

The Concept of Generation in the Study of Twenty-First Century Mexican Literature: Usefulness and Limitations

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Recibido: 15/02/2018 – Aceptado: 05/06/2018

DOI: 10.17533/udea.lyl.n74a06

Abstract: This article analyzes the concept of generation as a methodological tool for contemporary literary research, advancing its use to characterize aesthetic trends in the artistic production of diverse groups of coetaneous writers. By providing a cultural history of the uses of the category in Mexican literary studies, it examines the applicability and limitations of the concept of generation, highlighting the importance of contextual and diachronic awareness in its deployment. This study then advocates for an understanding of a generation as a porous sociobiological category that groups several people under a similar *Weltanschauung*. It contends that the heterogeneity of Mexican cultural nationalism generates an equivocal ground for the literature of the generation of writers born in the 1960s and 1970s, and argues for the consideration of the cluster of Mexican authors born in these decades as a generation.

Keywords: Generational analysis, Mexican Literature, Mexican Cultural Studies, Literary Research Methods, Literature of the *crack*.

EL CONCEPTO DE GENERACIÓN EN EL ESTUDIO DE LA LITERATURA MEXICANA DEL SIGLO XXI: USOS Y LIMITACIONES

Resumen: Este artículo analiza el concepto de generación como una herramienta metodológica para la investigación literaria contemporánea, proponiendo el uso del concepto para caracterizar las tendencias estéticas en la producción artística de diversos grupos de escritores coetáneos. A partir de una historia cultural de los usos de la categoría en los estudios literarios mexicanos, se examinan la aplicabilidad y limitaciones del concepto, recalcando la importancia de la conciencia textual y diacrónica en la aplicación de dicha categoría analítica. El presente estudio defiende una comprensión de la generación como una categoría sociobiológica porosa que agrupa a varias personas bajo un mismo *Weltanschauung*. Se sostiene que la heterogeneidad del nacionalismo cultural mexicano ha generado un terreno equivoco para la literatura de escritores mexicanos nacidos en los 1960s y 1970s, y propone la consideración de este conjunto de escritores como una generación.

Palabras clave: Análisis generacional, literatura mexicana, estudios culturales mexicanos, métodos de investigación literaria, literatura del crack.

1. Introduction

Broadly defined, a generation may be conceived as a biological, cultural and social construction that comprises people of more or less the same age, who are shaped by a major sociopolitical event, and as a result develop a sense of common destiny (Burke, 2013). A generation holds two interrelated fields of signification (Erl1, 2014). On the one hand, it is tied to the notion of a synchronic identity or «generationality», standing for «the conscious identification of a group of people, either by itself or by others *as* a generation» (Erl1, 2014, p. 387), a generalized understanding of the concept which can be traced back to the aftermath of the First World War. On the other hand, the category of generation is also diachronic; it is connected to notions of cultural genealogy and memory transmission, whereby generations are «mnemonic communities» (2014, p. 388) formed from inherited experiences of previous temporal realities, and in relation to their positionalities with regards to past historical periods.

While the concept has received increasing criticism in Latin American cultural studies, in the present article I follow Astrid Erl1's (2014, p. 405) argumentation that «'generation' in its very complexity deserves to become part of the *conceptual* core of literary history», and certainly, of Hispanic literary research. By providing a cultural history of the uses of the category of generation in Mexican literary research, this article puts forth a contribution to the understanding of the methods and categories applied in the study of Hispanic literatures. Its aim is to examine the applicability and limitations of the concept of generation in contemporary literary research, highlighting the importance of contextual and diachronic awareness in the deployment of such analytic category. First, my argumentation offers an analysis of the evolution of the concept in the study of Mexican literature and its diverse criticisms. Second, this essay uses the case study of the generation of Mexican writers born in the 1960s and 1970s to evaluate the explanatory potential of the concept, arguing in favour of its usefulness in identifying and characterising broad aesthetic trends in the artistic production of diverse groups of coetaneous writers.

Taken as a heuristic tool, generational analyses have been vastly present in Hispanic cultural and literary studies as they provide a model to explore rapid cultural change and the impact of technological innovations, conceptualizing social heterogeneity through differences in biological age. However, while methodologically advantageous, when applied to literary studies, the concept of generation presents non-negligible problems and may even indicate a misleading determinism.

For instance, writers who share a common age or nationality often diverge in aesthetic choices. In addition, the contemporary period with its rapid transformations, seems to diffuse the import of political events, making it difficult to calibrate

empirically their effects on writers' literary choices; while some of these events are punctual and circumscribed – as in the case of an electoral transition or a massacre – others are prolonged and their radius of effects extended such as in the case of ongoing armed conflicts. One also needs to account for the fact that some of the most relevant formal and thematic affinities are found between writers separated by geography, age, and nexus of influences. Adding to these difficulties, the concept of generation potentially carries an ideological load, requiring critics to exert awareness when applying it to dynamic and culturally specific contexts, where individual and collective actors hold different statures and where power is exercised unequally.

However important the consideration of these limitations, in this study I turn to the concept of generation as a mode of entry into the heterogeneous and fast-paced present since, as Giorgio Agamben (2009) reminds us:

Those who have tried to think about contemporariness have been able to do so only by splitting it up into several times, by introducing into time an essential dishomogeneity ... they inscribe into it a caesura and a discontinuity ... [The contemporary] makes of this fracture a meeting place, or an encounter between times and generations (p. 52).

