

TRANSNATIONAL LATINA
NARRATIVES IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Politics of Gender,
Race, and Migrations

JUANITA HEREDIA



Transnational Latina Narratives in
the Twenty-first Century

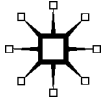
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Juanita Heredia

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Introduction: Transnational Latina Narratives

During the decade of the 1980s, Chicana and Puerto Rican fiction writers in the United States, as a collective voice, emerged as the leading groups of U.S. Latinas to pave the way for other Latin American heritage women writers to follow in contributing to the American literary canon. The study of contemporary Latina narratives in this decade also received much critical attention with the publication of two collections, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writings and Critical Readings* (1989).¹ Critics in both works made an active effort to disseminate knowledge about U.S. Latina narratives where gender, along with race and class, became integral components that transcended academic disciplines at universities and conferences across the United States.

In the 1990s, Latina writers reached another milestone by making a tremendous impact on the national literary scene in terms of a Latina literary boom, mentioned in the critical introduction of *Latina Self-Portraits* (2000).² Women authors of Cuban, Dominican, Mexican, and Puerto Rican descent in the United States became more prominent because they were publishing narratives such as memoirs, novels, and short fiction that became mainstreamed by East Coast agents who made their works more accessible to a broader, national audience in the United States.³ Toward the end of this decade, one also witnessed the emergence of a critical trend in transnational feminist studies that provided analytical tools to examine narratives by ethnic women writers, including Latinas, in a comparative context across national borders.⁴

For almost thirty years, substantial collective anthologies and individual articles on U.S. Latina narratives have been published that cover

works of the twentieth century. However, hardly any critical study in the form of a single-authored monograph examines, from a transnational comparative perspective, the impact of twenty-first century narratives by a Pan-Latina group of women writers in the United States.⁵

Transnational Latina Narratives contributes to a critical discourse on Latina narratives published in the post-2000 decade by analyzing the intersection of gender, race, and migrations in the historical and social context of each writer's national heritage in relationship to the United States. By juxtaposing writers of Dominican, Mexican, Peruvian, and Puerto Rican heritages/backgrounds, this study locates five particular Latina narratives by Denise Chávez, Sandra Cisneros, Marta Moreno Vega, Angie Cruz, and Marie Arana in a trans-American and transnational hemispheric dialogue between American and Latin American cultures, histories, and politics. Although these Latina narratives may be "made-in-the-USA," their stories have roots and origins south of the U.S. border and in other global settings. Furthermore, this critical study demonstrates parallels in these narratives through the writers' experiences of migrations physically and through memory between the United States and the respective Latin American nation. As a result of these voyages south and north, across time, I claim that these Latina writers participate in a revision of official and popular history across U.S./Latin American transnational borderlands. In other words, whether the characters in the narratives are located in a small town in southern New Mexico or a metropolitan city, such as New York, they are equally affected by shifting communities of im/migrants, residents, or citizens, in constant movement across cities, towns, and nations in the Americas.

The contemporary U.S. Latina writers in this study have been educated primarily in U.S. academic institutions, both in outstanding creative writing programs (e.g., Iowa Writers' Workshop, New York University, University of New Mexico) and graduate schools (e.g., Temple and Yale Universities). As a consequence of their formal education and personal experiences, these Latina writers have maintained cultural ties to their heritage by reclaiming their Latin American history and (popular) culture through film, literature, or music, to demonstrate a cultural affirmation of their hybrid identity, a fusion of American and Latin American influences, as a consequence of transnational migrations. In this critical study, I also draw attention to the identity formation of mixed ethnicities and races in connection to gender on both sides of the U.S./Latin American borderlands. These writers of Mexican, Afro-Caribbean, and South American diasporas ask us

to consider the politics of gender and race in diverse Latino/a communities in the United States and Latin America. Although these women writers may be more U.S. than Latin American-based, they are fully engaged and aware of the cultural and historical legacies of *el otro lado* in Latin America and its effect on U.S. communities. Furthermore, it is important to clarify that class issues and socioeconomic status will be taken into consideration when addressing the intersection of gender and race because these three elements are inextricably linked in this study.

