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Mexican American literature of all genres is being written, published, and appraised at a striking rate. In addition to established journals such as El Grito, Aztlan, and Con Sapos, new periodicals dedicated to the dissemination of Chicano culture continue to appear. In 1970, at its meeting in New York City, the Modern Language Association included a workshop on Chicano studies; at its meeting in Detroit in 1971, the Midwest Modern Language Association accepted a paper on Chicano literature; and in December of that same year, the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, meeting in Chicago, dedicated an entire section of its program to the examination of Mexican American literature. This condition of affairs has been aptly called by Philip D. Ortega a "Chicano Renaissance."

It is our belief that an effort should be made to trace the historical development of Mexican American literature now that it has been recognized as a subject worthy of serious study. It has not yet been determined, however, whether Mexican American literature should be considered as an entity in itself, as a part of American literature, or even, perhaps, as a part of Mexican literature. It has been pointed out that since Chicanos are Americans, their literature should not be separated from American literature. On the other hand, since a large part of

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Mexican American literature is written in Spanish, or is bilingual, its study has often been assigned to critics and professors of Spanish American literature, primarily those acquainted with Mexican literature, for Chicano literature is a living organism: its roots are to be found in the long literary tradition of Mexico, while its flowers grow for the English or bilingual reader, and especially for the Chicanos who form part of that reading public. Though the use of a dual language poses a problem for critics, excellent contributions of criticism and analysis have already been made by specialists in both English and Spanish American studies, such as Philip D. Ortego, Gerald Haslam, Robert Blauner, Edward Simmen, Octavio Ignacio Romano-V., Herminio Ríos C., Tomás Rivera, and José R. Reyna. The training of Chicano specialists conversant not only with American literature but also with Mexican letters and Chicano culture will accelerate the formation of a tradition in Chicano literary criticism. Better still would be the training of Chicanos themselves to evaluate their own artistic productions. In regard to this, Teresa McKenna has said, "The Chicano must not only address himself to the creation of a distinct literature emergent from his own reality, he must also contribute to the further richness of his art through the development of a body of criticism that approaches Chicano literature from a Chicano perspective."

To consider Chicano literature as a part of American literature is an object too idealistic, at least for the time being, for socially Chicanos are considered a group apart. The rejection of the Mexican American in the United States is well documented. One of the best studies is that of Carey McWilliams, who, in 1949, published North from Mexico, one of the first books to explore the plight of the Chicano in the United States with a sympathetic attitude.

The rejection of the Chicano is also reflected in literature, as demonstrated by Cecil Robinson in With the Ears of Strangers: The Mexican in American Literature and in the short stories collected by Simmen in his anthology The Chicano: From Caricature to Self-Portrait.

Neither can we say that Chicano literature is a branch of Mexican literature, even though it has, as we have said, its roots there and still derives inspiration and a model from it. That the Chicanos are rejected
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in the United States does not mean that he or she has always been accepted in Mexico, or even by Mexicans visiting the United States. Amado Nervo, passing through the United States in 1900 on his way to Europe, wrote: "Walking the streets of San Antonio, Texas, I come across one or another type of Mexican, but all so distasteful that I dare not approach them, because I know that from their lips I can expect only gutter sentences, and I do not wish to witness the profanation of the harmonious treasure of my old Latin language." In more recent years, walking down the streets of Los Angeles, another American city with a large Chicano population, the poet Octavio Paz had this to say: "Something similar occurs with the Mexicans whom one meets in the street; although they have lived there for many years, they still wear the same clothing, speak the same language, and are ashamed of their origins. No one would confuse them with authentic North Americans." The same point is made from a different direction by José Vasconcelos in defining pocho: "A word that is used in California to designate the outcast who rejects Mexican culture although he has it in his blood, and who attempts to adjust all his actions imitatively to those of the present rulers of the region."

This attitude is not confined to writers alone. The new immigrant, too, often considered himself superior to the conforming Mexican American. The sociologist Manuel Gamio, in 1931, collected this testimony from Anastacio Torres, of León, Guanajuato: "I don't have anything against the pochos, but the truth is that although they are Mexicans, for they are of our own blood because their parents were Mexicans, they pretend that they are Americans. They also want to talk in English and they speak Spanish very badly. That is why I don't like them." In recent years, of course, this attitude has changed in Mexico mainly as a result of the Chicanos' struggle for civil rights. The Chicanos and their problems are now viewed with sympathy, and an effort is being made to understand them, as is evidenced by recent articles in the weekly review Siempre!, in the important Cuadernos Americanos, and in books such as those written by Gilberto López y Rivas and Hernán Solís Garza.