Whilst limited in its inability to grasp the actual experience of lived time, and subject to the shortcomings that any category has in accounting for a given totality, the concept of generation allows us to test a productive «caesura» in the comprehension of the trends that dominate, shape and vivify a literary field.

2. Origins of a Concept

While generational analyses usually draw from the approaches developed by Wilhelm Dilthey and Karl Mannheim, the conceptualization of generation in the context of Mexican literary and cultural studies followed an alternate trajectory, drawing from the Spanish contribution to the debate. Specifically, in Mexico generational analysis is crucially indebted to José Ortega y Gasset's celebrated *El tema de nuestro tiempo* (1923) where he stated that:

[L]as variaciones de la sensibilidad vital que son decisivas en historia se presentan bajo la forma de generación. Una generación... es como un nuevo cuerpo social íntegro, con su minoría selecta y su muchedumbre, que ha sido lanzado sobre el ámbito de la existencia con una trayectoria vital determinada (pp. 19-20).

The complications with Ortega's conception of a new shared sensibility tied to a collective impulse, however, are numerous, particularly with regards to his vision of «integrity» —as in «cuerpo social íntegro» above— which conveys a deceptive

homogeneity never actually present in large social bodies. Moreover, the division between a select elite and a «muchedumbre» posits a generation as a hierarchical unit, organized according to a social blueprint that reproduces structures of inequality.

This problematic elaboration of the concept as a renewal of unequal structures is echoed in Octavio Paz's attempt to define literary generations as a response to his experience with the cultural magazine *Taller* and his perceived lack of intellectual freedom in the late 1930s. Paz, arguably Mexico's most influential and powerful intellectual figure from the 1950s until his death in 1998, identified a literary generation as:

un hecho biológico que asimismo es un hecho social: la generación es un grupo de muchachos de la misma edad, nacidos en la misma clase y el mismo país, lectores de los mismos libros y poseídos por las mismas pasiones e intereses estéticos y morales (1983, p. 94).

Paz's definition is appealing in that he renders the concept of generation manageable by emphasizing embodied affinities and serendipitous cohesion. He posits them as small, selective groups of people who share multiple commonalities. Yet, on closer inspection, these commonalities reveal a reductionism that attaches generational unity to privilege or lack thereof.

Moreover, Paz's use of the word «hecho» (fact) obscures the concept's narrative artificiality —the knowledge that «generationality is produced in the act of representation» (Erlil, 2014, p. 391). Though this representational mediation in itself does not necessarily undermine the concept's elucidatory potential, Paz's definition favours an appearance of objectivity that inevitably translates into rigidity. If Paz's characterization describes a «fact» and such fact is defined by country of birth, for example, how is one to account for Tomás Segovia and José de la Colina, both Spanish-born exiles who became fundamental figures of the Mexican «Generación de Medio Siglo»? (Guedea, 2007). Furthermore, for Paz, a generation is necessarily bounded according to social strata and, in this sense, it preserves the status quo by legitimizing larger social and class divisions.

Paz's generation concept is based on an abstract unity around a shared sense of taste and sensibility: «lo que distingue a una generación de otra no son tanto las ideas como la sensibilidad, las actitudes, los gustos y antipatías, en una palabra: el *temple*» (1983, p. 94). Echoing Ortega, Paz's abstractions such as taste, temperament or moral inclinations offer a normative definition of generation, placing the concept close to Pierre Bourdieu's «habitus». As we know, habitus «expresses first the *result of an organizing action*... (structure)...; it also designates a *way of being a habitual state* (especially of the body) and, in particular, a *predisposition, tendency*

propensity or inclination» (1977, p. 214). In other words, *habitus* operates as Paz's «temple»; an embodied and intuitive mode of being that enables the reproduction of social structures.

Paz's and Ortega's approaches to the concept of generation ultimately risk legitimizing cultural elitism and traditional groups with access to cultural power. Surely, the Mexican «República de las Letras» may appear a less inclusive precinct of creative agency —«numéricamente reducida, reconocible, centralizada vía alianzas y, sobre todo, exclusiones» (Yépez, 2013b, p. 3) — this is to say comprised by a mainly white, wealthy, centralized, metropolitan male elite. In this sense, the focalizing concept of generation in Ortega's and Paz's conception accurately testifies to this exclusivity. And certainly, in Mexican cultural history, these generational conceptions gave way to actual political practices in the form of generational groupings with effective power.

One of such assemblages was «La Mafia», a name widely used by non-members, and coined by Luis Guillermo Piazza in his roman à clef *La Mafia* of 1967.¹ This term encompassed a group of intellectuals, artists and writers formed around the 1950s, which exerted significant influence in the cultural policies of state institutions, literary magazines, museums and publishing houses in Mexico, often being able to determine the success or failure of emerging talents or alternative literary practices (Volpi, 1998, pp. 41-46). While La Mafia did not have absolute power, as was sometimes believed, its existence derives from the close-knit and highly localized power networks that have historically dominated Mexico's cultural landscape (Agustín, 1998, pp. 171-226), a supremacy that younger authors tend to reject.

