

## Reflections on the “Chicano Renaissance”

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### I

In chronological time, 1971 is now almost 35 years ago, but in ideological time it seems to me like only yesterday. In chronological time, 1971 is a world and a half ago, tucked into the mnemonic archives of the Chicano Movement. In May of that year, the *Journal of Social Casework* published a special issue of various pieces on Chicano concerns across multiple disciplines edited by Lydia Aguirre, professor of socialwork at the University of Texas at El Paso who convinced Margaret Mangold, editor of the *Journal of Social Casework*, to produce that special issue. Aware that I was completing a work on Mexican American Literature, Lydia encouraged me to submit a piece for that special issue.

The last section of *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature*, the work I was finishing up, covered the years of the Chicano Movement from circa 1960 to 1971, a period within which I perceived a particular literary impulse (a wave, a boom) that I labeled “The Chicano Renaissance,” since it bore particular characteristics similar to other literary renaissances, I had studied, particularly “The Harlem Renaissance” and the “Irish Renaissance.” Initially I penned the term as a descriptive phrase, not a noun phrase. But when I began working the material from the text of *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature* into the article for the *Journal of Social Casework*, I was struck by the panoramic sweep of the literary works being produced by Chicano writers since 1966, the start of the Chicano renaissance, a literary irruption from within the Chicano Movement.

The years 1966 to 1971 may not seem very long, but within the span of those five years a geo-literary outcrop roiled up out of the earth of the Hispanic Southwest that changed the character of the land that had once been Mexico and was now the

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United States. The diasporic *peregrinos* of *Aztlan*, as the land was renamed by mejicanos transformed into Chicanos, *estaban en marcha*, though few of the hegemonic elite could see their spectral forms gathering in the dim light before the dawn.

By 1971 few Chicano writers had “made it”—so to speak—into the American literary mainstream. There were, of course, Chicano novelists like José Antonio Villarreal, John Rechy, Floyd Salas, and Hank López with mainstream publishers. Other Chicano writers hooked up with ephemeral publishers or set up garage presses (as Ray Barrios did) to get their works out to the public, principally activist Chicano readers anxious to devour works by their own. In academia today this is not considered reputable publishing. But this was all that was available to us then. The times were not propitious for Chicano literature. For example, when I suggested a piece on Chicano literature in 1970 to Richard Ohman, editor of NCTE’s (National Council of Teachers of English) *College English* he brushed me aside with the remark that he didn’t think it would have much appeal to the readers of *College English*. It was equally difficult for Chicano academics to get their works on Chicano topics published in mainstream academic publications. I was fortunate that during this time my pieces on traditional British and American topics got into print in academic journals. However, I was doing better in the public affairs arena of Chicano issues.

My public affairs pieces on Chicanos were quickly published by *The Nation*, *Saturday Review*, *The Center Magazine*, *Trans-Action*, *The Texas Observer*, and others. In general, however, breaking into academic journals with Chicano topics was a tough nut to crack. Publication of the article “The Chicano Renaissance” was a singular breakthrough for me, establishing direction for my professional academic career. The article was immediately republished in various collections and journals and cited in myriad works. It has since been translated into various other languages. It also raised strong criticisms, principally that the word “renaissance” suggested that Chicanos had been asleep; also, that calling Chicano literary production thus far a “renaissance” was premature. In the main, however, the article has fared well as a point of departure for Chicano literary history and in opening the aperture of the American literary canon to include Chicano literature. That became my life’s mission.

In part, that mission was actuated by a remark Richard Wright made in May of 1958 at the Sorbonne in Paris where at the invitation of the USIS he spoke on “The American Novel.” In response to a question about black literary production, he said, black culture was defined by oppression and, therefore, black literature was a manifestation of that oppression. In an aside he compared blacks in the United States

to Jews in Nazi Germany. That response stayed with me through my own studies of Chicano literary production. Analogously, I reasoned that Chicano literature was a manifestation of American oppression. The Chicano diaspora looked a lot like the Jewish diaspora (Ortego 1990: 6).

