

*Poco A Poco:*  
**The Continuing Development of Mexican  
American Children's Literature in the 1990s**

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*Poco a poco* ("little by little") seems an apt phrase to describe the growth and development of Mexican American children's literature from the late 1980s through the 1990s, a period of increased publishing of multicultural/multiethnic literature in the United States. As this candid but hopeful phrase might imply, the number and quality of children's books on the Mexican American/Chicano experience have improved gradually but steadily in recent years; however, progress along both fronts needs to continue. The ongoing development of this body of books, one of several under the Latino literature umbrella, has been discussed in two previous reports (Barrera, Liguori, & Salas, 1993; Barrera & Cortes, 1997). In this article, we build on that line of work by examining Mexican American children's literature published from late 1995 to late 1998.

The first part of this article, which leads off with a brief overview of research methods employed, provides a numerical, descriptive picture of Mexican American children's books published during this time period. The books were organized by basic characteristics, such as genre, grade level appropriateness, text language, and themes/topics, and the resulting distributions were examined and compared to prior related findings. Then in the second part, we provide an interpretive, evaluative view of selected books, critically addressing both the content and form of the literature. We conclude with a brief summary and some directions for future research in this area.

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It should be noted that although the term "Mexican American" may be more familiar to readers of this journal than "Chicano," we will use these terms jointly when referring to the collective experience of Mexican-origin peoples in the United States in recognition of the sociopolitical significance of the latter designation. We will use the two terms interchangeably when referring to the ethnic identity of particular writers who identify themselves in like manner, and the former term by itself when referring to the body of literature about these peoples.

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### Procedures

In the Barrera and Cortes study (1997), books published from 1992 to mid-1995 were examined. The present study picks up where its predecessor left off, encompassing books published nearly to the end of 1998. The focal books were identified by consulting a variety of sources: publishing company catalogs; professional journals such as *Multicultural Review*, *School Library Journal*, *The Horn Book Magazine*, *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, *Booklist*, and *Booklinks*; lists of nominees/winners of book awards, chief among them the Pura Belpré Award, the Americas Book Award, and the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award; published bibliographies such as the second edition of *Kaleidoscope* (Barrera, Thompson & Dressman, 1997) and the multicultural booklist by the Cooperative Children's Book Center (Kruse, Horning & Schliesman, 1997); *Books in Print* (Bowker, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998); and web sites for various online booksellers.

Each book was read by at least two of the researchers, if not all three, and evaluated in terms of its literary merit and ethnic content. To assess literary merit, checksheets for recording an evaluator's comments for three different literature categories (i.e., stories, poetry, and informational books) were developed based on guidelines for selecting literature by Tompkins and McGee (1993), and completed for each book to be included. For assessing content, two sets of evaluative criteria were kept in mind as the books were read, and addressed when necessary on the checksheet—the set of evaluative questions articulated by Bishop (1993) for making informed choices about multicultural literature and the checklist for evaluating Chicano material set forth by the Council on Interracial Books for Children (1975).

Only books dealing integrally with the Mexican American/Chicano experience were analyzed, that is, books about the life and culture of Mexican-ori-



gin people residing in the United States. The following works were *not* part of this analysis: books about (a) the Mexican experience (i.e., life and culture in Mexico), (b) the experiences of other Latino peoples in the United States (e.g., Puerto Rican Americans, Cuban Americans, and others), (c) people, life, and culture in Latin America (i.e., Central America, South America, and the Caribbean), and (d) multicultural/multiethnic content that includes Mexican Americans among other peoples.

## Findings

Based on the above procedures, a total of 92 books were identified for examination—12 from 1995, 26 from 1996, 36 from 1997, and 18 from 1998—a 37 percent increase over the number of books examined by Barrera and Cortes (1997) for the preceding three-and-a-half year period. Any title available in both English and Spanish versions was counted as one book, not two individual books. Reprints of any titles, or revised editions, were not counted, as our intent was to track new titles. While this increase is encouraging, the number of books produced annually (an average of 31 in this study as compared to 19 in the prior one) is still only a small proportion—approximately half of a percent (.5%)—of the total number of children's books published annually in the United States.

