Re-envisioning the Latino South and the Cultural Poetics of Angela de Hoyos: A *Transfrontera* Synthesis[1]

By Antonio L. Vásquez

In Memory of Angela

"in Teatro Guadalupe
after the strong voice of Doctor Sánchez
and the well-thought-out
reasoning of raulsalinas
you stood up and said Arise, Chicano
and we did"

--Reyes Cárdenas, September 28, 2009[2]

Extant interdisciplinary scholarship has described and interpreted the presence of Latinos in the southern United States in two principal ways. The most dominant situates southern Latinos as "new" transnational immigrants, influenced fully by the most recent period of large-scale migration at the turn of the twenty-first century.[3] Various internal and external factors that included U.S. federal immigration policy and economic pursuits abroad, particularly the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986 and the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, directly contributed to the widespread growth of Latino communities throughout the region. Through NAFTA, at least 1.5 million Mexican agricultural workers were displaced in Mexico and prompted systemic migration elsewhere, including to the U.S. South. The political victory of IRCA enabled nearly three million persons to apply and receive permanent residency in the United States. The legislation also provided a means for migration from other states with high concentrations of Latino communities, such as California and New York (Smith 240-241). The 1990s has been cited as a critical beginning point for understanding the Latino presence across the South. In that decade alone, Latino growth rates in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee were all identified to be among the highest nationwide (Kochar, Suro, and Tafoya).

With book titles such as *Latino Immigrants and the Transformation of the U.S. South*, *New Destination Dreaming: Immigration, Race, and Legal Status in the Rural American South*, *Being Brown in Dixie: Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Immigration in the New South,* and, more recently, *The Sounds of Latinidad: Immigrants Making Music and Creating Culture in a Southern City*, Latinos have continued to be most represented as newcomers to the region and nation, part of the last wave of new immigrants. Thus, their experiences with inequality in the South have been viewed as a completely novel and unexamined phenomenon. "In a region that continues to grapple with long held traditions of privilege, belonging, and 'race,'" argued Owen J. Furuseth and Heather A. Smith, for example, in *Latinos in the New South: Transformations of Place*, "the growing presence of Latinos complicates the traditional mythology of southerness and gives rise to yet another iteration of the so called 'New South' (2). Due to the sole focus on the contemporary period, most scholarship has chosen to exclude past historical experiences of Latino place-making in the region. The lives of Mexicans in Texas and Florida in particular, have been voided from intellectual inquiry and belonging in the literature, deemed insignificant to the Latino South. As editors make clear in one pioneering text, *Latino Immigrants and the*

Transformation of the U.S. South, "we define the South as those states that share a history of slavery and the legal institution of racial segregation and its undoing by the civil rights movement….Because of our interest in new immigration states we omit Texas and Florida, for they have a longer and different history of Latin American immigration" (Odem and Lacy x). Latino history is "longer and different" in Texas and Florida, yet both states have served as principal geographic centers, corridors, and destinations for migration that deserve consideration.

The increased concentration of commercial agriculture gave rise to the systemic inducement of Mexican labor migration in the twentieth century. From 1942 to 1964, as one example, over 4.5 million workers from Mexico were employed in the United States through an official guest worker agreement between the two countries. Although justified out of a real and perceived shortage of workers in the United States during the Second World War, the Bracero Program only increased numerically and expanded geographically in the aftermath that had adverse effects for communities in the South. First, large-scale growers sought out and employed Mexican National workers on farms through the program, as early as 1947 in North Carolina and, subsequently, in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. The largest concentration of braceros workers was employed on southern farms in Texas, second only to California nationwide. The availability of a large labor force through the Bracero Program also provided a means for large-scale growers to completely saturate the labor market in South Texas in pursuit of more capital, which, in turn, undermined the economic and social livelihoods of the Mexican American working-class. The Bracero Program, thus, stimulated processes for intra-state and inter-state labor migration for Mexican American workers and their families from South Texas, who were transformed into the largest pool of agricultural migrant labor in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Their presence had extended to more than thirty-seven states nationwide by the end of the 1950s, transforming existent communities and creating new ones. As early as 1950, these same workers and respective families were able to establish homes in towns like Homestead, Florida, and pursue work and eventual resettlement in other states such as Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia. Commercial agriculture and the concomitant desire for Mexican labor, thus, proved to be an important recourse for increased Latino migration and settlement from Texas to familiar and unfamiliar destinations in the South through the latter twentieth century (Vásquez 112). Scholarship that focuses on the contemporary is absolutely critical yet, as a whole, remains vastly incomplete in offering comprehensive framework for understanding the varied roots and flows of the Latino South. More discussion, and historical perspective, is needed.

