

# Narrative Memory and Reconciliatory Genre Encounters in *Norte* (2011) by Edmundo Paz Soldán

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In *Norte* (2011) Edmundo Paz Soldán explores multiple perspectives of immigration from Latin America to the United States during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The narratives of each of the four protagonists—Michelle, Martín, Jesús, and Sergeant Fernández—characterize complex relationships with the United States and with their own countries of origin. Through the characters of Michelle, Jesús, and Sergeant Fernández Paz Soldán establishes an encounter between different literary genres, that highlights Latin Americans' migratory experiences in the U.S., as it examines the prison system, the university, undocumented immigration, violence, and border crossing. In this article, it will be argued that, through different types of narrative memory, this novel reflects upon twenty-first century Latin American writing that is trying to find its place in the United States. The term narrative memory used in this analysis names the reconciliatory encounter between the literary past and present that regulates this novel: shuttling between references to the Hernández brothers' comic books, vampire narratives, Juan Rulfo's "Luvina," and detective fiction.

**Keywords:** U.S. Latinxs; intertextuality; immigration; Juan Rulfo; Edmundo Paz Soldán

## Introduction

Bolivian writer-scholar Edmundo Paz Soldán currently lives in the United States and has a long literary career, with published novels and short stories, in addition to contributions to national and international newspapers. The topics of his works are varied, and he frequently examines Latin America and its relationship with the U.S. in his fiction writings. Most notably, Paz Soldán's recent publications question the social, political, and cultural implications of Latin America's historical northward migration, and his 2011 novel *Norte* in particular explores whether Latin Americans have

found a true home in the U.S., or if they are still *norteados*.<sup>1</sup>—disoriented, or lost in the “North”, as Paz Soldán has argued in interviews.<sup>2</sup>

*Norte* flouts the rigidity of literary genres, with writing of many different types, and Paz Soldán clarifies the intentionality of his genre-bending at the end of the book. In an addendum titled “Notes and Acknowledgements,” he names texts that shaped the novel. Two of *Norte*’s protagonists, Jesús and Martín, were inspired by newspaper articles he read about the serial killer Ángel Maturino Reséndiz and the painter Martín Ramírez. Nonfiction books also provided him with specific details for the development of these characters: “Jesús and Martín, the main characters of *Norte*, are freely rendered versions of Maturino and Ramírez. The books that most helped me imagine them are *The Railroad Killer* by Wensley Clarkson (St. Martin’s, 1999) and *Martín Ramírez* by Brooke Davis Anderson (Marquand Books, 2007)” (2011, 315). Nevertheless, this “Note” does not clarify the incorporation of the other discourses, literary genres, and visual influences that also shaped the novel.

The “Note” illustrates that *Norte*’s characters are based not only on real people, but also on the real-life relationships these individuals had with the United States. Many of Paz Soldán’s nonfiction writings explore issues related to immigration, nationalism, and the author’s own connections to the “North,”<sup>3</sup> and this is his second novel about the United States.<sup>4</sup> It is divided into five parts, each of which is further divided into five to seven sections. The narratives of the four protagonists—Michelle, Martín Ramírez, Jesús, and Sergeant Fernández—belong to different time periods. Each narrative follows its own chronological order. The characters’ backstories are different, and they negotiate varying relationships with the United States while simultaneously maintaining a complex relationship with their countries of origin.

This analysis will centralize the stories of Michelle, Jesús, and Sergeant Fernández to examine the literary genre traditions with which the author engages. In the novel, the Martín Ramírez story is approached in Michelle’s creative writing endeavors;<sup>5</sup> she is a writer from Bolivia, and her story is set in Lanslide, Texas, 2008–2009. Jesús’s serial killings are examined through the detective lens of Fernández; both characters are from Mexico and Sergeant Fernández’s detective search straddles Texan and Mexican border cities between 1985 and 2009. This study will demonstrate that in narrating the stories Paz Soldán reformulates genres and literary traditions through his innovative use of Juan Rulfo’s story “Luvina,” combined with techniques of zombie and detective modalities.

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<sup>1</sup> Popular expression in Spanish to emphasize someone’s geographical disorientation.

<sup>2</sup> “En el Sur se llenan las maletas de sueños y se emprende el difícil rumbo al Norte. Pero la realidad es que muchos de los que llegan a ese Norte imaginado e idealizado por la necesidad económica acaban perdidos en él.” Bárbara Celis interview with Edmundo Paz Soldán, “Me interesa ahondar en la herida,” *El País*, April 9, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> He received his Ph.D. from University of California, Berkeley and has worked in many U.S. universities. Currently, he is a professor of Spanish literature at Cornell University.

