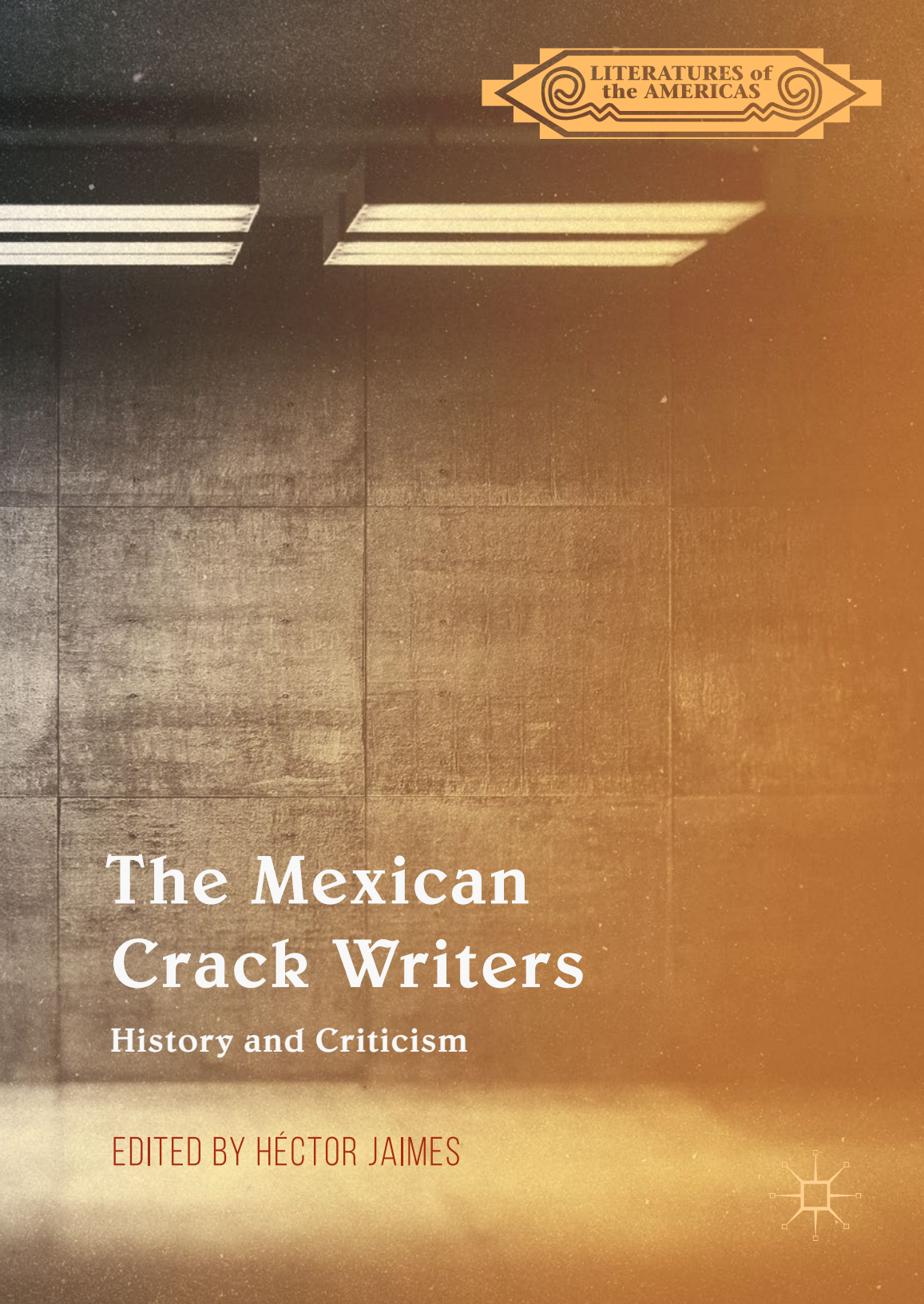

The Mexican Crack Writers

History and Criticism

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(1992–1999) y la tradición de la ruptura (2009) [*Newness of the Old: Jorge Volpi's Novel (1992–1999) and the Tradition of Rupture*], and *Historia personal del Crack: Entrevistas críticas* (2017). He collaborated with the seven members of the Crack group to co-author the volume *Crack: Instrucciones de uso* (2004). He has published articles on Mexican literature in books and journals in Spain, France, Germany, Latin America, and the USA.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Mexican Crack Writers—Toward a New Literary Aesthetics

