

# 1. Reading the Border, North and South

Very few places have been subjected to as much verbal abuse as the border between the United States and Mexico.

—*Rolando J. Romero, "Border of Fear, Border of Desire"*

In a recent essay, Etienne Balibar comments that he first became aware of the equivocal and vacillating nature of borders during an afternoon of beer and chocolate with a fisherman from Pátzcuaro. Borders, the French philosopher learned, do not always work in the same way, and people bring different baggage with them when they cross. The man explained to Balibar why his attempts to cross the border into the United States always met with failure:

because, he told me, "there is a letter missing" in Tarasca (his maternal language); "hace falta una letra, entiendes amigo." This letter, lost from time immemorial, can never be recovered. And this letter is the one you have to have to cross the northern border.

Balibar goes on to comment that this impossible recuperation of the missing letter, and with it the ability to cross into the United States, is nonreciprocal:

for never in his life will the gringo tourist recover the letter that is missing in English, or French, or German, and nonetheless he will cross the border as often as he wants for as long as he wants, to the point that it will lose its materiality. (227)

There is much to ponder in this anecdote, about imaginary and material borders, about Mexican immigration and gringo tourism, about the relative weight of the words of an indigenous Mexican fisherman and a French tourist/philosopher, about the way in which the northern Mexican border serves from the one side as a definitive barrier and from the other as an inconsequential (immaterial, metaphorical) line. The fisherman's missing letter almost too neatly fits into an allegorical articulation of current theoretical discussions of culture as something constructed through discourse. From this perspective it becomes all too easy to reimagine his confrontation with the northern border as a dissonance in signification, a site of discursive contestation. Thus, while it may seem that the literary-critical establishment has in recent years developed an allergy to fixed taxonomies, our profession has not yet been able to escape entirely from the ancient art of the catalogue, as if we too were looking for a missing letter that will provide a metaphorical key to break through an intellectual barrier/border. Metaphors like the "migrant" (Hall), "nomad" (Bradotti), "frontier" (Grossberg), "hybrid" (Bhabha), "circuit" (Rouse), "fringe" (Burgin), "margin" (Hutcheon) help to make possible an alternative cognitive map in the contemporary social space.

Furthermore, these discussions of the individual's interaction with this abstract space, often vaguely defined with the equally metaphorical term *border*, have served as points of departure for powerful contemporary theories that attempt to explain modern sociocultural phenomena.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, too, the interplay between Balibar and the fisherman, between Balibar and the reader of his academic essay (in its original French or translated English), also bears upon a concern forcefully articulated by Bruce Robbins:

the gendered and classed privilege of mobile observation in a world of tight borders and limited visibility corresponds to a traditional self-image of criticism itself. . . . It is an article of our contemporary faith that . . . intellectuals and academics are not detached but *situated*. (248–49)

Reading together Balibar and Robbins reminds us how equivocal this situatedness can become for the western intellectual, who has access to the facile border-crossing ability denied his interlocutor. Robbins continues:

The anticospopolitan jargon of the authentically particular and the authentically local provides no escape from or political alternative to the realm of the professional. It simply conceals the exemplification, representation, and generalization in which any intellectual work, professional or not, is inescapably involved, its own included. (251)

It is simply too easy for us intellectuals to read the metaphorical potential of the missing letter without taking into account the very real material conditions of a closed border/barrier.

Undoubtedly, the theoretical discussion on the metaphorical border owes its most enduring debt to Gloria Anzaldúa's much commented on and cited 1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera*. It is in part due to her influence that the idea of "the border" has become very prominent in a number of academic disciplines since the mid-1980s, especially in the United States, where this image has served as a popular locus for discussion on the breakdown of monolithic structures. Scholars working in border studies have attempted, in Anderson's words, to "dismantle the patriarchal and Anglocentric confinements of the term 'American,' specifically as it relates to 'American literature'" (1). In this sense, Anzaldúa's border, like Balibar's and unlike the Mexican fisherman's, evokes the intellectual project of a discursively based alternative national culture while gesturing toward a more heterogeneous transnational space of identity formation.

The notion of the border has been used recurrently in the theoretical and critical arena in order to illustrate a privileged site of operations. Yet, for those involved in border studies on the Mexican side of the border, it is difficult to conceive of the border simply as a metaphor at the very moment in which we are seeking conceptual frameworks for the analysis of border literature. If the U.S. theoretically conceived border serves as an objective correlative for discussions of U.S. dominant culture and its resistant spaces, the Mexican border region, in a parallel manner, helps address the question of how and where to relocate discussions about mexicanidad. From the Mexican side, however, the borderline itself retains a stronger materiality than is typical in U.S.-based commentary, a

not-unexpected result of the differential in ability to simply cross to the other side. Far too often, as for the Pátzcuaro fisherman, the geopolitical border looms as a puzzling barrier against which Mexican nationals' dreams are dashed and broken. At the same time, if border literary expression in Mexico is someday reduced to simply being a metaphor, it will be necessary for us to find the direction of such metaphors and the degree of scientific truth they may contain. By saying this we do not mean to imply that the border is "the possession of one or the other side" (Bruce-Novoa, "Metas monológicas, estrategias dialógicas," 13). But it is important to indicate that in order to think of the border "as a line shared by the inhabitants on both sides [in order that it be] open to transit" (ibid.), it is important either to take both sides—the United States and Mexico—into consideration or to be specific about which side one is going to talk about or study and to recognize the material and metaphorical differences involved in such transnational analyses. Otherwise, the "intellectual colonialism" from which the Mexican border has suffered to this day will be perpetuated to the detriment of both its primary referents—people in general or flesh-and-blood artists—and its literature.

In this book we propose to look at such questions through a reading of women's writing, including authors from both sides of the border across the region from Texas to California. When writing this book we intentionally chose to focus on short stories and fragmentary texts, not only because they are by far the most vital and exciting products of the new border narrative by women, but also because they speak most forcefully to the necessary rethinking of border theory from within the border area. Homi Bhabha has said that the border serves to place the polemic of culture in the realm of "the beyond." "The beyond," as he explains, is not a new horizon, nor does it pretend to leave out the past, since we live in a moment of transit, when time and space traverse each other to produce complex figures of difference and identity: past and present, in and out, inclusion and exclusion. This social space any longer corresponds to "the abstract cohesion of a compact national State . . . which can be defined because of its relation with a specific territory, neither to the oppositions between centers and peripheries, since our world does not work that way" (*Location of Culture*, 1–4). With human mobility, migration, or diaspora, either from rural to urban areas, from small cities to large metropolises, or from the Third World to the First,

the concept of culture as an internally coherent autonomous universe can no longer be sustained. It is, then, important to rethink our habitat (home, city, country, world) not as a static place with peoples who enjoy fixed identities, but rather as dynamic territories and peoples with multiple identities.

If we agree that we are in a moment of "the beyond," or "the time-of-the-now," it becomes even more vital to rethink the importance of those immobile origin narratives and to observe the moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. Those spaces will be, in Homi Bhabha's terms, the places of the in-between, the interstices from which we can elaborate other strategies of being, which will allow us to create new places of identity, collaboration, and subversion in the precise moment of defining society itself. In his introduction to *Rethinking Borders*, John C. Welchman speaks about how crucial the theme of the border has become for many exhibits, intellectual projects, and conferences. However, he quite rightly indicates that in many of those cases a convincing critical framework has yet to be established for the border discourse. One of the signal goals of his project is precisely that of outlining this underexplored critical framework and developing a coherent perspective on the proliferation of border theories and practices that have constructed a new scenario on the debates regarding postmodernity, cultural studies, and postcolonialism.

