

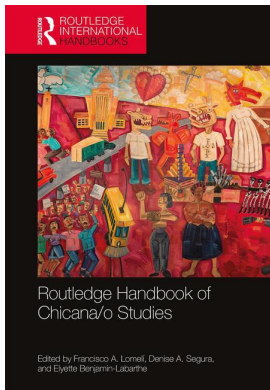
This article was downloaded by: 10.2.97.136

On: 27 Sep 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of Chicana/o Studies

Francisco A. Lomelí, Denise A. Segura, Elyette Benjamin-Labarthe

Regional singularity and decolonial Chicana/o Studies

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315726366-25>

Lene M. Johannessen

Published online on: 03 Aug 2018

How to cite :- Lene M. Johannessen. 03 Aug 2018, *Regional singularity and decolonial Chicana/o Studies from:* Routledge Handbook of Chicana/o Studies Routledge

Accessed on: 27 Sep 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315726366-25>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Regional singularity and decolonial Chicana/o Studies

Lene M. Johannessen

Introduction

Alex Rivera's dystopian sci-fi movie *Sleep Dealer* from 2008 never showed in theatres in Norway due to its controversial nature. I heard about it at a conference in Toledo, Spain, and ordered it online. I watched it several times, and taught it at least once. *Sleep Dealer* opens with the main protagonist, Memo Cruz, and his family as they struggle to make ends meet from their little *milpa* (corn field) in a small village in Oaxaca, Mexico. Memo's listening on satellite via a "hacking kit" draws the attention of the water company, and it sends a drone to attack what they assume are "aqua terrorists," killing Memo's father. In the dystopian future Rivera portrays, the threat of droughts has come true, and American monopolies are controlling water resources as far south as Colombia. The border has been closed, but Tijuana still and significantly beckons the desperate and hopeful masses with the sign "City of the Future."

One line in particular, spoken by the main protagonist's father, has a particular resonance to this day: As his son Memo Cruz expresses his frustration with his family's life in their small village in Oaxaca, with no water or prospects of a better life, he asks "Why are we still here?" The father abruptly turns to his son and asks: "Is our future a thing of the past?" The line is spoken against the image of a dammed-up river, now owned and policed electronically by American water companies, and paid for in dollars. I return to *Sleep Dealer*, for now the question will serve as an entry point to an exploration of Chicana/o Studies from a Norwegian perspective. From the perspective of an outsider or distant observer, this chapter will read a selection of works as aesthetic carriers of a regional singularity predicated on decoloniality and its consequences.

"Is our future a thing of the past?" goes to the core of an epistemic and historical "knot" relating to the intricate histories of the Americas/"America." It marks the legacy generated by what scholars such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, José David Saldívar and others examine under the auspices of coloniality/decoloniality, a dividing up of the world whose aftershocks are lived everywhere, every day.¹ The advantage this conceptual scaffolding has over, for instance, the more nation-fixated vocabulary trailing the postcolonial and neocolonial, is that it pulls "the time horizon of debates on modernity back to the fifteenth century and extends them southwards" (Bhambra 2014, p. 119). The decolonial also originates in the Americas themselves, and

its close relation to what Quijano and Wallerstein coin “Americanity” brings out what they refer to as “an essential element in what we mean by ‘modernity’” (1992, p. 549).

The nexus that more specifically orients this chapter’s readings, or “fieldworks,” in Chicana/o literature, film, and music, as well as their aesthetic-refractions of decoloniality, is what I will refer to as a kind of regional singularity. This composite brings the rich legacy of literary regionalism together with the aesthetic-philosophical orientation of singularity – “the irreplaceable, yet always already plural ‘one’” (Kaiser 2015, p. 3). The potential of regional singularity as a tool of analysis will be the focus in the first part of this chapter, tuning an appropriate understanding of region as well as singularity in their exchange with the traces of coloniality/decoloniality as they appear, disappear, and reappear.

The second part brings the methodological framework to bear on a selection of case studies, starting with María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don* (1992 [1885]). That novel brings out an early representation of a regional singularity resting on certain master tropes to do with displacement and race, an enunciation from under the colonial shadow that compellingly echoes Americanity’s fourfold vectors of colonialism, ethnicity, racism and newness. Throughout we should keep in mind Mignolo’s description of how:

[t]he “decolonial” option, turn or gesture is always at once analytic [with] signs of delinking from coloniality. Delinking means always already being engaged in project and processes of re-existence, re-surgence and re-emergence of all signs of living in plenitude and harmony that coloniality repressed, suppressed, or disavowed in the name and justification of “modernity” as salvation.

(Mignolo 2014, N.P.)

For example, in Lalo Guerrero’s “Corrido de Boxeo” (2005) the continuities of disavowals run throughout this work, and further the tropology of dispossession. The ideas of delinking, as what “paves the way to create our own selves, not to become what controllers of education, media, capital, and religious institutions create” (Mignolo 2013, N.P.), inform and propel into very different venues. A challenging but important case in point is the music video “Azul y Negro: The Ballad of Heisenberg” from the U.S. popular TV series, AMC’s *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013).

The rather casual appearance of this ballad in a mainstream series watched worldwide makes it a compelling fieldwork that uneasily raises questions of “re-existence, re-surgence and re-emergence” on several levels. The performance as a whole (audio and visual) lends urgency to regional singularity as always precariously balancing between the essentialist configuration of place as “closed, coherent . . . as always-already divided up” (Massey 2005, p. 6) on the one hand, and, on the other, the fluidity and contingency of the spatial as always relational, as “a simultaneity of stories-so-far” (Ibid., p. 9).

