

Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak and Nancy Sullivan. *Conversations with Mexican American Writers: Languages and Literatures in the Borderlands*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009. 161 pp.

On a panel of Chicana writers of historical fiction at the 2010 Los Angeles Latino Book Festival, one of the writers (who is also a trained historian) reminded the audience that much of official U.S. history is fiction and that fiction can sometimes seem more real than history. Many writers of color have felt responsible to fill in an erased history through fiction. This is, after all, the writers' contribution in helping to create a historical memory in light of loss. Across the multiple disciplines in the broader field of Ethnic Studies, writers are attempting to establish a collective historical memory, a challenge when one's history has been disregarded at best and misrepresented and erased at worst. In the introduction to their interviews with Norma Elia Cantú, Denise Chávez, Sandra Cisneros, Montserrat Fontes, Dagoberto Gilb, Diana Montejano, Pat Mora, Benjamín Alire Sáenz, and Helena María Viramontes, Mermann-Jozwiak and Sullivan state that "in their literary and activist work, the authors communicate their desire to counter the voicelessness of border subjects" (x). As border subjects, these nine writers are attempting to remember home by working through language against historical neglect.

Conversations with Mexican American Writers documents the voices of authors intimately connected to the borderlands who, because of the absence of the Mexican American experience in mainstream historical texts, engage in creating a historical memory of this experience in Mexico and the greater Southwestern United States. As interviewers, Mermann-Jozwiak and Sullivan's goal is to remind us of the transformative nature of the arts and literature in particular. They believe that the conversations help to "illustrate literature's ability to resist dominant ideologies – linguistic, cultural, social, and political – and to create shifts in perspective" (xxii).

While the overarching theme of the collection is the writers' literary engagement with their life histories and experiences in the borderlands, they also explore the importance of how language is intimately tied to identity and the questions posed to them lead to the exploration of greater concerns related to history, literature and linguistics. For instance Helena María Viramontes, who sees the writer as a social activist, discusses the importance of writers "bringing history to life." The writer's job, as she sees it, is to put her reader in the "moment," while historians are more interested in factual recording (83). Benjamín Alire Sáenz reminds us that the border is a place that "creates real material poverty," but that it is also a place where "cultural capital is

created” (52). One of his hopes is that the cultural production created at the border is not just seen as a metaphor, but as a real place. For Sáenz, the border is the place that feeds him and his literary subjects.

Most compelling is Mermann-Jozwiak and Sullivan’s placing of Mexican American literature within a transnational context. Certainly, the broader field of Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies has always been a transnational endeavor. The questions that the interviewers ask of the authors privilege the view that “authors internationalize the borderlands and infuse it with a hemispheric consciousness” (xiii). For any student of literature or history, this book is a must to learn how Chicana and Chicano writers are remembering their subjects’ experiences on the border and in doing so, creating a larger historical memory of the United States and Greater Mexico.

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