What we define as "border theory" or "border writing" in the United States almost always refers to concepts such as these, rather than to any particular geographical area, though the U.S.-Mexico border is frequently called into reference in the margins of such arguments as the most salient test case for such theoretical analyses. South of the border, these terms allude more specifically to the region's literary output. Nevertheless, despite the increasing theoretical attention to the border area, literature from the Mexican border has been seriously understudied, both in Mexico, due in large part to its marginal geographic position within the country, and in the U.S. academic arena, where the rising trend of Chicana/o-based border theory has effectively captured the bulk of critical attention.

Thus, when one examines studies on border literature, two very distinct perspectives come into view: the Mexican perspective, which focuses on the literature produced within the region, and the U.S. perspective, which focuses on more abstract theoretical concerns with

typical gestures in the direction of Chicano/a and Latin American literature. Despite numerous elements that would seem to suggest the affinity between U.S. and Mexican border theories and literatures, the asymmetry between the United States and Mexico also marks the differences between the two cultural projects. The border as perceived from the United States is more of a textual—theoretical—border than a geographical one. U.S. Chicana/o scholars use the border metaphor to create a multicultural space in the United States in order to erase geographical boundaries. They use the real geopolitical border to construct an alternative Chicano/a discourse and to denounce centralist hegemony in the United States, and sometimes—more rarely—in Mexico as well. Strikingly, however, the global phenomenon of transnationalization turns binational and local when we turn our gaze to the border zone. Despite the efforts of theoreticians to develop their analyses in an even-handed manner, the cultural products of these two countries fall into a distinct power differential, as is also true of the political realm. U.S. border literature occupies the dominant space, and Mexican border literature falls into a subordinate one. While there is no doubt that Chicano/a literature serves as an expression of a minority culture within the United States, nevertheless when it is put into the perspective of a transborder literary project, the disparity is clear. What and who crosses the border and what does not applies to literary texts as well as persons. In a balance of relative privilege the Chicano/a scholar's resistant text, with its limited distribution network within the U.S. dominant culture, is in a position of clear and distinct advantage when compared to the extraordinary difficulties attending Mexican border writers both within the Mexican dominant establishment and with respect to international border theoretical discussions. Added to this already complicated scenario, we could also speak of the disarticulation of Mexican literature, and the tension between dominant and border cultures within the two countries, which adds another layer of contradiction and complexity to the discussion.

When we turn to Mexican border literature, one of the more striking aspects of the sparse scholarship is its general lack of attention to such theoretical issues and, on the level of textual analysis, a tendency to ignore women's literary production. While women have been extremely active, only recently have they begun to be noticed as authors of significant creative works in the most important border cities (Tijuana,

Mexicali, and Juárez). What scholarship has been published on writers from the border has tended to study work by their male counterparts. The sparse creative writing workshops up until very recently have limited their support to men, and kept a distance between the male writers and those women who wanted to join the workshops. Public and private institutions did very little to support literary work, and the spaces for publication were reduced to a few literary reviews, which most of the time limited their pages to works by male writers. These boundaries excluded women writers from the opportunities to present their writings to the general public. Yet, in terms of a transborder literary theory, the women's work is far more compelling than the more publicized men's; in general, women authors tend to leave behind old literary and social conventions in order to conceive innovative writing forms, and to posit new subjectivities.

Since the mid-1990s, however, it has become possible to talk about a handful of Mexican women who are gaining visibility locally as well as nationally and, incipiently, internationally. Their writings are still primarily published in local newspapers, chapbooks, and magazines, and while it is tempting to speculate about the interaction of publishing outlets and creative efforts, the end result is a distinct preference for short forms. In their prose works, these authors favor vignettes, short stories, chronicles, and short novels; whether by choice or necessity, however, these short forms have come to define a particular quality of Mexican border writing by women. Interestingly enough, these emergent voices, while often very different from those of their Chicana counterparts, address analogous concerns, allowing us to read these women from both sides of the border together for a more nuanced exploration of the theory and practice of border writing.

A common trait with all of these writers is their tight imbrication of an awareness of how these issues of cultural location affect perception of the geopolitical border, along with a carefully calibrated exploration of the other, personal border of gender roles and gender consciousness. Thus, for example, Rosina Conde has declared that even before taking cognizance of the geographical border, the first border she was made aware of was the border of gender. Likewise, Rosario Sanmiguel claims in an interview that she does not remember living in a world without borders:

La frontera es un espacio muy violento. Te golpea por todas partes. El hecho de estar junto a los Estados Unidos y tener a la Migra vigilándonos todo el tiempo. La frontera es como la habitamos y como caminamos por todos sus espacios. Nos permea por todos lados. Ahí nos confundimos y nos mezclamos todos: ricos y pobres, mexicanos, chicanos y gringos, cholos y chorchos, hombres y mujeres, homosexuales y heterosexuales; primer mundo y tercero. La frontera es violenta, pero fascinante. Cuando descubres todos sus rincones, no te puedes separar de ella.

[The border is a very violent space. It strikes at you from every angle. The fact is that the United States is right next to us and the Migra is constantly watching our coming and going. The border is the way in which we dwell and walk through all its spaces. We all swarm through the air and intertwine: rich and poor, Mexicans and Chicanos, cholos and preppies, men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, First World and Third World. The border is violent but fascinating. When you discover every nook and cranny, you cannot stay away from it.]

In their exploration of these personal and political borders, the authors' living spaces are subverted and the characters rearticulate the home, the office, the streets, the hotels, the brothels, and even their own bodies. They transgress the traditional chronotopes of patriarchal literature through focusing on the narrative voice of a female subject (Díaz-Diocaretz, 91). Here, too, reading together the Mexican women with their Chicana counterparts provides a fruitful dialogue about the relationships of daily life and domestic space to a larger national reality, about the shift in perception provided by a doubly marginalized character—female and border dweller—with respect to the local cultural enclave, to the reinterpretation of dominant national culture, to the rethinking of transborder dynamics.

One dominant characteristic of both Mexican and Chicana texts is that they privilege orality. Their language is direct, and their speech is taken from everyday life. The narrative or lyric voice does not hesitate to express, when necessary, her sexuality or eroticism. Such characterizations can be found on a continuum between two poles: the individual and the social. On the one hand, the Mexican women frequently write about the exploration of the female body through the desire for the other, and/or the communion with the other; on the other, they often imagine their characters' interactions with the bars and brothels that

define one of the most well-known social problematics of the region, with the tensions of migration to the North, with experiences of harassment as undocumented workers, and with the fearful interactions with the border patrol. These topics will also serve as a framework to discuss the exploitation of prostitutes, maquila workers, and undocumented women. At the same time, the Chicana writers frequently provide a complementary discussion of these social spaces, now from within—and resistant to—pressures of U.S. dominant culture. Here the tensions of migration are imagined from the other side, from the permeable border of assimilation and the more-difficult-to-transit spaces of racial discrimination.

Nelly Richard's excellent essay, "Cultural Peripheries: Latin America and Postmodern De-Centering," elaborates not only on the way in which the centers concentrate wealth and control its distribution, but also how those centers have had enough authority to confer and validate meaning on people, places, and things. Consequently, in order to decenter the centers, Richard considers it essential to incorporate the rhetoric of the other within the concerns of progressive intellectuals. Likewise, she emphasizes that it is fundamental to achieve the democratization of the mechanisms of cultural meaning which depend on the dehierarchization of those discourses that comprise the production circuits of critical discursive exchange. For Richard two types of forces impel dehierarchization: those that move theoreticians and critics of the so-called alternative postmodernity, who have decided to "use privilege to destroy privilege." The second force is that of the people who have emerged from the borders. For these people to use the border as a place of enunciation allows them to shift the constraints that cross the boundaries of cultural systems of distribution when they unveil the arbitrariness and the vulnerability of discourses of the center. Says Richard, Latin America

uses (abuses) the postmodernist model in international competition (the parodic quote) in order to auto-consecrate itself postmodernistically as both pretender and impostor in the ceremony of the precedences and successions of the First World, in order to auto-consecrate itself as the usurper of the role of master of ceremonies. (220)

It is precisely this task of dehierarchization and reelaboration that we propose in this bifocal, binational study of women's writing. What remains in question is to what degree border writing in general duplicates

the kind of “tricks of meaning” Richard adumbrates in her lucid discussion of the postmodern peripheral use of pastiche.

