

## Introduction

**D**espite efforts throughout the twentieth century, especially during the last thirty years, to improve how Mexican Americans and other Spanish-speaking people are perceived in the United States, Chicanos<sup>1</sup> and other Latinos are not yet seen as typical American citizens. Latinos continue to receive poor educations. The media continue to represent us in ways that have not been changed substantially by the emergence of Chicano literature or by anything else attempted by American Latinos during the last three decades. There has been no acceleration of efforts to educate and develop this potentially great national human resource, and success continues to be available only to a tiny fraction of Hispanics. Although some small improvements have occurred, the great majority of Latinos in the United States still live in separate worlds connected only tangentially to the rest of American culture. Despite the efforts of many Spanish-speaking citizens to interact more meaningfully with the rest of American society, too often the Chicano barrios and other Latino communities that exist throughout the United States remain social spaces to be avoided instead of places that can be developed and enhanced to promote a town, city, state, or region.<sup>2</sup>

Since Chicano literature provides an ongoing record about the presence of a resident and growing Spanish-speaking population in the United States, examining the writings of Chicano writers in light of certain widely assumed views about Hispanics is a social imperative. Essentially, the issue is one of Mexican American and Latino visibility—or, visible

invisibility, as it were—within the larger American environment. Studying how Chicano authors have labored to improve education and analyzing how Latinos continue to be represented in newspapers, magazines, television programs, films, and advertisements should allow readers to determine where our narratives have succeeded and where they have fallen short of the needs of Latinos and American society.<sup>3</sup>

By examining four Chicano books in this study, I hope to focus attention on the larger but seldom-noticed social text that adumbrates the relationships between the wider American public and the permanent Latino communities of the United States. Such relationships offer a cultural text that Chicano writers and critics have been constructing one-sidedly since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo created Mexican Americans in 1848. Since such a text can be accessed from a number of sociopolitical, economic, and historical perspectives, I do not presume to speak for all American Hispanics in the following pages. Nonetheless, I believe that education and media portrayals of Spanish-speaking Americans are the two most important socializing vehicles that, generation after generation, have continued to shape and influence that very real Hispanic world that exists, however nebulously, in the American consciousness. While Chicano literature dramatizes the impact of education and the American media on Latinos, and even though many Mexican Americans and Latinos invest considerable time and effort on our relationships to American society today, the larger American public seems to remain unengaged.

United States Latinos often feel less like Americans and more like recent immigrants or life-long foreigners in our own country. Dramatized in a variety of forms, which include anger, indifference, adjustment, and accommodation, Chicano authors have long rendered frustrating sociopolitical realities and psychological responses that have remained unheeded and unaddressed. If America's Latinos are to help advance American civilization in the twenty-first century, our Spanish-speaking citizens require better educations and the American media will have to learn how to represent Hispanics more attractively.<sup>4</sup> The schools and the media are singled out because these two socializing vehicles continue to be the chief means that daily shape and influence Latinos. If no extra efforts are soon made to improve how Hispanics are educated and perceived and responded to throughout American society, the future promises to be bleaker than the shameful past that made it acceptable to discriminate against Latinos.

Although a number of studies have addressed relationships between mainstream Americans and Chicanos, such efforts have not especially sought to bring the people of these two American cultures to a better understanding of each other.<sup>5</sup> Some Latinos want and may even state a wish to remain separate and apart, but the majority of us have shown by our lifestyles that we would rather be regarded as regular American citizens. Despite the different desires expressed by Latinos throughout the twentieth century, from those who would create a separate society to those who would deny that they have special problems within American culture, I think it is time to assert a willingness to join the great American experiment that all Americans now need to facilitate and encourage.<sup>6</sup> Not to embrace this challenge is to consign Latino Americans to the second-class citizenship that Ana Castillo, among other writers like Alurista, Angela de Hoyos, and Evangelina Vigil, has posited.

Mexican Americans and other Latinos are noticeably absent from the media and from the life that most people recognize as "American" for reasons that need to be seriously considered. Absence, or what might be called negative presence, more than anything else, lies at the heart of many of the problems that Chicanos and other Spanish-speaking Americans experience and endure. The almost automatic response of many mainstream Americans to such a view is that Latinos, like other citizens, ought to take more responsibility for our own lives and decisions. And, like other Americans, we do. We work, pay taxes, and have become the fastest-growing consumer group in the country. Data, however, show that the images and the representations that consistently appear in the American media about Hispanics, as well as the different kinds of primary, secondary, and higher educations readily available to Latinos and to other Americans, are the prime reasons why many United States Latinos feel estranged in our own land. Although such realities may change in three or four more generations, if persuaded that all Americans will gain when Latinos are treated as regular Americans, educators and media people could expedite that process by educating and better depicting Latinos now.<sup>7</sup>

Although we are often conflated and perceived as Mexican citizens or as Latino immigrants to the United States, Mexican Americans and other American-born Latinos are increasingly visible in American society. Our complex relationships among ourselves, with other Latinos, and with American society in general, however, are not known well enough by the average American to engage the type of interest that could actually improve the future of Latino youths. The media por-

trayals, educational struggles, and attitudes that Hispanics normally encounter in American life, as well as our own understandably ambiguous responses to the postcolonial environments in which we are born, grow, and develop, are documented by Chicano historians and authors. But even though our narratives both describe how we currently represent ourselves and respond to how we are seen in general throughout the United States, such counternarratives have not received wide enough attention and dissemination to impact the rest of American society.

The writers selected for this study, two male and two female authors, were chosen because they usefully illuminate the psychological conflicts, the identity uncertainties, and the cultural encounters, adjustments, and resolutions that most Mexican American men and women undergo, generation after generation. Singly and together, the books considered here unfold a long overdue, though still one-sided or culturally insulated, dialogue with American culture.<sup>8</sup>

Readers familiar with Chicano novels and autobiographies can point to other needs at this juncture in our history, but I think it is also important to address readers who may be less familiar with Chicano literature.<sup>9</sup> In writing for the general educated reader, I attempt to explain how the education system and the American media influence the minds of Mexican Americans, the larger Latino population, and other Americans. Chicano authors have written about how education and the media coalesce to complicate and sometimes even undo the lives of Hispanics. By discussing the extraordinary efforts made by a group of American ethnic writers interested in capturing the voices of Latinos to establish a discourse with mainstream America, I seek to garner for Hispanic writers the type of attention they have not yet received. Although the accomplishments of our first generation of writers are considerable, their works are still not known outside of a small circle of readers. As we will see in Chapter 2, my purpose is to explain some of the problems that ethnic oppositional authors encounter in creating a literature. If Chicano writers were to expand our horizons by incorporating more of American life in their books, they might attract a greater readership to a literature that endeavors to render how Mexican Americans, Latinos, and other Americans actually live and dream, or how we all might.

The media, education, and Chicano literature are three distinct fields, each with scholars who naturally write in response to the theories in