***HISPANIC LITERARY HERITAGE: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE***

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What better way to learn about others than by reading their literature? What better way to learn about our own ways than to read our own people’s literary productions? Literature is an artistic written expression that represents who and what we are. For millennia, the literature and history of a people existed only in oral form. But once human beings developed written means of expressing themselves through hieroglyphics, icons, or alphabets, their history, beliefs and philosophy of life became preserved for posterity, and thus we get to know them today.

Through literature we express our understanding of what it means to be human. Poetry, essays, novels, and plays convey our comprehension of this world, our feelings, our modes of entertainment, and how we relate to and communicate with each other. Therefore, the study of literature proves to be a good tool to learn about our shared humanity.

The Hispanic literary heritage is a cultural treasure of the United States. Through their contributions to the development of this country, Hispanics have transformed US culture. Hispanic experiences in the United States, in all their complexity and singularity, are woven into the fabric of American history, which consists of multiple ways of being open to possibilities, the willingness to leave behind comfort and venture into the unknown, to explore, to be diverse and creative, and to seek freedom; it is also the determination for change, and the willingness to hope. This, in an all-encompassing manner, embodies the United States of America.

Rudolfo Anaya, the great Mexican American novelist, once said, “writing is an exploration and the exploration is not only for me, it’s for the reader.” I invite everybody here to join me this evening as we begin to explore some aspects of Hispanic Literature of the United States. This is just a preliminary survey of the terrain, something that I hope will encourage you to continue reading Hispanic Literature of the United States and explore the subject in more depth.

EXPLORATION: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

What we know as “Western Civilization” was first brought to the Americas by Spanish colonizers who were the first to introduce a written European language in the continent. The introduction of an alphabetic written mode of expression, in contrast with the pre-Columbian hieroglyphic writing, allowed for a different level of complexity in the communicative process and in the formation of abstract conceptual frameworks. This is well captured in the following video clip of the 1991 Canadian movie “Black Robe.”

As the first written European language in the area that later would be a part of the United States, Spanish was used for all the exploration documents. For example, Ponce de León wrote his travel-logs in Florida in 1513. Also, the Spaniard Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, who spent eight years among the Native American Indians, wrote about his explorations and experiences in North America, including what would later be Texas—actually quite close to here. His “La relación” was published in 1542, and it is considered the first anthropological and ethnographic treatise of what would be the United States.

“Written culture” was instrumental in documenting the conquest and colonization and enabled the development of laws for government and the establishment of commercial transactions. Spanish was the language for all the civil, military, and religious records, as well as for descriptions and studies of the people, fauna, and flora of the Americas. The first naturalist who studied Texas and the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, and who wrote about his findings, was Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora (1645-1700), a professor at the University of Mexico, who organized a scientific expedition to the area in 1693. Institutions such as schools, universities, libraries, governmental archives, and courts were first introduced in North America by Hispanics around the mid 16th century. Prior to the British arrival on the continent, the legal importation of books was approved in 1525, the first press was established in 1539, and the first newspapers were published in 1541.

Thus, a cultivated, educated Hispanic population was established in North America long before northern New Spain became the United States Southwest. The Hispanic literary legacy, however, is not restricted to the states that now border Mexico. Hispanics who were living in the thirteen British colonies in North America also made use of the press. For example, in the mid 17th century, exiled Sephardic Jews who spoke Old Spanish established communities in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern colonies and had their own publications. Also, other immigrants from Spain, the Caribbean, and South America published and printed political and creative books in the Northeast beginning around 1780.

In 1813, a group of Hispanics fighting for Mexican independence from Spain brought the first printing press to what is now Texas. In 1821, a liberal government tried to establish public education and democracy in the newly formed nation, which at that time encompassed a much larger territory. This resulted in the establishment of the first press in California in 1834, as well as the first press in what is now New Mexico. Some examples of early papers are the following: “El Misisipi,” published in New Orleans in 1808; “La gaceta de Texas,” published in Nacogdoches, Texas, in 1813; “El Telegrafo de las Floridas” in Florida, 1817; and “El Habanero,” in Philadelphia, 1824. These papers were an important venue for the publication of essays, poetry, and fiction.

