

## Beyond the Latina Boom: New Directions within the Field of US Latina Literature

MACARENA GARCÍA-AVELLO

Universidad de Cantabria

[gavellom@unican.es](mailto:gavellom@unican.es)

This article aims to identify a lesser-known generation of female writers that has given a new direction to US Latina literature in the twenty-first century. Beyond the significance of the Latina boom that marked the 1980s and 1990s, the latest generation differs from their predecessors in important ways, amounting to a paradigm shift in US Latina literature that needs to be thoroughly explored. To carry out this task, I have selected three canonical Latina boom novels: Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Julia Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992). These texts will be contrasted with Angie Cruz's *Soledad* (2001), Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe* (2001) and Felicia Luna Lemus's *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2004). My contention is that while the US Latina literary boom might have sought synthesis or the creation of a third space, associated with Gloria Anzaldúa's *consciousness of the borderlands*, these twenty-first century female writers offer representations of nonnormative sexualities that take indeterminacy and ambiguity to a limit that defies all resolution.

Keywords: US Latina literature; Latina boom; borderlands; new generation; nonnormative sexualities

...

### Más allá del *boom* latino: nuevas direcciones en el campo de la literatura latina estadounidense

Este artículo pretende identificar una generación de autoras, aún poco conocidas, que ha promovido una nueva corriente dentro del campo de la literatura latina estadounidense del siglo XXI. Más allá de la relevancia del *boom* latino de la década de los ochenta y noventa, esta nueva generación difiere de sus precesoras en importantes aspectos, evidenciando así un

cambio de paradigma que se examinará a lo largo de este artículo. Para ello, se analizarán tres de las novelas canónicas del *boom*: *The House on Mango Street* (1984) de Sandra Cisneros, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) de Julia Álvarez y *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) de Cristina García. Estos textos se contrastarán con *Soledad* (2001) de Angie Cruz, *Days of Awe* (2001) de Achy Obejas y *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2004) de Felicia Luna Lemus. La tesis de la que parto es que mientras las autoras del *boom* crean una síntesis o un tercer espacio asociado a *la conciencia de la frontera* de Gloria Anzaldúa, la generación más reciente de escritoras ofrece representaciones de sexualidades no normativas que ahondan en la ambigüedad impidiendo toda resolución.

Palabras clave: literatura latina estadounidense; *boom* latino; la frontera; nueva generación; sexualidades no normativas

In *Redreaming America* (2005), Debra Castillo refers to the increasing visibility of Latinas/as in the 1980s and 1990s as a *Latin boom* in popular culture and literary studies. She specifically highlights the contributions of US Latina writers like Julia Álvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Cristina García and Esmeralda Santiago to the emergence of a literary boom that became particularly successful at creating a discursive space for the construction of subjectivities that had previously been silenced. Beyond the significance of the US Latina literary boom that marked the 1980s and 1990s, this article aims to identify a group of lesser-known female writers that have given a new direction to US Latina literature in the twenty-first century. Therefore, my research explores a major shift in US Latina literature that distinguishes the canonical authors from a new generation of writers whose work remains largely unknown. To carry out this task, I have selected three canonical Latina boom novels: Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Álvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992). These will be contrasted with the twenty-first century texts *Soledad* (2001), by Angie Cruz, *Days of Awe* (2001), by Achy Obejas, and *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* (2004), by Felicia Luna Lemus.

In *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (2000), Sonia Saldívar-Hull examines the different ways in which cross-border feminists challenge the power dynamics that exert material and discursive pressures on Latina subjectivities. Taking this into account, I will argue that the three Latina boom novels mentioned in the preceding paragraph can be studied within the theoretical framework that Gloria Anzaldúa establishes in *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). I will start, therefore, by offering an overview of Anzaldúa's epistemology and how the literary texts of the Latina boom can be read through such a lens. I will then turn to an analysis of the selected twenty-first century works in order to illustrate how they differ from their predecessors. While Anzaldúa remains a major influence, the latest generation of writers focuses specifically on her contribution to queer theory rather than her concepts of the "new mestiza" or the "consciousness of the borderlands" (1987, 77). My contention is that while the US Latina literary boom might have sought synthesis or resolution through the creation of the third space associated with Anzaldúa's consciousness of the borderlands, these twenty-first century female writers offer representations of nonnormative sexualities that take indeterminacy and ambiguity to a limit that defies all resolution.

Anzaldúa understands the borderlands not only as a geographical space dividing Mexico and the United States, but as a metaphor for the *interstices* where multiple cultures, languages and worlds collide. *Mestizas* are left stranded in-between, facing several forms of oppression as women and as members of a minority group. In other words, discrimination against them comes from the dominant culture, as well as from their own ethnic group, which turns them, according to Ana Castillo, into "countryless women" (1995, 40). Anzaldúa refers to the plight of the mestiza when she describes her as "petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces

between the different worlds she inhabits” (1987, 20; italics in the original). As a result, life in the borderlands is fraught with tension, ambivalence and contradictions, thus becoming—in Anzaldúa’s words—“a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war” (1987, 21). Anzaldúa not only denounces the predicament of the mestiza but, more importantly, she displays how her anxiety and oppression can be confronted and endured through the creation of a discursive space that embraces the conflicts and ambiguities of living in-between: “living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create [...]. When I write it feels like I’m carving bone. It feels like I’m creating my own face, my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act” (1987, 73).

