

INTRODUCTION

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We are both writers and avid readers of twenty-first-century Latinx literature. We have engaged in conversations about this ever-growing body of work at several levels in the past two decades, as fellow writers, as instructors, and as friends. We have found a genuine sense of community in these literary circles—meaning that we have met and bonded and followed each other and other Latinx writers. It is always great to hear of a new author or a new book from an already familiar author. We talk at conferences; we talk after readings when we catch the authors when they come through town on their book tours; we talk when we bring authors to our campus; and we talk on social media. We knew many of the writers in this book before this project, and of the others, we knew their work and have wanted to meet them. There is a strong sense of support for each other, and it is from this sense of community and conversation that we approach this book of interviews.

WHY WE CHOSE INTERVIEWS

We decided on interviews because we think of author interviews as their own literary genre. When we first started to write, or were trying to write, we'd turn to them to learn about the writer's process. What most appealed to us were the glimpses into a writer's ritual: where they wrote,

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how many words a day, whether they wrote their first drafts by hand or typed them, the books they turned to for inspiration—the mechanics of actual writing more so than the discussion of its contents. How one *becomes* a writer can be a mystery, especially for the aspiring writer full of desire but lacking in guidance. What good author interviews do is show the artist for the human being they are, full of doubts and insecurities and with plenty of obstacles to overcome. In our opinion, the best author interviews are less a manual of how to become a writer and more a manual of how to persevere as one.

As Chicano writers ourselves, we found two collections of interviews especially influential: Juan Bruce-Novoa's *Chicano Authors: Inquiry by Interview* and Frederick Luis Aldama's *Spilling the Beans in Chicanolandia: Conversations with Writers and Artists*. Both books made us feel as if we were part of something larger, a literary heritage. These influential books gave us an essential glimpse into the mindsets of those who helped establish the tradition in which we were engaging and trying to contribute. Two decades into the twenty-first century, that tradition has only expanded and evolved, and a whole new generation of creators has come of age. While the collections mentioned have focused on just Chicana writers, our collection broadens its reach to Latinx writers as a whole. The cultural and historical differences between Latinx communities, which are reflected in our respective literatures, are all the more reason why it's important to see these artists side by side. Latinx literature is not monolithic. It's not one voice but many. These conversations highlight the vast range of approaches to thinking about identity and community as well as about craft.

In Tomás Rivera's interview in Bruce-Novoa's *Chicano Authors*, Rivera describes his discovery of Américo Paredes's book "*With His Pistol in His Hand*," a scholarly work that tells the story of Gregorio Cortez and explores the significance of corridos in the border region. Rivera explains how coming across that book in the library while a graduate student in the late 1950s revealed several things to him: first, it was possible for a Chicano (Paredes) to publish; two, it was possible for a Chicano (Cortez) to be the central subject of a story and to be represented as a complete figure as opposed to a racialized stereotype; and three, it opened a whole world of "imaginative possibilities," one in which Rivera realized that he could write about the stories that mattered to him. Just as Paredes had documented Cortez "para siempre" (forever), Rivera could document the stories of the migrant farmworkers of his youth.

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Eventually, those stories would become his seminal novel . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra*. This moment from Rivera's interview captures what is most powerful about the literary interview: how a single moment of discovery can awaken not only one's creative potential but also one's humanity.

Our book, *Imaginative Possibilities: Conversations with Twenty-First-Century Latinx Authors*, is a collection of interviews with contemporary Latinx creators that seeks to engage the writers' processes, aesthetics, and creative trajectories and how they see themselves within the larger body of Latinx literature. They speak to new trends and developments in Latinx literature and current preoccupations and struggles in their creative work as well as reveal anew the powerful process through which they find their voices and declare themselves artists. Within this book, twenty-one authors discuss how they found their own paths, and over and over, we see how the intervention of one person or the discovery of one book can open a door to a world of imaginative possibilities.

