

# Re-defining the Criteria for American and US-Hispanic Literatures at the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century\*

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## RESUMEN

Con el objetivo de desactivar tanto los límites políticos, ideológicos y morales, como los diversos purismos, temores y binarios (a saber, ‘mayoría / minoría’, ‘anglo / hispano’, ‘centro / periferia’ y ‘ellos / nosotros’) derivados de las prácticas concretas de los siglos XIX y XX, abogo aquí por comprender las nuevas circunstancias estadounidenses producto de la creciente presencia hispana en el país, y repensar así los criterios que puedan redefinir el canon de la literatura latina y el de la literatura estadounidense de inicios del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: literatura latina, canon de la literatura estadounidense, canon de la literatura latina, binarios, literatura del siglo XXI.

## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to examine and therefore disable the political, ideological and moral boundaries as well as the implicit purisms, fears and binaries (‘majority /

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minority,'Anglo / Hispanic,'center / periphery' and 'they / we') that have characterized the concrete critical practices of the 19th and 20th centuries. I make the case for both understanding the new US contexts brought about by the growing Hispanic presence in the country, and rethinking the criteria to re-define the canons of Latino literature and US literature from the early 21st century.

Keywords: Latino literature, US literary canon, Latino literary canon, binaries, 21st Century literature.

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The large Latino population of the US has provided not only diverse communities of rapid growth and continued presence throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, but also a burgeoning literature originally written in English, Spanish or a combination of both languages (including Spanglish). Due to multicultural theories and the revisions of the canon of American literature, Latino literature has gained a deserved place in anthologies, textbooks and university departments throughout the country. Commonly displaced as Ethnic Literature or under the subcategory of Latino/US-Hispanic or Chicano/Mexican-American literature,<sup>1</sup> it occupies a minority status and may fulfill either a politically-correct quota or a market demand. Instead of being comprehensively represented, this ethnic integration usually opts for works originally written in English—with a familiar folkloric tolerance towards Spanglish—by Latinos born or raised in the US. The criteria behind such inclusion should be revisited, since they leave out—as expressed in the prefaces or implicit in the book indexes—the following issues which are pertinent to other literary works that, for decades—and centuries, in the case of Mexican-Americans—, are part of the Hispanic communities that, whether historically or contemporarily, have inhabited what today constitutes the US territory.

By adopting Anglo monolingualism, these criteria exclude Spanish, the second most spoken language in the country, which indicates that a very large segment of the population have daily experiences of 'being American' in Spanish. Even many non-Latinos<sup>2</sup> experience their 'being American' by their frequent contacts with Spanish culture, if only as passive dependents. Like it or not, especially in vast areas of the Southwest and in cities like Miami, New York, Los Angeles and Houston, the Spanish language is part of the US. In fact, Spanish is neither in decline nor under signs of rapid assimilation to 'the Anglo,' as it was prior to the 1960s. On the contrary, it is

flourishing, even among younger generations. In spite of some sporadic outbreaks of racism and discrimination—which current laws could control—, ‘all things Latino/Hispanic’ are very alive today due to different factors (cultural, educational, legal, political, or of identity, media, trade, population, immigration, etc.) that have allowed their strengthening, recognition and pride. Reality has also proven that the ‘melting pot’ idea can neither be successfully applied throughout the US nor is it the most adequate approach. In contrast, the Canadian idea of a ‘mosaic’ has attained greater visibility and acceptance.

While the melting pot advocates for the assimilation of disparate elements of society to the standards of an Anglo-White-Western mainstream—taken as the dominant social validation (“Sameness,” using Edouard Glissant’s terminology)—, the mosaic signifies the non-hierarchical, equal integration of “Diversity” within the social fabric. This brings us to Glissant’s concept of “cross-cultural poetics.” Whereas Sameness tries to create a homogenous and hegemonic discourse which considers itself to be the holder of a universal truth that denies difference (in Couto 136), Diversity, as an “accepted difference,” confronts Sameness and “leads to cultural contact: that is the modern tendency among cultures, in their wanderings, the ‘structural’ need for an unreserved equality” (Glissant 97-98). Whereas Sameness relates to an identity-based root that destroys in its path, Diversity is associated with an identity-rhizome, a “multiple root” that would ideally spread “without harming other plants” within the social fabric (Glissant, in Couto 137). A more harmonious US will ultimately know how to integrate, like a rhizome in a mosaic, those manifestations of diversity that have been here for decades—or even centuries. Although the largest minority (or the so-called ‘majority-minority’), that is US-Hispanics, is quantitatively and qualitatively relevant, it still constitutes only one facet of the mosaic.

