WRITING THROUGH TRAUMA: RESILIENCE AND HEALING IN LATINE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Pre-2016, most of the books that included Latine representation embodied a plot that was grounded in the character's trauma, suffering, and never-ending obstacles. These storylines usually revolved around generational trauma, sexual assault, deportation fears, and poverty. Although these stories provide a necessary perspective into the Latine community, it falls into a trap of Latine literature only existing within a trauma scope. The Latine community deserves literature that also captures their post-traumatic growth and healing because they are more than their trauma. This paper delves into the transformative power of literature for the Latine community, arguing that it serves not only as a testament to their resilience but also as a coping mechanism in the face of multi-layered trauma. Through its exploration of literature, the paper aims to illuminate the role of creative expression in the journey from post-traumatic stress to post-traumatic growth, addressing the gap in discussions of people of color's experiences in the United States and underscoring the significance of writing as a liberating tool for expressing emotions and vulnerabilities without fear of oppression. Throughout the paper, the term "Latine" is used as a gender neutral and inclusive descriptor as opposed to the gendered nouns "Latinos/Latinas."

INTRODUCTION

Using a qualitative thematic analysis of peer-reviewed articles and books that range fiction, poetry, and intellectual activism, this paper argues that literature is not only to shine a light on the resilience of the Latine community, but also as a coping tool to face indescribable trauma. Specifically, the paper explores writing as a post-traumatic coping mechanism for the Latine community through the experiences of undocumented immigrants, the nuance of womanhood, and Brownness as a racial identifier to prove that survivorship is deeply rooted in our genetic code as a protective barrier passed down from generation to generation. The collective ancestral spirit I allude to is the "living legacy of forebearers bound not by blood, but by the bridge of intracultural women of color consciousness" (Moraga and Anzaldua, 1981, p. 20). Intergenerational survivorship encapsulates the skills and knowledge of minoritized populations worldwide, whether explicitly identified or not; such qualities include adaptability, resilience, ambition and motivation, multilingualism, and biculturalism. Women of color scholars such as Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Audre Lorde imply this theory of survivorship in their writings – a declaration of liberation through community and self-preservation crafted as a tool earned from systemic oppression.

Representations and the transmission of trauma have found a link between literary fiction and clinical psychology that helps propel individuals into healing. Trauma in fiction offers significant insight into individual experiences, emotions, dissociation, communication, the meaning of choices, and healing and recovery (Goldsmith and Satterlee, 2004). It is essential to recognize that the research does not explore how accurate representations of ethnic minority groups, in this case, Latines, would benefit from seeing themselves as characters in a novel that not only highlights their trauma but also places their strength and survivorship as a focal point. The novels examined in this paper provide a contextual framework that situates trauma within specific social and historical contexts. This framework enables readers to comprehend the intricate relationship between characters' personal experiences and their surroundings, as well as the varied range of responses and coping mechanisms related to trauma that, in turn, reveal the character's unwavering survivorship.

The term intergenerational trauma first appeared in a 1966 research article written by Canadian psychiatrist Vivian M. Rakoff, MD, about the high rates of psychological distress among children of Holocaust survivors. Since then, terms such as "cultural trauma" and "collective trauma" have reached mainstream society with a rising social movement that uncovers oppressive and psychologically harmful structures in our country. Current trauma theorists have emphasized that the focus on intergenerational trauma needs to be broadened to include communities of color in the United States. Drawing from previous research, this paper highlights how intergenerational trauma directly applies to the Latine community in the U.S. and instances of how post-traumatic trauma and growth are represented in literature. Victor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and professor of neurology and psychology, discusses post-traumatic growth and resilience in his research of tragic optimism. He claims that tragic optimism embraces the negative emotions and experiences and views them as opportunities to gain a deeper sense of meaning and purpose (Frankle, 1984). Similarly, Gloria Anzaldua is in conversation with these theories as she places the act of writing as a tool of healing to make meaning out of tragedy. This paper brings together the existing literature about intergenerational trauma and survivorship and broadens the area of focus to include BIPOC people in the U.S. Theorists like Frankl and others have shown how creative expression can be used as a tool for Holocaust survivors to move from post-traumatic stress to post-traumatic growth, but the same has not been discussed for people of color in the U.S. Specifically within the context of the Latine community, Latine immigrants do not have the privilege to explore life as vastly as they want; many are concerned with surviving day to day, and this is seen in writings throughout the Latine diaspora because its contents are usually about immigration and trauma. Therefore, writing is used as a coping mechanism that allows individuals to freely express their emotions and vulnerabilities about their trauma without fear of oppression.