<sup>4</sup> The first was *Los vivos y los muertos* (2009) [*The Living and the Dead*].

<sup>5</sup> Martín Ramírez’s story engages with the overall topics discussed in this article, but his story focuses on visual artistry and not literary genres. The details of his story of migration, imprisonment, and classification of his paintings as “outsider art” go beyond the framework of this analysis. See Irwin (2014) on “Migración, comodificación, memoria: El caso insólito de Martín Ramírez.”

The interweaving of characters and genres in Paz Soldan's novel brings into discussion the multiple discourses needed to represent the identities of Latin American migrants in the United States in the twenty-first century. Intertextuality between discourses will be read through the concept of narrative memory. This is my term, and I propose it to critically name the intersections between intertextuality, dialogism, and ongoing connections between the literary past and present that regulate the logic of certain works of Latin American literature.<sup>6</sup> My analysis of narrative memory in *Norte* elucidates how the author negotiates this mnemonic literary dialogue, a sort of reconciliatory encounter, from U.S. coordinates. The approach to the function of "memory" in this term is through Bakhtin's propositions on dialogism, intertextuality, and memory in literary genres. In his essay "Discourse in the Novel" (1934–35), Bakhtin extensively delves into the historical trajectory of this genre. His focus on its development extends to other concepts analyzed in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). His propositions on genre and memory also consider how reinterpretations of a text's "images and language" are recontextualized as cultures change over time (Bakhtin 1981, 420–421). In *Norte*, this type of dialogism presents readers with critical perspectives on historical connections between Latin American migration to the United States and psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and universities, as it interrogates issues related to violence and border crossing and cultural production by the Latin American diaspora in the United States.

## **Michelle: The Writer and Narrative Memory**

The role of dialogue within narrative memory is crucial for analyzing the Michelle character in *Norte*. She is described as a university student who abandons a graduate program in Latin American literature to become a graphic novelist. In contrast to other characters, Michelle narrates immigration from the standpoint of someone who came to the U.S. very early in life. No details of her journey from Bolivia or reasons for her immigration are provided. The narrative focal point of her story is her presence in twenty-first century Texas and her relationships with alcohol, drugs, and a former professor. Her father yearns to return to Bolivia, but the move is presented as impossible, and he makes no effort to initiate travel. For Michelle, a return to Bolivia is not something she desires, and her relationship with her native land is linked mainly to literary traditions.

Art plays a crucial role for Michelle, as it provides her with ways to communicate, to survive, and to understand her environment, which tends to silence voices like hers. The central criticism embedded in her narration targets the U.S. university system, where rules and procedures suppress the creative spirit, thereby stifling diverse voices. The university causes Michelle to feel as if she does not belong to the real world. She reflects upon this predicament in one of her last visits to campus:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I also use this term in my analysis, "Espacios de salvación y prisión: Memoria narrativa y 'colindancia' en *La ciudad de los hombres* de Cristina Rivera Garza." *Catedral Tomada. Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 4, no. 7 (2016): 142–177 (doi 10.5195/).

<sup>7</sup> Citations here are to the novel's English translation, *Norte – A Novel* (2016).

They all had the same hopeful air. No dazed passengers in this boat. Same as me back in the day, until crisis struck and I decided to jump off the deep end. But that wasn't the only reason, and I knew it. It wasn't only because classes at the university had seemed like a long parenthesis in my life, as though I wasn't really living in the "real world." The only good thing to come of the two years working on my master's degree was being forced to reconsider the doctorate. (Paz Soldán 2016, 61–62)

After dropping out of school, Michelle begins to search for her creative voice and undertakes self-exploration while entering a tormented relationship with a former professor. These two paths pull her thoughts and feelings about Latin American literature in different directions. Her lover's literary research projects further her own creative exploration, but his lifestyle unsettles her. Spending time with him also incites her to consume cocaine and alcohol and suffer the intellectual and emotional hardships inherent in a tumultuous relationship.

Michelle prefers the visual imagery of comics and graphic novels and rejects classical literary forms. She predicts that the genre of the traditional novel will soon find itself endangered: "Honestly, I think the days for literature as we know it are numbered. It's the century of the graphic novel, the *books*, digital novels hooked up to Wikipedia and YouTube" (66–67). Her distance from traditional narrative forms, however, is inspired by that very tradition. Her yearning for inspiration, for a distinct creative voice, leads her to metaliterary projects and adaptations. Michelle's sections of the novel constantly quote other works of literature, evoking a shared "narrative memory." These references inspire her to create zombie "remakes," as she calls them, of canonical Latin American works.

