
Reviewed by John Morán González, University of Texas at Austin

Bridges, Borders, Breaks evaluates the current state of Chicana/o literary studies using one of its now foundational works—Ramón Saldívar’s Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference—as its starting point. The Introduction clearly and meticulously lays out the importance of Chicano Narrative for contemporary literary studies by explicating its basic theoretical principles, grounded in Marxist and poststructuralist theory—primarily via Fredric Jameson’s The Political Unconscious. The editors then trace the subsequent methodological developments that stemmed from Chicano Narrative, particularly transnationalist paradigms. Finally, the Introduction outlines how the various contributors to the volume articulate concerns that, in some way or another, can be traced to the influence of Chicano Narrative, although clearly some essays engage this legacy more directly than others. The fine essays by Paula Moya, Belinda Rincon, and Ralph Rodríguez hint at Chicano Narrative more than interrogate it, although Rodríguez slyly suggests that the dominance of ideological critique as exemplified by Chicano Narrative has occluded other forms of engagement with the text, particularly (dis)identificative modes of sexualities placed under erasure by racialized heternormativity.

In contrast, Jesse Alemán’s essay engages Saldívar’s book in the most sustained fashion of all the essays. Critical in the best sense of the term, Alemán acknowledges how Saldívar opened crucial theoretical possibilities for Chicana/o literary studies in the study of contemporary Chicana/o literature, even as he points out how this influential monograph simultaneously foreclosed the development of literary theories appropriate for the study of literature produced by people of Mexican descent in the US prior to the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Alemán notes how the arrival of Chicano Narrative injected a much-needed theoretical sophistication into what had otherwise devolved into the search for identitarian politics, even as it simultaneously privileged those contemporary texts that actively contested the racial and other ideological narratives of dominant US society. According to Alemán, this theoretical orientation precluded serious consideration of texts, primarily those recovered by the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project, which presented a much more problematic relationship to contemporary notions of “resistance.” These texts resisted simple incorporation into a genealogy of Chicana/o literary resistance by their advocacy of racial, class, gender, and colonialist stances that would be considered culturally and
politically anathema today. In this sense, Alemán charts the unintended consequences of the dominance that a theoretical paradigm might wield within a particular field.

Likewise concerned with tracing the influence of Chicano Narrative, David Luis-Brown maps the specifically transnational implications of Saldivar’s model, first in Chicano Narrative and then fully developed in The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary. Positing that Saldivar’s studies enabled the subsequent pursuit of “centrifugal” models of transnationalism in Chican/o literary studies, Luis-Brown gives an extensive comparative review of Anna Brickhouse’s Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere, along with Raúl Coronado’s The World Not to Come: A History of Latino Writing and Print Culture, which comes after an insightful comparison of the transnational thought of Américo Paredes and W. E .B. Du Bois. If the former represents what Luis-Brown terms a “polycentric” trans-American methodology that displaces nationalist paradigms through the proliferation of different discursive centers spread over the Americas, the latter represents a “centrifugal” trans-American methodology that focuses on borderland areas and marginal contact zones to highlight the to-and-fro movement of ideas as mapped upon disparities of social power. While both approaches prove valuable in displacing nationalist methodologies, Luis-Brown foregrounds the comparative, transnational dimensions of colonial racialization, demonstrating how literary fields themselves limit the complexity of their objects of study. For Luis-Brown, comparative transnationalist methodologies, particularly in its “centrifugal” mode, suggest a way past this epistemological roadblock.

If the essays by Alemán and Luis-Brown directly assess the influence of Chicano Narrative on Chican/o literary studies, the remaining essays are more concerned to demonstrate its impact upon the interpretation of Chicano literature. These contributions show how foundational the model of ideological critique that Saldivar first systematically propounded has become. They further explore how a younger generation of literary scholars simultaneously pursued different avenues suggested by Saldivar’s work.

To that end, Yolanda Padilla and Olga Herrera take up the transnational implications, focusing upon the transborder phenomenon of the Mexican Revolution both in its historical moment and in its contemporary representational afterlife. For Padilla, nationalist paradigms of literary studies, whether Mexican or US, have obscured the role of fronterizas/os as agents of history. Revisiting the novel of the Mexican Revolution from a transnational perspective disrupts the nationalist production of history and subjectivity, rendering the agency of other forms of community visible. Herrera’s transnational approach to Sandra Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street likewise allows for reconsidering literary models of how migration works, particularly in its insistence
of seeing Chicago as a resolutely Mexican space. Her work integrates sociological research without subsuming the aesthetics of Cisneros’s fiction. In this respect, Herrera’s readings identify more precisely how the social world of Greater Mexico inhabitssuch textsas The House on Mango Street or the understudied Caramelo. As correctives to Saldívar’s only partial incorporation of Chicana feminist theory, these feminist interventions delineate the agency of Chicanas—then and now—and illustrate the usefulness of a comparative, transborder approach.

In an essay discussing what impact a text’s publishing history has for its interpretation, John Alba Cutler also ventures into aspects of literary production and interpretation little touched upon by Saldívar. According to Cutler, Saldívar’s theoretical framework assumes that textual meaning is immanent; hence, Saldívar and his adherents cannot account for the material production of the text, which introduces the possibility of competing, sometimes conflicting actions of the multiple agents involved in the text’s production, and therefore meaning-making. Cutler’s archival-based readings of Paredes’s “Over the Waves is Out” and Oscar Zeta Acosta’s Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo exhibit the post-Chicano Narrative methodology that Alemán demands.

Finally, Ramón Saldívar’s two commentaries upon the legacy of his scholarship, and of Chicano Narrative in particular, make a fitting coda to Bridges, Borders, Breaks. The brief “Chicano Narrative Now: Literary Discourses in an Age of Transnationalism” is less a reflection upon the editors’ premises or the impact of the book than a glance to the further development of trans-American methodologies. The more substantial interview between Saldívar, Orchard, and Padilla that closes the volume usefully unfolds Saldívar’s intellectual trajectory from his early years in the lower Rio Grande Valley, his college days at the University of Texas at Austin, his graduate school education at Yale during the heyday of deconstruction, and his return to UT-Austin as a professor of English. The interview ends with Saldívar’s remarks concerning “postracial” speculative fiction, thereby tracing how his thinking evolved between the Chicano-centric theorizings of his earlier work to the resolutely comparative nature of his current project. If nothing else, Saldívar’s two contributions demonstrate why his work will continue to exert great impact today.

The essays collected here represent a field whose methodological sophistication has grown exponentially since its institutional inception through Saldívar’s crucial example. As a critical commentary upon the work of one of the most influential scholars in Chicana/o literary studies over the past quarter-century, this volume is unique in the field, cogently outlining that legacy while sensitively and intelligently critiquing it.