

# “This Is Not Your Country!”: Nation and Belonging in Latina/o Literature

Paula M. L. Moya

In the first chapter of his prizewinning autobiography, *Always Running* (1993), Luis Rodriguez—peace activist, poet, writer, and former gang member—tells a story about one of the first lessons he received about the politics of identity in this country. Having taken a walk to Will Rogers Park in Los Angeles with his mother and siblings, Rodriguez (who was born a US citizen) witnesses his Mexican mother’s humiliation at the hands of an “American” woman who contests his mother’s right to sit herself and her children on an available park bench. “‘Look spic, you can’t sit there!’ the American woman yelled. ‘You don’t belong here! Understand? This is not your country!’” (19). The anecdote serves to introduce Rodriguez’s reader to a key theme that runs throughout the book—a theme that motivates much of the action in the plot of his life. From a very young age, Rodriguez heard the message from teachers, policemen, and random “American” strangers that, as a young, poor, Mexican-origin boy, he was unwanted, out of place, and ultimately disposable. Rodriguez’s reaction to his predicament was one that he suggests is completely understandable—he joined a gang. “Gangs,” he explains, “are not alien powers. They begin as unstructured groupings, our children, who desire the same as any young person. Respect. A sense of belonging. Protection. The same thing that the YMCA, Little League or the Boy Scouts want. It wasn’t any more than what I wanted as a child” (250).

What Rodriguez wanted as a child and what he got, however, were two very different things. Although the gangs he joined *did* initially give him “something to belong to,” they did not finally empower him to claim his rightful place as a fully entitled citizen of the US (41). It was not until he began to educate himself through the Chicano Movement about the economic and social institutions that put him and others like him at a structural disadvantage relative to other “Americans” that Rodriguez was able to break free of gang life and begin the long, arduous process toward achieving full, substantive

*Rewriting North  
American Borders  
in Chicano  
and Chicana  
Narrative*  
By Monika Kaup  
Peter Lang, 2001

*Extinct Lands,  
Temporal Geographies:  
Chicana Literature  
and the Urgency  
of Space*  
By Mary Pat Brady  
Duke University  
Press, 2002

*Gang Nation:  
Delinquent Citizens  
in Puerto Rican,  
Chicano and Chicana  
Narratives*  
By Monica Brown  
University of Minnesota  
Press, 2002

US citizenship. His work with gang prevention in the schools has been a crucial part of that process. But Rodriguez has had his greatest success with his autobiography—a powerful work of literature that he wrote as a gift for his son Ramiro, and for all the young people who face the same kinds of hurdles today that he faced a generation ago. Rodriguez’s compelling autobiography works on a variety of levels. It works as an experiential narrative that conveys the anger, fear, and hopelessness that can lead people to hurt themselves and others, while also portraying the love and hope that can be found in any human situation. It works as a sociological account of the dynamics of gang membership and identity, and as an exquisitely beautiful literary rendering of the images and feelings that are part of the gang experience. Finally, it works as a vehicle through which Rodriguez makes a devastating critique of the economic and social structures that lead to the criminalization of poor urban Latina/o youth. His autobiography, by exposing the dynamics of exclusion operative in the dominant conception of US nationalism, works to interrogate those dynamics and that conception, even as it contests the idea that Latina/os must forever be outsiders to the US national imaginary.

Three recent scholarly books by Monika Kaup, Mary Pat Brady, and Monica Brown indicate that Rodriguez’s preoccupations are resonant with Latina/o literature as a whole. Indeed, their work demonstrates that Latina/o literature has been involved from its inception in the project of examining, contesting, and reconfiguring dominant conceptions of citizenship and nation. The questions these three critics ask, the concerns they demonstrate, and the metaphors they draw from the literature all point to an interested and ongoing engagement with the project of examining and refiguring the US national imaginary. Each scholar in her own way broadens and deepens the field of Latina/o literary criticism even as she provides a very different model for how cultural critics might approach this transformational endeavor.

