

## Healing Wounds: Justice, Creativity, and Joy in the Borderlands and Beyond

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When we, the special issue editors, were invited to curate the Summer 2025 issue of *Label Me Latina/o*, Kamala Harris had just announced her presidential candidacy. Harris's campaign videos, which declared a commitment to freedom and ostentatiously played a Beyoncé track, offered a potential gendered and generational shift of the country's leadership. For 107 days, voters had another option besides our usual presidential archetype of elderly white men. It was a small acknowledgement of our concerns, even if not full relief.

As we write this introduction, in May 2025, Donald Trump has been in office for 120 days. He has put those days to extreme use, setting a record with the number of executive orders he has signed. The onslaught is so unrelenting—like being knocked about in thrashing waves near a rocky shore—that even the most dedicated among us suffer compassion fatigue: public school district funding threatened because the curriculum includes Latinx history, taxpayer resources diverted to militarize the border with high tech drones and high powered rifles, trans activist history erased from the Stonewall National Park website, US residents deported without due process, migrants sent to ostensibly black-site prisons in third-party countries to avoid human rights investigations, US-born children deported to other countries.<sup>1</sup> And these are just a small sample of the second Trump Administration's reactionary barrage.

Trump campaigned on a constellation of grievance politics that had long been ascendant in both right-wing politics and the US mainstream. Since 2020 Christopher Rufo, James Lindsay, Moms for Liberty, and others have positioned their grievance politics as a war against critical race theory (CRT) as well as diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI), arguing that these frameworks cause psychological harm to or blame white children for past injustice.<sup>2</sup> Perched on his bully pulpit, in just four months, Trump has launched a direct attack on programs and organizations promoting diversity, seeking equity, or inviting inclusion. In early May 2025, he cut federal grants to hundreds of nonprofit arts and humanities organizations provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities (Veltman). In precise and dry language, state and local organizations that had been awarded these prestigious and highly competitive grants received notice that the grants were immediately rescinded. Actions such as these intentionally stoke an environment of confusion and fear. Organizations that rely on federal funding, but may not align with Trump's ever-changing priorities, are at risk. Because of this, nonprofits and companies alike are significantly scaling back their previous efforts to combat racism, classism, sexism, and other injustices. Seemingly overnight, websites were scrubbed of "woke" language and the scope of identity programming became "inclusive" to all/white men.

Within the sphere of higher education, there is a remarkable range of response to this ascendant fascism—most of which flows with the money. Some organizations and entities have the huge amount of resources needed to combat bullying abuses of power. For example, Harvard University has relied on its funds and alumni donations to actively resist the Trump Administration's encroachment onto universities' autonomy, first by refusing his demands to audit their classes and then suing to block a ban on their international students (Saul, et al.). Of course, not all universities have the networks and endowments of the oldest and richest university in the US, and even some of those similarly endowed make different choices. Columbia University,

another Ivy with impressive resources, was the first school to capitulate to the Trump Administration's demands (Reuters). While hundreds of other university presidents have signed onto an open letter calling for "Constructive Engagement," the vast majority of the 650-plus signatories are from private universities. Those from public universities are by and large in fairly liberal states ("A Call"). In other words, it is unlikely that public university presidents in conservative states like Arizona, Indiana, and Nebraska will speak out, even tepidly, against fascism at the risk of losing federal and state funding or their own jobs.

In marked contrast, smaller community-driven projects like *Label Me Latina/o* are already proving resilient (with 15 years of making!) This journal is a self-reliant collective—the work of multiple scholars not housed at any one university, operating without pressure from university presidents or deans. That unrestraint is hard-earned, using our most precious resource: our freely-given time. The editors, special issue editors, and peer reviewers all work on a volunteer basis, committed to the idea that we need a space for buoying ourselves. The submitting scholars and writers are wholly compelled by its calls and themes. The premise is specific—a journal created by Latinx folks for Latinx people to study Latinx literary excellence. The journal's nimbleness allows it to write and love and praise and publish what is needed. It is both a humbling and heartening experience, bringing a compact, digital journal into these times when many are folding under the burden of hate.

Historically, Latinx communities have organized their own Spanish and then English language publications since the Spanish, Mexican, and American colonial eras (Coronado). These endeavors have been for-profit, non-profits attached to large institutions, and small, community-driven endeavors like the local activist newsletters that circulated during the 1960s and 1970s. Today we recognize that *Label Me Latina/o* is a thread in the community-driven Latinx literary tapestry that also includes works like *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*, a short-lived newsletter that published poetry and feminist essays in the early 1970s before becoming *Encuentro Femenil*; *Y.L.O.* the newspaper of the Chicago chapter of the Young Lords Organization that shared news articles, essays, poetry, and cartoons; and *El Grito del Norte* published by Elizabeth "Betita" Martinez and Beverly Axelrod in northern New Mexico during the 1960s-1970s land grant struggle.