3. A Contested Category

The open rejection of the concept of generation in Mexico was pioneered by Ricardo Chávez Castañeda's and Celso Santajuliana's contentious *La generación de los enterradores* (2000), a highly controversial exposé of the Mexican literary system as a nepotistic absolute monarchy, where aspiring authors, the «enterradores», must stage palace coups in an attempt to «bury» their predecessors and occupy their place in the «Continente Narrativo Mexicano» (2000, pp. 79-98). The authors contend that this «continent»: «es un sistema cerrado y sectarista que juzga ofensivo e inadmisibile el hecho de que se le debele» (2000, p. 81). More recently, the denunciation of generational categories has seen a proliferation of debates on the issue. For instance, David Miklos has claimed that «Las generaciones son producto del mercado»

¹ According to Jorge Volpi (1998, p.437, n.22) the coinage of the motto has also been attributed to Mexican poet and critic Margarita Michelena.

(Raphael, 2011, p. 57) and in an even more irreverent spirit, Heriberto Yépez has argued that «La idea de una generación es huevona» (Raphael, 2011, p. 57).²

Certainly, given the ideological underpinnings of the term's deployment, since the late 1990s, authors in Mexico have tended to be critical and sceptical of the concept of generation and its ability to describe their diverse regional and social identities. The use of generation has become associated in some quarters with a reactionary organizational approach, as explained by writer and critic Tryno Maldonado (2013b):

El concepto de generación suele aplicarse dentro de estructuras sociales relativamente estáticas y patriarcales, gerontocráticas. Funciona para describir cómo los miembros menores van asumiendo los roles y el poder de los mayores, cómo van reproduciendo las estructuras sociales y las relaciones de poder (p. 4).

Maldonado's view is informed by the specific cultural history of Mexico, where generations consolidated themselves into self-identifying groups such as La Mafia, discussed above. Similarly, several writers have expressed a concern with the artificiality of certain generational categorizations and their commercial use by the publishing industry – notably the Latin American Boom and in Mexico, the literary group known as the Crack, discussed below. There is also a widespread reluctance to subscribe to any political or aesthetic parameters, and a differentiating intervention stressing the condition of unbelonging vis-à-vis the style or themes of other writers of the same period.

While Yépez (2013c) has urged critics of Mexican literature to note that «hay obras que son un diálogo con lo regional y, en general, afinidades ajenas a 'generaciones'» (p.10) —as in the case of those works labelled under «literatura del desierto» or «literatura del norte»³— this observation can also sustain the necessity of a methodological diversity that responds to literature's inherent dynamism.

For instance, the generational paradigm is useful, notably, to frame the widely voiced thematization of generational change during the 1990s and early 2000s in Mexico. In this sense, a more nuanced application of the concept provides an exceptionally congruent and thematically resonant viewpoint to describe a common epochal spirit. It becomes necessary, however, to challenge earlier definitions of generation in favour of a characterization that accounts for the diversity present in writers sharing a sociohistorical context of upbringing, granting each of them

2 See also Maldonado (2013a); Maldonado (2013b); Yépez (2013a).

3 These two interchangeable names are used to denominate the widely theorized trend of literary fiction by writers of Northern Mexico, which is often dominated by a preoccupation with the regional landscape and culture of the border states of the Mexican North.

sufficient agency in their ability to challenge the status quo. A rigid generational approach does not suffice to analyze twenty-first-century Mexican literature, since this epoch is characterized by the fast-paced changes of late modernity.

Some of the drawbacks of the concept of generation in its previous applications in Mexico can be bypassed by considering, as Zygmunt Bauman (2007) does, that the main contribution of Ortega's thought on the phenomenon of generations is not so much the idea of temporal succession as that of coexistence, since «las fronteras que separan a las generaciones no están ni pueden estar claramente definidas, ... no pueden dejar de ser ambiguas y ... no pueden pasarse por alto y, aún menos, ignorarse» (2007, p. 112). Instead of focusing on Ortega's assumption of unity and Paz's elective fraternity, Bauman's reading of Ortega makes room for the fluidity and blurring of boundaries that has become a recurrent trope of contemporary cultural discourse. Generational boundaries are, in his view, ever present but also ever mobile and subject to shifts and appropriations.

I have so far discussed the conceptual underpinnings of the analytic category of generation. My argumentation has led to the exposition of some of the drawbacks and issues that have emerged from previous understandings of the concept of generation to the study of Mexican literature. Following this line of inquiry, I now turn to the discussion of the usefulness of the concept of generation to address new developments in Mexican literature at the turn of the millennium as an exemplification of the possible applications of this category in Hispanic literary studies.

