

***Label Me Latina/o* Special Issue**

Introduction: The State of Latinx Young Adult Literature

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When we met at the American Literature Association symposium, “The Latina/o Literary Landscape,” in San Antonio in 2014, we quickly bonded over our mutual interest in Young Adult (YA) literature. Although the field was already quickly expanding by the time of that conference, there were still relatively few titles that had formed what we could now firmly call the Latinx YA literature canon. Novels such as *The Mariposa Club* (2009) by Rigoberto González, *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012) by Benjamin Alire Sáenz, and *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (2013) by Meg Medina had already made waves in literature circles, becoming best-sellers, winning prestigious literary prizes, and solidifying Latinx YA as a burgeoning subfield within both Latinx literature and YA literature. From 2010-2020, the field exploded, with texts by Elizabeth Acevedo, Erika L. Sánchez, and Daniel José Older making their way to college classrooms nationwide and making critical topics like neocolonialism, mental health, dystopia, and artistic creation, long visible in “adult” Latinx literature, accessible to youthful audiences. But even before these writers would become household names, Latinx YA writers had been publishing widely, their works often buried within the larger field of Latinx literature, or worse, seldom taken seriously by scholars of Latinx literature. Writers like Jo Ann Yolanda Hernández, Alex Sánchez, Charles Rice-González, and Gloria Velásquez published YA novels that spanned the mid/late 1990’s to the early 2000’s, delving into topics like queerness, masculinity, family violence, and urban Latinidad, breaking ground even as they seldom received the name recognition of authors like Junot Díaz, Sandra Cisneros, or Cristina García. However, we remain optimistic, as this special issue demonstrates that Latinx YA literature will no longer be sidelined, and its power as a field is represented in the contributions we see here.

Seeing this exponential growth and interest in Latinx YA literature, we decided to do something with all of these remarkable and often groundbreaking novels (aside from curling up on the sofa with our cats and reading them, of course). We edited *Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicanx and Latinx Young Adult Literature* (University Press of Mississippi, 2020) as a response to the growth we were seeing in the field. Chapters in our volume demonstrated the breadth and dynamic nature of Latinx YA literature, placing front and center those misfit identities that have rarely taken center stage, and in doing so, the chapters called on scholars to study Latinx literature through the lens of the weirdo, the nerd, and the outsider. Yet, still, there were few scholarly studies that delved into the topic. Aside from a handful of journal articles and Frederick Luis Aldama’s book of interviews, *Latino/a Children’s and Young Adult Writers on the Art of Storytelling* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), or Laura Alamillo, Larissa M. Mercado-López, and Cristina

Herrera's edited collection, *Voices of Resistance: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Chicana@ Children's Literature* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), little academic discussion was taking place on the role of Latinx YA literature.

Now, in 2021, we can firmly say that the landscape has shifted. Latinx YA Literature has captured scholarly attention and is arguably one of the fastest-growing subfields of Latinx literature. Scholarly monographs published in recent years such as Cristina Herrera's *ChicaNerds in Chicana Young Adult Literature: Brown and Nerdy* (Routledge, 2020) and Angel Daniel Matos' *The Reparative Possibilities of Queer Young Adult Literature and Culture* (Routledge, forthcoming 2021), and Marilisa Jiménez-García's *Side by Side: US Empire, Puerto Rico, and the Roots of American Youth Literature and Culture* (UP of Mississippi, 2021), pay particular attention to Latinx youth identities and, especially, how they appear in written cultures. Scholars Cristina Rhodes and Sonia Alejandra Rodríguez, for example, have written dissertations on the subject, paving the way for future doctoral students to add to the conversation about Latinx youth studies.¹ In an important sign that Latinx YA literature had firmly established itself as a field, the benchmark journal, *Children's Literature*, published a special forum on the topic in 2019, edited by Marilisa Jiménez-García. The past decade has witnessed groundbreaking critical work by Jiménez-García, Isabel Millán, Domino Renee Pérez, and Phillip Serrato, who were some of the first scholars to publish on Latinx YA and children's literature in such venues as *Latino Studies*, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, *Children's Literature*, and *Signs*. Moreover, we have expanded our own scholarship on Latinx adolescence with the forthcoming *Latinx Teens: US Popular Culture on the Page, Stage, and Screen* (University of Arizona Press, 2022). Our co-authored volume considers representations of Latinx youth in contemporary television, film, YA literature, and theatre. The aforementioned examples form a considerable body of work on Latinx YA literature that would have been unimaginable even a decade ago, but, today, it should be expected. More than anything, these works document the need to uncover themes of power, trauma, violence, and colonialism through the specific frame of young adulthood, not where young people are merely passing concerns but fundamental to how we understand the field of Latinx literature more broadly.

