Essay: *An Overview of Latino Poetry: The Iceberg below the Surface*

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Latinos have been writing poetry in these lands that became the United States since the late-sixteenth century. Despite their having cultivated all types of written and oral literature during the ensuing centuries of incorporation into the United States through conquest, territorial purchase, and immigration, many of their literary traditions persisted in order to preserve their cultural identity within an expanding and overwhelmingly aggressive "national" culture that did not recognize Spanish speakers as part of an ever-evolving "America."

It was not until the emergence of a Latino literary movement as part of civil rights struggles in the 1960s that scholars, critics, and writers gained some awareness of Latino poetry, its traditions and practices, albeit only in the poetry that was accessible to them through the English language. Like the civil rights struggles themselves, the literary movement was highly identified with working-class communities and mores, and unselfconsciously was derived from and nurtured by folk literary practices and rituals—most importantly by the tradition of the roving bards and musical performers.

The first poets involved in the Chicano Movement hailed from these grass roots. Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales, the author of what has been acknowledged as *the* Chicano epic poem, *I Am Joaquín/Yo soy Joaquín*, was a boxer and political activist. The poem, self-published bilingually in 1967, summarized Mexican and Mexican American history, reviewed the exploitation of the *mestizos* from colonial times to the present, and shaped a nationalist ideology for activism, using the model of the nineteenth-century social rebel, Joaquín Murieta. The pamphlet edition of the poem was literally passed from hand to hand in communities, read aloud at rallies, dramatized by Chicano theaters, and even produced as a slide show on a film with a dramatic reading by the major dramatist/activist of the times, Luis Valdez. All of this spurred further grassroots poetic creativity and pointed to the poet as a spokesperson for his/her disenfranchised community.

Another community-based poet, Abelardo (Delgado), was a Spanish-dominant bilingual writer steeped in the performance styles and the intimate relationship of *declamadores* to their local audiences; instead of performing his works at holiday celebrations, Mother's Day, and poetic *debates* (which he was perfectly capable and willing to do), his performances now took place at political rallies, strikes, and marches. Unlike many a traditional *declamador*, however, Abelardo allowed his poems to be printed and circulated in local barrio newspapers throughout the Southwest, where community folk and activists found them, copied them, and then circulated them by hand. Out of practicality and in order to spread the word of the Chicano Movement, Abelardo began to self-publish books of his own poetry, such as *Chicano: 25 Pieces of a Chicano Mind* (1969), which became one of the first bestsellers in the barrios and a staple in the early ethnic studies courses at universities.

The word of the political and social movement, accompanied by artistic expression of all types, from mural painting to street theater, quickly spread to those warehouses of the victims of racism and miseducation: the prisons. From prison cells emerged self-taught voices that again returned to their barrio upbringings for inspiration and passionately declared that their previous violence on society would be redirected to revolution or reform in the name of their community. From behind the bars emerged some of the most lasting and inspiring poets: Ricardo Sánchez, Raúl Salinas, and, later, Jimmy Santiago Baca. In fact, Salinas made the prison experience the central metaphor for Chicano life in the barrios in his *Un Trip through the Mind Jail* (1973).

In New York and the Midwest, a similar grassroots movement emerged, also led by poets of the spoken word who were inspired by folk poetry and music, in this case salsa music and performance. From the prisons emerged Piri Tomas, Miguel Piñero, Lucky Cienfuegos, and numerous others. Community bards, such as Jorge Brandon, *declamando* his poems on corners in the Lower East Side, served as models of artistic and cultural commitment for these writers, as did the African American jailhouse poets. Tato Laviera even apprenticed himself to Brandon, who had traveled the countries rimming the Caribbean basin reciting his works and collecting the words and styles of other *declamadores*, from Columbia to Mexico. A very young Victor Hernández Cruz studied the relationship established by salsa composers and performers with their audiences and emulated their artistry, hoping to reproduce the Afro-Caribbean sounds and ethos of Ray Barreto, Eddie Palmieri, and Tito Puente. In Chicago, David Hernández likewise took street and salsa rhythms and diction and even performed with Afro-Caribbean jazz ensembles.

