

## Book Review

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*Bridges, Borders, Breaks: History, Narrative, and Nation in Twenty-First Century Chicana/o Literary Criticism*, edited by William Orchard and Yolanda Padilla.  
Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016.

*Bridges, Borders, Breaks: History, Narrative, and Nation in Twenty-First Century Chicana/o Literary Criticism* is a fresh contribution to the field of Chicano/a and Latino/a literary criticism. This book is an outcome of the 2010 American Comparative Literature Association conference in New Orleans, during which scholars participated in a forum that revisited Ramón Saldívar's seminal 1990 volume, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*, twenty years after its publication. Saldívar's work proposed new ideas in the field of literary criticism and challenged the American literary canon's exclusion of Chicano literature through a study of various Chicano/a texts. He argued for reading difference in Chicano/a literary works but within their American context. It was imperative for him that Chicano/a narrative "be seen as an active participant in [the] reconceptualization of American literary discourse."<sup>1</sup>

*Bridges, Borders, Breaks* is divided into an introduction and ten chapters. The contributors look to answer questions that have arisen since the publication of *Chicano Narrative* and that were not envisioned or addressed by the book. Each chapter dialogues with Saldívar's text, albeit to different degrees and in different ways. The contributors agree with, challenge, and further develop some of *Chicano Narrative*'s original premises as they explore different Chicano/a works, most of which were included in Saldívar's book. Although some chapters interact more directly and purposely than others with *Chicano Narrative*, as a whole they provide a picture of the expanded field of Chicano/a studies and point to its continued vitality and relevance.

The introduction revisits *Chicano Narrative*'s main contributions to the field of Chicano/a studies and alludes to changes that necessitate new readings of texts and traditions. It also details *Chicano Narrative*'s insistence on the inclusion of the U.S. Southwest and its borderlands into the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 215.

American literary corpus and on the distancing of the dominant canon from the idea of nation as one of its defining concepts. This perspective, according to the editors, marks *Chicano Narrative* as a precursor to the transnationalist move of the new body of Chicano/a writings. While the description of the essays in the volume is quite brief, the introduction effectively groups the first three and the second three chapters thematically by illustrating the links and commonalities between the essays.

In Chapter 1 Jesse Alemán uses Jacques Derrida's spatial and temporal concept of difference to discuss *Chicano Narrative* within the field, both at the moment of its publication and twenty years later. He charts the bifurcating paths that the field was taking and explains that: "*Chicano Narrative* appeared at the very moment when Chicano/a literary history cleaved in two directions, one toward the past and the other toward the contemporary, making *Chicano Narrative* formative for contemporary Chicano/a literary studies and, simultaneously, a little more fugitive for recovered texts" (26–27). First, Alemán places *Chicano Narrative* in relation to the theoretical debates of the period, then he details the revisionary move in the field that was accomplished through The Recovery Project, which set out to reconsider literary sources that were produced by Hispanic writers in the United States as far back as the Colonial Period. Although Alemán is critical of *Chicano Narrative*'s theory of contemporary Chicano/a works because he considers it inadequate for reading the previous narrative forms unearthed by The Recovery Project, he recognizes and highlights the book's contribution to the development of contemporary Chicano/a literature.

In Chapter 2, David Luis-Brown points out commonalities between Chicano/a studies' centrifugal and hemispheric studies' polycentric methodologies, establishing that both *Chicano Narrative* and work in hemispheric studies deploy "a cluster of strategies for disrupting previous ethnocentric configurations of US American national literature and history," because they transgress the boundaries of nation and ethnicity (40). The author establishes points of contact between both fields and both models as "critiques of imperial and racial formations" as well as the common claim that "the perspectives of minorities sharpen our understanding of national and world cultures and histories" (50-51).