#### THEORIES ABOUT THE U.S. BORDER

Harry Polkinhorn, one of the most prolific U.S.-based critics of border writing, considers border literature to be a discourse that cannot be confined within theoretical frameworks. For Polkinhorn, border writing stresses the importance of an *otherness* whose locus is to be found in a nonplace of transition that gives rise to either a game or a struggle between two or more languages and cultures. While Polkinhorn focuses on Chicano/a literature, the border as a geographical region becomes particularly important in his essay, “Alambrada: Hacia una teoría de la escritura fronteriza,” in which he states that “the only way to understand the border is to cross it” (31). The perspectives of this critic, the way he views the border—and/or what makes it a border—occurs through looking from North to South. “Crossing the border” seems to provide simply a pretext for a more distanced reflection that will allow him to better evaluate the expression of his points of view on Chicano/a literary production. At the same time, Polkinhorn’s metaphor of a war fought against contending centers of power is clearly indicative of a centralist bias. In this struggle, he imagines that Chicano/a literature and that of Mexico’s northern border participate in analogous, if not identical, situations.

He considers border literature—Chicano/a literature in his case—to be subversive because it is a “bastard” form. Chicano/a literature is thought to be illegitimate because it has taken root in a transformation of linguistic code and an unawareness of Chicano/a identity and parentage, an unawareness of an external “we.” According to this critic, this misbegotten offspring threatens the status quo. He views narrative identities in Chicano/a literature as being imprisoned between opposing forces caught in a no-man’s land between the United States and Mexico that produces fragmented and marginal literature.

Polkinhorn sees the wire fence separating the two countries as a barrier that does not allow Chicano/a literature to cross over to the Mexican side. On the U.S. side, however, this no-man’s land has extended its limits northward, far beyond its former confines. This reconceptualized image of the border is not particular to Polkinhorn but has become a commonplace in contemporary Chicano/a criticism, to the degree

that the borderlands “become a Chicano Eden, the original paradise” (Romero, “Postdeconstructive Spaces,” 230). It is no longer a matter of Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Nuyoricans struggling separately against hegemonic centers of power within ethnically exclusive fields of conflict. Today a self-concept of Latinity is readily being embraced, academically and politically, by Chicanos/as, Nuyoricans, Latin Americans, and Spaniards living in the United States. Consequently, any discussion within the United States on “the border” addresses a much broader field of ethnic, class, and gender differences.<sup>2</sup>

Walter Mignolo’s *Local Histories/Global Designs* offers one of the most complete and theoretically powerful surveys of recent discussions of the idea of the border in U.S., Latin American, Caribbean, European, and former British Commonwealth thought. Mignolo condenses his major contribution to this extensive body of theory through use of a metaphor: “By ‘border thinking’ I mean the moments when the imaginary of the modern world system cracks” (23). Later, he clarifies that this crucial organizing concept for his project derives not from a Platonic universal, but rather from the concrete and specific histories of the Spanish intervention in the Americas, and especially the fraught history of U.S.-Mexican and U.S.-Caribbean relations since the nineteenth century (67). Mignolo throughout this book is concerned with two seemingly contradictory impulses: first, to anchor his highly theoretical and “global” studies in local Latin American and U.S. minority practices, as well as in the special perspective derived from intellectuals like himself who move between two languages and two cultures, and, second, to track the effects of globalization, which in his study are notable for “creating the condition for and enacting the relocation of languages and the fracture of cultures” (293). Finally, for Mignolo, the most crucial insight of his discussion of what he alternatively calls border gnosis or border thinking is that this structure offers him the opportunity to imagine the possibility “of theorizing from the border (border as threshold and liminality, as two sides connected by a bridge, as a geographical and epistemological location)” (309).

It is precisely in this respect that Claire Fox raises a warning flag, and her book, *The Fence and the River*, has as its explicit goal a critique of the abstract or metaphorical concept of border so frequently evoked in theoretical discussions like Mignolo’s. Fox comments that “even though the U.S.-Mexico border retains a shadowy presence in the usage of these

terms, the border that is currently in vogue in the United States, both among Chicano/a scholars and among those theorists working on other cultural differences is rarely site-specific.” Most typically, Fox finds, the concept of border is used to mark “hybrid or liminal subjectivities” in general, and when spatialized, “that space is almost always universal” (119).

Guillermo Gómez-Peña is perhaps one of the most well-known U.S.-based artists whose primary stock-in-trade has been his status as the authentic border subject-cum-postmodern native informant. Yet, Gómez-Peña creates precisely this sense of a generalized, deracinated borderness in his performances, and local referents are excluded in the analytic deployment of these same performances by writers and critics from both sides of the border, people like Néstor García Canclini and Homi Bhabha, who have picked up on Gómez-Peña’s articles and performances as archetypal representations of the border self. Eduardo Barrera succinctly summarizes his concerns about this issue:

The artist’s texts are the product of his fascination with the border’s synchronism. It would be naive to think that they have not been influenced by post-structuralist bibliography. Gómez-Peña fabricates his border by drinking from the same theoretical watering holes as the academics who test their arguments with his texts. This quasi-incestuous relationship has turned into a vicious circle which excludes primary referents. Gómez-Peña’s border turns into the Border of García Canclini and Homi Bhabha, and the artist turns into the Migrant. (16)

The U.S.-Mexican “border” popularized by Gómez-Peña displaces the actual physical border and all it contains. The release of his video *Border Brujo*, his performance of “The New World (B)order,” and the publication of *Warrior for Gringostroika* (1993) have led audiences to think that the border represented by this artist is truly “the” U.S.-Mexican border.<sup>3</sup> Notoriously, at the same time, local Mexican artists reject his vision with the comment that his border in no way corresponds to theirs. This opinion was expressed, for example, in interviews with culture researcher José Manuel Valenzuela and writer Rosina Conde. Conde’s comment is particularly apposite, as she belonged to the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF), which Gómez-Peña founded. Conde left the workshop, she says, because

they wanted to present a border art much different than ours, but this was not the problem since art can be represented in a number of forms. The problem was that they wanted to impose their will. They wanted to turn us into pseudo-Chicanos/as, or into a *fronterizo/a* that did not represent us. They wanted us (the Mexicans) to agree with their proposals just to get an audience. This was not right as it was a matter of each one of us making his or her own contribution while respecting other individuals and cultures, but this did not turn out to be the case.<sup>4</sup>

Gómez-Peña’s colonializing gesture can be interpreted using one of Rosaura Sánchez’s concepts from “Ethnicity, Ideologies, and Academia.” Sánchez discusses the ideological strategies that mainstream culture uses to mystify the relationship between minority cultures and itself; by means of such mystification strategies, U.S. cultural imperialism extends itself beyond the geopolitical boundaries of the United States. However, “being affected, influenced, and exploited by a culture is one thing and participating fully in that culture is another” (81). If we relate Sánchez’s example to “the border” as metaphor, we can note that the efforts to erase the borders and the appropriation of categories such as that of the migrant, and even of the border itself, facilitate the erasure of the physical border, along with its flesh-and-blood migrants, writers, and readers, as well as the artistic expression that is produced on the Mexican side.

