Introduction

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Covering the last thirty years, this volume marks both a period in which Latinx literature established itself as a global phenomenon as well as a period of rising hostility to Latinx communities in the United States. These pulls in two directions – one toward recognition and the other toward violence – are apparent in three events that occurred in the year with which this collection begins. The 1992 Los Angeles uprisings in response to the acquittal of four police officers in the beating of Rodney King exposed the racial fault lines not only in LA but also in the larger United States. As Héctor Tobar shows in his novel *The Tattooed Soldier* (1999), which takes place against the background of the uprisings, the relationship of people of color to state violence is both local and transnational. Tobar also shows the challenge of establishing solidarities between African Americans, Mexican Americans, Central Americans, and Asian Americans given their different and complicated histories in relation to US empire. During this same year, the Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage project was also established, devoted to locating and recuperating texts written by Latinxs from colonial times to 1960.[1] As Nicolás Kanellos, the Recovery Project's founder, notes, the effort was not only to build an "ethnic archive" but to embody "a transnational identity for Latinos in the United States, and, probably, for the United States as a whole" (372).

The focus on transnational analyses links these two events with that which 1992 is perhaps best known: the Columbian Quincentenary. This event spurred Latinx writers and artists to join with Indigenous activists to demand the end of Columbus Day as a national holiday and to insist that the commemorated event be understood not as an "encounter" or "conquest" but as the onset of European colonization and genocide in the Americas. The Columbian Quincentenary catalyzes decolonial thinking in Latinx literature as writers begin to think beyond nationality and consider their shared histories of colonization, resulting in creative and scholarly

writing that questions the colonial frameworks of knowledge, the white colonial gaze, and the coloniality of power, more generally. In these three events, we see the seeds of tensions and projects that will continue through the present: a turn toward understanding Latinx experience in its transnational dimensions, the need to form coalitions and solidarities within Latinx groups as well as with other minoritized racial and ethnic communities to challenge state violence and US imperial projects, the reckoning with a history that was suppressed or erased, and burgeoning decolonial projects that resist Western epistemologies and attempt to discover new ways of knowing.

This volume is divided in four parts that examine these various historical transformations and show how Latinx literature has responded to them. Part I, "Shifting Coordinates," examines some of the historical turns of the last thirty years and considers how these events have altered the ways we envision Latinidad. These events have exploded the diversity of Latinidad, further revealing the heterogeneity of this complex community. Part II, "Transforming Genres," and Part III, "Emerging Media," focus on the forms that Latinx takes in literary genres and in new media. By focusing on literary form, we can glimpse the structures that give shape to Latinidad while also tracking the transformations in Latinx literary culture in the last three decades. Part IV, "Theoretical Turns," distills some of the important theoretical ideas that have developed from the historical shifts and from new writing. In particular, Part IV considers theories of race, gender, sexuality, and form that expose a frustration with Latinx as a category and challenge us to imagine new ways of being that more radically challenge US empire, the coloniality of knowledge, and the different ways that Latinxs may have been complicit in those projects.

The period covered in this volume might simply be called "the contemporary," but such a designation would obscure the different occurrences that shaped the politics and cultural expressions of Latinxs during these eventful decades. In Chapter 1, Alberto Varon highlights some important years in recent US history that proved influential, focusing not just on 1992, but also on 2001, 2008, and 2016. Across these years, we see the patterns of 1992 repeat as US politics oscillates between offering Latinxs opportunities for greater inclusion in the life of the nation and seeing Latinxs as a threat that requires policing and violent exclusion. With each cycling, the intensities attached to each pole increase. The attacks on September 11, 2001, seemed, initially, to offer a moment of unification as people in the United States came together in the face of that calamity.[2] In the patriotic spirit that ruled the nation in 9/11's aftermath, some