A second emerging thread in the scholarship has begun to expand the conversation by interpreting the meaning of Latino lives within a longer historical trajectory in the U.S. South.[4] The present essay follows suit by engaging in one brief examination of the life and literary work of the late poet Angela de Hoyos. At the very least, this synthesis from the field of literary studies helps to reaffirm a historical presence of Latino cultural expression that has made "fundamental contributions to North American culture," according to literary scholar Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, yet has been "largely unrecognized and conspicuously absent in the nation's cultural and educational institutions" ("A Panorama" 155). The literary heritage can be traced to the sixteenth century amid Spanish colonization in the Americas when *romances*, *cuentos, alabados,* and other expressions were adopted and adapted. "Only thirty years after the [Spanish] Conquest," according to literary scholar Raymond Paredes, "Mexican Indians were composing romance-like ballads of their own" (72). Perhaps the most popular to emerge in the latter nineteenth century and into the twentieth century was the *corrido*. Variants of the predominantly

male narrative folksong developed in other regions in Mexico such as in Michoacán. *Corridos* in South Texas, however, diverged during the same period amid the U.S. military invasion and consequent experiences of dispossession and exclusion.[5] "The forms and the language of the ballads are conventionally Mexican," noted again Raymond Paredes, "but the themes, the intensity of sentiment, and the level of cultural awareness associated with these themes represent a departure from Mexican models" (76). The formation of Latino cultural production in the United States, representing today the space "where the struggle for and against social equality is engaged," manifested in South Texas, in opposition to the violence of war (Habell-Pallán and Romero 6).

Angela de Hoyos wrote and co-edited numerous published books and anthologies in her lifetime. Her personal writings include, but are not limited to, *Arise, Chicano! and Other Poems* (1975), *Chicano Poems for the Barrio* (1975), *Poems/Poemas* (1975), *Selecciones—Selected Poems* (1976), *Woman, Woman* (1985), and *Linking Roots* (1993). Her works have been translated into at least 15 different languages and have received numerous national and international awards from Argentina, India, Italy, Germany, and the United States. In 1994, de Hoyos was the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award by the Texas Commission on the Arts. An equally impressive and rare quality that made de Hoyos most endearing was her direct and wholehearted dedication to other writers. This was clear when she co-founded M&A Editions, an independent publishing press with her life partner, and *Huehuetitlan*, a periodical dedicated to Chicano culture and poetry (Ramirez 164; "Angela de Hoyos;" "De Hoyos Was a Pioneer"). Angela de Hoyos was a beloved mentor to others as much as she was committed to her own work as a poet and artist.

Studies from *la Xicanuac* have firmly placed Angela de Hoyos and her historical significance as a poet during the 1960s and 1970s in South Texas.[6] While largely absent from mainstream studies on the civil rights movement, participants in the Chicano Movement challenged inequality at the local, national, and international level. Influences during the period included the "rural farmworkers struggle, urban Civil Rights activities like those promoted by Crusade for Justice in Colorado, the land grants confrontations…and the student and anti-war movements on colleges and university campuses" (Ybarra-Frausto, "The Chicano Movement" 83). In his local study on the Chicano Movement, ethnic studies scholar David Montejano argued that San Antonio was best compared to Atlanta, Georgia, in terms of its size, entrenched segregationist practices, and "similar political convulsions during the sixties and seventies" (1). "Indeed," he continued, "change the accents and skin color of the political actors, and the following history [in San Antonio] becomes one of many movement narratives of social change that shook nearly all the major urban areas of the country during that time" (1). One critical variant of the Chicano Movement was also a flurry of literary and cultural production or what literary scholar Philip Ortego has rightly described as the "Chicano Renaissance" (Lomelí 103). In one study, Beatriz Rivera identified de Hoyos as being one of four critical poets from the "militant Chicana generation" (33). Tey Diana Rebolledo recognized de Hoyos as "one of the first Chicana writers to explore the socio-political realities of the Chicano experience in a lyric way" (9). For Marcella Aguilar-Henson, the social-political themes only intensified through de Hoyos' participation in the Chicano Movement. "Even though she wrote social-conscious poetry before her 'Chicano Movement' experience, this experience reinforced certain thematic preoccupations," according to Aguilar-Henson (13). Informed by her Chicana-*Tejana*-San Antonio-*pocha* subjectivity, de Hoyos actively engaged in writing, according to Lori Beth Rodriguez, "in opposition to delegitimization and stereotyping of Mexican American culture by

San Antonio's dominant Anglo society" (75). Insights drawn from de Hoyos' poetry can also illuminate different perspectives that enhance this discussion on the Latino South. Three inter-related points include the emphasis on transnationalism, representation of Latinos as newcomers, and resistance to inequality.