Intergenerational trauma involves the transference of psychological and physiological effects caused by oppressive or traumatic events from one generation to another. In this paper, we aim to place Latine intergenerational trauma within the broader spectrum of collective traumas. This form of trauma is positioned within frameworks of structural vulnerability and historical and political violence, largely resulting from legacies of colonialism and migration-related stressors (Cerdeña et al. YEAR). Over-defining Latine intergenerational trauma may risk overgeneralizing and potentially excluding experiences outside the mainstream understanding of this issue. However, it is essential to highlight a few factors contributing to such trauma: the immigration process, being separated from family, physical relocation that does not guarantee safe arrival, extreme poverty that leads to housing and food insecurity, violence from supposed institutions that are meant to keep people safe, i.e., the police, domestic abuse, childhood parentification, and adultification, the racist call for assimilation, and embedded systemic issues such as racism, colonialism, and the patriarchy (in this case *machismo* specifically), among other factors. Undoubtedly, there are various factors that are responsible for Latine intergenerational trauma to continue reproducing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Latine generational trauma manifests and reproduces itself through various contributing factors unique to Latine immigrants' experiences in the United States. Research studies exploring the causes of trauma for Latines found that exposure to political violence, experiencing personal assaults, higher perceived discrimination, and anxiety or substance disorder add to rising traumatic experiences (Fortuna et al., 2008). Additionally, the pervasive demand for assimilation into American culture results in "a negative predictor of dissociation" and higher levels of traumatic "survivor's guilt" and PTSD. Conversely, the findings of this research offer acculturation as a filter for maintaining traditions and cultural significance post-migration that positively promotes mental health (Marshall and Orlando, 2002). Literature under the umbrella of Latine intergenerational trauma and survivorship includes the study of the transmission of trauma; a distinct difference has been identified as primary vs. secondary trauma as it relates to second-generation Latine immigrant youth. During a study examining depressive symptoms among Latine immigrants (Phipps and Degges-White, 2014), it was observed that the repercussions of traumatic events encountered at any phase of immigration could endure well beyond the settlement of a family in their new home and country. If parents or grandparents grapple with psychological distress, their ability to

provide emotional care may be significantly diminished, resulting in potential suffering for their descendants stemming from the original trauma experienced by the first generation (primary). This phenomenon, termed transgenerational trauma or intergenerational trauma, occurs when the impact of trauma extends to subsequent generations (secondary) within the same family beyond the generation directly affected by the initial traumatic experience.

Research within the Latine community also shows the cultural importance of *familismo*, which is a strong loyalty to immediate and extended family, that presents as an indicating factor to transgenerational trauma because the emotions of one family member are expected to be prioritized in all family members (Phipps and Degges-White, 2014). Additionally, the short-term and long-term challenges of finding housing and employment in a new and often xenophobic environment and prolonged exposure to anti-immigrant patrols and policies that actively dehumanize and seek to deport "illegals" further expose immigrants to violence, discrimination, and mistreatment. This covert form of racism places individuals into survival mode, where personal feelings, emotional processing, and vulnerability are seen as "weaknesses" due to the body's automatic response to trauma, including hypervigilance, emotionally reactive, and memory fog (Garcini et al., 2021). As research advances in the transgenerational trauma of the Latine experience, so does research in healing and restorative justice grounded in community-based methods that are culturally responsive to the Latine community. For example, a pilot study of Positive Adaptations for Trauma and Healing (PATH) supports a "manualized treatment for Latino youth and their caregivers" that uses trauma models, positive psychology, and resilience while engaging in community-based group work to reduce trauma symptoms (Hoskins et al., 2018). In this same realm of community healing, researcher Lillian Comas-Díaz advocates for the blending of mainstream psychotherapy techniques with Latine ethnic psychology, including the use of *cuentos, dichos*, and spirituality as a way to practice culturally resilient Western therapy (Comas-Díaz, 2006).

ON BEING UNDOCUMENTED

The term "undocumented" refers to individuals living in the United States without legal authorization or proper documentation. In Latine communities, being undocumented holds significant implications and positioning because it represents a shared experience among many community members who face various challenges due to their immigration status. Psychologically, the experience of being undocumented can give rise to heightened stress, anxiety, and fear due to the constant risk of detection, deportation, and separation from loved ones. The uncertainty surrounding their future and limited access to resources can lead to exploitation and feelings of powerlessness. Generationally, the effects of being undocumented can extend beyond the individuals themselves. The trauma and stress experienced by undocumented parents can impact their children and subsequent generations because the uncertainty and fear within the family unit can create a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety, affecting children's emotional well-being and development. Additionally, the stigma associated with being undocumented can contribute to social isolation and a sense of marginalization within the broader society and the Latine community. The trauma persists when people do not have the opportunity to treat these symptoms and begin the healing process.