I had started that mission in 1962 not knowing I was on a mission, with formation of the Southwest Council of Foreign Language Teachers, the founding organization of the Southwest Council for Bilingual Education which morphed into the National Association for Bilingual Education in 1970. Between 1962 and 1968, the organization lobbied and worked relentlessly for passage of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 carried to fruition by Texas Senator Ralph Yarborough. From 1962 to 1970, I was engaged in an array of research on Mexican Americans and second-language acquisition, as well as a number of expository pieces on the sad state of Mexican American education (see *Select Bibliography of Works about Hispanics* by the author). In 1970 when *The Center Magazine* of the John Maynard Hutchins Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara published my piece on “Montezuma’s Children” as the cover story, Senator Yarborough had the entire piece entered into *The Congressional Record* with the comment that the piece exposed the sordid treatment Mexican American children received in the American educational system. That piece too was widely reprinted and circulated.

That same year the Center for Applied Linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington, DC published my research on *The Linguistic Imperative in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*. Parallel to my work in bilingual education, in 1968 I became a founding member of the Task Force on Racism and Bias in the Teaching of English established by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) on the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. that year. The Task Force was chaired by Ernece Kelly and included the African American critic Darwin Turner, Montana Rickards, Frank Chin, Jeff Chan, José Carrasco, and Carlota Cárdenas-Dwyer. In 1973, NCTE published the Task Force’s stinging report on the status of minority writers in the canon of American literature. Minority writers were not included in the anthologies of American literature then published by various mainstream publishing houses. The report was issued under the provocative title *Searching for America*. My piece (with José Carrasco) in that report on “Chicanos and American Literature” took aim at shameless American writers and American publishers who had treated mejicanos in the United States stereotypically since well before 1848 (see, for example, *Two Years Before the Mast* by Richard Henry Dana).

## II

In the midst of my activities in bilingual education and Chicano literature, I was tapped to be the founding director of the first Chicano Studies Program in the state at the University of Texas at El Paso. I arrived there ABD (all but the dissertation). I was completing the dissertation in English at the University of New Mexico. Years later I learned I was the first Chicano to earn the Ph.D. in English there. The dissertation, *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature*, was also the first historical and taxonomical study in the field. I did not know that then. Nor did I know that Arturo Islas was completing a Ph.D. dissertation in English (not on a Chicano topic) at Stanford University. He completed his in May of 1971; I finished mine in August of 1971. I did not know then either that Arturo Islas and I rounded out a handful of Chicanos in the country with Ph.D's in English.

I started my Ph.D. studies at the University of New Mexico in the summer of 1966 at the urging of Joseph Zavadil, chair of the English Department at UNM, and Newman Reed, chair of the English Department at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces where I had been teaching since 1964. Newman Reed suggested UNM, reminding me that if I had aspirations as an academic I would need the doctorate. In 1966 I was 40 years old.

I spent the next four summers completing the Ph.D. course work while teaching full-time at New Mexico State University (NMSU) during those academic years. I managed some independent course work. In the summer of 1969 I passed the English Ph.D. Comprehensive Examination and began a Chaucer dissertation with Edith Buchanan as advisor and chair of my dissertation committee. During my Master's study in English at Texas Western College of the University of Texas at El Paso I had the good fortune to study Chaucer with Haldeen Braddy who inspired me to write a Master's thesis on *Hamlet*, a work studded with controversy since I advanced a radical proposition in the reading of Shakespeare's text. I had an equally radical proposition in deciphering the text of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Perhaps it was fate. ¿*Quién sabe?* But in the Summer of 1969 when I was finishing up my Ph.D. course work and studying for the English Ph.D. comps that August, Louis Bransford who had been appointed Director of the Chicano Studies program at UNM asked me to organize a course for that fall on Chicano literature for the fledgling Chicano Studies Program. That was most fortuitous since I was going to be a Teaching Fellow in the English Department during the 69-70 academic year while satisfying the university residency requirement. I would be on leave from New Mexico State University. Louis Bransford's request did not strike me as strange,