Latinxs enlist in the military and serve in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In plays like Quiara Alegría Hudes's *Elliot Trilogy* (2008–2013) and Virginia Grise's *blu* (2010), that initial fervor wanes as Latinxs veterans confront their complicity with US imperial projects and face the ways in which rising nativism and xenophobia, institutionalized in forms like the Department of Homeland Security and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE), exposed the promise of inclusion as a myth.[3] The 2008 election of Barack Obama initially promised an end to the forever wars, and, because he was the nation's first Black president, produced a sense that the terms for thinking about race in the United States were shifting. Ramón Saldívar notes how in this period, ethnic American writers often turned to the tropes and devices of historical fantasy and speculative fiction "to invent a new 'imaginary' for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction" (575). One work that connects to this moment is Lin-Manuel Miranda's blockbuster musical *Hamilton* (2015), which writes Black and brown people into a story of the nation's founding fathers. If the Obama years inspired cautious optimism that waned as hope brushed against the realities of governing, this optimism was extinguished by the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump, which baldly exposed strains of white supremacy in thought and action that had devastating consequences for many Latinx communities. At the same time, it also revealed Latinx complicity with white supremacy, and provoked a new kind of racial reckoning. As Varon notes, although these dates seem tidy, each left its own wake so that cultural expressions considering each event's consequences overlap with other dates and extend into the present. This attempt to taxonomize Latinx literary production in relation to recent US history provides a useful grid for understanding some of the urgent questions Latinx writers have responded to in the last three decades.

As helpful as such historical markers are, to historicize recent Latinx literature only in relation to significant dates in US history risks presenting Latinx writers as simply reactive to the fluctuations in national policies and attitudes. There are other ways of thinking about the shifts and changes that occur in the period that this volume covers. One way would to be to consider achievements in Latinx literature, particularly how this body of writing becomes more incorporated into the mainstream literary establishment. In 1990, Oscar Hijuelos is the first Latino to receive a Pulitzer Prize, for his novel *The Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love*. The later awarding of the prize to Nilo Cruz's play *Anna in the Tropics* (2001), Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Quiara Alegría

Hudes's play *Water by the Spoonful* (2012), Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton* (2015), the journalistic articles that would become Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey* (2003), and – most recently – Hernan Diaz's novel *Trust* (2022) reveal the arrival of Latinx writing in the US literary establishment. This was further buttressed with the selection of Richard Blanco to deliver a poem at Barack Obama's second inauguration and the naming of Juan Felipe Herrera as US Poet Laureate in 2015 and Ada Limón to the same position in the 2022. Beyond these forms of national recognition, Marion Rohrleitner, in her chapter in this volume on the translation of Latinx literature, notes how Latinx literature enjoys a growing global readership that not only extends into Latin America, but also to Germany, Japan, and beyond. Rohrleitner charts not only the challenges and transformations that occur as Latinx literature is translated on the global stage, but also how the multilinguality of Latinx writers transforms this process and the ways that we conceive of national and transnational literatures.

Significantly, many of the celebrated writers named above hold MFA degrees in creative writing.[4] In "Generation MFA," Elena Machado Sáez examines recent Latinx writing in relation to Mark McGurl's claims in *The Program Era* about how, in the post–World War II period, MFA programs have shaped the aesthetics and production of US fiction. Machado Sáez shows how the MFA's influence on writing happens later for the Latinx writers in part because of some barriers to accessing the elite institutions where such programs first appear. However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Latinx writers gain access to these institutions and as creative writing programs begin to proliferate across the nation, the MFA program begins to transform Latinx literary production as it did US fiction generally. This period parallels the rise of "multiculturalism," which Machado Sáez defines as "a market discourse . . . that emerges as a cooptation of civil rights movement energies, in part to contain their threat as well as to harness their appeal for the market" (370).[5] In a similar way, the MFA transforms the cultural work of writing stories and poetry from a service to the community to an artistic practice, resulting in an "aesthetic containment" of the social and political energies of early artists and writers (367, 377). The MFA program also becomes the main route to publishing one's work and engaging audiences. For Latinx authors, this means that other paths to publication are rendered nearly nonexistent as the publishing marketplace commodifies ethnic writing in such a way that "does not permit the development of a heterogenous population of US Latinx writers (and readers)" (378), which, results in a "limited agency" for Latinx writers

who have to create "within racist and neoliberal institutions" (368). Machado Sáez is careful to celebrate the achievements of Latinx writers such as those listed above who have achieved acclaim and attracted large readerships, but she warns that Latinx scholars, creative writers, and readers need to work together to open other pathways to publication and to think of new ways of imagining the history of contemporary Latinx literature.

