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Author(s): Virginia Sánchez Korrol
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The Origins and Evolution of Latino History

Virginia Sánchez Korrol

I am new. History made me. My first language was spanglish.
I was born at the crossroads
and I am whole.

Aurora Levins Morales
"Child of the Americas"(1)

Mexican Americans/Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, and their descendants, the oldest and largest sub-groups among a population of some thirty million Hispanics in the United States, form the core of a union that matches relatively recent arrivals, predominantly from the Dominican Republic and Central and South America, with long-time U.S. residents; English speaking with Spanish speaking; aliens with citizens; and documented individuals with undocumented immigrants. As the nation’s fastest growing “minority,” all indicators point to a heightened sense of awareness and receptivity among Latinos across ethnic and national lines, regarding a collective consciousness and historical role in the U.S.

The validation of memory, self-identification, contestation, and affirmation spans centuries as persons of Spanish American heritage have always figured in the making of the United States of America.

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Viewed from another perspective, as Native Americans, Latinos were there when Plymouth Rock was just a pebble. As Spanish settlements, presidios, villas, pueblos, and missions throughout the Americas pre-date Jamestown by at least one hundred years, the origins of a comprehensive Latino/Hispanic entity began well before the massive migrations and immigrations of the present. The forgotten heritage of Hispanics in what is now the United States forms the focus of contemporary historical and literary investigation (2).

Spanish American chronicles, diaries and testimonials, administrative, civil, military, and ecclesiastical records, musical compositions and theatrical works, prose, poetry, travel narratives, and other rich primary sources form the earliest extant literature in what is today the United States. A wealth of materials, including oral traditions, chronicle multifaceted life in colonial settlements from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries in what are presently Florida, New Mexico, Georgia, Texas, Arizona, Louisiana, South Carolina, California, Missouri, Mississippi, Kansas, Arkansas, Alabama, and Nebraska, and include as well the Hispanic Caribbean islands. Sources reveal a strong web of regional interconnections that linked the Hispanic Caribbean and South and Central America with U.S. communities, aiding migration from one point to another. The founding of major commercial, religious, and cultural sites—among them the cities of Los Angeles, Santa Fe, St. Augustine, San Antonio, and San Juan—testify to the vitality of a period that set standards for enduring socio-cultural institutions and wove the earliest connecting strands among Spanish Americans.

The nineteenth century brings into focus the formation of peoplehood. This period initiates a rich tapestry of docu-
mishment from the regional presses that bridged peripheral northern communities with the southern metropolis in Mexico City, or Havana, or San Juan, to the novels, essays, *testimonios*, and treatises of political exiles. The first historical novel ever written in the United States might well have been *Jicoténcal*, penned by Cuban Felix Varela in Philadelphia in 1826 (3). Along with other literary efforts, Varela’s work serves to illustrate the earliest ideas about Latin American nationhood. It is significant also that the first Spanish language newspaper to emerge from U. S. Hispanic communities, *El Misisipi*, published in New Orleans in 1808, initiated a long chain of periodicals that afford the historian intimate glimpses into the ethos of large communities of Americans who happened to speak and write in Spanish (4).

By the time the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded half of the Mexican territory to the United States in 1848, Mexican heritage had become inextricably woven into the historical fabric of the American Southwest. As they assessed their situation in the “uneasy space that marked the intersection of the cultures of Mexico and the United States,” Mexican Americans struggled with issues of identity in the decades following 1848 (5). Their concerns were expressed in writing in dozens of Spanish language newspapers that dotted the Southwest, in folkloric border *corridos* that extolled the virtues of folk heroes like Gregorio Cortez or Juan Chacón, in the actions of rebels like Joaquin Murrieta and Tiburcio Vásquez, and in autobiographies like Mariano Vallejo’s that served as a form of cultural resistance. Viewed also through the lens of the landed elite, novels like María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don* testify to a chaotic world of clashing Anglo and Mexican values as the century neared its conclusion (6).