The borderlands becomes a space of negotiation, or as Rafael Pérez-Torres defines it in *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture*, an “interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated” (2006, 4). For Anzaldúa, this negotiation takes place at a discursive level. More specifically, she regards writing as an inclusive and transformative process that allows the mestiza to come to terms with the unceasing struggle that life in the borderlands entails—“it is this learning to live with *la Coatlicue* that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare to a numinous experience. It is always a path/state to something else” (Anzaldúa 1987, 73; italics in the original).<sup>1</sup> That something else is the consciousness of the borderlands or new mestiza, a new subjectivity that is the outcome of a writing process that turns the ambivalence and ambiguities of the interstices into sources of creativity. Through her writing, Anzaldúa articulates a transnational space where identity categories and labels are contested, deconstructed and discursively reappropriated. In this sense, the borderlands resemble Homi Bhabha’s notion of the interstices as a space where dominant narratives can be contested and deconstructed, particularly those pertaining to heteropatriarchy:<sup>2</sup> “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated” (1994, 2).

Subjectivities in Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, Álvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* and García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* are formed through a narrative process that entails the search for a place of enunciation that corresponds to Anzaldúa’s consciousness of the borderlands. In fact, the consciousness of the borderlands recurs throughout these novels as the protagonists create a transnational discursive space where narratives of the female self are deconstructed and re/constructed in different terms. In what follows, I will argue that despite the Latina boom writers’ diverse backgrounds and the numerous differences between their work, the depiction of the narrative process of subject formation in the novels of Cisneros, Álvarez and García follows a pattern that includes three stages: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. The thesis

<sup>1</sup> Anzaldúa correlates the creative process to the Aztec goddess Coatlicue.

<sup>2</sup> Jacqui Alexander defines heteropatriarchy as “the twin processes of heterosexualization and patriarchy” (2005, 65).

refers to an adolescent protagonist confronted with two cultures comprised of different languages and apparently opposing worlds. The antithesis places the protagonists amidst two worlds that exert multiple forms of oppression; Denise Segura and Jennifer Pierce argue that this situation is common to most Chicanos/as, as they “come to maturity as members of a racial and ethnic minority in a social and historical context in which their political, economic, and cultural uniqueness is constantly undermined, denigrated, and violated” (1993, 70). While the antithesis delves into the discrimination and alienation experienced, the synthesis occurs once the main characters come to terms and learn to cope with these conflicts by constructing narratives in the form of writings and paintings. Thus, the fact that the struggle is inscribed through their art opens up a space for constructing an alternative self that resembles Anzaldúa’s “new mestiza” (1987, 77).

Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* presents the coming of age of Esperanza Cordero, a Chicana teenager growing up in a Latino neighbourhood in Chicago. The novel displays throughout its numerous vignettes the development of a female subject that does not conform to the notion of the lone, self-sufficient individual, but whose identity is regarded as “inflected by race, class, culture, but especially and above all, by space” (Estill 1994, 40). Indeed, Cisneros reflects on the meaning of womanhood within that particular context taking into account the parameters identified by Adriana Estill, to which sex and sexuality should be added. The house, referred to as “the house I belong but do not belong to” (Cisneros [1984] 1991, 109-10), becomes the symbol of Esperanza’s alienation at the same time as acting as a dividing line separating the private self from the public world represented by the Latino neighbourhood. Furthermore, the process of Esperanza’s maturing is represented in connection with the community of women living in the neighbourhood, which offers an alternative version of the bildungsroman and the subjectivity associated with it. Cisneros’s stress on the community rather than the individual suggests that the self is necessarily dependent on others. Thus, *Mango Street*, along with the people and stories that inhabit it, cannot be separated from the construction of Esperanza’s subjectivity.

Throughout the novel, Esperanza longs for “a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (Cisneros [1984] 1991, 108), far away from *Mango Street*. However, her coming of age culminates with the realisation that leaving her neighbourhood behind is not an option. *Las comadres*, the three magical sisters, tell her at the end of the novel: “when you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be *Mango Street*. You can’t erase what you know: You can’t forget who you are” ([1984] 1991, 105). By the end of the novel, the protagonist understands that she cannot turn her back on her roots. Furthermore, writing allows her to come to terms with and revise the traumatic experiences that she has both witnessed and experienced, incorporating them as part of a narrative that projects healing and transformative effects. Esperanza negotiates with the oppressive circumstances she faces as a Chicana

teenager through a narrative that provides her with a channel to create a subjectivity that incorporates ambivalence and turns it into a source of creativity: “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She [Mango Street] does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (Cisneros [1984] 1991, 110). While Esperanza imagines other futures for the women of the neighbourhood, she cannot conceive of herself, or her writing, as separate from Mango Street. The fact that for Esperanza the prospect of a better future is dependent on her writing evokes the potentiality of narratives to transcend the oppressive circumstances faced by Latinas.

Cisneros herself explains in an interview that when she was in college, she became aware of how her different background constituted a powerful source of inspiration, as it rendered possible the representation of subjectivities and experiences that had never made their way into fiction: “I knew I was a Mexican woman. But, I didn’t think it had anything to do with why I felt so much imbalance in my life, whereas it had everything to do with it! My race, my gender, and my class! And it didn’t make sense until that moment [...]. That’s when I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn’t write about” (Doyle 2010, 65). Not only did Cisneros’s positioning or, more specifically, her difference, provide her with a genuine insight, but it also gave her a responsibility towards a community of Chicana women whose experiences had been traditionally overlooked. This realisation encouraged her to conceive fiction as a means to open up new spaces for the deployment of voices emanating from the borderlands.

