

REVIEW

Julio Cañero. *Literatura chicana. La experiencia colonial interna en las obras de Rudolfo Anaya* (Madrid: Catarata, 2017. 301 pp. ISBN: 978-84-9097-308-0)

In an essay published in 2000, the New Mexican writer Rudolfo A. Anaya stated that, in writing, his intention has been to plunge readers 'into my story to reveal not only my journey, but elements of my history and culture' (Anaya, 2000: 6). At stake here is not simply the idea of writing as representing an individual story, inevitably shaped by the rhythms of aesthetic creativity, but also a firm belief in the potential of literature to act as a cultural narrative, as a fictional exploration of the social, cultural, economic and even political synergies determining the historical evolution of the Chicano community. This duality, lucidly articulated by Anaya himself, also provides the backbone for the analyses carried out in *Literatura chicana. La experiencia colonial interna en las obras de Rudolfo Anaya*, first published in 2017 and written by Julio Cañero Serrano, Director of the Franklin Institute at the Universidad de Alcalá. Bringing together and expanding his long-standing research on this critically acclaimed writer and on Chicano literature and culture in general, Julio Cañero Serrano offers here an enlightening approach to Anaya's oeuvre, scrutinising the author's fictional and non-fictional writing against the backdrop of social, cultural, political and economic discourses. The book, while adding to and updating previous criticism on Rudolfo Anaya (González, 1990; Fernández Olmos, 1999), certainly stands out for its genuine commitment to analysing Anaya's work from a highly multidisciplinary perspective, being ultimately aimed at exposing how Anaya recreated the experience of internal colonialism

endured by the Chicano community from the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 to the last decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, as José Antonio Gurpegui points out in the 'Prologue' to the book, *Literatura chicana* 'supone un importante avance en la crítica literaria del autor, pues se aproxima a él desde un enfoque donde conjuga de forma magistral aspectos de índole literaria, cultural y social' (8). Displaying expertise in a number of domains germane to the broad field of Chicano studies, Julio Cañero Serrano produces a socially, culturally, economically and politically well-informed analysis of Anaya's work. And he does so, however, without losing sight of the fact that, as Gurpegui asserts in the prologue, 'la literatura más que copiar la realidad la recrea. A fin de cuentas, la literatura es arte y la vida ... es otra cosa' (8).

Literatura chicana is divided into five chapters, well-balanced and cohesively interconnected, plus an introduction and conclusive section. In the 'Introduction', Julio Cañero Serrano succeeds in laying bare the book's overall objectives and scope, whilst rigorously acknowledging its indebtedness to other scholars and disciplines. Particular emphasis is here placed on the heterogeneous field of cultural studies and its potential to build a bridge between various epistemological domains. As Cañero Serrano forcefully stresses in the 'Introduction', the disciplinary cross-fertilisation and practical flexibility of cultural studies allow for establishing a productive dialogue between literature and other disciplines with a social, cultural, economic and political focus, an idea that represents the methodological cornerstone of the book. In fact, as the author manifests, *Literatura chicana* distances itself from literary criticism in a strict sense, providing instead a hybrid and multidisciplinary approach to Chicano history, culture and literature, where



Anaya's work is mostly analysed as a literary window on the Chicano internal colonial experience. Despite its relative brevity, the 'Introduction' also unpacks several key concepts which are later explained in full depth in Chapter 1, entitled '*La experiencia colonial*'. Particularly suggestive is Cañero Serrano's discussion of the Chicano community as an 'internal colony' which has shown a certain degree of 'porosity and sponginess' over the course of history (34). The author elaborates on this argument in Chapter 1, where he begins by briefly reviewing the history of traditional colonialism as well as its imperialist and neo-colonialist variants. Drawing and at the same time building on pioneering studies on internal colonialism as applied to the Chicano community (Cardoso, 1972, González Casanova, 1969), Julio Cañero Serrano demonstrates the pertinence of conceptualising internal colonialism as just another manifestation of the colonial experience, one that is nonetheless different from classical colonialism and neo-colonialism. The author then goes on to theorise the concept of 'porous colony', using it to refer to an (internal) colony that exhibits a certain degree of social permeability, making (in)visible barriers spongier at times. Supporting his arguments with factual data, Cañero Serrano describes the Chicano community as both an 'internal colony' and a 'porous colony', and he devotes the remainder of Chapter 1 to examining Anaya's non-fictional writing along these lines. Focusing on a series of interviews with the New Mexican author as well as on his essay writing, Cañero Serrano succeeds in documenting Anaya's political agenda as a writer. Assuming the always problematic position of spokesperson, and defining himself as a politically committed artist, Anaya denounced the oppressive structures of the internal colony, whilst simultaneously striving to raise a collective consciousness amongst Mexicans in the United States, ultimately seeking, as Cañero Serrano concludes, to bolster pride in Chicano cultural identity.

