are still some very real issues and problems facing Hispanic American writers in terms of finding outlets and venues for their work, as there are for other multicultural artists and, to be sure, writers in general. Although more work is being issued each year by major publishing houses, most of the interesting and engaging literature comes from small, independent presses that rely upon U.S. Government, private and university grants for stability. Literary journals and reviews always have been an outlet for Hispanic American voices, and

some of the best work is coming from such sources. Increasingly, though, with the recognition associated with the nation's most prestigious literary awards -- the Before Columbus Foundation Award, the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize -- Hispanic American authors are being courted by the publishing establishment.

Much of the attention of recent times, justifiably, is owed to the groundbreaking work of the Chicano Arts movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s and the emergence of Hispanic American poets such as Rodolfo Gonzales and Luis Alberto Urista (“Alurista,”) and other writers who chronicled the social and political history of the movement. The campaign was propelled by grassroots activists such as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta who played key roles in the unionization of migrant workers achieved through *huelgas* (strikes and boycotts). As invariably has happened throughout history, paralleling political issues in one country or another, the plight of the migrant workers and their struggle for recognition were directly reflected in the arts. A prime example was the work of Luis Valdez and *Teatro Campesino*, his theater troupe, which played a pivotal role in creating solidarity and new social consciousness. During the strikes, *Teatro Campesino* performed from the back of flatbed trucks using striking migrant workers as performers -- theater for the people and by the people. One of his plays, *Zoot Suit*, went from rudimentary stagings to workshops to successful productions in Los Angeles and New York, eventually becoming a film.

In referring to Hispanic American literature, definitions are important. In this context, we are speaking about the literature written in English, and which mainly concerns itself with life in the United States. An early classic of this type is exemplified by

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the publication in 1959 of Jose Antonio Villareal's *Pocho*, a novel about a youth whose parents migrate to the United States from Mexico, in Depression-era America, to better their lives.

Hispanic American literature contains, within its tent, writings from different countries and cultures. Villareal represents one of the major Hispanic groups to contribute -- Mexican Americans. (A word of definition is in order. Mexican Americans are distinguished from Chicanos in that the former feel more of a national identity with Mexico; Chicanos, on the other hand, are more culturally allied with the United States and particularly with Native Americans.) To a great extent, their literary tradition owes a debt to the *corridos*, the popular ballads of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that recounted heroic exploits. These *corridos* were also precursors to Chicano poetry of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, laying the foundation for a poetics that fuses the oral and the written, music and word. In the *corrido* we begin to see the mixing of the Spanish with the English, thus creating a new language with which to express a new reality.

Today, Chicano American writers have made an impression with such classic works as Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1985), Denise Chavez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), Tomas Rivera's *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1987), and the poetry of Jimmy Santiago Baca, Loma Dee Cervantes and Leroy V. Quintana. They represent the heartbeat of the Chicano American community -- the living, breathing record of these people in the United States.

Puerto Ricans are the next largest contributors to the canon of Hispanic American literature with works such as Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Line of the Sun* (1989), Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), Ed Vega's *Casualty Report* (1991), and the poetry of Victor Hernandez Cruz, Miguel Algarin and Sandra Maria Estevez. They reflect the rhythms of their island that have been transported to New York City, San Francisco and other U.S. urban centers.

The next largest group to be represented are the Cuban Americans, making recent additions to bookshelves and college syllabi with works such as Roberto G. Fernandez' *Raining Backwards* (1988), Elias Miguel Munoz's *The Greatest Performance* (1991), Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992),

Oscar Hijuelos' *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), along with the poetry of Gustavo Perez Firmat, Ricardo Pau-Llosa and Carolina Hospital. Their literary motivation, for the most part, is rooted in the reality of exile.

Students of Hispanic American literature and casual readers alike can gain fresh insights into the diversity of this literature through a number of anthologies. These collections gather both the established and emerging voices from among the main Hispanic American groups in the United States, as well as new voices emerging from the Dominican, Colombian and Guatemalan communities, currently represented by the work of Julia Alvarez, author of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and other novels, and books such as Jaime Manrique's *Twilight at the Equator* (1997), Francisco Goldman's *The Long Night of the White Chickens* (1992), and Junot Diaz's *Drown* (1996). Each of these writers is bringing along a piece of a homeland that most likely is unfamiliar to the general readership.

