

Once Upon a Time in Texas: Researching Contemporary Mexican American Fiction at TCU

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It is late February, winter is ever so slowly loosening its grip on the city of Debrecen, making transportation once again reasonably fast—just in time to allow me to zoom from one location to the next as my second semester as an instructor comes into full swing. It might turn out to be slightly less hectic than the previous one, as experience accumulates and I fall into the rhythm of the academic work environment, but one thing is certain: it won't get any closer to the nurturing tranquility of my research year abroad than this belated Hungarian winter does to the seven-month mild season of Texas. In the 2010/2011 academic year, I had the good fortune to conduct two semesters of undisturbed dissertation research at Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, on a Fulbright Visiting Student Researcher scholarship. What follows is a subjective blend of a research report and nostalgic reminiscences.

Background to Research: Text and Context in Recent Chicana/o Literary Narratives

On professional forums both home and abroad, I am often asked what makes me interested in Mexican American culture, of all things. I could refer to the Spanish colonial presence in what is now the American Southwest, or I could mention that Latinos in the US are currently not only the largest but also the fastest-growing ethnoracial minority, and people of Mexican descent account for 63% of all Hispanics. History and demographics equally reinforce that there can be no balanced and comprehensive study of the United States—in Hungary or elsewhere—without granting substantial attention to the contribution of Mexican Americans. My fascination with this subculture, however, is motivated by more than mere numbers.

The late feminist Chicana author and scholar Gloria Anzaldúa unforgettably conceptualized the southern border of the United States as an open wound, an ever-aching contact zone of two civilizations: “The US-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (25). I am drawn to Chicana and Chicano fictional narratives because, to me, they epitomize both the contradictory aspects of American culture and its inherent capacity to resolve those contradictions. “And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third,” Anzaldúa explains. Through the magic and power of language, Mexican American literary texts often effect such miracles, transforming life-threatening wounds into life-saving and enlivening blood transfusions. In this respect, no single work can surpass Rudolfo Anaya’s classic Chicano Bildungsroman *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), which first got me interested in the culture as an undergraduate student many years ago. Latino literatures of the United States being relatively scarcely researched in Hungary at this stage, this novel was also about as much as my home institution’s library could offer, and I initiated my Ph.D. project on a narrow range of texts ordered from abroad. Thus it was inevitable from the start that I would need to conduct research at a US university, the opportunity to which arrived in the fall of 2010.

Having defended a tentative proposal for my dissertation before embarking on my Fulbright odyssey, my primary objective was to complete one or more chapters by the end of my stay, although I was acutely aware that what I would find might radically reinterpret my entire project. Initially a considerable portion of my time and energy had to be devoted to identifying and familiarizing myself with primary sources—mainly novels—that were unavailable in Hungary, if not in all of Europe. I was reading not only additional works by authors that I already knew, like Rolando Hinojosa, Rudolfo Anaya, and Alejandro Morales, but I also ventured into new textual realms, discovering the narrative art of Chicanos Ron Arias, José Antonio Villareal, Nash Candelaria, Richard Rodriguez,

John Rechy, and Chicanas Gloria Anzaldúa, Ana Castillo, and Cherry Moraga for the first time. Another direction of reading, inevitably, involved secondary sources on this body of literature, as Chicano Studies has fortunately seen both phenomenal proliferation and much needed diversification since its inception in the 1970s. Perhaps Héctor Calderón’s *Narratives of Greater Mexico* (2004) has been the most inspiring finding for me in this vein, although several more seasoned anthologies also proved to be useful in initiating me into the critical discourse. Thirdly and true to the cultural orientation of my project, I did my best to round out my rather lacking knowledge of Mexican American history, social issues, and cultural practices. Volumes such as Daniel D. Arreola’s *Tejano South Texas* or Rafael Pérez-Torres’s *Mestizaje* aided me a great deal in this respect, not only as part of my dissertation research but also in preparation for a teaching career in North American Studies, for which I was lucky enough to receive an opportunity at the University of Debrecen upon completion of my grant period.

