
Introduction

One of the most compelling stories of North America's origins—a dramatic tale of ambition, adventure, hardship and transformation—and one of the first to document the intercultural accommodations required for survival in North America is largely unknown to present-day students and teachers of American literature. Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca's *Relación* (*The Account*), which details the disastrous results of the ill-fated Spanish expedition to the North American mainland in 1527 that forced the survivors to spend eight years wandering westward from Galveston Island in the first transcontinental crossing of North America by Europeans, continues to intrigue historians, anthropologists, archeologists, ethnobotanists, and others for its detailed observations of the peoples and places of what is now the southwestern United States. From a literary perspective, the work is foundational. As the forerunner of U.S. Latino literature, *The Account* represents the beginning of a long and rich cultural tradition born in America, a tradition bred of hope, dreams, and, in some cases, desperation, of persons willing to wager all to attain their goals in a land of promise.

Had the adventures published by Cabeza de Vaca in 1542 taken place in the northeastern United States among Anglo literary cultures, they would undoubtedly have assumed a significant role in the U.S. literary imagination. To date, however, *The Account*, as well as the works of many U.S. Hispanic/Latino peoples produced prior to the 1960s (and even most produced after the 1960s), remains merely a curious footnote in some U.S. literary education texts, despite the growing evidence that

the Latinos resident in the United States—native-born, immigrants, and exiles living here for extended periods of time—have forged a significant literary culture throughout the past 450 years.

This work is our contribution to the growing body of scholarship that seeks to correct that omission. Our 1997 anthology, *The Latino Reader: An American Literary Tradition from 1542 to the Present*, was the first historical collection to trace this important body of American letters from the Spanish colonial era in North America beginning in the early 1500s through the period after 1848 when, as a result of warfare between the United States and Mexico, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo forced Mexico to cede to the United States almost half its territory, to the Spanish Cuban American War of 1898 which left Cuba and Puerto Rico under U.S. domination, and to the twentieth century with its sporadic and ongoing waves of immigration from the Caribbean (Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic in particular), Mexico, and more recently Central and South America. The destinies of Latino peoples, and their relationship vis-à-vis the United States, have always been intricately linked to imperial territorial expansion and the vagaries of geopolitics. Despite the thematic, aesthetic, and political diversity of Latino literary culture, a common historical subtext permeates this multivocal and even multilingual literature.

Describing this varied population with one term, "Latino," is disputable and warrants some clarification. Although loosely united by a common heritage as native Spanish speakers from the Americas or their descendants, the numerous Latino groups in the United States are ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically heterogeneous; each Latino subgroup represents a distinct culture and geographical area of the Americas. Using the terms "Latino" and the more official "Hispanic," which the U.S. Census Bureau began to use in 1970, to describe the cultures of peoples from Mexico and the countries of Central and South America and the Caribbean is problematic in several respects. The term "Hispanic" is rejected by many authors as too reductive in its association with Spain and Spanish culture, thereby ignoring the indigenous and African heritage of many Latin American and Caribbean peoples. The term "Latino," which is perceived as a more useful, if still unsatisfactory, label, is based more neutrally on an identity shared through the use of language. "Chicano" and "Nuyorican," which are more recent, are occasionally interchangeable with "Mexican American" and "mainland Puerto Rican," although the former in particular reflects a political expression of ethnic pride and the latter is now geographically limiting. As in *The Latino Reader*, we have given preference to "Latino" until a more precise term emerges.

It is important to recognize that the peoples described above constitute an ever-increasing segment of U.S. society. By all accounts the United

States is currently undergoing one of the most profound demographic shifts in its ethnic and racial makeup since the late nineteenth century, which is creating a multicultural society of unparalleled diversity. The Latino/Hispanic population is playing a major role in these changes. According to 1995 Census Bureau figures, Hispanics comprise 10.2 percent of the total U.S. population and, at present rates of growth, they are expected to make up one quarter of the population by the year 2050.