4. The Problem of the Crack

Most scholars and critics of recent Mexican literature agree that the literary group of the Crack represents the most important organized movement in Mexican narrative since the «narrativa de la Onda» of the 1960s and 70s (Pohl, 2004, p. 55). Loosely comprised of seven writers born in the 1960s—Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, Alejandro Estivill, Vicente Herrasti, Ignacio Padilla, Pedro Ángel Palou, Eloy Urroz and Jorge Volpi—the group's breakthrough came in 1996 when they presented five heterogeneous novels with a deliberately controversial *Manifiesto Crack* (2004).⁴

Known by an onomatopoeia that sounds like rupture and echoes the Latin American Boom, the Crack openly condemned Mexican and Latin American narrative of the late 1970s and 1980s for its alleged lack of aesthetic quality and thematic gravi-

4 All writers except Herrasti, who joined the Crack in 2000, were involved with the group from the mid-1990s or earlier. Alejandro Estivill distanced himself from the literary association, identifying instead with the «proto-crack», which he deems an earlier, formative stage of the group (A. Estivill, personal communication, November 30, 2011).

tas. While respecting the groundbreaking works of figures such as Gabriel García Márquez and Alejo Carpentier, they opposed and derided later versions of magical realism such as those introduced to popular acclaim by Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel. They claimed to be equally tired of a literature embedded with «discursos patrioterros», referring to novels that, in their view, appropriated «lo popular» to define a concept of national culture and identity that was false and fetishistic. Likewise, they were at odds with «lo engagé» (Chávez Castañeda et al., 2004, p. 215), pointing to novels characterized by their discernible political leanings such as those of Luis Spota and Gerardo de la Torre. Opposing these broad-brushed trends, they inscribed themselves into Mexican literary history, perhaps with a degree of knowing opportunism, by calling for a return to the «novela profunda» (Chávez Castañeda et al., 2004, p. 212). This was an allusion to veteran critic of Mexican letters John S. Brushwood's idea of a formally complex and challenging novel in the style of Agustín Yáñez's *Al filo del agua* (1947) and Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955). It was also a tribute to the Boom and Mario Vargas Llosa's experimental definition of the «novela total» as a critical exercise of dismantling of a sense of reality developed in opposition to what the Nobel laureate called the «novela totalitaria» (Klahn and Corral 1991, 118-119), which he saw as inferior and ideologically charged.

Thus, the Crack described itself as a «ruptura en digna continuidad» (Chávez Castañeda et al., 2004, p. 218), a reference to Luis Mario Schneider's *Ruptura y continuidad* (1975), in which the critic traced the origins of the polemics between nationalism and cosmopolitanism as well as between literary innovation and academism in Mexican literary criticism.⁵ In this way, its members carefully crafted their own position within Mexican literary genealogy, a form of generational positionality, as productive of selective continuities as well as of severances, creating a signature narrative of separation and renewal.

Due to the polemical style of their manifesto and its contentious and sometimes equivocal generalizations, and owing to the controversies caused by the constant nuancing of its original postulations by members of the group in public, the Crack generated a wave of negative reactions in critical circles, tainting the reputation of its adherents as media opportunists (Regalado López, 2009a, pp. 68–74; Chávez Castañeda, 2004, pp. 143-144). Despite these adverse responses, by the late 2000s the Crack had consolidated its visibility within the emerging literary canon of millennial Mexican literature.

Given its relevance and visibility, the Crack's household name came to be extended to signify an entire generation. The magnitude of its presumed influence

⁵ The Crack has openly acknowledged Schneider's influence in their views. See Chávez Castañeda et al. (2004, p.195).

and its ubiquity in cultural journalism led more than a few scholars and critics to employ the trade name of the group to encompass all Mexican writers born in the decade of 1960 (Regalado López, 2009a, p. 158). More than two decades have elapsed since their confrontational irruption on to the literary scene and the hostility directed towards the Crack's project has been diluted. Yet, the label continues to be exclusionary and to carry controversial connotations in terms of cultural politics, making its generalization rather problematic.

First, the Crack was an isolated effort to form a group during a period when most Mexican writers preferred to position themselves as self-sufficient literary islands (Raphael, 2011, p. 49). The group had an official manifesto to which its members subscribed and which expressed a shared commitment to a literature «con exigencias» and «sin concesiones» (Chávez Castañeda et al., 2004, p. 212). In contrast to this expression of allegiance, many writers of the same biological generation, such as Álvaro Enrigue (b.1969), Adrián Curiel Rivera (b.1969) and Cristina Rivera Garza (b.1964), have been vocal in explicitly denying any lazily assumed ties with the Crack (Regalado López, 2009b, pp. 101-102; Interantionales Literaturfestival Berlin, 2004).

Second, some critics have pointed to the reduced number of shared traits in the literature of the Crack, which Tomás Regalado López (2009) summarizes as: «el nacimiento de los autores en un mismo espectro cronológico, su nacionalidad mexicana y el concepto de la amistad literaria asociado a una profunda conciencia de cuestionamiento crítico» (p. 144). These are, according to the critic, the vague linking points in the creative writing of the group members, leading —and rightly so— to the conclusion that the Crack cannot be considered a literary generation (Regalado López, 2009b, p. 115).

Even the members of the Crack have questioned the usefulness of the tag and have mocked the concept as a one-size-fits-all category. In an instance of the Crack's «broma literaria» (Plascencia Vela & Reyes Giardiello, 2006, p. 38), in the edited volume that revisited the Crack's history in 2005, Jorge Volpi playfully expanded the original rubric to include, «independientemente de su voluntad» (Chávez Castañeda et al., 2004, p. 180): Cristina Rivera Garza, Mario Bellatin, Rosa Beltrán, Mario González Suárez, Edmundo Paz Soldán, Alberto Fuguet, Santiago Gamboa, José Manuel Prieto, Belén Gopegui, Rodrigo Fresán, and Fernando Iwasaki. In Volpi's mischievous disclaimer, the compulsory membership of this heterogeneous assortment of multinational Spanish-speaking writers born in the 1960s serves to underscore the ineffectiveness of such a vague category.

