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## Criticism in the Borderlands Interview with Héctor Calderón<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

#### I

Héctor Calderón's and José David Saldívar's *Criticism in the Borderlands* reterritorializes criticism by inscribing its social intersections and its overlapping categories of literature, culture and ideology, and by framing intellectual production within a geopolitical space filled with vivid historical memory and contemporary social realities.<sup>2</sup> To date, the book has been widely received as bringing new dimensions to the discourses on borders, diasporas and postmodernism. It has been acclaimed as a "virtually monumental collection [that] constitutes a decisive intervention into Chicano criticism reminiscent of classic feminist and African-American anthologies," and as a "new standard for Chicano literary scholarship... poised to play a major role in American letters in the late twentieth century." Finally, it has been credited with altering received notions of "what counts as culture and theory and who counts as theorists."<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, little has been said about the dedication that relays a critical intention of enormous significance for those whose encounter with it is assumed as a way out of the historical neglect of Chicana/o and Mexicana/o cultures. The dedication reads: "For all who came before us." This dedication ushers up a generational effect, the possibility of a transnational migration toward other Chicana/o subjects and cultural productions that have been absent from American literary histories. In addition, the book offers the opportunity for another type of mapping, one that links present with past efforts, today's critics with those of yesterday. Thus, a historical consciousness forms an important backdrop for *Criticism in the Borderlands* especially insofar as the anthology incorporates noteworthy critical movements generated within Chicana/o criticism: its ideological breadth and theoretical parameters; its global travel between first and third worlds; and its passage from commentary to metacommentary.

As many have pointed out in book reviews and citations from Canada, France, Germany, Mexico, and the U.S., *Criticism in the Borderlands* offers an important

moment within the development of a critical practice that has survived and flourished "through the persistence of committed women and men."<sup>4</sup> The names of many of the contributors to the volume are now familiar to those working in Chicana/o literature. A few of these critics even figure within general literary and cultural studies. However, much needs to be done if the critical affiliations conjured up at the imaginary level in the dedication are to be fully realized. General and specialized histories of criticism still show little or no inclination for mapping the roads taken and not taken in Chicana/o criticism. The collective efforts that gave birth to the cultural movements within Chicana/o criticism are, thus, not part of the historical record, leaving students of culture with the idea that no one came before us (at least, no one that matters). This makes it difficult to see how the debates associated with the theories of widely disseminated critics such as Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, are part of extensive cultural conversations that can only be entered by going beyond the borders of the criticism of "the mainland" toward an alternative field of criticism. I am referring to criticism that includes the trajectories of individual critics as they refashion their critical identities, that records their conversations with other critics, that seriously examines all those real processes involved in the consolidation of a field of study.

## II

At a time when students of Chicana/o literature, culture and ideology have at their disposal a wide variety of epistemological and theoretical frameworks with which to engage cultural productions and are, indeed, contributing to these frameworks in new and exciting ways, it is important to reevaluate the nature of the practice that has given rise to Chicana/o criticism itself, not only in terms of the analysis of critical perspectives, but also in terms of the nature of the activity and the individual histories that it encompasses.

My interview with Héctor Calderón emerged as a result of an interest in this field sparked years earlier by the fact that, unlike many other students of Chicano literature, I studied with Chicana/o mentors and commentators of Chicana/o literature. I had the opportunity to see Chicana/o criticism being produced as a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego. There a critical dialogue was in full swing with the likes of critics such as Rosaura Sánchez, Joseph Sommers, Jorge Huerta, Marta Sánchez, Carlos Blanco, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, Juan Rodríguez, Jaime Concha, and a strong nucleus of graduate students.<sup>5</sup> Together professors and students brought contemporary theories of culture to bear upon Chicana/o literature; thus, Chicana/o criticism was not only something that was being formulated there at the Literature Department at UCSD and its affiliates, it was something that was being transformed on the page, in the late seventies and early eighties.

Through this exposure I gained an interest in understanding how critics of literature arrived at their critical positions. At the same time in my work, I began to

see the value of offering a different kind of representation of critics, one that incorporated their voices, their self-reflexive dialogue, their own metacommentaries, their memories of their trajectories, their exchanges with those who came before them and those who followed.

If the annals of criticism were not registering the impact of another critical history, if Chicana/o criticism had only embraced the field as theoretical approaches, then I had to talk to the critics themselves, a practice that was still quite a novelty as this format was generally reserved for their literary counterparts who were often associated with highly privileged forms of writing. The idea of doing criticism, a history of criticism, through interviews raised some eyebrows even though this format facilitated the recovery of a discourse that had been marginalized and muted. From another angle, however, recovering Chicana/o criticism this way was entirely appropriate because the idea of "dialogue" was vital to criticism. As Todorov explains, "criticism is dialogue...the encounter of two voices..." involving multiple authorship, contrasting works and a historical trajectory.<sup>6</sup> Conscious of the limitations of Chicana/o versions of "*cómo se comenta un texto literario*," I wanted to reconstruct the practice of criticism in a way that shunned the notion of the scholar critic as an exclusive textual persona, as a commodity, or as the sole promoter of literary standards and assumptions. I was interested in refashioning critical identities and critical passages that were vital to the continued dissemination of Chicana/o literature and criticism. I was animated by the lacunae in the history of criticism, by a need to talk back to the histories of criticism that had accepted the idea that criticism had, indeed, undergone a fundamental change in the seventies but could not fathom the idea that another critical sphere was, in effect, operating and doing so under a different chronology and maintaining a strong affiliation with the public sphere.

### III

This interview with Héctor Calderón (and the others with critics such as Norma Alarcón, Erlinda Gonzales-Berry, María Herrera-Sobek, Luis Leal, Genaro Padilla, José David Saldívar, Ramón Saldívar and Rosaura Sánchez that form part of "Conversations with Chicana/o Critics") bears witness to the striking changes in the history of literary criticism that have yet to be assessed; to the divergent institutional backdrops that frame Chicana/o critical production; and, finally, to the significance of the ethnographic focus for understanding how we entered the academy. It is my hope to leave future students of Chicana/o literature with an idea of *some* of those who came before. The ethnographic passages through life histories of critics (outside of the institution of criticism) are absolutely crucial for understanding the complex social dimensions of Chicana/o criticism and the conditions of its production. It was suggested to me that I edit out these passages from this history, that I represent Chicana/o intellectuals as just that, intellectuals. I rejected this idea because these lived experiences form an essential part of this criticism in the

borderlands: they offer a passageway out of the notion of criticism as a self-contained unit and deepen our understanding of the relations between criticism and society.

The interview with Calderón was itself historically marked by an important event. The interview took place within a week of the conference, *Chicano Literary Criticism in a Social Context*, that was jointly coordinated by Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar and formed the basis for *Criticism in the Borderlands*. The atmosphere was charged with electric anticipation and dutiful purpose: soon, representative scholars, critics, and writers with diverse critical and institutional affiliations would be descending upon Stanford University for an exchange that promised to mark new directions in Chicano literary theory and criticism. Among the most visible participants would be novelists, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith and Arturo Islas, and poet, Lorna Dee Cervantes. Many longstanding and new members of the Chicano critical community would be in attendance.<sup>7</sup> Already the “generational” effect was beginning to manifest itself in Chicana/o critical discourse, particularly through self-reflexive debates surrounding past and present conceptual frontiers of Chicano literary and critical genres.

Anticipation of the conference weighed heavily upon the interview participants (myself, José David Saldívar and my student assistant Angélica Coronado) who approached the ensuing critical dialogue armed with the general consensus that Chicana/o critical discourse had, indeed, crossed an important watershed in the eighties, boldly entering into a new phase of its existence: an age of Chicana/o criticism that had not yet received proper definition. No longer would Chicana/o critical discourse be subordinated to the existential fact of any given literary text, no longer would critics bear the unjust burden of an anti-theoretical impulse. Just as Chicana/o literature had been recovered, just as it had grown, Chicana/o criticism would flourish, and it would be part of the historical record. Recognition of these changing dimensions of Chicano critical discourse influenced the course of the dialogue, continually obliging both interviewer and interviewee to go back and retrace the course of the trajectory of Chicana/o critical discourse from the personal, autobiographical narrative as a Chicano and as a critic, to his various experiences and formation at diverse literary institutions, to the collective experiences and works of other critics of Chicano literature, and, finally, to the various schools, polemics and points of contact between dissimilar critical traditions and their respective literatures.