The persistent allusions to Latin American literature signal a Latin American generation that is seeking its own voice within the borders of the United States. Michelle represents artists grappling with their identities inside U.S. institutions, which canonically privilege other voices. She finds herself in the middle of many cross-cultural influences, shuttling between her admiration for comics by the brothers Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez, fantasy and gothic books, Laurell K. Hamilton's vampire narratives, and Juan Rulfo's short stories.

Michelle's own literary projects also negotiate with a tradition that has already forged a space for a dialogue on identities: Chicanx and Latinx<sup>8</sup> literature. From the beginning of the novel, she presents her perspective on these designations and their cultural influence, performing this work through the main character of her own graphic novel, Samantha: "My brother Toño would want me to give her Hispanic features—he discovered his Latino identity in his last year of high school and hasn't stopped criticizing my illustrations since then, saying they don't deal with 'the struggle of a minority against the oppression of the Anglo majority.' And I won't pay any attention" (19). Michelle's

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<sup>8</sup> Gender-neutral or non-binary form. Alternative to Chicano/a or Latino/a.

narratives seek to depart from tradition and are aimed at brokering literary, ideological, and political affinities. While Michelle is ambivalent about her brother's ideological stances and distances herself from specifically "Latino" perceptions of identity, her creative work mirrors Latinx identity concerns by proposing literary and artistic alternative, nontraditional forms, and it aligns particularly with issues concerning this community. In the field of Chicana studies, for example, Gloria Anzaldúa's literary and theoretical work constantly strived to disrupt the establishment by decentering canonical Western discourses ([1987] 2007). Michelle's creative attempts are genre-bending, as Anzaldúa theorized: "I think that before you can make any changes in composition studies, philosophy, or whatever it is, you have to have a certain awareness of the territory; you have to be familiar with it and you have to be able to maneuver in it before you can say, 'Here's an alternative model for this particular field, for its norms, for its rules and regulations, for its laws'" (qtd. in Lunsford and Ouzgane 2004, 40). Even though Michelle's position seems to be critical of Hispanic/Latino/Latinx reflections on identity, her posture on creative explorations are not dissimilar to them.

Michelle's graphic novel projects push the limits of canonical texts by creating within different genres. The character does not name all her associations, but her work is consistent with Anzaldúa's postures on writing and her arguments on cultural identity, which she staged at the "borderlands."<sup>9</sup> From this positioning, we can also compare her work to arguments that are fundamental in Latin America's "Arte Comprometido"<sup>10</sup> and "Testimonio Studies."<sup>11</sup> In *Norte*, all her creative products are left unfinished—which serves as a testament to her ideological postures—as throughout the novel they are in constant development and never clearly announced. Nonetheless, it is relevant to keep in mind that a politically committed work of literature is not always explicit. As Eduardo Galeano argues in his influential cultural analysis "Diez errores o mentiras frecuentes sobre literatura y cultura en América Latina": "La literatura puede reivindicar, creo, un sentido político liberador, toda vez que contribuya a revelar la realidad en sus dimensiones múltiples, y que de algún modo alimente la identidad colectiva o rescate la memoria de la comunidad que la genera, *sean cuales fueren sus temas*" (1980, 15). The term narrative memory names the reconciliatory encounter that regulates the logic of Michelle's creative work and ideologies; it places her "remakes" in dialogue with past narratives and their social and political contexts.

The present approach to narrative memory is informed by M. M. Bakhtin's work on dialogism, intertextuality, and memory in different literary genres. Bakhtin claims in his 1972 *Problems of*

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<sup>9</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa's writing is well known as one that challenges genre limits and borders, which is a central argument in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* ([1987] 2007).

<sup>10</sup> "Arte Comprometido," Committed Art, calls for artistic and political rebellion, modernization, and popularization of art. Michelle's artistic endeavors seek to embody this kind of creation, but the character never voices a socially committed cause, which is an important component in this tradition. See: Hernández Otero's *Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo: Resistencia y Acción* (2002). Nonetheless, as Galeano argues, an explicit commitment is not necessarily needed (1980).

<sup>11</sup> Testimonial Studies serves to understand the role of genre in undermining master or canonical narratives. In Latin America, "testimonios" have been regarded as the most authentic representations of "subaltern lives," and as gendered discourses, testimonials have provided insights into women's history and gender relations, especially as a direct response to military repressions in the 1970s (Sternbach Saporta 1991, 91). Michelle's graphic novels pair genre and identity as a strategy to represent Latin American, but also Latinx, identities in the U.S.