Going back a little in time, to Tomás Rivera’s seminal *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971 [English translation 1978]), we see how this simultaneity is filtered through defining notions of alterity introduced in *The Squatter and the Don*. In *Earth* these figurations of otherness come into their own in a literary event of a decolonial aesthetics. The reader may recall the end of Rivera’s novel: “To discover and rediscover and piece things together” (p. 145), the emergence of a perspective singularly pertaining to an extended sense of region and community founded on retrieval and revival.

That perspective is problematized and nearly obliterated in Alex Rivera’s already mentioned *Sleep Dealer* (2008), a dark comment on the U.S.–Mexico border which reaches into the future as well as into the past in a singular vision of the perpetuation of the colonial encounter. Here,

the full scope of Americanness can be witnessed in all its implications, carried in a decolonial aesthetics whose opening up “the way to create our own selves” is disturbingly questioned.

Regional singularity

Few writers have expressed with more clarity the significance of region in literature than American southern writer Eudora Welty. In her essay “Place in Fiction” she observes:

to the writer at work, [place] is seen in a frame. Not an empty frame, a brimming one. Point of view is a sort of burning-glass, a product of personal experience and time; it is burnished with feelings and sensibilities, charged from moment to moment with the sun-points of imagination.

(1978, p. 114)

In the particular context of the present essay Welty’s conceptualization of the locale’s import is central in a double movement. The first relates to my own perspective, a somewhat “disconnected” perspective from where Chicana/o culture and aesthetics find its place among the multiple components that make up American (and the Americas’) literatures and cultures – a composite that in *its* turn already comes tangled in drawn-out networks crisscrossing the planet. My approach is thus also a matter of placement, quite concretely: from a non-American perspective, from “afar,” Chicana/o presents itself not unlike how Chinese American, African American, Southern, Midwestern cultures and aesthetics do – the products so far of historical vectors in a “space of loose ends and missing links” (Massey 2005, p. 12).

To “see horizontally,” so to speak, by no means implies collapsing multiple designations onto one axis; quite the contrary, such approach is firmly anchored in the idea that the various articulations of numerous, irreducible historic-cultural beings constitute differently formed threads in a large and complicated fabric within the geographical body we know as the United States. They constitute regionalism in its fullest spectrum, always as Welty’s “brimming frame,” a contextual lens thick with “experience and time.” The frame comes trailing particular “feelings and sensibilities” that define it as, precisely, a spatially situated perspective. These threads and the frames through which they refract are regional also in the sense of evoking the “spirit of place,” filtering through what Michael Kowalewski refers to as writers’ “central nervous system immersed in the local ecology, subcultures, hidden history, and spoken idioms of a given location” (2003, p. 7). Hence, the regional is always distinct, already singular, recognizable and anchored in small and large histories as they invariably and unpredictably interweave.²

Region is however also elusive; let us not forget its etymon *regiō*, referring to not only area, but also “direction, line, boundary, part of a larger area or space” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), and its close kinship to *chora* – space as well as place – and a “locatory matrix for things” (Casey 1998, p. 34). The regional furthermore links to *Landschaft* (landscape) in the sense of being “a way of seeing that *has its own history*” (Cosgrove & Daniels in Pearson 2006, p. 10), and, tellingly, as “an area concatenated by peregrinations between the places it connects” (Casey 1997, p. 24). These are only some of the ruminations the concept of region invites, and when we now turn to *Aztlán*, the “mythical homeland of the Aztecs” and a central trope in the Chicano imaginary, we see how it vibrates with all of the above inflections.

Ever since the drafting of the *Plan de Aztlán* in 1969 the name of this *regiō* has designated a temporal as well as spatial configuration that inscribes a charged and complex borderscape. On a concrete level the culturological phenomenon of this lineage can be conceptualized in Alfred

Arteaga's statement that "to be a Chicano and live in Aztlán is to have historical precedence over Anglos in the Southwest; it is to declare a historical fact of descent" (1997, p. 8). Such marking off of a spatial and temporal originary, as coined by Eric Gans, may also serve as an entryway into thinking about the decolonial in terms of critical regionalism, which José Limón describes as follows:

critical regionalism is simultaneously a theory, methodology, and praxis for recognizing, closely examining, fostering, but also linking cultural and socioeconomic localized identities, especially as these stand in antagonistic, if also negotiated, relationships with late capitalist globalization.

(2008, p. 167)

Critical regionalism may be a useful concept that immediately lends itself to the finer calibrations of the local as it is spun into the global, a matrix that is emplaced and that refracts precisely Welty's take on regionalism and point of view as "brimming frame." And yet, as a minority in a conquered homeland, Chicana/o "regionalism," while concretely localizable to a specific place (the annexed territories in the Southwest) is more crucially infused by the *time* of displacement. The "discernibly unified" (Limón 2008, p. 168) quickly splinters into a spatial practicing of displacement well beyond a specific topos, not only to link with the global webs into which it weaves, but as importantly to abide as region infused with the temporal quality of *regiō* as direction. As a complexly enriched perspective pertaining to situatedness, the phrase thus also echoes Kent Ryden's idea that, "the landscape of a place is an objectification of the past, a catalyst of the past, a catalyst of memory" (1993, p. 39). In the specific case of Aztlán this relates to what Emma Pérez in *The Decolonial Imaginary* calls its "mythic past [entwining] with a future where a decolonized imaginary has possibilities" (1999, p. 78). And it is for this reason, to more directly address the aesthetic refractions of temporally informed multivalent and multimodal praxes that are inherently fluid, I suggest we introduce singularity.