Nuyorican writing made its appearance with a definite proletarian identity, emerging from the

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working-class, urbanized culture of the children of migrants. It arose as a dynamic literature of oral performance based on the folklore and popular culture within the neighborhoods of the most cosmopolitan and postmodern city in the United States: New York ("Nuyorican" was derived from "New York Rican"). Victor Hernández Cruz's urban jazz poetry and Piri Thomas's black-inflected poetry and prose in the late 1960s, and later Miguel Alagrín and Miguel Piñero's *Nuyorican Poetry* anthology (1975)—all issued by mainstream commercial presses about the same time they were reprinting *I Am Joaquín* and publishing Ricardo Sánchez's *Canto y grito mi liberación* (1971)—led the way toward the establishment of a new cultural and literary Nuyorican identity that was as hip as salsa and as alienated and seethingly revolutionary as shouts from urban labor camps and from prisons, the prisons in which many of the first practitioners of Nuyorican poetry learned their craft.

The Nuyorican writers created a style and ideology that still dominates urban Hispanic writing today: working-class, unapologetic, and proud of its lack of schooling and polish—a threat not only to mainstream literature and the academy but also, with its insistence on its outlaw and street culture elements, to mainstream society. Poets such as Tato Laviera, Victor Hernández Cruz, Sandra María Esteves, and Pedro Pietri did not seek written models for their work. In capturing the sights and sounds of their "urban pastoral," it was an easy and natural step to cultivating bilingual poetry, to capturing the bilingual-bicultural reality that surrounded them and reintroducing their works into their communities. El Barrio, the Bronx, and Loisaida (the Lower East Side) neighborhood audiences, made exigent by the technical sophistication of salsa records and live performance, as well as television and film, demanded authenticity, artistic virtuosity, and philosophical and political insight. And Laviera, Hernández Cruz, Esteves, and Pietri reigned as masters for almost two decades.

It was Miguel Algarín, however, a university-educated poet and professor at Rutgers University also raised in the Puerto Rican barrios, who insisted on the publication of Nuyorican poetry in anthologies, magazines, and books. Besides authoring outstanding avant-garde poetry himself (somewhat indebted to the Beat Generation), Algarín helped to solidify the Nuyorican literary identity and foster its entrance into the larger world of contemporary American avant-garde poetics.

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The 1970s saw the emergence of the first generation of US Hispanics to have expanded access to college. For Chicano literature, the decade of the 1960s was a time of questioning of all the commonly accepted truths in the society, foremost of which was the question of equality. The grassroots movement was soon joined by one in academe, with university-educated writers and university-based magazines and publishing houses continuing the development of Latino literature, mostly in English. Precedents were set for *The Rican: Journal of Contemporary Puerto Rican Thought* (1971), *Revisit Chicano-Rouen* (1973), and *The Bilingual Review* (1974). Octavio Romano and Herminio Ríos, two University of California-Berkeley social science professors, started publishing *El Grotto's Journal of Contemporary Mexican-American Thought* (1967), and their canonizing publishing house, Editorial Quinton Sol, was established. The Berkeley professors also issued their own first anthology of bilingual-bicultural Chicano literature, *El Speedo/The Mirror* (1969), which helped to launch the career of the important pioneer and transitional writer, Alurista (Alberto Baltasar Urista). Alurista combined the activism of the grassroots poet with a literate tradition that went back to Aztec and Mayan writers in poems that were trilingual. He later became the greatest experimenter and innovator of bilingual poetry, creating a meta-language of sound and symbol with conflicting connotations and denotations, especially in *Spik in glyph?* (1981).

As ethnic studies courses and student activism grew during the 1970s, numerous Chicano, Nuyorican, and even Cuban writers developed at universities from coast to coast. In general, they were not educated in creative writing programs, which up until the 1990s remained aloof from and reproving of what their professors believed to be uneducated doggerel. Rather, many of the Latino poets were Spanish majors and, if students of English, their models remained outside the academy, including the literate models from Spain and Latin America. Among these politically committed authors making the transition from the activist poetry of the 1960s to the learned university environment were José Antonio Burciaga, Martín Espada, Cecilo García Camarillo, Leroy Quintana, Luis Omar Salinas, Juan Felipe Herrera, Leo Romero, and the first women writers to finally break through what had been a male-dominated and testosterone-fueled movement: Lorna Dee Cervantes, Lucha Corpi (writing only in Spanish), Inés Hernández Tovar, Angela de Hoyos, Pat Mora, Marina Rivera, Carmen Tafolla, Gina Valdés, Alma Villanueva, Evangelina Vigil, and Bernice Zamora.

