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Border Confluences: Borderland Narratives from the Mexican  
War to the Present (review)

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## Review Essay

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Rosemary A. King, *Border Confluences:  
Borderland Narratives from the Mexican War to the Present*  
Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004, xvii + 170 pp.

In *Border Confluences*, Rosemary King offers a comparative analysis of the literature of the borderlands with specific attention to “geopoetics,” which she characterizes as a way of reading the representation of place and space within a specific genre. King begins her study with narratives that capture the legal debates of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Subsequent chapters look at the production of fiction about the Mexican Revolution in 1910, as well as post–Second-World-War narratives that contemplate the costs of assimilation. In surveying one hundred fifty years of Mexican-American, Native-American, American, and Mexican writing, King brings into focus historical, legal, and cultural elements of life on the frontier. Her selection of texts is appropriate and illuminates her theory of geopoetics.

In the introduction, King maps out her terminology and the scope of her scholarship, which includes the narratives of twelve authors. In order to locate her discussion in concrete terms, she notes the variety of names associated with the region between the U.S. and Mexico and the connotations of those names: Herbert Eugene Bolton’s coining of the term “borderlands,” Américo Paredes’s idea of Greater Mexico, as well as Richard Bauman’s reading of the border as *México de Adentro* (inside the country of Mexico) and *México de Afuera* (Mexico outside its borders).

Chapter 1 explores how the theme of cultural difference operates in the nineteenth-century romance, concentrating on the work of three women writers in order to discuss “domestic places and national divides.” King examines Helen Hunt Jackson’s wildly popular novel, *Ramona* (1884), and María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), both of which take place in southern California. King also addresses Jovita González’s *Caballero: A Historical Novel* (1996), which is set in Texas in the 1840’s. *Border Confluences* adds depth to the relatively recent scholarship on Jackson, Ruiz de Barton, and González. The author’s treatment of Ruiz de Burton, in particular, reminds readers that Mexican-American writing dates back to the nineteenth century, a fact frequently ignored in contemporary scholarship, which usually begins with the twentieth.

Helen Hunt Jackson, who was a white reformer for Indian rights in the nine-

teenth century, offers in *Ramona* a Native-American counterpoint to Harriet Beecher Stowe's treatment of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *Ramona* articulates, in King's estimation, the absolutist elements (good / evil or hero / villain) needed for a romance; *Ramona* draws on such binaries to enrich her description of conflicts between Anglos, Mexicans, and Indians. For King, intercultural disputes and negotiations in the novel take place in the domestic sphere. With that in mind, King addresses Indian dispossession by following the flight of *Ramona* and her husband Alessandro from the Moreno estate and on to various towns and villages, each of which ultimately gives way to the authority of white settlers. King identifies in a triangulation of Señora Moreno (a Mexican of Spanish ancestry), *Ramona* (of Scottish and Indian), and Alessandro (of Indian) the nineteenth century racial hierarchies that privilege Spanish blood over Indian blood and, to some extent, Indian blood over that of the *mestizo* or *mestiza*.

Along with her reading of *Ramona*, King's interpretation of Ruiz de Barton's *The Squatter and the Don* fits nicely within the framework of geopoetics. The novel centers on lawsuits over Don Mariano's ownership of the Alamar ranch and how, in King's words, Ruiz de Burton "creates an us-or-them mentality" between the American squatters and the Mexican ranchers. The chapter contextualizes the struggle between the two groups when King observes that "whether one farms wheat or raises cattle makes a difference in the novel, as it did historically in the 1870's when the local economy of southern California was changing from cattle ranching to agriculture-based capitalism" (King 19). Don Alamar dies, and his property is ultimately transferred to Clarence, the Anglo suitor of Mercedes Alamar. King's application of Doris Sommer's work here is relevant and convincing. *Border Confluences* reads *The Squatter and the Don* as a national romance whereby Mexican women living on lands they once owned (like the Alamar Ranch) can use marriage, even to Anglo men, to maintain a sense of continuity with their past.

Debates over land tenure and the conventions of the romance novel inform King's assessment of Jovita González's *Caballero*. *Caballero*, which takes place in Texas in the 1840's, tells the story of the Mendoza y Soria family; its patriarch, Santiago; his hacienda, Rancho La Palma; and his daughters, Susanita and Angela. King notes that González sets up binaries between the Mexican caudillo and the U.S. settler, between Spanish speakers and English speakers, between ownership of land through inheritance and appropriation of land through squatter's rights. Don Santiago's vision of the future ends in the aftermath of the Mexican War. Don Santiago's daughters defy tradition and marry Anglos; they move away from the Mendoza ancestral lands and give birth to a new generation. The mixed heritage (*mestizo*) of Susanita and Angela's children "makes a figurative reconciliation between Mexicans and Anglos and signifies the end of an era where the United States and Mexico fought in military battle for control of the borderland territory" (King 29).