It is important to recognize that recent interpretations of the border in the United States have been innovative in their attempt to equate the border with the boundaries of the Americas, boundaries that are in a state of transformation and are therefore culturally unstable. Notwithstanding, in practice, it is also true that the United States, after the signing of NAFTA, has reinforced its geopolitical border with Mexico and, consequently, social and cultural exchange has become more difficult than it was before. As a result, the performances of Gómez-Peña, rather than offering “alternative reality” or creating an internationalist dialogue, have mistakenly projected the mere image of a migrant while displacing the flesh-and-blood referent. The latter “is left alone and exploited by a very real blockade and Resolution 187 after his or her existential surplus value has been extracted” (Barrera, 16). In the same fashion, Gómez-Peña’s artistic portrayal of the border suppresses numerous other artistic representations of the border and makes them disappear.

The work of Gómez-Peña has also influenced cultural criticism in

Mexico. For example, Néstor García Canclini does not consult the works of writers and artists from Tijuana in order to carry out his work on “hybrid cultures” in that city. Instead, he focuses on Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s performances and on his polemical essays on border life. In light of the fact that Guillermo Gómez-Peña is perceived as an “outsider” in Tijuana’s cultural circles, it is ironic that hegemonic critics such as García Canclini validate Gómez-Peña by accepting the latter as “the fronterizo” while presenting Tijuana as the representation of *the* hybrid space.

Unfortunately, such intellectual colonialism, as seen in the work of Gómez-Peña, is not the only factor responsible for the lack of specialized criticism directed toward literary production on the Mexican border. The reconceptualization of Chicano/a critical discourse from the mid-1980s to the present decade has also had an impact. This change has favored an attempt to capture a global perspective of the border in an effort, as proposed by Héctor Calderón and José David Saldívar in *Criticism in the Borderlands*, “to remap the borderlands of theory and theorists” (7). That book does, in fact, make a serious effort to disarticulate the borders of the monolithic discourse of American literature in favor of a more expansive definition that will give greater currency to the work of Chicano/a writers and other writers of color in the United States. Nevertheless, from the point of view of an effort to look for a binational border theory, their book again falls short, in that it concerns itself solely with U.S. local concerns: its criticism on the borderlands is restricted to the U.S. side of the border.

One more example underlines this point. Perhaps because of her zeal to erase borders, Emily Hicks uses terms such as *biculturalism*, *bilingualism*, and *bi-conception of reality* as foundational concepts for her analysis in her book, *Border Writing* (xxv). This is a laudable and intriguing proposal, yet in presuming that all border residents who read “are informed by two codes of reference” (226) and, therefore, capable of being categorized as uniformly bilingual, she runs the risk of excluding a large number of primary referents. For example, there are few bilingual writers on Mexico’s border with the United States and even fewer who are bicultural. Nor are there many readers in the region who can be characterized as either bilingual or bicultural. Thus, Emily Hicks’s border writers and readers are either ideal types, or they are seen through a Bakhtinian theoretical perspective on “border culture,” according to which any and all readers and writers are border residents; therefore they

are bicultural in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the term *culture*.<sup>5</sup> In Hicks’s attempt to erase borders and present us with ideal types of creators/writers, she obscures the social, cultural, and economic policies that affect very real human beings who inhabit the borders.

In the Chicano/a attempt to decolonize the border, there is still a trace of “a longing for unity and cohesion” (Romero, “Postdeconstructive Spaces,” 229), as can be noted in Gloria Anzaldúa’s search for a mythological space in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In the same way that Gómez-Peña has been legitimated as “the migrant,” critics have made Anzaldúa “the representative” of “the border.” In Anzaldúa’s work the border also functions primarily as a metaphor, in that the border space as a geopolitical region converges with discourses of ethnicity, class, gender/sex, and sexual preference. Nevertheless, Anzaldúa’s book, despite its multiple crossings of cultural and gender borders—from ethnicity to feminisms, from the academic realm to the work of blue-collar labor—tends to essentialize relations between Mexico and the United States. Her third country between the two nations, the borderlands, is still a metaphorical country defined and narrated from a First World perspective. Her story is less ludic than that of Gómez-Peña, and more anchored in real referents, but these referents are defined solely in terms of an outcast status. Anzaldúa’s famous analysis does not take into cognizance the many other othernesses related to a border existence; her “us” is limited to U.S. minorities; her “them” is U.S. dominant culture. Mexican border dwellers are also “us” and “them” with respect to their Chicana/o counterparts; they can in some sense be considered the “other” of both dominant and U.S. resistance discourses.

In contrast with Hicks, *Borderlands*’ perspective more closely approximates the everyday life of the primary cultures of the valley of Texas. For Anzaldúa the border space is a place inhabited, from an Anglo perspective, by strange and mulish persons. Here the Texan brand of capitalism has made its mark by dispossessing the valley’s inhabitants. In her book Anzaldúa articulates a cultural and social wall between white Americans and Mexican Americans, again in contrast to the diffusion of borders as observed in Hicks, or in Calderón and Saldívar’s work. Gloria Anzaldúa is critical of U.S. authoritarianism, and in her writings she challenges the hegemony of monolithic U.S. discourse. It is in no wise the same, however, to belong to an official minority within the United States as it is in Mexico. Anzaldúa and Gómez-Peña speak from the interstices



of U.S. dominant culture and they have self-authorized their hybrid discourse in the social construction of difference. Nevertheless, upon becoming authorized and canonized voices of that difference, they are ineluctably allied to the practices of political and economic power on an international level, even given the fact that—ironically—their writing and their performative actions resist such practices. In contrast with Gómez-Peña's appropriation and promotion of his "unique migrant self," Anzaldúa writes about being tired of being "repeatedly token[ized]" (*Making Face, Making Soul*, xvi), since there are a lot of women of color living in the borderlands.

If we were to follow out the implications of such arguments, if we cross the border literally as well as metaphorically, we would have to note that because of the comparatively fewer social, economic, and political advantages enjoyed by Mexico's northern border states, Mexican writers in the region do not possess the publishing resources available to minority groups in the United States. This means that it is not the same to be a minority and have to resist the center in the United States as in Mexico. For example, small independent publishing houses, such as Azar Publications of Chihuahua, *Between Lines* (Entrelíneas), *Earrings and Bracelets* (Aretes y pulseras) of Tijuana, and Puente Libre Editores of Juárez, or government-supported presses, such as the Autonomous University of Baja California, UNISON, and the Autonomous University of Juárez, while publishing and disseminating literature from the border area do not have the resources or the recognition, range of design possibilities, press runs, or distribution outlets of even such "minor" publishing houses as Aunt Lute Press, Kitchen Table Press, Third Woman Press, and Arte Público Press in the United States.

As can be observed in this brief review, the border as perceived from the United States is more textual and theoretical than geographical, whereas from the Mexican side the geopolitical referent never entirely disappears. While we could say that each side has a "missing letter" that makes crossing difficult and challenges comprehension, the different cultural and political factors that influence intellectual and artistic production remain ineluctably tied to economic issues and local conditions of relative privilege and deprivation or discrimination. Carl Gutiérrez-Jones concisely pulls together both the trends and the stakes:

[S]tepping away from this specific conflict enough to resituate ourselves in the context of the various border culture theories considered here, it seems apparent that such theorization will of necessity concern itself with the institutionalization not only of disciplinary techniques manipulating desire but also of particular epistemological constructions of what can and cannot be "legitimately" known. Several avenues might be pursued as critics delve into these dynamics; one might, for instance, pursue an anatomy of the institutional practices that would sustain the anti-immigrant epistemological stance. However, as the theoretical trends noted suggest, even greater attention will need to be paid to the mediation among diverse "subject-affects" and specifically situated institutional designs. (III)

In both *The Dialectics of Our America* and his later book, *Border Matters*, José David Saldívar sets out to traverse a space impregnated with Latinity by which Latino and Latin American writers of diverse backgrounds set out to articulate "a new transgeographical conception of American culture—one more responsive to the hemisphere's geographical ties and political crosscurrents than to the narrow national ideologies" (*Dialectics*, xi). Saldívar's methodologically rigorous and thorough studies offer important points of departure for our work in this book, while at the same time these revisionary projects are clearly set within the context of rethinking U.S. literary and cultural studies. In them, he strategically explores and explodes the melting-pot myth with a more subtle rereading of the historical and cultural record to take cognizance of migrant flows from Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America, and their impact on U.S. national culture, asking, for instance, the crucial question: "what changes, for example, when American culture and literature are understood in terms of 'migration' and not only immigration?" (*Border Matters*, 8). In both books Saldívar proposes that it is difficult to theorize in general at present because current theory is not written from a critical "distance," but from "a place of hybridity and betweenness in a global border composed of historically connected post-colonial spaces" (*Dialectics*, 152). In addition to his reflections on being in a hybrid space of interpolation, the global borders he defines are more real to a position of articulation from within the border area; after all, the U.S.-Mexican border is indeed a place in which (post)colonial spaces are historically connected.

