

2005

## Spanish Speakers and Early 'Latino' Expression

Lázaro Lima

*University of Richmond*, [llima@richmond.edu](mailto:llima@richmond.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Lima, Lázaro. *American History through Literature: 1820-1870*. Ed. Janet Gabler-Hover and Robert D. Sattelmeyer. New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 2005. 1118-123. Print.

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## SPANISH SPEAKERS AND EARLY "LATINO" EXPRESSION

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Spanish speakers have been present and writing in what is today the United States since the late sixteenth century, when Spanish explorers and colonizers described their experiences in chronicles, prose, poems, and epistolary exchanges. But it was not until the nineteenth century that Spanish speakers from various Latin American countries and Spain began to develop a cultural identity within the United States that was linguistically, racially, and culturally distinct from the Anglo-American majority culture. In the nineteenth century Spanish speakers comprised three principal groups: American citizens of Spanish ancestry, Spanish-speaking immigrants from the Americas, and exiled political figures in the United States who fought for Latin American independence from Spain. The presence of these Spanish speakers transformed the American cultural landscape at a time when the United States was defining its own cultural and national identity in response to its rapid continental and hemispheric expansion. The most significant polemic of and about Spanish speakers in the United States came as a result of the Mexican-American War (1846–1848). After the war Mexico lost almost half of its territories to the United States, including modern-day California, Utah, and Nevada and parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming as well as Mexico's claim to Texas, which had been under U.S. occupation since 1836. The massive acquisition of territory meant that the country's cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious makeup would undergo considerable transformation. Yet how is it that American literary history has not been able to register this important incorporation of a people, their cultural history, and the literature that charts this transformation? This essay seeks to provide the basis from which to understand what has been conceived as a "recent" cultural and literary phenomenon borne out the 1960s civil rights movements.

### SPANISH SPEAKERS AFTER "THE AMERICAN 1848"

Scholars (Michael Paul Rogin, Shelly Streeby) have referred to the period after the Mexican-American War as "the American 1848" in order to emphasize how the United States's acquisition of Mexican territories signaled a new age of expansionism driven by monopoly

capitalism. The American 1848 also aggravated the tenuous balance held between northern free states and southern slave states that would culminate in the Civil War. These tensions arose with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), which ended the Mexican-American War. The acquisition of land also meant the incorporation of the territory's inhabitants as well as their culture, customs, and modes of being.

When the treaty was finally signed on 2 February 1848, Mexico sought to protect its citizens by negotiating three articles that referred specifically to Mexicans who would remain in the newly conquered territory. These three articles informed both the legal status of Mexicans in the United States as well as their role as future U.S. citizens in the making. Mexican familiarity with Anglo-American law is evident in the drafting of these articles insofar as they acknowledge an ethnically marked subject of citizenship as well as the symbolic preconditions for asserting differential (but not deferential) citizenship: namely, the protection of cultural, religious, and linguistic difference. The articles in question, Articles 8, 9, and 10, sought to ensure U.S. citizenship, free practice of religion (the protection of Catholicism in a predominantly Protestant country), and recognition of Mexican land grants, respectively. The articles were heavily contested on the Anglo-American side before the treaty was signed. On 4 January 1848, almost four weeks prior to the signing, Senator John Calhoun (1782–1850) of South Carolina appeared before the Senate floor to state his disdain for the annexation of Mexican territories to the United States. Calhoun, though an expansionist, vehemently expressed racially motivated concerns in an effort to thwart the signing of the treaty. He noted how the United States had "never dreamt of incorporating into our Union any but the Caucasian race—the free white race" (pp. 98–99). Calhoun's conflation of racial identity with ethnic, national, and linguistic identities was a strategic move meant to prevent what he and many others saw as the incorporation of potentially free states into the union.

