

RECENT CHICANA/O CULTURAL CRITICISM

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CHICANA FEMINISMS: A CRITICAL READER. Edited by Gabriela F. Arredondo, Aída Hurtado, Norma Klahn, Olga Nájera-Ramírez, and Patricia Zavella. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. Pp. xii+391. \$23.95 paper.)

EXTINCT LANDS, TEMPORAL GEOGRAPHIES: CHICANA LITERATURE AND THE URGENCY OF SPACE. By Mary Pat Brady. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. Pp. 274. \$54.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)

GANG NATION: DELINQUENT CITIZENS IN PUERTO RICAN, CHICANO, AND CHICANA NARRATIVES. By Monica Brown. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Pp. xxv+212. \$52.95 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)

LIFE IN SEARCH OF READERS: READING (IN) CHICANO/A LITERATURE. By Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003. Pp. 232. \$35.00 cloth.)

HISTORIA: THE LITERARY MAKING OF CHICANA AND CHICANO HISTORY. By Louis Gerard Mendoza. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001. Pp. xi+336. \$49.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)

One can now speak of over three decades of Chicana/o studies, in the realm of culture defined on the basis of literature, as well as culture defined on the basis of history, sociology, and anthropology (obviously, excluding the important Chicana/o studies work in the natural and health sciences). Chicana/o studies, undoubtedly, has become an academic discipline, and it would be inconceivable for a major university—or any college in an area of significant demographic concentration of Chicanas/os—not to have a formal department or, at least, an interdisciplinary studies unit. Indeed, faculty members often have to make a choice as to whether to stay in their original disciplinary department, or to base themselves primarily in the Chicana/o studies program.

But such a decision is characteristically intertwined with issues of language. The simple fact is now that Chicana/o studies research and

teaching is mostly conducted in English (a necessary part of its mainstreaming into the U.S. academic marketplace). Scholars who prefer to emphasize Spanish-language Chicana/o literature must remain primarily within the Spanish program. It is not always an easy division of labor, since, while Chicana/o writing in English may be studied in a Spanish course along with the writing in Spanish (after all, Spanish programs have always studied a certain amount of literature written in other languages: Borges's few texts in English, for example, or Spanish-language translations of Latin American indigenous composition), an English course does not include original writing in Spanish, which is why it has been necessary to translate important founding documents into English.

Moreover, as part of the emergence of a national Latino consciousness in the United States, Chicana/o literature can no longer "stand alone," as it did in much of the 1970s and 1980s, but rather is interfaced with Nuyorican and Cuban-American writing, not to mention individuals of other Latin American origins who give evidence of being part of a continuum with Latino society (e.g., the performance work and narrative prose, respectively, of the Colombian-Americans John Leguizamo and Jaime Manrique or the theater of Chilean-American Guillermo Reyes). Preponderantly—usually for lamentable market reasons—Latino writing is in English (except for Nuyorican poetry in *caló*, it is difficult to come up with names of writers in Spanish), which has brought Chicana/o writing more and more into the orbit of the English language. It is an English that is often heavily inflected with Spanish and *raza* cultural referents, often with little concession to the Anglo reader, giving it a significant parallel to African-American writing.

Essentialism continues to play a strong role in Chicana/o scholarship, although I would venture to say that it is often significantly attenuated: few scholars of *raza* origin would now insist that only scholars of such origin should be engaged in teaching and researching Chicana/o literature, and the concept of Aztlán has become more of a symbolic icon than a compelling foundational myth.

But Chicana scholarship has affirmed itself in splendid ways. Not only is there the insistence that the record of gender discrimination be corrected by writing Chicana first in the formulation "Chicana/[Chican]o," but the simple fact is that, statistically, there appears to be more Chicana than Chicano scholarship going on. Unquestionably, the demand for feminist writing in the United States has seen, concomitantly, a preponderance of Chicana women writers in the past decade, while few noteworthy Chicano names have emerged.