*Dostoevsky's Poetics*: “Genre lives in the present, but it always remembers the past, its beginnings” (1984, 106). The mnemonic roots of genres proposed by Bakhtin clarify how literatures develop across different epochs. In *Norte*, the complex exercise of weaving together disparate traditions is expressed in Michelle’s creative work, which she uses to justify her decision to drop out of college. This journey in the novel leads her to “remake” Juan Rulfo’s short story “Luvina” (1953) in a different genre, without forgetting the text’s past. The fourth part of *Norte* engages with Rulfo’s text in an overt manner. The first paragraph of Michelle’s section begins with phrases by Rulfo’s ambiguous narrator: “*Of the mountains in the south Luvina is the highest and rockiest*” (201).<sup>12</sup> In fact, “Luvina” takes over from pages 201 to 203, even though there is no direct reference to the Mexican author in the text. The following citation is from Rulfo, and Michelle’s contributions are just a few phrases, as I note here in bold: “*They say in Luvina that one’s dreams come up from those barrancas; but the only thing I seen come up out of them was zombies. Sad zombies, scraping the air with their thorny howls, making a noise like a knife on a whetstone*” (201). Her contributions to this palimpsest are structurally similar at other moments of the story and always include the word “zombie.”

The references to Rulfo can be quickly recognized by those who know his work, but it is important to note that “Luvina” belongs to Rulfo’s short story collection *El llano en llamas* (1953),<sup>13</sup> which is now considered a canonical text in Latin America. Rulfo’s literary corpus includes this collection and the novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955). His narrative imaginaries present arid fields and uninhabited towns, but also violence, persecution, and the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution during the first half of the twentieth century. These distinct characteristics transcend local references. Rulfo’s engagement with themes of the revolution was not emblematic of narrative strategies of the period, as José Miguel Oviedo argues:

Aunque Rulfo trataba temas mexicanos y presentaba situaciones sociales reconocibles para la mayoría, no eran exactamente narraciones tradicionales, del tipo que la novela de la Revolución Mexicana había popularizado. Esta es la gran novedad que traía su obra: el fin de la novela revolucionaria como crónica y con una posición o juicio histórico claramente establecidos [...]. El autor da un giro decisivo a todas esas tradiciones literarias cuyos consabidos referentes eran la tierra, el campesino-víctima, el caciquismo feudal, la historia sangrienta de sus luchas, para someterlos a una inflexión universal, mítica y simbólica. (2001, 2)

The non-traditional features in Rulfo’s text are what Michelle highlights in her own rendition. Thus, the relationship with this short story reaffirms Paz Soldán’s commitment to evoking the shared memory of a Latin American literary tradition. In Michelle’s version, the references to zombies obstruct the narrative flow for those who know the Rulfo text; the story is threatened by zombies, and there is no room for ambiguity as there is in “Luvina”: ““What country are we in, Agripina?” I asked

<sup>12</sup> The use of Rulfo appears in italics only in the English version, not in the original Spanish version.

<sup>13</sup> Published in English as *The Burning Plain and Other Stories* (1964).

*my wife. And she shrugged her shoulders. ‘Go and look for a place where we can eat and spend the night.’ She took the youngest child by the hand and left. But she didn’t come back.* **Did the zombies eat them?**’ (202). By appropriating a specific text from the parameters of a different genre and context, the overall meaning is necessarily altered.

Contemporary critics of the zombie narrative have postulated that the zombie is a signifier for cultural reflection, a “screen” onto which predicaments are projected and take shape. In their study of this figure, “Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope” (2008), Jen Webb and Sam Byrnard reflect on its multiple meanings: “[...] it has become a familiar character, one that participates in narratives of the body, of life and death, of good and evil; one that gestures to alterity, racism, species-ism, the inescapable, the immutable. Thus, it takes us to ‘the other side’—alienation, death, and what is worse than death: the state of being undead” (83). The recasting of Rulfo’s story as a zombie tale causes readers to reevaluate its meaning. The zombie trope has a long history in Caribbean and Afro-Latin American religions, as argued by Persephone Braham: “The origins of the word ‘zombi’ have been traced back to West African languages as well as the Romance *sombra/ombre*” (2015, 154). These origins nonetheless differ from colonial resignifications of Caribbean beliefs.<sup>14</sup> In my analysis, the zombie genre is used to reflect a living-dead literary tradition. Put differently, it remembers a past and comments on a present. A twenty-first century version of Rulfo’s story inspires Michelle’s creative expression. This narrative memory helps establish a dialogue with the spatial and temporal coordinates of the imagined past. In *Norte*, this mnemonic strategy causes us to reflect on the positionality of the Latin American artist in the United States.

