

# **The Routledge Concise History of Latino/a Literature**

**Frederick Luis Aldama**



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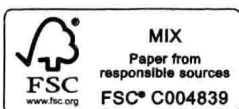
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**For Indra Leyva, Samuel Saldívar, Theresa  
Rojas, and Corina Isabel Villena-Aldama – *the*  
*next generation*. For Christopher González – *keen*  
*editor and thinker*.**

# Preface

In writing *The Routledge Concise History of Latino/a Literature* I face several challenges and seeming paradoxes.

There is, of course, the task of deciding what to include and what to exclude. Even delimiting primarily the territory to the twentieth century (with slight spillover into its bookend centuries) still requires a selecting in – and mostly out – of literary texts to give a general sense of the map. This map is *not* and could never be the territory. It does not comprise all relevant books in the Library of Congress and in all other archives. It is, as always and necessarily, a selection and a reduction of the whole that allows for a suitable abstraction of a content that conveys a sense of the topography of the history of Latino/a literature. All this selecting and abstracting are constrained unavoidably by this author's material limitations, such as available hours in the day to read, take notes, and write and rewrite.

At a general level, there must be a rationale – a conceptual viewpoint that acts as a filter – for deciding what is included, that is, what ingredients must be present for a given Latino/a literary artifact to be considered. Is it the requirement that the author should be of Latino/a origin: whether of Dominican, Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican – or Central and South America generally? Is it the stipulation that Spanish (words, sentences, full text) be used in the writing? Is it the condition that theme, event, and characterization must privilege issues, occurrences, and/or people of the Latino/a Americas? I am not the first to ask such questions. The history of scholarship on Latino/a literature has been a series of expansions and contractions that determine who is in and who is out. In a way, this short history of Latino/a literature is also a brief history of these critical movements. Recently, in the monumental *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* my colleague, friend and co-conspirator Ilan Stavans has taken a stab at this problem of creating a rationale for the category “Latino/a Literature.” At the most general level, he considers that Latino/a literature concerns “the tension between double attachments to place, to language, and to identity” (Stavans 2010a: liii). Like all of us scholars of Latino/a literature, Stavans seeks to make graspable what is perhaps an unmanageable category. He goes on to complicate his “attachment” characterization by adding history as a further criterion, where Latino/a literature grows out of a demographic presence

generationally and linguistically rooted in a common Hispanic ancestral heritage and is shaped by the movement of national borders and migration flows.

I picked out Stavans here as a sounding board, but I could have chosen any number of others (including myself in my past work) who have sought to define the concept of Latino/a literature. In *The Routledge Concise History of Latino/a Literature* what unfolds is a history of individuals who choose to commit time, energy, and resources to writing short stories, novels, poetry, drama, and the like using as building blocks for their art chunks of the life and experiences of those who are demographically classified as “Latinos.” Thus, we see a narrative unfold that is less about a Latino attachment to place, language, or nation and more about worldviews, socioeconomic circumstances, and living experiences – on the part of both the Latino writers and their infinitely multifarious subject-matter.

This history includes the increased difficulty of migratory flows to the United States from Latin American countries, proximate (Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, for instance) or not, as well as the significant rise in the urbanization of the Latino population since the end of the nineteenth century, and particularly since the second half of the twentieth century.

**Latino urbanization:** In “New Patterns of Hispanic Settlement in Rural America,” William Kandel and John Cromartie discuss the research results on Latino population growth in metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas between 1990 and 2000: “Hispanics remain among the most urbanized ethnic/racial groups in America, with over 90 percent living in metro areas in the year 2000” (Kandel and Cromartie 2004: ii).

