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082-12/2022EN*

ISSN 2688-2949 (online)

ISSN 2688-2965 (print)

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The *Latinx* Generation: Longings of Voices from the Border

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Abstract: This article proposes the use of the term *Latinx* as a category for classifying a generation of women authors whose works have been published since the beginning of the 21st century. To justify this classification, it briefly reviews how Latin American and Caribbean diasporas have taken shape in the United States, as well as the origins of the term *Latinx*. This sets the context for a series of works representative of the trend defined in this paper as *Latinx*. This analysis aims to show that these works' transnational nature and the mechanisms for deconstructing the gender binary come together as the constitutive characteristics of a group of women authors who could be considered a literary generation.

Keywords: *Latinx*, transnational, gender, United States Latino/a literature, Hispanic.

* Editors' note: This text is an English translation, offered by the Observatorio, of the Spanish original submitted by the author. See study 082-12/2022SP.

How to cite this work:

García-Avello, M. (2022). The *Latinx* Generation: Longings of Voices from the Border. *Estudios del Observatorio / Observatorio Studies*, 82, pp. 1–32.
<https://cervantesobservatorio.fas.harvard.edu/en/reports>

1. Introduction

In recent years, especially in informal contexts, the consonant 'x' has begun to be used in United States Spanish to replace the declensions of grammatical gender. One of the words linked to the Latino/a community in the United States for which this use appears to have become widespread is *Latinx*. This study seeks to explore how, beyond its use in non-academic settings, this term proves to be particularly appropriate for classifying a group of women authors belonging to contemporary United States Latino/a literature from the first decades of the 21st century. Concretely, the following corpus of works will be selected and studied, with attention to their role in the tradition of U.S. Latino/a studies: *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2004) by Felicia Luna Lemus, *Desert Blood: The Juarez Murders* (2005) by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Rosas de abolengo* (2011) by Sonia Rivera-Valdés, *The Cha, Cha Files: A Chapina Poética* (2014) by Maya Chinchilla, and *A Cup of Water Under My Bed: A Memoir* (2014) by Daisy Hernández. The analysis will demonstrate how the effects produced by the word *Latinx* in language are analogous to these works' proposed epistemology, while in both cases the term breaks with linguistic norms and the gender binary, transgressing the established boundaries.

Before diving into the literary analysis, it is necessary to explain the context in which these works emerge. To do so, this article will begin by reviewing how the main diasporas from Latin America and the Caribbean in the United States have taken shape in recent decades, which will lead us on a path beginning with the main migration flows and proceeding to the way cultural identities have been articulated in response to transnational exchanges and connections. This will be followed by a review of the brief genealogy of the term *Latinx*, its origins, and the controversy it has stirred up in various environments. The contexts in which its use seems to have been consolidated will also

be interrogated. Finally, this paper will offer an overview of the role of Latino/a literature in social movements, spanning from the second half of the 20th century, with Chicano nationalism, to the trend defined here as *Latinx*.

2. *Latinidades* in the U.S.

If we examine the relationship between the United States and Latin America, it becomes clear that the borders between them have been extraordinarily blurred throughout history. In fact, the geopolitical border has shifted on various occasions, most significantly following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). As a result of this treaty, a large part of Mexican territory became part of the United States, including the current states of California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona and Colorado, and part of what is today Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming. Since then, the two-way linkages between the United States and the different countries that make up Latin America have continued to strengthen. The United States has played a fundamental role in the politics of these countries, while the presence and influence of the population from Latin America and the Caribbean in the U.S. has simultaneously increased since the second half of the 20th century, largely as a consequence of immigration. Beyond their different individual conditions, migration processes vary greatly, and differ in general terms depending on their country of origin. Historically, three main flows of Hispanic immigration to the U.S. had been identified—from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean—while the main settlements were found in the country's southwest region.

Nevertheless, since the end of the 20th century, there has been an observed increase in the migrant population from countries such as Venezuela and Colombia, as well as from the Southern Cone. Also, important internal migration flows in recent

years are worth noting. Although the majority of Hispanic Americans¹ were concentrated in eight states—California, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, Arizona, New Jersey, and Colorado—at the end of the 20th century, the 2010 census shows that the largest increase in the Hispanic population did not occur in traditional areas, but instead in the South (57%) and the Midwest (49%). Both the increase in immigration from different groups and the expansion to new geographic areas have contributed to the lack of uniformity of Hispanic hubs and to greater geolectal and sociolectal diversification, which are already beginning to manifest in the 21st century (Dumitrescu, 2013).

The diversity that characterizes this group contrasts with attempts to assimilate it into a single category, whether *Hispanic* or *Latino/a*. Although both are umbrella terms that transcend ethnic identities, Cristina Lacomba's article "Hispanics and/or Latinos in the United States: The Social Construction of an Identity" (2020) explores some of the differences between the two. The term *Hispanic* was introduced for the first time in 1970 by the Nixon administration, which aimed to classify in the census all people who, irrespective of race, came from a Hispanic country. It was, therefore, a government-imposed category that did not necessarily match the identities established by persons belonging to diverse subgroups, minorities, ethnicities, races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and national origins. As Lacomba notes, this term "fits with current parameters of the U.S. government's status quo and, therefore, is considered by part of the Latino population to be of a conservative tone" (2020, p. 17).