Only Article 8 (citizenship) of the treaty survived intact when it was ratified by the Senate on 19 March 1848. By striking Article 10 completely, the Senate placed a serious impediment to the "guarantee" of Mexican American citizenship it had bestowed: the full exercise of citizenship could be achieved only if one was a landowner. As a result of various poll-tax and literacy laws that were already in effect prior to the signing of the treaty, Mexican Americans and many Spanish speakers in previously Mexican territories had limited possibilities for entry into civic life as their U.S. citizenship became largely symbolic. The question of

land title was therefore of paramount importance if Mexican Americans were to exercise full citizenship. Yet Mexican American possibilities for resolving land disputes were fraught with lengthy and costly battles. After the California Land Act of 1851, which established the procedures for confirming land titles for Mexican and Spanish grants, the average time for settlement of a claim in California was seventeen years (Robinson, p. 106). Not surprisingly, Mexican Americans began to redress their second-class citizenship in both the court of law and the court of public opinion. For many Spanish speakers, the rise of print culture made publishing a viable medium for redressing the injustices occasioned by the American 1848. Spanish speakers writing in both English and Spanish attempted to reach their own communities as well as English-speaking communities. The responses to cultural, political, and material dispossession were class codified and could be divided into four principal—though not exclusive—literary modes of historical and self-representation. These four principal modes were the *corrido* (a border ballad, usually about a struggle or border conflict); plays that emerged from an older tradition of *autos* (devotional plays) from the Spanish colonial period; the novel (the historical novel in particular); and the *crónica* (opinion pieces, editorials, and essays). Each of these modes of literary-historical and cultural recordation reached various class strata and relied on either print culture or oral transmission for the representation of group-specific concerns.

#### THE *CORRIDO*

The *corrido* emerged in the nineteenth century along the U.S.-Mexican border after the Texas Revolution of 1836, which provided ample historical and personal material from which to relate stories of valor in the face of Anglo-American encroachment. Transmitted and sung along the border, the most famous *corridos* were reproduced in broadsides and in Spanish-language newspapers throughout the Southwest. The *corrido* was transmitted orally and required no literate reading public since it was performed to a community of listener-observers who were in turn witnessing the staging of an event from a decidedly Mexican perspective. The *corrido* provided an easy-to-understand, though often variable, counterrepresentational medium because it did not require a literate public. Unlike the novel and the *crónica*, the *corrido* allowed history and counter-histories to filter through various class strata. The Spanish *romance* eight-syllable line structure also facilitated rote memorization and dissemination and explains the *corrido*'s continuing popularity.

The *corrido*, however, was ultimately bound to iteration in and among various Spanish-speaking

communities; transmitted almost always in Spanish, its resonance in the American public sphere was therefore limited. This was not the case with the plays, novels, or *crónicas* whose counterhistorical resonance attempted to sway Anglo-American sentiment about the Mexican-American War and, even more broadly, about the various Spanish-speaking groups in the country and their respective concerns regarding an ever-expanding United States.

#### STAGING DISSENT

Though the literary historiography is scant, the historical record indicates that in the nineteenth century plays by and for Spanish speakers were written, performed, and often improvised. Many of these plays have been lost, and all we have are mentions of them in newspapers, playbills, and broadsides. The extant material that we do possess and are still recovering from this period come from the pioneering work of Chicano scholars. The Chicano literature scholar Raymund A. Paredes notes how one of the earliest and most interesting plays from the period is the anonymous *Los Tejanos* (The Texans), which appears to have been written around 1846 (p. 1082). No doubt inspired by the nickname given to Texas Rangers by Mexicans, *los diablos tejanos* ("the Texan devils" or, more felicitously, "the devilish Texans"), the play tells the story of the Santa Fe expedition of 1841 when some three hundred Texans attempted to "free" New Mexico from Mexican control. The play, though incomplete, charts this factual military and cultural intrusion by recalling how the "liberators" were captured or killed as a result of their hubris and cultural incompetence. The Texans presume to know the Mexican character, and it is their belief in the prevailing negative stereotypes about Mexicans that causes their downfall. These stereotypes consisted of racialized associations that posited the Mexican as sinister, conniving, and lazy "greasers." Falling prey to these stereotypes, the Texan General McLeod is outsmarted by the New Mexican Jorge Ramírez, who leads the general and his band into a cultural and military ambush. He pretends to be a traitor to his fellow Mexicans only to have General McLeod follow him into Santa Fe, all the while being oblivious to Ramírez's scheme. Once in New Mexico, Ramírez's men ambush the bewildered Anglo-Americans and thereby prevent New Mexico from being usurped by the United States.

