



## The Theme of Outsiderness in Chicanx and Latinx Young Adult Literature: Self-Fashioning Identities, Canons, and Fields of Study

Boffone, T., & Herrera, C. (Eds.). (2020). *Nerds, goths, geeks and freaks: Outsiders in Chicanx and Latinx young adult literature*. University Press of Mississippi.

### Abstract:

This review article focuses on the critical anthology *Nerds, Goths, Geeks and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicanx and Latinx Young Adult Literature*, edited by Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera (2020). The goal of this collection of essays is to fill the gap that exists in both Latinx cultural studies and children's and young adult (YA) literature scholarship: the focus on US Latinx children's and YA literature. Its second goal is to concentrate on Latina and Latino outsiders, who are also ignored in the above-mentioned fields of study, even when it comes to nerds, goths, geeks, or freaks. The anthology offers a necessary exploration of the double marginalisation of Latinx and queer, nerdy, geeky, or otherwise non-conformist teenagers and young adults. The authors analyse Latinx YA texts to capture the strategies and practices the protagonists use to reject or question the dominant Latinx/Chicanx identity scripts, self-fashion a new identity, or, simply, to survive. The article outlines the key problems and themes of the anthology and describes two additional goals of the editors: to create and reaffirm an emerging Latinx YA literary canon as well as to establish an academic field of Latinx YA literature studies. Moreover, key concepts from Latinx cultural theory are sketched out, and special

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emphasis is placed on the difference between theme and theory, which serves as the starting point for evaluating the collection's achievements and shortcomings.

**Key words:**

Cristina Herrera, decoloniality, Latinx literature, outsiderness, Trevor Boffone, young adult literature

## Kwestia outsiderstwa w młodzieżowej literaturze chicanx i latinx. Samodzielnie kształtowane tożsamości, kanony i pola badawcze

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**Abstrakt:**

Niniejszy artykuł recenzyjny poświęcony jest antologii krytycznej *Nerds, Goths, Geeks and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicanx and Latinx Young Adult Literature* [Nerdzi, goci, geeki i dziwacy. Outsiderzy w młodzieżowej literaturze chicanx i latinx] pod redakcją Trevora Boffone'a i Cristiny Herrery (2020). Celem tego zbioru esejów jest wypełnienie luki, która istnieje zarówno w badaniach nad „kulturą latynoską” [*Latinx cultural studies*], jak i nad literaturą dla dzieci i młodych dorosłych (YA): nie pojawia się w nich zainteresowanie latynoską literaturą dziecięcą i młodzieżową w USA. Drugim celem redaktorów książki jest skupienie się na latynoskich outsiderach, którzy również są ignorowani w wyżej wymienionych dziedzinach nauki, nawet jeśli mówi się o nerdach, gotach, geekach czy dziwakach. Antologia oferuje potrzebną eksplorację podwójnej marginalizacji bycia zarówno Latynosem, jak i osobą queerową, nerdem, geekiem lub innym nonkonformistycznym nastolatkiem lub młodym dorosłym. Autorzy analizują amerykańskie latynoskie teksty dla młodzieży, by przyjrzeć się strategiom i praktykom stosowanym przez bohaterów, których celem jest odrzucenie lub zakwestionowanie dominujących skryptów tożsamości latinx/chicanx, stworzenie nowej tożsamości lub po prostu przetrwanie. Artykuł przedstawia najważniejsze problemy i tematy antologii oraz opisuje dwa dodatkowe cele redaktorów: stworzenie/potwierdzenie wyłaniającego się kanonu literackiego latynoskiej literatury dla dzieci i młodzieży oraz ustanowienie konkretnej, zajmującej się nią akademickiej dziedziny badań. W tekście zarysowane zostały kluczowe dla redaktorów tomu pojęcia z zakresu latynoskiej teorii kultury. Szczególny nacisk położono na różnicę między analizą tematyczną a teoretyczną. Służy ona jako podstawa do oceny osiągnięć i niedociągnięć zbioru.