for a brew of Chicano literary ideations had been percolating in my mind since 1966, the year I met Octavio Romano in a chance encounter on the NMSU campus. He and his wife were visiting her mother who lived in Las Cruces and he just decided that day to stroll the campus where we chanced to run into each other near the university library. We met a number of times that summer and during our conversations he mentioned *El Grito*, an enterprise he and a cohort of Chicanos at Berkeley were contemplating. *El Grito*, of course, and Quinto Sol Publications would become the touchstones of the Chicano literary movement. I was fortunate to be counted as one of the early Quinto Sol writers with a number of my pieces appearing in the first volume. Octavio Romano influenced me more than he may realize in my formulation of Chicano literature. The Editorial of Volume 1, Number 1 of *El Grito* said it all. That editorial was a literary declaration as powerful as the manifesto articulated by Yeats in freeing Irish literature from the yoke of the British literary canon. With *El Grito*, Chicano writers declared themselves free from the yoke of American literature that subjected their works to the scrutiny and validation of the American literary establishment and ultimately rejected by that establishment as not being American enough. No more, according to *El Grito*, Chicanos would be the arbiters of their own literature. Moreover, Chicanos would be who *they* said they were rather than who the Anglo mainstream said they were. I read that Editorial as the Chicano Manifesto for the Chicano Renaissance:

Only Mexican Americans themselves can accomplish the collapse of [social science rhetoric about Mexican Americans, professionally certified and institutionally sanctified] and other such rhetorical structures by [exposing] their fallacious nature and the development of intellectual alternatives. *El Grito* has been founded for just this purpose to provide a forum for Mexican-American self definition and expression on this and other issues of relevance to Mexican-Americans in American society today (*El Grito*, Volume 1, Number 1, Fall 1967).

In the latter years of the 60's my academic interests took a decided literary turn, though that turn had really begun in 1962, as I have mentioned, with my participation with the Bilingual Education movement that resulted in passage of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968. I had no idea during those years that the various threads of my Mexican American/Chicano interests and activities were all part of a coaxial cultural cable grounding me firmly in the soil of Chicano identity.

Thanks to Octavio Romano, I became a Chicano in 1966, though since 1958 I had been working politically in causes that were incipiently Chicano, starting with the Mexican American Political Association and the work of mejicanos in promoting

the administration of Raymond Telles, first Mexican American mayor of El Paso, Texas. Telles was actually elected mayor in 1957 but the real work of developing an Hispanic socio-political agenda was still in the offing, though the seeds of that agenda were sown in Texas in 1957.

In 1958, I was 32 years old and a Captain in the Air Force stationed at Biggs Air Force Base in El Paso, Texas. I had spent the last four years in Europe, first in England, then in France as an Air Force Intelligence Officer (Threat Analyst) in Soviet Studies. I was anxious to move on with my literary interests sparked at the University of Pittsburgh where I was an undergraduate from 1948 to 1952. I left the Air Force in 1962 as a reserve Major and started the Master's in English at the University of Texas at El Paso. As I've already mentioned, thanks to Haldeen Braddy, I finished the Master's in English in 1966 with a thesis on *The Stamp of One Defect: A Study of Hamlet* which was both pummeled and praised for its radical perspective on *Hamlet*.

From 1962 to 1964 I taught French at Jefferson High School in El Paso; Texas, since the El Paso Schools were loathe to hire a "Mexican" to teach English. In 1964, however, thanks to professor Newman Reed, I joined the English department at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces as an Instructor of English. Encouraged by Newman Reed and my colleague Mark Medoff (author of *Children of a Lesser God*) to pursue the doctorate, I applied for and was accepted into the Ph.D. program in English at the University of New Mexico where I was eager to start work on a Chaucer dissertation. But fate had other plans for me.

### III

What was needed for the Chicano literature course Louis Bransford asked me to teach were texts sufficient for a classroom of students and which, naively, I assumed would be easy to find. I assumed that organizing a Chicano literature course was no different than organizing any other course. To my surprise, there were very few extant texts that fit the requirements of the course in Chicano literature as I had configured it at the time. The ideological bent for the course was right, but there were few texts to support it. Many of the Mexican American literary works I found and surveyed in preparation for that course were in various libraries whose nooks and crannies I scoured diligently, but many were in private collections difficult to get to.