The play is emblematic of the cultural conflicts between Mexican Americans and Anglo-Americans that would also manifest themselves in other literary genres of the period. The Mexican American is caught in a contentious and consistently confrontational



**Illustration from Colonel Frank Triplett's *Conquering the Wilderness*, 1883.** After 1848, the stereotype of Mexicans as sinister characters became commonplace in the public imagination. This engraving labels Mexicans as "Greasers", a nearby illustration carried the caption "Murderous Mexicans." CLEMENTS LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

engagement with Anglo-Americans over the right to determine what public identity the dispossessed are to assume: the identity imposed by the aggressor or the one clamoring for representational justice. The figure of Jorge Ramírez was significant to the degree that he symbolically assured Mexican Americans that they would ultimately prevail. The tensions would also be evident in the literature of Mexican Americans as well as in that of other Spanish speakers.

#### HISTORICAL MEMORY

One of the most important novels from the period is María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's (1832–1895) historical romance *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), a text destined to oblivion were it not for the intervention of the Chicana scholars Beatrice Pita and Rosaura Sánchez, who reedited the novel and provided an important introduction to the historical circumstances

that produced it. Ruiz de Burton's novel narratively stages in English how Mexicans became second-class citizens after the war. The "Don" in the title refers to Mariano Alamar, a patrician rancher whose wealth has been encroached upon by an eastern squatter, William Darrell. The Darrells, well-to-do easterners, have found themselves caught in a moral dilemma involving the legitimacy of Mexican-Spanish land grants and the right to stake claims to those grants that may or may not be binding in the reconstruction's judicial system. The Alamars watch as entrepreneurs such as Charles Crocker, Mark Hopkins, Collis P. Huntington, and Leland Stanford successfully promote underdevelopment in the don's southern California by successfully blocking a southern transcontinental railroad with a terminus in San Diego from being built, thereby forcing the Mexicans to sell their land as nearby Los Angeles is developed to the detriment of the Mexican stronghold of San Diego. Ruiz de Burton's Californio blue-eyed protagonist, Don Alamar, notes:

When I first read the text of the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, I felt a bitter resentment against my people; against Mexico, the mother country, who abandoned us—her children—with so slight a provision of obligatory stipulations for protection. But afterwards, upon mature reflection, I saw that Mexico did as much as could have been reasonably expected at the time. In the very preamble of the treaty the spirit of peace and friendship, which animated both nations, was carefully made manifest. . . . The treaty said that our rights would be the same as those enjoyed by all American citizens. But, you see, Congress takes very good care not to enact retroactive laws for Americans. . . . I think but few Americans know or believe to what extent we have been wronged by Congressional action. (P. 67)

Don Alamar's recourse to historical memory presents the personalized narrative of an *hombre de razón*, literally "a reasonable man" but connotatively a "white man," who has weighed the injustices of empire and found Congress, and by extension the nation itself, wanting in its legally binding responsibility to honor the agreements set forth in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Ruiz de Burton's conscious construction of Don Alamar as "white," however, evinces a palliative strategy of racial and linguistic accommodation—one that she must have found to be successful because of, and not in spite of, its assimilative cultural grounding. To date there is no conclusive evidence regarding the public-sphere resonance of her counterhistorical novel after it was published. The evidence is clear, however, about how she was received in the political sphere.

After the onset of the American Civil War (1861–1865), concern over her husband, the Union army captain Henry S. Burton (and perhaps even concern over her pension), made her request a meeting with President Abraham Lincoln (Aranda, p. 64). After several attempts she secured a meeting with Lincoln, whom she finally met in person in 1861. (She would fictionally reconstruct this meeting in her first novel, *Who Would Have Thought It?*, 1872.) She discussed her husband's service to the Union and requested his promotion to colonel, a request that did not fall on deaf ears. Lincoln wrote to his secretary of war, Simon Cameron, and asked him to promote her husband "if it could be done without injustice to other officers"; six months later the Senate formally approved the promotion of Henry S. Burton (Aranda, p. 64).

Ruiz de Burton's counterhistorical agency—her willingness to sway public opinion in favor of Mexican Americans—as ultimately dependent upon a literate English-speaking public, and the cultural, political, and historical memory her novel attempted to redress was an important though largely symbolic gesture since discrimination against Mexicans did not cease but intensified. The representation of Mexicanness that she wanted to redress as *gente de razón* (as reasonable "white" people) did not achieve any resonance in the public sphere. That was not the case with the various Spanish-speaking media outlets that sought mass circulation in an attempt to increase sales, widen their sphere of influence, and provide an accurate forum for Spanish speakers and their group-specific concerns.