Like Saldívar, who knows that in order to study the border it is necessary to take both sides into consideration, Rolando Romero reminds us of the need to specify which side(s) of the border is (are) been analyzed in any given study. In his judiciously wrought “Border of Fear, Border of Desire,” for example, Romero examines cultural and political texts from both Mexico and the United States and traces out the institutional structures undergirding typical theoretical gestures and informing common metaphors. As he notes in his conclusion to the article, “the conflicting views of the border suggest that most of the critics project their own assumptions and Utopias. Under the guise of a quest for knowledge, the researcher invests the Other with non-existent cultural signification” (62). Romero’s cautionary words are well taken. As he reminds us, “we will not be in a position to recognize the allegories of the self in the narrations of the border” unless we make the effort to unpack the metaphorical overdetermination of such now-standard metaphorical usages.

#### LITERATURE FROM THE MEXICAN BORDER

If, generally speaking, the projection of a borderlands theory represents for many Chicano/a writers and thinkers the imaginative return to a metaphorically conceived Mexican/Latin American cultural tradition which serves as a source of empowerment, this tradition is accessed more often through memory and secondary texts than through actual visits to the Mexican side of the geopolitical boundary line. This tendency toward a metaphorical, rather than literally based appropriation of border experience underlies one of the crucial differences with those border dwellers who live on and cross over between the two nations on a daily basis. For such people, it is difficult to see the border as a metaphor or as a utopia, although at the same time there is a deep awareness that repetitive movement does not guarantee a more correct perception or a clear-cut representational model.

In Mexico the study of what is referred to as the literature of the northern border began in the mid-eighties. The emergence of this literary form, as well as its analysis, derive from a coincidence of specific political factors, reinforcing our perception that in order for this cultural movement to exist there needed to be more than a talent pool; certain minimal material resources had to become available. Francisco Luna and Rosina Conde, among others, agree that interest in border culture and

its literature evolved at that time because of the obsession on the part of Mexico City authorities “por reforzar el fardo romántico de la identidad nacional” [to reinforce the romantic notion of national identity] (Luna, 79), to “cultivar y nacionalizar a los estados fronterizos, dándose de conocer lo que consideró la esencia de lo mexicano” [cultivate and nationalize the border states by revealing the essence of what it was to be Mexican] (Conde, “¿Dónde está la frontera?” 52) or, more crudely and probably more accurately, “por darles chamba a los cuates” [to give jobs to their buddies] (M. Villarreal, interview) through the Border Cultural Program (Programa Cultural de las Fronteras). These three responses clearly indicate the range of reactions to the program: to shore up a conflicted sense of national identity, to civilize the barbarians, and to continue centralized corruption by other means. At any rate, border literature was given a significant boost dating from 1985 with the influx of federal money to support cultural projects.

However, the conceptualization of this project is fraught with contradiction. If the central government’s concern is primarily seen as one of “nationalization,” it follows that the inhabitants of the northern states were still largely seen in the mid-1980s as an uncultured and potentially disruptive hybrid group, dangerously threatened by absorption into the U.S. culture next door. The centrist dominant discourse, then, would be geared toward promoting a process of homogenization with a very specific political agenda. At the same time, to remind us that the agenda is “romantic” in nature is to also evoke the centrist persistence of thinking in terms of tired clichés held over from nineteenth-century models of nation formation. To hint that the unspoken agenda was to provide opportunities for typically corrupt political appointments is also to voice the resistance of many border inhabitants to the process of centrist totalization.

What might be the political stake for then-president Miguel de la Madrid in maintaining a country distinguished as “muy mexicano” [very Mexican] through promoting regional cultural development? What would inspire such a program of wanting to reinforce an abstract Mexicanness at precisely this point in history? De la Madrid’s border program was created in 1985, when Mexico was still suffering the effects of the 1982 crisis and the hegemony of the ruling party, the PRI, was being threatened, particularly by powerful conservative politicians in the north. As a political project, then, the program served to authorize and to include

the all-too-often forgotten (and increasingly important) border population within the horizons of “lo nacional” [the national], and also—in this area of heavy investment in foreign industrial plants—helped to buttress with visible projects the rhetorical position that “el país no estaba en venta” [the country was not for sale] to transnational interests. The official project, then, to use Bhabha’s terms, seemed to require “an originary narration of fulfillment” (*Location of Culture*, 51). It needed to sketch out the absent subject and make him/her present; it needed to identify itself within the concept of the savage border or to identify the savage with the civilizing force of national culture in order to impose upon the border another discourse, transforming and normalizing it within the national classificatory system. It is not too exaggerated to suggest that, in anticipation of NAFTA legislative approval, the border culture program projected a Mexico both educated and united in order to counteract national anxieties about appropriation or absorption by the United States.

A number of authors born in the border region, or whose work has been produced in that area, have refused to allow themselves to be considered border writers, specifically as a rejection of the political project underlying the Border Cultural Program. For Rosina Conde, for example, to accept the label “border writer” would be to accept as well the stereotype that the official project attempted to institutionalize and in fact perpetuated through the mechanisms of the state (Nelson, 1). José Javier Villarreal and Minerva Margarita Villarreal believe that being catalogued as border writers has the very real effect of preventing them from ever entering into the hallowed canon of “Mexican writers.” Rosario Sanmiguel, on the other hand, considers that recognizing herself as a border writer means accepting as well her marginal position within the national literary scene:

El día que me publique una editorial fuerte y que mi trabajo se difunda como el de Campbell o Gardea, dejaré de ser de la frontera para ser del centro; la frontera y lo fronterizo es estar fuera del ejercicio del poder. (interview)

[The day that a large press publishes my work and it is distributed like that of Campbell or Gardea is the day that I will stop being from the border and begin being from the center. The border and borderness means being outside the exercise of power.]

From both sides of this discussion, then, the label “border writer” becomes a highly charged, ideological issue. At the same time, all these writers consider literature from the northern border to be their own particular contribution to national literature. They do not see the task of addressing a border reality as an imposition—after all, they had been writing and commenting on this region, and had been meeting to read and discuss each others’ works, long before the federal government stepped in with a new program to allow them to achieve some minimal local visibility and distribution for their works. Although official patronage through government programs was largely designed to put a “chastity belt on Mexican nationality in order to protect us from foreign influence,” and border residents were forced “to adopt a role dictated to them which was based on false premises” (Luna, 80, 52), other social factors, combined with the government’s program, contributed to enabling literature to gain wider currency more quickly in northern Mexico than it had in the past.