At the center of this collage of critical passages, domains, and forces, emerges a vivid and forceful portrait of a Chicano critic, Héctor Calderón, at work as he labors with the disparities of competing Spanish, Latin American, Anglo-American and Chicano literary traditions and conventions, offering the reader a glimpse into the intersecting literary horizons that are currently shaping the dimensions of Chicana/o criticism in the late eighties and early nineties. The cultural and literary dimensions of Calderón’s enterprise were visually represented by a sixteenth-century Arabic map of the world displayed in his office (where our interview took

place) that inverted the relations between north and south, between first and third world nations. The walls of his office were lined with the narratives of García Márquez, Islas, Cervantes, Cisneros, Hinojosa, Donoso, and the critical discourses of Jameson, Sommers, Iser, Sánchez, Monegal, Saldívar, and Frye, to cite a few.

The fruits of Calderón's own production include not only *Criticism in the Borderlands*, but also a book on modern and postmodern narrative, *Conciencia y lenguaje en el "Quijote" y "El obscuro pájaro de la noche"* (Editorial Pliegos, 1987), praised in a recent review, "Critical Approaches to Latin American Fiction" in *Latin American Research Review* (29.1 [1994]). His work on Chicano literature includes the following diverse publications: an often cited work on genre with the first readings of Chicano romance and satire, "To Read Chicano Narrative: Commentary and Metacommentary," *Mester* (1983); a brief article in a collection of remarkable essays by highly-regarded critics on Rolando Hinojosa that stood out, according to the editors, for its originality and sophistication, "On the Uses of Chronicle, Biography, and Sketch in Hinojosa's *Generaciones y semblanzas*," *The Rolando Hinojosa Reader* (1985); a lengthy essay that set a new standard for lucid, precise, nuanced readings of Chicano literature, "Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. A Chicano Romance of the Southwest," *Crítica* (1986); an insightful overview of and introduction to the many and varied accomplishments of Chicano literature and criticism, "At the Crossroads of History, on the Borders of Change: Chicano Literary Studies Past, Present, and Future," *Left Politics and the Literary Profession* (1990); an essay in postmodern criticism combining empirical, creative and critical discourses, "Reinventing the Border: From the Southwest Genre to Chicano Cultural Studies," *Rearticulations: The Practice of Chicano Cultural Studies* (forthcoming); and now for *Mester*, Calderón engages the reader in a critical dialogue. Calderón will continue his work on Chicano narrative in his current book project entitled, "Contemporary Chicano Narrative: A Tradition and Its Forms," which is well under way. His work as editor and scholar has been acknowledged and cited in the United States and abroad by numerous critics in the fields of American Literature, American Studies, Anthropology, Chicano Studies, Cultural Studies, Comparative Literature and Latin American Literature. Some of these critics include, Houston A. Baker, Jr., Ruth Behar, Hanny Berkelmans, Jay Clayton, Rosa Fernández-Levin, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Fredric Jameson, Abdul JanMohamed, George Lang, José Limón, Antonio Márquez, Renato Rosaldo, José David Saldívar, Ramón Saldívar, Chuck Tatum, Horst Tonn and Marc Zimmerman.

Originally from Calexico and the son of Mexican immigrants, Héctor Calderón is currently Associate Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at UCLA. Here, we chronicle his trajectory, beginning with his place of origin.

**Interview**

## IV

Angie: I'd like to begin by asking you about your personal history, where you're from, your early education and so on.

Héctor: Where I was born? ¿Lo quieres en español o en inglés? (*Do you want it in Spanish or English?*)

A: **En inglés está bien** (*English is fine*).

H: I was born in Calexico, California. My parents both came from Mexico, so I'm the first generation born here in the United States.

A: **What year did they come?**

H: Soon after the Mexican Revolution. My father, Bernabé Calderón, is from Guaymas, Sonora and my mother, Luz Valle, is from Torreón, Coahuila. My father arrived at the age of nine in 1919 with his grandmother, a sister and two cousins; my mother came in 1924 at the age of five with her mother through the hard work and good fortune of her eldest brother. On my mother's side, her family earned a living mainly as migrant farm workers, but during her generation they managed to settle down. On my father's side they were railroad workers on both sides of the border, working for the *Inter-California* in Mexicali or the Southern Pacific in Calexico. In fact, I'm the first Calderón male not to work on the railroad. My parents have known each other since childhood.

A: **And where did they settle?**

H: In Calexico. I lived there, I went to elementary school and high school there.

A: **What kinds of schools did you attend?**

H: I attended public schools except for kinder at Our Lady of Guadalupe Academy.

A: **What was your experience in the educational system?**

H: Well, that was before the Chicano Movement, so you can imagine. The town is right on the border, about 95% Mexican American. From my house you could walk to Mexicali, which is what the town is called on the Mexican side. I tend to think of both sides as one city, as one economic entity. Up until 1924, with the establishment of the Border Patrol, the two sides weren't really divided. Families lived on both

sides. Now the fence is a constant reminder of separation. Calexico is a very Mexican town. In terms of the educational system, which in the 1950s was controlled by the Anglo minority, well, what can I say? It was a segregated school system.

**A: Were your classes predominantly Chicano?**

H: There was one class that was almost completely Anglo composed of children of merchants and farmers and all the rest of the classrooms were almost completely Mexican. We also had a few Asian and African American students as well as Mexican students from Mexicali's upper class. Most of the students in my classroom, rumored to be one of the toughest and lowest academically, were the children of migrant farm workers who lived in the oldest Mexican neighborhood, *La Garra* (The Rag). *La Garra* was a shanty town with unpaved streets across the tracks from the main part of town. From the first grade, in 1951, the class was kept pretty much intact through the eighth grade. Out of some thirty plus students, three of us graduated from high school on time, a few others had to repeat grades and the rest were lost along the way.

**A: Was Spanish spoken at all in the classroom?**

H: All of the children spoke Spanish, but it was frowned upon: you were sometimes punished for speaking Spanish. I guess it's not an uncommon experience.

**A: At home did you speak English or Spanish?**

H: Spanish. It was our first language.

**A: What was your parents' educational background?**

H: They both have a seventh grade education. I do recall that when I was five my father took me to get my first library card. That was very significant in my life.

**A: What about the other members of your family—did they go on to high school?**

H: Yes. I have six sisters, and they all finished high school. There's a fifteen year separation between the eldest and the youngest, so you can get the pattern of transition from Mexican American to Chicano. My older sisters were raised more Mexican, very traditionally, because of the influence of our maternal grandmother Amada Valle who lived with us until her death. Then with me (in terms of ages, I'm in the middle) and the sixties, there's a shift to maybe another way—really a Chicano perspective.



**A: At what point did you become interested in going to college? What motivated you to go on?**

H: I never thought about college until my junior or senior year in high school. In those days, there weren't really counselors for Chicanos: that was something that you did on your own. But two years before I graduated, a group from our high school had gone on to the UC system, and they'd done so well that as a group they received an award for the highest GPA's from a single high school. So that started something: after that, there was a small stream of students that would go on to the UC system. Out of my graduating class in 1963, a group of five Chicanos from Calexico went on to UCLA.

**A: Did your sisters attend college?**

H: The younger ones did, immediately after high school. My older sisters did not until later. Five of them have attended at least two years in a junior college or university. The youngest graduated in Spanish from UCLA and is an elementary school teacher in bilingual classrooms in El Monte, California.

**A: When did you become interested in literature? Was it in high school? Did you or other members of your family read much literature?**

H: No, in high school I was more interested in the sciences. I was in the college prep science track—science and math.

