

# Review

## ***Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicanx and Latinx Young Adult Literature.*** Edited by Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera. **University Press of Mississippi, 2020.**

Kristina West

### **SITUATING THE 'OUTSIDE'**

*Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicanx and Latinx Young Adult Literature* is characterised by a certain frustration that there is still a lack of representation in literature for teenagers, with each chapter foregrounding the need for Chicanx and Latinx youth to read about their own lives and issues and to see themselves portrayed on stage and in the media. In their introduction, co-editors Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera consider the peripheral status of Latinx teens as they exist on the edge of white US society; in the liminal and transitional state of the teenager; and in terms of a frequent outsider status within the Latin community where they are often neither Latin nor American enough and fail to adhere to narrow and restrictive stereotypes that threaten to oppress and suppress their burgeoning adult identities. This book considers each of these experiences of peripherality, focusing on

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**Kristina West** is an independent scholar focusing on narratives of childhood in American Literature. Her first book, *Louisa May Alcott and the Textual Child*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in May 2020. Her second monograph, *Reading the Salem Witch Child*, is due out with Palgrave in November 2020. She also has a chapter on Ayn Rand, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and childhood in the edited collection, *Questioning Ayn Rand: Subjectivity, Political Economy, and the Arts* (October 2020), and has published many other articles and book entries. Her current work focuses on archives and the uncanny.

literature exploring youth identities that are not specific to this community – including the titular “nerds, goths, geeks, and freaks” – while also looking at issues within Chicana and Latina communities that are already marginalized by the societies in which they live.

## CREATIVITY AND SELF-FASHIONING

The book begins with a section on “Artists and Punks” that considers how creative outlets can foster and validate a range of brown youth identities. As such, the authors situate creativity in terms of the public and the personal from the outset, considering intersections between the two as creativity bleeds into the creation of oneself in these different arenas and encourages the self-fashioning of others in its public expression. However, this section’s focus on creativity is related solely to girls, with most analysis of male experience restricted to the final section of the book. Such a binary gender focus could have been more helpfully addressed here given this section’s focus on identity.

Amanda Ellis’ opening chapter introduces key themes of liminality, identity, and “fail[ing] at being brown” (16); each of this book’s authors engages with such issues, as do the novels and plays under discussion. Ellis considers the power of creativity in the development of Gabi, the protagonist of Isabel Quintero’s *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (2014), who experiments with activist art, creative writing, and performance poetry, with writing and personal experiences combining to both form and fracture her identity: the “in pieces” of the book’s title. Yet this claim to be “in pieces” suggests a pre-existing or desired wholeness that must always be problematic and merited further attention in this analysis.

In Ellis’ discussions of creative outlets for Chicana outsiders and her work on borderlands, she considers the multiplicity of form in Gabi’s writing and how such creative work can be mobilized to form and validate an identity as a geeky Chicana. As such, this chapter focuses more on how the ‘geek’ stereotype acts as an othering from what is therefore figured as a mainstream Chicana identity rather than from wider American society. In her discussion of borderlands, Ellis states: “Quintero stages an illusory voyeuristic access to a private landscape through this mode of narration that is meant to be read as a sincere glimpse into the most private of borderlands” (21). This valuable point has the potential for further exploration in terms of the apparent boundary between the private and the public Chicana self and raises questions that are explored further in subsequent chapters.

Lettycia Terrones’ chapter on Celia C. Pérez’s *The First Rule of Punk* (2017) further engages with this theme of self-fashioning and creative expression. However, in its exploration of brown punk feminism, it focuses on what is being resisted in a more complex sense than the merely personal. Terrones discusses punk fashion and performativity, thereby problematizing Ellis’ underlying assumption of a wholeness that can or should be returned to; rather, Terrones reads Pérez’s characters as using fashion to both protect

themselves and to form a new inside of Chicax punk. She further suggests that rejection of an imposed mainstream stereotype does not necessarily result in a rejection of the desire to belong, with the zine form as a guidebook “in the spirit of collective action” (42), thereby structuring an attempt at a new inclusivity. Terrones also raises the issue of language and its malleability regarding the use of creative avenues to deal with racism; namely, Pérez’s biracial protagonist Malú’s reappropriation of the racial slur ‘coconut’ (used to describe someone with brown skin who is ‘white inside’) to name her band, The Co-cos, and her zine, *A Handbook for Coconuts* (39). A more extensive discussion of that reappropriation, language, and meaning, would also have been welcome.

