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## Review: The Routledge Concise History of Latino/a Literature

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### Frederick Luis Aldama

*The Routledge Concise History of Latino/a Literature*. London: Routledge, 2012. xvi + 197 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.95)

To write a *concise* history of Latino/a literature seems like an impossible task. (As co-editor of the mammoth, 47-chapter *Routledge Companion to Latino/a Literature*, I know this to be true.) One might try to collapse the long history and cultural heterogeneity of the field into one coherent canon, but such a canon would inevitably reproduce stereotypes and counterproductive exclusions. “Latino/a” is a term designed to encompass a variety of groups: Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans, Dominican Americans, and, increasingly, U.S. residents of Central and South American descent. The literature it refers to crosses national, racial, and linguistic borders and disrupts generic conventions. Latino/a literature, by definition, resists circumscription by any single framework.

Frederick Luis Aldama’s new book does an excellent job of pointing out the difficulties of the task and highlighting the diversity of the field. Its range is impressively broad, and Aldama consistently reminds readers of the challenge of trying to fit this unwieldy conglomerate into one linear history. The style he settles on does not make for seamless reading. There are repetitions, with some authors and ideas appearing in multiple contexts throughout. Aldama quotes extensively from the literary works he describes as well as from other critics. Instead of footnotes, supplementary background material appears in dozens of grey text boxes scattered throughout the book, defining terms ranging from the historical (like “The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo” and “The Cuban Revolution”) to the literary (like “Arté Público Press” and “The Nuyorican Poets’ Café”) to the philosophical (like “lowbrow, middlebrow, highbrow” and “Pre-Columbian worldview”). There is a glossary of Spanish-language terms, a guide to further reading, and conclusions at the end of each chapter that summarize key ideas with bullet points. Readers can pick and choose which of these peripheral matters to read, and which to skip. In short, this is a densely layered, inter-textual book. The overall effect is dialogic; one gets the feeling that the book is a product of a community of scholars, and decades of scholarly effort, rather than the perspective of one self-proclaimed expert. This is a brilliant solution to the problem of summarizing a diverse field. Making it too easy or too seamless would do violence to the complexity of Latino/a literature.

The primary subjects Aldama emphasizes are history (change through time), form (the diverse genres and modes of experimentation employed by Latino/a writers), language (the ways in which Latino/a writers incorporate Spanish or

other languages), and identity (the cultural diversity of Latino/as as well as the many racial and national mixtures of Latino/a authors). One of the greatest strengths of Aldama's work is his desire to tell more than the expected story. He includes writers who don't make the "short list" of most anthologies of Latino/a literature (like the nineteenth-century Cuban writer Mary Andrews Denison or the Peruvian-American editor and "chica lit" author Marie Arana), genres not usually associated with Latino/a literature (like performance art, "gumshoe," and comics), and a coda about literacy and literary criticism. Aldama (p. 1) opens the book with the claim that, as Latino/as and their writings have become increasingly diverse and increasingly institutionalized, Latino/a literature has become less coherent as a literary category:

The challenge begins with the definition of Latino/a literature and extends into the very paradox of its becoming visible as a significant body of texts at the same time that it begins a process of self-erasure. The more it becomes diversified as a literary topography in the late twentieth century and satisfies the increased appetite of a greatly varied Latino demographic, the less we see it "segregated" or placed on its own "Latino" identified shelves in a Barnes & Noble bookstore, for instance.

It is apt to ask "what is Latino/a literature?" at this moment, and Aldama's answer is remarkably inclusive.

The book creates a narrative of development, becoming more diverse as it moves chronologically, which makes sense pedagogically but also tends to overshadow the complexity of the earlier periods. After a brief preface and a longer introduction that present the central themes and outline of the book, the first chapter, "Who is a Latino/a Author? What is Latino/a Literature?," returns to the difficulty of circumscribing the field given the diverse ethnic biographies, worldviews, and geographies of Latino/a authors. Chapter 2, "Latino/a Literary Foundations," historicizes the presence of different Latino/a groups in the United States and their literary productions prior to the "Latino/a Literary Renaissance"—the title of Chapter 3, which provides an overview of Latino/a authors who emerged from the Chicano and "Émigré Latino/a" identity movements of the 1960s and 1970s to reclaim and proclaim their cultural heritage in literature. Chapter 4 outlines the "Feminist and Queer Turns," surveying some of the best-known Latino/a writers of the 1980s and 1990s, many of whom happen to be feminists, lesbians, or gay men, emerging in a climate of increasing gender sensitivity and inclusivity. Chapter 5, "New Latino/a Forms," discusses "chica lit" (Latina chick lit), historical fiction, mysteries, magical realism, post-modern experimentation, and graphic novels. The coda, "Production, Dissem-

ination, and Consumption on a Global Stage,” ends with a look at Latino/a literature’s conditions of production.

The primary weakness of the text lies not in its content but in the less than careful proofreading. But the book is still engaging and clear. It will be a useful tool for students new to the field, teachers who want to supplement their knowledge, or experts looking for new corners of the field that are not usually explored. I am glad Aldama wrote it.

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