HOW WE SELECTED THE AUTHORS

Bruce-Novoa's book was the first interview collection, whether Chicana or Latinx, to bring together authors as part of the same literary movement or tradition. He focuses on what can be described as the first wave of Chicano authors, such as Tomás Rivera, Rolando Hinojosa, and Rodolfo Anaya. Aldama's *Spilling the Beans in Chicanolandia*, along with other interview collections from the 2000s such as Hector A. Torres's *Conversations with Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Writers* and Karin Rosa Ika's *Chicana Ways*, focuses on the second wave of Chicana writers. Another important collection to note is Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia's *Latina Self-Portraits* because it expands to include Latinx writers more broadly—in this case Latinx women writers who were part of the second wave, such as Julia Alvarez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Denise Chávez.

We're now in a moment where a significant number of Latinx authors have emerged and it makes sense to demonstrate connectedness between the different Latinidades, even while we keep in mind the diverse and separate traditions among Latinx writers. Defining literature in group terms can be imperfect, even problematic, whether that's generational or ethnic. One of the positive achievements in the twenty-first century is that there are many more books by Latinx writers published every year, but a related challenge is trying to conceive or define a gen-

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eration that is both expanding and in constant flux. For this reason, we adapted the question from Bruce-Novoa in which we ask the writers themselves to reflect on the milestones so far of Latinx literature in the first two decades of the century and which directions they see Latinx literature heading. In doing so, we let a representative group of writers define and conceive the generation by hearing what achievements they prioritize, what writers inspire them, and what trends most excite them.

Since our purpose in this book of interviews is to capture the voices of Latinx writers in the twenty-first century, we decided that the most logical way to organize the interviews is chronologically based on the date of the authors' first publication. This provides us more context for when the authors entered the literary scene, and in this way, the table of contents can be read as a timeline—of publications, of influences, of divergences, and of mentorship. We chart important inroads, whether that's publishing with large commercial presses or covering new thematic ground, and as we move toward the more recent publication dates, we see these inroads built upon and expanded with an increasing number of voices, venues, and challenges to the way we conceive of Latinx literature.

The key development in Latinx literature(s) of the twenty-first century has to be its expansion in terms of perspectives. Bruce-Novoa interviewed writers that were mostly men and Chicano. In *Spilling the Beans in Chicanolandia*, Aldama expands the selection of writers to include more women and queer writers. For our project, we recognize voices that now have a significant presence in Latinx literature: the centrality of queer writers and the emergence of Central American (American) diaspora writers, Afro-Latinx writers, and undocumented migrant writers, among other groups. These new voices aren't just expressing new perspectives but are offering critiques of the Latinx literature that came before, such as nationalistic hegemony, erasure of Indigenous groups, and anti-Blackness in Latinidad. We can only really understand this generation through a multiplicity of voices. How they conceive of their work within a larger community of writers ultimately will determine the outlines of that generation. We hope that this collection attempts to broaden those outlines rather than narrows them by acknowledging multiple or intersectional identities, embracing hybridity, and breaking down borders.

This book is composed of conversations—authors speaking about their own work within a broader context of their particular literary tra-

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dition and Latinx literature as a whole. Our hope is to demonstrate how varied the voices in Latinx literature are, but any book that attempts to be representative of a particular group or identity, especially one as large and varied as the umbrella term *Latinx*, will likely fall short. We already know there are voices and demographics and important perspectives that we haven't included. We interviewed twenty-one authors, but we easily could've interviewed twice that number and still felt that authors doing important, innovative work were left out. What is heartening to see, as many of the authors discuss, is the sheer number of Latinx writers that are publishing work today. As poet Willie Perdomo mentions regarding the anthology he coedited, *LatiNext*, his hope would be that those not included in the anthology would create their own anthologies. This is not to shirk responsibility for whatever gaps this collection might have, and as much as we challenge the burden placed on individual artists to be representative of a larger identity, we understand that a collection like this cannot escape it. We encourage the dialogue that results as a way to learn and grow. Many of the authors we interviewed spoke with excitement and anticipation about the next generation of Latinx writers because they were so unapologetic in challenging the status quo, including accepted ideas long considered sacrosanct, and pushing the dialogue in new directions that are ever more complex, nuanced, and individuated. We share their enthusiasm and hope that this collection can be one that those authors build upon and challenge.