### THE RISE OF "LATINO" EXPRESSION

Mid-nineteenth-century New Orleans provided a propitious environment for various multi-language print media. Kirsten Silva Gruesz, in her pioneering *Ambassadors of Culture*, asserts that since the inception of the "first Spanish-language newspaper in the United States, *El Misisipi*," New Orleans was "the undisputed capital of Hispanophone print production" with at least twenty-three different Spanish-language periodicals; its nearest contender, New York, had only thirteen (p. 110). She notes how important French-language newspapers like *L'Abeille* and the *L'Avenir du peuple* were by the 1830s already printing Spanish-language sections; by the 1840s nearly half the items in *L'Avenir du peuple* were written in Spanish. The 1840s also saw the Spanish-language press in New Orleans thrive and supersede the French-language press, not only for the Spanish-speaking expatriate communities but for Latin Americans as well. Important newspapers such as *El independiente*, *Diario del gobierno*, *La verdad*, *La patria*, and its predecessor *El hablador* were distributed throughout the

United States via express courier, steamboat, and railway as well as the rudimentary but fast-spreading technology of the telegraph, allowing almost immediate access to important news in and out of the United States (Silva Gruesz, p. 112). The war with Mexico was covered with singular interest in the Spanish-language press since many Spanish speakers (citizens, expatriates, émigrés, and travelers) saw Anglo-American expansion in Mexico as but a precursor to Anglo-American expansion into the other Americas—a fundamental concern for the Cuban writer José Martí as he noted in his essay *Nuestra América* (Our America).

### RACIAL AND ETHNIC CONFLATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

In the eastern United States, the feared expansionist zeal attributed to the United States after the war with Mexico and interventions elsewhere in the Americas forced Spanish-speaking communities, particularly in the Atlantic cultural centers of Philadelphia and New York City, to fight two principal representational battles: one racial and the other political as jingoist rhetoric saturated public media. The Cuban independence leader José Martí (1853–1895), who lived fourteen years of his life in exile in the United States, spearheaded the drive to form what today would be considered a "Latino" counterpublic, a community-specific attempt to counter prevailing stereotypes and media inaccuracies of and about Spanish speakers and their descendants.

Martí was a champion of liberatory projects and left a substantial body of writing that reasoned through the possibilities for racial parity as a condition of democracy, as he argued in *Nuestra América*. Though he spent most of his time in New York City while he was in the States, he often traveled to Key West and the Tampa Bay region, where Cuban communities had established themselves in mid-nineteenth century. In New York he was also associated as a writer with various English, Spanish, and bilingual newspapers. He wrote for the *New York Sun* as well as for *Patria*, the paper of the Cuban independence party (not to be confused with *La patria* of New Orleans, though his essays in Spanish appeared there as well), and his *crónicas* appeared in major newspapers throughout the United States and the Americas, as did his many important political essays and belletristic works.

When Martí first arrived in the United States he was in awe of a country where the experiment of democracy inspired him to dream of a Cuba free from Spanish colonial rule. His exuberance was short-lived, however, as he steadily witnessed the struggles of

working people in cities like New York and Philadelphia. Martí was also concerned with what the Spanish-speaking press had acknowledged about U.S. expansionism in Latin America since the war with Mexico: that it was imperial expansionism driven by a belief in "Manifest Destiny." With the memory of the annexation of Mexico close to the heart, Martí and many other Latin American intellectuals living in the United States saw how American expansionism was threatening the newly liberated, or soon to be liberated, republics of Latin America, which had been under Spanish colonial rule. Martí was especially concerned about what he saw as U.S. encroachment upon Cuba and the Caribbean.