I went through a list of keywords in card catalogs. At the time, the term "Chicano" was not on that list. Neither was the term "Mexican Americans." Most card catalogs identified us as "Mexicans in the United States." The wonder, though,

is why no one (insofar as I knew) had looked at Mexican American writing as a literary tradition, studied it and given it a cladistic structure from which to discuss it critically and historically as an integral part of the Mexican American experience and of American literature. To be sure, there were bits and pieces of study but not an overarching one. My work was only the tip of the iceberg. I learned that Mexican Americans had a trove of literature, stretching back to well before 1848, to the Spanish colonial period. And earlier.

The course was successful beyond my expectations despite the paucity of works readily available for instruction. Many of the historical texts I thought suitable for the course were, woefully, out of print. Contemporary works (few as there were) were difficult to secure in quantities sufficient for the enrollment of the course since many of them were published ephemerally by “small” presses or in garage presses like Raymond Barrios’ *The Plum Plum Pickers*. The only text available in quantity for the course was *Pocho* which was languishing in remainders since its publication in 1959. I quickly identified it as the first Chicano novel.

After teaching that course I found validity for the proposition that there existed a body of Mexican American literature, amorphous in historical structure but there nevertheless. As a consequence of that course I petitioned for a change of dissertation topic, three chapters of which I had already written. I fully understood what that change would entail. Instead of finishing up the Ph.D. by May of 1970, I’d be looking at another year, at least, since there was still considerable research to be carried out. Despite strenuous objections, Joe Zavadil, chair of the English department at UNM, approved my request to change my dissertation topic contingent on my putting together a dissertation committee. No one on the English faculty had any experience with the topic I was broaching. Fortunately I found three new faculty who agreed to serve as my dissertation committee, intrigued by the prospectus I gave them about *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature*.

In that study I sought to provide some historical and taxonomic shape to Mexican American literature. In the Preface, I pointed out that what was proffered therein represented but a skeletal view of Mexican American literature, that it was an exploration in literary archaeology akin to the representations we see of dinosaurs in museums made life-like from inductions and deductions of the animal fossils found here and there. We don’t really know what woolly mammoths or mastadons looked like. Or saber-toothed tigers. Or pterodactyls. Or early man. The taxidermic models we see in museums are what we think they looked like from the way we’ve pieced together the scant evidence we’ve found.

In literary history, as in archaeology, there is always a lacunae (discontinuity) in need of exploration and interpretation. By and large, in 1969 our view of Mexican American literature was nominal. We know more about Mexican American literature in the year 2004 than we did in 1969. Thirty-five years after Kitty Hawk, we knew considerably more about heavier-than-air flight than when Wilbur and Orville Wright undertook their first historic flight.

Undertaking the study of *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature*, out of which my concept of “the Chicano Renaissance” emerged, helped me to periodize the structural history of Mexican American literature (see *Chicano Literature: Roots and Traditions*). It all seemed so clear and so simple. The roots of Mexican American literature lay in the pre-1848 Hispanic past and its traditions were wrought in the post-1848 world in which Mexicans, now Mexican Americans, struggled to survive. Out of that root postulation came to me the recognition that Mexican Americans had a rich literary heritage, that they had been nurtured by a literary tradition that stretched back hundred of yours. That’s what I learned from undertaking the study of *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature*. I also realized that my study would in no way be exhaustive nor definitive. It was a first effort, a scaffold, at a chronology of Mexican American literary history. Taxonomically, I conceptualized Mexican American literature as a continuum of two pasts, welded together by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

#### IV

Sketching out the historical structure of Mexican American literature came easily. The difficult part of *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature* would be finding the materials that fit into the categories I had settled on (see Periodization Chart: Chicano Literature: Roots and Traditions). Where to start? How to start? And what territorial boundaries would be appropriate in claiming particular works as roots of Mexican American literature? It was here that I saw that Mexicans and Mexican Americans shared a common literary heritage from 1521 to 1821 (Ortego, 2002). And that both groups shared in the brief literary heritage of the Mexican National Period from 1821 to 1848 with the exception of Texas since it broke away from Mexican hegemony in 1836. And what of the times before 1521? Period by period, I started building the scaffold of *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature* by studying first the autochthonous Mexican roots and the Spanish peninsular roots. One of the most interesting works along this conjunction was Salvador de Madariaga’s *El corazón de piedra verde* which tells the story of a Spanish hidalgo and an autochthonous

maiden and the bonding that takes place in the evolution of *mestizaje* in Mexico. I knew a lot about the literature of Spain but knew less about the literature of Mexico before the “conquest.”

