

Chicano/a Pass-Over*

by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, UCLA

Editor's note: The fifteenth annual Inter-American Bookfair & Literary Festival sponsored by the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center was held November 5-23, 2002. One of the scholars' panels, Chicano Literature in a Latino Century, focused on a discussion of the effect changes in demographics and readership are having on our literature. Panelists included Juan Rodríguez (TLU), Alicia Gaspar de Alba (UCLA), Gwendolyn Díaz (St.MU), Louis Mendoza (UTSA) and E.A. Tony Mares (UNM).

In this issue of Voz, Alicia Gaspar de Alba shares some of the commentary she prepared for the panel.

I'd like to take a more critical approach to the topic and analyze the assumptions of the title of this panel. Certainly, the panel description seems innocuous enough; as Chicano/a and Latino/a scholars, we are supposed to discuss the "effect changes in demographics and readership are having on our literature." Already, however, I am perplexed. Whose literature is "our" literature? Is the apostrophized reference to Chicano/a literature? To Latino/a literature? Or, to mainstream American literature? Are we, as experts in the fields of Chicano/a and Latino/a literature, supposed to dialogue about how those demographic changes, in other words that exponential increase of Latino/as in the United States, are changing not only those who read "our" literature, but those who write it, as well? Or, are we supposed to discuss how Chicano/a literature has to change as a result of increased Latinization?

We've all seen the results of the latest U.S. Census, we know that Latino/as—or rather, all those who are now being lumped together under the label Latino the way we were all once labeled Hispanics—are becoming the largest "minority" in the United States. I hate the word "minority" because like the word "subculture" it implies that we are minor, less than, below. But if we can tolerate that word for a minute, what does it mean to be in the existential moment of becoming the largest national minority? Does it mean that we've finally achieved a critical mass that gives more power to the old Chicano adage: aquí estamos y no nos vamos? Does it mean we're becoming less minor, less insignificant, less marginalized, less subject to the majority? Or, does it mean that we've arrived as a legitimate presence in the consciousness of that majority (and, of course, by legitimate, we mean marketable)?

Demographic shifts don't necessarily signify that things are getting better for Latino/as. Witness what happened in California when it became abundantly clear that Los Angeles was the largest Mexican city outside of México. Proposition 187 passed by an overwhelming majority in 1994, ending public health care and public education for undocumented—but tax-paying—immigrants, and turning schools, clinics, and

hospitals into border watchdogs that not only kept out the unwanted, but also rooted out and reported on anyone suspected of being undocumented. This racist proposition (which won the vote of at least 20% of California's "Hispanic" voters, by the way) was promptly followed by the end of Affirmative Action (Proposition 209) and the end of Bilingual Education (Proposition 227)—two of the most important and hard-won battles of the Civil Rights movements. Other states followed suit to control the flow, curtail the access to public resources, and contain the opportunities of this perniciously growing Latino minority.

Paradoxically, at the same time that all this legislation is being passed, voted for, and implemented, the culture industry witnesses a virtual explosion of things Latino, and the popular marketplace becomes a virtual showplace of Latinidad. Que Ricky Martin, Selena, Marc Anthony, J-Lo, and Shakira; que "American Me," "Mi Familia," "Resurrection Blvd.," "American Family," "Y Tu Mamá, También," "Real Women Have Curves," "El Crimen del Padre Amaro,"

"Frida," and (of course) "Selena"; que la Sandra, la Ana, la Denise, el Rudy, el Luis, la Julia, la Cristina—not to mention the other Cristina, Walter Mercado, or Don Francisco—la Isabel, el Ruben, el Victor. The multicultural agenda of the late 1980s and early 1990s helped the mainstream culture industry to recognize that Latino/as are, in fact, a huge market of consumers who can actually afford to buy books, records, and movies by and about people like themselves.

The publishing industry, which is what concerns us at a book fair, has represented this demographic change by mainstreaming some Chicana/o and Latina/o authors. How has mainstreaming impacted "our" literature, I would ask? Have the books and authors selected to flow in that mainstream represented Latinidad in all of its diversity? Or, do they fulfill audience expectations of what Latino/as are? Do they promote the dominant culture's ideology of Latino/as?

Part of that ideology includes seeing Latino/as as border

crossers—exotic or magical, criminal or sultry, going to college or driving-by with a gun—the main mainstream narrative about Latino/as is that we're foreigners and immigrants. In fact, this lumping together of everyone under the Latino label only underscores our collective immigrant status. We are outsiders. We "belong" somewhere else, but have all come here to "be the best that we can be." And a good indicator of our accomplishment, our own piece of the American Dream (if we can't also get a piece of the rock) is the evident flourishing of Latino/a books and films and music and television programs. Our percentage of politicians or tenured professors in universities isn't quite up to par, and despite the growing number of brown faces in American classrooms, our schools don't quite reflect their student populations in their teachers or administrators. But, hey, we can find our books at Barnes & Noble and at airports across the country. We can buy our movies and our music at Wal-Mart or Best Buy. All the major publishers have started Latino imprints now (some of which even publish books in Spanish, I guess because someone in New York figured out that not speaking English doesn't mean people are illiterate) and university presses from coast to coast have implemented Chicano/a and Latino/a series that publish more Chicano/a and Latino/a scholarship in one year than in the entire decade of the 1980s. All of this just goes to show that Latino/as really can make it in the United States, and I guess this is what the title of the panel means by a "Latino century."

What I, as a Chicana writer from the border who did not cross the border and whose literature does not fulfill mainstream audience expectations of what a Chicana is, and who, therefore, is not flowing in the mainstream of this Latino century, want to know is: what happened to the Chicano century? How did Chicana/os, who are not immigrants but natives to the landbase of Texas y Nuevo México y California y Arizona, Nevada, Colorado, Utah, etc.—how did the descendants of those 100,000 Mexicans who stayed on their own land after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo tore away half their country and put it in Uncle Sam's big pocket—how did we get passed over by the angel of Latinidad?

In the Jewish tradition, Passover means survival, and survival—the mystery of survival, if you will—the fascinating and remarkable story of our survival, "those of us who were never meant to survive," as Native American poet Joy Harjo says, is certainly our most radical act. But for Chicano/as to be passed over by Latino/as in a "Latino century" is to be subsumed by Latinidad, and to deny our historical roots to this landbase. That is the crucial difference between Latino/as and Chicano/as. We are not immigrants. We are not part of the Diasporic tradition in the sense that we left our land; our land left us, just as we did not cross the border, the border crossed us. Thus, we are exiles in our own land, we come from the same place that we are told over and over again we do not belong, and our Chicano/a literature (not just what has become popular in the neo-Latino boom) speaks to that existential and contradictory reality of being

both native and foreigner at the same time.

If Chicano/a literature suddenly becomes Latino/a literature in this so-called Latino century, my fear is that our memory as natives to this landbase will not survive. Already, too many of us believe that we're "from" somewhere else, too many of us have forgotten the story of the theft, the story of our indigenous connection to this occupied territory. Too many of us think of our migration in terms of immigration rather than recuperation. We forget that "Volver, Volver" is our national anthem, and substitute it for "La Vida Loca" or worse, "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." And, as the Mexican dicho that is the motto of my entire working life says: el pueblo que pierde su memoria pierde su destino. The people that forgets its memory forfeits its future.



Alicia Gaspar de Alba, associate professor at UCLA, is an accomplished author whose books include Sor Juana's Second Dream, Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master's House, and soon to be published, Desert Blood.

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