In *Mexicano Political Experience in Occupied Aztlán: Struggles and Change*, Armando Navarro notes: “The 2000 Census also revealed that Latinos were a highly urbanized population. Nearly 46.4 percent lived in a central city within a metropolitan area, while 45.1 percent lived outside of central cities but within a metropolitan area. According to a July 2002 Brookings Institution report, an exodus of Latinos from the cities to the suburbs had begun: 54 percent of the nation’s Latinos lived in the suburbs, which represented a 71 percent increase since 1990. The urbanization and suburbanization of the Latino population was evident in their large presence in the country’s large cities: Los Angeles, 1,719,073 (47 percent); Chicago, 753,644 (26 percent); Houston, 730,865 (37.4 percent); San Antonio, 671,394 (58.7 percent); El Paso, 431,875 (76.6 percent); Dallas 422,587 (35.6 percent); Phoenix, 449,972 (34.1 percent); and San Jose, California, 269,989 (30.2 percent). People of color, essentially Latinos and blacks, became the ‘New Minority-Majority’ in the country’s top 100 cities between 1990 and 2000. Latinos and blacks were respectively 23 percent and 24 percent” (Navarro 2005: 575–76).

In my biography of novelist, poet, and professor Arturo Islas (Aldama 2004), I remark on how easy it was for his parents' generation to cross back and forth from El Paso, where they lived, to Juárez, where they shopped and visited members of their large family. This ease of movement in the 1940s and 1950s has completely disappeared today. And, in many ways, Islas's life is paradigmatic of this survival impulse. While Spanish was the dominant language at home, his grandmother, Crecenciana, insisted that he master English in oral and written forms as a way to keep afloat and eventually succeed socially and economically; she insisted that he become proficient in the dominant language of the country he lived in because both English and the United States were his to fully inhabit. Islas followed this advice to the extent that he not only became a consummate writer but also became a professor at Stanford. His novel *The Rain God* ([1984] Islas 1991) is one of the seminal texts of our Latino/a literary canon. Another testimony, terribly unpopular at the time of its publication in 1982, was *Hunger of Memory*, where Robert Rodriguez upholds the same will to endure and succeed.

**Émigré groups:** In *The American Past: A Survey of American History* (ninth edition), Joseph R. Conlin charts the history of immigration to the U.S. that includes the waves of migration of English, Scots, Welsh, Irish, Dutch, German, Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, Italian, Balkan, Greek, Jewish, among others. In the early 1900s many of these immigrants “filled most of unskilled jobs in construction, manufacturing, and mining. [ ... ] For each of the six years after the turn of the century, more than a million people arrived in the United States. On one day in 1907, 11,747 immigrants were processed at a single point of entry, New York’s Ellis Island” (Conlin 2012: 470). Much of the immigrant population (four out of five) settled in industrial cities in the Northeast. Conlin writes: “By the first years of the twentieth century, immigrants and their children made up half the population of Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Seattle; 60 percent in Buffalo, Detroit, and Minneapolis; 70 percent in New York, Chicago, and Milwaukee” (479). While immigrants tended to live within communities that corresponded to their ethnic origins – the patchwork quilt effect – second and third generation émigrés understood well that becoming proficient in English and learning to read, write, and do arithmetic operations would open better employment opportunities and the possibility of entering the middle class (owners of small business, lawyers, physicians, accountants, teachers, and the like). Conlin also discusses the different assimilation pressures on the immigrant groups, such as the national policy to make English “the language of instruction in public schools” (584).

Delinking to one extent or another from the language of ancestral origin does not mean one is less Latino/a or that one is not writing Latino/a literature. We are dealing here with a very complex phenomenon. Such delinking is an aspect of the emergence of something new, that is, the creation of a new cultural reality in which people do not simply give up a previous culture (including language) nor do they simply acquire a new one. We, Latinos/as, with our massive and ever growing presence in the United States, are creating a new world, a new culture in a country where dozens and dozens of ethnic cultures converge in one common, overarching language and culture held together by common institutions and common laws and regulations.

There is today a massive two-way flow between Latino and mainstream culture (what some have called *latinization*), and between Latino and many ethnic minorities. Indeed, Latinos/as are educated by the mainstream and in their turn educate the mainstream.

Because of this daily ongoing reality, we can imagine a point in the future where Latinos will be as much a part of the mainstream as today we consider the Irish or any other immigrant culture an integrated component of the mainstream. In the meantime, this whole process, of course, has been (and still is) extremely painful for first (and even second) generation Latinos/as, particularly for those without entry papers.