DIVERSITY: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Beyond the literature of exploration and colonization, scholars such as Nicolás Kanellos categorize the diverse Hispanic literature in the United States into three types: Literature of the Exile, Literature of the Immigrant, and Literature of the Native.

The literature of the Exile is written by those who, during these last two centuries, have come to the United States as political refugees. They have come to this country, among other reasons, to express themselves freely, and/or to practice their religion freely. The authors’ intentions are to return to their respective homelands once political circumstances permit. A main focus of this type of literature is political protest. These writers usually belong to a cultural elite and try to influence the politics of their homeland from exile with their writings, working surreptitiously to introduce censured works into their countries in order to stimulate political change. Most of this literature’s themes revolve around issues of social injustice, dictatorship, and violations of human rights back in their homeland. Exiled authors yearn to return to a “lost paradise,” and at times feel as captives in this country; unable to act directly, they use their pen as swords from the distance.

The writings of the famous Cuban poet José Martí are a good example of this type of literature. Born in 1853, he fought for Cuban independence from Spain and lived in the United States. Martí published most of his work while living in New York. Later, he died fighting for Cuba. “Versos sencillos” [“Simple Verses”] are among Martí’s best known poems. Acclaimed singer Celia Cruz, also a Cuban exile in New York, sings Martí´s poems in her rendition of “Guantanamera” in this video clip. The lines are:

Yo soy un hombre sincero  A sincere man am I

de donde crece la palma,  From the land where palm trees grow

y antes de morirme quiero  And I want before I die

echar mis versos del alma. My soul’s verses to bestow.

Cultivo una rosa Blanca I have a white rose to tend

en junio como en enero In July as in January;

para el amigo sincero I give it to the true friend

que me da su mano franca Who offers his frank hand to me.

Y para el cruel que me arranca And for the cruel one whose blows

el corazón con que vivo, Break the heart by which I live,

cardo ni ortiga cultivo; Thistle not thorn do I give:

cultivo la rosa Blanca. For him, too, I have a white rose.

The literature of the Immigrant is written by those who, during the last two centuries, have come to this country due to economic conditions, searching for opportunities to make a better life. Nevertheless, their writing often expresses dreams of returning to their homeland, since the authors long for what they left behind. Many of them feel nostalgic for their motherland, hoping to return as soon as their finances improve. Through their works, these writers try to preserve the culture of their respective homeland while living in the United States. They feel the need to maintain their cooking, holidays, family structures, neighborhoods, and traditions as much as possible. Furthermore, while some of those traditions evolve and change back in the homeland, here in the United States immigrants fight to conserve the illusion of cultural purity.

The majority of Hispanic immigrant authors give voice to a working-class culture, in opposition to a minority of those who adopt a bourgeois posture. Many writers also struggle for labor rights and protest racism and exploitation. Some of the recurrent themes are about life in the city, how migration affects family relations, the conflict of generations, loss of identity, and labor exploitation. On occasion, they advise against migrating to this country due to the hardships of life here.

A good example of Immigrant literature can be found in what is known as the “immigrant press.” This type of press experienced a boom in the Southwest with the “outpouring of political and economic refugees of the Mexican Revolution of 1910” (Kanellos, *Cronistas* 4). In their essays and chronicles, many publishers, editors, and columnists for the immigrant communities developed the idea of “*México de afuera”* or a “Mexican colony abroad.” They believed that Mexican immigrants should protect and hang on to the essence of Mexican culture by maintaining the Spanish language, keeping the Catholic faith, and making sure their children did not adopt “the deleterious example of low moral standards practiced by Anglo-Americans” (*Cronistas* 4). The *México de afuera* proponents’ main idea was to preserve Mexican culture within the U.S.,

an environment where Hispanic women were in short supply and seen as subject of pursuit by the Anglos, where the English language and more liberal or progressive Anglo-American customs and values were overwhelming, and where discrimination and abuse against Mexicans existed. (Kanellos, *Cronistas* 5)

This press’writers were mostly male—like Daniel Venegas (El Malcriado) and Julio G. Arce (Jorge Ulica)—and ridiculed women who were mesmerized by the Anglo ways. In their opinion, women were supposed to keep and maintain culture and tradition. They should stay at home, take care of the family, and cook the meals.