The search for a discursive space associated with the borderlands is also represented in Álvarez’s novels. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* focuses on the García sisters’ feelings of displacement after their family flees the Dominican Republic due to their father’s participation in a coup d’état against Trujillo and joins their cousins, who are already living in the United States.<sup>3</sup> The novel deals with the conflicts inherent in the process of adjusting and accommodating to Anglo-American culture experienced by Yolanda, the narrator, who describes the different ways in which she and her sisters negotiate between the two worlds. The novel exposes the set of norms and behaviours that are considered desirable for women of her privileged social class in the Dominican Republic, but from the very beginning Yolanda is described as incapable of fashioning her gender identity according to this ideal of femininity. When she is back in her native country, she sees herself through the eyes of her Dominican cousins: “Yolanda sees herself as they will, shabby in a black cotton skirt and jersey top, sandals on her feet, her wild black hair held back with a hairband. Like a missionary, her cousins will say, like one of those Peace Corps girls” (1991, 4). Yolanda’s feelings of inadequacy underpin a sense of alienation that persists in the United States. Instead of assimilating into the dominant culture, through her writing Yolanda is able to find a discursive space in the interstices where dominant narratives from both nations are interrogated

<sup>3</sup> The Dominican Republic was ruled by the dictator Leónidas Trujillo from 1930 to 1961.

and deconstructed. Furthermore, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* demonstrates that identity categories like gender, sexuality, class, nationality or race acquire different meanings in the Dominican Republic and the United States.

Moving from one country to another implies a transposition in the categories and value systems conforming reality. Álvarez's fiction emphasises a shift in identity categories between the Dominican Republic and the United States that leads her to define the sisters as "translocal subjects" according to the following definition: "translocality describes the way in which displacement makes class, gender, sexuality, nationality and racial classifications continuously fluctuate. It also challenges the neatly defined boundaries of national, ethnic/racial, or class cultures by proposing a view that takes into consideration their transformations amidst shifting contexts" (Santos-Febres 1992, 26). While the García sisters belong to the privileged class on the island, their arrival in New York means a loss in social status. The same happens with race; while in the Dominican Republic they were at the top of the racial hierarchy, in the United States they become Latinas, that is, members of an ethnic minority. This deconstructs essentialist discourses on race and gender or, in other words, "this shift in classification itself reveals the relativity of social groupings, thereby reinforcing their fictive nature. If two countries can construct these categories differently [...] we must consider how these categories are socially rather than biologically created or natural" (Gaffney 2003, 19). Through her characters, Álvarez reflects on the confluence of discourses and material conditions that act on the body, regarded as a codified materiality represented through language, which indicates how language is used as a means to deconstruct only to later re/construct on a different basis. While the novel seems to confirm Sidonie Smith's claim that "the body is our most material site of potential homelessness" (1993, 267), writing provides a discursive space in which other forms of subjectivity can be imagined and articulated.

García's *Dreaming in Cuban* follows three generations of del Pino women: Celia, who stays in Cuba, her daughter Lourdes, determined to assimilate into the Anglo-American culture she now lives in, and Pilar, the granddaughter positioned amidst these opposing forces. The novel tackles the various problems faced by each generation, casting light on the intricate web weaving together nation, gender and sexuality. Celia spends her final years supporting Fidel Castro's dictatorship, driven by a nationalist fervour that is fused with her adoration of the leader after her husband's death: "ten years or twenty, whatever she has left, she will devote to El Líder, give herself to his revolution. Now that Jorge is dead, she will volunteer for every project—vaccination campaigns, tutoring, the microbrigades" (García 1993a, 44). The fact that Celia even replaces her dead husband's portrait with one of Castro suggests that her duty as a widow is to remain loyal to the symbolic father of the nation. The following quotation evinces how loyalty to the political regime is equated with a kind of self-surrender: "she imagines that El Líder is watching her, whispering in her ear with his warm cigar breath. She would gladly do anything he asked" (García 1993a, 112).

Taking this into account, it is not surprising that Celia regards her daughter's exodus to the United States as a betrayal of revolutionary values. Lourdes's rejection of her Cuban past is largely due to the violence and rape perpetrated against her by a soldier back on the island. Thus, Lourdes conceives of her migration to the United States as a means of leaving her traumatic past behind in her homeland: "immigration has redefined her [...] she welcomes her adopted language, its possibilities for reinvention [...]. She wants no part of Cuba" (García 1993a, 73). Nevertheless, the aftermath of this rupture gives rise to an inflated American patriotism and an excessively high libido, as well as a staggering voracity. Instead of working through the violence inherent in the sexual assault and subsequent migration, the repression of Lourdes's trauma triggers the pathological responses enacted by her body: "her appetite for sex and baked goods increased dramatically. [...] Lourdes did not battle her cravings; rather she submitted to them like a somnambulist to a dream. [...] Lourdes was reaching through Rufino [her husband] for something he could not give her, she wasn't sure what" (García 1993a, 21).

