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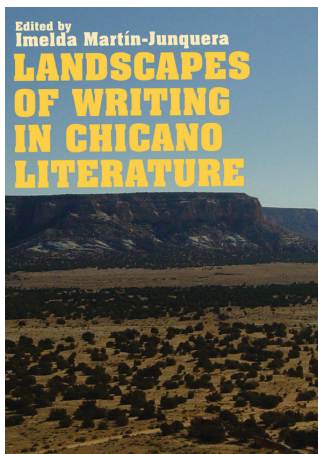
**DECODING AMERICAN CULTURES
IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT**

special issue

LANDSCAPES OF WRITING IN CHICANO LITERATURE

edited by Imelda Martín-Junquera

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Landscape may be perceived as a seemingly simple natural phenomenon of a certain visual value. However, as this collection of essays demonstrates, landscape transcends its own tangibility: in its beholder's eyes, it may become an *interior*, a complex inscription of history, experience, and a vista of the future.

Writings are their authors' traces: deep imprints in the ground or snow. The landscape, storing these unique signatures, becomes storied itself.

Even though an increasing number of scholars in the Americas appreciate the narrative power of the landscape, the number of studies and publications addressing the matter remains insignificant. The landscape, patiently, awaits reading: holding stories in store, it invites insight. This is precisely what the texts collected in the *Landscape of Writing in Chicano Literature* offer.

The majority of the contributors to the volume address the complex correlation of identity and space in Chicano literature. The critical texts of the first part of the collection focus specifically on *The House on Mango Street*, *Women Hollering Creek*, and the recently published *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*. What the narratives share is certainly the theme

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of the performative function of space in the process of identity formation. The land, ruthless and barren as it may be, functions as the space of emotional nourishment and cultivated beauty. The descriptions of the land, offered, mostly, in English, are often presented in lieu of writer's memories: land and memory fuse into a *Welt/Anschauung*, a transcendent, yet worldless landscape, capable of speaking whole worlds.

And thus, the first chapter by Elisabetta Careri explores the eponymous house on Mango Street, a safe zone for its inhabitants. Any trespassing may—and does—result in dangerous encounters with strangers. Participating in the dynamics defined by the house and its neighborhood becomes a meaningful process: the understanding of the very intimate relationship between character and their habitats involves not only one's revision of what one assumes should be true about the quotidian experience of the daily world, but also one's readiness to learn one's language anew: at home, phrases such as 'upstairs' or 'over there' are meaningless to an outsider, whose own 'upstairs' or 'over there' might be topoi of an altogether different set of stories.

Careri makes an interesting observation on the relationship between the building, the protagonist's body residing within the walls, and nature that complements the living picture. *The House on Mango Street* faces four elm trees that 'grow towards the sky.' Anthropomorphized, the trees fuse with Esperanza's body and her house. Unlike the building, the human being within it and the trees remain in constant motion. Such a landscape, with a symbol of permanence in the center and epitomes of change in the fringes, defines the girl's safe zone: a zone made of literary discourse of 'impure blood,' whose impurities 'bled through' from Sandra Cisneros's own biographical landscape. In this context, Elena Avilés, the next contributor to the volume, emphasizes the narrative power of the aquatic rhetoric in the text: she exposes the relationship between the landscape-related figures of water and the figurations of character. Water, in her view, stands for mother nature and its ungraspable, ever floating identity,

which, like that of a woman's, defies the limits of language. The connection between the idea of the limits of the female body and the aquatic imagery (the flow of the creek) allows Avilés to provide her reader with an insight, whereby the combination of landscape with the concept of cultural displacement renders the *genius loci* central to the narrative as a figure rendering palpable the otherwise ineffable dynamics in a woman's life.

A female-centered perspective is also applied in chapter two, in which Elena Avilés discusses *Women Hollering Creek*. She reads the land present in the work as a culturally shaped territory upon which women *voice* their identities. Landscape therefore gains yet another role. It ceases to be a *setting* for events, it *tells* stories *pronouncing* the links between past and present and gives voice to the people who used to have none. Avilés argues that the Chicana/Chicano representations of landscape more than often alludes to the fight and struggle for the land that had been lost for a variety of complex reasons. The chapter focuses on women altering geography by manipulating the visions and views of landscapes existing in the narrative. Particularly interesting is the way in which Avilés connects the idea of crossing the US-Mexican border with the symbolic transgression of borders of one's identity: adapting to a new life as a wife, becoming a new citizen in a different country, all such transformations involve the transgression of the limits of one's self, resulting in one's becoming 'someone else', a new person.