**W**ith this impressive diversity of voices goes a caveat. Teachers, editors and readers more than ever have to be sensitive to issues of factionalism along national lines, which is only natural, since the grouping of these distinct and separate cultures under one term, Hispanic American, can seem forced. Yet one can argue that bringing all these cultures together under the one term may be comparable to the tension of sharing a meal with distant relatives -- there is a separate history and experience, yet there exists a bond of recognition, a family camaraderie.

The central point of unity among Hispanic American writers is language. While they may speak with different accents and use different expressions, they all share the experience of bilingualism. The ability to communicate in two languages, and more important, to think and feel in two languages, at times brings with it the phenomenon of being unable to express oneself fully in only one. Linguists term this "interference," and generally view it as a negative trait, or shortcoming. Still, Hispanic American writers and readers of Hispanic American literature assert that the intermingling of the two languages is an effective means of communicating what otherwise could not be expressed. Thus, many Hispanic

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American writers use Spanish in their work because it is an integral part of their experience.

Indeed, many Hispanic American authors believe that in the lives of their characters Spanish is not a “foreign” language, but rather a vital part of everyday speech and as such should not be emphasized with the use of italics. They emphasize the importance of Spanish by doing this. So many of the writers express themselves in English -- the language of the mainstream (whatever that may mean) -- but are resisting the destruction of their culture and thus preserve their identity by using Hispanic American expressions, points of reference and experiences. Hopefully this will become accepted not as “exotic,” but rather part of the redefined mainstream in the arts. Again, this is a clear distinction between Hispanic American literature and Latin American literature, which exists solely in Spanish and in translation in the United States, written by writers who do not live and work in this country.

A second facet that all Hispanic American cultures share is the need for cultural survival. This is a controversial issue among Hispanic Americans, especially writers of literature, since it deals with the question of assimilation. How much of their culture should Hispanic Americans be willing to lose or suppress in order to participate in mainstream society? The answers to this important question vary, yet it is an issue that all Hispanic American writers tackle either directly or in more subtle ways. There are worlds of difference, for instance, between a novel like *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, and Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*. *Bless Me, Ultima* has at its core a timeless bond with the earth and nature, and an aura reflecting a traditional spiritual heritage. Cisneros’ story cycle is more urban and pragmatic, and contemporary and assimilated in its stance on gender. But that’s the beauty of so many voices adding to the canon.

The differences, which can be significant, at times may not be obvious to a general readership in the United States and elsewhere. We have touched upon the rural peasant or *campesino* tradition, the strong ties to the land, with which the writings of Mexican Americans are interwoven. Puerto Rican, Dominican and Cuban Americans, being islanders, have strong ties to water,

reflected in the writings of the poets from those heritages, such as Firmat and Cofer. Urban life in the United States has given rise to a new tradition in Hispanic American literature, that of the *barrio*, the inner city. While for Mexican Americans the *barrio* is likely to be in California, the southwestern U.S. or Chicago, for the Puerto Rican the *barrio* is in New York City, evident chiefly in the work of Thomas and Vega. Cuban Americans are preoccupied with the dilemmas and frustrations of political exile. Their characters often feel a yearning and sense of loss for a homeland to which they cannot return. This is most obvious in nostalgic literature set in the idyllic Cuba of the past, as well as those speculating on the Cuba of the future, as in the novels of Roberto G. Fernandez and Cristina Garcia.

To a degree, the differences in religion enter the literature, from the Catholicism unique to various Latin American countries to the African *santeria* influence in Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Chicana American novelist Ana Castillo, in *So Far From God* (1993), presents a Catholic perspective that does not lose sight of the indigenous Indian belief system. By the same token, Cuban American poets Adrian Castro and Sandra Castillo work *santeria* into their poetry.