Today the Hispanic presence has emerged, seemingly suddenly, as a pervasive fact of American life. History is filled with unintended consequences, and one of the ironies (a "latent destiny"?) of the history of a nation that expanded its influence and "manifest destiny" into Latin America and the Caribbean is that, in significant numbers, their diverse peoples have come to the United States and themselves become "Americans."¹

Being "American" and becoming "Americanized" is one of the thematic conflicts that define the Latino literature of the 1960s and 1970s, the era of the emergence of Latino writing in the United States. It is the period in which Latinos began to forge a distinct tradition in poetry, drama, and fiction, the fruits of efforts sown painstakingly generations before by writers, scholars, and researchers. The writing that emerged from the Chicano and Nuyorican barrios or neighborhoods affirmed values in direct contrast to mainstream Anglo culture; autobiographical narrative usually reflected the tensions and conflicts inherent in the drive toward assimilation and the pull to remain loyal to one's ethnic group. The works produced during this period were often characterized by militant calls for social change; the task of writing was perceived as promoting political struggle and serving as a stimulus for action against social injustices. Some of the most prominent names in U.S. Latino writing emerged in this era, several of which continue to resonate today: Piri Thomas, Tomás Rivera, and Rudolfo Anaya, for example, are among the writers who helped to forge a distinct literary path for Latino peoples.

In the final decades of the twentieth century, Latino literature reflects the increasing diversity of the Latino population itself. The defiant social and occasionally rhetorical stance that characterized much of the literature of the 1960s has given way to a greater aesthetic flexibility. The writing has become more inclusive, with women and gay and lesbian authors creating a space for themselves, contesting the limitations of the dominant society and of their own cultural groups. Such authors as Richard Rodriguez, Sandra Cisneros, Cristina Garcia and Julia Alvarez illustrate the aesthetic flowering that has broadened the expanse of a Latino writing no longer circumscribed aesthetically, linguistically, or ideologically. As a result, U.S. Latino writing has enjoyed substantial critical and

commercial success in the United States and abroad in recent years, and it is beginning to receive the critical recognition it deserves.

Will our cultural and educational institutions be prepared to meet the challenges of our multicultural society? The studies included in this book, arranged chronologically by date of the subject-text's publication, are designed to assist educators and their students in that task by providing biographical and critical information about representative Latino authors and their works. The general format of the essays herein, with some variation, includes a brief biography of the authors, an analysis of the themes and forms of the work(s) selected, suggestions for teaching, and a section on criticism and related works for further study or classroom use. We were influenced by the ground-breaking work of John R. Maitino and David R. Peck, *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures* (1996).² Our book adds an appendix with a sample course on U.S. Latino literature, web sites, and other resources for classroom and research use. The need for such a work is clear: much of this material is not available elsewhere. For some readers, the Latino world described herein will be familiar. Others, however, will become modern-day explorers, discovering an unknown terrain, a parallel U.S. tradition, within their own society.

The works included in this book, on which the critical essays were based, were suggested by a group of 15 high school teachers who participated in a year-long series of seminars on U.S. Latino literature that took place at the Center for World Literature of The Mercantile Library of New York during the academic year 1995–96, which was funded by a Humanities Focus Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Of the 22 texts these teachers were asked to read, discuss, and analyze, the following were selected by those teachers as those most relevant to the lives, reading levels, and school curricula of their students, although many others could have been included. We would like to thank Anthony Castelli, Carole Dalton, Gwyneth DeGraf, Olga Economos, Lydia Nagle, Pat Peacock, Barbara Peiser, Estrella Pujadas, Alan Ravage, Zacarias Rivera, Jr., Jordan Ronson, Marceline Rogers, Steve Shreefter, Barbara Stroud, and Roberto Vega, the teachers who participated in our seminars and whose invaluable assistance made this book possible. We would also like to thank Charles Sterne for his help in preparing the manuscript and Angela Spellman for her development of the list of web sites.

One should also note that there has often been some confusion about classifying these works as "Latino." They are indeed different from the Latin American texts that are also used in the classroom. Stemming from an intercultural literary tradition with influences from European, Latin American, and, often, U.S. "ethnic" fiction, U.S. Latino literature has elements of each but belongs in its own category.

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NOTES

1. Rubén G. Rumbaut, "The Americans: Latin American and Caribbean Peoples in the United States" in *Americas: New Interpretive Essays*, ed. Alfred Stepan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 275.
2. John R. Maitino and David R. Peck, *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

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