What I knew about that period had come to me through the hegemonic texts we were subjected to in the American public schools, including colleges and universities. I gained a greater appreciation and respect for the Pre-Columbian peoples of Mexico. I sought to emphasize that appreciation in *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature* and in “The Chicano Renaissance.” The shame is that so few of those ancient texts had survived, like the *Popul Vuh* of the Maya. Most of the literary codices of indigenous Mexico were destroyed by zealous Spanish friars, principally Fray Zumárraga, who thought them the works of the devil because of their pictographs. Ironically, no original works of indigenous Mexico are extant in the country; only copies. The literary wealth of indigenous Mexico was pillaged by imperial scavengers.

My contention in *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature* was that just as the English-language literature of New England and the Atlantic Frontier between 1607 and 1776 constituted the British Colonial roots of American literature, so too, analogously, the Spanish-language literature of New Spain and Mexico in what is now the United States constituted the Spanish Colonial and Mexican National roots of American literature as well as the roots of Mexican American literature. This became a key part of my piece on “The Chicano Renaissance”. I consolidated the various threads of *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature* into the essay on the Chicano renaissance.

In *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature* I also explained that the literary citations of the Spanish Colonial and Mexican National Periods which I referred to therein were just baseline citations, that future research would yield a trove of Mexican American literature whose size would astonish us, as the University of Houston project in Recovering the Hispanic Literary Heritage of the United States has borne out in the last ten years. My rationale for bringing into American literature the Spanish Colonial and Mexican National roots of Mexican American literature emerged from my contention that, properly speaking, American Literature began not with the founding of Jamestown in 1607 but with the Declaration of Independence in 1776; ergo, this literature is in reality the British Colonial roots of American literature from 1607 to 1776. Jehlen and Warner make this point clearly: “all [British colonials] saw themselves as Englishmen away from England” (101). American literature is everything after 1776. For the most part, British colonial literature

emulated the British forms of literature, a practice which continued well into the 19th century. For example, a course in American literature was not taught in an American college or university until the 20th century.

In the periodization of American literature, I postulated that there needs to be room for the literatures of populations which have been absorbed into the American hegemony by conquest. That includes the literatures of Native Americans (including Aleuts), of Mexican Americans, of Puerto Ricans, and of Pacific Islanders, all of them territorial minorities, the United States came to them, contrary to the popular American assertion that in the United States, all the people are “immigrants.”

It dawned on me that the histories of these territorial minorities did not begin *sui generis* at the moment of their conquest.. They came into the American fold with a history, with customs, with roots (Leiker 9). As I have already pointed out, in 1848 when the Mexicans of the Mexican Cession became Americans, they had been nurtured by a long literary tradition. The same is true of Puerto Ricans, of Native Americans, and of Pacific Islanders. In the case of Mexican Americans, they were brought into the American fold in 1848 and Puerto Ricans were brought into the American fold fifty years later in 1898 (DeGregorio 205). The literary roots of both were in Spanish. I also realized that, in large part, resistance to incorporating the literary traditions of territorial minorities was due to language. But language should not be a bar to that incorporation, Thomas M. Pearce, professor of English at the University of New Mexico, argued in 1942 in *American Traditions and Our Histories of Literature* (279).