While indeed resonating in the modern era, Latinos have engaged in transnational exchange since their violent incorporation into the U.S. colonial project with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. Nicolás Kanellos raised this point in his comprehensive review of literally thousands of archival documents through the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project. "The Hispanic peoples living north of the Rio Grande prior to and after U.S. expansion southward and westward," according to Kanellos, "were never cut off from communications and intercourse with the rest of the Spanish-speaking world" (18). He argued that Mexican American, Nuyorican, and Cuban American literature in particular, should "be seen on the continuum of transnationalism" (18). Continued flows of large-scale migration from Mexico since the mid-nineteenth century have reinforced *transfrontera* processes that continue into the present.

Angela de Hoyos demonstrated a consciousness extending within, across, and in opposition to the U.S.-Mexico border through language in her work. As a young child, she migrated with her family from Mexico to South Texas in the 1940s, during the period of the Bracero Program. "*Nací en Coahuila, México, pero desde pequeña me trajeron mis padres a los Estados Unidos*," she once stated in a published interview (Vásquez-Castro 19). She lived most of her life in the southern city of San Antonio, where she created and engaged with the world until her departure in 2009. "*Desde un principio me eduqué en este país, y en un ambiente completamente bilingüe. Mis hermanos hablaban inglés, pero con mis padres nos comunicábamos en español, y gracias a eso conservé el español*," she continued (Vásquez-Castro 17). The use of Spanish in her poetry, thus, provided a critical medium for de Hoyos to maintain a personal connection to Mexico and to engage directly with those reflected in her work, including the "Spanish-speaking immigrant population in the United States as well as in Mexico" (Christoph 223).

One poem that illuminates the power of language for the author is "Gracias, Mees-ter!" In this poem, de Hoyos detests the ill-treatment toward the "teen-age Chicano" based on differences in class and language. This is evident in the opening stanza:

> No, you will never understand
> - you in your comfortable recliner,
> watching 'cops and robbers'
> on your color TV -
> why the teen-age Chicano
> who shines your shoes
> at the Hilton entrance
> has not yet learned to pronounce
> the King's English correctly.

Representing a form of "speaking truth to power," de Hoyos questions how the labor of the teenage Chicano is desired to shine "your shoes," yet his manhood remains ignored and even loathed for not pronouncing "the King's English correctly." In this way, she underscores how

language has been used as a central marker of racialization to dehumanize and perpetuate inequality.

The author contests this rendering, however, by engaging in role reversal and showing how language can also serve to affirm and empower. This is demonstrated through her intentional inclusion of the teenage Chicano's organic language in the title and last sentence of the poem, "gracias, mees-ter." In doing so, she validates both his presence and his world, which is also hers, and succeeds in demonstrating the fluidity and diversity of language apart from the confines of what is accepted as proper. The play with language in this poem enables de Hoyos to "honor her motherland language and to resist the cultural hegemony in the United States" (Christoph 240). Rather than being viewed a sign of shame, the organic integration of spoken English and Spanish likewise should be source of strength. Language for de Hoyos is intimately tied to the culture and dignity of her people.

Another example emerges in the poem, "Brindis: For the Barrio." The first stanza begins: "Brothers, today we drink/ the fresh milk of dawn/ - for once, not tasting/ of sourness." The following stanza reads: "For once/the table is set/ with plates full of hope,/ and in our illiterate hands/ some kind of fate has placed/ a promise of gold for tomorrow." From the opening verse, de Hoyos speaks directly to her people, not as an outside observer but one who identifies intimately with and shares in their same circumstance. In this way, the poem reflects an expression of accompaniment, offering "plates full of hope" that is the Chicano Movement. The conclusion of the poem reads, "but today we eat/to soothe a pain/ - a pain of alien-hungers/ Vallejo never knew." The author makes a contrast here with another poem, "*La Cena Miserable*," by famed Peruvian poet César Vallejo. For Marcella Aguilar-Henson, both poems create a visual representation of a banquet for, described as a "*cena*" for Vallejo and a "*desayuno*" for de Hoyos. Vallejo's approach "poses the philosophical question of how long must man suffer on his earth in order to find gratification and peace" (Aguilar-Henson 23). Angela de Hoyos identifies with this sentiment but still presents a more hopeful message. She, thus, offers "an optimistic and vital counter to the Peruvian's pessimism" (Aguilar-Henson 24). Withstanding this critique, de Hoyos still holds no illusion about "a pain of alien-hungers" against her people in the face of systemic violence in these United States. In spite of demands for social justice in the historical moment at hand, the author is absolutely clear that "a promise of gold for tomorrow" is not yet fully realized, the Chicano Movement being only one step within a longer struggle for human dignity. By linking those present in "Brindis: For the Barrio" with "*La Cena Miserable*," the author effectively asserts her voice alongside the greater narrative of Latino Letters in the Americas.[7]