The literature of the Native is written by Hispanics born and raised in the United States, some of whom have been in the land for generations—even before it was officially the United States. It usually reflects a sense of place in this country. Its writers are US citizens; some of them come from generations of Hispanics who, without moving from their homes, changed nationalities. This is the case of those whose families were originally Spanish colonials, became Mexicans in 1821, Texans in 1836, and United States citizens in 1845. Therefore, many Hispanics can proudly say that they did not cross the border; rather, “the border crossed them!” The Native writers often mention their claims as American citizens. As many other Americans, they have also protested injustice, struggled for civil and human rights, and contributed to cultural change. Many Hispanic Native authors choose English as their language of preference. They frequently present their sense of cultural synthesis, hybrid identities, and minority consciousness.

Native Literature mostly focuses on living conditions of Hispanics in the United States. The Native Hispanics do not yearn to return to places such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, or Mexico, because this country, the United States, is their homeland. Native Hispanic literature proclaims a sense of roots within the United States, and some authors attribute a quasi-mystic location to these lands. The Chicano civil rights movement in the 60s and 70s, for example, referred to Aztlán, the legendary place of origin of the Aztecs, as located in the five states of the Southwest. In this manner, they reclaimed a place of priority in these lands, inhabited by them even before the Europeans arrived. They also conceived of the creation of a new hybrid culture that, somehow, is the result of mixing the cultures of the old Hispanic with the Anglo-Saxon. The Native Hispanics defend their bilingual, bicultural identity, and some even believe they have created a new aesthetic. Their literature, sometimes, refers to characters “trapped” between cultures. These characters are usually searching for an identity, trying to create a positive place for themselves within a society often torn between impositions of ethnic loyalty. We encounter an example of this in Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*, a coming-of-age novel in the American tradition that is set in New Mexico and negotiates Hispanic, Native American, and Anglo-American identities.

These three categories –Exile, Immigrant, and Native– encompass a wide and very diverse range of cultures and backgrounds. In a coincidence of opposites, while erasing borders and embracing transnationalism, most authors aim to maintain their cultural idiosyncrasies, building their identities as members of a specific group. This is a personal choice. Some feel comfortable claiming the term “Chicano” while others prefer Mexican-American, for example. Others embrace broader terms such as Hispanic, meaning of “Spanish-American” ancestry, or even the more encompassing term “Latino” that also applies to those from Latin American countries where Portuguese and French are spoken. I am using the term Hispanic as described above, to refer to those of “Spanish-American ancestry,” that is, the people who have blended the cultures mostly of Spain and the Amerindians and Africa and reside within the United States, but most characteristic in their cultural past is the predominant use of the Spanish language. The term “Hispanic” refers to an ethnic group, not a race. People of all races compose the Hispanic group; this is also reflected in their literature. Thus, Hispanic literature of the United States represents a diversity of backgrounds, races, national origins, traditions, customs, social and economic conditions, educational levels, and cultures. Depending on their location within the United States, and their ethnic composition (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Spanish, etc), Hispanic communities possess diverse and distinctive characteristics, while at the same time, sharing core cultural traits, such as the importance of family life and community relations. Their authors navigate through a sea of questioning, as they build identities. The expression of these leads to an abundance of artistic creations.