If the Chicano was rejected by both the Anglo-American and the Mexican national, he himself rejected both groups. The pachuco, says
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Paz, "does not wish to return to his Mexican origin; nor it would seem does he wish to blend into North American life." This desire to establish an identity has resulted in the creation of a unique literature that reflects Chicano culture and possesses characteristics that differentiate it from Anglo-American as well as Mexican literature.

Before the word Chicano became naturalized, no one spoke of a Mexican American literature or a Mexican American art. On this account, some critics have tended to identify Chicano literature with that written during the last decade by militants. Simmen, in the introduction to his collection of short stories, claims that Chicano literature did not exist before our own days. To explain its absence, he argues that Chicano society did not permit the appearance of the Chicano writer. The rich, educated minority were not interested in writing, and the poor were not trained to do so. The emerging middle class, the so-called vendidos, was not concerned, Simmen holds, to preserve their way of life, and therefore had no will to give it expression in literary works. To prove his theory, Simmen cites his own bibliography of Chicano literature, in which the earliest Chicano work dates from 1947. But this is argument by fiat. For Simmen, a Chicano can only be an American of Mexican descent who has liberal or radical ideas about the social and economic order. Necessarily, then, Chicano literature is of recent origin, appearing at the same time as the social and economic movement called El Movimiento.

A less restrictive definition is that of Luis Dávila. He holds that Chicano literature is literature written by Americans of Mexican descent "regardless of what they might prefer to call themselves." If it is of recent origin this is because "the bicultural Mexican-American writer of yesteryear often found himself in awkward relation to the supposedly monolithic cultures of the United States and Mexico. For this reason he virtually did not exist." For a definition still less restrictive, one may point to Herminio Ríos C., who identifies Mexican American (or Chicano) literature as that written by the Spanish-speaking inhabitants of the Southwest since 1848.

During the 1930s and before, Americans of Mexican descent and "Americanized" Mexicans were called pochos by the recent immigrants. In return, the pochos called the immigrants Chicanos (short for mexicanos).
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The terms Chicano and Mexican American thus came to be used interchangeably. The review El Grito, founded by Chicanos and a stout defender of Chicanismo, calls itself in its subtitle "A Journal of Contemporary Mexican American Thought."

On these grounds, we shall consider Chicano literature here to be that literature written by Mexicans and their descendants living or having lived in what is now the United States. We shall consider works, especially those dating before 1821, written by the inhabitants of this region with a Spanish background, to belong to an early stage of Chicano literature. We are not overlooking the fact that before 1848 Mexican American legally did not exist as a group; they have, however, a long uninterrupted literary tradition. Though in 1848 English became the official language of the Mexican territory annexed to the United States, and for this reason affected the development of the literature of the region, it did not interrupt the tradition.

Accepting this definition of Chicano, we can say that Chicano literature had its origin when the Southwest was settled by the inhabitants of Mexico during colonial times and continues uninterrupted to the present. We shall divide its course into five literary periods and cite a few representative authors of each. A great deal of research must yet be done to give Mexican American literature the attention it deserves. Here we can only hint at the possibilities.

The Hispanic Period (to 1821)

This first period is characterized by prose writings of a historical or semi-historical nature, including many descriptions left behind by explorers of the region where the majority of Chicanos now live. Among them we find the relaciones of Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Fray Marcos de Niza (Relación del descubrimiento de las Siete Ciudades), and Fray Francisco Palou; the diarios of Juan Bautista de Anza, Miguel Costansó, Fray Juan Crespi, Fray Tomás de la Peña, Gaspar de Portolá, and Fray Junípero Serra; also, a number of historias, memorias, recuerdos, anales, and apuntes. More significant, perhaps, is the Historia de la Nueva México, a rhymed
history of the conquest of New Mexico in thirty-four cantos, by Gaspar Pérez de Villagrán.