Monika Kaup’s *Rewriting North American Borders in Chicano and Chicana Narrative* (2001) examines the question of national belonging through a focus on the border as a key theme in Chicana/o literature. Kaup concentrates on Chicana/o literature written in English since 1960 (with a few significant nods to earlier texts)—especially those works that are set on the border, or that use the border as an organizing metaphor for cultural, gender, or racial conflict within the US. She argues that Chicana/o writers have been developing the border theme over time and that its meaning has changed even as it has given rise to new narrative forms. Kaup’s central contention, in fact, is that the border theme has produced two fundamental plots in Chicana/o narrative: “a resistant nationalism that emphasizes

forced annexation with attendant racial conflict and a more consent-oriented immigrant and ethnic model” (10). The most significant works of Chicana/o literature, according to Kaup, employ or revise one or both of these two fundamental plots.<sup>1</sup>

Kaup finds the nationalist plot most clearly articulated in the literature of South Texas, particularly in the work of writers such as Americo Paredes, Rolando Hinojosa, and Genaro Gonzalez. Writers employing the nationalist plot, she suggests, view space as the battleground and time as the enemy. As Ramón Saldívar has argued, for writers like Paredes, the border region was transformed by modernity and the imperial designs of the US from native homeland into foreign territory. The Anglo-American incursion into South Texas, and the economic and social changes that accompanied it, fundamentally challenged a patriarchal and semifeudal economy at the same time that it instituted a new racial order that profoundly disadvantaged the prior Mexican border residents.<sup>2</sup> It is for this reason, Kaup suggests, that the narratives produced by South Texas Chicano writers are dominated by a “spatial poetics of territorial resistance against historical change” (11). It is a plot, she claims, that places space at the center of narrative representation.

By contrast, the Chicano writers who employ the immigrant plot figure the border very differently. Kaup associates the immigrant plot most strongly with California writers—in particular José Villarreal, Richard Vasquez, Victor Villaseñor, and Richard Rodriguez. This plot, Kaup argues, “is governed by a temporal poetics of spatial mobility and change in ethnic identity” (11). The writers employing the immigrant plot are oriented toward the future, not the past, and their attitude toward the process of Americanization is one of desire rather than resistance. More significant for Kaup’s purposes is their differing figuration of the border. Rather than being a homeland to be resistantly occupied and defended against the Anglo-American invader as in the nationalist plot, the border in the immigrant plot is a line of demarcation—a point in space to be passed over and left behind—along the journey toward a new, American future. In Chicana/o immigrant literature, Kaup notes, “the geography of the border appears as a liminal stage in a plot structured by the drama of temporal change in Mexican American ethnic identity” (12).

The strength of Kaup’s basic argument lies both in its clarity and in its historically grounded relationship to the different regional experiences of South Texas and California Chicano (male) writers. Her schema powerfully clarifies the major differences between, for example, an Americo Paredes and a José Villarreal. Moreover, it makes apparent at least one reason why Paredes and not Villarreal has emerged as the patriarchal figure of Chicana/o literary studies. Insofar as Chicana/o studies is a field that has constituted itself in

opposition to (or at least in critical engagement with) a traditional Anglo-centric American studies, the example of territorial resistance provided by Paredes is far more congenial to our critical sensibilities than is a model that advocates assimilation and accommodation.

Kaup's account, however, is not without its weaknesses. It is not especially useful for helping us to understand narrative forms of Chicana/o literature produced prior to the Chicana/o Movement and in other regions of the country such as New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, or the Midwest. For instance, because Kaup's basic model posits only two responses to oppression—resistance or accommodation—it has little to say about the politically ambiguous and ideologically complex autobiographical works written by nineteenth-century *Californias/os* and *Nuevomexicanas/os* who were struggling but failing to maintain their status as fully entitled citizens of the US.<sup>3</sup> Kaup is certainly aware of this limitation in her work and even suggests that she “does not mean to set up, once again, the particularities of one regional experience as a model for a trans-regional, national Chicano epic” (32). Unfortunately, Kaup's work does just that. Part of the problem is that she asserts a *fundamental* status for the two border plots she identifies in Chicana/o literature and then associates those plots so firmly with the regional (South Texas and California) twentieth-century Chicano writers she posits as exemplary. Moreover, what Kaup's model gains in clarity, it loses in nuance.