While Celia and Lourdes take seemingly irreconcilable positions, the assumption of their respective nationalist discourses and the gender roles associated with them contributes to their subordination. Pilar, on the other hand, becomes the only character who, pitted against these two opposing forces, manages to interrogate and dismantle these discourses: "even though I've been living in Brooklyn all my life, it doesn't feel like home to me. I'm not sure Cuba is, but I want to find out. If I could only see Abuela Celia again, I'd know where I belonged" (García 1993, 50). Even though Pilar is educated according to the American values professed by her mother, the telepathic communication she shares with her grandmother connects her with her Cuban roots. Her position in-between these conflicting influences generates numerous clashes and feelings of alienation that find expression through her art. When she is asked about the mutilated bodies that pervade her drawings, she thinks: "what could I say? That my mother is driving me crazy? That I miss my grandmother and wish I'd never left Cuba? That I want to be a famous artist someday? [...]. Painting is its own language, I wanted to tell him. Translations just confuse it, dilute it, like words going from Spanish to English" (García 1993a, 59). Thus the displacement and distress resulting from her double heritage is transposed to her paintings, which become the channel or language through which she creates a bicultural self that embraces the contradictions and ambiguities of living in-between two worlds, in what Anzaldúa calls the borderlands.

This in-betweenness is associated with the place of enunciation shared by the author herself. García confirms this when she explains in an interview, "those of us who kind of straddle both cultures are in a unique position to tell our family stories. We're still very close to the immigration, and yet we weren't as directly affected by it [...]. So we are truly bilingual, truly bicultural" (García 1993b, 612). In the novel, Pilar is in charge of inscribing the family past through art and drawing becomes the means to represent memory in a process that entails the transformation of her own subjectivity. Her paintings mirror the crafting of a self that, far from assuming the nationalist discourses



transmitted by either Celia or Lourdes, opts for the reconciliation of seemingly opposing worldviews. As Andrea O'Reilly argues in "Women and the Revolution in García's *Dreaming in Cuban*", through Pilar, García privileges painting over writing as a way to disclose the self and its past: "although Pilar transforms and reinscribes both herstory and History—in other words, her artwork is not unmediated by her own personal biases or, for that matter, by social or cultural specificity—nevertheless the language of painting is for her a more universal and, therefore, less 'corrupt' mode of communication and interpretation" (1997, 89).

This critical overview of Cisneros's, Álvarez's and García's novels indicates that in spite of their numerous differences, there is a shared preoccupation with the multiple forms of discrimination suffered by Latina women. But far from simply denouncing this oppression, the representation of the material and discursive circumstances surrounding the protagonists demonstrates that alternative possibilities, along with alternative selves, can be imagined and projected through the construction of narratives. The novels can be taken as examples of what happens when, following Ana Castillo's statement, "we refuse learned associations, dualisms" (1995, 170), namely, "we may begin to introduce unimaginable images and concepts into our poetics" (1995, 170). The protagonists create a space of enunciation placed in the borderlands between two worlds with different ideologies and languages, which in Pilar's case involves embracing bilingualism and biculturalism through their writings and paintings. These narratives provide them with the tools to transform their destinies while revising and redefining their subjectivities. The three novels conclude once the protagonists have articulated a subjectivity that can be identified with Anzaldúa's consciousness of the borderlands or new *mestiza*. Like Anzaldúa's new *mestiza*, the narrators have succeeded in "developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity [...]. Not only [do they] sustain contradictions, [they] turn the ambivalence into something else" (1987, 101).

Moving on to the three lesser-known twenty-first-century works selected for discussion in this article, they resemble the Latina boom novels as regards the way they transcend the borders of the nation. However, the new generation of writers problematises the creation of a third space where tension and ambivalence can be embraced. More specifically, the representation of nonnormative sexualities throughout their novels foregrounds an indeterminacy that leaves conflicts unsolved. The analysis that follows highlights an interplay between alternative sexualities and feelings of dislocation that connects with Anzaldúa's identification of queers as those who do not belong: "we are the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective culture. [...] the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we do not fit, and because we do not fit we are a threat" (2009, 50).

Cruz's *Soledad* tells the story of a nineteen-year-old Nuyorican girl who returns to her family home in Washington Heights when her mum Olivia falls into a deep depression causing her to lose her ability to speak. This silence sets in motion a search

that prompts Soledad to look into her mother's life at the same time as her return means she must confront the ghosts of her own past. Her narrative unveils a childhood fraught with domestic violence and abuses from her stepfather, along with the spiral of exclusion and lack of opportunities that condition the lives of girls belonging to her social and racial group. Throughout the novel, Soledad criticises the compulsory heteronormativity that she holds accountable for her oppression and that of other women around her. In addition, Soledad's ongoing clashes with her mother and her Dominican roots are represented as a dialectical struggle between her drive to move forward and leave behind this environment and the affective bonds that link her with her genealogical past. Like the Latina boom novels, *Soledad* explores the contrasts between the first and second generation. But unlike them, Cruz's novel fails to reach a synthesis, opting instead to complicate the narrative resolution. Soledad befriends Carmel, a Chicana whose discourse can be compared to Esperanza, Pilar and Yolanda's efforts to create a third space—for example, when she urges Soledad “to start our own thing, make our own rules, where the sky is the limit. A place where our mamis can come and visit and not feel like they don't belong” (Cruz 2001, 57). However, at the end of the novel Soledad has not managed to forge this place; instead of reaching a synthesis, the narrative ends with the revelation that Soledad was sexually abused, which calls into question the Latina boom approach to narratives as transforming and healing processes through which an alternate subjectivity can be conceived.

