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Literature

Hector Avalos

Iowa State University, havalos@iastate.edu

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Literature

Abstract

As has been the case from the dawn of writing, U.S. Latino/a authors often express religious themes and attitudes in their literature. Although some scholars begin the history of U.S. Latino/a literature with the arrival of the Spaniards, we draw some very clear boundaries as follows: 1848 for Mexican American literature; 1898 for Puerto Rican literature; 1959 for Cuban American literature; and later for other groups. Overall, U.S. Latino/a literature reflects a triadic interaction among indigenous, Christian, and African religious traditions. The Christian tradition has been predominantly Catholic, with Protestant writers becoming a more recent phenomenon.

Disciplines

Christian Denominations and Sects | Latina/o Studies | Other Religion

Comments

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LITERATURE

As has been the case from the dawn of writing, U.S. Latino/a authors often express religious themes and attitudes in their literature. Although some scholars begin the history of U.S. Latino/a literature with the arrival of the Spaniards, we draw some very clear boundaries as follows: 1848 for Mexican American literature; 1898 for Puerto Rican literature; 1959 for Cuban American literature; and later for other groups. Overall, U.S. Latino/a literature reflects a triadic interaction among indigenous, Christian, and African religious traditions. The Christian tradition has been predominantly Catholic, with Protestant writers becoming a more recent phenomenon.

Mexican American Literature

Insofar as religious expression is concerned, three periods of Mexican American literature may be tentatively identified: "The Normative Religious" period (1848–1959) where most literary works still revered or supported the Catholic Church; "The Reactionary Religious" period (1959–1972), in which works began actively to criticize the Catholic Church; and "The Alternative Religious" period, (1972–present), wherein writers have consciously constructed alternative and systematic

traditions that draw consciously from non-Christian religions.

The literature of Mexican Americans from our Normative Religious period (1848–1959) is still being recovered and categorized. Genres include corridos (short narrative poems set to music), and assorted devotional poetry and short stories. One of the exemplars of this period would be Fray Angélico Chávez (1910–1996), whose poetry and short stories (e.g., *New Mexico Triptych* 1940) portray the advent of Catholicism to the Americas and the Southwest as one of the greatest achievements of Christendom.

The Reactionary Religious period in Mexican American literature had a definite beginning with Jose Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho* (1959), which is often acknowledged as the first Chicano novel. The open criticism of the Catholic Church and its espousal of frank atheism by its protagonist were unprecedented in Mexican American literature.

After the significant changes in Catholic policy promulgated by Vatican II (1962–1965), many more Mexican American authors became quite critical of the Church. One of the most militant was the mysterious Oscar Zeta Acosta (1935–1974?), who assumed the alter ego of Buffalo Z. Brown in various novels, including his *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and its sequel, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973), which discuss his rejection of Christianity and religion altogether.

The early 1970s mark a sort of golden age in Mexican American literature. Presses such as *Quinto Sol* were established to publish works by Mexican Americans. Especially notable is Tomás Rivera's ... *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971), which tells a Job-like story of the miserable existence of

Chicanos in the fields, and the silence of God regarding their plight. However, for all of the criticism of Catholicism or religion, authors in this period usually do not construct alternative religious visions.

This changed with the publication of *Bless Me Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, a native of New Mexico. From its publication in 1972, we mark the beginning of the Alternative Religious period in which authors went beyond criticizing traditional Catholicism and began a systematic exploration and active construction of alternative religious traditions. In *Bless Me Ultima*, Tony Maréz, the main character, opts for a pantheistic religion that can mediate between a strict Catholicism represented by his mother, a skepticism represented by his father, and an indigenous tradition represented by Ultima, a curandera who lives with Tony's family.

The floruit of the Alternative Religious period in Mexican American literature may be seen in *Borderlands* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004), who constructs a woman-centered religion based on Nahuatl traditions. Another example is found in Ana Castillo's *So Far From God* (1993), which centers on a systematic critique of androcentric religions. For Castillo, religions must be judged according to how they serve the needs of women.

Some authors concentrated on how ordinary women navigated their Latino/a spirituality in American urban environments. John Rechy, an openly gay Mexican-American author, published *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez* (1991), which is about woman who struggles to find God in the midst of an urban life in Hollywood. Similarly, Maria Amparo Escandón's *Esperanza's Box of Saints* (1999) examines the life

of a woman who struggles to adjust Catholic theology to the realities she encounters as she moves from Mexico to the United States. Indeed, the religious lives of women were a hallmark of the religious themes in the Latino/a literature of the 1980s and 1990s.

Of course, not all books in this Alternative Religious period were intent on creating alternative systematic theologies. In Alejandro Morales' *Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) we find a science fiction genre used to express religious themes. Others concentrated on showing how religion helped maintain cohesive bonds in a Mexican Diaspora. For example, Victor Villaseñor's sprawling epic, *Rain of Gold* (1991), tells the story of the two sides of the author's semi-fictional family and its journey from Mexico to the United States.

