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Author(s): Allison Ramay and Manuela Mercado

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From Chicano Studies to Mexican Studies, from Literature to Popular Culture: An Interview with Héctor Calderón

Allison Ramay and Manuela Mercado¹



Héctor Calderón at his home in Mexico City, September 14, 2011.

Héctor Calderón is a professor in the Spanish and Portuguese Department at UCLA. He was the founding Chair of the César E. Chávez Center at UCLA (1994) and served as Director of the University of California, Education Abroad Program's Mexico Study Center (2004-2008). He was also the founding Executive Director of the Casa de la Universidad de California en México, A.C. (2006-2008). His areas of expertise are Chicano Literature, Spanish American Literature, Mexican Literature and Mexican Popular Culture and Rock en Español.

¹Allison Ramay, Ph.D. (UCLA 2009); and Manuela Mercado, B.A. (PUC 2011).

Professor Calderón became one of the founders of Chicano literary criticism with his co-edited *Criticism in the Borderlands* (Duke 1991) which brought to light a canon of Chicano literature. His most recently published book is *Narratives of Greater Mexico: Essays on Chicano Literary History, Genre, & Borders* (Texas 2005), a study of how seven Chicana and Chicano authors contribute to a cultural and historical Mexican presence within the United States. While much of Professor Calderón's work has focused on narrative, he has also researched and published on select Mexican rock bands and singer-song writers and the implications of their linguistic, cultural and social border-crossings between Mexico and the United States. He has published articles in multiple prestigious journals including Chicano literature's oldest and most revered *Aztlán* from UCLA. His current research interests include Mexican literature, film, and rock and Mexican American fiction of Los Angeles. In this interview conducted online from the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile with Professor Calderón, in both Los Angeles and Mexico City, he reflects on his life as a border person, on the development of Chicano studies, and on the emerging North American Mexican diaspora evident in literature and music.

Childhood and Early Career

You grew up in Caléxico on the northern side of the U.S.- Mexico border. In a recent publication in Intramuros (2009), you describe the negotiation of identity that you experienced at a young age; your classmates in Caléxico considered you a Mexican; however on the southern side of the border, in Mexicali, they considered you a "pocho" (a sell-out or an inauthentic Mexican). Currently you cross the border often because you have a home in Mexico City and you teach at UCLA. Can you please explain in which ways this crossing has changed for you and/or if it has remained unchanged in some ways? Also, do you feel more at home in one of these two cities? Is one more hospitable to "seres fronterizos" than the other?

As a child and as an adolescent, I would cross the border several times a week. I could see the border fence from our home. Sometimes I would cross with parents and sometimes it would be by myself. In those days crossing into Mexico meant just being waved on in Spanish by the Mexican immigration official with "pase." Upon returning to Calexico, I would say "American born." No problem entering the U.S. because I dressed and spoke English like an "American." I would walk back and forth across the la línea (we would say "cruzar la línea"). I did not carry any documents

with me. Despite the ease with which one entered both nations, I was still aware of the two sides. It is still clear today. Calexico is laid out in blocks, very organized. Mexicali just grew haphazardly away from the border with a much larger population than the north side. This was in the 1950s and 1960s and I was not aware that I was a border person, un ser fronterizo . Calexico was just as Mexican as Mexicali in terms of a population of Mexican origin. It was probably 95% Mexican. And though we shared much on both sides, yes, on the north side we were *pochos*, Mexicans who had lost their culture and language. We were not “real” Mexicans. And for the city officials, school teachers who were all Anglos, I was Mexican, not a “real” American. Despite these labels, in our home, with our family, we were always Mexicans, *mexicanos*, and bilingual, bicultural, and in some ways binational. These early life experiences have served me well. We lived our postmodernity *avant la lettre* on a daily basis in these mirror cities.

Of course, flying now at some 40,000 ft. back and forth across the border is different. I smile, however, when the flight captain informs passengers that we will be entering Mexico or the U.S. over the Calexico-Mexicali border. We are now much more aware of borders as both limits and as points of entry. There are legal and illegal immigrants, documented and undocumented people, between these two nations. I fly between two major North American capitals after 9/11. Entering either country is a major event. I am now one of many foreigners entering both nations. In Los Angeles, I enter with many Asians. In Mexico, I enter with visitors from Europe and Latin America. I may be indistinguishable from Mexicans and other Latin Americans as I wait in line. When I am greeted by the Migración official in Mexico or the Homeland Security agent, I present my documents, my U.S. passport in Los Angeles (*El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora La Reina de Los Angeles*) and my FM3 Visa as a *rentista no inmigrante en la Ciudad de México*. One of my two languages takes over at the point of entry.

In Mexico, according to legal documents, I am a foreigner. Being Mexican means being a citizen of Mexico with a *credencial de elector*. As Mexican flight attendants distribute customs declaration forms, they give me a puzzled look when I answer “*mexicano pero ciudadano estadounidense*” to their “*mexicano o americano?*” There is no official designation for being biologically and culturally Mexican from another nation. On the streets of Mexico City, however, I am a Mexican. And though a foreigner, this is the city that I call home, “the one that stole my heart away” according to one graduate student. After four years as Director of the University of California

Education Abroad Program in Mexico (2004-2008) and two years a Director Ejecutivo de la Casa de la Universidad de California en México, A.C. (2006-2008), I decided to buy a place in Mexico in the south of the city in Tlalpan which is one of the colonial neighborhoods along with Coyoacán and San Angel. These areas were located on the southern shores of Lake Texcoco. I live in the origins of North America. Hernán Cortés established his capital in Coyoacán in 1521. These are my origins too.