On the other side of the continent, late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Cuban and Puerto Rican political exiles, joined by expatriates from South and Central America, articulated an agenda of working-class concerns in the Spanish language presses of southern Florida and New York City. Confronting oppressive colonial structures and the economic devastation wrought by the ten-year war, Cubans spearheaded extensions of the island’s cigar industry in Tampa, Ybor City, and New York City, providing the locus for working-class emigrations that would continue into the twentieth century. Strategies of Antillean independence, radical labor organizing, and even the seeds of Puerto Rican feminism were sown; the latter especially with the second edition publication of Luisa Capetillo’s *Mi opinión: Descatación sobre las libertades de la mujer* in Ybor City (7).

Under leaders like José Martí, Francisco González (Pachín) Marin, and Sotero Figueroa, “The Bases of the Cuban Revolutionary Party” were written and ratified by supportive groups in New York, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and other revolutionary centers throughout the Americas. These ideologies were well known outside and within exile communities composed predominantly of racially diverse working-class men and women. Progressive views on the social and economic contradictions found within their communities appeared in the pages of *Patria*, the revolutionary organ, and others like *El Latino-Americano* or *El Porvenir* (8).

Following the Spanish Cuban American War, focus shifted from independence to internal community concerns, including the organization of workers in mutual aid societies, unions, and other supportive associations. Women emerged prominently among the union ranks, and could be found at the forefront of workers’ struggles. In New York, essayists—including Cuban Alberto O’Farrill, editor of the weekly, *Gráfico*; Puerto Rican Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, bibliophile of the African experience in the Americas; Bernardo Vega, chronicler; and Jesús Colón, columnist for *Justicia*, as well as other papers—defended their communities against American foreign and domestic imperialism (9). In so doing, they
followed a tradition set forth by leading nineteenth-century Antillean thinkers who lived and wrote in New York. Included among this group were José Martí, the father of the Cuban independence, and Eugenio María de Hostos, educator of the Americas. These intellectuals, in particular, supported a concept of Ibero-American unity and were acutely aware of their historical place within the Ibero-American family.

Within fifty years, a handful of pioneering intellectuals, writers, and other pensadores grappled with the condition and status of Latinos, especially Mexican Americans. Conditioned by the political tone and generation in which they were produced, their contributions proposed to mediate, validate, and, ultimately, redefine the Mexican American, Puerto Rican, or Cuban U.S. experience. In the production of new knowledge, the academics attempted to eradicate debasing stereotypes and to confront racism and discrimination. Among the first scholars to fashion a Mexican American identity were historian Carlos E. Castañeda, sociologist George I. Sánchez, and folklorist Arthur I. Campa. Cultural stirrings concerning self-definition, colonialism, racism, ethnicity, and the sub-altern status of U.S. Hispanos surfaced in other camps as well (10).

Identity and affirmation were at the core of literary works written in Latin America, the Hispanic Caribbean, and the United States. In this vein, the works of Octavio Paz delve into the Mexican psyche both north and south of the Rio Grande. The articles of Mario Suarez which establish post World War II concepts of a Mexican American identity are reflected in the East Coast in Puerto Rican Bernardo Vega’s memoirs (11). The decade of the sixties witnesses the publications of Guillermo Cotto Thorner’s Trópico en Manhattan, Piri Thomas’s Down These Mean Streets, and Jesús Colón’s A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches. All works describe the migration and harsh conditions in the barrio hispano (12). Similar concerns emanated from Chicano writers as they grappled with the bitterness of racism. They strove toward cultural affirmation and bilingual innovation in their creative expression. Listed among this group are Rodolfo “Corky” González’s Yo Soy Joaquín/ I Am Joaquin; Tomás Rivera’s epic about Mexican American farm workers, y no se lo tragó la tierra/ And the Earth did not Part; Ernesto Galarza’s ethnographic autobiography, Barrio Boy: The Story of a Boy’s Acculturation; and the classic, Bless Me Ultima, Rudolfo Anaya’s validation of oral tradition and the transmission of culture (13). It is within this climate of provocative, probing, and often militant activism that Juan Gómez Quiñones issues his influential essay on culture and resistance, “On Culture” (14). Today, these works are viewed as foundational, the first among several building blocks preserving and shaping contemporary Latino ideology.