CREATIVITY: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Since classical antiquity, Music, Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Dance, and Literature have comprised the Fine Arts. As a relative newcomer, just over a century old, Film has become known as “the seventh art.” Regarding literature, the Greeks classified it as either “Epic,” “Lyric,” or “Dramatic.” But we can also distinguish between fiction and non-fiction, as well as between prose and poetry. Nevertheless, no matter what categorization we prefer, the poetry, essays, novels, and plays produced by a specific culture represent the creativity of its members as well as its idiosyncrasies. Playwrights and theater performances are excellent examples of Hispanic creativity.

In the Hispanic communities, there is a long tradition of theater and live entertainment. North of Rio Grande, early Spanish colonizers and missionaries introduced the theater. In the missions, religious scenes were represented as a tool for evangelization. Nowadays, some of these folk religious plays are still performed in many churches at Christmas, Easter, and on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Professional groups started to develop during the nineteenth century when Mexican and Spanish acting troupes added several cities from the South and Southwest to their itineraries, and local companies were established. Also, around 1890, many cigar factories relocated to the Tampa, Florida, area to avoid the Cuban war of Independence, as well as to get closer to the United States market and to evade import taxation. Many workers moved from Cuba to Florida to work in these factories, where it was customary to work while listening to readings. In Florida, the tobacco workers built theaters and auditoriums for the general entertainment of the community.

Later, around the 1920s, Hispanic theater in the United States experienced great development, with representation of classical plays as well as local playwrights, vaudeville, zarzuelas, varieties, satire, and burlesque performances. In the South and Southwest, there also were itinerant, circus-like companies, known as “*teatros* de *carpa*,” that represented satirical sketches with stereotypical characters. However, with the Great Depression, due to either forced or voluntary repatriations, many communities in the South and Southwest were depopulated, negatively affecting Hispanic theater. In the New York area, however, the *Teatro Hispano* survived by catering to working class needs and helping the community with fund-raisers, raffles, and talent shows. Nevertheless, by the 1950s, film proved to be cheaper than live entertainment. Many theater houses converted to cinemas, thereby reducing the number of venues for Hispanic playwrights.

Some film roles were accessible to Hispanic actors in Hollywood during the silent film period. With the emergence of audio technology, their access declined. At that time, however, dubbing techniques had not been adequately developed, and several Hollywood movies had a Spanish version. In the same studios where their Anglo counterparts recorded during daytime hours, Spanish-speaking actors filmed during the night. Although the script was a translation into Spanish, the Hispanic producers aimed to improve what had already been done during the day, experimenting with camera angles, character development, and wardrobe. In this video clip we can see an example of this, with a scene from the 1931 *Dracula*.

Hispanic cultural creativity is also well represented in its ORAL TRADITION. Due to Spanish colonial censorships, the oral tradition — storytelling, songs, etc, — became a valuable vehicle of cultural preservation. This folklore represents a rich legacy that has influenced many literary endeavors. Part of this folklore is the *Corrido*, a sung poem narrating events such as crimes, violent deaths, bandit biographies, battles, humoristic/satiric stories, and love or hate relationships. These songs have roots in medieval Spanish compositions, as well as indigenous rhythms and religious hymns. Most of them have a similar structure: first calling for the audience’s attention, followed by biographical or historical data of the main character or event; then developing the plot and giving a message; and finally concluding with the main character’s good-byes as well as the singer’s farewell. One of the most famous *corridos* is about Joaquin Murieta, a legendary bandit from the California Gold Rush. But the *corridos* tradition continues to this day. Let’s listen to the beginning of a modern *corrido* sung by the California band “Los tigres del norte” (“The Northern Tigers”), who are parodied as “Los gatos del sur” (“The Sourthern Cats”) in a novel by Chicana writer Denise Chávez. In this corrido “Los tigres” sing about a female bandit of the 21st century known as “La reina del sur” (“The Queen of the South”). She has also become a character in a novel and a movie of the same name.