Chapter 3 focuses on the marginalized novels of the Mexican Revolution. Yolanda Padilla argues that the narratives of the revolution that emanated from the borderlands were effectively excluded from the official narrative, as the Mexican government sought to consolidate power and create an "imagined community." She examines twentieth-century border texts about the revolution that include the issues of violence and resistance that are central to Chicano/a writing. However, she reads these texts through a transnational lens that considers "overlapping national contexts and conditions," to show that border subjects are in an unstable position "between nations and imagined alternative possibilities for self- and community actualization" (65). These texts engage the Mexican Revolution, as many Mexican novels do, and emphasize some of the same themes. However, they do so from the perspective of the borderlands, one that centers on "issues of national identity and belonging" (66).

Chapter 4 explores the theme of female desire through the texts of two women writers, Mexican Sabina Berman and Chicana Sandra Cisneros. Both authors articulate the experience of

women through a rewriting of the Mexican Revolution from different sides of the border. In her analysis, Belinda Linn Rincón shows how both authors consider the ideological function that the revolution has played in shaping identity and historiography. Through a close study of their texts Rincón shows that there is potential “for building transnational frameworks for literary analysis based on narrative strategies that destabilize” established borders, be they disciplinary or national (102).

Chapters 5 and 6 engage the themes of space and form in Sandra Cisneros’s work. In Chapter 5, Olga Herrera coins the term “Mexican Chicago” to discuss the textual and social space that is created by the narrators in *House on Mango Street* and *Caramelo*. She shows how both portray a Chicago that is marked by Mexican migration while they maintain a “living engagement” with Mexico. She uses Saldívar’s argument that the dialectics of Chicano narrative not only reflect reality but transform it as well to argue that Cisneros’s texts describe a transnational community and narratively produce Mexican Chicago. In Chapter 6, Paula Moya explains reasons for the dominance of the novel as genre and proposes reading *House on Mango Street* as a prose poem cycle in order to resist the supremacy of the novel schema (135).

Chapter 7 discusses the topic of print culture in Chicano/a literature. John Alba Cutler focuses on the print history of Américo Paredes’s story “Over the Waves is Out” and Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo*, two works that Saldívar analyzes at length in *Chicano Narrative*. Cutler purports that examining the print culture context of Chicano works of literature illuminates the “dialectics of difference” in a way that close readings of the texts do not. He also explains that studying print culture points to the ways these works dialogue with the institutions and publics of their time, effectively showing not only what Chicano/a literature is, but also what it does.

Chapter 8 is aptly titled “I digress...” because in it author Ralph Rodríguez describes how his approach to Chicano literature has begun to deviate from established patterns. He begins by describing *Chicano Narrative*’s influence on his scholarship and then suggests new ways to think about Chicano/a literature, through “a reinvigorated return to formalist readings” (161). He exhorts scholars to return to slow, methodical readings of texts that have been sacrificed in the name of “the political urgency” of the text (169).

Written by Ramón Saldívar, Chapter 9 serves as an epilogue. Here Saldívar returns to his original discussion of Américo Paredes’s concept of “Greater Mexico” to consider the emergence of a new paradigm for global and local area studies, one that operates outside the purely national imaginary. Although this new “transnational imaginary” will continue coexisting with the national one, the new paradigm’s “sense of dynamics of how knowledge is generated and human resources are used, as well as a recognition of the rich reservoir of knowledge that exists in developing countries” will serve to create equality and social justice (176).

Chapter 10 is a lengthy interview with Ramón Saldívar in which he discusses a variety of topics from his personal trajectory and scholarship to the ways contemporary Chicano/a narrative has expanded beyond a critique of the nation. He considers how the field continues to highlight the Chicano/a experience while also establishing connections with other disciplines dedicated to critiquing

the excesses of globalization and neoliberalism. He also addresses his vision of where Chicano/a studies is going and what it needs to do to remain vital, especially in light of claims that Chicano/a studies is being absorbed by Latino/a studies.

The essays in this volume reaffirm *Chicano Narrative's* influence on the field of Chicano/a literary studies and provide new ways of understanding past and present Chicano/a texts. *Bridges, Borders, Breaks* will certainly take its place among other contemporary publications devoted to Latino/a literary studies. Its transnational focus places it well within current modes of thinking about contemporary questions and issues.