In the discussion that follows, a slash (/) is used to separate the English and Spanish equivalent titles of a *bilingual* book, a single book whose pages contain parallel text in English and Spanish. For a *dual-language* edition, in which one written work is produced in two different language versions (in this case, Spanish and English), brackets ([ ]) are used to set off the Spanish-language title from its English-language counterpart.

## Genre and Level

When organized by genre, specifically fiction, poetry/rhyme/song, folklore, biography/autobiography, or informational, by far the most numerous were fiction books (58%), followed by biography (22%); informational (12%), and poetry (7%). Only one folkloristic work was found, *My First Book of Proverbs / Mi primer libro de dichos* (Gonzales & Ruiz, 1995). Several picture books, however, incorporate folklore into their story lines, such as *Prietita and the Ghost Woman / Prietita y la Llorona* (Anzaldúa, 1996), which highlights the legendary la Llorona, the Weeping Woman, who is also featured in one of the story pictures in *In My Family/En mi familia* (Garza, 1996). Another picture book, *The Gullywasher* (Rossi, 1995), incorporates a different folklore form, the tall tale, into its story.

We should note that traditional literature such as folktales, myths, and legends that reflect a Mexican context tend to be more plentiful than those with a Mexican American context. By definition, however, such works were precluded from our analysis, which maintained a strict focus on books with explicit content about the Mexican American experience, not merely the Mexican experience. Thus a Mexico-based folktale, such as *Maya's Children: The Story of La Llorona* by Chicano author Rudolfo Anaya (1997) was not included in our count, although it is certainly part of the cultural heritage of Mexican Americans.

Compared to results of the earlier study, biography and poetry seem to have increased proportionately in publication from 1995 to 1998, while fiction and informational books decreased. When the five genres were aligned into two broad groupings, *fiction* (encompassing folklore and poetry) and *nonfiction* (comprised of informational and biography), fictional works outnumbered nonfiction by a ratio of 2 to 1. These two broad groupings match those of the 1975 landmark investigation of Chicano children's literature done by the Council of Interracial Books for Children.

When organized by grade level appropriateness according to three overlapping designations (i.e., primary—Grades K–3, intermediate—Grades 3–6, and young adult—Grades 6–8), almost half the books were judged suitable for the primary grades; almost a third for the intermediate grades; and about a quarter for older readers. This distribution differs somewhat from the prior study's findings in that the proportion of books for primary readers declined slightly from 1995 to 1998, while the proportion of books for older readers increased accordingly. A cross-tabulation of the books by genre and level is shown in Table I.

TABLE I  
Cross-tabulation of Focal Books by Genre and Grade Level

	Primary	Middle	Upper	Total
Fiction	26	14	14	54
Folklore	1	0	0	1
Poetry	6	0	1	7
Biography	8	9	3	20
Informational	4	3	3	10
	45	26	21	92

### Text Language

Although the majority of the focal books are written in English, some feature a bilingual format with parallel texts in English and Spanish appearing on the same page or per two-page spread. A lesser number of titles are available as separate Spanish and English language editions. We counted 19 of the former and 10 of the latter. All bilingual editions are fiction, poetry, and folklore for Grades K–3, with the exception of one biography for older readers, *Remembering Selena: A Tribute in Pictures and Words / Recordando a Selena: Un tributo en palabras y fotos* (Novas & Silva, 1995). All dual-language editions are fiction for the primary and intermediate grades, with the exception of two informational books for primary readers, *Barrio: José's Neighborhood [Barrio: El barrio de José]* (Ancona, 1998) and *From Father to Son [De padre a hijo]* (Almada, 1997). The majority of the dual-language titles are part of a six-book historical fiction se-



ries by Pleasant Company revolving around its newest character in the American Girls Collection, a Hispanic girl named María Josefina Montoya, living in New Mexico in 1824 (Tripp 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c).

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Many of the English-language books make use of Spanish to varying degrees, incorporating single words as well as brief phrases in their pages. Such items are usually explained within the context or translated directly following their appearance. Glossaries are also provided in most books that incorporate some Spanish. As in the previous study, we found a number of Spanish typographical and translation errors in both English- and Spanish-language books. Moreover, based on professional experience in U.S. bilingual classrooms, the first and second authors also perceived differences in level of difficulty between the Spanish and English used in some of the bilingual and dual-language editions, with more challenging language structures and vocabulary in the Spanish texts than in the English.