My interest in literature came about not so much through the printed word as through storytelling. I was very close to my grandmother, we all were. My parents had no advanced education; however, they were to a certain degree literate. But we had a grandmother who told us stories every night. This was before our family had a television set, and that might have had something to do with the closeness of our family group.

**A: What kinds of stories did your grandmother tell you?**

H: We were told all kinds. Stories of her childhood in Mexico. She was born Amada Triana in 1888 in Sombrerete, Zacatecas. I recall a story about an evil *cacique don Natividad del Toro*, others about Indian raids and the Revolution. She also told me traditional stories that later I found could be traced to other sources in Spain such as the romance of Genoveva de Brabante which I later rediscovered in Alejo Carpentier's *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*). Then there were the stories that she made up, imaginary ones, children's stories, many versions of *la llorona* (the wailing woman). All of it from Hispanic and Native American traditions, but oral...

**A: And the purpose was to entertain...?**

H: It was entertainment, yes, and instruction, values. I couldn't go to sleep without having a story told..

**A: And what was your relationship to Anglo American literature? Were you exposed to anything conventional outside of school?**

H: No, just in school.

**A: How did you finally come to study literature?**

H: When I went to college and started reading more widely I became involved with literature. But it wasn't a serious enterprise until I read Latin American literature. About five years before that, in 1965, I was in the Work Study Program working for Wayland D. Hand, Director of the Center for Folklore and Mythology at UCLA, when I happened to run across the works of J. Frank Dobie and a book by an author with a Spanish surname—Paredes. The title was, of course, "*With His Pistol in His Hand*." I started reading it and couldn't put it down. I read it straight through even though I was at work. I became interested in folklore, took a course from Professor Hand, and even collected stories, proverbs and folk cures from my family for him. Those were the sixties and I was very much affected by the oral tradition including Black folk and blues music and rock 'n roll. Although I was an undergraduate, I worked as a bibliographer alongside graduate students some of whom were quite famous in their own right: John Fahey, a folk performer; Pete Weldon, a blues record producer; and a crazy fellow named Barry who introduced me to the blues and who went on to fame in late night radio and MTV as Dr. Demento. Working in Folklore and Mythology for three years, reading Américo Paredes, coming from an oral storytelling tradition within my family, searching for alternative forms of artistic expression all came together for me in Latin American literature especially in the work of Juan Rulfo, Gabriel García Márquez and José Donoso.

**A: Did you have contact with any Chicano professors?**

H: No. There were no Chicano professors at UCLA at that time. While I was there at UCLA I think there were only seventy or eighty Mexican Americans. About eleven were from my hometown so we had a little group that hung out together. But no, no Chicano professors that I recall.

**A: When did you initiate your studies in Spanish and Latin American literature?**

H: I initiated them later...after teaching seventh and eighth grade in El Monte, I

decided I wanted to be a teacher, and I went back to get what I thought would be a secondary credential in Spanish. But one thing led to another and before I knew it I was in the B.A. program in Spanish at Cal State LA. And then from there I went into the M.A. program at Irvine.

**A: At Cal State LA, did you take any courses in Chicano literature?**

H: No. I studied Spanish and Latin American literature. You had to have a balance between those two, but I never had a course in Chicano literature. Never.

**A: When did you begin teaching Chicano literature?**

H: Not really until Yale, in 1983. Although I did teach some Chicano literature in my Chicano culture course at Stanford in 1981.

**A: What about Irvine? Did you have any kind of professional relationship with people involved in Chicano Studies? Chicano literature?**

H: No, we didn't have a Chicano instructor there until the year I left, when Alejandro Morales came. We graduate students were not encouraged to study Chicano literature. A course like that would have to be an independent study, and the units would not count toward your degree.

**A: How did the Chicano Movement influence your literary sensibility?**

H: I was at UCLA when it began; 1965 was an important year with the strike in Delano. Reies López Tijerina from New Mexico came to speak (all in Spanish) to UCLA students. I remember in 1968 a small group of us from United Mexican American Students (U.M.A.S.) met with the Chancellor in his office, requesting Chicano courses, Chicano professors... these events made an impression, politically speaking.

**A: Do you remember the first Chicano novel or poem that you read? What was it? What was its impact on you?**

H: When I was a graduate student in 1972 in the M.A. program at UC Irvine a professor of mine, Seymour Menton, had written a review that appeared in *Latin American Literary Review* of *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* by Tomás Rivera. Seymour told me that Tomás Rivera had been a student of his in Guadalajara, México during one of those summer National Defense Institutes in the 60s. So he gave me the review and said, in his unique voice, "Here, Héctor, read this—it's Chicano literature." So I did, I read it, and of course I was immediately involved with Chicano literature. Right after that Alurista's *Floriscanto en Aztlán* came out and then in '72

Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*, which won the Quinto Sol Prize. So that's more or less when I began to read Chicano literature.

Later, in the fall of 1974 the chair of the Spanish Department at Irvine, Juan Villegas, wanted to see the department involved in an activity that would have an impact on the Chicano and Latino community of Southern California. So I was one of the founders of the Chicano Literary Prize; several of us graduate students together with Villegas and Alejandro Morales put that contest together in 1974-1975, organized the whole thing. And that's when I began to be very much involved with Chicano literature. I'm very proud of having a hand in the oldest continuous prize in Chicano letters.

I recall that I asked Seymour Menton if he could get Tomás Rivera to come and speak at the award ceremonies for the prize, since they were friends and Seymour had written that review. Rivera came to Irvine in 1975, and I met him as well as Ron Arias who had won first place in short story... and that was the beginning of my professional contact with Chicano professors and writers.

**A: What was your educational experience like as a graduate student? Could you trace your evolution as a reader and critic during those years?**

H: My first interest was in Latin American literature. The book that fired my imagination and started me on that track was García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) and then Juan Rulfo and all the writers of the "Boom." In the early stages, about 1971, it was just an interest in reading the literature, without any critical activity attached to it.

I developed an interest in literary theory while working with Professor Andrés Díez Alonso, a Spaniard, at Irvine. He was a Marxist and as intelligent and knowledgeable as any of the famous critics I have met. He was an outstanding teacher and my role model. He would give us students everything he had in his library to read. Under his guidance, it was a smooth transition to having a critical approach. Later on, I tried to apply the same disciplined rigor to Chicano literature.

**A: When and where did you earn your doctorate?**

H: When and where ... and under what circumstances? I attended Yale from fall 1975 to fall 1977 having completed all courses with Honors, language requirements and written and oral qualifying exams by May of 1977. When my wife, Vicki, and I had our first daughter in November 1976, I stayed home with her, Catherine, from the time she was five weeks until December 1977; Vicki worked full time for a bank in downtown New Haven. After the department accepted my dissertation prospectus in December 1977, we returned to California. After Yale, I just couldn't get a teaching position though I tried. I was a substitute teacher for the East Area of the LA Unified School District and taught courses at night at Cal State, LA while I worked on the thesis. I finished the thesis in the fall of 1980 as I was starting my first

teaching position at Stanford having been offered a lecturership by Jean Franco. The doctorate with a Major in Contemporary Latin American Literature and a Minor in Comparative Literature was awarded in May of 1981.

**A: What was it like going from Irvine to Yale?**

H: It was a pretty big change. I mean if you can imagine never having studied literature at all and going to Cal State LA, and everything goes well, and then to Irvine, and again, things go well, and you seem to be on this track you never thought of, never dreamed of ... And then you get accepted into the Spanish department at Yale.

Getting accepted there was very important to me. I wanted to study with Emir Rodríguez Monegal, who was at the time one of the most important critics of Latin American literature. I applied to only one place and that was Yale.

I arrived there with quite a bit of idealism about the place. Being there was a little different than what I'd expected, but there were positive aspects... I had a friend from high school, Conrado Aragón, now a Superior Court Judge in East LA ... he'd come to Yale the year before I arrived, and he set me up with another fellow to help smooth the transition. And the other fellow was Ramón Saldívar. It turned out we even lived in the same building. We were neighbors in a Latin American student *barrio* that also included Ernesto Zedillo from Mexicali. Ramón was a graduate student in Comparative Literature in his last year working with G. Hillis Miller and Paul de Man. Ramón and I hit it off, and at the time, in terms of making that transition, that was very important. I also met José David Saldívar who was a junior at Yale College.