Moreover, Soledad's rejection of heteronormativity is misunderstood by her own family, who regard it as an attempt to assimilate into Anglo-American culture, and hence as some sort of betrayal of her heritage. On several occasions she is accused of behaving as “a blanquita [...] a sellout, a wannabe white girl” (Cruz 2001, 3). This echoes Cherrie Moraga's observation that the Chicana “who defies her roles as subservient to her husband, father, brother, or son by taking control of her own sexual destiny is purported to be a ‘traitor to her race’ [...] even if the defiant woman is not a lesbian” (1983, 113). In *Soledad*, the multiple conflicts emanating from the protagonist's gender and sexuality remain unsolved, leading to an open, uncertain ending that refuses to show her overcoming obstacles once and for all.

This pattern is echoed in the representation of Soledad's mother, Olivia, whose life is characterised as an obstacle race, due in part to the heteropatriarchy that perpetuates inequality and leaves her without any prospects. As a teenager, Olivia managed to run away from an unwanted arranged marriage and move to Santo Domingo with the help of a Swedish photographer: “if she hadn't escaped she would have had to marry that man [...] leaving home seemed like the better option [...] all she wanted, to be on her own. He [the Swedish man] said all she needed to do was look beautiful. With her green eyes, she would have no problem at all” (Cruz 2001, 47). However, this apparent liberation becomes a mere mirage once she finds herself forced to work as a prostitute. Her luck, though, seems to change when she marries Manolo, an American citizen who takes her to the United States. But far from offering any real prospect of building a better

future for herself, this turns out to be a sentence to a life of domestic confinement and abuse. The representation of Olivia's past suggests a notion of agency that is necessarily understood as an ongoing process that cannot be accomplished once and for all. This approach can be related to Donette Francis's view of female agency, defined not as "a fixed destination at which one arrives with the act being forever completed" but, rather, as "a continuous series of manoeuvres to be enacted and reenacted" (2011, 60). In other words, Olivia is left with continuous acts of resistance that need to be reenacted within the context of the power relations that traverse the novel.

Unlike the discursive subjectivities identified in the Latina boom novels, the self in *Soledad* is conceived as a performance that needs to be permanently reiterated. Thus, Cruz represents an endless series of ongoing resistances that forecloses the creation of a consciousness of the borderlands. This kind of practice of subject formation resembles Chela Sandoval's "differential mode of oppositional consciousness," defined as "a tactical subjectivity with the capacity to recenter depending upon the kinds of oppression to be confronted" (2000, 14). Furthermore, it should be noted that Olivia's past is narrated indirectly through the pieces that the protagonist has been able to gather, and as Soledad delves into her mother's past, new interrogations emerge, transforming her quest into an endless struggle that ultimately eschews any possible closure. This implies that the novel ends with the conviction that every attempt to answer one question can only lead to new doubts, leaving the mystery surrounding Soledad's present and her mother's past unsolved.

Lemus's *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* also examines the generational conflict of a queer Chicana, Leti, whose life fluctuates between two opposing forces: that of her grandmother Nana, responsible for the transmission of traditional Mexican values, and the urban setting of Los Angeles, along with its queer community. Leti's story revolves around a dilemma that confronts her crafting of a queer self and the influence exerted by Nana, who has raised her in accordance with the conventions, norms and traditions prevailing in Mexican-American culture, with particular emphasis on the transmission of the dominant ideology of gender. In an attempt to find her own space within the queer community of Los Angeles, Leti moves out of her grandma's house, but she soon realises that the impact of her Mexican upbringing is inexorable. In spite of her relocation, the narrator reflects on how "the apartment I had rented [...] I was beginning to realize was a futile attempt to outrun my Weeping Woman and Nana" (Lemus 2004, 9). The allusion to the archetype of the Weeping Woman, *La Llorona* in Mexican folklore, highlights Leti's failure to run away from the gender ideology instilled in her by her grandmother.

The numerous descriptions of Nana teaching Leti how to dress, wear her hair and act during her childhood evince the intergenerational transmission of attitudes, roles and behaviours that lead to the formation of gender expression. As a consequence, Leti's defiance of the binary gender system primarily occurs through the way gender is performed, specifically through external codes like clothes. On several occasions, Leti's

clothing choices cause an effect termed “layering” by Judith Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* (1998, 3), which refers to the overlapping of masculine and feminine symbols as a way to prove that sex and gender are not necessarily aligned. In these cases, the main role of clothes is not to conceal, but to delve into and exploit the confusion. By dressing in a masculine way, Leti does not aim to look like a man, but to carry out a subversive parody that exposes gender as a construction that, as such, can be deconstructed and re-constructed in different ways. In Halberstam’s words, “if masculinity is not the social and cultural and indeed political expression of maleness, then what is it? [...]. Far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity” (1998, 1). Instead of two antagonistic forms of masculine and feminine gender that align with the corresponding sex, Leti disrupts the binary classification of sex and gender by identifying herself as dyke, queer, femme, boy, boy-girl or even princess depending on the situation. Furthermore, within the context of nonheteronormative relationships, Leti alternates her adoption and reproduction of the gender roles that correspond to the prototype of masculinity with qualities and codes attributed to the feminine.

In sum, the conception of gender underlying the novel can best be understood in the light of Judith Butler’s definition of gender as “performance,” that is, “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1990, 33). This representation of gender rejects the existence of a fixed identity underlying the different acts that configure gender expression. Instead of opposing the gender system, the protagonist of Lemus’s novel subverts it from within by blurring the lines that organise sex and gender into two distinct and disconnected spheres of masculinity and femininity. In other words, Leti’s subversive repetition of gender roles leads to her identification as a queer subject, understood throughout the text as “a praxis of resistance. Queer in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order” (Tinsley 2008, 199).