**Słowa kluczowe:**

Cristina Herrera, dekolonizacja, literatura latynoska, outsiderstwo, Trevor Boffone, literatura młodzieżowa

*Nerds, Goths, Geeks and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicana and Latinx Young Adult Literature* is “the first critical anthology addressing thematic concerns around outsiders and other ‘taboo’ identities” in Chicana and Latinx children’s and young adult literature (Boffone & Herrera, 2020a, p. 7). Broader theoretical concerns around these themes are, unfortunately, rather backgrounded.

The declared and achieved goal of this collection of essays is to fill the gap that exists both in Latinx cultural studies and children’s and young adult (YA) literature scholarship: the focus on US Latinx children’s and YA literature. The lack of visibility and representation, as the editors declare, is not in the scarcity of publications, since a certain canon of Latinx YA novels has already emerged and is growing (Boffone & Herrera, 2020a, p. 4). It is literary and academic institutions that pay insufficient attention to the growing number of books that reflect changes in the US demography. According to the editors, the need to analyse the Latinx YA experience is ignored both by Latinx studies, which focus on adult issues, and by children’s and YA literature studies, which tend to omit Latinx writings. Moreover, the criticism of Latinx YA literature does not focus on outsiders, while American YA literature pays no attention to Latinx authors, even when it comes to nerds, goths, geeks, or freaks, who are often critically discussed. The essays collected in the discussed book (Boffone & Herrera, 2020b) seek to remedy this problem and offer a necessary exploration of the double marginalisation of Latinx, queer, nerdy, geeky, or otherwise non-conformist teenagers and young adults.

Furthermore, this task is not solely an academic project: the editors openly declare the need to increase the visibility of Latinx YA literature and to depict the nuances of the Latinx youth experience with the mental health of its target audience in mind (Boffone & Herrera, 2020a, p. 4). The volume, therefore, also has a didactic and educational purpose. The book is divided in four sections, preceded by an emotional “Foreword” by writer Guadalupe Garcia McCall (2020) and the “Introduction: Weirding Out Latinx America” by Trevor Boffone and Cristina Herrera (2020a). The editors stress the need for such publication, provide basic theoretical contexts, and offer a comprehensive overview of the essays collected in the volume. Each section focuses on one type of outsidership: 1) protagonists who are artists or punks, 2) superheroes and supernatural beings, 3) LatiNerds and bookworms, and, finally, 4) non-cholos and queer young people.

Drawing upon the detailed descriptions of the plot of the novels (or plays), the essays explore the specific experiences of the protagonists and strategies for negotiating their identities. Together they develop the theme of outsidership, that is, belonging to neither the mainstream culture nor the stereotypical (or stereotyped) Latinx culture. The Latinx adolescents described in this anthology take

on the outsider identities of nerds, goths, geeks, and freaks and try to deal with different kinds of assimilative pressure. They push against the imperative of being ‘hip’ in the mainstream culture and try to make ‘uncool’ cool. They challenge the ways the dominant culture oversimplifies them as intellectually stunted cholos and cholas. They also face the same problem within the Latinx community, where, as Boffone and Herrera point out, “Latinas who do not model themselves as cholas are victims of identity-policing, rendered not »really« Latina, and dismissed as weirdos or outsiders within this narrow gender-racial identity script that defines the chola as the only »authentic« young, urban, Latina identity that exists” (2020a, p. 10). The protagonists analysed in *Nerds, Goths, Geeks and Freaks...* change the preconceptions of what a Latina is supposed to be and reconsider or question urban male Chicano masculinity by actively rejecting the dominant Latinx and Chicanx identity scripts. In some cases, especially for Chicana teens, the problem can also involve one’s own family, as evidenced by young women who have to deconstruct the oppression of home (Cook, 2020, p. 68).

However, “[t]he characters who take on these identities do not wish to separate themselves from the mainstream Latinx community. Rather, they theorise their identities to forge new paths for Latinx youth to follow in ways that harmonise notions of being different and fitting in” (Boffone & Herrera, 2020a, p. 8). Instead of conformist assimilation, they choose the strategy of authentic self-expression, reinterpretation, and revaluation to self-fashion a new identity or simply survive. They do that by embracing their outsiderness and taking control of the narrative, often literally: another theme present in this anthology is the importance of art, reading, and writing.

