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**A Comparative Study of the Latino
Discourse in the United States**
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Hipertexto

It is a well-known fact that the American literary canon excluded for years the literature written by Hispanic writers in the United States. In 1991, Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar wrote the following: “We have witnessed in recent years the need for a new history of American literature, one that would include the contributions of women and cultural groups ignored by the academy. Much work still lies ahead, however, especially in the field of Chicano literature, . . . our literature and scholarship have yet to receive full institutional support or national attention (1).” Nicolás Kanellos, sadly explains that this resistance to languages other than English, particularly to Spanish, goes back to the nineteenth century, in spite of the fact that more than ninety percent of the creative writing by Latinos in the United States has been produced in Spanish (8). Moreover, Spanish and English departments at American Universities also resisted to include in their curricula the works of Hispanics living in the United States whose writings appeared in English and/or Spanish. This opposition is also a well-known and undisputed fact.

Fortunately, in the last few years, with the massive migration of Hispanics seeking a better way of life in the United States, and the exile or displacement of many Hispanic intellectuals seeking a haven from the political unrest in their native countries, the interest in the Latino literature written in the United States has been growing steadily. Many colleges and universities now offer specific courses on these literatures, and their content varies from a concentration on a specific culture group to a more inclusive attempt to group all Latino writers under the same umbrella.

Although many common denominators do indeed exist, it is also true that many differences separate the writings of these diverse writers. In these short pages we propose to identify the differences and similarities between them.

Mexican-American, Puerto Rican and Cuban-American writers comprise the three mayor groups usually grouped under the Latino population of writers in the United States. Writers from each of these groups give a voice to the members of their culture and generations; however, their discourse is set under different cultural, social, historical and political premises. An analysis of the themes, characters, narratives and poetic voices found in these works reveal many differences in the historical, social and cultural backgrounds projected in them. While American and Puerto Rican writers rise in opposition to a culture that has ignored them for more than a century, the works of Cuban-Americans seem to seek an appositional negotiation with the hegemonic culture.

Cuban-American literature is difficult to place within the American literary discourse because it is written both in English and Spanish by authors born either in the United States or in Cuba. The tendency, as reflected in most of the anthologies of Hispanic writers, is to group Cuban-American literature with the other two main currents of Hispanic ethnic literature written in the United States: Chicano and Nuyorican literature. However, one needs to question whether the literary manifestations of Cuban-American literature respond, largely, to the same oppositional tendency that is evident in the literature of the other two ethnic groups. In other words, are we in the presence of a minority culture in opposition to a hegemonic culture as seems to be the case with Chicano and Nuyorican literatures? Two issues need to be considered relative to this point. On the one hand, we need to consider which language is being used in the narrative discourse. Is the author writing in English, Spanish or both? On the other hand, we need to consider the perspective of the author. Is the author writing from an American or from another national perspective? Nicholasa Mohr, a writer of Puerto Rican descent, establishes a clear difference in the perspective of Puerto Rican writers--who write in Spanish from a Puerto Rican point of view--and the Puerto Rican writers who write in English: "My birth makes me a native New Yorker. I write here in the United States about my personal experiences and those of a particular group of migrants that number in the millions. Yet, all of these actualities seem to have little or no bearing on those who insist on seeing me as an "intruder," or "outsider" who has taken on a foreign language: perhaps even taken it on much too forcefully, using it to document and validate our existence and survival inside the very nation that chose to colonize us" (112). To many Puerto Rican ethnic writers, literature is the medium to express a cultural identity already formed and in conflict with a hegemonic culture. The cultural identity and language of Puerto Ricans born in the United States are determined by linguistic and cultural patterns already established. They do not go through

the process of assimilation and acculturation that immigrants and exiles experience because they are born within a well-developed linguistic and cultural milieu. That environment, depending on the strength of its bilingual and bicultural traits, will largely determine whether the individual will assume a bilingual and bicultural identity, or submits to the influence of the hegemonic language and culture. Nevertheless, it seems paradoxical that some Puerto Rican writers embrace the linguistic and ethnic position defined by Nicholasa Mohr who, by choice or by necessity, uses as vehicle of expression the language of that hegemonic culture she rebels against. Mohr says: "In my work, I continue examining the values I have inherited, always aware of the fact that I have come from an Island people who have been colonized from the very onset of their being and who, to this day, continue their dependency" (114). Tato Laviera, a Nuyorican poet, espouses a different view. He skillfully uses code-switching to express the linguistic dilemma of many members of his ethnic generation. In his poem, *My Graduation Speech*, the narrative voices says:

*I think in Spanish
I write in English....
Tengo las venas aculturadas
Escribo en spanglish...
How are you?
¿Cómo estás ?
I don't know if I'm coming
or si me fui ya. (379)*

Code-switching and the use of Spanish words interspersed in English discourse are characteristics of this hybrid use of the language. Virgil Suárez and Delia Poey state that the authors included in their anthology *Iguana Dreams* refused the use of italics in their English works, "explaining that in the lives of their characters Spanish is not a foreign language, but rather a vital part of everyday speech and as such should not appear in italics (xvi)." According to the editors, the writers' reactions emphasize the importance that, for many of them, Spanish has in the Latino literature written in the United States.