Héctor Jaimes

The Mexican Crack writers emerged at a time of transition in Latin America. On the one hand, literary models in Latin America had been exhausted or had become too trite; on the other hand, new economic realities had greatly changed the social and historical environments such that it was possible for writers to create a new literary and aesthetic sphere. Also, the publication of the *Crack Manifesto* (1996) gave these writers a unique literary identity. Although some of their works had previously been published and circulated very quickly throughout Latin America, the manifesto established their vision and served to launch their literary careers. It was originally read in Mexico City, where its authors simultaneously presented five novels: *El temperamento melancólico* (1996) by Jorge Volpi; *Memoria de los días* by Pedro Ángel Palou; *Si volviesen sus majestades* (1996) by Ignacio Padilla; *La conspiración idiota* (1996) by Ricardo Chávez Castañeda; and *Las Rémoras* by Eloy Urroz (Castillo Pérez 83). Literary manifestos and movements are not new to Latin America, and they have typically signaled a new transitional period and direction in the literary scene; such was the case with

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Manuel Maples Arce's Stridentist manifesto (1921) in Mexico and with Vicente Huidobro's *Manifestes* (1925) in Chile, and such was the case with the Crack writers as well. But as manifesto writing has long been discontinued, we may ask: why did five writers, all born in the 1960s, decide to revisit this tradition? The answer, paradoxically, can be found both in the literary tradition and in the question of canonicity within the literary tradition.

The Crack writers knowingly placed themselves within the Latin American literary tradition by learning and admiring its writers, but simultaneously they broke away from it by relaunching the novel with all its attributes as set forth in the manifesto, which implied a change of settings (locales) in the new narratives. This dual undertaking created a rupture or a "crack," and this is how their movement's name was coined. In their view, the literary aspects of magical realism, as popularized by García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), had been so exhausted by post-Boom writers in Latin America that new writing techniques and styles had almost ceased to be created. Indeed, the *Crack Manifesto*'s engagement with the great literary tradition comes alive through its constant references to numerous authors beyond and within Latin America. One of this text's remarkable literary qualities is precisely its literariness: from Calvino to Boccaccio, from Shakespeare to Cervantes, from Rulfo to Elizondo, from Revueltas to Fuentes, from Pessoa to Ortega y Gasset and from Borges to Nervo, at its core the *Crack Manifesto* relishes and celebrates literature as one of the most supreme and sublime vehicles to express and represent the human condition. The textual tapestry implied in it brings forth the notion of influence but also of continuity within the great tradition of literary writing. As T.S. Eliot wrote, tradition "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (4). However, the simultaneity of this order does not preclude the emergence, within this literary continuity, of new and decisive points of departure that can be viewed as milestones if we

take into consideration the history of literature in general. The *Crack Manifesto*, as a matter of fact, can be viewed as a decisive point of departure because Crack writers wished to make a leap forward and beyond magical realism and to move away from the territorial and leftist ideological constraints typically associated with Latin American literature. As these were new times and new writers, so were the themes.

In his analysis of Volpi's *En busca de Klingsor*, Aníbal González highlights two major historical events, but I believe these events also provide context for the emergence of this literary group in 1996. First, the fall of the Berlin Wall in November of 1989 and the subsequent fall of Communism in Eastern Europe set in motion the reconfiguration of a new world order in which literature and the arts also had to reconfigure themselves according to these new realities. As time and space were to experience a breakup and globalization was to utilize and redefine space in search for higher profits, writers felt less compelled to adhere to the fixity of their own national or cultural territory. Many Crack novels exemplify how the territorial space and location dramatically shifted within the new narratives; Volpi's *No será la tierra* (2006), a classic example, can be read as a historical testimony of some of the ideological battles of the twentieth century regardless of national territory. But if we consider that in Latin America the debates for and against ideological writing have almost fully determined how literature is written in the region, then the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Octavio Paz in 1990 and to Mario Vargas Llosa in 2010—two prominent writers and supporters, *grosso modo*, of the neoliberal agenda—seemed to resolve these debates with the understanding that they were promoters of literature as "freedom," which implicitly meant non-ideological. However, from my point of view we do not have to investigate too deeply to realize that Paz's and Vargas Llosa's writings are also fraught with ideology, therefore reopening the debate regarding the relationship between literature and politics. Literature can be directly or indirectly ideological, and readers can have preferences depending on their taste, background, values, or interests; but the literary paths of these two Nobel Prize winners did in fact pave the way for the Crack writers to conceive literary "freedom" beyond the question of ideology and nationality. And, at this point, a very clear distinction must be made. The Crack writers emerged at a time when neoliberalism was taking hold in Mexico and Latin America in a more profound manner, thus creating radical changes in society which were to be represented in literature and the arts in general;