Despite these apparent signs of success, Latinx writers have often encountered a hostile literary marketplace. In his contribution to this volume, Francisco E. Robles examines the various ways Latinx writers have responded to this by building their own institutions in response to the exclusionary nature of the world of poetry publishing. For example, Norma Elia Cantú, Celeste Guzman Mendoza, Pablo Miguel Martinez, Deborah Paredez, and Carmen Tafolla founded CantoMundo in 2009, which conducts workshops, provides mentoring, and helps Latinx poets establish the networks necessary to get published. Noting that many poetry contests had citizenship requirements that excluded undocumented applicants, Marcelo Hernandez Castillo, Christopher Soto, and Javier Zamora established Undocupoets in 2015, which promotes the work of undocumented poets and raises consciousness about the structural barriers undocumented writers face in the literary marketplace.[6] Thus, while writers are being incorporated into the literary mainstream in work that sometimes reproduces familiar tropes about Latinxs or conforms to the marketplace's aesthetic expectations, Latinx writers are also building their own institutions to promote the flourishing of a range of writing that represents what the critic Claudia Milian calls the "copiousness" of Latinidad.[7]

One important factor contributing to this "copiousness" is the shifting demographics within Latinidad as a result of new migrations from Latin America and the Caribbean. On the one hand, these shifting demographics exacerbate what Cristina Beltrán has called "trouble with unity," making it difficult to imagine a Latinidad that coheres. On the other, new migrations have infused Latinx literature with new narratives, new concepts, and new frameworks for imagining Latinx experience broadly. During the period covered by this volume, the Dominican American population more than tripled, from roughly half a million in 1990 to more than two million persons today. As John Ribó explores in his chapter on Haiti in the field imaginary of Latinx studies, the growth of Dominican studies in the United States contributed to reappraisals of Haiti's relationship to Latinx studies. Theorizing a "transnational Hispaniola," scholars in Dominican

studies collaborated with scholars in Haitian Studies to challenge the anti-Black discourses that have been directed at Haiti, to see the borderlands between the two nations as a site of dynamic exchange, and to consider the entwined histories of these nations. This is an instance of how one new migration spurs knowledge that reverberates across the entire field imaginary: The reassessment of Haiti connects with efforts to think critically about how we imagine Latin America; dispels some of the tired gothic tropes that paint Haiti as an exotic, threatening other; and opens an important avenue for further considering the long history of anti-Blackness in the hemisphere. Ribó notes the ambivalent place Haiti occupies in Latinx studies while also considering the ambivalence Haitians and Haiti Americans have toward Latinidad, which has so often excluded them. Drawing on the work of Régine Jean-Charles, Ribó advocates an "uncomfortable togetherness" that "can neither simply claim Haiti – and Haitian American literature – as its own nor exclude Haiti as unrelated, foreign other."

Rebeca Hey-Colón brings Haitian-Canadian-American writer Myriam J. S. Chancy's novel *What Storm, What Thunder* (2021) into "uncomfortable togetherness" with Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* and Daniel José Older's *Shadowshaper* in her chapter to reveal the growing significance of water for Latinx studies.[8] Latinx studies has been (and continues to be) focused on land – from the annexation of the now US Southwest after the US–Mexico War in 1848 to the occupation and colonization of Puerto Rico after the Spanish American War in 1898 to the growing militarization of the US–Mexico border to the recent critical considerations of gentrifying processes that routinely displace people of color. As generative as considerations of land have been, a recent group of scholars asks us to attend to water – maritime borders, Atlantic crossings, rivers, and streams – to "unsettle the centrality of the Mexico–US border in Latinx studies" in work that often draws attention to the Hispanophone Caribbean, even as it extends beyond it (Moreno 2).[9] Among other things, an attention to water in its various forms allows scholars to consider movements and connections *within* the Global South and to engage Afro-diasporic and Indigenous epistemologies, rooted in religions and spiritual practices, that regard water as a place of connection (Moreno 2, Hey-Colón 16). Hey-Colón plays on the Spanish word for "overflow" – *desbordar* – to consider how water undoes borders and insists on connectedness.