With respect to the trajectory of the Chicano narrative in the United States, I believe that the works of Ramón Zaldivar, Juan Bruce Novoa, Héctor Calderón and others agree on many common denominators. During the sixties, the Chicano movement initiates a political, social and cultural cry of rebellion against the insensitive and discriminatory dominant culture. Chicano literature emerges as a force of opposition that feeds on the insensitivity of the hegemonic culture that not only ignores the Chicano culture, but attempts to represses it as well. Its rebelliousness manifests itself in the search of an expressive and nonconformist language capable of revealing the culture from which it comes. Hence the bilingual content found in these texts. Because Chicano literature emerges as a weapon of protest, just as Nuyorican literature does, we believe that both literatures

develop from the need to express a linguistic and cultural environment already formed. Thus, the code-switching and other forms of linguistic experimentation that we encounter in those texts, is representative of the latent strength of that culture. Octavio Paz, in his seminal work *El laberinto de la soledad*, identifies that strength as an important factor in the development of the Mexican culture. In this respect, it is important to point out that in spite of the social and linguistic persecution endured by the Chicanos in the American Southwest, where punitive measures were imposed upon the children who spoke Spanish in the schools, the language and the culture have remained very much alive in the region up to the present time, much to our pride and enrichment.

We will argue also that the place of origin does not appear to play a crucial role in the writer's choice of English or Spanish. There are many Hispanic ethnic writers who have crossed the linguistic threshold and write in English, in spite of having been born and raised outside the United States. On the other hand, many Chicano writers prefer to use Spanish or move in and out of the two languages with equal ease. Others, like Mohr, prefer to use only English. One needs to reflect then on the language being a medium which the writer uses to communicate his/her cultural and linguistic identity. I agree with Frances Aparicio who perceives Hispanic ethnic literature as the representation of a conflict where Latino writers use the language as a symbol of resistance and identification. On this point, Aparicio says: "If one considers language as both an identity marker and as a tool for defining one's identity, the mixture of Spanish and English within an individual text serves to define the writer's cultural and political position within his/her bicultural world"(147).

Relative to the preference for either language, or for a mixture of both in the narrative discourse, we have to bring into play the difference between the poetic and the narrative discourse. Because poetry is the ideal medium for the expression of identity and culture in opposition to the hegemonic culture, it is logical to think that code-switching between Spanish and English in a short and connotative poetic discourse, reflects to the optimum the oppositional play of both cultures. This oppositional play, we need to remember, is not a new artifice in the poetic discourse. In Medieval Spain we find ample proof of this linguistic phenomenon in the mixture of Hebrew, Spanish and Arabic found in the poetics texts of the *Jarchas* and the *Muwasahas*. The narrative discourse, on the other hand, does not lend itself so easily to this interlingual play. The tone of social protest and the representation of cultural conflicts are expressed in the narrative discourse in the thematic context more than in an interlingual play of words. This does not mean that the interlingual play is absent from the narrative discourse of Latino literature written in the United States. What it means is that the emphasis is shifted from the interlingual play as focal point, to the themes and situations which are represented in the narrative discourse and enhanced by the use of

Spanish words and expressions. Yet, as we have said, some Latino writers opt for English, others choose Spanish, and others, particularly the poets, prefer the interlingual play.

The use of language as a defining and identifying markers of the Latino writer's culture, in opposition to the hegemonic one, is typical of Chicano literature. Francisco Lomelí proposes that much of Chicano literature portrays culture as a dynamic process of resistance, where the use of language plays a key role. In some cases the writer opts for using Spanish, rather than the interlingual play. Thus, "language in itself encompasses the prism through which a world view of culture is filtered. This language choice favoring Spanish can be understood as a form of self-exile and defiance within a country so intolerant toward other languages" (108). The tone of protest that Lomelí finds in Chicano literature coincides with what Ramón Saldívar has defined as "the dialects of difference." In a powerful and perceptive essay Saldívar proposes that "the oppositional literature of twentieth-century Mexican-American men and women is a direct resistance to the ideas inherent in 'America's political opportunity,' an opportunity that rationalized the colonized oppression of the native people of the Southwest and the exclusion of their writings from the canon of American literature" (20).