Mexico City is Athens, Rome, Paris, New York City, and Washington, D.C. all in one. Mexico City is Mexico's center for government, business, religion, arts and culture. It is our North American classical antiquity that extends back thirty centuries. It is also an international capital, a postmodern city, a destination for Europeans, Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians. It is the second largest city in the world, at the center of other large regional capitals. Mexico City has all that I need. Culture, art, music, film are important reasons for choosing Mexico City as home. The people, however, made the difference. Mexicans are gente cálida, con un trato muy personal. They are welcoming, generous, and friendly to me. I have friends who are rockeros, rappers, taxi drivers, filmmakers, administrators, and professors, people from all social classes. I enjoy walking to mercados where the vendors know you by name. In Mexico City, I feel at home. Like many other Mexicans, I take the "bus" that in three hours will fly me from Los Angeles to Mexico. A professor friend from Morelia, Michoacán told me that the definition of a Mexican should be someone who has a relative in the United States. I am now part of a large North American Mexican diaspora and the border now extends deep into Mexico. I am an international traveler and still a ser fronterizo.

What was the first memorable text you read in English? Did it influence your path as a professor, researcher and critic of Chicano literature? If so, how?

I was not a literature student in high school. I was a student of math and science. These were the traditional disciplines that one encountered on the road to college. If one excelled in math and science, you were likely to be judged by your teachers as smart and as possible college material. It was on the basis of my grade point average in math and science courses that I was accepted at UCLA into the School of Engineering. In high school, we were not taught to think critically. Actually, I did not have a very good high school education in the liberal arts, in the humanities, in Calxico. I did, however, enjoy reading in school and in the city library. My family did not possess many books that I recall, no, not in literature. We did have an encyclopedia. Interesting this question

about my readings in English. It is such a coincidence because just several days ago in conversation with my Ph.D. student on her dissertation on prostitution in Chicana and Mexicana literature, the first serious complete work in English that I read came back to mind. It was Stephen Crane's short novel *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* (1893). It was a novel of naturalism written by a social reformer. Though the setting was New York City in the late nineteenth century, I could understand poverty, alcoholism, and prostitution. I could understand poverty from my own class situation. And living on the border, I knew of cantinas and prostitutas. As one entered Mexicali from Calexico, the world described by Crane was clearly visible. One does not have to be an adult, I must have been 16 or 17, to understand this social phenomenon. I must have chosen this book for reasons I do not recall now. But at my age now, the road to the study of literature, a literature that values the social, returns me to Crane's novel. I still recall it vividly as I read it and tried to articulate its meaning in my high school "theme" paper.

Chicano Literature: Terminologies, Reflections and Projections

In many contemporary academic publications the terms "Mexican American" and "Chicano" are synonymous. In your pioneering Narratives of Greater Mexico you explain that the word "Chicano" refers to a particular phase of Mexican American identity and writing, that is, during and following the Chicano Movement of the late 1960s. Your interest, however, lies in "American Mexicans" meaning how writers reveal Mexican cultural, historical and linguistic phenomena and presence in the United States. In that sense, is the term Chicano only historically significant or does it have relevancy today?

The term Chicano has existed at least back to the nineteenth century. It is a shortened form of Mexicano—Xicano or Chicano. It was used by my family to refer endearingly to someone who had just arrived in the U.S. from Mexico. "Es un chicanito" my father would say. In the 1960s, the term began to be used in a political sense. Around 1967 and 1968, Mexican college students became self-identified Chicanos. Whether you were or not an activist, the term was appropriate if one understood the historical, social, and economic origins of Mexicans in the United States. To most Anglo Americans prior to the Chicano Movement, we were Mexicans not Americans. We were part of other minority groups. We were culturally disadvantaged and we knew poverty. According to Anglo Americans and social science literature, there were reasons for our status: we were dumb, social vegetables who preferred being poor rather than assimilate and enjoy the American way of life. That we were not dumb, that we lacked opportunities, and that we suffered from racism and

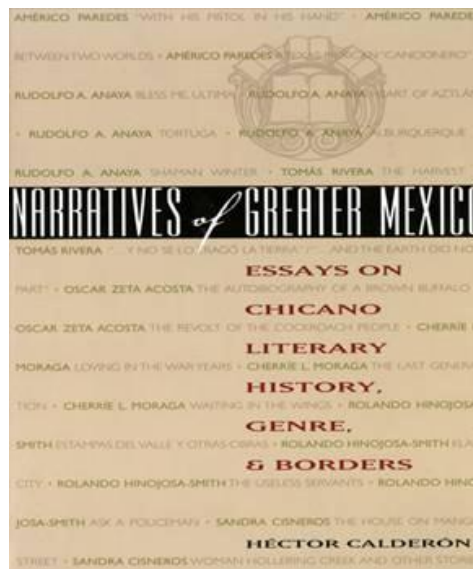
economic exploitation, these reasons were not part of the explanation. Being Chicano in 1967 and 1968 meant that we understand the realities of our situation in the U.S.

The term gave us an identity, a movement, a historical awareness in the twentieth century different from previous centuries. Mexicans in the United States, beginning in 1835 (The Texas Republic) and in 1848 (War between the United States and Mexico), understood very well their political situation as a conquered people who resisted. In the twentieth century, the entry of Chicanos into institutions of learning, into politics, and into professions made the difference. For Chicanas and Chicanos, history was in the future, history was yet to be made. The term has historical significance still today. Departments of Chicana and Chicano Studies are so named for historically symbolic reasons, one of them being to keep the Mexican in us. The Chicano Movement also made Mexico aware of Mexicans in the United States, that we had our own evolving history, culture, identity though we did not negate our Mexican origins.