As for the theoretical underpinnings of my project, it is invested in an exciting new branch of literary studies often referred to as cultural narratology. Narratology in the structuralist sense—as the systematic study of narratives with the purpose of construing a universal grammar of stories that can be used to assign meaning to any narrative—has been pronounced dead several times since the 1990s. Yet the omnipresence of narratives in all areas of human activity and the clear-cut descriptive terminology of narrative theory not only lent it a staying power that few could anticipate but eventually elevated it to the rank of a transdisciplinary and transnational metalanguage, on a par with hermeneutics and semiotics (Sommer 4). Instead of the re-emergence of a unified theory, however, we have been recently witnessing the ramification of the study of narratives into a host of context-sensitive approaches, propelled both by “complex changes in the theoretical and critical climate, which have been dubbed the ‘cultural turn,’ ‘historical turn,’ ‘anthropological turn,’ ‘ethical turn,’ and ‘narrative’ or ‘narrativist turn’” (Nünning 2), and by the challenges that poststructuralism posed to the universalist aspirations and essentialist pitfalls of classical narratology. Postclassical narrative theories have managed to overcome most shortcomings of their structuralist predecessors by discarding the old mimesis-based definition of narrative and conceptualizing stories as active cognitive forces, by semanticizing narrative structures and analyzing their ideological investments, and by considering the reader’s role in making sense of narrative features.

Thus the systematic study of narratives not only survived the crisis it faced in the 1990s, but emerged in the form of new inspiring critical trends, the import of which well exceeds literary studies. Applied cultural narratology,

for instance, is more than culturally sensitive, context-oriented readings of fictional narratives; it also provides indispensable analytical tools for cultural analysis and cultural history, serving as an elaborate metalanguage between various disciplines. In Ansgar Nünning's formulation, its mission is "to cross the border between textual formalism and historical contextualism, and to close the gaps between narratological bottom-up analysis and cultural top-down synthesis" (5). This is exactly what I intended to perform in relation to contemporary Chicano and Chicana literary texts by identifying narrative patterns with the help of concepts and categories borrowed from classical narratology, and, in turn, interpreting these patterns within their unique Mexican American cultural context(s). Needless to say, such an interpretive practice requires both close acquaintance with the relevant theories and thorough knowledge of the social, historical, and cultural backgrounds of texts.

Divergent Projects: Hypothetical Focalization, Narrative Polyphony, and the Possible Worlds of Fiction and Historiography

My initial suspicion that new findings might take my research in unfathomable directions soon proved to be well-founded. Enjoying all the privileges of an American private university's library—including free and fast interlibrary loan—is arguably as close to potential omniscience as any human being can get. With even the most recent scholarship at my fingertips, I delved into the intricacies of poststructuralist narrative theories, starting out from generic anthologies like *Narratologies*, edited by David Herman, or *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, edited by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz, and moving on towards more specialized conceptual systems. I found myself especially intrigued by perspective as problematized by Herman in *Story Logic*. In that 2002 monograph, he made a really promising attempt to link types of perspectival filtering—or point-of-view—to epistemological modalities, outlining a system that could measure the congruity of the expressed world and the reference world in narratives. Hypothetical focalization, in his formulation, is one shade along a continuum of filters which encodes some kind of doubt and uncertainty with regard to certain aspects of the story.

Reading Ana Castillo's *The Mixquiahuala Letters* at the same time as Herman's theory, I realized the pertinence of hypothetical focalization as a descriptive category and began to wonder about its interpretive significance within the specifically Chicana cultural context of the narrative. In this monologic epistolary novel, the Chicana protagonist Teresa virtually recreates the perspective of her Anglo friend and correspondent Alicia in a series of hypothetically focalized letters. The hypotheses are justified by a kind of interracial "uterine comprehension" that supposedly binds

the two female characters, yet this understanding that would precede language is curiously undermined by the text itself. In an article written for the journal *Narrative*, I attempted to account for this rift in the narrative form by referring to Chicanas' position within patriarchal and postcolonial social contexts and associating the epistemological doubt encoded in hypothetical focalization with the untenability of any frame of reference available for the doubly subjugated social position of Chicanas.