Hey-Colón merges environmental perspectives with Afro-diasporic and Indigenous spiritual traditions. Her most pointed engagement with

environmentalism occurs in her discussion of the pollution of Guatemalan waters in Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier*, a contamination that causes the deaths of poor children and that Tobar parallels with the sullied water systems of Los Angeles. By connecting environmentalism with Central America, Hey-Colón also reminds us that environmental catastrophes in the Americas have compelled mass migration in the period that this volume covers, and that Central America is one of the regions of the world most ravaged by these changes. Indeed, Guatemala and Honduras recently called on the United Nations to recognize Central America as the region most affected by climate change.[10] Climate catastrophe combined with the forms of political violence that are aftershocks of US-sponsored wars in the region have spurred migrations from Central American, resulting in some important demographic shifts in the composition of US Latinxs. Mexican Americans/Chicanxs, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans were long the three largest groups of Latinxs. However, recently, Salvadoran Americans have emerged as the third largest group and, when their population is combined with those from other Central American nations, Central American Americans are close to overtaking Puerto Ricans as the second largest Latinx group.[11]

These mass movements of people also correlate with the increasing importance of narratives about migration in Latinx studies. In her chapter, Jennifer Harford Vargas examines aspects of South American migrations that also resonate with the histories and tropes that appear in the stories of other Latinx groups, especially Central Americans. Focusing on how migration from South American nations has been shaped by war, civil conflict, and dictatorship, Harford Vargas offers the field two keywords for further thinking about this movement of people across the hemisphere: *desaparecidos* and *el Hueco*. Desaparecido ("disappeared") is perhaps the more familiar of the terms, naming forms of state violence that involve the secret kidnapping, torturing, and murdering of its citizens. As Harford Vargas notes, the term *desaparecido* "functions to simultaneously erase who is doing the disappearing *and* the person being disappeared," creating an in-between state that suspends the disappeared between life and death. While Harford Vargas locates the origins of the term in the Argentine Dirty War of the 1970s and 1980s, the practice of abducting perceived dissidents and others extended to other nations, notably several nations in Central America. In *Scales of Captivity*, Mary Pat Brady reads deportation as a form of disappearance, one that produces "subjunctive mourning": a mourning of "the loss of what could have been" (217). Harford Vargas describes the psychic costs for the kin and intimates of the disappeared in

similar terms. If the desaparecido creates ungrievable gaps for those left behind, el Hueco, which draws on the Colombian term (translated as "gap" or "hole") to describe crossing undocumented, names the spaces through which undocumented migrants travel and a state of suspension as migrants enter a state of rightlessness that Harford Vargas, drawing on the work of Lisa Cacho, describes as "social death." While aspects of these experiences of undocumented migration echo in the experiences of other groups, Harford Vargas uses the term *el Hueco* to highlight the South American specificity of the narratives she examines – a specificity that, as with Moreno's examination of water, decenters the ways the field's consideration of migration has so often been riveted to the US–Mexico border. In the South American Latinx narratives she analyzes, Harford Vargas sees writers attempting "to use narrative as a form of reappearance and as means of naming sources of trauma and imagining different Latinx futurities."

The chapters in the first part of this volume, then, explain several of the ways that Latinx communities and literature have transformed in the last three decades: the political events in which Latinxs are enmeshed, the literary successes that Latinxs have enjoyed, the institutions that they have built, the migrations that changed the composition of US Latinidad, and the concepts and stories resulting from these shifts. One consequence of these developments is that Latinx, as a category, is perhaps more heterogeneous now than it ever has been. The challenge of this heterogeneity is that it makes it difficult to say anything definitive about Latinx's "impossible diversity" (Gruesz x). Political theorist Cristina Beltrán suggests that we think about Latinx performatively rather than ontologically: "as action – as something we *do* rather than something we *are*" (19). This entails scrutinizing different instantiations of Latinidad and understanding them as always already coalitional, bringing disparate groups into a sustainable assemblage for some distinct aim. Approaching Latinidad in this way also leaves space for us to examine the places where unity dissolves and conflicts erupt between different groups placed under the umbrella of that term.

Ricardo L. Ortiz lauds Beltran for showing how Latinidad is a *process* "characterized by fluidity, heterogeneity, unevenness and nonidentity," and further extends her insights to "an imbricating consideration of *literature*, as itself a practice and a project" (*Latinx* 1, 19). For literary scholars and writers, one of the ways that we *do* Latinidad is through genre. In *Latinx Literature Unbound*, Ralph Rodriguez argues that genre may be a more useful category for Latinx literature studies in part because it unbinds us from "identity and thematic expectations" (12), which is to say that it opens Latinx up to the fluidity and heterogeneity Ortiz sees in Beltran's