The fact is that up until the last few decades, most Latinos were working as exploitable agricultural labor. It was not unusual for Latinos to work 14–16

**Latinization** of U.S. mainstream culture: In *Remaking the American Mainstream*, Richard D. Alba and Victor Nee discuss the expectation and pressure on different immigration groups to integrate into a U.S. mainstream (language, culture, national identity), while, at the same time, being “blocked by the racism of U.S. society from full pursuit of the assimilation goal” (Alba and Nee 2003: 3). Importantly, as Alba and Nee point out, assimilation is not a simple phenomenon; over time ethnic cultures have themselves shaped the mainstream. Alba and Nee write: “Historically, the American mainstream, which originated with the colonial northern European settlers, has evolved through incremental inclusion of ethnic and racial groups that formerly were excluded and accretion of parts of their cultures to the composite culture. [ ... ] Such elements are most easily seen in cuisine and in highbrow and middlebrow forms of entertainment and artistic expression” (12). With regards to Latino immigration and presence in the U.S., some have called this process the *latinization* of the U.S. mainstream culture. We see this in the food eaten, music listened to, films and television seen, among much much more.

**Integration:** Danny Postel identifies the obstacles presented (racism, classism, and the like) as well as the various stated positions by Latino activists and scholars that seek to reject the assimilationist model, yet ultimately holds to the statistics that show that Latinos are assimilating. However, he is careful to point out that this integration takes shape differently among the different Latino groups: "Puerto Ricans, for instance, who have U.S. citizenship and can come and go freely, display one pattern; Mexicans, many of whom risk their lives to cross over and live here illegally, follow different patterns of assimilation" (Postel 2005: 155).

One important factor to mention is the history of the urbanization of the Latino/a population. The twentieth century is characterized globally by the movement of jobs from rural areas to urban centers. We see this in Mexico and all of Latin America, just as in the United States. A significant outcome of this complex process is that fewer Latinos work in the fields and many more live in urban centers – working, living, and forging for themselves *an urban mentality*.

hours a day. Under these conditions, even if the will was present, there was little time for a sophisticated education and therefore for either a readership or an authorship of literature to grow. There cannot be *in strictu sensu* a Latino authorship without a Latino readership – and vice versa. It is only when socioeconomic and political conditions begin to change, and when the population begins to increase and diversify socioeconomically, that we can begin to see a series of authors writing for a growing body of Latino readers who, over time, develop a very varied taste for all kinds of literature to satisfy this multifarious taste.

Latino/a literary products and their consumption by Latino/a readers became tangible mainly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But this, too, had its positives

**Urban mentality:** Judith Bodnár identifies how the urbanization trend in immigration populations has led to a paradoxical sense of isolation, with urban dwellers living increasingly among strangers. She references Georg Simmel's study of the growing presence of an "urban mentality" characterized by a "fundamental indifference to distinctions" and a "blasé attitude." Bodnár also references Erving Goffman's identification of an urban mentality that is characterized by a "co-presence without co-mingling, awareness without engrossment, courtesy without conversation" (Bodnár 2001: 176). According to Bodnár, an urban mentality grows from an urban social-psychological situation "where civility toward diversity rules" (177).

and negatives. Of course, that authors such as Alurista (1947–), Piri Thomas (1928–2011), Miguel Piñero (1946–88), Oscar “Zeta” Acosta (April 8, 1935 – disappeared 1974), Rudolfo A. Anaya (1937–), Estella Portillo Trambley (1936–99), Diana López aka Isabella Ríos (1948–), and many others were visible is clearly a positive. However, as Richard Rodriguez writes in the preface to *Brown* (Rodriguez 2002), while this ushered in the moment in U.S. history he calls the “browning of America” (xiii) and opened many more doors to Latino/a literature, Latino/a works of fiction were not shelved “near those one has loved” (26). In this sense, together with increased visibility was segregation. Also, as Rodriguez points out, “blood became the authority to speak” (27).

This, of course, passed rapidly in the 1990s and early twenty-first century to its opposite: Latino literature was no longer visible as such because it now *did* sit on the shelf near the authors and volumes Rodriguez loved. The vast majority living in urban centers in the last decades of the twentieth century gave rise to a shift in the social, economic, and demographic numbers of Latinos. While Latinos/as continue to encounter huge obstacles in the education system and workplace, there has been an increased number of this urban higher-educated demographic. Consequently, whereas in earlier historical moments there was a rather limited Latino audience, toward the mid- to late-1990s we see the beginning of what has become solidified today: a massively urban, more highly educated audience. An example that reflects this development is the launching in 2003 by the mainstream behemoth HarperCollins of its imprint Rayo, which publishes Latino authors.