In light of this, it becomes necessary to opt for a reflexive designation of the Crack as a particular group of seven authors, based on the imponderables of a literary friendship, operating within a broader assembly of Mexican writers. Furthermore,

there is a necessity to propose an analytical category distinct from the literary group of the Crack that avoids synecdochical transpositions and that accounts for a wider range of writers born in the 1960s and 1970s.

5. An Impossible Generation?

Besides the Crack's ubiquitous denomination, several other labels have been explored in efforts to categorize what appears to be a group of authors defined by a meaningful heterogeneity and who all emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s; what writer Vicente Luis Mora (b.1970) has called «Mi imposible generación» (Raphael, 2011, p. 57). In 1993 Javier Sicilia proposed to name them «Generación sin contienda» (Sicilia, 1993, p. 11), to highlight what he regarded as an indifference towards political struggles among writers born in the 1960s. In a similar vein, Chávez Castañeda (1992) named his own generation «la generación fría», also observing a lack of social conscience and political empathy among writers of his age group. This has proved to be a misleading reading of the fiction associated with the generation of Mexican writers born in the 1960s and 1970s (Treviño, 2016, ch.4), but this misinterpretation can be explained by the premature application of such denominations.

Another common set of labels deployed by scholars and cultural commentators includes tags, such as «No generación» and «Generación inexistente», that underline the almost unanimous refusal by authors born in the 1960s and 1970s to be included in any sort of generational demarcation—with the notable exception of the Crack. This generalized position of evasion and contrariness among authors born in these decades has been captured by Pablo Raphael (2011) as a form of negativity rather than nihilism: «*Los que decimos que no tenemos nada en común tenemos todos la misma postura. Que tendemos a negarlo todo y a negarnos nosotros mismos como generación no es ninguna coincidencia*» (p. 59). Whilst remarkably insightful in terms of revealing a fierce generational individualism combined with a self-negating impulse, Raphael's conclusion—which he reached after interviewing more than fifty Mexican and Latin American writers born in the 1960s and 1970s—conveys very little about the generation's poetics.

Inscribed within a framework determined by biological temporality, and alluding to authors born in the late 1960s and 1970s, Raphael's sociological study proposes the alternative morphology of «nube» (cloud) to highlight generational fragmentation and contradiction. The particles (writers) forming this transient and intangible structure, he states, are only similar in that: «Somos neoliberales con vocaciones distintas» (2011, p. 68). The identification of neoliberalism as a defining characteristic of this apparently amorphous cluster of authors, while significant in our understanding of

the political moment of its emergence, misses the mark by neglecting to extend the interpretation to a consideration of the inner workings of the texts that were produced.

6. Against División

In addition to the aforementioned attempts at producing a grouping category, the generation of Mexican writers born in the 1960s and 1970s has sometimes been separated in two cohorts: the Crack of the 1960s and the generation of the 1970s (Maldonado, 2008; González Boixo, 2009). What seems to escape critics embracing this view is the difference between the Crack as a group and the broader literary generation of the 1960s, making it easier for them to create an unsustainable distinction between authors born in two consecutive decades.

For instance, some critics have included non-Crack writers born in the 1960s in characterizations of a 1970s generation, while sustaining a 1960s/1970s division. In his «generación inexistente» of the 1970s, José Carlos González Boixo includes Fabricio Mejía (b. 1968), Iván Ríos Gascón (b. 1968) and Álvaro Enrigue (b. 1969). He argues that in his categorization he takes 1968—a year synonymous with generational rebellion, crisis and dissent—as the symbolic starting point, yet he omits Ignacio Padilla and Jorge Volpi, both of whom were born in that same year, presumably because he considers them part of the Crack and thus of an earlier generation (González Boixo, 2009). Similarly, in his insightful revision of this period, 1970-born Raphael specifically names Álvaro Enrigue's *La muerte de un instalador* (1996) and Edgardo Bermejo Mora's (b. 1967) *Marcos' fashion* (1996) as the inaugural novels of his 1970s generation (Raphael, 2011, p. 54), effectively destabilizing the decade-based division when considering non-Crack writers born in the 1960s.

Moreover, this division generally evaporates under close scrutiny due to the stylistic and thematic affinities between writers born in both decades. One of the main proponents of the 1960s/1970s split is Tryno Maldonado. Maldonado's coinage of the term «Generación Atari»—in reference to the videogame console commercialized in Mexico in the late 1970s—attempts to separate authors born in the late 1960s from authors born in the 1970s based on the measurable influence of videogames and new media on their aesthetic and thematic orientations. Nevertheless, Xavier Velasco's *Diablo guardián* (2003) seemingly contests Maldonado's division. Born in 1964, Velasco (2003) pens a protagonist who constantly compares her life to a videogame: «De repente la vida es como un videojuego que no puedes apagar. Y tienes que correr, antes de que él te apague a ti... Igual que el videojuego de mi vida, ¿ajá?» (p. 205). In this example and elsewhere in the text, *Diablo guardián* offers a perspective that reproduces the intrusion of new technologies in the preserves of

intimacy and subjectivity, hence demonstrating the importance of flexibility in the deployment of generational readings, particularly in relation to temporal divisions such as decades, which sometimes fail to respond to other sociopolitical events or self-affirming practices.