theorization. In an elegant extension of Rodriguez's arguments, Aarón Aguilar-Ramírez argues that the kinds of neo-formalist approaches Rodriguez recommends "may very well help us to deploy the term 'Latinx' meaningfully as a cultural designator and interpretive framework, because teasing out narrative threads across ethnic lines provides us with otherwise lacking evidence of concrete pan-ethnic cultural formations" (50). We see vestiges of this in the above brief consideration of South American Latinx migration narratives, which both share features with migration narratives of those from other nations but also contain enough elasticity in order to be historically particular. Part II of this volume, "Transforming Genres," considers genre and form in recent Latinx literature in these terms: as a site for the complex unfolding of what Latinx means and can mean. The term "transforming" is meant both to indicate a shift in attitude toward literary form and to describe the ways that writers have leveraged the capacities of popular genres – such as science fiction, fantasy, and children's literature – to envision new horizons for Latinidad.

In their chapters, Aguilar-Ramírez and Guadalupe Escobar ground their discussions in two esteemed genres in literary studies: the novel and poetry. Aguilar-Ramírez situates Mexican writer Valeria Luiselli's celebrated novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019) in a tradition of what Ana Patricia Rodríguez calls "solidarity fiction." Also referring to these works as "fiction of solidarity" to signal the double-edged nature of these fictional projects, Rodríguez critiques Chicana novels from the 1990s by such writers as Ana Castillo, Graciela Limón, and Demetria Martínez because, while "clearly representing the plight of Central Americans during the civil wars in the 1980s," they also center "Chicana/o agencies, subjectivities, histories, and cultural mythologies," forcing Central Americans to "recede into the historical backdrop" (155). Aguilar-Ramírez detects in Luiselli's novel a new form of solidarity writing that understands the limits of pan-ethnic solidarities and uses narrative as "a site of negotiation, where writers envision possibilities of mutual identification and reveal the impasses that curtail coalition-building efforts." Luiselli explores the limits of representing migrant ethnic others, especially child migrants. In her consideration of contemporary Central American poetry, Escobar shifts the perspective from the person who regards the child migrant to the child migrant as witness. In the poetry of such writers as William Archila, Maya Chinchilla, Roy Guzmán, and, especially, Javier Zamora, Escobar tracks the child migrant as a speaker of poems that draw "on the conventions of witness poetry in order to record intergenerational war trauma and recast the Central American unaccompanied minor as a right-bearing subject."

In both chapters, child migrants figure prominently. The central role of children in migration narratives during this period is in part attributable to how the child, especially the Latinx child, emerged as a key figure in US debates about immigration. The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which was first introduced to Congress in 2001 by Senators Dick Durbin and Orrin Hatch, has shaped many debates about immigration in the United States for the past two and a half decades. The DREAM Act would extend a six-year conditional legal status to undocumented youth who meet several criteria, such as arriving in the United States before the age of sixteen, maintaining a continuous presence in the United States five years prior to the bill's enactment, receipt of a high school diploma, and demonstrating "good moral character." Although some saluted the act as a minor achievement in immigration reform, scholars note that the DREAM Act reinforces a good immigrant/bad immigrant account of migration that criminalizes undocumented parents while labeling their children as "innocent." While the DREAM Act has yet to be approved by both houses of Congress, President Obama signed an executive order, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), in 2012 that allows some undocumented youth brought to the United States as children to receive a two-year renewable deferred action from deportation, but, unlike the DREAM Act, DACA offers no path to citizenship. The fragility of this status became apparent during the Trump administration, which initially moved to rescind DACA. If the DREAM Act inaugurated a period in which the Latinx child became a central figure, attention on Latinx child migrants intensified in the 2014 child migrant crisis and during the years of the Trump administration in the harrowing images and sounds of caged child migrants detained at the border.[12] Works like Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* and Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied* reckon in serious ways with how the Latinx child has been figured in this discourse, providing us with important contexts while also making the case for the Latinx child's human rights.

While ample critical attention has been given to literary fiction that examines the Latinx child, less attention to been given to the booming catalog of Latinx children's literature that confronts some of these issues and attempts to imagine other frameworks and futures for Latinx youth. In *Latinx Teens*, Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera note the "double exclusion" of Latinx youth literature from both Latinx literary studies and from studies of children's literature. They point out, for instance, how considerations of Latinx youth literature appear in neither the recent *Cambridge Companion to Latina/o American Literature* nor *The Norton*