### Themes and Topics

In fiction for the primary grades, two interrelated themes, the importance of family and intergenerational connections, weave through many of the picture books, for example, in *In My Family / En mi familia* (Garza, 1996), *Going Home* (Bunting, 1996), *Abuelita's Heart* (Cordova, 1997), and *A Gift from Papá Diego / Un regalo de Papá Diego* (Sáenz, 1998). Other themes include the following: (a) childhood memories, in *Chave's Memories* (Delgado, 1996) and *Where Fireflies Dance / Ahí donde bailan las luciérnagas* (Corpi, 1997); (b) growing up and gaining confidence, in *Prietita and the Ghost Woman / Prietita y la llorona* (Anzaldúa, 1996) and *Tomás and the Library Lady [Tomás y la señora de la biblioteca]* (Mora, 1997); (c) cultural transition involving school, in *La Mariposa* (Jiménez, 1998) and *Tonio's Cat* (Calhoun, 1996); and (d) celebrations, in *Snapshots from a Wedding* (Soto, 1997c) and *Birthday Swap [¿Qué sorpresa de cumpleaños!]* (Lopez, 1997).

At the intermediate level, family relationships and family issues were common thematic threads in the focal books, including sibling relations, family secrets, and adjustment to changes in family structure. Intertwined were related themes such as coping with the death of relatives, as in *Meet Josefina* (Tripp, 1997c) and *Leticia's Secret* (Lachtman, 1997b). Although family also constituted an overarching theme for the young adult literature, other themes were also evident, such as maturation and survival struggles in *Buried Onions* (Soto, 1997a), *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida*, (Martinez, 1996) and *Secret of Two Brothers*

(Hernández, 1995); intercultural conflict in *White Bread Competition* (Hernández, 1997); dealing with and overcoming personal issues in *Tommy Stands Alone* (Velásquez, 1995) and *A Sunburned Prayer* (Talbert, 1995); and cultural conservation and change in *Spirits of the High Mesa* (Martínez, 1997).

Informational books tended to reflect three different foci, following in order from highest to lowest occurring: people and places, arts and crafts, and history and culture. The life of a young boy is the focus of each of three books, *Anthony Reynoso: Born to Rope* (Cooper & Gordon, 1996), *Migrant Worker: A Boy from the Rio Grande Valley* (Hoyt-Goldsmith, 1996), and *Barrio: José's Neighborhood* [*Barrio: El barrio de José*] (Ancona, 1998). Two books offer a historical look at cooking and crafts in New Mexico in the early 1800s, *Josefina's Cook Book: A Peek at Dining in the Past with Meals You Can Cook Today* (England & Tripp, 1998a) and *Josefina's Craft Book: A Look at Crafts from the Past with Projects You Can Make Today* (England & Tripp, 1998b).

### Other Aspects

**Gender of Protagonist/Subject.** Works of fiction and biography were examined from a gender perspective. In fiction for the primary grades, females and males were featured as main characters almost equally. In fiction for the intermediate grades, however, only one book had a main character who was male; the rest all featured females. In fiction for young adults, there were twice as many books with male main characters as females. Additionally, with the exception of Gary Soto's *The Old Man and His Door* (1996b), which has an elderly gentleman as its main character, all picture books had children or children and adults together as the main characters. This was also true of fiction at the two higher levels.

Biographies with male subjects outnumbered those with female subjects. Only three different females were biographical subjects: slain Tejano music star Selena Quintanilla Perez, four biographies; farm worker leader and community organizer Dolores Huerta, one biography; and Texas community leader Guadalupe Quintanilla, one biography. However, ten different males were biographical subjects, and the sole autobiography also featured a male subject. Three biographies were devoted to the former farm worker leader and activist Cesar Chávez, two to Tommy Nuñez, professional basketball referee, and one each for the remaining male subjects. Overall, in terms of subjects' professional backgrounds, the biographies seemed to be evenly split among three categories: sports figures, people in entertainment and the arts, and individuals in politics and public service.