If ‘national literature’ is the literary expression of an ever-changing ‘national being’ that corresponds to the actual individuals that shape the nation, then American literature must both rethink the limitation of conceiving itself as monolingual Anglo—open only lexically to folklorisms intentionally labeled as exotic—, and accept diversity as a self-identity issue evidenced by the rampant English/Spanish bilingualism seen in important regions of the US. Our neighbor Canada—now with an increasing Hispanic presence and literature—legally demonstrates, although not without conflict, an English/French bilingual condition, even though its French component is geographically limited to Quebec province. The situation is not as clear in the US territory, where borders between bilingual (English/Spanish) and monolingual (Anglo or Hispanic) areas are constantly evolving. The American social fabric has been and still is extremely complex and ever-changing.

English/Spanish bilingualism in the US is no longer a minority condition. Whatever level of linguistic skills they might have, there are more than 50 million US-Hispanics. In addition, it is quite common to find many Spanish-speaking non-Latinos, particularly in regions where bicultural experiences include the family, the neighborhood and the schools. Spanish is, by far, the 'foreign' language most studied by university students and a common requirement for many jobs and professions. Any major office, hospital, business, law office or sales venues usually provide support in Spanish.

If we geographically locate the above figure of 50 million Hispanics, the supposed Latino minority constitutes a visible 'majority' in many rural and urban areas. Moreover, this figure, while abstract, is highly significant in a country of approximately 312 million people composed not only of Caucasians/Europeans but of numerous races and ethnicities. For these reasons, I propose here to avoid the theoretical classification of Latinos as a minority.<sup>3</sup>

To accept the term 'minority' implies the reproduction of divisionist and reductionist criteria on such a complex population. Divisionism falsely situates an artificial and supposedly majoritarian Anglo-White-Western construction as a center around which revolve its subalternate minoritarian peripheries, often included as either folkloric or exotic even with the complicity of various Latino authors. Equally unacceptable is a reductionism that demagogically imposes social homogenizations on diversity: neither do US-Hispanics constitute a homogeneous entity, nor does the alleged Anglo-White majority to which they presumptively oppose. The Anglo-White majority concept does not acknowledge its own internal divisions based on class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ideology and ethnicity; and leaves out of focus the economically and politically powerful 'Anglo minority' that manipulates other Anglos by pretending to represent them in a demagogic construction of a white 'English-speaking only' America.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the human condition, as well as individual identities, can no longer be conceived in a single-minded and deterministic way. Multicultural studies and realities have amply shown not only the multiple and disparate aspects (of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, ideology, race, etc.) that form individual identity, but also the role of personal choice in self-creating it, even beyond the inherited social constructions or biology and with the help of technology, if needed. Numerous factors already call into question the false and outdated homogeneity of the alleged Anglo majority and Latino minority, as well as the reduction of the US population to an Anglo/Hispanic dichotomy that overlooks the multiple ethnicities and races widely

visible in the country. Manuel Martín Jr.'s play *Rita and Bessie* clearly illustrates the ethno-cultural, racial and social American fabric by presenting the conflict between a black Anglo bisexual Bessie and a mulatto Hispanic heterosexual Rita—both looking for an acting job in New York—, as well as their respective attitudes towards a faceless voice (agent/boss), which, for the sake of my argument, could be identified as an Anglo-White-Western 'bourgeois.'

