

## Book Review

### Narratives of Greater Mexico: Essays on Chicano Literary History, Genre, & Borders

Hector Calderón

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As its subtitle suggests, *Narratives of Greater Mexico* offers not a single thesis about Chicano literature but a series of chapter-length essays tied loosely together by a common thematic of borders. Identified on the book's back cover as "one of the founders of Chicano literary criticism" – he co-edited the widely cited 1991 anthology, *Criticism in the Borderlands* – Calderón has structured the book around his position as a participant, not just an observer, in the birth of a new field. *Narratives of Greater Mexico* interweaves analysis with anecdote, describing the author's textual and personal encounters with Américo Paredes, Rudolfo Anaya, Tomás Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Oscar "Zeta" Acosta, Cherríe Moraga, and Sandra Cisneros. Since many of these writers themselves worry the boundaries between memoir and fiction, observation and engagement, this kind of personalism is not out of place. Indeed, networks of relation between "critical" and "creative" writers were crucial to that seminal moment when the *Movimiento*, having lost political momentum, took its cultural turn in the 1980s, and in brief but vivid passages we glimpse the younger Calderón's sense of excitement and discovery as he witnesses Chicano literature's parallel coming of age.

Unfortunately, Calderón does not capitalize on his front-row seat to tell the history of this process of institutionalization in any depth, and the book too often lapses into admiring descriptions of "my writer friends" (218). A chapter on the *nuevomexicano* tradition, for instance, describes Calderón's road trip to Jémez Springs, where he plans to interview Anaya about the epic sweep of his later novels and gets invited to stay at the writer's ranch. But accepting Anaya's hospitality seems to paralyze his critical instincts: he administers a well-deserved drubbing to Charles Lummis for romanticizing the New Mexican past, but then falls into the same language when he describes *Bless Me, Ultima* as "an elegaic romance, a beautiful vision of a Hispanic Southwest that is passing out of existence" (39). He rightly concludes that the transparency of its archetypal framework "accounts ... for the book's international popularity" because it offers outsiders "easy access into the Chicano world" (50), an insight that prompts important questions about the consequences of such "easy access" for the process of canon formation but does not go on to address them. Indeed, throughout *Narratives of Greater Mexico*, Chicano literature stands as a self-affirming and unexamined category. A very brief discussion of the recently recovered *nuevomexicano* writers Cleofas Jaramillo, Nina Otero-Warren, and Aurelio Espinosa effectively disqualifies them from membership in that canon: "one cannot but be amazed at this conservative strain of Mexican American thought" (14). Since the book makes overtures to historicist method – long passages



are devoted to the history of Texas and New Mexico, though not (curiously enough) to Calderón's home state of California – this unwillingness to engage early texts on their own terms is disappointing.

The book's central chapters treat seminal works associated with the Chicano Movement, examining the relationship between print organs and political agency and offering suggestive insights about "points of coincidence between early Chicano Movement print culture and [that of] sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain" (74). When its critical focus shifts to contexts of reception rather than production, however, the results are mixed. Calderón argues that Rivera's famous novel ... *Y no se le tragó la tierra* is calculated to transform "the individual Chicano reader" (74); through the reading process "Chicano readers are made aware of the structural and conceptual limits of their own class and cultural situation" (77). However true this may be in many particular cases, such an ill-defined idealization of "the Chicano reader" skirts the problem of internal distinctions of class and language, not to mention the significant tension between urban and rural manifestations of *chicanismo* during the late 1960s and 1970s. It also tells us nothing about how non-Chicano readers have apprehended the novel, especially in the university classrooms where it has had its widest dissemination, nor does it address the competing English translations of Rivera's work.

Calderón is on firmer ground when he makes observations about literary genre, and the chapters on Hinojosa-Smith and Cisneros offer solid if unrevelatory readings about the thematic and structural underpinnings of their work, bolstered by his conversations with the authors. Perhaps because Acosta is the one writer with whom

Calderón does not claim a personal connection, the chapter on *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* seems to flounder about in search of a thesis: he rehearses the coalescences and divergences between that work and the known facts of Acosta's abbreviated life and then summarizes it as "a palimpsest of genres" (107). He concludes that *Brown Buffalo* should be considered "as one of the many voices of an international sixties period" (110), but since no such global contexts have been offered in the preceding analysis, the point has not been earned. Indeed, more attention to transnational contexts throughout might have lent *Narratives of Greater Mexico* a more powerful sense of coherence. Despite the geographical amplitude of its title, and its closing reassurances that "the border is everywhere in Mexico and the United States" (218), the book pays relatively little attention to language questions or to authors and audiences *del otro lado*, with the exception of some helpful but unoriginal readings of Paz and Fuentes in relation to Moraga's figure of *la vendida*.

The discussion of Moraga does make a welcome foray beyond *Loving in the War Years* to her later writings, yet this too is marred by a genteel unwillingness to delve too deeply into the sometimes contradictory directions her work takes. Moraga has always had a knack for recounting autobiographical detail in ways that become symbolically resonant, but Calderón's dutiful recounting of those details refuses her invitation to *interpret* those resonances. For instance, he notes that at one point she eventually took back her white father's name (it is not clear in what context), yet during the same period she finds "solace once again in her culture – feminismo and indigenismo" (137). This kind of inconsistency begs for

a more rigorous engagement than it gets here. Likewise, he repeats but does not comment on Moraga's critique of the academy – her contention that “Ethnic Studies and Women [sic] Studies programs have moved away from the political struggles out of which they emerged” (136). An awareness of the

importance of such institutional contexts to the way we read and talk about Chicana/o literature hovers around *Narratives of Greater Mexico*, but never quite lands.

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