At the same time that the scholarly field has grown, mainstream publishing houses have taken notice in Latinx YA writers. Popular titles such as *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (2014) by Isabel Quintero; *Shadowshaper* (2015) by Daniel José Older; *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017) by Erika L. Sánchez; *More Happy Than Not* (2015), *They Both Die at the End* (2017), and *Infinity Son* (2020) by Adam Silvera; and *The Poet X* (2018), *With the Fire on High* (2019), and *Clap When You Land* (2020) by Elizabeth Acevedo have become best-sellers, spending considerable time on the coveted *New York Times* best-seller list. 2020 even had a few surprises in store for YA writers. For example, Sánchez's novel was adapted for the stage by playwright

¹ Noel Zavala's 2018 dissertation, while focusing on Chicano adolescence, does not fully engage with the field of YA literature, although one chapter is dedicated to an analysis of YA texts by De La Peña and Sáenz. In addition, there are a number of dissertations that include one or two chapters dedicated to Latinx YA novels and, in most cases, these studies look at the most canonical novels such as *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*.

Isaac Gomez, receiving a much-lauded production at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre. Silvera's *They Both Die at the End* mysteriously re-emerged on the *New York Times* best-seller list three years after its debut. As Silvera frequently noted on Twitter, the novel's re-emergence in the YA mainstream was both a surprise and humbling while also speaking to readers' interest in nuanced portrayals of Latinx boyhood and adolescence. In December 2020, several arts and culture websites reported that Acevedo's novel, *Clap When You Land*, was set to be adapted into a television series, a tremendous feat that shows the range of Latinx YA literature and its role in US popular culture. These stories are just the tip of the iceberg as far as the successes that Latinx YA authors experience today. Now, when an avid reader walks into Barnes & Noble looking for a YA book, there is no need to dive deep down the aisles looking for Latinx literature. Writers such as Acevedo, Sánchez, and Silvera are not just Latinx YA writers. They are YA writers. They aren't just niche writers discussing Latinidad. They have become the mainstream.

This special issue documents the established field of Latinx Young Adult Literature. The contributed essays point to the field's growing influence, and we're privileged to play a role in this trajectory. One thing is certain, as this special issue attests, the Latinx kids are alright. We just have to pay attention.

Here, we welcome six scholarly pieces, in addition to an interview. Representing a wide range of theoretical approaches, these contributions reflect the dynamic and complex themes with which Latinx YA and children's writers engage, including futurity, dystopia, immigration, sports, healing, and more.

In "Performativity in Yuyi Morales's *Dreamers*," Lettycia Terrones examines "scenes of transgression" in Chicana picture books to highlight the characters' subjectivity and agency within a sociopolitical climate that polices undocumented immigrants. Terrones's article insists on recognizing the political and subversive qualities of picture books penned and illustrated by Latinx writers. In her contribution, "It's her Gooooaaallllllll!: Centering Latina Athletes in Yamile Saied Méndez's *Furia*," Melissa Castillo Planas examines the feminist and political implications of soccer in Yamile Saied Méndez's YA novel, *Furia*. As Castillo Planas argues, *Furia* offers a critical commentary on the linkage between gender, power, and violence in Latin America, a hostile environment the protagonist navigates as she attempts to gain entrance into the male dominated world of soccer.

Cristina Rhodes's article, "Imagining the Future: The (Im)Possibilities of Queerness in Two Latinx Speculative Young Adult Novels," analyzes Adam Silvera's *More Happy Than Not* and Alexandra Villasante's *The Grief Keeper*. Rhodes questions future possibilities for queer Latinx youth by unpacking how protagonists Aaron and Marisol experiment with cutting-edge scientific procedures that will supposedly improve their lives. Maria Durán's contribution, "'Alien' Orientations and Family Fragmentation in William Alexander's *Ambassador*," interrogates the

slippages between “alien immigrant” and “alien other.” Focusing on *Ambassador*’s protagonist, Gabe, Durán contends that the character must navigate and negotiate a landscape that criminalizes and polices undocumented immigrants while challenging the linkage of immigrants with destruction to claim a space of resistance and agency.

In ““He doesn’t talk:” Silence, Trauma, and Fathers in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*,” Roxana Loza uses two of the most commercially successful Latinx YA novels to engage with how protagonists Aristotle and Julia deal with trauma, hope, and healing. In demonstrating how trauma is passed on from fathers to children, Loza argues that Ari and Julia’s youth enables them to navigate their trauma in ways that were not accessible to previous generations. In “Navigating through the Coatlicue State: A Young Chicana’s Path to Conocimiento in Kelly Parra’s YA Novel *Graffiti Girl*,” Laura Marie López examines the protagonist Angel Rodriguez through the lens of Gloria Anzaldúa’s “Coatlicue state.” As Angel develops a “new mestiza consciousness,” she is able to re-imagine her relationships to her family, culture, and community, thus moving through her adolescence into adulthood.

Taryne Taylor offers an in-depth and lively interview with arguably the most significant author of Latinx dystopian and fantasy fiction, Daniel José Older. In their conversation, Older discusses, among other topics, his writing craft, the significance of Latinx representation in YA literature, and Santería, offering important insights into what it means to be a Latinx YA writer in our present day.

This special issue’s contents, in tandem with collections such as *Voices of Resistance* and *Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks*, offer a robust playground for Latinx young adult literature to thrive. This special issue, we hope, will serve as a springboard for continued growth and conversation on all things Latinx YA literature. Yet, as this scholarly introduction reveals, this work is only just beginning. As Latinx YA literature continues to grow and thrive, so, too, does the need for critical analyses of this work. It is our sincerest hope that Latinx studies scholars will find motivation in this special issue and ensure that something that could be a blip on the radar becomes a movement instead.