My research revealed that in the history of the United States not all American writers produced works in English. In the ethnic enclaves of America, there were publications in myriad languages. From the beginning of the American experience, foreign languages have flourished in the literary arts of the United States. The Germans in America produced newspapers and other information venues in German. The Italians of New York, the Poles and the Ukrainians of the Ohio Valley Crescent all produced literatures, respectively, in Italian, in Polish, and in Ukrainian. The Jews of America, especially in New York, produced literature in Yiddish. The Norwegians and Swedes of the Midwest produced literature in their respective languages. The American writer from Minnesota, Ole Rolvaag, wrote *Giants in the Earth* (1929) in Norwegian and was published in Norway for distribution there and in the Norwegian communities of the United States. So too, Mexican American writers produced literary works by necessity in Spanish both during the Period of Transition (1848-1912) and by choice during the Period of Americanization (1912-1960) and the

Chicano Period (1960 to the Present). Thus, one bit of information at a time I began to build the case for Chicano literature as presented in *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature* and which engendered the essay “The Chicano Renaissance.” Wherever and whenever possible I sought to find parallel precedents for Chicano literature in what already existed in the American milieu. I found that despite hostility towards Mexican Americans by the American mainstream that Mexican American writers produced works that resisted American hegemony while at the same time raising the level of consciousness among Mexican Americans via print venues that were expediently available to them, principally newspapers and private printings here and there.

## V

Significantly, a literature draws from the history and myths of its people’s past. Chicanos turned to their Indian past for their most meaningful symbols and metaphors. One of the key symbols of the Chicano Movement was the icon of the 5th sun celebrated by the Aztecs in the form of the great calendar stone. The Aztecs considered themselves people of the Fifth Sun (*Quinto Sol*). The publishing enterprise that produced *El Grito* as named *Quinto Sol* Publications. The title *El Grito* celebrated the essence of the Mexican War for independence. *Cuauhtemoc*, not his brother *Moctezuma*, was apotheosized by Chicanos as the champion of indigenous resistance to Cortez and the Spaniards. These were the semiotic signs, it seemed to me, most relevant in the Chicano Renaissance.

From the beginning, I was conscious that Mexican American literature was a body of intellectual/cultural production looking for a form. In a rather odd way the situation I perceived reminded me of Luigi Pirandello’s play of “Six Characters in Search of an Author.” I proffered a form in *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature*. In particular I sought to make clear that Chicano literature was a “bubble” (a boom) in the linear progression of Mexican American literature which began in 1848 and that out of its *incunabula* many of the early works of Chicano literature were inspired by ideological needs that did not lessen the expectations that the responsibilities of Chicano writers were ultimately to create a literature so essentially Chicano that it stood on its own merits apart from other literatures. As it emerged from the cauldron of Chicano nationalism, the role of Chicano literature was to reflect Chicano life and Chicano values drawing from a distinctively Chicano imagination. Like the disciples of Senchan Torpeist, the fabled Irish poet of myth, who were sent out to recover the whole of the Tain—the great Irish saga—which none of them could

remember entirely, Chicano writers were the “disciples” through whom the lost literary inheritance of Chicanos would be recovered.

In conceptualizing “The Chicano Renaissance” I came to realize that a piece of literature is not just a speech act. It’s a social act as well; it has cultural connotations that reveal a writer’s relation to his or her group and to the entire fabric of society. As a cultural manifestation, a literary work inheres a sense of audience, its language (whether English, Spanish or a combination of both) is part of a *weltanschauung* shared by a community of readers. The significance of a literary work lies not only in the social reality in which the writer participates but grows out of the culture which nourished him or her.

Early on, I noticed that what most characterized Chicano literature were its countertexts: the textual backgrounds against which Chicano literature was superimposed, in other words, the texts of Chicano reality. Chicano writers were expositing not just Chicano views but countertexts of Anglo views by which Chicano were judged socially; countertexts which showed how Chicanos were contained within the value framework of mainstream culture and subjected cruelly and brutally to it. I reasoned that through the countertexts of the Chicano Renaissance, Chicano writers were showing the insidious ways by which mainstream culture exercised hegemony over the Chicano community, pointing out how having been subjected to coercive Anglo texts and having internalized the values inherent in them Chicanos had inadvertently been instruments in their own oppression. It appeared to me that out of this concern, Chicano writers tacitly, if not overtly, established their responsibility to (1) identify the enemy, (2) praise the people, and (3) promote the revolution. Chicano literature emerged thus as a revolutionary concept, much the way Irish literature emerged in the wake of the Irish Renaissance. The Chicano challenge to the American literary mainstream and its exclusive canon was a shot across the bow of the American literary establishment. Chicanos were out to deconstruct American literature. It turned out they were ready to deconstruct the entire fabric of American society. But that way danger lay and the dark tower. Rising out of the Chicano Renaissance was a heavy emphasis that Chicano texts had to be ideologically Chicano. The question was: by whose standards? That was Juan Bruce Novoa’s concern.