Equally divisionist is the vision of US-Hispanics as 'a country within a country.' However ingenious the phrase may be, this population does not constitute a country in any formal, legal or geographical sense. Such a phrase promotes a voluntary isolation in an abstract otherness by neglecting the fact that Latinos make up an integral piece in the vast American mosaic. But the Latino piece itself constitutes a mosaic. Puerto Rican Judith Ortiz Cofer—who lived in New Jersey and in Georgia—corroborates this when she recognizes the difference between her writings and those of her Nuyoricán compatriots (Nicolasa Mohr, Pedro Pietri, Miguel Piñero):

I continue reading and supporting [the Nuyoricans]. However, they do not exactly speak to me and for me in the sense that the Nuyoricán school is specific to that area. Although I lived in Paterson, it is not the same as living in New York City, in the barrios, and in those large communities where there is support and confirmation of culture and literature. The Nuyoricán writers have nourished me in the sense that it is good to know that they are completing the mosaic of Puerto Rican literature in the US. There is not just one reality to being a Puerto Rican writer. (Ocasio 45)

Manipulation exists in any speech that continues to replicate the polarity between false homogenizations of both Anglo-White-Western and Latino conditions. It is obvious that such a polarity persists and, at times, results in some circumstantial, discriminatory practices. However, this does not validate or legitimize its questionable theoretical foundations. Therefore, Hispanics should try to escape from that deforming conception of the human condition, society and life, by not repeating in a critical and mimetic way the segregating and deviatory racist traps found in the unyielding opposition between 'us' and 'them.' Animosity, as well as solidarity, towards US-Hispanics can arise from all pieces of the mosaic, whether it be non-Anglo-White-Western or Latinos themselves.

The continual recycling of the 'us vs. them' discourse—present in several US-Hispanic works and scholarly criticism from the 1960s to the 1980s—implies a reductive perception of the US mosaic by unfairly disregarding from the social fabric other pieces highly visible and/or powerful in certain regions, such as negro-descendants, surviving Native Americans, Chinese, Indians, Arabs, etc. They are obviously neither

part of the Latino ‘us’ nor of the Anglo-White-Western ‘them,’ and, as in the case of Hispanics, they make up a numerically and culturally relevant population in some areas. Without underestimating the significant role of ethnicity, race, class, religion, gender, sexuality, etc. in society, the aim of any theoretical response should be to dismantle those false sociopolitical constructions and dichotomies that have both distorted our consciousness, perception of reality, reflection and speech, and prevented us from relating to “the universal identity of mankind” (Martí), which must be at the center of all human consideration.

To properly challenge the traditional institution of gender (male/female) in society, Pierre Bourdieu advised not to use as “instruments of knowledge” but as “objects of knowledge,” the established categories of perception and of thought that have been “inscribed for millennia in the objectivity of social structures and in the subjectivity of mental structures,” because such categories, organized as irreconcilable binary oppositions, often embody a relation of power constructed “from the standpoint of the dominant, i.e., as natural” (Bourdieu 171). Following Bourdieu’s methodological advice, the binaries of majority/minority, Anglo/Latino, center/periphery and them/us, are contested here by taking them not as instruments but as questionable concepts in a discourse that seeks to unmask the relation of power hidden in such binaries when they try to validate themselves, pass as normal or natural, and infiltrate our perception and analysis of reality.

In line with the current Hispanic reality of the country, English/Spanish bilingualism should be considered a significant part of the US literature of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, without the need to ethnically or numerically label it, which has led to devaluating or treating it as a necessary quota. It is true that there are ‘English only’ areas in the US, but it is no less true that there are regions in which a menacing and persistent Spanish monolingualism predominates and, at times, even reminds passers-by with signs stating paradoxically ‘English spoken here.’ As it happens in their communities, many Latino literary works either deal with or fluctuate between these linguistic options, which are not simply personal realities or preferences.

By both limiting itself to Hispanic authors born or raised in the US and conceiving or labeling them as ethnic, the integrating practice seen in anthologies and textbooks reconfirms, albeit unconsciously, the Anglo-White-Western segment as an ethnically-unlabeled population center (which is a fallacy) that controls politics and, therefore, culture (which constitutes a false mechanicism).<sup>4</sup> Such a practice includes US-Hispanic works only in English and mostly dealing with the topic of identity as a process of cultural fusion or conflict (a back and forth movement between cultures) or the eventual assimilation or rejection of one over the other, both of which reconfirm the different Latino-labeled ethnicity within the pattern of an expected identity crisis,

a worn-out commonplace. A lucid and playful example of this cliché is found in Gustavo Pérez Firmat's poetry: "soy un ajiaco de contradicciones" [I am a casserole of contradictions], "el cubano-americano es un estar que no sabe dónde es" [the Cuban-American is not where he appears], "two hemispheres and neither one likes the other" (1995: 22, 28-29<sup>5</sup>).