Essentially, these works do not belong to the history of Spanish literature. In the words of Federico de Onís, “The originality of Spanish American literature exists from the very beginning, from the very moment at which America itself commences to exist. . . . ‘Originality’ derives from ‘origin,’ and American originality lies in the fact of being America and not Europe.” Somewhat earlier, another critic, Menéndez y Pelayo, recognized that Spanish American writers, even those born in Spain, confronted a new environment that modified their attitudes. Spanish American literature had its origins, he said, “in the contemplation of a new world, in the very elements of its landscape, in the modification of human beings by the environment, and in the energetic style of life which they created, first in the effort of colonization and conquest, later in the wars of separation, and finally in their periods of civil strife.”

Philip D. Ortego, in his article “Chicano Poetry: Roots and Writers,” mentions Ercilla’s *La Araucana* and calls it “the first modern epic in the New World dealing with an American theme.” Pérez de Villagrán’s poem, if incomparably less artistic than Ercilla’s, also deals with a distinctly American theme. If *La Araucana* belongs to Chilean literature, why can the *Historia de la Nueva México* not be a part of the literature of Aztlan? As Ray Padilla has said, “all works prior to 1848 can be treated as pre-Chicano Aztlánense materials.”

Popular literature brought to the Southwest by early settlers from Mexico resembles the popular literature of Mexico in all its aspects. The many romances, corridos, folktales, and religious plays are often difficult to assign to a place of origin with any assurance. In 1600, for example, Juan de la Peña wrote a religious play, *Las cuatro apariciones de la Virgen de Guadalupe*. Since nothing is known about the author, we cannot determine if the play belongs to Mexico or New Mexico. We do know, however, that it was very popular in New Mexico and that it is not mentioned by the historians of the Mexican theater. With another play, a *pastorela*, we are more fortunate. We know that it was written in California in 1820 by Fray Francisco Ibáñez of Soledad Mission.
The corrido, a typical poetic form of the Mexican populace, is very common in the Southwest and wherever Chicanos live. Apparently derived from the Spanish romance, it expresses brilliantly the oral impulse that runs deep in Chicano literary culture and, as a "form of the people, has served that culture as a primary vehicle toward self-understanding and self-definition."

No less important than the corrido is the folktale, where we often find modified forms reflecting the psychology not only of the Mexican Indian, but also of the American Indian. The folktale, it is well known, is one of the popular forms that can most easily adopt cultural motives to give expression to the desires and aspirations of the people. Aurora Lucero, who has collected popular literature in her native state of New Mexico, has said of those who brought this literature to the region, "They recited her prayers, they retold her stories, they sang her songs, they reenacted her plays. The fervor that went into the doing, the reciting, the telling and the acting was of such nature as to result in a tradition that was to take roots in the soil, roots that flowered into a pattern that has constituted the basis for living in the Hispanic New World, and a tradition that still endures."

The Mexican Period (1821–1848)

When Mexico's independence was finally achieved from Spain in 1821, the northern provinces, the land now called Aztlan by the Chicanos, became part of the Republic of Mexico. This second period, although short-lived and unstable—it ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo—represents an important link in the development of Mexican American literature, since it was during this period that the Hispanic Mexican inhabitants of the region had to decide if they were to remain loyal to Mexico or fight for their own independence. This spiritual struggle gives uniqueness to the literature produced during these years. The clashes with the Mexican authorities began almost immediately. In 1830, while celebrating the independence on September 16 in the house of the governor of California, a violent fight occurred
between some young californios and “los de la otra banda.” In another incident, a certain José Castro was imprisoned for posting derogatory remarks about the Mexicans. According to the memoirs of Governor Alvarado, Castro later beat up the Mexican Rodrigo del Pliego because he had insulted californios by calling them ill-bred.

The case of the writer Lorenzo de Zavala is instructive. Having defended the independence of Texas, he lost his Mexican citizenship and was ostracized in his own country. His *Viaje a los Estados Unidos de Norte America* (Paris, 1834) definitely belongs to this period of Mexican American literature. Typical of the poetry of the time are the verses of Joaquín Buelna, who in California between 1836 and 1840 wrote compositions dedicated to the native rancheros. Histories, memoirs, and diaries are represented by José Arnaz, Juan Bandini, and Juan Bautista Alvarado. An interest in the cultures of the native Indians also appears. Gerónimo Boscana (1776–1831) wrote a historical account of the origin, customs, and traditions of the Indians of the Mission of San Juan Capistrano under the title Chínigüíñieh. Popular literature continues to offer the familiar genres. There are several religious plays, among them a Pastorela en dos actos dated from 1828 and signed with the initials M. A. de la C. In New Mexico this popular play was performed regularly. An *Auto pastoral*, of Mexican origin, was performed in Taos, New Mexico, as early as 1840.