Rudolfo A. Anaya's work 'is a literature of liberation' (Farrell, 1985: 9) and, as Cañero Serrano contends in Chapter 1, his is also a literature that bears witness to Chicano internal colonialism and the structures on which this

process was based: economy, politics, society and culture. In the light of this, the remaining four chapters in the book are devoted to examining each of these four dimensions thoroughly, unveiling in the process how the New Mexican writer problematised them in his fiction. To this end, Cañero Serrano focuses on four novels by Anaya – *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), *Heart of Aztlán* (1976), *Tortuga* (1979) and *Albuquerque* (1992) – creating a superb symbiosis between literary exploration and social, cultural, economic and political analysis. Thus, Chapter 2, entitled '*La dominación económica en la colonia interna chicana*', offers a detailed exploration of the economic subjugation experienced by the Chicano community since the 1848 annexation. Deprived of the land they had cultivated for generations, Chicanos then initiated a massive exodus to the most populated cities in the region, where they soon became cheap labour for the growing industries. This process of proletarianisation, as Cañero Serrano signals, laid the foundations for the internal colonization of Chicanos from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Skilfully interlacing an economic and literary narrative, the author also shows here how Anaya used his fiction to unpick the mechanisms leading to the economic domination of Chicanos, from the adverse effects of Anglo-capitalism on Chicano development, echoed in *Bless Me, Ultima*, to the anti-union repression captured in *Heart of Aztlán*, or the racial segregation so powerfully dramatized in *Albuquerque*. Rudolfo Anaya, as Cañero Serrano notes earlier in the book, upheld that writers should 'speak clearly against the political and economic processes whose only goal is material gain' (1995: 346), and in Chapter 3 he manages to unravel the political subtext that Anaya also wove into the fabrics of his novels. Entitled '*El poder político y la comunidad chicana*', Chapter 3 examines, in a comprehensive way, the political evolution of the Chicano community over four periods, all of them vividly evoked in Anaya's novels: 1) 'Confrontation and understanding' (1848-1920); 2) 'In search of equality' (1920-1960); 3) 'The Chicano Movement' (1960-1975); 4) 'The post-Movement' (1975 onwards). Critically incisive and insightful, the chapter reveals, inter alia,



the ethically ambiguous role played by some members of the Chicano bourgeoisie during the first half of the twentieth century. Like Mannie Garcia –‘el Super’– in Anaya’s *Heart of Aztlán*, the so-called ‘vendidos’ joined the colonizing elites with a self-serving purpose, turning a blind eye to the political subordination of Chicanos and helping to maintain the status quo. Particularly illuminating is Cañero Serrano’s analysis of Anaya’s *Tortuga* as a metaphor for the internal colonialism endured by the Chicano community on a political level. The author draws insightful analogies between the political history of Chicanos and the conditions of subordination and powerlessness experienced by the teenagers secluded in the sanatorium that appears in the novel. This notwithstanding, as Cañero Serrano claims, the novel is also a story of survival and struggle and, in this respect, *Tortuga*’s eventual Spring reveals a way out, just as the Chicano Movement of the 1960s brought about the first signs of liberation.

Set beside these structures of economic and political subordination is the social exclusion experienced by the Chicano community during the period covered in the book. In Chapter 4 –‘*Chicanos en una sociedad internamente colonizada*’– Julio Cañero Serrano delves, in effect, into this rhizomatic form of discrimination, discussing, inter alia, the harmful process of ‘barriorization’, the pervasive abuse of police authority, the experience of uneven legal treatment or the ubiquity of racial discrimination. As evinced by Anaya in his portrayals of the Barela barrio, the process of ‘barriorization’, initiated in the nineteenth century, led to the confinement of Chicanos into socially relegated neighbourhoods, riven by social and economic problems. Drugs, alcoholism and prostitution found here a perfect breeding ground and, although often a response to powerlessness, this situation fuelled negative stereotypes and cultural mythologies around Chicanos. Hegemonic culture soon exploited these mythologies in a self-serving way and, as Cañero Serrano shows, writers like Anaya, albeit critical at times, strove to debunk stereotypes through a sensitive portrayal of characters. All this notwithstanding, there was a positive side to life in the barrio. As Cañero

Serrano explains, the barrio acted as a home and place of refuge for its inhabitants, providing Chicanos with a sense of belonging and community, and thus contributing to maintaining Chicano cultural identity. As for other colonized peoples, for Chicanos, retaining their cultural identity was a strong challenge, considering the systematic acculturation pressures exerted by the majority community during the period analysed in the book. This and other related issues are further discussed in Chapter 5, entitled ‘*La cultura en la colonia interna*’. In it, Cañero Serrano describes the Chicano community as a culturally colonised group and, through a close exploration of Anaya’s novels, he manages to shine a torch on the mechanisms and institutions placed at the service of this process of cultural domination. As the author claims, the education system forced Chicanos to reject their language and culture; stereotyping discredited Chicano culture; and the Catholic Church –embodied by Father Byrnes and Father Cayo in Anaya’s novels– ratified the cultural, social and political subordination of the Chicano community. In this context, the ‘porosity’ of the internal colony, albeit existent, was limited and often conditional, dependent on the willingness of its members to undergo acculturation, to become complicit with hegemonic powers or to cling to a mythical heritage, as exemplified by Don Manuel in Rudolfo Anaya’s *Albuquerque*.

All in all, *Literatura chicana* emerges as a remarkable and timely book which cuts across various disciplines in its subtle intertwining of literary exploration and economic, political, cultural and social analysis. Indeed, the author is to be congratulated for managing to integrate all these narratives into a seamless whole, aptly demonstrating how Rudolfo Anaya recreated the experience of internal colonialism endured by the Chicano community over a period that covers from the mid nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Partly as a result of this intertwining, however, the line between fiction and reality sometimes becomes blurred, and yet this is understandable, given that the discussion moves constantly from real politics to fictional explorations. A strong sense of theoretical knowledge is conveyed throughout, making the book



theoretically sound. In fact, despite relying heavily on previous studies on internal colonialism, the book does not fail to provide new theoretical insights, particularly as regards the concept of 'porous colony', which could even be transposed to the analysis of other contexts. Conceptually well-informed and coherently argued, *Literatura chicana* offers a kaleidoscopic and multi-angled approach to Anaya's fiction and Chicano culture in the light of theories on internal colonialism and the porous colony. The book is of interest to researchers and academics in a number of disciplines and is written in a manner that is accessible to anyone interested in Chicano literature and culture.

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