While resistance remained in some quarters, most writers from the border region took advantage of this brief transformatory period to negotiate and to authorize their own cultural projects through making use of the possibilities opened by these official channels. They took advantage of the centrist rhetoric to make present a movement that had been gestating in limited circles in the region for many years, but whose projects in a larger context were stagnating for lack of official support. Francisco Amparán has made it clear that many of the pre-1968 writers (1955–60) who had been born outside Mexico City took this project seriously, remaining in their places of origin and forming local literary workshops. Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz agrees. Trujillo notes that the workshops helped poets to become more aware of their potential and to acquire more critical perspectives. Humberto Félix Berumen, in “El cuento entre los bárbaros del norte,” discusses other factors that rapidly opened new avenues for the development of literature in the northern border states: a burgeoning middle class, the demand for educational and cultural services, the association of writers who decided to produce and publish their work in their places of origin, the presence of a market of readers, and the increased diversity of local publications.

In general, the consensus is that the literature of the northern border states experienced dynamic and significant growth during the eighties. The emergence of regional literary forms was clearly indicative of a

tendency to reject the federal government in Mexico City and to affirm regional interests, as paradoxical as this may seem in light of support programs subsidized by the federal government. Of course, the centralist policy of “domesticating the barbarians of the North and teaching them what culture is” demonstrates a total unawareness and lack of respect for the officially designated narrative other while ostensibly favoring the region by promoting forums on northern border literature.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the Mexican government’s promotion of decentralization and the promise of NAFTA during the 1980s, although presented as panaceas, have resulted in consequences such as the population boom along Mexico’s border with the United States. This result is all too closely related to the processes mentioned by Amparán and Berumen, which are, as we saw previously, reflected in the perspectives of Conde, Luna, and Villarreal. Nevertheless, considering the lack of autonomy of Mexican states, it would be naive to believe that any artistic-cultural phenomena could be promoted without the previous blessing (or curse) of the Mexican government. That is to say, one can hardly discuss the manifestation of artistic production in the northern states without acknowledging the fact that the matter first passed from one desk to another within the federal government’s bureaucracy in Mexico City.

One of the most visible products of this infusion of funds were the series of books published by the Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y de las Artes (National Commission on Culture and the Arts). These books have become the official version of the regional literatures from the border states and for that very reason have been controversial. Berumen, for example, says that the idea behind the project was a good one, but that the volumes themselves are insufficient to give a sense of the depth of literary cultures in the region (“La literatura,” 20–21). Especially controversial was the government’s tendency to appoint volume editors from Mexico City, frequently giving the job to people with little direct knowledge of the literatures they were supposed to anthologize.

The prologues of the volumes from border states which make up the collection *Letras de la república*<sup>7</sup> offer little discussion of literature dealing specifically with the border area or with the emergence of “border literature.” Nevertheless, these prologues all have certain elements in common: particularly, they all signal the need for the region or state to be recognized by the community itself and they describe an effort to seek redress for exclusion, neglect, and abandonment by Mexico City.

These prologues also agree that the period of the greatest publication and promotion of each state’s literature began in the late eighties, and that cultural magazines and workshops have furthered literary production in the region. These anthologies discuss a “testimonial vocation as it relates to natural and human landscapes” and an “interest in structuring a discourse in which contradictions of cultural identity” can be resolved or given priority (Cortés Bargalló, 63). They also speak of a sense of regional autonomy and identity that subsists in a tense relationship with Mexico City’s efforts to promote a homogeneous (but implicitly centrist) concept of “Mexicanness.”

Ignacio Betancourt, Patricio Bayardo, and Chicano critic Francisco A. Lomelí are among the first scholars to begin to sketch out informed analyses of border literature. Betancourt, in a very brief article, comments on various works by both Mexican and Chicano authors. Although the conclusions reached in the article are suggestive rather than fully developed, Betancourt’s work is interesting because his concept of the border includes both border regions and, consequently, their literatures: specifically, Chicano/a literature and the literature of Baja California, Mexico, in which Betancourt is an active participant.<sup>8</sup> Bayardo, in *El signo y la alambrada*, surveys the literature of Baja California as well as providing a historical explanation for the permutations of culture in the California border space from 1848 (when the United States took control of upper California) up through the 1980s.<sup>9</sup> Although we do not share his traditional and monolithic vision of Mexico, he nevertheless deserves recognition as one of the first thinkers to carry out a systematic effort to understand the uniqueness of Mexican border life without stereotyping it.

In the seminal article “En torno a la literatura de la frontera: ¿Convergencia o divergencia?,” Lomelí develops his concept of the border as a dynamic site of socioeconomical, cultural, and political exchange and resistance, and as a unifying element between Mexicans and Chicanas/os. He also talks about Mexican border literature and comments on two Chicano authors. He mentions some of the difficulties of defining “border literature” because of the particularities of this geopolitical space and the cultural differences among the inhabitants on both sides of the border. Lomelí’s essay is of great value since he makes very clear why it is important to rethink the category of “Literature,” directly confronting the kind of bias so succinctly captured in Mexican writer Carlos Montemayor’s declaration: “La literatura de la frontera

norte (es) un mito, un error” [Mexican Northern Border literature is a myth, a mistake] (27). Lomelí argues that scholars and writers who adopt Montemayor’s position in effect only take into consideration an “official” literature, which is of course canonical literature or “good” literature, disregarding any national, regional, or gender-conscious literatures. Lomelí discusses the significance of the broader and more nuanced understanding of what is called “literature” and the valid claim of the border(s) literature(s) to be reread and evaluated in an appropriate context.

Still, the study of this literature is in its early stages since very few critics have done substantive research and most of the work is descriptive. Sergio Gómez Montero, Humberto Félix Berumen, Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz, and Francisco Luna agree on most points of discussion, and these four authors have served as the most consistent commentators on the literature of Mexico’s northern border region. These essayists have suggested that in order to study the literature of northern Mexico, one must not view either its literature or geography as a massive whole. The region is made up of diverse topographies, natural resources, and climates. Urban development differs significantly from one state to the next. Consequently, contrary to the concept of “border literature” in the United States, “la literatura de la frontera norte” is a phenomenon set into motion differentially by the unique cultural factors existing in different places.

These authors believe that the literature of Mexico’s northern border emerged and coalesced during the 1970s. This holds particularly true for the more important urban centers of the border states. Literary production—and, on most occasions, publication—takes place in cities located on the border or in other important urban centers in Mexico’s northern states. Narrative and poetry stand out as the most widely employed literary forms. Among the diverse themes of both genres, the border’s geographic realities (mountains, the sea, the desert, the borderline, urban centers) are fundamental. The colloquial and vernacular quality of the language permits the portrayal of the region’s typical linguistic characteristics; however, bilingualism and code-switching are not common practices in the literary works they study. The re-creation of everyday life is given priority, and the representation of urban space is one of its unique traits, without falling prey to the provincial costumbrismo of the past.

The authors producing this literature were born, for the most part, since the 1950s, and their work began to be published in the 1980s. They can be placed into three different groups: (1) those who have produced a body of well-established work that is recognized both in Mexico City and internationally, including Gerardo Cornejo, Jesús Gardea, Ricardo Elizondo, Alfredo Espinosa, Rosina Conde, Daniel Sada, José Javier Villarreal, and Minerva Margarita Villarreal; (2) those authors such as Mario Anteo, Francisco Amparán, Inés Martínez de Castro, Luis Humberto Crosthwaite, José Manuel Di Bella, Patricia Laurent, Margarita Oropeza, Rosario Sanmiguel, Federico Schafler, Micaela Solís, Regina Swain, and Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz who have managed to establish solid reputations within the national literary scene; and (3) those writers who participate in creative endeavors that are not widely recognized outside of their local communities.<sup>10</sup> It is worth emphasizing that not all border writers write about their regional contexts or experiences; a number place their writings at a distance from the region’s temporality and its sociological conflicts.