**Transition Period (1848–1910)**

The third period begins in 1848 and ends in 1910, the year of the Mexican Revolution. It is a period during which Mexican American literature lays the basis from which Chicano literature is to develop; a period in which Mexicans living on the land taken over by the United States had to make up their minds if they wished to return to Mexico or stay and become American citizens with all the accompanying requirements of learning a new language and going to new schools. Most decided to stay but to remain at the same time faithful to their Mexican traditions and language. In this way they became trapped, forming, politically, a
part of a society that socially rejected them. Poised between two cultural worlds, they developed ambivalent attitudes that were to mold their way of thinking for some time and expressed themselves in the literature of the period, often by use of both languages, Spanish and English. But there were times when the new citizens were able to break through the rigid social barriers and pass on to become part of Anglo-American society. Such was the case of Miguel A. Otero, who was appointed governor of the territory of New Mexico in 1897. How this transition from the use of Spanish to English takes place in Mexican American literature is an area not yet sufficiently investigated. Naturally, writers using Spanish still predominate at this time. As an example we shall mention the works of Francisco Palou, the biographer of Fray Junípero Serra.

Popular literature was perhaps the least affected by the political change. The people continued to produce corridos, romances, pastorelas, and cuentos. Nevertheless, even here, subject matter was expanded to include events related to non-Mexicans, such as the corrido "Muerte del afamado Bilito" ("Death of Famous Bilito"), in which the death of Billy the Kid is related:

\begin{verbatim}
El Bilito mentado
por penas bien merecidas
fue en Santa Fe encarcelado
dedudor de veinte en la vida
de Santa Fe a la Mesilla.
\end{verbatim}

This well-known Billy the Kid for punishment he well deserved
was jailed in Santa Fe
for he owed twenty people their lives
from Santa Fe to la Mesilla.

Another corrido ("La voz de mi conciencia") is significant because it introduces the theme of social protest. This corrido corroborates Romano's theory that the Mexican American was not a passive, resigned person expecting all salvation from without. The corridista says:
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Treintitres días de cárcel
injustamente ha sufrido
por un falso testimonio
de un crimen no cometido.
Cuando el juez nos sentenció
fue cosa de reír
al culpable casi libre
y al inocente a sufrir.

Thirty-three days in jail
unjustly have I suffered
because of a false witness
of a crime I did not commit.
When the judge handed down his sentence
it almost made me laugh
the guilty one would go free
while the innocent was left to suffer.

Still another writer of this period, mentioned by H. Herminio Ríos C.,
is León Calvillo-Ponce.

Interaction Period (1910–1942)

Immigration from Mexico to the United States between 1848 and 1910
was negligible. After 1910, a large influx of immigrants crossed the bor-
der in search of security and work in the green fields of Texas, New
Mexico, and California, as well as in the factories of more remote states.
Most of these immigrants never returned to their native land (except
during the Depression years of the 1930s), and their sons and daughters
became American citizens by birth, although still attached to the way of
life of their parents. The new immigrants brought new blood into the
Mexican American community and reinforced the Mexican traditions.
The same thing occurred in intellectual circles with the interchange of
ideas among writers such as José Vasconcelos, Martín Luis Guzmán,
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Mariano Azuela, Ricardo Flores Magón, and others who lived in the United States.

This period, which comes to an end with World War II, is characterized by the appearance among Mexican Americans of a group consciousness that manifests itself in the formation of societies whose purpose is mutual help and protection of the needy. Some of these associations became politically oriented and spearheaded the struggle for equal rights. Their periodicals, as well as the many newspapers that sprang up during the period, included poetry, short stories, and scholarly articles as well as news. The pages of LULAC News, Alianza, and others are a good source for the literary production of this period. Ortega, in his study of Chicano poetry, has brought to light the names of some of the poets who published in these periodicals. He also discusses the poetry of Vicente Bernal and Fray Angélico Chávez, the former the author of an early book of poems, Las primicias (1916), and the latter a representative of the mystic tradition in three works, New Mexico Triptych (1940), Eleven Lady-Lyrics and Other Poems (1945), and The Single Rose (1948).