To think through (decolonial) regional singularity borrows from literary scholar Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*. He observes that "singularity is an event, the event of singularization which takes place in reception: it does not occur outside the responses of those who encounter and thereby constitute it" (2004, p. 64), and this can be brought over into the spatialization of the brimming frame. Attridge's conceptualization of singularity rests, among others, on philosopher Jean Luc Nancy's idea of the "singular plural," as "always with-in-among others. . . [foregrounding] otherness that requires and permits reception, translation, and response(ability)" (Attridge in Kaiser 2015, p. 3). If we transpose this primarily aesthetic framework over into the cultural field we recognize that the distinctness of a region (temporally and spatially understood) eventuates from its enfolding into and over against the spatializations of other, regional purviews. Attridge's elaboration is helpful to further make these connections:

the singularity of a cultural object consists in its difference from all other such objects, not simply as a manifestation of general rules but *as a peculiar nexus within the culture that is perceived as resisting or exceeding all pre-existing general determinations.*

(2004, p. 63, *my emphasis*)

Transposing this notion of singularity in literature to extend more broadly to region and culture finds us firmly relating to the concreteness of roots and routes, their nestings and embeddedness in a complex web of what Wai Chee Dimock calls "Deep time," a map of kinships and denationalized spaces (2001).

Singularity is however crucially also the “welcoming of alterity,” a cultural and aesthetic seeing of otherness with one important qualification:

the other is not some other-worldly, alien existence. It is that which is other to an existing way of thinking or configuration of knowledge or habitual emotional response; it is what those familiar modes of being exclude in order to be and remain what they are.

(Attridge 2004, p. 67)

In other words, what is other is already predicated on an element of recognition, but must be kept at bay in order to secure the safety of sameness. When we couple these understandings of alterity and singularity with the regional it means to acknowledge the spatialization of an epistemic point of view that originates in concrete and emplaced encounters with otherness. The aesthetic creation that follows rests both on resistance to and excess of these negotiations.

The ideas of resistance/excess, nestings and alterity, the otherness that singularity always trails, resonate with decoloniality. Mignolo’s point that “[t]he ‘de’ in decolonial emphasizes the confrontation with ‘colonial’ at the very moment that it appears” (2013) alerts us to the already constituted kinds of alterities within the “matrix of colonial power” (Quijano 2007), in a cultural and ideological sense, as never the same, never fixed. Similarly, regional singularity dialogues with the global movements that brought into existence region as point of view in the first place. Such dynamic also carries over into the U.S.-Mexican Borderland (or any borderland for that matter), as Gloria Anzaldúa argued several decades ago. It, too, carries the mark of changeability, of the precarious balance of resistance and excess: it is a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in constant transition” (Anzaldúa 1999, p. 25). Consequently, like singularity, the fabric of coloniality (and the Borderland) as simultaneously constituting the decolonial can be grasped “within certain power grids and with an incalculable array of ghosts” (Kaiser 2015, p. 6). For our purposes here, all of the above can be located in the aesthetic carriers of those “ghosts,” articulating a poetics of regional singularity within the decolonial, and vibrating with Wallace Stegner’s often-quoted words: “[n]o place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments. Fictions serve as well as facts” (Stegner 1992, p. 4).

Readings in a Chicana/o regional singularity

The continuing allure of María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s now classical text, *The Squatter and the Don* (1992 [1885]), has several explanations, but its most dramatic attraction is its moment of enunciation as preparing the ground for an emplaced point of view tangled in multiple intersections of alterity. Here is in effect a colonized text, writing from within the moment of loss, and grappling with its enduring consequences. Its imbrication in the coloniality of power and its literary eventness operates on several levels, but we shall here concentrate on its production of a way of seeing that ascends from its regional singularity. This happens in a very specific manifestation, as the main conflict runs between a now-disempowered, native *Californio* elite and eastern squatters descending on their “open” lands in Southern California. The struggle is in turn already implicated in a capitalist project of railroad construction specifically pertaining to modernity/modernization, but is more generally playing out in that space Emma Pérez calls the “decolonial imaginary,” that time lag between the colonial and postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated (1999, p. 6). The decolonial here figures similarly to how we have employed it so far, and the idea

of a “rupturing space” clearly resonates with an alterity already inscribed in the moment of coloniality/decoloniality.

Within that space *The Squatter and the Don* presents itself specifically as a text of “Americanness,” displaying in compelling ways the processes by which the coloniality of power locks places and people into its tentacled grip. If the description of what Quijano and Wallerstein call Americanness runs along the four axes of coloniality, ethnicity, racism and “newness” (1992), Ruiz de Burton engages all of these dynamics into the event of her romance: Don Mariano’s fall from landed gentry to dispossession in a new, imposed country is predicated on the history of the Spanish conquest of Native American lands and people. The text persistently represents the main characters (the “Dons”) as “European-looking,” creating a cultural distance to Mexico and Mexicans, Indigeneity, and *mestizaje*. On this initial level, therefore, coloniality (“the creation of states linked together within an interstate system in hierarchical layers,” Quijano & Wallerstein [1992, p. 550]) inscribes difference through its new categories of ethnicity (delineating “the social boundaries corresponding to the division of labor,” *Ibid.*). The reader notices the deafening silence shrouding the “Indians” working on Don Alamar’s ranch; they merely appear in passing, as labor to be used – as “Indian boy,” evoking another region’s derogation of some subjects’ dignity (Ruiz de Burton 1992, p. 94), and as “lazy” (*Ibid.*, p. 278). However, most interesting to the present analysis is the transition into parameters assisted by Americanness’s fourth pillar, newness itself.