Angela de Hoyos also challenges the blanket rendering of her people as outsiders, a critique most eloquently appearing in the poem, "*HERMANO*:" "I was born too late/in a land/that no longer belongs to me/ (so it says right here in this Texas History)." In this opening verse, the author revisits and laments the telling of official history, "Texas History," at the expense of her people. By being "born too late," the poem serves as a witness to the shifting geopolitical demarcations from Mexico to the United States in South Texas, with de Hoyos making place in the former. The middle of the poem reads as follows:

> Tu cielo
> Ya no me pertenece.
> Ni el Alamo, ni la Villita,
> Ni el río que a capricho

Por tu mero centro corre.
Ni las misiones
-joyas de tu pasada-
San Juan de Capistrano
Concepción
San José
La Espada
: They belong to a pilgrim
who arrived here only yesterday
whose racist tongue says to me: I hate
Meskins. You're a Meskin. Why don't you
go back to where you came from?
Yes amigo…! Why don't I? Why don't I
resurrect the *Pinta*, the *Niña* and the *Santa María*
-and you can scare up your little '*Flor de Mayo'*-
so we can all sail back
to where we came from: the motherland womb.

Irrespective of country of origin, citizen and non-citizen, the author's people remain racialized as foreigners to the body politic of the nation. Dehumanizing depictions permeating in U.S. popular culture, as reflected here in the derogatory "Meskin," are not random but rather emanate from this tale of colonialism that justified U.S. military conquest in South Texas and experiences of violence that have followed. The author directly challenges this official history, however, by inverting foreignness to "a pilgrim/who arrived here only yesterday" and appealing to a different past in the Americas, "*joyas de tu pasada*." The conclusion of the poem reads as follows:

I was born too late
or perhaps I was born too soon:
It is not yet my time;
this is not yet my home.

I must wait for the conquering barbarian
to learn the Spanish word for love:
HERMANO

By being "born too soon" and "this is not yet my home," the author envisions a certain interdependent future that is still being written among the victims and victors of war. Mere integration into existing dominant institutions in the name of progress is not enough; Angela de Hoyos calls for a complete societal transformation of values in the "Spanish word for love." Her hope for the future is anchored in the title and conclusion of the poem, "HERMANO," to reflect an intimacy, a profound sense of love and dedication to humanity that is the heart of the Chicano Movement.

The author offers another refined critique in a short though powerful poem, "To Walt Whitman." Its entirety is below, followed by a brief analysis:

hey man, my brother

world-poet
prophet democratic
here's a guitar
for you
-a chicana guitar-
so you can spill out a song
for the open road
big enough for my people
-my NativeIndian race
that I can't seem to find
in your poems.

With the opening, "hey brother man/world-poet/prophet democratic," the author recognizes the lasting imprint of famed poet Walt Whitman, as embodied in his beloved *Leaves of Grass*. By speaking directly to Whitman, she addresses and questions who belongs in the making of U.S. literature, the soul of the nation. De Hoyos asserts her own voice, "a chicana guitar," to position her people as makers and contributors to this greater narrative in spite of their exclusion. Her resistance to the foreigner label in "HERMANO" is grounded in an earlier Spanish colonial past in the Americas, while her critique is rooted here in "my NativeIndian race." Hence, "To Walt Whitman" represents the author's most critical anti-colonialism from a position of indigeneity.

Angela de Hoyos' stern opposition to inequality is consistent throughout her poetry. Her most popular poem, "Arise, Chicano!" continues this same counter-hegemonic discourse. A complete version is shown is its entirety below, followed by a brief analysis:

In your migrant's world of hand-to-mouth days,
your children go smileless to a cold bed;
the bare walls rockaby the same wry song,
a ragged dirge, thin as the air...

I have seen you go down
under the shrewd heel of exploit—
your long suns of brutal sweat
with ignoble pittance crowned.
Trapped in the never-ending fields
where you stoop, dreaming of sweeter dawns,
while the mocking whip of slavehood
confiscates your moment of reverie.
Or beneath the stars—offended
by your rude songs of rebellion—
when, at last, you shroud your dreams
and with them, your hymn of hope.