In his defence of a distinct «Generación Atari» of writers born in the 1970s, Maldonado (2008) ambiguously states that «cuando estos nuevos autores [nacidos en los 1970s] comenzaban a publicar, a alguien se le ocurrió decretar absurdamente el fin de las fronteras y de las nacionalidades en la literatura» (p. 14). Here, he seemingly argues against the globalizing trend in literature by alluding to the debate ignited by the Crack that dominated the mid-1990s to the early 2000s.

This controversy began in 1996 and intensified in 1999 and 2000 and had the Crack as its primary focus. It was a polemic about literary nationalism and identity, which centred on the representation of Mexico and Mexican characters. One of its key aspects was the absence of national[ist] markers in the novels of members of the Crack, including emerging writers such as Ignacio Padilla and Jorge Volpi. Some of their most vocal critics expressed what can only be described as an extreme form of literary nationalism. José Felipe Coria offers a representative case: he declared to *El País* that Padilla and Volpi «están renunciando a ser mexicanos, ya no podemos considerarlos autores mexicanos porque ni su tema ni su tratamiento se remiten a México» (Ávila, 2000, p. 43). Thus, the presence or absence of Mexico in creative media was the central and reductive theme of this discussion.

In his 2008 anthology of Mexican writers born in the 1970s, Maldonado describes the legacy of what he deems the previous generation in terms that emphasize the ostensibly easily marketable character of their prose: «cuya obra suena todavía a chill-out y world music» (2008, p. 7). He mockingly qualifies the generation of the 1960s in this way, probably as an allusion to the Crack's predilection for international topics, the «universal» appeal of their widely translated works and their allegedly standardized use of Spanish, free of vernacular inflection.

However, Maldonado also defends the «Generación Atari»'s insertion within this postnational trend: «es un hecho que México no aparece más como tema, ni con mayúsculas, ni como factor de debate ni de tensión en los discursos de estos nuevos autores, como sí lo fue para generaciones anteriores» (2008, p. 14). In Maldonado's suspect assumption, the main difference is qualitative: both generations eschew discussing Mexico in their fiction, but the generation born in the 1960s engaged in an open reflection on this dismissal and members of the «Generación Atari» did not.

The allegedly absurd end of frontiers and nationalities referred to in Maldonado's sceptical rebuttal can be linked to a number of statements by writers born in the

1960s, especially to Volpi's declarations on the effect of geographical borders and nationalities in literature, voiced at different stages of his career and neatly summarized in a 2011 article published in *Nexos*:

El fin de las fronteras y las aduanas. De la distinción entre lo local y lo global. De la literatura como prueba de identidad (nacional, étnica, lingüística, sexual). El fin de los departamentos universitarios de 'literatura latinoamericana', de 'literatura española' y de 'lenguas romances'. ¿Y el inicio de qué? (Volpi, 2011, p. 104).

What appears with clarity in Volpi's disabused synopsis on the collapse of conventional identitarian categories is that downplaying the nation is not a measure of difference but the basis of a commonality among writers born in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, one of the main themes in Maldonado's introductory framing of the generation of the 1970s is the lack of importance of the «topos» of (national) territory in the establishment of bonds of belonging narrativized in their fiction. Hence he writes:

estos narradores exponen, sea cual sea el escenario, real o ficticio (es lo de menos, que no los distraiga el topos)... las nuevas dinámicas que ha encontrado el ser humano para entablar nexos con la comunidad en este nuevo orden global (Maldonado, 2008, p. 15).

Undeniably, Maldonado's portrayal of an almost neutral human exploring her or his condition under the new global order speaks about the humanist «universalism» that was already embraced by authors born in the 1960s (Treviño, 2016). Certainly, one of the crucial ways in which the 1960s/1970s division is misinformed is in its dismissal of issues regarding universalism and cosmopolitanism in the narrative fiction of emerging Mexican authors. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, according to Maldonado, the debate regarding the inclusion or exclusion of the theme of Mexico in contemporary literature had been surpassed by younger writers who, born in the 1970s, were free of ideology, populist fervour and patriotic discourses but whose writing also «no pretende en absoluto hacerse pasar por cosmopolita, ni mucho menos por 'universal'» (2008, p. 14). Instead, in his reading the emphasis falls on subtle and indirect ways to ascertain individual and communal identities, a concern that, contradicting his 1960s/1970s division also surfaces in the fiction of Mexican writers born in the 1960s (Treviño, 2014).

Contrary to Maldonado's claim about a refusal of universalism, in one of the foundational essays about a new literary generation in Mexico, Geney Beltrán (2004) challenges the lack of similarities between the writers born in the late 1960s and 1970s: «la ficción de un país ha muerto. La búsqueda es crear otras ficciones —más poderosas, éstas sí universales» (p. 5). That which for Maldonado is a point of generational divergence is framed in Beltrán's statement as an aesthetic continuity.