The next chapter, by Ellen McCracken, has a more of a linguistic undertone. The author analyzes *Caramelo* by Sandra Cisneros as well as *The Brief Wondrous life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. The text itself is what interests her most. Literary footnotes and other paratexts identified in the works she selected as her material are studies with the use of methodological tools inspired by Gerard Genette. The analysis leads to the conclusion that such paratexts serve as cognitive thresholds of the processes of reading and interpreting. McCracken asserts that such a treatment of paratexts chal-

lenges the Western linear, present-dominated narratives, and offers a new perspective on footnotes or side-notes that may include mini-biographies, or even fully fledged stories. Thus, a paratextual landscape becomes the central text itself, which is the main point of Maria Laura Spoturno's argument presented in the chapter immediately following. Like McCracken, also Spoturno explores the paratextual stratum of *Caramelo*. Her inquiry complements the previous one by offering the reader a more disciplined categorization of paratexts and by demonstrating how, in the acts of reading, they shift from the margins of the main text and displace it, thus becoming, to use a Derridian phrase, dangerous supplements. She classifies them as privileged agents of a cultural and linguistic mediation. As the story progresses, paratexts become protagonists themselves.

With the second part of the book comes the change of the scenery. The next section of the collection offers studies addressing Chicana poetry; its general focus is upon the female body as a component of Chicana landscape. In the fifth chapter of the collection, Elyette Benjamin-Labarthe investigates poetry in the wide social, political, and economic context that historically conditioned male/female poetry writing and, simultaneously, determined the usage of the figures of nature in poetic texts. She stresses the importance of the difference between traditional Mexican poetry and Chicano/Chicana poetry: the latter, in her view, constitutes a distinct genre, characterized by the centrality of themes such as exile, alienation or nationhood. These motifs are in tune with the depictions of landscapes; the characters complement the natural world together with its *milpas*, *saguaros*, or *chamisa* blossoms, while mountains, rivers, fields, arroyos and flowers are no longer inanimate props in the process of storytelling, they became active and dynamic elements of protagonists' behavior and experience.

A shift in focus may be observed in the next chapter by Yolanda Godsey who explores the industrial milieu, in which gender struggle takes place. She also tackles the issue of undocumented workers who struggle with class, gender, and racial

discrimination every day. The author locates her argument in the context of the 1987 Simpson-Rodino Amnesty Law that granted 'undocumented people' the opportunity to obtain legal residency, which also provides the intellectual backdrop to Godsey's study of the play *Real Women Have Curves* by Joséfina López. The plot revolves around visits from *la migra*: the immigration authorities that circulate the protagonist's—Estela's—neighborhood and control the mode of the girl's work in the garment industry. The shift in the landscape brings economic factors into play: Godsey shows how women are slaves to wage and how unjust the lower positions to which they are relegated truly are.

Inferiority and submissiveness of women in the male dominated society is a topic of major importance to Carmen Melchor Iñiguez and María Jesús Perea Villena. The scholars analyze texts by writers who offer a new vision of a Chicana: a woman able to fight against harmful beliefs shared by her traditional community. They raise issues of unhappily married Chicana teens, marginalized wives overshadowed by their macho husbands, and recent sexual liberation. The emergence of the feminist thought in the Chicana community notwithstanding, one may infer that difficulties in communicating the rationale for the newly adopted stances to the Anglo-speaking community in the US have proven to be the factor slowing down the process of change. Working toward the transformation, the feminist Chicana writers allow themselves to be ironic about their situation and vent their frustration creating narratives in which the category of womanhood, much less rigid than that born out of the androcentric discourse, allows individuality.