Obviously, the topic of ethnical identity is relevant and authentic for many Hispanics, be they writers or not—and by extension, for the entire ethnically diverse US society. But, as seen in Pérez Firmat, it has not always been written exclusively in English; therefore, the literary production related to this topic, but written in Spanish, is usually excluded by the American canon due to its criteria of English monolingualism. When US-Hispanic authors have the linguistic and artistic capacity for using Spanish or English and, by either resisting the temptations of the singing sirens of the English marketplace or responding to their own expressive needs, they decide on a Spanish or a bilingual text to express this topic, such a decision is not a mere selection of language, but, rather, an aesthetic and cultural commentary about their work and society in terms of identity and the natural audience for their art. But the English monolingual concept does not correspond because it includes only a partial, and perhaps false, representation of the facts and conflicts. To record this topic exclusively in English not only determines the genesis and reception of the text, but may also lead to implicitly falsifying it. It is not by chance or whim that Dolores Prida conceived her "bilingual fantasy" *Coser y cantar* in a bilingual format, and emphatically demanded that it should never be done in a single language: "This play must NEVER be performed in just one language" (49). She felt that it was inappropriate to reduce the dual existential condition of her characters ELLA/SHE to one language, even if it were done in the most faithful and accurate translation. Likewise, Pérez Firmat's poem "Dedication" has indicated the treason or falsification behind expressing, only in English, this topic of identity:

The fact that I  
am writing to you  
in English  
already falsifies what I  
wanted to tell you.

My subject:  
how to explain to you  
that I  
don't belong to English  
though I belong nowhere else  
if not here  
in English. (1995: 3)

Symptomatic, then, in some of his texts is the restless displacement of one language to another, and the inclusion, at times, of witty interlinguistic games or mixtures of the two languages, all for the exclusive consumption and enjoyment of an English/Spanish bilingual reader. To fuse identities and languages into one single harmonic entity is not only a literary issue, but a psychological one as well: “O fundo o me fundo: /¡Me fundo!” [I found or founder: /I found(er)!], Pérez Firmat desperately shouts (1995: 54<sup>6</sup>).

Tato Laviera’s poem “My graduation speech” belongs to the same realm. Whereas Pérez Firmat’s rich vocabulary, refined references and playful ease are written proof of the enrichment that results from his mastery of both languages, Laviera’s voice, with its careless Spanish vernacular record, deliberately expresses a disturbing intellectual and linguistic impoverishment:

i think in spanish  
i write in english [...]  
si me dicen caviar, i digo,  
“a new pair of converse sneakers.”

ahí supe que estoy jodío  
ahí supe que estamos jodíos [...]

hablo lo inglés matao  
hablo lo español matao  
no sé leer ninguno bien

so it is, spanglish to matao  
what i digo  
¡ay, virgen, yo no sé hablar! (17)

Even more distressing and controversial, Miguel Algarín’s poem “Inside control: my tongue” articulates, in the militant 1970s, the conflict between individual expression and the English language, which he conceives as one more way that ‘Whites’ exercise power over the subalternate:

If the man owns the world  
oh white power hidden  
behind every word i speak  
if the man takes me into his  
caverns of meaning in sound  
if all my talk is borrowed  
from his tongue then I want  
hot boiling water to wash  
out my mouth I want lye



to soothe my soiled lips  
 for the English that i  
 speak betrays my need to be  
 a self made power. (Algarín and Piñero 58)

To identify US-Hispanic literature solely with Latino ‘ethnic writers’—those born or raised in the US—is, in many ways, a limiting practice. There are authors who arrived as adults and have successfully represented the topic of ethnic identity in either language. Cuban exile Reinaldo Arenas’ novel *El portero* [*The Doorman*] is an example. However, the American literary canon would not include it, due to the choice of language and ‘foreign’ (exiled) perspective. It would be more fruitful to go beyond this dichotomy between ethnic and exiled writers by understanding that the ‘foreign’ perspective (Cuban, Salvadoran, Chinese, Haitian, etc.) represents, in numerous communities, a substantial part of everyday American life and what ‘being American’ means today.