By the end of the novel, as corporate monopoly and capitalism prevail over squatters and dons alike, the moment of loss has turned into a loss also of ethnic distinctions, replaced by racial formations that reassign all Mexicans/“Spaniards” into a single, racially defined space of otherness. This is expressed with remarkable clarity in the following passage, where towards the end of the romance Gabriel Alamar has had to take up work as a menial hod carrier:

In that hod . . . the *entire history* of the native Californians of Spanish descent was epitomized. Yes, Gabriel carrying his hod full of bricks up a steep ladder, was a symbolical representation of his race. The natives, of Spanish origin, having lost all their property, must henceforth be hod carriers.

(Ruiz de Burton 1992, p. 352)

In terms of Americanness and the decolonial as emphasizing “the confrontation with ‘colonial; at the very moment that it appears” (Mignolo 2013), the passage reflects how “full-fledged racism, theorized and explicit, was a creation largely of the nineteenth century, as a means of shoring up culturally an economic hierarchy” (Quijano & Wallerstein 1992, p. 551). The opening up of a regional singularity that the text performs thus takes good note of a social and economic order following 1848 that folds the various ethnicities and loci of enunciations into one, conglomerated point of view. For in the meeting with a capitalist system unfettered by archaic feudal traditions, “the exceptional case of a society which shaped itself” (*Ibid.* 555), *California* as the result of the Ibero-American version of coloniality cannot prevail.

The Squatter and the Don can be read as a configuration of what José David Saldívar calls the “long colonial encounter within the context of ‘the American crucible” (2011, p. 123). As such it also signals the spatialization of a “brimming frame” that rests on the broadening of ethnicity and race into a general constitution of otherness from the purview of Anglo American “sameness.” As Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita comment in their introduction to the reissued novel, “[f]or the younger generations the prognosis is likewise bleak; there is seemingly only acculturation and accommodation and a disempowerment shared within the general citizenry”

(1992, p. 51). *The Squatter and the Don* takes part in the process by which the coloniality of power continues to constitute its hierarchies by inscribing a pluralistic alterity in all its profound complexity. By shifting the focus from former colonists (the consequences of Spain/New Spain) and colonized (Native Americans) to neocolonizer (the United States) and her newly colonized (former Mexican citizens no matter what descent as well as Native Americans), the text articulates regional singularity with paradoxical accuracy. It aestheticizes a newly opened space and the practices of its emerging cultural-epistemic outlook as already immersed in internal and external differentiations and a troubled version of Ramón Saldivar's "dialectics of difference" (1990). And it does so in close alignment with how Attridge describes the singularity of the artwork *per se*, by:

its redeployment of the resources of the culture, understood as sets of relations rather than concrete objects; and this redeployment, because it introduces new perspectives and relationships which can be understood as the implementation of new codes and norms, always offers the possibility of imitation, translation, parody, and forgery.

(2004, p. 73)

The Squatter and the Don's engagement with the tangled rationalities of Americanness serves as an extended invitation for future elaborations, and they would follow. While this particular text's concrete emplacement was restricted to Southern California and the battle against one of modernity's "hydra-headed monsters," it introduced one of the central tropes through which the "practice" of that place would continue to transmit and resonate, namely a borderscape defined by the time of dispossession.

The trope of loss of a homeland, predicated on and circumscribed by the previously mentioned vectors of coloniality, ethnicity, racism and newness, is also at the heart of legendary singer/songwriter Lalo Guerrero's "Corrido de Boxeo." The ballad was written for and performed on Ry Cooder's concept album *Chavez Ravine* (2005), a composite narrative of the predominantly Mexican Los Angeles neighborhood that in the 1950s was razed ostensibly to give room for housing projects, but ultimately formed the site of a new stadium for the relocated Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team renamed the Los Angeles Dodgers. Guerrero's ballad is one among 15 songs of various genres and provenances that all contribute to a veritable excavation project: from under the baseball field the buried and overlaid stories describing Chavez Ravine surface, among them that recovered in "Corrido de Boxeo." We could have chosen almost any of the songs, but in relation to decolonial regional singularity this one is of particular interest, precisely because of the enduring genre on which it performs.

Guerrero's ballad tells the story of the brothers Carlos and Fabela Chávez, both successful boxers from the neighborhood.³ The singer pits their motto: "Si peleas limpio, Siempre ganas, nunca pierdes" (If you fight clean, You'll always win, never lose) against the futility of their struggle to save the largely Mexican/Chicano neighborhood.⁴ While this motto may have served the brothers well in their boxing matches downtown, this ethos could not help them "ganar el pleito de Chávez Ravine" (win the fight for Chavez Ravine). The corrido brings to life conflicting imaginaries and cultural memories on the site of a very particular carrier of aesthetic operations; recall Michel De Certeau again: "Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it" (1988, p. 117). The orientation and purview of this corrido depend crucially on the generic frameworks of expectation that its formal scaffolding commands, itself the actualization of revisions and adaptations.

It bears repeating: the corrido genre survives from its romance ballad origin in Arabic Medieval Spain, through sixteenth century (colonial) transpositions to New Spain and later Mexico,

until in the latter half of the nineteenth century it surfaces as the border corrido in the areas north and south of the U.S.-Mexican border,⁵ which Américo Paredes in *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-American Border* describes as follows:

certain elements of the Texas-Mexican repertoire (in folklore) . . . are part of the shared traditions of Greater Mexico, [but] this is only half the picture, for a significant portion of the repertoire, the most distinctive portion, is generated by the stark social oppositions of the border region, a response to differential – not shared – identity.