**Rayo Press:** According to Sarah Alonso: “From 2000 to late 2004, the imprint published between 30 and 35 titles per year. In September 2004, expansion plans were announced and Rayo now plans to publish around 75 titles per year. While the imprint has traditionally been dedicated to literary and popular fiction and memoirs, more reference, health, children’s and non-fiction titles will be added to the list as the overall number of titles grows. Rayo claims Univision anchor Jorge Ramos as one of their bestselling authors in addition to lucrative translations of Atkins titles and literary and bestselling author Isabel Allende. In 2004, Rayo had 3 of the top 10 Spanish language bestsellers for the year. The recent expansion of Rayo is a clear indication of HarperCollins’ dedication and optimism in the opportunities of the Hispanic book market. Rayo is unique in its focus on bilingualism by publishing simultaneous editions in both English and Spanish” (Alonso 2005: 56). Rayo has published the works of Monica Brown, Jane L. Delgado, and Ariane de Bonvoisin, Guy Garcia, Yxta Maya Muray, Luis Rodríguez, and Ilan Stavans, among many others. In 2009 Rayo Press launched its *Esenciales* series that publishes Spanish-language literature.

The facts speak for themselves: it is the urbanization and forging of an urban mentality that provide the conditions for the production and consumption of a Latino/a literature (that is, one that is no longer limited to a handful of authors and a very small readership).

Paradoxically, the more Latinos move into socioeconomic positions that allow for the making and consuming of its fictional products, the more we see not only urbanization, but also the integration of this demographic. The Latino/a novels, short stories, drama, and poetry of the early- and mid-twentieth century are more limited in focus and generic range than those of today. At the same time, the literature of today is made by authors who are clearly more integrated socioeconomically than those of yesteryear. The paradox holds. The results, if they go the way of other minority literatures, might lead in the future to the erasure of the category Latino/a Literature itself. Only time will tell. (See also Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* [Warren 2011].)

The history of Latino/a literature is the trace-marker of Latinos/as living in time and place as a historical, sociological entity that has become the *majority* minority population in the U.S. (50-plus million), with a socioeconomic diversity that yields a sufficiently large number of urban-educated, middle-class individuals who, in turn, yield a sufficiently large number of cultural producers, consumers, and interpreters: authors, filmmakers, intellectuals, readers, critics, academics, scientists, and the like. (According to the U.S. census data from April 1, 2010, one out of every six people in the U.S. is Latino. Those of Mexican origin represent the largest group: approximately 31 million. Those of Puerto Rican origin: four million. Those of Central American origin: four million. Those of Cuban origin: 1.6 million. These numbers do not account for the undocumented Latinos living in the U.S. that number in the 10–12 million.)

The category Latino/a is an academic one, in this sense. It identifies a population that is characterized as much by class difference as the next. In this sense too, any definitions that rest on talk of a shared *latinidad* – language, culture, history – are just that: academic, intellectual or interpretive demarcations that in many ways artificially cut into and across social reality. It is a composite reality where social classes and political institutions exist and represent diverging and in many ways opposite interests. Latinoness or a *latinidad* are indicative not of a group essence but rather of an evolving circumstance where class membership is today as paramount as it is everywhere in our planet. Cecilia Rodríguez's story, "Beast of Burden," portrays this class divide superbly – a class divide that, of course, also cuts across Latino ethnic affiliation. Her story begins: "Fito pulls into the job site at 5:50 in the morning and the Mexicans are already there. Eight of them, all related, short, genial and they work like animals. It can be said he worked them like animals since he was the supervisor. The construction manager, José, only promoted Cubans since he could be assured they were legal, but Fito knew that wasn't the truth. He saw how they were treated; in solidarity, he tried to keep up with them

and share the load. For the last week, it was the extra long sheetrock – all these new big houses had exaggeratedly high ceilings. It astonished him to see Benito pick up a couple by himself; Fito, a foot taller, skinny but who always thought himself strong, staggered when he tried. This family is from Zacatecas. He had no idea where that was, having never been anywhere but Cuba and here” (Rodríguez Milanés 2009: 163).