Puerto Rican Literature

For the purposes of our survey, the Puerto Rican literature that is most significant was that published from 1898 to the present. It was in 1898 that the United States acquired Puerto Rico as one of its territories. In the U.S. mainland, Puerto Rican literati have mainly concentrated in the New York area and reflect closely the immigration patterns of most Puerto Ricans of the post-World War II era. Thus, our treatment of religion concentrates on the works published in the mainland since World War II.

As in the case of Mexican American literature, there is a mass of folk genres (e.g., boleros, plenas) of lyric poetry and song that have yet to be systematically categorized in terms of religious content. Although not published until 1977, *Memorias de Bernardo Vega* (Memoirs of Bernardo Vega), written originally in

the late 1940s, has come to represent the period between World War I and World War II in the United States. Its attitude toward Catholicism does not seem to be very strong, but it is not hostile. With Jesús Colón (1901–1974), however, we find a more nonreligious and openly Marxist approach in *A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches* (1961).

One of the most prominent differences of Mexican American literature is the prevalence of African religious traditions in Puerto Rican literature. Often this acceptance of African religious traditions is juxtaposed with a criticism of the Catholic Church, as in the work of Tato Laviera, reputed to be the best-selling Latino/a poet in America. His work *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* (1992) is a powerful jeremiad against organized Catholicism juxtaposed with a call to acknowledge African traditions. Some of the poems, in fact, form substitute African rituals for Catholic liturgical traditions.

Relations between Puerto Rican and Irish Catholics in New York have been a point of contention. One expression of these tense relations is found in Edward Rivera's "First Communion," a story that is part of a larger work, *Family Installments* (1982). "First Communion" is about a boy, Santos Malanguéz, and his transition from Puerto Rico to New York, where he learns about the various ways in which Puerto Ricans maintained their identity in an Irish-dominated parish.

It is to be expected that Jews and Puerto Ricans would interact in New York City in a manner that may not happen in many other places in the United States. Nicholasa Mohr has explored these relationships in a number of stories featured in her book *El Bronx*

Remembered (1986). Piri Thomas, one of the most salient of Nuyorican authors, exemplifies the experimentation of Latino/as with Islam in *Down These Mean Streets* (1967), while his later book *Savior, Savior, Hold My Hand* (1973) details his disillusionment with Pentecostalism.

The difficulty in finding books written by Protestants attests to the position of Protestantism in Puerto Rican culture (and in Latino/a culture). And although nearly a third of Puerto Ricans are now Protestant, one finds very few positive depictions of Protestantism. In fact, we find that Protestants are largely missing from the canon of U.S. Latino/a literature found in most anthologies of Latino/a literature. One omission is Nicky Cruz, whose book, *Run, Baby, Run* (1968), differs very little, on formal and content grounds, from what Piri Thomas writes. Despite the fact that Cruz probably outsells Piri Thomas, Cruz, who is vocally evangelical and criticizes non-Protestant religions, is not normally viewed as part of the canon in academia.

Ed Vega represents a more secularist approach in his writings. His book *The Comeback* (1985) is perhaps one of the most intricate and sardonic works in all of U.S. Latino/a literature. Vega's *The Comeback* is a literary expression of the idea that God and religion are products of the human imagination. In many ways, *The Comeback* mirrors Vega's rejection of his religious upbringing.

Puerto Rican literature also seems to have had more women writers earlier than Mexican American literature. These women include Julia de Burgos, Sandra María Estévez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Aurora Levins Morales, and Esmeralda Santiago. Often, these women also comment on religion. For example, Judith Ortiz Cofer's poem, "Cada Dia" [Each

Day] in *Terms of Survival* (1976) offers a feminist and somewhat satirical version of the Lord's Prayer. In *Terms of Survival* one finds another poem, "Costumbre" [Custom], wherein she comments on how piety and hypocrisy mix in Puerto Rican culture. Aurora Levins Morales has alluded to the issues and problems of being Puerto Rican and Jewish in works such as *Getting Home Alive* (1986) and *Medicine Stories: History, Culture, and the Politics of Integrity* (1998).

Cuban American Literature

For Cuban American history, 1959 is a crucial date. In that year, Fidel Castro created a communist dictatorship, which led to the emigration of thousands of Cubans to the United States. Cuban American literature may be periodized easily into at least two phases: (1) the immigrant adult generation; and (2) younger immigrant and American-born generations. It is the second group that has produced the bulk of what is called Cuban American literature. A major theme involves the interplay between life and religion in Cuba and America. Also important is the role of race relations, a subject often suppressed in Cuba, but given new vigor by the role of race in the United States. Most Cuban American literature has been the domain of White Cubans. One of the works that integrates these themes is Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), which presents a multivalent view of Santería, one of the main African traditions brought to, and transformed in, Cuba.