As the first part of my stay at TCU coincided with my last semester in the Ph.D. program at home, I was to produce a dissertation chapter in accordance with my original proposal. I revisited, therefore, three Chicano classics that had been known to me previously—Tomás Rivera's . . . y no se lo tragó la tierra, Aristeo Brito's *El diablo en Texas*, and Rolando Hinojosa's *Klail City*—but with the new insights I had gained in the meantime.

One of the most striking features of these novels is the notorious lack of a unified narratorial consciousness or a narrative voice that would be maintained with some regularity and thereby establish a sense of permanency. (In fact, each narrative offers initially such a permanent voice, only to frustrate the reader's expectations later on.) Instead of a unified narrative voice or a fairly limited number of narrators, the fabula events are related by a host of intradiegetic storytellers, some of them heterodiegetic witnesses, others homodiegetic participants. Two strategies stand out as characteristic of all the three novels, both employing the direct discourse of characters. One of them is the untagged, seemingly unmediated dialogue, typically between unidentified characters, which either dramatizes some emblematic scene or construes the story of an absent community member in the fashion of hearsay and gossip. The other strategy, namely, the direct quotation of a recognizable or anonymous character's monologue, is only slightly less dramatic, considering that the narrating situation and the narratee are often made explicit. Yet another type of polyphony also utilizes direct discourse, but condenses a large number of voices into a single segment by non-realistic means in order to radically expand the scope of the narrative. What emerges is a (not necessarily symphonic) orchestra of individual voices which, in my interpretation, create the mimetic illusion of an ongoing community discourse through dispersed diegesis. The seemingly unmediated representations of characters' direct speech and thought—whether monologic, dialogic, or polyphonic—and the delegation of narrative authority to one or more hypodiegetic narrators thus emerge as vital devices for Rivera, Brito, and Hinojosa in fashioning a likeness of Chicano communal discourse in the novel form, an intersubjective mode of storytelling.

Another but related issue that I addressed in the dissertation chapter at hand was the economy of narrative information and its sociohistorical interpretation. In the fragmentary designs of the *Diablo*, *Tierra*, and *Klail City*, the individual episodes, anecdotes, conversations,

scenes, various speech acts, and more developed short stories typically stand separately and attain a measure of coherence only in the reading process. The speakers and storytellers themselves remain unaware not only of the logical, thematic, and symbolic connections among their utterances but sometimes even of the most fundamental actions and events that determine their existence and especially the motivations behind those. Ultimately I proposed to regard this uncertainty, the limited knowledge of characters, and their parallel stories that meet only in the reader's mind as the dramatization of Chicanas' and Chicanos'(continuing) underprivileged status in terms of (the dominant) language, literacy, education, and access to printed media.

In the final months of my grant period, I gravitated towards the problem of history as a subtext for Chicano literature. Of course the recognition that, like many other creative artists of minority background, Chicana and Chicano authors are deeply invested in history and its aftermath is nothing new. The dominant Marxist strain of Mexican American literary and cultural criticism has done more than enough to drive home this disciplinary dogma. Yet the nature of the literature-history interface continues to intrigue scholars into the twenty-first century, as Gerald Louis Mendoza's volume *Historia—The Literary Making of Chicana and Chicano History* demonstrates. That this theoretical issue might have very culturally specific implications for the Hispanic context is hinted at by the pun intended in the title: *historia* in Spanish can mean both history and story. Incidentally, the history=narrative=fiction double equation, initiated by Roland Barthes and Hayden White, are hailed by many as the single most influential breakthrough of postmodern historiography. In my view, Mendoza's otherwise insightful account is unfortunately tainted by such a conflation of historical and fictional narratives, despite his explicit resolution to the contrary. His method prompted me to inquire into my own assumptions regarding literary scholarship, history-writing, and the interaction of the two. In my groping for solid theoretical footing, I found a powerful ally in model-theoretical semantics—popularly known as possible worlds theory—as applied by Lubomír Doležel in *The Possible Worlds of Fiction and History*. The question that interests me here is how widespread this uncritical blending of historical and literary discourse might be among Chicana and Chicano critics, and whether it could be motivated by some culturally specific factors, such as the coincidence of poetry and historiography in pre-Columbian civilizations. Depending on the fertility of this direction of inquiry, it might well redefine my dissertation project altogether.

