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– *Narratives of Greater Mexico: Essays on Chicano Literary History, Genre, and Borders*, by Héctor Calderón. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.

‘For the first seventeen years of my life, *la línea* was a daily presence’, writes Héctor Calderón in the first sentence of his immensely readable series of vignettes addressing the broad trajectory of twentieth-century Chicano literature in the U.S. Southwest. *La línea*, which refers to the U.S.-Mexico border environs of Calexico where the author was raised, hints literally as well as figuratively at a central theme developed throughout his book: the crucial role that Chicano literature has played over the decades in forging a hybrid, *mestiza*, or continental consciousness linking persons of Mexican origin on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border. In developing his chronology of proto- and self-consciously Chicano writers, Calderón suggests that such a border-crossing identity had largely been suppressed as a consequence of the Anglo-American colonization and annexation of Mexican territory in the mid-nineteenth century. As a result of Anglo-centred colonization, and as the experience of his own autobiography attests, the territories of Greater Mexico incorporated into the U.S. Southwest would become ‘Hispanicized’, detached from their roots in working-class Mexican popular culture and transposed to a mythico-romantic past linked to imperial Iberia. People south of the border were Mexican, while those north of the dividing line became ‘Spanish’, with all the racial and economic privileges this entailed with regard to the former.

For Calderón, paradigmatic of this tradition is the work of the Anglo-American Charles F. Lummis, whose paternalistic and conservative romanticism almost single-handedly reduced a wider continental vision of *América Mexicana* into an area circumscribed by the generic term ‘Southwest’ or ‘Spanish Southwest’, encompassing New Mexico, Arizona, Southern California, and parts of Colorado, Utah and Texas. As other typical and contemporary European imperialists at the time (we may think of French General Lyautey in Morocco or the Brit Lane in Egypt), Lummis’ Southwest would describe a largely agricultural but empty landscape of simple and picturesque folk culture undisturbed by the modern world, in which a purified Spanish legacy is presented as the sole key to understanding a region devoid of civilizational conflict or racial and ethnic mixing.

The works of writers with whom Calderón engages represent an attempt to

wrench the U.S. Southwest from the colonial geographical imagination inscribed by authors such as Lummis. Thus, Américo Paredes, best known for his pioneering treatise on the Texas-Mexican *corrido* [*With his Pistol in his Hand* (1958)] is considered to have reinterpreted the then hegemonic theories of the origins and dissemination of Spanish folklore in the Southwest by situating them within the history and culture of the colony of Nuevo Santander, a history in which the cultural conflict between Anglo Texan and Border Mexican is emphasized. In this work – in which the rebellious figure of Gregorio Cortez would appear as an exemplary icon for later authors of the later Chicano Movement – Paredes redefines Lummis’ borderlands from that of ‘Old Spain in Our Southwest’ to that of Greater Mexico, a historically overly determined space of military, cultural and linguistic struggle. For Calderón, this Mexican American search for ‘la Nueva México’ is also reflected in the collected *oeuvre* of Rudolfo Anaya, whose novel *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), in its forward temporal thrust and focus on areas not captured by traditional ‘Spanish’ strongholds of the northern Río Grande Valley of New Mexico, provides additional impetus for the creation of an Indigenous Chicano Homeland whose gritty, worldly realism brings to closure a period of New Mexican history marked by innocent and parochial paternalism.

Despite the fact that Calderón presents his authors in semi-chronological fashion, he argues against the view of Chicano narrative as a ‘ready-made object to be defined, studied, and historicized in evolutionary terms’. For the Los Angeles-based critic, an alternative historicization of Chicano literature’ is to explore ‘how the forces of change have formed Chicanos and their literature in the twentieth century’. In this respect, the co-terminous development of a novel Chicano literary genre and emergent political identity is well showcased in the work of Tomás Rivera, whose award-winning publication of ‘... *y no se lo tragó la tierra* ...’ in 1971 refashioned then prevalent negative stereotypes of Mexican Americans through the creation of characters fully integrated within an expanding American modernity characterized by rational will-formation, self-reflection and discovery. Consisting of a unique combination of tales, vignettes, *cuadros*, fragments and monologues, *Tierra* is represented by Calderón as a ‘Mexican novel that crossed borders: the reformulation of the Mexican mestizo cultural diaspora into the beginning of a Chicano narrative tradition’. Beyond that, Rivera’s work re-imagined the formal and ideological content of the novel itself, which seized upon and gave expression to utopian currents already coursing through the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Manifesting an equally powerful tendency within this period, in *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972), Oscar Zeta Acosta would ride as Hunter Thompson’s tragic side-kick into the Las Vegas sunset, thereby pioneering the alcohol and drug-induced writing style that was later to be valued as ‘Gonzo journalism’. Reflecting the widely interacting counter-currents of the 1960s, Acosta’s troubled work is characterized by its problematization of Chicano/Mexicano masculinity, as well as the development of an ethnic consciousness emerging from the cultural racism of the pre-WWII Southwest.