In recent years, multiple books have explored the nuance of being undocumented and having to live in a police state. *Sanctuary* (2020), written by Paola Mendoza and Abby Sher, is the story of Vali, a teenager struggling to live an everyday life under the constant fear of deportation. When forced to forge a path without her family, she creates a beloved community that not only survives but allows love to guide her to safety. Throughout the story, she is described as living "carefully, vigilantly and never looking back; only forward [as this] is what it took to survive" (Mendoza and Sher, 2020, p.43). Often immigrants who live in the United States without legal documentation do not have the luxury of enjoying their youth or reveling in moments of joy because their livelihood is at risk, and they are acutely aware of their next decision to stay safe. Although Vali's choices and decisions stem from an innate need to stay unharmed, it is equally rooted in trauma because of the adultification she had to go through and also from being separated from loved ones. Similar concepts are explored in *Lineage of Rain* (2020) written by Janel Piñeda, who uses poetry as a form to uncover the traumatic feelings of displacement due to childhood migration: "I am six years old and afraid / of being left behind. / I am six years old and my blood remembers /

what it feels like to leave / a whole homeland behind" (Piñeda, 2020, p.10). Many children of immigrants may not have concrete memories of their country's origin but can piece together moments from family stories and photographs; however, their bodies remember the trauma of being separated from their extended family and from the first place they considered home. Post-migration, there is a great demand to assimilate into American culture, which often means leaving behind the culture of a person's birth country, and this usually includes language: "The only Spanish that lives in this poem is faint memory/ the words of a younger braver self" (Piñeda, 2020, p.29). Although many immigrants believe that the answer to a fast-track acceptance into American society is to contort and conform to the will of American culture and expectations, this also includes having to erase a part of their identity, which begs the question: "What happens when a free and fragile thing is forced to survive" in a country that does not want them? (Piñeda, 2020, p.20). The immigrant and undocumented experience explore this phenomenon of living in two worlds, yet belonging to neither, especially without the resources, safety, or time to examine their positionality in relation to both countries because they are submerged in survival mode.

On the other side of the undocumented experience are individuals who are exploited for work and threatened with deportation to comply with cheap labor laws. Many undocumented immigrants in the United States are the backbone of the agricultural department and food distribution centers; however, they are often paid pennies on the dollars without work benefits and often in hazardous environments (Boufkhed, Sabah et al., 2022). The poetic anthology *We Had Our Reasons* (2022), written by Ricardo Ruiz, intimately details the experiences of crossing into and working under the United States as an undocumented immigrant; one of the poems reads: "My spirit mistreated, my body breaking. Had I enslaved myself? *Una prisionera sin papeles?*" (Ruiz, 2022, p.68). The writer of this poem is questioning her decision to live and work in the United States; she is not viewed as a human being but rather as a prisoner without papers that can be taken advantage of by superiors. In a similar sentiment, a different writer unveils a conversation between him and his dad: "I told my dad I am going north. He sipped on his *café con leche*. He didn't stop me; He closed his eyes *y me dio la bendición*, with the warning, don't ever trust America" (Ruiz, 2022, p.92). For context, his father had immigrated to the United States and worked without papers in a farm field, where he was abused and underpaid, and when he realized that the "American Dream" was a myth, he decided to return to his home country. Although he does not plan to stop his son from embarking on his journey, his advice resonates within the larger historical context of America being an oppressive and colonizer country.

Although these three texts showcase an abundance of trauma, each also displays the survivorship entrenched within all characters. For instance, in *Lineage of Rain* (2020), the author expresses her sister's smile as "wide across her face, teeth brave, bold like our blood" (Piñeda, 2020, p. 36). Being brave and bold presents as more than just an adaptive trait but rather a generational characteristic encoded in the characters DNA. Likewise, the writer's interpretation of her community no longer depends on living under trauma. She says, "In this life, our people are not things of silences, but whole worlds bursting into breath" (Piñeda, 2020, p.6). Through this writing, she attempts to regain her power and identity despite living in a world that profits off her silence; the phrase "bursting into breath" gives the impression that communities are coming to life and coming together to advocate for more inclusive policies that protect rather than police. In *We Had Our Reasons* (2022), one of Ruiz's last poems is a connection to his ancestors' strength without knowing it was present in the first place: "They told me drunk one night, I had warrior blood that burns, I searched for what they told me, finally finding it in war, I found home" (Ruiz, 2022, p.123). The mentions of blood in these two texts are significant because it ties these writers who are alive today to their ancestral lineage; it would be dismissive to categorize their ancestral roots as mere victims of colonization; instead, there is a need to shift focus and view these ancestral spirits as places of power, knowledge, and guidance that survive throughout generations.