However, we cannot deny that we are in a different historical situation today. The Chicano generation of the 1960s and 1970s was very homogeneous. Today's Mexican populations in the U.S. are very diverse in terms of class, racial mixtures, sexual identities, and Mexican origins. I have learned from my UCLA students and my UC students in Mexico. They identify as michoacano, oaxaqueño, zacatecano. Some may refer to themselves as Chicanos but all most certainly call themselves mexicanos. This is our current situation in the U.S. where recent Mexican immigrants now work in Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, and New York. And in Los Angeles, for example, these populations may be Mexican mestizo as well as zapotecos (indígenas) from Oaxaca. It is important here to say that the term Mexican, which was always used by Mexican Americans, may have a new meaning with a new civil society of Mexicans that is emerging in the U.S. A civil society that identifies you as Mexican whether from Chiapas, Oaxaca, Zacatecas, Sinaloa, and not just as a card carrying Mexican with a credencial de elector, not just a member of one of the three dominant Mexican political parties. Students have taught me that there is a changing base in the population of Mexican origin in the U.S. with a different political agenda that includes such struggles as immigrant rights, work place conditions, assisting the undocumented. The political activism also includes hometown associations in the U.S. that retain their Mexican civic responsibility by sending money to their towns of origins in Mexico to build roads and schools for example. I have met these students

at UCLA in my classes and in Mexico in my UC programs. Many of these students are citizens of both Mexico and the United States and are active politically in both nations.

The Chicano Movement of the 1960s, made possible opportunities for students in 2011. Greater numbers of students are gaining entrance to the UC system. In fall 2011, some 9000 Chicano/Latino students intended to enroll across the UC campuses. That number was almost equal to white students intending to enroll. These ethnic designations are UC's. The Chicano Movement was one important historical moment in the larger history of Mexican culture in North America. The Chicano Movement was affected by demographics, the Mexican American baby boomers that entered college in the 1960s. In 2011, we are seeing another demographic change, with the children of new immigrants entering college. These two groups were formed by the Chicano Movement. Of course, not all students identify as Chicano. Students now identify as Chicano and Mexicano. And other mixtures exist too, Chicano and Peruvian, Chicano and Salvadoran, even Chicano Cuban. Students in my Chicano literature classes come from throughout Latin America.



In your chapter “Rereading Rivera’s Y no se lo tragó la tierra” (1991) you state that “Chicano literature is not simply a ‘minority’ or marginal literature, it is one of the latest chapters of the Western tradition, or perhaps, with an eye to the future of the Americas, it is indicative of new, alternative cultural traditions” (99). How are contemporary writers on either side of the border contributing to the development of “alternative cultural traditions”, particularly in regards to Mexican Americans?

That chapter essay was written in the late 1980s and published in 1991. Rock en español in Mexico was in its initial stages. I think of rock and rock cultures across the U.S.-Mexico border as new cultural traditions. Maldita Vecindad has been a leader in this regard. In their 1989 *Maldita Vecindad* CD, Maldita Vecindad included “Mojado.” The 1991 *Circo* opened with “Pachuco.” These two songs understood the importance of dos comunidades y un pueblo, the history of migration, the history of new cultural types from the 1940s to the end of the twentieth century, from pachuco to punk. Sandra Cisneros’s *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories* (1991) and novel *Caramelo* (2002) were written because of her American Mexican identity. Travels to Mexico City, her father’s home, gave her an American Mexican identity before she understood Chicano. *Woman Hollering Creek* and *Caramelo* are stories of cross-border solidarity between Mexican American women and Mexicans. Much of Mexican folk and popular culture is used by Cisneros to invent her characters and situations. In *Caramelo*, Cisneros argues that we have a blood and cultural relationship with mexicanas and mexicanos. Fuentes’s *Frontera de cristal: Una novela en nueve cuentos* (1995) clearly draws on Chicano literature, on the Chicana and Chicano novel-as- tales or composite novel such as Rivera’s *Y no se lo tragó tierra* (1971). The tales in *Frontera de cristal* all come together at the ending, at the political and symbolic border that divides and unites Mexico and the United States. Fuentes’s narrator is hopeful about new cultural traditions (Sandra Cisneros is one of the Chicana and Chicano writers mentioned by the narrator), hoping for “un nosotros” across border lines. My rapper friend DJ Azteck 732 of the D.F. rap collective La Vieja Guardia is a bilingual rapper and DJ. He learned English from black rap music. Only recently has he traveled to the U.S. to L.A. and New York City but because of the Internet he connects with the U.S. His musical understanding and music is cross-border and cross ethnic lines. He is very active on Facebook with comments on events in Mexico and the United States. Hello Seahorse! is a band composed of Denise Lo Blondo (Gutiérrez) born in Van Nuys, CA, and Mexican-born Oro de Neta (Fernando Burgos), Bonnz! (Gabriel G. de León), and Joe (José Borunda). Because of Denise, who is the lyricist, the band has English language songs like “Won’t Say Anything.” Though Hello Seahorse! is a “flow” electronic band, members Oro de Neta and Bonnz! are also DJs who spin rap. They both have played with my friend DJ Aztek. This band now has appeal across borders. These are but a few of the new traditions that have developed out of mutual interests across the U.S.-Mexico border. Just about everyone now in Mexican rock and rap music is bilingual just like the Chicanos and Mexican Americans before them.

Do you think that the new technologies and the way we communicate today have reshaped the definition of “border” and “border-crossing”? Is it possible to talk about these concepts nowadays?