Adrianna M. Santos’s (2020) essay “Broken Open: Writing, Healing, and Affirmation in Isabel Quintero’s *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* and Erika L. Sanchez’s *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*” shows the power of exploring Latinx literary classics, such as Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984). It can prove to be as effective a means to self-acceptance and affirmation as finding someone who shares our experience of outsiderness and marginalisation, as described by Boffone (2020) in “Young, Gay, and Latino: ‘Feeling Brown’ in Emilio Rodriguez’s *Swimming While Drowning*.” Moreover, as Amanda Ellis (2020, p. 16) notes, novels such as Isabel Quintero’s *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* (2014) reveal that “the creation of political art, the practice of writing, and the power of performance poetry serve as vital creative outlets for Chicana outsiders, be they nerds, goths, geeks, or freaks.” It enables them to “fashion forms of agency and create pathways for individual and communal transformation.”

These processes concern not only the characters in the novels examined, but also their authors. Several essays in this collection emphasise that

the protagonists' modes of self-fashioning and questioning the existing identity scripts are reflected in the authors' creative practices. For instance, Celia C. Perez's *The First Rule of Punk* (2017) can be seen as a self-affirming, "creative work that holds up a mirror to all the weirdo outsiders, all the underrepresented Chicanx and Latinx youth, the deviant punks who are also refused through misrepresentations, erasures, and omissions by the various mainstream institutional systems they navigate" (Terrones, 2020, p. 42). Similarly, Christi Cook (2020, p. 69) notes that the "idea of not belonging to the niche that is expected of one," as embodied by Milagro, the protagonist of *Happy Hour at Casa Dracula* (2006), is particularly fitting for the novel's author, Marta Acosta, "who refuses to write in the genre of magical realism since that is what editors and audiences expect of Latinx peoples." She prefers to challenge the preconceptions of what a Latinx author should be.

This anthology offers a new typology of teenage and YA identities, a redefinition of Latinx experiences, and a revision of the traditional identity scripts. It not only describes a changing world, but also calls for greater inclusion of outsider identities such as LatiNerds and queer Latinxs. In addition to its declared goals of giving visibility to Latinx YA literature and raising its status, Boffone and Herrera's anthology has two additional, slightly less explicit purposes: to establish and reaffirm the canons of Latinx children's and YA literature as well as Latinx children's and YA literature studies. The first one is accomplished by focusing on or alluding to relatively well-known works: Benjamin Alire Saenz's *Artistotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), Anna-Marie McLemore's *The Weight of Feathers* (2015), Meg Medina's *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass* (2013), Matt de la Pena's *Mexican White Boy* (2008), Pérez's *The First Rule of Punk*, Quintero's *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*, Erika L. Sanchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* (2017), as well as by including representatives of fantasy or gothic literature: Acosta's *Happy Hour at Casa Dracula* and Daniel José Older's *Shadowshaper* (2015). Moreover, the anthology also promotes lesser-known plays, such as *Swimming While Drowning* by Emilio Rodríguez (2017), and theatre as an educational platform. The strategy to achieve the second goal is to construct a theoretical framework based mainly on Latinx scholars. Just as the authors' creative strategies reflect the protagonists' problems and solutions, the essays collected in this anthology seek to self-fashion the field of Chicanx and Latinx children's and YA literary theory by carefully inscribing it into the existing Latinx cultural theory.

The *Introduction* highlights the importance of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), which constitutes one of the main theoretical references for several of the collected essays. Other scholars quoted

in multiple contributions include José Esteban Muñoz (1999, 2007) and the volume's editor Cristina Herrera (2017). Particular emphasis is placed on Muñoz's concepts of "disidentification," a refusal to conform to the stereotyped identities of Latinx people as perceived by members of the dominant culture, and "feeling brown," feeling like a problem, and on Herrera's feminist concept of ChicaNerd.