Where Kaup's two-plot model finally finds its limits, however, is in her discussion of Chicana writers. Although she argues that Chicana writers revise and combine the two fundamental border plots to reconfigure a new, hybrid, and de-centered Chicana literary community (201), Kaup's own exposition of the works of Chicana writers suggests otherwise. Her account of the themes and metaphors Chicanas employ departs significantly enough from the border theme to suggest that they are doing something far more original and interesting than “revising” prior male models.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that Chicanas do not treat the border thematically, or that the US-Mexican border is not fundamental to the conceptualizations and forms of their literary works. Indeed, Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987 book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, has been tremendously influential in both Chicana/o studies and cultural studies more broadly and is surely largely responsible for the focus on the concept of the border within contemporary Chicana/o literary criticism. Kaup's mistake, I believe, is in figuring Chicanas as “[I]atecomers to a body of Chicano literature, criticism, and cultural studies” (197). It is a curious claim, especially in light of the fact that Kaup immediately qualifies the claim, recognizing that Chicanas were in fact “involved in the formation of Chicano literature from the very beginning, writing in Chicano journals in the late 60s and early 70s during the Chicano

movement, and thus participating in creating the discourse of Chicano nationalism” (197). She further admits “women were also among the nineteenth- and twentieth-century precursors of post-war Chicano literature, whose work is now being recovered” (197). My impression is that, having discovered something significant about how some regional twentieth-century Chicano writers have approached the theme of the border, Kaup may have been too interested in making her discovery foundational to Chicana/o literature as a whole to fully credit those aspects of the literature or its production that would have complicated or even dislodged her argument.

Another recent book that attends to the ideological implications of Chicana/o identity formation in relation to the nation-state is Mary Pat Brady’s *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (2002). Brady takes off from theorizations of the concept of space by thinkers such as Edward Soja, Henri Lefebvre, and Doreen Massey to argue that Chicana literature (and to some extent Chicano literature) “offers an important theoretics of space” that both “implicates the production of space in the everyday, in the social” and “suggests the relevance of aesthetics, of ‘the literary mode of knowing’ for understanding the intermeshing of the spatial and the social” (6). Brady contends that Chicanas, as members of a group whose subjectivity has been shaped historically by processes of physical and discursive displacement and dislocation, are admirably situated to understand the productivity of space. They understand, in other words, that the organization and use of physical space—as well as how it is imagined, articulated, and represented—affects profoundly peoples’ mode of interaction with each other. According to Brady, this understanding accounts for why Chicanas (and Chicanos) have for the past 130 years resisted their “disarticulation”—their denigration and erasure within Anglo-American discourses about space—through the creation of literary narratives that offer alternative conceptions of the spaces they occupy. Chicanas further, Brady contends, understand that race, gender, and sexuality, as well as class, are relevant to the way meanings about particular spaces are produced as well as to how physical space is organized and distributed. Moreover, the meanings people attribute to the social categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality are enacted and reinforced through the use, as well as the representation, of space. Chicanas’ understanding of all these processes, Brady suggests, is captured within Chicana literature, which is a body of literature with a “sense of spatial urgency” (7).