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2019 shows how, even though almost half of Hispanic people (47%) self-identify according to their country of origin, 39% identify as Hispanic or Latino. Lacomba's article also identifies a strong generational component when choosing such identifications, as there is a preference

¹ "Hispanic American" is a neologism created and adopted by the North American Academy of the Spanish Language (Academia Norteamericana de la Lengua Española, ANLE) as a demonym intended to describe all Hispanic people living in the United States, whether they speak Spanish or not.

for inclusive terms such as *Latino* or *Hispanic* (González-Barrera, 2020) among those who were born in the United States and belong to a second or subsequent generation. Despite the inherent heterogeneity of this group and the influence that national origins still have, there is a growing common identity being forged, particularly in recent decades (Golash-Boza, 2006; Aparicio, 2019). Both categories, Hispanic and Latino/a, have a bearing on the ethnic origin of the population residing in the United States, but one of the usually attributed differences between them is that the designation Latino/a does not come about as an imposition by an external body, such as from government officials, but rather as an identification, in many cases, from within the group itself, reflecting the emergence of a shared cultural identity (Corlett, 1999, p. 274).

This sense of community within such a heterogeneous group leads us to ask ourselves about the aspects around which Latino/a identity has been built. In this regard, the Spanish language is one of the aspects typically used to distinguish this group from other minorities, and from hegemonic U.S. identity as represented by the Caucasian race of Protestant and European origins. Even though language is intimately tied to identity and, in many cases, Spanish has been defended as one of the majority languages in the United States, examining the data reveals that Spanish is not the first language of a significant proportion of people who identify as Latino/a. In many cases, it is not among their languages at all. Regarding the myth that immigrants from Latin America refuse to assimilate into the dominant culture of the United States, linguistic research shows that language is one of the aspects in which assimilation proves to be most evident (Dowling, et al., 2012).

According to the data provided in the article “The Economic Value of Spanish in the United States: Opportunities and Challenges for the Future,” in 2020, 20.9% of the Hispanic population stated that they did not speak any Spanish (E. Martínez García & M. T. Martínez García, 2022, p. 14). Related to this, the National Survey of Latinos by the Pew Hispanic Center reveals high intergenerational variation. The Pew Research

Center (2009) developed a technique to measure “primary language” by combining reading, writing, and oral comprehension/communication skills in both English and Spanish. According to this measure, in the first generation, 7% of youth are classified as English dominant, 40% as bilingual, and 53% as Spanish dominant. Nevertheless, by the second generation, 44% show greater English skills, while 2% remain Spanish dominant and 56% are bilingual. In the third generation, only 15% are classified as bilingual. In short, the data confirms that Spanish barely manages to pass through to the third generation, which leads Ricardo Otheguy to describe how “the overall pattern of the United States is, sadly, that of a language [Spanish] with few grandchildren”² (2008, p. 224). Other studies by Ana Celia Zentella and Ricardo Otheguy (2012) on New York families of Puerto Rican origin conclude that 43% of second-generation speakers speak Spanish fluently, while this proportion drops to 6% in the third generation. Ruben Rumbaut, Douglas Massey, and Frank Bean (2006) also corroborated this trend in their observations of Mexican families in San Diego and Los Angeles.

As confirmed by the research cited above, beginning with “Generation 1.5”—those who arrived in the country during childhood—knowledge of the Spanish language trends downward in favor of English. The fact that the most representative Latino/a literature since the last decades of the 20th century is originally written in English, as observed in most of the works discussed here, is symptomatic of this. Nevertheless, the use of the Spanish term *Latinidades*, and even the respect for the “o/a” declension of grammatical gender when this group calls itself Latino or Latina, bring to light how the Spanish language plays a fundamental role in the construction of identity. Its relevance is also evident in the way nativist discourses have been directed at the language in many cases.³ In *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, Samuel P. Huntington lays out a series of arguments against immigration from

² “el patrón general de los Estados Unidos es, tristemente, el de una lengua [el español] con pocos nietos”. All excerpts from materials published in Spanish have been translated into English for this paper.

³ The historian John Higham (2002) highlights how nativist discourses are built on antagonism and opposition to minorities who are defined as foreign and not legitimate parts of the nation.

Latin America and the Caribbean, including about the harm to the English language that this immigration signifies: “The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages [...] Mexican Americans will share in that dream and that society only if they dream in English” (2004, p. 45). In line with this view, language—in this case, English—becomes a symbol of national unity in the face of an external threat associated with Spanish. Given that, as noted above, there is virtually full linguistic assimilation by the third generation, Huntington’s arguments reveal a series of baseless but sufficiently widespread prejudices.

In fact, one of the aspects that has contributed to forging this Latino/a cultural identity is discrimination by dominant U.S. society, as Nilda Flores-González (2017) notes in her ethnographic study on millennials. The media, as well as dominant discourses in the public sphere, reproduce stereotypes of the Latino/a community that, in many cases, come across as incompatible with notions inherent to the concept of U.S. citizenship (Amaya, 2013). In his article “Stereotypical Depictions of Latino Criminality: U.S. Latinos in the Media during the MAGA Campaign,” Eduardo González concludes the same after analyzing different political discourses: “By reproducing stereotypes of violence, lawlessness, and foreign identity, Latinos in the U.S. often exist in the social imaginary of media and political elites as being legally and culturally incompatible with conventional understandings of U.S. citizenship” (2019, p. 47). Specifically, nativist discourses promote a representation of the nation in which there seems to be no room for minorities from Latin America and the Caribbean.

