

# Letras Hispanas

## Volume 18, 2022

**TITLE:** *A Critical Collection on Alejandro Morales: Forging an Alternative Chicano Fiction*

**EDITORS:** Marc García-Martínez and Francisco A. Lomelí

**PUBLISHER:** University of New Mexico Press

**YEAR:** 2021

**AUTHOR OF THE REVIEW:** Jennifer Susana Vasquez, University of California, Irvine, and Salvador C. Fernández, Occidental College

Since the publication of his first novel *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* (1975) by Joaquín Mortiz, the most important Mexican press at the moment, Alejandro Morales has been a leading novelist in the Chicano/a literary community. This collection of essays anchors Morales's literary trajectory, aesthetic values, and cultural importance for the Chicano/a canon. The editors coherently capture the essence of Morales's works, an affirmation and resistance to central themes and narrative conventions that characterize Chicana/o literature.

In the introduction, the editors conceptualize Morales' scholarly criticism stressing the historical, rhetorical, literary, cultural and experimental innovations of his work that serve as a conduit to explore the thematic units represented in each literary piece. With Los Angeles as the main foreground in many of his works, several of the essays analyze how Morales protagonizes the role of the Mexican American community in (re)building the city. For instance, Marc García-Martínez (see Ch.1) and Baojie Li (see Ch. 7) both signal his novel *River of Angels* (2014) as a testimonial rendering of the Mexican labor that transformed Los Angeles from pueblo to major cosmopolitan city. Their readings highlight the city's ethnic stratification and social animosity as a contrivance, as well as concepts of historicity, emergence of urbanization, and the city's social transformation

from pre-industrial to capitalist. Meanwhile, Amaia Ibarra-Bigalondo (see Ch. 8) reads *Pequeña nación* (2004) as an example of how Morales critiques the policing of the barrios and the press's negative effect on the representation of urban gangs. Moreover, she interprets his narrative as a pivotal, feminist text to understand the existence of urban gangs and the agency women play in (re)claiming their community. From another perspective, Jesús Rosales (see Ch. 5) employs Ramón del Valle-Inclán's literary technique of *esperpento* to explore further the role that history plays in the depiction of spatial justice in this work, as well.

Focusing on the relationship between history and space, another central theme in Morales' work, Margarita López López (see Ch. 6) postulates that *Waiting to Happen* (2001) juxtaposes official and unofficial histories in both Mexico City and Southern California to give voice to silenced and displaced communities. Similarly, Luis Leal's comparative study (see Ch.13) provides a thorough description of the role that history and fiction play in many of Morales' works including *Caras viejas y vino nuevo*, *La verdad sin voz* (1979), *Reto en el paraíso* (1983), *The Brick People* (1998) and *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992). Equally interesting, Adam Spires (see Ch. 9) and Adina Ciugoreanu (see Ch. 10) both theorize interstitial spaces in Morales' works. Spires reads *The Place of the White Heron* as an allegorical text

that portrays violence, racism and tension between the United States and Mexico, and of the imaginary space Aztlanlandia; meanwhile, Ciugureanu applies the concept of *mestiza* consciousness to study *The Brick People* and *River of Angels* and stresses the role that Mexican communities have in (re)building Los Angeles as a heterotopic space and place as typified by land, language, and the senses.

The other essays compiled in this volume approach Morales' works from varied fields of study providing unique takes on his experimentation. For example, Francisco A. Lomelí (see Ch. 2) perceptively theorizes and identifies the literary echoes of Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*, Cela's *La familia de Pascual Duarte* and Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* found in Morales' *Barrio in the Edge/Caras viejas y vino nuevo*. Stephen Miller (see Ch. 3) interprets the role that tuberculosis plays in Morales' *The Captain of All These Men of Death* (2008) and polio occupies in Roth's *Nemesis* (2010) suggesting that both authors produced polyphonic works that engage the reader to seek multiple interpretations. Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez (see Ch. 11) postulates that *The Rag Doll Plagues* reflects Morales' interrogation of cultural identity *mestizaje*, the future, and environmental degradation; this essay contextualizes these concepts within Atlantic-Pacific oceanic notions as *loci*, expanding the understanding of *mestizaje*. Additionally, Elena Errico (see Ch.12) focuses on the role that translation

plays in Morales's *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* by comparing and contrasting the stylistic choices of two translations of this work, one by Francisco Lomelí and the other by Max Martínez.

The remaining essays present distinctive ecocritical readings of Morales' novels and excellent contributions to the collection. Sophia Emmanouilidou (see Ch. 4) postulates that Morales' *River of Angels* exemplifies Chicano ecocriticism by establishing a relationship between the borderland and laws of nature. María Herrera-Sobek (see Ch. 14) centers on the ecological representation and racism in *The Rag Doll Plagues* lending a theoretical framing and critique of the exploitation the Mexican community suffers in the United States. The last chapter is an extensive interview with Alejandro Morales conducted by Francisco Lomelí, Marc García-Martínez, and Daniel Olivas that focuses on the novelist's creative process, the development of his narrative, and the overall contextualization of his work. Finally, the volume closes with a definite biography written by Donald W. Urioste.

In evaluating this volume, the following qualities are distinguished: strong theoretical framing, original and astute readings, and the diversity and corpus of the novels examined. Ultimately, Marc García-Martínez and Francisco Lomelí edited a volume that serves as a model to emulate as it compiles a comprehensive cultural literary analysis of Alejandro Morales' works.