but in no way, can we affirm that these writers had a neoliberal agenda or that their writings celebrated its intervention in the region. Their novels are important because of their literary qualities and because, in some cases, they provide us with a new and rich vision of our present and recent past.

The second significant historical event contextualizing the emergence of the Crack writers is the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect in 1994. NAFTA lifted some commercial tariffs between Mexico, the USA, and Canada, and it created and configured a new economic "free zone" in the Americas. Paradoxically, at the end of that year and after a major devaluation of the peso, the Mexican economy almost collapsed, but the USA rescued it with a $50 billion package "mostly in the form of short-term loans" (Greenspan 159). As the Mexican economy recovered and as commodities, labor, and wealth were to travel with fewer restrictions and with less confinement to a territorial space, the same happened to values (of all kinds), influences, and new ideologies. With a considerable industrial footprint and a location so close to the USA, Mexican society embodied speed, change, and unprecedented social transformations. If Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity" was to be applied primarily to developed industrial nations, I believe that Mexico could also represent an example of this state, for it represents extremely rapid change thanks to the market-oriented economy and to the debasement of norms and social institutions, as depicted in Guillermo Fadanelli's novel *Lodo* (2002), although he is not considered a Crack writer. Theoretically speaking, Bauman has described this debasement as follows:

> Interhuman bonds, once woven into a security net worthy of a large and continuous investment of time and effort, and worth the sacrifice of immediate individual interests […] become increasingly frail and admitted to be temporary. Individual exposure to the vagaries of commodity-and-labour markets inspires and promotes division, not unity; it puts a premium on competitive attitudes, while degrading collaboration and team work to the rank of temporary stratagems that need to be suspended or terminated the moment their benefits have been used up. "Society" is increasingly viewed and treated as a "network" rather than a "structure" (let alone a solid "totality"): it is perceived and treated as a matrix of random connections and disconnections and of an essentially infinite volume of possible permutations. (2–3)

Although the relationship between economy and literature is too complex to be reduced to the mere representation of money, the writer's values, or social class in literature, the impact of these emerging markets cannot be overlooked either. Put in context, the Crack writers appeared at a time when the Mexican economy threw open its doors to finance capitalism, and if finance capitalism was to change Mexico, literature too was to experience a dramatic transformation. No wonder, then, that Jorge Volpi has claimed that "Latin American literature" does not exist anymore.

The Crack writers have also been known in some circles as the Crack generation, but they are in fact just a group of friends [with the recent and lamentable passing of Ignacio Padilla (1968–2016)], who happen to have the privilege of sharing a great literary talent and who have published a great number of very ambitious novels. Although classifying these authors as a "generation" is not accurate, one must observe that their writings do express generational traits of Mexican writers born in the 1960s, and more importantly, of people living in our times. Indeed, the publication of *McOndo* in 1996—an anthology of short stories supposedly representing the new Latin American literature, edited by Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez—is another sign that the Crack writers possessed generational literary traits, if seen within the larger Latin American context. Also, as Ignacio Padilla rightly observes:

> Since the first manifestations and publications by Jóvenes Caníbales, the *New Puritans*, the Crack writers, *McOndo* writers and the new Colombian writers, the world from where we write has made a more dramatic turn than expected. Now it is not only in literature, but also in all the areas of society, where men and women born in the sixties have started to express the need and the duty that this generation has to draw the new ways to see our reality without giving up concepts that were long valuable but which have been distorted by history itself.
>
> Thus, along with the passion of the young who celebrated the fall of the Berlin Wall—similar to the one that characterized the initiatives set forth by the literary renovation groups at the turn of the century—the urgency to establish a more moderate type of thinking has been taking place, and a more mature social and literary activity without denying the validity of the original ideas. (Padilla 38)

Although in the case of Mexico the notion of "generational traits" can preliminarily function as a methodological tool to create a visual mapping of authors, themes, and literary trends in general, the diversity of styles on display demands a less encompassing and generalizing approach. One would only need to take into consideration the literary diversity found in a collection such as *Dispersión multitudinaria* (1997)—edited by Leonardo da Jandra and Roberto Max, and including Mexican authors born for the most part in the 1960s—to realize that generation alone cannot function as the best classifying method to interpret texts that are presumably related to one another because they appeared around the same time. This literary diversity is further confirmed in books such as *La generación de los enterradores: Expedición a la narrativa mexicana del tercer milenio* (2000), by Celso Santajuliana and Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, the latter being one of the Crack writers, and in the study *Tendencias de la narrativa mexicana actual* (2009) by José Carlos González Boixo. With the publication of the *Crack Manifesto* we cannot simply and evenly apply the "crack" nomenclature to all the works of the Crack writers and expect to have a perfect match between the principles of the literary production and the novels themselves, but the Crack designation can provide a point of departure. This point of departure is further confirmed in 2016 with the publication of the *Crack Postmanifesto (1996–2016)*, in which the group celebrated their twentieth anniversary and came full circle with their literary project by evaluating the historical context when the group first appeared as well as the validity of their literary attributes.

In 2016, I organized a "creative conversation" for the Modern Language Association conference, titled "Veinte años después: La generación del 'Crack' y la literatura latinoamericana contemporánea." My original idea was to have all five writers present, but only Palou, Urroz, and Volpi could attend. Prior to our meeting, I sent them a working questionnaire addressing the transcendence of the first *Crack Manifesto* in their works, the relationship between "literature and its publics," the inner and outer reshaping of literature due to technological advancements and social networks, and above all, the place and positioning of their writing in relation to our contemporary society, seen and understood as a period of transition and crisis. To my amazement, and to the amazement of the audience, they presented and read the *Crack Postmanifesto* (*1996–2016*), a text that can be read as the other side of the coin of the first manifesto, for its political, historical, and literary

commentaries. At that point, and given the high quality of their literary production and their impact in Latin America and beyond, it became evident to me that it was urgent to put together a collection of critical essays on this topic with the greatest scope possible: multiple critical perspectives and key novels.

This edition grew out of formal and informal conversations with the Crack writers and their critics. It is informed by contemporary literary and cultural theories, and it aims not only to shed light on the Crack writers' literary styles and themes but also to contextualize their works within Mexican and Latin American literature. In Chap. 2 ("The *Crack*: Generational Strategies in Mexico at the Turn of the Century"), Tomás Regalado examines "the alleged identity of *Crack* as a literary generation, its links to other generational movements in Mexico and Latin America during the turn of the century, and the possibility of developing additional critical devices that offer, from a sociological study of literature, a consistent explanation of these writers as a whole." Regalado has written a very ambitious chapter, but he masterfully incorporates Bourdieu's notion of the "literary field" to give further meaning to an already diverse web of texts. At the end, he is able to provide not only the history of the group, as he later concludes, but also its genealogy. In Chap. 3 ["The *Crack* Movement's Literary Cartography (1996–2016)"], guided by the theoretical framework of cartography, Ramón Alvarado Ruiz highlights the relevance of the "spatial shifts" in the Mexican novel and analyzes how these shifts become one of the central tenets of the Crack writers as exemplified by some of their key novels. In Chap. 4 ("Narrative Techniques in Jorge Volpi's Fictions"), Sara Calderón examines in detail many of the most important and recurrent writing techniques and strategies of Jorge Volpi's works. Continuing with Volpi, in Chap. 5 ("Science, Art, and Magic: Totalization and Totalitarianism in Jorge Volpi's *In Search of Klingsor*") Aníbal González focuses on *In Search of Klingsor* (1999), the novel that catapulted Volpi to stardom, and discusses how this novel owes a debt to Borges's literary legacy while pushing boundaries within the Latin American novel. Most importantly, González analyzes "the ideological implications of Nazis and Nazism […] which are central to the paradox of totalization and self-reflexiveness in this novel."