The feeling of being excluded from hegemonic U.S. identity is one of the factors that can affect the ties the Latino/a community establishes with its ancestors’ communities of origin. In this vein, in the article, “We’re From Here, Too: Identity and Belonging Among 1.5- and Second-Generation Latinxs in Nashville, Tennessee,” James Chaney and Laura Clark acknowledge the role that discrimination plays when it comes

to shaping transnational identifications among 1.5- and second-generation Latinx with respect to their parents' and ancestors' home cultures and communities. The key question their study aims to answer, and which is ultimately answered with a "yes," is "Does perceived discrimination at either the national level or local level drive a stronger attachment to their immigrant parents' communities of origin or influence how they self-identify [...]?" (2020, p. 282). Even so, the fact of a shared history of immigration does not apply in all cases; it is worth mentioning, in this regard, Mexicans who did not cross the border, but rather had the border cross them after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and who, in some cases, are brought together through other types of cultural and ethnic connections.

Additionally, given that different generations with different origins coexist on American soil, new interactions can occur that blur the possibility of identifying with a single country of origin, contributing to what Frances Aparicio (2019) calls "intralatinidades." In these cases, as with the concept of Latinidades, the framework of national origin noticeably loses relevance in the face of transnational connections and exchanges. In her article "'Chicana! Rican? No, Chicana-Riqueña!' Refashioning the Transnational Connection" (1994), Angie Chabram-Dernersesian explores her hybrid heritage as the granddaughter of Puerto Ricans and Chicanos/as, aiming to question the essentialism of identifications based on national origin. Her search for more inclusive forms of identification leads her to reflect on the ties that connect her to the different subgroups that make up the Latinx community, and on the way increasing exchanges and contacts among younger generations blur the boundaries of closed categories which have predominated for decades around national, racial, or ethnic identities.

Faced with the dissonance between a homogenizing term such as 'Hispanic' and the proliferation of different groups in artificially separated compartments, Latinidades remain open, transitory, and inevitably hybrid. In addressing how this identity has taken shape, Stuart Hall's distinction between the two possible ways of

understanding cultural identity proves to be particularly useful. While the first is based on a collective identity that remains stable, with “unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning” (2003, p. 234), the second type of cultural identity concerns what takes place in the case of Latinidades, insofar as certain commonalities within the group are acknowledged, but without glossing over or minimizing differences and contradictions. Rather, “difference” is perceived as something inherent and productive. In other words, “difference” is understood as a constitutive element: “Not an essence but a *positioning*” (Hall, 2003, p. 237).

From a similar perspective, Hommi Bhabha holds “difference” up against the concept of “diversity”: “With the notion of cultural difference, I try to place myself in that position of liminality, in that productive space of the construction of culture as difference, in the spirit of alterity or otherness” (1994, p. 209). The idea of *Latinidad* does not adhere to stable references, since it does not presuppose an essence, nor notions associated with authenticity; it does not even turn to references of national origin. The shifting lands of difference, also called the “third space,” are where Latinidades navigate, taking shape in an ambivalence that Bhabha summarizes as “the alienation of the self in the construction of forms of solidarity” (1994, p. 214). The shaping of *Latinidad* as a category implies a process of *interpellation* by which subjects are constituted through the very categories that give them a name, as Judith Butler (1990) has reiterated.

The process of interpellation and the way the subject of Latinidades responds to it is reflected in the performative art of Guillermo Gómez Peña. In performances such as “Welcome to the Third World” (2004), Gómez Peña explores how Latino/a subjectivity emerges as a result of attempts to reconcile the manner in which it is approached by dominant U.S. culture, while also apprehending it as a performative identity that is shaped through the same discursive practices that bisect and constitute it. The video of the performance begins with a voiceover from the artist, who welcomes

various Western colonizers to colonized locations. Then, he finishes by welcoming the viewer to his art, which indicates how the act of looking, upon which the process of interpellation is based, has colonialist and racist roots that, in turn, have an impact on the way the figure of Latino/a has been constructed as *other* in the United States. This otherness is manifested in the following terms:

To be in America is a complicated matter. You are in relation to the multiplicity of looks you are able to display. I am brown therefore I am underdeveloped. I wear a moustache therefore I am Mexican. I gesticulate therefore I am Latino [...] I experiment therefore I am not authentic. I speak about politics therefore I am un-American. My art is indescribable therefore I am a performance artist. I talk therefore I am. Period (2000, p. 91).

Just as Gómez Peña notes, the identity claimed by the subject unfolds through discursive practices; in his own performative art, the Latinidad the artist identifies with resides in that “I talk.” This also makes it possible, in the words of De la Campa, to carry out “a challenging examination of simultaneous elements—such as nation, gender, ontological making, language, social class, race—as well as a broader assessment of the relationship between the written word and other cultural forms” (2002, p. 895).⁴ For Gómez Peña, the resistance to conform to foundational categories, such as race, class, or nationality, as well as the opening and multiplicity of hybrid subjectivities set the course for what it means to be Latino/a in the United States.

This view dovetails with the definition of Latinidades that Juana María Rodríguez proposes as “‘dimensions’ or the ‘directions in motion’ of history and culture and geography and language and self-named identities” (2003, p. 22). Latinidad discourses have been influenced by the transnational turn that has prevailed in American literary studies (Goyal, 2017, p. 1) since the last decade of the 20th century, thus contributing to what Ursula K. Heise has described as “the increasing interest in

⁴ “un examen desafiante de ejes simultáneos —nación, género, confección ontológica, lengua, clase social, razas, entre otros—, al igual que una valoración más amplia de la relación entre la palabra escrita y otras formas culturales” (2002, p. 895)

approaching the study of the US in a more international framework, in terms of both the questions being asked and the resources deployed to answer them” (2008, p. 381).

