

MAPPING THE MINEFIELD:
The State of Chicano and U.S. Latino
Literary and Cultural Studies

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CHICANO POETICS: HETEROTEXTS AND HYBRIDITIES. By Alfred Arteaga. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. 185. \$49.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.)

SHOW AND TELL: IDENTITY AS PERFORMANCE IN U.S. LATINA/O FICTION. By Karen Christian. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997. Pp. 189. \$39.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

THE AZTEC PALIMPSEST: MEXICO IN THE MODERN IMAGINATION. By Daniel Cooper Alarcón. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997. Pp. 224. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)

GENTE DECENTE: A BORDERLANDS RESPONSE TO THE RHETORIC OF DOMINATION. By Leticia M. Garza-Falcón. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998. Pp. 303. \$35.00 cloth, \$18.95 paper.)

SPEAKING FOR THEMSELVES: NEOMEXICANO CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE SPANISH-LANGUAGE PRESS, 1880–1920. By Doris Meyer. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996. Pp. 279. \$29.95 paper.)

LATIN LOOKS: IMAGES OF LATINAS AND LATINOS IN THE U.S. MEDIA. Edited by Clara E. Rodríguez. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997. Pp. 288. \$69.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.)

What is the direction of Chicano and Latino literary and cultural studies? The equivocal use of terms signals some of the uncertainty that this question raises.¹ While the books reviewed here reveal some trends or

1. The terms *U.S. Latino* and *Latina* or simply *Latino* and *Latina* are gaining favor, especially as programs using these names become more established, particularly in the eastern United States (simultaneously, *Hispanic* is appearing less often). But many scholars still focus on groups defined by nationality: Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, U.S. Puertorricans. Chicano/a Studies reflects the Mexican-American civil rights movement of the 1960s and tends to suggest specific political orientations. In this review, I will try to use the terms that seem most appropriate to the work being reviewed, but my use of both *Chicano* (a particular “national” group) and *Latino* (an ascendant “blanket” term) follows the greater number of

common concerns, perhaps the main conclusion that can be reached is that this area of study is in a state of such growth that no single methodological, thematic, generic, or theoretical approach reigns at this moment. The rapid production of knowledge in the field contrasts markedly with the period from 1982 to 1995. After the publication of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La frontera* (1987), it seemed that every text in the field of Chicano Studies used the border as an organizing trope, a catchy title, or a common theoretical grounding, from the legal and literary tour de force of Carl Gutiérrez-Jones (1995) to the justly influential *Criticism in the Borderlands*, edited by Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar (1991). Both these books exemplify the best use of the border, and both articulate the need to contextualize Chicano culture and literature within a framework of interaction between Mexican and U.S. societies. Moreover, Calderón and Saldívar positioned their collection to travel "between first and third worlds, between cores and peripheries, centers and margins," transforming the U.S.-Mexico border into a "local and global borderlands" (1991, 7).

Several recent developments in the field have transformed the border focus into a less definable but more intriguing and ample set of foci. First, recognition has mounted that the border does not respond geographically or metaphorically to the reality of all Mexican Americans, much less all U.S. Latinos. Furthermore, the growing strength of other Latino communities around the United States calls for different ways of articulating Latino and Latina identities. This social concern is increasingly common in media and culture studies where frequent use of the term *Latino* by marketing divisions in the mass media ensures that academic communication studies adhere more easily to the rubric of Latino Studies. Evidence of this shift in identity terminology can be perceived in the comparison between *The Ethnic Eye* edited by Chon Noriega and Ana López (1996) and Noriega's earlier edited collection *Chicanos and Film* (1992). The recent *Tropicalizations* (1997), edited by Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, goes a long way in thinking through literary and cultural studies while employing the same panoramic lens that media studies captured some years back. The essays in *Tropicalizations* consider the ways in which "*latinidad*" is perceived by the dominant culture and the methods by which it provides spaces for resistance, rearticulation, and dialogue.