Most Puerto Rican and Chicano writers in the United States share the political struggle of being minorities within a hegemonic culture. Thus, their literature, to a large extent, is characterized by what Aparicio has defined as "a stance of cultural differentiation and resistance *vis-a-vis* the other, the Anglo world"(147). Speaking specifically about Chicano literature, Francisco Lomelí explains that nostalgia makes these writers try salvage images and customs from their Mexican past, and this function as a form of isolation. However, "they soon discover that their isolation is not self-imposed, but greatly enhanced by a society that essentially, and tragically, rejects them"(109).

The literature of Cuban-American writers develops along different lines. Gustavo Pérez Firmat, with his usual critical perception, analyses Saldívar's position to conclude that: "it may be, in fact, that Cuban-American literature differs from Chicano literature in conceiving culture as appositional rather than oppositional"(6). An important difference to remember is that most Cuban-American literature is the product of an exile experience, and this is a crucial event that shapes the literary focus of these authors. Cuban-American writers seek to integrate their newly found experiences in a foreign soil with their cultural traditions and remembrances from their past. Thus, at times we witness a conflict between their lost paradise and the cultural negotiations that are necessary to survive in a new culture. Their search for a new cultural identity does not manifest itself in the rebellious cry of a discriminated group against the society that rejects them. This search for identity is not a social phenomenon; it reveals the process and the negotiations of

individuals trying to integrate their past with their present, but always in a very personal way. Rafael Conte, speaking of a similar phenomenon experienced by the Spanish writers who went into exile in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, says that exile literature is always an individual and very personal phenomenon, never social, but always present in the writings of all those affected by exile (14). The conflict of exile is clearly evident in the works of most Cuban-American writers and is one of the differentiating features that sets them apart from Chicano and Puerto Rican authors. According to Carolina Hospital, this consciousness and feeling of being an exile maps a direction “that allows for synthesis rather than antagonism, syncretism rather than divergence. The Cuban-American writer is not resisting, but rather forging a new literature that mingles and intertwines different cultural legacies in order to violate and transform reality”(18). This consciousness of an exile in the process of becoming an immigrant and the personal involvement and pain in trying to define a new identity, are of utmost importance to understand the syncretic process in which this new identity is forged. This, I repeat, is not a social process. It is an individual process of internalization which all writers share but follow in their own special and personal way. The process is painful and difficult for it implies a transformation that requires choices about what to keep and what to forget, keeping enough in order not to lose one’s own identity while opening up to new experiences and a new culture. This conflict could not have been expressed more patently than in *Dreaming in Cuban*, one of the most successful Cuban-American novels written by Cristina García. The conflict of growing up in a bicultural environment, still laden with traditions from the old country, is evident in the character of Pilar whose name, Pilar Puente, is emblematic of the conflict and its possible solution. She is Pilar, a pillar of traditions; but she is also the Puente, the bridge that will unite the two cultures. Pilar is a young adolescent raised in New York by very traditional Cuban parents. She rejects many of the family values and is in constant conflict with her bicultural identity. Her dream is to return to Cuba, visit with her grandmother Celia, and search for her roots. When she finally reaches her goal and goes to Cuba, she realizes that her voyage has been fruitful, but not in the manner she had expected. Her voyage, like the voyage of all mythical heroes, helps her gain a deeper understanding of her conflict and the solutions, but not in the manner she had anticipated. In a well-developed interior monologue, Pilar expresses the understanding of what she needs to do in order to accept herself. This implies a reconciliation with her feelings about Cuba, exemplified in her family traditions, and New York which becomes a symbol of her new life in exile. While in Cuba, she reflects upon everything that she has seen and experienced, and on her new awareness: “I’m afraid to lose all this, to lose abuela Celia again. But sooner or later I’d have to return to New York. I know it’s where I belong--not instead of here, but more than here”(135).

The attempt to integrate the “there” with the “here,” the past with the present, the old with the new, and the pain and conflict that the process involves at the personal level, is perhaps the main leitmotif in the creative discourse of these Cuban-American writers. This position is clearly expressed in the words of a poet of this generation. In his book *From this Shore: Cuban Poetry from Exile*, Elías Miguel Muñoz says: “The space of exile, a real and daunting place, will demand a rupture with the past, the adoption of new languages and new customs, the acceptance of a new homeland. In the face of these demands, the writer seeks refuge in the power of memory, rewriting the past or exploring an inner space that, as chaotic as it may be, is nevertheless less inhospitable than the immediate one. The Island provides a root, a soil where the writer finds a base from which to project himself. Island/Homeland. Island/Refuge. We all return to her at one time or another. Recovering our memories of her, watching her triumphs and shortcomings, recreating her in our imagination, that is how we become part of the new world”(21).

As these Cuban-American writers move from exiles to immigrants, their literature will be another powerful testimonial of the painful experience of exile; and of the strength of immigrants to adapt and survive, while retaining aspects of their culture so dear to them.



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