The Internet has made a difference in the ways in which people relate to each other across borders. Blogs, MySpace, Facebook and more have allowed for the world to communicate across borders. These virtual borderless communities exist. I (we) communicate on a daily basis with people throughout the world. I maintain an active internet life, communicating with friends, students across different borders. But make no mistake, physical borders still exist. And for me the border is the U.S.-Mexico border which still exists and separates much more than it did when I was a child in Calexico. The border in the U.S. is very high profile much more so than when I was a child on the Calexico-Mexicali border. In a 2009 trip to Calexico, I saw first-hand the Homeland Security patrol and the Black Hawk helicopters that patrol the air. That militarized border did not exist during my childhood and adolescence in Calexico. When I returned to Calexico from Mexicali in 2009, I was asked questions about my reasons for going to Mexicali. (The same happens at the L.A. airport.) Detention centers are a business now, especially in Arizona. Private companies, those involved in wars, run these centers. And Black Hawk helicopters that are used in wars patrol the border. In 2011, the border is very visible and very politically and economically charged. Borders and border-crossings are still very much a part of our 21st century reality.

This is a personal question regarding the experience that some of us have had while reading Chicano Literature, and specifically that of Chicanas Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga. We are Chilean, not Chicanas, we are not poor or lesbians, but nevertheless we felt identified with what these authors wrote. Perhaps this is because we are from a third world country, but due to class divisions in Chile many of us live in a first world “bubble”, so we inhabit a “middle-ground” which allows us to see and experience two different worlds. Do you think that this facilitates our connection with these authors? And in general, what advantages or disadvantages do you think South Americans have when reading and interpreting Chicano Literature?

The position you inhabit in Chile, that “middle-ground” of being able to see around you both a first and a third-world reality is the same space that Anzaldúa and Moraga inhabit. I know in the case of Anzaldúa that she knew rural poverty on the Texas-Mexico border, on a Mexican rancho in Texas. Moraga was born and raised in the Los Angeles area and also understood poverty and urban migrancy. Both writers earned university degrees. Both were teachers. When they wrote their respective autobiographies they had relocated to another social position. They were writing to

understand and to communicate their reality as Mexicanas, as Chicanas, as lesbians. They were writing for readers though they did invoke women as their target audience. In the second edition of her *Loving in the War Years*, Moraga wrote that she was writing for males who would listen, and this because Moraga has a son. You in a third world country, though you do not come from the lower classes, can understand issues addressed by Moraga and Anzaldúa. They write for you too. The issues addressed in the ground-breaking *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1982) had an impact upon readers beyond the borders of the U.S. When the second edition of *Bridge* was published in 2002, Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating produced the anthology *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*, a collection of testimonials, responses, from around the world on the influence of the first *Bridge* (see my “A New Connection, a New Set of Recognitions: From *This Bridge Called My Back* to *this bridge we call home*” [*Discourse* 25.1, 2003:294-303]). This new *bridge* is 608 pages with 80 contributors. The first *Bridge* was a product of grass-roots organizing, the second *bridge* is product of the Internet and is transcultural, transnational, and transgendered. The work of Moraga and Anzaldúa has resonated with many readers, with many women. You in Chile are members of a very large group of readers who understand Chicana literature. Writers write and readers read. Ultimately, a book belongs to the reader.

In my classes at UCLA, I have had students from Argentina, Perú, Colombia, Brazil most of them women. Some of these women are racially mixed, Japanese or Korean and South American. All found a home in Chicana and Chicano literature. Perhaps, it is our common history, culture, language evident in Chicana and Chicano literature that brings them to the class that allows you in Chile to read with understanding. I think these students and you in Chile are in a better position to understand Moraga and Anzaldúa than some of my male and female students who are not Chicano or Latino. I have a Peruvian student in my Chicana and Chicano narrative class that just concluded this week. She found herself at UCLA inhabiting the same space as other Latinas. She understands Chicana literature from her own position. She is a member of the editorial board and writes for *La Gente*, UCLA’s Chicana and Chicano magazine. I think being Chilean is more of an advantage than a disadvantage when reading Chicana and Chicano literature.

What are the most remarkable changes you have observed in the field of Chicano Studies since your graduate years at Yale in the 1980s?

I began graduate school in 1971. I earned an M.A. in Spanish at UC Irvine in 1975. In 1971, *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* was published. A few other books were published through 1975 when I left UC Irvine for Yale. In 1981, I completed the Ph.D. at Yale in Latin American Literature with a Minor in Comparative Literature. I went to Yale because of Emir Rodríguez Monegal, the leading critic in the novel of the Boom. I wrote my thesis on Cervantes's *Quijote* and José Donoso's *El obscuro pájaro de la noche*. It was a trans-Atlantic dissertation on two historical moments, the dawn of modernity and postmodernity. Though I have a reputation as a scholar of Chicano literature, my training was in the traditional fields of Latin American literature. And in my career, I have taught virtually every upper-division course in a Spanish American literature program.

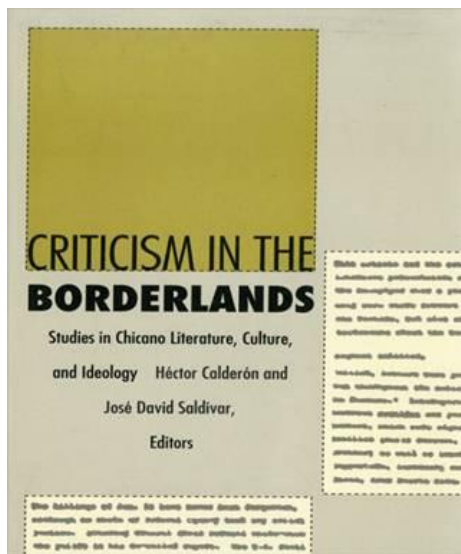
I turned to Chicano literature later. As a graduate student, I was not allowed to study Chicano literature. I belong to the second group of Chicano scholars who made the field what it is now. We had no training in Chicano literature when we began our teaching careers. You ask about changes. To begin with, most books were out of print in the 1980s. I taught mostly from “Xerox” copies. Now all books are available in print and now the well-known writers have New York publishers and New York literary agents. I belong to the group of scholars that entered graduate school just as literary studies were being transformed by a host of new theories from Europe. Yale was one of the leading centers in innovative literary studies. Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Julia Kristeva, Wolfgang Iser, Fredric Jameson were among the stellar individuals that I saw at Yale. My group of Chicana and Chicano scholars brought a new critical sophistication to Chicana and Chicano literary studies. These are the scholars that are in my coedited (with José Saldívar) *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* (Duke 1991). This book comes after the 1970s and 1980s; by then Chicana and Chicano scholars had moved into cultural studies and feminism. Each critic in the collection had carved a piece of the Chicana and Chicano literary pie for themselves. We had become specialists. But we cannot deny that the critical movements of our graduate school years influenced us greatly.