I use the category Latino/a Literature in order to make manageable a study that charts the history of Latino/a literature as an academic field of study. However, it is just that – a pedagogical category. This therefore means that *The Routledge Concise History of Latinola Literature* seeks to provide its readers with a history of Latino/a literature as it takes form in a material reality shaped with its particularities and specific settings by Latinas and Latinos, among them the fact that their lives evolve within a climate of racism and sexism – both appendages of capitalist oppression and exploitation. It is the aim of this careful topographic map of Latino literature not to pastoralize (mock idealize!) the Latino experience and its consequent cultural by-products, such as its literature, and not to idealize the concept of Latino. In this book Latino/a Literature is construed and used as a category to identify what we might consider to be a dialectal variation of world literature that coexists in the United States with quite a few other “literary dialects,” including the so-called literary mainstream.

Finally, I make note here of a common practice among U.S. Latino scholars, authors, artists, and the like who often choose to *not* put accents on their names as would be the grammatical practice in Spanish. Already we see above how the author Robert Rodríguez chooses not to accentuate the “i” in his last name and yet the author Cecilia Rodríguez does choose to do so. This indeterminate grammatical practice itself mirrors in its tiny way the multifarious practices, identities, and experiences of Latinos in the U.S.

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# Introduction

## Overview

In the Preface, I briefly outlined the challenges of mapping a *concise history of Latinola literature*. The challenge begins with a definition of Latino/a literature and extends into the very paradox of its becoming visible as a significant body of texts at the same time that it begins a process of self-erasure. The more it becomes diversified as a literary topography in the late twentieth century and satisfies the increased appetite of a greatly varied Latino demographic, the less we see it “segregated” or placed on its own “Latino” identified shelves in a Barnes & Noble bookstore, for instance. The higher-brow Richard Rodriguez is found alongside an Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez (who now publishes as Alisa Valdes), together with all other authors (Latino, African American, Anglo, or otherwise) in the literature sections. (It merits repeating that U.S. Latino authors choose to use or to drop the accents on their names that the Spanish language would otherwise dictate. Richard Rodriguez is a case in point. Rodríguez would appear with an accent in all cases as per the Spanish language grammar. However, authors such as Sandra Rodriguez Barron and Richard Rodriguez as well as film director Robert Rodriguez, among many others, choose not to include the accented “í”. And, while Cuban author Ana Menéndez chooses to use the accent, Grove Press spells it without the accent on the cover of her book *Loving Che*.)

This is not necessarily to be understood as a simple case of integration. Indeed, Latino/a cultural production and presence are such that we cannot talk about a mainstream that has not been itself transformed by Latinos/as. The ascendancy of Latino culture in the United States has itself shaped what we call the mainstream. As José Limón writes in *American Encounters*: “the Anglo” is no longer a unitary and all encompassing category of domination – if indeed, it ever was (Limón 1998: 103).

Now, the distinction between Latino/a culture and mainstream culture requires some clarification before we continue our discussion. Anthropology characterizes culture as the complex and interacting products of human activity, which includes phenomena such as social institutions (from kinship to tribal groupings, to government, to law and justice systems, to so-called

## 2 Introduction

economic modes of production, and so on), instruments of all kinds, including hand tools and later industrial means of production, manual and intellectual skills and knowledge, arts, particular languages, eating traditions and all sorts of everyday habits, ideas and worldviews, etc. Now, when talking about mainstream culture we are referring to all these phenomena in their most widespread, dominant and accepted form in a certain country, in our case, the United States. And when we talk about Latino/a culture we are talking about manifestations of more particularized manifestations of thought, emotion, behavior, attitudes, manners, arts, gastronomic, sartorial, artistic and other tastes, and so on, as revealed in the American mainstream culture.

These two human realities do not evolve separately. On the contrary, they evolve together and over time, in their reciprocal interpenetration and ultimate fusion, they create something new, that is, they give birth to a new mainstream culture.