**A: Describe your relationship with Monegal. How did he influence your work?**

H: His was a very powerful influence until his death in 1985. Both friends and enemies would agree that he was a powerful presence. He was my professor for only one graduate course, a seminar on Borges in 1975 in which José Saldívar, as an undergraduate was a fellow classmate. For the thesis we agreed that I would work independently and when necessary seek his advice. After our initial meetings, we met only twice while he was in California at USC. In 1983 when I returned to Yale as a faculty member, he took me under his wing. We were good friends although we had different political opinions. He never steered me in any one direction and was willing to help me. Much was written about Monegal's politics in the early seventies; that is part of the history of the "Boom." Although he had his idiosyncrasies, he didn't force his views on his students. By the way, not many know that his daughter was imprisoned in Uruguay for her activities with the *Tupamaros*. We met in his hospital room a week prior to his death from cancer; he expressed his extreme pleasure with the way my career was developing. As you well know, a history of Latin American literature cannot be written without mention of his name. I am pleased to have had a similar relationship with Roberto González Echevarría, my

former Chair at Yale, who I consider the highest ranking critic in Latin American literary criticism.

Monegal was a promoter of literature and approached it as an avid but careful reader and wrote in a style that was part criticism and part journalism. He came from an earlier school of critics having studied on a scholarship with F. K. Leavis in England; he then pursued his literary interests through journalism. He was able to reach a wide audience with that balanced style which it seems many critics lack. I am still not completely able to do that myself, but I'd like to—to write for a wide audience and at the same time maintain a critical edge. He also taught me the importance of one's work. He had such a strength of will and continued reading and writing (his memoirs) until the very end.

**A: What was your course of study at Yale?**

H: I went there to study Latin American literature, particularly the contemporary period, because I saw a relationship between my own intellectual growth, the 1960s, the Chicano Movement, and a parallel development in Latin America. There was a growing consciousness of one continent with interests that transcended national boundaries, and I think the same sort of consciousness was part of the Chicano Movement.

**A: What was the topic of your dissertation?**

H: It was on the theory of the novel, using an historical approach. I did a comparative study, Cervantes's *Don Quijote* and José Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche*. But before I explain about that, you have to understand what it was like when I came to Yale... The tremendous excitement... It was the period from 1975 to 1977, and the Yale critics were not yet the "Yale critics," everything was in the formative stages, a very exciting time to be in literature. One of the first weeks I was there, Ramón said, "Derrida is coming." I said, "Who's Derrida?" Well, pretty soon I found out who Derrida was.

About my third or fourth week at Yale, I am walking into an auditorium to hear Derrida speak, and having people point out Geoffrey Hartman and Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller. And the atmosphere was sort of: *Here was the word*. The final answer was about to be given, and all these critics were gathered to hear it.

And that poststructuralist way of thinking was very influential for me. At the same time, I'd always had a historical perspective, there was that element too... Because of the historical bent of so much of Latin American literature, especially writers of the "Boom" such as García Márquez or Fuentes, we're almost obligated to approach it with an historical perspective. With Anglo American literature, we don't do that. I was trying in the dissertation, "Self and Language in the Novel," to bring historical depth to poststructuralism. As you can tell by the title it was very much a "Yale" thesis in the light of the work of Paul De Man and Derrida. It seemed to me, for my

own formation, that I needed some historical reconstruction of the representation of the subject through language. What Derrida was calling the metaphysics of presence, the union of Greek conceptuality and Christian creationism, I found all there in the intellectual sources for Cervantes's *Don Quijote*. So I took two important moments in the development of narrative in Spanish, the beginning of the modern with Cervantes's *Don Quijote* (1605, 1615) and the postmodern with José Donoso's *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (1970). I was taking two slices out of history à la Foucault to find out something about the ideological preconditions for the epistemologies at work in each book. For both psychological narratives, once consciousness comes under scrutiny there follow similar concerns with the representation of the subject through language.

I located Cervantes's concerns with the psychological subject as the locus of signification in the psychological, aesthetic, and linguistic discourses of the sixteenth century, in Juan Huarte and Alonso López Pinciano. The concerns with the *ingenio natural* (natural genius) and the *ánima racional* (rational soul), with what the self can know and understand through representational language, in large measure, determine Cervantes's concepts of the writer and reader as well as character. I was trying to document with Spanish sources what Foucault had written about modernity and the *Quijote* in *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*). This rationalist epistemology in *Quijote* leads eventually to Fielding's experimentation with exemplary narrative.

The influence of Henry James on José Donoso served as a superstructural mediation connecting an earlier nineteenth-century psychological realism in the works of Balzac and Flaubert with the search for representing hidden states of consciousness through parable and allegory. These strategies, so much like Freudian psychoanalysis, were to mark, as R. P. Blackmur had written earlier, James's turn toward literary modernism. This historical layering is evident in Donoso's deconstruction of the patriarchal subject. Although, I must explain, that Donoso added his own narrative discourses from Native American tales and myths to mass media images, newspapers, romantic novels and Disney comics. This fabulation and storytelling were indicative of a Latin American postmodernism. Chicano writers like Tomás Rivera and Rolando Hinojosa have used similar techniques (the layering of orality, realism and modernism), although in a less baroque fashion, to produce a collective subjectivity.

I was trying to pull all that together, and it was somewhat naive, to think I could do it. But to me it seemed important to relate these two periods, the Renaissance and what was being called postmodernism...showing connections between the Spanish Renaissance and the handling of these forms—the novel, romance, satire, chronicle and what was happening in the 1960s with the Latin American "Boom." Critics were doing this in other literatures, and I wanted to do it with Spanish and Spanish American literature. It was an ambitious project, and not totally successful. But in terms of my formation as a critic to understand modernity and postmodernism, it was very important.

**A: Your experience has been that of a Chicano coming from a bilingual, working-class background, growing up on the border and living in the United States as an ethnic minority. What impact might that background have had on your formation as a critic?**

H: Well, just coming from a background that was largely oral was bound to have an impact... Then going to Yale where *writing* is everything, the written text everything. It seemed to me that the approach was skewed toward Europe and a large part of the world—a lot of literature and storytelling—was being left out. The heavy emphasis on the written word means that you're basing your whole ontology, thinking of Derrida, on something that's limited mainly to a single continent, and leaves out the majority of the people in the world. Those early memories of my grandmother telling me stories have had a tremendous influence upon the way I think about literature.

Another thing that bothered me about Yale, offended me, even, was this notion that history does not exist. That even the subject doesn't exist. Again, that seemed to exclude a whole group of people who were very much involved with history, who were making history at that moment. The Chicano Movement itself, for example, was not only making history but it was a new collective subject. And there didn't seem to be a space for thinking about that within the framework that says: "there's no subject, there's no history."

*José Saldívar*: If I could interject just something? Héctor and I were saying recently that it seems a bit ironic—just when all these critics are talking about "the end of the subject," and we have Chicanos, feminists, and other people of color finally beginning to see themselves *as subjects*, as capable of action instead of just being acted upon... It may not be a coincidence that mainstream critics are talking about the end of the subject just when those people who have been cut off from power become aware of their potential role—as subjects—within the historical moment.

H: Walking around New Haven you would hear people spouting these things, you know, there's no history, there's no subject. But of course there is. You know that there is, and I know that there is!