The transnational trend among the group that identifies as Latino/a fits with the way U.S. citizens begin perceiving themselves, according to Jahan Ramazani, as born “not of one or another hermetically sealed national or civilizational bloc, but of intercultural worlds that ceaselessly overlap, intersect and converge” (2006, p. 355). More concretely, the fact that they are groups with very diverse origins, whose American identity revolves around the ties, exchanges, and connections that unite them to Latin America and the Caribbean, brings to light the transnational nature inherent in Latinidad. However, although this transnational nature is central to the construction of Latinidades, the sudden emergence of the term *Latinx* in recent years adds new layers of meaning related to the concept of gender that will be explained below.

3. Genealogy of the Term *Latinx*

The term *Latinx* appeared on the internet for the first time in 2004, but its use began to become widespread as of 2015 (García-Avello, 2018, p. 126) on social media and the Web 2.0, then extending to numerous other environments, including associations such as the Latinx Caucus, as well as academic institutions across the United States. As mentioned above, the Spanish language is a relevant element of Latino/a identity. Although there is a trend of Spanish proficiency weakening in favor of English from the second generation onward, when it comes to identifying as Latino/a, not only was the term in Spanish adopted for use in English, but the ‘o/a’ declension of grammatical gender, which does not exist in English, was also adopted. Nevertheless, the aim of acknowledging a broader spectrum of gender identities beyond the masculine/

feminine binary drove forward the use of the ‘x.’ Not only is the ‘x’ proposed as an alternative to the generic use of the masculine form, but it is also used with the ultimate aim of transcending masculine/feminine dualism. Because, in Spanish, the ‘x’ does not have that gendering grammatical function and does not even figure in this context, its sudden emergence challenges the language’s grammatical and phonetic rules. Furthermore, pronouncing the ‘x’ forces a pronunciation—‘Latinex’—that suits English better than Spanish.

It is hardly surprising that this transgression has stirred up great controversy, creating a palpable division between those who consider this use of the ‘x’ to be a degeneration of the Spanish language and those who defend the need to look for new and original ways to employ more inclusive language. Beyond the arguments used for each of these positions, a fundamental aspect considered in this paper as regards adopting this term is the multilingual context in which the word *Latinx* emerges. As mentioned above in relation to national frameworks, contact between Spanish and English contributes to a blurring of the boundaries between the two languages. As a result, instead of bilingualism, which would involve the existence of two clearly defined languages, the contact and mutual interaction between Spanish and English contribute to a context of exchange, although in many cases the trend is toward the loss of Spanish.

As already mentioned above, linguistic discussions house debates that transcend purely linguistic aspects. What is at stake is not so much the repercussions of the word *Latinx* for the Spanish language, but the consequences it has on the construction of social identities. Although the way the term *Latinx* has become widespread in recent years is unquestionable, regardless of whether it is a passing fad or takes root more permanently, this paper defends adopting this term as a category to classify and describe a trend in U.S. Latino/a literature that has emerged in recent decades. Some examples of this are provided below. As the last section will expand on, the meanings inherent in the term *Latinx* point to the transnational character and

gender transgression that are represented in the selected works, and which motivate the use of this category. Accordingly, beyond the term's consolidation or linguistic-level controversies, the following sections will address the use of the term *Latinx* from a literary perspective, as a category to classify a group of contemporary women writers whose works seek to transcend the boundaries of nation and gender, imagining a third transnational, *translingual* space capable of also transcending dominant gender discourses.

4. Literature: From the Chicano Movement to the 'Latino Boom'

This section will provide an overview of the central role of literature in the construction of Latino identities, as well as in Latino studies in the United States beginning in the second half of the 20th century more generally. In the 1960s, the Chicano movement emerged when people of Mexican origin living in California decided to protest against the systemic discrimination they endured as members of an ethnic minority. Although the term *Chicano*'s exact origin is unknown, its use started becoming widespread at this time to distinguish from a strictly Mexican identity. Against this backdrop, literature became a channel for exploring and transmitting this group's concerns, difficulties, and interests.

The border appears in many works of this time period as a leitmotif. Its influence is notable in José Antonio Villareal's novel, *Pocho* (1959), which centers on the search for the identity of Richard Rubio, a son of Mexican immigrants in California. Although the novel anticipates the Chicano literary movement of the 1960s, this work has also been criticized for its assimilationist tendencies (C. Shirley & P. W. Shirley, 1988; Vallejos, 1980; Paredes, 1982). However, although Richard's efforts to assimilate into U.S. culture set him apart from the Mexican community he describes, this assimilation is thwarted by the racial and ethnic discrimination he experiences in the context of

dominant U.S. society. The work thus foretells the handling of issues such as immigration, the identity crisis stemming from migration processes, and the antagonistic forces that cut across Chicano literature from the 1960s.

The border, displacements, and the double discrimination experienced by the Chicano population as both members of an ethnic minority in the United States and expatriates from their communities of origin, give rise to social problems such as those depicted in Tomás Rivera's *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971). This short story collection focuses on the precarious working conditions of Mexican farm workers in rural areas of southern Texas and the Midwest during the 1950s. As observed in *Pocho*, early Chicano literature not only condemns the segregation and exclusion of people of Mexican descent but also addresses identity conflicts stemming from border experiences between the United States and Mexico. Francisco Lomelí reflects on this situation by concluding that "people of Mexican descent have a rightful place they can claim their own that is both Mexican and Anglo American, which Chicanos synthesize in varying degrees" (in Vázquez, 2013, p. 302). Chicanos condemn the way dominant U.S. society pushes them to the margins while still exerting an influence on them that prevents them from identifying as 'authentic' Mexicans. In Chicano literature, the border is thus cast as a metaphor that captures life on the margins, between two languages, two cultures, and two worlds that shape their subjectivities.