(1993, p. xiv)

“Corrido de Boxeo” places itself squarely in this account: when it sings the story of clean fighters who are powerless against the City, and who “se deshicieron encima con mentiras hasta al fin/ Se batieron en el lodo hasta que perdieron todo” (were crushed with lies until the end/ They rolled in the mud until all was lost), it adds to the pattern of the corrido’s thematic positioning of a “common working man against forces beyond his control,” the binary of honesty and treachery (Saldívar 1990, p. 35), here couched as “clean fighting” against the “lies” of the City.

In the context of a Chicano regional singularity we can however add to this description a further modality: The corrido reaches directly back to a moment of coloniality whereby decoloniality is constituted, and its “delinked” aesthetics rests firmly on an understanding of decoloniality as intercultural, “the celebration by border dwellers of being together in and beyond the border” (Mignolo 2013). Paredes’ Greater Mexico thus names the region as what Casey calls “an area concatenated by peregrinations between the places it connects” (1997, p. 24), and presents an epistemic purview circumscribed by an originating alterity that traverses all the way across and up to Guerrero’s personalized lament in his “Corrido de Boxeo.”

There is, however, and naturally so given its moment of creation, a certain backward-looking tenor to Guerrero’s work, and one may argue that it may not accomplish the kind of otherness Attridge describes as singular, but is instead “unique,” in the sense that it “is the process of comprehension – the registering of its particular configuration of familiar laws – that discloses its uniqueness” (2004, p. 64). This aspect would also account for why the corrido actually does not fit into Pérez’s decolonial imaginary: if “the [colonial imaginary] remains the inhibiting trace, accepting power relations as they are, perhaps confronting them, but not reconfiguring them” (1999, p. 110), “Corrido de Boxeo” could be argued to place itself in a continued position of confrontation, not reconfiguration; unique, not singular.

We will continue with performance on genre: The appearance of *cuates de Sinaloa’s* “Azul y Negro: the Ballad of Heisenberg” in the second season of the award-winning AMC series *Breaking Bad* speaks to decoloniality and regional singularity in several ways. Readers who are familiar with the series recall that the music video comes on in the very beginning of the seventh episode, *before* the series’ staple periodic table begins rolling over the screen. The *Cuates* are filmed by a handheld camera as they sing the story about Heisenberg, who is taking over the drug market and infuriating the cartels. They are standing in the New Mexico semi-desert, now and then showing Heisenberg/Walter White in his signature black attire and hat; at other times scenes from real-life violence wreaked by the drug war are interspersed.

The “Corrido de Heisenberg” is performed in Spanish, but I discuss the English translation here. The fifth verse recounts how the character of Walter White/Heisenberg is in fact already dead, albeit he may not know it yet. The sway of the cartels is inescapable, and any disrespect, such as infringing on their market, will have terrible consequences. What is interesting about the corrido at the point it appears in the series is thus the summary it provides of the entire plot, and even if, given his terminal cancer, nobody thought Walter White would get out alive, the ending

is revealed. I am not going to comment too much on the relation between the relatively recent modification of the corrido tradition into its narcocorrido variant, nor to its close kinship with its heir. Suffice it to note that, as José Limón notes, the border corrido served the function of a “local news service” (1992, p. 10). So, too, does the narcocorrido genre generally by chronicling events and figures pertaining to the drug wars.⁶ For the discussion here it is important, however, to point out two topological events in the music video that are unthinkable outside the regional singularity as we have so far explored it.

One has to do with topology: In the ballad’s sixth verse we hear that the rumor of White/Heisenberg’s success and forays in the drug business is no longer merely local, but travels south of the border. As the lines are sung, the visual in the background shows Heisenberg/Walter White standing with his back towards us facing a road that traverses a flat, semi-desert landscape. Then the camera pans out to show two bodies lying behind him, a violent reminder of the tens of thousands of victims in the drug wars. In this context Denis Cosgrove provides a useful perspective on landscape as constituting “a discourse through which identifiable social groups have framed themselves and their relations both with the land and with other human groups, and . . . this discourse is closely related epistemically and technically to ways of seeing” (2008, p. 20). The image of the road disappearing into the horizon, accompanied by the corrido’s mapping a state well to the south in central Mexico, links – or, concatenates – a transnational space according to a history of coloniality as well that history’s creation of markets and sources of demand and supply.⁷ Indeed, the mere inclusion of the music video in a mainstream TV series tells us something about the widening of that space, a reflection of the repercussions of a capitalist, market-driven economy unevenly balancing North and South.

The other trope relates to semiotics: immediately following the desert shot we get a brief glimpse of a 100 pesos bill, featuring Netzahualcōyotl, the warrior-poet from a pre-Columbian era, a further cementation of the line crossing the flat landscape as *regiō* – direction as much as container. Closely related, by singing that the state of New Mexico looks like Mexico, and pronouncing Mexico as something approximating “*Meshiko*” (thus resembling the pronunciation of the Náhuatl *Mexica*), north and south of the border are effectively collapsed.⁸ The corrido and its topological mapping thus delineate a continuity of the (pre)colonial past into the violence of the decolonial present in subtle ways, and the epistemic discourse the landscape here “sees” through resounds unpleasantly, to say the least. Indeed, the really singular event that the video’s reconfiguration (not confrontation) represents also lies in its unceremonious appearance in the series – a comment made almost in passing that underscores the horrific everyday nature of the topic the corrido sings, a casual nod to a phenomenon, ultimately of the haves and the have nots, that defies any border.