The importance of Chicana feminism is witnessed in several of the volumes under review here. *Chicana Feminisms*, for example, is the most ambitious work to date on the subject. The result of an interdisciplinary

collective based at the University of California at Santa Cruz (established in 1992), five scholars from complementary disciplines (anthropology, folklore, history, literature, and psychology) have organized a volume of eleven state-of-the-art essays. First of all, one will notice the use of the plural (*feminisms*) in the title. While the use of the singular does not always signify that there is one, and only one, feminism—abstract nouns may involve a collective reading: philosophy does mean, in addition to a unitarily conceived discipline, all possible varieties of doing or engaging in philosophy—it is true that one must often insist on the plural form in order to underscore the fact that there is not one overarching construction of what it means, in this case, to be a Chicana and to be involved in feminism.

A second feature of the essays is the way in which each of the eleven papers is accompanied by a response. In many cases, if the main paper deals with a specific phenomenon (i.e., a particular text or group of texts), the response will place the main paper in a larger theoretical and bibliographic context, or vice-versa (in one case, the response is given in Spanish, along with an accompanying translation). It is difficult to single out a few of the essays, since, between main papers and responses, the twenty-two names, along with the five editors, constitute something like an intellectual “who’s who” for the field. The subtitle of the introduction (really, a twelfth essay) is “Disruptions in Dialogue,” a trope that not only figures the multiplicity of voices, methodologies, and points of view, but as well the (inter)disciplinary solidarity that the original collective implies: “Such multidisciplinary can be challenging, problematic, and marginal. Working at the interstices, Chicana feminists make visible subjugated knowledges and offer new theories and insights” (6–7).

Finally, the twenty-seven scholars are not all women. If one sign of the intellectual sophistication of Chicana/o scholarship has been a movement away from the privileging of identity politics, the participation, commitment, and contribution of men in the discussion of women’s issues, in both political and theoretical terms, is also an indication of this sophistication. It is difficult to conceive of virtually any course in Chicana/o studies in which this book, if it is not used as a main text, should not be a recommended title.

Gang Nation does several things with the concept of “gang.” In the first place, it literally refers to the social phenomenon of the gang. After all, it is under this heading that the book is classified by the Library of Congress: the gangs studied here are specifically Latino gangs, but with a strong emphasis on their feminine incarnations. But Brown’s title is essentially a trope on both the term *gang* and on the term *nation*, in that she sees such gangs not just as delinquent organizations, but as sites of

social struggle, and she sees them as replications of the American nation within which they take place, as collectives marked by the aspiration to be part of the larger, legitimate nation, even as that nation rejects them as social outcasts and misfits.

Working from theories of the Other, whereby the identity of A is defined in large measure by what it excludes and brackets as B, Brown sees the gang both as an internally coherent social group and as a reprehensible menace that is more meaningful in terms of the view of what it *is not*, rather than in terms of what *it is* internally. The gang is anything that cannot be absorbed into the dominant Anglo-racist ideology of social organization. American middle-class society perceives Latinos as a menace when the latter do not aspire to become part of mainstream culture. Latinos, in order to be acceptable to the dominant culture, must undergo disruptive and reconstitutive changes. The rejection of the demand for such changes is distilled into the figure of the gang. Concomitantly, the demand for such changes is repelled and distilled into the figure of the gang, which is viewed as destructive (thereby legitimating any and all sorts of police repression) and subject to repression (which permits the negation of any attempt to analyze the constructed figure of the gang).

Despite the volume's classification by the Library of Congress, Brown does not set out to provide yet another examination of Latino gangs from the perspective of the social sciences, either by recycling the condemnations of their blight on American society or redeeming them as potent sites of social action. Rather, as a literary scholar, her interest lies in examining a diverse inventory of cultural production in which the urban gang constitutes the controlling social dynamic of a narrative text—here, novels, TV episodes, and documentaries. Brown's interest is focused as a consequence on those texts that seriously attempt to analyze urban life constituted around the collective life and solidarity of the resistant space of the gang, but always with the understanding that life in the gang is part of the attempt to gain access to the American dream, the American way of life, and American national culture.

