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Spanish-language writers and the making of a U.S. literary tradition

Since the 16th century, the Spanish language has been interwoven into the fabric of American history, shaping its literary and cultural landscapes. Yet, much of this literary tradition remains underexplored. In “Florilegio,” Víctor Fuentes — a professor emeritus at UC Santa Barbara — brings together a collection of Spanish-language texts written within the United States, spanning from the 16th to the mid-20th century.

The book’s title, meaning “flower picking,” reflects its purpose: to gather and showcase a literary tradition that has long flourished in the U.S., even if it has often been overlooked. “This literature is part of the history of the United States, but it has been forgotten, erased,” said Fuentes, a historian of Spanish literature. “My intention is to bring part of that to the reader, to offer it.” The texts include diaries, essays and poetry, accompanied by brief notes on the authors and an extensive bibliography — tools Fuentes hopes will inspire further scholarship.

More than an anthology, “Florilegio” presents a historical and cultural context for these works, offering what Fuentes described as “the seeds of a history of Spanish-language literature in the U.S., waiting to be written.” With its 375 pages, “Florilegio de las letras en español en los Estados Unidos: desde el siglo XVI a mediados del XX” (Stockcero 2024), collects a vast amount of erudite and creative texts, divided into five parts with multiple sections exploring diverse themes and topics. The book offers a comprehensive look at this literary tradition, highlighting its richness and

complexity.

Conceived as a tribute to Don Luis Leal, one of the most influential Latin Americanists in the U.S., “Florilegio” honors the legacy of the late professor emeritus of UCSB’s Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies. Leal’s early advocacy helped elevate Spanish-language literature within academia, and Fuentes said he hoped to continue this mission by highlighting voices that shaped the literary world across centuries.

“Leal was one of the first scholars to teach Chicano literature at the university level,” Fuentes said. “He legitimized it, gave it the recognition it deserved.” For his work, Leal was honored with a National Humanities Medal. Two articles by Don Luis are included in Fuentes’ anthology, “Vida y aventuras del idioma español en los Estados Unidos” and “¿Qué es un latino?”

“Florilegio” underscores the ongoing influence of Spanish in the U.S. “The Spanish language has been used in literary form since the 1500s — it’s had a continuous legacy,” Fuentes noted. “We tend to think of Spanish in the U.S. as something recent, something tied only to immigration, but it has always been here.” The book illustrates how Spanish-language literature has been integral to American culture, much like French in Canada or Nahuatl in Mexico. “It’s not just a matter of language,” Fuentes added. “It’s a matter of identity, of cultural memory.”

In “Florilegio,” Fuentes brings together works from a range of Spanish-language writers whose voices have shaped literary history in the United States. Among them is Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá, whose “Historia de la Nueva México” (1610) stands as one of the earliest epic poems about the American Southwest. Fuentes also highlights the contributions of José Martí, the Cuban poet and revolutionary who wrote extensively while in exile in New York, and María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, a 19th-century novelist who captured the struggles of Californios in the wake of U.S. annexation. The collection also includes selections from Mexican American writers such as Américo Paredes, showcasing the evolution of Spanish-language literature from the colonial era through the mid-20th century.

Gabriela Mistral, the Chilean poet and Nobel Laureate, also features in “Florilegio,” reflecting the deep literary and cultural exchanges between Latin America and the U.S. Mistral spent years in the U.S. as an educator and diplomat, influencing Spanish-language literary circles and advocating for bilingual education. Her poetry,

which explores themes of identity, exile and social justice, resonates with the broader narrative of Hispanic literary contributions in the U.S. “Her last great work, ‘Poema de Chile,’ in part written in Santa Barbara, where she lived in 1946–47, contains a marvelous homage to the native Indigenous population,” noted Fuentes.

By bringing these texts to light, “Florilegio” invites readers to rediscover a literary history that has long been part of the American story. Fuentes hopes that, in doing so, the book will help shift the narrative around Spanish in the U.S. “This is a literature that belongs to everyone," he said. “It is time for it to be recognized as such.

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