The genres that Michelle uses to represent this positionality are considered minor by the representatives of academia in the novel. In a conversation with Sam—graduate student of literature, friend, confidant, and reader of her work—he roughly criticizes her zombie version of “Luvina”: “I know where you got the idea, my dear, I’m familiar with that novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. But none of it convinces me. I mean, I expect more from you. I’m willing to concede all the paraphernalia of monsters and gothic scenery, as long as the ideas are fresh and original” (204). For Sam, to interlace Juan Rulfo in this way is not creative, nor does it have value as an “original” work. Michelle’s lover Fabián shares this judgement: “Yet another voice trying to kill off literature. Get in line” (67). The supposed lack of originality voiced by these two characters fails to acknowledge the position she is proposing or the generic historical aspects to which she alludes. This is not an innocent selection, as she strongly responds to Fabián: “It’s scholars like you who kill it off a little bit every day: theory as an end in itself, books that can only be read by other academics” (67). Michelle, the only first-person narrator in *Norte*, repeatedly reflects on how to master canonical and noncanonical texts for her own

<sup>14</sup> Historically, European and U.S. colonizers in the Caribbean portrayed the “zombie” figure negatively as the product of an induced trance, a ritualistic possession of the body entered through music and dance as a conduit for spirits to communicate with the devoted. This ritual appears in major Afro-Latin American religions, such as Brazilian *candomblé* and *macumba*, Haitian *vodou*, and Cuban *Regla de Ocha*. At the same time, the trance has been also interpreted as a form of resistance, an “escape” from the toils of slavery, suffering, and poverty (Braham 2015, 155). In addition, author and journalist Amy Wilentz, argues that the historical meaning of the “zombie” trope has its roots in Haiti and slavery: a state of zombification was linked to the fear of an after-death state, consciousness-less, and perpetual slavery. Wilentz has critiqued the whitewashing of the zombie archetype in her “Response to ‘I Walked with a Zombie’” (2011).

repurposing as an artist in the U.S. In another example, she imagines a werewolf version of Gabriel García Márquez's famous character, Aureliano Buendía.

Michelle's appropriation of "Luvina" is not her last creative attempt. In *Norte*, we accompany her on an imaginative journey inspired by the work of another character in the novel: painter and prisoner Martín Ramírez. The intersection of the two stories takes place at the university. In the first part of the novel, Ruth, one of Michelle's former professors, asks her to contribute to a dossier on the painter's work that will accompany an exhibition. At first, she is uninterested in his paintings. The images she finds online and reproductions of his paintings in books do not impress her, nor does her professor's perspective on the artist. Ruth argues to her students with conviction that the artist should not be interpreted as Mexican: "Ramírez shouldn't be qualified as a Mexican but as a Latino, a Hispanic, a Chicano, a Mexican-American (he had lived in the U.S. for forty of his sixty-eight years)" (231). Ruth's ideological claims about Martín's identity align with those of Michelle's brother, and she dismisses them all.

However, the exhibition of Ramírez's work spurs Michelle to reflect once again on a narrative memory, this time from a visual standpoint. She does not participate in the dossier, but when she sees Martín's paintings in the university gallery, she is inspired: "The drawings were massive and they captivated me, they were like a revelation [...]. So there's my novel. Instead of zombies and skulls with Freddy Krueger-style faces, they will be Mexican, but seen through the lens of North American horror films" (234). In search of an artistic and immigrant identity of her own, Michelle once again remakes another's work and refashions its meaning.

When we put the different discourses that inspire Michelle together, we see that *Norte* engages in a grander debate about what is considered high literature, what is considered popular culture, and why. It proposes a creative dialogue between these genres. This dialogue is a strategy to produce narratives that, unlike any single genre in isolation, can represent the particularities of a Latin American artist in the U.S. in the twenty-first century. In this way, Paz Soldán echoes a narrative memory while also expanding existing discussions of the literary history of Latin Americans in the U.S., and *Norte* constitutes a commentary on current conversations on the cultural production of immigrants.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This is not the first-time Paz Soldán has engaged in this type of reimagining in his work. His writing appears in anthologies such as *Se habla español: Voces latinas en USA* (2000) [Spanish is Spoken Here: Latino Voices in the U.S.], which he edited with Alberto Fuguet, and *Sam no es mi tío: veinticuatro crónicas migrantes y un sueño americano* (2012) [*Sam is Not My Uncle: Twenty-Four Chronicles of Migration and One American Dream*]. Both collections reflect upon the U.S. experience through irreverent and critical takes on immigration, identity, and the politics of language. *Spanish is Spoken Here* gathers stories about the United States, its society, politics, and culture by Latin American authors, Spanish-speaking visitors, immigrants, and residents. *Sam is Not My Uncle* gathers chronicles by writers and academics that are critical of contemporary U.S.-Latin American issues of migration, violence, racism, xenophobia, and the "American Dream."