The third part of the volume offers an insight into the cultural conditioning of the Chicano population in the United States. Forced to negotiate their identity and ethnicity while creating their own vision of reality, Chicanos produce narratives relying upon the continuity and change of the cultural landscape with which they identify. The section begins with Berta Delgado Melgosa's study, who, analyzing selected biographies of Chicano Vietnam War veterans, argues that

identity can be constituted by trauma, which, albeit shared by representatives of many American ethnicities, always generates figures of difference. Such figures, one might infer, may be treated as portals into the discursive logic of each of these ethnic identities, including that of the Chicanos.

Sophia Emmanouilidou takes a different approach towards exploring the relation between the Chicano and the white American experience. She revisits the concept of neighborhood, focusing especially on the ambivalence of the negative associations of *el barrio*. She invites her readers to see the space of *el barrio* as a sphere of fraternity and solidarity, an enclave protecting cultural and ethnic heritage. She presents *el barrio* as a formative space and a safe space: a space in which one's origin is celebrated, in which one's identity is formed and in which it develops. Emmanouilidou deftly deconstructs the double entendre invoked by the word *el hoyo* ('a hole') being the name of *el barrio* in a collection of short stories by Mario Suárez, thus drawing attention to the interpretive potential of the frequently neglected Spanish onomastics in well-known works of literature.

Tey Diana Rebolledo explores the landscapes of protagonists' imagination using symbolic maps provided by authors of selected Chicano/Chicana narratives. She emphasizes the difference between Chicano and Mexican experience showing how Chicano identity and sense of belonging, frequently metaphorized and metonymized with reference to the figure of the house, is a construct of memory, whose texture includes threads of personal and group experience of resistance and trauma. If both home and neighborhood are states of mind, as the scholar asserts, the house and the landscape it co-creates, may well be the most legible figures of the Chicano/Chicana self.

Interweaving Spanish vocabulary within an English narrative, Chicano/Chicana literature adds a unique element to the US literary landscape. As such, it becomes a graceful object for yet another type of identity-oriented studies. The question of code switching is analyzed by José Antonio Gurpegui, María López Ponz and Cecilia Montes-Alcalá who

all argue that language is a weapon susceptible to political manipulation. People of Mexican descent are by far the largest minority in the United States of America. Uprooted, disconnected from their original landscape, they build it anew in the language, which remains one of the most emblematic way of 'cultivating' *the langue*. Rooted in a new soil, language requires attention and care to grow and flourish. Integrated with the substrate, the *transplanted* language manifests itself within the English discourse in loanwords, syntax and instances of code switching; a process natural to bilinguals. The above notwithstanding, Gurpegui notices that in the US context Spanish will never influence English the way the latter shapes the former: such a process would be culturally counterproductive as it would hinder the comprehension of the message. To warrant the efficiency of trans-ethnic communications, translation comes to the forefront of scholars' attention as a strategy of pivotal importance. For instance, Ponz, whose article focuses on Spanish-to-English translation, claims that translation determines the work's reception in the target culture. However, bearing in mind that writers tend to adapt the simultaneous usage of Spanish and English in their texts to their own needs and literary goals, it is important to observe that the growth of 'bilingual' literature, that is literature abundant with non-English expressions and rich in code-switching, has been stigmatized as of lesser value only initially. With time, however, it became clear that such a phenomenon is a result of a desire to confront the two concurrent languages with the view to achieving a particular effect (Lipski). The aesthetics of code-switching offers an interesting artistic tool for Chicano writers, who may thus position an English-speaking reader face to face with what is simultaneously very well familiar, yet uncanny; next-door, yet a world apart.

To sum up, the volume offers a multifaceted 'synaesthetic' introduction for those non-Spanish speakers who wish not only to experience a valuable insight into Chicano/Chicana literature, but above all, for those who are ready

to 'organically' comprehend the Chicano culture. The speechless, yet outspoken landscape, employed by the contributors to the volume as a means of modeling unmediated experience of the Chicano reality, opens space for more than just another discussion on the Chicano literature and its contexts. An interesting element of the present day academic scenery, *The Landscapes of Writing in Chicano Literature* will be an eye-opener to anyone who wishes to venture beyond the limits of his or her own discourse and to see what is there.

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