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The impossibility of keeping an essence free from U.S. influences drives a search for identity that comes to life in narratives such as Rodolfo González's poem, "I Am Joaquín" (1967), where the reasoning of the narrative voice culminates in the construction of a hybrid or 'mestizo' subjectivity. This theme, in turn, led to taking ownership of the *Bildungsroman* genre, as occurs in the emblematic work of Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). Anaya's novel proposes a revision of *Bildungsroman*, fitting it to the initiation rite of Tony, a six-year-old boy who tries to find a way to fit into the U.S. education system without renouncing his Mexican heritage.

Noticeably, a large part of the literature associated with the Chicano movement is written from a male perspective, in which women's concerns and voices are relegated to a second plane. This led women in the Chicano movement to search for feminist alliances with other women's movements, including African Americans. Cherrie Moraga, a key figure in Chicana feminism, was one of the first women to drive forward dialogue between minority women's movements in the United States, aiming to oppose sexism, racism, and homophobia. Her efforts to build alliances were reflected in the bridge metaphor used in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), an anthology of texts written by African American and Latina women that Moraga co-edited with Gloria Anzaldúa. Chicana women share experiences of complex discrimination not limited to gender with women of other ethnic minorities. This discrimination, in the words of Melissa Groenewold, is an "imposed oppression determined by her cultural allegiance, not only from the Anglo-dominated society in which she struggles to survive, but also that oppression inflicted upon her from within her culture of origin" (2005, p. 92).

The different axes of Chicanas' marginalization are examined more systematically through the notion of the border in Gloria Anzaldúa's foundational text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). The border is not limited to a geopolitical space but is fundamentally a metaphor for transitory states between cultures, languages, and antithetical realities. Anzaldúa reflects on how this crossroads gives rise to a third space, the interstices, where multiple conflicting discourses converge. The border is conceived as a line that separates, divides, and segregates, but also with acknowledged potential as a space for resistance due to its fluctuating and malleable nature. The ability to navigate multiple borders conditions the experiences of Chicana women, immersed in transitional states from which dominant discourses on gender, sexuality, nation, and ethnicity are interrogated and deconstructed, ultimately to be re-constructed on alternative paradigms. Epistemic categories are challenged in a process that leads Chicanas to cope with these

ambiguities, contradictions, and various centers of power until they forge a new form of consciousness: “the consciousness of the Borderlands” or “a new mestiza consciousness.” Anzaldúa defines this as a metaphorical space created by an “I” capable of rising above dualism: “The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity [...] Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (1987, p. 101).

Anzaldúa’s foundational text laid the theoretical foundations for studies about the border and about Chicana feminism, and it also greatly influenced the U.S. Latino/a literature that emerged in the last decades of the 20th century. In this context, in the 1980s and 1990s, a series of works written by women authors from different backgrounds became popular, ranging from those by Chicanas such as Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Graciela Limón, Demetria Martínez, and Helena María Viramontes to those by Caribbean writers such as Cristina García, Julia Álvarez, and Esmeralda Santiago. The commercial success of many of these works led to the “Latino Boom” (Castillo, 2005), which was made up of a group of U.S. Latina writers whose works became very popular in the 1980s and 1990s. Two aspects related to this movement are worth highlighting: it is about women writers who reflect on how gender affects their lived experiences at the same time as it is intertwined with social class, ethnicity, and race, thus producing an intersectional perspective. This generation has had a strong impact on contemporary literature and has paved the way for more recent women authors, such as those classified below under the *Latinx* category.

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5. *Latinx* Literature

The literature studied in this section revolves around two core characteristics integral to the category of *Latinx*: on the one hand, its transnational nature; on the other, the trend toward understanding gender and sexuality in more flexible and inclusive ways.

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Estudios del Observatorio/Observatorio Studies. 082-12/2022EN

ISSN: 2688-2949 (online) 2688-2965 (print) doi: 10.15427/OR082-12/2022EN

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Consequently, in the context of this research, the term *Latinx* is not used as a synonym for *Latino/a*, but as a possible category for classifying a group of contemporary women authors whose works are characterized by the interaction between the transnational dimension and a fluid view of gender. The works that have been selected, and which will be introduced in this section as representative of this new trend, are the following: *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2004) by Felicia Luna Lemus, *Desert Blood: The Juarez Murders* (2005) by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Rosas de abolengo* (2011) by Sonia Rivera-Valdés, *The Cha, Cha Files: A Chapina Poética* (2014) by Maya Chinchilla, and *A Cup of Water Under My Bed: A Memoir* (2014) by Daisy Hernández.

The selected works propose a transnational literary space that, as described by Maya Socolovsky in her book *Troubling Nationhood in U.S. Latina Literature* (2013), is home to a proliferation of transnational approaches capable of connecting U.S. *Latinidad* to Latin American history and, more specifically, to the imperialist policies that have driven immigration to the United States (p. 15). In all these cases, the narrators navigate an environment in which persistent national frameworks coexist with processes of globalization, in a world where increasing transnational connections run through personal stories. They are not the only works that may be classified as *Latinx*, but they are indeed very representative of the characteristics described above and, thus, have been chosen to be studied in this paper.