**Setting.** Fiction books were examined for setting, that is, the context of time and place. At two levels, primary and young adult, stories set in contemporary times outnumbered those set in the past. We defined the historical past as the time during or prior to World War II. At the intermediate level, however, there were as many books with a contemporary setting as there were books set in the historical past. This even distribution was influenced largely by the *Josefina* historical fiction series, which accounted for six titles at the intermediate level. We assigned these titles to the intermediate level rather than to primary because we considered the Spanish-language editions of the series to be potentially challenging for K-3 readers in U.S. schools.



In terms of place, which we categorized into urban and rural, books with urban settings dominated in the young adult fiction, but at the primary and intermediate levels, books with rural settings were as common as books with urban settings. At each of the two latter levels, one book had a dual rural and urban setting.

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**Authors and Illustrators.** Two writers with the most titles published during the focal period across more than one genre were Gary Soto and Pat Mora. Soto's published works consisted of three picture books for the primary grades, *Big Bushy Mustache* (1998a), *The Old Man and His Door* (1996b), and *Snapshots from the Wedding* (1997c); one chapter book for intermediate, *Off and Running* (1996a); and three titles for young adults, *Buried Onions* (1997a), a novel; *Novio Boy* (1997b), a play; and *Petty Crimes* (1998b), a collection of short stories. Mora's works were *Tomás and the Library Lady* [*Tomás y la señora de la biblioteca*] (1997), a picture book, and three books of poetry for young readers, *Confetti: Poems for Children* (1996), *Delicious Hullabaloo / Pachanga deliciosa* (1998a), and *This Big Sky* (1998b). Another writer, Olivia Dumas Lachtman, also published four books, all fiction, however: *Big Enough / Bastante grande* (1998), *Leticia's Secret*, (1997b), *Call me Consuelo* (1997a), and *The Girl from Playa Blanca* (1995).

Several well-known Chicano writers who traditionally have written for adults published books during this period of time, among them Francisco Alarcón, two poetry collections for young readers, *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems / Jitomates risueños y otros poemas de primavera* (1997) and *From the Belly Button of the Moon and Other Summer Poems / Del ombligo de la luna y otros poemas* (1998); Francisco Jiménez, *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child* (1997), a short story collection for young adults, and *La Mariposa* (1998), a picture book based on material from the former; Victor Martinez, a young adult novel, *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* (1996); Luis Rodríguez, a picture book, *América is Her Name* [*La llaman América*] (1996), as well as the subject of a biography, *Luis Rodriguez: Writer, Community Leader, and Activist* (Schwartz, 1997); and Benjamin Alire Sáenz, the picture book *A Gift from Papá Diego / Un regalo de Papá Diego* (1997). Their Chicana counterparts included Lucha Corpi, with a picture book, *Where Fireflies Dance / Ahí donde bailan las luciérnagas* (1997), and Jo Ann Yolanda Hernández, with a young adult novel, *White Bread Competition* (1997).

Artwork by a variety of artists, many of them of Latino heritage, is reflected in the pages of the focal books. It is noteworthy that art by two well-known Mexican American artists, Carmen Lomas Garza and Amado M. Peña, is the centerpiece in two books, *In My Family / En mi familia* (1996) and *Peña on Peña* (1995), respectively. Additionally, one of the books, *Going Home* (Bunting, 1996), is illustrated by Caldecott Award winner David Diaz. Represented more than once among the illustrators were Maya Christina Gonzalez, for *Prietita*

(Anzaldúa, 1996), *Laughing Tomatoes* (Alarcón, 1997) and *From the Belly Button of the Moon* (Alarcón, 1998); Joe Cepeda, for *Big Bushy Mustache* (Soto, 1998a) and *Old Man and His Door* (Soto, 1996b); Enrique Sánchez, for *Big Enough / Bastante grande* (Lachtman, 1998) and *Dear Abuelita* (Keane, 1997); and Simón Silva for *Gathering the Sun: Alphabet in Spanish and English* (Ada, 1997) and *La Mariposa* (Jiménez, 1998).