The novel thus deconstructs the binary gender system, pointing to a more flexible and inclusive spectrum of gender and sexual identities that have been associated with “genderqueer practices” (Wilchins 2002, 53) in the context of transnational cultural formations. In the following extract, Leti describes herself as being in the process of opening up new unexplored paths that defy the norms imposed by the dominant discourses of gender:

I’d seen signs at intersections that read ‘Diagonal Crossing Allowed.’ Those signs fascinated me. See, even when diagonal crossing is permitted, I’ve noticed that the vast majority of people walk lines perpendicular to the well-traveled roads. Why? Fuck if I know. What I did know was that my life depended on me crossing the street diagonally, sometimes in a winding circular pattern for that matter. (Lemus 2004, 169)

The challenging of normative notions of masculinity and femininity is symbolised by the diagonals and circles, which resonate with the oblique, nonlinear, nonnormative paths defined by Mikko Tuhkanen and Elizabeth McCallum as lacking “proper orientation in terms of time as much as of social norms” (2011, 7). Anzaldúa also reflects on the limiting effects of linguistic terms which simplify sexual complexity and confine it to a few labels: “what I object to about the words ‘lesbian’ and ‘homosexual’ is that they are terms with iron-cast molds [...]. A mestiza colored queer person is bodily shoved by both the heterosexual world and by White gays into the ‘lesbian’ or ‘homosexual’ mold whether she fits or not. La persona está situada dentro de la idea en vez de al revés” (Anzaldúa 1991, 165-66).

Against the narrator’s efforts to transcend the persistent gender binaries, the novel foregrounds the endless obstacles that inhibit the lives of queer subjects. In particular, Lemus highlights society’s failure to see beyond the conventional classification of gender and sex into two opposing poles, to the extent that those who do not conform to normative gender roles are viewed as inviable subjects. Seen in this way, gender is not a matter of choice, but rather, as Butler explains, it consists of “the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment” (1993, 232). As a result of not conforming to the binary gender system, the world that surrounds Leti approaches her with confusion and misunderstanding, especially her Nana, who is incapable of recognising her granddaughter’s performances as manifestations of an alternative subjectivity. This is illustrated by Nana’s reaction on the night of Thanksgiving, when Leti shows up dressed as a boy: “dear Mother of God. Is that a boy or a girl?” (2004, 167), she asks. The fact that Leti does not fit into the set of social norms and behaviours that are considered acceptable or appropriate within the logic of a heteronormative system makes her illegible to Nana. After the Thanksgiving episode, Nana and Leti have a falling out, which leads to an estrangement that signals both Nana’s lack of a conceptual framework for understanding queer subjectivities and Leti’s failure to come to terms with her Mexican roots. The problematisation of discursive spaces where queer subjectivities can be fully developed leads Jackie Cuevas in “Imagining Queer Chican@s in the Post-Borderlands” to establish an epistemological distinction between the Chicana tradition of the 1980s, on the one hand, and Lemus, on the other, concluding that in the latter’s work, it is “genderqueerness that becomes the next borderlands of Chican@ identity to be crossed, entered, negotiated, constructed, interrogated, and imagined” (2013, n.p.).

This struggle is aggravated at the end of the novel when Nana dies without making peace with her granddaughter, which confirms that Leti has not succeeded in reconciling her queer subjectivity with her Mexican background. Nevertheless, the failure with which the novel concludes should not be read only in negative terms. On the contrary, the fact that other forms of subjectivity are represented and imagined in the novel points towards a more promising future, a time when other ways of being, acting and desiring could be read and included. In this respect, Lemus offers a representation of

queerness that resembles José Esteban Muñoz's association between queerness and the idea of futurity: "queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain" (2009, 1).

Obejas's *Days of Awe* also explores the irresolution experienced by the narrator, Alejandra San José, a Cuban Jew exiled in the United States as a young girl. Alejandra embarks on an identity search that takes her back to the island only to be confronted by a complete lack of a sense of belonging: "what could be more dramatic than returning to the place of your birth and feeling nothing, absolutely nothing, but the slightest cyber of an echo from a bottomless pit?" (2001, 75). Her critical interrogation of her background prevents her from recognising herself as either Cuban, American or Jewish, enhancing the uncertainty conveyed throughout the novel. Diaspora becomes a symbol of Alejandra's inability to relate to a homeland or a place of origin, exacerbating feelings of absence and loss. In her article "Next Year in the Diaspora: The Uneasy Articulation of Transcultural Positionality in Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe*," Dara Goldman concludes that "the loss is never fully eradicated. Although the protagonist does successfully realize a journey of discovery that leads to more satisfying self-expression, the novel ultimately presents a vision of increased equilibrium and authority within a situation of irrevocable displacement" (2011, 61).

This indeterminacy is mirrored by Alejandra's alternation of masculine and feminine roles within the context of homosexual relationships. The destabilisation of national identity and sexuality are thus inextricably linked through Alejandra's account, which is reminiscent of Ellie Hernández's statement that "gender and sexuality offer more varied responses to the idea of the dissolution of the nation" (2006, 5). In this sense, it is worth noting that Alejandra's urge to adopt masculine roles associated with the stereotypical Cuban lover happens when she becomes involved with an American woman: "She called me her Latin lover [...]. I've never been more Cuban than when I was with her [...]. With Leni [her American girlfriend], I was closer than ever to all the dark peoples for whom I interpreted and to whom I represented a system and established order that I never felt part of. With her, I relinquished my own darkness" (Obejas 2001, 178-79). As in Lemus's novel, gender performances in *Days of Awe* also have subversive effects, as it is the female protagonist who adopts the masculine roles reserved for men within the national discourse on Cubanness. This leads Alejandra to reflect on her feelings of inadequacy at different points in the novel, as is the case when she wonders, "Who am I in all this? I'm a stranger, as out of place as a whale whimpering on the shore, a lute, a hairless native pretending to live free" (Obejas 2001, 192).

