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**Citizenship and the Landscapes of Latinidad:  
A Review of Maya Socolovsky's *Troubling Nationhood in U.S. Latina Literature*  
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Maya Socolovsky  
*Troubling Nationhood in U.S. Latina Literature: Explorations of Place and Belonging*  
Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2013  
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Maya Socolovsky opens *Troubling Nationhood in U.S. Latina Literature* (2013) with an anecdote about a reader's xenophobic reaction to *Gourmet* magazine's 2009 feature of "Cuban-born cook and restaurateur Maricel Presilla's annual barbecue in Palisades Interstate Park, in Alpine, New Jersey" (1). The reader complains that Presilla's outing represents a dangerous culinary model because it can initiate a slippery cultural slope that would begin with "refried black beans made with ten Mexican avocado leaves" and spiral down into a Fourth of July celebration with "Mongolian or Ethiopian recipes" (2). Socolovsky sees in the reader's fear—of the contaminating threat posed by depicting Latino cooking in a mainstream US magazine—an ideal illustration for the type of nationalist discourses that inform US Latino/a writing. Socolovsky notes that "geopolitical nationalism" effectively "turns Latinos/as within the United States, almost no matter their national origins, legal standing, or historical continuity in the country, into outsiders" (3). These geopolitical discourses on citizenship narrate a cultural and geographical boundary between belonging and unbelonging that characterizes Latinidad as foreign presence. The racialization of Latinidad categorizes diverse, pan-ethnic communities as un-American in terms of both their cultural and geographic origins.

Socolovsky points to the unifying logic of geopolitical nationalism as the basis for her pan-ethnic approach to US Latino writing, discussing the work of Chicana writers Denise Chavez, Ana Castillo, and Sandra Cisneros, Puerto Rican authors Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Cuban American writer Himilce Novas. Many critics might assume that the value of performing a comparative study of Latino writers is self-evident and eschew a discussion of divergent ethnic and historical contexts. However, Socolovsky chooses to face head-on the distinctive historical contexts of these different Latino groups, acknowledging their unique relationships to US citizenship. The introduction to the book offers an excellent overview of the different processes of unbelonging and racialization for Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and Cuban Americans. As a result, the introductory chapter can serve as a useful teaching tool in undergraduate courses of US Latino literature, providing an entry point for discussing how the divergent experiences of migration, residency and citizenship shape the racialization of particular Latino/a groups. At the same time, the introduction emphasizes that “a historical racialization of citizenship” (16) produces a collective experience of unbelonging—effectively arguing how productive a comparative approach to Latino writing can be by calling attention to a shared context of nationalist discourses.

Socolovsky makes the case that US Latina writers are responsive to nationalist discourses that delegitimize Latino citizenship, reading their fiction as offering alternative definitions of belonging through depictions of space, landscape and embodiment. Since “spatial representation determines mainstream responses to new cultural presences and the extent of their membership in the nation,” Latina writers center on and challenge dominant geopolitical definitions of Americanness (21). US Latina literature “re-nationalizes” the United States “as part of a collective of the Spanish-speaking Americas” (23) by “blending” the histories and “the

geographies of those histories” (8). The strategy of remapping US geography in Denise Chavez’s writing shifts attention away from the US/Mexico border to focus on the internal borders of New Mexico or between states like Texas and New Mexico (40). Meanwhile, Ana Castillo and Sandra Cisneros depict the Midwest “not just as part of Latin America but also legitimated as an indigenous and mestizo nation” (63). Consequently, US Latina writing “undermine[s] the United States’ demarcation of foreign (illegitimate) and native (legitimate) presence in the nation” (8). Socolovsky also explores how the reconfiguration of the American landscape reimagines the place(ment) of Latino bodies. For example, in Denise Chavez’s *The Last of the Menu Girls*, the political discourse of sickness locates undocumented Latino immigrants as a threat to the health of US national identity. In turn, the novel foregrounds the effects of this racialization, which is mirrored in a rhetoric of personal sickness for US Latino citizens. Cultural difference is translated into a biopolitical experience for Latinos regardless of their relationship to legal status. Similarly, Himilce Novas’s *Princess Papaya* situates California as a “new frontier” where “an idyllic version of socialist Cuba” is possible, through the alternate forms of kinship and community offered by the indigenous culture of the Chumash. With the tribe’s “valorization of intersexual bodies” (178), the intersexual Chumash character, Cooper, becomes a “curative site” that can provide belonging to Victoria, a Cuban American Jewish woman, as well as healing “the nation’s ailments” (171).