FREEDOM: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Like all Americans, Hispanic authors in the United States have partaken in the exercise of their constitutional rights. Foremost among these have been the First Amendment protections of freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

Freedom of Speech has become a precious tool for many authors who have taken political refuge in this country and have contributed to the above-mentioned “ Exile literature.” Their main focus has been to protest politics in their homeland: colonialism, dictatorships, censorship etc. Since they cannot do this at home, they publish in the United States in the hope that their writings will somehow return to their homeland and function as intellectual tools of rebellion and political change. For example, as these two illustrations show (see slide), in the early 1800s writers from Spain and from Venezuela wrote about the political troubles of their countries, publishing their books in New Orleans (1808) and Philadelphia (1817) respectively. Later, due to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), many political refugees in the United States published their opinions in different anti-fascist venues such as “España Libre” and “Frente Popular.”

Immigrant authors also make use of freedom of speech, mostly when they ally themselves with native writers to denounce labor practices and socio-economic conditions. Many have employed the press as their principal mode of communication. Across what is now the continental United States, a total of 2,500 Hispanic newspapers were published between 1808 and 1960. In addition to recording news about commerce and politics, these newspapers contained poetry, essays, chronicles, short stories and more, thus serving as educational tools and ideological documents. In this way, they were instrumental in the construction of identities and the preservation of communities.

The First Amendment also protected the religious diversity of Hispanics in the United States. Many came to this country to practice freely their religious beliefs. For example, during the *Guerras Cristeras* in Mexico (1926-1929), the Mexican government severed relations with the Catholic Church, which lead to a violent confrontation and the exile of many religious officials and church supporters to the United States, where they published extensively in defense of their cause.

Although most Hispanics are Catholic, some have embraced other faiths. After their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula and subsequent wanderings throughout Europe, several Sephardic Jewish communities found refuge in North America. These communities established their own publishing houses such as the Sephardic Publishing Company of New York that produced the newspaper “El Luzero.” Furthermore, there is a long literary tradition of Hymnals, prayer books, religious meditations, and theological writings by Hispanic members of the Baptist, Evangelical, Methodist-Episcopal, and other denominations.

DETERMINATION: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A sense of resilience and determination often permeates the Hispanic literature of the United States. Women’s, Civil Rights, and Labor Movements have all been represented in different literary genres.

A good example is the literary enterprise of female writers at the turn of the 20th century, who were determined to improve the conditions of women and fought as suffragettes for the right to vote. Working class women, like Puerto Rican tobacco factory reader Luisa Capetillo, were among the leaders of the labor and political movements. However, leadership in socio-political and cultural groups was comprised mostly of high-class, educated women. Some of the later, in spite of their interest in the advancement of their gender peers, still supported traditional gender roles established by their male counterparts. For instance, among Hispanics, women were considered responsible for keeping and maintaining traditions. Those who were lured by the “American way” were mocked as *agringadas*. Therefore, at a time in which their contemporary Anglo-American peers were fighting for a new kind of freedom, Hispanic women found themselves in conflict between their understanding of that new freedom and their own (or imposed) sense of responsibility towards their cultural traditions.

This conflict is reflected in their writings on domestic advice, which inform us about more than just cleaning, neighborliness, or cooking. These writings offer an insight to cultural celebrations, family and gender relations, and domestic work roles. Furthermore, in keeping with their time, though many of them seem to comply with patriarchal impositions—giving advice on social and culinary issues—they used humor or a light tone to present an undercurrent of subversive ideas. They may not have always written openly about feminist issues, but they managed to counteract the patriarchal discourse by overturning expectations and reclaiming female subjectivity. For instance, in the article titled “*Consejos de una mujer*” (“ A woman’s advice”), published in *El Labrador* of Las Cruces, New Mexico, on April 13, 1905, the unnamed author writes, “*Guárdate de un hombre ingobernable aunque a decir verdad todos los hombres tienen este grave defecto. … Todos los hombres son inconstantes, pero de la esposa depende tenerlos seguros*”(3). [“Keep away from the man who is ungovernable, although to tell the truth, all men have this grave defect. … All men are inconstant, but it is up to the wife to have them secured*.”*]

These publications provide us important information about social indicators of the status of women, highlighting the emergent conflicts between their roles as keepers of traditions and promoters of progress, as well as the tension between cultural preservation and cultural assimilation.