HOW WE DEvised THE QUESTIONS

Again, we acknowledge the validity and necessity of critiques against the heteronormative, nationalistic, and patriarchal nature of the movements and literatures of previous generations of Latinx writers. As we will see in the interviews, the authors we have included in this book have been some of the more prominent voices in those critiques, both in their literary works and in their thinking. But what we want to argue for is that amid this contention there is also a significant continuity between the Latinx writers of the twentieth century and the Latinx writers of the twenty-first century. For that reason, we decided to use several of the questions from Bruce-Novoa's inquiry to emphasize and explore that continuity. A central question, for example, in Bruce-Novoa's interviews is: "Do you perceive yourself and your work as political?" Just as Bruce-Novoa wanted to get a sense of how the writers and their work were connected to the Chicano Movement, we also wanted to inquire

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about the authors' connectedness to and awareness of twenty-first-century movements, including the struggles for justice and rights for migrants, Black and Indigenous peoples, LGBTQ+ and trans communities, and women, all of which taken together illustrate the intersectionality of the Latinx population.

There is a genuine excitement and curiosity in Bruce-Novoa's inquiry into the new cultural phenomenon that was the emerging literature of the Chicano Movement. We feel a similar excitement and curiosity about the emerging twenty-first-century Latinx literature. Despite being a scholar of Chicano literature, Bruce-Novoa didn't frame his questions with a certain interpretative framework or theory. Instead, he invited the writers to define for themselves their work and influences, their sense of place and community, and their responsibility as artists as well as the milestones and directions of their literary movement. Since we conceived of this interview project as fellow writers, we also believed in approaching this project with an openness that would invite and allow the interviewees to offer their own interpretations of these complex and significant ideas.

In *Spilling the Beans in Chicanolandia*, Aldama also acknowledges the importance of Bruce-Novoa's book of interviews and the influence of it on his own interview project. While Bruce-Novoa interviewed the first generation of Chicano writers, Aldama interviewed what he calls the "second wave" of Chicano authors. Although Aldama sees Bruce-Novoa's book as a model, he makes the case for a more organic approach to the interviews. While Bruce-Novoa asked the same questions of each author via a survey, Aldama met with the authors individually and asked questions that paid attention to the particulars of the authors' literary works. As writers ourselves, we also favor asking specific questions sensitive to the nuances of each author's books in addition to questions addressing common themes and concerns. Thus, our methodology became a combination of both Bruce-Novoa's predetermined questions and Aldama's more organic, individualized approach. This resulted in fruitful conversations on diverse themes and creative concerns as well as a degree of unpredictability. There are certain resonances throughout the collection—for example, the impact of the pandemic, the formative moments in their journeys as writers, the political nature of their work, the future directions of Latinx literature—but just as often the conversations deviated from the script as we readily followed the authors' responses and preoccupations.

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WHAT WE FOUND

We realized that our interview project would be influenced by the COVID19 pandemic. This was the main reason why we conducted the interviews over Zoom. But we also felt it was pertinent to ask the authors about their writing during this time, especially the shelter-in-place phase of the pandemic. Our authors describe experiencing a certain pause in their lives—not a pause of reflection but one of uncertainty. It was not uncommon for the authors we interviewed to experience a lack of productivity during this pause or, even more to the point, a lack of connection with their literary selves, at least during the initial weeks and months of the shutdown in 2020. Our authors communicated an eventual drive to be and feel human during this crisis and, along with that, a need to reconnect with reading, writing, and the literary life. This would lead to authors finding themselves again not only as persons but also as writers. For several of them, this reconnection involved a redefining, through either exploring different genres or a recommitment to their creative life.

We must also make note of the sense of loss during the pandemic and the accompanying grief. For some of our authors, this includes personal loss, losing someone in their family to COVID19 or knowing of someone who passed away from complications from the virus. But our authors also observe a sense of national grief, including reflections on the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the resulting protests for racial justice. In one interview, the poet Aracelis Girmay connects the pandemic and the protests and speaks about poetry being a place of quiet and contemplation that she hadn't been prepared to go to given the turmoil around her. There is a general sense that for most of our authors, COVID19 and their experiences with this crisis compelled them to question their purpose as artists. Despite having established careers, the authors express having been at a crossroads, asking themselves how they will make the rest of their work, literary or otherwise, more meaningful in the years to come.