In this respect, Alejandra's narrative contradicts Gustavo Pérez-Firmat's thesis in *Life on the Hyphen*, according to which indeterminacy can in fact become a permanent state. Pérez-Firmat identifies three stages that the 1.5 generation of immigrants goes

through until they reach biculturality. The first one is a substitution phase dominated by a nostalgia that encourages them to re-create their homelands in the new country. The second stage is a response to the realisation that the homeland cannot be recovered: “no amount of duplicate landmarks can cover up the fact that you are no longer there and what’s more, that you may never return” (Pérez-Firmat 1994, 9). Finally, the impossibility of living in a fantasy or imaginary recreation leads to the reconciliation of certain aspects of the homeland and the destination country, which results in the achievement of biculturality.

Obejas, on the other hand, presents a character who is incapable of reaching this third stage. Unlike Pilar, Yolanda and Esperanza in the Latina boom novels, Alejandra never escapes the uncertainty, nor does she learn to cope with it. She remains in a state of constant struggle, overwhelmed by endless questions and doubts, which is equated in the novel with the image of diaspora. The fact that her father’s ashes are scattered at sea at the end of the novel suggests that her father, just like Alejandra herself, is left floating in the ocean, unable to be pinpointed to one particular location. In “Days of Awe and the Jewish Experience of a Cuban Exile: The Case of Achy Obejas,” Carolyn Wolfenson states that “a Jew is not the one who returns, seems to say Obejas, but the one who wants to return. Jewish heritage is not land, but a form of desire, and Jewish community is a commonality of desire” (2010, 115). Instead of creating a third space that could be identified with the borderlands, the novel concludes with the narrator’s failure to reach a narrative resolution.

This article evinces how the more contemporary novels by Latina writers revolve around some sort of absence or loss that cannot be overcome in the present time. The representations of alternate sexualities in *Soledad*, *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties* and *Days of Awe* contribute to the proliferation of conflicts that leave the protagonists exposed to alienating circumstances, resulting in the openness that characterises their endings. In the Latina boom texts examined here, on the other hand, while multiple forms of discrimination are also exposed, ultimately the protagonists—Esperanza, the García sisters and Pilar—are shown embracing ambiguity. In Sigrid Wiegel’s words, they learn “to voice the contradictions, to see them, to comprehend them, to live in and with them, also learn to gain strength from the rebellion against yesterday and from the anticipation of tomorrow” (1986, 99). The construction of their respective narratives means a present resolution, as it allows the narrators to cope with their reality in a manner that is absent from the work of the latest generation. In their novels, the representation of nonnormative sexualities fosters in the protagonists insurmountable feelings of inadequacy that cause their narratives to end with the same irresolution they began with.

In Cruz’s *Soledad*, lack of closure is illustrated by Olivia’s frustrated agency, but also by Soledad’s failure in putting together the pieces of her own past or that of her mother. In Lemus’s *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*, the gender fluidity embodied by Leti contrasts with an environment that lacks the conceptual frameworks through

which queer identities can be articulated and comprehended. Nana's confusion represents the unintelligibility that queer subjectivities experience in a world that has not been able to transcend gender binaries. In Obejas's *Days of Awe*, Alejandra stays in the diaspora, identified as an imprecise and misty space. The unresolved conflicts and inconclusive endings of each of these more recent works enhance the openness that leaves their narrators floating in a sea of indeterminacy. While this suspension could be misinterpreted as a present failure, the fact that the underlying conflicts are articulated points towards a horizon, a future that has not been reached, but which has at least been imagined. This resembles Agamben's notion of "the potential," defined in "On Potentiality" as "to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential. They can be because they are in relation to their own non-Being. In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness" (1999, 182).

Since the inception of an unrealised future places the post-boom novels within the realm of the potential, their endings can also be related to Hernández's argument in "The Future Perfect: Chicana Feminist Critical Analysis in the Twenty-first Century." Hernández uses the title of one of Tomás Rivera's stories in ...Y no se lo tragó la tierra, "Cuando lleguemos," to illustrate how Chicana feminisms project towards a perfect future: "when we arrive" signals "orientation toward the political as a future perfect construction, motivated by hope and situated within the realism of present-day politics" (2006, 65). Since in the novels written by Cruz, Lemus and Obejas, the present is imbued with misunderstanding and the failure to create a discursive space where nonnormative selves can be narrated, hope becomes necessarily displaced towards a future time. Therefore, instead of creating the third space identified in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), the new generation of lesser-known Latina writers rejects narrative resolution through their representation of alternate sexualities, pointing towards a new horizon of potentiality.<sup>4</sup>

#### WORKS CITED

- AGAMBEN, Giorgio. 1999. *Potentialities: Collective Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP.
- ALEXANDER, Jacqui. 2005. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. London and Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- ÁLVAREZ, Julia. 1991. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. New York: Wokman.
- ANZALDÚA, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.