Chapter 2 of King's book focuses on the transformation of the self through travel and the experience of being an expatriate. Through a comparative study of Harriet Doerr's *Stones for Ibarra* (1978), Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), and the Mexican author Carlos Fuentes's *Old Gringo* (1985), King analyzes the impact that the Mexican Revolution had on both Americans and Mexicans crossing the border. In her reading of confluences (rather than influences, which is unidirectional), King argues that we can read McCarthy's, Doerr's, and Fuentes's work as geopoetical. King's theory highlights the relationship between frontier and genre, whether in the new "western" of McCarthy or in the expatriate and travel fiction of Doerr or Fuentes. King's application of Clifford Geertz's theory of cultural difference is clear and compelling, as is her adoption of Mary Louise Pratt's notion of *exploratrices sociales* to describe the charitable roles of women travelers and expatriates in Ibarra's and Fuentes's novels. Likewise, King acknowledges the importance of Edward Said's ideas about representing the Other in her geopoetical framing of literature from the borderlands. Chapter 2 contributes to an ongoing literary and cultural conversation that, in addition to Pratt, Geertz, and Said, includes Gloria Anzaldúa.

In chapter 3, King addresses the notion of transculturation and assimilation in the *Bildungsromane* of Villarreal, Galarza, Paredes, and Islas. Here we see that the Chicano depiction of northern migration constitutes an inversion of Ramona's flight in Jackson's novel from California to Mexico. As a counterpoint to chapter 1, chapter 3 tracks migration to the U.S. during the Mexican Revolution, as in José Antonio Villarreal's *Pocho*. King then considers the articulation of the self in Ernesto Galarza's coming-of-age story, which begins in Jalcoctán, in Nayarit, Mexico, and ends in the barrios of Tucson and Sacramento. In her reading of Villarreal's and Galarza's autobiographical works, King explains that the Mexican Revolution was a catalyst not just for political change but also for change in the traditional life of the Mexican family, which became split according to the degree to which each generation valued assimilation.

King assesses how the duality of Mexican and American culture informs Américo Paredes's *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel* and Arturo Islas's *The Rain God*. In terms of setting, the narratives of Galarza, Paredes, and Islas move us closer to the present time; each story takes place, at least in part, during the civil rights movement. King notes that one way Mexican Americans approach assimilation to U.S. culture is through the military; Richard in *Pocho* and George in Paredes's novel serve, respectively, in the Navy and in counterintelligence. Meanwhile, the autobiographical character of Ernesto in *Barrio Boy* acculturates by acting as a translator between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking worlds. As a way of bringing threads together, King tackles the theme of self-hatred, the chal-

lence of maintaining one's heritage while also trying to integrate oneself, and the potential for reconciliation between generations in *The Rain God*.

Chapter 4 bears witness to the mythic, psychological, legal, and physical energy devoted to the issue of civil rights in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and Miguel Méndez's *Pilgrims in Aztlán* (1974). Méndez represents Aztlán as a "place where the poor will have self-worth" but "Aztlán is a desert mirage that cannot materialize because the aggressive and violent forces of capitalism prevent its realization" (King 97). Silko's vision of utopia is also frustrated, although the conclusion of *Almanac* "suggests it will come to fruition through the efforts of multiethnic resistance movements poised to destroy the borderland dystopia that they inhabit" (King 97). King's analysis of borderlands narrative is consistently thoughtful, and we can recognize the utopias and dystopias of Silko and Méndez's polemical fiction.

King's treatment of Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*, however, remains problematic. Silko's characters decry the history of exploitation of Native Americans and other disenfranchised groups in the Southwest (especially in Tucson). The characters argue (by relying on the writings of Karl Marx) that the Indian Wars are not over and that the U.S. establishment can be dismantled according to the foretelling of the future in the *Almanac of the Dead* (a tribal prophecy). But King's *Border Confluences* does not explore how the novel's advocacy of destruction and hatred repeats a cycle of violence. That is, the novel envisions Native-American reappropriation of lost land—through eliminating borders, destroying property by arson, resorting to technological warfare, and organizing a militia—and the spread of racial hatred against European Americans. But King overlooks the striking parallel between this "prophecy" and the impulses that drove Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century together with U.S. intervention in Latin-American affairs in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, King does a good job of revealing the utopian and dystopic vision of Silko and Méndez, and in engaging in a broader critical conversation with Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / la Frontera*, which points out how borders are at once geographical, cultural, and psychological.

The conclusion of *Border Confluences* demonstrates how the notion of geopoetics applies to other forms besides the narrative: the short story, the *corrido* (ballad), and the film. Overall, King's scholarship is well-researched; her writing is persuasive and her analyses thoughtful. The text will be useful for scholars working on the history and literature of the borderlands; because of the clarity of its prose, the book is also appropriate for the classroom.

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