This slow movement toward the Latino label suggests increasing dissatisfaction with nationally bound identities and a desire to find cultural commonalities that might imply political or social unity or both. This progression does not imply that Chicano studies (or regional studies) is outdated as a field because the exclusive use of *Latino* as the U.S.-Hispanic eth-

texts and programs, which are well established within Chicana and Chicano Studies. In this review essay, use of *Chicano* and *Latino* are intended to be gender-inclusive.

nic label is clearly inappropriate in certain cases where a particular community is being discussed. But more scholars are attempting to negotiate regional- or community-specific terms as well as general, all-embracing terms.

The second development in the field is the growing emphasis on studies of Latinos before the 1960s. Leading the way was the University of Houston's Arte Público Press and its director Nicholas Kanellos. In 1991 he began the project "Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage," which was joined by several presses, including the University of New Mexico Press with its "Pasó por Aquí: Series on the Nuevomexicano Literary Heritage." This endeavor is bringing together scholars who are conducting literary and historical investigations of U.S. Hispanics' written production from colonial times up to the 1960s. One of the project's main goals is to publish recovered works. The widespread influence of the "recovery project" has fostered a greater understanding of the long and productive history of Hispanics in the United States, which has been acknowledged and "fleshed out." Scholars are beginning to recognize the critical importance of understanding the era prior to the 1960s for comprehending the development of communities within the United States. These studies of the colonial period and the nineteenth century go far in revealing how the construction of ethnicity depends on place and time period and in elaborating the diversity of the U.S. Hispanic experience. The numerous works now emerging under the aegis of the recovery project analyze such disparate texts as *testimonios*, newspapers, and several self-consciously literary texts that have been recovered.² As a whole, these pre-civil rights projects address differences between regions and within seemingly homogenous groups with a great deal of success, ensuring that class, gender, and political divergences are acknowledged and situated in a context of historical processes.

Third, emphasis has increased within literary studies on the cultural production of the mass media and the individual performers not accounted for in television, film, or radio. Two recent books are emblematic of this movement: José David Saldívar's *Border Matters* (1997), which reads art, literature, video art, and popular music side by side, and José Limón's *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture* (1998).

These three recent developments of the earlier "border studies" approach have played a role in ensuring a manifold study area in which theoretical approaches vary and regional questions share the stage with broader U.S. Latino issues. Several common issues emerge in the texts

2. See, for example, Sánchez (1995), Meyer in *Speaking for Themselves*, and Meléndez (1997). Herrera-Sobek's (1993) collection assembled essays focusing on the colonial period in the Southwest.

under review here. The first is a lucid focus on the constructing or reconstructing of a literary or cultural community, although the methods by which this creation is urged differ. For instance, Doris Meyer's *Speaking for Themselves* looks at the development of Neomexicano identity through the public dissemination of ideas in the Spanish-language press of late-nineteenth-century New Mexico.³ In contrast, *Latin Looks* provides a solid teaching text that emphasizes the representation and politics of U.S. Latinos in the media. In doing so, the volume argues consciously for a U.S. Hispanic community affected by the media that also wields growing influence on the media.

In the midst of theoretical heterogeneity, the repeated evocation of "resistance" is another significant theme. Whether through Bakhtinian heteroglossia (Arteaga), performative "excess" (Christian), or literary history (Garza-Falcón), the importance of some degree of resistance to dominant social orders is emphasized.

Finally, most of these texts assent to some degree to a vision of ethnicity as partially constructed by society and its forces. Therefore, an understanding of self and community is always restricted by one's social placement. Arteaga, for instance, wants to work out "poetically some sense of how one is Chicano," and he thus begins by emphasizing the process of definition, not the end result (p. 6). Christian adopts Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of identity: the idea that there is no core self-identity, only unconscious performances that become the "clothing" and appear as a seamless identity. Christian uses this concept to assert "ethnic identity as process" (p. 4).