A very different articulation is found in Tomás Rivera’s seminal *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* from 1971. Perhaps more than any other work, this novel refracts a Chicano regional singularity with an astounding precision and beauty that transcend its moment and place. I say precision, which may seem paradoxical given the elusiveness of region as well as singularity, but the text’s traversals of unidentified spaces and its multiple enunciations from unknown locations serve to inscribe out of decolonial erasure a lasting presence. The irreducible singularity of Rivera’s work resides in its “redeployment of the resources of culture” (Attridge 2004, p. 73), understood broadly. Like, for instance, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and its intercalary chapters’ command of the reader’s empathy through its predominantly metonymical figuration of distress and loss, *Earth* puts all its weight on fragmentation and multiplicity, yet accomplishes within each story and vignette an individuation that *Grapes* abstains from. Leaving the reader no recourse to a linear narrative for relief, *Earth*’s tenacious focus on otherness – thematically, figuratively, culturally – hammers in the event of creation of and by alterity.

Francisco Lomelí notes that “Rivera’s main concern is a collectivity” (2012, p. 206), and Rivera himself commented that “for me the literary experience is one of total communion, an awesome awareness of the ‘other,’ of one’s potential self. I have come to recognize my ‘other’ in Chicano literature” (quoted in Olivares 1985, p. 67). The use here of the word “awesome” is significant. The bringing together of fragmented “others” hitherto kept separate crucially inscribes into existence an aesthetic space of wonder, extending beyond the Southwest and pulling together strands from a variety of epistemic loci of enunciations into what Attridge describes as “a creative event . . . at once implicit in the cultural field and wholly unpredictable from it” (2004, p. 25). Rivera’s is a project that “delinks,” that brings to the foreground “other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economies, other politics, other ethics” (Mignolo 2007, p. 453). In this achievement resides the continued momentousness of *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* as it crosses from otherness to recognition, from other to same – regionally singular, over and over again.

We return to where we began, with Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer*. The movie extends and problematizes the ramifications of “the long colonial encounter” and its infusion of a regional singularity, and places itself squarely in a discourse on borders and their constitutions. Of course, the border(land) has long served as an analytic lens for explorations in Chicano/a Studies, notably in the already mentioned work of Gloria Anzaldúa, whose *Borderlands/La Frontera*, (first published in 1987) broke new ground in terms of border thinking generally and a Chicana perspective specifically. Anzaldúa opens her book with these oft-quoted words:

The Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.

(1999 Preface)⁹

If Cuates de Sinaloa from earlier in this discussion sing a specific kind of border violence, Anzaldúa opens the border up in a display of its entire register of transgressions, violations, possibilities and impossibilities – gendered, racist, economic. The compass in Alex Rivera’s *Sleep Dealer* orients the discourse of the Borderland even further, moving us into a dystopian future that in several key aspects seems eerily present.

As we saw initially in this chapter, the movie projects Tijuana as a “City of the Future,” where poor people come to seek employment as “cybraceros” in the sleep dealer factories that gives the movie its title. They provide digitized labor across a closed border: “This is the American dream,” the foreman where Memo gets a job says, “We give the U.S. what they’ve always wanted. All the work, without the workers.”¹⁰ If the decolonial imagination envisions “into existence alternative worlds that have not yet been recognized or conjured” (Hanna et al. 2016, p. 8), such imagining comes darkly in Rivera’s version. It consolidates Americanness’s four pillars into a worldview where a colonized South is walled off from a colonizing North. An enforced border, patrolled by de Certeau’s “law of the proper” defines a closed-off place, reducing the bodies of the poor to mere machines, and draining them of the life force as effectively and completely as the rivers.

The ending of *Sleep Dealer* presents however a glimpse of an alternate vision: In his remorse over having killed Memo’s father, Rudy, the drone pilot, offers to give Memo any help he needs to ease his family’s struggle. As Rudy uses his drone to explode the dam, the movie ends with the image of rushing waters and corn sprouting from dry soil with Memo’s voice-over: perhaps there can be “a future on the edge of everything. A future with a past.” What that future might be is a point of speculation, but for all its dystopia *Sleep Dealer* offers a glimmer of hope, literally, that which appears faintly, a glimmer that also speaks to “edges” beyond the U.S.–Mexico border.

“Is our future a thing of the past?” We return to the question, and the ambiguity it contains: Memo’s father puts emphasis on a future relegated to what is no longer, *passé*, afraid his son is refusing his identity. *Sleep Dealer* comes close to eradication, the erasure of a way of life, and of life itself, but in the last moment turns to emphasize the relationality in the question, the *obtaining* of a future from the past. And in most of the “fieldworks” we have looked at in this chapter the promise of alternative paths prevail: in *The Squatter and the Don* in the character Doña Josefa’s final “I slander no one, but shall speak the truth” (Ruiz de Burton 1992, p. 364), in Lalo Guerrero’s “Se la pagarán con Dios, esa bola de bandidos” [They’ll have to face God, that band of bandits] (2003), and in *Earth*’s protagonist’s final stance: “He even raised one arm and waved it back and forth so that other could that he knew he was there” (Rivera [1995], p. 145). From the legacies of an interwoven and scarred past ensue demands on performances, and the decoloniality of Chicana/o culture and aesthetics necessarily materializes in multiple forms. They arise however from a dialogue with unsettling and unsettled histories and often in various responses to the question, “Is our future a thing of the past?”