**A: I think that what you're saying right now closely relates to a series of important matters that arise from the interaction of two dissimilar traditions of literary criticism. I am referring to the kinds of political, cultural issues, and the problems raised by looking at a text from the periphery of the mainstream critical culture... Obviously the questions raised by alternative partially incorporated perspectives are bound to have an impact—they're going to interject not only new types of cultural discourse, but new questions, new ways of looking at literary texts. As you said earlier, often there is a gap between what**



**happens in mainstream criticism and what happens in Latin American and Chicano criticism. I'm curious as to how it was for you, working in the Spanish department at Yale and attempting to incorporate all these elements—how did you find these theoretical trends, such as deconstruction, being reckoned with in the Spanish department?**

H: I had some problems, you know, with fellow classmates at Yale and well-known critics who would take every wave of new criticism that came out of France and swallow it whole and then apply it to Latin American literature. Those French critics, including the Belgian Paul de Man, had their own historical development—they had worked their way through the philosophy of language, phenomenology, existentialism. All of that had come in stages, and here, it was taken whole and complete and applied to produce a poststructuralist reading of the latest book out of Latin America, like critic Alicia Borinsky did, for example ... Derrida in Europe was much more tentative and politically subversive given his place within Western philosophy. Yet here, in the United States, the way he was read, was very orthodox and conservative. It seemed to me there was a problem with that. Roberto González Echevarría who began his career as a disciple of Derrida and deconstruction began to see its limitations and his work on the Latin American chronicle and novel was an important shift toward reading literature as a social institution embedded with the history of both Spain and America.

And going back for a moment to my dissertation, I thought that if I was going to truly understand poststructuralism, I needed to trace it back through the various steps that Western thought had gone through to reach this point, this particular poststructuralist or postmodernist moment. As things stood, these theories weren't being sufficiently reckoned with; they were being lifted whole from the French tradition, whatever the current fashion.

**A: As a graduate student at Yale, with a solid grounding in critical theory, can you tell me what was your communication with other critics of Chicano literature? Did you see any relationship between what you were experiencing within the mainstream critical tradition and what you saw going on within Chicano and Latin American criticism?**

H: At that point, I have to say I knew very little about a "Chicano" critical tradition. I had read a little bit about people like Roberto Cantú, and Alejandro Morales who was at Irvine the last year I was there, and Luis Leal, who was also a writer I was familiar with at the time. Then when I arrived at Yale, Juan Bruce-Novoa was there, it was his second year on the faculty there. So my knowledge was fairly limited as to what was being done in Chicano literature.

Even so, and partly I suppose because of my own background, I felt uncomfortable about some of the things Roberto Cantú was saying, to the effect that Chicano writers were responding to some chaos that could not be described, could not be

defined. Chaos, and then all of a sudden, Chicano literature! At UCI, I heard him give a talk on Oscar Zeta Acosta's responding to chaos in East LA and it seemed to me that something essential was being avoided...that there needed to be work done to describe just what that "chaos" was.

And of course it was Juan Bruce-Novoa who made the most of the notion of chaos. His work on the subject had a religious bent to it. Drawing on Bataille and Juan García Ponce, he saw the Chicano artist existing outside of society and politics, a romantic figure who made art out of nothing, who transformed chaos into form. Juan's "space of Chicano literature" was limited, sacred and inviolable. I had a problem with that type of early Chicano criticism as well.

**A: Did you study with Juan Bruce-Novoa?**

H: I never took a course with him, but he was (and continues to be) a very good friend, very supportive, as well as the first person I met when I came to the Spanish department.

**A: Can you comment on the reception of someone like Bruce-Novoa at Yale?**

H: It was very positive; the students liked him a lot, and he had quite a following. Although Ramón Saldívar as a graduate student taught the first Chicano literature course in the Spanish department at Yale, we should credit Juan, I think, with establishing from the beginning of his tenure a real Chicano presence at Yale, and this included working with another professor in history, Pedro Castillo. In fact I remember being somewhat envious of the undergraduates, because there were so many more of them (they had a hundred plus students, we only had seven or eight Chicano graduate students at the time scattered over the entire campus) and they in turn seemed such a close group. He did a lot to bring people together, to establish that community... In large measure, he made possible my position at Yale.

**A: When did you begin writing specifically about Chicano literature—what was the first critical project that you embarked on?**

H: At Stanford in 1980-81. I was a lecturer at Stanford; I taught in the bilingual program and also, for the first time, I began to teach Chicano literature and culture. Then the following year I went to UCLA as a Visiting Lecturer in Spanish American Literature, not Chicano Literature. The Spanish department sponsored a *mesa redonda* (round table) with Alurista, Guillermo Hernández and Margarita Nieto as candidates for a position in Chicano literature and I was asked to be the fourth person on the panel. That was my first formal paper in November 1981; it was called "Literatura chicana como comunicación" ("Chicano Literature as Communication"). In that paper I applied Wolfgang Iser's theories of reading to *Y no se lo tragó la tierra*.

**A: What was the main point you were trying to make about Chicano literature as a form of communication? Were you taking from Jakobson's model?**

H: Well, I was attracted to the work of Wolfgang Iser and Fredric Jameson who had been my professors at The School of Criticism & Theory in 1978. They both offered me a more historical approach to literature different from the deconstructive fashion of the time. I had begun to explore their theories in my graduate papers at Yale. Jameson offered me an ideological/historical approach to literature... Iser raised the question of how ideology is transferred from a transindividual system to the text, how the text incorporates an ideology, which is then reactualized by the individual reader. And in that sense, this whole idea of reading itself being an act of performance and interaction becomes important.

That first piece on Chicano literature, and a lot of the work I've done through the mid-eighties, was attempting to blend the ideas of these two writers, Iser and Jameson, and apply them to a text, in this case, *Y no se lo tragó la tierra*. And what came out of that was the idea that Rivera was striving for the same kind of communal relationship with his audience that storytellers traditionally enjoy: the same face-to-face dialogue and directness, the same intimacy of communication but doing it in a print culture, and that could only be accomplished by asking the reader to participate—to engage in some kind of performance of the book. And through this reading-performing process, as the protagonist arrived at consciousness of himself and his world, the Chicana and Chicano reader would also. And if that were the sort of experience Rivera was aiming for in this exemplary narrative, then the fragmentation of the plot made sense, because it served the purpose of encouraging the reader's active participation: the reader reconstructed the plots along with the protagonist of the story and produced an ideology of a Chicano community, a constant theme in Rivera's essays. Of course, the strategies are more complicated than my description for one should take into account the layering of historical moments as Rivera takes the reader from residual, to dominant or hegemonic, to emergent utopian ideologies. In the end, the singular or individual subjectivity of the Chicano artist is at the service of the community.

**A: One of your first published essays on Chicano literature was called "To Read Chicano Narrative: Commentary and Metacommentary." I wonder if you might talk a little more about how Fredric Jameson influenced you in this piece since the title of your essay is so reminiscent of his earlier work, "Commentary and Metacommentary."**

H: Jameson's writings have been very influential in my work. Actually, our interests have taken us along similar paths. He may be the only one of the world-ranking critics who reads Chicano literature. He has taught Chicanas and Chicanos in his courses. As I already mentioned, I took a course from him at the The School of

Criticism and Theory at Irvine in summer 1978 after finishing my course of study at Yale. As you well know, a group of Chicano critics including Rosaura Sánchez, José Limón, Lauro Flores, Ramón and José Saldívar are constructing a discourse informed by and also critical of Jameson. I have shared my work with him and consider him a strong supporter of Chicano literature. Had it not been for Jameson, *Criticism in the Borderlands* (1991) might not have been published. In 1987 I sent the prospectus for this collection to every major university press in the United States including my home press at Yale. I was turned down by all except Duke University Press. The Director Dick Rowston, who had grown up in central California, gave the prospectus to Jameson. Jameson encouraged the press to continue with the project for inclusion in his "Post-Contemporary Interventions" series. The collection was published in spring 1991; the first printing had sold out by late 1993. I am so pleased that he saw the value in this critical anthology.

While I was struggling with *realismo mágico* (magic realism) in my graduate papers at Yale in 1975-76, his article "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre" in *New Literary History* allowed me to refocus my writing in terms of the representation of the subject. After completing my dissertation in 1980 and reading *The Political Unconscious*, I discovered that we both had reached similar conclusions on the different social worlds that give rise to romance and novel and on the importance of the concept of the psychological subject for the development of realistic narrative. And the combination of oral tales, myth, curse and satire that occupied my writing in the final chapter of the dissertation and for which I had no term is now being referred to as Third World postmodernism or "the return to storytelling." Later in *Critical Inquiry*, Jameson himself through his friendship with the Cuban critic Roberto Fernández Retamar wrote an article on magic realism in film. Thus narrative as determined either by First World or Third World realities has led me to return to the writings of Jameson.