Although obviated in their arguments, what is implied in Maldonado's and Beltrán's discussions is the question regarding the role of local/national particularities in literature. Both their statements reveal that, along with the resistance to the idea of the nation as the obligatory subject of serious literature, the notion of a «universal» cosmopolitan narrative continues to be a significant concern for contemporary Mexican fiction, and that these debates extend beyond the Crack as recognizable issues under question.

What lies behind these debates is an attempt to carry out a literary renovation that would allow contemporary writers and future generations to shape their own tradition, removed from the smothering elements of the Mexican literary canon. This renovation is deeply concerned with a growing awareness of the relevance of space —national, global, literary, personal, cultural— and its intricate relation with time (Treviño, 2014). Throughout the twentieth century, Mexican writers tried to transcend nationalist discourses and to replace or re-signify frequent allegorical tropes, but the forces of the Mexican state apparatus limited their success: «while [artists, writers and intellectuals]... have refashioned the official stories of Mexico, the PRI⁶ continues to recycle them too, often using its powerful links to the nation's culture industries» (Joseph, Rubenstein, & Zolov, 2001, p. 14). Visible dissenting writers were elevated as representatives of national literature, using their literary reputation to reinforce the very discourse they tried to undermine.

Also, attempts at dismantling the government-sponsored discourses of history and identity through fiction were incorporated into the official nationalist myth of Mexican identity or «mexicanidad» by which, «El individuo es visto como un ser inacabado y larvario, cuya metamorfosis solo puede ocurrir en el seno del Estado revolucionario» (Bartra, 2013, p. 53). Through the myth of «mexicanidad», Mexican nationalism was articulated as a process of identity-making that embraced the notion of the larval to adapt to different times and to loosen the bind of a normative identity advancing an ill-defined and incomplete half-citizen. Since the myth «alberga una buena dosis de protesta, de amargura, de revuelta, de resistencia» (Bartra, 2013, p. 49), the voicing of disenchantment, the articulation of rebellion, and the advocacy of resistance could be turned in favour of the state as part of its legitimizing discourses.

Here, it is not my intention to suggest that the relationship between nationalism, state politics, and collective identities as addressed in Mexican literature and arts is straightforward, homogeneously nationalist or uncomplicated. On the contrary, the

6 The PRI, Partido Revolucionario Institucional was Mexico's only ruling party from the 1920s until the democratic transition of 2000. The party came back into power in 2012 with the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto.

interplay between these categories and the representation of landscape and territory has an intricate and widely studied history (Segre, 2007, 5–58). It is in fact the heterogeneity of Mexican cultural nationalism that generates an equivocal ground for the literature of the generation of writers born in the 1960s and 1970s.

For the generation of the 1960s and 1970s authorial freedom is not interpreted in relation to the impact of direct censorship or persecution by the state and other political forces, but with regards to the radius of reception, and, in particular, the possibility for fiction to be written and read beyond nationally or regionally bounded interpretations. By pursuing the dislodgement of their creative writing from identitarian discourses of nationhood, they aspire to a «liberating» and «liberated» literature outside an all-embracing, co-optation-prone political system and its attendant cultural regime of clientelism.

7. Generation: A Concept for the Twenty-first Century

Echoing Bauman's ambiguous generational borders, writer Daniel Espartaco (b. 1977) states: «Mi generación se diluye en la anterior y en la que sigue, y es transitoria» (Raphael 2011, p. 58). For Espartaco, the point of generational coincidence is the decade of the 1970s, although the boundaries with writers born in the 1960s are, as he states, diluted and imprecise. Certainly, there is a far-reaching fluidity in the grouping of younger Mexican—and sometimes Latin American and Spanish-speaking—authors as defined by writers, scholars and publishers alike; this phenomenon of exegesis and fixation with generational spectrums of transitions is particularly significant for non-Crack authors born in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. It is in this vein of thought that Raphael (2011) writes: «hay un limbo generacional al que pertenecemos los nacidos entre 1965 y 1975, por decir algo, diez años entre los estertores del Boom [...] y la escritura veloz del Blog» (p. 62).

In line with Espartaco's observation, and informed by an in-depth reflection on Raphael's limbo-like generational space marked by inbetweenness, oscillation and indeterminacy, which extends its boundaries between decades, I argue for the consideration of the cluster of authors born in the 1960s and 1970s as a generation. As an alternative to the approaches discussed above and informed by Bauman's and Burke's stances, the concept of generation—more precisely literary generation—is deployed here as a heuristic tool that allows the bringing together of a constellation of writers according to their shared sociohistorical experiences and the thematic orientation of their narrative strategies. In the case study of contemporary Mexican literature, the proposal of a generation of writers born in the 1960s and 1970s allows for a productive forging of correlations and of articulating affinities among the

emergent fiction writers in the country, without seeking to attribute a homogenized aesthetic activity or perpetuating an implicit determinism. It is in this sense that I advocate for an understanding of a generation as a porous sociobiological category that groups several people under a similar *Weltanschauung*, as a self-aware manoeuvre.