Cervantes brought to the literature a clear and passionate commitment to human rights born of her own experience of poverty and oppression, along with personal family tragedy. Mora translated within her own clean and spiritual verse the emotions and worldview of border dwellers, very much preserving a sense of spoken Spanish, but within an English-language framework. Much like Esteves and Laviera, Evangelina Vigil captured the internal history of cultural and linguistic conflict within her bilingual poems that celebrated life in the barrios. Castillo, very early on, took up the women's struggle within Latino culture as a dominant theme, while the other writers mentioned pressed their feminism as an orientation for a diverse array of sociopolitical themes. (It was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that a fully developed feminist and lesbian poetics developed in such writers as Gloria Anzaldúa, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Cherríe Moraga, Rosario Levins Morales, and Luz María Umpierre.)

To borrow a term from minority music criticism, the first generation of Latino poets to "cross over" to the English-language academy was in place by the mid-1980s. For the most part, they were the beneficiaries of a democratized university and had greater access to Latino models as well as mainstream literate ones, and they predominantly were the products of creative writing programs. Something new had occurred in the history of Hispanic literature in the United States: Latinos were going to college and graduate school to become professional writers. Furthermore, a Latino could actually make a living by writing about his or her own cultural upbringing. Latino life was an adequate subject for "high art," or so their creative writing professors had counseled them. Among the ranks of graduates from MFA programs were Alberto Ríos, Julia Alvarez, Denise Chávez, Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Gary Soto, Virgil Suárez, and Helena María Viramontes. Most of these authors were to be recognized with some of the academy's most prestigious awards, from Walt Whitman prizes, Guggenheims, and NEA fellowships to a MacArthur grant. Many of their books were published by prestigious university presses, and their prose works were issued or reissued (after first appearing in Latino presses) by the large commercial publishers. Some of them were able to sustain their writing with faculty positions in creative writing at such prestigious institutions as UC-Berkeley, Cornell, and Vanderbilt.

The literature of this generation is the Latino literature that is most known by non-Latino readers in the United States today and has the greatest possibility of entering and influencing mainstream culture. It is the most accessible to a broad segment of English speakers and has the greatest access to publishing houses and critics. On the other hand, this literature is the literature of a minority of Hispanic writers and tends to distance itself from its indigenous roots. Theirs is a contemporary manifestation of a longstanding Latino heritage; it is the very tip of an iceberg whose body is made up of centuries of writing in Spanish as racialized natives of the United States or as immigrants sought for their cheap labor or as the children of political exiles.

The fervor and opportunities for politically engaged poetry have abated considerably since the 1970s. Few writers have been able to cross from one writing culture to another in Latino literature. Lorna Dee Cervantes is an exception in her ability to maintain the passion and the craft and to continue to develop her art while finding a permanent place for herself in a creative writing program (University of Colorado). Others, such as Judith Ortiz Cofer, have attained endowed chairs and prestigious awards while remaining faithful to their bicultural upbringing and culture; in part Cofer has accomplished this not just through the authenticity and frankness of her voice, but also by reaching out to young Latino audiences through young adult literature—without prejudice to the genre.

Distinguished writers outside the academy who continue to be a mainstay of the literature include Pat Mora, who has become the most reprinted Latino poet in language arts and high school textbooks. In addition, she has produced poetry collections for young adults and even introduced her poetry in children's picture books. Rafael Campo, who is a physician, has become one of the most distinguished voices of the gay community in his poetry. Somewhat distanced from the Puerto Rican populations in the Northeast and the Midwest, Gloria Vando has produced two outstanding collections of poems reflective of imperialism and colonized peoples around the world. Finally, a new writer has come up through university training but maintained the authentic voice and class stand of her people: police officer-poet Sarah Cortez, whose *How to Undress a Cop* (2001, reviewed in *ABR* 22.5) has attracted significant critical response from *The Hudson Review* and academic journals.

It should be noted before closing that during the last two decades, an important segment of Latino poetry has been created by immigrant writers who write in Spanish and/or English and deal with feelings of alienation, exile, and uprootedness in American society. Among them are Marjorie Agosín, José Corrales, Isaac Goldemberg, Guillermo Gómez Peña, Carolina Hospital, José Kozer, Rubén Medina, Jaime Montesinos, Heberto Padilla, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Emma Sepúlveda, Iván Silén (a Puerto Rican writing in New York as an exile), and Virgil Suárez. Of these, Guillermo Gómez Peña has been the most experimental and daring, fully exploring the transnationalism of Latinos and other populations around the postmodern world. His poems are part of a multimedia happening that extends to theater, essay, painting, and music in bilingual performance.

This iceberg called Latino Poetry is not new, runs deep, and has many facets.

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