The Importance of Place and Community

In the canonical Chicano poem “Un Trip through the Mind Jail,” Raúl Salinas ends his poem with a roll call of neighborhoods, including Segundo Barrio in El Paso, East Los Angeles, and other neighborhoods known for being ethnic enclaves. The previous generations of Latinx

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writers were often writing as representatives of their communities, and based on these interviews, it's clear that twenty-first-century Latinx writers still speak from a certain place, neighborhood, and community that is central to their work. This involves neighborhoods and places with a long Latinx presence and rich literary history, such as Willie Perdomo's Harlem, Erika L. Sánchez's Chicago, Tim Z. Hernandez's San Joaquin Valley, and Oscar Cásares's Rio Grande Valley.

But some writers have started to shift the attention from those traditional neighborhoods and communities to new places. For instance, Los Angeles has long been central in the works of Latinx writers, especially Chicanos, but Yesika Salgado, a Salvadoran American writer, focuses on the neighborhood of Silver Lake, and Guatemalan American novelist Héctor Tobar tackles the entire landscape of Los Angeles, including wealthy suburbs, to explore class tensions. This slight move to another community can also be seen in Jennine Capó Crucet's decision to locate many of her stories in Hialeah. Little Havana may be central to our imagination of the Cuban American experience, but Jennine Capó Crucet shifts the camera to the side to show us a more settled, middle-class, and largely second-generation Cuban American community. We also see major shifts in sense of place. For instance, Lorraine López writes about Latinos in the South, a change in focus that aligns with the growing Latinx population in the Southern states, and Ivelisse Rodríguez, in her stories about Puerto Rican women and their failed search for love, relocates our attention from New York City to a lesser-known Puerto Rican enclave in Holyoke, Massachusetts.

In addition, the authors we interviewed remain interested in the conversation about place in relation to migration and exile. The countries of origin—Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru—show up in the works of these writers along with their distinct histories and relations to the United States. In the twenty-first century, and particularly with the writers we interviewed, we see that this relation to the home country is complicated. This might be especially present in the emergent literature of undocumented migrant writers, as can be seen in the novels and memoirs written by Reyna Grande. She writes about the distance between Iguala, Guerrero, and Los Angeles, and as with other undocumented persons, the distance is felt even more because of the inability to go back. The longing for the home country is also present in the works of Ana Menéndez, especially in the Little Havana depicted in her stories populated by Cuban émigrés waiting for the opportunity

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to return to Cuba. This leads to a conversation about displacement and diaspora. Aracelis Girmay speaks of both the rootedness and the routes of her mixed heritage Puerto Rican and Eritrean family, and Urayoán Noel talks about how his neighborhood in the Bronx greatly resembles the neighborhood where he grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and the “ghosts” of the lives now gone that he finds in both places.

The Persistence of the Political

The poet Carmen Giménez talks about how art happens in movements, artists surrounded by other artists and art forms, nourishing, inspiring, and challenging each other, often reflecting charged political moments. It was the civil rights movement in the 1960s that gave rise to the cultural renaissance in the Latinx community. Cultural galleries and community art centers sprung up across the country, such as the influential Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City, as did Chicano/Latino publishing houses, such as Quinto Sol at UC Berkeley. Chicano/Latino studies departments were established that provided a receptive audience for these emergent literatures, with readers hungry for work that instilled cultural pride and spoke to their experiences in a country that maligned their language, cultural, history, and identity. In Bruce-Novoa's *Chicano Authors*, the range of answers to the question about the political nature of the authors' work is surprising given the political wellspring that their writing emerged from and the political stridency identified with that generation of cultural activists. Each author interprets *political* in their own way, some defensively as though they had grown wary of the expectation that their work should be so overt. Overall, they came down on the autonomy of the artist as their first priority.