As we have seen, the Hispanic American experience has many points of divergence from that of the mainstream, so it follows that the literature does too. However, there are common experiences that we all share as human beings, experiences that transcend cultures and find expression in art, making it universal and timeless. Coming of age, traditional family relationships, assimilation and the pursuit of the American dream are among the themes explored again and again. With the particular perspective Hispanic American writers bring to their work, it has a unique quality that, today, more and more, is finding an appreciative readership in the United States. ■

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## PROFILE:

JULIA ALVAREZ -- THE TWO WORLDS

In *Something To Declare*, her 1998 volume of personal essays following three novels and three collections of verse, Dominican American novelist Julia Alvarez quoted fellow writer of fiction Robert Stone's observation that "writing is how we take care of the human family."

To which she added, "it is through writing that I give myself to a much larger *familia* than my own blood."

The probings into relationships that have propelled Alvarez into the first rank of the current generation of Hispanic American writers are very much caught up with *la familia*, and an intriguing history it has been.

Alvarez, born in New York City in 1950 to Dominican parents, writes books whose scenes and sensibilities are very much linked to her own history. In her case, the links to the United States were deep: her uncles attended prestigious U.S. universities and her grandfather was a Dominican cultural attache posted to the United Nations. She and her three sisters grew up in the Dominican Republic at the family compound, surrounded by cousins and other relatives. But her father became involved in a plot against the island's dictator, Rafael Trujillo, and at 10, her existence was uprooted when, following a tip that an arrest was imminent, the family was compelled to leave the country for the United States on short notice. And so, her nomadic life began, taking her from home to boarding school to college, and on to poetry residences and university faculty appointments in a number of locales. She published her first poetry collection, *Homecomings*, in 1984.

During the second half of the decade, she began to write stories, 15 of which were joined together into three symmetrical sections to form a novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), told in reverse chronological order. A glimpse of a Dominican family not unlike her own that must adjust to U.S. life, it delineated what one critic called "its protagonists' precarious coming of age as Latinas in the United States and gringas in Santo Domingo." For Donna Rifkind, writing in *The New York Times Book Review*, Alvarez had "beautifully captured the

threshold experience of the new immigrant, where the past is not yet a memory and the future remains an anxious dream."

The conflicted state in which the author found herself between two facets -- her American side and her Dominican heritage -- surfaced anew in her second novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), a darker novel with many more political overtones than her first, inspired by three sisters who were killed in 1960 for their underground activities against the Trujillo regime. Alvarez placed a thinly-veiled version of herself into the story as a writer who, seeking information, visits the family home of the women -- now a shrine run by a fourth sister who, by chance, escaped being killed. By inserting herself as *la gringa norteamericana* [the North American woman], critic Ilan Stavins noted in *The Nation*, she once again linked the old and the new.

*¡Yo!* (meaning "I"), revisiting the Garcia family of her first book, appeared in 1996, and is a much more rambunctious story, even as it hews to the central theme in Alvarez' work, the dual existence and conflicting experiences. Centering it on Yolanda, or Yo, the third sister, a published novelist who has turned her relatives into characters, Alvarez, cheekily, allowed the various family members and friends to offer their thoughts on Yo, from infancy to her new fame, while providing the author herself with the chance to consider the creative art and artist.

Alvarez, who has been on the English faculty at Middlebury College, in Vermont, since 1988, has always let readers into her heart and mind, but never more so than in her most recent nonfiction collection. She describes the circumstances of her emigration and the tensions surrounding it, family life in the United States and her maturation, the flowering of her writing career, the joys of teaching and the art of creating literature.

As a writer inhabiting two cultures, and aware that the spotlight is on multicultural writing these days more than ever, she explains, on behalf of her fellow Hispanic authors and, arguably, for writers of many backgrounds, that "we want our work to become part of the great body of all that has been thought and felt and written by writers of different cultures, languages, experiences, classes, races."

-- M.J.B.