One particular strength of Brady’s book is that she fills some gaps in Chicana/o literary criticism by taking up some lesser-known, Arizona-based writers such as Patricia Preciado Martin and Montserrat Fontes. Her readings throughout the book of these and other Texas- and

California-based Chicana and Chicano authors are nuanced and insightful. Particularly noteworthy is Brady's treatment of the chronotope of the border within selected works of Chicana/o literature. According to Brady, the US-Mexican border is an "abjection machine" that works to produce Chicana/os as illegal aliens or unequal citizens (50). Through a series of readings of border-crossing scenes in works by Fontes, Gina Valdes, Norma Cantú, and Arturo Islas, Brady highlights the narrative desire present in each of these works to "double-cross the border—to trick the extensive machinery of containment, of discipline, and of exploitation that has historically made the border a proving ground not simply for citizenship but for humanness as well" (53). According to Brady, these narratives reconceptualize the border, understanding it not as a site but as a *process*, thus denaturalizing it and making visible some of its operations that work to sustain existing structures of inequality.

If Brady's book has a weakness, however, it is the extent to which she frames her analysis within a binary opposition between (subordinated) Chicanos and (hegemonic) Anglos. This framing prevents her from being as critical of the kinds of discursive resistance contained within the literature she reads as might be useful to a larger project of contesting the dynamics of exclusion. In her first chapter, "Razing Arizona," Brady presents her archival research on the production of the Arizona landscape in the wake of the Gadsden Purchase. She examines Spanish-language newspaper articles, personal reminiscences, ceremonial speeches, Anglo memoirs, and short stories written in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to chart *los Tucsonenses'* discursive contestations of dominant Anglo-American representations of the newly acquired territory. One of the more interesting documents that Brady discusses is an 1878 speech by Ignacio Bonillas on the occasion of the 68<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the independence of Mexico. Bonillas's speech is fascinating both because it contains what might be the earliest known reference to the concept of Aztlán (the mythic Aztec homeland taken up by Chicano nationalists in the 1960s as a symbol of Chicano unity) and because the logic of Bonillas's rhetoric is so homologous to the Anglo-American discourses it sought to oppose. Just as Anglo-American travel writers and developers disparaged the industry and achievements of the (prior) Mexican inhabitants of the region in order to produce the Arizona landscape as empty and available for Anglo-American settlement and development, so too did Bonillas malign the industry and achievements of the (even earlier) Native American inhabitants of the region in order to stake out the *mexicanos'* claim to the region (33–37). Moreover, Brady makes clear that Bonillas was not the only member of the Sonoran elite to bolster his claim to the land by discursively disenfranchising other groups. She discusses an 1877

article published in *Las Dos Repúblicas* by an author identified as Quivira (39–42). In that article, Quivira attempts to claim the moral high ground for *mexicanos* at the expense of Anglo-Saxons (whom, he implies, have been emasculated by such movements as “spiritualism,” “Free Love,” “women’s rights,” “divorce,” and “mormonism”), even as he urges his fellow *mexicanos* to identify with and follow the model of the post-Reconstruction white Southerner (39). Quivira explains that although white Southerners, too, had suffered a military defeat, they had been successful at reestablishing their former power through political mobility at the national level. It is worth noting that Quivira’s article reaches its rhetorical pitch at precisely the moment that he likens the possible fate of *los mexicanos* to the already sealed fate of the Native Americans (42). And yet Quivira’s deteriorating situation does not prompt him to identify with the Native Americans or with other disenfranchised groups such as women or formerly enslaved blacks; neither does it cause him to examine the complicity of *los mexicanos* in the apparently unenviable fate of the (prior) Native American inhabitants of the region. Instead, Quivira seeks to emulate and identify with the post-Reconstruction white Southerner.

What does Brady make of Quivira’s turn toward the white Southerner? How does she allow his rhetorical choices to speak to the complexity of the discursive and material power relations in nineteenth-century America? Indeed, if Brady’s analysis of this instance of discursive contestation lacks something, it is an adequate rendering of how multivalent Quivira’s and his compeers’ situation really was. In her discussion of his article, Brady registers, but never really confronts, the Mexican elite’s long-standing implication with the racist and sexist logic of modernity (42). Because Brady frames her analysis within a binary opposition between (subordinated) Chicanos and (hegemonic) Anglos, she must, in a sense, downplay that very implication by suggesting that Quivira merely “appropriates the very language of scientific racism for [the] Tucsonenses’ own nationalist ends” (42; emphasis added). In Brady’s account, Quivira’s racist and sexist rhetoric is figured as a strategic maneuver rather than as an expression of a worldview that had already had devastating consequences for the indigenous inhabitants of the region. Brady also fails to discuss the extent to which Quivira’s “nationalism” is oriented as much toward the US as it is to Mexico. Brady’s analysis thus does not adequately consider the multiple contradictions within the discursive contestations of the late-nineteenth-century Sonoran elite. She overlooks the opportunity to fully examine how a group of former elites (in this case upper-class Mexican men), who had secured their own hegemony through the differential and interlocking “disarticulations” of a variety of other groups (in this case Native Americans,