In the article on commentary and metacommentary also on chicano romance and satire, I was drawing on genre criticism in the work of Jameson and also Northrop Frye. I had been encouraged to continue my work on narrative and these critics by my professors at Yale, Peter Brooks and Alfred MacAdam. Jameson and Frye offered an alternative to the novel-centered interpretation of Chicano narrative. When one thinks of the many forms of oral and written narrative throughout world cultures, one has to realize how culture-specific, how European, is our notion of Chicano narrative.

Frye gave me the European context. Jameson's idea that genres are dependent on a specific moment for their origin, their invention, and that they die or re-surface according to changing social conditions was also very attractive. And Iser was also very useful with his notion that the text belongs to the reader, it is the reader who actualizes the text. And Jameson would agree that there is a performative aspect to the text which is already ideologically overdetermined that the reader must realize. I was moving from Western culture, to a historical perspective, to the private moment of reading. I think we all have to agree that there is that moment to be taken

into account. We can discuss the issues of audience or public, but we read in private. The act of interpretation, in these three areas, needed to be scrutinized for Chicano narrative.

In Chicano literary theory, critics were using the word “novel” and it occurred to me that we couldn’t do that without examining the notion of genre. The way you use that word “novel” should mean something, should have a specific meaning to critics, whereas it seemed to me we were using the word simply as a label, a catch-all phrase.

Of course some of it has to do with marketing. Publishers need labels for their products; distributors have to know what shelf to put a book on; and anything longer than say a hundred pages, if it’s a narrative, is called a novel. But for critics, it was a case of using the word a little too loosely, and not looking at what I’d call the specific narrative strategies used by writers. And it’s not enough to supply a list of technical devices, either. Sure, you can list all of the technical elements which make a novel, which make a romance, but to investigate the way a writer might be using these elements as political strategies, as interpretations of history, as revealing social contradictions... And I guess there, again, Jameson’s work is significant. I was applying some of his work on the “political unconscious” to genre not just as an aspect of technique, but as a strategy with ideological and political implications.

**A: I think that by obliging us to go back and rethink these accepted categories, you’re opening up a very interesting territory. It brings to mind the essay you wrote on Rudy Anaya’s *Bless Me Ultima*, in which you take the position that this text is a romance, not a novel. I would have to agree with you that this term “novel” has been thrown around rather loosely, that it hasn’t been defined as precisely as it could be, that it’s a problematic term... And especially when applied to Chicano literature, which by its nature seems to resist these classifications. In a sense, our entire critical apparatus has arisen in response to a fixed idea of what constitutes a novel, and this may be a primary stumbling block. There are people who claim we have no Chicano novels, that their fragmented form more closely approaches that of the literary sketch, or other early narrative forms.**

**H: It is a very difficult issue, and it’s a problem of applying the notion of genre to Chicano literature, which is, after all, a very specific literature. It’s not “Western” literature in the conventional sense, yet it has grown both from within the tradition of Western literature, and in response to pressures from the periphery of Western culture. If you think in terms of where we’re educated, the universities we attend, the institutional framework which transmits a European, in some cases a very British tradition, and then you examine the cultural bonds with Mexican or Latin American tradition—this dual formation, First World and Third World, is going to come through in the work of our writers. A Chicano writer has a certain social formation that may run counter to the “Western” tradition at the same time that he**

or she has an ideological formation that *is* Western. It's there, we can't deny either aspect... We're brought up in this country, we're trained in this country...

What I'm trying to grapple with is the question, what to do with writers who are somehow different from the mainstream tradition of Western culture or Western aesthetics... To ask myself how they are using these traditional Western forms, how are they changing or modifying them to produce something different? No writer simply repeats tradition; it's going to be changed to fit the needs of the particular writer. When I read Chicano narrative, I'm very much aware of these two aspects, that yes, I'm reading Rolando Hinojosa, I'm reading Sandra Cisneros, and they may be coming from a very Chicano perspective, but at the same time they're very much influenced by the institutions of the United States.

**A:** I think we can see the same thing happening on a more global level, between developed and underdeveloped nations. You have certain literary forms that have arisen in a context of advanced capitalism, that is to say, in the U.S. and Europe, and then you see some first world forms being reproduced in dependent countries, Latin American, for example. But the form will never be an exact replication of the original mold—it will be modified by the cultural and social circumstances of the writer who uses it, and who transforms it.

It seems to me that the same process must be at work in the critical response of this literature. You are part of an alternative circle of critics who have been shaped by the mainstream critical tradition and who, at the same time, are responding to the tradition, modifying it in terms of your own perspective as a Chicano, as someone emerging from a specific set of social and cultural circumstances.

I think we need to ask what happens when we take a critical apparatus that has developed from within a particular cultural context and apply that apparatus to a text that has emerged from a somewhat different cultural and historical perspective. To what degree does the text itself shape or contribute to shaping its critical response, the critical perspective adopted, under the impact of the cultural circumstances implicated within the text? These questions have been raised elsewhere, and while there are no definite answers now, they will be important in the consideration of our critical history.

**H:** I would agree with that, there are no easy answers. Let me begin in a very simplistic fashion. Much of our early normative criticism, and here I'm most familiar with narrative, did not allow for any deviation in form even though this was due to different cultural or historical perspectives. I'm thinking of negative criticism leveled against writers because their works did not conform to the strategies of the novel or literary realism. The novel was invoked because of its central place as an indication of advanced cultural development. Critics who claim that there are no Chicano novels do not concern me. In this context, books by Tomás Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa, Sandra Cisneros and Oscar Zeta Acosta are exemplary

of these problems of interpretation. Fragmentation and digression need not be negative characteristics.

I'm also the first to admit that critics bring their own ideological baggage to their role as readers. However, I have tried to write criticism from the particular ideologies (aesthetics) operative within the text. I have also begun to reassess the usefulness of the political unconscious to all Chicano narratives. *Bless Me, Ultima* in which the social and historical contradictions of gender, class and race are driven underground is a text that lends itself to a psychoanalytic interpretive model. This view does not do justice to *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* which for me is a critical examination of what we might term a Third World Mexican-mestizo peasant culture during a period of increasing exploitation and agricultural production in southern Texas.

What really troubles me, however, is that this literature will be appropriated by non-Chicano or mainstream critics who will publish in widely circulating journals without any references to the critical debates within Chicano criticism and without any interest in the political dimensions of Chicano literature. This is now happening in some well-known journals. In the end, is it a matter of a critical apparatus or the interests being served? The career of Guillermo Gómez-Peña is a good example. He is someone from Mexico City who moves to Tijuana and appropriates from Chicano and northern Mexican culture the critical vocabulary on borders without any real attention to the analysis of history, race and class. His performance art dwells on spectacle and stereotypes that are easily consumed by the Anglo-American media. He receives the MacArthur Foundation Prize from the United States and leaves Tijuana for New York City. So much for the border!

**A: Returning then to your essay on *Bless Me Ultima*, published in *Crítica*... In this piece you also discuss the relationship between literary form and ideology. You refer to this novel as "a Chicano romance of the Southwest," and suggest that the form in which Anaya chose to write it—the romance—is actually a response to certain social and historical conditions depicted in the text. I wonder if you could elaborate on this concept?**

H: Yes. But let me begin by stating that this article on Anaya was an intervention in a debate over the appropriateness of the concept of Latin American magic realism for *Bless Me, Ultima*. It seemed to me that this concept, which has had its own problematic existence within Latin American criticism, had been lifted too easily from its own critical context and forced upon this Chicano literary text. It was more useful to situate Anaya's full symbolic landscapes and scenic registers, even the denial of the forces of history, within an older Romanticism and an Anglo-American or British modernist literary tradition. For example, the confrontation between subject and object, really the contemplation and absorption of the subject by the forces of an animistic nature in *Bless Me, Ultima* occur in a radically different context in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. While there are moments of epiphany in

García Márquez, he is such an intelligent writer that he did not resort to the older subjectivism of Romanticism. Is there an artist-hero, a man of sympathy and feeling like Antonio Juan Márez y Luna in Macondo or Comala for that matter? I'm not denying that links exist between Chicano and Latin American literature especially in the use of myth; however, we must draw distinctions.