In selecting her texts, Brown acknowledges her repudiation of what she calls the "spectacularization of the gang," a representation whereby readers anxious for facile images of the violence of an outcast youth culture are mendaciously catered to by a popular culture market. This is a problem that not only characterizes some non-Latino writing about gangs, but also some of the texts of Latino writers as well. Rather than surveying the many texts of these various classifications, Brown focuses in depth on a few judiciously chosen ones, some of which, like Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* and Luis Valdés's *Zoot Suit* (both play and film) are now solid parts of the canon. Of special interest is the way in which Brown returns repeatedly to gender issues in her

discussion of texts by male authors and—the most important contribution of her monograph—the third chapter, devoted to “American She: Gendering Gangs.” As Brown notes, there has been insufficient attention paid to female gangs and to the cultural production about them, and her chapter provides a fine point of departure for additional work.

It is worth noting that Brown only refers in passing to film, and she does not mention what the Cuban-American primary bibliography might be, nor that of other Latino groups (e.g., the gang references in Colombian-American John Leguizamo’s performance work).

Chicana feminism is also the basis of Brady’s superb monograph, *Extinct Land, Temporal Geographies* although in this case it is combined with human geography—that is, the way social subjects/social subjectivities relate to space, both the geological terrain within which individuals and societies move and their built environment. It has often been noted that Chicanas/os are particularly sensitive to space, although one would need to evaluate this statement with respect to ethnic literatures in general and to correlate it with the longstanding tradition of regional or region-centered literature in the United States. Yet, one reason why Chicana/o literature would be particularly tied to locale is that, beyond the concrete sense of a relationship to the Southwest (and, concomitantly, to a “lost” Mexico) and the mythic figure of Aztlán, there is the very real issue of displacement, dispossession, and expropriation by greater political and economic powers of Chicana/o identity, whether collectively in terms of the disruption of the barrio or personally in terms of individual loss.

In terms of feminist issues, these questions are raised to a second order, both in the way in which women are more disadvantaged and in the way in which—and this can be seen as a prominent motif in ethnic literature—men are feminized by the agents of hegemonic power. At the same time, feminist geography traces the specific historical relations women have to space, not only the ways in which certain spaces have been assigned to women as privatively, putatively feminine, but the way in which women, whether in the form of resistance or just simply survival, appropriate certain spaces as their own and for their own needs. An eloquent example would be the way in which the space of the Church (paradigmatically Catholic, to be sure) is a space of feminine movement, interaction, and communal fulfillment. The Church as an institution may be part of a vast patriarchal hierarchy, but the nave and surrounding areas of the Church as embodied materially in its buildings are spaces in which women (and often feminized men) move prominently. The altar as the site of the Mass may belong to the priest—and through him, to the patriarchal institution—but the audience of the Mass is typically made up of women, and the care of the altar is in the hands of women far more than it is used for the saying of Mass. There is, of course, a complex relationship between women as feminine agents and women delegates

of the masculine authority of the Church, but the relationship between women and the Church is an important place to begin the analysis of feminist space in Latin American culture in general, but, with particular visibility, Mexicana/Chicana women in particular.

Brady does not focus at any precise point on the relationship between Chicanas and the Church, although she does devote one section—as well as passing references—to the Virgin of Guadalupe, that ecclesiastic figure who is both an instrument in the domination of the indigenous and mestizo people by the European Church and a powerful symbol of ethnic and gender rebellion and reinscription. Brady remains very much in the context of liberal feminism in her study and her discussions of feminist interpretations of space in major writers like Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Terri de la Peña, who is less well known among general Chicano and Anglo readers than the other three. Although some reference is made to lesbianism and lesbian desire, it is regrettable that Brady does not enter much into a discussion of this facet of feminist identity.

Brady grew up as a Chicana near the Mexican border in the mining town of Douglas, Arizona, and one of the most notable features of her book is the long introductory chapter devoted to conflicting Anglo and Chicana interpretations of the state, both in the sense of its current existence as a political entity and, more importantly, in the geographic space that predates that current identity. She begins her chapter with the bald statement that “Arizona began as a mistake” (13), and goes on to examine, with reference to feminist writing, primarily Patricia Preciado Martín’s story “The Journey,” the “production of Arizona as the Anglo complement to the Nuevomexicano other” (46). Arizona is in many ways the least “Hispanic” of the four border states, and this gem of a chapter is an excellent interpretation of why this is so and why Latino society has yet to exercise a consistently persuasive voice in contemporary Arizona (I write this from an office in downtown Phoenix, as I look out at the unremittingly Anglo skyline of what is now the nation’s largest state capital and fifth largest demographic concentration: I know that the barrio is on the other side of the high-rises I see as I write this, but they cannot be seen from here).