women, and blacks), reacted when they were unable to maintain their supremacy within their new nation-state. This failure, in turn, causes Brady to neglect the necessity of providing a rationale for why her readers—particularly those who have no prior identification with the nineteenth-century Mexican residents of Arizona—should prefer the Mexican “production” of the Arizona landscape to that of the Anglo. Although it is indisputable that the Mexican residents of Tucson did not deserve the disenfranchisement and disrespect they suffered at the hands of the Anglo newcomers, it is not at all clear that the prior social order was, on the whole, less oppressive and more just to those persons who were located on the bottom rungs of the social ladder.

The failure of evaluation that surfaces in Brady’s first chapter (and especially in her discussion of Bonillas and Quivira) is less apparent in the rest of the book because, with some few exceptions, the Chicanas and Chicanos whose work Brady examines do not predicate their own empowerment on some other group’s disempowerment. Furthermore, in her chapter on Cherríe Moraga, Brady successfully moves her project beyond one that simply valorizes Chicanas’ discursive resistance to (and implication within) a dominant order to one that explores how a new, more just order might be built from within the old. No doubt this is due in part to the visionary quality of Moraga’s work itself. As Brady remarks, “[m]ore than simply uncovering zones of complicity [with the detritus of colonialism, its imperial legacy, the work of racism and homophobia and misogyny], Moraga hungers to go past them, *to offer a vision worth fighting for*” (138; emphasis added). Indeed, Brady’s graceful and perceptive readings of a number of Moraga’s poems and plays represent a genuine contribution to the existing scholarship on the work of this significant contemporary intellectual/artist.<sup>5</sup>

Of the three books under review here, Monica Brown’s book, *Gang Nation: Delinquent Citizens in Puerto Rican, Chicana and Chicano Narratives* (2002), provides the best model for critically evaluating the dynamics of exclusion and oppression operative within discourses of nation and citizenship. In her book, Brown analyzes works of literature by Chicana/o and Puerto Rican writers that focus on the figure of the urban gang member. According to Brown, such works offer a literary meditation on the topic of gang membership and gang identity—a meditation that, among other things, highlights how the US nation-state has been constructed in part by suppressing the rights of some groups in the name of protecting the integrity of the nation as a whole. Building on the work of cultural critics such as Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, Ralph Cintron, and Rosa Linda Fregoso, Brown argues that Latina/o writers employ the figure of the gang member in order to voice concerns about nationalism, civil rights, and



the criminalization of urban youth of color. Because gangs provide a refracted image of dominant nationalism, she suggests, they offer through their practices and rhetoric a kind of critical commentary on the organizing institutions (economic, political, legal, and social) of the nation-state. Key to Brown's argument is the claim that poor urban youth of color have been targeted and demonized as the "enemy within" in order to shore up the dominant culture's sense of itself as the rightful and exclusive possessor of the full range of legal and social rights afforded to those who are recognized as "good" citizens of the US. Together with Latina/o immigrants, Latina/o gang members are the scapegoats that ensure that Latina/os as a group are figured within the prevailing national imaginary as either alien invaders or internal others. Brown thus pulls together previous work on cultural citizenship by scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Juan Flores, Renato Rosaldo, and Lauren Berlant, even as she importantly extends that work by showing how the conferring or withholding of the rights of citizenship works with regard to a specific group of people at a precise moment in history.