A half century later, the authors we interviewed didn't seem to have any qualms about the term *political* or feel the need to quibble over definitions, nor did they appear to feel the same anxiety over whether claiming the political nature of one's work undermined their commitment to their craft. To be political was obvious, to deny it seemed naive. Their politics were embodied, in some cases literally, as both Eduardo C. Corral and Carmen Maria Machado state, in essence, that to inhabit brown bodies, queer bodies, fat bodies, or migrant bodies in this society was to be political. Others felt by virtue of claiming an identity, whether Chicanx or Latinx, was to understand oneself in relation to the mainstream. Instead of being viewed as a hindrance to one's work, just about every author articulates this ingrained aspect of their work as a unique

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entry point for their creative voice and a necessary responsibility. This responsibility often led to a discussion of literary citizenship and how they could best contribute to knocking down barriers to access. This is perhaps best exemplified by Rigoberto González, who says that when he writes he looks around for his communities and asks himself how his work is serving them. For many authors, this willingness to serve includes their role as teachers, participating on boards or judging prizes to ensure Latinx books are considered, or being very intentional about using their work to inspire dialogue and open minds.

Influences and Traditions

This book is interested in exploring traditions and continuity as much as departures. However spontaneous it may feel, an artistic movement springs from a tradition, whether building on the pillars erected by prior generations or knocking them down. It's one of the reasons why we asked every author what tradition they saw themselves inheriting or a part of. Overall, the authors acknowledge the importance of early Latinx writers, including the role of individual mentors such as Judith Ortiz Cofer, Juan Felipe Herrera, Helena María Viramontes, Martín Espada, and Francisco X. Alarcón and the impact of Pedro Pietri, Miguel Algarín, and the Nuyorican poets. These mentorships often in turn inspired the authors to be mentors to younger writers, knowing how important these interventions can be. Other authors talk about the experience of immersing themselves in early Latinx writing to find inspiration but more importantly departure points for their own work.

In general, however, we found that the authors are hardly siloed in their reading. The influences are vast and as varied as perusing a used bookstore. They speak to an unbounded love of literature and storytelling rather than feeling that being part of a literary tradition confines one to that tradition. Cuban American author Ana Menéndez cites the importance of Italo Calvino and Georges Perec on her most recent project. Chicano author Daniel Chacón discovered a decades-long affinity for Emanuel Swedenborg by way of Jorge Luis Borges, and Peruvian American author Daniel Alarcón speaks movingly about the early years of his writing journey when an obscure record or a dog-eared book could be a potential discovery and influence. If there is one constant theme, it is that the authors repeatedly speak about the importance of the Black tradition in their work, often because it was the first literature they were

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exposed to that aligned with their own experience of otherness. These influential authors include James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, and Percival Everett. Author Manuel Muñoz speaks about how young Latinx literature was in relation to other literatures, and how he could turn to Black literature for a greater range of voices speaking about issues of race and identity in complex ways. It is the relative newness of Latinx literature that makes this question of influences so essential, because it informs our understanding of how a literary tradition grows—not in isolation but in communion with other literatures.

Experiences in Publishing

The authors interviewed largely view the future of Latinx literature with excitement and optimism, while acknowledging the obstacles that remain, particularly regarding access to a wider audience. Latinx authors are publishing in all venues, from large commercial presses to independent and academic presses, as well as creating their own publishing houses. The interest of commercial publishers in Latinx authors continues to be viewed with caution, especially as there have been moments in the past decades where that promise has focused on a select number of authors rather than a comprehensive and lasting commitment to Latinx literature. Latinx authors continue to struggle to get the support they need from big publishers and have learned it's not just about getting published that matters but also about the marketing support that results in reviews, awards, and getting books into readers' hands. Several authors referred to the 2019 *American Dirt* controversy and how it demonstrated that a white author with a work of questionable literary merit about a Latinx immigrant can still receive the kind of lucrative advance and industry support that most Latinx authors can only dream of. As a result of the controversy and others like it, commercial publishers have made attempts to diversify their books as well as their employees. It remains to be seen whether this change will be lasting. What's clear, however, is that most of the authors we interviewed, even those published by commercial publishers, are clear-eyed about the industry's unreliability. Waiting for it to change has been a decades-long process. Finding ways to hold it accountable is one path, embracing alternative publishing venues is another; but the main focus for these authors remains on the writing, their love of the craft, their willingness to share their knowledge

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with the next generation of authors, and their desire to open doors so that the road to a literary career isn't so difficult for subsequent generations of Latinx authors.