One of the principal impediments to potential literary delimitation is the lack of critical studies dedicated to the analysis of the diverse literary expressions found in individual genres. At present, narrative has far more often been the subject of research than other genres, although poetry is the form most preferred by authors. This critical gap is probably due to the fact that the narrative has been the literary form that has received the most attention both nationally and internationally. Theater has received virtually no attention, in spite of the fact that there are writers and critics in Mexico’s border states dedicated to dramaturgy. Although institutions of higher education have personnel involved in literary research, little is done to promote conferences specifically designed to further critical analysis of contemporary regional literature. With the exception of the meticulous studies on literary-cultural production carried out by the Department of the Humanities in Hermosillo, Sonora, and in the Autonomous University of Baja California, which has a professorship in regional literature, no other border institutions have permanent seminars or courses dealing with contemporary regional literature.<sup>11</sup>

Defining the territorial limits of the “northern border” is another difficulty we face. In his works dealing with border narrative Berumen includes both those writers who live and work in urban centers as well as those who live 900 kilometers to the south of the U.S.-Mexican border.

One of the arguments used to justify these limits is Berumen's contention that one must not approach the region from the vantage point of its administrative characteristics when discussing literary phenomena, but rather its sociocultural traits. This is perhaps Berumen's least convincing argument, since there may very well be more differences than similarities. However, among Berumen's great achievements, it is worth mentioning the periods he has established for the contemporary narrative, his analysis of literary phenomena as sociocultural processes, and, most especially, his inquiry into the role of labeling or classifying these phenomena as "border literature"—*literatura de la frontera*.

In addition to thinking about the region's growth and development, its cities, and the idiosyncrasies and regionalisms of its inhabitants, one must also consider the border discourse of the last two decades in terms of its relevancy to the inhabitants of the region in general, and to its writers in particular.<sup>12</sup> It may strike one as odd that Fernando Martínez Sánchez, in his prologue to an anthology on Coahuila, considers this state to fall within the limits of what is referred to as border culture, or that the cities with the greatest literary production in the state, Torreón and Saltillo, are located 700 and 400 kilometers south of the border. This oddity points up the question of the border region's geographic limits and the place of articulation of its writers *vis-à-vis* traditionally recognized northern cultural centers such as Monterrey and Chihuahua. The discussion has gone principally in two directions: on the one hand, the literature that is produced in these two cities is not considered as being marginalized from Mexican national culture, given the support that the writers and the urban centers have enjoyed (despite the tension between Mexico City and Monterrey that Minerva Margarita Villarreal stresses in her anthology *Nuevo León, Brújula solar*). In considering the literary-cultural patronage of border cities before the 1980s, Monterrey and Chihuahua, although lacking Mexico City's resources, do compete for and obtain more support from the capital than does the border area, and they have more resources to begin with. On the other hand, there are those who would argue that—the political economy of culture aside—given the distance of the two cities to the south, accurate assessments of the degree of "borderness" cannot be reliably made by anyone living so far from the border that they seriously question whether or not they actually live within the border region.

The two preceding perspectives can be termed *regionalist* and *es-*

*essentialist*. The proponents of the first perspective have drawn attention for commentary that has been critical of cultural institutions in Chihuahua and Monterrey because of their favored status in receiving official patronage.<sup>13</sup> This perspective reflects an antagonistic relationship between those who reside in the relatively more dominant urban centers in the north and those who live on the border. Hence Humberto Félix Berumen's suggestion that the border be divided in terms of its socioeconomic characteristics turns out to be unconvincing. The essentialist view would establish a fixed border literature in which border writers would all be cut from the same cloth. In this taxonomy, border writers, in order to be considered as such, would have to reflect solely on matters having to do with the border.

Is border literature about, on, of, or from the border? In Mexico, for whom have the terms "the border's literature" or "border literature"—*literatura de la frontera* or *literatura fronteriza*—been coined? There is still a great deal of confusion on this matter. Academics tend to assume that border literature is comprised of those Mexican works that focus on regional themes. The origin of this misunderstanding lies in the fact that writers from Mexico City who write about the border are generally included in literary analyses of northern border literature, often to the detriment of less well-known writers from the border area who may or may not use local referents in their work. Danny Anderson, for example, posits that the perspectives of Laura Esquivel, Carlos Fuentes, Ricardo Garibay, Ethel Krauze, and Paco Ignacio Taibo II, among others who write about but not from the border, have provided a historical storehouse of "representations which help one to distinguish the uniqueness and the often responsive nature of literary production on the border and in border states" (6). It is also certain that by relying exclusively on these more canonical works one is likely to engage in a Gómez-Peña-type intellectual colonialism. This colonialism is made manifest when one accepts the works of these writers as representative of the border, instead of seeking out other texts by writers from the area. As a result, those authors who write from the border find their work displaced from public consciousness in favor of the latest thematically related "border" book by a well-known centrist writer. It is, therefore, signally important to make the distinction between the border as expressed in literature as opposed to the literature actually produced on the border. The differentiation

helps prevent the erasure of Mexican border writers and their writings in favor of works by either well-known Mexican or Chicano/a writers.

When studying the introductions to the *Letras de la república* collection, a number of peculiarities characteristic of northern border literature can be noted. If we accept the validity of the border division suggested by Berumen as well as the posited ecotonal community of Gómez Montero,<sup>14</sup> the prologues, as a whole, seem to be discussing a regional literature far more comprehensive than each state offers individually. The region proposed as the northern border region brings to the forefront of critical discussion Mexico's decentralization and the North's creation of new artistic forms. It reflects a literary movement whose textual reconstruction began in the late 1970s and is gaining literary currency today. With this in mind, we can begin the articulation of a textual border, analogous to that defined in Chicano/a literature, in which a Mexican geographic space would also acquire a generalizable value, not in relationship to the United States or the rest of Mexico or Latin America, but in terms of the bonds existing among the border states. In this rearticulation, the main differences between the literature on the two sides of the border may very well persist: for Chicano/a literature the border is an abstraction, an inexhaustible utopia, a "Garden of Eden." In Mexican border literature the topic of the border occupies an ordinary space, a place that is infrequently represented in writing. It is, in this literature, more than a trope or locus amoenus. It is part of a literary regional movement that, like the border itself, is in a state of constant development: dynamic and forever changing.<sup>15</sup>

#### MEXICAN/CHICANA WOMEN WRITERS

It is the purpose of this book to contribute to the rethinking of border theory and border practice through a nuanced engagement with texts by women writers from both sides of the U.S./Mexico border, emphasizing the contributions of writers whose work, in Spanish, English, or a mixture of the two languages, calls into question accepted notions of border identities. Each chapter reads a different border writer and uses her work as a point of departure to re-elaborate a more binationally sensitive and feminocentric border theory.

Chapter 2 focuses on Alicia Gaspar de Alba, who was born in El Paso and wrote her collection of short stories, *The Mystery of Survival*, in the 1980s as she moved from El Paso to Juárez to other cities in both Mexico

and the United States. Her work, both in this collection of stories and in her poems, is less easily recoupable to the emerging Chicana canon than that of fellow creative writers like Helena Viramontes or Sandra Cisneros, partly because her aggressively bilingual style poses a serious course-adoption dilemma to the primarily Anglophone institutional structure for most such courses in the United States. Thus, the theoretical question that engages us in this chapter is precisely that of the place of a binational, bilingual writer in the national literary consciousness. Two of the eleven stories in *Mystery of Survival* are written entirely in Spanish. Another sequence of stories, focused on the curandera Estrella González, rely for their impact on a de-exoticized acceptance of the powers of this traditional healer. In each case, the weighted choice of Spanish or English or Spanglish in these stories evokes the tensions of living in two languages and two cultures, languages that conflict not only with each other, but also with the presumed cultural underpinnings that, in the border zone, are frequently highly charged. Gaspar de Alba's narrative is marked in a particular manner by her own social commitment, her own imbrication in a border reality that has left the northern border of Mexico out of official histories of that country, and at the same time has left Chicano history out of official histories of the United States. Doubly set adrift from official historiography, the Chicana writer attempts to piece together an alternative, rooted, genealogical tale.