Building Community

Ethnic studies generally have maintained as a goal the establishment of a literary community or canon, whether to enable "minority resistance" (Christian, p. 6) or to illuminate voices not heard within mainstream America. As Doris Meyer explains her project, it was "time to listen . . . to what those voices that managed to speak out had to say about becoming part of this country" (p. 4). Each of the reviewed texts is preoccupied with community in some way or another.

Meyer's *Speaking for Themselves: Neomexicano Cultural Identity and the Spanish-Language Press* argues clearly for the importance of recovering poetry and political exchange from one of the few forums where Neomexicanos' voices were heard: the local print media. Meyer's work establishes the significance of these authors—anonymous or not—as writers of cul-

3. The term *neomexicano* was often used by nineteenth-century Spanish-speaking residents of New Mexico to refer to themselves. Doris Meyer adds that although *neomexicano* was not the only appellation used at the time, it is the most historically accurate.

tural texts representing an “ongoing narrative of identity” (p. 15). Meyer balances well literary analysis of the poems and cultural study of the production of newspapers, their role in an emerging political battle between Anglos and Neomexicanos, and the usefulness of the newspapers in maintaining the Spanish language in the region. Meyer’s fluid writing is engaging, making the book an intelligent and well-organized scholarly text but an enjoyable read also. *Speaking for Themselves* would fit well in the classroom because Meyer’s theoretical language is always well explained and never superfluous.

The major strength of Clara Rodríguez’s edited collection of essays and study guides, *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media*, is its potential use in the classroom. As the editor explains, the book’s “ultimate goal is to develop and strengthen analytical skills and fostering in readers a critical eye when viewing the media” (p. 5). To this end, *Latin Looks* contains essays on Latino images in film, television, and the news. The array of critical perspectives is impressive, with some writers offering historical reviews, others using content analysis to ascertain the numerical presence or absence of Latinos, and still others providing literary studies of specific shows or movies.

Latin Looks takes as its starting point the fact that Hispanics are underrepresented, that media images of Latinos are generally negative, and that Latinos are generally portrayed as a single homogenous group. For this reason, the book generally tends not to differentiate between Chicanos, Cubanos, or Puertorriqueños, although individual essayists do. The essays are a bit uneven: a couple manage to make interesting subjects dreary or unpalatable, but the majority of the essays represent the work of the best scholars in the field today. Particularly notable are Robert Lichter and Daniel Amundson’s fascinating essay on Hispanic characters on television, Chon Noriega’s overview of Chicanos in U.S. films, Carlos Cortés’s use of impact analysis to discuss the Chicano image in film, Alberto Sandoval Sánchez’s reading of *West Side Story*, Lillian Jiménez’s and Liz Kotz’s examinations of alternative cinema by Latinas, and the historical overview of “Hispanic-oriented media” by Federico Subervi-Vélez et al.

Where Rodríguez’s collection and her vision truly shine are in her assembly in the last section of *Latin Looks* of “Strategies for Change”: exercises and questions formulated to promote analytical and critical viewing. From study questions about the various essays to surveys for readers about their own viewing patterns, this section cements the book’s role as a solid teaching text.

Articulating the Resisting Subject

Leticia Garza-Falcón’s *Gente Decente: A Borderlands Response to the Rhetoric of Domination* sets as its goal to “question a certain dominative

history of the U.S. West and Southwest and explicate a number of literary works . . . which challenge that history" (p. ix). The dominant history that Garza-Falcón refers to is the one produced by Walter Prescott Webb, author of *The Great Plains* (1931) and *The Texas Rangers* (1935).

The problems with "resistance politics" become most evident as this monograph sets up Webb as the straw man whose slanted and prejudiced histories of Texas necessitated interventions by Chicano authors at different moments. Garza-Falcón, in her desire to convince the reader that Webb's books have created a Texas history that alienates, vilifies, and even erases Tejanos, engages in the same rhetorical strategies that she attributes to Webb, like the use of fictionalized history, a romantic narrative, and a nonobjective relationship between the historian and his or her object of study. Ultimately, Garza-Falcón appears as one-sided and prejudiced as Webb.