Thus a bitterness in your life:
wherever you turn for solace
there is an embargo.
How to express your anguish

when not even your burning words
are yours, they are borrowed
from the festering barrios of poverty,
and the sadness in your eyes
only reflects the mute pain of your people.

Arise Chicano!—that divine spark within you
surely says—Wash your wounds
and swathe your agonies.
There is no one to succor you.
You must be your own messiah.

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Using descriptions like a “cold bed” and “brutal sweat” in the “migrant’s world of hand-to-mouth days,” the author responds here to the “shrewd heel of exploit” that confront her people in South Texas. She is aware and critical of the role of commercial agriculture and systemic inducement of Mexican labor in the twentieth century, as much as the consequent “embargo” of economic inequality “in the festering barrios of poverty.” Their labor is deemed desirable, yet their dignity remains denied. While de Hoyos skillfully and visually describes manifestations of inequality in the poem, “a bitterness in your life” and “the sadness in your eyes,” that is not enough. As she affirms, “that divine spark within you/ surely says - wash your wounds/ and swathe your agonies/ There is no one to succor you.” In concert with the farmworker movement for justice, “Arise, Chicano!” represents a direct call to action: We together must create the conditions we want to see for true social change to take place; we “must be our own messiah.”

In summary, the cultural poetics of Angela de Hoyos necessitates a re-envisioning of the Latino experience in the southern United States. The sole focus on the contemporary at best offers an incomplete picture to a lived experience that is both modern and historic and at worst engages in another rendition of historical amnesia and cultural erasure through the widespread adoption of the new immigrant narrative. Historian Emma Pérez highlights inherent limitations from this perspective: “Immigrants are expected to become part of the dominant culture; they are urged to adopt its habits and forget their own—to erase” (78). Angela de Hoyos challenges this perception from intimate knowledge of her people as creators and contributors to the imagined community in the region, nation, and world.

In addition, her oppositional consciousness draws from a specific history of U.S. colonialism in relation to Mexico. Future directions in Latino South scholarship should likewise consider the geographic expanse of Latino migration and historic-structural modes of incorporation into the region. The Latino South was formed from the most recent period of large-scale migration, primarily from Mexico and Central America and secondarily from the Caribbean and South America. More nuanced interpretations should help illuminate distinct configurations and contestations related to colonialism and migration. The literary critical analysis of Angela de Hoyos presented in this essay represents one direct contribution to a series of much-needed counter-narratives still to be constructed in the Latino South literature.

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Notes

[1] The author dedicates this small essay to the late Angela de Hoyos and all the departed from San Antonio who gave completely and unconditionally, with "plates full of hope," for a better tomorrow.

[2] Reyes Cárdenas is a *Tejano* poet whose work first emerged during the period of the Chicano Movement in Texas, and who continues to write poetry into the present. For a recent critical work of his writings, see *Chicano Poet, 1970-2010* (San Antonio: Aztlan Libre Press, 2013).

[3] To be consistent with the New Latino South literature, in which this article contributes, I utilize "Latino" in this critical essay to refer to male and female persons in plural form whose country of origin and/or ancestry is rooted in Latin America, including Mexico. For consistency, this same approach is applied to the term "Chicano" to refer to male and female persons in plural form who live in the United States and whose cultural ancestry are rooted in Mexico.

[4] To-date, only one full-length book publication and a series of articles integrate this latter perspective, all focusing on earlier decades in the twentieth century. See, for example, Julie Weise, *Corazón de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Julie Weise, "Mexican Nationalisms, Southern Racisms: Mexican and Mexican Americans in the U.S. South, 1908-1939," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2008): 749-777; Néstor Rodríguez, "New Southern Neighbors: Latino Immigration and Prospects for Intergroup Relations Between African-Americans and Latinos in the South," *Latino Studies* 10, no. 1-2 (2012): 18-40; Antonio L. Vásquez, "Deep in the Heart: *Braceros*, *Tejanos* and Differential Disposability in South Texas," *The Journal of South Texas* 27, no. 2 (2013): 102-117.

[5] The prime model to emerge during this period was the heroic *corrido*. For a thorough synthesis, see the pioneering work by Américo Paredes, *With a Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958).

[6] For creative purposes, I have decided to use "la Xicanuac" in lieu of Chicano Letters, referring to literary analyses in Chicana/o Studies.

[7] In addition to César Vallejo, Angela de Hoyos also acknowledged the influence of other Latin American writers in her own work. They included Nicanor Segunda Parra Sandavol and Pablo Neruda, both from Chile, as well as Octavio Paz from Mexico (Vásquez-Castro 24).