Underlying that insistence, however, was the expectation that Chicano texts augured representation. Not until the new millennium would the evolutionary transformation of Chicano literature become evident that Chicano literature was ultimately a process, not an outcome, a process of imagining and figuring our the world. As products of process, Chicano texts were not finalities of truth but limns by

which Chicano liberation could be achieved. Chicano literature was thus envisioned in the service of the cause, the people. Chicano literature was not an end in itself. This meant Chicano texts were not self-sufficient but required the help of Chicano readers to actualize their meanings. Or as Ramón Saldívar has put it: the function of Chicano [literature] is . . . to produce creative structures of knowledge to allow its readers to see, feel, and understand their social reality (6).

What I perceived about Chicano literature and the “Chicano Renaissance” was that it was a literature in process, drawing from different literary traditions (American, Mexican, global), sometimes from one or the other, and sometimes in a unique synthesis of Mexican and American that is both startling and innovative. The permutations are manifold. Nowhere are those permutations more visible than in the language of Chicano texts in which Spanish and English are mixed in binary utterances using the syntactic structure of both languages to create binary metaphors.

## VI

What is astounding today is how widely the term “the Chicano Renaissance” is used in critical parlance. Equally astounding is that in a sample of three texts discussing “the Chicano Renaissance” not one of the three attributed the term’s origin. Michelle Bottalico at the University of Salerno in Italy discusses the renaissance in his work *Writing Another History: Divergent Trends in Testimonial Literature* but does not attribute origin of the term. Teresa Palomo Acosta’s piece on the “Chicano Literary Renaissance” in *The Handbook of Texas Online* discusses the Chicano renaissance and uses that term without attribution whatever to its origins. The one that really caught my eye, however, was David Maciel’s *Chicano Renaissance: Contemporary Cultural Trends* that discusses the Chicano renaissance without attribution to its origins. One commentary on the book does point out that “the title should have given credit to Felipe Ortego.” The term is not proprietary; I don’t own the term. It’s not officially a trademark, though *informally* it has become a trademark of my work in Chicano literature.

I was blessed. *Fue un don: Espero que lo cumplí como hubiera de haber sido*. I note that the ideas in *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature* and “The Chicano Renaissance” have migrated into contemporary perspectives on Chicano literature. However, one of the earliest texts to reflect some of that influence was a critical and annotated bibliography titled *Chicano Perspectives in Literature* by Francisco Lomelí and Donald Urioste (1976). About *Backgrounds of Mexican American Literature*, they wrote:

For its time, the most comprehensive study into the origins of Chicano literature. Its value lies in Ortego's highly eclectic approach in which he bases his conclusions on research from a wide spectrum of fields: American and Mexican literature, American-Mexican-Southwest histories, sociology, economic trends, educational statistics, Southwest folklore, etc. He accurately claims that our literature had its actual beginning in 1848 but that the Chicano Movement shaped it into what it is. His thesis is multifold: to define the amorphous body of literature, to refute the general negligence toward it, to explain the characteristics that make it unique, and to project its future direction. Undoubtedly offers the most detailed history of our literature by exploring contexts, mentalities and trends of different historical periods. Represents an excellent study because Ortego destroys myths, such as cultural determinism, and deromanticizes folklore (75-6).

In today's parlance, what we were all doing—writers, critics—was “deconstruction.” What was most obvious to me in conceptualizing “the Chicano Renaissance” was that while patronymically *mexican* (lower case “m”), Mexican Americans were not politically *Mexicans* (upper case “M”). In the United States, post-1848 life evolved for Mexican Americans as part of an ongoing process that was both Mexican and American but which did not engender its own literary strictures and aesthetics until the Chicano literary movement of the 1960's. Mexican Americans were unprepared for the holocaust that was to befall them. The brutality of that holocaust caused them to cleave all the more to the motherland, and to pass on to their heirs that the land they lived on had been their homeland before the Anglo conquest of Mexico. The force of that memory surged to consciousness a hundred years later during the Chicano period when the sins of the conquerors would be called to account by Chicanos.