---

<sup>4</sup> The research underpinning this article was conducted within the framework of the project "Transnational Post-Westerns: Global Impact of a Regional Myth," financed by the Government of Cantabria (SODERCAN/FEDER 13.JU21.64661).



- . 1991. "To(o) Queer the Writer-Loca, escritora y chicana." In Keating 2009, 163-75.
- BHABHA, Hommi. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. New York and London: Routledge.
- BUTLER, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London: Routledge.
- . 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York and London: Routledge.
- CASTILLO, Ana. 1995. *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. New York: Penguin.
- CASTILLO, Debra. 2005. *Redreaming America: Toward a Bilingual American Culture*. Albany: SUNY P.
- CISNEROS, Sandra. (1984) 1991. *The House on Mango Street*. Reprint, New York: Vintage.
- CRUZ, Angie. 2001. *Soledad*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- CUEVAS, Jackie. 2013. "Imagining Queer Chican@s in the Post-Borderlands." *Revue Lisa e-Journal* XI (2). [Accessed online on December 10, 2017].
- DOYLE, Jacqueline. 1994. "More Room of Her Own: Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*." *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 19 (4): 5-35.
- ECKER, Gisela, ed. 1986. *Feminist Aesthetics*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- ESTILL, Adriana. 1994. "Building the Chicana Body in Sandra Cisneros's *My Wicked Wicked Ways*." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 56: 25-43.
- FRANCIS, Donette. 2011. "Novel Insights: Sex Works, Secrets and Depression in Angie Cruz's *Soledad*." In Smith 2011, 53-71.
- GARCÍA, Cristina. 1993a. *Dreaming in Cuban*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- . 1993b. "'... And There is Only Imagination Where Our History Should Be': An Interview with Cristina García." By Iraida López. *Michigan Quarterly Review* 33 (3): 605-17.
- GAFFNEY, Karen. 2003. "Julia Álvarez, Yo!" In Quintana 2003, 15-23.
- GOLDMAN, Dara. 2011. "Next Year in the Diaspora: The Uneasy Articulation of Transcultural Positionality in Achy Obejas's *Days of Awe*." *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 8: 59-74.
- HALBERSTAM, Judith. 1998. *Female Masculinity*. London and Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- HERNÁNDEZ, Ellie. 2006. "The Future Perfect: Chicana Feminist Critical Analysis in the Twenty-First Century." *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras* 5 (2): 59-91.
- . 2009. *Postnationalism in Chicano/a Literature and Culture*. Austin: U of Texas P.
- KEATING, Anne, ed. 2009. *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. London and Durham, NC: Duke UP.
- LEMUS, Felicia Luna. 2004. *Trace Elements of Random Tea Parties*. Berkeley, CA: Seal Press.
- MCCALLUM, Elizabeth and Mikko Tuhkanen. 2011. *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*. Albany: SUNY P.

- MORAGA, Cherrie. 1983. *Loving in the War Years: lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- MUÑOZ, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York and London: New York UP.
- NESTLE, Joan, Clare Howell and Riki Anne Wilchins, eds. 2002. *GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary*. New York: Alyson Books.
- OBEJAS, Achy. 2001. *Days of Awe*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- O REILLY, Andrea. 1997. "Women and the Revolution in García's *Dreaming in Cuban*." *Modern Language Studies* 27 (3): 69-91.
- PÉREZ-FIRMAT, Gustavo. 1994. *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*. Austin: U of Texas P.
- PÉREZ-ROSARIO, Vanesa, ed. 2010. *Hispanic Caribbean Literature of Migration: Narratives of Displacement*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- PÉREZ-TORRES, Rafael. 2006. *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- QUINTANA, Alvina, ed. 2003. *Reading US Latina Writers: Remapping American Literature*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- RIVERA, Tomás. 2012. *...Y no se lo tragó la tierra*. Houston: Arte Público Press.
- SALDÍVAR-HULL, Sonia. 2000. *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature*. Berkeley: U of California P.
- SANDOVAL, Chela. 2000. *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P.
- SANTOS-FEBRES, Mayra. 1992. *The Translocal Papers: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature*. Cornell, NY: Cornell UP.
- SEGURA, Denise and Jennifer Pierce. 1993. "Chicana/o Family Structure and Gender Personality: Chodorow, Familism, and Psychoanalytic Sociology Revisited." *Signs* 19 (1): 62-91.
- SMITH, Faith, ed. 2011. *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P.
- SMITH, Sidonie. 1993. *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- TINSLEY, Omise'eke Natasha. 2008. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic. Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* Volume 14 (2): 191-215.
- WIEGEL, Sigrid. 1986. "Double Focus: On the History of Women's Writing." In Ecker 1986, 23-52.
- WILCHINS, Riki. 2002. "Changing the Subject." In Nestle 2002, 47-54.
- WOLFENSON, Carolyn. 2010. "*Days of Awe* and the Jewish Experience of a Cuban Exile: The Case of Achy Obejas." In Pérez-Rosario 2010, 104-18.

Received 6 February 2018

Revised version accepted 19 October 2018

Macarena García-Avello holds a PhD in Hispanic Studies from the University of Maryland (2017) and a PhD in Gender and Women's Studies from the University of Oviedo (2014). She currently works at the University of Cantabria in Santander. She has published books and articles in peer-reviewed journals on twentieth-century American literature, feminist theory and the representation of gender in fiction.

Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa. Facultad de Educación. Universidad de Cantabria. Avda. de los Castros, s/n. 39005 Santander, Spain. Tel.: + 34 942201252.