As a consequence of the revolution, Mariano Azuela published his famous novel, Los de abajo, in the pages of the newspaper El Paso del Norte, of El Paso, Texas, in November 1915. Later, in 1935, Teodoro Torres, who lived nine years in the United States and was editor of La Prensa of San Antonio, Texas, published La patria perdida, a novel whose first part takes place in the United States and deals with life among Mexican Americans. Another Mexican, Alberto Rembao, who lived in New York and edited the review La Nueva Democracia, published novels with Mexican themes and settings. In general, the novel and short story of this period need study. Research will undoubtedly uncover many novels written by Mexican Americans, both in English and Spanish.

The corrido continues at this time to be a popular form of expression, with social protest and politics entering more prominently into its content. In 1936, a corrido was written about some Gallup, New Mexico, coal miners who had been subdued with gunfire by the sheriff and his men during a strike. Senator Bronson Cutting's defense of the lawmen elicited a protest poem that ended with the following lines:
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Usted se come sus coles
Con su pan y mantequilla
Y yo me como mis frijoles
Con un pedazo de tortilla.

You eat your cabbages
With your bread and butter
And I eat mine with beans
And with a bit of tortilla.

During this period, serious scholarship and literary criticism begin to appear with the works of Carlos Castañeda, Juan B. Rael, George Sánchez, Arthur L. Campa, and Aurelio M. Espinosa.

Chicano Period (1943–Present)

June 1943 marks the beginning of a new period in the history of the Mexican American. The so-called zoot suit riots, which took place in Los Angeles that month, began an open confrontation that was to be intensified during the postwar years by the presence of thousands of returning Mexican American veterans. A new type of literature emerges animated by a rebellious spirit often inspired by the revolutionary leaders of Mexico, such as Villa and Zapata. Characteristic of this writing is the Chicano's search for identity, often probing for the roots of his being in the Indian past. This quest is found in the poetry of Luis Omar Salinas, Miguel Ponce, Alurista, Sergio Elizondo, and Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, the last of whom expresses this sentiment in I Am Joaquin (1967):

I am Cuauhtémoc,
Proud and noble
leader of men

I am the Maya Prince.
I am Nezahualcóyotl,
Great leader of the Chichimecas

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I am the Eagle and Serpent of
the Aztec civilization.

In his metaphoric prose "Tata Casheua," Miguel Méndez M. goes back to more recent, but timeless Indian ancestry. He dedicates his story, "To My Indian Ancestors, nailed to the sign of Omega, and to their tragic Fate."

Other writers find inspiration for their poetry and prose from their barrio experiences. Sometimes the language is that of the barrio, and almost always there is the use of Spanish and English in a juxtaposition that is often startling in effect. We find this in the tender poem of José Montoya, "La jefita," about a barrio mother.

Several anthologies of Mexican American literature have already been published. In addition to *El Espejo*, which contains prose and poetry, we have Ed Ludwig and James Santibáñez (eds.), *The Chicanos: Mexican-American Voices* (1971); Antonia Castañeda Shular, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, and Joseph Sommers (eds.), *Chicano Literature: Text and Context* (1972); Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner (eds.), *Aztlán: An Anthology of Mexican American Literature* (1972); Philip D. Ortego (ed.), *We Are Chicanos* (1973); and Luis Omar Salinas and Lillian Faderman (comps.), *From the Barrio: A Chicano Anthology* (1973); and many others.


The possibilities of the drama have not yet been explored, though El Teatro Campesino has carried on its traditions under the directorship of Luis Valdez. The corrido, the most enduring of the popular genres, is still being composed and sung by Chicanos, especially the *buelguistas*;
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unfortunately, very few have been written down. One is “The Corrido of César Chávez,” in English, which in part says:

On March seventeenth,
First Thursday morning of Lent
César walked from Delano,
Taking with him his faith.

When we arrive in Fresno
All the people shout:
Long live César Chávez,
And all who follow him.

In conclusion, it may be reemphasized that Mexican American literature is not just a by-product of the struggle for civil rights. By this I do not mean to minimize the efforts of the Chicano movement or to underestimate the new energy that it has sparked. The very term Chicano, whatever connotation it may eventually receive, has spurred the production of literature. Even so, it is only when we look at Mexican American literature from a historical perspective that we understand its true nature. From Mexican literature it has derived its forms, both erudite and popular, as well as its spirit of rebellion. And although the more recent phase of it may emphasize social protest or a search for Chicano identity, its roots reach far back to poets like Vicente Bernal who write simply about mystic experience or other universal themes.