In the beginning of this chapter we saw that regional singularity dialogues with global movements that constitute region/regiō as point of view. It may at this point be worth reminding that such constitutiveness affects any epistemic-cultural discourse of spatialized direction, and approaching the various degrees of conglomeration and palimpsesting that characterize components of American literatures and cultures invariably demands a method that “sees” broadly. The singularity of region as point of view trails various, irreducible complexes, and their aesthetic carriers must stay open to “contamination, grafting, accidents, reinterpretation, and recontextualization” (Attridge 2004, p. 63), keeping them, in a word, alive, yet predicated on the insoluble dependency of the future on its past(s). Decoloniality in this sense invites a way to think about that past as also full of surprises, a consequence of Dimock’s aforementioned “deep time”: deep time “produces a map that, thanks to its receding horizons, its backward extension into far-flung temporal and spatial coordinates, must depart significantly from a map predicated on the short life of the US” (2001, p. 759). Those “far-flung coordinates” necessarily reach beyond the concrete, political borders of the United States, and, as we have seen, the ones defining Chicana/o regional singularity certainly illustrate this fact. If American Studies generally has taken a transnational turn in the past years, Chicana/o Studies was always motivated by the concerns of such parameters. Indeed, one of this field’s hallmarks may well be precisely the continuous process of recontextualizations and reinterpretations of recognitions and negotiations of the multiple aesthetic and cultural vectors that uphold its expressions.

Notes

- 1 The decolonial is sometimes spelled with “de” in parentheses to emphasize the co-constitutive moment of coloniality and decoloniality (e.g., Mignolo), at other times it is spelled with a hyphen. Some scholars, like Saldívar, leave the parentheses and hyphen out, but retain the emphasis on the countering strategies predicated on the ripple effects of the colonial power matrix. This is the version I follow in this chapter.
- 2 It might be relevant to bring in the relatively recent emphasis in governance and international studies on “new regionalism,” which (e.g., Fredrik Söderbaum in *Theories of New Regionalism*) describes as follows: “New regionalism – a range of formal/informal mid-level ‘triangular’ relations among not only states but also non-state actors, notably civil societies and private companies – is a central aspect of the ‘new’ inter- or transnational relations” (Palgrave 2003). The relation is however beyond the scope of this chapter, and is moreover problematic in relation to decoloniality and its regional singularities as they precede such description of “relations” by centuries.
- 3 Lalo Guerrero’s son, Mark Guerrero recalls that, “The lyrics were based on an idea by Ry Cooder. My dad happened to remember the names of two boxers who had lived in Chavez Ravine by the name of

- Carlos and Fabela Chávez. He personalized the song by bringing in real people” (http://markguerrero.com/misc_43.php)
- 4 Permission to quote from the lyrics of “Corrido de Boxeo” obtained from Barrio Libre Music, BMI. My gratitude goes to Mark Guerrero for expediting the permission when there was so little time before this *Handbook* had to go to press.
 - 5 From that point on the tradition also takes on the character of an American music. Some critics claim that the corrido is to the Mexican American what blues is for the African American, a claim based on the role it has had and continues to have as a cultural and aesthetic form. But the two share more: both underwent long journeys, both have an intimate relation to oral traditions of more “archaic” times, and both have persevered in the midst of the march of modernity and the onslaught of the technologizing of popular culture forms.
 - 6 For more on the narcocorrido see for instance Shaul Shwarz’s 2013 documentary *Narco Cultura*, and Elijah Wald’s *Narcocorrido: A Journey Into the Music of Drugs, Guns and Guerrillas* (Harper Collins, 2002).
 - 7 *Breaking Bad*’s musical supervisor Thomas Golubic indeed comments that, “it seemed appropriate [to include the corrido] because we’re dealing with the same world, just on the other side of the border,” in (Nashawaty 2009).
 - 8 It bears reminding here that “Meshika” was the Náhuatl word used by the Aztecs. One theory holds that this is what “Chicano” derives from, initially used derogatorily for poor Mexican immigrants, but then taken up by activists in the 1960s to mean what we associate with Chicano today (see for instance R. Gutiérrez in this *Handbook* and María Herrera-Sobek, *Chicano Folklore: A Handbook* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006)).
 - 9 The Border(lands) is the focus of a host of works, among them several essays in Richard Rodriguez’s *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1992) and *Brown: the Last Discovery of America* (2002), Luis Alberto Urrea’s *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border* (1993), a number of cultural-historically oriented works like Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez’s *Border Visions: Mexican Cultures of the Southwest United States* (1996), and José David Saldívar’s *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (1997), to mention only a few. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* remains however the pioneering text in this company, and one that speaks well beyond its own geographic domain.
 - 10 Rivera comments that he got the idea for *Sleep Dealer* when telecommunication in the 1980s was all the rage (“Bonus material,” *Sleep Dealer* 2005).