Transnational Migrations

Despite the fact that the Latina authors of these post-2000 narratives hail from different national heritages, one can still find similarities with respect to tropes of travels, voyages, and migrations across national borders. Virtually all of the Latina authors mentioned in this study trace a genealogy or a community that shifts back and forth, physically and mentally, in reality and in the imaginary between the respective heritage and homeland—the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Peru, and Puerto Rico—and the mainland United States. Although the Latina works by Chávez, Cisneros, Cruz, Vega, and Arana contain vastly different representations of histories, politics, and popular cultures, I maintain that these Latina writers allude to a legacy of colonial history, explicitly and implicitly, in a transnational context that begins with the Spanish Conquest of the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century and, other forms of U.S. domination that have repercussions for U.S. Latina/o communities up until the twenty-first century. In these narratives, a modern form of domination still pervades the communities represented in Chicago, the Southwest borderlands, New York City neighborhoods, such as El Barrio and Washington Heights, and New Jersey. At the same time, their U.S. communities are intrinsically tied to the homeland or heritage land through representing revolutions, wars, occupations, or other social movements situated in Mexico City, Santo Domingo, or Lima, Peru that led to the migrations of families to the United States.

Without understanding the social and historical context of Latin America in a hemispheric dialogue with the United States in these transnational narratives, one cannot comprehend the political impact of continuous im/migrations of communities and especially, genealogies that stretch between the United States and Latin American nations. In

this respect, it is important to note the role of each Latina author as a historical commentator, as opposed to a historian per se, because each is well aware of the fact that nation-building in the United States and Latin America is often recorded as the efforts by men, often obfuscating the role of the marginal in societies (i.e., black, indigenous, Asian, mestizos, women, and the working class).⁶ These women writers are not only imparting gender matters or a woman's perspective on official history, but also popular culture.⁷ At the same time, the writers present *alternative* histories to contest the hegemonic power of official history in their transnational narratives, because traditionally, their perspectives and voices have been omitted.⁸ Thus, Chávez, Cisneros, Cruz, Vega, and Arana find themselves in a specific liminal and mediating position as cultural and historical ambassadors with a dual vision of Latin American and American cultures in contact and in conflict with one another.

The field of transnational studies, or transnationalism, has received much attention in the social sciences from noted social scientists, Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, and Michael Smith, to mention a few, in the early 1990s. These scholars began to explore critical paradigms based on theoretical and field research by examining and comparing communities in Latin America and the United States. Although the definition of transnationalism varies from one scholar to another, all essentially come to an agreement when they look at the experiences of transmigrants, people who migrate from a country of origin to a host one and maintain cultural, emotional, or physical connections to the residence of origin in the host country.⁹ While critics of *Nations Unbound* (1994) maintain that migrants "retain ties to their homeland" through family, organizations, and cultural practices in the host country, critics of *Transnationalism from Below* explore "how this process affects power relations, cultural constructions, economic interactions, and more generally, social organization at the level of locality" (Smith and Guarnizo 1998, 6). Rather than examining solely the physical journeys of migrants who cross national boundaries, Smith and Guarnizo are interested in understanding material and symbolic exchanges between the U.S. and Latin American residences at the local level.

In the humanities, particularly in literary studies, few critics address questions of the transnational Chicano/Latino imaginary, but no one quite develops a critical paradigm using Latina narratives of the post-2000 period. In his critical study of Américo Paredes's work in the United States and abroad in Asia in *The Transnational Imaginary* (2006), Ramón Saldívar explains that "generating a transnational Greater

Mexico [and Latin America], spanning the real and imaginary geographies of North America and staging new cultural designs, the meanings of which could not yet even be imagined... a site rich with possibilities for the repositioning of citizenship, the emergence of subjectivities, and the invention of novel spaces for vernacular politics in the mode of subaltern modernity” (394). Like Saldívar’s positioning of Paredes in the transnational imaginary, I suggest that the Latina writers in my study are involved in a decolonizing process by writing and relocating subaltern cultures from their respective national heritages and the United States to the forefront in order to participate and combat modernizing (colonizing) efforts from hegemonic forms (i.e., governments, corporations, institutional power, and patriarchy). Saldívar models his critique in many ways after postcolonial critic Paul Gilroy’s construction of the Black Atlantic imaginary “as a concept capable of transcending ‘both the structures of the nation and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity’” (2006, 394); Gilroy’s critique is important as far as situating transnational migrations that have contributed to the African diaspora.¹⁰ Both Saldívar and Gilroy signal a transnational agency designated for cultural representatives (i.e., writers, artists, and other cultural workers) of subaltern communities who are in movement or transit from one home to another, and who should also hold cultural citizenship beyond the border of their host nation.

