

BOOK REVIEW

New Historical and Geographic Horizons for Chicana/o Literature: Marissa K. López's *Chicano Nations* and Chicana/o Literary History

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Chicano Nations: The Hemispheric Origins of Mexican American Literature. By Marissa K. López. New York: New York University Press, 2011. Pp. 269. \$24.00 (paper).

In *Chicano Nations: The Hemispheric Origins of Mexican American Literature*, Marissa K. López—an assistant professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles—revises the temporal and spatial boundaries of Chicana/o literary history. Responding in part to Chicana/o literary histories that fixate on the U.S. Southwest of 1848 or the Aztlán of the 1960s–1970s, López introduces us to Mexican and Latin American writings of the early nineteenth century, when the implosion of the Spanish empire impacted the larger hemisphere and globe. From 1834, the year marking the publication of Mexican politician Lorenzo de Zavala's *Viaje a los Estados Unidos del Norte de América*, López makes her way into and beyond the twentieth century, leaving us, in the end, with post-9/11 Chicana/o literature. Through its exploration of writings which are largely archival or non-canonical, *Chicano Nations* is able to render a more usable past for current scholars and students of Chicana/o, American, and inter-American literatures. It is a remarkable and much-needed work whose rigorous historical approach and deft close readings indicate a promising direction for Chicana/o literary studies.

Chicano Nations is organized into three parts that traverse the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries chronologically in order to highlight three

crucial moments in Chicana/o history. Part 1, “Imagining the Americas,” looks to Latin American Independence and U.S. expansion in the nineteenth century; Part 2, “Inhabiting America,” addresses the Mexican Revolution in the early twentieth century; and Part 3, “American Diasporas” takes as its focus September 11, 2001. As López explains in her “Introduction,” these divisions work to explore the “grounding, evolution, contemporary manifestation, and future possibility of a hemispheric vision for Chicana/o literature” (14). Since the early 1800s, according to López, Mexican and Latin American writers have discerned the potential to forge connections—whether commercial, environmental, or other—with individuals and communities of other countries.

Part 1 of *Chicano Nations*, “Imagining the Americas,” comprises two ambitious chapters that reflect major nineteenth-century cartographic phenomena and illustrate the role race played in both determining and deterring the hemispheric vision of Chicanas/os. In Chapters 1 and 2, “*Latinidad* Abroad” and “*Mexicanidad* at Home,” we see that Mexican and Latin American writers imagined a productive union between the Americas, but we also see that the union, repeatedly curbed by racism, was not achieved during their lifetimes. In “*Latinidad* Abroad” López discusses the three Mexican and Latin American travel narratives of Domingo Sarmiento, Lorenzo de Zavala, and Vicente Pérez Rosales within a post-Monroe Doctrine context; and in “*Mexicanidad* at Home” she moves into the post-U.S. Civil War California historiography of Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo. Using such diverse texts, López argues that failed “Transamerican” imaginaries characterized this century.

Part 2 of *Chicano Nations*, “Inhabiting America,” expands López’s threads of inquiry as it enters the terrain of Chicana/o fiction; nineteenth-century questions of nation and race lead to early twentieth-century questions of class, gender, and sexuality. Significantly, the intracommunal tensions (largely forms

of racism) glimpsed from afar in Part 1 become amplified in Part 2's focus on the diverse and conflicting ways Chicana/o writers understood the land and people of the Americas. The chapters included here highlight literature born in the tumultuous opening decades of the twentieth century (1910s–1930s). According to López, where the literature is heavily marked by the Mexican Revolution and U.S. Depression, it displays, “the reality of living as a Mexican in the United States” and “the nuances and complexities of early twentieth-century *chicanismo*” (17). What makes “Inhabiting America” arguably more reflective of Chicana/o thought and culture than “Imagining the Americas” is its inclusion of the Mexican female writers María Cristina Mena and Jovita González, whose work, like that of their male counterparts, reflects the intracommunal tensions of their time.

The third and final part of *Chicano Nations*, “American Diasporas,” leaves us at the turn of the twenty-first century as it considers “how Chicana/o literature incorporates the tectonic shifts occasioned by Central American migrations... and how assertions of U.S. power abroad shape domestic, ethnic tensions” (19). Here López introduces feminist, queer, and detective Chicana/o fiction that addresses not only the U.S. wars of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, but also the migrations, immigrations, and ultra-secured borders still visible today. Both chapters included in Part 3—“Ana Castillo’s ‘distinct place in the Americas’” and “Border Patrol as Global Surveillance: Post-9/11 Chicana/o Detective Fiction”—bring López’s central argument to its fullest elaboration: Chicana/o writers are cultural critics whose work encourages us to imagine ourselves—whether we are Chicanas/os living in the United States or not—in relation to humans existing in places far beyond our immediate reach.

Chicano Nations belongs to the burgeoning wave of Chicana/o, Latina/o literary, and cultural criticism that has, in the last two to three decades, sought

to mend perceptible fissures in the history we know and use today. Like Ramón Saldivar's formative *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (1990), *Chicano Nations* asserts the longstanding presence of Mexican American writers in the United States and sees their body of writing as an integral part of U.S. literature that speaks in opposition to dominant Anglo culture. But where it moves outside of *Chicano Narrative's* southwestern, Mexican American working-class scope, López's book might be more akin to another exceptional work of literary history, Kirsten Silva Gruesz's *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (2002). Both López and Gruesz situate Latina/o writing within the hemispheric and global contexts of the early nineteenth century, but whereas Gruesz retains a lens of Latinidad, López uses these contexts ultimately to construct a Mexican American genealogy. Each of these three works successfully recovers U.S. Chicana/o-Latina/o writing and repositions it within literary studies.

Building and expanding upon the literary histories that have come before it, *Chicano Nations* compels us to continue to investigate the geographic and historical markers in place—to posit new, perhaps once-unimaginable markers if and where necessary. It compels us, as López herself explains, to “transgress the mental borders that might keep us from appreciating” certain texts and writers as Chicana/o (208). Her heterogeneous cast of literary ancestors and descendants can be used as a model for understanding not only the generational and intracommunal tensions that separate Chicanas/os but also the hemispheric and global visions that bring them together across time and space. Graduate courses that grapple with Mexican American literary history might best benefit from her book, especially courses that aim to draw or disrupt connections between early and contemporary Chicana/o literature. López has given us, in the end, a comprehensive literary history that must be plotted along not a simple continuum but within our own complex, far-reaching imaginations. As scholars

continue to define the bookends of Chicana/o literature's past and future, let us hope to see more work of *Chicano Nations'* caliber.

Works Cited

- Gruesz, Kirsten Silva. 2002. *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Saldívar, Ramón. 1990. *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.