While Garza-Falcón's theoretical framework in *Gente Decente* is basically sound, her rather single-minded account tends to duplicate the kind of subjective historical writing that she deplors. For example, Garza-Falcón argues, "Webb's brand of history serves as an excellent example of how scholarship considered academically sound during a particular epoch can be revealed as a justification for racism and serve to anesthetize a national consciousness" (p. 1). Yet while suggesting in a contemporary vein that his history is more akin to fiction, Garza-Falcón later contends that Chicano fiction is an appropriate site for finding historical contestation to Webb.

In spite of the fact that Garza-Falcón argues against Webb's portrayal of Native Americans, she cites no sources that support her counterargument. Rather, she uses the same name-calling and finger-pointing as Webb, at one point stating that Webb failed his preliminary doctoral oral exams. Garza-Falcón thus implies that his work lacks academic credentials, a seemingly dangerous argument considering that several of the Chicana writers she wants to use against Webb lack such academic sanction.

These failures of logic make Garza-Falcón's case against Webb seem flawed and partial, even though some of her individual arguments have merit. Also detracting from a convincing analysis are unnecessary neologisms, irrelevant paragraphs, and unclear sentences. *Gente Decente* will appeal mainly to readers especially interested in María Cristina Mena, Fermina Guerra, or Jovita González, whose literary works are analyzed in the volume.

Daniel Cooper Alarcón's *The Aztec Palimpsest: Mexico in the Modern Imagination* is a paragon of rigorous research and thinking. The text analyzes the representation of Mexico in various discourses: Chicano nationalist rhetoric, U.S. and English literatures, Chicano literature, and tourist propaganda. Cooper Alarcón argues that Mexico is a palimpsest, "as much the product of a complex network of discourses as it is a physical place" (p. xiv).

Cooper Alarcón does not shy away from making difficult judgments. He critiques the dominant Anglo vision of Mexico as “the infernal paradise” characterized by timelessness and “colorful people,” a place of spiritual trial. But he also admits that Chicano literature echoes many of these views of Mexico. Cooper Alarcón concludes, “sharing in a Mexican cultural heritage does not inherently bestow an enlightened view of its Mexican elements” (p. 147).

This author argues that using the metaphor of the palimpsest to comprehend the “multilayered text” that is Mexico allows for a complex understanding of culture and identity that sketches out “a paradigm for understanding Chicano identity that is at once fluid, overlapping, and inherently provisional” (p. 9). Aztlán, as a many-layered trope, can more easily be understood as containing contestatory or subversive elements—always undergoing revision and always incorporating different kinds of narratives or discourses.

Cooper Alarcón’s analysis sometimes seems too optimistic in his hope that the palimpsest could avoid the silencing of any voices: a palimpsest still privileges certain information because previous writings have been erased. Yet his work is compelling in providing a coherent argument based on Mesoamerica and colonial documents on up to his reading of tourist information disseminated by the Mexican government. He concludes in *The Aztec Palimpsest* that cultural identity is “fluid and provisional, thereby resisting monolithic conceptualizations . . . and providing space for intracultural differences” (p. 190). Thus Cooper Alarcón also advocates understanding all identities (ethnic identity included) as constructed by various historical, social, and literary forces. In a context of resistance politics, he remains cognizant of the coexistence of resistance and submission, a theoretical framework that makes sense out of both Mesoamerican and Chicano texts that struggle to define one community vis-à-vis another more dominant society.

Ethnic Identity as Construct

Karen Christian reflects on the theoretical perils of her endeavor in her introduction to *Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction*, which seeks to demonstrate how ethnic identities are constructed in various literary texts. She first posits the tenuous nature of ethnicity, as exemplified by the difficulty of establishing a set of markers that identifies who is or is not a “U.S. Latino.” Similarly, Christian boldly points out the overwhelming tendency of scholars of ethnic literature to “re-essentialize” ethnic categories even as they try to debunk them (pp. 9–12).