Despite the tendency towards homogenization, Latinos themselves make up an extremely heterogeneous conglomerate in terms of country of origin, age, traditional values, cultural preference, ethnic and/or racial composition, historical experience, political orientation, presence within the US territory, perception of the US, gender, sexuality, etc. This heterogeneity is somewhat overlooked when the goal is to integrate US-Hispanics into an American literary project. Only few critics have searched for writers and works that transcend the dichotomies previously discussed. As a result, the same ‘ethnic authors’ still reappear: Rudolfo Anaya, Sandra Cisneros, Oscar Hijuelos, Julia Álvarez, Junot Díaz, Cristina García, etc.

The canon’s preference for ‘all things Latino’ usually overlooks issues or conflicts that adult immigrants may carry from their countries of origin and express in Spanish, so that they reaffirm the connection with their abandoned cultural spaces. Like it or not—as it has happened in the past with other ethnic groups (Irish, Italians)—, the US is still today comprised of these Hispanic immigrants or permanent exiles who, besides belonging to the culture of their countries of origin, are an enriching piece of the American mosaic. The binational condition of many of them (as evidenced by the thousands currently holding two legal passports, not to mention the peculiar legal circumstances of Puerto Ricans) is not just a bureaucratic fact, but an everyday living and existential experience. Such groups exist at the core of the American nation: with their own ideologies and cultures, they interact with both their native countries and the US. Neither Latino literature nor American literature should exclude the literary offerings of works such as Matías Montes Huidobro’s *Concierto para sordos*, which,

from Miami, paradoxically recreates ‘all things Cuban;’ and Hilda Perera’s *Los Robledal*, which, also from Miami, reconstructs the multiple facets of Havana during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Similar to these Spanish texts are, in English, Julia Álvarez’s *In the Name of Salomé*, which presents and discusses the shaping of the Dominican Republic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Line of the Sun*, in which she fictionally recreates her Puerto Rican hometown and identity.

Even Latinos born in the US have experienced the so-called ‘foreign’ sentiment: many Hispanic families from the Southwest did not emigrate; on the contrary, they witnessed the US government extend its borders and incorporate their households in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Their conception of a Spanish, Mexican and/or Native American ancestry is not a ‘foreign’ but rather an integral part of US history.

The University of Houston has developed an important research project called ‘Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage’ in order “to make accessible the literature created by Hispanics in all areas that came to be part of the US, from the colonial period up to 1960” (Kanellos 30). Following these criteria, Nicholas Kanellos’ edition of *Herencia* includes not only authors who lived briefly in the US (Mariano Azuela, René Marqués, Bonifacio Byrne), but also the Spanish chroniclers Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà and Alonso Gregorio de Escobedo, with their respective poems about the history of the former Spanish territories of New Mexico and Florida. This approach is echoed in Humberto López Morales’ *Enciclopedia del español en los Estados Unidos*, and Ilan Stavans’ *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*.

Having a solid foothold on one’s own or inherited homeland (Mexico, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, etc.) is not confined to first-generation immigrants, although it may seem to be. This topic may apply to subsequent generations (born in the US) and to any US-Hispanic community: it appears, disappears and reappears at will. Fixed classifications for any living writer or literary trend in progress are not pertinent: the way Latinos perceive themselves and their literatures might change over time. According to Kanellos, there are authors “who in one moment saw themselves as immigrants or exiles and in another as naturalized citizens or natives identifying strongly with the long history of Hispanic culture in the US” (30). But this process is not always a one-way street: it can travel in the opposite direction, as in Pérez Firmat’s *Cincuenta lecciones de exilio y desexilio*, where questions of identity move from being Cuban-American/Ethnic to Cuban in exile and then un-exiled. In conclusion, the criteria which will establish the American literary canon for the 21<sup>st</sup> century should neither disregard the complex history and respective concerns of the heterogeneous US-Hispanic communities, nor be limited to the narrow topics of ethnic identity and English-only language (Spanglish included).