The novel *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* sketches a cartography of the transnational dimension through the search that Leti, the protagonist, undertakes to find her place in the world and, more specifically, within the queer community of Los Angeles. From the beginning of the novel, the influence Leti's grandmother exerts through stories linked to Mexican folklore, embodied in the figure of La Llorona, the "Weeping Woman," is revealed. The transnational dimension materializes in two seemingly contradictory forces: one that unites Leti to the Mexican tradition represented by her grandmother Nana, and the other to the relationships she

establishes with the queer community she encounters when she moves north to the city. Both forces represent views on gender and sexual identity that the protagonist will attempt to negotiate throughout this rite of passage novel. From the beginning, the narrator reveals the three characters around whom the plot revolves: “I might as well tell you right now that this is really about my girl Weeping Woman, Nana and me” (Lemus, 2004, p. 3). Leti’s narrative search culminates in her *(sub)version* of prototypical femininity as symbolized by the revision of the Weeping Woman myth. The result, as the title indicates, is a free revision of elements from the Mexican tradition combined with new associations the protagonist cultivates with her changing environment.

The geopolitical space of the U.S.–Mexico border serves as the setting for the novel *Desert Blood: The Juarez Murders* (2005). The protagonist, Ivon, who identifies as Chicana and queer, is prompted to investigate the feminicides of women in Juárez in the wake of her sister’s kidnapping. In this case, the transnational dimension is examined from a standpoint that questions the role of globalization and capitalism in the lives of women from the South, specifically reflecting on how the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has not only effected economics but transformed people’s lives—in this case, those of the *maquiladora* workers who labor in extremely precarious conditions. These circumstances push the workers, who are seen to lack value beyond their use as production machinery, into situations that endanger their lives. Far from idealized images of the border, Gaspar de Alba renders a horrifying image of the different conditions that come together to enable crimes to be committed with impunity.

In *Rosas de abolengo* (2011) by Sonia Rivera-Valdés, Lázara is still in the process of reconciling her migration from Cuba to New York as a child when she learns that she is the daughter of Argentine parents who were disappeared during the military dictatorship. Thus begins a journey that takes her to visit both Argentina and Cuba in search of roots she will never find. One of the conclusions she draws from her failed

genealogical search is that “life is always present, and the rest is nonsense, a product of imagination” (2011, p. 124).⁵ In other words, any attempt to rediscover her roots takes place in the present, which inevitably implies a process of construction.

In her collection of poems *The Cha, Cha Files: A Chapina Poética*⁶ (2014), Maya Chinchilla compiles her lived experiences as the daughter of Guatemalan activists settled in the San Francisco Bay Area. The different transnational influences that tinge her voice are captured in poems such as “Doña Maruca,” in which Chinchilla sees herself through the eyes and, more specifically, the words of her Guatemalan grandmother:

She looks like a boy, not a little girl, dressed like that. And how did you let her mother cut her hair so short así. Y esos shorty shorts. No'mbre! you should tell her something.

No. Dile vos. A mí no me va a entender. Está muy agringada. Her tongue stumbles on Spanish like a baby who hasn't learned to walk.

Sí pues, if her tongue wasn't so floja I could tell her myself. Maybe she would help me with los frijoles y las tortitas de carne? If I wait around for her tongue to catch up we would never finish on time.

[...]

No es que no quiero a tus gringas. I love when you bring las niñas all the way over here to visit (2014, p. 28)

Of the four sections into which the collection is divided—“Solidarity Babies,” “Central American Unicorns,” “Homegirls and Dedications,” and “Cha Cha Files”—the second most exhaustively explores the construction of a hybrid subjectivity that neither assimilates into U.S. subjectivity nor matches the prototypical Guatemalan identity. While this section focuses on how the transnational dimension has impacted the author at the individual level, many of the poems in “Solidarity Babies” and “Homegirls

⁵ “la vida siempre es presente, y lo demás es bobería, invento de la imaginación” (2011, p. 124).

⁶ The poetry has not been translated to avoid some of the form-related meaning being lost in translation.

and Dedications” adopt a collective vision, making it possible to sketch a society in which bonds, circuits, and exchanges transcend the framework of the nation. “I was born a bridge” (2014, p. 18) begins her poem “Baby Hold Half the Sky,” and it is through the narrator’s experience that the ties uniting her with other groups are established, both within the Bay Area, where she spends much of her childhood and youth, and the Central American isthmus where she continually returns, physically and symbolically, throughout her life. In so doing, the link that keeps her bound to Central America extends to other Latino/a groups with whom she shares struggles, longings, and projects.

Finally, Daisy Hernández’s memories in *A Cup of Water Under My Bed: A Memoir* (2014) reflect the author’s experience of belonging to a generation in which the notion of a homeland have grown blurry. The same could be said of the groups of Latinos/as Hernández grew up around, a truth reflected in the varieties of Spanish that coexist with English in her neighborhood. Her Cuban background on her father’s side and Colombian background on her mother’s side formed a childhood that looks in two different directions, divided, a testament to the fact that her American present cannot be separated from her parents’ past:

We send dollars because of the wars. It is the eighties and there are two wars. The one in Colombia is about land and poor people. The other one, the Cold War, means my mother and I cannot travel to Cuba [. . .] We travel instead to Hialeah, Florida, and Mami and I go together by plane to Bogotá and Bocayá, and by train to Queens and Manhattan. By the time I start kindergarten, I feel these places and New Jersey are part of the same country. Everyone lives within its borders (2014, p. 7).

Similar to the other works discussed, what happens at the political level in the Southern Hemisphere disrupts the life of a girl growing up in a neighborhood in a U.S. city. The excerpt also shows how the numerous trips throughout her childhood and the relationships that transcend borders prevent her from being confined to national boundaries.