My Texas, TCU, and Fulbright Experience

My choice of an academic host institution was both complex and self-evident. As the Lone Star State boasts with the second largest Mexican American community in the country, I was quite in the midst of Chicanos' and Chicanas' experiential reality, with tex-mex music, cuisine, and art within easy reach. Although my arguably privileged status as a visiting grad student at an elite university and my less than sufficient Spanish language skills inevitably separated me from the working class milieu of most Mexican Americans, my extended stay afforded me a bit more than a casual glimpse at the touristy aspects of their culture. From the cleaning ladies on campus to the construction workers around the neighborhood and my best friend, a grad student in physics, I had regular contact with people of Mexican descent, which definitely animated my so far somewhat bookish interest in the culture. One plan that regrettably fell through was a visit to San Antonio, the cultural capital of Tejanos, and the small town of Presidio on the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo, which inspired Brito's novel. Instead, however, I had the opportunity to travel to New Mexico and visit the actual Nambé pueblo that is celebrated in Orlando Romero's *nambé-year one*. Furthermore, as a climber and outdoor sports enthusiast, I also got to spend enough time in contact with the arid land of the American Southwest to get a feel for the harsh but enchanting natural environment that shaped the ethnic character and *Weltanschauung* of the early Hispanic settlers.

Within the Texan higher education scene, I opted for TCU not only because of its academic excellence and national reputation, but more importantly because of the interdepartmental relationship that had been recently established between its English department and the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Debrecen. My supervisor, Dr. Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, was the first to teach at TCU, and it was reassuring to experience that even after a decade he is still vividly remembered there with awe and fondness. In later years, my home institution twice had the privilege to welcome Dr. David Vanderwerken of TCU, and I was lucky enough to attend his seminar. We could not wish for a more ardent and convincing advocate of the TCU-IEAS, Debrecen cooperation than Dr. V., but for me he was so much more: long-time mentor, friend, academic father-figure. With his incredibly lovely and caring wife, Karen—my Texas mom—they made sure I felt at home in all senses of the word at TCU, in Fort Worth, in Texas, and wherever I went in the US. From sheltering me in the first few days to helping me find housing and the monthly Cost-Co runs for food, they stood by me with wise generosity that I can only repay to future foreign visitors coming to Hungary. It was also Dr. V. who first put me in touch with Dr. David Colón, Latino scholar and new member of the TCU English faculty, who kindly agreed to supervise my research and never ceased helping



The adobe church of
Nambé pueblo,
New Mexico



Fulbright Enrichment Seminar, New York City



My Texas family:
Karen and David
Vanderwerken



Experiencing the
Southwestern desert:
Climbing trip with friends

me with his knowledgeable guidance. I am deeply indebted to him not only for the insights and research achievements mentioned above, but also for facilitating my development into an educator, for the bike his wife, Lucia, lent me, and for the friendship they both shared with me. I also owe special thanks to Dr. Neil Easterbrook, who always readily and enthusiastically tutored me on the intricacies of literary and cultural theories and Profesora María Zalduondo of the Spanish department, who kindly and tirelessly helped me improve my Spanish communication skills.

In the nine months of my grant period, TCU became much more to me than a host institution; the library research, the classes, the sport events, the international student programs, the recreation activities all contributed to my integration into this true academic family. Likewise, I experienced Fulbright as more than an impersonal organization aiding my research and career. I was always excited to meet fellow Fulbrighters at the events of the North Texas Chapter of the US Fulbright Alumni Association, selflessly organized by Kristopher Franks. And brief as it was for meeting so many brilliant young people, the New York Enrichment Seminar on greening the planet was undoubtedly one of the highlights of my stay. The educational, intellectual, career, and other benefits I received via my Fulbright scholarship are impossible to enumerate, not to mention repaying it. Yet as a proud Fulbright Alumnus, I am resolved to take advantage of any opportunity to promote the goals and vision of this exemplary international cooperation, and I encourage all future Fulbrighters to make the best of this unique experience.

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