A worldview or *Weltanschauung*, in this hermeneutic sense, refers to a way of being-in-the-world and of making sense of the world framed by a system of meanings that give shape to experience (Naugle, 2002, p. 330) or what Mexican philosopher Samuel Ramos (2001) had presciently identified in the 1920s as «un común sentido de la vida» (p. 127). In the case of the generation of the 1960s and 1970s, more than a set of particular styles or specific and sustained thematic interests motivated by the dynamic period of 1985 to 2000, this *Weltanschauung* translates into a common set of general crises, anxieties and interrogations, a shared way of seeing quizzically, that creates echoes and connections and that is subtly interpenetrated with an environment of ideas. This inescapably multiverse and diffuse generational worldview appears in recurring narrative motifs, and affects the means by which characters, their agency and their relations are conceptualized within the literary text.⁷

Most members of this generation come from similar professional backgrounds in the Arts and Humanities, with most writers having studied literature at an undergraduate or graduate level and many of them having obtained a doctoral qualification, often at a prestigious university abroad. More than by a single political event, this generation is shaped by several national and international crises, «instantes decisivos» (Raphael, 2011, p. 66), that unify their diverse personal experiences under an umbrella period of radical sociopolitical transformation: the devastating earthquake of 1985; the electoral fraud of 1988; the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989; the tumultuous year of 1994 which witnessed contemporaneously the taking effect of NAFTA and the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) uprising in Chiapas; the democratic transition of 2000; and the attacks of 11 September 2001. Rather than implying any sort of historical determinism prescribing the literary production of this generation, I consider these events as part of multiple vectors that inform their aesthetic and thematic choices. Such factors include literary influences, market dynamics, cultural traditions, personal experiences and authorial identities.

7 Some limited examples of works linked by an anxiety about the ambiguousness of social identities, collective memory, and the uncertainty of contemporary times through fictional spaces are Mario Bellatin's *Salón de belleza* (1994), Alberto Chimal's *Los esclavos* (2009), Ana Clavel's *Cuerpo naufrago* (2005), Ignacio Padilla's *Espiral de artillería* (2003), Cristina Rivera Garza's *La cresta de Ilión* (2002), Xavier Velasco's *Diablo guardiano* (2003), Jorge Volpi's *El jardín devastado* (2008), and Heriberto Yépez's *Cuentos para oír y huir al otro lado* (2002). For an in-depth analysis see Treviño (2014) and Treviño (2016).

8. Conclusion

Even in their best attempts to dislodge from generational categories, contemporary Mexican writers continue to resort to generational thinking, though their reflections often lack an operationalization of the concept that addresses previous uses and the genealogical evolution of the category. Such persistence points to the fact that while it may be perceived as limiting or outmoded, the concept of generation is still deeply attached to our understanding of Hispanic literary cultures. Furthermore, as this essay has shown, the elucidatory potential of the concept has not yet been exhausted.

It could be argued that one of the reasons for the recurrence of generation is the methodological advantage offered by a grouping analytic category, whose widespread currency allows an expanded explanatory and descriptive use, even across disciplinary boundaries. As Erll, argues, «literary images of generational identity can travel through translation, adaptation, an rewriting—not only across media and nations, but eventually also across time» (2014, p. 395). Certainly, images, notions and assumptions regarding literary generations are pervasive and central to Hispanic studies, such as in the cases of the Spanish «Generación del 27», the Argentinean «Generación de 1937», the Chilean «Generación Neocriollista de 1940», the Mexican «Generación del medio siglo», and the Colombian «Generación desencantada» of the 1970s and 1980s. Though always subject to scrutiny and correction, the ideas attached to these characterizations help orient our understanding and critical paths by providing a chart of a literary culture.

This article demonstrates the need for a constant critical revision of the ways in which categories have been used to write cultural histories. Indeed, the conceptual potency of generation demands scholars to develop an awareness of the politics involved in its application as a form of representation. In particular, the history of generation in Mexico demonstrates that theoretical concepts can be subject to intentional or unaware ideological and political instrumentalization. Critics should reflect on the category's exclusionary elements in order to incorporate analytical angles that address this risk without losing the category's insightfulness.

My findings reiterate the relevance of an operative generational category that is both contextual and diachronic in the study of Hispanic literary cultures. This means evaluating how the concept has been used in a specific region, questioning the boundaries of said region, and looking at the origins and evolution of its application throughout time. For instance, in the case of Mexico, it requires acknowledging that the use of generation responded more to the Spanish framing of the category than to the larger European debate, influencing its reception, later appropriation and concep-

tual evolution. Such approach also involves evincing the connections and differences between criticism, cultural production and social practice at different moments.

Through a flexible and inclusive reframing of its conceptualization that takes a shared *Weltanschauung* as a starting point, the concept of generation can continue to offer a privileged point of view to address aesthetic trends in literary studies in the twenty-first century. Its demonstrated usefulness to approach the literature of Mexican writers born in the 1960s and 1970s beyond limiting demarcations such as the Crack, opens up the question for the critical revision of other contemporary generational groupings such as Spain's «Generación Nocilla» and the South American «McOndo». My argumentation highlights the need to move beyond sociological applications of the concept of generation towards the analysis of generational poetics in literary studies. The pursuit of these questions can lead to better insights regarding the present cultural moment.

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