For me, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo created two peoples. Not two sides of the same coin, but two separate coins. This is what I sought to explain in “The Chicano Renaissance.” Mexicans have pursued their destiny in a continuum of language and culture relatively intact though assaulted traumatically a time or two by the circumstances of history. Mexican Americans, on the other hand, forged their destiny in a continuum of language and culture they were not part of but thrown brutally into. Out of existential necessity Mexican Americans developed and honed bilingual and bicultural responses to the oftentimes harsh realities of their altered political situation. Mexicans have not had their language suppressed in their schools. They have not been punished for speaking their language extramurally. Their language and culture have not been derided in public nor have they been stereotyped in their country the way Mexican Americans have been stereotyped in the United States.

Most assuredly, Mexican Americans are not Mexicans. Despite their hues and patrimonies, they differ ideologically (for the most part). They also differ in their outlook. One is not better than the other, just different. Not by choice necessarily but by circumstance and necessity. The most striking difference is in the literary mode of production. While some Mexican Americans write in Spanish, most Mexican Americans write in English. Once a plethora of Spanish-language publications thrived in the United States. Now there are only a handful (Meléndez, *passim*). Despite affirmation of Chicano literature's international voice, Mexican American literary production is not congruent with Mexican literary production. In this regard, Mexicans have access to the production mode of literature while Mexican Americans do not, except for a few Mexican American presses.

Chicano literature codes a historical experience in the United States just as Mexican literature codes a historical experience in Mexico. This distinction is significant yet eludes many who think a reading list, say, that includes Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz satisfies the literary requirements of Mexican Americans. While Mexican American writers are much more knowledgeable about Mexico and its literary tradition, Mexican writers are less knowledgeable about Mexican Americans and their literary traditions. I ascertained that this was also true about American writers: that Mexican American writers are much more knowledgeable about American literature and its traditions than American writers are knowledgeable about Mexican American literature and its traditions.

## VII

I marvel at the sweep and breadth of Hispanic letters, both historically and contemporaneously. There is no equal to *El Cid* or *Don Quixote* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *Estampas del Valle* or *Loving Pedro Infante*. The Hispanic literary tradition remains unbroken, each generation of Hispanic writers adding to the Hispanic literary corpus, each generation of Hispanic writers struggling with myriad obstacles and the socio-political matrix of its time. However, in the United States the Chicano writers of the Quinto Sol generation encountered anomalous difficulties owing to historical circumstances that made them strangers in their own land. Like Rodolfo "Corky" González' *Yo soy Joaquín*, they persevered and survived.

At the start of the Chicano era, reflection on the Mexican American past engendered harsh criticism of the Conquest and Immigrant generations, asking why those generations did not achieve more equity and civil rights for Mexican Americans. My response has been that they were struggling to survive. Pero a pesar de todo nos

dejaron una herencia rica de resistencia contra el colonialismo Americano que trató de eradicarlos de sus tierras. Contrary to popular Anglo history, I discovered during my research for “The Chicano Renaissance” that Mexican Americans resisted tooth and nail Anglo efforts to deracinate them. Scores of protective (*mutualistas*) organizations were established by Mexican Americans for the protection of their civil rights. For the United States, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was just another piece of paper.

Ironically, California proved to be the fuse of the Chicano Renaissance that Aurora Lucero hoped New Mexico would produce. In 1953 she wrote optimistically: There now remains but one renaissance to be effected: the literary. With the happy accident that New Mexico possesses more traditional literary materials than any other Hispanic region, it should be possible to bring about such a rebirth in the reenactment of the lovely old plays, in the keeping alive the wonderful old folk dances and in the singing of the old traditional songs (96).

But the Chicano renaissance came into being not in relation to the quaint and traditional Hispanic past of the Mexican American Southwest but in the wake of growing awareness by Mexican Americans of their mestizo past and their sociopolitical status. The Chicano Renaissance was a people’s coming of age, long overdue, which, like Milton’s unsightly root, in another country bore a bright and golden flower. It was this flower I sought to nurture, not to pluck.

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