Of all the narratives written in Northern Mexico in the last decade, that of Rosario Sanmiguel is surely among the most significant, and chapter 3 of this book is dedicated to her collection of stories, *Callejón Sucre y otros relatos* [Sucre Street and other stories]. These stories respond forcefully to the demand for a border literature that is firmly anchored in the language and the landscapes of her home city, Juárez. This urban environment is the point of reference for all the stories, and the main characters frequently play out the domestic dramas between mothers and daughters. At the same time, this polyphonic text captures the social diversity of languages, individual voices, and multilayered social discourses from both sides of the border. While the stories make no programmatic effort to define a border identity as such, the subjectivities described in them could be understood nowhere else. Nevertheless, Sanmiguel's stories sit oddly against the body of border theories common to the U.S. cultural context and it is, perhaps, only because of work like hers that we can begin to explore the reasons why this is so. As noted

above, what we understand as border theory tends to be written from north to south—that is, from the United States to Mexico—and the gesture of crossing borders serves most often in such studies only as a pretext for the articulation of wholly northern projects. Sanmiguel's stories, however, are firmly located on the southern side of the border. When she narratively crosses to the other side, south to north, her specific geographical and social contexts inevitably provoke a necessary, bifocal alignment of theoretical presuppositions as well.

Contemporary theorizing about the autobiographical form serves as a point of departure for our discussion (chapter 4) of two border narratives that implicitly insert themselves into this ongoing discussion. Both Norma Cantú's *Canticula* and Sheila Ortiz Taylor and Sandra Ortiz Taylor's *Imaginary Parents* explicitly play with the borderlines of presumptions about the autobiographical genre in their playful, fragmentary adaptations of this form. In either or both cases, the narrative always comes back to the tensions between traditional conceptions of autobiography and the particular circumstances defining an interstitial or fronterizo cultural space. It is telling that both of these autoethnographies require physical displacement from, and return to, the borderlands in order to open a free space for creation, and that one of the most crucial defining characteristics of these two fronterizo texts is their encoding of border life as constant movement, either realized or potential.

Reading Tijuana-based Rosina Conde's works (chapter 5) requires yet another shift of attention. For this border writer, the consciousness of liminality extends itself to all realms of experience. Conde's work directly addresses the traditional dichotomies of Mexican fiction and inscribes the border existence as a particularly privileged location—simultaneously strange and familiar—to explore the gender- and regionally bound nature of discursive constructions of Mexicanness itself. Her explorations of the intimate spaces of daily lives of border dwellers offer themselves at the same time as a political release from erasure on the national cultural scene as they also effect a rejection of sexually marked repression in relationships both ordinary (portraits of stress lines in working-class and middle-class families) and liminal (her delicate explorations of the insistently border-inflected worlds of assembly plants, prostitution, and striptease).

Chapter 6 offers a U.S.-based parallel to Conde's reinvention of Mexican identity. This chapter studies Californian Helena María Viramontes'

collection of short stories, "Paris Rats in East L.A." The power of Viramontes' collection rides to a great degree upon the cusp of the near-oxymoronic double meaning of "homely"—both homelike and unattractive—and that in the interstitial slippage across the discursive boundaries between places and people both loved and unlovely we can locate the parameters of Viramontes' own homely theorization of a specific contemporary Chicana consciousness. The streets and houses of East L.A. are all the home her characters know or can imagine, and they deal comfortably with their stridencies, since those streets and those interiors are their intimate domestic spaces. The ten-year-old budding "home girl" of 1963 is today's Chicana feminist, and in delving into the roots of Champ's story Viramontes reconstructs the historical and cultural conjuncture that led to today's Chicana's sense of cultural and political agency.

In *Mother Tongue*, the prize-winning novel about the tortuous relationship between a Chicana Sanctuary worker and a Salvadoran refugee, which we study in chapter 7, Demetria Martínez offers the reader a theory and a poetics for rethinking the construction of ethnic discourse and national identity at the conflicted intersection of various simultaneously held, and often mutually contradictory roles. Martínez puts us all, herself as well, in the position of observers upon the recent events in El Salvador and on the U.S. Sanctuary movement, contemporary history that is already and too soon fading in our collective memory. Both the Salvadoran man, who has solid reasons for needing to change his name and hide his identity, and the Chicana woman, whose identity is split between her U.S. life and her Mexican heritage, suffer from traumas that are both political and linguistic, and so in their mutual love they hurt each other as a reaction to the pain and estrangement they both feel. What makes this book so compelling is that its delicately poetic concern with the gendered quality of language and of complexly nuanced human relationships carries as well an implicit call to reconsider personal decisions involving political commitment.

Recent discussions about that archetypal postmodern border city, Tijuana (cf. García Canclini)—whether philosophical, anthropological, critical, or fictional—tend to focus on typical themes or narrative tics: the flexible geography that makes Tijuana both an island and an analog for the postmodern condition, the theme of the city as a Hollywoodesque set for a Wild West movie, the puzzlement over how to understand the



role of the maquiladoras and the area's industrial boom, the awareness of a vast movement of people both north and south at this busiest of the world's borders, the uneasy concern that Tijuana is both a pop-culture commercial construct and a degraded utopia, a persistent and nagging phobia about feminization, and about female sexuality. Chapter 8 examines Regina Swain's collection of short stories, *La señorita Superman y otras danzas* [Miss Superman and other dances], and María Novaro's film *Jardin de Edén* [Garden of Eden] and discusses how both of these narratives provide explicitly border Mexican, explicitly female-gendered takes on these issues. What Swain does in these brief stories is to trace critical nodes in these contradictory and complementary discourses, recovering their concealed or forgotten genealogies, and setting them side by side in a text where everything and everyone is dangerously, disruptively out of place. Likewise, Novaro's film reelaborates the Tijuana border space. Even though Novaro is an "outsider" to the border region, in her film she grants the city a different image from that projected from Hollywood since the 1930s or Mexico City's film industry since the 1940s. Like Swain's stories, Novaro's film concentrates on the imbrication of the Tijuana border area with her inhabitants' search for identities and dreams.

As these texts intimate, theorizations about the border cannot be consolidated into a singular, hegemonic structure, but rather need to maintain an alert attentiveness to the nuances of multiple voices and positions. Short, fragmentary retakes and seemingly discontinuous snapshots offer, perhaps, our best hope of more positioned and polyphonic border theories. In shuttling back and forth across the real and metaphorical borders between countries, books, languages, and institutions, we hope to be able to provide at least a suggestion of some of the missing letters that will contribute to the evolving study of border theory and border culture.

## 2. Bilingual

*Alicia Gaspar de Alba*

El pueblo que pierde su memoria pierde su destino.

—*Mexican proverb*

As we commented in the first chapter, many recent discussions of border theory in general, and Mexican-U.S. border theory in particular, have a curious undertone that profoundly shades how we read border texts and predetermines to some degree what texts enter into this dialogue and thereby constitute the newly forming canon from which we choose our examples. From the Mexican side, one aspect of this phenomenon is the displacement of writers *from* the border—who, subject to small press runs and inadequate distribution, are less well known and tend to be associated with "regional" themes—by centrist writers *about* the border (Carlos Fuentes' *Frontera de cristal* and Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* are salient recent examples) and by border writers displaced to the center of the country (Silvia Molina's *La familia vino del norte*) whose work is widely read and distributed, while also fitting more neatly into dominant culture constructions/inventions of borderness. On the U.S. side is a notable privileging of English-dominant oppositional Chicana thinker-poets like Gloria Anzaldúa in course syllabi, elite journals, and texts by high-powered theoreticians like Homi Bhabha. In many of