Calderón leads his authors to a close by focusing on the work of two Chicana feminist writers: Cherríe Moraga and Sandra Cisneros. In their collected work, extending through the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, both *mujeres* would lead the way in opening up Chicano consciousness and activism beyond the patriarchal relations crippling the Movement in previous decades, while responding to the paternalism of American left and white feminism. With Moraga’s 1983 *This Bridge*

*Called Me Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (co-edited with Gloria Anzaldúa) and her own *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*, as well as Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1983) and *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991), Chicano literature would be revitalized through the crafting of new cross-border subjectivities linking issues of sexuality, feminism, race and class in the service of a Third World or a radical feminist perspective. For Moraga, central to the re-affirmation of an empowered Chicana feminist identity is a recasting of the role of the Indian woman *Malinche*, who is considered both traitor and mother by Mexicans. It is only by working through this complex figure that she can achieve a more liberated vision for Chicana feminism, in which a positive affirmation of sexuality replaces 'the historical and cultural baggage of La Chingada – passive, inert, open'. Similarly, by embracing the restless back-and-forth shuttle of families across the U.S.-Mexico border as a core theme of her work, Cisneros carves out a space exploring the inherent 'doubleness' of Mexican American culture which grows out of her lived experience in the Midwest and Texas, her engagement with an emergent Chicana feminism and her insightful probing of Mexican culture. Calderón writes approvingly that none other than Carlos Fuentes has pointed to Cisneros' work – '*el cuento de Cisneros*' – as leading to the creation of a '*nosotros*' on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Despite its fluid and personally engaging style, *Narratives of Greater Mexico* is not without its conceptual inconsistencies. In offering us a bird's-eye view of major contributors to the Chicano literary canon, Calderón provides a glimpse into what he affirms to be an emergent 'Third World postmodernism', characterized by a 'rejection of the metaphysical and the acceptance of the social, the decentring of the autonomous subject and the reconciliation of individual desire within a wider social movement'. This assertion exists rather tensely, however, alongside the author's affirmed goal to construct a 'master narrative for Chicano literature'. Moreover, notably in his engagement with the works of 'proto-Chicano' writers, Calderón at times seems to posit the existence of a working-class and mestizo Mexican identity existing in unsullied form prior to Anglo-American occupation and subsequent 'mystification', whose authenticity is properly recuperated by the writer-activists under scrutiny. In this reviewer's opinion, such a stance not only sits uneasily with the genealogical methodologies of Paredes or Anaya, but also surely runs counter to the ethos of some of the best of anti-essentialist postmodernism, one which focuses on the inherent relationality of identity-construction in the ongoing struggle between Anglo- and Mexican-America into our day. At the end of his acknowledgment section, Calderón signs off from *Uclatlán, Califas* (the purportedly Zapotec transliteration of UCLA, California). During my graduate studies there in the mid-1990s, I was once asked by a militant Chicano student member of MeCHA, 'What the f— are you doing here?', as if to imply that as an Anglo I no longer had the right to inhabit a now predominately Asian and Latino campus, that there was no *space* for me there (little did he know he was dealing with a Franco-German-American fluent in the languages of Greater Mexico and active in East LA immigration politics). For the sake of the health of the contemporary Chicano Movement, now having achieved at long last the pinnacle of power in capturing the mayoralty of *La Señora Reina de Los Ángeles y Porciúncula* for the first time in more than a century, I hope Calderón would also beg to differ with that MeCHA student.

Olivier Thomas Kramersch  
Nijmegen Centre for Border Research, Radboud Universiteit