When I began teaching Chicano literature at Stanford and Yale in the 1980s, I had some 6 or 7 students. I am currently completing fall quarter 2011 at UCLA. In my current undergraduate Chicana and Chicano narrative course I have 81 students. And these students come from throughout the campus—the biological and physical sciences, humanities, social sciences—and they are a very diverse group. Not just Chicanos and Latinos from Peru, Colombia, El Salvador,

Guatemala and Mexico, but also African American, Asian American, and Anglo American students. And since 1991 when I began at UCLA, I have been producing the next generation of scholars.

The Chicana and Chicano writers and scholars have produced works that cut across disciplinary lines into American Literature, American Studies, Comparative Literature, American Ethnic Literatures. Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) is an international bestseller. Scholars in Europe, especially German and French, have been interested in Chicana and Chicano literature since the 1980s with biannual conferences in Europe. And there too, there is a second generation of scholars in the field of Chicano/Latino literature.

The national and international interest in Chicana and Chicano literature is the most remarkable change that I have witnessed in my career.



Current Research on Mexican Rock Bands

You have a close relationship to Maldita Vecindad and your work has revealed the musical, cultural and political precursors on both sides of the border that have influenced the band's work. I read that you played an essential part in bringing Lalo Guerrero to one of Maldita's shows in 2003.² Do you consider your work with Maldita to be more social activism, research, or both? How do you incorporate your work with Maldita into your classes?

²http://www.markguerrero.com/misc_27.php

Maldita has always courted Chicano audiences. It was the the first Mexican rock en español band to tour in the U.S. starting in 1989. Lalo Guerrero is one of the founders of Mexican American music. In the 1940s, he became popular for his Pachuco music, blending black R&B with Latin sounds. I knew that Maldita's members were admirers of Lalo and knew his music. I had heard them play Lalo's "Los Chucos Suaves" in post-concert parties. It seemed only natural that these founding performers should meet. I met Lalo at a celebration of his music at the Los Angeles Mexican Consulate. Lalo's son Mark contacted me and I had him meet Maldita at a concert in San Bernadino, CA. Mark invited the band and me to meet Lalo at a concert in his honor in Los Angeles. Mark wrote about this meeting on his website.

I consider writing on Maldita as both research and social activism and institutional activism. I think Maldita is an important musical institution that crossed borders. It was unafraid to speak out on problems affecting Mexicans and Chicanos on both sides of the border. I consider Maldita as a group of organic intellectuals. They were very aware since their beginning of their intellectual and political point of view, and this without diminishing the artistic quality of their music. They also returned Mexico to a formative period in Mexican culture, films of the golden age cinema, to comedian Tin Tan, to music such as boleros, mambos, and danzones. And in the U.S. with Roco shouting, "Órale raza de Califaztlán," the band returned new generations of Mexican Americans to the Chicano Movement. For me, it was a way to point Chicano Studies away from purely national concerns and for Mexicans to understand Maldita also as a Chicano band with a political cause in the U.S. This last point is why I submitted my article on Maldita and the interview in Spanish with Maldita bass player and dear friend Aldo Acuña to Chicano Studies' oldest and most important journal, *Aztlán*.

In 2001, I began to include Maldita's music in my course on Mexico that included literature, film, and music. Some of the readings of classic Mexican writers such as Juan Rulfo, Carlos Fuentes, and Rosario Castellanos are enriched with the music and themes of Maldita. The crucial debates in literature and politics in these writers are also taken up, updated by Maldita in their CDs *Maldita Vecindad* (1989), *Circo* (1991), *Baile de Máscaras* (1997), *Mostros* (1999) and *Circular Colectivo* (2009). Just as Rulfo, Fuentes, and Castellanos spoke out about Mexican problems in their own time, so did Maldita in music near the end of the twentieth century. Maldita is featured near the end of my course as we cross political borders and include Sandra Cisneros's *Woman Hollering Creek* and

Fuentes's *Frontera de cristal* and María Novaro's film *Danzón* (1991) with new border crossings in social, political, gender, and sexual identities. We come to a limit and the emergence of new Mexican identities. This course with Maldita's music is aimed at understanding a new North American Mexican cultural diaspora. I have had wonderful student papers on Cisneros's and Novaro's women characters crossing borders, on sexual identities in Maldita's "Rafael" and Novaro's gay characters, on the role of rock in the new Zapatismo.

In "The Mexico City- Los Angeles Cultural Mosh Pits" (2006) you document the public discourse of rock band MalditaVecindad and how they gradually became proponents of diverse identities in their public speaking. In 1993 they mentioned "lo que nos hace igual es precisamente la diferencia" (107) which is reminiscent of discourses of multiculturalism in the U.S. Given the various definitions and understandings of multiculturalism as well as the difficulties of a "universal" and unifying multiculturalism in a market economy (thinking of John Beverley and Néstor Canclini's arguments) do you think MalditaVecindad has contributed primarily to bridging Mexican Americans and Mexicans both north and south of the border or do you think their music and discourse also help bridge Americans and Mexican Americans on the northern side of the border?