In the final chapter in this section, Adrianna M. Santos returns to *Gabi* and also considers Erika L. Sánchez’s *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017). Santos expands on Ellis’ argument in terms of self-representation and “writing, healing, affirmation” (45) via a critique of models of teaching limited to Anglo narratives of childhood. She also considers the question of bilingualism and its seeming illegitimacy in Chicax and Latinx culture, with a plea for recognition of a need to speak without separating Spanish and English. Her plea acts as a perfect foil for this academic work in which Spanish terms are rarely explained, thereby highlighting their legitimacy in a work written primarily in English and foregrounding issues of language, interpretation, and understanding that is one of the book’s principal successes.

Santos’ chapter succeeds in its analysis of societal issues raised by her two chosen texts, such as mental health, suicide, and sex; its consideration of Chicax teens as outsiders in American society; and its exploration of beginnings and endings as each protagonist considers college ahead as first-generation college-goers in a society that still sees college as for men. However, a more comprehensive exploration of the complications of crossing boundaries, such as the implicit move from Latin to American in rejecting the gendered family educational imperative, would have been welcome relative to identity-forming.

This chapter also raises an issue that troubles me through many of the chapters in this text: that of ‘authenticity’, a concept that deserves some solid critical engagement in this book but is repeatedly used without being problematized. What might constitute authenticity in Chicax/Latinx texts and young adult life? What might it mean to make such a claim? In a book that is primarily concerned with identity and positioning as an outsider to the mainstream, this deserves much more analysis rather than such a seemingly unproblematic assertion of truth and wholeness.

## **MAGIC AND THE OUTSIDER**

The second section of this book, “Superheroes and Other Worldly Beings”, considers Chicax and Latinx teens in fantasy writing, with a consideration of the ‘outsider’ via supernatural

scenarios and characters in which issues of ethnicity, hybridity, and cultural spaces are analysed. Christi Cook's chapter focuses on Marta Acosta's *Happy Hour at Casa Dracula* (2006) and Anna-Marie McLemore's *The Weight of Feathers* (2015), considering the marginalization of their characters through ethnicity and gender, and ideas of hybridity. Cook returns to themes of borderlands and authenticity in *Casa Dracula* character Milagro's "search for home and authentic identity" (64); although here, at least, 'authenticity' is something that may be sought but not necessarily found. Cook's analysis raises issues of place and belonging, and also what might constitute home, with Milagro's loss situating home as both desired and expected: an inalienable right that, nonetheless, can be withheld. Cook also considers how the fantasy genre is particularly applicable to an analysis of the outsider status of Chicana/Latina teens, with the *Dracula* trope so often centred on blood as contagion and a societal threat based largely on race and claims to contamination. However, it is perhaps the discussion of hybridity and its relevance to the young adult that is of most interest here in that it opens the way for further discussion in this work and beyond.

Domino Pérez's subsequent chapter is one of the standout chapters in this book, particularly in its continuing exploration of this issue of hybridity in Daniel José Older's *Shadowshaper* (2015) and Zoraida Córdova's *Labyrinth Lost* (2016). In her figuration of the protagonists of the two texts as *afuerxs* or outsiders, Pérez raises the question of what 'outsider' means, particularly in the territory of the borderland, with the characters under discussion frequently occupying this liminal space. For example, in her claim that, in *Shadowshaper*, "Sierra and Alejandra (who prefers Alex) are the inheritors of exceptional magic rooted in cultural practices specific to their ethnoracial communities" (74), Pérez appears to be beset by contradictions between "exceptional" magic that is yet "rooted in their ethnoracial communities"; and again, in her focus on "folklore and cultural practice" as "sites of refusal for the protagonists, who reinforce social or affiliative practices through the participation in and reframing of their respective cultural traditions" (74). Her claims might appear to militate against themselves, yet what she is drawing attention to so successfully is the very contradictions inherent in inhabiting these societal, cultural, and racial borderlands, in which the characters are crossing between defence of, and participation in, a Latinx culture and society that is, itself, an outsider.

Pérez also usefully places these works in context of other 'magical' works and their status within mainstream publishing. She notes the whiteness of the commercial publishing industry and books such as the *Harry Potter* series whose nod to racial diversity feels more like tokenism. In doing so, Pérez draws attention to the status of novels including her primary materials as outsiders themselves in a publishing industry that problematically depicts the protagonists' racial identities. Though, as Pérez explains, they still "refuse the expectation of heroic whiteness" (77) and thereby create space for teens of colour to see themselves as heroic.