*Troubling Nationhood* not only argues that Latina writing reconfigures the physical and symbolic boundaries of the nation and territorializes Latinidad in new ways, but also deftly maps out the existing critical conversation on these Latina writers. In each chapter, Socolovsky clearly delineates how her readings differ from that of prior interpretations and she is perhaps most persuasive when analyzing the memoirs of Esmeralda Santiago. Adopting a rare focus on the

entire oeuvre of *When I Was Puerto Rican*, *Almost A Woman* and *The Turkish Lover*, Socolovsky challenges the critiques of Santiago for the “apparent assimilationist drive” of her writing, pointing out that such readings rely on analyzing the “first memoir in isolation” (128). Each memoir establishes parallels between geographic and psychic space, with “the relationship and ‘gap’ between the United States and the island” mirroring that between protagonist and autobiographer (130). In addition to offering a creative and convincing corrective to the established reading of Santiago, Socolovsky advances an excellent rereading of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* in her chapter on Castillo and Cisneros. In a similar contextualizing move, Socolovsky calls attention to the critical blindspot produced by the tendency to focus exclusively on the last chapter of Anzaldúa’s book, which is also “the most frequently anthologized section” (64). She returns to the first chapter, “The Homeland, Aztlan,” in order to foreground how Anzaldúa’s “interpretation of mestizaje sees it as a geopolitical practice” (63). In other words, place, locality and physicality matter a great deal to Anzaldúa’s definition of the mestizo subject. By reviewing the importance of geopolitics in the first chapter, Socolovsky effectively “brings us back to the critically popular chapter with new perspective that highlights Anzaldúa’s “call of return to the land” (65). Socolovsky reframes Anzaldúa’s “aesthetic of land and geography” within the broader discourses on citizenship and Latinidad that Castillo and Cisneros are also negotiating (65).

With its attention to the intersection of landscape and US Latino identity, *Troubling Nationhood* is in dialogue with other recent work in US Latino literary studies. Similarly to Mary Pat Brady’s *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (2002), Socolovsky foregrounds the ways in which spaciality is performative in Chicana writing and how these authors depict the way historical contexts simultaneously transform

geography and shape subjectivity. Socolovsky's work on Esmeralda Santiago and Judith Ortiz Cofer also connects with Marisel Moreno's *Puerto Rican Women Authors on the Island and the Mainland* (2012). For example, Socolovsky's interpretation of borders as geographic, cultural, and psychic is analogous to by Moreno's concept of "frontera intranacional" as referring to the "barriers between Puerto Ricans on the basis of language, race and location" (14). *Troubling Nationhood* obviously departs from the trajectory mapped by Brady and Moreno in that Socolovsky's comparative approach suggests the ways in which the depiction of space in Chicana and Puerto Rican fiction can be fleshed out more fully with a pan-Latino comparative framework.

Contemporary critics have argued that US Latino literature is inspired by and geared towards intervening in contemporary debates about immigration and the policing of national borders. Socolovsky's book makes a unique contribution to the field by articulating a pan-ethnic approach to US Latino literature, mapping out the converging and diverging strategies used by Latina writers to reimagine the topography of US nationalism. In a similar vein, María DeGuzmán's *Buenas Noches, American Culture: Latina/o Aesthetics of Night* (2012) analyzes how Latino/a writers employ the trope of night to put forward a critique of both the assimilationist routes plotted for Latinos and the racialization of Latinos as foreign bodies. DeGuzmán and Socolovsky share an understanding that aesthetic choices are closely aligned with ethical perspectives in Latino/a writing. While DeGuzmán by necessity narrows her focus to the depiction of night, however, Socolovsky analyzes the broader range of symbolic language that constructs landscapes within US Latino/a literature. Ultimately, *Troubling Nationhood* is responsive to the "strategic" use of Latinidad as a concept, as articulated by Marta Caminero-Santangelo's *On Latinidad: US Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* (2007).

Caminero-Santangelo asks, “what if we saw *latinidad* as *commitment*—not just to an exploration of conditions that encourage pan-ethnic collectivity but also to an exploration of those conditions (including differences) which potentially inhibit it?” (218). In its best moments, Maya Socolovsky’s *Troubling Nationhood in U.S. Latina Literature* brilliantly balances a dedication to both context and locality, to cohesion and variance, while offering a superb model of critical engagement and creativity.

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