## Jesús and Sergeant Fernández—Border Narratives of Crime and Transnational Detective Fiction

*Norte* alludes to locations in the United States and in northern Mexico, and specifically to border crossings from Ciudad Juárez to several U.S. cities. We follow Jesús, a young drug trafficker who becomes one of the U.S.'s most wanted serial killers in the 1980s and 1990s. The third-person narrative regarding Jesús places the reader in the role of a witness to his crimes, murders, and psychotic disintegration. But toward the end of the novel's first part, a detective appears. At this point, the narrative's focus splits and is no longer exclusively focused on Jesús and his insatiable desires to kill, but also on a detective who feels guilty for the serial killer's crimes, Sergeant Fernández, a Mexican immigrant who has completely accepted the United States as his homeland. This acceptance does not, however, make him feel distant from the Latin American community. Fernández recognizes that over the course of his career he has not arrested or given fines to Mexican or Central American immigrants, or to people who could be immigrants, because he is convinced that they are driven by a search for better opportunities. Yet, once he reads a police report detailing Jesús's first murder in the U.S., he questions his previous assumptions: "Three stab wounds to the chest, her face had been smashed in with a baseball bat. She had been raped after death. Two words were written in blood on a kitchen wall—or two attempts to write the same word. The killer's fingerprints were found at the scene of the crime, taken from the knife and bat. Sperm samples were sent for analysis" (182). The media discover this information and use the tragic murder as a springboard for challenging U.S. immigration issues, drug trafficking, and weak enforcement policies on border crossing. These comments are presented as reminiscent of current real-life slogans in the U.S.: "Immigration laws are so lax that our country is being invaded by Mexicans who are spreading the same type of callous violence they practice over there. It's time we build a wall and keep them out!" (186). Jesús's murders and the discriminatory attitudes the media propagate against the Latin American migrant community trap Fernández between two loyalties: to his country of origin and to his new home.

The dilemma he faces can be explored through the characteristics of classic detective fiction and how these characteristics are reformulated in the novel. *Norte*'s specific play on detective narratives highlights the connections between the crime, the investigation, and the search for truth—the founding pillars of this fiction, but these pillars are refracted through the lens of the relationship between Latin America and the U.S. The original triad of the detective genre (crime, investigation, truth) is merged here with the themes of immigration, U.S. authoritarianism, xenophobia, and violence.

Detective fiction has long been a part of Latin American literature. Writers such as Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1986), Rodolfo Usigli (1905–1979), Adolfo Bioy Casares (1914–1999), Rodolfo Walsh (1927–1977), Manuel Puig (1932–1990), María Elvira Bermúdez (1912–1988), and Vicente Leñero (1913–2014), to name a few, utilized this genre and proposed formulations of it.<sup>16</sup> The detective genre

<sup>16</sup> Latin American detective fiction varies in themes and ideologies that are closely related to each country's historical contexts. For example, in Argentina during the 1950s–1960s, detective fiction was linked to investigative journalism and was a tool of denunciation of silenced voices, as in Rodolfo Walsh's *Operation Massacre* (1959). In Mexico, Paco Ignacio Taibo II's detective series are set during the 1970s in a Mexico City where the police force is intrinsically linked to

also has a long tradition in the U.S., starting in 1841 with Edgar Allan Poe,<sup>17</sup> which has evolved and brought changes to the founding triad. Latin American writers are well known for reshaping the genre's formula to examine the achievability of justice. They have been especially interested in displaying society's mistrust of justice during dictatorial, oppressive, and corrupt regimes, as has been studied by Ana María Amar Sánchez: "El relato [policial] latinoamericano quiebra este pacto, destruye la armonía entre sociedad/justicia/ley al representar el crimen como *producto* de las instituciones políticas y sociales" (2000, 60–61). Moreover, according to Tzvetan Todorov in "The Typology of Detective Fiction," in the classical version of the genre, the detective's investigation is based on a search for clues that will help him solve crimes and identify criminals<sup>18</sup> ([1966] 1977, 44). Sergeant Fernández embodies certain characteristics of this type of investigative detective. To arrest Jesús, he visits every murder scene in Texas from 1985 to the late 1990s. He scrutinizes all the details and inspects the walls to see if there are any messages, which Jesús tends to leave whenever he commits a crime. Fernández tracks him closely in the pursuit of justice.