To conclude the section, Ella Diaz's chapter, also examining *Shadowshaper*, works well with Pérez's chapter to offer a new perspective: Diaz focuses on the "rich art history of New York City" (89) in terms of street art and civil rights mobilizations, thereby figuring Sierra, the protagonist, as part of a cultural history rooted in a reality, recorded in (and as) art. Diaz's focus on art also precipitates a new focus on the relationship between identity, art, and place: Sierra is positioned as "alien", but one who – atop scaffolding while making public art – begins to see world differently, thereby "pushing her experience of reality" (91). Diaz is therefore not just accepting 'reality' and 'authenticity' but analysing and discussing their places in this text and beyond. To my mind, a section that might usefully have been expanded is that which considers the relationship between masculinity, power, and space through the Junklot and the Tower where Sierra is invited by a male participant to paint a mural. In particular, the need for male invitation and problematic gender roles in the artists' community could have been further interrogated in a book that suffers more widely from a lack of gender discussion, and it might therefore offer an interesting avenue for future research.

## YA LITERATURE AND THE INTELLECTUAL

The third section, "LatiNerds and Bookworms", focuses again on the need for representation of traditionally marginalized sections of the Latinx and Chicanx young adult community. Here, the focus is on the intellectual teen who is frequently ignored in favour of the *cholo/a* stereotype or othered by those teens who attempt to conform. In a chapter that looks at representation on stage as well as in paper, Roxanne Schroeder-Arce considers media portrayals of Latinx youth in terms of negative stereotypes and how challenging such stereotypes on stage "may work towards positive identity development among Latinx youth" (106). This chapter acts as an important 'call to arms' for representation of Latinx smartness, however it could have been strengthened with more nuanced and developed analysis in places. For example, when Schroeder-Arce explores what she terms as "[d]ifferent ways of knowing" (112), a reader might be left wondering: 'Different' in what sense? Racialized difference? Types of education? Taught versus experience or self-taught?

In the chapter that follows, Cristina Herrera begins an exploration of "many ways of being Chicana" (116) via her analysis of the movie *Mosquita y Mari* (2013) and its representations of "young, queer Chicana love" (116). Herrera considers intersections between identities: Chicana, queer, urban, and smart/studious with a contrast to the *chola* aesthetic, one that has received only limited attention in the edited collection up until this point. She discusses the *chola* as "Chicana feminist resistance, the epitome of cool toughness" and considers how this movie challenges "boundaries of Latina urban identity" (117). In her analysis of Meg Medina's *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (2013), Herrera discusses how Medina refuses

to glamorize the *chola*, but also argues that we can retain her without erasing other Latina/Chicana identities. Herrera offers a sensitive appraisal of problems of Latina identities between ‘bookish’ Piddy and her *chola* nemesis Yaqui, especially regarding claims to realness and authenticity. Piddy associates toughness with being a ‘real’ Latina – with being a *chola* – and Herrera raises the issue herself with her appeal to “touchy subjects like authenticity” (127) and how they need more thought and analysis. Herrera concludes: “A more poignant question to ask is why popular culture continues to define Latina adolescence, particularly urban Latina adolescence, along such narrow terms” (127). This book goes some way towards redressing the balance.

Tim Wadham’s subsequent chapter concludes the section by examining the intersection between life and literature with a welcome focus (in terms of balance) on a male protagonist, Tomás Rivera. Wadham offers the perspective of a children’s librarian working with young, Spanish-speakers in Arizona and their links between identity and language, but this is a perspective in which a focus on the personal – via his experience of inviting Latinx mothers into his library through an engagement with Pat Mora’s narrative of Rivera’s childhood – informs and complements an academic analysis of this text and the stage play by José Cruz González. Wadham looks at the intersections between book and play, and considers the links between language and outsider status through young Tomás’ relationship with the German librarian in Mora’s text, and the play in which Tomás has nightmare about a teacher “who berates Tomás for not speaking English” (137). In doing so, Wadham usefully explores intersections between language and outsider status in mainstream white US society and in the shift in language between different generations of Latinx families. By the end, Wadham tells us, “language, the thing that kept him on the outside, is now [Tomás’] ticket to belonging” (139). This chapter succeeds particularly in its considerations of different forms of writing and in an analysis of language as that which both divides and builds bridges. In recounting Rivera’s story of the Spanish-speaking child who was ostracized by and from language who then went on to become a writer with a library named after him, Wadham discusses why Rivera is the prototype of Latin outliers, but one who became a success on his own terms.