John Beverley is a scholar from the first world. He made his name writing on testimonios from Central America. Néstor García Canclini was a literary critic in his native Argentina. In Mexico, he is an anthropologist. MalditaVecindad is a band with working-class origins. At least one member, Aldo Acuña (from Jujuy, Argentina) was a street child in Mexico City who earned his living by playing his guitar on the streets. Maldita has never deviated from their politically-edged music. They have something to say about Mexico's history, the uneven distribution of wealth, the extreme poverty in some areas of Mexico, the repression of groups like rockeros, punks, goths, indígenas by the ruling political parties. The recent PAN presidencies are just as bad as the PRI. Does Maldita educate in its concerts? Yes. Vocalist Roco delivered the band's political messages in between songs. In Mexico and in the U.S., Maldita's fan base has been working-class youths. Do these youths understand the messages? Yes. Will these youths have an effect upon the hegemony, upon the nation? No, not really. But maybe yes at the local level, in the neighborhood, at the level of the delegación. Has Maldita created an awareness of problems across borders? Yes. Does this awareness bridge Mexican Americans and Mexicans? Yes. The fluidity between both groups is great. Mexican Americans are not only Mexican Americans, they are also Mexicans with family in Mexico. Does Maldita enable bridging the gap between Americans and Mexican Americans? If by Americans is

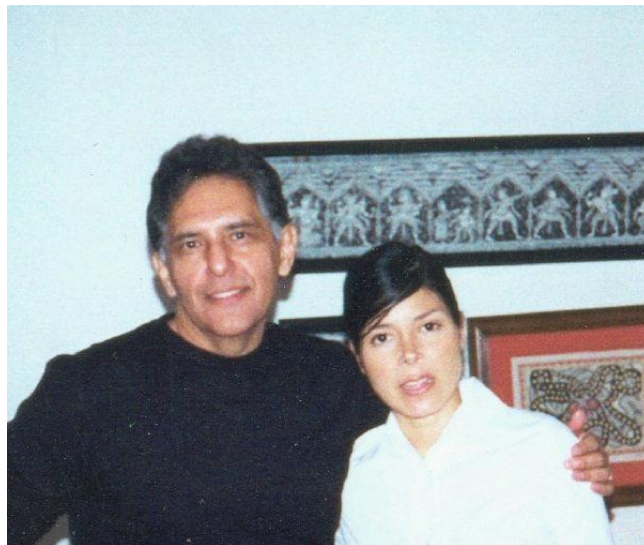
meant “white.” The answer is no. Maldita is not a band for Americans. Most Americans will not like Maldita’s messages. Very few “Americans” go to Maldita concerts.

From my point of view, the multiculturalism in the U.S. that emerged in the 1980s was an issue created by the political right. Political correctness is also a child of the center and the right. Multiculturalism and political correctness were answers to the rise of what had been “culturally disadvantaged minorities” in the 1960s. Through the end of the twentieth century, the United States became much more “ethnic,” more threatening to those in power. I recall billboards in California proclaiming the 1980s as the “Decade of the Hispanics.” Hispanics (Chicanos) did not pay for these billboards, nor did Mexican Americans/Chicanos espouse political correctness or multiculturalism. This came from above, not from below. But the issue here is not to think of cultures but of citizens who may be very diverse and who have rights and responsibilities. Maldita’s discourse on difference comes from the history of Mexico, slavery, racism, exploitation, that still continues today. Maldita best expressed difference with song “Salta Pa’ Tras” that ends with “Nuestras diferencias somos.” And that song is not a celebration of difference, it is a sad and tragic commentary on systems of control and repression from Spanish colony to the present Mexican state. In this song offered as a chant, Maldita returns to the Spanish colonial caste system of control, the family portraits of the seventeen combinations of racial types, castas, based on Spanish, Indian, and African. These portraits did not display racism, exploitation, poverty. They were in some strange way a celebration of difference, eighteenth-century multiculturalism, but under control. They are miniature billboards, if you will. In the song, Maldita goes back to the origins of Mexico that are symbolically repeated in the twentieth century against rockeros, punks, students, gays, indígenas. Maldita repeats the hateful words uttered by those in power, those who control, identify, and separate. In this contestatory manner, Maldita did unite Mexicans with Mexican Americans. Maldita’s music will continue, though the band is no longer together as Maldita Vecindad.

You began publishing about the lyrics, style and story of singer-songwriter Ely Guerra as her music was gaining national and international recognition. What first drew you to Ely Guerra’s artistic creation?

It was a chance meeting in my parents’ home in 1997. At that time Ely had two CDs. I was not aware of them. My father and mother videotaped Mexican television programs for me. They introduced me to Ely Guerra singing “Júrame” a classic song by a Mexican composer María Grever. Ely chose “Júrame” for the first song on her first CD because Grever was the first successful female

composer in Mexico. In the program, Ely was very articulate, obviously very intelligent and talented. At that time, she had not traveled outside of Mexico as a performer. In my trips to Mexico, on three different occasions, I purchased *Ely Guerra* (1994), *Pa' Morirse de Amor* (1997), and *Lotofire* (1999). With each CD, she added new concepts, new themes to her music. Each one read as a collection of poems with beginning and ending frame. It was obvious that there was a personal development as a Mexican woman and as an artist. I thought of her as a poet; her lyrics interested me. She emailed me after our first meeting in 2001: "Su dedicación me otorga una tranquilidad suave que me hace pensar que todo vale la pena. El hecho de que usted analice mis letras me hace dichosa, porque mis letras son lo más importante de mi música." And that if she had continued to college, she would have chosen to study filosofía y letras. I began teaching *Lotofire* in my undergraduate Mexican literature course in 2001 inviting students to read her album CD as a collection of poems. On Ely's first concert tour to the U.S. in October 2001, we met at a small club in Orange County, J.C. Fandango. I was the only person who wanted to see her after her concert. (That certainly has changed.) We talked. She was flattered that I was interested in her work. She invited me to come to Mexico for a personal interview. Our friendship developed from that meeting.