In Chap. 6 ("Soldiers and Shadows: The Post-National Militant in Ignacio Padilla's *Amphitryon* and *El daño no es de ayer*"), Anne Stachura explores the concepts of identity and violence in two of Padilla's novels,

Amphytrion (2000) and *El daño no es de ayer* (2011), by considering the tenets of globalization and the "post-national imaginary." In Chap. 7 ("Living in Las Rémoras: An introduction to Eloy Urroz's Fiction"), Regalado provides the reader with an in-depth overview of Urroz's works, taking into consideration not only the salient aspects of his novels but also his literary influences from Latin America and beyond. In Chap. 8 ("Toward a Philosophy of Love: Pedro Ángel Palou's *Qliphoth* and *La profundidad de la piel*"), I bring to the fore the difficulty of writing novels about love, especially today. I argue that the traditional critical apparatus regarding this topic proves somewhat elusive in relation to Palou's works, which is why Palou himself resorts to writing a "philosophy of love" instead of a novel about love per se. Also, discussing Palou, in Chap. 9 ("*El dinero del diablo* by Pedro Ángel Palou: A New Moral Dialogue"), Eugenia Helena Houvenaghel argues that the novel *El dinero del diablo* functions as a moral dialogue representing opposing views with very different ethical positions. Finally, in Chap. 10 ("Ricardo Chávez Castañeda: The Limits of Fiction") Ignacio Sánchez Prado "relocate[s] Chávez Castañeda as a writer whose travails with literary form are essential to understand the impulse and relevance of the Crack group in the reconfiguration of Mexican fiction in the turn of the century," and demonstrates, by analyzing *La conspiración idiota* (1994) and *El día del hurón* (1997), how Chávez Castañeda's unique literary style emerges as a "reconfiguration of the very structure of literary narration in Mexico." In the Appendices I have included the two manifestos because of their seminal importance to the emergence of the Crack writers and their literary project as a whole and because the contributors to this edition reference them constantly. This referencing can also be viewed as a way of collectively theorizing about these two pieces. In short, this edition provides a historical and critical overview of the Mexican Crack writers and their contributions to the Latin American literary scene.

Although the Crack writers emerged in reaction to established literary styles and canons, their works have also canonized them. However, this fact must not be viewed as a negative or disqualifying attribute of their literature; as we know, whether we employ Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a "field" or Harold Bloom's notion of "influence," good literature always happens in between, as a relationship between texts. Sometimes this relationship is a dialogue, sometimes a contestation, and sometimes a platform to create new—and more—literature. Besides, as John Guillory

cleverly reminds us, "the canon is never other than an imaginary list; it never appears as a complete and uncontested list in any particular time and place" (30). This edition will certainly not close the debate regarding the literary canon in Latin America, quite the contrary, it opens it up to a relatively new and innovative literary group that has transformed the sphere of literature altogether.

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PART I

History

CHAPTER 2

The Crack: Generational Strategies in Mexico at the Turn of the Century

Tomás Regalado López

To Nacho Padilla,
in memoriam

The Crack phenomenon occupies a central place in the study of Latin American literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Critical studies pertaining to the group, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2016, are very much in vogue, and it is more than ever necessary to define the movement, establish a critical apparatus to sharpen its contours, and examine its aesthetic positions to see how they reflect—or clash with—those of the individual authors. It is likewise time to question errors, stereotypes, and clichés that have continually surrounded it since even before its public debut with the reading of the *Crack Manifesto* on August 7, 1996. While one of the major critical challenges resides in treating the group as a literary generation, Ricardo Chávez Castañeda (b. 1961), Pedro Ángel Palou (b. 1966), Eloy Urroz (b. 1967), Jorge Volpi (b. 1968), and Ignacio Padilla (1968–2016) did not reject such a

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