Some essays introduce additional noteworthy concepts. Boffone (2020) draws upon numerous studies from social sciences and psychology, reinforcing his activist approach. Lettycia Terrones's (2020) "Praxis of Refusal: Self-Fashioning Identity and Throwing Attitude in Pérez's *The First Rule of Punk*" builds on Marci McMahon's (2013) notion of "self-identification" and on Amalia Mesa-Bains's (1999) theory of Chicana cultural resistance, "domesticana." Thus, it can be placed in the broader context of Chicanx (queer) feminism as evidenced by the essays by Ellis (2020), Herrera (2020), Santos (2020), Roxanne Schroeder-Arce, and Terrones (2020). Elena Avilés's (2020) essay "What Can We Learn from Cool Cats? *Chillante* Pedagogy, Gary Soto, and the Chato Series" not only enters into dialogue with decolonial thought, Mesa-Bains's notion of "domesticana" and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's (1991) concept of "rasquachismo," but also elaborates on the author's original theory of "*chillante* pedagogy" which "reveals the coded sensibilities of barrio strategies of affirmation and resistance across text and image, and the decolonial cultural acts remixing notions of outsiders or outliers" (Avilés, 2020, p. 165).

Overall, however, the theoretical framework of the anthology seems rather disappointing, or at least excessively backgrounded or deliberately limited. While establishing a clear Latinx theoretical frame of reference for the analysis of Latinx literature makes logical and ideological sense, the editors' declaration of "expanding" Anzaldúa's theory and "engaging with" Muñoz's key concepts may fall short of expectations (Boffone & Herrera, 2020a, p. 7). The above-mentioned theories are simply quoted and described, or slightly narrowed down. By way of example, Cook (2020, pp. 66–67) observes that Anzaldúa's notion of the inclusive hybrid identity of the New Mestiza should not apply to struggling adolescents, for whom it is too idealistic. More specifically, they get visibility and promotion, but what they lack is actual discussion and development. Perhaps it should not be required of a collection of essays, but the absence of theoretical reflection on the subject broached in the "Introduction" seems like a missed opportunity. Moreover, the editors state that their intention is to establish their field, that is, to focus specifically on Latinx children's and YA literature and its themes of outsiderness, but this self-imposed limitation suppresses the opportunity for a broader discussion and a wide-ranging

renegotiation of the problems of identity construction, othering, and decoloniality, among others.<sup>1</sup> While various authors contribute to the possible theorisation of outsidership, the editors do not attempt to turn it into an operative construct based on the essays collected in the anthology. Decoloniality is mentioned in several different chapters (23 times to be exact). However, the concept seems to be actively embraced only in Avilés's paper on Gary Soto's *Chato* series, published from 1995. Moreover, apart from one footnote reference to Franz Fanon (Terrones, 2020, p. 43) and a brief citation of Emma Pérez's *The Decolonial Imaginary* (1999) in the "Introduction," the essays do not discuss any theories related to this concept, and one will not find it in the anthology's index (again, with the exception of Pérez who is indexed even though her work only appears once and is not referred to in any of the essays).

The index deserves separate attention. On the one hand, it is quite useful and helps the editors to determine the key elements of their anthology. On the other hand, it is highly selective and contains mainly themes (such as "fat shaming," "geeks," "girlhood," "Latinas: adolescence," "Latinos: boyhood," "masculinity," "nerds," "outsiders," "popular culture," "queer," "weirdos") rather than theories and problematised concepts, with the exception of Anzaldúa's and Muñoz's ideas. It simply serves as a means to bolster the editors' goals, while excluding some Latinx scholars, such as Alicia Gaspar de Alba (quoted several times in different essays), which seems counterproductive.

In conclusion, *Nerds, Goths, Geeks and Freaks: Outsiders in Chicana and Latinx Young Adult Literature* explores important themes of contemporary Latinx and Chicana YA literature, raising their visibility and academic prestige. It offers an overview of the emerging Latinx YA literary canon and takes a closer look at several concepts of Latinx scholarship. However, while the anthology has the potential to enrich a broader academic conversation on the problem of cultural and individual identity, it does not seek to do so, favouring an exploration of certain themes over an organised and challenging theoretical discussion. Nevertheless, it should prove to be an interesting context for other studies, both in the field of (not only Latinx) cultural theory and YA literature.

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<sup>1</sup> No constructive dialogue is established with the general field of (US) young adult literature either.

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