Adding to the significance of Brown's work on cultural citizenship is her penetrating exploration of the social and economic functions that gangs serve for those who join them. She couples a critique of dominant US nationalism with an analysis of the practices, behaviors, and rhetoric associated with urban youth gangs. She notes the similarity in their underlying logics, pointing to the violence that accompanies the founding moment of claiming territory, the sense of solidarity that results from delimiting boundaries and identifying outsiders, and the uncritical loyalty that is demanded of both patriots and gang members. Through perceptive readings of works by writers such as Piri Thomas, Edwin Torres, Luis Valdez, and Luis Rodriguez, Brown demonstrates that poor urban youth of color have not reacted to their exclusion from the US imaginary by turning their backs on an idealized notion of what it means to be a good citizen of America. Rather, they turn to gangs as a way of creating an alternative "nation" within which they can gain access to a version of "equal citizenship" (xvi). By engaging in nationalistic signifying practices that assert a code of loyalty and honor to the gang, "Latina/o urban gang members are asserting an alternative citizenship in a counter-nation, one that provides a sense of economic security (most often through delinquent behavior), one that establishes its own moral and juridical authority with a history tied to territory, and one that provides a sense of communal identity, belonging" (xxiii). Urban youth gangs are thus both a response to and a substitute for a national imaginary that works to exclude poor urban Latina/os from full citizenship in the nation-state.

Brown is as attentive to gender as she is to race and class. She considers the effect of gender relations on the choices made by male gang members just as she does with female gang members. Moreover, she eschews an exclusive focus on the figure of either the male or female gang member, opting instead to show how both men and women—albeit differently and to different effect—engage the desire for national belonging. In her chapter “American She: Gendering Gangs,” Brown analyzes the works of Mona Ruiz and Yxta Maya Murray to show that although girls’ gangs invoke ritual, symbol, and community in their efforts to establish gang member identities, they do not mimic the nationalistic discourse employed by many male gang narratives. This is because girl gang members are forced to negotiate their place in the world with reference to boyfriends, fathers, and father figures before they can locate themselves with reference to the nation-state. Brown’s analysis shows that girl gang members perform those dual negotiations as they struggle to secure some measure of empowerment and recognition for themselves both within the family and on the streets. Moreover, as Brown’s last chapter on the media coverage gangs receive demonstrates, girl gang members often do so in the face of pervasive negative representations that seek to exploit them as paradigmatic examples of shockingly “deviant” women (128–35).

Finally, Brown’s method remains evaluative and critical even when she analyzes the rhetoric and practices of the Latina/o gang members. Although she displays enormous sympathy for the Latina/o gang members whose situations she analyzes, Brown refuses to excuse or justify the violence they perpetrate against their victims—many if not most of whom are members of their own communities. So, although Brown is concerned with speaking on behalf of a disenfranchised group, she is equally concerned with identifying and understanding the underlying causal structures and cultural practices that create the situations that give rise to gang membership and gang violence in the first place. Literary representations of gang identity, Brown argues, are valuable resources in this effort; not only do they offer commentaries on the structure of the world, but they do important cultural work as they reconfigure and rewrite current notions of citizenship and nation (xxi–xxx). Brown’s work thus persuasively demonstrates that as participants in a larger national conversation about the salience of identity and the importance of belonging, Latina/o gang members—and the writers who write about them—have much to teach us about the kinds of representations and exclusionary practices that serve to uphold unjust and oppressive systems of power and privilege.