At the same time, Christian acknowledges that social identity and material experience (the worlds individuals grow up in, the way they ex-

perience their bodies) affect one's understanding of individuals as members of an ethnic community. Christian's greatest struggle, then, is to maintain both a de-essentialized view of identity and an awareness of material conditions and to reconcile these contradictory notions of identity.

Christian is persuasive and maneuvers through a great deal of philosophical and theoretical literature with ease. Her most compelling argument in *Show and Tell* centers around "excess" and how it determines the identification of individuals who fall outside the mainstream. Hence "excessive" food, dress, or music all "mark" the performance of U.S. Latinos (pp. 18–19 and passim). But the contradiction just discussed comes back to haunt Christian. The well-written individual chapters are suggestive in terms of outlining the "ongoing process of negotiation—the endless creation of self." But they fail to provide convincing readings of performance of the various novels that Christian tackles.

I would argue that this limited failure hinges on Christian's use of performance theory, which cannot reconcile areas that do not involve agency (such as physiognomy for Christian) (p. 31) with those that purportedly do (everything else). Christian does not fully incorporate Judith Butler's later text, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), which discusses the issue of agency and the idea that performance is not necessarily ever self-conscious. Christian's desire to view performance as conscious leads to various interpretations of literary texts that are forced and unsupported.

Alfredo Arteaga's *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities* presents an interesting development of social construction theory. Arteaga begins by stating that he is most concerned with "how language undertakes the act of being Chicano" (p. 6). He is particularly invested, then, in the linguistic and textual "becoming" of Chicanos because "to be Chicano is to negotiate difference; it is a process" (p. 95).

To establish these processes, Arteaga uses Bakhtinian notions of heteroglossia and dialogism, the term *hybridity* as developed in recent Chicano studies, and a full discourse on the body as influenced by Judith Butler (1993), among others. *Chicano Poetics* ranges widely theoretically and textually, as Arteaga offers textual criticism on everything from contemporary Chicano poetry (notably Juan Felipe Herrera and Lorna Dee Cervantes) to Sor Juana to a chapter on Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà, a Spanish poet who took part in the conquest of New Mexico. Arteaga also includes several poems of his own, which practice the heteroglossic and polyvocal strategies that he preaches.

For Arteaga, linguistic processes such as *difrasismo* ("two for one" or complementary binaries), multilingual hybridization, and dialogism are quintessentially Chicano in nature. In his opinion, "Chicanismo [is] at the site where social forces converge, and it stresses being Chicano as a dynamic of being in relation to others" (p. 15).

As a description of linguistic and textual constructions, the idea that being Chicano is a process works well. As Arteaga explains, “Chicano subjectivity posits as central metaphor that it is mestizo and that its constitutive mode is hybridization” (p. 25). Arteaga’s mastery of poetic language and a diversity of Mexican and Chicano texts from various periods makes *Chicano Poetics* invigorating and challenging reading.

Yet Arteaga writes as a poet in his critical essays as well as in his poems, so that while many of his ideas are exciting and thought-provoking, readers must take a number of Arteaga’s arguments on faith and follow willingly his lyrical pronouncements. What Arteaga constructs through his descriptions of Chicano as hybridity or Chicano as process is nonetheless a rather limited vision of Chicano creativity that proposes an essentialized “Chicano language” that is no more true than any closed system.

Overall, Arteaga, Karen Christian, and Daniel Cooper Alarcón are moving Chicano and Latino Studies toward a greater understanding of how ethnicity and race are constructed, whether through a focus on excessive cultural markers, on literary traditions, or on linguistic processes. Doris Meyer, Clara Rodríguez, and Leticia Garza-Falcón acknowledge the complexity of historical narratives and the diversity of texts (literary, filmic, televisual, and periodical) that create a people, a community, a society. Together, these texts are encouraging greater appreciation of an evolving literary and cultural heritage.

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