## **CHALLENGING MALE STEREOTYPES**

The final section of this book, “Non-Cholos in the Hood”, focuses on one of the key damaging stereotypes of Latin youth identity that has been largely overlooked except by implication so far in this work: that of the young male *cholo* with the difficulties experienced by those who transgress this imposed role and those who embrace it. As such, these chapters engage with peripheralized male identities in their consideration of intersections between the outsider status of Latinx males in mainstream US society and within their own communities.

Trevor Boffone's chapter on being "young, gay, and Latino" via a reading of Emilio Rodriguez's play, *Swimming While Drowning*, returns to a consideration of outsiders/outliers and space, with the intersection of the text's "queer brown youth identities" (146) and homelessness. Boffone usefully discusses intersections between different experiences of societal peripherality and how one experience of othering so often creates or coincides with others. He considers "feeling like a problem in a society that values whiteness (and heterosexuality)" (148), both in terms of this othering and in terms of a new commonality of feeling. Further, Boffone precipitates a conversation about queerness and its disruption of Latino identity and masculinity, although he also claims that "queer Latinx playwrights have always existed and have subsequently used dramatic writing as a tool to expand homogenous notions of Latinidad" (150).

In the penultimate chapter of this work, Elena Avilés continues an exploration of male youth identity through the type of the "cool cat" (159), one that both chimes with the *cholo* identity and challenges it, with Avilés arguing that Gary Soto's *Chato* series "curbs hypermasculinity while preserving the tradition and significance of the cool cat stance" (159). Avilés returns to her own invention of *chillante* pedagogy, first introduced in her works on Chicana feminist pedagogy, to consider intersections of "cool cat" identity with space and fashion. While she usefully draws attention to fashion as an "outlet for men of color to affirm a self-generated style" (164) in similar terms to prior discussions of literature and art as tools for self-generation and affirmation, further analysis of why and how different styles create different identities would have been beneficial. This chapter is perhaps most successful in its discussions of the barrio and urban male spaces, with a valuable comparison to *Stranger Things*' 'upside down', a world outside the logic of Western thought. Avilés discusses how "decolonizing barrio communities while honoring the use of expressive color marks the visual traditions of Chicana visual practices and their connection to Latin American art" (169), and links space to the politics of speech and language.

Finally, Carolina Alonso's chapter returns to queer brown identities with an analysis of Carla Trujillo's *What Night Brings* (2003) and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz (2012). Alonso looks at male and female queer characters, and at the related issue of violence, one that so often results in that very intersection between queer youths and homelessness. However, Alonso is careful to point out that both of these texts also show a positive side to queer identities, resisting the 'bury your gays' trope to offer encouraging endings, thus validating a range of queer experiences for Chicana YA readers.

Alonso explores the issue of space and outliers in a new way to previous chapters, in that she brings these two texts together to show how a change of space – even when it precipitates a return – can result in a happy ending. This chapter also gives space to an important discussion about the intersection of queerness, space, and voice/silence with its analysis of the silencing and physical removal of gay family members (in a particularly

Freudian ‘unhoming’) and the silencing of lesbian Marci’s voice in both church and her home. To my mind, her chapter is most successful in its consideration of queer identity as a phase still so closely linked to childhood, in questioning the assumption that heterosexual friendships between children (and particularly girls) must be “sexless and innocent” (179), while these texts show that they also create “a space to experience queer desire” (180).

## CONCLUSION

*Nerds, Goths, Geeks, and Freaks* successfully fulfils its aim of, and repeated call for, representation of a range of Latinx and Chicanx identities – a representation still lacking in YA fiction and academic analysis – in that it validates identities beyond the *cholo/a* while analysing the difficulties of their intersection with and cultural dislocation from both white American and Latinx communities. The text raises many important points for further discussion, particularly on cultural spaces; voice and language; teen sexuality; arts and their intersection with personal and political consciousness; and the complex interplay between outsider status from one community resulting in insider status for or within another. Further research and response to the text may precipitate analysis of some issues that remain, such as the book’s repeated and frequently unproblematized claims to ‘authenticity’, which would benefit from being challenged and explored. As it is, this book will become an important jumping-off point for many further discussions in the field.