

**Frederick Luis Aldama. *A User's Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderlands Fiction*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. 208 pp.**

Literary studies has generally decided to parcel out the world in geographical increments. Postcolonial literature (as texts written outside of the U.S. and Europe) and U.S. ethnic studies (as texts written by minority groups within the U.S.) thus occupy distinct spaces within this geographical configuration. While critics sometimes call attention to parallels or exchanges between these sub-fields, an idea of literature as attached to nation-states requires them to be treated as separate. In light of increasing interest in transnationalism, though, the boundaries between these different regions can be seen to be more permeable; rather than capturing ethnic groups seemingly based in the U.S. such as Latino/as in a momentary snapshot, a transnational approach suggests that these groups are part of complex geographical webs stretching beyond national borders. Frederick Luis Aldama's *A User's Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderlands Fiction* would seem to be one such intervention in reframing the configuration of literary studies to account for these sorts of transnational realities; but in fact, his study emerges as a challenge to any sort of identity-based conception of literature, making a case instead for the universality of literature and a reading model based on a biological response to aesthetics.

The emphasis on the lessons of biology to literary studies is certainly the most distinctive aspect of Aldama's text. His definition of subjectivity, for example, is purely biological; as he puts it, "if I self-identify as a borderland subject, I do not fundamentally alter who I am as a subject [...] I am still a social and biological being informed by a shared genetic and evolutionary history with all of humanity" (7). This biological determinism is an interesting defense against historical hierarchies that have questioned the humanity of non-Europeans; but it also presents a strange idea of subjectivity as completely free of social constraints. Most of the work of postcolonial and ethnic studies has been precisely to question such a universal subject, and to show how the subject is enmeshed in a set of social relations (frequently thought of as race, class, and gender). Aldama remains consistent in his dismissal of what he considers these identity-based approaches to literary studies, even if his emphasis on the universality of all literature raises the question of why he has chosen to draw the boundaries he does at all; if, as he puts it, "narrative theory furnishes us with the verifiable means to identify structures in a given narrative fiction that can be studied in comparison with literature conceived by all sorts of authors in all parts of the world and in many different epochs" (21), then

presumably his decision to focus on Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Hari Kunzru, Zadie Smith, Dagoberto Gilb, Luis Rodriguez, and U.S. Latino/a comic books is completely arbitrary and the same study could have included an entirely different set of writers and texts from places neither postcolonial nor borderland. In light of his defining world literature in such a broad way, it seems equally strange that he continues to enforce boundaries based on what can appear to be essential qualities, as when he asserts that “we need to understand that the vast majority of the fiction written by postcolonial and borderlands authors is written in English” (10). Why Latin American or Francophone writing—or any of the literatures written in hundreds of other languages—belongs to a different discussion seems counter to the book’s overall argument about the unity of world literature.

The specific chapters use this biological, narratological methodology to present readings of how specific texts produce emotional responses in their (presumed as universal) reader. But it isn’t clear at all who is the ideal reader of Aldama’s text, especially since his idiosyncratic approach is coupled with a surprising hostility towards the rest of his field. He describes Homi Bhabha’s work as “nonsense” (69) and the deconstruction of signifier and signified as “sheer gibberish” (70); critics of *The God of Small Things* who focus on the novel’s politics and possible exoticizing of India “are ultimately not interesting” (50); while the texts Aldama treats show aesthetic sophistication, most celebrated postcolonial writers produce “what amount to romance novels with pretensions of high-brow postcolonial grandeur” (29); and in perhaps the most mean-spirited comment of all, Gloria Anzaldúa is mocked for “creat[ing] Kleenex narratives,” meaning that “once we finish (if we finish), we find the nearest garbage can” (7). Almost all of these comments come as dismissive asides rather than actual arguments against those with whom Aldama disagrees: this blindside is the only mention of Anzaldúa in the book, and the postcolonial writers who can’t live up to Aldama’s ideas about high art are not named. For all of Aldama’s interest in how fiction shows empathy and produces emotions in the reader, *A User’s Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderland Fiction* leaves this reader bewildered as to the goals of the strategies it uses.

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