The detective's investigation speaks to broader themes concerning the differences between the Mexican and U.S. police and their divergent codes of justice. When the Sergeant was young, the narrator tells us, he dreamed of becoming a police officer, but his dreams were shattered when he realized there was little difference between criminals and cops: "In fact, as a boy in Mexicali he had dreamed of becoming a police officer. Rafael was crestfallen when he found out that these agents of the public good were the same racketeers who visited his father's liquor store every last Friday of the month and threatened to close him down if he didn't pay extortion money" (94). These abuses force his family to cross the border. In the U.S. Fernández changes his mind and joins the police. Still, he remains critical of the institution and is particularly unforgiving about its problematic position on immigration, a position that is crucial when Jesús attacks again in 1985, close to the railroad tracks, and the police force and public respond with fear and anger.

After this murder, Jesús earns the nickname of the "Railroad Killer" because he does not change the place where he commits his crimes. In contrast, it is the attitude of the public and the police that changes. The news that a Mexican immigrant has killed again increases the community's fear of immigrants. Fernández empathizes with this fear but wants to avoid collective panic. His superiors, however, do not share his views. His captain's statements make him realize that the role of the police is not what it used to be: "Maybe the captain was right. It wasn't the police's mission to calm the frenzied populace, assure them that order would be restored. These were troubled times, and to keep ahead of the game, the police needed to put pressure on public opinion, make people feel

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crimes, killings, and rapes. This type of literature was influential in detective fiction that arose in Mexico in the twenty-first century to critique the relationship between *narvos* and the government. See: Parra (2005).

<sup>17</sup> "[...] the detective story was invented in 1841 by Edgar Allan Poe, who acknowledged some debt to the structure as well as content of William Godwin's earlier novel *Caleb Williams* (1794)" (Priestman 2013, 2).

<sup>18</sup> There are many studies on this tradition, but Todorov's typology is especially appropriate because it treats epochs as well as the malleability of the genre. Todorov considers the traditional genre, or what is also called the *Whodunit*, which in Spanish has been called a text of "enigma," as the origin of detective fiction. The genre's first type is transparent and direct; two stories are told: the assassin's and the investigator's. The second type is the *thriller*, which suppresses the story of the murder and instead focuses on the investigation. The third type is the *suspense* novel, which, like the *thriller*, focuses on the investigation, but also on what happens afterwards, as it is concerned with the past and the present.

unsafe, encourage them to report prowlers in their neighborhood, awaken the fervor of the mob that would lynch a stranger for being an outsider” (95). These statements go against the grain of both the U.S. and Latin American detective fiction traditions. The classical detective that Fernández seems to personify at the beginning evokes the U.S. detective narrative, since he truly believes that Jesús can be brought to justice. Yet, Fernández’s complex positions on the security of the border and the fact that Jesús’s fingerprints are in the archives of U.S. authorities defy the established narrative. U.S. officers had arrested Jesús in the past, returned him to the border, and released him multiple times before drug trafficking became a critical issue for both countries in the early 1980s.<sup>19</sup> Fernández’s investigative story ultimately aligns with the Latin American detective narrative as a political critique, noted by Amar Sánchez: “[...] en América Latina la versión del género se vuelve política” (2000, 61). Though this “border detective’s” actions deviate from the classical trajectory, his search for justice will ultimately lead him to expose the U.S. judicial system’s politicized enforcement of immigration laws, depending on its contemporaneous relationship with Mexico. Paz Soldán emphasizes the political nature of justice through the stories of Sergeant Fernández and Jesús.

Once again, *Norte* dialogues with a historical period and its complexities. By employing a narrative memory, Paz Soldán recontextualizes and reformulates the detective fiction across two cultures through a genre that has been a key form of denunciation in Latin America. The reconciliatory encounter with detective genre representations distrustful of the achievability of justice brings to the forefront the narrative memory of this genre in the Southern Cone and elsewhere. The literariness of such efforts cannot be overlooked. As Galeano has argued about literature and culture in Latin America: “El mismo engranaje que arroja a las nuevas generaciones a la desesperación y a la crónica policial es el que llama Libertad a una cárcel, como ocurre en el Uruguay, y Colonia Dignidad a un campo de concentración, como ocurre en Chile” (1980, 7). Detective literature in the region and its diverse reformulations, as critics argue, have been historically a powerful tool of accusation.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the variation of detective fiction in this novel amplifies the portrayal of the U.S. justice system through Sergeant Fernández’s observations: “The INS, the Rangers, the FBI were pathetic as organizations. Bungling and ineffective, and powerless to secure borders or capture the Railroad Killer” (261) He sees that nothing functions well and for this reason he decides to take matters into his own hands. He crosses the border to find Jesús’s wife. Thanks to her, Sergeant Fernández determines that the suspect is in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in search of his sister, María Luisa. Jesús’s surrender to the police is possible because of the Sergeant’s disclosure to the sister of her brother’s violent crimes. She is the one who convinces him to surrender: “María Luisa had reassured him that in return for