The onset of the 1970s and 1980s propagated a generation of historians and other academics schooled in the struggles for civil rights in the turbulent 1960s and influenced by the creative expression of their communities. Intent on expanding the boundaries of academic history to include strong national connections, labor, gender, and ethno-racial perspectives, intergenerational dynamics, interdisciplinary methods, and new categories of analysis, they challenged the demeaning, distorted, and monolithic interpretations of the U.S. Latino experience. Scholars mined the sources documenting the origins and evolutions of Latino communities, unlocking a wide range of materials to new interpretations, sometimes building upon—more often contesting—the intellectual cornerstones of borderlands, frontier, and area studies. Their generation questioned Anglo American hegemony over historical interpretation and their domination of the historical research agenda (15). Not satisfied with merely creating “knowledge for the sake of knowledge,” their goals ranged from charting innovative courses and methods that served to “set the record straight,” to reconstructing social histories important in and of themselves.

The academic generation of the seventies and eighties sought to reconstruct nineteenth- and twentieth-century diaspora

![League of Puerto Rican Hispanics, Brooklyn, New York.]( Courtesy of Hunter College, CUNY)
communities in all of their ethno-racial, class, and gendered complexities. Incorporating popular culture and written and oral traditions, these academics redefined the parameters of the new social history and, in the process, empowered Latino communities. The result was a historical interpretation that conferred agency on U.S. Latinos, bringing them out of the shadows and on to center stage where their reality contrasted and contested the dominant Anglo experience and where they interacted within and across class lines and ethno-racial barriers, with counterparts across state lines, oceans, and/or national boundaries. The outcome was both U.S. and Latin America drawing strengths from components of both. This harvest of knowledge has proceeded at an impressive pace, yet the corpus of this literature remains peripheral to the core of U.S. history.

Much of the ground-breaking scholarship emanates from academic niches in American, Latin American, cultural, or Hispanic-oriented ethnic studies, or from the earliest departments and programs in Mexican American, Chicano, or Puerto Rican Studies. One need only peruse the bibliographic publications on Latinos/Hispanos—Albert Camarillo’s *Latinos in the United States* is a case in point—to appreciate the scope of industry, commercial agriculture, as union organizers and as transmitters of culture; from employment and labor history to the politics of language; and from the migration/immigration experience to the forging of diverse communities incorporating grass-roots leadership and institutional structures.

Examples abound of the seminal work produced by this generation, including the frontier studies of David Weber; the intergenerational focus of Mario T. Garcia’s study on Mexican American leadership; Ramón Gutiérrez’s interdisciplinary analysis of power and sexuality in New Mexico; the family and community studies of Richard Griswold del Castillo and Albert Camarillo; Chicana culture, consciousness, and interrelationship with the non-Hispanic societies by Vicki Ruiz and Sarah Deutsch; studies on race, ethnicity, and identity by Clara E. Rodríguez and Juan Flores; nineteenth-century Cuban community studies of Gerald E. Poyo; the Puerto Rican community by Virginia Sánchez Korrol; the migration/immigration studies of Alejandro Portes and of the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños; and bilingualism and pub-
lic education studies of Guadalupe San Miguel, Jr. (17).

Until now, however, historical production has tended to promote primarily the very necessary foundational reconstruction of Latino experiences, viewed predominantly from a North American perspective. In searching for elements of latinitud, scholars have tended to explore contemporary U.S. communities excluding the broader Latin American/Caribbean context and neglecting to address Hispanic diversity. Like stepping stones to the past, the collective body of literature encompasses the groundwork for a comprehensive narrative. Current research trends on Latino historiography and literature in the 1990s mark a move toward the premise that Spanish American history legitimately belongs to the Americas— that the concept of borderlands transcends imaginary geo-political or academic boundaries. It argues that the history of Latinos forms an indivisible chapter subject to its own universality and specificity, and integral to our understanding of both U.S. and Latin American history (18).

To speak then in terms of a collective Latino/Hispanic history that posits an integrated consciousness within the broader framework of United States history invites students and scholars alike to conceptualize an area of study in formation. It incorporates multilingual, multicultural, and interdisciplinary perspectives, ethno-racial realities, and analytical categories based on migration experience, labor, social class, gender, and identity. As it seeks to reproduce the past in terms of an Hispanic ethnic and national diversity, it urgently challenges us to search for common ground among groups whose historical entry into what is presently the United States occurred at different times and was conditioned by different circumstances.