Transnational Latina Narratives looks at protagonists in each narrative who have struggled and fought for the right to control their destiny rather than have institutions take over their choices within the context of transnational migrations. Even though I provide specific examples, one can find overlapping experiences of cultural, emotional, historical, and physical movements in the five narratives. First of all, I consider the actual physical crossings of family members such as those in *Caramelo* and *American Chica* who maintain cultural connections between the United States and respective Latin American home country. In *Let It Rain Coffee*, I trace the historical memory of pivotal events that instigate a transnational link between the United States and the Caribbean. I also examine the symbolic journeys to the heritage through cultural memory such as the adult narrator in *When the Spirits Dance Mambo* who recalls music in her childhood in Spanish Harlem. Finally, I analyze the emotional ties to the heritage such as the fans’ interest in Mexican films in *Loving Pedro Infante*. In comparing these transnational practices, I also draw on the categories of gender and race to better understand each narrative. By dialoging with critics of *Transnationalism from Below* as well as Saldívar (2006) and Gilroy, I

am able to develop my critical paradigm on transnational migrations because this study also contests the hegemonic forces behind migrating bodies, locally and globally.

Gender Matters

In *Transnational Latina Narratives*, the post-2000 narratives by U.S. Latina writers offer a woman's perspective on official history of the Americas by representing transnational multiethnic communities migrating between Latin America and the United States. By examining the narratives by Arana, Cisneros, Chávez, Cruz, and Vega, I draw parallels between these women writers of different U.S. ethnic/national heritage backgrounds to demonstrate how gender, race, and nation, in their respective historical contexts, form part of a broader discourse on transnational Latina identities. In fact, the twenty-first century has set the tone for new transnational feminist cultural studies, one that engages the complex relationship between gender, and the politics of local and global migrations across national borders. In *Between Woman and Nation* (1999), Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón, and Mino Moallem maintain that

Transnational feminist cultural studies recognize that practices are always negotiated in both a connected and a specific field of conflict and contradiction and, that feminist agendas must be viewed as a formulation and reformulation that is contingent upon historically specific conditions. (358)

They further explain that “The task for transnational feminist cultural studies is to negotiate between the national, the global and the historical as well as the contemporary diasporic” (360). This critical investigation also engages in broadening transnational feminist cultural studies by taking into account the representation of gender in different geographical and historical periods that began in the colonial period in the Americas as these Latina narratives allude to, and mention explicitly the effects of colonialism on ethnically marginalized groups, including women in both, local and global contexts.

In addition to the theoretical paradigms presented in the previous critical works, we need to consider the transnational context in the intersection of gender, race, and migrations that greatly informs the U.S. Latina narratives of this study. In the introduction to *Feminist*

Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures (1996), Jaequi Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty assert:

Thus, while the current “color line” may suggest more complicated forms of racialized identities, the hierarchical relationships among racial groups and geographies have not disappeared. Yet, race does not figure in most “first world” considerations of postmodernism. And as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan persuasively suggest, it is the cultural, political, economic and social consequences of the historical situations and transformations within (post)modernity that will enable a more sophisticated understanding of transnational, postcolonial, feminist practices. (1997, xvii)

Alexander and Mohanty remind us that feminism, and the construction of gender for that matter, cannot be understood without incorporating a historical context of race as much in “First World” nations like the United States as in developing Latin American countries. In addition to this theoretical model, I suggest that the representation of im/migrations and the formation of diasporic communities in the United States must be examined in connection to gender and race in a transnational context.¹¹ The genealogical migrations represented in the Latina narratives of this study also consider previous forms of forced colonialisms, such as African slavery, importation of Asian labor, and internal indigenous migrations within Latin America and then, immigration to the United States. The triple play of gender, race, and migrations are crucial to understand the transnational component of this study. This hemispheric approach allows me to compare gender formation in the U.S. Latinas’ experiences of migrations between the United States and Latin America to critique gender relations across the borderland divide in the emergence of a transnational feminism or transnational consciousness of gender.

