

**LATINIDAD AT THE CROSSROADS. INSIGHTS INTO LATINX  
IDENTITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

Amanda Ellen Gerke and Luisa María González Rodríguez, eds.  
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At the intersection of literary and socio-political criticism, *Latinidad at the Crossroads: Insights into Latinx Identity in the Twenty-First Century* (2021) explores the building process of a self-assigned, rather than a US-imposed Latinx identity, which reflects its multifaceted and constantly changing essence, as well as its crucial oscillations between sameness and difference, solidarity and individuality. In this vein, the volume starts with an overview by the editors, Amanda Ellen Gerke and Luisa María González Rodríguez, of the evolution of the terms used to describe the Latinx community through the years, proving that ethnic tags are socially constructed and are therefore subjected to an ever-changing communal and individual negotiation for inclusion and distinctiveness at the same time. Chicano/a were the first terms used, but due to their Mexican-centric conception and the clear European echoes of concepts like Hispanic, they were substituted by Latino/a. Only lately the terms Latin@, Latinx, and Afro-Latinx have started to be used.

Focusing on US Afro-Latinidad, and particularly on Afro-Latinas, is for sure one of the strengths of this volume. This Afro-diasporic approach is made explicit from the introduction—where the Afro-Latinx community's central claims and a poem by the Afro-Latina Sandra María Esteves are insightfully discussed—to chapters 3 and 5 by González Rodríguez and Esther Álvarez López, respectively. To date, only Jiménez Román and Flores' *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), Moreno Vega,

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Modestin and Alba's *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latin Diaspora* (2012), Richardson's *The Afro-Latin@ Experience in Contemporary American Literature* (2016), Rivera-Rideau, Jones and Paschel's *Afro-Latin@s in Movement: Critical Approaches to Blackness and Transnationalism in the Americas* (2016), Fennell's *Wild Tongues Can't Be Tamed* (2021) and a few other authors have addressed US Afro-Latinxs' experience and literature.<sup>1</sup> This is a developing field in the United States, and almost inexistent in Spain, with the exception of scholars such as Liamar Durán-Almarza and her research (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013) on Josefina Báez and Chiqui Vicioso. In this sense, González Rodríguez and Álvarez López continue to develop this field by addressing a new generation of Afro-Latina authors who are still neglected by academia, namely the contemporaries Raquel Cepeda, Jasmine Méndez, Elizabeth Acevedo, Ariana Brown and Mayda del Valle.

192 *Latinidad at the Crossroads* does not only represent an important diversification of Latinx studies in terms of race and gender, but also in terms of nationalities. Traditionally Chicanxs, but also Puerto Ricans and Cubans due to their relationship with the United States —as US citizens and refugees from a Communist country, respectively— have been very present in US society and, thus, have hogged academic attention. However, as Fernando Aquino in Chapter 4, Jorge Duany (2008, 2011) and Silvio Torres-Saillant (1999, 2017) have claimed, since the 1970s Dominican migration has been increasing to form a massive presence, especially in New York. In this vein, by addressing the Dominican population in three out of the seven contributions (chapters 3, 4, and 5) *Latinidad at the Crossroads* responds to the growing importance of this subgroup within the US contemporary Latinx community and to its critical neglect in Latinx studies.

In Chapter 3, “Digging through the Past to Reconcile Race and Latinx Identity in Dominican-American Women’s Memoirs”, González Rodríguez explores the bildungsroman/travel autobiographies of two US Afro-Dominicans, Méndez’s *Island of Dreams* (2013) and Cepeda’s *Bird of Paradise* (2013). Through these literal and metaphorical trips, the authors negotiate a multifaceted identity and a transnational belonging that challenges their enforced “either-or” position —not only within the Dominican-American disjunctive, common to all Latinxs, but also within the Black-Latinx one, specific to the Afro-Latinx community, since in the US these are mutually exclusive categories.

In “Dominicans and the Political Realm of Latinidad in New York City”, Aquino focuses on the extraordinary progress in winning New York City elections that Dominicans have made in the last three decades. What is especially interesting about Aquino’s analysis is how Dominicans negotiate their identities and emphasize their articulation of a context-dependent national or a pan-ethnic identity to assure

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their political success. While in Dominican-centered neighborhoods like Washington Heights, they stress their nationality, in Latinx-diverse boroughs like Queens or Brooklyn, they accept a pan-Latino identity. Thus, although identification choices need to be made within the boundaries of US social categories which are different to those in Latin America, this chapter shows that arriving groups still have some flexibility in their negotiations and that identities are highly situational and un-fixed.

In the last chapter addressing the Dominican community, “Identity Decolonization and Cosmopolitanism in (Afro)Latina Artists’ Spoken Word Performances”, Álvarez López analyses the performances of Elizabeth Acevedo (Dominican), Ariana Brown (Mexican), Mayda del Valle (Puerto Rican-Cuban) and Amalia Ortiz (Texan) to underline narratives, and particularly of spoken poetry, as sites of vindication and self-representation. Apart from honoring the Nuyorican tradition, performing implies a public negotiation and contestation of traditional notions about Latinx identity, as well as an epistemological decolonization since the embodied and situational essence of discourse, which is always articulated from a specific situation (time, place, race, gender, etc.), is clearly made visible through embodied performance. In this vein, this chapter, like the third one, challenges Latinx traditional ideas regarding race and gender, even if this means rebelling against their own cultural and familial affiliations.