Future Concerns and Directions

We asked the authors about the future directions of Latinx literature in the twenty-first century and invited them to think about this question in their roles as editors, publishers, teachers, literary critics, and readers. The authors we interviewed have a special insight into this question because most of them have engaged in editorial and publication projects that group other twenty-first-century Latinx writers. Of course, many if not all of our authors teach and, in that role, also have the opportunity to be invested in the direction of contemporary Latinx literature. The writers appreciated the opportunity to speak beyond their own writing when considering these future directions.

In terms of themes and genres, several writers speak about the ecological concern of climate change and the connected turn to the speculative. Carmen Giménez comments that in reality we couldn't write about anything else but the issue of the impending climate disaster, and Jennine Capó Crucet expresses immense concern that Miami will be under water during our lifetime, transforming her stories about place into elegies. In general, there seems to be an openness or desire for more speculative fiction or genre writing, including from authors like Gabby Rivera and Carmen Maria Machado who have turned toward comic book projects with Marvel and DC, respectively. This shift has been felt more markedly perhaps in Latinx literature, which for the most part has been perceived as fiction based on literary realism. What this turn to speculative and genre writing demonstrates is that there is an openness for Latinx writers and other writers of color to broach other topics, other styles, and other genres than what have traditionally been used or that they have been expected to use. This turn is not an escape from that sense of responsibility or commitment to one's community but instead a new way to tell those stories.

Most notably, the majority of the authors we interviewed express the importance of highlighting voices that haven't been heard before. Their goal in previous editorial and publication projects, as well as in their role as mentors, was to include a greater range of voices speaking to the specificity and intersectionality of their experience. Several authors speak about moving beyond a generalized identity and forcing

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themselves to dig deeper to create multilayered works addressing not just ethnic identity but other identities such as queerness and disability. While this work is already being done, a general sentiment among the authors in their role as mentors is to encourage further exploration of these complex identities and promote publishing opportunities for these new voices. Yesika Salgado mentions how exciting it is that when people ask her for Latinx book recommendations she can now offer diverse choices based on their background and interests. Other authors acknowledge the need for more multilayered works that engage transnational, multilingual, and hemispheric conversations. This all points to multiple openings and possibilities—possibilities that are only now being imagined—as we continue into the twenty-first century.

WHAT WE TAKE AWAY

The exciting part of a project of this nature, reading literature encapsulating a time period and conducting interviews over the course of two years, during a pandemic no less, is that we were conscious of offering a snapshot of time. We joked often—especially when we expressed regret that we hadn't interviewed a particular author—that we wouldn't stop at twenty-one authors, that we would keep interviewing authors ad infinitum, creating endless spinoff collections focused on specific subsets within the umbrella of Latinx literature. But these conversations are happening already, across the country and even transnationally, in all different kinds of forums. Our goal in this book is to bring attention to these ongoing conversations as well as document them for future writers, readers, and scholars.

We can't predict how subsequent generations will interpret the conversations within this collection, but we know the impact this project has had on us as readers, writers, and friends, how meaningful it was to immerse ourselves in the work of our contemporaries, to enter virtually into their homes, and to have deeply personal conversations about the craft of writing and the stories they hold dear. There were always questions and points of inquiry that we didn't get to. Most of our conversations could have continued far beyond the allotted time. We always would stop the recording, say our goodbyes, and end the Zoom session, returning to the solitude of our respective workspaces feeling inspired, much as we did when we were aspiring young writers devouring the literary interviews of a previous generation. We're grateful to the authors in this collection for their time, their insights, and their candidness and

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for sharing their artistic and personal journeys. We hope that, taken together, their journeys create a roadmap for understanding Latinx literature in the first two decades of the twenty-first century but also serve as inspiration for the future writers who will shape Latinx literature in the decades to come.