Taken on December 14, 2001 at Ely Guerra's home

In your article "Mexicana hasta el alma soy yo" (Puentes, 2004) you explain that Ely Guerra's Lotofire (1999) was somewhat controversial in Mexico because of her use of English. Were there specific politics that led to this reception or was it a reaction to the imperialistic connotations of English?

Language is always crucial to a national identity. Mexicans until recently have refused to learn English. This is due to the presence of U.S. culture and products throughout Mexico. Being in any way like an American was seen as selling-out, being a traitor. Now any Mexican who wants to succeed must learn English. Ely Guerra left Mexico and enrolled in a community college in the state of Washington in the early 1990s to learn English. She is now fluent in English. As I said, to make it in the world, a Mexican must learn English. The U.S. is one of the largest markets for rock en español. When we first met, she told me that her title of *Lotofire* had met with resistance from the Mexican representatives of her record label and friends. They could not understand why she had chosen the title. She had to explain title, including lyrics and music. She did so with photographs to show her passionately unfolding like a lotus blossom. They began to understand. She told me she did not understand why the resistance to her title since so many U.S. products are available in Mexico.

In “Invisible Man” Ely Guerra’s use of English and Spanish is very interesting because she combines them in such a way that it sounds as if she were speaking a single language. How is bilingualism in her songs received now by her different audiences?

Invisible Man is Ely's forthcoming jazz version of her *Hombre Invisible*. With *Sweet & Sour, Hot y Spicy* (2004), she began to use English in her music. “Te amo, I love you” uses the English phrase in the title. “Puerto Vallarta” and “Angelito Heart” are completely in English. In her most recent CD *Hombre Invisible* (2009), “You love me” is completely in English. “Messy” has the idiomatic refrain “men make women messy.” One of my favorites from that CD is “Stranger.” She uses stranger and extraño interchangeably at the beginning of the song, with a very Spanish poetic syntactic style : “soy un extraño aquí, con pasos nuevos voy, soy un stranger, stranger, stranger soy.” Language and world are now more contemporary than in her second CD, *Pa’ Morirse de Amor* (1997), for example, which Ely calls her black and white album. And for me, her passionate song-poems with their opposites of sun and moon, male and female, water and earth are rendered in a black and white mood, day and night, very much like the black and white exteriors of Gabriel Figueroa’s Mexican classic 1940s and 1950s films. The CD includes a photo of Ely reminiscent of an iconic Figueroa photo still of María Félix. In “Dime,” Ely wrote “si me tomo el tren que va directo al lugar en donde estás, serías más feliz, dime, dime.” In *Hombre Invisible* we are in another world. In “Stranger,” Ely writes about the next plane ride: “sigue girando el planeta, próximo viaje despegá”

which changes near the end of the song to “próximo paso despega.” In between, she sings “soy un instante aquí, seré ceniza al mar, soy un stranger, stranger, stranger, stranger más.” To answer your question, yes Ely uses English with Spanish to render a contemporary world. However, the emotional interior is Mexican. Her song recalls classic Mexican poems of solitude, alienation, and the ultimate destination for all, death, like José Gorostiza’s classic “Muerte sin fin.” I have seen her in three concerts in Mexico City since the presentación of *Hombre Invisible* in December 2009 and language does not make a difference. Audiences sing along with her. Audiences are going to concerts with Mexican rock performers who compose and sing in English such as Hello Seahorse! and Natalia Lafourcade. Mexico is changing.

In a recent interview she gave with Roberto del Río from gozamos.com he mentioned that previously Ely had said that she did not consider herself a feminist but rather “pro vieja”. Could you explain what she means by this?

I have seen the interview with Roberto del Río. The interview was conducted in English. The context for the question was Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as a feminist. Del Río offered that Ely had once said, “No soy feminista, soy pro vieja.” Ely responded in her usual unusual manner. She told Del Río that Sor Juan was an influence, the scientist in Sor Juana, the alchemist who is also a cook in the kitchen. And it is true that Sor Juana was as much a student of science as she was of literature. Her poem “Primero sueño” is replete with references to scientific knowledge of her time. In her now famous letter in defense of women’s education, “Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz,” Sor Juana comments that if Aristotle had been in the kitchen he would have written much more. I enjoyed Ely’s response to Del Río. She continued her response explaining her love of cooking, and preparing meals for special occasions, for meetings with her support group or her family. Ely remarked to Del Río, that Sor Juana was a cook. I should point out here that Sor Juana had her own book of recipes. I have been to Ely’s home and I know that she does love to cook. And I might add, she also loves to eat. After our first meeting at her home, she took me to el Mercado de Coyoacán on Calle Malintzin to see and smell all that Mexican cuisine has to offer in terms of ingredients and spices.

I do not want to speak for Ely, to put words in her mouth. I’ll try to answer your question from what I have read, seen, heard and understand of Ely as a woman, as an artist, and as a Mexican. Again, recall that Del Río conducted the interview in English. The English term “feminism” may have a very limited meaning in Mexico in terms of what a woman can be. And I think this is largely

due to Anglo-American feminism which, while emancipating is also limiting, focusing on class, the white middle class, and professional advancement. That was the case with the feminism of the 1970s, the decade with which feminism is most associated. Here important to note that Ely does not know Chicana feminism though she does know the work of Rosario Castellanos, the founder of Mexico's feminist movement. When I told her about my comparison of her person and her work to poet Castellanos in my "Mexicana hasta el alma soy yo," she told me "muy acertado Profe."

