

# Introduction

Latino and Latina writing is a growing and diversifying field that is reshaping U.S. literature and culture. Although its indigenous, European, and African roots are irrefutable, it is a relatively new voice, since much of it has been created and published after 1960. Latino and Latina authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Oscar Hijuelos, and Julia Alvarez were unheard of fifteen years ago, as their works were published by small or academic presses. Now their works, and that of others, are widely read, reviewed by major media, and optioned for films, such as *Zoot Suit* (1981), *Mambo Kings* (1992), *Luminarias* (2000), *In the Time of the Butterflies* (2001), and *Real Women Have Curves* (2002). This is due, in part, to the growing population of Latinos and Latinas in the United States, which now constitutes the largest minority in the country.

Much of the research and scholarship published on Latino and Latina literature has focused on a specific group, be it Nuyorican poetry, Chicana feminism, or Cuban American fiction on exile. *Latino and Latina Writers* is more comprehensive because it brings together, for the first time, well crafted, in-depth studies of the works of some fifty-five authors representing different ethnicities and nationalities, in addition to five thematic essays treating autobiography and memoir, theater and performance, Chicana feminist criticism, Latino and Latina identity, and the historical antecedents of Latino literature.

The newness of Latino and Latina literature means it is under constant definition and redefinition. Does a Latino or Latina writer craft his or her work only in English, Spanish, Spanglish, or all three? Do they have to be born in the United States? How do these writers identify themselves racially, socially, culturally, and sexually? Have they experienced racism in the United States? Did they come to the United States as a small child, an adolescent, or as an adult? Did the family come for better economic opportunities, to flee a repressive regime or a civil war, or to study and then stay? If raised here, did they grow up in a large city like Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York, or in smaller, rural communities in Texas, Colorado, or Florida? The answers to these questions are neither simple nor straightforward, since many Latinos and Latinas are of mixed heritage, write in English, Spanish (and sometimes Spanglish), and consider themselves bi- or tri-cultural, pluri-racial, and multilingual.

As authors they might identify themselves as writers who happen to be Latinos rather than as Latino writers. The major—but not exclusive—focus of *Latino and Latina Writers* is on authors who write in English and whose characters, locations, and themes show some distinct commonalities. Their works stand as a testimonial commitment to create a literature that is ethically grounded and aesthetically innovative. For Latino and Latina writers, although

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expressed in individually unique voices, ethical concerns are embedded within a more collective consciousness—be it family, community, or nation—and directly or indirectly express the utopian yearnings of hope and transformation—a metamorphosis fashioned by recovering or affirming an identity, irreverently probing memory and history, and grappling with the intricate workings of power, injustice, resistance, and autonomy. This transformation generated by the creative tension between individual and collective concerns is perhaps best exemplified by the African proverb: “A person becomes human because of others.”

What makes a literary work Latino or Latina? Are certain themes addressed, like personal or cultural identity, immigration to the United States, coming-of-age stories in an Anglo culture, an examination of the roots and problems of a community, either in the barrio or back in the home country? Is it the use of English and Spanish, the names and surnames of the characters, the settings and locations, or the cultural background in which a narrative, poem, or play takes place? What about the enormous weight and persistence of memoir, personal narrative, and autobiography within Latino and Latina letters? Many works might seem to fit these models, such as Ernesto Galarza’s *Barrio Boy* (1971), Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), or Piri Thomas’s *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), novels like Ana Castillo’s *Sapogonia: An Anti-Romance in 3/8 Meter* (1990), a book of poems like Juan Felipe Herrera’s *Love After the Riots* (1996), or Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems, & Loqueras for the End of the Century* (1996), with its mixture of poems, prophecies, performance pieces, essays, and a glossary of “borderismos,” as prototypical coming-of-age works that reflect their respective milieu: the Mexican American barrio of Sacramento, the bleak neighborhoods of New York, and the Cuban exile experience. These works, however, elude easy classification by inhabiting hybrid and cross-genre spaces.

Criticism and theory about Latino and Latina literature and culture has emphasized its hybridity and multicultural dimensions, often drawing on such subjects as *mestizaje*, *rascuachismo*, and transculturation. Latino and Latina theorists have eloquently written on border theory or what has come to be known as “life on the hyphen.” Chicana border theorists, as women of color, have made a significant contribution to social and aesthetic thought in the United States with their feminist-borderist work. To contextualize the significance of this thought, the origins of Latino and Latina culture must be examined.

### SOURCES OF LATINO AND LATINA LITERATURE: INDIGENOUS, IBERIAN, AFRICAN

Latino and Latina literature was born out of conquest, colonialism, slavery, empire, and civil strife. Spain’s influence in the southern parts of North America, Central America, the Caribbean, and Latin America was vast from 1492 to 1898. In Mexico and what is today the U.S. Southwest, the Spanish