Of course, it is never as simple as Latinx literary resistance against white supremacist fascism. Then or now. Though Latinx literary antepasados like María Amparo Ruiz de Burton and Cleofas Martínez Jaramillo may have been critical about certain aspects of the US, they were simultaneously laying strong claims to whiteness as the grounds to belonging within it. Those types of claims continue today. The especially sharp edge to our current rising white supremacy is that it is multiracial and supported by many of our Latino brothers (among others) (Beltrán). Our communities still have much work to do among ourselves to eschew the lure of white supremacist culture. Nevertheless, whether writing in the nineteenth century under US colonization or in 2025 amidst rising fascism, Latinx writing and the work of publishing are acts of community formation, and they *can* be acts of resistance.

When we envisioned this issue, we wanted to return contributors and readers to Gloria Anzaldúa's famous line where she states that "[t]he U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" while simultaneously highlighting the creative power that the wound unleashes: "And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture" (25). Anzaldúa's 1987 imagery is incredibly evocative for readers. Her careful choice of words brings to mind a space that bucks expectations and has an undertow of violence, a reputation that precedes itself which we experienced firsthand.

Both Lee and Gionni were warned against building their homes and careers in Arizona's vast deserts and rapidly expanding metropolis. When Lee moved here in 2011, it was at the height of the media firestorm which lambasted comprehensive ethnic studies and humane immigration laws. Arizona's most extreme legislation (HB2281 and SB1070) caused organizations and businesses to boycott the state, moving conferences, conventions, even concerts to other locations. Friends in Chicana/Latina studies warned Lee about the hostility he might face to his scholarly work in Arizona. When planning to return home, Gionni was told it would be impossible to lead a writerly life west of the Mississippi, that the East Coast was the center of literary culture. What we both found instead was a local Latina community with a commitment to justice, creativity, and joy that emerges from the struggle and conflict at the border; and that crux is where we decided to focus our call.

We are drawing on Anzaldúa's poem, "Healing Wounds," to help us forge community through our current times: "to heal / there must be wounds/ to repair there must be damage / for light there must be darkness" (Anzaldúa and Keating, 249). Third-space border cultures—their justice struggles and their creative endeavors—are not delegated solely to the sidelines. They are located all around and within the United States, and we asked our scholars and writers to share their own spaces. They answered this call with critical care, examining the many delineations drawn by our government, scholarly thought, and even our own communities. Mónica Baldonado-Ruiz's autoethnography moves across the high desert to question the ways her graduate education can bring her closer to her grandmother's one-room schoolhouse. As an educator of future teachers, Baldonado-Ruiz argues for the urgency in recognizing the diverse funds of knowledge learners draw from—the very ones discredited in her own education—as sites of strength to help them access and trespass upon academic spaces. Adriana Estill's poetry explores language acquisition, its griefs and joys, for bilingual families. Isabel Díaz Sánchez explores how Chicana feminists used poetry to respond to heteropatriarchal expectations of gender roles for women in the Chicano movement and afterward, using humor and language play to challenge the nationalist imagination. Berenice Limeta Jimenez's poetry looks at the explosive and mundane violences that our penal systems inflict on people who call this land home. Joshua Deckman's essay takes a deep dive into the work of contemporary writer Alán Peláez López, exploring the anti-Black racializing limits of *mestizaje* and *Latinidad* and reminding readers to, in the words of Peláez López, "fuck shame."

These writers recognize the border as a site of pain, wounding, and indeterminacy, while also appreciating the joy, creative fecundity, dynamism and resilience of the border. These writers are strategic. They make use of the resources that are available, stealing the knowledge that they need, and sourcing ancestral practices for their work. Beyond that, these works are the worst fear of those who continue to support the current administration: They are well researched. They are brilliantly argued and creatively expressed. They are critical. They pose a great threat to those who would sanitize our history, quiet our concerns, and smooth over our differences.

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<sup>1</sup> These are a handful of examples; part of the exhaustion of this moment is the sheer number of orders that are fundamentally reshaping the national reality (Staff and Valencia; Lillis and Bertrand; Sarnoff, et al; Romero; Beitsch).

<sup>2</sup> Writing from Arizona, we know that this war on DEI has its roots in our state's own 2010, anti-ethnic studies bill (HB2281), which sought to ban Mexican-American Studies in K-12 education at the same time the state passed its anti-Latina, anti-immigrant "show me your papers" (SB1070) law.

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