But not all Cuban American literary attitudes toward religion are negative. The attitudes found in *Mr. Ives' Christmas* (1995) are quite positive toward the



Writer Oscar Hijuelos displays his new book, *A Simple Habana Melody*, on June 18, 2002, in West Hollywood, California. Hijuelos won the Pulitzer Prize for the book *Mambo Kings*. (Getty Images)

Catholic Church. *Mr. Ives' Christmas* was authored by Oscar Hijuelos, who was the first U.S. Latina/o author to have garnered a Pulitzer Prize (1990) for literature. Furthermore, Achy Obejas has opened up new paths in exploring a Latino/Cuban Jewish identity (e.g., *Days of Awe*, 2001). A more eclectic approach to religion is found in the works of Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Nilo Cruz.

Dominican Literature and Other Groups

Authors from other Latino/a subgroups, while still a minority, are increasingly producing significant works. The themes are quite similar to those found in

Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban American literature. For example, in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), Julia Alvarez, the Dominican American writer, illustrates how American consumerism replaces their Dominican Catholic traditions.

Central and South Americans still do not have a significant voice in Latino/a literature. In fact, some of the best-known works involving Central American characters are authored by Mexican American authors. One illustration is *In Search of Bernabé* (1993) written by Graciela Limón, a native of Los Angeles who worked in El Salvador. The plot of the book centers on a Salvadoran woman who seeks a son who was lost amidst the chaos that resulted from the assassination of Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of El Salvador. The book focuses on the political struggles of El Salvador, but alludes frequently to the Catholic milieu of Salvadoran culture. Similarly, in *Mother Tongue* (1994), Demetria Martinez, a Mexican American author, voices the real-life struggles of Salvadorans who are involved in the American church sanctuary movement for undocumented persons.

Conclusion

Latina/o literature reflects the religious experience of Latinas/os only partially. One significant reflection is the role of Catholicism in the U.S. Latino/a experience. Cultural differences are also reflected in literature as we compare Caribbean with Mexican American authors. Certainly, we find more evidence of the influence of African traditions in the works of Puerto Rican and Cuban writers. We find many allusions to Aztec

religious traditions in Mexican American literature.

However, many authors are part of the elite educated strata of Anglo-American society who hold PhDs. Many are academics. These are not the experiences of most Latinas/os. Nor is the general religious profile like that of most Latinas/os now. Although perhaps over 25 percent of Puerto Ricans are Protestant (and positive toward Protestantism), one will not find a quarter of all Puerto Rican authors writing positively about Protestantism.

From at least 1959 onward, we see in most Mexican American writers an antipathy toward organized religion. At the same time, many of these writers have emphasized individualism. This individualism is consistent with Anglo-American religious traditions. We also see a marked increase in tolerance toward non-Christian traditions, especially since Vatican II. The works of Laviera and García exemplify some of the diverse attitudes that Latinas/os have toward African religions.

There are still many areas unexplored in Latina/o religion and literature. There needs to be a more systematic study that integrates different genres (including folk songs, corridos, etc.) into a more synthetic study of religion and literature. Our periodizations need to be refined and perhaps even abandoned when more systematic study of all literary genres is completed. And, of course, we need more reliable demographic data on Latino/a religion so that we can gauge how Latinos compare with Latino/a authors. The future is difficult to predict, but certainly we can expect Central and South Americans to make their voices heard in U.S. Latino/a literature. Eclectic forms of religious literary expression, drawn

from traditions all over the globe, may be the dominant trend for the foreseeable future.

Hector Avalos

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LA LUCHA

La lucha (the struggle) is an intrinsic element of Latina/o culture, influencing the way Latina/os learn, look at life, face life, and think about themselves. *La lucha* is a fundamental concept that captures and synthesizes a variety of Latina/o cultural insights, values, and ways of dealing with life. This dynamic, foundational concept is expressed in a variety of words and expressions, among them *bregar* for Puerto Ricans; *si se puede* for Chicanas/os and Mexican Americans; and *resolver* for Cubans. *La lucha* takes

on a particular meaning for Latina/os in the United States who historically have been and continue to be minoritized, marginalized, and exploited by the dominant group. Given the social, economic, political, and religious context of oppression in which the majority of Latina/os in the United States live, *la lucha* takes on a particular meaning, concerned not just with the efforts all living entails, but particularly with the struggle for liberation/fullness of life. *La lucha*, in this sense of struggle for liberation/fullness of life, is a concrete reality in the life of Latina/os in the United States, a first horizon in the way life is experienced and engaged.

La lucha is an element of the way Latina/os understand themselves—as social beings who struggle—not as an individualistic act but as a family affair, a community enterprise, a societal endeavor. *La lucha* is very much part of the way Latina/os come to know reality, being central to Latina/o experiences, and at the heart of the three-pronged process for acquiring knowledge: immersion in the material mediations of the reality one is learning; apprehending it, that is, grasping it as fully as possible; and, in the process of apprehending it, changing it. *La lucha* makes clear that to know reality is to change reality. *La lucha* also identifies the perspective from which Latina/os look at life; it is the grounding point of view of the perennial search for ways to struggle because not to struggle is to perish. *La lucha* likewise refers to reflective action on behalf of liberation/fullness of life, negating the erroneous idea that the oppressed do not have anything to contribute in the creation of a just world order. *La lucha* as a liberative praxis is not just any action, but one grounded in rational analysis and passionate intentionality, manifested in