Whereas the American literary canon has not entertained the idea of including Spanish-language works, other artistic forms, such as music and art, which do not depend on language, have been much more inclusive. Leaving aside the language spoken by the artist, years of residence in the US, or themes and aesthetics (ethnic or not)—all of which, in the case of adult immigrants, might still be linked to their native cultural spaces—, art critics have welcomed works by Latinos into the contemporary American art scene. A good example of this inclusive practice was the American art exhibition at Shanghai's 2011 International Art Fair. Among the ten artists included, two were Latinos: Sergio García (1959) and Yovani Bauta (1955), who arrived in the US in 1961 and 1993, respectively. Identifying American art with the heterogeneous reality of the subjects involved, the curator in charge, Inez Suen, appropriately stated that “contemporary American art is as diverse as the American artists.”

From the 1960s to the 1980s, two theoretical errors corrupted certain academic studies, journals and anthologies on Latino literature. The first was to convert into validating artistic concepts issues not intrinsically literary, such as an author's political ideology (usually leftist or liberal) and rapport with his/her cultural heritage or Latinness in general. Based on an ideologically reductive categorization of literature, this error contributed not only to the neglect of different proposals by other US-Hispanics, but also to the exclusion of any further assumed ‘deviation’ taken by an author who was initially included. The second error was to establish specific characteristics and experiences of one or two communities (i.a., the Chicano and the Nuyorican) as the general ‘is and ought’ of the Latino condition. As a result, any other behavior or community that deviated from the norm was omitted from ‘all things Latino.’ For example, during these three decades, the omission of certain reputable US-Cuban writers was so rampant that some scholars tried to veil it by including any low-quality text written by any Cuban-American who aligned with their ideological mandates. To identify such errors also underscores the critics’ (un)conscious complicity with other attempts to homogenize Latinness, a complicity that serves only to reduce, blur and, finally, erase the vast, complex and diverse reality (political, ideological, cultural, historical, racial, ethnic, religious, and that of class, gender and sexuality) of more than 50 million individuals. Although the dogmatic, anti-dialectical and anti-literary nature of such criteria has diminished, it still resurfaces from time to time.

Since the 1980s, issues of sexual orientation and gender have problematized those collective identity constructions that claimed to express some sort of “homogeneity” and “eternal essences” (López-Baralt xlvi) and, in an evident bid to preserve themselves, have considered any difference as a sickening contaminant rather

than a potential enrichment. The emergence of non-conformist writers (mostly women and/or homosexuals, traditionally seen as pollutants or destabilizers) has complicated the concept of Latinness. Works such as Richard Rodríguez's *Hunger of Memory*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Carla Mari Trujillo's *Chicano Lesbians*, Elías Miguel Muñoz's *The Greatest Performance*, and Emilio Bejel's *The Horizon of My Skin* have not only questioned the heterosexist machismo rooted in their respective Hispanic heritages, but also reformulated (if not rejected) them with more egalitarian, less prejudiced and, paradoxically, healthier proposals.

Crucial in her time was Anzaldúa's border identity discourse, which challenged both the identity dictated by dominant US culture, and the homogeneous and essentialist identity created by the Chicano Movement itself. Standing "beyond binary constructions", hers was "a discourse and identity of the difference and the displacement" (Elenes 359).

The case of Mexican-American John Rechy is notorious. During the political boom of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s, Rechy achieved recognition not as a Chicano author, but a pioneer of gay American literature, with his novels *City of Night*, *Numbers* and *This Day's Death*, all of which bluntly showed the world of homosexuality, transvestism and male prostitution in the US. According to David William Foster (76-77), it was not until 1979 that three critics (Charles Tatum, Juan Bruce-Novoa and Carlos Zamora) challenged the reductive concepts of the 'is and ought' of Chicano literature, and began to include Rechy in said literary corpus. Nevertheless, it was only in the 1990s, thanks to his *The Miraculous Day of Amalia Gómez*, which touches on Hispanic but not precisely gay issues, that Rechy has been accepted as part of the Chicano canon without reservations.