Hispanics have also participated in the Civil Rights movements and labor struggles throughout American history. In the 60s, for example, one of the most fascinating literary developments was the creation of a new form of theatrical performance. In 1965, Luis Valdez established the *Teatro Campesino* (Farmer Theater) to support César Chávez’s effort to defend the rights of migrant farm workers by organizing them into a union. This form of theater followed in the tradition of the *Teatro de Carpa* (Tent/Circus Theater) and quickly developed into a labor theater movement that was followed and imitated by other groups such as the *Teatro Urbano* or the *Teatro Movimiento Primavera* in Los Angeles. The plays had a sense of urgency; they were often performed on roadsides, in fields or factories, and in parking lots. Their message dealt with political or cultural concerns. The actors were workers recreating their own daily struggles or students involved with the labor communities. Later, professional theatrical companies and Hollywood became interested in this movement’s productions, which lead to professionalization. Luis Valdez, for example, is known as the “father of Chicano theater,” but he also wrote and directed acclaimed movies such as *Zoot Suit* (1981) and *La Bamba* (1987).

Capturing the spirit and idealism of many American youths in the 60s, renowned folk singer Joan Báez became one of the representatives of the struggles for peace and justice of those times. The granddaughter of a Methodist minister from Mexico who moved to New York to experience freedom of religion, and the daughter of a prominent MIT professor of physics and mathematics, Joan Báez represented the voice of many in the United States. She not only recovered folkloric music of the United States, but also wrote many of her songs’ poetic lyrics. Here is a clip of her rendition of one of the Civil Rights anthems “We Shall Overcome.”

HOPE: AN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

From the beginning ­­–when the world of books, libraries and western education was first introduced by the Spaniards in North America– until our time, Hispanics in the United States have transformed the culture of this country. They have contributed to its development and have built special cultural patterns that are now intrinsic to its essence. Exploration, diversity, creativity, freedom, and determination are some of the most prevalent characteristics. However, there are other means of literary representation that I have not had the chance to discuss today. Literature lovers can find an enormous display of ideas, thoughts, and emotions in different literary forms. It is important to pay attention to all of these forms of expression; they are part of the United States cultural legacy, and, as such, they also imply a sense of hope. We should put this heritage to a good use by using this legacy to build a better future.

Due to the fluidity among the literatures of the exile, the immigrant and the native, Hispanic literature in the United States allows for constant change from generation to generation. There are many young Hispanic authors following in the footsteps of those who came before them, but marching even farther; from Denise Chávez, and Rudolfo Anaya, through Tato Laviera and Sandra Cisneros, to Junot Diaz, and Richard Blanco. They are the heirs of those who explored, contributed to diversity, demonstrated their creativity, searched for freedom, and showed determination. They are also working to construe and to put together what future generations will receive. Thus, Hispanic literature in the United States remains a vital force in our cultural field today and represents a mosaic of American experiences.

For the 2013 Inauguration Ceremony, President Obama chose an openly gay poet of Cuban ancestry, Richard Blanco, as the Inaugural Poet. In an interview with *The New York Times* journalist Sheryl Gay Stolberg, Mr. Blanco commented on how Mr. Obama’s inaugural theme, “Our People, Our Future,” was relevant to his writing. He also expressed his desire to write about “the salt-of-the-earth sense that I think all Americans have, of hard work, we can work it out together, that incredible American spirit that after 200-plus years is still there.” In Richard Blanco’s Inaugural poem titled “One Today”, the poetic voice takes us through a whole day from dawn to dusk. I would like to finish my presentation with the last stanza of Blanco’s Inaugural poem:

We head home: through the gloss of rain or weight

of snow, or the plum blush of dusk, but always—home,

always under one sky, our sky. And always one moon

like a silent drum tapping on every rooftop

and every window, of one country—all of us—

facing the stars

hope—a new constellation

waiting for us to map it,

waiting for us to name it—together.