WOMANHOOD

Womanhood is a peculiar state of being whose definition changes depending on the audience; for the context of this paper, womanhood is located using a feminist of color framework that acknowledges the lived experiences, struggles, and strengths of Latina immigrants. In order to locate its place in the gender diaspora within the Latine community, the definition and exploration of *machismo* are needed. *Machismo*

is a covert characteristic of patriarchal authority that exaggerates a sense of masculinity through dominant, entitled, and violent displays of power rooted in the assumption that men are superior to women, and as a result, women are expected to serve and obey their partners. In Latine culture, *machismo* is the cornerstone of family relationships and gender roles. For example, girls are taught to accept catcalling and sexual assault as forms of flattery rather than as forms of harassment, and many young girls are forced through the process of adultification because they are expected to adopt into caretaking roles (Nunez et al., 2016). By imposing these damaging ideas, society successfully limits women's agency over their own bodies, stories, and voices.

Although womanhood has stressful experiences in the Latine community, it is also a state of being that validates the multiplicity of identities and allows an intersectional lens through which people experience the world. Wendy Trevino, the author of *Cruel Fiction* (2018), writes: "The word "disposable" keeps coming up. The "disposable female bodies" of women in Juarez [...] Let's be honest: the brutality of capitalism's not as brutal to some women. For instance, in Juarez not every woman's body is seen as "disposable." The women whose bodies Rosa-Linda Fregoso refers to are racialized, as well as gendered and poor" (Trevino, 2018, p.72-73). In this excerpt of Trevino's poem titled "28", she speaks on the unique experiences of women of color who are "disposable" and suffer abuse under the brutality of capitalism, specifically those who are Black, Brown, trans, and poor. The author uses an intersectional framework to focus the attention on the bodies of women who are doubly oppressed due to their economic status, gender, and race. In the anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), edited by Gloria Anzaldua and edited by Cherrie Moraga, the women of color authors identify their lives at a "crossroad, where no aspect of our identity is wholly dismissed from our consciousness, even as we navigate a daily shifting political landscape" (Moraga and Anzaldua, 1981, p.41). Women of color are acutely aware of their personal and generational oppression and trauma. They face daily challenges in a country that actively disregards their safety; however, they are standing together, dismantling the same system attempting to silence them.

For generations, women have employed writing to express their politicization as women of color and document what is "wholly known in the body" as trauma and call for liberation. In *Lineage of Rain* (2020), the author notes that women's poems "have never had the luxury of being enamored with the moon. Perhaps this is why all my poems are about the sun, about coming from women who have survived by chasing it" (Piñeda, 2020, p. 10). As previously mentioned, Latine immigrants do not have the privilege to explore life as vastly as they want; many are concerned with surviving day to day, and this is seen in writings throughout the Latine diaspora because its contents are usually about immigration and trauma. Writing is a coping mechanism that allows individuals to freely express their emotions and vulnerabilities without fear of oppression. As Gloria Anzaldúa notes: "The very act of writing then, conjuring/coming to "see," what has yet to be recorded in history is to bring into consciousness what only the body knows to be true" (Moraga and Anzaldua, 1981, p.43). In many instances, Latina immigrants do not have access to the language or theories to accurately represent their struggles in a foreign country, but trauma and adversary leave an authentic imprint on the body that needs to be let out one way or another. Although the experiences of womanhood in Latine immigration are unique because of its position in a racial and gendered hierarchy, it begs the question, what happens after the trauma is identified? Anzaldúa has an answer:

> "And yes, we intimately know the origins of oppression; it brewed in our beds, tables, and streets; screaming out in anger is a necessary stage in our evolution into freedom, but do we have to dwell forever on that piece of terrain, forever stuck in the middle of that bridge? This land of thorns is not habitable. We carry this bridge inside us, the struggle, the movement toward liberation." (Moraga and Anzaldua, 1981, p.31)