**Publishers.** Three specialized or niche publishing companies produced almost a third of the focal books, Arte Público Press and its imprint Piñata Books, 15 titles; Pleasant Company, eight; and Children's Book Press, six. Almost half the titles in the young adult fiction category were by Arte Público, which together with Children's Book Press accounted for one-fourth of the titles in the primary fiction category. The remaining titles by Children's Book Press were in folklore and poetry/rhyme/song. Pleasant Company published two informational books, *Josefina's Cook Book* (England & Tripp, 1998a) and *Josefina's Craft Book* (England & Tripp, 1998b), as part of its newest series.

## Interpretation and Evaluation

Apart from the quantitative, descriptive analysis undertaken, we also looked critically at the content and form of the focal books, identifying noteworthy titles and problematic ones by genre. We present our observations below with the hope of providing a qualitative sense of the literature examined.

### Fiction

A salient feature of the fiction published from 1995 to 1998, if not of the entire body of books for this time period, is a significant core of young adult fiction books which combine gripping content, cultural authenticity, and skilled writing. One such book is *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* by Victor Martinez (1996), winner of the 1996 National Book Award, the 1998 Pura Belpré Award for narrative, and the 1996 Americas Book Award for fiction, among others. Martinez's episodic narrative of 14-year-old Manuel (Manny) Hernandez and his family appears to be cut from life, woven with believable characters, realistic events, and evocative language into a memorable literary whole. The contemporary, urban, and financially strapped Mexican American/Chicano experience lived by Manny in Fresno, California, is laced with pain, humor, innocence, and hope, providing an authentic view that will provoke thought and discussion by students in grades seven and above. An explanation of the intriguing title is given at the outset of this compelling story.

Another exemplary book in the young adult fiction category is *The Circuit: Stories from the Life of a Migrant Child*, a collection of short stories by Francisco Jiménez (1997), which won the 1997 Americas Award for fiction, and is the basis for the picture book *La Mariposa* (1998). Jiménez's honest and poignant portrayal of life along the California migrant circuit will cast doubt, and rightfully so, on the romanticized depiction of the migrant experience sometimes offered in children's and young adult literature. The school experiences of Pancho, the child protagonist, are almost as heart-rending as his experiences at home and in the fields. Throughout the book, the support, sacrifices, and interdependence of the members of Pancho's family are graphically conveyed. As



Martínez does in *Parrot in the Oven*, Jiménez dexterously and authentically utilizes Spanish words, phrases, and sentences to enhance story meaning as only an "insider" of the culture can do and without intimidating the non-Spanish-speaking reader.

Other laudable titles for young adults include *Spirits of the High Mesa* by Floyd Martínez (1997), *Buried Onions* by Gary Soto (1997a), and *White Bread Competition* by Jo Ann Yolanda Hernández (1997). The life challenges faced by young Flavio in Martínez's novel, by 19-year-old Eddie in Soto's story, and by ninth-grader Luz in Hernández's multiple-perspective narrative are diverse in many ways yet related in a basic way—they afford the reader a fuller understanding of growing up Mexican American/ Chicano in the Southwest in contemporary times. In doing so, works such as the foregoing are helping to set a new standard for quality and authenticity in literature about the Mexican American/Chicano experience for adolescent readers.

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Regrettably, the same cannot be said about the fiction we examined for intermediate-grade readers. Although just as many titles were found here as at the higher level, the quality of the intermediate books in terms of content and form was less notable. One lackluster book is *Elena* (Stanley, 1996), which begins by confusing the reader with an explanation about the choice of names for the protagonist, proceeds to gloss over an interesting period in history central to the story line, and ends with a mainstream, ethnocentric perspective on the Mexican American experience.

Given the importance of the intermediate grades to the academic achievement of Latino children and all students in general, a pressing need at this level is for more original, less formulaic offerings. Another concern is that these books tend to be written with mostly a female readership in mind, as few of them feature boys as main characters. One exception to the norm was *Breakaway* (Griffiths, 1997), a sports-oriented story featuring a strong boy character in positive, non-traditional interactions with young and adult female characters. However, a set of popular works, such as the *Josefina* series, although commendable for historical accuracy and for having an advisory board to ensure cultural authenticity, still does not represent a major departure from traditional fare for this level.