Mendoza’s literary history is more of a conventional analysis of literature than the works discussed so far, in that he is committed to a survey of contemporary works that have been crucial to the formation of the Chicana/o literary canon. Yet what is important about his study is the good, old-fashioned commitment to the eloquence of creative writing. It remains true that Chicano works are often read as fictional texts that nevertheless document the Movement and the struggles for social justice, with social science works *strictu sensu* routinely consulted to verify the accuracy of the fictional representation.

Mendoza's interest, however, is in revalidating the richness of literary representations and their particular power to provide deep and complex characterizations of human events. At the same, and as part of the seriousness with which he invests in the particular power of literature, he is uncomfortable with the way in which historical writing (and, one would assume, other forms of social science writing) are treated as literary texts:

[History] is the narrative battleground upon which the literature is based—the writing and rewriting of Chicana/o history thus becomes an important subtext of the literature. On the other hand, in most Chicana/o literary criticism, Chicana/o historical narratives are integrated uncritically into an analysis of the literature to establish a context or background for reading. In these cases Chicana/o historical writings are invoked as a representation of the “real,” a presentation of historical facts as a counternarrative intended to complement or substantiate the imaginative subject matter of the literature. This use of history merely reinforces a polarity in which history is seen as “factual truth” and literature as “imaginary.” (17)

Mendoza, as one might expect, refers to Hayden White and the line of thinking he defended in which historical writing is a form of rhetorical figuration rather than an objective representation of the “real.” Mendoza does not necessarily wish to return to a pre-White position with regard to the nature of historical writing, although he does wish to defend a productive tension between a putatively proper history and a putatively proper literature. Such a distinction is unconcerned with defending the turf of history: as a social science, history need not worry much about its primacy in a hierarchy with literature. Rather, the problem lies with “enriching” literature by including texts whose markers of textual production (stated objective, discursive protocols, evidentiary citations, footnotes, bibliographies, and indexes) reveal them to be, if not definitively history, at least not definitively literature. Therefore retaining textual production within the latter category allows it to be advantageously analyzed for the processes of fictionalization that one customarily associates with literature.

There is little point, it seems to me, in arguing with Mendoza about ambiguous texts, either how they relate to history versus literature or any other genre versus literature, since the issue is what one wishes to accomplish with a textual analysis. Mendoza clearly wishes to promote the distinguishing characteristics and advantages of those texts that can be bracketed in any number of ways as literature—or, perhaps, as literature because they are not history, and so on. There are necessarily texts that are going to present issues: Is Chicano literature better off for relegating Richard Rodriguez (whom Mendoza does not discuss) to the category of nonliterature? Or, since Cherríe Moraga clearly is a Chicana literary giant, should a text like *Waiting in the Wings: Portrait of a Queer Motherhood*, in which Moraga describes in autobiographical terms the

experience of becoming a mother through artificial insemination, be excluded from her so-called literary record?

I find Mendoza rather highly selective in his choice of literary works. For example, John Rechy is never mentioned, despite his foundational role in the Chicano novel and in the ethnic novel in American literature, nor is Miguel Méndez-M.; Aristeo Brito's *El diablo en Texas* is discussed as a historical document; and, reference to theater is also absent, although the historical correlations of Luis Valdés's Teatro Campesino are clearly impressive. Yet the discussion of the interrelationship between historiography and literary creativity is persuasively handled. Readers will, however, note the troubling paucity of coverage for the Chicana part of Mendoza's title.