References

- Anzaldúa, G. 1999, *Borderlands/la frontera: the new mestiza*, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco.
- Arteaga, A. 1997, *Chicano poetics: heterotexts and hybridities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Attridge, D. 2004, *The singularity of literature*, Routledge, London.
- Attridge, D. 2015, ‘Contemporary Afrikaans fiction and English translation: singularity and the question of minor languages’, in B.M. Kaiser (ed.) *Singularity and transnational poetics*, Routledge, London, pp. 61–78.
- Bhabra, G.K. 2014, ‘Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues’, *Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 115–121.
- Casey, E.S. 1997, ‘How to get from space to place in a fairly short stretch of time: pheonomological prologema’, in S. Feld & K. Basso (eds.) *Senses of place*, School of American Research Press. Accessed June 14, 2016. <https://philosophydocuments.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/14-space-to-place.pdf>
- Casey, E.S. 1998, *The fate of place*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Cosgrove, D.E. 2008, ‘Introduction to social formation and symbolic landscape’, in R.Z. DeLue, & J. Elkins (eds.) *Landscape theory*, Routledge, New York & London, pp. 17–42.
- De Certeau, M. 1988, *The practice of everyday life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Dimock, W.C. 2001, ‘Deep time: American literature and world history’, *American Literary History*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 755–775.
- Guerrero, L. 2005, ‘Corrido de Boxeo’, CD, R. Cooder, *Chavez Ravine*, Nonesuch Records, Burbank, CA.
- Guerrero, M. 2003, ‘Lalo Guerrero recording sessions with Ry Cooder, January 29–30’, *Mark Guerrero*. Accessed May 17, 2016. http://markguerrero.com/misc_43.php
- Hanna, M., Vargas, J.F. & Saldívar, J.D. 2016, *Junot Díaz and the decolonial imagination*, Duke UP, Durham.
- Kaiser, B.M. 2015, ‘Singularity and transnational poetics’, in B.M. Kaiser (ed.) *Singularity and transnational poetics*, Routledge, London, pp. 3–24.

- Kowaleski, M. 2003, 'Contemporary regionalism', in C.L. Crow (ed.) *A companion to the regional literatures of America*, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken New Jersey, pp. 7–24.
- Limón, J.E. 1992, *Mexican ballads, Chicano poems: history and influence in Mexican-American social poetry*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.
- Limón, J.E. 2008, 'Border literary histories, globalization, and critical regionalism', *American Literary History*, vol. 20, no. 1–2, pp. 160–182.
- Lomelí, F. 2012, 'Tomás Rivera: the writer as creator of community', in J. Cañero & J.F. Elices (eds.) *The Chicano@ literary imagination: a collection of critical studies by Francisco A. Lomelí*, Biblioteca Benjamin Franklin, Universidad de Alcalá, pp. 205–216.
- Los Cuates de Sinaloa, 'Azul y Negro: the Ballad of Heisenberg', *Breaking Bad*, 2008–2013, DVD, AMC.
- Massey, D. 2005, *For space*, Sage Publications, London.
- Mignolo, D. 2013, 'Decolonial aestheTics/aesthesis', *TDI+Transnational Decolonial Institute*. Accessed May 30, 2016. <https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/about-2/>
- Mignolo, D. 2014, 'Looking for the meaning of "decolonial gesture"', *E-Misférica*, vol. 11, no. 1, Hemispheric Institute. Accessed May 30, 2016. <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/emisferica-111-decolonial-gesture/mignolo>.
- Mignolo, W. 2007, 'Delinking.' *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 449–514.
- Nashawaty, C. 2009, 'How did a scary Mexican gangsta-rap group end up on one of TV's hottest shows?' *Entertainment Weekly*, April 20. Accessed May 1, 2016. www.ew.com/article/2009/04/20/breaking-bads-s.
- Olivares, J. 1985, 'The search for being, identity and form in the work of Tomás Rivera', in J. Olivares (ed.) *International studies in honor of Tomás Rivera, Revista Chicano-Riqueña*, Arte Público Press, Houston, vol. 13, no. 3–4, pp. 66–80.
- Paredes, A. 1993, *Folklore and culture on the Texas-American border*, University of Texas at Austin, Austin.
- Pearson, M. 2006, *'In comes I': performance, memory and landscape*, University of Exeter Press, Exeter.
- Pérez, E. 1999, *The decolonial imaginary: writing chicanas into history*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.
- Pita, B. & Sánchez, R. 1992, 'Introduction to *The Squatter and the don*', in B. Pita & R. Sánchez (eds.) *The squatter and the Don*, by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, Arte Público Press, Houston, pp. 5–51.
- Quijano, A. 2007, 'Coloniality and modernity/rationality', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2–3, pp. 168–178.
- Quijano, A. & Wallerstein, I. 1992, 'Americanity as a concept, or the Americas in the modern world-system', *International Social Science Journal*, vol. 134, pp. 549–557.
- Rivera, Alex. 2008, *Sleep Dealer*, motion picture, New York, Likely Story.
- Rivera, Tomás. 1995 [1971], . . . *And the earth did not devour him*, Arte Público Press, Houston.
- Ruiz de Burton, M.A. 1992 [1885], *The squatter and the don*, Arte Público Press, Houston.
- Ryden, K.C. 1993, *American land & life: mapping the invisible landscape: folklore, writing, and the sense of place*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City.
- Saldívar, J.D. 2011, 'Conjectures on "Americanity" and Junot Díaz's "fuku americanus"', *The brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao*, *The Global South*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 120–136.
- Saldívar, R. 1990, *Chicano narratives: the dialectics of difference*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.
- Stegner, W. 1992, 'The sense of place', in *The sense of place*, Random House, New York.
- Söderbaum, F. 2003, 'Theories of new regionalism', in F. Söderbaum & T. Shaw (eds.) *Theories of new regionalism: a Palgrave Macmillan reader*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 1–21.
- Welty, E. 1978, 'Place in fiction', in *The eye of the story: selected essays and reviews*, Random House, New York.