My article also lacked any real grounding in the literature of New Mexico and the West, but now I am pleased that Genaro Padilla's work on early autobiographical texts by New Mexican Hispanas has uncovered a romance tradition imported by Easterners, Anglos, and superimposed upon native New Mexican traditions. Following on the work of Padilla, I have traced this discourse to European romanticism exported in mid-nineteenth century to New England and then superimposed by easterner Charles F. Lummis on conquered Mexican territory in the 1890s. As Lummis boasted in 1925, he was the first to identify Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and parts of California, Colorado and Utah as the Southwest or more specifically the Spanish Southwest. A whole set of literary, folkloric and cultural practices were invented in the early twentieth century which survive to this day in the popular imagination and which are marked by the priority of the Spanish element over Native American and Mexican/Chicano traditions.

Now to answer your question, Anaya specifically located his narrative in the summer of 1945 when New Mexico was undergoing extreme social and economic changes. The war and the accompanying industries and new large scale farming had displaced many young males from traditional life styles in New Mexican villages. Sociologist Charles P. Loomis has documented this period of population loss. Of course, the detonation of the first atomic bomb at Point Trinity twenty-five miles from Carrizozo, New Mexico, was also to have its consequences within the area. Anaya was aware of these events because he refers to them as having a tragic influence on the Márez family. However, his interpretation is cloaked in myth, in the romance of Spanish settlement and Native American traditions. It's just as signs proclaim upon entering New Mexico, "Welcome to the Land of Enchantment."

Anaya constructs a mythical landscape where events are governed by cyclical patterns, magic, curse and prophecy. The outcome of these strategies is the polarization of good and evil. The real causes of events are largely ignored and no imaginative analysis of the contradictions of gender, race and class is undertaken. In this relationship between history and myth, this romance bears no resemblance to Latin American magic realism.

Also, in romance, as opposed to the novel form, we see a contrasting view of history. In the novel, events appear to rise out of the complex and often ambiguous acts of individuals, whereas in romance, the emphasis shifts: history, at least the writer like Rudolfo Anaya wants to see history, is a rather simplified contest between good and evil forces. There is no ambiguity either: the hero is always solidly on the side of the good forces. That seemed to be the view of historical development found in *Bless Me, Ultima*. From the very beginning, there's no doubt about "character"... the symbolism of Antonio Márez y Luna is clear from the beginning, and everything is



more or less prefigured. Here, my own work, *Conciencia y lenguaje en la novela* (*Self and Language in the Novel*), on the representation of the psychological subject as it emerges along with individualism and literary realism, has been helpful in drawing distinctions between the novel and other narrative forms such as romance and *realismo mágico* (magic realism) in which “characters” or actants are fluid and not restrained by the conventions of realism.

**A:** I think what you’re saying here, about the ideological preconditions necessary for this particular literary form is very important, particularly insofar as it contributes to the ongoing debate on Chicano narrative. But it seems to me that you could take it a lot further, that maybe this form is delimited and determined by a social ideology, and in this case, one we’ve come to call “cultural nationalism.” In other words, I’m suggesting that ideology does not just emanate from the use of certain *textual* forms... And I’m a little bothered by the fact that, in not taking your discussion beyond what you’ve defined as the ideology of form, you more or less downplay Anaya’s tendency, in that work, to mythologize the past, to mysticize it even. This kind of harking back to some glorious precolonial past that you find echoed in his book—those attitudes had their place within the context of the Chicano Movement, but in the present time, it seems maybe overly fatalistic—not really in touch with the realities of social change as we currently perceive them.

Wouldn’t you agree that from a historical-materialist or “Marxist” perspective, anyway, it’s important to go beyond the ideology of form, beyond the preconditions in a text, beyond formulaic manifestations, to evaluate the types of social ideologies that are permeating our literature...perhaps even paving the way for the adoption of certain forms over others, or at least creating a symbolic field for the expression of various types of ideological formations be they authorial, collective, or formal?

**H:** Yes, you’re right, the symbolism of Antonio Márez y Luna is very much related to a conservative strain of cultural nationalism, taking the history of New Mexico and making it into some sort of mythic construct. All turns out to be a celebration of the past. This is the romantic view of history that Genaro Padilla has traced back to an Anglo ideological hegemony in New Mexico. But obviously at the moment when that book came out, there was a strong movement toward myth and mystification—that part of the Chicano Movement that was caught up with books like Castañeda’s *The Teachings of Don Juan*. I tend to think of Anaya as consciously transforming his own well-known New Mexican tradition—Charles F. Lummis, upper-class Hispanas like Cleofas Martínez Jaramillo, and Hispanist Aurelio M. Espinosa—into a Chicano tradition with similar tendencies. After *Bless Me, Ultima* Anaya writes *Heart of Aztlan* using a term popularized during the height of Chicano cultural nationalism, a term, by the way, that was used much earlier by Anglos in New Mexico.

At the 1987 NACS meeting in Salt Lake City, I heard some interesting papers on Octavio Romano and his concept of a cultural core, values that persist over time. The books that received the Quinto Sol award were selected for specific reasons. There is much work to be done in this area also.

**A: Returning again to the question of genres in Chicano Literature, a topic which is interesting indeed! Now we all know that the novel is a bourgeois form, and that obviously, Chicanos, as a people, have had very little access to this form, or to the social strata in which it's produced. Would you agree that some of the problems involved in the classification of Chicano literary forms can be traced to the social, economic, and cultural circumstances of our writers, and the impact which these circumstances have exerted on their literary creation?**

H: Yes, of course. The social circumstances are such that the majority of writers and critics—and I can speak from my own personal experience—most of our writers come from working-class backgrounds. And yet their training has come from within the institutions of the United States. We come from a certain class, but we participate in the activities, we pursue the interests of another class, and it becomes a question of where your allegiance will be, with which class. As you suggest, it's a situation of working-class writers grappling with a bourgeois form...I think these questions of self-identity weren't really problems for Chicanos until recently, when this contradiction between our working-class origins and our experiences as critics, teachers and writers came about and began to influence the literature and criticism. That's partly what makes it Chicano literature, our being forced to invent forms that are very much our own.

And one aspect of form that is our own is the oral one; I believe that Chicano writers of narrative tend to employ certain oral storytelling techniques. We're trying to convey to the reader the sense that it's not just the individual we're concerned about, it's the community. In some sense the narrative is viewed as a community event—it emerges from and speaks to the community in much the same way that storytelling does.

**A: In recent years, Chicano criticism has experienced an unprecedented growth and sophistication, and it has expanded to include a new and dynamic circle of critics. Which critics have most influenced you in terms of your approach to Chicano literature, and your theoretical formation as a critic?**

H: Joseph Sommers, for one—there's absolutely no doubt about that.

**A: What in particular caught your attention about his approach?**

H: His seemed the most significant historical-materialist approach to Chicano literature, at the time when I first encountered his work.

And Ramón Saldívar... I think the importance of Ramón is the rigor that he brings to a text. I'm probably more of a practical reader of a text than Ramón. Also, he has a way of using English that I don't see with any other critic of Chicano literature, or anyone else, for that matter. Others have made this point about Ramón—that he brings a new sense of the use of language, as well as a definite critical rigor to Chicano literary criticism. There are many others from whom I have drawn examples. I already mentioned Genaro Padilla. Over the years, Rosaura Sánchez has been producing great, thorough scholarship. Norma Alarcón writes honest, probing feminist scholarship. I admire José Limón's anecdotal style. José Saldívar is quite adventurous with his criticism. And of course, Américo Paredes still amazes me for his creative and critical work which now spans almost the entire twentieth century. He has had a remarkable career!