In 1889 Martí wrote the editor of the *New York Evening Post* after the paper reproduced an article that appeared in the *Philadelphia Manufacturer*. The article was characterized by Martí as an attack on Cubans in the United States and on the island alike. Articulating sentiments similar to those levied against Mexican's inferior racial composition on the human scale by the likes of Calhoun, the *Philadelphia Manufacturer* article depicted Cubans as "destitute vagrants" and "moral pigmies"; "effeminate"; people "unfitted by nature and experience to discharge the obligations of citizenship in a great and free country" like the United States (*José Martí Reader*, p. 210). Writing in English, Martí responded by interweaving Cuba's Ten Years' War (1868–1878) with Cuban American civic intervention in the United States. Martí noted that these claims against Cubans and Cuban Americans "cannot be justly said of a people who possess, besides the energy that built the first railroad in Spanish dominions and established against the opposition of the government all the agencies of civilization, a truly remarkable knowledge of the body politic" (p. 210). He went on:

Never was ignorance of history and character more pitifully displayed. . . . We need to recollect, in order to answer without bitterness, that more than one American bled by our side, in a war that another American was to call a farce. A farce the war that has been by foreign observers compared to an epic, the upheaval of a whole country, the voluntary abandonment of wealth, the abolition of slavery in our first moment of freedom. (P. 211)

Martí was quick to note that the Cuban independence movement was premised on the very ideals of democratic institutions that were worth fighting for alongside Americans who believed in these ideals.

For Martí the *crónica* provided an immediate and useful tool for both his work as the architect of the Cuban independence movement and the early Latino expression that emerged in the nineteenth century

after the American 1848. That today we do not consider the likes of Ruiz de Burton or Martí part of the American literature canon is instructive of the degree to which the decidedly American creation of "difference" (especially with regard to its connotatively related racial, ethnic, gender, and linguistic markers) has served as one of the organizing principles of American identity from the nineteenth century to the present. That the United States does not recognize difference as its own creation should not obfuscate our need to reexamine the foundational conceits of American literary history and cultural memory.

## CONCLUSION

The demise of an exilic consciousness on the part of Latin Americans in major Latino centers and Mexican responses to dispossession from the protocols of citizenship resulted in the commonality of Latino expression that scholars in the U.S. academy have only recently begun to chart. The direct engagement with the strictures of Anglo-American political representation was a primary concern for Spanish speakers that found expression organized around two principal fronts: first, the local—that is, the manifestations of homeland concerns at the immediate local level—and second, what has come to be termed the "glocal," meaning the impact of American policies in the country of origin (even if the country of origin was the United States, newly conceived after 1848, as was the case for Mexicans). The fundamental generative moment when it became necessary to articulate what today we call a Latino-specific subjectivity and identity was in 1848 and was fashioned by the ensuing polemic that registered the transition from Mexican to Anglo-American territorial dominance. The Latino subject surfaced along that literal and metaphorical divide between Mexico and the United States—a divide that fractured alliances, elided ethnic identities, and disembodied subjects from the protocols of citizenship. The literal divide was a trope of a rising U.S. nationalism, and its complicit metaphorical weight and accompanying truth claims were perpetuated in the public sphere through various print media on both sides of the cultural divide.

The current emphasis and ostensible novelty associated with Latino cultural production and identity is but a recent manifestation of a larger and unresolved cultural conflict that arose after the Mexican-American War. The various conceits associated with American democratic participation and the unfulfilled promise of equality created competing forms of cultural citizenship that vied for legitimacy and human access to cultural capital in the public sphere. These competing forms of "*being* American" appealed to the ontological

status of Latino citizens (the purportedly knowable core of their “being”), where strategic whiteness and claims to a distinctive ethnic identity born of proto-colonialism renegotiated the nature of Hispanicity, often to near-collusive ends, as with Ruiz de Burton’s blue-eyed protagonist. The public-sphere resonance of Latino responses to the loss of political influence, like Ruiz de Burton’s novel, resulted in a publicly rendered identity that elided ethnic particularisms in favor of assimilative forms of national belonging. Like most projects marked by strategic essentialism, the politics of nineteenth-century Latino identity positioned itself as racially white for political gain, all the while lamenting the symbolic loss of cultural and ethnic particularisms. Its alternative, the noncritical embrace of a Latino-specific ethnic identity, did not prove to be a worthwhile strategy in the public sphere as civic influence diminished in measure with the singular dependence on Spanish-language accounts of “glocal” and local concerns. Spanish-language prominence and Anglo-American cultural and linguistic discrimination during this period ultimately facilitated the disintegration of a viable bilingual cultural identity for Spanish speakers. These negotiations surrounding civic identity constituted subject positions that altered the way Spanish speakers understood themselves in relation to the American body politic and the way that they were imagined as a community by the culture writ large.

*See also* Borders; Catholics; Democracy; Ethnology; Manifest Destiny; Mexican-American War; New Orleans

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