Latinos have been writing poetry in these lands that became the United States since the late-sixteenth century. Despite their having cultivated all types of written and oral literature during the ensuing centuries of incorporation into the United States through conquest, territorial purchase, and immigration, many of their literary traditions persisted in order to preserve their cultural identity within an expanding and overwhelmingly aggressive “national” culture that did not recognize Spanish speakers as part of an ever-evolving “America.”

It was not until the emergence of a Latino literary movement as part of civil rights struggles in the 1960s that scholars, critics, and writers gained some awareness of Latino poetry, its traditions and practices, albeit only in the poetry that was accessible to them through the English language. Like the civil rights struggles themselves, the literary movement was highly identified with working-class communities and mores, and self-consciously was derived from and nurtured by folk literary practices and rituals—most importantly by the tradition of the roving bards and musical performers.

The first poets involved in the Chicano Movement hailed from these grass roots. Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, the author of what has been acknowledged as the Chicano epic poem, I Am Joaquin/Yo soy Joaquin, was a boxer and political activist. The poem, self-published bilingually in 1967, summarized Mexican and Mexican American history, reviewed the exploitation of the mestizos from colonial times to the present, and shaped a nationalist ideology for activism, using the model of the nineteenth-century social rebel, Joaquin Murieta. The pamphlet edition of the poem was literally passed from hand to hand in communities, read aloud at rallies, dramatized by Chicano theaters, and even produced as a slide show on a film with a dramatic reading by the major dramatist/activist of the times, Luis Valdez. All of this spurred further grassroots poetic creativity and pointed to the poet as a spokesperson for his/her disenfranchised community.

Another community-based poet, Abelardo Barreto (Delgado), was a Spanish-dominant bilingual writer steeped in the performance styles and the intimate relationship of declamadores to their local audiences; instead of performing his works at holiday celebrations, Mother’s Day, and poetic debates (which he was perfectly capable and willing to do), his performances now took place at political rallies, strikes, and marches. Unlike many a traditional declamador, however, Abelardo allowed his poems to be printed and circulated in local barrio newspapers throughout the Southwest, where community folk and activists found them, copied them, and then circulated them by hand. Out of practicality and in order to spread the word of the Chicano Movement, Abelardo began to self-publish books of his own poetry, such as Chicano: 22 Pieces of a Chicano Mind (1969), which became one of the first bestsellers in the barrios and a staple in the early ethnic studies courses at universities.

The word of the political and social movement, accompanied by artistic expression of all types, from mural painting to street theater, quickly spread to those warehouses of the victims of racism and miseducation: the prisons. From prison cells emerged self-taught voices that again returned to their barrio upbringings for inspiration and passionately declared that their previous violence on society would be redirected to revolution or reform in the name of their community. From behind the bars emerged some of the most lasting and inspiring poets: Ricardo Sánchez, Raúl Salinas, and, later, Jimmy Santiago Baca. In fact, Salinas made the prison experience the central metaphor for Chicano life in the barrios in his Un Trip through the Mind Jail (1973).

In New York and the Midwest, a similar grassroots movement emerged, also led by poets of the spoken word who were inspired by folk poetry and music, in this case salsa music and performance. From the prisons emerged Piri Tomas, Miguel Piñero, Lucky Cienfuegos, and numerous others. Community bards, such as Jorge Brandon, declamando his poems on corners in the Lower East Side, served as models of artistic and cultural commitment for these writers, as did the African American jailhouse poets. Tato Laviera even apprenticed himself to Brandon, who had traveled the countries rimming the Caribbean basin reciting his works and collecting the words and styles of other declamadores, from Columbia to Mexico. A very young Victor Hernández Cruz studied the relationship established by salsa composers and performers with their audiences and emulated their artistry, hoping to reproduce the Afro-Caribbean sounds and ethos of Ray Barretto, Eddie Palmieri, and Tito Puente. In Chicago, David Hernández likewise took street and salsa rhythms and diction and even performed with Afro-Caribbean jazz ensembles.

Nuyorican writing made its appearance with a definite proletarian identity, emerging from the
From prison cells emerged self-taught voices that again returned to their barrio upbringings for inspiration.

The 1970s saw the emergence of the first generation of US Hispanics to have expanded access to college. For Chicano literature, the decade of the 1960s was a time of questioning of all the commonly accepted truths in the society, foremost of which was the question of equality. The grassroots movement was soon followed by the bilingual movement that sought to capture the sights and sounds of their “urban pastoral,” it was an easy and natural step to cultivating bilingual poetry, to capture the bilingual-bicultural reality that surrounded them and reintroducing their works into their communities. El Barrio, the Bronx, and Loisaida (the Lower East Side) neighborhood audiences, made exigent by the technical sophistication of salsa records and live performances, as well as in film and literature, demanded authenticity, artistic virtuosity, and philosophical and political insight. And Laviena, Hernández Cruz, Esteves, and Pietri reigned as masters for almost two decades. 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