**A: How would you evaluate the initial popular criticism that was coming out in the beginning, ten or fifteen years ago? How would you react now, in hindsight, to all those literary manifestos?**

H: I have to say that at all times, I try to contextualize or historicize what I read. This is in no way saying that the "popular" criticism was not good. Given the moment it was written, it was important. You have to begin somewhere, and we owe a great deal to all those critics who first began writing on Chicano literature. There's no way out of that.

It just seems that now we're at another point in history, and we are bringing new critical tools to bear upon our reading of the literary text. Though I will admit that I've had my reservations about certain critics who were writing say in the early and mid-seventies.

**A: Would you care to express those reservations?**

H: Well, for example, the historicist criticism of Luis Leal and Raymund Paredes, the kind which, in my opinion, wants to see the history of Chicano literature as an unbroken evolutionary line that descends from the Spanish chronicles of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. This, of course, is a problem of literary history, but one which we will be dealing with for some time to come, especially now with the accelerated development of both Chicano literature and criticism. The Spanish chroniclers are Spaniards of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, something happens with the introduction of the Anglo element. Recently, I have listened to some very interesting papers by Rosaura Sánchez, Lauro Flores and Genaro Padilla that have dealt with specific nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts written by Mexican Americans. Until this work is done, I agree with José Armas that we can't speak of a Chicano tradition that extends centuries into the past. I do not want to give you the impression that history is not important for me. In my own work I want to work out on a theoretical level the still evident determinations,

the mental and economic structures that were set in place with the discovery and conquest of the Americas. Awareness of these determinations was certainly part of a new Chicano subjectivity in the sixties. And a writer as smart as Richard Rodriguez is aware of this although he tries to deny it. His feelings of inferiority about his ethnicity and culture are proof that he has bought into a racist ideology. The battles waged by Europeans and "Americans" against their cultural others have been repeated often and are all too familiar to Chicanos. Why search for origins, when the past is already present with us. Of course, my observations pertain to a literate tradition. The persistence of a *mestizo* culture is another matter which will go unquestioned.

In all fairness to Leal and Paredes, in the seventies, at that point, it seemed you had to do that, you had to verify, "Yes, we do have a tradition. It's Spanish, Mexican and English, and it is a tradition." I have written about this with reference to the relationship between Chicano and Mexican literature, in a review of Luis Leal's work *Aztlán y México: Perfiles literarios e históricos*. Given the circumstances, without a readily available context for Chicano literature, the logical direction to look toward for some starting point was Mexico. Writers and critics pursued this course. Fine, you have Vasconcelos, Paz and Fuentes. That was fine and good because we didn't have much else in terms of a context for Chicano literature. But it bears repeating that Chicanos are not Mexicans even though some Mexican intellectuals are beginning to reclaim us. Now I think we've reached a wider perspective, we're asking "What's *American* literature? What does it include?" This is the point where José David Saldívar comes into the debate, where his influence on my own work becomes very important. His whole rereading of American literature in terms of two hemispheres, borders and diasporas, that interact with each other proposes that we should not look at American literature as the national literature of a certain group that has appropriated the right to speak for everyone; rather we have to see it as much larger and more culturally diverse. That's the contribution of José's *The Dialectics of Our America* has made to my thinking about Chicano literature, seeing it in terms of its place within the literatures of the Americas.

**A:** How do you feel about the professionalization of Chicano criticism... the potentially negative effects of this process in terms of its narrowing of the audience that our criticism reaches? At one time, it was easy for someone in sociology or political science to pick up a review of a Chicano text and get something out of it, without knowing a whole lot about even literature, let alone various modes of philosophical thought. But now we are moving towards a more specialized critical vocabulary. We are speaking in a difficult terminology that isn't very accessible even to other Chicano intellectuals. Which means it's even further removed from the general public.

**H:** Yes. But I'm also wondering just how large was that original public... We were

talking a moment ago about popular critics. Were they “popular” in the sense that they reached a large audience? I guess I have my doubts as to how much Chicano literary criticism, popular or otherwise, has reached the average Chicano reader, if there even is such a thing as the average Chicano reader. I also have the feeling that our literary criticism is largely ignored by Chicanos in other disciplines.

**A: So you don't foresee any possible negative effects in this increasing tendency toward specialization in our literary criticism?**

H: Let's just say that at this point in my career I'm trying to look at the beginning of Chicano narrative and examine its existence from the late nineteenth century to the present. It's a limited project, but for me, it's an important one. I try in my own work to deal with the material in a way that's both theoretically informed yet accessible to a wide readership. But I know that it's only partially accessible to the majority of Mexican Americans in the United States. I hope, however, to reach a wider group within the academy. I do think it's important to reach non-Chicano readers; in fact, I think we should be reaching as many audiences as possible, and if that means translating into Spanish and other languages, fine. No need to limit oneself. José Saldívar and I tried to reach a wide an audience as possible with *Criticism in the Borderlands*. From the reviews and citations that we have received of this collection, it has added to the critical debates on borders, diasporas, postmodernism, etc., in the fields of Latin American Studies, American Literature, Comparative Literature and Anthropology in the United States, Europe and Canada. You know in some quarters Chicano writers are seen as representatives of the community while critics are professionals far removed from “the people.” Of course, this is a false problem because, on one hand, most writers have academic degrees and, on the other, the Chicano readership exists mainly within the academy. Should we think of Chicano literature as a closed circuit involving only writers and critics? I don't think so. As professors, we have an immediate constituency; students are also readers. I take my pedagogical duties very seriously and try to inform my students of the active roles that they should be playing both within their institutions of higher learning and after graduation as professionals within their communities.

Professionalization for both writers and critics is bound to happen, specialization is going to happen. In fact, it is already happening... In a way it's good in the sense that there will be more critics who will be writing on Chicano literature and culture with even greater rigor and more solid theoretical grounding. I have met so many critics and writers who are doing such interesting work. Think of the important work being done by you, Rosaura Sánchez, José and Ramón Saldívar, Genaro Padilla, Erlinda Gonzales-Berry, Norma Alarcón, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa not to mention the Mexican and European scholars. This specialization will lead us, as you have stated elsewhere, Angie, toward an age of Chicano literary criticism. Hopefully, as a result of this collective process and the debates it generates our work

will be taken seriously by our colleagues, including Chicanas and Chicanos in other disciplines, and, ultimately, the interests of our community will be served.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Some of the ideas put forth in the introduction are elaborated in this as yet unpublished manuscript entitled "Conversations with Chicana/o Critics." Héctor Calderón's interview was first conducted in May 1987 while he was at the Stanford Humanities Center on leave from Yale University; the interview has been revised and updated for this issue of *Mester*.

<sup>2</sup>*Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology*. Ed. Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

<sup>3</sup>See book description and comments on jacket by Fredric Jameson, Houston A. Baker, Jr., Charles Tatum, Juan Bruce Novoa and Hanny Berkelmans. The book forms part of the Post-Contemporary Interventions Series edited by Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson.

<sup>4</sup>Calderón and Saldívar paraphrasing Rolando Hinojosa in his Foreword to the anthology.

<sup>5</sup>Graduate students included Alurista, Alda Blanco, Rafael Chabrán, Mónica Espinosa, Lauro Flores, Rosa Linda Fregoso, Luz Garzón, Yolanda Guerrero, Pedro Gutiérrez, Sylvia Lizárraga, Clara Lomas, Lupe López, Mariana Marín, Rubén Medina, José Monleón, Beatriz Pita, Rita Sánchez, Gina Valdés and Cecilia Ubilla.

<sup>6</sup>Tzvetan Todorov. "A Dialogical Criticism." *Raritan* 4.1 (1984):64-75.

<sup>7</sup>Those scholars in attendance included Norma Alarcón, Juan Bruce Novoa, Norma Cantú, Lauro Flores, María Herrera-Sobek, Francisco Jiménez, Luis Leal, José Limón, Ellen McCracken, Teresa McKenna, Elizabeth Ordóñez, Genaro Padilla, Alvina Quintana, Juan Rodríguez, Renato Rosaldo, Ramón Saldívar, Rosaura Sánchez and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto as well as members of the wider Stanford scholarly community.