In the Preface we saw that Ilan Stavans has reflected on the way *latinidad* (Latino-ness) has been the common denominator holding Latinos in the U.S. together. He identifies language as the glue that allows for a “shared ethos based on their minority status and their history of struggles for equality and social justice” (Stavans 2010a: 1,469). *Latinidad* is that which inspires people to “partake in a shared sense of history” (1,469). He also sees a trend whereby *latinidad*, as reflected by today’s Latino/a authors, might have given way to a greater sense of the crisscrossing of Latin American, Anglo America, and minority literary traditions: “The writer no longer develops in a monolithic culture, but absorbs many cultures during the course of a life” (Stavans 2010a: lxv). It is this and more.

The history of Latino/a literature is one characterized by a trajectory whereby the early works of the late nineteenth century and of the early-to mid-twentieth century existed largely in isolation from one another. Those produced in the late twentieth century were much more in dialogue and unified across a sense of *latinidad*. And in a predictable fashion, in those of the early twenty-first century we begin to see not so much a splintering away from one another, but a deeper and wider participation in a mainstream that has itself, say, become Latinized. Another way to think of this is to ask a question such as, is Alisa Valdes (1969–) writing a “dialectal” variation of (mainstream identified) chick lit, or is her chica-lit an innovative Latino/a addition to the mainstream, itself educated by the presence of a Latino/a literature and culture?

To put it in a nutshell, we live in a country composed of people who have migrated from all over the world; our mainstream is decisively mixed and multicultural in its origins and continuous development. America is a country where Latinos/as and all other groups that make up the general population have grown a rich and diverse appetite for a wide variety of cultural activities and their products. Satisfying this diversified demand creates new needs and new demands. And this satisfaction of new appetites leads to an ever new education of the senses (tastes, smells, touch, sounds, sights) as well as the education of the cultural needs with respect to these ever new appetites. In its

**Chica-lit:** In “Chica-Lit: Multicultural Literature Blurs Borders,” Marie Loggia-Kee writes, “With chick lit, it’s all about attitude: Think of the original *Diary of Bridget Jones*, a tell-all of the dating life of a singleton. Chica lit takes that sass and combines it with culture. [...] Often Chica literature breaks the traditional roles and forges a new identity; the protagonist of the new fiction is not just a woman of Latina heritage, she’s a strong, and strongly identified Latina-American woman” (Loggia-Kee 2007: 46). She continues to remark of authors such as Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez and Mary Castillo (author of *Hot Tamara: What’s Life Without a Little Spice*) who write to “a segment of the population eager for role models that reflect some of the realities and obstacles they face in real life” (46). Moreover, Loggia-Kee identifies how editors such as Selina McLemore who acquires for Harlequin consider how authors like Valdes-Rodriguez are “changing the voice of literature” (46). She comments, too, how “many of the readers are not Latina at all” (48).

always evolving needs and their satisfaction, the always evolving ethnic (particular) cultures and the always evolving mainstream result in the education of novel aesthetic capabilities, fresh viewpoints and new interpretations.

That is the point where people like myself enter the picture. We function in our interpretive capacity to show how these new social products educate the senses – in my case, Latino/a literature. A book like this one functions to show why it is important to read and study the results of cultural efforts such as Latino/a literature.

As I mentioned in the Preface, it is not just the growing of Latino/a demographics, but the development of *an urban worldview*, that makes a qualitative difference in the presence in the U.S. of Latino/a authors and Latino literature as such. For a long time Latinos lived and worked in the countryside, with little time, energy and inclination to create works of literature and/or engage in them. Literary production was done by a handful of authors and their readership was scarce. When towns and cities started to grow at an accelerated pace in America toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the cultural environment of the country changed. People in the entertainment industry became legion and the number of authors grew exponentially. After the Second World War the Latino population increased ever more and settled mainly in large towns and cities, where their economic life shifted from agriculture to factory production and consumer industries. This shift brought about new lifestyles and new worldviews, with more time for leisure and entertainment and a will to overcome the alienation and anonymity associated with urban life. Urbanization also meant, then, cultural renewal, and the rapid development of the taste for