Martín-Rodríguez's monograph in many respects is the most interesting of the titles reviewed here; it is certainly the most innovative. The examination of readerships, whether undertaken in a theoretical vein (as it is here) or in a sociohistorical way (through a methodologically coherent survey of the literary marketplace) has not been done with regard to Hispanic letters. Danny Anderson has been publishing some important essays with reference to contemporary Mexican literature and its readership and the editorial enterprises that serve it, while Alejandro Herrero-Olaizola has done similar and equally fascinating work with respect to contemporary Spanish literature and official editorial policies in Spain.

Martín-Rodríguez's study is theoretical in the sense that he does not use statistical analyses and surveys, but rather interprets various periods and instances of Chicana/o literature in order to identify the shifts in its nature as cultural production, taking into account diverse implicit readerships. Although his perspective is historical and reaches back to the origins of a Chicana/o literary practice in the colonial period of Latin American and Mexico, he is mostly concerned with practices that date from the mid-twentieth century.

Martín-Rodríguez begins with the Quinto Sol project, which was both a literary and cultural review and a publishing imprint, and he speaks of the Quinto Sol generation, which is defined primarily by the foundational anthology from 1969, *El espejo/The Mirror*, edited by Octavio I. Romano-V.:

For the first time in Chicano/a literary history, an anthology of Mexican American writers from different parts of the United States (along with some from Mexico) reached beyond the local level to present a selection of what was then perceived as an emergent national literature. In fact, the search for a national culture and visibility became one of the major forces behind both the Chicano/a Movement and its editorial branch. In the realm of letters, it could be claimed that the zenith of this nationalistic drive was attained with the institution of the Quinto Sol annual literary prizes . . . (18)

Martín-Rodríguez accomplishes several things with this paragraph: he describes a unified editorial project that defined a field of Chicana/o

writing by bringing together writers from various parts of the United States and including, notably, some Mexican writers (the relationship between Chicana/o and Mexican writers is a particularly thorny issue). Martín-Rodríguez conceives the overarching project in terms of a nationalistic enterprise, which was the definition of a Chicana/o people; and he creates conditions for a sustained literary production. It is important to note, however, that Martín-Rodríguez does not address what is also an important dimension of this project: the matter of gender, both in the exclusion of women writers and in the underlying, unquestionable assumption of heterosexuality. Martín-Rodríguez barely mentions matters of queer gender (he does discuss homosexuality with reference to José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho*, and although Cherríe Moraga is mentioned on several occasions, her seminal essay on gender issues, "Queer Aztlán," is not. John Rechy is mentioned briefly a couple of times, but the question of the reception (or nonreception) of his works as part of the Chicana/o canon in the light of his public homosexuality and the intersection of the Chicano and queer sexuality in many of his works is a crucial issue for the definition of a Chicana/o readership and its changing face.

However, *Life in the Search of Readers* does devote an entire chapter to "(En)gendering the Reader: Chicana Literature and Its Implied Audience." Yet, just as male homosexuality is ignored, Chicana lesbian writing, the lesbian writer, the lesbian character, and the implied lesbian reader are all regrettably ignored. Chicana writers have been far more explicit in dealing with queer sexuality, both in terms of creative representations and cultural and sociohistorical theorizing, than male writers have been (after all, Carla Trujillo's anthology *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* was first published in 1991).

Juan Bruce-Novoa once said that American publishers were eagerly awaiting the emergence of the great Chicano novelist. The various ways in which Chicana/o literature has been "mainstreamed" during the past two decades—including its incorporation into the American literary canon under the rubric of ethnic writing, the virtual triumph of English as the linguistic medium of composition (even when versions of *caló* and code-switching are present), and its inclusion in the inventory of American literature being translated into foreign languages and studied abroad—are all phenomena that are crucial, albeit not always celebrated, milestones in the long road from the publication of *El espejo/ The Mirror* over three decades ago.

Taken as a group, these studies attest to the enormous development of Chicana/o literary studies—in this case, always to be celebrated—that has occurred since the publication in 1972 of an equally important foundation text of Chicana/o culture, *Literatura chicana: Texto y contexto*, edited by Antonia Castañeda Schular, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, and

Joseph Sommers. Indeed, a desirable companion volume to Martín-Rodríguez's study might now be an examination of the creation in the past thirty-plus years of the Chicana/o critical establishment.

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