The works studied here evidence the impossibility of understanding the conflicts, both collective and personal, that affect the narrators and protagonists using the lens of the nation-state, and advocate instead for a transnational perspective that, nevertheless, recognizes the existence of geopolitical borders that cannot be ignored or minimized. Lázara's trips in *Rosas de abolengo*—from Argentina to Cuba, from Cuba to the United States—as well as those of Daisy's family, and Maya's family's move from Guatemala to the San Francisco Bay Area reveal the complex interconnections of phenomena that occur in distant places around the globe. The United States' participation in military coups in Central and South America, as well as the consequences of the blockade in Cuba, bring about migration flows that, once settled, give rise to a proliferation of ties and exchanges with Latin America and the Caribbean.

As for *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders*, the border between Juárez and the United States reminds us of the image of the “herida abierta” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 25), the “open wound” that provides a glimpse of globalization's cruelest face. The murders of women in Juárez serve as a starting point to condemn how, in this case, transnational connections lead to women's exploitation at the southern border, reducing these women to sources of labor. The transnational perspective converges with a representation of material conditions within the set of texts that addresses the continued influence of borders, understood not as mere divisions between nations but also as a metaphor for existing barriers related to variables such as class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity.

The works studied reveal a view of gender identities that, despite unfolding in a transnational context, in no way ignores the transcendence of material conditions. It is, therefore, a question of combining two apparently contradictory aspects: a context marked by exchanges and flows that take place at the international level and the persistence of geopolitical and socio-symbolic borders that hinder freedom of movement. The selected literary representations align with Jacqui Alexander's analysis

in *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005) by examining multiple operations of power through the lens of gender, class, and race without being confined to the hermetically sealed borders of the nation-state.

A series of factors delimit the lives of these protagonists and narrators, notably the interaction between gender and the different national contexts in which they move. *Desert Blood: The Juarez Murders* and poems by Chinchilla, such as “24th & Mission Border Transmission,” make it possible to observe more explicitly how the border is not a mere illusion or metaphor but rather is revealed as a space marked by violence and the oppression of women struggling to survive.

It's dangerous to be a woman; even first world.
That is why I am connected to my hermanas on the border.
I know what it is to fear to have body of mujer
Be careful I hear they are killing women over there
My 1st world status means nothing?
[...]
The Border
this line that is not a bridge, not a line, it's a ditch a hole an open wound,
like the Berlin wall the great wall of China, apartheid wall, imaginary
walls
not just one wall
but several, cement, iron gate, barbed wire
men with guns protecting who again?
Whose interests?
Eerie walls of silence (2014, p. 51)

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One of the main themes addressed throughout Gaspar de Alba's novel is NAFTA's effects on Mexican women, showing how the border that divides people from Mexico and the United States does not represent any kind of obstacle for the companies and corporations benefiting from these international agreements. Furthermore, the settlement of U.S. companies near the border in northern Mexico led to these areas' industrialization, which in turn stimulated Mexican women's movement to other areas of the country in search of work in factories. The processes of globalization promoted by NAFTA not only contributed to the division of labor on a global scale, but also on a discursive and imaginary level. *Desert Blood: The Juarez*

Murders explores how, in these border regions, traditional Catholic and Mexican values attempt to reconcile with industrializing, globalizing, and capitalist forces that place women at the intersection of contradictory discourses. At one extreme are patriarchal discourses on gender that relegate women to the domestic sphere, as well as to the roles of wives and mothers; at the other is the capitalist and globalizing machinery that reduces them to mere constituent links of the economic chain, to which motherhood represents a threat. The result is a space in which discourses based on the imposition of fear, intimidation, and violence proliferate.

Faced with this reality, both Gaspar de Alba's protagonist and Chinchilla's narrative voice represent a vision of feminine identity that does not align with any discourses of normative femininity on either side of the border. As in the rest of the selected works, a fluid view of gender is proposed. Juana María Rodríguez's definition of the term *queer* coincides not only with how gender and sexuality are represented in the works, but with what the 'x' in Latinx signifies: "a breaking down of categories, questioning definitions and giving them new meaning, moving through spaces of understanding and dissension, working through the critical practice of 'refusing explication' is precisely what queerness entails" (2003, p. 24). The challenge posed by the 'x' is analogous to the way in which the narrators challenge gender identities.

In all cases, the narrators and protagonists perceptibly recreate themselves in indeterminacy, in the inexplicable, in ambiguity with respect to possible ways of self-identifying. In *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, Leti describes how she prepares to appear before her grandmother, combining clothes considered to be masculine with feminine-associated elements: "Preparing the new version of myself for presentation to Nana was like I had lost the notes for a chemistry lab but was going ahead with the experiment anyway, hoping that the elements would meld without too harsh an explosion" (Lemus, 2004, p. 166). However, Nana's reaction reveals the impossibility of understanding the way Leti manifests her gender within traditional categories and,

more specifically, in relation to masculine/feminine dualism. Nana's exclamation—"Dear Mother of God. Is that a boy or a girl?" (2004, p. 167)—reflects how the absence of language to name realities such as the gender Leti identifies with is intimately connected to the impossibility, in many cases, of transcending the masculine/feminine dichotomy.

In other cases, the incomprehension is due to the sexual orientation of the narrators and protagonists. As Hernández recalls, her family is unable to understand a woman having a romantic relationship with another woman: "That my romantic choices could upset my mother and tías had been a given since high school. A lot can be said about a woman who dates the wrong man. But dating the same sex or dating both sexes has no explanation" (Hernández, 2014, p. 85). The confusion is compounded by the fact that neither Daisy nor the other narrators identify as lesbians, but share a view of sexuality as something fluid, incapable of being confined to closed categories. In many cases, this leads them to play with identifications as well as desires. In "Jota Poetics," Chinchilla projects herself through language toward a horizon that allows her to imagine ways of being that have still not been named and whose existence, therefore, carries no awareness: "We are the threads that weave / a bed for you to lay / the wild roots that can't be cut back / the skirts of a volcano con su boca ebullada / the cactus flower blooming in the desert / We are letting go / holding space for the 'mmm' not yet named" (2014, p. 57).