The 1980s was marked by a prominent feminist and lesbian literary trend related to Chicano identity, with Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga in the lead. Yet, shortly before (between 1976 and 1981) but not connected to the core construction of Cubanness previously created by exiles, two US-Cubans in New York (Ana María Simo and Magali Alabau) founded and maintained, against all odds and in English, a gender-oriented East Village-based community project called Medusa's Revenge. Kate Davy has adequately documented the pioneering and inspiring nature of their project for the New York (English-language) lesbian feminist theater movement during the 1980s (39-43), which years later included the irreverent shows of Carmelita Tropicana, who did combine feminism and lesbianism with her Cuban-American and Latina conditions.

Finally, US-Hispanic literature, like any other, is not the programmatic ‘is and ought’ dictated by the praxis, ideology or worldview of only a few, but the literary corpus which is being constantly (re)invented and (re)created by Latino writers from all walks of life. For critics, there is nothing left to do except to study it in its entirety and, if necessary, to classify it without resorting to extra-literary, political agenda or personal prejudices. Today, how can we deactivate not only the moral, political or ideological restrictions, but also the purisms or fears (cultural, linguistic, identity-related, nationalistic) derived, at times, from concrete practices of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries? I advocate here for the acceptance and understanding of new domestic circumstances produced by an ever-growing Hispanic presence. Such circumstances mandate rethinking the criteria that can re-define the canon of American and US-Hispanic literatures at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It is inappropriate to approach and attempt to understand the US national mosaic and culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by simply adopting criteria used in past centuries. Such criteria were derived from different facts and experiences and do not necessarily correspond to contemporary times. After noting that “each conception of the historic was accompanied by a particular form of rhetoric,” Glissant adds that the tracing of this link will demonstrate “how History (whether we see it as expression or lived reality) and Literature form part of the same problematics: the account, or the frame of reference, of the collective relationship of men with their environment, in a space that keeps changing and in a time that constantly is being altered” (69-70). The question remains: how can we reshape the criteria that define both American and US-Hispanic literatures in such a way that new and/or revised concepts will provide inclusive and sufficient responses to the dynamic and diverse social practices from which and about which this literature is being produced at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

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## NOTAS

\* Translated from Spanish by Jeff Longwell, Mary E. Wolf, and the author. A longer and slightly different Spanish version of this article appeared under the title "La literatura hispana de los Estados Unidos: conceptos de pertinencia y espacios de pertenencia a inicios del siglo XXI" in *Latinidad en encuentro: experiencias migratorias en los Estados Unidos* (eds. Antonio Aja et al., Havana-NY: Casa de las Américas-Campana, 2014. 73–92).

<sup>1</sup> However controversial, I use indistinctly the terms 'Latino,' 'Hispanic' and 'US-Hispanic' when referring to peoples of Spanish-American or Spanish-Peninsular origin or descent and who reside permanently in the US. Clara E. Rodríguez sums up this terminological conflict, found in the media and in academic studies: "the term 'Latin' is still loosely used, as in 'Latin music' or 'Latin star.' [...], the term tends to include only those who have origins in Latin-America or [...] Spain. Today 'Latino' and 'Hispanic' have been added to the list. There have been strong debates in some ethnic studies arenas as to whether those from Spain, Brazil and Portugal should be included in the term 'Latino,' and not all US residents from these countries identify with any of these terms. Others debate whether the term 'Hispanic' has any legitimacy among Latinos, and still others reject any generic

term, preferring to identify themselves by their country of origin—Cuban, Salvadoran, and the like. [...] The terms ‘Latin,’ ‘Latino,’ ‘Hispanic’ and simply ‘ethnic’ are all used for those who have Spanish or Latin-American origins” (21-22). See also Eliana Rivero’s particular use of the term “latinounidenses” (138), translated here as ‘US-Hispanic.’

<sup>2</sup> Instead of ‘Anglo-White-Western,’ the term ‘non-Latino’ is more pertinent here, because the former does not account for the enormous ethnic and racial diversity of the US population, composed also by African-Americans, Native Americans, Korean, Jewish, Muslim, etc.

<sup>3</sup> I understand the pragmatic side of identifying minorities in terms of providing aid for education, health, social and business services, etc.

<sup>4</sup> It is not uncommon that a region’s dominant culture be produced by a historically subalternate and/or ethnically labeled segment of society, as exemplified by the African-American culture in the Deep South and in cities like New York and Chicago.

<sup>5</sup> His translation.

<sup>6</sup> His translation.