Ely left home at the age of fifteen to pursue a career in music. She has lived alone since then and now has her own home. She entered a profession—alternative rock music—that was dominated by males. She had to struggle against being judged only by her physical appearance. She never wanted to be a pop star—never has been. She writes intelligent, intellectual lyrics that display a wide range of thoughts and feelings, intimate, passionate, from the point of view of a woman. As she matured, so did her music. In *Lotofire*, "Yo no" was written on behalf of the murdered women of Juárez. Ely has stated that every woman has a right to her own space, to walk without fear in public. This song predates much of the current literature, interest in Juárez. "Vete," was written on behalf of the dwindling population of the Tarahumara of Chihuahua. From the point of view of the Tarahumaras' struggle against Spanish and Mexican conquerors, Ely writes "Vete porque te quiero matar." "Tiempo" is about the urgency to confront environmental issues. What we gather, from Ely is a woman whose thinking about freedom covers different aspects of life in Mexico. *Lotofire* was written when Ely was in her late twenties, as she began to unfold, rise lotus-like, and look at her world. And being a woman for Ely also means being physically strong (she works out with weights and runs), feminine and stylish at the same time.

During the bicentennial celebrations in Mexico 2009-2010, Ely joined a group of women performers, Las Corregidoras. The group was named after Doña Josefa Ortiz Domínguez, la Corregidora, the wife of the Corregidor (the mayor) of Querétaro. Doña Josefa was an educated woman who supported independence for all including indigenous people. She sent the letter to Miguel Hidalgo that prompted the now famous cry for independence, el Grito de Dolores on September 15, 1810. The modern Corregidoras sang in public transport (buses and metro) throughout Mexico City celebrating the role of women in the independence of Mexico. In March 2010, las Corregidoras took their performance to Madrid and Cádiz. On September 15, 2010, Ely, along with rockeras Denise LoBlondo of Hello Seahorse! and Natalia Lafourcade, joined conductor

Alondra de la Parra and la Orquesta Filarmónica de las Américas at the Bicentennial Celebration at the Angel de la Independencia in Mexico City.

In 2011, Ely controls her own destiny, which is to say, her own image. Since 2009, she is her own company and now produces her own music. “Soy una vieja,” Ely once said in a concert that I witnessed in Los Angeles in 2001. *Vieja* means *mujer*. *Pro vieja* should be understood as *pro mujer* and *pro independence*.

In Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, she states that “Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads”. Anzaldúa’s contribution to improving inter-cultural relationships in and between Mexico and the United States was the “new mestiza” who has a plurality of sexual, ethnic and national identities and thus has the tools to be an effective intermediary between peoples. Do you think Ely Guerra could be an example of this new mestiza? If so, how would you describe the bridges she creates?

I have never thought of Ely in relation to Gloria Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza.” Ely is certainly changing Mexican traditions with her person and her music. I have thought of commonalities between Ely and Sandra Cisneros, who both are my friends. I also use Ely’s music in my course on Mexico, and students have written on Cisneros and Ely. I sent Sandra Ely’s *Lotofire* (1999) and I gave Ely *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) as well as two CDs by R&B great Etta James. I thought Ely and Sandra should meet. About Anzaldúa and Ely, yes, it makes sense. Ely is taking Mexican womanhood and femininity into new areas, speaking out also on social and political causes on both sides of the border in both Spanish and English. And for her *Hombre Invisible* CD, she asked men to contribute musical notes, chords for her compositions. For her it was a collaborative effort making *Hombre Invisible*. The issue was for her to accommodate these musical styles into her music. The kind of music that she writes and composes reaches various audiences in Mexico. Gloria Anzaldúa had her mythical Coatlicue-serpent guide. For *Hombre Invisible*, Ely has a series of photos, Ely with animal bodies, her mythical bestiary. The bestiary is an ancient literary form thinking of Aesop’s fables. Ely tiene su bestiario visual, Ely como mujer-ave, mujer-felina, y mujer-guerrera. Interesting connections between these two women. Mexico City now allows same-sex marriage. Openly gay and lesbian couples are now part of Ely’s audience. I also enjoyed that for her *Sweet & Sour, Hot and Spicy* (2004), she used an Afro wig and composed for the first time in English. She was criticized for the Afro that detracted from her person. In accepting Afro-Mexican culture, *la tercera raíz*, as also part of Mexican beauty, Ely was making a statement. In this sense of bridging cultures and identities, Ely

has bridged Mexican Americans and Mexicans with different political, ethnic, and sexual identities. Ely is so much like Chicana writers Sandra Cisneros, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria in testing the limits of Mexican culture.



How would you describe the core questions that drive your current research and activism?

I have been researching and working on a book, Mexican American literature of Los Angeles, a combination of social, political, and literary landscapes from various neighborhoods of Los Angeles. As for Mexico research, I am working on a long-overdue book on Mexican literature, film, and music. Something like *Mexicanos en Movimiento*, meaning transgressing political, ethnic, and sexual borders. It is about artists who test the limits of Mexican cultures. At this point in my research and writing, the bilingual band Hello Seahorse! and my friend DJ Aztek 732 will be crucial for the ending. El Aztek is a Mexican with origins in Oaxaca and Chiapas, who on his first visit to the U.S. traveled to Compton, CA, who speaks English like a black rapper and is unafraid to be “symbolically black” as well as Mexican. With these musical performers, the Internet, MySpace, Facebook were crucial to the formation and communication across borders. This book is written against the backdrop of Mexico’s bicentennial celebrations as a nation and the centennial of the

Mexican Revolution. The Mexican transborder cultural identity should be clear in both books. Too bad the political and social imagination of intellectuals, writers, and artists has not been accepted and understood by leaders of Mexico's three leading political parties.