Language's ability to name and, vice versa, the difficulty of conceiving what has not yet been named, move the subjectivities of the protagonists and narrators closer to a performative view of gender. As mentioned in the section above dedicated to Latinidades, there is no essence, but rather a succession of practices, of acts, that shape what they themselves name. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler develops an idea of gender not as identity, but as a succession of acts that is repeated in time, producing the mirage that a substance, a natural identity, exists. Gender identity is not a "being," but a "doing"; according to the linguistic theory of J. L. Austin, gender is

conceived from this point of view as performative, which means that “it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler, 1990, p. 136).

Gender identity is, from this standpoint, an illusion based on the repetition of a series of norms that a subject must perform throughout their existence. The selected works break with the illusion of the permanence of gender identity by introducing small transformations, what Butler calls “re-citations” capable of transgressing norms instead of confirming them, insofar as they focus on these norms as they simultaneously destabilize their reiterations: “the task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (1990, p. 148).

In *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, Leti plays with identifying and “disidentifying”⁷ (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11) with different categories, as observed in the way she incorporates and combines different external elements associated with masculinity with other elements typical of femininity, including clothing, makeup, or accessories such as pearl necklaces, even tiaras. Leti’s refusal to be pigeonholed is clearly expressed in reflections such as the following: “I wasn’t a boy, not entirely at least, but at times I wasn’t a girl, either [. . .] there were times I was at least part boy. A femme boy deep down. Shy sweater fag [. . .] What kind of dyke was I anyway? Good question. Simple and complicated all at once, I wasn’t a pigeon to be tucked away neatly into a hole. I didn’t wear a fixed category without feeling pain” (2004, p. 170). In other cases, such as in *Rosas de abolengo*, the transgression in identification takes place in the context of the protagonists’ sexual practices, in which they adopt different roles that destabilize normative patterns of masculinity and femininity. One example

⁷ José Muñoz has defined disidentification as a strategy that recycles dominant images to open way for resistance within the established order. Even though the dominant ideology promotes either identification or counteridentification, there is also a third mode that he calls disidentification (Muñoz, 1999, p. 11).

in *Rosas de abolengo* is the obsession during a part of Lázara's life with a symbol of masculinity: the mustache. Decontextualized as soon as it begins to refer to a fake mustache, it loses its meaning: "I decided that, for the moment, the person's sex was irrelevant; after all, there are magnificent fake mustaches, I told myself, and it's true. Now I'm an expert in them" (Rivera-Valdés, 2011, p. 222).⁸

In short, the works studied demonstrate how borders, both geopolitical and symbolic, grow blurry through the practices of the narrative voices. While generations such as the authors of the 'Latino boom' paved the way for the representation of a transnational literary space, the authors included here go a step further, by transcending not only national frameworks but also the limits imposed by identity categories related to gender and sexuality. This has been this study's aim.

6. Conclusion

This review has demonstrated the existence of a group of women authors in recent years whose works could be classified by the term *Latinx*. Beyond debates about the appropriateness of this term, this paper has defended its use to describe a trend in U.S. Latino studies that stands out for its deconstruction of national frameworks, as well as identity categories such as gender. The deconstruction of gender is precisely the crucial element shared across all the works mentioned here, as well as what differentiates them from another generation of U.S. Latina writers, those usually studied within the referenced 'Latino boom' in the last two decades of the 20th century. Although the Latinx authors share a transnational approach with the 'Latino boom group,' the feminist standpoint from which they write are replaced, in the case of many of the most recent works, by representations of gender based on approaches that deconstruct binarism, moving closer to what are called queer approaches. While

⁸ "decidí que por el momento el sexo de la persona era irrelevante; a fin de cuentas, magníficos bigotes postizos hay, me dije, y es cierto. Ahora soy experta en ellos" (Rivera-Valdés, 2011, p. 222).

the Latinx category points in this new direction, it would be useful for future research to delve into the challenges and possibilities posed by the use of the Latinx category in studying the abovementioned works, as well as other works and authors that would also fit within Latinx.

The works classified here as Latinx offer a vision of identities that could be defined as performative, insofar as they create what they themselves name: the existence of ties that unite different subjectivities under the term *Latinidades* and the ‘x’ through which they try to escape normative gender identities. Although it is still too early to see if this group coalesces into a generation, there are other works that could be analyzed with this lens. This article has opted for a manageable selection that illustrates how markers associated with the term Latinx align with representations proposed by Luna Lemus, Gaspar de Alba, Hernández, Chinchilla, and Rivera-Valdés.⁹ It is appropriate to conclude by giving the leading role back to the ‘x,’ as Chinchilla expresses in her poem “A Chapina Poética” as follows:

X, for what is lost . . . and X for reclaiming, for the loss of the Ch, X for crossroads, X as in Ch, sometimes X as in sh, as in Xela, as in X to break the shhhhh, I love all my exes, exis for x’s. The X mark on hand that washes off after a night of dancing. A Chapina with an X on her chest like superhero mayan intuitive espiritista getting a handle on her powers (2014, p. 45).

⁹ Other names may be added to this list of authors, such as Achy Obejas, Gabby Rivera, Tehlor Kay Mejia, Anel I. Flores, Jaquira Díaz, and Anna-Marie McLemore.

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