In terms of the quality of its words and pictures, the fiction for young readers we examined can best be described as a "mixed bag," with some well-crafted picture books and others not so well-crafted, the latter exhibiting contrived

plots, shallow characters, didactic text, and even stereotypical art. However, it was not difficult to select some laudable picture books for sharing with young audiences, among these are *Snapshots from the Wedding* (Soto, 1997c), not only for its award-winning art but also for its credible child narrator; *In My Family / En mi familia* (Garza, 1996), for its culturally rich art and text; and *Tomás and the Library Lady [Tomás y la señora de la biblioteca]* (Mora, 1997) for its inspiring story line and fine blending of text and art. Stephanie Garcia's art for *Snapshots from the Wedding* was awarded the 1998 Pura Belpré Award for illustration; Garza's book received the 1996 Americas Book Award; and Mora's book won the 1997 Tomás Rivera Book Award.

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A noteworthy book for young readers which breaks some familiar stereotypes of Mexican American child life and culture both artistically and textually is *A Gift from Papá Diego / Un regalo de Papá Diego* (Sáenz, 1998). For example, the birthday piñata so ubiquitous to recent picture and informational books for the young is pleasantly absent in this ingratiating story about a modern, urban Mexican American boy named for his grandfather. In contrast, an example of a picture book whose words and pictures lack appeal and originality is *Big Enough / Bastante grande* (Lachtman, 1998), which features a weak cast of characters, a tiresome plot, and unexciting art.

### Poetry

Engaging poetry for young readers—culturally rich, appealingly illustrated, and often presented bilingually—enhances the poetry/rhyme/song offerings published from 1995 to 1998. Two commendable works are the playful poetry collections by Francisco Alarcón, *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems / Jitomates risueños y otros poemas de primavera* (1997), and *From the Belly Button of the Moon and Other Summer Poems / Del ombligo de la luna y otras poemas de verano* (1998). Particularly impressive is the ability with which Alarcón writes poetry so that it is equally lyrical and captivating in both Spanish and English. Often with just a few words, he is able to evoke a myriad of feelings and images in the reader that leave a lasting impression. Additionally, the art of Maya Christina Gonzalez works in perfect synchrony with Alarcón's poetic texts, providing a strong complement and creating a seamless whole.

Another poetry collection in which the text and illustrations blend into a pleasing, unified product is *This Big Sky*, written by Pat Mora (1998b) and illustrated by Steve Jenkins. The setting of Mora's poems is the southwestern U.S.



desert, primarily its animals and land. A few Spanish words strategically placed in the English compositions serve to remind the reader of the Mexican American/Chicano presence in the desert Southwest. Also a rich amalgam of words and pictures is *Gathering the Sun: Alphabet in Spanish and English* written by Alma Flor Ada (1997) and illustrated by Simón Silva. Respect and dignity for the nation's Mexican American migrant farm workers, young and old, is equally conveyed by the text and art of this book focused on the Spanish alphabet. One of the poems, apparently all originally written in Spanish and then translated into English, pays homage to Chicano farm worker leader Cesar Chávez.

### Informational

A discernible difference in the informational books published from 1995 to 1998 is the absence of "clone-like" editions of holiday and celebration books that were so prominent a finding in earlier analyses. Absent from this investigation, for example, were books focusing entirely on a particular holiday, such as Cinco de Mayo or Day of the Dead, two cultural festivities which appear to have been quite popular with publishers until recently. This does not mean that these holidays were forgotten completely, for we found them embedded in some of the fiction for young readers, for example, in *A Gift for Abuelita: Celebrating Day of the Dead / Un regalo para abuelita: En celebración del Día de los Muertos* (Luern, 1998) and in *Soccer Cousins* (Marzollo, 1997), which contrives cultural flavor in its pages by combining three ingredients: a visit to Mexico, Day of the Dead, and soccer action.

Among the informational texts examined, two photo-essay books worth noting are *Anthony Reynoso: Born to Rope* (Cooper & Gordon, 1996) and *Barrio: José's Neighborhood [Barrio: El barrio de José]* (Ancona, 1998). An original focus, clear text, and sparkling color photography will make *Anthony Reynoso* a memorable book for young readers who are bound to marvel at the roping ability of the nine-year-old Tucson, Arizona, native. They also will be interested in learning what it takes for him to hone his skill as a *charro*. In the San Francisco-set *Barrio*, Ancona displays tremendous respect through his words and pictures for his young photographic subject, José, and his family and community, just as he has done in many of his recent works.