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## OTHER HISPANIC AMERICAN WRITERS

**RUDOLFO ANAYA**, a native of New Mexico, where he was born in 1937, is considered one of the premier Chicano American writers. He is best known for a trilogy of novels published during the 1970s -- *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), which won the prestigious Premio Quinto Sol national Chicano literary award; *Heart of Aztlán* (1976); and *Tortuga* (1979). All three works focus on growing up as a Hispanic American in U.S. society. Many of Anaya's works are about faith and the loss of faith. His writing is rich in symbolism, poetry, and spiritualism as he explores the mystery of life and his cultural heritage. His novels include *The Legend of La Llorona* (1984); *Lord of the Dawn* (1987); and *Albuquerque* (1992), for which he received the PEN-West Fiction Award; *Zia Sammer and Jalamanta* (1995); and *Rio Grande Fall* (1996). His most current work is *My Land Sings: Stories from the Rio Grande* (1999). In addition to his novels and short stories, Anaya has written plays, poems, children's books and works of nonfiction. He is currently a professor of English at the University of New Mexico.

**ANA (HERNANDEZ DEL) CASTILLO**, a highly-respected Chicana poet, novelist, and essayist, has been called one of the most original voices in Chicana and contemporary American feminist literature. Her work often considers how gender and sexuality intersect with racism and cultural conflict. Her first novel, *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), an American Book Award winner, explores the changing role of Hispanic women in the United States and Mexico during the 1970s and 1980s. *So Far From God* (1993), her most popular novel, focus on the complex lives and relationships of Latino women. Castillo's poetry collections, *Women Are Not Roses* (1984), and *My Father Was a Toltec* (1988), explore the lives and gender roles of Latinas in the Hispanic community. *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (1994), examines the situation of women of color in the United States. Over the years, Castillo has broadened her work to include musical performance.

Mexican American writer of fiction **SANDRA CISNEROS** ignited a cultural controversy in 1997 when she painted her historic San Antonio, Texas, house neon purple in violation of the city's historic preservation code -- claiming the bright color as a key part of her Mexican heritage. The incident mirrors her most well-known work and National Book Award winner, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), in which she writes, "One day I'll own my own house, but I won't forget who I am or where I came from." Cisneros, born in Chicago in 1954, draws heavily upon her childhood experiences and ethnic heritage in her writing -- addressing poverty, cultural suppression, self-identity and gender roles in her fiction and poetry. Although she is noted primarily for *Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), her poetry, which includes *Bad Boys* (1980), *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (1987), and *Loose Woman* (1994) has also received considerable attention.

**CRISTINA GARCIA** was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1958 and fled the Castro regime to New York City with her family when she was two. In 1990 she left her job as a reporter and correspondent for *Time* magazine to explore the issues of her Cuban heritage and her childhood in fiction. She has written two critically acclaimed books chronicling what it means to be Cuban American. The first, *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), focuses on three generations of maternally-related Cuban women, each living her life differently as a result of the Cuban revolution. The *San Francisco Chronicle* called it "evocative and lush...a rich and haunting narrative." Her second, *The Aguero Sisters* (1997), glimpses two middle-aged siblings -- one an electrician in Havana, the other a salesperson in New York City. It, too, received glowing reviews and won her a new and increasingly devoted readership. As one critic has noted, Garcia "has opened a portal to Cuba -- where readers enter a world of history, culture, love, yearning, and loss."

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Award-winning novelist **OSCAR HIJUELOS**, born in 1951 in New York City, calls upon his Cuban American heritage in writing fictional works that have won him both critical and popular acclaim. His first novel, *Our House in the Last World* (1983), tells of a Cuban American family's difficulties adjusting to life in the United States during 1940s. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), moved him to the first rank of American novelists in portraying two brothers who leave their native Cuba and to seek their fortunes as singers in New York City in the early 1950s, at the outset of the television era, as the Latino musical craze erupts. Hijuelos' 1993 novel, *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*, takes a different tack, focusing on the female members of a

Cuban-Irish family living in Pennsylvania. The author's heritage was only a minor theme in *Mr. Ives' Christmas* (1995), a tender tale of a foundling, that was greeted by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as "a life-affirming novel, a worthy successor to Dickens." However, his most recent story, *Empress of the Splendid Season* (1999) returns to those roots as it tells the story of a humble Cuban American from the late 1940s to the present. Hijuelos is most noted for the skilled contrasts he draws between Cuban and American life, his rich descriptions of everyday existence in Cuba, and his capacity for incorporating elements of magical realism into his novels.

-- S.D.