<sup>19</sup> “U.S.-led attempts to contain drug trades in the 1980s and 1990s had two critical effects on Mexico, both unintended and unforeseen: first, to make drug commerce increasingly violent and menacing to U.S. interests, and second, to bring the center of dangerous trades closer and closer to its consumers and the prohibitionist apparatus within U.S. borders” (Gootenberg 2010, 8).

<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that there is a tradition of Latinx detective fiction in the U.S. and to highlight the literature in this genre by Rudolfo Anaya, Lucha Corpí, Max Martínez, Michael Nava, Rolando Hinojosa, and Ricardo Means Ybarra, among others. Manuel Ramos, a detective fiction author himself, has written about this genre in the U.S. and argues that a central topic of this fiction is an investigative search for history, identity, and roots (2001, 166). *Norte*’s focus on migration and identity contrasts with these characteristics, but the genre-bending practices could be a point of comparison in a separate study.

turning himself in, they had promised there would be no death sentence” (297). The promise is not kept, and his arrest has complex results: justice is served, but Jesús becomes a celebrity sensation.

The media in the novel publicize his arrest and spark unconventional admiration in the community for his violence. Jesús receives fan letters and gifts in prison, sells autographs, and more: “Women and autograph hunters wrote to him. His signature was worth fifty dollars. He sold locks of his hair. He even sold corns from his feet. Fucking gringos were batshit loco” (305). Thus, this Mexican immigrant is admired precisely when he embodies the U.S. public’s collective nightmare. The reformulation of the detective genre within *Norte* becomes a critical testimony of the complexity and diversity of Mexicans and other Latin Americans and their relationship to the U.S. in the twenty-first century. A Mexican detective tries to negotiate loyalties between his two countries, but in the end, the negotiation is moot. He chooses justice, but Jesús becomes a cult-figure prisoner.

## **Conclusion: Narrative Memory and Reconciliatory Genre Encounters**

The voices of Latin American immigrants in *Norte* evoke different genres, discourses, and literary traditions—different narrative memories, which reflect on the complex relationship of immigrants to the U.S. and their home countries, and of Latin America to the U.S. Paz Soldán emphasizes Michelle’s literary and artistic voice, her inspirations and critiques through relentless metaliterary discussions and adaptations. Michelle’s story remains open-ended, but she is also the character who allows all the stories to intersect. Jesús, the “Railroad Killer,” incites another type of narration in her, as she observes: “A Latino serial killer like the Night Stalker, a Mexican. There’s something there. A vast country where Latinos lose themselves and are found. It made me think about extreme forms of madness” (289). She decides to write a Latino serial killer narrative, but this remake, like her other projects, remains unfinished.

In the story of Sergeant Fernández detective fiction is reformulated. This remake of a classic, clue-driven investigation forces us to consider the relationship of Latin America and the U.S. as one of violence and failed justice. Jesús is sentenced to the death penalty, but he dies in prison while still being widely revered. Sergeant Fernández is praised for fulfillment of his duty but remains ambivalent about his relationship to both the U.S. and his home country.

Through very different characters, reformulations, and reconciliatory literary genre encounters, *Norte* provides a home for different voices, while also reaffirming a Latin American presence in the cultural and literary memory of the U.S. Paz Soldán’s narrative choices suggest that fears and misconceptions about migrants remain rampant. The author’s “Note” at the end of the novel further emphasizes its inception and his intentions of writing about Latin Americans in the U.S.: “[...] I had been throwing around the idea of a novel that brought in stories of Latin Americans lost in the immensity of the United States” (315). In the novel itself, he achieves this goal by echoing real-life stories and political debates, as well as by reconciling—as Michelle’s narratives do—politicized literary

genres. These uses of different narrative memories posit that certain immigrant stories have remained invisible in the canon. At the same time, literary projects telling the story of Latin Americans in the U.S. are still in the making; *Norte* is an example of one such project.

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