Admittedly, the nomenclatures we ascribe to this body of knowledge are paradoxical, imprecise, and politically-laden. The terms Latino, Latina, Hispanic, Hispanic American, Spanish American, or Ibero-Americano seek to embrace the totality of the U.S. experience regardless of class, color, regional variations, national antecedents, gender, or generational differences. Scholar Edna Acosta Belén believes the “shorthand label (Hispanic) is turning into a symbol of cultural affirmation and identity in an alienating society that traditionally has been hostile and prejudicial to cultural and racial differences, and unresponsive to the socioeconomic and educational needs of a large segment of the Hispanic population” (19). Others, however, argue overwhelmingly on the side of difference, citing centuries of regional disconnection and discontinuity among U.S. Latinos, and point to the absence of a common history as a case in point. Still others probe intra-group and generational dimensions challenging static notions of cultural adaptation, contextual dualities, and hence the formation of identity. Referring specifically to cultural evolution among Mexican Americans, who comprise well over a half of the total Latino population, historian George J. Sánchez cautions that a bipolaric model stressing “either cultural continuity or gradual acculturation has short-circuited a full exploration of the complex process of cultural adaptation” (20). Such arguments cannot be ignored, yet in spite of the contradictions, the tide appears to turn increasingly toward endorsement of an overarching Latino/Hispanic ideal. Each group rightfully stakes a nonnegotiable claim to its own past, linguistic variations, creative expression, and overall uniqueness within the broader ethnico-racial contours of this nation, but each also proudly appropriates a common historical legacy, shared language, and cultural elements, customs, attitudes, and traditions.

How historians frame the conversation on Latino history is vital. If the danger of assuming affinity within and across this enormously complex population lies in over-generalization, a blurring of distinctions and total homogenization of the groups, the challenge to historians

![Confederación General Puertorriqueña.](image-url)
becomes how best to incorporate and balance the nuances and variegated experiences of all Latinos, particularly of those who figured centrally in the historical enterprise in any given period, without misappropriation, distortion, or omission. According to historian Gerald E. Poyo, grounds indeed exist for collective identity, which he describes as an “evolving phenomenon that by definition thrives on the commonalities within the diverse Latin American background groups.” If identity is understood as a continuum of shared experience, then a comprehensive narrative is surely possible. What has been lacking until now is the development of popular consciousness about an integrated past (21).

What then, does it mean to be Latino/Hispanic in American society at the crossroads of the millennium? How have we persevered and created community in two world contexts? How have we dealt with diversity within and across borders? How, indeed, have we shaped the Americas?

The quest begins with what Genaro M. Padilla refers to as the “Spanish colonial discourse of conquest, exploration, and settlement,” that took place between 1492 and the nineteenth century, and marks the earliest period in the documentation of Latino history. It concludes with the contemporary issues of the present (22). Undoubtedly, the most pivotal legacy throughout is the process of mestizaje—the blending of Spanish, African, and indigenous American peoples and cultures—so intrinsic, from its beginnings to the present, to the formation of individual identity, national consciousness, and syncretic culture, throughout Latin America and among U.S. Latinos. It holds the key to our understanding of a collective Latino past.

Endnotes
2. Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage is one such project. A ten year enterprise based at the University of Houston, Texas, the project focuses on the implementation of the following programs: (1) an on-line data base; (2) a periodicals recovery program; (3) a consortium of Hispanic Archives; (4) grants-in-aid and fellowships for scholars; (5) a publishing program; (6) a curriculum program; and (7) conferences and disseminations of information.
8. Alternative or oppositional presses proliferated throughout the Southwest, particularly as precursors to the downfall of the Porfirato and the Revolution of 1910. Often, these presses were tied into exile political organizations, but they also informed the community at large on a myriad of issues, including the emancipation of women. Regeneración, published by the Flores Magón brothers in 1905, is one example of these presses, which appeared in Laredo, San Antonio, El Paso, Los Angeles, etc. Current research explores the role of women as editors and contributors to these alternative presses. See Clara Lomas, “The Articulation of Gender in the Mexican Borderlands, 1900-1915,” in Recovering.


Bibliography


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Virginia Sánchez Korrol chairs the Department of Puerto Rican Studies at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. She is author of From Colonia to Community: The History of Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1917-1948. A revised second edition was published by the University of California Press last year.