Chicana activist Gloria Anzaldua writes that women cannot "dwell" in trauma forever because it is uninhabitable; living in a space that repeats the emotional and psychological harm done to us inhibits our ability to heal. Simply put, women cannot be stuck in a place of trauma because it replicates in future generations; instead, the focus needs to be on the movement toward liberation that separates the tools for survival from being in survival mode. As multiple authors have examined in their writings, womanhood is not a synonym for victimhood; it includes the strength, knowledge, and wisdom from previous

generations that have survived similar oppression by different forms of patriarchies. Womanhood, when located in feminist of color scholarship, denotes the intricate relationship with one's ancestral lineage and the guidance to break generational cycles.

BROWNNESS

Brownness is a concept and racial identifier meant to ground people left floating between acknowledged and not recognized (Rivas, 2022). In relation to race, Brownness is the gap between black and white. Brownness is an open space for the global majority to find a home after being displaced due to violent colonization (Rivas, 2022). The United States is infamous for using a binary system when it comes to a multitude of social factors, including race, which is why those who do not identify as white or black are left in an abyss of confusion regarding their identity. Although this paper specifically focuses on the Latine experience, Brownness is not exclusive to non-white Latines; instead, it is a spectrum that goes beyond Latinidad and welcomes those who feel marginalized and cannot identify within the white and black binary.

Many Latine immigrants who are new to the racial hierarchy of the United States are not aware of their placement in the racial system; however, law-enforcement departments, such as state police and I.C.E., categorize Latines as one monolith under the term Brown as an excuse to hunt and deport anyone who fits that description. Wendy Trevino writes about this in her poetry: "A border, like race, is a cruel fiction maintained by constant policing, violence always threatening a new map. We are who we are to them, even when we don't know who we are to each other & culture is a record of us figuring that out" (Trevino, 2018, p.92). The phrase "cruel fiction" is a reminder that race is a social construct as the definition of race changes throughout time, geographical location, and context; however, it does have real-life consequences; she notes that Latines are seen as the outgroup of white America and that the threat of a new map alludes to the history of colonization of South American countries and its current struggles today. In addition, the phrase "culture is a record of us trying to figure out who we are'' implies the intentional discovery of ancestral roots.

In conversation with this poem, the book, *When We Make It* (2022) by Elisabet Velasquez explores the life of a first-generation high school student who is balancing the world of family traumas and systemic pressures of *machismo* while trying to feel at home with her Boricua identity. Throughout the novel, she ponders her mother's decision to leave Puerto Rico and the generational effects that came with it: "She says that leaving the island is a hard decision and that ever since Mami moved to New York she's spent her life just trying to survive the day & if you think about it, really think about it, staying alive, well, that too is Puerto Rican history" (Velasquez, 2022, p.345). Many Latin American countries have gone through structural change due to colonization and white supremacy that stem from global empires such as the United States; this idea of "surviving the day is Puerto Rican history" can also be translated to "surviving the day is Brown history." Again, when referencing Brownness, it is an attempt to frame the particularity of group identification that temporarily displaces terms like "Hispanic" or even "Latina/o." Brownness registers as a descriptor that allows subjects to identify themselves and recognize others; it is a negation "enacted by failing to conform to the affective protocols of normative cultural citizenship" (Muñoz, 2020, p. 46). In other words, Brownness is an act of rebellion and resistance against a colonizer country that attempts to systematically erase the people it has harmed. The sense of being Brown is innately connected to survivorship qualities rooted in a community's ancestral lineage as past generations have fought, failed, and faced displacement in a nation never fully home to them but have stored wisdom from historical and systemic violence.

CONCLUSION

This paper critically examined the concept of intergenerational survivorship within the Latine community and foregrounds a new approach to Latine literature that moves beyond focusing solely on trauma itself, but rather embracing a holistic approach that centers healing and growth. Drawing on the perspectives of Gloria Anzaldua and Victor Frankl, the paper explores the significant presence of

intergenerational survivorship and its profound connection to literature. By delving into the experiences of being undocumented, the nuances of womanhood, and the complexities associated with Brownness, the study sheds light on the need to incorporate Latine trauma into the broader discourse on trauma and post-trauma growth. However, while this research acknowledges the resilience and strength demonstrated by fictional Latine characters inspired by real events, it also recognizes the work that still needs to be done in this area. Future studies should further explore the specific mechanisms through which Latine literature is produced and examine the use of creative and personal writing as a tool for healing in post-trauma settings.

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