Particularly lacking as an informational text is *Los Vaqueros: Our First Cowboys* (Munson, 1996), which manages to misrepresent its topic through omission of pertinent historical facts, a disorganized presentation, and inappropriately selected and displayed photographs. In contrast, a book that does treat its subject carefully and factually, albeit in a textually and visually challenging way, is *Migrant Worker: A Boy from the Rio Grande Valley* (Hoyt-Goldsmith, 1996), which documents the hard life of an 11-year-old boy, Ricardo (Ricky), whose migrant family lives in the border town of Rio Grande City, Texas. Teachers and students can still learn from the latter book; the same does not hold true for the former.

### Biography

As might be expected, many of the biographies of Mexican Americans published from 1995 to 1998 were part of a series. Among those devoted to subjects

of various previous biographies are *Cesar Chavez: A Photo-illustrated Biography* (Davis, 1998), which lists his wife, Helen Chávez, as a content consultant, and *Dolores Huerta* (Pérez, 1996), which paints an unbalanced view of this revered Chicana as a superwoman who spends her years juggling childrearing and the farm workers' cause. The Chávez biography includes in its end matter a trio of useful web sites for further information on endeavors associated with the farm worker leader. Biographies devoted to "newer" subjects include *Tommy Nuñez, NBA Referee: Taking My Best Shot* (Marvis, 1996) and *Robert Rodriguez* (Marvis, 1998), two books which paint more balanced pictures of their subjects and tell their stories in an engaging manner, as well as *Guadalupe Quintanilla, Leader of the Hispanic Community* (Wade, 1995), a readable account of a modern-day professional woman with a strong social conscience.

### Folklore

While only one book fell into the folklore category, *My First Book of Proverbs / Mi primer libro de dichos* (Gonzales & Ruiz, 1995), it deserves to be commended for breaking new ground in this area. As we noted earlier, most of the folklore relating to the Mexican American experience falls into the domain of root-culture literature, or books dealing with the Mexican experience and Mexican-origin folklore. The two authors, however, give this collection of *dichos*, or folk sayings, a bilingual and bicultural flavor, without compromising either cultural authenticity or quality.

### Concluding Remarks

The past decade has been a period of unprecedented growth of the Latino population in the U.S., the largest proportion of which is Mexican in origin. Unfortunately, during this same time period, the quantity and quality of children's books on the Mexican American/Chicano experience has not kept pace with this significant demographic shift. Our analysis of three years worth of recent books left us both encouraged and discouraged. On the one hand, the total number of Mexican American-themed books published per year continued to grow, reflecting individual titles of admirable literary quality and cultural authenticity. On the other hand, however, these books are still a disproportionately small part of the larger body of U.S. children's literature and their overall quality can best be characterized as uneven. The publishing count for 1998, while not complete at the time of our analysis, merits watching because it appears to be reflecting a possible decrease. What influence, if any, current sociopolitical developments such as the anti-bilingual education referendum in California might have on the publication of Mexican-American themed books in English and/or Spanish remains to be seen. We are heartened, however, by those various professionals in the book-making process—writers, illustrators, publishers, and editors—who continue to advance the state of Mexican American children's literature in a demographically interesting and sociopolitically challenging era.

It should be noted that we have not placed our data within the context of Latino children's publishing during the 1990s to assess its relative state within that collectivity of writing. It would be worthwhile to conduct comparative



analyses, quantitative as well as qualitative, of the different ethnic literatures under the Latino umbrella, and to establish a longitudinal, critical focus on a particular strand, as we have done here on Mexican American children's literature. Likewise, one might look also at culturally-generic Latino children's books (i.e., books that feature ethnically-undistinguishable Latinos) and multicultural/multiethnic Latino children's books (i.e., books that feature different groups of Latino peoples, including Mexican Americans/Chicanos) and relate, if possible, such types of books to patterns and trends in Mexican American children's literature in the 1990s. We would like to think that this and other related research has potential for positively influencing the state of children's books dealing with Mexican American/Chicano life and culture.

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