The persistence within Latina/o literature of questions of identity and belonging, as demonstrated in the three scholarly books

under consideration, suggests both the duration and pervasiveness of the pernicious idea that Latina/os are constitutive outsiders to the US nation-state. The work done by Kaup, Brady, and Brown makes significant contributions toward the project of interrogating and contesting that idea. As such, they are participating in the making of what Ramón Saldívar and I have termed elsewhere the “trans-American imaginary.”<sup>6</sup> In a recent piece published in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Saldívar and I propose the trans-American imaginary as an interpretive framework that yokes together North and South America instead of New England and England. In choosing the trans-American imaginary as the guiding concept for the collection of essays we put together to accompany that essay, Saldívar and I make several interconnecting claims about the significance of the imaginary to the production of identities and knowledge. More crucially, we register a burgeoning movement among Latina/o and other Americanist cultural critics to contest and reconfigure a US national imaginary that consistently figures Latina/os and other nonwhite US citizens as being outside the realm of national belonging.<sup>7</sup>

In conceiving of our proposed national imaginary as *trans-American*, Saldívar and I acknowledge the continuing salience of the US nation-state as a legal entity while simultaneously insisting on a greater awareness of our nation’s historic contextualization within the Americas. We contend that the prevailing view that sees the US only in relation to England (and Europe more generally) is inadequate to the task of explaining the historical presence of Latina/os in the US and to registering the contributions of Latina/os to the making of this nation. As Kirsten Silva Gruesz has pointed out, the commonly held idea that Latina/os have only recently arrived on the national scene ignores important historical events in the history of the US nation-state and obscures ongoing and constitutive relations of inequality in the American hemisphere (54–58). This has had the effect of making dominant political interests within the US appear natural and inevitable, even as it further contributes to the ideology that Latina/os are inherent outsiders to the realm of national belonging. The realm of the imaginary remains a crucial arena for epistemological and political struggle for Latina/os who are interested in claiming their rightful place as full and entitled citizens of the US. When it comes to the way that different groups of people are incorporated into or excluded from the sphere of belonging, the stories that we tell ourselves about how we came to be here are central. Almost as important for what has happened historically is how historical events have been narrativized or ignored, remembered or repressed, figured as central—or marginal—to the dominant imaginary of the US nation-state. The trans-American imaginary is thus an alternative and epistemically valuable way of

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understanding our place in the world and the significance of the literature we teach.

Unfortunately, the idea that Latina/os are outside the realm of national belonging is an idea that refuses to go quietly to rest.<sup>8</sup> Most recently, it has resurfaced in the work of Samuel Huntington, who has shifted his reductive and alarmist gaze from the Islamic world to what he sees as the dire threat posed by high levels of Hispanic immigration to the “core Anglo-Protestant culture” of the US.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, Latina/o and other Americanist cultural critics who are interested in promoting a more nuanced and accurate understanding of our society—one that will contribute to a more just and democratic society for *all* of us—have much work left to do.

### Notes

1. Kaup writes, “the border—as the setting of dominant cultural themes into deeper levels of structure, order, and form—has become the organizational principle, providing the fundamental plots in Chicano narrative” (11).
2. See Ramón Saldívar’s forthcoming *Transnational Identities and Border Aesthetics: The Poetics of Américo Paredes* (Duke UP, 2005).
3. For excellent criticism on *Nuevomexicana/o* and *California/o* texts, see Genaro M. Padilla, *My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography* (1993) and Rosaura Sanchez, *Telling Identities: The California Testimonies* (1995).
4. Just a few of the metaphors Kaup points out include the Chicana as architect, as translator, and as exile. Although Kaup attempts to articulate these figurations within the context of the overall border theme, her attempt is not entirely successful.
5. See Yvonne Yarbro-Bejanano, *The Wounded Heart: Writing on Cherrie Moraga* (2001); Paula M. L. Moya, *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles* (2002), especially chapters 1 and 2.
6. See Paula M. L. Moya and Ramón Saldívar, “Fictions of the Trans-American Imaginary,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.1 (2003): 1–18.
7. See, for example, Gruesz; Kaplan; Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, eds. *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1993); and José David Saldívar, *The Dialectics of Our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History* (1991).
8. See also Brady, 203–06.
9. See also David Glenn, “Critics Assail Scholar’s Article Arguing That Hispanic Immigration Threatens U.S.” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 24 Feb. 2004 <<http://chronicle.com/daily/2004/02/2004022401n.htm>>.

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