Race Matters

Transnational Latina Narratives is also a critical intervention in dismantling the boundaries between official history and popular culture by presenting a complex portrait of the politics of race, both in Latin America and the United States. The Latina writers in this study do not pretend to be authorities on history, per se, dealing with facts in fiction and revealing “the truth” of life-changing events. Rather, they engage

in dialogues to uncover the effects and consequences of such “facts” of major historical events involving the United States in relationship to Latin America (i.e., Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848, Mexican Revolution of 1910, World War II, U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1916 and 1965, U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898). By contesting hegemonic forms of historical discourse at the national levels, these women writers form a critique of the imbalance of power in race relations in official history across national borders to point to a more egalitarian society. In *Race Matters* (1993) Cornel West observes, “We need leaders—neither saints, nor sparkling television personalities—who can situate themselves within a larger historical narrative of this country and our world, who can grasp the complex dynamics of our peoplehood and imagine a future grounded in the best of our past, yet who are attuned to the frightening obstacles that now perplex us” (1993, 7). In order to move forward, we must examine the past.

Critical studies of U.S. Latino/a literature and culture that have addressed race matters have often done so within a national heritage context, such as *mestizaje* in Chicano/a literature or the African diaspora in Latino Caribbean literature. Rafael Pérez-Torres (2006), for example, looks at indigenous, Spanish, and mestizo cultures in the formation of the mixed-race Chicano/a identity in literary and cultural representations. Suzanne Bost (2003) constructs a comparative paradigm of mixed-race identities in the representation of mestizas and mulattas in literature of the Americas by African American, Caribbean, and U.S. Latinas, including Puerto Ricans. Agustín Laó-Montes (2007, 2008) does pay attention to a concentricity of diasporas when he discusses the formation of an Afro-Latino identity, more so in Latin America than the United States. Likewise, Torres-Saillant (2007a) negotiates the location of the African diasporic in Latino Caribbean identity, which is a good initial paradigm, but I further include the gender component in this critical inquiry. These aforementioned critics begin to address the complexity of the politics of many races and gender in contact and in conflict within a *single* national group, which should be expanded more panethnically Latina/o by investigating the transnational migrations historically between the heritage land/homeland, and the United States.

Race and racial discrimination hold different meanings in Latin America and vary greatly from one nation to another, owing to multiple social and historical factors that influence each nation’s colonial legacy. U.S. critics need to understand the implications of such politics of race in conjunction with gender and migrations to avoid the pitfalls of

homogenizing “a Latin American experience,” and assume that racism is the same in every nation south of the U.S. border. For instance, being of African descent has different connotations in the Spanish Caribbean and Mexico *and* in the U.S. Critics in Chicana/o studies have tended to focus on the European/indigenous binary model of *mestizaje* that echoes the rhetoric of nationalism that dates back to national consolidation under modernity after the Mexico Revolution. What about the participation of other races and cultures (i.e., African, Asian, Middle-Eastern diasporas and at times, mixtures of these cultures) involved in the nation-building process in Mexico? How does that factor into the U.S. imaginary?

Chicana or Mexican American women writers such as Chávez and Cisneros clearly have the ability to see beyond this binary model in the construction of Chicano and Mexican nationalisms and, therefore, represent more complicated representations of race in their narratives of transnational migrations as they include references to the African diaspora, for example. Likewise, Puerto Rican writer Moreno Vega traces the teleology of music and spirituality in her narrative, not only to the Caribbean, but to Africa as a locus. Dominican American Cruz incorporates African and Asian diasporas in her narrative to understand Dominican immigration and its diaspora to the U.S. Peruvian American Arana uncovers layers of ethnicities and races as a consequence of intercultural mixings within one nation, Peru, and then, the implications of its transnational migrations to the United States. The Latina writers in this study construct characters who cross national borders beyond the United States and Latin America also as they perform the roles of transnational ambassadors.

Organization

Transnational Latina Narratives consists of five chapters, with each dedicated to a particular Latina narrative writer within her local and national heritage context. By narrative, I include the novel and memoir. The critical framework of this study draws on previous historical literary studies on the Latino/a narrative that emerged in the period of 1991–2006, especially that of Chicana/o and U.S. Puerto Rican.¹²

Chapters one and two are dedicated to Chicana writers, Denise Chávez and Sandra Cisneros, who hail from a mestiza (hybrid) Mexican American background, and I explore that hybrid heritage in their narratives. Publishing contemporary narratives since the 1980s,