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*Latinidad at the Crossroads* also addresses the now canonical Chicana studies in chapters 2, 7, and 8. In the second chapter of this volume, “Seismic Shifts in Chicano/a Literature Leading into the Twenty-First Century”, Francisco A. Lomelí provides a state of the art review of Chicana literature going from the Chicano Renaissance and its Spanglish and barrio-centric features, passing through the Chicano Postmodern Generation of the 1980s with renowned Chicana artists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga or Sandra Cisneros who explored dissident sexuality and genre blending, to the seismic shift of queer writing in the 1990s. Lomelí also discusses the new directions of Chicana literature including transnational, non-socio-political, and postmodern writing, which blends low and high art.

As suggested by the titles of chapters 7, “Revisiting la Frontera: Consuelo Jiménez Underwood and Ana Teresa Fernández”, and 8, “Border and Immigration: Revisiting Canonical Chicano Literature under Trump’s Regime”, the volume reconsiders the border in performative and constructivist terms. In this light, José Antonio Gurpegui again blurs the boundaries between literature, politics and socio-culture in his analysis of authors such as Tomás Rivera, Raymond Barrios, Alejandro Morales, Oscar Zeta Acosta and Miguel Méndez. Against Trump’s attempt at Mexicanizing any immigrant of Hispanic origin, Gurpegui’s goal is to revisit

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canonical Chicano literature on the basis of the border history from the McCarran-Walter Act (1965, 1976), passing through the Simpson-Rodino bill (1986), operations such as Bloqueo (1993), Guardian (1994), Salvaguarda (1995) and Río Grande (1997) in the 1990s, to Trump's politics. Gurpegui also states that current Latinx literature's aim to reflect characters' search for identity does not mean distancing itself from social denunciation/activism, since to construct a frontier identity it is necessary to transgress normative cultures and social categories.

In Chapter 7, Ewa Antoszek analyses the pictorial and performative *la frontera* productions of two Chicana artists —Jiménez Underwood and Fernández— where their concerns about migration, indigenous communities, ecological destruction, and gender stereotypes are portrayed. Thus, as in Chapter 5, art, whether performance or installation, is proved to be able to reclaim space. Antoszek emphasizes that all Latinx communities, rather than just the Chicanx, are informed by *la frontera*, since the border is both a physical and a metaphorical place that symbolizes Latinxs' hyphenated identities, displacement and unbelonging. However, both she and Gurpegui (in Chapter 8) clearly focus on Chicanx experience, thus dismissing water borderscapes, as experienced by Caribbean communities, and other bordering practices such as the current gentrification in US neighborhoods. Furthermore, by quoting Laura E. Pérez, who states that the Latinx descend from Native Americans and Spanish colonizers, Antoszek reproduces the unfortunately common “meeting of two worlds” narratives that leave out Afro-descendants, as many Afro-Latinx authors and scholars such as J. T. Richardson (2016) and Marta Cruz-Janzen (2007) have claimed.

Finally, Chapter 6, “Encarnaciones Cubanas: Elías Miguel Muñoz and Queering of the Latina/o Canon”, queers the canon in a double way. Firstly, Ylce Irizarry deals with homosexuality in Elías Miguel Muñoz's *The Greatest Performance* (1991), running through LGBTQI+ Cuban history from Castro to AIDS, as well as addressing gays and lesbians' different treatment, and sexuality as a resistance practice against heteronormativity. Secondly, drawing on Muñoz's *Brand New Memory* (1998), she proposes a ground-breaking paradigm to analyze Latinx literature —which she has developed in *Chicana/o and Latina/o Fiction: New Memory of Latinidad* (2016)—, distinguishing 4 types of narratives: those traditionally deployed by first generation migrants, “loss” and “reclaim,” and those normally written by second generation migrants, “fracture” and “new memory.” “Loss” and “reclaim” deal with acculturation issues. “Fracture” implies fighting against essentialist notions of Latinidad. “New memory” challenges the traditional dichotomy of either giving up one's own culture and thus living in an eternal nostalgia, or succeeding in the US. Furthermore, she argues that while the

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first generation learned to be American, the second learns to be Cuban, but critically questioning their ancestors' narratives and nationalist fantasies.

As its title illustrates, *Latinidad at the Crossroads: Insights into Latinx Identity in the Twenty-First Century* (2021) contributes to the construction of an intersectional Latinidad, which is not only reflected by a single hyphen, but by a multiplicity of them. While maintaining solidarity and cohesion, and honoring legacy and roots, this volume shows a new memory of Latinx identities, which can no longer be homogenized under terms such as American-Dominican or Chicana, but should rather metaphorically use several hyphens to illuminate their hybrid, transnational and diverse origins, affiliations, and projects, thus also reclaiming their individuality and difference.

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## Notes

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1. Among these authors are Silvio Torres-Saillant, Ylce Irizarry, Omaris Zamora, Vanessa Valdés, Melissa Castillo-Garsow, Christina Lam, Roberta Hurtado, Sharina Yomaira Figueroa, Vanessa Pérez-Rosario, Maillo-Pozo, and Regina Marie Mills.

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